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Even Children Get Older:

Challenges and Potentials Adult Children of Queers Bring to Queer Theory

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts in

Feminist Studies

by

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The thesis of Emma C. H. Schuster is approved.

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ABSTRACT

Even Children Get Older:

Challenges and Potentials Adult Children of Queers Bring to Queer Theory

by

Emma C. H. Schuster

Through interviews with adult children of queer parents, this paper begins to understand the possibilities, consequences, and limitations of queer families and to take seriously the lives and feelings of queer-raised adults as a potential site for theorizing. This project contributes to conversations in queer theory surrounding children and family – conversations that, while lively and contentious, have yet to contend with the actual experiences of adults raised by queer people. Through qualitative analysis of informal interviews with people raised by queer parents this thesis considers two main sites of tension – how adult children of queer people navigate and refuse visibility and legibility and how we respond to pressures to perform as the "happy, healthy and heterosexual" children of our parents. These themes, as well as our potential wisdom in intergenerational queer and feminist conversations, are potential entry points for taking adult children of queer seriously as thinkers in queer theory.

Introduction

In January 2011, Zach Wahls, then a freshman at the University of Iowa and a son of lesbian mothers, testified in front of the Iowa House Judiciary Committee against a bill that would ban same-sex marriage in his home state. In a YouTube video of the hearings, which would go viral, Wahls testifies that his family "isn't so different from any other Iowa family," — that he was raised by a gay couple and is "doing pretty well." As proof of this he tells his audience that he scored on the ninety-ninth percentile on the ACT, is a proud Eagle Scout[1] and operates his own small business all while working full-time on his engineering degree.[2] I was a senior in high school when his speech went viral, and even before starting my career in women's, gender and sexuality studies, before being exposed to any substantial sort of queer theory at all, I rolled my eyes. As feminists, my own mothers raised me to irreverently mock the "marriage equality" movement, and I was politically shrewd enough to know that inclusion in the exclusive, misogynistic institution of marriage was a sad substitute for real justice. Using a clean-cut, broad-shouldered, young, straight, white man – a *literal Boy Scout* – as proof that gay couples raise "good children" felt almost too on the nose.

My feelings about Zach Wahls were not simply about the gay marriage debate. More than being politically exasperated by his eager devotion to the marriage equality movement, I felt a peculiar combination of irritation, betrayal, and something else that was hard to put into words. I realize now that the confusing and almost repressed feeling I had watching Zach Wahls in that viral clip long ago was jealousy. I was not jealous of his spontaneous national

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[1] This fact also lets the audience know Zach Wahls is straight, as at the time Boy Scouts of America banned any openly gay members — something that wouldn't change for scouts until January 2014 and adult leaders until July 2015. (Davidson, Jon W. "BSA to Allow Gay Scout Leaders Followed a Long and Winding Path." Lambda Legal, 25 July 2015. https://www.lambdalegal.org/blog/20150727_boy-scout-ban Accessed Mar 2020.)

[2] "Zach Wahls Speaks About Family." Online video clip. YouTube, 3 Feb 2011. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FSQQK2Vuf9Q Accessed 14 Oct 2019.

platform, but rather that he felt entitled to speak as a child of lesbian mothers, to acknowledge that as an experience worthy of recognition and discourse, at all. Because the message from liberal LGBTQ movements has so long been that people raised by gay parents are "just like" their counterparts raised by straight parents, I had internalized the conclusion that logically follows: that there was simply nothing remarkable to say about being a child of queer[3] parents. This "fact" had shaped my life and childhood the most, and I believed that to acknowledge it as a marker of difference would be catastrophic in some way.

I do not actually know that many adult children of queer parents personally, but the ones I have met have largely been like me; hesitant to speak about families, rarely spontaneously delivering unrequested information about them even amongst known gay-friendly crowds. I suspect this hesitation comes from the impossibility of taking a legible position. If one speaks too glowingly about one's family one risks getting co-opted by the mainstream LGBT movement, like the Zach Wahlses of the world, but if one says anything about the difficulty of being raised by queer parents it will only give fuel to the homophobic right wing. It often seems, to me at least, that the only viable option is one of detached irony – to simply pretend that of course your family structure or parents' sexuality didn't "affect" you and to change the subject.

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[3] Like many interdisciplinary scholars (Muñoz (1999 & 2009), Duggan (2012), Halberstam (2011 & 2012), Rodríguez (2014), Ferguson (2003), etc) I use the term "queer" as an umbrella term to refer to lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, same-gender-loving, etc. sexualities. I realize that many people who may fit into this description, especially those from older generations, do not choose to use the term "queer" – in fact, some may actively eschew it – and I don't mean to ignore those concerns, but I believe queer is the most concise way to express this umbrella group. I purposefully do not use the acronym "LGBT," because I am not *actively* seeking out participants with trans parents (although if such a participant expressed interest in being interviewed I would happily agree and engage with their experiences as a part of my project). I do not wish to flatten the differences between cis queer experience and trans experience or imply that I am engaging with the experiences of those raised by trans parents when I am not. I think a project similar to mine specifically engaging with adult children of trans parents would be incredibly worthwhile, but I don't think I am particularly well-positioned to undertake such research.

Throughout this thesis I challenge myself to push past my own hesitation to say anything at all about growing up in a queer family in the hopes that exploring the experiences and thoughts of people raised by queer parents will encourage us, as queer theorists, to understand the possibilities, consequences, and limitations of queer families and to take seriously the lives and feelings of queer-raised people as a potential site for theorizing and imagining queer futurity. This project contributes to scholarly conversations in queer theory surrounding children and families – conversations that, while lively, robust and contentious, rarely include the actual children of queers. These conversations are usually about childhood as a particularly queer stage of life or children as a discursive concept, not necessarily about children as real people with their own stakes in queer theory.[4] Similarly, the majority of sociological and historical work on queer families, while perhaps taking queers and their children seriously as actors, still tends to focus on queer *parents*[5] and their choices and navigation of a heterosexist society, not necessarily on their children.[6] While this cliché is tired, it is apt: it seems that in academic discourse the children of queers are seen but not heard.

Of course, just because adult children of queers have rarely asserted themselves as such in the academy does not mean that we have not spoken out about or written about our experiences elsewhere. The only nationwide group for children of queers, COLAGE,[7] lists

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[4] Especially see Lee Edelman's *No Future* (2004), Jack Halberstam's *Gaga Feminism* (2012) & *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), Kathryn Bond Stockton's *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (2009).

[5] Such as Mignon Moore's *Invisible Families: Gay Identities, Relationships, and Motherhood Among Black Women* (2011), or Sandra Patton-Imani's *Queering Family Tree: Race, Reproductive Justice, and Lesbian Motherhood* (forthcoming 2020).

[6] There are notable exceptions to this, perhaps most notably the work of Daniel Winunwe Rivers in *Radical Relations: Lesbian Mothers, Gay Fathers, and Their Children in the United States Since World War II* (2013) which I expand on below.

[7] Established in 1990 COLAGE is a national network for children of queer people, whose honorary board includes the founder, Stefan Lynch, memoirist Alysia Abbott, and Zach Wahls himself. COLAGE hosts an

dozens of written resources on their website, a large portion of which are anthologies of essays from children of queers or "queerspawn,"[8] or made up of interview data. I am urging queer theory and theorists to pay attention to the long-ignored material realities of people actually raised by queer parents.[9]

Methodology and Methods

The central material for my master's thesis consists of ten interviews with adults of queer children, carried out over a two year period.[10] I conducted my interview recruitment with the intention that my interviewees' identities and experiences should be broad and diverse in order to avoid replicating the image of queer families as white, middle-class, headed by two married parents, etc. My project includes those raised in two-parent households headed by lesbian and gay couples, people raised by single queer parents, people whose parents decided to have children after living openly as gay, lesbian or queer, and those

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annual "Family Week" celebration for LGBTQ parents and their children in Provincetown, MA. Beyond this it seems they are much more of a virtual network than one based on in-person support. While COLAGE is a national organization, it is important to keep their actual reach in perspective. They celebrate on their website serving 2,000 community members every year, and their Instagram, Facebook and Twitter pages list between 1,000 and 6,700 followers each. The Williams Institute estimates 6 million people in the United States have an LGBT parent. Anecdotally, although COLAGE was founded in my hometown of Seattle two years before I was born I had not heard of it until doing research for this project. I do believe a virtual network is helpful, but it is still worth noting that intentional, institutionalized opportunities to meet other children of queer parents are slim.

[8] This is often the preferred term used by adult children of queers in these anthologies. I do not use "queerspawn," either in my everyday life nor in this paper, primarily because I was twenty-four the first time I heard it. If it was broadly used during my childhood (which I suspect it was not) I was not aware of it. Since I was first introduced to it, I have actually come to enjoy its cheeky affect and suggestion of deviance – "spawn" implying some sort of dirty or illegitimate offspring – but I do not think its levity would have resonated with me as a child and thus using it feels insincere and vaguely disrespectful to my younger self. I am also wary of creating more identarian terms, especially for the queer community, that may be co-opted by neoliberal identity politics. Thus, while "adult children of queers" is much clunkier I find its awkwardness useful in reminding readers that I am speaking about people with certain shared life experiences, not necessarily a common *identity*.

[9] There are of course queer theorists who do not ignore this discourse, most notably Liz Montegary in *Familiar Perversions: The Racial, Sexual and Economic Politics of LGBT Families* (2018) which I will expand on below.

[10] My human subjects and IRB approval was granted in the spring of 2018.

whose parents came out during interviewees' childhood or adolescence. Having participants with a range of family structures means challenging the mainstream LGBT movement's idea of homonormative nuclear families and possibly making connections between queer families and other "non-traditional" families marginalized by our white supremacist, heterosexist, patriarchal society.[11]

Participants' race and class differences provide an opening to begin to address how people of color and people across the class spectrum raised by queer parents have experienced their childhoods and families differently, as well as how race is navigated in families with multiple racial identities. That said, while racial diversity especially was one of my goals for interview recruitment, in the end six of my ten interviewees were white women. I suspect this is mostly because of my recruitment tactics and my identity as a white woman. These tactics mostly consisted of snowball-sampling — asking interviewees if they had any peers or friends who might want to be interviewed— word of mouth, and passing my call for interviews among networks of middle-aged and older queers mostly known to me (such as my own mothers). Because I am a white woman who travels in many circles with other white women these numbers are perhaps not surprising, if unfortunate. While I do my best to write from a place of racial and reproductive justice, a project with more interviewees of color, or only interviewees of color, would de-center white, middle-class families as the paradigmatic "queer family."

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[11] This connection is one repeatedly advocated for in queer of color critique, particularly by Cathy Cohen, who contends that political alliances should not be based on "some homogenized identity," but rather "one's relation to power." (Cohen, Cathy. "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens." *Gay & Lesbian Quarterly*, vol. 3, 1997, pp. 438)

My focusing on the children of queers, as opposed to their parents, is another intentional choice in this research project. Certainly it is important to engage with how queer parents negotiate having families in heterosexist societies. But, to assume that they are the only ones who are doing this negotiating – or worse, that they are the only ones capable of this negotiation – is not only insulting, it is also intellectually and politically damaging. What do queer theories miss out on when treating queer parents as the only actors with knowledge of how to survive in a society fraught with homophobia, a society that was not meant to sustain queer families?

While I focus on children of queer parents, I mean "children" in the relational sense, not in terms of age. That is, I intentionally concentrate on studying and learning from "adult children" of queer parents. Not only has much of queer theory avoided dealing with actual, real children of queers, but in both queer theory and societal discourse in general the discussion of gay and lesbian families, for instance, often prefigures a family with young children. Thus, adult children tend to be doubly erased: figured both only as theoretical concepts as well as frozen in time. This choice is directly linked to my studying of the writing of adult adoptees of color. Many adopted writers and scholars describe similar ways that adoptees are constructed in the public imagination as perpetual children and the way that this renders the voices and concerns of adult adoptees illegible, meaning that they are left out of political discussions that directly affect them.[12]

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[12] One good introductory source on adoption studies, *Outsiders Within: Writings on Transracial Adoption* (2006), deals explicitly with this phenomenon. See also an overview of adoption studies, "Critical Adoption Studies: Conversations in Progress" (Margaret Homans, Peggy Phelan, et. al. vol. 6, no. 1, *Critical Adoption Studies,* 2018, pp. 1-49). There is also a body of non-scholarly writing on this subject, for example, Nicole Chung's *All You Can Ever Know: A Memoir* (2018).

"Adult" children of queer parents can cover a wide age-range, however, and the ages and generational placements of my interviewees are not evenly distributed from eighteen to eighty. Of my ten interviewees, seven were born between 1987 and 1993; one was born earlier than that, in 1967, and three were born later than that with the youngest born in 1999. In some ways, this concentration can be explained by my recruitment tactics. Thus, in the same way that there is an over-representation of white women amongst my interviewees, there is an over-representation of millennials,[13] which is perhaps not surprising coming from a researcher who herself was born in 1992.

However, at a certain point, I started to actively seek out millennial interviewees and even in some cases turned down recruitment leads when they were outside of this generation, especially people born later. I began to suspect that there was a theoretical benefit to interviewing adult children of queer parents from my generation specifically, most of us having been born during the "gayby boom" of the late 1980s-early 1990s. Not only are there some obvious discursive parallels between millennials in general and "gayby boomers" as a microcosm — such as the tendency among older generations to imagine or pre-figure us as youth, despite the fact that the average millennial is around thirty years old — but because of the historical period which shaped our childhoods and adolescence. Namely, the transition from the AIDS crisis as the central issue in LGBTQ organizing to the neoliberal rally (and ultimate win) around marriage equality.[14]

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[13] Generational boundaries are not widely agreed upon, and the Pew Research Center defines millennials as those born between 1981 and 1996 (Dimock, Michael. "Where Millennials end and Generation Z begins," *Fact Tank*. Pew Research Center. 17 January 2019.)

[14] This historical narrative is discussed by many thinkers, see especially Katrina Kimport's *Queering Marriage: Challenging Family Formation in the United States* (2013), Liz Montegary's *Familiar Perversions: The Racial, Sexual, and Economic Politics of LGBT Families* (2018), and Daniel Rivers's *Radical Relations: Lesbian Mothers, Gay Fathers, and Their Children in the United States Since World War II* (2013).

Another concern that adult adoptees and I share is the risk of reproducing the idea that children raised in "alternatively created" families are subjects to be studied or tested in general. Because of this history, I am wary of reifying children of queers as evidence in an experiment, and I am concerned about the ethics of interviewing adult children of queer parents. For the Christian right and even some of their more centrist friends, it is still a question whether parents who are not a married heterosexual couple raising their own biological children — including gay and lesbian parents, single parents, divorced parents, adoptive parents, etc – can "successfully" raise "well-adjusted" children. These questions lead to ethical debates surrounding whether or not queers should be "allowed" to raise children (often at the heart of policy debates surrounding gay marriage) or the addition of hetero-marriage coercion policies in the welfare system.[15] In my experience, because these ethical debates are ongoing — they were still very much in question during my childhood in the 1990s and early-2000s, even growing up in the liberal metropolis of Seattle, Washington — being raised in a family headed by queers can frequently feel like being evidence in an experiment, either proving or disproving one side of a hypothesis.

Zach Wahls's testimony is just one example of children of queers embodying evidence in this ongoing experiment, and overall the mainstream LGBT movement has not challenged the terms of this debate at all. Instead, liberal activists have met homophobes at

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[15] A significant aspect of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 passed by Bill Clinton was its redirection of funds from Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) to "marriage promotion" programs amongst welfare recipients in order to end "dependence" on the state and "encourage the formation and maintenance of healthy 2-parent married families" (see Fineman, Martha, et al. "No Promotion of Marriage in TANF!" *Social Justice*, vol. 30, no. 4 (94), 2003, pp. 126–134 for an overview). These policy changes have historical origins in the pathologizing of single-mothers, especially Black single mothers, summarized by Daniel Patrick Moynihan in his 1965 report, "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action," (often simply called "The Moynihan Report"). Black feminism and Black queer studies has a long intellectual history of debunking and grappling with this discourse; see the works of Hortense Spillers (1987), Dorothy Roberts (1998), Roderick Ferguson (2004), Cathy Cohen (1987) and dozens of other scholars.

their own level, periodically offering up examples of particularly "well-adjusted" young adults as "proof" that children raised by queers turn out "just like everybody else." In *Familiar Perversions: The Racial, Sexual, and Economic Politics of LGBT Families* (2018) theorist Liz Montegary investigates the strategies of major LGBT rights organizations, such as Freedom to Marry, Human Rights Campaign and Lambda Legal, examining the testimony of people such as Evann Orleck-Jetter, Kasey Nicholson-McFadden, and Sam Puttnam-Ripley, who spoke before their various State representatives in 2009 at the ages of twelve, ten, and fourteen respectively in support of various marriage equality bills backed by these advocacy organizations. These testimonies are nearly identical in their insistence that families headed by lesbian mothers are loving and "normal" or "typical," that the children testifying do well in school and are happy.[16] Sam Putnam-Riley's testimony specifically, like Zach Wahls's, makes casual reference to the fact that he is straight, presumably assuaging fears that queer people will raise gay children. While Montegary's analysis focuses on children brought to testify on behalf of marriage equality bills or civil rights lawsuits filed on behalf of LGBT parents, the insistence that children raised by queer parents "turn out fine" is also replicated in dozens of psychological studies.[17]

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[16] Montegary, Liz *Familiar Perversions: The Racial, Sexual, and Economic Politics of LGBT Families*. Rutgers University Press, 2018, pp. 111-115.

[17] Cornell University's Center for the Study of Inequality recently published a review of seventy-nine psychological studies on children of queer parents (published between 1980 and 2017), seventy-five of which found no significant differences in psychological outcomes between children raised by gay parents and those raised by heterosexual parents ("What does the scholarly research say about the well-being of children with gay and lesbian parents?" *What We Know: The Public Policy Research Council*. Cornell University.). Researchers Judith Stacey and Biblarz have also conducted similar "meta-analyses" looking at close to eighty studies, the vast majority of which have similar findings — that children of queer parents are not more likely to do worse in school or exhibit "delinquency" (Bryner, Jeanna. "Children Raised by Lesbians do Just Fine, Studies Show." *Live Science*. 08 Feb 2010.). Of course, these two "meta-analyses" may overlap in the studies they are taking as examples (that is, we cannot conclude that this means are one hundred and sixty unique studies), but it stands that there is a robust scholarly interest in the psychological well-being of children of queers.

In thinking more deeply about the ethics of interviewing children of queers in this context, I have turned to the wisdom of feminist researchers before me. Broadly speaking, feminist research attempts to challenge the "traditional" perception of the interview — as a researcher extracting evidence from their subject which they then transform into institutional knowledge — and recast it as the co-creation of knowledge between interviewer and interviewee. Many feminist researchers[18] have contributed to this theory of methodology, but most famously these assertions are attributed to Ann Oakley's 1974 publication "Interviewing women: A contradiction in terms?"[19] Although Oakley has recently revisited her thoughts on this claim, with the addendum that it might be too rosy or uncritical of a view, it is often still the goal of feminist researchers conducting interviews to challenge "the exploitative nature of conventional interviewing."[20] Historian Nan Alamilla Boyd makes a similar point about queer methodologies in relation to oral histories, explaining "Feminist researchers try to empower (rather than exploit) historical narrators by trusting their voices, positioning narrators as historical experts, and interpreting narrators' voices alongside the narrators' interpretations of their own memories. Many gay, lesbian, and queer historians have followed suit."[21] I view interviewing as part of a co-creation process with my interviewees and believe that doing my own interviews — as opposed to simply analyzing anthologies of essays or books based on others' interviews, which are available — has been a very moving and perhaps even healing process.

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[18] See Shulamit Reinharz's *Feminist Methods in Social Research* (1992) for a more thorough array of examples.
[19] Oakley, Ann. (1981). "Interviewing Women: A Contradiction in Terms." *Doing Feminist Research*. Ed. Helen Roberts. London, Routledge, 1981, pp. 30-61.
[20] Oakley, Ann. "Interviewing Women Again: Power, Time and the Gift." *Sociology,* vol. 50, no. 1, 2016, p. 198.
[21] Boyd, Nan Alamilla. "Who Is the Subject? Queer Theory Meets Oral History?" *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, vol. 17, no. 2, May 2008, p. 178.

My own experience growing up as an only child with queer parents was a lonely one, and talking with others who have shared some of my childhood experiences has been the best strategy in combating this, something echoed by my interviewees. While I cannot necessarily quote them on this, as these thoughts were often expressed after I stopped recording, most of my participants commented without prompting that they found the interview helpful, cathartic, or fun. One specifically said that it was refreshing to talk without having to be in "explanation mode," and actually be able to reflect on his childhood and family dynamics. While it is possible that analyzing essays or using interview data collected by another researcher would have the same intellectual and political value as original interviews there was an added personal value — both to me and I like to think to my interviewees — to the method I chose. Meaning-making with my peers combats isolation and is perhaps yet another way of belonging. Part of what makes this possible is that I myself have lesbian moms. My position as a fellow adult child of queer parents affords me a unique camaraderie with my interviewees, and my own experiences have been able to shape the direction and focus of my interview questions. Additionally, my interdisciplinary background and positioning in the academy — Feminist Studies is a field which relies on multiple methodologies — will be invaluable in a methodology that bridges conversations happening between adult children of queer parents both in writing and interviews with those in queer theory.

Theoretical Frameworks

The literature relevant to this thesis comes from various fields: queer theory coming out of various academic disciplines including literary criticism and anthropology, historical and sociological research, psychological research on children of queer people, and popular

press books often written by children of queer parents themselves. Queer theorists have been

writing about children since the beginning of queer theory.[22] Often in queer theory,

discussions frequently center on the discursive figure of "the child," queer children,

childhood as a particularly and universally queer period, or children's media as queer.[23]

Overwhelmingly, there are two queer theorists who are most frequently referenced by other

academics in conversations when I mention my research – literary critic Lee Edelman and

anthropologist Kath Weston. Both of these thinkers provide crucial context for my work and

weigh in on the most relevant questions, for me, coming from queer theory: are queer

families with children necessarily assimilationist, how, and what exactly does that mean?

There is a long history of the idea of children being used to criminalize, disempower

and disappear queers and other sexualized or racialized others for the purpose of sanitizing

public space.[24] This rhetorical strategy has been used to "clean-up" certain neighborhoods[25]

or create laws which banned gays and lesbians from certain aspects of public life.[26] Both

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[22] See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's "How To Bring Your Kids Up Gay" (1991).

[23] See Kathryn Bond Stockton's *The Queer Child, Or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (2009) and Jack Halberstam's writing in both *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011) and *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal (Queer Ideas/Queer Action)* (2012)

[24] Fascinatingly, as I finish this thesis, there is an animated debate in own wealthy Santa Barbara neighborhood over the construction of permanent supportive housing for houseless people struggling with mental illness. The primary concern of those opposed is that this structure would be situated close to three schools and a daycare center, in the middle of suburban area with lots of small children. There is a fear, both implicit and explicit, of the sexual predation of children by residents. I have yet to hear anyone, either online or during in-person forums, express concern for the safety of the children incarcerated in the juvenile detention center up the block, despite whatever sexual predation may be happening there.

[25] For example, the official website of Times Square in New York City proudly boasts of how the landmark neighborhood — which was previously a favorite hustling spot of queer and trans sex workers, as described in John Rechy's *City of Night* or Samuel Delany's *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* — began to transform under Mayor Giuliani's reign of "family values" and safety: "adult stores and sleazy theaters were replaced by child-oriented stores and successful musicals" ("From Dazzling to Dirty and Back Again: A Brief History of Times Square." *The Official Times Square Website*).

[26] The most infamous example of this is Anita Bryant's 1977 "Save Our Children" campaign which successfully fought to repeal a Dade County ordinance banning job discrimination based on sexual orientation. This campaign, and others elsewhere in the country being waged contemporaneously, was most concerned with the employment of gay and lesbian teachers. The reasoning behind this concern was that because queer people "couldn't reproduce" they needed to "recruit" children in order to grow their movement and make sure it carried

Weston and Edelman encourage queers to push back against the parameters of these debates. They encourage a refusal of the counter-argument that queer people are not "dirty" and are "just like heterosexuals," – that is, an assimilationist argument – both instead advocating for the idea that queers may have a different, and better, set of values entirely. What those values might be is where the theorists differ.

Weston's *Families We Choose* (1991) is an extensive ethnography of gays and lesbians in San Francisco. She discusses the difficulties queer people often have breaking ties with their biological families of origin, dynamics between long-term partners, how the AIDS crisis built and transformed networks of care, how the AIDS crisis affected queer people's feelings about raising children,[27] and whether or not raising children and forming more nuclear family units is always or inherently a capitulation to our heterosexist, patriarchal society. Reading Weston in today's world is rather stunning. She warns, "In the years to come it will be important that gay men and lesbians not become so concerned about gaining recognition for their families that they settle for whatever sort of recognition it seems possible to get."[28] She instead advocates for universal healthcare and a stronger social safety

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on into the next generation. Thus, giving queers "access" to children through education and childcare professions was dangerous. I will return to the specific fear of "recruitment" of children later.

[27] While I did not necessarily ask about this, and am not yet prepared to theorize it yet, three of my ten participants mentioned one of their parents' previous partners dying of AIDS before they were born. While the AIDS crisis may now be discursively separated from the lesbian "gayby boom" around the same time, in actuality Weston shows how intimately the two are connected; often the networks of care created to tend to AIDS patients were used for conception and parenting as well. Queer parents such as Cherríe Moraga have written about the significance of death and AIDS in their decisions to give birth (see *Waiting in the Wings: Portrait of a Queer Motherhood* (1997)) and one participant echoed similar logics of hope which he felt growing up: "I've talked about myself as a novel child in a group of adults...a lot of that was that this friend group of gay men were passing away from AIDS or had AIDS and there was mass loss, so it was one of the few signs of hope in the gay and lesbian community at the time." Older adult children of queers, such as Stefan Lynch and Alysia Abbott, whose fathers died of AIDS, have spoken about the difficulty of this position. Quoted in Abigail Garner's *Families Like Mine*, Lynch explains, "Typical AIDS support groups are not set up to deal with kids at all. . .They can be alienating instead of helpful" (Garner, Abigail. *Families Like Mine: Children of Gay Parents Tell It Like It Is*. Harper Perennial, 2004, p. 159).

[28] Weston, Kath. *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship*. Columbia University Press, 1991, p. 209.

net, insuring protection for all vulnerable people, queer or not, regardless of whether they are members of privatized individual family units. Of course, nearly thirty years later after the fight for and ultimate win of marriage equality, it is apparent that the mainstream LGBTQ movement did not prioritize universal benefits, privileging very narrow recognition from the state instead.

Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004) is similarly opposed to the fight for marriage equality, but responds to the assimilationist turn in mainstream LGBTQ politics differently than Weston. Following other queer theorists who have rightfully criticized the way the discursive trope of childhood innocence and asexuality is weaponized against sexual deviance as discussed above,[29] Edelman pairs this with "anti-relational" queer theorists[30] and argues that the idea of "the child" is constitutively tied up with heterosexual (re)productivity and the teleological, progressive march towards a heterosexual future. He urges the queer movement away from an investment in the future and children, and instead towards embracing the traditionally homophobic logic that queer people are inherently antisocial, a force destructive to community and family, and thus futurity in general.

Edelman's intriguing response to mainstream LGBTQ politics might be convincing, but for his very striking and peculiar omission of race as a key factor (perhaps *the* key factor) in matters of reproductive politics and thus futurity. Many queer scholars of color have argued that Edelman's paradigmatic figure of the child *must* be a white child, and his failure to specify this means lumping all queers into a position without and against futurity, which has different significance for people of color who already experience targeted and genocidal

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[29] See Michel Foucault's discussion of the Victorian child in *The History of Sexuality* (1976) and Gayle Rubin's "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of Sexual Politics" (1984).
[30] See especially the work of Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" (1987) and *Homos* (1996).

violence from the state. Jafari Allen, an anthropologist in Black queer studies, rightfully asserts that, "not every child — and almost no Black child — resembles the child in Edelman's polemic,"[31] and performance studies scholar José Esteban Muñoz agrees, countering Edelman's claim that "the future is kid stuff," with the reminder that, "The future is only the stuff of some kids. Racialized kids, queer kids, are not the sovereign princes of the future."[32] This critique of Edelman is more than a simple "gotcha" moment; it is an assertion that queerness is "primarily about futurity and hope,"[33] and that queers of color have investments in family, children and the future beyond "normative white reproductive futurity."[34]

Scholars such as Juana María Rodríguez and her former student, Liz Montegary, have taken up discussions of queer futurity that explicitly engage with the real children being raised by queers.[35] For Rodríguez and Montegary, parenting can "queer" some queers further, in contrast to the commonsense notion that it assimilates all queers. They both also echo earlier queer theorists, such as Weston and Cathy Cohen, who argue that queer activism should focus on goals — such as universal healthcare, abolishing capitalism and white supremacy, and valuing reproductive labor — that would serve the majority of parenting queers, most of whom are multiply marginalized in other ways as well.

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[31] Allen, Jafari. "For 'the Children' Dancing the Beloved Community." *Souls*, vol. 11 no. 3, 2009, p. 314.
[32] Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York University Press, 2009, p. 95.
[33] Muñoz, 11
[34] Muñoz, 95
[35] See Rodríguez's *Sexual Futures: Queer Gestures and Other Latina Longings* (2014) and Montegary's *Familiar Perversions: The Racial, Sexual and Economic Politics of LGBT Families* (2018) for two exceptionally important books in queer theory that engage with the children of queers as they actually exist, not merely as a hypothetical imbued with political implications.

Scholars who might not be considered thinkers in "queer theory" have also contributed to the body of knowledge concerning queers raising children. While historical work has not been abundant, there is a small collection of literature in this field. Most notable and comprehensive is Daniel Winunwe Rivers's *Radical Relations: Lesbian Mothers, Gay Fathers, and Their Children in the United States Since WWII* (2013). Rivers provides a thorough history of the custody battles of gay and lesbian parents who came out after having children in their heterosexual marriages, children who were raised in lesbian separatist communities, the lesbian "gayby boom" of the late eighties and early nineties, and more recent queer family activism surrounding gay marriage. Rivers is much less critical of queer family politics than his contemporaries in queer theory. He argues that "the current focus on family/domestic rights in the modern LGBT freedom struggle… was a direct result of the social activism of lesbian mothers and gay fathers,"[36] something he sees as neither regrettable nor particularly influenced by larger political and economic trends towards neoliberalism.

Sociologists have also been interested in queer parents and their children, which is another site of work that tends to focus on the real, material lives of queer families. One of the most important examples of this work has been Mignon Moore's *Invisible Families: Gay Identities, Relationships, and Motherhood Among Black Women* (2011). Moore argues that Black lesbians have been thus far ignored in discussions of queer parenting. While much of her study focuses on the challenges and experiences of Black lesbians in general, not necessarily in regards to parenting, she also speaks specifically about the racial and classed implications of ignoring women who bore children from previous heterosexual relationships

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[36] Rivers, Daniel Winunwe. *Radical Relations: Lesbian Mothers, Gay Fathers, and Their Children in the United States since World War Two*. University of North Carolina Press, 2013, p. 5.

in discussions of "lesbian motherhood," as well as how race can trouble aspects of lesbian relationships thought of as a "given."[37]

However thorough studies of queer families in history, sociology or anthropology may be, nearly all such literature focuses on parents as the primary representatives of and actors in the family, not necessarily their children. Following the ethos of work being done in Girlhood Studies, especially scholars interested in racialized girlhood, such as Black Girlhood Studies,[38] I aim to take the real experiences and material circumstances of children raised by queers seriously. I focus on adult children of queers both because we are often discursively erased, as I have mentioned above, and for the benefit of personal reflection. Fellow adult child of queers and author, Abigail Garner, explains in her book that she chose to interview adult children of queers, "because the safety of time and space from their upbringing means that they have offered responses for this book that are true *for them*. I know that after becoming an adult and moving out on my own, I felt freer to talk about my life experience as *my own* rather than a reflection on whether my parents were *bad* or *good*."[39] I have decided on the same choice for similar reasons.

Abigail Garner is not the only adult child of queers to write about her and others' experiences. Adult children of queers have contributed a substantial body of writing, usually in the form of essays in larger anthologies, memoirs, and books constructed from interview

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[37] For instance, Moore argues that traditionally lesbian couples are assumed to split both finances and domestic duties equally, but for Black lesbian mothers financial independence from a partner may be of higher value due to wisdom passed on from childhood, and thus even though couples may be just as committed to each other Black lesbians are less likely to have joint bank accounts.

[38] See Tammy C. Owens, Durell M. Callier, Jessica L. Robinson, Porshé R. Garner. "Towards an Interdisciplinary Field of Black Girlhood Studies" (2017) and *The Black Girlhood Studies Collection* (2019), edited by Aria Halliday.

[39] Garner, Abigail. *Families Like Mine: Children of Gay Parents Tell It Like It Is*. Harper Perennial, 2004, p. 8.

data.[40] All of these pieces reference and thank activist Stefan Lynch, who both founded

COLAGE and is credited with coining the word "queerspawn," as I noted earlier. In this way,

there does actually seem to be a small citational community among adult children of queers

— nearly all of these works cite each other and refer back to COLAGE as a central hub of

"queerspawn" communication — even if this is not widely publicized or known about

beyond these circles.

Many of the themes expressed across these sources are similar to those I found in my

interviews. Nearly all children of queers contributors shared experiences of hiding or

avoiding disclosure of their parents' sexuality and many mentioned that this is often a

surprise to their parents. Lesbian mother and editor of *Different Mothers: Sons and

Daughters of Lesbians Talk about their Lives* (1990), Louise Rafkin admits that in the course

of editing submission, "it was difficult to discover just how much children carry the burden

of social stigma."[41] Fourteen years later, Abigail Garner, daughter of a gay father and author

of *Families Like Mine: Children of Gay Parents Tell It Like It Is* (2004) notices that "Many

parents of the gayby boom are surprised to discover that despite growing acceptance these

challenges still exist for their children."[42] In addition to avoiding visibility, published

children of queers often write about the pressures of living under scrutiny. In their

introduction to *Spawning Generations: Rants and Reflections on Growing Up with LGBTQ

Parents* (2018), Makeda Zook and Sadie Epstein-Fine, two adult children of queers, put it

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[40] See: Abigail Garner's *Families Like Mine* (2004), Alysia Abbott's *Fairyland: A Memoir of my Father* (2013), Makeda Zook and Sadie Epstein-Fine's *Spawning Generations: Rants and Reflections on Growing up with LGBTQ Parents* (2018), Rachel Epstein's *Who's Your Daddy? And Other Writings on Queer Parenting* (2009), *Different Mothers: Sons and Daughters of Lesbians Talk about their Lives* (1990).
[41] Rafkin, Louise. *Different Mothers: Sons and Daughters of Lesbians Talk about their Lives*. Cleis Press, 1990, p. 13.
[42] Garner, 9

succinctly: "Too often, as queerspawn, we have been taught that airbrushing our lives is the best form of survival — to protect our families, we must present a particular picture of who we are to the world."[43] Discussions of this pressure are echoed throughout their anthology.

One way in particular this pressure is expressed is through pressures for adult children of queers to be straight. Those who do not are often referred to in this literature as "second generation."[44] In her essay contribution to *Who's Your Daddy? And Other Writings on Queer Parenting* (2009) that she co-writes with her father, Julie Mooney-Somers explains that many "queer kids of queer parents are filled with angst around letting the side down, as if turning out gay confirms the accusations of homophobes that gay parents can't raise 'normal' kids. Apparently having a queer child is the terrible guilty fear of many queer parents."[45] Overall, the goals of most pieces in this body of literature are expressly *not* to convince those outside the queer community that queer parents raise "normal" children, but rather to talk about the consequences of living under that expectation. I have found this literature to be immensely validating and helpful, and I would encourage us as queer theorists to take a closer look at as a potential source of resistance to mainstream LGBTQ neoliberalism and radical ways of thinking about sexuality and family.

Sites of Tension

I covered certain topics throughout each of my interviews – language use in referring to family members, childhood experiences with homophobia in schools and from peers,

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[43] Zook, Makeda and Sadie Epstein-Fine. *Spawning Generations: Rants and Reflections on Growing up with LGBTQ Parents*. Demeter Press, 2018, p. 3.
[44] This, like "queerspawn," was another term reportedly coined by Stefan Lynch (Bateman, Geoffrey W. "Children of GLBTQ Parents." *GLBTQ Encyclopedia*. 2007.)
[45] Epstein, Rachel. *Who's Your Daddy? And Other Writings on Queer Parenting*. Sumach Press, 2009, p. 284.

people's experience of race in their families, participants' own sexualities, and more. My analysis of interviews revealed that participants were consistently speaking to, whether they meant to or not, two overarching themes through these topics: what I call visibility/legibility and poster family syndrome. There were times during the interview when I asked my interviewees if they had ever intentionally lied or obscured information about their family structure, but even if they answered no to this question there were other times when they clearly did actively resist being made visible or legible as children of queer parents. Additionally pointing to a contradiction, much came up during interviews about the ways in which it was difficult to be raised in a family with queer parents, but when providing an overview of their childhoods this was often downplayed.

While I cannot necessarily know for certain why adult children of queers have the tendency to de-emphasize their struggles, I posit that this phenomenon is related to the mainstream LGBTQ movement's assertion — in order to prove a political point — that children raised by queer parents are particularly "well-adjusted." This phenomenon is covered extensively in anthologies of essays written by children of queers and usually referred to as "poster child syndrome."[46] The necessary twin belief — that queer parents are perhaps particularly good parents[47] — is something that I am calling "poster family syndrome."

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[46] Zook and Epstein-Fine, 3.

[47] I have heard this logic expressed by people in passing so many times that it seems to have become common LGBTQ wisdom. The argument is usually two-pronged; first, queers make better parents because they must intentionally choose parenthood (as opposed to, it is implied, irresponsible heterosexuals who are worse parents because they do not plan their pregnancies), and second because their children are more "tolerant," "open-minded," or "empathetic" about "other" differences, because they have personal experience with homophobic discrimination. (see Pappas, Stephanie. "Why Gay Parents May Be the Best Parents." *Live Science*. 15 Jan 2012). In ignoring children born of previous heterosexual relationships or hook-ups and implying that children of queers do not face "other" discrimination (such as racism, classism, etc.) themselves, this reasoning shores up the common understanding of queer families as white, middle-class two-parent households who use ART to

"Poster family syndrome" may be a bit cumbersome to use, but it is an intentional choice. I am tempted to call the phenomenon simply "respectability," following from the more widely-understood notion of "respectability politics," a phrase one of my (Black) participants herself used to describe this dynamic. However, as most of my participants are not Black, I am not Black, and this is not a project primarily housed in or contributing to Black studies I am wary of appropriating theoretical terms from Black feminist theorists.[48] Thus, I turn to a term with its origins in the written discourse of adult children of queer parents, even if my participants themselves do not use it in their interviews. I do, however, see lots of overlap between poster family syndrome and respectability politics and I do not mean to erase that connection. Both projects originate in marginalized communities as a response to and survival strategy in the face of bigotry (either racism, homophobia, or both), even if both phenomena are still invested in white supremacist standards of proper sexuality and family structures. Regardless of what I have chosen to call it, nearly all participants spoke to the pressures their families were under. Whether talking about their own sexuality, their experience of race as children (especially when raised in interracial families), their parents' outness or visibility and how that related to their own experiences of homophobia, participants directly and/or indirectly spoke to the internalized need to be seen as "happy, healthy, and heterosexual,"[49] as well what it could look like to not live up to these expectations, personally and politically.

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create their genetically-related families, when we know this is in fact describes a minority of queers raising children.

[48] Especially see the work of Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (1993), as well as Patricia Hill Collins (1990, 2004), E. Frances White (2001), and Mireille Miller-Young (2014).

[49] Montegary, 129.

Legibility and Visibility

One of the most obvious discursive sites of visibility and legibility is in language choices. A close friend once pointed out to me that when I refer to the two women who raised me in casual conversation I almost religiously say "my parents" and nearly never "my moms."[50] After she pointed this out I began to notice it as well, and one of the first things I wanted to ask my participants was how they referred to their own family. Many of my participants either described their families using similarly ambiguous language, admitting that often they avoided "outing" their family in casual conversation unless it was necessary. One participant explained, "I kind of sense it out. Like if there are other people who are queer, I have no problem telling them. But… like most of my grad school friends have been straight, and so I'm more hesitant to tell them because it usually brings up a lot of questions… Just a lot of questions that I don't always have the energy to answer. So I kind of just like sense it out." Another explained that when she was growing up, "I don't know if I was embarrassed of it…I just didn't like being different in any way, so I would just say 'my parents' not like 'my moms' or anything," and even revealed a recent anecdote, explaining "I was donating blood and someone asked me, 'what do your parents do?' And I just like picked my mom and my step dad and said, 'my mom does this and my dad does this.'" This example was particularly striking to me, as it was current and not something remembered from childhood.

While interviewees self-reported evasion of family visibility is certainly one pertinent site of this phenomenon, even more interesting to me is when interviewees claimed that they

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[50]It appears Microsoft Word agrees with my language choice, as it flags the phrase "my moms" as grammatically incorrect, suggesting it be changed to "my mom's."

were clear and unambiguous in their language use, but in fact were not during the interviews themselves. Of my participants who had a family configuration where it might make sense to use the phrase "my moms," there was mixed self-reporting of whether they preferred "my moms" to "my parents," — some claimed to not have a preference, some admitted to using "my parents" more, others still definitively stated their preference for "my moms" over "my parents."[51] However, a cursory search of these terms in their interview transcripts reveals that all but one used the phrase "my parents" at least twice as often as the phrase "my moms."[52] So, even when participants claimed to speak about their families in legible and visible ways, their speech was not as legible as they might imagine.

As with many strategies to resist oppression — and the danger of romanticizing strategies to resist oppression — it can be hard to tell where necessary tactics to survive in a homophobic society end and creative, queer ways of imagining and organizing life differently begin.[53] It is possible that the ways children of queers learn to resist visibility, such as language, are merely products of growing up in our homophobic society and that these tactics should not be celebrated but rather treated as regrettable necessities for our current moment. However, I do think it's possible that there is an interesting potential we could glean from paying attention to these decisions.

I wonder if these choices are not always made out of fear of explicit homophobia, but are instead an energy-conservation strategy necessitated by heteronormativity. Perhaps as a statement that one's own time and energy are more important than taking the time to educate

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[51] Of the four participants for whom it was relevant, one straightforwardly said she preferred saying "my parents," another was more ambivalent, reluctantly admitting that she probably used "my parents" more, a third proudly claimed to use "my moms" over "my parents" and the last definitively stated her preference for "my moms" over "my parents."

[52] Their ratios being 18/41, 13/94, and 20/54, respectively.

[53] For a more thorough discussion of this see Sara Ahmed *Living a Feminist Life* (2017).

people with heterosexist conceptions of family, even if they are well-meaning? Again, reflecting personally, my attachment to choosing "my parents" over "my moms" comes from a place of (perhaps twisted and childish!) stubbornness; I see now that liberal LGBTQ activists who preach the politics of visibility were not there for me as a child in classrooms or on the playground, so why should I do the groundwork required by their agenda of visibility now? Furthermore, why *shouldn't* "parents" mean two women or two men? In refusing to specify the gender of our parents and render the structures of our family immediately legible to an outside audience, are children of queers require the general public to check their own assumptions about who "parents" can be, putting the onus of dismantling heterosexism on our heterosexist society. Put another way, if I refer to my parents and the person I am speaking to assumes from my lack of specification that I have a mother and a father, that is because of their own heterosexism and thus their problem, not mine.

In addition to not always specifying the gender of one's parents, another example of language use that avoids immediately "outing" one's family is the lack of specification in referring to various parents. Two participants explicitly mentioned that when referring to one of their multiple mothers amongst acquaintances, friends or strangers they simply said "my mom" instead of using a name. One participant, whose mothers had separated and married other women, explained, "I mean for a stranger...I wouldn't necessarily explain my whole mom situation. I would just be like, 'my mom said blah,' you know...referring to any of them and they don't need to know that I have three other moms, you know?" Another further described how her audience would understand who she was referring to, saying, "even if it's not my really tight, immediate social circle, they can guess, but it's also like there's enough

context clues for people who are like the next layer out socially to also kind of guess based on context clues."

My other participants did not necessarily mention doing this explicitly, but for everyone whom it was applicable they all *did* it. That is, everyone who had either multiple moms or dads would say "my mom" or "my dad" without specifying which parent they were talking about. This resonates with me, as I've noticed that I pretty consistently say "my mom" when referring to either of my moms and don't bother to explain unless someone asks. Again, I wonder if something more than simple convenience can account for this choice. Or, perhaps more precisely put, if choosing one's own convenience over another's detailed understanding of one's family could be doing political work. Maybe in this move there is a refusal to make one's family legible to others and a demand for either doing the work of intimacy — getting to know the person well enough to figure things out from context clues — or the consequence of sitting with uncertainty.

In addition to having a unique way of referring to their parents to strangers and friends, many adult children of queer parents also address their parents in an unusual manner. That is, some of my participants (about half) used their parents' first names when addressing them to their face. This is yet another thing that I felt familiar with, as I also tend to call my parents by their names when talking with them. In spite of this language choice, all of my participants who used it maintained that they thought of the people whom they addressed by their first names to be just as much of parents to them. One participant, who calls her biological mom and dad "mom" and "dad," intentionally specified that for her other parents, "even though I call them by their first names, that's not necessarily representative of how I understand the parentage to work." Thus, even in referring to our parents, not necessarily in

public or to other people, we are challenging normative assumptions about which language practices mean what.

Of course, certainly much has been said in queer theory and other fields about the subversive potential of evading legibility and rejecting the affirmative politics of visibility.[54] So is there something happening when children of queers refuse legibility that is different from queer people generally refusing legibility, and is there anything at stake in this difference? I am not sure if I can claim that there is a significant difference based on my study alone, but I do feel the difference when I draw on my own experiences as a queer person raised by lesbian mothers. The latter descriptor has had a much more forceful impact on my life than the former, both because I have spent my whole life as my mothers' daughter, including the most formative years of my life, whereas I came out as queer in late high school, and because the nature of homophobia has changed dramatically even in the short time between my childhood and my queer adulthood. Thus, evading legibility as a child of queers feels more significant than evading legibility as a queer person.

But perhaps more importantly, there are also unavoidably other people's feelings at stake in a "children of," identity that is defined by one's relation to another person (namely, the feelings of that person). I personally feel absolutely no guilt if I choose to hide or obscure

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[54] Queer of color critics, especially Black queer theorists, have extensively discussed the limits of LGBTQ visibility and the language of "coming out" as a specifically white way of understanding and expressing one's queerness. See the work of Marlon B. Ross "Beyond the Closet as Raceless Paradigm" (2005), William Hawkeswood *One of the Children: Gay Black Men in Harlem* (1996), Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley *Thiefing Sugar: Eroticism Between Women in Caribbean Literature* (2010), Namaste, Ki "The Politics of Inside/Out: Queer Theory, Poststructuralism, and a Sociological Approach to Sexuality" (1994), etc. In addition to conversations in queer of color critique, scholars in Black studies have theorized the importance of refusal in the face of state-enforced visibility – see Tina Campt *Listening to Images* (2017) – Black interiority – see Kevin Quashie *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture* (2012) – and engaged with Martinican mid-century literary critic Édouard Glissant's theory of "opacity," which Kara Keeling summarizes as "a group's right to remain illegible to other groups or otherwise imperceptible according to the dominant terms through which things become perceptible" (Keeling, Kara. *Queer Times, Black Futures*. New York University Press, 2019, p. 191).

my own queerness; my sexuality is my own business, and I contend that I do not owe those who share my identity my visibility as a queer person.[55] However, when I obscure the truth of my *parents'* sexuality, I know that they might be hurt by my misrepresentation were they present to witness it. While I obviously have sympathy for my parents, *I* know that the evasions of legibility made throughout my life have not been primarily out of shame, but out of a refusal to do the work of explaining things to people, so ultimately I do not feel guilty for doing this either. When children of queer people reject legibility of our families, we are effectively enacting a double-refusal: a refusal of mainstream LGBTQ activism's demand that we be visible products of queer families and a refusal of our parents' potential desire for visibility, a refusal to put their desires ahead of our own. Personally, I find this second refusal to be a much more difficult, and thus perhaps more important, thing to do because it is doing both personal and political work.

When reflecting on this dynamic, I am reminded of a short essay I encountered in college by an adult adoptee, Rachel Quy Collier, on her experience as an adoptee of color raised by white parents, "Performing Childhood."[56] In the piece, Collier feels an unexpected connection when reading an ethnography of the relationships children with cancer have with their parents and caregivers. The ethnographer Myra Bluebond-Langer describes the ways that the children in these relationships are forced to manage their parents' fear and pain to the point that such children end up denying their own fear and appearing much braver than they actually feel. To be clear, I am absolutely not suggesting that having childhood cancer is at

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[55] I do feel that I owe other queer people solidarity and a commitment to fighting for justice, but, following theorists I discussed above, I do not see individual visibility as a part of that project.

[56] This piece was published in an anthology of writing by adult adoptees of color which I referenced above, *Outsiders Within: Writings of Transracial Adoption.*

all the same as growing up with queer parents, but the piece of the parent-child dynamic that resonated with Collier — children innately sensing that their parents need them to seem happy — resonates with me as well. Children of queer people and adoptees of color raised in white families are two groups of people that sometimes literally overlap and may have experiences of certain family dynamics in common.

I do not necessarily know if this can be determined from my interview data alone, but I am curious about what happens when children of queers refuse to render our families legible. By refusing to prioritize our parents' desire for visibility over our own desires to navigate the world as we wish, how often we are also taking a stance that challenges the history of how emotions are managed in our families? To do this without apology or guilt is not only to make a political statement about the usefulness of visibility, but also to make a personal statement about how parent-child relationships work and how they could perhaps work better.

"Poster Family Syndrome"

The burden of presenting a story of a happy childhood is not an expectation that is limited to one's parents. As discussed elsewhere, the idea of "poster child syndrome" is one that is frequently discussed in literature written by children of queers.[57] Due to the conservative right's insistence that gays cannot raise children and the LGBTQ establishment's response that queers raise "well-adjusted" children, often children of queers report a pressure to prove this true. I advocate for extending the concept of "poster child syndrome" to not just pressuring children of queers into a certain model of success, but also

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[57] See Zook and Epstein-Fine as a primary example.

to sugarcoating difficult things about being raised in our families – perhaps, "poster family syndrome" itself. As one interviewee put it, "[there is] this need to defend your family, but also that really limits when and where you can be real about what it was like to be in your family." My participants spoke about a number of familial struggles – including those related to societal homophobia, interracial dynamics within their families, parents' mental health and substance abuse issues, and their own mental health struggles. Many expressed the need they felt to minimize those struggles. Or, if they didn't, often they *did* minimize them, which became clear through their other answers to separate questions later on.

One example is participants' downplaying of any homophobia they may have faced while simultaneously referencing homophobic or heterosexist climates as something so obvious as to be taken for granted. Multiple participants stated clearly and succinctly that they never experienced homophobia directly, claiming, "I was never bullied for it. I never experienced any form of discrimination about it," describing their grade school as "this wonderful little [west coast liberal] social justice, peace and love, hippy school...everybody knew. I never got any shit for it," or their college as "very open campus and...lots of organizations and stuff. So I felt very accepted," and failing to remember, "any experience where my friends' families ever said anything strange… I wasn't really bullied about [having two moms]."

However, all four of these participants also later admitted to tense interactions with their peers or extended families. In a moment when discussing alternative insemination one participant remembers being asked by her peer if she had a belly button, to which she replied, "Of course I have a belly button! Like what do you think, I was made in a factory?" She also spoke about a moment when the burden of visibility was lifted, remembering, "once after my

parents split up, like a year or so after, I was at the store with my mom and her boyfriend and I was like, 'wow, this is kind of nice. People probably just assume that I'm there with my mom and my dad.' I don't have to worry about like, what people are thinking my family situation is like." The participant who reflected fondly on their elementary school doubled back when asked about other times of life: "Once I got to middle school… homophobia was definitely a thing...I never really experienced much of it in relationship to my parents, but...I got the vibe that it was not okay for me to be gay or for any of the other kids to be gay." And despite going to college on a relatively accepting campus yet another participant recalled that it was "a big deal when I came out, like my third year, that was like a mess...because I was in a Christian sorority and so, and my girlfriend at the time was as well and certainly when we started dating it was like this whole big thing. So that was kind of traumatizing...it was kind of a reality wave of like, no, like you can be in a really progressive place and they're still going to be people who like suddenly don't like you anymore." And the final participant reflected on the fact that, "I know that there have been some members of my family who have been like, 'you're going to go to hell.' And I'm assuming a lot of that was mostly prior to me being born, so I'm sure they had sort of like a second wave of, if not outright hatred and bigotry and all that, then certainly another level of confusion and discomfort. Like 'who's going to be the dad?' you know, like 'oh, she's going to grow up missing something,'" and even disclosed that some members of her extended family told strangers that she was conceived not as a choice but via rape. That this story was easier for her extended family to repeat than the truth of her conception via alternative insemination illustrates a violent level of homophobia. She claimed to never experience homophobic discrimination from friends or their families, but said that often friends were not allowed at

her house because of "different parenting choices" her mothers made, such as being more relaxed with alcohol and marijuana.

Another way I attempted to ask about experiences of homophobia was through my question about families today. One of my participants, who claimed not to experience that much discrimination went on to answer the question with the following:

> I think I'm a little envious of them… because they are growing up in a very different time than you or I did… it was rough, growing up, in a lot of ways, *now that I think about it*, it was. Maybe it was only in the spaces that I was exposed to, but my mom being a divorcee with kids and coming out late in the game was an odd thing, because it was right kind of at that cusp, right? Like the early two thousands where more and more people were not closeted to the point that they got so far as to marry into a heterosexual coupling? So, yeah, I think I'm a little envious of them… But I'm also hopeful because of them, because I think there will be a lot more empathetic people raised in those kinds of families… But then it's also that simultaneous, because you don't know the struggle really, that history is going to be forgotten. That often happens when we've made progress… And people born of that progress don't learn their history.

Despite her claim that she did not experience much homophobia growing up, upon reflection she admits to expressing envy of children of queers today who might have it easier.

Only one of my participants really emphasized the amount of homophobia she received from her peers, and she also stressed the importance of time and place, saying that homophobia was very present, "especially growing up, you know I [was born in the late 1980s] and am from [the Midwest]." While she did not necessarily discuss any specific stories the burden of having a lesbian mom in that place and time seemed to be implied. Similarly, my oldest participant, who primarily dealt with her father's homosexuality as a young teen in the eighties spoke not necessarily of specific events, but "this black cloud of homophobia, heterosexism is over all of it," and again referenced time and place, explaining, "maybe there's a historical moment — and maybe it's your historical moment — in which

kids in kindergarten wrote 'I have two dads and a mom,' and I have this and that. I didn't have that." Homophobia and heterosexism are clearly not the fault of gay people, but that is hardly relevant to the conservative Right or their more moderate allies, who frequently argue that gay people shouldn't have children because of the homophobia and bullying their children might face. That this logic is flimsy and cyclical does not necessarily matter if one has learned from childhood never to give ammunition to homophobes; the denial of homophobia followed by later, often reluctant recognition of it is a clear result of "poster family syndrome."

I asked my participants a list of identical questions, following-up on each as necessary. When I reached questions about race, my white participants often did not have that much to say and some even seemed surprised by the question. Almost across the board, white interviewees described growing up in mostly racially homogenous, white neighbors and cities, with varying degrees of emphasis on well-meaning, liberal, nineties-era multiculturalism. One interviewee put it very vividly:

> I think that having gay parents made it easier for me to be racist… I grew up in a very white, fairly wealthy space… and you know, I grew up with the idea that racists were bad, and racists were individual people who were hateful… and the like diversity is beautiful and it's lots of different colors and the sort of diluted, happy-go-lucky version… And I think when I was growing up I was really sheltered from the microaggressions or straight-up oppression or violence that my parents experienced… so I had sort of the status of being related to a marginalized group, but it's like, my parents didn't lose their jobs. I was never homeless. Or a lot of the other… experiences that a lot of queer, especially young, people have… So I grew up with all the privilege of two white parents who were income earners, who had advanced degrees, but I had this status of I'm a good person by proxy… and I was like 'oh, being gay is the worst kind of oppression,' because I didn't know any people of color, right? And that assumption was left unchallenged for a very long time. So it was kind of like I had this excuse to ignore and be complicit in institutionalized racism because my parents were gay… Like, 'I can't be a bad person, my parents are gay!'… I haven't actually found that that's worked out for me. I can actually be a totally shit person.

Nearly all of my white interviewees expressed regret about this aspect of their childhoods and recognized that they still needed to do a lot of unlearning in order to fully live up to anti-racist values. These admissions directly contradict the oft-cited argument that (white) queer parents will raise (white) children who are better equipped to fight racism and empathize with people of color because of their experiences with homophobic discrimination. Not only does this logic erase children of queers who face racism themselves, but it obscures the totalizing effect of white privilege. While white adult children of queers may not be completely "just like" their counterparts raised by heterosexual parents, one of my white participants confirmed that in terms of race politics they *are* "just like other white people."

White children of queers are not the only children of queers who must navigate the racial politics of white parents. One of my Black participants whose mother's family has Mexican ancestry but is largely white-passing explained how her personal thoughts had evolved on this issue:

> As I've become more politically conscious, especially around anti-Black racism, I feel more of a responsibility to not participate in this way that I think mixed race people and mixed race identities get deployed in an anti-Black way that's sort of fetishizing mixed people… like, 'mixed kids are the cutest!' That kind of thing, that I grew up hearing a lot and not interrogating, and now I see that as very much anti-Black, very colorist… [My family might] say things in front of me that they wouldn't say in front of someone who was not mixed race, who was darker skinned… I've realized that my experience is actually different from theirs and that even though they're my family, our political commitments are very different. And I think sometimes… there's a perception that because I have queer, progressive people in my family that I wouldn't have to have any of those conversations with them, but they can be problematic too.

This participant's reflection is clearly specific to Blackness and anti-Black racism. While recognizing the specificity of this, [58] I would also argue that white or white-passing queer parents' shortcomings in supporting their children of color is certainly a phenomenon described in queerspawn literature by adults of color raised by white queer parents and is yet another potential overlap with adult adoptees of color raised in white families. In her contribution to *Who's Your Daddy?* Tobi Hill-Meyer explains how her parents, "showed me how to deal with homophobia, how to build community, and how to survive in a society that constantly denigrates queer people, but I never had the opportunity to learn the same things around race and racism, at least not until I sought out people of colour on my own."[59] It is clear from Hill-Meyer's essay that being an adult adoptee of color raised in a white family was as much of an influential factor in her life as being a child raised by queer parents.

White parents and family members are certainly not the only people in queer families who deal with race politics. When I asked what her experiences of race were like growing up one of my Latina participants spoke about her Mexican mother and grandparents' ideas of performing race respectably: "My family would see the *cholo*-looking men, or the *cholas*, with the tattoos and the baggy pants and the thin eyebrows...and they would be like 'don't be like them...those are dirty Mexicans'...So it was very much about being respectable and being modest and *educada* — not exactly educated, but more like 'well-mannered,'...assimilationist isn't the right word, but a lot more of that respectability politics going on." As I mentioned before, certainly respectability politics is a survival strategy developed in the face of racism,

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[58] Many scholars in Black studies have cautioned against uncritical deployments of the phrase "people of color," arguing that it obscures the specific history of global anti-Blackness, in which Blackness is placed on the very bottom of our contemporary racial hierarchy. See Jared Sexton "People-of-Color-Blindness: Notes on the Afterlife of Slavery" (2010) for a specific and thorough discussion of this.
[59] Epstein, 274.

and as such I do not mean to critique my participant's family for these views. Rather, it is important to note the ways she distances herself from her family's views and perhaps takes a more skeptical attitude from the position of adulthood.

I certainly do not have enough interview data to conclude that queer families always have problematic navigations of racial politics. One of the largest problems with this potential claim is that the number of my participants of color who were raised exclusively by people of color is quite low. However, the opposite proposition — that there is a clear or easy translation between struggles against racism and struggles of homophobia — is certainly disproved with my participants' experiences. Of course, this has already been thoroughly disproved,[60] but the experiences of adult children of queer people are perhaps an overlooked source of reflection on this front.

The assumption of anti-racist politics is not the only dimension of supposedly perfect queer families, and the grappling with implicit racism within queer families is not the only way children of queers are affected by poster family syndrome. Another symptom of poster family syndrome is the pressure to maintain appropriate sexualities and desires, ones that conform to bourgeois, heteropatriarchal, white supremacist notions of propriety. This is most often manifested as expectations that LGBTQ people be partnered, monogamous, vanilla, and otherwise normative. The children of queer parents are also affected by these pressures. Due to the longstanding tradition of the conservative right to paint queer people as seducers and corruptors of children, the "appropriate" sexuality for children of queers, in the eyes of the mainstream LGBTQ movement, *must* be heterosexual.

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[60] See the extensive work in queer of color critique, including the work of Roderick Ferguson (2004), José Esteban Muñoz (1999), Juana María Rodríguez (2003), etc.

Some researchers have contested this, pointing out that the liberal platitude, that gay people mostly raise straight children, is both untrue and unrealistic. In their 2001 meta-analysis of twenty-one different psychological studies, sociologists Judith Stacey and Timothy Bilbarz argue that "defensively stress[ing]" the absence of harm caused by queer parenting, as well as glossing any tendencies in children's' sexuality reaffirms heterosexuality as the "gold standard" which queer parenting can only hope to imitate as closely as possible. They assert that there is no theory of sexual development — biological determinist, social constructionist, psychoanalytic, or any others — in which a parent's sexuality would not make a difference to their child's sexuality. And yet, they write, "this is precisely the outcome that most scholars report, although the limited empirical record does not justify it."[61] While my own sample-size is miniscule, this is strongly supported by evidence from my interviews. Only two of my ten participants identified as straight, the rest choosing to call themselves "gay," "bisexual or queer," or simply, "not straight."

Being a queer raised by queer parents — referred to as "second generation," in some circles[62] — is less straightforward than it may seem. When my queer peers find out that I was raised by lesbian moms they often express jealousy, assuming that because my parents are gay themeselves of the biggest obstacles to being publicly queer, letting your family know about your sexuality, is essentially a moot point. In some ways this is very true, and I would never want to dismiss the privilege I've had in having my parents be so accepting of my queerness, a sentiment that was resoundingly echoed by my interview participants. However,

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[61] Stacey, Judith and Timothy J. Biblarz. "(How) Does the Sexual Orientation of Parents Matter?" *American Sociological Review*, vol. 66, no. 2, Apr 2001, p. 163.
[62] Usually the same circles in which "queerspawn" is used, those virtually connected to COLAGE or as a part of the literature written by adult children of queer parents.

this sentiment does not capture the full picture of what it is like to be a queer child of queer

parents. I would posit that as a group, we are very aware of the fear (from both the

conservative Right and their liberal counterparts) that queer people having children will

breed more queer people. One of my interviewees explained, referencing her mother, "one of

the things I've struggled with is just the scrutiny of like, 'oh, you're a lesbian and you have

two queer children,'... especially after my sister came out, I was like, 'well I can't be queer

now, because we can't *both* be queer,' which is really fucked up to think, but I actually

remember having that very thought of [worrying about] how will people read that. There's

just this whole history of pathologizing lesbians and queer people in general."

In our grappling with this scrutiny, adult children of queer parents express a political

response to it, one that I find much more liberatory than the mainstream LGBTQ

movement's denial of our queerness. Some of my interviewees welcomed the suggestion that

their upbringing could be related to their own sexuality. One participant explained that she

had always "had it modeled that you didn't need a man to be happy or be in a relationship. So

I always knew that that was an option, whether that was unconscious or subconscious, I'm

not sure." Another used similar language of example-setting when she explained that,

"because I have kind of a different form of family, like my mom whoever she was dating, it

allowed me to be okay with different forms of what would be a family or different forms of

love and relationships." Even more striking than participants who confirmed that their

parents' sexuality influenced their own were participants who simply asked: so what? One

interviewee put it succinctly, "when you're really afraid of dealing with homophobic people,

you don't want to give them any ammunition in terms of, 'oh this is why you're gay.' I'm

like, 'It doesn't matter why I'm gay. There's nothing wrong with being gay.' So if my mom

was left handed and I'm left handed, it doesn't matter if it's genetic or how she taught me, it's just we're left handed and that's just how it is." These alternatives to the "party line" of mainstream queer family activism — that queer parents are no more likely to raise queer children than straight parents — illustrate that such defensive thinking is not just personally harmful to queers with queer parents, but politically harmful to all queers in its implication that queerness is something to be avoided.

While it may seem obvious or easy to state, as my participant did, that "there's nothing wrong with being gay," the sentiment is radical to me in its absolute refusal to engage with questions of how queerness happens, or where queerness comes from. Even in discursive spaces which are explicitly pro-queer there is a lot of space ceded to these questions — emphasis on the fact it is not a choice or curiosity about the possibility of a "gay gene." As Eve Sedgwick humorously points out in one of queer theory's first pieces to grapple with the issue of children, this usually centers on how to avoid homosexuality: "advice on how to help your kids turn out gay… is less ubiquitous than you might think."[63] Above quotes from participants indicate an openness to the possibility that queer parents may be more likely to raise queer children. One participant explicitly said "that would be lovely, wonderful."

Certainly a part of me agrees that this implication is exciting, but I am also hesitant to locate radical politics simply in the replication of certain sexual identities.[64] Partially, as a queer person raised by queer parents, I feel more of an immediate connection with a straight

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[63] Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. "How To Bring Your Kids Up Gay." *Social Text*, no. 29, 1991, p. 23.
[64] As I mentioned earlier, part of the reason I choose to say "adult children of queers" instead of the more popular "queerspawn," is my hesitation around reifying yet another totalizing identity category instead of meditating on lived experiences themselves.

person raised by queer parents than a queer person raised by straight parents, and I do not want to exclude such people from the radical potential of being raised in a queer family. In other words, I believe the goal of queer politics is the abolition of heterosexual (white supremacist, capitalist) patriarchy, and my contention that adult children of queers have wisdom to lend in this fight is irrespective of who we are personally romantically partnered with. I do not believe this wisdom or "radical potential" comes from some innate strength of queer families or that it is passed down from our parents at all. Rather, I would posit that it comes from our lifetimes of struggle with heterosexism. This struggle is one that is definitionally marked by our relation to others — one is not "queered" as an individual, but through the queering of someone else— and as such it necessitates a complex navigation of visibility, sexuality and family dynamics. One participant mused, "I wouldn't be totally shocked if gay families raised [people] who think about the world in a slightly different way or who think about relationships in a different way or who think about social change in a different way."

I want to be clear that while I see these relational skills as a potentially vital source of wisdom for queer politics and for how we might navigate intimacy and relationships in a better, more just world, I do not see them as evidence that adult children of queers are "well-adjusted" to our current world. Two adult children of queers, Makeda Zook and Sadie Epstein-Fine, ask in their introduction to *Spawning Generations*, "What does it mean to be 'well-adjusted' in a world… rife with problems and fraught with violence?"[65] Implied here is the argument that "success" in our current world — demonstrated by high-achievement in one's career or schooling, emotional stability, lack of mental illnesses or addictions —

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[65] Zook and Epstein-Fine, 4.

indicates a level of contentment with our current social structures of oppression and injustice. By far my interview participants could in fact be called "well-adjusted" in the traditional sense — most were well-educated and/or on their way to achieving professional success. However, as I have shown, the pressure to achieve this state of "well-adjustment" is immense, and we are discouraged from discussing the ways in which we are "*mal*adjusted" — familial tensions, mental illnesses, etc. What if instead of seeing these moments as regrettable instances of our poster-families failing, we chose to see them as radical instances of our queer families succeeding in raising people that are not content with this world? I am not suggesting that adult children of queers should or need to experience pain. I am saying that when we *do* — and perhaps especially when we manage this pain in ways that our current capitalist, white supremacist, hetero-patriarchal regime deems unproductive or unhealthy — this is neither particularly surprising nor necessarily detrimental to queer politics. After all, people do not wish to change a world they are already content with or reconciled to.

Conclusion: Adult Children of Queers as Thought-Partners in Queer Theory

The thoughts and feelings of adult children of queer parents are nuanced, varied and perhaps unexpected given how they are disregarded by scholars. Despite a substantial number of anthologies of essays and interviews written and given by children of queer parents there has been little engagement with such work in the academy, especially in queer theory. The marriage equality movement has been the central issue in LGBTQ activism in the last two decades, and thus the central target of critique coming from radical queer theorists. Marriage equality activists have yoked the concept of queers raising children to this

fight and critical queer theorists have not done that much to challenge that pairing. Queer families raising children are glossed as homonormative, and, because identifying and denouncing homonormativity is the bread and butter of queer theory, such families are thrown out with the proverbial bathwater of the marriage equality movement.

This was the theoretical landscape I stumbled into as an undergraduate, which was very disorienting as a real person who had been raised by queer parents. The constant discursive disparaging of the homonormative nuclear family confused me, as it implies that the experience of children raised in said families is no different and no "queerer" than the experience of children raised by heterosexually married couples. This implication is so discordant with my experience of childhood — which was much different than my peers and solidly unhappy — that to be told my family structure was not even considered queer anymore seemed unfair. I felt like I had missed the window, if there ever was such a window, when I could have been proud to be my mothers' daughter. This sense of discord, along with the lack of attention paid to anything written by adult children of queers in queer theory was maddening.

Queer theory has largely ignored the thoughts of actual children of queer parents, which means that it has ignored unique perspectives on visibility and legibility, ways of living queerly, and the potential and limits of queer families. Additionally, while I did not explore this in-depth in my research, I wonder if adult children of queer parents might be potential bridge workers in generational debates among queer theorists and feminists today.[66] There are many such examples, but a specific recommendation for future research would be

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[66] For a thorough discussion of these debates see Astrid Henry *Not My Mother's Sister: Generational Conflict and Third Wave Feminism* (2004).

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an engagement with adult children of queers who also identify as trans or non-binary, who may be forced to have difficult conversations with their parents around gender and transition. Clearly adult children of queers are not alone in needing to have these difficult conversations – people raised by straight parents must also have them. However, when one's parents are queer themselves the challenges one faces in coming out to family as trans might look less like standard transphobia. Instead, they may resemble current discourses in feminist and queer circles today about the significance and meaning of gender – especially what it means to be a woman.[67] However, talking with trans adult children of queers about their discussions with their parents should not be seen as an exercise in extraction of their wisdom, but rather as an opportunity for such members of the queer community to lead the discussions across generations.

Navigation of generational debates among queer people and feminists is not the only navigation adult children of queers must do in their lifetimes. Additionally, adult children of queers have learned the nuances of legibility and visibility, as well as how to respond to and live under pressures to be the "happy, healthy, and heterosexual" poster children for their

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[67]One participant who identified as trans explained that his parents, "had kind of a tough time with stuff with my gender identity," saying that one of his moms, "came out as a lesbian when there was actually a huge rift between trans men and the lesbian community." I wondered aloud if it ever felt like some things might be easier to explain to straight parents because they do not always have a stake in conversations about minoritized genders and sexualities. He agreed and explained further, "Absolutely… my impression is with straight parents you're like 'ok, you don't know *anything* about this thing, so I'm going to teach you *all* of the ideas and vocabulary and all of this stuff.' Versus with my parents, they had this whole set of ideas about gender and sexuality from when they were coming of age." Again, this is not to imply that straight people do not have a set of ideas about gender and sexuality — my participant stressed this as well — but simply that the conversations one must have are different. While our current historical moment is not the genesis of these conversations and disagreements, it is undeniable that certain debates over transgender rights in feminist communities have come to a head in the past few years. While I do not necessarily think the debates themselves are important — I believe that trans people are who they say they are and deserve protection, resources, solidarity and love — I do think the question of "what to do" with people who do not immediately understand this position has yet to be sufficiently answered. These debates are the ones that interest me and the ones that I believe trans adult children of queers, who may be forced to answer this question in regards to their own family, could potentially lend expertise to.

queer families. Our wisdom and lived experiences of these dynamics has been largely ignored by queer theorists, in their attempt to intentionally disregard any assimilationist conceptions of queer families, which is the only thing that children of queers can represent under our current structure of thinking. The omission of the lived experiences of adult children of queers from theorizing on children and families, indeed from queer theory in general, has always struck me as ironic, because I think children of queers may be some of the most obvious thought-partners in questioning visibility, legibility, fixed identity, and neoliberal family politics. I hope this thesis is a continuation of some of this work and a call for more adult children of queer theorizing in queer theory.

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