

Queer Families

In December 2005, an appeals court in New York State ruled “that the state constitution does not require New York to treat gay couples the same as heterosexual couples in marriage licensing” (Keen 11). The ongoing gay marriage debate has set the stage for many lesbians, gays, and queers to ask what marriage equality really means for the gay movement. According to Michael Warner in the book The Trouble With Normal, the institution of marriage by nature privileges those who are married over those who are not married. Additionally, it forces lesbians and gays to conform to a heterosexual lifestyle. Warner explains the difference between straight culture and gay culture when he says:

Marriage marks that line. It is not the way many queers live. If there is such a thing as a gay way of life, it consists in these relations, a welter of intimacies outside the framework of professions and institutions and ordinary social obligations...Instead, the marriage issue, as currently framed, seems to be a way of denying recognition to these relations... (116)

In my paper, I explore the issue of gay marriage through the related concept of the family and how that notion is interpreted in queer culture. Because of the recent buzz surrounding gay marriage, it is important to understand the ways queers organize and how this organization can and cannot be viewed in heterosexual terms. Once we understand what family means in a queer interpretation, then we can go back and ask Warner’s question “Is marriage a step in the right direction?” (Warner 126).

What Is a Family?

Not the Traditional Definition

Before I introduce my research and findings, I must define how the term family will be used in this paper. When the New York State Court ruled against gay marriage, Justice Milton Williams wrote for the majority opinion that state marriage law “systematically regulates heterosexual behavior, brings order to the resulting procreation and ensures a stable family structure for the rearing, education and socialization of children” (Keen 11). Though Williams does not define family, he undoubtedly believes that a “stable family structure” is dependent on marriage in the traditional sense. In making this statement, Williams is either ignoring the existence of queer families or implying that they are unstable. In my paper, I will use the term family to refer to the rearing of children by one or more adults. With this definition, I will show how “stable family structure[s] for the rearing, education, and socialization of children” can and do exist outside of the institution of marriage. Thus, when the gay movement fights for gay marriage, it is giving more credence to Williams’ unfounded belief that marriage is the way to “ensure a stable family structure” and that this stability is tied to “heterosexual behavior” (Keen 11).

Introduction:

Queer Families, Straight Society

The book Queer Families, Queer Politics contains a collection of articles meant to address issues relating to the organization of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people into what are commonly understood as “families”. In the first chapter of the book, editors Mary Bernstein and Renate Reimann introduce the articles in the upcoming

chapters. According to Bernstein and Reimann, one factor that enables a queer family to exist within the larger heteronormative society is money. They say, “In general, queers who want to be parents have limited choices. Put simply, the more money one has, the more options one has” (Bernstein and Reimann 9). Options like artificial insemination, surrogacy, and adoption are all very costly. Another factor that plays a role in the lives of queer families is the legal system, more specifically issues of legal guardianship. This becomes especially interesting in the case of lesbian couples in which one mother is the biological parent and the other has no biological relation to the child. These two factors, money and legal status, are byproducts of the current structures that exist in society. One could see how laws accommodating queer parenting or social programs for poorer queer families might alleviate these issues.

Bernstein and Reimann, however, also include articles that address some of the less obvious and more puzzling dilemmas that queer families face. Due to heterosexual presumption, many institutions are organized around heterosexual notions of family. This is best summed up by Bernstein and Reimann when they say, “Although the law may provide protection from harm and grant rights to queers, legal change in and of itself neither creates acceptance nor transforms heteronormativity” (13). They go on to say, “Access to institutions is predicated on fitting into the dominant categories that often make no sense for queers” (14). Thus they are saying that even while laws may change to accommodate gay families, the laws contain no notion of familial arrangements outside the traditional. This may cause homosexual families to act and organize in a more traditional, heterosexual manner than queer manner like Warner describes.

The dilemma that queer families face of existing within a heteronormative society leaves little room for queer families that do not fit the mold. Specifically, Bernstein and Reimann say, “The issue of visibility, and who can be visible, is intimately linked to whether family politics are tied to acceptance or transformation”(13). The current marriage debate renders visible only those queer families that model themselves after heterosexual, traditional families. The following case studies illustrate the ways heteronormativity shapes queer families and privileges certain queer family structures—those that mimic the heterosexual—over others. My attempt in this paper is not to generalize queer families, but instead to explain some dominant themes I encountered after reading several case studies on families with homosexual parents. These themes explain what Warner meant when he said that marriage “is not the way many queers live” and show why the “family politics” of the gay movement need to be tied to “transformation” and not “acceptance” of the current heteronormative values.

Organization of Lesbian Families:

The Varied Roles of Birth-Mother and Co-Mother

In my research, I found one particular theme in the organization of lesbian families, a concept that on the surface appears to conform to heterosexuality but at the same time cannot be described in heterosexual terms. This is the case involving artificial insemination where there is a birth-mother and a co-mother, and they play very different roles. In the book The Family of Woman, the author finds “An important effect of lesbian maternity is the way in which it insulates the birth parent from heterosexist opprobrium (where it is an issue) and simultaneously exposes the nonbirth mother to even greater levels of it” (Sullivan 184). As the co-mother is exposed to even greater

social stigma, the birth-mother is able to “pass” as a heterosexual woman. In one interview, a lesbian birth mother explains, “You sort of enter this ‘mommy’ world, you know, and that’s a whole other world. And you realize what you have in common with straight women—you have motherhood in common” (Nelson 97). For the lesbian birth-mother, motherhood in general becomes an identity, often more central than the lesbian identity. Another author says, “Lesbian mothers, like other mothers, select elements of their narratives from a circumscribed repertoire, a language of caring and nurturance, a language that makes motherhood supersede and engulf other aspects of identity” (Lewin 183). In addition, the process of pregnancy provides lesbian birth-mothers with a rite of passage that allows them to gain acceptance into the families that may have shunned them. One birth-mother explains, “My oldest sister is a born-again Christian and she’s not very accepting...but after Nate was born, my sister and niece called and they wanted to come up here and see Nate and everything and that was kind of out of the blue” (Sullivan 132).

The co-mother, on the other hand, must often hide or obscure her relation to her child in order to fit into preconceptions of the form families take. Sullivan calls this technique “Speaking Half-Truths to Power” (Sullivan 168). Sullivan says, “Like the closet, which removes lesbian sexual identity completely from view, passing as the birth mother constitutes the most repressive strategy available to co-mothers” (Sullivan 171). Indeed, this “repressive strategy” results from the fact that co-mothers have no alternative categories available to them to describe their relation to the child. Additionally, it can cause the co-mother to feel deceitful. One co-mother explained, “You know, it’s really kind of weird, you want to say things like ‘This is my baby but I’m not really the birth

mom, but this is my baby.’” (Sullivan, 170). Thus, in public situations, the identity of motherhood is only available to co-mothers at the price of hiding their lesbianism.

Organization of Gay Male Families:

The Struggle to Create and Maintain Family

Unlike lesbian families, many gay male families are organized differently, due to the fact that men cannot bear children. In cases of adoption, this leads to a different dynamic than the lesbian families where both men are equally the dads. However, because of the difficulty in adoption and the increased difficulty when it comes to gay male adoption, the struggle that gay men go through to have families is often much greater than that of the lesbian families.

The book Gay Dads interviews 24 families with gay male parents. In most cases described in the book, the fathers went to great lengths to obtain their children. The author says, “It took Pericles Rellas and Mitch Edwards two and a half years, 10 county social workers, two private social workers, and a battery of lawyers...to adopt their children” (Strah 29). In other cases, the men had to conceal their relationship so that one man could adopt as a single parent. Strah points to a specific case of two gay men adopting a boy from Russia when he says, “...Russian law does not allow gay adoptions, so Chuck knew he would need to closet himself to be approved as Alex’s father” (Strah 144).

In the introduction to the book, the author points out a theme he noticed when interviewing the gay male dads. He says, “Ironically, however, fatherhood can “cause” another kind of isolation—this time from the gay community...the fathers’ sense that their gay friends are no longer interested in them, a recognition that becoming parents has

changed their lives and sensibilities that they no longer “fit” in that community...” (Strah 5). This sentiment echoes the theme expressed in many lesbian families where becoming parents suddenly aligns these families with straight culture in a way only being a parent can. For many queer parents, it is the case that their parental identity supercedes their identity as a homosexual.

Similarities and Differences:

Is Family a Ticket Into the Heterosexual World?

One might conclude from the previous examples that gays and lesbians use the approach of family as a ticket into the heterosexual world. While children are often a commonality gays and lesbians find between themselves and their straight counterparts, the approach with which gays and lesbians parent is often drastically different from their straight counterparts. One common theme I found in the case studies of gay male families was their willingness to accept children with birth defects and racial diversity. The book Gay Dads interviews a gay male couple named Joe and Stephen who adopted a black son Ruben with potential “lifelong gastrointestinal problems” (Strah 102). One of the fathers says, “[The birth mother] wondered if we would be upset if Ruben got darker. We assured her we couldn’t care less about color, that we couldn’t love Ruben more under any circumstances” (Strah 103). These men were not bound by traditional notions that everyone in a family should look the same or that children need to be perfect.

In the book Lesbian Mothers, the author quotes one lesbian mother who points out the differences inherent in a lesbian family. She says, “As lesbians, who are automatically placed on the fringe of society by the choice of our lives, we can bring to parenting and to young children the positive aspects of being on that fringe...a world of

many families in changing and varied forms, not limited by the term *traditional*” (Lewin 76). Thus this lesbian mother, like the gay male parents Joe and Stephen, recognized the ways that gay families “can bring...to young children” diversity and acceptance that the “traditional” family may lack. This queering of the family is a move toward the transformation of family politics by rendering visible alternative families.

In addition, lesbian mothers emphasize a consciousness of gender. One mother says, “...I’m concerned at this point that that reinforces what people might see as I’m the mother who stays at home with the children. And that is not how our relationship is and that’s not how I want gay relationships to be perceived” (Sullivan, 94). It is important for many lesbian parents not to appear to be conforming to the heterosexual parenting roles. Another lesbian mother says, “With Steven [baby] now it’s whoever is home does most of the housekeeping and cooking and things like that...we’re really really conscious of gender stereotypical roles” (Nelson, 110). Furthermore, in the book Families We Choose, the author says, “...in cases where lesbian parents in a couple did identify as butch and fem, there seemed to be no preordained correspondence between biological motherhood and their respective gendered identifications” (Weston, 172). Therefore even when gendered identities exist, they in no way define biological motherhood. This notion goes against the heterosexual idea that equates feminine with female biology and masculine with male biology.

Gay male couples also stressed their desire to defy gender stereotypes that say men cannot be as nurturing as women. Gay father David Strah emphasizes both his and his partner Barry’s nurturance when he says, “...fatherhood added an entirely new dimension to our relationship. It unleashed the parenting instinct in both of us that Barry

insists is ‘as real as the maternal instinct, but less realized’” (Strah 237). Thus, both gay males and lesbians understand that gender need not dictate parental roles.

A Queerer Approach to Family:

Not Every Family Looks Heterosexual

It was important for me in my research to find examples of families that go against the grain. This was indeed a difficult task as many gay male and lesbian parents tend to organize as couples. For example, an article published in 2004 by *U.S. News and World Report* includes case studies of gay families, all of which appear traditional despite the homosexuality of the two parents. The article even states, “Gay parents say their families are much like those led by their straight counterparts” (Gilgoff). This sentiment is echoed by many of the lesbian and gay male couples that stress the ways parenthood has aligned them with the heterosexual world. It also makes sense in light of a society that has an easier time accepting queer families modeled after traditional heterosexual families.

Although it is easier to find examples of lesbian and gay families that tend to assimilate or exist within a straight culture, there are indeed families that feel unrestricted by the bounds of heterosexuality. An article published in 2003 by *The Village Voice* profiles some queer families that are organized in queerer ways, such as families with more than two parents. The author of the article says, “Co-parenting while cohabiting may be the exception to the rule in the LGBT community. It took me months to find just three of these families” (Hyde-Keller). One such family includes a single lesbian Beth Niernberg co-parenting with the gay couple Phillip Hernandez and James Slayton. The three live together with Niernberg staying home with the children and Hernandez and

Slayton providing the financial support. The author says, "...no language exists to explain the relationships between Beth and her sons' fathers. She is not a surrogate; they are not sperm donors. They are a family..." (Hyde-Keller).

The book Gay Dads also includes an instance of a queer family with a very different arrangement. Gay couple Paul Fishman and Mike Kurokawa co-parent with lesbian couple Ellen and Joanne. What makes their arrangement different from the previous example is that Paul and Mike live in a different household from Ellen and Joanne and while all four parents financially support their son, each couple has separate finances. The author describes the relationship of these four adults when he says, "Marriage without pillow talk or divorce without enmity, the relationship that Danny's parents have worked out nevertheless works as a structure for four adults and one much-loved boy" (Strah 191). These examples illustrate the stability of family arrangements outside the traditional and in no way bound by marriage.

Gay Marriage As It Affects Families:

Answering Warner's Question

The purpose of examining the ways queer families with children organize was to understand if marriage "is a step in the right direction" for the gay movement (Warner 126). In one way, marriage would alleviate some of the issues queer families face. For gay males, adoption would be easier since married couples are given preference when adopting children in the United States. Additionally, both gay males and lesbians would be less vulnerable to losing their children in instances of divorce or death of the legal parent. However, what does marriage even mean for co-parents like Niernberg,

Hernandez, and Slayton who consist of a gay male couple and a lesbian raising children as a single family unit? Ultimately, I must concur with Warner when he says:

Marriage, in other words, is defined partly by the bundling of various privileges and statuses as a single package. The argument for gay marriage no doubt appeals to many people because it is a shortcut to equalizing these practical social advantages. But the unmodulated demand for same-sex marriage fails to challenge the bundling of privileges that have no necessary connection to one another or to marriage. (120-121)

Gay marriage is a “shortcut” because it does a cursory job of addressing the needs of queer families. Because it does such a cursory job, it will lead to more harm than good by “confirm[ing] the relevance of spousal status and [leaving] unmarried queers looking more deviant before a legal system that could claim broader legitimacy” (Warner 121). Additionally, gay marriage does not guarantee to change the social stigma associated with being gay. For these reasons, the gay movement cannot take the easy road by appealing to the politics of acceptance. We must use the notion of queer families to unwrap the packaging of privilege and marriage, appealing to the politics of transformation. Families should be legitimized regardless of the form they take, no matter how untraditional they may seem. Structures for rearing children need not consist of two heterosexual parents as the Justice Milton Williams asserts. Since the gay marriage movement works against this end goal, it should not be pursued.

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