Introduction

Tolstoy Was Wrong

Love and marriage, love and marriage
Go together like a horse and carriage
This I tell you, brother
You can’t have one without the other

— “Love and Marriage,” lyrics by Sammy Cahn, recorded by Frank Sinatra, 1955

When “Frankie,” a New Jersey hero, recorded the song “Love and Marriage” in 1955, he was crooning for me and my gals, and we sure did soak it up. Coming of age in a white ethnic, lower-middle-class New Jersey town, we were part of the first generation of kids to encounter the magic box of television, which fed us a steady diet of fifties family fables—Father Knows Best, Leave It to Beaver, Ozzie and Harriet, and my personal favorite, I Remember Mama. In the mid-fifties, my gal pack and I jumped rope chanting the popular jingle, “First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes [Judy] with a baby carriage.” The post-war era was a time when such platitudes were uncontroversial and almost as empirically accurate as they were morally prescriptive, a time when in the eyes of many voters, divorce rendered presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson unfit for office, and marital infidelity turned Hollywood heartthrob Ingrid Bergman, the Swedish star of Casablanca, into a pariah denounced on the floor of the U.S. Senate as “Hollywood’s apostle of degradation.” Those were the days, of course, when any sort of love other than heterosexual monogamy dared not yet whisper its name, and nobody would have thought to specify the sexual orientation of the imaginary blissful couple that the song and the jump-rope jingle celebrated.

Baby, carriage, and all sure have come a long way down and around since then. Paths between love, marriage, and babies have multiplied, divided,
inverted, eroded, and confounded. Divorced candidates, even conservative Republicans, now routinely run for the highest offices without apology, or public mention. No fifties rope jumper, seventies feminist, or family sociologist, like me, could possibly have imagined a world in which an unwed pregnant teenager could perch with her boyfriend amidst the proud family tableau on the dais at the Republican presidential convention while her mother, a right-wing governor, accepted the party’s nomination for vice president of the United States. But that, of course, was what happened when Sarah Palin became Republican John McCain’s running mate in 2008.

During the same decades that divorce, adultery, and unwed maternity were becoming unremarkable, rising percentages of Americans began to freely fall in and out of love without bothering to marry or parent at all. In 1950, married couples anchored four out of five households, but now the majority of domiciles shelter unmarried adults living with or without other grown-ups or children. Instead of Leave It to Beaver or Father Knows Best, viewers can set their TV dials to a dizzying array of niche-market, domestic sitcoms, series, and “reality” shows that range from The Good Wife,
Desperate Housewives, and reruns of Sex and the City, Six Feet Under, and Friends to Big Love, The L Word, Noah’s Arc, and reportedly soon even a CBS reality program, Arranged Marriage.

Meanwhile, love, marriage, and baby carriages are all the rage among lesbians, gay men, and transgendered people. The drive for same-sex marriage became the centerfold campaign of a vigorous gay rights movement. More than eighteen thousand lesbian and gay couples sprinted to tie the knot in California during the five months of 2008 after the state’s supreme court opened the constitutional gates to the altar to them and before passage of Proposition 8 slammed the gates shut once again.\(^3\) The families of former vice president Cheney’s lesbian daughter and donor-insemination mom Mary Cheney and of queer sex columnist and gay adoptive dad Dan Savage can vie with thousands like theirs for a vacation berth on Rosie O’Donnell’s “Family Cruise” or at “Family Week” in Provincetown. On board or at the beach, gay parents can park their kids in Camp COLAGE (Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere), while the grown-ups sample film screenings that feature all manner of queer families, like Transamerica.

After fifty years together, pathbreaking lesbian and feminist activist couple Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon are the first same-sex couple to legally wed in San Francisco, on June 16, 2008. Del Martin died two months later, on August 27, 2008. Reprinted by permission of Liz Mangelsdorf.
the critically acclaimed feature about a male-to-female trans-parent who sets out to meet the son she unknowingly sired when she was a male.

And yet, despite these mind-bending changes, the word family continues to conjure an image of a married, monogamous, heterosexual pair and their progeny. This is still the model of a “normal family,” not only in the world of soccer moms and Joe six-packs and among politicians across the ideological spectrum who bid to win their votes but even among some family researchers who should know better. As the popular rubric “alternative families” makes clear, this “normal family” remains the standard against which all other forms of intimacy and kinship are compared and usually found lacking. Citizens and scholars alike widely presume that the “normal family” is not only superior to all others but close to universal historically and cross-culturally, a quasi-natural institution, virtually the core definition of family.4

Certainly, a married papa and mama with their children is the image most often brought to mind by the memorable opening lines of Anna Karenina: “Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.”5 But it should be pretty obvious by now that Tolstoy was wrong. Or rather, he was a great fiction writer. In no place or time have all happy families been alike. Across centuries, continents, and cultures, happy (and unhappy) kinds of family and kinship always have differed wildly. They continue to do so today. This book takes issue with the singular view of a proper happy family embedded in the popular songs and chants of my fifties childhood and in the ideology of family values that has become bipartisan political orthodoxy in the United States over the past few decades.

Of course, this is by no means the first book, or even my own first book, to challenge that view.6 By now a voluminous literature, including fine recent books like Stephanie Coontz’s Marriage, a History, Andrew Cherlin’s The Marriage-Go-Round, Barbara Risman’s Families as They Really Are, and Nancy Polikoff’s Beyond (Straight and Gay) Marriage, has expertly exposed the fallacies of the one-size-fits-all vision of happy families that undergirds and distorts a great deal of public family policy today. Nor is this book unique in debunking three influential tenets of the contemporary marriage promotion movement: first, that marriage is a universal and necessary institution; second, that the ideal family structure for raising children is a married man and woman and their biological or adopted children; and third, that children generally, and boys particularly, need both a father and a mother to turn out well.7 However, in this book I trek a different, less-traveled road to the Rome of family diversity. I do not enter the fray
over the causes and consequences of “divorce culture,” “fatherlessness,” the campaign for same-sex marriage, gay parenthood, or other divisive issues in the family wars. Instead, I offer readers an ethnographic introduction to happy (and unhappy) instances of a few of the contemporary world’s newest, oldest, and least “familiar” species of family life and of the social, political, and economic conditions that buttress and batter them. When we understand how and why different sorts of families foster different patterns of happiness and unhappiness for their members, we will better grasp the inescapable challenges and trade-offs that our quests for intimacy and kinship must navigate in the modern world.

Domesticity Is Rarely an Aphrodisiac

Of course, it’s true that all societies depend mightily on families to feed and form children and to sustain, and restrain, adults. As Civilization and Its Discontents, Freud’s gloomy rumination on the human condition, underscored long ago, just as individuals toggle uncomfortably between the competing demands of id and superego, all human societies contend with irreconcilable tensions between the domains of eros and domesticity. We might think of families serving as culture’s counterpart to the ego in these duels. Every culture develops family and kinship forms to negotiate inescapable human conflicts between unruly romantic and sexual desires, on the one hand, and timeless human (and social) needs for durable, dependable, intimate relationships and care, on the other. All societies devise families to confront this universal quandary, but the families they design are by no means all alike. Even a cursory scan through the historical and anthropological record reveals that the nuclear family that most Americans think of as normal—one spawned when reciprocal romantic love inspires one man and one woman to exchange vows to forsake all others before they begin inviting visits from the stork—is quite the cultural exception rather than the rule.

Sammy Cahn’s pop lyrical conceit that “love and marriage go together like a horse and carriage” would seem ludicrous, or perhaps literally ass-backward, to most inhabitants of traditional societies. The reality, succinctly captured by Stephanie Coontz in the subtitle, How Love Conquered Marriage, of her superb history of the institution, is that romantic love and erotic attractions rarely enter into the calculus of traditional, marital match-making. Rather, “first comes marriage,” as the title of a contemporary
advice book that offers relationship wisdom from the still-vital tradition of Indian arranged marriage customs insists.9

Just this premise inspired a more savvy set of lyrics in Fiddler on the Roof, the 1960s smash Broadway musical that dramatized the clash between traditional and modern family values in a Jewish shtetl in Tsarist Russia. Tevye the milkman, the paternal protagonist of the play, flummoxes his wife, Golde, by asking if she loves him. “Do I love you?” his exasperated helpmeet warbles: “For twenty-five years I’ve washed your clothes / Cooked your meals, cleaned your house / Given you children, milked the cow / After twenty-five years, why talk about love right now?” But Tevye persists until Golde concedes, “Do I love him? / For twenty-five years I’ve lived with him, / Fought with him, starved with him / Twenty-five years my bed is his / If that’s not love, what is?”10

Few married women living in traditional cultures then or now would define love much differently. Through most of human history, and still throughout much of the world, romantic love has occupied a realm outside of marriage, reserved chiefly for those men and members of the aristocracy who could dare to engage in liaisons that were decidedly “dangereuses.”11 Most family systems try to manage the conflict between desire and domesticity by sacrificing the yearnings of the former to the demands of the latter, especially when the former belong to women. A hoary host of patriarchal marriage systems rigorously restrict, and at times excise, women’s sexual and romantic cravings in order to secure the fruits of their procreative and domestic labors.

Sturdy remnants of many of these traditional kinship regimes, some with boggling permutations of love, sex, marriage, and parenthood, survive in our contemporary world. More marriage systems have been polygamous than monogamous (almost always polygynous—one man with multiple wives—and very rarely polyandrous—one woman with multiple husbands), and arranged marriage systems, like the one that hitched Golde to Tevye, far outnumber free love matches. Casual cross-cultural research can speedily unearth a goody-bag of more exotic sexual, marital, and parental practices as well. Some cultures expect men to kidnap their brides in capture marriages,12 and others oblige women or men to marry ghosts.13 Some cultures practice levirate polygamy,14 which requires a man to wed his deceased brother’s widows, while cultures with fraternal polyandry mate women to multiple brothers.15 The archives of fertility and childrearing customs document not only wet-nursing in France and child-swapping in England but also Sambian boys in New Guinea who must spend years
fellating men and ingesting their semen in order to achieve heterosexual potency and Arzawagh Muslim daughters in Niger who are force-fed in order to enhance their sexual appeal, fertility, and marriagability. As for versions of gender and sexuality that extend beyond our understandings of male or female or of GLBT or straight, consider, for example, the sworn female virgins of Albania who live as fierce male heads of their households, the bisexual “mati work” practiced by working-class women in Dutch Suriname, or India’s cross-gender, self-castrated hijiras, who must be paid off to bless weddings and births. Etcetera.

And we don’t need to trek even a millimeter beyond what are now the borders of the fifty U.S. states to add copious specimens of exotica to our collection of such un-“familiar” practices. American historical archives stock ample supplies of these as well. When the European colonists arrived on these shores, they encountered (and often eradicated) a cornucopia of alien family practices among hundreds of indigenous cultures. For example, there were the unsettling gender norms of the comparatively sexually egalitarian Iroquois, who lived in matrilineal longhouses, not to mention the titillating and shocking Inuit practice of ritual sexual spouse-swapping.

Nor were our American forebears slouches when it came to inventing new forms of intimacy and kinship themselves or imposing “alternative” family lives on the people they enslaved. Through the apprenticeship system, for example, colonial families routinely swapped parental responsibility for vocational and religious training of their adolescent sons, and sometimes their daughters. The sad fate of Hester Prynne in Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* taught generations of schoolgirls like me the severe price colonial women paid for indulging in sex outside the sanctified bonds of matrimony. Yet at the same time, laws denied slaves access to legal marriage, thereby requiring, and sometimes forcing, unmarried slave women to copulate and to breed human property for their owners. Moreover, because owners could disrupt slave unions and families with impunity, slaves had no choice but to create more collective and fluid forms of parenting and kinship. Likewise, from the seventeenth century until the Supreme Court finally overturned anti-miscegenation laws in 1967, American colonies and states passed laws that aimed (unsuccessfully, of course) to prevent interracial intimacy. Clothed plural, and biracial unions and families, like the one Thomas Jefferson created with his slave Sally Hemings, were among the perverse consequences of such laws.

Meanwhile, in the nineteenth century, while white Americans were imposing alternatives to monogamous married family life on black slaves,
they were busily inventing a bevy of novel, often exotic, forms of intimacy for themselves. The heyday of radical, utopian communities that rejected marriage, monogamy, and private property and experimented with alternative forms of intimacy in the United States did not take place during the counter-cultural 1960s but a full century earlier. For example, the dissident Protestant Shakers, still famous for their furniture design, rejected sex and baby-making entirely. They established numerous, surprisingly long-lasting, celibate communities whose members lived in sex-segregated “families” that could reproduce only by attracting new recruits or by adopting orphans. In stark contrast, John Humphrey Noyes, the libidinous founder of the Oneida community of upstate New York, invented a system of sexual “stirpiculture” that gave him authority to assign multiple, short-term sexual and procreative matings to his followers. Likewise, in 1831, Joseph Smith, an equally randy contemporary, received the fateful Revelation that emboldened the founder of the Church of Latter-Day Saints to embrace “the principle” of polygyny—a far more traditional domestic accommodation to masculine eros that this book will examine in a variety of shapes and sites.

Somethings Old, Somethings New, Somethings Borrowed . . .

The chapters that follow draw from an eclectic set of research projects on family diversity that I have pursued at home and abroad over the past ten years. I invite readers to explore with me some species of family life that are quite new, some old-fashioned, and one that lies very far from the beaten trail. To gain the most from our family visits, it will help to travel light, leaving as much cultural baggage behind as possible. In particular, I urge readers to set aside expectations about love, marriage, parenthood, and kinship drawn from prevailing Western theories about family, intimacy, and modernity. Our expedition will enable us to consider afresh two bodies of theory that have proven especially influential among scholars as well as citizens.

First, diverse theories of modernization have long predicted that urbanization, economic development, and the global spread of media, markets, and migration would diffuse Western family life throughout the developing world. Cold War optimists anticipated the irrepressible, global triumph of democratic, voluntary, love-match, companionate marriages and egalitarian gender norms over traditional patriarchal marriage regimes.
Some leftist critics, in contrast, feared that individualistic market rationality would wreak havoc on the familial “haven in a heartless world.” More recently, theorists of post-modern transformations of intimacy and critics of these changes have faced off over contemporary prospects that eros will utterly vanquish domesticity. A controversial, optimistic account by eminent British sociologist Anthony Giddens theorized that the economic and social conditions of late modernity enable a liberated practice of intimacy that he termed the “pure relationship.” He reasoned that with sexuality “severed from its age-old integration with reproduction, kinship and the generations,” equals were becoming free to pursue intimacy purely “for its own sake,” and so intimate relationships would endure only so long as they “deliver enough satisfactions for each individual to stay within it.”

If Giddens was sanguine about the liberating potential of these developments, they represent the tragic triumph of narcissism over family solidarity of any sort to many critics on both the left and the right of the political spectrum. Yet despite their incompatible values, optimists and pessimists generally share an expectation that globalization will erode traditional family forms. I ask readers to suspend such presumptions as you approach the chapters and families ahead. Collectively, these demonstrate that despite, and at times because of, globalization, there remain more ways of organizing family life in heaven and earth than are dreamt of by those currently engaged in efforts to promote or to prevent marriage—whether straight or gay.

Gay men certainly qualify as among the newest, the most controversial, and in my view, the most creative petitioners for family recognition and rights around the globe today. Their struggles to navigate eros and domesticity are more intense and their strategies necessarily more various and visible than those that heterosexuals or even, as we will see, that most lesbians have to muster. For just these reasons, gay men have much to teach the rest of us. The first two chapters present research on intimacy and kinship among gay men that I conducted in Los Angeles between 1999 and 2003. Chapter 1 focuses on the familial adult bonds that the men I studied forged with lovers, friends, ex-lovers, and others. It includes portraits of sex pigs and celibates; men in monogamous and sexually open relationships; men living alone by choice or by chance; others with mates, whether committed or ambivalent, passionate or platonic, including a long-term exclusive trio. Some of these men sought lives of love and marriage indistinguishable from the 1950s horse-and-carriage trade. Others were bravely redefining fidelity and family life with uneven degrees of success.
Chapter 2 treats parenthood among this first generation of gay men who began openly, often ingeniously, to reconsider and reconfigure it against the odds. Readers will meet gay men bringing up children alone or with male partners, and some with women friends. Many of these men fostered and adopted children of varying ages across all manner of racial, social, religious, national, physical, and emotional boundaries. Some provided sperm to female friends or relatives; others pioneered forms of surrogacy-extended parenthood. You will encounter men who give bold new meaning to the concept “planned parenthood,” sometimes forging elaborate agreements to guide relationships among three and four co-parents who span households and cities. Included too are surprisingly rare stories of gay men who steadfastly refused to join the world of diapers and day care, as well as more frequent tales of those whose passion for parenthood simply failed to clear the high bar required of gay men. All of these choices and lives illuminate social forces that underlie the decline of conventional paternity in recent decades but that also allowed new forms to emerge. Lesbian and gay-parent families challenge widely held prejudices about whether children need both a father and a mother and about the ways in which a parent’s sexual orientation or marital status does and doesn’t matter.

From the novelty of gay L.A., we journey to a tenacious, traditional form of family life on the other side of the globe: polygamy in South Africa. While banned and generally considered depraved in the United States, polygamy is one of the world’s oldest and most widely practiced family regimes. Chapters 3 and 4 revisit this stigmatized family system by juxtaposing it with gay intimacy in contemporary South Africa. Drawing from my comparative research on stunningly different family policies and practices in post-apartheid South Africa and the United States, I address divisive questions about family and sexual diversity.

Chapter 3 compares de facto family policy in one of the world’s oldest constitutional democracies with de jure family policy in one of the newest. The 1996 South African constitution was the world’s first, and is still the only, to ban discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation and marital status. South Africa also is the lone nation in which both polygamy and same-sex marriage are currently legal. This vanguard legal framework, however, far outstrips popular consciousness. Directly opposite, in the United States, recalcitrant family laws, including the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) and anti-bigamy statutes, contrast with a colorful history of avant-garde family practices. This includes not only the queer new families of gay “el lay” but also the stubborn persistence of outlawed fundamentalist
Mormon polygamy and the emergence of new, sometimes instrumental versions of plural marriage. Rather than ridicule the popular conservative warning that legalizing same-sex marriage will pave a slippery slope to legal polygamy, chapter 3 takes the argument seriously. By doing so, I identify some unsuspected cross-country trails that traverse the terrain between the two alternatives to heterosexual monogamy.

Chapter 4 ventures more deeply into these brambles. Drawing on field research I conducted in South Africa in 2007, I explore rarely noted paradoxes in the relationship between modernity and polygamy. The chapter suggests that although formal polygamy generally does lose its grip when a society modernizes, as theory and common sense predict, this does not turn out to be an unadulterated victory for monogamy. Instead, I show that informal species of plural marriage survive, and even multiply, not only in South Africa but in the United States as well. What is more, globalization unleashes forces that promote novel, transnational forms of polygamy. The chapter exposes the irrationality, hypocrisy, and the unfortunate, unintended consequences of U.S. policies toward bigamy and adultery that spring from our deep cultural antipathy to polygamy. I join those unpopular figures and rare feminists who argue that laws against bigamy do more to harm women and children than to protect them and that decriminalizing polygamy would be the wiser, less destructive course.

Finally, in chapter 5, readers will encounter one of the most distinctive, enduring family systems ever documented by anthropologists. The Mosuo people of southwest China, as the chapter’s title indicates, radically separate erotic horses from domesticating carriages, and without corolling either. Most Mosuo people do not marry their lovers, or anyone else, and couples do not live or raise children together. Men visit their female lovers at night but return to their maternal homes each morning to share daily life and work with their own extended kin and to help raise their sisters’ children and grandchildren.

Mosuo family and sexual practices seem as exotic and titillating to mainstream Chinese as they do to Westerners. The remote Mosuo mountain villages have become one of the most popular Chinese destinations for domestic and foreign tourists, including feminist scholars like myself. The normal Mosuo family seems to be the world’s lone surviving exception to a family structure based on a conjugal couple that feminist legal theorist Martha Fineman lamented in her book title *The Neutered Mother, the Sexual Family, and Other Twentieth-Century American Tragedies*. It is an exception, however, that may not last.
Readers are about to embark on a family odyssey rife with ironies, paradoxes, and provocations for prejudices and ideologies of all stripes, including some of my own. This book challenges popular convictions about family, gender, and sexuality held on the left, right, and center, by feminists and fundamentalists, and especially by marriage-movement advocates and opponents, gay and straight. In writing this book, I seek to bury Tolstoy’s dictum, or rather to return it to the fiction shelf. I hope that the sundry conceptions of love, marriage, parenthood, intimacy, and kinship depicted in its pages will encourage readers to make their peace with the fact that family diversity is here to stay. I wish also to persuade you that this is no cause for despair. Rather, the sooner and better our society comes to terms with the inescapable variety of intimacy and kinship in the modern world, the fewer unhappy families it will generate.