



Public Relations: Why the Rush to Same-Sex Marriage? And Who Stands to Benefit?

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Public relations

by Julie Abraham

Why the rush to same-sex marriage?

And who stands to benefit?



I grew up in a world in which girls were less valued than boys. Educating girls was understood to be a wasteful proposition—after all, they would just get married. The only women who did not marry were nuns and dutiful daughters who stayed at home to care for their aging parents. The nuns were another species; the dutiful daughters were pitied. I was pretty sure I did not want to be a nun. The prospect of staying at home forever was frankly terrifying. But I knew by the time I was ten years old that I did not want to marry.

It took almost another decade before I understood that women could make lives together. (News traveled slowly to isolated children in lower-middle-class Catholic circles in the colonies.) That was twenty years ago. To come out then was to escape the prospect of marriage as definitively—and who knows, perhaps with as much relief—as if one had become a nun.

My childhood is hardly ancient history. Different versions of the fate vivid to my ten-year-old self remain in place for many young girls in this country, not to mention most of the rest of the world. It is impossible for me to think about marriage apart from either second-class status for women or constraint. And in fact, both second-class status for women and constraint are integral to much of the rhetoric fueling the current campaign for same-sex marriage in the United States.

My memories were prompted by reading Michael Warner's recently published discussion of contemporary lesbian/gay/queer politics, *The Trouble with Normal*, in conjunction with the predominantly gay, largely conservative, literature of the past decade that he engages. Warner argues—not always persuasively—that political differences within the gay community cannot be explained as a matter of Left vs. Right, separatist vs. assimilationist, pro-sex vs. anti-sex, or radical vs. pragmatic. He maintains instead that we are enmeshed in a conflict between “a politics of homosexuality” and “a politics of sex.” This conflict, based on “long-simmering tensions,” has taken a “newly destructive form” in the context of the Clinton era's rapid development of a national, media-based lesbian/gay/queer political presence. At the center of this conflict is the campaign for same-sex marriage.

There is now, Warner argues, “a widening gap in the United States between the national lesbian and gay movement” and “queers.” The movement is increasingly committed to the pursuit of “lesbian and gay rights”—and an understanding of those rights—stripped of all sexual connotations. The chief goal of this effort is same-sex marriage. At the same time, the campaign for same-sex marriage is itself being used to consolidate “lesbians and gays” as a homosexual silent majority, the “good gays,” in opposition to the “bad queers” joined under the sign of sexual shame.

Warner rehearses the distinction between an identity politics associated with “lesbians and gays” and a more fluid

and in his view radical alternative, to be found among the queers who prefer to identify themselves in terms of their hostility to heterosexual norms. He identifies himself with the more radical queers. In practice, this queer label seems to cover a range of more specific identities: leathermen, androgynes, clones, circuit boys, dildo dykes, the transgendered, and so on. The difference he is actually identifying is between those who understand themselves to be defined by sex and those who resist such an understanding.

As an advocate for a politics of sex, however, Warner denies that there can be any real escape from definition by sex. Marriage may be presented as a way for lesbians and gays to neutralize the shame of sex, and so escape the stigma of homosexuality, but all that will be achieved, he believes, is a sham dignity paid for by the repression of desire. At the same time, “any politics,” he claims, “that makes full social membership conditional on the proprieties of the marital form is ultimately a way to pave over the collective world that lesbians and gays have made.”

Social membership is what is crucially at issue, and of interest, in Warner's argument. “The campaign for gay marriage,” he points out, “is not so much a campaign for marriage as a campaign about

the constituency and vocabulary of the gay and lesbian public.” Who is to be part of this new constituency? And who represents that constituency? Do we want marriage? Who is the “we” who might want marriage? All of these questions are inextricably linked.

Almost all of the contributors to the national media discussion of same-sex marriage have been white, and almost all have been male. Their subject is clearly *gay* marriage rather than same-sex marriage. But if same-sex marriage becomes a possibility, the landscape will change irrevocably for lesbians as well as gay men. As the gay marriage rhetoric reveals, you can't have marriage without women, even if the subject is marriage between men.

The advocacy of gay marriage is framed by the two central arguments advanced by those opposed to it: first, that the goal of marriage is the production of children; and second, that the goal of marriage is the civilization of men. Gay marriage advocates must of course disagree with the proposition that children are the purpose of marriage. But they can claim, as they do, that gays have children—children who need married parents. They can also retain a child as a touchstone of their discussion—the gay child who needs the prospect of marriage in his future.

I began with reference to my own childhood because so many gay marriage arguments begin with the figure of a child. The opening scene of conservative gay journalist Bruce Bawer's *A Place at the Table* is, as Warner points out, hard to overlook: an innocent (white, blond, middle-class, protected) boy hovers anxiously before a Grand Central Station newsstand, poised on the verge of shame at—or corruption by—the sexually explicit images he will

find in any gay publication he has the courage to pick up. As Bawer's passage indicates, the child in question is invariably male and equally invariably in pain.

The child in question must be a boy, and must be in pain, because anti- and pro-gay marriage advocates agree that the goal of marriage is to improve the lives of males, through the civilization—that is, the domestication—of men. As Warner notes, the subtitle of legal scholar William Eskridge's 1996 book, *The Case for Same-Sex Marriage: From Sexual Liberty to Civilized Commitment*, perfectly captures this assumption. The misery of the gay boy child, with nothing before him but the sexually excessive, emotionally empty, profoundly self-destructive universe gay men naturally inhabit, becomes itself an argument for gay marriage. Marriage will relieve his suffering.

The gay marriage advocates find themselves with something of a problem at this point, however. Heterosexual conservatives such as Hadley Arkes argue that “it is not marriage that domesticates men; it is women.” Gay marriage advocates must stake their all on the institution of marriage as in and of itself domesticating: the institution of marriage itself becomes the necessary female figure in the narrative of gay marriage. And in fact the gay marriage advocates' trump card, the one they invariably flourish at this point in their discussions, is that there are already legions of homosexuals epitomizing the domestic future of same-sex marriage—long-term loving monogamous couples, free of any taint of out-of-control sexuality, and perhaps of any sexuality at all: the lesbians down the block. This invocation of lesbians—in *Love Undetectable*, Andrew Sullivan describes “lesbian culture” as “a monogamist's dream of political and social community”—can also be traced in the work of Bawer, Gabriel Rotello in *Sexual Ecology*, Michelangelo Signorile in *The Life Outside* and others.

Not only do you need women for marriage, you apparently also need gender norms. Women are only present in the gay discussions of marriage when identified with marriage. Even E.J. Graff, one of the very few lesbians with a speaking part in this drama, frames her advocacy of same-sex marriage with descriptions of herself and her partner. Graff concludes her book, *What is Marriage For?*, by proposing the celebration of “each individual spirit.” But no one else is discussing individual spirits.

Not only do these discussions of marriage demonstrate the femininity of lesbians, they confirm the masculinity of gay men. Lesbians marry because they are women, and therefore incapable of doing anything else. They hardly need the church or the state: they have the force of the cumulative femininity of the female couple on their side. But gay men need marriage because they are men. As Sullivan opines, “gay male society is far more persuasively explained—and understood—in terms of its gender than of its orientation. The landscape of gay life is, indeed, almost a painting in testosterone.”

The sign of the masculinity of gay men, in this schema, is unrestrained sexuality. “Gay male society is often ‘blamed’ for being promiscuous,” Rotello laments, “as if it were possible for a male society whose members have no sanctioned relationships and no responsibility to anyone but themselves to be otherwise.” Marriage will civilize and domesticate gay men by restraining gay male sexuality. Consequently advocates of gay marriage, such as Rotello and Signorile, not only play up the pain but, in conjunction with elab-

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orate accounts of gay male sexual excess, downplay any other elements of gay culture; all gay social or cultural institutions other than bars, bathhouses, gyms and circuit parties seem to have vanished. The gay boy child can have nothing to look forward to except sex, without marriage.

Many of us, though uninterested in marriage for ourselves, are susceptible to the proposition most often articulated by the national lesbian and gay organizations, that we should at least have a choice in the matter. But much of the pro-gay marriage argument is founded on a denial of choice. Lesbians/gays/queers did not choose their sexual difference, the argument goes; consequently, they don't deserve to be shut out by that difference from a social institution that they understand as fundamental to a good life in a good society.

Denial of choice is also central to the vision of marriage many of these people are arguing for. While there is some talk about the changes that marriage has undergone over the centuries (by Graff and Eskridge), and the changes that same-sex couples might make to the institution (by Eskridge and lawyer Nan Hunter), its most vocal advocates want gay marriage *because* marriage stands at the center of a system of legitimation and delegitimation, reward and punishment. They are eager to enroll their peers in such a system. Gay male sexuality must be restrained, whether because it shocks children and straight people (Bawer), produces AIDS (Rotello), produces unhappy gay men (Signorile), or simply for the greater social good (Rauch). "That marriage would provide status to those who married and implicitly penalize those who did not...[is] a key point," writes Rotello in *The Nation*. Or, as Jonathan Rauch insists in *The New Republic*, "If marriage is to work it cannot be merely a 'lifestyle option.' It must be privileged.... It is not enough...for gay people to say we want the right to marry. If we do not use it, shame on us."

How are gay men—or those of us lesbians not already wedded to the altar—to be led to marriage? Through the strategic application of pain and shame. The pain and shame that first appear in this discussion as evidence of the gay boy child's need for marriage soon become evidence of his lack of choice in his sexual desires, and so his right to marriage. Finally, pain and shame will be the tools used to ensure his, and our, marriage. As Graff cheerily proposes in a letter to *The Nation*, "same-sex marriage may well return society's political fissure to one between monogamous and promiscuous rather than homo and het, a division far more historically familiar."

Just as we apparently did not have a choice about being gay and will not be offered a choice about marrying, so we will not be offered a choice about gender. In the brave new world made possible by gay marriage, as Andrew Sullivan envisions it,

The future for gay men and women is one in which our gender, male or female, is neither abolished nor caricatured, but reclaimed. It is one in which being a man will always and everywhere be different from being a woman but will be compatible in every respect with loving another man, just as being a woman will always and everywhere be different from being a man but will be compatible in every respect with loving another woman.

(*Love Undetectable*, p.153)

When Sullivan goes on to insist that "gender differences...are deeper than the differences between heterosexuals and homosexuals," I have to wonder if the pain and shame of his homosexuality is somehow tied to the prospect of being unfairly forced into the company of the girls.

In the course of developing his arguments against gay marriage, Michael Warner recognizes and rejects the many gay marriage advocates' commitment to denial of choice. But he too embraces pain and shame along with the gay child. "Almost all children grow up in families that think of themselves and all their members as heterosexual," he writes, "and for some children this produces a profound and nameless estrangement, a sense of inner secrets and hidden shame. No amount of adult 'acceptance' or progress in civil rights is likely to eliminate this experience of queerness for many children and adolescents." Although for Warner such pain leads not to the redemption of homosexuality in marriage, but to an identification with all potential victims of sexual shaming, I still hear distinct echoes of Sullivan lamenting "those early wounds." And the shamed queer child is still a boy. Warner's world is divided into "women and gay people," as he explains (in a gesture apparently intended as inclusive) that "Women and gay people have been especially vulnerable to the shaming effects of isolation."

Because so many of the gay marriage advocates emphasize that the function of marriage will be to control gay male sexuality, Warner is able to argue plausibly that sex—or willingness to be identified with/by sex—is the faultline of contemporary lesbian/gay/queer politics. But sex is only one of the factors at issue. Sexual practices, even sexual identifications, don't make a politics. That is surely the lesson of gay conservatism. Indeed, the exclusivity of Warner's focus on sex reinforces the very narrowing of the political field that he complains of.

The new gay and lesbian constituency being constructed through the marriage debates is a wholly white, conventionally gendered as well as sexually circumspect crowd—each feminine woman already joined to another equally feminine woman, each masculine man eager to plight his troth to an equally manly fellow. It is dominated by adult males separated as children from the loving families—and by implication the welcoming world—around them only by their different sexual desire. There are very few women. No one is poor. Or unashamed. Or miserable for reasons other than their sex. And people of color appear only as host communities—as in Warner's proclamation that "the queer ethos is currently thriving in urban scenes...in drag cultures, among black and Latino cultures, in club scenes and the arts."

None of this would be anything other than business as usual—plus shame and pain—if the most conservative of the would-be representatives of this new gay and lesbian constituency (Bawer, Sullivan and company) had not so successfully taken their show public. Their embrace of shame and pain is surely one source of that mainstream success. But they have also been so successful, in part, because the gay marriage debate has allowed them simultaneously to capitalize on and contain a broader interest in "the public" among lesbians, gays and queers.

There are two different versions of "the public" in Warner's analysis. The first, a media-based and -defined public, is where the new lesbian and gay con-

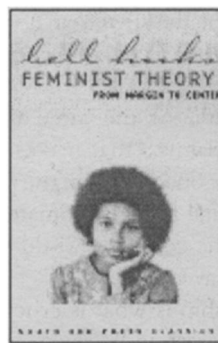
stituency is being created—at the expense of the second, a queer counter-public. Gays stay home and cook dinner for their boyfriends. Their community involvement is limited to buying magazines and donating money. But queers meet in the bars and on the streets; their community involvement is simultaneously sexual and political. Many of the gay marriage advocates are explicitly anti-urban; they present the city as hostile to the very possibility of gay marriage. In contrast, Warner, like other sex-positive gay commentators such as Michael Bronski in *The Pleasure Principle* and Samuel Delany in *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*, identifies the city as a crucial site of lesbian/gay/queer cultures. "[M]ovement politics on the national scale" clearly is, as Warner observes, "now dominated by a small group of national organizations...media celebrities...[and] big money." But he offers little middle ground between this disembodied national media-public and an urban counter-public.

One of the key paradoxes of life in the USA today is that lesbians, gays and

queers are coming out at an unprecedented rate, but into a rapidly shrinking public space. How do you come out if there is nowhere to go? It seems that for some, the answer is, you get married. As Warner notes, "Many of the gay people who now say they want marriage...seem to want...[a] form of coming out"; "when gay men and lesbians think about marriage... [t]hey assimilate it to the model of *coming out*," they are "driven by expressive need."

The interest in visible expression Warner records echoes Sullivan, who sees the gender transgression he deplores in lesbian/gay/queer cultures—the unfeminine women, the less than masculine men, the butches and the queens—as the "products of deep and searing anxiety, of the inability to be a publicly gay man or woman except as a caricature of one gender or another." Marriage would allow gay men and lesbians to assume their proper manly and womanly roles, Sullivan implies, because marriage would give them proper access to the public realm.

Warner sees the conclusion to this conflation of coming out and marriage as



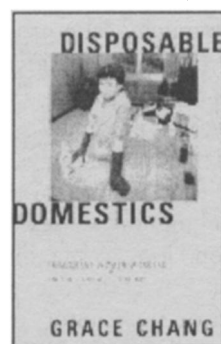
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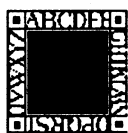
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"I'm gay! I do!" But what this pattern actually sounds like is "I do" therefore "I'm gay"—that is, definitively, publicly gay.

But marriage is hardly the ideal institution through which to pursue public recognition, public space, space in the public realm. Marriage is a public declaration of a couple's *withdrawal* from the world. Except of course that it was not historically the couple that withdrew from the world but the wife, whose subsequent symbolic if not actual confinement to the privacy of the home both testified to and materially supported the public stability and social integration—the civilization—of her husband. (Rather as all those loving lesbian couples nesting just off-stage demonstrate the potential for civilization of otherwise errant gay men.)

Whose sexuality has historically been controlled by marriage? Can we forget how recent, even in the United States, were the bitter struggles for a married woman's right to her own body, to her children, to own property, to make legal decisions, and to a divorce? These are still rights being battled over in much of the world.

As the gay marriage debate demonstrates, even when wedding is merely under discussion, women end up second-class citizens, as subjects and as participants. Urvashi Vaid in *Virtual Equality*, Barbara Smith in the essays collected in *The Truth That Never Hurts*, and most recently Michael Bronski, have all in the past decade argued, like Warner, against the mainstreaming of lesbian and gay politics. Bronski shares Warner's focus on sex and consequently discusses gay marriage. But neither Vaid nor Smith focus on sex or marriage at all.

Most of the women who do write about same-sex marriage, from Paula Ettelbrick at the end of the eighties to Claudia Card in the mid-nineties to Valerie Lehr most recently, reject mar-

riage as a goal. In *Queer Family Values*, Lehr challenges the assumptions about "family" underlying much of the debate. Most of the women advocating same-sex marriage, like Nan Hunter, are committed to changing marriage rather than lesbians, gays or queers. Significantly, those women who are debating same-sex marriage speak to smaller audiences than their male peers—in alternative papers, academic journals or university press books, rather than in the major media or from the lists of mainstream publishers.

In this context Vermont's recent decision to institute a form of "civil union" for same-sex couples looks like a plausible compromise—a public statement, plus legal protections, but without history. And yet, as *The New York Times* editorialized on March 18, the day after the crucial vote was taken, "Vermonters...are leading the way toward a society that values stable gay relationships." Or, as the message was conveyed more succinctly just a day later, "backers proclaimed it a significant step toward equal rights for all committed couples." Homosexuals are not being offered full citizenship here. Rather, "gay" is being buried beneath the weight of "stable" and "relationship." And if you—gay, lesbian, queer, or straight—don't happen to want a coupled life, don't happen to have found the coupled life you want, or don't happen to require, if coupled, the stability a state can confer? What happened to equal rights for all?

Being coupled does not make me more socially valuable than my single friends and relations, nor more deserving of financial breaks, health insurance, legal protections. I still don't want to get married. And I don't want my capacity to care for those close to me further undermined because, when I could, I chose not to register with the state.

Geography lesson

by Jane Holtz Kay

Women and the City: Gender, Power, and Space in Boston,

1870-1940 by Sarah Deutsch. New York: Oxford University

Press, 2000, 402 pp., \$35.00 hardcover.

Woman's place" is more than a dot on a map. In the literature of gender, it is a symbol, a construct, an emblem. If the everyday meaning of place or space lies in the world of architecture and planning, the literature of gender has little to do with geography. Place or places are personal metaphors, a "moral geography" or sign of character rather than an earthly location.

Some feminists have seen place as a symbol of liberation and self-determination (Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*); others, as a locus of suffocation and entombment (Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*). Either way, the metaphorical view has dominated, while women's role in inventing and being invented by the physical world is more ignored than documented.

In *Women and the City*, historian Sarah Deutsch continues this tradition. Women's role is "encoded in space" and defined symbolically, not as four walls and a front door or actual itinerary. Despite this overplayed metaphor, Deutsch has done a nimble job of encapsulating women's status and role from after the Civil War to the Second World War in Boston. Her book is lively and informative, a well-researched contribution to the social, political and gender history of the city and its inhabitants.

Deutsch threads her way through the seventy-year social tapestry of women's lives in the city. She knits together disparate lives, from the boardinghouse keeper or "taileress" struggling to survive in socialist Robert Woods' nineteenth-century "City Wilderness," to the elite of Beacon Hill and Back Bay thriving atop the Puritan "City Upon a Hill." Her colorful and careful narrative offers the changing panorama of women and the city in an intricate weave of political and social events, power shifts and personal exchanges laced with anecdotes, mini-biographies and analyses.

Deutsch deftly describes the social byplay in class and gender interactions. Moving from women's cloistered roles to their freer existence, she carries the reader into the landscape of their lives. The descriptions of the tenements where lodgers laid their mattresses on boxes to sleep, foot to head, and "breathing was in short supply," are vivid. The corroded surroundings and fetid spaces that caused 21,280 deaths from preventable diseases between 1878 and 1887 become almost tactile; the oppressive conditions of the sweatshops are Dickensian in their miseries. One feels, sees, senses the deprivations, weaknesses, strengths and struggles of a vast collection of women.

Deutsch begins with "The 'Overworked Wife,'" the homebound woman enmeshed in the domestic economies and confines of a house that often served as both home and income-producing lodging-house. She proceeds to the nineteenth-century woman's place in the external world of "Work or Worse," then to the urban conditions of the

"working girl" and small entrepreneur, and finally to the factory worker, the union organizer and the suffragist. The histories of supporting or allying organizations and institutions like the Women's Educational and Industrial Union and Denison House are well integrated if sometimes too detailed.

Deutsch's special gift lies in her portraits. *Women and the City* brings to life the everyday words of her characters, both the unsung and the chronicled, with zest. She is skilled at penetrating class differences, exchanges and attitudes. The affluent matron persuades herself that she is providing "moral guardianship" for her women servants by keeping them off the streets in the safety of her house; these servants do the "all-too-dust-catching, high-maintenance maintaining" while (as statistics show) they are in greater danger from the man of the house than the strangers in the "dangerous streets." No change here.

Deutsch combines colorful individual portraits with scenes where working women, union activists and suffragists interact and agitate. In one dramatic episode, striking factory workers take to the streets, joined in short order by 5000 prostitutes infuriated by the Boston police force's series of brothel raids, and reinforced in turn by a crew of South End madams. Organizing a "Landladies Union" to promote licensing brothels and protest the police raids, these influential madams demonstrate in behalf of the thousands of girls brought "into the streets of Boston without means of support, and no provision made for their support or maintenance by said officials," as they declared, "thereby spreading diseases and destitution all over the city by driving this class into lodging houses, hotels and flats."

Deutsch has written a bottom-up book, devoted to daily, working-class life. Yet, for all the *noblesse oblige* attitude she finds in the "middle-class and elite," she recognizes genuine feeling in these do-gooders. For all the class conflicts of the age she explores, Deutsch makes us appreciate the good intentions of prosperous women philanthropists along with the social ironies generated when, say, residents of elegant Joy Street try to be helpmates to their hardworking "sisters" in a city that is both reformist and elitist. Though her sympathy inevitably lies with the hard-pressed newcomers and working-class women moving from private into more public life (or "space," as she would put it), Deutsch shapes good views of both worlds.

The range of Deutsch's tales is wide, spanning the personal and the political—from the chaotic kosher meat market riot of 1902 to the tale of Emma Goldman's off-and-on lover flirting with a hat trimmer from Roxbury. At a deeper level, she grasps the predicament of the black community during this seventy-year period, integrating racial differences and relations into the larger fabric of the tale.

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