Navigating Spaces: Lesbians Claiming Territory

By Alia Levine

The concept and definition of "family" have fractured and shifted over time, with changes in the two-parent family structure according to new "norms." Higher divorce rates, and the economy in an increasingly consumption-driven society, are just two factors leading to a breakdown of the more traditional patriarchal hierarchy of father/husband as sole breadwinner in a heterosexual family unit.

Despite this shift away from a more conservative notion of what defines "family," the heterosexual model is still the point of reference for all discussions of "family." Those families that do not fit this model face the challenge of negotiating a space for themselves in an environment that may be less than welcoming. What makes it especially difficult is that the heterosexual family unit is reinscribed as normative and validated in almost every form of media. Moreover, it is supported and sustained (at the expense and to the exclusion of other models) by both churches and states around the world, as illustrated by laws such as those relating to marriage, adoption, and inheritance rights.

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The conservative model of the family unit is both sacrosanct and ubiquitous. Critiques of the family unit reveal the "sanctity" of the family as an illusion, a tactic created to benefit a select few. Not only are lesbians excluded from this model, they may also be identified as threats to it. The family can also be seen as a metaphor for society, complete with its own hierarchies and patriarchal laws. Thus, where can a lesbian, who by definition exists outside the model family, find a legitimate space for herself in what may potentially be the oppressive, discriminatory structure of the family unit—and its larger equivalent, society?

Cheryl Clarke in a 1983 article has a cynical view of what she describes as "the mythic family unit." From her vantage in the United States, Clarke comments, "Consider the family as this country's preeminent model of love. Supposedly, the family is a space of safety, intimacy and privacy...the family offers us respite from the hardships of the public, workaday world."

Challenging this all-inclusive image, Clarke asks, "Where is the love? In the normal, middle-class family who kicks their 15-year-old son out of the house for fucking the captain of the football team?"

Is there space for lesbians (and for that matter other queer folk) in your "average, everyday" family, and/or in your "average, everyday" town? It's not that hard to find news of "hate crimes"—look on any queer news website, or check out the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund—and learn about the insecurity of our very existence, not to mention the safety of any space we may have for ourselves. Pull together a room of lesbians and their coming-out stories, and you're bound to hear stories of persecution: the family who didn't talk to their daughter—or their sister—for eight years; the mother who would steal off to meet her daughter in secret, lest she also incur the wrath of a hurt and angry (or just plain homophobic) father/husband. Of course, there are positive tales too: my mother was almost relieved when I told her I was gay—she couldn't stand the boys I used to bring home! There are those who are fortunate enough to have other gay family members, there are those who have family who wave the PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians And Gays) with vigour, and there are those who—rather than fight to be in a club they

don't even like—create loving, accepting families of their own. Clarke celebrates the options open to those who don't subscribe to a draconian family order, as she declares, "We have the potential to wrench apart a social order where the personal, the private and the public are maintained as separate realms. We have the capacity to upset the strict set of rules prescribing what is allowed to take place in each one." In other words, the mere state of openly being a lesbian has the potential to disrupt and break down long-established social structures; those heterosexual spaces (the home, the workplace, the neighbourhood) that have been held in place by silence, homophobia, and oppression. By stating our identities—as gay, queer, anything other than heterosexual—we are claiming (or reclaiming) space in our environments.

Clarke's comments are as applicable to societal structures as they are to the confines of "the family." It is incumbent upon us (not only lesbians, but also other minorities or oppressed groups) to ensure to the best of our abilities that the space we choose to inhabit (or may need to create) is one that will not vilify, discriminate against, harm, or kill us. Finding, inhabiting, or creating such a space—publicly, that is—is not always possible, in the family or in greater social spheres. Not all countries or states have human rights laws that protect the rights of lesbians, and even those that do are not able to fully ensure one's safety and well-being. For this reason, for many, discretion may be the better, if not the only, part of ensuring one's own safety and keeping the peace in the family and the broader society.

In *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community*, Elizabeth Lapowsky and Madeline D. Davis define "family" as a group who, "by definition, takes an active interest in its members' social life, and expects its members to participate in the same activities." This definition by no means implies an unconditional inclusion for all. Making known one's identity as a lesbian is a risk. It can mean losing your place in the family, to be out of the closet can mean being cast out of the home; the entire option (let alone the expectation) to "participate" can be rescinded.

Lapowsky and Davis describe the challenge of negotiating space within one's family when they observe (in this case, of lesbian life in the 1930s and 1940s), "The goal of discretion in family life, therefore, was not so much to keep members of the immediate family ignorant of one's lesbianism, but rather to avoid further disruption of family relationships and to protect one's immediate family from general social disgrace and ridicule by fellow workers, neighbours and relatives."

A close friend of mine recently (neither the 1930s or 1940s!) experienced first-hand this type of discrimination-by-discretion. When invited to be the maid of honour at her sister's wedding, she was told that, while she was welcome to bring her girlfriend (who was very welcome in her family's home), they were to refrain from kissing or dancing together lest the groom's family or guests take offence at the public display of lesbianism, which would then reflect poorly on her sister, the bride-to-be. The extent of acceptable public behaviour was limited to holding hands.

Stories such as this always sadden and anger me, for they are reminders that lesbians still must resort to struggling, negotiating, and tenaciously clinging to their

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Ideal societies and families are those wherein lesbian identities are naturally up in the mainstream and lesbians, out in the public.

human rights to openly inhabit space in the world—as lesbians. Has so little changed from the era described by Lapowsky and Davis? Instead of an inherent entitlement to choose and define the parameters of one's space—when, how, and where one desires—one is forced to debate and negotiate the terms of one's space. The terms of my space, as a lesbian, should not be open to debate, negotiation, or, in the case of the lesbian at her sister's wedding, compromise. It may in fact be easier, in some cases, to negotiate, demand, or simply take one's own space in a city of millions than within an intimate family environment.

Sally Munt, in *Heroic Desire: Lesbian Identity and Cultural Space*, discusses alternative ways in which lesbians create and negotiate space. For her, the lesbian's negotiation of space takes place within the most intimate space—the body. "Who belongs in social spaces, and what are the criteria for membership?" Munt asks. She remarks, "This thing I call 'my space' is a portable self, sometimes reducible to my body, often extended, in order of priority to my house, my car and my office." In an environment that is unaccepting of lesbians, this internalised, solitary space may be the only option.

Unlike what is considered your average, white, Western family unit (mum, dad, 1.2 kids, station-wagon, dog, and hopefully a picket fence) where one's space in the world is accepted as a matter of course (even if it may be no more than an unchallenged notion of entitlement), as a lesbian, I am often acutely conscious of the space I inhabit. There is always a context, and my space is both mutable and relative. On a basic level, this can merely reflect the company I keep and the place I inhabit. Holding hands in Provincetown, Massachusetts (or any other exceptionally Sapphically-populated region) is far less challenging—or risky—than kissing my girlfriend on Fifth Avenue, New York, only to be spat on. My identity as a lesbian informs my sense of space, for I am constantly aware that this place (this space: my "portable self") that I have constructed for myself may only be as safe as the environment I am in at any given time.

The ways in which we negotiate and claim space for ourselves and within such constructs as our families and society—our communities, workplaces, cities, countries—are endless. Lapowsky and Davis's description of the lesbian compromise, existing in a discrete external space, is very different from Munt's depiction of a private, internal space. And both are extraordinarily different from Clarke, who states, "To be queer is to make love public," challenging the reader, "Will you take that risk?"

Of the three, Clarke's take is my favourite. By being defiantly gay—being out from the outset, we can disallow speculation and assumption—in this space, there is no space for discussion or debate, no room for discretion. In the economy model of my fantasy, for me, the ideal family would always be, as Clarke so succinctly—and romantically—puts it, a "preeminent model of love." It would be a place where discretion—like a pair of shoes muddied with the outdoor grime of societal judgement and discrimination—would be left at the door. One's family would be the core place where one could guarantee a sense of (safe) space, protected from outside ignorance, prejudice, and oppression. In my dreams, though, in the super-deluxe version of my fantasy, the above model of the ideal family would be merely a replica of greater society at large. Society would be such that the negotiation of lesbian space would be unnecessary.

"To be queer is to make love public. Will you take that risk?"

A staunch lesbian/feminist/antipodean, Alia Levine moved from New Zealand to her family's native city, New York, in 1997 (she only planned to visit), where she works as a freelance writer/editor/consultant in the land of publishing and human rights. She is a Women's Studies/English Literature graduate from Victoria University, New Zealand.

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