

Mating in Captivity: Sexuality and Monogamy

September 13, 2008

2:30 PM

The Philoctetes Center

Levy: Francis Levy
Nersessian: Edward Nersessian
Kimmel: Michael Kimmel
Paul: Pamela Paul
Perel: Esther Perel
Renik: Owen Renik
Audience: Question from audience

Nersessian: Welcome to Philoctetes. I'm Edward Nersessian, and Francis Levy and I are co-directors of the center.

Dr. Owen Renick, an old and good friend from San Francisco, will be moderating the discussion. Owen is Professor of Psychiatry at University of San Francisco and Training and Supervising Analyst at the San Francisco Psychoanalytic Institute. He is the past editor of the premier psychoanalytic journal, which is *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, and he's the author of numerous important psychoanalytic papers, and the book that I mentioned.

Renick: Hello everybody. You know the Philoctetes Center likes to encourage as wide-ranging and informal a discussion as possible, and I think what we'll be talking about this afternoon is particularly well-suited to that agenda. It's not an esoteric topic. I think it's likely that just about everybody here has had some experience with sexuality within a monogamous partnership and how that plays out, and has probably formed an idea or two about the matter. So I think we can look forward—at least I hope so—to a lively interchange.

The format will be that first the panelists, the roundtable, will bat some questions around for a while, and then at a certain point we'll open it up and invite everybody to join in. Okay?

Now let me introduce the panelists, which I'll do extremely briefly, because you all should have this handout with the same biographical information that I do. But just to mention, in alphabetical order, Michael Kimmel is an internationally recognized expert in the area of masculinity, a Professor of Sociology at SUNY Stony Brook and the author of many books on the subject, and the editor of the scholarly journal *Men and Masculinities*.

Francis Levy is the author of a recently published novel, *Erotomania: A Romance*, described as delightfully raunchy, among other things, and, as Ed said, it is getting terrific reviews. But he's a published author previously in many places that you're familiar with: *The Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The New Republic* and so on.

Pamela Paul is the author of *The Starter Marriage and the Future of Matrimony*, which I'm sure you know stirred quite a bit of controversy when it came out a while back, and also author of

another book which bears on our subject, *Pornified: How Pornography is Damaging Our Lives, Our Relationships and Our Families*. Pamela too is a frequent contributor to *The Times* and other places that you're likely to run into her work.

And finally, Esther Perel is a family therapist who spends her time in Antwerp, in Tel Aviv and in New York, where she has a full-time practice in family therapy. She's on the faculty of the Department of Psychiatry at NYU Medical School, and she's the author of *Mating in Captivity: Reconciling the Erotic and the Domestic*.

It is the title of Esther's book that we have appropriated for the title of the roundtable, and so it's been suggested to me that we begin by directing a question to Esther, but it's one that I hope everybody will want to chime in on. It's really designed to give Esther an opportunity to elaborate on the title which we've taken. Esther, your book, *Mating in Captivity*—the title refers to a poem by D.H. Lawrence entitled *Wild Things in Captivity*, in which Lawrence asserts his conviction that domesticity is a cage and the human animal when confined to that cage cannot be fully sexual. The question I would like to pose to you is was Lawrence right? That is to say—

Audience: No.

Renick: Pardon? Somebody has answered it already.

Was Lawrence right in this sense? That is to say, is there an inevitable contradiction between pursuing sexual life to the fullest and maintaining a long-term, monogamous partnership? Does that involve a tradeoff that requires a degree of sexual inhibition, or, on the other hand, is it actually in principle not true because in fact there are no limits to the new possibilities which that limitation offers as well as to some that it may in fact foreclose?

Perel: *Mating in Captivity* was related to the poem of Lawrence, but I found the poem later. The first people who inspired me were the panda bears and the bonobo apes, because they also could not mate, and they had to be shown porn in order to actually become aroused so that they would mate while they were in the same cages with each other. So the term actually comes from the animal kingdom and from anthropology.

I don't know if Lawrence was right. Actually, I don't think there is an absolute answer to that. It changes from person to person and in one person's life. But I know that Lawrence was right to launch a whole set of questions. The question that I had was why is it that great sex so often fades for people who continue to love each other as much as ever? Not for the troubled ones. And then, can we want what we already have? And then, why doesn't good intimacy guarantee great sex? And then, why does sex make babies, and babies spell erotic disaster in couples? And then, why is the forbidden so erotic? Time and again the couples that I would work with would describe to me a kind of paradoxical union between our need for security and stability and predictability on the one side, and our need for adventure and novelty and mystery and danger on the other. Never in history have we tried to actually bring the comfort and the edge in the same place, and we live twice as long.

Does that launch a conversation?

Renick: What do you think?

Paul: I think that the live twice as long is probably one of the most important things to remember. It's something I explored in *The Starter Marriage and the Future of Matrimony*, which is to say that in 1900 people were getting married and living until they were in their late thirties or late forties, and so marriage was something that lasted for ten or fifteen years and then you died. Today the age of first marriage in this country is still around twenty-seven, twenty-six, so if you get married and you live until you're eighty-five that's sixty years of being with the same person. So we're really dealing with a biological and practical reality that we never have before. I think that there is obviously a lot to question about our assumptions about monogamous relationships under those circumstances. I mean, to be with the same person for sixty years is a tremendous undertaking.

Kimmel: And to expect to be sexually active with that person.

Paul: To even tolerate the person for sixty years is—

Kimmel: Right. My grandparents lived a really long time, but I think that by the age of forty-five or so they were pretty much done with sex, and they seemed perfectly comfortable with that decision. We're not perfectly comfortable with that decision.

Audience: How do you know—

Kimmel: Because I asked them.

Paul: [One of the few grandchildren that asks that question.

Renik: And they've never lied to you, ever.

Kimmel: I'm not a psychoanalyst, but I am the adult child of psychoanalysts. I'm in recovery. Sociology is my form of recovery. And so what do I do? I interview people. So I asked them.

Levy: I don't really think that it's a question of time so much as I think that marriage is a form of socialization. I think that consciousness is the villain here more than the question of eroticism within a long-term relationship. I think that bearing the burden of consciousness is the factor—this is what Freud talks about a little bit in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, because we are born with a certain libidinous, natural, instinctual desire, but we live in a society, and so the compromise is that individuals have to mate to be within a society.

Now I think that it's interesting that marriage is a dyad and that dyads—I started to think about this recently—have a particular kind of a significance. In literature you see—like in *War and Peace* and in *Anna Karenina* you have Vronsky and Levin, Pierre and Andre. Beckett significantly has Didi and Gogo as protagonists of *Waiting for Godot*. I think that there's a very important kind of mirroring element that occurs within a dyadic relationship. That is to say, you see yourself through other people's eyes and they see you through their eyes. So I would argue that, in essence, not to criticize the institution of marriage, but I would say that marriage is an extension of the biological life of the conscious human animal.

Kimmel: Can I ask you what you mean when you say the phrase that everyone seemed to agree with: “great sex fades”? Can you tell me what great sex is?

Perel: Yes, I mean I'll tell you how I understand it. I actually was not interested in sex. I was interested in eroticism. And eroticism, from the mystical point of view, when people complain about the listlessness of their sex lives they sometimes want more sex, but they always want better. And the better that they are referring to is a sense of aliveness, of vibrancy, of vitality, a sense of an antidote to death. That's what they consider great sex. It has nothing to do with how often, how hard, how long, how many, no statistics and no medicalization.

Kimmel: Got it.

Perel: It has to do with a vibrancy and a sense of feeling alive. People dread deadness.

Kimmel: Yes.

Perel: Deadness in the relationship is what I was really interested in. This is the first time in history where sexuality in long-term relationships—and I prefer we call it that than marriage, if it's okay—is rooted in desire and not exclusively in reproduction or in female marital duty, at least in many parts of the world. How you sustain desire and how you blend what fuels desire with what fuels love, which are not necessarily the same, is a real existential challenge. That's what I wanted to probe.

Levy: I think that's interesting, because I was introducing kind of a psychoanalytic notion, but now I'd like to introduce a kind of contra-psychoanalytic notion into this discussion, because I think that really what is required in a certain sense is a form of imagination in the context of the creation of the relationship. That's just from my own personal experience. I hate to introduce all these literary allusions and citations, but I can't help thinking that—like I started this morning to think about the roundtable and Ibsen was coming to mind. In *Peer Gynt*, one of his earliest plays, he creates this succession of dramatic tableaux in which the personality is completely changeable. In his later plays it's all about self-realization, becoming closer to what the self—kind of like a concrete notion of the self against others. But in this particular one I think that it's this chameleon-like notion of personality that is the saving grace in marriage, that you can play many roles, enact many different things within the safety of the marriage situation itself, and erotically enact many different things.

I mean in a marital context that people should be free. In a certain sense I say non-psychoanalytical approach because I think people should be free to not be themselves within the marriage. They should act out other—we had a roundtable that Dave Kirkpatrick was on about the future of technology, and we talked about this game Second Life in which people have avatars. It's a very popular universe to be in, because one of the most popular things in Second Life actually are the sex clubs. And what people do is they adopt identities. What I'm saying in a certain sense is that we should question the very nature of personality in marriage.

Perel: You know, in *The Double Flame* Octavio Paz gives a very nice distinction: sex is the primordial, it's the nature. Eroticism is an act of the imagination. We are in a way maybe the only ones who can make love to somebody for four hours, have a fabulous time, and touch nobody.

Levy: Yes.

Perel: You know, because we can *imagine* it.

Levy: Sure.

Perel: That is the distinction between sexuality and eroticism, that it is infinitely varied and multiple and rooted in our culture and in our personal histories and so forth. But the act of the imagination is what I link to the breakdown of desire. And the question that you asked about monogamy has to do—I don't think you can talk about monogamy in relation just to is it a tradeoff with sex. I think it has to do with the changing definition of intimacy. Intimacy means something completely different today, and really needs to be understood in order for us to understand what people come expecting from marriage, which never in history have we wanted the same as what we always wanted: a companion, a family, economic support, respectability, and on top of it you should be my best friend, my trusted confidant and my passionate lover to boot, all in one. Sometimes it happens, but for a vast majority of people it seems to not happen just *au deux*.

Kimmel: How do we know that? That was an empirical claim. I'm an empiricist.

Perel: Yes.

Kimmel: How do we know that for the vast majority of people it doesn't happen? How do we know that?

Perel: Because I believe that in order to not be alone we need to be two, but in order to be a couple there needs to be a third hovering at the edge. After having gone to twenty countries and looking at sexuality multi-culturally in traditional as well as in more emancipated societies, there seems to be a real challenge to have a sense that there is one person for everything. And when it doesn't work it doesn't question the model. It just says, I chose the wrong person. Next time I'll do better.

Levy: Is it necessarily triangulation you're talking about, or can it be many people?

Perel: It's fantasy. It's real, it's embodied, it's not. It doesn't have to be acted out at all. But there is a sense that for every person you choose, because today most of us choose our partner, there are other ones you haven't chosen. But they continue to exist somewhere, if not up there.

Paul: Couldn't you say that the successful relationships, the long-term relationships, whether they're marital or not, are the ones where the person lets go of that idea which is unrealistic to begin with? In a sense that ideal, which is one that I heard over and over again when interviewing people in their twenties and people in their thirties about when they were in their twenties or in their teens, is something that's very naïve, that you're going to find someone who you'll have great sex with and who's going to be your best friend and your tennis partner, et cetera. I think that once you actually mature and you're in a relationship you begin to let go of that ideal. You know, you can have many people in your circle, and once you let go of that concept that that's when you become happy in a long-term relationship.

Perel: Some people do that giving up of that ideal by opting for non-monogamy as a way to balance the relationship, as a way to compartmentalize it. That is actually often experienced by

some people as a form of—I don't know if they would call it solution, but as an attempt to deal with that very giving up of the idealization that you talk about. By the way, it's been researched empirically by Peggy Kleinplatz, who is one of the foremost researchers on non-monogamous couples.

Levy: Why not do it on an imaginative basis—why materialize it though? I'm not saying it's good or it's bad, but I mean what's the difference between imaging having four people or five people in bed and it's all imagination, or actually acting these things out and having other relationships in the world the way you're describing?

Perel: I'm not going to become the advocate or the apologist for—

Levy: No, no. You just said some people do and some people don't, but—

Perel: Yes. Because—

Levy: You know, I always think that that's a very big step—

Perel: Yes.

Levy: —when you make the decision to actually enact in reality something that may have remained in fantasy.

Perel: Right. But I think that the question has a few parts. First, I'm really very serious. I'm not going to be the defendant of this. Nobody has ever asked Esther Perel for the permission to cheat. They will do it if they want to do it.

Kimmel: Can I ask you? Since no one had ever done it before, I'd like your blessing if I make that choice.

Perel: None of you.

Kimmel: I'll give you permission if you give it to me.

Renik: They're all acting as if it's not too late.

Perel: It's never too late. I would probably say that in the heterosexual world today monogamy is assumed. It is the sacred cow of the romantic ideal. It has switched from an imposition on women and an economic matter to a matter of love and loyalty, and monogamy is translated in terms of sexual exclusivity, rather than many other forms of monogamy that are also part of the relationship that have to do with commitment, with loyalty, with the primacy of that relationship and that are not just expressed in sexual terms.

And then I would say that in the straight world monogamy is not negotiated, and probably at some point it will become negotiated, because all boundaries of relationships at this point have been negotiated. We have an elastic view of marriage: single, blended, with children, without children, adopted, commuter. The boundaries of marriage have really expanded. The only one,

the reigning queen that is creating terror in people is the examination of the sexual boundaries, for a lot of psychoanalytic, powerful, powerful reasons beyond the social I think.

Paul: I think when you redefine marriage, the reasons for being in a monogamous relationship, and you say obviously it's no longer as much economic or even socially imposed and now it's about love in the relationship, I still think that there is something biological and very practical that makes sexual monogamy important to a monogamous relationship, in terms of disease, obviously, and sexually transmitted diseases—that it makes sense for people to demand sexual monogamy or to expect sexual monogamy in a monogamous relationship. There's also the question of parenthood and when you have a family and the fact that whether you're the man or the woman in the relationship you can't establish and ensure paternity unless there's exclusivity.

Perel: You're all talking to me.

Levy: You're the nominee.

Kimmel: It's your thesis in a way.

Perel: Because of the title?

Kimmel: Yes. I won't direct it to your comments then, Esther. I'll just direct it in general, but I'm not persuaded yet, and I'm not persuaded I think for three reasons.

Perel: Of what?

Kimmel: That great sex has to fade, or, as you said, for the vast majority of people it does. My three levels are, one, the level of assumption. I think perhaps I don't share a set of assumptions with many of the people in this room, and I'll explain what I mean by that. The second is political, and the third is actually empirical.

The level of assumptions: there's a constant refrain that I've heard from virtually everyone that the erotic is the domain of the unequal. It's about mystery, the unknown. It's about maybe being out of control, power imbalance, et cetera. I think the one piece that I've not heard there—here comes the bridge to the political—is the effect of the avalanche—Pamela knows this better than anyone I know—the avalanche of images of what we are told the erotic actually looks like. Very rarely do you see domestic bliss portrayed as erotic. It's usually the feeling of being out of control, being powerless, being swept away, so we come to think that. My political argument is a feminist one, which is to say the feminist project around heterosexual relationship is to enhance equality in the relationship. And I believe equality is super hot.

Levy: What do you mean by super hot?

Kimmel: What I mean by super hot is someone who is equal in desire, someone who is my equal in desire. I have two sets of empirical data for this, because I think the case to be made here is actually a really powerful one, particularly to men. And that is the work of John Gottman, a psychologist at University of Washington, whom many of you probably know, the guy who wrote the book *Successful Marriage*. And Scott Coltrane, a sociologist at UC Riverside. Both of

them have found basically this: that the more equal the marriage is the happier it is. I'll operationalize that for you in a moment—

Perel: In the kitchen—

Kimmel: Ah, no. In the bedroom as well. Coltrane, for example, finds that men who share housework and childcare are not only happier, they see therapists less. That means some of you might not get to see them. They're prescribed medication less, they're diagnosed with depression less, they are far less likely to drink, smoke or take recreational drugs. They report much higher levels of marital satisfaction. Their kids do better in school, their wives are happier and healthier, and they have more sex. The more equal the marriage, the happier it is. By the way, guess which one of these great findings—happier children, better achievement, et cetera—made the cover of *Men's Health Magazine*? “Housework Makes Her Horny” was their title. Not when she does it.

My argument is that equality in the marriage need not be the damper on Eros that I think is a kind of assumption here. I'm not putting this on you. I'm saying I felt these words of mystery, the unknown, being the words that we were using to talk about eroticism, and I was becoming a bit uncomfortable with those as the only words we use. To me the known is the loved, and that to me is extraordinarily erotic. I think sharing housework and childcare not only gives us plenty more time, but also reduces the resentment that enormous numbers of women feel that they do all the housework and childcare. You want to talk about a damper on Eros, talk about resentment and anger. So I'm just suggesting that at the level of assumption and politics, a feminist critique of the traditional heterosexual marriage—that is to say promoting egalitarian marriage—may in fact be something that liberates Eros rather than dampens it.

Perel: Maybe the first thing we should do is this. I may sound sometimes like I talk with confidence, but I am sure of nothing I say. I don't have an answer, and I believe that this is a subject without an answer, even though America loves to have answers for every problem, even the complicated ones. I also think that it changes from people to people, and more importantly at different stages in our life. I think there are plenty of times when people will be monogamous around parenthood and switch later on. More and more my thoughts are that most adults in the West will have two or three relationships in their adult life. It's just that some of them will do it with the same person.

So I have developed a much more developmental perspective on committed relationships than one marriage. I think that maybe the way to phrase it for me, when I got interested in the dilemmas of desire and the intricacies of love and desire—I am a clinician, okay? The places where I went for inspiration were mostly not in the psychological literature. The sex therapy literature has nothing to say about relationships, virtually nothing, and the relationship literature has virtually nothing to say about sexuality, including Gottman, I may say.

What I was interested in was poetry and literature, because they, and art in general, have a capacity to describe how people can hold contradictory values at the same time and without having to collapse them. That was really where I went to look for ideas. My understanding became this, and it's really a thesis, if you want. It's not a truth, but it's a thesis that warrants conversation. It's what you asked about the poem. It just creates for very interesting conversation. Love in some way needs closeness. It needs proximity. It needs to know. It thrives

on that knowing. It wants that feeling of belonging. It wants to collapse the distance. Desire seems to need space to thrive. It needs a bridge to cross to get on the other side.

The challenge of many modern couples today is to reconcile their wish for a safe, solid anchor in their partner and in the same way have with that partner something that is more transcendent and more far-reaching. That is something that is utterly doable, and that is what I ended up working on. I really don't spend much time thinking about great sex. I am spending much time thinking about how one's emotional history translates in the physicality of sex. I am interested in deadness. I am interested in the multiple meanings of affairs, and from a non-judgmental, non-moralistic point of view, so that I can understand why people cross the boundaries and what they went to look for there. Those are the questions that interest me.

When I ask people all over where I've gone, now tell me moments where you find yourself most drawn to your partner, the only one that is gender-based is when women say, "When I see him playing with the kids." Never the other way around.

Kimmel: Of course.

Perel: All the others have to do with, "When I see my partner passionate about something." "When I see her at work." "When I see him on stage." "When he plays the piano." "When we're galloping on our horse." "When he's doing"—you know, it's when I see my partner as a separate person, in their own individuality, and momentarily this familiar, known person is once again somewhat mysterious and somewhat unknown, because you never know your partner fully. And in that space is the erotic alone. First and foremost, it's never a space of caretaking, because caretaking is loving, but it seems to be mightily un-erotic.

Paul: Then isn't a way to achieve that in a very practical way in a long-term relationship? To me part of the problem that seems to exist is that people have this expectation of everything at the same time. It's sort of the old a woman can have it all myth, that you can have everything at once, which I think is now transitioning into this notion that women can have it all, but perhaps sequentially or cyclically. I think that the same thing is true in relationships, because if you have periods in which you're a little bit distant from the person, then assuming that the emotional and the love underpinnings of the relationship are strong so that it won't lead to rupture, you then get that distance that you're talking about, which then revives the erotic.

In a very practical way that works for people, because relationships will go through long periods, for example during the childbearing years, where pragmatically speaking there's going to be that distance. But then you will get to the other side, even if it's say three years later or five years later, where that person has regained that mystery and that distance, because you physically haven't been with them as much for a long time. What you often hear from men is that the woman becomes so enraptured with her children. But in a way the children then become something for the man to compete with to get the woman back. It seems to me that if you think sequentially or cyclically in a relationship, and you're assuming the long-term, you then have the ability to recapture that distance and that eroticism and that seeing the person as separate.

Perel: Absolutely.

Levy: I have a little trouble, though with—I mean the statistics are interesting, but I think they discount the role of the fact is man is an animal, which I keep coming back to, and the role of the irrational, which I think you were alluding to a little bit in the sense that you couldn't come to all kinds of conclusions about enormously complex phenomena. I think that the irrational elements—in other words, we are in a kind of a quandary now in culture to the extent of this egalitarian impulse, which is one of the enlightenment. It's reason over instinct. Reason functions on one level, but instinct is a total other level. Reasoning would make us think that equality was the natural state of being that man should aspire to. But then we have man as an instinctual, libidinous animal who is filled with all kinds of pressures and desires that can't be codified in such ways. So how does that manifest itself—because it's an interesting theme that's coming up, and you bring it up too. It's not simply in terms of housework and so forth, but—

Paul: When you say man do you mean man and woman, or do you mean—

Levy: I mean men and women. I mean *Homo sapiens*, with the cerebral cortex. The cerebral cortex is to me the key element in the discussion of the transmogrification of sexuality, how sexuality is transformed from the animal state. I think that the key element that we're sort of alluding to, not so much in terms of the necessary pragmatic things that you talked about in terms of house care, but in the fact of this notion of friendship—that there has been a change in society in which couples who are friends marry and negotiate the question of passion in a different type of way.

Perel: Absolutely.

Levy: Friendship is a more egalitarian institution. You talk about literature. If you look in the literature of the '50s, if you look at Updike, if you look at *Too Far to Go*, the collection of short stories about the Maples and the dissolution of his own marriage—highly autobiographical set of short stories, and very touching—and in Cheever, you see a tremendous amount of marital infidelity. That's the subject of literature.

Personally speaking, within my nexus of friends I only know one person who is a serial adulterer. And he does it as a kind of artistic—he's a conceptual artist really. It's more the legacy of a kind of Bohemian tradition that he was born into. But I don't know. I know nobody who has been cheating on—

Kimmel: Do the women say that too?

Levy: About what?

Kimmel: Would his partners also describe him as a conceptual artist? Or more a con artist?

Levy: I don't know. He's very well known. They know what they're getting into.

Kimmel: Okay.

Perel: I would like to make a distinction. Talking about monogamy and non-monogamy is one thing. You could call it monogamy and its discontents. Talking about infidelity or affairs or cheating or adultery or all the twenty other words that we have to talk about that act is a different

subject. We should decide, are we exploring monogamy and non-monogamy in relationships today, or are we talking about what motivates people to cross the boundaries, and people have done so from time indeterminate. That to me is not the same conversation. The question of equality is not about house chores. It's about sovereignty. It's about a sense of power. It's about what you called equal desire. It's about the fact that for the first time in history women can switch from sexual duty to sexual pleasure, or sexual wanting. There are women for whom the house chores are very arousing, or make them love their partner more because they are less resentful and therefore more inclined to engage with them sexually, but actually these are women who need equality of the relationship as the basis for their desire. For plenty of other women that is not the mechanism. When he does the dishes she may like him more, but it may do absolutely nothing in the bedroom.

Kimmel: Or she may hate him more.

Perel: Furthermore, we have a proliferation of sexual explorations taking place in most societies these days that are all seeming to counter or to grapple with the consequences of the egalitarian model, from a playful, erotic space.

Then lastly, what I want to say is that there is a whole gay community, gay culture, gay model of relationships that has grappled with the question of how you combine monogamy of a different sort with a sexuality that isn't necessarily exclusive. There's a lot to learn from how other people have already tried to do so.

Renik: Let me jump in for a second to try and structure a little bit what we've said up to this point, because it seems to me that a fundamental question that has underlain some of the exchanges is what are the required conditions for erotic desire, for eroticism? It's been identified so far in terms of space and the perception of an other. But those are after all somewhat abstract, somewhat conceptual ways of discussing it. What does that actually mean? If, for example, sexual desire inevitably involves an element of conquest—that's why it has to be an other—then there's a fundamental opposition between the security of marriage and the conditions for the erotic. But why is it that there has to be this space and this perception of the other? How does that work? How does that create eroticism?

Just as an aside, I don't think the question of equality in relationships is necessarily crucial, because equality doesn't mean identity. Even two people who are equal can have all kinds of ways in which they trade power differentials as long as the bottom line is one of parity. What are we really talking about when we talk about the fundamental conditions that are necessary in order to experience erotic desire? Why does it have to be an other?

Paul: Well I agree with the idea that distance is necessary to desire. You don't want what you already have obviously. But I think if you're talking about what does this actually mean in a relationship—

Renik: Yes, right.

Paul: —It can be as Esther said, seeing your partner in an atmosphere where they are loving something other than you, even if that thing is the piano at that moment, or that thing is their

work. That automatically puts you in competition with that other thing, and then that makes you want them. It can be as simple as if you're in a married relationship or monogamous relationship going out on a double date with another couple, because you then will automatically see your partner in that other man's eyes, and also in the other woman's, and you will begin to think how are they perceiving her? Did they just flirt with her? It creates an erotic distance.

Renik: So are you saying that insecurity is a primary requirement for erotic desire?

Perel: Not requirement—

Paul: Not necessarily insecurity—

Renik: I'm just asking. I'm not trying to sell it. I'm trying to ask about it.

Paul: I wouldn't say that it's insecurity, but I would say that it is risk. It's the sense of risk, the sense of chance.

Perel: I like very much what you're saying, Pamela. I think what you're asking is what fuels erotic desire. Again, I can tell you things that I have thought about, but it's maybe not so much distance as space. Because when you say distance people very quickly begin to think of it as emotional distance, and you can only have that space because you have the emotional security. So to what you were talking about before, for me the issue is this. You never have your partner. You have them on loan with an option to renew.

Kimmel: That's right. That's right.

Perel: That one did not come from me. It came from a patient of mine.

Our quest for security today—I think we so badly want it because of the nuclear model and because of the concentration of having one person who needs to give us a sense of belonging, and what we call significant other, and recognition that we have collapsed that space. Those are the mechanisms that we use to secure love that actually trample the very energy that brought the relationship into being.

I think that when I say desire needs space, it needs otherness and stuff, people think of it as abstract. But when they answer me that question, where they're looking at the person from a certain distance, they get it. Very rarely is it about we're looking at each other, five centimeters from each other, and getting to one, because, by the way, if you bring the finger too close you no longer can distinguish the contours.

So transgression is a major element of what fuels the erotic, because transgression gives you a sense of power, a sense of freedom, and I think the erotic is highly bound up with freedom, with an ability to act on something, to go beyond boundaries, beyond rules, internal as well as cultural and political and social, even if it's only in your imagination, especially because it's in your imagination, actually, because you can find erotic the very thing that you would be demonstrating against on the street the next morning. That's the irrationality of our desire. It takes you to places where your rational conscious being would never dare to go and want to go.

What fuels erotic desire is for many people a sense of recognition, safety, complicity, familiarity that you're talking about.

I think the issue is this: for some people love and desire or love and sex are inseparable, and they flow. One leads into the other the way you describe. But for other people, they're often far more incompatible, because it's sometimes more difficult to be ruthless with the person you love. The question I had is why is it that for so many people it's hard to make passionate love with the person they love? Part of it is because of the inability to have that space.

Now Proust has this beautiful line—I don't remember it, but it's something about the true voyage of discovery is not to go to new places but to look with new eyes. Mystery is not that you suddenly notice, it's about the shifts, the slight shifts of perception, when you realize that you still don't fully know and the other doesn't fully know you, and you don't wait for the day they cheat on you to tell me, "I didn't know him."

Levy: It's sort of what art in a way does, isn't it? Art allows you to take familiar objects and re-see them in a way that restores their strangeness.

Perel: Yes.

Levy: The question of nakedness, for instance. You can see someone you've seen naked every single day and you go to the bathroom with them—some people do, some people don't. They have this incredible familiarity, and they look at themselves and sometimes the body—it's an incredible thing that the imagination does. It either restores a certain degree of sexuality to the encounter, or it quotidianizes it and denudes it of all sense of the kind of mystery.

What I was thinking was say I'm a reader of romance novels, a male reader of romance novels, but I wish to be ravished like a woman in one of these romance novels. The simple thing would be I am a male and I dream of ravishing a woman, but say I'm a male who dreams of being ravished by my wife. I mean what are the possible personae, what are the possible combinations and permutations of sexuality that can exist? I think you said it, there's a lot of fear about transgressiveness. In other words, this egalitarian thing kills in a certain sense—

Perel: Can—

Levy: It can kill some of the invention.

Perel: There's another word that needs to be introduced: anticipation. The erotic, the desire, is intensely fueled by the anticipation, the expectation, the looking forward to something, the imagination of it in advance. Spontaneity never exists. You know, people always say, oh, I want to go back to the spontaneity of the beginning. But in the beginning there always was a plot. Desire always has a plot. It just took place in your own head before you went out on the date.

Levy: Sure. So I think if consciousness is the villain here, and then consciousness has condemned us to this thinking out of our sexuality, then consciousness has to be the thing to save us also. In other words, it takes work—

Perel: Creative work.

Renik: If I understand you, consciousness is what makes eroticism possible rather than simply animal activity. But if I understood what you guys are saying, it's something rather important, which is that love and intimacy are not the enemies of desire. The enemy of desire is a kind of cowardice that needs to deny the otherness of the loved one.

Perel: That's right.

Renik: And that makes that insecurity possible—that sense of risk I think is the way you put it—and that's the villain in long term relationships, not love, not intimacy, but that kind of denial of the otherness of the partner.

Perel: Anxiety about it.

Renik: Yes.

Paul: Again, I go back to that idea of wanting everything at exactly the same time. In a healthy relationship I think there's such a thing as healthy compartmentalization, where there's a time to have the totally egalitarian—you know, you change the diaper while I go empty out the diaper pail thing. You can completely compartmentalize your sexual life very separately from that and then achieve that distance while still having that intimacy in other spheres of the relationship. I don't think they have to be contradictory.

Levy: It's inveighed against so many times, but I think compartmentalization is a key thing for the success of the inventiveness in relationships.

Kimmel: I was thinking a lot about the words that we're using, and, again, I think that we do desire a great disservice if the only language that we use is a language of competitiveness and conquest, rather than also a language of sharing and surrender. I think it's all of those things.

I would never suggest one model over another, but I would ask that we continually expand that possibility. And the other big change it seems to me that needs to be partly acknowledged—the longevity part I think is important—but again, this is the first generation or two of women who are equally entitled, who feel equally entitled to pleasure.

Perel: That's right. I'm glad you finally brought up that word. How can you talk about sex and not use the word pleasure? We're here an hour.

Kimmel: I teach a class on sexuality at Stony Brook, and actually Pamela's visited that class when we talked about pornography. A class of 400 students, right, a course on intimacy. We were just talking about Kinsey and the National Opinion Research Center studies on sexuality. Kinsey in 1954 found that 41 percent of women over 25 had ever masturbated. That's a pretty good measure of entitlement to pleasure, right? Like, I'm so entitled I'll do it myself. The 1996 Social Organization of Sexuality found that over 90 percent of American women had ever masturbated. That is an enormous change. There's nothing even remotely like that among men, not even close.

Levy: It's a revolution.

Nersessian: Is it a change, or did they reveal something they wouldn't have revealed then?

Kimmel: That's a very important point, because a lot of people think that in the earlier data women were far more reticent, far less likely to reveal. The truth is Kinsey over-sampled. His rates were actually higher than he should have gotten, for three reasons. His first sample was college students. Then he hung out in singles bars and gay bars in Indianapolis. And a third group he got to talk about sex was in prison. So his rates are actually quite a bit higher with people who were more likely to report—in 1948, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, 1954 *Human Female*—than would have been a nationally representative sample. I think 41 percent is probably high for 1954. But 90 percent for 1996 is probably about right.

Paul: I think there's a way to reconcile what you were saying earlier about the fact that peer relationships and women's equality in relationships has enhanced relationships, and the concept that you're talking about, about the distance required for desire in some way.

Perel: They're not in opposition.

Paul: No, but I think they work very well together because what they create is that for a man who—you watch *Mad Men*, for example, and for a man who comes home to January Jones's character every day, there's nothing new or interesting in that character. She's incredibly boring to come home to. But a woman now—the man is constantly seeing that woman in a competitive position. He's competing with the workplace for her time. He's competing with a greater social respect for her time and attention. I think that it then makes sense that men are more sexually happy with and sexually more satisfied with a peer relationship because it does create that sense of—I know you don't like the word competition, but it does create that competition—

Kimmel: No, I understand. It goes back to something that Owen said earlier, and I want to make a distinction. We often think that equality means sameness. I think that's a terrible mistake. That's basically how we de-legitimized Communism or Socialism, that it would make everyone the same.

Renik: Right.

Kimmel: When we think of gender equality the fear that I hear from people is it will be androgyny. Women and men will be so much the same there won't be any friction anymore. I think that the trick for us, and I like that in your book a lot, was this idea that what we want is to be respectful of difference, but within the context of equality. So that's the thing we need, the place I think we need to go.

Perel: But Michael, that's the consequence of American feminism versus European feminism. American feminism proposed the notion of sameness. This is the only country where maternity leave is a disability.

Kimmel: Right. But that's not a feminist reform to make it a disability—

Perel: No, no. But they fought for it.

Kimmel: That's the way male-controlled corporations institutionally dealt with the fact that women wanted parental leave.

Perel: They fought for it. There was a collusion, they fought for it. American feminism really did very much want to look at equality from a position of sameness.

Paul: I think the one way in which that plays out in a negative way in American relationships as compared with European is that in Europe maternity is also eroticized in a way that it is completely not here, and quite the opposite, which I think—

Kimmel: Multicultural feminism is all about difference. It's founded on difference.

Perel: Of course. But I wanted to actually go back to something you said before. You seem to be cautious, and in a very important way, about abuses of power and about misuses of power. I didn't use the word conquest. I think Owen did, but you know, when you conquer, somebody surrenders on the other side.

Kimmel: Not necessarily.

Perel: In the dynamic of the erotic, when it is voluntary, when it is playful—here are the words missing for me in the conversation about eroticism—pleasure, which you finally uttered. Eroticism is the cultivation of pleasure for its own sake, with no other purpose attached. Many people who seem to have no desire for sex anymore in their relationships simply don't have desire for the sex they can have in their relationships. It has become repetitive, boring, no anticipation, nothing to look forward to. No cultivation of that desire. And especially in the difference between men and women if you want to put it in that sense, but for me men and women is not just a man and a woman. It's a continuum. I think that power is intrinsic to the erotic and to desire.

Kimmel: But subject populations are rarely playful.

Perel: What does that mean?

Kimmel: I think that equality enhances the capacities for playfulness that you were exactly describing.

Perel: Yes, in some situations.

Kimmel: I don't think Ghengis Khan was a very playful fellow either. I think conquest and submission involuntarily—like on *Mad Men*, for example—may be the things that reduce or diminish the capacities for playfulness and pleasure as we're describing them.

Perel: For me what secures the capacity for playfulness has nothing to do with equality. It has to do with a secure sense of attachment. When you have a little child that sits here on your lap, at some point, like all little children, they want to hop off and go and explore and see what is out there in the world. At some point that little child is going to turn and look at the adult who is here, and if the adult who is here says, Go for it, kiddo. Enjoy. The world is a fabulous place,

what does the kid do—he goes further and experiences connection and separateness or connection and freedom at the same time.

Kimmel: Right.

Perel: But if the little child turns around and there's a person here who says, what's so great out there? Don't you miss me? Didn't you used to have such a fabulous time? I am anxious, I'm depressed, I'm lonely, and the rest, then the little child has two choices. Either they come right back to base, and they understand that in order to not lose you I'll lose a part of me—and that will often be the person later on, from what I have understood, who will have a harder time making love to the person they love, because love will become burdensome to them. When I love you I feel responsible, I feel beholden, I feel burdened. It will take away the un-self-consciousness and the freedom that is necessary for desire with the person that you love. And then there's a few other options that little kid can have.

For me equality is not what leads to playfulness per se. It may, but a sense of security the way you were talking about it does, that allows you to then go and experience that space and that freedom. When you ask people to look at love and to look at desire or sex and they free associate, there's a few things that are really very outstanding to me. Want, acceptance, always appear here. Excitement appears there. Hunger, greed, power, heat. This is warm. This is hot.

Kimmel: Right.

Perel: This is tender, this is acceptance, this is about something else. I think that they coexist inside of us. There's absolutely no need to dichotomize them.

Kimmel: Earlier you suggested that we look to the gay community. Since the phrase, as you just described it, which I think is exactly spot on—that the way to reduce risk for STDs and particularly HIV is of course safe sex, which as you just described it is an oxymoron.

Perel: There is no safe sex. There are safe relationships.

Kimmel: The gay community's response to that is how can we make safe sex sexy? How can we eroticize responsibility?

Perel: Yes.

Kimmel: That's also been a feminist project, eroticizing responsibility around birth control and around sexual assault. Women need to know that their body's integrity is going to be respected, that their boundaries will be respected, that no means no. You don't get to yes without knowing that no means no.

Perel: Michael Shernoff, who was the instigator and the creator of all the safer sex programs for GMHC in the early '80s, just died. You know, it was all about that: eroticize safer sex. My sentence often is there is no safe sex, not in the sense of STDs. There is not safe sex in that if you really want to take it to a place that is beyond performance and mechanics and orgasm and result then you've got to go to a place that is extremely vulnerable, that the immensity of our needs and our longings and our quests manifest itself in the erotic in ways that words can sometimes not

even begin to capture. That's the risk, that's the vulnerability that some people have an easier time experiencing outside than at home.

Renik: Just to summarize what we've been talking about, when you make the analogy to the child who leaves the mother and so on, the paradox is—

Perel: Or father.

Renik: Or father, quite right. The caretaker, yes. The paradox is that the secure attachment gives the individual the courage to experience risk. Now in the long-term relationships in which eroticism dies, it isn't because the attachment is insecure. It's because the courage to face risk goes away. In other words, when you talk to people with relationships in which eroticism has died, it's not like they're saying I don't feel any more securely attached to my partner. They feel securely attached, but they wonder where the magic went. So there's a paradox here. I just want to make sure we don't exclude the other side. It's not just that the relationship as a precondition has to offer a secure enough attachment. It has to somehow allow the possibility of facing risk.

Perel: I think that the unknown is inherent to desire. Faced with the unknown, people can have a few responses. You can stay open to it and welcome the persistent mystery of your partner, or you can respond with anxiety. For me the question is the issue of certainty. I think love is never certain. It is inherent that the potential of lust is part of love. If you want to pretend to create an illusion of certainty then you often will collapse. The ingredients that make for the erotic, which is surprise, difference, novelty, imagination and all of those things—that's when you see that people are no longer able to do what I think Pamela describes very well in the more practical way, to respect that individuality. To be able to see your partner play the piano you have to be comfortable that your partner is enjoying the piano without thinking, why don't you want to spend time with me? Again you're playing the piano, and maybe you're avoiding me by playing the piano, and why am I not able to be everything for you, et cetera. For me the issue is really more anxiety over that space.

You know, we believe in permanence in the West. We think there is such a thing as certainty. We think there is such a thing as reality. Sometimes I wonder if when you opt for reality instead of passion maybe you've just traded one fiction for another.

Nersessian: I understand what everybody's doing, namely trying to find certain more general ways to describe what happens in a relationship. But having seen people for over thirty years in detailed ways day after day, what I'm most impressed with is the difference between the individuals. It's very hard to make a statement about the research that you cite, with equality there's more desire. In some people there seems to be, in some others it seems to have completely the opposite effect. It seems a lot to do with the nature of people's fantasies and the degree of anxiety that is the motive for some of those fantasies. The higher the level of anxiety, the more the need to escape into those kinds of fantasies with other women or other men, the more you have a problem.

Going back to your piano analogy, it seems to me if a patient came to me and said, "Every time I play the piano my husband gets turned on," I'd think the husband has a problem. So I think it's very difficult to generalize.

Kimmel: What's the problem exactly?

Nersessian: The problem is he doesn't let her finish playing the piano.

Kimmel: Oh. That makes sense.

Perel: Or they do it on the piano.

Nersessian: The other thing that came up in terms of intimacy—it seems to me that sexuality is necessary for intimacy. It is impossible to have real intimacy in the absence of sexuality. You can be naked with each other, go to the bathroom with each other, have dinner with each other, but you are not intimate. The level of intimacy that is achieved through sexuality is what I would consider to be the real level of intimacy, the capacity to let one's self go in a situation which involves the sexual act.

Paul: There are two tensions between the vulnerability aspect and the intimacy that I think end up becoming this problem of mating in captivity. One is that if you have an assumption of intimacy and you're with someone for, say fifteen years, and secretly you have some kind of sexual desire that your partner is not aware of, it can feel like an act of betrayal then for one partner to reveal to the other, well, this is what I actually want, because there's that sense, then who are you, this person that I thought I knew so well that I've been with all this time? Which then makes that person more fearful of revealing and of getting to that very vulnerable place that you're talking about.

The other thing I think that often gets in the way is that the more intimate you are the more you obviously are able to hurt the person you're with. If you've been with someone for twenty years there are obviously going to have been opportunities to get angry and to have hurt that person, and therefore sexually you're then all the more unlikely to get to that vulnerable place or to open up in that way, because you know that this is the person that can hurt you best, and probably already has if you've been with someone for ten or even five years.

Nersessian: I'm not so sure that's the case. I think the opposite could play just as well, that the more intimate you are the more safe you feel and the more the person hurting you today doesn't mean they're going to hurt you tomorrow.

Perel: But I think what you highlight is that for everything we say we could also say it's opposite and it would also have merit, and that's very beautiful. The question Stephen Mitchell talks a lot about—and since we are in a psychoanalytic place—that notion that it's what's at stake in opening up that way to the person that you depend upon for so much. And the question of what is the real nakedness, and can you experience that kind of intimacy. I think that there's a distinction between touch, sensuality, sex and eroticism. They're not one and the same. People who don't get touched, like children, become aggressive, irritable, you know, not good. Some relationships can remain intensely affectionate without having remained sexual, and who is to say that this is problematic?

What you were talking about before is that lots more relationships today are actually formed with the project of making a family and with security, partly because we are committing ourselves later on, and because many people have had plenty of passion and it didn't give them much

stability, and now they want the secure thing. The ones who come into my office saying we never had it, it's much more complicated. Because they know why they chose each other and they are reluctant to let go of that. The ones who say we lusted, then you wonder where did they disconnect from themselves? There is no sexual relationship with someone else if you are sexually disconnected from yourself, from your own body, from your capacity to experience sensuality, et cetera.

The ones that you talked about earlier, about women with the children, you know the centrality of children today and the way that parenting is taking place has really created a kind of Eros redirected. When I see the descriptions of the holding in the arms and the tickling and the nibbling and the licking, I mean it's just about the same description as the three nights they spent fifteen years ago in the hotel with their partner. It's intensely erotic, and so sometimes at the end of the day when she says, I have nothing left to give, I'm thinking maybe there's nothing more you need. In the old rules of the game she could go into motherland and intensive care of childcare and be with the children because he had the right to go to the brothel. There was an equality if you want to use that word. There was an arrangement.

Kimmel: No, that's not what I'm talking about.

Perel: I'm not caring about equality here. Today it's different, because you ask the person to stay put and wait, in a way that people have not had to wait before, and hope that one day you will not mistake my invitation for a demand and answer me by saying, I've got three kids. I don't need another one. And to understand that there is an invitation and that there are roles in a relationship, as you were talking about, according to stages, where there is one person who is preserving the family and another person who is preserving the relationship. Because families today will only survive if the couple does well. There's not many other reasons to keep it together.

Levy: And I think they have to be kind of evolutionary, in other words. That's what I was talking about in the very beginning. They have to be willing to wear different guises. I'm sort of concerned about these definitions. I mean intimacy and sexuality—what about sexuality without intimacy?

Perel: That's right.

Levy: What you said about patients, how it's so *sui generis* to make these overarching kind of definitions—but I did want to say one thing. This book *Erotomania* has gotten a lot of press comparing it to Henry Miller and Bukowski, and I am a product of my own time in a certain way. I mean I'm not only the author of the book, but society is the author of the book. One thing about this particular book that's so interesting in terms of our discussion—and I only conceived of this retrospectively, because I haven't really ratiocinated about the book really, I just wrote the book—is that all of this reputed sexuality takes place in a monogamous relationship. They have no other relationships with anyone else throughout the book, and they act this thing out constantly in their own relationship. So there is something about *Mating in Captivity* that's very apropos of our time I think, and within the history of sensibility. I think this is kind of the real question. A lot of attention and concentration of interest is being placed upon the dyad now. And as I was trying to say earlier, the literature records the fact that in earlier decades there was much

more of the concept, perhaps even due to the lack of egalitarianism in society. There were many factors, but adultery was considered almost a rite of passage within the marriage. It was what couples went through. And now there is a different kind of idealization going on in a strange way.

Kimmel: I'm not at all persuaded by this idea that you argued before that only with sex is real intimacy possible. I think what we've witnessed over this century has been the increased sexualization of intimacy. If you look, for example, at memoirs of soldiers who held each other while they were dying and wept with each other as they held each other's guts, sort of Henry the IV, "He who sheds his blood with me will be my brother," probably the greatest line in all these guyland things, all of these evocations of the brotherhood, all of these evocations of male-male bonding in the 19th century that is as intimate as men's lives got. And it was not at all sexual.

Nersessian: No, I think it's how you define it.

Kimmel: What I'm suggesting is because of the absolute hegemony of the marital couple, the dyad that you're describing, we have now so sexualized that intimacy that we've made them inextricable, as you say. But I think we've also failed to explore what's possible in terms of intimacy outside of sexualizing it. I think religious mystics are unbelievably intimate with each other and it's not necessarily sexual, but it's surely erotic.

Levy: Look at George Foreman and Mohamed Ali. They had three bouts, and they developed an incredible intimacy, and also Ali and Frazier bouts, where the dueling and the fighting, their contests are what brought them together.

Kimmel: I think intimacy becomes impoverished when we just sexualize it.

Nersessian: I think you misunderstand it.

Kimmel: Okay.

Nersessian: Look, you can have an intimate friend and you can have an intimate relationship with a lot of people, but I think in a relationship, let's say in a marital relationship, the absence of sexuality, the absence of sexual closeness would not allow the kind of intimacy to continue to exist and to develop.

Paul: But I think that there's a way in which what you're talking about negatively impacts monogamous relationships between men and women, which is to say that I think that while it's not true for female friendship it does seem to me that male friendships are relatively impoverished with that lack of intimacy today, and male friendships tend to be very superficial.

Nersessian: I don't think that's true.

Paul: I think it creates an intense need for intimacy for the man in the relationship with the wife that then becomes a burden.

Perel: I really hope we're not just going to do binary Mars and Venus, but the question that you ask about in the relationship itself—can you have an intimacy that isn't sexual—I would like to

add the issue is not about just doing it. There are plenty of couples who do it, and that doesn't make it sexually intimate or intimate at all. I like your phrase that intimacy is becoming impoverished, but I understand it a little different. You know, intimacy used to be we plow the land together. It's a *convivencia* and it's a companionship for life. And then it kind of switched, and the whole history of it is less relevant, to a discursive experience. The new definition emerged at the same time as the concept of self. Intimacy is I talk to you and I reveal to you my internal world and you are going to reflect back to me. In that interaction or transaction I will know that I matter. I will momentarily transcend my existential aloneness. That to me is what intimacy has come to mean in the West. My West African patients don't know what the hell I'm talking about.

So intimacy in some way has become paramount, and at the same time narrowed, not because of the sexualization of intimacy, but because of what some people have called a kind of feminization of intimacy—i.e. the privileging of talking over the expressiveness of the body—and that it is an undervaluing of the body as our mother tongue, long before we can utter any words, and the body as being able to sometimes even express feelings that some people are more reluctant or have more difficulty articulating in words. And that is not about sexualizing intimacy. There's plenty of sexualization in our society, but I do think romantic love sexualized intimacy because that was the point of it. Otherwise you went for the passion and for the erotic somewhere else, if anywhere at all, and mostly the men, because it was too dangerous for the women.

Kimmel: But why would you call that feminization, when we had the evocation of *Civilization and Its Discontents* earlier, which was women represent the body. Men are the talkers. Men are the culture-builders. Why would you come full-circle and call *that* feminization?

Perel: Because the body of women was controlled. It's like when people say women want security, men are the roamers. I always think if women were so domestic why did every civilization put about so many systems for oppressing female sexuality to keep it in check if she's so domestically inclined anyway?

Kimmel: You bet. That's right.

Perel: But the body of women was not a place that women could freely go and explore, and certainly not sexually, until the democratization of contraception. It was simply too dangerous. So the body of the woman as a source of public pleasure that is not for decoration and display—

Kimmel: Her subjectivity as opposed to being constructed as an object.

Perel: Yes. True. And the ability to make the body be this language without it becoming the language of *those* kind of women. So that she has to wrap it around five layers of relatedness to make it okay to then be able to experience the flesh in a non-vilified, prostitutionalized kind of way. That's what I think has happened, so that when you deprive one group, men or women, from the language of the body, and you deprive the other group from the language of words, you create a bit of a mess. By the way, the other word missing for eroticism is tension.

Renik: Yes, and along that line, because I don't want Ed's point to get lost—Michael, in terms of what you were saying, the kind of intimacy between men that has been lauded in the St. Crispin's Day speech, it's about shared dangers and shared adventures. Who's to say that that's not erotic? Because as Esther said, it's not just about doing it.

Perel: It's feeling alive.

Renik: Who knows what they did in the tents anyway? But when that is lost in a marital relationship, or a long term heterosexual relationship, I think Ed's point would be then you get a pseudo-intimacy, you get a deadening. When that is kept alive, that sense of shared adventure and willingness to confront dangers together, then you get the kind of possibilities that you guys have been talking about that permits recognition of vulnerability to loss of the other, recognition of the difference from the other, the distance from the other, and then that's expressed and maintained through sexuality. And so Ed's point—I don't want to speak for you—would be—

Nersessian: You're doing very well.

Renik: —that absence of sexuality in a long-term relationship is an alarming possible symptom of the failure of true intimacy.

Kimmel: Caveats accepted. Alarming possible—but you're talking about risk taking, and I want to echo Esther's point: it's not about doing it necessarily. What bigger risk can a couple possibly take together than bringing a child into a world that seems hell-bent on destroying itself? That seems to be massive risk taking.

Nersessian: I think biology is being a bit underplayed. Biology has a lot of role in all of this. It has a role in desire, it has a role in procreation, it has a role in all of those things that we've been talking about. And that's what keeps pushing.

Levy: And it doesn't know about equanimity.

Nersessian: The more curious thing is how come with so much pressure with biology sometimes couples don't have any sex for months?

Perel: I was at this conference long ago and it was 400 urologists and OBs talking about female desire. They're desperate to find a Viagra for women. They talked about the hormones, the hormones, and all of this is biologically really, really true. But put the same woman in front of somebody who is now compelling and I promise you the next day she has no problem with her hormones.

Nersessian: For how long?

Perel: It doesn't matter. It's always the same time. It was the same time when she was in her twenties as it would be in her fifties. The pheromones do wane after two years. But the question that you're asking about the man—when you say it's erotic, for me it means it's alive. I would say that one of the powerful connectors I see with the longing—because the word is longing and yearning—for this erotic, when couples have kind of lost that certain vitality, that energy, it often is linked to a sense of loss. You've gone to the doctor and gotten bad news. A friend has died too

soon. Or your parent is gone. There is something at the level of sex, sexuality—this is the place where you can feel alive, in opposition to death, at a level that is sometimes unmatched. It can be autoerotic or with a partner. That is the primitive primariness of it that I think is really unique. And what I've become very intrigued by, especially when I look at non-monogamy, is the connection between that sense of loss and the longing that makes people have what Mitchell used to call acts of exuberant defiance.

Renik: Okay, I think maybe this is the moment at which we invite the rest of you to join in.

A: There's a subjectivity inevitable in this kind of discussion that I'm more impressed by than I was when I came in. That's my own opinion. And because I have that opinion, I would be very interested to know the marital history of each of the panelists because I feel it must be a factor in some of their opinions. So that's my question.

Perel: Great question.

Renik: You want us to be intimate with you, I think. Share a little risk.

Perel: Or naked.

Renik: Well, anybody feel like rising to the challenge?

Paul: I'll go first, since my first book was about the starter marriage. I was married briefly in my twenties for a year, now I'm remarried, and I have two young children and another on the way. So I'm in the least erotic time in my life.

Kimmel: I had a starter marriage. I'm deliriously happily remarried for fifteen years and I have a nine-year old son.

Levy: I've been married since 1982. I have two children.

Renik: Let's see, I had a very brief early marriage. I would even hesitate to call it a starter marriage. It was more like a moment in time. Then I was married for almost thirty years. Ultimately we got divorced. It was great for a long time, but then it went south at the end. And she unhappily died some time after. I have two grown girls, thirty and twenty-eight.

Your turn, Esther.

Perel: Oh, my turn? I am with the same man for twenty-five years. We have a twelve-year-old and a fifteen-year-old and we've had three marriages together. Meaning I met him at twenty-two, I married at twenty-seven, and I just turned fifty and I've had three marriages with the same guy.

Levy: You literally had marriage ceremonies?

Perel: No, just complete different relationships.

Nersessian: Is it better now?

Perel: Far better.

Kimmel: Which one did you like the best?

Perel: Well, the first one was a powerful illusion that I had to give up. The second one was a fight about recovering the illusion. And the third one has been wonderful. *Is* wonderful.

A: I have a question, if I can direct it to Esther. I'm a physician. I was married, divorced, and I have a thirty-four-year-old son.

Paul: Now everyone has to give their marital—

Kimmel: Yes, right, everybody. No one's going to ask any more questions now.

Perel: Do you have a green card or a passport? We should do the immigration too.

A: My question has to do with age. I'm going to be seventy December 4th, and as I progress in my attachment to myself there are no guys around. They're all dead. Because the longevity of women—I find this in my practice, since I'm an older practitioner. Most of my patients are older women, not because of my bad medical practice. Guys drop like flies. Just in the room itself there are more—well, the average age is much younger than what I am. This discussion was great, but what happens with age? I measure everybody's testosterone levels, and I've found the elixir to be testosterone, both for men and women. But be that as it may, just the bonding with somebody, like to go with a younger guy, I could just throw up at the thought of that because your bodies are so different. The thought of going out with somebody even twenty years younger than me, I'd be comparing my body to his, and I'd say, oh my God, this is terrible. Like my breasts are on the floor—

A: They don't care.

A: So my question has to do with the fact that women really do live much longer than men, and what do older women—

Perel: But I think you have two points to what you're asking, and I'm curious what you'll say. First is what happens to sexuality over age, and the second one is what happens to the lessening of opportunities to bond with someone over age? It's two different things though.

A: Can you address both?

Kimmel: And with a concrete answer, websites, phone numbers

Perel: For the second one you should check in with me in twenty years. I don't know.

A: I'll be ninety.

Perel: Here is what I would say for the first one, which I think probably is a little more tricky in this society that has a real cult of youth, is that maybe the libido is stronger when you're young, but the mind is much freer when you're older. Sometimes I would say if I had the confidence of today with the looks of then, but then I was whining and complaining all the time, and now I am actually not the same—there is something about age that finally gives you the right to do what

you want, the right to go to places that you never dared go before. So I am of the view that for many people, and again, all the statements that are generalized should be qualified, I experience that sexuality becomes better. It can go one way or the other, but there's a whole group of people for whom their sexuality becomes better because the erotic mind frees up. The more the body changes, the more the mind becomes the place of riches.

A: But what do you do with the scarcity of men your own age?

Perel: The scarcity of men is a fact of life that I don't have anything—there's a sociologist here. Maybe he's a demographer as well. I don't know. You need to take that one on.

A: Could the sociologist speak to that?

Kimmel: You want to know where the men are?

Perel: She said they fall like flies. It's very difficult to answer that. What's to say about that?

Kimmel: And they're going out with thirty-year-olds.

A: Hello. I want to address your point, because it's very plaintive in the way I hear you talking about it. We have also learned that the sexuality of women is very plastic. I think as women get older they're going to start looking at other women and going to find a way to have a different kind of sexuality and intimacy than they may have defined when they were younger.

Perel: I think if I can add on to what she says, plasticity is a beautiful concept for looking at female sexuality, meaning that the sexuality of women changes throughout her life. She can discover things in her forties that she never knew existed, in ways that for other people it's often much more of a blueprint that is layered earlier on. She can switch orientation in the course of her life back and forth. She can experience her body very differently. Rather than limiting the possibilities for women with age, that actually expands it, and that is often not articulated enough. There is an enormous investment in wanting to see men as sexual and women as not, basically.

Paul: Demographically that's already playing out, because there is a growth in the number of women who are living together later in life.

Renik: You're talking about that limitation for men and the freedom for women, the increased plasticity for women, as a culturally determined thing, no? That culture sanctions a great deal more experimentation. For example, female homosexuality in various expressions has always been much more tolerated in our culture here than male homosexuality. That's what you're referring to, yes?

Perel: And culturally as well as psychologically.

A: I have a question for the whole panel. Otto Kernberg wrote a series of articles which I found very interesting on the couple and the group. He asked the question which you're all addressing in one way or another: what makes a couple stay together? His answer is that the same thing that makes a couple stay together is also what makes them break up. The argument is this: that with a

mature couple, for lack of a better term, there is enough intimacy and enough sense of safety that they can really explore what's been called the transgressive, the dangerous, the imaginative and so on. But he specifies it more. He says they can really express their archaic sexuality, especially their sadism, and Stower's work has to come in here. As long as that is sufficiently expressed, and as long as there's the safety to do it, that keeps the couple alive. But when it gets out of control, when it goes too far and there isn't a container for it, that's what often makes a couple break up.

In terms of this question about equality, if you take Kernberg's position there's really not an opposition between equality and desire, because here are two adults who really claim the right, which is quite a radical thing to do, to say you're an adult. You're free to do what you want with your body, your mind, your imagination, and to indulge in it. You're equal in the sense that you're both sovereign sexual adults who are claiming the rights to pleasure and excitement. But I especially want to stress the thing about the role that aggression and destructiveness plays.

Perel: Kernberg has a whole series of articles on aggression and sexuality. I actually think that there has been an attempt, because of the ways that we have wanted to purge the abuses of power, to neutralize power and aggression from desire. That's where the problem of the egalitarianism come in. Not equality, egalitarianism. There needs to be a certain power differential, and sexually that doesn't necessarily need to happen in the raising of children or in the management of many other aspects of life. In the name of wanting to condemn aggression it got purified at the level that completely tames it and flattens it. And you know desire does not play by the rules of good citizenship.

Audience: Two equal partners can act out their fantasies of aggression and domination and what have you in the privacy of their own bedroom and it doesn't mean that they're going to be abusive to each other outside of the bedroom.

Perel: That's right.

Renik: Did anybody want to comment on the thing that Joel brought up about the genie getting out of the bottle as a reason that people break up? The Kernberg's thesis. Has that been your experience, that you found that to be the case?

Perel: My experience is that the very thing that attracts you initially because it is different is the thing that drives you up the wall later because it is different.

Kimmel: The only thing I would say in response to that thing about power differential is the absolutely great thing to me about women's increased equality has been the exposure of the fluidity of that power and how easily it moves, and how it's not fixed. Gender used to simply be a proxy for power imbalance.

Perel: That's right.

Kimmel: But the good thing it seems to me about feminism is that it can no longer be so in the context of a relationship, politically. Obviously institutionally it's still quite salient. So it become more fluid, and that is I think unbelievably freeing both to women and to men.

Perel: I think what you as well as the man that just spoke and Francis are talking about is the sensuality of fantasy, this idea that the relationships live in the shadow of the third and that fantasy in some way is an imaginative, exquisitely efficient way to bypass the conflict and the pitfalls of familiarity and the negative aspects, if you want, of intimacy.

Levy: It's also the basis of what we mentally represent to other people. When you see someone you form an image of them in your mind. This is a creation.

A: I'm an individual and couple's therapist and I just wanted to comment on what the last person said. I see a lot of partners wanting different things from each other, so that one person might be able to take risks and explore and be separate enough to want to know where they can go with their partner, and the other person is very happy with status quo. We talk about couples a lot as a dyad, but in a couple there are two very different people—

Nersessian: That's why they come to see you.

A: Yes.

Perel: Great question.

Renik: That can become apparent sometimes only over time.

Levy: But it's not fixed in stone. Let's go back to Bergman's *Persona*, where it starts off with the gregarious nurse and the actress who is practically autistic. By the end of the movie it's taken a complete reversal, where the nurse is now completely quiet and it's the actress who is constantly seeking her attention. You find that in couples, where in the progress of the relationship if one couple stops enacting the very thing with which they started, then the other one sort of takes up the slack.

A: Yes. They do something different. Thank you.

Perel: What I like in your question is that you didn't say one wants and the other one doesn't. You said one wants certain things and the other one wants other things. That's a much more nuanced question. As a therapist sometimes I ask, "Do you still have sex with each other," but that doesn't tell me that much. But I am very interested in the question what does sex mean for you? What do you look to sex to provide you? What do you want to experience in sex? Escape, rebellion, surrender, connection, spirituality? What do you go for that sex can allow you to experience? That's when the differences of what they want to do actually start to get a larger meaning about why it is that this is what they want to do. That's the beginning of the answer.

Levy: Why is this power thing always put in a gender term though? It seems to me that when you take relationships, homosexual relationships or—there's usually one person in a relationship who plays a certain role and another person plays another role. It's no longer so gender-based it strikes me.

Perel: It's not gender-based at all.

Paul: I think it's whoever is currently seeing a competition for the other person's affections. That person becomes the aggressor or the chaser and the other person has the power.

Levy: That's a good point.

Paul: In a healthy relationship I think that's fluid and changes throughout.

Renik: Well, I'm told that our time has come to an end. I would like to thank all the panelists.