The Violence of Memory
Showtime’s The Affair and the gender politics of recollection

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“It’s a good fairy tale,” said Van.
“It’s a fairy tale,” said careful Ada.
— Vladimir Nabokov, Ada, or Ardor

Can you remember where you were when you first became aware of how little you owned your own image? I was fourteen, standing in the checkout line at the Jewel-Osco with my mother. He was red-faced, my age; he looked hungry and bewildered. His eyes dug at me over the top of a paper bag.

He had taken something from me, but as I stood and wished for obscurity I realized that I had also given it. Hadn’t I? By merely walking outside and into the line of sight of others, I had made a copy of myself available to anybody and everybody who wanted one. Mannequins with my body and snippets of my affect probably roamed in the minds of more strangers than I could ever count. More than that, I was guilty of the same procedure. I also pressed people into the thin paper of my mind like flowers, greedily collected and hoarded. Who didn’t hold on to people in this way? There was nothing to do about it. It seemed like the oldest thing in the world.

By the time I started working as a waitress, and watched myself being remembered at a far greater frequency than before, I had a new literary arsenal with which to hammer at this question. I also
had an excuse to write—with a serious enough facial expression, you can always make out like you’re correcting an order, or re-numbering the guests at your table, or making sure you charged for three glasses of wine instead of two. Instead, I wrote: *We all keep people, but who has more power to do it in the way they want, and to bring the world into line with those thoughts? Whose memory carries weight? Whose memory can be felt by its target? Whose fantasies have teeth?*

**THE AFFAIR**

A slim woman in a bathing suit approaches a man leaning on the edge of a pool. “Mind if I split?” she asks. “Sure,” he says, smiling, and she dives over him and into his lane. This first moment of dialogue in Showtime’s *The Affair*, though brief, is charged. For one, it is a beginning of sly misdirection in a show that will take up misdirection as a major theme; these two characters, despite some heavy-handed sexual tension, are not the two characters that will carry out the show’s titular affair. That the man, our first protagonist Noah Solloway (a rumpled and perpetually weary-eyebrowed Dominic West) permits the entry of a figurative disruption into his space in a feminine form also seems telling—we are witnessing, in a way, precisely the kind of moment we are expecting as viewers of a show called *The Affair*. The reason why one watches a show called *The Affair*, after all, is to figure out what leads to such a moment: to a giving of permission, to an entrance into space that was previously exclusive and cordoned off—why someone, in short, might break a promise, and how they do it.

But there’s something else, too. The “Mind if I split?” also serves as a tongue-in-cheek request to the viewer, given that *The Affair* itself is split: in what may seem to be an unpromising premise but is (usually) masterfully executed, each episode of the first season’s ten, which aired last fall, is cut in half, presented from the perspective of each of the show’s two main protagonists. The narration, at least in the beginning, is revealed to us in voiceover to also be a retelling in the present: both Allison and Noah (loaded names for a romantic plotline, especially since for about a thousand reasons *The Notebook* this is not) are relating the story of their relationship to a detective in an interrogation room.
That story is revealed slowly, piecemeal, and in conflicting terms. Noah is a teacher and father of four, fresh off the publication of his first book, happily married and living in New York on his in-laws’ dime. Those in-laws live in Montauk, where the Solloways travel every summer and where Allison (an electric Ruth Wilson, who won a Golden Globe for the role) is a waitress at the Lobster Roll, married to the son of a prominent local family that owns and operates a ranch (as well as, we learn, a sizeable cocaine operation). Allison is trying to salvage a marriage with her husband after the death of their young child while Noah, in full canonical midlife crisis mode, is struggling with fulfilling expectations and trying to pull together a second novel. In some episodes, they narrate the same exact set of events pertaining to their entanglement, or at least operate within the same timetable, while in others their stories fit chronologically one after the other.

The split perspective is the show’s greatest risk, greatest triumph, and greatest sticking point for critics. Commentators have noted the differences in the portrayal of events but with regard to gender most of the interest has been disappointingly cosmetic. It is remarked, for instance, and never explored, that Noah remembers Allison with her hair down, in shorter skirts and falling spaghetti straps, while she remembers herself dressing more conservatively with her hair...
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tucked away—because, of course. Otherwise, the question of gender disappears altogether. Discussions about the discrepancies between Noah and Allison's stories become a generic and dull meditation on perspective in which writers feign surprise that two people's memories of the same event can vary.

In my view, this perspective completely fails to engage with what I think the show does best: call up the gendered complexities regarding (1) memory and (2) sex. The first is done through the dual-storytelling device, which provides a dizzyingly enormous catalogue of moments to compare Noah's and Allison's perspectives. The second is achieved through explicit scenes. As more and more TV is doing these days, thanks to the fact that “the golden age of TV” is largely taking place on smaller networks and providers who can afford more leniency in this regard, The Affair challenges the legacy of sex as a narrative black hole that art cannot represent without compromising itself and becoming pornography. Game of Thrones, which has been criticized for its nudity and explicit sex, has done something similar. Sex on Thrones is (for the most part) about characterization and conversation. “Sex scenes” are not scenes that are comprised entirely of sex; they are scenes where sex is also happening. The Affair follows in this tradition, taking up the line between art and porn, and tying a gleeful knot in it.

This brings me to the main point of this essay, which will be that both sex and memory are often treated like analytical antimatter—beyond, for whatever reason, the space of meaningful critical engagement. The real genius of The Affair, for me, is that it puts both sex and memory squarely at the center of our engagement with its story: in order to follow along, we have to get involved with them, and in order to critique the show, we have to get critical about them.

REMEMBERING GENDER

ALLISON: Can I ask you something? What do you see now, when you look at me?
NOAH: What do you think I see?

Noah's Allison is charming, knowing; an open-mouthed wink in
human form. Allison’s Noah is exuberant and professorly. Both exaggerations clearly represent something that the Noah and Allison, in recollection, believe that they needed: for Noah, someone with adventurous direction and spark to lead him out of his aimlessness; for Allison, someone with determined optimism and affection to lead her out of her grief.

When I was about halfway through the first season of *The Affair*, I called my sister Claire, who had recommended the show to me, to tell her about my thoughts. I confessed, tentatively, that I had begun to treat Noah’s story like the fictionalized version of events, and Alison’s like the truth. My hesitation was unwarranted: Claire told me she had started to do the same.

This approach to the story felt somehow taboo. I think it’s because, like sex, memory was supposed to be a dead analytical and narrative space: since Noah and Allison both want to remember things as better than they were, and both want to remember themselves in a more flattering light, one ought to trust them, or distrust them, equally. If sex was narrative antimatter, memory was moral antimatter: it was where one could not go without collapsing the question.

But I felt unsatisfied by that explanation, rather similarly to how I felt unsatisfied by Janet Halley’s October 2014 talk at the University of Chicago Law School, where Halley deconstructed the famous rape case *State v. Rusk* by showing a chart with five to six “Pats” (the plaintiff) and six corresponding “Eddies” (the defendant). The exercise imagined, at each end, a “completely innocent” Pat/Eddie paired with a “completely evil” Pat/Eddie, with “neither evil nor innocent” possibilities in between. This seemed to me like it couldn’t possibly be necessary. Is creating a set of coordinates, a visible spectrum of pairs, the only, or even best, way we have to make
judgments of character? The question of whether it is perhaps an unfortunate obligation of the law to think in this way is a different issue, and one I don’t want to speak to here. But when we want to get a grasp on the past, do we have to mark the memories of those who were there as always-already unreliable and disposable if they don’t match up? Is our only recourse to imagine, crudely and approximately, what kind of people they might have been?

*The Affair* is distinctive in that it not only portrays explicit sex but also employs its device of twin-rememberings in its portrayals of that sex—and, in doing so, calls into relevance this whole set of questions related to current discourse around sexual violence. While there is never an incident where consent is in question between the two main characters in the show, the specter of sexual violence hangs permanently at the periphery of *The Affair*’s central relationship. In the pilot episode we are shown a scene where Noah views Allison having sex with her husband against a truck; in Noah’s memory, the sex is cruel and forced, and he only refrains from heroically intervening at Allison’s shake of the head; in Allison’s memory, the sex is consensual, and she feels at first horrified and then aroused as she realizes Noah is watching. In the direct context of their relationship, both Noah and Allison recall that the other person initiated more sexual and physical contact (although there is some asymmetry in how this is done).
There are high current political stakes to these decisions. Various review outlets have spoken of The Affair as a “he said, she said” story, a turn of phrase that has often been—and still often is—put to use in the context of dismissing sexual violence. What “he said, she said,” means is: a man and a woman disagree, so no one knows.

But can’t we know? Or can’t we try? After Halley’s talk I requested that she explain what she had meant by the phrase “fear of Eros,” which she had identified as a problem among young activists working on issues of sexual assault. She explained, confirming what I had suspected but had hoped was otherwise, that she used the term to refer to a fear of seduction, a fear of sex. Having the benefit of a more direct perspective on the youth she was referring to, I cannot help but guess that she was speaking either of (1) the recent and, in my opinion, deserved pushback against the flattening ideological regime of sex positivity, or, even worse, of (2) the ridiculous but surprisingly popular proposition that all this talk of assault is keeping people from having good sex anymore.

I’ve already said that I think part of what makes The Affair so great—and this is something the showrunners realize—is the way it treats sex not as a singular plot point but as an interaction, as a multilayered, non-universal form of human experience whose importance to narrative exceeds a suggestive fade to black. Sex does not stop time. Sex, like time, is motion (if, perhaps, a motion that can enable a certain kind of stasis). Within it space relations are rearranged minutely or re-inscribed; new or old fissures between people and ideas and pasts and presents are called into friction. Sex, like many other forms of human interaction, means a thousand things, and rarely even means the same thing to those involved. This is an argument others have made, and wisely, to end the stigmatization of sex work, for instance. It is one that also works against the emerging idea of sex positivity as a universal human aspiration, as I mentioned above. And it is the same argument that Halley is afraid of: that if we draw attention to the plasticity of sex as a form of experience, we somehow compromise its sexiness.

But both sex and memory do more for us when we let go of them as inaccessible and mysterious homogeneities of life. When
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we see them as spaces into which life, power enter differently, and unexpectedly, we can ask new questions. We can ask, for instance, what we might see when we allow ourselves to explore the possibility that what Noah is telling is less like the truth.

THE PLUNGE

Sometimes I have worried that The Affair expects nothing more of us than what most television critics have offered—that it expects us to be sated by its gimmick, content either to chart out Noahs and Allisons in corresponding pairs (Good Allison, Bad Noah; Good Noah, Bad Allison) among whom we can divide blame, or throw up our hands in the face of conflicting stories and decide that nothing can be done.

But then I re-watch. That The Affair begins with a dive portends its most recurrent and oppressive theme: characters swim lengths in pools, contemplate drowning, take oddly frequent showers. The sea looms over Montauk and over the plot of the show darkly and inevitably. It is the site that precipitated the death of Allison’s son, who was a victim of secondary drowning. The Affair’s promotional images, in a scene that has never appeared in the show, portray Noah and Allison submerged in the ocean, peering suspiciously back at us. The show’s Fiona Apple-penned theme, in the tradition both of her oeuvre and The Affair’s aesthetic, is oddly as jaunty as it is chilling and minimal, and ends with Apple repeating

I have only one thing to do and that’s
Be the way that I am and then
Sink back into the ocean.

The Affair suggests, through the recurrence of depths and their approximations, a vast unconscious, an oceanic feeling a la Freud. It urges us into the multidimensionality and messiness of things. And as part of this project it points, quietly but surely, to gender.

I decided to doubt Noah in the fourth episode, the first time he and Allison concretize (and consummate) their affair. They go away together, taking a ferry to a small island, and in both their versions
of events, they share a conversation by a beach where cliffs rise in the distance and rocks rise out of the spray. Noah’s version of events includes this remark from Allison:

**ALLISON:** My grandfather used to bring me out here when I was a kid—he was a bit of a shipwreck fanatic. There’s one right out there past the break, and sometimes when the tide is low you can still see the tip of the mast. We used to come down here and we’d pretend it was Neverland. And Peter Pan and the Lost Boys on the shipwreck, and I was Tiger Lily, waiting for them on the beach. My grandfather used to say if I listened closely to the wind, I would hear Peter calling for me.

For Allison, this moment goes like this:

**ALLISON:** They say this beach is haunted. You see where it gets dark suddenly? It looks like a whirlpool. Right out there about a hundred yards out.

**NOAH:** Yeah.

**ALLISON:** It’s a shipwreck.

**NOAH:** No kidding.

**ALLISON:** Yeah. This island is famous for them.

**NOAH:** Huh. It seems like such a pleasant place.

**ALLISON:** They say if you, um, if you listen closely to the wind, you can hear the sound of a little boy who died in the ship calling for his mother.

**NOAH:** Jesus.

The first obvious difference here is one of form: in Noah’s memory, Allison speaks in monologue; in Allison’s memory, this is a conversation. In the second instance, Noah is what I would call *actively subordinate*: he reacts to each piece of the narrative to confirm its receipt and his continued interest; all the while allowing Allison to push toward the story that she really wants to tell. Allison is clearly the conductor of this conversation, and the scene is shot such that she faces away from Noah, looking out over the landscape. In this exchange she wanders, and Noah follows behind, picking up what she strews in her wake.
The monologue, in contrast, is toward, and for, Noah—it is shot with Allison facing him. In this version her story is charming, it does not gesture toward darkness, and its function is to entertain. Noah, silently, consumes.

The same themes emerge in the relation of each of these moments to place. In Noah’s memory, Allison has personal history with the spot where this conversation occurs: it is directly bound up with her past. She is part of its beauty and wildness, native to it, a player in its mythology. It is her grandfather, her childhood; Peter calls to her. But in her memory of the exchange, she, like Noah, is merely a spectator to that mythology—rather than entertaining, she is sharing knowledge. Her grandfather replaced by an amorphous “they”, the Allison in her own version of the story has no particular connection to this place. The tale is the kind of local knowledge that might be found in a brochure—possibly part of an intellectual and narrative inheritance, but never part of her body, of her self. She is not of it. She stands together with Noah at the distance of a tourist.

The importance of this distinction is brought into relief for us by a remark of Allison’s elsewhere, in which she expresses her surprise that anything ever happened between herself and Noah at all, given that he is a “summer person”. “They come in, they leave”, she tells the detective. “They barely even notice us, the ones who wait their tables or bait their lines. We might as well be traffic lights to them. Stop signs, lamp posts. We blend into the scenery.” In Noah’s memory, Allison has to be part of the landscape—he is, after all, fictionalizing her not only in memory but also in his new novel, which is a thinly veiled reproduction of his and Allison’s affair. Part of the purpose of the island trip is to do research for the book, which not only mirrors their situation but also contains a twist that Noah decides to add at the prompting of his agent, who suggests that stories like Noah’s are not terribly new. “So how is it different?”

Noah pauses to think about this, and then says: “He kills her. In the end.”

If this is the harm Noah does for Allison in memory, that her struggles with grief and self-injury are forgotten, that her gaze
outward is forced back in upon Noah and his need for levity and adoration, then what is the harm Allison does to Noah? She remembers that he is kind, that he sees and recognizes her pain. She misremembers, possibly. But is it a harmful forgetting? Noah himself admits, in the first monologue of the pilot, that he was not unhappy, that he could not trace the genesis of the affair back to any specific sensation, not even boredom. One cannot help but remember here—or at least I can’t—that Allison is a waitress, that her body in uniform, and perhaps outside of it, too, signals not only occupational but emotional availability to those who are looking for it. She is paid to pretend that her will is synonymous with the needs of the table and its guests, that she can sense its aches before it can cry out. She is in this sense asked to be inanimate, to be tidal, to bring in plates and saltshakers and then to pull them away. She is asked to be scenery. Noah never says so, but maybe he asks the same.

CRACKING OPEN MEMORY

Part of a good politics is figuring out what you can live with, and what you can’t. Stephen Sondheim’s Into the Woods, another work for whom sex surfaces (though less explicitly) as a key site of characterization, contains the following verse, in a song called “No
One Is Alone” (whose moral, I hasten to add, is rather more complex than the platitudinous title suggests):

People make mistakes—fathers, mothers—people make mistakes
Holding to their own, thinking they’re alone
Honor their mistakes, fight for their mistakes, everybody makes—
One another’s terrible mistakes

I have always liked these words for how terrible they are, and how certain. How can one honor a mistake, and why should one? Should one not strive to condemn mistakes, even of those one loves and respects? Can’t one condemn mistakes and spare those who make them? What this verse suggests is the inevitability of our imperfect entanglements in the world: we will all fail, sooner or later, to be able to cleanly separate a mistake from its maker, and we will all find ourselves in the position of having to defend mistakes, and to fight for them. The question is: whose mistakes will you honor? Whose mistakes can you live with?

A show like *The Affair* asks us, invites us, to make judgments about these questions. What I have tried to do here is to show that when we hunt for criteria to answer them—which we can do—we can enter memory rather than deny it as a space of nihilistic sameness. The past is not an unreadable muddle of fantasies that inevitably conflict, in which everyone is equally and similarly self-aggrandizing. When we take gender as a human legacy of collective forgetfulness, memory cracks open.

The first principle that canonical queer theorist Eve Sedgwick outlines in her essay “Axiomatic” is, “People are different from one another.” By this she means something like what I have claimed above, that is, that categories of experience are necessarily flawed and distortive; that frames of reference for meaning, while guessable, are not predetermined and must always be assumed to be in flux. Rather than endorsing a kind of negative and total cultural relativism, this view encourages constant critical engagement, a certain lightness of foot. It urges us onward toward horizons of
difference. How are people different from one another? And what different kinds of permission do they have to forget?

Somewhere within, or perhaps slightly before, its last frenetic hour of television, *The Affair* falls apart. The heart of the show becomes submerged underneath the choppy waters and baffling drama of its poorly conceived murder plotline. Its true center, for me—and maybe Ruth Wilson is more to blame for this than the showrunners—was always the question of where Allison is, where she goes. Noah’s imagination, one senses, begins and ends in Montauk—the setting of his book, where his characters and those he characterizes go about their lives. Allison is elsewhere. One wants to call it grief, but it’s more than that. She’s listening to something else. He never asks her what.

Two episodes after I lost faith in Noah, his memory takes us to a nightclub called The End in which he pretends to meet Allison as though he never knew her. They stumble back to a hotel room, where Allison stands up on the bed. Noah stops and stares at her. “You know,” he says, “sometimes I worry you’re just a really great dream.”

“Well, don’t wake up now”, she says. Noah’s Allison, the one he remembers. As if to say: I allow this. As if to say: let me be what you made me. I am happy like this.