

## Queer Families Quack Back

JUDITH STACEY AND ELIZABETH DAVENPORT

That's what I like.... How we as queers get to choose our families. It's like picking the right color scheme for your house. We don't have to accept what the state has given us. We accessorize. – ('George', in Mann, 1999)

The buzz around this year's Millennium March on Washington doesn't tout glitter or pageantry. It boasts the addition of a 'family area' with activities for the kids; it tells you where to rent a baby stroller. (Hank Stuever, 2000)

'If it looks like a duck, and it walks like a duck, and it quacks like a duck, then it *is* a duck!' Thus ran the verdict pronounced by opponents of the historic legislation by which Vermont became the first state in the USA to grant lesbian and gay couples the right to form civil unions. Debating the bill's provisions in March 2000, hostile lawmakers complained that a civil union was nothing less than marriage by another name, while a flock of little yellow plastic ducks brooded disconsolately on desks throughout the chamber.

Should gay or lesbian couples be allowed by law to marry? Should some form of domestic partnership be recognized as an alternative to marriage, perhaps for heterosexual couples also? Should lesbians and gay men conceive and rear children? Is there really any single way of being 'family' nowadays? Such questions preoccupy

citizens and policy-makers alike at the dawn of the new millennium, not only in the United States but in parliaments and public squares around the world. Just a month before the Vermont debate, Canada amended its federal regulations pertaining to spouses to extend to same-sex couples all rights and obligations enjoyed by those of mixed sex. The weekend prior to that, thousands of noisy demonstrators gathered in Paris to protest against the French government's decision to offer unmarried couples, regardless of gender, many benefits and duties that French married couples receive. '*Oui au mariage*' (yes to marriage), they chanted, implying that those who would not, or could not, marry should not be entitled to equality in the eyes of the law.

But if it looks like a duck, and it walks like a duck, is it then a duck ... ? Nowhere in the world as yet can same-sex couples actually marry under exactly the same terms and in exactly the same manner as their heterosexual counterparts. Although the conservative owners of the little yellow ducks in Vermont failed to defeat the civil unions bill, they did successfully reserve the word 'marriage' for the union of a man and a woman. Likewise, Canadian law recognizes only married persons as spouses and classifies gay and lesbian partners along with unmarried heterosexual couples of at least twelve months duration as common

law mates. And the French government has never proposed extending *mariage* itself to those whom it now legally acknowledges as registered partners.

But that marriage, and such related issues as the legal relationship of a non-biological parent to his or her children, should have become part of the much-vaunted 'homosexual agenda' at all would have appeared ludicrous had anyone prophesied it even a short time ago. Most gay liberationists of the 1960s and 1970s had no interest in imitating or assimilating into heterosexual norms. Those who first broke down the tightly secured door of the closet, deliberately spilling its contents all over the floor, never imagined they might be clearing the way for a new culture of domesticity. The queens of Stonewall so quickly laid to one side by gay and lesbian couples proudly chasing the latest advances in reproductive technology in the quest for their own little princes and princesses – who would have guessed it?

In this chapter we examine the queer political environment in which our putative ducklings – gay and lesbian families in their many plumed varieties – must sink or swim. In the course of what follows, we ask whether lesbian, gay, and other queer genres of kinship represent the brave new families of the twenty-first century, pointing to ways that those in more conventional families might also renegotiate the demands of love and labor. Or conversely, does the gay movement's embrace of family discourse in fact signify capitulation – a retirement from activism to couch potato viewing of *Leave it to Beaver* re-runs?

#### NO PLACE LIKE HOME: THE POSTMODERN FAMILY CONDITION

Let us begin with a bird's eye view of the context in which queer families of all kinds have hatched. The first thing to notice is how easily these fowl blend into their surrounding terrain. An image of 'Beaver' rather than a duck evokes the 'fabled family

of Western nostalgia', signifying the bygone 1950s' era of the modern nuclear family system to which we can no longer return. *Leave it to Beaver*, a popular TV sitcom of that era, idealized a world when proper men were breadwinners and proper women homemakers, when marriage was for life and homosexuality was not a fit topic for family dinner table conversation. However, even before the sitcom could make it into reruns, a global post-industrial world began to supplant the industrial economy that had underwritten the Cleavers' family regime. The 'patriarchal bargain' of the modern family order (Kandiyoti, 1988) – in which women subordinated their individual interests to those of husbands and children in exchange for economic support and social respectability – would soon unravel. Rates of maternal employment, developments in contraception and reproductive technology, and no-fault divorce petitions advanced apace, while feminist and gay liberation movements spurred women and men to question received understandings of gender, sexuality, and family life and to pursue what sociologist Anthony Giddens (1992) terms the modern ideal of a 'pure relationship' of 'confluent love'.

In place of the supposedly 'normal' American family immortalized by 1950s' sitcoms, most people today seek love and intimacy within the denaturalized world of the postmodern family condition. The post-modern family represents no new normal family structure, but instead an irreversible condition of family diversity, choice, flux, and contest. The sequence and packaging of romance, courtship, love, marriage, sex, conception, gestation, parenthood, and death are no longer predictable. Now that there is no consensus on the form a normal family should assume, every kind of family has become an alternative family. Lesbigoay or queer families occupy pride of place in this cultural smorgasbord which includes familiar varieties that were historically most prevalent among the poor – such as stepfamilies, unwed motherhood, blended families, bi-national families, divorce-extended kin,

cohabiting coupledness, and grandparent-headed families – along with such newer developments as at-home fatherhood, deadbeat dads, and open adoption – as well as innovations made possible by new commerce and technology – surrogacy, sperm banks, ovum exchange, genetic screening, gender selection, frozen embryos, and the no-longer-distant specter of human cloning.

As family innovations proliferate, the mass media energetically broadcast provocative images on a global scale. British journalists gave front-page coverage in late 1999 to the story of a gay male couple who challenged the time-honored passage of citizenship through the mother's line. Returning home to London with infant twins borne by an American surrogate mother, the two men were identified as 'parent one' and 'parent two' on the babies' birth certificates (Gibb, 1999; BBC, 2000). Singer Melissa Etheridge, her former partner Julie Cypher, and David Crosby, their proud celebrity sperm donor, have graced the glossy pages of entertainment monthlies as symbols of new ways to be family. Hollywood gave its first twenty-first century Oscar for best actress to Hilary Swank for her performance as the transgendered 'boyfriend' of Chloe Sevigny in *Boys Don't Cry* (to traditionalists' dismay, the transgendered can truly quack like ducks by legally entering into marriage with a 'same-gendered' partner). And in *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, the young son of one of the bus travelers is portrayed enthusiastically applauding the drag show that dad and his mates perform in a little Australian outback town where the boy lives with his mother.

Of course, similar topics now grace the pages of academic journals in numerous disciplines (from sociology, psychology and law, to political science, anthropology, cultural studies, religion, history, and medicine). Whereas appropriate motherhood has long been the focus of scholarly debate, now fathers too have become contested subjects – whether as deadbeat or at-home dads, or as cells in turkey basters. Scholars on the conservative end of the

spectrum have begun to claim that not only can children experience too little fathering (as in the case of fathers absent through disappearance or divorce, imprisonment or inertia), but also too much (as in the case of gay men co-parenting).

Perhaps it should not surprise us that the sight of such unfamiliar courses of intimacy gives conservative diners indigestion. Confronted by so much novelty, threatened forces train their rifles at the handiest targets, and campaigns for lesbian family rights have become difficult to miss. Queer families occupy the vanguard of the post-modern family condition, because they make the denaturalized and contingent character of family and kinship impossible to ignore. How irresistible these sitting ducks must appear to backlash troops mustered for target practice; and their frustration can only be magnified as they begin to suspect the futility of their cause. For by the turn of the millenium, it was already obvious that the historic move toward the legalization of gay marriage had gathered such a head of steam that was it no longer a matter of *if*, but of *when* or *where* it would first secure full legal status. And indeed, in April 2001, the Netherlands led the way and same gendered couples began to be wed. Other nations seem likely to follow suit, including Denmark, Sweden, Canada, and the Norway.

Even in the United States, where progress will undoubtedly be slower, popular anti-gay sentiment is steadily declining. Early in 2000, *Newsweek* conducted a poll which showed 83 per cent of all Americans favoring protection from discrimination at work for gay people (up from 56 per cent in 1977), with almost 60 per cent considering gay partners entitled to shared health benefits, and more than one-third supporting the legalization of gay marriage (Leland, 2000). Those viewing homosexuality as a sin were down to 46 per cent (from 54 per cent only two years earlier, in 1998). And indeed, in California, a poll taken in the aftermath of a bitterly fought ballot initiative – designed to restrict marriage to the union of a man and a woman – indicated that the 'debate' itself

raised consciousness in this regard: while 42 per cent of Californians said they considered homosexuality morally wrong, no fewer than 54 per cent came out against homophobia (Warren 2000). Another poll found 41 per cent of all Americans saying yes to civil unions as a means of extending benefits normally associated with marriage (*Los Angeles Times*, 2000). Early French surveys concerning the new civil unions (*pactes civils de solidarité*, or PACS, as the French more colorfully name them) indicated that almost half the population approved of offering them to gay and lesbian couples, and an even greater percentage supported PACS for straight couples. Indeed, startlingly high numbers of heterosexuals have presented themselves to be 'PACS-ed' even though for them marriage remains an option (*New York Times*, 2000).

But although other nations have surged ahead of the United States on the road to making marriage open to all, jurisdictions in the USA lead in providing legal pathways for planned lesbian and gay parenthood. Here, dramatic legal, popular, and technological gains in the area of lesbian and gay parental rights have preceded the advent of civil unions or marriage. Consistent with this trend, the *Newsweek* poll (Leland, 2000) showed a higher proportion of respondents favoring adoption rights for gay partners (39 per cent) than the percentage approving marriage (34 per cent).

#### QUEER FAMILY VALUES: A CASE OF CONFORMITY?

Although gay family rights issues now enjoy immense grassroots support among lesbians and gay men in many corners of the world, not all gay theorists or activists find this trend ducky. The same ideological and strategic differences that characterize other contemporary lesbian, gay, and queer discourses undergird the family quarrels: should the ultimate goal be normalization or subversion? Do the politics of accommodation or resistance promise to pave the royal road to 'Home'?

Scholars and activists of diverse ideological leanings continue to debate the consequences of legalizing same-sex marriage. They ask whether it augurs to democratize and degender the institution of marriage, or simply to exacerbate existing inequalities between haves and have-nots, couples and singles, women and men, and among members of different racial and ethnic groups. Would gay marriage increase social acceptance of lesbians and gays, or would it merely promote sexual conservatism and conformist, white picket-fence values? Lesbian and Gay Studies scholars also cross quills over domestic partnership legislation. Is this best viewed as a desirable and even preferable alternative, a strategic stepping stone, or as a second-class stepsister to full marriage rights? Similarly, what can be said about the current character of gay family relationships? Are they indeed more egalitarian and less violent than their heterosexual counterparts, as enthusiasts frequently claim? Are gay people – gay male people in particular – less inclined to monogamy, and if so, is that cause for regret or applause? Are queer family forms inherently more innovative, more unstable, and/or more considered than mainstream ones?

At the very least it is evident that lesbians and gay men do not share a common set of family values with each other, not to mention with those who occupy less common frequencies on the queer rainbow bandwidth. Indeed, the very notion of 'queer family values' is somewhat oxymoronic, signifying a quixotic wish to fuse subversion with normalization. Even so, for just this reason queer family values may serve as a fitting parodic figure to represent the paradigmatic paradoxes of postmodern intimacy! After examining some of the thickets and thorns of these debates, we will argue for the somewhat frustrating claim that the best answer to most of these questions is 'all of the above'. That is to say, contemporary lesbian and gay or queer family agendas necessarily house elements of liberation and accommodation, political success and co-option, hand in hand.

### RIGHTS AND RITES: THE DEBATE OVER MARRIAGE

Perhaps nowhere do disagreements over queer family values proceed as visibly or with such volatility as in the debate over legalizing same-sex marriage. While momentum for this goal gathers popular force, gay and lesbian scholars and activists continue to disagree over whether campaigning for the right to marry represents a subversive or normalizing project – or both. Disputes still rage, as anthropologist Ellen Lewin (1998) notes in her engaging book about gay weddings, *Recognizing Ourselves: Ceremonies of Lesbian and Gay Commitment*, ‘over whether same-sex marriage constitutes a callow effort to fit into the mainstream or a bold rebellion against the limitations of a rigid gender hierarchy’ (ibid.: 35).

In some respects, the major fault lines in the seismic terrain lie between a moderate reformism and a radical oppositional stance, between national gay rights organizations and queer direct action politics, and to some extent along gender and racial lines, with comparatively affluent, socially ambitious, white gay men typically more enthusiastic and prominent in the drive for marriage rights than less privileged, more dissident, lesbian feminists and gay people of color. In fact, lesbian critic Julie Abraham (2000) goes so far – perhaps a bit too far – as to charge that ‘the new gay and lesbian constituency being constructed through the marriage debates is a wholly white, conventionally gendered as well as sexually circumspect crowd ...’. However, one of the more attractive (or pernicious, depending on one’s standpoint) features of the marriage debate is that scholars do not all line up neatly as pro-marriage conservatives on one side and anti-marriage libertines on the other. Instead, arguments for opening matrimony to all comers, regardless of gender combination can be, and are, readily made from feminist, radical, liberal, and conservative corners alike. Likewise, cogent cases

against the gay marriage crusade rest upon equivalent incommensurate ideological underpinnings – including queer theory, feminism, socialism, anarchism, and libertarianism, along with the more obvious assists from conservative religious doctrines and unadulterated homophobic sentiments.

The intra-community debate over gay marriage was forcefully joined in 1989 in a now classic pair of articles by Tom Stoddard and Paula Ettelbrick, both then attorneys with the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund. Responding to Stoddard’s (1992) seemingly self-evident equal rights argument that since marriage exists and confers economic and other benefits, it should be open to all, Ettelbrick (1992) took the classic militant position that to affirm marriage ran contrary to the values of gay identity and culture. What of other kinds of relations than monogamous pairings? What of challenging privilege rather than being co-opted into its halls? ‘Being queer is more than setting up house, sleeping with a person of the same gender, and seeking state approval for doing so,’ she protested.

Criticisms like Ettelbrick’s were habitually thrown at those few lesbian and gay couples who dared to venture down the aisle toward even a virtual altar twenty years or more ago. Suzanne Sherman (1992) cites the experience of a lesbian couple who planned a commitment ceremony back then:

We were a very, very small handful of lesbians who got married. We took a lot of flak from other lesbians, as well as heterosexuals. In 1981, we didn’t know any other lesbians, not a single one, who had had a ceremony in Santa Cruz, and a lot of lesbians live in that city. Everybody was on our case about it. They said, What are you doing?; How heterosexual. We really had to sell it. (ibid.: 191).

Now, however, lesbian and gay weddings routinely receive recognition in mainstream newspapers, through ‘bridal’ registries, and on prime-time TV, while purveyors of classy (or camp!) gay or lesbian wedding commodities mail their catalogs by the thousands. Gay weddings, it seems, are already big business, at least for those who

can afford them. Their political meanings are quite complex, however, often lying, as Lewin (1998) shows, in the eye of the beholder: 'Symbols couples intend to invoke resistance may instead suggest complicity with cultural norms, while other symbols explicitly meant to suggest conformity may be understood to subvert and undermine heteronormativity' (1998: 46). Indeed, as Lewin's book ably demonstrates, the line between rituals of resignation and of resistance is traced on shifting sands.

In an influential 1991 article, 'Marriage, law, and gender: a feminist inquiry', feminist legal theorist Nan Hunter suggested that several events of 1989 served to shift the cultural contours of that line and contributed to a 'rapidly developing sense that the legalization of marriage for lesbian and gay Americans [was] politically possible at some unknown but not unreachable point in the future' (ibid.:10). In May 1989, the city of San Francisco became the first major city in the United States to introduce a proposed domestic partnership ordinance, and the California State Bar Association passed a resolution calling upon the state to amend marriage laws to include gay and lesbian couples. In June 1989, Denmark became the first country in the world to open a 'registered partnership' category which conferred upon gay and lesbian couples all of the economic and social benefits of marriage – with the significant exception of rights to parental custody for non-biological parents. Following rapidly in July, the New York State Court of Appeals issued a landmark ruling in favor of a gay partner's claim to protection from eviction, based upon his 'family' relation to the deceased tenant-of-record. And in August, New York City Mayor Ed Koch authorized bereavement leave for the domestic partners of city employees. Within this context, the tide of gay and lesbian resistance to gay marriage began to ebb, reconfiguring and layering the shifting contours of the ideological shoreline.

It's about sex discrimination, pure and simple – not gay rights, not privacy, not freedom of intimate association, but just sex

discrimination – gay legal activists argued in the 1993 Hawaiian state court case, an argument which reverberated so widely that the prospect of gay marriage at once became a national electoral issue. It's also about family values, added Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund attorney Evan Wolfson (1994–95), commenting during the Hawaii case for which he was the plaintiffs' lead attorney: 'Inclusion at the level of marriage is uniquely revolutionary, conservatively subversive, singularly faithful to true American and family values in a way that few, if any, other gay and lesbian victories would be' (ibid.: 580).

Marriage is worth fighting for, posits philosopher Richard Mohr (1994), not just for equal rights or benefits but because it defines and creates social relations. It is a conduit for justice at times of crisis such as illness, death, or financial collapse. And, lest anyone be concerned about its sexual shackles, it is plainly compatible with non-monogamy, he adds: if the ability of many gay men to sustain long-term relationships built on factors other than promises of sexual exclusivity is not witness enough, look to the fact that adultery has been widely decriminalized for heterosexuals in recent decades!

The debate is also about redefining the entire institution of marriage, say those who share Tom Stoddard's (1992) reading that marriage 'may be unattractive and even oppressive as it is currently structured and practiced ... [but] enlarging the concept to embrace same-sex couples would necessarily transform it into something new' (ibid.: 13). Indeed, marriage is a state long associated with changing mores, as Nan Hunter (1991) expounds. Even its recent history demonstrates that rigid institutionalizations of gender (or race) have frequently been rapidly discarded as times change: the courts no longer hold to their once key assumption of a husband's authority over his wife, for example, and bans on interracial marriage seem to belong to another era (despite the fact that the last existing such ban, in Alabama, was eliminated only in 1999,

more than thirty years after the 1967 *Loving vs. Virginia* Supreme Court decision striking down miscegenation laws). Hunter deduces, therefore, that marriage itself would be enriched and democratized rather than damaged by opening it to same-gendered partners, since this would serve to 'radically denaturalize the social and political construction of male/female difference as authority/dependence relationships that courts have deemed essential to the definition of marriage' (1991: 9). Marriage is simply a social construction without any natural existence outside of particular laws and customs, she asserts, and as cultures change, marriage changes with them.

It is clearly the case that marriage has carried vastly different meanings in different times and places, and does still to this day among different classes and social groups, as lesbian social historian E.J. Graff (1999) documents in her aptly-named volume, *What is Marriage For? The Strange Social History of our Most Intimate Institution*. Time was when the vast civil disobedience of young heterosexuals today, living in pairs in great numbers without benefit of marriage, would have been considered greatly shocking. Today more people are shocked by past generations' assumptions that marriage was primarily about the transfer of estate and other property (including the bride herself) from one family to another. For not until the messy marriage law reforms of the eighteenth century did the day dawn when, in Graff's words, 'marriage for love – long the dubious privilege of the poor, nearly a guarantee of penury, a weird refusal to see that one could love wherever duty lay – started to become its own holy ideal all across the West' (1999: 26).

Perhaps the most significant historical shift with regard to the meaning of marriage at the present time, however, has been the recognition in most quarters that procreation is no longer its necessary complement or goal. Lewin (1998) notes that even those who cannot have sexual relations at all (on account of physical disability, or incarceration, for

example) are nowadays encouraged to marry for the 'spiritual' or cultural worth of doing so. And once the time arrives that marriage is sacred even without babies. (Graff, 1999, flags the 1965 Supreme Court ruling in *Griswold vs. Connecticut* on contraception as a private matter between couples, as such a moment), then the exclusion from the married state of those for whom sexual relations can never lead to natural conception becomes more tenuous. Hence, like Hunter (1991), Graff believes that same-sex marriage can deal a feminist *coup de grâce* to male supremacy: 'Same-sex marriage will imply that the sexes are deeply and fundamentally equal' (ibid.:159). However, unlike Hunter, Graff has no objection to the likelihood that 'opening marriage to same-sex couples may well shift our society's sexual dividing line from the current and temporary line between homosexual and heterosexual back to one more historically familiar, a divide between monogamous and promiscuous' (ibid.:190).

But this is simply shameless capitulation to suburban conformity, scoff many critics from within. Queer theorists and leftists often charge that the recent outbreak of 'mad vow disease', as one witty, scornful critic dubbed the gay marriage campaign (Kate Clinton in Warner, 1999), uncritically embraces bourgeois values, monogamy, and state regulation of intimacy. Emulating heterosexual marriage will strengthen the inequitable and repressive status quo, they complain, for what happily married gay or lesbian couple will turn around to oppose the assignment of benefits they thereby gain? 'In the modern era,' Michael Warner charges, 'marriage has become the central legitimating institution by which the state penetrates the sexuality of its subjects; it is the 'zone of privacy' outside which sex is unprotected' (1999: 128). Moreover, expanding the marital tent will do more to reinforce than to eradicate gender prescriptions, many lesbian theorists add, unconvinced by the more optimistic predictions made by Hunter (1991) or Graff (1999). Marriage is an inherently problematic institution, its

practice terminally riddled with patriarchy, Nancy Polikoff (1993) maintains. Likewise, Ruthan Robson (1994) posits that to theorize lesbian relations in the context of family law inevitably serves only to domesticate and depoliticize lesbianism (should lesbians allow themselves the unfortunate compliment of being classed as 'good' sexual deviants if they happen to be monogamous and focused on the family?).

Neoconservative gay male intellectuals, such as Andrew Sullivan (1995, 1997), Jonathan Rauch (1994), and Bruce Bawer (1993), unabashedly embrace the goal of opening marriage to gay men and lesbians in precisely these terms, explicitly endorsing the assimilationist project. They do not wish to change anything about the institution of marriage beyond the mixed-gender entry permit to its privileged status, for they champion the very conservative family, sexual, gender, and property values that most queer theorists, lesbians, and feminists oppose. Sullivan goes so far as to suggest that opening social rites such as marriage to gay men and lesbians is the most that a democratic society can tolerate, and that efforts to fight discrimination in other environs cross the line of acceptability. Teasing opponents of gay marriage in terms calculated to raise hackles in both conservative and progressive quarters, he proposes: 'Since persecution is not an option in a civilized society, why not coax gays into traditional values rather than rail incoherently against them?' (1989: 22).

Traditional values, of course, are precisely what more radical critics reject. Echoes of the feminist 'sex wars' and of the queer theory 'sex panic' debate reverberate in the controversy over gay marriage. Radicals do not wish merely to expand access to a one-size-fits-all garment, but rather to redesign and multiply the models for intimacy, sexuality, and kinship available in the family wardrobe. They disagree among themselves, however, over whether marriage should remain one of the selections on the rack. 'The strategic question facing lawyers,' as Warner explains, 'is whether to

extend benefits and recognition even further beyond conventional marriage or to extend the status of marriage and thereby restrict entitlements and recognition to it' (1999: 138). Warner represents a dwindling number of white gay male opponents of same-sex marriage, but many lesbian and feminist theorists, such as Robson (1994), Abraham (2000), and Martha Fineman (1995), still advocate a politics of resistance, aiming to abolish policies that make benefits contingent upon marital status, or indeed to discard the category of 'family' altogether.

But of course such an approach readily attracts the charge of unattainable utopianism, as political theorist Valerie Lehr (1999) notes, in *Queer Family Values: Debunking the Myth of the Nuclear Family*: 'Political theory can provide powerful arguments against seeking inclusion into the institution of marriage, but these arguments may have little persuasive power for lesbian and gay couples trying to confront challenges such as the denial of health care benefits to partners' (ibid.: 30). And as political events unfolded over the 1990s, even former critics like Ettelbrick began to draw closer to the pro-marriage fold. Interviewed in 2000 by a *New York Times* reporter just after Vermont approved civil unions, Ettelbrick acknowledged that she and her partner had 'always told each other in good feminist fashion that they would never marry'; but, she confessed:

I will admit to being very awed by the developments in Vermont, and just personally, it has made me rethink the opportunity it might provide for me and for my children ... The possibility of a border state to New York allowing something like this is very emotional, and part of it is that it signifies a very long road to being included as citizens of this country. (in Goldberg, 2000)

As Warner concedes,

It is possible, at least in theory, to imagine a politics in which sex-neutral marriage is seen as a step toward the more fundamental goals of sexual justice: not just formal equality before the law, based on a procedural bar to discrimination, but a substantive justice that would target sexual domination, making possible a democratic cultivation of alternative sexualities. (1999: 124)



To do so, however, would require articulating this more liberatory vision in the public discourse of the gay marriage crusade, because, as Warner correctly notes, 'the public sphere in which the discussion takes place is one of the contexts that *define* marriage' (ibid.: 149). Warner charges that the advocates of gay marriage have not made this case.

We disagree somewhat. As we have shown, some feminists like Hunter (1991), Ettelbrick (1992), and Lehr (1999) do indeed advocate marriage as part of a liberatory vision not only of sexuality, but of gender and social justice as well. However, their more critical and visionary perspectives rarely make their way into the circumscribed and polarized discursive constructs through which the mainstream media and the male-dominated national gay press and rights organizations produce and circulate 'the gay marriage debate'. Like these more marginalized voices, we would wish to decouple most individual economic and social entitlements from the already socially privileged domain of coupledness. However, particularly in a society like the United States in which there are scant grounds for presuming that the institution of marriage will soon fade away, and in which grassroots support for same-sex marriage is so keen, it strikes us as both elitist and politically misguided for more critical voices to cede the discursive struggle over marriage to the assimilationist camp.

#### SEPARATE BUT EQUAL? DOMESTIC PARTNERSHIP AND OTHER ALTERNATIVE MODELS

Paradoxically, while queer and feminist theorists wish to resist the normalizing implications of same-sex marriage, no nation or state has yet dared to present such an option to same-sex couples. Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Iceland, Germany, Finland, France, Vermont ... all have chosen the politically 'safer' bargain of domestic

partnership as a way of offering such couples most, but not all, of the benefits of marriage. Other states and nations are moving in this direction (at the time of writing, Canada, Australia, South Africa, and Israel and also some US states, including California, have created variations on the 'common-law spouse' theme). But though conservative opponents in Vermont view civil unions as tantamount to marriage (if it quacks like a duck, remember?), gay and lesbian couples who seek the same rights and benefits as other citizens are barely likely to be satisfied with anything that merits the tag 'separate but equal.' Separate has never proven equal before, they rightly aver. That the French PACS are proving highly attractive to young straight couples wanting a pledge of their commitment to one another but not yet ready to plunge fully into marriage, indicates that the two are not the same. And indeed, it is hard to sustain any argument that says domestic partnership is not a second-class status so long as marriage remains an exclusively heterosexual institution.

This does not mean, however, that domestic partnership is inherently an inferior family form. Anyone disliking a one-size-fits-all model is predisposed to consider alternative arrangements for creating family a worthy goal (the sting remaining, of course, that something 'alternative' must indeed be an alternative and not the only choice available). In fact, many queer and feminist theorists prefer domestic partnership over marriage as an option for those who so desire, given the historical ties of marriage to other unwanted baggage. Valerie Lehr (1999) reminds her readers that the gay liberation movement sprang up in the midst of a far broader questioning of a racist, sexist, capitalist economy. Noting that current family narratives (in the West) contain assumptions rooted in the consolidation of industrial capitalism, and tracing the ways in which those of other classes and ethnic backgrounds have rarely been able (or wanted?) to imitate the privatized household of families headed by a middle-class, white, male wage-earner, she urges leaving

aside the values of the dominant culture and creating a new ethical framework that allows for traditional ways without excluding other choices.

Feminist legal theorist Martha A. Fineman (1995) proposes a more fundamental rejection of Western definitions of family, arguing that making the sexual pairing of adults the root of family is misguided because it renders women and children economically vulnerable to the vagaries of adult erotic and emotional attachments. Risking the charge of gender 'essentialism', Fineman calls instead for making the mother/child unit the base for state support and, where necessary, intervention. Meanwhile, queer theorists such as Warner (1993, 1999) and Frank Browning (1994) oppose allowing monogamous sexual coupling of any kind to serve as the basis for entitlements or regulation.

Others call for wide-ranging redefinitions of marriage, or of what Fineman calls the sexual family. Neil Miller, for example, quotes a Danish lesbian activist as saying, 'If I am going to marry it will be with one of my oldest friends in order to share pensions and things like that. But I'd never marry a lover. That is the advantage of being married to a close friend. Then, you never have to marry a lover!' (1992: 350). Of course, as Fineman (1995) and others protest, the question left begging is why pensions, health benefits, and so forth should ever have been tied to marital status in the first place. In Scandinavian societies, where this is not the case, all children and adults receive such basic entitlements, and child poverty has been nearly eradicated.

Hunter, fruitfully in our view, advocates offering domestic partnership alongside marriage, multiplying options in the direction of greater family diversity for all. On the one hand, she concludes, domestic partnerships 'go farthest from removing the state from the regulation of intimate relationships' (1991: 24); but, on the other hand, she asks whether this is always a good thing, since non-interference from the state in family matters has historically served chiefly to buttress patriarchy. Moreover,

Hunter adds, domestic partnerships may be more of a burden for those with fewer financial resources since they still lack protections which must then be added by cumbersome and costly legal processes. But simply removing the bar to same-sex marriage would provide nothing by way of alternative, and would limit the ways by which those who so desired could challenge its customs.

That is why the 'all of the above' approach – extending both marriage and domestic partnership to any and all comers – seems the best strategy for addressing the inherent diversity and contradictions of the postmodern family condition. Moreover, any public debate that considers expanding civil rights and protecting sexual (or other) minorities from abuse and discrimination has political value in itself. More at issue, perhaps, are the most effective political strategies for achieving these goals. Impatient with the extravagant drain of labor and finances needed to resist – defensively, and unsuccessfully – the wave of backlash state initiatives designed to pre-empt same-sex marriage, critics such as Eric Rofes (2000) and William Rubenstein (2000) have proposed the more 'up close and personal' strategy of a marital boycott. Until such time as marriage is open to all, they ask sympathetic heterosexuals to refuse to collude with unjust public policy by taking advantage of their heterosexual privilege, and they challenge queer folks to turn down invitations to attend legal weddings with pointed explanations as to their reason for so doing. But to those who continue to insist that even talking about gay marriage is reactionary, Evan Wolfson simply replies, 'The ship has sailed' (1994–95: 660). Marriage is on the gay agenda, like it or not.

#### HEATHER'S MOMMIES AND OTHER RELATIVES: RESEARCHING QUEER FAMILIES

In a cartoon published not so long ago in the *New Yorker*, a brisk-looking elementary

school teacher poses a decidedly postmodern math problem to her young charges. 'If Heather has two mommies,' she asks, 'and each of them has two brothers, and one of those brothers has another man for a "room-mate", how many uncles does Heather have?'<sup>1</sup> The question artfully exposes the way in which the mapping of a family tree, a project rather more commonly assigned by elementary school teachers, is problematic to a child whose family does not match assumed genealogical norms. Must a household reflect some particular cultural pattern (father, mother, and 2.1 children of assorted gender, for example) in order to be considered a family by others?

The notion of 'families we choose' (the discourse-setting title of anthropologist Kath Weston's 1991 study of lesbian and gay families in and around San Francisco) challenges essentialist understandings of kinship. Weston identified the widespread gay experience of rejection by families of origin and the need to construct alternative support structures (a need dramatically heightened by the first ravages of the AIDS epidemic among gay men), as foundational to the creativity with which lesbians and gay men began structuring their own families of choice during the last decades of the twentieth century. Multi-household support networks, the blending of selected biological and chosen kin, early lesbian experiments in planned parenthood via donor insemination were but some of the 'chosen' family forms she investigated.

*Families We Choose* rightly serves as a portal into the lesbian and gay studies literature on family formation, for it presciently traced the historic shift – at a time when that shift was still young and raw – from the anti-family stance of the early gay liberation movement to the sense of entitlement increasingly voiced by gays and lesbians in their struggle for family recognition and rights as enjoyed by others. Such demands, as Weston noted, are not inherently reactionary, reformist, or even progressive. Whether gay family discourse replicates or resists mainstream family 'values' depends

upon the particular social and political context. She read the move toward establishing families of choice as a sign of a growing sense of political confidence and entitlement among lesbians and gay men. Even Weston might have been surprised, however, to find that within the decade, gay and lesbian parents and their children would become the feted subjects of cover stories in *Newsweek* and other mainstream publications.

#### AND BABY MAKES THREE (OR TWO, OR FIVE): PARENTING IN QUEER FAMILIES

How many uncles does – or should – Heather acknowledge, indeed? And a few years later, will students find themselves asking in high school biology how Heather herself was conceived ... by artificial insemination from one of the uncles to his sister's female partner, or by sperm donated by an unknown biological 'parent' (or even, nowadays, sperm stored by one of the 'moms' in anticipation of a lesbian coupling, prior to her undergoing male-to-female sex reassignment surgery)? With ovum exchange or fusion? With a pre-birth custody decree attached? Or one of the many other variants rapidly gaining in popularity? Two or more gay men sharing with one, two or more women in the raising of children sharing all their genetic material? And any other co-mothers out there? A former partner, perhaps, and her own new partner, all equally, or perhaps competitively, devoted to Heather and to her healthy growth to maturity? Or non-sexual co-parents, defying the modern Western norm that the family be inherently sexual by definition? Or other kinship relations consciously forged in ways that might be emulated by heterosexual parents also?

The 'gayby boom' (or, more accurately, 'lesbaby boom') of the past two decades has been nothing short of spectacular. By the late 1970s, as Weston (1991) documented, lesbians on the west coast and in other urban

centers of the United States had begun deciding to bear their own biological children (aided by new assisted reproduction techniques). By the 1990s, gay men were joining the planned parenthood brigade, via adoption, surrogacy, or joint parenting arrangements. Prior to this time, of course, children raised by gay men or lesbians had typically been born in the context of an earlier heterosexual relationship, and few parents who came out of the closet in those days were able to win contests for custody of their children.

Heterosexual procreation and parenthood, after all, represent the ideological lynchpin of Western gender and family conventions. The advent of planned lesbian and gay parenting has spawned a growing mixture of political controversies in the USA and Europe, as well as a new social science industry. Do children need a biological or a social father? A mother? All, or none of the above? Are lesbian and gay parents better, worse, or different from straight parents, and how do their children fare? Queer parenting experiments and the custody rights issues these pose have, interestingly, birthed a natural laboratory for the study of the effects of parental gender and sexual orientation upon child development.

As might be expected, conservative scholars have predicted dire outcomes; and their pejorative views dominated the perspectives of judges and legislators who dealt with the first wave of child custody conflicts and demands. Conservatives claim, for example, that homosexual parents are more sexually promiscuous and more likely to molest their own children; that their children suffer a greater risk of losing a parent to AIDS, substance abuse, or suicide; that the children are more apt to be confused about gender and sexual identities and to become homosexual themselves; that the social stigma and embarrassment of having a homosexual parent unfairly ostracize children and damage their ability to form peer relationships, and that as a consequence of all this, such children suffer higher levels of depression and other emotional difficulties

(e.g. Cameron and Cameron, 1996; Cameron, et al., 1996; Wardle, 1997). Opponents of homosexual parenthood insist also that children of lesbians suffer the supposed ill effects of 'fatherlessness'. 'It is now undeniable,' a Brigham Young professor of family law asserts, 'that, just as a mother's influence is crucial to the secure, healthy, and full development of a child, [a] paternal presence in the life of a child is essential to the child emotionally and physically' (Wardle, 1997: 860).

On the contrary, although the research record has limitations, more than two decades of studies have failed to substantiate such claims. The vast majority of studies to date attempt to compare child outcomes among offspring reared by heterosexual and lesbian mothers. However, since most of these children were born within heterosexual marriages which later dissolved, it has proved very difficult to isolate the effects of parental sexual orientation from such factors as divorce, coming out, step-parenting, or declines and other changes in living standards. But a new literature is growing up as fast as the children themselves, to study the children of self-identified lesbians and gay men consciously choosing to become parents through various means.

This research remains fledgling and constrained by methodological challenges, but thus far researchers almost uniformly report no meaningful differences in the measures of child outcomes they have employed; and this emerging social scientific consensus has helped to shift custody policies and decisions in a more progressive direction. Over time, increasing numbers of state courts and legislatures are extending custody, adoption, and foster care rights to lesbian and gay parents. Not surprisingly, this trend has provoked a backlash assault on the reputed ideological purposes of such research and renewed, sporadically successful, efforts to restrict parenting rights explicitly to heterosexuals.<sup>2</sup>

The available research, however, in our view, suffers more from its defensive response to homophobia than from ideological

partisanship. For although few reputable social scientists now subscribe to the view that homosexual parents subject their children to serious risks, too many sympathetic researchers have felt compelled to adopt an implicitly heteronormative defense of gay parenting which accepts heterosexual parenting as the gold standard and therefore sets out to investigate whether or not homosexual parents are indeed inferior. Too often scholars seem to believe that this precludes discovering any differences in child outcomes at all. Thus a characteristically defensive review of research on lesbian-mother families concludes: 'a rapidly growing and highly consistent body of empirical work has failed to identify significant differences between lesbian mothers and their heterosexual counterparts or the children raised by these groups. Researchers have been unable to establish empirically that detriment results to children from being raised by lesbian mothers' (Falk, 1994: 151).

While it is easy to understand and sympathize with the reasoning behind this defensive stance, the impulse to downplay or deny any finding of difference serves to forfeit a unique opportunity for exploring the effects of parental gender and sexual identity, ideology, and behavior on children. This is particularly unfortunate for the domain of gender and sexual theory. Indeed, foreclosing the most interesting questions, researchers report findings that some might find perverse, defensively claiming that children of gay and lesbian parents turn out to be heterosexual in virtually the same proportion as those raised by heterosexual parents. However, while there is no evidence that parental sexual orientation *per se* has a notable impact on children's general psychological, intellectual or social development (nor reason that it should, apart from the social stigma involved), it seems as likely as it should be acceptable that gay parents affirmatively expose their children to a greater range of gender and sexual options. Indeed, there are scattered findings in the published studies that support such a view (see Tasker and Golombok, 1997; Stacey and Biblarz, 2001).

Moreover, should the day in fact come when homosexuality is no longer stigmatized, would it matter anyway how many kids did turn out to be gay? It should seem self-evident to all but the most biased observer that more heterosexual parents, as well as the dominant culture, are likely to attempt to influence their children to follow in their heterosexual footsteps than are gay parents to deliberately 'bring their kids up gay' (to quote Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's teasingly titled monograph). As Sedgwick (1993: 76) wryly notes, 'advice on how to help your kids turn out gay, not to mention your students, your parishioners, your therapy clients, or your military subordinates, is less ubiquitous that you might think'.

The other minor differences reported in the research on lesbian parenting derive from the special demographic characteristics, values, and quality of relationships such parents currently represent. Given the social and economic requisites involved, lesbians (and especially gay men) who choose to become parents tend to be older and better educated than parents in general, and more often reside in urban settings. And as the means of assisted reproduction and independent adoption are more readily available to those in dominant social groups, such parents are more likely to be white and comparatively affluent. Not surprisingly, the majority of studies to date focus on the group easiest to identify, namely, white lesbian mothers in major cities, and their children. Their tantalizing findings prompt a rash of questions in their turn. Lesbian co-mothers studied, for example, seem to have higher parenting skills than heterosexual stepfathers. But is this related to their sexual orientation, their gender, or other factors? Do gay fathers parent any differently than dads in general, and, if so, why? Would the findings be the same if more racially diverse populations of gay parents were included? And, indeed, are the very categories 'lesbian mother' and 'gay father' ethnocentric, historically transitional and conceptually flawed, as queer theory would imply, since they presume sexual orientation

to be fixed and dichotomous rather than fluid, inconsistent, and more multiple? Might we not learn more of interest by studying the gender and number of parents in given families, and their diverse biological and social routes to parenthood, rather than emphasizing effects of their sexual orientation?

Valerie Lehr helpfully summarizes some of the issues researchers might usefully seek to address in this context:

By highlighting the contradictory roles that queer people create when we enter families, we can perhaps identify some of the challenges that queer families pose for dominant understandings of family: How do we understand lesbian non-biological mothers who live with a child's biological mother? Are lesbian partners mothers or fathers in those relationships? Can a lesbian be a father? Similarly, how do we understand the roles played by two male parents? Are they fathers, mothers, or some of each? ... If a child has three or more parents, how do we identify them? (1999: 103).

Or, as Graff (1999) puts it, bemoaning her own lack of legal status as a potential co-parent, 'if a dead man, or an uncle, or an absent cuckold, or a holy ghost, or a sperm-bank-supplemented husband can be a sociological 'father,' why can't I?' (ibid.: 105).

#### LIBERTY, EQUALITY, DIVERSITY?

While some researchers spend their efforts measuring lesbigay families against tacit heteronormative standards, others are more interested in assessing whether queer family relationships are superior – more liberated and liberating – than the *ancien régime* of compulsory heterosexual marriage and gender-divided parenting. Three prominent areas of current concern involve sexual practice and ethics, distributions of labor and power, and racial or ethnic differences in family formation and ideology.

The thorny issue of variance in sexual practice and ethics is not of course one unique to gay people. Values with regard to monogamy, promiscuity, sexual sport, and

sex outside of love and relationships are ubiquitous subjects of debate among sexual ethicists and the general public, not to mention the US Congress! Many gay men, however, pursue this dispute with particular energy, passion and creativity. For the gay male 'culture of desire' – which queer theorists like Frank Browning (1994) affirm – creates special challenges for those gay men who question the colonization of sexuality in the name of respectability or of redemption or of 'safe' sex after the devastating terrors of AIDS, but who nonetheless seek the semblance of intimate family bonds. Navigating some of the choppiest channels in the currents of eros and domesticity, such gay men experimentally invent new genres of the 'sexual' family. That is precisely what makes homosexuality so threatening to self-appointed defenders of civilization, Browning claims:

What is wrong with us homosexual people to straight society is that we are always available (potentially); what threatens them [*sic*] is their anxiety that *all* men harbor a desire to be penetrated and to surrender to the universal impulse toward wildness, an impulse that if allowed to go unchecked would proliferate into a thousand jungles of desire. (1994: 100)

Although data on sexual practice is difficult to gather and decode, most research supports the view that quite a few gay men do indeed seem to walk on the wild side with greater abandon than most of the rest of the population. *Homosexualities*, A.P. Bell and M.S. Weinberg's (1978) classic study on this matter, reports quite formidable levels of gay male sexual activity. Almost half of the white gay men interviewed and one-third of black gay men claimed to have had at least 500 different sex partners in their lives, and more than 90 per cent of the white gay men reported 25 partners or more. Moreover, more than one-quarter of the white gay men reported sexual activity with more than 50 partners during the year of the study, a second quarter indicated between 20 and 50, and more than half of the 29 per cent who considered themselves coupled at the time of their interview depicted their relationships

as non-monogamous. Similarly, Gary Dowsett's (1996) *Practicing Desire*, an ethnographic study of gay male sexual practice in Australia, records extensive numbers of sexual partners. The majority of lesbians in the Bell and Weinberg (1978) study, by contrast, claimed to have had fewer than ten partners, with another quarter reporting fewer than five. Almost three-quarters of the women said that they were currently in a stable relationship with another woman which integrated love and sex (despite a culture of jokes about lesbian bed-death), and far more of these than the men believed that sexual infidelity would cause their relationship to fail. And, indeed, despite their greater tolerance for open relationships, Bell and Weinberg record considerable instability in gay male couple relationships.

More recently, voices claim to detect a move away from sexual libertinism, particularly among younger gay men, partly the result of AIDS, and partly a classic historical/political generational shift. Some critics complain that current family discourse represents a conservative retreat from the defense of sexual liberty and pleasure (paralleling feminist sex wars over pornography). 'Sex Panic' critics, like Browning (1994), Warner (1993, 1999), Douglas Crimp (1988), and Kobena Mercer (1994), castigate prominent mainstream gay authors, including Sullivan (1995, 1997), Bawer (1993), Michelangelo Signorile (1997), and Gabriel Rotello (1997), for fostering such a retreat. And while lesbians certainly divide along similar ideological lines, it is as striking as it is unsurprising that this is a discourse dominated by men.

But who, if anyone, dominates the household when couples cannot resort to default mode gender scripts? Studies of the division of domestic labor and power have become a major area of sociological research ever since feminists focused attention on the politics of housework. Because same-sex couples offer an exceptional social laboratory for gender theory and practice, research on how gay and lesbian couples and co-parents share household duties and expenses is a

thriving enterprise, assessing the great gay hope that their relationships are more egalitarian and just than heterosexual ones. The record thus far provides grounds for both self-congratulation and caution. *American Couples*, the 1983 classic study by Philip Blumstein and Pepper Schwartz, which compared married and cohabiting straight couples with their gay male and lesbian counterparts, did find that gender served as a potent determinant across the spectrum of money, work, and sex. Lesbians were most likely to share domestic tasks equally, they reported, and gay men to divide them by interest, but both were more egalitarian and more economically autonomous than married couples. Later studies of lesbian co-parents report similar results. For example, Raymond Chan, Risa Brooks et al. (1998) found that lesbian co-mothers shared childcare tasks more equally than heterosexual parents and that more egalitarian couples were also more satisfied with their relationships. Likewise, Maureen Sullivan (1996) found that lesbian co-parents tended to perform equal childcare duties and enjoy equal status in the home as long as both remained employed. But if one (and not necessarily the birth mother) became a full-time homemaker, her breadwinner partner seemed to assume more of the kind of decision-making power that male breadwinners have traditionally enjoyed. A recent ethnographic study, however, more skeptically asks if such findings owe more to romantic, self-congratulatory ideological investments than to quotidian practice. After closely observing more than fifty families, Christopher Carrington (1999) claims that domestic tasks were, in fact, far from equally shared, but that investment in egalitarianism led lesbians to credit partners who contribute little with more than they in fact do, while dominant gay male partners worked hard to counter any perceived emasculation of the more domesticated partner by stressing that partner's non-domestic activities.

The fond myth that a same-gendered relationship is inherently shielded from patriarchal patterns of dominance and subordination

can even make lesbians and gays particularly vulnerable to more threatening consequences. For it fosters a tendency to deny what divorce lawyers have known all along, namely that attempts to anchor romantic affairs in the turbulent waters of domesticity are beset by all kinds of dangers, including violence in the home. The emergence of disappointing data pointing to the prevalence of partner abuse among gay men and lesbians – which preliminary surveys indicate to be no less rampant than in heterosexual relationships – has led to community-based efforts to provide domestic violence intervention and prevention services, at least in urban centers (National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs, 1997, 1998, 1999). Service providers emphasize the need for concerted efforts to increase the sensitivity of health care and law enforcement agencies to victims of same-gendered domestic violence. For example, a battered lesbian rightly fears that her partner can gain the same access as she to the network of women's shelters, and a gay man might report an assault by his partner as perpetrated by a stranger. Confronting the tendency within lesbian and gay groups to deny the existence of such violence remains a major challenge. Lesbians, in particular, have been reluctant to acknowledge that loving women does not in itself grant them immunity from domestic abuse. And feminist theory must confront the complex question of whether and why families in all their new varieties might retain as much potential for violence and danger as when gender seemed to explain all.

However long the 'families we choose' literature may be on matters of liberty and equality, it falls significantly behind – like much else in lesbian and gay studies – on matters of racial and ethnic diversity. This is a disproportionately white discourse, both among authors and subjects, reflecting the unwitting ethnocentrism of categories like gay, queer, and choice. After all, communities constructed around sexual identity tend to be white-dominated in Western countries, because the identification of 'gay' with 'white' points to the relatively privileged

position of those who can afford to make sexuality the central axis of their identity.<sup>3</sup> As the late Joseph Beam, a Black gay poet, observed with some bitterness before he died of AIDS: 'We ain't family. Very clearly, gay male means: white, middle-class, youthful, nautalized, and probably butch; there is no room for Black gay men within the confines of this gay pentagon' (1986: 14). And, of course, the word 'family' itself often signifies differently among communities of color, not to mention among peoples of non-Western nations.

Consequently, the emergent literature on the family formations of lesbigay people of color builds on the premise that most are likely to regard the racial groups to which they belong as a stronger source of solidarity and identity (and marginality) than they do their sexual affinities. Indeed, lesbigay people of color appear to be more apt than whites to remain semi-closeted, embedded within their own racial kin groups and neighborhoods, and to pursue homoerotic interests within racial bonds (see, e.g., Hawkeswood, 1996). Keith Boykin, Executive Director of the National Black Gay and Lesbian Leadership Forum, recounts how he came to such a stance: 'The shared racial identity develops a much stronger family bond than any presumed identity based on sexual orientation. I never polled my family members, but ultimately I decided that some would be more disturbed by my dating a white woman, while others would be more upset by my dating a black man' (1996: 23).

Likewise, gay men and lesbians of color are less likely to participate in the planned gayby boom, partly because of economic barriers which disproportionately affect people of color; partly because they are less likely to live within communities which support and foster this choice; and partly because of the relative paucity of non-white sperm donors. As Boykin notes, 'Homophobia and heterosexism are frequently seen not as prejudices but as survival skills for the black race or the black individual' (1996: 167). Black gay and lesbian people – where their existence is even acknowledged – are



sometimes viewed by their own families, communities, and churches as lacking commitment to the race on a similar scale to heterosexuals who intermarry. Boykin admits that a 'black man who dates only men raises the specter of the extinction of the family name, potentially causes embarrassment to the family, and often suggests an irresponsible disregard for the need to create strong, black families' (ibid.: 23). A black gay couple caring for their own children are likely not counted a 'strong, black family' in this sense.

For similar reasons, one finds few gay people of color leading the race to the altar. For some, the gay marriage crusade represents a distraction from more urgent racial causes. Indeed, one can readily make the case that in the USA, access to marriage is becoming a major form of class and race privilege, in addition to its status as an exclusively heterosexual club. Paradoxically, however, gay and lesbian family rights activists of all colors frequently cast *themselves* as the inheritors of the struggles for Black civil rights. They cite the historic Supreme Court decisions, *Loving vs. Virginia*, 1967, which struck down anti-miscegenation laws, and *Palmore vs. Sidoti*, 1984, which affirmed a divorced white woman's right to retain custody of her children after she married a black man, as precedents for granting similar protections to queer marriage and family goals. And beyond the US borders, journalist Neil Miller (1992) found the prospect of gay marriage capturing the imagination of Black people in the townships of South Africa, and inspiring gay people the world over. Moreover, because South Africa's post-apartheid constitution is the first in the world to bar discrimination against people on the basis of any social identity, including sexuality, that nation is actively considering full legalization of same-sex marriage and family rights.

Indeed, one can readily argue that the improvisational diversity of family practices which African-Americans and South Africans forged in response to racial subordination and poverty – such as 'other-mothering' and

multi-household families – foreshadowed many features of the postmodern family condition in the West as a whole. Certainly, the explosive national discourse on black 'matriarchy' in the USA provoked by the 1965 *Moynihan Report* foreshadowed preoccupations of the contemporary politics of 'family values' more generally, as in the Murphy Brown discourse. That is why, in theory, it seems clear that forging a 'rainbow coalition' to support queer family values could benefit both communities of color and gay people of every hue. Translating such theory into practice, however, will require far more awareness and respect than has yet been achieved for the genuine diversity of family definitions, priorities and vulnerabilities that divide racial and ethnic communities here and elsewhere.

#### SO DUCK OR NO DUCK?

If it looks like a duck, and it walks like a duck, and it quacks like a duck, then is it a duck? We began by asking whether the Vermont experiment in creating civil unions for same-sex couples represents marriage in all but name. So does it? Does the demand of so many lesbian and gay people, in so many parts of the world at once, for equal recognition of their pairings presage an irreversible move toward the embrace of conventional forms of family life? Are lesbigay family forms really just the same as everyone else's, differing only by the gender combination of sexually-bonded adults? Does gay marriage really threaten to undo civilization, as conservatives fear? As Frank Browning observes, 'Worse even than the sexual perversions they practice, gay people's more damning threat to traditionalists is their claim to family parity, their claim to family life as a right' (1994: 142).

Given our claim that queer family developments signal the frontier of global changes in family structure inherent in the postmodern family condition, we could say that in that sense, families created by

lesbians and gay men are truly not distinct from other families. They simply heighten the visibility of the fact of irreversible diversity. They bring us face to face with inescapable contests over legitimate relations of gender, sexuality, and family. The decline of the modern (Western) nuclear family system, as we have noted, has left us with no prevailing culturally mandated family pattern – as any third-grader trying to fill in those blanks on a traditional family tree quickly discovers. All forms of intimacy now contend with instability, contradiction, experimentation. Yet family life itself has by no means been discarded. Instead, many are reinventing it with ingenuity and passion. And here gay men and women (and especially those who defy dichotomization as men or women at all) are leading the pack.

The political meanings of family sentiments, practices, and discourse among gay men and lesbians cannot be defined by checking any one box (progressive, reactionary, and so forth), other than the one marked ‘all of the above’. Most reforms are two-edged, often contradictory, and can be read as progressive and co-optive, subversive and accommodationist all at once, depending upon social, economic, and political contexts. Extending marriage to same-gendered couples, as we saw, could simultaneously redefine the institution by eroding gender meanings and homophobia, but also exacerbate class inequities and couple privilege, further marginalizing the single, dissidents, sexual radicals, and all who lack economic resources. Choosing to bear children might help to combat homophobia as Heather’s mommies take their place as soccer moms, at PTA meetings, and in church and temple, and other children come to see two mommies as yet another norm. But it could also foster more puritanical and conformist values, as critics charge, and sap collective energies from other ongoing political and social battles, as well as ignoring the needs of the elderly gay, or of disenfranchised youth.

The way a society treats its gay families has broad implications for all families. Just

as we refuse to protect the family bonds of children because their parent(s) are gay, denying them equal access to health care or to inheritance or to appropriate custody arrangements, so too we punish children for other parental infractions, such as being born to a single mother on welfare or belonging to another group subject to social prejudice. Queer family discourse is not likely to disappear until we come to understand that, as one of us has argued elsewhere, ‘all our families are queer’. Gay and lesbian families simply display with added intensity the characteristics of broader family and social realities today, helping to expose the dangerous disjunction between popular ‘family values’ rhetoric and the complex lived realities of contemporary families. Not the same as other families, nor an alternative to ‘the family’, lesbian families expose the social and historical character of every definition of family. Promoting queer family values within a multi-hued rainbow coalition to support all shapes and colors of families could establish family diversity itself as normal in a democracy.

## EPILOGUE

Perhaps we might end by suggesting that newly emerging gay and lesbian family forms might better be compared not to plastic ducks but to the ugly duckling of the children’s fairy-tale. Hatched as if in prophetic anticipation of the current technological revolution in methods of reproduction as one of a brood of ducklings, one offspring quickly appears different from his nest-mates. Everyone who sees the ugly duckling considers him disturbingly queer. ‘Quack, Quack! Get out of town!’ they derisively sing. But in time, the queer duckling quacks back, for to his own surprise and theirs he survives their taunts and emerges a magnificent swan, the pride of the pond. Not a duck at all, although the egg from which he came had been laid among their kind. And wouldn’t it be dull if the only species

our pond could sustain were identical little yellow plastic ducks?

## NOTES

1 *The New Yorker*, 8 March, 1999, with reference to Leslea Newman, 1991. *Heather Has Two Mommies*. Boston: Alyson Publications.

2 In Utah, for example, Wardle drafted regulations limiting adoption and foster care placements to households in which all adults were related by blood or marriage (later passed by the state legislature), shortly after publishing his 1997 article impugning the methods, merits, and motives of social science research on lesbian and gay parenting.

3 Note Steven Seidman's assertion that: 'Lesbians and gay men of color have contested the notion of a unitary gay subject and the idea that the meaning and experience of being gay are socially uniform. Indeed, they argue that a discourse that abstracts a notion of gay identity from considerations of race and class is oppressive because it invariably implies a white, middle-class standpoint' (1993: 120). Valerie Lehr (1999) suggests that the fact that racial/ethnic identity is more likely to be central to self-definition for people of color in the USA may result in greater sexual freedom because of the consequently lessened need to embrace a fixed sexual identity. She further wonders, conversely, whether bisexuality is undercounted in white communities.

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