

## Literary Couples and 20th-Century Writing: Narrative and Intimacy

Janine Utell, London, Bloomsbury, 2020, Pp. 215. \$108 (hardback), \$35.95 (paper), \$ 28.76 (ebook). ISBN: 9781350003460

Kate Schnur

To cite this article: Kate Schnur (2021) Literary Couples and 20th-Century Writing: Narrative and Intimacy, *Feminist Modernist Studies*, 4:3, 394-396, DOI: [10.1080/24692921.2021.1989256](https://doi.org/10.1080/24692921.2021.1989256)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/24692921.2021.1989256>



Published online: 08 Nov 2021.



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Janine Utell's *Literary Couples and 20th-Century Life Writing* is a study rooted in the play of oppositions. It illuminates the distance that comes from intimacy, the knowledge that stems from the unknowable, the obscure that hides behind the famous, and the collective identity that depends upon individual subjectivity. *Literary Couples* offers new avenues for analysis in the fields of modernism and life writing through its refusal to take the state of "the couple" for granted, and through its larger meditation on what it means to know the life of a literary figure. "The couple" becomes an active and continued state of becoming through the life writing they produce. Intimacy, then, is an epistemological state created by writing through and around the impossibility of knowing. Utell turns "the couple" into a literary concept that needs its own set of methodologies and assumptions in order to understand the knowledges created – and obfuscated – within the couple's intimate writings. This process-oriented method allows for an appreciation of the realities a text can create, not the biographical "truths" they (mis)represent. In Utell's readings, meaning is constantly becoming and shifting, and it is the critic's challenge to read through the intertwined works of writers who constantly re-inscribe their own lives: lives that are then analyzed, mythologized, and re-narrated by later authors and artists. Life writing, consequently, becomes deeply intimate, local, public, and hyper-mediated.

*Literary Couples* reads as almost the natural sequel to Utell's earlier work on marriage and desire in *James Joyce and the Revolt of Love* (2010) and on the work of narrative and storytelling in *Engagements with Narrative* (2016). Here, Utell transforms the concept of "the couple" into a project of "world-building," as the authors move from the ontological state of "I" to the markedly distinct, coupled state of "we" through the generative work of life writing. The book's archive is capacious in its expanse across the twentieth century, across the literary canon, across theoretical schools, and across genres of "text," as Utell turns to novels, letters, autobiographies, interviews, films, museum exhibitions, podcasts, and cartoons. The case studies that Utell offers focus on moments of collaboration by the couples themselves – like Christopher Isherwood and Don Bachardy's *October* or Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland's *Whether a Dove or a Seagull* – re-tellings of a couple's intimacy after the death of one of the partners – like Alice Toklas's retelling of her domesticity with Stein through her *Cookbook* – and creative renderings of the couple's biography – like Virginia Woolf's *Flush* or the museum exhibitions that curate the lives of Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes. In each chapter, Utell further analyzes the role of biography in establishing narrative and creating knowledge from each of the couples studied. The reparative readings Utell offers – sometimes to counter these narratives – allow the texts to build on, revise, and outright contradict each other in their representations of domestic happiness, sexual betrayal, and terminal illness. Utell embraces the interstitial moments of confusion that lie between and beneath the biographical moments that complicate the couples' attempts to know each other and the contemporary reader's to know the couple. These struggles with knowledge are, Utell argues, directly related to the experimentation in form that make each of these authors distinctly modernist.

In chapter 1, "Early 20th-Century Life Writing and the Making of Intimacy," Utell constructs a theoretical framework that accounts for new experimentations in subject representation in the growth of the modernist "new biography." Utell analyzes how the ontological and epistemological confusion of "the couple" is literarily rendered through intimate life

writing through analysis of Leslie Stephens's *Mausoleum Book*, Vita Sackville-West's *Portrait of a Marriage* (conspicuously edited by her son Nigel Nicholson), and Virginia Woolf's *Flush*.

Chapter 2 – “Worlding” – argues that Gertrude Stein's “Ada,” *A Book Concluding With As a Wife Has a Cow*, *The Autobiography of Alice B Toklas*, *Tender Buttons*, and Alice Toklas's *The Alice B. Toklas Cook Book* are texts that address the epistemological relations of the couple as they retrace their partners' lives before they meet, when they are together, and when they are separated by death. In Utell's care, this collection of canonical and non-canonical Stein become shared, collaborative texts that build a “storyworld” rooted in the ordinariness of Stein and Toklas's daily existence.

Chapter 3 analyzes the narrative strategies taken by Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland in their life writing, offering an intertextual analysis of their letters and diaries, their published memoirs, and their supposedly collaborative volume of poetry, *Whether a Dove or a Seagull*. “Encounter and Loss” analyzes the couple's methods of writing together, writing through each other's subjectivities, and rewriting past experiences that have now taken new form in the face of the pain of infidelity and illness. Utell poignantly argues that allowing for heterogenous narratives of a couple to exist together does not mean that it is impossible for readers to make meaning from these texts, but rather the collection of texts serve as an “intimate archive” where we “encounter a proliferation of ‘I’s and ‘we’s in conversation with each other, and with us.”<sup>1</sup>

In chapter 4, “Time and the Other,” Utell contextualizes Isherwood and Bachardy's collaborative *October*. Arguing that part of the state of the “we” is seeing a partner as both subject and other, Utell analyzes their letters and diaries – particularly their creation of “The Animal” personas – as a mutual embrace of the partner's otherness. In the second half of the chapter, Utell turns to the blending of intimate life writing, biographical commentary, and the retroactive adaptation of a couple's life in the podcast *The Animals*, the film *Chris & Don: A Love Story*, and Isherwood's memoir of his parents' relationship *Kathleen and Frank* in order to analyze the “afterlives” of a couple, and the new cultural work intimacy does in these later retellings. Utell closes *Literary Couples* with an analysis of the impact of biography on analyses of the poetry of Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes. In “Gaps and Closures,” Utell reads Hughes's infidelity as an epistemological rupture for the couple that disrupts their becoming and their ability to narrate their “we.” Through an analysis of their poetry, letters, and interviews, Utell argues that the Plath/Hughes couple could not allow for the “difference” between the two members, ultimately arguing that intimacy depends on difference. Difference facilitates the couple's “radical effort to be made toward shared knowledge or mutual recognition.”<sup>2</sup>

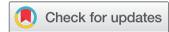
*Literary Couples* is most apparently useful to biographers and scholars who specialize in life writing both within and outside the modernist period because of its rigorous analysis of the methods of biography and the analysis of life writing. It is also of further use to modernist critics invested in using queer theory as an analytical framework, as Utell's theorizing of intimacy, knowledge, and history depends on the works of Lauren Berlant, Heather Love, and Sara Ahmed, among others. Though Utell often discusses the work of the “biographer,” the large cross-genre body of texts studied suggests that any literary critic or artist who works with the lives of authors must learn from the questions of ethics and method that Utell poses throughout this study. Utell's diligent outlining of the epistemological impossibilities inherent in the couples' self-narration is, to my mind, what is most instructive in this text. *Literary Couples* models how to make meaning from those gaps without solving them, and articulates the distinctions literary critics must make between truth, knowledge, and meaning.

## Notes

1. Utell, *Literary Couples*, 118.
2. *Ibid.*, 162.

Kate Schnur  
Queens College, City University of New York  
✉ kate.schnur@qc.cuny.edu

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/24692921.2021.1989256>



**In and Out of Sight: Modernist Writing and the Photographic Unseen**, by Alix Beeston, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018, 280 pp., \$82 (hardcover) ISBN: 9780190690168

The growing attention paid by American culture to the racialized and gendered characteristics of police brutality has given rise to the piecemeal recognition that photographic stills, and even film clips, do not have a straightforward relationship to the truth. Their function as documentary evidence has often been undercut by the preconceptions and prejudices of viewers. That we ever believed in the objectivity of photography is, as media historians have shown, in part a product of photography's early adoption as an empiricizing instrument by practitioners of various nineteenth-century pseudo-sciences whose positivist impulses found in the visual technology a means of demarcating and regulating supposed biological, social, and cultural norms. Francis Galton, for instance, the founder of eugenics and cousin to Charles Darwin, leveraged the mechanical precision of photography to make seem factual his claim that biological features (such as race, sex, and disability) are linked in a predetermined fashion to social facts (such as class and criminality). His composite portraits, which overlaid photographs of multiple—sometimes many—individuals to form ghostly group aggregates, provided, he asserted, generalizations that were akin to “pictorial statistics”—like any chart or tabulated dataset.

Opening with a multi-faceted dissection of Galton's experiments in composite photography, Alix Beeston's new study, *In and Out of Sight*, argues that Galton's nineteenth-century project provides “a surprising but compelling model for the poetics and politics of modernist literary texts written in the early decades of the twentieth century.”<sup>1</sup> By demonstrating the ways in which Galton's portraits subvert the scopic regime of his camera and its eugenicist frame, Beeston develops a thesis that relates the lapses and aberrations that become evident in Galton's reiterative photographic assemblages to the serialized and segmented forms of narrativization and characterization in modernist novels. In particular, *In and Out of Sight* conceptualizes what Beeston names “the woman-in-series,” a formulation which asserts that the “reiterated, sutured” bodies of literary modernism's female characters are “coextensive with the reiterated sutured bodies of the texts [they] populate.”<sup>2</sup> What this ontological swivel of the woman-in-series permits, Beeston contends, is “a new theory of literary textuality in modernism—a theory that occasions a feminist reappraisal of its ethical possibilities.” Four chapters—accompanied by an engaging selection of black and white photographic plates—elaborate this thesis in relation to Gertrude Stein's *Three Lives*, Jean Toomer's *Cane*, John Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer*, and F. Scott Fitzgerald's Hollywood