

# Redrawing National Boundaries

## Gender, Race, Class, and Same-Sex Marriage Discourse in Canada

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*Ce papier analyse les discours autour des mariages homosexuels comme il émerge des magazines gays et lesbiens du Canada. Je crois que ce discours qui remet en question le lien entre l'hétérosexualité et le mariage se réfère aux hiérarchies sociales et les reproduit selon les genres, les ethnies, les classes et les nationalités.*

Kevin Bourassa and Joe Varnell broke the law and got married on January 14, 2001 at the Metropolitan Community Church of Toronto, making them the first same-sex couple to be married in Canada. The lead-up to and the wedding itself garnered much media attention, with photographs of the wedding enjoying front-page coverage on many Canadian newspapers (see "Equal Marriage for Same-Sex Couples"). Since then, newspaper coverage of same-sex marriage has focused mainly on two questions: "Will Canada legalize same-sex marriage?" and "Should Canada legalize same-sex marriage?" The former question got an answer when on July 12, 2002, an Ontario court ruled that the bar against same-sex marriage was inconsistent with the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and represented unjustified discrimination against same-sex couples. After a long appeal process, a June 10, 2003 decision made same-sex marriage legal in Ontario, effective immediately. British Columbia, and later Quebec, Manitoba, the Yukon and Nova Scotia, all having been involved in legal battles similar to those in Ontario, followed suit. No other province or territory has stepped forward to change its legislation, but the Supreme Court of Canada determined on December 9, 2004 that same-sex marriage is in line with the Canadian Charter. Consequently, and in spite of the current "family values" backlash against same-sex marriage, it appears likely that the federal government will codify a new definition of marriage that includes same-sex couples.

Undoubtedly, same-sex marriage in Canada has had, and will continue to have as it becomes legal across the country, some important positive effects. Gay, lesbian,

and bisexual people<sup>1</sup> can now legally marry same-sex partners in some parts of Canada. The corresponding media attention, which has often been affirmative, can feel empowering for the many people who have never experienced mainstream validation. These changes are in very large part due to the determined organizing efforts and hard work of groups like Egale, and I do not want to minimize their struggle or accomplishments. At the same time, it is essential to critically analyze same-sex marriage, because struggles for social change can reify as well as oppose oppressive social hierarchies (c.f. Burton). It is therefore always necessary to take these struggles as objects of analysis rather than simply celebrating them as universally liberatory vehicles for change. Towards this goal, I ask not *whether* same-sex marriage should be allowed, but look into *how* it is being deployed: What is the pro-queer discourse that constructs same-sex marriage in Canada? How does this discourse operate, and what "truths" does it rely on and help to (re)produce? Finally, what are the consequences of this discourse?

This paper works towards answering the above questions through an analysis of articles about same-sex marriage that were printed in gay and lesbian newspapers across Canada between June 2003 and April 2004. I show that in these representations, same-sex marriage appears as an issue of human rights, equality, and respectability. I then analyze how these articles operate to construct Canada as an international leader in human rights, and Canadian gay men and lesbians as respectable and heroic leaders showing their progressive nation, and the rest of the world, the way towards greater equality. Next I discuss how the logic of this discourse relies upon and takes for granted three central "truths." First, it assumes homosexuality to be a unified and marginalized identity, marked only by its queerness. Second, it depends upon the idea of Canada as a nation existing as leader and saviour within an imagined family of nations. And third, it presumes a monolithic "third world" to be backwards and repressive,

a place where queers could never dream of getting married. Lastly, I turn to discuss some consequences of this discourse, showing how it entrenches notions of western superiority, and leaves unexamined historical, economic, and discursive conditions that reveal the Canadian state, and Canadian queers, as implicated in inequalities that are definitely not stopped, and are perhaps exacerbated by, same-sex marriage.

Before turning to my analysis, I offer some quick notes about methodology. In order to track down gay and lesbian newspapers across Canada, I searched the Internet

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and found a number of different papers, all free and published either biweekly or monthly. In total, I was able to collect 22 articles that discuss same-sex marriage, and my research is based on these. This is certainly not a comprehensive look at queer representations of same-sex marriage in Canada, nor does it aim to be such: this short paper is merely a starting place for tracing trends in the broader same-sex marriage discourse. Also, I do not mean to suggest that these newspaper articles represent the views on same-sex marriage of all queers in Canada. As papers which are mainly directed at gay men with the means to acquire the condominiums, vacations, and wedding packages advertised on the newspapers' pages, they are not known for their radical perspectives. Still, as some of the few free queer publications with fairly large readerships (*Xtra!* boasts a circulation of 42,000), the articles in these newspapers can provide some, however incomplete, insights into how same-sex marriage is being framed within queer discourse.

In the newspaper representation, same-sex marriage appears as an issue of human rights and equality, terms that appear in five article titles, and countless times in the bodies of the articles. Before the legalization of same-sex marriage, various authors hope that Canada will legitimate the "human rights" of queer Canadians by "legaliz[ing] lesbian and gay marriage" (Gallagher). "The equal right to marriage," after all, "is the cornerstone to garnering equal rights in a wider sense" (Lee 2003c), and represents "full equal rights for gay and lesbian people" (Fraser). Similarly, contributors agree that "it's a right," and "it's about choice," and "basic equality rights" (qtd. in Gulliver 2003b and Kirkby).

Respectability is another central theme within the emerging same-sex marriage discourse, and is articulated in one of two ways. Most often gay and lesbian people are

represented as innately respectable. For example, one article describes queer people as upstanding citizens because they are writers, editors, teachers, nurses, architects, and web designers (Gulliver 2003b). Lesbians and gay men are also constructed as respectable through being "just like them [straight people]" (qtd. in Kirkby), since "same-sex marriage conforms to today's model of heterosexual marriage" (Abbott). Similarly, in order to have a respectable (read nuclear) family, "it is important" for a Vancouver lesbian couple, "that we be married when our child is born" (qtd. in Findlay). Same-sex marriage is represented as the vehicle through which respectable gay and lesbian Canadians become widely seen as upstanding citizens; now "rather than being marginalized, we are being embraced by the communities in which we live. This couple lives in suburban Ottawa in a beautiful house across from a small park that is a year-round utopia for children" (Lee 2003c). Respectability is very occasionally represented as undesirable, and some articles emphasize that not all queer people want to get married (c.f. Garro; Gulliver 2003a). But while some lesbians and gay men contend that marriage is not for them, they still support same-sex marriage, "respect[ing] the dedication of marriage advocates," (Garro), and "support[ing] the changes for others" (Gulliver 2003a). Thus while a respectable homosexual identity is not what every queer wants, the concept of respectability itself, or the desire others feel to attain it, remains unquestioned and unproblematic within the narrative.

Canada appears within the discourse as an international leader in human rights and equality, and Canadian gay men and lesbians are portrayed as the true heroes within their nation: "Canada has led the North American charge towards equality" (Heale), is "an international leader in human rights" (Gallagher), and "our victory will be heard around the globe" (Gallagher). All Canadian gay men and lesbians are imagined to be heroes because we all contribute to the "dynamic process" of creating "a gay identity," including leading the way in same-sex marriage, "one of the biggest battles our community has faced in years" (Gallant).

The emerging same-sex marriage discourse operates through comparisons, constructing Canadian queers and the fight for same-sex marriage through both what they are *like* and what they are *not like*. The struggle for marriage is represented as similar to struggles for justice throughout time. As one article puts it, "the ban on same-sex unions is akin to the big civil rights cases of the past, like segregation laws and universal suffrage" (Mackenzie). According to another, allowing same-sex civil unions but not marriages is "not unlike the antebellum custom of granting some slaves the privilege of 'jumping over the broomstick' while depriving them the right to church weddings" (Abbot). Similarly, "as blacks in the southern U.S. found out, separate but equal is never equal" (Gallagher). In the only Canadian comparison offered,

not allowing same-sex couples to marry is like “Canada’s [past] longstanding anti-Asian tax and immigration policies” (Kirkby). Here, it appears that justice has been served for everyone except same-sex couples, since all examples cited are from the past. Now it is “unthinkable” that black people might be discriminated against (Lee 2003a), and since “our Canada celebrates diversity” (Kirkby), Asian people and women are no longer marginalized. Injustice lurks only in the past, and the legalization of same-sex marriage marks “full equality” for *all* Canadians in the present (qtd. in Wockner).

At the same time that same-sex marriage is represented as like past struggles for justice, it is also constructed as not like the “third world,” which is imagined as monolithic, backwards, and repressive. Though the narrative emerging from the newspaper articles articulates pride in Canada’s *finally* beating the United States to something, and the comparison between Canada and the United States is often made in the articles, the U.S. is not constructed as backwards in the same way as is the “third world.” Rather, Canada appears as so far advanced that we eclipse *even* the U.S., under whose shadow we are understood to dwell regarding other issues (Carreiro). One article, for example, asks, “If you were an American, why would you come to Canada for your holiday? Would it be because we’re leading the way when it comes to gay marriage?” (Matthews).

Unlike the U.S., non-western countries are often represented as backwards by virtue of their supposed ignorance of sexual orientation issues (c.f. Marchand). One article, for example, discusses how in Singapore, a rally for same-sex marriage like the one that occurred in Vancouver “could *never* happen” because “sex between men is *still* illegal” (qtd. in Kirkby, *emphasis mine*). Another article states that if you “ask a person from China about homosexuality in their own country . . . they will tell you that it’s impossible and unimaginable” (Lee 2003b). Within the discourse, Chinese culture is constructed as “patriarchal,” “communist,” and so homophobic that the “word lesbian does not exist in Chinese” (Lee 2003b). Non-western countries are represented as backwards in other ways as well. One article states, for example, that “in Afghanistan, there was a saying that a girl was expected to experience her first menstruation in her husband’s home,” and that recently “a 65-year-old Zambian man was charged with a criminal offence for marrying a 10-year-old girl” (Abbott). While these examples clearly have nothing to do with same-sex marriage, they serve to construct an imagined “third world” as the place where “brutal” practices take place, and as opposed to same-sex marriage in Canada, which reflects “our egalitarianism and pursuit of self-fulfillment” (Abbott). While it is of course inaccurate and problematic to invoke the idea of a unified “third world,” this is indeed the representation that emerges from the newspaper articles. Through this kind of representation, Canada also appears to be helping “third world” countries

along when it comes to same-sex issues. Not only does same-sex marriage give “hope to many isolated individuals” in many parts of the world (Gallagher), but Canadian organizations are also “actively seeking more Africans and Asians to join in the effort” to achieve international human rights for lesbians and gay men (Marchand).

Central to this same-sex marriage discourse is a construction of who gay and lesbian people are. As discussed, we are imagined as respectable people: we have well-paying and well-respected jobs (Gulliver 2003b); live in nice suburban houses, with lives “that a large number of

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### **Same-sex marriage is represented as the vehicle through which respectable gay and lesbian Canadians become widely seen as upstanding citizens.**

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Canadians can aspire to and idealize” (Lee 2003c); sing the national anthem at rallies (Kirkby); are loving, tolerant and knowledgeable (Fraser), and restrained, classy and well-educated (Mackenzie); and want to get married and have legitimate families (c.f. Findlay). Though no articles explicitly describe what we are not, it is quite clear from the representation of what we are, that we are not a number of things: poor; lazy; people who do not respect the nation; hateful, intolerant, ignorant and uneducated; and people who reproduce out of wedlock. Given dominant media and state representations of which people embody these characteristics—the single, black “welfare mother” and the Islamic fundamentalist “terrorist,” for example—it is safe to say that the same-sex marriage discourse constructs queer Canadians as good (read white and middle-class), against the backdrop of poor people of colour who are imagined to threaten the stability of the nation (see Razack 2000).

In order for this narrative to remain cohesive, it depends upon the related assumptions of Canada as a leader within the family of nations, the “third world” as made up of inferior nations within that same family, and homosexuality as a unified identity. In her article “Citizens of Humanity,” Liisa Malkki focuses on internationalism, by which she means “the imagining of a World Community of ‘nations’ . . . [which is] fruitfully explored as a transnational cultural form for imagining and ordering difference among people” (41). She shows that this cultural form appears ubiquitously, everywhere from the Olympics and beauty pageants to UNICEF cards and board games, and that it allows people to think of themselves as part of distinct nations within an international community. Taking for granted that nations are not natural forms but rather imagined communities that must be continually reproduced and legitimated (Anderson),

Malkki argues that internationalism is one way in which the national form is (re)created and naturalized; each flag, costume, or dinner plate represents a distinct member of the family of nations. While an egalitarian notion of family is assumed within internationalism, Malkki reveals that some members of the family (western countries) are constructed as masculine and strong, whereas other members (mostly southern and eastern countries) are represented as feminine and weak (51). These differences, however, are not imagined as causally related; that is, countries like the United States are not seen as strong

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*because of unjust policies that disproportionately affect the global South. Rather, inequalities both within and between nations are erased, and differences are constructed as natural and national, rather than as historical and political (Malkki 58).*

The form of internationalism that Malkki describes informs the construction of both Canada and the “third world” in the same-sex marriage discourse. As discussed, Canada emerges in this narrative as a progressive and just nation by virtue of its legalizing same-sex marriage (Fraser). No divisions within Canada regarding same-sex marriage are acknowledged. Instead, Canada now “guarantees equality to [all] men and women” (Carreiro). Same-sex marriage discourse also helps to produce the “third world,” which in contrast to Canada is envisioned as backwards because of its general oppressiveness, and especially its homophobia. There, “women are beholden to their male family members” and gays and lesbians are forced to “live in the shadows” (Lee 2003b). Within this discourse, Canada and the “third world” are seen as related only insofar as Canada exists as benevolent northern big brother, giving “hope” to oppressed queers globally (Gallagher), and teaching the “third world” about issues of sexual orientation about which they are unaware (Marchand).

Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan argue that, in studies of sexuality, gender and sexual difference “have become understood as attributes of bodies unmarked in any other way,” despite abundant evidence showing that gender and sexuality cannot be comprehended except as interconnected with other factors such as race, class, and nation (667). The representation of same-sex marriage in the newspapers similarly understands sexuality as a unified identity, where gay men and lesbians differ in gender, but this makes no difference in terms of their struggle to get married; gender matters only insofar as who should

marry whom. Race and class divisions are also elided through the construction of a singular (respectable) gay identity, which as discussed, is definitely not poor or black. But by assuming that this identity represents all Canadian queers, race and class differentials simply disappear. The fact that same-sex marriage is celebrated in this discourse as the end of all oppression in Canada reinforces the notion of queers as similarly located; poverty, racism, sexism, and ableism exist only as a problem elsewhere. Even when gay and lesbian people live or come from elsewhere, their bodies are marked only by queerness. In China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, for example, “lesbians and gays are living their lives” and “know who [they] are” (Lee 2003b). While they may not be allowed to “openly come out in their day-to-day lives” due to their oppressive cultures (Lee 2003b), they are not represented as identifying with or being a part of these cultures, but are rather viewed only as “queer,” and as unfortunately stuck in backwards cultures.

I turn now to discuss some of the consequences of the emerging same-sex marriage discourse. While this discourse clearly celebrates same-sex marriage as creating equality, how significant is the accomplishment of same-sex marriage in Canada? Does it disrupt the status quo, or does it simply shift the status quo enough to include married queers? In her discussion of elite Chinese emigrants who settle in San Francisco suburbs, Aihwa Ong argues that by participating in the practices of the white elite, for example playing tennis or collecting violins, Chinese subjects help to reify the fact that “regimes of consumption and credentialization are definitely hierarchized, with Europe and America setting the standards for international middle-class style” (90). Thus, even as Ong’s subjects disrupt the racialized (white) space of American suburbs, they simultaneously confer Euroamerican cultural hegemony. In parallel, by struggling for the privilege of getting married, same-sex couples do the important work of interrupting the taken-for-granted link between heterosexuality and marriage. But by framing the issue as one of respectability, where queers are “just like” (qtd. in Kirkby) their straight counterparts, same-sex marriage discourse reinscribes heterosexuality as the norm to which to aspire, thus in some ways reaffirming the hierarchy same-sex marriage attempts to dismantle. At the same time, the newspaper representations also function to create other “others,” demonstrating that a move for inclusion within the dominant paradigm is not always already emancipatory for all. The “others” created by same-sex marriage discourse, not surprisingly, are those excluded from respectable queer subjectivity, exclusions drawn upon racial, gender, class, and national lines.

A related consequence of the same-sex marriage discourse emerging from the articles stems from its framing of same-sex marriage as entailing full equality for all. As Rosemary Hennessy observes, while changes like same-sex marriage “may disrupt norms and challenge state practices

that are indeed oppressive, they do not necessarily challenge neoliberalism or disrupt capitalism,” which “invariably depends on the lives and labor of invisible others” (109, 111). Similarly, as Jasbir Kuar Puar argues in a discussion of queer tourism, “those who are already enabled and rewarded by capitalist formations can most easily harness the positive effects of increased queer tourism” (126). A similar argument can be made for same-sex marriage. It is not a coincidence that articles about same-sex marriage often sit on pages which also feature advertisements for wedding planners, flower arrangers, real estate agents, or gay cruises. Some of the articles themselves even appear to be ads. One article, for example, aptly entitled “Customize your love,” describes at length the flowers, outfits, rings, and expenses of different same-sex weddings (Gulliver 2003b). Clearly, however, not all queers can afford to “customize our love.” While a few are off planning weddings and taking cruises, others are too busy picking the flowers, sewing the outfits, and cleaning the floors of the reception hall to realize the “full equality” that same-sex marriage supposedly brings. But in the same-sex marriage discourse where all other injustices in Canada have disappeared and therefore marriage-equals-liberation-period, there is no room to ask which queers have the privilege of seeing their weddings as the end of their marginalization, thus foreclosing a discussion of differences among queers, as well as among differently located straight and queer people. It also prevents us from asking: If same-sex marriage is the good business prospect it appears to be, then what is at the bottom line—liberation or profit?

Through the representation of Canada as a just and progressive nation where inequalities do not exist, same-sex marriage discourse elides the role the Canadian state plays in perpetuating inequalities both within and among nations, thus helping to erase the visibility of these inequalities, and allowing Canada to maintain its upstanding image. As has been amply shown, the current form of economic globalization, including the rise of neoliberal policies beginning after World War Two, has led to a widening gap between the rich and the poor, both within and among nations (c.f. Harvey; Hennessy). While globalization is sometimes represented as a new and overwhelming phenomenon, where markets and corporations instead of states and citizens dictate global conditions, various authors have shown that globalization is neither new (c.f. Cooper; Katz), nor does it signal the end of the nation-state. Instead, relationships of power and inequality within the current form of economic globalization are connected to racial, gender, national, and class inequalities from earlier forms of globalization (Grewal and Kaplan 663). Also, states actively participate and help to create current transformations in the organization of economic activity and politico-economic power (Sassen 2001: 190; see also Sassen 2000), thus directly contributing to the growing gap between rich and poor. In Canada, the ever-

increasing number of neoliberal policies being put in place, as well as decreased funding for health care, social services, and education exacerbate previously-existing inequalities. Same-sex marriage forces only very small changes (i.e., who can get married), while leaving in place the structure that is often responsible for inequalities in the first place. But even as inequalities are intensified in this era of neoliberalism, they are simultaneously erased in a move that constructs the Canadian state as benevolently allowing people to marry whomever they choose.

Further, the celebration of Canada in same-sex mar-

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riage discourse allows the state and its more privileged citizens to ignore Canadian imperialist practices, for example in gender persecution refugee hearings which require that “third world” women “speak of their realities of sexual violence outside of, and at the expense of, their realities as colonized peoples” (Razack 1998: 90). A similar case could be made for gay refugee claimants, where, as Sherene Razack argues for women, cases are more likely to be successful when the courts can demonstrate that claimants are particularly oppressed by their culture. As discussed, “third world” cultures appear similarly backwards in the same-sex marriage discourse, with queers from the “third world” needing to be rescued by progressive Canada. Canada thus appears unimplicated in global power relationships, except as saviour to “third world” queers, a representation which obscures “Western hegemony and its destructive impact on the Third World” (Razack 1998: 90). Simultaneously, this hegemony is secured, as western states are “figured as modern and thus as the sites of progressive social movements, while other parts of the world are presumed to be traditional, especially in regard to sexuality” (Grewal and Kaplan 669). But of course, as Jacqui Alexander reminds us, while Canadian same-sex marriage discourse may represent Canada as nonheterosexist, Canada is “constantly involved in the reconsolidation of borders and in the repressive deployment of heteropatriarchy in domains other than the sexual” (69).

The argument could be made that while the *representation* of same-sex marriage that appears in the newspapers is problematic in its dismissal and reproduction of inequities in and outside the nation, and its racist imagination of the “third world,” same-sex marriage *itself* is not so bad. Indeed, Hennessy contends that same-sex marriage and related accomplishments like same-sex spousal benefits are “important and necessary achievements of political

emancipation that challenge the heterogendered definition of family and household" (67). The problem as she sees it is that these kinds of movements which struggle for change *within* capitalism do not go far enough (110). By claiming only the commonalities among differently located queers, and ignoring the power structures, asymmetries, and inequalities that create different queer subjects differently (Grewal and Kaplan 671), same-sex marriage discourse marginalizes the economic and political issues that divide rather than unite queers both within and outside the nation. This claim to commonality (i.e., unified queers who are oppressed *because* we are not allowed to be married), as Grewal argues in the case of global feminism, "has proved difficult to translate to policy and action against poverty and survival issues" (346). In order to force broader changes, we must call into question rather than seek redress from the very institutions that perpetuate inequalities. Then we really will have something to celebrate.

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<sup>1</sup>I will use both the terms "queer" and "lesbian and gay" in this paper, though they are both contested terms, and often in conflict with one another. Both, however, are used to name homosexual identities or desires or histories. "Lesbian and gay" is often considered a more traditional phrase which presumes a clear division between hetero- and homosexuality, and between "man" and "woman." "Queer" often purports to disrupt and challenge these binaries, to inquire into their historical emergence, and to embrace complex sexual identities that are formed along racial, gender and class as well as sexual lines. But while "queer" promises a critical standpoint which always questions attempts to fix identities, it is also argued that the more "queer" is proliferated, the more it becomes simply a stand-in for "lesbian and gay," or worse, for nothing at all if everything counts as "queer." For now it is enough to say that no term is adequate to explain the diverse histories and identities at stake here, and I will leave it by agreeing with Judith Butler that "queer" is a "site of collective contestation" (229). Tellingly, in an angry response written to the *only* article I found pointing to the relationship between same-sex marriage and capitalism (Thompson), a reader comments that "queer theory must keep in mind that some—maybe many?—queer people support liberal forms of capitalism and traditional institutions such as family and marriage" (Ragazzini).

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## RENEE NORMAN

### Hybrid Clotheslines

i dream of clotheslines  
strung out  
northwest Calgary yards  
my grandfather's apartment building  
across prairie  
hybrid clotheslines  
of memory

i am always hanging on them  
sheets and towels mostly  
pulley clotheslines that never end  
flying flapping  
remnants of childhood  
and long wooden porches

*Renee Norman, PhD, is a poet, writer, and teacher. Her poetry appears in the anthology The Missing Line. A volume of poetry is forthcoming.*

## R. LEIGH KRAFFT

### bloodletting

I am strong,  
with unwavering hands  
until the trembling begins.

fear at the flowering  
a brief vertigo  
just as the blood bubbles up out of flesh.

a living river  
phonemes and syntax  
silences.

a litany scrawled  
upon my wall, poems  
that I never meant to write.

*R. Leigh Krafft's poetry appears earlier in this volume.*