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Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli

Introducing the dilemma of sexual and familial dichotomy

This one-size-fits-all model of family ... erase (s) the rest of us, damages our most precious resource, our children, and wastes what so many of us as families could be contributing ... just because we’re messing up the couples’ cabinet.

—research participant Naomi, heterosexual polyamorous mother with a heterosexual monogamous male partner and a bisexual polyamorous male partner

Polyamorous and mixed-orientation families and communities are in the precarious position of lacking visibility and legitimation in the same fashion that ethnic, and gay/lesbian families and communities have experienced at various points in historical time (Attali 2005). Power-challenging poly-bi-communities are emerging in Australia, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Europe (see Lano & Parry 1995; Anderlini-D’Onofrio 2004; Anapol 2010; Barker & Langdrige 2010; Pallotta-Chiarolli 2010a; 2010b). However, there is no officially sanctioned or endorsed debate, discussion or definition of polyfamilies within the same-sex marriage and gay/lesbian family movement (Klesse 2007; Hidalgo et al. 2008).

From 2000 to 2010, as I supported the increasing movement for same-sex couples’ marriage rights, I was also supporting heterosexual couples and feminist movements who refused to uphold marriage as the ultimate goal, legitimation and symbol of a successful relationship. At the same time I was also conducting ethnographic research, holding discussion groups and corresponding, via email and internet listservs, with people in polyamorous and/or mixed orientation relationships, hereto referred to as ‘queerly mixed’ relationships and families (see Pallotta-Chiarolli 2006; 2010a; 2010b).

As we discussed love and lust, mortgages and marriages, children and pets, ‘ethical slutness’ (Easton & Lizt 1997) and sexual health, religion and rosters for kitchen/laundry/bedroom/employment/childcare, we would sometimes find
ourselves surrounded—emotionally, mentally and at times physically—by an increasingly loud vortex of media articles, TV programs, local and international campaigns for same-sex marriage rights. The conversations would then often turn to how ‘queerly mixed’ people, relationships and families were feeling doubly invisibilised, undermined, and excluded within and between this dichotomy of hetero-world and homo-world, which somehow seemed to be finding a bridge they could hold hands on: the bridge of (official) monogamy and coupledom, or what cultural studies writer and activist Sethorun Raj (2011) calls ‘couple citizenship’.

‘Queerly mixed’ research participants talked about being on the borders of these marriage debates and dichotomies, simultaneously supporting and disengaging as allies and insider/outsiders of a queer movement that had somehow, comfortably, conveniently, perhaps unknowingly, forgotten that poly-hetero-queers, poly-bi-queers, poly-trans-queers and yes, poly-lesbians and poly-gays existed, many of them replete with children, houses in the suburbs, and the extraordinary ordinariness of relationships that had been for too long recognised and rewarded for straights within heteronormative institutions, and now being claimed by gays and lesbians in a homo-normative insertion into that hetero-normativity. What were the points of difference that deemed the ‘queerly mixed’ necessarily to be excluded, and indeed deserving of that exclusion? They were loving and/or being sexually intimate with more than one other person, sometimes with more than one other gender, thereby messing up the same-sex and opposite-sex ‘couples’ cabinet’.

These ‘queerly mixed’ boundary-blurrers saw themselves as not even being given the option to marry by the very people—same-sex couples and their communities and systems—who were protesting their not being given an option to marry by opposite-sex couples and their communities and regulatory systems. Indeed, should a poly-perspective get leaked into the debate, the straights would demonise them as what could happen if we went down that ‘slippery slope’ of same-sex marriage, and the gays and lesbians would deny that such sliding down that slope would ever happen. After all, same-sex marriage didn’t mean marriage of more than two people, it was just like opposite-sex marriage, just a little different in the genders of the two people, and at least the genders were the same.

Interestingly, this ‘slippery slope’ discourse, framing the hetero-normative fears and the homo-normative refusals, has been extensively written about by family fundamentalists such as Kurtz (2000, 2003a, 2003b), who warn that legitimating same-sex marriage and families is a disastrous landslide down the slippery slope to legitimating poly-amorous families. Some advocates of same-
sex marriages and families then rush in to reassure fundamentalists such as Kurz that the slippery slope fears will not be realised, as the proposed change in the marriage laws applies only to those relationships that are monogamous: same-sex couples are ‘normal families like straights have’; thereby assimilating to dominant heterosexual models of ‘couple citizenship’ (Raj 2011) and perpetuating what Hidalgo et al. (2008) define as ‘the dyadic imaginary’. The feminist theorist Robson uses the term ‘domesticate’ to describe what happens to same-sex attracted people who accept the terms for belonging offered to us by the state. . . [that] may ultimately serve to further enshrine the existing forms of kinship that are available (and recognised) under heteropatriarchy, rather than creating a space for new ways of understanding ourselves and our relationships (1992: 173).

Queer theorists such as Christian Kless refer to the delineation between ‘Good Homosexuals’ and ‘Dangerous Queers’ as being the machinations of heteronormativity with which some gays and lesbians are complicit (2007: 11). Thus, what academics in gender studies, Pieper and Bauer (2005), and academics in the field of psychology, Ritchie and Barker (2006), call ‘mono-normativity’ involves the formation of new boundaries and borders between ‘the legitimate [heterosexual, monogamous, nuclear families] and the about-to-be legitimate [homosexual, monogamous, nuclear families] from those relationships and sexual practices which become more intensively inscribed as illegible [bisexual, multisexual, polyamorous families]’ (Baey 2007: 167).

So where did I position myself on that bridge, border, slippery slope as a woman, researcher, activist? I found myself, as always, positioning myself and being positioned, on the borders, too.

I’m talking to people at a GLBTIQ conference about my latest research into polyamorous and multisexual families. The same gay father who has just applauded me for my work on same-sex families in schools looks very troubled and loudly says, ‘I don’t think you should be doing this work. You’ll alienate those you wish to persuade by shoving this polymorphous perversity polymory crap in their face. It’ll only justify their claims that two lesbians or two gay men can’t have a normal family like straights have.’ (Taken from my research notes)

I am married as a feminist queer straight woman and mother, and actually love being married. I actually still deeply love that heterosexual male partner after almost three decades. So, I am one of the hetero-privileged few who somehow keep making it work with not too much work, just making up our own rules, focused more on us as equal individuals with independent goals and lives within
a relationship of interdependence that shifts and evolves over time and according to context and circumstance, rather than trying to live up to some rulebook intended to perpetuate hetero-patriarchal fixedness, compliance and dysfunctionality.

So yes, alongside being a ‘happily married woman’, I also see marriage as a predominantly dysfunctional, consumerist, coercive institution and profit-seeking industry of patriarchal privilege and power, replete with complicit women vying for some power within that hierarchy, and disastrous for many children raised in nuclear implosive households.

I also personally support and publicly advocate for same-sex marriage rights and gay/lesbian families. I attend same-sex weddings and ceremonies of wonderful friends, rejoicing that they can finally have the ceremony, the declaration and ritualisation of love surrounded by loving family and community, as well as having the frocks, the food, the festivities and fun of it all, just like I did.

And I love baby showers, family gatherings and birthdays celebrating the children born and adopted into same-sex families who then grow up before my eyes to become world-cluey and smart-savvy young people who do put some offspring from narrow straitestville to shame. Indeed, out of hundreds of weddings I’ve attended in my lifetime so far, the most heartfelt, the most sincere, the most devoid of bland scripting and conformist performance, was the wedding between a queer lesbian Muslim-Pakistani friend and her Anglo lesbian partner.

Simultaneously, alongside my advocacy and participation in exhilarating political and personal expressions of same-sex marital love and family, I also worry to what extent same-sex marriage is about assimilating to what I expressed above as a very dysfunctional institution and about providing more profitable fodder for a mega-industry within which I have seen many straight friends (and their children) flounder, despair, dry up and die many deaths (sadly not the petit morts of orgasmic sexual connection).

Simultaneously, just as I am saddened by the exclusion and inferiorisation of single straights from hetero-coupleworld, particularly that apparently abhorrent and pitiful being, the ‘single barren woman’, I am saddened by the exclusion and inferiorisation of queer community friends who are in polyamorous and ‘queerly mixed’ relationships and families who just don’t get a look in from either side, despite how many children, mortgages and consumer dollars they’re contributing to society.

So as I live and act and think on the borders, I’m stuck in this dilemma of dichotomies in trying to figure out how to bring it all together. I want queer
marriage rights to be about ways of doing love and relationships and families beyond the heteropatriarchy that narrow ‘straights’ are clinging to all too desperately! I want queer marriage rights to be transformative and transgressive and truthful about the many ways to love, lust and live life with children, partners and communities.

Am I asking too much from queer communities? Maybe, ultimately, it’s about everyone’s right to love whomever they please; marry or not marry whomever and how ever many they please; raise kids or refuse to have kids; flourish in exhilarating, lifelong marriages or reach marital use-by dates; navigate the positives and problematics of monogamy, serial monogamy, polyamory; and understand that dysfunctionality and divorce aren’t owned, or due to, any particular relationship structure, but maybe—just maybe—having more choices about how to do relationships and families might ease their proliferation and associated agony, somewhat?

But there’s that sticking point again: everyone’s ‘right to marriage’; to do it well, do it badly, have the options of churches and divorce/custody courts, not who is next in line to gain those rights telling others further down the line they can’t have those rights … or at least, not yet.

I don’t want history repeating itself: inter-racial marriages were once illegal and immoral; white feminists pushing for women’s right to vote agreed it was illegal for Aboriginal women to vote; when Jews and homosexuals were released from Nazi concentration camps, Jews were assisted to start new lives as free citizens while homosexuals were placed right back into civic prisons.

Someone—either the oppressor and/or the oppressed—has always decided to keep oppressing someone else, someone apparently less deserving, someone who muddies the movement and may make it harder for the powerful to bestow the hard-fought for privileges on the most-normal of the deviants. The renowned philosopher in critical pedagogy, Paolo Freire (1972), explores the operation of dichotomous logics in the way the oppressed often emulate the strategies of control adopted against them by their oppressors. Indeed, ‘normative deviants’ such as gays and lesbians will sometimes position themselves alongside the ‘normal Straights’ in bullying ‘abnormal deviants’ such as bisexual people or those in polyamorous relationships. Other gays and lesbians feel caught in the middle, justifying their alignment with hetero-coupledom to their ‘queerly mixed’ allies and community-members thus: ‘Not now, it’s too soon, it’s hard enough getting our rights; your rights will come later’.

So ultimately, are some people just going to have to wait to get on to that dreaded or denied slippery slope, take their place in the queue to be the next...
group in line for some rights? Just like indigenous people did (do). Just like women did (do). Just like gays and lesbians did (do).

But what does the marriage equality movement look like if we move it onto the queer borders of multiplicity and diversity, rather than endorse the opposite-sex and same-sex coupledom binary?

It would call for the queerification of marriage that acknowledges the existences, experiences, and expertise of border sexualities, genders and families that do not fit the heterosexual/homosexual duality or the male/female binary, and the claims of all these relationship configurations to equal rights and recognition. Indeed, the queerification of marriage would also mean addressing queer forms of heterosexuality in our communities, such as heterosexual partners of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, or queer individuals, and heterosexual individuals who have more than one intimate partner.

Queer border-theorising beyond the ‘Have a normal family like straights have’, or ‘Refuse marriage’, dichotomy

Okay, so in the previous section, I’ve laid it out, personally and as an activist.

But being the diligent little academic/researcher as well, I can’t help but want to explore these issues a little further, and see how theorising from a queer border-position might provide some context to, and connection between, the hierarchical duality of ‘have a normal family like straights have’ and ‘refusing marriage’. Theories of hierarchical dualisms, social ascription and community cohesion, and borderland theories may help clarify why I believe the borderzone is the ever-shifting heterotopic site (Foucault 1986) of collaboration and contestation, contradiction and coalition.

From this heterotopia, we can see how the gaining of more political power and sociocultural legitimation of gay and lesbian families has led to the development of what could be defined as a homo-normative hierarchy based on what is constructed as the dominant homosexual group: usually white, middle-class, monogamously coupled, exclusively homosexual parents (Klesse 2007). While not positioning homo-normativity alongside hetero-normativity in terms of power within the wider society, difference, power, and hierarchy within the non-heterosexual communities need to be considered as a consequence, reflection, and emulation of the workings of hetero-normative, monogamist discourses within the wider society (Riggs 2007).

These critiques and questionings above, as conducted on the queer borders, are not intended to undermine, displace, or negate the enormous work of gay and lesbian research, activism, and human rights campaigns to recognise, affirm, and celebrate same-sex monogamous-couple marriages and gay/lesbian
monogamous-couple families within political, legal, economic, educational, health, religious and sociocultural systems and structures. These queer border-discussions are also not intended to undermine, displace, or negate heterosexual monogamous couple relationships and families. Heterosexuality and monogamy should continue to be affirmed and celebrated, but should not be privileged or constructed as the only form of sexuality or relationship/family worthy of validation and attention, indeed emulation, within hetero-patriarchal, monogamist political, legal, economic, educational, health, religious and sociocultural systems and structures. Finally, queer border-discussions are not intended to place bisexual and polyamorous individuals and their families and communities on a pedestal, proclaiming their perfection with the purpose of recruiting new members. This would be merely another form of discrimination and inferiorisation via simplistic representation, exoticisation and trendification. Rather, queer border-discussions are about interrogating, broadening, and adding to ongoing debates and activism regarding sexual diversity and relationship diversity, so that our work as researchers, policy makers and activists transforms the very way we conceptualise, construct, and take action in regard to promoting healthy and sustainable familial and sexual diversity.

It is those border zones of ‘too much truth’ (Derrida 1981: 105)—constructed as ‘unreal’ or negated in dichotomous, discursive boundaries in relation to sexuality and family—that need to be explored. Indeed, many of the ‘queerly mixed’ families I worked with in my research (Pallotta-Chiarolli 2010a, 2010b) could identify with the following description of border dwelling by postcolonial feminist writer Trinh T Minh-ha:

But every place she went
they pushed her to the other side
and that other side pushed her to the other side
of the other side of the other side
Kept in the shadows of the other (1990: 328).

Like queer theorist O’Brien, below, in reflecting upon whether same sex marriage is a transgression of what constitutes ‘cultural belonging’, or whether it is demonstrating ‘deservedness’ of inclusion into a state-sanctioned fixed system, I keep arriving at the borders, and saying it’s ‘both/and’, rather than ‘either/or’:

Lesbians and gay men who seek marriage are thereby attempting to alter a landscape based almost entirely on the fissures of a gender binary. This is indeed radical. At the same time, [...] gender radical as it is, [...] same gender marriage is likely to perpetuate a status quo that favors one

Ritch Savin-Williams, a professor in developmental psychology, also situates himself on the both/and border between the construction of gay people as having ‘a distinctive life course that reflects their ‘queerness,’ their sense of difference’ or that ‘they are basically similar to straight people’, by concluding,

A differential development trajectories perspective allows that both notions are true and that remarkable diversity characterizes individuals with same-sex desire. They seek to adapt to mainstream culture even as they demand acceptance of their sexuality as normative and as they appreciate the increasingly gay quality of the culture... they simultaneously highlight their commonalities while challenging the stereotypes. (2005: 196–97; see also Riggs 2007).

Queer border-theorists do acknowledge and understand the seductiveness of how assimilating to hetero-normative constructions of family certainly alleviates some of the surveillance and scrutinisation both real and panopticonically imagined by gay and lesbian individuals, families and communities. As queer and gender studies researcher and activist Sue Kentlyn explains, queer family lives are lived within their ‘queer’ homes as a ‘safe space’ and simultaneously a ‘scrutinised space’:

[The] private space of the queer home can be seen to embody the tension between a safe space to be queer in, but also a place where the subversive performance of gender, sexuality and family comes under scrutiny (2008: 327–28).

However, this sense of being constantly under surveillance is also shared, indeed sometimes more strongly felt, by ‘queerly mixed’ families who are excluded from the same-sex marriage movement:

I am sick of looking over my shoulder. I am sick of being afraid to call an ambulance or talk to a policeman or anything like that for fear of coming under the public eye. I am sick of worrying whether or not the parents of my children’s playmates know the score. Certainly it’s none of their business, but if it became obvious, will we have to cope with our children having friends taken away without understanding why?

—(Nina, bisexual-polyamorous mum)

What queer border-theorists are asking for is an acknowledgment of and engagement with one of the costs to queer communities and cultures of designing a relationship and family that has a greater chance of inclusion into the socially ascribed norms of hetero-normative marital monogamism: the
construction of internal hierarchies. They are asking that the following
questions be debated openly and collaboratively:

- do gays and lesbians ally themselves with the heteronormating
marital coupledom, in opposition to bisexuals and polyfamilies,
thereby climbing a few more steps in order to gain legal, political, and
socioeconomic rewards; or,

- do they ally with the ‘deviant’ bisexuals and polyfamilies and thereby
experience even more stigmatisation, policing, and the refusal (or at
best, delaying) of the dominant group to grant mainstreaming
rewards?

This either/or dilemma is presented with sinister eloquence in the following by
the writer Mary Meigs:

The worst aspect of passing— that you become what you imitate, and
that disdain for your own kind, the member of your own kind who is
too conspicuous or too courageous to try to pass, enters into your heart
and you become a traitor, denying like Peter when the moment comes
to declare your real allegiance, or keeping silent ... We were like mice
that have been brought up with cats and are not eaten. First we enjoyed
the luxury of not being eaten; then we became cats ourselves and were
stricken with terror at the idea that we would be taken for mice, that the
us in us showed. In some cases, some of us became more ferocious
toward mice than cats in order to show that there was no mouse in us.
The less extreme simply adapted so perfectly and felt so comfortable,
that they saw no reason for changing ... [and] gratefully accepted our
position in society as honorary cats and took our nourishment from the
masters ... to eat cat food. (1983: 32–33).

The ‘multiple within’, ‘queerly mixed’ border realities, or the existence of
‘edge identities’ (Bersten 2008) call for the following questions to be addressed
in relation to advocating and lobbying for same-sex marriage rights:

- how does one use the word ‘community’ without meaning
homogeneity; and where and how are the boundarics of exclusion
and inclusion of a community drawn?

- how do we construct a supportive ‘community’ and an effective
‘identity politics’ without collapsing membership into an
inclusion/exclusion paradox?

- is it possible to accommodate for internal difference and maintain the
cohesion and coalitions necessary to undertake political, legal and
sociocultural struggles?
Thus, whether the goal of a community is to either assist individuals in conforming to more normative behaviour or to challenge the expectations of emulation of a hostile society, difficulties and contradictions will manifest themselves within that community in relation to how it will present itself to the wider society and how it will deal with internal differences. The sociologist Goffman (1973) uses the phrase ‘concern with in-group purification’ to describe the efforts of stigmatised persons to ‘normify’ their own conduct and also clean up the conduct of ‘others’ in the group (see also Petrella 2007). As critical theorist Giroux writes, identity politics enabled many formerly silenced and displaced groups to emerge from the margins of power and dominant culture to reassert and reclaim suppressed identities and experiences; but in doing so, they often substituted one master narrative for another, invoked a politics of separativism, and suppressed differences within their own ‘liberatory’ narratives (1993: 3).

Educational philosopher Nicholas Burbules (1997) calls for a model of diversity rather than difference. In other words, considering each group’s oppression as unified, homogenous, and distinct fails to accommodate the similarities, overlaps, and diversity of oppressions of different groups, and falsely represents the situation of all group members within one group as either completely the same or completely different. This is very pertinent to the debates about same-sex marriage: how broad, optional, and multi-definitional does the meaning of marriage need to become to accommodate the various relationship permutations within queer communities?

Postcolonial feminist academic, Yuval-Davis (1994), puts forward the idea of ‘transversal politics’ which recognises the specific positionings of those who participate in a community as well as the ‘unfinished knowledge’ that each such situated positioning can offer. Hence, identity politics is not an end in itself; it is a precursor to further, more broadbased and hence more effective, activity (Adams 1989: 26). This is a framework that constructs ‘community’ and ‘identity politics’ as strategic tools and sites of arrivals for queer border travellers in preparation for future departures. Communities are not meant to be fixed and homogenising entities and constructs that restrict further journeys. Thus, a positive engagement with the ‘slippery slope theory’ suggests that the achievement of one social and legislative change, such as allowing same-sex couples to marry, must undertake to open the doors for other social justice rights and changes, such as allowing people to marry more than one other person. Interestingly, as presented earlier, this is exactly what objectors to gay marriage are foregrounding and fearfully predicting will occur (Kurtz 2006).
Thus, ‘models of diversity’ and ‘transversal politics’ are two theoretical tools for getting beyond and bordering wider societal ascriptions and community identity politics in the same-sex marriage rights movement. In the work of postcolonial lesbian-feminist writer and activist Gloria Anzaldua (1987a; 1987b; 1989), the border zone becomes the site of much activity, agency, resistance, and creativity. Anzaldua utilises the term *nepantla* to theorise liminality (in Anzaldua & Keating, 2002: 1). ‘Nepantla’ is a zone of possibility, an in-between place of constant transition:

Nepantla is the site of transformation, the place where different perspectives come into conflict and where you question the basic ideas, tenets, and identities inherited from your family, your education, and your different cultures (2002: 547–48).

Thus, Anzaldua’s work is pertinent to queer border discussions re ‘queerly mixed’ relationships, for it is about multiple divisions, and the borderland itself is a place of creative hybridity, reflection, and transcendence where one can find ‘an overlay of codes, a multiplicity of culturally inscribed subject positions, a displacement of normative reference codes, and a polyvalent assemblage of new cultural meanings’ (McLaren 1993: 121).

Border theories teach that there is always an excess, a supplement beyond fixed and normative poles that can never be subsumed. ‘Queerly mixed’ persons and their relationships and families are seen as the excess that cannot be fixed and incorporated (Derrida 1981; Burbules 1997):

... a sort of overrun [débordement] that spoils all those boundaries and divisions and forces us to extend the accredited concept... [but] it still will have come as a shock, producing endless efforts to dam up, resist, rebuild the old partitions, to blame what could no longer be thought without confusion, to blame difference as wrongful confusion! (Derrida, in Kamuf 1991: 256–57).

The sociologist, Zygmunt Bauman, uses the Derridean definition of the ‘undecidable’ to represent any identity that ‘calls the bluff of the opposition’ between mainstream and marginal (1990: 145):

Undecidables ... brutally expose the fragility of a most secure of separations. They bring the outside into the inside, and poison the comfort of order with suspicion of chaos (Bauman 1990: 146).

These metaphors of impure ‘undecidables’ aptly apply to ‘queerly mixed’ families:

They are that third element which should not be. The true hybrids, the monsters: not just unclassified, but unclassifiable ... They question oppositions as such, the very principle of the opposition, the plausibility
of dichotomy ... They unmask the brittle artificiality of division (Bauman 1990: 148–49).

The following research participant is an example of these theories of ‘excess’ and ‘undecideability’:

There’s too much of me ... I can’t fit into a Tupperware plastic version of a married wife and mother. I’m not a tidy meal sealed in plastic. I leak, I ooze out, I’m a messy mixture.

—Naomi, hetero-poly mum with one hetero-monogamous male and one bi-polymorous male partner

Indeed, it is only through polluting existing and residual ‘Tupperware plastic versions’ of marital and familial systems and structures that emerging systems and structures can evolve. It is via ‘messy mixtures’ and their noncompliance, innovation, and resistance to the dominant, ‘sealed in plastic’ worlds, that far-reaching, empowering political, social, and legal outcomes are initiated. From the queer borders, we can articulate, envision and strategise for this.

‘Debordement’ and ‘Messy Mixtures’: Bordering the ‘residual’ and the ‘emergent’

The social and cultural worlds will always be shaped by combinations of the residual and the new and by competition between the emergent and what has always been. (Carrington 2001: 195)

The queer border-discussions in this essay regarding ‘queerly-mixed’ relationships and families as ‘nepantlas and undecideables’ have demonstrated that the reality of contemporary social relationships and identifications for many families are not dichotomous, but rather fluid and multiple, and require engagements with models of diversity and ‘transversal politics’ that do not demand either assimilating to hetero-mono-normative social ascriptions, nor adhering to the identity politics of a minority community. As Anzaldúa explains:

It’s easier to remain in entrenched systems and erect defenses to keep out new ideas. Or we can learn to navigate through the whirlwinds ... Having become aware of the fictions and fissures in our belief systems, we perceive the cracks between the different worlds, the holes in reality ... Living in the midst of different vortexes makes it hard for us to make sense of the chaos and put the pieces together. But it is in the cracks between worlds and realities where changes and consciousness can occur. In this shifting place of transitions, we morph, adapt to new cultural realities. (In Keating 2000: 279–80)
My personal reflections, theoretical debates and empirical research demonstrate the limitations, oppressions, and silencing of realities inherent in the ways both powerful mainstream ‘residualist’, hetero-normative, and monogamist groups, and power-challenging marginal homo-normative groups, have utilised bifurcating strategies to homogenise, categorise, and scissor the lives of so many ‘emergent’ relationships and families in our communities. The pathway through these discourses lies in the constitution of multi-placed, border-dwelling persons, and in the acknowledgment and understanding of ‘emergent’ sexualities and families:

Subversion of the past, emergence of the future; two sides of the same undertaking. On one side, ideas, values and institutions that become outdated and constantly have to be readjusted and reformulated. On the other side, lifestyles, relationship modes, expressions and languages ceaselessly appearing and which must be given a place ... the ‘something new’ constantly, indefinitely recreating itself. Unpredictable, just like the continuous flow of humans commingling ... with the resulting emergence ... of a wide variety of societies and cultures. (Audinert 2004: 140, 147)

Polyamorous and mixed-orientation individuals, relationships and communities are creating and locating space beyond the prescribed normative orders and binary conflicts regarding ‘couple citizenship’ (Raj 2011). Their experiences and self-ascribed identities illustrate that shifting, flexible boundaries are real and not necessarily problematic. Indeed, they are increasingly asking why their sexualities and families are problematised or ignored in the marriage rights movement, calling for a deconstructive recognition and analysis of ‘residual’ marital boundaries, their strategic usefulness as well as their potential destructiveness. They want to know why the illusory and damaging ‘mainstream’ socio-cultural, educational, economic, religious and legal discourses in relation to marriage, sexuality and family are not being queerly challenged. Discursive strategies are required that interrogate and disrupt the constraints of these traditional paradigms as well as expand current paradigms in relation to same-sex families which may also be blocking the ‘emergent’ via prohibition and disavowal of what the marriage movement activists consider ‘taboo’ and ‘unreal’:

lesbian and gay ... reform is neither neutral nor inconsequential. Such efforts must also be scrutinized, since ideology inheres in the various strategies of implementation (Irvine 2001: 251).

From the queer border and its advantages of multiple perspectives, we ask the same-sex marriage rights movement to continue its campaign for
acknowledgment, and simultaneously acknowledge its complicity and silencing of ‘queerly mixed’ relationship and family diversity; and to engage in discussions about its motivations, strategies and plans. Indeed, some renowned gay activists, such as Peter Tatchell, are challenging the hetero-assimilationist ‘residualism’ of gay and lesbian incorporation and participation into hetero-dominated structures and institutions such as marriage:

We have now reached a situation where the dominant gay agenda is equal rights and law reform, rather than queer emancipation and the transformation of society ... Equal rights for lesbians and gay men inevitably means parity on straight terms, within a pre-existing framework of values, laws and institutions ... This nouveau gay reformism involves the abandonment of any critical perspective on straight culture. In place of a healthy skepticism towards the heterosexual consensus, it substitutes naïve acquiescence. Discernment is abandoned in favor of compliance ... They are straight minds trapped in queer bodies. Accepting society as it is, these hetero homos want nothing more than their cosy place in the straight sun. (Tatchell 2002: 9).

Constructing coalitions, creating inclusive social movements, and building bridges are required ‘at the crossroads of various social justice issues that affect people across the range of nationality, race, class, (dis)ability, age, gender and sexual identities’, and must include the ‘questioning and reconceptualizing [of] relationship and families’ and ‘engage all of us in creating sustainable relationships, families and communities’ (Noel 2006: 616–17; see also Anderlini-D’Onofrio 2009). Undoubtedly, the inclusion of bisexuality, multisexual families, and polyamory into relationship and family diversity laws and culture will be initially disruptive. After all, the ‘emergent’, such as same-sex marriage activists actually once were, pollute with their ‘too many truths’ and realities that ‘mess up the filing cabinet’ of residual structures, systems and cultures. As educational researchers Epstein and Johnson write, ‘it may be that certain elements of sexual life or discourse ... constitute such a ‘pre-emergence’ or ‘that dangerous supplement’ which has the potential to transform the whole field’ (1998: 192). As queer border researchers, we need to consider how our research that informs activism and legislation, policy and practice, engages with relationship diversity, or does it acquiesce and accept the dichotomous ‘couples cabinet’ framework/shelving? (Roseneil & Budgeon 2004)

So, after this article’s journey through my personal, activist and academic border-ruminations, protestations and affirmations, I can say that being on the queer borders of the same-sex marriage movement debate allows for celebration
and contestation, recognition and remonstration. I can push for same-sex couple marriages and push the same-sex couple marriage lobbyists to include ‘queerly mixed’ marriages, and push for the right not to do marriage, regardless of coupledom, multipartnering, genders or sexualities. Ultimately, I situate myself alongside Melinda Paras, who, as the then executive director of the United States National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF), said some time ago: ‘By the time equality finally gets won universally, we will be in a whole other place about the definition of family, and gay marriage may become almost irrelevant’ (in Findlen 1995: 23). We haven’t got there yet, and the processes and shifts required to affirm the most basic human rights, such as the right to define and choose one’s relationship and family formation, remain painstakingly slow despite the enormous amount of energy and effort. Meanwhile, a fundamental reality remains unchanged and yet requiring reminding, both within and on the borders of the ‘residual’ and the ‘emergent’, as the historian and sociologist Jeffrey Weeks stated:

Desire is multi-faceted, contradictory, subversive: its inevitable social organization requires that we are engaged in a continuous conversation about both its possibilities and limits (1995: 50).

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