

Queering Genealogies

This special section of *Feminist Theory* explores the theme of ‘Queering Genealogies’. It brings together work which explores intersections of queering, queerness, biotechnology, kinship relations, genealogy and intergenerational relations. It unites two areas of study: queer kinship studies; and queer science studies. The section was edited by Dr Elizabeth Reed and Dr Kate O’Riordan, and our focus is on queer family making, kinship relations, genealogies and networks. The scope of the papers collected here ranges from biotechnologies such as DNA tests, IVF, gamete donation, and surrogacy, to digital media platforms that facilitate new strategic, transitory, and lasting relationships and make experiences of relation, genealogy and kinship. It critically engages with the ways in which kinship, genealogy and generational connection and traditions might be queered. The section contributes to a growing field and intervenes in this work of queer intellectual kinship-making through publishing research, which bridges disciplinary areas and creates links between theoretical approaches.

In this introduction, we reflect on some of the elements that inform the curation of this section. These include ways of making queer kin through media making, fictional forms, critical theory, ethnographic and empirical work and intellectual community. Two projects led by the authors at earlier points, orientate these reflections. Both projects employed similar methodological approaches, examining media representations, and interviewing participants. Firstly, Reed’s 2013 project ‘Making Queer Families: Identity, LGBTQ Parents, Media, and Cultural Representation’. This was an extensive piece of research, conducted over three years, that examined media representations and the role of media in the lives of queer families. The research combined media analysis with interviews to examine the ways in which media is central to the identity work of LGBTQ parents and is strongly implicated in the construction of home and family life. Although this viewed kinship-making through the lens of parenthood, the question of intergenerational connection, inheritance, and relation was central to the research. A second point of orientation is O’Riordan’s project ‘Queering Genealogies: intergenerational relationships in LGBTQ+ lives’, with Ross Robinson, which ran from 2008-2010. This project, examined experiences and representations of growing up in queer kinship groups, from the point of view of adult subjects with those experiences. It explored the hypothesis that although many people have experienced significant intergenerational LGBTQ+ relationships over the life course, intergenerational relationships in LGBTQ+ lives are often invisible. This is perhaps brought into focus most sharply by the dominance of the ‘breaking from the past’ trope in coming out narratives; particularly as a rupture in kinship and generation, and a coming into peer group relation.

In relation to Reed’s ‘Making Queer Families’ project, in a special issue of *Women: A Cultural Review*, centred on motherhood in the 21st century, Reed (2018) examines how lesbian, gay, bisexual and queer women negotiate mother-identity narratives through critical engagement with diverse media representations. Reed’s analysis brings out the ways in which the language and meaning of mothering played out in a range of parenting practices in the research:

These LGBTQ women were engaged in dialogue with heterosexual imperatives of motherhood. Their various responses to those imperatives indicate an attempt to shift or trouble dominant discourses of motherhood in order to enable greater possibilities and more varied productions of culturally validated mother identities. Through a cultural reservoir of representations, which they curated and shaped, and through their individual identity narratives, these women generated new possibilities for motherhood. (Reed, 2018: 58)

Reed’s careful attention to the testimony and interviews of the participants in the project helped to locate the ways in which they were engaging, negotiating, and remaking heterosexual imperatives of parenthood. Reed argued that these negotiations worked in many ways to queer the kinship networks and identities formed around these practices, challenging narratives that parenting is only about heteronormative assimilation. This chimes with Gamson’s emphasis on the contradictory burden for LGBTQ+ families, who are vulnerable in relation to normative institutions, and also navigating queer critiques of homonormativity (Gamson, 2015). Reed’s work develops an understanding of these tensions further and challenges assumptions about the figure of the mother, and other parents, and demonstrates the radical flexibility of motherwork.

In relation to the second orientation point, *Queering Genealogies*, this was outlined in a 2013 paper, ‘Two of my parents were lesbians and other stories’ (O’Riordan, 2013) given at the *Lesbian Lives* conference at the University of Brighton. *Lesbian Lives* has been running for over 25 years and is the world’s only annual Lesbian Studies event. It is international, inclusive, and an important event in honouring lesbian lives. Whilst the increased visibility of lesbian and gay parenting has generated multi-dimensional representation, attention to the experiences of growing up, coming of age and becoming an adult through and in intergenerational LGBTQ+ relations has remained largely unexplored, and in many cases, stigmatised. This project opened a space to think about people who have grown up in queer kinship networks, interviewing people who had grown up with experience of queer parents or other significant adults in their lives. Jules Pidduck’s conceptualisation of media-making ‘as a specific and productive kinship practice’ (Pidduck, 2019: 441) was influential for the research, and in thinking about putting these materials together.

As well as collecting primary data through interviews, the research also drew on found material from the LGBTQ story archive, *I’m from Driftwood* which had launched in 2009. Although the archive was in its early days, it was already a rich repository of stories about growing up with queer parents or in relation to queer kinship. It continues to champion an inclusive, intergenerational and intersectional vision of queer community through the use of life story practices. At the time it was one of only a few sites that enabled access to representations of LGBTQ life stories with accounts of intergenerational kinship. Whilst the *I’m from Driftwood* archive is largely affirmative, the project interviews also gave voice to difficult experiences including reflections on internalised homophobia, challenges around stigma and prejudice and forms of emotional and physical abuse. Interviews, and life story narratives, both fictional and empirical are key to this special section. This includes biographical, and autobiographical reflection, narrative identity, and the life story. These offer accounts of queer lives as they are lived, holding on to incoherence and contingency, whilst also offering an orientation towards the past and the future.

The Queering Genealogies project was developed in part through thinking about autobiographical accounts. The title, ‘Two of my parents were lesbians and other stories’ was drawn from O’Riordan’s experience of intergenerational queer kinship. Much of what drew them to the research was the desire to understand and be connected to other accounts of queer relation. Conducting interviews with people who had experience of LGBTQ+ parents, carers or others, and curating and analysing found stories of the same, enabled access to new kinds of queer world-making. The project also used the work of Heather Love, Carla Freccero, Judith Butler and Anne Cvetkovich to contextualise the life stories and interviews and create a platform to think about textual practices – both making and consuming – and queer identities across different kinds of generation, relation and time.

This theoretical platform remains important for this special section of *Feminist Theory*. At the time these earlier projects were inaugurated, Love had recently published *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (2009), drawing on both Freccero’s *Queer Early Modern* (2006) and Cvetkovich’s (2003) *Archive of Feeling*. Taken together, these writings offered a platform to think about how to connect literary history and queer theory with contemporary social life. They spoke powerfully to ideas about how to join up the living and the dead, and fact and fiction, to account for the impossibility of history and the ruthlessness of time passing whilst accounting for our own lives cast across different temporalities. Reparation in relation to invisibility, trauma and violence, cannot be entirely worked through reading practices, the craft of scholarship or the friction of activism, but it can be accounted

for differently in terms of lived experience and the life story. Judith Butler’s work on narrative and intelligibility (2005) offered a way of bringing together these different ways of thinking about history, time, generation, archive and storytelling: ‘An ability to affirm what is contingent and incoherent in oneself may allow one to affirm others’ (Butler, 2005: 41). Butler’s work connects across and influences Love, Freccero and Cvetkovich’s writing, as well as being generative for thinking about genealogy in this special section. The life story taken as an account in Butler’s terms, offers a way of feeling backwards into very close encounter with the lived past. The life story, as a collation of contingency and incoherence, taken at the intersection of queer generations offers a way of orienting queer lives as they are lived as well as an orientation towards the past and the future. Life stories, autobiography and oral histories are media forms, and only one tool amongst many; they are meaning-making practices with their own particular lens, and a form of storytelling.

Fiction is a crucial source in this space. An attachment to queer cultural production connects these disparate projects offering ways of identifying and thinking. Queer cultural production, and queer readings of culture, represent and make queer kinship. Whilst texts on queer motherhood (e.g. Moraga, 1997; Nelson, 2015) are crucial in embodying literary queer kin making, Alison Bechdel’s (2006) graphic novel, *Fun Home*, also offers a way of thinking about the intergenerational nexus of history, fiction, identity, connection, and life story. Also adapted as a piece of musical theatre, *Fun Home* combines techniques of fiction, and the form of the graphic novel, with autobiography and queer generation. The comic graphic novel enables long form narrative, whilst also having capacity to visualise complex temporalities. The autobiographical account is that of Bechdel’s negotiation of her own sexuality, growing up in the shadow of her father’s closeted homosexuality, which led to his suicide. It engages with stigma, trauma, death, homophobia and loss, and at the same time it is reparative and hopeful with an orientation towards the future. The title refers to Bechdel’s growing up in a funeral home, the comedy of the account, and tragicomedy of the tale. Detail from moments such as when the children of the family are playing and hiding in empty coffins, while their father is showing a bereaved client the coffin selection, demonstrate the lively and dark humour of the text. Queering genealogy brings liveliness and loss together, and this segue through Bechdel’s novel draws out grief and loss, and the ways in which different kinds of media making inform thinking about kinship practices and materials.

Enter technoscience (again)

Tangential to this nexus of queer theory and life story, but emerging in the same period, enter Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ART). This other kind of media is at once

intensely heteronormative, and radically queer. ARTs both destabilise heterosexual reproduction and re-enforce it through access to fertility, gestation and biological genealogy. Surrogacy, gamete and sperm donation and IVF have become dominant modes in ART and have been made accessible to different populations, in very uneven, but also potentially transformative ways (Farquar, 1997; Mamo 2007). At the same time that trajectories in queer culture, and other accounts destabilised biological kinship as the primary site of family and affirmed and legitimated families of choice and made kinship, ARTs also made an industry of restoring biology as the material of kinship (Smietana, Thompson and Twine, 2018).

Although stories of biology as kinship are powerful and often represented as universal, they are also partial and linked to particular centres. Stories of inheritance and descent are bound up in European narratives of evolution, class and the circulation and inheritance of wealth. In the UK context for example, working class histories, histories of colonisation and slavery (McClintock, 1995); and contemporary kinship stories from Black and Asian diasporas (Gunaratnam, 2014; Puar, 2007), challenge heteronormative assumptions that put biology at the centre (Lewis, 2000; 2009). In the context of scholarship in the USA, Black and indigenous feminism (Gumbs et al. 2016; Tallbear, 2018) and family abolitionism (O’Brien, 2019) also challenge heteronormative genetic kinship narratives. The scope of this special section remains narrow in its White European/American focus. In this sense, it fails to inclusively open up the field and the reproduction of this lens is a significant shortcoming.

Whilst attention has been paid to families and kinship of choice, less work gives attention to the ways in which biotechnology has queered kinship relations and stabilizes, disrupts or creates relationality. Notable exceptions include *Queering Reproduction* (Mamo, 2007) *Mediated Intimacies* (Andreassen et al, 2017), *Making Parents* (Thompson, 2007) *Bits of life: feminism at the intersections of media, bioscience, and technology*. (Smelik and Lykke, eds, 2015). This special section attempts to redraw this focus to bring these areas together, sometimes in the same article, and to create a space of intellectual kinship for these different modes of attention to attend to each other.

Through this section, we have aimed to craft an intervention that brings together biological and digital media forms; one that recognises, traces and amplifies the interconnection of medium specificity and biomediation. Borrowing from Dahl and Gabb (2019), we have aimed to craft this in a way that attempts to be mindful of context and is attuned to their analysis.

“to not ignore the foundational questions of gender, sexuality, race, and nation that inform kinship. To (...) think further about what queer intellectual kinship means, who

we care for and who we consider ourselves related to (...) and to how our geopolitical, sexual, gendered and generational differences and ties shape and make our affinities and solidarities.” (Dahl and Gabb, 2019).

Special Section Articles:

The section brings together papers which queer genealogical research and/or examine queer genealogies. Queering in this context can refer to any engagement with queer theory, and or engagement with LGBTQ+ genealogies and their intersections. We speculated that genealogy in this context might refer to ancestry, kinship, relation, reproduction, history, origin and naturalization. The special section seeks to queer the existing field through both an attention to queering genealogical analysis and examining queer kinship across life story, media and biotechnology.

In, ‘From the families we choose, to the families we find online’ Rikke Andreassen centres her analysis on connections made between donor siblings, facilitated through the sociality of digital media. This article draws on both the medium of semen, and social media to examine the way in which kinship is re-made through ‘finding’ donor sperm relations. In the context of a boom in queer and single families, made possible through access to sperm banks, Andreassen examines how new networks of donor siblings have emerged. These connect a relatively small number of donors to an extended network of potentially hundreds of recipients of donor treatments. This extends to a significant network of donor siblings and a generative context for new routes to kinship for the children of single and queer parents. Andreassen notes that single parents are more likely than queer parents to engage in extended donor sibling networks and argues that this offers another way of thinking about queering kinship. The article brings together donor treatments and social media to examine the convergence of these technologies as reproductive.

In ‘Queering the origin story: Adults raised by LGBTQ parents narrate kinship and connection’, Eliza Garwood explores the experiences of adults raised by LGBTQ parents. The origin stories that emerge combine genetic origin and queer kinship in the construction of narrative identity. These stories function as a resource to build connection and create family bonds, as well as to a broader sense of queer identity and politics. Garwood argues that although biogenetic ties remain central to understanding kinship, these origin stories are as social as they are biogenetic. Garwood looks at the way ‘many adults raised in LGBTQ households were interested in tracing their queer family histories, rather than solely their biological relations.’ These queer family histories invoked a much broader sense of family history and identity than the immediate family. They drew on queer histories, coming-out, community

and activism, and media-making practices including film, documentary and memoir. These stories bring together genetic and social stories, and connect political, social and personal histories.

Elizabeth Reed and Tanya Kant bring together digital and biological media in their article: ‘One donor egg and “a dollop of love”: ART and de-queering genealogies in Facebook advertising’. They examine the targeted advertising of egg banking and egg donation through social media. Drawing on Kant’s work on algorithmic targeting and Reed’s work on the role of media in identity-making, they explore the construction of essentialised heterosexual femininity in the promotional culture of commercial ARTs. Their analysis demonstrates the ways in which egg donation is conjured as a relation between women, of gifts, and reproductive hope. This imaginary is constructed in the service of the imperatives of biomedicalization (Clarke, 2014) in an industry facing an undersupply of eggs.

Sophie Lewis gives an account of mothers and mothering, in ‘Momrades against Motherhood, Mothering against the World’, threaded together with an incredible reach of connective queer intellectual kinship-making and skill. Lewis combines political, social and personal histories through stories about her own mother, family abolitionism, xenofeminism and Black feminism. The latter particularly through the work of Pauline Gumbs (Gumbs, 2010; Gumbs et al, 2016). Lewis’s manifesto *Full Surrogacy Now* also underpins this account, and the death of Lewis’s mother in the period of writing the article also frames the narrative. Lewis’s account is of dystopia, reparation and kinship – or kith connection – figuring comrades, momrades, doulas and alien connection: ‘Kinship, that is, is always made, not given. By the same token, more often than we think, where kinship is assumed as a given, it fails to be made.’

Together the articles critically queer genealogy across biotechnological and digital media forms.

Conclusion: genealogy and reparation

Calls to radical relationality, and the recognition of new kinship patterns are emerging in the context of digital life, ecological crisis and intensifying social injustice. Techno-social structures have both transformed kinship relations and exacerbated their most reactionary formations, at the level of species, nation, kin and person. In this context, a critical re-examination of what it means to be related to life, to kin, and the world is central to understanding individual and collective identity.

Bringing together this section in the context of the pandemic has necessarily pushed us all into very different timelines, even given the infamous length of time anticipated in academic publishing. This feels like a project spread over decades – in many ways it has been – and this introduction aims to give a sense of that longer timeline to enable a platform that in turn contextualises the excellent writing and thinking in the articles published here. Media making including the promotional cultures of biotechnology, the novels that structure Love and Cvetkovich’s analysis, and the media genres central to Reed’s research, are productive kinship practices (Pidduck, 2009, 2018). In tune with this we alight on two novels here as something of a coda: *Girl, Woman, Other* (Evaristo, 2019) and the *Parable of the Talents* (Butler, 1998). We started this project by looking for stories about intergenerational relation; stories are a technology of kinship, and ART and other biotechnologies are technologies of story: biomedica across text and test tube. The stories across these two novels, speak to the challenge of reparative world-making in dystopian times, and the making of hopeful genealogies of kith-ship, time, queerness and technology.

Girl Women Other, came into print as the final comments were coming in for the peer review of these articles, so was read for the first time, whilst the *Parable of the Talents* we have gone back to many times. Evaristo’s novel is about intergenerational kinship, telling the stories of twelve characters. It is (mostly) about Black women in the UK. It gives voice to feminism, families and friendship and draws together the past in the present, connecting and disconnecting mothers, sisters, lovers and children. It connects 1980s activism in the UK with women’s land projects in the USA, and navigates gender identity, queerness, feminism, class, nationality, ethnicity and racism. Towards the end of the novel, it also draws on genetic testing as a technology of life story, as a narrative device and as an agent in the story, making genealogy intelligible and opening up futures of kinship making. The *Parable of the Talents* is also an extraordinary novel that covers more ground than we can give any sense of here. However, it connects through this material in two ways. One is through its own story of mothering against motherhood. The central character and her immediate family are never reconciled. Divisions, and damage across biological family relation, are irreparable and rerouted through other kinship relations. The other connection is through the extraordinary capacity of narrative as technology, and technology as narrative. In the novel the protagonist is driven by a prophetic vision of a people targeted by white violence, escaping the politics of the USA, and travelling into space, specifically to Mars. Octavia Butler died in 2006, and in March 2021 NASA named the first landing site on Mars, the ‘Octavia E. Butler’s Landing’. For us, landing Evaristo and Butler (Octavia as well as Judith) together through this introduction and bringing together these excellent articles across the theme of queering genealogy, has been part of a project of queer intellectual kinship.

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