

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by Dr. Suzanne Leonard, professor of race, gender, and sexuality studies at Simmons University, and author of the book *A Feminist Guide to Marriage*, as well as *Wife, Inc.: The Business of Marriage in the 21st Century* and *Fatal Attraction*. She's also co-editor of *Imagining We in the Age of I: Romance and Social Bonding in Contemporary Culture*. Today she's here to talk about feminist marriage, and I know that both historically and today a lot of feminists choose to just avoid marriage altogether, particularly if they're attracted to men, even if they're cohabitating and co-parenting with a partner. So do you think that the distinction of marriage, specifically going through that process, makes a difference if you're already effectively living as though you were a married couple?

SL: I think the short answer to your question is yes, and I think the reason is because we need to think about marriage as a legal and economic institution. With that comes a host of rights and privileges, everything from tax benefits to inheritance laws to questions of healthcare proxies and visiting people when they're in the hospital. So while it is true that in lived practice a cohabitating couple has perhaps the day-to-day life is very, very different, any time and in any instance that the state would become involved in your life, which is more often than you'd think, even questions about who's eligible to be put on your health insurance, that really comes into play. So I think, yes, in terms of the way in which people might think of themselves, they might think of themselves as life partners. And for many people, resisting the institution of marriage is a political act. They don't want the state involved in their life, and I think that makes perfect sense. That being said, the state nevertheless has a way of figuring out and finding out what your status is and acting accordingly, oftentimes perhaps in ways that you wouldn't want. So I think we do ourselves a disservice to say that marriage is simply an individual choice.

AT: And I also remember that during the debates in the U.S. about legalizing same-sex marriage, there was a lot of people pointing out that, "oh, you say that we have a civil union or a domestic partnership, but these are all not the same." We have not given them the same weight and the same rights as marriage. And similarly, one of the advantages that I found to being married is that if my husband and I are traveling internationally, marriage is recognized, and again, that straight presenting privilege, if you will, that we're not going to go to a country where they say they don't recognize marriage between a man and a woman. But there's all of these aspects where you have the security of marriage, if we're traveling and if something happens to one of us, we have that standing, I suppose you would say, that you wouldn't necessarily have with a common-law partnership or something like that that isn't recognized everywhere.

SL: Exactly. And I think one thing that's been an interesting and I think definitely unintentional byproduct of the legalization of same-sex marriage is that common-law marriage or domestic partnerships have actually, those regions have gotten fewer rights. So for example, my husband is a pilot and his company has always been very LGBTQ-friendly. And they basically granted the same health care rights and travel benefits, which is a big thing in the airline industry, to domestic partners pre-2015. When gay marriage became legalized, the company said, "well, in order to get those same marriages, same benefits, you now need to get married." So in other words, the status of domestic partnerships in the hierarchy actually lowered. And so there was almost a penalty for not getting married. And I think that was really troubling to many, many of us, in the queer community and not, because it once again just reaffirmed what you said, which is this idea and actually practical reality that marriage comes with all of these privileges and to not participate in those privileges, particularly now you can say, or the idea might be, that everybody has the ability to, regardless of their sexual orientation, then if you're not choosing to participate, then you don't access those things.

AT: Aren't there even tax benefits and things?

SL: Oh, definitely. Definitely. I don't know tax law and the intricacies of it. I do know there's this whole question about filing jointly or filing separately. But yes, there are tax benefits. There was an article that was in Slate a few years ago, and the title of it was "When Should You Start Planning for Your Death? At Your Wedding." And it was by a young widow whose husband had died very unexpectedly. And basically, though they were legally married, they hadn't changed wills, they hadn't thought about trusts or any of that stuff. This poor woman spent the days following her husband's untimely demise racing around trying to make sure that she could still have her name on the mortgage, for example. And so, as much I think as we want to believe that these things don't matter, they really do. And it's often in times of crisis when someone is sick, when someone's been injured, etc., that we realize the real material effects of this institution.

AT: And I just want to be clear, in case it's not obvious, that neither of us is saying, even though we are both cisgender women married to cisgender men, we are not advocating for anyone to get married. We're just discussing the social pressures and the way that our governments, our societies, enforce these ideas. And so I also want to touch on the psychological aspect, because I feel like particularly for women, there is very much that idea that you are not complete, that you have not fully achieved adulthood, that this is a milestone that you have to reach, and this is a goal that has to be central to your life. And I feel like that applies to having a romantic partner more broadly, but particularly that goalpost of marriage.

SL: Yeah, I really want to underscore the first thing you said, which is that every statement I'm making is a diagnosis, not an endorsement. And I'm hoping a little later in this conversation we can talk about the socioeconomics of marriage and the way in which marriage has become really a privilege and a luxury of the rich, more so than it has in previous generations. So that's something I want to double back to. But I think your question about this notion of marriage as a milestone is in part how I got interested in the topic in the first place. Which is to say, in the contemporary imagination, the idea, particularly for women, that one's life is not complete until they are married is just commonplace. And I've actually been very surprised in some ways how pervasive and prevalent this continues to be. I'm a college professor. Actually, I work at a school that has a very high community of LGBTQ students. It's also a women-centered college, many of them are young women or women identified in some way, who talk a lot about the fact that they just thought they had to have a boyfriend. And they weren't attracted to men. And they would basically, and oftentimes pick the least offensive option to have as their boyfriend, or they would say to their girlfriends, "oh, I have a crush on Jeff." But it could have been Tom. They were just trying to perform what Adrienne Rich calls compulsory heterosexuality. This notion that again, that there's what Adrienne Rich calls a cluster of forces, which convinces women that marriage to men is an inevitable, if unsatisfactory, conclusion to their lives or accomplishment in their lives. I'm misquoting her a little bit at the end, but I know she calls it a cluster of forces, which I really like. Because I think that speaks to, again, the intense economic, social, political, psychological pressure that is exerted on people to tell them that they need to be sexual in certain ways and that that sexuality should then be funneled into a monogamous partnership with someone of the opposite gender. Another thing that I always wondered was the difference between the romanticization, the way we romanticize marriage and particularly weddings versus the quotidian domestic arrangements that are most of the marriages that I saw in my life, the first one, of course, being my parents, who remain married after 50 years. But there's been a lot of tension. There were a lot of fights. There continue to be. And again, I think my parents have a fairly healthy relationship. Healthy-ish, anyway. So I just wondered, when you see something firsthand, you live day in, day out with people that are participating in this institution. And you can see times when certainly they're satisfied with it, but other times, many other times when they're not. And I just thought, how did we get to a position where we take this commitment that really is rocky for all of us, even in the happiest marriages, the happiest of relationships, regardless, but then has this cultural symbolism that it is going to be the pinnacle. Sara Ahmed is a theorist I really like, and she talks about this notion of happiness and how young girls are told that the wedding day will be the happiest day of their life. And again, I think this sounds very common to us and

perhaps not worthy of note, but I think Ahmed really does a really good job of thinking about, why is it that we even think happiness is the most important thing to achieve in one's life? What about social equality? What about fighting injustice? Why is it that getting married and being happy is the thing all of us are trained to want and then to strive for our entire lives? And what does that do to the social fabric when everybody's just thinking about being happy and getting married? And she's pretty cynical about the downsides of that ideology.

AT: I will say I am pro-happiness. (laughter) But I think what she's getting at is this individualism versus collectivism. So when you look at the US being a very individualistic, focused on yourself and enriching yourself and all of that, as opposed to more collectivist societies like India or Japan, which is certainly not to say that, those societies also have their own issues. We're not actually saying that one of these is better or worse, but that focus on prioritizing yourself versus prioritizing the collective. So it's an interesting rabbit hole, but one that we are not going down today because we've got so much to talk about. I do want to loop back to what you were saying earlier about in today's world, and I feel like you could argue this historically as well as marriage being for the privileged, because there are many times throughout history where certain people couldn't marry because of a marginalization. So obviously gay marriage would be the biggest example in today's world. But going back to ancient Greece, there's a fantastic woman in antiquity named Aspasia who wasn't allowed to marry her partner Pericles because she was not, I believe it was Athenian, and foreigners couldn't marry Athenians. So there have always been these ways that the state uses marriage as a tool to marginalize people, whether we're talking about, obviously slavery would be another huge example and interracial marriage. So there's all these ways that societies have used marriage as that tool of marginalization. But how does that play out in socioeconomic status today?

SL: Yeah, first I just want to underscore what you just said, Allison, about marriage as a kind of cudgel. I think we often think of, "oh, it's two independent parties coming together, committing their life to one another." But to your very smart point, slaves weren't allowed to marry. It wasn't until *Loving vs Virginia* in the United States that people of different races, even though we understand I think now what a construction race is, were allowed to be married. So prevailing and reigning prejudices of any given period remain inscribed in the institution. And to your point, I think that we could see gay marriage as not the last prejudicial inscription, but even thinking about monogamy. It's not legal to marry more than one person. And so again, that is a social conception that has now been enshrined in law, saying who's allowed to do what. And the state has vested interests in policing people in that way. Obviously, religion has played a huge role in that, too, where people of different religions aren't able to marry. So there's no way to study marriage without looking at histories of power and oppression. I think that's the first thing to keep in mind.

I think something, though, different has happened, as economists have talked about in the last 50-ish years, which is that though marriage is still held up as a life goal for many people, with rising income inequality, people don't want to get married until they feel that they have their economic ducks in a row, so to speak. They want to have a good job. They want to maybe be able to purchase a house. And only then did they say they're willing to yoke their financial futures to another person. But for people, and there are vast swaths of them that never feel that way, in fact, never get married, in part because they never quite feel rich enough, nor do they necessarily want to yoke their financial futures to someone else who's economically precarious. So you have a lot of people having children with partners. It's not that there are no children being born, but people who are, for very smart reasons, very worried about not having their economic ducks in a row, and never do. And there's this, in my opinion, really problematic conservative talking point that, "oh, it's more economically secure for a child to be raised in a two-parent family." And they think about the outcome. There's this sociologist and he talks about the sort of merry-go-round, these children that are coming in and out of different relationships, if their parents are in different relationships with different people. And I think what this sociologist doesn't really understand is that this is a symptom of a much larger problem. It's not going to be solved by people getting married. It's going to be solved by people having affordable housing. It's going to be solved by having people

have jobs that they can earn a sustainable wage at. So, again, the fact that people of lower economic stances are not marrying is a direct byproduct of wealth inequality. And wealth inequality is not going to be solved by people getting married. And I think that's a major misconception in this conversation.

AT: It's like saying that we solved racism by allowing interracial marriage. Like, no, you didn't. Again, I want to reiterate that we are not here to tell anyone else how to live their lives. But let's talk about what makes a marriage feminist. So, as mentioned, we're both cis women married to cis men. And for me, I would say the key component is balancing not just the practical labor, so the chores, but also the emotional and mental labor, which can be tricky because it comes down to where is that line between "I am being a supportive partner" and "I am taking on too much of the mental and emotional load"? And I would say it's also very important to be in a relationship with someone whose attitudes and behaviors reflect gender equality. So none of this "oh, but he treats me fine, even if he says sexist things to other people." None of that. We're not doing that. So what makes a marriage feminist from your perspective?

SL: Yeah, I think you've given us some some good starting talking points, Allison. I think a fundamental belief in gender equality, and also a fundamental belief for me anyway, in social justice. And something I've been thinking a lot about as I've been working on *A Feminist Guide to Marriage* is the notion that essentially feminism is about recognizing inequities in power. Sometimes those inequities are a product of gender. Oftentimes they're a product of race. They can be a product of sexuality, ability, all of those things. So for me, a feminist marriage is one that recognizes inequities or equities in power, in whatever form that takes. So, for example, it is unlikely that both people in a partnership are going to make the same amount of money. But there is a way to think about, each according to what they can give. So, for example, when my now husband and I first started living together, we split our rent 50-50. We were making about the same amount of money. As the years have gone on, as I mentioned, he's a pilot for an airline industry. He makes a lot more money than I do as a professor. And so we've changed. We've changed the way we allot the payment for our now mortgage. And so I think it's both a recognition of power differentials, but also a recognition that those power differentials change. I've heard a lot of, did a lot of reading about couples that felt very equitable in their relationship, and then children came along. And then suddenly, (laughter) you can't see her, but Allison's eyes are wide and there's a lot of nodding going on. And I think that's because, of course, there's all sorts of new kinds of labor, new kinds of labor that then are introduced that frankly weren't there before.

And I think a recognition of thinking about, okay, what constitutes labor? And as you said, labor comes in all forms. There's emotional labor. There's physical labor. There's domestic labor. There's the paid labor. There's all those things. And so I think a feminist marriage is one that always recognizes where power lies, assumes and understands that things in any given situation will never be 50-50, but you will do your best to keep all of those different types of power as equal as possible when you can. Again, with the understanding that there are going to be times where somebody's going to need a little bit more support or somebody's going to have to pitch in and sort of do a little more. And it's recognizing when your partner needs a break. I think it's a really huge thing. And again, that could be a break from doing dishes or it could be a break because they need to spend some time alone. However that manifests itself, I think feminist marriage is one that's attuned to power in all of its forms.

AT: And I do also want to point out, when we talk about division of labor, a lot of times people will say, "oh, but he does X, Y, and Z." And the interesting nuances that I've heard about that, again, that's a whole other rabbit hole that we could go down, but I just want to sort of graze the surface. One interesting breakdown that I found really helpful was that any given task actually involves three steps. Recognizing that something needs to be done, planning, whatever that means. So even if that's telling your partner, "hey, could you do this?" So a lot of times the woman has already done those first two steps and then the man does the third step, but it's treated as though, "oh, but he did the thing." Yeah, but she had to do the mental load and the "nagging," which again,

that's a whole other tangent we could go down. Point being, even if he's doing the third step, she's already had to do those first two, even recognizing, "oh, that's dirty and needs to be cleaned." There's also the fact that, as I understand it, a lot of the masculinized tasks, so mowing the lawn, taking out the trash, are things that only need to be done so often and they are more flexible in terms of, oh, well, if you don't get to it today, you can do it tomorrow or you can do it at any point on trash day, you can take out the trash. Whereas the more feminized tasks tend to be things like cooking that need to be done at a certain time because people need to be fed and it's constant. And so just looking at not just are you doing equal amounts of labor on the surface, but who is actually doing the household management? Am I always the one reminding my husband, "oh, it's your mom's birthday, make sure that you call her today and make sure that you've gotten her something" and all of that life management type stuff. And like you said, especially once you put kids into the mix. And I will also just say, because I am the one who chose to have cats, I do not consider it an unequal labor imbalance that I do all of the cat stuff because from my perspective, that was my choice. And that's not fair to put that on him. (laughter)

SL: I'm actually going to start with the cat example and give you my own, which I think was my biggest marriage hack to date, which is that we needed a new washing machine, but we did not need a new dryer. And I felt quite strongly that I didn't want to contribute to industrial waste by throwing away a perfectly good dryer because my husband really wanted a matching set. And he felt very strongly that he did want a matching set. And this partly had to do with growing up in pretty, he wasn't impoverished by any means, but I'd say, on the lower end of middle class with a single mother, I don't think they had never, the idea of a matching washing dryer set was just not in their realm of possibility ever. (AT: It's a symbol of economic security.) Yes, it was a symbol of economic security. And as I said, it mattered to him. And so we'll often apply this metric of, to whom does it matter more? And I'll talk a little bit about that in a second. But I'm gonna get to the laundry hack. So I basically said, "okay, we get a matching washer and dryer, you do all the laundry." And he does. For years, I actually didn't know how to run the washing machine. Now, we've had situations when he's gone, and I've had to learn, I can do it perfectly fine. But I don't do it. Honestly, my towels, will just sort of disappear, they'll come back clean. One needs to recognize that two people do not necessarily have the same belief system of how things need to be done, in what way they need to be done.

For my husband, it really matters to have the dishwasher loaded in the most efficient way possible, that all of the plates have to be lined up in a certain way. We maximize the space and he's a pilot. So he thinks a little like an engineer and the way the water is going to come down off of the plates and off of the bowls. And I just sort of throw everything in there. But it really matters to him to have it done that way. So when he's around, he loads the dishwasher. And when he's not there, I load the dishwasher the way I want to load the dishwasher. And I saw this one thing that in every relationship, somebody loads the dishwasher as like a Swiss engineer, and somebody else loads it like a raccoon on meth. And so clearly, I'm the raccoon on meth and he's the Swiss engineer. But I think the mistake would be, particularly for him, to try to make me load the dishwasher like the Swiss engineer because that's not who I am and what I care about. And I think that that's another thing I would say is, it is very important to recognize that other people's relationships are other people's problems. In other words, when it's my husband's mother's birthday, I might remind him of it. But if he wants to get her a gift, he wants to get a gift, that's not my relationship to maintain.

AT: In case anybody is struggling with this particular issue, the phrase, "not my circus, not my monkeys" truly changed my life, that idea that you are not responsible for everything, even if we're talking about your partner and their life and their relationships. They are an adult and they are not your responsibility.

SL: Yeah, thank you. And this is actually going to come into child rearing because we have one child, she's 10 now, but when she was an infant, when I left my daughter with my husband, I just said, "okay, keep her alive." And the same when he would leave me with her. And again, there was no micromanaging. I would see friends of mine constantly like, "Oh my God, did, did he do this? And is this getting done? And what are they eating?"

And are they getting their vegetables?" And we both think, look, we're both competent adults. We both have a vested interest in keeping this child alive. And however you do it is the way you do it.

AT: I don't have kids. I'm not interested in having kids. And my philosophy has always been given the choice, if you have a partner that you do not think that you can leave a child alone with, do not have a child with that person. Not to be ableist, if that's the reason, that's a whole other conversation to be having. But generally speaking, I feel like a lot of women have partners that are either infantilized when they get them, or they infantilize them. It's like, this man is not your child. And if you're treating him that way, you should not have additional children.

SL: True. No, I think it's so true. But it's funny. One of my best friends had a child on her own. And I can tell she sort of feels bad for me that I have to, and again, my husband and I generally like agree on parenting. But she said to me more than once, "oh, it's so nice. Whatever I want to do with Tyler, whatever decisions I make about how to discipline him, or just anything like, what summer camp he's going to go to, all that stuff." And it's funny, because, in the same breath, I would always say to people, "oh, I would never want to have a child by myself. It's just an experience it's important for me to share with another adult." But I do think you're absolutely right, Allison, that these are relational, and you have to think about then how a relationship will change. Of course, it when, when an if a child or a cat comes into it.

AT: I do want to distinguish here between marriage, the institution and a marriage, which I feel like we've already sort of addressed. But when we're talking about the difference between individual relationship versus this state enforced paradigm, shall we say. Obviously, marriage as an institution is largely broken in many ways. But it does seem like a lot of people will take that as a personal attack. Just like if I say, I don't want kids, there are certain people that take that as me attacking them for being a parent. And it's this idea that if I choose something that is not "the norm," or if I criticize, so Chappell Rowan stirred up controversy by pointing out that being a mother of young children is tough. So she basically said that all of her friends who have small children are in hell. (laughter) And perhaps that was not the the gentlest of phrasings. But again, never having had kids, I have to assume that most parents of small children, especially if you're the primary caregiver, which does tend to default to women, I can't imagine any mom not ever having felt like "this is hell," given the burden. It's frustrating that some people are so adverse to acknowledging that children are a burden. Yes, they are also a blessing. Two things can be those things simultaneously. Not to be flippant, but my cats are both a burden and a blessing. These are not mutually exclusive. But people will take it as a personal attack. And I do wonder how much of that is insecurity, people who are questioning whether they even made the right choice, whether that's getting married, whether that's having children, and if they are more sensitive to anyone criticizing the institution, the institution of parenthood, the institution of marriage, taking that as a personal attack, rather than just a reasonable commentary on reality.

SL: I completely agree. I think the thing that's so weird and yet fascinating to me about marriage is precisely what you're articulating, which is the way it operates on this completely institutional level and this completely quotidian domestic level. And as we've been talking about before, at different times and in different ways, those things are made more or less apparent. But most marriages are lived in a very domestic, quotidian way. But whether or not one is married says a lot to the world. It says a lot to the world about who you are, what you value. I'll admit something, which is if I was younger, I would always look at people and see if they have wedding rings on. And if they had wedding rings on, I assumed they were happier. Now that is completely kooky, right? That's completely kooky. Even to this day, though, when I see someone I know is married that they don't have on a ring, I'm like, "oh, what's going on?" There are certain cultures that people don't even wear rings. But for me, it was always this tell. You can find out something actually quite personal about somebody just from a ring on their finger. Most other signifiers, the race we present, or the gender we present, etc., etc.,

are things that we walk around with, but we can't take on and off like a ring. But when we know someone is married or not married, we think we know something about them. And so again, it exists in a very private space, but I think we deceive ourselves to think it only exists in a private space. I think marriage and married lives exist in public spaces in all kinds of ways, precisely because of the type of judgments that you're talking about with people thinking they know something about you if you've chosen to parent or if you haven't chosen to parent. That's another thing that often people think of it as a baseline. Just again, be really candid here, when we had decided to have a child, my husband kept saying, "well, I don't really like children." And I was like, "how could you possibly say that?" I was horrified, absolutely horrified. And then we have a child and we both adore her. I've realized, Allison, I don't really like children. I took her Girl Scout troop to my institution where I teach yesterday. And a lot of kids just don't behave in ways that I find particularly acceptable. And this is a group of 9 through 11 year olds, just rude, demanding, not appreciative. And, being around 18 9- to 11-year-olds for three hours, I was gone. I honestly, I came home and I said to my husband, "I'm so glad we have one child. How do people do it with more?"

But I think we really need to separate again, the mythology of, this is some ultimate achievement, like getting married or having kids, and this is what's going to make you happy. But we really need to think about again, as my husband would coin it, the typical day. What is a typical day going to look like with this person, in this place, living this life? And I think asking those really hard questions, those are actually really hard questions, but doing our best to figure out those answers is a way of acting with a certain degree of honesty and self-awareness. And that to me is also the hallmark of a feminist marriage. It's one where both people are as self-aware as possible at all times. And that doesn't mean one doesn't make mistakes, but one comes back and say, "gee, I was really in a bad place when I said those things or when I acted this way." And that recursive process or processing, it has been really important for me in sustaining a marriage that is relatively healthy and happy.

AT: I think what you're touching on here is the propaganda aspect where being a mom, particularly if you're going through pregnancy and childbirth, which of course not all moms do, particularly in the US, the US has the highest maternal mortality rate of any wealthy country. And pregnancy and childbirth are not fun. Again, speaking as someone who has not experienced this, my understanding is that these are not fun experiences, but the propaganda around it is like, "oh, you're glowing." It's like, "yeah, that's because she's sweating." But again, this feeling that a lot of people will attack you just for saying that even something that is objectively uncomfortable at best is not a great experience, a lot of people will come after you for saying that. And I think we're getting into how societies rely on women in particular getting married and having babies and the societal motivation for convincing women that this is not only something you should want, but your be-all-end-all goal should be to be a wife and mother. Because most societies couldn't function if women, I would say, accepted that these are often not ideal circumstances and chose not to pursue those paths.

LS: Yes. And I think there are a couple things just to add to what you're saying. First, you were talking about the maternal mortality rate in the United States, and I think we can nuance that even further. We have a particularly abysmal maternal mortality rate for Black women. And so earlier in the conversation, I was talking about the way in which power imbalances are etched into the experience of marriage. And I think that's a perfect example, which is to say that a white woman has a much better chance of having a successful delivery and birth and having both baby and mother walk away from it alive than a Black woman does in this country. And I also was thinking about the implicit whiteness of the marriage and child ideal. I think it's particularly white women that are held up as the paragon of, again, you must have a child and you must stay home with that child and you must devote your entire life to that child. And just the crazy contradiction that is when a Black woman perhaps wants to stay home with her child, we have a whole different racialized rhetoric around that thanks to Reagan era, the welfare [Listen to Alexis Pedrick on medical racism](#) or [read the transcript](#). So I think we need to be really careful about who it is that is being

told that being a mother is the pinnacle of their existence. It's usually white women that are being told this and then white women that are being celebrated, although not with any kind of social safety net. We still have, frankly, terrible early childhood intervention problems. We don't have any kind of socialized daycare system. So there's all these problems. So we tell women, "oh, you need to have children" and then we do nothing to support them, which is why I'm very interested in the reproductive justice movement, which is about women having, not just the ability to carry a child to term or to not, but if women do choose to parent, to parent those children in healthy environments where they have affordable healthcare and housing and proper nutrition and education and all those things. That's a big piece of this, but we get so hung up on the image of the white glowing bride, or like you said, the baby bump or the happy newborn pictures. But I think that's incredibly deceptive because there's so many ugly injustices that contribute to the perpetuation of that image.

AT: Following on from that, one of the things that you write about is the idea that it's the best social arrangement for the raising of children, which is not to say that you are advocating that, but it is very much the prevailing dominant idea, at least in the US and other European, Western countries. One argument that I've heard against romantic partnering is that the expectation that we prioritize that relationship over friendships and often familial ones, so this idea that this is your most important relationship in your life, and yet when it comes to raising children, a lot of women get more support from those friendship and family relationships than they do from a male partner, even when he's ostensibly meant to be an equally responsible parent.

SL: I think you're entirely right. More and more in my research, I try to think historically. I'm not trained as a historian in any way. I study contemporary stuff. So I've been kind of a presentist for a very long time. But of course, now some of those things are in the past. But I want to double back and say, "okay, where did we get this idea? Where did we get this idea? When did the nuclear family model as the aspiration, where did that come from?" Many, many people have said this, but I'll just say the same thing, which is post-World War II, "we need to jumpstart the economy, we have the GI Bill, we build houses in the suburbs so that everybody needs their own refrigerator, washer and dryer, television." And at that point, the nuclear family model becomes, again, its own self-supposedly self-sufficient unit with a man who goes out to work, a woman who stays home and takes care of the kids, the whole *Leave it to Beaver* idea. Economically speaking, that was such a blip. That was such a blip in the history of this country. For centuries, people have had extended family help raise their children. People lived often with their relatives or near their relatives. And as you say too, friendships, I'm not saying every woman lived on a commune, but the way in which people would share childcare responsibilities with other women in their communities, that's been happening and I think continues to happen. But we're so stuck in this idea that a perfect family is some *Leave it to Beaver* model, that I think we often miss what's actually happening and what makes for a sustainable community. Because a isolationist nuclear family model is really troubling for so many reasons. And I hate to actually reference this because I feel like people think feminism started with Betty Friedan and hello, it did not. But I do think there was something important about what Betty Friedan did, was she found all these well-educated housewives popping Valium all day because they were so bored and lonely. And that boredom and loneliness is what I find really interesting because part of the reason they were so bored and lonely is because they were living in these houses in the suburbs and couldn't admit that living in a house in the suburbs with two kids and a dog was actually quite miserable. And that is only one very raced and classed type of story, but I do think it tells us what some of the perils and pains really are when we hold the nuclear family up as the be-all and end-all of one's existence.

AT: When we're talking about privilege, and particularly, we know Betty Friedan was a huge homophobe. And I always have to point that out, just like I'll always point out Coco Chanel is a Nazi. But I think what it comes down to is, even the women with the most privilege, the women that this system is supposed to work for, it's not even working for them.

SL: I think that's a great point, Allison. And if it's not working for them, it's really not working for anyone. And as you say, those are the women with the most privilege and the most power. I couldn't have said it better. I think that's such an excellent point.

AT: Now, you've also written that, "while it does address gay marriage and queer communities, the bulk of the book addresses heterosexual marriage because it is the most prominent and publicized form of the commitment." But I'm curious, obviously, we've been talking a lot about male/female relationships. But how do different gender dynamics impact feminism in a marriage or relationship from your perspective?

SL: Part of the reason I wrote that statement that you just took from *A Feminist Guide to Marriage* is while I am writing a book that sort of posits me as quasi-psychologist, really I'm a media studies scholar, and I have a PhD in English. So really what I study are stories, essentially, I study stories about marriage. And the most prevalent stories about marriage are about heterosexual marriage, in part because, I'm mostly an Americanist, gay marriage was legalized only 10 years ago. But all this being said, something really interesting is happening now, despite the current political climate, which is really trying to reinstate the gender binary in all kinds of horrific and disturbing ways. But I really think the cat's out of the bag in some ways, which is to say that despite what the current administration is trying to enforce, we know that gender isn't a binary. Now, granted, I know I'm an intellectual academic who lives in Boston and writes books, and I'm certainly fodder for some comedians. But I do think we are seeing that the younger generations are really starting to play with ideas of gender, gender fluidity. I see a lot of students who are non-binary, and so I think this notion of getting so hung up on, is a marriage heterosexual or is a marriage gay? It is my true hope, and it doesn't seem like it's going to get realized anytime soon, but my true hope is that we will stop spending so much time trying to figure out, well, is this a gay marriage? Or if it's a trans woman and a cis man, is that a heterosexual marriage? Who cares? I think what I'm really interested in is how do two people, or three people, frankly, try to spend their lives together? What does it mean to mix one's sexual desire and the fact that someone has to mop up the floor when you spill the milk? For me, as I said, again, as we really start to unpack these questions of gender and sexuality, what remains a constant is the question of how do people live together? How do we live in a community? How do we care for each other and other things, be they cats, be they parakeets, be they children? And how do we do this in a way that forwards a mission of social justice and equality, not just for the parakeets and ourselves, but for our entire communities? How do we model that for our communities? And so I think as time goes on, we'll get less hung up on questions of "what does a man do?" I'm really hoping that there will be a time, probably not in my lifetime, but that maybe there will be a time when people won't know that men are the one who take out the trash. Maybe it'll just be whoever likes taking out the trash will take out the trash. And that's my hope. As I said, I know we're not going to get there anytime soon, but attaching gender to all of these things that really don't have a gender, to me, is where I wish for the world to go.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women Podcast. And remember, well-behaved women rarely make history.