Adultery

Laura Kipnis

A spectre is haunting the nation—the spectre of adultery.

Lying Down on the Job

"Would you like to dance?" You've mustered all the studied casualness you can, momentarily convincing yourself (self-deception being the *sine qua non* of moments such as these) that your heart is as pure as the gold of your wedding band, your virtue as thick as your mortgage payment booklet. The rest of the crowd is flailing around wildly with such graceless pseudoabandon that it gives the phrase "repressive desublimation" a whole new meaning.[1] (What's that joke about the academic body being a badly designed life-support system for an overweening cerebral cortex?) Your torpid married body now pressed nervously against this person who's been casting winsome glances in your direction all night, a muffled but familiar feeling seems to be stirring deep within you, a distant rum-

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1. The term *repressive desublimation,* meaning sexual liberation in the service of social control, is Herbert Marcuse's. See Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston, 1964), pp. 72–78. See also Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston, 1955), pp. 197–221. This essay leans heavily on Marcuse's general critique of social domination and the reduction of life to work.

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bling getting louder and louder, like a herd of elephants massing on the bushveld—oh God, it's your *libido,* once a noted freedom fighter, now a sorry, shriveled thing, from sixties outlaw to nineties upstanding citizen, Janis Joplin to Tipper Gore in just a few short decades; successfully sublimated into career and family life, pledged to your marriage as community property, still summoned occasionally to perform those increasingly predictable conjugal interchanges, but with—let's face it—somewhat flagging ardor, a gradually drooping interest. (When did sex get so boring? When did it turn into this thing you're supposed to "work at"? Embarrassing isn't it, how long you can go without it if you don't remember to have it, and how much more inviting a good night's sleep can seem compared to those overrehearsed acts. Even though it used to be pretty good—if memory serves—before there was all that sarcasm. Or disappointment. Or children. Or history.)

So here you are, bopping to the beat (you hope), awash in an exotic sensation. Is it enjoyment? A long time since someone looked at you with that kind of interest, isn't it? Various bodily and mental parts are stirred to attention by this close encounter with a body not your spouse's, who's conveniently out of town, or didn't feel like coming, or maybe you're conveniently out of town and . . .

Quash that thought, quickly. That is, if you can call what's going through your mind *thinking.*

Will all the adulterers in the room please stand up? This means all you cheating wives and philandering husbands, past, present, and future. While adultery's paradigmatic form requires the context of a state-sanctioned marriage, any long-term public couple arrangement based on the assumption of sexual fidelity will do for our purposes: gay or straight, anywhere the commitment to monogamy reigns, adultery will provide its structural transgression, and you can commit it with any sex or gender your psyche can manage to organize its desire around (which may not always be the same one that shapes your public commitments).[2] Those who have fantasized about it a lot, please rise also. So may those who have ever played supporting roles in the adultery melodrama: "other man"; "other woman"; suspicious spouse or marital detective *("I called your office at 3 and they said you'd left!");* or, least fun of all, the miserable cuckold or

2. The point that adultery is a structural transgression of marriage is made by Tony Tanner in *Adultery in the Novel: Contract and Transgression* (Baltimore, 1979), pp. 3–11.

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cuckoldess. Which, of course, you may be without—at least consciously—knowing you are. Feel free to take a second to mull this over, or just to make a quick call home: *"Hi hon, just checking in!"*

Those in happy marriages can leave now: this essay is not for you, for whom marriage is a site of optimism, not anesthesia; intensity, not resignation. No one here means to impugn, not for a second, the delights of marital fidelity, the rewards of long-term intimacies. But before you rush the exits, a point of clarification: a happy marriage would mean having—and wanting to have—sex with your spouse on something more than a quarterly basis. It would mean inhabiting a structure of feeling in which monogamy wasn't giving something up (your "freedom," in the vernacular), because such cost-benefit calculations just don't compute. It would require a domestic sphere in which monogamy wasn't proactively secured through routine interrogations *("Who was that on the phone, dear?")*, surveillance *("Do you think I didn't notice how much time you spent talking to X at the reception?")*, or impromptu search and seizure. A "happy" state of monogamy would be defined as a state you don't have to *work* at maintaining.

Yes, we all know that Good Marriages Take Work. But, then, work takes work, too. Wage labor, intimacy labor—are you ever not on the clock? If you're working at monogamy, you've already entered a system of exchange: an economy of intimacy governed—as such economies are—by scarcity, threat, and internalized prohibitions; secured ideologically—as such economies are—by incessant assurances that there are no viable alternatives. When monogamy becomes work, when desire is organized contractually, with accounts kept and fidelity extracted like labor from employees, with marriage a domestic factory policed by means of rigid shop-floor discipline designed to keep the wives and husbands of the world choke-chained to the reproduction machinery—this is a somewhat different state of affairs than Happy Marriage. It requires a different terminology. This mode of intimacy organization we will designate—with a nostalgic tip of the hat to secular liberation theologian Herbert Marcuse, from whom we inherit the concept of "surplus-repression"—*surplus monogamy.*[3]

Maybe it wasn't a party; it was a conference, an airplane, your health club—or, for those who like living on the edge, office hours. The venue doesn't matter; what does is finding yourself so voluptuously hurtled into a state of possibility, a might-be-the-start-of-something kind of moment. You felt transformed: suddenly so charming, so attractive, awakened from emotional deadness, and dumbstruck with all the stabbing desire

3. Marcuse distinguishes "surplus-repression" from "basic repression," that being "the 'modifications' of the instincts necessary for the perpetuation of the human race in civilization" (Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization,* p. 35).

you thought you'd long outgrown. Then there was that first nervous phone call, coffee or a drink, and that incredible marathon conversation—it's been so long since someone really *listened* to you like that. And laughed at your jokes, and looked wistfully into your eyes. And fascinated you. So long since you fascinated yourself. When you touch, "accidentally," an ache of longing lodges itself in mind and groin, replacing an emptiness you hadn't quite acknowledged was there (or had become accustomed to self-medicating with all the usual palliatives). Somehow things quickly get a little more serious than you'd anticipated, which you secretly (all right, desperately) wanted, and now *emotions* are involved, vulnerabilities are involved—emotions you didn't intend on having, vulnerability that thrills you to the core, and you shouldn't be feeling any of this, but you're also weirdly . . . is it elated?

Hard on the heels of that elation is a cold fusion of numbing anxiety and gnawing guilt. You seem to be sweating constantly, an unpleasant, clammy sweat. And, Christ, is that a cold sore? Your stomach's going haywire; your conscience feels like an inflamed appendix, paining you, about to burst open with bile and blame. Are you really the kind of person who does this sort of thing? It's all quite proleptic, this self-punishment, because you haven't really "done anything" yet, but you hate yourself anyway. You decide to talk it out with the new love object, make the graceful exit. "I just can't," you explain mournfully, while realizing that, actually, you can. No reliable statistics are available on the average time lapse between the utterance "I just can't" and the commencement of foreplay, but psycholinguists should consider investigating the phrase's peculiar aphrodisiacal power. And, anyway, guilt is good homeopathic medicine: it reassures you that you're really not a bad person. A bad person wouldn't be feeling guilty.

So here you are, poised on the threshold of a major commandment infraction, about to be inducted into the secret underground guild of marital saboteurs, clogging up the social machinery with their errant desires. You have no *clue* what you're doing. All your theory, all your degrees won't help you here. Consider what follows a handbook, if you like. Or a manifesto—even though this may not yet be the time for adulterers to openly and in the face of the world publish their views, or unite to throw off their chains, to paraphrase a classic of the genre. Or just a footnote to the literature of workplace radicalism.

"People Will Get Hurt," or Keywords of Adultery

> *Idiotic I know, but can't stop thinking about you. (My distraction has not gone unnoticed.) Just a quick email, horribly late already but wanted this to be waiting for you when you wake up. Hoping like crazy I can get away later as promised . . .*

This essay, as should be clear to adultery cognoscenti, is not about the one-night stand: not about your transient conference sex, half-remembered drunken fumblings, or any of the other casual opportunities for bodies to collide in relatively impersonal ways available in the American late-capitalist landscapes of desire, simultaneously hypersexualized and puritanical. Statistics on the percentage of the married who have strayed at least once vary from 20 to 70 percent; apparently taking an occasional walk on the wild side while still wholeheartedly pledged to monogamous marriage isn't necessarily an earthshaking contradiction.[4] Many of us manage to summon merciful self-explanations *("Shouldn't drink on an empty stomach")* as required, or have learned over the years to deploy the strategic exception *("Out of town doesn't count"; "Oral sex doesn't count")*. This essay though, is not about "arrangements" with either self or spouse, or open marriages, or instances when adultery is no big thing.

This essay, rather, is about the affair: exchanges of intimacy, reawakened passion, confession, and idealization—along with books, childhood stories, marital complaints, and self—often requiring agonized consultation with close friends, because one or both parties are married or committed to long-term monogamy with someone else; all this merging and ardor taking place in nervous, hard-won secrecy and turning your world upside down. This is about finding yourself in the interesting circumstance of having elected to live a life from which you now plot intricate and meticulous escapes, a Houdini of the home front, with domesticity a custom-designed straitjacket whose secret combination is the ingenious and undetectable excuses you concoct to explain your mounting absences. When defenses are down, this turn of events may actually raise fundamental questions about what sort of affective world you aspire to inhabit and what fulfillments you're entitled to. (Alternatively, forego hard questions and just up the Prozac prescription, which will probably take care of that resurgent libido problem, too.) This essay is also about the public face of adultery in America at this moment in history, when

4. Sexual self-reporting is notoriously unreliable; the statistics on adultery are simply all over the place. Kinsey's reports famously pegged male adultery at 50 percent in 1948 and female adultery at 26 percent in 1953. The numbers currently in common usage, based on a 1994 survey by the National Opinion Research Center, are quite low by comparison (21 percent for men, 11 percent for women), but suspicion has been cast on the method for arriving at these figures and the data collection method itself (the interviewers were predominantly white, middle-aged women, for example). One problem is that men seem to overreport and women to underreport sexual activity. In the raw numbers gathered for this survey, apparently 64 percent of male sexual contacts can't be accounted for—or, rather, they could if in a pool of thirty-five hundred responses, ten different women each had two thousand partners they didn't report. Researchers thus routinely "adjust" their data by eliminating the high-end male responses, even though it seems unclear why the assumption would be that men misreport upward more than women downward. See David L. Wheeler, "Explaining the Discrepancies in Sex Surveys," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 27 Oct. 1993, p. A9. The relation of any of this data to actual practices seems problematic, to say the least.

adultery has become the favored metonym for all broken promises, intimate and national, a transparent sign for tawdriness and bad behavior. It's about adultery as a cover story. ("In the '90s, infidelity sparks more outrage than it did a few decades ago.")[5] It's about the fear that adultery *puts things at risk:* from the organization of daily life to the very moral fabric of the nation.

To define our terms: the language of work and the condition of overwork will stand in as the modal feeling of the discontented marriage. After all, the demand for fidelity beyond the duration of desire *feels* like work—or work as currently constituted: routinized, unfulfilling, deadened. The workplace vocabulary (and the language of its critique) at least offers an idiom with which to reshape adultery from the object of a predictable moral/ethical response into—we hope—a more open and difficult question. Perhaps in the analogy of workplace protest we may find an idiom, like communism as theorized by Marx and Engels, through which to think about adultery as a form of social articulation, a way of organizing grievances about existing conditions into a collectively imagined form, and one which offers a vehicle for optimism about other, better possibilities.[6] At least it leaves behind the privatizing languages of psychology and neurosis, or ethics, or autobiography, as well as the pseudo-objectivity of sociology—all those conventional idioms typically employed to wrestle this seamy object into rectitude.

Yes, of course adulterers behave badly; deception rules this land. Not knowing what you're doing risks bad faith and an invariable presentism, with sodden emotional disasters eventually strewn behind. Note, though, the phraseology of the charges typically leveled against the adulterer: "immaturity" (failure to demonstrate the requisite degree of civilized repression); "selfishness" (failure to work for the collective good—of course, a somewhat selectively imposed requirement); "boorishness" (failure to achieve proper class behavior). Or the extra fillip of moral trumping: "People will get hurt!"

True, typically, in outbursts of mass dissatisfaction—strikes, rebellions, uprisings—people do, at times, get hurt. Beware of sharp rocks and flying debris. But if adultery summons the shaming language of bad citizenship, this also indicates the extent to which marriage is meant to function as a boot camp for citizenship instruction, a training ground for resignation to the *a priori.* Anything short of a full salute to existing conditions will be named bad ethics. Ambivalence, universal though it may be, is typically regarded as the ur-form of bad marital citizenship,

5. Jerry Adler, "Adultery: A New Furor over an Old Sin," *Newsweek,* 30 Sept. 1996, p. 51.

6. Communists, according to Marx and Engels, have "no interest separate and apart from those of the proletariat as a whole," no "separate principles of their own" (Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto,* trans. Samuel Moore, ed. David McLellan [New York, 1992], p. 17).

but ambivalence may also be thought of as another way to describe a constitutive lack of skill at changing things. We social subjects occupy the possibilities of transformation quite badly, typically having had little training in effecting change; even when not fully resigned to the *a priori,* we are still often quite unable to leave it behind. This may not always present such a pretty picture when seen close up, given that the forms this inertness takes in disappointed marriages—seductiveness, broken promises, emotional vulnerability—perch a little precariously on all that rocky desperation. But at least credit bad marital citizenship with having hatched an entire service industry. Not to worry—marriage counselors are standing by, their profession owing its existence to the cheery idea that ambivalence is a curable condition. Ambivalence may indeed fade into resignation, and given a high enough tolerance for unhappiness, this *counts* as a cure—particularly in the absence of countertheories of everyday life. But even if adultery is construed as a critical practice with respect to existing conditions, this is practice galumphing far ahead of theory. If passionate love evolves from mistaken identity anyway—that poignant psychoanalytic paradigm—all parties here can expect to be governed by an overdetermined degree of aporia. Adulterers, lovers, adultery theorists, too—we're all madly flinging ourselves down uncharted paths, falling back on bad alibis after scattering telltale clues, which we will be forced, at some point, to confront.[7] In adultery, its blockages to knowledge joined at the hip to the lures of disavowal, all the players—adulterers, lovers, theorists—risk drowning in the same swirling, antinomic tidal wave of feelings, cramped up with hubris and quixotry, having thought ourselves shrewd and agile enough to surf the crest despite the posted danger signs. You may say you're not going to get in too deep; you may say you just want to have fun; but before you know it you're flattened by a crashing wave from nowhere and left gasping for air with a mouthful of sand.

Given the absence of concepts that could bridge the gap between the present and a future lifeworld where mise-en-scènes for change exist, given a prevailing ethos of conformity and renunciation, where are the avenues of resistance, aside from subcultures of bad behavior and pockets of social deviancy?[8] Marcuse, patron saint of vernacular utopians, had a soft spot for outcasts and outsiders who oppose social cohesion ("Their opposition is revolutionary even if their consciousness is not").[9] Protest, in other words, however inchoate, has to be protected from moral sham-

7. On the theme of love as mistaken identity, see Judith Livingston, "Love and Illusion," *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 65 (1996): 548–50.

8. On the links between criminal or deviant subcultures and social stasis, see Eric Hobsbawm, *Bandits* (New York, 1981); Stuart Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (London, 1978); and Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London, 1979).

9. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man,* p. 256.

ing about what it may fail to know about itself. If the forms such protests take have, at times, a fantasmic or even scummy character, then dialectically speaking isn't this simply a reflection of real conditions of existence? Aren't there concrete grounds for the refusal of conformity, just as there are concrete causes of this underdeveloped capacity to think creatively, or agentively, or collectively about change?

Thus it may be that what an essay on this subject can best hope to accomplish is an erratic reproduction of the structure—and structuring antinomies—of its object: bad behavior and inchoate longings trolling around for a theory adequate to them. This is an essay about compromise formations and what they feel like. We will be shuttling between rubrics and voices that don't necessarily map onto each other: from complaint to mourning, from Marx to Freud, from utopia to kitsch, and from self-parody to earnestness. We will be insufficient to our object. Just like all you adulterers out there, tripping over your big floppy shoes chasing improbable fulfillment, knowing full well it has the whiff of a doomed undertaking, we theorists, too, propel ourselves in pursuit of seductive and alluring objects because something essential seems to lie in that general direction. Trying to retell tired old stories about quotidian unhappiness as collective narratives that transcend individual angst may risk hubris, though, not to mention embarrassment. It means imagining—as adulterers so often do—that you can do it differently, that you can engineer, through sheer will, a different moral and affective universe.

The elegiac mode does traditionally allow a certain excess, so please read what follows in a mournful spirit. Please dignify the risks and hopes of those everyday utopians who have trod this path before us with some patience for the bad bargains and compensatory forms the miserable classes engineer for themselves in daily life. So many comrades have met such joyless and dismal fates, dutifully renouncing what they once recognized as their best desires under threat of horrific losses and tortures in the merciless tribunals of marital inquisition. They "had no choice." And, so, to those who did not survive to realize their own wishes for different selves and better futures, who could only filch a few brief moments of happiness and self-reinvention before being drop-kicked, shamed and self-loathing, back to the marital *gulags,* we mourn your deaths, you, the disappeared classes once so full of love and hope and desire and reasonableness. We leave bouquets at your gravesides, bouquets of flowery prose.

Necromimesis, or The Condition of Believing One Is Dead

> *Last night was delicious, though stumbling around in a stupor today and completely behind on everything. All discipline completely shot to hell. Your fault. Talk later? Desperate to hear your voice . . .*

Good marriages may take work, but unfortunately, in erotic life, trying is always trying too hard: work doesn't work.[10] Erotically speaking, play is what works. Nevertheless, while labor and capital may have struck a temporary truce at the eight-hour workday (an advance crumbling around us as we speak), in our emotional culture it's double shifting for everyone.[11] With one sphere sliding so smoothly into the other—production/reproduction, public/private, wage labor/relationship labor—what's the difference if the system chugs along most efficiently when each entails the other, with overwork, obedience, and the illusion of free choice the structuring conditions of all? Joint membership requires only a certain enforced renunciation of play—or of playing around—even when off the clock. The work ethic long ago penetrated the sphere of leisure; leisure, too, as we know, also takes a lot of work.[12] Is intimacy already the next lost cause? Or do you labor happily under the conviction that intimacy is your haven from the heartless brutality of the marketplace and domestic labor a refuge from the daily grind of wage labor? Oh, it's a labor of love? Sentimentality about the work ethic is not exactly a new story—as Marx should have said if he didn't—given how useful it is in heading off unsentimental inquiries into the frequently soul-crippling conditions of the factories, productive or reproductive.

Marx himself leaned heavily on Gothic metaphors of menacing deadness in the course of answering his own plaintive question, "What is a working day?"[13] It turns out that the mise-en-scène of the workday is a veritable graveyard, menaced by gruesome creatures and ghouls from the world of the ambulatory dead. Overwork produces stunted monsters; capital is a blood-sucking vampire, its machinery a big congealed mass of "dead labour" (*C,* 1:342); and the working day has become a site of contestation between workers and owners because the "werewolf-like hunger for surplus labor" is so ravenous that if laborers didn't fight about it, the workday would be subject to unlimited extension (*C,* 1:353).

The motif of being bled dry keeps cropping up in Marx's iconogra-

10. "In our erotic life. . . . it is no more possible to work at a relationship than it is to will an erection, or arrange to have a dream. In fact when you are working at it you know it has gone wrong, that something is already missing" (Adam Phillips, *Monogamy* [New York, 1996], p. 62).

11. One of the most common labor law violations is failure to pay for overtime work, to the tune of some $19 billion a year. See "Overtime Blues," *The Nation,* 10 Mar. 1997, p. 7.

12. See Robert Goldman, "'We Make Weekends': Leisure and the Commodity Form," *Social Text,* no. 8 (Winter 1983–84): 84–103.

13. Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy,* trans. Ben Fowkes, 3 vols. (New York, 1976), 1:342; hereafter abbreviated *C.* Much of this language occurs in volume 1, chapter 10, "The Working Day," but it is scattered throughout. On Marx's use of metaphor, see Chris Baldick, *In Frankenstein's Shadow: Myth, Monstrosity, and Nineteenth-Century Writing* (Oxford, 1987), pp. 121–40. For another turn through the affective boneyard, see Lauren Berlant on "dead citizenship," in her "Live Sex Acts (Parental Advisory: Explicit Material)," *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham, N. C., 1997), pp. 55–81, an analysis that influences mine significantly.

phy of the workday, in which surplus labor is unpaid labor unsentimentally extracted from the already tapped-out bodies of exhausted workers, who will be left crippled monstrosities by the process. Surplus labor is the differential between "necessary labor," or the number of hours of work necessary to produce the value of your pay, and the total length of the workday (*C,* 1:325). The value of those extra hours are expropriated from the worker for the purpose of sustaining owners and institutions. The difference between the two—the ratio of necessary to surplus labor—is both the origin of profit and a formula to calculate overwork: in Marx's idiom, the rate of exploitation. Given the "vampire thirst for the living blood of labour," says Marx, the prolongation of the working day beyond the limits of the natural day and into the night will only ever partially palliate capital (*C,* 1:367). Since forced labor until death from overwork looks so bad—a little too *visibly* exploitative—one solution is shift work. Bring in the night crew, work them, send them home, and bring on the midnight shift.

In the Marriage Takes Work regime of normative intimacy, when the work shift ends and the domestic shift begins hardly makes much difference; from surplus labor to surplus monogamy is a short, easy commute. Under conditions of surplus monogamy, adultery—a sphere of purposelessness, outside contracts, not colonized by the logic of productivity and the performance principle—becomes something beyond a structural possibility. It's a counterlogic to the prevailing system.

After all, when Marriage Takes Work—and it didn't always; this is an ideology that accompanied the rise of what historians of emotion call the "companionate couple"—what we get is a new form of compulsory labor.[14] With the extension of the working day into leisure time and the consequent transformations in intimacy, it means, in effect, a massive giveback in the overall ratio of necessary labor to surplus labor for the average citizen: vertical integration in exploitation. The struggle over the length of the workday formed the basis of worker activism in Marx's day, when the ten-hour day was considered a humanitarian advance. In our own period we see, by contrast, a weird affinity for work—or so you'd imagine given the popularity of the assumption that you keep on doing it in your off-hours. But interestingly, as contemporary work sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild notes, one reason for the current creeping expansion of the paid workday is that large segments of the workforce are putting in increasing hours of overtime because they're *avoiding going home.*[15] Labor strikes in the sphere of reproduction were a development Marx failed to foresee. Not surprisingly, it turns out to be the Christian

14. See Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love, and Eroticism in Modern Societies* (Stanford, Calif., 1992), p. 155.

15. See Arlie Russell Hochschild, "Time in the Balance," *The Nation,* 26 May 1997, p. 11; excerpted from Hochschild's book *The Time Bind: When Work Becomes Home and Home Becomes Work* (New York, 1997).

Right that has kept tabs on marital slackers and stepped forward with the antidote, a movement which goes by the name of the Promise Keepers—mass rallies of Christian husbands (2.7 million in 1997) who pack into football stadiums by the tens of thousands, singing hymns, chanting sports cheers, confessing sexual sins, and repledging their marriage vows (to each other—wives don't take part) in frenzied affirmations of God and patriotism. Note, however, the degree to which here, too, the language of work saturates the marital scene. "Let me ask you this question," thunders one leader to the assembled masses of husbands, exhorting them to spend more time with their wives. "What would your business look like if you applied the same amount of mental and emotional energy to it that you do to understanding your wife? Am I far off the mark when I say that most of America would be bankrupt?"[16]

The point that monogamous marriage is founded on the private property relation is familiar enough not to need rehearsing here, but an essay claiming the tradition of the left critique of the family can hardly be complete without noting one additional (if well-known) fact, namely, that marriages bind couples together not just by means of affect, but juridically.[17] Just as for Marx, the role of the state in protecting dominant interests is not exactly neutral—meaning that on those occasions when, for example, federal troops fire on striking workers, we might not want to describe their return to work as precisely voluntary—so too we must mention that in matters of domestic labor, as well, the state makes its compelling interest in promoting good marital citizenship quite clear. In many locales, sex with someone who isn't your spouse means betraying the state as well as your mate—and can this be completely without affective consequences?[18] In the nation of marriage, adultery is traitorship, divorce means having your passport revoked, and who mediates your

16. Quoted in Linda Kintz, "The Appeal and Danger of Sacred Familiarity: The Promise Keepers" (unpublished paper), p. 6. See also Ron Stodghill II, "God of Our Fathers," *Time,* 6 Oct. 1997, pp. 34–40.

17. See Mark Poster, *Critical Theory of the Family* (New York, 1978), and Eli Zaretsky, *Capitalism, the Family, and Personal Life* (New York, 1976). For materialist feminist critiques, see, for example, Michèle Barrett, *Women's Oppression Today: Problems in Marxist Feminist Analysis* (London, 1980); Barrett and Mary McIntosh, *The Anti-Social Family* (London, 1982); and Christine Delphy, *Close to Home: A Materialist Analysis of Women's Oppression,* trans. and ed. Diana Leonard (Amherst, Mass., 1984). The inception of much of this general line of thinking is in Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (Harmondsworth, 1986); the critique of the family continues as a general theme in Frankfurt School critical theory, particularly in the work of Wilhelm Reich.

18. The state of Louisiana has even introduced something called covenant marriage, which couples can elect over civil marriage and which will make divorces more difficult to obtain—incompatibility isn't sufficient grounds, although adultery is. State officials predict more states will follow suit. Divorce laws vary from state to state, but as of 1988 only five states had no adultery laws on the books. See Annette Lawson, *Adultery: An Analysis of Love and Betrayal* (New York, 1988), p. 42. Tanner also discusses adultery in relation to contract law and the state in *Adultery in the Novel,* pp. 3–11.

subjection to the state but your spouse? Infidelity makes you an infidel to the law, for which your spouse becomes an emblem, the hinge between the privacy of your desires and the power of the state installed right there in your master bedroom. We may always already be legal subjects, with divorce court, property settlements, and custody arrangements entreating faithfulness should will and vows alone not do the trick, but keeping those promises means at least not inviting the law to make its presence any more *felt* than necessary in your life, not having to dwell upon your subjection *too* consciously.

The Marital Panopticon

> *Bad moment over last month's phone bill. Did you know they now break local calls down by zone? (Although, thank God, not yet by number!) There seems to be an astronomical number of calls to one zone all of a sudden—this took some quick thinking! Am only going to be able to call from the office for a while . . .*

Yes, of course, we all understand jealousy. But remember that the state too casts a jealous, insecure, watchful eye on the fidelity of its citizens. Every regime knows that good intelligence props up its rule; thus, best to figure you're being watched at every moment. The big eye watches and observes: you never know exactly when, or from where. When it doesn't like what it sees, it fashions itself after police interrogation techniques. The most practiced spouses can play both sides of the good cop/bad cop routine. (*"Just tell me, I promise I'll understand. . . . You did WHAT?!"*) Once suspicions are aroused, the crisis alarm starts shrilling, and at that point any tactics are justified to ensure your loyalty—although, as with the FBI, keep in mind that since almost anything can arouse suspicion, "preventative domestic policing" will always be an option.

Sure, easy to feel sympathetic to the wronged spouse: humiliated, undesired, getting fat, deserving better. The question of why someone cheats on you or leaves you can never be adequately explained. As the cuckolded say on the soaps, clinging to tattered dignity, "I want some answers!"—but what would really constitute an answer? Realizing that people are talking; that friends knew and you didn't; that someone has been poaching in your pasture, stealing what is, by law, yours is a special kind of shame. And even if you don't particularly want to have sex with your spouse, it's a little galling that someone else does. (This fact can also spark a belated resurgence of desire; the suspicion-ridden marriage bed is at times a pretty steamy place.) So here's a question for you spouse-detectives: as you're combing through those credit card receipts, or scanning through email, or perfecting the art of noiselessly lifting up extensions—what are you hoping to find? If you're looking, you basically

know the answer, yet you're still there. And if you don't find anything this time, are you willing to declare the matter settled? Hardly! Suspicion is addictive, even, at times, perversely gratifying. After all, rectitude is on your side, and you want those promises kept, damn it. You want those vows obeyed. You want *security.* Of course you want love, and who doesn't?—not, least of all, the state. But you'll settle for obedience, and, when all else fails, you'll take adherence to forms. It's not as though you don't know when you're being lied to, though, and having transfigured yourself into a one-person citizen surveillance unit, how can you not hate your spouse for forcing you to act with such a lack of dignity?

Modern societies have covert emotional histories.[19] If social conditions are alienating and fantasmic, private life is no less so, and knowledge about those conditions will be alienated and fantasmic as well. Take the plangent cry of the adulterer caught in the act: "I didn't know what I was doing!" Too true. If the adulterous wish lodges itself in the fundamental psychic split between the pleasure-ego and the reality-ego, the resulting collision course between deeply unknowable motives and the intransigence of the reality principle can only ceaselessly reproduce the contours of that division.[20] Of course adultery's practices will be structured as a series of unreconcilable antinomies: as much blockage to knowledge as a condition of its possibility; as much romance with possibilities of transformation as aversion to change. Idealization and deidealization, utopianism and despair, knowing and disavowing, the whole enterprise mirroring both long-suppressed desires and a bleak conviction about the futility of ever realizing them. With approach-avoidance choreographing the whole long *folie à trois,* even when the lights stay on, so much of adultery takes place in the dark.

But try to think. When adultery happened to you, serious adultery—what exactly happened? Despite the anxiety, the guilt, didn't you, in some ridiculously short space of time, begin risking things you never thought you'd risk, without a clue how you'd gotten yourself into the whole thing or what disasters were waiting around the next corner (or the next phone bill)? Every moronic love song drilled a pathway directly to your deepest self, and even while fully aware of just how trite a thing you were doing, wasn't it a million times more compelling than anything else in your life? You may have been hurtled up and down the entire gamut of emotions from one hour to the next, consuming Tums like Raisinets, but didn't you

19. See Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy,* p. 2.

20. A term that defines the subject's relation to the outside world and modes of access to reality. Given that the two expressions are invariably opposed to one another, the reality principle usually gets to settle the debate—although less so in the case of sexual instincts, which are "more difficult to 'educate' than the ego-instincts" (J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, "Pleasure-Ego/Reality-Ego," *The Language of Psycho-Analysis,* trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith [New York, 1973], p. 320; see also pp. 320–22).

feel suddenly reborn, with the power to reinvent everyday life, to act toward it as if surprise, risk, gratification, and fulfillment were genuinely imaginable possibilities?

What did you want? What *do* adulterers want—as Freud should have asked if he didn't.[21] Not to feel dead? Not to feel miserable? You didn't care for how long—you weren't even really thinking all that clearly, to tell the truth, although you knew enough to feel slightly embarrassed by the banality of saying your spouse didn't understand you—even though it's *true*. And if you spilled the most intimate details of your marriage after a couple of shots of scotch, it's just because you haven't felt *connected* to anyone in so long. You just wanted to feel the optimism of a new thing, something in which everything wasn't known in advance, wasn't so fucking predictable.

Is there anyone completely shameless about simply desiring not to be emotionally dead? What sort of entitlement does it take to risk feeling alive, unarmed with the twin weapons of self-justification and self-abasement, whether vented to potential affair mates or just a private tune on auto-play somewhere deep in your reptile brain. (Situational ethics must have been invented in the inner monologues of the adulterer.) For all the theoretical circulation of the term *desire,* and all the disciplines that currently claim it as their terrain—from lit-crit to architecture—why are its specific enactments so cringe-inducing? When did desire become so banal—such a middlebrow enterprise?[22] Or, to put the question slightly differently, what makes us so faithful to these languages of shame and banality? Although as a citizenry we've produced a massive amount of largely negative fascination with the subject of adultery over the course of the last decade or so, hurling all sorts of language at it, aren't we still quite sure there's nothing of interest to say about it? In a society in which

21. The question actually paraphrases one posed in Michael Warner's slightly melancholy introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory:* "What do queers want? This volume takes for granted that the answer is not just sex. Sexual desires themselves can imply other wants, ideals, and conditions" (Michael Warner, introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory,* ed. Warner [Minneapolis, 1993], p. vii; hereafter abbreviated "I"). Warner proposes affiliating critical work in queer theory with the left tradition of "dissatisfaction with the regime of the normal in general," although pointing out that left social theory often manages to exile sexuality from even work on social reproduction ("I," p. xxvii). For Warner, too, critical social theories of sexuality double as a "carrier of utopian imagination" ("I," p. viii).

22. A random example of the ubiquity of the language of banality when it comes to adultery: "In telling the story of Nona, a narcissistic, 40-year-old New Yorker who leaves a 'patient, loving' husband for a short, pitiful affair, Sigrid Nunez's second novel could verge on the banal. But with her well-pitched prose . . ." (Christine Schwartz Hartley, review of *Naked Sleeper,* by Sigrid Nunez, *New York Times Book Review,* 1 Dec. 1996, p. 23). Questions about happiness seem to automatically invoke fears of banality: even Freud fretted about this in *Civilization and Its Discontents,* wondering if his observation that life isn't made for our happiness was a waste of paper and ink. See Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents,* trans. James Strachey (New York, 1961), p. 71.

all spheres of existence have achieved such happy harmony that the same languages suffice for work, leisure, and love, and pledged as we are to a society without opposition, whose great achievement is to have effected exactly this paralysis of criticism, knowing what future you might want—achieving critical knowledge—becomes a fraught and complicated affair.[23] There are few languages for it, besides sex, that is—a natural idiom for utopianism, without the clunkiness of language; a ready-made habitat for so many forms of wishing.[24]

Marriage on the rocks? Have the feeling there must be more to living than this?[25] Sorry, but according to company policy, grievance procedures must be lodged in therapeutic idioms for which, it turns out, the disease doubles as the prescription. Clearly you're not working hard enough. Solution: therapy labor.

"I Wasn't Thinking"

For Marx, in his more epistemologically optimistic moments, exploitation in itself is a route to knowledge production. Conditions of overwork and access to consciousness about it *should* be proximate because this kind of consciousness is, after all, fundamentally embodied knowledge: born of exhaustion, the aging process, and direct observation of the conditions of production. Thus, workers naturally start to husband their resources, their labor. They become ornery and thrifty, resistant to wasting it foolishly, especially to the extent that more of it is demanded from them than feels just. Absent sentiment, and without other blockages to knowledge, resistance to exploitation should be an inevitable consequence of a production process predicated on overwork, a process only exacerbated as exploitation is intensified. If collective demands for better conditions are ignored, workers will organize, bargain, or strike—knowledgeable that when it comes to bosses, "any appeal to [the] heart [or] sentiment is out of place" (*C,* 1:343). In the end, "the bourgeoisie . . . produces . . . its own grave-diggers."[26]

In practice, as it turns out, there are as many impediments to knowledge and resistance as the day is long, impediments both ideological and material—not to mention invariable trade-offs between short-term reforms and systemic transformations. The story of why things don't change

23. The critique of a society without opposition is Marcuse's general theme in *One-Dimensional Man.*

24. This line of argument is developed more fully in Laura Kipnis, *Bound and Gagged: Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America* (New York, 1996).

25. For Charles Taylor, asking oneself "what makes life worth living?" is the fundamental question of modern subjecthood (Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* [Cambridge, Mass., 1989], p. 4).

26. Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto,* p. 16. See also *C,* 1:342–45, 1:929–30.

is a long and complicated story indeed. Ever more elaborate theories are devised to account for why everything keeps on just like before, or gets worse. We have formulae that explain the adaptability of capital to new conditions of accumulation. We devise origin narratives about processes of subjectivity pathetically eager to auction off their consent to any lowball bidder that comes up the pike. We make calibrations of the precise number of orbits reality takes before reappearing upside down, bobbing in the specular seas of ideology. Critical theorists may skirmish about whether Marx needs Freud more than Freud needs Marx, but it's a little like asking whether it's the Tin Man or the Scarecrow who should lead us to the revolution. As history sorts it out, we, its subjects, shuttle between two incompletely theorized spheres—love and work, subjective processes and objective processes—punching in, punching out, trying to wrest love from the bosses when not busily toiling in the mine shafts of domesticity. Or is it the reverse?

The miserable classes can frequently be located scraping for happier consciousness in the discreetly soundproofed offices of therapeutic culture—psychoanalysis and its various domesticated offshoots—where it's circumscribed as "self-knowledge" and the authorized forms of desire are those pollinated in the hothouse of the nuclear family, forever in lockstep with its oedipal teleologies. It's not that we social subjects don't register the contradictions of our collective existences: we register them painfully and seek relief, salves, treatment. But even when desire maladies are treated as social relations—and often in therapy they are, up to a point (the mantra of the M.S.W.: "Tell them how you feel")—it's an interpersonal relation rather than a psychosocial affair, with your excess desires typically recast along a developmental teleology, something maturity will eventually cure. That the invention of romantic love was coincident with the invention of the novel has been widely noted: if entering romance gives you a story to tell about yourself, then entering therapy begins a project of retronarration in which desires that exceed social conventions invariably find their origin stories in the rubric of individual trauma or childhood deprivations. You can be fairly certain it's not going to be the social order that's organized pathologically, it's you. Conflicts in the realm of desire act out something "unresolved" in the self—a buried thing you will certainly have to spend years excavating, in regular visits and at no small cost. Cure will likely necessitate renouncing whatever it is that interferes with playing out your assigned role in social reproduction. But at least regular office visits will take the edge off any corners of psychic life not yet integrated into existing conditions.

According to Freud, desire *is* regressive; from certain vantage points—a psychoanalytically inflected radical politics, for example—this is a good thing about it. Therapy culture at its best may offer a degree of moral lability; but despite its often quite supple languages about intimacy—even while describing, for example, romantic love as potentially

"a powerful agent of change"—the sort of change envisioned here is of the socialism-in-one-country variety: transformation in one psyche.[27] We have no emotional correlate of a labor theory of value to calculate the rate of overwork in the private sphere—in other words, what portion of intimacy shift work is necessary labor that sustains and dignifies the intimate subject and what portion is sucked from you simply because, as Marx puts it, "the vampire will not let go 'while there remains a single muscle, sinew or drop of blood to be exploited'" (*C,* 1:416). The gap between theory and practice grows ever wider, while corollary forms like lying and self-alienation multiply correspondingly.

Some so-called pragmatic versions of marital etiquette hold that lies are, at times, required to sustain the long-term couple. This may indeed be true. But lying is also a statement about the presence of power, implicitly a calculation that the truth will put you at risk. As with other strategic adaptations to situations premised on unfreedom, deception becomes necessary when having desires that don't conform to the shape of an externally imposed system will subject you to harsh treatment.[28] Wanting two things at once is, after all, the topography of the Freudian psyche, whether or not having antinomic desires is a marital taboo. Given the ambivalent nature of your desires, producing a false version of yourself (self-alienation) is one solution, splitting another.[29] Splitting is inevitable in any case. But this need not be simply a routine matter of assigning competing desires to different agencies of your psyche; adultery affords the far more elegant solution of externalizing the conflict through the competing agents of your custom-designed triangle. Transformational desiring is bequested to your idlike seducees, who, taking on the risks of your fantasies and incoherence, are guaranteed to mistake the semantics of everyday misery for a rescue plea or for the language of a real future. The two do sound awfully similar, given that restless adulterers, like mouldering POWs, will promise anything for a shot at freedom—and besides, there's no "no" in the language of the unconscious. "You led me on!" the wounded lover invariably charges, as if it were somehow *your* fault. (Like you were in control or something!) The spouse plays superego, of course, and you—well, you don't know anything about it. What's an ego for if not disavowal? Or keeping up appearances?

The worship of appearances, it might be recalled, also has a certain

27. Livingston, "Love and Illusion," p. 549.

28. For Michel de Certeau tactics like "poaching," "ruses," and "deception" are deployed against the power of established orders, thus, reading de Certeau backward, may be taken as a clue to its presence as well (Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life,* trans. Steven F. Rendall [Berkeley, 1984], pp. 31, 37).

29. Or see Phillips, who poses it as an individual question about self-knowledge: "What does commitment leave out of the picture that we might want?" (Phillips, *On Flirtation* [Cambridge, Mass. 1994], p. xviii; see also pp. xviii–xx). The question is about flirtation, but translates well enough to adultery.

centrality in Marx's thoughts about social life, as the modal subjectivity of alienated labor. In the sphere of reproductive labor, too, we see a fetish of surface appearances—of virtue, of the happy couple—representing the parallel subjectivity to alienated labor, its stay-at-home spouse. In deadened domesticity, the products of affective labor also seem to take on a life of their own. The affective commodity too comes to subsume and dominate its producers, who, lacking any perspective on what they've lost, allow themselves to be transformed into mere appendages to the process. Paradoxically, this gives the machinery—productive or reproductive—magical powers, and it grows ever more powerful, taking on a life and soul of its own quite apart from you. So you escape as often as you can, stoking the machine with more lies about where you've been (*"Search committee meeting tonight—yes I know it's the third time this month!"*), self-alienated in love as in labor.

For Marx, the process of surplus extraction inherently produces coldness. "Capital is dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks" (*C,* 1:342). Deadness inheres in the very machinery of production, itself the product of labors past; but this thing that *you* invented and onto which *you* bestowed life now confronts you as a hostile alien force. It doesn't exist for you; you exist for it, to nourish its insatiable desire for fresh labor. But in your alienation, you misrecognize the products of your labor as something separate and autonomous, something imbued with power over you. You pay deference to the machinery, accede to its demands—partly because they come so prettily packaged in the guise of affective ties. As Marx says of the capitalist machinery, cribbing the romantic idiom from Goethe, it "becomes an animated monster, and it starts to act 'as if consumed by love'" (*C,* 1:1007).

Funny how this funereal argot haunts the scene of reproduction as well: dead marriages, frozen desires, cold husbands and frigid wives, all going through the motions, just a little machinelike themselves. Those vampires of capital seem to have followed you home and sunk their fangs in for another feeding. Your desire may have vacated the scene, you may long for other things, but you're indentured nevertheless because you've poured so much of yourself into the machine already—your lifeblood, your history. But unlike the coldness of surplus labor, the sucked-dry emotional deadness of surplus monogamy relies on producing a fundamental *disembodiment:* "Shut up!" it says to embodied desires. However, if the extraction of surplus labor in the sphere of production produces embodied knowledge, the extraction of surplus monogamy, conversely, produces a stupefying bodily self-alienation. The utility of delibidinalization (apart from Freud's claim that there's a certain comfort in deadness) is that it secures more than just spousal fidelity; it organizes a fundamental acquiescence to shrunken desires that the labor process alone can't

manage to accomplish. Surplus monogamy doesn't merely ask that you renounce other lovers; it's a pledge to the ethos of renunciation itself.

Renunciation does seem to be enjoying something of a social whirl in these return-to-the family 1990s. With all the aggressive familialism pervading the zeitgeist, aspirations for collectivity have been downsized to about the size of a nuclear household. With the emergence of HIV as a convenient narrative denouement for any remaining countercultural fantasies of psychosexual reinvention, the heteronormative social narrative can now pretty confidently reassert its favorite myth, that "monogamous relationships are not only the norm but ultimately everyone's deepest desire."[30] Asserting otherwise invites doses of ritual shaming. Not only adultery's practitioners, but its chroniclers, too, are paraded through the town square of our small village under the sign of vulgar theory, derision hurled like spitballs. ("'Adultery'? It sounds like one of those celebration of transgression essays," pronounces a recently betrothed villager.)[31] Even the counterhegemonic rank and file, who could once be counted on at least to *notice* the rapport between the prevailing social organization of sexuality and the grander designs of capitalist patriarchy, have the stockades primed. Censure from the left: "The committed life doesn't have time for soap operas like adultery, which, after all, simply thematize late capitalism's colonization of interiority. This isn't race, it isn't class—the *real* social contradictions—it's suffering suburbanites and petit bourgeois individualism."[32] A reproach from feminists: "Isn't adultery just an exercise of male prerogative and a mirror of gender inequities? Isn't the standard demographic the tearful single woman and the sex-starved married man? And just who do you think is more vulnerable to exploitation in that couple?"[33] In the meantime, gay activists are lobbying for

30. Douglas Crimp, "How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic," *October,* no. 43 (Winter 1987): 253.

31. Response to an earlier version of this essay presented at the 1996 MLA convention in Washington, D.C. Thank you to my interlocutors in the "Vulgar Marxism" audience.

32. So responded a Marxist reader of an earlier version of this essay (with apologies for poetic license). An extensive left literature critiques the attention devoted by cultural studies to "minor forms" like fandom, subcultures, pornography, and other marginalia, routinely accusing this work of neglecting the centrality of class. See, for example, Judith Williamson, "The Perils of Being Popular," *New Socialist* (Sept. 1986): 14–15; Corey Dolgon, "Challenging Cultural Studies: Not by 'Culture' Alone," *Minnesota Review* 43–44 (Fall 1994–Spring 1995): 99–112; Teresa Ebert, "Ludic Feminism, the Body, Performance, and Labor: Bringing *Materialism* Back into Feminist Cultural Studies," *Cultural Critique* 23 (Winter 1992–93): 20–26; and Mike Budd, Robert M. Entman, and Clay Steinman, "The Affirmative Character of U.S. Cultural Studies," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 7 (1990): 169–84.

33. So responded an early feminist reader (again, apologies for poetic license). Recent reports suggest there are generational shifts in these arrangements and that women in their twenties are now more likely to stray then men. Therapists also report anecdotally that adultery among women is increasing. See Adler, "Adultery," p. 58. The literature—popular, psychological, sociological—on gender roles in adultery is, of course, enormous, and while

entree into the ranks of the legally married, while reinventing monogamy under the guise of healthful living and a new, greener terminology of renunciation: "sexual ecology."[34]

With the language of renunciation uniting so many former social antagonists; with such universal reconciliation to the view that out-of-scale desires make bad theory, bad subjects, and a bad polis; when even social critique is mounted in terms remarkably congenial to the shriveled expectations of the current conjuncture, is there no outside to all this newfound social harmony? When refusal seems like just so much childishness or churlishness, with resistance coded as bad behavior and quickly recouped by the individualizing vocabularies of psychology or ethics, is there no collective narrative that can at least be glued together from the fragments of individual experience? When another theorist of workplace radicalism, E. P. Thompson, chronicled the story of nineteenth-century class struggle, he zoomed in on prototransformational moments in which the state seemed to teeter on the brink of change but revolution failed to congeal. What Thompson reveals in the process of tracking these outbreaks of resistance is that—however spontaneous, nascent, or voluntarist they may appear—what looked like isolated events formed part of a larger narrative. However, given the absence of implements—or theories—for nourishing transformational moments and the lack of contexts to support any kind of full-scale transformation, the impetus for social change, though clearly pressing and clearly present, was detoured into insurrection or bought off by short-term reforms. But then, as Thompson points out, it was precisely the impediments to telling a collective story that gave the events in question—those outbreaks of resistance and rebellion, sabotage and wildcat strikes—their spontaneous, disjointed character. Without enabling narratives, these various shards of resistance never managed to organize themselves into revolutionary challenges. But that doesn't mean there isn't a collective story to tell about them. According to Thompson, one such shard, notably, was the Romantic tradition, whose resistance to Utilitarianism ran a parallel course to political radicalism but failed to merge with it into any sort of effective political challenge. As Thompson puts it, elegiacally: "In the failure of the two traditions to come to a point of junction, something was lost. How much we cannot be

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certain roles may be commonly associated with certain genders (cheating husbands, jealous wives), sociologists also indicate that the more education women have, the more likely they are to have affairs. In couples in which the wife has more education than the husband, she's the one more likely to stray. See Lawson, *Adultery*, p. 79. I presume I'm addressing a readership with a high degree of postgraduate education and one in which gender roles may perhaps be less predictable. Hence my avoidance of gendered pronouns throughout the essay.

34. See the recent book by Gabriel Rotello, *Sexual Ecology: AIDS and the Destiny of Gay Men* (New York, 1997). For the argument against Rotello and gay neoconservatism generally, see Warner, "Media Gays: A New Stone Wall," *The Nation*, 14 July 1997, pp. 15–19.

sure, for we are among the losers."[35] Change that capital *R* to lowercase, and the relevance to the forms of intimacy under discussion might become more apparent.

The history of why things don't change is a long, complicated history indeed. In our time, when intimacy saturates all aspects of the public sphere, from politics to culture to law, its regimes and temporalities are certainly as instrumental in pacifying the citizenry and securing social cohesion as were those of the workplace when work ruled the land.[36] It's easy to miss the aspirations and wishes coded in small gestures of resistance and insurgency. But with intimacy the structure-in-dominance at this conjuncture, is reading *Capital* as a marriage manual really all *that* idiosyncratic? (Marx was himself, of course, a notorious adulterer.)[37]

Stolen Moments

> *Christ, I didn't get home until after 1. That took some explaining. We really have to be more careful . . .*

Is ever a wristwatch checked more frequently than when in the midst of the adulterous love affair? Caught in adultery's throes, even the most punctilious clock punchers will begin running perpetually late, missing appointments, double-booking, even somehow leaving watches behind in places they had no business being to begin with. Basically, you'll risk just about everything for those stolen moments with your beloved. Time is a finite resource and not exactly yours to possess, as you'll soon discover, now that your greatest desire is to transfer vast sums of it into the accounts of the one you love. The regulation of time and temporality is one of the most fundamental modes of reconciliation to the social, yet now, for a mere "free" evening, you'll break your commitments and breach your ethics; risk exposure, betrayal, property, reputation, and all-too-certain eventual misery in the service of redistributing this most precious of commodities. (The adulterer's rallying cry: not "Liberate the prisoners!" but "Free time!")[38]

35. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1964), p. 832.

36. See Berlant, "Introduction: The Intimate Public Sphere," *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*, pp. 1–24.

37. Given the current apotheosis of autobiographical writing into the genre-in-dominance and the corresponding critical move to regard all writing *as*, fundamentally, autobiography, it now becomes possible to read Marx's chapter on the workday as a protracted discussion of his own marriage and struggles with fidelity. See Kipnis, *Marx: The Video* (1990) or its script, "Marx: The Video, a Politics of Revolting Bodies," in Kipnis, *Ecstasy Unlimited: On Sex, Capital, Gender, and Aesthetics* (Minneapolis, 1993), pp. 243–93.

38. This discussion of poaching time draws largely on de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, but the regulation of time is also a theme in Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization*. The literature on the colonization of time by capital is also quite vast.

Stolen moments: what a dumb cliché. But time has been transformed into a currency you're embezzling from its rightful owners: spouse, job, children, pets—in order to fabricate new temporalities. You become a specialist of everyday ruses, coughing up complex and instantaneous explanations for all those unauthorized breaks. You'll be needing to work late quite a lot, or to make frequent, lengthy visitations to the library for your research. *("Don't wait up!")* Suddenly the car needs numerous repairs; errands seem to multiply; an out-of-town trip is furtively extended for a day. And it's not just time you're ripping off, it's the wage-labor system itself. Instead of working on that paper that was due days or weeks ago, you're on the computer composing elaborate and witty emails to the beloved. Every time you hit "send," you're redirecting resources—your productivity, that is. More industrial sabotage. Your mind is elsewhere—not on the job but playing over the last conversation or last sexual marathon, longing for the next one. You're on the phone until all hours of the night, meaning days are spent in a fog, alert enough only to plot your next assignation. From virtuous citizen to petty thief—it's a slippery slope you're on. Pilfering from the company stockroom, poaching in the boss's pond: you're hardly going to make employee of the year this way.

As we've learned from the avant-garde, all dominant forms invite their structural transgressions, sitting ducks for whatever forces transpire to disrupt their logic. These inversions are not confined to the aesthetic realm alone, of course: religion has its blasphemers and the military its mutineers; with modern consumerism came an epidemic of shoplifting; and entering into marriage automatically opens the possibility of adultery. When correctly packaged (that is, in aesthetic guises) transgressing social expectations is widely celebrated as a form of expressivity. When stamped with the imprimatur of Art, social violation is much vaunted as a sphere of knowledge production, rebellion and bad behavior celebrated as privileged domains of truth.[39] Political avant-gardistes would maintain that these transgressions of social norms can never be completely contained by walled-off spaces—whether museums, or language practices, or households. If selves are constituted through networks of institutional, symbolic, and material everyday practices, then given the homologies between psychic and social structures, sufficiently disrupting the first must, in some corresponding way, rattle the latter. In the experimental spaces opened by deliberate violations of institutional norms lie the weak links of subject to structure. Creating these provisional, experimental spaces opens the possibility for social subjects to be pummeled by affective and aesthetic shocks, to be uncongealed and remade—and as theorists of cultural revolution tell us, nothing will ever change, socially or politically,

39. For a discussion of the modern tendency to privilege expressivity as a form of knowledge production, see Taylor, *Sources of the Self,* pp. 368–90, 456–93.

without basic character structures being remade too.[40] At the very least, shaking things up emblematizes the possibilities of subjective dissidence from symbolic law. What can we learn from this? What we learn will depend on whether we regard adultery as a relatively contained cultural practice, taking, in other words, an aestheticist position ("adultery for adultery's sake"), or whether, like theorists of a political avant-garde, we see its violations of convention echoing through wider social contexts, joining forces with other movements aimed, ultimately, at renegotiating the conditions of hegemonic consensus. Isn't this what causes so much of the squeamishness and angst about adultery—the fear that it does indeed indicate that *all* vows, all contracts, are up for renegotiation?

The analogy of aesthetic transgression might provide a useful heuristic in regard to adultery, for in many respects they are not dissimilar. Don't both make you see something differently—at least temporarily? Adultery too has an aesthetics, after all; it too delivers calculated shocks to our sensibilities. Adultery doesn't just adulterate marriage, it systematically profanes it—a form of vernacular surrealism.[41] After all, the convention that expressivity and bad behavior are the province of professional artists is the legacy of a historical division of labor; this separation of art from life need not be adhered to forever. If in theory we were willing to entertain the possibility that everyday life too is a realm of expressivity, and that transgression too has a pedagogy, we might entertain the possibility—in theory—that behind the facade of quotidian life, a WPA of ordinary citizens have assigned themselves roles as vernacular experimentalists, mounting their two-person shows in the museum of the ordinary. We might thus be compelled to ask, seriously, as we would of a signed urinal or a fur-covered teacup in a museum—two examples of things that look silly but that are enshrined in the pantheon of serious forms—what do these transgressions mean to teach us? What's at stake?

Shocking the Bourgeoisie

What if adultery, like the aesthetic avant-garde, were construed as a mode of experimentation? Consider that without a proper place (the

40. I'm drawing on theorists of the various avant-gardes, for whom the materiality of literary and artistic practices effect the category of the subject. See, for example, Paul Smith, *Discerning the Subject* (Minneapolis, 1988); Alice A. Jardine, *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity* (Ithaca, N. Y., 1985); and Colin MacCabe, *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word* (London, 1979).

41. See Helena Lewis, *The Politics of Surrealism* (New York, 1988) on the historical association between political and aesthetic avant-gardes, including the close ties between surrealism and the Communist Party. See also Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis, 1984), on aesthetic movements that challenge art's autonomy from daily life.

home), or institutional sanctions (the marital contract), it too relies on improvisation and invention; poaching from established spaces; haphazardly borrowing, rejecting, or inverting its conventions on an ad hoc basis. Like previous *bricoleurs* and collage artists, it produces new forms out of detritus and leftovers; a few scraps of time, some unused emotions are stuck together to create a new, unforeseen thing. Not only will this involve reinventing conventions of spectatorship and revamping basic ways of seeing but adultery does, in effect, materially rearrange the most fundamental geometry of social reproduction, the couple form—covertly transforming a vast social infrastructure of intimate relations from dyad to triangle, revamping its very contours.

But adultery is basically a parodic aesthetic, and only you marital insiders could wage such effective parody, could so tactically undermine the social framework from within. You have to thoroughly know the terrain to zero right in on its most cherished illusions and demolish them so efficiently. Parody hinges on knowing the logic of the system and systematically perverting it—at which point, one might say it verges on sabotage. And this parodic transgression of the couple dyad is certainly a not insignificant component of adultery's allure. Privately or nationally, profaning the institution of the couple must have at least something to do with the secret frisson, the clandestine thrill, of the adultery enterprise—as perhaps becomes clearer from the other side of the bed.

The saboteur has a privileged vantage point on the underside of the system. From down here, outside the proper, with little reason to prop up its rule or protect its vanities, the strains and incoherence of the system are embarrassingly obvious. It goes without saying that you—when "you" are the other man or woman—will be exposed to quite privy aspects of your lover's marriage, will find yourself possessing a storehouse of data on the absent spouse's intimate life, an encyclopedic knowledge of every annoying habit, not to mention the full array of neuroses small and large, as lovers often reveal to each other what they admit to no one else. It's not sex that really occupies the bulk of your affair hours, is it? It's talk: confession, revelation, exchanges of embarrassing secrets.

Privacy norms and every other form of marital propriety are out the window. You, the third party, may on occasion find yourself on a tour of the family domicile, may sleep—or whatever—in the marital bed; have occasions to view family photographs; explore closets, medicine chests, refrigerators. You may attend social functions at which the spouse is present, knowing that you know their secrets while they don't know yours. You see it all. Triangulation has a rude and messy materiality to it. Even when conducted with discretion, flaunting marital rule can't help but leave a certain mucky residue behind—a faint odor of the sewer, a banana peel in the foyer. This messiness has a material and practical dimension: boundaries become permeable; the colors start to run. The spouse's movements and domestic routines will begin to color yours, the lover.

You may find yourself involved in household business and errands; you are introduced to family friends who may or may not be in on the secret. Your own daily life will be shaped by the spouse's moods, travels, illnesses, propensities—or lack thereof—to jealousy and suspicion. And vice versa: it's not as if your actions don't register in the other direction. In fact, this person's well-being lies smack in your hands. Do you kindly protect an unsuspecting spouse from the secret you know could shake his or her world, or do you find yourself—unconsciously or not—complicit in organizing its discovery? Easy to call at the wrong moment; to fail to wake your lover in time to get home at the appointed hour; to leave telltale signs in or on body, clothing, car; to neglect to point out when the lover is acting "carelessly."

As the boundaries crumble, you become, in some sense, sexual intimates with the spouse. You may not have met, but, after all, you're sharing many things. It's not just that certain sexual details may be confessed, or vented, or inferred, but that the spouse's existence is registered in precise detail on your body. You're having a sexual whirl because the spouse has lost interest, is depressed or on antidepressants, too angry or too ambivalent, too busy or too bossy, impotent or frigid or too out of relation with his or her body. But also—let's be frank—sexual techniques and rhythms get developed, in a long-term sexual relationship, in relation to a spouse's body, and being made love to as though you inhabited someone else's sexual preferences puts you on quite complicated terms of sexual intimacy: the preferences of another body are mapped out for you on your own. So too when you are the adulterer, you make love to your lover with the pleasure—but at times, the chagrin—of unfamiliarity, mapping as you go the similarities and the differences. How can you not be comparing, measuring, playing catch-up, but still invariably registering the absent presence of another very familiar body, the one that shares your bed when you finally return to the domestic fold, for sleep if nothing else. (Although sometimes for something else as well. How awkward to return home from the adultery bed to the marriage bed to find your spouse unexpectedly amorous!)

In these adulterous avant-gardes, perhaps something new does enter the world. Maybe, for a minute, you the adulterer had your perspective shifted, had a new emotion. Maybe, briefly, change seemed possible, as if, with your newfound beloved the world *was* one of expressivity and desire and utopian possibilities.[42] Until, that is, you dragged yourself

42. The "utopian impulse" is "able to do its work only in disguise," after all, as Fredric Jameson has pointed out (Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* [Princeton, N.J., 1971], p. 156). Jameson's reading of Ernst Bloch's work colors this essay (as does Jameson's commitment to utopian thinking generally), particularly his point that philosophizing utopia "begins at home . . . in lived experience itself and in its smallest details, in the body and its sensations," or in experiences like astonishment, and other epiphanies of daily life (p. 122). For a discussion of the vicissitudes of the utopian

home, crash-landing back in marital temporality, where the vows you'd sworn to uphold so long ago had long ago begun to feel monotonous, as claustrophobic as prison. "Where were you, I was expecting you hours ago!" shouts the spouse over the television when you roll home at midnight. You were trying out new futures, that's where you were. But don't get any ideas about tunneling for freedom or making a run for it because armed guards (children, public opinion) patrol the perimeters, and the attack dogs are starved for scandal.

Adultery is, according to psychoanalyst Adam Phillips, at heart a drama about change. It's a way of trying to invent a world, and a way of knowing something about what we may want: by definition, then, a political form.[43] Articulating visions of change tends to be the province of political discourses and critical theories, but since these perhaps have failed to hold up their end, other forms step into the breach and arrogate the function of a political imaginary. When political culture devotes itself to the privatization of needs, increasingly attempting to relegate need itself to the realm of individual responsibility, privacy in turn becomes the repository for imagoes of reimagined futures. At the same time, it's not as though collective life will ever be completely evacuated of messy needs and transgressive wishes. As we see, political culture has lately devoted itself to inventing theatricalized social spaces where elected and appointed officials improvise spectacles of transgression for the edification and amusement of their political constituents. Indeed, national politics seems to be quite overcoded with desire these days. It may be that electoral politics has become so increasingly evacuated of meaning that scandal is one of the only ways politicians can capture anyone's attention, but given that the specifics of these scandals increasingly concern adultery, we political constituents have been reconstituted as *adultery publics*. And to us falls that classic question—in the stentorious words of *Divorce Court*—Can this marriage be saved?

The Union Is in Trouble, or Adultery as a National Affair

Even if *Time* hadn't designated Bill Clinton the nation's "Libido in Chief," you'd have to have been in a coma this decade not to notice that politician adultery is occupying an inordinate amount of the nation's attention, with the military recently vying to play Gomorrah to Washington's Sodom on the Potomac.[44] Politicians and public figures have of

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impulse for which Jameson's work is also crucial, see Berlant, "'68, or Something," *Critical Inquiry* 21 (Autumn 1994): 124–55.

43. See Phillips, *Monogamy*, pp. 4–18.

44. The military generates its scandals internally instead of relying on the press: 124 U.S. military personnel were convicted of adultery in the past year, although as "*Harper's*

course been having their extramarital flings since day one of organized social life, but only recently has marital fidelity—or "character," in current political usage—come to be the protective talisman supposed to save this rudderless nation of ours.[45] The citizenry, in turn, has grown ever more suspicious and mistrustful, ever more intent on ferreting out evidence of betrayal. Each new scandal just ups the ante, feeding the zeal to nose out yet another juicy betrayal. *Not* betrayals of national principles, justice, or democracy—betrayals of politicians' marriage vows are what makes headlines. It's the marital panopticon writ national. Think of it this way: these cheating politicians are, after all, our *representatives*. These cheating soldiers are our *defense*.[46] They are, in other words, our stand-ins. Are we feeling vulnerable, anxious? Do we suspect somehow, that things are going sour? Or, as your marriage counselor will surely inquire at the very first tearful session, is there something that we, the citizenry, aren't getting from this union of ours that we would need to feel secure in its embrace?

In scandal and other genres devoted to exposing secret things, citizens have the opportunity to play the role of *social detectives,* a term Fredric Jameson has invented to express the ways certain kinds of knowledge are produced in investigation plots. In plots organized around detection, there are stories in which an individual detective confronts crimes of collective dimensions, and there are stories in which the collectivity ferrets out the solution to an individual crime. But in both cases the detective role widens to take on a social function because, according to Jameson, it's invariably *society as a whole* that's the mystery to be solved and "revelations of its hidden nature" that are exposed.[47] Detective stories allegorize

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Index" points out, the number of generals prosecuted for adultery since 1951 is 0. See "*Harper's* Index," *Harper's* (Aug. 1997): 13.

45. The press continued to pound the character issue throughout the 1996 elections, although often litotically. See, for example, Francis X. Clines, "Character Question Fails to Catch Public Interest," *New York Times,* 28 Oct. 1996, p. A14, which raises the issue to say it's a nonissue, just as Bob Dole repeatedly invoked the "problem" of Clinton's character by insisting he wouldn't bring it up, while then proceeding to do so. However, postelection reports claimed that Dole quickly dropped the character question (and the press altogether) after learning that the *Washington Post* was pursuing a story about an affair he'd had while married to his first wife—which, although confirmed by the affair mate, the *Post* never ran, probably because of the enormous pressure Elizabeth Dole and influential friends put on the paper to kill it. See Ken Auletta, "Inside Story: Why Did Both Candidates Despise the Press?" *The New Yorker,* 18 Nov. 1996, p. 48.

46. As one commentator puts it, perhaps somewhat ironically, the "vigorous pursuit of the good fight against adultery springs from basic common sense and the bedrock military principle on which our entire defense posture has been built: When the enemy attacks, we simply can't have our soldiers, sailors, marines and pilots lying down on the job" (Alan Abelson, "Bum Raps," *Barron's,* 9 June 1997, p. 3).

47. Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (Bloomington, Ind., 1992), p. 39; see also pp. 36–39. Jameson's analysis echoes Deleuze and Guattari on the invariably collective nature of minor forms. The "cramped space" of minor literature

the social totality; it's the unconscious desire to represent our collective destiny that animates all this social detection, even if in protocognitive fashion. But then again, as Phillips would add, suspicion is actually a philosophy of hope. Jealousy is a form of optimism: "It makes us believe that there is something to know and something worth knowing."[48]

As these national adultery scandals continue to unfold, they often seem like amazingly bad theater on a mass scale. The plot is excessively familiar: faithless marital citizens cast as the dastardly criminal class, cooperatively playing along by carelessly scattering incriminating clues for a delighted nation of social gumshoes yapping at their heels. ("Prove it," challenged Gary Hart, while dangling the perfectly cast Donna Rice before a weirdly enraptured news media. It didn't exactly take Colombo to solve that one.) Regardless, the engine of an investigation plot sutures us back into the scene; the addictive quality of detective stories is not that they're open-ended but rather that you always find out whom to blame. Once the hapless adulterer is nabbed in the act, politics is reinvented as a scene from which at least one true thing has been unearthed. Despite the fact that the aggregate citizenry claim to believe when asked (or, indeed, when voting) that adultery has nothing to do with "character," the two can't seem to get disentangled; sexual faithfulness to a wife (no adultery scandals about female politicians yet) has become a very public code for fidelity to an electorate, with sex in the wrong bed standing for the slimy betrayal of both her and the nation. (A recent anti-Clinton bumper sticker: "First Hillary, then Gennifer, now us.")

In this retooled national allegory, the citizenry is cast in the role of insecure wife, continually suspecting and fearing perfidy. With the national press devoted to nosing out adultery scandals and the tabloids paying off mistresses for their stories before the sheets are even dry, with television interviewers playing couples therapists in tearful prime time confessionals, electoral politics has been refigured as a stagnant marriage, and don't we, the wives waiting at home, secretly know it? (Look at the apathy of the 1996 elections: we were all just going through the motions; the romance died long ago.) We're being cheated and duped; his promises are lies, his vows a joke. We're a nation of cuckolds.[49] Or worse: we're wives who *know* we're being mocked and ridiculed behind closed doors while the lovers whoop it up with champagne and pastries. But

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"forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics" (Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, "What Is a Minor Literature?" trans. Dana Polan, in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Russell Ferguson et al. [New York, 1990], p. 59).

48. Phillips, *Monogamy*, p. 41.

49. David Brock's *The Seduction of Hillary Rodham* (New York, 1996) follows this line of argument and its identifications from the right. With its weirdly sympathetic identification with Hillary Clinton as scorned wife, the point is clearly that to whatever extent Bill betrayed Hillary, he's betrayed the electorate as well. Brock is an ultra–right wing columnist for the *American Spectator*.

lacking agency, or assertiveness, or dignity, schooled as wives so often are in passivity and pragmatism, we know we're better off just keeping up appearances, and so grow colder and deader with each passing year and each new humiliation.

According to anthropologist Victor Turner, leaders often plot their lives as social narratives, consciously or unconsciously acting in ways that allow them to become clothed with allusiveness and metaphor.[50] We elect our leaders, in other words, because they've made themselves legible to us as a collective mirror. What else does character mean at this moment in political culture but the ability of a particular political "character" to embody the appropriate collective story? (And, certainly, it's not anthropologists alone who have achieved this insight; it's the essence of the modern political campaign. About the 1992 presidential election, one operative wrote, "I put it to Clinton that launching a presidential candidacy was not unlike writing a novel: You had to create yourself as a sympathetic hero, in language that would touch the reader's heart and mind. Clinton readily agreed that he had so far failed to emerge as a rounded and credible character in the unfolding narrative of the election.")[51] Or, conversely, we do not elect those who tell the wrong stories. Throughout the 1996 presidential campaign, Bob Dole strove valiantly, yet in the end fruitlessly, to get his own body to signify, to make his own war wounds and disabilities metonyms of a national history and future. He wanted his body to narrate a tale of triumph over adversity, stoicism in the face of pain and injury, and sacrifice in the service of American military hegemony—without realizing that the nation was in the grip of an entirely different story about itself and that national narratives these days are composed in the idiom of sex, not sacrifice. His wounds seemed old-fashioned: today's heroes suffer *from* the nation, not for it.[52]

If scandals are realms of protoknowledge about the social totality, one inference that might be drawn from all this marital snooping is that the insecurity of the electorate about the "faithfulness" of our representatives coincides with anxieties about the fidelity of the wider institutions of representation themselves. Is the "union" itself in trouble? The language of needs is a crossover language, condensing the national, the sexual, and the deeply personal, as well as matters of public policy and resource distribution. With the painful economic restructuring underway in late capitalism's transnationalist incarnation, the destabilizing effects of which are

50. See Victor Turner, "Social Dramas and Stories about Them," *Critical Inquiry* 7 (Autumn 1980): 141–68.

51. Jonathan Raban, quoted in Howard Kurtz, "The Press in Campaignland," *Washington Post Magazine,* 16 July 1995, p. 13.

52. I'm drawing on Berlant's work on national intimacy and traumatized citizenship here and throughout this section. See Berlant, "The Subject of True Feeling: Pain, Privacy, and Politics," in *Cultural Pluralism, Identity Politics, and the Law,* ed. Austin Sarat (forthcoming) and "Introduction: The Intimate Public Sphere."

filtering down through all levels of social existence, the Western economies are becoming increasingly tightfisted, refusing to live up to their most basic vows—unable or unwilling to provide even the most minimal economic safety nets, let alone economic justice, let alone the old promise of the good life. The lower economic tiers are cavalierly abandoned to their fates like so many discarded middle-aged wives, and the floating trash heap of those unwillingly expelled from the wage economy floats from harbor to harbor with nowhere to land, teeming with workers unceremoniously sent back, pink slips in hand, to homes they can no longer afford. Being made "redundant" is experienced as intensely private and intensely shameful. It *feels* personal, no matter that you're hardly a blip on the screen of large and impersonal forces. It feels like being threatened with nonexistence. Cheated. Betrayed. Traded in for younger—or cheaper, or foreign—labor (categories that sound remarkably like the staples of the politician's sexual imaginary too, from what we hear).

Isn't the citizenry being remarkably gracious about all of this? Downsizing—not only of corporations but also of national expectations—is the watchword of the nineties. Has the union betrayed you, caused you pain, shifted its loyalties, redistributed its resources? Then expect less. Make your peace with it. Lie back and think of a balanced budget. It doesn't matter if you're happy—or employed, or if you have a home—simply show up for public displays of loyalty as required, hand in hand like our national couple, Bill and Hillary, whose own marriage—or so we social detectives have deduced—is just such an arrangement. What ensures such meek submission to indifferent institutions, even when crisis, transition, or pervasive discontent could, conceivably, prompt enlarged rather than diminished expectations, more rather than fewer social demands? What impedes alternative kinds of knowledge about social and affective unions from acceding to consciousness? Is it precisely that resignation to the a priori that marital citizenship training (among other forms of complacency schooling) provides? Do note that in the vast barrage of media attention to national adultery, in all the microscopic scrutinies of every blemish or "distinguishing mark" on the politician-body, the question of what these adulterer-representatives of ours are seeking in these nondomestic beds and yachts and hotel rooms is simply never posed.[53] *What* could be so compelling that risking everything for a few moments in the semipublic arms of campaign workers, bimbos, congressional pages, hookers, or boys seems like a risk worth taking? How is it that politicians and their operatives whose careers are built on canniness and mistrust so readily display their vulnerabilities and *everything else* with such alacrity and such bad judgment? Cynics, moralists, and feminists unite in telling

53. When Paula Jones claimed she could prove that Bill Clinton had dropped his pants in a Little Rock hotel room because she could identify "distinguishing marks" on his penis, one NPR commentator asked the other what he supposed these marks could be. The other answered, "I don't know. A map of Bosnia?"

us the answer is simply power—either the desire for more or the expectation of its protection. But thanks to the tabloidization of political life, we social detectives are now the eager beneficiaries of numerous blow-by-blow accounts of the pillow talk of the powerful, each one making it appallingly clear that these affairs are conducted not under the sign of power but that of pathos. If the name Dick Morris still means anything by the time this essay goes to press, I need not say more.[54]

My point is that what is so ordinary and accepted as to go quite unnoticed in all of this is simply that toxic levels of everyday unhappiness or grinding boredom are the functional norm in many lives and marriages; that adultery, in some fumbling way, seeks to palliate this, under conditions of enforced secrecy that dictate behavior ranging from bad to stupid to risky to deeply unconscious; and that shame, humiliation, and even ruin accompany the public exposure of this most ordinary of circumstances, particularly in the cases of those who labor for the nation—those whose bodies represent and defend the "national interest." Just "wanting to feel alive" or "young," "wanting a little excitement," "wanting a change," spells downfall. In other words, and in a quite perverse sense, America is a functioning representational democracy after all; it just works in reverse, with politician adultery representing back to the constituents at home both the impossibility of living by the rules of conventional ideologies of intimacy, and the dangerous impossibility of making happiness any sort of a political demand (or a demand of politicians). The absence of contexts for transformation is the defining condition of social existence—nationally and personally—as our politicians so effectively mirror back to us, with intimacy ideologies organizing habituation to low-level discontent so effectively that to chance transformation of any sort will seem patently ridiculous: a guaranteed laugh on a domestic sitcom or a guaranteed cover story in the *Star.* If adultery dares to stake out a small preserve for *wanting* something—even temporarily—it manages to do so largely through the always available idiom of sex. But renunciation still rules, the cornerstone of the administered psyche. Citizens are split subjects, maritally and nationally, and like spouses who know each other's vulnerabilities all too well, our national institutions—politics, the media—reproduce themselves efficiently by playing that split for all it's worth. With renunciation the reaction formation to thwarted desire, the unfortunate sequel to the entertainment of national scandal is the unctuous strutting of public virtue. Renunciation is supposed to be a cure-all for the dangerous experimentation of a utopian imagination, an organ

54. The *Star* broke the story that Morris attempted to impress his prostitute girlfriend by, among other grand gestures, letting her listen in on phone conversations with the president. See *Star,* 10 Sept. 1996. Prostitutes often report that in general, the more socially powerful men are, the more they want to be humiliated and made submissive in sex. So reports "Barbara," in her "It's a Pleasure Doing Business with You," *Social Text,* no. 37 (Winter 1993): 18.

even politicians apparently find themselves supplied with. Luckily, virtue doesn't appear to be a particularly sustainable form—isn't this the message behind scandal culture?—and useless desires keep finding hapless emissaries to attach themselves to.[55]

"What about Us?"

> *Look, now that things are out in the open, please think about us. This is a plea for us, for the things you said you wanted. For happiness. Please don't abandon that, even though it must now seem like the easiest thing to do.*

Renunciation brings us, sadly, to the question of endings. As anyone who's ever taken up one of the available roles in the adultery plot knows, the uncomfortable question of the future will eventually loom. How will this thing end? Who will fare well, and who badly? Which alliances will be left standing; which will be "history"? (Or is adultery's biggest risk stasis: the risk of transforming nothing?) Some affairs do end well, fading into fond memories. But with so much unhappiness and disavowal bouncing off the walls of such confined quarters, unfortunately, this will not always be the case.

Are you the sort of adulterer who didn't realize how unhappy you were in your marriage until you found yourself in the midst of a serious affair? Or did you, knowing exactly how unhappy you were, dive headlong into this affair as a rickety lifeboat from the premature funeral you call home? Paradoxically, this latter category of adulterer often seems, "coincidentally," to get discovered. Unaccountably, a letter is left out, a phone call overheard, an email misaddressed, an appointment missed. The spouse makes an inquiring phone call, and inevitably you're not where you were meant to be because you're in someone else's bed, complaining about your spouse.

Nothing creates intensity or instant intimacy in an affair like the spousal complaint, and when you are the other person, sharing your lover's aversions to the person who is, after all, your rival, being vested with the inside scoop on the private inferno of marital woes, knowing that you alone are the respite from their ever-growing malaise—as you're assured in those whispered phone calls, those agonized emails—well, it's quite the

55. On the politics of renunciation and the difficulties of finding a properly political idiom for the languages of desire, see Carolyn Kay Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1986), pp. 110–24. On the differences between public and private forms of renunciation—and enjoyment—see Slavoj Žižek, "Superego by Default," *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Women and Causality* (London, 1994), pp. 54–85, who argues a different case: that the Law secretly condones transgression, including adultery, making the only true transgression publicly overidentifying with its dictates.

sweep-you-off-your-feet experience. The spouse's faults become a staple of intimate patter: she's bitter; he's insecure; she's a bitch; he's remote; she's boring; he's a tightwad. (It goes without saying that they've all lost interest in sex, or were never very interested to begin with.) The marriage is nothing short of a nightmare. All of this can provide you the opportunity for gracious beneficence: you may even find yourself arguing the spouse's side; becoming a behind-the-scenes adjudicator in marital quarrels; offering analysis, counsel, insight. If marriage is society's container for intimacy, property, children, and libido, adultery doubles as its dumpster for all the toxic waste of marital strife and unhappiness—and who better personifies the receptacle than the detail-hungry lover? Every spousal complaint bonds you to each other that much more tightly. Until, that is . . . the discovered letter, the overheard phone call, or the missed appointment leading to the spouse's inquiring phone call.

And here you are, exposed. Perhaps not for the first time? Woe to you serial adulterers! You've done it before, most likely you'll do it again, but each time you somehow forget not to let it get so intense and out of control. This is an emotional enterprise with a large component of unacknowledged cynicism, a private bargain that the misery you know is coming up with your lover is worth inducing to escape the misery and tedium you're currently enduring with your spouse. Once you've been caught the first time, married life quickly transforms itself into the domestic equivalent of a South American police state, subjecting you to periodic search and seizures, ritual interrogations about movements and associations. Desk drawers are rifled for clues, bills audited for improprieties, and so-called friends transform themselves into a network of informants as extensive as that of former Stasi agents. All of which gives you even more to complain about to new love objects—although future affairs will now necessitate the cunning and sustained duplicity of an Anthony Blunt.[56] All of this at least eliminates the need for awkward confessionals; you don't need to confess because eventually you'll be found out.

Or was this perhaps what you wanted? It's not as though changing anything is so easy, after all. Among adultery's risks is the plunge into a certain structure of feeling: the destabilizing prospect of deeply wanting something beyond what all conventional institutions of personal life mean for you to want. Yes, all these feelings may take place in the murk of an extended present tense, but nevertheless, adultery, like cultural revolution, always risks shaking up habitual character structures. It creates intense new object relations at the same time that it unravels married subjects from the welter of ideological, social, and juridical commandments that handcuff inner life to the interests of orderly reproduction. It can invent "'*another attitude* of the subject with respect to himself or her-

56. The "fourth man."

self.'"[57] In adultery, the most conventional people in the world suddenly experience emotional free fall: unbounded intimacy outside contracts, law, and property relations.[58] Among adultery's risks would be living, even briefly, as if you had the conviction that discontent wasn't a natural condition, that as-yet-unknown forms of gratification and fulfillment were possible, that the world might transform itself—even momentarily—to allow space for new forms to come into being. Propelled into relations of nonidentity with dominant social forms, you're suddenly out of alignment with the reality principle and the social administration of desire. A "stray."

The more intense the affair, the more self-transforming it feels. Not surprisingly, it turns out that all sorts of outwardly conventional people hunger to surrender to the emotions that go unutilized in lives organized around conformity and narcosis. Passionate love, energized by unconscious fantasy, is one of our few chances for self-reinvention, to shed our ties to quotidian personalities and their often badly tattered intimacies, lashed as they are to histories of disappointment, anger, and other forms of personal failure. In other words, even though you can't believe your great luck in nabbing such a charming, attractive, witty, and highly sexed lover (with so many of the qualities so absent in your spouse), what keeps you glued to the phone till all hours of the night exchanging soul-searching, whispered intimacies is actually courtship of another new object—*yourself*—and a new set of conditions for personhood. The beloved mirrors this new self back to you, and aren't you madly in love with both of them, with two idealized love-objects?[59]

No, of course, we don't want to elevate individual experiences like these into imaginary forms of protorevolutionary praxis, or to hold up private utopias as models for social transformations. Adultery doesn't necessarily present you with models of utopian worlds; instead, the utopianism is contained in the feelings it embodies—an experience, not a blueprint.[60] Or as Thompson, elegist of failed revolutions, suggests: "Allow a

57. Joel Whitebook, *Perversion and Utopia: A Study in Psychoanalysis and Critical Theory* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995), p. 218. I borrow the phrase from Whitebook who borrows it from Cornelius Castoriadis. Whitebook gives an elegant psychoanalytic account of the utopian impulse, and although his zeal for sublimation as a solution to the antinomies of psyche and sociality is a little complacent for my taste, he provides an in-depth account of the tradition my own essay attempts to invoke through perhaps somewhat more unreconciled tactics and languages.

58. As in the realm of abjection, the space beyond identity, system and order whose occupant Julia Kristeva nicknames (coincidentally?) a "stray" (Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection,* trans. Leon S. Roudiez [New York, 1982], p. 8).

59. On self-transformation in romantic love, see Christopher Bollas, "Transformational Objects," *The Shadow of the Object: Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known* (New York, 1987), pp. 13–29, and Livingston, "Love and Illusion," pp. 557–59.

60. I'm drawing on Richard Dyer's argument in his "Entertainment and Utopia," in *Movies and Methods,* ed. Bill Nichols, 2 vols. (Berkeley, 1985), 2:220–32.

little space . . . for the unprescribed initiatives of everyday men and women who, in some part of themselves, are also alienated and utopian by turn."[61] In the conspiracies of your illicit adulterous cells, you lovers are pursuing desire, yes, but aren't you also playing closet theorists, vernacular utopians, performatively arguing the minority position that discontent isn't, *pace* Freud and everyone else, the human condition, or somehow natural?

Romance is, quite obviously, a socially sanctioned zone for wishing and desiring, and a repository for excess. Mobilized as it is by unconscious fantasy, it's potentially a profoundly antisocial form as well—when unharnessed from the project of social reproduction. So the state steps in to license its practices, as if couples were pharmacists dispensing controlled substances to each other. The state, of course, is hardly the only agency regulating these practices; we have superegos as well, and should romance become disaggregated from ritual and convention there's always shame, which kicks in rather quickly, making unregulated forms of romance look like a tawdry enterprise. Certainly there are few social subjects for whom being exposed in adultery is an entirely shame-free event and who can rescue much dignity from the scene. Between the inner mortification and the social ridicule, there you stand, red-faced, just another libidinous stooge packed into a crowded Volkswagen with twenty more clowns like yourself, all circling the big top in self-deluded quests for shiny lost objects and faint memories of plenitudes that never existed in the first place.

When possibilities to transform everyday life do manage to force themselves into the open, like tiny, delicate sprouts struggling up through the hard dirt, what an array of sharp-bladed mechanisms stand ready to mow them effectively into mulch before they manage to take root! When your fantasies are bared to the world—or your spouse, or yourself—and you stutter the requisite "I didn't know what I was doing!" it's no mystery how opting for rigor mortis comes to seem so inevitable, with even local transformation an impossibility. Every unhappily married person moonlights as a C.P.A., expert in marital cost-benefit calculations, armed with a private formula to assess the trade-offs, risks, investments, future payoffs of bad situations. Divide your current unhappiness according to how well you'd come out in the property settlement, multiply according to some private floating variable—fear of the unknown, fear of screwing up your kids—and what you arrive at is a misery quotient: a precise calibration of how much discontent you can tolerate as the purchase price of a normal existence. (The term *misery quotient* could also be another way of saying "ideology of everyday life.") And certainly, as even Thompson points out, there aren't any guarantees in the transformation business. Putting yourself on the side of change means embracing courage and

61. Quoted in Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman*, p. 110.

risk, with no particular assurance about outcomes. No one can say what the transformed future looks like. But given everyday lives composed of equal parts resignation and low-grade depression, it's most likely the case that all such possibilities will remain lodged in a never-to-arrive temporality.

The project for transformational critical theories of everyday life would be to reinvent the foundations for these calculations through redescription and denaturalization. But in personal life displacement rules: the forms available for imagining change are simultaneously blockages to knowledge and refuges from the real, all the while functioning as placeholders for unformed desires. And what *is* the status of the individual story here? Even when the changes under discussion are circumscribed issues of personal happiness, when the biggest change on the immediate agenda is likely to be only the creation of another couple, the buzz of language and moral pressure hurled about makes even local change resemble some kind of apocalypse. What could be more "natural," or comfortable, than not thinking about it as the default cognitive mode of personal life. But isn't the reason adultery feels like such a big drama, as it models the possibilities and impossibilities of change, the glimmer of other possibilities: the crack in the mirror of psyche and social existence, the homology that doesn't quite map? Falling into adultery propels social subjects into imaginary spaces and temporalities—call it the adultery imaginary—which, as we've seen, refuse compliance with social forms and conventions that don't deliver on their promises. In this space, provisional though it may be, being destabilized, desiring, and unself-alienated are norms; gratification is not a remote possibility but an immediate demand.

But this is the language of theory, not of adultery itself, which is inchoate and episodic. It doesn't sustain thinking; it resists narrative (favoring the lyric). So having engineered a massive domestic crisis, maybe not for the first time; having managed to bring yourself to what some might construe as a crossroads, the problem for you, the exposed adulterer, will be precisely those sticky questions about the future. You're being asked to confront something, but through a fog. As you said all along, you had *no idea* what you were doing. You were feeling your way toward something maybe, but you don't know what. Through the mucky emotions, the shouting, the tears—who could now say? Life is in chaos. Things are very fragile. Perhaps the lover, too, is giving you grief: "If you're so unhappy, why don't you finally just do something about it?" About what? About your unhappiness? About all the misery you've spent so much time detailing to the attentive lover, who seems to have been—who knew!—keeping track? Could you risk giving up your discontent—assuming you can even name it—or have you become so habituated to it

that you only feel legible to yourself in relation to your own unhappiness? After all, your experience in other affective worlds has been brief.

Perhaps this is the moment for abject contrition: "How could I have hurt you like this, I hate myself!" This may even work for both spouse and lover. Or you can try standing your ground: "Look how unhappy I've been. Look what I've been driven to!" You may even realize, somewhere back in the old reptile brain, that being found out isn't such bad leverage as a means to at least temporarily ameliorate the domestic scene. (Not that this was ever your intention of course—not consciously, anyway.) And renouncing the adulterous love object in a grand sacrifice on the altar of your dead marriage does help pump some blood into the corpse. If you're sacrificing something that really mattered to you, all the better. It may even propel you back into the arms of that previously reviled spouse, amidst pledges to *work harder* at the marriage and put in *more time* at home. Often things will improve. The spouse vows to become more attentive, less whiny or critical or remote, more sexually adventurous. Marriage counselors are consulted. Plans for family outings are made. Domestic improvements are undertaken; major appliances may be purchased; there is a sudden upsurge in public entertaining; vacations are embarked upon and real estate purchases considered: all capital reinvestments in the marriage. You'll never be ambivalent again, right? It may be a few years before you're let out alone again, but it's good to be back home.

Meanwhile, those new forms of subjectivity your love affair so recklessly and hopefully ushered into the world have probably started seeming, in retrospect, like something experienced in a temporary fugue. That other person, to whom you pledged love, courage, honesty, has become something of an inconvenience. You worry about gossip, about the egregious betrayal of your confidences and complaints. How stupid you were, how immature. The person you briefly became—the one you may even have recognized, temporarily, as your best self—seems distant, like the whole thing happened to someone else. What was all that stuff about desiring different futures anyway? Besides, the marital panopticon is on full alert, so glue that smile back in place.

For the Sake of the Children

> *The last thing in the world I want to do is hurt you, but I couldn't live with myself if I caused any more hurt than I have already. I may live to regret this, but at least for now . . .*

The discontented classes are creative geniuses at improvising displacements for transformational fears and desires. Intellectuals stuck in

bad lives can celebrate the possibilities of upheaval—textual or social—in their scholarship, can elegize all the bygone opportunities period by period, wresting rescue from the present, projecting disappointment into the past or hope into the future.[62] Then, of course, there are the children. Investing futurity and optimism in your children is always a good displacement; they make convenient prostheses for any surplus hopefulness you find yourself burdened with, as well as tidy explanations for your inertia should you be called on to explain it to the beloved or to yourself. "For the sake of the children" is always a good trump card: end of discussion (even though the privileging of the child's perspective in adult narratives will always be selective and capricious). At most you might allow yourself to calculate the years until they're grown and you yourself can matriculate to a less alienated life—but only when you're really feeling desperate.

Unfortunately, what "for the sake of the children" means, in practice, is habituating children to contexts of chronic unhappiness and dissatisfaction; to unmet needs as status quo; to bitching mothers, remote fathers, and other gendered forms of quotidian misery. Do you somehow think the kids don't know? That you're the master thespian of the home front; that your family life isn't just re-creating another generational training ground for lives of affective poverty, for emotional mutilation as the affective norm? The truth is, having grown up in such a household yourself, you consider it your rightful place. It *seems* like home. You couldn't "live with yourself" if you renounced it because you've had no emotional training in anything different. And neither will your children.

What would it take to sustain the new forms of self and the world of gratified needs invented by your love affair—that is, if you hadn't been persuaded that a sheepish return to the emotional deadness you tried so desperately and so recently to escape now counts as a happy ending? Or if you hadn't deluded yourself that your bittersweet love affair with your own unhappiness somehow protects those around you from injury? What would it take to install those newfound forms of optimism and desire into ordinary life in place of emotional fatigue and renunciation? (And by all means, bring the kids along.) What would it take to expect more forms of gratification and pleasure in the present, in other spheres than intimacy alone—even without the hand-me-down utopia of sex? If adultery weren't a placeholder for more sustained kinds of transformation and honesty, or a repository for wishes split off from the pragmatics of everyday life?

At the very least, it would take an unembarrassed commitment to utopian thinking. It would mean forging connections, in theory and in practice, between the myriad forms in which we do tentatively invent these possibilities in our everyday lives and larger questions about the

62. See Bollas, "Transformational Objects."

social organization of work, love, shame, and pleasure. It would take fantasy, which is indispensable to this kind of social project. In our everyday practices though, aren't we all quite dedicated to inventing beautiful, nascent worlds in which the realization of desire *is* possible? Do we not, at some level, know that these *aren't* banal questions, we avant-gardistes of everyday life, we emergent utopians who experimentally construct different futures out of whatever we can, taking up residence in our ragtag inventions in starving, greedy ways, though barely able to imagine committing to them—tourists in the world of gratification armed with temporary visas. We have, after all, been born into social forms in which fighting for happiness looks like a base and selfish thing, and realization of desire is thwarted and fleeting at best, so often an affair of short duration.[63]

63. See Jameson, "Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan: Marxism, Psychoanalytic Criticism, and the Problem of the Subject," *Yale French Studies,* nos. 55–56 (1977): 393–95, from which I paraphrase.