

**We're Here, We're Queer,
But We're Just Like
Heterosexuals:
A Cultural Studies Analysis
of Lesbian Themed Children's Books**

By Jennifer Esposito

In the heartwarming children's picture book, *Heather Has Two Mommies* by Leslea Newman, the main character Heather must grapple with the fact that her family may be different from her playmates' because she has two mommies but she does not have a daddy. The story begins rather quaintly with a description of her home "with the big apple tree in the front yard and the tall grass in the backyard." Mama Kate and Mama Jane "were friends for a long long time." After they finally fell in love, they decided they wanted to have a baby. The family seems perfect. "On sunny days they go to the park. On rainy days they stay inside and bake cookies." At Heather's playgroup, she learns that some other children have daddies. "Heather feels sad and begins to cry." The teacher decides to have every child draw a picture of his or her family so that Heather can see that families come in all types of configurations.

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By the end of the story, we are taught the lesson that “it doesn’t matter how many mommies or daddies your family has.”

What Newman leaves out, however, is that it does matter how many mommies or daddies you have. It matters so much, in fact, that the illustrator of Newman’s book was careful to portray Mama Kate and Mama Jane as nothing more than good friends. It matters so much that even Newman’s “picture-perfect” portrayal of a lesbian family did not deter her book from being banned from various schools and libraries. In fact, *Heather Has Two Mommies* is number eleven on the American Library Association’s “100 Most Frequently Challenged Books of 1990-2000.”

Queer Theory and Normalization

In an attempt to subvert the notion of lesbian as “Other,” Newman attempts to normalize lesbianism. This is not a new tactic. Walters (2001), in her analysis of gay culture, argues that in many texts which feature gay characters, gay identity is kept invisible or made legitimate only through assimilation into heterosexuality. *Heather Has Two Mommies*, like other children’s picture books about lesbian mothers and their children, inscribes heteronormativity on the lesbian family. The idea of heteronormativity is utilized in a ways similar to Berlant and Warner (1998):

the institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent—that is, organized as a sexuality—but also privileged. Its coherence is always provisional, and its privilege can take several (sometimes contradictory) forms: unmarked, as the basic idiom of the personal and social; or marked as a natural state; or projected as an ideal or moral accomplishment. (p. 548)

Heteronormativity creates heterosexuality as the quintessential ideal of sexuality, as the most natural state of being. This normalization, in turn, marginalizes homosexuality so that it becomes viewed as unnatural and immoral. Berlant and Warner (1998) go on to argue that one way heteronormative forms of intimacy get reinscribed is through love plots. This idea is important because the storylines of lesbian families in children’s picture books often represent heteronormative love plots. As Rofes (1998) argues, often “a lesbian couple simply serves to replace a heterosexual couple as the source of knowledge and authority within the family” (p. 18). Such a substitution of a lesbian couple for a heterosexual one means that social issues like homophobia do not have to be addressed. The lesbian family, in this instance, lives and loves just like the heterosexual family. Thus, in the world of children’s picture books, the lesbian family becomes insulated from its own marginalization. It is, therefore, important to understand how lesbian families are represented in a heteronormative society.

To examine such representation, five children’s picture books that include lesbian mothers and their children are analyzed. While there are also interesting and relevant children’s picture books about gay fathers, texts with lesbian parents

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were selected because of the relative scarcity of these representations. The books are: *Is Your Family Like Mine?* by Lois Abramchik, *Asha's Mums* by Rosamund Elwin and Michele Paulse, *Molly's Family* by Nancy Garden, *Heather Has Two Mommies* by Leslea Newman, and *The Daddy Machine* by Johnny Valentine. These particular books were chosen because of their availability.

The texts have been examined almost 20 years since they were first published. With this fact in mind, it is important to contextualize the discussion within a historical moment. Debates about the necessity of discussion of sexual orientation in schools during the nineties are noted by New York City's Rainbow Curriculum. In 1992, then school chancellor Joseph Fernandez proposed what became known as the Rainbow Curriculum. More inclusive than ever before on issues of gays and lesbians, the reading list even included one of the books analyzed here—*Heather Has Two Mommies*. Religious conservatives protested and the fervor made national headlines. Fernandez lost his job and the Rainbow Curriculum was not implemented. Around the country school libraries witnessed religiously conservative parents burn picture books dealing with gay content. This, of course, had ramifications on publishers which, in turn, affected what could get published and, thus, what authors could write. Such a historical context shaped the content of these picture books and it must be acknowledged that these books were, 20 years prior, on the cutting edge of what could be published in the genre.

Four themes emerged from the texts, though these themes should be evaluated within the above historical context. The first theme is the problematizing of not having a daddy. Many of the books pose as a problem the fact that children of lesbian mothers do not have a father. The second theme present is the “de-queering” of lesbianism. The de-queering approach represents lesbian families as just like heterosexual families. In essence, the approach erases difference. The third theme is the implication of children in the “Don’t ask, don’t tell” policy. The “don’t ask, don’t tell policy” was created by former president Bill Clinton in regards to gay people in the military. Based on this policy, it is illegal for gay military personnel to be asked directly if they are gay. This theme was present in the texts in that many of the lesbian families chose to live quiet closeted lives in the hopes that they would not be confronted directly about their family’s configuration. Finally, theme four is the use of lesbianism as a catalyst for heterosexual growth. The “problem” of lesbianism or lesbian families is utilized as a way of “teaching” heterosexuals to be more tolerant.

The critiques are solely from the standpoint of a Latina lesbian mom. As such, this paper neglects the voice of the child. One of its limitations is that an investigation of how children experience and make meaning of the texts discussed has not been included. For, as Buckingham (1993) argues, children are active interpreters of text and their interpretations may be different from ours, as adults. Although it is argued the texts privilege heterosexuality and attempt to “de-queer” lesbianism, it is possible for children to do a resistive reading of any of the texts critiqued here. Due to space limitations, this idea is not explored.

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Queer theory is a large academic discipline that has come to mean many things. Warner's (1993) explanation is most useful to this project:

Almost everything that would be called queer theory is about ways in which texts— either literature or mass culture or language—shape sexuality. Usually, the notion is that fantasy and other kinds of representation are inherently uncontrollable, queer by nature. This focus on messy representation allows queer theory, like non-academic queer activism, to be both assimilationist and anti-separatist: you can't eliminate queerness, says queer theory, or screen it out. It's everywhere. (p. 19)

In this sense of the term, queer theory takes as its problematic how texts (like children's picture books) shape our understandings and meanings of heterosexuality and homosexuality. Because the meaning of heterosexuality is dependant upon its constitutive other, subtexts of homosexuality are present alongside the more visible heterosexuality. One of queer theory's main intents is to deconstruct this binary of heterosexuality and homosexuality and illustrate how they are relational. While this deconstruction allows for a more sophisticated understanding of sexualities, some queer theorists wonder if such deconstruction privileges a certain kind of queer. Anzaldúa (1991) suggests that the umbrella term "queer" is not specific enough to include the particularities of those who are marginalized due to sexuality AND race. Thus, the term is representative only of white queers. The placement of white queers at the center of queer theory renders invisible the struggles queers of color face as they negotiate a racist and homophobic world.

Some theorists eschew the term queer because they feel it alienates gays and lesbians from straight people. For example, Penn (1995) states:

What harm does "queer" do? A great deal. It tells both ourselves and heterosexuals that we are so fundamentally different from them that they couldn't possibly understand who we are and what we're about. It reinforces the already all-persuasive notion that gay people lead lives that are totally unlike those led by straight people. That can only harm us. (p. 31)

Penn's stance, in some ways, tries to normalize homosexuality by making difference invisible. When difference is erased, heterosexuality remains privileged because it becomes an unmarked and unchallenged expression. As such, gays and lesbians who render invisible their difference also render invisible themselves. Gayness and lesbianism are states of being that are fully connected to power and privilege. Positioning one's self as the same as instead of as different from, does nothing to challenge power and privilege and instead masks a stable characteristic of homosexual life. For while gayness may not be a static identity, one aspect that remains constant is homosexuals' lack of privilege and rights. Often the more marginalized one is, the less visible he/she is.

Although queer theory is problematic, it is useful as a lens from which to view the picture books. Again, Warner's (1993) contributions to queer theory are important because he argues against the destabilizing effects of the term queer. Instead, he asserts that the use of the term queer should not be about asserting

sexual difference but rather about exposing the process of normalization. In other words, it might be more politically useful to examine how heterosexuality remains privileged and institutions like popular culture, churches, schools and families persist as heteronormative. Children's picture books are at the center of this process.

Picture Books as Popular Culture

Popular culture is commonly understood to be a site of conflict, a place where important issues in society get worked through. Children's picture books are a part of popular culture because they are a site where issues of race, sexuality, values, among other things, are both reflected and created. Children's picture books, like other texts, are not innocent of ideology. As children's literature critic Peter Hollindale (1992) states, "ideology is an inevitable, untamable and largely uncontrollable factor in the transaction between books and children" (p. 27). Hollindale continues by suggesting that the largest part of any book is not written by the author but, instead, by the world in which the author resides. In other words, ideologies which infect the author's world will also infect the author's writings. These representations about what is natural become insidious as they subtly teach about a larger moral order, largely informed by dominant heterosexual beliefs. Ideologies are problematic because they work to make themselves invisible. Although more schools now teach students how to read critically, many youth, especially very young children, do not read to uncover hidden ideologies. Of course, even as ideology becomes embedded within a text and it becomes difficult to identify, all readers continue to interpret and receive these texts in a variety of ways.

This article specifically addresses children's picture books, however, all popular culture texts help people make meaning of their lives and the lives of those represented in the texts. According to Kellner (1995), texts or what he calls media culture, help us fashion identities for ourselves by modeling identities and teaching what it means to be a particular race, class, gender, and sexuality. This means, then, that representations are powerful in how people come to understand themselves and others. People use popular culture texts to make sense of their worlds and to become familiar with those who they may not have personal experience with. This is especially true of children. Carlos Cortes (2000), as an example, contends that children use popular culture texts to learn lessons about gender and race and that these texts function as a curriculum on diversity. Unfortunately, the representation of race, class, gender and sexuality within mainstream popular culture is often informed by essentialized notions about identity. As Hall (1997) argues, things are given meaning by the ways in which they are represented. What we come to know is mediated by how it is represented. Texts, including children's picture books, with lesbian characters help construct what lesbianism is. Thus, popular culture's role in the construction and understanding of identities is especially true for those populations who fall outside of the dominant culture. Inness (1997) claims that lesbians:

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are particularly susceptible to being 'created' by popular culture representations. In other words, since the dominant culture has marginalized lesbians, representations of them such as those found in *Cosmopolitan* or juvenile books, can constitute the 'reality' of lesbianism for many people. (p. 3)

If those unfamiliar with lesbians experience a textual representation of a lesbian, most likely that image will help create who and what they come to know as "lesbian." Of course, there are multiple ways of being a "lesbian," but these multiplicities are generally not represented. Instead, lesbians are depicted in narrow ways. For example, Jenkins (2005) contends the recent trend in teen film is to depict lesbians as heterosexuals and as existing to satisfy straight men's fantasies about lesbian sex. There is not a "right" or "wrong" way to be a lesbian as it is not a static identity. Representations, therefore, cannot be judged as truth or fiction because they exist simultaneously as both. Since there are so few representations of lesbians in popular culture texts, however, the ones that do exist matter. At a time when debates about gay marriage are at the forefront of United States' politics, it becomes increasingly more important to evaluate representations of gay families. The Defense of Marriage Act which seeks to define marriage as "a legal union between one man and one woman as husband and wife," and the Federal Marriage Amendment which seeks to use the Constitution to deny same-sex marriage illustrate why it remains important to examine how gay and lesbian families are represented. The two Federal proposals clearly represent gay and lesbian families as deviant, un-"American," and problematic. Popular culture representations of gay and lesbian families, such as those in picture books, must be examined for the ways they may inform larger society's understandings of gay and lesbian family life. On the surface, these particular representations may seem harmless since they do not portray lesbians as murderers or as temptresses as, according to Inness (1997), many older texts were guilty of. Instead, many of these picture books were likely written by lesbians who were hungry for a diversity of representations about their lives and the lives of their children. Normalized versions of gay and lesbian life may be as devastating as criminal depictions, however. Using evidence from the picture books, four themes are examined.

Problematizing Not Having a Daddy

In *Heather Has Two Mommies* by Leslea Newman, we are introduced to a three year old White girl named Heather. Heather has two White mothers, Mama Kate, a doctor and Mama Jane, a carpenter. According to the story, they conceived Heather through artificial insemination. Heather lives a picturesque middle class life. She lives in a house with a large yard and has a dog and a cat. Her moms spend a lot of time with her. For Heather, it is "normal" that she has two mothers. Apparently, she never had to think twice about it until she encountered a play group.

At the play group, children tell stories about what their daddies do. Heather gets upset:

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“I don’t have a daddy,” Heather says. She’d never thought about it before. Did everyone except Heather have a daddy? Heather feels sad and begins to cry.

What is important is that Heather problematizes the fact that she does not have a daddy. She does not ask what it means that she has two moms. The story remains trapped within heterosexist discourse because, unintentionally, it posits having a mother and a father as “normal.” The mother-father configuration remains privileged and Heather is left to determine why her mom-mom configuration falls short. The statement, “I don’t have a daddy” illustrates the assumption that it is normal to have one. Heather’s family is left to defend itself because it falls outside the margins of what has been set up as normalcy. This is a symptom of heteronormativity.

Another picture book that has the main character problematize why she does not have a daddy is *Is Your Family Like Mine?*, written by Lois Abramchik. In this story, Armetha, who looks Latina, has a mom and a mommy. Her tale continues:

As they walked to school, Armetha asked “Matthew, is your Mommy going to school today? My Mommys’ are.” Matthew answered, “both my Mom and Dad are going to see Ms. Davis. How come your Dad isn’t going?” Armetha stopped and thought about Matthew’s question. Then she said, “I don’t have a Daddy.” Matthew’s eyes grew wide with surprise and he said, “you don’t have a Daddy, how come?” But before Armetha could answer, Matthew ran ahead with the other kids on the block. Armetha started wondering, “how come I don’t have a Daddy?”

This propels Armetha to survey her friends to find out “what makes a family.” All of her friends, with different family configurations, define family in terms of who loves them. Armetha is still troubled that she does not have a daddy. She thinks about it all day and, that night, asks her mothers why she does not have a daddy. Mom and mommy then tell Armetha that she does, in fact, have a daddy. The story continues:

Mommy continued, “Armetha, there are many kinds of Daddys. One kind of Daddy helps create babies and another kind helps raise them. You have the first kind of Daddy, who helped create you and you have two Mommys who love you and will help you grow up. Mom and I both love you very much and the three of us are a family together. There are many different kinds of families in the world and it is love that connects everyone together.

Armetha is satisfied and goes to sleep that night smiling and thinking, “I am very thankful to have my family. It is love that makes a family and it is love that makes all families like mine.”

Like Newman, Abramchik has the child in the story problematize the fact that she does not have a daddy. Instead of asking, “What does it mean to have two mothers?” both Heather and Armetha ask, “How come I do not have a daddy?” So, even though both stories attempt to portray lesbian families, both remain trapped within heterosexist discourse. Not having a daddy is portrayed as a problem children of lesbian parents must resolve. But heterosexuality and the mother-father family configuration remain normalized in the story. Because the heterosexual family is privileged in this unspoken way, homosexuality is further reified as abnormal.

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In *The Daddy Machine*, written by Johnny Valentine, one of the characters, a young White boy who narrates the story says:

We love both our moms, and our moms both love us. They're the best mothers we've ever had. But I said once to Sue, "Don't you think it'd be fun, to have two moms, and also one dad?"

The siblings' moms go out of town for a day and leave them with a construction set. They are able to build anything they want so they choose to build a machine that will produce a daddy. Although the children make clear that they love their two moms, they still pine for a dad. They end up building a machine that does not have an off switch so they create 62 dads before they are able to stop the machine. They are not happy with so many dads because they only wanted one. This story-line also privileges the mother-father family configuration since the children pine for a dad. Although they would like to keep their two moms, somehow they are not satisfied.

While some children of lesbian moms may desire a dad, not all of them do. Suzanne Johnson and Elizabeth O'Connor (2001), psychologists and lesbian moms who wrote *For Lesbian Parents: Your Guide to Helping Your Family Grow up Happy, Healthy, and Proud*, convey how their preschool age daughter's understanding of family is directly related to her lived experience of having two moms:

When our older daughter was three, Santa had delivered a dollhouse complete with two families so that we could assure her of two mommies or any other combination of parents that she wanted to use in her play. She had just begun playing when she turned around with the two male dolls and asked, "What are these guys for?" Suzanne thought for a moment and said, "Well, they can be for whatever you want." "Oh, okay. They can be the lawn guys that come and cut the grass every week." (p. 6)

In this example, Johnson's and O'Connor's daughter understands families to be comprised of two moms. She does not problematize why her family does not have a daddy. Instead, she wonders how to use male dolls in a play-family configuration when she already has the two female dolls that stand for the moms. This is the reality for many children of lesbian moms. To them, normal is having two mothers because that is their lived experience.

Recognition of the multiple ways children of lesbian moms might conceptualize family is crucial in picture books. The portrayal of children viewing their families as somehow deficient since they do not have a daddy further reifies the idea that it is heterosexuality which is normal. It leaves lesbian families to somehow measure up. This measuring up usually comes in the form of the next theme: "de-queering." In an attempt at measuring up to heterosexual families, some of the authors have created lesbian families that are "just like" heterosexual ones, thereby erasing difference.

Dequeering

Some of the picture books also participate in “dequeering.” In other words, they strip lesbian families of their difference and the social costs of those differences. As an example, in *Heather Has Two Mommies*, the playgroup teacher tells the children to draw pictures of their families and we learn that Heather is not the only child without a daddy. The story continues:

When the children are finished, Molly hangs up all the pictures and everyone looks at them. “It doesn’t matter how many mommies or how many daddies your family has,” Molly says to the children. “It doesn’t matter if your family has sisters or brothers or cousins or grandmothers or grandfathers or uncles or aunts. Each family is special.

Although the message is heartwarming, Newman neglects to communicate the message that in a homophobic world, it does matter what your family configuration looks like. By representing a lesbian family as no different than a heterosexual family, Newman does a disservice to children from lesbian families who may face discrimination and ridicule because they have two mommies. This denial is especially harmful when one thinks of the Defense of Marriage Proposal which clearly represents that it does matter what your family configuration looks like.

In *Is Your Family Like Mine?*, the character surveys her friends about what makes a family. They all conclude that it is love that makes a family. Love is never defined yet it is assumed that all people will construct the same corresponding concept when they encounter the idea of “love.” Because it is love that defines a family, according to Abramchik, lesbian families are no different than heterosexual families because lesbian families presumably love each other. What is problematic with this idea is that lesbian families are different from heterosexual families. They are not afforded the same rights and their family structures are often ridiculed and questioned. Johnson and O’Connor (2001) argue that:

Our children will eventually come to understand that their family is viewed as something unusual by other people. They will not be perceived as being “just like everybody else,” even if, in fact, their family is in many ways just like everybody else’s. We want our children to understand that “different” does not mean “worse.” We want them to have the mindset that will enable them, when faced with prejudice from others, to know that the problem lies with other people’s ignorance and not with them. (p. 51)

In other words, difference does not have to be a bad thing. The sad reality is that sometimes children of lesbian moms will face ridicule because their families are different from the normalized family structure of heterosexuals. This should be portrayed and the message inherent in such a story could be that they can be resilient in the face of ridicule. Texts that “de-queue” lesbianism allow homophobia to go unchallenged and thus, are not liberatory in the sense that they do not expose

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the artificiality of heteronormativity. Heterosexuality remains privileged since the texts attempt to assimilate queer families as heterosexual. It is heterosexuality that remains at the center, the standard all families should try to attain. Although other texts and institutions participate in “de-queering,” it is no less dangerous. In order to assimilate, the texts strip lesbianism of its particularities and make difference seem like a dirty word.

The intent of this analysis is not to hold these books accountable for representing every facet of the diversity within lesbian life. The idea, however, of erasing lesbian difference seems counterproductive if a goal is to depict the reality of the lives of children with lesbian mothers. It would be impossible to represent “authentic” lesbian experience. There, of course, is not one authentic experience. This means, then, that multiple types of experiences could and should be represented. Life is not picture perfect for many lesbians and their children. In this country in particular, lesbian marriage is not recognized as legal. Non-biological lesbian parents often have few rights to their children. Biological lesbian parents can still lose their children in custody battles, which posit them as unfit and immoral parents. These are, unfortunately, the political realities we face.

One attempt by gay marriage activists has been to illustrate the longevity and commitments of gay and lesbian relationships as if to say that we do live in marriages even if the state does not recognize them. This assimilationist tactic is problematic but it is a strategy utilized by some of the authors of these children's picture books. Lesbian couples are not just like heterosexual couples who live in marriages recognized by state and federal governments. Instead, there are political, legal, and social struggles we face. In addition, the lesbian community, like the heterosexual community, faces its fair share of people who break commitments, who are not monogamous long-term, and who have children for the wrong reasons. We do a disservice to ourselves by denying this, by refusing to “air our dirty laundry,” and by pretending that life is always picture-perfect in our communities.

Rofes (1998) believes that lesbians (and gays) must mediate their identities as lesbian (and gay) and as parents due to “moral panic” (p. 13). Historical constructions (many in popular culture) of lesbianism have often posited lesbians as immoral and deviant. Some of these constructions still linger and have a huge impact on our lives:

The messages delivered to us from the social world we occupy become lived-reality in our everyday lives, and repeatedly regenerate themselves. The vast apparatus of moral panic creates the scaffolding on which we construct what we think are “acceptable” public representations of our social and sexual worlds. (Rofes, 1998, p. 13)

This, of course, affects how we choose to represent ourselves. Moral panic could very well be the reason why the authors of the texts have taken an assimilationist stance and have stripped lesbianism of its “queerness.” Our representations of self and family life are mediated through the lens of moral panic. In an effort to construct acceptable representations, the authors of these books have created a singular view

of a diverse community. This idea of moral panic may have also contributed to the presence of the next theme explored: “Don’t ask, don’t tell.” The Don’t ask, don’t tell policy mandates silence on the part of the gay or lesbian person. Bill Clinton made it famous when he failed to make good on his promise to allow gays and lesbians into the military. Instead, Clinton forced them to become subject to “moral panic.” The mandate asked gays and lesbians to hide their sexuality, to keep it secret, to not tell anyone and, thus, to privilege heterosexuality.

Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell Policy

We live in a heteronormative society. Most people assume children have been born to heterosexual people (individuals or couples). The majority of lesbian moms must know this. So, how many would actually send their children to school without first explaining the particularities of their child’s situation? Of the six books examined here, two of the books take up this issue.

Asha’s Mums by Rosamund Elwin and Michelle Paulse is about a young girl of color named Asha. This text, however, does not begin with a child inquiring about her lack of a daddy. Instead, Asha is faced with the heterosexist assumption on the part of her teacher that she cannot possibly have two mums who both signed a permission slip. Asha’s story unfolds:

My teacher Ms. Samuels gave us a form to take home. Our parents had to fill it out and sign it so that we would have permission to go on the trip. I gave it back to her the next day. Just before break she asked to see me. She wanted to know which of the names on the form was my mum’s. I said, “Both.” “It can’t be both. You can’t have two mums,” she said briskly. “But I do! My brother and I have two mums,” I protested. Coreen and Judi were listening to me. “Take the form back home and have it filled out correctly,” Ms. Samuels said. “You can’t go on the trip if it isn’t.” She also gave me a note.

The teacher assumes that it is “correct” only to have a heterosexual family configuration. She does not even consider the lesbian family because there is no role for it in a heteronormative society. This example also reiterates an earlier point about the dangers of assimilation. No matter how hard lesbian families try to present themselves as similar to heterosexual families, they cannot erase the fact that two women are raising a child together. School forms, not to mention federal and state law often do not accommodate the mom-mom family configuration.

Asha’s mums eventually clear up the misunderstanding with the teacher and make her aware that it is possible to have two mothers. The reader, however, is not privy to this interaction. The story, however, tries to confront heteronormativity. It stresses that families can be comprised of two moms and that such a configuration should not be remarkable. Instead, educators and school policies should be more socially aware about difference. The book, however, never fully explores the ramifications of the teacher’s assumptions or the cost to Asha and her family. What is

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problematic about this story is that it implicates Asha in our nation's "Don't ask, don't tell" policy which requires gays and lesbians to remain silent about sexuality (and thus family structures). Most proactive lesbian parents who have dealt with homophobia and heteronormativity before would know to notify their child's teacher about her/his family structure to prevent these types of misunderstandings. Instead, Asha is represented as taking on the "burden" of her mothers' secret. Asha does not have the luxury of living in the closet, of not telling about her family life.

Molly's Family by Nancy Garden portrays a similar experience. This book features a five-year-old White girl named Molly. It is "Open School Night" for Molly's kindergarten class. She has drawn a picture of her family to hang up as a decoration. The other children are incredulous that she has a mommy and a mama. Tommy, a boy who has a daddy and a mommy, says to the teacher, Ms. Marston: "But you can't have a mommy and a mama. Can you?"

The teacher, who is obviously open-minded although not aware that Molly does have two mothers tries to deal with the situation:

Mrs. Marston sat down and looked at Molly's picture. "Who is this?" she asked.

Molly sniffed. "Mama Lu," she said.

"And who is this?"

"Mommy." Molly wiped her nose with a tissue Tanya gave her.

"Is Mama Lu visiting?" asked Ms. Marston.

"No."

"Is she your aunt?"

"No," said Molly. "She is my Mama Lu."

"So," said Ms. Marston, "it looks to me as if you can have a mommy and a mama."

Ms. Marston, perhaps caught unaware, tries to figure out who Mama Lu is. It is interesting that she assumes "mommy" is, in fact, Molly's mother and wonders instead, who "Mama Lu" is. She does not ask Molly whether Mommy and Mama Lu share a bed, but instead defines Mama Lu as a parent because she is not Molly's Aunt but she is living in the house with Molly and Mommy. Molly is also implicated in the "Don't ask, don't tell" policy. Because her mothers did not prepare her teacher in advance, Molly was left having to, like Asha, defend the "correctness" of her family after revealing what had become a secret.

Given the heteronormative structure of most schools, lesbian parents should speak with their child's teacher in advance. By not making teachers aware that a child has two moms, children of lesbians are implicated in the "Don't ask, don't tell" policy which underlies heterosexism. "Don't ask, don't tell" privileges heterosexuality by making lesbianism invisible. This invisibility then underlies a child's experience in school and heterosexual families remain normalized and important.

This favoring of heterosexuality leads to the next theme explored: catalyst for heterosexual growth.

Catalyst for Heterosexual Growth

The last theme discussed is how the books often utilize the “problem” of lesbian families as a catalyst for heterosexual growth. For example, in *Asha’s Mums*, Asha explains a picture of her family at Show and Tell. The students are incredulous:

Coreen said “How come you’ve got two mommies?” Because I do,” I said. “You can’t have two mommies,” Judi insisted. “Yes she can,” Rita said turning around in her seat. “Just like you can have two aunts, and two daddies and two grandmas,” yelled Diane from across the room.

The teacher is curiously silent as the discussion continues. One child insists, “My mum and dad said you can’t have two mothers living together. My dad says it’s bad.” The students ask the teacher if it is wrong but she never responds because a student yells out, “It’s not wrong if they’re nice to you and if you like them.” Then the bell rings. We are left wondering how the teacher would have responded since she made a heteronormative assumption about Asha’s family at the beginning of the story.

By the end of the story, Asha’s classmates have briefly met each mum and now accept them as Asha’s parents. Although Asha does not experience any angst over this exchange (she is more concerned about being able to go to the science museum with her classmates), her situation is used as a catalyst for her classmates and teacher to grow. Although we are not made aware of how Asha’s family was explained, lesbianism is fairly easily addressed in that Asha’s classmates seem to accept Asha’s family structure. In the story, they are illustrated as having grown from making a heteronormative assumption to being more socially aware.

In *Molly’s Family*, Molly’s classmates grow similarly. After Molly completes a picture of her two moms:

Tommy looked at Molly’s paper. “That’s not a family,” he said.

“It is so!” said Molly. “It’s my family.”

“Where’s your daddy?” asked Tommy.

“I don’t have a daddy,” said Molly. “I have a Mommy and Mama Lu and Sam.”

“You can’t have a mommy and a mama,” said Tommy.

This situation causes tremendous angst for Molly. Although her teacher and both her moms reassure her that it is possible to have a mommy and a mama, Molly remains unsure until the end of the story. Molly finally decides to bring her picture into school to hang up along with the other children’s pictures. Ms. Marston, her teacher, holds up her picture and says:

“Look everyone. Here’s Molly’s nice family again.” She held up Molly’s picture.

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"Here's her mommy," she said. "here's her Mama Lu. And here's her puppy, Sam."

Tommy, the antagonist of Molly's angst over having two mothers merely says: "I have a puppy, too... Can he come to Open School Night?"

It appears that Molly's suffering has educated Tommy and the rest of the class about different kinds of families. But, at what cost to Molly? The story does not make us aware of this. In both situations, the authors do not make explicit how the children of lesbian mothers grow in their understandings of family. Instead, it is the children from more traditionally heterosexual families whose growth is illustrated though never fully explored. We are not privy to the real and sometimes painful conversations that occur when people come up against tradition and difference. All we know as readers is that children from heterosexual families somehow come to "accept" the fact that a child may have two mothers. But do they really? This theme is also an example of dominant group privilege (McIntosh, 1988). The dominant group, by virtue of their power, do not ever have to learn about Others. It is marginalized groups who must know and understand the dominant group's culture. When the dominant group does seek knowledge about an Other, it is often presumed that the marginalized group must take on the responsibility of teaching the dominant group. The texts illustrate this privilege without naming it as such. It is kids of lesbian parents and the lesbian parents themselves who take on the responsibility of facilitating change and growth in heterosexual families.

Conclusion

Given the fact that one of the ways children (and adults) learn about this world is through books, it is important that these texts continually be critiqued. Because the dominant heterosexual society has traditionally marginalized lesbians and because popular culture has worked to render lesbianism invisible, texts which "take up" lesbianism become increasingly important. As argued by Gabriele Griffin (1993):

We might want to suggest that all representation of lesbians in popular culture is a good thing, because it gives lesbians a public platform but, where such representation operates within the mainstream, it is frequently problematic because it replicates stereotypes of lesbians produced within heteropatriarchal culture which derogates lesbians. (p. 4)

The lesbian family should be represented in complex ways because the "identity" lesbian does not denote one complete experience. The texts examined here have posited that lesbian families are "just like" heterosexual families. This is evident in the themes of "problematizing," "dequeueing" and "don't ask, don't tell." The intended message seems to be that because lesbian families mimic heterosexual families, they should be accepted. This assimilation technique is not unique to the authors of these books, however. Many marginalized groups have historically

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deployed this technique as a way to gain acceptance. Cornel West (1993) argued that initially the Black Diaspora:

proceeded in an assimilationist manner that set out to show that Black people were really like White people—thereby eliding differences (in history and culture) between Whites and Blacks. Black specificity and particularity was thus banished in order to gain White acceptance and approval. Second, these Black responses rested upon a homogenizing impulse that assumed that all Black people were really alike—hence obliterating differences (class, gender, region, sexual orientation) between Black peoples. (p. 210)

This type of assimilationist approach, when practiced by authors of children's books, ignores the particularities of lesbianism and “de-queers” them. In addition, the books do not interrupt heteronormativity because heterosexuality is privileged as evidenced by all four themes.

In a society where debates about gay and lesbian adoptions have entered into public discourse and where homophobic courts can rip children out of the arms of their biological and adoptive lesbian mothers, we can walk into some bookstores and find children's books that celebrate lesbian families. Yet, when state and federal laws deny lesbians the right to parent children, we cannot pretend these books tell the stories of the lives of lesbian parents. The tears and the struggles become lost among a world of acceptance and love. It is not that picture books should tell stories of hate crimes. But, representing lesbian families in a heteronormative manner denies the very real and very painful political and social struggles lesbians face.

The representation of lesbian families in this manner (i.e., it does not matter if you do not have a daddy because love is what makes a family) ignores the very real way in which lesbianism has been constructed in opposition to heterosexuality. The binary of heterosexuality/lesbianism constructs lesbians as “Other” and affords more power and privilege to the non-Other, heterosexuals. Merely stating that lesbians are “like” heterosexuals does nothing to deconstruct the binary which exists. The notion of lesbian as “Other” and bad would not have to be subverted were it not for the notion of heterosexual as proper and good. Also, positing heterosexual families as the norm leads lesbian families left to somehow measure up, to show that they are as “normal” as “normal” (read: heterosexual) families. Representations of lesbian families do not have to normalize because this tactic unwittingly reifies the power and privilege afforded to heterosexual families. Heteronormative representations allow heterosexual families to remain at the center of the discussion while lesbian families are relegated to the margins.

The texts also ignored the multiple ways that lesbians can be oppressed. For example, although *Is Your Family Like Mine?* and *Asha's Mums* allow lesbians of color and their children a chance to see their lives validated, the multiple oppressions lesbians of color encounter are not addressed. Children (and adults) may come to believe that lesbians are not affected by homophobia, people of color are not affected by racism, and women are not affected by sexism. For a child whose mothers may have encountered one or all of these oppressions, the books do not

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represent the complexities of living as a marginalized person. Identity needs to be conceptualized as complicated and attention should be paid to how oppressions like race, class, gender, (and sexuality) are, according to Collins (1991), “interlocking systems of oppression.” This approach would conceptualize marginalized groups in more complex ways. Individuals could be simultaneously viewed as both oppressor and oppressed depending on her or his power and privilege at any given moment. This would reflect the lived experience of children within lesbian families, especially children of color. Hollindale (1992) argues that:

We may live in a period when our common ideology has many local fractures, so that children in different parts of the same national society are caught between bonding and difference. If children who are citizens of one country live in worlds within a world, discrete subcultures within a culture, they need different storytelling voices to speak to them—voices which can speak within an ideology which for them is coherent and complete. (p. 33)

This means that the representations of lesbian families must be complex in order for children with lesbian moms to identify with them. Of course, anyone can do a resistive reading of a text even if the text's ideology is oppositional to one's experience and subject location. Nevertheless, children of lesbian moms live within a heteronormative society or, according to Hollindale, “worlds within a world” (p. 33). It might be more enjoyable for them to read stories that posit their worlds as normal while at the same time learning how to deal with the fact that particular subject positions (i.e., heterosexuality, Whiteness) remain privileged and normative. Many adults need this lesson as well and the texts could be a teaching tool for the adults who read to children. Sadly, many teacher education programs do not do enough to prepare teachers for the task of confronting difference especially around sexual orientation. These picture books are a source of knowledge for adults (teachers) who read the books and then lead discussions around the content. Just as children learn about lesbianism from the texts, so too do some adults. Without prior knowledge about the lesbian family, adults' and teachers' guiding discussions of the books take their cues from the preexisting content.

Since there is no such thing as the “True” lesbian family experience, it is important to represent lesbian families in multiple ways. In her analysis of the sitcom *Will and Grace*, Quimby (2005) argued we must broaden our understanding of how love works and that definitions of family must include the wonderfully varied “lived arrangements of queer life” (p. 728). Although she referred specifically to the gay male/straight female relationship, such a charge is useful to this project as well because lesbian families are not one in the same and, therefore, should be represented in complex and diverse ways. There are some children of lesbian moms who have a father who may or may not be involved in the child's life. *Is Your Family Like Mine?* illustrates that Armetha has a father but his sole role was to help create her while her mothers would help her grow up. This was an attempt at representing the varied “lived arrangements of queer life.” Representations do not just reflect. They create as well. Therefore, representations should be complex; they should be

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as multiple and varied as lived experience is. If they are not continually critiqued, it will become more difficult to recognize how texts that presume themselves to be “progressive” are inscribed with hegemonic values.

The authors of these picture books deserve praise. They are writing about lesbian families and lesbian relationships in a political and social world that praises heterosexual “family values” above all. Some of these books have been at the center of political discussions of family values because they have been banned from school libraries. These authors have written children’s books that announce that lesbian families should be valued. The argument made here merely asks of the authors to advance one step further, to represent lesbian relationships and lesbian families in complex ways, which illustrate the interconnectedness of identities and resist or disrupt heteronormativity by challenging it. Stories of “queerness” should be told in all its multiplicities.

We live in a world of social oppressions like homophobia and racism. These are facts that all children will face. Of course, some children will be subject to homophobia and racism while others will be privileged because their race and sexuality are normalized. Given this fact, why must children books pretend as if the world is a perfect place? Although it is important to foster imagination and creativity in children, they should also understand at an early age that some people have more power and privilege in the world than others and they should understand why this is so. Until more marginalized people become change agents and foster the desire for change in our children, the status quo will remain part of our reality. We should not teach our children the world is a fairytale. Yes, there are happy endings for some but not all of us. All children should understand why this is so.

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