

# "Marry" Me?

by Robert McRuer

You would think, by now, that gay marriage would be old news. It's been almost a decade since the cast of Northern Exposure gathered for one of the first prime time gay weddings (several other same-sex dyads-on *Queer as Folk*, *Will and Grace*, and other shows-have walked the aisle since then) and more than a decade since dozens of couples participated in a mass wedding outside the Internal Revenue Service as part of the 1993 March on Washington for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights (the IRS action was meant to bring attention to the dozens of state-sponsored benefits granted to married couples but denied to same-sex couples). It's been almost as long, moreover, since President Bill Clinton signed into law the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), which gave states the right to define marriage as the union of one man and one woman and ensured that marriages performed in one location would not need to be recognized in another. At the time, the fear was that we homos, getting hitched in Honolulu, would demand recognition of our so-called marriages in Houston or Hoboken. Hawaii voters, however, ended up putting into effect a DOMA of their very own, and-as the 1990s moved on-the feared locations shifted, to Copenhagen, Amsterdam, Toronto, and Burlington, Vermont.

And, now, Boston. Indeed, developments in the Bay State have made certain that, far from being old news, gay marriage will continue to be front page fodder again this election year. As I biked to work last week, I noted competing headlines on the *Washington Post* and the *Washington Times*. The *Post* declared "Mass. Court Backs Gay Marriage," while the Reagan-era *Times* insisted "Court Approves Homosexual 'Marriage'." As always when reporting on the issue, the *Washington Times* on that day employed scare quotes; even when a given paragraph calls for ten references or more, in fact, the *Washington Times* predictably protects the word in quotation marks, each and every time. Courts in Massachusetts may be, as the *Post* would have it, backing gay marriage, but the staid judicial institution, for the *Times*, is merely "approving" "homosexual" "marriage."

I was on my way to teach an undergraduate course in lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) studies, and I knew I had to somehow address what was going on with my students. And although I wanted to tackle head-on what it means to live in a world where a daily newspaper looks at a gay wedding and sees "marriage," not marriage, I also wanted to somehow be true to the specters that continue to haunt these conversations, no matter how many times those specters have been conjured away: 1970s feminist and gay liberation specters, declaring that marriage was a patriarchal institution about property and ownership and insisting that "in a free society, everyone will be gay"; 1980s AIDS activist specters staging die-ins in

the street and screaming "health care is a right." Those specters from the 1970s did not mean that everyone would turn to same-sex partnership; they meant that in their imagined future, everyone would be free to shape creative and pleasurable relations with other human beings (relations that would be founded on reciprocity and respect) and that we would not be able to predict in advance the inventive forms those relations would take. "We," homo and hetero alike, would certainly not see the options reduced to two: married or unmarried. Those specters from the 1980s, in turn, wanted to vouchsafe access: access to information, education, financial resources, environmental resources (clean water, clean air), health care. Medical, immigration, or any other benefits tied solely to marriage would not suffice for those 1980s activists; they, like anti-corporate or anti-globalization protesters after them, did not want these (and other) basic human rights tied to membership in an exclusive club.

And yet, as I biked to work, I knew the conversation would be a challenging one, and it was, though it was stimulating and generative, too. It would be challenging, I knew, because these terrible times seem to present us with such limited choices; as I said to my students, "what's a queer to do?" We have a vibrant history of refusing marriage and insisting instead-in coalition with other oppressed groups-on a more capacious understanding of social and economic justice. At the same time, the history we're living through calls for new refusals, refusals that can at times have the appearance of defending marriage. If the current mainstream options, in other words, are George W. Bush's support for a constitutional amendment defining marriage in the United States as the union of one man and one woman or Senator John Kerry's opposition to gay marriage but support for "civil unions," how can we not refuse these options and, in the name of justice, throw our lot behind those supporting gay marriage?

Fortunately, queer politics has long been comfortable with what are seeming contradictions, and thus it seems imperative to me, even in these times, to call back and extend the critiques of marriage from our past, while we simultaneously articulate clearly our opposition to each and every one of the dehumanizing options currently proffered us by the political and cultural mainstream in the United States, whether it's Bush's marriage amendment, the scare quotes in the Washington Times, or the Democrats' gutless distinctions between civil unions and the "sacred" institution of marriage. Everyone, LGBT and straight, needs to come out against these impoverished positions. I'll say it again, for straight readers, since coming out in these ways is old hat for gay readers: you need to be out and proud, loudly and consistently, in opposition to the positions on same-sex marriage swirling around you this year.

But we can also work to make sure that no one reads our defense of same-sex "marriage" as a defense of same-sex marriage-we still want health care, immigration, visitation, bereavement and other benefits defined as human-not

marriage-rights. We still want to register suspicion of cultural forms that shore up patriarchy. We still want to resist relational forms that potentially insulate us from others, that make unthinkable certain ways of being in households or communities. We want to honor our feminist, liberationist, and AIDS activist history, and remember always our coalition with non-LGBT people who share, in multiple ways, those histories.

I didn't participate in the wedding ceremony, but I was there at the IRS building in 1993. Like others that gathered there, my lover Tom and I picked up the chalk that was lying on the ground and drew our names in a heart on the cement. Our heart with "four years" was surrounded by dozens and dozens of other hearts, some drawn by couples, some drawn by friendship groups, some by individuals. Some honored those who were living, and some remembered those who had died. Some hearts marked years or even decades, while some playfully marked days or even hours. It was a queer performance, and like so many other queer performances (like all performances, really), it was momentary, fleeting. The chalk drawings were undoubtedly washed away in a matter of hours or days. Yet the memory of that performance can still mark the creative and democratic human desire for other ways of relating, other ways of being. To summarize all that I'm getting at: yes, we oppose attempts to prohibit gay "marriage," but yes, we also remember that, at certain times, we wanted much more.

Not long ago, Tom and I celebrated the holidays with his mother in Little Rock. Tom's boyfriend was there, and so was mine. Tom's nephew was there, as was his brother, his wife, and her children. It struck me then that over the years, our family had in many ways assimilated queer cultural forms-sure, some of the folks at the holiday gathering were married or had been married, but most were not, and the important thing was not marriage, but the far-reaching respect and recognition given to the range and the complexity of the relationships we had shaped. It's ironic that the culture has increasingly and quietly assimilated queer cultural and relational forms even as we have been surrounded by loud cultural conversations about the need to protect the sanctity of heterosexual "marriage."

In the face of this irony, LGBT folks could, perhaps, push for a constitutional amendment to keep straight people away from our sacred institutions-you can have friends, in other words, but "families we choose" will remain ours, hands off! True to our history, however, I hope we'll do the opposite: invite everyone to not only join with us against dehumanization and oppression (our own and others') but also experience and invent with us many other ways of relating to and caring for each other.

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