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FRIENDS AND FAMILY – THE REPRODUCTION OF QUEER LIFE

Andreas Bernard's article, *Making Babies: New Reproductive Technologies and the Structure of the Family*¹ touches – in some cases very briefly and in others at some length – on many of the key issues at stake in debates around the politics of (social) reproduction.² He addresses the ways that the emergence of “a liberal, capitalistically organized market economy” played a role in producing the modern form of the (heterosexual nuclear) family and its ideological veneration.³ His article explores the temporal coincidence between “the decisive breakthroughs in the history of reproductive medicine” and “the social upheavals” of the 1960s.⁴ He

¹ Andreas Bernard, “Making Babies: New Reproductive Technologies and the Structure of the Family”, *spheres: Journal for Digital Cultures*, 6, 2020.

² Barbara Laslett and Johanna Brenner provide one influential definition of this term. They write that “feminists use social reproduction to refer to the activities and attitudes, behaviors and emotions, responsibilities and relationships directly involved in the maintenance of life on a daily basis, and intergenerationally. Among other things, social reproduction includes how food, clothing, and shelter are made available for immediate consumption, the ways in which the care and socialization of children are provided, the care of the infirm and elderly, and the organization of sexuality.” It entails “various kinds of work – mental, manual, and emotional – aimed at providing the historically and socially, as well as biologically, defined care”. Barbara Laslett and Johanna Brenner, “Gender and Social Reproduction: Historical Perspectives”, *Annual Review of Sociology*, 15, 1989, pp. 381-404, here: pp. 382-383.

³ The relationship between the family and the capitalist mode of production has been addressed by socialist feminists from Alexandra Kollontai's 1921 “Theses on Communist Morality in the Sphere of Marital Relations”, over Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James' seminal contribution to the domestic labour debates of the 1970s and 80s (which became a founding document of the Wages for Housework Campaign), through to much more recent work, like that of Cinzia Arruzza. Alexandra Kollontai, “Theses on Communist Morality in the Sphere of Marital Relations”, in *Selected Writings*, New York, NY, W. W. Norton and Company, 1977 [1921], p. 225; Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, “Women and the Subversion of Community”, in *The Power of Women and the Subversion of Community* (Third Edition), Bristol, Falling Wall Press, 1975 [1971] pp. 30-31; Cinzia Arruzza, *Dangerous Liaisons: The Marriages and Divorces of Marxism and Feminism*, Pontypool, Wales, Merlin Press, 2013, pp. 90-97.

⁴ Paul B. Preciado has argued: “In the second half of the twentieth century” – amidst these social upheavals, and in the context of U.S. Cold War investment in sex and

notes the exclusion of certain individuals and relationship forms from access to reproductive rights and technologies, ensuring that heterosexual, dyadic, stable relationships (for some) continue to “enjoy the special protection of the state”.⁵ And, with reference to the diary published by Elizabeth Kane, described as “[t]he first [legal] commercially-brokered surrogate mother”, he gestures towards the forms of exploitation and the hierarchies of power that are often at stake.⁶

sexuality focused research, the emergence of post-Fordist forms of production, and what Michel Foucault described as ‘biopolitical’ systems of social control – “the discovery (or invention, depending on the degree of biocultural constructivism we are comfortable with) of hormones, genes, and cellular reproductive processes launched an epistemic paradigm shift, and with it a new model for politico-sexual management that I have called pharmaco-pornographic”. Paul B. Preciado, “Politically Assisted Procreation and State Heterosexualism”, *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 115 (2), 2016, pp. 405–410, here: pp. 408-409; Paul B. Preciado, “The Pharmacopornographic Era”, in *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era*, translated by Bruce Benderson, New York, The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2013, e.g. p. 25.

- ⁵ Preciado argues that: “For homosexuals, some transsexuals (those in relationships in which both partners produce only spermatozoa or only ova), some heterosexuals (those whose reproductive cells cannot effect genetic recombination without assistance), asexuals, and some functionally diverse people, recombining genetic material is not possible through a genital assemblage. That is, it is not possible through biopenis-biovagina penetration with ejaculation. [...] Along with all those bodies that medicolegal discourse considers ‘disabled’, homosexuals and transsexuals have been ‘politically’ sterilized: we have been forced to reproduce with heterosexual techniques that lie outside our own sexual assemblages. The current battle to extend medically assisted procreation to nonheterosexual bodies is a political and economic war for the depathologization of our bodies, for control over our own reproductive materials: our uteruses, our ova, our sperm, and, ultimately, our DNA strands.” Angela Davis has appealed for “a broad campaign to defend the reproductive rights of all women – and especially those women whose economic circumstances often compel them to relinquish the right to reproduction itself.” Describing the 1977 Hyde Amendment’s passage through the U.S. Congress, withdrawing the availability of federal funds for abortion, and “causing many state legislatures to follow suit”, she wrote: “Black, Puerto Rican, Chicana and Native American Indian women, together with their impoverished white sisters, were thus effectively divested of the right to legal abortions. Since surgical sterilizations, funded by the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, remained free on demand, more and more poor women have been forced to opt for permanent infertility.” Preciado, “Politically Assisted Procreation and State Heterosexualism”, p. 407. Angela Davis, “Racism, Birth Control and Reproductive Rights”, in *Women, Race & Class*, New York, Vintage Books, 1983 [1981], p. 206.
- ⁶ Robert Cole’s *New York Times* review of Elizabeth Kane’s *Birth Mother: The Story of America’s First Legal Surrogate Mother* quotes Kane as insisting that “wealthy men are taking advantage of women from lower-middle-income families”. Silvia Federici has argued that “[i]t is important to affirm the labour character of these processes, also to dispel the myth that surrogacy is a ‘gift’ and an act of generosity towards the couple that cannot have children [...] [T]he new reproductive technologies are examples of the ‘financialisation of reproduction’. Much wealth is accumulated by pharmaceutical companies, medical outfits, agencies arranging surrogacy contracts etc. out of the process of procreation, which has now become a goldmine”. Federici draws here on both Melinda Cooper (see, for example, her work with and Catherine Waldby) and Kalinda Vora. Robert Cole, “You Fell in Love With the Baby”, *New York Times*, June 22, 1988. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/1988/06/26/books/so-you-fell-in-love-with-your-baby.html> [accessed March 2, 2019.]. Jane Elliott and Seb Franklin, “‘The Synthesis is in the Machine’: An Interview with Silvia Federici”, *Australian Feminist*

Because these issues have been addressed in detail by others, I will largely leave them to one side here. Instead, I want to take up one aspect of Bernard's argument, namely, that the opening of the family to those who have previously been excluded – primarily through the possibilities enabled by new reproductive technologies, but also through the legalization of same-sex marriage – does not represent a threat to the family, as some conservatives have imaged. Rather, it is said to be breathing new life into a dying institution and confirming its logic.

He writes:

“Today, anyone looking for a television series with conventional family storylines about the small, staid joys of weddings or Valentine’s Days, are likely to come across the sitcoms *Modern Family* and *The New Normal*. At the center of these shows are same-sex couples with an adopted child, or one delivered by a surrogate mother, but the image of the family that they portray connects – as their titles suggest – the novelty of their family genesis with an almost celebrated normality.”⁷

He focusses on the trope of the shared evening family meal, arguing that its absence in recent decades – having been replaced by fast-food eaten on the sofa, in front of the TV – has served to illustrate the crisis of ‘the family’ (at least as this existed in the bourgeois cultural imaginary of the 19th and early 20th centuries).⁸ Bernard points out, however, that shows such as *Modern Family*, and films like *The Kids Are All Right*, which are centred on gay and lesbian parents and families, frequently show shared meals prepared with great care and ascribed “ritualized meanings”.⁹ “These supposedly ‘exotic’ families shore-up the symbols of bourgeois culture like few ‘traditional’ families are able to today.”¹⁰

I find this argument persuasive and other examples immediately spring to mind. The Netflix series *Grace & Frankie* (2015-present) begins

Studies, 33 (96), 2018, pp. 172-177, here: p. 173. Melinda Cooper and Catherine Waldby, *Clinical Labor: Tissue Donors and Research Subjects in the Global Bioeconomy*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2014. Kalindi Vora, *Life Support: Biocapital and the New History of Outsourced Labor*, Minneapolis, MN, University of Minnesota Press, 2015.

⁷ Bernard, “Making Babies”, 2020.

⁸ Lisa Lowe argues that while “[t]he feminized space of domestic intimacy and the masculine world of work and battle became a nineteenth-century ideal for European, British, and northeastern American societies”, feminist scholars have often shown this to be “an abstraction for ordering relations in civil society that is contradicted by the social realities of women’s lives.” And while “the practice of private and public spheres was unevenly imposed” in “colonial or slavery societies”, what she calls “[b]ourgeois intimacy” is said to have functioned as “a regulating ideal through which the colonial powers administered the enslaved and colonized and sought to indoctrinate the newly freed into forms of Christian marriage and family.” Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2015, pp. 29-30.

⁹ Bernard, “Making Babies”, 2020.

¹⁰ Ibid.

with the stars' husbands, Robert and Saul, both wealthy lawyers in their 70s, announcing that they have been having an affair for 20 years and will be leaving them to get married. "Because we can do that now", Robert says. (Frankie, the comically eccentric liberal to Grace's straight woman, replies: "I know, I hosted that fundraiser.") Grace and Robert first discuss all this with their adult children in their dining room over brunch. Frankie and Saul break the news to their two sons, one adopted, over dips.

Families' acceptance of their children's same-sex relationships, or of their gay or lesbian identities, is often demonstrated through the same device. Here too shared meals illustrate close, loving, and – importantly – quite 'normal' family bonds. In *Call Me by Your Name* (2017), Elio is a professor's son whose affair with Oliver, his father's graduate student research assistant, has not gone entirely unnoticed. When he is not alone enjoying a peach, Elio is frequently shown sharing meals with Oliver and his entirely supportive parents (the elaborate meals are carefully prepared, albeit by the house staff). In Amazon's *Transparent* (2014-2019), shared meals among parents and (adult) children again serve as a site loaded with meaning. It is at the dinner table that Maura Pfefferman first makes her, eventually aborted, attempt to come out as a trans woman. This is a place where familial bonds of trust are supposed to provide space for honest, even if difficult, discussion in an atmosphere that promises mutual support. In this scene, the implication appears to be that this is a promise that can disappoint, *just as it can in any family*.

I certainly do not read Andreas Bernard as arguing that *all* recent filmic and televisual representations of gay and lesbian parenting, or of queer families, "shore-up the symbols of bourgeois culture".¹¹ Nor do I believe he is suggesting that LGBT characters are *always* embedded within families portrayed as 'normal'. Indeed, when this does take place, as in this example from *Transparent*, it is not always all that is going on. The series is replete with members of the Pfefferman family experimenting with ways of organising their relationships – and developing a sense of intimacy, trust, and love – with others, breaking with the primacy of the heterosexual (and cisgender) nuclear family. Similarly, in *Grace & Frankie* the lead women's friendship appears much more rewarding and supportive than their relationships with their families (or their ex-husbands). Because Bernard's focus is indeed on what could be called '*homonormative*' representations of home and family, however, it is worth addressing here some of the ways that films and television series have also portrayed the reproduction of queer life in some very different ways. These representations circulate widely today, not least due to the

¹¹ Ibid.

proliferation of digital streaming platforms like Netflix and Amazon Prime, online media stores such as iTunes, video-sharing websites including YouTube and Vimeo, as well as the ability to (legally or illegally) download or stream media, or to use virtual private networks (VPNs) to access shows broadcast in other territories.

The Queer Studies scholar Lisa Duggan famously defined “*the new homonormativity*” as: “a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions” like marriage and the family “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.”¹² While this is far from a universal rule, the distance from homonormative representations of LGBT life is often greater when the challenges that confront queer characters are perhaps *shaped* by their queerness but not necessarily *reducible* to it. In other words, when characters are shown as having lives shaped by economic hardship, by the need to find or maintain housing or employment, by experiences of racism, or by a citizenship status that migration regimes have rendered precarious.

My argument here will be that – important homonormative currents like those rightly identified by Bernard notwithstanding – representations of the everyday lives of queer people have, over the last three decades, often shown that the reproduction of queer life requires three things. First, a capacity to *escape* from the violence, and the suffocating policing of norms, that the family often implies. Second, access to or the production of spaces *other* than the home, particularly as this exists in the bourgeois cultural imaginary. And third, the construction of *alternative* modes of kinship.

1. ESCAPE FROM THE FAMILY

The ABC show *My So-Called Life*, broadcast from 1994-1995, is often described as the first to feature an openly gay teenager on an American TV network.¹³ Enrique Vasquez, known as “Rickie”, describes his fear of “my Dad, who’s technically my uncle, but he raised me”. Towards the end of the first series, he is beaten by the homophobic uncle he fears, leaving home first to live with his friend Angela Chase (whose voice

¹² Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy*, Boston, MA, Beacon Press, 2003, p. 50.

¹³ Megan Garber, “What I Learned from Re-Watching *My So-Called Life* as an Adult”, *The Atlantic*, July 20, 2016. Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/07/what-i-learned-from-rewatching-my-so-called-life-as-an-adult/492005/> [accessed March 1, 2019].

narrates the show) and her parents, before squatting in a warehouse with others and, finally, being put up by a teacher (who is also gay). The gay children of biological parents often appear to fare no better. While the 15-year-old Nathan Maloney receives the love and support of his mother in the original series of *Queer as Folk*, produced by Britain's Channel 4 in the late-1990s, the same can certainly not be said for his relationship with his father. In *Moonlight* (2016), the young Chiron (or "Little") says he hates his mother, a drug-user who mocks him and says she knows "why the other boys kick his ass all the time." Several crucial scenes show Little at the dining table with Juan, a drug dealer who found him hiding from his tormenters in a "dope hole", and Juan's girlfriend Teresa. The care that they show for Little, and the affection between the three, serves as a contrast with his own family home.

In exceptional cases, where families do prove themselves relatively supportive of their queer children, these young people are often still subject to violence or ridicule through that other key institution of social reproduction: the school.¹⁴ There is the bullying of Elin Olsson and Agnes Ahlberg in the 1998 film *Fucking Åmål* (or *Show Me Love*), named after the claustrophobic Swedish small town the central characters contemplate their escape from. And there is the treatment of Eric Effiong in season one of Netflix's *Sex Education* (2019), particularly by Adam Groff, a fellow student and the headmaster's son, who (in a disappointing cliché) turns out to secretly desire Eric.

Numerous recent films, from *Stonewall* (in 2015) to *Saturday Church*, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, *Boy Erased* and *Rafiki* (all from 2018), as well as the 2017 documentary *Kiki*, show the particular precariousness that young queer people are exposed to. Each reflect the reality that, for many, receiving care from their families (or at least, from some family members) and the security of a home is far from guaranteed. In the United States in 2012, LGBT people made up 40 per cent of homeless young people. 68 per cent of LGBT homeless youth service users were found to have been rejected by their families and 54 per cent had experienced family abuse.¹⁵ In the United Kingdom, LGBT young people

¹⁴ Louis Althusser sought to show that the school, along with the family, functioned as the "dominant" means of reproducing the relations of production (as what he famously calls an 'Ideological State Apparatus'). Dalla Costa and James have been among those feminist theorists of social reproduction who have addressed the role played by the school and its relationship to the family. Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes Towards an Investigation", in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, translated by Ben Brewster, New York, Monthly Review Press, 2001 [1970], p. 106. Dalla Costa and James, "Women and the Subversion of Community", pp. 25-27.

¹⁵ Laura E. Durso and Gary J. Gates, *Serving Our Youth: Findings from a National Survey of Service Providers Working with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Youth Who are Homeless or At Risk of Becoming Homeless*, Los Angeles, The Williams Institute with True Colors Fund and the Palette Fund, 2012, pp. 3-4. Available at: <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu>

are also disproportionately represented among the young homeless (making up 24 per cent of the population), with 69 per cent of LGBT homeless youths having experienced rejection, abuse or violence by their families.¹⁶ In a 2017 study commissioned by the Stonewall organisation, the Centre for Family Research at the University of Cambridge found that 45 per cent of LGBT pupils (including 64 per cent of trans pupils) were “bullied for being LGBT at school”.¹⁷ 60 per cent said that they did not “have an adult at home that they can talk to about being LGBT”.¹⁸ While 40 per cent said that they “have been the target of homophobic, biphobic or transphobic abuse online”, 96 per cent “say the Internet has helped them understand more about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity”.¹⁹

2. OTHER HOMES

The everyday lives of queer characters are often shown as shaped, in contemporary films and television series, by a struggle to find or create a home. At times, this is a place that fulfils immediately material needs: somewhere to eat, wash, rest, and store one’s belongings. At others, it is shown as somewhere to fulfil perhaps less material but no less important needs: a place to *feel* at home; relaxed, wanted, supported, safe, able to be oneself, or to become who one wants to be.

In *Queer as Folk*, Nathan moves in with Hazel Tyler (the mother of a friend of the much older man he is infatuated with) and her gay lodger, Bernard Thomas. Both Hazel and Bernard are regulars in Manchester’s gay village, centred on Canal Street, which for many serves as a home in this second sense. In his book *Fabulous: The Rise of the Beautiful Eccentric*, Madison Moore describes the ways that the door policies of queer clubs can “rely on and even help circulate structures of racism and classism in contemporary society” and, just like these clubs, gay bars can certainly serve as sites of racialised, class-based, gendered and other forms of exclusion.²⁰ At a time when so many queer establishments are under

[la.edu/wp-content/uploads/Durso-Gates-LGBT-Homeless-Youth-Survey-July-2012.pdf](https://www.la.edu/wp-content/uploads/Durso-Gates-LGBT-Homeless-Youth-Survey-July-2012.pdf) [accessed March 4, 2019]

¹⁶ The Albert Kennedy Trust, *LGBT Youth Homelessness: A UK National Scoping of Causes, Prevalence, Response, and Outcome*, London, The Albert Kennedy Trust, 2015, p. 2. Available at: <https://www.akt.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=c0f29272-512a-45e8-9f9b-0b76e477baf1> [accessed March 4, 2019].

¹⁷ Josh Bradlow et al., *School Report: The Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bi and Trans Young People in Britain’s Schools in 2017*, London, Stonewall, 2017, p. 6. Available at: https://www.stonewall.org.uk/sites/default/files/the_school_report_2017.pdf [accessed March 5, 2019].

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 7.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Madison Moore, *Fabulous: The Rise of the Beautiful Eccentric*, New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, p. 126.

threat, however – primarily by gentrification, but also at times by much worse – it is nevertheless worth remembering what function such spaces can sometimes fulfil.²¹ In 2016, only hours after a gunman in Orlando, Florida had entered the (primarily Latinx) queer nightclub Pulse, murdering 49 people, Richard Kim wrote:

“[G]ay bars are more than just licensed establishments where homosexuals pay to drink. Gay bars are therapy for people who can’t afford therapy; temples for people who lost their religion, or whose religion lost them; vacations for people who can’t go on vacation; homes for folk without families; sanctuaries against aggression. They take sound and fabric and flesh from the ordinary world, and under cover of darkness and the influence of alcohol or drugs, transform it all into something that scrapes up against utopia.”²²

This is precisely the function of the bars and clubs of the Manchester scene for Nathan and many of the other characters in *Queer as Folk*, even as the older gay character, Bernard Thomas, shows frustration and disappointment with it (something that becomes increasingly understandable over the course of the series). Several queer scholars, and a good deal of commentary, has recently suggested that digital cultures – and dating and ‘hook-up’ apps such as Grindr, Scruff and Tinder – are among the threats posed to gay bars and queer nightlife today.²³ In 2017, the *Financial Times* reported that “70 per cent of gay relationships” now begin online.²⁴ I am sceptical that there is sufficient evidence to support a straight-forward causal link between the rise of one and the decline of the other. At the very least, however, digital cultures are certainly producing new spaces of queer sociality, including ways for people to meet one another who do not have access to the infrastructures that have

²¹ Take the example of London. Drawing on earlier research showing that “spaces catering to women and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) LGBTQ+ people have been disproportionately vulnerable to closure”, a 2017 study found London had lost 58 per cent of its LGBTQ+ venues since 2006. Various issues related to gentrification were found to be (likely) contributing factors: higher rents, old leases not being renewed, the lack of space, displacement by large infrastructure projects that often form part of redevelopments, and so on. Ben Campkin and Laura Marshall, *LGBTQ+ Cultural Infrastructure in London: Night Venues, 2006 – Present*, London, University College London (UCL) Urban Laboratory, 2017, pp. 5-6. Available at: https://www.ucl.ac.uk/urbanlab/docs/LGBTQ_cultural_infrastructure_in_London_nightlife_venues_2006_to_the_present.pdf [accessed March 5, 2019].

²² Richard Kim, “Please Don’t Stop the Music”, *The Nation*, June 12, 2016. Available at: <https://www.thenation.com/article/please-dont-stop-the-music/> [accessed March 3, 2019].

²³ David M. Halperin for instance argues that “[t]he Internet has completed the destruction of non-virtual gay commercial infrastructure.” David M. Halperin, *How To Be Gay*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2012, p. 439.

²⁴ Hugo Greenhalgh, “Grindr and Tinder: the disruptive influence of apps on gay bars”, *Financial Times*, December 12, 2017. Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/be9779b6-bfcb-11e7-823b-ed31693349d3> [accessed March 13, 2019].

historically defined urban LGBT life.

The attempt to create a home, or to create places in which one can feel at home, can occur in ‘private’ (or domestic) as well as ‘public’ spaces; and in ways that can blur the distinction between the two. In *Moonlight*, Chiron relies on his time at Juan and Teresa’s home to help him try and find the language to discover who he might be. “What’s a faggot?”, he asks. After he is told that it is “a word used to make gay people feel bad”, he nervously inquires, “Am I a faggot?”, “How do I know?”, before being reassured that if he is gay, he will know, but that he does not have to know yet. In the Kenyan film *Rafiki*, a camper van that has been abandoned on some nearby land serves as the place – the alternative to home – where two young women, Kena and Ziki, are able to be together, away from their families.

FX’s (2018-present) series *Pose* focusses on the queer of colour ballroom scene in New York City. In the first series, set in the mid 1980s, Blanca Rodriguez leaves the House of Abundance to become the “mother” of her own house, the House of Evangelista. Madison Moore describes the City’s drag ball history as stretching back to the late 19th century, “where female and male impersonators staged lavish drag contests” in Harlem and Greenwich Village, with parts of the former becoming transformed “into a self-sufficient gay world” where “black gay men could gather socially”; men that he points out “were frequently unwelcome in majority-white nightspots”.²⁵ The balls were characterised by “the inventive, creative costumes that turned the parties into a unique space in which gender and race were launched into suspension and critique”, Moore explains.²⁶ Voguing emerged out of the ball scene as a dance form, in the decade before the first series of *Pose* is set, and as what has been described as “a working class, primarily LGBTQ black and Latino aesthetic community”.²⁷ Drag balls have long “been the space”, Moore argues, “where queer people of color have removed themselves from the gendered and racist politics of everyday life and created their own unique social worlds, allowing them to live out alternative versions of sexuality and gender performance.”²⁸

Reviews of *Pose* often refer to the 1990 documentary film *Paris Is Burning* that depicted this scene. Chandan C. Reddy argues that the lexicon and language of the documentary’s subjects is “‘mopped’ from the annals of domestic life”, although “domesticity is not the center of the

²⁵ Moore, *Fabulous*, p. 188.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Here, Moore draws on Jonathan David Jackson’s account of voguing. Moore, *Fabulous*, p. 188; Jonathan David Jackson, “The Social World of Voguing”, *Journal for the Anthropological Study of Human Movement*, 12, 2002, pp. 26-42, here: p. 26.

²⁸ Moore, *Fabulous*, pp. 188-189.

documentary's dramatic structure."²⁹ "*Mopping*", Freddie Pendavis explains in the film, "is stealing." (Pendavis appears as himself in *Pose*, as a member of the House of Pendavis.) Pepper LaBeija, the legendary mother of the House of LaBeija, explains that many young participants in the balls "don't have two of nothing, some of them don't even eat. They come to balls starving" and – as in *Pose* – many are homeless.³⁰ Reddy explains that it is a mistake, however, to see the houses portrayed in *Paris Is Burning* as "possibly more accommodating homes, fulfilling the ideal promises of a universally incorporative loving domesticity."³¹ They sometimes function more "as a network of support and not a physical dwelling."³² (In *Pose*, Angel temporarily moves out of the building she shares with Blanca and the other members of the House of Evangelista, but she does not leave the House.) Moreover, Reddy points out, the existence of the houses featured in the documentary is "in part, due to conditions found in the home, generating cultural formations whose function it is to recognize subjects who are made unintelligible or abject within their own homes and the larger social formation."³³

3. ALTERNATIVE KINSHIPS

Didier Eribon argues in *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self* that while queer people can often feel a sense of liberation by breaking with their family, or by establishing distance from them, "this separation becomes harder and harder for many to endure."³⁴ He speculates that there is likely "a specifically homosexual 'melancholy'" in the Freudian "psychoanalytic sense of a never-ending process of mourning, one impossible to finish".³⁵ This is said to be "linked to the loss of family ties (with parents, brothers, the family circle), but also to the sometimes unavowed dream of a family life, a dream certain people cannot bring themselves to give up,

²⁹ Chandan C. Reddy, "Home, Houses, Nonidentity: *Paris Is Burning*", in Rosemary Marangoly George (ed.), *Burning Down the House: Recycling Domesticity*, Boulder, CO, Westview Press, 1998, pp. 355-379, here: p. 370 (emphasis added).

³⁰ The 2017 documentary film *Kiki* depicts the New York kiki scene (described as "a subset" of the ballroom scene) today, showing it as similarly composed of houses with mothers (and fathers). Houses are described as being like teams, with the house "mothers" and "fathers" performing the function of captains, albeit often for young people who have been thrown out of their homes. One protagonist explains, "When you come to the scene, you create a family. You have gay brothers, gay sisters, you can pick your gay parents, or your gay parents pick you." It is described as "a safe haven, a place that allows [...] youth that haven't been [...] fortunate or given the opportunity to have the family or the friends or to have that support – a network – in place to come to find that."

³¹ Reddy, "Home, Houses, Nonidentity", p. 370.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 371.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Didier Eribon, *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self*, translated by Michael Lucey, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2004, p. 36.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

endeavouring as much as possible to create such a life for themselves over time, living as long-term couples, raising children”.³⁶

He rightly rejects the opposition that is sometimes posited between queers who affiliate themselves with “a way of life outside of any institutional and juridical recognition” and those who choose to live as a couple, aspire “to have this union legally recorded”, and perhaps to have children too.³⁷ Both represent desires for “‘solutions’ invented to escape the [suffering]” that can derive from having been obliged to reject “heterosexual ways of life” *because “they reject you”*.³⁸

Some gays and lesbians need or desire access to the institution of marriage not only because of the promise of recognition that it holds out, which can itself alleviate what Eribon, drawing on Pierre Bourdieu, calls the “positional suffering” that sometimes derives from a subordinated or marginal social position.³⁹ It is also often desired because of the crucial rights it grants in many jurisdictions: from hospital and prison visitation rights, over the capacity to share health care coverage and the custody of a child, through to residency rights and a path to citizenship. Supporting those who articulate this need or desire clearly does not rule out a queer critique of the ways that marriage ties access to forms of recognition (e.g. recognition at having become a responsible adult capable of properly participating in the reproduction of society), as well as access to these crucial rights, to a particular social, political and legal form (i.e. the *family*, at the centre of which is a dyadic, stable, long-term relationship).⁴⁰

Paul B. Preciado argues that extending access to medically assisted procreation to gay, lesbian, trans and other people can contribute to the depathologisation of queer bodies, allowing queer people greater “control over our own reproductive materials”.⁴¹ The demand for queer access to these technologies, as with the demand for marriage rights, need not rule out a queer critique of what Michael Warner famously called “reprosexuality – the interweaving of heterosexuality, biological reproduction, cultural reproduction, and personal identity.”⁴² Reprosexuality “involves more than reproducing”, he explains, “more even than compulsory heterosexuality; it involves a relation to self that

³⁶ Ibid., pp. 36-37.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 38.

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 37-38 (emphasis added).

³⁹ Ibid., p. 38.

⁴⁰ I have discussed elsewhere the dangers and difficulties entailed in gay and lesbian demands for ‘marriage equality’ and the need to demand rights that are shareable in ways that create space for forms of queer life that include those that are illegible to the institution of marriage. Ben Trott, “Same-Sex Marriage and the Queer Politics of Dissensus”, *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 115 (2), 2016, pp. 411-423.

⁴¹ Preciado, “Politically Assisted Procreation and State Heterosexuality”, p. 407.

⁴² Michael Warner, “Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet”, *Social Text*, 29, 1991, pp. 3-17, here: p. 9.

finds its proper temporality and fulfilment in generational transmission.”⁴³

To address the reproduction of queer life means approaching the question of social reproduction from the perspective of those who live beyond, or who have been rejected by, heterosexual ways of life and reprosexuality, then. And social reproductive strategies to escape the melancholia that can derive from a queer ‘positional suffering’ can sometimes include attempts to access the institutions, rights and forms of recognition that have long been defined through their constitutive exclusion. Yet the constitutive exclusions that create the (subordinate, marginal) position that queer people inhabit does not produce suffering alone. As Michel Foucault argued, homosexuality – and much the same no doubt applies to other queer sexualities – is perhaps better understood not as *a form of desire* but as *something that is desirable*. Rather than trying to understand its “truth”, he invited us to ask, “What relations, through homosexuality, can be established, invented, multiplied, and modulated?”⁴⁴ And he suggested that “[t]he development toward which the problem of homosexuality tends is the one of friendship.”⁴⁵ “[N]ew alliances” and “unforeseen lines of force” can emerge through the forms of “affection, tenderness, friendship, fidelity, camaraderie, and companionship” that are produced among those who have been excluded.⁴⁶

The problem with many homonormative representations of queer life, then, is less to do with their efficacy in upholding and sustaining dominant institutions like marriage and the family, which I suspect may be quite limited. Jack Halberstam describes *The Kids Are All Right* as “a soul-crushing depiction of long-term relationships” which “unwittingly perhaps, made the argument that equal opportunity means equal chance to fuck your kids up and extend the tyranny of the nuclear family.”⁴⁷ On the *Gays with Kids* blog – which calls itself “the world’s largest digital media brand devoted exclusively to gay, bi and trans dads and dads-to-be” – one article on *Modern Family* asks, “Are Mitch & Cam TV’s Most Boring Gay Couple?”⁴⁸ Many critics have noted the couple’s de-

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Michel Foucault, “Friendship As A Way of Life” (interview with R. de Ceccaty, J. Danet, and J. Le Bitoux), *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth – The Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, Volume I, edited by Paul Rabinow, translated by Robert Hurley and others, New York, NY, The New Press, 1997, pp. 135-140, here: p. 135.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 136.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Jack Halberstam, *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal*, Boston, MA, Beacon Press, 2012, p. 54.

⁴⁸ David Dodge, “Are Mitch & Cam TV’s Most Boring Gay Couple”, *Gays With Kids*, May 6, 2017. Available at: <https://www.gayswithkids.com/mitch-cam-old-news-2465989953.html> [accessed March 7, 2019].

sexualisation, rarely showing one another the kinds of affection (or evidence of an erotic life) that is demonstrated among others on the show.⁴⁹ And particularly in the first season, we rarely see, or hear about, their queer friends; nor do they appear to have much of a queer social life (however broadly that might be defined). This is the more significant problem, here, with homonormative representations: they generally fail – as these examples do – to engage with either the politics of friendship that is often at stake in queer life, or with the subcultural spaces where these are frequently formed.

Part of Eribon's argument is that many gays and lesbians embark on a journey, not only by moving to urban areas, but also along a path from "solitude to socialization by means of meeting places".⁵⁰ Crucially, gay (we could say queer) life is said to entail forming "concentric circles of friendships" and a continued effort to renew them.⁵¹ The "basis for a specific world" becomes formed among friends, then, through a "shared participation in a stigmatized sexuality" and the "marginalization and exclusion" this implies.⁵² This phenomenon is central to many of the representations of queer life that have been discussed here, and numerous others too – *The L Word* (Showtime, 2004-2009) and HBO's *Looking* (2014-2015) are obvious examples. These networks of friendship are sometimes able to function as alternative kinship structures. As Eribon points out, they are not only crucial for young people, newly arrived in a city, but "[g]ay culture" also facilitates "the creation of lasting bonds of friendship."⁵³

The fields of Sociology and Cultural Studies, Halberstam rightly observes, have tended to approach the study of subcultures through a framework that presumes heterosexuality, with "an oedipalized structure within which rebel youth reject the world of their parents, and instead create a nether-world within which to reshape and reform the legacies of an older generation."⁵⁴ Part of the problem with this is shown to be that queer subcultures, unlike many others, "tend to form in relation to *place*" – gay bars, for instance – "as much as in relation to a genre of cultural expression".⁵⁵ "[Q]ueer urbanites", more frequently "lacking the pacing and schedules that inhere to family life and reproduction", are also often

⁴⁹ Alyssa Rosenberg, "'Modern Family' and Gay Marriage: It's Complicated", *The Atlantic*, October 13, 2012. Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2010/10/modern-family-and-gay-marriage-its-complicated/64397/> [accessed March 6, 2019].

⁵⁰ Eribon, *Insult*, p. 26.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 36.

⁵⁴ Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time & Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, New York, NY, New York University Press, 2005, pp. 160-161.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 161 (emphasis added).

able to take part in queer subcultures much later into life.⁵⁶ “[I]his may take the form of intense weekend clubbing, playing in small music bands, going to drag balls, participating in slam poetry events, or seeing performances of one kind or another in cramped and poorly ventilated spaces.”⁵⁷

Queer people, then, often need to *escape* (or establish distance) from the families that they are born into. And whatever household structures or familial forms they might go on to inhabit, it is *outside* the domestic space of the home that chosen queer friendships, *alternative* kinships, are able to be established, and frequently in places like these. Such friendship networks, and the spaces that allow them to be reproduced, are what can make queer life not only more liveable, but something that is desirable.

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⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 174.

⁵⁷ Ibid.