

# Gay Marriage, 1970s Style

ELISE CHENIER

**F**OR THE PAST TEN YEARS, same-sex marriage has dominated the American political landscape, but this is not the first time in history this issue has made front-page news. In 1971, *The San Francisco Chronicle* declared that a “gay marriage boom” was under way. In the first few years of that decade, *The New York Times*, *Life* magazine, *Jet*, and other periodicals ran feature articles about a handful of couples who launched America’s first battles for legal recognition of same-sex marriage. Jack Baker and Michael McConnell, the best known of these couples, were invited to appear on Phil Donahue’s enormously popular daytime television show, and a number of lesbian couples quickly followed in their footsteps.

Although ultimately unsuccessful, Baker and McConnell’s campaign garnered considerable media support and gave a very fetching face to American male homosexuality. Baker and McConnell are still together today, living proof, one might say, of the power of same-sex love and commitment, and a testament to the legitimacy of the claim to marriage equality.

Baker and McConnell were no traditionalists, however. In the early 1970s, reports of increasing marital discord and rising divorce rates accompanied by the growing trend toward premarital sex and common-law living arrangements signaled an end to traditional marriage. “In the United States we are at a crisis,” Baker said in one of his many university campus speeches. “We have to change ... the institution of marriage as we know it today. [We must] de-emphasize the nuclear family [and] create alternatives to marriage.” Legalizing same-sex marriage “would have such a devastating shock on ... the United States that people will begin to think rationally about alternatives to the nuclear family and will begin to think of new ways to enhance the reproductive process of society.” Thus the push for gay marriage had nothing to do with reinforcing society’s traditionalist, patriarchal moorings, but was all about throwing a monkey wrench into the family system. Marriage needed to be updated. Among other things, it was time to eliminate monogamy and the legal expectation of a life-long commitment.

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Baker and McConnell launched their campaign without the backing of any organized movement. Although they probably enjoyed support among the local Minneapolis gays they befriended through their University of Minnesota campus-based

activism, most politically inclined lesbians and gays were indifferent, if not outright hostile, toward marriage of any kind.

Compared to the radical vision for change advanced by liberationists in the late 1960s and early ’70s, Baker and McConnell’s crusade appears more reformist than revolutionary, but the context in which they made their bid is important to consider. It is easy to forget that even after Stonewall (1969), coming out publicly was what separated many liberationists from accommodationist homophiles, and was key to gay liberation’s confrontational politics and its success as a movement. The stigma of homosexuality made the social costs of coming out great, and even the most uncompromising liberationists recognized that doing so was a deeply personal decision. Moreover same-sex marriage was far beyond the pale of anything to which even the most sympathetic heterosexuals might acquiesce.

In fact, marriage equality wasn’t even on the lesbian and gay political agenda at this time. Carl Wittman’s highly influential “Refugees from Amerika: A Gay Manifesto” (1970) effectively summed up the movement’s take on marriage: “Traditional marriage is a rotten, oppressive institution.” The marriage contract

“smothers both people, denies needs, and places impossible demands on both people. ... Gay people must stop gauging their self-respect by how well they mimic straight marriages. Gay marriages will have the same problems as straight ones except in burlesque.

... To accept that happiness comes through finding a groovy spouse and settling down, showing the world that ‘we’re just the same as you’ is avoiding the real issues, and is an expression of self-hatred.” Lesbian and feminist Martha Shelley concurred. Gay marriage is a “form of Uncle Tomism” intended to “reassure the straight society that we are respectable.”

In the mid-1960s, well before Stonewall, support for same-sex marriage began to flow from an unlikely quarter. Encouraged by the Anglican members of Britain’s 1957 Wolfenden Commission who supported the Commission’s recommendation to decriminalize homosexuality, progressive Christian leaders in the U.S. began examining Christianity’s role in the oppression of homosexuals. One way Christian leaders could alleviate this oppression was to accept them into the Christian community as homosexuals, they argued. Another was to bless their unions.

Inspired by the revolutionary energy infusing gay culture, a small number of male ministers and priests came out themselves and began organizing non-denominational services geared toward gay and lesbian people of all faiths. Spirituality was also undergoing radical social transformation. Even just supporting lesbians and gays was risky, however. After Methodist Rev. Roger Lynn blessed the union of Baker and McConnell, he received some 5,000 letters from people who took the trouble to tell him what they thought of his actions; half praised him and

*Elise Chenier is an associate professor of history at Simon Fraser University and is currently writing a book on same-sex marriage in the U.S. since World War II. If you have any personal recollections, photos, or artifacts of pre-1980 same-sex marriage ceremonies, please contact the author at [echenier@gmail.com](mailto:echenier@gmail.com).*





*Jack Baker and James Michael McConnell, May 18, 1970.*

the other half condemned him. The Methodist Church sided with his critics, and Lynn lost his position. Although he has no regrets for blessing Baker and McConnell's union, doing so had long-term personal consequences.

Few couples were public about it, but blessing same-sex unions was a rite that supportive ministers were frequently called upon to perform. Father Robert Clement built a large lesbian and gay-positive spiritual community at the Church of the Beloved Disciple in New York. At the same time, Los Angeles-based Reverend Troy Perry began building the Metropolitan Community Church, which rapidly expanded across the U.S. and Canada, and eventually to other continents.

Blessing lesbian and gay unions took pastors like Perry out of the spiritual and into the political realm. California marriage law did not stipulate the sex or gender of marriage partners. In 1972, Perry went to court to argue that according to California law the marriages he conducted were legal. He lost, but the battle demonstrates how progressive Christian support for same-sex marriage was also a political act that directly challenged the way state laws oppressed gay people.

Blessing the unions of lesbians and gays also challenged the image of homosexuals as pathological sexual deviants. When Baker and McConnell were making headlines, the campaign to have the American Psychiatric Association eliminate homosexuality as a mental illness was just beginning to take shape. For the previous two-and-a-half decades homosexuals had been characterized in medicine and in popular culture as sex-crazed psychopaths or, at best, as lonely depressives. As is still the case today, lesbians and gays were also characterized as sinners doing the devil's work. Gay liberationists may have regarded marriage activism with disdain, but at a time when coming out was still a political act of deep personal significance, coming out and marrying a person of the same sex undermined popular perceptions and gave America new ways to imagine "the homosexual."

Marriage ceremonies confronted homophobia and positively supported the lesbian and gay community by acknowledging the emotional and sexual legitimacy of same-sex relationships. Clement and Perry's churches were the only spiritual institutions to *formally* recognize same-sex relation-

ships, and while some lesbians and gays had no desire for such recognition, for others it provided deeply meaningful emotional and political affirmation.

A handful of lesbian couples publicly championed gay marriage, too. Women did not challenge the fundamental premise of marriage as a monogamous institution, however. Instead, they challenged the popular perception of lesbian relationships as pathological, immature, and short-lived. Their efforts contributed to the public re-imagining of lesbianism as a foundation for loving relationships.

In 1971 Latina Bobbi Jean Sanchez and her African-American partner Joan Kearsce were married in Reverend Robert Clement's Church of the Beloved Disciple, in New York. In 1974, an African-American couple, Phyllis Marshall and Grace Thornton, both of Dayton, Ohio, applied six times to the Montgomery County Domestic Relations court for a marriage certificate. Marshall and Thornton launched a lawsuit against the state of Ohio for \$1,000,000 in damages in the hope that this would pressure the legislature to act in their favor. "We love each other and are not ashamed to scream it from the roofs," Thornton explained. "The whole world is love, if people would just let it be." They told reporters that if they were ever issued a marriage license, they would like to have a "big church wedding." They lost both the lawsuit and the bid for a marriage license.

**W**E REMEMBER the gay liberation movement within the context of sexual liberation generally, and for that reason sexual exploration dominates our historical imagination. We have forgotten that radicals also sought to unchain our capacity to love across differences. Like homophiles before them, gay liberationists challenged the stereotype of lesbians and gays as one-dimensional, sex-obsessed deviants. They strove to provide intellectual, creative, and physical spaces where we could become more fully human, and our intimate relationships more expansive. As Carl Wittman put it: "Where once there was frustration, alienation, and cynicism, there are new characteristics among us. We are full of love for each other and are showing it; we are full of anger at what has been done to us." We have to "realize that our loving each other is a good thing," he continued, "not an unfortunate thing, and that we have a lot to teach straights about sex, love, strength, and resistance." Liberationists and activists like Baker and McConnell and Marshall and Thornton held opposing views of marriage; what bound them together was a recognition that love was a radical political act.

Love as the basis for progressive or radical change is not something most social scientists who study post-World War II social movements have considered. Scholars of color, however, have been taking love seriously for quite some time. In 1994's *Outlaw Culture*, African-American lesbian bell hooks describes "the testimony of love as the practice of freedom." "The moment we choose to love," she writes, "we begin to move against domination, against oppression. The moment we choose to love we begin to move towards freedom, to act in ways that liberate ourselves and others." It was precisely such sentiments that Thornton and others expressed in deed, if not so eloquently in word.

Baker and McConnell's embrace of marriage was out of step



with the gay liberation movement, which rejected marriage and the family as oppressive institutions. But liberationists' critique of marriage and family did not make sense for people of color, who relied on family and church for their everyday survival, even as they battled homophobia within them. As the gay bar was for many whites a refuge from homophobia, so family and church were refuges from racism for lesbians and gays of color, including racism in the white lesbian and gay community. Rather than "smashing the church" and turning their back on family, lesbians and gays of color needed to find ways to negotiate or confront homophobia in those places while at the same time negotiating racism within the gay community.

The last two decades of advocacy for same-sex marriage rights has given rise to surprisingly conservative arguments about the nature of same-sex love and relationships. These more recent campaigns have stressed how lesbians and gays are not just formally equal to respectable heterosexuals, but just like them in general. Sounding more like the 1950s than the 1970s, some have idealized traditional marriage as the preferred social arrangement. Gilbert Herdt, a cultural and psychological anthropologist and professor of sexuality studies at San Francisco State University, for example, published a study supporting same-sex marriage on the grounds that long-term monogamy improves mental health.

One of the major ways that the marriage equality movement has de-radicalized queer politics is by de-emphasizing queer sex. And yet, it is our status as sexual outsiders that first inspired the liberationist and radical activism of the 60s. As John D'Emilio succinctly put it three decades ago: "gay men and lesbians exist on social terrain beyond the boundaries of the heterosexual nuclear family. Our communities have formed in that social space. Our survival and liberation depend on our ability to defend and expand that terrain, not just for ourselves but for everyone."

In normalizing lesbians and gays in order to integrate with heteronormative institutions, spaces where alternative sexualities take root and flourish were sacrificed. The liberationist and queer vision was reduced from an expansive view of sexual rights and justice that challenged definitions of normative sexuality to a more narrow concern with lesbian and gay equality that aligned with normative heterosexuality.

Advocates for same-sex marriage often take up the Baker and McConnell story as a precursor to the present day marriage equality movement. Unfortunately none actually mention Baker and McConnell's ambition to transform marriage, the family, and reproduction. By this act of omission, these accounts oversimplify Baker and McConnell's more complex—and much more interesting—proposition.

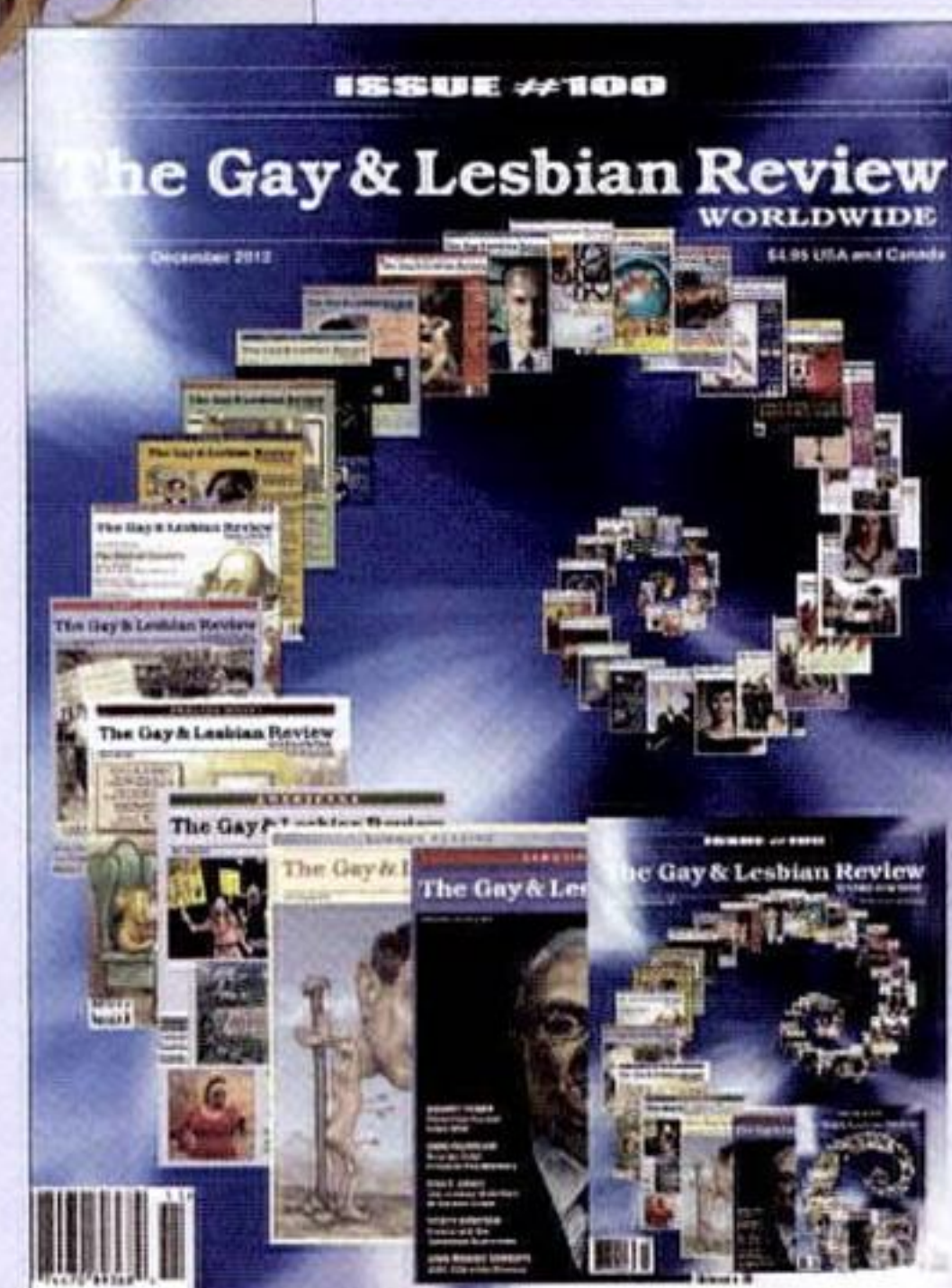
What's fascinating about Baker and McConnell's same-sex marriage campaign was that they championed gay male cultural values like non-monogamy as something to be preserved within a transformed institution of marriage, and something that would benefit heterosexuals as well. Women who launched similar campaigns made no such arguments simply because sex for its own sake was not a part of lesbian culture. Nevertheless, and despite the fact that none succeeded in winning same-sex marriage rights, their stories show us that the history of the same-sex marriage struggle is much longer and more complex than we might think.

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