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Wendy Gay Pearson

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Article abstract

My Fabulous Gay Wedding was intended from its conception to be “a hot topic, a controversial topic, a topic filled with lots of opportunity for emotional moments.” This article traces a number of contemporary discourses around same-sex marriage that are illuminated, albeit not clarified, by responses to the show, including a boycott of Canadian Tire, a purported sponsor, by a number of right-wing, anti-gay groups. However, the questions the show raises exceed the media’s simplistic binary of “lesbian and gay rights” v. “religious rights” and involve interrogating what, exactly, is being represented on screen, and whether or not same-sex weddings interpellate lesbian and gay couples into a form of heteronormativity.

NOT IN THE HARDWARE AISLE, PLEASE

Same-Sex Marriage, Anti-Gay Activism and My Fabulous Gay Wedding

Wendy Gay Pearson

Wilfred Laurier University

To study weddings using this theory of heterosexuality is to investigate the ways various practices, arrangements, relations, and rituals work to conceal the operation of [heteronormativity as an] institution. It means to ask how practices such as weddings prevent us from seeing what is at stake, what is kept in place, and what consequences are produced.... When used in professional settings, for example, weddings work as a form of ideological control to signal membership in relations of ruling as well as to signify that the couple is normal, moral, productive, family-centred, upstanding, and, most importantly, appropriately gendered (Ingraham 1999: 3).

Focusing on the wedding itself reveals possibilities that are lost when the purpose and result of “wedding” is presumed to be marriage as domestic law defines it: a monogamous, enduring, opposite-sex dyad with biological reproduction as its *raison d’être*. By undoing this presumption, texts that foreground the wedding as a production return to and rework the possibilities embedded in the ritual itself, asking in what ways the kinds of weddings people have, or dream of having, or thought they had, might be indices for forms of social life made possible in one domain, but impossible in another, or in one historical moment but not another — or might even be avatars for changes in what Raymond Williams calls “structures of feeling,” new senses of collective being felt viscerally, in advance of their institutionalization in discourse (Freeman 2002).

As both Chrys Ingraham and Elizabeth Freeman point out in the works cited in my epigraphs, the relationship between weddings and marriages is only discursively stable. Within the institution of heterosexuality — whose very *raison d’être* is to regulate, rather than

to reflect, the actual practices of heterosexual people — weddings and marriages appear to be linked in a productive relationship. The marriage causes the wedding; the wedding produces the marriage. And the relationship of wedding and marriage to each other is understood as both linear and singular. There is really only one proper form of wedding, the “white wedding,” and it leads to only one form of socially legitimated marital relationship, the procreative monogamous nuclear family.

In practice, however, not only are there many forms of wedding, in spite of the discursive and ideological power of what Ingraham calls “the wedding-industrial complex,” there are also many forms of marriage: couples too old to procreate still marry, as do couples where one or both parties are infertile or where neither is interested in parenthood (Ingraham 1999: 26). And this is before we contemplate the actual practices, from adultery to mutually consensual polyamory, that give the lie to the cultural assurance of monogamy. Thus, as Freeman notes, the existent practices of weddings tend to exceed the strictures of both heteronormative ideology and the economic and discursive power of the wedding-industrial complex. That is, the actual wedding may affirm much more — or much less — than the couple’s insertion into the heterosexual imaginary, the imagined relationship to the institution of heteronormativity that produces the married straight couple as both social norm and sole appropriate lifestyle.¹

In this article, I will examine the relationship between specific weddings, as depicted on the Global television series *My Fabulous Gay Wedding* (currently showing on U.S. cable under the name *First Comes Love*, a name change apparently calculated to avoid notice by the anti-gay marriage cohort), and expectations of the couples’ insertion into heteronormative ideological practices once same-sex marriage enters into the picture; I will do so, however, in the specific context of the battle over the right to marriage and the opposition to same-sex marriage by certain organizations with particular religious and political affiliations.

In examining the productive possibilities of same-sex weddings and their relationship not only to the heterosexual imaginary, but also to its power to obscure itself as normal, moral, traditional, and so on, it is

1. For further discussion of this term, see Ingraham (1994). For its application to the cultural practices of weddings in American culture, see Ingraham (1999).

useful to begin with the question, what is marriage today? At one end, we might claim, as both Ingraham and Freeman do, that marriage is a complex of social practices that are largely created and maintained by, yet whose resistant possibilities are also constructed through, the blandishments of consumer capitalism and the representational vagaries of the entertainment media. In other words, at the one extreme, marriage is a bridal magazine (one of many, all of which appear, at a glance, to be essentially identical), or it is both the prize and the rationale for a reality TV show, or it is the over-the-top embellishments of celebrity couples vacillating between the desire to display and to conceal their material, financial and sexual/relational excesses from their audiences. At the other end, marriage retains a largely illusionary discursive dispensation somewhere between nature and God: that is, it is supposedly a divinely regulated gift, supported with reference to nature, and apparently immutable. Needless to say, the first view of marriage oversimplifies the massive complexities of contemporary culture's relationship to relationship itself, particularly when the legally and/or religiously sanctioned means of creating a relationship is symbolised in the peculiarly commodified excess of signification of the white wedding. However, the second view of marriage also grossly oversimplifies everything from history to nature (about which those participating in Euro North American culture know less than we think we do) to God (about whom the same is increasingly true, as any doubt in the ability of fallible humans to claim infallible knowledge of God's will seems to become increasingly unpopular).

Recent studies in fields from ethology (the science of animal behaviour) to history have shown that the prevailing discourse about traditional marriage is rooted in a series of misconceptions and inaccuracies. The first of these is the belief that heterosexual behaviour is somehow more natural than are same-sex behaviours. Such claims have been decisively dismissed by scholars such as Bruce Bagemihl (1999) and Joan Roughgarden (2004) who have shown that sexual practices in the natural world occur over an extraordinarily diverse range of behaviours, including those that contemporary culture identifies as heterosexual and homosexual. From parthenogenetic female lizards whose sexual behaviour can only be same-sex (there are no males in these species) and unrelated to procreation (the very point of parthenogenesis is that these animals reproduce without sex) to a wide array of birds and mammals, from penguins to bighorn sheep to bonobos

to dolphins, all of whom routinely engage in same-sex erotic behaviours, the argument from nature, despite retaining popular regard, has in fact no basis in nature.²

Similarly, numerous scholars have shown that marriage has never been an immutable dispensation, even within Christian cultures. Indeed, for many centuries the religious establishment was largely disinterested in marriage. Even in the Catholic church, marriage was only permitted to become a sacrament in the twelfth century and did not become a compulsory sacrament until the sixteenth. And that's without citing more modern changes to marriage, particularly the very significant cultural switch from arranged marriages, whose aims were predominantly to do with money, labour and power, to love matches. Indeed, one might argue that the contemporary drive to recognize and legalize same-sex marriages was laid in train in the eighteenth century in Europe and North America, when young women and men began to insist that they had the right to marry people they loved. This is perhaps still the most significant change in the history of marriage: the transition from marriage for status, inheritance of property, and familial advantage to marriage for love.

Once love, rather than capital, became the essential part of the equation, it was inevitable that couples who loved one another and wished that love to receive social and legal recognition would eventually demand access to the institution. Comparatively, the extension of marriage to people of the same sex, in defiance of its traditional limitation to people of opposite sexes, is a relative technicality. But it is not one which is without controversy. Indeed, few changes to the social fabric, except the fight to recognize people of colour and women as humans with rights to equality under the law, seem to have been more inflammatory than the extension of marriage rights to same-sex couples. As Michael Warner points out, however, part of the reason marriage rights have become such an incendiary topic for some people lies in the inherently discriminatory nature of marriage as a contemporary institution:

To a couple that gets married, marriage just looks ennobling, as it does to [Republican Henry] Hyde. Stand outside it for a second and you see the implication: if you don't have it, you and your relations

2. For a discussion of the continuing prevalence in popular culture of the argument from nature, despite its debunking in the sciences, see Pearson (2002). See also Lancaster (2003).

are less worthy. Without this corollary effect, marriage would not be able to endow anyone's life with significance. The ennobling and the demeaning go hand in hand. Marriage does one only by virtue of the other. Marriage, in short, discriminates (1999: 81).

While I think that Warner may over-generalize this point — thus failing to allow for the possibility that, as Freeman suggests, actual marriages may occupy a much wider spectrum than heteronormative discourse recognizes — I have no disagreement with his basic argument here, which is that some, and perhaps many, people use their right to marriage as a way to feel superior about their own relationships.³

Having thus very briefly sketched in the background through which I approach the question of same-sex marriage, I would like to turn now to one particular small corner of the controversy: that is, what might be characterized as the tempest-in-a-teapot reaction by the Canadian Family Action Coalition, a right-wing group opposed to same-sex marriage, over the supposed relationship between the Canadian retail chain Canadian Tire and the reality television series *My Fabulous Gay Wedding*. Originally aired on Global in 2005, produced by Vancouver film-maker David Paperny, and hosted by Scott Thompson of *Kids in the Hall* and *Brain Candy* fame, *My Fabulous Gay Wedding* is a short series of six episodes, each of which portrays one ideal wedding of a same-sex couple.⁴ Each of the televised weddings is arranged over a two-week period by a team that consists of Thompson, wedding organizer Fern Cohen, and a group of assistants whom Thompson refers to as “the elves.” As with most reality TV wedding shows, the male wedding organizers are gay, while Cohen is straight — a distinction that is only emphasized when Cohen is confronted with aspects of lesbian and gay culture she doesn't know anything about. “Who's Lea Delaria?” she asks, when Thompson happily announces his discovery that soon-to-be-wed Donna and Paulina are Delaria fans.⁵

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3. It is ironic, but perhaps not surprising, that anti-gay marriage discourse actually relies completely unreflexively upon the same “special rights” rhetoric (ie. only heterosexuals can have special rights to marriage) of which they so frequently accuse lesbian and gay advocacy groups.
 4. The show won the 2006 Leo Award for excellence in British Columbia film and television for best information or lifestyle show.
 5. Lea Delaria is a singer, actor and stand-up comedian from the United States; she has two live comedy albums, including *Bull Dyke in a China Shop*, and three music CDs, in addition to television and film appearances.

For lesbian and gay viewers, such moments provide a kind of double resonance: on the one hand, it confirms our knowledge that, while we know a great deal about the straight world — it being somewhat hard to avoid —, even well-meaning straight people often know little about lesbian and gay cultures. On the other hand, it serves as an affirmation that, for once, we are entering as spectators into the relationship of recognition that for heterosexually-identified people is generally the norm. After all, while we may not like Lea Delaria or care much for drag queens, they remain part of the cultural knowledges amassed by most lesbian and gay people (just as straight people may dislike stag parties, but are inevitably familiar with their cultural currency). Indeed, this knowledge is all about cultural capital, in all sorts of ways.⁶

Part of the appeal of shows like *My Fabulous Gay Wedding* is recognition of lesbian and gay cultural capital. Such a recognition provides a counterpoint to the rather simplistic argument of those involved in the show that, although it may have a serious underlying message in the depiction and acceptance of same-sex marriages, *My Fabulous Gay Wedding* is predominantly a romantic comedy. Indeed, Scott Thompson has referred to the show in interviews as a “heartwarming comedy,” adding that “the show does not have a gay agenda, that the whole idea is just to tell good stories and entertain people,” although he concedes good stories do have the power to change people’s minds.⁷ He also notes that the show’s depiction of same-sex weddings helps to refute the beliefs of people who “don’t really believe that gay people can love with the same intensity and... don’t believe that gay relationships have the same depth. And that’s just absolutely, completely wrong and it’s ugly. That’s like believing that different races are incapable of different things” (McKay 2005).

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6. According to Pierre Bourdieu, cultural capital refers to the way in which cultural knowledges function within a cultural economy that privileges some forms of knowledge over others; differential access to cultural capital equates to differential access to social institutions and advancement.
 7. The idea that there is a homosexual agenda, prevalent amongst the Christian Right, has been widely spoofed by lesbian and gay comedians — usually along the lines of “10am: go to gym; 11am: smart coffee; 11:30am: shop for clothes; 1:00pm: take over world; 1:10pm: lunch....” Such spoofs take aim at right-wing assumptions about “the gay lifestyle” as much as they do the belief that all homosexuals are wealthy, politically powerful people both capable and desirous of “bring[ing] about the general decline of Western Civilization” (<http://www.bettybowers.com/homoagenda.html>).

Such messages make for good press releases, but they perpetuate the media's relentless insistence that entertainment, no matter how mindful, be taken as mindless by those being entertained. The rhetoric also makes it harder to recognize that shows like *My Fabulous Gay Wedding* may be enjoyable — indeed entertaining — even for people who are very dubious about the value of marriage itself, simply because they do provide a spectacle of belonging and recognition for people accustomed to being either invisible or misrepresented upon the screen. While shows like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* provide some degree of partial recognition, the stereotyping of gay men and their relegation to heterosexual helpmates make that show much more ambivalent for a lesbian and gay audience than *My Fabulous Gay Wedding*. *Fabulous* presents a much larger spectrum of lesbian and gay representation — from the normativity of some of the couples to the outrageousness of Thompson himself — as well as illuminating the extent to which supposedly straight and queer friends and families interact and support each other in ways which do not relegate lesbian and gay people to the margins of a discursively heterocentric world.

Indeed, this spectrum of representation is remarked, albeit unwittingly, in mainstream reactions to the show precisely through the emphasis on Thompson's own indifference to same-sex marriage and, indeed, to monogamous coupledness. For example, the press release from Paperny Films reports that

Former Kid In The Hall Scott Thompson knows nothing about weddings and hardly anything about relationships, yet in each episode of *My Fabulous Gay Wedding* he must make the wildest wedding dreams of a lucky gay couple come true in a mere two weeks. As our outrageously unpredictable Wedding Fairy, Thompson turns one of the most controversial topics of our times into a series of entertaining and poignant love stories... right before our very eyes (*My Fabulous Gay Wedding/First Comes Love* 2005).

Thompson's identification with a particularly non-normative form of gay representation thus provides a counterpoint to the show's potential for normativity, in part through audience recognition of Thompson himself. As the openly gay cast member of *Kids in the Hall*, Thompson's variously "outrageous" performances included Queen Elizabeth II (a role he has since reprised in the CBC mini-series *Pop-Up Royals*) and the gay bartender Buddy. Thomas Haig has noted that, as Buddy, Thompson flouts Hollywood's stereotypical construction of

effeminacy as “sexless, unappealing, and pathetic,” instead affirming Buddy’s effeminacy as “a source of pleasure and power both for himself and his audience” (1994: 228). Such non-normative associations mean that, at minimum, *My Fabulous Gay Wedding* is constantly in a process of negotiation between the audience’s queer recognition of Thompson (and his own self-presentation) and the marrying couples’ insertion into the normative, “ennobling” institution of marriage.

The superficial representation (and indeed self-representation) of the show in the media, however, is only able to focus on same-sex marriage as a binary opposition of competing rights-based discourses, i.e. lesbian and gay rights v. religious rights. Thus, according to Paperny, *My Fabulous Gay Wedding* was intended from its conception to present “gay weddings as a hot topic, a controversial topic, a topic filled with lots of opportunity for emotional moments” (Johnson 2006). Two items are worth noticing here: first, the show was originated and produced by people identified as straight who were interested in it, at least according to such reports, primarily for its potential to stir up affective responses; second, such statements about the controversial nature of “gay marriage” beg the question of whether the media itself supplies much of the moral panic around same-sex marriage and, by extension, lesbian and gay weddings.

Polls have consistently shown that same-sex marriage is not a big issue for most Canadians, as even those who disapprove of the idea tend to rank it low in their priorities. Gerald Keddy, one of only three Conservative MPs who voted in favour of same-sex marriage, notes that even in his largely rural and socially conservative riding, the issue was not important enough to his constituents to have a negative impact on their voting patterns, as he was re-elected the following year with a bigger majority (Ditchburn 2006).⁸ It is certainly clear, however, that the marriage issue has been a hot button topic for certain right-wing anti-gay groups, such as Focus on the Family Canada (FOTF) and the

8. An Environics poll reported just as I was finishing this article serves to emphasize this point: only 1% of people polled identified same-sex marriage as “the most important issue facing the country today” (Environics 2006). This consensus flies in the face of the theo-con insistence, voiced by people like CFAC head Charles McVety, that the majority of Canadians can’t wait “to see Judeo-Christian moral principles restored to Canada” (even without getting into the question of whether CFAC’s version of values is indeed a Judeo-Christian moral principle) (McDonald 2006: 56).

Canadian Family Action Coalition (CFAC), many of them linked to conservative or fundamentalist Christian movements and many also funded, at least in part, by larger parent organizations in the United States.⁹

The Canadian Family Action Coalition (CFAC) and the Campaign Life Coalition (CL) are member groups, along with REAL Women, and the Catholic Civil Rights League, in the umbrella group Defend Marriage Coalition. In its reactions to same-sex marriage and its alliance with anti-abortion and right-wing political groups, the Defend Marriage Coalition seems to be positioning itself as part of what Didi Herman, in *The Anti-Gay Agenda* (1997), refers to as the Christian Right. In promoting an agenda similar to those of better known anti-gay groups, particularly FOTF, however, the question remains whether the members of the Defend Marriage Coalition are, in fact, aligning themselves politically and ideologically with causes they themselves never speak about in their anti-gay marriage outreach, such as end-time beliefs, patriarchal domination, and forced adherence to specific forms of right-wing Christianity.¹⁰ Such a connection becomes more obvious when one looks, for example, at CFAC, whose cofounder, Brian Rushfeldt, makes “periodic appearances on Jerry Falwell’s *Old Time Gospel Hour*” or realizes that people such as Ernest Manning (father of Reform Party founder Preston Manning) are amongst the so-called “dispensationalists”

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9. I recognize that some of these groups would rather not see themselves described as anti-gay. However, as I explain below, such a designation is hard to avoid when such groups associate themselves — politically, ideologically and sometimes financially — with explicitly anti-gay activists like James Dobson. Indeed, the refusal by some groups to admit an anti-gay agenda often seems more disingenuous than sincere. Most such groups also deny receiving funding from the United States, but the *Montreal Gazette* has reported that FOTF Canada has received “\$1.6 million over four years” (McDonald 2006: 52). It is worth noting that groups opposed to same-sex marriage are much better funded than their opponents; Sean Cahill notes that in the United States FOTF reported an annual income of \$126 million, more than double that of the *thirteen* wealthiest lesbian and gay advocacy organizations, who had a combined annual income of \$54 million (2004: 21).
 10. Herman identifies Dobson and FOTF as part of the mainstream Christian Right which she specifically distinguishes from “extremist movements” which, for example, “have called for the death penalty for homosexuality” (1997: 12). Nevertheless, Dobson’s published statements bring Herman’s distinction between the Christian Right and extremist Christian fundamentalism into question.

who have manoeuvred belief in the rapture (the sucking into heaven of the born-again prior to the apocalypse) from the fringes to the evangelical mainstream (McDonald 2006: 56, 59). In addition, the head of FOTF, James Dobson, is identified by left-wing monitoring groups such as the Southern Poverty Law Coalition as an adherent of "Dominion Christianity," a form of dispensationalism that preaches that democracy and the secular state must be replaced by a type of patriarchal Christianity based not upon the New Testament teachings of Christ, but upon a supposedly literal interpretation of Old Testament law. The United States (or Canada) under the rule of Dominion Christians would apparently be a theocracy, imposed on all the nation's inhabitants regardless of their own religious beliefs, in which legal sanctions would include enforcing "the death penalty for homosexuality, along with a host of other 'abominations,' including heresy, astrology, and (for women only) 'unchastity before marriage'" (Moser 2006: 1).

Indeed, in a speech in Oklahoma City in 2003, Dobson continued the rhetoric of such anti-gay activists as R.J. Rushdoony, the founder of Christian Reconstruction, and Anita Bryant, of the now defunct anti-gay group Save Our Children. Bryant famously issued a press release in the 1970s entitled, "'Why Certain Sexual Deviations Are Punishable By Death.' Homosexuality was, of course, among those deviations. So was 'racial mixing of human seed'" (Moser 2006: 2). Not only is homosexuality characterized in such literature (and, indeed, on Dobson's FOTF website) as a perversion involving the corruption and recruitment of children, but lesbian and gay same-sex marriage advocates are dismissed as insincere by people like Dobson. Rather than accept the genuine desire of some gay and lesbian couples for social and legal recognition of their relationships, Dobson argues that, "Homosexuals are not monogamous.... They want to destroy the institution of marriage. It will destroy marriage. It will destroy the earth" (quoted in Moser 2006: 4). Yet, Sylvain Larocque, in his very detailed history of the same-sex marriage debate in Canada, clearly points out that the impetus to end civil marriage has come not from lesbian and gay rights groups, but rather from socially conservative politicians who believe it is better for the state to get out of the marriage business than to recognize same-sex marriages (2006: 162).

One of the curiously obscured things about the same-sex marriage debate is the way in which the media creates discursive positions that do not mirror reality. Thus mainstream media have tended to report on

the issue as if all lesbian and gay people favour same-sex marriage, ignoring those who don't believe in state regulation of human relationships, and as if all religious groups oppose it, ignoring the very large numbers of moderate and progressive Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu and other religious groups who have supported it — including Canada's second largest Christian denomination, the United Church. In the oversimplification that happens both in the media and in the political speechmaking of both the opponents and defenders of same-sex marriage, claims like Dobson's tend to get reported without context. The media presents neither the kind of context that would allow for an assessment of the degree of spin and deliberate misrepresentation that might be involved in such statements nor the kind that would identify where support for ending marriage might actually lie.

FOTF is also generally represented in the media without reference to its own internal dissension and controversies: Mike Trout, Dobson's co-host on FOTF's radio program, has admitted adultery, while FOTF's poster boy for the ex-gay movement, Mike Paulk, was caught lying about visiting gay bars (RNS 2000: 1105).¹¹ Even more strikingly, however, one of FOTF's original seven founders, Gil Alexander-Moegerle, has not only quit the organization, along with his wife Carolyn, but has also issued an apology for its actions and published a book entitled *James Dobson's War on America*. None of this receives any reference on the Canadian website of FOTF, which does not provide any links to its U.S. parent's website, although it does link to Dobson's radio show. Even more strikingly, however, FOTF Canada appears careful not to reproduce the anti-gay rhetoric so prevalent on the U.S. website. There is, for example, no repetition of statements like,

It had become obvious for several years that homosexual activists and their allies on the far left had crafted an alarming new strategy to gain control of children.... This effort represented an audacious attempt to reshape the beliefs and attitudes of an entire generation, beginning

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11. While I was writing this article, a leading United States evangelist and anti-gay spokesman, Ted Haggard, was forced to resign as pastor of the 14,000 strong New Life Church, when he was discovered to have been purchasing drugs and sex from a male prostitute. The frequency of such scandals — Haggard's resignation followed hard on the heels of accusations that Republican Congressman Mark Foley was abusing young pages — suggests that the anti-gay agenda masks some very problematic moral values, including simple, but stunning, dishonesty and hypocrisy.

with the youngest and most vulnerable. In so doing, they hoped to undermine the Judeo-Christian system of values in two or three decades and open the door to radical ways of thinking and behaving. It was a brilliant plan, hatched in Satan's own lair.

Not since Adolf Hitler prepared a generation of German and Austrian youth for war has so grand a strategy been attempted (Dobson 2006a).

This particular newsletter from June, 2006, goes on to raise the old chestnuts about STDs and homosexuality, child molestation, and other such defamations, aimed particularly at gay men.

On the topic of marriage, Dobson wrote in September 2003 that

The history of the gay and lesbian movement is that its adherents quickly move the goal line as soon as one has been breached, revealing even more shocking and outrageous objectives. In the present instance, homosexual activists, heady with power and exhilaration, feel the political climate is right to tell us what they have wanted all along. This is the real deal: most gays and lesbians do not want to marry each other. That would entangle them in all sorts of legal constraints. Who needs a lifetime commitment to one person? The intention here is to destroy marriage altogether. With marriage as we know it gone, everyone would enjoy all the legal benefits of marriage (custody rights, tax-free inheritance, joint ownership of property, health care and spousal citizenship, etc.) without limiting the number of partners or their gender. Nor would "couples" be bound to each other in the eyes of the law. This is clearly where the movement is headed (2006b).

Dobson goes on to adduce as evidence for this argument quotations from people, presumably gay or lesbian, opposed to state regulation of relationships and in favour of ending civil marriage entirely. Just as the media has tended to assume that all gay and lesbian people want same-sex marriage and all religious adherents are opposed to it, Dobson milks the assumption that all lesbian and gay people have the same goals with regard to marriage, relationship and recognition by the state. Moreover, nothing in Dobson's article makes it clear why, for example, joint ownership of property or health care needs to be limited to married couples nor what benefits such a limitation provides to the nation or its citizens. Indeed, it is precisely the lack of access to such benefits that motivates part of the campaign to legalize same-sex marriage in the United States. As Michael Warner points out, the fact that basic benefits, such as access to health care, are tied to marriage in the United States makes the demand to marry that much more of an assumption of heteronormative privileges, since it merely adds lesbian and gay married

couples to the lists of the privileged, while leaving large numbers of unmarried people, both gay and straight, without benefits or recognition (1999: 108). Nevertheless, Dobson's rhetoric takes for granted that only heterosexual married couples should "enjoy all the legal benefits of marriage." None of this rhetoric is reproduced on the Canadian website of FOTF, perhaps because it is assumed that such obviously homophobic rhetoric would affront most Canadians, perhaps because health care and so on are basic rights of Canadian citizens which do not have to be won through heterosexual marriage.

It is not clear from the information available from members of the Defend Marriage Coalition whether their beliefs, too, are dispensationalist or whether their aims include some form of dominion theology (all of which are based in apocalyptic belief systems which assume that the end of the world is both desirable and close at hand), thus making it hard to assess how hardcore the opposition to same-sex marriage is or how extreme the Christian Right in Canada has become.¹² However, reports of the ties between the reconstituted Conservative Party and its leader, Stephen Harper, and the Christian Right in Canada are now beginning to surface, suggesting that at least some of the "theo-cons" (Harper's own term) are indeed intent on imposing some sort of Christian state on the Canadian polity.

Within this ideological framework, attacks by right-wing religious and political groups on shows such as *My Fabulous Gay Wedding* are inevitable. Indeed, even such tame events as the invitation of Gilles Marchildon, executive director of Egale Canada,¹³ to speak on same-sex marriage at an event hosted by the Environmental Protection Agency in Washington, drew more than 800,000 protest emails to President George W. Bush. In Canada, the possibility that *My Fabulous Gay Wedding* might be receiving commercial sponsorship from two major Canadian retail chains, Canadian Tire and Loblaws, was sufficient to set off a similar, albeit relatively tiny, protest movement.¹⁴ To be fair,

12. For a lucid discussion of the popularity and dangers of end-time beliefs amongst fundamentalists of all persuasions, see New (2002) and Sim (2004). For the dangers of current evangelical ideologies to the contemporary world, see also Balmer (2006), Boyd (2006), and Phillips (2006).

13. Egale Canada's names includes both an acronym for Equality for Gays and Lesbians Everywhere and the French word *égal* for "equal."

14. The move to boycott Canadian Tire follows in the footsteps of a long history of anti-gay boycotts in the United States, including a campaign against PBS, complete with federal threats to the broadcaster's funding, that caused it to

such protest seems never to have become particularly prevalent, even amongst Christian Right groups, and it received very little attention in the mainstream Canadian media. Nevertheless, the CL and CFAC attempted to garner support for a boycott of Canadian Tire based on its supposed sponsorship of the TV show, which at that time had yet to be aired. The greater focus on Canadian Tire rather than on Loblaws may reflect its curious status as a Canadian icon, not unlike the donut chain Tim Horton's, as well as its larger association with normative masculine gender roles through the sale of tools, sporting equipment and auto parts.¹⁵

On February 14, 2005, the Canadian Life Coalition posted on its website, *Lifesite*, a statement that *My Fabulous Gay Wedding* was being sponsored by Canadian Tire and Loblaws.

Canadian Tire may find itself the subject of a boycott for the company's sponsorship of a television show promoting homosexual "marriage." The show, *My Fabulous Gay Wedding* will feature six one-hour episodes focusing on a different same-sex couple, as they prepare for and are "married."

The Corporation has thus far refused to cancel its sponsorship of the program despite multiple complaints.... The response from Canadian Tire justified its support of the show promoting gay "marriage" saying, "We understand this is a sensitive and emotional issue for many Canadians and there are many conflicting ideas on what constitutes a 'traditional Canadian family'. Canadian Tire does not define what constitutes a family, we feel we should leave that to policy makers and the government. Canadian Tire is inclusive and wants to sell our products and services to all Canadians" ("Canadian Tire Stands Behind Sponsorship" 2005).

Interestingly, neither *Lifesite* nor the various sites which reprinted their report comment on the claim of inclusivity. The next sentence in the report merely gives the email address for complaints to Canadian

cancel completion of the mini-series based on Armistead Maupin's *Tales of the City*, even though the series earned PBS its highest ever ratings; *More Tales of the City* and *Further Tales of the City* were, rather ironically, made without PBS involvement and shot in Montréal, standing in for San Francisco.

15. Curiously, the flipside of such an assumption lies in the role of the Canadian Tire store in lesbian and gay culture; lesbians in smaller cities and towns joke that the place to encounter other local lesbians is the hardware aisle of the town's Canadian Tire. Tim Horton's remains the sacrosanct Canadian retail icon, despite being owned by the United States-based Wendy's.

Tire, presumably in the assumption that readers will automatically adhere to the website's own ideological position on same-sex marriage. The presumption seems to be very much that no reader could possibly agree that "there are many conflicting ideas on what constitutes a 'traditional Canadian family'" or even be curious to see what a same-sex wedding might look like — how similar to and how different from heterosexual weddings such a ceremony might actually prove to be. One of the dangers of such exposure, of course, is that the discourse of love and affection which sustains same-sex marriage — and most opposite-sex marriage — may prove more powerful than ideological alliances and discursive blinkers. As Thompson himself says, "For people who don't understand homosexuals, I think they'll relate to that and go 'Oh I get it.' It's all about balance between the yin and the yang and it doesn't really matter what your genitals are" (McKay 2005). Such a danger is well understood by the anti-same-sex marriage movement: Daniel Farrow (2004) calls his introduction to *Divorcing Marriage*, an anthology of articles opposing same-sex marriage, "Canada's Romantic Mistake," although he is remarkably unconvincing about what makes equating marriage with love a mistake. In fact, the second of his three versions of "romantic mistake" sounds more like a paean to the advance of human rights than the satire it is presumably intended to be.¹⁶

Another website opposing Canadian Tire's purported sponsorship, a blog entitled "Rebecca Writes," provides a handy example of the kinds of complaints to Canadian Tire generated by the *Lifesite* report. Rebecca writes,

We believe strongly that a gay person should never be treated with anything but kindness, but we also believe just as strongly that marriage is something that is between one man and one woman. This is one of our core values, our essential beliefs, and we cannot in good conscious (sic) help contribute, through our purchasing, to a company that actively promotes something that goes against this core value we hold. So the windshield wiper and motor oil that I bought yesterday will be our last purchase from Canadian Tire for as long as we can

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16. Conversely, none of the articles comes to grips with the question of whether defining marriage in terms of procreation means valorizing marriages devoid of love, so long as procreation takes place, nor that the consequences of such a debunking of the contemporary definition of marriage (in popular culture, to quote Farrow, that "marriage = love" [2004: 2]) might be — precisely — the sort of ignorance of consequences of which they accuse same-sex marriage advocates.

hold out, or until we find out that the company has withdrawn it's (sic) sponsorship (Rebecca Writes 2005).

Of course, the rhetorical force of this complaint is weakened somewhat by the reluctant admission that the family's boycott may not outlast the company's putative sponsorship. However, the letter raises some interesting questions about the relationship of advertising to sponsorship, marketing trends to social values, and the assumption that the companies one shops at should promote specific lifestyles and should be encouraged, if not forced, to do so by tools such as boycotts.

For example, a 2005 article on the *BP News* website, published by Baptist Press, quotes Robert Knight, identified as a director of Concerned Women of American's Family & Culture Institute, advising Christians not to boycott Starbucks overtly over the inclusion of a quote by Armistead Maupin in their "The Way I See It" coffee cup promotion, but rather to follow the example of

"The American Family Association [which] has been doing this for years with great results. Often we don't see the results because a company will notice that it has gotten out to thousands of people and they pull back whatever thing they were doing that caused the concern in the first place," he said. "And then they ask the American Family Association, 'Don't make a big deal out of it because then we'll have the gay pride activists on us.' So they just back away. Many victories have been won like that and the public isn't aware of it" (Curry 2005).

The similarities to the campaign against Canadian Tire are very evident in this report, including the concluding citation, without comment, of Starbucks's own rationale for the promotion: "Starbucks said it started the 'The Way I See It' program 'as an extension of the coffeehouse culture — a way to promote open, respectful conversation among a wide variety of individuals'" (Curry 2005). The writer appears neither to notice any irony in the demand that Starbucks delete the only gay voice in this conversation nor to recognize that the erasure of such voices involves precisely the opposite of an "open, respectful conversation among a wide variety of individuals."

It is important to point out here, however, that neither pro-gay nor anti-gay forces have a monopoly on the boycott as a political tool. While one company may be boycotted for pro-gay practices, another may as easily be boycotted for anti-gay practices — precisely the

rationale Knight provides for suggesting a *sub rosa* campaign that aims to achieve its goal without public notice. The push and shove of ideological demands enforced by purchasing power, however, goes both ways, although overall it would tend to favour the anti-gay agenda were it indeed representative of the majority of heterosexually identified Canadians or Americans, simply through sheer numbers. Because lesbian and gay people are significantly outnumbered by those who identify as heterosexual, pro-gay boycotts work only where there is significant support for lesbian and gay human rights issues amongst the straight community.¹⁷

The scene in *My Fabulous Gay Wedding* which gave rise to the panic about Canadian Tire's putative sponsorship of the show is actually a brief moment in episode three, the wedding of Charles and Michael. Michael is a United Church minister and his intended spouse, Charles, is a game show addict. Thompson and Cohen go shopping at Canadian Tire for household items, both useful and humorous, to create prizes for the game show they're planning as part of the wedding celebration. Apart from a one-second shot of a Canadian Tire sign in the upper right quadrant of a crowded urban landscape, nothing about this section provides specific identification of the locale, which could as easily be Zellers or Walmart. When I showed this clip at the conference where I originally presented this paper, the majority of the audience failed to notice the Canadian Tire sign at all. After one dismisses Canadian Tire's involvement in the show — they did not directly make money from it and, as is evident from the right-wing reaction, risked offending some of their customer base — what is left is to examine how the show portrays the wedding of these two men.

Several aspects are immediately noticeable: the focus on love as the core of the relationship being celebrated and its clear intensity, as both men and others at the ceremony are moved to tears on several occasions; the involvement of the family, including parents and children from an earlier heterosexual marriage; and, finally, the ordinariness of it all. Michael's father, in particular, makes it clear that he approves of

17. If the very formula "lesbian and gay community" tends to be factitious, creating an imagined tribe of people purely on the basis of shared sexual orientation, whose political, economic and cultural interests can vary enormously, this ersatz quality is even more true of the idea of a "straight community." Sexual orientation rarely trumps other ideological alliances, but neither does it create an intrinsic divide between individuals.

Michael entering into marriage with Charles, comparing their relationship to his own fifty-year marriage to Michael's mother.

What this all means, however, is slightly less clear: does the similarity to heterosexual weddings automatically, as Warner would suggest, instate a hierarchizing, normativizing discourse that now sees Michael and Charles's marriage as "ennobling" in comparison to the relationships of their unmarried friends? Does the very ordinariness of the wedding equate to heteronormativity? As Warner notes, the obsession with being normal began in the nineteenth century with the advent of statistics. As people were measured and counted, the numbers created by statistical instruments produced a regulatory effect in a wide range of human behaviours. To take one example, if people were told that the average person had sex 2.2 times a week, they suddenly had a standard against which to determine if their sex life was too frequent or too infrequent. So, if Michael and Charles's wedding is normal or average, is it also normative? It is, in fact, a difficult question to answer, particularly as its apparent normativity varies to some extent between the six couples who marry on *My Fabulous Gay Wedding*. At the start of the episode showing his wedding to Greg, Rob makes a casual comment about kicking out men he and his partner have picked up for the night; this suggests a quite non-heteronormative (although fairly common) approach to non-monogamous coupledness. Yet the non-normative valence of that comment is at least partially derailed later in the episode when Greg says that Rob hurt him by cheating on him; of course, the audience cannot know how Rob and Greg define "cheating," and whether or not their relationship really does include sex with additional partners or whether Rob was just joking.¹⁸

Just as interesting in terms of Ingraham's and Freeman's emphasis on the actual practice of the wedding and what is produced by it is Thompson's insistence that every marriage must have a bride and a groom. However, rather than replicating heteronormative assumptions that all gay relationships feature one masculine and one feminine partner — a failure of the heterosexual imaginary to comprehend the possibility that neither love nor sex require the replication of binary sex roles —

18. Since I know at least two opposite sex couples with open relationships of long standing (almost twenty years, in one case), I do not want to make the issue of open v. monogamous relationships into a distinction between gay and straight relationships; the real issue is the clash between actual practices and normative discourses.

Thompson radically de-genders the terminology. The bride, in Thompson's usage, is not the effeminate man in a butch-femme couple (and neither term can be usefully or accurately applied to the participants in most of the gay male weddings), but rather the way in which popular culture produces the wedding as centring around one person. In the heterosexual imaginary, the person around whom the wedding revolves can only be female, although the actual practice of heterosexual weddings suggests that this is not as invariable as the discursive construction of the white wedding might indicate.¹⁹

By contrast, Thompson says, "Every couple's like that, man-woman men-together, there's always a bride. It's amazing. There's always one who needs more attention. A wedding's usually about one person, that's what I found" (McKay 2005). Rather than casting it in binary terms, Thompson refers to the "balance between the yin and the yang," which he carefully distinguishes from biological difference (McKay 2005). It's a good metaphor, given the intertwined and inextricable nature of yin and yang in Chinese cosmology — one that makes far more sense in the lesbian and gay community than any attempt to impose the heteronormative dichotomy of man = groom and woman = bride on the relationships in question. Charles and Michael argue in a good-natured fashion when Thompson asks them who is the bride in their wedding, but Michael wins. The show, however, is quite even-handed in its depiction of the two men (and of the participants in the other five episodes); the only real concession to Michael's claiming of the bride's central role is that he is the one who gets to spend the night before the wedding in a swanky hotel, while Charles goes home to the dogs.

The issue of whether such representations create or resist normative discourses around same-sex marriage remains unresolved, however. Are Charles and Michael normalized by their desire to marry and by the wedding ceremony itself? Is there, as I asked earlier, a difference between being normalized and normativized? Thus the show's vacillation between a positive-images approach to the niceness and normalness of same-sex couples and a much more in-your-face anti-normative gay sexuality

19. In watching some heterosexual reality TV wedding shows in order to provide a context for thinking about *My Fabulous Gay Wedding*, I was particularly struck by one episode of *Rich Bride, Poor Bride* where it was clear that the groom was not happy with the bride's ownership of the wedding, but attempted on several occasions to make himself the centre of attention. In most cases, however, the grooms seemed resigned to their temporary supporting roles.

embodied primarily by Thompson himself (particularly in such images as Thompson lying on the ground discussing submission and sexual versatility with the couple's dog), fails to delineate the extent to which same-sex marriage produces a new homonormativity, a not very queer, we're-just-like-you embrace of the postures and ideologies of the heteronormative.²⁰

A second noticeable feature of the show, however, and one that works against its assimilative homonormative potential, is its refusal to desexualize either Thompson (whose role is equivalent to that of *Queer Eye's* Fab Five, save that he is not ministering to heterosexuals) or the weddings it produces. Thompson says that one of the reasons he took the role of host in *My Fabulous Gay Wedding* is that he was in Los Angeles, working in episode television, and "tired of playing neutered gay helpmates" (Cole 2005). Unlike the better known gay television series, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, on *My Fabulous Gay Wedding* gay men are not constructed as offering a desexualized queer pedagogy focussed on "teaching domesticity and care of the self to facilitate heterosexual coupling" (McCarthy 2004: 98). While *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* is not marketed as a wedding show, it is clearly all about heterosexual coupledom. As Anna McCarthy notes, "The Fab Five are not 'positive images' of homosexuality; they are image makers and arbiters of correct forms of representation in the heterosexual marriage market" (2004: 98). Gustavus Stadler expands on McCarthy's argument, concluding that,

In the show and in all the phenomena I have been describing, I also pick up a hint of an all-too-available assumption that goes along with this: that to be queer means not only to be good at making straight people's lives happier but to have the time to do so — for another fantasy these shows serve as a platform for is the unactionable, momentary sigh of envy to live "like that," with no children to worry about or wake up to at five a.m., no haranguing in-laws, no looming divorce-rate statistics, no prospective wedding locations and meals to suss out. In the twisted logic that is no doubt rarely as complete or systematic as I am portraying it, being queer means having time to read magazines, go to museums, and hone one's salon conversation (2004: 111).

20. For an excellent discussion of the politics of normalization in the context of lesbian and gay debates over same-sex marriage, see Warner (1999) and Brandzel (2005).

In *My Fabulous Gay Wedding*, by contrast, Scott Thompson and his team's ministrations are aimed at other gay and lesbian people, serving not to enhance heterosexual coupledness but rather to do mitzvahs, as Thompson puts it, for gays and lesbians who want to become part of the institution of marriage. McCarthy understands *Queer Eye* as functioning within "what Laurie Ouellette describes as the neoliberal project of reality TV.... The Fab Five, like Ouellette's Judge Judy, 'construct templates for citizenship that complement the privatization of public life, the collapse of the welfare state, and, most importantly, the discourse of individual choice and personal responsibility'" (2004: 98). While FOTF and its ilk would have us believe that a return to God, complete with a strict patriarchal interpretation of the Bible, is the only appropriate cure for neoliberalism (or for liberalism, come to that), *My Fabulous Gay Wedding* suggests — albeit partially and incompletely — alternative ways of understanding queer life outside of the binarisms that govern contemporary heteronormative discourse.

From one perspective, it is possible to argue that the glimpses into real gay lives that *My Fabulous Gay Wedding* affords go a long way to debunking both neoconservative stereotypes of promiscuous, unhealthy and unhappy homosexuals and more liberal stereotypes of gay men as existing on the privileged outside of daily heterosexual duties, such as child-rearing and family chores. While Michael's children are grown, for example, he is not divorced from the so-called realities of ordinary life; he and Charles have jobs, dogs, a house to maintain, in-laws to please and, indeed, "prospective wedding locations and meals to suss out." From another perspective, Thompson's relative openness about sexual issues and the show's repeated images of the couples' exchanging loving kisses reinforces the way in which these weddings celebrate the intertwinedness of what Margaret Farley, in her work on Christian sexual ethics, calls "just love" and "just sex" ("just" in the sense of ethical) (Farley 2006). In fact, these weddings demonstrate quite clearly the very intimacy that Dobson claims is specific to (a few) heterosexual marriages, that is "the mystical bond of friendship, commitment, and understanding that almost defies explanation" (2006b). Dobson, of course, defines such a bond as occurring only "when a man and woman, being separate and distinct individuals, are fused into a single unit which the Bible calls 'one flesh'" and adds that he is "convinced the human spirit craves this kind of unconditional love, and experiences something akin to 'soul hunger' when it cannot be achieved" (2006b). Yet it would

be hard for any but the most closed-minded to watch the wedding of Charles and Michael — or of any of the other five couples — without being moved by precisely this kind of intimacy, the extent of their “friendship, commitment, and understanding.” Indeed, Stephen Cole notes that

My Fabulous Gay Wedding's biggest surprise is just how moving the actual ceremonies are. Reality TV is not a genre that has achieved too many moist-hanky moments. But the first two shows in MFGW generate so many tears you'd think wedding-cake candles set off sprinkler alarms (2005).

In the long run, the message of *My Fabulous Gay Wedding* may be just that: these weddings are ordinary — as variable, as emotional and loving, as quirky, as full of characters and surprises, as capable and as incapable of reproducing wedding discourse as any other wedding. Whether ordinary must inevitably mean normal and whether that is or is not a good thing cannot be totally determined, as much of the normalizing effect remains in the eye of the spectator. The attempt to boycott Canadian Tire for its putative support of *My Fabulous Gay Wedding* seems to have had little effect, either on Canadian Tire or on the show itself — although it was mentioned, disapprovingly, even in the *Calgary Sun*, part of one of Canada's more right-wing newspaper chains (Slotek 2005) — but it does suggest that this particular audience (or perhaps more accurately, non-audience, since the protesters have no intention of watching the show) is highly resistant to any normalizing discourses produced by the show, whether these are understood in a positive or negative light. The response to such discourses by more radical queer activists, such as Jane Rule, who famously called on all Canadians to refuse to fill out the relationship questions in the most recent census, seems likely to be similarly critical, albeit for strikingly different reasons (Yeung 2001).

Nevertheless, the very existence of the show is made possible only by the legalization of same-sex marriage in Canada. Opposition to same-sex marriage by the member groups of the Defend Marriage Coalition, by FOTF, and by other right-wing religious organizations is not simply a defence of traditional marriage, nor opposition to homosexuality per se, it also raises the critical question of whether the state should be secular or religious. Most of these organizations want Canada to be a Christian state but they have been less clear about what precisely this

would mean. That information can be more clearly found on the websites of related United States organizations, where outspokenness about the desire to create a Christian state with Old Testament values is much more common than it is in Canada.

A further issue involves the degree to which these groups' core values link beliefs about gender normativity and the primacy of the male with opposition to abortion, to hate crimes legislation, and to gay rights of any kind. Dobson, for example, is quite explicit that the family should be, in his view, an institution in which men are dominant and women and children subordinate. Thus, the demand for support of the core values of the Christian right is also a demand for their entrenchment within the institutions of society. Such demands, despite apparently compulsory phrases (at least in Canada) about "loving the sinner, not the sin," seem to have as their inevitable consequences the reversal of the reforms of 1969 — the recriminalization of homosexuality, abortion, and possibly divorce. The question behind the campaign against Canadian Tire and *My Fabulous Gay Wedding*, then, is how closely the organizational face of the Christian Right in Canada is tied to organizations in the United States, and whether or not these groups are linked to dispensationalism and dominion Christianity. The further query then raised by the attempt to boycott Canadian Tire and by the larger campaign against same-sex marriage is whether or not the Christian Right in Canada is a series of organizations whose values and goals actually differ amongst themselves, with some organizations genuinely respecting the human rights of lesbian and gay people even as other organizations cloak their homophobia under the rhetoric of loving the sinner, or whether most of them are simply the respectable face of a gay-hating, sexist, frequently racist and anti-Semitic movement whose stated goal is precisely the world domination that its own rhetoric attributes to the mythic homosexual agenda.

All of these questions are raised by the response to a campy little wedding TV show about six couples who want legal recognition of their love for each other and whose willingness to be wed actually supports ideas of state-sanctioned monogamy and may, indeed, insert those couples into the regime of the heteronormative. In the end, though, we are still left asking whether the media's production of an incommensurable dichotomy between "lesbian and gay" and "religious" actually does more than anything else to "prevent us from seeing what

is at stake, what is kept in place, and what consequences are produced” (Ingraham 1999: 18) both by same-sex weddings and by opposition to same-sex marriage.

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