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Abstract

This thesis argues that geographers must consider sexuality and family together as integral parts of social life. Although sexuality already entered the lexicon of geography in the 1980s, and a burgeoning field of the geography of sexuality exists today, too often it is still considered peripheral in geographic scholarship. Similarly, family either remains consigned either as merely a place for social reproduction by studies of political economy, or is relegated entirely as an object of inquiry for only feminist geographers. Drawing from sociology, feminist and queer studies, this thesis makes an important intervention by relating sexuality and family in the context of queer adoptive parents in central New York. By doing so, it is able to explain and critique the production of metronormativity in geographic scholarship, the historical injustices in the U.S. child welfare system, and the everyday political strategies enacted in paths to parenthood – all insights that would be impossible to glean without centering sexuality and family in existing theoretical frameworks.

ORDINARY FAMILIES:
QUEER SEXUALITY AND ADOPTIVE PARENTHOOD
IN CENTRAL NEW YORK

by

Sean H. Wang

B.A., University of Washington, 2011

Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Geography

Syracuse University
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I was totally and completely unsure about moving to Syracuse for graduate school. Just two years later, I cannot begin to imagine working, studying, and living without the awesome group of friends here. My incoming cohort has been a constant source of support and inspiration, and we have certainly come a long way since those chaotic first days in GEO 602. Among them, Carlo Sica made sure that neither of us spent our orientation alone. Ben Marley always had a few Marxist quips ready, complete with the trademark facial hair. Brian Hennigan's dry humor made many late classes bearable, and Renee Huset was always game for my baseball rants. Being Upstate natives, Bethany and Josh Eberle acted as our local guides and generously opened their lovely home to us out-of-towners during the holidays. Mike Kantor's incisive mind bailed me out numerous times in class, and he and Heather will be amazing parents to their beautiful daughter Denali. Emily Mitchell-Eaton is my true partner in crime, and without her I would have dropped out a long time ago. Her productivity and generosity are unmatched, and I am excited to continue working alongside her in the doctoral program.

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My sister, Joan Wang, has always been my best friend, and conversations with her on the weekends always manage to lift my spirit. My parents, Ted Y. Wang and Jessie C. Li, have always supported me (even when my choices do not meet their expectations). These are the people who taught me how to be a family, and I cannot ask for a better one. This thesis is especially dedicated to them.

Finally, this thesis – like any scholarly product – has been and always will be a collective undertaking that is never complete. Thus, it belongs to everyone as well.

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The Anthropologists (excerpt)

The anthropologists keep doing the fun things they do together, poking around. They knock on the doors of the little fishermen's huts on the frozen lake. They invite themselves in for a visit and sit down on the bench inside. But the fishermen don't say a thing. Not even "Who are you?" or "What are you doing here?" So they sit together in a wild, awkward silence staring down through the hole in the ice to the deep, dark waters below. They can't think of a single question that makes any sense at all.

– Stewart (2007, 37-38)

Preface: The Queer Art of Failure

This thesis you are about to read is mostly a product of failures. Many of them are my own – I failed to build community collaborations prior to fieldwork, I failed to convince some people that my project was worthwhile for them to participate in, and I failed to write a thesis that resembled my initial vision. The list goes on. This thesis documents my failures, and many more. It documents queer theorists’ failure to incorporate non-metropolitan visions, community organizations’ failure to faithfully represent their supposed constituents, our child welfare system’s failure to provide material and emotional support for families... But this thesis also displays high theory’s failure to dismiss rural queer subjectivities, heteronormative social policies’ failure to prevent queer people from becoming parents, or even just the utter failure of this depressing political and economic climate to foreclose ordinary people’s ability to continue living their everyday lives. But in order to understand how this thesis comes to be a project of failures, we must return to the very beginning.

I began the fieldwork for this thesis in April 2012, but the research for it began much earlier. I was trained as a demographer, but I grew disillusioned with demography quickly. It seemed preposterous the idea that statistics could ever adequately represent the totality of human life. Especially with my research interests in sexuality and queer studies, it seemed even more incredible that while all sorts of political debates around equality, rights, and recognition were going on, demographers were still quibbling about which survey to use! Queer demographic questions were (and remain) very important, as Chapter 2 will attest to, but I thought that radical queer politics would be better served not by demography, but by some form of equally radical research that was truly committed to uncovering the realities of queer lives. That kind of research was the kind I wanted to commit to.

In hindsight, my conviction appeared idealistic, almost naïve, but that was the project I set out to do. When I began fieldwork in 2012, my research question focused on the legal geographies of public adoption by gay men and lesbians, and – consistent with my goal to uncover (Anderson and Jack 1991) – I employed semi-structured interviews with gay men and lesbian adoptive parents, child welfare officials, and non-profit employees in central New York. It was not my first choice to conduct fieldwork near Syracuse – I had hoped to return to the Pacific Northwest, where I was familiar with various queer organizations, but logistical issues prevented me from doing so. That decision probably contributed to my primary challenge, which involved the recruitment of interviewees. I had utilized several e-mail listservs maintained by adoption non-profits and child welfare agencies. In addition, I also contacted child welfare officials directly. Despite having some communications, e.g. e-mail correspondence, conversation over the phone or in person, with over 30 potential participants, I had only managed five interviews on the record. I could only speculate why recruitment was so difficult. The switch in fieldwork location certainly did not help the matter. My position as an academic researcher (a graduate student, no less) and the prospect of the results being published (as part of a master's thesis, academic journal articles, etc.) clearly made many potential participants quite uncomfortable. Even with the protection of confidentiality, some questioned my motives regarding the research project. Obviously, this is where the power relations between the researcher and the researched, as well as the history of exploiting marginalized populations in the name of science, came to bear quite forcefully. Finally, I was acutely aware of my own gender, sexuality, race, and age during fieldwork (Mullings 1999). Obviously this should not be surprising, as much of the qualitative research literature for the past two decades has considered how the researcher's multiple identities

come to bear in the research project. Yet in this iteration, the role of place is crucial. It was a vastly different experience compared to my previous, albeit limited, engagement with a similar research project in Seattle. It showed up most explicitly in some off-the-record comments about my ‘unique’ identities, i.e. gay and Asian, and how they may potentially help my future adoptions in central New York, especially with interracial adoptions. Others concerned my relatively young age. As one social worker remarked: “You’re not thinking about adopting now, are you? Because I usually prefer my adoptive parents above 30; they probably know what they’re doing” (Interview, July 2012).

Based on my initial goals, then, my fieldwork was a failure in many ways. I did not end up with anything approaching a comprehensive legal geography of queer adoption. Though I perhaps have represented faithfully the few interviewees I had, I certainly do not profess to have discovered anything resembling *the* queer adoption experience. Left with less-than-expected interview materials, I was forced to re-imagine what form this thesis would take, and what political work it could now accomplish. Indeed, you will find that although my fieldwork informs how I think about many of the issues raised here, the fieldwork itself features prominently only in Chapters 3 and 4. Instead, my failures afforded me a certain degree of freedom in constructing this thesis. Compared to what I originally envisioned, this thesis is both less and more – it may lack the qualitative richness that high number of interviews could bring, but I would argue that the current version is more ambitious in its theoretical outlooks. The chapters, when read together, may lack a single coherent argument, but in each of them I gesture toward some conceptual problems in social and geographical theory that could be taken up more fully in the future. If there is a single central argument in this thesis, I would say it is a very simple one: that geographers may find

themselves thinking very differently about what they study if they truly consider sexuality and family as integral parts of social life. In each chapter, I take up a particular field that is familiar to geographers and make it strange (Mills 1959) – be it urban studies or population geography – by considering what queer folks have to say about themselves and what has been said about them. This argument – or observation, rather – is certainly not new. For example, Heidi Nast, as early as 1998, argued that heterosexuality was under-theorized by both political and queer geographers, despite the fact that it “was foundational to constructions of the nation-state” and therefore essential in studying geopolitics (Nast 1998, 191). Feminist geographers have also argued that family, as a primary site of social reproduction, cannot be relegated into the background of debates on economic restructuring or development (Mitchell, Marston, and Katz 2004; Katz 2004). These examples beg the question: Why does sexuality continue to be neglected in blanket statements about intersectionality while others – like race, class, and gender – are included “like a mantra”? (Oswin 2013, 107). This question is an inevitable result of an identity politics that presumes existing autonomous identities (like race, class, gender, and sexuality), so it is perhaps unfair to single out this particular statement rather than proposing an alternative understanding of politics that accommodates imbricated identities. Nonetheless, the proliferation of such statements, especially in our classrooms, indicates an area of profound neglect in geographical scholarship that this thesis seeks to redress.

Productive Failures

I borrowed the subtitle of this preface from Judith Halberstam, whose recent work *The Queer Art of Failure* provided inspiration while I struggled to finish this thesis. Although much of her book is a philosophical and aesthetic exploration of failures, I believe it offers very

productive ways to think about research methodologies as well. Drawing from sources ranging “from children’s animation to avant-garde performance and queer art,” Halberstam (2011, 2) considers the “ways of being and knowing that stand outside of conventional understanding of success,” which in our “heteronormative, capitalist society equates too easily to specific forms of reproductive maturity combined with wealth accumulation.” But she is not advocating for failure just for the sake of it. Rather, failure could potentially “offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world” under certain circumstances (p. 2-3). In other words, our current logic of success and failure is over-determined by the punishing norms of heteronormativity and capitalism, and failure might offer some “different rewards” (p. 3).

How can we think of failure as a method? “Failing,” Halberstam (2011, 3) writes, “is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well; for queers failure can be a style, to cite Quentin Crisp, or a way of life, to cite Foucault, and it can stand in contrast to the grim scenarios of success that depend upon ‘trying and trying again.’” Similarly, we can think of failure, in the context of this thesis, as both a style and a politics. In discussing failure’s political potential, Halberstam draws heavily from Barbara Ehrenreich’s *Bright-Sided*, which argues that “positive thinking is a North American affliction, ‘a mass delusion’ that emerges out of a combination of American exceptionalism and a desire to believe that success depends upon one’s attitude rather than structural conditions” (Ehrenreich 2009, 13 cited in Halberstam 2011, 3). For Ehrenreich, “the flip side of positivity is thus a harsh insistence on personal responsibility” (Ehrenreich 2009, 8 cited in Halberstam 2011, 3), that “success depends only upon working hard and failure is always your own doing” (Halberstam 2011, 3). Halberstam transports Ehrenreich’s argument into the tradition of

feminist and queer theories, which has always advocated for different standards for measuring success and failure rather than relying on what we often short-hand as societal norms. Lesbians are deemed as feminine failures, falling outside of patriarchal and heteronormative frameworks. But it is through being recognized *and* recognizing themselves as failures against these dominant ideologies, that they may begin to “re-create some of the meaning of their genders” (p. 4). In other words, failures can be particularly productive toward a different way of life – a different being – that works against dominant and oppressive political frameworks.

It is helpful, then, to understand people (and their actions) in this thesis as productive failures – in some instances, failing over and over. In Chapters 1 and 4, we see queer parents in central New York negotiating against different sets of political frameworks in order to establish their own ways of life and being. For some, this process involves working against metronormative notions of queer identity, while others may find personal relationship turmoil and heteronormative legal restrictions particularly challenging. Some articulate their place-relationship as that of a ‘normal’ family, just like everybody else in the neighborhood, even though everybody else in the neighborhood may not perceive them as such. Queer parents are not the only productive failures in this thesis. In Chapter 2, queer community organizations struggle against what it means to be visible, both in our communities and on different maps. Although metronormativity often reduces queer visibility to, literally, the display of rainbow flags, these non-profits sometimes choose to allow such a cartographic representation of themselves in order to tap into state financial support. Maps here, similar to Halberstam’s archive of cartoons, “serve as attractive tools for the easy transmission of dense ideologies” (Halberstam 2011, 175). But at other times, especially when rural service delivery is

discussed, they move away from metronormative representations and rely on their own lived experiences instead. In Chapter 3, the failure of the public adoption system to comfortably incorporate queer foster and adoptive parents leads to a renewed consideration of the emotional work of parenting, especially in light of the history of adoption in the U.S. In all of these cases, it is not the point to determine who the winners and the losers are, respectively. Rather, it is through these complex negotiations against multiple standards of success, that the standards themselves are destabilized. In the same spirit, Halberstam criticizes Slavoj Žižek for what she sees as a reified structure of success in his work *In Defense of Lost Causes*. Žižek, instead of destabilizing the concepts of success and failure, “situates failure as a stopping point on the way to success” (Halberstam 2011, 174). Halberstam’s intention is not to single out Žižek. Rather, she makes the point that many ‘high theory’ intellectuals, similar to Žižek, “resurrect a model of political insurgency that depends upon the wisdom, the intellectual virtuosity, and the radical insight of, well, people like [themselves]” (ibid.). So instead of recognizing that losers often lose because winners write the rules, these intellectuals ask the losers to follow *their* rules instead, trampling some other losers along the way. The people in this thesis are not necessarily successful all the time. Their struggles are often uneven and contradictory. From my point of view, some may even replicate the kind of conservative rhetoric that delegitimizes themselves and their families. Yet their failings demonstrate the elasticity and instability of the political frameworks they are struggling against (and sometimes in concert with).

Stylistically, then, this thesis imitates the kind of illegibility that characterizes everyday life. In part, my fieldwork experience necessitates this illegibility. The four chapters that follow this preface do not together sustain a central argument. Each chapter

instead partially chronicles how different actors – queer adoptive parents, community organizations, academics, child welfare workers, the legal system, etc. – confront the realities of queer adoptive families in central New York. The chapters together do not piece a complete picture of the phenomenon of queer adoption. Rather, they reflect the process of fieldwork, which, as a process of “exploring and mapping,” also necessarily involves “detours and getting lost” (Halberstam 2011, 24). If this thesis is to chronicle the research process, then I think it would be a disservice to erase all the detours – the failures – from the final product. Such illegibility also reflects the kind of productive failures that many people featured in this thesis engage in. “Illegibility, then,” James Scott (1999, 54) observes, “has been and remains a reliable source of political autonomy.” This is no small matter in a place like central New York, where many queer adoptive parents use precisely their own illegibility within the metronormative discourse of sexuality to articulate a different way of life. Similarly, then, if Scott is right that il/legibility is “a condition of manipulation” (Scott 1999, 183), then it behooves us to live and write in ways that “may lead to unbounded forms of speculation [and] modes of thinking that ally... with inspiration and unpredictability” (Halberstam 2011, 10), even if sometimes we fail, fantastically and spectacularly.

Situating Knowledges

This thesis explores how various people and institutions confront the phenomenon of queer adoption in central New York. Based on the subject matter, it shares a strong intellectual affinity with the geography of sexuality, and I trace some of this disciplinary lineage in Chapter 1. But this thesis, because of its structure, fails to fit easily within the literature from which it draws much inspiration. To borrow again from James Scott, the field of knowledge production has much in common with his parable of Germanic ordered forest, where the

modern state not only identifies trees that could become revenue-generating timbers, but also proceeds to “create, through careful seeding, planting, and cutting, a forest that was easier... to count, manipulate, measure, and assess” (Scott 1999, 15). If the geography of sexuality literature is such a forest, then the chapters here are like weeds sprouting among the trees and along the edges. Not only do they complicate the field management, but they have a strong centrifugal tendency to go with unrelated and irrelevant impulses. Here, I will briefly triangulate the layout of the forest, so to speak, by exposing a few prominent trees. Then, we can hopefully get to see where and how my weed-like chapters sprout out in and beyond the field.

Progress of Human Geography recently commissioned a series of progress reports on the geography of gender and sexuality. The first (Brown 2012) deals with the enduring influence of feminist theory of intersectionality, while the second (Brown 2013) focuses on the resurgence of interest in the ‘gayborhood’ and ‘gay ghetto.’ Intersectionality has long been an impetus for research on sexuality because it spurs geographers to consider “the relating of sexualities with other axes of identities” (Brown 2012, 541). It also has had a huge legacy in fostering the relations between queer theory and activism. By relating sexuality with other – and perhaps well-tread – axes of difference like race and gender, queer activists are able to better articulate a politics of solidarity and collaboration. Brown, following many others, however cautions against intersectionality’s current neglect of certain axes of identity like disabilities and mental health, as well as the kind of uncritical intersectionality that does not consider the potential consequences of some inevitable neglect. “The fallout,” he writes, “from our intersectional choices (however well considered) is the possible – and quite ironic – reinstatement of identity politics, albeit co-constituted ones” (p. 545).

This political tension between inclusion into, and exclusion from, intersectionality (as well as the potential benefits from them) bleeds into the second progress report on the resurgence of the ‘gayborhood.’ I cover the history of the urban geography literature on sexuality in Chapter 1, so I do not want to spoil the surprise here. But Brown rightly identifies a resurgence in the ‘gay ghetto’: while its material significance to queer people may have lessened (due to generational shifts, gentrification, and decrease in queer-only spaces), its symbolic significance (especially for gay men) has not (Brown 2013, 5). Intersectionality, through its inclusions and exclusions, continues to inform how this significance is negotiated differently by different people. So “homeless queer youth are relentlessly marginalized and excluded from ‘even’ Castro” (p. 4), while the gayborhood in Ottawa remains “a market and psychic identity” for gay men across the life course (p. 5). The point I am making here is that these “intersectional anxieties” that Brown (2012) identified necessarily play across space. To avoid the ironic resurrection of identity politics in our scholarship, then, we must attend to the contextual specificities of identities. Kath Weston made this point abundantly clear way back in 1991, when she critiqued “the way most discussions of gay families have evaluated the political significance of laying claim to kinship as either inherently assimilationist or inherently progressive, without respect to social or historical context” (Weston 1991 [1997], 198). Substitute “gay families” for any number of identities, and the point remains the same – to remain faithful to the ideals of intersectionality requires carefully exposing the specific contexts that continue to produce the tension between inclusion and exclusion.

Another piece of recent scholarship comes from the North, where Catherine Nash and JP Catungal co-edited a special issue of *ACME* on sexual landscapes, lives and livelihoods in

Canada. The collection of papers demonstrates the resurgence of interest in urban geography by queer geographers, and some managed to complicate the metronormative depictions that have dominated queer urban geography. I single this special issue out, however, to demonstrate the ways in which geographers think about queer visibility in relation to the state. Nash and Catungal, in their introduction, highlighted Canada's exceptional status in this regard: it "is often represented as a global leader in progressive [LGBTQ] politics, being one of the handful of nation-states to grant full marriage rights to same sex couples (in 2005), human rights protections (although not expressly for trans individuals) and various legal protections for sexual minorities" (Nash and Catungal 2013, 181). These achievements are results from a long history of engagement with (and sometimes hostile struggle against) the state, "[o]ften framed in terms of citizenship recognition [and] in the form of law, policy and state funding" (p. 183). "The recourse to the state," Nash and Catungal argue, "is strategic, given its central, if contested, role in liberal democratic societies. Its power to legitimize social relations, through law and policy, is statement [*sic*] of this centrality" (ibid.).

Equally important in this relation with the state, however, is the role of contestation to the state's supposed centrality. A fruitful intellectual and political project has emerged to demonstrate "the limits of state recognition as the ultimate goal of LGBT and queer politics" (Nash and Catungal 2013, 183). Under this rubric, "state recognition for LGBT and queer lives also tend[s] to align sexual politics with particular forms of Canadian nationalism, producing its own normalizing governmentalities and violent exclusions" (ibid.). These exclusions vary based on the context, and David Eng's (2010) queer liberalism that I draw on in Chapter 3 is one particular form that focuses on exclusions along racial and class lines. What I wish to emphasize here is not about specific exclusions. Rather, it is about the tyranny

of visibility in structuring those exclusions. Recognition and incorporation require visibility, quite literally (Winders 2012). But it is not only the state that must be able to see all the queer people as its citizens – we all must see one another that way as well. Seeing like a state, then, works not only at the conceptual level, but also the embodied level. Ellen Lewin’s (1999) excellent ethnography on queer commitment ceremonies illustrate this point, that the reproduction of traditional, i.e. heterosexual, white, Protestant, wedding rituals makes queer couples legible in the public consciousness as normal and ordinary people who are deserving of the same rights as everyone else, i.e. becoming citizens. Maps showing the concentration of same-sex couples may illustrate a conceptual visibility, but they depend crucially on their power to conjure up these embodied images in our minds (see Chapter 2). In the same vein, I would argue that the resurgence of interest in ‘gayborhoods’ depends on their literal visibility, even though they remain incredibly partial representations of queer lives. This is not to say that visibility completely determines our expression of subjectivities – for instance, not all queer couples follow the wedding conventions. But the examples above should demonstrate that our struggle to secure state recognition is not for just the recognition itself and the many material benefits it brings. Instead, the very act of our struggling is “to politicise, to build awareness of the exclusions, the unevenness” of state recognition itself (Pratt 2004, 114).

Finally, this very visibility has increased dramatically since queer families entered the public consciousness. In a recent report in the *Annual Review of Sociology*, the authors suggest that the ideological debates on sexuality and family are inevitable since “*by making themselves visible as families*, same-sex couple households reveal a subversive power that challenges dominant conceptions” (emphasis added; Moore and Stambolis-Ruhstorfer 2013,

493). Ironically, in a section titled “What makes a family?” the authors instead sidestepped their own question and relied on census definitions. This is perhaps the most explicit illustration of the governmentality that I discuss in Chapter 2. It also begs the question: How do people transform themselves from households – a part of the population – to families? Is it just the natural progression in the life course? Is it legal recognition from the state? Is it through performing certain rituals, such as commitment ceremonies? Is it by having children and becoming parents? The authors suggest that we must avoid “taking the meanings of family for granted” (p. 503). Queer families, like any other family then, must continually make those meanings, and I argue in Chapter 2 that maps are one place where these meanings are made and contested. It also demonstrates that the tyranny of visibility may determine some of those meanings, but it will never determine all meanings. Chapter 4 then tells how three same-sex households make themselves into queer families in their everyday life.

Charting the Error Log

All in all, this is a book about alternative ways of knowing and being that are not unduly optimistic, but nor are they mired in nihilistic critical dead ends. It is a book about failing well, failing often, and learning, in the words of Samuel Beckett, how to fail better (Halberstam 2011, 24).

It seems to me that all sorts of people keep failing when it comes to queer families with children, especially queer adoptive families. Sociologists have a hard time telling us what they are. Demographers have a hard time telling us who and where they are. Politicians are not sure whether all the “family values” campaign talk would get their votes. Queer theorists worry that they are repressing their queer sexuality in order to have kids. Everything is really difficult!

This thesis has also been really difficult. It is difficult for me to write, and – I imagine – will be difficult for you to read. Not to mention, it documents all sorts of difficulties when people confront queer adoptive families. Chapter 1 introduces the concept of metronormativity in order to challenge the urban-centric ways scholars theorize queer lives in the U.S. I take queer demographers to task in Chapter 2 in order to demonstrate how metronormativity (and, by extension, the politics of proximity) severely impacts the ability of community organizations, such as the Queer Families Development Project, to faithfully represent and advocate on behalf of their constituents. Chapter 3 transports us to foster care and adoption information sessions for queer prospective parents, where all participants – child welfare workers included – must confront the racial and imperial histories of U.S. adoption on the path to parenthood. And finally, three queer families speak out in Chapter 4 about their paths to becoming adoptive parents, with different challenges at different points along the way. It should be obvious by that point that families are incredibly difficult too!

A wise man, i.e. my advisor Don Mitchell, once told me that a master's thesis is like an error log, where you are forced to chronicle all of your mistakes during the research process so, hopefully, you will not make the same ones when writing your doctoral dissertation. I am certain that I will continue to make mistakes – maybe different ones, although I certainly would not put it past myself to repeat some of them. Scholarship is built upon these error logs, in the same way families are made out of error logs too. It is in this spirit that I write this thesis, where hopefully we all continue to fail well, fail often, and learn how to fail better.

Chapter 1: Taking a Drive, Setting the Scene

In early July of 2012, I drove out from Syracuse, going southeast toward Chenango County. The few weeks prior had been filled with anxiety, as I worked hard to make contacts with potential interviewees for my research project. After two rounds of calls for participants sent over e-mail listservs, as well as direct contacts with key actors of various private adoption agencies, non-profits, and county departments of social services that serve the gay and lesbian community around central New York, I finally was able to schedule an official interview. Josh¹, who works at a health-related non-profit, responded to my call for participants over e-mail. He and his fiancé Todd had been considering adoption, and they wanted to make some connections with an ‘expert’ in the field who might know the ins and outs of the local child welfare system. Initially, I was quite hesitant. I confessed that I did not have any personal experience with local adoption agencies, and I was interested in speaking with gay and lesbian parents who had already adopted. But I was not having any luck getting on-the-record interviews, so we all agreed to meet, and on a weekend, I hopped into my car and started driving.

Chenango County sits within the triangle made up of three interstate highways – I-81 connecting Syracuse and Binghamton to the south, I-90 the New York thruway, and I-88 that cuts northeast from Binghamton to the Capital Region. Unlike the Finger Lakes to the southwest of Syracuse, which is famous for its wineries and Cornell University, Chenango County looks like an empty space on the map. It contains a number of state forests and a number of small towns here and there. In fact, Todd, who is pursuing his graduate degree in human services, called Chenango County and much of the surrounding rural areas a “welfare county” (Interview, July 2012). As I drove on U.S.-92 and later N.Y. Rt. 80, I was struck by

¹ I use pseudonyms for all research participants.

the immediate change in landscapes – Syracuse’s deindustrialized core, followed by a zone of calm and quiet suburbs, quickly gave way to gently sloping fields, sparsely littered with barns and sheds. As a graduate student, I was literally driving out of place. The routes were connected by a string of small towns, with a short main street, the sundry storefronts, and – never without fail – a gas station. I could not help but think, “Are there really queer folks out here? More importantly, queer adoptive parents?”

It was not a surprise to learn during the interview that Josh and Todd shared some of my uneasiness. As a gay couple living in this rural area, though, their lived experience with this uneasiness is vastly different than mine, ostensibly only a passer-by. This chapter deals with the queer engagement with the rural and the non-metropolitan, and the divergent subject positions this engagement produces. On the one hand, the challenges of recruiting gay and lesbian adoptive parents for my project proved to be almost insurmountable, not because there were too few of them, but rather due to an almost universal reluctance to go on the record with an academic researcher. The parents I contacted often expressed this reluctance in two ways: first, they questioned their own ability to make any contribution to my project; and second, they questioned the value of my project. These two responses often depend upon a discourse of normality and tolerance that hangs in delicate tension. For one to be tolerant, it is necessary to recognize a perceived negative difference, which contradicts the claim to normality. Such a discourse has been criticized by many radical queer theorists (Lehr 1999; Duggan 2003), though clearly there is an alternative politics at work in my encounter with, for example, Josh and Todd. My first goal in this chapter, then, is to avoid generalizing a global queer politics, and instead look to the ways in which these gay and lesbian parents choose to be political in the everyday.

On the other hand, I resort to particular rural stereotypes to understand my fieldwork as well. As one based in Syracuse, Chenango County is on the outer edge among the places I went to for interviews, or to convince people to go on interviews with me. As a researcher and an urban queer, to drive out is to profoundly displace myself from the bubble of a university campus to the countryside or, on a grander scale, my own earlier displacement from hip Seattle to central New York. My displacement – and my affective reactions to it – reveals a largely metronormative subject position that recent queer engagement with the rural has been critiquing. For Judith Halberstam (2005, 22) “lonely rural landscapes feel laden with menace, and for many years nonurban areas were simply ‘out there,’ strange and distant horizons populated by hostile populations.” Halberstam perhaps dramatizes that fear of the rural, but it is precisely the image of those “horizons populated by hostile populations” that popular representations and media of non-metropolitan queer lives in the United States – *Boys Don’t Cry* (Halberstam 2005, ch. 2) and *Brokeback Mountain* (Phillips and Watt 2000) being two examples that have received the most attention. Much of the political organizing around sexual rights implicitly depends upon this metronormative discourse as well. However, many people I talked to, during official interviews and informal conversations, hotly contested this metronormative discourse. They argued that their mere presence residentially in these places should at the very least suggest that gay and lesbian lives are not universally metropolitan or universally queer, i.e. non-normative. My second goal, then, is to not dismiss them as either bad queer subjects who do not adhere to radical queer politics, or politically conservative participants in what Jasbir Puar (2007) calls “homonationalism.” Rather, I want to explore how these people articulate their sexuality in non-metronormative

ways; in other words, how do they articulate their sexuality in relations to their place *and* the dominant sexual politics in the U.S.?

As Geraldine Pratt (2004, 39) points out, there is always an “efficient” way to tell a story and it may not be any less correct, but doing so risks overlooking “the interplay between local tactics and overall strategy” where openings for political resistance may be revealed. The efficient way to tell this story is to consider metronormativity as its overall strategy, i.e. a dominant discourse, that pits urban dwelling gays and lesbians versus their rural counterparts in political orientation. Metronormativity, as one of the normativities that must be critiqued, masks the multiplicity of queer lives in places and renders particular forms of political action, especially those based in rural areas, invisible. Even when rural queer lives are being represented, they are always portrayed under metronormative terms (Spivak 1988). So far in this paragraph, I have told a very efficient story, one that I am comfortable with theoretically for the most part. But I find this story lacking in practice. For one, it makes sense to summarize stories efficiently, but telling an efficient story necessarily precludes attending to the multiplicities of identities and affects. Pratt (2004, 40) effectively highlights the importance of messy stories, especially since they reveal categories as “relational constructs” with “[c]omplex geographies... woven throughout.” This is a point that I try my best to insist upon throughout the entire project. For this chapter specifically, this efficient story does not explain how a normativity comes to be normative; it only describes the resulting effects. Often, a particular discourse, such as metronormativity, becomes hegemonic through popular representations, and cultural studies in particular have taught us how to read these representations. If this chapter at times serves as a literature review, then it also should reveal how metronormativity comes to be hegemonic through academic

representations. In this chapter, I weave these two practical concerns together to tell a less-than-efficient story about how the urban comes to be hegemonic in queer politics.

Being a Parent, Being Queer

In the same month I met Josh and Todd, I also met Shannon. Shannon is a lesbian who adopted four children on her own through the Monroe County Department of Social Services with her former partner. Now living outside of Rochester in suburban Wayne County with her girlfriend, she gushed over her suburban relocation during the interview.

Sean: I'm sure having kids around, a lot of the daily activities and schedules revolve around the kids too.

Shannon: Yeah.

Sean: Does [the suburb you live in] feel more like that kind of an environment, more comfortable for raising kids?

Shannon: Yeah, it does. The schools are really great – they have like a therapy doc at the primary school, and the school counselor... My kids have a lot of, they were adopted through foster care and they were abused, so they have a lot of mental health issues, and the counselors and the – his wife, actually, she's the special ed. teacher – are really invested in my kids, and so they have a really great relationship [...] they didn't have that one-on-one in the city, there was a lot of bullying... But a lot of their life is still wrapped up in the city, because like lessons and, you know, swimming and things like that, we have to drive to the city to go do. So it's mixed where you can't really escape the city because there's nothing available out here, but it's nice that the city's really close.
(Interview, July 2012)

Shannon, like several others whom I spoke to, cited the conditions of urban schools as one of the major reasons why moving out of the city was a good idea. When pressed, however, her feelings about the relocation were much more ambivalent.

It's still a bit of an adjustment for someone who- I mean, I've lived in the city for 15 years, I think, as an adult, and I could just go anywhere I wanted to in five minutes... And food, takeouts, those sorts of things are different, but I really like it here. It's a nice, small community and it's close enough where I still get my city fix, and it's nice enough where I get a break from the city problems too.

The concept of community eventually became the greatest source of ambivalence for Shannon. The “nice, small community” that she found in the suburb is separate from the one consists of her lesbian friends in Rochester. This original community based on her sexuality became one that she only saw “at pride festivals, and you’re like ‘Oh yay!’” After we concluded the interview, she also mentioned that she missed her social scene, referring to the cafes and gay bars in Rochester that she used to frequent and socialize at.

I quote Shannon at length for several reasons. She pointed to the profound shift in identity and lifestyle after parenthood, which is something common to all parents, and this shift is evident in Shannon’s first set of answers above. One of the gay couples that Ellen Lewin (2009, 152) interviewed simply declared after becoming fathers, “We’re not gay anymore.” I explore this shift more fully in Chapter 4. What intrigues me the most here is Shannon’s ambivalence and anxiety about the separation between her two communities. In addition to parenthood and its demands on her time, Shannon did not point to (the fear of) homophobia as an explanation for this separation (which some others, including Josh during his interview, had implied). Rather, she attributed it to geography. In other words, she refused to play up the “backward small town” stereotype. Unfortunately, she also recreated it through essentially an environmentally deterministic logic. Her neighbors and her lesbian friends do not interact because they are geographically separate and contained, to the point where she only sees her lesbian friends at pride festivals – not coincidentally, always in the city. Shannon’s narrative here is informed by metronormativity, albeit in an even more geographic form than usual, and provides an excellent entry into a critical engagement with the theoretical concept.

Judith Halberstam identifies metronormativity through reading the dominant narratives of queer lives in the U.S. In gay and lesbian narratives, coming out is often enabled, or followed, by moving away from home into a large city, where the presence of other gays and lesbians allows for sexual exploration. In these instances, to come into one's own sexuality – what David Bell (2000, 84) calls “metrosexuality” – often necessitates a “concomitant representation of the rural as essentially either ‘hostile’ or ‘idyllic’” (Halberstam 2005, 36). In other words, to be a proper queer sexual subject is to be *metrosexual*; that is, away from hostile heterosexuals and leaving the childhood innocence behind. Halberstam argues that metrosexuality is largely a temporal narrative. One loses childhood innocence, achieves sexual maturity, and eventually leaves home with or in search of sexual partner(s) – it is the universal temporal trajectory of growing up. Metronormativity, however, “maps a story of [queer] migration onto the coming-out narrative” so that the narrative becomes explicitly spatial, “within which the subject moves to a place of tolerance” – the urban – “after enduring life in a place of suspicion, persecution, and secrecy” – the rural (p. 36-37). Metronormativity naturalizes the spatial aspect of this narrative so that “it is easy to equate the physical journey from small town to big city with the psychological journey from closet case to out and proud” (p. 37). As such, the rural is always devalued while the urban conflated with queer visibility. Under this rubric, Shannon's narrative is metronormative because she naturally associates the urban with queer visibility, with limited consideration given to, say, the mobility of queer subjects in space across urban/rural boundaries and the social relations that determine such mobility (Cresswell 2010).

However, Shannon did not, in her narrative, actively represent the rural as “a place of suspicion, persecution, and secrecy,” and her migration pattern eventually went against the

rural-to-urban trajectory. In fact, she was quite ambivalent about many aspects of her relocation. Can metronormativity, as a dominant discourse, accommodate such ambivalence and contradiction? Or are these potential openings for dismantling metronormativity? Halberstam is rather on the fence about this question. As a theorist who thinks about normativity, discourse, and representation, she is certainly cognizant of discursive formations overlapping and colliding with one another. But she is suspicious of a knee-jerk impulse to resist, as it tends to be individualistic and runs to the other extreme of the existing discourse: romanticizing rural lives is equally careless, both analytically and politically, as demonizing them. Using the American underclass colloquially known as “white trash” as an example, Halberstam (2005, 39) shows that its formation involves diverse sets of social relations, and within them “rural queers in particular may participate in certain orders of bigotry (like racism or political conservatism) while being victimized and punished by others (like homophobia and sexism).” What she advocates for is to follow these sets of social relations, as metronormativity “also can shed light on the strangely similar constructions of nonmetropolitan queer sexualities in the United States and nonmetropolitan sexualities in other parts of the world” (p. 37), a challenge that Puar (2007) takes on much more fully. For this reason, she is deeply critical of Dennis Altman (2001)’s *Global Sex*, which advances a “universal gay identity” that is transphobic, orientalist, and developmentalist (Halberstam 2005, 37). Halberstam does not deny that such a gay identity that Altman identifies exists, but she argues that it is far from universal but rather metronormative, and “is always interacting with other, often nonmetropolitan sexual economies” (p. 38).

These diverse sets of social relations and interactions that Halberstam gestures toward here allow us to see the production of hegemony. Metronormativity does not become

hegemonic because dissenting and contradictory accounts do not exist. Rather, within a hegemonic discursive formation, certain accounts become inflated as if they are universal while others are marginalized and overlooked. Shannon's narrative is metronormative in part because she was not able to make competing claims on non-hegemonic terms, and her internal ambivalence comes from those residual complex social relations with her two communities that she was not able to fully articulate and that metronormativity must exclude. In similar ways, I then explore how the geographic literature is one discourse that contributes to the production of metronormativity.

The Origin Story

There is now quite a diverse and vibrant literature on sexuality and space within the discipline of geography, and I do not attempt to provide an exhaustive overview of this literature. To that end, I borrow heavily from existing literature reviews from three major edited volumes – *Mapping Desire* (1995), *De-Centring Sexualities* (2000), and *Geographies of Sexualities* (2007) – to sketch out how sexuality and space as a subdiscipline developed within geography. In particular, I draw attention to the production of metronormativity in this intellectual chronology, especially the marginalized presence of writings on the rural.

For any chronology, it is essential to pay attention to its origin story. The origin story becomes a foundation to the formation of discourse, and those who come after continually harken back to it to situate their own stories within that discourse. For sexuality and space, although there had been some engagements very early on with sex and sexuality by geographers (e.g. Symanski 1974), most point to the interests in understanding “gay ghettos” as its origin story. In the introduction to *Mapping Desire*, David Bell and Gill Valentine (1995, 4) identifies a few isolated attempts in the 1970s, largely copying the Chicago school

of urban sociology, to map out these gay ghettos. Bell and Valentine criticizes these early studies “for their patronizing, moralistic and ‘straight’ approach to lesbian and gay social and sexual relations,” especially on relatively visible gay and lesbian commercial spaces such as the bars, as they were mostly done by “researchers unable to or uninterested in getting their hands dirty talking to informants” (p. 4-5). In the 1980s, this intellectual engagement with gay ghettos intensified, but unlike the aforementioned attempts, geographers such as Manuel Castells (1983; Castells and Murphy 1982) and Larry Knopp (1987; 1990a, b; 1992; Lauria and Knopp 1985) were keen to avoid telling an efficient story of marginalization. Initially, the growing residential concentrations of gay men alongside gay businesses was explained by rural-to-urban migration and coming out (Bell and Valentine 1995, 4; G. Brown, Browne, and Lim 2007, 6). However, the residential influx of gay men accelerated gentrification so that many gay ghettos are ghettos in name only. These gay men are, in Martin Manalansan’s (2013) words, “ghetto fabulous” because they no longer suffer from the effects of economic exploitation and only remain spatially ghettoized. The American political system also provided incentives for gay men to remain residentially concentrated, through which they could pack the “gay vote” for formal political representation (Knopp 1990b). This origin story of sexuality and space literature is very much animated by an engagement with urban homosexuality. As Bell and Valentine (1995, 5) summarizes, “The impact that gay communities have on the urban fabric at a neighborhood level has been at the heart of much of the recent US work on sexualities.”

As Halberstam suggests, Knopp attempts to draw out the social relations that co-produce geography, e.g. urban neighborhoods, and sexuality, e.g. gay men, within capitalism. In two articles (Knopp 1990a, b), he looked at the gentrification patterns in New Orleans and

real estate investments made by childless gay men. He found aggressive investment and targeted marketing strategies directed towards, developed by and through, a network of relatively affluent gay men. Early comers among them were able to buy up cheap, dilapidated housing, fix them up, and flip them for a profit to other gay men looking to relocate. This exchange of money and real estate was lubricated and sped up by the extensive social network among affluent gay men; these personal connections enabled words of a house on sale to get out quicker than usual and for the sellers to target desirable buyers, i.e. other gay men. However, this process priced out many original residents in and around the French Quarter, and was looked upon with mixed feelings by local, working-class gay men. On the one hand, they recognized the growing concentration of gay men and the visibility and clout it brought, which might provide a means to greater political representation. On the other hand, if they were not able to remain in, or buy into, the neighborhood, then any benefits they might receive from increased political representation would be limited at best. This research demonstrates at least two key points. First, it again confirms Halberstam's suggestion that scholars must pay attention to the imbricated sets of social relations. As the ambivalence of working-class gay men suggests, sexuality is but one set of social relations at work in shaping the constitution of New Orleans as a place. Second, it reinforces the assertion that any set of social relations, sexuality included, is inherently geographical. Part of the aforementioned ambivalence arises precisely from the geographical mismatch among political representation, sexuality-based communities, and residential locations.

Knopp (1992, 652) considers this research "the first step in a much more ambitious and comprehensive theoretical project" that identifies "specific ways in which sexuality is implicated in the spatial constitution of society and, simultaneously, specific ways in which

space and place are implicated in the constitution of sexual practices and sexual identity.” In other words, sexuality – or any set of social relations – is not a mere additive to geography; rather, they are always co-constituted. Coupling the ways in which sexuality works in and through capitalist spatial arrangements (of which gentrified gay ghettos are a prime example) with panoptic heterosexism, Knopp concluded that “struggles over sexual relations manifest themselves spatially in ways that extend beyond their mere organization in space” because “sexual codings of space and sexual symbols in space also become material constituents in the structuration of space” (p. 664). Although much of Knopp’s research is urban-centered, his argument of the co-constitution of sexuality and geography suggests that if the geography is different, then sexuality, and struggles over it, would be constituted differently there (and vice versa). This becomes a crucial insight when we consider Halberstam’s musings of a nonmetropolitan homosexuality, and the various forms of sexuality and the struggles accompanying them in *De-Centring Sexualities*.

If the origin story of the sexuality and space literature is urban-centered, as I and others have suggested above, then it is necessary to explore what metronormativity masks and overlooks within it. One major exclusion is a gendered analysis of sexuality, what G. Brown, Browne, and Lim (2007, 7) aptly called “(re)placing lesbians in geography.” Much like how heterosexism imagines itself as the entirety of society, so too does sexism in geography of sexuality. The gay ghettos are largely populated by gay men, and Castells (1983, 140 cited in Bell and Valentine 1995, 5) “has claimed that the absence of similar territorially based lesbian communities reflects the fact that ‘women are poorer than gay men and have less choice in terms of work and location’.” Maxine Wolfe (1992, 151) argued that there were fewer lesbian commercial spaces because women had less economic power, and

lesbian bars tended to have short life span without “a consistent physical location.” Lauria and Knopp (1985) acknowledged the pervasive white, male, and middle-class gay identity, but posited that heterosexism and the construction of masculinity meant that gay men tended to be more oppressed “*as men* in relation to heterosexual men” compared to lesbians in relation to heterosexual women (G. Brown, Browne, and Lim 2007, 7). Thus, gay men were more likely to appropriate urban spaces as homogeneously gay to shelter against that greater oppression.

This discursive appropriation of gay urban spaces is problematic and is contested by geographers. For one, these explanations offered above do not attempt to challenge the economic structures that oppress lesbian women through both sexism and homophobia. Jayne Egerton (1990 cited in Bell and Valentine 1995, 7) called the lack of permanent housing “the single most chronic practical problem’ facing many lesbians.” This shortcoming led Knopp (1994) to later argue for a greater recognition for these economic oppressions in geographers’ works on social justice. G. Brown, Browne, and Lim (2007, 7) used Ettore (1978) as a very early example to challenge the perception that lesbians did not participate in urban politics. These are some of the issues excluded from the urban-centered, gay men-dominated origin story. Furthermore, Bell and Valentine (1995, 6) argued that Castells did not find visible lesbian urban communities because he simply did not know where to look. Linda Peake (1993) and Gill Valentine (1993a, b, c; 1995) both found lesbian ghettos in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and a small English town, respectively, but they were constituted differently from gay ghettos that Castells and Knopp found. There are very few lesbian commercial spaces, and the lesbian spaces tend to be exclusively residential, more spread out, and visible only for those in the know from personal networks. Outside of the home,

Valentine (1993c) argued that lesbian geography consists of complex “time-space strategies” where different groups assigned different meanings to at different times. Thus, there were no essentially gay spaces like a gay bar. These lesbian ghettos are relational and “leave no trace of their sexualities on the landscape” (Bell and Valentine 1995, 6). This observation forces us to consider gay ghettos as the anomaly rather than the norm, and to move away from an obsession over the visibility of sexuality, as “the reality is that most gay men and lesbians live and work not in these gay spaces but in the ‘straight’ world where they face prejudice, discrimination and queerbashing” (p. 7).

This visibility of sexuality, where there are literal traces of sexuality on the landscape, is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, Knopp has shown that visibility can be an effective political strategy for gaining recognition. On the other hand, this focus on urban visibility – which metronormativity depends on to discursively make the anomaly appear the norm – necessarily obscures sexual relations that are not visible in the landscape (or at least visible in the same way). Feminists have critiqued this over-reliance on vision and considered alternative ways to conceptualize vision (e.g. Kwan 2002). Under metronormativity, not only did nonmetropolitan accounts of sexuality become obscured, so too did nonmetropolitan accounts in academic discourse. As the sexuality and space literature comes to understand the city as a space appropriated by gay men, sexism and urban gay identity work to push lesbians (who, in reality, obviously live in all sorts of places, urban and rural) and nonmetropolitan expressions of sexuality out of place, and out of sight. Metronormativity functions precisely in such a way so that metropolitan accounts of sexuality appear as the entirety of possible sexual expressions, and in so doing obscure other, nonmetropolitan accounts.

In addition to relying on other senses, *De-Centring Sexualities* also considers places where sexuality may be visible in different ways. In its introduction, Phillips and Watt (2000) drew on *Brokeback Mountain* to demonstrate a sexuality that is rooted, and only possible, in a particular place. While mainstream media praised the movie for its portrayal of universal love, Phillips and Watt insisted that the sexuality in it was, in fact, not universal. It was not a gay story either, as Jack and Ennis, the protagonists, did not subscribe to nor practice metronormative gay sexuality. Rather, their sexuality took a form made possible by Wyoming, and they must “‘stand [their fate],’ and this means not only putting up with things as they are, but also standing his ground, refusing outsiders’ identities and politics, discourse and practice. This is specific, not generic ground” (Phillips and Watt 2000, 3). If Wyoming, as Phillips and Watt suggested, fixes sexual lives on its own terms, then at the very least it asserts “a militant particularism that disrupts the imperializing tendencies of metropolitan (regulatory and liberatory) voices” and, at its most radical potential, “might speak to other places, disrupting and reconfiguring politics and representation of sexuality that have assumed hegemonic status,” such as metronormativity (ibid.). It is in this spirit that Natalie Oswin (2008, 96) urged queer theorists to “abandon[...] the search for an inherently radical queer subject and turn[...] attention to the advancement of a critical approach to the workings of sexual normativities and non-normativities.”

Making Spaces in Geography

So far, I have argued that the sexuality and space literature in geography is metronormative, in the sense that its origin in studies of metropolitan sexuality has become hegemonic.

Among those who are overlooked, their key strategy to dismantle metronotmativity is to de-center the hegemony. For Gill Valentine (1995, 97), de-centering metronormativity requires

considering those spaces "produced or claimed through collective imaginings and sometimes fantasies focused upon social networks, individual celebrities and specific sites" and not necessarily material spaces like "stable neighbourhoods," e.g. gay ghettos. Contrast her version to *De-Centring Sexualities* (2000), which practices a form of geographic militant particularism and insists on revealing particular forms of (homo)sexuality that are fixed in particular places. These two could be read as opposing arguments – the former focusing on networks, the latter territories. But they need not to be read as a binary, especially if we were to translate this theoretical dismantling of metronormativity into practice. Consider the following exchange between Josh and Todd when they discussed what it is like to live as a gay couple in rural Chenango County:

Josh: Well, [Todd]'s from here, so he's used to it. For me, I'm used to it now. At first it was a really difficult adjustment because there aren't a lot of people of color here, and there aren't a lot of people who are openly gay that we know of [...] That was a situation where both of us learned to adjust to. But we do know people who have children [...] and I think that is another situation where it would be received differently with two women than two guys.

Sean: Is that a big concern, gay men adopting children vs. lesbians and what people might think?

Todd: Honestly, I never really thought about it. It's funny growing up in the area, like I've been here on and off for 33 years, you know. So to me I've never been, especially in a small town, the first thing that I've never been known for is my sexuality. So I feel like we got a lot of respect in the sense of we're not treated like the typical gay couple or whatever, and we don't live our life that way. We're just like any other, where I've never once felt shame walking down the street, or, our neighbors, he'll make comments all the time, like, on a daily basis stop us and speak to us, especially being such a small town, invite us over for wine or whatever. It's just, like, I've never felt perceived as anything different than just a couple. (Interview, July 2012)

Josh and Todd disagreed over how they should position themselves in their town. Josh is African American and grew up in the south side of Syracuse, and he only relocated because it was Todd's hometown. For him, being one of the only people of color in town was something

that took getting used to, and he implicitly drew on that subject positioning to understand a future where they might be the only gay parents in town. He understood his experience living in a rural town against his previous experience both growing up in a predominantly African American neighborhood and later living and working in the city. In his narrative, race and sexuality are parallel equivalents where the experience of being a racial minority helps him prepare for being a sexual minority and how he might be perceived.² Todd, on the other hand, contested Josh's narrative in part because his racial positioning is different. Further, he drew on heteronormative and, ironically, metronormative languages to articulate themselves. They are a gay couple, but Todd has "never been known for [his] sexuality." They do not live like "the typical gay couple" and consequently are not treated that way – I can only presume that by "typical" he meant the "white gay male metropolitan public sex culture" (Herring 2010, 4). If anything, Todd was exceedingly insistent throughout the interview that they were not like the typical gay couple. Josh and Todd's disagreement points to the difficulty of positioning queer subjects entirely outside of metronormativity, but it does suggest that there are multiple positions queer subjects occupy within it. Mapping out these multiple positions, then, allows a first cut into understanding how metronormativity functions in practice.

In particular, I want to point to "Queer Diffusions" (2003) as a model of how this critical mapping might be accomplished. In Knopp and Brown's assessment,

² Interestingly, the way my interviewees perceived me seemed to make them much more comfortable to talk about race. Josh's discursive move here, equating being racial and sexual minorities, occurred more than once. For example, Shannon, when describing her occasional discomfort for being a lesbian during the foster care application process, said the following to me: "I mean, it's hard, and you're Asian – I don't mean to be pointing that out, but when you're in a room full of a bunch of white people that have like no idea what it's like to be Asian, and you have to be aware of that at least, that uncomfortable feeling" (Interview, July 2012). Shannon's understanding of her sexuality, however, differs from Todd's. Although both accept the subjective dimension of queer sexuality, Shannon experiences the ascriptive dimension quite strongly while Todd does not (see Moya 2006 for a discussion of subjective and ascriptive identities).

With very few exceptions, queer work on sexuality in geography is urban focused and operates on the unspoken assumption that the most exciting and innovative forms of subjectivity, culture, and political resistance on the parts of queer people originate in large metropolitan areas and then diffuse through networks of connections – usually hierarchical – until they eventually find their way to more peripheral locations, where they serve (presumably) as models and are adopted by local populations, often in spite of conservative local suspicions (p. 412).

This diffusion narrative, together with its geographic inverse – the queer coming out narrative – forms the whole of metronormativity politically and demographically. From interviewing a number of queer people in Duluth, Minnesota, and Seattle, however, they concluded that structures of power, such as heteronormativity or metronormativity, are "in fact much more spatially disjoint and diffuse than many existing discussions of queer lives would suggest" (p. 420).

Demographically, people's coming out narratives are incredibly varied, and revealing this variety makes metronormativity – the mapping of "a story of [queer rural-to-urban] migration onto the coming-out narrative" (Halberstam 2005, 36) – a much more difficult myth to sustain. Although at the first glance, many people did come out after moving to a bigger city, their understanding of queer sex might have come from rural or military origins. In particular, these sexualities often take a particular form outside the urban and only become named in the city (e.g. Phillips and Watt 2000). However, Knopp and Brown (2003, 417) were keen to insist that this was but one narrative, and their interview evidence "strongly suggests... upward, sideward, and indeed multidirectional and multiscalar flows of people and ideas." Akin to Valentine's (1995) lesbian social networks, for example, a popular periodic gathering of gay men in eastern Washington was "advertised almost exclusively by word of mouth... and via notices in the emergent gay press of (ironically) Seattle, more than 100 miles away and on the other side of the formidable physical as well as psychological and

cultural barrier of Washington's Cascade Mountain range" (p. 418). These networks were not at all contained within a single town, as the ones Valentine had found in her fieldwork, and they also took place via many media, including the Internet. Knopp also drew on his personal experience to demonstrate how despite "a supportive family and gay-friendly cultural environment" while growing up, it actually took a relocation to Iowa for graduate school in the 1980s, and later to Duluth, for him to come out as a gay man. These and many more are all narratives that deviate from the metronormative version.

Politically, Knopp and Brown (2003, 413) suggested that "a rather wide range of interventions can constitute 'resistance'," and these different queer narratives, as "simple survival strategies[,] can be as meaningful and important in people's lives as revolutionary social change." In practice, it "is not so much whether an act is or is not 'resistance' but rather which *dimensions* of an act or intervention have some counterhegemonic power or effect, even while in other respects, or viewed from different perspectives or social locations, they may be quite reinforcing of dominant structures of power" (ibid.). Knopp and Brown quoted an interviewee from Duluth as an example. A business owner and occasional gay rights activist, this interviewee often leads protests against national organizations such as the Human Rights Campaign for their ignorance of queer lives in places like Duluth. He points to the success of Minnesota state legislature and local governments on passing more inclusive legislations than the federal government at the time as an evidence against metronormative queer politics. However, his organizing acumen as an activist came largely from emulating strategies of organizations in large cities elsewhere, some radical and some mainstream. Knopp and M. Brown observed that "he seems to delight in, as he puts it, 'making them squirm' by being confronted with what he sees as a contradiction between these

organizations own rhetoric and their practices,” i.e., giving them a taste of their own medicine (p. 421). This example points to the complexities and contradictions in engaging with metronormative queer politics, similar to the complex and contradictory ways Todd understands himself as a gay man against the metronormative, "typical" gay men.

What I wish to gesture toward here, at the end of this chapter, is the political potential of such a critical mapping of queer subjectivities within, and perhaps beyond, metronormativity. I have shown the formation and functions of metronormativity in geography and beyond, and by no means do I wish to suggest that it is all encompassing. But rather than starting from an overarching political strategy of resistance, I want to highlight the various dimensions queer subjectivities may work against, in concert, and sideways of metronormativity in different times and places. The examples in this chapter demonstrate that a direct ‘resistance’ to metronormativity may not be the most productive strategy. Todd’s expression of his sexual identity is the starkest example, while the Duluth-based activist is another example where metronormativity is partially embraced. As geographers, it behooves us to pay attention to the incredible spatial variations queer subjectivities can take and, as Karen Tongson (2011) did so well in the suburbs of southern California, to the places and scales where these queer lives might be away from the spotlight. In the same spirit, perhaps some "simple survival strategies" for queer parents may emerge from writing this thesis.

Chapter 2: Those Damn Maps

When I was first introduced to geography as an undergraduate student, I thought that geographers were mapmakers. It turns out that I was both right and wrong. In the years since, I have learned that geographers in fact do many different things but, as my introductory professor would say, “Making maps is the one thing all geographers do.” In Chapter 1, I suggested that the project of critically mapping queer subjectivities within, and perhaps beyond, metronormativity has great political potential. But we have not seen one single map so far! In this chapter, then, I take the process of mapping out of the discursive and metaphorical realms. How to critically map queer subjectivities on an actual map? What are some of the challenges in representing real lives cartographically? Do such representations remain metronormative? What are their politics?

One of those real maps came out in 2004, when the Urban Institute published *The Gay and Lesbian Atlas* (henceforth “the Atlas”) under considerably more media attention than a typical D.C. think tank publication would normally receive. It was a presidential election year where the issue of same-sex marriage played center-stage. 11 states passed constitutional amendments banning same-sex marriage, and the high turnout from voters citing “moral values” as the most important determinant for their votes played a significant role in, if not single-handedly swung, the re-election of George W. Bush (Lewis 2005). Or so the popular logic went. More recent analyses revealed that although same-sex marriage proved to be a wedge issue, it did not decide the presidential election nor increase the conservative voters’ turnout significantly (Smith, DeSantis, and Kassel 2006). Nonetheless, it was clear that this popular narrative did hold some merit, as debates about morality dominated the conversation leading up to the election (and continued afterward). It also

brought sexuality into electoral geography (and vice versa), as the ballot measures on same-sex marriage ban "likely primed Bush's share of the presidential vote" in key swing states like Michigan and Ohio (p. 88).³

The Atlas was published five months before the presidential election, and at least one reviewer called it a "high-profile atlas," jokes of oxymoron notwithstanding (Lauriault 2005, 121). Unless you are a geographer, can an atlas ever be "high-profile"? Nonetheless, Gary Gates, a well-known demographer and the lead author of the Atlas, was interviewed by many media outlets, including a feature spot on the National Public Radio. The first cartographic representation of the gay and lesbian population with nationally representative data (from the 2000 U.S. Census), it received ringing endorsements from academics, policy wonks, and politicians alike. And given its timing, it is entirely appropriate to read its publication against the political backdrop of the day. Under this light, the Atlas is undoubtedly a political text. But Gates disagreed with this characterization. In an interview on the National Public Radio's *Morning Edition*, host Steve Inskeep asked Gates whether he foresaw the Atlas being used *or misused* in a political context. Gates replied, "Well, I think there is the possibility for both. I mean, every time you put gay and lesbian on anything, it has some political ramification. I think we have tried very painstakingly to make [the Atlas] as much as possible a simple presentation of data, and tried to avoid any particular political stances. But certainly

³ It is important to note that most studies that employed quantitative methods tested for this hypothesis, that ballot measures banning same-sex marriages increased conservative and/or evangelical voter turnouts. This is a separate hypothesis from the following one, that high support from conservative and/or evangelical voters buoyed Bush to his re-election. Although both hypotheses are supported by electoral and demographic data, it is inconclusive as to whether the latter can be directly and universally attributed to the former. Many popular narratives on sexuality and elections tend to assume the positive relationship between these two hypotheses, which led to problematic discussions in the aftermath of Bush's re-election in 2004 and, even more distressingly, the simultaneous election of Barack Obama and the passage of California's Proposition 8 in 2008, i.e. blaming the high black voter turnout for the passage of Proposition 8 (for a summary, see Eng 2010, Preface).

I do see signs that these data are being used in congressional hearings, they've been used in some of the court cases..."

Inskeep quickly followed up, "Now I imagine you must be hearing from gay and lesbian activist groups about it?"

"Indeed," Gates replied, "and I have been told that it helps them, not least of which there is a quote from the very first paragraph of the book where a state senator from, I believe it was Mississippi, when he was told that there were gay people in his district, his quote was, 'Wow, you jest! I've never met any of these people.'

"People tell me that it is actually very powerful to go to a decision-maker of some sort and say, 'Look, there are really gay people in your area, and the United States Census says so.' There is something about the Census that has the credibility that other places don't" (Gates 2004).

This exchange is intriguing for several reasons. First, we can wonder what kind of (progressive) politics is possible from counting and mapping gay and lesbian people. For Gates, politics resides exclusively in the application of data, but as critical population geographers have pointed out, the very act of counting is inherently political (Knopp and Brown 2005). The language of using or misusing data is interesting; we might think of producing or misproducing the data during counting and mapping. For Gates, again, these are purely technical problems that require technical solutions, since his objective is to produce the best, i.e. the most objective and neutral, data. But the very fact that we can talk about the possibility of *mis*producing data or evaluating *the best* data indicates that there are standards and purposes to which data production is measured against, and those are always political. Indeed, the production of credibility must be a political process. Gates (2004) said, "every

time you put gay and lesbian on anything, it has some political ramification.” Asking why that is may be a naïve question, but how might we look at counting and mapping differently if we take politics seriously?

Second, the practice of counting and mapping gay and lesbian people has political effects at multiple scales. Although the popular narratives about the Atlas focused on its potential impacts on national policies and electoral geographies, Gates (2004) highlighted the ways in which gay and lesbian activists – many of them local – might use similar data to claim resources and popular support. It is difficult not to imagine the potential political impacts, especially in non-metropolitan places where support for queer politics is assumed to be non-existent. As Gates kept pressing during his media tour, the anecdote of the Mississippi state senator conveyed a powerful message – “There are queer people everywhere, even in places where you don’t expect.” One cannot help but think of this message as a geographic extension of the familiar adage, “We’re here, we’re queer – Get used to it.” The credibility of the Census – and other techniques of counting and mapping – comes in part from the technical expertise and the professed neutrality of data (Li 2007). And in this logic, showing objectively the lives of gay and lesbian people in statistics and on maps constitutes a claim for equality and acceptance, albeit one that “avoid[s] any particular political stances.” But does such a political strategy actually work? Or better yet, how do gay and lesbian activists, especially those in non-metropolitan areas, use this political strategy? And are there any pitfalls in this logic?

I attempt to work through some of these questions in this chapter. The Atlas is one of the first real attempts to take up the call for such a critical mapping, and for that reason alone its authors deserve to be applauded. But just from the two points I raised above, it is apparent

that the degree to which critical politics is integrated into the mapping process is rather minimal. This has led geographers to criticize Gates and Ost specifically for being “unconcerned with the normative implications of their use of these data” (Knopp and Brown 1005, 892), and to dismiss the Atlas more generally as another product of the culture of quantification that privileges technical documentations of measurements “over reflection on interpretation of and responses to the numbers” (Jocoy 2013, 398). I share many of these critiques of the Atlas, and this chapter in fact contributes to an expanding literature of them. But I think to dismiss the Atlas (and similar attempts of demographic and cartographic representations of queer lives in the U.S.) would be a mistake. There is nothing about counting and mapping that is inherently uncritical or regressive. Indeed, it seems obvious that analyses of social statistics have a “[critical] place in a critical social science research agenda” (Ellis 2009, 303), and all research in critical geography – quantitative *and* qualitative – should strive to be “reflexive, politically conscious, and activist” (p. 301). But these critiques of the Atlas show precisely that much greater reflection must be given to how these maps are made and how they are used.

I argue that the Atlas, in its current form, depends on a peculiar logic that I call the politics of proximity. Gates’ (2004) anecdote exemplifies this logic, that somehow the knowledge that queer people are in our midst (“same-sex unmarried partners were present in 99.3 percent of all counties in the United States”) would suddenly lead to greater social acceptance (“data can be used to open minds... [and] eyes, too”; Gates and Ost 2004, 2). Look at it another way, these political claims dovetail neatly with reports of public opinion polls that not only demonstrate that more than 50% of Americans support gay and lesbian rights (Newport and Himelfarb 2013; Pew Research Center 2013; Silver 2013), but attribute

this change to the fact that more Americans know someone personally who is gay or lesbian (Morales 2009; Cillizza 2013; Dolan and Garrison 2013). This logic led one commentator to declare that "Why do we support gay rights? Because we know each other" (Adams 2013). It is the same logic that sits behind campaigns like "Tell 3," where queer people are asked to not only come out to at least three people, but to share what it is like to be queer with them, because "[w]hat changes people's hearts and minds and gets them to support equality is having had personal, close relationships with gay people."⁴ Thus, the objective of queer politics becomes not only expanding one's social network, but to increase the proximity within it.

Although such a politics of social proximity has a nice sentiment, it has several weaknesses. Elizabeth Birch was the executive director of the Human Rights Campaign in 2004, and she wrote the foreword for the Atlas. She applauded the authors for "dispel[ling] ignorance with accurate information," so that people, especially legislators, could now no longer brush off LGBT rights by uttering, "But I don't know any gay people" (Gates and Ost 2004, ix). But does knowing gay people automatically absolve one's potential complicity with homophobia? As psychologist Gregory Herek (2009) suggests, if we were to take this logic at face value, then "why wasn't there *greater* support for marriage equality among poll respondents with gay or lesbian family or acquaintances?"⁵ For Herek, the answer lies in the quality of those relationships (or the lack thereof). The solution, then, is for queer people to actively cultivate those relationships closer and deeper. But even such a solution is lacking, for the politics of proximity grossly reduces the potential of radical queer politics. At its most extreme, it even negates the possibility of any radical politics. Personal relationships are an

⁴ http://www.tell-three.org/sub_1.html

⁵ Emphasis in original. Incidentally, Herek was one of the expert witnesses during 2010's Proposition 8 trial at the U.S. District Court, *Perry et al. v. Schwarzenegger et al.*

integral part of any political organizing, but they cannot be the entirety of political organizing. As Matthew Yglesias' (2013) excellent column reminds us, solely relying on the politics of proximity is a dangerous proposition because it replicates the worst quality of identity politics. In this proposition, not only does activism only originate from a common identity (or knowing someone with said identity), but it displaces the place of empathy and rational understanding in building a broad political coalition. In other words, it discounts the possibility that one might be persuaded in supporting a political cause even when there might not be any personal connections.

How does geography factor into this conundrum? The Atlas and other similar cartographic representations of queer people exemplify the politics of proximity. Although they may prove to be extremely effective tools for gay and lesbian activists, the overreliance on cartographic representations could potentially produce a disconnect between policy agendas and real queer lives. This disconnection comes from one particular way in which gay and lesbian activists use these cartographic products, where maps showing *geographic* proximity of gay and lesbian households are made to imply *social* proximity and, by extension, inclusion and acceptance. Although this strategy can be quite useful in garnering public support and funding, the supposedly direct causation between geographic and social proximity is rarely straightforward and amounts to environmental determinism.

The politics of proximity also returns queer activism into the realm of metronormativity entirely. For example, the Atlas contains a number of maps that exhibit the locational patterns of gay and lesbian households across the U.S. It becomes a problem, however, when those maps are used as evidence that demonstrates where gay and lesbian households “choose to live” (Gates and Ost 2004, 7). Since the maps display aggregate level

data, claiming evidence for locational decisions commits “a classic case of the ecological fallacy” and presents “a set of behaviorist rational-choice assumptions as fact” (Knopp and Brown 2005, 892). This folly is perhaps not so surprising when one considers how heavily Gates and Ost drew on Richard Florida’s (2002) creative class argument.⁶ But it reinstates the problematic assumption that queer rural-to-urban migration is a central driving force in queer politics. These maps by themselves do not demonstrate locational decisions at all, yet by describing them as evidence of choice, Gates and Ost introduced migration when the Atlas contains no migration data! In line with the politics of proximity, these maps are presented metronormatively as evidence that more queer presence must necessarily mean more queer inclusion and acceptance, which directs our attention away from the very real dangers queers still face in many places, rural and urban. It also reduces queer politics to merely seeking inclusion and acceptance.

Is it even possible, then, to make a map that both faithfully represents queer lives and advances a critical queer politics? This chapter is a preliminary stab at that question. Using the Atlas as an example, I first provide an overview of queer demography. By dissecting some of the technical issues from the Atlas, and by replicating some of its cartographic techniques with Syracuse’s recent census data, I want to show that the inevitable political nature of queer demographics that Gates (2004) identified cannot be reduced to questions of mis/producing and mis/using data. Rather, one must keep the political implications of each technical decision in mind during not just the interpretation of data, and prior to that during the production of data. I then use my own experiences to demonstrate the challenges of translating critical queer politics into mapping practices and their application. Through

⁶ Gates and Florida have in fact collaborated in applying Florida’s argument to the gay and lesbian context; see Florida and Gates 2002.

collaborating with a local non-profit organization, I present a particular case where gay and lesbian activist groups use counting and mapping as part of their strategy to represent the issues their constituents face in order to secure financial support. As a community advisory board member, I present in this chapter a self-reflexive exercise based on the process of grant renewal, in order to demonstrate the difficulty of *who counts* as our targeted population and how to best represent their experiences cartographically, while maximizing the likelihood of grant renewal, ideally.

The stake of this chapter is to re-theorize what queer visibility means. What happens when these maps – a literal representation of that visibility – are shown to policy makers, legislators, etc. to make political decisions? What happens when this political strategy – what I call “the politics of proximity”, where maps like this that show geographic proximity are used to convey social proximity and, by extension, acceptance of queer people – are supported by, frankly, badly made maps? This chapter examines these issues and suggests that these maps’ quality notwithstanding, they still have a strong cartographic power so even in collaborations, I was asked specifically to make similar maps. Here, then, is where I think geographers do have a strong responsibility to intervene and work within the practical constraints of community organizations.

How to Count, Technically

One of the main reasons that *The Gay and Lesbian Atlas* received so much public attention, besides its timing coinciding with the presidential election, is its historical significance. It is the first cartographic representation of the gay and lesbian population in the United States. This fact is important because historically, the majority of gay and lesbian studies were qualitative in nature, and such studies do not lend themselves well to cartographic

representations (c.f. Cope and Elwood 2009). Even studies with a large sample size tend to rely on convenience sampling through social networks, active recruitments, or ethnography. Although these studies generated much insight into queer lives in the U.S., demographers were hesitant to draw general inferences about the gay and lesbian population from these sources (Black et al. 2000, 139). For demographers interested in sexuality, the 2000 U.S. Census was a landmark event. For the first time, they were able to brush away questions of sampling and produce what they considered to be data of good quality. This achievement, they hoped, would finally allow them to undertake systematic study of the gay and lesbian population in the U.S.

My work in this section is to complicate the notion of "good data." Having trained as a demographer in my early career, I consider queer demography to be a very important field with exciting potential. But abstracting real lives into data is delicate work, and too often it is dismissed as mere technical problems. In reality, this process of abstraction consists of a series of extremely technical *and* extremely political decisions. In demographic parlance, we must "clean up" raw data so they can become usable datasets. This process involves a series of steps that any demographer is familiar with. My intention here, then, is to not only press on the rationale for taking those steps, but to look even earlier into the collection of raw data. What separates "raw" data from "good" data? And for studying gay and lesbian population, what is cleaned away during this process?

For demographers, the quality of data is judged on its accuracy and reliability (Babbie 2012). Already, trouble lies ahead. Hypothetically, I am a demographer and I want to count how many lesbians live on a particular street. In order for my measurement to produce good data, I must be both accurate and reliable. To be accurate, I need to ensure that the people I

count as lesbians are actually lesbians. To be reliable, I need to ensure that every time I (or anyone else) count, we get the same result. Demographers find measuring sexuality to be an incredibly difficult task. First, they must agree on how to measure sexual orientation. Gates and Sell (2006, 238) listed three ways in which demographers generally measure sexual orientation – sexual attraction, sexual behavior, and sexual identity. A fourth way is “assessing coupling status,” i.e. whether one’s partner is of the same sex or opposite sex, but this measurement excludes those who are single. It should be obvious that depending on the survey data source and the types of questions it includes, different dimensions of sexual orientation can lead to the identification of drastically different populations. Table 2.1 demonstrates this point. In the first column, the three dimensions of sexual orientation are listed, and the second column are corresponding survey questions (“Assessment”) that measure the dimensions. For example, a female survey respondent would be characterized as a lesbian under the sexual attraction dimension if she answers either b. or d. A male survey respondent would be characterized as a gay man under the sexual behavior dimension if he answers c. or d.⁷ The third and fourth columns are the corresponding population estimates provided by Laumann et al. (1994). Laumann and his colleagues, using the National Health and Social Life Survey, estimated that 8.6% of all women and 10.1% of all men expressed some form of same-sex sexual orientation, i.e. any one or any combination of the three dimensions of sexual orientation. Their estimates can be further broken down by dimensions of sexual orientation, so that 7.568% of all women had some form of same-sex sexual attraction, 3.526% had some same-sex sexual behaviors, and only 1.376% self-identified as

⁷ Bisexuality is under-theorized in queer demography, as it is common practice to lump bisexuals together with lesbians and gay men, especially if the dimensions of sexual orientation discussed are sexual attraction or sexual behavior. Under these two dimensions, same-sex sexual orientation is operationalized as expressions of *any* same-sex attraction/behavior, so bisexuals are often “double-counted” as both straight and gay in different studies using the same dataset.

lesbians or bisexuals. Another way to think about it is that of those 8.6% of women, 88% expressed some same-sex sexual attraction, 41% expressed some same-sex sexual behavior, and only 16% self-identified as lesbians. Table 2.1 demonstrates that not only do our population estimates of the gay and lesbian population vary widely based on how we define sexual orientation, but that these three dimensions of sexual orientation are not stable or mutually exclusive categories. It is far more common for someone to express same-sex sexual attraction than to act on it, and even fewer come to self-identify as gay or lesbian. But conversely, it is also possible for someone to self-identify as gay or lesbian without acting on it or finding anyone sexually attractive in the past year.

The most widely accepted measurement of sexual orientation in queer demography is sexual identity and, by extension, coupling status. Despite the fact that this measurement will most likely return the smallest population estimate of gay men and lesbians, the argument for it is that those who self-identify as gay or lesbian will be the most acculturated in that particular social role and are more likely to experience the consequences of being seen as an “out” gay or lesbian by others (Black et al. 2003; Baumle et al. 2009). Surprisingly, demographers do not yet know whether population estimates based on sexual identity would correspond to those based on coupling status, since no nationally representative survey could provide good reference data for both and the Census only allows estimates based on coupling status (Gates and Sell 2006).

Once accuracy is ensured – by agreeing on a consistent measurement for sexual orientation – demographers turn their attention to reliability. Since they generally consider extensive fieldwork and data collection to be impractical, the onus falls upon the identification of a dataset that already possesses the necessary variables, from which a

Table 2.1. Dimensions of Sexual Orientation and the Corresponding Population Estimates for Same-Sex Sexual Orientation

Dimensions of Sexual Orientation	Example of Assessment	Proportion of Women	Proportion of Men
Sexual attraction	<i>During the past year, the person(s) to whom you have been sexually attracted is (are):</i> a. I have not been sexually attracted to anyone b. Females(s) c. Male(s) d. Female(s) and Male(s)	7.568% (those who answered b. or d.)	7.575% (those who answered c. or d.)
Sexual behavior	<i>During the past year, the person(s) with whom you have had sexual contact is (are):</i> a. I have not had sexual contact with anyone b. Female(s) c. Male(s) d. Female(s) and Male(s)	3.526% (b. or d.)	5.252% (c. or d.)
Sexual identity	<i>Which of the following best describe you?</i> a. Heterosexual (straight) b. Gay c. Lesbian d. Bisexual e. Not sure	1.376% (c. or d.)	2.727% (b. or d.)
Any Dimensions of Same-Sex Sexual Orientation		8.6%	10.1%

Notes: Population estimates obtained from the analysis of the National Health and Social Life Survey done by Laumann et al. (1994); dimensions of sexual orientation and example of assessment taken from Gates and Sell (2006).

consistent measurement for sexual orientation can be taken. Those studies without representative samples and/or small sample sizes are immediately ruled out. Black et al. (2000) identified three national datasets that may yield data of above-average quality on the gay and lesbian population – the General Social Survey (GSS), the aforementioned National Health and Social Life Survey (NHSLs), and the Census (and, by extension, American Community Surveys [ACS]). Each has its pros and cons. For instance, NHSLs is the only survey that collects information on “sexual practices over the life course,” which would be

immensely useful in terms of comparing sexual behaviors versus sexual identity through time individually and among generations collectively. It may also provide insights into the fluidity of sexuality.⁸ GSS is similarly valuable because it is a longitudinal survey. Unfortunately, since both NHLS and GSS are sampled surveys, sample sizes of gay men and lesbians are even smaller (p. 140). The Census, on the other hand, is not a sampled survey. Although it only allows identification of gay men and lesbians through coupling status, so information on the single gay and lesbian population is lost, it still returns the largest sample size among the three. The downside, of course, is that the un-sampled portion of the Census does not include many survey questions, so one may still be forced to rely on sampled portions.⁹ Census Bureau data also suffers from inconsistent imputation protocols from year to year regarding gay and lesbian households, which makes longitudinal comparisons problematic.¹⁰

⁸ NHLS is the only nationally representative survey that includes assessments for all three dimensions of sexual orientation.

⁹ Prior to the 2010 Census, the U.S. Census Bureau employed both short forms and long forms when conducting the decennial census. Short forms were the un-sampled portion that collected basic demographic data and which all households were required to fill out. The long forms were only sent to roughly one-sixth of all households in the U.S. and collected more detailed socioeconomic and demographic data. Starting with the 2010 Census, the long form was phased out and replaced by annual ACS. This change was criticized by demographers, as ACS did not have the same degree of specificity compared to census long forms. For example, ACS did not differentiate among biological, step-, and adopted children in their household rosters.

¹⁰ Whenever some information about a person or household is missing or inconsistent in any Census survey, the U.S. Census Bureau performs imputations to make the information consistent. This practice is relevant to studying gay and lesbian households because the diverse family formations as well as varying degrees of legal recognition can easily lead to inconsistencies in filling out census forms (Gates and Sell 2006; Baumle et al. 2009). Prior to 2010, the federal government did not allow same-sex couples to be counted as "married" in any survey conducted by the Census Bureau (Gates and Ost 2004). In the 1990 Census, those same-sex couples who marked as "married" rather than "unmarried partners" were generally treated as a sex miscoding, so one partner's sex would be imputed to make them appear as a heterosexual married couple (Black et al. 2000). In the Census 2000, however, such inconsistencies are no longer treated as sex miscoding, but rather a relationship miscoding, so their relationship will be imputed from "husband/wife" to "unmarried partner" (Gates and Ost 2004; Gates and Sell 2006). In the 2010 Census, neither imputations were performed, so it was possible to identify two sub-sets of same-sex couples, those who identified as "married" and those as "unmarried partners." However, O'Connell and Feliz (2011) reported that the figure for married same-sex couples from the 2010 Census were greatly inflated compared to recent ACS estimates, and they estimated that up to 62% of those were actually opposite-sex married couples mis-

Nonetheless, demographers generally agree that among all datasets available currently, the Census Bureau data is the most reliable one.

Judging by demographers' own standard of accuracy and reliability, *The Gay and Lesbian Atlas* was an impeccable work. Gates and Ost (2004) clearly established their targeted group (same-sex households based on self-identified coupling status) from a reliable and representative survey (the 2000 Census). Based on these criteria, they successfully "cleaned up" raw data made available by the Census Bureau and turned it into a dataset populated by their targeted group (Brown and Boyle 2000). They were able to produce good data, which allowed them to proclaim the Atlas as a "simple presentation of data" and, by extension, "avoid taking any particular political stances" (Gates 2004). But the technical discussions above demonstrated that accuracy and reliability are actually produced by consensus. Consensus may be consolidated through practical concerns (e.g. the Census Bureau surveys reliably yield the largest sample) or specific rationale (e.g. self-identified sexual identity is the most accurate measure because we are interested in social attitudes and not necessarily, say, sexually transmitted infections among men who have sex with men), but either way there is nothing intrinsic or neutral about these technical decisions. Further, these technical decisions can only be made with certain political assumptions, and they carry political consequences as well. For instance, identifying gay and lesbian families based on household structure is incredibly problematic. It reproduces *and privileges* the image of heteronormative family, discounting the possibility of alternative family arrangements (Weston 1991 [1997]). It assumes that households are natural representations of families, thus ignoring families that do not necessarily live under one roof. It also assumes that

marking their census forms. For this reason, great caution is necessary when comparing data from same-sex households from the three previous censuses.

sexuality and gender are static categories so that those who do not fit are excluded and closeted. It should be clear that the Atlas is definitely not an apolitical product.

Again, my intention is not to dismiss queer demography. Rather, it is to push for the recognition that there may be limits to its utility and that technical problems are actually political problems. As Knopp and Brown (2005, 892) noted in their review of the Atlas, there was a "frustrating blind spot... [where] the attitude seems to be, 'All we need to do to address these problems is define them upfront as technical (rather than epistemological or ontological), reduce politics to policy, and knowledge to value-free facts'." So even "in the context of critical population geography [where] there has been a growing awareness of the importance of governmentality in the census... an atlas that is ostensibly all about breaking down the closet ends up reinstating it (albeit unwillingly)" (ibid.). Indeed, producing "good data" is a process filled with epistemological and ontological conundrums. When Gates and Ost (2004) presented these conundrums as technical problems, however, they not only removed potential for critical recognition and discussion, but this very move could end up encouraging a regressive politics.¹¹

The Cartographic Power

With these brief interventions in mind, we can begin to evaluate the political implications when "good data" on same-sex households is used to create "good maps" of same-sex households. Why study gay and lesbian location patterns? Gates and Ost (2004, 2-6) cited five main reasons: political awareness, providing public health services, marketing, community and economic development, and social science research. To the authors, the Atlas was a political project in so far as it went "beyond simply acknowledging that [same-sex households] exist... beyond recognition of their political clout" (p. 3). But cartography is a

¹¹ I thank Derek Ford for this insight.

very particular kind of representation, and there is a "power *internal*" to it, J.B. Harley noted (emphasis in original). "Cartographers manufacture power: they create a spatial panopticon. It is a power embedded in the map text. We can talk about the power of the map just as we already talk about the power of the word or about the book as a force for change. *In this sense maps have politics*" (emphasis added; Harley 1989, 13).

In the Atlas' case, the power of its maps rests upon their naked visibility, a cartographic coming out of the closet. By putting gay and lesbian people, previously invisible in governmental regimes, onto the map, their now visible presence would provoke some "political awareness" that Gates and Ost (2004) clamored for. This cartographic coming out, however, also made others invisible. Here I draw from Brown and Knopp's (2006) thorough deconstruction of the Atlas as an instrument of governmentality in state knowledges. By "outlining five distinct *analytical levels* at which governmentality can be recognized (episteme, visibility, identities, techne and ethos)," they argued that the Atlas "relied unreflexively, and thereby governmentally, on state-given scales" (emphasis in original; p. 224-225). Their article deserves a close reading on its own, but for my purposes I want to highlight the role of metronormativity – as part of that power internal to maps – in producing in/visibility and proximity in the Atlas.

The Atlas includes a series of choropleth maps at the national, state, and city scales. Rather than mapping the percentage of same-sex households in any given area, Gates and Ost (2004, 54) calculated what they called an "index of concentration" that "measures where gay and lesbian couples live *relative to* the general population, and thus captures whether gay and lesbian couples are over- or underrepresented in a particular geographic region" (emphasis in original). The index of concentration is equivalent to location quotient (LQ), and is

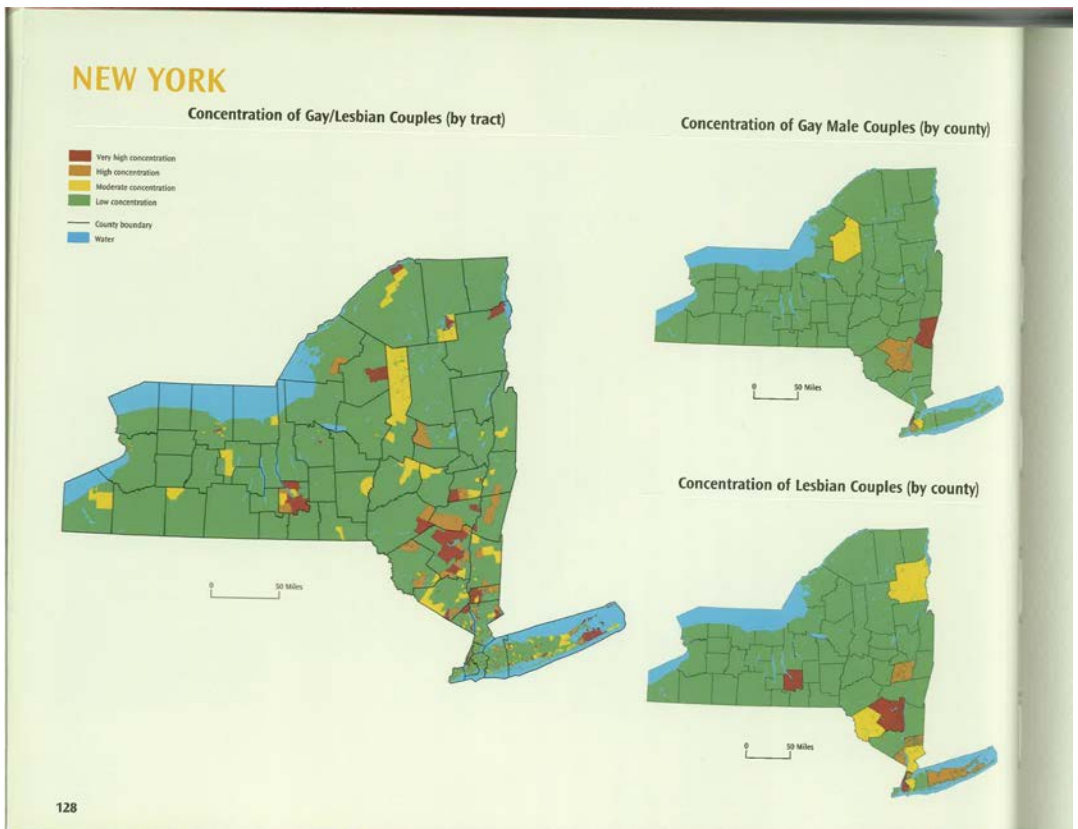
calculated by essentially comparing the number of same-sex households in a particular area against the distribution of same-sex households within the areal extent of the map. For example, "a map whose scope was that of a City showed location quotients whose numerators were based on the scale of the census tract and whose denominators were based on the scale of the City" (Brown and Knopp 2006, 227).¹² At both the state and the city scales, LQ maps are displayed alongside select demographic statistics and their "Gay/Lesbian Index Rank." For example, New York state is ranked eighth among all states (see Figure 2.1) while New York City is ranked 11th (see Figure 2.2). Although all 50 states are included, only 25 select cities are in the Atlas. They "include the 20 cities with the highest number of same-sex couples" – *not* the highest Gay/Lesbian Index Rank – "along with five additional cities chosen to reflect better geographic diversity [Nashville; Kansas City; Albuquerque] or acknowledge a particular high concentration of gay and lesbian couples [Orlando; New Orleans]" (Gates and Ost 2004, 58).

For those less literate in statistics, the authors provided instructions for how to interpret the LQs:

Since each index is a ratio of proportions, a value of 1.00 indicates that the proportions are the same. In this case, it means that a gay and/or lesbian couple is just as likely to be in that areal unit as any other household. Any value over 1.00 indicates that [same-sex] couples are more concentrated, or overrepresented, in that areal unit than the population in the area shown on the map. For example, an Index value of 2.00 for a tract means that same-sex couples are twice as likely as the typical [same-sex] households in the city to live in that location. Any value below 1.00 indicates that gay and/or lesbian couples are less concentrated in that areal unit than the population in the area shown (Gates and Ost 2004, 57).

Based on their instructions, we were led to interpret the bright red Tompkins County in one of the New York state maps as an overrepresentation of lesbian couples compared to typical lesbian couples in New York state (see Figure 2.1). But this interpretation is problematic for

¹² For a more detailed mathematical discussion, see Gates and Ost (2004, 57).



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Indices

Gay/Lesbian Index	1.17
Gay Male Index	1.22
Lesbian Index	1.12

Comparative Statistics

	All	GL couples	GL rank
Presence of children, among households	49%	27%	30
Seniors (55+), among adults	29%	20%	32
Nonwhite, among adults	38%	34%	8
Females, among adults	53%	47%	45
Rural, among households	13%	9%	43

Top New York Metro Areas
(among 331 metro areas nationwide)

	GL rank	Gay male rank	Lesbian rank
New York PMSA	11	5	35
Newburgh PMSA*	60	58	60
Nassau-Suffolk PMSA	81	87	87
Dutchess County PMSA	105	103	95
Albany-Schenectady-Troy MSA	128	163	98

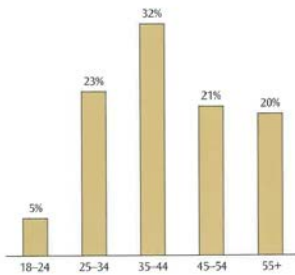
Top New York Communities
(among 1,360 communities nationwide with 50 or more GL couples)

	GL rank	Gay male rank	Lesbian rank
Ithaca	50	202	19
Ossining	96	85	120
Albany	123	174	101
Freeport	130	164	126
Rochester	136	129	177

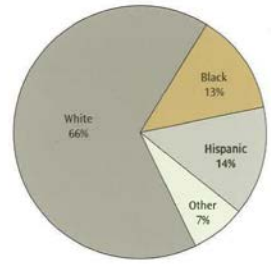
Gay/Lesbian Index Rank: 8

Gay Male Index Rank: 4 Lesbian Index Rank: 13 Gay/Lesbian-Supportive Laws Rank: 6

Ages of Same-Sex Unmarried Partners



Race/Ethnicity of Householder in Same-Sex Unmarried Partner Households



Presence of Children under Age 18 in Same-Sex Unmarried Partner Households



* Metropolitan area spans more than one state.

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Figure 2.1. LQ maps of New York state (Gates and Ost 2004, 128-129)

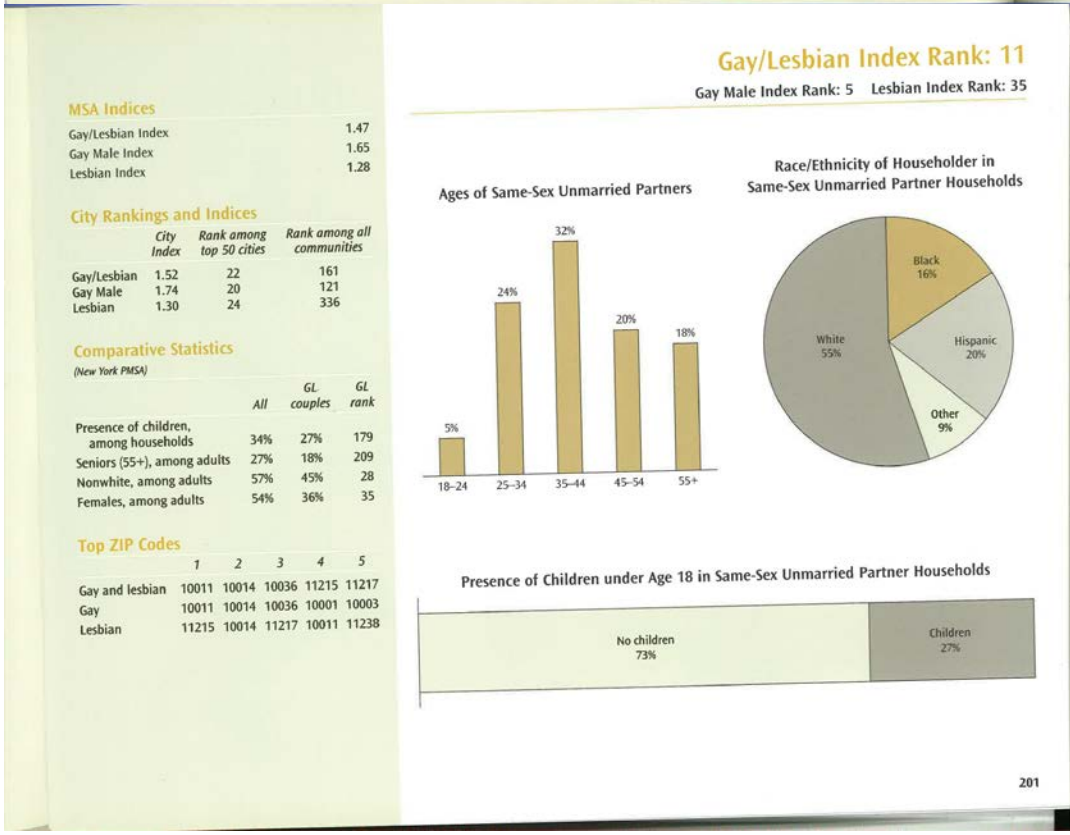
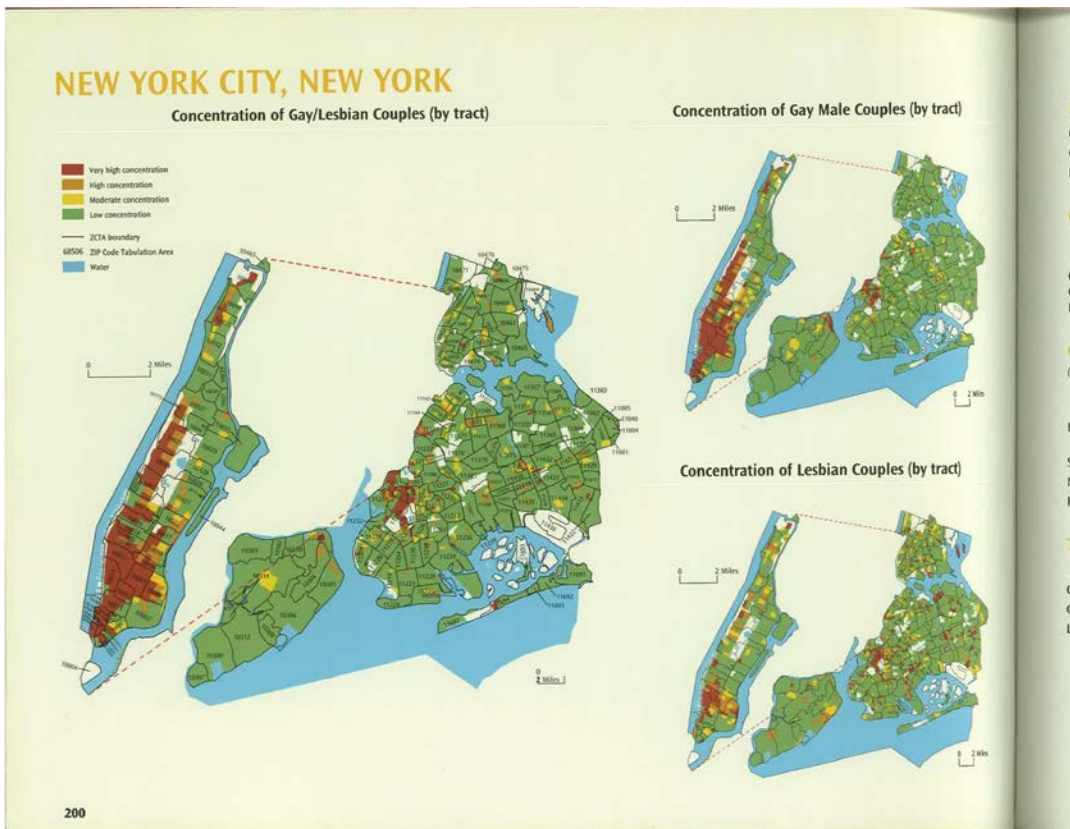


Figure 2.2. LQ maps of New York City (Gates and Ost 2004, 200-201)

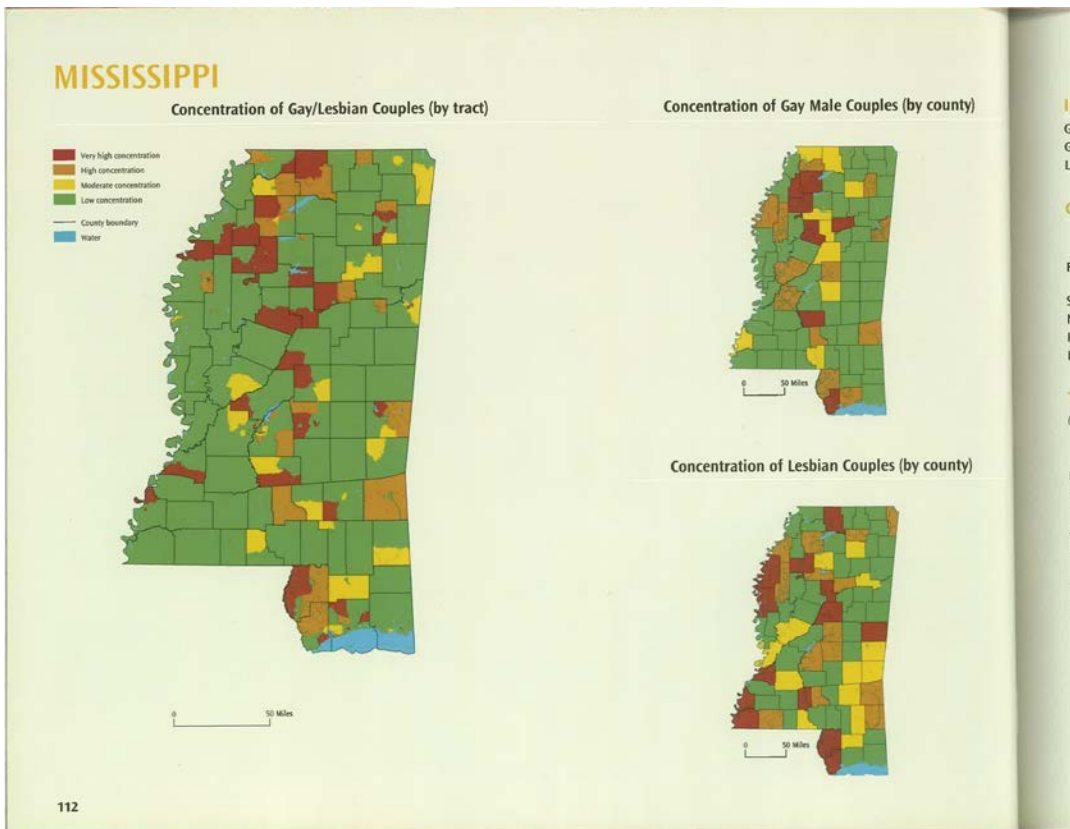
several reasons. First, Gates and Ost actually made a crucial error in their instructions. LQ is a ratio of proportions, so a high LQ for Tompkins County is calculated by comparing its count against the distribution across the entire New York state. In other words, it represents the probability of regressing to the mean. But household counts must always be non-negative integers. So hypothetically, if Tompkins County had a lesbian LQ of 2.25, it is correct to say that it is 2.25 times more likely to locate a lesbian couple in Tompkins County compared to the average number of lesbian couples per county in New York state, but it is incorrect to say that it is 2.25 times *as likely as the typical lesbian households* in New York state to live in Tompkins County. The average number of same-sex couples is a *fictitious* entity; it does not correspond to any typical same-sex couple as Gates and Ost's (2004) instructions implied. This point should be plain when one considers the possibility that this average is a decimal number. Gates and Ost's effort to make statistics more accessible to lay readers, ironically, causes potentially incorrect interpretations by introducing a typical same-sex couple that does not exist. This mistake is further compounded by the lack of raw statistics in their choropleth map legends. All the map legends in the Atlas include four categories: "Very high concentration," "High concentration," "Moderate concentration," and "Low concentration." I can only assume that the authors decided to omit the range of LQs associated with each category so the maps would appear cleaner and less cluttered. But this omission has severe consequences. Since the color band for the legends remains consistent throughout all the maps in the Atlas, the lack of raw LQs in the legends invites the readers to equate levels of concentration from one map to the next based on the same category *and color*, when in fact such comparison is incorrect given that the denominator in each LQ is based on the specific scope of each map. In the absence of raw LQs, the readers are left to either speculate based

on a triangulation of maps, the Index Rank, and demographic statistics; or mistake the categories as equivalent across all the maps.

It is also surprising that the authors of the Atlas did not attempt to at least address the modifiable areal unit problem (MAUP). MAUP refers to the statistical bias introduced when (point-based) data is aggregated into polygons. Stan Openshaw (1984, 3) argued that "the areal units (zonal objects) used in many geographical studies are arbitrary, modifiable, and subject to the whims and fancies of whoever is doing, or did, the aggregating." In the case of the Atlas, the areal unit of aggregation became the basis on which LQs were calculated. Gates and Ost took existing jurisdictional boundaries of states and cities as their areal units, which, as Knopp and Brown (2006) pointed out, reflected how state knowledges were naturalized. But I am more concerned with how MAUP, coupled with Gates and Ost's cartographic decisions, helps magnify the effect of metronormativity. For instance, let us compare the state maps of Mississippi (Figure 2.3) and Nebraska (Figure 2.4). Both states had relatively low Index Ranks, Mississippi at 32nd and Nebraska 46th. In the absence of raw LQs in the legends, we can only see from the maps that Mississippi appears to have many more counties in the top two categories – counties with "Very high" and "High" concentrations of same-sex households – compared to Nebraska, where the majority of the counties were in "Low concentration." But Mississippi and Nebraska, when aggregated at the state level and compared against the national average, both rank in the "Low concentration" category. Given that the national level is the largest scale of the entire dataset in the Atlas, we can also reasonably conclude that the raw numbers of same-sex households in both states were relatively close. So why does the Mississippi state map appear so much more colorful, so to speak, than Nebraska's? Here MAUP rears its ugly head. MAUP dictates that the

calculation of LQs must be based on the areal unit one scale larger than the choropleth units, and since LQs are ratios of proportions, they can be greatly skewed by existing patterns of general population distribution. What resulted was a cartographic illusion: areal units with multiple mid-level pockets of general population concentration became inflated, while those with few high-level pockets of general population concentration became deflated. Hence, Nebraska appears to have incredibly low number of same-sex couples compared to Mississippi because only Lincoln and Omaha are highlighted, whereas Mississippi's population is more evenly spread, so its LQ ranges between categories are more collapsed. The maps, when read together, appear to suggest that Mississippi has many more same-sex households, and reinforce the image of non-urban areas as "simply 'out there,' strange and distant horizons populated by hostile populations" (Halberstam 2005, 22).

Further, Brown and Knopp (2006) suggested that the very calculations that produced the Atlas should be questioned. Rather than accepting the conventional calculation of LQs as given, they questioned whether it was actually meaningful and, more importantly, meaningful *for whom*. In the Atlas, LQs were always calculated with denominator consistent with each map's scope, i.e. the one scale above the choropleth units. Gates and Ost (2004, 54) argued that this calculation ensured that "the reader can quickly assess where gay and lesbian couples constitute the highest proportion of households *within the region shown on the map*" (emphasis added). For Brown and Knopp (2006, 229), however, this decision was "assumption-laden" and "not self-evident at all, in part because such a correspondence is neither necessarily *culturally* meaningful nor politically innocent" (emphasis in original). It was, instead, meaningful perhaps "from the perspective of a trained map reader than a member of the population whose concentrations are being mapped" (ibid.). "For people who



Indices

Gay/Lesbian Index	0.81
Gay Male Index	0.75
Lesbian Index	0.86

Comparative Statistics

	All	GL couples	GL rank
Presence of children, among households	49%	41%	1
Seniors (55+), among adults	28%	26%	5
Nonwhite, among adults	39%	41%	4
Females, among adults	53%	53%	16
Rural, among households	51%	52%	4

Top Mississippi Metro Areas

(among 331 metro areas nationwide)

	GL rank	Gay male rank	Lesbian rank
Memphis MSA*	125	90	144
Biloxi-Gulfport-Pascagoula MSA	157	116	198
Jackson MSA	172	152	187
Hattiesburg MSA	299	272	309

Top Mississippi Communities

(among 1,360 communities nationwide with 50 or more GL couples)

	GL rank	Gay male rank	Lesbian rank
Natchez	414	476	357
Pearl	463	863	210
Greenville	732	975	425
Jackson	838	583	1,048
Gulfport	858	640	1,022

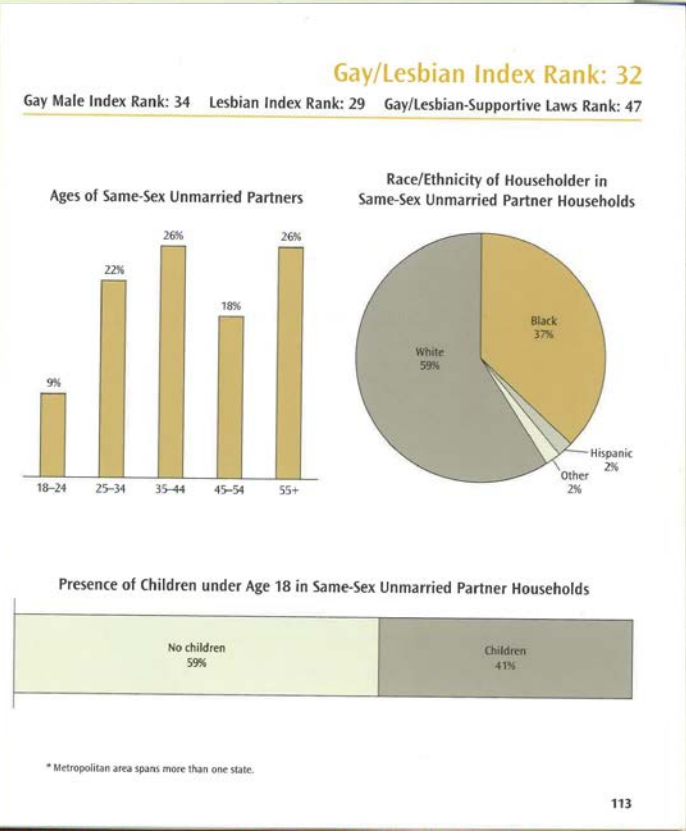
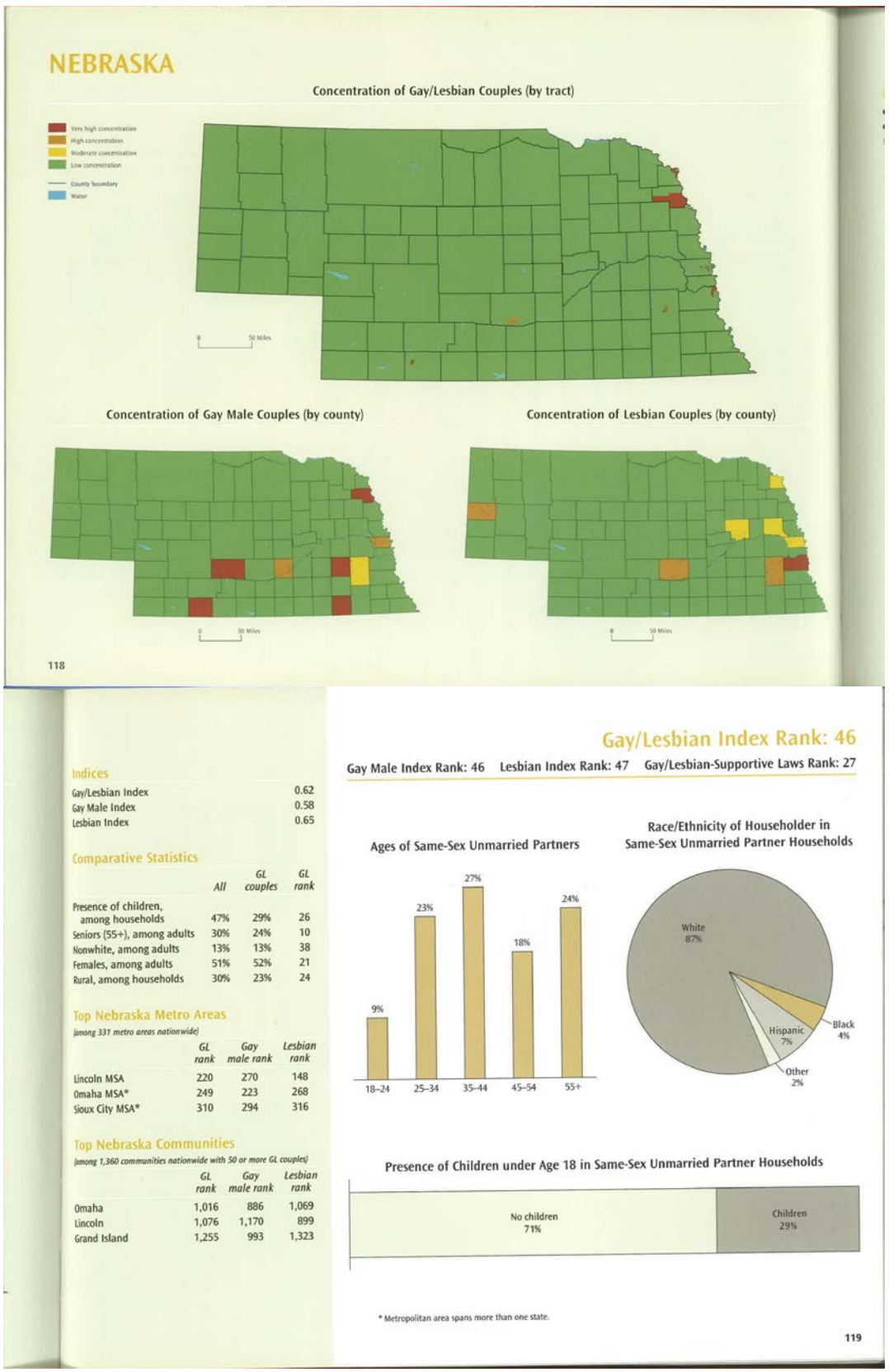


Figure 2.3. LQ maps of Mississippi (Gates and Ost 2004, 112-113)



Indices

Gay/Lesbian Index	0.62
Gay Male Index	0.58
Lesbian Index	0.65

Comparative Statistics

	All	GL couples	GL rank
Presence of children, among households	47%	29%	26
Seniors (55+), among adults	30%	24%	10
Nonwhite, among adults	13%	13%	38
Females, among adults	51%	52%	21
Rural, among households	30%	23%	24

Top Nebraska Metro Areas

(among 331 metro areas nationwide)

	GL rank	Gay male rank	Lesbian rank
Lincoln MSA	220	270	148
Omaha MSA*	249	223	268
Sioux City MSA*	310	294	316

Top Nebraska Communities

(among 1,360 communities nationwide with 50 or more GL couples)

	GL rank	Gay male rank	Lesbian rank
Omaha	1,016	886	1,069
Lincoln	1,076	1,170	899
Grand Island	1,255	993	1,323

Figure 2.4. LQ maps of Nebraska (Gates and Ost 2004, 118-119)

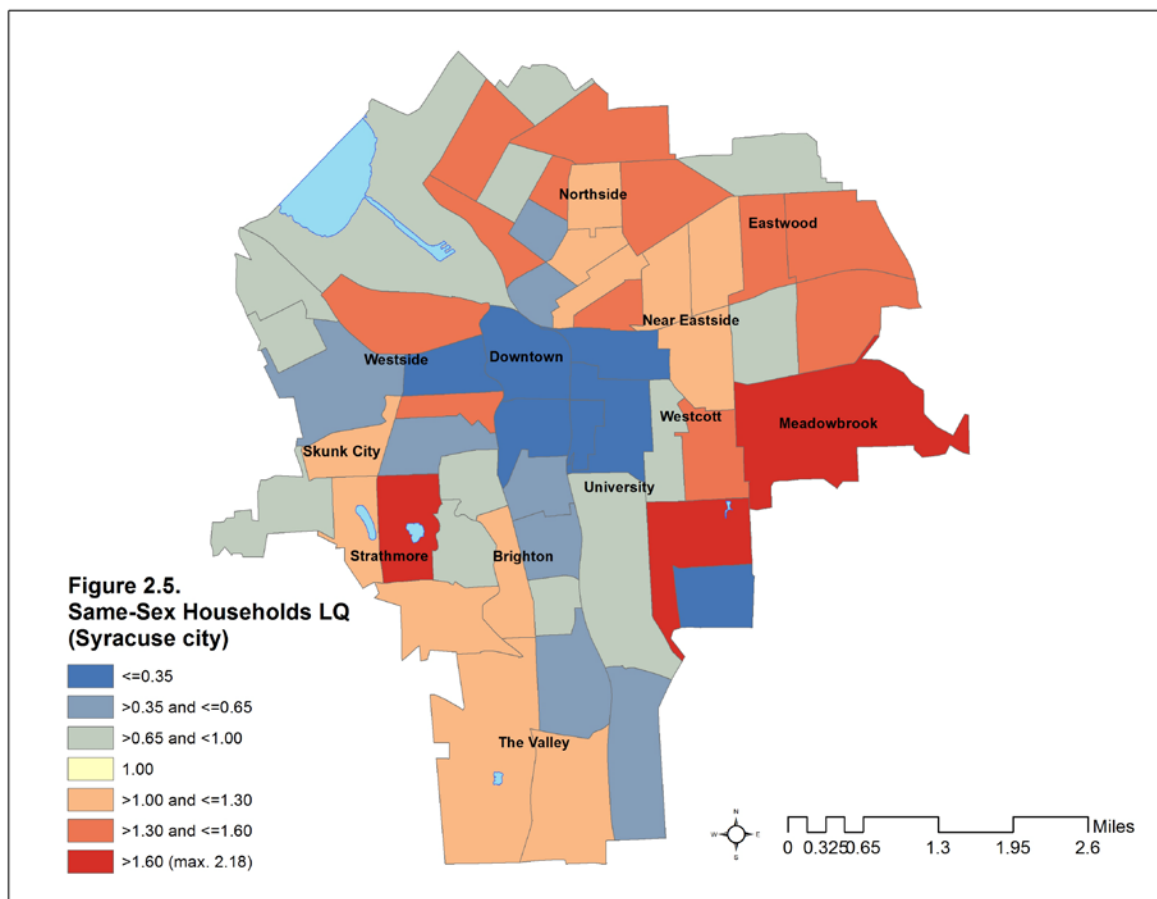
live in Seattle," Brown and Knopp speculated, "it might very well make more sense to situate LQs in terms of the County in which Seattle is located... rather than just the City... because the lived experience of many Seattle residents (potentially quite different from the more circumscribed experience of the map reader) does not stop at the city limits!" (ibid.). This critique is further bolstered by the aforementioned cartographic *faux pas* in the legends. It may be meaningful to adhere to the scope of each map, but none of them exists in its own vacuum; rather, they together constitute an atlas that will inevitably be read relationally. Indeed, the legend *faux pas* means that the only way to understand the data displayed the Atlas is by reading the maps – within each scale and across multiple scales – relationally to one another. Hence, proportion calculated "within the region shown on the map" is no longer self-evident.

To test the power of metronormativity internal to these maps, and to exercise my own "experiential authority" on the gay and lesbian population in Syracuse (Clifford 1988), I made a series of LQ maps of Syracuse with data from the 2010 Census. Similar to what Brown and Knopp (2006) had done for Seattle, I tinkered with the denominators in my LQ calculations as well. But perhaps I too was guilty of privileging my own meaning versus those who were being mapped. My tinkering was mostly done not to necessarily meaningfully represent the lives of same-sex couples in Syracuse, although that would be a welcomed unintended consequence. Rather, I tinkered in order to see how same-sex couples in different parts of Syracuse became un/closeted at different scale of reference. If the denominator in my LQ calculations, as Gates and Ost (2004) suggested, represents the average to which each unit was measured against, then it follows that the cartographic representation of same-sex couples in Syracuse may look very different when they are

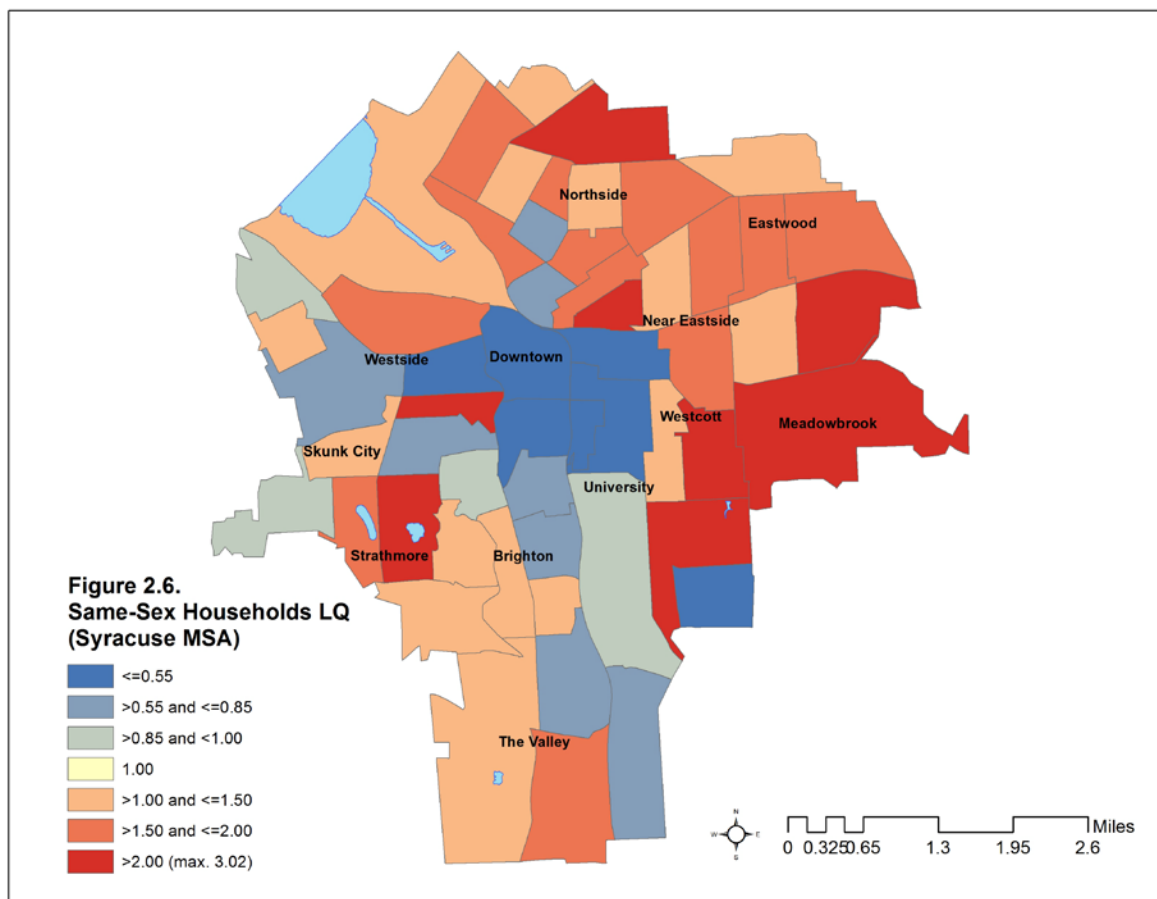
measured in reference to Onondaga County (to which Syracuse is undoubtedly its largest population concentration) versus the New York state (with New York City heavily skewing the population distribution).

Figures 2.5-7 are Syracuse census tract maps, with same-sex households LQs calculated at the City, Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA; a Census Bureau designated areal unit that approximates the extent of urban agglomeration), and State scales, respectively. Figure 2.8 is New York state census tract maps, which presents the same information as Figure 2.7 except with a larger cartographic scope. For all the maps, I used LQ value of 1.00 as the mid-point in separating choropleth categories; it is the "average" concentration. The ranges for other categories approximate natural breaks in the LQ distribution while optimizing the likelihood of equal-distant categories. This created categories with their unique LQ ranges even though their choropleth colors are the same from one map to the next. Although as I mentioned earlier, this inconsistency made comparisons across maps difficult, I retained it because I wanted to simulate the Atlas and a lay reader's reaction to it. In this case, I am not as concerned about whether one can make valid comparisons across the maps; rather, I want to see what kinds of conclusions one is likely to draw from a quick visual examination of the maps without paying close attention to statistical intricacies. Nonetheless, I compensated for this decision by showing raw LQ values in the legends, unlike in the Atlas.

By glancing at Figures 2.5-7, it is easy to see that high concentrations of same-sex households tend to locate on the edges of the city boundaries, while downtown Syracuse consistently has the lowest concentrations. However, we know from the combination of MAUP and the LQ equation that it is inconclusive as to whether this distribution is simply a

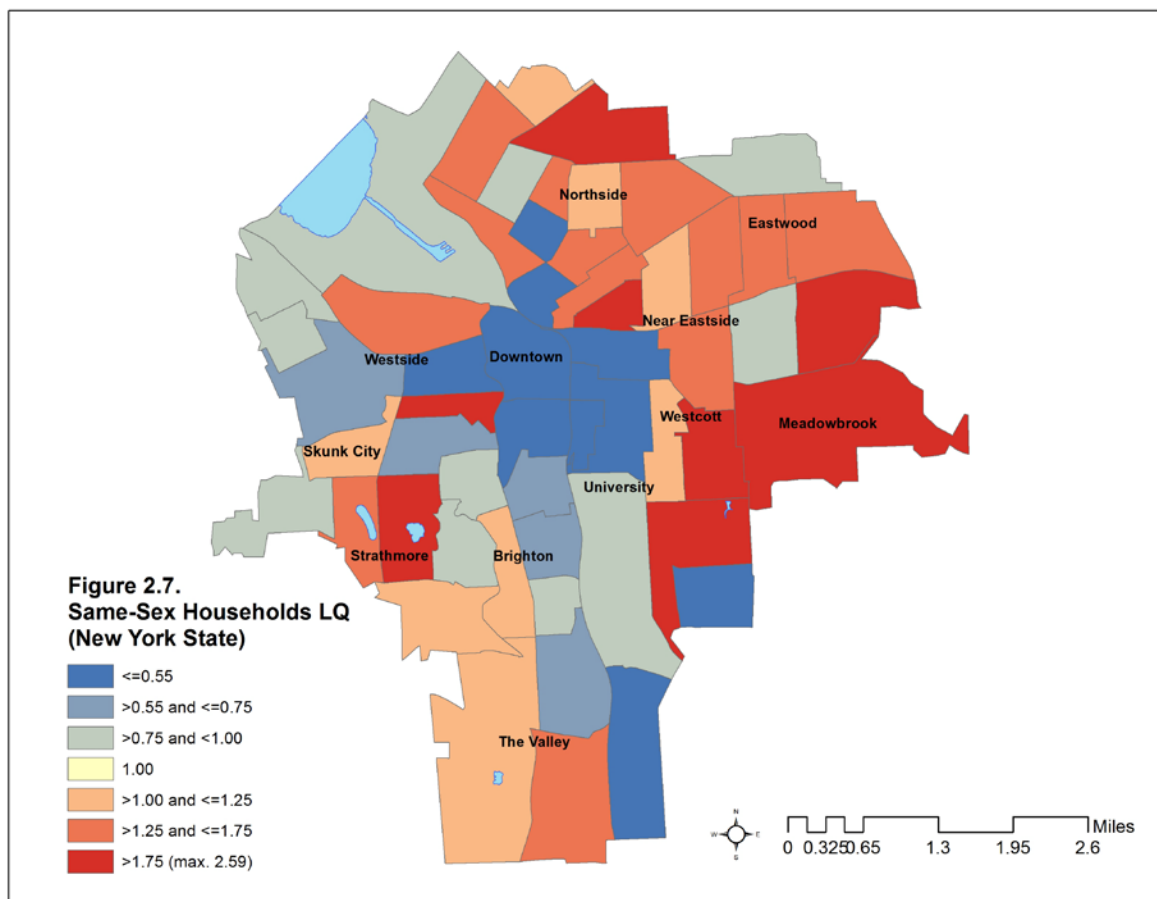


mirror of the general population distribution; the consistent low concentrations in and around Syracuse University seems to support this claim. The eastern part of Syracuse in particular consistently displays high LQs. It is easy to speculate that same-sex couples are more likely to live there due to a combination of residential housing location and the life course trajectory away from apartments in city centers. Syracuse does not have a concentrated gay ghetto – highly visible gay neighborhoods – so it is not surprising that there is no huge variation in LQs or isolated spots of concentration near city center. However, literature has suggested that gay men tend to be much more spatially concentrated and urban-based compared to lesbians (see Chapter 1). I did not separate gay couples and lesbian couples in my maps, but such pre-existing knowledge is but one potential influence on how the meaning of spatial scope might be decided. It also suggests that gay men might just be easier to count



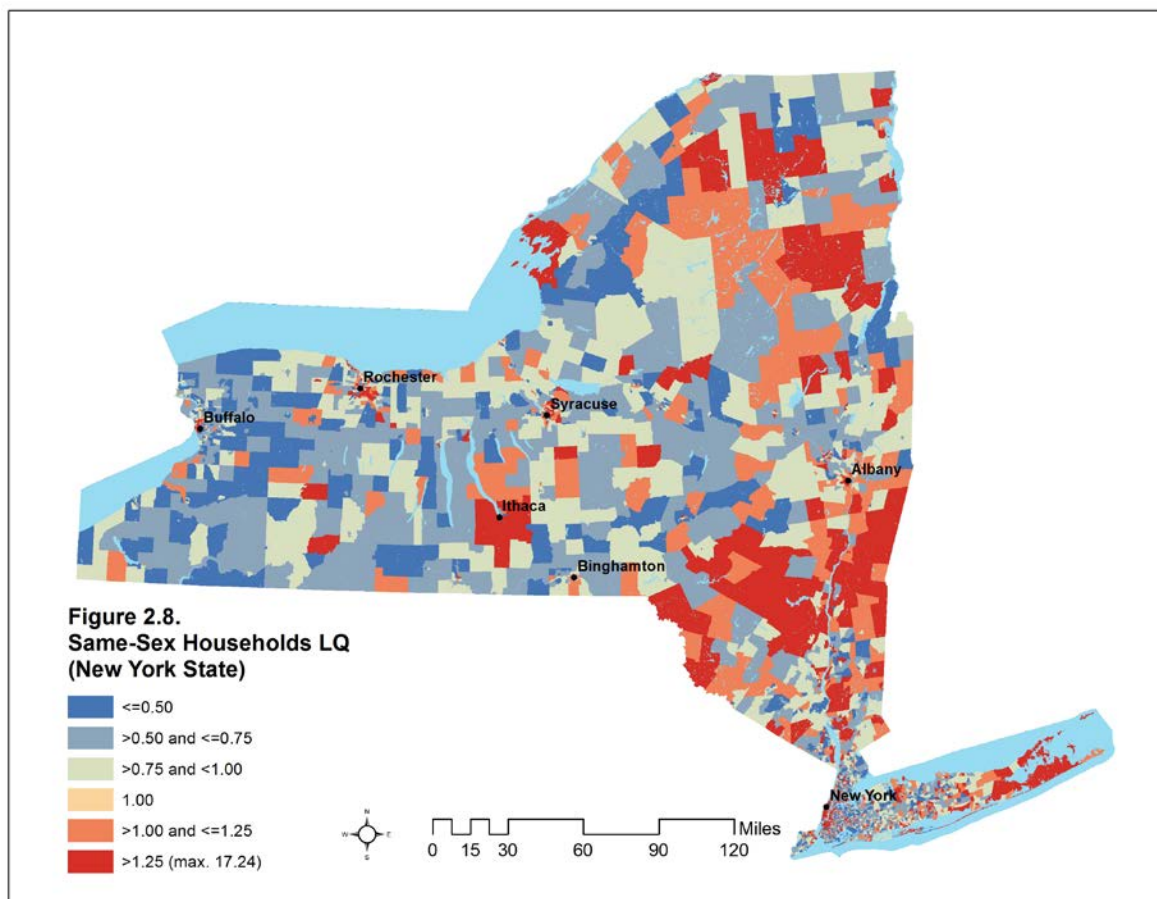
and map compared to lesbians, since the proliferation of city maps and the tendency to limit the scope mean that lesbians are easier to closet cartographically than gay men. This possibility, as Brown and Knopp (2006, 231-232) pointed out, has huge political implications.

One place where we can see the effect of scalar tinkering is at the highest range of LQs. Compare Figures 2.6-7, one based on the MSA and the other New York state. The highest LQs in each map are 3.02 and 2.59, respectively. We can infer from these values that the concentrations of same-sex households within Syracuse are more pronounced when compared with MSA rather than the state. This point is reinforced by looking at Figure 2.8, where the highest LQ is 17.24! Figures 2.7-8 are both LQ maps with reference to the entire New York state, but under the current legends, the highest category in the Syracuse map



would be barely above average in the New York state map. Figure 2.8 shows that not only do pockets of high concentration exist in urban areas with large population, but specific places with moderate population size like Ithaca and the Hudson Valley as well. It is also notable that among the three Syracuse city maps, Figures 2.5 and 2.7 bear more of a resemblance. Figure 2.6, the map based on MSA, tends to have higher LQs across the board in Syracuse city limits. This again shows that LQs tend to be inflated when population is incredibly concentrated in few points within the areal unit of reference.

These maps may not be particularly meaningful or truthful as reflections of queer lives in New York state, but cartographic manipulations at least show that the construction of the closet is a fluid process. Making "good data" and "good maps" requires a series of calculated decisions that are never politically neutral. In the case of same-sex households,



metronormativity becomes especially apparent when data is transformed into maps. Best exemplified by the Atlas, metronormativity is given a shape on paper and continue to influence how we conceptualize the queer community. Some of the issues I identified in this process are inherent to the kind of data and techniques available, but many are also results of intentional manipulation. For gay and lesbian activist groups, however, such data manipulations are often key strategies in securing financial support or public recognition, even when they potentially misrepresent the groups' constituents. In the next section, then, I will introduce my own experience working with demographic data for a non-profit organization for its grant renewal application. Harley (1989, 13) shifted his "focus of inquiry... from the place of cartography in a juridicial system of power to the political effects

of what cartographers do when they make maps." I am shifting in the reverse direction instead.

Making It Count

I first became involved with the Queer Families Development Project (QFDP)¹³ in March 2012, when I attended one of its adoption information sessions in Albany. Now in its second decade, QFDP was formally founded in the early 2000s when an informal group of gay and lesbian parents in central New York applied for and received a grant from the New York State Department of Health (NYDOH) to improve the delivery of local LGBT health services. QFDP's current director, Colleen, was part of the initial group, and she became its first full-time employee. At its founding, QFDP formalized the network of queer families in central New York under the banner of Rainbow Families, and used the grant to launch the Queer Families Health Initiative. Since then, it has expanded into education and training for both prospective queer parents and social service providers. I met Colleen at the information session and explained my research interests, and she generously allowed me access to QFDP's e-mail listservs. After my second information session in Ithaca, she recruited me into

¹³ This is a pseudonym. I use pseudonyms for local non-profit organizations for many of the same reasons why I use pseudonyms when quoting research participants. Although most research participants waived confidentiality at the time of the interview, and I encouraged them to contact me if they wanted to amend or retract (parts of) their interviews, I had not had a chance to circulate this thesis among all of them. Specifically regarding local non-profit organizations, although my observations and participations of them occurred in (mostly) public settings, their small sizes potentially made relevant individuals within them identifiable. Thus, although I will name large institutions like the New York State Department of Health or the Onondaga County Department of Social Services, I will instead use pseudonyms for local non-profit organizations. In all cases, I will use pseudonyms whenever I quote a particular individual (unless their statements were published and publicly available). This is a common practice in development research and collaborations with non-profit organizations, where large institutions like the World Bank (and its reports) will be named directly, but pseudonyms are used for smaller and/or local institutions where individuals could be easily identifiable. For a more detailed discussion of the politics of using pseudonyms, see Sangtin and Nagar 2006, Introduction.

QFDP's community advisory board, and I began attending board meetings over conference calls.

2012 was a tumultuous year for QFDP. Since its founding, QFDP had been housed under the Schiene Institute, another non-profit organization that provides infertility and genetic counseling. Schiene provided the institutional overhead and grant management support, but QFDP retained its autonomy. Over the years, however, it became apparent that QFDP's affiliation with Schiene often caused confusion among its targeted service population. At the same time, QFDP's funding from the NYDOH was about to run out. The timing of the grant renewal application allowed QFDP to begin exploring the possibility of severing its affiliation with Schiene and either become entirely independent or secure another institutional affiliation. QFDP also co-launched an initiative with Mothers United, another non-profit organization in central New York. Specifically targeted toward the child welfare system, the initiative's goal was to formalize and strengthen the relationships between queer families and social service providers. Syracuse became the base for this initiative due to its location – smack in the middle of New York. In fact, the series of adoption information sessions I attended was this new initiative's first events. For QFDP, then, this grant renewal application must satisfy a number of criteria. It must account for QFDP's territorial expansion of service delivery and accurately represent its diversified targeted population. The grant, if renewed, had to either sustain QFDP on its own, or prove to be acceptable for a new affiliation. It was under these changing circumstances that the community advisory board began meeting in October 2012.

By that time, I had concluded my research fieldwork, and Colleen asked if I could use census data to prepare some report for QFDP's grant renewal application. The application

would be submitted under NYDOH's funding request for application (RFA) "Health and Human Services for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Individuals, Families and Communities."¹⁴ Census data, Colleen wrote, "will help us make the case that there's an audience for our proposed programs, and hopefully say something about their geographic location" (pers. comm.). Not only demonstrating the audience but its geographic location was an important agenda because QFDP targeted a particular component of the RFA, to provide "statewide coordination of LGBT-related activities" that must enhance the current available "information and technical assistance to New York state agencies" and culminate in an "annual conference."¹⁵ In order to secure funding for the next five years for QFDP's geographic expansion, then, it had to demonstrate to the NYDOH that a need existed in central New York, and that QFDP could adequately meet that need.

Since board members were not personally involved in preparing the application, I did not have access to it. Hence, I provided preliminary statistics and maps on same-sex households by manipulating data on the Census Bureau's American FactFinder tool online.¹⁶ I assumed that the data would be self-explanatory, but a series of e-mail exchanges followed where John, QFDP's volunteer grant writer, and I attempted to determine what presentation of data would be the most correct but also the most beneficial to the application. Our first debate centered on just how many households we were counting as QFDP's potential clients. Excluding the New York City-counties, there were 22,906 same-sex couples in New York State, and 8,317 of them – approximately 36.3% – had children (which included both households with "own children" and those with anyone under the age of 18). QFDP, then, "serves (at least has a mailing list of) 7.2% of all same-sex coupled families with children in

¹⁴ <http://www.health.ny.gov/funding/rfa/inactive/1207260121/index.htm>

¹⁵ <http://www.health.ny.gov/funding/rfa/inactive/1207260121/1207260121.pdf>

¹⁶ <http://factfinder2.census.gov/>

NY State outside of NYC (as recorded by the [2010] census)" (pers. comm.). Based on the statistics, John wanted to insert this conclusion into the application – "Disclaimer: the census is wrong. It under-samples same-sex couples in general, and does not provide any way to track single LGBT parents with children at all" (ibid.).

John's conclusion from the data got the demographer in me all riled up. I pointed out that it is impossible for the Census to "under-sample" because "by definition it is an 100% sample of the population" (pers. comm.). I knew he meant "under-count," but even so the conclusion was still problematic because by all accounts the 2010 Census actually over-counted same-sex couples (O'Connell and Feliz 2011). Plus, the counts of same-sex couples that we just generated could include all sorts of household structure that did not correspond to QFDP's targeted population, since the data was broken into categories based on the presence of all children and not just *own* children. Wouldn't it make more sense to be more specific about what kinds of families QFDP was serving and give a correspondingly specific demographic profile? John disagreed. He implied that I was "boxed in," perhaps governmentally as Brown and Knopp (2006) suggested, by my demography training. Showing "total [same-sex] households with children data for NY State broken down by county" ensured that we included not only as many families as possible to demonstrate the need for QFDP's services, but also did not miss out on any families with arrangements and structures that the census form might have excluded, John argued (pers. comm.).

Concerned with the data we produced, I wrote a lengthy response that tried to simultaneously highlight the census' technical limitations and our own political agenda (pers. comm.):

Demographers also have two (annoying, in my opinion) tendencies: first, they are usually conservative in the sense that they would rather undercount than overcount any

population; this was a big sticking point especially for queer demography because the Census Bureau was quite aggressive in its error-correction for same-sex couples. Second, demographers like to have precise definitions and measurements for everything; this often results in quite exclusionary practices in counting queer families. For instance, the Census Bureau defines a "family" as something created through birth, marriage, or adoption. So a same-sex couple with no other biological or adoptive relatives in the household would be counted as a "nonfamily household" (since "marriage" is not recognized at the federal level), in the same way that a college frat house is a "nonfamily household."

Those caveats out of the way, here are the differences among "related children under 18," "own children under 18," and "no own children under 18." These are definitions based on the children's relationships to the "householder," which is the usually the homeowner or whoever filled out the census forms (usually one partner among the couples). So "related children" cover any children that are related by, again, birth, marriage, or adoption. For same-sex households, we can always throw out the "marriage" criteria because of the state/federal issue. Note that related children can include grandchildren.

"Own children" and "no own children" are obviously subgroups within the "related children" category. "Own children" refer to the householder's own children by birth or adoption (this does not include grandchildren), whereas "no own children" refer to children with any other type of relationships (grandchildren, biological nieces and nephews, etc.). These definitions may create some difficulties for queer families. For example, say we have a lesbian couple and a child in the household. The child is biologically related to one of the moms, but the non-biological mom happens to be the one designated as the householder on the census form, and her second-parent adoption has not gone through yet. In this case, even though common sense tells us that the child is obviously an "own child," the Census Bureau would actually classify her as "no own child" because the non-biological, not-yet second-parent-adopted mom is the householder. There are plenty of other scenarios. In many ways, the Census in its current form is quite a restrictive and heteronormative exercise.

The reason I highlighted "own children" is because I have also been affected by demographers' tendency - it is the most "accurate" and "specific" category, and for a governmental grant application, it is the category that these agencies and a lot of formal studies/documents use. Glancing over the table quickly, this could potentially undercount same-sex families with children by about 10%. It certainly makes some sense to include both categories since we want to argue that there is a larger population for us to serve.

So I guess rhetorically there are two strategies.

1. Highlight "own children" and note that there may be undercount issues up to around 10% and list some of the same-sex families-specific issues that I raised above. This is the strategy most governmental agencies, NGOs, and peer-reviewed articles tend to use.
2. Go for both categories and argue that we want to serve queer families in the broadest sense, and point out some of the Census Bureau's technical and heteronormative ways that actually prevent us from doing the best job to serve our intended populations.

No. 2 is certainly my own political position, but it also depends on Colleen's past experiences with DoH. If this were a publicly-available report, I would strongly argue for No. 2, but since the imperative here is to secure the grant, there's more room for maneuvering.

For John, picking the criteria that provided the highest estimates of same-sex households would satisfy both practical and political goals. Practically, it demonstrates a huge need for QFDP's services and increases the likelihood of grant renewal. Politically, by prioritizing the desire to include as many types of queer families as possible over the desire to reduce over-count, QFDP can signal that they welcome queer families in all shapes and forms. I was torn, however, between the same political commitment and my desire to produce "good data."

It turned out that we were not the only people struggling with whom to count for the grant application. During the community advisory board conference call in October 2012, it was announced that QFDP had secured a new affiliation. Starting from October 2013, QFDP would be affiliated with a local college's gender and sexuality studies program. Going independent and securing its own offices and grant administrators were too costly, and affiliating with an educational institution would better reflect QFDP's mission than Schiene. This change, despite being presented as incredibly positive, nonetheless prompted deep reflections, especially from long-time board members. As part of the grant application, QFDP must evaluate the need for their services. Those needs had changed. Might we need to revisit QFDP's mission as well?

Here is QFDP's mission:

The Queer Families Development Project is dedicated to helping lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ) people in upstate NY achieve their goals of building and sustaining healthy families. We do this by providing support, advocacy, information, and access to community and sensitive health care and services.

The Project envisions itself as a leader in bringing about a State of New York in which LGBTQ families are valued and feel safe enough to be visible in our communities. We

are physically and emotionally healthy and legally secure. We live without fear, stigma or isolation.

"Sustaining healthy families" requires an environment that is "safe enough to be visible in our communities... without... isolation." Upon reflecting on the mission, Peg, a long-time board member, commented: "It's become much more acceptable to become LGB. We need to drill down and find where the pockets of intolerance are. We need to find out what places we are needed more than other places."

But where were these pockets of intolerance? Rural areas, it turned out. Later, I was asked if the census data could be sorted based on urban/rural designations or, better yet, shown on a map. I expressed my concerns about this operation. For one, the threshold to be counted as an urban area by the Census Bureau was incredibly low; 50,000 residents were the low threshold to be considered a city. Highlighting urban regions on a map would cover large parts of New York. Instead, I made a map similar to Figure 2.8. With or without this map, rural areas had already been targeted as "pockets of intolerance" where "we are needed" anyway, but the map gave the board material justifications for those target strategies. High visibility on the map was equated with high visibility in real life and, by extension, places where we could feel "safe enough." This is certainly an attitude informed by metronormativity. Moreover, visibility (on the map or otherwise) seemed to imply that we no longer lived in isolation. Here we see the politics of proximity most explicitly, where geographic proximity is made to imply social proximity and, by extension, the completion of political activism. Indeed, we could now move elsewhere to those "pockets of intolerance" since, as John pointed out during the conference call, "We can now focus on the more mundane aspects of parenting."

This politics of proximity is dangerous in two interlocking ways. First, it metronormatively equates places with low proximity to large queer population as pockets of intolerance, and places with high proximity as places safe enough. We see this process' real effects in terms of resource allocation, in this case QFDP's service deliveries. Second, it considers the "mundane aspects of parenting" apolitical, when in fact the basis of politics is always mundane daily actions. It is our daily social interactions that determine the quality of our relationships and shape social attitudes, *not* statistics on a map. Seeing mundane actions as apolitical is harmful everywhere, urban and rural alike. In urban areas, where supposedly political interventions have been completed, board members who were themselves queer parents still identified a number of pressing issues – persistent legal and financial challenges, growing older and the increasing need for affordable healthcare, the need to engage older children and accommodate their social needs, bullying in schools, etc. They are all mundane issues that we must continue our political actions so they can improve. Conversely, it is impossible to combat intolerant *ideas* in rural areas. Instead, we are always combating intolerant *actions* – mundane and daily, but incredibly harmful regardless. When asked what kinds of services were required in northern rural New York, Gary, a small-town physician, replied: "Making social connections for our kids, either locally or online. Making sure that kids of all ages are accommodated for. Making sure that people know what services are available from us or other organizations." They are all mundane tasks, and tasks that have little to do with the stereotypical "pockets of intolerance." For Gary, then, the maps that accompanied the grant renewal application may serve a practical end, but in the process they sacrificed the opportunity to represent real needs of rural queer families. Instead, the maps

substituted “pockets of intolerance” for these real needs in order to tap into the representational power of maps.

The application had a successful conclusion. In June 2013, Colleen received official confirmation from the NYDOH that QFDP was selected to receive funding for the next five years, until 2018. The grant ensured that QFDP's many programs, including information sessions vital for recruiting queer foster and adoptive parents, would continue at least for the time being. But it would be incorrect to characterize the application process as an unmitigated success. As the exchange between John and me and the discussion at the community advisory board suggest, we all struggled with how to be successful based on multiple criteria. Statistics and maps played a crucial role in securing the grant, but they are certainly not politically neutral products. In this case, complicated manipulations of statistics and cartography helped create the impression of varying geographic proximity between places with high concentrations of same-sex couples and those pockets of intolerance. In this process, we were all implicated in some forms of metronormativity and politics of proximity, and – perhaps as some vindication of Gates and Ost – they prove to be very persuasive in gaining recognition even with their suspect politics.

I think, however, the take-away point should not be our theoretical shortcomings. To return to one of my original questions, these struggles demonstrate that there is a limit to the project of representation. Instead, for queer parents in upstate New York, building and sustaining healthy families are simultaneously incredibly mundane and incredibly political work. In our daily actions, theoretical purity is rather useless. Queer parents here "allow themselves to step forward and be counted and administered in specific ways" in order to achieve certain practical goals (Pratt 2004, 105). The work of QFDP here could be best

characterized as a productive failure. Cartographic representations that reflected little reality of queer lives in central New York were used to in the grant application. It could be argued – quite convincingly, I suspect – that maps were not the most appropriate way to demonstrate the need for QFDP’s services to begin with. But the board acknowledged the power of cartography and, I suspect, the maps were quite effective in helping to secure the grant. The grant then will allow QFDP to stay open and continue to provide important services to queer families. The notion of productive failure helps us think through these political decisions and avoid simplistic portrayals of the end justifying the means. If, while working every day to make our own families, we could bring a critical sensibility and appreciation to the steps we have taken and the things we have sacrificed – which apparently include making a few factually and politically suspect maps – to get to this point, then all the better. In the next two chapters, then, I transition from a critique of metronormativity to an exploration of the history and the current efforts of family building by queer parents in central New York.

Chapter 3: We Are Fit Parents

Queer parents are nothing new, and perhaps they are now even widely accepted by the mainstream U.S. culture. Consider the proliferation of popular representations of gay and lesbian couples with kids – Mitch and Cam, a gay couple who adopted a baby girl from Vietnam on *Modern Family*; David and Bryan, who pursued surrogacy on *The New Normal*; and perhaps representing diversity most insistently – *The Fosters* – with a lesbian couple and their multiple, multi-racial, biological, adopted, and foster kids. These representations in the media have planted gay and lesbian families firmly in the public consciousness. They also highlight the various routes through which queer parents intentionally create families, where adoption tends to feature prominently. However, as with any representations, these popular portrayals tend to gloss and romanticize certain aspects of queer parenthood. In particular, the prospect of transnational adoption for gays and lesbians has drastically diminished in recent years. With surrogacy still an incredibly expensive (and in many jurisdictions, illegal) option, domestic adoption appears to be one of the few practical options for lesbian and, especially, gay couples to become parents.

These real world developments, however, do not seem to deter the kind of glossy coverage transnational adoptions get in the media. The ethics of transnational adoption has been well scrutinized by academics. Conventional representations of international adoption usually involve a simplistic portrayal of white, western couples adopting children in need from the third world countries. These range from a whole host of celebrities – Madonna included – adopting African babies, to evangelical Christians growing their families by ‘doing God’s work,’ a contemporary recasting of the colonial missionary relations. Feminist scholars have long pushed for a more critical and self-reflexive look at transnational

adoption, asking whether this is not another instance where the global South becomes the “cabbage patch” of the global North (Dubinsky 2008). That stereotypical narratives of transnational adoption continue to persist in the face of so much critical attention is a testament to the enduring influences of the western savior myths.

It is curious, then, as gays and lesbians gradually move toward domestic adoptions to become parents, that the same sort of critical attention has not followed. In fact, it is alarming that a similar waxing of morality claims has also migrated, with many claiming that pursuing domestic adoption is somehow more just, more ethical, akin to “doing the right thing” in the face of a broken child welfare system (cf. Howell 2006). However, claims of morality are not given but rather produced, and they must be properly situated under specific historical conditions. What we now understand as the U.S. domestic adoption did not used to have the same form and function, and what is considered to be ethical and just adoption practices have changed as well. This chapter, then, is an effort to outline a history of adoption institution and practices in the U.S., and to orient some of the critical attention transnational adoption has received toward domestic adoption instead. Chiefly, I try to answer two questions. First, how have what is considered to be just and ethical adoption practices changed in the U.S.? Second, as transnational adoption becomes increasingly difficult for gays and lesbians, how does their incorporation into the domestic public child welfare system impact adoption practices? Does their incorporation present unique challenges?

These questions emerged out of my attendance at two foster care and adoption information sessions in the spring of 2012, specifically organized for LGBTQ people, in Albany and Ithaca. The sessions were put on by two non-profit organizations based in central New York – Mothers United and Queer Families Development Project (QFDP; the same

non-profit that I later became involved with [see Chapter 2]). As part of a grant from the New York State Department of Health to improve service delivery to queer families, QFDP co-organized five such information sessions throughout central New York between 2011 and 2012. These sessions include presentations from adoption service providers such as local Department of Social Services (DSS), assorted private adoption agencies who may or may not have held contracts from the DSS, attorneys who specialize in family law, informal support groups, and non-profits such as QFDP. Crucially, they also invite local queer parents who have already adopted to share their experiences whenever possible. At the two sessions I attended, there were 10 to 15 presenters and 20 to 35 attendees. This chapter uses my own participation, observation, and informal conversations with presenters and attendees at these two information sessions to begin to answer the questions I posed earlier.

Why adoption information sessions? These sessions are precisely the place where queer parenthood aspirations come into direct contact with social and political structures of family that determine – often quite explicitly – the terms of their inclusion. In other words, they are part of the “fragmented landscapes of hegemonic discourses” around kinship, sexuality, and children (Pratt 2004, 60). Even though queer families may be “families we choose,” choice is never without any constraints (Weston 1991 [1997], 201). I am interested in these information sessions, then, because they are the institutional manifestations of what David Eng (2010, 3) calls queer liberalism, “a contemporary confluence of the political and economic spheres that forms the basis for the liberal inclusion of particular gay and lesbian U.S. citizen-subjects petitioning for rights and recognition before the law.” Indeed, queer liberalism is the very condition of possibility under which a phrase such as “families we choose” could become legible, and gay parents adopting children with special needs could be

applauded for doing the right thing. Rather than reifying queer liberalism, however, I will situate it within the history of adoption reform in the U.S. as a particular moment where the child welfare system must accommodate a growing demand from queer parents looking to adopt.

My goal in this chapter, then, is to critically examine the history of adoption in the U.S. and its legacies in the child welfare system today. Specifically, I draw on participant observation at these informational meetings for prospective queer adoptive parents to argue that even as the child welfare system attempts to incorporate queer parents, it continues to deny (or at least fails to adequately address) difference, be it racial, sexual, or otherwise. I used historian Ellen Herman's (2008) term "kinship by design," where she argues that the denial of racial difference is a key governmental strategy to produce authentic adoptive families through adoption, to characterize the historical stages of child welfare development in the U.S. This history, then, has a huge impact because under the heavy-handed rhetoric of adoption as "doing the right thing," very little support – especially emotional support – is given to prospective parents and children who are in the system.

Kinship By Design

In March 2012, I traveled to Albany to take part in my first foster care and adoption information session for LGBTQ people at the local Pride Center. This was QFDP and Mothers United's second information session, with two more to follow that year. At the time, I was still planning on conducting my master's thesis research in the Pacific Northwest, but this session's flyer drew my attention. It highlighted the linkages among various child welfare agencies, public and private adoption agencies in cooperation as a part of the New York state child welfare system, and it boldly states that "LGBTQ people are taking their



Figure 3.1.
Display made by a non-profit organization in attendance.

places” within this system as foster and adoptive parents. My initial interest in this information session, then, was to take a quick peek of this system that everyone apparently was talking about.

Upon my entrance, the Center appeared to be quite festive. The session was scheduled in an early evening, so food was prepared downstairs from the meeting room. At least eight different agencies had booths set up, with colorful brochures and friendly

representatives waiting to chat with prospective gay and lesbian parents (see Figure 3.1). These agencies spanned the spectrum, including public agencies (Albany County Department for Children, Youth and Families; Schenectady County DSS), private agencies with and without religious affiliation (Adoption STAR; St. Catherine's Center for Children), private agencies with specializations (Forever Families Through Adoption, which connects birth parents with adoptive parents; Berkshire Farm Center, which works with children with behavioral issues), lawyers who specialize in adoption, and support and advocacy groups (Adoptive Families of the Capital Region, Inc.) all in one room. Without looking closely at the materials in each booth, one could easily mistake this scene for a small town carnival or a job fair. There were close to 30 attendees, and the staff from all agencies was eager to talk to them while passing out brochures along with various stationaries with agency logos. The attendees were generally more reserved, picking up promotional materials here and there. A typical conversation would start with the exchange of pleasantries, but agency representatives would quickly try to ascertain how serious the attendees were about adoption and how far along they were in the process. If the attendees were generally undecided, the agency representatives were quick to point out that they were already on the right track to parenthood.

However, many attendees were nervous by the prospect of dealing with public agencies while being open about their sexuality, even after same-sex marriage – a common sign for formal governmental inclusion and recognition – had been legalized in New York just a short while ago. Upstairs from the booths, the information session was designed to alleviate their worries. The director of Mothers United, Eddie, kicked off the session by congratulating the thirty or so attendees in the audience for “taking their rightful place within

the New York state child welfare system.” Speculating that very few attendees had intimate knowledge of the public child welfare system in New York, Eddie proceeded with what he called a "Child Welfare 101." The public child welfare system included a consortium of county DSSs and a number of private agencies that county DSSs outsourced parts of their operations to, which would explain the makeup of the booths downstairs. Although this uneven public-private arrangement occasionally created jurisdictional mismatches in service delivery, such complications should not deter anyone, Eddie suggested. A social worker there put it more bluntly. "We want you in the System," she said to the audience. And judging from the response, most attendees looked forward to their inclusion in this elaborate bureaucracy designed to place unwanted children in loving homes. But as remarks later in the session indicated, it was quite a difficult system to navigate and often failed to provide adequate service to all parties involved.

The public child welfare system, however, did not begin under its current form. Rather, as Ellen Herman argued, the field of child welfare as we understand it now did not come to be until the decades after 1945. The child welfare system and adoption practices were modernized in a process she characterized as "kinship by design," which "pledged to make families secure and knowable in the face of risk, often by normalizing people and relationships" (Herman 2008, 14). It is a process fraught with tensions and conflicts regarding how to do right by the child and how to create an authentic American family. Changing views and practices of adoption has a "symbolic importance in American life [that] far outstrips [their] statistical significance" because they reflect what we consider to be proper American families and proper state governance of those families. For these reasons,

understanding the history of adoption is crucial in understanding contemporary debates around family values in the U.S.

In the early years of the U.S. history, there was no legal regulation of adoption as a method for creating kinship. Although the 1851 Massachusetts statute is typically cited as the beginning of legal adoption in the U.S., very few people made use of public adoptions, as "many methods – formal and informal, commercial and sentimental, deliberate and impulsive – existed to acquire children" (Herman 2008, 22). Adopting children without blood ties was still considered an abnormal arrangement, but large numbers of foundlings, illegitimate children, and orphans continued to pour into orphanages because of poverty. "Placing out," which referred to "all noninstitutional arrangements to care for dependent children," was then grudgingly accepted as a way to alleviate the crowding orphanages (p. 23). A very small percentage of children were placed in free homes that resembled today's adoptive families. The majority, however, became indentured laborers or got sent on orphan trains heading to the western frontier. In the case of orphan trains, we begin to see the first disregard for natal ties in visualizing an authentic family. Charles Loring Brace and the New York Children's Aid Society were the best-known sponsors of the orphan train movement. They aimed not only to speed up the development of the frontier by injecting a new labor force, but to separate the children permanently from their Catholic parents (O'Connor 2001). Natal ties, in this case, could be sacrificed in order to turn recent Catholic immigrant children (many Irish and Italians) into proper American, i.e. Anglo-Protestant, citizens.

Commercial adoptions were commonplace during the first few decades of the 20th century as well. Practices such as baby farming and maternity homes were popular, "Unwed mothers, prostitutes, domestic servants, and destitute or deserted wives forced to work for

wages" often gave up their children as a result, and entrepreneurs quickly caught on and spawned an entire industry in acquiring, marketing, and selling infants (Herman 2008, 32). Sensationalized newspaper reports on the destitute conditions of baby farms and the unscrupulous practices of baby merchants created a national scandal and contributed to the invention of the modern adoption agency. First started as female "philanthropic amateurs," agencies such as the Spence Alumni Society and the Free Synagogue Child Adoption Committee, and the Alice Chapin Nursery declared that "heredity was not necessarily destiny, at least for white children," and they promised upward mobility for children (p. 40). The Spence Alumni Society, for example, declared, "Our purpose is to place children of unusual promise in homes of uncommon opportunities" (p. 41-42). In the 1920s, these agencies began to formally institutionalize, and organizations like the New York State Charities Aid Association and the Catholic Home Bureau began to professionalize its home-finding practices. Two institutions played major roles in professionalizing the child welfare system, the U.S. Children's Bureau (USCB; established by Congress in 1912) and the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA; founded by 14 organizations in 1915 and financially supported by the Russell Sage Foundation and the Commonwealth Fund). The USCB did not provide adoption services, but it acted as a node of information exchange, linking up prospective adoptive parents and adoption agencies. The CWLA "issued the first set of adoption standards" in the U.S. in 1938 (p. 58). Although these early standards still rested upon ideas of racial purity and matching appearances in creating the authentic family, they nonetheless formed the foundation of the contemporary child welfare system.

This brief and incomplete history of U.S. domestic adoption demonstrates the changing constructions of both child welfare and family. What is considered to be good for

the child and a proper family keeps changing even nowadays, although, as Herman (2008, 293) cautioned, there are striking continuities too, such as the use of "developmental diagnosis and measurement to certify the normality of adoptable children." Nonetheless, constructions of child welfare and family are historically specific, and institutions that facilitate and regulate adoptions have adapted to those changes too. In this sense, the current dominant ethos of adoption, which emphasized openness and choice, happened to generally dovetail with theorizations on queer families.

Choice is one concept that binds adoption and queer families. Kath Weston, in her groundbreaking ethnography *Families We Choose*, characterized choice as central to alternative kinship arrangements, especially as a counterpoint to biology and blood relations. She "situated chosen families in the specific context of an ideological opposition between families defined as straight and gay – families identified with biology and choice, respectively" (Weston 1991 [1997], 108). Although Weston certainly recognized this dichotomy as extreme oversimplification, it nonetheless had rhetorical purchase "by pairing categories previously believed to be at variance ('gay' and 'family')" (ibid.). Writing in the late 1980s, Weston saw queer kinship as much more flexible, especially in terms of its composition of relationships, compared to heterosexual nuclear families: "The families I saw gay men and lesbians creating in the Bay Area tended to have extremely fluid boundaries, not unlike kinship organization among sectors of the African-American, American Indian, and white working class" (ibid.). But what of queer families that, in composition, resemble heterosexual nuclear families (as many adoptive families tend to be, considering the policing effect of the application process)?¹⁷ And whose boundaries may not be as fluid? Weston

¹⁷ Adoptive families, especially those who adopted through public agencies, are more likely to resemble heterosexual nuclear families. In this sense, the application process of adoption through

argued that their radical potential must come from their lived experience rather than alternative composition alone. “[D]iscourse on gay kinship,” she wrote, has elevated the “notion of choice... very much an individualistic formulation... to the level of a principle organizing a certain type of family” (p. 200). Such individualism already permeates the way we theorize family formation, but gay families’ “lived experiences [may] mitigate the

public agencies has a policing effect similar to the census, in that both tend to make alternative family structures invisible (see Chapter 2). One social worker I interviewed during fieldwork, who had been to several similar information sessions as a representative from the local DSS, told me the following at the end of the interview without prompting:

I’ve been happy to assist in making families or adding to families who are gay and lesbian. I’m not perfect, I know I have my own prejudices, and I kinda like people to be regular. By regular I mean – I read a quote to my friend [who is gay] out of the paper this year, the Gay Pride Parade, one of the organizers said, “Okay people, this is not Mardi Gras, we’re not here to fuck!” So I don’t think, I don’t know. This day and age I would not be happy to... I don’t know. I want children to be okay in their homes and not... our children especially, and I’m not saying gay people should not be parents, they can have all the children they want privately. Our kids already have a lot of baggage, and I never want them to be subjected to more (Interview, July 2012).

After I asked for further clarification regarding the kind of red flags she would look for with gay and lesbian couples, she responded:

I think all I’m saying is that... I mean, let’s say... I guess I’m just... Let’s say if I went out and interviewed a couple that are both cross-dressers and really weren’t pulling it off very well. They’re 7 feet tall, don’t look good, have a 5 o’clock shadow, would I want to send a child there who already... I mean, if they’re living on an island, maybe they’d be the most lovely parents in the world, but I wouldn’t want that child to have any more feelings of otherness. Maybe they’d been sexually abused, maybe they’d have all these shame about their original birth family. Is that not fair? Probably it isn’t. But I try to be real with people (ibid.).

Although merely an anecdotal example, I think this exchange brings together quite a few critical issues around queer families that still persist. For one, the end of formal discrimination certainly does not necessarily mean the end of personal discrimination (e.g. “be[ing] real with people”), and personal prejudices continue to shape everyday experiences of gays and lesbians (see Eng 2010, 6-7). In addition, as mainstream queer politics moved from radical and progressive to increasingly assimilationist in search for formal recognition, queer families with alternative form and composition remained marginalized. Finally, the figure of the suffering children – and the deteriorating family values it symbolizes – continues to be wielded as justification for maintaining heterosexual nuclear family as the only proper form of family, with few logical explanations. For these reasons (and many more), *Families We Choose* and the questions it asked remain as timely as ever, which is perhaps a bit disappointing.

utopianism that is always a danger in adopting a concept so closely tied to individualism”

(ibid.). Further,

It is ironic that parenting, one of the phenomena within gay families most frequently taken as a sign of accommodation to “the traditional,” should also become a place where people can come to realize that social conditions impose limits on ostensibly unrestricted choice (p. 201).

Here we can see Weston continued to engage with the term “gay family” as an oxymoronic pairing and the tension it produced. Rather than condemning it as either inherently radical or inherently assimilationist, she instead situated gay family between its utmost abstraction, i.e. the notion of choice, and its most particular, i.e. its everyday experiences that cannot be summarized. By doing so, Weston opened up a space in which the representation of gay family as the ultimate utopian choice can be realistically curtailed to better reflect the diversity in form and composition of gay families.

The public child welfare system also operates on a certain amount of choice, though it may not accommodate the entire spectrum of queer kinship. Consider the number of agencies, public and private, are available to queer parents. Indeed, based on the questions during the information sessions, it can even appear to be more difficult to decide on an agency than to actually apply! Here is one conversation between an attendee, one of the organizers, and a social worker from a private agency at the information session:

Attendee 1: I’m just really confused. So you said earlier that you can get certified [as foster and adoptive parents] anywhere, but now you’re talking about being on these lists. So if I get certified at the Albany Co. DSS, or at the Berkshire Farm, the certification then works everywhere?

Organizer: Yes, yes, absolutely. If you move, then you’re –

Attendee 1: No, not about that. What if we decide to become foster parents, and now I’m in The System and are on all these lists, then –

Social worker: Here, let me explain. So you can get certified anywhere, DSS, Berkshire Farm, Adoption STAR... But what's important is that depending on where you file your application, then you belong on their list.

Attendee 1: So I'll only get calls from the agency where I apply?

Social worker: Yes.

Organizer: Or the DSS, if you apply there.

Attendee 1: But what about the kids?

Social worker: Well, this is the public child welfare system, so the pool of children all come from the same place. But county DSS will call on us private agencies if they have kids they can't provide adequate service to, or if they can't find foster parents immediately from their list.

Another attendee jumped in a few minutes later:

Attendee 2: So why can't we be on multiple lists? If we're really eager to become foster parents –

Social worker: Well, you may still get kids from other agencies, just through the place where you applied.

Organizer: And we need to keep track of all the children in The System.

Social worker: Yes, it's complicated enough. The bureaucracy really is to make sure no one gets lost, everyone in The System.

Prospective queer parents have a certain amount of flexibility when choosing agencies, although it is made obvious that their choice of agencies has a huge impact on the qualities of children available for adoption. Many DSSs contract out their hard-to-place children and children with special needs to private agencies who specialize in those areas. Some agencies specialize in infants, while others specialize in black children. Prospective adoptive parents can choose, but their choice is conditioned by a whole host of factors, including affordability and desire.

The child welfare system also adapted by creating technologies that facilitate the creation of kinship. One example is the Heart Gallery, a public gallery featuring professional portraits of children available for adoption in foster care. A national non-profit organization, it is hosted in New York by the Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS). The Heart Gallery was started in New Mexico in the early 2000s following dissatisfaction over the appearance of what social workers called the adoption book. Back then, all foster children available for adoption would have their photo taken and put in the adoption book (which is printed black-and-white to maintain the low cost). “If you wanted to adopt a child,” a social worker said, “you would go to your local library or department of social services, look through the adoption book, and go ‘Hmm... he looks kinda cute. Maybe this one.’” But the main problem was “They weren’t very nice pictures. They look worse than school pictures.” The Heart Gallery, in response, recruited professional photographers as volunteers instead to take the children’s portraits. “It’s such a brilliant idea!” she gushed. “They decided that the best way to sell – I don’t want to use the word sell – to sell our kids to the public, to let them know how wonderful they are and what great personalities they have... that the best way to do that was to have nice photographs.” The plan apparently went brilliantly – the first group of children who had their photos taken were “children that were the most difficult to place,” and they were all eventually adopted. Soon the Heart Gallery became a national phenomenon, and the OCFS now has gallery-sized portraits at their location, in addition to online and print publications. The Heart Gallery, then, could be seen as a contemporary reenactment of marketing tools during commercial adoption in the early 20th century. Although contemporary adoption is heavily regulated, the fact remains that child welfare professionals would like to place their children permanently with families as soon as possible

to ensure proper care. Professional photography, then, is one technique that invites desire and choice from prospective adoptive parents.

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Figure 3.2. Promotional flyer from KidsPeace

A uniquely contemporary feature of the child welfare system is its attempts to address both the emotional work by adoptive parents and the emotional trauma of adoptees. A significant part of the information sessions, then, was devoted to addressing the emotional work of fostering and parenting. Specifically, the audience was instructed to prepare themselves for a damaged child. Through acting out an exercise from the foster/adoptive parent certification course, prospective parents were taught to imagine the kind of emotional trauma a typical foster child might have experienced, and what sorts of emotional responses were appropriate

for repairing those damages. Herman (2008, 11) argued that adoption became an acceptable method of creating authentic families because "kinship by design" – the process of modernizing adoption institutions and practices – was a form of "therapeutic government." Instead of placing blame on the underlying sources that create large numbers of foster children, therapeutic government asks us instead to be proud of our ability to help a child in need. This moral feeling normalizes the nature of kinship between a parent and a child so that adopted child could appear as natural. For prospective queer parents, however, continued resistance by conservative commentators on their ability to be fit parents complicates this therapeutic government. Queer liberalism complements the process of therapeutic government because it too depends on the denial of difference in favor of reproducing heteronormative families. The emergence of transnational and transracial adoptive families "depends on the faithful reproduction of the heteronormative conjugal family" (Eng 2010, 99). In the construction of proper adopted family, then, the adopted child must pass for white while the queer parents must pass for heteronormative couple, thus making the child welfare system a difficult place for alternative kinship arrangements. In other words, therapeutic government must actively assert itself as colorblind even when the history of adoption has always had to deal with racial problems. Although many scholars attribute this denial of difference to the history of U.S. imperialism abroad, especially in the context of transnational adoption, here I wish to restrict my attention only to domestic transracial adoptions instead.¹⁸

¹⁸ This denial of difference is intimately linked with the history of U.S. imperialism abroad. Contemporary transnational adoption into the U.S. began as European orphans made their way over after World War II, but it solidified as an industry after the Korean War (1950-1953) (Cho 2008). South Korea, "with the assistance of Western religious and social service agencies, has expedited the adoption of over 200,000 South Korean children," a significant amount of which were not actual orphans but children of war crimes, prostitutions, poverty, and mixed-raced children shunned by Korean society (Eng 2010, 104). A smaller wave followed after Vietnam War as well, and "the U.S. has had either a notable military presence or strong political and economic interests, or both" in many

Recall the partial and incomplete history of the U.S. domestic adoption I presented in the previous section. Although the general framework of the modern child welfare system had been in place since the 1940s in the U.S. (with the exception of open adoption practices), race became an increasingly prominent problem in this system. The end of World War II brought about a revolution in adoption. Matching practices were first challenged when a number of Japanese-American orphans became available for adoption after the abolishment of internment camps. At the same time, increasing international contact from the U.S. meant that American soldiers and travelers abroad might have children with the local people or adopt from abroad. Public opinions began to see transracial adoptions as a display of moral courage, of lending a hand to those in need. Helen Doss is one well-publicized example (Nanette Fabray and Shirley Jones played Doss in two separate movies portraying her family, respectively). Helen and Carl Doss were a young couple in California, and Carl was training to be a minister. Helen was infertile, and the couple adopted Donny, a young white boy. Wanting siblings for Donny and having a difficult time finding white infants available for adoption, the Dosses began asking agencies to let them adopt non-white infants. They faced many oppositions – one agency official wrote that "Crossing racial lines is against all our principles of good social-work practice" – but the Dosses' insistence eventually led to 12 adopted children: "Filipino, Hawaiian, Balinese, Malayan, Indian, Mexican, and Native

top sending countries (p. 105). For example, Guatemala remains to date the most popular sending country in Latin America, and the practice started during the U.S.-involved Guatemalan civil war (Nelson 2009). Viewed from this light, transnational adoption is firmly entrenched in imperial histories. These unsavory imperial histories are covered up by portraying American adoptive parents as "heroes" saving "sexually violated third-world women with little agency," who are unable to care for their "innocent third-world child" (Eng 2010, 106). Nonetheless, "the language of choice and free will, as well as the rhetoric of donation and gift," persist as the figure of third-world women "is ascribed agency precisely at the moment she 'freely' relinquishes her child into the global system (or alternately 'chooses' to abandon her)" (ibid.). Choice, no matter in which context, continues to be a crucial "part of the morality tale that animates Western stories of self and the nation" (Coutin, Maurer, and Yngvesson 2002, 825).

American, in various combinations" (Herman 2008, 213). The Dosses' one attempt at adopting a half-black girl, Gretchen, however, failed in the face of strong backlashes. Families and friends balked at the idea of adopting black children, and eventually the Dosses located a "Negro" couple to adopt Gretchen instead. Helen Doss rationalized her decision, that Gretchen now would have parents with "the same warm toast shade that she was, and she would know that her own color was just right for *her*" (emphasis in original; quoted in Herman 2008, 215). Even though transnational adoption meant that transracial adoption was now more accepted, the racial lines, especially between blacks and whites, still persisted.

Racial difference structured two major events in the history of domestic adoption. The first was the Indian Adoption Project between 1958 and 1967. Funded by the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the USCB and administered by the CWLA, the Indian Adoption Project attempted to remove an entire child population from Native American tribes into white families. By the early 1970s, 25-35 percent of all Native American children were placed in adoption, foster homes, or institutions (Herman 2008, 241). Presented as a civil rights movement, it instead decimated an entire generation of Native Americans and caused painful loss of identity. Finally, the 1978 Indian Child Welfare Act reversed these policies and "defined children as collective resources essential for tribal survival" (ibid.). The second was the 1972 statement by the National Association of Black Social Workers that took "a vehement stand against the placements of black children in white homes for any reason" (cited in Herman 2008, 249). This statement culminated two decades of work that went into recruiting black adoptive parents for black children, given the difficulty in placing black children for adoption. Although this statement remains controversial, it represented the first serious reckoning of trauma in adoption. Identity became a serious issue for child welfare

professionals, and this statement in part pushed through the practice of open adoption considered standard practice nowadays (Patton 2000). Rather than assuming that adopted children would naturally achieve harmonious identity with their adopted parents, open adoption encouraged disclosure of adoption information with adoptees and maintenance of contact with birth families whenever possible. In the case of transracial adoption, open adoption practices could alleviate some of the traumatic loss of identity.

These racial problems that the child welfare system had to (and continues to) confront are rarely, if ever, acknowledged in these sessions or by child welfare professionals. This exercise during the information session, then, must perform the role of therapeutic government that is never complete due to this racial amnesia. During the application process, all prospective foster and adoptive parents must first become certified by taking a ten-week course, Model Approach to Partnerships in Parenting/Group Preparation and Selection (MAPP/GPS). During the session, two social workers ran one particular exercise from the course called "What did the child bring?" As one social worker explained, this particular exercise is a staple in MAPP/GPS and one of its most emotional and conversation-inducing exercises. After a reluctant volunteer had been invited to the front of the room, one social worker pulled out a black trash bag and asked the audience to imagine the volunteer as a foster child who had just arrived to his new foster home. She then instructed the volunteer to pull out the items from the trash bag one by one and to read out loud the note cards attached to them. The first item was a bag of Cheetos, and the volunteer read from the card – "I kept this bag of Cheetos because I hadn't had dinner last night and I might be hungry." Next, a dirty ticket stub from the movies – "My dad took me to the movies a few months ago and I haven't seen him since." The crowd sat in their seats awkwardly, and the mood was

noticeably somber compared to the lively chatter earlier. After all the items were pulled out from the trash bag, the social worker then handed the volunteer a stack of cards with words such as "temper tantrums" and "nightmares" written on them, and the volunteer was instructed to imagine himself as a foster child and act out these emotions as well as the motivations a foster child might have behind these emotions. The volunteer shrieked, imitating a scared child waking up from a nightmare. "I have so many of them from before," he said. "That's why I don't like going to bed. I just don't sleep."

This imaginative performance, passing for a foster child, was met with a moment of silence followed by uncomfortable laughter. The social workers reminded the audience that besides what meager belongings a foster child might have, they also carried trauma from "years of neglect and abuse." They then asked the attendees what they could do, if they were the foster parents, to make their new foster child feel welcome. After a few stuttered responses, one attendee said, "Assure him that we love him?" "Love is good. Love is always good," the social workers said.

During a regular MAPP/GPS, this particular exercise is scheduled for the eighth week. One social worker said, "This is the activity that brings it all together for me, and it's the activity that brings it together for a lot of people." It was not made clear what exactly was brought together by this exercise. She then elaborated, "I often tell people that these things might be intimidating, might be scary, but I tell my foster parents – You can do it. You absolutely have the skills to bring a child into your home and be able to nurture and love them." And to conclude, "The reason we're here tonight is to reach out to this community, to let you know that you are absolutely welcome, in [all of the agencies here], you are

absolutely welcome into our big family. To have this opportunity to change a life, and potentially change yours."

This exercise is a fantastic demonstration of the kind of less-than-tangible work that sustains adoption as an enterprise. The audience was asked to imagine a traumatized foster child, relying on the existing stereotype. This performance of the suffering child was the foundation of queer liberalism. Specifically, the suffering child is actively imagined as a racialized other, with his deadbeat dads and welfare moms (Kaufman and Nelson 2012). This imagination is insinuated by comments from the audience referring to "unfit parents in inner cities," and these comments are even more jarring when the volunteer for this exercise is one of the only few black men in the session. Such an imagined figure is made possible with the history of U.S. domestic adoption being actively forgotten, yet its specter haunts the information session nonetheless. Further, queer adoptive parents are more likely to confront this specter, since recent changes in the landscape of transnational adoption have made it very difficult for queer parents, single or coupled, to pursue that route (Raleigh 2012, 451). Among popular sending countries of adoptees, South Korea's adoption industry has contracted dramatically in recent years following public outcry and recognition of the lost generation of Korean children sent abroad; China requires all single applicants to sign an affidavit certifying that they are not part of a gay or lesbian couple; Guatemala's number of children available for adoption has decreased dramatically in recent years.¹⁹ Indeed, several social workers in attendance criticized the popular media depiction of queer adoptive parents as affluent and favoring transnational over domestic adoptions. Given these challenges, domestic adoption is the only viable route to parenthood for more gay and lesbian couples.

¹⁹ For a more detailed discussion, see Briggs 2012, especially Introduction and Part II.

There are both quantitative and qualitative evidences that suggest gay and lesbian adoptive parents are more willing to adopt hard-to-place children, including non-white children. Categories such as “hard-to-place” or “special needs” are ambiguous at best, but their deployment indicates quite explicitly how the child welfare system functions. Strictly speaking, “hard to place” refers to a child “who is no longer an infant, not white, and/or classified as suffering from a mental or physical disability” (Lewin 2009, 51). If a child is suffering from a mental or physical disability, then she is considered to have “special needs,” although those needs can range quite widely in terms of severity. However, these terms are so ambiguous that “agencies tend to use it to refer to *any* factors that make a child difficult to place, including children who are black and biracial, in sibling groups, and who have experienced more than one foster placement, even when they are healthy” (emphasis in original; *ibid.*). Raleigh (2012), using the 2000 U.S. Census data, found that indeed same-sex couples are more likely to adopt transracially after controlling for adoption market variables, even though white same-sex couples are still more likely to adopt Hispanic and Asian children than black children (p. 461). Furthermore, even while acknowledging that the adoption market metaphor can be crude and certainly has its limits, Raleigh is skeptical that her findings can be attributed solely to alternative kinship conceptions, considering how stratified the adoption market can be for non-traditional families.

Qualitatively, many gay and lesbian adoptive parents reported that adopting hard-to-place children is akin to doing the right thing in the face of social injustice, and they often drew upon their own marginalized sexuality as motivation for such a decision. For example, Josh and Todd, the mixed-race couple from Chapter 1, said that they want to adopt a child with special needs, especially a black boy, because they both work in human services and

understand the importance of giving back (Interview, July 2012). Such altruism can still be tempered by pragmatism, however, as shown by Andrew's experience (Lewin 2009, 54-57). Andrew is a single gay man who felt a strong desire to adopt a disabled child ever since he saw an advertisement from an agency looking for foster parents for hard-to-place children. He also felt that he grew up with "traditional values" that would make him a good parent. However, this moral tale became more nuanced as pragmatic details are considered. Andrew wanted to adopt an infant because he wanted to be there as the child grew up, but he did not have the financial resources to adopt through a private agency. Further, he thought that being a single gay man would make him less likely to be picked compared to married couples or even same-sex couples. Therefore, a special-needs child would be the most likely match given his position, Andrew reasoned. Andrew's story demonstrates that although the market metaphor can be crude, it remains important to consider the ways in which moral economies are never just about pure economic terms, and as Raleigh (2012, 453) stresses, the adoption marketplace is not just any regular market, it is "one of the few socially and legally regulated child welfare practices that help transfer children from one family to another," our misgivings about how it is run notwithstanding.

The exercise during the information session, then, demonstrates the imaginative work necessary for adoptive parents to manage and address trauma. As a form of therapeutic government, it asks adoptive parents and adopted children to shoulder a huge amount of emotional work. Further, it is much more likely for queer adoptive parents to have to shoulder this work since the child welfare system discourages alternative family arrangements. Recent changes only increased this likelihood for virtually foreclosing transnational adoption to queer parents. Queer adoptive parents can claim moral superiority

based on their supposedly *voluntary* inclusion within the domestic adoption system, and their willingness to adopt special-needs children, even when non-altruistic forces conditioned the terms of their inclusion. In other words, they present their story as one of free choice, a decision made out of the goodness of their hearts, when in fact their choices are very much curtailed by circumstances. And in their effort to become parents and to do the right thing, it is possible for queer adoptive parents to succumb to the unfair demands on their emotional capacity. Jack and Tyler's testimony during the information session in Ithaca is one particular example of the potential damages of therapeutic government in queer liberalism.

Jack and Tyler were a black-white couple in their mid-thirties. They were working-class with steady jobs, but the recent economic downturn had certainly hurt their finances. Jack and Tyler wanted to become parents, so they approached their local DSS directly and soon began fostering a young boy around ten years old named Sam. Sam was removed from his original home when his mother left and his father became abusive, and the local DSS required regular therapy sessions for Sam. Jack and Tyler loved Sam very much and finalized his adoption a year after taking him in. However, Sam's trauma from his abusive family had been too much for outpatient therapy to handle, and he grew increasingly violent. His behavioral issues were beyond normal teenage rebellions, and Tyler, being smaller in stature, grew increasingly afraid after several physical confrontations. They were also afraid that Sam might harm himself. Things finally escalated to the point that they had to commit Sam to a residential facility, where he remains to date. Now Jack and Tyler visit him once a week during the weekend.

Tyler, who is black, said that no one could have predicted this turn of events, yet Jack, a burly white man, did not see things the same way. "Adoption is not simply dealing

with the child or the DSS,” Jack said. “There’s a lot of other bullshit along the way.” At several points during the session, Tyler would grab Jack’s wrist, presumably to stop him from saying negative things about the child welfare system. Tyler confessed that he was the more enthusiastic one from the beginning, and perhaps he was a bit too eager for parenthood, overlooking some issues with Sam in the process. They both love Sam very much, they were quick to note. “He simply needs more care than we can give him right now,” Tyler said quietly.

After the session ended, I chatted briefly with Jack and Tyler over light refreshments. They asked me if I were thinking about adopting, a common question I got during fieldwork. I said yes, perhaps down the road, but that I was at the session primarily for my research project. Jack told me that’s good – I was too young to become a father anyway, “and you’re never ready even when you think you are. So what if I wasn’t ready? We weren’t gonna return Sam anyways.” He warned me, though, that social workers have their own caseloads to consider. Tyler was getting embarrassed – Jack had gotten combative on a few occasions, and Tyler did not want to appear “ungrateful even after getting [their] child.” “It’s just hard,” he said, “realizing that love sometimes is not quite enough.”

Jack and Tyler’s experience may be extreme, but they reveal some of the potential damages for queer adoptive parents, given how much more likely they are to adopt a child with special needs and/or transracially through the public child welfare system. The logic of queer liberalism, when situated within the history of adoption in the U.S., produces a unique set of challenges for queer adoptive parents. Both the child welfare system and the non-profit organizations in this case failed to adequately address these challenges. For child welfare professionals, then, future steps – such as increased capacity for emotional support – should

be taken to lessen the current system's capacity for causing trauma to both parents and children.

Chapter 4: Making Families

Paul and Keith are one of many couples featured in Ellen Lewin's *Gay Fatherhood* (2009, 152). Both white and successful professionals living in a suburb outside of Chicago, they had adopted two young black infants – Jordan and Christopher – a couple years earlier through a domestic private agency. Aged two and four at the time of the interview, Jordan and Christopher were energetic boys whose activities routinely spilled out of their playroom into the grown-up areas in Paul and Keith's spacious house. While discussing how parenthood had changed their lives, Lewin asked the two fathers, "Has becoming parents changed what it means to you to be gay?" After exchanging a knowing look between them, Paul replied, "Oh, we're not gay anymore. We pick our friends by what time their kids' nap time is."

Paul's answer is perhaps tongue-in-cheek, but it points to the ways in which our normative understanding of parenthood is potentially incommensurable with not just queer sexualities, but sexuality in general (cf. Weston 1991 [1997], xiii). Lewin (2009, 153) herself interprets this incommensurability as an ironic double-whammy against queer parents – not only do they have to "negotiate around assumptions that their families present subversive challenges to wider family values (from the right)" but also from the left accusations that "their desire for family reflects craven accommodationism," even when both assertions rely on the same essentialist logic linking parenthood directly with biology. This little vignette with Paul's family, however, remains one of my favorites from Lewin's fieldwork because I draw a decidedly more optimistic outlook from it. Rather than considering this incommensurability as necessarily a challenge that must be overcome by queer parents, I see Paul's quip as a genuine expression of how one particular family does parenthood every day, which admittedly has been lacking from this thesis so far. From such an expression (and

many more to come), we can begin to put textures to queer families and the work each of them do to “create coherence and generate meaning” through narratives, however incomplete and partial they may be (Aitken 2009, 229).

This chapter, then, draws directly from my own fieldwork to glean some coherence and meaning from the process of domestic public adoptions for queer parents in upstate New York. If the previous chapter is a theoretical examination of the state of domestic adoption, then this chapter is an attempt to show queer adoptive families struggling every day to make their own families. As I argued in Chapter 2, these mundane actions are the basis for transformative politics, and by telling these real experiences, we can weaken the hold of metronormativity by producing a counter-discourse to it. During fieldwork, I interviewed two gay couples and one single (at the time of the adoption) lesbian who are at various stages of that process, as well as a social worker from a DSS homefinding unit, in the region. These interviews are buttressed by informal communications with just over 30 people who have some experience with this process from their different positions (who declined to be quoted directly in my thesis), and my own participation and observation during two information sessions for prospective queer parents (see Chapter 3).

Structurally, this chapter is organized by interviewees, rather than by particular themes or spaces along the adoption application process. This is a conscious decision. In previous chapters, as well as much of the academic writing using qualitative data, there is a tendency to dissect interview transcripts into discrete quotes, which then serve as evidence for some point the author is making – “a slurry of academic theory and scholarly argument interspersed with a few choice nuggets from interviewees” (Aitken 2009, 9). Organizing by interviews and providing as much of the narratives as possible, I hope, would best

approximate the interactions between the interviewer and the interviewee as they occurred (Wiles, Rosenberg, and Kearns 2005). Although I still provide some overarching themes for each interview, they are only partial suggestions. The interviewees' voices deserve to be heard as fully as possible (Cvetkovich 2003). From a practical angle, this strategy also makes sense given the low number of interviews I completed during my fieldwork. I can afford, then, to devote more space to each interview.

Josh and Todd: Starting Out

Josh and Todd's home sit near the end of a street, directly across from the community pool and playground. Beyond are huge grass fields, and the day I drove over – a sunny Sunday – they were filled with kids and their parents, kicking balls, walking their dogs, playing catch, and generally having a swell time. It was late morning, and a few early birds were already setting up their grills under the shade, getting ready for an outdoor picnic. Josh saw me walking up and came out to greet me, their two dogs at his feet. "He looked younger than I expected," the first thought sprang to my mind.

Josh, if you remember from Chapter 1, was my first solid lead for an interview. He and his fiancé Todd had been considering adoption for a while, and when my call for participants made the rounds, it piqued Josh's attention. Their home looked lived in, but they did not look comfortable having my presence there, Josh apologizing for the mess while Todd peered at me skeptically. I suggested sitting outside; it was a gorgeous day and why not enjoy it? The three of us ended up sitting on the back porch on lawn chairs, while I turned on my new voice recorder for the first time.

It turned out that the location of the home was not a coincidence. "We've been together for five years now, and kids have been a steady conversation between the two of

us,” Josh said. “We bought this house about a year ago now, and the next logical step for us is obviously marriage now that same-sex marriage is legal [in New York], and we’ve been engaged for quite some time. And we’re kind of ready for a kid.” Todd grew up in this town and relocating back here with Josh fit the trajectory of their lives, as did the image of kids playing across the street on a Sunday morning.

“Why adoption though?” I asked. “What made adoption your first choice when considering parenthood?”

“Well there are two different theories,” Todd replied while gesturing toward Josh. “He wants babies more, where they’re younger and you get more emotional attachment. Whereas I think sometimes that would be nice, but there are also enough kids out there already that need homes and might work toward certain lifestyles, where you could have the option of taking in a five-year-old that is already past certain stages. You could do more at a certain point in your life and not have to go through all the stages of development at an early age, where you have to wait, perhaps. It fits your lifestyle, adoption, where you can pick a child that hopefully works for you and where you’re at, and the kid can adapt to whatever situation he’s in, you know?”

Todd’s answer was frank in a way that many of my previous conversations with adoptive parents were not. The child must fit with their lives; he must work for their current situation. “Have you guys talked about what kind of child who fits with your lifestyle now?” I asked. “This ability to pick and choose the child that fits best, is that something that made adoption an attractive option?”

“It does. I think like the fact he was saying, knowing that there are kids out there who do need homes, and like obviously we have a huge house and we would love to be able to

share that with another human being, especially someone who's vulnerable and needed us. We would love to biologically be able to have our own children," Josh reached over to grab Todd's hand, "but that's probably not going to ever happen, so adoption was something we considered. We actually talked about fostering first, but I think that attachment you get with fostering a child, that inkling of knowing that they could be taken back or whatever, parents getting it together and they might go back home. For us, thinking about adoption brings up all kinds of questions, and we really haven't dug in all that well 'cause we're still enjoying one another, but it's conversations that we loosely have, like, logistically it would be easiest to adopt rather than trying to find a surrogate or going through that whole process. Like he was saying, kids need homes."

"I think also that normal children are being adopted, and some may not be able to keep their placements or the surrounding environments they're in," Todd added. "He's in the human services field now and I'm going into human services. I also worked very closely with individuals with disabilities, knowing how hard it is for them to find proper placement in their world and not be judged or feel that ultimate unconditional love and care, and knowing that children that are... We spent so much time with people with those needs that we can give that away to individuals that require, and deserve, to be loved. We would come home and think, why not do that with individuals who need to be placed in a home, where they know it's not their fault and turn it around and basically be placed in a home that can give them exactly what they didn't have the chance to start off with."

How does one plan a life? It seems like an enormous question, but planning is something all of us do every day, from what we will do the next day to the next ten years. Yet planning over long periods sometimes appears like daydreaming. For queer adoptive

parents, planning inhabits the two extremes; it is at once the most surreal (idealizing over having a child) and the most mundane (accomplishing the logistics of getting one). For Josh and Todd, adoption *fits*. It is the proper action at this stage in their relationship, and they are absolutely ready for it.

All decisions to act rely on some ideas. For Josh and Todd, what is the logic that makes it logical for them to adopt now? Ellen Lewin (2009, 127) suggests that parenthood can be thought of as “the foundation of a moral career,” the basis of planning one’s life. Originated by Erving Goffman, moral career is “the regular sequence of changes that career entails in the person’s self and his framework of imagery for judging himself and others” (Goffman 1961, 128 cited in Lewin 2009, 128). The term is useful because of its “two-sidedness”:

One side is linked to internal matters held dearly and closely, such as image of self and felt identity; the other side concerns official position, jural relations, and style of life, and is part of a publicly accessible institutional complex. The concept of career, then, allows one to move back and forth between the personal and the public, between the self and its significant society (Goffman 1961, 127 cited in Lewin 2009, 128).

Parenthood is a moral career that one must meticulously plan, according to one’s own beliefs in relation to social institutions. For Josh and Todd, then, having a child now is proper in their vision for themselves, even if such constitution of the self “resides in the arrangements prevailing in a social system” (Goffman 1961, 168 cited in Lewin 2009, 128), i.e. heteronormative construction of family (see Chapter 3).

Josh and Todd’s moral career also takes on greater specificity as it oscillates between the personal and the social. Even though it “would be nice” to adopt a baby, it would also involve significant logistical and financial challenges (as they later hypothesized). Rather, they could pick a child that “works for you and where you’re at,” while still maintaining a

sense of self-worth and morality. Their careers involve working closely with marginalized groups, and being able to give a disabled child a home and love becomes a key component in giving additional meaning to their choice during their path to parenthood. It is also in the oscillation between the personal and the social that Josh and Todd's moral careers reveal their two-sidedness. It is with their specific framework that they evaluate their geographies and identities. The fields across the street help triangulate their desires for and views on parenthood. Josh and Todd walk their dogs together every day when they can, and Josh thought that the time had come for a child to join this excursion. "Even our neighbors comment on that sometimes," he quipped. "We've had the dogs for a while now – when are we going to graduate to a child?" More negatively, Todd quite strongly considered themselves as "not a typical gay couple," and this declaration is informed by what they see and do at their town every day (see Chapter 1).

Moral career is a temporal concept, but it is equally important to think about it spatially. Josh and Todd's planning for parenthood reveals careful considerations of their current situation as a couple, but it involves some deeply-held ideas about parenthood as well. These ideas help inform Josh and Todd's actions to first relocate to Todd's hometown and later citing their living situation and the environment as an indication of their readiness to become parents. Here we can see how ideas about proper parenthood shape both the temporal and spatial trajectory that Josh and Todd take. Aitken (2009, 20-21) suggests that these ideas can be thought of as "spatial frames":

At some level, the work of the father must have an image in order to act. This may be conceived as a structure – a spatial frame – from which actions emanate. Fathers are almost always caught in some form of spatial framing. And the institution of fatherhood is also embroiled with framings of this kind. But the actions and assemblages of fathers are also formless, what Deleuze and Guattari call "*bodies without organs*." In other words, fatherhood is an institutionalized network of virtual relations and, as such, it is

difficult to conceive of, and to push against. Nonetheless, this institution is immediately actualized as the material work of fathering wherever one of fatherhood's working images – the organs: the patriarch, the loving dad – go. These working representations convey action, they bring to each place and time – to each Deleuzian spatio-temporal coordinate – a relation that fundamentally changes those bodies' social and physical realities. The relation *is* father as an immanent social agent (emphasis in original).

Spatial frames obviously inform the larger institution of parenthood as well. Holding spatial frame alongside Goffman's moral career brings contingency and life's unpredictability into sharper relief. Although Josh and Todd were able to lend coherency to their desire for parenthood by narrating it through the lens of planning, plans never work out exactly the way we expect them to. Coherency, then, is fleeting. Their ideas of proper parenthood – their moral careers as parents – are often “actualized in ways that belie coherency” (Aitken 2009, 21). It is for this reason that the process of becoming parents deserves our scholarly attention in the study of queer lives. This dialectic between planning for coherency and the unpredictable actual events diverts our gaze farther away from identity or meaning, and towards “*what things are done* to create the ongoing contexts of [parenting]” (emphasis added; Aitken 2009, 229).

Moreover, focusing on in/coherent actions generates new possibilities to theorize space and politics. For example, recent studies on families and kinship tend to eschew long-held belief that family is a discrete unit with intrinsic structures and relationships, i.e. being a family, and instead look to the ways in which everyday actions come to constitute families, i.e. doing family (e.g. Aitken 2000, 68). These new theorizations of “family-as-practice situate the family squarely in the realm of the spatial. In other words, people ‘do family’ and they do it *somewhere*; constructing family as part of their everyday lives in very particular places and spaces that then become meaningful places for, and of, family. Family, in other words, is a spatial project” (emphasis in original; Luzia 2010, 360). With these theorizations,

however, also come the increasing abstractions of space, including terms like “spatial frames, and spatial representations and spatial metaphors that, ultimately, enervate political action” (Aitken 2009, 172). In other words, much like pairing moral career and spatial frame produces a tension, “doing family” and spatial abstractions are in delicate tension. Abstract too far, and one risks being left with “an independence [of spatial metaphors] that discourages as much as it allows fresh political insight” (Smith 1993, 98 cited in Aitken 2009, 173). Instead, doing family should be thought of as in/coherent actions that allow for freedom, flexibility, and surprise.

We see politics emerging from Josh and Todd’s incoherent actions. When discussing their adoption preferences, Josh deferred to Todd, even though he appeared to slightly favor adopting an infant. Todd rationalized their decision based on morality and fit of lifestyle, but it is also a decision made out of practical considerations such as cost and availability. Surrogacy, similarly, was ruled out quickly as a result. Here Josh’s initial desire for biological children was muted. However, there was genuine conviction when both related their careers with their goals for parenthood. As an attempt to push against the institution that demands their inclusion, they instead recast its terms, aligning their home and work by way of a common philosophy of life, so that they may still derive concrete family values that are their own. As Josh and Todd embark on their first step to parenthood together, there will surely be more lively incoherencies actualized along the way.

Geoff and Chris: Becoming Institutionalized

I met Geoff at his office at a local human services agency, where he and Chris met as co-workers. It was a cramped little office, filled with books, photographs, and paperwork everywhere. Chris worked in another wing of the office complex, and he was coming over to

meet us. It was an especially warm summer, and Geoff fumbled with the small air conditioner in his office, poking at it like it had done him wrong. Finally he gave up. “I guess we’ll just have to deal with the loud banging from the AC,” he apologized.

Geoff and Chris are legends among adoptive families in upstate New York. They have been together for 14 years and were one of the first same-sex couples to jointly adopt through the local DSS in the early 2000s. Joint adoption was a big deal prior to the legalization of same-sex marriage; although considered a judge’s discretion, unmarried couples typically are not allowed to adopt jointly and had to pursue a second-parent adoption instead, incurring additional cost and significant hassle. They became one of the model families that promotional materials and news articles had been based on, were active in adoption advocacy work, participated in Adoption Day festivities every year, and even got featured on the adoptive and foster parents recruitment website. They are well-connected and well-regarded in the social welfare community through both their work and their three adopted boys. Geoff guest lectures in the family law course at the Syracuse University School of Law every year. Basically, they were the kind of all-star interviewees researchers dream of.

Chris got to the office, panting slightly. We met during their lunch break, and they didn’t have long, so we got started quickly. Every family has its own origin story, and Chris was eager to share theirs. “We have been together for 14 years, and when we first got together we had talked about wanting to have a family, eventually, and we researched various ways to have children, either foreign adoption or domestic adoption. And we took a look at those options and there were certain barriers with those options. And friends of ours had

recently adopted through the local DSS, and we decided to take a look at that, and that seemed to be a better fit for us.”

“And, um, they are a same-sex couple as well,” Geoff added, “and I point that out because I think that we had the, I wondered if same-sex couples at that point could become foster parents or adopt, and they had no issue with that, and so that was sort of a word-of-mouth thing as well.”

It was easy to see that Chris and Geoff had been together for a long time. They talked over each other, cut the other off, finished sentences together, and generally behaved like an old married couple. They also liked to argue over numbers.

“This was definitely in 2002, 2003.” “We started our classes in January of 2003.” “So 2002 then. We probably were talking more seriously about it in 2002.”

“Chris,” I asked, “you mentioned that there were some barriers regarding to some of the options you guys explored. Can you talk a bit more about those barriers? Or challenges or concerns that you guys were having.”

“We went to a few adoption agencies that do foreign adoptions, and went to some informational meetings in Ithaca and Cortland, right?”

“I only remember one,” Geoff replied. “There were two?”

“I think so.”

“Okay, well.”

“Maybe it was just Ithaca then,” Chris concluded. “And, um, first there was only one country that would adopt to a single male. I think at the time it was Colombia?”

“Guatemala?” Geoff interjected.

“Guatemala, yeah, Guatemala. And they would talk about that one of the, um, whoever looked better on paper, you know, we would each have to have a dossier, and whoever would look better on paper would be the primary person going to the country and adopting the child, you know, getting the child. And we would have to come back and do a second-parent adoption, and that just doesn’t seem to fit well with us. If we were gonna be parents, if we were gonna be a family, we are both going to be represented in the process. That was one thing. The other thing, financially, it was expensive, and the lady talked about how you wear a money belt, and you would have to pay this person this amount of cash, and you would pay this person this amount, and this other person, you know, it just, the whole... And it was a legitimate adoption, you know. It just didn’t seem right. And I have, my other sibling was adopted from Korea, so you know, I was really very open to foreign adoption, but it just didn’t seem... the financial piece to it, the fact that we both couldn’t be represented in the process, was a major turn-off for us. We were gonna have a family, and do this together, we were both gonna be represented in the process.”

Geoff jumped in. “This could perhaps be me projecting, you know, hindsight’s 20/20, I don’t recall now, but I think there was, um, something to the fact that we liked the idea of adopting, fostering and adoption children from our own community, from here, as well, since there are plenty of kids. That could be me projecting backwards now, knowing what I know, but I believe that may have had something to do with it too.”

“And you know, surrogacy...” “Oh yeah, we didn’t wanna do that.” “It wasn’t really an option for us. We didn’t feel the need to do that.” “It wasn’t our scene. It wasn’t something we wanted to do.” “Yeah.” “We just didn’t wanna do that.”

Once the idea of foreign adoption and surrogacy were eliminated, Geoff and Chris quickly settled on their local DSS. It seemed that private domestic adoption was never considered. Since they both worked in the field of social services, they had a basic familiarity with the system compared to most laymen, and adopting through the DSS seemed like community service. For Geoff, “there are plenty of kids” here waiting to be adopted already. And since the local DSS received stamps of approval from their friends, they decided to go ahead and begin the process.

Chris and Geoff’s experiences are indicative of the process that queer couples go through to pinpoint their wishes and desires along the available options. What is interesting is that their decision was informed by a particular understanding of queer families, that as parents they should be accepted as natural, but not too natural. When discussing surrogacy, Geoff and Chris seemed embarrassed by the idea. Comfortable with their sexuality, they have accepted that being gay and in a committed relationship meant that no biological offspring would come from it. Geoff later expressed a common sentiment from queer parents, that having realized his same-sex desires, he did not picture family and kids from a young age, having “let go” of that idea already, thus making adoption an easily acceptable decision (Goldberg 2012, 43). This experience is quite different from heterosexual couples who come to adoption due to infertility. As Chris and Geoff later explained, a significant portion of the certification course – MAPP/GPS – was not very useful to them because it was designed so that such couples can deal with the trauma and grief from infertility, so that they can come to peace with adoption. Nonetheless, they expressed some form of understanding and empathy: “And this isn’t just a gay or same-sex couples issue, you know? This was the man and the

woman from the suburbs that want to have a child and can't or whatever, you know, that go through this too, you know, it's everybody. It's universal."

Very experienced now with the local DSS and the child welfare system, Chris and Geoff were able to walk me through the entire adoption process, from MAPP/GPS, home study, foster parenting, and finalizing the adoption. Overall, they found the process to be quite a positive one. Their sexuality was muted throughout, but that was what they wanted, and their outreach effort now largely focused on "letting people know that this is normal." Nonetheless, there are several instances in the process where their sexuality became prominent, either positively or negatively. One such instance was when a social worker noted how great they were as applicants.

"[Our sexuality] made us unique, a novelty," Geoff said. "I suppose it did make us stand out. We're also advocates, so that may be part of it. The caseworker that we had was wonderful to the little ones we adopted a few years ago, and at one point even said that she has had a couple other gay couples who were relatively new, which was good, she said that, 'Gee, you know, maybe I should just get all the gay couples,' you know, the gay men or the gay couples, because some of the families in the suburbs don't want anything to do with the biological family whereas we were more open to that kind of process. I highlight that only because perhaps, I don't know, perhaps it did make us stand out. Maybe, gay people try just a little harder, I don't know... I don't know, I can't tell you the answer to that.

Chris added, "We're also involved, we were in a, um, we volunteered for a foster parent recruitment group. We would meet once every other month to talk about ideas on how to recruit foster parents. Jeffrey did a couple presentations at some agencies, schools..."

"Jewish community centers..."

“And churches, so we were also involved too.”

I was curious about how their sexuality impacted the way the view family arrangements, so I asked what were the reasons they were more open to contacts with birth families of their adopted children compared to other adoptive parents. Geoff said, “I can say that, well, I don’t know if it mattered much, but we also worked in the non-profit field, and have been accustomed to working with people who are poor, from the inner city, people with developmental disabilities or limited. So we have that experience already, is a part of who we are. I know that’s certainly not true for all gay couples, certainly not two male, guy-guy couples.”

“That was just a unique experience to us because we’re both social workers,” Chris added.

“But perhaps because you have gone through some stuff as same-sex couples, you know, discrimination, this and that, I don’t know if that makes someone more open or not. But I can definitely speak to my own experiences, I don’t know if I want to generalize it,” Geoff mused.

Geoff hypothesized that “gay people try just a little harder,” but is it helpful to portray queer parents as a kind of model minority? Perhaps their desire for inclusion – to be a good citizen – make them amiable to the system’s demands. Nonetheless, in Geoff and Chris case, both being social workers themselves, they were more likely to tolerate the difficulties that come with the job. It is worth noting that perhaps sensing me as the kind of academic who likes to criticize and create problems, Geoff and Chris painted an extremely positive picture of the local DSS, always insisted that any complications were the result of small, isolated

errors and not a system-wide symptom. However, one particular social worker drew strong ire from the couple.

“Well, caseworkers, now that’s a Russian roulette,” Geoff mused. “The caseworker situation is that it runs the gamut who you’re gonna get - someone inexperienced, someone sensitive, someone not sensitive. They’re also, in fairness to the caseworkers, doing the toughest stuff. They’re dealing with tough situations, tough groups, tough dynamics. The caseworker we had for our first foster child - now adopted son - was... relatively new to being a caseworker, not to the county. She wasn’t a good caseworker. She’s probably also inexperienced, she was a nice person, she didn’t mean any harm, but she was inept at...”

“She couldn’t communicate,” Chris identified the source of her ineptitude. “She couldn’t communicate with us what was happening during visits, what was happening with court hearings, what families were involved... She also wasn’t good at documenting things that would happen during visits with the family. We actually took on writing a log of things, of conversations we would have with her, with social workers...”

“With biological families, visits...”

“...things we would hear from people about what would happen during visits, we would document those things...”

“Extensively,” Geoff stressed.

“Yes, extensively. She also seemed to set up this adversarial relationship between the biological family and us right from the beginning. Fairly early from the beginning we had asked to meet them, so that everybody was on the same page, so to speak, so that... I mean, we had their child! But she really seemed to keep us separate, and at one point, wasn’t until several months into us having our first son that we got the opportunity to meet some

extended family, which triggered a good working relationship between us and the biological family.”

“They didn’t know ‘til that point, believe it or not, that the child was with a same-sex family, two guys.”

“The caseworker never told them!” Chris was waving his hands at this point.

“And - this is the only example I can think of off the top of my head with DSS, that there was something related to sexual orientation - she, the caseworker, was fine with us, she was someone that I would have a drink with, she was like that, natural and humorous...”

“I wouldn’t. Maybe you would,” Chris deadpanned.

“Alright, maybe,” Geoff concurred amiably. “But anyway. But she even said, and this wasn’t in an offensive way, just in a sort of almost simplistic way, that she didn’t know how to work with same-sex couples, that it was her first time she had ever done it. And she spoke to her supervisor about it and didn’t feel supported about it, so that was the guy who told us in the class... Anyways, so she was very transparent about it, very upfront, not in a way that I found offensive, like ‘I don’t like you,’ but she’s inexperienced, and it sort of begs the question for those of us in the room, ‘Well, how do you work with same-sex couples who are just like anyone else?’ For the most part. But she sort of pointed that out, that somehow she... And I think that maybe she was saying, if I think back on it, was she didn’t know how to finesse that between the foster parents and the biological family. The biological family was very troubled, had lots of issues, they weren’t easy people to interact with by any stretch, so that may have something to do with it too.”

Although Geoff and Chris insisted that this experience was a singular, isolated incident, it still made me wonder. If the quality and training of social workers at the local

DSS was described as “a Russian roulette,” wouldn’t that signal a system-wide, or at least agency-wide, problem that must be addressed? They also found their homefinders to be “nice, warm, and experienced.” Shouldn’t we expect the same standard with the caseworkers as well? I wondered out loud.

“I think that’s fair,” Geoff said. “From the experience of the homefinders we knew, that’s definitely fair. Just say that,” he pointed to my notebook. “And we’ve talked to a number of foster parents, we know a lot of people, and you hear stories that run the gamut.”

“There seems to be, in my experiences with talking to other foster parents, other caseworkers, legal guardians, that there’s a lot of interpretations of procedures and what to do when with regards to the caseworkers,” Chris elaborated. “There’s just a different ways, some caseworkers seem to tell the foster parents what happens during the visits, other caseworkers don’t... There just seems to be an inconsistency in how policies and procedures are done.”

“It’s like the art of what we do, what they do, you know, where it’s not just following the rule, but how you implement it,” Geoff explained. “Because our experiences with the second two, biological half-siblings - same mom, different dads - the caseworker for them was a totally different experience. Although she was new, she had only been working there for a year and half, and she hadn’t worked in the DSS at all, I think she might’ve been a waitress or something...”

“She was very good.”

“She was fantastic. Part of it was just that she was committed, she was driven, she was extremely clear from the beginning - almost militant - about ‘My goal was about reuniting this family.’ She was very clear on the rules. And then as things changed and

headed towards termination of parental rights, she was clear to the biological family about the rules... You know what I mean? She was good.”

“She communicated information clearly...”

“Everything,” Geoff emphasized.

“And she documented things correctly, and you got a sense that she knew what was going on with the case. And she also had an inherent natural ability to do that though, whereas some people who applied for these jobs take the test, pass the test and do a great job on the test, the civil service test, but don’t have the skills to work with people.”

“What I would call job skills, when I help people with disabilities find jobs, and you know, there’s a job for everyone if there’s a right match. Well, she was in the right match, perhaps the first person wasn’t, perhaps the first person didn’t have the support that she had... It was a combination of factors,” Geoff concluded.

A combination of factors, then, contributed to Chris and Geoff’s negative experience with this one particular caseworker. There was the issue of personalities, lack of experience and training, unclear and/or inconsistent policies, etc.; a whole host of potential pitfalls that meant that navigating all and coming out unscathed was like an “art” that may never be mastered. Geoff was observant when he acknowledged that all cases were uniquely messy; if these were not messy situations, the child would not have ended up in the DSS’s care in the first place. Nonetheless, policy and training are two areas that concrete steps could be taken to ensure more positive experiences for all families, especially considering that they were the two most common complaints made by queer families (Goldberg 2012, 69). In terms of training, however, Geoff raised an interesting point. Is additional training necessary if queer couples are just like any other couples, like ‘normal’ couples? Or is it solely about familiarity

with queer people in general? What are some of the specific procedural changes that queer couples may demand? Here we see both the politics of proximity and queer liberalism colliding and merging. The recognition – and familiarity – of difference gives way to the refusal to address difference, assuming that homophobia is a past project already (see Chapters 2 and 3).

By the time Geoff and Chris completed their second adoption, though, such difficulties were assuredly in the past. Geoff characterized it as “The whole support thing. We were also better connected to the system, but another thing that played into it was that we had much better communications with and a much better caseworker. That helped a lot too. It wasn’t easy at times. There were still moments - with our first son, they had visits twice a month, every other week for an hour, that’s it. Things changed, and I guess systematically for the system that was a good thing, because they have this, what’s it called, Family Place now where they do all sorts of intensive services where they help keep families together, so the visits were more frequent, three times a week. We didn’t have to transport, but that was a whirlwind of dealing with the county, and the transporters, and then do the daycare, and the transporters, some of them were just horrible at the long time and how they interacted with people... So that whole process was a bit convoluted, a bit complicated, but emotionally it was much easier.”

Emotional issues aside, with their careers and their familiarity with the whole process, Geoff and Chris are decidedly insiders now. They became strong advocates for the child welfare system. “[I]t’s all good to do that kind of outreach,” Geoff said, “to let people know that this is a viable option because even if now for me, I’ve been through it for so long, it sort of becomes normal for me, and I forget probably how I felt the beginning of the process, and

I'm sure there are many people who feel that way. Even people I know who are couples, certainly guys who are together, when I talked about it they, there's sort of this, I don't know how to describe it, I don't know, you could tell the wheels were spinning, like, 'Should we do this?' or perhaps 'Why didn't we do this?' or 'Could I do this?' There's questions, I think, over people's heads."

Since Chris and Geoff were one of the first same-sex couples to jointly adopt here, and it had only been seven years since their first adoption was finalized in June, 2005, I asked them, "What was the biggest change regarding the attitude towards same-sex parents in DSS?"

Geoff replied, "The only thing that I can think of is that it is perhaps more normalized now, more common. I suspect that the caseworker that I told you about, that we had a hard time with at the beginning, seven years later would perhaps be more comfortable with it, I'm guessing. She also by the way, ironically, incidentally was the adoption worker for our two little ones 'cause she was in the adoption unit, so we saw each other at the National Adoption Day."

"And we found that out, really, like, 'Oh, no.' But it actually ended up being okay," Chris said.

"It was nice," Geoff elaborated. "She got to see [our first child], who's older now, and she was good with that, actually, and I actually took a picture of them together 'cause I've never had a picture like that. And that's another thing, I think it's important to have photos and pictures with whether it's biological families or caseworkers of their story, and we've got better at that, so on Adoption Day I took a picture of the two of them, I thought maybe one day he'd like that, you know? And that I want it today."

“Oh and the Adoption Day, I don’t know if you’re interested in that, but that’s a good program, a good day, that the county does, I feel. We actually were - I don’t know - they chose us to receive, on adoption day, an American flag that flew over the capitol, and it was presented to us by...”

“And we were chosen for this!” Geoff beamed.

“...by a representative, who at the time was Dan Maffei.”

““Who was that?” I was like.” Geoff quipped. “Yeah it was Dan Maffei, and I walked in there and again, we got to know people who were there, like the attorney who was also a foster-adoptive parent that does a lot the adoptions. [unintelligible recording here – I blamed it on the faulty AC in the background.]...the news is here the want to talk to you guys, oh boy, so we were on the news and they filmed it, and adoption was on the news and it was neat, and it was in the paper, so I got more people to this day, no anonymity, who would come up to me and say, ‘Oh, I saw you on the news, and we saw what you did, and it was a great thing!’”

“And we both got, when we both got presented with the American flag, we both had to walk up in front of all of the family court judges, the attorneys, the adoption workers, so that was pretty cool.”

“Pretty normalized, yeah.”

“Yeah, pretty normal,” Chris concluded.

Perhaps there is no more appropriate image for the kind of queer liberal citizenship today, as a gay couple and their adopted children stepped up and received an American flag to mark their inclusion as citizens. Queer politics, then, is reduced to and simultaneously magnified in the personal. As Geoff put it,

It's a personal choice. [...] I think it's important to know is that yes, people - even when I say to people that "Yes, we're doing it because we just want a family" - will say "Oh no, it's still special what you did." The truth of the matter is we also did it for self-serving reasons. We wanted a family, we wanted kids. Not to help change the world. Hopefully along the way we did that a little, but we're not doing it for any other reason- the reasons we're doing it for are the same as why other people have kids, not just altruistic reasons.

Shannon: Complex Relations

It was difficult to arrange a meeting with Shannon. After her initial response via e-mail, we were not able to set a time since she was quite busy and my offer of calling was turned down. As I later learned, Shannon was busy for good reasons. Although unemployed after being laid off from her job as a mental health counselor due to budget cuts a few months earlier, her free time was still filled by her four kids adopted through her local DSS. She also lived with her current girlfriend, who has another four kids of her own. "It's hard getting all of them into the SUV at once!" she joked. In her mid-thirties, she again was actively looking for a job as well. Besides a packed schedule, meeting at her home was not an option, so finally we arranged to meet at her local library, where we sat at a little table behind the stacks, hopefully away from the librarian's disapproving glances as we started the interview.

Shannon's stories are intriguing because her adoption cases were quite messy, and compared to Chris and Geoff, her interactions with the local DSS tended to be quite adversarial in nature. She also had much more to say about the delicate personal relationships that one built up (and tore down) during the process. Specifically, we get to see Shannon navigating not only the adoption process, but multiple foster children, difficult birth families and social workers, and personal relationships too. It seemed like an outrageous number, but since 2002 Shannon had had eighteen kids come in and out of her home, and she adopted four of them – Ella, Carlos, Jonny, and Luis – permanently. How did her role as a foster parent start?

“When I first got into foster care, I was dating someone – her name was Alice – and we started dating, and we only wanted to bring in one or two kids. But once we saw the needs and the kids, we ended up lots of times having six kids at a time, which was a lot. But these are the four that we adopted,” Shannon pointed a photograph and named them for me one by one. “We got Ella when she was 11 days old, Carlos was 18 months old, Jonny was two and a half, and Luis was four and a half. They’re a sibling set, and their ages are all kind of weird when we got them because we got them at separate times: we got Jonny first, and then a few months later we got Luis, and then we got Carlos, and then we got Ella when she was born.”

Adopting one child is quite an involved process, and rarely does someone adopt four altogether. Although Shannon did not plan on adopting so many kids, she had always wanted to be a mother.

“[Alice and I] didn’t have those talks, not at the very very beginning. But I’ve wanted kids for a very long time, and she was more ‘not really’ until we did it ‘cause I wanted to do it sort of thing, and I pretty much convinced her to do all of it, and she was always uncomfortable all the way along but sort of just did it.”

Shannon felt strongly about having kids for many reasons, but Alice was not as enthusiastic about the idea. This difference in their desires for parenthood contributed to the dissolution of the relationship later. But even with the threat of relationship strife, Shannon’s desires for kids did not abate as they went back quite deep in her personal history and philosophy.

“I always was the one good with the kids, I was the one the cousins always sort of grouped themselves with me, and we would go to family picnics and I was just always

around kids. And I'm a mental health counselor, so I work primarily with children. I also have this drive where I feel like I should give back to my community because community gives a lot to us even if we don't think so, and I think it's- my favorite quote is 'To be the change you want to see in the world' by Ghandi, so I tried to – and fail, a lot of times – but tried to do what I can not to just complain about society and to do something about it. My father's mother did foster care growing up, so we had cousins who were not really cousins, they were just foster kids who stayed in our lives throughout the years, and it was just always something that was normal, so it was not a huge stretch for me to immediately go into the foster care system and to look for kids.

“I think that Alice was uncomfortable because well, she's a little bit of a paranoid sort in the first place, so it might be interesting for you to do the interview with her too just to see how different her answers are from mine, but I think she was nervous about... we were both worried because right around the time when we first started, there were stories in the news about foster kids setting their foster parents' houses on fire, bio[logical] parents figuring out where they lived and shooting them, like there was maybe two or three different stories around that time, so we did actually make some rules where we were careful, like bio parents weren't allowed to come to the house unless we knew them for a long time, and we would meet them somewhere else, and stuff like that. So those were concerns of hers that I didn't really have except when she gave them to me from the media, then I was like, 'Okay, maybe...’”

Compared to gay couples like Chris and Geoff, in vitro fertilization and artificial insemination were realistic options for Shannon and Alice. They did explore the option, although they dismissed it as well. “Initially, before we did foster care, I did go to [an

infertility treatment clinic], and started to go through that process. But I actually found that process more uncomfortable than even working, and being out, in the foster care system. They ask you a lot of personal questions about your sex life and why you can't have kids, and I just didn't really like the atmosphere or the feeling of it, and I was nervous about getting pregnant and doing all that stuff – I wasn't really ready for that, I don't think. And right around the same time was also the tsunami, so what year was that, do you remember?"

The two of us tried to figure out the year of the Indian Ocean earthquake and Tsunami, eventually settled on 2002. It turned out that it was actually 2004, which would make Shannon's timeline a bit suspect. Nevertheless, the sentiment remains quite real in her narrative, as altruism featured prominently as a motivation for adoption.

"Anyway, it was right around the tsunami, 'cause I remember that I was going up there, and I had to get all these shots, and we had to like pick out sperm, and that was really weird, and I was just like ugh," Shannon made a gagging motion with her hands. "And the tsunami happened, and they were talking about all the orphans, and I was just like, 'Why am I doing this?' Like, I'm not comfortable with it, it's not what I really want to do, and there's always the kids in the world who need families, and I was just like naturally went over to the foster care. It wasn't really like, you know, in hindsight, I could say, 'Oh, the tsunami pushed me over the edge to doing foster care,' it wasn't as obvious at the time, but looking back now, I think I was just so uncomfortable talking to the doctors. They would come in and they would be like, 'Oh, I don't know, you're a lesbian and we don't know if insurance will cover it then,' and just a lot of those silly things that people say that did make it more uncomfortable, than just saying 'Oh we're gay' and them saying, 'Oh okay.' In the foster care system, it didn't really happen the same way. I don't really know how else to explain it."

Although altruism drove Shannon toward foster care and adoption, Alice wanted a biological child instead, and this was one disagreement in a long line of disagreements over parenting.

“Not for me, but [a biological child] was for Alice, it was a big deal for her. She, I don’t know, she had all these weird notions of good genes/bad genes, and I just didn’t really realize it at the time, and that belief that she has is essentially ultimately one of the reasons we broke up, one of the many. And it just sort of evolved itself when we started getting kids who sort of had these troublesome mental health issues, when she started having a harder and harder time when these things were coming out. I remember when we were looking at sperms, and I said ‘What do you think about this?’ She would be like, ‘Well, that person doesn’t look anything like me,’ and I was like, ‘Oh, it didn’t even occur to me to think to get somebody who looked like you.’ I don’t know.” Shannon laughed uncomfortably.

The desire for a child that bore physical resemblance did not seem to make sense to Shannon, but it certainly was an important consideration for many parents, even those who adopted. It was also important to note that Shannon felt quite awkward discussing her relationship with Alice during the interview, not because it was personal but because Alice was not present to give her side of the story. She mentioned after the interview that had she been able to convince Alice to participate as well, I might have gotten an entirely different conclusion. By this point, one got the impression that Shannon and Alice’s separation was inevitable, and this event played a pivotal role in Shannon’s relationship with the local DSS.

“The thing that was most uncomfortable about being in the foster care system and being gay was just that I think probably pretty similar for heterosexual couples in that your life is an open book to them, and they know all about what’s going on in your house, they

know who lives there, they know if there's problems... When the breakup happened, for example, Alice and I had the kids for years. We broke up in 2009, in July, and the kids weren't legally adopted yet because each of the kids had to be freed, they had different fathers, and it just took a really really long time for the whole process, 'cause we got them from when they were removed to when all of their terminations, trying to reunite, like all that stuff took a really long time 'cause they can't just take your kids and say 'Here you go.' Anyways, she and I started having trouble near the end, and part of that was like I said I started feeling like shit, and racial issues, and paranoia issues, so we started just kind of separating, and those issues started becoming part of...

"It wasn't like my partner and I can't have a fight, but it was like my partner and I had a fight, and my kids went to counseling and talked about it, and we had to talk about it with the caseworker, and then we broke up right before the adoption and that was like a really huge deal. Because I don't think the county had ever really dealt with that before. They've dealt it with heterosexual married couples, but legally with unmarried – 'cause there was no marriage in New York at that time – gay couples, there was no standing and foundation in the court, so it turned into a little... It was a big deal. We put the caseworkers on their head, that's for sure. Screwing around, trying to figure out what to do, but another layer to that was that Alice had started drinking, and she was a recovering alcoholic for the entire time of our relationship, and I had given her time to stop drinking, and it just wasn't... I told her I was gonna leave if she didn't stop drinking 'cause my father's an alcoholic and I couldn't be in a relationship with someone who's gonna drink like that. And one day I came home from work and she was drunk and the kids were there, so, no. So I left with the kids, I wasn't leaving the kids behind, and brought them... I had a friend who lives here, that's why

I knew the schools were good, and I came out here and across county lines, and called the caseworker and let 'em know that I had left here with the kids, so we had the ensuing court battle and all that stuff too.”

Shannon blurted out that entire response, stopped and took a breath. “We were kind of a divorcing couple with foster care, and the court system that managed us too. All the judges and the lawyers, the caseworkers, nobody really knew what to do.”

Although Shannon and Alice’s separation was an exceptional case, this confusion also demonstrated the potential violence inadequate policies and training could have on families. Rather than being limited to social workers, this inadequacy and confusion extended upward in the system as well. Shannon’s stories took quite a few twists and turns, so I asked her if we could work through it more chronologically – it was getting hard to keep track of everything.

“So the first kid we got was sort of an interesting story because, like I said, we were buying a new house at the time, and we did the training in the summer, and near the end of the summer we went on vacation, so there was this big group of paperwork that we had to sign, like those legal paperwork thing that, like, ‘We agree not to hit the kids’ and stuff like that. And so we had that big pack of paperwork that you get at the end, and we were on vacation and then we came back, and we had this huge housewarming party, and like I said, I don’t really drink, maybe occasionally, and at that time Alice wasn’t drinking at all, but it was a housewarming party so people brought their own liquor and bottles of wine to say congratulations. So there was like alcohol everywhere, like not kidding, and that was like a Saturday, and then Sunday we were beat from the party so we just hung out – I mean, we’ve picked up what we had to but the rest we didn’t. So Monday morning it was like, ‘We have a

sibling set, a baby and two kids – a two-year-old and a ten-year-old – and will you take them?’ and I was like ‘OMG we just had people over’ and they were like ‘It’s okay, we really need somebody for this family’ and I was like ‘Yeah, when will they be here?’ and they’re like ‘I don’t know, in a couple of hours.’ So I had like two hours to like opening cupboards and throwing wine bottles in there and closing it – I think we ended up giving all of it away ‘cause – I don’t know whatever happened to them, it was like [unintelligible recording] I don’t ever know. So funny ‘cause like we never drink and the day the caseworker’s coming over we were like hiding alcohol!’”

I was astounded, especially after talking to Geoff and Chris, how unpredictable and urgent the needs for foster parents can be. One of the reasons agencies focus so much energy on foster parent recruitment is that most people turn down their calls when the need arises, so having a huge list helps with finding someone in a pinch. The prospect of getting a call in the middle of night was anxiety-producing for many foster parents, but Shannon appeared to welcome it.

“I think it was anxiety producing for Alice because they would call whenever, and a lot of times it wouldn’t be convenient, like you would be going away for the weekend or you’d be busy and have stuff to do, so it always was interruptive. But for me it was kind of exciting, it was like ‘Yay, someone else is coming!’ My mother’s is like a garage sale hound, so my mother would get stuff for different aged kids ‘cause we had so many kids coming in and out and I had like totes with all different sizes and it would just be like the game kind of like an everyday affair. She would call and be like ‘Do you want a two-year-old shirt?’ and I go upstairs in the attic and pull down the two-year-old tote, you know? So for me it wasn’t that big of a deal but I adjust easy. Sometimes I started that... as these kids came and these

kids were adopted and we started getting more of a family unit, bringing more kids into the household started to become disruptive, so that's when we started backing away having new kids coming in and start maintaining just with these guys.”

However, taking in kids frequently took an emotional toll on Shannon as well. Foster parents do form emotional attachments to their foster children, especially for those who intended to permanently adopt when the situation permitted it. One of the reasons many prospective adoptive parents avoided the public system is that it can be difficult to adopt directly.²⁰ The MAPP/GPS certification allows one to both foster and adopt, and public

²⁰ For Geoff and Chris, this fear was quickly assuaged because a social worker implied to them that in most cases, biological reunification was unlikely if not impossible, so the chance of their foster child being freed for adoption was quite high. Geoff brought up this particular exchange without prompting,

One thing, can I talk about that? We went, and this is important, we went into this with the idea of adoption and adoption only. And although we knew very vaguely, kind of, what a foster care is, we went in, and this sort of encouraged us, that the message we got from the supervisor at the session was that although, she pretty much said this, and this was helpful, although there are, the goal is reunification with biological family, many kids come in to the system, they just, that's not gonna happen. And she even said something to the effect of, you know, “I think a lot of times the system recognizes that, there's families that, you know, this is kid number 8, and they've lost seven others to foster care,” and so there's an element of, you know, with a wink and a nod, “yeah, we're gonna follow the process as far as reunification, but the handwriting's on the wall.” So that, for us as potential adoptive parents, was hopeful. And that was important.

Without access to the case histories or statistics during my research, it was difficult to ascertain the percentage of foster children who were eventually reunited with their biological families. Nonetheless, there have been some changes that suggest that the local DSS is increasing its efforts on family reunification. A social worker I interviewed, Tina, said,

Tina: The focus of the state is to find blood families for children who are removed from their own families, and we've just within the last month have two workers from Hillside we've contracted, they're called Family Find, and I guess they'll be looking genealogically for relatives, that's their thing.

Sean: So that's part of the whole biological family reunification process, right?

Tina: Yeah, they're going to be looking for several degrees of separation.

agencies, pressed for the need for more foster parents, often encourage prospective parents to sign up for both. In addition, when a foster child is freed for adoption, his or her current foster parents receive first priority consideration since if reunification with biological family is not possible, agencies would avoid physical relocation whenever possible to promote further stability. This meant that waiting parents who refuse to foster often had to wait even longer for a child that fits their parameters. In Shannon's case, one particular foster child – Leo – made her keenly aware of the constantly present threat of losing a child under many different circumstances.

Recall that Shannon had fostered 18 kids total, and ended up adopting four of them. Leo was among the first group of kids Shannon and Alice brought into their home. “We had another little boy, his name was Leo, and his caseworker, his name was Todd,” Shannon recounted. “When Todd gave him to us he told us that we were probably going to be able to keep this one because the mother had lost a baby, and he was two months when I got him. He had been in another foster home before ours and [his previous foster mother] couldn't manage having a baby 'cause she was getting older, she was an older woman, so I thought we probably would be able to keep this one. The [biological] mom already had six or seven removed and she had like 13 kids total already, and it doesn't go well and most of them get removed from her, so we got him thinking that we would be able to adopt him. And the mother was a drug addict, and she was MIA the whole year the first year we had him, and then all of a sudden she came back into the picture, and all of a sudden they were like 'We're giving him back.' That was really huge for us – for me – because she was gone for the whole year, and she came back into the picture, and a month later she was going home [with Leo].

This exchange suggests that for prospective parents, the risk of losing a foster child is still present, and that the child welfare system still privileges blood connections – even very distant ones – over a stable foster family potentially willing to adopt.

It was kind of like this horrible... like almost worst than a death because he was so little and he was going home and I knew the mother was not reliable and wasn't going to take care of him. Sure enough, a few months after we sent him home, he got removed again and then an aunt spoke up for him because his mom left him alone.

“Part of the reason I mentioned this is because the reaction we got was, ‘Well, you’re foster care, you knew that he could go home,’ and people were very not understanding about that loss, that relationship loss, and that response was really critical that we got. ‘Why are you so upset about it? You should’ve expected this.’ And I got really angry because it was impossibly hard for me to imagine him being... I would drive by the house that the mom was staying in, and it was just awful, the situation was really awful, just imagining what was going to become of him and how different his life was going to be now. I think all of us were a little egocentric, thinking that with us things are gonna be better, safer, and you’re gonna be smarter, and happier, you know? So all of that stuff too, and there was just no recognition for that loss at all. And on top of that, a lot of people do have that, ‘Oh, you’re a foster parent, you must be in it for the money’ mentality, so ‘Why did you care? He’s not your kid,’ that kind of thing. It was a really big deal during that time.”

This loss was “almost worst than death” for Shannon. Although she expected Leo to be freed for adoption, this ultimately did not happen and this loss was devastating. Shannon was more traumatized when this loss was not understood, and she was criticized for her poor management of her own expectations and emotions. But is such management ever realistic? Many foster parents leave the foster care system within the first year, and most cite inadequate training and emotional support as their primary reason for quitting (Chipungu and Bent-Goodley 2004). Asking foster parents to manage their expectations, especially those

who eventually wanted to adopt, perhaps misses the point entirely. Rather than setting up an antagonistic and adversarial relationship between the foster and the biological parents, more resources should be allocated to emotional support for all families involved.²¹

Shannon and Alice eventually adopted four of the foster children – Jonny, Luis, Carlos, and Ella – who were a sibling group who came in at different times. Managing a household when kids came in and out was a challenging and chaotic experience. Jonny was

²¹ Setting up an adversarial relationship between the biological family and the foster parents is pointless and does not advance the child's interests in any way. This has been demonstrated in private open adoptions again and again, where adoptive parents are taught to incorporate the birth parents into the child's life, with terms being actively negotiated among all parties (Goldberg et al. 2011). In foster parenting and public adoptions, biological family and foster parents can often work together to provide adequate support to the child as well. Consider this example from Chris and Geoff's second foster (and later, adopted) child,

Geoff: The day we picked them up, this caseworker - this is important - we showed up at the hospital the day before Thanksgiving – Chris' birthday, it happened to be – to pick up Josh, he was in NICU at Crouse here. And the caseworker was gonna meet us there, walk in to the hospital, and his mother and father were there. It was actually really sad, they were crying - we didn't expect it, and the caseworker was like, "You know, let's just get this can open now." It was exactly the opposite of what we just described about the time before [with their first caseworker]. But they were, the biological family, were, we expected an adversarial, adversity or something, what you might think. It wasn't that way, they were actually thankful. Remember that? They were thanking us for doing this... It was very normal, human emotion, then they took pictures of all of us - that was a little weird. We still have pictures of that day. So we had a lot of contact with them. Somewhere along the way too, the mom sort of, I don't really care that much, but sort of an issue, and I think they tightened up some of this with foster care now, is that somehow she heard my last name somewhere, my last name is unique, unlike your Chris' name, last name, which isn't unique, I mean, in one of the [phone] books...

Chris: Thanks for that! [rolling his eyes]

Geoff: Well, it isn't! There are a million people with your name in the phone book. And the point is that she probably googled my name or something, found it and called us at home. Now she didn't abuse it, she and her mom - and they're still calling to this day every now and then - and it's okay. But we had that contact as well, probably was it a year into it? It was well into it, but somewhere along the way, they learned our name and they called us and just - again, it was a boundary issue, but it wasn't really over the top with it, so... And I think ironically I think it helped, because it made us real, and it made them know that "Oh, perhaps these were people who would allow me to see or have communications post-adoption." We kind of knew that. I don't want to say that we were disingenuous about it, but we also had this awareness of, you need to make people comfortable, so that this will make it easier for everybody going forward.

Shannon and Alice's first foster child: "Jonny came and stayed with us for a week and went home to his grandmother. She did the finger printing and all that and got him. That was in September of that year." Then came a stream of new foster children: "And then after that, we had Leo... and the two kids that we said that we wanted. And the Monday after Christmas, about 3pm I got a phone call, I think Christmas that year was Sunday... every time Pauline [the homefinder] called she would be like 'You're my last resort, please take these kids.' It was always really desperate, and they had tried all day to get the kid a home, because it was the Monday after Christmas, no one was around and nobody was answering, nobody wanted to do it, and she's like, 'We have this little boy, and he was with you in September, will you take him back?' And that's how it all really started."

It turned out that Jonny's grandmother returned him to the DSS, claiming that she was not able to deal with his behavioral problems anymore. "So [Jonny] came back in December, what happened was his – and even now his behavior is still challenging – but at the time it was just unbelievable to me. What happened was his grandmother... said 'I don't want him, don't bring him back,' pack up all of his clothes, brought his clothes to his... the grandmother told the medical transport people who bring him to his visits for his mom, so he left to go on a visit to his mom, and then the grandmother packed up his stuff, brought it over to his mom's house, told the medical motor's people not to bring him back, so after his visit with his mom, he was left behind at the DSS all day, and his mom didn't even stick around to hang out with him. And he was like two, two and a half. So here's this two and a half year old, the Monday after Christmas, his grandmother's like 'Get lost,' and his mother's like 'Nice seeing ya' and he's sitting at the DSS all day – I don't know, it's just hard."

That was how Jonny re-entered Shannon's life. Between Jonny's initial and second placements, 14 foster children had come in and out of Shannon and Alice's home. In January, Jonny's brother Luis was removed and brought to Shannon as well. "[At Jonny, Carlos, and Luis'] initial removal from their mom, [Ella] wasn't born yet, the mom was pregnant with her. Luis in the initial removal went with his dad, who lived in Pennsylvania. In January they called me and told me that [Luis' dad] was homeless and robbing houses and would I be able to take [Luis] in? [At the time] I had Leo who... was two months old, we had Jonny who was two years old, and [another foster child] Ned who was 13. And [Luis] was four and a half, and so we almost weren't gonna do it 'cause we already had three and we only wanted to have two. But then a two-month-old and a ten-month-old didn't leave anybody for Jonny to play with, and it made it really hard for me to take care of a newborn, and to keep a teenager busy, and a two-and-a-half year old busy! So I was just like 'Maybe a four-year-old will help keep them busy!' And it's his brother, how do you say no to his brother? So we said yes, and he came, and it did actually help to have someone to play with, so that's how we got Luis...

"In March, Carlos' aunt decided that she couldn't take care of him anymore, so he came in March. So he was 19 months... So we had [four toddlers and a teenager] then. And then [Ella] was born in June, at that point we already had her three siblings... We thought we're gonna adopt Leo, but the reason we had kept all three boys was because we really wanted to keep them together. So when she was born, I had all boys at the house, and they didn't want to have me taking her because you're not allowed to have three kids under two, and Carlos was 23 months old. So I fought for her for full 11 days, I was like, 'If Carlos was a month older, we wouldn't even be having this conversation. There isn't any difference between how he was now and how he would be in a month, and the whole reason I had all

these kids was to keep the siblings together.’ So she was born on the June 2, and they gave her to us on June 13, finally. That was really hard because I didn’t really understand why they were... If they had a family who was willing to keep that family together... why would they want to separate them?”

At the end, it was Shannon’s advocacy that kept all four siblings together. But initially, she was not planning to adopt them. Having planned on adopting only two children, Shannon and Alice thought they were going to adopt Leo, but that plan did not come to fruition. After Leo was taken back to his biological mother, Shannon and Alice then started the adoption process for the four siblings.

“It wasn’t really waiting at first, because we weren’t really sure that we’re gonna adopt these guys. We’d already had a lot of kids come in and go home and all that sorts of stuff. A lot of our time was just spent getting their needs met, because Luis didn’t even know what the letter ‘A’ was, they were really severely neglected and abused. They had a lot of issues, a lot of anxieties, and they were supposed to... he was just afraid of everything. They thought there were bugs on them all the time, nightmares, and just coping with the needs and what kids do, getting them to counseling on time, and getting to school all the time, doing all these things was how we kept busy in the beginning.

“And then it didn’t start becoming waiting until nearly the time when Alice and I broke up, so that was when I was feeling more and more uncomfortable because more of our lives were public, and the kids were older, they were in counseling and they were talking more about what was going on at home. It was hard because these kids come from really hard background and you were trying to do a lot of healing, and when you’re going through a hard

time, it impacts them as well. So there's a lot of conflict in that. A lot of that time, the hardest part of waiting was after Alice and I broke up."

The dissolution of Shannon and Alice's marriage complicated the adoption of the four siblings, in large part because the DSS and the court was not prepared to handle a divorcing lesbian couple – not legally married to begin with – who still wanted to jointly adopt the kids.

"Initially, when we broke up, we were still gonna both adopt the kids. And before I left, that was the agreement that we're gonna hold it out, wait for the adoption [to be finalized], and go our separate ways and share the kids like any other couple would share custody. That was what we thought was going to be, but after I left the agency wouldn't let us... There was a lot of talk about whether we would both be allowed to adopt them. We found a lawyer who had dealt with another gay couple just to make sure that we would both be able to adopt them, so we went through a lot of energy and effort to adopt them at the same time together. When we separated, they had to pick someone who was going to adopt them, and that took them three, four months to do. I left at the end of July and they told me around Thanksgiving, I think. So that was the hardest waiting because they couldn't remove the kids from both of our care, and at that time it was becoming clear that neither of us had a whole lot of rights to the kids because ultimately the agency does until the adoption is done. So really, the only reason why the kids weren't removed because of our breakup was because they wanted to preserve the integrity of the relationship they had with us and not causing another huge disruption for them."

It was during the breakup that that the ramifications of their legal standing (or the lack thereof) of their relationship was made clear to Shannon and Alice. Not only were they unable to advocate on their own behalf since the guardianship of the kids still resided with

the DSS, but they could not even continue a joint adoption or work out a potential custody arrangement for post-adoption privately with independent legal representation for both. Instead, their fate was left in the hands of the DSS, who ended up deciding which one of them were going to adopt the kids.

“There was a lot of time between the time I left and investigating even more into who we are as people and making that decision – who would be the better parent to adopt them. I left with the kids, I was not giving up my kids, you know? So they were with me primarily during the whole time and visiting Alice, and there were other people... Because I was more of the face, I think, the one who brings the kids to all the appointments and I was the one who had the mental health background, so that other counselors, and it was real subtle, the reason why they picked me, except for that Alice was drinking and being more erratic. So she would call and being pissed off with the caseworkers on the phone, and she was rightfully angry because I had the kids and she didn't, and I think if you were to talk to her about how they treated her, she would've internalized a lot of that more as because she was gay than I did because I had the kids, so first off my point of view was different, and I can't imagine what it would've been like [for Alice] during those four months.

“It put all of us in a really bad position too because I wasn't allowed to let her see the kids outside of what the agency said. I pretty much had to do every single thing the agency said, I was at their mercy during that time. I had to take the kids to a million different things, obsessed over whether there was trauma from my breakup, and we had all these things that we need to do, so it was craziness. Part of the thing that impacted me differently that the agency didn't understand, really, with being a gay couple, is that I would stay at home with the kids and I was going to school, so I wasn't working for a large amount of that time, and

so our house and our car and all those things were in Alice's name. So when I left, I had to leave the house, the car and everything, and I had to find a new place to live in like five minutes, and I had to get a car in like five minutes, so in those weeks span of time we were essentially homeless and had nothing. The police ended up letting me go back to get some of my stuff, but a lot of the kids' stuff was not mine, so I was only able to take what Alice let me take that day. It was pretty much starting all over because pretty much everything I own was in Alice's possession, and that made it really hard because you're being judged by this agency – are you gonna be a fit parent? – and here you are coping with all these things that might not have been. Maybe it would've been for a straight couple they had to fight it out in court, so it would've been the same for them, but there wasn't really any space for me to fight that out because I had to worry about the kids too, and they were my primary interest right then. I couldn't take Alice to court and fight about the car when I was worried about losing the kids. Any space I had to deal with losing everything I built that I knew was gone because I had to worry about the kids. So that sucks because you lost all the things that put into all that time, and she still lives in the house that I put the down payment on. My school refund paid for that car. So those sorts of things were hard, and I don't think it would've been the same for a straight couple.”²²

Shannon and Alice's lack of legal standing meant that they essentially went through the adoption process twice, first as an unmarried couple jointly adopting, and later as two single applicants competing for custody (with the DSS formally endorsing Shannon).

“We went through the process twice, though, because we went through a lot of the court process together as a couple, filing, getting a lawyer, and doing a lot of that kind of

²² It was during the breakup that Shannon relocated to suburban Wayne County, where she currently lives (see Chapter 1).

stuff together, but when we broke up, the whole investigation thing had to happen to make sure that the child's with the right person. [Social workers from the DSS] were really worried about what Alice was gonna do, what her rights were and what her standing was. In the basis of their account and what ended up happening in court was that she didn't really have any standing 'cause she's just a foster parent and it's actually the county that had the custody of the kids, not the foster parents." Ironically, what hurt Shannon and Alice as a couple with the DSS ended up benefiting Shannon in the court. Since Alice was just a foster parent and they were never married, she had no legal basis to challenge for custody once the DSS decided to endorse Shannon as the preferred applicant for adoption. The acrimonious breakup deeply hurt Shannon, and she wanted a joint adoption despite the breakup anyway.

"But a lot of people in the court and the foster system, which I was really happy about even though I wanted the kids to myself – of course, everybody does – they were really concerned with what was best for the kids, regardless of the fact that we're a lesbian couple. Our judge really wanted the kids to be able to see Alice, she really wanted to give Alice a fair shot to be a part of their lives, and really thought it was important to keep the kids together, to do that visitation just like a regular couple would. So I thought that was really good. I don't know if Alice would say the same thing because she didn't really get a lot of time with them during that time, and it was really hard 'cause I had no way to control that, you know what I mean? First of all, I was pretty angry with her, but second of all, even if I had wanted to, the agency set the visiting times. She shot herself in the foot a couple times, you know? Like that time when she called and yelled at the caseworker that went to supervise visits. And that made it worse for her. I don't really know all the thing that were said behind closed doors with them and how that was for her, but... So after they decided on me, we had to go through

some of that process again, and then I ended up adopting them by myself following November [2009].

“I left in July [2008], so it took a year and a half for the agency to settle in and be comfortable with me adopting them by myself. And then the kids were real upset because they didn't have a lot of support in their lives and their family, biological family, had nothing to do with them, and they missed [Alice]. So during that whole time all I could do was to say, ‘You have to trust me. You have to know that I know you care about her too, and that's important.’ So after the adoption, then I had control over when they could see her and all that sort of stuff.

“I don't know if she would say this, she probably wouldn't either, but in hindsight looking back, I'm really glad that I adopted them by myself instead of adopting them as a couple mostly because I feel like I have good judgment, so what happened was as a way to resolve the whole court conflict, we signed a paper that said that I was willing to facilitate a relationship with her and the children under my discretion. So it pretty much says that if I say they can go, they can go, and if I say you can't, then there's really nothing you can do about it. And I think it works great because any kind of arguing, I don't think we do any of that, a lot of the custody parents, where they both have custody, it sort of makes me wish like there's a way to determine who's going to be the more reasonable parent as far as all of this goes, who can really rationalize and work things through, and then just giving them that power! Because with a few, I mean, we've been separated now for three years, and this July was four years, and we've had very few incidents...

“It's very rare that I say no [to Alice spending time with the kids] unless there's something else that we have to do or they have something going on at school, or I don't think

it's a good time. Like I started saying no towards the end of the school year because she would want them during the week and spent the night at her house in the city, and she would drop them off at school in the morning, and they'd be at school and they can't really deal with a lot of change and adjustments and they were having a hard time at school and the teachers started noticing. So near the end of the school year, I was like, if they can't go to bed earlier and be more ready for school the next day, then they're not able to spend the night at your house before they go to school. So that was hard too because it was one of the first times when I really put a limit on when she could see them, and I don't really like doing it because even though I would never let her adopt them because I don't trust her, I do understand that it must feel unfair to her, in her position, and how she must've felt about it.”

Despite a trying period during the breakup and the subsequent legal battle, Shannon and Alice today remain on friendly terms, and Alice participates in the four kids' lives whenever she can. Indeed, as circumstances around their personal relationships with each other and with others in their social networks change, Shannon and Alice together work to create their family out of personal connections and fluid boundaries all across the Rochester area. As Shannon describes their current arrangement, “It's interesting that at school and even in court, [the kids] call me Mom, and they call [Alice] Mom, and I have a new partner, Alice has a new partner... and we just blew their minds! It's like, how many lesbians are coming to visit today?! One of the nurses was really funny, she was like ‘Okay, I thought I was all progressive and everything and didn't really miss a beat when I see a lesbian couple, but then a divorced lesbian couple came in with new partners and everything, and I just didn't know what to do with myself!’ And the boys, the kids, none of their dads were ever involved in their lives, they all had different dads. Luis especially remembers his own mother, so we

joke sometimes that they have five mothers in their lives and no father! And you gotta sort of feel bad for them.”

In many ways, Shannon’s parenting journey came full-circle, figuratively and spatially, at the Rochester Pride Parade. During the legal challenges, the kids had their own lawyers assigned to them by the DSS as well to ensure that their needs were being met in any legal decision handed down. Their assigned lawyer, Marie, happened to be a lesbian. Shannon suspected that her assignment was intentional, so that as a lesbian “she would be able to see the dynamic between Alice and I and be objective to our situation – subjective to our objective, if that makes sense!” Shannon had attended the parade with her kids, and it turned out that both Marie and the presiding judge were marching together. Marie saw Shannon and the kids watching the parade, so she excitedly pointed them out. “She was like ‘Judge, judge, judge!’ So the judge came over and saw the kids, saw how big they were now and gave me a big hug. I’m sure a lot of people don’t have experiences I do, and I’m sure that people will say negative things – I don’t remember one negative thing, really, maybe some ignorance that stands out, but I just thought it was really cool that here I am, a lesbian, and all that crap happened, I totally made their lives hell, and three years later she’s like hugging me on the side of the road during the gay pride parade!” And so yet again, just the “happenstance juxtaposition of previously unrelated trajectories” on a sidewalk, different lives come together in an unexpected encounter. Sometimes those encounters irritate and unnerve, terrorize and enrage. But other times it is something joyous, in a safe place people sharing and hugging “because, by so doing, community comes” (Aitken 2009, 233).

Kinship Reconsidered

In this chapter, I presented three dramatically different narratives, by queer people, of their journeys to parenthood. Certainly there are many more such narratives out there, and insights from any one of them would not be generalizable to all queer families. But generalizability is beside the point. I did not set out to uncover some coherent notion of queer family. Instead, I wanted to show how Josh and Todd, Chris and Geoff, and Shannon, respectively, “rely on shared universal norms to assert their particularity” (Pratt 2004, 83), and how these particularities produce a counter-narrative to the metronormative discourse of queer kinship. I also wanted to show that the kind of struggles with and against institutions in Chapter 3 also necessarily plays out in more mundane and specific ways on their particular paths to parenthood. It is telling that the notion of kinship remains one of such shared universal norms, but in their narratives we see it emerging out of very particular modes of encounter – walking dogs and chatting up neighbors, picking up a newborn and taking photos with his birth parents, hugging the family court judge at a pride parade. These narratives demonstrate to us that the political is not confined to the realm of big ideas. Rather, it necessarily also emerges from the everyday. Re-imagining kinship, then, requires all of us to go and live it and, in so doing, make it our own.

Postscript: Envisioning Ordinary Futures

In the Preface, I performed a double duty – I forcefully argued that geographers must consider sexuality and family as integral parts of social life, while admitting that this thesis should be read as a failure, albeit a productive one. Although these two statements might have appeared as opposites – or even unrelated – at first glance, I hope that by the time you arrive here I have already destabilized that first impression. Success and failure are always judged against particular standards, and in geography as well as in life, the conventional standards we are measured against may not be the most appropriate ones. In this sense, this thesis, through its insistence on the centrality of sexuality, argues for a re-imagining of the disciplinary standards and positions with which we judge geographic scholarship. On the other hand, failure in and of itself is not necessarily negative. Admitting failure in our research, or at the very least considering the research process as a series of failings, is to speak against the kind of certainty academic literature often exudes. It also forces us to recognize that there is a limit to what we can know from our research methods (Gordon 1997 [2008]). Failure can be productive, then, because it questions the very categories in which success and failure are boxed in, and perhaps it will lead to a less over-determined understanding of knowledge production. In this Postscript, then, I want to take stock of the many ideas I experimented with in this thesis, and how they as a collective may be intellectually productive.

It should be obvious that there is a geography of kinship which geographers must pay attention to (Volkman 2005). These geographies are bound up with historically contingent understandings of family across multiple scales. Chapter 3 demonstrates this point, that the history of adoption in the U.S. comes to bear in both global and local geographies of kinship.

On a global scale, the movement of adopted children is heavily structured by colonial and imperial relations, as well as a particular discourse around “saving the children.” Within the U.S., the legacies of colonization and slavery structure what the child welfare system considers to be in the best interest of its wards. These ideas about race are mobile and they continue to encounter one another; this mobility is one place where we reckon with the mutability of geographic scales. Chapter 4 (and portions of Chapters 1 and 3) demonstrates how this new geography of kinship travels to a more local scale, looking at the works of queer people on their paths to parenthood. Although histories and structural processes still shape their experiences, these parents also create their own particular senses of being through navigating their daily lives. They frequently encounter institutions and ideologies that determine what family should look like also take very particular forms. Here we see schools, careers, morals, and many other things influence the decision to become a parent (and the daily work of parenting). To restate a point from Chapter 1, these geographies constitute “the various dimensions queer subjectivities [that] may work against, in concert, and sideways of” institutions and ideologies.

Thinking about the geographies of kinship across multiple scales (as well as their many failures in history) helps us denaturalize commonsensical notions of family. What counts as commonsensical is temporally contingent (and Chapter 3 discusses the historical changes that structure the commonsense of family), and it is especially important today to highlight the elasticity of these categories. These notions of family have very real policy ramifications, and Laura Briggs’ (2012) personal vignette demonstrates this point. Opponents of racial matching in foster care and adoption placements have long argued that the time children spend in foster care can be drastically reduced by eliminating requirements of racial

matching, especially in the case of Native American and black children; essentially, these policies (in addition to the overzealous emphasis on biological family reunification) prevent white families from adopting black children (Bartholet 1999; 1991). Briggs, on the other hand, argued that these statements not only sidestep the reason why so many non-white children end up in the state's custody in the first place, but they also depend on the assumption of heterosexual nuclear permanent family. Specifically, the assumption that permanent adoption by a two-parent family is always the best option for children (cf. McLanahan 2009). If the assumption is that foster care (or any family structure other than the nuclear family, like grandparents raising grandchildren or single parents) is inherently bad, then logically there would be very little resource devoted to support and improve foster care. Instead, the priority is to place the children with permanent adoptive parents as soon as possible. These deeply-held assumptions were exposed when Briggs and her partner adopted their daughter. "For my daughter," Briggs wrote, "legal adoption was a disaster" (Briggs 2012, 20). First, legal adoption created deep emotional anxiety for their daughter, as she felt that she must declare some allegiance to her 'new' parents and discard her 'old' ones. "Ironically, while the adoption community in general is moving toward greater openness and maintaining ties with birth parents, in foster care policy we are trying to shut down the one legal mechanism that really does allow children to have two sets of parents," Briggs argued (ibid.). Further, legal adoption also created significant financial challenges. Since Briggs' daughter was not deemed to have significant disabilities, after the adoption she was no longer eligible for health-related benefits afforded to her as a foster child. There are very few private health insurances, however, that provide comprehensive mental health benefits, and the continued consultations and therapies dramatically increased Briggs' family spending. This is

symptomatic of the neoliberal reliance on private welfare “since family cures everything... [and] not incidentally, very helpful for [the child welfare system’s] budgets” (ibid.). The specific life history of their adopted daughter made Briggs speculate that had she and her partner not adopted the child but remained her foster parents instead, “she would not have been any less our child, but she would have had access to additional resources and maintained the legal form, at least, of her relationship to her birth family, which I suspect would have spared her a good deal of pain” (p. 21). I cite Briggs’ example here not to argue against adoption *per se*, but to make the point that the process in which certain notions of family become commonsensical is always violent. Considering multiple histories and geographies of kinship, then, may improve the child welfare system so that it can satisfy its mission to make decisions truly in each and every child’s particular best interest.

It is for this reason – to destabilize the commonsensical – that I pushed hard to incorporate the notion of productive failures. It is for the same reason that I pushed hard, particularly in Chapters 1 and 2, to include metronormativity and the politics of proximity, in order to complicate the notions of everyday geographical terms like city and neighborhood. Not coincidentally, through Chapters 1 and 2 – which foreground sexuality – we can arrive at a similar conclusion as the one arrived at after thinking critically about family (in Chapters 3 and 4). Geographers have recognized that identity and place are co-constitutive (e.g. Dyck 2005; Massey 1999; Anderson 1991). But here, drawing from M. Jacqui Alexander, I want to gesture toward a more expansive and explicitly political framework to situate this co-constitutive relationship between place and sexuality, specifically. In *Pedagogies of Crossing*, Alexander (2005, 188) argued that geographic concepts like proximity and distance are implicated in the project of modernity and empire:

[T]here was something instructive in this ideological formulation of distance: geographic distance produced analytic and experiential distance that is perennially inaccessible. It signaled a move from a “local” that was problematic but familiar to a “global” that was problematic and foreign – a similar unmasking of latent [colonial] hierarchy. It is in this slippage from local familiarity to global foreignness that latent hierarchical assumptions reside – assumptions that seemingly mark their difference from one another. An apparently neutral cultural relativism is not free, then, of absolutist claims.

This geographic slippage has its historical counterpart:

Put differently, tradition and modernity have been used to designate specific temporalities, but they are themselves practices that are constituted through social relations that are interested in their purchase, and thus in that process move them into ideological proximity to, or distance from, one another (p. 193).

And sexuality – or, more precisely, the process of heterosexualization – is what produces this slippage:

In focusing on... historical formations in which heterosexuality works as a mechanism to normativize and discipline, the practices that structure and mediate heterosexuality become crucial to show how these formations are indeed mutually, though unequally, entwined. The multiple sites in which heterosexuality is made to matter will also be made visible. The practices – the very mechanisms through state and nation are mediated – would have different effects that bear on the contextual arrangements in which they find themselves, which in turn shape their capacity to travel, to overlap, and circulate within and among these formations. This layered complex thickens our understanding of the multiple sites in which state and corporate neoliberalism re-enact heterosexual coercions at this contemporary moment. *Methodologically, all those sites that appear not to be (hetero)sexualized – welfare, militarism, the patriot, the citizen, the immigrant, the tourist, the soldier, the enemy – will be made to carry heterosexual freight* (p. 192, emphasis added).

Here we see how the co-constitution of sexuality and society is facilitated through the use of spatial metaphors. The key here is the equating of distance and incommensurability, the flip side of the coin that is the politics of proximity in Chapter 2. The process of heterosexualization serves two purposes: first, it relies on the metaphor of distance to designate non-heterosexuality as deviant and incommensurable to modernity, and second, in accomplishing the first, heterosexuality becomes so commonsensical that social relations no longer appear as sexualized precisely because they are *heterosexualized*. If we focus on the

ostensibly invisible process of heterosexualization, then we can understand both time and space as palimpsests rather than simply linear and sedimentary.

Thus, foregrounding the spatial language used to understand sexuality or any identity (and vice versa) becomes another cut to destabilize the categories that appear to be static and fixed. This point is perhaps the clearest in our classroom when we engage with the global and the local. Alexander discussed this issue in the context of teaching introductory courses on transnational feminism in a U.S. classroom, where students often expressed frustration with texts by women of color from the Global South because they “claimed an absolute alterity – too much difference” while embracing texts by women of color from the Global North due to their own “palpable desire to flatten out difference” (Alexander 2005, 186-187). This “paradoxical gesture of flattening out and assimilating difference on the one hand, while freezing and reifying it on the other” can only be understood when the spatial takes on ideological significance (p. 187). The issues I raised in Chapters 1 and 2, then, are best read as examples of critically unpacking the ideological work of spatial concepts.

This thesis incorporates these two routes – the new geographies of kinship and the ideological formulation of distance – to arrive at the same question that, for me, is really at stake. In *The Feeling of Kinship*, David Eng (2010, 22) asked, “What does it mean to take responsibility for a historical event one never actually experienced?” Thinking in the context of transnational adoption’s many (historical) injustices, Eng argued that for us to take responsibility today is “as much an affective as a political affair” – it requires us to “rethink the parameters, not just of family and kinship, but of identity and history” (ibid.). I am not as certain as Eng that this is the definitive answer,²³ although I see a lot of merit to it. For queer

²³ Especially since I do not see how affects can ever be apolitical. At the very least, they are always interpreted within regulatory frames that are political (Butler 2010, 54).

adoptive parents, to take responsibility for the racial violence and imperial conquests in the history of child welfare, as well as the very terms of their inclusion under queer liberalism, requires a critical awareness in their encounters with these institutions and with their children. Much of that is affective work. But perhaps equally importantly, it requires an explicit commitment to politicize history, to show that history does not necessarily imply completion in the past, and that injustices are to be reckoned with in the everyday (Hames-Garcia 2009). It is only through historicizing the personal that we can shed the burden of carrying over-determined identity freights and live an undiminished life.

It is also through historicizing the personal that we are able to envision ordinary futures for everyone. Through taking responsibility for our collective histories, the meaning of “ordinary” is radically transformed. As I suggest in Chapter 1, it is tempting to hear queer parents in central New York describe themselves as ordinary families – “just like everyone else” – and think that heteronormativity is at work. While that could be the case in some instances, through this thesis I have complicated that easy reading. Ordinary trains our attention to the politics in daily life (Staeheli et al. 2012), and in this framework queer parents are truly ordinary, just like everyone else.²⁴ What is at stake, then, is the way we understand social change and making a better life. As Avery Gordon (2004) suggests, utopia is not – and should never be – extraordinary; it must be an ordinary undertaking, in our practices and in our imaginations. To be ordinary is to fail well and fail often, and – while working toward utopia – learn how to fail better. It is my hope that by reckoning with these histories, the ordinary futures we envision can finally become a collective undertaking and, eventually, a collective reality that belongs to everyone.

²⁴ Geographers have a long history of engaging with the word “ordinary” (e.g. Robinson 2006; Amin and Graham 1997), and many trace this intellectual tradition to Raymond Williams’ seminal essay (1958) “Culture is Ordinary.”

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