This past spring we marked our second wedding anniversary. Over a celebratory dinner we discussed the relevance of this date, which we both identify as the day on which we got married and not as our true anniversary. After all, when we were legally married we had already been together for 14 years and had, for all of those years, celebrated the date on which we made a significant commitment to each other: “Forever and ever or until we don’t feel like it any longer.” At that time, neither of us recognized marriage as an institution worthy of our consideration and both of us believed that gays and lesbians seeking equal access to this institution were seriously deluded. We were young lesbian feminists, and we knew marriage was a conservative ritual profoundly connected with being heterosexual and with the denial of women’s rights (chiefly, our right to autonomy). Though pleased that straight friends and family members appeared happy at their weddings, we felt distanced from the whole procedure and were convinced it was all part of a process by which heterosexuals literally buy into the dominant value system (spending thousands of dollars on gowns, tuxedos, flowers, limousines, reception parties, gifts, et cetera). We firmly believed that fighting for the right to be legally married was tantamount to participating in the co-option of gay and lesbian relationships, i.e., it could only lead to the “straightening” out of our blissfully bent sexual and romantic liaisons.

In 2003, after numerous Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms challenges, gays and lesbians began to win the right to marry. The arrival of same-sex marriage in the mainstream media as a hot button issue re-established our interest in the ongoing debates regarding the pros and cons of gay and lesbian activism around marriage. Once again, we considered the personal, political, and social advantages and disadvantages of gays and lesbians seeking to obtain the right to marry. There is no denying that marriage continues to be a heterosexual institution designed to ensure the subjugation of women by a male-dominated power elite. It has been long and well argued by feminists that marriage is fundamentally oppressive to women. Many lesbian activists contend that while same-sex marriage may improve the plight of gay men to obtain rights equal to those of their heterosexual brothers, it merely entrenches the subordinate position of lesbians.

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within the prevalent system of heterosexuality. For example, in “Queer Theory: Transgression and/or Regression?” Louise Turcotte writes,

Gay men don’t have the same political agenda and history as lesbians. In having as a principal issue a different sexual orientation, the gay man’s questioning of heterosexuality is made more on the basis of a social norm than on questioning the social system. (1996, p. 118)

In other words, many gay men want the same privileges enjoyed by straight men, and obtaining the right to marry is a step toward achieving this goal. Politicized lesbians, on the other hand, have no desire to share the lot of married heterosexual women, which seems to presently include at least double the labour of married heterosexual men, with far fewer perks. Furthermore, the argument that gay and lesbian relationships are worthy of legitimation through marriage suggests that they are somehow inadequate unless they can be favourably compared to heterosexual pairings. Not to mention that gays and lesbians jumping on the matrimonial bandwagon begs the question “What types of relationships continue to be excluded and therefore remain illegitimate?”

Given that same-sex marriage continues to be fraught with complications, one may indeed wonder why on earth we decided to take the plunge. The shortest answer to this question is our lived experience. Over the years, we had become somewhat resigned to our subordinate social position: we had been forced to pay more than heterosexual couples in taxes; we had watched as straight couples who had been philosophically opposed to marriage easily succumbed for the privilege of travelling and living outside the country together; and we had been awkwardly introduced by family members at social gatherings, their embarrassment about our sexual orientation apparent. The emergence of same-sex marriage as a divisive topic appearing almost daily in newspapers and on television brought homophobia out of the closet and plunked it down at dinner tables, in living rooms, and in many other well-lit places. At this point we realized that, over the years, many of our colleagues and friends had ceased to recognize our difference while we continued to experience it on a daily basis.

Prior to the same-sex marriage debates, most left-leaning liberals did not take gays and lesbians as seriously as the conservative and religious right. It was only when same-sex marriage became a probability (rather than a possibility) that the outpouring of hostility from cultural, political, and religious groups made apparent the exact size, shape, and ugly features of homophobia. Suddenly it was difficult to ignore the stream of prejudiced vitriol that poured into the mainstream media leading up to the vote on Bill C-38 in Parliament. These included claims by Canadian security experts that the legalization of same-sex marriage would encourage attacks from al-Qaida and other jihadists who would view such a move as evidence of Canada’s moral degeneration (Schmitz, 2005).

Conservative MPs alleged that Canada would become the “Las Vegas of the North” for “quickie” gay and lesbian marriages, leading justice critic Vic Toews to call for residency requirements for civil marriage ceremonies. It is interesting to note that part of his rationale was pressure from Americans opposed to U.S. gay and lesbian couples crossing the border to legally wed (Naumetz, 2005).
Moreover, there was a flood of assertions that Bill C-38 was the slippery slope to polygamy, bestiality, and the general destruction of heterosexual families. Even Liberals, such as Cathal Marlow of Québec, asked “What’s next, pedophilia?” (Bailey & Bryden, 2005).

The excessiveness of these views seems less like ridiculous hyperbole and more like a rhetorical strategy designed to strike fear into the hearts of moderates and traditionalists alike. The fact that left-leaning liberals and activists find such statements to be ludicrous rather than tactical demonstrates both our collective underestimation of subtle methods for change from within as well as our overestimation of the strength and steadfastness of time-honoured institutions. Although Canada’s Catholic primate Cardinal Ouellet’s argument that same-sex marriage “will unleash nothing less than a cultural upheaval” and bring about “unpredictable demographic, social, cultural and religious consequences” (Harvey, 2005, p. 1) may seem almost fanatical in its passion, we believe he is working hard to sustain an untenable fixedness. There is a strong belief on the Right that adherence to traditional notions of marriage is key to maintaining the dominance of established patriarchal values. However, although ideologies may appear rigid, they are mechanisms, not static positions from which control is maintained. As Stuart Hall points out in “Deviance, Politics, and the Media,”

[I]deologies survive only if they are able to change, transform, and amplify themselves so as to take account of, and integrate, within the existing mental environment, new events and developments in social conflict. . . . Ideologies which are thoroughly fixed in their forms and content are not flexible enough to sustain themselves in the face of problematic and threatening events. (1993, p. 81)

Of course, it is this very capacity to shift and absorb contradictory positions by means of accommodating them that makes lesbian scholars and activists opposed to same-sex marriage so nervous.

For many lesbians, marriage is so deeply flawed that it is not only unredeemable but also poses a threat to any legitimate movement for social change. This threat is taken to the extreme by Claudia Card in her argument “Against Marriage and Motherhood,” where she states that marriage will cause our relationships to become

more like heterosexual marriages, loveless after the first few years but hopelessly bogged down with financial entanglements or children (adopted or products of turkey-baster insemination or previous marriages), making separation or divorce . . . too difficult to contemplate, giving rise to new motives for mayhem and murder. (1996, p. 10, italics added)

Not unlike the rantings of the conservative and religious Right, we believe Card’s claims to be a rhetorical strategy designed to alert gays and lesbians to the perils of the altar. Maybe we are being permitted to enter the inner sanctum of heterosexuality so that we may be assimilated and become destined to share their unfortunate fates. Perhaps heterosexuals are. . . Borg: Now that we have won the right to wed, resistance is futile. The suggestion that gays and lesbians will be drawn into an inherently evil structure, doomed to re-enact the nasty roles played out by
some heterosexual couples, is both insulting and improbable. It implies that gay and lesbian relationships have never mimicked heterosexual relationships and that, magically, they are free of violence and oppression. Unfortunately, this is simply not true. It also proposes that our diversity and our lived experiences of difference can be easily expunged. As though, by entering the arena of matrimony, we can be sanitized—all of our specificity cleansed away. Again, this is simply not true. Our relationships are fundamentally different than heterosexual relationships because of our positioning outside the established boundaries of traditional marriage. We are different because we are perceived to be so and because we have been historically regarded as aberrant (at the best of times) and as abhorrent (most of the time). Have we been treated this way because we are so easily integrated? Have our deviant sexualities become so well packaged and presentable as to be no longer a threat? If the highest-ranking Catholic clergymen in the country does not think so, then neither do we.

In “We Will Get What We Ask For: Why Legalizing Gay and Lesbian Marriage Will Not ‘Dismantle the Legal Structure of Gender in Every Marriage,’” Nancy D. Polikoff argues that gays and lesbians wanting to marry “is an attempt to mimic the worst of mainstream society, an effort to fit into an inherently problematic institution that betrays the promise of both lesbian and gay liberation and radical feminism” (1993, p. 1536). We no longer believe this position to be tenable. In fact, radical feminist arguments against same-sex marriage bear a striking resemblance to declarations made about pornography: “Pornography is the ideology of a culture that allows rape, wife-battering, incest, sexual harassment and women’s economic inequality to flourish” (Kerr, 1999, p. 280). Substitute marriage for pornography and you have much of the radical feminist argument against same-sex marriage. Although it is true that pornography can be about domination, denigration, violence, and cruelty directed primarily toward woman, how does sexually explicit material made by lesbians, for lesbians, fit into this broad generalization? The reality is that such pornography exists and that lesbians are no longer feeling guilty about consuming it. Likewise, while it is true that traditional marriage has allowed “rape, wife-battering, incest, sexual harassment and women’s economic inequality to flourish,” how do the majority of lesbian marriages that have occurred since 2003 fit into this broad generalization? Claiming that they do is the equivalent of claiming that lesbians who produce, and take pleasure in, sexually explicit material are participating in their own oppression.

This past spring we also attended a straight couple’s wedding ceremony where the groom’s former partner (now an “out” lesbian) expressed her joy at the growth of their extended family and the addition of the new partner and her children. This celebration of a family that includes past and present partners as well as children from different marriages and couplings challenges the historically restrictive notion of marriage. Similarly, we believe same-sex marriage has the potential to create a social framework of inclusion that contests the enduring notion that marriage is a union between one man and one woman to the exclusion of all others—including former partners and previous incarnations of family. Would our current Conservative prime minister be re-opening the debate, by having yet another vote on the issue, if same-sex marriage were not a genuine threat
to a prized conservative hobbyhorse: traditional family values? Only time will tell whether Cardinal Ouellet is correct and our marriage will be part of “a cultural upheaval.” We certainly hope his paranoid declarations come to pass and that our wedding helps to shift the meaning of what it means to be married. Our wedding anniversary may not be our true anniversary, but it does mark a genuine commitment to our love, our desire, and our belief in potential social and political change.

Notes
1. Here we are referring to the current state of working-class and middle-class married women, who bear by far the majority of responsibility for child rearing, meal planning, cooking, and household maintenance while working a part-time or full-time job outside the home—a job that, according to Statistics Canada (2002), pays “an average of 80 cents for every dollar earned by men.”

2. In February 2000, the Government of Canada “tabled the Modernization of Benefits and Obligations Act to ensure that common-law relationships (both opposite and same-sex) are treated equally under federal law,” forcing amendments to the Income Tax Act (Canada, Justice Canada, 2000).

3. Joan Scott (1993) has argued that “The evidence of experience . . . becomes evidence for the fact of difference, rather than a way of exploring how difference is established, how it operates, how and in what ways it constitutes subjects who see and act in the world” (p. 400). We agree that experience is often used simply as evidence of marginalization. However, it is also an impetus for activating social and political change while, at the same time, emphasizing our diversity. As Kobena Mercer (1991) asserts: difference leads to the production of “exciting and important work” not because of the fact of difference per se but because cultural producers who experience marginality are situated “at the interface between different traditions” (p. 204). Mercer contends that “[i]nsofar as these producers speak from the specificity of [their] experiences, they overturn the assumption that [they] speak for the entire community from which they come” (p. 204). So, although experience can be seen as evidence for the fact of difference, the verity and distinctive quality of our experiences confirms their specificity and, moreover, encourages our politicization.

4. Heterosexual marriages were not trouble-free prior to the legalization of same-sex marriage. In Canada “the proportion of marriages expected to end in divorce by the 30th wedding anniversary was 37.9% in 2001” (Statistics Canada, 2004).

References


