introducing: marriage

Despite the paradigmatic status of marriage as descriptive object within ethnology and anthropology, it has never been subject to a rigorous critique. What motivates this lack of critique, and what are the consequences or effects of its absence? In this article I begin such a critique by addressing the following questions, each of which could be the subject of a separate essay or book but, because of their interconnectedness, should be posed simultaneously: What have been the specific and changing representations of marriage in anthropological literature? What forms of inclusion and exclusion are derived from the use of marriage as a universal equivalent? What are the political stakes for anthropologists in the current imaginings of marriage in the age of AIDS?

Understanding marriage as the definitive ritual and universally translatable regulative ideal of human societies has preoccupied the discipline of ethnology, and later anthropology, since its origins in the late 19th century. The ritual forms of marriage have included, among others, “primitive promiscuity,” “marriage by capture,” “by purchase,” and “by right,” “group marriage,” “primitive marriage,” “communal marriage,” “levirate,” “ghost-marriage,” “monogamy,” “polyandry,” “polygyny,” and “love marriage.” Suddenly, in 1962, in an introduction to a volume on marriage in tribal societies, the renowned British social anthropologist Meyer Fortes pronounced that all the puzzles had been solved: “So much is now known about the customs and institutions of marriage in all human societies that it might seem doubtful if anything new can be added. Nor are there conspicuous lacunae in the theoretical study of the subject.”

Anthropology has represented marriage as the definitive ritual and universally translatable regulative ideal of human societies. Its relation to the assertion of privilege, to closure, death, abjection, and exclusion are rarely examined in anthropological analyses. In this article I analyze the specific and changing representations of marriage in anthropological literature. I ask what forms of inclusion and exclusion are derived from the use of marriage as a universal equivalent. I argue that there has been a metaphysical privileging of the categories marriage, gender, heterosexuality, and life, which obtain their privilege by functioning as part of violent hierarchies in occasions of symbolization. Given the high political stakes in this imagining of marriage in the age of AIDS, I conclude that anthropologists should pay more attention to variability and instability as well as to that which is denied articulation in the occasions of reiteration of marriage.

[marriage, death, AIDS, kinship, gender, sex]
Although Fortes equivocated at the end of his introduction, professing that “doubts about the possibility of adding anything new...are wholly unfounded,” the other essays in this volume and subsequent work on marriage seemed instead to confirm fully his earlier statement about the exhaustion of questions about and explanations of marriage. Fortes himself, however, seemed at a loss for new direction. His proposal of a “game theory” model for the study of marriage, with a focus on the “criteria governing the choice of a spouse and the procedure of espousal entailed thereby” (1962:2), has had few followers (among the most interesting, see Bourdieu 1977:33–71).

Subsequent anthropologists have not altogether ignored marriage—its ubiquity and iterability in the late 20th century continues to make the subject unavoidable—but they have failed to apply to it the kind of critiques made of other anthropological objects of inquiry, such as “race” or “the primitive.” Most anthropologists either have made marriage secondary or derivative of other units of analysis such as kinship, gender, power, and political economy or, like Rodney Needham in a volume that has served as the last word on marriage, they have concluded that “‘marriage’...is an odd-job word: very handy in all sorts of descriptive sentences, but worse than misleading in comparison and of no real use at all in analysis” (1971:7–8). In one respect, however, contemporary anthropologists have shown solidarity with their immediate predecessors in presuming that birth, marriage, and death constitute a serial trinity at the center of the human life course. And, with very few exceptions, they have analyzed marriage only in its relation to birth or life despite the nearly universal cross-cultural associations between marriage and death. Since World War II, “marriage,” defined as the “right to found a family,” has become global ideology and is explicitly protected in the constitutions of most countries throughout the world. The relentless debate about “families” in both anthropology and popular culture tends to disguise what is actually at stake: social and legal recognition and protection of marriage. In the United States, for instance, marriage is often claimed as a universal human right, more basic to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” than meeting other human needs, such as, for example, the need to eat, work, or love. Indeed, marriage today is one of the few positive rights that has attained nearly universal consensus. Because of this world ideology, the connections of marriage to the assertion of privilege, to closure, death, abjection, and exclusion are rarely seen and therefore rarely examined.

Paralleling the decline among anthropologists in the theoretical interest in marriage has been an assumption among social theorists that in the “modern world”—into which every culture, not only those in the West, is supposed to be rapidly entering, if not already “there”—marriage has lost or is losing its significance. Moreover, death, too, it is often maintained, no longer seems so unpredictable and central to life as it was in premodern circumstances; it has been demystified and delayed by modern science and medicine and deritualized in modern society (Ariès 1980). The most suggestive statement of this perspective remains that of Michel Foucault in The History of Sexuality (1978). “The new procedures of power that were devised during the classical age and employed in the nineteenth century,” he writes, “were what caused our societies to go from a symbolics of blood to an analytics of sexuality” (1978:148). By this he means that an analytics of sexuality has come to overlap and interact with, and even predominate over, a prior symbolics of blood. In other words, a discourse on sexuality and life has replaced one centered around marriage and death.

A “symbolics of blood” is generative of a social formation whose authority is invested in a sovereign ruler (“Sovereign-Father”), in kinship relations based on blood symbolism (“tabooed consanguinity” and the “law of alliance”), and on the ability to “take life or let live.” This blood symbolism is constitutive of a “regime of power” based on both inheriting blood by descent and mixing blood by marriage, and is aligned with a particular configuration of power based on a sovereign’s “right to kill” or unquestioned ability to order or require someone’s death. Alternatively, the “analytics of sexuality” is a new mechanism of power generative of a social formation
whose authority is invested in administering life by means of disciplining the body and regulating populations. This new analytics of sexuality, then, is the basis for a regime of power that thematizes knowledge and the disciplines, the establishment of norms and rules, with a particular emphasis on the production and control of sexuality and the regulation of life itself.

Foucault’s untimely death from a complication of AIDS has denied us his further insights into how the discourse of sexuality and the institution of marriage is currently being refrigured by the reintroduction of a symbolics of blood, now associated with the generation, regulation, and containment of HIV, the sexually transmittable virus identified with AIDS, blood, and death. My argument will be that marriage and the symbolics of blood should—indeed, must—return as an object for anthropological analysis, and that this complex must be analyzed in its relation to death, closure, and exclusion rather than to birth, life, and freedom of choice. Marriage and blood symbolics were considered to be anchors of the social order in Western societies until the 19th century and, among non-Western peoples, through the 1960s. But there has been a 30-year lacuna in theoretical studies that focus critically on marriage, and a death of anthropologists, especially those “established” in the academy, willing or able to deal with AIDS. Moreover, those anthropologists or anthropologically oriented social scientists who have not shunned AIDS and who are making important contributions to our understanding and defeat of the pandemic have also not made marriage central to their analyses (e.g., Bolton 1989; Farmer and Kleinman 1989; Herdt and Boxer 1991; Herdt and Lindenbaum 1992; Treichler 1988).

I proceed by (1) showing how marriage was made into a totem, an object of anthropological identification and analysis through the 1950s; (2) showing why there has been an absence in the last 30 years of a critical literature on marriage in anthropological writing, most notably in feminist accounts; and, finally, (3) suggesting alternative perspectives that might rearticulate marriage as an object of study and simultaneously add to an understanding of its political function at this particular time in American history. This third argument could perhaps be extended to other national political contexts, but I leave that work for others. My entire analysis will be far from comprehensive in reviewing the literature, and I will not concentrate on the intention of the authors examined; Elman Service (1985:3–99) has already provided such an admirable review of major marriage and kinship controversies. Rather, I take the function of this article to be more theoretical than empirical, and, as with all theory, it will overreach. The merit of a theory lies not in its ability to explain all objects or events under purview comprehensively, but in the fact that the theory illuminates a certain subset of objects or events in a novel way. Therefore my focus will be on the conceptual and figural implications of the use of specific tropes in selected exemplary anthropological studies. I will attempt to show, much as Judith Butler has for “gender,” how marriage “operates through exclusionary means, such that the human is produced not merely against the inhuman, but through a set of foreclosures, radical erasures, that are, strictly speaking, refused the possibility of cultural articulation” (Butler 1993:8).

The earliest comparative anthropological analyses of marriage, based primarily on missionary reports, culminated in a profusion of works that, if not brilliant in theory or analysis, were certainly comprehensive in cross-cultural ambitions. They addressed questions concerning sexuality, the origin and development of marriage, the nature of matriarchy and patriarchy as organizational forms, primitive promiscuity and communal marriage, the incest taboo, the role of blood ties, lineage, and descent. Written by German, British, and American scholars, most of the classic works were completed before the turn of the century. The foundational studies were Johann J. Bachofen’s Das Mutterrecht (1861) and Sir Henry Maine’s Ancient Law 1931[1861], both of which appeared in the same year. Appropriately, they came to exactly...
opposite conclusions. Whereas Maine argued that *patria potestas* (the authority of the father) — not marriage — established the first kinship organization, Bachofen posited a theory of primitive matriarchy as the first stage in the evolution of marriage and the family. Bachofen’s challenging thesis was that patriliny eventually replaced matriliney and a cult of the female deity, which included group marriage or the practice of “primitive promiscuity” in a socially unorganized state. J. F. McLennan followed shortly thereafter with an equally imaginative book, *Primitive Marriage: An Inquiry into the Origin of the Form of Capture in Marriage Ceremonies* (1865), and agreed with Bachofen’s thesis. He postulated that because of the widespread practice of female infanticide among “primitive” peoples, groups resorted to outmarriage (or “exogamy,” a word he coined). They (the men) were thus forced to resort to “marriage by capture” at this primitive stage of human development.

Fustel de Coulanges, whose work *The Ancient City* (1864[n.d.]) was largely ignored by his contemporaries, anticipated many later experts. He connected marriage to religion and power, insisting its effect was “the union of two beings in the same domestic worship, in order to produce from them a third who would be qualified to continue the worship” (1864[n.d.]:51). In *Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity of the Human Family* (1877), Lewis Henry Morgan modified and systematized McLennan’s notion of a movement from an original promiscuity to polyandry by formalizing kinship terminology and positing 15 normal stages in the development of family form. The final stage, called “civilization,” is characterized by monogamy and private property. Although W. Robertson Smith has become best known for his work on religion, his *Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia* (1885) was significant in extending to the “Semites” the thesis of a movement from matriarchy to patriarchy among “primitives,” thereby helping to construct an Orientalist alter ego to contrast with the West. Sir James Frazer’s cross-cultural smorgasbord, *The Golden Bough* (1890), served for many years as a source for further fantasies about marital customs, although he did not link these customs to any new or more general theory.

That task of revising the theory was left to Edward Westermarck in *The History of Human Marriage* (1891). Westermarck dismissed primitive promiscuity as a general stage in the history of human societies, writing that marriage was “the simplest of all social [sic] institutions,” derived from our primate ancestors, a product of nature and not society. He consciously developed a Darwinian model of history, with marriage as “a necessary requirement for the existence of certain species” that “does not belong exclusively to our own species.” Thus Westermarck effectively reversed the sequence posited by Maine, Bachofen, and McLennan, arguing that the institution of marriage was a universal equivalent not merely across human groups but across species; it antedated human historical development. If there has been any development in the institution of marriage, it is better characterized by devolution than by progress. He approvingly quotes a certain Dr. Bruhn, that “real genuine marriage can only be found among birds” (1891:B, 11, 39). So marriage, though not really “for the birds,” nonetheless finds its purest expression among them. What better way to naturalize and totemize an institution than to extend it to other species, making it a part of a natural order of things?

These early authorities assumed that marriage was foundational to the organization of social life, with questions about economics, politics, religion, and even kinship most often added to contextualize the study of marriage. Even Morgan, Maine, and Engels, writers who employed a materialist interpretation of history and understood marriage as the product of a progressive development of productive systems, certainly never questioned the centrality and relative significance of marriage for all of social organization. The wisdom on marriage at the turn of century was perhaps summed up best by Ernest Crawley in *The Mystic Rose: A Study of Primitive Marriage and of Primitive Thought in Its Bearing on Marriage* (1960[1902]). Crawley stakes out his position succinctly: “We have followed the principle that marriage, both in ceremony and in system, is grounded in primitive conceptions of sexual relations. Many collateral phenomena
will be discussed [that] lead from human relations through sexual relations to meet in marriage” (1960[1902] 1:2). By “sexual relations” Crawley meant neither sexual practices (e.g., cunnilingus, fellatio, frottage, sodomy, heterosexual intercourse) nor sexuality and sexual identity as it is conceptualized today, but instead the instinctual coming together of the (biological) sexes in an act with procreative possibilities. This “sex” he had in mind was not the object elaborated and critiqued by Foucault in *The History of Sexuality*, the one “worth dying for . . . that agency which appears to dominate us and that secret which seems to underlie all that we are” (1978:154–156). Sex, for Crawley, was anatomy without lack, function without latency, instinct without meaning, a primordial imperative that met the human—and thus could be found and analyzed at this meeting—in marriage.

Supported by the doctrine of the irreducible biological nature of the two sexes whose destiny was to be joined into a union, Crawley confidently concludes that “few people, if any, of those known to us, are without some marriage ceremony.” Moreover, those “said to possess none . . . will generally be found [to have] a ‘ceremony’ . . . which when analyzed turns out to be a real marriage rite” (1960[1902], 2:29). Marriage, then, for Crawley and his contemporaries, is universal, with a ceremonial part, the “joining together of a man and a woman,” and an institutional or systemic part, “the permanent living-together of a man and a woman” (1960[1902], 2:29). E. E. Evans-Pritchard, writing in 1965, concluded about *The Mystic Rose* that “I, like some of his contemporaries, find [the book] unintelligible” (1965:36).

For our purposes, Crawley’s representation is significant for two reasons, which I shall merely introduce at this point but will return to throughout this essay. First, marriage becomes the point of reference, the general equivalent for the project of translation across cultures, a universal and timeless human unity in relation to which the essential distinction between “a man and a woman” and thus the “human subject” can be posited. Marriage, then, functions as a common denominator for humanity (on the construction of symbolic economies, see Goux 1989). Second, the reference to marriage enables Crawley to treat a set of subsequent distinctions (between male and female, civilized and primitive, birth and death, heterosexual and homosexual, normal and deviant) as hierarchical oppositions in which one term is equated with presence and the other denotes absence, lack, or in some sense a fall from presence. These oppositions function as what Derrida (1976[1967]) has called “violent hierarchies”: the assumed logically or temporally prior term is continually asserted as present while the other is assumed to be added on or merely supplementary. The supplements (e.g., females, homosexuals, death, deviants, and primitives) are considered both inessential and necessary—inessential because they are added to something (e.g., males, heterosexuals, and civilized peoples) already complete; necessary because they are added in order to complete, to compensate for something missing. Marriage is the whole, the complete-ness, to which these oppositions refer, and is what enables their cross-cultural translatability.

Continuing in this discursive tradition, anthropologists have read “marriage” backward in time and across the universe. And with marriage as the stable point of reference, they also claimed universality for the violent hierarchies mentioned above: male/female, civilized/primitive, birth/death, heterosexual/homosexual, normal/deviant. As anthropology developed into a coherent discipline, the 19th-century concentration of some authors on marriage as legitimating sex was, with some major exceptions, subsumed under frameworks that focused on domestic organization, economic production, and transmission of property. In the first half of this century two major schools, descent and alliance theory, developed. Both schools continued to grant marriage an unquestioned centrality in analysis, though, as we shall see, with different emphases. The most prominent proponent of descent theory was A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, and of alliance theory, Claude Lévi-Strauss.

The theoretical interests that Radcliffe-Brown brought to bear on marriage can be traced to two sources: *Notes and Queries on Anthropology*, the charter text for several generations of
British social anthropologists, and Durkheimian social theory. *Notes and Queries*, first published in 1874, sets forth two criteria for marriage: a union between one man and one woman and that this union establish the legitimacy of children. In other words, marriage is concerned (1) with establishing and giving gender its fullest meaning in heterosexual union, and (2) with legitimating select offspring, generally through establishing paternity and the possibility of inheritance. Death and funerary rights, though still a necessary object in any ethnographic monograph, is increasingly dealt with separately from the cluster of meanings surrounding marriage.

Following Durkheim, Radcliffe-Brown (1950) emphasized that the object of anthropology was the social whole or, in his own words, “social structure,” which he conceptualized as being in equilibrium or disequilibrium. Writing about Africa, for example, he defines marriage as a “rearrangement of social structure [that] produces a temporary disequilibrium.” It does this by removing a daughter from her family and placing her in her husband’s group, where she becomes an “intrusion.” “Marriages,” he writes, “like births, deaths, or initiations at puberty, are rearrangements of structure that are constantly recurring in any society” (1950:43). In sum, for Radcliffe-Brown, marriage is a given, a timeless and recursive structure. Indeed, marriage actually forces movement in society and social structure, particularly in the kinship system through the “intrusions” of women—though marriage itself remains bounded and stable as it functions to reproduce timeless structures.

This model of marriage enables it to be represented by synchronic kinship diagrams, with a (male) gendered ego at the center who is shown to unite—to rearrange—two groups. These kinship charts have been to anthropologists what maps are to cartographers: not merely a formal tool of representation but an icon, a logos, of the discipline itself. In such diagrams, the male (Δ) and female (O) are represented as objects held together by three functions: descent (I), siblingship (—), and marriage (=). While descent may be adequately symbolized by the vertical bar (I), and sibling relations by a horizontal bar (—), only under the most exceptional circumstances could marriage, an extremely hierarchical relationship in nearly all anthropological accounts, be symbolized by an equal sign (=). This particular form of representation had the effect of encompassing marriage in a larger network of kinship relations. Indeed, Radcliffe-Brown tried to gloss this representation in such a way that not marriage, but what he called the “elementary family”—a man and his wife and their child or children—would constitute “the first order” or “unit of structure” of a human group.

But whereas kinship replaced and subsumed marriage as the metaphysical object enabling cross-cultural translation, marriage did not thereby lose its centrality. In fact, kinship diagrams formalized the centrality of marriage by making it impossible to represent the continued significance or contributions of an individual to the group unless that individual had an “=” attached to his or her icon of gender. Kinship charts also permit birth and death to rearrange social structure, but, as with marriage, this ability to rearrange serves to reproduce and reaffirm, to reiterate, the formal structure of the order, not to question or change its constitution. In short, kinship diagrams create a representation of a permanence and continuity, a wholeness and completeness, that constantly denies death as it reaffirms perpetual life in a series of equivalent heterosexual unions organized by marriage.

Furthermore, for Radcliffe-Brown marriage is about reproduction in its narrowest, biological, and essentially gendered sense. “An African,” he writes, “marries because he wants children. The most important part of the ‘value’ of a woman is her child-bearing capacity” (1950:51). This statement is an important deviation from what early authorities on the subject wrote, for it proposes that marriage is about heterosexual coupling and biological reproduction, but not about sexuality. This peculiar extracting of sexuality from heterosexual coupling and reproduction in marriage consciously removes “sex,” in the Foucauldian sense, from anthropological analysis. Sex is too messy, too unstable to be fixed by the repetitive labor of the marital norm.
“Sex” no longer adequately serves a project intent on finding a universal human equivalent, whereas marriage reaffirms the functionalist’s sense that reproductive heterosexuality reiterates the norms of the social, if indeed it is not conflated with society itself.

Radcliffe-Brown makes this point explicitly as he concludes about African societies, “The study of what are regarded as ‘unnatural’ offences, incest, bestiality, in some societies homosexuality, patricide, and matricide, is a special branch of the comparative study of morals” (1950:70). As for “Europe in Christian times,” he slightly revises the list of unnatural offences: “incest, bestiality, homosexuality, and witchcraft”—replacing patricide and matricide with witchcraft. For both Africa and Christian Europe, Radcliffe-Brown reduces sex and sexual desire to “sexual intercourse,” which, he concludes, “is felt to be wrong between two persons if by the rules of society they may not marry” (1950:71). With this move, sex of any sort outside of marriage is foreclosed, transferred from the study of natural—or, to be consistent with Radcliffe-Brown, of “natural offences”—to the “study of morals” (within marriage, sex is of course social, beyond reproach, and therefore in no need of explication). And morals constitute a field with which anthropologists, as cultural relativists and secular scientists working for colonial authorities, are supposedly unconcerned.

Radcliffe-Brown also pioneered the study of relations between siblings and friends. Yet he often reduced these relations to their structural positions on the kinship chart, which, since it was organized around a central (male) ego that marries, tended to reduce these relations to supplementary or secondary ones. People who do not relate to the social structure through affinal or consanguinal ties are simply omitted from consideration, for their life course does not follow the eternal, putatively cross-cultural sequence of birth, marriage, death. It follows that practices which do not contribute to establishing affinal ties become supplementary (inessential to kinship yet necessary for its adumbration) not only to kinship but also to the discipline of anthropology. One final binary that Radcliffe-Brown reinforces is that between primitive and civilized. The major difference between African and Anglo-Saxon marriage, he argues, is that the state plays a role in “civilized” Great Britain, whereas in “primitive” Africa marriage is merely an exchange between kin, outside centralized political authority. As against this difference (states and statelessness, or presence and absence), both Africans and Anglo-Saxon cultures share the same timeless structures of humanity, organized around marriage and kinship (1950:39–73).

Soon, however, the rigorous structuralism of Claude Lévi-Strauss displaced much Radcliffe-Brownian structural-functionalism, and the abstract field of “kinship theory” became the avant-garde of anthropological work. With the publication of Lévi-Strauss’s magisterial Elementary Structures of Kinship (1969[1949]), exchange theory and a focus on alliance competed with and relativized the significance of descent theory. Lévi-Strauss, however, reaffirmed that marriage, not the “elementary family,” was the unit around which kinship moved, now supplemented with a retheorized incest taboo. Not kinship units but the relation among groups, regulated by preferential marriage and the incest taboo, established the conditions for exchange and thus comprised the elementary structure of human organization. Lévi-Strauss correctly noted that Radcliffe-Brown’s “elementary family” unit presupposed a distinction between marriage and consanguinity. Hence kinship cannot exist as a natural unit before marriage because it “is allowed to establish itself only through specific forms of marriage” (Lévi-Strauss 1963:50). Sexuality, to the extent it was relevant to structuralism, remained a secondary concern. Despite differences between the two approaches, I should emphasize that studies on kinship in the 1950s and 1960s did not so much divide anthropologists between the competing foci of descent and alliance, which was often the feeling at that time, as enable them to remain united around the same object: the heterosexual, married human.

Unity around this anthropological object was made possible by assuming that the unit “marriage” was stable and universal among cultures as well as over time, and by assuming the
stability of “the sexes” and of the groups or “cultures” doing the marital exchange. Individuals whose status did not derive from the algebraically reducible units (which in turn were the products of affinal or consanguineal relations), but who were nonetheless imputed to be significant to the group, were called “categorical kin.” This neologism suggests that some kinship relations are grounded in nature and others in culture, some grounded in real kinship and beyond morality while others are merely a matter of categorical convenience and therefore morally questionable. Even biological relations not directly relevant to establishing affinity—such as those between siblings, mother and daughter, mother and son, father and daughter, or father and son—were often treated as supplementary, if not insignificant, to the marriage in particular, and to social structure in general.

In his conclusion to Elementary Structures Lévi-Strauss writes that “the relations between the sexes can be conceived as one of the modalities of a great ‘communication function’ which also includes language.” In other words the man-woman union in marriage is a form of primal speech, as central to the human as language. Pulling out all the stops, Lévi-Strauss gushes that “the relations between the sexes have preserved that affective richness, ardour and mystery which doubtless originally permeated the entire universe of human communications.” Indeed, we may have fallen from grace, but we have retained in heterosexuality something of that original “ardour and mystery.” When he says that women are the “object of personal desire, thus exciting sexual and proprietal instincts, . . . the subject of the desire of others, [meaning] binding others through alliance with them,” he is granting women a social centrality in several roles: as objects of male desire (as female) and of male proprietal instincts (as marriageable), as wives (thus married), and as alliance-makers (thus marital counters) (1969[1949]:496). This centrality for “the woman” relies solely on her definition as the alter, the exchange item, of “the man”—she is meaningless without him (see the critique by Rubin [1975:157–210]). Lévi-Strauss posits a particular, fixed set of gendered roles at the cost of other possible meanings for “the woman” (see Amadiume 1987:57–65).

Much like Radcliffe-Brown, Lévi-Strauss dismisses any primacy to the sexual independent from the marital: “In general, thus, sexual considerations interfere little in matrimonial plans. On the other hand, economic considerations are paramount, because it is above all the division of labor between the sexes that makes marriage indispensable. But, as with the family, the sexual division of labor rests on a social, rather than a natural basis” (1985[1956]:51). The indispensable social basis “originates in marriage,” which, although it may be social, is oddly assumed not to vary temporally and culturally (1985[1956]:44). Thus, for Lévi-Strauss, the family, which is “based on a union, more or less durable, but socially approved, of two individuals of opposite sexes who establish a household and bear and raise children, appears to be a practically universal phenomenon, present in every type of society” (1985[1956]:40–41).

If the threat of death enters into the marital story—as it does, for example, when Lévi-Strauss (1985[1956]:46) mentions how bachelors (“half a human being” among the Brazilian Bororo, he writes) fear death if they refuse or are unable to marry—marriage is immediately detached from death and is assumed to be the way out of this death threat rather than its trigger. Like most anthropologists when confronted with the frequent proximity of death to marriage, Lévi-Strauss inverts cause and effect. It is assumed that the community, in order to avoid a yet more violent crisis, must abject the homosexual, the bachelor, the childless couple—and this abjection is left unexplained. A bachelor among the Bororo is merely a supplement to “being” and to the marital pair: inessential because that pair is already complete, yet necessary as “half a being” in order to demonstrate the completeness of the pair in “being” whole. This disidentification with and sacrifice of the “half a human being” is necessary because this “half” threatens to disrupt the image of wholeness presented by a heterosexual “union.” Could one possibly imagine completeness outside it? And, to prevent this disruption, a bachelor’s fear of death is represented as a cause rather than effect of the regulatory ideal. In fact, in many societies this
single man’s death would be interpreted as a good omen, as a sacrifice that assures the couple they will never separate (on marriage as a sacrificial crisis, see Girard 1977:223–249).

Since the exhaustion of the Lévi-Straussian structuralist paradigm, about which Fortes laments in the introduction cited above, a kind of materialist dogma has characterized much subsequent treatment of marriage. Perhaps exemplary of this approach is Edmund Leach’s study of Pul Eliya (1961b), where he reduces marriage to land and water rights. This materialist reduction is also true of much sociological literature on marriage and the family (see, for example, Bane 1976; Weitzman 1985). In the remainder of this article I will focus on gender studies, the current dominant perspective employed by anthropologists to look at kinship and marriage—a perspective that I take to be the most recent transformation of marriage as object in the discourse of anthropology. My exclusion of other approaches to the anthropology of marriage does not mean that they are without merit. For example, Godelier’s work on the Buruya (1986) innovatively combines a structuralist and Marxist approaches in an analysis of marriage, gender, and sex. Yet most studies tenaciously hold to a biologistic paradigm that wants to assure us, as Thomas Lacqueur writes in his study Making Sex, “that bodies whose anatomies do not guarantee the dominance of heterosexual procreative sex nevertheless dedicate themselves to their assigned roles” (1990:243). This study of bodies dedicated “to their assigned roles” has become gender studies.

feminist reformulations

Much as a generation of scholars writing from approximately 1940 to 1960 had replaced marriage with kinship, feminist scholarship in the 1970s replaced kinship with “gender.” In each successive transformation kinship and marriage were neither left behind nor omitted; rather, each term was consecutively subsumed under another, which then served as a whole or referent to which other subunits and binary oppositions could refer for meaning. Alternatively, marriage, kinship, and gender served as universal equivalents for making possible the construction of the human subject and the translatability of cultures in anthropological discourse. Again, the very selective review that follows aims to highlight the figural implications of the use of specific tropes in exemplary studies; it does not attempt to deal with all feminist scholarship.

At the forefront of this most recent attempt to redefine the study of marriage and kinship was E. Kathleen Gough. Her renowned study of the Nayar challenged conventional wisdoms about descent and exchange. For the polyandrous Nayar were not organized around a conception of the elementary family as one wife, one husband, and children (see Schneider and Gough 1961). In fact, the Nayar, wrote Gough (1959), did not have a husband in the conventional sense, but divided the “male role” into a social father and lovers who were the actual procreators. Here Gough reconceptualizes marriage as “a relationship established between a woman and one or more other persons, which provides a child born to the woman under circumstances not prohibited by the rules of relationship, is accorded full birth-status rights common to normal members of his society or social stratum” (1968:68). Since the function of the marriage is to provide the “full birth-status rights” to the child, the primary social relationship becomes that between mother and child.

Gough reiterates this definition in a later, now-classic essay on the origin (and universality) of the family: “Marriage exists as a socially recognized, durable (although not necessarily life-long) relationship between individual men and women. From it springs social fatherhood” (1974:53). For her, maternity is prior to and more significant than either marriage or, following that, paternity. Fatherhood, always socially defined, becomes significant only upon marriage, which itself becomes significant only when women become pregnant. Whatever advances at the time of its publication that this reformulation may have made in reordering the hierarchies initially posited by Notes and Queries, Gough continued working within the same hierarchies.
Marriage has become the external form of an internal compulsion, namely, a mother's need to legitimize her child. Marriage remains the cultural union of two natural opposites, male and female, who seek wholeness in Being. But now the social regulation of female reproduction becomes the prior, the cause, while marriage and kinship become its effects. Though Gough's kinship model no longer relies on the (biological) male ego and paternity for its kinship core, it remains captive of a procreative and natalist bias rooted in a taken-for-granted heterosexual union of two genders.

Two pioneering edited volumes followed upon Gough's work and provided an explicit gender framework for future study. Both Michelle Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere's Woman, Culture, and Society (1974) and Rayna Reiter's Toward an Anthropology of Women (1975) focused on constructing "the woman" as an object of study in a discipline that had assumed the universality of "the male" voice. The various authors in both volumes were preoccupied with questions concerning the universal subordination of women and the mechanisms that produced various forms of domination. Their intent, much like Gough's, was to establish the centrality of women and female subjectivity as anthropological topics, and thereby to raise discussion of "gender" within anthropology to a more sophisticated theoretical and practical political level. Yet the reorientation toward women and gender was accompanied by a loss of interest in the subjects that had so preoccupied the founders of anthropology: marriage, death, and sex. Though early feminist scholarship reverses the initial hierarchy of male/female by privileging the female, it continues to work within the dualism rather than questioning or displacing it. Moreover, by holding "marriage" stable and assuming it to be an effect of gender, this scholarship leaves intact the other binary oppositions mentioned earlier: civilized/primitive, birth/death, heterosexual/homosexual. Marriage, the referent that enables these hierarchies to function, the referent that enables positing a male Adam as logically and temporally prior to a female Eve, is not asked to testify in its defense.

A third edited volume, Sherry Ortner and Harriet Whitehead's Sexual Meanings (1981), claims to remedy this imbalance, at least in part, by analyzing sex together with gender. Again, however, marriage is often collapsed together with kinship, as in "kinship/marriage" or "kinship-marriage," not in order to force a more rigorous justification of "sexual meanings" (by which the editors usually mean gender), but in order to extract sex and gender from the nexus of practices and meanings associated with marriage. Thus the authors hold marriage stable while allowing sexual meanings to vary wildly across culture and over time. Their most significant move, however, is not to explicate the variance they find in "gender systems" and "sexual meanings," but to substitute a presumed originary "prestige" for kinship-marriage as the reference or social whole that makes sense of the violent gender hierarchies they seek to explain. Thereby "kinship-marriage" becomes just a specific form of prestige. Now prestige, which is held stable and assumed to be universal and originary, replaces and subserves marriage and kinship.

It is important to note how the "sexual meanings" surveyed in this volume become divorced from a discussion of "sex" and marriage/death. In a memorable passage, Ortner and Whitehead state, "Undoubtedly some disappointment will set in as, in essay after essay, the erotic dissolves in the face of the economic, questions of passion evaporate into questions of rank, and images of male and female bodies, sexual substances, and reproductive acts are peeled back to reveal an abiding concern for military honors, the pig herd, and the estate" (1981:24). Indeed, Ortner and Whitehead are seeking something foundational, what they call "the home ground of the erotic," which, when bodies and sex are "peeled back," turns out to be nothing other than "gender itself" (1981:25). Thereby a study of sexual meanings and social organization is displaced into one of gender as a foundational prestige system, which in turn reveals our abiding concern with economics, rank, military honors, the pig herd, and the estate.
This said, Ortner does begin in her final chapter a critical examination of marriage. But rather than understand marriage as a privilege that operates through a series of foreclosures and abjections, through the creation of an “outside,” she narrows her focus to the deleterious effects of marriage on married women. Our sympathies are directed toward the married woman who for whatever reason fails to find the completeness promised her in marriage, and away from, for example, the unmarried, unmarriageable, celibate, or divorced. Why, she asks, do women who are more tied to maritally defined roles have less status than those women, such as virgins, who are able to draw on a broader range of kinship statuses? In marriage, “feminine attributes—mainly centering on biological reproduction—are highlighted, whereas in kinship roles they are not.” Marriage makes a woman “a radically different type of human being whereas in the context of kinship she is more easily seen as simply occupying different social roles” (1981:400). Confining her discussion of sex to heterosexual coitus and the issue of virginity, she concludes about hierarchical societies that nonvirgins (by which she means those women who have engaged in heterosexual coitus) are “down-graded to mere womanhood,” whereas virgins are considered “first of all, co-members of their own status groups” (1981:401). This interesting formulation occludes several crucial considerations. First, Ortner continues in the tradition of drawing the theoretical significance of marriage from its ties to physical reproduction, ignoring any connections it may have to death, in particular to forms of exclusion. Second, sex becomes meaningful only when incorporated into marriage; it has no independent significance. Thus her theoretical perspective unwittingly reproduces what it seeks to criticize: the American conception (or ideology) of kinship, as outlined and critiqued by David Schneider (1980), that Americans become fully human only as husband and wife engaged in heterosexual coitus for the purpose of reproducing legally legitimate children. Furthermore, by taking a male perspective, as Ortner and Whitehead admit to doing in the introduction, they are not better able, as they claim, to deal with the framework of male hegemony within which females act. Instead they are reduced to arguing from a position restricted to that of a particular (reproductive, heterosexual) male and about the position of a particular (reproductive, heterosexual) female.

Finally, Ortner and Whitehead make several moves characteristic of the American school of “symbolic anthropology”—what Johannes Fabian has called a “cultural gardens” (1983) approach—that have had dramatic consequences for shaping the study and understanding of marriage/death and gender. They criticize the British for “nailing each bit [of culture] to some specific feature of social organization” (Ortner and Whitehead 1981:4), by which they mean, I suspect, the frequent tendency among British anthropologists to derive sense from “social structure.” Yet they criticize this “nailing” process not in order to posit a different sort of relationship between cultural meanings and social organization, but to absolve themselves from having to deal with social structure altogether. “Military honors, the pig herd, and the estate,” three elements, presumably, of social structure, are themselves assumed to be effects of an originary prestige system called gender. This move justifies the omission of a more rigorous or critical conception of social organization, which would necessarily include, of course, the organization of marriage, sex, and death.

Moreover, from the symbolic anthropology perspective, Ortner and Whitehead argue that “culture itself has the properties of a system, a system that mediates between any given symbol and its social grounding” (1981:4). The separation of the symbol from its “social grounding” has been tellingly criticized elsewhere, as has the positing of a system of symbols somehow isolable from the practices they signify (Bourdieu 1977; Sperber 1975). Fabian, in particular, criticizes symbolic anthropologists for moving to a higher level of visual-spatial reduction to distance themselves temporally from their object. This distancing, he writes, “is inevitable so long as anthropology remains fixed on symbolic mediations whose importance no one denies but which, after all, should be the field of encounter with the Other in dialectical terms of confrontation, challenge, and contradiction, not the protective shield which cultures hold up until death do us part
against each other. So far, it seems, fixation on the symbolic favored maintaining the stance of
the viewer, observer, perhaps the decipherer of cultural ‘texts’” (Fabian 1983:136). Indeed, one
must ask if the “sexual meanings” posited by symbolic anthropologists have not functioned
precisely as a “protective shield” to be deciphered, one that, in permitting a placement of the
analyst apart from the objects of study, accepts, if not reinforces, the violent hierarchies of
primitive/civilized, egalitarian/hierarchical, heterosexual/homosexual?

Also coming from the symbolic anthropology school, though proposing to include a study of
practices, are the authors in Jane Collier and Sylvia Yanagisako’s 1987 edited volume, Gender
and Kinship: Essays toward a Unified Analysis. The editors, and presumably the other authors
in the volume, propose to revitalize the study of kinship by disassociating the ideas of gender
and sex and placing gender at the theoretical core (for a critique, see Errington 1990:26–31).
In their introduction Collier and Yanagisako usefully begin with an important statement:
“Gender is not everywhere rooted in the same difference” (1987:15). We are admonished not
to assume the nature of differences, but instead to investigate “the various ways in which
difference is conceptualized in other societies” (1987:41). The authors nonetheless argue for a
gender-centric model, now proposing to keep gender separate from biological sex, for gender
may be based on a set of differences other than sex. In this assumption, however, they not only
assume gender to be a coherent theoretical core but also assign it in analysis a priority that they
seek to avoid in their theoretical statement.

This belief, that gender does not always articulate the same differences but nonetheless
produces or grounds such differences, has been rigorously criticized by Judith Butler. Butler
argues that this move, which is normally done to separate sex from gender, is bound to fail, for
theories of gender invariably rely on a notion of the two sexes rooted in assumptions of
normative heterosexuality. She writes, “Indeed, the view of sex, gender, and desire that
presupposes a metaphysics of substance suggests that gender and desire are understood as
attributes that refer back to the substance of sex and make sense only as its reflection” (Butler
1990:336). She therefore argues against the “illusion of an interior and organizing gender core,
[for this core] is maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory
frame of reproductive heterosexuality” (1990:337). A very similar, although inverted, claim is
made in Lacqueur’s historical study of the making of sex in the West: “Almost everything one
wants to say about sex—however sex is understood—already has in it a claim about gender”
(1990:11).

It follows that when Collier and Yanagisako make a plea in their essay for recognizing types
of relationships that are not heterosexual-based, they are at a loss for examples that might
contribute theoretically to their “unified analysis” of gender. In Collier’s own essay in Gender
and Kinship, for example, where the focus is on women and marriage, she examines women
only in male-female relations, in interactions with “fathers, brothers, husbands, and possibly
male lovers” (Collier 1987:197). If she had found examples of same-sex relations, I suspect that
the “gender core” framework would have been unable to deal with them nonreductively, for
this framework necessarily considers same-sex relations to be supplementary—at most, as
additive to or deviations from the theorized gender system and its heteronormative ideal. Eve
Sedgwick justly writes, “A damaging bias toward heterosocial or heterosexist assumptions
inheres unavoidably in the very concept of gender. This bias would be built into any gender-
based analytic perspective to the extent that gender definition and gender identity are neces-
sarily relational between genders—to the extent, that is, that in any gender system, female
identity or definition is constructed by analogy, supplementarity, or contrast to male, or vice
versa” (1990:31).

A final problem in Collier and Yanagisako’s analysis is the positing of “social wholes” or
“systems” within which “cultural meanings” are to be deciphered without accounting for the
nature of the wholes. Although they question meanings (such as those for blood, love, and
sexual intercourse), they hold stable and unquestioned the wholes (marriage, society) of which these meanings are parts. When they ask, “What are a society’s cultural values?” (1987:40), for example, they do not question what that society is. What are its boundaries, what gives it coherence, who is positioned outside, as incoherent or incomplete? “Socially meaningful categories” and the “symbols and meanings [that] underlie them” are assumed variable and historical, but underneath these categories are supposedly the invariable “sexes.” It is therefore meaningless when they argue that one need not “discriminate between [the sexes]” (1987:41), for they are taking for granted that sexes as a form of distinction already exist.

A comprehensive review of feminist work is beyond the scope of this essay, but two other recent studies that reformulate gender and kinship should be mentioned. Marilyn Strathern’s *Reproducing the Future: Anthropology Kinship, and the New Reproductive Technologies* (1992) and Annette Weiner’s *Inalienable Possessions: The Paradox of Keeping-While-Giving* (1992) both make important contributions to the study of kinship and gender, but both also leave marriage/death unexamined. Strathern would seem poised to address marriage and AIDS, since most of her work has been concerned with kinship and because she is here trying to explain radical shifts in the conceptualization of parenting, partnering, and marriage. Yet she avoids any discussion of issues of sexuality (except man-woman for physical reproduction), of nonheterosexual identity forms, or of AIDS and its impact on marriage and kinship. Weiner takes gender as her object but then commendably argues for more research on “sibling intimacy,” since in “traditional theories of kinship [the focus has been] on marital exchange and human reproduction” (1992:66). Her critique of studies of reciprocal exchange is that such studies tend to take a male only perspective, whereas females are often involved in exchanges based on keeping-while-giving, of “keeping inalienable possessions out of exchange” (1992:150). This latter type of exchange is based on the “social prominence of sibling intimacy.” A focus on it would avoid “reducing women’s social roles to those of sexuality and human reproduction” (1992:151). A new concern with intimate relations between brother and sister as “the elementary kinship principle” redeﬁnes the object of analysis, argues Weiner, as one of gender and power (1992:17). While this reformulation will undoubtedly generate new questions, it continues to presuppose gender as stable, prior, and generative of other terms. Weiner fruitfully shifts the analysis from that of husbands and wives to one of brothers and sisters; the framework, however, remains heteronormative, and same-sex relations remain outside the framework. As Gayle Rubin had argued eight years earlier, in a reformulation of her earlier “sex/gender” framework: “Feminism is a theory of gender oppression.... [It] fails to distinguish between gender, on the one hand, and erotic desire, on the other” (1984:307). Why, we must ask, has the research of gender occluded the study not only of erotic desire but also of marriage/death?

I have been criticizing certain feminist reformulations for assuming that marriage is a supposedly stable representation of order separate from death, and often from sexuality, for uncritically subsuming marriage into a sex/gender framework, and for employing gender as a universal, cross-cultural equivalent. I should affirm my agreement with the emphasis on women, or perhaps better put, “the woman,” to the extent that this rhetorical focus has reframed the relation between presence and absence, completeness and lack, centrality and suppleness. A reversal of the man/woman hierarchy is an essential step in a deconstruction of terms, but such a reversal remains within the hierarchy and continues to legitimize the validity of the binary opposition itself. Moreover, any deconstruction does limited work: it does not claim to undo marriage or any other hierarchy, nor does it pretend to create a tabula rasa on which one can begin again. My goal has been, on the one hand, to criticize the search for a prior, original, core, foundational human institution, and, on the other, to situate differently the terms in question by demonstrating how the centrality of marriage, in gender studies as in kinship studies, is afﬁrmed and reiterated by means of a heteronormative logic that continually marginalizes,

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excludes, and abjects that which threatens to disrupt it. We must demand that the central referents justify their privilege and placement.

Unfortunately, in the feminist work reviewed above no displacement of marriage is possible. And, I am arguing, there is no displacement because gender is being asserted as prior to marriage and sexuality. Because marriage, the referent to which the gender hierarchy appeals, retains its centrality without justification, “gender itself” keeps on reasserting itself even as it is supposedly undermined by the substitution of the female perspective for that of the male. The cause (gender) is imagined after the effect (marriage) has already occurred. But is this causal schema produced by a metalepsis—a substitution of cause for effect? The trajectory could as easily be, and indeed has been in earlier anthropological studies, reversed: marriage produces gender as one of its primary effects. My purpose, however, is not to assert the priority of any particular object, but to show that gender is not the indubitable foundation or theoretical core of cultural hierarchies; rather, it is the historical product of a tropological or rhetorical operation that presupposes and depends on marriage.

In the last 30 years many scholars seem to have subsumed kinship under a supposedly originary gender concept, much as a previous generation of scholars had subsumed marriage under a supposedly originary kinship, and a generation prior to that had subsumed sex under a supposedly originary marriage. I have shown each term to be part of an originless, reiterable chain of substitutions, neither independent of, nor indispensable to, each other. I have also questioned the lack of a rigorous justification for the hierarchies they reproduce. Neither gender, kinship, marriage, nor sex can be demonstrated to be a prior term logically, temporally, or sociologically, much as female cannot be shown to be prior to or separate from, male, or homosexuality to heterosexuality, or primitive to advanced. The assertion of such a priority necessarily remains a mere supposition. Our collective response, I suggest, should be to question the metaphysical privileging of this chain of categories, specifically marriage, gender, heterosexuality, and life. If this privileging comes about through occasions of symbolization, then we might displace the privileged status of these terms by paying more attention to variability and instability in those occasions of reiteration. In other words, occasions where marriage is symbolized need not always be reiterations of exclusionary practices, and, where they are, ethnologists should document not only what asserts itself as presence and life, but also identify what is foreclosed, placed outside, or erased. Finally, it should be the primary responsibility of those who enjoy the privileges of marriage to question and displace the categories that generate them.

marriage/death in the age of AIDS

How might one go about challenging the centrality of marriage? I shall conclude this more general deconstruction of anthropological work on marriage by pointing to how one might begin a critical examination and displacement of marriage. The first point to keep in mind is one already mentioned: marriage is often associated with birth and life, but its relation to death, in the sense of exclusion, abjection, and closure, is frequently obscured if not altogether avoided. In the United States marriage tends to be posited as the antithesis of death: an escape or way out of death—out of the abyss of chaos, loneliness, singlehood, incompleteness, and, now, AIDS. At the same time that marriage is desired or experienced as a completion necessary for life, a making fully human or a whole of previous halves or parts, it also signals the security of a death to all possibilities for an unexpected history, an end to all histories outside the marriage, as if history thereafter were containable within the consanguinal and affinal relations of the kinship chart. After marriage, arbitrariness and surprise are eliminated in favor of a social contract that regulates, privileges, and protects; for the participants in the contract things can only repeat themselves “until death do us part” (see Pateman 1988). But this ideological
enclosure also produces a domain of practical abjection, an exclusion of all specters (e.g., the unmarried, the divorced, the homosexual) and their embodied counterparts that haunt its own self-grounding. And, as part of its operation, this process of abjection—whereby the social is identified, defined, and delimited—is consistently disavowed (see Butler 1993:232–243).

The second point, which I will explicate below, is that we need a better understanding of the consequences of a reappropriation of the symbolics of blood, that is, marriage, for the analytics of sexuality. First, however, two brief examples that point toward a displacement of marriage.

An essay by Shirley Lindenbaum in the Collier and Yanagisako volume cited earlier begins to problematize the place of gender as a theoretical core, and therefore its relation to sexuality. This essay goes beyond conventional gender analysis primarily because Lindenbaum does not derive the meaning of kinship from an assumed central male-female relationship. She begins in quite orthodox fashion, with kinship, and even states that there are “ideologies of masculinity and femininity” (Lindenbaum 1987:220). But in comparing New Guinea “homosexual regions” with “heterosexual regions” she is confronted with several paradoxes that force her to disentangle different kinds of sexual activity from the combinations of cross-sex and same-sex relations, from gender ideology, and from ideas of social productivity and physical reproduction.

For example, she demonstrates that gender (male-female) relations do not serve as a single and invariable model in structuring sexual activities and marriage, for siblingship or affinity, depending on the relations of the actors, often seems to structure both erotic relations (same-sex and cross-sex) and marital choice. Presumably drawing on the classic ethnography of the Etoro by Raymond Kelly (1974:179–184), Lindenbaum (1987:227) writes that among the Etoro (part of the “homosexual” region), “the ideal inseminator is a boy’s sister’s husband. A married sister and her brother thus share the same sexual partner.” Erotic and marital partners come together presumably because of the desire for exchange ties with a particular kinship unit, but the man who establishes relations with this new kin unit does so simultaneously through a marriage to a woman and a homosexual relationship. The fact that the homosexual union may precede the heterosexual marriage temporally is pointless, for epistemologically neither relationship can be established as originary. Would he have married the woman had she had no brother? Would he have become the sex partner of the boy had that boy had no sister? Such questions are misleading. Neither the hetero-marriage nor the homo-sexual union is prior; neither relation is supplementary to or completes the other, and neither is marked as presence or absence. Instead, gender, sex, marriage, and social organization are part of a variable chain of signifiers, a chain of differential references that are resignified and prioritized only at the occasions in which they are performed and symbolized. There is no originary theoretical or practical core out of which the other terms or relations are generated, no universal referent prior to all others, no heterosexual imperative grounding the social. Marriage, gender, and the symbolics of blood, then, enter into social relations not as prior to sexuality but as part of a matrix of power relations.

A second example comes from my own analysis of the role of marriage in nation building in postwar East and West Berlin (Borneman 1992:284–313). Rather than assume a universal definition of marriage, I began by listing 20 marriage types that I encountered in everyday speech and official texts. These types were occasions for symbolization, and included, for example, housewife marriage, love marriage, childless marriage, war marriage, binational marriage, sham marriage, same-sex marriage, and shotgun marriage. Only some of these types fulfilled a set of necessary and sufficient conditions to qualify as an official (state-sanctioned) marriage. And, although each alternative had some sort of relationship to the dominant official form, each was not merely a reiteration but also a resignifying of the dominant, which itself varied and changed over time and place.

Employing George Lakoff’s (1987) work on non-Aristotelian forms of categorization, I identified marriage more as a radial pattern than as a central referent for measurement of all
variant forms. What were the mechanisms motivating the organization of marriage in radial patterns? I tried to account for the various official forms as strategic devices for exclusion—for the regulation of the nation internally and for the demarcation of the nation from outsiders. And I accounted for the various unofficial forms, often merely practiced and unnamed, as marital tactics for inclusion that grew out of individual pragmatics that were historically contingent. I concluded that no single model of marriage, no universal equivalent, is able to account for all of the types that go by the name; they do not order themselves into normal and deviant forms except in the legal model, nor does any form exactly reproduce itself uncontested over time. In fact, in the process of symbolization some reiterations were subversive repetitions that forced eventual displacement of the dominant marital type. Beginning, then, with the empirical range of historical forms instead of an abstract, invariant standard, I did not find “marriage” to be always a privileged form that invariably produced gender as its effect, nor did every form always reinforce the other violent hierarchies that I have consistently identified in most other work on marriage. Rather, the variability among marriages was expressive of a constant struggle for the cultural and political (de)legitimation of different forms of sociability.

The totemic nature of marriage in anthropological discourse and the privileges accorded to those upholding that totem both in ideology and practice may, I suspect, be the primary reason why most anthropologists in the last decade have been reluctant to deal with AIDS. Among those who have done so, the focus has been on drug abuse, prostitution, and epidemiology rather than on marriage and death. Given the centrality of marriage to the history of anthropology, our silence about it and our reluctance to theorize it beyond its obvious demographic, gender, and class dimensions are all the more worthy of condemnation. One could easily enumerate the instances where AIDS has come to be associated with the unmarriageable, unmarried, or improperly married, with wandering or improperly “grounded” peoples, and with those who engage in sexual practices not dependent on gender differences. The political functions of such an ethnocentric figuration are obvious: the properly married—meaning those who are partnered in heterosexual, monogamous marriages—do not, or logically cannot, have AIDS. They are sure bets, beyond risk.

This particular violent heteronormative hierarchy, the married/unmarried, has tremendous political utility both within and outside the United States; for example, married/unmarried has been used to emplot the trajectory of AIDS in the non-Western world as an inevitable fate of its peoples, since their engagement in sex and partnership forms outside “proper” marriage puts them “at risk.” Properly married peoples, because they have a primary identity derived from a socially sanctioned symbolics of blood, do not perceive themselves as included within the structures defining AIDS, for the marital act itself has already reiterated an exclusion of “homosexuality” and “risk.” Clearly, however, these associations encourage a false sense of security. Foucault’s characterization of the modern as the “management of life rather than the menace of death” (1978:145) no longer holds. For not only has death reentered the “management of life,” by which Foucault was primarily referring to an analytics of sexuality, but marriage and the symbolics of blood have also reentered discourse to affirm a pernicious division in the Imaginary between life and death. It is no longer possible to imagine a shift from a symbolics of blood to an analytics of sexuality, for the two are now part of a chain of references with the former still associated with life and the latter with death. Precisely because blood and sex, the continuous life and the sudden death, can neither be clearly disentangled nor prevented from turning back on one another, the project of putting oneself “beyond risk” through marriage will ultimately fail.

In any case, marriage can never do more than postulate security and closure to history, since it cannot assure the prevention of HIV infection, nor can it prevent the return of the “abjected outside”—whether that be the woman in the man, the homosexual in the heterosexual, the primitive in the civilized—that is the basis of its founding repudiation. Nonetheless, by equating
marriage with life and a symbolics of blood as against death and an analytics of sexuality, marriage has been able to retain its centrality and exclusionary functions without having to acknowledge its privilege. A simple appeal for tolerance or pluralism, for inclusion of other, already existing forms within the marital type will do little to challenge the boundaries between the married and nonmarried; rather, we must create a framework that allows for recognition of a proliferation of forms of sexual expression and intimacy as well as arguments for their public legitimation. We might begin by recognizing how marriage obtains its exact and privileged place in the replication of our present order only by means of foreclosures and erasures of relations that resist facile, heteronormative symbolization. These foreclosures and exclusions do not stop after the initial exchange of rings but are reiterated each time that ring is displayed in the public sphere, where it is always a marker of belonging. Finally, in subjecting marriage and its occasions of symbolization to the same critical scrutiny given other human artifacts and performances, we begin to hold it accountable for that which it positions “outside.” We might then see more clearly the limits of its rearticulation and begin imagining human subjects in communities where the terms of recognition and life are no longer fixed nor predicated on the death of others.

notes

1. I do not mean to imply that research on marriage or the family is rare—quite the contrary. So much has been done that a review article would have to cover most of the discipline and require a new typology of kinship studies. Yet this work has not subjected marriage to a critique of its presumed centrality in anthropological discourse. Among some of the more noteworthy recent studies that have focused on marriage (to the exclusion of death), see, for example, Collier 1988, Gutierrez 1991, and Stolcke 1974. Whether in critique or reassessment, these authors approach marriage in the same terms as their predecessors such as P. G. Riviere, as a “universal structuring principle based on the differences between genders” (1971:64), and thus as a result of gender rather than as generative of it. Recent studies that have explicitly documented some of the linkages between marriage and death (e.g., Danforth 1982; Delaney 1991; Kligman 1988; Seremetakis 1991) have failed to theorize this linkage, except for Bloch (1978, 1992), who situates marriage in a general theory of ritual sacrifice, emphasizing the relation of marriage to “rebounding violence” and the sacrifice of participants (1992:65–84). At the same time, however, this particular group of authors uncritically accepts the nature of “participants,” without giving voice to what or who is foreclosed or excluded on the occasions of symbolization. Finally, there has been extensive study of alternative family forms (e.g., Kennedy and Davis 1993; Lewin 1993; Stack 1983; Weston 1991), and in the growing field of queer theory, primarily outside of anthropology, the effects of foreclosure and abjection through compulsory heterosexuality has also been explored (see, e.g., Butler 1993; Fuss 1991; Sedgwick 1990; Warner 1993), without, however, examining marriage’s relation to death. Writers of fiction and literary theorists tend to take more critical positions to marriage, frequently mocking or parodying it in tragic or comic genres, whereas social scientists generally emplot marriage in an epic genre.

2. On December 5, 1992, a group of established anthropologists did organize a panel on AIDS at the American Anthropological Association’s 91st Annual Meeting in San Francisco. Paul Rabinow and Nancy Scheper-Hughes of the University of California, Berkeley, chaired this panel, entitled “AIDS and the Social Imaginary.” This controversial panel was significant and laudable, in my opinion, because it was the first by anthropologists with tenure from elite universities to address AIDS as it related to their own research. Although the panel’s topic would seem to lend itself to address “marriage” and its relation to death and AIDS, there was to my knowledge no reference to marriage, their own or that of others, in any of the talks.

3. This analysis grew out of a seminar that I taught on this topic. I want to thank the participants Gina Bisagni, Sara Friedman, Ann Russ, and Pat Walker. I am also indebted to Scott Long, with whom I wrote an essay about nine years ago (Long and Borneman 1991) that initially raised some of the questions I am pursuing here.

4. See the review and rigorous critique by Kuper (1988) of early anthropological works that constructed the idea of the primitive.

5. I am ignoring here major differences within national traditions in the treatment of marriage during the first half of this century, which, in the last 50 years, have been combined in diverse cross-national approaches that frequently defy simple categorization (e.g., Goodenough 1978; Pitt-Rivers 1977). I am also not analyzing the Boasian-inspired school of American cultural anthropology, which developed its own approaches to kinship, some of which emphasized Morgan’s and Engels’s materialism while others emphasized sexual ideology and symbolism. The two approaches also did not always exclude each other. In the last part of my own analysis I will be limiting my examination to feminist reformulations within symbolic anthropology,
which, among the various extensions of the Boasian approach, have received the most attention in reformulations of marriage and kinship.

6. In 1961 Edmund Leach perspicaciously argued that marriage was neither a universal institution nor isolable from other social institutions (1961a). The most heated debates have occurred not around the universality of marriage, however, but around the universality of the "family" and of "kinship." Approximately ten years later, Rodney Needham (1971) and David Schneider (1972) made more compelling critiques, from quite different perspectives, of kinship as a domain of analysis.

7. This false sense of security is repeatedly confirmed in survey data. In an analysis of the largest national survey of sexual behavior since the Kinsey Report of 1948, the major author of the study concluded that there is "a denial of personal risk by a segment of the population that still believes [AIDS] is a gay disease" (Joseph Catania as cited in the New York Times 1992:A16).

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The central thesis of Borneman’s article appears to be that kinship theory in anthropology has linked together the categories of marriage, gender, heterosexuality, and life, and by doing so has failed to conceptualize adequately the relation of marriage to privilege, closure, death, abjection, and exclusion. As feminist anthropologists who have ourselves been engaged in rethinking kinship theory, we welcome attempts to revitalize the study of kinship by challenging its conventions and categories. We also recognize that all histories, including histories of anthropological theory, are selective and incomplete. All are written from particular viewpoints, to support specific projects, and to enable new theorizing. Our position and theoretical project, however, have led us to a different understanding of marriage and death in kinship theory that the one outlined by John Borneman.

First, we think that death—far from being ignored—was central to the development of kinship theory in anthropology. The anthropologists who developed “classic” (i.e., British structuralist-functionalist) kinship theory wanted to know how kin-based groups could persist through time given the deaths of individual men. The problem of the continuity of corporate groups—and, consequently, of social structure—lay at the heart of theorizing about the function of kinship in societies lacking Western jural institutions. Descent theorists focused on succession and inheritance because of their concerns about continuity and social stability; they reasoned that sex might create children, but marriage—as a legally recognized and enforced relationship—created legitimate heirs and successors. Through marriage men ensured both the continuity of the social order and the continuity of their social selves. Marriage enabled men and society—the two were often conflated—to transcend the physiological facts of birth, growth, death, and decay, which classic kinship theorists associated with women, sex, and the mortal body. The focus on rights and duties and on the links among kinship, religion, ritual, and cosmology recast relations among women, children, and men into relations between men and law in the politico-jural domain. While women’s deaths were left in the realm of the profane, men’s deaths were elevated to the realm of the social sacred.

Alliance theory also treated marriage as a political-legal relationship among men. By exchanging “sisters” for “wives” men reproduced the relationships among kin-based groups