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## QUEERING KINSHIP: LGBTQ PARENTS AND THE CREATION OF REAL UTOPIAS

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QUEERING KINSHIP: LGBTQ PARENTS AND THE CREATION OF REAL  
UTOPIAS

A Dissertation Presented

by

LAURA VICTORIA HESTON

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

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Sociology



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## DEDICATION

To the family members I have lost and the ones yet to come.

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## ABSTRACT

### QUEERING KINSHIP: LGBTQ PARENTS AND THE CREATION OF REAL UTOPIAS

MAY 2019

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Parenting in queer families calls into question some of our most fundamental assumptions: that parents are biologically related to their children, that only women give birth, that all fathers are men, that families push away friendships and communities based in anything other than “blood” ties, and that parenting is life-long. In this dissertation, presented through five in-depth family case studies and a series of analytic chapters based on fifty semi-structured interviews with LGBTQ adults in families with children I discuss gay sperm donors, gestational fathers, non-binary foster parents, transwomen dads, queer adopters of kids from queer birth parents, trans step-dads, and chosen third (or fourth, or fifth) parents. I argue that queer parents demonstrate the vast possibilities of parenting—and living—freed from heteronormative scripts.

The forms LGBTQ families with children take, that they can seldom be reduced to two procreative bodies and their offspring, leave opportunities for queer utopian experimentation in an institution synonymous with heteronormativity. I frame these families as “real utopias.” To call these families utopian is not to claim they are free of hardship, violence, sadness, or struggle. It is, however, to recognize that the new family

forms LGBTQ people are actively producing are not simply individual adaptations to new situations but also a way of rethinking family more generally.



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## CHAPTER 1

### THE DEATH OF FRIENDSGIVING

I think I might be ready to give up the ghost. In 2016, we celebrated “Friendsgiving” on the Monday before Thanksgiving...at a restaurant. Nostro, just opened earlier that year, the first nice, sit-down eatery in the newly-named “Greenwood Heights.” It was owned and run by an Italian immigrant couple who prided themselves on their handmade pastas. Nice as it was, it wasn’t like what we’d done the ten years previous—thoroughly planned a day-long boozy potluck celebration of our queer family on the actual day. It was my first exposure to a way of organizing intimacy outside the nuclear family. By way of introduction to this dissertation, this is an autoethnography capturing my own short-lived experience of queer utopia.

#### **The Birth of a Queer Holiday**

I met Billy my freshman year of college at the University of Florida, circa 2001. In a sea of 48,000 undergrads, finding him was almost a miracle. I was dating men and women at the time, but when a woman I was seeing introduced me to him at Denny’s, where he worked as a server, he took my number, entered me in his phone as “Laura Lesbo,” and I knew he was right. I was coming into my queerness in near isolation. He brought me out to the sole gay club in Gainesville and introduced me to a community I had never seen before. He brought me up, teaching me a language of identity and openness and the absence of shame. He wanted to know everything I’d never told anyone and he let me follow him anywhere. I got to him about a week before he started dating Nico and I thought he’d disappear into a love bubble, but it wasn’t like that. The circle only grew. It’s true I could have probably found my “tribe” in a group of women or

gender non-conforming people, but it didn't happen that way. I was raised by gay men and the straight and bi women who were in their orbit.

In those days, we all always went home to the various cities in Florida we'd come from for Thanksgiving. For me in college, going to Sarasota always meant going back in the closet. Aside from being the break before the break in the school year, Thanksgiving held no particular significance to me. Moving so far away, to New York City for most of my friends and to Amherst, Massachusetts for me, and being typically broke, heading home for Thanksgiving and then again for Christmas didn't make sense for any of us. By then our ranks had grown: there was Nico, of course; Ed who Billy went to high school with and dated for about a minute; Nick, Ed's ex, who was in love with Billy for years and was also my male doppelganger; eventually, Zack, Nick's ex-boyfriend; Katie, who Nico and I worked with proofreading accounting exam review books, and who opened up her monogamous straight relationship with Dan to date me; Dan was almost always there too. In an allegedly post "get thee to a big city" era in LGBTQ history, we all found ourselves in The City, together for every Thanksgiving for ten years.

When Billy and Nico (and Nick, now also their roommate) first moved into their apartment in Brooklyn surrounded by warehouses and abandoned buildings and flanked on the east by Greenwood Cemetery, it was called Sunset Park; a few years later it became South Slope, as in south of Park Slope—a neighborhood people actually wanted to live in. The Aladdin bakery across the street was a warehouse that supplied local businesses and bodegas with the Cuban rolls on which all deli sandwiches were made, from Bed-Stuy to Coney Island. The Spanish-speaking workers in white jumpsuits and hairnets road around on forklifts that beep beeped all night long—the frequency of which

was truly ear-piercing. The bar on the corner, El Norteno, was known locally as a “Mexican gang bar,” though that was likely an unfair assessment of the clientele. Whether gang members actually went there or if they were actually Mexican (rather than Puerto Rican, which was much more common in the area) was true or just racism, my friends and I, seemingly the only white people in a 10-block radius in 2007, and the only gay people for miles, never went in.

Because green space is hard to come by, and because real estate agents are always trying put a positive spin on things, when Greenwood Cemetery renovated its gothic entryway and became more welcoming to visitors, it transformed from just a graveyard from which you could view the Statue of Liberty to something more akin to a park. By 2015 Aladdin changed its name to “Baked in Brooklyn” (a name I once joked would be the title of Billy’s memoir) and had a storefront where you could buy coffee and bagel sandwiches and bags of the new pita chips and pretzel sticks branded with the company’s logo. El Norteno became Club Ecstasy (or Stasy’s as we affectionately called it), now the southern-most officially-gay bar in Brooklyn, and its placement on the end of their block was divine intervention if I have ever seen it. Soon after, a nearby block once dominated by a chain-link fenced power station welcomed a cute little Italian restaurant—Nostro. And Greenwood, the cemetery in front of which Nick was mugged while coming home drunk at 3 am, was a tourist attraction. “Greenwood Heights” was born.

It’s hard not to see this normatizing process, this gentrification into what our friend Sarah would call “grown-up Brooklyn” of which Park Slope has been emblematic, as a form of assimilation to which we all fell victim as the years went on (or helped initiate, depending on how you look at it). The first Friendsgiving was an accident. Back

then, Billy, Nico, and Nick lived in Washington Heights in an apartment in which they were so cramped it was literally hard to turn around. Nick occupied a “bedroom” that did have room for his bed, but nothing else. Renovations somehow made it so the shower head sprouted from the wall perpendicular to the bathtub, such that it hosed the shower curtain and often soaked the sliver of floor beyond it. Visitors would almost inevitably bruise their knees navigating around the tub to the tiny space past it where the toilet sat too close to the wall. It was in this apartment that we made the first turkey and stuffing to bring to Veronica’s apartment for what, in retrospect, would be the first Friendsgiving.

No dining table, we all held our paper plates and sat on chairs and couches, or just stood in the kitchen. After dinner we all went out drinking, to hidden gay bars in upper Manhattan, and a club called Duvet where beds were the only seating. I picked back up on a not-at-all-secret affair with Katie whose commercial airplane pilot boyfriend was conveniently out of town. Nick joined Veronica’s roommate in responding to a Craig’s List men-seeking-men ad (a primitive form of Grindr) and went on to have a three-way with a closeted minor television personality. The first fall snow fell that night. It was unlike any Thanksgiving I’d ever had and, my god, I wanted more.

The next year it was at Katie and Dan’s Inwood apartment—it was so far uptown, we took the 1 train as far as it would go and went the rest of the way on foot. While Katie and I shared a vegan Tofurkey that looked like a leathery balled-up sock, the boys tackled a turducken, which looked even grosser than it sounded. We drank, we danced, we Friendsgiving-ed. By the next year, everyone was already living in Brooklyn. As a last act still living in Manhattan, Billy proposed to Nico over a McDonald’s breakfast and a 100-page poem he wrote. Even after Billy and Nico became affianced, they moved with

Nick to the apartment on 26<sup>th</sup> Street, a two-floor railroad with a small backyard and patio that would serve as Friendsgiving headquarters for the holiday's remaining years. Over time, as the celebration grew year-on-year, the boys invested in more tables and chairs, patio furniture, two huge coolers, an outdoor heater (for the smokers), and raised garden beds for, among other things, fresh herbs for the turkey. Billy experimented with a half dozen different preparations with various amounts of baking, brining, stuffing, under-skin buttering, and herbing. In the weeks leading up to each Friendsgiving, Nico would send out the mass invitation and have everyone sign up to bring various dishes, desserts, or bottles of alcohol. We once had four kinds of stuffing: traditional, vegetarian, oyster, and White Castle (a dozen tiny burgers chopped with celery and carrots baked with chicken stock—it won that competition).

In a typical Friendsgiving, the festivities started with appetizers at 1, moving on to dinner at 3, this was followed by a nap and video/board gaming segment of the evening, dessert and coffee, and walking en masse to local bars and dance clubs. Somewhere in there, we would help clean up and pack Tupperware to send people home with leftovers. In the course of the night, people would come and go, smoke pot, call their relatives, get drunk, sober up, and get drunk again. It was unapologetically pleasure-centered, but warm and safe. Sure, it was a bit debauched, but I had the feeling of being exactly where I wanted to be, doing exactly what I wanted to be doing. My friends and I seldom made each other food, let alone all sit down at a big table passing the gravy. My sweet, but clueless, grandmother was not there to ask me if I had a boyfriend, then when I said, “I sure don’t, Mom-mom!”, respond with a wink and “Oh, I bet you have lots of boyfriends.” And I did, I had lots of boy friends!



My friends and I rarely played games together either, but somehow Friendsgiving was different. Instead of watching football, we'd play board games or video games. And there is dancing, always dancing. If we didn't go out to dance, we pushed aside the coffee table and Billy and Nico's two fake-leather couches, switched off the lights and turned on the actual miniature fog machine they bought and danced. It is painful to admit, but I don't think I'd ever experienced much joy at family holidays before Friendsgiving. I'd felt anxiety, and fear, and obligation, and even love, but not joy. Friendsgiving was different from a regular party, something about choosing to spend what is normally considered a "family" holiday together gave us more of a sense of chosen family than anything else did. Choosing it over and over for ten years only solidified that feeling. We took shelter with each other. And between the mainstays of dancing at gay clubs, post-turkey Craig's List cruising, hooking up, sexual puns in all of our game-playing, and the one time Nico tried to have everyone go around and say what they are thankful for and Zack yelled "COCK," queer sexuality was absolutely at the center of it all. Though there were always some straight-identified people there, it was a space where queers were the majority and sexual domination was flipped on its head, and straight people who might be offended by someone yelling "COCK" at the dinner table were unwelcome.

When Lisa Duggan wrote about homonormativity, bringing the term into queer theory's academic parlance, she named what she felt were twin evils plaguing the queer movement (2003). These evils, she argued, would inevitably sap the queer movement of all its anti-normativity and put us on the slippery slope toward assimilation: domesticity and consumption, the handmaidens of neoliberalism. Domestic coupling divorces people from their broader communities and makes daily concerns and struggles simply personal;

it motivates people to understand both successes and failures as the result of personal striving (or lack of it) rather than something shaped by structural conditions like economic and political shifts. Consumption is the carrot that's always moving: there are always better neighborhoods, bigger houses, faster cars, and more effective anti-aging creams. All these things take money and keep the labor force working harder and harder. The combination of domesticity and consumption, in Duggan's understanding, makes for a docile and divided populace. The fear is that these temptations will distract queer people from the revolutionary goals of smashing the family, which was defined in terms that excluded them, or seeing their struggles as linked with those of other marginalized and disempowered groups.

### **Dragsgiving, a Drag Pastiche**

Queer family Friendsgiving took the sacredness of Thanksgiving—a quintessentially American holiday celebrating *both* domesticity and consumption—and made it profane. We played at domesticity through cooking for each other and eating around a big table, but we were also making it farcical. The love was genuine, but the ritual felt like play—a turkey-bordered paper tablecloth bought at C-Town was simultaneously earnest and ironic. Friendsgiving was family drag as well as family. And though we certainly consumed a lot, alcohol and drugs and sex, we thought, moved this consumption away from the realm of “playing into the hands of capitalism” and more into the less productive space of pleasure-seeking.

The play and satire of family drag, a simultaneous recognition of connection and subversion of what connection obligates, was epitomized in Friendsgiving 2015's theme:

“Dragsgiving.” “Dragsgiving” was dreamed up that summer when about 10 of us celebrated the last of us turning 30 with a metaphorical trip to “Drag Island,” by staying on Fire Island and dressing in drag for three days. This coincided with both the “transgender tipping point” and the mainstream breakthrough of *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, arguably bringing ideas of gender construction and fluidity into mainstream gay culture after many decades on the margins. There were suddenly dozens of YouTube videos teaching people with masculine jawlines how to create the illusion of high cheekbones through makeup contouring. For the white and middle-classed gay men I hung out with, there was a shift in culture big enough to give permission to explore and play with gender on days that were not Halloween. Since college, Nico had looked forward to Halloween all year, often planning a costume months in advance. Even among our friends, he felt it was the one day a year he was “allowed” to dress in drag and not also carry the weight of a gender-nonnormative identity. At one point on that trip, Nico was sunbathing in a lime green, floral, silk romper and short, gray wig when Sarah asked for the time. Nico slowly rolled his head to the side, looked over his sunglasses, and said in a slow, gravely Joan Crawford affectation, “There’s no time on Drag Island.”

On “Drag Island,” dressing flamboyantly in the garb of someone you were not was entirely the point and not played for laughs. The goal was to embody, convincingly and playfully, a version of one’s self not normally seen. In this context, because it wasn’t a joke, support and care were required. We came up with pseudonyms (some favorites being the literary nod, Donna Tartlet; my own, Dick Stranger; and the even more perverse pun, Nico’s Diana Jacuzzi) and developed personae that might change with the outfit. In a plaid skirt, one might be an anime-loving high school girl or 1990s Brittany

Spears, depending on the wig. It was a space of trust and vulnerability as much as it was about play, and it was thrilling. Someone there uttered the word “Dragsgiving” and our fates were sealed.

Months later, “Dragsgiving” was a continuation of this experience in which the wigs, costumes, and makeup were brought out of what Billy and Nico called “deep drag storage” for an occasion known for its excess, but otherwise not that connected: Thanksgiving. Billy, our consummate host, was dressed as a Southern, 1950s housewife complete with big hair and checked apron. I was a Naval private on shore leave, and several other attendees were inspired by the aesthetics of various pop divas. While other people around the country were dressing for dinner in their Sunday best, we were dressing up in a different way.

### **Family Feud**

Then, the babies came. In prior years it was in the form of nieces and nephews. Since none of us were actually barred from spending Thanksgiving with our families of origin, when siblings started having kids, there was a pull and a pressure to spend time with them in their early years. Billy’s brother had a baby, then two. Nico’s sister had a baby, then three. Nick became Uncle Nick. But, they could have Christmas, right? Then, our friends Audrey and Frank brought their one-year-old to Dragsgiving. We were happy to have her, she was a source of both humor and curiosity, but the tiny tot was nearly tripped over by several gay men having Jell-O shots in heels and the family left early. It was official: Friendsgiving was not family friendly! But, two years later, when Katie had a baby, all eyes were on Mila. She made Zack’s “ovaries hurt.”

Zack had recently moved in with an architect, also named Zack. Their last names (which I use to avoid confusion) are Clark and Lewis respectively, and Clark has admitted to envisioning their Lewis and Clark-themed wedding invitations from very early on. Lewis comes from a line of architects and owns a place on the Lower East Side. One year, Zack and Nick—who once dated, then became best friends, and are now writing partners on a series of young adult novels—got into a fight about having children. But, the weird thing was, neither was against it. The argument was about surrogacy versus adoption. Lewis’s mom had offered to pay up to \$200,000 on a biologically-connected grandkid through a surrogate mother. Once, Clark had been the most politically progressive among us, and even offered Sarah and me his sperm, no strings attached, but the prospect of surrogacy made him reevaluate and express that he truly had a preference for “his own” child. He got defensive when Nick mentioned all the children already in the world who were in need of parents and was incredulous when Nick said he didn’t want to pass on his genes. Clark accused Nick of acting like a martyr and articulated Dan Savage’s argument in *The Kid*, a line of thinking rarely articulated, but perhaps not so rarely felt—that gay men were entitled to have the children they wanted. Savage adds the extra insult that the children gays are encouraged to adopt (older children, children with disabilities, and children of color) were lesser and “damaged,” and that he and his partner were entitled to a healthy, white baby as much as hetero white people.

I was actually a white baby adopted by hetero white people. But as a result, for me, biological connection has never been the basis for family. There was certainly a time when I wanted to reproduce with one of my guy friends, less for the biological

connections than adding a new layer of intimacy and connection with my friends, my chosen family which others might then recognize as family (including our families of origin) if we shared this link. My big personal dilemma was choosing whose sperm I would use. Maybe we'd mix some together and see what happened? But, like they say, "make plans and God laughs"—I started menopause at 29 years old. Most people assigned female at birth hit menopause closer to 50, but there I was having hot flashes and getting bone scans in my twenties. But, I had never really expected or preferred a biological child. I had mistakenly thought all queer people felt this way and would not pay hundreds of thousands of dollars to make a genetic connection.

Another layer to this conversation is that when Nick mentioned his "bad genes," he wasn't joking. At 34, Nick was diagnosed with lymphoma. The Friendsgiving that year, 2013, had a more serious tone, though we were so happy to see him attend. Nick had been receiving chemotherapy treatments for several months through a port in his chest, and was quite weak. The diagnosis led to a dramatic lifestyle change, he quit his half pack a day smoking habit and drinking entirely. Billy got an expensive juicer in part to make Nick elaborate healing concoctions. It hit us all pretty hard, but no one more than his partner, Andrew, who became his primary caregiver at the time and had medical problems of his own.

### **Queer Futures**

In 2017, though Friendsgiving still happened in name, it came together at the last minute and was fairly intimate. At its peak, there were a couple dozen people eating spinach dip and smoking cigarettes on the patio. This year, we were 10, more than half of us were married, and a baby stayed through dinner: the edge was gone. Children—the

ones we were planning and the ones we were related to—were coming between us, and the specter of death—from Nick’s illness to the beginnings of our own parents’ deaths—was making things weightier. Various couples wanted to spend holidays with their “real families” to visit with the kids and to see their own parents more.

Ironically, this kind of deterioration of queer social life is the consequence of greater social acceptance. In the recent past queers were excluded from straight families of origin, either physically or in spirit—often their intimates were not even acknowledged enough to be excluded. This change is certainly a good thing, but we didn’t need each other the way LGBTQ folks used to. Domesticity may have killed us after all. For a while we were choosing to be together, and then we were free to choose differently. This is not to say these things always fall apart. The families in this book have, in large part, found ways to maintain the plurality and unconventionality of their families even with the addition of children—some of whom they created with their friends. Looking back, it does seem a bit naïve thinking it might last. It seems more and more that I mistook a lifecourse phenomenon—those normless years between college and adulthood that were our twenties—for an experiment in critical family transformation. And yet, naïve though it might have been, there was something distinctively queer about our Friendsgiving. More importantly, no matter how temporary our Friendsgiving tradition turns out to be, it did show us a different way of organizing intimacy, an alternative both to biological families and an alternative to conventional sexualities and practices. Even if it’s really over, it was an experiment worth having. This lesson is something we’ll take with us, as we develop “our own” families that might make them a little less exclusive than a heteronormative family might be. Maybe Friendsgiving wasn’t revolutionary but it did

provide a model for a different organization of social life. It was our version of a real queer utopia, and this dissertation traces the possibilities of that utopia as it emerges from queer family life in the first part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.



## CHAPTER 2

### QUEER FAMILY AS REAL UTOPIA

#### Introduction

“A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realization of utopias.” – Oscar Wilde, *The Soul of Man under Socialism*

“Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality... The future is queerness’s domain.” – Jose Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*

Imagining another world, or fundamental changes to the one we have, is a human practice going back centuries. Some theorists believe that the imagination of alternatives is fundamental to efforts at social change. The place of “imagination” in social theory is certainly fraught—it is easy to dismiss discussions of utopia as hopeless, pie-in-the-sky optimism or naïve, short-cited ideology. In *Ideology and Utopia* (1936), Karl Mannheim distinguished utopianism from ideology; ideology looks to the past (witness the slogan “Make America Great Again” which imagines an idealized America of the past when things were “great”) whereas utopia represents the possibilities that have not yet been. There are also reasons to fear utopia. A literary theme from *Brave New World* (Huxley 1932) to *The Handmaid’s Tale* (Atwood 1985) to *The Hunger Games* (Collins 2008) is that one group’s utopia is another’s dystopia. Examples of this in reality might include some iterations of repressive communism in which a hopeful utopianism, put in practice, lead to the imprisonment and death of detractors. This has led some to believe that

utopias cannot become real, that they are confined to the realm of fantasy. Even the word “utopia” is a joke—a false cognate in Greek meaning both “good place” and “no place.”

Philosopher Ernst Bloch addressed this common critique—the utopias cannot exist in the real world—by specifying the difference between a utopia which was merely abstract versus one that was concrete, or able to come to fruition (Bloch 1923). Abstract utopias are those only ever alive in thought and not accompanied by a will to change, while concrete utopias are anticipatory (rather than compensatory) and reach toward some real possibility (Levitas 1990). His distinction rests on the threshold of “educated hope” – in the words of Ruth Levitas, “While abstract utopia may express desire, only concrete utopia carries hope” (Levitas 1990, 15). One way to identify concrete utopias is to look to the practices that already exist.

### **Real Utopias**

Informed by Bloch’s “concrete utopia,” Erik Olin Wright articulated a concept of the “real utopia.” Real utopias spring from identified circumstances in which human suffering is produced from existing dominant institutions, and the act of transforming these institutions would lead to less suffering. Not everyone in the society needs to be suffering from the status quo in order for it to be worth changing, Wright’s paradigmatic example is capitalism, in which many suffer economically for the benefit of the few, and transforming this system could lead to much greater human thriving for many more people. In *Envisioning Real Utopias* (2010), Wright a) maps out the moral principles an economic system might accomplish, b) diagnoses the ways in which capitalism fails to fulfill those principles, c) identifies viable alternatives to capitalism currently being

experimented with in the real world, and d) theorizes a path to systemic transformation. Wright states that the moral principles under consideration may be different in the transformation of other systems, but that he had identified democracy, equality, and sustainability as some core values threatened by capitalism.

Archetypal studies of “utopian” experiments imagine worlds unto themselves. Self-sustaining alternate communities with their own (usually egalitarian) forms of governance, separated from dominant society. There are studies of how people enter these communities, how they form, how they end, how they change people’s lives. They are also incredibly exclusionary, hard to access, and hard to change. But there is utopia to be found in the everyday. There is evidence to suggest that proximity to the world outside reinforces people’s commitment to living differently (Cooper 2014; Sargisson and Sargent 2017). All Wright’s examples—alternative economies, divisions of labor, democratic practices—happen within the context of normal life. The utopian spaces studied by Davina Cooper (2014)—including street-level public forum for debate and a lesbian bathhouse—offer respites from normal life by articulating with it. By viewing these life experiments through the lens of utopianism we take people’s efforts at micro-level social change seriously. Looking at queer families, the ones living in communities and spaces not cut off from the outside world, is to emphasize the “real” in real utopia.

### **Queer Utopias**

Bloch’s understanding of utopia is also taken up by the late José Esteban Muñoz in *Cruising Utopia* (2009) to advocate for a utopian striving in queer life and respond to a particular line of thought in queer theory. The “anti-social thesis” in queer theory is a

perspective founded on the understanding that since LGBTQ people have been cast out of the normative understanding of the heterosexual family and the reproduction of children which sanctifies it, they should embrace their abject status rather than fighting for the right to be included in a structure meant to exclude them (Bersani 1996; Edelman 2004). The figure of the queer, in political discourse and popular culture, signifies selfishness, frivolity, lack, and death, for instance finding its manifestation in the well-dressed, villain bachelors of Hitchcock films. Social life, with continual gesturing toward a future “for the children” is guided (or “terrorized” in Edelman’s terms) by the mandate of reproductive futurism from which the queer is, by lack of a reproductive sexuality and by his very queerness, excluded. But, in this, Edelman sees an opportunity:

Rather than rejecting, with liberal discourse, this ascription of negativity to the queer, we might, as I argue, do better to consider accepting and even embracing it...Fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we’re collectively terrorized. (Edelman 2003: 29)

Instead of taking offense to hostile characterizations of queer life, like that queers are too focused on sex and not invested in a collective future, Edelman wants us to embrace them. Edelman advocates giving up the ghost of liberal, rights-based political activism because the future in which we are all equal is a future without *queers* in it. Queers stand outside the social order guided by hetero-reproduction.

The fear of queer assimilation underlies many critiques of the gay family and has coalesced in the term “homonormativity.” Lisa Duggan (2003: 179) defined homonormativity as,

a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption.

Though it is unclear that participating in the institution of the family in and of itself contributes to this slide into homonormativity (as queer people were affiliating in families in the 1970s, the heyday of radical queer politics, as they do today), the literature on homonormativity has crystallized around the queer critique of gay marriage. One of the most convincing lines of reasoning in this critique asserts that in addition to being an exclusionary and privileged relational form, access to marriage would also produce “good gays”: those who do not question State policies that perpetuate inequalities (Warner 1999; Halberstam 2012). A chief consequence of some gays—namely White, gender-conforming, middle-class gays and lesbians who practice monogamy and have full citizenship rights—being given a place at the proverbial table is the reinforced exclusion of the poor, people of color, trans and genderqueer people, the polyamorous, the undocumented, and those practicing any form of sexual kink that might challenge the sanctity of marriage or its purpose as an institution bestowing rights and privileges to a particular relationship between adults. Ergo, gays and lesbians uniting for access to marriage reproduce the exact consequence, civil exclusion, which they are presumably fighting against. While expansions of civil rights-based protections, including marriage, are improving the lives of “good gays” who practice homonormativity, queers’ lives remain invalid, despised, and marginalized.

But, before we declare the end of queerness, killed by the twin evils of domesticity and consumption, Muñoz reminds us, “Queerness is not yet here.” For Muñoz, queerness is always on the horizon, something we are striving for by imagining what queer life could be. He claims that relationality, and not anti-socialism, is a key component of queerness primarily because queerness itself only exists in the future and necessitates communion—between people and between generations—in order to be realized. Muñoz offers a ruinous critique which undermines the premises of both Edelman and Bersani’s anti-relational arguments,

Yet I nonetheless contend that most of the work with which I disagree under the provisional title of “antirelational thesis” moves to imagine an escape or denouncement of relationality as first and foremost a distancing of queerness from what some theorists seem to think of as the contamination of race, gender, or other particularities that taint the purity of sexuality as a singular trope of difference. In other words, antirelational approaches to queer theory are romances of the negative, wishful thinking, and investments in deferring various dreams of difference. (Muñoz 2009: 11)

Essentially, Muñoz suggests antirelational arguments come from the presumption of a

White and masculine gay subject free of any other “difference” beyond sexuality.

Edelman and Bersani see no need for collective action because they imagine all queers are middle-class, White men with no sources of oppression other than that based on their sexualities. Assuming this identity, freed from any commitment to a community or interdependence with subjugated others, meant that to embrace the “death drive” would cost them nothing but themselves. Similarly, Halberstam notes that in Edelman’s rant

against reproduction, “woman becomes the site of the unqueer” in his analysis (Halberstam 2011: 118). Women, by the very fact of their birthing potential (not to mention the cultural associations of their care giving) come off as inherently more heteronormative and invested in reproductive futurism. Although Muñoz sidesteps a discussion of reproduction or childrearing per se, he does say, “I respond to Edelman’s assertion that the future is the province of the [C]hild and therefore not for queers by arguing that queerness is primarily about futurity and hope” (Muñoz 2009: 11).

The act of visualizing a utopian future is itself an act of resistance and a key part of any politics dedicated to social change. But, Muñoz doesn’t just want us to think utopia, or dream utopia, but to *feel* utopia. It is easy to feel cynical, what is more difficult is to put one’s emotions and energies behind realizing alternatives to how things are already lived. Muñoz quotes Oscar Wilde when he says, “A map of the world that does not include utopia is not worth glancing at.” Similarly, to Muñoz, a social theory that does not include the possibility of utopia is not worth considering. If queerness lies on the fringes of legality, morality, respectability, and normativity, let it also lie on the fringes of possibility, futurity, and the utopian. We haven’t realized utopia, just as we haven’t realized queerness. What we can do is strive for utopia in the future and look for glimpses of utopia in the past and present.

### **Real Queer Utopias**

I argue that all three values identified by Wright (2013): democracy, equality, and sustainability, though defined differently to suit the context, are also threatened by the hegemonic family form of the nuclear family while queer families have developed

practices that enact those values. In the context of the family, I propose that this may lead to greater human flourishing insofar as all families embraced queer practices. I also argue that, although it is, of course, possible for straight families to engage in queer parenting practices, or construct non-normative families, these practices are part of the fabric of queer family life. Queer families living outside the confines of the traditional family challenge it in three major ways. Queer families are making the family more democratic through a fluidity of family structure, or who is included in the family. They are undermining the gendered divisions of labor that are endemic to the traditional family by allowing for (at least the possibility of) a fluidity of roles, untethered to particular genders, and a greater chance at equity, if not equality, in the roles and practices of the family. Finally, queer families recognize that family sustainability requires openness to family dynamism and evolution over time; queer temporalities acknowledge that things do not always proceed as planned and that to live queerly is to live with uncertainty and be haunted by history. While these fluidities are often borne out of necessity and in response to institutional barriers, they also comprise queer family values which dovetail with the uniqueness of queer history and innovation.

The celebratory mode with which I write could easily lead to the dark territory of “queer exceptionalism” in which one claims LGBTQ people are free from the racism, sexism, ageism, and other inequalities. This is clearly not the case, and I hope to present examples in which all the good intentions of individuals are no match for the stultifying power of structures of inequality: in which adopted parents employ racism, sexism, and classism while referencing their own child’s birth parents; co-parenting sperm donors are sometimes transphobic even when conceiving a child with a trans person; a general



privileging of marriage over other forms of partnering; instances of emotional and physical intimate partner violence; and an exclusionary maintenance of boundaries around families that reinforce inequalities among queer people. What I do want to focus on is not the inherent superiority of queer people and queer families, but of the possibilities they present for living differently within the context of circumstances and spaces that are far from ideal.

**Queer Structures.** In *Families We Choose* Kath Weston (1991) first articulated a model of “gay kinship.” Weston observed that when gay and lesbian people “came out” to their families of origin and were met by either acceptance or rejection, the idea of choice was introduced into who is considered a family member. In many cases, children were disavowed by their parents and other family members—thrown out of the house, cut out of the will, disinvited to family gatherings, and unable to access emotional support. Precisely because acceptance was not obvious, it was necessary for families of origin to declare their support and continued involvement with their gay family member. Communities of friends and lovers, those for whom the revelation of homosexual desires was a point of commonality rather than a reason to abandon all ties, took on a significance greater than Weston saw among heterosexuals. Especially in the time period in which she wrote, the height of the HIV/AIDS crisis, communities of care were essential for the very survival of gay people as well as for the palliative care that many needed when their lives were cut short.

Some terminology has changed since Weston wrote her book, published over a quarter-century ago, most fundamentally expanding the gender and sexual minority alphabet beyond G and L to include bisexual, trans, queer, questioning, asexual, and other

identities. Weston's influence has remained, but in the literature over time her concept of "gay kinship" has morphed into "queer kinship." One aspect of "queer kinship" is the validation of chosen family relations. For although terminology has changed, the need for community for LGBTQ people beyond the structure of the Standard North American Family has remained. The Standard North American Family (or, SNAF) is shorthand for the series of assumptions embedded in the idealized "nuclear" family, including that this family is headed by two adults, one man and one woman, who live together in legal matrimony with their biogenetic (or, "blood") children conceived through sexual intercourse (Smith 1993). The archetypal SNAF is white, middle-classed, able-bodied, and has a breadwinner/homemaker division of labor. It is a closed unit with no room for non-monogamy or divorce. That these families have been in the minority even among straight couples since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century has seemed to have no bearing on the SNAF's continued ideological power. The SNAF, of course, leaves out all sorts of possible arrangements, including single parents, adopted children, a family without children, live-in friends and relatives, etc. Though not all hetero families are like this, this is the rod against which they are all measured.

Thus, non-normative family structures are not unique to the LGBTQ community. The literature on "extended kinship" highlights the necessary emotional and financial interdependence in economically disadvantaged communities, and particularly for immigrant families and families of color for whom fewer safety nets exist. LGBTQ people, even those who are wealthy enough to conceive or adopt children in any way they want (surrogacy, private adoption, and IVF all requiring quite a bit of money), are outside the privileged territory of the SNAF. Because of the necessity of introducing additional

people (or at least their donated gametes) to create or adopt children, there is no possibility of achieving the SNAF ideal. While medical science is currently working on a way to splice sperm and eggs in order to ensure a biological connection for two same-sex parents, there will need to be an accompanying egg or sperm. On top of that, of course, is that children borne of queer parents are seldom conceived in romantic intercourse. For queer couples looking to parent, heteronormativity by way of the SNAF may be a goal to approximate, but, without some truly hard to conceive bounds in biological science, it will never be a reality. For religious conservatives, who would deny all queer people access to parenthood, there is no difference between even a heteronormative queer family and a radically non-normative one.

In Weston's study, individual and collective histories of breaking ties with families of origin and built-in biological barriers to reproduction were the foundations upon which queer families were built. That the severance of ties with families of origin seems less and less a hallmark of queer life creates a potential quandary: the more LGBTQ people are accepted, the less likely they are to need chosen family. Or, perhaps LGBTQ people with children, grasping the thread of acceptance, agree to alter their behavior to maintain relationships with their families of origin. This is absolutely a temptation and not one we should be unsympathetic to. Mignon Moore emphasizes in *Invisible Families* (2011) that being "radical" is relative. For a Christian, Church-going Black American family, inviting their daughter's wife to Easter dinner might be a huge deal, and a willingness to participate in the potentially awkward situation where they don't feel entirely welcome, may be a sacrifice worth making for the meaning it brings.

For the queer families I talked to, being excluded from the definition of nuclear or normative family was not seen as a failure, or second-best, or a cross to bear. They are creating families the way they want—often a mixture of blood, legal, and chosen family ties. The understandings these families developed within themselves, however, didn't always translate to the legal system, which has real consequences for those families. Many relationships exist outside clear legal recognition, like that between a child and her father via sperm donation who signed away his rights, or a child and the unmarried partner of her birth mother. If the adults do happen to violate each others' trust, and need to take their dispute to court, there is little recourse for the sperm donor or the "other mother." They are vulnerable—to each other and to the State. Family members have to rely on trust and mutual understandings of where everyone stands when there is no language for these connections and, even less, recognition in the law. This ideal, in practice, not infrequently meets legal challenges that can reaffirm the very hierarchy of relationships the parents intended to circumvent. From involved egg and sperm donors, to co-parenting gay and lesbian couples, to a live-in friend and third parent, there are innumerable ways in which queer people are challenging the boundaries of who is considered a "family member." They needn't share a home or bloodline, be romantically involved or legally obligated to each other, but agree that they are family in spite of those more normative family definitions. Butterfield and Padavic (2014) remind us that even when families attempt to innovate, they not only run into structural and institutional barriers, they also draw upon examples in the broader culture that inadvertently invite inequality among family members. That the structures of queer families are different does not, as some suggest, necessarily mean they are radical or that their very existence

challenges the heterofamily and upends power dynamics (Sullivan 2004). It does however, create an opening—a crack in the sidewalk—where something unexpected may grow.

**Queer Roles and Practices.** Once LGBTQ people do have children, or when straight people with children transition to a different gender, come out as gay, or otherwise become queer in way that impacts irrevocably the family they once had, the normatively gendered scripts of “mother” and “father” are on unsteady ground. Who does what in the divisions of household and caretaking labor and the relation of those actions to family titles is unclear. When is a known sperm donor also a father: Never? At the point of conception? When he spends enough time with the child playing? When he contributes enough resources? When the child starts to think of him that way? When he takes the title himself? Can a donor not be a father, but his parents still be grandparents?

For all that is made in popular culture about the difference between a “man who gets someone pregnant” and a “father,” in straight culture, the two are, at least normatively, the same. He can be a bad father, a “deadbeat dad,” for not being around or contributing enough, but the title remains attributed to the sperm provider. In queer families, this is not so. From the outset, there may be three fathers, or no fathers. A father may appear on the scene. A mother might become a father. A father might become a woman. In families of choice, the choice must be affirmed and reaffirmed. When queer families are acting in institutions, legal, medical, and educational, those choices become quite limited.

The norms and practices of parenting themselves are challenged in queer families. I have seen children on vegan diets, toddlers instructed to “check in with themselves”

when they are acting out, and babies being fed back and forth between a breastfeeding woman and her transgender, breastfeeding husband. Almost none of this is distinctive to queer families; all of it is, however, more often found there. As they navigate a world not created with them in mind, queer families must employ a combination of “normative resistance” and “inventive pragmatism” (Pfeffer 2013). Queer parents adapt and, sometimes, resist the norms of parenting in many ways: by choosing not to marry; not being monogamous (though the chief determiner of one’s ability to have sexual relationships outside the home may not be fidelity, but time); providing a range of toys, clothing, and career options for their children, unrestricted by their genders; shielding children from marriage and romantic love, but teaching them about social justice. Inventive pragmatism comes out in instances when parents do things like exploit a loophole to get both their names on a birth certificate, pretend to be partnered to a sperm donor to qualify for fertility treatment, or allow their children to call them “Dad” after they transition from male to female.

Hundreds of studies later, we know that LGBTQ parents, all else being equal, have no negative effects on their children’s happiness or development. If anything, researchers, under the assumption that any found difference between gay and straight parents was a negative, have been motivated to bury findings of difference, even when those differences may be positive ones (Stacey and Biblarz 2001). In a meta-review and close look at the quantitative findings, Stacey and Biblarz found lesbian and gay parents in these studies were more open to their children’s gender non-normativity. The children of gay and lesbian parents were more open to exploring non-hetero sexualities themselves (even though they were statistically no more likely to identify as LGBTQ as adults) and,

overall, believed less strongly in gender norms, and the daughters of LGBTQ parents had much broader ideas of their eventual career paths and did not see themselves as confined to gender-typical options.

Equality is a goal and a value among queer parents. Studies, particularly of lesbian co-parents (Sullivan 2004; Dunne 2000), but also gay parents (Carrington 1999; Lewin 2009), find that same-sex couples attempt to live more equitably and share household labors and childrearing. In practice though, differences in individual incomes (Lewin 2009) or biological closeness (Butterfield and Padavic 2014; Moore 2011) do reinscribe hierarchy into these relationships. For instance, Moore finds that in the case of Black, lesbian stepmothers, the biological mothers maintain much more control over childrearing as a means of differentiating their relationships from the relationships of their children to this “other mother.” Butterfield and Padavic (2014) find the same even when the couple conceived a child together, if the non-biological mother’s relationship is potentially legally precarious. Holding these unequal statuses in the relationship put couples at a greater risk of breaking up (Biblarz and Savci 2010). But, family is nothing if not dynamic and we shouldn’t expect queer people and their relationships to remain static and perfect. Though the utopian is often conflated with perfection and stasis—*our problems are solved!*—real utopia is a shifting terrain that requires reevaluation. While finding their footing, queer families will engage in both the radical and the traditional, the revolutionary and the normative. These families are living things, flawed like all human inventions are. The goal itself, though—a different way of doing family so that more people can thrive and be included—is worth pursuing even in spite of the stumbling blocks.

**Queer Temporalities.** Queer families develop in “queer time” (Halberstam 2005). Queer time, or queer temporality, differs from “straight time” in that queer people’s markers of development and adulthood exist on a separate track. Whereas straight time is marked with events like getting married, having children, and building a career, such that a straight person who does not do those things is considered less of a “grown up” than their peers, queer time might be marked by coming out or transitioning or existing in a prolonged stage of “temporal drag” (Freeman 2010). Marriage and children may also come as stages in the life of a queer person, though these tend to happen later than in straight time and their absence does not lock the queer person in a holding pattern of “becoming.” Queer people were once defined as forever underdeveloped both by Freudians (having not made it through all stages of psychosexual development) and the general public—witness the spinster aunt who lived with her “friend” and was thought to be forever a virgin. By engaging in domestic life, especially by procreating, queer people invite in a new sense of time that includes geneology, heredity, and legacy. Of all institutional forms, The Family is the most intimately bound up with time. Families begin, change, grow, and die like the people in them.

Queer people have a unique relationship to time through the ever-present shadow of queer history, the collective specter of death and dying, and experiences of waiting and uncertainty. Because of the enormous impact of HIV/AIDS on the queer community, historically, death has also come faster for queer people. Weston makes much of this in *Families We Choose* as a major reason why chosen families are necessary, particularly for gay men. In helping their peers die with dignity, or dying themselves, queer people during the HIV/AIDS crisis in the US, and after, became acutely aware of mortality and



the end of time itself. The specter of early death also hangs over trans people who are forty times more likely to attempt suicide than their cisgender peers and more vulnerable to homicide by simply being trans. It hangs over trans and gay youth whose rates of attempted and completed suicides outpace other groups. To have community and support is vital for LGBTQ people. So even as LGBTQ people gain rights and increasing acceptance into the fabric of American society, we would do well not to forget the lessons and lived experiences of the past as well as the daily realities for more vulnerable members of the community: youth, people of color, low-income people, and those living with HIV, to name a few.

The temporal has a particular significance for trans folks. Taking on a new gendered identity may mean erasing or rewriting personal histories, having to go through puberty a second time, and having to build families from scratch. I spoke with people who transitioned genders before having kids, and those who transitioned after having kids. All of the parents I happened to talk to who transitioned after having kids were transwomen, and the trans people I talked to who transitioned before having kids were transmen and genderqueer people assigned female at birth. In a cross-national study with 1,500 trans people, researchers found there was a significant difference in the time people came out; if they came out as women, the median age this happened was between the ages of 30-39 while if they came out as men, the median age was 20-29 (Beemyn and Rankin 2011). This timing was such that nearly all trans people in my study identified as “dads” either because they already were “dads” when they transitioned (and continued to identify that way), or they became dads because they had already transitioned before

having kids. Thus, temporality may affect families in different ways depending on a parent's gender.

Becoming a queer parent can also take quite a bit of waiting. Waiting to be “ready,” waiting to be chosen by a birth mother in the case of adoption, waiting until laws change, tracking fertility and waiting to inseminate, waiting to be called upon to donate sperm, or until they've undergone enough shots to prompt egg retrieval, waiting to have the funds together to engage in any of these practices. A birth mother can decide she wants to keep her child. The expensive IVF treatment may not work. A biological child's legal parents can cut a chosen family member out at any time. These experiences demand adaptability and flexibility from people. A feeling of nervous uncertainty is not a new one for LGBTQ people—they experience it every day walking into convenience stores, riding the subway, ordering birthday cakes, going to work, accompanying their kids to the park. All these are opportunities to be questioned, looked at with malice, and denied entry. They also feel it with every new non-queer person they meet, having to come out over and over and, even when embraced, always wincing a minute just in case.

The pain and shame of queer life, and the specter of death, are what lead us to alternate ways of being and living in the first place—an emphasis on friendship and community versus the nuclear family, pursuing pleasure now versus sacrificing immediate desire to achieve something in the future, loosening the vice grip of terror with macabre humor and camp, and attempting to change the status quo versus just living with its harms. Some find that ignoring the past in order to assimilate into a structure never built with us in mind, like the nuclear family, is too high a price to pay. Some may also

understand that having to be welcomed in is a reminder that queer people can always be pushed back out.

And so we take comfort in each other. For some people I talked to, they knew their membership or position in a queer family was temporary—the result of happenstance, a living situation, or timing. When talking about the children that were “theirs,” sperm donors and elective fathers (those who lived with a family and became family members and self-identified parents), for instance, told me about the kids they have now, and also the “real” kids or their “own” kids that would come later. They say both “this *is* my child” and “when I have *my own* kids” and there is no contradiction for them. They live simultaneously in two family timelines, the one they have now and the one they will have later. I also talked to lesbian step mothers who were “step mothers” to each other’s children who have both *their kids* and *their own* kids. Talking in this way acknowledges both the structural realities and the queerness of their situations.

Whether queer people claim they were “born this way” or are “just like you,” or intentionally rebelling against societal norms, the reality is that uniqueness of queer life cannot be assimilated cleanly into US society. From “alt-right” nationalists to “family values” Christians, who insist acceptance of LGBTQ people impinges upon their own liberties, there are far too many people invested in never having that happen. Queer critics of marriage and family who fear assimilation will lead to the death of queer culture, though their fears are absolutely warranted, are imagining a situation, perhaps many people’s idea of utopia, which will never come to pass. What we can have though, are real utopias in families and communities wherein queer identity is an area of bonding rather than a point of contention. Facilitating queer families’ ability to enact the lives and

bonds they choose, rather than force them to contort to fit into the well-worn grooves of the heteronormative family.

### **Methods and Overview**

My entry-point for this study was personal. As both an adoptee and a queer person, my ideas of family cannot be taken for granted. There is no one in my life that I share a biological connection with, so for me family has always been about choice, affiliation, and belonging. I do not know what it is like to look at someone and recognize my own face, filling out family medical history forms is a breeze, and my parents are my parents because I say they are. Part of this book is based on autoethnographic data, of my own chosen family, but all of it is informed by my experience. That said, I have tried to remain impartial and admit when my participants have done something I disagree with. For the most part though I assume my subjects are the experts of their own lives and neither attempted to deceive nor impress me with false claims. I have also tried very hard not to “sociologize” or deconstruct them and their experiences into oblivion. It is much easier to criticize people for their faults than to see them as imperfect and striving for something different because the status quo has not served them thus far.

The four family case studies that make up the core of this text are selected from a sample of semi-structured interviews with 50 LGBTQ adults in families with children conducted between 2010 and 2015. I have chosen them for the breadth of family types they illustrate and because, for each of them, I have been able to combine the narratives of multiple family members to give a fuller picture of family life from multiple points of entry. When looking for participants, my definition of a “queer parent” was quite

generous in order to capture the ways in which queer people were parenting outside the State or normative definitions. To consider oneself a parent to a child does not require legal custody, biological relatedness, nor shared housing, though many of the people I talked to had one or more of these qualities. I also found that to be a parent does not require everyone in the family to agree one is a parent. A queer parenting status may endure the test of time or not. One can also become a parent by forming a connection to a child that deepens over time. Queer parenting structures vary: from chosen single parents to a network of a dozen parents, step parents, biological donors, housemates, friends, and non-monogamous partners.

LGBTQ interview subjects are still considered a “hidden population,” but they are much less hidden when the researcher is also a member of the population. My participants came to me primarily through personal connections, friends and friends of friends, but others I connected with through posting in Facebook groups, listservs, bulletin boards, presenting at and attending LGTBQ conferences, and attending, flyer-ing, and volunteering at Provincetown Family Week in the summers of 2012-14. For the thematic chapters, I draw upon the full sample to make points and connections among people I see parenting on the margins of motherhood and fatherhood, as inhabiting “queer otherhoods”: transwomen “dads,” gestational fathers, known donors, and elective parents with neither biological or legal connections to their children. The parents I interviewed were predominantly located in either Western Massachusetts (19) or New York City (14), but others were living in Minneapolis (4), Boston (3), Provincetown (3), Tampa (2), Pittsburgh (2), San Francisco (2), and New Orleans (1). The slight majority of people in my sample identified as women (26), while twenty identified as men and four as

genderqueer. Most of my subjects identified as cisgender (38) while twenty-four percent identified as trans, including five transmen, three transwomen, and four non-binary people.

Of my 50 participants, 41 identified as white, 3 as Black, 2 as Asian-American, 2 as Latino, and 2 as Middle Eastern/North African. This racial skew is due almost entirely to convenience sampling methods. Since I am a white, genderqueer, overeducated person my personal networks tend to reflect these identities. The sampling that went beyond my networks happened at queer conferences and Family Week where the participants were mostly middle-class and white. I regret that my sample is not more diverse. I think my findings will necessarily reflect only a thin sliver of queer family life because of this racial homogeneity which keeps me from seeing the many many varieties and approaches to queer parenting and family formation that exist. Still, I was able to gather data from a pool diverse in family forms, gender identity, and experiments with utopic striving. My sample was never meant to be representative of the general population of queer parents (the majority of whom are actually queer parents of color in the South), and the cases presented here were chosen for their structural dissimilarities to the two-parent family norms and their potential theoretical significance. A clear future direction would be to consciously sample queer parents of color and poor parents; this would allow a researcher to potentially tease apart two strands of sociological theory: that which focuses on the extended networks of kin more common to working-class and poor people out of necessity and of people of color through the importance of common community, and that of queer people forming families of choice via a mixture of those two motivating factors.

The four family case studies in Chapter 3 show there is no eponymous queer parent. Though the cases represent five different family “types,” this is not to suggest there are only five types of queer parents or that these cases can be generalized to other families of the same type. The family cases chosen also vary in their internal intersections of race, class, gender, and age. Rather than produce composite narratives based on many cases (Hochschild 1989), these chapters are composites of my interviews with multiple family members, forming a triangulated and more complete picture of the family as a whole. I chose this organization in order to honor the specific complexities in each case; to take them out of context or significantly change the details of their experience would risk my ability to adequately analyze them or draw conclusions with implications for theory, which is the general goal of a case study approach (George and Bennett 2004). When I present information I think is a product of one person’s point of view or an embellishment, I note this in my discussion. The words and experiences of the families captured here reflect where they were in a certain point in time. Though many of the contours of these families have changed since the interviews I conducted 2010-2014—some have broken up, some have added new members, individuals have transitioned or detransitioned—I limit my analysis to the data captured in the interviews and my observations from fieldnotes at the time of study.

Chapter 4 draws upon data from the wider sample of interviews conducted in this project. Each part is organized by a type of “queer otherhood” or a variety of parenthood that falls outside heteronormative definitions of gendered parenting. Here, I combine data from several interviews with people with similar parenting experiences and draw broader conclusions about how these parents challenge and expand our most fundamental ideas of

parenthood in ways that at once give insight into the mothering and fathering practices of their hetero and cisgender counterparts and lay out paths for alternate ways of being. I look at the transwomen in my study who still identify as “dads”—they are proud of their roles as parents developed in the context of their lives before transitioning and so continue accepting with this gendered signifier (Dad) of who they simultaneously are and are no longer. However, it was through transitioning that they were able to form closer bonds to children and become better parents. I also consider the collective experiences of the gestational fathers in my study—those transmen and masculine of center genderqueer people who carried and delivered their children. Through the experiences of these parents we are able to see all the taken for granted ways parenting is gendered and how disrupting these expectations has different consequences for binary versus non-binary identified people and people of color. Known donors show us the power of biological connection even outside of heterosexual family structures and the ways in which gender power dynamics are undermined in some ways and reinscribed in others. Finally, elective parents are those who lack biological or legal connection their children; they have chosen to become parents free of both obligation and legal security, but reaffirm their connection daily in the lives of their children.

Can real queer utopias be realized in the present? What are the conditions under which they are either hampered or flourish? What we have now are chosen families in which LGBTQ people pick and choose from among their biological/adoptive families of origin, their friends-as-family bonds, and the people that come into their lives to facilitate their becoming parents—sperm and egg donors, surrogates, the birth parents of their fostered and adopted children, etc.—to create a family amalgam. Here I discuss the



negotiations of the realities of queer co-parenting, its failures and successes, and how even with the best of intentions, queer families are not free of inequality, particularly between and among genders. For people of any sexual orientation, family members are born, die, blended in, and phased out over the course of a lifetime. For non-traditional members of queer families (those without legal rights or biological connections), there is a simultaneous struggle to stay part of their chosen families versus a desire to break away and start “their own” families.

These are not perfect arrangements. Within these families are unequal power dynamics, different amounts of labor, different understandings of the same situations, and instances where they sometimes show bias and bigotry. They are families composed of flawed individuals. What they also are are attempts at doing family differently the results of which will prove to benefit all families. When I started this project, it seemed relatively conservative to study the domestic lives of queer people who decided to, for the most part, get married and have babies. Now, the political context of the Trump presidency and the ushering of archconservatives into the legislative process and the courts that adjudicate those decisions, which are already curtailing and rolling back LGBTQ people’s rights under the banner of “religious freedom,” clarifies the importance of this work. These families are on the margins of an already marginalized group in an America working to quash them. The people we are supposed to rely on to protect our rights believe Christians in public office should be able to deny LGBTQ people services, including medical and legal services, that LGBTQ people do not need equal protection under the law when it comes to housing or employment, that transgender people, particularly adolescents and those in the military, should be eliminated from these

institutions rather than changing those systems to accommodate them. Couldn't we all use a little utopia?

## CHAPTER 3

### CASE STUDIES IN QUEERING KINSHIP

#### **My Three Dads: Michael, Huck, and Bayani**

In *Unhitched*, Judith Stacey states, “Gay men would seem to make unpromising subjects for a study of family life. They lack the biological equipment, the social training, and the conventional institutional and legal resources for forging families” (Stacey 2011: 15). Of course, they do form the “postmodern families”—those lacking clear norms and departing in structure, content, and kind from traditional nuclear families—which have served as a cornerstone of Stacey’s sociological *oeuvre*. Stacey argues that gay men have not been prepared for family life in the ways women have. They face the twin family-forming handicaps of a lack of training in feminine ritual (kin, domestic, and emotional labors among others) and the inability to rely on women to compensate for them as heterosexual men do. However, Stacey constructs this straw man in order to topple it by arguing the gay men have also been uniquely adept at reconfiguring their approaches to intimacies, negotiating polyamory and monogamy, and, more than straight folks or lesbians, having intimate connections across class, race, and age. She finds that this variety and fluidity promotes a “rainbow kinship” of friends and lovers that benefits structurally disempowered men in ways heterosexual women seldom experience in their intimate relationships with men. Thus, gay men are hardly incompatible with family connection. The case explored in this chapter is that of a multi-racial and class diverse household of three men and their young son. Michael and Huck are a married, white, gay couple with careers in the competitive and well-compensated world of theater in New York City: one in set-design and the other in accounting. They share their home with

Bayani, a second-generation Filipino-American who works for a religious non-profit. The three have lived together since before their son, Gus, was born. When they were shopping for their downtown Brooklyn brownstone, Michael and Huck had it in mind that they wanted Bayani to live with them and they wanted space to bring children into their family as well. They talk lovingly about their unconventional home, how they share labor and avoid conflict. Though Michael and Huck are Gus's legal parents, they consider Bayani, and he considers himself, to be a third dad in the house. Bayani sometimes struggles with his position as the "outsider" in Michael and Huck's family and he eventually sees himself moving out and starting a family of "his own." They are assisted in accomplishing the tasks of parenting by the ghostly presences of women: Gus's birth mother, their part-time nanny, and a housekeeper. I begin with Michael and Huck's path to (legal) parenthood and then discuss Bayani's role and some potential complications. This case shows that some utopian family situations are facilitated by conventionality in other areas.

### **Michael and Huck's Path to Parenthood**

Michael and Huck had stopped waiting by the phone for a birth mother to pick them. The two had recently moved from a Manhattan condo to a Brooklyn walk-up to have more room for kids, but it didn't look like the kids were coming any time soon. They called their lawyer and said they wanted to try again in six months; by then maybe their luck would change. They had been chosen three times, by three women, and each time the woman had a change of heart. Rather than go through an agency, with a potentially long waiting period until they would be considered even potential parents,

Michael and Huck struck out on their own convinced they could cut the time by placing ads all over the country, asking if any pregnant woman considering adoption would choose them to adopt her baby. As two white, upper middle-class, gender-conforming, fully-employed citizens, they may have actually had better luck at an adoption agency than a similarly-positioned heterosexual couple. There is some evidence to suggest gay couples stand out to and are even preferred by birth mothers, inundated with similar vacation pictures and generic-sounding profiles from dozens of heterosexual couples. Some also like the idea of adopting out to gay couples since they can remain a child's "only mother."

A friend recommended the alternate, less predictable, and highly stressful path of hiring a private lawyer to advise them as they sought to adopt independently.

Traditionally, gay couples would hire these lawyers because adoption agencies have biases which benefit married, Christian, heterosexual couples. Now, gay couples hire private lawyers to keep up with the changing field of gay rights in all states and the effects on family formation. The independent, non-agency path offers both more control of and vulnerability to the adoption process, but is banned in some states since the practice is less regulated. For instance, this route does not require parents go through any training or home studies before they adopt. In addition to finalizing transfers of parentage, lawyers offer a particular set of services to couples centered on brokering agreements for payment (e.g., compensation for medical expenses) and negotiating visitation or the frequency of updates sent to birth parents.

Michael and Huck's lawyer posted ads in newspapers in five states. The first response they got was via text message. The women were instructed in the ad to dial an

800 number, but somehow this person got a hold of Michael's cell number and texted him. Michael called her back anyway and they spoke briefly and planned to have another call soon. Before Michael called her again, he Googled her, found a mug shot, and promptly withdrew his interest. But the ad plan worked, kind of; Michael sometimes felt like a call-center worker. He's the first to admit that Huck is far more charming and personable than him, especially on the phone, but, during a particularly busy time at Huck's work, a theatrical talent agency, the calls kept coming in and Michael, channeling his best Huck impersonation, fielded them all. At one point, like hopeful job applicants with multiple interviews, Huck and Michael thought they might be able to choose. But, like many hopeful job applicants with multiple interviews, they nervously took calls, and, one by one, women regrettably informed them they had gone with someone else, or no one at all.

Just as they were giving up hope, one of those women called back saying she had reconsidered. Before they got too excited, they flew out to Ohio to meet Eileen, the birth mother, in person. She was a tall white woman with dirty blonde hair, and immensely pregnant. She had set up an OB/GYN appointment for their visit, so they could see a sonogram of their future son. While they held hands, tears welling up and overflowing their eyes, staring at the fuzzy, TV-static shape of their son, Eileen began contractions two weeks early. Of course, since they were only planning a short visit, Michael and Huck were completely unprepared to meet their baby on the same day they met his birth mother, but that's what happened. They had to call their relatives, close friends, and co-workers to say, "We finally found a birth mother! Oh, and she's giving birth today!" Huck's parents immediately got in the car and drove the three hours it took to meet them

at the hospital. They met Eileen, her mother, her two-year-old son, and, later that same day, they all met Gus.

Michael and Huck were both in the delivery room, but only Huck got to cut the umbilical cord. It was the first time they ran up against the assumption that their child would have only one father. The nurse offered, and they just had to make a snap decision. But, hours after he was born, Eileen said she needed time to think. Transfer of custody papers unsigned, Michael said they “just stopped breathing.” At first, they all waited—birth mother, her mother, two would-be dads, and two would-be grandparents—in the same hospital room. The nursing staff, aware of the painfully awkward situation, arranged for another room. The baby initially went with Michael and Huck, but, all night, Gus traveled back and forth between the rooms because Eileen wanted to see him. The men couldn’t sleep at all that night, expecting Eileen to change her mind. But, she didn’t. By the morning, Eileen had signed the papers, went to court via conference call, and irrevocably gave up her rights to Gus. Eileen was discharged and she and her mother hosted a pizza party for Gus and his new family that night.

But, missing from this celebration was Bayani, Michael and Huck’s housemate, best friend, and shared best man. He’d stood by them through the whole process: the excitements, the fall-outs, the tough choices. When Michael and Huck drove home, they drove home to him. They arrived at two in the morning, and Bayani had waited up for them. He’d set up the crib himself. Last-minute as it all was, they weren’t nearly prepared to bring a baby home already. But, they were figuring it all out together.

Everything happened so quickly that Eileen only got to negotiate the terms of the adoption after the birth. The new dads went home with their crying, pooping, sleeping

bundle of joy and were immediately involved in “money negotiations.” They explained to me that they didn’t want to “buy a baby,” but they could give Eileen money for her medical expenses, “which she was really pushing.” In Michael’s description of Eileen, she is smart, funny, and makes “poor decisions with men.” He rationalized her choice to relinquish her rights to Gus for monetary reasons: “So she [already] had a kid, she could barely take care of him; she knew she couldn’t take care of a second kid.” But Michael prickled at the thought of actually paying her and felt she was being “pushy” by asking. They were doing her a favor, taking this child off her hands.

“You can’t buy a baby” is a refrain of many adopting parents, meant to distance themselves from the transactional nature of bringing someone else’s child home. It also makes it OK to have that transaction be one-sided. When money and intimacy get too close together, we become uncomfortable. The suggestion that love, or sex, or family connections can be “bought” seemingly (and ironically) cheapens them. The suggestion that an adoptive couple has purchased a baby is especially threatening as it begs the question, “from whom?” Looking too hard at the conditions, principally poverty, that motivate someone to put their child up for adoption mars the otherwise oversimplified narrative of destiny and joy. The idea of giving Eileen compensation also suggests that Gus is, in fact, not priceless, but part of an adoption economy which moves children from poor homes (mostly of color) to well-off ones (very often white). The position of LGBTQ people in this economy has shifted over time. There are now more agencies that cater to gay and lesbian couples and singles looking to adopt, but there are also constant culture wars threatening to become policy and restrict queer people’s ability to parent. The fear



conservative people have, about the degradation of the “American family” (read: straight, white, and wealthy) is an invention, but the multiplicity of family experiments is real.

About a year later, Eileen was pregnant again. She asked Michael and Huck if they wanted to adopt Gus’s sibling. They would be full siblings since Gus’s birth dad was back in her life. It seemed a little odd how casual she was about it. A friend of theirs, a self-proclaimed medium told them she had a feeling Eileen was getting pregnant “for the money.” Considering how little she received from the last adoption, this seems unlikely, but, I suppose, possible. Deciding whether to also adopt their son’s sibling was pretty agonizing. They weren’t planning on another child, but they felt inherently invested in Gus’s “blood” kin, and saying “no” felt like betraying Gus and abandoning his brother or sister. On the other hand, Huck said, they saw the pregnancy as an outcome of Eileen “not making smart choices for herself.” Eileen’s mother called them and said she was “terribly disappointed” in her daughter, but she expressed wanting her grandchildren under the same roof as well. They tentatively agreed to adopt. Eileen was about four months pregnant and would sometimes call randomly and ask for small sums of money, and they gave them to her. Then, the birth father called. He felt he was owed some compensation as well as this would also be his child and he had a claim to custody. Michael says he requested either \$500 or \$1000 to be “bought off,” Michael couldn’t remember. The men could easily afford that sum, but the sense that they were being taken advantage of grew and they pulled out. Eileen called and texted them for weeks afterward, but they stopped communicating with her. What began as an open adoption, with promises to send regular pictures and updates, to talk to her on the phone, and even take calls from her mother and other family, shut down. From then on, Huck and Michael

vowed to only follow the adoption agreement to the letter, sending annual updates until Gus turned four, and that was it.

But, just because Gus would not have much of a relationship with his birth mother didn't mean Huck and Michael were the only parental figures in his life. They adopted Gus in the context of living in the same house as Bayani—their long-time friend, confidant, chosen family member, shared best man, and Gus's godfather—with the knowledge that he would be a daily part of Gus's life. Gus has uncles, but they are not nearly as involved as Bayani. In fact, the three men agree that they are raising Gus together, Bayani serving as the third dad, even though on the cover of their book for birth mothers Bayani was literally out of the picture. The triad is open about and proud of their arrangement to most people: friends, relatives, and relative strangers like me. It's a family arrangement they all agree works for them, though it can be hard for some to understand.

This set-up, unlike an extended kin network based in need, was chosen. Michael and Huck are both fully-employed and doing well enough to own their own brownstone in Brooklyn. They are married, monogamous, gender-normative, and only somewhat politically-minded white men. Huck stays home half the day with Gus, and for the other half of the day, they have a regular nanny. They are perfect candidates for the embodiment of homonormativity. But, and with almost no self-congratulation, they are choosing to live in a queer family form, sharing their home and childcare with Bayani, a Filipino-American gay man who is also financially capable of living on his own. Before they found the house, and they all looked together. Though Michael and Huck have the mortgage and Bayani rents from them, Bayani would regularly spend the night on their couch in their Chelsea apartment. Recounting what Michael or Huck once said and how

they all decided to live together, Bayani says, “They were like, ‘You basically kind of live here,’ so...[laughs] so they were kind of used to seeing my face in the morning, so...yeah.” They were looking for more space for their family, the one they were starting and the one they had already.

In all my time visiting Brooklyn, over ten years, I had never met anyone who actually owned a brownstone. I had no idea I was only two-degrees separated from the upper echelon of Gay Brooklyn, having been introduced by a mutual friend. I got off the train at Jay St-Metrotech, walked two blocks away from the bustle of discount sporting goods stores and clothing outlets I associate with downtown Brooklyn, and ended up on a tree-lined street. I should have been tipped off when the address they gave me did not include an apartment number, but I came to a stop in front of an imposing set of stairs. I climbed, rang the doorbell, and was greeted by Michael, a white, thin, buttoned-up, handsome man, who invited me into their front room—he actually called it “the parlor.” He seemed wary of me, and we shared a stiff handshake and clipped introduction.

I sat on the edge of an overstuffed, light blue couch, my back to the requisite bay windows I have seen in all Brooklyn brownstones (though, until this point all my referents had been broken up into apartments) as he grabbed me a glass of ice water. Just then, Huck came down from checking on Gus, their 18-month-old son, all smiles and charm. Huck has the relaxed handsomeness of someone so well-aware of his attractiveness he became bored of it long ago and now attempts to pass as a mere mortal. He has an athletic build, I would learn, from his years playing hockey in the small, snowy town in Indiana where he grew up. He wore a relaxed, plaid shirt with an open collar and rolled sleeves which came off as more casual in contrast to Michael’s multi-colored,

striped polo shirt buttoned almost all the way up. They are the kind of gay men who don't "seem gay" to straight co-workers and take their sexuality for granted most of the time. Straight women regularly had crushes on them. Huck even ended up on a Buzzfeed list of hot guys reading books on the subway.

The two men took their seats upon stylish a club chair and rocker, at conscious diagonals, across from me. The seats were a lot like the men themselves: modern, coordinated, but definitely not matching. The chairs were situated about ten feet away giving me the distinct impression that they were interviewing me and not the opposite. I also noticed that Michael had laid down a coaster on the coffee table, under my drink, and as I looked up from it I finally took in how immaculate the place looked. There were no toys or board books scattered about, and the decor was certainly not centered around baby supplies like an activity chair or play mat as I had seen in other homes. They had so much control of the space they even had a single, decorative toy among all the photos on the mantle: a train piece in the shape of the letter G, for Gus. All other toys, like the baby himself, were completely out of sight.

Michael and Huck's path to parenthood began on their first "serious" date, which was actually only their second time hanging out together. I take the designation of "serious date" to mean that this was the first time Huck slept over at Michael's place, because he was still there the next day. The date lasted into the following evening when Michael had to attend a board meeting for his condo association. Meanwhile, Huck stayed behind and watched episodes of *Nip/Tuck* while sipping on gin and tonics. This was their relationship in a nutshell—Oscar and Felix, the straight man and the comic relief, the one who goes to meetings on the weekend and the one who feels comfortable

alone in anyone's home. As Michael puts it, "[I am a] perfectly fine lovely person, but [Huck] comes off much warmer right away." But, of course, this is too simple a story to tell. While Michael was at his meeting, Huck prepared, in his head, a short list of serious questions, the answers to which would determine either their ability to continue dating seriously, or the necessity of downshifting back to a more casual relationship. This is how Michael tells it:

And when I came back he said he had three questions, because he was perfectly prepared to just have fun and see where the relationship went but it wasn't going to get serious unless I answered the three questions properly, in order of importance. Which were: "Would you ever have a Christmas tree?" Because I'm Jewish. And, I said yes. And, did I want to have children one day, not necessarily with him, but someday, and I said yes. And then the least important to him, and of course it was a different time, not that long ago, but a different time, was, "Would I ever want to get married?" Which was also a "yes." So, apparently, having passed the test, I...we were allowed to continue.

Christmas, marriage, and family. These were the questions on Huck's mind by the second date with Michael, his new gay lover. Huck is an actor and has always had jobs in the arts. At the time of the interview, he was working for a prominent theatrical talent agency. Michael worked in the theater as well, but in an administrative capacity. Frequently, after work, the two attended play openings and other work/social events that put them in contact with New York's, still strongly gay, art scene. When they moved in together, about a month after the above conversation, it was to Michael's one-bedroom in Chelsea which, in 2007, was still the (gentrifying) heart of gay New York.

Huck grew up in the Midwest, playing team sports and attending church four or five times a week. The Baptist church he attended was very vocal about being against homosexuality and his father was a church deacon. As the church forbade it, Huck never saw his parents drink. Dancing and card games were also out of the question. Without humor, his grandfather called playing cards “the Devil’s play toy.” He basically lived in the town in *Footloose*. Ironically, Huck managed to come out at a relatively young age, 17, and his parents showed him nothing but support, though their own version of it. They wanted to sign him up for corrective counseling with the hope he would be “helped” and change his mind about being gay. To their credit, they ultimately respected his view that that kind of counseling was “not an option.” Huck doesn’t seem ruffled at their initial response and feels they had to process the information much as he did. And, he sympathized with their concern for his health and physical safety. As he puts it,

... when I came out of the closet, it was the mid-90s. Certainly AIDS and HIV is something that is still a big issue in the world, but it’s not the sort of death sentence [for gay men in the US], necessarily, as it was...then. And I think that scared them. I think they were *horrified by the challenges that I was going to face in my life* because of this added component. It’s not added, it’s just who you are, but that’s the way they sort of communicated it to me when I was in high school. And I think now...as times have evolved, too, [my parents] are completely different...completely embrace it. *They realize that the challenges that I face are just life challenges, just like my other brother’s face*, and that we’ve been blessed and we got...we’re lucky.

Huck highlights the tension between his parents' protection and disapproval. He mentions the mid-90s, the peak of the HIV/AIDS health crisis, very specific to gay men, as a concern of his parents (and, presumably himself), but quickly transitions into the language of equality emphasizing that his struggles are no different from his brothers. But, they are. His two hetero-identified brothers did not have come out to their parents, nor fear their rejection. They could also feel largely immune from a disease once known as the gay plague. This contradictory thought process, "I'm different, but I am no different" could also summarize the current lesbian and gay movement in the US. As a political strategy, gay men and lesbians have taken up a "we're just like you" discourse. This not only privileges the experience of heterosexuals, but situates heterosexuality as the standard by which other sexualities are measured. It also, implicitly, begs an abstract heterosexual public for admittance to the realm of full social, and eventually legal, citizenship (through marriage, adoption and immigration rights). Ultimately, this strategy only brings the most normative of gays and lesbians into the fold: the white, middle-classed, monogamous, HIV-negative, documented, and gender-conforming. By situating himself as identical to his brothers except for the "added component" of being gay, Huck is helping himself to feel safer. But, as someone with the above advantages, he is relatively safer, from violence as well as AIDS, than other gay men.

Huck left the Midwest for New York City in 2006, right after he graduated from college. He began in the city the way so many college graduates do: working for free as an intern and hoping to god it would pay off with a job at the end. He had always loved musical theater and had a dream of making a living in the arts. In an effort to keep his passion alive on very little money, Huck became a fixture at Marie's Crisis, a now-

closed, mostly-gay piano bar in the Village. The place had the added advantage of putting him in touch with a gay community the likes of which he had never seen growing up in Indiana. Through their mutual friend, the piano player, he met a second-generation Filipino man, and fellow recent transplant, Bayani. The two became fast friends, then, briefly, lovers. Their relationship began romantically but quickly transformed into close friendship. Talking about their early days, Bayani seemed a bit wistful, as if it had been Huck's decision to just be friends.

### **Bayani: Third Dad for Now**

When I met Bayani for the first time, before work in a sweet and pricey French coffee spot in downtown Brooklyn, I knew him even before we spoke: his clothes spoke on his behalf. While Huck and Michael were certainly not sloppily dressed when I met them, Bayani's look was head-to-toe impeccable. His hair seemed freshly cut and painstakingly molded into a very of-the-moment style crewcut around the back and sides with a long, floppy pompadour-ish crown. He wore a slim-fitting navy blazer over a tailored, textured white dress shirt (with French cuffs, of course) and a very hip, yet professional, navy and red knit tie. His khaki pants suggested casualness, but their fit, cut to his form and hitting slightly above his bare ankles, said otherwise. The *pièce de résistance* was definitely the cognac-colored, polished wingtips. This may not sound especially unusual for a professional reporting to work in Manhattan, but Bayani works for a religious non-profit: suit and tie is definitely not the dress code. Bayani has held a couple of jobs as an adviser on LGBT affairs to different Christian non-profits, but recently got a new position at the United Nations. Even so, Bayani does not come from



money and probably buys his high-end fashions thoughtfully. His look is refined and cultivated, but also a little stiff, and speaks to his need for control.

Bayani does nothing halfway. Not only did he serve as both Huck and Michael's best man at their wedding, he was also the *de facto* wedding planner. Michael and Huck keep a treasured picture of him from the wedding in their living room; he looks very serious behind a pair of Ray-Bans on the phone with a tardy violinist. They value his seriousness, but also find humor in it. They refer to the Bayani in that picture as "The Don": a conscious reference to *The Godfather*. He actually *is* Gus's godfather, but, like Marlon Brando's character, he is the kind of godfather you don't want to mess with. Since Gus has come into his life, Bayani serves as a resource for his other gay friends looking to have children; you may even say they "seek his counsel." He once advised a couple not to buy a certain house based on its baby-unfriendly layout. He also has weekly visits with a single-father friend with baby triplets in order to help him with the kids and impart wisdom he's gained watching Gus grow into a toddler. He describes his propensity for mastery and control in life this way:

I handle it. I do it at work; I do it in my personal life. In fact, I was joking with this guy that I'm talking to [romantically]...that it's just in my nature to be handling things, or fixing things. And so, yeah, for [Michael and Huck's] wedding I did that especially. And, it was fun, and I've done it for other people's weddings. It's just kind of my nature: figuring out stuff. Having some sort of control...*but, I'm not like a control freak. [stiff laugh]*.

In my experience, the only people who insist they are not control freaks are people who worry they are control freaks. Bayani certainly likes knowing what to expect and

preventing mishaps. This became clear in the first moments of our sitting down to talk. I will admit, just the look of his perfectly constructed appearance, and the fancy place we met, intimidated me. That vanished pretty quickly when he spilled his tea (black tea with milk) all over the table. He was flustered and embarrassed in a way that suggests he takes himself a little too seriously and then found equilibrium by calling over a waitress to clean it up.

In his past, Bayani found there were things he could not control. His father died when he was still a teenager. When he talks about the loss, he tells it through the perspectives of everyone else to obfuscate his own feelings. His mother was crushed, of course, and his two older brothers started getting into more trouble with drugs, violence, and incarceration. His relationships with both brothers failed, a combination of their drug abuse and homophobia, and they haven't spoken with him in years. Bayani, from a young age, was his mother's "golden boy." Growing up, he felt pressure to succeed for his mom: he was all she had left. Further explaining his generalized anxiety and need for control, Bayani states,

I'm anxious because...I just wanted to like prove to [my mom] that [she] did a great job, right? And, I can do this (succeed at life). And I can do this because [she] taught me how. So that's kind of the reason for why I'm pretty anxious.

Bayani, very aware that there are many people who would blame his mother, an immigrant of color and single parent, for the waywardness of her children, did not want his brother's failures laid at their mother's feet. He took it upon himself to prove that she was a good parent by making himself a living example: succeeding at school and staying

out of trouble. But then, of course, he knew he was gay and worried that this would disappoint her.

The way he came out was rather orchestrated. He waited awhile to tell her he was gay, though everyone at college knew. Free of the constraints of the home in which he grew up, Bayani developed a gay community in college and quickly met his first boyfriend. Always close with his mom, Bayani couldn't stand not telling her, and he saw his new boyfriend as an opportunity to show her he was happy. Explaining his reasoning for waiting until he was in a relationship before coming out, Bayani stated:

...if I had somebody to kind of show that I was happy with, and have some sort of proof of that happiness, and that he happened to be a really nice guy and a cute guy then my mom would be like, "Okay, alright, this all makes sense," right?

Aware of the cultural trope of the sad, lonely gay man, made popular in cinema representations and intensified by the constant grief and threat that AIDS brought to the gay community. He came out in 2002, when the worst seemed to have passed, but was still very much in recent memory. He wanted to bring his mother a nice, cute guy that would help her see that gay men could be healthy and happy together. The problem was, he didn't exactly tell her. Bayani went home for three weeks in the summer after his first year of college. The first week, it was just him; the second week, his gay best friend, Blake, joined them; and then his boyfriend, Mitch, was to arrive in the last week. Bayani knew he had to come out ahead of their arrival, so he took his mom out to dinner with the intention of telling her. He was incredibly nervous and used his friend to lay the groundwork for his own coming out by telling his mom not to ask about Blake's "girlfriend" (as parents do), because he was gay. So, his mom asked about the other

young man scheduled to visit and Bayani simply said, “Mitch is my boyfriend.” Silence. Bayani asked her what she thought about what he had just said. In his words,

And I’m like, “So, mom, what do you think? Do you care?” and she’s like, “*Anoko*,” which means, in the Filipino language that my parents speak, *anoko* means “the only thing I care about is getting a spoon for my soup.”

His mother was letting him know his admission was neither shocking nor a big deal. But, she also didn’t acknowledge it at all. She suggested to him that she “didn’t care” (though she didn’t even say this explicitly) in response to a confession about which he had clearly struggled. Bayani repeats the story, now, as a point of humor without reference to the dismissiveness of her reaction which is really the underside of the same story.

Bayani is still close with his mom, but the core of his family has shifted to his life with Huck, Michael and Gus. His connection extends beyond the two men and into their extended families with whom he has a standing invitation to family holidays and vacations.

I’ve spent the last, I don’t know, five or six Thanksgivings with [Huck and Michael]. All the holidays: Hanukah, Yom Kippur, everything. Gone on family vacations, and so Michael and Huck they’re like my *urban family*, ‘cause I haven’t been home to California, where my family [of origin] is from, in about three years and [Michael and Huck have] just kind of become that nuclear unit for me that grounds me here in New York.

Bayani calls Huck and Michael his “urban family,” indirectly referencing the similar terms “chosen family” or “queer family.” More explicitly, Bayani referenced the lack of a

relationship with his own brothers and stated, “So, in a way, Michael and Huck have become kind of like replacement brothers for me.”

His relationship with Michael and Huck can be hard for outsiders to understand. As a way of making sense of his sharing a home with these two married men, people assume their relationship is either sexual or exploitative. Bayani says he is often asked if the three men are in a “thruple” (three-partner relationship) to which he responds, “Like no, there’s not a thruple, [Michael and Huck and I] don’t have that type of relationship we’re all, you know, just really good friends, so that’s just the way it is.” Though, this knowledge has not kept previous partners from expressing jealousy or concern.

[When Gus was born] I was dating a guy who... was worried that my life would be kind of consumed by their life, by Michael, Huck, and Gus’s life, and that I wouldn’t...have time for myself, or that I would become some sort of *glorified nanny* or something like that. But, to me it was just kind of, *this was my family, right?*

I admit that, at first, I had the same concern as Bayani’s former partner. Why else would two wealthy white men share a home with an unrelated man of color, specifically an Asian man, if he wasn’t doing domestic work? Again, drawing from film, Asian men out in the settling US West, displaced from work laying track for train lines, found a niche in domestic work. While wealthy Americans preferred women (typically women of color) to work in homes back East, Asian men, both available and stereotyped as “feminine,” were handy surrogates. This legacy is alive in Bayani’s partner’s comment about becoming a “glorified nanny.” Though it is clear that Bayani’s lack of time with his boyfriend was the more prominent motivator for the comment, there is a broader critique

of the domestic relationships that develop when wealthy whites share their homes with employees of color- while the white employers may see their nannies and housekeepers as “family,” the sentiment rings hollow because these workers are taking time away from their own families in order to serve another (Hondagneu-Sotelo). There’s also the awkwardness that one side of that “family” dynamic can be asked to leave at any moment. Bayani’s partner saw the danger of the situation for Bayani, having no legal or defined social connection to Gus he could have easily been exploited and then discarded.

But, Bayani sees it differently. To him, Michael, Huck, and Gus are his family and any labor he does, from coming home early from work, or spending an evening or weekend with Gus while Michael and Huck are away, are priorities for him. It doesn’t feel like exploitation because he wants to do it. In the statement above, Bayani moves from his ex’s concern about his time to a rearticulation of his status as a member of the family. Still, rather than a declarative statement, Bayani couches his assertion in a question, “this was my family, *right?*” Plus, Bayani knows he is not the nanny because the men *also have a nanny!*

Reflecting on how he became Gus’s other dad, Bayani sites his close connection to Michael and Huck: they are his family. They became especially important when Bayani’s genetic siblings rejected him for being gay and he found these “replacement brothers.” So, it follows, Gus would be his family as well. Bayani says,

And so, when Gus came into my life, I was just like, “well, this is a given, right?” it’s just a fact of life, and I’m gonna love him *as if he’s my own*, and if that has an impact on the rest of my life, then that’s just the way it is.

The way Bayani tells it, it really wasn't a "given" that he would become a parent to Gus, but it wasn't a surprise either. It doesn't seem like this was entirely the plan, but Bayani was excited to take on the responsibility. When he says, "I'm gonna love him as if he's my own," he could be referring to the fact Gus is adopted, but he's also talking about his own tenuous position in the family: legally, Gus is Michael and Huck's. But Bayani plans to have Gus be a permanent part of the rest of his life. The impacts it could have on his life are making decisions to live where the boys want to live, and to have to continually explain, as he did to his ex, what his role is in the family.

One person who did understand the significance of Gus's arrival for Bayani was his boss, at the time, who made accommodations and allowed Bayani to take time off as if Gus were "his own."

My boss...just thought it was awesome that I was doing this with the boys and that I was so committed to Gus's life and helping to raise him and she would encourage me to go home early and spend time with Gus. And I had a lot of time off, or working from home when Gus was born because she was just like, "Stay there, I mean, it's such a privileged time and not many people get to do this, so you should do that."

Bayani was working for a non-profit Christian advocacy organization which encourages churches to be more welcoming to lesbian and gay parishioners, so his boss may be more open-minded than most. Still, it was really important for Bayani to have his status as a parent and caregiver validated by his employer.

Bayani has also received a surprising amount of support from his mom, who, although pretty blasé about his coming out, has been so excited to have Gus in her life.

And then my mom is, she just loves Gus *like he's her own* grandson and she came here for Mother's Day and was just like doting on him the entire time. So she asks about him, we Facetime with her. So, it's like the cliché, it's just the new normal, this is what happens, right? I don't think it's uncommon to, you know, even heterosexual families to have somebody else around. I've known like a bunch of my aunts and uncles to have brothers and sisters of theirs help raise the kid for a time, you know?

Again, Bayani's language is tempered when it comes to claiming he's a parent or his mother is a grandmother, but, unlike, his aunts and uncles, he's not helping "from time to time," he's living with them, eating dinner with them every night, and seeing Gus every day. Bayani's touchstone for examples of other non-nuclear childrearing set-ups is his own family. In his experience, it's pretty normal for extended kin to help one another raise children.

I asked Bayani if he could explain why it seems like this situation is "the new normal," and he astutely pointed to economic factors that might motivate the need for extra support, but ultimately thinks it just "makes more sense." Bayani says,

Well, it's all, it's the whole it takes a village thing, and if there are people willing to do it, why would you reject the help, right? So, because, we're not in the 1950s anymore—both parents have to work, right? And childcare is *expensive*. And also, housing is *expensive*, and so if you have a sibling who needs a place to live, and you have room, and they are willing to help with the, to lend a hand with the baby, then why not? *Because it's more love for the baby and it makes your life a little bit easier as a parent, so you'd be crazy and a fool to like reject something*



*like that* unless you had a terrible relationship with the person, but it just, you know, economically, emotionally, you know, relationship-wise, I think it all makes sense. I mean, obviously it wouldn't work for everybody, but I think Michael, Huck, and I had a very strong relationship before [Gus arrived].

Living in New York City, Bayani would know how expensive things can get. Though his statement begins with economic need, it “takes a village” because everything is so expensive and people need each other to afford it, it quickly transitions into an emotional explanation. It's more “love for the baby” and you'd have to be “crazy” to interfere with that. It's also help, and even if it isn't needed, it sure is helpful to have life be a bit easier for parents. The baby wins, the parents win, but he neglects the reason he got involved in the first place, it's good for the person helping out too. It's harder to see what Bayani gets out of this arrangement. He's not being paid, in fact he's paying rent. What he's also doing is making his own family. In the absence of a romantic partnership or a supportive family of origin, Bayani has found the most stability and support in his life with these men. Helping take care of Gus solidifies his import in this family. And, although Michael and Huck are far from poor, childcare is expensive and rent is expensive and these factors have opened a place for him. Even if Bayani never creates “his own” family, he has one.

Michael and Huck clearly value him. Firstly, he makes an unfamiliar experience, caring for a child, seem bearable,

If we lived more isolated lives, if [Bayani] lived down the block, if my mother wasn't 45 minutes away, if we didn't feel like we could really depend on friends and family, what already feels slightly overwhelming would probably feel too daunting.

If Bayani even lived down the block from them, Michael knows his life would be more difficult. For Michael, a terrifying experience he wasn't quite sure he'd be able to have, being a dad, is made much more possible with help. So, what does any of this have to do with being gay? They are much more open to the help. At the end of the interview, in a rare moment of emotional sincerity, Michael told me,

Perhaps we [gay parents] are just more open to it [family structures with more than two parents] because nothing is conventional in how we grew up and how we formed our families...We don't have as defined roles either, right? [Huck] is the primary caretaker, he's home...but, we don't have, it's never "he's supposed to do that" or "I'm supposed to do that" to begin with. So, therefore, if somebody else comes into that equation to help or to be apart of it, they are not necessarily stepping on my toes or his toes either.

Michael hits on a lot of points here. He makes the case that queer people may be more open to non-normative family structures, a taken-for-granted idea, but he offers a multi-part explanation: gay people grow up differently, they form their families differently, and they do not have the codified parenting scripts straight people do. Queer people come up knowing that the conventional life course path does not include them, and so is fundamentally flawed and worth questioning. If they want kids outside a hetero relationship, the conventional does not cut it there either. Even the most heteronormative queer folks have to involve other people to have a child. At least one other person, but often more, is necessary: to adopt, to use one member's genetic material to produce biogenetic offspring, to gestate a fetus in the absence of a uterus. And those additional people bring even more family connections to the table. Finally, the guidelines of who

should do what are unclear, straight mothers and fathers know what is expected of them even if they rebel against those norms, but queer people still have few models. Most insightfully, Michael remarks that unclear roles leave space open to additional people. Michael offers an explanation that goes beyond positing that queer people are inherently “more evolved,” but that there are fewer scripts and people are generally making things up as they go—thus there are lower barriers to entry, if someone wanted to jump in as an additional co-parent. And, lo and behold, it makes things easier in practice.

I can’t help but be worried. Bayani, as Gus’s godfather, may be the designated caretaker in the event of Michael and Huck’s untimely passing, but, in the meantime, his rights are limited. Throughout our interview though, he seemed to be gesturing toward the inevitable: that someday he wants *his own* family. Bayani says four times in our interview that he cares for Gus *as if* he were his own, and also that his mother treats him *as if* he were her grandson. Bayani is very realistic about the fragility of his situation and the possibility of the current set-up ending. He says,

And that’s something that I think about every now and then when it comes to [Gus]. Like, I love him like he’s my own, but I could very easily remove myself from the situation if I wanted. So, it is a very privileged position to be in. And I think, because I choose to be in it, I think it carries more weight and meaning.

The idea of endurance, even if it doesn’t last, seems integral to the establishment of family ties, and the same could be said for obligation. Bayani doesn’t see it that way. He’s knowingly chosen to be part of a complex family situation *for now*. He’s right, the ability to walk away is a privilege he has, and Michael and Huck could also walk away from him. Realistically though, people walk away from family obligations all the time, a

legal or biological connection does not guarantee people stick around. The stakes are lower for him, of course, but it is still a family experiment worth trying out, even if it doesn't last. Right now, he is Gus's third dad. He may not always be, but it will not mean the family has "failed" if he isn't.

Michael, Huck, and Bayani, an example of a queer parenting structure, are also operating on "queer time." Straight time unfolds in a predictable way—you move out of your parents' house, live on your own, you build a career, get married, have children, get rich, and die—and anything short of this progression is a perpetual "becoming" or growing up (Halberstam 2005; Freeman 2010). Queer people who take part in the club scene, have sex with multiple partners, do not have steady incomes, and live with roommates aren't seen as grown or settled no matter their age. "Settling down" is something LGBTQ people increasingly take part in, most clearly seen in getting married and having babies. But Michael and Huck have careers, they're married, and they have a baby, but they also have a roommate. They don't need Bayani to live with them, but they choose to have him live there. This set-up and the fact of their queerness left open the possibility that Bayani could help them raise their son. As Michael said, the absence of roles in queer childrearing means no one is doing someone else's "job" or stepping on someone else's toes. The consequences for Gus and his parents are overwhelmingly positive: Gus has more people in his life and more love, Michael and Huck have more help, free babysitting, and another source of income. While these side-effects may seem rather bourgeois, they accomplished through a conscious queering of the nuclear family. This case adds necessary nuance to the claim that with the possibility of marriage and parenting queer people will come to mimic straight people and become "no different."

Michael reminds us though that, with the lack of gender-based parenting scripts hanging over these families, they will always be different, and being different offers them the freedom to innovate.

Queer temporality of another sort is manifest in how this family recognizes it can, and likely will, change. Bayani could move out, he could sever himself from this relationship and this family. But, knowing that and choosing to stay makes the situation “more meaningful” to him. In spite of the frequency of separation and divorce among straight couples, the imperative is to endure. To admit the family structure could change in divorce or in death would be taboo. This family can change and they are all aware of it. If or when it does happen, they will be more prepared to handle it and stay on good terms.

Although conventional in many ways, Michael, Huck, and Bayani bring alternative understandings to the parameters of parenting. It is this alternative approach to intimacies Stacey finds so beneficial to gay men and the families they form. They chose to raise Gus in a house with three dads and found it hugely beneficial to have the help. Gus gets more love and care and a lasting relationship (though the contours of it may change over time) with someone outside his legal family. Bayani gets to weed out the potential partners that are not understanding of the alternate family form he has. Michael and Huck, the very model of the gay ideal—young, prosperous, good-looking, and white—still understand family to be malleable, chosen, and oriented toward fulfilling needs for connection and care. This family could be entirely heteronormative, Michael and Huck have the means, but the members of this family recognize that what they are doing helps them all and the child they are raising. This innovation that improves their

daily lives, even though many people question it and do not understand how it works, is what makes this three-dad family a real queer utopia.

### **Transracial Adoption-Extended Family: Katie and Catherine**

#### **Co-parenting in Dyke Slope**

Katie and Catherine are one of the few couples I talked to who were not only unmarried, but against marriage. My interview with them was before the 2015 Supreme Court decision to overturn DOMA. Knowing they are against marriage does not stop anyone from suggesting it. They have jointly adopted their daughter, Ophelia, so getting married would not add anything to their legal claims to her, only to each other. Because they don't make much money separately, both employed by politically progressive non-profits, they would not save much money by marrying and filing their taxes together. But, getting married would guarantee their wishes to will everything to the other in the event of their death. As their lawyer tells them, "it really has no benefit to you in life, it benefits you in death." Katie especially, sees no benefit at all, and has a well-developed critique of marriage:

I'm opposed to marriage, I mean you can do it if you want, I'll fight for your right to do that, but I don't think the government should be sanctioning relationships, period. And I don't think there should be financial benefits or harm to your relationship [through marriage], and I think you should be able to give your money to whoever you want and all of that. So, for me, the whole marriage thing is not all that exciting, quite frankly. I think we'd be better off fighting for people to live their lives however they want.

Katie sees marriage as an opportunity for the government to sanction relationships, and ultimately control people's lives. She works for a large non-profit that advocates for civil rights, and, on this issue, her own thinking clashes with the advocacy she is paid to do.

And it's hard, like I work at [a civil rights advocacy organization] and it's a big part of what we've done and I get it that it's for the movement, but I have real frustrations. All the work we do in *our LGBT stuff is about being the same as everybody else. [I'm frustrated] because I thought it could be a little different.*

Katie finds herself a minority within a minority: a gay person against gay marriage. Her critique here not only goes against the position of her own organization but the vast majority of the gay rights movement for whom legal parity with straight couples is the goal. Katie would rather open the field of options, for people to "live their lives however they want" rather than restrict gay lives to being "the same as everybody else." Katie and Catherine's family is not like everyone else's. They adopted their daughter in an open adoption process through a private, though politically progressive, adoption agency. They are white, Brooklyn lesbians with an adopted Black child living in an area of Brooklyn where people of color were pushed out to make way for the monied and white. Ophelia is not without connection to her birth family though because her biological sister is living just a few blocks away with another white lesbian couple. Through this connection, the two families have merged their lives, seeing each other on a regular basis by playing in the park, making each other dinner, and going on vacation together. When they decided to adopt Ophelia, the couple had no idea they were adding so many new people to their lives. Katie's opposition to marriage and family access as core goals of the LGBTQ rights movement unquestioningly framed these families as nuclear, heteronormative,

closed units. But her experience of her own queer family is more radical than even she was prepared for.

Katie and Catherine met in 1994. They were interning together in Washington, DC for at the headquarters for the National Organization of Women. At 24 and 23, their lives were driven by their feminist politics, and they continued working for change in DC for five more years as their relationship got more serious. In 1999, they moved to New York so Katie could go to graduate school in the city. This was also a homecoming for Catherine who grew up in the Upper East Side of Manhattan, though the two non-profit workers had to settle for more-affordable Brooklyn. They landed in Park Slope and soon bought the top floor of a three-floor walk-up brownstone only a handful of avenues west of Prospect Park. They assure me that in the late '90s the neighborhood was a bit different than its present affluent, stroller and coffee shop-spotted state. As Katie explains:

So, I'd say that when we moved here, it really was Dyke Slope, right? So, it was like lesbians everywhere. The neighborhood was still being gentrified...And 7<sup>th</sup> [Avenue] only really had a couple of nice restaurants, but the Barnes & Noble was there. So it was really like: lesbians, teachers, like, the co-op was there so it still had like the activist people, non-profit people, all of that. And then, I don't know when...there was literally a day when we were out in the neighborhood like, "What the hell? Who are these people?"

Katie's comment makes it seem like the neighborhood changed overnight, though Park Slope has a long and fraught history of changing residents and gentrification. The area was built into a residential neighborhood in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century. By 1900, it was among



the richest communities in the US. During the Depression, working-class Irish and Italian immigrants called Park Slope home, though it wasn't long before increasing Black and Latino presence in the now more-affordable neighborhood led to "white flight." By the 1970s the area began to be "cleaned up" by real estate developers attracted to the brownstone and other historic buildings; they pushed out low-income residents and poured money into restoring buildings. Sections of Park Slope were then deemed to have historic significance and rents steadily climbed. A Barnes & Noble moved in.

All this happened before Katie and Catherine's time, though their having purchased their apartment before the area was completely gentrified (yet again) gives them access to some claims of authenticity. Though they live in Park Slope, they are not "Park Slope" in all its current yuppie connotations. They associate themselves with the white artists and activists, disproportionately lesbians, who moved in (along with another wave of working-class Irish and Italians) rather than the present wave of well-to-do Manhattan professionals looking to start families somewhere more tree-lined and calm. The *New York* magazine profile of the neighborhood speaks volumes about the current state of Park Slope.

No neighborhood is the butt of more stroller jokes or the recipient of more anti-gentrification scorn. But any way you slice it, Park Slope is the very definition of a well-rounded neighborhood. It falls just slightly below average in two [ways]: affordability (the average two-bedroom rental is \$2,275) and diversity. In all other areas, it's somewhere between above grade and superlative: It's blessed with excellent public schools, low crime, vast stretches of green space, scores of restaurants and bars, a diverse retail sector, and a population of more artists and

creatives than even its reputation for comfortable bohemianism might suggest (more, in fact, than younger, trendier Williamsburg). It might not be everyone's idea of a perfect neighborhood, but statistically speaking (by a hair), there's nowhere better. (Newyorkmag.com)

Katie and Catherine had no idea the neighborhood would take off like it did. As Catherine puts it succinctly, "The people who can afford to pay \$800,000 for a two-bedroom apartment and think that's a good deal are not the people we wanted to live next door to." When they bought their place in 2002, admittedly attempting to take advantage of the post-9/11 fear of buying anywhere in the city, they paid \$200,000 for the two-bedroom apartment with the bay windows and spacious living room I sat in while we talked. At the time they felt like they were paying a fortune, but as they watch their neighbors across the hall (another lesbian couple with kids) buy for 400% more 15 years later, they feel lucky.

Katie has long blond hair with a strong, athletic build while Catherine is a lithe brunette always in a baseball cap. Neither is particularly butch or femme looking; as Catherine says, she never felt "conspicuous as a lesbian" in public. Though it is clear they both preferred modest "Dyke Slope" to the prosperous, straight present, they have no plans to move. In any other city, their modest apartment would be considered cramped but cozy. But, by Brooklyn standards, it is a nicely-sized two-bedroom in a great location. Katie and Catherine are the first to admit that they would have to move if they had another child. Luckily, their motto on childrearing is "one and done" because, as Katie puts it, they prefer to outnumber their child(ren).

## **The Adoption Gauntlet**

After thirteen years together, Katie and Catherine decided it was time to try and get pregnant. Their first choice was to have Catherine give birth. She works as a nurse practitioner specializing in fertility care and has successfully, in her words “gotten other women pregnant,” so she assumed it would be relatively easy. The two ordered anonymous sperm from a non-profit sperm bank in California which arrived, rather indiscreetly, at their local post office creating even further embarrassment with a bus driver who refused to let them board with the suspicious package covered in warning labels and, then, nosey neighbors in the lobby of their apartment building. When these at-home attempts (at around \$800 a pop) were unsuccessful, they tried going to a clinic. Catherine still couldn’t conceive. Then, they tried getting Katie pregnant; still, nothing happened.

They started researching gay-friendly adoption agencies. One such agency encouraged them to apply for admittance to an international adoption information session. After a two-hour meeting, Katie and Catherine were told that no countries the agency works with allows for adoption by gay and lesbian couples. They were told that one of them could have applied as a single person, but now that the agency knew they were a couple, they would not lie for them. The agency’s domestic program was more accepting, but by then the two decided they did not want to work with this agency that misled them. A few months later, they then met Josie, a representative of Triad Adoptions. At Triad, they provide services and care for birth parents, adoptive parents, and adoptees. It’s a private agency founded with the goal of honoring all members of the adoption “triad.” Co-founder Josie, who adopted her own daughter, is a proud ex-hippie

who was annoyed at what she saw as discriminatory practices in other agencies. She and her male partner had a hard time adopting in the 1980s; agencies did not like that the couple wasn't married, that they were atheists, and that they were generally non-conventional. This experience motivated Josie to found an agency that explicitly (though not exclusively) works with co-habiting unmarried heterosexual couples and gay and lesbian couples.

Josie was upfront with Katie and Catherine about the challenges of being a same-sex couple looking to adopt; she told them it would likely take longer than for a straight couple, but that it would happen. They called the agency many times looking for a spot on the agency's short client list, but for six months they were turned away.

They had a certain balance that [Josie] liked between like...it was like 1/3, 1/3, 1/3: it was straight [couples], gay men, gay women [respectively]. They weren't even taking single people [because] she had that one woman who had been on the list a very long time. So we had to keep calling.

Josie had a preference for a sort of balance of clients in terms of gender and sexuality. It was the policy of the agency to turn away any kind of couple (or single) they had "too much of" since the agency was pretty small and couldn't serve everyone who wanted their services. Still, Triad's list of potential parents was 2/3 gay and lesbian. This certainly speaks to the growing interest of queer people in becoming parents, but it also reveals the politics of maintaining a "balance" between those who would quickly be chosen by birth parents (straight couples) and those who would not (singles and gay and lesbian couples). Working with Triad, though, was appealing for birth mothers because the agency was strictly about facilitating open adoptions in which birth mothers were

known and in some contact with the children they adopted out. Giving birth parents the power to choose with whom to place their child has presumably maintained private adoption agencies' ability to discriminate among waiting parents, but Triad worked hard to advocate for their gay and lesbian clients. Birth parents, if they have a preference, are likely to prefer placing their child with a straight couple. Unlike a deli line, the adoption process is not first come, first served.

It took Katie and Catherine six months to make the agency's list. Next came the orientation, the information sessions, and the home study. Catherine was particularly peeved about the home study, not because it was difficult, but because it was mandated. She describes the experience this way:

They just ask a lot of questions to try to learn about us and our lives. It wasn't challenging at all, there was no question that it was going to be okay, it was just time-consuming and more money. It was just frustrating to sit there and have to tell someone your whole life story to have a kid *when people get pregnant all the time by accident or they don't want to be or stuff like that* so, it was not a big deal, but at the same time, frustrating.

All told, it took about 14 months from the time Katie and Catherine decided to pursue the adoption route to the time they were actually listed in the agency's catalog. This does not include the time they spent looking at different agencies, nor the time it took to actually find an interested birth family. Catherine holds some bitterness about straight couples being able to "accidentally" conceive, all the more frustrating after her and Katie's failed attempts with donor sperm. Catherine felt entitled to become a parent because she wanted to be, and felt angry that having a child was "no big deal" to straight couples, as

though becoming pregnant when you didn't want to be or making the decision to place a child for adoption were "no big deal."

Adoption also turned out to be no more of a "big deal" for straight couples, even on a list that was 2/3 gay. Once they were clients of Triad, Katie and Catherine went on a retreat to meet with other prospective parents and get to know the agency and the adoption process. They had been trying to become parents for five years at this point: two years of planning, two and a half years of insemination attempts, and another six months on Triad's waiting list. After all this, one couple they meet at the Triad retreat demonstrated just how different the process is for straight couples on Triad's list. Catherine says, "Of course the first people we meet [on the retreat] are like, 'Yeah, we're coming back for a second [child] and we got our first [child] within 24 hours of being on the [agency's] list.'" The purpose of the agency's retreat was to help waiting couples see they were not alone, but for Katie and Catherine, it only reinforced their feeling of having the odds stacked against them.

For two more years, nothing happened. To add salt to the wound, they had to pay to have yearly home studies in order to remain eligible to adopt. When Katie and Catherine finally were contacted, their difficulties only increased. They drove to Providence to meet an interested birth mother, Maya, and her case worker. As they tell it, she was flakey from the start nearly missing their first meeting. After that, it was clear she had no idea how her birth would proceed telling them both that she was going to have a C-section and have her labor induced. The agency also reported that sometimes on the phone, Maya sounded drunk. Catherine wanted to know what was going on and pressed to see Maya's medical records to which Maya gave her signed consent. Catherine says,

Yeah, and so [the agency] finally got the record [sic] and it had said that she, in the beginning, had reported binge drinking every weekend until she had started getting care, until about 6 months in, because said she didn't know she was pregnant until that point and at that point we were out.

Catherine and Katie decided against working with this birth mother because of her use of alcohol while pregnant even though they were told by an agency worker, years before, that they had to be open to some drug and alcohol use "otherwise there's nobody."

Catherine with equal parts sympathy and derision states,

Nobody is making an adoption plan for their child if they have their shit together, right? So there's always *some* drug and alcohol use and [adoption case workers] have you clarify whether you are okay with *use* and whether you are okay with *abuse*.

Looking at Maya's medical records, Catherine concluded that she was on the wrong side of the use/abuse divide.

Four months later, they received another call. Keisha, a Black birth mother who had worked with the agency before, had just given birth to a girl. Her baby had been exposed to both drugs and alcohol, but appeared healthy. The agency told Katie and Catherine that Keisha's last child had been exposed to a similar amount and was doing fine. They had six hours to decide if they wanted to take her home. Still concerned about the drug exposure, a paranoia informed by the adoption books they had been reading, Katie and Catherine contacted a medical specialist who worked with the agency who told them unsympathetically, "You never know, figure it out." They went for it, and that's how their daughter, Ophelia, came into their lives.

Looking back, Katie makes the connection between the fear of birth mother drug and alcohol abuse, promoted by the adoption books, with racism.

And now, you look back in the stuff that we read and there is so much racial stuff involved with the idea...with the impact of what drugs and alcohol have on kids, you know? What you hear about is like “crack baby syndrome” and this and that and the other thing, and most of those studies haven’t borne out, but in the moment when you have like 3 hours to decide...so we decided to go for it and we did.

Katie picked up on the racial undertones of “drug abuse” and “crack babies.” Though calling what she saw “racial stuff” isn’t quite the same as naming racism, Katie knew she and Catherine were being privileged in this process that painted adoptive parents (assumed to be white) as saviors and birth mothers (assumed to be women of color) as reckless, drug addicts not worthy of parenthood because they did not plan their pregnancies. This became all the more clear when the two new parents went to the hospital to pick up their baby. As Katie says,

[The nurses in the maternity ward] were fine with us being a same sex couple, but we had not even left the grounds of the hospital and we had two interactions with people about how horrible [Ophelia’s] birth mom was.

These comments actually came from hospital staff who, Katie and Catherine are sure, did not know the birth mother and may not have interacted with her while she was there.

Catherine recounts the biased way she assumes the nurses thought about Keisha,



It was just [like] obviously if you are giving your child up for adoption, you're a horrible person. You're a bad person. And like, "Oh thank god she has a better life now" but they don't know us either.

Though Katie and Catherine were scandalized by these comments from the hospital workers, they are themselves far from beyond reproach when it comes to assumptions about birth mother morality. In addition to their scorn about "accidental" pregnancies generally, they had their own assumptions about Keisha. Commenting that their child's birth father may never know they have adopted his offspring, Katie jibes, "I don't even know if [Keisha] knows who he was." Even more heinously, at the hospital and waiting to pick up their baby, Catherine, a nurse practitioner who works for a women's health center that provides abortion and family planning services, made an off-color joke to the adoption case worker:

So, I had made some joke...made some joke when we picked [Ophelia] up, "Oh, my co-workers were saying I should have come with an IUD in hand."

This comment from Catherine is an open suggestion that the birth mother of her child should be sterilized, or at least secretly prevented from future pregnancies. Waiting seven years to finally have a child while she knew other women were getting unintentionally pregnant, or placing children with adoption agencies, angered Catherine. And, rather than aiming her anger at a heterosexist system or a homophobic culture, she falls into the too-ready trap of shaming birth mothers. Catherine is by all accounts a well-meaning liberal and feminist who would vehemently deny having racial biases. Still, this joke about the IUD should be taken within the context of the broader culture. The US has a long and shameful history of forced sterilization of women of color with remnants still found

today, as in cases in which state welfare agencies offer monetary bonuses to women who volunteer to be sterilized. There are many agencies now associated with the movement for reproductive justice in communities of color, such as the Black Women's Health Imperative, which traces the control of Black women's fertility back to slavery and use history to put modern health outcomes and practices in context.

At an adoption picnic the following year, Catherine ran into the same case worker to whom she'd made the comment about the IUD. The case worker took the time, and possibly violated confidentiality, when she mentioned to Catherine that Ophelia's birthmother, Keisha, actually identifies as a lesbian.

And so that case worker says, "Oh, I always remember you saying that because, in fact, really [Ophelia's] birth mom's a lesbian so she doesn't actually need that much contraception. Just occasionally stuff happens and then she ends up pregnant."

Catherine then brushes off what seemed like a defense of Keisha's morality by the case worker, someone who *does* know her. She says, "It doesn't matter, if it happens once, four times, you still need [laughs quietly]...If you don't want to be pregnant, you still need to do something about it." It is possible, but does not occur to Catherine, that the comment about the IUD stuck with the case worker because of its offense and not its humor or irony and that she was motivated to set the record straight as the only way to stand up for her client. It's also possible that when the case worker says, "Just occasionally stuff happens and then she ends up pregnant" may have been a suggestion that Keisha was the victim of sexual violence and not changes of whim when it came to

her sexual partners. By mentioning that Keisha identifies as a lesbian, as they do, she may have been hoping to humanize her for the adoptive parents.

### **“It’s Lesbians and a Black Kid!”**

When they started the adoption process, Katie and Catherine were hesitant to consider a Black child. In Katie’s words, “We were very much of the white, liberal [opinion] ‘Oh, I can’t possibly take on raising a Black child, it’s such a big responsibility and I don’t know enough.’” In the process of waiting, and discussing the possibility together, Katie and Catherine realized that it didn’t much matter to them what their child’s race would be. Katie continues,

[Adopting a child of color is] certainly a responsibility but it’s, as you’re in it, it’s just that’s who she is and, like with any kid, you have to figure out who they are and we have to deal with it.

Katie couches their decision to adopt Ophelia in the language of color-blind racism, it’s just “who she is,” as a way to mitigate the threat of “not knowing enough” about how to raise a Black child. When I asked what they did to prepare themselves for raising a child of color, they stumbled.

Katie: (*laughs*) I don’t know what we did [to prepare].

Catherine: Well, we read stuff.

Katie: Yeah.

Catherine: We went to that transracial thing.

Katie: That was after she was born.

Catherine: We went to a...

Katie: Oh yeah, we did.

Catherine: ...like a baby care class which was more *reassuring that we knew what we were doing* more than anything else. And then we went to a post-adoption workshop [Triad] was holding and we talked a lot about, you know how you talk to your kids about adoption and issues with birth families and transracial adoption and all kinds of stuff. But, it's one of these things that, when you're waiting [for a child], it just makes you sad, but you're like, "Well, I should be prepared...so, I'm going to do this, *but then I don't want to think of it again.*"

This kind of short back and forth was rare for Katie and Catherine. The question itself ("How did you all prepare yourselves for adopting, and for transracial adoption, did you do anything special?") may have felt threatening with its assumption that something had been done. Though the two had attended two seminars the points they took away were to reassure them they "already knew what [they] were doing" or the information came at a point in the process that made it unhelpful. The trainings offered to parents on transracial adoption are typically very minimal and based on an understanding of individual prejudice. Parents are taught not to be biased against their own children, not about systemic racism and the effects that will have on their kids and themselves. Additionally, as Katie says, Ophelia is "not going to be able to hide she's adopted, that's pretty obvious."

That Ophelia is Black makes it "obvious" that they adopted her and draws more attention to them as a lesbian couple. Being Ophelia's moms has thrust them into the spotlight. They are like local celebrities, they cannot even go to the park without being recognized. Catherine says,

Our nanny is also white, I think people think of her as *the Black kid with all the white people around her*. And so like we'll go places all the time, and people are like, "It's Ophelia!" and we have no idea who they are, and they're like, "We know Ophelia from such and so." It's like, "Oh, okay, great."

As a pair of introverts now constantly being forced to be social, they feel conspicuous and self-conscious. Catherine expresses some anxiety about her daughter being "the Black kid with all the white people around her." Whether they were ready or not, Katie and Catherine are raising a Black child, and they are getting a lot of attention for it. Though this attention isn't exactly negative, it's hard to call it supportive. At the same time, Katie and Catherine feel more visible as a same-sex couple with Ophelia around. Rarely affectionate in public, for the 18 years before Ophelia was around, they generally "passed" as straight women, now they are tokenized as an exemplary "modern family." Catherine gives this anecdote:

Like, we went to Montana, I had a conference. And so, we all went to Montana together and we went to Yellowstone. And there were people...like we were staying at this place that was like an hour away from the park entrance and we would drive every day and we went back to the hotel and [Katie] was walking around with [Ophelia] and these people were like, "Oh, we saw you in Yellowstone the other day."

Katie adds that the same people, complete strangers, admitted to taking a picture of them. People notice the trio, recognize them as a family, and congratulate themselves for being so accepting. Katie explains that even in Brooklyn they are an anomaly straight liberals parents salivate over to add diversity to their children's playgroups,

Like “Oh, I can check off two things! It’s lesbians and a Black kid!” People get like “Wow, this is good stuff!” It’s very kind of pronounced, like “that’s exciting” more than anything, I think. That’s honestly the experience that we have more than anything.

Though the comments sound like approval and Katie and Catherine say they haven’t been discriminated against per se, their “difference” from other families is constantly being reflected back to them by other people. The attention they get is often annoyingly tokenizing. People remember them and tell them what a beautiful family they are. Black women in Target are drawn to Ophelia and dote on her; Katie and Catherine also have the sense they may be checking on her or making themselves known to her. It also means they cannot hide from people who might have a problem with their family. They live with the constant threat of being mistreated on all sides, for being lesbians, for adopting a child as lesbians, and for adopting a Black child as white lesbians. They don’t even notice how routine the added stress this attention brings has become until they are in the rare space in which their family is “normal.” As Catherine puts it,

You don’t really think about it [being in a same-sex couple with a transracially-adopted child] that much, but then you go somewhere, like at Family Week where no one is looking at your family in any way and it’s like, “[*big sigh*] Oh, wow. Relief. No one’s paying attention to us just because of what we look like.”

Provincetown Family week is an annual week-long event put on by the Family Equality Council in Provincetown, Massachusetts, a tourist town on at the tip of Cape Cod known as a progressive arts town with a high concentration of LGBTQ residents. Every week in the summer is another special event to draw (mostly) queer tourists: Bear Week, Leather

Week, “Girl Splash,” Family Week, and others. Many of the families that come to Family Week are mixed-race families, many, but not all of whom are composed of white parents and kids of color. There are also many interracial couples and their kids, as well as single folks with kids. It feels like being on a different planet. There’s programming for kids so they can hang out with other COLAGERS (the name of an organization, “Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere,” but also what the kids call themselves and each other), meet up groups for dads, moms, trans parents, families through adoption, families through surrogacy, a families of color ice cream social (no joke), dances, movie nights, a beach bar-b-que, all kinds of stuff.

Family Week is one of the few places where their family isn’t “weird.” Catherine’s relief comes in finally fitting in and not having to worry about the microaggressions of strangers asking inappropriate questions (“Where did you get your baby?”) or giving dirty looks to her family. Being constantly watched, even by supportive strangers, can produce a lot of stress for couples like Katie and Catherine. In a way they are learning, for the first time, what it is like to be in a family of color, and a queer one at that. They are noticing and internalizing what educator and indigenous rights advocate Diane Hill calls ethnostress, or the psychological burden placed on people of color in the US (fear of policing, feeling constantly watched, anxiety in response to discrimination) which has been linked to poorer health outcomes including shorter life spans.

Katie and Catherine are practicing a wait-and-see approach to talking to Ophelia about her Black identity. They’ve not been terribly pro-active because they do worry that they are those white liberals who think, “I don’t know enough” and they are afraid that all their liberal credibility has not added up to knowing much more about race. They know

they will have to though. They worry about what could happen: discrimination against Ophelia, discrimination against them as a family, Ophelia potentially growing up and disidentifying with them, Ophelia feeling confused about her own identity because they raised her. They also feel irrevocably changed. Just as people see them as visible lesbians, the mixed-racial character of their family is also immediately visible and that extends to them. And they don't always know what they should do for Ophelia. Would drawing more attention to Ophelia's race, to educate and prepare her for the world, only emphasize her difference from them?

### **Party of Seven?**

Luckily, Katie and Catherine soon found they were not alone in their experience of being white lesbians parenting a Black daughter. The other child Keisha had placed with Triad, Monica, lived just a few blocks away with her two moms and sister. The extreme convenience of this set-up—two white lesbian couples living in Park Slope and parenting biological siblings—was not lost on Katie. She explains that, “We think there was a little hand-of-god from [Josie] making it happen because it was just a little too convenient.” Finally, fate, and the agency's discretion, was on their side. Katie and Catherine got to meet Monica's moms, Jacqueline and Elisa, almost immediately after they finalized their adoption. Monica was three, and had a five-year-old white sister, Tara. In what Katie calls “the joy and drama of adoption,” Jacqueline and Elisa were open to help foster a relationship between Monica and Ophelia.

The two couples and three kids have spent a lot of time together, even vacationing for a week in Maine. As Katie puts it, the connection with Jacqueline, Elisa, Monica, and



Tara was “just sudden family.” Catherine reiterates, “Yeah, so we not only got the baby, but four other people in our family!” The fifth, shadow member of the family is, of course, Keisha. Katie and Catherine have a framed picture of Keisha and Ophelia, from right after she was born, in Ophelia’s room as well as picture of Keisha on their family picture wall. As part of their contract with Triad, Katie and Catherine send pictures of Ophelia to Keisha, through the agency, every six months. Keisha hasn’t picked up the last two sets. They say they hope Keisha can be part of Ophelia’s life, though they are not sure she wants to be, “and that’s why it’s really great to have [Monica], because maybe [Ophelia’s] birth mom won’t be part of her life, but then she’ll have someone,” says Katie. That Keisha’s connection seems to be fading makes Katie and Catherine even more thankful for their connection to Monica and her moms. They might also find Keisha threatening in a way Monica and her household are not. I think what I’m missing in this section is a sense of the emotional tensions that might accompany the arrangements in question. Rather than erase Ophelia’s birth story and make themselves her heroines, Katie and Catherine want her to grow up knowing about Keisha and forming a close bond with Monica. They embrace the complications of their accidental extended family, and see it as a kind of fortune. As Catherine puts it,

[Josie] kept on saying that you get the kid you were meant to have and you know, [I was] kind of like, “Yeah, yeah, whatever, you just wait and then you get one.” But, I really think it’s actually true in this case—there are just too many things about it.

Though they are far from perfect in how they talk about Keisha, they recognize the power she will have for Ophelia and, rather than stand in the way, they are presenting Ophelia

with opportunities for continued connection with her biological kin. Ophelia, only two years old, doesn't know yet that she and Monica are biological siblings. For now, they are friends and the two Black girls "surrounded by white people." They are planning to let her know, just biding their time. So much of their experience is foreign to the other parents on the playground. Liz says,

It's funny to see people who are just straight people with kids, and whenever we mention things about [Ophelia] and about letting her know at some point [that she has this connection to this other family]...it's very hard for them to wrap their heads around, like she can have as many moms as she wants. Like that's great, how great is that? Like if she thinks of [Monica]'s moms as people she can go to, if her birth mom is ever in the picture... I think because she's ours, we don't have a proprietary thing about that mother role, so we're like, "Yeah, have as many as you want." Great.

Ophelia coming into their lives has completely transformed how Katie and Catherine think about family too. This was all very much an accident. They did not seek out a transracial adoption, a family that extends across households, or a life in the local spotlight. Their successes, so far, are limited, but they remain open to what may come. In the process, they have expanded their own family to include Jacqueline and Elisa and both their kids. Together they are helping each other figure out how to live as lesbian couples in this ever-changing neighborhood raising daughters of color.

I haven't caught up with Katie and Catherine in some time, but so much has changed in the racial consciousness in America in the last few years. The riots in response to police killings of unarmed Black men, the rise of the Black Lives Matter

movement, Black athletes being moved to protest on national television, the election of Trump and the subsequent surfacing of white nationalists. Katie works for the nation's largest civil rights organization and is well aware of these events. Ophelia's now old enough to be going to elementary school where she will be exposed to individual and institutional biases against her. I can only hope Katie and Catherine are ready, and in my utopia, where their daily acts of parenting and being constantly noticed, comparing notes with Monica's parents on their hopes and anxieties raises their racial consciousness little by little, they are.

### **Transfeminine Fatherhood in Provincetown: Fran and Avril**

#### **“I could tell my wife...was pissed”**

Fran is a 60-year-old white, trans woman and former construction worker and an example of how someone, just in the course of living their life, can wander into utopianism. Until she convinced her brother to buy out her half of their small business, she was co-owner and operator of a fence contracting and installation company in rural Pennsylvania. She was accustomed both to dealing with the financial aspects of the business and going out on jobs to install the fences themselves. In her free time, she went out on her 26-foot sailboat with her wife and their two young kids or cruised around on her 1973 Harley-Davidson Sportster. Though she was never officially a member of any of Pennsylvania's infamous motorcycle clubs, she would occasionally “run with” Satan's Sons (not to be confused with the outlaw biker gang, the Sons of Satan who were also very active in the area). Even with all this butch cred, Fran's always been a romantic. Before her transition, she and her ex-wife, Darlene, were dedicated ballroom dancers and

dressed up and went out, kid-free on a weekly basis. Fran, then “Frank,” would pomade her hair, comb her medium-length beard, and break out a sport coat for the occasion. Many of their mutual friends were also straight married couples in the ballroom scene. Dancing together, and with others, kept their marriage fresh and connected.

For six weeks each fall, there would be Friday night ballroom socials with a theme. One of these nights, the theme was “He/She Night” (it was the 1980s), where the organizers thought it would be fun for the men and women to “switch roles” not only in their dance, but in their physical gender presentation. Darlene wasn’t particularly into the theme nights but thought it would be fun; she could wear her husband’s shirt and jeans and suggested that Fran could wear one of Darlene’s mom’s old dresses. Still looking back in disgust at the proposition of wearing a frumpy dress Fran tells me about that night,

I says [to Darlene], “No, no I’ll take care of myself. I’m not going to wear some 80-year-old woman’s dress. I mean, forget it. If I’m going to do this, I want something at least halfway decent.”

What Darlene didn’t know was that Fran thrilled at the idea of going out as a woman. She took her task incredibly seriously, going far beyond the borrowed dresses of the cisgender men at the dance that night. First, she went to a lingerie shop two towns away and Jean, the woman working there, could tell she needed help. As an ice-breaker Jean said, “I help guys every Halloween to do it [dress up as a woman], not a problem,” and proceeded to help Fran far beyond what she asked. Fran explains,

[Jean] says, “Get in there. Try this on, try that on.” And we finally found stuff.

She says, “Now, you gotta get rid of the beard.” [I said,] “Okay.” She says, “You

gotta go out and get wigs.” My hair was relatively short at the time. I said,  
“Okay.” “And you’re going to have to find shoes, I don’t have any shoes for you.”  
But, she says, “Come [back] here, I’ll do your makeup for you, I’ll get you all  
ready.”

Fran was relieved to have someone non-judgmentally assist her in her desire to look, not  
just like a “man in a dress” but a beautiful woman. And Jean could tell that Fran’s  
enthusiasm went far beyond the party. The night of the dance, Fran returned to the  
lingerie shop with her new clothes, clean-shaven, with a wig and heels. Wanting to  
surprise Darlene, she told her she was having her make-up done and would just meet her  
at the party. After she was made-up, Jean offered to take some pictures of Fran outside  
next to Fran’s shiny black Camero, and Fran tells me this attracted some attention,

I’m standing by the Camaro, and these guys come by [and say], “Hey, girls, you  
wanna come out and party tonight?” [Jean and I are] like [*laughing*], “Oh my  
God,” you know? [Jean] was like, “Don’t you say a word. Keep your mouth shut,  
I’ll talk,” you know?

This was the first time Fran had dressed like a woman in public and she was already  
being validated as passable and attractive. Jean knew the deep voice would give Fran  
away though, and either for her safety or to keep the fun going, she told her not to talk to  
the men who approached them. By the time Fran got to the dance, she was beaming. She  
entered to a chorus of “Oh, my God!” and a sea of jaws dropping. Fran says,  
humbly, “You know, at the time I was only in my late 30s and, I must say, I came out  
pretty good.” The only person unimpressed by Fran’s transformation was her wife—“I  
could tell my wife, my ex, was pissed.” As the night wore on, Darlene’s attitude only

worsened, though no one but Fran seemed to notice. The rest of their ballroom dance friends wanted to spend even more time with the new Fran,

We used to go out afterwards, dancing, and they all said, “Oh, you gotta come!”

So they dragged us along and [Darlene] was getting more and more pissed. And I had guys at the bar hitting on me. So, [Darlene says,] “let’s go home, let’s take you home.” She didn’t talk to me for about a week after that. She was so mad.

And so, I put everything in the closet and hid it again for, I think, about six more years before I finally came out to her.

While everyone else fed off Fran’s excited energy and egged her on, wanting to take her out beyond the confines of the “he/she” dance, Darlene saw that Fran’s joy ran deeper than the gag the event was supposed to be and wanted to leave as soon as possible. From that night on, there was no going back for Fran, but Darlene’s response led Fran to restrict her interest in dressing in women’s clothes to a private activity. Though they didn’t talk about what happened that night or what it might mean for years, they both knew it was significant.

Fran thought about that night a lot in the intervening years. She was worried enough to seek out her own therapist about her desire to “cross dress.” The therapist was supportive of Fran coming out to her wife and helped her to write a letter to Darlene. Fran handed over the letter the day they dropped their two girls off at summer camp. She wanted to give Darlene the space and time to be mad and to process the revelation away from the kids. Recounting the day, Fran says,

So, yeah, [Darlene] was furious. I gave her a letter and she read it and she sat there in shock and then she started yelling at me, you know, [she said,] “Oh, do I have to protect the girls around you now...and keep them away from you?”

Darlene’s immediate connection—between her husband telling her, “I like to wear women’s clothes” and the completely unrelated concern that this somehow made Fran a pedophile—was unfair, but it was also a reflection of the times. It was the mid-1980s in which the prevailing logic on how to interpret this news was: 1) a man who dresses like a woman is a homosexual, and 2) homosexuals are pedophiles. It was a knee-jerk reaction, but also a guaranteed way to hurt Fran and cut to straight to her deepest fears about coming out and being misunderstood. After a few days, and Darlene’s consultation with a nurse she knew, Darlene felt different. Fran, paraphrases her comments—which, more than growth or acceptance, amounted to a kind of individual adaptation—saying,

[Darlene said,] “I’ve come to the conclusion: you don’t drink, you don’t gamble, you don’t beat me or anything like that...the only [other] woman you run around with is yourself.” She says, “In the grand scheme of things, this isn’t so bad. As long as we, you know, figure out how to work around it.”

Darlene concluded that Fran’s gender non-conformity, as far as anti-social vices went, including spousal abuse and alcoholism, wasn’t so bad. An insult, to be sure, this response was actually immensely relieving to Fran since it suggested Darlene could live with it. But, Darlene’s acceptance held hidden conditions: “As long as we figure out how to...work around it” meant Fran would have to kiss their daughters goodbye, make them wait in another room, then change her outfit and leave without seeing them on nights she went out in her preferred clothing. Darlene was, indeed, “protecting the girls” around

Fran, afraid of what seeing their father in a dress would do to them. Fran says that this was basically okay with her because “at the time, cross-dressing was enough and occasional.” Fran and Darlene joined a local chapter of the Society for the Second Self, or Tri-Ess. Tri-Ess is still an active group today, with a dozen chapters across the US, though it’s mission as “an international social and support group for heterosexual crossdressers, their partners, the spouses of married crossdressers and their families” (tri-ess.org) has fallen out of political favor. Chapters vary in the language they use, but the group was established specifically for “heterosexual crossdressers,” a phrase which intentionally, and unironically, excludes those who identify as part of LGBTQ community. This is less a social club than a support group meant only to support people as long as they do not seek to transition and live full-time as a gender they were not assigned at birth. Summing up the Tri-Ess approach to gender variance Fran says, “So, if you decide to transition, you’re ousted, or, if you’re gay, you’re ousted. They’re very rigid, they’re a dying organization.”

Tri-Ess advised a slow process of coming out to children, if at all. So, Darlene started asking their oldest, Harriet, thirteen at the time, what she thought about men who dressed like women. Harriet said she was fine with these hypothetical men, but when eventually Darlene asked Harriet how she would feel if she knew her dad cross-dressed, Harriet’s face fell. She was incredulous, so Darlene told her to go ask her father. Fran recounts,

So, she comes over and says, “Dad, Mom says you like to dress in women’s clothes.” [Harriet], she’s very direct...so I says, “Yeah, well, I do.” I says, “How



do you feel about it?” She says...she wouldn’t want to see it at all, she said “just do what you want.”

Eventually both kids did see her dressed up before a Tri-Ess meeting rather than waiting in another room when Fran and Darlene left. While Harriet was hurt and perplexed, their younger daughter, Alice, was more curious than anything else.

[Alice] says, “Mom, I want to see Dad.” So [Alice] comes out and she gives me the look up and down, up and down, and then she says, “Cool shoes, Dad.” She says, “I’m going back to watch TV now.” That was it! I said, “Okay...”

[*laughing*] and I think the following evening [Harriet] said, “Okay, I want to see Dad now. If [Alice] says it’s okay, then it’s okay.” And after that they were kind of fine with it.

Being in Tri-Ess reiterated to Fran that “crossdressing” was something only to be done in secret. After she came out to her kids, and it went pretty well, she started to question the shame that seemed to be at the group’s foundation. She sought out a more celebratory setting for people who were gender non-normative and went, by herself, to Fantasia Fair in Provincetown, some six and a half hours from her home. According to Provincetown.com,

Fantasia Fair is a week-long transgender event held every October in the LGBT resort town of Provincetown, Massachusetts. Part conference, part social gathering, the Fair is a “full immersion” experience, meaning that attendees can and usually do spend an entire week 24/7 presenting their gender as they wish.

For this one week, she didn’t have to sneak around or worry that other people were judging her. It was like the night of the “he/she” dance for seven days in a row. For the

first time, she was comfortable in her own skin. She met people, she danced, she learned make-up tips. And every year she kept going back. But, when it came time to return home, and return to her life as Frank, Fran fell into a depression. It was no longer enough for her to occasionally crossdress at Tri-Ess meetings after she knew how good it felt to her to present as a woman fulltime. Fran says,

And, we did that for 6 or 7 years before [Darlene] finally decided I had to go this route [transitioning to female]. She said, “You’re too happy when you go [to Fantasia Fair].” I would go to Fantasia Fair and come home and she could see me, I would just go into a funk for two weeks after I came home because I was so happy up there and then [I’d] go home and put everything away again until next year.

Fantasia Fair was the catalyst Fran needed. It showed her that things could be different; she could have a community and live as she pleased.

Though it was Darlene who “decided” Fran had to transition, actually following through cost Fran her marriage and threatened her relationships with her children. Though Fran was still very much in love with her wife, changing her gender meant a sudden shift from a heterosexual relationship to a lesbian one. They were essentially the same people in the same relationship, but what everyone else saw would be fundamentally different and, for Darlene, it was too much. She was fine with the occasional cross dressing, but Fran coming out would jeopardize the comfort of the unremarkable, heteronormative exterior she’d been trying to maintain. They bumped up against the rigidity of binary categories of sexuality: Fran was attracted to women, as Frank this made her straight, but now as Fran she was suddenly a lesbian even though it

was her gender that changed and not her sexual “orientation.” Fran didn’t know any more about being a lesbian than Darlene did, but Darlene wasn’t willing to go on that journey with her. Recounting the split six year later, Fran says,

[Darlene] says she’s not a lesbian and she can’t be with a lesbian and so, we decided to split and it’s an amicable split and we went our separate ways and so...it was a heart-wrenching process because I still care for her.

This sentiment is echoed by many ciswomen formerly married to transwomen. It’s fairly common for relationships (particularly heterosexual marriages) to dissolve when a partner transitions (Haines, Ajayi, and Boyd 2014). In addition to the changes to labels and physical and hormonal changes that happen during transitioning, the non-transitioning partner can feel a sense of betrayal, like if they didn’t know something so fundamental—their own partner’s gender identity— they really didn’t know who they married. Cisgender, heterosexual women may not want to lose their heterosexual identities. It’s like the opposite of Carla Pfeffer’s study of the cisgender women partners of trans men who go out of their way to signal they are queer for fear they might be mistaken for heterosexuals now that they were with men (Pfeffer 2017).

### **Harriet and Alice Meet Fran and Avril**

After twenty-two years of marriage, Fran found the idea of moving on difficult. Not only had she had little experience being a woman herself, she was very far outside anything resembling a lesbian community. Nothing about Fran’s attractions changed, but the relationships themselves, and how they would be seen, changed irrevocably. Changed too were her relationships to her children. She was becoming a woman, but was still, in

her eyes, a father. Fran says, “I told [Harriet and Alice] I would always be ‘Dad’ and so if that’s what they’re comfortable calling me, then fine, they could call me Dad. You know, I still act like Dad to them.” But, initially, Alice didn’t feel that way, she was losing her dad in a few ways: Fran was divorcing her mom, moving out of the family home, and becoming a woman. Fran’s appearance over the next few years would change dramatically. At the same time, teenage Alice was hitting puberty and going through emotional and physical changes herself. She didn’t want anyone at school to know her dad was a woman and hardly wanted to see Fran herself. She would skip their planned monthly visits and insist on meeting in public when she agreed to them and loudly called Fran “Dad” to intentionally try to out Fran in public. Alice was doling out the kind of punishment that was commonly court-ordered for parents who came out as gay and lesbian and legally lost all but a tenuous connection to their kids: no overnight visits, no “exposure” to the LGBTQ “lifestyle” by meeting the parents’ new partners, and visits in public, presumably to guard against the kind of abuse Darlene’s mind immediately went to when Fran came out to her. Courts argued that it was “in the best interests of the child” to guard them against their queer parents. Concerns over these parents, fueled by dubious studies funded by conservative lobbies like Focus on the Family, ranged from queer influence that threatened to “turn” their kids gay or trans, to potential psychological trauma, to the contraction of HIV.

Harriet, a few years older than Alice, took the news of her changing family much better. Within a year of her father coming out to her, Harriet’s close friend came out to her as a trans guy. There were no resources for LGBTQ youth at her high school, so Harriet organized a GSA herself against the protests of the administration. In Fran’s

proud retelling, Harriet has been a vocal trans advocate for most of her life. When she saw a lack of material on trans people being taught in her small college's introduction to women's studies course, she took it upon herself to educate her classmates. Avril, Fran's current partner, prompts Fran, "tell the story about when [Harriet] held the picture of you up in class." This story has achieved the level of family myth, being retold some ten years later. It is meant to be emblematic of Harriet's bravery and ability to point out injustice. Harriet stood in front of the class and held up a magazine. Referencing the cover model, she asked, "How many of you think this is a beautiful woman?" She paused to let people nod and put up their hands in agreement and then told them, "that's my dad." It's unclear if Harriet meant for the students in the class to be right—"yes, this is a beautiful woman and also my dad"—or wrong—"you thought this was a beautiful woman and it isn't, it's my dad." In any case, the event caused enough of a stir that Harriet felt unwelcome at her right-of-center liberal arts college and she dropped out. The next year she started going to a state school and was much happier blending in with the crowd.

Fran had shared custody of Alice after the divorce and, in time, Alice started spending alternating weeks with Fran. Fran still loved being a dad, but she was also building a new life for herself. She started going out to meet new people and was accepted into a circle of women at a lesbian bar she'd commute to in Philadelphia. She loved this bar also for its dancefloor. That's where she met Avril. Remembering the evening, Fran says, "So, I'm up on the floor and I'm dancing on the floor and [Avril] was coming at me, I saw her coming at me and I was like, 'Oh, no, this is not good.'" Fran hadn't started dating yet and wasn't particularly ready. She was focused on fitting in with her new community and was also pretty oblivious to flirtation. Avril said, "I saw her on

the dance floor and I was like, ‘I have got to ask her to dance.’” They dance for a while and Avril asks if she can buy Fran a drink. Fran got nervous then, she was worried the illusion of them just being two women dancing at a gay bar would be broken once they started talking. “One of the first things I said to her,” says Fran, “I said, ‘Firstly, you know I’m a guy...’” Without missing a beat Avril said, “Yeah I kind of picked that up with your voice” and kept on going. Avril says of their first conversation, “it was as natural as anything.”

A year and a half later they married. Around that time Fran decided she wanted to surgically transition. Though Fran identified as a woman, was on hormones and going through a painful and drawn-out electrolysis process, her transition hadn’t reached the level of legal recognition (at the time) since her sex change surgery was scheduled for another six months later. This was 2006 and the Defense of Marriage Act had not yet been ruled unconstitutional. Fran and Avril were planning to move to Massachusetts anyway, where gay marriage was legal, but they were afraid of their marriage being nullified by moving somewhere else or having it found “illegitimate” in some other way. They registered as a heterosexually-married couple and were legally married at a local courthouse, but both women wore wedding dresses to their church ceremony four months later, during Fantasia Fair week, in Provincetown.

### **“Love, Your P-town Moms”**

Once Alice left for college, Fran and Avril made their move to Provincetown official. They sold most of their possessions, including Fran’s motorcycle and sailboat, and Fran convinced her brother to buy her out of the fence business, so she could invest

in a bed and breakfast in the heart of the place she first got to feel like herself. Fitting in, it turns out, is not the same as blending in. Though Fran identifies as a woman and a lesbian, she's also openly trans in Provincetown. In part, this is an effect of the space, Fran says,

Well, part of the problem here [in Provincetown] is that everyone is so attuned to it [the possibility of other people being trans] that it's very hard to pass here. So, they just...they zero in right away. It's kind of like gaydar—transdar, so they know right away [that I'm trans] and it's like, "Oh why even bother [trying to pass as a ciswoman]?" It's easier just to let my voice fall... I look like most of the lesbians in town, you know?

Since Fran serves as the handywoman of the inn, she's most often seen in what Avril calls "dyke gear"—a t-shirt and cargo shorts with a tool belt and work boots. She doesn't wear make-up, but has long hair she pulls back into a ponytail. Essentially, she dresses and acts as she always has—her gender identity isn't expressed in the clothes she wears or any new interests she can more comfortably pursue now, as a woman. She's still fixing things, going to the hardware store, and working with her hands. "Passing" as a ciswoman, as opposed to a transwoman people can pick up with their transdar, is not something she bothers to do where she lives.

Going out of town, though, presents the possibility of danger, Fran says, "But, when we go out of town...I try much harder [to pass]. Especially on vacations and stuff." She told me about a particular incident in the airport when she was traveling with her mother to Harriet's college graduation:

We went out for [Harriet's] graduation...and we're going through the airport and my mom, when she's traveling, she has a tendency to babble...We're walking through the airport and she's like, "Oh, [Frank], look at this. Oh, [Frank], look at that. Oh, Frank!" I'm like, I finally had to tell her, I says, "Mom, quit calling me [Frank], either call me [Fran] or don't call me anything at all." I said, "Because the TSA people are gonna hear you calling me [Frank] and that's not what my passport says, or any of my ID says, and they're gonna throw me in the glass cage and be doing all kinds of stuff."

At airport security across the US, passengers are most likely to be asked to go through full-body scanners, which utilize Advanced Imaging Technology (AIT). Though the AIT is meant to use the image of a "generic passenger" to scan and locate potential "anomalies," operators must choose between "male" and "female" when a person enters the booth, typically done without asking and based on the operators assessment of the person's gender, so the machine can search for "unusual contours" in a person's (gendered) body. The machine will detect things considered to be prostheses, including breast forms and packers. When asked, and the passenger will be asked, the trans passenger must explain. Passengers can opt-out of AIT scans, but the alternative is a thorough pat-down, which may make the trans passenger even less comfortable. To the TSA's credit, they include training and guidelines on how to interact with transgender passengers (<https://www.tsa.gov/transgender-passengers>) which indicates that passengers should be treated with respect and not asked to remove any prostheses for further inspection if they have adequately explained it. In practice, of course, trans passengers are understandably nervous that they will not be "treated with respect and courtesy" and



be subject to humiliation and disrespect. Fran, though typically very accommodating of her mother's struggle to understand her gender, draws the line here and is right to highlight the importance of having all documentation line up to avoid suspicion of wrongdoing and any subsequent invasive procedures.

Avril's mom is similarly well-meaning but not exactly attuned to trans identities. Avril came out to her mom as a lesbian many years before, so that part was no problem, but sometime during their first conversation when Fran met Avril's mom, Avril says, "She started talking about menstrual cycles and says to [Fran], 'Well, you understand what I'm talking about.' And my younger sister is like, 'Mom, did you forget who you're talking to?'" [And my mom says,] 'Well, actually, I did.'"

In time, Harriet and Alice have come to accept Avril's presence, though not her place, in their lives. Avril says about her relationship with the two girls,

We've always been on good terms... it was a really easy transition being dad's girlfriend and now dad's wife. Although one time I signed [Harriet's] birthday card, "love Dad and your stepmom [Avril]" or "your rockin' stepmom [Avril]," and she got all upset [and said], "You're not my stepmother!"

Following up on this retelling, Fran says, "[Avril] learned you know, she doesn't refer to herself as stepmother at all. That's probably the only point of contention... It hit a button with [Harriet and Alice] and if that's the concession well, it's no big deal." It may be no big deal to Fran, but it might be for Avril. Avril is legally married to Harriet and Alice's parent—how would she not be a step-mother? It's possible that Harriet was just being oppositional at that moment, not willing to recognize Avril as her step-mom because doing so would admit that her dad has moved on, but this is something that has persisted,

something Avril has “learned” not to say. It may also be that Avril has become the undeniable symbol of the changes in Fran’s life. Avril isn’t just “dad’s wife,” but the lesbian partner of their dad who is now a woman. Fran is pushing back in her own subtle way and tells me that they have already decided that if Harriet ever has kids, they want to honor her discomfort with Avril by not giving her the designation “grandmother,” but that both women, Fran and Avril will take the designation “alma” which is “grandmother” in German. Explaining their thought process, Fran and Avril switch off saying,

Fran: We already decided that we won’t refer to her [Avril] as Grandma because it, you know, that’s my ex’s spot.

Avril: I’m going to be an Alma, which is...

Fran (*finishing Avril’s sentence*): ...Grandma in German. So...

Avril (*finishing Fran’s sentence*): ...it’ll be Alma [Fran] and Alma [Avril].

Fran: At least this way they’ll have something to refer to her by rather than just [Avril]. Because little kids need to...*show respect* for the older people, so you have a title, and that will give them a decent title to use. Yet, it’s not really stepping on my ex’s toes at all. *We try to make sure we work well with everybody.*

Avril: And that will *get them acclimated to the fact you’re female in the beginning*. And then, as they get older and they can understand more, eventually you can say, “Nope, trans...trans woman.” (All emphasis mine.)

Thus, Fran and Avril have worked out a compromise: if Harriet and Alice have children, they don’t have call Avril ‘grandma’, but they do have to give both women respectful alternative titles that acknowledge both Avril’s official position in the kids’ lives and

Fran's female identity. When Fran says, "We try to make sure we work well with everybody" and acknowledges that she doesn't want to step on anyone's toes, she puts a fine point on her and Avril's seemingly tenuous place in the family. They try to be as accommodating as possible, while they (mostly Avril) also insist on limits. The recognition they have not yet received is being postponed to the next generation, their future grandchildren, where they hope to establish different terms from the start.

A set of relationships on even shakier ground are those Fran and Avril have with Fran's brother, Steve, and his family. While Fran's brother has, for the most part, come around and accepted Fran's transition, his wife Helen has been her greatest critic. Once Fran transitioned, Helen, a devout Catholic, insisted that she and her nine children—Fran's niece and eight nephews—could no longer be around her. Helen was able to cut Fran and Avril out of larger family gatherings, like Christmas at Fran's parents' house, using the kids as leverage. Fran says,

I don't see my nephews [and niece] at all because I'm not allowed over [to their house], [Helen] wants no part of me...once I transitioned, then that was it. I was off the radar. [She said to me], "How am I going to explain that to the kids?" and stuff like this. If she was visiting my parents like on holidays and stuff, I wasn't allowed to be there. Because she would tell my mother, "Well, if [Frank]'s (sic) going to be there, we're not coming then because I'm not going to expose the kids to that." So, my mother would say [to me], "Look, I wanna see the grandkids, so would you mind [not coming]?"

So, not only is Fran banned from her brother's home, she's also been essentially cut out of the family. Fran insists that Helen has single-handedly ruined her relationships with

her family of origin, including being a motivating factor behind Fran selling her stake in the family business and moving away. Fran says of Helen's role, "[Helen] put a lot of stress on my brother...[Tony] and I ran the whole [business] and, you know, because he was pulled both ways he was kind of—it weighed very heavily on him...*so it was easier for me to step aside*" (emphasis mine). Though Helen is the focal point for this family pain, Helen's transphobia is being enabled by Fran's own parents and brother with the consequence of Fran fading out of their lives.

With these examples, Fran gives two examples of her making accommodations in order for other people to feel more comfortable with her being trans by basically going away. In saying "it was easier for me to step aside," she means it was easier for *everyone else* if she wasn't around. But, Helen and Tony's kids have "been exposed" to their Aunt Fran. Prior to the move to Provincetown, Fran was training her oldest nephew to take over her spot in the family business, Fran says, "He trained under me and he really admires me and, you know, when he has a problem he calls me and talks to me and stuff. He kind of thinks his mother's a jerk too." This relationship with her nephew offers Fran a small sense of vindication. Adding to this, Avril is also sure to let me know that everyone thinks one of the nephews is gay, she says, "Everybody thinks he's gay, even [Fran's] parents think he's gay...and the irony [is] he's [Helen's] favorite!" Giving a nod to Helen's Catholicism, which presumably motivated her anti-LGBTQ stance, Fran quips, "God works in mysterious ways!"

These incidents have changed Fran's mind about what family is and what it should mean. Prior to coming out, she didn't have to think much about it; her family was her wife and children, her parents, and her brother's family. A taken-for-granted aspect of

family is that the relationships endure the trials of life, but when Fran was cut out, and so easily, she started to question the idea that we should take the families we are given.

Fran says,

My oldest daughter, [Harriet] said one time, she says, “There’s a new definition for family nowadays. It’s not who you’re blood related to so much, it’s who you can count on to be there when you need them.” And that’s what family should be, especially in our [the LGBTQ] community. I think that’s really the real telling thing. Because so many of us are estranged from our whole families, or parts of our families and stuff that...they don’t really matter anymore. But that friend of yours who also has no family, suddenly becomes your family.

In spite of its radical origins, “chosen family” is now a commonplace idea. It’s used to sell cell phone plans (think T-Mobile’s friends and family, or “Framily” plan) and was off-handedly employed in an episode of a teen drama, *Riverdale*, based in the Archie Comics universe to describe close friendships. For Fran and many people like her though, this idea—people who you decide are family when your own family has turned its back—maintains its import. Straight people are welcome to use the term and apply it to their own lives. But Fran reminds us of its original, Westonian intent: to provide connection and support to those who have none.

It’s no wonder why Fran and Avril chose to move to Provincetown, the place that welcomed them, permanently. Running an inn not only offers them a source of income, but the opportunity to host the kind of visitors they used to be. Visitors come for Fantasia Fair, Bear Week, Pride, Leather weekends, Family Week, Girl Splash, and other events where queer people can be “fully-immersed” in a town of supportive and like-minded

people without fear of violence or judgment. Fran and Avril get to meet people who are as thrilled to be visiting and experiencing this alternative landscape as they used to be, but they're now in the position of being able to offer advice and help and home. Running the inn for almost a decade now has allowed them to form close bonds with repeat visitors, none more precious to them than Ethan, a shy gay man in his twenties who can usually be found behind an old film camera. He loves visiting Provincetown but is less into the party scene than other gay visitors his age. Fran and Avril find this very endearing and they've taken him under their wings. When he visits, Fran makes his favorite vegetarian chili and they both encourage him to stay longer, for free. Elaborating on their closeness, Avril told me,

We call [Ethan] our son. He's been here, gosh fifteen, sixteen times at least... When he came out, his entire family just cut him out, with no contact whatsoever. So, we kind of try to *take care of him* when he comes to visit. One time a couple years ago, we met him at the dock for the ferry and we're holding up a sign [that reads], "Welcome home, son. Love your P-town moms!" and he comes walking up the gangway and he see this sign and he just breaks out laughing. Big smile on his face. [Emphasis mine.]

In Ethan, Fran and Avril see an opportunity to do the kind of caretaking they're unable to do for Fran's kids. Neither of them is closer to him than the other, and that they are lesbians, that one of them is trans, that Ethan is gay, have the opposite effect that it did with their families of origin: these facts facilitate their connection rather than compromise it. In each other they have found community, friendship, and chosen family. In this

family drag, that may only last a weekend a few times a year, Avril is a parent, Fran gets to be a mom, and Ethan is a son who is beloved by his parents.

This connection would probably not have been possible somewhere else.

Provincetown is one of those unique spaces where queer people flock to be around other queer people. It helps that it is also gorgeous. Talking about the locations of places like Provincetown, Key West, and other gay tourist destinations that are not big cities, I quip that gay people just have great taste in real estate. Fran picked up this idea and took it somewhere else. She said,

That or we're trying to get away from everybody, one or the other. We seem to gravitate towards water. San Francisco is right on the water there. Asbury Park, Rehoboth Beach, you know?... But this place [Provincetown] was always free and easy and Norman Mailer used to call it "the Wild West of the East" because everything went at the time. No matter who or what you were, it didn't matter.

You came here, and you were yourself, and you lived life, and everyone left everyone alone.

Being left alone may not be utopia for everyone, but it is for Fran. After decades of having to accommodate the emotional needs of others in response to her gender, it feels like a break to repair toilets, flip beds, and bake muffins for strangers who know she's trans and don't care.

Fran has had to practice accommodation of nearly everyone else's feelings since she transitioned. For her wife, it was not dressing up in public, not coming out for years, hiding it from their kids, moving out of her home, and, finally, getting divorced over it. For her kids, she moved out, never forced them to see her if they didn't want to, allowing

them to insist Avril not call herself a step-mother, and still being “Dad.” For the rest of the family she’s been patient with their misgendering and misnaming her and has removed herself from family functions altogether because one person feels uncomfortable around her. Fran wants to maintain connections to the people of her past, but it comes at the cost of her own comfort. Going to Fantasy Fest, hanging out at the lesbian bar, and living in Provincetown have allowed her some respite from this constant emotional labor. Avril, the first person to see her and love her as is, has offered her a new shot at family, one they get to navigate together.

We usually think of utopia as something that is conceived first and then, with more or less success, attempted in practice. That is not the case for Fran. Living far outside any LGBTQ community in the 1980s, she did not see her desire as part of a political or social movement. In Fran’s case, practice preceded conviction. By inclination easy going and deeply accommodating—to her ex-wife, to her daughters, to her sister-in-law—Fran nonetheless developed a set of convictions about the way she wanted to live and with whom. Even more generally, if not quite as explicitly, she developed a conviction about freedom to choose a gender and freedom to choose a way of doing that gender. This conviction hasn’t quite overcome her desire to accommodate, but she’s much more aware of what she wants and where she’ll draw the line, particularly when it comes to family. Fran has found her utopia in Provincetown, with Avril, and with the life they make together.



### **Queer Blended Family: Liz, Yasmine, Derek, and Sadie**

Liz, her ex-partner Sadie, her current partner, Yasmine, and Derek, Yasmine's ex-husband, are the very picture of the queer blended family. Even by Western Massachusetts standards, where grade school classes can be as full of children with two mothers as those with one mother and one father, they are pretty unusual. All four live within a few miles and are committed to staying in proximity. The threat of a potential job relocation for one of them means the potential relocation of all of them and the three children they share. Sadie's on the academic job market and the prospect of her partner's ex moving away worries Yasmine. She says,

Sadie has to find a job. How that's going to work, I don't know. If she's going to get to stay close or not or if I'm going to have a long-distance relationship with Liz, or like will I feel comfortable moving? And if I move, Derek would have to move too. Just like, such a terrible mess. It's just a big downer... It's so rare, there's like four adults who happen to live within a couple miles radius of each other. Everyone else I know who's divorced just doesn't even have that, you know? Even just having the ability to walk there [to Derek's] makes life a lot easier. I wouldn't want the kids to have a long-distance relationship with their dad, but Dylan can't have a long-distance relationship with Sadie. I don't know what the answer is.

With this prospect hanging over them, I entered their lives and took a snapshot of how each adult was processing their current arrangement and their hopes and fears for the future of their family.

## **Liz Makes Her Case**

I'd known Liz already. When I first saw a pregnant Liz, I must admit, I thought she was just getting a beer belly. A white, cisgender lesbian in her late twenties, she was a lot younger than most parents I knew and much snarkier. She was a graduate student with harsh and thoughtful critiques delivered with a biting wit. I honestly could not picture her mothering anyone and, beyond that, since she was also queer, I had no idea why she would want to. But she did, and she had wanted a kid for years before it became a reality.

Her ex, Sadie, is pleasant and soft-spoken. Tall, with short, dark hair, she has the kind of Australian accent that drives American women crazy, but she also blushes at the least bit of attention from them. They were an odd couple, but they complimented each other: Liz was cynical where Sadie was hopeful, angry where Sadie was excited, and brash and demanding where Sadie sought polite compromise. But, as much as she usually went along with what Liz wanted, Sadie was actually very resistant to having a kid. In her words,

I had been ambivalent for a long time probably since the beginning when we [first] talked about it. But, it became more and more apparent that my ex [Liz] really wanted to have a kid. And then my ambivalence became more like, "Well, let's try one."

As Liz tells her experience of the same time in their lives,

I was in a relationship with somebody who didn't really want to have a child but was open to the idea and knew that I did [want to have a child]...So after many

years of poking—not many, a few years—of poking and prodding, *she decided that we could do it*. (Emphasis mine)

Both Liz and Sadie frame the decision of having a kid as Liz’s idea, but Sadie, after some wearing down and convincing, ultimately had to agree for it to happen. Sadie was not much interested in the process, remarking on how easy the experience was for her because of the work Liz was doing researching pregnancy methods, sperm banks, midwives, etc, “[S]he actually made it easy, well, relatively easy from my perspective.” It was easy for Sadie because Liz took care of things. If I can apply a language of household chore distribution, Liz was the “manager” and Sadie was the “helper” in their pregnancy process. Summing up the complex deliberative process in her characteristically dry sense of humor, Liz said, “Lots of different possibilities of how to do it [get pregnant] and I decided pretty quickly about using anonymous, frozen sperm from the Internet.” Some people might want to dress up this process, going through a list of pros and cons and why one way works for their family more than the others, but Liz cuts to the heart of the awkward consumptive intimacy of ordering “frozen sperm from the Internet” by situating it as something akin to ordering a paper towel holder from Amazon.

Searching for the right sperm donor was actually the part of the process that most interested Sadie. They had their pick from the hugely expansive catalog available through the California Cryobank.

[I]t’s such a commodified process...they give you some information about each donor, but then little pieces of extra information all cost more money. So, it’s like if you want to see a baby photo, it’s \$20, if you want to see their SAT scores, \$15.

So, for people who have a much wider range [of potential donors] and care about more things, it's just like thousands of dollars of extra money.

As a social scientist, this process of selecting and buying sperm fascinated Liz, but, as a graduate student, her eye was also on the bottom line. For people (gay or straight) without access to free donor sperm but the means to “buy it from the Internet,” the commercial nature of intentional family formation is something they must constantly confront. Liz saw how someone might get caught up in the sheer number of options and combination of qualities and end up spending thousands to get “the perfect donor,” and that companies were more than happy to monetize the alleviation of their anxieties.

But, Sadie's preference for a Chinese donor narrowed the field quite a bit. Since they knew Liz would carry the child, they wanted to make sure the donor incorporated some of Sadie's qualities so the child looked like both of them. While Liz was open to all Asian donors, Sadie specifically wanted a Chinese donor to reflect her heritage.

According to Liz, “That was more important to her, I mean I wanted the baby to look like both of us, it was more important to her than it was to me that it was Chinese.” While Liz was open to considering all Asian donors, Sadie was not. This phenomenon, of matching donor race/ethnicity/cultural heritage and other qualities, like stature and personal interests, is present among heterosexual couples looking to use donor sperm as well, the thought being that by just looking at the family, people wouldn't know the children “weren't theirs” and assume they were biologically connected. This takes on a certain irony when two women attempt to have their child look like both of them. But, in a market of thousands of donors to choose from, narrowing the field to Chinese and Chinese-American donors was actually a blessing. Compared to the genetic material of

white men and other men of color, the sperm of Asian men was in low supply, likely because of a lower demand. The work of David Eng and others suggests stereotypes of Asian men characterize them as smaller, more feminine, and, most importantly, less virile than men of other races (Eng 2001). While all men are welcome to try to sell their genetic material, and vials are not priced according to the race of the donor, sperm banks operate by a market logic and seek to build up their supplies of some sperm over others to meet anticipated demands. Hence, a bank may no longer be accepting sperm from, say, Asian men, because there is not the demand to justify the supply (Almeling 2011). Liz says,

Actually, that made the choice of sperm, a sperm donor, pretty easy because out of the like maybe eight or so places in the US that it's easy to get sperm from, like total, there was maybe ten Chinese donors. So like we made a little spreadsheet of them ...and I actually did most of this work. I was the motor behind most of this. She was open to having a kid but I did all of the research, I figured out everything. I, you know, researched the various options, the various people, made this little spreadsheet, was going over the pluses and minuses with her and she was just like, "Let's just choose the tallest one." So, I was like, "OK."

After Liz went to the trouble of putting in all the work, she sums it all up by saying, "So, we just chose the tallest Chinese anonymous guy we could find."

They tried three times without success and for \$800 a pop. In frustration, Liz decided to take some time off of trying to get pregnant, but she and Sadie met with a midwife anyway just for information. They knew that insemination by IUI (where the sperm is actually injected into the uterus) was much more successful, but had worried about the cost as this was something insurance did not cover unless a woman had

documented fertility issues, the threshold being that a woman had tried to get pregnant without success for one year. Obviously, this does not account for the needs of non-hetero couples and that having sex with someone for months without conception does not always mean there is trouble with fertility. The midwife, used to assisting with the pregnancies of queer parents, told her they would actually do it for free. Newly invigorated, when her fertile period came around next, Liz made the snap decision, alone in the car on the way to a department Christmas party, to order another vial of sperm without talking to Sadie first. Sadie hardly had time to be upset because the midwife came over the next night to perform the IUI.

Weeks later, again when she was alone, Liz went to a WalMart, bought a pregnancy test, and took the test in the store bathroom: it was positive. Liz said she had an idea she might be pregnant but didn't tell Sadie or ask her to be with her when she took a test,

I knew [I was pregnant] because we went to Christmas at my grandmother's in Rhode Island and was so emotional I just sort of had this idea the whole time that something was going on and we came back from Christmas, like the next day or whatever I went to WalMart, and I bought a test, and I was alone. I actually just went into the bathroom at WalMart to use it—because like I couldn't wait—and it was positive.

She wanted these moments for herself and perhaps, even then, foresaw the end of her relationship with Sadie. To Liz, this was ultimately something she was doing basically by herself, and Sadie, admittedly ambivalent about the whole thing, was along for the ride if she wanted to be. Liz researched, planned, and managed all aspects of her pregnancy and

Sadie had little interest other than picking the right donor, but even then Liz did all the legwork for making that decision. Sadie was much more career-focused and especially wary because she viewed having a kid in grad school as a possible impediment to her graduation or her ability to get an academic job, but Liz made it easy for her,

[S]he had also mapped out a plan in terms of the fact that we're both graduate students. She suggested who would take time off when and she would be taking the bulk of the time off [after the birth] so I would still be able to do my work.

Sadie's thought process is not so different from a disengaged dad in a straight relationship. The fact of her being a woman doesn't mean she is any more interested in the process of getting pregnant and no more likely to prioritize children above everything else. As we'll see though, she is a much more involved co-parent than her male counterpart, Derek.

When Dylan was born though, Sadie was enamored with her, and Liz convinced Sadie to file for a second-parent adoption. Liz, a cynical radical who thinks feminists are both too conservative and too ideological, does not believe marriage is beneficial to anyone's relationship, and especially not queer relationships. In fact, she told me that if she could shelter her children from learning about marriage and weddings at all, she would. I'd seen many gay and lesbian couples marry for convenience since the practice became legal in Massachusetts in 2003: to be on the same health insurance, pay less in taxes, or to have a legal connection to their own children. Until then, lesbian co-parent adoption was the most common way for non-biological moms to ensure any challenges to their parenting status had a defense, though that didn't always work (see Watkins). When Dylan was born, Liz insisted Sadie file for legal adoption since they were not married and

Liz never would be. They hadn't talked about it before, assuming staying together would be insurance enough, but Liz, the kernel of doubt growing in the back of her mind, wanted Sadie to have this legal connection for her own sake. She knew too, that it would be important for the child she'd given birth to have a lifelong connection to the Chinese side of her family. The Pioneer Valley of Western Massachusetts, while self-congratulatingly progressive in many ways, is overwhelmingly white and lacks the Chinese community that might be found in a more integrated space.

### **Derek and Yasmine's Path to Parenthood**

Derek and Yasmine's path to parenthood was much more traditional. Derek grew up in Kalamazoo, Michigan, an only child raised strictly Roman Catholic by parents of Argentine decent. Derek was in Catholic school from Kindergarten to high school. He was both intensely spiritual and questioning, saying he rejected Catholicism but has oscillated between identifying as agnostic and atheist throughout his adult life. He grew up feeling like an outsider, a non-conformist but not a renegade. Even after leaving the Church entirely, the teachings of his youth dogged Derek enough for him to combine this passion for questioning it with his passion for fantasy and science fiction and he penned a novel he worked on for close to a decade and published in his mid-twenties. The book illustrates the dystopic possibilities inherent in unquestioning conformity, especially religious conformity.

After college, but before the book's publication, he met Yasmine online. She seemed weird and cool and thought more deeply than the women he'd known before. She too had rejected the religious beliefs of her family, who were Muslim and mostly living



in Lebanon. She moved to the States for school and then stayed. They met in a chat room, and then started messaging each other privately, building a long-distance relationship through email and instant messages. They had similar interests and a great chemistry. At the point he met Yasmine, just out of MSU and in his early 20s, Derek identified as polyamorous and was dating multiple partners at once. Derek, inherently distrustful of the blind conventions of others, believed himself to be someone capable of sustaining loving relationships with multiple people. As they got more serious, Yasmine made him choose: be monogamous with her, or continue to be poly without her. Derek chose the former and started flying to Massachusetts for short trips, a week at a time. During his third visit, they decided he should move there and in with her. Though he was willing to be monogamous with Yasmine, Derek had no interest in pursuing that zenith of heterosexual monogamy, marriage. For Derek, marriage was tainted especially by its religious overtones and was never on the table for their relationship—until it was. According to Derek,

I didn't want to get married, even if it wasn't [a] religious [ceremony], and I ended up doing both: getting married, and in an Islamic ceremony... if I had gone back in time and told myself I was going to do that, I probably wouldn't have believed it.

For Derek, getting married was a huge compromise of what he thought he wanted in his life. But being with Yasmine, a non-traditional woman, ironically meant becoming more normative and traditional. He'd already become monogamous for her and when Yasmine's parents found out she was living with a man, they began a concerted campaign of disapproval until Yasmine and Derek agreed they would marry. They

weren't happy that he wasn't Muslim, but Yasmine's parents liked Derek, a stably-employed, American man who was in love with their daughter. In order to preserve Yasmine's relationship with her mother, which had begun to deteriorate, Derek relented. In his words,

[T]he religious part [of the wedding] I agreed to only because I wanted Yasmine and her mother to continue talking to each other... We got married in Beirut and I was stuck putting on a show for people who didn't know me, and Yasmine's parents knew that I wasn't religious.

Derek was so anti-religion that he spent all his adult life up until then writing a scathing, thinly-veiled critique of organized religion and publishing it as a novel. For the second time, Derek compromised something significant to himself to stay in his relationship.

In their first year of marriage, Yasmine became pregnant and gave birth to Cecily. Unlike becoming a husband, becoming a father was something Derek had always wanted. They'd started talking about kids early in their relationship and knew they wanted at least two, eventually. Yasmine also started running a daycare out of their home, so kids were her business.

It was a way to both raise Cecily and make money by watching other kids too. One of those kids was Dylan, Liz and Sadie's daughter. Dylan started doing daycare with Yasmine when she was still a toddler. Liz and Yasmine liked each other immediately; they shared a dry sense of humor and a no-frills approach to motherhood, out crunching even the crunchiest of Western Mass moms. Liz began potty training Dylan just about from the day she was born. She'd learned about a technique to train your baby to eliminate on a schedule and would just periodically go to the bathroom, (public or

private), hold baby Dylan above the toilet, and she would go. The women also agreed Barbies were inappropriate toys for girls that would give them body image issues and unrealistic beauty expectations. They believed all kids really needed were wooden blocks, cloth diapers, plain clothes handed down and eventually passed along, a sling to be carried in, and lots of books. Liz's friendship with Yasmine grew, and so did the sexual tension between them. They'd hung out a few times on their own. Yasmine got pregnant again, and Liz loved the way she glowed. When, three months into her pregnancy, Yasmine had a miscarriage, Liz was the first person she called. The fetus had died in her womb, but she still had to deliver it. Liz was with her throughout the process. The experience was intensely emotional and brought them much closer and in unexpected ways. Yasmine explains,

Then I was going to have this miscarriage and she was just there for me in a way that I couldn't have gotten support from anyone including Derek, my ex, and I really didn't want support from him anyway. It was a really intense couple of weeks and she was just there for me. It was just hard. I was trying to balance being sad about this loss but at the same time there were all these emotions going on. I just didn't really know...I needed support and comfort but I was getting a lot more out of it than just that.

Yasmine felt a mixture of conflicting feelings while Liz took care of her through her loss. She was sad, of course, but she also reveled in how much attention she was getting from Liz. It was the most time they'd ever spent together. When she says "I needed support and comfort but I was getting a lot more out of it than just that," she means she was falling in love.

### **“Sometimes You Want to Do Something Even Though It’s Hard”**

A few weeks later Yasmine opened a dialog with Derek about the possibility of her dating a woman, specifically Liz. Derek says, “[S]he wasn’t like cheating on me [with Liz]. I basically said, ‘This is OK with me, just tell me what’s going on.’” Part of him felt vindicated, this is what he’d wanted in the beginning of their relationship! Sadie, on the other hand, was left in the dark and the revelation of the affair after a month of dishonesty put an immediate end to her partnership with Liz.

So then Liz and Dylan moved in with...Derek, Yasmine, and Cecily. At around the same time, Yasmine let Derek know she was pregnant again and also wanted a divorce, “After about a month [of seeing Liz] Yasmine basically sort of abruptly told me she couldn’t have a relationship with me anymore,” says Derek. Since Yasmine and Derek’s sexual relationship had waned, Yasmine knew the exact night she conceived Arlo—it was the same night she had her first kiss with Liz. Yasmine sums up the night of the conception as, “We kissed in the woods, I came home, I told Derek, he wanted to have sex, and I said yes.” Because of the coincidence, Liz credits herself with being the first lesbian to get another woman pregnant. Reflecting on this tongue-in-cheek claim, Yasmine says,

Jude even has [Liz’s] eyes, I don’t know how that worked out. That’s like so much more miraculous...she definitely got me pregnant and it was kind of a cool series of events though people really frown on it like it was being irresponsible or whatever but I don’t really look at it that way.

Perhaps out of the same impulse that led Sadie to specify they needed to go with a Chinese donor, Yasmine wills Arlo's biogenetic connection to Liz into existence. That Arlo would "have [Liz's] eyes" is impossible, and Yasmine and Liz both understand that, but this sentiment has worked as a shorthand for the strength of their connection. Saying Arlo has Liz's eyes works to simplify a complex situation and add some levity to an origin story people certainly find salacious. It's also a way to write Derek out of the narrative of the pregnancy, a move picked up on by Derek. He says,

Someone on Facebook said [Arlo] looked like [Liz] and I didn't know how to react. I didn't want to say, "he's *my* kid" or something like that. I did say something; I said like, "well, but he gets this from me," just because I want to get credit.

When Derek saw the comment on Liz's Facebook wall, possibly even a satirical one from a friend familiar with the situation, he didn't want to seem defensive, but he also couldn't let it go. He felt erased and insecure and worked to insert himself back into the story, informing not only Liz's friend, but reminding Liz herself he was Arlo's *real* parent. Liz may have intended to do this herself or let the comment roll off as an innocent joke or mistake. But Derek certainly wasn't laughing. He continues,

At one point there were some people who thought...that [Liz] had actually given birth to [Arlo] or something like that. It's funny because of the timing of [Arlo's] birth; he almost sort of *is a child of three people*. I think there were some people who thought because [Liz] and [Yasmine] were together, that he was theirs and there was no one else involved. I'm always like, "*but what about me?*" [Emphasis added.]

Since Liz and Yasmine were together throughout her pregnancy, Derek feels left out and more distant from Arlo than he'd like to be. He fights for recognition as Arlo's father and maybe likes the idea of having a foothold in Liz and Yasmine's relationship, hoping he's made himself indispensable.

As Yasmine tells it, he was indispensable in the most basic way, saying bluntly, "Really, the only reason I got together with him was to have kids." Having Derek in her life now comes with other perks as well, primarily the chance to spend time away from her kids. Though Derek is insecure about his place in the family, Yasmine and Liz both appreciate the role he plays. In the tumultuous and difficult first years of Arlo's life, when he wasn't sleeping through the night and when he hit the terrible twos, Yasmine says that the ability to have Derek care for him overnight even a couple of nights a week made it "actually easier to love him [Arlo]" and improved her own connection to him versus feeling overwhelmed when Cecily was young. It also gave Liz and Yasmine time to be alone and develop their young relationship. When it got comfortable enough, Derek would not only take Cecily and Arlo for the night, but Dylan as well, and quickly became her *de facto* "Dad,"

And actually Dylan spends time with us sometimes because she's around them so much, she's basically their sister now, and every once in a while Dylan calls me Dad as well because there's really no one else that she would call Dad, so might as well.

Derek is flattered to have another kid in his life calling him "Dad," but he doesn't see his days without his bio kids as a break,

I know it [having multiple households] makes it easier, but it doesn't change the fact that I would like to be with them. *Sometimes you want to do something even though it's hard.*

While the women see shared childrearing as a positive for their relationship and the relationships they have with their children, Derek doesn't. Seeing them less makes him feel more distant. In this case, he would rather do the harder thing, taking on more childcare responsibilities, than share the load and have his kids mostly live with their mother(s).

On the other hand, Liz and Yasmine also separately criticized what they saw as Derek's minimal involvement with his kids, for all he talks about wanting to see them more. They are happy for the times he's there but feel like he makes a big deal of the effort he puts in even though it is much less than theirs. While he has the kids two nights a week, they have them the other five. Although they are away just a couple of nights a week, Yasmine feels judged for not wanting to be with them every night. She had a strange encounter with another mom at Cecily's school who had a second child around Arlo's age. The mother was looking for some shared misery with Yasmine about not getting any sleep, and Yasmine said, "Well, that's the convenience of having another parent living in another house, like one or two times a week I get to sleep in." In response, Yasmine says the woman laughed uncomfortably, "She just laughed in this really uncomfortable way like trying to make me feel better, trying to seem like she was cool with that, but she wasn't." Yasmine says she feels more judged for parenting while divorced with young kids than she does for parenting in a lesbian relationship.

The ability to share childcare labor is something all the adults in this family value, but members put in different amounts of work, not just in spending time with the kids, but in actually *parenting* them—making decisions and setting the boundaries that shape their lives. Similar to how Liz did all the research to find a sperm donor and Sadie benefitted, Derek takes his cues from Yasmine. According to her, “We don’t really have a co-parenting relationship when I hand [the kids] off. And he also like...does whatever I tell him to do.” In the co-parenting, Derek is the “helper” to Yasmine’s “manager”—she tells him what to feed them, when to put them to bed, and manages the Google calendar they share to coordinate handoffs.

She sees this in contrast to Liz and Sadie’s co-parenting relationship. Yasmine envies the strength of the relationship Sadie has with Dylan. Unlike the emotional space Derek has left for Liz to parent his children, Yasmine doesn’t feel like she has the same opportunity, saying “I kind of feel like I don’t have as much of a role in [Dylan’s] life as [Liz] does in [Cecily] and [Arlo’s] lives.” At the same time, she’s jealous of Liz and Sadie’s more equitable approach to co-parenting: “[Liz] and [Sadie] co-parent [Dylan] really efficiently and evenly. I don’t really have that relationship with [Derek].” So, while it is clear that Liz has a significant place in the lives of Cecily and Arlo, Yasmine doesn’t quite feel secure with her role in Dylan’s. Yasmine tells me this has been a source of conflict in her relationship with Liz:

And I struggled with that a lot and that’s caused us a lot of trouble and I have sort of bad feelings about it...about not being able to feel like I matter as much in [Dylan’s] life and feel like I’m not given the space to do that...it’s hard. *The whole blended family thing is just really difficult.*



Though having additional co-parents frees up her time and allows her to get more sleep and more help, Yasmine finds it more emotionally taxing than raising kids only with Derek. She is used to being the primary caretaker for Arlo and Cecily, but when it comes to Dylan, she feels like she comes in third place. Though both Yasmine and Liz are what Mignon Moore would consider “lesbian step parents,” parenting the other’s child/children Yasmine shows more of the emotional toll Moore documents of having the responsibility of child but not the authority to make decisions about how it is raised.

“The whole blended family thing” has been hard for Derek too. He finds it hard to remember when to pick the kids up, “especially around holidays, forget it,” so now everyone shares a calendar. When he thinks of the possibility of the arrangement with Liz, Sadie, and Yasmine changing in the future, he says, “I don’t mind if it gets more complicated, but I don’t want it to get more difficult.” For Derek, “more complicated” might be Sadie moving away, but “more difficult” would be if this initiated a chain migration to wherever Sadie moved because Liz would move to bring Dylan closer to Sadie, and Yasmine would move to be closer to Liz, so then he would have to move to be near his children.

### **Claiming Narratives**

Derek’s “complications,” began with the messiness of the divorce. While dealing with his own heartache, Derek also had to field calls from Yasmine’s distressed parents who were processing the double whammy of their daughter getting divorced and leaving her husband for a woman. As Derek tells it,

When Yasmine and I separated, there was a period when her family almost wouldn’t talk to her at all, and they would talk to me. They...basically blamed

everything on her, were upset with her, and I was in the bizarre position of actually defending her most of the time.

Especially because of the circumstances surrounding their separation, Yasmine leaving Derek to be with a woman, Yasmine's parents felt a further distance from their own daughter than they did for their son-in-law of four years. Though they'd known Derek for only a handful of years, the revelation left Yasmine's parents feeling like they didn't know her at all.

Derek found himself acting as Yasmine's advocate to her family, explaining how this could happen in terms he knew to be too simple to actually be true. Here he is working through his thought process about how he could be left suddenly for Liz:

I could just assume that she sort of discovered at that point that she was really more...I don't know the right way to say it, that she was really more of a lesbian than heterosexual, but I don't know, I feel like that would kind of be too easy of an answer. It played some role, I am sure, but I don't know. It just really, it's been a longstanding mystery to me, and it's been over five years.

Derek struggled to articulate to me his understanding of Yasmine's identity. He described Yasmine's decision to her parents, and himself, in essentialist terms—as beyond her control—but there is also something nagging him. To say she was now “more of a lesbian” takes any responsibility for their separation, and eventual divorce, off of Derek himself.

When I first asked Yasmine how she would label her own sexuality, she told me she didn't believe in labels. But, I pushed her on it and she told me,

Well, if I had to label myself, I guess I would say I'm a lesbian...[but] I wasn't a lesbian until *I became a lesbian*. It was never an option as far as I could see, especially growing up in Saudi Arabia and Lebanon, it just wasn't an option. Although Yasmine had claimed she was only ever interested in being with Derek as a way to have kids, she's unwilling to say she's always been a lesbian as though it were some "natural" part of her she's only recently tapped into. To Yasmine, though she's been interested in women since she was young, she only had the "option" of "becoming a lesbian" when she moved from the Middle East, met Liz, and chose to be one. Growing up, her home was full of life, many cousins coming and going. She had a happy childhood, she didn't "become a lesbian" later in life because she felt oppressed, it just literally *was not an option* for her to consider. Her father has died, but her relationship with her mother and sisters has been strained since she told them about Liz. She's not even sure if her mother has told family and friends in Lebanon she's divorced let alone that she's with a woman now. Recently, her mother and sister came to visit and actually stayed in the house with her and Liz, something that hadn't happened in the four years they had been together and Yasmine says was "a really big deal."

If it were up to Derek though, they'd still be together, even if Yasmine were still with Liz. Derek says that Yasmine dating a woman within the context of their marriage would have been fine and he would have stayed with her, "Yeah, that didn't end it for me. It was entirely her decision," he said. But, in retrospect, Derek says he's actually better off no longer being with Yasmine who he considers sometimes to be thoughtlessly cruel. By way of example, he offers me a story,

Like one time [Liz] fell down the stairs and [Yasmine] came over at the top of the stairs and instead of asking, “Hey, are you OK?” she said, “Why are you making so much noise?” and it made perfect sense to me.

He laughs when he tells me this, but also seems to be clearly saying, “See? She’s awful.” Derek spent a lot of the interview telling me how hurt he is, not by Liz’s actions, but by Yasmine’s. He says Yasmine has barely spoken to him since the split. She only talks to him via email and delivers the essential information she thinks he needs. Derek sees this as a form of emotional blackmail, Yasmine withholding herself from him, but Yasmine tells me she stopped talking to him in person for his own good because she gets mean and upset with him when she does. Derek actually now feels like he has a better relationship with Liz who he’ll sometimes meet up with at a bar for a beer, or see a movie. Yasmine refers to these outings as their dates. As in, “[Liz] and [Derek] recently went on a date to see [a movie] and I babysat the children.” In these visits, Liz and Derek talk more openly about the kids and about Yasmine. Derek tells me he is able to do this because Liz “never meant to” break up his marriage and he doesn’t see her as his enemy. What Derek feels betrayed by is not the affair itself, which he was clearly OK with, but the sudden loss of someone he was in love with without what he saw as an adequate explanation. To him, Yasmine left a perfectly healthy relationship to gamble on having “a little bit better of a relationship with someone else.” Derek says,

I don’t think people should just stay together no matter what, but I also think whether you stay together should be influenced by some *rational decision*. I feel like there’s...it’s hard to...I guess I don’t feel like relationships that adults have with each other are like the most important thing in their lives...like if you think

that you would have *a little bit better of a relationship with someone else*, it sort of, I think there's a trade-off. You have to consider is it worth it to end what you have and possibly make things more difficult for your children for what might not be the biggest improvement.

Derek's torn between what he sees as parental duty versus pursuing one's own happiness. Though he speaks in general, he seems to be coming, very specifically, to a conclusion about what happened in his relationship—that Yasmine chose Liz over her children. That raising children in two homes or in the context of a lesbian relationship is “more difficult” is taken for granted. Though Derek considers himself a politically progressive person, he marshals an all-to-familiar argument about gay sexuality being selfish and antithetical to a child's happiness. He sees Yasmine's decision to leave him for a woman as irrational and impulsive even though he also knows it was something she'd wanted, and waited for, for decades.

### **At the Gates of Queer Heaven**

To his credit, Derek was not intimidated by the prospect of dating again and having to explain that he was separated, but living with his ex-wife and her girlfriend. This, of course, put one or two women off when they accused him of being “just a married guy cheating on his wife.” But this assessment was more rare than people might think, because of the women Derek dates. By his own admission, Derek has the tendency to be attracted to women who are queer. He also *feels* queer because of this attraction, his preference for polyamory, and his interest in “kink.” He says,

There's this phenomenon in my life. It's not intentional, but I keep ending up with women who are bisexual or almost always attracted to women but want to date me. Sometimes I joke that I'm a butch lesbian in a man's body...I've never like dated a man or anything like that, but I sort of feel like *I identify with people who are queer*...I'm sort of a kinky person, I guess I feel like they [bisexual and lesbian women] are more likely to accept me being unusual in that way. I've also identified as polyamorous and I think like if you are a person who's experienced what its like not to conform to other people's norms, you're more likely to not reject someone when they're not normal.

Derek, though in some ways having his life turned upside down by his wife's queerness, has a genuine appreciation for queer culture. He finds it more open to the "unusual"—people and behavior that don't belong to "other people's norms." He finds queer people he's interested in dating more understanding of his non-traditional family structure, preference for non-monogamy, and interest in kink, than strictly heterosexual women are. And he wonders if this means he fits under the queer umbrella himself.

I sometimes wonder whether I'm allowed to say that I am [queer]. Usually I kind of think of myself as being queer. I feel like if you had to have an ID card and pass a test, I might not pass the test, or they might not let me in to *queer heaven* or something.

Derek has a serious girlfriend now. Misty lives with him and he says the kids love her, especially Cecily. Misty is slowly being woven into the fabric of this blended family. I asked Yasmine if she thinks Derek and Misty will have kids as well and she tells me they probably will and the thought terrifies her, but she isn't unprepared for it. The effect of

Derek having additional children, or Sadie, or even Liz and Yasmine themselves, would have a ripple effect and shift the priorities and schedules in all of their lives.

Moving into the future, there's worry about Sadie relocating, of course, and if it will lead to a caravanning of all of them across the country so they can stay together. They all live with a constant underlying state of uncertainty. Describing her own thoughts about further complications, not to mention the potential for further difficulty, Yasmine says,

I don't know how it will work out...[not knowing] used to sort of really wreck me, it used to be a much bigger deal and now I'm just, I don't know, I found this place of calm and peace, like *whatever happens it'll work out*.

Beyond the fear at the potential of what could happen, Yasmine has trust and faith in the other members of her blended family. She's learning to give up some control and surrender to possibility.

When social scientists and journalists write about LGBTQ people in families, it tends to be through lens of exceptional purity. Andrew Sullivan (1996) has touted the civilizing potential of marriage and family on queer people, gay men in particular. Parenting itself is said to be a normalizing process: it shifts an individual's priorities and atomizes family groups into heteronormative nuclear units of legal parents (maximum: two) and their custodial children. But this is not how queer families began, and it's not how they live now. More often than not they were, and still are, queer blended families. The Williams Institute found that, numerically, the most common form of queer parenting in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is in the context of a blended family. The majority of queer parents in the US live in the South and are people of color, often of limited means.

While the archetype of a queer family—the ones pictured on the front of travel brochures and shown on TV— is the white, urbane, monogamous queer couple unburdened by the needs of people outside their homes, the reality is far more complex. Needs change and so do people. For Yasmine, it was a matter of opportunity. She'd grown up thinking the only way to have children would be in the context of a heterosexual marriage. Anything else would risk her inclusion in her religion, culture and family of origin. Sure, she was attracted to women, but what did that matter? Derek has convinced himself that all the sacrifices have been his. He sacrificed non-monogamy, his stance against marriage, not wanting a religious wedding, and lost his family so his ex could be, in his words, “a little bit happier.” He's turned his twice a week parenting into a sad narrative of not seeing his kids more. Yasmine is angry about this. From her perspective, she and Liz do a lot more of the parenting and even when the kids are with him, Derek is only following her instruction. Liz is their broker. She hangs out with Derek, catching him up on new developments at home or in school, and she is fully co-parenting in two households. Yasmine is also mad because she can make a direct comparison between Derek and Sadie. Sadie is more invested in the decision-making about Dylan's life than Derek is in the lives of his children, negotiating with Liz even though it is uncomfortable. This closer bond, with Dylan and with Liz, is threatening to Yasmine, but she is working through her jealousy. She sees Derek is incompetent and “a little bit pathetic,” but she trusts him as a sort-of babysitter, and his involvement affords her and Liz some intimate time together. The bar may very well be lower though, because he is a man and has fewer cultural demands about how competent a parent he *should* be. This doesn't keep Derek from “wanting the credit” though and becoming offended when



it is suggested that Liz is more a parent to his children than he is: biologically and practically. It bothers him, this assumption that Liz carried his child, because it stands in for what she does do and the guilt he has around it. The queer blended family shows us all the mess, inequality, and jealousy in relationships between parents, but it also shows us how these obstacles can be addressed in unconventional ways. Derek feels frozen out by Yasmine, so Liz brings him back in. Cecily and Arlo have come to know Dylan as a sister, so Derek takes all three when Dylan is not with Sadie. Sadie's a bit more removed, but it was her instinct to want a child who looked like her. Initially this may partly have been so she and Liz and Dylan looked more like "a family" together, without her seeming to be the odd one out. But, since the separation, it's also helped to secure a place in Dylan's life as she grows up seldom coming into contact with other Chinese-Americans. That Dylan does look more like Sadie than she looks like Liz is also a constant reminder—to Liz, to Yasmine, and to outsiders—that Sadie is present even when she is not, and that she also deserves the "credit."

Both Liz and Derek were once ideologues with very clear, utopian, ideas about how people can and should live. They saw themselves as outsiders, rebels against normativity. In practice, life turned out differently. Derek, in particular, surrendered his utopian convictions, abandoning polyamory and accommodating to both the pressures of religion and marriage. Much in the lives of Derek, Liz, Sadie, and Yasmine is far from perfect; in this unconventional reality, things are messy. There's jealousy, hurt feelings, missteps, and a lot of work, but there's also room for exploration, non-monogamy, continued personal growth, alone time, boundaries, and the ability to choose to prioritize one's own happiness over their children's or parents'. Things are free to be complex. But,

at the core there is an understanding that the boundaries and contours of the family and identity are subject to change and that this is okay and expected. If that's not queer heaven, I don't know what is.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **QUEER OTHERHOODS**

In the course of my study, I became more and more interested in those parents whose experiences could not be fully captured in the terms “motherhood” and “fatherhood.” These included trans women who still identified as “dads,” trans men who carried gave birth to their children, and known donors who waived their rights to legal parentage who were still part of the lives of their children, but both benefitted and suffered from not having the security of a legal relationship. In what follows, I pull together some narratives about these experiences from across my interviews to delve deeper into how meanings of parenthood, and what it entails, differs for LGBTQ people. I propose the term “queer otherhoods” as a way of organizing these people on the margins of the LGBTQ parenting margin under an umbrella.

One form of queer “otherhood” that has been explored in some depth is the “lesbian other mother” (Lewin 1993; Dalton and Bielby 2000; Sullivan 2004; Gabb 2005; Mamo 2007; Padavic and Butterfield 2011; Butterfield and Padavic 2014), and similarly, but to a lesser extent, the lesbian step mother (Moore 2011; Acosta 2017). These studies have helped shaped our understanding of the power dynamics in queer families when one parent is biogenetically connected to a child and the other is not. To a lesser extent, other forms of what I would call queer parenting “otherhoods” have been explored: gay sperm donors (Sullivan 2004; Mamo 2007), transwomen who transition after having kids (Hines 2006 and Haines, Ajayi, and Boyd 2014) and gestational fathers (More 1998; Riggs 2014). It is to these three forms of parenting I turn my attention in the chapter that

follows. I don't claim that this exhausts the list of parenting forms at all, as there are other varieties of ways people engage in queer parenting still emerging.

### **Transwomen Dads**

Too much research on trans people, important as it is, has focused on the harassment, discrimination, violence, and other harms they routinely suffer. In the National Transgender Discrimination Survey, a survey of 6,450 transgender and gender non-conforming adults in the US, 41% reported attempting suicide at some point in their lives (Grant, et al. 2011). The average rate of suicide attempts for cisgender people is around 4%. The report, titled "Injustice at Every Turn" paints a pretty bleak picture. Trans people reported harassment and discrimination in education, employment, housing, the criminal justice system, medical treatment, and in public accommodations, like retail stores. Most trans people (57%) also faced significant discrimination at home, but the study reports family acceptance makes a big difference in health outcomes and risk of suicide:

In the face of extensive institutional discrimination, family acceptance had a protective affect against many threats to well-being including health risks such as HIV infection and suicide...Those who were rejected by family members had considerably elevated negative outcomes, including homelessness (three times the frequency), sex work (double the rate), and suicidality (almost double), compared to those that were accepted by their family members. (Grant, et.al 2011:7-88)

Thus, family acceptance and support are not luxuries but may be necessary to the survival of trans people. Beyond this, families are an important site of joy and fulfillment in the lives of trans people who are more likely to face discrimination than not (Grant, et al.

2011). Even when families of origin prove unsupportive, chosen families are a key way in which trans people create alternatives to the negativity they encounter in institutions and public life. Family life in quotidian practice holds the ability to make new worlds for trans people in which their lives are valuable, meaningful, and fulfilling.

Very little sociological literature addresses the family lives of transgender and gender non-conforming people. Even in review articles under the somewhat misleading banner of “LGBT families,” trans families seldom receive more than a paragraph’s worth of attention usually consisting of a proverbial shrug. For instance, in Biblarz and Stavci’s 2010 review piece, “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Families,” this is what the authors have to say regarding trans families:

Academic research on transgender people and their family relationships is almost nonexistent...These issues are obviously vastly different than one’s child, partner, or parent coming out as gay and point out the need for research in this realm while complicating the idea of LGBT families as an umbrella term.

Thus, the families of trans people are expected to be fundamentally different than LGB people’s families, but since there is almost no research on these populations, we cannot be sure.

Three years of research later, in the piece titled, “LGBT Families at the Start of the Twenty-first Century,” Moore and Strambolis-Ruhstorfer sounds a little more hopeful (2013). The authors report:

After a paucity of research on transgender families, recent scholarship has begun to fill this gap (Hines 2006; Schilt & Westbrook 2009; Pfeffer 2010, 2012; Sanger 2010; Ward 2010). These sociologists investigate intimate relationships in which

at least one of the partners has changed or is in the process of changing sexes and how that transition impacts aspects of families such as the division of household labor, relationship formation and dissolution, communication to family and outsiders, the management of self understandings, and the negotiation of institutions.

Indeed, the works of these authors have become essential in understanding the relational lives of trans people, though with the exception of Hines, they are not studying families with children. Beemyn and Rankin (2011) conducted a large-scale survey (n=1500) of trans people that explores all aspects of their lives: employment, housing, schooling, family life, etc. Haines, Ajayi, and Boyd's (2014) explicit study of trans parents presents a pretty bleak picture. Trans parents often preferred to be closeted to their children's friends and the teachers at their schools. They feared, justifiably, that their children, even more than kids of LGB folks would be bullied and harassed because of *their* identities. Transitioning after becoming a parent can produce conflict between the parent and their children and with their partner or spouse, often leading to relationship dissolution. Conflict with a co-parent/former partner is especially consequential and is the source of anxiety; the authors state, "parents reported that their trans identity was used against them in conflicts over visitation or custody. Fear of or experienced discrimination in family court is a major stressor that can interfere with trans parents' ability to parent" (Haines, Ajayi, and Boyd 2014: 243). There is little guidance or support of trans parents in the realm of family therapy and these families are often left fending for themselves.

Sociological narratives of transwomen in general focus on their vulnerability to violence, underemployment, participation in sex work, and early deaths. This is certainly

an improvement from the wolf in sheep's clothing narrative of radical feminists in the 80s recently taken up by conservatives in the present. The Janice Raymond theory of transsexual women asserts that the people who occupy this identity have experienced male privilege all their lives and are now dressing as women and invading women's spaces in order to coopt those spaces and potentially to harass and, specifically, sexually assault women. Though this thinking was controversial at the time and wholly refuted by scholars of gender today, this same thought process is at work in contemporary multi-state efforts to block transpeople from accessing the bathrooms that correspond with their gender identities rather than the genders they were assigned at birth. The peculiar notion that trans women are the key threat to cis women's safety is a political red herring with the sole goal of restricting the rights of transgender people (and sometimes, by extension, LGB people as well). The "logic" refutes the possibility that anyone could actually be transgender by suggesting trans women are actually cisgender heterosexual men who would "abuse" the right to use the restroom of one's choice in order to sexually assault cisgender women. Not only does this policy create the ironic result of forcing transgender men into the women's room, but it has encouraged the active gender policing of people entering women's rooms such that cisgender men, in an effort to "protect" women and girls end up harassing gender non-conforming women and masculine-presenting genderqueer people. Transgender advocates are quick to point out that a) it is already illegal to harass, assault, and rape women, and b) forcing transwomen to use men's rooms is a huge threat to their safety. While statistically there have been no assaults by transgender women against ciswomen, transwomen (and ciswomen, for that matter) are at significant risk of being beaten, assaulted, and murdered by cisgender men.

The more difficult experiences associated with transwomen may account for the near decade longer they take before coming out. In a national survey of over 1500 transgender people, transwomen and transmen report roughly recognizing they were “different” and beginning to recognize themselves as trans at similar ages (the preteen to teen years and teen years respectively for both groups), there was a statistically significant difference between the ages they came out. Transmen, on average, report being open about their trans identities in their twenties, while transwomen do not report having the same experience until their thirties (Beemyn and Rankin 2011). While the transmen in my sample tended to come out as trans prior to becoming parents, the three transwomen I interviewed (as well as numerous others, with one exception) had children prior to coming out.

### **“I Told Them I Would Always Be ‘Dad’”**

Fran is an older transwoman in charge of all the repairs to the northeastern seaside bed and breakfast she co-runs with her wife, Avril (see their case in Chapter 3). Though they barely have time since they started the b&b, sailing is passion they share, and Fran is sure to let me know she confidently out-butches the men at the boat club, who once called her “little lady” but now know better. Standing above six feet tall, she is a commanding presence most often found working in the b&b’s basement, in a plain t-shirt and cargo shorts, sporting a long, dirty blonde ponytail. She comes up every morning, with a plate of mini-quiches, to socialize with guests, pour them tea, and tell them the best tours for guaranteed whale sightings. She is unflappably pleasant and you get the sense by watching her that she is exactly where she wants to be, doing exactly what she wants to be doing.



Fran's kids still call her "Dad," but she doesn't mind, saying "I told them I would always be "Dad" and so if that's what they're comfortable calling me, then fine, they could call me Dad...I still act like Dad to them." Fran continues to do what she considers "dad things" including fixing her older daughter's sink and, recently, flying across the country to help Alice and her husband install a six-foot fence around their home. Fran takes pride in her proficiencies and shows her daughters care by helping them.

Compared to her former life as a closeted crossdressing man, Fran's gender expression as a woman is much broader. Though she's a woman, she's never been particularly "girlie." However, Fran's transition came at a time when it was necessary to be diagnosed with a mental illness (gender identity disorder) in order to begin physically transitioning under a doctor's care. Fran was required to see a counsellor for a year as she began socially transitioning and taking estrogen. Fran had to show that she was a woman's woman- wearing makeup and skirts, changing the way she walked, and talking in a higher register. Fran was required to perform a narrow definition of feminine identity in order to become the low-maintenance, butch lesbian she ultimately was. Though she progressed through various identities, her gender expression was policed, by her intimates and the general public, at each one: man, crossdresser, woman. Finally, Fran is able to be the woman she wants to be, exactly where she wants to be, doing exactly what she wants to be doing.

### **"I was exhausted, so I wasn't a good parent"**

When I met Margot, she was checking her stocks in the *Wall Street Journal*. We met in a hotel in Atlanta where Margot had come for the Southern Comfort Conference,

an annual transgender conference which offered panels where people talked about their own transitions, shared strategies for how to be out at work, gave legal advice, and doctors offered panels on feminizing facial surgeries and other biomedical steps transpeople could take. There were dozens of tables offering literature on healthcare centers, financial planning, and family planning. There were also craftspeople selling screen-printed t-shirts with slogans like “Nobody Knows I’m Trans” and “Reclaim Your Gender.” Walking the halls of the hotel, it was like I was dropped into an alternate trans universe where the men were shorter than usual and the women were all tall and gorgeous. The conference was held in a big, nationally-recognized chain hotel. There were a few people I saw who were not with the conference and looked around with wide eyes, but they seemed more amused than upset.

Transpeople had travelled from all over the country to be there. Margot herself has been coming down from Pennsylvania for years. Gwen, a transwoman I met in a panel on writing memoir, introduced Margot to me as her “trans mother”- the person from whom she learned the ropes about coming out as trans. After I explained that I was a researcher wanting to talk to transgender parents about parenting, Gwen said, “You have to meet Margot.” Though it seemed like at this event many transwomen, in particular, were relishing the opportunity to be dressed to the nines in a supportive space, Margot, a 56-year-old white transwoman, was much more reserved. Gwen commented that Margot was “stealth,” meaning she was recognized as a woman wherever she went (see Pfeffer 2017 for a discussion of “passing” versus “being recognized”). She wore a long-sleeved light-colored t-shirt with pants and sneakers and very little make up. Her hair was a distinctive mop of tight shoulder-length dark blond curls that immediately

reminded me of Mia Farrow in the 90s. She was relaxed and seemed to not give a damn how other people saw her. She put down her newspaper and took off her colorful reading glasses to talk to me.

At the time, I had a habit of wearing a short-brimmed chambray fedora, and she told me she liked my style- that it reminded her of how she used to dress. Margot, prior to her transition, dressed like a dandy in bespoke suits in loud patterns—paisley, hound’s-tooth, and plaid—and handmade Italian wingtips. She smiles as she tells me how expensive it was to dress that way. I picture her as a younger person, looking the embodiment of *American Psycho* yuppie masculinity, while working on Wall Street in the 1980s. She was successful, serving as Senior Vice President for a large investment management firm. She would commute into the city from Connecticut and work long, 14 or 15-hour days. She never got home before sundown, if she went home at all, and barely saw her wife and two kids. In Margot’s words, “That barely left enough time for sleep and meals. I was exhausted, so I wasn’t a good parent.” Putting a finer point on her commitment to her job back then, she tells me she actually came out at work before she came out at home. She told her boss and made an announcement to the over one hundred employees in the office that she would be transitioning. She then went home to tell her wife and kids.

Like Fran, Margot’s family life was turned upside down when she transitioned. Her wife lived in denial at first and told Margot that she would “never be passable as a woman” as a backhanded way to keep her from transitioning. Her children were upset and barely spoke to her. Margot moved out, but that first Christmas after she started living as a woman, was hard. She felt extremely guilty for prioritizing her own needs

over her family's, something she was learning not to do after losing her job, so she attempted to take it all back:

I felt so bad about it, I wanted to give my kids back their father, so I de-transitioned for a month...I was suicidal for a couple of weeks, so I went back [to being a woman] the day after Christmas. I gave them their father for Christmas.

Margot realized that her attempt to de-transition nearly cost her children their parent entirely, but she still felt guilt and shame. She signed her son and daughter up for therapy, which they ended up resenting, and mostly stayed away.

Her transition eventually cost her her job as she was deemed “too distracting” to clients at the firm. Margot now frames losing her job because of discrimination as a gift she wouldn't have had if she had stayed in her old life. Unemployment brought her much closer to the children she felt she barely knew.

Prior to my losing my job because of my transition, I was working long hours, long commute to New York City...I was gone 14, 15 hours a day. That barely left enough time for sleep and meals. I was exhausted, so I wasn't a good parent.

Fortunately, she had socked away quite a bit of money from her Wall Street days and was free to be around more for her children; she considers this “one of the pluses of getting canned.” She allowed her kids to “set the pace” of their new relationship, which mended over time. When her kids applied for college, she helped with their applications and is incredibly proud of her son going to Yale. As she tells it, “Losing my job gave me more time to be a good parent and...that was much more important to me [than keeping my job].”

Losing her job also helped Margot reconnect with her ex-wife. Though they divorced some twenty years ago, at this point, Margot is still in love and considers her ex to be her best friend. As Margot says, “[We] hug and kiss probably a little bit longer than most divorced couples...It would have been nice if we could have stayed together.” Like Fran’s ex, Margot’s ex had a problem with the identity shift that would go along with their continued, post-transition relationship. As Margot put it simply, “She would just never identify as a lesbian. She would only identify as a heterosexual.” For Margot, this decision feels arbitrary, they are still in love and Margot considers herself to be fundamentally improved as a potential partner, more committed to her family. The fact of Margot’s female identity, however, and the implication on not only hers, but her wife’s sexual identity, seems to be too much to overcome.

### **Trans Mothering**

Margot has been able to use her own family experiences to help other trans women parents. Her friend, roommate, and trans “daughter,” Gwen (46), only recently came out to her family. She and her wife had been staying with her mother-in-law until they could get settled in a new place, but, after she came out, her wife stopped speaking to her for a time, and her mother-in-law kicked her out. Since then, she has been crashing with Margot. When she identified as a man, Gwen describes herself as being an angry alcoholic who would instigate bar fights instead of going home at night. She was laid off from her entry-level office job and slumped into a deep depression. When she began her transition, her life improved dramatically. Gwen feels her relationship with her wife and five-year-old daughter has improved since she came out.

[My wife] said, “You’re just a 180 degree different person, you seem happy to be with your daughter now. You make time for her, you play together, and you’re just more present.”

Gwen feels that she and her wife have a real chance at reconciliation and has been working as an administrative assistant trying to save money for an apartment so her family can be reunited. There is no question in her mind that transitioning was the best thing she could do not only for herself but also for her family. She is now able spend time more quality time with her daughter, and is looking for ways to talk about her transition in ways that reflect its positivity.

How do I take these experiences, and the experiences I have now and filter them in a positive way to my daughter? And so she can grow from them, so this [transitioning] is a positive experience, a strength? I want to make sure my daughter has the best possible life.

To Gwen, her transition is an unqualified good, even though it made her family life more complicated. She sees it as a learning experience and improvement in her daughter’s life. By honoring herself, Gwen is now able to model for her daughter strength through authenticity instead of the toxic masculinity she had been displaying before her transition.

In the meantime, Gwen has found Margot who has been an important example of coming through the process of transitioning after kids and served as an emotional support. Gwen refers to Margot as her “trans mom,” sleeps on her couch and considers her a trusted friend. From Gwen, Margot gets to feel needed and that sharing her tough experiences has meant a great deal. Margot has become the trans mother she’d never felt herself to be with her kids, but for Gwen.

## **Conclusion**

Fran, Margot, and Gwen are struggling to free themselves, not just from a male identity, but the confines of gender more generally. They are women *and* fathers, and these identities, in combination, change the meaning of the other. This isn't a smooth process, not because they do not know what they want or who they are, but because others have a hard time understanding. The resistance to holding these contradictory identities simultaneously, from now ex-wives, from children, from employers is constant. They struggle through a notion of gender that doesn't just challenge, but transforms it. Fran becomes a woman but in a way that allows womanhood to include conventionally masculine skills. Margot becomes a more conventional woman but, in becoming a woman, frees herself to connect with her kids by freeing herself of some of the most odious parts of conventional masculinity. Gwen's anger has dissipated, by no longer being a man, she's becoming a good dad. In the next chapter, I look at parents who challenge an even more fundamental basis of gender. While Fran, Margot, and Gwen were fathers who became women, in the next chapter I look at "gestational fathers," trans men who seemingly did the most essentially feminine thing of all and carried a child to birth.

## **Gestational Fatherhood**

### **Creating "the Pregnant Man"**

Not terribly long ago, in the spring of 2008, Thomas Beatie made international news from his interview with *People Magazine* and subsequent appearance on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* as the "pregnant man": a transgender man with a uterus who achieved

pregnancy. These public platforms made Beatie a household name, at least in many queer and transgender households, and the butt of many bad jokes. He was the subject of an SNL sketch, some Leno Mother's Day jabs, a host of MSNBC's *Morning Joe* saying, "I'm going to be sick," and even a Letterman Top Ten list: "Top Ten Message Left on the Pregnant Man's Answering Machine." Number 1: "Michael Jackson here—just wanted to reach out to another androgynous freak show." It's safe to say the world was not kind to Thomas Beatie when he came on to the world stage.

That Beatie's debut was an appearance on daytime television, representing an experience of gender completely novel to middle America, is important. In *Freaks Talk Back*, Josh Gamson examines the double-edged sword of queer visibility via daytime TV (Gamson 1998). While LGBT people were invited onto *Sally Jesse* or *Donahue* and able to represent themselves rather than just be spoken about, their humanity on full display for the people at home, they were also novelties invited on as sensations the audience was encouraged to gawk at and to ask rude questions about their sex lives and genitalia. The hosts of these shows were seldom much more sensitive, and the result was that trans people were more often humiliated and ridiculed than identified with. Oprah did a little better with Thomas Beatie, but the result was the same. Beatie's body became a subject of fascination which set off a deeply essentialist conversation about what a man really was. It opened his subjective experience up to the opining of Internet trolls (before they were even called that), many of whom refused to see him as a man because of the pregnancy. That this was the action of a single person, they felt, only lent support to this assertion. Though the public knew little about the experiences of trans men, they "knew" transgender men wanted to assimilate to gender norms and that pregnancy was anathema



to this goal. Not only was Beatie not doing manhood right, he wasn't doing trans manhood right either.

In addition to criticism from mainstream news and Internet trolls, Beatie's newfound fame as "the pregnant man" faced a two-pronged backlash among transgender men. First, many transmen took issue with Beatie's claim of being the first transman to become pregnant and give birth, and pointed specifically to an article in *The Village Voice* from 2000 written by Patrick Califia-Rice about his partner, Matt Rice, who, beard and all, got pregnant via known donor sperm and gave birth to their son. Second, there was a sentiment from transmen, many of whom had worked very hard to become "fully" men, that Beatie was a harmful representative of "the movement." They resented that the world's exposure to Beatie, the first transman many people had ever seen, highlighted his pregnancy and, because of that, threatened his legitimacy as a man. His pregnancy was framed, both by mainstream media and transmen, as indicative of him being confused about his gender identity because "real men" don't give birth.

Pat Califia and Matt Rice faced the same reaction from other transmen and consider them their biggest critics:

Our birth families and straight neighbors have been pretty sweet to us. The only people who've gotten upset are a handful of straight-identified homophobic FTMs online who started calling Matt by his girl name, because real men don't get pregnant. One of these bigots even said it would be better for our baby to be born dead than be raised by two people who are "confused about their gender."

(Califia-Rice, 2000)

The suggestion that a man can become pregnant and give birth is deeply threatening, not just in a psychological sense but also in a cognitive sense. It challenges perhaps the most fundamental assumption of the gender binary: that one sex gives birth and the other does not. Fairly or unfairly, this fact, from birth, sets a series of expectations of appearance, personality, desires, and capabilities. How do we then explain a person who has gone through the steps of becoming socially male (and in many cases biologically male through the use of hormones and top surgery) but does not give up his ability to gestate and deliver a child? It turns out that biology is not destiny if you take both into your own hands. Trans men who give birth both challenge the foundation of the gender binary and expose that the institutions of society are unprepared to handle that challenge. Through it all, gestational fathers, in the face of institutions that just do not know what to do with them, demonstrate the twin strategies Carla Pfeffer (2017) calls “normative resistance” and “inventive pragmatism.” Pfeffer developed this analysis by interviewing transmen and their cisgender women partners, but, as I show below, the points still hold. They consciously resist and upend expectations, particularly of gender performance (normative resistance), but also exploit the loopholes that can be found in the practices of institutions—hospitals, insurance companies, legal marriage, and courts—that do not know what to do with them (inventive pragmatism). This presents them with opportunities to use the systems that exclude them to get the services, care, and recognition that benefits them.

## Normative Narratives of Trans Experience

The idea of a man not only becoming pregnant but *wanting* to become pregnant confounds people with a strictly binary view of gender. In discussing my research in classrooms and among friends, I've found that cisgender people (not always straight, but almost always men) say that men becoming pregnant makes no logical sense. To them, the fact that someone becomes pregnant, especially if this is something they've chosen consciously to pursue, *makes* them women. The teleology goes as follows: because the students have only ever understood women to become pregnant and give birth, any pregnant men they do encounter must actually be women because they understand women to be the only people who become pregnant and give birth. The same is echoed in Beatie's book where talk show hosts and Internet bloggers would reason that a functioning uterus makes this person a woman and therefore they will address him as "her." Even trans rights groups Beatie contacted had a hard time getting on his side, saying basically that his decision to become pregnant undermined his identity as a man and made it seem like trans people were "confused" about their own identities. The outside world would mistake Beatie's utopian effort to undo gender for confusion.

The words "pregnancy" and "birth" are so closely associated with womanhood that some trans people have advocated for calling this process "gestational parenthood." I use the phrase "gestational fatherhood" to highlight the specificity of transmen's unique roles as the child bearer in these cases and assert that the act of giving birth does not automatically make someone a mother. The gestational fathers I have spoken with certainly do not see it that way. To them, their identity as men and their desire to become pregnant are two separate things. If they still have the ability to become pregnant or carry

fetuses to term themselves, why should they not do it? Just because cisgender men have not been presented with the option of birthing children does not mean that none would choose to if they could (see Arnold Schwarzenegger's notably terrible film *Junior* for a particularly irreverent example).

Even sympathetic cisgender people often believe the repeated narrative that transpeople must feel a disconnect between their physical bodies and their “inner selves,” and that transitioning’s purpose is to bring these things into alignment with the goal of “passing” on the outside as the gender they identify with on the inside. Though some people certainly do experience things that way, this narrative was developed, at least in part, out of clinical necessity. Prior to the 2011 international standards of care guidelines for treating transgender patients published by the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH), psychiatrists were guided by the definition of gender dysphoria, and, later, gender identity disorder, in the DSM (since changed in subsequent editions) which specified that people suffering from this “ailment” needed to show signs that they were distressed by their physical bodies in order to be diagnosed with Gender Identity Disorder (GID) and therefore be able to legally access treatments: hormones and surgery. Though there was, and still is, an underground medical market for hormones and the possibility of traveling to other countries for surgeries, a legal path to access has been incredibly important for mitigating medical and legal risks. For newly transitioning people, there was an incentive to use the narrative that had worked in helping other trans people successfully access these treatments. People who wanted to transition learned the “party line.” To be diagnosed with GID, transpeople had to: show an interest in stereotypical masculine or feminine hobbies, clothing, and occupations; claim a desire to

be heterosexual post-transition; learn how to change the way they walked or the tenor of their voices; and then complete a one-year “real world test”- dressing and identifying as the chosen gender, without hormone therapy or surgery to prove this was not a “phase”—prior to approval for medicines or surgical procedures. Trans people had to prove themselves to be certain *kinds* of men and women before they could become the men and women they wanted to be. Just as not all cisgender women wear make-up and dresses, shave their legs, and experience sexual attraction toward men, not all transwomen do either. I’ve known trans, lesbian handywomen and effeminate, pansexual transmen. But these are not the examples people tend to think of when they picture archetypal, gender-conforming, transpeople, in part because of this diagnostic history which insisted on gender conformity and normativity. Trans people’s gender expressions exist on a spectrum of masculinity and femininity just as cisgender people’s genders do. What is seen and trivialized as “gender confusion” is, in a way, an attempt by transmen to liberate themselves from gender. That they have also transitioned, even to a binary gender identity, does not invalidate this effort.

I introduce the term “gestational father” as a way to discuss transgender men who give birth to their children and distinguish them from transgender fathers who did not give birth. Gestational fathers-to-be stop testosterone treatments for a few months prior to attempting to conceive. If they are premenopausal and still producing eggs, transmen can use their “original plumbing” (the uterus and ovaries with which they were born) to get pregnant. With egg donation a possibility, they (like anyone with a uterus) can also participate in *in vitro* fertilization, and even carry children postmenopausally with the help of donor eggs, if that is a factor. If they have undergone top surgery – surgery to

remove breast tissue – transmen will not be able to breastfeed, but their infants can be formula-fed or fed through informal breastmilk banking communities in which people who are able to breastfeed deep freeze excess breastmilk and donate it to those in need.

Having to be diagnosed with a mental illness in order to legally access medical and therapeutic resources was only the most overt barrier for trans people accessing legal protections and medical access. Most states have no explicit protections for trans people's rights to housing, employment, and public accommodations free from discrimination. Reflecting on why, after being a butch woman, then a person in transition, and finally becoming legally male, he would want to complicate all that by getting pregnant, Beatie says,

Once [my wife and I] decided I was the best person to carry my own child, we didn't let the inevitable complications that lay ahead shake us from our convictions. I didn't let the fact that I was inviting a whole new round of funny looks and disapproving stares influence my decision. I'm not saying that I wanted to pick a fight—all I wanted to do was have a family. But if accomplishing that goal meant having to fight for my rights as a human being then I was more than ready to do that. (2008: 249)

Beatie wasn't much of an activist before the pregnancy, but the experience of the pregnancy made him into one. He just wanted to be a man who happened to give birth, but doing so vaulted him into the global spotlight, for better or worse. He sought the limited goal of having a child, but became a trans icon. He's currently living in Sweden and is a vocal proponent for LGBTQ family rights.

Beatie's statement sums up much of the experience of pregnancy the transmen and masculine genderqueer folks I spoke with reported. While they saw themselves as simply creating families they wanted in the way they wanted, the institutions and people around them struggled to keep up. For this reason and others, I prefer to take a broad approach to who I consider to be a "gestational father." I include three self-identified trans men (Tucker, Jack, and Chris) but I also include two people whose gender identities are genderqueer or non-binary and who gave birth but have not transitioned and are thus "legally female." These two subjects (Dani and Paris) are butch, masculine people with short hair, who dress exclusively in men's clothing, and are more often called "sir" than "ma'am" in public. Their pregnancies too challenged conventional notions of motherhood. In this sense, their experiences are in many ways more akin to transmen who've given birth than to cisgender women.

### **Relationship to the Self/Body**

When he was identifying as a woman and a lesbian, Tucker never wanted to get pregnant. He joked that when he was in a relationship with a woman, as a woman, the assumption was that whoever was less butch would be carrying the children. Tucker:

I never really thought I was going to be pregnant. And I would have relationships and we'd talk about kids, with different partners, but whoever was going to carry the kids, *it was usually just like whoever was less butch*. It just changed depending on who I was with. [Emphasis added.]

A baby-faced brunette in his early twenties, sometimes he was the butcher partner, and sometimes not, but he was never interested in being pregnant. However,

post-transition, Tucker actually became more interested in giving birth, saying, “[After transitioning] I started thinking about [becoming pregnant]...I felt there was no other experience that compared to [pregnancy].” Tucker became more open to the idea of pregnancy *because* he transitioned. This may seem ironic, but for Tucker feeling comfortable in his own body was the catalyst for reevaluating his desire to give birth. Maybe it wasn’t that he never wanted to be pregnant, but, instead, didn’t want to be a woman who was pregnant. After transitioning, but even prior to becoming pregnant, Tucker saw the potential of pregnancy to help him reidentify with his body not as male or female, but as his own. Tucker puts this experience in spiritual terms,

I really felt like going through a pregnancy and giving birth would be like...this intensive healing process around my female spirit... [but] healing a female spirit, is not me becoming female again, I’m still trans...but, I feel really good and really far more at home in my body, and myself, and my gender than I ever have.

Tucker had the feeling that pregnancy would help him connect to his physical body. In order to become pregnant, for six months Tucker had to go off of the testosterone therapy he’d been on. Prior to the pregnancy, Tucker was on the path toward having top surgery, but decided to postpone it until after his baby was finished nursing. Now he isn’t so sure.

I really am enjoying nursing. I feel like my chest is suddenly just my chest. It does not cause me nearly as much of the dysphoria as it has in the past...I can’t bind [my chest] while I’m nursing because the milk ducts would get clogged really easily and that doesn’t feel good.



Binding his chest was an early step Tucker took to feel comfortable in his own body. While ACE bandages used to be the way to go, there are now products on the market made for transmasculine people with breasts, “binders” or compression tanks that smooth the chest by compressing and redistributing breast tissue for a flatter more masculine chest. Becoming pregnant and then nursing made wearing a binder much too difficult. Fortunately, through nursing, Tucker was able to experience his chest in a different way - not as a visual stimulus for others but as a utilitarian source of sustenance for his child - and reported feeling less dysphoria, or disconnection between his physical body and how he thought he should look, than before pregnancy. He also wants to leave open the option of giving birth to a second child in the future, so he’s put top surgery (the surgical removal of mammary tissue) off for the foreseeable future. For Tucker, transitioning to male allowed him to feel more at home in the body he had. It also changed how he saw pregnancy: not just as a chore for the “less butch” lesbian partner, but as a wholly different bodily experience he wanted to, and could, have. Tucker’s experience as a trans gestational parent is about as utopian as it gets. Through pregnancy he was able to experience his body in a different way and come out on the other side as someone whose experience is not captured in the gender binary.

Tucker’s story also illustrates how difficult this freedom is to achieve. Other than the jokes about butchness, he’d hardly given real thought to having children before he met his wife, Abby. Prior to dating Abby, Tucker felt, “as a queer, young, poor trans person, I was like, “No one wants to reproduce with me!”...I was like, “I would [get pregnant], but I think I’m going to give birth to an alien.” He was still only friends with Abby when Abby gave birth to her first child. Early on in their dating life, Tucker got to

accompany Abby on a visit to the hospital to visit her friend, Jack, a transman who had just given birth. The experience was eye-opening and just a few months into their relationship, Abby and Tucker began planning Tucker's pregnancy. Now a self-described "stay-at-home sea horse," Tucker has embraced his role as a gestational father and primary caretaker to his and Abby's two young children.

While other people might welcome a pregnancy, especially after pursuing fertility treatment for years, Dani did not. Dani, a 44-year-old self-identified trans lesbian ("My gender is trans, and my sexuality is lesbian, and I don't care if people think they meet up. I don't have to choose") is definitely not the more feminine partner in their relationship. Dani uses both gender-neutral (they/them) and feminine (she/her) pronouns and was assigned female at birth [Note: I will use female pronouns for ease of reading but want to emphasize Dani's gender is more complicated than that]. With a close-cut military haircut, ever-present cargo shorts, and not a stitch of clothing from the women's section for more than twenty years, Dani is as butch as they come. On a daily basis, she is more likely to be called "sir" than "ma'am," and is happy with that. Dani agreed to become pregnant, but under duress, openly admitting hating the experience. When asked if she wanted to be pregnant, Dani responded, "No. I hated [being pregnant]. I actually, the only reason why...we sort of got stuck, I think." Dani and her partner live in Florida and they started considering having a child while Florida had an on-going adoption ban, so adopting was not an option for them.

For two years, Dani's partner, Helene, went through a gamut of fertility treatments attempting to become pregnant. Helene, a bit older than Dani, is conventionally feminine and had previously only ever dated cisgender men. She assumed

from a young age that she would carry and give birth to a child and having a partner who could not provide sperm was not going to stop her. Using sperm from a sperm bank, and an egg donation from a friend, they tried *in vitro* with Helene's uterus. Helene had a history of uterine fibroids, and the embryos were not implanting successfully. Dani's own eggs were no longer viable, so they proceeded trying to get pregnant with the same donors Helene had tried, but with Dani's uterus and, to Dani's joy and chagrin, it worked. According to Dani, "We just really wanted to go with the scenario that seemed most likely. And, unfortunately for me, that was my uterus..." Though they are both overjoyed at the result, an adorable child, Helene had really wanted to be pregnant and still carries some sadness about missing out. Instead she suffered the irony of Dani being able to carry their child and vocally hating every minute of it. In Dani's words,

I did not like pregnancy. People were like, "Oh, how are you enjoying your pregnancy?" And I'm like, "Enjoy? Well that's an interesting selection of words."

It just wasn't something I ever wanted to do. It certainly messed with a lot of my identity about myself in terms of what I didn't want to experience with my body.

Dani, though fluid with pronouns, is very invested in a masculine gender display. Being pregnant was so at odds with how Dani saw herself, she became invested instead in blending in as a man with an expanding beer belly. Dani insists there's nothing inherent about the need for maternity clothes. Billed as utilitarian, these clothes are built around accommodating and accentuating the pregnant body - often incorporating a ruffle, capped shirt sleeves, and fake pockets which, for Dani, is the opposite of utilitarian. Dani balked at female friends who insisted she would need these special clothes. Dani says,

People kept telling me “you’re going to *need* maternity clothes”...And I started looking at men’s bodies...How many pot-bellied men are out there walking around that look far more pregnant than I ever was? They are all over the place. And yet they fit in what are described as men’s clothes, so I just went and bought a bigger size [of what I already wore], hence, people thought either that I was getting fat, or they just thought of me as a man. I was probably eight and a half to nine months pregnant before people recognized it as a pregnancy.

Dani felt uncomfortable in her own skin and tried to maintain normality by continuing to wear men’s clothes, but in larger sizes. It’s clear that for Dani, pregnancy was not a joy. It was a compromise she was willing to make in order to achieve the goal of parenthood. It was also a selfless act of love from her to her partner only made possible by her body’s ability to gestate in spite of her own desires not to. While for Tucker becoming pregnant was a surprising and awesome experience of reconnecting to his body, Dani felt disassociated from hers and being pregnant brought back to the surface the anxiety and dysphoria that decades of Carhardt wearing helped suppress. What Dani was not willing to do was breastfeed, so their baby is being raised with formula and everyone (Dani, Helene, and baby) seems perfectly happy about this.

### **Fertility Clinics, Man-ternity Care, and Insurance**

While Tucker and Dani both met pregnancy with a mix of trepidation and outright dread, Jack, the man Tucker met in the maternity ward, could not wait to become pregnant - and it took him almost five years. He’d started considering getting pregnant when many of his older gay friends started adopting children. He was worried that he

wouldn't be eligible to adopt because he wasn't "straight enough" for the adoption agencies or the birth mothers who'd be deciding who raised their kids. Jack is trans and gay-identified, and prefers to date other trans men. He felt this combination of identities may be a road too twisty for a (presumably) straight and cisgender birth mother considering where to place her child in an open adoption. Though he still had a uterus and ovaries, he didn't think about them much until Matt Rice's pregnancy gave him an epiphany:

I was like, "Oh, *I* can have a baby!" and my ex decided "No, you couldn't!" and he was like, "You are too..." I think his thing was that he thought it would be too difficult [for me] to be pregnant from an emotional perspective.

Jack's partner was worried that being pregnant would feel to Jack like being a woman again, and back to that place of discomfort in his own body, after he'd fought so hard to become a man- he'd even lost friends and family in the process. But Jack's desire to give birth outlasted that ex-boyfriend. It outlasted a series of sperm donors as well, who didn't work out for one reason or another. It outlasted the first fertility clinic he tried in Canada (where he is from) and their sperm donor approval process - as a single person, even with known donor sperm, Jack had to see a psychiatrist to make sure he knew about donor conception before he started. Two years and several failed attempts to conceive later, Jack was living in the US and in the market for a new donor. From previous experience, Jack knew that he would need to conceive through IVF (*in vitro* fertilization) which has a higher success rate than attempting to insert donor sperm himself, or having a nurse inject sperm in what is pejoratively known as the "turkey-baster method." Jack

preferred a gay sperm donor and asked his friend Kurt if he knew any potential candidates and Kurt volunteered himself.

Donor secured, Jack tried going to one fertility clinic that kept coming up with excuses for why they couldn't treat him: examining his medical records, testing his hormone levels (which he knew to be in the treatable range). Then they wouldn't give him his results and wouldn't let him book a follow-up appointment; their doctor stopped returning Jack's calls and eventually the clinic told him he would have to see their in-house social worker and then they would bring his case before an ethics committee before agreeing to treat him. Jack says, "And, it came out of the blue and sucker punched me because I thought everything was fine...this hospital has an explicit policy of trans-inclusion." But he agreed to meet with the social worker because he wanted the treatment. After so many years trying to get pregnant, Jack wasn't willing to give up that easily. He also knew that his problem had nothing to do with his gender. He wasn't "confused," he knew exactly what his body was capable of and that it didn't mean he was no longer a man. But, used to the confusion of others about his desire to be pregnant, Jack went in to the meeting with the clinic's social worker happy to talk about understanding what it meant to conceive with donor sperm, but not willing to have a therapy session interrogating his gender identity.

I basically refused to talk to their social worker in the terms that she wanted to hear...she treated me absolutely horribly at our meeting and asked me questions like, what kind of clothing I wore as a child and stuff that was mostly directly related to me being trans. Which then the hospital tried to turn around and say that they actually wanted to have the meeting just to evaluate me in terms of my

suitability because I was using a known donor. Like, it wasn't because I was trans, it was because I had a donor. And I was like, "Um, except that she didn't ask me a single question about the donor."

Uncomfortable interview with the social worker complete, Jack called the hospital to see how his case was proceeding with the ethics committee,

So, I contacted [the hospital] and said, "Look I understand my case is being presented [before the hospital ethics committee] and I want to be there." And they said, "Your case isn't being presented, what are you talking about?" So then what it boiled down to was basically their lawyer told them to treat me and they basically said "No, we won't"... And to add insult to injury around the same time the hospital got some sort of award from Lambda Legal or GLADD or one of those organizations for being trans inclusive because they have all of these great trans inclusion policies.

Though the hospital was commended for its "trans inclusion policies," those policies were limited in scope in that they did not include reproductive care. When confronted with a novel situation in which they had no policy or precedent, the organizational response was clueless and stymied. But, this hospital was also progressive. Very few hospitals even acknowledged the existence of trans people when Jack was trying to get pregnant nearly a decade ago and few do now. The public conversation about accommodations for trans people has been stuck on which bathrooms they are legally permitted to use. In this situation of normlessness, where the people there were not prepared to understand what might be different about Jack's pregnancy, the clinic administration did the only thing it felt able to do, deny him treatment.

Jack then tried to appeal to a group he thought would be more sympathetic to his situation, GLAAD (the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation), for help in his fight against the clinic he felt unlawfully discriminated against him,

And around the same time the GLAAD [chapter in a nearby city] was running a fundraising campaign focused on trans access to healthcare. So, I got in touch with them and they pretty much told me that trans access to healthcare, like fertility care, wasn't really part of what they'd meant by healthcare...It was directly within their purview and they didn't want to touch it with a ten-foot pole.

It seems trans people trying to reproduce are pretty much left on their own. Even in the 2011 “Standards of Care for the Health of Transsexual, Transgender, and Gender Nonconforming People” published by the World Professional Association of Transgender Health (WPATH), there is very little by way of information about the reproductive health of trans people. It's almost as though there is an inherent assumption that trans people will not want to reproduce, or that it is at least of secondary concern. In this 120-page document, covering standards of care for treating mental health, hormone therapy, voice therapy, surgery and post-op care in trans people, trans reproduction is addressed on one and a half pages. Though this is mostly a bare-bones utilitarian document sometimes saying roughly, “treat this in a trans person as you would a person who is not trans,” the content of those pages is extremely unhelpful and approaches the trans person's interest in reproduction as though they must be mistaken either about transitioning or their desire to parent. Healthcare professionals are advised to mention reproductive options and potential limitations prior to hormone therapy and surgery even when the patient is receiving mental healthcare because, “Cases are known of people who received hormone



therapy and genital surgery and later regretted their inability to parent genetically related children.” The main advice seems to be to tell transwomen to freeze their sperm before estrogen treatments and to have transmen freeze eggs or embryos before considering testosterone and surgery even if “patients are not interested in these issues at the time of treatment.” They mention the possibility of stopping hormone therapy and allowing the body to begin producing gametes (eggs and sperm) again, but say that other than “debate and opinion pieces” very little medical study data has been published on the issue. Somewhat buried in the text is the very important line, “Transsexual, transgender, and gender nonconforming people should not be refused reproductive options for any reason,” which would presumably include options even after the person has gone through hormone therapy and surgery. Jack eventually hired a lawyer and filed a complaint against the hospital with the state commission against discrimination, but, at the time of the interview, it had been a year and a half and he’d heard nothing in response.

Though he did find a fertility clinic that agreed to treat him, Jack’s trouble didn’t end there. He also had a series of fights with his insurance company about how his various fertility treatments would be billed. His insurance company listed different billing codes depending on whether the claimant was male or female, so they had the problem of figuring out how to make a claim for female fertility treatments performed on a man. This combination was thought by this agency to be out of the realm of possibility. His need for this care was unintelligible for an institution unprepared to deal with him. He called the company so much that he had huge phone bills and a preferred representative.

I had so many fights with them I started being like... “I know you are going to find this obnoxious, but you’re going to need to put me on hold for 5 minutes and

read all the notes in my file posted by [Tammy C.]... And so they would put me on hold and then come back and say, “Ok, sir, I think I understand, so your wife...” [And I’d say] “Nah, nah, nah, put me back on hold, go read the notes, I’ll wait.” And so eventually, I had like a claim supervisor who was put on my file and I knew when she was at work, she would give me her schedule and I would call her up and be like, “So, Tammy, this is our problem, let’s fix this.”

With a master’s degree, Jack had the knowledge and the class background to advocate for himself in this way with the fertility clinic and the insurance company. Not every pregnant transman would have these resources and, and many would be out of luck. In both cases, it was the very lack of a policy against treating him, or covering his “female” medical treatments, that left the opportunity for him to push his case. He exploited the normlessness of these institutions to challenge them. It did not work with the clinic, but it did with the insurance company. Jack was empowered by the experience and has advocated for and counseled other trans men on navigating the insurance process, including Tucker.

While Tucker is sweet, shy, young, and reserved, his partner is the perfect complement: bold, brash, and fierce. Abby’s also about ten years older, in her early thirties, and the primary account holder for their health insurance, so she had to do a lot of arguing on the phone on Tucker’s behalf. They married so Tucker could benefit from Abby’s healthcare (Tucker was on public assistance before that), and Abby sure did get a kick out of telling people “my husband is pregnant.” Abby quipped, “Like, it’s not my job to explain it and unpack it for them!” Sometimes, though, it is on Abby to explain and unpack Tucker’s needs, like with the insurance company. Abby describes the typical

conversation with the front-line representative of their health insurance company while inquiring about coverage for bills connected to Tucker's pregnancy aftercare:

[T]hey're like, "Wait a minute, wait a minute, so who's the father?" and I'm like, "Tucker's the father," "Wait, but wasn't he pregnant?" "Yes, but I'm the mother." And finally, I've just gotten to the point where my soundbite now is like, "Look, just because it doesn't fit, *just because you don't have these options in your computer, doesn't mean there's anything wrong with our family model.* Your computer needs to have an 'Other.' I don't know what else to tell you."

Since billing codes are connected with gender, Tucker and Abby's insurer had the same problem Jack's insurance did with figuring out how to cover procedures they've only ever accounted for as "female." But, with Jack having had the experience, and telling people about it, Abby has the strength to push back using Jack's example:

[The insurance company is] telling me that like, so they've switched him to be male [in their system], but they're telling me that he's no longer eligible for OB/GYN appointments. I know that's not true, so I've just told them, "He will go and, for now, he's still under the care of his home-birth midwives, and eventually he will get the healthcare he needs, and you will get the bill, and you will figure out how to enter that in your computer, and pay for it! It's not our fault that you don't have a category, you know? Just because your computer doesn't have a box for him, doesn't mean he doesn't exist."

When Tucker transitioned, he did not go through the process of seeing a psychiatrist to diagnose him with GID, but started getting testosterone (T) on the black market, so he was not considered legally male though he started growing facial hair and

being seen as a guy. Going off of T to get pregnant allowed Tucker's cycle to begin again, but he was never comfortable taking on female or gender-neutral pronouns. Because they thought it would just be easier, Abby and Tucker, when they were still considered domestic partners, kept Tucker listed as "female" with the insurance company through most of the pregnancy, and had decided to have a home birth accompanied by local midwives who were more open to the idea of a man being pregnant.

But both Abby and Tucker wanted to be seen as their child's legal parents, so they got married three weeks before Tucker's due date. Tucker had gone through the process of changing his legal name (to his chosen name, Tucker) and gender marker (F to M) on his driver's license, a process that does not require evidence of hormone treatment, surgery, or GID diagnosis in the state of Massachusetts, just a note from a counselor or physician. Most of his other legal documents still had him as "female." Stuck between two worlds, in some cases "legally male" and others "legally female," Tucker's existence too confounded the insurance company for whom there existed only two fixed genders corresponding to two fixed biological sexes. Either one, or the other.

But, as Abby puts it, "Just because [the insurance company's] computer doesn't have a box for him, doesn't mean he doesn't exist." The current way of doing things has the effect of denying the very existence of gestational fathers and their choices become: a) claiming a female identity they do not have (which may be complicated by the presence of facial hair, a deep voice, a lack of breasts and legal documentation of a masculine identity) in order to receive the treatment they need, or b) honoring their gender identities, but not having access to coverage for certain treatments. This leads transmen to seek alternatives to conventional medical treatments. Tucker's hesitancy to

go through a psychiatrist to prescribe him testosterone led him to take his hormone treatment into his own hands. Tucker employed a similar avoidance and control technique when he decided he would give birth at home. According to Tucker:

I found the home-birth process to be very empowering as a trans person, and to like really be like a safe space, I know [Jack] had a great hospital birth where he was totally respected, but I feel like, I don't know, I feel like there's a rise in midwives working and in like people doing birth work and being doulas that there's a strong queer and trans presence in that would make sense.

Tucker's empowering experience of being able to direct his own birth plan leads him to realize that, perhaps for that reason, queer and trans people would be likely to be involved in this kind of work professionally. He was able to give birth with only supportive people around him and avoided the awkwardness he feared he would face in a hospital. This experience led to his own interest in practicing alternative medicine including reiki (a healing art in which the energy from the practitioner is said to pass into the body of the client) and producing his own ailment-treating tinctures made from organic ingredients. Tucker planned to use his developing knowledge of DIY healthcare to treat both himself and other gender non-conforming people.

Throughout their pregnancies, Tucker and Jack were having to continually confront the limits of the gender binary. Though they had become the men they wanted to become, and wanted to be able to push what that meant, the experience of being a gestational father took them to a revolutionary place beyond that. Where once they had freedom *of* gender, freedom to choose the gender they wanted, by exploiting the

normlessness in the situations they confronted, they found freedom *from* gender—their experience cannot be captured in the binary as we know it.

### **Legal and Custodial Challenges**

Paris is a Black, early twenties person who identifies as neither man nor woman and refers to hir gender presentation as androgynous and queer (I will use the gender-neutral pronouns of ze/hir throughout). Whenever I ran into Paris walking around campus, it was like encountering a slice of Brooklyn in the otherwise be-cardiganed and UGG-booted landscape of undergraduates. There were two features of hir wardrobe I knew I could always count on: a stiff-brimmed ball cap over a close-clipped fade and (usually color coordinating) hightop sneakers. One of the few undergrads old enough to get into the university bar, they could be found there regularly, drinking PBRs and arguing with graduate students, occasionally braving the cold to smoke an American Spirit, the only concession they seemed to give to the local culture. Paris would get you into a conversation you might have a hard time getting out of about a TV show about as often as sociological theory; I had no idea ze had a kid. We'd met at least four times before ze mentioned it, probably in response to my talking about my research. "Oh, yeah, I'm a queer parent," seems like something ze would say. Coming to campus was an escape. Ze said it was hard enough being pregnant and having a child (now a 4-year-old) as a trans person, but that it has also exacerbated hir experience of mental health issues, including depression. It's also been suggested that Paris has a form of autism, potentially Aspergers syndrome. It's hard enough being a gender-nonconforming person of color, but these mental health struggles put Paris under a lot more scrutiny. While Paris loves

hir child ze's been treated as a "bad mother" by friends, family, and agents of the State who still see hir as female. Paris sees these critiques as inherently sexist and feels that if ze were seen as a man people would not be saying ze is a "bad father" for the same behaviors.

Describing hir path to parenthood, Paris blithely quotes their grandmother's saying, "when you get bored, you get pregnant." Paris was an undergrad at a more prestigious college before transferring to a state school, but in the same mostly-white New England town. Ze commuted in from an outlying area more affordable to live in with a much high concentration of people of color. After being expelled for issues stemming from mental illness (Paris fell into a deep depression and was no longer able to complete hir assignments), Paris took solace in the small Black community available to them and met Robert who ze's been with nearly five years. Paris had no interest in becoming a parent and says matter-of-factly, "I don't even really like kids." Ze kept the pregnancy because the romantic relationship was getting more serious and they knew Robert wanted a child.

Paris has had a hard time connecting with Roberta (named for her father) emotionally and relies on Robert to be demonstrative by holding her, playing with her, and letting her know she is loved and cared for. In describing Robert as a good parent and "Mr. Mom," Paris says, "She'll crawl all over him and he's really good at being touched." Paris feels that ze will be more involved with Roberta when she gets older: when ze can take her to museums, eat sushi, and, in Paris's words, build her "cultural capital." Physicians, social workers, and family members have judged Paris for this

approach to parenting because ze is interpreted as the child's mother even though Paris doesn't feel that way. In Paris's words:

There's apparently a difference in how attached fathers are supposed to be versus how attached they want mothers to be and, since it's reversed in my case, it's very hard to be treated the way I'm treated— that I have to prove I love my kid. I can't love her in my way, I have to love her in a *Leave It to Beaver*, 1950s way, and I can't do that. So, people say things and I'm just like they're not really accepting of me being queer.

Though this is surely complicated by Paris's difficulty with emotional attachment, Paris interprets always being seen as, in the end, Roberta's "mother" with all the weight that word entails, as a denial of hir queer identity. The relationship they and Robert have is not a heteronormative one and neither is their parenting style. As Paris says, "its reversed in my case," meaning the familial gender roles they and Robert have worked out. They feel constantly reprimanded for not being the kind of mother people expect them to be: the self-sacrificing martyr who is the symbol of emotional care in a family. But, again, Paris does not identify as a mother at all, but feels much more affinity with the role of a father. While some see this as a failing, Paris is clear that this is better than the alternative of shifting their focus from their career path to caregiving, which ze is certain would come with negative consequences.

If it's a matter of choosing between my career and my autonomy or being like a Martha Stewart-assed mom, I'm going to choose my career every day and my autonomy every day. My career is more valuable to me because without it I'd be bat-shit crazy or in jail. Probably both.



The strategy Paris has developed to keep from going “bat-shit crazy” — to show love in their own way, to prioritize career over family, and to feel no shame about these choices that more closely mirror traditional fatherhood more than motherhood—has been a huge point of contention between Paris and State representatives in the form of social services. As a working-class part-time student, an African-American, and someone who suffers from mental illness, Paris was already under constant scrutiny and felt like everyone was just waiting for hir to mess up. From the jump, Paris lived under the threat of having hir child taken away. But, when representatives from DSS (the Department of Social Services) came to interview Paris, they diagnosed them with yet another ailment deemed detrimental to their child: gender identity disorder. The implication of their gender identity being a “disorder” at all infuriated Paris.

How can [DSS] tell me that because I’m not dressed as a woman should be dressed, or that I’m dressed more androgynously, that there’s... a pathology behind that? I just, I don’t feel like it’s harmful. I grew up in a harmful parental environment and abuse is harmful, and neglect is harmful, and presenting the way I present [my gender] is not harmful, so I’m kind of mistrusting of the whole system. I feel disgusted because they’re focusing on things that are really superficial, they’re not really focused on the supports that I need to be [a good] parent... They’re looking at me, but they are not looking at the weight of what it is to raise a family in America...when there is barely a social safety net to do such a thing.

Paris is clear that interference from DSS, while apparently meant to assist as much as monitor hir, is not helping Paris become a better parent. The solution, as far as

Paris is concerned, is at the macro level: to build a social safety net to actually give parents like Paris the opportunity to parent well. The focus by DSS on Paris's gender presentation and assumption that it is "distressing" to Roberta - they argue, because Paris does not "look like a mother" - is itself very stressful. That, in addition to their knowledge of Paris's depression and Asperger's, has Paris convinced that the State will take hir child away. This looming threat, in itself, has had a profoundly negative impact on hir parenting and only worsened hir depression.

I honestly stopped being as attached to my kid as I was when I realized how precarious my relationship with her was. Seventy to eighty percent of people with mental difficulties, disabilities, or neurological problems or otherwise, eventually lose their children. So, I am always counting down the days until I lose her.

Paris's intersecting experiences as a low-income, genderqueer, Black parent with mental illness has put hir parenting under a microscope. Hir trans status, that ze is uninterested in being the kind of parent social services wants to see, makes hir depression seem all the more serious to the social service agents of the state. Where Paris is wishing for nuance, social services sees more evidence of depression and mental illness. On top of that, the constant policing from healthcare providers and DSS has led Paris to conclude that hir child will be taken away no matter what ze does, and that's only made hir less invested in parenting. Paris's experience throws into relief how much structurally privileged positions—being white, middle-classed, and gender conforming—allows for more freedom to challenge established parenting norms. A woman who, like Paris, is very invested in her career and finds the daily duties of parenthood overwhelming can afford to outsource her labor to a caretaker. Paris does not have this option.

Christopher too got pregnant young and on accident, though the situation was a bit different. As he notes of the particular night of conception “I was using Ecstasy, which was a common feature of my life at that point.” Nine years later, Chris is a wiry white guy who has a 90s soul patch on his chin. He has shaggy, brown hair and seems to always be smiling. At the time he got pregnant, Chris was identifying as captain of the butch lesbians. While his unintended pregnancy was alarming to his queer friends, they quickly spun a myth around him that they could digest.

...I heard this story about how I was a queer martyr. Like I got pregnant the first time I ever... you know? And that that was what happened. And like, “oh, poor, [Chris]”..I was like, who the hell made up that story? That story is inaccurate.

That was the story they wanted to hear though. Because I was totally unapologetic about it.. Like, “So, I had a couple of...” You know? That’s an authentic part of my history, and you know what? It wasn’t so great, but it happened. Why should I lie about it?

Chris’s friends would rather have thought of him as the queer Virgin Mary than accept his sexuality was a little more fluid than they thought. It was complicated for Chris too. Although he says he was “unapologetic,” even in front of me he couldn’t bring himself to actually say he’d had sex with men while a lesbian, twice saying “you know?” instead.

Getting pregnant through intercourse with a man was rendered understandable through some sort of convoluted Queer Virgin Mary narrative. His friends assumed, wrongly, that it must have been his one and only sexual encounter with a man. Still quite young, Christopher tried to live life as it was before his son was born, and he brought him

everywhere. For the activist queers who were his friends, he was either shunned or exalted for becoming a young, queer, single parent, “Like [people would say] ‘It’s so awesome; I think it’s the coolest thing I have ever heard!’ And I’m like, ‘Riiight, why don’t you try living it and then tell me how cool and radical it is.’” To the young activist community around him, Chris’s accidental, fairly heteronormative pregnancy story was transformed into a heroic queer narrative of struggle, and, therefore, credibility. Unbeknownst to Chris, while he was changing diapers and buying teething rings, he’d become a radical icon.

But, Chris lost his queer parenting credibility among the lesbian community he was part of once he transitioned to male.

I had quite a chunk of lesbian friends who were not cool with it...like, “you are a traitor to the cause”...I was very high profile, everybody knew me and I was a big deal [local lesbian activist]. They didn’t take it well.

While Chris’s pregnancy was chalked up to a one-time mishap, his decision to become not just a man, but a (presumably) straight, white man was traitorous behavior. Was Chris really going to go from fighting the patriarchy to benefitting from it? For Chris, of course, it was not as easy as seamlessly going from butch lesbian to nondescript white guy overnight. Friends he could lose, their disapproval wasn’t going to threaten his livelihood or his custodial rights to his son, but Chris’s parents were a different story.

Chris’s parents were able to weaponize their disapproval of his transitioning to male by not only informing the rest of the family (aunts, uncles, cousins, etc) without his consent, but by suing for custody of his son, Ezra, in family court. This came after Chris told his parents that if they had a problem with his transition, he did not have to see them

or allow them to see Ezra. Chris was looking for an open dialog, but his parents did not want to speak with him yet wanted to be able to see their grandchild.

[My mother] refused and I said, “You know what, until you are ready to talk about it I don’t think we should see each other and I don’t think you should see [Ezra] either because you don’t get him without me.” So, her response was that she filed [for custody] in court.

The fact that Chris had Ezra made him extremely vulnerable. His parents couldn’t sue or hospitalize him for transitioning, but they could use misconceptions about trans people to make him look like an unfit parent. Chris’s parents claimed his transition was actually endangering his child. They suggested that the process of transitioning showed that Chris “didn’t know who [he] was” was making him selfish and unfit to parent. His own parents painted a picture of Chris in court as an unstable and violent person incapable of raising his son on his own. They said Chris’s testosterone therapy, specifically, was creating a harmful environment.

I also got to hear how I was basically going to have ‘roid rage [from testosterone]. They brought this up in court. And they were like, “You’re so hostile” and I was like, “I’m hostile because you’re being an asshole to me! I deserve to be hostile! You turned my whole family against me!”

He said the experience of family court was like “Judge Judy meets Jerry Springer.” At one point Chris’s dad yelled out, “Please, your honor, this child is in danger!” It didn’t help that Chris’s court-appointed attorney did not show up for the court date. It was like a worst-case scenario TV movie. Small consolation was the reaction of other people in the

courtroom awaiting their own hearings; Chris says, “Everybody in that courtroom looked disgusted and horrified at my parents.”

In the end, Chris got to keep primary custody of his son, but the judge granted his parents visitation rights and he was forced to see them once a month with Ezra. The judge, using his discretionary power to assess “the best interests of the child,” decided it was in Ezra’s interest to spend court-mandated time with his transphobic grandparents. Chris used some colorful words to describe the judge who was known locally as “gay friendly” and was quick to point out that this did not make him “trans friendly.” On the way out of court that day, an attorney there for another client handed him his card. Chris managed to eventually regain full custody of Ezra after that lawyer put him in contact with a representative at GLAAD who gave him important legal advice.

The upshot is that these visits, years of them, eventually lead to a truce between Chris and his parents. In the meantime, Chris met another single parent, Jocelyn, and the two got married and are raising their children together. When asked how his parents are with his kids now, Chris admits to being pleased but also having low expectations.

It’s funny because [my parents] are great with [my kids]. As great as they can be, you know. I feel like the trans mantra in life is “you take what you can get.” In the spirit of that, yeah, they’re great! (*Laughs.*)

Through it all, Chris has managed to maintain a sense of humor. He’d had no plan of becoming a parent, and it turned out that having a child made him very vulnerable to the judgment of his transition by both his parents and the legal system. But, in the long term, an unintended consequence of having a kid helped to bring an end to the conflict he was having with his own parents about his transition.

## Conclusion

Gestational fathers are paragon practitioners of what Carla Pfeffer calls “normative resistance” and “inventive pragmatism” (2017). Gestational fatherhood is deeply disruptive to the norms and assumptions about the gender binary and how it relates to reproduction. The result is frequent bewilderment and routine hostility from medical institutions, social services, and families of origin—to say nothing of the stares from strangers attempting to comprehend someone both pregnant and male. But this bewilderment, institutions confronting normlessness about if and how to interact with them also provided an opportunity. Because there are few expectations for gestational fathers, they and their partners got to make up the rules as they went. They all faced challenges and could certainly have done with better finances, better access to medical care, more support from their families of origin, and greater sympathy and understanding from nearly everyone. But all of the gestational fathers—Dani, Tucker, Jack, Chris, and Paris—were able to make up new versions of fatherhood. In this sense, these are utopian experiments in family formation facilitated by a queer identity.

Some came to their utopianism reluctantly, like Beatie, whose very public story began this chapter, who went from simply wanting a child to becoming a living critique of the gender binary. Most of the gestational fathers I talked to had already rejected gender norms, and it was this rejection that led them to imagine becoming gestational fathers in the first place. Becoming a gestational father was claiming more than the gender of their choosing, it was claiming a freedom from gender, to be neither men nor women in this area of their lives. They didn’t always succeed and the certainly ran into

more than their fair share of obstacles. Each encountered people and institutions that asked them to choose a gender. Sometimes, for the sake of inventive pragmatism, in the moment, they did (it wasn't always consistent, of course), but others held strong and asked the institutions to come to them.

### **Known Gay Sperm Donors**

#### **Looking Beyond the Two-parent Family**

Nearly all of the research on LGBTQ families has focused on two-parent households with children. Part of the motivation for this was political: Liberal social scientists have an investment in portraying LGBTQ families as non-threatening to heteronormative family traditions—"just like everyone else" (Stacey and Biblarz 2001). Nevermind that "everyone else" turns out to be a mostly-empty category as the ideal heterosexually-married breadwinner and homemaker couple is rarer than ever. The premise was misguided from the start. The implied comparison, argued from a defensive position, has kept us from exploring what might be extraordinary about LGBTQ families—which cannot help but be different (Hicks 2005). Some have argued that this is a quasi-cultural difference: LGBTQ people bring different experiences to bear on institutions of the family not built with them in mind. Others have argued that LGBTQ people, by experiencing oppression themselves (as though it were unilaterally the same for all non-straight people), have insight into power and inequality, helping them to raise more sensitive children and situating them well to care for transracial and transcultural adoptees, children with disabilities, and children who are gender and sexual minorities themselves. While these predispositions are likely real, I would suggest that a more



fruitful angle of inquiry comes from the structural variance from the two-parent ideal, which, while certainly present among straight couples, is inherent to LGBTQ families. This structural variance is particularly evident in those families where gay men have donated sperm to queer (including lesbian and trans) couples.

Looking at the gay men who donate their sperm to queer couples allows us to consider a) the role of family members who live outside the household, b) the importance (or not) of genetic connection in LGBTQ families, and c) the permeability of queer fatherhood identities. Specifically, this chapter will focus on how these things come together for the donor by exploring the fissure between the pre-birth negotiations of a sperm donor's place in the family versus the lived reality.

Pregnancy through the use of donated sperm is nothing new. There are sperm banks across the country which compensate men for a sample of their sperm and regulations around who can donate, how many times, and how many children can be borne of each donor (Almeling 2011). Sperm banks protect the identities of their clients and pay small fees in order to encourage more men to donate. Studies of anonymous sperm donors suggest these men do not consider themselves to be fathers, but recognize the exchange as strictly commercial. Some banks allow men to release their names to children upon kids' 18<sup>th</sup> birthdays at which point they are free to establish relationships with each other. Some sperm donors are chosen on the basis of their willingness to be known while others are chosen because they would like their identities to remain unknown.

But sperm banks are only one way to acquire sperm for the purpose of conception. Other donations are informally arranged through friends and social networks.

This method is preferred by those who wish for their children and donors to have a relationship early on in life and in order to avoid paying for sperm or interacting with the “sperm industrial complex.” This approach has its own dangers as donors and sperm-seekers have to map out their own relationship agreements, which may or may not hold up under legal scrutiny. To better shore up their desired rights, donors and sperm-seekers sign contracts wherein the donor gives up their claims to custody of the child. This move has been intensified by a few publicized legal cases in which donors sued for rights after only orally relinquishing custody claims. On a less litigious note, donors and parents also have to navigate their relationships to each other as well as the donor’s relationship to children, including the labels the family uses to refer to the donor and communicate his involvement to others. While anonymous donors seldom end up having relationships with the children biologically connected to them, known donors can and often do, but, as I will show, the range of donor involvement in the daily lives of children is enormous.

A donor to an LGBTQ family is often framed as providing a “necessary ingredient” that makes family formation possible. For cisgender men, the donation effort is minimal, but, unlike the case for sperm bank donors, carries an oversized significance. The process of donating sperm turns the product of masturbation into “the gift of life” and the donor into someone who has “fathered” a child. He feels integral to the mechanics of getting pregnant and the family that forms as a result. Like the birth mothers who choose gay men as their child’s adoptive parents and relish the idea they will be the child’s one and only mother, men providing sperm to lesbian couples might embrace the label of father more confidently and readily than if they donated to an unknown heterosexual couple. But, what if that donor is donating sperm to a transman, to

help another man become pregnant and become a dad? Though just as necessary, the donor is not as unique in the life of the child, if he chooses to identify as a father of a child who already has another father. One response is to undermine the transman's claim to fatherhood (and manhood) to take on the label of "true father." Another is to honor the gestational father's claim to fatherhood, denying it for the sperm donor. There is, of course, a third option—to accept that a child might have two biological fathers. It is, however, easier to recognize that a child can have two biological mothers: one that provides an ovum and another that gestates the fetus. Acknowledging that a child might have two biological fathers challenges our notion of the sex/gender system.

### **The Origin of the Known Donor**

Barry is a gay, white, architect in his late 30s who has donated sperm twice, once to his friend from high school, Abby, and once to her partner, Tucker, a trans man. Barry had been close to Abby since high school. Together they drank, did drugs, and hopped trains for fun. They bonded over their shared radical politics and were openly queer in a rural community where sexuality was never talked about, much less celebrated. Barry was a self-described "club kid" in the 90s, partying in Boston and New York scenes and fell out of touch with Abby for a time. Barry was jealous when Abby had initially asked his high school ex, Tom, to donate. Fortunately, according to Barry, Tom's sperm was "broken," so she had to call upon him for a viable donation. (The truth is that Tom did not realize he had to abstain from masturbating for more than 24 hours before donating, and had been giving Abby bad samples for over a year.) Abby tracked her basal temperature, and, when the time was right, Abby had Barry ejaculate into a jar and then

injected the semen into her own body with a syringe. Via this DIY method, Abby was able to become pregnant and give birth to Ember, who was three at the time of the interview.

Two years after Abby's son Ember was born she approached Barry again and asked if he would serve as a sperm donor to Tucker, Abby's trans male partner of only a few months. Barry was more hesitant this time and had certain conditions,

I was like, "[The kids] need to have a stable upbringing and I would like them to be in a house, a home, with a family" and that sort of thing and so, I was like

"These are the conditions that I'm wanting out there...Tucker if you're going to have a child, you're going to be part of a family with Abby for the long haul," you know what I mean?

Barry wanted assurances that Tucker would be there for "the long haul": get married to Abby, live in a stable home, and raise their kids together. Barry's insistence that Abby and Tucker raise his progeny heteronormatively is a bit ironic given the radical politics and outlaw past he shared with Abby that was the basis of their friendship. Though Barry had agreed that Tucker and Abby would be raising the children, and he would not be responsible for them, Barry wanted to know they were being raised "right." Tucker and Abby actually did get married and move in to a house and were raising Ember and Ray (Tucker's biological child) together, though it is unclear if this was in any way because of Barry's requests. Because of the presence of children, and his ability to exercise control by setting conditions on who can use his sperm, Barry attempts to superimpose a heteronormative narrative on Tucker and Abby's romance. He now thinks their relationship will reflect on him. The result is awkward and patronizing. Barry is claiming

a parental right—having a say in how the child is raised—as a condition of relinquishing his rights. The examples that follow hit on different points, but this story perhaps orients us to the contradictions and conflicts a normless relationship like that between a donor and a birth parent can have.

None of the other men I interviewed mentioned placing conditions on the use of their sperm. In fact, the concern seemed to be quite the opposite. Known donor contracts, agreements between sperm donors and the recipients of their donations, are typically drawn up to affirm the rights of the primary parents: the donor agrees to give up legal claims to custody and submits full control over decision-making in regards to the child to the legal guardians. But, donor agreements protect donors as well in terms of their legal and financial responsibilities to their children.

Dominic is a 49-year-old, white non-profit worker, and known donor to two families- one lesbian couple and one single lesbian—producing three children (aged 6 to 12). He describes the legal landscape for those moms this way:

So, for the moms to be able to adopt...I had to give up my legal standing as a parent...which was fine, because that's what we talked about originally in the donor agreements, that there wouldn't be any kind of financial responsibility...especially with Keisha when she was a single mom...if she had gone on any type of public assistance, [the State] would have gone after me [to help support her].

Although Dominic considers himself to be a full parent to the children he brought into the world (and the moms do too), he legally gave up that status so that the partners of the women who gave birth could legally adopt their own children. Dominic frames this

magnanimously- he's giving up his rights- but also mentions how he is protected from having to provide child support (to children he considers his own, mind you) in the event that the mothers of his children fall on hard times, specifically the woman who gave birth as a single mother. But Dominic's kids call him "Dad" and he does things dads do: he attends their softball games and sees them at birthday parties and holidays. Structurally his role is more akin to a divorced father than an equal co-parent at one extreme, or uncle on the other. Recently, Dominic took in one of his children for several months while her sister (of a different donor) was recovering from an automobile accident. He was happy to do it, but it was clear that these were special circumstances.

### **A Rose is a Rose?**

Among known sperm donors and their families, who is a dad, and what his parenting responsibilities are, is not always clear. Terminology isn't much help either given that no label really exists that might encompass these men's roles in their families. After calling himself a "known donor," Barry asked me the term I would use for him. When I turned the question back around, he got into why it was complicated to say:

I don't know, on my inner level, *I consider myself a father*. But...I don't know if *I'm a dad*...I have *fathered* a child. I don't know what the difference is...Because *Tucker's the Papa*, that's what [Abby and Tucker] say. Essentially, what we've decided...I am whatever Ember decides to term me. *Right now I'm Baba*, so whatever...Okay, I'm Baba... There's nothing suggestive, no one ever says anything like "this is your father" or anything like that. They're the parents, this [Baba label] is for them... I mean *I would like to be thought of as "Dad"* you

know, when they're of an age to understand and recognize that... And I don't know what Abby and Tucker think about it, I just don't. (emphasis added)

In these few sentences Barry maps out four discrete fatherhood identities that could each apply to him. First is what he considers himself to be: a father through procreation. To Barry, since he has engaged in the process of fathering, he has earned the title "father," though he feels this label goes largely unrecognized ("no one ever says... "this is your father"). Second, he mentions "Dad" as more of a social role and it's the title he would like to earn in his relationship with his kids by developing relationships with them. To Barry, dads do more than just father. Third, he also wants to honor whatever Ember calls him, currently "Baba," but he is quick to point out that this is a label developed by the parents, to make them more comfortable. Barry wants to be "Dad." Finally, there's the other label Barry seems to have hesitation about—"Papa" ("that's what they say")—the term his daughter uses to address the male parent she lives with. In sum, Barry considers himself a father, aspires to be a dad, is called Baba, and has to share the role with someone called Papa. Barry has some confusion about his label, and, by extension, perhaps, his place in the family. He is dissatisfied with the invented term that might signal his non-traditional role, Baba, and wants to be "Dad," though there is someone else who might lay claim to the title by an alternate iteration—Papa. He ends by saying he doesn't know what Abby and Tucker think about his label/place in the family, but Abby clearly told me his relationship was more akin to an uncle than a father.

Yeah, [Ember] has a different relationship with [Barry] than with other friends.

And I wasn't really sure how I felt about it at first...Everyone would be like,

"Look at her...she's so fixated on him, every time he walks into the room." [I

thought] people are just reading shit into it [because he's the donor], but now...he really plays for her *that super playful uncle role*...at this point she just knows that he's Baba...and *his parents are her grandparents*...[T]he way I've always envisioned explaining [that he is the sperm donor] is just that like [Barry] wanted [Tucker and I] to be able to be parents and he gave us this gift so that you could be here.

In this quote, Abby works to play down Barry's role and expresses irritation that other people would be looking for a stronger connection between her daughter and her donor. She remarks that, in the beginning, she was "not sure how she felt" about a significant connection between Barry and Ember. That Barry was the sperm donor seems significant to other people in her life, presumably because of the biological connection that signals, and Abby sees this as threatening to the family she is trying to build. She does not consider Barry to be a parent to her daughter, but rather someone who gave her and her partner the ability to become parents themselves. However, Abby is not immune to the specter of Barry's biological connection when she acknowledges the relationship Ember has with Barry is stronger than the relationship she has with other people. She seems to cave into the explanation, from outsiders, that they are so close because of their shared biology over other explanations such as his increased presence and personal investment in Ember. Still, Abby stops short of seeing Barry as a father, or dad figure, and makes him analogous to an uncle by explicitly comparing him to her brother. That Barry's parents are considered grandparents also makes sense if he is her "brother"; after all one's uncles' parents are still one's grandparents, even if an uncle is not a dad.



While there is some disagreement about what role Barry plays (father or uncle) in his family, and how much dad-duty Dominic is actually doing for his kids, Kurt is in solid “uncle” territory. Kurt and Jack were co-workers when they decided to produce a kid together. Both identify as gay men, but Jack is also trans and had a long-standing desire to give birth. After trying to become pregnant for about three years to no avail, with a different sperm donor, Jack was looking for a new donor to try with, and was mentioning this to Kurt one day in their shared office. Kurt explains what happened next:

So, Jack had been trying to get pregnant for several years, for about three years at that point, since well before he’d come to [workplace], and he had a particular donor he’d been working with who was about to move away and he basically said, it wasn’t a “Will you be my new donor?” it was a “Hey, keep your ear to the ground and let me know if you hear of anyone who might want to be a sperm donor.”

Kurt took some time to think about it, but pretty quickly offered his own services. Kurt saw the experience as an opportunity to do something he didn’t think he’d ever get to do as a gay man: father a child. Kurt and Jack weren’t especially close before they began trying to get Jack pregnant. Jack was in his mid-thirties and had gone off of testosterone injections just three months prior to trying to conceive, and the “turkey baster method” ended up not being an option for him. While Barry’s and Dominic’s participation in the conception of their children ended at successful ejaculations, Kurt was intimately involved in Jack’s becoming pregnant, learning about terminology and fertility cycles and attending and participating in the *in vitro* process.

We tried a few different times, a few different methods, none of which worked.

Until finally, I guess we'd been at it for about half a year or so...It was January of 2010 when he went for *in vitro* fertilization treatment in Boston, and so, of course, I had to go out there with him [to provide a fresh sperm sample]. And the first try was a success, we had viable embryos, they implanted, and one of them stuck and took and grew.

Though they weren't close before, Jack and Kurt's bond grew through spending time together on the road to pregnancy and through the pregnancy as well. When Jack went into the hospital to give birth, Kurt not only visited him there but was the second face the baby, Ginger, saw. He organized a team of friends to clean Jack's house and stock his refrigerator so he could come home to a clean home with meals already prepared.

While Kurt playfully referred to himself as a "spunkle" (a hybrid of the words "sperm," or "spunk," and "uncle") during the pregnancy, it felt a bit too flippant after the birth. Kurt at first underestimated the connection he would feel to Ginger, and, welling up with tears, told me his first thought upon seeing her was "she has my eyes." Jack and Kurt both realized that Kurt would be a serious part of Ginger's family now that she was born, and settled on the title "Uncle Kurt." Growing up close to his Puerto Rican aunts and uncles, Kurt did not consider "uncle" to be an insult or a suggestion he was distant from Ginger. Here's how Kurt understood it:

We decided "uncle" worked really well, because...[an uncle] was someone who was connected to this child, who was involved in this child's life, but who was not parenting in this child's life. And the nice thing about the term uncle is [that it]...cover[s] a wide range of possible interactions.

For Kurt, the term “uncle” helped maintain boundaries around his participation in Ginger’s life. “Uncle” was also a term open for interpretation I and had a flexibility that other familial roles (mother and father, in particular) may not. “You could be an uncle who you saw maybe once every five years or you could be the uncle that lived down the street and you saw a lot or you could be somewhere in the middle and we knew that I would be somewhere in that middle to a lot range.”

Kurt did more “work” to produce a child than either Barry or Dominic, but he was also happier settling into an uncle roll and his role was understood more clearly from the beginning. Barry was asked to be both Abby and Tucker’s donor, and had to be reassured that they would use his sperm to create a happy nuclear family. Dominic, also asked by people in his life to donate, had to be reassured he would have no financial responsibilities for his offspring. In contrast to these cases of exchange and reassurance, Kurt volunteered his sperm without preconditions, but was more intimately involved in the pregnancy, birth, and early life of Ember, the child his sperm helped create.

Another angle that may have affected Kurt’s comfort, and Barry’s seeming discomfort, with being an uncle rather than a father, is that Kurt had no question that Jack was a man and the fact of Jack’s pregnancy and giving birth didn’t change that. Kurt expanded his personal idea of who could become pregnant to include transmen rather than using pregnancy as a marker of Jack’s “true” femininity. This was not true for Barry who struggled to rectify what he thought he knew about womanhood with the transman who was carrying his child. This hadn’t even occurred to me until I semi-jokingly asked Barry what it was like to get another guy pregnant.

I mean, I thought of Tucker as a male, but then when he was pregnant *I had an issue with that* because there is a womb and it is there for a woman, you know what I mean? And...I was like, well yes, you can psychologically identify as *such a thing* and I respect and honor that fully, but then there is this other reality...I didn't think of it necessarily as getting a man pregnant.

Barry agreed that Tucker was a man before he got pregnant, but it was Tucker's pregnancy itself, and not a change in self-identity, that, to Barry, undermined Tucker's male identity. He seems to be saying that because Tucker either had a uterus, or was using it, that that made him a woman. One cannot "respect and honor" someone's self-identity and simultaneously "have a problem" with how they choose to identify based on biology. In a culture in which genders are defined as binary wherein women are seen as childbearers (even if they are lesbians, don't want children, or can't have them) and men are not, Barry is perhaps understandably confused. Just as Barry and Tucker/Abby do not agree on Barry's place in their children's lives, Abby and Tucker would strongly refute the claim that because Tucker was pregnant, he is a woman and would likely be deeply hurt by the knowledge that Barry thinks this.

But, Barry's response is consistent with an investment in biology and seeing himself, as a biogenetic donor, as a critical participant in the creation of these children with an indelible connection. In Barry's mind, as the provider of sperm, he is the only "true" father of these children, and that defines his place in the family, which could otherwise be seen as very tenuous. His involvement goes beyond just donating sperm, by visiting and playing with them and developing a relationship with the children he helped to create, but if the family packed up and moved away, he would have no legal recourse.

He has to rely on their trust and permission to see Ember and Ray, and this is a relationally precarious position to be in. Barry is deeply invested in his role as the father of these kids, which may motivate his undermining Tucker's own claims to fatherhood. Barry may not think all people who reproductively father children are dads, but he does believe they are the only ones who can stake the claim. Later, I will take to task the idea that people with uteruses cannot "father" children in my deeper discussion of gestational fatherhood.

### **Creating "Our Own" Kids**

The gay sperm donors in my study not only see donating sperm as a way to create children they may not otherwise have created, but see choosing to donate to other queer people as an opportunity for LGBTQ people to create their own families together. Explaining that although they are gay and have a child together, Kurt has never been sexually involved with Jack, Kurt quips:

I made some comment [to Jack] about we've just proven that [by getting pregnant without sex] abstinence is not 100% effective at preventing pregnancy, to which Jack said, "It's an immaculate conception!"

Known sperm donors are not typically who we think of as family members, but LGBTQ families are not typical. They are making families from whole cloth and figuring things out along the way. In hetero-couples, who supplies the egg and who supplies the sperm are fairly straight forward in most cases- this is the "traditional family" enshrined in American law and policy, though straight people also use reproductive technologies, surrogates, and adoption agencies and foster care. These alternatives to reproduction through hetero intercourse each carry the stigma of deligitimacy: when straight couples

don't bring all components- sperm, egg, uterus, insemination, conception- to the table without medical assistance, this is seen as a failure. When straight couples adopt, it is typically (though not always) their second choice to having kids of "their own."

For queer people, creating "our own" families has a different meaning. In practical terms, it is bringing into the mix other queer people to assist with reproduction. Symbolically these partnerships to create children challenge the assumption that LGBT people cannot reproduce, especially with each other. As Dominic put it:

[Becoming a father] was really never in my realm of possibilities growing up as a young gay man in the '80s... The gay men that I knew that had kids were men that were married to women, and then came out later in life. So, there was nothing particularly deliberate in the same way as [having children] through our identities as...gay and lesbian people... [donating sperm to lesbians] was like taking control as gays and lesbians and creating kids and having families.

For Dominic, the thought of having children was once completely out of the question. The 1980s, when Dominic was growing up, was still very much a time of "straight is to family as gay is to no family." The only examples he saw of gay men parenting were in those cases in which formerly hetero-married men came out as gay. These were also cases in which custody was likely challenged, and often denied to gay men by unsympathetic family court judges. Judges saw gay men as inherently psychologically unfit, because homosexuality had been classified as a mental illness until 1973 and, in some ways, has still not shed that stigma. Since gay sex acts were officially criminalized in many states until 2003, gay fathers were also seen as inherently criminal, and therefore as bad influences on their children. Dominic sees the choice to deliberately parent as a

gay person as a different, and empowering, experience by contrast, particularly when gays and lesbians could come together and have children without needing the assistance of straight people. A gay man providing sperm to a lesbian woman using her own eggs and uterus makes gay reproduction possible. Dominic sees this as gays and lesbians “taking control” of the creation of their own families. By extension, we might also include trans and gender-variant people in this calculus and say that any LGBTQ people with viable sperm, eggs, or uterus, can find other LGBTQ people to provide the other “ingredients” of biogenetic reproduction and create life.

Creating “our own” families also offers opportunities to LGBTQ folks to engage in the mysterious process of reproduction and learn more about themselves. This can be especially important for gay men whose bodies, as a result of the HIV/AIDS crisis, have been framed as sites of disease. For instance, before Abby had Barry donate sperm, she was working with Tom to see if he might. Abby tells a brief story about Tom discovering a new source of pride: his sperm count.

He had a lot of internalized homophobia and he just believed that he wasn’t really fertile. So, we found a do-it-[yourself]...like a home sperm count test where he could just like drop some sperm on a little slip and it would be bright blue if there were lots of little spermies that swam across the strip or light blue if there weren’t a lot. We did one of those and he scored “aqua” and he was feeling really good about it and walked around with his chest puffed out for a few days.

Sperm count is a measure of masculine virility that only really makes sense for men wanting to get someone pregnant. This wasn’t a prospect for Tom before Abby asked, but

it meant something to him that translated to masculinity, which helped assuage some of his internalized homophobia.

Creating “our own” families is also about navigating into uncharted relational territory with friends and donors. Kurt and Jack had no analogs to look to for guidance when they decided to have a child: a) borne of two men, b) created without romance or intercourse, and c) in which only one of them acted as the parent. Kurt describes their continued relationship as a process rather than a static connection.

[I]t just became a matter of continually refining what is this relationship going to look like, how are we going to treat it, it’s a very non-traditional, non-normative way to form a family...for better or worse, the three of us are bound as a family for the rest of our lives, from this point out. Yeah, it, you know, we’ve never had sex with each other, but we’ve produced a child and that is an intimate act and we are bound as a family in some way. But it’s not a normal family, in your traditional husband-wife-white picket fence kind of mentality, it’s very very different [laughs].

### **Conclusion**

In these examples we can see that sperm donors both unsettle heteronormativity and allow opportunity for heteronormativity to reassert itself. A man giving up his rights to a child also means he doesn’t need to worry about any financial responsibilities to that child nor any kind of given that he will raise the child in the event of death. This seems like kind of the perfect no-strings-attached set up: a man can be a father without any responsibility at all and not be considered a “dead-beat.” Utopian for some, to be sure.



But the known gay sperm donor brings an inherently different structure to the queer family. The family extends beyond the home, queer people are creating life-long ties to each other, biological fatherhood and social fatherhood are separated within an ongoing relationship, and forces everyone concerned to evaluate what makes a father, and, by extension, a parent. The known gay sperm donor is emblematic of an attempt to undermine heteronormative fatherhood. There's plenty of evidence of heteronormativity sneaking its way back in, most evidently in Barry's case. That said, the structure of these families makes it hard for heteronormativity to sneak in unseen. All of the families wind up reconsidering both the rights (visitation, authority) and obligations (financial, emotional) of fatherhood in ways that are, if not exactly utopian, at very least departures from the Standard North American Family. From family to family, fatherhood can be assigned to a donor, or to a gestational father, both of which, although in different ways, reinscribe conventional fatherhood. Or, the notion of a "unified" fatherhood can be dropped altogether (of which Kurt is the best example. The lesson we might take away is that alternate family structures may unsettle heteronormativity, but does not, in itself, undo it as even trans and queer people occasionally make efforts to reassert it. Others, though, resist that temptation, and in that resistance develop new family forms that stretch the boundaries of the possible.

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