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REFLECTIONS ON MARRIAGE EQUALITY AS A VEHICLE FOR LGBTQ POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION

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Editors' introduction:

In this chapter, sociologist Mignon Moore extends her remarks from the closing plenary of the "After Marriage" conference to offer a different take on the normalization debate. Reflecting on her research on African American LGBT populations and on her family's experiences as a Black, married, lesbian couple with children who move across different social spaces in New York City, Moore argues that the marriage equality movement has been a "vehicle" that has helped many LGBTQ people of color talk with their families and communities about their full lives. She also suggests that some of the relationship norms that queer critics have seen as heteronormative are better understood as expressions of race and class privilege. Moore emphasizes the importance of context in shaping the norms that surround marriage, and argues that in some contexts normalization can itself be radical.

Thank you for inviting me to be part of this conference and part of the plenary panel. In listening to some of the remarks made here today, I am aware that there are at least some in this room, participating in this conversation, who are critical of marriage and the access to legal marriage as one platform for reducing the stigma associated with same-sex desire. Some, like the legal scholar Katherine Franke (2015), have questioned the kinds of freedom and the kinds of equality that the capacity to marry mobilizes. Others see this movement as mainstream and not particularly radical or revolutionary. I address these postulations by examining the experiences of African American LGBTQ people and *intraracial* relationships among Blacks as they relate to the marriage-equality campaign.

I will begin by letting you know that I was an active participant in the marriage-equality movement. In 2012, my wife and I were invited to have photos from our wedding in Los Cabos, Mexico, featured in Evan Wolfson's Freedom to Marry campaign. Cathy Renna, the principal of Target Hue, a public interest/PR communications firm, organized the press release of my first book, *Invisible Families: Gay*

Identities, Relationships and Motherhood among Black Women (Moore, 2011), and introduced us to the campaign. From there, photos of us embraced in a kiss were part of a *Time* magazine cover story on the shifting public opinion on marriage between lesbian and gay couples (Von Drehle, 2013), and we were interviewed by and featured on the cover of *Black Enterprise*, a magazine that is a primary business and investing resource for Black communities, as part of a story about the economic inequalities experienced by same-sex unmarried couples compared to different-sex couples who could legally marry (Brown, 2013). Participating in those and other news stories, exposing our sexual minority status to the public, permitting our intimacy to be photographed, and allowing ourselves to be quoted about our love and our struggles as a same-sex couple—not just to the larger world but to our racial communities—felt to us like a very radical act.

So I approach these questions both as a scholar who has been researching African American LGBTQ families and identities over the past thirteen years, and as an individual who has been engaged in political activities surrounding my own liberation and the liberation of all Black people and LGBTQ people. In my work (Moore, 2010a, 2010b) I have come to understand the marriage-equality movement as a vehicle through which people, and particularly people of color, could begin to talk about LGBTQ issues with their family members and individuals in their racial and ethnic and cultural communities. Because it was such a prominent feature of the political landscape at the start of the twenty-first century, it offered that entryway.

And as the movement unfolded, we began to see conversations and debates happening in barbershops, in beauty salons, across the tables at coffee shops, and over Thanksgiving dinner. Queer folks were no longer just bringing their partner home and having everyone around the table know this was their partner but failing to acknowledge the true nature of their relationship. The discourse around Proposition 8 and marriage equality gave people an opening,¹ and those who took that opening, who initiated or responded to discussions about marriage equality by directly stating their own stake in that legislation or by linking themselves and their sexuality to that movement, felt as though they were engaged in radical and transformative acts. It exposed a vulnerability: talking to people in your socially conservative ethnic and cultural communities, asking them to acknowledge your LGBTQ identity and to incorporate it into who you are and your sense of self. So it was not, “We’re here, we’re queer, get used to it!”—which I guess dates me, because that slogan was relevant way back in the 1980s and 1990s. It wasn’t that kind of debate for the Black and Brown LGBTQ people I met doing this work in their Black and Latino/a, and even Iranian and Korean, neighborhoods. It was, “We are your family, we are part of you, and we want you to accept all of these different parts of us.”

That being said, I acknowledge that the passage of marriage equality did not directly help every member of the LGBTQ community. For some people it had no relevance for their lives; for others it had a different political connotation than how they understood themselves and what they wanted for themselves. But for people

who *did* want to marry, who wanted to have their relationships acknowledged by the state, it offered something important for their sense of self and for the way they wanted to live and be in the world. My critique of marriage equality as a platform for LGBTQ social justice is that the issue overshadowed everything else, leaving out other concerns that were and remain critically important for other parts of the community. And now that marriage has been won, different concerns that may not have been directly relevant to the lives of the most advantaged sexual minorities are not being as vociferously supported by LGBTQ organizations. Many Black LGBTQ leaders who criticize the movement say marriage equality cannot be the only story queer activists bring to disenfranchised communities. LGBTQ leaders have to also show that they care about and realize the importance of other issues those communities are fighting for, what political observer Jasmyne Cannick calls the “bread and butter” issues of Black communities: poverty, unemployment, racial profiling, inferior grocery stores, inadequate services.

In thinking about what communities of color can do to support LGBTQ people within their racial and culture groups, I provide the example of an experience I had in Los Angeles around 2008 while conducting research in Leimert Park, then a predominantly Black middle-class neighborhood where I also lived. Some of the residents were trying to bring an afterschool science program in the community. They approached adults at various social events in the neighborhood, asking folks to sign a petition in support of this endeavor. At the time I had no children, but I said, “Okay, yes. I am going to join forces with this group to help them secure a science program because it is important to the community. It has no direct or personal relevance to me, but I will still support it. In turn, I want you to acknowledge this thing called marriage equality that is important to me, as a Black person in this community who is also a lesbian.” And so, if I am going to support your science center, then I want you to support the issues that are important to me, because that is what it means to be part of a community. If something affects one of us, it affects all of us.

And so that is how I came to relate marriage equality to people in African-American communities. This reasoning has resonance with other groups. I was thinking about work by the sociologist Katie Acosta. Her first book, *Amigas y Amantes: Sexually Nonconforming Latinas Negotiate Family* (Acosta, 2013), is a study of lesbian, bisexual, and queer Latina women. Her work supports the idea of marriage among same-sex couples as a response to stigma. It emphasizes the importance of social context when understanding how marriage equality is understood and experienced. If you are discussing marriage in a larger cultural setting that is traditional and religious and centered on this relationship only being legitimate when it takes place between a woman and a man, and where it is perceived as a “natural” step for respectable women, the idea of marriage between two women who want to publicly acknowledge this relationship as real and legitimate becomes a particularly noteworthy and adversarial position to take. Acosta does a wonderful job of incorporating the ways culture and religion influence how sexual minorities experience and enact same-sex desire within the confines of their ethnic communities.

Heteronormativity and the intersections of race, class, and sexuality

Many argue that the current gay and lesbian civil rights campaign has suggested that in order for us to gain rights as full citizens, we must adopt elements of heteronormativity. I am defining heteronormativity to mean the institutions, practices, and norms within society that maintain heterosexuality, gender binaries, and power differentials. It is part of a series of terms that explain how individuals are socially coerced into, and rewarded for, participating in “normative heterosexual practices,” which include things like getting married and reproducing biological children. It is reinforced through behaviors that have been (in my mind incorrectly) defined as middle-class expressions of *heterosexuality*, such as buying a house together, opening a bank account with a partner, and accessing spousal benefits or insurance through employment (Rumens, 2016). Some queer theorists believe that the acceptance of LGBTQ people as full citizens requires that we “adopt the cultural norms of the idealized American citizen—productivity, selflessness, responsibility, sexual restraint and the restraint of homosexuality in particular” (Russell, 2008, p. 101). Queer theory scholars have identified these norms as “constituting the cultural structure of the heterosexual family,” thus labeling them “heteronormativity.” They argue that the movement for marriage rights has been refocused from outward rebellion to aspirations toward assimilation, stability, and acceptance in mainstream society. Russell contrasts this with LGBTQ people who are maintaining a politics of non-conformity, referring to them as individuals who “do not choose to sacrifice their desires for citizenship” (p. 102).

Although I have been in lesbian relationships for more than twenty-five years, until recently I never viewed myself as an active participant in the LGBTQ movement. I never saw myself as outside of the mainstream, and I have not seen myself as trying to assimilate into “dominant” norms. My norms have always been my own. My interest in rebelling against establishments has been about removing barriers that block my access and other people’s access to equal opportunity—barriers constructed around inequities based in race, gender, sexuality, socioeconomic status. I reject the binary formulation of heterosexism that positions certain behaviors as homosexual or heterosexual. So in my quest for marriage equality I never saw myself as acquiescing to heteronormativity, and as I live daily as an out Black lesbian woman, I am trying to create a full experience for myself that allows me to gain access to the things I want. I wanted my same-sex partner to have the same legal rights as a different-sex partner might receive, and I wanted us to have and raise children together in a way that freed my children from any secondary status or citizenship because of our sexual orientation. I did not want the law to restrict me from having those things, so I challenged the law. Now, I struggle with how to move around in institutions and structures built for heterosexuals and heterosexually married families. This is a challenge that relates to my sexuality and race; therefore, in my mind it is part of the continued struggle for equality that LGBTQ movements should incorporate into their agenda. Two institutions

where this struggle plays out for me are the religious practice I am trying to carve out for my children and the school systems my family must navigate for my daughter and son.

I was raised in the Apostolic Holiness faith, a particularly conservative form of Black Pentecostalism. I am sure it rejects homosexuality and same-sex relationships as falling outside of God's will. My grandparents were among the earliest members of the church I grew up in, and my uncle is the current pastor. When I moved back to New York in 2015, I arrived with a wife and two young children. One of the main reasons I returned to New York was to offer my children the chance to bond with their grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Since the church is the center of my extended family's social life and also a place that has always felt like home to me, I regularly (meaning once every other month or so) bring my children to the church I was raised in.

When I go to church, my wife also comes along. She is left of center in her gender presentation, and dresses in men's clothes. Although my church requires that women specifically not wear "clothes pertaining to a man," my wife arrives wearing men's pants, shoes, shirts, and sometimes blazers (never a tie, however). The four of us enter, sit on a pew near the front, and in varying ways participate in the worship service. Our children sing in the children's choir and I stand with the congregation and sing along with the hymns or speak aloud when the church collectively reads a Bible passage. After service, people I have known for close to forty years come over and embrace us. I am sure a few may be biting their tongues to keep from saying something that might be offensive. But they hold back any negative opinions about my sexuality (though they will chide me, as they would any other parent, for not bringing the children to church more regularly!).

While scholars may theorize our church participation as an attempt to conform to societal standards of heterosexuality, our presence and involvement is in no way experienced by us as an attempt to conform. I am sure the parishioners do not see us as conforming. When I sit in the pew and a visiting minister gives a sermon, I hold my breath waiting to hear something homophobic. We have been attending for almost three years and I have not heard anything homophobic. I believe the visible participation of our little LGBT-parent family in this storefront Holiness church in Queens, New York, is radical, even revolutionary behavior. Every time I walk through those doors, I am making myself vulnerable while I silently bring my full self to the altar. Those who say this is conformist have not experienced this type of participation in conservative institutions.

The assumption of heteronormativity connects economic success and the building of committed relationships as attempts to affirm heterosexuality, but I do not give over these freedoms to any group based on their sexual orientation. I do link some of these experiences to the privileges economically advantaged people, and upper middle-class Whites in particular, are able to procure. I see these issues playing out in particular ways for my family as we navigate the world of elite private education in Manhattan. My children currently attend a nursery school that is a feeder to schools who are part of the New York State Association of Independent

Schools. As a sociologist who studies racial inequality, I am acutely aware of the disadvantages African American boys and girls face in the public school system (Ferguson, 2000; Morris, 2016). The New York City public school system is one of the most segregated in the country, and I can see the unequal resources allocated according to the racial composition of schools even within my own Upper West Side school district. When my wife and I have discussed our interest in pursuing private schooling for our children, the response from many of our White and Black middle-class peers has been varied, though most have tended to be suspicious. For example, my (White, heterosexual, male) accountant said with incredulity: “What’s wrong with the public school system? I went to public school. Why is it not good enough for your children?” His response, in my mind, was not based in my sexual orientation, but in the belief that my little Black children attending an elite independent school is disruptive of the racial order.

When my wife and I tour and interview for private kindergartens, we walk in the room with our brown faces, wearing professional styles of dress that are consistent with our different gender presentations. While our behaviors are consistent with middle-class linguistic styles, education, and forms of dress, we consistently feel particularly visible because of our constellation of race, sexuality, and gender presentation. At one elite school, the African American admissions officer spoke plainly. When we asked about the racial and ethnic diversity of the school she replied, “We obviously are not where we should be. As you know, these schools were not created for us. They were created for wealthy, White, heterosexual families to protect their children from others who are not those things.” We see our attempts to gain equal access to institutions that have been overwhelmingly reserved for White elites not as attempts to conform, but as rebellious behavior. And while race is the primary disruption, our presence crosses multiple boundaries, including race, class, and sexual orientation. That feels radical to us. And we persist.

I do not see my efforts to gain access as a replacement of my Black lesbian identity—and all that has meant historically—with a staid, conformist, Black heteronormativity. I see myself as actively combining what it means to be a married Black lesbian with children, with what it means to be a Black woman who worships God, who is trying to achieve economic freedom and have well-adjusted children who do not see themselves as limited by race or by having two moms. So I would say that the *contexts* in which the quest for and aftereffects of marriage equality are occurring should be emphasized in discussions about the meaning of this movement for LGBTQ people. I also want to posit the idea that “normalization” can in itself be radical, depending again on the context. As a person from a racial community whose people have been stereotyped as failing to live up to their responsibilities and not conforming to the expectations of “mainstream” society, the idea of having a same-sex marriage and having that relationship publicly acknowledged is experienced by many as revolutionary. Specific communities stand in complex and often unequal relation to broader societies, and this adds further nuance to how we think about concepts like “normalization” and “radical.”

Note

- 1 Proposition 8 was an initiative on the November 2008 ballot in California to overturn the California Supreme Court's ruling that same-sex couples had the right to marry under the California state constitution.

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