

CHAPTER

14

Sexual Identities, Family Matters, and Border Crossings in Contemporary America



The role of sexuality in defining personal relationships has undergone significant changes in recent decades, as Americans debated and revised their notions of family, kinship, and affinity. A growing number of gay men and lesbians have exchanged commitment vows, raised children, and sought the right to marry. Beginning in the 1980s, some cities, universities, and businesses granted domestic partnership rights. Such measures remain highly controversial, with conservatives mounting political opposition based upon religious and cultural beliefs about the family. At the present time, the legislative record is mixed. Although the Hawaii Supreme Court opened the door to gay marriages in 1993, the state legislature slammed it shut by passing a constitutional amendment restricting marriage to heterosexual couples. In contrast, Vermont passed a civil unions law in 2000, granting most of the benefits of marriage to gay men and lesbians.

Beliefs about the "traditional" family—nuclear, heterosexual, based on "blood" and biology—have been challenged in other ways as well: through the use of new reproductive technologies and surrogate motherhood, by the growing numbers of single parents, and by the creation of "blended families" through divorce and remarriage. These reflect new attitudes toward sexuality and morality. Complicating this picture further is the profound change in the American population resulting from global migrations. Not since the early twentieth century has there been such a large percentage of immigrants and their children in the United States. As was true earlier in American history, conflicts over sexual cultures rooted in national differences and ethnic traditions continue to shape sexual identities and choices deeply.

The implications of these cultural and social transformations for the lived experience and politics of sexuality remain to be seen. Will sexual subcultures—from the Filipino custom of mail marriages to the gay liberationist group Sex Panic—flourish? Or will cultural "margins" disappear into the mainstream? What will sexual encounters, marriage, and family mean in the future? Even as sharp lines have been drawn in political controversies and public scandals, a more nuanced

and complex conversation about sexual matters is taking place in Americans' everyday lives. As those exchanges continue, this seems a period marked less by assimilation than by border crossings, where sexual categories are blurred, allegiances unpredictable, and identities fluid.

DOCUMENTS

What is a family, and do lesbian and gay Americans have a place in it? This question was at the heart of the Sharon Kowalski case, which pitted Kowalski's "blood" family against her life partner, as legal scholar-activist Nan D. Hunter explained in Document 1. In Document 2, journalist Andrew Sullivan claimed the right of homosexuals to marry and form families. In contrast, the members of Sex Panic, as reported in the *New York Times*, vigorously oppose gay assimilation into the mainstream and argue that promiscuous sex is central to gay male identity (Document 3). Debates over sexuality and family take on a different coloration in many immigrant communities. In Document 4, Roberto Ordonez noted how the old practice of "mail order brides" has been modernized by new global technologies; such marriages contain many risks for Filipinas, but can be a route of economic mobility and family formation. M. Evelina Galang, in an excerpt from "Deflowering the Sampaguita" (Document 5), wrote evocatively of Filipina-American daughters who routinely cross cultural borders; she suggested the inner struggle to understand one's sexuality, navigate the expectations of family and community, and create an identity in a complex social world.

1. Nan D. Hunter Defines the Family in the Sharon Kowalski Case, 1991

In the effort to end second-class citizenship for lesbian and gay Americans, no obstacle has proved tougher to surmount than the cluster of issues surrounding "the family." For the past twenty years, the concept of family has functioned as a giant cultural screen. Projected onto it, contests over race, gender, sexuality and a range of other "domestic" issues from crime to taxes constantly create and recreate a newly identified zone of social combat, the politics of the family. Activists of all persuasions eagerly seek to enter the discursive field, ever-ready to debate and discuss: Who counts as a family? Which "family values" are the authentic ones? Is there a place in the family for queers? As battles are won and lost in this cultural war, progressives and conservatives agree on at least one thing—the family is highly politicized terrain.

For lesbians and gays, these debates have dramatic real-life consequences, probably more so than with any other legal issue. Relationship questions touch almost every person's life at some point, in a way that military issues, for example, do not. Further, the unequal treatment is blatant, de jure and universal, as compared with the employment arena, where discrimination may be more subtle and variable. No state allows a lesbian or gay couple to marry. No state recognizes (although

Nan D. Hunter, "Nan D. Hunter Defines the Family in the Sharon Kowalski Case, 1991" originally titled "Sexual Dissent and the Family: The Sharon Kowalski Case." Reprinted with permission from the October 7, 1991 issue of *The Nation* (406–411).

sixteen counties and cities do) domestic partnership systems under which unmarried couples (gay or straight) can become eligible for certain benefits usually available only to spouses. The fundamental inequity is that, barring mental incompetence or consanguinity, virtually any straight couple has the option to marry and thus establish a next-of-kin relationship that the state will enforce. No lesbian or gay couple can. Under the law, two women or two men are forever strangers, regardless of their relationship.

One result is that every lesbian or gay man's nightmare is to be cut off from one's primary other, physically incapacitated, stranded, unable to make contact, without legal recourse. It is a nightmare that could not happen to a married couple. But it did happen to two Minnesota women, Sharon Kowalski and Karen Thompson, in a remarkable case that has been threading its way through the courts for six years.

Sharon Kowalski, notwithstanding the Minnesota State District Court's characterization of her as a "child of divorce," is an adult with both a committed life partner and parents who bitterly refuse to acknowledge either her lesbianism or her lover. Kowalski is a former physical education teacher and amateur athlete, whose Minnesota women's high school shot-put record still stands. In 1983, she was living with her lover, Thompson, in the home they had jointly purchased in St. Cloud. Both women were deeply closeted; they exchanged rings with each other but told virtually no one of their relationship. That November, Kowalski suffered devastating injuries in a car accident, which left her unable to speak or walk, with arms deformed and with major brain damage, including seriously impaired short-term memory.

After the accident, both Thompson and Kowalski's father petitioned to be appointed Sharon's guardian; initially, an agreement was entered that the father would become guardian on the condition that Thompson retain equal rights to visit and consult with doctors. By the summer of 1985, after growing hostilities, the father refused to continue the arrangement and persuaded a local court that Thompson's visits caused Kowalski to feel depressed. One doctor hired by the father wrote a letter stating that Kowalski was in danger of sexual abuse. Within twenty-four hours after being named sole guardian, the father cut off all contact between Thompson and Kowalski, including mail. By this time, Kowalski had been moved to a nursing home near the small town where she grew up in the Iron Range, a rural mining area in northern Minnesota.

Surely one reason the Kowalski case is so compelling is that for millions of parents, learning that one's son is gay or daughter is lesbian would be their worst nightmare. That is all the more true in small-town America, among people who are religiously observant and whose expectations for a daughter are primarily marriage and motherhood. "The good Lord put us here for reproduction, not that kind of way," Donald Kowalski told the *Los Angeles Times* in 1988. "It's just not a normal life style. The Bible will tell you that." Karen Thompson, he told other reporters, was "an animal" and was lying about his daughter's life. "I've never seen anything that would make me believe" that she is lesbian, he said to *The New York Times* in 1989. How much less painful it must be to explain a lesbian daughter's life as seduction, rather than to experience it as betrayal.

... Thompson's stubborn struggle to "bring Sharon home" ... entered a new stage. In late 1988 a different judge, sitting in Duluth, ordered Kowalski moved to

a new facility for medical evaluation. Soon thereafter, based on staff recommendations from the second nursing facility, the court ordered that Thompson be allowed to visit. The two women saw each other again in the spring of 1989, after three and a half years of forced separation. ... Kowalski, who can communicate by typing on a special keyboard, ... said that she wants to live in "St. Cloud with Karen."

... In May 1990, citing a heart condition for which he had been hospitalized, Donald Kowalski resigned as his daughter's guardian. This resignation set the stage for Thompson to file a renewed petition for appointment as guardian, which she did. But in an April 1991 ruling, Minnesota State District Court Judge Robert Campbell selected as guardian Karen Tomberlin—a friend of both Kowalski and her parents, who supported Tomberlin's request. On the surface, the court sought balance. The judge characterized the Kowalski parents and Karen Thompson as the "two wings" of Sharon Kowalski's family. He repeatedly asserted that both must have ample access to visitation with Kowalski. He described Tomberlin as a neutral third party who would not exclude either side. But the biggest single reason behind the decision, the one that he characterized as "instrumental," seemed to be the judge's anger at Thompson for ever telling Kowalski's parents (in a private letter), and then the world at large, that she and Kowalski were lovers.

The court condemned Thompson's revelation of her own relationship as the "outing" of Sharon Kowalski. Thompson did write the letter to Kowalski's parents without telling Kowalski (who was at the time just emerging from a three-month coma after the accident) and did build on her own an active political organization around the case, composed chiefly of disability and lesbian and gay rights groups. Of course, for most of that period, she could not have consulted Kowalski because the two were cut off from each other.

In truth, though, the judge's concern seemed to be more for the outing of Kowalski's parents. He describes the Kowalskis as "outraged and hurt by the public invasion of Sharon's privacy and their privacy," and he blames this outing for the bitterness between Thompson and the parents. Had Thompson simply kept this to herself, the court implies, none of these nasty facts would ever have had to be discussed. But then Thompson would never have been able to maintain her relationship with her lover. ...

The conflict in the Kowalski case illustrates one of the prime contradictions underlying all the cases seeking legal protection for lesbian and gay couples. This culture is deeply invested with a notion of the ideal family as not only a zone of privacy and a structure of authority (preferably male in the conservative view) but also as a barrier against unlicensed sexuality. Even many leftists and progressives, who actively contest male authority and at least some of the assumptions behind privacy, are queasy about constructing a family politics with queer sex on the inside rather than the outside. ...

A debate continues within the lesbian and gay community about whether [the] effort [to legalize gay marriage] is assimilationist and conservatizing and whether same-sex marriage would simply constitute the newest form of boundary. Much of that debate, however, simply assumes that the social meaning of marriage is unchanging and timeless. If same-sex couples could marry, the profoundly gendered structure at the heart of marriage would be radically disrupted. Who would be the

"husband" in a marriage of two men, or the "wife" in a marriage of two women? And either way—if there can be no such thing as a female husband or a male wife, as the right wing argues with contempt; or if indeed in some sense there *can* be, as lesbian and gay couples reconfigure these roles on their own terms—the absolute conflation of gender with role is shattered. What would be the impact on heterosexual marriage?

The law's changes to protect sexual dissent within the family will occur at different speeds in different places, which might not be so bad. Family law has always been a province primarily of state rather than federal regulation and often has varied from state to state; grounds for divorce, for example, used to differ dramatically depending on geography. What seems likely to occur in the next wave of family cases is the same kind of variability in the legal definition of the family itself. Those very discrepancies may help to denaturalize concepts like "marriage" and "parent" and expose the utter contingency of the sexual conventions that, in part, construct the family.

2. Andrew Sullivan Makes a Conservative Case for Gay Marriage, 1989

[In July 1989,] in New York, a court ruled that a gay lover had the right to stay in his deceased partner's rent-control apartment because the lover qualified as a member of the deceased's family. The ruling deftly annoyed almost everybody. Conservatives saw judicial activism in favor of gay rent control: three reasons to be appalled. Chastened liberals[,] . . . while endorsing the recognition of gay relationships, also worried about the abuse of already stretched entitlements that the ruling threatened. What neither side quite contemplated is that they both might be right, and that the way to tackle the issue of unconventional relationships in conventional society is to try something both more radical and more conservative than putting courts in the business of deciding what is and is not a family. That alternative is the legalization of civil gay marriage.

The New York rent-control case did not go anywhere near that far, which is the problem. The rent-control regulations merely stipulated that a "family" member had the right to remain in the apartment. The judge ruled that to all intents and purposes a gay lover is part of his lover's family, inasmuch as a "family" merely means an interwoven social life, emotional commitment, and some level of financial interdependence.

It's [a] principle now well established around the country. Several cities have "domestic partnership" laws, which allow relationships that do not fit into the category of heterosexual marriage to be registered with the city and qualify for benefits that up till now have been reserved for straight married couples. . . . In these cities, a variety of interpersonal arrangements qualify for health insurance, bereavement leave, insurance, annuity and pension rights, housing rights (such as rent-control

apartments), adoption and inheritance rights. Eventually, according to gay lobby groups, the aim is to include federal income tax and veterans' benefits as well. . . .

. . . [T]he concept of domestic partnership chips away at the prestige of traditional relationships and undermines the priority we give them. This priority is not necessarily a product of heterosexism. Consider heterosexual couples. Society has good reason to extend legal advantages to heterosexuals who choose the formal sanction of marriage over simply living together. They make a deeper commitment to one another and to society; in exchange, society extends certain benefits to them. Marriage provides an anchor, if an arbitrary and weak one, in the chaos of sex and relationships to which we are all prone. It provides a mechanism for emotional stability, economic security, and the healthy rearing of the next generation. We rig the law in its favor not because we disparage all forms of relationship other than the nuclear family, but because we recognize that not to promote marriage would be to ask too much of human virtue. In the context of the weakened family's effect upon the poor, it might also invite social disintegration. One of the worst products of the New Right's "family values" campaign is that its extremism and hatred of diversity has disguised this more measured and more convincing case for the importance of the marital bond.

The concept of domestic partnership ignores these concerns, indeed directly attacks them. This is a pity, since one of its most important objectives—providing some civil recognition for gay relationships—is a noble cause and one completely compatible with the defense of the family. But the way to go about it is not to undermine straight marriage; it is to legalize old-style marriage for gays.

The gay movement has ducked this issue primarily out of fear of division. Much of the gay leadership clings to notions of gay life as essentially outsider, anti-bourgeois, radical. Marriage, for them, is co-optation into straight society. For the Stonewall generation, it is hard to see how this vision of conflict will ever fundamentally change. But for many other gays—my guess, a majority—while they don't deny the importance of rebellion 20 years ago and are grateful for what was done, there's now the sense of a new opportunity. A need to rebel has quietly ceded to a desire to belong. To be gay and to be bourgeois no longer seems such an absurd proposition. Certainly since AIDS, to be gay and to be responsible has become a necessity. . . .

Legalizing gay marriage would offer homosexuals the same-deal society now offers heterosexuals: general social approval and specific legal advantages in exchange for a deeper and harder-to-extract-yourself-from commitment to another human being. Like straight marriage, it would foster social cohesion, emotional security, and economic prudence. Since there's no reason gays should not be allowed to adopt or be foster parents, it could also help nurture children. And its introduction would not be some sort of radical break with social custom. As it has become more acceptable for gay people to acknowledge their loves publicly, more and more have committed themselves to one another for life in full view of their families and their friends. A law institutionalizing gay marriage would merely reinforce a healthy social trend. It would also, in the wake of AIDS, qualify as a genuine public health measure. Those conservatives who deplore promiscuity among some homosexuals should be among the first to support it. . . .

Of course, some would claim that any legal recognition of homosexuality is a de facto attack upon heterosexuality. But even the most hardened conservatives

recognize that gays are a permanent minority and aren't likely to go away. Since persecution is not an option in a civilized society, why not coax gays into traditional values rather than rail incoherently against them?

There's a less elaborate argument for gay marriage: it's good for gays. It provides role models for young gay people who, after the exhilaration of coming out, can easily lapse into short-term relationships and insecurity with no tangible goal in sight. My own guess is that most gays would embrace such a goal with as much (if not more) commitment as straights. Even in our society as it is, many lesbian relationships are virtual textbook cases of monogamous commitment. Legal gay marriage could also help bridge the gulf often found between gays and their parents. It could bring the essence of gay life—a gay couple—into the heart of the traditional straight family in a way the family can most understand and the gay offspring can most easily acknowledge. It could do as much to heal the gay-straight rift as any amount of gay rights legislation.

If these arguments sound socially conservative, that's no accident. It's one of the richest ironies of our society's blind spot toward gays that essentially conservative social goals should have the appearance of being so radical. But gay marriage is not a radical step. It avoids the mess of domestic partnership; it is humane; it is conservative in the best sense of the word.

3. Sex Panic Opposes Gay Assimilation, 1997

One night last May, a handful of New York City's best-known gay journalists, artists and academics called together some friends to bemoan what they viewed as a backlash against the sexual practices of homosexuals. The turnout surprised them: five dozen people jammed into an overheated room.

They swapped stories of police crackdowns on sex in public restrooms and closings of gay discos and pubs. And they complained about new books taking aim at what remains, even in the AIDS era, a central feature of gay urban life: sex clubs, bathhouses and weekend-long drug parties where men may have intercourse with a dozen partners a night.

"It sounds like a traditional sex panic," someone declared, borrowing a term historians use to describe a wave of societal prudishness. Thus the group adopted a name: Sex Panic.

Gay activist groups are hardly in short supply. What makes Sex Panic different are its enemies: three of the nation's most prominent gay authors, Gabriel Rotello, Michaelangelo Signorile and Larry Kramer. All sound alarms about the homosexual culture of sexual freedom, warning that its promiscuous pursuit by a core of gay men threatens to perpetuate epidemic AIDS.

As viruses go, H.I.V. is fragile and difficult to transmit. But in the late 70's and early 80's, Mr. Rotello writes[,] . . . H.I.V. found a home in the homosexual fast lane. As their movement for sexual liberation took hold, gay men changed sex partners as often as some people changed clothes. But the very behavior favored by

them—anal intercourse—was particularly conducive to the spread of AIDS. Gay men began dying.

When scientists learned that latex condoms blocked H.I.V., public health officials and AIDS activists created a "safe sex" strategy. But what Mr. Rotello calls "the condom code"—the idea that the number of partners doesn't matter, so long as you always use a condom—hasn't stamped out H.I.V., mainly because not everyone follows it. Now, two decades into the epidemic, bathhouses and unsafe sex are coming back.

"The whole culture has to change," Mr. Kramer said in an interview. "We have created a culture that in fact murdered us, killed us. What you can't help but think, if you've got any brains, is don't people ever learn anything?"

Such remarks have won him few fans at Sex Panic. "A culture doesn't kill people," retorted Kendall Thomas, a law professor at Columbia University and a founder of Sex Panic. "The virus kills people."

The volleying has deeply divided the gay intelligentsia. For the first time since the publication in 1987 of "And The Band Played On" by Randy Shilts, there is open debate among homosexuals about promiscuity's role in AIDS. For many of them, it is a terrifying discussion, one they fear could fan the flames of discrimination as it becomes public by focusing on their behavior as a cause of the epidemic. "It is something a lot of people are really afraid to speak up about," Mr. Signorile said.

A Question of Assimilation

How this argument is settled will have broad implications for all of America as the financial, social and emotional toll of AIDS continues. While death rates have been declining, studies show that men who have sex with men still account for the majority of AIDS cases, and that a young gay man has as much as a 50 percent chance of acquiring H.I.V. by middle age.

But the debate is about more than public health; it is about what it means to be homosexual. As some homosexuals press for same-sex marriage, adoption and other forms of societal acceptance, welcoming President Clinton's address this month to a gay and lesbian civil rights group (the first by a sitting President), others protest assimilation.

On one side are those like Mr. Kramer, who are beseeching homosexuals to adopt a culture rooted as much in art, literature and relationships as in "what's between our legs and what we do with it."

On the other are those like Mr. Thomas and Michael Warner, an English professor at Rutgers University and a founder of Sex Panic, who argue that promiscuous sex is the essence of gay liberation, and that any attempt to fight AIDS by changing the culture is doomed.

"It is an absurd fantasy to expect gay men to live without a sexual culture when we have almost nothing else that brings us together," Mr. Warner said.

The debate occurs against a backdrop of evidence that homosexuals are returning to what they call "bare-back sex," anal intercourse without condoms. In a survey of 205 gay men in Miami's South Beach, Dr. William W. Darrow, a public health professor at Florida International University, found that 45 percent had unprotected anal sex in the past year. . . .

The reasons aren't fully understood. Mr. Signorile blames the social scene; . . . he attacks the "circuit," a national series of weekend-long bashes laden with drugs.

"What we are seeing," he said in an interview, "is a kind of live-and-let-live intense party scene that is very similar to the same scene that contributed to the AIDS epidemic exploding in the 1970's."

Invincible Youth

The myth of invincible youth is also a factor; a generation of young men has now grown up amid AIDS. Some men have simply grown weary of wearing condoms. And there is evidence that the life-saving promise of protease inhibitors is backfiring: as drugs extend the lives of AIDS patients, more people take risks. . . .

. . . [A]s the number of partners goes up, use of condoms goes down, said Ron Stall, a behavioral scientist at the Center for AIDS Prevention Studies at the University of San Francisco. He fears that if gay men continue to have unsafe sex in the age of protease inhibitors, drug-resistant strains of H.I.V. will spread. "We have then yielded the epidemiological nightmare," he said.

To Sex Panic, this sounds like an alarmist pretext for restricting gay civil rights. Promiscuity and safe sex can coexist, its members argue. And while it may be difficult for heterosexuals to understand anonymous sex with multiple partners, to many homosexuals it is a cornerstone of liberation. Homosexuals had been discriminated against for the way they had sex; liberation meant having as much sex as possible, as publicly as possible.

"We want to reinsert sexual liberation back in our movement," said Tony Valenzuela, an actor in gay pornographic films who organized Sex Panic's first national conference, held in San Diego this month. "For those of us who like anonymous sex, there is something very erotic," he said, adding that safe sex is standard in gay porn. "The important thing is that it can be healthy."

The debate is only likely to intensify. "In the end," Dr. Stall said, "it is a cultural fight as much as an epidemiological fight. What is the future of gay culture going to be like?"

4. The Risks of Mail Marriage, 1996

The trial of an American in Washington State for the death by shooting of his Filipina wife and her two friends in a courthouse in Seattle March 1 last year while appearing as protagonists in a messy divorce contest highlights yet again the problems confronting so-called "mail-order brides" and the dilemma in convincing Filipino women to avoid getting married through mail or computer wife-ordering services. Timothy C. Blackwell, a computer technician, met Susana Remerata, a comely Filipina restaurant management graduate, via a catalogue called Asian Encounters, one of several dozen such publications that feature Asian women. The women, whose photos peer out from the catalogue's pages, were supposed to be looking for "pen pals," but the men knew they were hunting for husbands.

At any rate, following some exchanges of letters and pictures and other information, the two got married barely a week after they met personally when Blackwell went to the Philippines. That marriage lasted only two weeks. Susana fled from Blackwell claiming she was being abused. Last year Susana and the two Filipinas were shot at point-blank range by Blackwell in a courthouse where a divorce proceeding involving him and his estranged wife was set to be heard. Blackwell, 48, now faces three murder charges for killing Susana, 23, and her two friends, Phoebe Dizon, 46, and Veronica Laureta Johnson, 42. A manslaughter charge has been added after an eight-month old fetus in Susana's womb died as a result of the shooting. Blackwell brought the divorce case against Susana claiming that she was not attentive to his needs and that he had suspected that he was "duped" in an immigration "con" game. He was asking that she pay him \$20,000, the amount he had spent in pursuing their love affair. His lawyer argued that Blackwell suffered a "mental snap" after learning that his wife became pregnant by a Filipino after she had left him. Susana, however, in her counter suit insisted that she had been a victim of physical and sexual brutality by Blackwell since arriving in the U.S. She added that, at one time, he nearly choked her to death. She fled from him in fear of her life.

Recently the Philippines passed a law banning all types of mail-order bride schemes. The law provides stiff penalties for violators. Passing such a law is one thing. How to stop this kind of operation, which through the years has been turned into a highly profitable industry, is another. Yearly, no less than 20,000 Filipinas leave the country as fiancées of foreigners. Most come to America, but many thousands more also find their way to France, Great Britain, Germany, the Scandinavian and Benelux countries, and Asian countries like Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, and Singapore, and the Middle East. There are many reasons why these Filipinas seek ways to leave the safety and warmth of the country, even by marrying foreigners whose past many of them are not even aware of. Foremost among these reasons, of course, is the dire economic condition back home. Their perception of despair and hopelessness, and the lack of a bright future to bank on prompts them to seek greener pastures, so to speak. The Western influence is also one of the factors. But since it's difficult to seek employment due to cumbersome requirements, and likewise when one does not possess skills, their only means is to turn to the mail-order bride industry.

Women advocates in the U.S. are trying to hammer out laws that would ban any form of advertisement that entices men to correspond with women for romantic intentions or otherwise. There are . . . others who want simply to outlaw outright any business that has to do with pairing men with women. But these moves may seem difficult to pursue given the penchant of courts to protect First Amendment rights. Then, too, from the catalogue or magazine operation, the mail order bride industry has been transformed into a highly technical computerized undertaking. Women's photos, vital statistics and related information are all over cyberspace. And so they say that as long as there are lonely men and there are women searching for what they believe are better opportunities or the perception that they can improve their status in life, they would find ways to get in touch with one another. Who is to stop them? And who is to blame?

Instead of finger pointing, Filipino advocates and organizations overseas should try to allot part of their time to assist Filipinas who leave the country as a

postal bride or somesuch. Support groups may be set up in the countries of destination among those who are already residing or working there. This is an area of concern that should interest groups like the Lions, Jaycees, professional, religious, and other civic organizations to pool resources and set up some sort of support groups. But most important, there should be a massive information and education campaign starting right in the Philippines to acquaint Filipinas seeking foreign husbands on what could happen to them or what they may expect, just in case. Women should be advised to demand a background check of their husbands to be, for instance. New York City requires several hours of counselling for those intending to get married. Why not a special seminar for the Filipina who is plunging into a marital relationship with someone she met via the postal service? . . . In the U.S., . . . it takes three years following the marriage for the alien spouse to be eligible for citizenship. In the meantime, it is not uncommon for a woman to feel that her continued stay here lies in the hands of her husband. The woman becomes powerless and insecure. She tends to submit meekly even to a point when she becomes what appears to a man as a willing or uncomplaining victim of verbal, physical, or even sexual assault. The fact that they spent money to go to the Philippines to claim their brides, marry them, put up a wedding party, and bring them to the U.S. would let most men believe that the women, like chattel or a piece of property, are owned by them and, therefore, in their complete control. They may do as they want to with them, even turn them into punching bags.

Recently, Pres. Clinton signed into law a bill that gives a woman the right to pursue her citizenship on her own if she is a victim of spousal or domestic abuse. But as I have said before, there are thousands and thousands of mail order brides, on the other hand, who are living comfortably, raising their children and building good families in many parts of the world, including the United States. There are thousands, too, who are living in obscurity, fear, and horror, refraining from making contacts with their compatriots precisely because of the bad connotation given to mail-order brides or due to lack of information or just out of plain ignorance. They should be encouraged to report their arrival in any country and subsequent whereabouts to the nearest Philippine embassy or consulate. They must be enticed to socialize or even find ways to improve themselves by acquiring some skills. They ought to be persuaded to come out in the open when they are being abused.

5. M. Evelina Galang Evokes "Deflowering the Sampaguita," 1997

With a group of your best Pinay friends, and their boyfriends, pile into a van and take over a local dance club. Dance less than a breath apart. Crowd the floor like a cluster of rich red grapes, threaded together by a single vine. You have colored your mouth burgundy, teased your hair, and decorated your neck, your ears, your skinny brown arms with gold and copper bangles. You have stretched a cotton shirt, scoop

M. Evelina Galang, "Deflowering the Sampaguita," in Maria P. P. Root, ed., *Filipino Americans: Transformation and Identity* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1997), 225-229. Reprinted by permission.

and flirt; and when he leans over for that first kiss, first moment of intimacy, sinking into you long and slow; it is your first holy communion all over again. Spirit floating high in the sky and then, for an instant, for one breath, you are one.

ESSAYS

The perception that the family is natural and biological—its members related by “blood”—reinforces its role as a powerful arbiter of normative heterosexuality; in this view, lesbians and gay men—by virtue of their nonreproductive sexuality—are outside the family circle. As anthropologist Kath Weston of Brandeis University writes, historically homosexuals accepted the equation that “straight is to gay as family is to not-family.” In the 1980s, however, a new discourse on the gay family emerged. Weston examines the “families we choose,” formed through nonbiological bonds of affinity and commitment, and identifies specific historical changes—in the beliefs, social relations, and politics of gay and lesbian Americans—that fostered these new family forms. Tomás Almaguer of San Francisco State University suggests that for Chicano men, the question of sexual identity and family is more complex, because the U.S. and Mexico construct homosexuality and the family in distinct ways. In Mexico and Chicano communities, men who have sex with men are divided into “active” and “passive” categories based on sex acts. Almaguer argues that white, middle-class concepts of gay identity have been less prevalent among Chicanos; for those men, to “choose” a gay identity or a gay family means to embrace American bourgeois values.

Gay Families as the “Families We Choose”

KATH WESTON

Lesbian and gay San Francisco during the 1980s offered a fascinating opportunity to learn something about how ideologies arise and change as people lock in conflict, work toward reconciliation, reorganize relationships, establish or break ties, and agree to disagree. In an apartment on Valencia Street, a young lesbian reassured her gay friend that his parents would get over their initially negative reaction if he told them he was gay. On Polk Street, a 16-year-old searched for a place to spend the night because he had already come out to his parents and now he had nowhere to go. While two lovers were busy organizing an anniversary party that would bring blood relations together with their gay families, a woman on the other side of the city reported to work as usual because she feared losing her job if her employer should discover that she was mourning the passing of her partner, who had died the night before. For every lesbian considering parenthood, several friends worried about the changes children would introduce into peer relationships. For every eight or nine people who spoke with excitement about building families of friends, one or two rejected gay families as an oppressive accommodation to a heterosexual society.

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Although not always codified or clear, the discourse on gay families that emerged during the 1980s challenged many cultural representations and common practices that have effectively denied lesbians and gay men access to kinship. In earlier decades gay people had also fought custody battles, brought partners home to meet their parents, filed suit against discriminatory insurance policies, and struggled to maintain ties with adoptive or blood relations. What set this new discourse apart was its emphasis on the kinship character of the ties gay people had forged to close friends and lovers, its demand that those ties receive social and legal recognition, and its separation of parenting and family formation from heterosexual relations. For the first time, gay men and lesbians systematically laid claim to families of their own. . . .

For years, and in an amazing variety of contexts, claiming a lesbian or gay identity has been portrayed as a rejection of "the family" and a departure from kinship. . . . Two presuppositions lend a dubious credence to [media] imagery: the belief that gay men and lesbians do not have children or establish lasting relationships, and the belief that they invariably alienate adoptive and blood kin once their sexual identities become known. By presenting "the family" as a unitary object, these depictions also imply that everyone participates in identical sorts of kinship relations and subscribes to one universally agreed-upon definition of family. . . .

It is but a short step from positioning lesbians and gay men somewhere beyond "the family"—unencumbered by relations of kinship, responsibility, or affection—to portraying them as a menace to family and society. . . . Proposition 6 (the Briggs initiative), which appeared on the ballot in California in 1978, was defeated only after a massive organizing campaign that mobilized lesbians and gay men in record numbers. The text of the initiative, which would have barred gay and lesbian teachers (along with heterosexual teachers who advocated homosexuality) from the public schools, was phrased as a defense of "the family":

One of the most fundamental interests of the State is the establishment and preservation of the family unit. Consistent with this interest is the State's duty to protect its impressionable youth from influences which are antithetical to this vital interest.

Other anti-gay legislative initiative campaigns adopted the slogans "save the family" and "save the children" as their rallying cries. . . .

Some lesbians and gay men in the Bay Area had embraced the popular equation of their sexual identities with the renunciation of access to kinship, particularly when first coming out. "My image of gay life was very lonely, very weird, no family," Rafael Ortiz recollected. "I assumed that my family was gone now—that's it." After Bob Korkowski began to call himself gay, he wrote a series of poems in which an orphan was the central character. Bob said the poetry expressed his fear of "having to give up my family because I was queer." When I spoke with Rona Bren after she had been home with the flu, she told me that whenever she was sick, she relived old fears. That day she had remembered her mother's grim prediction: "You'll be a lesbian and you'll be alone the rest of your life. Even a dog shouldn't be alone." . . .

At the height of gay liberation, activists had attempted to develop alternatives to "the family," whereas by the 1980s many lesbians and gay men were struggling

to legitimate gay families as a form of kinship. When Armistead Maupin spoke at a gathering on Castro Street to welcome home two gay men who had been held hostage in the Middle East, partners who had stood with arms around one another upon their release, he congratulated them not only for their safe return, but also as representatives of a new kind of family. Gay or chosen families might incorporate friends, lovers, or children, in any combination. Organized through ideologies of love, choice, and creation, gay families have been defined through a contrast with what many gay men and lesbians in the Bay Area called "straight," "biological," or "blood" family. If families we choose were the families lesbians and gay men created for themselves, straight family represented the families in which most had grown to adulthood. . . .

The families I saw gay men and lesbians creating in the Bay Area tended to have extremely fluid boundaries, not unlike kinship organizations among sectors of the African-American, American Indian, and white working class. . . . Listen for a moment to Toni Williams' account of the people she called kin:

In my family, all of us kids are godparents to each others' kids, okay? See we're very connected that way. But when I go to have a kid, I'm not gonna have my sisters as godparents. I'm gonna have people that are around me, that are gay. That are straight. I don't have that many straight friends, but certainly I would integrate them in my life. They would help me. They would babysit my child, or . . . like my kitty, I'm not calling up my family and saying, "Hey, Mom, can you watch my cat?" No. I call on my inner family—my community, or whatever—to help me with my life.

So there's definitely a family. And you're building it; it keeps getting bigger and bigger. Next thing you know, you have hundreds of people as your family. Me personally, I might not have a hundred, because I'm more of a loner. I don't have a lot of friends, nor do I want that many friends, either. But I see [my lover] as having many many family members involved in what's going on.

What Toni portrayed was an ego-centered calculus of relations that pictured family members as a cluster surrounding a single individual, rather than taking couples or groups as units of affiliation. This meant that even the most nuclear of couple would construct theoretically distinguishable families, although an area of overlapping membership generally developed. At the same time, chosen families were not restricted to person-to-person ties. Individuals occasionally added entire groups with preexisting, multiplex connections among members. In one such case a woman reported incorporating a "circle" of her new lover's gay family into her own kinship universe. . . .

Obituaries provide a relatively overlooked, if somber, source of information about notions of kinship. Death notices in the *Bay Area Reporter* (a weekly newspaper distributed in bars and other gay establishments) were sometimes written by lovers, and included references to friends, former lovers, blood or adoptive relatives (usually denominated as "father," "sister," etc.), "community members" present at a death or assisting during an illness, and occasionally coworkers. While I was conducting fieldwork, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, a major citywide daily, instituted a policy of refusing to list gay lovers as survivors, citing complaints from relatives who could lay claim to genealogical or adoptive ties to the deceased. Although the *Chronicle's* decision denied recognition to gay families, it also testified

to the growing impact of a discourse that refused to cede kinship to relations organized through procreation.

By opening the door to the creation of families different in kind and composition, choice assigned kinship to the realm of free will and inclination. . . . People often presented gay families as a foray into uncharted territory, where the lack of cultural guideposts to mark the journey engendered fear and exhilaration. Indeed, there was a utopian cast to the way many lesbians and gay men talked about the families they were fashioning. Jennifer Bauman maintained that as a gay person, "you're already on the edge, so you've got more room to be whatever you want to be. And to create. There's more space on the edge." What to do with all that "space"? "I create my own traditions," she replied. . . .

Despite the ideological characterization of gay families as freely chosen, in practice the particular choices made yielded families that were far from randomly selected, much less demographically representative. When I asked people who said they had gay families to list the individuals they included under that rubric, their lists were primarily, though not exclusively, composed of other lesbians and gay men. Not surprisingly, the majority of people listed tended to come from the same gender, class, race, and age cohort as the respondent.

Both men and women consistently counted lovers as family, often placing their partners at the head of a list of relatives. A few believed a lover, or a lover plus children, would be essential in order to have gay family, but the vast majority felt that all gay men and lesbians, including those who are single, can create families of their own. The partner of someone already considered family might or might not be included as kin. "Yeah, they're part of the family, but they're like in-laws," laughed one man. "You know, you love them, and yet there isn't that same closeness." . . .

A lover's biological or adoptive relatives might or might not be classified as kin, contingent upon their "rejecting" or "accepting" attitudes. Gina Pellegrini, for example, found refuge at a lover's house after her parents kicked her out of her own home as an adolescent. She was out to her lover's mother before her own parents, and still considered this woman family. . . . After years of listening to her father attack homosexuality, remembered Roberta Osabe, "My girlfriend Debi and my father shot pool together. And she whipped his ass! . . . That was his way, I think, of trying to make amends." Jerry Freitag and his partner Kurt had made a point of introducing their parents to one another. "My mother and his mother talk on the phone every once in a while and write letters and stuff. Like my grandmother just died. Kurt's mother was one of the first people to call my mom." For Charlyne Harris, however, calling her ex-lover's mother "family" would have been out of the question. "Her mother didn't like me. Number one, she didn't want her to be in a lesbian relationship; number two, she knew that I was black. So I didn't have a lot of good things to say about her mother. . . . Pam told me, 'She can't even say your name!'"

In addition to friendships and relationships with lovers or ex-lovers, chosen family might also embrace ties to children or people who shared a residence. *Gay Community News* published a series of letters from gay male prisoners who had united to form "the Del-Ray Family" (only to be separated by the warden). Back in San Francisco, Rose Ellis told me about the apartment she had shared with several friends. One woman in particular, she said, was "like a big sister to me." When this

woman died of cancer, the household split up, and "that kind of broke the family thing." In other circumstances, however, hardship drew people together across household lines. Groups organized to assist individuals who were chronically or terminally ill often incorporated love and persisted through time, characteristics some participants took as signs of kinship. Occasionally a person could catch a glimpse of potential family relationships in the making. When I met Harold Sanders he was making plans to live with someone to prepare for the possibility that he might require physical assistance as he moved into his seventies. Harold explained that he would rather choose that person in advance than be forced to settle for "just anyone" in an emergency. . . .

Like their heterosexual counterparts, most gay men and lesbians insisted that family members are people who are "there for you," people you can count on emotionally and materially. "They take care of me," said one man, "I take care of them." . . . [T]he "middle class" in the United States tends to share affective support but not material resources within friendships. In the Bay Area, however, lesbians and gay men from all classes and class backgrounds regularly rendered both sorts of assistance to one another. Many considered this an important way of demarcating friend from family. Diane Kunin, a writer, described family as people who will care for you when you're sick, get you out of jail, help you fix a flat tire, or drive you to the airport. Edith Motzko, who worked as a carpenter, said of a woman she had known ten years, "There's nothing in the world that [she] would ask of me that I wouldn't do for her." Louise Romero joked that a gay friend "only calls me when he wants something: he wants to borrow the truck 'cause he's moving. So I guess that's family!" . . .

. . . [D]iscussions of gay families pictured kinship as an *extension* of friendship, rather than viewing the two as competitors or assimilating friendships to biogenetic relationships regarded as somehow more fundamental. It was not unusual for a gay man or lesbian to speak of another as family in one breath and friend in the next. Yet the solidarity implicit in such statements has not always been a taken-for-granted feature of gay lives. . . . [R]ecognition of the possibility of establishing nonerotic ties among homosexuals constituted a key historical development that paved the way for the emergence of lesbian and gay "community"—and . . . for the later appearance of the ideological opposition between biological family and families we choose. . . .

The years following World War II—a watershed period for many groups in the United States—witnessed an unprecedented elaboration of nonerotic solidarities among homosexuals. During the 1950s and 1960s, gay men adapted kinship terminology to the task of distinguishing sexual from nonsexual relationships. At that time the rhetoric of brothers, sisters, and friends applied primarily to nonerotic relationships. In the film version of *The Boys in the Band*, one character quips, "If they're not lovers, they're sisters." . . .

The contrast between the sexual and the nonsexual was drawn only to be blurred in later years after the possibility of nonerotic ties among gay people became firmly established. By the 1970s both gay men and lesbians had begun to picture friends and lovers as two ends of a single continuum rather than as oppositional categories. "We women been waiting all our lives for our sisters to be our lovers," announced the lyrics of the song *Gay and Proud*. The contribution of lesbian-feminism toward

codifying this notion of a continuum is evident in Adrienne Rich's work on "compulsory heterosexuality." Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's classic article on relations between women in the nineteenth-century United States was also widely read in women's studies classes and cited to buttress the contention that sexual and sisterly relations were semantically separable but overlapping in practice—with little regard for efforts to distinguish precisely these relationships during the intervening decades.

The realignment that linked erotic to nonerotic relations through the device of a continuum was not confined to political activists. As San Francisco moved into the 1980s, "friend" seemed to be overtaking "roommate" in popularity as a euphemistic reference to a lover in situations where lesbians and gay men elected not to reveal their sexual identities. . . . A similar continuity was implicit in coming-out stories narrated by women who had first claimed a lesbian identity during the 1970s. One said coming out was epitomized for her by the realization that "oh, wow, then I get to keep all my girlfriends!" Elaine Scavone explained with a laugh, "All of a sudden I felt I could be myself. I could be the way I really want to be with women: I could touch them, I could make friends, I could make my girlfriends and I could go home and kiss them." Although women were sometimes said to be more likely to come out by falling in love with a friend and men through an encounter instrumentally focused on sex, both men and women featured early attractions to friends in their coming-out stories. . . .

In retrospect, this shift from contrast to continuum laid the ground for the rise of a family-centered discourse that bridged the erotic and the nonerotic, bringing lovers together with friends under a single construct. But the historical development of friendship ties among persons whose shared "sexual" identity was initially defined solely through their sexuality turned out to be merely an introductory episode in a more lengthy tale of community formation.

Among lesbians and gay men the term "community" (like coming out) has become as multifaceted in meaning as it is ubiquitous. In context, community can refer to the historical appearance of gay institutions, the totality of self-defined lesbians and gay men, or unity and harmony predicated upon a common sexual identity. Older gay people generally considered the term an anachronism when applied to the period before the late 1960s, since "community" came into popular usage only with the rise of a gay movement. . . .

. . . During the 1970s the concept of community came to embody practical wisdom emerging from the bars, friendship networks, and a spate of new gay organizations: the knowledge that lesbians and gay men, joining together on the basis of a sexual identity, could create enduring social ties. In the process, sexuality was reconstituted as a ground of common experience rather than a quintessentially personal domain.

From its inception, activists pressed the community concept into the service of an identity politics that cast gays in the part of an ethnic minority and a subculture. Lesbians and gay men represent a constant 10 percent of the population, they contended, a veritable multitude prepared to claim its own distinct history, culture, and institutions. The basis for these arguments was, of course, laid earlier with the recognition that homosexuals could unite through bonds of friendship as well as

sex, and elaborated through analogies with identity-based movements organized along racial lines. . . .

In extending homosexuality beyond the sexual, the notion of identity-based community opened new possibilities for using kinship terminology to imagine lesbians and gay men as members of a unified totality. Identity provided the linking concept that lent power to analogies between gay and consanguineal relations. Wasn't this what families in the United States were all about: identity and likeness mediated by the symbolism of blood ties?

Yet the application of kinship terminology to gay community differed from the subsequent discourse on gay families in that it described *all* lesbians and gay men as kin: no "choice" determined familial relationships. To claim a lesbian or gay identity was sufficient to claim kinship to any and every other gay person. Some people hoped community would replace alienated biological ties, appealing not to chosen families but to the collectivity: "If I could gain acceptance in the community of lesbians, I would have, I hoped, the loving family I missed." In gay bars across the nation, this was the era of circle dances to the popular music hit, *We Are Family*. . . .

By the late 1970s, signs of disenchantment with the unity implicit in the concept of community began to appear: a popular critique of the look-alike styles of "Castro [San Francisco gay neighborhood] clones"; a resurgence of butch/fem relations among lesbians that flew in the face of feminist prescriptions for androgyny; and a heated debate about sadomasochism (s/m), pedophilia, and other marginalized sexualities. Though some dissenters insisted upon their right to be included in the larger collectivity of lesbians and gay men, others did not experience themselves as community members, much less as agents in community formation. "I was just me, in a gay world," explained Kevin Jones.

During the same period, lesbians and gays of color critiqued the simplistic assumption that mutual understanding would flow from a shared identity. Along with Jewish lesbians and gay men, they drew attention to the racism and anti-Semitism pervading gay communities, and exposed the illusory character of any quest for an encompassing commonality in the face of the crosscutting allegiances produced by an identity politics. Predictably, this recognition of differences, while important and overdue, tended to undermine meanings of harmony and equality carried by "community." Accompanying the positive explorations of what it meant to be black and gay or lesbian and Latina was widespread disillusionment with the failure to attain the unity implicit in the ideal of *communitas*. . . .

During the 1980s, categories of identity remained integral to the process of making and breaking social ties among lesbians and gay men. Most gay bars and social or political organizations in San Francisco were segregated by gender. Some of the community institutions that lesbians associated with gay men maintained a nominal lesbian presence. A gay theater, for example, included scripts with lesbian characters in its annual repertoire, and the number of women in attendance grew from two or three to a third of the audience when lesbian plays were performed. Yet the most visible gay institutions, businesses, and public rituals (such as Halloween on Castro Street) remained male-owned and male-organized. Even the exceptions seemed

to prove the rule. After a crafts fair in the gay South of Market area, the *Bay Area Reporter* published a picture of two women kissing, over the caption, "It wasn't all men at the Folsom Street Fair either."

When gay groups in southern California suggested adding a lambda to the rainbow flag supposed to represent all gay people, lesbians denounced the addition as a noninclusive male symbol. At a benefit for the Gay Games sponsored by the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence (a group of gay men in nun drag), lesbians cheered the women's softball game and martial arts demonstration, but some voiced impatience with "all the boys parading around in their outfits." Disagreements periodically erupted concerning the proportion of men's to women's coverage in newspapers that attempted to serve "the community" as a whole. It was not uncommon for lesbians and gay men to stereotype one another, building on constructions of identity and difference in the wider culture. . . .

Like other differences, divisions between lesbians and gay men are not absolute, but socially, historically, and interpretively constructed. After a women's musical troupe was asked to play for a gay male swimsuit contest, group members voiced positions ranging from "support our gay brothers," to "porn is porn," to "who cares, let's take the money!" Several lesbians cited their work with AIDS organizations as an experience that had helped them "feel connected" to gay men. . . .

Class differences traced out lines of division within as well as between the men's and women's "communities." Many lesbians attributed the visibility of gay male institutions to the fact that men in general have greater access to money than women. Gay vacation spots at the nearby Russian River proved too expensive for many lesbians (as well as working-class and unemployed gay men), who tended to stay at campgrounds rather than resorts if they visited the area. Popular categories opposed "bikers" to "professionals" and "bar gays" (presumably working-class) to "politicals" (stereotyped as "middle class"). . . .

Individuals who had purposefully sought employment in gay businesses reported their surprise at finding the gay employer-employee relationship as marked by conflict and difference as any other. In a dispute between the lesbian owner of an apartment building and one of her lesbian tenants, both sides seemed perplexed to discover that their shared sexual identity could not resolve the issue at hand. . . . While merchants encouraged people to "buy gay" and pointed with pride to the proliferation of shops that had made it theoretically possible to live without ever leaving the Castro, only a very small segment of lesbians and gay men could have afforded to do so, even if they were so inclined.

Anyone who visits a variety of lesbian and gay households in the Bay Area will come away with an impression of generational depth. Gay organizations and establishments, however, tended to serve a relatively narrow middle age range. Bowling, for instance, is a sport that many people in the United States pursue into their older years. But gay league nights at bowling alleys across the city found the lanes filled with teams predominantly composed of men in their twenties and thirties. Young lesbians and gay men came to San Francisco expecting to find acceptance and gay mecca but instead experienced trouble getting into bars and often ended up feeling peripheral to "the community." . . . For their part, older people mentioned ageist door policies at bars, and complained about feeling "other" when surrounded by younger faces at community events.

Racially discriminatory treatment at gay organizations, white beauty standards, ethnic divisions in the crowds at different bars, and racist door policies were other frequently cited reasons for questioning the community concept. Kevin Jones, an African-American man, said that when he first came to San Francisco,

I thought that if I was white, it would be a lot different then. Because it seemed like it was hard for me to talk to people in bars. But it didn't seem like other people were having a hard time talking to each other. It almost seemed like they knew each other. And if they didn't know each other, they were gonna go up and talk to each other and meet. But I'd go to the bars, and I could sit there and watch pool, and nobody would ever talk to me. And I couldn't understand that. And I thought, "If I was white, I bet you I would know a lot more of these people."

Something more is involved here than racial identity as a ground for difference and discrimination, or ethnicity as an obstacle to the easy interaction implicit in notions of community. Most people of color claimed membership in communities defined in terms of racial identity, attachments that predated coming out as a lesbian or gay man. . . .

For some, sexual identity had become a minimal defining feature, all "we" have in common. . . . "I knew that I didn't fit into the Castro any more than I fit into my family," another man insisted. Whether that sense of difference was based on categorical understandings of self (mediated by race, age, class, gender) or on tensions between the individual and the social, the result has been a generalized rejection of the unity and above all the sameness implicit in the concept of gay community.

In contrast, the family-centered discourse emerging during this period did not assume identity (in the sense of sameness) based upon sexuality alone. Lesbians and gay men who claimed membership in multiple communities but felt at home in none joined with those who had strategically repositioned themselves outside community in transferring the language of kinship from collective to interpersonal relations. While familial ideologies assumed new prominence in the United States at large during the 1980s, among gay men and lesbians the historical legacy of community building and subsequent struggles to comprehend relations of difference mediated a shift in focus from friendship to kinship. Meanwhile the possibility of being rejected by blood relatives for a lesbian or gay identity shaped the specific meaning carried by "family" in gay contexts, undermining the permanence culturally attributed to blood ties while highlighting categories of choice and love.

Defined in opposition to biological family, the concept of families we chose proved attractive in part because it reintroduced agency and a subjective sense of making culture into lesbian and gay social organization. The institutionalized gay community of the 1970s, with its shops and bars and associations, by the 1980s could appear as something prefabricated, an entity over and above individuals in which they might or might not fit. Most understood gay families to be customized individual creations that need not deny conflict or difference. Family also supplied the face-to-face relationships and concrete knowledge of persons promised by the romantic imagery of small-town community. As a successor to nonerotic ties elaborated in terms of community or friendship, chosen families introduced something rather novel into kinship relations in the United States by grouping friends together with lovers and children within a single cultural domain.