

NORMALIZING DESIRE – DESIRING NORMALITY: BODIES, DESIRES, AND KINSHIP IN SCIENTIFIC, POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE¹

Annika K Thiem

Guest Lecturer, Department of New Testament, Unisa

University of California

Abstract

This paper inquires into assumptions on sexuality and kinship in religious and theological interventions in the debates around same-sex marriage and assisted reproduction. I am especially concerned about how a steadfast investment in “the natural” and “the normal” haunts these debates. Not only does the Roman Catholic Church object to same-sex relations, but the supporters of same-sex marriage often equally rely on the sexual and erotic privilege of the monogamous couple, which serves as the basis for “normal” family life. This “normality” is completed by the fulfillment of the desire to raise children, a creation of the model modern family that increasingly, for both heterosexuals and homosexuals, includes assisted reproductive technologies. In both discussions, how the family is defined focuses on the body and on its legal, medical, and scientific status. The aim of this paper is to ask in what ways the horizons of intelligibility and practices of recognition structure who and what we can become.

Keywords: Same-Sex Marriage, Assisted Reproductive Technologies, Roman Catholic Church, Kinship

While I was first thinking about this paper, the Massachusetts Supreme Court had just ruled that same-sex couples have the right to get married, San Francisco and a handful of other cities had begun to issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples, and in response to these developments several opponents to gay marriage, among them President Bush and the Alliance for Marriage, demanded a constitutional amendment defining marriage as the union between one man and one woman. The amendment ended up failing to pass the U.S. Senate – but I found interesting and quite disconcerting that the same premises and figures appeared in the arguments of both the supporters as well as the opponents to gay marriage. These discussions were about sexuality and kinship, bodies, desires, passionate attachments, their possibilities and their limits – and time and again two arguments were key: “The well-being of our children” as well as the “values of our society” and their erosion.

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This discourse around marriage, negotiating who gets to raise children and to have families, is bound up with the discourses around assisted reproductive technologies (ART), because these technologies have made possible child-bearing in separation from sexual intercourse.² Certainly family and kinship cannot be reduced to the dimension of upbringing of offspring, but insofar as child-rearing is being tied to family, marriage turns out to be integral to the question of who gets to have or ought to get to have family, both of the discourses around ART and marriage acquire peculiar agencies as they work as operations normalizing bodies and desires by feeding off of a desire for normality. The promise for normality in marriage lies, for same-sex relations, in the promise of social, financial and legal recognition, and the promise for normality in assisted reproduction lies in the promise of offspring and even more so in “genetically own” offspring.

In this paper I would like to inquire into underlying assumptions on sexuality and kinship as these are negotiated in religious and theological interventions. I am especially concerned about how a certain steadfast biologism and investment in “the natural” and “the normal” seem to haunt these debates. The *Magisterium* of the Roman Catholic Church and the religious right object to the legitimation and recognition of queer relationships on grounds of the abnormal and thus morally problematic nature of queer sexuality that does not coincide with the reproductive sexuality of the heterosexual couple. But in their efforts to unclench the heterosexual privilege of recognition, the supporters of same-sex marriage rely equally on the sexual and erotic privilege of the monogamous couple. The commitment to the dyad of the couple is what then justifies the fitness of gay and lesbian relationships for “normal” family life. This “normality” is completed by the fulfillment of the desire to raise children, a creation of the model modern family that increasingly, for both heterosexuals and homosexuals, includes ART. In both discussions, how the family is defined focuses on the body and on its legal, medical, and scientific status. For all the perceived changes in attitudes that surround the idea of “family,” the discourse itself remains rooted in the traditional Western notion – or what has been constructed as traditional, at any rate.

The Vatican’s understanding of sexuality and kinship³ is notoriously one that operates through a heterosexist procreationism coupled with a staunch – but admittedly consistent – rejection of all kinds of new reproductive technologies, a rejection affirmed in February 2004 in the *Pontifical Academy for Life* in its final *communiqué* on “The Dignity of Human Procreation and Reproductive Technologies: Anthropological and Ethical Aspects.”⁴ If reproductive technologies are to be eschewed, how much more so a relationship that could not under any circumstances “naturally” result in children? In June 2003 the *Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith* reinforced its teachings on homosexuality in the document “Considerations Regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions between Homo-

² For a thoughtful and thorough discussion see Haker, H 2002. *Ethik der genetischen Frühdiagnostik: Sozialethische Reflexionen zur Verantwortung am Beginn des menschlichen Lebens*. Paderborn: Mentis.

³ Certainly the Vatican’s opinion and reasoning is neither representative of many of the positions of Catholic theologians nor of the majority of Catholics in Western countries. As well, the Roman Catholic Church is not equivalent to or even simply contiguous with what is termed the religious right in the US context. For a survey of the English-speaking contributions to the discussion of gays and lesbians in Catholic theology, see Keenan SJ, J 2003. The Open Debate: Moral Theology and the Lives of Gay and Lesbian Persons. *Theological Studies* 64:127-150; and Pope, S 2004. The *Magisterium*’s Arguments Against “Same-sex Marriage”: An Ethical Analysis and Critique. *Theological Studies* 65:530-565.

⁴ Pontifical Academy for Life. *The Dignity of Human Procreation and Reproductive Technologies: Anthropological and Ethical Aspects*. No pages. Cited 20 July 2004. Online: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_academies/acdlife/documents/rc_pont-acd_life_doc_20040316_x-gen-assembly-final_en.html.

sexual Persons”⁵ by emphasizing: “There are absolutely no grounds for considering homosexual unions to be in any way similar or even remotely analogous to God’s plan for marriage and family. Marriage is holy, while homosexual acts go against the natural moral law. Homosexual acts “close the sexual act to the gift of life. They do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity. Under no circumstances can they be approved” (Considerations 4). For the Vatican, the moral goodness and sanctity of marriage lie in its being tied to having a family. “Marriage” here is opposed to “homosexual acts” – and this is a somewhat strange opposition, because one would expect homosexual *relationships* and not sex acts to be juxtaposed with marriage. By virtue of this juxtaposition, marriage becomes the term standing for “heterosexual acts,” and marriage and its sanctity seem to turn into sexual acts. And through this language, any aspects of emotional attachments, of commitments, of taking on responsibilities, of caring for another person, etc., come to be eclipsed. It is extremely fascinating, though, how something as immaterial as the sanctity of a relationship comes to be negotiated through the very material framework of two bodies having sex with each other. Nonetheless, for the Vatican the sanctity of marriage is bound up with heterosexual coitus as without intervention possibly leading to the conception of a child, and thus same-sex unions cannot be conceived of as analogous to heterosexual marriage, because gay and lesbian sex is usually – to my best knowledge – non-reproductive.

Yet in the Vatican’s argument it is not simply lack of the possibility to be reproductive that is problematic with regard to same-sex relations, but proper reproductivity is bound to a certain complementarity. Homosexual acts are deemed unnatural and in conflict with natural moral law, because “They do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity” (Considerations 4). Sexual acts here are said to proceed from some origin, and this origin needs to be “genuine complementarity” for the sex acts to be morally good. Gay and lesbian sex suffers from a deficiency, that is, inappropriate “affective and sexual complementarity.” This complementarity is specifically conceived of as one that is bound to biological sex and sex is determined through reproductive functions. Complementarity that translates into the possibility of reproductive heterosexual sex is further the origin that endows sex with moral value (under the condition that the lovers are married). This origin comes to figure as a kind of completeness that emerges in the joining of the complementary parts, but this completeness is found only insofar as it is open toward the conception of new life. The criterion for “good” sexuality here hinges on nothing but its openness for reproduction within marriage and only such sexual activity is human. “Homosexual unions are also totally lacking in the conjugal dimension, which represents the human and ordered form of sexuality. Sexual relations are human when and insofar as they express and promote the mutual assistance of the sexes in marriage and are open to the transmission of new life” (Considerations 7). The labeling of gay and lesbian sex as unnatural thus means that such sex is not only unnatural with regard to its non-reproductivity, but in fact gay and lesbian sex does not even qualify as human sex. However, the realm of sex that does not qualify as “human”, according to the Vatican’s criteria, seems to be quite a well-populated realm, including such seemingly mundane forms as marital sex using contraceptives. And perhaps instead of trying to join this narrow understanding of

⁵ Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith. *Considerations Regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions between Homosexual Persons*. No pages. Cited 20 July 2004. Online: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20030731_homosexual-unions_en.html.

what counts as human sex and what does not, this might be an opportunity to call into question an understanding that depends on “orderly” sex as the ticket to being human.⁶

The threat of not properly human sexuality seems to be its lack of order, which implies that while homosexuality, as one of these forms of sexuality, is not biologically fecund, there is a threatening power connected to it. The Vatican seems to acknowledge a certain productive force of homosexuality as it feels the need to “[remind] the government of the need to contain the phenomenon within certain limits so as to safeguard public morality and, above all, to avoid exposing young people to erroneous ideas about sexuality and marriage that would deprive them of their necessary defences and contribute to the spread of the phenomenon” (Considerations 5). Homosexuality, while not reproductive in the sense of directly conceiving children, is fecund insofar as it is attributed the power of spreading if not restrained and the power of having a profound effect on society. Homosexuality as a phenomenon thus needs to be contained. And not only homosexuality: Sexuality in general needs to be regulated, structured, channeled, guided, and controlled – it is good only in its “ordered form” that is, as cited above, the monogamous, married heterosexual couple: “Sexual relations are human when and insofar as they express and promote the mutual assistance of the sexes in marriage and are open to the transmission of new life” (Considerations 7). Underlying this argument is an acknowledgment of an enormous power that seems to be inherent in sexuality, a power that if unleashed would wreck havoc of a public morality that is apparently in opposition to this sexuality and unable to withstand the attacks of this sexuality. In connection to the appeal to governments to contain homosexuality, the Vatican emphasizes that “Those who would move from tolerance to the legitimization of specific rights for cohabiting homosexual persons need to be reminded that the approval or legalization of evil is something far different from the toleration of evil” (Considerations 5). The Vatican is concerned about moving from *tolerating* “cohabiting homosexual persons” to legalizing and thereby *approving* of their relationships. This argument is extremely revealing about how tolerance performs: Evil – here, homosexual relations – can be tolerated, but may not be legitimized; this means that under the *aegis* of tolerance, lives and bodies can still be held evil. Tolerance functions as an “inclusive exclusion” insofar as it does not fully refuse the other recognition, but these others have to remain other, unequal, and here in the case of gay and lesbian relationships in the Catholic Church, these relationships can be tolerated by being stigmatized as morally bad.

The problem with same-sex unions, let alone same-sex marriages, is that the “common good” would be endangered because basic values would be obscured as well as the institution of marriage devalued.⁷ This argument is sustained by the position that “Such unions are not able to contribute in a proper way to the procreation and survival of the human race. The possibility of using recently discovered methods of artificial reproduction, beyond involving a grave lack of respect for human dignity, does nothing to alter this inadequacy” (Considerations 7). For the Catholic Church, neither adoption nor assisted reproductive technologies (ART) such as insemination or in-vitro fertilization can “cure” the lack of openness toward conceiving children in same-sex relationships. While adoption by same-sex parents is rejected because of the lack of “complementarity,”⁸ ART are

⁶ For incisive and more sustained interrogations into the political and ethical dimensions of taking up and problematizing the question of the human, see Butler, J 2004. *Prearious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso; and Butler, J 2004. *Undoing Gender*. New York: Routledge.

⁷ See Considerations 6.

⁸ The argument against adoption of children by gay and lesbian couples is that adopting would mean to do violence against children, since they need to grow up with a father and a mother; see Considerations 7.

rejected in general for all couples, because utilizing these technologies violates the dignity of the human being that emerges through this assistance (see “Procreation”). The argument against ART is made from the perspective of the embryo’s dignity, which is bound to the “conjugal unity of the couple.” So ART are objected to, because these technologies involve others beyond the married couple and thus “far from being a real treatment for the sterility of a couple, [they] in reality constitute an unworthy method for the coming forth of a new life, whose beginning thus depends in large measure on the technical action of third parties outside the couple” (Procreation).

But is this involvement of others in the creation of “family” necessarily such a bad thing? As Haker (2002) has pointed out, not only has sexuality in the modern age become severed from procreation in the way that sexual intercourse must not, if one does not wish it, lead to procreation, but the link between sexuality and procreation has been rendered arbitrary also with regard to the fact that our lovers need not be those with whom we have children. As a woman (with enough money) one can even become pregnant without having any kind of sexual intercourse. This possible separation of procreation from sexual intercourse between a man and a woman has opened up questions of kinship in a way more radical than adoption has before. As one consequence, the discussion of kinship has been recast in juxtaposition between “genetically own” and social and emotional family bonds, which has rendered the meaning of having one’s “own children” and what constitutes a “family” open to reinterpretation. Certainly there are serious ethical concerns arising in connection with these new technologies, and the medicalization of our bodies, our desires, our lives and relations demands critical and vigilant inquiries in how our bodies, our desires, our lives and relations are produced, governed, and administered.

Within religious discourse this upheaval of traditional paradigms appears to be deeply troubling, as reproduction is no longer necessarily connected with “man and woman becoming one flesh” (Matt 20:5). Yet it is in fact Christianity that already has a paradigmatically upsetting case in that of Mary, Mother of Jesus Christ. If the Holy Spirit is acknowledged as the feminine aspect of God and if Mary’s conception was due to an encounter with the Holy Spirit, why is it so hard to think a step further? What exactly is the threat in acknowledging an aspect of a lesbian relation that seems to be implicated in this refiguring of Jesus’ conception?

At the same time I do not think that casting Jesus’ conception as procreative lesbian sex already affords a positive reevaluation of lesbian sexuality within Christian religious and theological discourse. At best, this recasting shows how particular readings and interpretations of tenants of faith are bound up with and mobilize other theological and theologico-political motivations, which in this process emerges endowed with persuasive force and authority they would not necessarily have on their own. At any rate, I am not certain about making an argument for a positive reevaluation of queer sexuality and its integration in Christian theology through appealing to a lesbian conception of Jesus, because even then we would remain firmly locked in a framework that conceives of “good sex” as creating offspring. Rogers (1999, 205) in his study *Sexuality and the Christian Body: Their Way into the Triune God* questions procreativity as the criterion that renders individual sex acts good or bad, because “procreation is simply not a good that belongs to the couple as such, much less to every sex act. Rather it belongs to the species. Procreation is a good of the species, because the species is what procreation exists to promote.”⁹ Procreativity as such does not endow sexual acts with ethical value, and procreativity goes further than merely conceiving

⁹ Rogers, E 1999. *Sexuality and the Christian Body: Their Way into the Triune God*. Oxford: Blackwell.

children. Goss (1997, 35) argues that “procreativity ... includes notions of social reproduction, renewal, and transformation.”¹⁰ While these efforts to unclench and reclaim a notion of procreativity that has been reduced to a biological dimension of fertilization as result of heterosexual sex is laudable, this argumentation leaves unreflected that sexuality still is understood only through the binary procreative/non-procreative. Not only is the framework awarding sexual passion intelligibility tied to and structured by “procreativity,” but sexual passion has to justify itself with regard to its reconceived procreativity. Sexuality under these conditions is good insofar as it brings forth something. Sexual passion is endowed with positive value as it emerges in an instrumental relationship to something other than itself, the “common good,” “social renewal.” Sexual passion then is bad insofar as it is wasted and falling outside of its being ordered toward a greater purpose. Yet we might see this instrumentalist understanding of sexual passion come into tension within the very position offered by the Vatican, insofar as sexual passion is there also understood as a “self-giving” and as a gift that is precisely not evaluated or determined by its being “deployed” by the lovers in order to achieve a purpose or goal beyond this “self-giving.”¹¹ While certainly the aim of the Vatican’s argument is not in the first place to dislodge an instrumental understanding of sexuality, and while certainly sexual passion is embedded in the context of the married couple, nonetheless we see an understanding of sexual passion as a gift emerge here. As a gift, sexual passion emerges as a kind of giving without returns. In sexual passion we are moved beyond ourselves, we are given to our passions, we are receiving our passions, we are receiving in our giving what is but a being given over to a giving without return and without returns: Desire and passion, gratis, for nothing. This does not mean that sexual passion is reintroduced as a kind of “pure” state that is utterly undirected and that this “pure” form is the only “good” sexuality. Nor is this to say that all procreativity is now to emerge as questionable. In the back of sexual passion an unexpected procreativity may emerge, but this procreativity is not *per se* the *telos* or purpose of the passion that renders this passion good. And to question procreativity as the criterion for “good sexuality” and to think about sexual passion as an experience in which we are moved besides ourselves also does not mean to claim that per that definition there cannot be any sexual violence, sexual abuse, passion that becomes abusive, and by no means does this imply that in sexual passion all responsibility is eclipsed in a way that obliterates any responsibility for violence that one may exert. Yet if we accept a non-instrumentalist, non-consequentialist understanding of sexuality we can no longer fall back on a framework of ends that are achieved through particular forms and instances of sexuality in order to distinguish between and evaluate these forms and instances of sexuality.

Despite, or perhaps precisely because of, these questions regarding “social procreativity,” it is important not to obliterate the social and political dimension of sexuality and kinship that is rendered explicit and the importance of the desire for recognition. We should not be too quick to give up the notion of recognition and need to think about the question of recognition as it is negotiated in the demands for and opposition to same-sex

¹⁰ Goss, R 1997. Challenging Procreative Privilege: Equal Rites. *Theology and Sexuality* 6:33-55.

¹¹ The Vatican proffers this understanding of sexual passion in the context of refuting the notion of a child as *telos* of sexual passion, which might justify utilizing ART: “In reality, a child can never be understood as an “object of desire” to be obtained at any cost. Rather, a child should be seen as a very valuable gift to be welcomed with love, whenever he arrives. Spouses are called through their reciprocal conjugal self-giving to create all the conditions needed for a new life to begin, but they cannot licitly go so far as to determine its coming forth by commissioning its “production” in a laboratory through the work of technicians who have nothing to do with the couple itself” (see “Procreation”).

marriage. One suggestion that has been made is that there should be the possibility of civil marriage for gays and lesbians and those churches should be able to adhere to their traditions as they believe and be able to deny their blessing to non-heterosexual unions. However, this is a solution only for those who do not seek recognition in this way by these churches. For those gays and lesbians who are and want to be part of these church communities and who experience this exclusion, it remains painful.

Yet I would want to turn this question a bit and ask what it is about this desire to get “married.” What does “marriage” mean? What does it do? How does it operate? What are the implications? What kind of social recognition is it that is sought here? By whom, from whom, for what? By marrying two people, the relation of these two people, which they enter (for the most part, at least today in “Western” societies) by choice, the state and the church not only acknowledge this relation. This recognition by state and church operates also as a sanctioning, a specific kind of sanctioning that joins together and works over in particular ways bodies and lives. There is something special about “getting married” – it seems to me, at least partly, that this is where the modern secular state reveals its religious roots, as even in secular discourses, there remains a special sanctity surrounding marriage. In a broader sense, marriage remains tied to offspring and kinship or the promise of kinship – and this legitimized and sanctioned kinship remains heterosexual at its heart, even although married persons by no means need to commit to raising children. But if marriage were completely severed from the aspect of “having a family” and if kinship were not so deeply bound up with heterosexuality, then the reluctance to grant gays and lesbians the right to marry would not be buttressed so staunchly by worries about the well-being of children raised in such relations.

Before I return to the questions of the challenges and changes to our understandings of kinship, I would like to think about the conservatism that reemerges in the arguments supporting gay marriage. These arguments often seem to be eager to dismiss ideas about queers as promiscuous, living in “unstable” relationships lacking commitment. For example, Goss (1997, 35) emphasizes, “For years translesbigays have formed committed, stable relationships. Now we are demanding official recognition for these unions.” Marriage and the social recognition that is administered through it are bound to a promise as well as to a demand for stability. Do we know what we ask for when we ask for marriage? In modern Western society social recognition operates in marriage by an unchallenged stipulation of that of the couple, of exclusiveness and monogamy. Even if the failure of marriages is less and less a kind of social death, as more and more marriages are dissolved, and even if having multiple sexual partners has become more acceptable, a committed relationship and even more so marriage still implies and demands monogamy, even if that is serial monogamy. There seems to be a profound inability or unwillingness to embrace other relationship patterns in modern Western societies. Goss (1997, 37) in his “Challenging Procreative Privilege: Equal Rites” gestures at expanding recognition of sexual relationships beyond the couple: “Companionship or the unitive dimension of marriage exists in same-sex couples as well. It may also exist in other than pair bonded relationships.” And he (Goss 1997, 44) does ask whether there may not new patterns of kinship to be found among the queer community where alternative patterns emerged out of necessity due to the situation of disenfranchisement, which points to the fact that of course “kinship” implies many more dimensions than the issue of monogamy/non-monogamy. That said, the aim cannot be to simply replace the norm and stipulation of monogamy with non-monogamy as new norm to which we can then adhere. Simply by virtue of having multiple partners one is not already making a political statement, acting revolutionarily, furthering social justice. But there seems to be something to desires, to sexual passion and

bodies sexually encountering each other that is “dangerous” insofar as it provides the potential of instability, potentials for change, potentials unleashed, passionate attachments demanding and affording attention and negotiation.

The argument that is often brought forth at this point is that non-monogamy is yet another symptom of a “postmodern, postindustrial ‘fun society’” in which a capitalist individualism flourishes and nothing but the realization of one’s own pleasures and desires counts. Forms of non-monogamy are seen as furthering and accelerating the erosion of values and willingness to take on responsibility. Having sex with multiple partners must mean – so the assumption – that respect for the other persons is non-existent and the others are in principle nothing other than commodities used for self-gratification. This line of argument, I would like to point out, is extremely close to the argument the Vatican and many on the religious right bring forth against gay and lesbian relationships.¹² In other words, the argument presumes that having sexual relationships with more than one person can only and exclusively be possible under the condition of a staunch egotism. Yet it seems to me that egotism – taking advantage of others, their bodies, their feelings – is not bound to a certain type of relationship. And if we were to believe that by endowing relationships with state and church blessings, we could ensure their flourishing, then we would seriously mistake the precarious nature of human relationships. Equally, simply taking away the limitation of marriage to one spouse (at a time) and allowing multiple partners or abolishing all rights regulating relationships will not ensure these relationships flourish either. This is not an argument to decry the importance of rights – in fact, human and civil rights efforts are crucial to emancipatory and social justice projects and by no means can we pretend as if all that needs to be achieved has been achieved. But this also does not mean that we have to uncritically endorse every argument that is proffered in connection with human rights and civil rights discourses. It is necessary to inquire how rights operate to shape and structure everyday lives, how they work over bodies, what kinds of bodies and lives they produce and protect, and how this protection is shaping these bodies and their desires in very particular ways. We do need to be careful not to believe that through rights and their encoding in legal documents everyday lives become safer and more livable. It takes a lot of daily work to transform social practices and opinions.

A host of practical questions arise at this point about how state, church, and society as institutions can function, if the present ways of acknowledging legal ties and administering benefits were to be undone and redone in radical ways, but this would also mean that a thorough reworking of these frameworks could become thinkable as well. And here I return to the need for social recognition and the concern about responsible parenting. Social recognition is crucial for negotiating relationships and conflicts within these relationships; and I believe that without a certain social intelligibility and recognition, children, as one of the weakest in kinship constellations, will suffer from the unspeakabilities and from living marginalized. Whether the biological, social, and emotional parents are the same or several persons has long become a more and more open question. There have always been various practices of adoption, and in the recent years ART has radicalized the diversity of constellations, as has greater acceptance of cohabitation, divorce, and queer relationships. Still, the blessing, sanctioning, and supporting of kinship ties, passionate attachments, and commitments by state and church and the language by which this recognition is conferred

¹² The idea that there can be such things as bisexuality and bisexual relationships remains quite ungraspable to many of these positions, perhaps because the “bi” already implies an opening that cannot easily be reinscribed in and reduced to a stable dyad of lovers.

and regulated have remained tied up firmly with sexual and biological lines. Apart from the official practices, there are also the language and discourses through which this recognition is enacted and reenacted or refused by us in our daily interactions. And we have to wonder whether we are not perhaps strangely unable to imagine otherwise, to find new ways of speaking and negotiating.

New reproductive technologies and the possibilities for queer families that emerge through these technologies will not by necessity transform societies and our ways of living and negotiating relationships in progressive and radically democratic ways. In fact, to me it seems as if the scientific progress has a very conservative social dimension to it. There has been a strange reemergence of naturalism in conjunction with these technologies, bringing about and feeding a desire for “genetically own” children. While these technologies have made possible and necessary a rethinking of our concepts of kinship in new ways, as kinship can no longer be exclusively defined via the naturalization of biological necessity, even so the biological bond that establishes kinship has conventionally been cast as “bloodlines,” and over the past decades this blood-tie has been reframed in terms of genetics, which has brought forth the fraught notion of the *genetically own*. What has become obvious, though, is that the understanding of kinship configured by the genetic and marital bond as the “natural” and necessary way of thinking kinship is an inadequate simplification.

What are we left with here then? This is a theoretical inquiry; it emerges at a distance from the discourses and practices with which it is concerned, and it does not tell us what to do when we put down this piece. Yet insofar as thinking is a dislodging of one’s own position and practices, thinking is precisely not a merely intellectual exercise. This kind of theorizing thus is a critical practice that is important insofar as it is risky for the one doing and undergoing it, as Butler (2002, 19) emphasizes in her essay “Is Kinship Always Heterosexual?”: “The questioning of taken-for granted conditions becomes possible on occasion, but one cannot get there through a thought-experiment, an *epoché*, an act of will. One gets there, as it were, through suffering the dehiscence, the breakup, of the ground itself.”¹³ The practical and political question and potential, then, lie in the experience of this ungrounding and the mobilization of these dehiscences and breakages, in coming to decide how to react to those shattered grounds and to that which emerges as possible. In the case of asking what it means to dislodge both the couple’s privilege of erotic and sexual relationships as well as the heterosexual privilege of procreation, interrupting these privileges then does not mean to demand that everyone must have multiple partners and that everyone must utilize ART. The task of theory as critical practice and critical of practice is not to make these decisions for us or to offer us recipes for our speaking, decision-making, and acting. But the task of theory is very much to reflect on these discourses, decisions, actions and their meanings, their premises, their limits. Inquiring the unspeakable, the unthinkable does not mean to believe that all would be better if we could and only would live that which has to be disavowed. But I do believe that critical inquiries are crucial to help us imagine otherwise and to reinvigorate our daily struggles.

Yet this seems to be too non-committal for ending this essay that may find itself caught uncomfortably between theory and practice. One way to mobilize this uncomfortable position productively might be to at least gesture toward a possible engagement in the debates and struggles committed to reworking recognition beyond identity politics and

¹³ Butler, J 2002. Is Kinship Always Heterosexual? *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 13(1):14-44.

beyond instituting being fully recognizable as ultimate goal. I am reluctant to dissolve the tension between a need for recognition and possibilities of that which is precisely not quite recognizable into a version of “we all need to attend to each others’ narratives and let ourselves be challenged by each other.” But at the same time simply reducing the endeavor to a struggle for a certain set of norms and rights – a “normative vision” of what society should be like – does not capture the endeavor either. In order to experience the lack of recognition as a kind of suffering there must be some kind of recognition already there or one must perceive oneself an intelligible and recognizable in some particular way; otherwise, being not recognizable could not really figure as an experience at all. It seems that. There may be a kind of unintelligibility to which we might not want to dissolve, because it allows an attentiveness of and toward becoming, of not being fixed, categorized, evading a kind of petrifying recognition. But certainly there are other kinds of unspeakability and unintelligibility that are tied to a threat or fact of violence. Strangely perhaps, this violence implies that the unintelligible seems to already be intelligible, intelligible enough to be, ever so vaguely, but powerfully, intelligible as threat. So the promise may very well lie in that which we do not quite need to be able to know, to have names and categories for, which may allow us to become strangers to each other and to ourselves and to find each other – becomingly and unbecomingly – becoming.

What might this mean concretely with regard to same-sex marriage and with regard to kinship? And what might this mean for a theological perspective? The question is how we can fight for both: Extending the category of “marriage” beyond heterosexuality, so that those who want to get married can do so regardless of their partners’ gender, and at the same time challenging the institution of marriage and narratives that the ideal of parenting can only be the configuration of the couple – struggling for doing kinship differently, understanding kinship beyond blood-ties, beyond regulations of sexual relations, and beyond legal ties. Precisely because kinship cannot be reduced to an accounting of who is related to whom genetically, or who gets to sleep with whom, and not even to whom is legally responsible for whom, we have to struggle for kinship. And this may be the point where in, through, beyond all our struggles – carefully, very carefully – we may come to want to speak again of a certain sanctity around human relations that we may sometimes, in ever so brief moments, ever so fleetingly, ever so unknowingly get a brief glimpse of.