

Giving Traditional Marriage a Makeover

Camp, Queer Theory, and Same Sex Weddings

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In her groundbreaking article *Notes on 'Camp'*, Susan Sontag notes that camp «is not a natural mode of sensibility, if there be any such. Indeed, the essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration».¹ Since Sontag's "notes," queer theorists have drawn upon camp's emphasis on artifice, exaggeration and surface and its potential to expose and demythologize rituals and structures that claim an essential reality in defining and hierarchizing social relationships and ways of understanding the self, particularly around one's gender and sexuality. Since beliefs in the essentialism of gender and sexuality still continue to oppress non-normative gender and sexual behavior, camp as a sensibility and a critical tool continues to give fodder for queer theory. In this paper, I will focus on the struggle over same-sex marriage in the United States to consider the resonance that gay camp still offers and queer theory's complicated relationship to it.

Since the 1980s, queer theorists have advocated for a utopian self-fashioning of one's gender and sexual being, arguing against conventional, oppressive gender constructs and heteronormativity that oppress all people. Moreover, queer theorists have argued against traditional marriage and conventional structuring of family. These theorists argue that marriage should not be necessary to receive the benefits that legal marriage bestows to loving individuals that construct a domestic life together, forming a communal group. Indeed, to these theorists, the concept of family should be open to experimentation, breaking free of the oppression of a two-parent structure with its clearly defined parental roles of patriarch and matriarch that provides the nation with future citizens of the same ilk and rejects gender and sexual difference.

However, recent success around marriage and gays in the military by gay and lesbian activists in the United States has sidelined these utopian, radical challenges offered by queer theorists. To win acceptance within the national fabric of the United States, the majority of gays and lesbians have accepted the belief that homosexuality is inborn and is not chosen and cannot be changed. Activists stopped trying to challenge conventional marriage and familial formations, arguing

¹ Susan Sontag, *Notes on "Camp"*, «Partisan Review», vol. 31, n. 4, Fall 1964; reprinted in Fabio Cleto (ed.), *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*, University of Michigan Press, 1999, pp. 53-66; we quote for the latter, p. 53.

that gays and lesbians believed in the monogamous, two-person definition of marriage and embraced national patriotism and military service. Financially successful gays and lesbians began to donate to political parties and organizations that supported including gays and lesbians in these more conservative structures of family and citizenship, which became and is the political goal of a wide majority of gays and lesbians in the United States.

On the other hand, I will argue in this paper, the advocates against same-sex marriage are right—same-sex marriage is queering the institution of marriage, since gay marriages are more likely to reject the moral framework associated with marriage and new concepts of family are being tested. (Other historical economic and social pressures are impacting the institution of marriage, but are beyond the focus of this paper.) A typical claim by conservative religious organizations is that marriage has been a sacred bond between a man and a woman for time immemorial. In the online conservative Catholic magazine *Crisis*, for example, journalist John Jalsevac, using language that is similar to other conservative religious voices, argues, «Traditional Marriage is founded upon certain, solid, objective facts: the fact of the biological and psychological complementarity of the sexes; the fact of a solemn public vow made before God which is deemed to be actually binding for life, and not a mere ceremony; the fact that sexual union between members of the opposite sex leads naturally to children; the fact that children do best with both a mother and a father; and the fact that healthy, stable families are the necessary foundation of a healthy, stable society»² (*Why We are Losing the Gay “Marriage” Debate*). For Jalsevac and other religious leaders and writers, marriage as a sacred institution and the organization of the family is radically changed and weakened when two men or two women are allowed to stand before the priest and exchange vows.

Gay and lesbian activists and legal scholars counter this understanding of marriage by noting that marriage should be about two people publicly acknowledging their commitment and love and that same-sex marriage actually strengthens marriage with this public commitment that promises stability to the family. Additionally, government recognition of marriage in the United States is not about a sacred bestowal upon the couple, but about federal and state benefits, including tax benefits, the rights of inheritance, the right to make medical decisions for one’s partner, and other legal issues. This is not a commitment continuing the natural order ordained by a Supreme Being, but a secular, legal commitment.

² John Jalsevac, *Why We are Losing the Gay ‘Marriage’ Debate (And How We Can Start Winning*, in «Crisis Magazine: A Voice for the Faithful Catholic Laity», <<http://www.crisismagazine.com/2013/why-we-are-losing-the-gay-marriage-debate-and-how-we-can-start-winning>> (accessed on 3 June 2013).

While many gays and lesbians seek out a church wedding with the traditional ritual and blessing of the priest and congregation, the Catholic Church and other conservative religions have emphatically stated that they will not sanctify nor allow these marriages in their spaces, forcing those gay and lesbian couples in their congregation engaged to marry to seek alternatives. While there are churches that will perform gay marriage, the lack of religious accord in the United States on the issue and the intransigence of conservative churches, implicitly weaken the authority of church over marriage as more states within the United States recognize gay marriage and alternatives to the traditional wedding are available.

Thus, gay and lesbian weddings are often located in the secular, and rituals and vows are free from the traditional structure and language that a church wedding brings to the ceremony. Couples are free to experiment and draw upon new inspirations for expressing love, joy, and commitment. As they plan their wedding ceremony and receptions, gay and lesbian couples, often with the help of wedding planners, often turn to their favorite poems, music, and taste in décor, often revealing a deep-seated camp sensibility. While the love that brought the couple to marriage is sincere, the idea of marriage is no longer a moral and spiritual commitment; it doesn't contain the solemn ceremony and priestly and community scrutiny of the ceremony.

The controversy over gay marriage in the Western world, and increasingly elsewhere, suggests that “camp” as a sensibility and aesthetic practice and “queer” as a theoretical critique are still valuable concepts, and that a queer read of same-sex marriage and the family demystifies traditional marriage, family, and gender and sexual systems. And while there is an assertion of the married couple and the two-parent family, there are new narratives and camp aesthetics that are brought into the marriage ceremony and domestic life after marriage.

The seriousness and ritual of the marriage ceremony is being loosened up and changed with gay politics, camp aesthetics and humor, and other aspects of gay culture. For instance, many gay wedding ceremonies either mix traditional music such as *The Wedding March* by Mendelssohn with popular songs by such gay icons as Elton John or Madonna or do away with the serious musical altogether. Columnist John Myers offers his selections for gays and lesbians tying the knot, drawing upon a combination of gay divas such as Cher, Diana Ross, and Barbara Streisand to gay anthems such as The Weather Girls' camp classic *It's Raining Men*, and then closing the wedding party with Judy Garland's *Over the Rainbow*³ (*Music Suggestions for a Gay Wedding in New York*). Similar to countercultural and new age religious vows of the 1960s and 70s, many of the vows are now self

³ John Myers, *Music Suggestions for a Gay Wedding in New York*, in «Yahoo Voices», 24 July 2011, <<http://voices.yahoo.com/music-suggestions-gay-wedding-york-8859541.html?cat=7>> (accessed on 3 June 2013).

designed, drawing upon gay poets and novelists such as Walt Whitman and Oscar Wilde, Broadway show lyrics from such shows as *West Side Story* or *Wicked*, and/or the legal decisions handed down by the courts, legitimizing the marriage and emphasizing the political struggle that led to the legal marriage. The receptions include wedding cakes with camp ornaments, such as two grooms on an art nouveau like design, elaborate flower designs, a rainbow-layered cake, or two lesbians with bicycles. These modern elements in the ceremony and reception emphasize a mixture of love between the couple, gay community, and camp culture over the moral directives of Biblical scripture and the priests administering the wedding vows.

Honeymoons are also planned with a decidedly gay sensibility, often again for the camp appeal in the location or honeymoon suite. While many gay newlyweds will honeymoon in gay friendly cities with extensive gay entertainment centers such as Sydney or Cape Town, gay men and lesbians are also invading traditional heterosexual honeymoon locations with advertising appeals for these queer newlyweds coming directly from the most traditional honeymoon locations such as Disneyland and Niagara Falls. In New York State's Catskills, the Roxbury Hotel also offers a gay fantasy alternative: «Rooms in this former motor lodge were designed with cinematic or television icons in mind, and two are particularly suited to romance. There's the Golightly-a-Go-Go, awash in Tiffany blue — from the walls to the bedding to the blue-tiled bathroom — and the Amadeus' Bride suite, which, Henderson [the owner] notes, was 'purposefully designed for honeymooners.' The dual-level room features 20-foot ceilings, 18k gold leaf moldings, 27 mirrors reflecting an enormous Austrian crystal chandelier and a two-person soaking tub»⁴ (Ceaser, *Top 10 Gay Honeymoon Destinations*).

The queering of family equally applies to many gay and lesbian families as well. For instance, the traditional mom and dad structure not only changes visually with the lack of the traditional image of father and mother, but in practice as well, with two men or two women often sharing tasks, earning the livelihood, and raising the children. Children observe their fathers cooking and dominating the kitchen or their mothers mowing the lawn or grilling hamburgers. A lesbian mother might teach a child how to throw or kick a ball while the gay father might take his child to a Broadway musical or ballet class. Thus, there are new images, new attitudes, and new structures that break down conventional gender parenting and child upbringing.

New unconventional members are added to the concept of family as well. When gay men and women have children, some couples move the childbearing surrogate

⁴ Jennifer Ceaser, *Top 10 Gay Honeymoon Destinations*, in *Your Gay Wedding*, 9 February 2012, <<http://yourweddinggay.com/index.php/component/content/article/8-news/latest-news/255-top-10-gay-honeymoon-destinations?showall=1&limitstart>> (accessed on 3 June 2013).

into the house; thus, the household can consist of the child with his/her parents consisting of two fathers and a mother or two mothers and a father. Additionally, the child's relatives are no longer determined solely on the concept of blood kin. Family gatherings at holidays can consist of a bevy of gay uncles and lesbian aunts, who are not blood relatives, in addition to traditional grandparents and blood related kinfolk. However unplanned, in these various re-conceptualizations of family, queer theory seems to be implicitly in practice, breaking down traditional family and gender roles and acts.

Same-sex couples maintain many of the basic aspects of the traditional wedding ritual, such as music, vows, throwing of rice (or an environmentally sound alternative if birdseed or soap bubbles), cutting of the cake, etc. But with the secularization of most gay and lesbian weddings, artifice and exaggeration easily slips into ceremony and celebration, often bringing a camp sensibility to the proceeding which has aesthetic weight over the sacred in the ritual of marriage. Queer theorists need to revisit the experimental work that is being performed by same-sex marriage, finding that through camp and other sensibilities from the gay and lesbian community, these weddings demythologize the sacred underpinnings of traditional marriage, turning marriage into entertainment that is as spectacular and excessive as a trip to Las Vegas, a ride at Disney World, or a Carnival Ocean Cruise.