

Commentary: Queer Comes the Bride

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I've got this song in my head. It goes something like this. . . "No I won't be a nun, no I shall not be a nun, for I am so fond of pleasure, I cannot be a nun." These are lines from the film *Black Narcissus* (Powell & Pressburger, 1947) sung by Mr. Dean in response to the Convent of the Order of the Servants of Mary who are setting up a school and hospital in the remote village of Mopu, high up in the Himalayas where Mr. Dean lives. One of the nuns, Sister Ruth, is curious enough about Mr. Dean's fondness for pleasure that she is soon out of habit, dressed seductively in red, and off to seek the arms of the film's leading man. After her desire is briskly rejected, the morality tale takes its toll and Sister Ruth falls to her death.

Mr. Dean's song trespasses onto an irony between religion and desire that encapsulates my concerns about the current sexual politics that result from the Canadian House of Commons' decision to approve same-sex marriage in June 2005. The responses to this decision that I am interested in are those that consider discourses about both queer rights and a general critique of queer marriage. As Sister Ruth's death suggests, religion and sexual desire do not go hand in hand. Michael Cobb's (2006) recent book gets right to my point; it's titled *God Hates Fags*. One of Cobb's main arguments is that religious discourses are one of the most potent and pervasive forms of queer expression and activism throughout the twentieth century.

On June 29, 2005, the front-page headline of the *Globe and Mail* read: "After bitter two-year political battle, divisive legislation moves to Senate; Same-sex bill finally passes" (Curry and Galloway, 2005, p. A1). Duly noted, the *National Post* is less enthusiastic, running the headline "For Better or Worse; House of Commons approves same-sex marriage 158-133" (Naumetz, 2005, p. A1). I do not claim to be an expert on issues of same-sex marriage. I write this commentary in response to the House of Commons' ruling not because I know anything about queer civil unions but as a challenge to myself—to articulate my opinion about the possibility of getting married to my partner. His name is Todd. It's a topic I've thought about for a long time but never really taken seriously until it became legally possible. The debates around queer marriage that I've participated in for the past 15 years have finally come to some fruition, at least in Canada. And I relish the possibilities. Going bridal. Queer comes the bride. My bid at Bridezilla. Ohmigod—what will I wear?

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I should also say that I have no expertise in Canadian law, nor do I know anything about current Canadian discourse about queer civil unions. In this article, I bring multiple subject positions: as a queer, as an academic who studies media, and as a media activist from New York. Within this context, I consider the value of this discussion as contributing to our queer discourse community, i.e., those of us engaged in discussion about queer sexuality, and in this context, about the debates that surround queer civil unions. To help explore my positions about queer marriage, I look to two video texts—one, Su Friedrich's experimental short from 1987 titled *Damned If You Don't*, and two, Charissa King's 2004 video diary/documentary titled *In My Father's Church*. I want to talk about these two films because they challenge the queer marriage issue within a religious context. These are the films that led me to my muddled, somewhat contradictory position about queer marriage. Laura Kipnis (2003) makes my illusion more complex: "We live in sexually interesting times, meaning a culture which manages to be simultaneously hypersexualized and to retain its Puritan underpinnings, in precisely equal proportions" (p. 11). The symbolic impact of queer civil unions needs to be reconsidered beyond the essentialist positions of assimilation into or liberation from straight society. Simply put, by positioning queer bodies within a regulatory discourse of marriage, queer marriage both provokes and avoids questions of pleasure and desire.

Su Friedrich is a celebrated video pioneer, now professor in the Council of the Humanities and Visual Arts at Princeton University. I envision her as an active member of ACT UP New York in the early days (in fact, she was a member of the Lesbian Avengers), and as one of the first filmmakers whose work was distributed through Women Make Movies, the national feminist community-based media arts organization.

Friedrich's 1987 short must inexorably be linked with the March on Washington in that same year, when thousands of dykes and fags participated in direct action. Estimates for the Sunday march ranged from 200,000 people, as officially reported in the *New York Times*, to about 600,000, according to the organizers (Silversides, 2003). Many exchanged labyrinths, kisses, flowers, and cock rings in front of the Lincoln Memorial as both a form of social protest and as a way to celebrate queer love. That was the year when activist queers began to express interest in the trappings of a straight marriage: fidelity, legality, and social approval. Dale Peck (1991) wrote, "At last the awkward *life-partner* can be eschewed, without irony or guilt, for *my wife* or *my husband*" (p. 48). For Peck, the battle can be measured through speech acts, reclaiming language and the perlocutionary acts that ensue and that are distinguished. All of the activist speeches, including some rants, that led up to the mass matrimonial ceremony had a common theme: that no church or government can dictate who we love, nor do we need any official approval, religious or otherwise, to express our love.

Damned If You Don't, Friedrich's text, begins with the song of Mr. Dean from *Black Narcissus*. Mr. Dean, Sister Ruth, and the Convent of the Order of the Servants of Mary are all subject to her camera. She uses the song as a soundtrack to make a point that religious discourse sees queer rights as a morality play between heaven and hell. *Damned If You Don't* resists this discourse by consider-

ing Mr. Dean's song with a different question. A voice-over repeats: "Does a fondness for pleasure preclude being a nun?" Friedrich's work re-articulated the relationship between nun and sex in ways that recognize not just pleasure, but a new sense of what is right. Queer sex—I should say hot queer sex: girl on nun action—is not just about pleasure but also about demanding queer rights.

Damned If You Don't first reads Sister Ruth as engendering a single unsexed-sex. Nuns perform their dedication to religious devotion by undertaking an oath not to marry. The commu-

nity of nuns as a collective women-centred space titillates Friedrich's queer position as she transgresses the tradition of *nun* as a sex that is unsexed. The challenge, of course, is the invisibility of lesbian desire. The non-sexual nun is reversed. Onscreen, we see Sister Ruth sutured by Friedrich's nun. Dressed in her habit, she walks throughout Brooklyn as though she belongs. There are no direct clues in Friedrich's montage that suggest this nun is tempted by pleasure. She watches and is watched. As she moves through Prospect Park, she passes a sign that reads "No Trespassing." Yet this nun trespasses on unholy ground. Indeed, Friedrich's nun is trespassed upon as she literally defrocks and succumbs—naked, to the camera's



Stills from *Damned If You Don't*, Courtesy of Su Friedrich.



glaring eye. The young nun is then bound in hot lesbian sex. Two naked women, bodies knotted and writhing, are removed from the sacraments of the church and display pleasure for the camera.

Here, the Anglo-Catholic defrocked nun is not a single unsexed-*nun*. Friedrich's character performs outside of her habit as butch and femme, top and bottom, the woman and the woman. The sexual dynamics are shared lovingly. The ethics of Friedrich's construction are clear. Her nun isn't damned, but would have been had she not acted on her desire. Friedrich's video smirks at the invisibility of lesbianism. Her work is not just about sex and sexual desire but about

being right. Clearly, these women like sex, and Friedrich articulates her sexual politics to her viewers.

This video also engages religious discourse within a framework of social protest. Friedrich highlights this nun/lesbian desire through the use of Judith Brown's (1986) research about Sister Carlini. Brown's book presents the story of an ambitious abbess, Benedetta Carlini, whose drive for ambition drove her to create the illusion of stigmata, with the help of her lesbian lover. Carlini's fortune achieves new heights of power and respect in the church. But upon accusations and scrutiny, she's brought down and pays for her ambition. It is the story of the making and unmaking of a saint. Friedrich's nun enacts Sister Carlini. The voice-over is tender as Friedrich reads from Brown's book and talks to others about their response to the story. She repeats select passages from the book that describe "the removal of her heart by Jesus." We hear her read and repeat "the hole there"—"the hole." In addition to the visual erotics, Friedrich refers to the story of the lesbian nun to provoke viewers into re-considering the frameworks for desire and pleasure. *Damned If You Don't* provides a context for queer civil union as social protest.

At the height of the AIDS crisis in 1987, queer activists demanded queer civil rights by relying on tactics to resist two recent U.S. Supreme Court rulings,



Courtesy of *Women Make Movies* (www.wmm.com)

one that denied a woman access to her paralyzed lover and another upholding the criminalization of same-sex sodomy. For activist Michael Lynch, these two rulings represent a broad complicity that upholds homophobia and "continues to increase the epidemic's toll" (Siversides, 2003, p. 127). Direct action implied the civil disobedience that ensued. ACT UP had introduced a new kind of social protest to queers. We got angry. We started movements. We organized ourselves into cells. We made movies.

In looking at Charissa King's 2004 work *In My Father's Church*, also distributed by Women Make Movies, I am reminded of the voices of the activists of 1987. The government can now dictate whom we can love. Queers in Canada have official approval. Hail to the Queen. But for King, government-sanctioned consent is less important. King's documentary traces her relationship with Kelly O'Brien. As the film's title suggests, however, she is more concerned about her father, the Reverend Jack K. King, pastor of the Grace United Methodist Church in Lindenhurst, New York. "My parents weren't exactly thrilled when they found out about our wedding plans. My father is not allowed to marry Kelly and me according to the rules of the United Methodist Church, and I'm not sure if he's supportive of my upcoming wedding." Debates about King's religious community

dominate the queer discourse in this film. Unlike the work of Su Friedrich, King utterly avoids any social protest, and avoids any contest for pleasure and desire.

A forlorn King comments on how her father had performed ceremonies for her brother and childhood friends. King and her partner are seen at another wedding where King is the hired wedding videographer. She takes this opportunity to gather footage for her own work. In the distance, across the crowded room of wedding-goers, the camera captures O'Brien in her floral dress. Drinking and dancing, the bride and groom are encircled in the middle of the dance floor. But King moves her camera closer to O'Brien, who resists her gaze. Muffled we hear, "I wish you would dance with me. . ." It seems fitting that lesbian desire is dispossessed at the beginning of the film, which functions as microcosm of the larger queer civil union debates. But the intention is clear. These queers are getting married. But King refuses to acknowledge how her queer desire influences her religious background. In fact, King avoids any controversy and—in doing so—often voids the desire and pleasure of her own queer civil union.

We see King and O'Brien outside of her father's parsonage, on the grounds of the United Methodist Church. They are lying on the grass, flapping their arms and legs, performing what I understood as snow angels, but given the summer climate, their actions cannot leave an imprint on the chattels of the church. "Are we dead yet?" we hear O'Brien say to King, still in the grass. The juxtaposition of O'Brien's red hair and the lush grass with the church in the distance calls up the illusion of the cemetery. Clearly King articulates a refusal here. This time it's not her refusal but her father's. We hear King's voice-over: "My father will not talk about the issues of same-sex marriages."

But King has conflicting ideas about what she wants her father to do. The implications of him performing a ceremony would mean a loss of his career. Case in point, she looks to Nebraska: "There is a pastor who is going through what I most fear for my father. His name is Reverend Jimmy Creech and he co-officiated a ceremony for two men." King went to Nebraska to witness his church trial. She participated with Creech's protesters. They were a sorry sight. A dozen or so young supporters wearing T-shirts that read "Stop Spiritual Violence" were singing "We Shall Overcome." Downtrodden, they encircle Creech, holding hands. We soon learn, "He lost his credentials. He is no longer a pastor."

At this point King makes a decision. Her position is clear and decidedly unexpected. She aims to provoke social norms within the Methodist Church, but instead chooses to avoid the possibilities of queer civil unions as social protest. She is unwilling to put her father in the same position as Creech. I am disappointed in King. She expected her father to take up her cause. I want to grab her by the shoulders and shake her because I am hoping she will force a social protest. I want her to use her power as a filmmaker and a daughter of a minister to engage her discourse community. But her value is clear. Not that a lesbian wedding is wrong, per se, just not in her father's church. When queer civil unions are framed around the question of religion, queers loose. The hope that I glimpsed from her title is now lost, and King pedals backwards trying to maintain her narrative and build diegetic space.

To address her narrative pessimism, King looks for support wherever she can

get it. Anita O'Brien, Kelly's mom, is the first to step up and offer emotional support when she agrees the wedding is a good idea. "It makes everything more real. . . official." I am moved when she says, "I better get with the program and however much more I have to do, I'm going to be there." King then tells the story of Reverend Don Fardo, who officiated at a lesbian wedding unscathed. His method was to attain the support of 67 other pastors. They collectively performed the ceremony for Jeanne Barnett and Ellie Charlton, who had been together for 15 years. Fardo is interviewed: "How can I say no to two of the most active members of my church? That would be a denial of my Ministry of Orders, obedience to what it is to be the church." King's attempt at optimism backfired. If Fardo can make it happen, why can't King? Why won't King? She turns her camera to the Legislative Committee on Faith and Hope, where a large gathering of people listen intently to the speaker, "We do not recognize ceremonies that recognize homosexual marriages." During the question-and-answer period a pastor stands up and declares: "Marriage is for fellowship and procreation." I've been waiting for that word to be said—procreation. The assumption that queer couples cannot procreate is at the root of much of this discourse. Social and technological imperatives render these assumptions perilous. Again, queer marriage acknowledges, in fact sanctions queer bodies to enact sexual politics. King never returns to this subject and, I suppose, positions the possibility of children as material for her future video diaries. The fact is, this film is less a political act than it is a diary. When King's father challenges, "Aren't you trying to make a statement about your ceremony, to make a point?" King's answer is clear, "No, I'm just trying to get married." "Then why the documentary?" he asks. She has no answer.

The dialogue that ends the film reveals King as a tragic figure. It's six months after the wedding and the diary continues. King is still concerned about what her father's congregation might think about her lesbian wedding. She is caught up in her own identity politics without concern for the sexual politics, what's really at stake in a work such as this. King and her father are sitting on the step to the pulpit of his church. The conversation is slow and intimate. Talking about her wedding and his church King inquires, "Are you disappointed I didn't ask you?" And here's the crux of the problem with King's discourse. Her father responds, "No, I'm wondering why didn't you ask me." She never did. "I told you. I didn't want you to get into trouble. And you don't like controversy. That's what you said." The reversal is made most clear when her father finally reveals his position. "I don't go looking for controversy. But I usually try to do the right thing when faced with it." King then clarifies, "So are you saying you probably would have allowed us to have our ceremony in your church?" To which he replies, "I probably would have."

King never recognizes that she lost control of her message, her medium, and the politics of her work. In fact, she turns control of her sexual politics over to her father. Like reading a teenager's journal, King's diary is painful to watch. King has not asked her father to marry her or whether her wedding can take place in his church. Her title *In My Father's Church* is a misnomer. King abandons the power of documentary by refusing to resist the politics of her religious discourse community. King incorporates her lesbian desire within a sexual politic that supports dominant discourse. Yes, she's a lesbian bride. But her message makes clear that

without the sanctity of her father, her union and thus all queer marriage is diminished.

King believes in the solidity of the church. But King is wrong. Ideological institutions like marriage are transitory. Marriage for love, in fact, is a relatively recent phenomenon. According to Stephanie Coontz (2005) marriage has historically been a malleable institution incorporated into existing social, political, and economic purposes. The hero in her study, the incorporated act, is love.

In the eighteenth century, people began to adopt the radical new idea that love should be the most fundamental reason for marriage and that young people should be free to choose their marriage partners on the basis of love. The sentimentalization of the love-based marriage in the nineteenth century and its sexualization in the twentieth each represented a logical step in the evolution of this new approach to marriage. (p. 5)

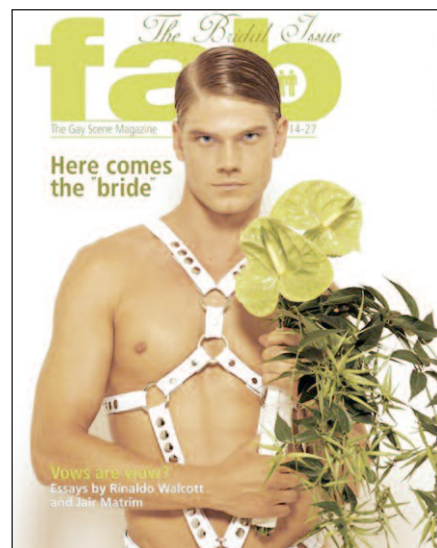
Coontz doesn't suggest that queer civil unions are the next step or that the church is on the verge of incorporating a new sexual politic. Er, no. Clearly for King, there will be no trespassing. Her work is too safe in a time when safety can function as a reversal. Though King expresses her lesbian desire, and subverts current values about civic and spiritual marriage, she avoids any real controversy and, in doing so, voids the desire and pleasure of her own queer wedding.

King's *In My Father's Church* and Friedrich's *Damned If You Don't* both challenge my understanding of the problems inherent in the issue of queer civil unions. Clearly there are multiple perspectives to take, and the emotional responses to these attitudes resonate strongly in public discourse. Alternative video is one place I often look for emergent discourse about such issues, and usually the nature of the medium and its systems of distribution make for varying, alternative approaches to hotly debated issues. King's work earnestly addresses her personal journey within the context of religion and same-sex unions. Friedrich's journey relies more on the experimental nature of video to consider the same issue, but her focus is framed around issues of sexuality. Both of these works contribute to the growing numbers of people participating in the discourse communities interested in same-sex civil unions. Both films have provided me with the language for contributing to the conversation. Because Friedrich frames her work around the larger issue of sexuality, it resonates more strongly with my queer world and perhaps nostalgia for what I believed to be an underground subculture. As I recognize my own queer identity as subcultural capital, Sarah Thornton's (1995) work about club cultures describes this position by recognizing the subtle power relations at play within my overpoliticized queer world. Her work is important to me because it makes clear the politics and discourse communities of my sexuality. So, for example, as I celebrated my underground identity, she venerates this identity as subculture; where my underground queerness led me to denounce hetero-normativity, she criticizes hegemony; and where I lament the selling out of my underground identity to this hetero-normativity through the institution of marriage, she theorizes as "incorporation."

The activist queers of 1987 and their social protest is, today, incorporated as lobby. Like the work of Friedrich, a political reversal is enacted as queers take the

attitude of the other and go *above ground*, fighting for acceptance wherever we can get it. The courts seem like an obvious choice given the history of queer social protest. I'm not exactly comfortable with this stance given the site of my subcultural capital. This assimilationist stance, to me, seems like a reversal in the worst way. We're putting on the habits of straights. How can I, why should I strive to be accepted into an institution that, for my entire life, has refused to accept me? I don't want to belong to a club that doesn't want me as a member. Since 1987, this has been my approach to marriage. I'd rather start my own club. We'll wear leather.

Twenty years later, however, I must admit, I'm wearing less leather. I recognize the messages my body politic transmits to today's queer youth. Queer activists aren't just fighting for the right to marry. The freedom to marry is the next step toward civil liberty, within a longer history of suppression and repression.



Photograph by Lindsay Lozon,
courtesy of *Fab Magazine*.

Queer civil unions are a kind of liberation from the threats of straight society. Said simply, people are still dying. HIV disease is still rampant in queer communities, and young queers are not free from the gay shame Stonewall sought to abolish. I remember feeling the fear of AIDS and the shame of my sexuality some 20 years ago. It is these memories that led me to support a stance where queers fight back.

So queer civil unions are a good for us queers. But wait, what about my underground identity, my lost nostalgia, my leather? Incorporations suggest that subcultural capital need not be abandoned when critique is applied—as here. My reading of these two video works helps make clear how

queer marriage can both provoke and avoid questions of pleasure and desire. Today in Canada, my partner and I can get married. And I must admit, I appreciate the option of a queer civil union. I am contented that for the first time in my life marriage is a possibility. I wonder, “How would I look in white leather?”

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