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Gender, Genetics, and Generation: Reformulating Biology in Lesbian Kinship

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The complicated historical relationship between ideas about homosexuality and concepts of “the family” in American culture makes the idea of gay and lesbian families—“chosen” or “created”—a provocative one in the study of American kinship. Insofar as lesbians and gay men have been ideologically excluded from the realm of kinship in American culture (Weston 1991:4–6), it is perhaps not surprising that claims to the legitimacy of gay and lesbian family configurations are often articulated *and* contested in terms of their perceived difference from (or similarity to) normative ideologies of “the American family.” In her pivotal work, *Families We Choose* (1991), Kath Weston argues for the *distinctiveness* of a certain configuration of gay and lesbian kinship in which biological ties are decentered and choice, or love, becomes the defining feature of kin relationships. For Weston, gay and lesbian chosen families are neither derivative of, nor substitutes for, “straight,” biological families; rather, they are distinctive in their own right (1991:210). Ellen Lewin takes a markedly different approach to the value of distinctiveness in her recent book, *Lesbian Mothers* (1993). By her own account exceeding the goal of her earlier work on maternal custody strategies—showing that lesbian mothers are “just as good” as heterosexual mothers—Lewin finds that “motherhood” in American culture constitutes a defining feature of womanhood that indeed supersedes the “difference” of lesbian identity (1993:3). In this reading, there is nothing particularly unique about the ways in which lesbian mothers negotiate relatedness and relationships.

Though they are not explicitly foregrounded in such terms, I would argue that these two pivotal ethnographies together suggest that “biology,” broadly conceived, is a crucial axis around which claims to the “distinctiveness” of gay and lesbian kinship revolve. Thus the relative centrality of biology in gay and lesbian families might be seen to signal a corollary assimilation into, or depar-

ture from, “traditional” forms of American kinship. In this logic, the argument would read as follows: when biological ties are displaced (as in Weston’s work), claims to distinctiveness can be made; where biological ties are central (especially in the case of motherhood), claims to difference lose their relevance or legitimacy.

I want to disrupt the flow of this argument on several levels. To that end, this article is an exploration of the ways in which many lesbian mothers employ notions of biology, in the context of donor insemination, to articulate their own sense of uniquely lesbian kinship. I offer, then, an ethnographic reading of specific kinds of claims I have encountered in recent lesbian-feminist writings, newspaper articles, court cases, and informal conversations. I must stress that these particular articulations of lesbian familial desire in no way offer a “representative” stance on parenting within lesbian and gay communities.¹ On the one hand, the question of whether or not to become a parent has a long and complicated history for many gay men and lesbians; for lesbians in particular, the centrality of motherhood to American cultural narratives of womanhood has long made mothering a particularly potent site of contestation. Current articulations of the radical potential of lesbian families must be placed within the context of continuing debates over reproductive “choice”—and the choice *not* to mother—within various lesbian and feminist communities.²

On the other hand, for lesbians and gay men who are parents, the two-parent “intentional” family (Lewin 1993) is obviously not the only model. Lesbians and gay men have children through previous heterosexual relationships; they adopt children; they are single parents or raise children with several co-parents. Moreover, gay and lesbian parenting families have long existed, and certainly predate the current interest in “alternative” families. I focus specifically on lesbians who create families through donor insemination not because they are a defining model for lesbian kinship (if there could be such a thing) but rather because of the particular ways in which biology is made both explicit and mutable in these visions of a “distinct” family configuration.³ Moreover, these claims to a uniquely lesbian kinship often challenge the (heterosexual) gender configuration that is foundational to American cultural notions of kinship. These articulations of lesbian families thus provide a context in which to continue important theoretical discussions of the relationship among gender, sexuality, and kinship (see Collier and Yanagisako 1987; Rubin 1975; Weston 1991).

I want to follow Marilyn Strathern in resisting the temptation to argue for wholly novel conceptual developments in ideas about kinship, though I do hope to retain space for imagining how “images pressed into new service acquire new meanings” (Strathern 1992b:15). Such an approach assumes from the outset that there is nothing “truly new” under the sun; at the same time, the continual back and forth between “new” and “old” ideas allows for the possibility of reformulating existing symbols in creative and meaningful ways.

Taking on “American Kinship”

The claim to a distinctive gay and lesbian kinship elicits questions about the elasticity of American kinship as a symbolic system and implies the possibility of transforming the dominant model of American kinship. Such moves call for a clarification of exactly what *kind(s)* of kinship one has in mind and how one chooses to define dominant, transformative, or derivative versions of American kinship. Though it has been challenged on many fronts, the foundational model of American kinship laid out by David Schneider (1980[1968]) more than 25 years ago remains an enduring one. Discussions of gay and lesbian kinship, and arguments about its sameness (and therefore derivative nature) or difference (implying the potential for transformation), continue to resonate with the terms that Schneider set forth in 1968. American kinship, he argued, is a symbolic system resting on the two contrasting but mutually dependent elements of blood (shared biogenetic substance) and love (a code for conduct both legitimating the creation of blood ties and governing the behavior of those who are related by blood). Characterizing Americans’ (and American anthropologists’) understanding of kinship as a “folk theory of biological reproduction,” Schneider declared the *symbol* of (hetero)sexual intercourse—mediating and mediated by blood and marriage—as central to American kinship (1980[1968]:37–38).

Not surprisingly, this premise has been made problematic by lesbians and gay men, who have been symbolically excluded from the realm of kinship. The supposed exclusion from, and threat to, family that marks gay men and lesbians has amounted to a virtual denial of their cultural citizenship, as Weston has noted (1991:4–6). Indeed, one has only to glance at the most basic manifestations of homophobia in the United States to grasp their foundation on the interdependent web of kinship, sexuality, gender, and procreation. Exemplified by the pseudo-evolutionary theory that homosexuals must *recruit* progeny because they cannot reproduce themselves, this particular version of the “threat to family” argument highlights the ways in which heterosexuality, gender, and kinship are mutually constituted.⁴

The perceived centrality of procreative sexuality to the stability of “the family” underlies such familiar statements as, “I have a problem with homosexuals who flaunt what they’re doing . . . before the public in an effort to destroy and break down family life. . . . The family creates. Homosexuals only cause trouble. They can’t create anything” (Glasgow quoted in Green 1991:1–2). It is likewise this notion of creativity that figures so strongly in claims to the legitimacy of gay and lesbian families, with or without children. At stake in such contests over creativity is the meaning of sexual intercourse in American kinship and, subsequently, the ways in which blood and love are privileged as defining features of families. Weston notes the ways in which chosen families complicate “traditional” notions of blood and love: “Familial ties between persons of the same sex that may be erotic *but are not grounded in biology or procreation* do not fit any tidy division of kinship into relations of blood and marriage” (1991:3, emphasis added). Weston’s work focuses on families of friends

and lovers—"chosen families" that challenge the sanctity of blood and marriage as the sole determinants of legitimate kin ties.

Although these chosen families bring up crucial questions about kinship *without* biological connections (or without the *expectation* of creating biological kin through procreation),⁵ quite different questions arise in the creation of lesbian and gay parenting families in which biology, via procreation, reenters the picture. Using Weston's work as a foundation for exploring lesbian and gay critiques of the central premises of American kinship, I will focus below on the complicated intersections of biological procreation and lesbian kinship. I am interested not simply in the assertion that biology *is* mobilized in articulations of "uniquely" lesbian family configurations; my concern lies more in the ways in which the symbol of biology is unpacked, dispersed, and distributed within these configurations.⁶ In this way, certain articulations of lesbian kinship provide important ground on which to theorize biology as a symbol that is continually refigured within the contested symbolic field(s) of American kinship.

Love Makes a Family⁷

Weston implicates chosen families in an explicit challenge to the dominant model of American kinship and its foundation in procreation and biological ties. In *Families We Choose*, she writes,

The very notion of gay families asserts that people who claim nonprocreative sexual identities . . . can lay claim to family ties of their own. . . . Theirs has not been a proposal to number gay families among variations in "American kinship," but a more comprehensive attack on the privilege accorded to a biogenetically grounded mode of determining what relationships will *count* as kinship. [1991:35, emphasis in original]

The families to which Weston refers are families forged out of ties to friends and lovers. United by choice and love, not by biological ties or the expectation of creating such, these families clearly set themselves apart from the dominant model of American kinship and its maxim that "blood is thicker than water." Without denying that blood ties "work" (Strathern 1992b), chosen families nonetheless level a profound critique at the *centrality* in American kinship of heterosexual, procreative relationships and the biogenetic ties that arise from these relationships.

Weston clearly believes that chosen families are neither imitative nor derivative of the dominant model of American kinship. Rather, she argues that they constitute a distinctive form of kinship, contrastive rather than analogous to straight kinship (Weston 1991:211).⁸ Still, she maintains that choice cannot be read as license to create a family structure unfettered by conventional notions of kinship. Situating chosen families within the bounded symbolic universe of American kinship, Weston's analysis posits a continuum in which gay, chosen families have emerged in explicit opposition to, but coexisting with, straight, biological families. Thus the very idea of chosen families becomes meaningful

only in the context of the cultural belief in the power of blood ties (Weston 1991:211).

There is another dimension to chosen families' position within the dominant symbolic matrix of American kinship. In her review of *Families We Choose*, Strathern writes that perhaps *the* fundamental critique enacted through chosen families is that they "make explicit the fact that there was always a choice as to whether or not biology is made the foundation of relationships" (1992b:3). This, indeed, is one of Schneider's central points throughout *American Kinship*: though Americans believe that blood determines family, there is and always has been a necessary element of choice in the degree to which blood ties become "relationships" in any given family (not to mention the ways in which blood ties are conceived in the first place) (Schneider 1980[1968]:62-63; see also Strathern 1981).

Schneider's and Strathern's reminders of the centrality of choice in heterosexual kinship dislodge biology from its privileged place in that model; they assert unequivocally that there is much more at work in the creation of kinship in American culture than a fervent belief in the self-evidence of blood ties might allow. In the context of lesbian and gay kinship, this displacement of biology as *the* central and defining feature of family connotes a challenge to the direct, exclusive correlation that is assumed between heterosexual procreation and the production of kin ties.

In Strathern's analysis, chosen families challenge the privilege enjoyed by straight kinship by shifting the emphasis from blood to choice *on two levels*—explicitly, through their own chosen families, and implicitly, by suggesting that despite its supposed basis in the "facts of nature," straight, blood-based kinship is itself a construction. As the focus of this article now turns to lesbian motherhood, Strathern's point bears elaboration. The creation of lesbian and gay families with children cannot be discussed in exactly the same terms as chosen families, since each indexes somewhat different notions of biology. Where chosen families may *decentralize* biology, lesbian families' explicit mobilization of biological ties challenges the notion of biology as a *singular* category through which kin ties are reckoned. Far from depleting its symbolic capital, the dispersal of the biological tie seems here to highlight its elasticity within the symbolic matrix of American kinship.

Gender and Kinship

While the chosen families of lesbians and gay men may forge new ground in kinship divorced from procreation, lesbian co-parenting families engender a slightly different set of symbolic renegotiations, since the presence of procreation refigures the blood/choice dichotomy. Does biological reproduction ground kinship "back" in biology, thereby negating the "progress" achieved by chosen families? Does lesbian sex itself create kinship different from that mediated by heterosexual sex? Does a child with two mothers come from a different kind of kinship arrangement than a child with one mother and/or one father? As these questions suggest, sex and gender, in the context of a procreative fam-

ily, become central elements of contestation in efforts to define the place of lesbian families in American kinship.

Many feminist anthropologists, in critique of Schneider, contend that “the American Kinship System” does not exist apart from its constituent elements of gender, age, ethnicity, race, or class, among other things (Collier and Yanagisako 1987; Delaney and Yanagisako, in press; McKinnon 1992; Strathern 1992a). For Schneider, these mediating factors do not inhabit the realm of “pure culture.” Collier and Yanagisako (1987) have argued that the split between the “cultural” realm of kinship and the “mediating factor” of gender is illusory, at least in American culture. Kinship and gender are mutually constituted, they write, because both categories are based on the same ideas of biological difference. Gender assumptions about the facts of sexual reproduction pervade kinship theory, just as sexual reproduction is central to the definition of gender (Collier and Yanagisako 1987:23–34). Thus even a separation of the two on a “purely analytical” level, as Schneider enjoys, becomes problematic.⁹

Further, categories such as gender, age, class, and so on, produce structural distinctions that mediate relationships within families; to talk about any of them, therefore, means to talk about power. Schneider’s insistence on separating gender from kinship has, by extension, opened him up to criticisms that his model ignores issues of power and inequality (Delaney and Yanagisako, in press; McKinnon 1992). Delaney and Yanagisako write, “Schneider did not address the question of how inequality is embedded in cultural systems, in part because he did not follow out the logic of the specificity of symbols and instead made abstractions of them” (in press:3). Standing firm in the position that symbolic analysis of kinship—kept separate from gender, age, power, and so on—goes only so far as blood and love, Schneider ensures the stability of his model of kinship. For, in these fairly abstract terms, a “transformation” in kinship would necessitate a complete departure from the blood-love (or blood-choice) symbolic matrix. Thus, for example, chosen families as described by Weston cannot claim distinctiveness because they remain enmeshed within the tension between blood and love. A more contextualized, power-conscious analysis such as that enjoined by Delaney, Yanagisako, McKinnon, and Strathern allows for the stability of Schneider’s symbolic *universe* while leaving room for reconfigurations of the meanings of these symbols.

Power and Parenthood

The centrality of power and gender to American kinship is particularly illuminated by lesbian families in which both parents are explicitly considered mothers. These families potentially unsettle the “dominant” vision of American kinship in several ways, perhaps most significantly in their challenge to ideas about gendered hierarchy and parenthood. For women with a clear and gendered agenda for lesbian motherhood, its promise is deeply bound to the existence of a second female parent, who is neither downplayed nor de-gendered. She is not a father substitute, nor is she a gender-neutral parent; she is clearly another

mother. Resonating with a legacy of feminist and lesbian-feminist writings on “compulsory heterosexuality” (most notably, of course, Adrienne Rich’s [1984] article by that name), such understandings of the radical potential of lesbian motherhood are offered in criticism of—and as an alternative to—the institutionalized gender inequities seen to inhere in heterosexuality.

There is a dual implication to this oppositional construction of parental roles. First, embracing rather than contesting the image of motherhood as a distinctly female, nurturant enterprise, the benefits of the family are construed in terms of a doubling of maternal love and support. In the feminist volume *Politics of the Heart: A Lesbian Parenting Anthology*, one contributor writes, “I’m not opposed to fathers, but I do believe every baby should have at least two mothers” (Washburne 1987:144–145). Another notes that “when straight mothers find out my son has two moms, they are actually envious on some level; there are two people doing the job they often do alone” (Hill 1987:118).

Second, more than the “convenience” of double motherhood, claims to the distinctiveness of lesbian co-parenting rest heavily on a critique of the power relationships that many of these women associate with heterosexual families. Such understandings of lesbian parenting allege, on the one hand, that heterosexuality contains built-in power inequities; by contrast, lesbian mothers claim to offer gender equality and therefore parental equality. Counteracting the accusations that same-sex relationships are, by definition, pathological (and therefore detrimental to children’s development), many mental health professionals and theorists contend that the gender configurations of gay and lesbian relationships are indeed as healthy as, if not healthier than, those of their straight counterparts.¹⁰ Contributing to this compensatory project is psychologist Margaret Nichols, who writes,

In my experience, far too many heterosexual relationships become bogged down in the mire of sex-role conflicts and never transcend these conflicts to a point where both partners see each other as full human beings. I do not mean to imply that lesbian and gay relationships are without conflict, simply that the conflicts . . . are certainly much less likely to exhibit the vast power differentials that can be found in many heterosexual relationships. [1987:102]

If the absence of gender *difference* is portrayed as a positive attribute, then the gendering of both partners as *female* is seen to multiply the benefits exponentially. Suzanne Cusick writes that a lesbian relationship is

a relationship based on non-power—that is, a relationship in which a porous boundary exists at all moments between she who seems to have the power and she who doesn’t, allowing for a flow of power in both directions. *No one in the relationship is formed to be the power figure, though all can play at it.* [1991:10, emphasis added]

De-eroticizing this last point for a moment, the thesis of equal or fluid power—given the premise of non-power—forms the basis of a politicized view of the potential for difference in certain lesbian co-parenting families. Thus, bearing

and raising a child in a lesbian household is understood as a tool for “radical motherhood” to combat “heteromothering” (Cooper 1987:223); a “unique opportunity in history to raise children in a home with two parents with potentially equal power” (Polikoff 1987:329); or, on the other side of the coin, perhaps creates a perverse environment in which men and women do not “adhere to their roles” (Polikoff 1990:560).

Further, as Cusick’s erotic gender equation amply suggests, gender roles within kinship are inextricably linked to the act and symbol of sex itself. Schneider contends that sexual intercourse is a central symbol in American kinship because it is through sex (or the symbol thereof) that blood ties are created and family relationships mediated:

Sexual intercourse (the act of procreation) is the symbol which provides the distinctive features in terms of which both the members of the family as relatives and the family as a cultural unit are defined and differentiated. [1980(1968):31]

He continues, “Father is the genitor, mother the genitrix of the child which is their offspring. . . . Husband and wife are lovers and the child is the product of their love as well as the object of their love” (1980[1968]:43). In these terms, lesbian parents do not fit easily into American kinship. Genitrix and genitor are not interchangeable; to replace one with the other is dramatically to change the character of the union between parents. The union between man and woman (as husband and wife) is one imbued with deep symbolic meaning in American culture, not the least of which is, as Schneider says, the means through which family relationships are created and differentiated.

Strathern notes that this symbolic union is also deeply imbued with gendered relations of power:

In . . . Euro-American formulations, male and female parents are differently placed with respect to parenthood: *an equal union is also an asymmetric pairing*. . . . The relationship of the sexual act to conception is not, therefore, simply a technical one. It serves to reproduce parenthood as the perceived outcome of a union in which the parties are distinguished by gender. Apart from anything else, it thus plays a *conceptually* significant part in procreation. [1992a:4, emphasis added]

In an analysis conscious of gender and power relations, a family mediated by lesbian sex arguably makes kinship look different than a family “unified” through the sexual relationship between mother and father. Strathern clearly implicates sexual intercourse in the symbolic reproduction of structural gender relations. For those invested in a feminist reworking of parental roles, the unity symbolized by lesbian lovers as mothers reproduces a different gender and power configuration through which the lesbian family is organized. To follow the logic of Collier and Yanagisako’s argument that gender and kinship are mutually constituted, this particular understanding of lesbian kinship carves out its own place along the spectrum of American kinships *precisely because it*

refigures the alignment of gender and power roles which have traditionally marked the American family.

All Lesbian Mothers Do Not Create Equally

As might be expected, this somewhat utopian, egalitarian vision of lesbian kinship runs into trouble in the face of a legal structure that retains its historic commitment to the equation of blood ties with family. The promise that some women see in lesbian families—the opportunity to raise children in an environment of gender equality—is often thrown into disarray when one partner bears a child. Having children through donor insemination automatically introduces its own asymmetry into the relationship among lesbian parents and child. The “birth mother” has a validated and immediately recognizable relationship with her child, while her partner (as neither a biological parent nor a legally recognized spouse) is doubly excluded from the realm of kinship. Her marginality is expressed in the dearth of established, much less positive, terms for the role of the “co-mother.” Often represented as the proverbial “lack,” she is the “nonbiological mother,” the “nonbirth mother,” the “other mother” (Riley 1988:89).

This structural inequality is perceived to have profound repercussions for the dynamics of lesbian families. Psychologist Sally Crawford writes,

When the relationship between parents is unrecognized . . . then no matter how defined the system may be internally, ex-lovers, ex-husbands, and members of the couple's family of origin can often walk in and walk out at will, as though the family unit does not exist. [1987:203]

One mother notes, “If the family structure is not reflected legally, then our families are distorted, they're not supported, and we're not able to function fully as the families we are” (Keen 1991:8).

While both mothers may talk of the ways their family is distorted by the lack of legal recognition, co-mother and birth mother often express significantly different concerns. Toni Tortorilla writes,

There is no readily definable slot [for nonbiological parents in a lesbian or gay relationship]. The parameters of society's vision are stretched by our very existence. . . . And yet, though standing outside the protection and sanction of the system, many adults still choose to enter into a parental role with the children of their lovers. They commit time and energy to loving, nurturing, and supporting these children while risking the changes which could lead to separation from those whose lives they nourished and formed. It is a risk the biological parent often minimizes or fails to recognize in her own need for support with childrearing. [1987:174]

Another woman writes of feeling like a fraud “if I act like he's my baby. I'm afraid someone will ask me about labor or my husband or something. I have to keep telling myself he *is* my baby and he will be perceived that way because it's the truth” (Gray 1987:136, emphasis in original).

Though not articulated as frequently, there is a flip side to this imbalance, which one woman terms “The Comother’s Choice.” She writes,

Kathleen is angry that I have [a choice]. . . . My doubts—“I don’t know if I can do my writing and be in This Situation”—all point to the imbalance between us. She can’t choose anymore. . . . Andrew is the new life. That’s not the choice I made. That’s the choice of the biological mother. I chose parenting without complete sacrifice. [Gray 1987:137]

The dilemmas engendered by the absence of a biological tie between a child and co-mother illuminate the centrality of blood ties to the dispensation of familial rights and obligations in American kinship. The element of choice in these families simultaneously heightens the sense of “risk,” “creativity,” and freedom from “complete sacrifice” for the nonbiological partner. The myriad ways in which lesbian mothers attempt to legitimize their family structures by rectifying this asymmetry, symbolically and legally, demonstrate the complexity with which the symbol of the blood tie retains its salience even in the midst of an explicit challenge to certain “traditional” notions of American kinship.

Blood and Other Fluid Symbols

In contrast to the attempts by chosen families to decentralize biology in kinship, many gay and lesbian co-parenting families often attempt to create equality between parents precisely by establishing a figurative or literal sharing of blood between the nonbiological mother and her child. Whether calling up the metaphor of shared blood ties or creating a more direct genetic link between co-mother and child, these families employ biology as an important symbol that can be articulated and embodied in a number of ways.

In the recent case *Alison D. v. Virginia M.* (552 N.Y.S.2d 321), in which the co-mother petitioned for a hearing for visitation rights after she and her partner separated, one *Amici Curiae* brief (Gay and Lesbian Parents Coalition et al. 1990) delineated explicit actions generally taken by co-parents to indicate their intention to enter into a fully functioning parental role with their children. The brief cites actions that imply a desire to maintain an equal relationship between parents vis-à-vis the child. These actions include combining or hyphenating the co-parents’ names to form the child’s surname, “a practice which identifies the child with both co-parents,” and having the child call both parents names that reflect equal parental obligations, as in “Daddy Wayne and Daddy Sol,” or “Momma G and Momma D” (Gay and Lesbian Parents Coalition et al. 1990:29–31). Further, they often “manifest their equal roles as parents by having the parents and siblings—on both sides—participate as aunts, uncles, and grandparents” (Gay and Lesbian Parents Coalition et al. 1990:31, emphasis added). Kinship terms thus become one medium through which gay and lesbian co-parenting families declare equal claims, for both parents, to a legitimate relationship with their children. These relationships and their assertion of familial love

clearly infer blood ties (and the rights and obligations that accompany blood relations) among children, parents, and extended family.

The mobilization of kinship terms is part of an overall display of “deliberateness,” a symbolic flag that signals partners’ commitment to forming a “real” family. As the *Amici* brief states, “The acts and declarations of co-parents leave little doubt that they intend to assume all the obligations of parenthood, including financial support, on a permanent basis” (Gay and Lesbian Parents Coalition et al. 1990:29). Part of the determination of intent to form a family is, arguably, co-parents’ extensive deliberation over the decision to have a child: “These couples take the act of parenting very seriously” (Gay and Lesbian Parents Coalition et al. 1990:29).

This strategy leads to an intriguing attempt to locate the metaphor of biological, *generative* power in the co-parent. Claiming that co-parents engage in a *joint* decision to raise a child, the *Amici* brief argues that lesbians and gay men claim an active role, both figuratively and literally, in the creation of the child:

It is because *both* co-parents wish to act as parents that a child is brought into their home. The non-biological co-parent is thus partly responsible for the child’s presence in the home, *or even for the child’s very existence*. . . . The non-biological co-[mother] typically participates in every step of the . . . pregnancy to the fullest extent possible. [Gay and Lesbian Parents Coalition et al. 1990:32, emphasis added]

By asserting the co-parent’s responsibility for the existence of the child, gay and lesbian parents make clear their investment in the central relationship between procreation and unity within the family. On one level, such a declaration of procreative agency is equally significant for both gay men and lesbians, given the context of a cultural logic in which gay and lesbian relationships are deemed illegitimate because of their figurative impotence/sterility.

Further, the appropriation of generative power specifically by a lesbian co-parent places her squarely in the realm of (male) authorship. She grounds her claim to chosen motherhood in the image of agency and biological creativity—an image that has defined American cultural conceptions of the male contribution to procreation. As Carol Delaney (1986) has argued, the cultural narrative of paternity as authorship positions the male contribution as central and irreplaceable to the identity of the product of conception. Thus paternity “has meant the primary and creative role” (Delaney 1986:502). Despite a general sense that men and women contribute equally to the genetic makeup of their progeny, this symbolic asymmetry persists (Delaney 1986; Rothman 1989). Thus the woman is not a co-creator but a provider of a nurturant environment; “female receptivity” is glorified at the expense of “female creativity” (Delaney 1986:495).¹¹

Lesbian co-mothers who take on a generative role in the conception of their children claim space for female creativity. In so doing, the co-mother does not attempt to become male; rather, she carves out a distinctive but recognizable place in the birth of her child.¹² Nancy Zook and Rachel Hallenback write of their experience performing donor insemination at home:

The jar [of semen] was handed over, hugs exchanged, and he was on his way. With Nancy's hips on pillows at a forty-five degree-angle, Rachel, taking a quick breath, inserted the semen into Nancy's vagina with a sterile syringe. . . . Rachel's participation in conception was crucial to us, as this was to be her child as well. [1987:90]

By impregnating Nancy, Rachel becomes intimately connected with the act of conception in a way that challenges the dichotomy between (female) gestation/receptivity and (male) authorship/agency.

Central to this transformed reading of generative power is the "uncertainty" of the physical bond of paternity. Generation becomes less a genetic concept than a kinetic one; it is less an issue of the *ownership* of biogenetic substance than one of placing this substance in motion, of being responsible for starting off the "unseen process unfolding in Nancy's body" (Zook and Hallenback 1987:90). Rachel's claim to generative power and the sharing of her identity with the child's thus constitutes a powerful reworking of the idea of genetic authorship. The act of begetting is separated from authorship; shared parenthood can be demonstrated through active participation in the process, without necessarily laying claim to a genetic relationship as well.¹³

Where such claims to female creativity can remove the sperm donor's genetic contribution from the picture, other strategies unreservedly embrace the underlying American cultural understanding of genetics as a defining feature of personhood, an indicator of health and personality, a blueprint for appearance and disposition. Thus some lesbian co-mothers use donor insemination in ways that more directly establish biogenetic ties *within* the family. In cases where each woman bears a child, the same donor is sometimes used so that the children will be related (Gay and Lesbian Parents Coalition et al. 1990:30–31). This tactic is often utilized not only by women who want a consistent "male presence" for their children but also by those who desire an anonymous donor while retaining genetic connections within the family (Hill 1987:112). One couple interviewed in *Politics of the Heart* (1987) alternated donors to make the identity of the father unclear, only to decide later that they wanted to identify him in response to their daughter's fascination with a friend's father. The mothers imply that the father, if known, will become the donor for the next child, though they do not envision that he will have a relationship with the children (Hill 1987:111).¹⁴ In such instances, the donor gains significance within the family, not through his direct involvement as a person who is a "relative" (Schneider 1980), but rather through his ability to provide the substance that will ensure biogenetic continuity between offspring. Biogenetic substance itself becomes the object of importance, separate from the identity of the donor.

Biology here is abstracted and dispersed in a way that challenges the cultural assumption of the primacy of the male seed (Delaney 1986). Though lesbians may take great care in choosing a donor, the act of insemination, by eliminating direct physical contact, is often seen to minimize the man's role *as a gendered individual* in conception. The focus is then not on the person of the do-

nor, but rather on semen, “making the procreative pair (if any) woman plus sperm, gendered person plus gender signifier” (Weston 1991:171).

Weston suggests that lesbians are somewhat unique in creating a distinction between male personhood, on the one hand, and the male’s physical contribution to conception, on the other; such a distinction does not seem to be an inevitable consequence of the technology itself (1991:171). She cites a 1989 study indicating that married heterosexual women associated insemination with adultery and extramarital sex, and believed that insemination would allow an unwanted third party into their marriage relationship. The lesbians surveyed by Weston (1991:171), in contrast, did not view insemination as a substitution for something that would otherwise have come from their sexual partners; their link to the donor was patently nonsexual. This disjuncture allows the nonbiological mother to take on a parenting role without the danger of displacing another (male) individual who is also a parent; she *is* the other parent. Though genetic continuity is powerful as an abstracted, disembodied signifier of family, it is also employed as a literal signifier for kinship and love in a more “connected” or “owned” sense (Laqueur 1990:212). A couple may choose a donor whose physical characteristics in some way resemble those of the co-mother, suggesting again the sharing of substance and the reproduction of her image. Or, the brother of the nonbiological parent-to-be may be the donor, giving both women a biogenetic link to the child. Thus, when the donor possesses desirable traits (i.e., a genetic relationship with, or physical resemblance to, the co-mother), lesbian mothers may choose to incorporate those traits into their notions of family. Genetic continuity, whether literal or implied, becomes an integral resource in such attempts to bring a certain unity to lesbian parenting families.

Finally, in the most old-fashioned sense of biogenetic relatedness, the donor might be incorporated into the family, whether as a gendered individual (the proverbial “male presence”) or as a co-parent. Of course, such relationships are not always simple matters of unilateral choice. On the one hand, they can be complicated by donors’ contestatory attempts to secure paternity and parental rights; on the other hand, not uncommonly, lesbian mothers may rethink their initial decision on the matter and attempt to create a more (or less) involved relationship with the donor than they had originally planned.

As the myriad examples above suggest, lesbian mothers’ strategies to gain symbolic legitimation for their families (in the context of donor insemination) effectively disperse the “biological connection” as it has been conceived in American kinship. Insemination is perceived to give lesbian parents space to negotiate the degree to which a donor’s sperm is imbued with (or disabused of) distinctive features of identity. In many cases, the mobility of disembodied sperm allows the deployment of genetic ties in the service of unifying lesbian families. Thus genetic substance *itself* can become the referent for relatedness (as when the same anonymous donor is used so that the children will be related); a donor may be chosen on the basis of features that he shares with the “nonbiological” mother, thereby implying a biogenetic connection between her and the child; or the donor, by virtue of his biogenetic connection to the child, can be incorpo-

rated into the family configuration. On the one hand, these moves reify the importance of genetic continuity in the construction of kin relations; however, insofar as they allow for varying gradations of the separation of genetic substance from its "owner," they disrupt the cultural narrative of paternity as authorship. But, again, just as genetic ties retain their appeal (in dispersed form), so too does this notion of authorship persist though it is reinscribed here with a different kind of gender/genetic symbolism. Within the logistics of insemination, the *act* of begetting can be separated from the ownership of genetic substance. Here, a kinetic reading of generation, of bringing into being, supersedes genetic connection as the privileged signifier of relatedness.

The notion of biological relatedness in this context takes on an excess of meanings. One effect of this excess is that biogenetic connection explicitly becomes a contingent, rather than immutable, feature of relatedness. Yet, as is apparent above, its contingency does not signal trivialization. Instead, the creative lengths to which many lesbian mothers go to inscribe their families with genetic continuity speak eloquently to the tremendous, continued salience of biological relatedness.

Reformulating the "Single" Mother

The enterprising mobilization of genetic/kinetic relatedness in these visions of lesbian kinship often calls up an arguably "old-fashioned" notion of motherhood as the quintessential fulfillment of womanhood (see Lewin 1993). Indeed, as I noted earlier, the very distinctiveness of lesbian families is often predicated on the fact that they offer a multiplication of femaleness; it is perhaps not entirely surprising that the cultural narrative of motherhood as the ultimate expression of female identity often finds its way into these claims. This, arguably, is the central paradox that arises in casting lesbian motherhood as "unique"; just as the gender configuration of lesbian co-parenting families promises an ostensibly different model of parenthood, the supposed naturalness, and therefore universality, of motherhood both highlights and undermines that uniqueness. Thus the virtues of lesbian families are articulated in terms of the virtue of having not just two parents, but two *mothers*; at the same time, motherhood can eclipse the difference encoded in a lesbian identity. Thus, as one woman notes, "even when someone knows I am a lesbian my motherhood makes me seem normal" (Polikoff 1987:53).

Lewin's work (1993) is particularly instructive regarding the ways in which motherhood can become the core of identity for heterosexual and lesbian mothers alike. Quite apart from my focus here, her concern is with single mothers. Arguably, the challenges of single parenthood magnify the centrality of motherhood to the identities of the women Lewin describes. Lesbians who enter into motherhood with one or more co-parents confront slightly different demands, including negotiating the place of the so-called nonbiological mother within the family configuration. It is here, in the space occupied by this "other mother," that the radical potential of lesbian co-parenting is often envisioned.¹⁵

How then does the “naturalness” of motherhood intersect with negotiations of nonbiological motherhood in lesbian family configurations? Quite in line with conventional American cultural constructions of maternity and paternity, it is the perceived singularity or unitariness of biological motherhood that might be seen, in the first place, to impel the mobilization of genetic continuity (associated with paternity) in creating a biogenetic connection for the “nonbiological” mother. For, unlike paternity, which is understood in terms of alienable relationships and mobile biogenetic substance, maternity is understood to be less easily dispersed (see Barnes 1973). If it is “inconceivable to Euro-Americans that a child could be born motherless” (Strathern 1992a: 12), it has been equally inconceivable that a child could have two biological mothers—thus the troubling legal and symbolic asymmetry between the biological mother and her partner. Of course, current possibilities for “assisted reproduction”—especially in vitro fertilization and surrogate motherhood—are fragmenting, in popular and legal views, the supposedly self-evident idea of real, biological motherhood.¹⁶ In the context of these reproductive technologies, maternity has become thinkable in tripartite form, divvied up among genetic mother, birth mother, and social mother. Awareness of such possibilities informs what is sometimes imagined as the obvious and “perfect” option for lesbian families: one woman could contribute the genetic material, and her partner could become the gestational/birth mother. The implied self-evidence of this techno-fantasy of distributed maternity suggests the degree to which biology is operative, in the imaginings of some women, even as it is dispersed. More commonly practiced on this front is a kind of dual motherhood, in which each mother gives birth. If the same donor is used, the children will be related to each other. To complete this particular circle of biological and legal unification, it is becoming increasingly common for courts to grant lesbian partners the right to adopt each other’s (biological) children.¹⁷

In one sense, this move does little to unsettle the supposed unitariness of maternity. Yet there is an important slippage implied here between “maternity” and “motherhood.” Maternity, I suggest, signals the epitome of embodied relationality—that is, gestation and birth—whereas motherhood connotes both this physical relationship *and* a gendered, naturalized code for conduct. This biologized desire to mother is expressed quite nicely in the euphemism of the maternal instinct. I would argue that the so-called naturalness of motherhood—not only as a biological relationship but also as a supposedly nurturing, explicitly feminine propensity—in some ways makes intelligible the notion of the two-mother family. Implied here is a latent split between the “natural” and the “biological”; if biological motherhood can re-naturalize a lesbian’s womanhood, so too, I would suggest, does the mothering performed by a so-called nonbirth mother become intelligible as natural in the name of women’s propensity “to mother.”¹⁸ While I do not want to make too much of this (rather speculative) point, I consider it an important element within the amalgamation of ideas that both makes sense of and asserts dissonances in the notion of a family composed of mothers—who are lovers—and their children.

Conclusion

Underlying this entire discussion, as I noted at the beginning of this article, is a persistent cultural narrative denying the naturalness of lesbian and gay sexuality quite explicitly because it is perceived to be inherently nonprocreative. As a key context from which these lesbian procreative families emerge, this narrative lends a complex oppositionality to many lesbians' mobilization of the "naturalness" of motherhood, as well as to their desire to endow co-parenting families with biogenetic continuity. When put into service in the name of creating a uniquely lesbian kinship configuration, these "old" ideas of what constitutes relatedness are both made explicit and reformulated.

The so-called core symbols of American kinship, blood and love, are mediated here by very different unifying symbols (and gender/power configurations) than the central emblem of (hetero)sexual intercourse described by Schneider. On the one hand, lesbian sex provides a different model for love partly, to build on Strathern's (1992a:4) argument, by reproducing a gender configuration that is seen to promise gender equality rather than asymmetry. At the same time, the symbol of blood, also inscribed as biogenetic substance or biological relatedness, is deployed to give unity to families that are marked both by proscribed gender relations *and* the particular asymmetries of biological and nonbiological motherhood.

In the process, these lesbian mothers simultaneously affirm the importance of blood as a symbol and challenge the American cultural assumption that biology is a self-evident, singular fact and *the* natural baseline on which kinship is built. Biology is not understood here to stand on its own as a defining feature of kin, nor does biogenetic connection retain any single, transparent meaning. The dominant idea of American kinship as Schneider describes it posits a belief in the genetic tie as a baseline, elaborated into a relationship through certain kinds of behavior. In the negotiations of lesbian motherhood discussed above, the creation of blood ties—varying in kind and degree—instead becomes an indicator (if not enhancement) of parent-like behavior. The baseline then becomes the co-mothers' generative agency, broadly conceived. Central to this subtle reformulation of the blood/love symbolic hierarchy is a disruption of the once taken-for-granted matrix of paternity, authorship, generation, and genetic substance. As the perceived meanings of these notions of blood and code, authorship and agency, are made contingent rather than self-evident, these lesbian mothers set forth quite complex notions of what constitutes both distinctiveness and unity in the creation of their kin ties.

As the symbol of the blood tie is both embraced and dispersed within certain lesbian families, so too does the dichotomy between straight biological families and gay and lesbian chosen families become muddied. Rather than trying to determine which understanding of gay and lesbian kinship promises a more radical critique of American kinship, I have been concerned here with drawing out some of the ways in which the so-called core symbols of kinship—the ideas that define what constitutes relatedness—are reworked and recontextualized. As reproductive and genetic technologies continue to proliferate,

blood and love will surely continue to be (re)inscribed in notions of relatedness, in often predictable but perhaps also surprising ways. The ways in which lesbians and gay men negotiate such reinscriptions make explicit not only the contingency of these symbols but also—equally important in theorizing kinship—the dynamic, mutual construction of gender, generation, kinship, and sexuality.

Notes

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1. I thank Ellen Lewin for her helpful comments on this subject. The question of representativeness is here, as ever, not a simple one. First, my intention is to examine certain articulations of distinctiveness; I do not claim to represent a “critical mass” of lesbian families. I recognize also that access to reproductive technologies (though donor insemination is one of the most low-tech practices on the menu) is a key foundation for the visions of lesbian motherhood discussed in this paper. Access inevitably raises questions of class, as well as race; the creation of lesbian families through insemination is, arguably, an option most available to a largely white, middle-class clientele. Though insemination can certainly take place without the intervention of sperm banks or health care providers (as attested to by the legendary turkey-baster joke), laws protecting women from donors’ paternity suits encourage the institutionalization of such arrangements. Thus a California statute on insemination protects married couples from “any claim of paternity by any outsider,” regardless of physician involvement, while “unmarried” women are provided such protection only if they broker their insemination through a physician (*Jhordan C. v. Mary K.* 1986). The implication is that although access to sperm banks is not necessary to the creation of these families, it is certainly made desirable in terms of maintaining their legal integrity. And insofar as many lesbians choose gay male friends as donors, the specter of HIV transmission also contributes to increasing medical intervention in the insemination process.

2. For a rich contextualization of the recent “lesbian baby boom” vis-à-vis ongoing lesbian and feminist debates on motherhood, see Pollack and Vaughn’s anthology, *Politics of the Heart* (1987). Jan Clausen, for example, writes,

Most interesting and most painful is a totally irrational feeling of betrayal: I thought other lesbians were with me in the decision not to give birth, in that defiance of our expected womanly role—and now here these new lesbian mothers go, showing me up, *proving* that the fact that I’m a dyke is no excuse for my failure to have a baby. [1987:338]

See also Lewin (1993:14) for a discussion of the heightened salience, for lesbians, of the narrative of motherhood as an “achievement.” Paralleling shifts in American cultural notions of gender and reproduction, the notion of achieved motherhood indexes the complexities with which women’s assertions of autonomy and individualism circulate within existing narratives of conventional femininity (see Ginsburg 1990 and Ginsburg and Tsing 1990:7).

3. See Marilyn Strathern, *Reproducing the Future* (1992), for a discussion of the ways in which new reproductive technologies provide a context for making the “natural” mutable.

4. Several pivotal feminist works speak to this argument for the mutually instituted categories of heterosexuality, gender, and kinship, including Collier and Yanagisako’s *Gender and Kinship: Toward a Unified Analysis* (1987), Rich’s “Compulsory Heterosexuality” (1984), and Rubin’s “The Traffic in Women” (1975).

5. I use the phrase “expectation of creating biological kin” in anticipation of the question of how same-sex couples (which are only one facet of chosen families) differ from heterosexual couples without children in terms of their relation to blood and choice. Expectation here is a simplified reference to the complicated cultural belief in the interdependence of heterosexual marriage, biological procreation, and social reproduction. Legal scholar Hannah Schwarzschild quotes a 1971 Minnesota decision denying same-sex couples the right to marry:

The state’s refusal to grant a [marriage] license . . . is based upon the state’s recognition that our society as a whole views marriage as the appropriate and desirable forum for procreation and the rearing of children. . . . [I]t is apparent that no same-sex couple offers the possibility of the birth of children by their union. Thus the refusal of the state to authorize same-sex marriage results from such impossibility of reproduction. [Schwarzschild 1988:116]

In this logic, all heterosexual couples conceptually have the potential to beget and raise offspring; whether or not they can or choose to is irrelevant to the defenders of the primacy of heterosexual marriage. Chosen families, whether composed of friends or lovers, or both, take on this assigned nonprocreative identity and challenge its implications for their place in kinship. Thus the contestation emerges in their claim that kinship can exist beyond blood and marriage, both of which assume procreative relations as their central referent.

6. See Biddick 1993, Spillers 1987, and Strathern 1991 for perspectives on dispersed kinship and distributed maternity.

7. A popular bumper sticker sold in many lesbian and gay bookstores.

8. This point is highlighted in Strathern’s review of *Families We Choose* (1993:196).

9. Personal communication with David Schneider, August 13, 1992.

10. See, for example, psychologist Charlotte Patterson’s landmark review article, “Children of Lesbian and Gay Parents” (1992).

11. Among those who make sperm their business, the assumption that the male role in conception is *the* creative one remains strong. Beautifully articulating the 19th-century vision of sperm as the “purest extract of blood” and the “sum and representation of its bearer” (Barker-Benfield 1974:49), the director of a California sperm bank distributed T-shirts with a picture of swimming sperm, captioned “Future People” (Rothman 1989:35).

12. The association of a nonbiological parent with the creative, generative aspect of conception also appeared in a 1985 custody case in slightly macabre form. In *Karin T. v. Michael T.* (1985), the two parties had been married, had given birth to two children through donor insemination, and Michael T. had signed the birth certificate as Karin T.’s husband. Upon their separation, Michael T. claimed to be exempt from child support. The grounds? Michael T. was actually a woman who presented herself to the world as a man. She argued that she should not have to pay child support because she was “a woman who was not biologically or legally related to the children.” Given the usual legal response to such situations, Michael T. could reasonably expect to get away with such an allegation. But judicial interpretation is full of surprises: the court rejected her argument. “Defining parent as ‘one who procreates, begets, or brings forth offspring,’ the Court determined that Michael T.’s actions ‘certainly brought forth these offspring *as if done biologically*’ ” (1985:784, emphasis added). This remarkable opinion is not the watershed lesbian and gay parents might hope for; the court clearly aims *not* to establish lesbian and gay co-parents’ claim to children but rather to punish Michael T. for gender fraud. The court’s assertion that she had an active part in bringing forth the children is apparently predicated on her appropriation of the male role, since

she played “husband” by seeking out “men’s work.” In the interest of punishment, the court becomes curiously complicit in this game of gender-switching.

13. This idea of generativity is in no way limited to articulations of lesbian and gay kinship. See, for example, Helena Ragone’s (1994) work on surrogacy, where the intent to conceive signals an act of generation. I am also reminded of international patent laws regarding biotechnological manipulation of DNA; legal ownership of genetic substance is not determined in terms of its original “source” but rather in terms of the party responsible for manipulating and replicating the DNA. Here, and in concert with other developments in the enterprising management of life itself, the act of replication or manipulation itself becomes the moment of authorship. Such developments suggest intriguing intersections among notions of reproduction, ownership, and (kinetic?) intervention. For discussions of replication, authorship, and ownership, see Lury 1993; see also Sarah Franklin’s notions of auto-paternity in “Romancing the Helix” (in press).

14. Alternating donors is similar to the practice, used by some heterosexual couples, of having sexual intercourse immediately after the woman is inseminated. The scientific uncertainty of the paternal bond enables the couple to entertain the possibility that, if the woman does become pregnant, her (thought-to-be-sterile) husband is the father. Uncertainty here is used to fictionalize the identity of one specific father, whereas for lesbians, uncertainty can help perpetuate anonymity.

15. This is not to argue that couples are more radical than single mothers but merely to point out that the challenges facing co-parents are different than those facing single mothers; the implication is that the particular challenges of co-parenting also open up space for creating uniquely “lesbian” families. Of course, the location of radical potential in the second parent effects a somewhat ironic inversion of the argument that the valuation of the “mating pair” is a decisively conservative move (see Ettelbrick 1992). I am indebted to Anna Tsing for this insight.

16. For a discussion of negotiations of “natural” parenthood within surrogacy arrangements, see Ragone 1994. For a discussion of anxieties surrounding the relationships engendered via surrogate motherhood and other technologies of reproduction, see Gallagher 1993 and Franklin 1993.

17. See, for example, Keen 1991a, Sullivan 1992, *The New York Times* 1993. Of course, the legitimation of lesbian parental relationships conferred by these joint adoptions is by no means a new legal standard; Sharon Bottoms and April Wade, a lesbian couple in Virginia, recently had their child taken from them on the basis of their “immoral” relationship. Without assuming too much coherence in the rationale informing these particular decisions, it is impossible to dismiss the significance of class here. Of the three successful cases cited above, one couple consists of two physicians, another of a physician and a Ph.D. In contrast, Sharon Bottoms and April Wade are characterized in court and in the press as working class. Their unfitness as parents—as charged by Sharon Bottoms’ mother, Kay—rests not only on their lesbianism but also on the “instability” of their working-class home (see Kelly 1993).

18. Arguably, women’s appropriation of generativity is also made intelligible in terms of the naturalness of maternal desire. Again, see Ragone 1994 for a discussion of the generative potential of intent. The other side of this logic, of course, is that the decision not to mother is often used to demonize women as unnatural. In addition to the vast literature on abortion in the United States, see Tsing 1990.

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⁶ **Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book**

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¹⁰ **Children of Lesbian and Gay Parents**

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