

**The “New-Queer” Family:  
An Investigation of Queer Family Values on Stage: 1964-2011**

**An honors thesis for the Department of Drama & Dance**

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*For everyone who celebrates the many kinds of "family."*

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## **Prologue: How I Got Here**

During the summer of 2011, I had the pleasure and privilege of working for the City of Chicago's Commission on Human Relations. Specifically, I worked for their Advisory Council on Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Issues. I was assigned several tasks over the course of the summer that related to Illinois' new civil unions legislation, which allowed civil unions to start being performed on June 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2011. The first of my tasks was to attend an anti civil unions rally, being staged a few days before the law went into effect. I was assigned to observe of how many people attended the rally, how many people formed the inevitable counter protest, and how many police showed up.

I was much more affected by the protest than I had been prepared for. I had expected the hymns. I had expected the signs with slogans such as "No Gay 'Marriage' ." I had expected it to be sponsored by groups with names such as "Americans for Life," "The American Society for the Defense of Tradition, Family, and Property," and the "Americans for Truth About Homosexuality."<sup>1</sup> What I had not expected was that a law designed to grant such things as hospital visitation and inheritance rights to queer people (not even full marriage rights) could elicit such virulent reactions. I was even more surprised when several men stood and gave the Nazi salute without being shunned or asked to leave. Out of grim fascination, I lingered a little longer than required by my boss, and later reported back to the office. His response was that what I had witnessed was pretty standard.

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<sup>1</sup> AFTAH, it should be noted, is designated as a hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center

A few days after this, the City of Chicago held a large civil unions ceremony for thirty couples in Millennium Park. I was responsible for organizing the volunteers at this event. Couples brought their children, friends, and family, and I remember talking to one lesbian couple who had just received their Civil Union. They spoke specifically about how happy they were that their family was finally being recognized. This really hit home. For some time, I had thought that the push for marriage equality was problematic. To me, it seemed to be a sort of push to be included in heterosexuality, to assimilate into a system that I wasn't necessarily thrilled to join. But the civil unions ceremonies really brought the issue of family in a queer context to my attention.

A little later that summer, I attended the opening of the Chicago History Museum's "Out In Chicago" exhibit. In one part of the exhibit, there was a mock living room with a television in the fireplace. The television was playing short profiles on different kinds of queer families. Instead of only including profiles of long-term couples or couples with children, there were discussions of family that ranged from ballroom culture to discussions of the leather community.<sup>2</sup> I connected with a comment from Chuck Renslow, a figure in the Chicago leather community, discussing his polyamorous household: "I consider them all family. They considered it also. Just 'cause you're gay doesn't mean you can't be in a family. You have to make your own division of family" (Out in Chicago).

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<sup>2</sup> The surrogate family ballroom houses were one of the first forms of queer family I thought about, but couldn't find any theatrical writing about them. For an introduction to ballroom culture, the movie *Paris is Burning* provides a very good starting point.

## **Introduction: Family Values**

It's no coincidence that the word "family" is political these days, especially in the United States and England, where a heated national debate on same-sex marriage is being held. In these discussions, the term "family values" is bandied about quite often. Many purport to have them, but few can define just what they entail. In a conservative cultural narrative, the term implies a wholesome quality, a non-threatening 1950s ethos that recalls a time when men were men, women were women, and the "darker" sides of humanity stayed where they "belonged." Since the contrivance of the conservative definition of "family values" in the 1980s, the United States has hardly experienced an election cycle where these "values" were not being discussed. Organizations such as the American Family Association, Focus on the Family, and the Family Research Council seek to preserve "traditional" family values. Many organizations and politicians in the "family values" camp apply the term "family" in a strict nuclear and heterosexual sense. An ideal "family" is also likely to be a Christian family with legally married parents and at least one child.

At the same time, there is an opposing narrative in this domestic culture war. While conservative groups attempt to limit, or "preserve," the definition of family, progressive groups seek to expand it. The marriage equality movement seeks to expand definitions of marriage to include same-sex couples. Popular entertainment has also taken notice of this expansion. Movies and television shows such as *The Kids Are All Right* (2010) and ABC's *Modern Family* (2009 - ) feature queer families in leading roles. Musicals such as *La Cage Aux Folles* (1983) are revived, and new queer work is gaining footholds in New York and across the country. Plays such as

*Next Fall* (2009), *Standing on Ceremony: The Gay Marriage Plays* (2011), and *The Kid* (2009) are just a few to discuss queer families. *Kids* won several Golden Globes, and *Modern Family* has been the winner of the Emmy for Outstanding Comedy twice. Granted, these are industry awards, given by organizations that may generally be considered liberal, but how did we get here? Same-sex couples did not suddenly appear in the United States' cultural narrative in 2004, when same-sex marriage was legalized in Massachusetts. And although the term "modern" in ABC's sitcom title may imply certain newness to the same-sex family, it does not mean that these families did not exist before whatever the "modern" day is.

I'm then left with some questions: *Since there is a dominant cultural narrative of "family values," what about LGBT and queer individuals and families? Is there a queer answer to the Reaganite battle-axe of Conservative Family Values? And if so, where are these values being discussed? What forms do queer families take? Are there examples on stage of families like Chuck Renslow's leather family? Or do these depictions stick mostly palatable forms of family?*

Before proceeding, it will be necessary to define for the reader some terms that will be used heavily throughout the course of this paper. In this paper, "queer" will be used in the sense of "counter-normative," but especially "counter-heteronormative," a definition with widespread academic use. It will include the categories of gay, lesbian, same-sex, transsexual, transvestite, polyamorous, as well as sexual orientation and gender-oriented subcultures generally considered to run counter to societal norms.

“Family” will also have a rather loose definition in this paper, primarily because the very definition of family and the creation of a “family” narrative for queer people are under investigation. It will cover anything from long-term same-sex couples to same-sex families with children. For the purpose of this paper, however, the “family” does not need to be a permanent entity, nor does it especially need to include children. “Family” will cover groups that do not fit conventional definitions, such as single-parent homes, as well as other forms of “family,” such as close friend groups. This association is made especially rich by the LGBT slang term “family,” generally a term used to discreetly confirm that a person is LGBT. This is a sort of tribalism that seems prevalent in LGBT work, an “us vs. them” mentality that seeks to harbor LGBT people in their mutual exclusion from other spheres. There are few consistent factors in this use of the term “family,” but it will involve at a basic level, commitment, from two or more partners or participants, and will usually, but not always, be based on romantic love. It may be based on a sort of peer-love or filial-parental-love; since there is more to family than solely romantic partnership that potentially results in offspring. It is a unit held together primarily by love and commitment, as well as common goals and mutual dependence, economic advantage, safety, and even convenience.

“Family Values,” finally, will be used to express general childrearing and relationship-related mores. I will try to qualify the term, e.g. “queer family values” or “conservative/traditional family values.” Those, respectively, would mean, “family values counter to heteronormative values; valuing, or praising non-heteronormative models” and “family values as expressed by those with ideologies based in

'tradition', 'religion', etc." I do not mean to imply that "queer" and "conservative" are mutually exclusive, but only that they often appear on opposite ends of the political spectrum in national conversations.

This paper will seek to examine queer ideas of family in the context of theatre from the 1960s to the present. Theatre is a relevant context in which to examine the ideas of queer family for several reasons. First, the theatre is a place to express both political and social aspirations. So-called "problem plays" present social issues that are usually resolved in some way by the end of the play. These can be valuable expressions of desires on the part of the playwright or company producing the work. The work itself can also function as a reflection of the various mores of those involved. In this way, a dialogue between playwright, company, and audience is created. Theatre becomes a sounding board for cultural debate. I would like to see which, if any, ideas of queer family arise in queer drama from the 1960's until the present. I would also like to investigate the manners in which these families are discussed and/or negotiated on stage.

Queer history has passed through several phases since the 1960's, from a hazy, ill-defined "pre-Stonewall" period to "gay liberation" to the AIDS crisis, to the post-AIDS "queer" moment, and the contemporary refocusing (which some would call "hijacking") on the politics of marriage equality. Along this timeline, there has been a marked increase in for gay and lesbian people in the United States and England. This paper will focus on seven plays across that half-century. It will explore early incarnations of queer families and see what ideas and models they present.

It is my suspicion that upon investigation of plays of the early “gay moment” and the vastly different current “LGBT moment,” one can discover various family narratives in competition. There are narratives advancing that same-sex families are identical to those of straight families; that is to say, perfectly in lockstep with conservative “family values,” apart from the fact that the two adult participants are of the same gender. Other narratives tout the fact that queer families are inherently different and can never be separated from this difference and their marginalized experience. The investigation of these narratives will help broaden understanding of what “family” has meant to queer people in the past fifty years and how certain narratives have been subsumed into or even airbrushed out of the debate over a nuclear and heterosexually-inspired “marriage equality.”

It should also be mentioned that the scope of this paper is limited entirely to plays written in English, most of which were written by authors from the United States. This is because the goal of this paper is primarily to examine the concept of queer family within a US context, although I have found important and interesting examples, which merited inclusion, from an English context as well. The place of these plays within a history of LGBTQ theatre in the English-speaking world is what interests me. The US context, and to some extent the English, is also made more interesting when plays are examined in groups that grant a wider view of opinions, especially in light of contemporary pushes for marriage equality, which exists in some US States and in the UK as civil partnerships.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> At the time this paper was written, the following US States allow same-sex marriage: Washington, Iowa, New York, Maryland, Massachusetts, Connecticut,

Thus, by investigating “queer families,” this paper will also be concerned with what makes a family “queer” or counter-normative, especially in its historical context. It will also endeavor to investigate models and tropes in the plays under investigation by looking at consistent family/relationship types. What makes a so-called “family” “queer” in the 1960s? What makes it “queer” in the new millennium? How do current social trends, such as widespread approval and advocacy for same-sex marriage, alter definitions of what is perceived as “queer”? Since “Marriage Equality” rests upon assumptions of the legal validity and equality of certain universal rights, have they ceased to be truly counter-normative? The paper shall attempt to analyze these questions and concepts through the lens of dramatic literature, and where appropriate, social and historical context will be provided by alternate media such as print, television, and film.

I will first investigate Charles Dyer’s *Staircase*, (1966), Mart Crowley’s *The Boys in the Band* (1968), and Harvey Fierstein’s *Torch Song Trilogy* (1978-79). In these plays, I will investigate early models of same sex relationships on stage. Next, I will investigate two later plays, Cherie Moraga’s *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea* (1995) and *Hijra* (2000) by Ash Kotak will explore another emerging theme, that of the queer family and exile. Finally, the last section will look at several as yet unpublished plays: *A Twist of Water* (2011), by Caitlin Montayne Parish, *The Kid Thing* (2011), by Sarah Gubbins, and *Standing on Ceremony: The Gay Marriage Plays* (2011), a series of ten-minute plays by multiple authors.

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Vermont, New Hampshire, as well as the District of Columbia. Civil unions are allowed in Illinois, New Jersey, Delaware, and Rhode Island.

## **Chapter 1: The Early Years & Standard Models, *Staircase*, *Boys in the Band*, and *Torch Song Trilogy***

### ***Staircase and the “Long Term Relationship” Model***

The erosion of taboos surrounding homosexuality, at least in the Anglophone West, was a slow process. In many places, it is not entirely complete. In the early twentieth century, social institutions in both the United States and England went so far as to censor discussions of all material that was deemed inappropriate, especially homosexuality.

One such institution in England was the Lord Chamberlain’s Office. The Lord Chamberlain’s Office was a branch of the English Government responsible for censoring drama, and had a strong hand in shaping content that reached audiences through plays. By the 1960s the power of the Office, notorious for moralistic censorship, was eroding. But it still had the ability to prevent certain plays from reaching the stage. Due to sexually “inappropriate” themes, it denied a license to John Osborne’s *A Patriot for Me*, which the Royal Court Theatre in London put on in 1965 (Chambers 142). The Royal Court was forced to convert itself to a private club in order to present the play, which severely reduced its financial earnings.

Osborne was not the only playwright who met with opposition from the Lord Chamberlain. Charles Dyer may also have had to fight heavily with the Lord Chamberlain’s office for his play, *Staircase*, produced in 1966. Along with *A Patriot for Me*, these plays, according to Colin Chambers, former Literary Manager of the RSC:

... form a genuine acknowledgement that the formation of homosexuality in the twentieth century has been inextricably mixed up with the formation of other controversial identities – the ‘nonconformist’, the ‘pervert’, the ‘independent woman’, the ‘virile’, ‘promiscuous’, or ‘effeminate’ man. [Chambers 305]

*Staircase* was commissioned by Peter Hall for the Royal Shakespeare Company and went up at the Aldwych Theatre featuring Paul Schoefield and Patrick McGee as Charlie and Harry, two long-time lovers and barbershop owners. Its homosexual subject matter would have made it quite the target for the Lord Chamberlain’s Office (Fisher). It is unclear to what extent, if any, the blue pencil of the Lord Chamberlain’s office affected *Staircase*, but the fact that the Royal Shakespeare Company had to dance around the topic is evident in the play. With the censorship of *A Patriot for Me* only a year before *Staircase*’s production, it seems that homosexuality was still a rather taboo subject for the stage. The Lord Chamberlain’s office would not be abolished until two years later, in 1968 (Etienne 331).

Also striking are the legal implications of the relationship between Charlie and Harry, as well as Charlie’s tendency to dress in drag. The play is never sexually explicit, but part of the crux of the drama is that Charlie is being summoned on charges of parading “in female attire” and encouraging “depravity” (Dyer 14). These were very real scenarios for gay men in England in the 1950s and early 1960s.<sup>4</sup> The audience also discovers partway through the play that Charlie has spent time in prison. In these ways, the play provides a realistic jumping-off point in terms of its overall mood.

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<sup>4</sup> Additionally, the decriminalization of consensual male-male sex in England would not come until 1967.

The plot of *Staircase* revolves around Harry and Charlie, who own and operate a barbershop and reside upstairs. Charlie is a part-time, and mostly washed up, actor who has a daughter named Cassy from a former marriage. Cassy is supposedly on her way to visit, and Charlie refuses to let Harry meet her. Charlie has not seen her in twenty years, and is ashamed both of his homosexuality, and of Harry. Harry is alone but for Charlie and his mother. The core of the drama is an envelope, which arrives bearing the news that Charlie is being called before a judge for charges involving cross-dressing and propositioning a Police Officer; this is reminiscent of older tales of blackmail, a typical early gay trope in film and theatre<sup>5</sup>. By the end of the play, Charlie and Harry have made peace, and Charlie has agreed to let Harry meet Cassy.

Charles Dyer's *Staircase* is a good place to begin an investigation of gay relationships onstage because it is an early example of family and long-term gay companionship onstage and it brings up several themes and tropes that will recur repeatedly. It contains a basic "type" of gay relationship, the "long term couple," in addition to illustrating the constantly unstable interaction between heterosexual nuclear "family" and queer "family," as well as discussing invisible children.

Relevant to the play's family dynamics is *The Montreal Gazette's* description of the relationship, from a review of the original production: "In *Staircase*, Schofield plays Charles Dyer (given the author's name to reduce the possibility of lawsuits, apparently), the dominating, self-centered wife of a 20-year-old male marriage"

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<sup>5</sup> A notable example is include *Anders als die Andern* (1919), and there is good discussion of blackmail as trope in the introduction to Laurence Senelick's *Lovesick: Modernist Plays of Same-Sex Love, 1895-1925*.

(Leiner 8). The use of “wife” seems to be a particularly deprecating choice, meant to gender the relationship and demean woman and homosexuals all at once. The reviewer uses “wife” and “male marriage” to reinforce the impossibility that, according to the conventional social mores of the time, what Charlie and Harry have could be called a family.

But the relationship between Harry and Charlie is, at face value, a standard “type” of gay relationship that could constitute a “queer family.” This, of course, would be a rather elementary type that might be called simply the “long-term couple.” This could be what the *Gazette* refers to as “male marriage.” This type of relationship will show up time and time again in gay theatre and seems a preoccupation of many gay writers. It will not be until later that there are many references to same-sex marriages or “families.” At the beginning, it seems much more common that if a gay character is searching for love, he is either hopelessly promiscuous, or he is just looking for one person to settle down with peacefully. In *Staircase*, the relationship of Harry and Charlie is illustrative of this “long-term couple” type. Although two issues complicate it — one of which is somewhat of a trope, and one of which is a device that seems quite unique to *Staircase*. These are, respectively, the trope of the child of previous heterosexual union, and the possible non-existence of either Charlie or Harry.

The other recurring concept introduced in this play is one that will run through the course of this project. That concept is the collision of the heterosexual family and the queer family. The two “families” exchange models and ideas, reflect each other and often disturb each other’s equilibriums. For instance, in *Staircase*, the

event of Charlie's daughter's imminent visit causes a disruption in the two men's relationship. She never appears, and may not even exist (to be discussed a bit later) but nevertheless, she is an important symbol of the collision of nuclear and queer family. As a remnant of Charlie's former marriage, his daughter serves as a sort of potential savior of Charlie as proof of his once-"heterosexual" status; she is a daughter-beard. He seeks to prove his own heterosexuality through her. While Harry and Charlie are arguing over Charlie's court summons, Charlie exclaims about himself: "I was married, mate. That's me. Nothing puffy with me, mate. *I'm normal. I was married with a baby*" (Dyer 16). Charlie's plans to get around his charges depend on the denial of his own gay relationship. When Harry offers to attend the hearing with Charlie, he is rebuked: "You! Come with me? God no, they'd give me thirty years" (17). Instead, their hopes are later fancifully pinned to Charlie's daughter, "...if she turned out to be a wowzer, Harry. You know, mate: a real lush babe. And I could say *That is mine! I made that!*" (33). In the end, though, Charlie's marriage was "ruined" by drag habits (40).<sup>6</sup> Charlie's former family is a point of contention between the two lovers, but it is this very family that can save Charlie, and by extension Harry.

Harry also has an interesting moment of privileging the straight family over his own. He tells Charlie about a white lie that became a habit with a shop clerk down the way: "Oh, I loved it. Loved having a wife. ... It made me belong; like a

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<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that there is a slight conflation of drag and cross-dressing in this play that is difficult to parse. Harry calls it, cut and dry, "drag" (14), and Charlie relates the police telling him he was "m-masquerading as a woman" (40). Cross-dressing and drag outside of theatrical performance would have been illegal at this time, but it's likely that given Charlie's theatrical history, he may have been playing at a "dame" part. For more on this, see Senelick's *The Changing Room*.

parson in swim trunks getting a slap on the back” (41). So ultimately, both of these men view the straight family as superior to their own and more valuable. The gay dramatic milestones of the 1960s are often steeped in an atmosphere of self-hatred and violent shame. This will also be one of the key issues two years After *Staircase* in New York when *Boys in the Band* premieres. The shame that runs through these plays produces intense mental fatigue for all characters involved.

Another complication to *Staircase* is an author’s note after the text. The note reads, in part: “So it *could* be just Charlie in a grubby little barber shop. No Harry! And perhaps in that Case, that Incident, exists only in Charlie’s mind. ... Or maybe it’s just Harry; and no Charlie! But whatever the truth, this is a story of deep loneliness” (47). This quotation could either complicate or edify one’s reading of *Staircase*. In the case that the play is indeed a psycho-drama instead of a reality, the reader is left with the possibility that Charlie (or Harry) is confronting a shadow, and that no family exists at all. It may all be a Freudian dream, an attempt at wish fulfillment in a manifestly deranged sense – long-repressed homosexual desires bubbling to the surface. This is perhaps a more compelling reading for Charlie than for Harry, as it would make Charlie into a person of remarkably ambiguous sexuality.

However, if one focuses instead on the second part of the author’s note, the insistence that “whatever the truth, this is a story of deep loneliness,” then one can see that the relationship between these two men is a vastly unsatisfying one. That is, if one hasn’t seen this already from the course of the play itself. *Staircase*, which premiered in 1966, is written somewhat in the mode of an explosively popular play of 1962 – *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* There is an emphasis on rather brutal

badinage, harmful grenades of wit lobbed at one's partner, attempting to break them or produce some sort of response. Some reviewers found this resemblance to be rather unfavorable (Leiner 8). The relationship is at once too toxic to sustain, but also too old of a habit to break. The members of the couple seem to need each other. Although the dialogue is somewhat less literate than Albee's classic gladiator match, it is no less emotionally barbarous. Much like in *Virginia Woolf?*, Charlie and Harry also muse about an imaginary baby. However, in *Staircase*, the imagined child in question is not necessarily a long-running game, but more an idle daydream. Charlie says: "Ah but Charlie: if you and me- you know, if we could've had a little lad of our own. All our own, to teach and cherish. Oh, I'd've loved him till he popped," and later goes on, "They wouldn't let us anyhow. Such a shame; but they wouldn't give a baby to our kind" (Dyer 31). Significant in this discussion is the inclusion of the phrase "our kind" in Harry's line. To be a homosexual at this time was to be cast out and maligned by society. One recalls the *Montreal Gazette's* insistence that the name "Charles Dyer" was used for a character in order to avoid lawsuits. Homosexuals are perceived of as pariahs, a community of ill-repute which would corrupt any child that it raises. There is an almost inherent assumption that Charlie and Harry would not be allowed to raise a baby because society is scared that the child of this "male marriage" would be as depraved as they perceive Charlie and Harry to be.

One other final kind of queer family shows up in *Staircase*. It is particularly British and apropos, given the play's impending judicial action. This is Charlie's refrain of "God help us all and Oscar Wilde" (13, 30). This exclamation, while extremely flip, also reveals Oscar Wilde's status as a gay icon, a progenitor, a saintly

family member who was in the same pickle as the protagonists. He is perhaps a patriarch of their loose “community” They see themselves as connected to Oscar Wilde, so, in the slang sense, Charlie is at least aware that he has “family.”

Although the “long term relationship” queer family model in *Staircase* is fairly straightforward, it is complicated significantly by collisions with Charlie’s own straight family, as well as by both Charlie and Harry’s complex internal feelings about their own sexualities. Both Charlie and Harry deal with self-hatred that becomes outwardly manifested in insults and cruelty. These are not happy homosexuals, but happy homosexuals would not be allowed on the stage for quite some time. Charlie and Harry present the limitations of staging gay work in England in the 1960s, and their relationship represents a sort of milestone for gay relationships on stage.

### ***Boys in the Band – Friends as Chosen “Family”***

From Charles Dyer’s *Staircase*, we move across the pond to Mart Crowley’s *The Boys in The Band* (1968), which provides another kind of queer family model: that of the close-knit friend group. In addition, the play includes an example of the “long term relationship” model. The “friends as family” model is a persistent one in queer storytelling – groups of friends become surrogate families in the face of the marginalization. Plays such as *Last Summer at Bluefish Cove* (1980), *Love! Valour! Compassion!* (1994), *The Homosexuals* (2011) and films such as *The Broken Hearts Club* (2000) become a sort of sub-cultural barometer. They seek to portray an idea of what life is like for a group of gay people, and in doing so, hope to universalize that experience. They are almost always limited in scope, due to the fact that capturing a cross-section of gay life at any moment is impossible, as there is no “standard” gay life one can present as a universal model without trivializing subjective experiences. However, these plays and films commonly approach their intended universality by trying to use a “one of every flavor” approach to their characters.

The “friends as family” model almost seems to justify the slang use of the term “family” to mean “of a gay or lesbian persuasion.” It is also interesting, perhaps, to think of these friend groups as “tribes.”<sup>7</sup> When one looks at the *dramatis personae* for *Boys in the Band*, it becomes clear that the play uses a “one of every

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<sup>7</sup> I realize that this term is potentially culturally loaded, both with colonial associations, as well as the more common colloquial Jewish use (as in “a member of the tribe”). However, it seems to be a parallel concept to that of the LGBT “family” at large.

flavor” model. It has a wide spectrum of gay men such as the über-fey Emory, the black Bernard, the Jewish Harold, the hustler Cowboy, etc. However, this is only a semblance of inclusivity. The play lacks true ethnic, racial, geographic, and economic diversity, concerning itself primarily with the woes of mostly white, middle class New York gay men. Bernard is the most interesting exception to this, due to his internalized issues with race and class. The reasons that *Boys in the Band* is valuable in the context of this paper are for its illustration of the “friends as family” model, showing again how the straight world and queer families collide, and finally, illustrating another perspective on the sexually liberal, even queer, “long term couple” model present in Hank and Larry.

*The Boys in the Band* premiered in January 1968 at the Vandam Theatre. It moved to Theater Four in April 1968, and ran for five years, picking up multiple national tours, a film, and many international productions in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It is commonly regarded as the first play to show that gay theatre could be commercially viable to straight audiences. The plot concerns a group of gay men in New York who gather for their friend Harold’s birthday party. Michael hosts the party, and the guests include Donald, Hank, Larry, Bernard, and Emory. Emory’s present to Harold is an unintelligent but beautiful hustler called Cowboy. Partway through the party, Michael’s supposedly straight college roommate, Alan, shows up after an earlier emotional breakdown on the phone with Michael. The party is something of a disaster – Alan ends up punching Emory, and Michael, who has sworn off drinking, gets drunk and forces his guests into a game whose ultimate goal is to humiliate and make everyone as miserable as himself. It should be pointed out

that if *Staircase* owes some sort of debt to Albee's 1962 *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, then *The Boys in the Band* owes an even larger one – it has a similarly cutting dialogue style, and an eleventh hour party game/plot device with destructive consequences.

This was also the era of Stanley Kauffman, the notoriously homophobic drama critic for *The New York Times*. In 1966, Kauffman wrote a now infamous article called, "Homosexual Drama And Its Disguises." The article decried the state of the American family and marriage as depicted on stage. It placed the blame on homosexual playwrights who, according to Kauffman, were forced to masquerade their own torturously unhappy lives, and thus masquerade their homosexual characters as straight and married couples and families. Kauffman wrote, supposedly of Inge, Williams, and Albee:

Because three of the most successful American playwrights of the last twenty years are (reputed) homosexuals and because their plays often treat of women and marriage, therefore, it is said, postwar American drama presents a badly distorted picture of American women, marriage, and society in general. [Kauffman 1]

Kauffman argues, in a strange way, that it is social stigma that drives this dissembling. It is an argument that desperately wants to be progressive, while still upholding unfortunate homophobic attitudes. In *Making the Boys* (2011), a retrospective documentary on the play, Crowley cites this article as one of his inspirations for writing *The Boys in the Band*.

At the time *The Boys in the Band* premiered, it was a bad lot to be gay in the United States. To be homosexual in the mid-60s could entail arrests, mental asylum visits, and/or shock treatments. Homosexuality was, at this point, still considered by

many to be a mental illness. In 1967, one year before the play was released, CBS aired a documentary program called *CBS Reports: The Homosexuals* that dissected societal opinions on homosexuality. The documentary, both praised and reviled in its own time, featured opinions from “homosexuals,” psychologists, and other “leading experts.” One psychologist in the documentary states: “The fact that somebody is homosexual, a true, obligatory homosexual, automatically rules out the possibility that he will remain happy for long, in my opinion.” However, this program does give some time to those who believe that homosexuality falls within the “normal range of deviation.” On the whole, the program is entrenched in the mores of its time, it does not aim for a progressive understanding, but it provides valuable insight into the general societal attitudes toward homosexuality at the time.

The psychologist quoted above chose his words well: happiness is a concern of the men of this play. If they are a family, they are not a happy one. They do not all like each other, they are not even all acquainted, and by the end of the play some of their relationships may have been irreparably damaged. But I include this play in this thesis partially because of its place in theatre history as “representative” of the lives of gay men in New York City in 1968. It asserts, through characters such as Michael, who seem to claim to speak for all gay men, that this state of unhappiness is universal. The gay men of this play are either stuck with each other or some other group of equally miserable gay men. And that, in a loose and non-romantic sense, makes them a family, perhaps a tribe. It is a form of family different from the other families discussed in this paper – it is not a generative or generational family, it is

not based on a monogamous relationship, but it does in the end link its members together whether they like it or not. This qualifies it as different from any other group of friends in that these men are brought together as an oppressed and unhappy group, wallowing in a collective marginalization that binds them all as social pariahs. These men are forced to wander together in search of their happiness, alleviating each other's sorrows with quips and quibbles.

Crowley makes a clear assertion in this play that these men are trapped in their unhappiness, self-pity, and self-hatred with no escape. This is one of the long-standing criticisms of the play. It was revolutionary in 1968, but after Stonewall in 1969 and the ensuing exile of the concept of shame from public gay life, the play and subsequent film became something else – a symbol of a bygone time, an irrelevant and backward era of gay history. In *Making The Boys*, this rejection is discussed at length. Organizations that formed soon after the play was released, such as the Gay Liberation Front, which came out of Stonewall, protested the film by calling it “retrograde.” San Francisco’s Mattachine Society also boycotted the film. Michael Musto, a *Village Voice* columnist and gay journalist, theorizes that this could be due to the fact that it “was after Stonewall, but still presented a pre-Stonewall mentality” (*Making the Boys*). The play has since gone in and out of vogue, with Ben Brantley’s review of a 1996 revival beginning, “It is, apparently, O.K. to like ‘The Boys in the Band’ again” (Brantley).

But the play seems quite important to its pre-Stonewall moment; Michael’s plaintive cry serves as Mart Crowley’s mouthpiece for how Crowley sees the world. Michael’s discussion of the “Christ was I drunk last night syndrome” seems to speak

for a large portion of the men in the room, Donald, Larry, and Bernard all cop to it at some point. Michael's climactic revelation of "...If we... if we could just... not hate ourselves so much. That's it, you know. If we could just *learn* not to hate ourselves quite so very much" (Crowley 90-91) is a show-stopping plea for empathy that seems both heartfelt and remarkably calculated on Crowley's part. Michael obviously means it, and Crowley, too, seems to share this sentiment. The protagonist of the play sees the need for gay men to love themselves more, and the author does as well – even trying to address them as a whole. In a time when mainstream theater pussyfooted around gay characters, and Stanley Kaufman openly lambasted "disguised" homosexual theatre, *Boys in the Band* might have seemed a battle cry, bringing the lives of gay men directly into the limelight of straight culture.

A familiar aspect of this play is the continual collision between the spheres of heterosexual family and same-sex family. In *Boys in the Band*, this occurs through the arrival of Alan. While less literal in *Boys in the Band*, this collision is still important. In any problem play dealing with homosexuality, the problem usually comes from a collision of heterosexual and homosexual norms. But this recurring confrontation is important. Alan is straight and married. The audience finds out that he has left his wife. There has been speculation as to whether or not his visit to Michael and his leaving his wife add up to his being gay. Michael certainly has his opinions on this, and has heard from a former mutual friend that this is the case. But, during the telephone game, Alan calls his wife and makes up. It is often speculated that if Alan had shown up at Michael's to come out, then he is too repulsed by what he has seen to go through with it. In a way, Alan represents "family

values.” As the only heterosexual (or unconfirmed homosexual/bisexual) in the play, he is given the burden of representing the entire straight world. In the end, if he chooses to remain in the closet, then he ultimately affirms a sort of homophobic “family values” centered on rejecting gayness in all forms in favor of maintaining the stolid veneer of a “successful American family.”

Another part of the play that relates to queer “family values” is the relationship between Hank and Larry. *The Boys in The Band* is, in part, a landmark because of its honest depictions of its characters. It does not yield to convention or sanitize their lives to make them more palatable. Hank and Larry’s rickety relationship, one of the more didactic parts of the play, seems to be a recurring plea for understanding from the audience. Hank and Larry argue about just what their relationship means. It is clear that they are in one of the longer relationships of anyone at the party, and this play’s portrayal of their earnest and honest discussion of its terms is a valuable example of discourse about what long-term same-sex relationships can mean for gay men.

Throughout the play, Hank is jealous of Larry’s infidelities. Larry is jealous of Hank’s ability to bond instantly with Alan. Although the terms of their relationship are never made specific, there is a lot of good discussion of their monogamy in Act II. They are important to the play because in the “one of everything” model common in works about groups of queer people, they serve as an example of a couple, a long-term same-sex relationship that is something beyond simply sex. Of course, Hank’s monogamous values clash with Larry’s more promiscuous values. But the climax of their relationship seems to be a speech by Larry,

...In my own way, Hank, I love you, but you have to understand that even though I do want to go on living with you, sometimes there may be others. I don't want to flaunt it in your face. If it happens, I know I'll never mention it. But if you ask me, I'll tell you. I don't want to hurt you but I won't lie to you if you want to know anything about me. [81]

This speech is a declaration of Larry's terms of the relationship. They are unconventional terms, but they go hand in hand with a declaration of commitment, though not fidelity, to Hank. It also bears mentioning that this is a pre-AIDS moment, in which fidelity is less of a clinical concern.

Again, it is the depiction of this open negotiation that makes Hank and Larry so important. But the relationship does not belong solely to Larry. Hank also has a say in it and makes declarations of his own. After all, Hank says he left his "wife and family" for Larry (77). This is interesting for two reasons. The first is Hank's choice of words. In a play that does not mince words, the application of the term "family" solely to a heterosexual unit with children is telling. It smacks of a certain sense of what a family was in 1968. Clearly, without children, Hank and Larry cannot call themselves a "family." But what is more interesting is the play's championing of Hank's decision to leave his wife for Larry. Larry complains about being portrayed as a home wrecker, but ultimately, this is unimportant. What is important is that the play shows that Hank gets a satisfaction with Larry that is far greater than that of his previous relationship. At one point in the play, Michael virulently lobs at Harold, "not all faggots bump themselves off at the end of the story" (59). Indeed, Hank and Larry make up at the end of the story. They are no happier than anyone else, but they seem to have the best chance of it based on their ultimate reconciliation.

All in all, *The Boys in the Band* serves as an important milestone in the theatre, in addition to foregrounding the “friends as family” model. The large group of men functions as a sort of surrogate family, tribe, or community, while Hank and Larry’s relationship is a much more literal examination, a sort of case study in queer family values. The representation of a gay couple struggling and striving to find solid ground to stand upon, especially in the chaotically self-loathing world that many of the “boys” live in, is an important moment. It openly acknowledges that gay relationships at this time are sometimes different from the dominant cultural narrative of generally monogamous straight relationships in important ways, and introduces a concept of the negotiation of queer values.

### ***Torch Song Trilogy – Queer Family in many forms***

From the late 1960s, we move to the late '70s and the tri-partite package known as *Torch Song Trilogy* (1978-79) by Harvey Fierstein. It would be impossible to pass by these plays if only for the amount they have to say about queer family. They also did not go unnoticed; they won awards and were, like *Staircase* and *Boys in the Band*, made into a movie by the same title. The trilogy itself is composed of the plays *The International Stud*, *Fugue in a Nursery*, and *Widows and Children First!* They were presented individually, as they were completed, from 1978 to 1979 at La Mama E.T.C in New York City. They eventually opened uptown in 1981 as a single play and transferred to Broadway in 1982, winning both the 1983 Tony for Best Play and Best Actor for Fierstein, who starred in it. The play was positively reviewed, and the review by Mel Gussow in *The New York Times*, while actively trying not to like the play too much, did observe that the play's "sociological implications are complex" (Gussow). However, the play was not universally loved. Robert Brustein, Artistic Director of the American Repertory Theatre, allegedly wrote in a notorious 1983 article in *The Nation*, that *Torch Song* won its Tony awards over the ART's " 'night Mother" due to an "AIDS sympathy vote" (Bronski 132).

The play also snagged the Best Play Drama Desk Award and then won the 1983 Playwriting award for the Dramatist's Guild. *Torch Song Trilogy* obviously struck some sort of cultural nerve, at least within the theatre industry. It could be partially due to an obsession in the United States with plays about families, as well as a fascination with the perceived seediness of drag queens, and a relatively

positive cultural moment. This was only the beginning of the AIDS crisis, and the decimation of the gay populations of New York City and the world at large was not yet underway. The plays, written in the late 70's, contain no references to the disease that was just beginning to claim the lives of homosexuals and heterosexuals alike. The tone of *Torch Song* is significantly less full of self-hated and shame than *Staircase* and *Boys in the Band*, likely owing to its post-Stonewall birth, and the unheard-of steam power of the gay civil rights movement in the 70s.

The plays of *Torch Song Trilogy* concern the life of Arnold, a Jewish drag queen in New York City. They chronicle events that center around his search for love and successful relationships. Given the title of the play, which references a type of song typically about lost or unrequited love, it is unsurprising that these are not happy and peaceful relationships. The plays' structures get more conventional over the course of the trilogy. *The International Stud* is a collection of monologues and two-character scenes, while *Fugue in a Nursery* actually attempts to mimic the structure of a fugue, and *Widows and Children First!* is a rather straight-forward, sitcom-inspired domestic drama involving the most naturalistic set and dialogue of any of the three.

The sheer length of the trilogy as a whole means that it has plenty of opportunities to go on at length about precisely what "family" means to Arnold and his off-again on-again lover, Ed. Ed, who is bisexual, is briefly married to a well-bred woman named Laurel. Of the plays so far, *Torch Song Trilogy* presents one of the lengthiest and most variable discussions of queer models of "family." An examination of the different meanings and possible meanings of "family" at different

points in Arnold's life is a valuable exercise, considering that the play made a splash when it moved from the smaller arena of La MaMa to Broadway, where it encountered a larger, and likely straighter, audience. The models and ideas put forward by *Torch Song Trilogy* reached a large number of people and bear investigation.

Fierstein has a lot to say about family, especially as the *Trilogy* progresses. To understand where Arnold is coming from, it is prudent to investigate his origins in *The International Stud*. Arnold, as listed in the character descriptions, is "twenty-four (going on forty)" and is interested in finding the right man and settling down. He possesses a world-weary, romantic air which is presented in stark contrast to the promiscuity of the gay bar scene. Arnold does not cotton to the backrooms of such bars as the eponymous "International Stud" and is in search of something more meaningful. He speaks a monologue to his perpetually invisible friend Murray, which sheds light on his feelings: "'Cause deep down in my heart I know they do not marry sluts. No, they don't, Murray. And it hurts me, Murray, it truly does to see this multitude of men so love-starved that they resort to sex in a dirty backroom instead of the way God meant us to be" (Fierstein 27).

Fierstein's words clue the reader or audience member into his, or at least Arnold's, point of view. It is almost doubly queer in that it is counter to mainstream gay culture at the time. Arnold espouses what seem to be standard heteronormative values, eschewing the promiscuity of his peers. (It is unclear, however, whether or not Fierstein is espousing views that could be called "ahead of his time," such as the desire to get married and settle down, or if he is simply too much of a romantic to

think any other way.) This is not necessarily Arnold defecting from the standard gay mores of his time; Arnold could not align himself with a straight worldview any more than he could sprout wings and fly away. It is, rather, Arnold's realization of his own unfortunate lot as a gay man in the 70s bar scene who cares about more than sex. Eventually, Arnold allows himself to succumb to the allure of the backroom, and in typical fashion, becomes emotionally attached to his encounter.

Despite this moral lapse, criticism of the promiscuous zeitgeist continues in *Fugue in a Nursery*: "Fidelity is out of fashion, / Variety is everybody's passion. / Drugs can keep you copulating till you cash in. / And when you're through they'll bury you with your wife" (99). Again, Arnold bemoans the fact that he is a hopeless romantic in the era of backrooms. He is much more focused on finding a "one" and settling down. He even dreams of having children. He discusses this with Ed in *Fugue*. When Ed asks "Who said anything about kids?" Arnold responds, "You did. Don't you remember? At the party there was that woman who arranged for gay couples to adopt." While Ed claims that this was just a fantasy, Arnold responds, "They weren't fantasies. They were possibilities" (72-73). Yet another theoretical and imaginary child makes its appearance in the gay drama. Arnold and what he wants romantically are constantly at odds with what he's being presented with. His Weltschmerz is apparent throughout *Fugue*, especially in the patronizing tone he uses with his boyfriend, Alan. Arnold often seems to be more of a father to Alan than a lover. He chides him for turning tricks, and for maintaining his modeling profession.

Arnold and Alan, however, eventually become a more serious item. When Laurel tells Arnold of her and Ed's engagement, Arnold reveals that he and Alan are also planning on getting, "As married as two men can illegally get. Actually it's more of a contract signing party" (96). However, the contract is one sentence long: "We, Arnold and Alan, being of sound mind and social-diseaseless bodies, hereby swear to take equal responsibility for walking and feeding the dog" (96). This is an interesting moment in the framework of the play. Held up against the impending legal and traditional wedding of Ed and Laurel, it's something of a joke. That these two men have argued and crafted this contract over many weeks and months and have come up with one simple sentence that boils down to a domestic form of animal husbandry is either a profoundly human moment or another punch-line in Arnold's mordant world. However, if this contract is meant in earnest, it becomes a kind of a queer marriage manifesto; the two have chosen to take their exclusion from the legal institution and instead craft their own narrative based on a realistic, if self-effacing, happy medium. This will end up being a recurring theme in the on-stage depictions of same-sex marriage.

In *The International Stud*, Arnold begins his relationship with Ed, a bisexual man with gay leanings. The relationship is up and down, and Ed's bisexuality becomes an interesting mediator between the straight family and the queer family. Ed, throughout the *Trilogy*, is involved with Arnold, then married to a woman, Laurel, then messing around with Arnold's boyfriend Alan, and eventually begging for Arnold to consider taking him back. Ed's bisexuality is a frequent sticking point in Ed and Arnold's relationship. Arnold eventually even seems to accept that Ed is

marrying Laurel and that Ed might prefer to be with Laurel. When he and Laurel are discussing marriages in *Fugue*, Arnold kindly reassures Laurel that she and Arnold “will get married and live happily ever after” (97). This is in stark opposition to Arnold’s own canine-oriented marriage vision, but it shows that by the end of *Fugue*, Arnold has made some peace with not having Ed.

So far, this discussion has included only two of the three plays in the *Trilogy*, which is partially to do with the fact that the structures of the plays vary quite a lot. Apart from their continuity of character, it is hard to believe they were ever written with being presented as one in mind. *Widows and Children First!* is the most “mainstream” of the plays, possibly because of its familiar style and its Afterschool Special overtones.<sup>8</sup> However, this is the play of the *Trilogy* that moves beyond Arnold’s endless search for the right man into a frank discussion of family and just what it can mean in a queer context.

Within *Widows and Children First!* there is no clear queer family model promoted. At the play’s outset, Arnold (now widowed) is apparently raising David, a teenage boy, while Ed, no longer married to Laurel, cooks breakfast. Eventually Arnold’s mother shows up, and the audience discovers that they have had significant parallels in their lives: raising troubled children and the loss of their spouses. Arnold is destined to be like his mother, and this echo of her strong personality means conflict. Because this play evokes living-room drama and sitcoms so well (the opening stage directions note that the set is “realistically represented” and “the set

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<sup>8</sup> The Afterschool Special was a special program on ABC from 1972-97 which aired several times a year. The episodes were various made-for-TV movies aimed at kids and teenagers, often dealing with controversial topics.

of a conventional sit-com”), the audience cannot help but think of the countless US family stories that take place in a space such as that. One has visions of quirky foibles in middle/upper middle-class (usually white) households with 2-5 children, a loving mother and father, and plenty of hijinks, ultimately ending in family togetherness and love. It’s hard to say whether purposeful integration of same-sex couples into a popular form of media is a choice that should be read as subverting or pandering to dominant narratives.

The domestic scene that opens the play is at once mysterious and familiar. The family structure has hetero-imitative aspirations; Arnold is clearly more of a “mother” than a “father.” But it is mysterious because the audience is unsure how Ed got to be the one cooking breakfast. The addition of David, the troubled foster child whom Arnold is trying to adopt, is also intriguing. It is familiar, however, in its use of what can only be described as the (somewhat queered) form of a standard family morning. Breakfast is being cooked, David is getting ready to school, Arnold fusses over David’s black eye. Arnold later comments on this dynamic towards the end of the play when he and Ed are discussing getting back together: “Five days ago you walked through the door and from that moment I’ve been playing the dutiful wife and mother to your understanding if distant father. And David? He’s been having the time of his life playing baby” (166).

Here we get to the crux of the play’s discussions on family – Ed and Arnold argue about making themselves into a family. This creation of a family unit is the essence of the queer family discussion. It seems to say: “Now. Just how do we do this?” It seems that the five years since the last play have matured Ed, while Arnold

is comfortable in his widowhood and does not see it fit to begin making a family again. Ed exclaims that what he has with Laurel is “at best a friendship, not a marriage” and he’s “almost forty” which means “it’s time for me to stop jerkin’ around. I want more than a marriage which is at best purposeless, unfulfilling, but perfectly acceptable. Now whatever you think of us, you could never describe us like that” (167). Ed is working at achieving a self-actualized queerness that embraces the fact that he cannot both lie and be happy. He is, in fact, stepping up to Arnold’s level of self-acceptance. This is something new in the plays we have seen so far. And in a way, it makes perfect sense. Before these relationships can move beyond the level of “long term couples” into creating a “family,” they must first accept that they are worthy of, equal to (or better than) their heterosexual model. Arnold, in this scene, remains hesitant: “ I don’t know, Ed. Christ, I mean, I don’t even know what this is supposed to be. I can’t exactly buy a book or study some *Reader’s Digest* article that’s gonna tell me. All I know is whatever this is, it’s not a Grade-B imitation of a heterosexual marriage” (167). While this passage is open to some degree of interpretation -- it could be a clarion call for marriage equality, a reflection on the lack of role models for queer families, or even a rallying cry for a different system of family -- it is, at the very least not without Gussow’s complex “sociological implications.”

The main drama of *Widows and Children First!* is centered around the oncoming visit of Arnold’s mother. Once again, the straight family’s intrusion into the queer family’s space causes great drama. Because of the strange time-gap between *Fugue* and *Widows*, the audience is unsure what became of Alan. It is

eventually made clear that Alan has been murdered, and Arnold is still mourning him. It is also made clear that Arnold did indeed go through with his “marriage” plans, as discussed in *Fugue*; he refers to Alan as his “husband.” (Alan’s death, while horrible and heart-wrenching, seems like a plot device to make sure that the leading man and leading man-who-dresses-as-lady end up together, and serves as a catalyst for Arnold’s climactic confrontation with Ma.)

Dramatic devices aside, much of the conflict in *Widows* comes when Arnold has to explain continually himself and his family to his mother. This is when the play reaches its most didactic point, with Arnold and Ma shouting and exploding at various times throughout her visit. This is the true collision of the straight and queer family models in *Torch Song*. Ma cannot seem to fathom Arnold’s desire to take in a child, nor that David could be gay of his own accord and not out of some dark influence. A particularly explosive moment comes in the middle of one of these fights:

You had it easy, Ma. You lost your husband in a nice clean hospital, I lost mine out there. They killed him there on the street. Twenty-three years old, laying dead on the street. Killed by a bunch of kids with baseball bats. Children. Children taught by people like you. [146]

This is another rally-cry moment of the play – perhaps the overarching message. It does more than assert the equality of the queer family, it asserts the *superiority* of the queer family, claiming it as *more than*, instead of *less than*. The love that two same-sex parents provide may be equal to the love of a male and a female, but ultimately their family is stronger, better, and more loving because of the immense hardships they must face. Additionally, Arnold accuses the heterosexual family system represented by Ma of failure. Because the youths who killed Arnold’s

husband were “taught by people like [Ma], this is an indictment of conservative and heteronormative family values at large. According to Arnold, Ma’s traditional parenting ideology can only be flawed because it breeds hatred and violence.

This, in the end, seems to be the message of *Torch Song Trilogy*. Two people who love each other can create a family. If they happen to be a same-sex couple, they will be that much stronger for the hardship. By the end of the play, Ma even manages to call David Arnold’s “son.” The queer family is accepted, by way of verbal gesture. The radio announcer dedicates a song from David to Arnold – a notably symbolic ending, but no less hopeful. The schmaltzy tone is exactly what is called for in the domestically realist sit-com world of *Widows and Children First!*

The play even manages to bring in Oscar Wilde, that patron saint of gay men, when David is reading “The Ballad of Reading Gaol” for class. Through time, these gay men are once again connected to Wilde. Wilde in *Staircase* is a joking parallel, in *Torch Song Trilogy*, he is an ancestor, perhaps father of the line of all gay men. It seems almost as if certain plays harken back to him as founding father of modern gay struggles.

*Torch Song*’s legacy is as an exploration of what it means to make a queer family. Arnold confronts the questions of how to make a family out of two men, and brings his experiences as a marginalized person, in multiple senses, to that creation. Through its three plays, the reader or audience member learns that Arnold is, if nothing else, a man with principles. He is also Fierstein’s device to show the validity of queer families. By showing that queer love and struggles are equal to, if not superior to, the struggles of straight families, Fierstein used the tools of the

marriage equality movement years before the marriage equality movement existed. In a way, it is a classic strategy, and a strategy that queer theatre has been employing for a long time. It's nothing more than humanizing queer characters and making them more accessible to wide audiences. But at the time it was released, the plays sought to normalize, or at least gain acceptance and recognition of, queer families. By making his pro-queer message more palatable, Fierstein ultimately subverts the forms that he is using.

## Chapter 2: Queer Families in Exile

The following two plays deal heavily with homosexuality and same-sex desire in contexts different from those examined so far. The first play, *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea* (1995), is a response to the exclusion of LGBT and queer people from the Chican@ political narrative.<sup>9</sup> The second, *Hijra* (2000), is a romantic comedy set in Mumbai and London, dealing with homophobia and transphobia in the Indian and Anglo-Indian expat communities. *Hijra* deals with a lot of gender ambiguity, although it is more of a drag comedy than a trans\*-comedy.<sup>10</sup> *Hungry Woman* involves a woman's struggles with exile, desire, sexuality, motherhood, race, and more. The discussions of queer family values presented in *Hijra* and *Hungry Woman* are notable because they both take place in kinds of exile. In *Hijra*, Nils lives in London, away from his Indian roots. In *Hungry Woman*, Medea and her female lover, Luna, live in Phoenix, Arizona, between the reclaimed Aztlán and the former United States, now "Gringolandia."<sup>11</sup> Both of these plays also deal with non-Anglo cultures in which homosexuality can still be very taboo. The fictionalized, though allegorical, culture portrayed in *Hungry Woman* is filled with *machismo* and

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<sup>9</sup> "Chican@" is an alternate form of "Chicano/a" or "Xicano/a," with the @ forming both of the gendered endings at once so as not to exclude individuals who are male, female, both, or neither. The Chicano movement began in the 1960s, although the organized movement for empowerment of US citizens of Mexican descent can be traced back to the 1940s. It included goals like ending segregation in schools, restoration of land grants, and farm workers' rights, among other goals.

<sup>10</sup> Trans\* is an inclusive, umbrella term. Trans\* is taken generally to mean transgender and transsexual, but also includes gender-queer and non-binary gender identities. I include it in this paper because I believe it is the best available term to talk about non-cis-gendered individuals as a group, especially since it's not necessarily productive to throw the *hijra* into limited Western categories. ("You Know You're Trans\* When...")

<sup>11</sup> More on Aztlán in the next section.

patriarchal dominance. In *Hijra*'s depiction of Indian culture, homosexuality is taboo, but can be accepted by some Indians who live expatriate lifestyles. Perhaps there is something about escape or banishment from a dominating ideology that necessitates, encourages, or at the very least allows the exploration of previously taboo subjects, such as queer family models.

So far, this paper has only explored queer family models and values associated with gay men, mostly white, and mostly of the middle class and two of the three plays originate in the United States. I do not want to fall into the trap of representing LGBT concerns and plays as those solely of white, middle-class, gay men while leaving out the voices of those of different economic backgrounds, as well as women, trans\* people, and communities of color. *Hungry Woman* and *Hijra* are personally and academically important for me to include in this thesis because I want to paint a diverse picture in this exploration of queer family values, and I can't do this within a system that doesn't try to include non-white, non-gay-male voices.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> That said, I have a limited exposure to queer Chican@ and South-Asian politics and theory. These plays fall within the scope of my academic interest in LGBT theatre, but they occur at the intersections of multiple identities with which I am less familiar academically. I want to acknowledge my privileged position while writing these sections, and have tried to create quality scholarship. I have done my best to write about these plays and their attendant issues fairly and competently, and hope that if there are errors or misrepresentations, I can be corrected about them and pushed in the right direction.

### ***The Hungry Woman: “seeking itself became home”***

For the most part, this paper has dealt with plays that are firmly grounded in realism, or at least a fictionalized, sometimes sit-com inspired version thereof. It has dealt also with problem plays, which express a social ill and undertake to cure that ill in two hours and several acts. However, the work of Cherríe Moraga will represent a brief, fantastical departure from those worlds. Her 1995 play, *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea* takes place in a highly fictionalized universe that does not reflect, but rather, resonates with our own. It seems to warn that the world of the play might be a natural conclusion of the way we deal with issues such as race, sexuality, and the rights of native cultures. But the play is subtler than that. It's not solely a cautionary tale. Catherine S. Ramírez calls the play “science fiction” because it:

can prompt us to recognize and rethink the status quo by depicting an alternative world, be it a parallel universe, distant future, or revised past. Good science fiction re-presents the present or past, albeit with a twist. It tweaks what we take to be reality of history in doing so exposes its constructiveness. [Ramírez 185-186]

Moraga herself referred to the work as “a critique and a warning in an extended metaphor” (Oliver-Rotger).

The play was commissioned by Berkeley Repertory Theatre and premiered there as a reading in 1995 (“The Hungry Woman”). Since then, there have been a handful of productions, mostly staged readings, concentrated on the West Coast.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Moraga’s website lists five productions, four of which are in California (three of those in the Bay area) and one in Seattle. These productions include:

- Staged Reading. “Plays on the Border Festival” at The Magic Theatre, San Francisco. December 4, 2000. Directed by the author.

There was a production at Stanford in 2005 with a newly revised script, which sought to remove some of the plays “Mexican”-“ness” in order for an easier literacy with a United States audience, there was also a production at Brown University in 2006 which attempted to do this (Barnes).<sup>14</sup> It is somewhat difficult to trace productions of *The Hungry Woman*, as it appears not to have been produced very often in the last seventeen years.

*The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea* is, in broad strokes, the classic tale of Medea. Many of the familiar plot points are there. Jason has betrayed Medea, she lives in exile, and she eventually commits filicide. However, many unfamiliar elements are also present. For example, the author’s note to the play states that:

The play takes place in the near future of a fictional past--one only dreamed in the Chicana imagination. An ethnic civil war has "balkanized" the United States. Medea, her lover Luna, and Medea's child Chac-Mool have been exiled to what remains of Phoenix, Arizona. Located in the border region between Gringolandia (white Amerika) and Aztlán (Chicano country), Phoenix is now a city-in-ruin, the dumping site of every kind of poison and person unwanted by its neighbors. [The Hungry Woman 1]

This is definitely not Corinth. We are introduced to Medea in a Psychiatric ward, and the tone of the play is immediately different from the Classical *Medea* narrative of either Euripides or Seneca.

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- Staged Reading. A Contemporary Theater, Seattle. May 21, 1999. Directed by Richard E. T. White.
  - Staged Reading. Brava Theater Center in San Francisco. June 10, 1997. Directed by the author.
  - Staged Reading. New Work Festival at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles. December 3, 1995. Directed by Lisa Wolpe.
  - Reading. Berkeley Repertory Theater. April 10, 1995. Directed by Tony Kelly.

<sup>14</sup> This production is regarded as a “productive failure” by the director, Patricia Ybarra, in her article *The Revolution Fails Here: Cherríe Moraga’s The Hungry Woman as a Mexican Medea*. She has a lot to say on the effectiveness of this play in production, discussing the limiting factor of its use of Mexican theatrical technique and cultural vocabulary which US audiences are not familiar with.

Medea's mother, Mama Sal, an old style *curandera* (folk healer), is present. So are Medea's girlfriend, Luna, and Luna's girlfriend, Savannah. Medea has one son, who goes by Chac-Mool.<sup>15</sup> There is also Jasón, Medea's former husband who has taken on a new bride. A chorus of Aztec dancers, the Cihuateteo, plays Savannah, Jasón, a Border Guard, and the psych ward Nurse.<sup>16 17</sup>

The play takes after Euripides' meditative *Medea*, rather than Seneca's fiercely violent *Medea*. The action floats in and out of the "present" timeline, and over the course of the play the audience gleans information about the revolution that has occurred. This revolution has reclaimed the region of Aztlán, a large swath of land comprising much of what is currently the Southwestern United States.<sup>18</sup> It

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<sup>15</sup> Names in this play are highly symbolic. Chac-Mool's birth name is Adolfo, but Medea renames him Chac-Mool, after a type of Toltec statue; often thought to be representative of a fallen warrior, he is also a messenger between the living and the gods (Emmerich 175). Medea's lover is named Luna, a name that strongly connotes femininity, complicated by her butch appearance and men's clothes.

<sup>16</sup> The Cihuateteo all represent women who have died in childbirth. In Aztec culture, childbirth was also considered a kind of battle, and so they were honored as fallen warriors (Emmerich 113). The inclusion of women into the category of warrior is important to this play is important for many reasons: Medea's role as a warrior in the revolution is one that is echoed by their presence. In having a chorus comprised of these women Moraga is reasserting the woman's place in the Chican@ narrative, and is bringing them back into a place from which they have been excluded. The Cihuateteo serve as a ghostly reminder of the place of the female in the history of the indigenous American peoples. Ybarra discusses the recurring theme of the fallen warrior in Mexican literature in *The Revolution Fails Here*.

<sup>17</sup> Something not mentioned in Moraga is that the Cihuateteo were also supposed to have been malevolent, demonic spirits who haunted crossroads to main and kill, but the exploration of this exclusion is beyond the scope of this thesis (Clendinnen).

<sup>18</sup> First introduced in the Chicano movement of the 1960s, the concept of Aztlán is as a reclaimed Chican@ homeland, located in what is currently the Southwest United States, and formerly the homeland of many indigenous peoples before being invaded by colonial powers and eventually ceded to the United States. It usually includes Texas, Arizona, California, Utah, Nevada, and at least parts of Colorado and Idaho. Depending who is invoking it, Aztlán can either be a symbolic place or an eventual nationalistic goal. In *Hungry Woman*, Moraga states that this Aztlán is in

becomes apparent that Medea fought for the revolution, which succeeded, but was kicked out when she took up a female lover. The new Aztlán has kicked out all of its queer citizens. We also discover that Chac-Mool is nearing the age of thirteen, the age when he can begin participating in a Sun Dance ceremony, which Aztlán appears to hold as an important cultural rite.<sup>19</sup> If Chac-Mool will return to Aztlán, he must do so soon. The pressure to return is high because Jasón, now the minister of culture in Aztlán, lacks native blood required to live in Aztlán and seeks to bring Chac-Mool, born of Medea's native blood, as an assurance of his position.<sup>20</sup>

Medea eventually kills Chac-Mool, poisoning him quietly on the evening before he is to return to Aztlán. She is put in the Psychiatric ward in which we first see her, and the play ends with a surreal suicide in which Chac-Mool delivers to Medea the same drugs that killed him.

This play deals with a number of issues worthy of study. It occurs at an intersection of Chicana@ desires; it deals with race, ethnicity, ethocentrism, gender, misogyny, family, sexual identity, and more. To unpack all of these issues is beyond the scope of this paper. This section will focus on *The Hungry Woman's* expression of

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"the near future of a fictional past--one only dreamed in the Chicana imagination". In other writing, she calls it "a home for the exiled heart in a country of benevolent ancestors," but decries the fact that the lived reality is different, and non-inclusive of queer Chicana@s (Moraga, *Xicana Codex* 122).

<sup>19</sup> The Sun Dance is somewhat of a catchall term for a fairly ubiquitous ceremony that is a widespread tradition among North American native cultures, especially the Plains Indians (Jorgensen 17).

<sup>20</sup> As pointed out in Ybarra: Jasón's lack of native blood, and Medea's sleeping with him to ensure the future of Chac-Mool in the border motel scene has echoes of Malinche, who was an indigenous woman who "betrayed" her people by allying with and sleeping with Hernán Cortés. This, combined with the fact that Jasón is without native blood, makes a pretty clear parallel, although Ybarra warns against judging Medea too harshly for this, she also argues that the parallel lives in such a place in the Mexican and Mexican-American cultural memory that it makes it hard not to.

and discussion of queer families. The play has many things to say about Medea's exile, desires, marriage, motherhood, the role of her child in society, and much more.<sup>21</sup> These issues and ideas are nearly all also entrenched in Chicana@ political dialogue and focused around the nucleus of the exile of queer people from Aztlán.<sup>22</sup> Moraga writes in an essay from three years before *Hungry Woman* appeared at Berkeley Rep:

Chicano lesbians and gay men do not merely seek inclusion in the Chicano nation; we seek a nation strong enough to embrace a full range of racial diversities, human sexualities, and expressions of gender. We seek a culture that can allow for the natural expression of our femaleness and maleness and our love without prejudice or punishment. In a 'queer' Aztlán, there would be no freaks, no 'others' to point one's finger at. ["Queer Aztlan" 235]

One of the most prominent themes of *The Hungry Woman* is that of exiled queerness. Due to their expulsion from Aztlán, the only place that queer people and families can exist in the world of *Hungry Woman* is outside of society, exiled from Aztlán. The concept of the "traditional" family once again finds itself at war with the queer family. Moraga writes: "Since lesbians and gay men have often been forced out of our blood families, and since our love and sexual desire are not housed within the traditional family, we are in a critical position to address those areas within our

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<sup>21</sup> Relevant to this section, but discovered too close to deadline to obtain a copy, would be Moraga's writings on lesbian motherhood in *Waiting in the Wings: Portrait of a Queer Motherhood*, published in 1997 by Firebrand books. Moraga talks about a concept relevant to this thesis, that concept of "making *familia* from scratch."

<sup>22</sup> Moraga has written extensively on this subject. It appears frequently in her writing, and her essay "Queer Aztlán: The Re-formation of the Chicano Tribe" provides an excellent history and analysis of the exclusion of queer people from the Chicano movement. The piece first appeared in 1992, and a version appeared in *Queer Cultures*, Carlin and DiGrazia, ed. Pearson, 2004. The analysis in "Queer Aztlán" is extremely hopeful. This is contrasted by the pessimism of *The Hungry Woman*, which is very much a reflection on the failure of the ideas Moraga presents in "Queer Aztlán."

cultural family that need to change" ("Queer Aztlán" 232). It is important to note that Moraga is using this fictional exile to echo the exclusion of queer people from the Chican@ movement. It is important to use the word "queer" in instance, because Medea's own queerness is something she struggles to define and accept over the course of the play. She has been in a relationship with Luna for seven years but does not call herself a lesbian. However, Luna refers to herself and her fellow Phoenix-dwellers as dykes, *jotos* (faggots), lesbians, and more. The labels and words in this play are particularly important. Medea shows a certain hesitance to label her same-sex desire. There is, perhaps, not enough discourse in the world of *The Hungry Woman* to help her define herself. If Medea is mad, in the end, it is both her struggles with her exile and her sexuality that make her so: "As a lesbian, Medea laments the dangers of homophobia in the Chicano community bound by the hegemonic limits of patriarchal and heterosexist reproductions" (Arrizón 81). So, although the narrative of the play may be highly fantastical, it is responding to contemporary issues.

Aside from Medea and her family's exile, there is another important discussion of queerness going on in *The Hungry Woman*. This is the play's dialogue on motherhood and child rearing. There are several frank discussions of Medea and Luna's relationships with Chac-Mool in which Luna and Medea's problems with same-sex parenting emerge. Early in the play, Luna asserts her love for Chac-Mool, whom she has been raising with Medea: "I always thought that if Jasón had felt even the smallest part of what I've come to feel for Chac-Mool, that he never would've let him go." (*The Hungry Woman* 10). Luna repeatedly asserts her co-motherhood of Chac-Mool, while Medea tries to deny it. When Luna calls Chac-Mool "Our son,"

Medea responds simply with “My son” (9). Luna’s “our” versus Medea’s “my” are at odds for the entire play. It’s interesting to note that Luna even refers to their relationship as a “marriage” at one point (99). In these ways, Luna is much more comfortable calling herself a lesbian than Medea. She is less concerned about her same-sex desires, and that seems to allow her to use words such as “marriage.”

This rejection by Medea to be included in the category of “lesbian mother” is made clearer when she says, discussing Jason’s potential seizure of Chac-Mool: “And our hands are left empty...you and I, childless women que chupan each other’s barren breasts?” (11)<sup>23</sup> From this, it becomes clear that Medea thinks that outside of Chac-Mool, she has very little. She seems to discount “lesbian” as a category due to her having been with Jasón. Her desires put her into a category she is unable to define, but if her son were to be removed, she would lose a large part of what identity she has built on the foundation of motherhood. When Chac-Mool is on the verge of leaving, and Medea’s identity is therefore on the verge of being shattered, she murders him (but, also, to some extent, herself). Moraga said in an interview:

A partera friend posed another possibility to me. As a woman who had worked as a nurse-mid-wife for many years among *mechicanas*, she was intimately connected with the full range of maternal instincts (both sanctioned and taboo). “Infanticide is not a homicide,” she told me, “but a suicide. A mother never completely separates from her child. She always remains a part of her children.” [Oliver-Rotger]

In addition to this bond between Medea’s motherhood and womanhood, there is a notion that Chac-Mool somehow credits Medea, making her “straighter,” something more-than-queer. Luna makes this point towards the end of Act one: “I don’t know

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<sup>23</sup> *Que chupan* = “that suck”. The word *chupar* also has the connotation of “to suckle,” and the duality of meaning vis-à-vis infants and children in this section is notable. Moraga’s use of Spanish in this play is very deliberate.

what's going on with you. It's like the thought of losing Chac... no kid between us... and we got nothing to disguise what we are to each other. Maybe for you, Chac-Mool somehow makes us less lesbian" (*The Hungry Woman* 49). This echoes, in some ways, the sentiments of Charlie vis-à-vis his own progeny in *Staircase*. Medea is ashamed of her desires and wears her son as a shield against being declared totally lesbian. Mama Sal also explains the interweaving of womanhood and motherhood to Luna, saying that when one is young, she goes from the role of daughter to that of mother, and there isn't anything in between. She then says that Luna changes that transition, because in being a lesbian, she has no motherhood phase. It is something radically different, a departure from the natural order.

This is yet another example of the queer and straight family models colliding. Mama Sal's description of the traditional mores of her "people written como los diez commandments on the metate stone from the beginning of all time" (52) implies that anything other than this model is inherently unnatural and outside standard morals. These would be the so-called "traditional family values" mentioned by Moraga in "Queer Aztlán," those of the Chicano Catholic identity, which are too large to be discussed here. These, of course, are not synonymous with the family values of the United States' white, middle class, conservative "family values." Moraga is operating within a realm of Chican@ narrative. The collision of queer and straight spheres also occurs in this play with the intrusion of Jasón into Medea's life to claim Chac-Mool. The very real and very threatening resurfacing of Jasón tears Medea's

world apart. The sphere of the straight family and the sphere of the queer family do not often co-exist peacefully in drama.<sup>24</sup>

*The Hungry Woman* also deals with children and their place in the queer family. There is a tendency to view Chac-Mool, since he does not come of age for most of the play, as a representation of the future. Medea levels charges against Jasón that he only wants Chac-Mool to come to Aztlán so that he can have an Indian blood-claim to be there, since Medea is of indigenous descent and Jasón is not. In one of their confrontations, Jasón says to Medea: “I have what I want now. Land and a future in the body of that boy. You can’t stop me” (73). In this way, Jasón is echoing a fairly established view that children are representations of the future. His ability to paternally claim Chac-Mool is also his ability to assure his own future will live through the boy. Medea, however has a counter to this. She tells Jasón that “Betrayal occurs when a boy grows into a man and sees his mother as a man for the first time. A woman. A thing. A creature to be controlled” (75). She also claims that Chac-Mool will naturally have to leave her but will do so “as a daughter does, will all the necessary wrenching, and his eyes will never see me ‘as woman’” (75). These vows indicate that Medea’s rearing of Chac-Mool by herself (and with Luna) is an inherently political act, intended to disrupt the power structures that brought on her exile in the first place. In *The Hungry Woman*, raising her child in this way allows

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<sup>24</sup> This is, of course, not the case in all queer drama. Lanford Wilson’s *Fifth of July*, aside from being almost criminally bucolic, provides a glimpse into a more peaceful world in which the protagonist, Kenneth Talley, Jr., is relatively secure and safe living with his partner. Granted, his only living relatives are his sister and his aunt, so he does not have to answer to any parental influence.

Medea to continue her own revolution in fighting against the way the patriarchy assimilates young men.

The Border Guard later repeats this notion when Chac-Mool is preparing to make his way to Aztlán for the Sundance ceremonies. A particularly meta-theatrical analysis is made of the boy: “You’re the source of conflict. You’re also the youngest one here, which means you’re the future, it’s gotta be about you. *And*, you’re the only real male in the cast” (82). These few sentences are enormously important. Chac-Mool, being the only male, almost cannot escape his destiny to join the patriarchy of Aztlán. Either he has failed to learn from her or she has failed to teach him, and so when he must leave Medea, it is not as a daughter. Medea senses his departure, perhaps also her own failure, and it could be argued that one reason for her murder is to avenge Chac-Mool’s *traición* (literally, treason). Not long before the end of the play, Chac-Mool argues that he is returning to Aztlán because in Phoenix “There’s nobody to be. No man to be” (95). Medea rightly accuses him of implying that the *tios* (uncles) she’s surrounded him with growing up aren’t men. This obsession with patriarchy, gender, gender expression, and growing up without a father or fatherland are the crux of the play. In the end, it is unimportant whether Medea has failed to educate Chac-mool or whether he has failed to learn (or simply ignored her lessons). What is important to the end of this play is that Chac-Mool has, wittingly or not, been absorbed into the cycle of betrayal that excludes queer people from Aztlán. It is these obsessions and this *traición*, this defection that lead Medea to her filicide.

*The Hungry Woman* explores queer family values within the setting of queer exclusion from Chican@ politics. T. It is remarkably important to include these

voices that are responding to specific problems outside of white, United States gay men's problems, especially because Moraga is often vocal about her exclusion from the US queer movements due to her skin color. This exclusion places Moraga's Medea outside of any homeland. The perceived failure of "Queer Aztlán" necessitates these kinds of queer responses about family. *The Hungry Woman* is an important meditation on what went wrong, and potentially provides space to move forward from that failure and keep trying. Although Ybarra points out that in the world of *The Hungry Woman*, "social justice has ceased to be a possibility," this is not necessarily so in the world outside of it.

## **Hijra: Romantic Comedy, Bollywood, and Gender Ambiguity**

So far, the search for “queer family values” has brought us from London to New York, to the near future of a fictional past, and now it will bring us to Mumbai. *Hijra* (2000) by Ash Kotak, was developed at the New London Play Festival, and was first performed in October 2000 at the Theatre Royal in Plymouth. It was later taken to the Bush Theatre in London.

The play concerns the relationship between Nils, eligible closeted bachelor of Indian parentage who lives in London, and his lover, Raj. Raj has had a different upbringing; he was raised by the Guru of a house of *hijra*, which are a type of “third gender” Indian transvestite (more on them later). At the play’s outset, Nils and his mother, Madhu, are in Mumbai for the wedding season. She is trying very hard to marry him off, even going so far as to procure a near-engagement to a girl named Sheila. But, Nils and Raj wed in secret. Nils returns to London, and Raj follows in drag with forged papers that claim he is Nils’ wife. In London, Raj poses in drag as Rani, and escapades ensue. Eventually, they are found out and Sheila’s mother is enraged. Nils has a small personal crisis about what kind of gay man he wants to be, especially after Raj begins to run a *hijra*-related business. Surprisingly, Madhu is perfectly fine with the relationship, and the play has a sort of “all’s well that ends well” ending after Nils makes a grandiose apologetic gesture by showing up at the temple at Diwali in drag and embracing Raj.

*Hijra*’s reception was mostly positive. *The Observer*, a liberal London paper, discussing a new wave of millennial playwriting and theatre, called the play “welcome” (Clapp 15). Another review pointed out the play’s “sexual radicalism”

and went to comment on the play's wishful thinking, "Nils gets his man but, quite as important to the young British and Asian audience cheering it on at the Bush, is, you sense, the sound of parental domination and the stifling ties of tradition biting the dust" ("Theatre Hijra..."). This review in particular seems to be aware of the rigid family structures and traditions present in Indian culture, commenting on the play's bitterness towards meddling mothers and arranged marriages, as well as taking note of a perceived cultural catharsis.<sup>25</sup> At the turn of the millennium, it is understandable that a play dealing with a unique subculture (to which many Londoners had not been exposed previously) with a different vocabulary of sexuality and gender identity would make a splash in London, but overall, the play is not particularly radical. It does not address caste or class differences between the likely affluent family of Nils, which could afford to school him in London and travel back and forth between India, and that of Raj, who lives on the edges of society with the *hijra* house. The play also draws easy lines between heroes and villains. Mrs. Patel and Indira represent repressive Indian social structures, and give Nils and Raj that much more favor from the audience. So although the relationship between Nils and Raj is decidedly queer and rebellious in the realm of gender, the play is more of a "rom-com" than anything else, and keeps to its Bollywood roots.

The first part of the play is set in Mumbai, where most of India's Bollywood films are produced. Stylistically, Bollywood films are often romantically driven,

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<sup>25</sup> This reviewer also seems to be somewhat shocked by the sexual content of the play, which could explain why Kotak is even listed in another article about the "In-Yer-Face" generation of playwrights as a possible exciting successor to the movement. This seems to be a comment based solely upon the sexually unusual content of the play, as it lacks the grit and gore of much of the rest of "In-Yer-Face" (Sierz).

colorful with high spectacle, and contain a certain amount of self-aware cheesiness. These are all aspects shared by *Hijra*. It is full of meddling mothers, drag monkeyshines, and plenty of innuendo. The play opens with a song, “‘*Chalte, Chalte*’ from the film ‘*Pakeezah*’ “ (Kotak 9). Additionally, “we see a lone woman dancing. Or is it a woman?” (9). This androgynous dancer is the audience’s first exposure to the *hijra*.

Hijra, “devotees of the mother goddess Bahuchara Mata, are men who live as women; many but not all are castrated, most voluntarily (though this is in dispute); a very few are hermaphrodites” (Senelick 25). They are also religious figures attributed with holy powers and the ability to bless with men and women fertility. Their presence is often necessary at events such as weddings, and they number in India between fifty thousand and a million. The hijras operate in a liminal gender territory. They are not fully male, and most definitely are not fully female. They are chiefly performative and are usually extremely vulgar, telling bawdy jokes and displaying their (sometimes mutilated) genitalia. It should be noted that this is definitely not a one-to-one comparison with the US concept of transsexuals (Towle).

The play offers its own version of *hijra* mythology. It includes a story of the origin of the *hijra* from the Ramayana. The Guru tells Nils a story of the “great injustices” that the *hijra* have suffered. The tale roughly discusses Rama’s sojourn into the forest with Sita, and his command that people leave the edges of the forest and not wait for them. When Rama eventually re-appears, the *hijra* are still waiting. Rama is angry and asks why they’ve stayed, and they respond that he “demanded that all men and women should return to their homes, but we are the third gender,

neither man nor woman' (Kotak 34-35). Rama then granted them special powers, including the "third eye and the ability to cast spells." The *hijra's* association with weddings is also important to this play. They are considered ceremonially necessary at weddings, being able to bless those present or curse them. This aspect of the *hijra* is interesting, since it locates them at an intersection of necessity and exile. *Hijra* are not integrated into society, and often live outside of it.

This play is never quite clear if Raj is actually a *hijra*. He is certainly well versed in *hijra* culture, technique, and ritual. There is no discussion of his genitalia, although mutilation is not required for *hijra* status. He was raised by a Guru *hijra*, and does work as a *hijra*, but by the end of the play it seems clear that he does not fully identify: "Today it will end. Welcome back Raj, just a plain old-fashioned gay boy" (84). The play's conflation of Raj's gender identity and sexuality is a bit frustrating, but ultimately, it seems that Raj is more a drag queen than anything else. He is a skilled *hijra*, or *hijra* impersonator, but at the end of the day is a gay man.

In terms of family values, this play is a fertile arena of criticism for a sort of outdated heterosexual Indian morality, and ultimately champions a cosmopolitan queer morality. The play is critical of arranged marriages, by way of Nils' reluctance to court or marry Sheila, except when he is trying to fit to society's standards. But Nils and Raj must survive in a world that has different values than they do. Nils has it better than Raj, for he is a reflection of his expatriate origins; schooled in London, he would prefer for his relationship with Raj to be more along the lines of "normal blokes with normal lives" (75). Conversely, Raj's values reflect his own upbringing: he was raised in a *hijra* house, definitely outside the bounds of societal values

regarding sexuality and gender. The Guru is the one who marries Raj and Nils, and the one who never bats an eyelash at their relationship – Nils is the outsider who is being accepted into the queer *hijra* family. But it bears repeating – Nils and Raj must sneak around for most of the play, operating outside the conventional marriage conversations. Nils' mother essentially arranges him a fiancée, an echo of the custom of arranged marriages that are more about practicality than love. This ethos is critiqued by Kotak, who pairs both Nils and Sheila, the would-be married couple, with people they seem genuinely interested in. Sheila ends up with Nils' playful buddy, Bobby, and seems much happier for it.

The collision of straight and queer spheres in this play is dramatic, but the stakes are only ever artificially high. For instance, Nils' nosy neighbor, Mrs. Patel, discovers Raj's disguise as Rani and shows Indira, who is Sheila's mother. Indira is predictably furious, and the old women are disgusted that Nils has brought Raj/Rani to their community and is living with him. They proclaim their family values: "This is a respectable community. We are respectable people. And we do not approve!" (76). Raj begins dancing like a *hijra* and the women are driven off, frightened that Raj is casting a spell on them. Mrs. Patel returns a later in supplication, once Raj and Madhu have opened their *hijra* agency. She requests Raj's presence at a wedding. Ultimately, it is the religious values that drove Mrs. Patel from Nils' flat that compel her to return. Or, perhaps the play wants to suggest that she has examined her biases and is swallowing her pride to make a gesture of acceptance.

The *hijra* house is also a unique form of queer family. The house members function as business partners and live in a house where they are bound to each

other through the passing of knowledge, culture, and spirituality.<sup>26</sup> The Guru Hijra, who is a guiding mother figure in the household, heads the family. She is attributed wisdom and knowledge, and is seen several times reading a book titled “How to be Happy Homos.”<sup>27</sup> She is even referred to as “maa” by Raj, which is a familiar appellation for mothers in South Asian culture. It is the Guru who guides Raj, conducts his marriage with Nils, and arranges Raj’s false papers. The Guru is very much the queer answer to Sheila and Nils’ meddling mothers. Living outside traditional sexual and gendered mores of Indian society allows the *hijra* a permissive retreat, and makes use of trope of trans\* individuals as sources of “mystical wisdom.”

The review mentioned earlier talked about the cheering British and Asian audiences at *Hijra*. Gay rights in India are a contentious issue, and this play does not take a strong political stance, but uses a gentler comic approach. Kotak has been quoted as saying of the play:

It’s a feel-good, *all’s-well-that-end’s-well* type of play. I am dealing with subject matter that might be a bit challenging for some audiences but by having it as a romantic comedy I hope people will laugh and go with it. While homosexuality is legal in Britain, it is still illegal in India under the old British laws. In the British Asian community, it is like going back to Victorian Britain. It is just that the subject is not discussed and is seen as a white man’s problem. A lot of gay Asian people do not come out. [Rai, his emphasis]<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> This is the type of dynamic I spoke about in the introduction when I mentioned searching for plays that looked at queer families like ballroom houses – queer surrogate family environments.

<sup>27</sup> This, perhaps, resonates with one of Michael’s lines in *Boys in the Band*: “Show me a happy homosexual, and I’ll show you a gay corpse.” However, in this case, the homosexuals need not die to find happiness.

<sup>28</sup> In February of 2012, the Indian Supreme Court struck down these laws, and same-sex sexual relations is no longer illegal in India.

This play mentions several times the unfortunate situation of homosexuals in India, but never even mentions the illegality of homosexuality. It is a decidedly subtle, perhaps underwhelming approach. Kotak is definitely pulling his punches in favor of a happier tale, but perhaps this adherence to genre lends him greater credibility.

All in all, *Hijra* succeeds in discussing queer family values in an expatriate British Asian context and showing new and different forms of family. It shows a queer family in the form of the *hijra* house, but also shows an amusing attempt at living within society's expectations in the mini-drag farce of Raj's disguise.<sup>29</sup> The play is an interesting piece in the context of anti-homosexual policies in India in the early years of the twenty-first century. Kotak makes the choice to reflect the unfortunate situation of Indian homosexuals through a lens of comedy. This, at the very least, makes this play more interesting to consider because of its lack of misfortune. This lack of gravity definitely makes it more of a romantic comedy than a problem play, and, it seems that the two main characters do discover "How to be Happy Homos" and that perhaps the future will not be so bad. No one is prosecuted for homosexuality, nor do they kill themselves from shame, nor do they engage in a sham wedding. This is also, however, because both characters will likely not be going back to India any time soon. So, perhaps a part of creating a stable queer family or relationship is to find a place that is safe to do it. This could involve emigration, or it might involve ostracism and exile, as in Cherríe Moraga's work.

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<sup>29</sup> *Hijra* is not the only queer family-oriented play to use this device, *LA Cages Aux Folles* makes use of drag disguise as a device for the drag queen mother, Albin, to fit the expectations of a conservative politician.

These characters are much less tied to place than Moraga's, it is much less tragic for them to have to leave their homeland. These two contrasting moods have different effects. It seems in vain to try and determine which is more successful, but it is important to note that both these plays further reinforce queer family's location as outside of society. The next plays discussed, all written in 2011, will take a different approach.

### Chapter 3: Contemporary Discussions of Queer Family

The last plays to be discussed in this paper are three very contemporary works. *A Twist of Water* (2011) deals with medical emergencies, death, grief, and adoption in a gay family. *The Kid Thing* (2011) discusses some modern lesbian parenting attitudes. Finally, *Standing on Ceremony* (2011) gives a strong, multi-vocal discussion about gay marriage. Each of these plays takes on the ideas of queer family values in different ways. In *Twist*, the sexuality of the remaining father, Noah, is of some consequence, but the play focuses more on familial grief. *The Kid Thing*, at times, reads almost like a panel discussion on the realities of lesbian parenting. Finally, *Standing on Ceremony* examines the inclusion of queer families into a cultural and legal institution in the United States.

All three of these plays premiered in 2011. The first two went up in Chicago, and the third had readings all across the country and ran briefly in New York City. They indicate a sort of post-millennial cultural moment; most of their characters are no longer cripplingly debilitated by shame or fear. With the exception of Darcy in *The Kid Thing*, most of these characters seem to have learned or are actively learning “How to be Happy Homos.” At the end of the day these are plays about queer families and queer family-making. But there seems to be progress in how little these families seem to be a threat to the established order. There are still elements of prejudice and homophobia inflicted upon the characters in these plays, but they seem to mirror the United States’ dialogue on these topics. This is both advantageous and disadvantageous. It allows for the inclusion of lesbian and gay couples into conversations such as those surrounding marriage and those of child

rearing. But there are few in-depth examinations of the privileged position of marriage and child rearing as the glorified, dominant modes of “family.”

## ***A Twist of Water: Grief and Gay Families***

Caitlin Montayne Parrish's play, *A Twist of Water* (2011) is a play about several things. First and foremost, the play is a love letter to Chicago. It drips with Carl Sandburg and Abraham Lincoln, and depends heavily on Lake Michigan as both symbol and plot device. However, the play speaks to more than that. At its heart, it is a problem play. The nucleus of that problem is homophobia and its effects on a gay family. This play is a tight, realistic, domestic drama, although an argument could be made for this play's inclusion in the category of lyrical realism. Its subject is a family in grief. The protagonists are coping, mourning, and trying to heal. It is the fact that this ordinary domestic story takes place in the realm of queer families that makes it worthy of note.

The play premiered in February 2011 at the Theatre Wit in Chicago. It received an extension and ran through June at the Mercury Theatre. It will reportedly run in the fall of 2012 at 59E59 in New York City with the original cast intact (Jones). The play was extremely popular, and was attended by then mayor-elect Rahm Emanuel, who apparently liked it so much that he has referred to it in several speeches since then.

*A Twist of Water* follows the two main characters, Noah and Jira, as they navigate grief and new beginnings. The play opens a year after the death of Richard, Noah's husband and Jira's father. Jira is Noah and Richard's black, adopted, and seventeen-year old daughter. Noah is white, a history teacher at Jira's school, and is thirty-nine-years old. She wants "more family," and has begun requesting to meet her birth mother. At the root of Jira's angst is the death of Richard, who was on the

way back from a medical conference in Michigan when his car slipped off an icy road and into Lake Michigan. Noah and Jira raced to the Michigan hospital, where Noah was not allowed to be with Richard as he died because he wasn't officially a family member. Noah sent Jira back to Richard alone. At the time the play begins, Noah is beginning to allow himself to form a new romantic relationship with Liam, who also teaches (English) at Jira's high school. Eventually, Jira meets her birth mother, Tia. Tia has buried her memories of Jira, having become pregnant at the age of 16. Their meeting is an anticlimax for Jira. In the end, a peace is reached. Jira accepts and values the family she has. It seems that she, Noah, and Liam may be on the verge of starting a new life.

Interspersed throughout the play are a series of poetic monologues/lectures on Chicago history, given by Noah, that serve as metaphors for the emotional states of the characters. Chicago is presented as a risk taken, a place of great loss and rebuilding. The Great Chicago Fire, which burned a large portion of the city in 1871, is used as a fairly direct metaphor for Richard's death. There is a lot of talk about rebirth after tragedy. The characters spend a lot of time outside, and the winter deadness and sub-zero temperatures echo Noah and Jira's emotional numbness.

The most interesting thing about *Twist of Water* is the fact that the play does not present itself as being about a *gay* family in grief, but rather just a *family* in grief. One member of the family just happens to be gay. It is the banal quality of homosexuality in *Twist of Water* that is interesting. None of the characters has angst about his or her sexuality, which seems to set *Twist* apart from nearly every other play examined so far. Of course, part of the drama is linked to Richard's death, and

discrimination against his relationship with Noah, but the play acknowledges that even that has changed. Illinois Governor Pat Quinn signed civil unions into law on January 31, 2011, and they began to be issued in June of that same year (Garcia). Although the hospital was in Michigan, it still may have given Noah some hope of getting to see Richard before his death. At one point, Noah acknowledges this: "If Richard had just hit an ice patch this year instead of last year I could have gone back there and Jira and I could be at each other's throats for better reasons. History was just a bit tardy for me, but the law's changed. It won't happen any more" (Parrish 44).

But even though the play strives to be about a family, homophobia and prejudice still enter into it. But conversations about being gay in this play are concentrated mostly in the first scene of Act II. Jira confronts Noah about what she perceives to have been cowardice on his part. She admonishes him, albeit a bit petulantly, about his reluctance to make a scene in this hospital: "I know the hospital wasn't your fault. I know what this world is. But you... I expected you to do it differently" (40). Noah responds to Jira that if he were to have made "a scene" and "run past every obstacle" it would have been the "ugliest moment of your life. And neither of us would've been allowed back. And he would have died alone. *No*" (40-41). There is a little more discussion; Noah lectures Jira on the difficulties of being gay, and Jira lectures him for continuing to lie down at Richard's funeral. Noah responds that a funeral is not the time of place for a "statement," and in the end, the argument basically concludes with Noah saying: "you have to draw a line somewhere and take care of yourself" (41). Even Jira's disappointment in Noah

revolves around what she perceives as a failure in spousal/fatherly duties, and not his sexuality. This is, by and large, the bulk of discussion of homosexuality and the negative treatment of homosexuals in the play. There are a few references to prejudice and homophobia throughout the rest of the play, and Liam discusses his hope that coming out to his father would be easy because his father owned a copy of Sandburg's *Prairie Years*, the Abraham Lincoln biography that might have subtly implied that Lincoln had a gay friendship, according to some modern historians.<sup>30</sup> But, by and large, that's it. The thrust of this play is not the sexuality of its characters, such as the other two plays discussed in this chapter.

This could be because the play takes place firmly inside the sphere of Noah and Jira's family. It is their struggle, and the audience sees it from their perspective. The audience is on the ground with the Noah and Jira, staring at the ice floes on Lake Michigan, wondering when the grief and winter will end. Liam and Tia function as outsiders. The play begins in a situation that is out-of-stasis, namely, grief. It is only through the intrusions of Tia and Liam into Jira and Noah's grief that balance can be restored. Tia and Liam provide closure and renewal, respectively.

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<sup>30</sup> From *The Prairie Years* (1926): "Joshua Speed was a deep-chested man of large sockets, with broad measurement between the ears. A streak of lavender ran through him; he had spots soft as may violets. He and Abraham Lincoln told each other their secrets about women. Lincoln too had tough physical shanks and large sockets, also a streak of lavender, and spots soft as May Violets" (166). "A streak of lavender" was slang, and its use to describe effeminate and homosexual men is noted in Jonathan Ned Katz's *Love Stories*. It is also interesting to note that a later, condensed edition of *The Prairie Years* and *The War Years*, edited by Sandburg and released in 1954, read only: "Joshua Speed, deep-chested, broad between the ears, had spots soft as May violets. He and Abraham Lincoln told each other their secrets about women" (71).

Queer families and straight families collide in a different way in *A Twist of Water* than in the other plays examined so far. In this case, it is not a competition for validity, but rather an exploration of roads not taken. *A Twist of Water*, like Fierstein's *Widows and Children First!* asserts the strength, through hardship, of gay families. They are portrayed as better because of their tribulations and because they actually want their children. In fact, Noah has a whole monologue to this effect, after Tia tells Jira that she's "not un-adopted just because we said 'I love you.' Just cause it's true doesn't mean we know each other. I'm not your mom" (69). Jira is disturbed, confused, and hurt by this news from Tia, on whom she had built so many hopes. Noah then delivers a heartfelt speech:

NOAH: Jira. You have no idea how badly I wanted you. Or how happy dad and I were when we finally met you and got to take you home. We wanted a little girl. We so desperately wanted *you*. And the day they put you in our hands...you were so breakable. You were the size of a book, and we could each hold you in one hand. We fought over who got to hold you. Dad was working nights at the hospital when you were small, so I got you to myself after dinner, and you'd fall asleep every night on my chest. I could feel your little heart against me. And I swear to God my pulse would always line up with yours. It still does.

[NOAH takes JIRA's hand.]

NOAH: *cont.* Baby. If you ache, I ache.

JIRA: ...dad? [70]

This passage is significant for many reasons. First, it asserts Noah's superiority over Tia as parent. Second, it finally allows Jira to understand Noah's love for her. The fact that she responds to this speech with "...dad?" is important. Since this is a problem play, this can be considered the emotional climax, the "problem solved" moment in which whatever has been blocking Jira is unblocked. Everything after this is denouement. Jira finally recognizes Noah, and their queer family is back on track, once again on nearly equal footing to straight families, stronger for their

struggle. The final scene is titled from Sandburg, "Prayers after World War." The play may not always be subtle in its poetic inclusions, but the fact that they are all from Sandburg lends the piece certain cohesion.

In the end, *A Twist of Water* is fascinating because it represents a sort of watershed moment. Noah and Liam are not closeted or ashamed of their homosexuality. Most of the discussion about their relationship revolves around making sure that they are being sensitive to Jira. Jira has no shame about having two fathers. It is a play about grief, Chicago, and rebuilding. The portrayal of these characters not as exiled, obsessed with, or driven mad by their sexuality is a breath of fresh air. It examines what is surely a trying period in the life of a family, but ultimately, the last line of the last poem mentioned in the play rings true: "Out of the storm let us have one star."

### ***The Kid Thing: Lesbian Parenting and Family Perspectives***

I have to admit that the sample of lesbian plays in this thesis is unfortunately small, but I am trying not to let any one play be representative of attitudes of all queer people everywhere. These plays, to me, serve as discussions both with audience and society at large. They are jumping off points for debates, and reflect certain queer attitudes in their times.

That said: Sarah Gubbins' *The Kid Thing* (2011) is a very contemporary play. It premiered at About Face Theatre in Chicago in the fall of 2011, and received some press attention, but did not make a gigantic splash. About Face Theatre is a Chicago company that stages plays "...to advance the national dialogue on gender and sexual identity, and to challenge and entertain audiences in Chicago, across the country, and around the world" ("About Us"). *The Kid Thing* deals heavily with themes about gender, gender expression, and sexual identity within a sample group of four Chicago lesbians. It is an expansive discussion, a sort of cross-section of lesbian parenting and child-rearing angst. The dialogue reveals a queer, left wing, urbanite context. The women of the play actively discuss their own lesbianism, and butch-femme lesbian culture is usually involved in the subtext, if it is not the actual topic of conversation.

The plot is bookended by two dinner parties, both of which are hosted by Darcy and Leigh, a lesbian couple in a long-term relationship. Darcy is "on the butchier side" and opposed to "the kid thing" while Leigh is "soft and feminine" and wants children. They host Margot and Nate, another lesbian couple, for dinner. Margot is more femme and is pregnant, while Nate is "often mistaken for a skater

boy.” Margot and Nate’s sperm donor is a college friend of Nate and Leigh’s, Jacob. In a complicated series of behind-the-back living room conversations, Leigh eventually sleeps with Jacob by misleading him about Darcy’s desire for children. Darcy eventually finds out about this at the final dinner party, and reveals that she does not want to bring a child into a world that views her as an “it.” Darcy’s own internalized homophobia leads her to lash out at everyone in the play, and she ends up driving Leigh, Margot, and Nate away, and she is left on stage alone.

What starts out as a seeming romp through the quirks of lesbian pregnancy actually ends up as an extremely dark and somewhat moralizing tale. The tone at the beginning of the play is light, with characters bantering about the recently deceased Michael Jackson, and whether or not he should have been allowed to raise children. But the tone gets “serious” quickly, when Darcy drops the phrase “girl/boy freakshow” to describe the late King of Pop and is reprimanded by the other women (Gubbins 3). The evening goes on, with Darcy’s sarcasm occasionally souring the mood. The structure of the play becomes almost farcical, full of unlikely infidelity, partner swapping, etc. While the dialogue remains bitingly funny, the subject matter becomes much more serious. In the end, Darcy ends up being the driving force behind the play’s newfound gravity.

This play is a somewhat sprawling discussion of queer family, but it touches on a few key themes. The first of these themes, given the title of the piece, is same-sex parenting. Both couples discuss parenting, and specifically parenting as lesbians, throughout the play. These discussions are multi-leveled. At first, one is intrigued by how alike to straight parenting discussions they sound. It is forgotten

for a moment that the two parents will be women. The minutiae of their concerns could be those of any parent. They worry about education, parenting styles, etc. But then the pendulum swings back, and one recalls that they are lesbian parents when they start to discuss transparency vis-à-vis Jacob's role in their child's life, and the need for a "positive male role model" and the desire for the "bio-dad" to be around (88). This is a play that revolves around modern urban lesbians talking about modern urban lesbian concerns. There are notable markers of their urban-ness and politics in conversations about doulas, yuppie parenting styles, and constant pot shots at the suburbs.

There is an absence in this play of the collision between straight and queer families. It is hinted that perhaps Margot's parents are not very tolerant of her relationship and that perhaps Darcy's family is less-than-harmonious as well. But that is where it ends. Jacob is the only ostensibly straight character in the play. However, even he is left ambiguous. Of all the character descriptions, Jacob is the only character whose sexuality is not defined. Every woman in the play is marked with the primary features of age and sexuality: "mid 30s. Lesbian," while Jacob's description reads, "mid 30s. Verging on hipster. Ernest. [sic] The sperm donor" (1). Towards the end of the play, Darcy attacks Jacob by leveling charges against his heterosexuality based on his extended bachelorhood. Jacob adequately rebuts these, and it is clear that Darcy's attacks are reflective of her own shame and internalized homophobia, and it makes sense that this would be her tactic.

Darcy's internalized homophobia is an interesting facet of her character, and brings up a point about queer families that hasn't yet been hit on in this paper. This

play has a lot of discussion about the butch/femme constructs in lesbian relationships. Darcy, as opposed to the other women in this play, seems particularly anxious about the question of femininity as it ties to lesbian motherhood. Although I will not go into depth about butch-femme anxieties, roles, and constructs here, I do think that the play brings up interesting issues focused around this point.

Butch/femme anxiety in this play seems to point to a larger male/female anxiety in queer relationships, or rather a mother/father anxiety. The mother/father system is so deeply entrenched in the dominant parenting narrative of the United States that to those who are outside it, there is a sort of natural anxiety or need to define their own system. In drama, this question sometimes resolves itself by having a relationship composed of a butch queer and a femme queer.<sup>31</sup> *The Kid Thing* is the only play of those discussed in this paper that seems preoccupied with the question: “if you’re both women, who is the father?” This question is present Moraga’s *Hungry Woman* in that Medea clearly wrestles with this kind of labeling and categorization, but Moraga’s work is subtler than Gubbins’ and concerned with other questions.

Finally, this play is interesting for its acknowledgement of the “groups of friends as family” model of queer family, which harkens back to *The Boys in the Band*. When Nate is announcing Margot’s pregnancy news at the beginning of the play, she toasts:

To our good, good friends. We’ve been through so much with you guys. And you’re like family. No actually you are family. And I know that, well, a lot of

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<sup>31</sup> This is seen specifically in the work of Fierstein, in both Ed/Arnold in *Torch Song Trilogy* and his work with Jerry Herman’s Georges/Albin in *La Cage Aux Folles* (1983).

gays are all 'we choose our own family' and that's totally cheese-tastic. But it's really true with you guys... so we just wanted you guys to know first. [13]

While this speech itself may be “cheese-tastic” it is important for illustrating that the “friends as family” model hasn't simply disappeared in the 43 intervening years between *The Kid Thing* and *The Boys in the Band*. In *The Kid Thing*, it is an acknowledged trope, a sort of “conventional wisdom” that Nate invokes. It is an example of the cliché that is cliché for a reason. The two couples even discuss a co-parenting arrangement fairly seriously in the second half of the play. It emphasizes the active role queer people can have in making and choosing their own families. *The Kid Thing* is, after all, about the act of making family, and the potential of a family with four lesbian mothers, or at least very close family friends is another acknowledgement of the myriad queer forms that families can take.

## **Standing on Ceremony: The Gay Marriage Plays** <sup>32</sup>

The final plays to be discussed here will be *Standing on Ceremony: The Gay Marriage Plays* (2011). These eleven plays began as a series of benefits in Los Angeles, and opened off-Broadway at the Minetta Lane Theatre on November 13, 2011. Despite positive reviews, the play closed an open-ended run after one month (Ganz). In addition to a run in New York, the producers of the play, in conjunction with Tectonic Theater Project, brought staged readings to 25 theaters and universities around the United States. The Minetta Lane production was staged as a reading as well, with actors consulting scripts in on music stands in front of them.

The plays in *Standing on Ceremony* (2011) are mostly light-hearted. There are two short works by Paul Rudnick, best known for his AIDS-comedy *Jeffrey* (1993). “My Husband” and “The Gay Agenda” are wry and joke-filled looks into the minds of straight people preoccupied with gay marriage. In “My Husband,” a New York mother has a conniption fit when the state legislature passes a Gay Marriage law, and takes liberties with her son’s (lack of a) romantic life in order to stay competitive with her pack of overbearing friends. In “The Gay Agenda,” an Ohio housewife attempts amicably to explain her stance against gay marriage and ends up revealing her own comically fanatical bigotry. Douglas Wright, primarily known for the Pulitzer Prize winning *I Am My Own Wife* (2003), contributed “On Facebook,” which is a dramatized Facebook comment thread. The plays which attempt to deal with gay marriage more seriously include “London Mosquitoes” by Moisés Kaufman,

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<sup>32</sup> This section will predominantly use the term, “gay marriage” because that is what is found in the title of the play. It feels more correct than “same-sex marriage” in this case, because most of the characters in this play identify as “gay” in the colloquial catch-all term for self-identifying same-sex desiring individuals.

and “Pablo & Andrew at the Altar of Words” by José Rivera. Neil LaBute’s piece, “Strange Fruit,” also takes a grisly turn, as people familiar with the song “Strange Fruit” may guess.

The sum total of these plays is a hefty collection of opinions and negotiations about what gay marriage is, should be, and can be. Some advocate, or at least mention, non-assimilation, championing the ingenuity of queer people’s unions in the face of exclusion from the legal institution of marriage. Others ignore this aspect completely, and most of the plays emphasize the love at the core of these relationships. In many, there is an open acknowledgement that gay marriage is new ground, and many of the plays deal with couples exploring their recent inclusion into an institution from which they felt estranged.

The play opens with “The Revision,” by Jordan Harrison, which follows one couple’s re-writing of the standard marriage script before their ceremony. Nate bemoans Wallace’s “traditional” sounding vows, and they re-write these vows into a more honest form. This section smacks of *Torch Song Trilogy*’s “equal responsibility for walking and feeding the dog” marriage vow between Arnold and Alan. However, there is an important difference here. Arnold and Alan got “as married as two men can illegally get.” (Fierstein 96). Nate and Wallace are, presumably, getting as married as two men can *legally* get. There are some limitations to this, though. The men write into their vows: “and do you promise, in the eyes of God and the ever-shifting whims of state and federal constitutional law, to cherish him for the rest of your days?” (Harrison 7). So, within the first ten pages of *Standing on Ceremony*, there is the assertion that gay weddings are non-traditional, different, lesser. Gay

weddings seem to be something of a revision in and of them selves. In fact, one of the common arguments against gay marriage is that it is a “redefinition” of marriage. There is also an acknowledgement that these marriages are subject to legal interpretation.

The next play, “This Flight Tonight” focuses on this legal limbo, as it examines the pre-wedding jitters of two California lesbians about to board a flight for Iowa, where gay marriage became legal in 2009.<sup>33</sup> Hannah spends her time cajoling Allie, and warming her cold feet. Allie’s nerves manifest in numerous jabs at Iowa, and a general feeling of distaste for the provincial location of their wedding. By the end of the play, these fears are allayed. The two board the plane mutually confident about their Iowa wedding. There is almost an echo in this piece of the theme of queerness in exile. Due to the overturning of California’s gay marriage laws by Proposition 8 in the 2008 general election, Hannah and Allie are forced to leave home. Oddly, though, it’s not necessarily to somewhere more cosmopolitan, as in *Hijra*. Nor is this the banishment from Aztlán, as in *The Hungry Woman*. It’s a lighter exile, with realistic dialogue and sit-com sentimentality, more of an inconvenience than anything else. One gets the sense that although these two women may not be pleased to have to go to Iowa to get married, it beats not being able to get married.

Moisés Kaufman’s “London Mosquitoes” features only one character, and no marriage. Joe delivers the eulogy at the funeral of his partner, Paul. They met in college and were together for forty-six years until Paul’s death. Joe relates asking Paul about whether or not he’d like to get married, and Paul responding, “If we

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<sup>33</sup> It is interesting to note that the three Iowa Supreme Court Justices responsible for this ruling were voted out in the 2010 Midterm election. (Sulzberger)

married now, we'd be having our one year anniversary next year. What would that say about the last forty five [sic] years? That we were just messing around?"

(Kaufman 109). This play provides a voice not often heard in contemporary queer work, which is the voice of the previous generation. Queer plays, like queer politics, tend to be focused on the issues at hand, and a piece that looks at the ways in which the previous generations have dealt with partnership and marriage is important.

Kaufman isn't necessarily the voice of this generation, but his character waxes poetic:

We're always gaining things. Small and large victories. But each triumph has a price. We get aids [sic] medications, but our fighting spirit ceases to soar. We get to come out of the closet, but we lose the clandestine and secret habits of the past, we get marriage but we lose the habit of inventing our own unions. And now we lose Paul. And with Paul we lose a generation of men and women who persisted. Who were not heroes. Who lived in the world that was given to them! Before long, we will all be gone. [Kaufman 109]

Obviously, this nostalgia for the past is not universal. Not every man or woman would be pining for the days before Stonewall, or the "Christ was I drunk last night" syndrome described in *Boys in the Band*. But it is important to include this viewpoint to make sure that the voices of this play are not too uniform; this view of dissent about the role of marriage, and its use to legitimize relationships, is necessary.

In "A Traditional Wedding," by Mo Gaffney, two lesbians discuss their wedding in the style of a documentary interview. Liz wanted a wedding that would be unlike anything done before, and she did not want to borrow from heterosexual tradition in any way. Her "broom" (a portmanteau of "bride" and "groom" coined by the couple) is Cate, who insisted on some of the traditional elements. They ended up

creating their own wedding, drawn from a variety of traditions. The key moment of this play is when Liz monologues:

And now we're legally hitched. My old ball and chain. It's funny, when you grow up thinking there is no way a certain thing can ever happen for you, you belittle it, you make fun of it, you say it's stupid because if it IS meaningful, if it does matter, then where does that leave you? I used to say a piece of paper couldn't possibly make a difference in how two people feel. But then it did. It does. For me, anyway. Maybe not for everybody. [Gaffney 79]

This monologue is representative of a larger ethos present at times in *Standing on Ceremony*. It is, obviously, a play advocating for gay marriage. But more than that, it is often a play advocating for marriage as an institution. *Standing on Ceremony* wrestles with this issue. Simply to pretend that now gay couples can engage in marriage just like everybody else would be, as Kaufman put it, to lose habits. These habits, such as those of forming unique unions, are formed out of a marginalized experience that cannot be corrected solely by inclusion. Inclusion privileges marriage and heterosexual institutions as the chief incarnation of family. But there are couples in existence for whom marriage is a valuable, cathartic, important experience.

The problematic nature of these plays certainly doesn't arise from any malicious intent. It likely arises due to the limitations put on these plays' lengths. Because they are so short, they're capable only of limited discourse. They provide springboards for discussion, but much of the material on stage sticks to the script of a pro-marriage-as-an-institution message. It would not look good if the plays intended as a fundraiser for marriage equality contained questions such as "Are we sure that marriage is the thing we want to be supporting?" Ultimately, there are not many deep examinations of marriage, and this causes the play to seem reductive.

There is some discussion by gay characters in the play of how queer people have created their own unions outside of marriage, but Kaufman seems to be the only one who actually views this as a positive. Harrison explores gay people's legal inclusion in the institution of marriage, but "The Revision" is more like a celebration of that inclusion than they are comments on it. The whole play might better have been called "Standing on Ceremony: The Marriage Plays."

However, the lack of examination of marriage as an institution does not wholly condemn the play. One must also consider audience when considering this *Standing on Ceremony*. The play opened off-Broadway with an open-ended run. It seems as though the producers may have anticipated it to be a smash hit. Demographic information for off-Broadway theatres is difficult to come by, but it's easy to imagine that most of the audiences at the Minetta Lane Theater in 2011 would be supportive of gay marriage. In New York, this piece was less likely to be swaying hearts and minds, especially since public opinion in New York in 2011 was in favor of same-sex marriage (Katz). I do not mention this to dismiss *Standing on Ceremony's* political potential. The play had readings all over the country at theatres and universities. The readings took place at such places as Syracuse University in New York, and Hendrix College in Conway, Arkansas. In these comparatively less urban and more conservative communities, a play such as *Standing on Ceremony* is more likely to make an impact and start conversations. This is the play's legacy; the potential to start conversations around the United States by providing characters who break the ice.

## **Conclusion: What are “Queer Family Values” in any context?**

There are many ways to write a conclusion to a paper like this. At first, I had thought that a lengthy, forty-or-so-page analysis pulling from a massive amount of queer theorists from the 1960s to the present would be a good ending. I thought that this would help me understand what I had learned from this whole process. But I now realize that this thesis is nearing one hundred pages, and that twenty to forty pages of densely knotted theory are not necessarily what it needs. Plus, I had tried to approach it from the perspective of dramaturgical analysis, and queer theory seems too closely tied to literary theory to be totally relevant. The paper needs reflection, surely. It needs *some* analysis as well. And I have found this in a few places, which I will discuss here. But parroting and applying things that other people have said will not be the best way to illustrate what I think I have learned over the course of this thesis.

At the beginning of this paper, I asked a series of questions. I will not repeat them here, but they all revolved around a few core questions: *How do queer people express “family values”?* *Is it possible to get an idea of this by looking at representations of queer families on stage?* *What forms do those families take?* I found some answers to this, primarily in queer people’s creation of their own families, but also in the queer family model of friends as surrogate family groups. The recurring theme of the collision of straight and queer families also ended up being very important.

Over the course of this paper, I have become even more acutely aware of what I perceive to be a narrative, in the United States particularly, of a family model

that seems to be a vestigial holdout from the era of the American Dream. It's almost mythic, and represents "family" as being a procreative opposite-sex couple with children, or one's blood relatives. This is a titanic image, the "American Family." It is constantly invoked in endless arenas.

But I have also realized that while this is a prominent and powerful cultural myth here in the United States, many have acknowledged that the lived reality of family life is infinitely messier. In the United States and England, family, marriage, and tradition have been under investigation for most of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. I'm obviously not the first one to question what they mean. Should this thesis have been longer, it would have included sections on popular "family" plays in the periods of the queer plays investigated. For instance, I think Tracy Letts' *August: Osage County* (2008) has a lot to say about the American family. I now understand that an investigation of how queer families are presenting themselves on stage is not complete without an understanding of how all families are presenting themselves on stage, and I regret not being able to add that to this thesis.

But more than locating queer work against "straight" work, I want to discuss something that I think many of these plays stress. This is the act of creation in family. Families, in the traditional sense, are generative. They are focused around having more than one starts with – whether this is through making or adopting children, or just finding someone to call a partner, spouse, or companion. But what so much of the queer work I examined stresses is expressible by something Moraga mentions: "making *familia* from scratch" (Cited in Ybarra). I think this creation is a core queer family "value." When Arnold says in *Widows and Children First!* "I don't

even know what this is supposed to be. I can't exactly buy a book or study some *Reader's Digest* article that's gonna tell me. All I know is whatever this is, it's not a Grade-B imitation of a heterosexual marriage.""; or when Moisés Kauffman talks about "losing the habit" of creating unions; or when Noah gives his climactic speech about adopting Jira, ending it with "Baby. When you ache, I ache"; these are moments that stress the act of creation in queer family. Queer people can and must, usually out of sheer will power, create family where there was no family before. This is one theme that I have encountered time and time again.

But this is complicated. While doing research for this paper, I started to read Lee Edelman's *No Future* and it threw me for a loop. I started to question what I was calling "queer," and how I would define it. Edelman's supposition that "*queerness* names the side of those *not* 'fighting for the children,' the side outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism" gave me a lot to think about (3). Edelman advances a queer narrative that places the *queer* against the notion that ethical discussions in politics are tied to a sort of reasoning about what is good 'for the children'. In that case, I thought, what becomes of my thesis?

Obviously, I am not required to hold Edelman and his theories as the be-all end-all of a non-existent "queer ethics." But I feel obligated to consider it. It was this book that led me to question queerness in general, that made me think about whether or not queer people's desire to raise families, and the representations of this on stage, were then reinforcing a cultural narrative with which I was uncomfortable. I began to wonder whether or not this hetero-imitative (in the sense

of reproductive) form of family actively worked against the other queer forms of family that I sought to find, and could explain their absence from cultural narratives. I wondered if plays about same-sex couples with children pushed out plays about groups of queer people who were exiled from other places. *Torch Song Trilogy* smacked of this until I remembered that Arnold was fostering a gay son, which complicated that queer family even further.

I also argued for a model of queer work that sought to position groups of friends as surrogate families. This is a particularly queer model, I think, because it is one of the most creative. It is a persistent model in drama, perhaps owing to the initial explosive success of *Boys in the Band*. One of things I heard most often this past summer regarding About Face Theater's production of Philip Dawkins' *The Homosexuals* was that it was a modern reflection on *Boys in the Band* and *Love! Valour! Compassion!*. And in some ways, it was. The play follows a group of gay men backwards through time to the arrival of one new friend years ago, and shows how they have grown and changed over the years. When I hear any description that starts with "The play follows a group of gay men..." I immediately, involuntarily think of *The Boys in the Band*. I cannot parse whether this is a personal response, or one based on the cultural phenomenon of *The Boys in the Band's* success. And I cannot help but wonder if this model will persist because it can be such a financial success.

I was also influenced in this thesis by Geoffrey Naufft's *Next Fall* (2009), which I had the privilege of acting in at Tufts in the fall semester of 2011. I owe this play the debt of specifically bringing the repeated trope/theme of the collision

between heterosexual and queer family models to the front of my brain. It's a memory play, and it follows the five-year relationship of Luke and Adam. Luke is a born-again Christian, Adam an atheist. At the beginning of the play, Luke has been hit by a car. The play flashes back and forth between a hospital waiting room in the present and scenes from Adam and Luke's relationship. The tension between Adam and Luke's parents, who do not know about Adam and Luke's relationship, is written with a lot of care. But it finally explodes when Adam and Butch, Luke's father, begin yelling at one another over Luke's comatose body, with Luke's mother, Arlene, and Luke and Adam's friend, Holly, looking on. The following exchange provided a lot of ideas for this thesis:

BUTCH: I don't even know who you are, son.

ADAM: You don't know who I am?

HOLLY: Okay, everybody –

BUTCH: I could have your ass thrown out of here.

ADAM: I'm sure you could.

BUTCH: And there wouldn't be a damn thing you could do about it.

HOLLY: Sweetie, maybe we should –

BUTCH: Coming in here, disrupting my family.

ARLENE: Okay, now. Stop it, Butch.

BUTCH: You've got a lot of nerve, son.

ADAM: I'm not your son.

BUTCH: No, you're not, are you? [Nauffts 65]

It was through this section that I began to recognize a lot of the framing and themes I wanted to use in this thesis. Butch's use of "disrupting my family" is a particularly interesting phrase because it resonates on two levels. On the surface, Butch is angry that Adam is interfering with his time in the hospital with his son. On a deeper level, this says that Butch thinks Adam is disrupting the very idea of his family. This theme ended up being very prominent in a lot of the drama I looked at. Which led me to question Edelman again. Although queer people may be forming families which are

child-focused, and therefore perhaps not *queer* by Edelman's standards, how can I in good conscience not call them queer when I still see them having to compete in drama with traditional, heterosexual family models?

Finally, I think that more important than all of this is the negotiation of queer family values on stage in their own cultural contexts. I think the active give and take, the didactic discussions of how characters want to live, and the celebration of alternative family forms are what drive the ideas behind queer family values on stage. "Values" are never something fully written "como los diez commandments on the metate stone from the beginning of all time" as Mama Sal says in *The Hungry Woman*. They are something that can change over time. Is this not what Moraga started out saying in the early nineties with "Queer Aztlán"? There is a certain lingering pessimism from the perceived failure of that project, but it does not mean those things were or are impossible.<sup>34</sup>

I'll close with an observation of general trends: The three plays from 2011 have much less collision. Granted, they are also located in a white, United States, middle class context. It is important not to ignore things that authors such as Moraga are saying. It is extremely important not to leave out the voices of people who are marginalized ethnically, racially, economically, and by their gender expressions. The voices of Kotak and Moraga have influenced this thesis immensely. As I think about what this thesis means, and has meant, I hope that it ultimately

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<sup>34</sup> Moraga is the one writer in this thesis that I wish I had devoted more time to. Her large body of work demands more attention than I was able to give, and she has boundless things to say about theatre-making and storytelling in a queer context and a Cican@ context that I will keep delving into as I graduate, starting with *Loving in the War Years*.

means a voice for a discussion which I sometimes think is marginalized: the place of the family, what forms it can take, whether or not marriage deserves a privileged position as the only governmentally sanctioned form of family. I hope it has meant a celebration of families in all forms, and the love, strength, and pain that people find in them.

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<<http://youknowyouretrans.tumblr.com/FAQ>>. The use of Trans\* as an adjective is relatively new, so I had trouble finding scholarly uses of the term. Most of the uses I could find were on trans\*-focused communities and blogs. There is a lot of debate about the term, but I believe that it is the best term currently available to

describe a large amount of people who primarily self-identify, often in very personal ways.