

# 1. Going to the chapel: Same sex marriage and competing narratives of intimate citizenship

## ABSTRACT

The public discourse about marriage oscillates between a story of the ideal and a story of the everyday. A range of symbolic references or myths are mobilised in media stories about marriage; this is particularly evident in the polarised debate around same-sex marriage. This article identifies and explores three of the myths that underlie the rhetoric in same-sex marriage stories: 1) the evolution/revolution myth; 2) the apocalypse myth and 3) the myth of the child. It also argues that the production of such stories has effects on the realm of 'intimate citizenship' (Plummer 1995) and that it is through this contested storytelling that new identities and their attendant rights become possible.

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**T**HIS ARTICLE looks at the cultural and media debates about same-sex marriage and argues that these debates draw upon a wide range of symbolic or mythic storylines. This study arises out of an analysis of print media stories on same sex marriage, which appeared in Australian and key international publications during July - October 2003, the three months surrounding major statements on the issue by the Vatican, US President George Bush and Australian Prime Minister John Howard.<sup>1</sup>

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The article seeks to provide a set of possible readings of selected articles and an indicative typology, which begins to engage with a broad cultural analysis of the same sex marriage debate as it is being staged in the media, and in a range of key political, religious and social institutions both in Australia and internationally.

A detailed analytical reading of particular articles is used to draw out the mythological/symbolic repertoire at play in the debate. However, this article does not attempt to provide a thorough content analysis of the data, nor does it attempt a detailed narrative or discourse analysis. Although my primary data set is print media reports, my intention is not primarily to investigate traditional media studies questions such as the liberal or conservative biases of the reports. However, certain media constructions of the debate are highlighted in the course of the analysis and discussed further in my conclusions.

Debates around same-sex marriage have proved particularly volatile over the last 12 months. There are a number of key sites of contestation including the courts, the legislatures, the churches, the news media and the broader realm of popular culture. Although this study cannot pretend to be a comprehensive analysis of this complex situation it does seek to make a range of links between these different sites of struggle.

As executive director of the US National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, Matt Foreman told the New Jersey *Star-Ledger* that public opinion formation on this issue is taking place during ‘an extraordinary confluence of events’. Apart from a series of major American legal decisions, Foreman listed Canada’s legalisation of gay marriage, the election of the first openly gay bishop in the Episcopal Church, the ‘buzz’ over the television show *Queer Eye For the Straight Guy* and Madonna’s open-mouthed kiss of Britney Spears at the MTV Video Music Awards as factors potentially causing public anxiety and influencing a sudden drop in public support for same sex unions (*Star-Ledger*, 7 October 2003).

I will draw on a range of documentation such as statements from advocacy organisations and an analysis of the reality TV programme *The Amazing Race* to place the print media reports in a broader cultural context.

### **Journalism, marriage and myth**

A variety of theoretical models have been developed which posit news as cultural storytelling. Narrative strategies (Zelizer, 1990), core plots (Davis, 1984), fairytale (Turner, 2000), frames (Gitlin, 1980), maps of meaning (Hall,

1978), master narratives (Rosen, 2003) and ritual (Carey, 1998) have all been used as paradigms to discuss both the structures and cultural effects of news. The notion of news as myth has been an influential model that has been adopted by a broad range of scholars (Fiske & Hartley, 1978; Bird & Dardeene, 1988; Lule, 2001).

In his book length study of news and myth, Lule (2001) identifies journalists as part of a 'long storytelling tradition', which includes minstrels and shamans as well as more contemporary purveyors of information. Following the historian of religion Mircea Eliade, Lule defines myth as 'archetypal stories which play a crucial social role'. He applies this model to seven case studies, drawn from the *New York Times*, to demonstrate how seven 'master myths' – the victim, the scapegoat, the hero, the good mother, the trickster, the other world and the flood – shape the production of news stories. His studies are remarkably diverse, ranging from Mother Teresa as good mother through to Haiti as the other world. His examples extend across sporting celebrities, disaster stories, crime stories and international news.

Although she is sympathetic to this type of project, Elizabeth Bird (2003) is critical of the 'universalising' text-bound approach of Lule's study. She contends that it 'pays scant attention to the differences in time and place that produce particular cultural moments and narratives, rooted in particular histories. Furthermore in focusing on texts, it ignores the participatory role of the culture in which the myth is embedded' (2003:159).

While I would agree with Bird that this is one tendency in Lule's work, I believe that in his most cogent case studies Lule draws on a number of other frameworks to enrich his analysis, thus providing a contemporary politicised context for his 'eternal stories'. His analysis of Mother Teresa as good mother, for example, shows how recourse to an easy mythic framework allows the eclipse of problematic structural issues concerning gender, religion and poverty. Lule also draws on other theoretical frameworks, such as studies of the human-interest story, to show how myth can feed reliance on journalistic routines leading to a naturalised, ideologically inflected portrait.

Bird argues for an anthropological understanding of myth 'more as process than text and as a joint product of storyteller and audience' (2003:159). She stresses the need for multi-site ethnographic audience studies, which would attempt to conceptualise and understand the emergence of broad intertextual 'mediascapes'. However, she also argues that traditional text-based studies can play a part in this project if they pursue a 'thick' description,

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which looks towards the place of the text in everyday life.

The holistic, cultural focus of anthropology, reach[es] out from the story itself toward a set of connections between it and notions that are simmering in the culture at large. In this respect although the analysis starts with the text, I believe such a 'thick' contextual exploration also sheds light on the relationship between text and reception (Bird, 2003:162).

One recent study, which attempts to interrogate traditional mythic patterns within a 'thick' description of contemporary cultures, is Ken Plummer's (1995) work on the emergence of contemporary sexual story telling.

Plummer argues that radically new stories, such as gay and lesbian coming out stories, women's rape survivor stories and stories focused on recovery from sexual dysfunction, are deeply connected to the traditional stream of storytelling. He shows that three movements are common to each of these new types of sexual stories: there is always suffering which leads to a turning point or epiphany, which in turn leads to a transformation, surviving or surpassing. Plummer argues that these elements link directly to the traditional mythic patterns of journey, suffering and consummation identified by literary critic Langdon Elsbree (1982).

Plummer also argues that the connections between the traditional and the emergent are part of the political power of these new narratives. He suggests that one useful way of thinking about the political place of such stories, is through the concept of 'intimate citizenship'. This sphere of sexual politics is shaped by new stories, the communities that create them and the communities that resist them.

He argues that political rights and responsibilities are not 'natural' or 'inalienable', they are 'invented through human activities, and built into the notions of communities, citizenship and identities' (1995: 150).

Moving out of a silence, the stories [of gays and lesbians and rape survivors] helped shape a new public language, generating communities to receive and disseminate them on a global scale ... Indeed the (late) modern period has invented stories of being, identity and community for both rape survivors and gays that has made it increasingly possible to claim rights in ways that could not be done until these stories were invented (1995: 149-50).

Stories or myths help form individual tribes and wider cultures. They are opportunities for change as well as fuel for tradition.

The term myth as I will use it in this study is a heuristic device, which helps to identify and highlight some of the notions 'simmering in the culture'. Myths are best understood as nodes at the heart of complex networks of inter-related stories. As broad, intertextual narratives, myths can act as literary organising devices, which bring different, sometimes contradictory, textual elements into dialogue with one another.

This model, which attempts a thick contextual exploration, is a particularly useful model for exploring narratives of same sex marriage because, as philosopher Richard Mohr has pointed out, the debate is often marked by highly charged symbolic terms. Mohr draws a useful distinction between two views of marriage that, he says, are at the heart of the societal conflict over the push for legalised same-sex marriage.

Marriage viewed as a way of experiencing the world explains gays' sudden interest in the issue, while marriage viewed as a cultural ideal explains the strength of the backlash against gay marriage. The unfortunate result is that in this battle of the cultural wars the combatants are not even fighting on the same field (Mohr 2000:22).

Mohr analyses an exchange between openly gay Democrat Representative Barney Frank and Republican powerbroker Henry Hyde during a hearing about the *1996 Defence of Marriage Act* (DOMA), which was the first attempt by conservative forces in America to enshrine a heterosexual definition of marriage in law.

In the exchange over DOMA Frank kept coming back at Hyde trying to get him to specify exactly how same-sex marriage would threaten, change, or hurt in any way Hydes own marriage or any other marriage. In the end Frank got Hyde to admit that two gay men or two lesbians getting married would not take anything away from Hyde's own marriage nor would any heterosexual lose any rights or benefits currently associated with their marriage. So exactly what was the problem? Hyde's reply was stark and revelatory in its directness: 'It demeans the institution. The institution of marriage is trivialized by same-sex marriage,' Hyde replies. As Mohr comments:

The institution of marriage has now become completely detached from any actual marriage. It is only the concept or ideal of marriage—marriage

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wholly in the abstract – that concerns Hyde. Here we have left the realm of traditional social policy and entered the realm of cultural symbols (Moher 2000:23).

Mohr's distinction between marriage as everyday reality and marriage as cultural symbol is a useful one when trying to understand the way this debate is being played out and the intransigence of government decision makers even on matters of far less symbolic importance than marriage. For Australian gays and lesbians, the battle over same-sex couple superannuation rights, for example, is a very simple matter about the everyday economic organisation of their lives, there are no logical public policy reasons to oppose it. The Government's opposition can only be read as ideological opposition based on particular notions of an institutional ideal.

### **Marriage: Old stories, new stories**

This study would support Mohr's claim that one of the defining ways marriage is conceived publicly is as a cultural ideal. My initial explorations would further suggest that the media presents marriage as either a fantasy or as a social problem: an ideal achieved or an ideal thwarted. Common media stories about marriage sway between the fairy tale romances of princesses, pop idols or movie stars and stories about divorce rates, the problems of working mothers or acrimonious child custody disputes.<sup>2</sup>

A third media narrative about marriage is part of a wider media discourse, which I have previously identified as the 'new self/new world' myth. Stories which fall under this rubric document emerging social trends but they also seek to rewrite the traditional heroic quest with a folk psychoanalytic figure of the 'self', set in an ambiguous post modern world saturated with both utopic and apocalyptic omens (O'Donnell, 2004). Examples of this third kind of marriage story include articles such as one in the *Melbourne Age* (2 October 2003) that profiled couples who are also business partners, or an article from the *Good Weekend* (1 February 2003) that explored a new type of 'extended family' where the new and old families of divorced partners – including both sets of ex-partners and their new partners – form a friendly relational unit.

In the single biggest media story of a marriage in recent times: the story of Diana of Wales, we can see the intersection of all three marriage story types. It was, at different points in its trajectory, presented as both a fairytale and a catastrophe. The tale was also played out against the wider story of changing

social forms in marriage, the monarchy and the media. In more recent times we have seen the emergence of another princess fairytale in the Australian news. On 9 October 2003, the *Sydney Morning Herald* – and most other Australian papers – led with the story of Mary Donaldson, the real estate agent from Tasmania, and her engagement to Prince Fredrick of Denmark.

One of the keynotes of the stories published about Donaldson over the weeks surrounding the announcement was the motif of ‘transformation’: of a commoner into a princess, of an English speaker into a Danish speaker, of a woman fond of ‘sporty’ attire into a wearer of haute couture. These stories represent an institutional discourse about marriage even when this is cloaked by the fantasy of the lucky princess. This is nowhere clearer than in the stories that emphasised that Donaldson’s ‘main job’ in the immediate future will be to bear a royal heir.

In the same issue of the *Herald* another power couple were featured: victorious Californian Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger and his wife Maria Shriver.

If anyone was in doubt that this was an American dream sprung to life, Schwarzenegger’s victory script removed all uncertainty: ‘I came here with absolutely nothing and California has given me absolutely everything. I want to be the people’s governor’, Schwarzenegger said. He called for support to make ‘the tough choices ahead’ so that ‘together we can make this again the greatest state in the greatest country in the world’ (*SMH*, 9 October 2003).

Shriver is an integral part of that dream. She comes with Kennedy family pedigree and thus links this story with the Kennedy story, with the Camelot myth, with the story of Jack and Jackie. But this is not really about romance, it is about a pragmatic alliance. The ‘telegenic and politically astute’ Shriver as one report (*SMH*, 9 October 2003) called her, is an important part of Arnold’s political strategy. The report continues:

Mr Schwarzenegger fought back against the groping allegations with the help of his wife, who is recognised as a talented television journalist. Ms Shriver was the first person the actor thanked for his victory. He told her in front of his supporters: ‘I know how many votes I got today because of you’ (*SMH*, 9 October 2003).

If Shriver’s relationship to the Kennedys immediately summons up the vestiges of the American Camelot, this defence of her husband immediately

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summons up another contemporary political marriage: that of Hilary and Bill. If in the story of Fredrick and Mary we see the fantasy meeting the institution with Schwarzenegger and Shriver we see the dream meeting pragmatism. What is strikingly obvious from both these examples is the extent to which current media discourse on marriage is still embroiled in traditional narratives of gender and linked directly to other narratives of political power. It is in this context of an institution that is at once idealised and problematised that we must situate any discussion of same sex marriage.

### **Amazing couples**

The symbolic parameters of the marriage debate were starkly highlighted on the 2003 season of the reality TV show *The Amazing Race*. This adventure series is a kind of cross between orienteering and a treasure hunt in which 12 two-person teams competed across four continents, 24 cities, and 44,000 miles. An analysis of the way differing views of both heterosexual and same sex marriage were mobilised by the series participants, and by commentators in the ensuing press coverage, provides a succinct introduction to the myths underlying the marriage debate.

*The Amazing Race* couples include best friends, work colleagues, a father and son, heterosexual couples and a gay couple. The show flips between the 12 couples in a quickly edited sequence and each time a couple comes on screen again their name and designation flash up: 'Monica and Sheree NFL wives, mums' or 'Russell and Cindy friends, dating' or 'Debra and Steve married, parents'. This title provides a definite branding of the couple and their identity because it can flash up on screen 10 times or more in the course of an average episode.

In previous series of the show gay couples who participated had been designated 'life partners'. In the 2003 series, Reichen and Chip, the gay couple who eventually went on to win the race, insisted that they be labeled 'Married'. They had celebrated their union in a ceremony with 200 of their friends and family the previous year and celebrated their one year anniversary during the show. CBS executives, after some discussion, agreed to the married label and were forthright in defending that decision when the inevitable backlash came from the religious right.

Mike Haley, the manager of the Gender Issues Department at Focus on the Family – an influential Christian radio-based organisation that its founder



James Dobson says is fighting a ‘civil war of values’ – had this to say about Reichen and Chip in an article posted on the organizations website:

*The Amazing Race* ... was amazing because the two gay contestants crowned the show’s champions - Reichen and Chip - proudly declared to America that they are married.... they aren’t really married....No one is more aware of this than gay activists. That’s why they couldn’t be happier that CBS let Reichen and Chip call their relationship whatever they wanted - and that the duo was the last team standing. Those activists know that the more Americans hear something, even when what they’re hearing is a lie, the more likely they are to believe it (Haley, 2003).

Haley is right about the power of repetition. Because this is actually a debate with very few substantive issues, both sides are essentially reduced to the repetition of symbolic mantras. The religious right talks endlessly about ‘the protection of marriage’ and gay and lesbian activists talk just as relentlessly about ‘same-sex marriage equality’. Both sides know the power of repetition and both sides know the power of the symbolic.

Reichen and Chip were not the only symbols on *The Amazing Race*. One of the other couples had an equally striking tag line: Millie and Chuck from Chattanooga Tennessee labeled themselves: ‘Dating Twelve Years/ Virgins’. Millie and Chuck set themselves up as a poster couple for the ‘sanctity of marriage’, and were forthright about being ‘bible-believing’ Christians.

When the couples got together at one point during the series both Reichen and Chip and Millie and Chuck had to negotiate a ‘coming out’ process. By and large the gay marrieds, Reichen and Chip, gained much more ready acceptance than the virginal Millie and Chuck. One of the contestants exclaimed: ‘Screw the gay marriage, I can’t believe I’m sitting next to a 28-year-old virgin.’

Reichen and Chip describe their stance and CBS support as ‘revolutionary’. In a post victory interview with the gay magazine *The Advocate*, Reichen had this to say about their being tagged as a married couple:

It’s revolutionary. You know, it’s kind of saying, “Yeah, you know what? If the state isn’t going to recognize the rights that people want to have, then the people will go ahead and recognize that for the state (Steele, 2003).

Chip describes it as a basic redefinition of a key cultural term.

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The word 'married', I guess, in the Oxford dictionary is a term used in a church [ceremony] for a man and woman, and what's happening today, which has always happened through any revolution of culture, is that people redefine words. And we're basically saying ... It's time to redefine it. They're doing it in Canada; they already recognise it in Amsterdam. The United States is way behind on many issues, and I don't really care how you would like to phrase it: We like to use the word 'married' (Steele 2003)

In these two quotes we can identify something of the broader shape of the marriage debate. The framework for Reichen and Chip's decisions and beliefs is not stable. On the one hand it is very much a personal act, just a preference ('we like to use the word "married"') but it is also a 'revolution of culture', linked to other previous revolutions when words and concepts have been redefined, and it is a change that is being played out on an international stage.

In this debate participants, on both sides, are constantly shifting their address, and often their underlying rhetorical framework, between appeals to the individual, the state, the church, the national community, the international community and particular sub-cultures.

### **Same-sex marriage myth 1: Evolution/revolution**

One of the beliefs underlying Reichen and Chip's statements is an idea that change in this area is both evolutionary and inevitable; that it has already, or will at some point soon, reach a point of self-generating efficacy. This is what I will call the *evolution/revolution myth* in the gay marriage story. This mythic framework is clearly evident in a report of a decision on gay marriage by the Arizona Court of Appeals. The court had been asked to determine whether two gay men had the legal right to marry under Arizona law. Both the court's decision and the couple's reaction reflect the evolution/revolution myth.

The Presiding Judge, Ann A. Scott Timmer, for the unanimous three-judge panel, wrote:

'Although many traditional views of homosexuality have been recast over time in our state and Nation, the choice to marry a same-sex partner has not taken sufficient root to receive constitutional protection as a fundamental right' (*The Arizona Republic*, 10 October 2003).

This is very much a 'not yet' decision rather than a 'no-way' decision. It

reflects judicial caution over changing social mores. But there is a clear implication that change may evolve over time and take root just as other attitudes have been ‘recast’. What is perhaps more interesting is the response of Tod Keltner who along with his partner Don Standhardt had brought the case to court.

‘I was upset for about five minutes, or maybe three,’ Keltner said. ‘Then I got this euphoric feeling. Things work in strange ways. This might just be a minor battle in the overall war. It might anger people so much they do more, that they’re not so apathetic. Who knows what the long-term effects will be?’ (*The Arizona Republic*, 10 October 2003).

The evolution/revolution myth can be seen to be functioning in quite different ways. It can act as both a stultifying force: be careful, just wait, change will occur as it is meant to. Or it can act as a buttressing device to promote hope and spur further action.

### **Same-sex marriage myth 2: The apocalypse**

The evolution/revolution myth can be seen as the flip side of another prominent myth in the gay marriage story, which I will call the *apocalypse myth*. Apocalyptic discourse is one of the dominant narratives of contemporary culture (Dellamora, 1995; Berger, 2000) and has been given added symbolic resonance in the post-September 11 world.

The apocalypse myth is primarily seen in comment from religious authorities but apocalyptic comments make for such good copy that the tone, if not the content, is often extended by media reports rather than isolated as aberrant or extreme. This can be identified in reports of a number of Sydney Anglican Archbishop Philip Jensen’s comments on gay marriage, homosexuality and the church.

A report in the *Sydney Morning Herald* of Jensen’s address to the 2003 Sydney Anglican Synod begins:

Parts of Western Christianity were locked in a struggle to survive, and the issues of homosexual ministers and same-sex unions would prove the turning point, the Anglican Archbishop of Sydney, Peter Jensen, said yesterday.

Jensen is quoted as saying:

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‘The reality of the Anglican Communion has been put to its severest test this year over the issue of blessing of same-sex unions and the endorsement of unrepentant homosexual ministry. Indeed it is no exaggeration to suggest that parts of Western Christianity are at an acute phase of the struggle to survive as Christians in our sort of culture, and that this issue is the turning point’ (*SMH*, 14 October 2003).

This follows on from prior statements by Jensen that the battle over homosexuality was a battle for the ‘soul of the west’.

‘It’s really a contest for the soul of the west; it’s not just the church.’  
‘It’s a question of whether the permissive sexual ethics of the 1960s are actually going to triumph in western culture, and the church is almost the last port of call in this’ (*SMH*, 2 October 2003).

The apocalyptic is not just a religious discourse about hell-fire and damnation. It is particularly easy to engage in end-time stories at times of uncertainty and fear. Thus, it feeds into current discourses on terror both explicitly and subliminally (Lincoln, 2003:30-31). It is not just coincidental that ‘Marriage Protection’ and ‘Border Protection’ are phrased so similarly. The rhetorical force of both these political catch phrases relies, at least in part, on broader end-time narratives of cultural values under threat.

The way these various narratives work together is seen at its most extreme in the US religious right leader, Jerry Falwell’s blaming of abortionists, feminists, gays and lesbians for September 11. A few days after the attack he said on his Christian television programme:

‘I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People For the American Way, all of them who have tried to secularise America. I point the finger in their face and say “you helped this happen”.’

Falwell, pastor of the 22,000-member Thomas Road Baptist Church, viewed the attacks as God’s judgment on America for ‘throwing God out of the public square, out of the schools. The abortionists have got to bear some burden for this because God will not be mocked’ (CNN.com, 14 November 2001).

This apocalyptic myth is taken up by groups who believe themselves to be a

faithful remnant standing out against the turning tide. As Falwell's statement makes clear gays and lesbians are not the only problem. The link with abortion and feminism is particularly instructive. The gay marriage debate is very much a mirror of the abortion debate and on the religious right many of the players are the same.

Same-sex marriage and abortion both involve the conjunction of legal, media and religious discourse and the organised campaigns for legislative change have, in both cases, evolved out of a rights-based, sub-cultural politics. Both debates also contrast the rights of the child with the rights of adult sexualities.

### **Same-sex marriage myth 3: The surrogate child**

The child is one of the most powerful and enduring images in the symbolic repertoire and the *myth of the child* has been mobilised by both sides of the gay marriage debate. The image of the child rarely functions simply. It can be wrapped in nostalgia of particular childhoods, or it can play as a cipher of an undiagnosed future. It represents innocence, playfulness, mischief and fragility. It has an originary or primeval provenance and links easily with narratives about the natural and the unnatural. The child often functions as surrogate for other concerns or undeclared fears in political debates over sexuality. The hypothetical child, for example, is often evoked as arbiter in debates about censorship.

Australian Prime Minister John Howard waded into the debate about gay marriage on the back of statements from US President George Bush and the Vatican. This is how the *Canberra Times* reported Howard's statement:

Marriage without children is no marriage at all, according to Prime Minister John Howard.

Mr Howard yesterday denounced same-sex marriages, saying traditional heterosexual marriage was a bedrock of society all about ensuring the survival of the species....

'I'm opposed to changing the law in Australia to give them [gay couples] the same status as marriage that we all understand in our society and our communities,' Mr Howard said.

'That's not an expression of discrimination, it is just an expression that marriage as we understand it is one of the bedrock institutions of our society. It is very much about the raising of children, the having of children, and the continuation of our species' (6 August 2003).

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Here the child is evoked not as an innocent who needs protection but as part of an almost mechanical process that ensures the ‘continuation of the species’. Children here are an abstraction of the future and as such these statements also subtly play to the apocalypse myth. Howard engages in a classic process of ‘othering’ with this statement. Gays and lesbians are reduced to a ‘them’ and opposed to the ‘we all’ that understands the status of marriage.

But that’s not an expression of discrimination, he claims, it’s just an expression that marriage, as we understand it, is one of the bedrock institutions of our society. This statement is of course an expulsion of gays and lesbians from that ‘bedrock’ core of Howard’s ‘we all’ community.

The rhetorical shift to children and the future immediately blunts the effect of Howard’s nullification of gay and lesbian people, because children, particularly as they function here to represent the species and the future, are, or at least they pass as, an inclusive metaphor. But of course if the ‘our’ in ‘our species’ is the same as the ‘we all’ of the previous statement, then in Howard’s linguistic universe gays and lesbians are not even human.

*The Australian* columnist Janet Albrechtsen jumped into the ensuing debate and warned that this was a ‘zero-sum game where a few gays might win at the expense of many, many more children’ (*The Australian*, 13/08/03):

Look at the importance of marriage through the eyes of a child of divorce, or the thousands of children of divorce. The results of our social experiment with divorce and laissez-faire marriage are in: children do better on every score when reared by their biological mother and father. This is why marriage must remain special and why discrimination is not always a dirty word ... Supporters of same-sex marriage reject this as judgmental nonsense. But their non-judgmental path is in itself a judgment. It is a judgment that marriage should be overhauled to cater for a small group of adults who do not want to feel left out, that the interests of children are of secondary importance. (*The Australian*, 13 August 2003)

This is typical Albrechtsen style: fiery rhetoric mixed with an appeal to a set of unverifiable statistics. It is a pointless exercise to try and unpack the logic or lack of logic here because it was never intended to follow a pattern of reasoned argument. It does, however, have a powerful emotional logic and that logic stems from the sullen eyes of those thousands of damaged children that she evokes.

The letter's pages of *The Australian* over the next few days carried numerous responses to Albrechtsen's article many of them derisively negative. Iain Clacher of Woolloongabba, Queensland had this to say:

Like the Prime Minister, [Albrechtsen] confuses marriage with child-rearing and in the process insults all those in childless marriages. She insults many more when she suggests children are better off in violent or loveless marriages than being raised by loving adoptive parents, unmarried parents, single parents or a blended family.

If the institution of marriage really does help couples maintain stable relationships, same-sex couples and their children will benefit from recognising same-sex marriages.

A much larger group of children will also benefit – those who currently reach puberty and discover the state considers them such second class citizens it denies them both the rights of marriage and the rite of responsible commitment it represents (*The Australian*, 15 August 2003).

Here we see the other side of the child myth, which is increasingly used by pro-same-sex marriage forces. Appeal is made to the actual children being reared by gay and lesbian parents and also to the symbolic gay child who is the silent victim of homophobic discourse. If the imaginary child functions as an ideological surrogate in these statements it is a fascinating twist to see an actual surrogate child suddenly take centre stage.

Lee Mathews and his son Alexander, who was born to a surrogate mother, became media darlings after Mathews told his story to the Melbourne gay newspaper, *Melbourne Star Observer*. Mathews agreed to tell his story because he was disturbed by Howard's comments on gay marriage. The story was picked up by *The Age* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* and led to a segment on SBS *Insight* and further media coverage.

Looking at the story, which appeared on page three of the weekend *Herald* with a beautiful page dominant image of a delighted, happy, father and son, it is tempting to hail this as a breakthrough story. And in some ways it is. But in other ways it is a site of tremendous contestation.

The story begins with some introductory set-up, quotes from a lesbian doctor and a lawyer who have helped set up surrogacy arrangements for gay parents. Both sources are used only to establish the extent and process of gay men becoming fathers. The report then develops with a few paragraphs about Mathews but no direct quotes. Then we suddenly segue into the 'strong

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concerns' of the Australian Family Association.

'Some people have said it's a form of child abuse to bring a child deliberately into the world without a mother and father,' said spokesman Bill Muehlenberg. 'Every child has a right to its own mother and father, not two dads, not two mothers and not a committee.'

Mr Muehlenberg said he feared for the future of Mr Matthews's child. 'We wouldn't deliberately bring a child into this world and deliberately lop off its arms and its legs, which is what we are doing with these kind of arrangements.'

A spokesman for the Catholic Church, Monsignor Les Tomlinson, was also critical. 'Such ways of procuring offspring is stepping outside the natural order,' he said.

Depriving a child of a mother and father, he said, could 'impair the psychological and emotional growth' of a child and contribute to later dysfunction (16 August 2003).

Then the article moves back to a summary of current Australian legal issues concerning surrogacy. After a comment that Matthews went public 'with his family's story after the Prime Minister John Howard ruled out marriage for homosexuals,' the report ends by recapping Howard's statement.

Muehlenberg and Tomlinson are quoted as part of journalism's 'strategic ritual' of objectivity (Tuchman, 1972). And at first it may seem that their quotes do add balance, but they are in fact only answering back their own concerns. The other voices in the article are asked to comment on the process of surrogacy while Muehlenberg and Tomlinson are invited to comment on the morality of the arrangement and the welfare of the child. The authority of Muehlenberg and Tomlinson as experts in this matter must also be questioned. If the concern was really about child welfare then surely a paediatrician or child psychologist would have been a better choice to achieve a strategic balance.

But this story is not really about the rights of the child, it is about a contentious social debate. The journalist has chosen to stay within 'the established terms of the problematic in play' (Hall, 1982:81) with reference to moral and religious authorities rather than treat this as an emerging new story of family.

## Conclusions

The myths of evolution/revolution, of apocalypse and of the child are helpful



heuristic devices, which point to some of the specific ways in which the same-sex marriage debate is being constructed but they also link the debate back to a set of larger cultural issues. Other myths are also active in the debate<sup>3</sup> but the three discussed above provide a broadly useful map of the discursive terrain.

The myth of evolution/revolution is one of the primary myths that underlies much of the discourse of gay and lesbian activists/lobbyists. The two elements of this myth show inherent tensions in the contemporary gay and lesbian movement, which grew from a radical (revolutionary) liberation movement in the 1970s to a mainstream (evolutionary) political lobby today.

While the move for same-sex marriage recognition is indicative of the movement's political mainstreaming, it is still constructed by some as a revolutionary act in tune with the movement's foundation ethos. The notion of revolution becomes, in the religious rhetoric of same-sex marriage opponents, an apocalyptic change, which links to traditional Christian eschatology. As I have already noted these apocalyptic narratives of the end-time link directly to other aspects of threatening cultural change and to the self identification of many fundamentalist religious groups as a resisting remnant with either a wrathful or redemptive mission.

These myths are mobilised by same-sex marriage activists and their religious opponents because they link directly to myths at the heart of their sub-cultural identities. But their use to structure news stories is more complex.

One reason why these myths are easily identified in media reports is because they are the lingua franca of the accepted sources for these stories: gay activists and their religious opponents. Politicians who are drawn into the debate are usually trying to play to one of these audiences and thus also adopt elements of this rhetoric.

But another reason why these myths are so readily integrated into media reports is that they appeal to a key news value: conflict. In fact, the pitting of gay activists against their religious opponents is also driven by this news value. As McGregor (2002) has argued: 'the conflict format... imposes on the news what issues are selected, what sources are used and which events are chosen.' McGregor believes this to be particularly true of news about controversial social issues, because without conflict 'journalists cannot satisfy notional fairness required by most codes of practice'.

This reliance on a conflict framework is evident in many of the examples quoted above but it is particularly obvious in my analysis of the report about Lee Mathews and his surrogate child.

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Each of the mythic frameworks that I have discussed feeds this notion of contest. Notions of apocalypse and revolution are implicitly conflictual and the myth of the child is mobilised as a polarising narrative of risk and protection. The fact that the other key arenas where this debate is being played out are the adversarial environments of the courts and legislatures, further reinforces the conflictual mode as the primary way that this issue is presented in the public sphere.

Plummer, in his work on sexual storytelling, argues that new sexual stories, such as those that have emerged out of the women's movement and the gay movement, are part of 'the process through which contemporary politics is being rewritten' (1995:145). The emergence of these new emancipatory stories inevitably involves conflict with older authoritative stories.

Plummer claims that the real work of 'intimate citizenship' has just begun and that 'the problem of conflicting or competing stories is a central political issue for the future'. He suggests that a range of responses to the problem of competing stories are possible – 'from fundamentalism and tribalism to a more pluralistic and participatory culture' – but that none of these frameworks offers an easy solution (1995:162).

The debate over same-sex marriage has emerged relatively suddenly from the private dreams of gay and lesbian citizens into the courts and onto the front page. The powerful myths that underscore much of the debate show that this is not merely a minority or religious issue. Contemporary societies must find ways of coming to terms with the conflict over same-sex marriage, and other issues of intimate citizenship, if the modern project of pluralistic democracy is to flourish.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The initial pool of stories were identified by two separate Lexis database searches, one of Australian newspapers and one of major world publications, for articles in the period July 15 - October 15, 2003. Search parameters were stories that included the terms gay, same-sex, or homosexual marriage more than three times.
- <sup>2</sup> This typology is one that needs to be further developed and explored and was primarily developed by a cursory exploration of articles published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* during the first weeks of October 2003.
- <sup>3</sup> The myth of battle/war; the myth of contagion/mutation and the myth of the slippery slope are three further myths that could easily be delineated.

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