



## GETTING YOUR DUCKS IN A ROW: Marriage, Protection, and Love without Regret in Virginia

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Like their heterosexual counterparts, most lesbians and gay men in the United States during the 1980s and 1990s were looking to the future when they constructed kinship ties and argued for their authenticity. They spoke of their gay families as a source of “security,” expecting chosen kin to “be there” for them at some unspecified time of need in days to come.

— Kath Weston, “Forever Is a Long Time,” 1995

What does it mean to be safe? Who gets to be safe?

—Jatin Dua, *Captured at Sea*, 2019

“You . . . we . . . you want your ducks in a row. It’s for tax purposes,” said Brinn.

“And to remove any uncertainty, potential trials and tribulations, should anything happen . . . medical . . . ,” said Andrew, Brinn’s husband of fifteen years.

“Medical . . . legal . . . financial, inheritance . . . there’s power of attorney, isn’t there . . . ,” Brinn echoed and added.

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Like most of the liberal-on-some-issues-progressive couples I met in 2017–2018 in Charlottesville, Virginia, for Brinn and Andrew, a social worker and an academic, both white and approaching fifty, parents to a tween, also sharing their home with two cats and discussing welcoming some chickens, talk of what legal marriage could bring in terms of financial and medical benefits and matters of property was its own kind of love language. The people I met highlighted how, when you engaged with these marriage bureaucracies, what you really got was a sense of the inevitability of death—even though, for most couples, the when, the where, the how, and the “who first out of we two?” remained unknown.

That legal marriage was a way of, as Brinn put it, “getting one’s ducks in a row” was not, it was understood, unromantic. It did not jar with marriage’s social, ritualistic, and often, religious or spiritual, meanings—the idea that when you found someone you loved enough to want to marry, this was against the odds. Brinn and Andrew wore rings and referred to each other as spouses, “husband and wife.” Some of their home décor was wedding paraphernalia: a framed, A3-sized picture of a tree for which wedding guests’ bottle green inked thumbprints made up leaves; the lyrics to their first dance song calligraphed and framed by a bridesmaid.

“How big was your wedding?” I asked.

“In the end, about 150!”

Seeing as I was in Charlottesville in the early years of marriage equality (introduced to Virginia in 2014 and across the United States in 2015), [John Borneman’s](#) (1997, 582) pithy phrase to criticize what he saw in the 1990s as anthropologists’ preoccupation when studying kinship with “the normative trinity of birth, marriage, and death” most obviously resonates with the question of how marriage pertains to themes of exclusion, recognition, and “rights.” Indeed, in Charlottesville, the politics of (homo)normativity ([Duggan 2002](#)) was a hot topic. While most openly queer people and allies whom I met praised marriage equality and took it as evidence of legal marriage’s status as, as one lawyer put it, “a working document,” some wondered aloud about how legal marriage’s historical exclusion of “people like them” colored marriage (and queerness) *now*. Did a couple that did not include a man and a woman hold the possibility for a nonhierarchical marriage in which both people gained as much as they gave? Or were marriages inherently normative relationships, whichever genders were involved ([Brandzel 2005](#))? For queer people, was normativity ever a possibility, married or unmarried? On top of that, wasn’t normativity a *right*? I met several conservative-leaning queer people who bemoaned the assumption that they voted Demo-

crat. One wondered out loud, only slightly tongue-in-cheek, “haven’t we [queer people] earned the right to be boring?”

But Borneman’s words have an additional resonance for me when I think about marriage in Charlottesville, because one part of Borneman’s “normative trinity”—marriage—frequently referenced another: death (see also [Borneman 1996](#)). At Brinn and Andrew’s wedding, they promised each other *for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health . . . ‘til death do we part*. Material memento mori honored deceased loved ones and intensified the day’s affective redolence. Brinn wore a turquoise bracelet that had belonged to a college friend who had died in her twenties (the friend’s mother loaned it to her—the mother was herself a wedding guest and more than this, someone who was honored in Brinn’s speech). A dresser at the reception held silver- and gold-framed photographs of both sides’ deceased “blood relatives,” from “good death” great-grandparents to a “gone-too-soon” (in his thirties) cousin of Andrew’s.

Practices of mourning-cum-recognitions of mortality varied between weddings: there was talk of how “it was his mother’s ring”; when wind chimes in trees pealed, it was the beloved dead making their presence heard; there was a “Scotch-based signature cocktail” for a deceased father of a groom; a bride wore the perfume of her deceased mother; swatches of the deceased’s handkerchiefs were sewn into suit jackets and locket holding photographs were tied around bouquets; a pastor, in a ceremony, noted that, earlier that day, the couple had left flowers on the grave of the bride’s first husband. “Let us not forget that wedding days are days when we make promises to many different people—and some of those people are no longer with us in an earthly way,” the pastor said.

### GETTING YOUR DUCKS IN A ROW

In this article, I think about protection as a key motivating ideology and practice ([Dua 2019](#)) for people I met talking of marriage and kinship in Charlottesville in 2017 and 2018. Forget about “fairy-tale” weddings (or at least, forget about them being the main part of the story) or pretending to be perfect; marriage was an idiom for talking about uncertainty, “what really matters,” political upheaval, “scars,” mortality—as Brinn and Andrew said, it was at least in part about when something bad happens.

I’m not writing about marriage within a certain group, a community in an “ethnic,” “racial,” sexuality-based, or religious sense, despite my admiration of many of these studies (e.g., [Barnes 2016](#); [Bjork-James 2021](#); [Lewin 2001](#)). My sample were people living in Charlottesville and willing and able to talk about

one aspect or another of marriage. One of the things that struck me was how people from a range of situations in terms of race, class, gender and sexuality, and political-cum-religious affiliations talked of protection when they spoke of marriage. And so I was curious about how protection had become a kind of kinship-political baseline. I'm not using my observations about protection (or about marriage) to claim "so, we're actually all in the same position! Facing the same challenges!" Rather, what seems pertinent here is how whether or not a cross-section of society talk of threat and protection when they talk of marriage, some people are more likely than others to face certain kinds of danger and, in particular, to be treated as if they were dangerous.<sup>1</sup> Histories such as [Christina Hanhardt's \(2013\) \*Safe Space: Gay Neighborhood History and the Politics of Violence\*](#) (see also [Thomsen 2021](#)) show us that ideas about protection's related discourses of safety, danger, and threat have been used to segment (and hierarchize) society along lines such as race, gender, sexuality, class, faith, and nationality ([Ralph 2019](#); as have marriage laws, see [Cott 2000](#) and [Hunter 2017](#)). (I should also say that I'm white—and so is my husband, who was with me in Virginia—and this will have shaped how and what it was for us to be in Virginia, as is always also the case in the United Kingdom, where I grew up and live now.)

In focusing on protection as a politically complex and, I argue, rather naturalized sentiment in local understandings of what legal marriage is, I am highlighting how central protection is to intimacy when it's already been acknowledged how central it is to, for example, justifications of U.S. foreign policy and national security—wars, walls, guns, surveillance, policing, safety laws (e.g., [Anderson 2024](#); [Briggs 2017](#); [Masco 2014](#); [Stone 2022](#); [Jain 2006](#); [Ralph 2019](#); [Burton 2015](#)) and to discussions of who young people are and what society's responsibilities are toward them (think "child protection"; see [Mariner 2019](#)). The history of protection via marriage tells a story about the U.S. nation ([Cott 2000](#); [Coontz 2006](#); [McKinnon 2019](#)). Themes of property and supposed liberty apply to sentiments around protecting loved ones just as they apply to protecting the nation ([Reddy 2011](#)). People of color and then those in same-sex relationships having access to legal marriage signifies (at least in theory) a transition from their being othered as people whom society should be *protected from* to full persons whose rights and relationships must be protected—regardless of whether or not they, as individuals, "believe" in marriage, or want to marry, or ever "meet the right person" ([Hanhardt 2013](#); [Holloway 2006](#); [Cashin 2017](#); [Cleves 2014](#)).

For sure, legal marriage in the United States has always been deadly serious. At many points in history, marriage has not only reflected but formed and

reinforced racial, gendered, nationality, and class-based hierarchies. As a way of making personal attachments public (Cott 2000), marriage tells a story of U.S. civil rights—and lacks thereof. There were the laws of the Colonies and the use of marriage to dispossess Indigenous people; how marriage was (is?) the linchpin of “settler sex and family,” bringing together property with a certain kind of morality (TallBear 2018). There were the battles free and enslaved Black people fought to stay with the people they loved (Gordon-Reed 1998, 2008; Hunter 2017). There were the plights of immigrants and religious minorities (Cannell 2013; McKinnon 2019). There was the oppression and ingenuity of interracial couples before the 1967 U.S. Supreme Court case *Loving v. Virginia* (Cashin 2017)—and note that this came about because anti-miscegenation laws contravened the Equal Protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment written after the Civil War and that was meant to establish formerly enslaved people’s enfranchisement). There was the stuckness and stigma those who needed to leave marriages faced in the years before the “no-fault” divorce (Celeslo 2009). What was going to be the next big politics marriage story? My fieldwork took place in the early years of marriage equality, but also in the first year of the first Trump presidency, and people told me they didn’t know what was going to happen next, if there was going to be a backslide, if the right to legal marriage could be taken away.

With this context in mind, as both an analytic and an ideology (Dua 2019) *protection* does the necessary work of recognizing the acute scale and intensity of kinship and relatedness—of what’s at stake for those involved. Kin may well “live each other’s lives and die each other’s deaths” (Sahlins 2011, 14), but even this arresting phrase does not reflect how, looking back on my time in Virginia, people *strived* to keep intimates safe (sometimes in vain) from threats that were sometimes clear, sometimes ill-defined.

Protection resembles “care” (Borneman 1997) because, as a way of discussing how people are entangled, it foregrounds what they do for one another—or what they might do for one another if they had to. Particularly pre–marriage equality, protecting kin via marriage and protecting an exclusionary status quo (e.g., through homophobic laws or inheritance laws that privilege the wealthy and often the white) seemed particularly co-constitutive (cf. Brandzel 2005). Although Borneman (1997, 574; emphasis mine) did not explicitly analyze the use of *protection*, he observed how “marriage and the ‘protection of families’ 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, to work, or to love.” “Care,” for Borneman, was an alternative analytic that avoided centring formal legal systems and “the family” (narrowly defined).

But isn’t it also the case that protection is also something that people do for those who matter to them outside of formal, hegemonic, and normative relationships? Hasn’t it often been the only option?

Borneman (1997) described how, in the mid-1990s, Harald, a terminally ill German man adopted his partner, an arrangement that was possible because this man was twenty years his junior and necessary because legally recognized same-sex marriage had not yet been introduced. Harald was (perilously) lying in court when he said that they had never had sex. But he was telling the truth when he said that he wanted this younger man to become his legal kin so that he could leave him “his house and wealth” (Borneman 1997, 577). To me, this seems like protection rather than care alone. Protection captures the dramatic nature of Harald’s actions and the gravity of the stakes. Protection shows how relationships can involve calling on the state for help, but how this can involve both protecting loved ones from the state and using state support in non-normative ways. Protection reflects how affect is usually wrapped up with thoughts of material survival and of the mortality of oneself and one’s loved ones. If marriage and protection are linked culturally, politically, and perhaps unconsciously, it is not because marriage is unique, but because it signifies a formalization of what many people feel is an important part of relationships—whether they would like this to be the case or not. There are debates about whether or not the introduction of legally recognized same-sex marriage creates new exclusions (Butler 2002; Brandzel 2005; Briggs 2017). But then there is the more general question of what it means psychically and societally for threat to be a persistent presence in conceptualizations of love and attachment.

### PROTECTION AND KINSHIP

The ties between legal marriage, protection, and the intense politicization of safety, danger, and mortality in the United States are apparent in an overlap between how David Schneider (1968) wrote about *American Kinship* and how Laurence Ralph (2019) has, much more recently, analyzed policing in the country. While Ralph seeks to denaturalize safety, Schneider aimed to denaturalize the family. When looked at as a set, one gets a sense of how the institution of marriage’s potency might in part result from its associations (earned or otherwise) with protection and safety in a place where these are hegemonic cultural values. Schneider (1968, 34–35) writes:

Informants describe the family as consisting of husband, wife, and their children who live together as a natural unit. The family is formed according to the laws of nature and it lives by rules which are regarded by Americans as self-evidently natural. So Americans are not really surprised when they hear this same sort of arrangement is found among some animals and birds and even fish. It seems quite natural for a pair to live together, to mate, to have a place of their own with their offspring, to protect that place and their offspring . . . .

*To protect that place and their offspring:* here, home merges one's closest people with one's precious property, alongside the understanding too, of course, that the property will at some point belong to the offspring. Schneider does not suggest that this way of thinking is wrong. Rather, he shows that this is *curious*, worthy of ethnographic description. Schneider denaturalizes the normative U.S. family of the time: not even a man and a woman living together (denaturalizing heterosexuality), but a "husband [and] wife" (denaturalizing marriage). He continues, "Americans see a family when animals mate and rear their young in a place which they occupy and protect—their nest, their cave, their home" (Schneider 1968, 35). What is notable here is that, "like animals," families live with threat, and therefore live with protection—or are constituted by protection—even when things are going right or, at least, *going normative*.

Agreeing with Schneider (1968, 35) that kinship and relatedness, understood as the need to "occupy and protect," are local ideas rather than "natural" facts, "universals," I was surprised to read the following lines in Ralph's (2019, 13; emphasis mine) book on police torture in Chicago:

For all of our achievements as humans, we are still a species that is ruled by very basic instincts, instincts developed millions of years ago and ones shared by most animals. The most basic of instincts is the desire to keep ourselves alive; thus, we are incredibly attuned to danger, and *fear shapes much of our emotional life*. Because we are fearful of threats, what we crave—perhaps even more than food or companionship—is a sense of safety.

What kind of safety politics, I wondered, are at play when being "fearful of threats" is rendered as a human quality rather than a product of historical, cultural, or political shaping? However, as Ralph proceeds, he focuses precisely on

how safety (and, I argue, protection) is not primordial but rather a national and institutional project, so he focuses on history:

The very idea of safety in the United States is rooted in the frontier logic that justified the settlement of this country in the 1700s. For the white settlers, safety was premised on viewing Native Americans as threats and so transforming them into “savages.” (Ralph 2019, 3)

As a project, the United States can be viewed accordingly as comprising offensive moves dressed up as preemptive defences. Protection always creates an other, and violence is perpetrated in the name of *protecting oneself and one’s people*, and getting married has been one of the ways in which people in the United States have marked out who their people are (and therefore also who they are not). Ralph demonstrates the danger of “our people” being understood along racial lines. Orisanmi Burton (2015), also writing on policing in the United States, takes the U.S. police motto, “to serve and protect,” and argues that we need to be explicit about who or what is being protected—his article is entitled, “To Protect and Serve Whiteness.”

*How to protect* is a political issue that carves out differences: Policing and formal legal systems? Guns? Prisons? Taxes? Insurance? Cars? Community support? God? Democracy? Marriage? Indivisible from processes of racialization are the slippages between *family* and *nation* that occur in the name of protection. As Sophie Bjork-James (2020) points out, “heterosexuality provides an ideological framework for rightist movements. Gender does the dual work of articulating a set of valorized identities for participants while also creating a system of moral justification for prejudice. For instance, they portray women and children as requiring protection from foreign, racialized, or queer others.” At a 2020 pro-gun rally in Richmond, Virginia, the Virginia Republican John McGuire said, “Our country was founded on common sense. . . . Our Founding Fathers believed it was a God-given right to protect yourself, your family and your children. That’s why these people are here today and I support them” (BBC News 2020).

It’s far from the case that protection is solely a conservative concept. For the past decade, “Protect Trans Kids” has been a notable U.S. trans rights slogan. Megan Thee Stallion when, in October 2020, performing her song “Savage” on *Saturday Night Live* had projected on to the stage behind her the words “PROTECT BLACK WOMEN.” She paused to play a clip of Black Lives Matter and gun-control activist Tamika Mallory’s words, “Daniel Cameron is no different

than the sell-out Negroes who sold our people into slavery.” The previous month, Daniel Cameron, Kentucky’s first Black attorney, had announced that only one of the officers involved in Breonna Taylor’s murder would face charges (and not for murder) (Aswad and Jackson 2020; see also Thee Stallion 2020). *Whom to protect* is arguably the question at the heart of civil rights.

In this article, showing how discussions of whom and how to protect take shape surrounding so-called private relationships and intensely public “big politics” and media debates alike, I’ll go ahead in five sections. The first describes researching marriage in 2017 and 2018 Charlottesville, drawing on conversations about kinship, racialization, and notions of threat that came to the fore in the wake of the Unite the Right rally, but which were, of course, also “in the wake” (Sharpe 2016) of much deeper Virginia, national, and global histories. The second section describes the frequency and forms of *threat* and *danger* as local kinship idioms. This provides necessary groundwork for making it understood that one of the reasons that marriage is the focus of so much cultural discussion in the United States may be because marriage seems to in no small part concern “what happens if something bad occurs.” The penultimate section, the third, relays how a queer couple discuss marriage following marriage equality. The final substantive section interprets interlocutors’ reflection about how marriage is something they “don’t want to regret not doing”—and how narrations of these thought processes, and pathways to getting engaged or married, sometimes include references to bereavement.

## RESEARCHING MARRIAGE IN 2017 AND 2018

### CHARLOTTESVILLE

“We’re *rooting for that couple*,” a young play center practitioner told me in Charlottesville in the summer of 2018, shaking her head as she fished choke-hazard-small crayon butts out of a plastic tub at a community event.

Who were “that couple”?

In May 2018, the *New York Times*’ iconic “Vows” section led with an article titled “Months after a Brutal Day in Charlottesville, a Tender Wedding” (La Gorce 2018). The article described the wedding of twenty-seven-year-old Marcus Martin and twenty-eight-year-old Marissa Blair, who had been counter-protestors at the Unite the Right rally on August 17, 2017. On August 11 and 12, white nationalists seeking to “unite the Right” attacked the bucolic and increasingly expensive college town, symbolic to some of an “Upper South liberal elite,” a “Hillary hotspot,” and a “blue bubble in a sea of red.” The apparent

provocation was the City Council's proposed removal from a public park of a Jim Crow-era statue of Confederate leader Robert E. Lee.<sup>2</sup> Attacks were staged at the University of Virginia campus and the city center. James Alex Fields Jr., a twenty-year-old neo-Nazi from Ohio, drove his Dodge Challenger into a group of counter-protestors walking along the Downtown Mall and murdered the thirty-two-year-old paralegal Heather Heyer (see [Bellamy 2018](#); [Spencer 2018](#); [Bodroghkozy 2022](#)).

In the same story as the wedding photographs, the Times printed a different sort of photograph—one that won a Pulitzer for the Charlottesville *Daily Progress's* Ryan Kelly. Under the glare of the August Virginian sun, a young Black man is suspended mid-air. The red-and-white sole of his shoe point at the viewer. Without context, the photograph might depict the man performing a virtuoso high kick. In truth, the man—Marcus Martin—had been shunted into the air. The back of Fields's Dodge Challenger is at the back of the photograph, framed by Sharpied placards: "LOVE," "solidarity," "Black Lives Matter."

Martin was one of the people rammed into by James Alex Fields Jr. Seconds before, Martin had pushed Blair, then his fiancée, out of the car's path, giving her, as the *Times* put it, a "protective shove" ([La Gorce 2018](#)). Heyer, the woman whom Fields murdered, was Blair and Martin's friend.

In 2018, Blair and Martin chose purple, Heyer's favorite color, as their wedding hue. "You don't have to do this," said wedding guest Susan Bro ([Leach 2018](#)), Heyer's mother and a community activist. But, as Blair told a second publication, *Glamour*,

I'm a big believer in that everything happens for a reason, and while I hate that Heather had to die that day, if she had went any other way the message wouldn't be this loud. It wouldn't have reached so many people and showed them that there is so much hate in this world, but if we love each other it will be OK. My bridesmaids said it perfectly. "*August 12th is what hate looks like. May 12th is what love looks like.*" (qtd. in [Leach 2018](#); emphasis mine)

I arrived (along with my husband and our one-year-old) in Charlottesville in early July 2017. I was going to interview religious leaders, those who made and enforced laws surrounding marriage, wedding professionals, activists and advocates, and just about anyone else who had something to say about marriage.

Talk of protection and kinship were foregrounded because of August 2017's violence. Some of the business owners I was interviewing in their capacity as

wedding vendors were based in the center of town and wondered how they would be able to pay their steep-and-rising rents if engaged couples (Charlottesville was, especially in the fall, a “wedding mecca”) and prospective University of Virginia students’ families “were too scared to come to Cville.” Some of the religious leaders I interviewed in their capacity as wedding officiants and premarital counselors said they were thinking about how to protect their congregations.

Salient to protection as it relates to family and community, the kind of terrorism enacted on Charlottesville was threatening in part because of the importance people placed on being in public and semi-public spaces with strangers or acquaintances—free concerts, shops and markets, religious services, community events like pancake breakfasts, sporting events and tailgating, chatting at the playground. You never could tell how justified worries about safety were. But pushing fears aside, and being seen to do so, was both kinship and politics and was, as some described it, a way of “protecting our way of life . . . what we stand for.” Sometimes “being in community” meant a degree of uncertainty about who else was there or what their motivations were. There was some speculation about whether or not Cville Pride 2017 (tagline “Y’All Means All”) would go ahead, given that it was scheduled for a month after the August tragedy (henceforth, “A12”), and on the Downtown Mall where Heyer was murdered—but it did.

Carrying on with “normal everyday life” did, however, create some edginess. “I’m not usually one to keep my cell out during meetups,” said a lawyer-turned-wedding-officiant apologetically as I interviewed him in a coffee shop. “But my kid’s going through something at the moment . . . plus there’s been the unpleasantness.” A common narrative framing device for talking about where you were on A12 was “who I called first,” or “who did I try to check up on?” Sylvette, a wedding planner who was white and of mixed French and Irish-American descent, had been extremely worried about her adult daughter when she failed to pick up “about fifty” calls from her and her wife, because her daughter was out for coffee with a friend and had her phone on silent. However, I also heard lots of accounts of people checking in on people to whom they had “weaker” ties than family or friends—neighbors who were vulnerable older people, for example—but also those who owned local businesses that might be impacted by the white supremacists’ violence.

In the year following A12, some people discussed in public and private for what the catastrophe said about Charlottesville’s politics and history (see [Douglas 2024](#)). I got the sense that white people, from a range of different political affiliations, expressed more surprise about A12 than people of color did. There was

dismay at the white nationalists' violence, but also at how the city government, the university leadership (see [Bashkow 2017](#)), and the police had handled the event. In summer 2018—A12's anniversary—helicopters circled the city.

I carried out fieldwork at a time when many people in Charlottesville were particularly concerned about protection, but it was my impression that allusions to threats and death were also a feature of kinship talk in purportedly normal times. That to love someone meant possessing a peripheral vision attuned to potential threats came out in strikingly everyday conversations. When I chatted with other parents—or with parenting grandparents, aunts, and uncles—about topics such as sleep, eating, and, as it was sometimes put locally, “acting out,” they often referenced rhetorically unthinkable disasters without batting an eyelid: “Don’t get me wrong, I would take a bullet for him, but the threes and the fours have been real tough,” “I would run through fire for her; I always say ‘she’s my heart walking around outside my body,’ but the other day I gave her my cell phone and lay down on the floor for an hour.” Calls for women to practice self-care, admonishments that you couldn’t look after kin or community (see also [Barnes 2016](#)) “if your cup wasn’t full,” were transmitted through the simile, “It’s like what they say when you’re on an airplane: *if there’s an emergency you have to put on your own oxygen mask before putting on anyone else’s!*” When love, kinship, and attachment, are “ineffable” ([Cannell 2013](#)), disaster, and specifically what you would do for a loved one if you needed to, offered some kind of vocabulary; hence, I suppose, the wedding vows I mentioned earlier. Mortality and morality were intertwined in how people prioritized the protection of some people over others, but the *some people over others* applied both to *some people over others* in a person’s family and community and *some people over others* on a societal level—what we might call “protectable lives” (cf. [Butler 2009](#)).

Protection brought together family, place, property, and sentiments that drew on the multiple meanings of *home*, and the multiple meanings of *mine* arose often during my fieldwork. Histories of an earlier, more rural Virginia constituted sources of meaning. Lynn, a white sixty-year-old who worked in the wedding business, and I were talking about engagement rings when she told me,

In the American tradition, a woman was given a pearl in an engagement ring and then the band was given at the time of matrimony. And the ring was symbolic of you know, “we’re betrothed,” because you had the preacher who went on the circuit and you could be betrothed and have

children before the preacher came round to marry you. Especially here in the rural areas.

I asked Lynn if it was scandalous to have children when you weren't married, to which she replied,

No, because the couple are together. And if you go back into the history of the hollows of Virginia just here, the preacher was on his circuit, and if he didn't get around to you within a year then you didn't wait. You had to have children. You had subsistence farming. Those children had to be coming out so you could have little workers. Right?!

Some details here are cast as outmoded: subsistence farming, children contributing materially to their households, the image of a Virginia so sparsely populated that Christians did not have enough neighbors to warrant a congregation with their minister. However, this picture of "together"—as Lynn put it—evokes an atmospherics (what [Stewart \[2011\]](#) calls "the charged atmospheres of everyday life") of kinship and politics that, for some, continues today. Marriage can be a circle that some families draw around them—not necessarily of farmland, not necessarily much of a physical space at all, but a conceptual, material and possibly legal space.

Both because of and despite the idea that your kin are the people you protect, many people reflected on the extent to which kinship is inherently exclusionary ([Wagner 1977](#); see also [Cooper 2019](#)). The same people who said that your spouse should be your "best friend" lamented that best friend-talk was a notable cause of upset in their children's elementary schools. People wondered aloud if it was inevitable to contribute to the flourishing of some over others. Formal legal systems, economies of time and money, and laws of physics that said you couldn't be in more than one place at a time dictated that, even to startlingly altruistic, community-minded people practicing a "priority kinship"—protection was not a zero-sum game: everyone mattered, but some came first, and you would endanger yourself in a beat for your kin. Many interlocutors were deeply moved by what they saw as the central pillar of their faith: *God sacrificed his only son, put believers before his son*, and this was divine because it inverted what could and should happen in earthly kinship. Religious leaders and activists were admonished (and admonished themselves) if giving time to politics and community meant they didn't see enough of their families and friends. "It's like Jackie

O said,” a retailer and LGBTQ+ rights activist told me, “if you mess up raising your kids, then nothing else you’ve done matters *one jot*.” “Pastors get divorced *a lot*,” said an evangelical pastor. None of this was easy—I had never been somewhere before where there was so much talk (and action) of community.

### THREAT AND DANGER IN VIRGINIAN KINSHIP-POLITICAL ATMOSPHERICS

To understand why and how marriage—an institution associated with protection—has such deep cultural purchase in the United States, we need to comprehend the pervasiveness of talk of threat and danger in in everyday kinship-political atmospherics.

“Political affiliations in Virginia *run the gamut*,” a lawyer told me. In 2017 and 2018, Virginia was held by the Democrats, but it has historically been a “purple,” or swing state and a bellwether for U.S. politics, a “battleground.” Charlottesville and Lynchburg (where I was also doing research) weren’t only places but ideas, and many people used them as shorthand for how Virginia was a place of polarized politics. On the one hand, as it was put, was Lynchburg, Jerry Falwell’s (Sr. and Jr.) Christian-conservative town, a *Southern* place. On the other hand, so it went, there was the college town where Thomas Jefferson had separated church and state, an internationally minded home to the University of Virginia, a prestigious “state Ivy.” “Charlottesville has been voted the happiest place in America and there was only one homicide here last year!” I was told on our way from the airport.

Political talk sometimes took the idiom of “How Southern is Virginia?.” After A12 and its subsequent reckonings with race, people petitioned, “Can we now agree that Charlottesville is undeniably Southern?” A teacher and Charlottesville Democrat activist told me, “Cville people want a Pride event but not a parade; LGBTQ+ people don’t want folks to think they’re displaying themselves, thinking they’re special—that’s a Southern thing.” Young women in a Charlottesville shop corrected me when I surmised that many people married quite young in Virginia because of Christian belief. “It’s also because this is a military state,” one of them said. “Folks go to military school and then they marry young in case they’re deployed.” People with many different religious and political affiliations married. However, marriage, the military, and more conservative denominations of Christianity shared associations (“tradition,” structure, nominally clear ideas about gender) that made it seem, according to local social logics, that if you liked one, you’d also like one or two of the other.

Charlottesville's residential streets were lined with primary-color chalked kids' etchings, sedan car-squashed squirrels (plus the odd roadkill snake), and lovingly constructed front-porch Halloween vignettes. Salient to the public politics of marriage (Cott 2000), beliefs were not confined to inside the home, let alone to inside the head or the ballot box. People staked in their front yards the Mennonite sign *No matter where you're from, we're glad you're our neighbor* in Spanish, English, and Arabic, along with signs declaring who they planned to vote for. Caps and T-shirts read "MAGA," "Bernie Sanders," "Sojourners," and, on rare occasions, "The First Rule of Gun Safety Is Own a Gun," while preppy couples wearing pearls and boat shoes took their children to the Cville Pride event I mentioned earlier. There were whispers and eye rolls and bumper stickers, and yet this difference of opinion was expected: "democratic"; "what I grew up with myself"; "my uncle holds those views"; "American"; "one thing about the South is, it's important to be polite—at least to people's faces!"

But, especially since the 2016 election, I was told, things could be tense, conflictual, *exhausting*, "a dumpster fire." Some academics might be cynical about the idea of polarization (e.g., Grossberg 2019) but it was one of the registers through which people I met said that all this was not so new. Many discussed how white supremacy, and the uncertain rights of women, gender-nonconforming, and queer people, had been present since the beginning of the United States. Kiki Petrosino (2020), a poet and University of Virginia professor, published *White Blood: A Lyric of Virginia*. Petrosino writes in her poem "The Shop at Monticello," "I'm a black body in this Commonwealth [of Virginia], which turned black bodies/ into money. Now, I have money to spend on little trinkets to remind me of this fact." Several times I heard debates about whether what tied together Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings was a "relationship" or *rape* (see Gordon-Reed 1998). Jocelyn Nicole Johnson's 2021 novella *My Monticello* is about a descendent of Jefferson and Hemings seeking refuge in Monticello when white militia attack Charlottesville. Things were "especially bad" while I was in Charlottesville, but what's the grammatically correct way of saying they had been especially bad forever?

People across the political spectrum discussed if "things were getting better or getting worse." Some of the people I knew who were liberal or progressive and in their sixties and up said that they had seen great progress in their lifetimes. The rights of LGBTQ+ people came up as a key example here, and advocates said that this level of progress, epitomized by marriage equality, would

have been unimaginable only a couple of decades ago—“shoot, *one* decade ago.” But then they said that what they saw now in elections, and online, and on the streets of Charlottesville did make them wonder. But then they said that there were good people here and that “this city has woken up and we won’t let hate win.” But then, but then.

### CHELSEA AND LOUISE

Chelsea and Louise’s wedding took place twenty-six years after they’d met and twenty-four years after they’d become a couple after meeting while university students in North Carolina. They had been friends and roommates and then got together when Chelsea returned from studying abroad. “We’re both wanderers to some extent,” said Chelsea. “We’ve had a number of lines of work. We’ve moved about a bit: cities in the South mostly—after college it was Charleston, Charlotte, Roanoke, Richmond. Charlottesville isn’t perfect—obviously—but it’s been home for eighteen, nineteen years.” Chelsea worked as an administrator and Louise managed a bookshop. They identified as respectively of “mixed English, Irish, and German descent” and “mostly Scottish, so I’m told, but with a Black ancestor, apparently, a few generations back.”

“We called it our retrospective” Chelsea said dryly of their wedding. They had a courthouse wedding and then a reception at their home.

“It’s not like we were chomping at the bit to marry all these years,” Louise said. “When we got together there was a movement for it, but it wasn’t the center of much.” Chelsea and Louise married in 2017, three years after marriage equality in Virginia and two years after marriage equality across the country as a whole. When discussing how they decided to marry, Chelsea and Louise situated their marriage against the backdrop of marriage equality but also against events and relationships in their life together.

Chelsea and Louise had decided to marry after Louise’s father’s ninetieth birthday celebration in South Carolina in the summer of 2016. About twenty family members from four generations had gathered. They had enjoyed water sports and lobster dinners. Louise’s sister, her partner, and their teenage daughter had flown over from Japan—a rare treat. Louise said,

There was a strange moment at the end of the weekend when we had that sort of light depression that comes with saying goodbye—we were packing up and having some refreshments—when my mother said “so when’s the

next time we'll all get together?" and Chelsea and I just sort of looked at each other out of the corner of our eyes. It was just kind of "shall we?!"

Chelsea added, "on the drive back, we said 'Bah! Let's do it!'"

Louise reflected on how part of the appeal of legal marriage was that it can hopefully protect the rights—and even safety—of same-sex couples if strangers appear hostile or disrespectful. Louise said

We haven't faced any real bad problems, prejudices. But then sometimes we've been on vacation . . . traveling, and we've had that experience of a bartender or a taxi driver saying, calling us, "friends" and you just sort of have this understanding that sometimes you say "well, actually . . .," and other times you let them think that . . . Just because of the atmosphere, the sense you're getting. And these places haven't been in the South necessarily, or in countries you think of as conservative or difficult for women. We're talking Maine! We're even talking Scandinavia!

I suppose if you're married, you've got this extra power in your back pocket, like "hang on there," if someone disrespects you. Whether someone likes it that we're married on a personal level, it's the law of the land.

Chelsea added, "I don't want her hurt by someone's disrespect."

Chelsea and Louise's words express uncertainty about which person in a couple will need help, and there is the uncertainty of what—or who—threatens a couple. But the examples of bartenders and taxi drivers they use prove instructive. This was not the coming out that some LGBTQ+ people in Charlottesville may have done to their family of origin, classmates, or coworkers (see [Clare 2017](#) on some of the politics of coming out). Rather, it was about being read as being LGBTQ+ in transient encounters such as buying something. A frequent topic of discussion in the early years of marriage equality were homophobic consumer situations, for example, the religious-freedom-centered Supreme Court case *Masterpiece Cakeshop v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission* (2018). Raheem, a beverage industry entrepreneur in Charlottesville, put it succinctly, "In the run-up to marriage equality, we said it wasn't about the big wedding cake, it was about health insurance, the hospital; but now it is also about the big wedding cake." These encounters show that kinship is here conceived as being in part about

feelings for intimates, but also in part about feelings for those who are known to—or might—form part of more public surroundings.

*Whether someone likes it that we're married on a personal level, it's the law of the land.* A friend and colleague who read this asked what I thought Louise thought being married would do to stop these kinds of encounters. This was not clear—at a time when, for example, it was still legal for a person to be fired on the grounds of their sexuality and when many doubted whether or not the police could be relied on to protect who needs to be protected. On one level this speaks to what we might call the “legal atmospherics” of marriage, the ways in which marriage offers both a lens onto public opinion and consensus, and something that drives change (people often said, “Now that marriage equality is here, it's really time to get conversion therapy made illegal”). I think this says something not only about the institution of marriage but also about institutions more generally. They are associated with being old and powerful, or they are associated with being powerful because they are associated with being old (Mayblin 2019). But the nuts and bolts of what they do might remain murky. On another level, this speaks to the ways in which threat is by definition vague and that people do not marry to remove threat from their lives; rather, it formed part of the feeling and language of what made an ineffable topic—love—describable.

### MARRIAGE, PROTECTION, AND CLARIFICATION

Interactions with the gravely ill and with bereavement were a common motif in people's narrations of how they came to be married. Death—living through other people's or imagining one's own—was taken to clarify relationships. Rather than solving the problem of mortality, death motivated feelings about protection and gave marriage much of its affective redolence.

Some people in long-term relationships had told their partner's dying parent or particularly beloved grandparent that they intended to marry their child or grandchild. A woman called Leighton, a teacher in her forties, who was “Scots-Irish and Filipino” and had grown up in nearby Lynchburg, told me:

My now husband went in to see my father when he was in hospital and they had a conversation, and he came out and he said, “Will you marry me? Your father just gave me his blessing.” And ordinarily I would say, “That's hogwash; I'm not my father's, just as I'm not yours” but in this situation, at a hospital, it was like, “This is tying things together, this is how things should be.”

I spoke with her husband, Rhodri, a white musician in his fifties who described himself as “Welsh via New Jersey,” He said,

These are the moments of our lives, and they are never what you imagine them being, but they’re more than what you’d imagine. You’re in a hospital, like, things are stripped away with the furniture, you know, for hygiene. But they’re also stripped away because you see the life cycle and you see time slipping away. There’s clarity. And marriage is about clarity. In my faith and just in life, I want to learn, and the lesson of being with a dying person is: better to regret doing something than not doing something. But I knew I’d never regret marrying her! That’s commitment.

Leighton and Rhodri’s words proffer noticeable themes: the connection between death and “clarity,” and the compatibility of thinking about marriage and death with thinking about faith. But Rhodri’s words, in relation to marriage, “better to regret doing something than not doing something,” resonated with the theme of marriage as *action*. Marriage did not protect from *death*, but it could protect from a lack of clarity. And while some of this clarity was bureaucratic and legal, some of it was affective. People marry for many different reasons (combinations of securing custody rights, money, health insurance, visa opportunities, expectations from families of origin or from religious groups).<sup>3</sup> However, the dominant discourses centered, quite predictably, on “love” and “commitment,” and central to both was the notion of *regretting not having gotten married* (and to a particular person). This sentiment seemed to hold for both imaginations of death by natural causes and nightmares regarding death by accident or even hate and homicide.

While regret can be experienced at any point in the life course (see [Landman 1993](#)), as I saw it in Virginia, death (or when one is close to it) was cast as the *ultimate* moment when a person would assess the path they had taken in life. Young teenagers spoke urbanely about having “bucket lists” (as in “kicking the bucket”): experiences they wanted to have, places they wanted to visit before they died. Adults said the question of what they wanted to do in life, how they should live, was clearer when they asked themselves “what do I want to be said about me at my funeral?” Women in particular referenced the Mary Oliver line “Is this how I want to be living my one wild and precious life?”—tongue-in-cheek when doing tedious things like work emails, worrying about having offended an acquaintance, or scrubbing food off car seats. Mortality provided a

picture of finite time, and finite time was clarifying—a meaning-maker compatible with a range of religious and political views, even as it often indexed individuals taking responsibility for structural pressures.

Other people's deaths gave people the chance to see their own situations with more clarity. Nick, a Black real estate agent in his early thirties, told me how he'd proposed to his partner, Dominique, of similar age and of mixed African American and Jamaican descent, after an uncle with whom she'd been very close, Vincent, had died of complications from a heart attack, leaving Dominique distraught. "I just thought, 'fuck it, let's go *all in*,'" Nick said. He proposed while they were getting dinner after helping clear out the deceased uncle's place. Nick wasn't filling a role inhabited previously by Vincent. Marriage wasn't a comforting distraction during a difficult time. "Marriage ain't a Band-Aid," I was often told—particularly by religious leaders. To boot, Dominique's bereavement formed part of the story of Nick and Dominique's engagement, but, importantly, the headline was the couple's "success" and "compatibility." That Nick had supported Dominique through a difficult time, and expressed "diffuse enduring solidarity" (Schneider 1968), evidenced this. I am arguing that one of the ways the institution of marriage reproduces itself is by having people witness other people's deaths and not only mourn them but rather, for a moment, inhabit them, fast-forwarding to their own moment of death.

People didn't only think about marriage, protection, mortality, and regret by indexing what happened to friends or relatives, but by thinking about stories and situations from the media. Elizabeth, a single and dating grocery store manager in her thirties, a woman who was white and had grown up in Charlottesville, lamenting how expensive it had become, how "the scene has changed so much," said to me, "When I think about what is really a marriage, I think about that poor man who called his wife on 9/11. He was in one of the buildings. He perished. It's a beautiful message. That's love, that's *marriage*. You can listen online." (I also met two couples who had gotten engaged in the weeks that followed 9/11).

When people brought up *Obergefell v. Hodges*, the 2015 U.S. Supreme Court case that made all U.S. states perform and recognize same-sex marriages, they cast it as a civil rights *biography* of a couple. And that this was a story of commitment between two men (James Obergefell and John Arthur) was evidenced by Obergefell caring for Arthur when the latter fell gravely ill. My interlocutors' memories of the particulars were often fuzzy (e.g., regarding Arthur's name, and that he suffered from ALS). But being together through serious illness

symbolized locally “sticking around during the tough times”—and therefore “real commitment.” *Real commitment* might sound tautological but, of course, everyone knew of (or had experienced) marriages that were not committed, rather turning into sites of hurt.

Marriage equality and the plaintiffs at the center of it highlighted the connections between rights, affection, and mortality in marriage. And at a certain point in my fieldwork I was struck by how some heterosexual couples drew on images of discrimination and indignity—and of illness, accident, and death—that were most clearly associated with same-sex couples before marriage equality as problems that could befall any unmarried couple. They featured in lists of reasons to get married. These visions—nightmares—formed part of what made marriage a matter of protection:

“What if you’re not married and the hospital employees only let spouses by your bedside?”

“What if you’re not married and your significant other dies and then people, the authorities, can’t tell that your kids are your kids and not only your significant other’s kids?” (see also [Briggs 2017](#))

“What if your spouse loved you and hated their blood relatives, but then a random cousin ends up inheriting their money and you’re not even invited to the funeral?” (see also [Reimers 2011](#))

It might appear jarring to those who have experienced these kinds of tragedies to have them called on discursively in this matter. But I suggest we see these reflections as evidence of how central stories of “actual couples” are to how legal marriage has been shaped over time, of how marriage has been shaped, in part, by tragedy and exclusion.

## CONCLUSION

*Marriage, a History: How Love Conquered Marriage*—so goes the title of [Stephanie Coontz’s 2006](#) best-seller. But this article offers an account of how *marriage has conquered threat and death* and how this proves consequential not only for how we think about kinship and relatedness but also for how we think of politics, the state, and power ([Mbembe 2019](#)). Following my interlocutors, I haven’t presented marriage as a path to immortality, nor as a lucky amulet. Rather, I’ve

observed the pervasiveness of danger and threat in talk of kinship and love. The idea of protection and the institution of marriage were, at the time of my fieldwork, often presented not as a way of eradicating threat (and, ultimately, *inevitably*, death) but as a way of, ideally (given that marriages, like other personal relationships, can also be sites of abuse,<sup>4</sup> including intimate partner violence), lessening uncertainties around legal and financial rights, and of making sure that a spouse and society know the depth of commitment (again, ideally!) one felt for one's significant other.

Mainstream media, and sometimes religious or academic discourses in favor of marriage, or at least the fantasy of marriage, focus on how getting married can ameliorate uncertainty (uncertainty over whether a lover truly cares about you, uncertainty about whether or not your life is actually "on track" or not, meeting "goals") and stability (the psychic-social and indeed financial state that is especially mobilized in tracts about the "correct" circumstances under which to have a child). My suggestion is that one of the compelling things about marriage (to those who enter into it and perhaps to those who study it) is that it is never just about how a loved one feels about you but also always about the imagined and actualized threats and protections a relationship, a society, and a world produce, coupled with mortality. It seems as if, in certain contexts, uncertainty and stability—the at first sight mundane pair—become "activated" to make them threat and protection. But the point is that, in legal understandings of marriage, and in at least some of the cultural imaginaries in which these are nested, threat and protection were there, in talk of uncertainty and stability, all along.

And this uncertainty, in relationships, but also in knowing how and when we will die, is surely one of the reasons why protection has flourished in kinship and politics in many parts of the world (e.g., [Babül 2015](#))—and yet it seems somehow heightened in the United States. In focusing on marriage, protection, and threat, this article might be seen, in part, as a story of how, as [Michael Taussig \(1984\)](#) identified (and see also [Sluka 1995](#)), "cultures of terror" are particularly palpable in settler societies. Consider Kathleen Stewart's description of 1980s West Virginia and its salience to the love-fear connection-exclusion that evokes both marriage and the nation:

Here, too, it seemed as if family and place were all-important, and I imagined that the porch lights left on all night here, too, signalled both a welcome to visitors and a warning to intruders. Here, too, a swath of open

space around a house seemed to leave it both unprotected and in a position to see what approaches (Stewart 1996, 41)

*Welcoming and warning; protecting and being protected from.*

If kinship, and particularly marriage, is not only political but is politics (McKinnon and Cannell 2013; Carsten et al. 2021), and the political is expressed in the language of threat and protection, then anthropologists should consider how people experience *loving against, caring against, doing kinship against* the dangers presented by the times and places their interlocutors inhabit, while also looking at notions of protection and threat as historically contingent (Ralph 2020). In Virginia, in 2017 and 2018, protection was indeed diffuse and marriage in no small part concerned flexibility. You signed up for a person, an institution, the Commonwealth of Virginia, but much of what followed remained unclear. Protection emerged as a core value amid this uncertainty.

## ABSTRACT

*Marriage, as a topic of ethnographic and historical exploration, ties together kinship, politics, economics, and faith in complex and significant ways. In the United States, federal and state governments have used legal marriage to create insiders and outsiders along lines of “race,” sexuality, and religion. Those who have not been allowed to marry a consenting partner of their choice have been cast as dangerous, and as threats to the nation. Drawing on fieldwork in the Virginia city of Charlottesville, I argue that protection is a key idiom through which to understand marriage and kinship in the United States. The research took place at the time of the 2017 white nationalist attack on Charlottesville, and discussions of marriage and kinship resonated with wider political questions about what it means to be safe, and how kinship often means loving against and caring against—protecting against—dangers that threaten those closest to us. [USA; kinship; marriage; Virginia; protection]*

## NOTES

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Names and some identifying features have been changed.

1. In Charlottesville at the time of my research, the ways in which people have been wrongly labeled as dangerous to justify violence was being felt in the starkest ways by community members who were commemorating John Henry James, who had been lynched near Charlottesville in 1898. A white woman had falsely accused him of rape. In 2018, people from Charlottesville and Albermarle participated in the Equal Justice Initiative's Community Remembrance Project, a pilgrimage from Charlottesville to Alabama and back, recognizing John Henry James. The pilgrimage took place in conjunction with community discussions and history programs. See [Douglas 2024](#).
2. This was realized in 2021.
3. I'm grateful to the reviewer who urged me to make this point explicit.
4. Thank you to the reviewer who encouraged me to make this clearer than it had been in previous drafts.

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