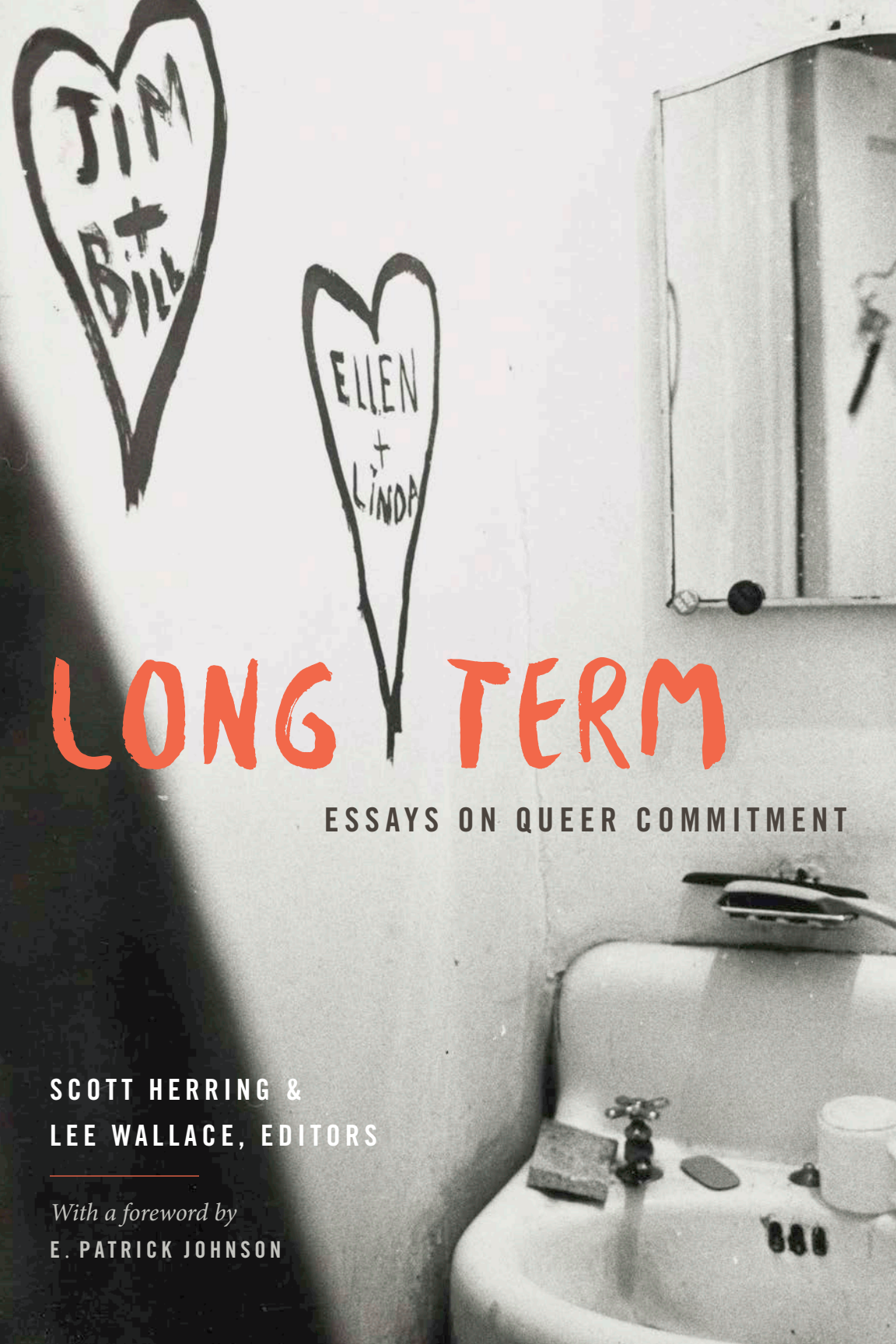

LONG TERM

ESSAYS ON QUEER COMMITMENT

SCOTT HERRING &
LEE WALLACE, EDITORS

With a foreword by
E. PATRICK JOHNSON

BUY LONG TERM

LONG ♥ TERM

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ESSAYS ON QUEER COMMITMENT

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FOREWORD

Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey

Nothing awakens the senses like death. Although we don't know (unless we are psychics, oracles, or other intermediaries) if we continue to sense after death, those of us left in the wake of death know all too well the plethora of emotions that rain down upon us after the loss of a loved one. Nonetheless, death is the one event that we are compelled to commit to—in the long and short term—because we can't predict, at least with any precise certainty, its arrival, only its inevitability. We do have some agency, I suppose, around when death might happen if we choose suicide, but even in that instance death may choose not to take the bait. It might, for instance, decide that we have much more living to do, despite our feelings of despondency, depression, or desire to exist in another realm. It is in this way that death is a queer phenomenon: a thing to which one must commit because it has committed itself to us but also something that remains elusive, even in its seeming finality. The interstitial space that precedes death—the anticipation and uncertainty of its arrival—and that which follows—the unknowingness of the afterlife—link it to queer affects/effects with long-term implications. Death, then, becomes an apropos allegory for long-term queer commitments.

To wit, many of the essays in this volume index death as the ghost of queer affiliations: the waiting with and on loved ones who are ill, managing a life-threatening disease, the impending death of a relationship or pet, the purgatory of incarceration, the death wish for gay marriage alongside a valuing of its "afterlife," and so on. These authors' engagement with death, I believe, is coincidental, as opposed to an ideological alignment with queer theorists who focus on antisociality and the death drive. They also do not easily align with the counterideology of queer utopia; rather, these authors sidestep those polemics in pursuit of something more nuanced about how long-term commitment affectively registers and effectively responds to queer attachments. As the editors of this volume suggest, these authors "stay around long enough to consider the ramifications of indentured commitments—familial, financial, institutional—that might wax and wane across time." The concern, then, is not death in and of itself, but death as a temporal and spatial metaphor for how queers commit to commitment in ways that supersede the obvious tautology of such a construction and in ways that are not in bed with heteronormativity. These authors' promiscuity acutely disavows normativity that flows in either direction—hetero or homo—in an attempt to cheat death at its own game.

Thus, these essays ironically account for how we as queers commit to life and living despite a contemporaneous world in which we are constantly under siege. If we think about how queer existence has been sustained by queer *persistence*, we quickly come to understand the relationship between commitment and the long term. There is a gospel song titled "I Believe I'll Run On," the recurring line of which says, "I believe I'll run on, see what the end's goin' be" (Oprah Winfrey used it as the theme song for her talk show one season!). Although the song is about having faith that things will get better at the end, it's also about endurance and commitment to the journey. Indeed, the song encapsulates the ambiguity of the "end" because it is an unspecified designation (the finish line? Death? Heaven?). Nonetheless, the speaker is going to run, not walk, toward whatever the unspecified state/place because they are committed to the *process* of the journey. Queers, then, have a unique relationship to commitment because we are in a constant process of becoming and unbecoming, and sometimes in ways—like running—that are exhausting. But there is also joy and pleasure in the pursuit of that place that dare not speak its name: unknown, unnamed, unmoored, undone. What we, as queers, have reaped from our undying cathexis to commitment is both the solemnity that follows each and every reminder that white-supremacist heteropatriarchy reigns supreme and the jubilance

that stems from our radical resistance to the same. But for our long-term commitment to care for one another, we would have never survived the hold of the slave ship, the concentration camp, McCarthyism, HIV/AIDS, Don't Ask, Don't Tell, DOMA, and dare I say, Trumpism, although that remains to be seen.

The essays collected here wade into troubled waters but find a life buoy by way of rhetorical flourishes that convincingly argue for the focus on commitment to postmarriage equality. Collectively, they shore up the notion that long-term commitment is not anathema to the radicality, nonnormativity, and transgressive politics that have come to be associated with queer culture. However, they also note that even the more conservative formations of long-term commitment (e.g., gay marriage) have radical material implications that are often overlooked or ignored. Some might construe my suggestion here as equating commitment with a progress narrative of queer equality toward a path of hetero or homonormativity. Yes and no. Yes, in the sense that queer fortitude has afforded many of us (despite the fact that race and class status still make progress elusive to some) access to certain rights. No, in the sense that the goal or even the by-product of commitment is not necessarily "progress" or access to rights or commodities. Sometimes, the commitment is for commitment's sake, for the experience to live inside the liminal space of queerness, unencumbered. For example, when someone "gets their life" on the dance floor—that liminal space where the body is committed to the exhilarating exhaustion of moving to the pulse of the music. Or that liminal space where the body is committed to the touch, the taste, the sound, the sight, the smell of passionate sex. Or that liminal space where the body is committed to marching, chanting, rallying, laying prostrate in the street, for the right to love and fuck as many or as few or whomever it desires. Or that liminal space where the body is committed to the care of a lover, spouse, parent, pet, plant, or other sentient being because to commit to the care of and for an "other" is to assure our redemption in the long term. For in the long term there will be a reckoning. And in the long term, those who come after will look afresh on how we did and did not commit—not to the end, but to the journey.

E. PATRICK JOHNSON

INTRODUCTION

A Theory of the Long Term

SCOTT HERRING AND LEE WALLACE

In the back-end world of computer programming there is a protocol called a "pre-commit" that checks code for errors before intended changes are made permanent. In this cryptographic schema, the opposite of commitment is "rollback," the protocol by which tentative tweakings of code are discarded along with all data saved since work began. The error-proofing protocols put in place around relational database management systems have no equivalent in the front-end world of interpersonal relationships, where the codes of commitment are all the richer for not deleting but keeping the many flaws, mistakes, and gestures of reparation that make up a committed life. The essays in this collection address durational commitments of the kind that

might be thought at odds with the instantaneous likability metrics built into contemporary social media, which buoy up our sense that the world runs on good feelings alone, just as they resist the idea that the social, sexual, and emotional dimensions of relationships can be compressed into text-friendly initialisms such as LTR (long-term relationship), STR (short-term relationship), or LDR (long-distance relationship).

As coeditors committed to the slow task of rewriting each other's sentences to the point where they blended into a uniquely standardized voice, one of the few things we struggled with was the grammar of this collection's title. When referencing the "long term," did we mean a noun—as in "serving a long term"—or an adjective—as in "long-term prognosis"? Or was it something else we were trying to capture, say the point at which the compound adjective starts to register as a phenomenon in its own right, hardening off as something called the "longterm"—a consolidation of effects brought about by engaging the idea of the long term? Long-term commitments, long-term relationships, long-term sentences, long-term ambitions, long-term writing projects, long-term institutionalization, long-term climate change—all of these seem to point to a shift in our affective apprehension of how duration might be weathered, to use a phrase that turned up in the environmental humanities to catch at the changes attendant on materially living through time: "weathered bodies, weathered houses, weathered cars, weathered clothes, weathered relationships, weathered dreams."[1] Certainly, our contributors had no problem understanding what we meant when we first raised the idea of this collection with them. As soon as we prompted them with our title—sometimes hyphenated, sometimes not, depending on which one of us was at the keyboard—they anticipated our thinking and engaged us on themes the two of us had already been scoping out in the long, informal conversations that have marked our getting to know each other across the last several years: mortality, change, viability, dependence, and care.

This casual responsiveness confirmed our initial hunch that the long term has emerged as a structure of feeling while many of us have been resisting it, particularly in the context of gay marriage debates and the queer critique of homonormativity. As Raymond Williams famously pointed out, changes in our shared apprehensions of the world—whether intuitive or critical—do not happen overnight, nor is overnight the time frame we invoke here. It has been two decades, for instance, since Lauren Berlant edited "Intimacy," the award-winning special issue of *Critical Inquiry*. Subsequently expanded into a volume that appeared two years later, "Intimacy" helped to recast the personal field of love and sex across transnational domains of citizenship,

capitalism, race, and ethnicity.[2] In so doing, "Intimacy" laid the groundwork for future affective and political coordinates of queer studies as decisively as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* had facilitated its fin-de-siècle concerns ten years earlier. Many of the tightly argued ideas put forward by Berlant and her contributors about intimate publics and the role that mediated sentiments play in civil belonging remain critically influential, just as the collection's outlier formal contributions—such as Sedgwick's account of her post-chemo psychotherapy, one of several pieces relying on autobiographical experimentation to break the usual code of academic impersonality—reimagined theory from the ground up and enabled new iterations of personal writing to flourish within the field.[3]

Looking back at that landmark millennial volume, however, it is also obvious that in the twenty years since then the social infrastructure that determines what counts as private and what counts as public around intimacy and queerness has been transformed in many ways, not all of them predictable. The world of 2000, for instance, is still the world of Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky, a place where—for all the mediated interpenetration of public and private interests represented in that peculiarly American sex scandal—sexuality and virtuality have yet to mutually implant in ways that are taken for granted in a smartphone-enabled world. Although the ideas in Berlant and Michael Warner's coauthored contribution, "Sex in Public," stay as current as the day they were minted, the everyday context that the essay points to has evolved. Written at a moment when Google was still being conceived by some Stanford doctoral punks, the form of the internet undergirding "Sex in Public" is not the ubiquitous filter for everything that it has become. Thus, when Berlant and Warner refer to the various tacit and explicit sexual publics that swell in the interstices of American national culture, they could not have anticipated the public-private affordances of geosocial networking applications such as Grindr.[4] Rereading their turn-of-the-century essay from the vantage point of now also reveals that, back then, the cause of gay marriage was not yet a highly mobile global juggernaut but could be neatly represented by a handful of conservative stooges within the gay movement—Andrew Sullivan, William N. Eskridge Jr.—and thus presents something of an easy target for what will toughen into the antinormative impetus that subtends Queer Theory, Mark II.[5]

Rather than emphasize innovation around sex and the technological extension of nonproximate queer communities, the essays gathered here proceed from the assumption that the time is right for further rethinking of intimacies postmarriage equality, a social phenomenon that has arrived in

many jurisdictions as a customary practice well ahead of its legal implementation. Not everyone, of course, is enamored of this social acceptance, nor do they consider it a legal advance, including many of this volume's contributors. One confirms "the twin homonationalist forces of marriage and militarization"; one considers "the lies and false promises of gay marriage discourse"; one of us elaborates on an "apolitical queer habitus" that manifests in fiction but is not limited to that context. In dialogue with other essays that approach marriage equality and the social legitimation that underscores it more obliquely, these writings contribute to what Warner refers to as "the history of principled critique of marriage in queer politics."[6] That unfinished project remains a long-term enterprise to which we remain wired.

When we rehearse these challenges to normative iterations of marriage equality, we lock arms with forceful critiques originating within queer-of-color theory. A decade after "Intimacy," José Esteban Muñoz would decry "today's hamstrung pragmatic gay agenda" and its devaluation of queer lifeways less indexed to presentist aspiration.[7] Others such as Juana María Rodríguez cite "a reappropriation of family values discourse and political platforms focused on same-sex marriage and homonormative formulations of family life" that exclude "those who are poor, institutionalized, gender-nonconforming, disabled, in alternative domestic relationships, or marginalized by their race or immigration status."[8] Still others, such as Chandan Reddy, have linked the success of rights-based marriage-equality claims to the rise of a racially liberal state that first appeared in the context of the rescinding of twentieth-century prohibitions on miscegenation, a progressive legal advance that strives "to obscure and displace from political legitimacy" a "variety of autonomous black social struggles."[9]

We heed Reddy when we also remind ourselves that long-term commitments can and have operated as technologies of racial normativity and hegemonic whiteness, whether or not they formalized themselves into marital bonds. Perhaps the best example of this technology on the American scene remains Daniel Patrick Moynihan's "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action" (1965), the so-called "Moynihan Report." Part of Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty, the statistically driven sociology animating the report officialized stale tropes of Black dysfunction that acquired a newly intimate profile, such as "family disorganization" and "disintegration of the Negro family structure" that erroneously contribute to a "family pathology" characterized by "divorce, separation, and desertion, female family head, children in broken homes, and illegitimacy," or what might be called diseases of the long term.[10] Queer and antiracist critiques of the liberal ahistoricism

driving the Moynihan Report, such as those launched by Hortense Spillers and Roderick Ferguson, continue to stand as necessary correctives that strive to secure breathing room for multiple axes of antinormativity, including those that fail—or are cast outside of—the state's propulsion toward norms of relational durability.[11] Laboring to dislodge totalizing notions of normative white commitment, our contributors are also in agreement with Sara Ahmed's observation that "it is not up to bodies of color to do the work of antiracism" either personally or on an institutional scale.[12]

As they set about diversifying the landscape of the long term, particularly as it intersects with the drive to marriage equality, some of our essayists find themselves in step with Kendall Thomas's valorization of the attempt "to create aesthetic and imaginal space that positions black lives in marital narratives with unexpected and even 'queer' effects." Looking at recent Black cinema, specifically the unlikely double feature made by *Moonlight* (2016) and *Black Panther* (2018), Thomas considers how Black directors have creatively modified a normative script by providing stories of "African American erotic and intimate life *beyond* the binary boundaries of normative whiteness and nonnormative blackness." Filled with wonder by these films and the post-*Obergefell* times of their making, Thomas is moved to ask "Is black marriage queer?" Responsive to the racial violences of the populist era, but not limited to them, these films give Thomas cause to embrace the adaptability of the marriage plot as a narrative means of capturing "whether, why, and how bisexual, heterosexual, gay, and lesbian black people around the world experiment with conjugality by crafting spaces *within* marriage that engage and include intimate relational possibilities *outside* it."[13]

Thomas's interest in queer-of-color marital imaginaries recalls sociologist Mignon R. Moore's thesis that "'normalization' can in itself be radical, depending again on the context."[14] The context for Moore's claim is her experience as "an active participant in the marriage equality movement" and a critic of "marriage equality as a platform for LGBTQ social justice" to the exclusion of "everything else"—a profile we suspect she shares with many of our readers—but also her life experience as a wife, a mother of two, and a not-infrequent churchgoer. Like E. Patrick Johnson's foreword to this volume, Moore invites us to think about the particularities of LGBTQ lives and the multiple ways that people negotiate racial and sexual normativities that may paradoxically result in "radical, even revolutionary behaviour" beyond the usual ken of queerness.[15]

In line with these queer-of-color critiques of the popular embrace of same-sex marriage that ask us to crack open this historically conservative

institutional form, our contributors likewise find the present moment to be a vertiginous time of constraint, contradiction, and potential. To move along the critical conversations delineated above, we have collectively flagged a dimension of queer life generally unremarked upon or neglected outside conjugal paradigms either pro or con or somewhere in between. The original essays that make up this volume address queer theoretical ambivalence around commitment by reflecting on long-term queer achievements in all their idiosyncrasy and contextually driven nuance. They consider what queers have committed to—politically, erotically, domestically, psychically—and how these commitments appear now that the legal advent of same-sex marriage has broadly transformed the idea of what some LGBTQ persons want or, in terms of legal and medical benefits, need. Given a wide brief, our authors take prevalent conceptions of what currently counts as queer—the nonidentitarian, the performative, the ephemeral—and expand them to include commitments that overlap with normative impetus toward the long term. Without stepping away from the queer critique of longevity and the normativity embedded in reproductive futurity, they nonetheless stay around long enough to consider the ramifications of indentured commitments—familial, financial, institutional—that might wax and wane across time.[16] Considering topics ranging from the long-term care of household pets to the durational cruelties of incarceration and the queer family as a scene of racialized commitment, they trace the costs and consolations of normativity in queer commitments that last the distance, as well as those that don't.

Building on prior critiques and queerings of long-term marital intimacies, we continue to ask what queer commitment involves, in either its universalizing or minoritizing idioms.[17] In this we follow Ahmed, who in her 2006 book-length thought experiment on the notion of queer phenomenology puts forward the negative proposition that "rather than being a commitment to a line of deviation," a queer commitment "would be a commitment not to presume that lives have to follow certain lines in order to count as lives."[18] Although the word *commitment* carries less psychoanalytic baggage than the more theoretically invested *attachment*, it is not without its philological complications, which suggests to us that commitment has always been defined by its capacity to deviate from itself. The *Oxford English Dictionary* tracks the now pervasive meaning of the word to as recent a date as 1962: "the state or condition of being committed to a partner in a long-term romantic relationship; the action or an act of committing to such a relationship."[19] Intimately tied to the verb *commit*—appearing as late as 1987 as "to resolve to remain in a long-term (monogamous) relationship with an-

other person"—commitment has both a fairly recent and a historically dense definitional life.[20] Although it carries forward earlier usages such as the late sixteenth-century phrasing "to commit marriage," the term's normative associations date largely to the late twentieth century, the period in which the institution of marriage has come under legal pressure to include same-sex couples.[21]

Other usages hint at similarly crossed wires between normative and antinormative messaging. Even the phrase *commitment ceremony*—now understood as a socially performative event "at which a couple in a romantic relationship declare their long-term commitment to one another without becoming legally married"—in the early twentieth-century United States referred to the burial of a corpse, an end-of-life ritual in which the singular materiality of a body is ultimately acknowledged.[22] Although the "usual sense" of commitment remains shackled to legalized marriage, other, less conventional instances of its usage also populate the *OED*, which notes that commitment can refer to psychiatric institutionalization ("commitment order"), jailing, and increased militarization, all instances that ramp up the normative and antinormative tendencies of the term and parlay them across a highly complex social field that engages notions of sanity, punishment, security, and delinquency.[23]

Our contributors collectively grasp the real-time stakes of these historical vocabularies. Their essays understand the overlaps and discordances between these interrelated usages and point to the myriad modes of commitment that transect the social and how often it is that commitments, voluntary or involuntary, manifest in durational terms, whether in the binding vow or psychiatric sectioning that tithes body and soul to an institution or the recognition—whether slow or instant—that a forward-tending promise has been dishonored or reneged upon. As the somewhat muddy distinction between a commitment and a committal registers, some commitments lay more claim to us than others. Our emotional, spiritual, and fiscal commitments may coincide or run counter to one another. In intimate and professional spheres we can be overcommitted or undercommitted, or both at the same time. Consider, too, how the therapeutic discourse that has developed around intimate obligation catches up even those who avoid commitment as "commitment-phobes," a highly stigmatizing term in the psy-friendly sphere of listicle culture and a phenomenon that one of our pieces considers at length.[24]

We validate the aversion to commitment even as we focus on what one contributor refers to as "the long run" or the span across which the long lasting and the fleeting compete for ongoing outlay. Within the trip-wired world

of commitment, where the appropriate level of investment, risk, or restraint is hard enough to call, let alone sustain, the psychoanalyst Adam Phillips sees advantages to "being uncommitted," which he likens to Freud's "notion of free-floating attention." In his counterintuitive and aphoristic style, Phillips entertains the idea that "to be committed to something—a person, an ideology, a vocabulary, a way of going about things—one has first to be committed, perhaps unconsciously, to commitment itself."[25] Unsurprisingly, Phillips has found Herman Melville's Bartleby—whose catchphrase "I would prefer not to" went into extraliterary circulation during Occupy Wall Street as a slogan for passive resistance or noncommital to capitalism—a good figure to think this conundrum through, specifically in relation to the refusal of things that are said to be good for us, such as food or nurture.[26]

In their individual and collective noncompliance, Bartleby and his activist heirs undermine the organizational commitment that industrial psychology deems crucial to prosperous workplace dynamics.[27] Although anyone who works in a world of 24/7 email appreciates Bartleby's wish, Phillips understands that a clear-cut binary between commitment and noncommitment cannot always be assumed, for most commitments come trailing countercommitments or "side-bets," as they are known in the psychology domain.[28] Contra commitment altogether, Phillips advocates flirtation as a reminder of the open-ended fickleness of desire: "If our descriptions of our sexuality are tyrannized by various stories of committed purpose—sex as reproduction, sex as heterosexual romance, sex as intimacy—flirtation puts in disarray our sense of an ending."[29] Like Ahmed, Phillips distrusts commitment to the degree that it promotes not just closure but the idea that some commitments are better than others emotionally, socially, or sexually.

Rather than calibrating commitments against each other in these terms—thruples considered more socially experimental than couples, flings assumed to be less emotionally complicated than LTRs, LDRs thought to deliver the best of both worlds, casual encounters presumed to have fewer strings attached—others have likewise questioned the utility of commitments at all. For instance, Leo Bersani insists that in psychoanalytic terms commitments—particularly the commitment to monogamy—are "inconceivable except as something that blocks circuits of desire": in the Freudian schema the "incestuous monogamous passion" of the infant for one particular person is ultimately renounced in favor of a nonexclusive desire that can fasten on any person. Bersani's insistence that the renunciation of exclusivity provides the "passage from the family to the social" suggests that the high value placed on monogamy in general is done at the cost of the social rather

than in its defense.[30] This counterintuitive proposition leads us to ask what is it that commitments are thought to secure when they no longer assume monogamy or longevity as their measure or rationale.

Like Thomas, who is interested in the ways in which queer modes of relationality have been brought into long-term bonds, we do not presuppose that all intimate commitments play to the hard-core rules of loyalty, duty, and constancy. Commitments can be loose or hesitant as easily as harsh or demanding, sometimes driven and other times less compelling. Or they may slip the framework of commitment in favor of something more enigmatic, such as acknowledgment, or at least that is what Berlant proposes in her recent two-hander with Lee Edelman around sex and the unbearable necessity of intimate relationality itself: "Acknowledgment, what we do in the sustained presence of an object, . . . performs our obligation to it by way of a looseness that, from the perspective of drama, can constitute a formally comic scene." Whereas her work on melodrama tends to emphasize the cruel optimism of attachment, particularly maternal attachment, Berlant derives this perspective on comic performance and its capacity to "make routes within the impossible" from two scholars: Sedgwick and Stanley Cavell, whose name is less frequently bandied about in queer circles.[31] Indeed, much of Berlant's work on "the attachment to attachment" has its origins in her attachment to Cavell's work on marriage—specifically American marriage as mediated by popular Hollywood cinema—as a form of public-private intimacy.[32] In *Cruel Optimism*, for instance, she acknowledges her indebtedness to his writing on the uncanniness of the ordinary as "an interesting space . . . for inventing new rhythms for living, rhythms that could, at any time, congeal into norms, forms, and institutions."[33] Earlier, in *The Female Complaint*, she notes that her idea of "whatever optimism," which explicitly connects her work with that of Giorgio Agamben, "is also cognate, I think, with Stanley Cavell's argument in *Contesting Tears*, that love ideally involves a commitment to a mutual continuity without guarantees."[34] More recently, she has acknowledged her interest in Cavell's thinking on the Hollywood comedy of remarriage, a genre that at first glance (and even a second look) seems an unlikely match to queer theoretical interests.[35] In her contribution to a *Critical Inquiry* special issue on comedy, Berlant references Cavell as an outlier among comedy theorists—most of whom insist that humorlessness is key to comedy—in his promotion of remarriage comedy as "a test of the conditions of freedom in relation."[36] Like Berlant, we also think that Cavell is a go-to theorist for anyone wanting to put the comedy back in what might otherwise be read as the cruel optimism of queer commitment.

For those unfamiliar with his idea that the real mark of marriage is remarriage, Cavell has written, not one, but two books about the same Hollywood movies, as if he understood the need for—or should that be "a commitment to"—getting things wrong before you have a shot at getting them right, a premise that underwrites the seven films he is obsessed by, all of which involve a married couple getting back together after the error of their estrangement.[37] Whereas one of us has elsewhere argued for the critical utility of the notion of remarriage in the context of gay marriage, and does so again in one of the two couple contributions included in this book, for present purposes we follow Cavell in suggesting that perhaps what we want, when we don't want commitment, is enchantment.[38] Understood as a benign process of perpetual reattachment that thrives on change, enchantment delivers us the best version of ourselves in the object to which we continuously yet spontaneously attach. Whether that object be a person, a project, a scene, or an abstraction (like God or America, for enchantments are both specific and generic), and no matter how misconceived that commitment looks to someone outside it (or even on the receiving end of it), enchantment secures attachment, even attachments such as marriages, which some like to think are built on more solid institutional ground. Drawing a long historical and complacently Eurocentric bow, Cavell argues that since the time of Luther and Henry VIII, "it has been a more or less open secret in our world that we do not know what legitimizes either divorce or marriage." Within this context of secular uncertainty, and coincident with the American middle-class acceptance of divorce, a Hollywood comedy genre arises that

> emphasizes the mystery of marriage by finding that neither law nor sexuality (nor, by implication, progeny) is sufficient to ensure true marriage and suggesting that what provides legitimacy is the mutual willingness for remarriage, for a sort of continuous reaffirmation, and one in which the couple's isolation from the rest of the world is generally marked; they form as it were a world elsewhere. The spirit of comedy in these films depends on our willingness to entertain the possibility of such a world, one in which good dreams come true.[39]

This dream world is the world of marriage equality. Although Cavell makes the connection between his interest in the generic reinvestment in marriage represented by the Hollywood comedies of remarriage and the worldly expansion of the institution to include same-sex marriage, he immediately slides out from under the obligation to think of the two forms of marriage together: "While same-sex marriages, or unions, have become common

enough to force a consciousness, and elaboration, of the economic and legal consequences for partners and for children reared in such marriages, it is too early yet to know (or I am too isolated in my experience to tell) what new shapes such marriages will discover for their investments in imaginativeness, exclusiveness, and equality."[40] Drawing on their own experience inside or outside marriage-like unions, many of our contributors investigate precisely these contours of commitment, from the creative blockages of palliative caregiving to the inequalities at the core of prison volunteerism, to the changed understanding of what it takes to build enduring queer families now that there is a transnational reproductive market that brokers interracial gamete donation and surrogacy.

Whether they consider films or novels, add to the growing genre of queer life writing, or touch on issues of fiscal or institutional policy, the essays in this collection engage with queer commitments as they are extended and retracted in the bedroom, the classroom, the doctor's office, in multispecies households, state penitentiaries, on the dance floor, and via the virtual byways of contemporary hookup culture. As this summary suggests, the genres of long-term commitment never stand still but, like all genres, bend to accommodate novelty and change, as each of our contributors well understands. Together, these essays orient us to the psychic and affective polyculture that queer commitments can induce. As always, however, our thinking in this area is often outrun by the popular genres themselves. In this introduction's remainder we turn to two subgenres that combine photography and autoethnography in order to capture the intricacies of commitment premarriage and postmarriage equality, a moment in which the distinction between normative and antinormative is often hard to define.[41] Like the theorists of commitment we have drawn on, the popular genres we point to invoke multiple ways of being with someone or something for the duration, however short, long, or indeterminate that time span may be.[42]

Our first example is East Coast–based photographer Sage Sohier's *At Home with Themselves: Same-Sex Couples in 1980s America*, a glossy photobook published in 2014 that documents queer racialized commitments against the backdrop of late twentieth-century norms of the long term. Featuring black-and-white photographs of LGBTQ couples and their families, children, and pets, *At Home with Themselves* is itself a long-term project. Featuring Mexican American, Anglo American, African American, and Filipino subjects, the photographs were taken across a near twenty-year span, from 1986 to 2002, with many couples being photographed twice at least a decade apart. The book is formally divided into two parts: a portfolio of

staged portraits followed by transcripts of personal interviews with the subjects from the moment the photographs were taken. Where photograph titles are uniformly minimalist—*Lloyd & Joel, San Francisco, 1987*; *Lloyd & Joel, Stockbridge, MA, 2002*—the interviews are briefly prefaced with notes about relationship duration, occupation, and general well-being. The sixty or so full-page couple portraits in the book range across gender, race, ethnicity, age, class, and geography, with a concentration of subjects hailing from the demographically queer epicenters of New Orleans, San Francisco, and Boston. Collectively, these photographs testify to "the prevalence, variety, and longevity of gay and lesbian relationships" within the wider context of American urbanity and its domestic life-stylings.[43]

Some of the photographic updates reveal the deaths from AIDS-related causes of previously photographed subjects, but the emotional tone in which this information is delivered shares none of the outrage and militancy historically associated with public activism around the HIV/AIDS crisis. Throughout the book the framing of LGBTQ social trauma—and LGBTQ social justice—remains intimate, as does the visual prominence of the "longtime companion," a relational mode and caretaking identity central to the lives and deaths of many LGBTQ persons in the 1980s and 1990s that went into mainstream circulation via the obituary pages of the *New York Times* and Norman René's 1989 film of the same title. The photographs and verbatim transcripts reflect the long-term relational achievements and challenges of being LGBTQ in the United States from the Reagan years to the time when George W. Bush reprised his father's role in the White House, a period in which the idea of same-sex couples gaining popular support for the right to marry remained a political pipe dream.

Although Sohier's intent is to capture "private love" in the usual routines of domesticity, where couples cook breakfast, get dressed, or share a bathtub together, the book sometimes records a more collective desire for literal marriage or an equivalently public display of intimate commitment (7).[44] Whereas some of the same-sex couples express ambivalence about long-term intimacies, others claim marriage as a jointly held aspiration. *Cindy & Barb's Wedding, Boston, 1986* shows two besuited white women in a crowded kitchen, surrounded by well-wishers, slicing into a pseudo–wedding cake seven years before the Supreme Court of Hawai'i ruled bans on same-sex marriage unconstitutional, thereby super-boosting the US marriage-equality movement (see figure I.1).

Other couples are captured in equally iconic forms of commitment. David and Eric have been "*on and off, for 10 years*," although the intravenous

FIGURE I.1. *Cindy & Barb's Wedding, Boston, 1986*. Photograph by Sage Sohier. Reproduced with permission.

cannula on Eric's chest and his holding hands with David on an unmade bed conveys the steadfast nature of their relationship to a camera that neither he nor his boyfriend looks at directly (82). In the corner of their bedroom, alongside a chrome IV stand, there is an equivalently tall armless boy mannequin, smooth groin and hips girded in stretch underpants, who stares with them along the same oblique sight line (see figure I.2). Constructing clear, clean frontal frames around LGBTQ couples with nothing to hide, *At Home with Themselves* elsewhere quietly teases away at what counts as longevity. "*Together 45 years; have lived together 36 years*," Lloyd and Joel have also been "*in a threesome with John (not shown) for 23 years*" (91). The couple seen in *Jean & Elaine, Santa Fe, 1988* have been together for less than half a year, whereas George and Tom, two well-preserved Florida retirees in their mid-sixties, talk about Tom's suicide attempt and speak of aging as if it were a liability rather than the jackpot of life.

As these examples make clear, *At Home with Themselves* surveys different understandings and experiences of long-term intimacies. Combining visual documentation with self-reflection, the book is rife with negotiations of change and care as commitments splinter and foster new allegiances in their wake, a dynamic that several of our contributors also detail at length. *Shadow, San Francisco, 2002*, for instance, captures a bearded man seated in

FIGURE 1.2. *David & Eric, Boston, 1986*. Photograph by Sage Sohier. Reproduced with permission.

FIGURE 1.3. *Shadow, San Francisco, 2002*. Photograph by Sage Sohier. Reproduced with permission.

a plastic chair, hands clasped, looking directly at the camera. The only solo portrait in the book, the photograph is linked to an earlier couple photograph, *Shadow & Sky, San Francisco, 1987*, and two interview transcriptions, also from 1987 and 2002 (see figure I.3). In the second transcript, Shadow, now aged forty-one, speaks about a decade of transitioning and the intimacies, counterpublics, and family relationships that have sustained him across that time. "I identify as a gay man," he matter-of-factly states. "[I] haven't had a long-term relationship since Sky and I broke up. . . . I've had on-and-off relationships, but they're not like partner relationships" (96).

Although she stays out of sight, Sohier is also implicated in the forms of lesbian, trans, gay, and queer-of-color longevity that she documents. As she acknowledges in the prologue, the origins of the book are in her "lifelong curiosity about my father," who shared apartments with various men for decades, although his relationship with them was never broached conversationally (5). Sohier's photographs of LGBTQ couples are dedicated to her father and his male partner of forty years, an aesthetic surrogate for the domestic life they never openly shared with her or her sister. With regard to its reparative effect, as well as its content, Sohier's book is precisely what we have in mind when we think about what queered commitment entails at this particular moment.

Our second example of the expanding genres of commitment is the Museum of Broken Relationships, founded as a pop-up in Zagreb, Croatia, in 2010, with a landed offshoot opening in Los Angeles in 2016 and shuttering the following year. The antithesis of lover's padlocks attached to wire fences in Cinque Terre or steel trees in Moscow, the museum's globally dispersed sites offer curatorial space for the remnants of failed or finished relationships, whether a former high school crush or a thirty-five-year marriage that ended in divorce. They exhibit "objects donated anonymously by members of the public from all over the world," including, to date, Brazil, China, Qatar, South Korea, Spain, Switzerland, Mexico, Belgium, the United States, the Netherlands, and Ireland. Along with the objects, donors also give accounts of their provenance in broken relationships that the museum terms "brokenships," a tongue-in-cheek neologism that fast becomes sincere.[45]

In its LA instantiation the museum presented as a minimalist white box amid all the tat and trash where Hollywood Boulevard intersects Highland Avenue. When visited in spring 2017, not long before its closing, the immaculate vitrines held running medals, a cheerleader outfit, a piñata, pubic hair, belly-button lint, a used set of silicone breast implants, handwritten notes, and an empty bottle of rum. These queered objects were paired with wall

texts prefaced by curatorial notes that specify the time span and the place across which the now broken relationship endured. The rest of the wall text was given over to first-person accounts of marriages that had reached breaking point, soured friendships, abandoned ideals ("this is my breakup with hope"), lost youth, and everyday lives altered by unexpected disability.[46] Yet the more that the visitor wandered and read—or scrolled, if you happen to be in the museum's virtual exhibition—this initial impression of erotic idiosyncrasy gave way to banal uniformity, as if all brokenships were ultimately the same, at least to the degree that they insist on personal uniqueness.

As this sampling of first-person accounts suggests, the Museum of Broken Relationships often archives something other than failed long-term romance even as it exhibits a ton of failed long-term romance. "The museum's concept," the print catalog informs us, "was born when the founders—Olinka Vištica and Dražin Grubišić—wondered what people did with objects that had been meaningful in their relationships."[47] Although it had its origins in the founding couple's broken romance, the museum's brief has subsequently expanded to include broken commitments of any kind as well as those that refuse to break whatever the circumstance. For instance, the Los Angeles museum exhibited a pair of well-worn denim jeans that connects to a heterosexual marriage based in the small town of Hailey, Idaho. The collection label dated this relationship from 1983 to 2009 and informed visitors in the ubiquitous first person that the wearer of the jeans, "my husband, the father of our children, was hit by an elk on his motorcycle one summer evening." The text ran on to say that "he is able to talk, although his reality is very different. He time travels to different decades of his life, locations, and people. He is still there, but I have had to learn how to live with a broken relationship, a one-sided relationship."[48] With one partner cognitively and affectively elsewhere, this relationship is simultaneously over and ongoing. Sitting uncomfortably across genres of disability, trauma, and everyday life, this testimony to a spoiled yet enduring commitment alters how we calibrate attachment and loss, a theme that is also taken up by several of our contributors, who anchor their observations in disability and debility studies, as well as the companion field of mad studies, in order to engage what disability justice activist Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha has called "long-term survivorhood."[49]

Although it is not a nominally LGBTQ archive, the Museum of Broken Relationships has an inclusive approach to documenting attachment and detachment in all its diversity.[50] As a blended museum with virtual and actual displays, the exhibits curated by the Museum of Broken Relationships speak to any number of breached dependencies, many of which have come up in

our own thinking in this area. But whether they deal with compulsions to lovers, friends, objects, or substances, the consistent element connecting all these exhibits is narration itself and the need to position oneself, however provisionally, in relation to a no-longer-shared past. Most of these narratives register as both highly personal and strangely impersonal—even the obsessional or violent details register predictably, like the melted cell phone retrieved from an oven. Many of the exhibits also revealed the projects of collation that are part and parcel of falling in love: the kept 3M love notes, the serial regiftings or found items repurposed as tokens, and the claiming of representational ciphers for a shared attachment to the world, such as the assembly of tins, boxes, and books emblazoned with a "mutually loved font."[51] Many of the anonymous donors expressed relief or just a sense of rightness at being able to hand over to the impersonal collecting drive of a museum the custodianship of some personal object they wanted to be without but could not discard. The gift shop accommodated this ambivalence in other ways, peddling an array of T-shirts, coffee cups, books, and other commodities that spoke to the productive alienation of emotion on a broader scale. In this sense the museum's rightful home is Hollywood and the Boulevard of Broken Dreams, the place where the attachment to the fantasy of attachment is played out on an industrial scale, although now the narrational output is meme-like rather than feature-length and commonly accessed in print-to-order publications available online.

When taken together, *At Home with Themselves* and the Museum of Broken Relationships invoke and at times reinforce normative genres of the long term, but they also suggest their compatibility with nonnormative content. This lived tension is explored in this volume as our contributors broach diverse forms of commitment to other people, to animals, to the couple form, to caretaking, to genres, to race, to class, to careers, to prisoners, to therapy, to saving, to practice, to theory. For all the inclusiveness of this list, we are still troubled by what else might have been included and the gaps left by those who reluctantly withdrew from this project because of overcommitment.

Rather than presenting as the last word on commitment and the long term, the original essays that follow open onto a set of theoretical inquiries that invite ongoing attention as a form of what Elizabeth Freeman might call chronic thinking, or observations produced in and of a situation that is persistent rather than resolvable.[52] Featuring case studies drawn from sites such as contemporary Asian American literary fiction, sentimental literature, endurance performance art, HIV/AIDS and personal illness narratives, trans-of-color documentary film, and a threnody of mourning, these essays engage the implications of the long term as their authors have come to know

it. Although the collection was never designed with any consensus in mind, as the essays arrived in our inboxes we nonetheless began to sense a shared aesthetic and theoretical adherence to the "experimental critical writing" that Sedgwick reserves for prose and poetry that dilutes the boundaries "between genres, between 'critical' and 'creative' writing, between private and public address, between argumentation and performance"—and between the personal and the impersonal. Sedgwick reminds us that these committed writing styles have been around much longer than any of us and were historically jump-started by "liberatory theoretical movements around race, colonialism, and sexuality."[53] As Johnson's foreword also reminds us, these stylistics have historically functioned as instruction manuals for "how we as queers commit to life and living despite a contemporaneous world in which we are constantly under siege."

We are happy to report that this tradition of committed life writing is alive and kicking within LGBTQ studies, as evidenced in queer feminist autotheory; in trans memoir; in the antiracist ethnography Johnson models in his writing with Black queer Southern women; and in those chapters ahead that eschew the impersonal academic voice in favor of something more queerly indentured.[54] Even as they deal in theoretically rigorous ways with interracial dynamics, coupling and uncoupling, interspecies animacy and technologically driven sound, generational divides and overlaps, cognitive and physical disabilities, incapacity, licit and illicit drug use, kinship, care and stranger intimacy, we also noted how many were unsolicited refreshings of the queer life writing tradition. We hope that readers will take up—and take issue with—all that is laid out in these pages in a way that keeps knowledge production in this area engaged and attentive to its conditions of possibility. In the network-provider speak that perpetually pimps the world while disclaiming it, we invite you to browse further but make no commitment on your behalf.

NOTES

1 Astrida Neimanis and Jennifer Hamilton, "The Weather Is Now Political," *Conversation*, May 22, 2017, https://theconversation.com/the-weather-is-now-political-77791. For a lengthier discussion of weathering, see Neimanis and Walker, "*Weathering*."

2 See Berlant, *Intimacy*.

3 For a reengagement of the personal and impersonal impulses undergirding the theoretical enterprise, see Jagose and Wallace, "Dicktation."

4 For more on twenty-first-century digital innovations of sexual cultures, see Kipnis, *Unwanted Advances*, and Dean, "Introduction: Pornography, Technology, Archive."

5 Berlant and Warner, "Sex in Public," 326.
6 Warner, *The Trouble with Normal*, 98. For further historical and theoretical elaborations of queer marriage, see Franke, *Wedlocked*; Cleves, "'What, Another Female Husband?'"; Chauncey, *Why Marriage?*; Freeman, *The Wedding Complex*; Chenier, "Love-Politics"; and Shelden, *Unmaking Love*.
7 Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 10.
8 Rodríguez, *Sexual Futures*, 35, 36.
9 Reddy, "Race and the Critique of Marriage," 430. See also Reddy, "Time for Rights?"
10 Moynihan, "The Negro Family," 12, 14, 19.
11 See Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," and Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black*, 119–23.
12 Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 177. See also Ahmed, *On Being Included*.
13 Thomas, "Is Black Marriage Queer?," 208, 211.
14 Moore, "Reflections on Marriage Equality," 78. See also Moore, "Marriage Equality."
15 Moore, "Reflections on Marriage Equality," 73, 75, 77.
16 Although these ideas now circulate under the umbrella term the *antisocial thesis*, they are more compellingly encountered in the particularity of their source documents: Caserio et al., "The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory"; Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*; and Edelman, *No Future*. For longevity critiques, see Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*; Puar, "Prognosis Time"; and Berlant, "Do You Intend to Die?"
17 See Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents*; Shah, *Stranger Intimacy*; Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*; Bersani and Phillips, *Intimacies*; and Kunzel, *Criminal Intimacy*.
18 Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 178.
19 *Oxford English Dictionary*, "commitment," www.oed.com.
20 *OED*, "commit."
21 *OED*.
22 *OED*, "commitment ceremony."
23 *OED*, "commit"; *OED*, "commitment order."
24 A quick (unhyphenated) search on one of our browsers immediately returns the following click-bait headers: "42 Signs You're in Love with a Commitment-Phobe"; "Commitment-Phobe: 7 Signs He's Terrified of Being in a Relationship"; "12 Women Reveal What It Takes to Nudge a Commitment Phobic Man into a Relationship"; "7 Types of Commitment Phobe"; "10 Signs that Your Lover Is Commitment Phobic"; and "10 Things Commitment Phobic Men Need to Know."
25 Phillips, *On Flirtation*, xi, xviii.
26 For his discussion of Bartleby and the lessons his patients with anorexia nervosa have taught him, see Phillips, "On Eating, and Preferring Not To." For a wider discussion of what is at stake in Bartleby's second life on Wall Street, see Castronovo, "Occupy Bartleby."
27 For relevant literatures on organizational commitment, see Mercurio, "Affective Commitment as a Core Essence of Organizational Commitment."
28 For a classic account of the human tendency to hedge one commitment with another one, see Becker, "Note on the Concept of Commitment."

29 Phillips, *On Flirtation*, xviii–xix. See also Kipnis, *Against Love*, 201, where, using Phillips, she "flirts with paradox" in her thoughts on marriage and adultery.
30 Bersani, "Against Monogamy," 11, 6.
31 Berlant and Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable*, 89–90, 90. For more of Berlant's thinking around comedy, see Berlant and Ngai, "Comedy Has Issues."
32 Berlant and Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable*, 90.
33 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 9.
34 Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, 310.
35 The connection between Berlant and Cavell is pursued further in Wallace, *Reattachment Theory*.
36 Berlant, "Humorlessness," 313.
37 The seven films that obsess Cavell are, in the order in which he discusses them, *The Lady Eve* (Preston Sturges, 1941), *It Happened One Night* (Frank Capra, 1934), *Bringing Up Baby* (Howard Hawks, 1938), *The Philadelphia Story* (George Cukor, 1940), *His Girl Friday* (Howard Hawks, 1940), *Adam's Rib* (George Cukor, 1949), and *The Awful Truth* (Leo McCarey, 1937). Initially discussed in *Pursuits of Happiness*, these same seven films are revisited in *Cities of Words*.
38 See Wallace, *Reattachment Theory*.
39 Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 142.
40 Cavell, *Cities of Words*, 16.
41 For more on such blurring, see Wiegman and Wilson, "Introduction: Antinormativity's Queer Conventions."
42 For more about the queer dimensionalities of temporality, duration, and repetition, see Freeman, *Time Binds*.
43 Sohier, *At Home with Themselves*, 6. Page references to Sohier will hereafter be given parenthetically in the text.
44 For discussion of the racialized contours of queer domesticity as they emerge in US public health discourse, see Shah, *Contagious Divides*, 77–104. For an equally historical account of the role of domestic food preparation and consumption in the emergence of American gay male identity, see Vider, "'Oh Hell, May, Why Don't You People Have a Cookbook?'"
45 "About Us," Museum of Broken Relationships, Los Angeles, 2016, http://brokenships.la/about.
46 "Betty Boop Doll: 2013 to Present: Los Angeles, California," *Museum of Broken Relationships*.
47 *Museum of Broken Relationships*.
48 "Blue Jeans: 1985 to 2009: Hailey, Idaho," *Museum of Broken Relationships*.
49 Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work*, 237. Piepzna-Samarasinha is responding to Eli Clare's call that we "embrace our brokenness." See Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection,* 160. Further iterations of queer disability studies and queer debility studies can be found in Puar, *The Right to Maim*; Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*; Chen, *Animacies*; and McRuer, *Crip Times*.
50 The museum's popular transnational spread might therefore be considered alongside recent work on queer archiving such as Richardson, *The Queer Limit of Black Memory*, and Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*.

51 "Mutually Loved Davida Font: October 2008 to December 2012: Los Angeles, California," *Museum of Broken Relationships*.

52 Freeman, "Hopeless Cases."

53 Sedgwick, "Teaching 'Experimental Critical Writing,'" 104. We have in mind Jean-Paul Sartre's account of committed writing as it appears in *What Is Literature?* See Goldthorpe, *Sartre,* and Berman, *Modernist Commitments*, for more recent accounts of how philosophical ideas around commitment have overlap with experimental writing across the twentieth century.

54 See Johnson, *Black. Queer. Southern. Women.,* 280–322; and Johnson, *Honeypot*.

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