

## Do Subversive Weddings Challenge Amatonormativity? Polyamorous Weddings and Romantic Love Ideals

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**Abstract:** Subversive weddings seem to challenge widespread norms regarding romantic love. Weddings have a social significance as capstones of romantic love narratives; often, they serve as symbols of romantic love. Changing their significance would thus be a powerful tool in changing widespread expectations and beliefs regarding romantic love or committed love relationships more generally. Insofar as amatonormativity (the expectation and normative expectation that everyone seeks and flourishes in the same type of dyadic, romantic, sexual love relationship) is harmful, this is a good thing. Polyamorous weddings, for example, seem to challenge the norm that romantic love relationships must be exclusive, and the prevalence of such weddings could increase social visibility of non-exclusive love relationships. It could also lead to greater visibility for other non-traditional life paths, such as prioritizing friendships over romantic love relationships, or abstaining from romantic love relationships. But can subversive weddings really subvert the prevailing norms? One problem is that if weddings – or attempted weddings – diverge too far from the social norms, they may not succeed in changing those norms because they will not be recognized as weddings at all. A second problem is that such weddings may lead to assimilation to, rather than subversion of, dominant norms. This poses a dilemma: if subversive weddings are not in fact weddings, it seems they cannot change the social significance of weddings in the way they are intended to do; but if they are weddings, their attempts at subversion could be undermined because they bear the social significance of weddings.

**Keywords:** love, polyamory, weddings, amatonormativity, marriage.



## 1. Subversive Weddings

Weddings are often seen as a way to express one's personal style. Within the constraints of what we call 'traditional' weddings, this might mean picking just the right shade of flowers and style of dress. But weddings can also be 'alternative', or more individualized: the wedding website *offbeat bride* suggests wedding themes such as steampunk, mermaid, and goth.<sup>1</sup> The content of the vows, as well as venue, décor, and dress, can express the couple's sense of personal style or uniqueness, pushing against the limits of the 'traditional' wedding. This customization of weddings raises the question: How far can one customize or individualize a wedding and still have it be socially recognized as a *wedding*? And what hangs on the answer to this question? That is, what are the social implications of whether an event is socially recognized as a wedding or not?

This question is of particular interest in light of the deployment of subversive weddings – or 'weddings' – as tools of political protest, aimed at changing the social beliefs, expectations and values surrounding romantic love. Subversive weddings were performed before the legal recognition of same-sex marriage to protest the law and to change public opinion regard it. Such weddings were intended to express their participants' desires to be recognized as married, and thereby simultaneously to compel social recognition of the ways in which same-sex relationships resembled different-sex relationships recognized as marriages. Today, polyamorous weddings similarly express their participants' desires for their relationships to be recognized as marriages and they seek to gain social recognition for polyamorous relationships as having equal value to monogamous relationships. Likewise, sologamy – the practice of marrying oneself – expresses the participant's commitment to loving and valuing him- or herself, while also seeking to gain social recognition for the value of a relationship with oneself as equivalent in value to romantic relationships with others.

Polyamorous weddings, sologamy, and other subversive weddings challenge amatonormativity, "the assumptions that a central, exclusive, amorous relationship is normal for humans, in that it is a universally shared goal, and that such a relationship is normative, in that it *should* be aimed at in preference to other relationship types."<sup>2</sup> To be successful in this challenge, such weddings must change beliefs regarding the comparative value of relationships, including the

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://offbeatbride.com/>.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Brake, *Minimizing Marriage: Marriage, Morality, and the Law* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 88.

relationship with oneself. But subversive weddings also run the risk of being dismissed as not being weddings at all.

Someone might think that legal marriage, with its clearly defined rights and obligations, constrains what can be socially recognized as a wedding. On such a view, only weddings which initiated or were at least associated with legal marriages (perhaps occurring after the legal marriage) could, socially, count as weddings. Hence, a polyamorous or same-sex ‘wedding’ would not in fact be a wedding in a jurisdiction which failed to recognize them as initiating legal marriages.

But such a view would be too narrow. The rituals which are socially recognized as weddings vary, of course, cross-culturally and trans-historically – and they have not always included legal marriage.<sup>3</sup> Today, one can have what is socially recognized as a wedding without a legal marriage, such as a religious ceremony or backyard handfasting.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, same-sex weddings were recognized as such in countries such as the U.S. and Canada before same-sex marriage was legally recognized.

For example, Karen Dunak describes a mass wedding, celebrating 2,000 same-sex unions, held on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. in 1987. Witnesses to this event – simply called “The Wedding” – recognized it as a wedding; yet the marriages in question were not legally recognized – which was the point. Dunak writes that: “the event incorporated familiar elements of the wedding ceremony. Most participants wore some sort of special dress; ... and guests bore witness to the event. The familiarity of the wedding served as a valuable political tool even as it fulfilled the personal desires of same-sex couples who wished to share their lives together.”<sup>5</sup> The symbolism of weddings was here explicitly employed as a form of protest, to challenge the legal exclusion of gays and lesbians from marriage; participants’ intentions to initiate marriage-like relationships was key to the event’s purpose of changing minds about what could count as a marriage, by showing the public instances of same-sex marriage-like relationships.

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<sup>3</sup> For a description of “self-marriages” in the early U.S., in which spouses simply declared themselves married without officiation by authorities, see Nancy Cott, *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), Chapter 2.

<sup>4</sup> For a description of contemporary pagan handfasting practices, see Kendra Vaughan Hovey, *Handfasting: A Pagan Guide to Commitment Rituals* (London: Provenance Press, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Karen Dunak, *As Long as We Both Shall Love: The White Wedding in Postwar America* (New York: NYU Press, 2013), p. 137.

But while atypical events such as this can be socially recognized as weddings, there are numerous events – graduation ceremonies, birthday parties, trials – which it would be simply unintelligible to call ‘weddings’. If someone were to refer to such an event as a wedding, what they were trying to say would be opaque; they would simply seem to be mistaken in the usage of the term ‘wedding’. So there are constraints on what is socially recognized as a wedding.

Moreover, some wedding-like events would be construed as fake or pretend weddings: a play wedding of dolls enacted by children or a wedding in a movie or play, for example. But presumably some bystanders might have also seen “The Wedding” as such a pretend wedding. For example, some conservatives deny that same-sex marriages are or can be marriages.<sup>6</sup> Presumably, people with such views would understand “The Wedding” as employing the conventions of weddings in the service of something which (in the view of these hypothetical conservative observers) could not be a real marriage – and hence as being only an imitation wedding.

This suggests how we might push the question of the constraints on what is socially recognized as a wedding back: a wedding need not initiate a legal marriage, but, plausibly, a wedding initiates or is at least associated with a marriage – which could be legal, or only religious, or merely socially recognized.<sup>7</sup> This would explain why children’s doll weddings are only pretend weddings: they do not initiate marriages (except perhaps pretend marriages). And it would explain why the conservative would deny that “The Wedding” was a genuine wedding: because they deny that same-sex marriages are genuine marriages.

It might be thought that it is not the actual initiation of a marriage which defines a wedding, but rather, the participants’ intentions to initiate a marriage. Stage actors do not intend to initiate a marriage, any more than their actions initiate a marriage. Likewise, we might think that pre-*Obergefell*<sup>8</sup> same-sex protest weddings were weddings because the participants intended them to initiate marriages. But the intent to initiate a marriage cannot be a necessary condition for a wedding. Imagine someone who went through a wedding ceremony intending to play a practical joke, with no intention of marrying. It seems likely to me that the event would still have been socially recognized a wedding, despite the lack of intention to marry. It also does not seem that

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<sup>6</sup> See for example John Finnis, “The Good of Marriage and the Morality of Sexual Relations: Some Philosophical and Historical Observations,” *American Journal of Jurisprudence* 42 (1997): 97–134, p. 102.

<sup>7</sup> It is possible for a wedding to occur after a legal marriage, celebrating it; hence, while I will speak of weddings as initiating marriages for shorthand, the requirement is the weaker one that the wedding at least be associated with a marriage. Thanks to Daniela Cutas for this point.

<sup>8</sup> The 2015 case in which the US Supreme Court found same-sex couples have a right to marry.

intending to initiate a marriage can be a sufficient condition for a wedding. Recall the examples of unintelligible ‘weddings’ above. Someone who intends to initiate a marriage by participating in, say, a graduation ceremony is simply deeply confused.

For the purposes of argument, let us assume that what can count, socially, as a wedding piggybacks on what can count, socially, as a marriage.<sup>9</sup> Roughly, as a stipulative definition to be re-assessed later, a wedding is a public and socially recognized event which initiates a marriage. But this leaves us with the question of what can be socially understood as a marriage. We do not have to look far to find problem cases. Here are some examples, self-described by participants both as weddings and as initiating marriages, where there is at least a question as to whether they are really socially understood as weddings, or as leading to marriages, as opposed to imitations:

- Self-marriage or “sologamy,” in which people wed themselves, which *Cosmopolitan* calls a “small but growing movement.”<sup>10</sup>
- Performance artists Elizabeth Stephens’ and Annie Sprinkle’s “ecosex weddings,” through which they seek to eroticize the natural world, partly to make environmentalism fun. These artists have married themselves to the dirt (in a ceremony in which they rolled in the dirt) and to Lake Kallavesi (in a ceremony in which they jumped in the lake). They have also married coal, rocks, snow, the moon, the Appalachian Mountains, the earth, sky, and sea.<sup>11</sup>
- Erika Eiffel married the Eiffel tower via a “commitment ceremony,” and Eija-Riitta Berliner-Mauer married the Berlin Wall, both taking the surname of their love object.<sup>12</sup>
- People have ‘married’ their pets, including one woman who, according to the *New York Daily News*, married her dog when her first husband – a cat – died.<sup>13</sup>
- And, of course, there have been “Throuple” weddings, in which three people marry each other as a unit (first, three Massachusetts women in a legally unrecognized ceremony, and more recently three men in Colombia, who succeeded in gaining legal recognition).

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<sup>9</sup> Of course, there is a debate in the literature on marriage as to what defines marriage – nature, function, procreation, and so on. I have in mind here the narrow historical, anthropological, or sociological question of how different communities understand marriage.

<sup>10</sup> Abigail Pesta, “Why I Married Myself,” *Cosmopolitan*, December 20, 2016, [www.cosmopolitan.com/sex-love/a8507112/marrying-yourself-wedding-trend/](http://www.cosmopolitan.com/sex-love/a8507112/marrying-yourself-wedding-trend/). See also <https://imarriedme.com/>.

<sup>11</sup> See [sexecology.org](http://sexecology.org).

<sup>12</sup> See news reports in *The Telegraph*. ([www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstoppers/howaboutthat/2074301/Woman-with-objects-fetish-marries-Eiffel-Tower.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstoppers/howaboutthat/2074301/Woman-with-objects-fetish-marries-Eiffel-Tower.html), [www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstoppers/howaboutthat/2035996/Woman-married-to-Berlin-Wall-for-29-years.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstoppers/howaboutthat/2035996/Woman-married-to-Berlin-Wall-for-29-years.html)).

<sup>13</sup> See [marryyourpet.com](http://marryyourpet.com), and a news report at <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/world/dutch-woman-marry-dog-cat-husband-dies-article-1.2299047>.

Polyamorous weddings can include weddings either of more than two partners or weddings of couples who intend to be polyamorous. (For now, I'll define polyamory simply as having multiple love and sex relationships.)<sup>14</sup>

What interests me about these cases is that the brides and grooms ('weddors'?) want to invoke some aspects of mainstream marriage while extending them or subverting other aspects. In this way, what they are doing differs from children wedding their dolls or actors in a play: they intend to make a statement about their love and commitment by invoking the symbolism or meaning of weddings and marriage. These weddings are not instances of unintelligibly, mistakenly, or arbitrarily calling an event with no resemblance to a wedding a 'wedding'. Exactly as couples did in "The Wedding," these people invoke symbolic aspects of weddings as well as aspects of the social significance of weddings both to make a statement about their relationships and to change social beliefs about non-typical relationships.

For example, a theme in the pet wedding community is the mutual unconditional love between human and pet. Pet weddings invoke the wedding vows' pledge of unconditional love while extending it to non-traditional love objects. Likewise, Stephens and Sprinkle want to express erotic love towards the things they marry, as do Erika Eiffel and Eija-Riitta Berliner-Mauer, who are object fetishists. They are extending the scope of what we can have erotic love for beyond persons who can reciprocate – while perhaps also seeking to challenge understandings of reciprocity and personhood. Sologamists who wed themselves are expressing their self-love. At the same time, they are rejecting the amatonormative pressure to partner with another person which 'traditional' weddings enshrine. They challenge the amatonormative belief that everyone seeks and flourishes in the same type of dyadic, romantic, sexual love relationship by demonstrating that they flourish outside of such a relationship.<sup>15</sup> Finally, polyamorists who wed tend to reject the possessiveness and exclusivity of 'traditional' wedding vows but want to express love and commitment.

All of these 'weddors' do not merely seek to disrupt the meaning of weddings and marriage. Rather, they seek to invoke some of the norms of marriage (commitment, love, trust) while extending them to non-traditional objects, relationships, or numbers of people, and also sometimes

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<sup>14</sup> See news reports at <https://nypost.com/2014/04/23/married-lesbian-threesome-expecting-first-child/> and [www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jul/03/colombia-three-men-union-alejandro-rodriguez-manuel-bermudez-victor-hugo-prada](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jul/03/colombia-three-men-union-alejandro-rodriguez-manuel-bermudez-victor-hugo-prada).

<sup>15</sup> See Brake, *Minimizing Marriage*, 88-108.

rejecting other norms (exclusivity, speciesism, having another human as one's partner). These weddings do not merely invoke conventions ironically, keeping an emotional distance and meaning the opposite of what the conventions typically signify; they retain a degree of sincerity about the project.

One question this raises is whether these are socially recognizable as weddings at all. While we can understand the intentions behind them in relation to weddings, is a ceremony with a pet or inanimate object really socially recognized as a wedding? This is, of course, an empirical question, and the answer will depend on the relevant society or community; but I want to suggest that either way, whether subversive weddings are socially recognized as weddings or not, there is a challenge for the would-be subversive. The problem is how far such weddings can subvert social conventions by employing them, at least in part, sincerely.

To be clear, my view is that this proliferation of weddings is an interesting phenomenon, not a cause for concern or for questioning the legalization of same-sex marriage. Because conservatives have often invoked the specter of polygamy, bestiality, and incest against legalizing same-sex marriage (with the argument that it is a slippery slope to recognizing the other cases as marriages), highlighting the phenomenon of pet weddings or polyamorous weddings might seem to add fuel to their fire.<sup>16</sup> But the conservative argument, so far as it involves legal marriage, is faulty. Legal marriage is a voluntarily entered contract; animals and children cannot enter legal contracts, and so, under a just law of marriage in which participants enter with voluntary consent, legal marriage is simply not a possibility for them.<sup>17</sup> Nor does recognizing committed sexual relationships, whether same-sex or different-sex, between adult humans on grounds of equal treatment have any implications for changing laws prohibiting sex with children, which is rights-violating, or sex with non-humans, which may involve cruelty to animals. Group weddings are a more complicated case, as arguably they could be recognized on equal treatment grounds for the same reason as same-sex marriages – but only if doing so is not likely to cause serious harm.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> For a summary of and response to such arguments, see John Corvino, "Homosexuality and the PIB Argument," *Ethics* 115 (2005).

<sup>17</sup> Of course, as an anonymous reviewer helpfully pointed out, child marriage does exist in some jurisdictions. However, minors who are incompetent to consent to sex or to make their own medical decisions are likewise not competent to consent to the legal ramifications of marriage; child marriage should thus be abolished where it does exist.

<sup>18</sup> On this issue, see Cheshire Calhoun, "Who's Afraid of Polygamous Marriage? Lessons for Same-Sex Marriage Advocacy from the History of Polygamy," *San Diego Law Review* 42 (2005); Brake, *Minimizing Marriage*, Chapter 7; for an opposing view, see Thom Brooks, "The Problem of Polygamy," *Philosophical Topics* 37, no. 2 (2009).

Weddings, as I have noted above, are distinct from legal marriage, and their performance need have no legal implications: so pet weddings need not change the law of marriage, for example.

Furthermore, the performance of subversive weddings may do good by challenging amatonormativity, the false belief that everyone is seeking the same kind of romantic, monogamous, sexual love relationship, and the accompanying evaluative judgment that such a relationship is best for everyone. This widespread norm is harmful when it socially marginalizes friends, singles, asexuals, and polyamorists, and when it is used to provide an alleged justification for legal discrimination against them. It is also particularly harmful for women, as women undergo greater social pressure to marry and to sacrifice on marriage.<sup>19</sup> Thus, by undermining amatonormative beliefs and judgments, subversive weddings could do good – for instance, by affirming the intrinsic value and worth of women without a partner or members of non-traditional relationships.

The question is whether and how far can we subvert beliefs, values, and expectations surrounding romantic love by employing one of the very conventions which, in part, perpetuates those values, beliefs, and expectations. There are several questions lurking here which I want to distinguish and set aside. One is the general philosophical question of how social conventions and practices have meanings and how these change. Another is the sociological or psychological question of how conventions and related social pressures shape our behavior. For instance, there is an empirical question about whether and how same-sex marriage has affected behavior around gender roles and expectations or the behavior of same-sex married couples.<sup>20</sup> Likewise, there is research showing that men and women who intend to enter marriages with egalitarian divisions of labor eventually revert to a gendered division of labor.<sup>21</sup> I want to set aside this question about how legal status and social roles and conventions can change the behavior of people who intend to defy them.

The question of interest here is whether an intentionally subversive wedding can change the conventions and beliefs surrounding romantic love if it is not socially recognized as a wedding

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<sup>19</sup> The social costs of amatonormativity are discussed in Brake, *Minimizing Marriage*, 88-108.

<sup>20</sup> For an interesting preliminary study on the effects of same-sex marriage on financial interdependence in gay and lesbian couples, see Charlotte Bendall and Rosie Harding, “Heteronormativity in dissolution proceedings: Exploring the impact of recourse to legal advice in same sex relationship breakdown,” in Elizabeth Brake and Lucinda Ferguson, eds., *Philosophical Foundations of Children’s and Family Law* (Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>21</sup> See Clare Chambers, *Against Marriage: An Egalitarian Defence of the Marriage-Free State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 20-21.

– or, indeed, if it is. There seems to be a dilemma for the would-be subversive. On the one hand, it seems as if a subversive wedding must be socially recognized as a wedding in order to subvert the meaning of weddings. Otherwise it is parody or performance art; it could be about weddings, but not extend or change what they mean. While parody and performance art can both be deployed to subvert or change common beliefs, part of the intended subversion of subversive weddings involves the recognition of the event as a wedding in order to change beliefs about which relationships have value, can be celebrated through weddings and recognized as marriages, and so on.

On the other hand, if the event is socially recognized as a wedding, another risk arises. This is the risk that it then will bear the social significance and attendant expectations associated with weddings – despite the authors’ intentions. For example, a feminist wedding intending to celebrate egalitarian relationships could prompt the expectations from the community that the bride will take on certain gendered responsibilities: writing thank-you notes and corresponding with family. Thus, there is a dilemma: if ‘subversive weddings’ are not weddings, they cannot subvert or extend the social significance of weddings in the way that they seek to; but if they are weddings, their attempts at subversion could be undermined because they bear the social significance assigned to weddings.

The second horn of the dilemma parallels one concern raised in the same-sex marriage debates. Some same-sex marriage advocates argued that same-sex marriage would transform marriage and gender roles. But queer theorists argued that, rather than transforming marriage, same-sex marriage would invoke the heteronormative expectations and meanings attached to marriage and as a result put pressure on same-sex relationships to assimilate to dominant norms of different-sex relationships.<sup>22</sup> For example, as a result of legal recognition for same-sex marriage, young gays and lesbians might now be pressured to marry – a pressure previously trained mainly on straight young people.

To adapt Hegel’s comments about arson in *The Philosophy of Right*: someone who lights a bit of wood on fire cannot deny that he has committed arson because he only intended to light that bit of wood, and not the pile in which it sat. If I knowingly do the series of actions which are socially and legally defined as arson (lighting a match, throwing it into someone’s woodpile), but

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<sup>22</sup> For one such argument, see Michael Warner, “Response to Martha Nussbaum,” *California Law Review* 98, no. 3 (2010); for an overview, see Chambers, *Against Marriage*, 28-38.

claim that I did not have the relevant intention, I have nonetheless committed arson.<sup>23</sup> Our intentions alone do not determine the meanings of actions which are constituted through social conventions and social recognition.

By parity of reasoning, if I go through the actions which constitute a polyamorous wedding, and weddings are socially defined as signifying exclusivity, then I cannot deny that significance or socially assigned meaning, just as the firestarter cannot deny that he has committed arson.<sup>24</sup> A wedding signals (assuming this is the social meaning) exclusivity; by wedding, I have now invoked expectations of exclusivity and assigned that meaning to my relationship. The socially defined nature of conventions also seems to entail that I can intend to do a socially defined action, but fail to do so. This raises the possibility that I could intend to wed myself or my cat but simply fail at wedding (just as the person who goes through a graduate ceremony intending to wed fails at wedding).

It might be thought that it is not a problem if success conditions for weddings depend on social or community recognition of the act as a wedding, because anyone with access to the internet can likely find the relevant community. But outside the relevant community, two potential problems arise. These are, again, the two horns of the dilemma.

*Option One: Failed weddings*

Whenever there is no uptake or social recognition, are subversive weddings simply failed weddings – that is, not weddings at all?<sup>25</sup> We might ask why this matters. Even though they might not be recognized as such, when we hear of such weddings, we can roughly grasp the intention: to commit or to express love. This is even true in cases which intend to subvert the norms of marriage. Even failed weddings still express an intention regarding the relationship, just as a commitment ceremony does. They can make a political statement, just as parody or performance art can. But some people engaging in such performance view themselves, and wish to be viewed, as wedding,

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<sup>23</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H. B. Nisbet, ed. Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 147-150.

<sup>24</sup> For example, in his defense of same-sex marriage, Ralph Wedgwood argues that there is a core social understanding of marriage. See Ralph Wedgwood, “The Fundamental Argument for Same-Sex Marriage,” *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 7, no. 3 (1999). See also his “Is Civil Marriage Illiberal?” in *After Marriage: Rethinking Marital Relationships*, ed. Elizabeth Brake (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>25</sup> On the parallel issue of whether wedding vows fail as promises, see Elizabeth Brake, “Is Divorce Promise-Breaking?,” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 14 (2011).

like the same-sex couples in “The Wedding” or like the polyamorists I discuss below, and so this matters, at least, to them. Furthermore, insofar as the social change they are aiming at involves compelling recognition of the event as a wedding, social recognition matters.

*Option Two: Backfiring weddings*

This is perhaps the more serious problem for the would-be subversive. Because the meaning of a convention does not depend only on an agent’s intentions, a would-be subversive may inadvertently signify something she did not intend or even which she intended to reject. Someone who marries within a lesbian poly community, for example, may intend to signify that her relationship is egalitarian and non-possessive and simultaneously suggest the potential for egalitarian non-possessive marriages in general. But in the larger community she might have labeled herself as a subordinate (perhaps that community can only see marriage as hierarchical) or as exclusive. Even if her relationship does not adhere to traditional norms, she may be perceived in various contexts as exemplifying those norms, irrespective of the facts of her relationship. For example, whenever she uses a term such as ‘wife’ or ‘husband’ or ‘marriage’, her interlocutor may assume a traditional usage. To correct this, she would have to divulge personal information, possibly inappropriate or even dangerous in a given context, whenever she uses these terms.

To sum up so far: To be a wedding, an event must be recognized by some community as a wedding, as (according to the stipulative definition) an event which initiates a marriage; this need not require legal or religious recognition, but the recognition of some community or society. While the ongoing relationships which they celebrate may be lived out in private, weddings are to this extent public and social. This is reflected in the fact that weddings often require an officiant and witnesses and usually include members of the larger community as an audience. At the same time, each individual wedding contributes to the social understanding of weddings by representing what a wedding is.

I will return to the dilemma below, after using polyamorous weddings as a test case to think through the problem. I will consider how polyamorous weddings both invoke and potentially subvert social norms surrounding weddings and romantic love. They have the potential to critique amatonormative social expectations which are the focal point of weddings – and possibly to a

greater extent than monogamous same-sex or feminist weddings. I will begin by sketching the romantic love ideals which polyamorous weddings challenge.

## 2. Wedding romances

Weddings, I want to venture, are widely and popularly associated with a set of romantic yearnings, closely linked to a consumerist, wedding-industry-fueled drive to achieve a certain presentation or expression of the couple's identity.<sup>26</sup> These romantic yearnings, directed at the other party, are often seen as symbolized by and culminating in the wedding itself. (Indeed, the wedding itself seems to become an object of desire for many, as evidenced by the fascination with wedding planning, images of weddings, and wedding-related consumer goods.) The emotional force of wedding-related symbolism is why subversive weddings could be a particularly effective means of protest or change. And insofar as the romantic yearnings associated with weddings are amatonormative, such subversion is a good thing. Moreover, to the extent that such yearnings are inherently unsatisfiable, creating expectations which can never be fulfilled, subversive weddings which diminish their force have other social benefits.

It might be objected that weddings do not primarily express romantic attitudes. For instance, they might primarily express a desire to involve the community in one's relationship and invoke its protective regard, particularly within small religious communities.<sup>27</sup> Or, they could be seen as ritually enacting the transfer of possession of a virgin bride, an untouched piece of property, from father to husband.<sup>28</sup> Or, they could serve to establish a certain social cachet and class identification.<sup>29</sup> But my claim is not meant to be universal, or to exclude other such symbolism. Indeed, I don't want to suggest that the romantic yearnings associated with weddings are ahistorical or culturally transcendent, before the "Love Revolution" in marriage broadly transformed marriage from a property and kinship relation to an aspiring union of soulmates.<sup>30</sup> I merely want to suggest that in some contemporary societies, weddings enact, and ask the community to recognize, certain romantic yearnings – or the fantasy of their satisfaction.

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<sup>26</sup> This draws on the analysis of the wedding industry and beliefs about love in Laura Kipnis, *Against Love: A Polemic* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003).

<sup>27</sup> Roger Scruton, *Sexual Desire* (London: The Free Press, 1986), 358-359.

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, Clare Chambers, "The Marriage-Free State," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 113, Part 2 (2013), and her *Against Marriage*, Chapter 1.

<sup>29</sup> See Linda C. McClain, "The Other Marriage Equality Problem," *Boston University Law Review* 93, no. 3 (2013).

<sup>30</sup> See Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage: a History* (London: Penguin, 2006).

For it could be that these yearnings are unrealistic expectations which the social narratives surrounding weddings propagate. It would not be surprising to find that wedding culture perpetuates unrealistic expectations or confused beliefs about romantic love: arguably, deep conceptual confusions likewise underlie assumptions about the morally transformative power of weddings. For example, promises to love are problematic at best; yet Instagram and Pinterest suggest that more attention is paid to flowers, dresses, and venues than to the moral significance of wedding vows. This is unfortunate if it detracts from attention to the legal ramifications of marriage and the emotional substance of the relationship itself.<sup>31</sup> Here I want to focus on a different set of unrealistic expectations, regarding romantic love, disseminated through wedding culture, and how polyamorous weddings challenge them.

What are these romantic yearnings of which weddings symbolize the culmination? To be clear, I am not arguing that these yearnings constitute or exhaust the romantic love ideal. I am making the more modest point that romantic love is often portrayed as, or believed to involve, certain yearning for uniqueness. I want to distinguish between two sets of yearnings. The first is for uniqueness and irreplaceability: to be the unique, irreplaceable beloved, in the sense that the lover loves no one else, and could not love anyone else in this way. Some recent philosophical work arguing that monogamy has a distinctive nature, meriting special legal treatment, suggests that uniqueness and irreplaceability are important psychologically. Chris Bennett has argued that by feeling one is the *only* beloved, one's sense of value is confirmed. This feeling of uniqueness confirms one's worth and importance precisely because no one else could do; one has been chosen above all others.<sup>32</sup> Drawing on work by biologist Helen Fisher, Eric Cave describes "symptoms" of erotic love, including jealousy – suggesting that the desire for exclusivity is biologically inherent to erotic love.<sup>33</sup> Yearnings to be the unique beloved and irreplaceable to one's lover are certainly satisfiable; but given the frequency with which they are disappointed, we might ask whether these are prudent goals to have.

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<sup>31</sup> See Brake, "Is Divorce Promise-Breaking?"

<sup>32</sup> Christopher Bennett, "Liberalism, Autonomy, and Conjugal Love," *Res Publica* 9 (2003).

<sup>33</sup> Eric Cave, "Liberalism, Civil Marriage, and Amorous Caregiving Dyads," *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, OnlineFirst (2017), <https://doi-org.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/10.1111/japp.12282>. For one response to such views of love, see Carrie Jenkins, "Modal Monogamy," *Ergo* 2:8 (2015), <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/ergo.12405314.0002.008>. See also Natasha McKeever, "Is the Requirement of Sexual Exclusivity Consistent with Romantic Love?," *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 34, no. 3 (2017).

A second, distinct yearning is unsatisfiable; this is that implicit in the popular idea of a unique “soulmate.” The yearning for “specialness” or non-contingency goes beyond the yearning to be the unique and irreplaceable beloved: it is to desire not only that no-one else currently, or in the future, be the beloved, but that no one else *could have been* the beloved. This yearning for a unique soulmate is expressed in Aristophanes’ famous myth in Plato’s *Symposium*: the beloved is our other half, the only piece who could fit us, to whom we crave to be rejoined.<sup>34</sup> Perhaps the imagined fulfillment of this yearning for non-contingency serves as a bulwark against recognizing the contingency of our own existence, our finitude and mortality. To be necessary to another makes us necessary.

But the presence of particular others in our lives is contingent, even wildly so. It is random that X and Y should meet, should be unattached to anyone else, should be attracted to one another, and have the time and ability to develop a relationship. This assumption has a corollary: it easily could all have been otherwise, with X meeting Z instead. The alternatives to this assumption, that two people meeting is God’s will or destiny, strike me as utterly implausible, although the soulmate view, if taken seriously, seems bound up with some such metaphysics. This contingency of meeting and mating conflicts with the yearning of romantic love to be the only possible beloved. If the relationship is contingent, other loves were possible.

Recognizing the contingency of our relationships and the possibility of our partner’s other lovers is conceptually connected with recognizing the separateness of the other, their independent existence and experience. If we can love others beyond our beloved, whom our beloved does not also love, then we are separate beings, not a unity. The drive for union (as marriage has historically been characterized), so literally depicted in Aristophanes’ myth, is a drive to transcend this separateness, precluding other loves and the separateness of the other.

There is thus a conceptual linkage between recognizing the contingency of the relationship itself, the possibility of other lovers, and the other’s independent experience. By acknowledging these facts, we may be less deceived, in the poet Philip Larkin’s phrase, although disappointed; but, we may say, so much the worse for the yearnings and illusions of romantic love. Metaphysically, acknowledging separateness and contingency is more accurate; ethically, that recognition may be the basis of a radical transformation from self-centered love, yearning for the satisfaction of certain desires, to other-centered love, recognizing the independence of other, as a

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<sup>34</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989).

necessary condition to true benevolence. (No doubt most of the time this is a matter of continua and see-sawing.) In short, revealing the yearning to find one's unique soulmate – and to be someone's unique soulmate – to be based on false beliefs and hence inherently unsatisfiable could benefit people by encouraging a more realistic evaluation of their expectations and beliefs (including a re-evaluation of their failure to find such a soulmate).

This also has implications for challenging amatonormativity. To the extent that the belief in a unique soulmate is part of romantic love ideals, then it is part of amatonormative assumptions about the value of romantic love. Recognizing that the romantic yearning for non-contingency (to be a unique soulmate) is inherently unsatisfiable, then, would be a corrective to the amatonormative assumption that the satisfaction of this yearning is a condition of human flourishing. And recognizing that the romantic yearning for uniqueness and irreplaceability is often unsatisfied also serves to correct amatonormative expectations. Of course, the beliefs and expectations concerned here are popular assumptions sustained through media, social media, and practices, and not – usually – through philosophical argument; but this is just why subversive weddings, which can propagate a different symbolism, are positioned to change them.

### 3. Polyamorous weddings

What does this brief sketch of wedding-related romantic yearnings have to do with subversive weddings, and specifically with polyamorous weddings? Let us start with 'traditional' monogamous weddings. I suggested that the psychological importance so many attach to weddings issues from the drive to satisfy these romantic and existential yearnings for specialness, uniqueness, and union. I would add that the wedding industry harnesses these drives to sell its expensive products and services. The specialness of the wedding comes to stand in for the specialness of the union, and of each member; thus the drive to individualize, to express oneself, through the wedding. Just as the spouses-to-be are the irreplaceable, unique objects of love, so too the wedding is unique and irreplaceable (at least, so they hope). The image of the bride too is of a *singular* object of desire (no matter how many times such images are replicated). It is *her* day – and no-one else's. (This recalls Simone de Beauvoir's claim that a woman in love aspires to transcendence through her connection to the male love object.<sup>35</sup>)

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<sup>35</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans., ed. H. M. Parshley (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 234-239.

This investment of romantic yearnings into weddings is plausibly explained by the fact that weddings serve as a capstone of romantic love narratives. Instead of replaceability, separateness, and contingency, they symbolize irreplaceability, union, and specialness, partly through the spoken wedding vows. And these vows initiate marital status, in which each is unique *qua* spouse, in a union intended to be buttressed against contingency (“in sickness or in health ...”).

The feminist analysis of marriage as a form of property offers insight into how weddings offer the fulfillment of the romantic yearnings. If marriage is a property relation, weddings are an act of taking possession, by which the other person is made into a thing, for it is only things which can be owned (this is what Kant struggled with in his account of marriage<sup>36</sup>). Weddings (illusively) appear to make static and permanent something which is by its nature contingent and impermanent, the love relationship; as an act of taking possession of the other’s *love*, they appear to satisfy the yearnings for uniqueness and irreplaceability. If I take possession of your love, you cannot give it to anyone else. But this reflects an aspect of the difficulty of love of which Jean-Paul Sartre wrote, the tension between yearning to possess another’s love and recognition of the freedom and subjectivity of the other person, a tension which Sartre thought essential to erotic love. Of course, taking possession of another’s love by making it unchanging is impossible; not so much because love cannot last, but because – as Sartre points out – the love which is wanted is freely and spontaneously given.<sup>37</sup>

Polyamorous weddings challenge all that; insofar as weddings are a social script for satisfying the romantic yearnings, for making love relationships permanent by taking possession of the other’s love, polyamorous weddings destabilize that script. What is destabilizing about polyamorous weddings is not the sex part, as one might think – but the love part. They do not necessarily challenge sexual exclusivity, as polyfidelity incorporates sexual exclusivity between more than two people. Likewise, a couple in a loving dyadic marriage could agree to have sex with other people but to refrain from loving them, maintaining their status as each other’s unique love object. The challenge to the romantic yearnings is not sexual openness but the possibility – and even desirability – of multiple non-hierarchical love relationships. Although we know we can love

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<sup>36</sup> Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor, in *Practical Philosophy*, ed. Mary Gregor (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 426-432.

<sup>37</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), 356.

many friends, children, or siblings, in a monogamist society romantic love is unique, singular, special.

Polyamorous weddings, even more than the practice of polyamory, are poised to threaten the understanding of romantic love as aiming at uniqueness, irreplaceability, and finding one's soulmate. They make public a different script, one directly opposed to the romantic narratives of weddings. Polyamorous weddings celebrate romantic love without a unique and irreplaceable (at least *qua* love object) beloved, commitment without exclusivity.

Polyamory challenges the romantic love ideal associated with the yearnings I have sketched not only because it allows for multiple love relationships, but also because it is essentially fluid. Polyamory does not merely consist in multiple love or sex relationships but is additionally constituted by a commitment to values such as radical honesty, openness, non-possessiveness, autonomy, and communication.<sup>38</sup> Of course, polyamorists, like monogamists, can cheat (I do not want to idealize polyamory!), and, having invoked de Beauvoir and Sartre and the specter of their problematic relationship, I should acknowledge that polyamory can, as Thom Brooks notes,<sup>39</sup> devolve into the most inegalitarian form of gendered relationship. However, the polyamorous ideal involves commitment to arrangements agreed to through a process of honesty, communication, and ongoing consent, and not to a fixed form. It could involve an open dyadic relationship, or relationships among primary and secondary partners, or polyfidelity. Moreover, its aspirations to consensual, communicative relationships require fluidity or openness to changing arrangements.

By its nature, polyamory, in its ideal form, challenges the features of romantic love which weddings symbolize. It challenges the yearning for uniqueness and irreplaceability simply because it permits romantic love for more than one person. It challenges the yearning for specialness because it implicitly acknowledges the contingency of relations, through its openness to revisiting the terms of the relationship and because involvement in other love relationships compels recognition of the contingency of the relationship, of the fact that others could have been 'the one'.

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<sup>38</sup> See Deborah Anapol, *Polyamory in the 21st Century: Love and Intimacy with Many Partners* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010); Elizabeth Brake, "Is 'Loving More' Better?: The Values of Polyamory," *The Philosophy of Sex: Contemporary Readings*, 7th edition, ed. Raja Halwani, Sarah Hoffman, and Alan Soble (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017), and "Recognizing Care: The Case for Friendship and Polyamory," *Syracuse Law and Civic Engagement Journal* 1 (2014), <http://slace.syr.edu/>. See also Luke Brunning, "The Distinctiveness of Polyamory," *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, OnlineFirst (2016), <https://doi-org.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/10.1111/japp.12240>.

<sup>39</sup> Brooks, "The Problem of Polygamy." While Brooks' paper mainly focuses on polygamy, he makes this comment in response to the objection that polyamory does not share the inegalitarian features of polygamy.

It challenges the associated ideal of union or non-separateness by acknowledging the reality of the other's independence. It does this both because it acknowledges the other's separate loves and pleasure and because it focuses on communication, autonomy, and consent. In its ideal form it reflects de Beauvoir's description of genuine love as "the mutual recognition of ... liberties; the lovers would experience themselves both as self and as other."<sup>40</sup> Finally, it challenges the symbolic taking possession of the other's love by its fluid and open arrangements. Weddings initiate marriages, with fixed roles and expectations. Weddings fix relationships into more or less rigid rules; polyamory is fluid and open to ongoing re-arrangement, relationship-based rather than role-based, with terms defined by mutual, ongoing consent. Thus, polyamorous weddings subvert the romantic narratives I have suggested that weddings entrench, that such romantic yearnings can be fulfilled through marriage.

It might be thought that polygamy also challenges these aspects of the romantic love ideal. But polygamy tends to reflect a pre-Love-Revolution understanding of weddings and marriage; that is, polygamists often tend to be motivated by religious ideals and focus on gendered spousal roles, not romantic love, as definitional of marriage. Polygamists are typically not in the marriage-for-romantic-love game to begin with, so their practices hardly challenge that ideal; they are not invoking it. Whereas polygamists tend to aim at marriage, polyamorists have emphasized self-defined relationships.

This brings us to a final way in which polyamorous weddings flout the norms of weddings and marriages. Polyamorous weddings are weddings without legal marriages (so far, except possibly in Colombia). (In this they are reminiscent of pre-legal or extra-legal self-marriage, where spouses married themselves to one another by declaration without legal recognition, a kind of marital Wild West.<sup>41</sup>) Because of the differences between polyamory and the romantic ideals of marriage, polyamorists have not often sought legal marriage (though this is now changing) even when they have sought other legal protections. Much polyamorist writing has in fact *opposed* marriage. Socially, polyamorous weddings are not widely understood as instituting marriages. If what is understood by standing in the role of a spouse entails exclusivity, then they cannot be standing (socially) in the role of spouses. How then do they fare on the dilemma sketched above?

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<sup>40</sup> De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 239.

<sup>41</sup> On the history of "self-marriage" in the U.S., see Cott, *Public Vows*, Chapter 2.

#### 4. Weddings without Marriages

##### *Option One: Failed Weddings*

The first horn of the dilemma is that polyamorous weddings are failed weddings: they are only wedding-like. Their participants intended to initiate a marriage through them, but failed to do so. If weddings initiate marriages, and polyamorous arrangements are not marriages, then their celebrations cannot be weddings. This is not so bad: as I noted above, these events can still express certain intentions and make commitments, like a commitment ceremony, without being weddings. They may also begin to alter social norms, as parody or performance art can. They can make political statements without being weddings.

One way to avoid this horn of the dilemma is to argue that polyamorous weddings are weddings, and that they initiate polyamorous marriages. For this to be the case, non-exclusive group marriages must be possible. While I think such marriages are possible, there is another alternative which suggests that our stipulative definition of weddings as initiating marriages is unnecessarily restrictive.

This is that polyamorous weddings are weddings which do not initiate marriages, and so we should reject the definition of weddings assumed at the outset. This alternative seems to reflect how some polyamorists actually understand their weddings. At least some of the time, polyamorous weddings are not intended to initiate marriages at all but to celebrate love and commitment before a gathering of friends and family. Author Angi Becker Stephens writes of her polyamorous wedding: “I want to have a wedding for the same reasons I imagine most people want to have them...: to bring the people I care about together to celebrate a love and a commitment that already exist, to stand in front of my friends and family and declare that I love this person and he loves me and we intend to stick together for the long haul.”<sup>42</sup> This suggests another solution to the dilemma: the stipulative definition which I gave above of weddings as events which initiate marriages should be rejected. There can be weddings without marriages, social recognition of a relationship and a commitment without expectations of fixed roles, uniqueness, irreplaceability, and unique soulmate status. On this alternative, weddings are like commitment ceremonies.

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<sup>42</sup> Angi Becker Stephens, “A poly wedding: My decision to marry my boyfriend while I’m legally married to my husband,” July 31, 2013, <http://offbeatbride.com/a-polyamorous-wedding/>.

Can one have a wedding – a ritual and party celebrating a relationship – with no marriage in the offing? Such a revision of the significance of weddings might seem to present problems. If a wedding need not initiate a marriage, but need only celebrate a relationship, why not call all sorts of things weddings – such as children’s blood brothers or best friends rituals, college reunions, or team meetings? In response, commitment ceremonies are generally understood to celebrate loving intimate relationships. There is no reason to think that weddings could not also be so understood, which would rule out college reunions and team meetings. But particularly because polyamory is so fluid and open-ended, it is challenging to rule out non-romantic love relationships. In a polyamorous relationship of four people, for example, two members could remain loving and committed to one another yet lack a romantic love connection. And the romantic status between members of a polyamorous network could, of course, change over time.

However, the implication that weddings could celebrate non-romantic best friend relationships could be a benefit of this account, rather than a *reductio*. If weddings could celebrate loving relationships beyond amorous dyads, including other close, long-term relationships – such as best friends – this would make another contribution to challenging amatonormativity. Socially, this would be one way to put non-romantic relationships on an equal footing with romantic partnerships.

The proliferation of alternative weddings – as well as the commercial impulse to focus on weddings, not marriages – suggests that socially, weddings and marriages are already coming unyoked. If weddings are defined socially, this suggests that the definition might be changing from “events which initiate marriages” to “events which celebrate love relationships.” While the cultural obsession with weddings appears to be a symptom of amatonormativity, the diversification of weddings could weaken amatonormativity, *if* it allows for the celebration of diverse kinds of love (such as for friends). Moreover, if the symbolism of weddings is detached from satisfying the romantic yearnings, it could weaken the social pressure to pursue romantic yearnings at the cost of other loving relationships.

*Option Two: Backfiring weddings*

Of course, if weddings cannot be detached from marriages, and marriages are associated with the romantic love ideal, then subversive weddings might backfire, reinforcing the romantic love ideal. As with same-sex marriage, the threat of assimilationism arises. Could polyamory be ossified into fixed roles? Rather than recognizing the limitless possibilities of relationships and eroticism, will “my one and only” simply be replaced with “my two and onlies”? Fluidity, ongoing consent, and communication are essential to polyamory. By moving into wedding culture, let alone marriage, the threat is that polyamorists who wed will be stamped with rigid roles and romantic ideals – that weddings will change polyamory rather than vice-versa.

Wedding polyamorists must perform the fine balance of seeking community recognition through a cultural form while attempting to subvert or change this cultural form. In her essay, Stephens wrestles with her polyamorous wedding, because she worries that she is driven by desires to make her alternative relationship seem more ‘normal’: “there is a part of me that wants the cultural validation of marriage, of declaring that this love is as real as any other.”<sup>43</sup> This is reminiscent of queer theorist’s Michael Warner’s warning that same-sex marriage may be “a political shortcut to dignity and respect from straight people through the granting of marriage rights.... to argue for gay marriage on these grounds is to despair that respect can be compelled on any other terms.”<sup>44</sup>

Stephens resolves her anxieties by arguing that “there’s something wonderfully defiant about standing up and saying that neither the state or society can dictate whether or not we are fully committed to one another ... we can take the old traditions and infuse them with whatever meaning we choose, as long as we are conscious and intentional about doing so.”<sup>45</sup> She sees her wedding as redefining what a commitment can mean and what love counts as “real.”

The question I have raised is whether it is possible to do this through the vehicle of a *wedding*. My answer is somewhat equivocal. In some contexts, a polyamorous couple introducing themselves as spouses may serve to (in small part) reinforce assumptions concerning marriage. But as subversive weddings grow in visibility, and as polyamorists seek legal recognition, those assumptions will likewise be weakened. Dismantling amatonormative expectations and unrealistic

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<sup>43</sup> Stephens, “A poly wedding.”

<sup>44</sup> Warner, “Response,” 729.

<sup>45</sup> Stephens, “A poly wedding.”

cultural narratives of romantic love is, unsurprisingly, a slow process; but subversive weddings can contribute to it<sup>46</sup>.

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<sup>46</sup> For helpful discussion, many thanks to participants in The Wedding Conference at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, and to Hallie Liberto and Brian Berkey for organizing that conference. Thanks especially to Daniela Cutaş and an anonymous reviewer for detailed comments on a draft of this paper.

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