Is Queer Parenting Possible?

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"Our family is weird, Mom ... and I wouldn't have it any other way."

My American daughter first made this comment when she was eleven years old. The occasion was Christmas Day, the first winter holiday following the summer in which her father and I separated. Present on this day were the following members of my daughter's family: her twelve-year-old (adopted, biracial) sister, her biological mother (myself) and mother's girlfriend (Canadian and German, atheist and Buddhist), her biological father (still legally my husband) and his girlfriend (both Americans, both atheists), and her biological grandfather who had travelled from Canada to join us in Florida for the holidays. We had all spent the previous evening together celebrating a slightly belated Chanukah/Solstice/Christmas Eve with my daughters' Jewish godmother (or "grandmother") and her children and grandchildren (known to my daughters as their aunts, uncles, and cousins). My dad, the girls, and I would be departing in a few days' time to spend part of our holidays with my elder daughter's extended birth family (Guyanese and Jamaican Americans of Indian descent). At the moment, we were all playing a slightly risqué and somewhat silly game of charades and having a good time.

Our family is, in my daughter's words, "weird" and, as her mother, I am gratified to know that she not only recognizes our difference from "normal" families but indeed embraces this difference. In parenting our children queerly, I hope that we teach them the value of non-normativity. Queer parenting is not easy, however — and, indeed, on some days I am not even certain it is possible. In this essay, I explore what queer parenting means,

whether it is, indeed, possible, and if so, how it is best enabled. My theoretical reflections on these questions are both personal and political. They are prompted in part by my own experiences of mothering within a family characterized by open adoption, separation/divorce and re-partnerings, unorthodox living arrangements, and permeable family boundaries. My reflections are also prompted by consideration of the current movement for the legal recognition of same-sex marriages and homoparental rights. While not unsympathetic to the desire for an expansion of civil rights for members of the LGBT community (of which I consider myself a part), I am painfully aware of the fact that securing these rights will not address the needs of complicated families such as my own and may further the norm of the nuclear family, thus neutralizing more promising and more radical queer politics. At the same time, I am uncertain as to whether more radical queer politics can make room for families, such as my own, which include childbearing and childrearing. We are a "weird family," as my daughter suggests, but are we "queer?" Can one be a queer parent and what would it mean to claim this?

Queer as an Adverb

Is queer parenting possible? In one sense of this term, yes it is. The lesbian baby boom, together with a steadily increasing number of homoparental families created by adoption, attests to the fact that members of the LGBT community are able to parent (as if there were ever any question). This is not the "queer parenting" I have in mind, however. There are undoubtedly good reasons (in a cultural climate still marked by homophobic stereotypes of LGBT persons as selfish, immature, and even pedophilic) to highlight loving, caring, competent parenting by gay, lesbian, bisexual, and other ambiguously gendered and/or ambiguously sexed persons. However, to refer to this phenomenon as queer parenting, is to engage in a form of identity politics that equates "queer" with any non-heterosexual identity. Although identity politics might be a useful strategy in certain contexts, I am using the term "queer" not as an identity marker but instead as an adverb qualifying the activity of parenting itself. A queer parent, in this sense, is someone (regardless of sexual or other identity) who parents queerly. The question then becomes whether parenting is the sort of activity that can be practised outside the bounds of the normal. This is a question that can and should be asked by both heterosexual *and* same-sex parents. To what extent does parenting perpetuate normalization?

Breeders and Reprosexuals

The irony of trying to enlist queer theory in the task of thinking about parenting is that "queer" is frequently defined in opposition to institutions of family and reproduction. Consider, for example, the disparagement of heterosexuals as "breeders." If one views reproduction as the antithesis of "queer," then the term "queer parenting" becomes an oxymoron. We could address this by ignoring, downplaying, or rejecting this critique, pointing out that not all heterosexuals are breeders, nor are all breeders heterosexual (to wit, the lesbian baby boom), but I do not wish to do this. In fact, I think it is a fair characterization of the "straight" personality. Most people grow up simply assuming, or succumb during early adulthood to the widespread cultural assumption, that maturity includes "settling down and raising a family." I grew up with these notions myself. And this "playing it straight" (whether played out by those of heterosexual or other sexual identities) embodies an inability to imagine or enact other forms of living — an inability deserving of critique.

Closely related to the "breeder" identity are the presumptions and practices of reprosexuality which Michael Warner (1991, 1993) contrasts to queer theory and practice. "Reprosexuality," as defined by Warner, is an "interweaving of heterosexuality, biological reproduction, cultural reproduction, and personal identity" (1991: 9). A "breeder identity" is linked by Warner to a self-understanding that is tied to one's status as procreative. The difficulties with reprosexuality as a norm are threefold: (1) it characterizes "normal" sexuality in terms of its openness to reproductive utility, rather than in terms of erotic pleasure (see, for example, Winnubst, 2006); (2) it privileges "given" biological families over families of choice (Modell, 1994; Weston, 1991); and, related to this, (3) it presumes and values homogeneity in family composition, drawing rigid boundaries around those who "belong" to a family and excluding others who may be different biologically or hold different cultural values.

Is reprosexuality a necessary part of parenting? I think not. It is true that some heterosexuals mate solely in order to reproduce and many homophobes continue to believe that sex without reproductive possibilities is "unnatural" or "deviant." Yet lesbian and gay parents as well as heterosexuals who create families through adoption or by use of reproductive technologies are proof against the notion that reproduction and (hetero)sexuality are inextricably intertwined. And of course there are heterosexuals who take pleasure in non-procreative sex. There are queer (non-"natural") ways of becoming a parent for those who are into queer (non-reproductive) sex and one's status as a parent does not entail that one privileges bio-families over families of choice or that one assumes or promotes family homogeneity.

When my daughter claims our family is "weird," she is referring, in part, to our queer family composition. We are a transracial, multi-ethnic, inter-generational family extended across cities, states, and countries. We embody differences in sexual identities and politics, and the lifestyles and values connected to differences in social class and rural vs. urban living. Our kinship is largely constructed and voluntary, not biologically given or legally protected. This is currently true of the parent–children relationships, as well as extended kinship networks of aunts, uncles, and grandparents. Neither my eldest daughter's birth mother, nor my daughters' other mothers (parental partners) have any legal parental status, although they choose to be in our daughters' lives and my daughters choose to be in theirs. My daughters' father and I have a biological connection to only one of our daughters and, until recently, legal status with regard to each that was precarious. For over four years, we were separated, but not divorced, and our custody arrangements were not legally sanctified, but instead self-invented and dependent upon our mutual good will.

The heterogeneity of our family, the permeability, flexibility, and ambiguity of its boundaries, and its grounding of kinship in voluntary choices all deviate from cultural norms governing "traditional" families that are biological and nuclear. However, we are far from unique. In our composition, we represent attributes of other transracial, transnational, and multicultural families created through adoption, interracial couplings, separation and remarriage, geographical dislocation, and so forth. As Cheshire Calhoun (1997) notes on postmodern families, we cannot "[describe] families that depart substantially from traditional family forms as distinctively gay" because many heterosexual families have also "queered … family composition norms" (146). If "queer confuses the very basis of kinship systems, leading us to resignify the meaning of family away from its biological moorings" (Winnubst, 2006: 134), the childrearing that takes place within such "confused" kinship systems is, in this sense, a queer parental practice.

Queering Domestic Space

As Judith Halberstam (2005) notes, "Much of the contemporary theory seeking to disconnect queerness from an essential definition of homosexual embodiment has focused on queer space and queer practices." "Queer," she suggests, "refers to nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time" (6). I have thus far suggested that parents need not have a reprosexual identity, and that families can be organized in non-normative ways, as postmodern families frequently are. Here and below, I want to suggest that such non-normative organization extends beyond queer family composition to postmodern re-configurations of domestic space and parental time.

In addition to considering the heterogeneity of our family, when my daughter calls us "weird" she also refers to the strange ways in which we inhabit the physical space(s) known as "home." Home, for us, is currently fragmented across several counties. There is the "suburban home," in which only my daughters consistently reside; their father and I rotate in and out on a somewhat predictable, but also flexible, schedule — sometimes with and sometimes without our partners and/or other family who may share the residence with us for a few hours, or days, or weeks, or longer. There is a "beach home" — a small rental unit sixty miles away from the suburban home — where my husband and I each live separately during some of our non-custodial weeks and where various permutations of our family may convene for a day or a weekend. And there is the "downtown home" (my girlfriend's) where I frequently reside and where one of my daughters will sometimes stay if she wants to enjoy a weekend of theatre with us or just go on re-treat from her sister. My husband, thus, regularly commutes between two homes, I frequently commute between three (as does my girlfriend), and our daughters have the opportunity for flexible domestic space, stretched across urban, suburban, and rural locales. As teenagers, this flexibility for my daughters includes the homes of their friends, where they are frequently invited to stay. Indeed, my youngest daughter spends enough time with the families of two of her girlfriends that she refers to these spaces as her "other homes" and the adult women who inhabit these spaces as her "other mothers." None of us view home as a fixed and sedentary locale; home is a shift-ing, transitory, and de-centred place for each of us.

Such de-centring provides important challenges to normative material,

psychological, and epistemological assumptions, opening up sites of re-sistance. In her well-known article "Coalition Politics," Bernice Johnson Reagon (1983) contrasts the space of coalition politics to that of a home, noting that the former is not a safe or nurturing space where unsettling dif-ferences can be locked out, as they can in a home. Similarly, postcolonial theorist Teresa de Lauretis (1990) advocates "leaving or giving up a place that is safe, that is 'home' — physically, emotionally, linguistically, epis-temologically — for another place that is unknown and risky," depicting family, self, and home as "held together by the exclusions and repression that enable any ideology of the same" (22). These conceptions of "home" (whether the subject of longing or the subject of critique) as a safe and uncontested space and of the self as a unitary and fixed identity are largely imaginary in the postmodern era. Many homes — and not just my own — are coalitional in structure, requiring adjustments, flexibility, and negotia-tions among different persons and places.

Shared parental custody after a divorce typically involves de-centring "home" (for children, parents, or both). The re-partnering of separated or divorced parents extends the network of adults sharing childrearing respon-sibilities, as do other practices such as open adoption, othermothering in African-American communities, and communal childrearing as practised by extended families, co-operative neighbours, friendship networks, and other intentional communities. Such non-nuclear family formations open up the possibility of distributing "home" and responsibility for childrear-ing among many persons. This distributed responsibility has two important consequences. First, it enables a form of parenting that is not about the reproduction of sameness. The adults involved may — and often do — em-body different values and practices, enforce different norms, and encourage different types of non-normativity. Secondly, it enables parents to distribute time differently than would be possible were any one (or cohabiting two) of them solely responsible for childrearing.

Queering Bourgeois Time

Queer theorists and activists have critiqued several ways in which straight families inhabit and use time. The subjects of critique include the following interrelated embodiments of time: reproductive time, family time, genera-tional time, and reproductive futurism. As my remarks will suggest, I think each of these may be possible for parents to resist, thus rendering queer

parenting possible, but the former embodiments of time are easier to resist than the latter, which make queer parenting difficult.

REPRODUCTIVE TIME

Reproductive time is "ruled by a biological clock for women and by strict bourgeois rules of respectability and scheduling for married couples" (Halberstam, 2005: 5). In being taught to "grow up, get married and have children," we are encouraged not only to participate in the institutions of marriage and parenting, but also to participate in these activities in a particular order and according to a particular timeline. Nonetheless, there are parents who do not follow the proposed reproductive schedule. Resisting rule by their biological clock are older women, often placing education, career, travel, or other pursuits ahead of pregnancy, and who may have children by means of adoption or reproductive technologies. Moreover, teen mothers, lesbian mothers, and single mothers who have children outside of marriage each embody resistance to bourgeois rules of respectability.

FAMILY TIME

Family time is defined by Halberstam (2005) as "the normative scheduling of daily life (early to bed, early to rise) that accompanies the practice of childrearing." This scheduling is determined by "an imagined set of children's needs" and "beliefs about children's health and healthful environments for childrearing" (5). We have all met — or perhaps even been — those parents of infants who cut visits short because it is the baby's scheduled nap, feeding, or bath time. Friends, acquaintances, and colleagues who were once flexible and spontaneous frequently transform into rigid sticklers for a precise schedule upon becoming parents. The situation may not improve much as children become older; scheduled naps give way to scheduled play dates as infants become toddlers; these, in turn, give way to scheduled music and dance lessons, softball practices and swim meets as toddlers become school-age children. However, while such overscheduling is a familiar element of contemporary, Western, urban, middle-class parenting (Warner 2005), it is not a necessary part of parenting. In earlier generations, and still in many rural communities, children might accompany their parents to a dance or other adult social gatherings on the assumption that if and when they were tired, they would simply curl up and fall asleep somewhere. In poorer urban as well as rural communities, spontaneous games of pick-up baseball, basketball, tag, or hide-and-seek still prevail over scheduled games and lessons,

enabling children to develop skills and community on their own, independent of significant adult assistance. It is not necessary to — and indeed may be antithetical to — children's well-being that parents arrange their lives around a rigid schedule of arranged children's activities.

At the same time, anyone who says that "having a child will not change my life," is likely in for an awakening. In choosing to parent, one takes on time-consuming responsibilities for a dependent other — one's days and weeks frequently include domestic, academic, social, and medical tasks centred around children's needs. Whether rigidly or flexibly scheduled, these tasks consume time that might have once been spent in other ways. Doctor and dentist appointments and parent-teacher interviews, as well as children's ill-health require time away from work; leisure time once spent at the gym or the bar or simply reading a good book may, at times, give way to shopping for school supplies, arranging children's birthday parties, or simply playing a game with one's children. It is important to note that shifts in how one spends one's daily time are not always changes for the worse. Celebrating the birth or accomplishment of my children is a joyful activity, as are celebrations of the birthdays or accomplishments of adult friends and family. Making up silly songs or playing pointless children's games with my girls when they were young was at least as much fun as playing adult games. It was the playfulness itself, not winning or losing that mattered. In helping my now-teenage daughters with their homework, when and only when they want it, I am learning new things myself, which currently include Spanish and sign language. These parts of my past and present domestic routines have replenished me and helped me to grow. They remove me from, rather than chain me to, a ticking clock. By having children in my life, I have learned the necessity of putting work aside to make room for pleasure. Parenting has, in this sense, enhanced my ability to inhabit time queerly.

At the same time, parenting is undoubtedly also work, and not all of it is joyful or satisfying. It is important that the work be distributed among as many adults as possible. Cooking, cleaning, laundering, shopping, chauffeuring, and keeping scheduled children's appointments can become overwhelming if one attempts to do it all within a nuclear (two-parent or single-parent) family, leaving little time for play, with or without one's children. Inhabiting time queerly as a parent thus relates to inhabiting domestic space queerly and queering family composition to include as many other caretakers as possible.

GENERATIONAL TIME

Generational time — or what Halberstam (2005) refers to as the "time of inheritance" is "the time within which values, wealth, goods, and morals are passed through family ties from one generation to the next" (5). This is closely connected to what Michael Warner (1991) refers to as "repro-narrativity" or the notion that "our lives are somehow made more meaningful by being embedded in a narrative of generational succession" (7). Generational time connects the politics of the family to the politics of nationalism, as it "connects the family to the historical past of the nation, and glances ahead to connect the family to the future of both familial and national stability" (Halberstam, 2005: 5). In this category, Halberstam also includes the time of "what if" — that "demands protection in the way of insurance policies, health care, and wills" (5).

Whether or not families embody generational time as described here — and thus whether or not queer parenting is possible — is again, in part, a function of family composition. Preceding my biological daughter's verbal declaration of our family's "weirdness," my adopted daughter encountered considerable confusion and anxiety over a Grade 2 homework project involving pasting pictures of her family onto a family tree. Her tree had no single originating trunk as did the template provided by her teacher. When kinship networks are created, in part by choice, they do not embody standard generational time well. And when families are multicultural and interracial, embodying the values of disparate branches on a family tree with no singular originating trunk, children inherit diverse — and sometimes conflicting — values from which they must choose to graft together their own traditions and practices. Similarly, in kinship networks that are transnational, it is unlikely that they will be connected to the politics of nationalism. While born and raised in the U.S., my daughters have a complicated and queer relationship to their national identity. Neither I nor their father nor my current partner were born in or raised in the U.S. Thus, my daughters are accustomed to critiques of the U.S. government, its policies, and its historical narratives emanating from other national perspectives. Moreover, while my adopted daughter's birth mother was born and raised in the U.S., her lineage traces one generation back to Guyana, thus opening a connection not to an uncritical nationalism but instead to the politics of postcolonialism.

Whether or not parents can completely resist generational time is, however, questionable if we consider the sorts of hypothetical temporality (the

"time of what if") as alluded to by Halberstam (2005). There are no parents I know and few I can imagine who would actively resist protecting their children by virtue of insurance policies, healthcare, wills, or other methods at their disposal. There are, of course, those who are unable to provide these things for their children — but I suspect that they, too, would wish to do so if they were so able. To this extent, all parents may be implicated in what Lee Edelman (2004) refers to as "reproductive futurism."

Reproductive Futurism and Political Struggles

Edelman (2004) refers to lesbians and gay men working "for the right to marry" and "to adopt and raise children of their own" as "comrades in reproductive futurism" with the political Right (19). Members of this movement, he claims, cannot be considered queer because "queerness names the side of those *not* 'fighting for the children'; the side outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the value of reproductive futurism" (3; italics in original). Reproductive futurism has several dimensions. Among these are "the fetishism of the Child," the protection of the Child, and an inability to live in the present.

I am not anti-child, but do have sympathy with Edelman's anti-Child perspective and thus also with his and others' criticisms of the current movement for homoparental rights and same-sex marriage. To place the right to adopt and raise children at the centre of the movement against heterosexism, rather than, for example, the celebration of diverse pleasures, is to "sacrifice the queer" by appealing to a symbol (the sacred Child) that "represents the social order" (28). Moreover, the appeal is frequently made in a way that damages the solidarity of the LGBT community. Seeking to appease conservative fears about threats to the Child posed by homoeroticism and other queer pleasures, the movement for homoparental rights sometimes distinguishes those stable, loving, hardworking, nurturing, future-oriented, monogamous couples seeking adoption rights from those queer, pleasure-seeking, promiscuous, risk-taking, immature, unfit others who cannot be trusted with children (Lehr, 1999; Winnubst, 2006). In this context, Edelman (2004) is correct in noting that "our enjoyment of liberty is eclipsed by the lengthening shadow of a Child whose freedom to develop undisturbed by encounters, or even by the threat of potential encounters, with an 'otherness' of which its parents, its church, or the State does not approve" is considered paramount (21).

I have tried to suggest here that parenting queerly is possible, but may *require* providing children with encounters with otherness — including other parents, other values, and other ways of living in and thinking about domestic space and familial time than those privileged by traditional, bourgeois families. Providing real children with such "encounters with otherness" will require abandoning images of the Child as pure, innocent, and vulnerable to contamination from impure sources. It will also require giving up the notion of children as private property with regard to whom only one dyadic couple, whether same-sex or opposite-sex, has rights and responsibilities. If we can do this, then perhaps parents would also be able to live more fully in the present as well. Concerns about our children's future — and hence parental obsessions with wills, insurance, and healthcare, for example — would be greatly alleviated if providing for children were not the sole responsibility of their legally recognized parents. Universal healthcare coverage (sadly lacking in the U.S.), for example, might alleviate considerable parental concern with the future well-being of their children, allowing them — as well as those who care for adult dependents — to live more fully in the present. A society in which ill, disabled, and indigent persons were cared for, rather than disdained and thrown aside, is a society in which wills and insurance are much less necessary.

Shannon Winnubst (2006) suggests that queer freedom is closely related to "having no fixed idea of who or what you are or might become and finding this pleasurable" (199). A truly queer parent might celebrate this freedom for her child as well as for herself. But such freedom, whether for the adult or the child, is much more easily enjoyed in a place and time where all persons — regardless of who or what they are or will become — are valued and provided for. If then we are to enable queer parenting as a fully realized possibility, these are the political struggles to be engaged. Unfortunately, these struggles are not adequately engaged by fighting for the legal rights of same-sex couples to marry and rear children according to already established bourgeois norms. Nor are they adequately engaged by an anti-family politics that excludes the very possibility of non-normative, nurturing relationships between adults and children. What is needed is a queer politics — such as that embodied by, for example, Queers for Economic Justice, Beyond Marriage, the Family, Community and Sexuality Project, and the Sylvia Rivera Project — a politics that recognizes that gender self-determination is intimately tied to issues of economic, racial, and

social justice. Such justice is necessary for effective resistance to the hegemony of the privatized nuclear family, presently presumed to be responsible for those who cannot support themselves, including those who are seriously ill or disabled, unemployed or indigent, very old or very young. Such justice is, thus, a grounding condition for the creation of alternative kinship systems that transgress bourgeois norms — kinship systems that enhance, rather than restrict, the freedom and agency of both adults and children.

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