

Cheshire Calhoun

Feminism, the family, and the politics of the closet: Lesbian and gay displacement

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Calhoun's book is philosophy of the best sort. It grows out of her personal experience of becoming a lesbian after living 37 years with heterosexual privilege. And it comes out of her recognition that the insights of feminist theory provided her few resources to live her life as a lesbian or to understand gay and lesbian subordination.

At the time I was reading Cheshire Calhoun's very fine book, *Feminism, the Family and the Politics of the Closet: Lesbian and Gay Displacement*, I also happened to see the 1994 movie, *Four Weddings and a Funeral*. The movie is a romantic comedy featuring the muddled but loveable Charles who meets the lovely Carrie at the wedding of a mutual friend. After some brief, bumbling conversation, the pair fall into bed together only to meet again many months later at another wedding where their passion is rekindled and somehow sustained without contact or conversation through Carrie's own misbegotten marriage right up to aisle to Charles' own wedding day—to another woman. This indecisive and inept pairing is contrasted with the real heart of the film: a gay couple, Garath and Matthew, whose own mature commitment is revealed in Matthew's heart-rending recitation of W.H. Auden's poem *Funeral Blues* at Garath's funeral.

There are a few things worth noting about the dynamics of sexual orientation in the film. First, Garath's fatal heart attack occurs in the wings during the speech-making at Carrie's wedding reception. The wedding revelry and the discretion of those attempting to care for Gareth succeeds in making almost everyone oblivious to the death of one member of the movie's only gay and most sympathetic pair. Second, at Garath's funeral, the minister who calls Matthew up to give his eulogy refers to Matthew as Gareth's "best friend." Third, by way of acknowledging Gareth and Matthew's relationship, Charles and another heterosexual male friend observe that while they have been bumbling around in search of the right partner, Gareth and Matthew were there all along in a true marriage and that this fact made them "enemies in our midst." Fourth, the expletive of choice in the film is "bugger." The word is used often by Charles and his side kicks in response to one thing or another going awry. The only other use of the term is by Matthew who in his eulogy refers to Gareth as the best bugger he has ever known. It doesn't seem too much of a stretch to point out that the heterosexual characters in the movie have appropriated and become oblivious to the term's meaning for Matthew.

Cheshire Calhoun's book gives us a very helpful roadmap and conceptual tools for understanding the dynamics of sexual orientation both in this movie and in our society where this frothy, film was a box-office hit. The key conceptual tool in Calhoun's book is that of the *displacement* of gays and lesbians. In the book, Calhoun makes a compelling argument that the systematic subordination of gays and lesbians is reinforced not only intentionally in conservative quarters where you would expect it, but also unintentionally in liberal and socialist feminist theory. The failure of feminist theory to adequately account for the uniquely damaging effects of

heterosexual dominance on gays and lesbians, as distinct from the damaging effects of white and male dominance on racial minorities and women, contributes to the literal displacement of homosexuals “from both the public and private spheres of civil society” (2). The problem of displacement, Calhoun argues, demands a new methodology that will move lesbian and gay subordination “from the margin to the center.” At stake in the orientation of theory and politics to sexual orientation are three crucial liberties: (1) the liberty to represent one’s identity publicly; (2) the liberty to have a protected private sphere; and (3) the liberty to equal opportunity to influence future generations (159).

Calhoun provides the basis for this new methodology through an intricate argument that examines first how feminist theory fails to serve the aims of justice for gays and lesbians, and second, why marriage and family issues are the appropriate political center of gay and lesbian liberatory activity.

In making her case that feminist theory fails to adequately represent lesbian concerns, Calhoun argues that the group Radicalesbians as well as theorists Monique Wittig, Charlotte Bunch, Adrienne Rich and Marilyn Frye all “claim too much for lesbians” (40) by regarding lesbianism as “the quintessential form of feminist revolt” (40). The problem with this view is that it assumes that heterosexuality only serves to support male dominance. In fact, argues Calhoun, heterosexual dominance serves to support the institutionalized assumption that marriage between a man and a woman is the most fundamental relationship in civil society. To overcome the exclusion of gays and lesbians from civil society, therefore, Calhoun argues, lesbians and gays must make access to marriage and family the centerpiece of our political agenda.

If these theorists and activists claim too much for lesbians, Calhoun argues, Janice Raymond and Sarah Hoagland claim too little. In their emphasis on how lesbians themselves may be in the thrall of heteronormativity (acting out relations of dominance and subordination in lesbian s/m or through pornography) and through their focus on resistance to such hetero-relations, Raymond and Hoagland, Calhoun argues, “[eliminate] space for *lesbian* theory” (42). For example, the lesbian feminist call for “loving women” is fine, says Calhoun but loving “women” is not lesbian love. “Lesbians fall in love with, want to make love to, decide to set up a household with a *particular* other woman, not a class of women. It is for this particularized, sexualized love that lesbians are penalized in heterosexual society. Because of this, lesbian theory needs to move specifically lesbian love to the center of its political stage” (45). To do this, theory needs to examine the ways that heterosexuals and nonheterosexuals “constitute opposing political classes” (72), not just practitioners of different forms of sexual expression.

It is her argument about the centrality of family and marriage that highlights the political subordination of gays and lesbians relative to heterosexuals. Gays and lesbians, (like Matthew who is represented only as the “best friend” to his dead partner, Gareth—the parallel with the movie, *is mine*, not Calhoun’s) must “adopt a pseudonymous heterosexual identity in order to gain full access to the public sphere” (76). Likewise, despite Charles’ blithe assumption that Gareth and Matthew are a “married couple,” gays and lesbians are “displaced from civil society’s private sphere—namely, the sphere of marriage and family—via the bar on same-sex marriage” (76). Further, says Calhoun, because homosexuality is commonly understood to be about sexual acts alone and indeed excessive sexuality, homosexuals are represented as “unfit”

for politically sanctioned relationships with children (through bars on adoption, custody, foster parenting).

In a very insightful analysis of the debates surrounding the “Defense of Marriage Act,” Calhoun answers a question that has been nagging me as I have attempted to understand the conservative rhetoric around the “Federal Marriage Amendment,” the recently proposed constitutional amendment to secure the definitional boundaries of “marriage” against same sex unions. Quoting from speeches on the floor of Congress, Calhoun explains that conservatives believe that allowing same sex marriage will “cheapen,” “demote”—or as we recently heard from the president of the Family Research Council—“devalue” marriage just as counterfeit money devalues the dollar. Calhoun helpfully explains that this conservative position is based on the view that marriage is not like other forms of voluntary association, but is regarded as the “pre-political” institution on which the state is founded (124). To allow same-sex marriages would, according to conservative opponents, make marriage like any other voluntary association about which the state remains neutral. The upshot of this view, says Calhoun is that it deprives gays and lesbians of the distinctive political status of heterosexuals and thus, displaces us as “inessential citizens” (124). Because, on this view, “only heterosexuals are fit to participate in this foundational marriage institution, only heterosexuals are entitled to lay claim to a unique citizenship status . . . as well as special entitlement to control future generations’ ongoing commitment to heterosexuality and heterosexual marriage” (127).

Calhoun is aware that her argument to place marriage and family at the center of gay and lesbian political action could be seen as a “retro” and fundamentally conservative move. This is all the more true as she is somewhat wary of abandoning the notion that marriage is a pre-political institution (129-31). In response, she argues that she is not claiming for gays and lesbians “the right to participate in traditional forms of family but the right to *define* what counts as a family” (132). As we move in that direction, she says, we must challenge conventional representations of gays and lesbians as “outlaws of the family.” In her final chapter she returns to deficiencies in feminist theory and to Anglo-American cultural history to examine the ways in which the image of the “family outlaw” has been maintained and how we might challenge it.

Calhoun’s book is philosophy of the best sort. It grows out of her personal experience of becoming a lesbian after living 37 years with heterosexual privilege (v). And it comes out of her recognition that the insights of feminist theory provided her few resources to live her life as a lesbian or to understand gay and lesbian subordination. She marshals impressive intellectual and scholarly resources to argue her case. That the issue of gay marriage has been somewhat surprisingly compelled onto the national stage in 2004 affirms Calhoun’s prescience and provides an opportunity for her arguments about the centrality of marriage and family to play a central role in shaping public policy.

Although Calhoun’s book tends to focus on lesbians and to do so from a perspective that emphasizes the experiences of whites, it should be an invitation in particular to lesbians of color, white gay men and gay men of color, as well as gays and lesbians outside the United States to test her methodology against their own histories and representations.

If, in the four years since her book was published, gay and lesbian invisibility and displacement have been somewhat lessened in the United States, mostly through the mass media, arguments such as Calhoun's serve as a test to assess the evolving representations of gays and lesbians in the public and private spheres and as a roadmap to securing citizenship in the fullest sense.

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