



LUST: ESTHER PEREL AND LAURA KIPNIS

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER, Instigator

The Erotic and the Domestic: The Pitfalls of Modern Intimacy

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PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: My name is Paul Holdengräber, and I have the distinct pleasure—I think today is a good day to say “pleasure”—**(laughter)** of sitting between Esther Perel, on my right, and Laura Kipnis, on my left. I feel like a very happy man today. We are here to talk about a very serious subject, lust, but before I explore, explode, the subject, I would like to tell you a few things that are of importance. We are going to talk for about forty-five minutes. As you gather, that’s about as long as a psychoanalytical session. At forty-five minutes, I will be told—in a fashion I will show you in a minute—that my time, their time, our time is over, and we will have another two minutes to wrap up. If in two minutes, we haven’t wrapped up and we’re still, as it were, lustful to talk some more, we will get a third cue. At that point, you will have, unlike in a psychoanalytical session, you, the audience, will have fifteen minutes of your own to ask questions. I insist on the notion of questions. For those of you who were here just in the preceding event on diversity, questions in my view can be asked in about fifty-two seconds, give or take a second here or there. And after that there will be a book signing.

Both Esther's book and Laura's book will be outside for you to purchase at a discount rate, I'm told to tell you.

Now, let me demonstrate to you how the first time at forty-five minutes, the session will end. **(First notes of Fifth Symphony) (laughter)** Then, at forty-seven minutes, let me demonstrate how I will be reminded that it's about to end. **(First notes of Fifth Symphony)** And then at sixty minutes, we might, if we're still going over time, and we're still desirous to speak some more, there will be a very loud beginning of that Fifth Symphony of Beethoven, which I'm sure all of you recognized.

This is part of *The Atlantic Monthly* celebration. We're celebrating a hundred and fifty years of *The Atlantic Monthly*. We're also celebrating a hundred and fifty years of Freud, so for those of you who have tickets to come and hear Zizek and George Prochnik and Wayne Koestenbaum, I hope you will come and attend. For those of you who have tickets and are not coming, please remit those tickets, as we are totally sold out for that event, I'm happy to say. And here there are very few empty seats, which doesn't surprise me.

Let's begin immediately, in medias res, and it's a question that I will ask both of you and I don't know with whom to begin so whoever speaks first, go ahead and explore this topic. Let's talk about adultery. I thought this was a good way of beginning. **(laughter)** As a way of saving a marriage. Why is divorce so often the answer to adultery, is another way of posing the question. Laura, Esther, who wants to take that first?

LAURA KIPNIS: Oh, I would just like to start by quoting myself. Will all the adulterers in the room please stand up?

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Yeah, it's on the, on the, so?

LAURA KIPNIS: And then I usually wait.

ESTHER PEREL: Will all those who have ever *thought* about adultery ever stand up?

Q: Can we just raise our hands?

(laughter)

ESTHER PEREL: Yes, raise your hands. I think that certainly in this country, there seems to be a very great tolerance for divorce, and for multiple marriages, but a great intolerance for the concept of renegotiating boundary, for adultery, any sort. Somehow people would almost prefer dismantling the whole relationship than to question its structure. That's part of why you can be in a series of monogamous relationships, one after the other, you know, and be considered faithful, but if you have cheated once, you are an adulterer and an infidel forever. And why do United States would much rather dissolve it all, I think has to do with the sacred cow of monogamy, which is part of the romantic ideal, that there is something about sexual betrayal that seems to be the reigning queen of all infidelities.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: So divorce, you're saying if I understand you well, is less of a taboo in this country than adultery?

ESTHER PEREL: Yes. Partly because it feeds right into the idea that there is one relationship that can be for *everything*, and that if you find out that this relationship isn't going to do that for you, then you opt out, and you say, "I chose the wrong person. I'll go and look elsewhere for the person with whom I can *really* have everything," rather than question the model of the institution itself.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: So to go back to my question, adultery as a way of saving a marriage. You believe that is a correct statement?

ESTHER PEREL: I think that some affairs are the death knell for a gasping relationship that was already on its way out. And I think it—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: But for a better relationship, it's a way of making it—

ESTHER PEREL: I think for many others it is the alarm that gets people reinvigorated and reengaged. Nothing like the threat of loss to get people interested in each other again, sexually also. **(laughter)** You recognize? Raise your hand. This is going to be our mantra.

LAURA KIPNIS: I think we would have to say that there are different types of adultery, and that adultery isn't only one kind of thing.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: So let's make a taxonomy of adultery.

LAURA KIPNIS: Okay. So the first taxonomy, the first two categories, are the adultery that becomes known versus the adultery that never is discovered. So, you know, adultery can be used for all sorts of purposes. And there's the form of adultery which sustains a marriage and is kept on the quiet and, you know, or people who have serial affairs and that goes on for years. Or there are these interesting games that people play with each other, where the *exposure* of the affair has some kind of significance in itself. And I mean, there are endless numbers of varieties of adultery, but I just don't think it's *one* thing. And I was, I got—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: But you are a proponent of adultery.

LAURA KIPNIS: Well, I got accused of being a proponent of adultery and I thought that was kind of a dumb reading of my book, of *Against Love*.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I didn't mean to say that I read it in that dumb fashion.

(laughter)

LAURA KIPNIS: And I didn't mean to call you dumb.

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: No, not this early in the conversation.

LAURA KIPNIS: Not quite yet, not quite yet.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Let's wait another twenty-five minutes for that to happen.

LAURA KIPNIS: But I've had to say many times that adultery doesn't need me to be its proponent, you know, it's doing quite well on its own.

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: But I mean I think it gained some momentum with you behind it.

(laughter)

LAURA KIPNIS: Why, thank you, but as I said, I was trying to explicate some of the aspects of it that aren't so usually explicated, or do the taxonomy, or look at it without the ethical hammer, and say, "Well, what is it that people are actually pursuing when they're doing this?" as opposed to just saying, "You're bad and you've betrayed your vows." So I was trying to complicate the subject.

ESTHER PEREL: I think that at the border of every relationship lives the third. The third. The third is that person which I didn't choose when I chose you but that continues to hover around. The third is the manifestation—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And change.

ESTHER PEREL: And change. It can be multiple people. It can be the cashier this morning that I saw at the supermarket, it can be my ex-boyfriend from twenty years ago. It can be the person that I would never want to approach. But there is a sense that the third is the manifestation of my desire for anything that lies outside the fence. It is the forbidden. And you can have adulterous relationships that are completely in your erotic mind, in your own imagination, that are never coming into fruition and that do the trick, you know. But what I'm trying—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: The trick being?

ESTHER PEREL: The trick being that it can reconfirm why you chose the person you're with. The trick is that they maintain a sense of freedom, that you have actually one place where you can always go, which is in your own imagination—that is the ultimate freedom we have. The trick is that you continue to imagine other possibilities, and you choose the possibility that you are in right now, and the trick is that you imagine one day another possibility.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: But all of this must remain—

ESTHER PEREL: That's what my patients describe to me again and again.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: But so adultery in this view is theoretical, not active?

ESTHER PEREL: Well, that depends. If active only means when it is—what, you know, there is an interesting thing about “active.” It means what? When people have had sex together? But people can sit with each other like this and discuss books and ideas and be in a completely erotic experience and never have touched each other at all.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Indeed, indeed.

(laughter)

LAURA KIPNIS: We are.

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Believe me, indeed, no, I agree.

ESTHER PEREL: So the definition of “active,” you know?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: No, no, no, I completely agree. **(laughter)** So tell me. No, really. **(laughter)** But tell me this. Is— is— is—

ESTHER PEREL: I didn’t mean to implicate you.

LAURA KIPNIS: I did.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Why not? I mean, please. **(laughter)** I feel—well, I’m sorry you don’t want to implicate me— **(laughter)** But in any event, let me ask you this. Is adultery a sign of a bad marriage?

ESTHER PEREL: Look. I am a psychologist and I work exclusively with couples, or essentially with couples, not only. But my field has tried very hard to convince us that an affair is a sign of a troubled marriage, and I think that that actually is not always the case. I think that there are very good marriages, very happy relationships, but they are not necessarily for *everything*. And the idea that sometimes people go outside to find something they don’t experience at home doesn’t mean that what is at home is not good. I think that the prime reason, from my experience with many of the patients I work with, is that there is sometimes in an ongoing relationship, a sense of *deadness* that sets in, a

sense of flatness. And you know, if we're talking about lust, and if we're talking about the erotic, which is to talk about a quality of aliveness, of exuberance, of vibrancy, of vitality, an affair is pretty much high up there in what can make you feel instantly alive, like you hadn't felt in years.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Alive and at the same time can cause great suffering.

ESTHER PEREL: Because the thing is that what suddenly makes *me* feel alive may at the same time be extremely hurtful for you. I think that every relationship lives with the specter of betrayal, from the start, and—but nobody sets out necessarily to go and betray their partner. But that is part of the experience. That's what makes it so impossible sometimes. Is that while I am reconnecting with something, with a part of myself, with a part of life that I so had forgotten, I am also feeling guilt, shame, bad about my transgression, terrified about the consequences of what this may mean for us, for our family, or for our couple, I mean, it's just so all-intensified and you know the third, the marriage, you know, the spouse, lives at the center of the affair, and the lover becomes the shadow of the marriage, so they are constantly juggling with the third, also. It's a complete triangular, a triangular relationship. And part of that is why many affairs actually don't necessarily succeed once they become just a dyad. They were organized in this triangular fashion, it was part of their structure. I mean, I can go on for a long time on this.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I realize. Laura. (laughter)

LAURA KIPNIS: Well, I think one of the things that interested me about adultery was that the basic idea is wanting something more. And that's not something that I think in general you want to quash in people. I mean, yes, it has its scummy, betraying dimension when it comes to marriage and, you know, the cheating-on-another-person thing, but I mean the wanting more is a basic utopian kind of impulse and one of the things that interested me in writing about adultery was that I thought that I wasn't only interested in the individual dyad or triad or whatever, but the larger dimensions of how it is that people

express a desire for *more*. And that in this culture it's through these subterranean, sneaky—you know, in this subterranean, sneaky fashion, but I think that that, you know, expression is quashed in every other realm, where people are encouraged to want less, to want less from life, ask less from, you know, *everything* plan for modern living so I like this wanting more and I think that is what's at the heart of it.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: In your book *Against Love* you quote a philosopher, historian, I've always very much loved, and who I don't know if anyone reads any more today outside of the academy, Denis de Rougement.

LAURA KIPNIS: I saw it on your card.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You saw it on my card. God. I need to hide my cards. Denis de Rougement in a book called *Love in the Western World*, I highly recommend it, writes this. He says, "The one obstacle love can't overcome is time." Say a bit about that.

LAURA KIPNIS: Well, you know, the obvious thing to say is that marriage is a social contract and what it is supposed to do is produce stability and that lust is about something else. I mean, it is often short-lived, and it's destabilizing, or it can be at its best, you know, destabilizing in various ways. And so, you know, one of the desire—one of the things that ends up happening with lust is this desire (a) to continue it and (b) to stabilize it so lust can either lead to a marriage or it can dissolve a marriage, you know, in certain cases because it becomes a more attractive alternative, but, you know, this is very widely said, but the question is, is marriage is a social institution particularly in the modern form where it's supposed to absorb all desires and lust—are they reconcilable? And I'm not sure that they are, and it's a kind of basic existential problem.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: That what is not irreconcilable?

LAURA KIPNIS: The desire for lust and newness and renewal and the stability that marriage as a social institution requires.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: But you, no—

ESTHER PEREL: I think my—*Mating in Captivity* is all about that.

LAURA KIPNIS: Right.

ESTHER PEREL: It's about how we go about reconciling our need for security and our need for adventure, and I think that if you take out the word "marriage," and you look at it in terms of—here's how I began to think of it. You know, I would meet happy couples, loving couples, who care about each other very much, and whose sexual life was dull, and time and again what would emerge is a kind of a description of the paradox between on the one hand our need for security, for familiarity, and for predictability, and on the other hand our need for adventure and novelty and risk.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And danger.

ESTHER PEREL: And danger. And the fact that the erotic thrives on those. But my image always was the little child. Because when I think about marriage, I don't think about the institution. I think about what people do in their desire to connect and to create a sense of secure base with each other. The rest of it—the institution—is actually one of the forms that it's a fairly recent one that we are doing with. And the little kid, he sits on your lap, and he experiences this secure base, and then, once he's comfortable and he's kind of taken you in, what does he do? He jumps off and he runs out, and he goes to explore and to discover, and he's into the novelty, the adventure, the security, the passion, the lust, all of that. And then he turns, and he sees, to see if you are still there. And when you are still there, what does he do? He goes further. And it is that balance between—do you remember that image? He goes further. And then every once in a while he comes back and he nests again and he anchors us, and there is a tension between our need for grounding and anchoring and predictability and our need for novelty and

mystery and all of that. And what we've tried to do in marriage today is to bring these two together. I think it is complicated.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: In this way you're not completely at odds with each other.

LAURA KIPNIS: I would say that there are all sorts of industries that thrive on trying to solve this problem, from therapy to sex toys. So it's not as if—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You're talking about the industry that Esther belongs to.

LAURA KIPNIS: The marriage-counseling industry, yeah, yeah. I mean it is, you know, the therapy-industrial complex. **(laughter)** And, you know, it is dedicated to producing optimism about this situation, but, you know, as I say there are all sorts of businesses.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: But what about if Esther actually is helping people?

(laughter)

ESTHER PEREL: I *do*. Every once in a while, I do.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: So is an industrial—what is it?

LAURA KIPNIS: I think I said the therapy-industrial complex. You know, if I—

ESTHER PEREL: We can switch to the girlfriend industrial complex.

LAURA KIPNIS: Yeah, I mean, well there are all these industries that are devoted to producing optimism. Like the antioxidant formula is supposed to solve the fine wrinkles around your eyes. I mean, optimism springs eternal.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Do you use any creams?

LAURA KIPNIS: And they're very pricey, these creams. And so is therapy. I mean, if I was getting two-fifty an hour, I could produce optimism, too, about this.

(laughter/applause)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: But because you're, I mean, because you're paid less, you're kind of—

LAURA KIPNIS: Far less, far less.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: So, maybe that's why you don't feel optimistic.

LAURA KIPNIS: That's why I'm so dissatisfied. Yeah, yeah.

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: But let's take this a little bit seriously for a moment. I'm actually quite interested by the fact that Esther Perel's business, line of work, as it were, could actually help.

LAURA KIPNIS: No, everybody's interested in that, because people are seeking a solution to this. Listen, I wrote a book—could I just finish?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You may, of course.

LAURA KIPNIS: I wrote a book with the title *Against Love* and everywhere I went, people were asking me, "But how do I fix this problem?" You know, if you write a book with "love" in the title, people think that you are going to solve their problems, and ask for advice. I could have become part of this advice-giving profession if I wouldn't have

felt like a bit of a fraud doing it. So, I mean the desire for advice doesn't mean—the desire for advice is there, let me say that, and it is real, it is quite real.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I read somewhere that you responded to a questioner by saying, a questioner, saying that you didn't need to be a pragmatist, you didn't need to offer pragmatic advice to anyone.

LAURA KIPNIS: I think there is a place for people to sort of step back and contemplate things before leaping in with the advice, and I tend to do that in my books. I mean, there's an awful lot of advice, and it just produces the need for more advice.

ESTHER PEREL: I think that there we probably—I always thought that I have one license by not being American, is that I have absolutely no need to find a solution. **(laughter)** I mean, this is a country that likes to believe there is a solution for every problem, even existential ones. **(laughter)** And reconciling the erotic and the domestic is a paradox to manage, and not a problem to solve. However, I don't think therapy is about making people optimistic, and I also don't think necessarily that we live in a society where people don't want *more* and actually are willing to accept less. Actually, we could make just the case for the opposite. **(applause)** This is equally a society where people constantly want more, better, younger, new, fresh, and have a very hard time seeing what they have and be grateful and appreciative about it.

LAURA KIPNIS: I was thinking politically—I was actually thinking of the larger political situation

ESTHER PEREL: Even politically.

LAURA KIPNIS: —or economically. I think people have settled for quite a lot less politically and economically, even in the last thirty years.

ESTHER PEREL: But not because they want to, only because it is usually forced upon them. It is not—when you look at the—

LAURA KIPNIS: I think people have become complacent about it. And part of the point that I was making, it is the kind of the structure of the marriage that in a way produces that complacency. To ask less from your marriage. So I was actually trying to link those two levels, the political and what happens in the individual household, because I think they're not unrelated.

ESTHER PEREL: You see, I think every—this is how I look at this. Every system, every living organism, in nature, in corporations, as well as in family life, goes back and forth between change and stability, between *this* and running out. When couples come to therapy, they come because they have gotten stuck, and every system that gets mired in too much rigidity and not enough change can fossilize. On the other hand, when it changes too rapidly, and it unravels, it can become chaotic. This is true for nature. This is true for couples. I don't think about marriages. I look at relationships, that is very much a different thing for me. They sometimes are married, they sometimes are not. They sometimes are heterosexual, they quite often are gay. I look at two people who, actually, at the beginning, wanted to experience something with each other.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And maybe did.

ESTHER PEREL: And did. Quite often. Different things. You know, “I was chosen.” “I got elevated.” “I got singled out from the lot.” “My significance got enhanced.” “I, you know, felt that I mattered.” “By your gaze onto me, I was able to transcend this fundamental aloneness that is so much a part of the life that we live today.” I think of it in that sense and then what happens when the thing turns around? “I feel like I am some worn-out sofa.” “I've become invisible.” “I've become like for-granted.” “I have no sense here, I could be here or not be here, you wouldn't even notice the difference.” And then—I don't know that I go into optimism. I think what you do is you remind people that they have both needs, and you reconnect them with their desire for both of this. And

the possibility to see, is this still something they can have with each other, or not? And “not” doesn’t mean they have to part. “Not” sometimes may mean that you have to make a different choice about what you have available to you.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: So people come to you, as it were, sometimes, obviously for various ailments they are experiencing. They come to you to learn to re-lust in some way.

ESTHER PEREL: Yes, they come to reconnect with a sense of aliveness, with a certain vitality, with a certain energy. They come to, sometimes, step out of feeling trapped, because they are mating in captivity and it’s very hard to want that which is right there. They come to recover a sense of autonomy and a sense of freedom in the middle of connection. But it is about experiencing both at the same time. And quite often what people do is in the name of connection, and in the name of security they will *trap* each other. “You know, you belong to me, I own you, you are mine, and I even own what goes up there in your head,” and that’s when we’re talking about the fantasy life. You know, you never own the person. They’re never yours, you can at any moment lose them, in all kinds of ways, and if you actually can tolerate that—in a way, it’s a paradox, because if you can tolerate your fundamental aloneness, you can better connect, and if you can do that you will even continue to desire. Because, in a way, what I was looking at is why is it so that loving relationships find it so difficult to continue to experience desire? Not just lust. Lust and passion is an intensity of it—*that* you get every once in a while. And you were talking about the issue of time with Rougement. I think it’s never time that makes it harder, it’s fear.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: It’s fear.

ESTHER PEREL: Fear, it is much more risk—it’s, you know, Mitchell, Stephen Mitchell is a wonderful analyst who was actually the spine for the model of looking at security and adventure. He has this beautiful line, “It’s not that romance fades over time, it’s that it becomes riskier.” It’s much more difficult to let go, to show those other sides

of you, to the person to whom you depend upon for so much. It's much easier to do it when the emotional stakes are lower, contrary to what we have been told. You know, that is one of the things in my field that I've challenged a great deal: "intimacy begets sexuality." And I because it may look like I'm a representative of the couples-therapy field, but I'm actually a bomb in my field at this point. **(laughter)** I am throwing over just a bunch of sacred cows and assumptions that have remained unexamined. Quite often, greater intimacy doesn't necessarily lead to better sex, to the contrary. Because the way you love has an element of selflessness to it. You care, you feel responsible, you worry, you have protective elements. And those forces that breed love are often erotically deflating, because the erotic goes more selfish, much more raw, much more objectifying sometimes, much less into that caring, protective element, and that's why it's sometimes harder to lust in the same place where you look for stability and connection.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Laura, your turn.

(laughter)

ESTHER PEREL: Did you get that?

(applause)

LAURA KIPNIS: There's not much to disagree with in what you said. And I think that's a very poignant description of a state in which desire has, you know, been evacuated. And I do think that there is something that is kind of fundamental or inherent in love that is anxiety-producing, and the ways that people cope with that anxiety is often to try to control the other person and produce these—I call them like domestic gulags, these endless systems of rules and regulations, almost resembling the ones about the timing of our session here. **(laughter/applause)** These endless kinds of rigidity and—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Put on the music now. **(laughter)** Stop her.

LAURA KIPNIS: And that's why I do agree, that you know the kind of playfulness that you would like to—that's kind of inherent to lust and desire, and the desire to control another person, because the loss of love, the feeling which I think you describe so well that somebody is—doesn't desire you, or desires someone else instead, is incredibly ego-damaging and anxiety-producing, the thought of it is anxiety-producing, so the answer is to invent all these rules and try to control the other person, which deflates the desire anyway. So there is a kind of, you know, cycle to that and I do agree that the ability to live with the anxiety of the uncertainty of another person's autonomy is a great challenge, so in that we agree.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: So there we're talking nearly as if we were analyzing Marcel Proust—I mean, we're talking about jealousy and jealousy as a motor to keep a relationship alive. Is that right?

ESTHER PEREL: I think it's Alain de Botton, on *What We can We Learn about Proust*, he has this great line where he says—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: He got it from somewhere, I'm sure.

ESTHER PEREL: Actually, if you don't mind, I will—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And he got it probably from Proust.

ESTHER PEREL: Yes, that's quite likely, but since I got it from him—

LAURA KIPNIS: Do you think he's not an original thinker?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I wouldn't say that.

ESTHER PEREL: Which one, Proust or De Botton?

LAURA KIPNIS: De Botton.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I would choose one over the other.

ESTHER PEREL: Here, actually, he asks Proust, “‘Are there any secrets to a long-standing relationship?’ ‘Infidelity. Not the act itself but the threat of it.’ For Proust an injection of jealousy is the only thing capable of rescuing a relationship ruined by habits.”

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: There you have your homework.

ESTHER PEREL: So your question is about jealousy?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Jealousy, and then for you to explore a little bit more of this very interesting notion, I think, of intimacy getting in the way of passion.

ESTHER PEREL: You see, I think to do that, it’s very important to think together about the word “intimacy,” because intimacy has become the sovereign antidote of our lives of increasing isolation, and it’s come to mean something that it never meant before. You know, today we no longer plow the land. Today we talk. And intimacy is about *me* talking to *you* and you are my empathic listener, and I am going to reveal myself to you and you are going to reflect back to me, and, in that experience, I’m going to know that I exist and I matter and I’m validated. You know, when you think about *Fiddler on the Roof*. You know, “Do you love me?” and she said, you know, I watched your kids—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: **(sings)** Do you love me? **(laughter)** Yeah, no, I remember. I’ve washed your socks for twenty-five years—

ESTHER PEREL: I’ve milked your cows, I’ve fed your kids, I’ve slept with you, and if that ain’t love, what is?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: If I had known, I would have had it cued.

ESTHER PEREL: We would, today, would call this domesticity, at best oppression, probably. You know, I mean this is not about intimacy and this kind of discursive, verb, you know, talk-intimacy is very recent. I think it's a very female, or feminine, definition of intimacy that came to be at a time when women entered my profession, and it certainly leaves out the body and many other languages that we have for expression and for connection and it really fits a puritanical society to just say, you know, we get close because we talk.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: So here it's words that get in the way?

ESTHER PEREL: It's words that get in the way in the sense that I think that privacy enhances intimacy. I think we live with a model of togetherness today that is about candor, transparency, sharing everything, telling everything. Here's the thing. We want today what we always wanted from our partner in committed relationships, marriage. I want security, companionship, children, respectability, and on top of it now I need my job, to also be my best friend, my confidante, and my passionate lover. All of that in one and we live twice as long. Go figure.

(laughter/applause)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: It's the twice as long which is difficult.

(laughter/applause)

ESTHER PEREL: That really gave it *le coup final*.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Length matters, yeah.

(laughter/applause)

ESTHER PEREL: I think that contrary to what we often think, it's not always the lack of closeness that stifles desire, but actually too much closeness. But the problem is that the way we live in these nuclear, one-on-one, relationships, quite isolated from the rest makes it very hard to not be pushed, and that is a political force that is coming from outside, that is not just an internal need. Where, with no social support, with no institutional support, "It is you and me, baby," and maybe if we have kids, "It's you and me, baby, and the smurfs." And it's all on our shoulders.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: The smurfs?

ESTHER PEREL: (inaudible) The kids, you know, and that, you know, when you expect so much from one person in that sense, it becomes much harder to experience playfulness, curiosity, novelty, imagination, those *key* ingredients of the erotic. You can have sex, you can have your average number every week, but that's not lust, and that's not erotic.

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You know, I think we've come at a moment here where I'd like to—

ESTHER PEREL: Is this ten minutes before the end of the session?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I have no idea.

ESTHER PEREL: My patients like to know that.

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I think this is a good moment, Laura, for you maybe to ask Esther a question and for Esther to ask you a question. And we can do it in any order.

LAURA KIPNIS: I'm not sure I have a question at the ready, I feel very apologetic about this, but, I mean, there's been a lot of advice on offer. So, I mean, we've ended up having a therapeutic kind of conversation, and as I said—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Has it been helpful to you?

(laughter)

LAURA KIPNIS: I feel cured, actually, yes, yes. I mean, that's part of my point, is that all of these conversations about love seem to kind of end up at this one level, which is the advice level, and I don't feel capable of participating in that, because I was actually trying to ask questions at a different level, you know, more at a social level.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Well, ask them now.

LAURA KIPNIS: Well, I guess I would say my approach would be more like this: It seems to me that societies produce the kind of character types that are functional for them, and one of the things I was trying to do was look at these complaints that people have about their marriages and the therapy that's offered to solve it, but never actually solves it, and see in what way is this socially functional. So it's not just how do we fix this at the individual level, but how is this working to prop up other social institutions and other forms of power and, you know, the ways—the status quo in the way things operate, so—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: But you see, I think Esther was taking a point of view which wasn't just the individual, by talking about perhaps a slight, perhaps, hesitation to think that the nuclear family was a good solution for our problems now. Things have changed, and we now rely much more on the nuclear family than we did maybe two generations ago in a way it brings us back to a great article actually that *The Atlantic* published some ten years ago, maybe fifteen years ago, Robert Putnam's essay which

then became a book, *Bowling Alone*, which I think brings us back to—I mean, a fabulous title, *Bowling Alone*, much better as an article in the pages of *The Atlantic* than as a book.

(laughter)

LAURA KIPNIS: I mean, I was thinking, you know, the point has been made that therapy is like the Protestantism of our times, the way Weber described the role of Protestantism in the growth of capitalism, that therapy is the ideology that supports our culture and, you know, becomes a way of perpetuating it. So I'm sort of, you know, interested in how it does that. And I guess, you know, that's the question, in what way does therapy, individual therapy, or that approach to solving this—what we both agree is to some degree an existential kind of issue about lust versus stability or desire versus, you know, the monogamous couple—you know, do you see larger social dimensions to that?

ESTHER PEREL: I see plenty. I mean, the first one—I think it's an excellent question, by the way, and there is the therapy per se vis-à-vis the problematic if you want or the paradox that we suggested today and then there is what I think about the endeavor of therapy and its social meaning today. I think that we ask from one person today what once an entire village used to provide. That in itself is utterly problematic. I think that this is—and when I work in the, you know, in the United States, and I work with families, for example, or I work with couples who have children and who are trying to reconnect erotically, sexually, with each other. I am very well aware that this is the only country—western country—with no maternity leave, and if you get one it's called a disability leave—no, it's as if you broke a leg, eh? It's the same. It is also the place that where childcare, affordable childcare, is out of range for even the middle-class women, you can basically stop working just to pay—I mean, I can never forget all of that when I say to people, “You need to go out on a date,” if I ever even said that, you know.

LAURA KIPNIS: Because look where you'll end up.

ESTHER PEREL: Yeah, I mean, you know, it's—so, you know, family therapy or couples therapy where I come from, from a systemic perspective, *never* was individualistic, never was deterministic, is always contextual in its thinking and came to be because it looked at problems in context and in relation to the larger social, political, and economic issues.

LAURA KIPNIS: Where here it becomes accommodationist, because it does provide solutions only at the individual level, and so everything is taken to be an individual problem, and, you know, any kind of social momentum gets kind of dissolved or defused.

ESTHER PEREL: Right. So here is the way where that can happen. Because this lack of social supports and institutional supports in the mind of Americans, who consider themselves autonomous and free thinkers, they tend to privatize the problems. It is not seen as, “There is a lack of external something that is impinging on us,” it is privatized. My work is to let that be known that there is, you know. I am—it is very different when—I think very often people from the world of literature and cultural studies look at psychotherapy, and they think about psychoanalysis. And in the last fifty years an entire body of psychotherapy and thinking emerged that is *not* cognitive-behavioral and that is not psychoanalytic, that is very political and very systemic in its thinking. So one challenge for me is to tell people that this privatizing of the problems is convenient for a lot of other people who therefore don't need to worry about you. You know, but I say this in my office. What I also actually at some times did in my office, because one of the ideas in your book that I thought was *so* right on is how, you know, we often tend to think how intimacy can be confused with merging, but what you were highlighting is how intimacy can be confused with surveillance, and you have those three pages of all the things I no longer can do because I—and I have read this to so many couples, just sit there in my office, reading those pages—they crack up. Now, there is no solution, but there is humor.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You want to crack them up?

ESTHER PEREL: There's a few of those.

LAURA KIPNIS: I've had people e-mail me and say that they've read this at their prenuptial dinners, **(laughter)** so it's, I think it's become shtick, I worry that it's become shtick.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I don't have that passage, but this passage caught my attention. "This modern belief that love lasts, shapes us into particular fretful psychological beings, perpetually in search of prescriptions, interventions, aids. Passion must not be allowed to die. Frequent professional consultation and attempted cures of those routines seized on with desperation, regardless of cost or consequence. At least this has an economic upside. Whole new sectors of the economy have been spawned, an array of ancillary industries, markets fostered, and massive social investments in new technologies undertaken, from Viagra to couples porn. Late capitalism's Lourdes, Lourdes for dying marriages, like dedicated doctors keeping corpses breathing with shiny heart/lung machines with artificial organs, couples, too, are armed with their newfangled technologies can now beat back passion's death." And so on. **(applause)** But at any rate. It's—you know, the title may not be uplifting, but it's a good read, I highly recommend it. **(laughter)**

LAURA KIPNIS: Ironic. I'm really not against love. I'm deeply romantic.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Well, okay.

(laughter)

LAURA KIPNIS: Too romantic . . .

ESTHER PEREL: . . . to compromise. Is that what the second part of the sentence would be?

LAURA KIPNIS: Well, you know, I play a certain role as a cultural critic, you know, a self-appointed role. In my private life I'm, you know, is beset by all these dilemmas as any of us. But I think, you know, as a cultural critic, I can stand back from them, and yeah, I think not compromising is a stance you can take as a cultural critic, and maybe one we'd like to see more people take. But as I say, you know, I'm not saying that I have solved all these problems myself, but I can write about them.

ESTHER PEREL: But I will challenge you to not think about therapy as reduced to advice-giving in its most simplistic form. Neither is the opposite of it just a slight stepping back and reflecting. I think that part of what happens today because, you know, I didn't always live in the United States, and I didn't come from a culture where the therapist was part of your social milieu, you know, and where people at a dinner table talk about "my therapist, my therapist," okay?

LAURA KIPNIS: Right, it's a necessity now, to have a relationship you need a therapist to consult.

(laughter)

ESTHER PEREL: No, not necessarily, sometimes you do, but then you ask yourself, how is it that people have come to therapist when they no longer—you know, this goes hand-in-hand with a study that Stephanie Coontz was writing about in the op-eds a couple of weeks ago that the average American at this point has two people that they talk to about intimate, private things or when they are in crisis. You know, you cannot forget that. So, just so you understand, as a therapist, I don't encourage people to only talk to me. I very much work with them on developing a network. Again, for people who often haven't even understood the importance of that. So just so you see there is a constant back-and-forth between the external and the personal that takes place in the therapeutic room. But I know the study and I know that there are couples who talk to me and they have nobody else to talk about. And I also know that there is one subject nobody talks

about easily, and that's sex, it's the one you lie about the most, and you certainly lie about it more today if you don't have enough of it.

(laughter)

LAURA KIPNIS: Well, who has enough?

ESTHER PEREL: As much as you think you probably—you know, whatever you have decided was the average that—you know. So to look you know what people talk about their longing, their yearnings, you know when couples, to go back to lust, when couples complain about the listlessness of their erotic lives, they sometimes want more, but they always want *better*, and what they yearn for is the experience of connection, of renewal, and of playfulness that sex used to afford them. The erotic is much larger. We modern people have made it very sexual, and it is one of the places where we used to experience that sense of awe and that transcendence.

(First notes of Fifth Symphony.)

(laughter/applause)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Perfect! Perfect! I told you, when she says transcendence, that's it!

(laughter)

ESTHER PEREL: Est-ce parfait! It's the perfect moment.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You have a moment—c'est parfait, no? We're talented at the New York Public Library. Quickly, you have time for a question for Laura, and then I have some advice for both of you.

(laughter)

LAURA KIPNIS: We can cut to the advice if you want.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: No, no, no, you've had enough of advice. Ask the question.

ESTHER PEREL: Can you imagine work—because you criticize work in relationships. Can you imagine that work need not be drudge and alienating but work that can be creative and enlivening—

LAURA KIPNIS: Oh, sure.

ESTHER PEREL: —in couplehood. Not when you write books.

LAURA KIPNIS: I mean, the model of—you know, exactly, you know, I'm lucky to do a kind of work that isn't alienating, but I mean the, and so yes, I can imagine the kind of integrative, creative sort of work as a model for relationships, let's say, but, I mean, the part about can you teach lust or can you teach desire? Or the point at which people usually go for these consultations, when there's no—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Or when it's lost is it lost?

LAURA KIPNIS: Yeah, yeah. I mean, the idea—the flogging of something dead in order to, you know, instill it with some iota of life to, you know, perpetuate it, it's hard for me to imagine, you know, a joyful sort of work of that sort, so I mean I do have the question of when people are at that state, is desire renewable? I mean, you know, that's a question.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Your reply to that? Because I saw you shaking your head.

ESTHER PEREL: Because I think that so many times I was wrong when I thought that something was dead. And I began to see that something can look dead, something can look frozen, something can look like it's been mired like that, narrow, rigid, predictable, and yet, if you think about it as interdependent parts, if you find one piece sometimes to remove or to move, the entire thing can begin to—you know, it's like ice blocks, and I have become much less linear about thinking, "It's gone, it doesn't come back." I think sometimes it just lives like this, and I think at other times it is extraordinary, what people can at times resuscitate inside themselves and with each other, but there was a crust that just sat there for so long. So I am no longer willing to just trust even my own impression, when I think, "These, finished, they're done." I don't always know. It's much more subtle and much more mysterious.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: So maybe it's less optimism than hope that you're lacking.

LAURA KIPNIS: It also goes back to the time issue, your quote from de Rougement. That, you know, that it's our social necessity to make desire last the course of a lifetime if we want to have these lifetime marriages now.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And they're longer, our lives, now.

LAURA KIPNIS: But, yeah, but I mean Lawrence Stone makes the point that early death used to take care of what divorce takes care of now.

(first notes of Fifth Symphony)

(laughter)

ESTHER PEREL: It's either transcendence or death!

(laughter)

LAURA KIPNIS: Now we're trying to force desire to last a lifetime, and I think that goes back to the question of timing. I mean, is that a legitimate thing to do with it?

ESTHER PEREL: But there are many relationships where people are not trying to keep desire alive like that. They are very pleased and happy and content to live in a companionate, affectionate coupledom that is deeply loving. And that is actually sometimes *our* prejudice that we have to guard against as therapists who often think that people *should* want more, actually.

LAURA KIPNIS: If people are happy in that state, I have no—it's the people who live in these states of low-level depression for years and years, and misery, because they're not content with that companionship or whatever you want to call it. But, you know, I'm not going to argue with anyone who finds fulfillment in that.

ESTHER PEREL: So what do you have to tell us?

LAURA KIPNIS: Yes, please.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I think I'll leave that for the very end. Now it's your turn to ask questions, and let me just mention that we have mikes on each side, and we would like you to ask a question, and as I say, questions usually don't take much more than fifty—what did I say—fifty-two seconds. Right here in the front second row. Second row. Mike, here, just one second. Stand up if you could.

Q: Okay. So, I have a question about intimacy. **(inaudible)** When you were saying that there is a whole prejudice somehow about intimacy being a condition of a good happy couple or love or whatever, and actually the other should be—we should be *less* intimate and we should not talk. And of course, it's a paradox, so I have a question about this because just as a feeling, what I would say as a kind of spontaneous feeling, the feeling I would have is that actually at some point when the other becomes too close, we just take the other for granted and we don't listen anymore. He just doesn't exist as an other. I

agree with you that there is a strangeness that is missing, the otherness that is missing, but I don't know if it comes from too much intimacy, it comes also from a melting into the background of their life, like a piece of furniture, like you just don't listen any more, you don't have any space. You listen to other people but not to that person there. So that's just a question I have about maybe the use of words or of listening. I'm not sure.

ESTHER PEREL: You know, the image I often have is that, you know, love tries very hard to close the gap between two people, to minimize the uncertainties, to maximize the security, and to do away with the surprises and the unpredictability and desire is about opening that space again and then bringing it to life. You don't—you absolutely need otherness for desire. That is very clear to me. Fire needs air. Sometimes when we talk about intimacy, and he's right there next to you, and you no longer listen to him what you really are talking about also is familiarity, and sometimes it goes even further into a kind of merging. You know, we are *one*, and in that oneness is a kind of false sense of security. And then it's very easy to think that you know everything about the one who is right next to you and then you can complain about boredom and lack of mystery. It kind of goes hand in hand.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: So that the notion of—the adventure, really, of being with someone, which is really what marriage is also about, is an adventure of—is that you choose your mate in part because they share your adjectives and you learn through language to go deeper, so the notion of speaking can be also a deepening of a relationship.

ESTHER PEREL: Yes, but you see there is a kind of speaking, that's the list that I read from Laura, that is, you know, "And who did you see and where did you go and where did you talk and what did you eat and how long did you stay?" and all of that. That is not about intimacy, that is about a kind of closeness, familiarity, that makes us feel that we always know where the other one is, and it can be very *nice*, it's not by itself always tension or negative, but I don't have anything against talking, but I think that there is a kind of oversharing of the trivial, that makes it much harder to stay in touch with the

sublime, so that you only hear your partner actually say interesting things when you are at a dinner table with other people and you listen to them talk to the third. **(applause)** I'm twenty-five years with the same person. We talk a lot, it's not like. You know, that's what I've been accused about, that I'm against talking now.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: It's not apparent. **(laughter)** So I think, you know, there's a certain amount of practice, but maybe more of it is necessary.

LAURA KIPNIS: Can I just say something? It strikes me that relationships have become very complicated things, they're like these modern forms of technology, and the language, you know, gets very complicated, and that's partly why so much expertise is required from, you know, outside experts in order to conduct a relationship. Just the *language* of this gets very technical and you know, who is capable, what ordinary individual is capable of doing this on their own? So it is a new form of technology. I think I used the analogy, it's like trying to build your own telecommunications satellite and launch it into space. You know, it's something no ordinary person is actually capable of. So it has become—you know, the way we talk about relationships now—has become this newfangled kind of technology.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Just wait one second.

Q: To follow up on the language then, I was going to ask about the language adultery, the word, using the word adultery, because it always feels like father-dominated society doesn't want their people to grow up, so they should be banned from adultery, or become adults, or it's not like that, of course, but what is the semiological concept of it?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Before your answer, Esther had the great wisdom of taking maybe three questions and then—you had a question behind there.

Q: Yeah, I'm perplexed as anyone by what seems to be the irreconcilability between lust and domesticity, and as a writer for many of the women's magazines for many, many

years, I've interviewed all kinds of people who seem to have the answer, and the one person I interviewed years ago was this psychiatrist, this was for young women, Penelope Russianoff, who played the therapist in *An Unmarried Woman*, for people who know that movie. And she said, "Tell young women to masturbate before they go out on a date." And I thought, of all the advice I've ever heard and given, that seemed like the most sensible to me.

(laughter)

LAURA KIPNIS: Is that what you were going to tell us?

Q: And I think too of Carolyn Heilbrun, the wonderful writer and teacher, who said that, you know, certain men are husbands and certain men are not husbands, but the third thing, and I know this is very disparate, is that listening to people who appear on—in the audiences of the various television talk shows who ape the talk of therapy in this very obligatory, good-girlish, because it's usually women, way, I find so demoralizing, so depressing, so I don't know, I don't even know what my question is, except that—

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Neither do I.

Q: Okay. I'll stop. I'll just stop.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: But it was very interesting. **(laughter)** Let's take one more.

ESTHER PEREL: In the back, the man.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: One more woman and then the man in the back. You're a woman, go on.

Q: My question is actually around equality. As we've seen sort of more equality in the workplace and in the home and more sharing of what were traditionally gender roles, I'm interested in hearing your comments on how that affects lust.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Muy bien. Yes, one more. There's a man there, I see a man. Let's get the mike. We'll take those four and then if we have time, depending on the music—

Q: A word that's been thrown around this entire conversation that I'm still not really grasping is what do you mean by love?

ESTHER PEREL: Adultery, you should start.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Adultery, we should start.

LAURA KIPNIS: Well, adultery, adulterate, you know, it's this spoiling kind of action.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Same origin as adulthood?

LAURA KIPNIS: I think, you know, I'm not sure I actually did the precise etymology. I guessed at it. So, I mean, that seems kind of clear. The depressing guests on talk shows, yes, I second that. **(laughter)** This desire for easy advice, you know, the masturbate before the date, or some men are husbands and some men are lovers, I mean, you know, he's just not that into you, you know, the desire for the easy advice, yes, we all have that. And I would say for most of these books, *Against Love* and my new book, *The Female Thing*, I ended up reading a lot of advice books, and I have to say, I read with one eye as a cultural critic, and with the other eye you're looking for tips, you know. **(laughter)** I think we're all very susceptible to that and especially to the simple formulas.

ESTHER PEREL: Adultery?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I was going to say “Esther,” but go ahead. **(laughter)**

ESTHER PEREL: It’s very interesting, because I don’t usually think in terms of adultery, as much as in terms of infidelity, and then I think about it in terms of emotional infidelity and sexual infidelity.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: So the difference being—

LAURA KIPNIS: Oh, the women in the workplace issue, that was one of these questions.

ESTHER PEREL: I mean, basically, what has really, what interests me about adultery per se is the fact that it has shifted from an imposition on women within a patriarchal society that was there to assure property and lineage. It had absolutely nothing to do with love and now it has everything to do with love and it is an equal opportunity statement and it’s gone from an imposition to a conviction. And that’s why I’ve become interested in looking at how the issue of sexual exclusivity and monogamy and the “no” to adultery becomes part of the romantic ideal. The question of equality?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You speak about that, quite a lot, and democracy.

ESTHER PEREL: I have a whole chapter that’s called “Democracy Versus Hot Sex.”

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Choose!

(laughter)

ESTHER PEREL: Because I think that the democratic values that we so cherish in the workplace if you want, and even in many parts of our relationship, don’t necessarily work that well erotically speaking, that the flattening, the neutralizing of power differential, is actually contrary to the way I imagine desire operating, or not just operating, but the way

that desire is constructed, that lust has an element of aggression in it, that wanting, that conquering, that hostility that's built in there, that has something that is often not allowed anymore in the equalizing egalitarian model. And we want—nobody wants to go back. I think the challenge is that you want the egalitarian model between six and eight in your kitchen but you may want something else after ten o'clock. **(laughter)** You see? And I think those who were steeped into the egalitarian ideal and how we translate it into romantic relationships have sometimes found it difficult to acknowledge that. Because it suddenly wasn't proper because the erotic desire is politically incorrect and it doesn't necessarily play by the rules of good citizenship.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Shall we take—

ESTHER PEREL: And love, there was the love one, but that we'll have to come back.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Yes, second row here, a man.

Q: Well, I just wanted to put in a word for psychoanalysis. Speaking as a psychoanalyst, I mean, there was this idea that in our culture we have replaced the confessor with the therapist who is now the one who returns us to society denuded of our passionate antisocial tendencies. And Esther said, no, the couples therapist, at least the one that she is, does not accept the social norms but sometimes challenges them, it's the *psychoanalyst* who is going to sit in the room and just listen and play that role of the confessor and the calm, accepting other, giving advice and playing a relational role. I just want to say that that is *not* the role of the psychoanalyst, and *Freud* was the one who said, "The problem of living in a culture is that where I love I cannot desire and where I desire I cannot love," and that it is the job of the psychoanalyst, actually, to *destabilize* the condition of the individual and that the destabilization is not caused by the analyst but *permitted* by the analyst because of the innate passion within the individual, and so the solution, for example, of masturbating before you go out, is the same solution as taking Prozac. Prozac *reduces* sexual desire. That they say is the side effect. I think it's the main effect. **(applause)** And the psychoanalyst is—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: The people applauding here are people who took Prozac, I'm thinking.

(laughter)

Q: They know.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: They know, I know, exactly.

Q: So, I just want to say that psychoanalysis is the original, it's a hundred and fifty years of Freud, so I want to bring him in. It's the original destabilizer to liberate exactly that sexual passion that is the trouble when you go out on the date. Okay.

ESTHER PEREL: Thank you. **(applause)** Behind you there's a man that's been—

Q: I'm interested at looking at this historically, in relationships historically, even my parents' relationship versus my own. Now, with education, women are politically, economically, and intellectually more, generally more at an equal with men, and so intellectually in the relationship they're at an equal with men. We were speaking before about how men found an intellectual equal with other men and then went home to the woman. Now, you know, you're more likely to have an intellectual equal with the woman.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Close with a question now, only, if you could.

Q: Yes. I was getting to that. Do you find a difference that is predictable in relationships where the woman—in relationships between men and women—where the woman has an equal or even higher political or economic place in society now as the man because I think that this is very newly a different situation.

(first notes of Fifth Symphony)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Take that question, go ahead.

ESTHER PEREL: I think that where you have a shift in power that takes place where the woman in your example is earning more, is more educated, and all of that. I have yet to see it not be a challenge to renegotiate masculinity and femininity, power and lust, in the relationship, but it's done by many, many people in very creative ways, but it never is simple, simply, primarily because it is so new and different from all the expectations and the assumptions that we have piled up in our head about what is expected in men and manhood and masculinity and the same in womanhood and femininity. And I think there's something extremely liberating about finally getting out of some of these boxes. There is, you know, the problem of a lot of marriages, if you want to look at it in marriage, is that there is a conventionality to it that made it look like one size should fit all and maybe so many of us don't succeed at it because we should be able to come up with our own model for it. Not because the thing itself isn't doable.

LAURA KIPNIS: I actually agree with that, and it's what—I've written a lot about it in my new book, *The Female Thing*, that women's demands for equality, gender equality in the political and social sphere, I think got mapped onto the question of sexuality and relations between men and women such that a demand for men to be more like women got expressed, particularly in American feminism, this is really the American context, as a sort of political demand, and the question of female desire I think *is* actually much more complicated than that, and I think that we are actually all dealing with the confusion between that now, so I think I actually agree with you on this.

ESTHER PEREL: The interesting thing is the woman who wants the man to be more emotionally available and more soft and more gentle and more this and more that. And then when he does any of that, she doesn't like to—she actually struggles with his vulnerability, because that's not what she really expected in men, you know, and then when he comes and he asks for something because he's finally learned to ask for what he

needs, then she doesn't want another kid who needs something else from here. **(laughter)** So it's very, you know, the thing about Laura in *The Female Thing* is that she really asks women to be honest with themselves.

LAURA KIPNIS: But it's also that American feminism gave women a sort of language to create a kind of invulnerability that gets expressed in a kind of rigidity or inflexibility in male/female relations. I agree with that.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I think this session has been very helpful to you both. **(laughter)** It is for that very reason that the advice I was going to give you is that you, I think that you should—

ESTHER PEREL: Meet and go for coffee?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: No, much better than that. I think you should get into business together, actually. **(laughter)** You should open a center of diagnosis and treatment, you know, you should open a center together, you know, the academy and the practical matters.

LAURA KIPNIS: Oh, I don't want to represent the academy. Don't saddle me with that, please.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Okay, diagnosis and treatment, we'll call it. But I think Perel, Kipnis, to me.

ESTHER PEREL: Associates!

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Yeah, and I'll be the treasurer. Thank you very much.

(applause)

