

## the superstrong black mother

winter 2016

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*when a baltimore mom hit her son to keep him away from protests, many applauded her—but the myth of the superstrong black mother does more harm than good.*

Baltimore mother Toya Graham became a viral video sensation after being filmed yelling at and hitting her teen son. Graham, who is Black, was trying to stop her son from joining the protests following Freddie Gray's death in police custody in Baltimore in April 2015. Dubbed "mother of the year," news outlets applauded Graham for her fierce determination to keep her son out of harm's way by any means necessary. The media and ensuing public response to the video are illuminating for what they say about cultural notions of Black motherhood: the good Black mom should be superstrong to protect her children, but she is also responsible for controlling her children and preventing them from getting into trouble. In celebrating Graham, the media was implicitly condemning all the other mothers whose children participated in the protests—that is, the mothers who did not prevent their children from "senseless" rioting against institutional racism in policing.

According to the social theorist Patricia Hill Collins, the superstrong Black mom has long been a stereotypical image of Black mothers. Initially emerging from Black communities' valorization of Black mothers' intensive efforts to raise their children and shield them from the

dangers of living with racism and poverty, the superstrong Black mother image now dictates the terms of good mothering for Black women: be strong and be solely responsible. The modern emphasis on individual responsibility as a solution to structural problems reinforces this idea. This context presents extraordinary challenges for Black mothers as they attempt to protect their children from the dangers of institutionalized racism. The nearly 50 low-income urban Black mothers of teenagers we interviewed in North Carolina and New York described the

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multiple strategies they use to insulate their children from danger—strategies that also bring stress and hardship to the mothers themselves. About half the mothers

we spoke with are partnered but we focus exclusively on the mothers' parenting experiences here. Their stories reveal the staggering odds they are up against as they and their children confront the realities of historical and ongoing racial discrimination.

### mothers' common grief

Raising kids is hard, but raising children who face daily assaults on their very being is especially hard. In a study tracking a nationally

representative group of mothers of children from kindergarten to third grade, researchers Kei Nomaguchi and Amanda House found that only Black mothers experienced heightened levels of parenting stress as their children grew older and mothers' concerns about their safety and survival increased. Recent analyses by statistician Nate Silver underscore how dangerous the United States is for Black Americans, who are almost eight times as likely as White Americans to be homicide victims.

Malaya, a New York mother of three, is a heartbreaking example of this reality. When asked in an interview about recent major events in her life, she said her 26-year-old son had been murdered three weeks ago while trying to break up a fight at a house party. "My son passed away at the same age as his father. He passed away two blocks from where his father got murdered," she somberly related. Malaya's son's death has made her even more worried about the safety of her two younger children.

The day before her son was murdered, Malaya joined a community gym with plans to lose weight because she was experiencing some health problems she wanted to manage: stress, diabetes, and high blood pressure. Since she received the late-night phone call about her son's death, she has not returned to the gym. Instead, she has been focused on getting justice for her dead son and insulating her two remaining children from danger. Especially since her son's death, Malaya tries to teach her 16-year-old daughter Nina to keep to herself and not to trust anyone. "I be just so afraid with my daughter outside now, even around friends. And she is like 'Ma, would you want me to be in the house forever?' No, I just, I don't even know how to even put it like. . . . Friends are friends, but your life is more important."

Malaya encourages Nina to avoid becoming too close to anyone. Her personal philosophy is "go to work, come home, take care of the house,

do what you've got to do. All that mingling in the streets is only going to cause trouble." She takes this approach in her own life: "I can't even trust my own friends. I don't have nothing against them, but I don't know what's their motive. I want Nina to understand it. Because when you came out of my womb, you came out alone. So there's always a boundary that you got to know." Malaya instructs Nina to avoid all unnecessary social contact and stay inside their apartment, hoping this will save her life.

Malaya's third child is a 3-year-old son. Even prior to her older son's murder, Malaya was concerned about the safety of her youngest son. To insulate him from danger, Malaya spoke of her interest in homeschooling: "I was really scared to let him out. I'm like that because I've seen what happens when someone gets out." A social worker convinced Malaya to enroll her son in public preschool, but she is strict about his socializing: "I don't have him with no friends. He goes to school on the bus, he comes home on it."

Malaya's story captures several aspects of the unfortunately common experiences of low-income Black mothers: losing a child, living in unsafe neighborhoods owing to subsidized housing policies that intensified poverty and racial segregation, deep social distrust and disenfranchisement, and profound efforts to insulate and protect their children. Her story also demonstrates the impact stress and self-sacrifice can have on mothers' health. Reflecting on how her son's murder affected her life, she said: "And me, all I just wanted is just to live a normal life and just be normal. I want to go to the gym."

safety from the streets, safety from the law

Not only do Black Americans have high homicide rates, they are also disproportionately arrested and incarcerated, leading legal scholar Michelle Alexander to argue that Black incarceration rates reflect a legacy of discriminatory laws

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and policies, such as racial profiling, the heavy police presence in low-income Black neighborhoods, and the war on drugs, which involved higher prison sentences for possession of crack cocaine (more common among Blacks) than cocaine (more commonly used by Whites) though there is no chemical difference between them.

With one in nine Black men behind bars, Black mothers worry about their children, especially their sons, ending up on the wrong side of the criminal justice system. Vivian, a New York mother of two boys, worried that her 17-year-old son Dixon would end up in jail or dead. Her fears led her to ask him: "Which one do you want to be, a name or a number? What I mean by that is, like, what do you want? A job or you want to go to jail?" Likening Dixon's social environment to crabs trapped in a bucket, Vivian said she had to pull him out and separate him from his friends: "You ever saw like a bucket of crabs, and you pull the crabs up, what is the other crab doing? Yeah, they are holding on. It's always going to be somebody that's going to try to pull you down, you know, but if you have a strong family behind you, they're going to break that arm. You know what I'm saying? And that's what the hell I did, I broke that arm.

Yeah, and pushed those friends away from him. And look at him now, he's out there working." Vivian intervened to end

her son's relationship with friends she worried would expose him to the long arm of the law, and Vivian's brother offered her son a job in his moving company, an option not available to many low-income urban Black youth who face bleak employment prospects.

Like Malaya, Vivian keeps to herself and encourages the same for her children, sending them away from the neighborhood as frequently as possible to "show my kids there's a different world out of this place. I know it's nothing but

poverty up and down here, but if you can choose to walk outside of this, you will see a different world. I take my kids to 42nd Street, to do things upstate, somewhere out the house, things like that. To Virginia to go see my brothers." One in four Black Americans live in neighborhoods marked by extreme poverty thanks to a host of federal, state, and local housing policies that concentrate poverty in preexisting low-income areas. Moreover, these policies are racially based: Poor Blacks are much more likely than poor Whites to live in neighborhoods characterized by extreme poverty, crumbling infrastructure, and minimal job opportunities. When they are at home, Vivian tries to ensure her sons' safety by keeping them inside and occupied with video games. "If the [video] game keeps them from out of the street, they can play it all day, you know. Hey, if they keeps them under me, under my eye watch, go right ahead. I'm not saying all day, but it keeps them here, you know." Vivian's awareness that too much screen time is unhealthy for children is tempered by her fears for her sons' safety outside and away from her watchful eye.

Adrianna also worries about her children's safety outside their home. We interviewed Adri-

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anna in North Carolina following her move from the northeast in the hopes of finding a safer place to raise her children. The

mother of three explained that even so, she is vigilant: "I keep very close eyes on my children. They can't be wandering the neighborhood. I need to know where my kids are at. If they're going somewhere with other children, I need to talk to the parents. Who's gonna be supervising them?" Only half-jokingly, Adrianna went on to say that she won't let her children leave the house without the "phone numbers, addresses, and social security numbers" of their friends' parents.

In addition to being vigilant to insulate their children from neighborhood dangers, Black mothers also find themselves advocating for their children in racist institutional contexts such as schools. Adrianna recounted the forms of racial discrimination her three children have faced in school since their move to North Carolina. A recent analysis of federal school data by researchers at the University of Pennsylvania found that, even as Black children represent less than a quarter of the student body in North Carolina and 12 other southern states, they make up about half of all expulsions and suspensions. At the time of her interview, Adrianna's 11-year-old son was facing a possible suspension for violating the dress code with his Mohawk hairstyle, which Adrianna defended as "a part of who we are as a people." In her frustration with the school system, Adrianna, like Malaya, is considering taking her children out of school to homeschool them. Their interest in homeschooling mirrors a larger trend of homeschooling becoming more popular among Black families as they try to insulate their children from discriminatory treatment.

#### blaming mothers

"I'm not one of those parents who is laxa-ditty," emphasized Adrianna, distancing herself from the stereotype of the bad mother. "I have always been a mother first. I don't put anything above my children's lives," she said. Black mothers across the income spectrum have to deal with the negative connotations of stereotypes about them as mothers and the stress of raising Black children in a racist society. In separate works, sociologists Dawn Dow and Karen McCormack found that the controlling images of Black women, such as the welfare queen and

the strong Black woman, influence how both poor *and* middle-class Black mothers make parenting decisions, and create a sense of exclusion from White motherhood.

In her book on racial bias in the child welfare system, Dorothy Roberts, an eminent scholar of race, gender, and the law, argues that stereotypes of poor Black women as bad mothers mean that they are more heavily monitored by the state and their mothering is treated with suspicion. Racial bias can infuse even teachers' perceptions of Black mothers. A 2012 study by Susan Dumais and her colleagues found that elementary school

Vivian's awareness that too much screen time is unhealthy for children is tempered by her fears for her sons' safety outdoors and away from her watchful eye.

teachers viewed Black parents' involvement in their children's schooling negatively, while interpreting White parents' involvement positively.

Similarly, the Black mothers we spoke with whose children were involved with state institutions—including public schools and the criminal justice system—discussed the ways their mothering was assumed to be inadequate by institutional practices.

Several of the mothers spoke of their sons' entanglement with the court system in particular. As researchers Victor Rios, Nikki Jones, and others have observed, the institutions that surround Black children are eager to discipline and lock them up; when they do, their mothers also come under the authority of the criminal justice system. Tiana "felt like I was the one that committed the crime," when she recounted the things she had to do in order to meet the conditions of her 14-year-old son's probation for kicking a motorcycle, such as attending Saturday morning classes and advocating for him in the system. When a judge threatened to put her son on probation for another six months, Tiana said, "I was like, what? Uh-uh. I had to take him to all them little, you know, classes and it was cutting out time for my other kids." Tiana

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agreed to attend even more classes with her son, however, to demonstrate her commitment as a mother and to keep him from receiving an additional sentence.

When Mariah's 15-year-old son was caught trying to steal a moped, a condition of his probation was that Mariah had to take weekly parenting classes. She explained, "They send a guy over here to do a parenting class with us every Saturday. He shows us some videos of other parents and their children, going through probably the same things [and teaches us] maybe the different things that maybe I can do instead of yelling and screaming." Mariah described the classes as "sometimes" helpful but noted that they don't address what to do when she tells her son "don't go or you can't go outside today. Soon as you turn your back, he's out the door, like you didn't tell him nothing."

All too often the mothers' stories underscored how state institutions and policies positioned mothers as suspect parents *but also* solely responsible for their children's behavior. Tiffany's 16-year-old son Corey was in trouble for skipping school, for which the school blamed Tiffany. "I don't understand how they want to blame the parents for the kids when you send them out there to go to school," she said, explaining that both the school and the law punished her for Corey's truancy even though she made sure he was out the door with his school clothes and backpack every day. "I get like a phone call telling me that it is mandatory that I makes the school meeting. . . . Basically they were telling me [the principal] was going to call ACS (Administration for Child Services) on me because Corey is not coming to school. I was like, I have a seven-year-old and you can check, he has perfect attendance. So you cannot fault me for his mistakes."

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Stereotypes of poor Black women as bad mothers mean that they are more heavily monitored by the state and their mothering is treated with suspicion, even by their kids' teachers.

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They did, however, fault her, subjecting her to an embarrassing 30-day investigation involving multiple home visits by ACS workers.

### praise and punishment

Highly publicized recent incidences of police brutality have highlighted persistent racism and the ongoing challenges of being Black in America. Black mothers not only fear for their children each time they step outside the door, they also encounter gender, class, and racial discrimination of their own, including stereotypes about them as mothers. The women we interviewed proudly spoke of their strength and the sacrifices they have made to insulate their children from the surrounding dangers, but as their stories demonstrate, these efforts stem from living in impossible conditions created by state policies and practices, and they are often not enough. Praising mothers for being superstrong also makes it easy to lay the blame for children's hardships at mothers' feet.

The U.S. welfare state is shrinking while an emphasis on small government grows, inspired and perpetuated by inaccurate understandings of the causes of poverty and by racist stereotypes about those who use social programs. State and institutional supports for poor families that do exist tend to focus on what mothers are doing wrong and how they could be better parents. This reflects a larger trend of shifting responsibility onto the individual, illustrated in the stories we presented earlier. The mothers we interviewed described how state involvement in their lives was at best neglectful and at worst exacerbated the parenting challenges and stress they faced. It's no surprise then that they see little choice but to be hypervigilant, separating their children

from their peers, keeping them inside, and trying to get them away from the surrounding dangers, including discriminatory treatment.

Time and again sociological research has revealed that mothers like Malaya, Vivian, Adriana, and others we spoke with face many challenges raising children, and that the vast majority do everything they can to protect and nurture their children. The adverse conditions these mothers and their children find themselves in are created by inadequate and racist past and current social policies, yet mothers are told it is up to them alone to remedy them, to be super-strong. This is a losing proposition that puts undue pressure on low-income Black mothers and blames them when their children falter.

As for Toya Graham, six months after she was filmed determinedly trying to keep her son from joining the Baltimore protests against police brutality, Graham described her life to a CBS reporter as a constant struggle. Speaking of her 16-year-old son, Graham said, "I know there's nothing out there but harm. But I'm going to protect him. . . . I know a lot of mothers out here understand where I'm coming from. We're struggling, we're just trying to make sure we keep food on our table for our children, keep them out of harm's way, keep them out of danger." On being dubbed a hero, Graham responded, "I just don't feel like a hero. This is a real struggle. When the cameras is gone, the reality of life is still there. It's still there."

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## RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

T. F. Charlton. 2013. "The Impossibility of the Good Black Mother," in *The Good Mother Myth*. New York: Seal Press.

Explores the negative stereotypes that Black mothers face in their everyday lives through a combination of personal essay and gender and race theory.

Patricia Hill Collins. 2000. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge.

Explores the uniqueness of Black women's perspectives and develops an accessible critical social theory.

Ann Arnett Ferguson. 2000. *Bad Boys: Public Schools in the Making of Black Masculinity*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Offers a rich account of students' and teachers' daily interactions to demonstrate the ways racialized gender stereotypes lead schools to disproportionately punish Black boys.

Judith Levine. 2013. *Ain't No Trust: How Bosses, Boyfriends, and Bureaucrats Fail Low-Income Mothers and Why It Matters*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Documents low-income women's interactions with untrustworthy actors and how they contribute to further lack of trust.

Dorothy Roberts. 2002. *Shattered Bonds: The Color of Child Welfare*. New York: Basic Civitas Books.

Examines the racist underpinnings of the child welfare system and the consequences for Black families and communities.

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## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. The stereotype about Black mothers that this article discusses is generally considered to be a positive stereotype. What are the unseen sides or consequences of that stereotype?
2. What role does the criminal justice system play in the experiences of some Black mothers?
3. Compare the experiences of White mothers and Black mothers, as described in the article.

## viewpoints

### after gay marriage equality forum

summer 2015

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*andrew j. cherlin, steven w. thrasher, joshua gamson, and georgiann davis discuss the implications of the legalization of gay marriage and what it says about what comes next.*

Suddenly, the Supreme Court has declared marriage for same-sex couples a constitutional right. Now what? To help answer that, *Contexts* presents a symposium of short responses to the phrase “after marriage equality.” The four writers featured are prominent

researchers on the politics, demography, history, identity, law, and culture of where we are, how we got here, and what comes next. Together, this symposium offers a sociology of the moment.

—Philip N. Cohen and Syed Ali



(Photo by Philip N. Cohen)

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## the triumph of family diversity

Without doubt, liberal observers of American family life are delighted with the Supreme Court's decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges*. I am one of them. In 1996 I was one of five sociologists to sign a friend of the court brief in *Baehr v. Miike*, a case in which three same-sex couples sued the state of Hawaii for the right to marry. The brief, which supported the couples' position, was coordinated by Lawrence Wu, now at New York University. I soon moved on, but Wu and many other social scientists and historians took up the issue and have seen it through to its conclusion. The transformation of American law and public opinion in two decades is remarkable.

Yet most liberals would avoid the ringing rhetoric with which Justice Anthony Kennedy extolled "the transcendent importance of marriage" in writing the majority's opinion in *Obergefell*. I don't know many college professors who would be comfortable telling their students, as Kennedy told the nation, "No union is more profound than marriage, for it embodies the highest ideals of love, fidelity, devotion, sacrifice, and family." Instead, liberals are likely to celebrate the ruling not because it may strengthen marriage but rather because it establishes that families come in diverse forms and deserve equal rights and protections. In this sense, *Obergefell* represents the triumph of the idea of family diversity.

This irony of this triumph has not been lost on social conservatives. Ross Douthat wrote in his column in the *New York Times*:

Millennials may agree with Kennedy's ruling, but they're making his view of marriage as "a keystone of the nation's social order" look antique. In their views and (lack of) vows, they're

taking a more relaxed perspective, in which wedlock is malleable and optional, one way among many to love, live, rear kids—or not.

Like Douthat, many of the defenders of heterosexual marriage over the past decade are wary of same-sex marriage. Their claim is that legitimizing alternatives to traditional marriage will serve to weaken marriage as an institution: diversity equals decline.

Will *Obergefell* weaken marriage? It is certainly possible that as alternative paths to adulthood are legitimized, the role of marriage in the American family system may lessen. In fact, that has already happened. It is simply less necessary to be married today, be it with a same- or different-sex partner, than it was for different-sex partners in the past. Attitudes toward having children outside of marriage are less negative than they used to be. Rates of marriage have declined; cohabitation has increased. The critics of the Court's decision argue essentially that the greater the number of acceptable ways of forming a partnership and having children, the less normative any one route is. *Obergefell* opens up another one.

And yet the opposite case—that *Obergefell* will strengthen marriage—can be made. On the level of social norms—on what's best for families, on what kind of family is preferred—marriage remains broadly popular among the American population, up and down the social-class ladder and across racial and ethnic groups. The legitimization of alternatives—what I have called the deinstitutionalization of marriage—does not seem to have altered Americans' preference for marriage. The announcement of the Supreme Court's decision and the attention

paid to it in the media have sent a message to the American public: Marriage still matters. We shouldn't underestimate the influence of this message, which was issued by the most respected governmental institution in the nation. The public debate about the wisdom of *Obergefell* demonstrates how much Americans continue to value marriage. In contrast, the French or Swedish public would not care as much whether a court decision weakened or strengthened marriage.

Moreover gay men and lesbians in states that allowed same-sex marriage before *Obergefell* have been voting with their feet in favor of marriage. Demographer Gary Gates estimates that 34 percent of all same-sex couples in the Northeast—the region where same-sex marriage has been legal the longest—were married in 2013. That's a surprisingly large percentage, given the relatively short period during which more than a handful of states permitted same-sex marriages. To be sure, the high current levels of same-sex marriage may decline as the backlog

of committed couples in long-standing relationships decreases. Young gay men and lesbians in new partnerships are unlikely to marry with such fervor.

Nevertheless, some same-sex marriage advocates have joined with longtime proponents of heterosexual marriage to argue that we are at a "marriage opportunity" moment in which its advantages can be made plain to all. Liberals can now join conservatives in endorsing the benefits of marriage, they argue, without abandoning their commitment to inclusion and equality. "In short," they write, "for the first time in decades, Americans have an opportunity to think about marriage in a way that brings us together rather than drives us apart."

So the net effect of the legalization of same-sex marriage is hard to predict. It is by no means clear that it will weaken the institution of marriage. Meanwhile this highly valued and privileged status has been opened to all couples, regardless of sexual orientation—a major social advance.

steven w. thrasher

## knowledge for the next generation's movement

In my career as a journalist, I have probably written more about the fight for marriage equality than on any other single topic, covering it nationally for ten publications over seven years (the *Ventura County Star*, the *New York Times*, *Out*, the *Advocate*, the *Village Voice*, *Newsweek*/the *Daily Beast*, *Gawker*, *BuzzFeed*, the *Guardian*, and, with this post, *Contexts*). In just two presidential administrations, gay and lesbian couples seeking the right to marry have gone from being wedge scapegoats used by President George W. Bush to whip up votes from his bigoted base, to being celebrated by

President Obama with a White House bathed in rainbow colors.

My interest in marriage equality was initially very personal: my parents' interracial marriage had once been illegal, I am gay, and when I started covering the movement, I was in a relationship with a foreign citizen. (He eventually left the United States, before marriage could have been an option to keep us together.)

Yet over the years, I've become increasingly critical of the ways the marriage equality movement was at odds with queerness, as it encouraged LGBT America to downplay sexuality and

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embrace a straight, Fordist notion of being “normal.” I’ve never thought marriage equality was unimportant, but in my reporting I’ve become aware of its conservative nature and of the ways it overshadows challenges LGBT people face which can’t be fixed by getting hitched. For example: No LGBT groups or even AIDS service organizations were part of Occupy Wall Street, not even its call for universal health care access—a goal which would greatly address HIV/AIDS and the disparate impact it has on LGBT people (especially gay men of color). Instead, gay rights groups pursued marriage as a vehicle to increase insurance access, a goal which leaves out all single uninsured people and those not able to marry someone with a job offering spousal health benefits.

Similarly, issues like HIV criminalization, LGBT youth homelessness, and LGBT immigration issues of the unmarried have been left largely ignored by the likes of the Human Rights Campaign, the largest LGBT organization (and a shamefully self-acknowledged “White Men’s Club”). Black Lives Matter, though started by and filled with queer people of color, is also off the radar of most LGBT groups, who have found it easier to raise money off of smiling couples than to address the police brutality and systemic racism.

*Sex* has also been politely scrubbed from homosexuality during the marriage movement. When I wrote about monogamy in same-sex couples for *Gawker* in 2013, I relied upon the work of the Gay Couples Study at the Center for Research and Education on Gender and Sexuality in San Francisco, which has found that about 50 percent of gay male couples are openly nonmonogamous. It occurred to me at the time that, as excellent as the research is (CREGS has been interviewing over 500 male couples for more than six years), the data could only tell us so much about the sexual practices of same-sex couples. The population was only from the San

Francisco Bay Area, there’s no data about women, and the participants’ sex lives were shaped in an era where marriage equality was largely or entirely unavailable. The literature of the field is so scant, no literature review is yet possible.

To understand LGBT families as sociologists, journalists, or even simply as humans, we are going to need to study a full generation from June 26, 2015. The Williams Institute at UCLA School of Law has done excellent work on LGBT families across a broad spectrum of research, but until last month, it was all done in the context of an access to marriage that was largely unavailable in most of the country. Just as good research can now look at mixed-race families post 1967’s *Loving v. Virginia*, a generation or two will be needed to see how LGBT families do or do not conform to American familial norms. (I’m especially curious, in the coming decades, to test a theory I’ve long had: that young heterosexual Millennials, close to their out queer peers, might decide to adopt the openly nonmonogamous sexuality that has been associated with gay male culture.)

It’s going to take time even with marriage. Hopefully, government institutions like the Census, the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and the Centers for Disease Control will follow the excellent examples of CREGS and the Williams Institute and invest appropriate funds for the study of this newly legalized demographic. But as writers, scholars, and activists, this is a huge opportunity to broaden our scope of inquiry with one issue largely solved. It would behoove us now to actively study the many issues (homelessness, legal employment discrimination, violence against trans women, police profiling) not fulfilled by marriage, and to train our eyes on the systemic challenges LGBT people face which can remain invisible even when in plain sight—as marriage once was.

joshua gamson

## the moment of maybe

In the days since *Obergefell v. Hodges* and its rainbow celebration, I spent way too much time on Facebook reading through the voluminous posts and commentaries about how wonderful, awful, incomplete, conservative, progressive, lame, and historic the Supreme Court's decision is. Setting aside the more strident, ungenerous, overstated, patronizing, and self-serving of these—frankly, that eliminates a lot of them—these stocktaking discussions highlight several important, basic points. First, marriage equality symbolically and legally marks the end of outsider status for many within gay movements, and that is both an uneasy and vexed transition. Second, there's a whole lot more work to be done, both in terms of completing the equalization of rights and the broader work of social justice and institutional change; beware of what Michelangelo Signorile has called "victory blindness." Third, the fact that the Supreme Court ruled favorably toward marriage equality, and that public opinion, pop culture, and big business have shifted so favorably toward gay rights in recent years, stands in stark, telling juxtaposition to the heightened attacks on Black Americans and the rollback of reproductive rights.

Clearly, the Supreme Court's marriage equality decision marks a turning point for the LGBT movement—or rather, for the diverse, messy array of efforts and organizations that fall under that rubric. The question now is what that movement will do in this moment of possibility. A lot of smart people have been thinking, writing, talking, and acting on that question, and the best I can do is to cull from them the intertwined principles that might guide the next stages in this vibrant, ass-kicking movement.

*Formal equality is not enough.* Activists such as Urvashi Vaid have for decades been pointing to the limits of pursuing a "state of virtual equality that would grant legal and formal equal rights to LGBT people but would not transform the institutions of society that repress sexual, racial, and gender difference." If you needed a devastating reminder of legal equality's insufficiency, you could get that by flipping from the breathless SCOTUS celebrations to Rev. Pinckney's dead body being carried past the Confederate flag. Now that gay and lesbian virtual equality is well within reach—legal scholar Nan Hunter predicts that the LGBT-rights movement "will seem banal in 20 years if not sooner"—LGBT movements can return to a more ambitious social-justice agenda.

*Do not close the doors.* A few years ago, Vaid suggested the guiding movement principle of "Leave No Queer Behind," and it's a crucial one at this moment. One of the risks when some beneficiaries of a movement are invited into social institutions is that they will abandon those who remain by necessity or choice on the margins. Refusing to do so—refusing to betray or abandon those who aren't easily assimilated or who don't want to assimilate—may involve the movement, as historian Timothy Stewart-Winter points out, in challenging the institutions that have just invited some of us in.

*Intersectionality is not just a theory.* That sexuality is intertwined with race, class, gender, physical ability, age, and the like is often noted but has not deeply informed much of mainstream LGBT rights organizing. It should be impossible to see the attacks on Black and Brown bodies, for instance, as an issue separate from LGBT concerns, if only for the obvious reason that some of

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us *are* LGBT people of color. The fight for gay rights has advanced in part by deploying economic and racial privilege, and over time, Vaid asserts, LGBT organizations have moved away from their earlier intersectional roots; the movement has been “oddly complacent in its acceptance of racial, gender, and economic inequalities, and vocal only in its challenge to the conditions facing a White, middle-class conception of the ‘status queer.’” At this turning point moment, she has advocated, a “re-formed LGBT movement focused on social justice [must] commit itself to one truth: that not all LGBT people are White or well-off.”

*Coalitions, coalitions, coalitions.* All of these linked principles—seeing formal equality as a starting rather than end point, refusing to leave anyone behind, making intersectionality a core organizing principle—promote a renewed focus on building and strengthening coalitions. The movement itself has always been a coalition, of

course, and a fragile one; this transitional moment offers an opportunity to recommit to a coalition of lesbian *and* gay *and* bisexual *and* transgender coalition. It’s also an opportunity to imagine and enact new progressive coalitions; some are already working on these coalitions, and others have long ties that can be renewed.

Until last week, these principles seemed right but like a bit of a lost cause. As sociologist Suzanna Danuta Walters puts it, the gay marriage fight, for all its practical and symbolic value, took up a lot of “bandwidth and sucked the air out of the potentially more capacious room of queer world-making.” Now, at this turning point, when energy can be redirected and different voices emboldened, they seem instead like hopeful possibilities. Whether the LGBT movement manages to, as Walters says, “pivot and recalibrate,” I can’t predict, but the principles for recalibration are certainly well articulated. We are in a big moment of maybe.

*georgiann davis*

## what’s marriage equality got to do with intersex?

Intersex people have, consciously or not, been queering marriage long before U.S. activists were fighting for marriage equality. Intersex people, that is, people whose bodies defy arbitrary markers of sex, including genital, chromosomal, and gonadal characteristics, didn’t have to wait for the U.S. Supreme Court’s historical decision to legally say “I do!” to a romantic partner with the same sex chromosomes, a key, albeit arbitrary, marker of biological sex.

I vividly remember queering my own marriage in 2001. On a rainy October Saturday in a suburb of Chicago, I walked down the aisle in a traditional white wedding dress and married a cisgender man who, like me, has XY chromosomes. We

were legally married surrounded by our families and friends (and later amicably divorced, but that’s for another blog post).

I was diagnosed with complete androgen insensitivity syndrome (CAIS) when I was a young teenager, but I didn’t know this until years after my parents received the diagnosis and I underwent “normalization” surgery, the removal of my internal and undescended testes. Like many intersex people with CAIS, I had no idea that I had testes and XY chromosomes because doctors lied to me and told me I was born with precancerous ovaries, not healthy testes that were removed because medical providers didn’t think it was acceptable for a girl to

after gay marriage equality forum

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have testes. Encouraged by the health professionals who “fixed” me, my parents went along with the medical lies in order to protect the development of my gender identity.

I uncovered the medical lies I was told when I obtained my medical records and read through the redacted text to learn I had testicular feminization syndrome (what my intersex trait was called when I was initially diagnosed). I didn’t discuss my diagnosis with anyone, as I was too ashamed and was worried others would see me for the freak that I felt I was. I remember questioning whether or not I was really a man. Why else would providers and my parents lie to me? I also remember making a conscious decision to keep my medical history from my then soon-to-be husband. I was convinced he would call off our wedding if he knew what I had just found out about my body.

When the time came to sign the marriage license, I felt my gender as a woman legally validated. Marriage, a state-sponsored institution, was the powerful vehicle that disentangled my sex (biological, albeit arbitrary, markers of “male” or “female” characteristics) from my gender (socially agreed upon, and also arbitrary, markers of “masculinity” and “femininity” characteristics). Marriage, to a man, was a big step in making me a woman.

In 2008 I found myself in a sociology doctoral program studying the complexities of sex, gender, and sexuality. It was then that I decided to embrace my intersex trait and question my gender identity, although this time in a liberating, rather than stigmatizing, manner. As I learned about the arbitrary markers of biological sex, the complexities of gender, and fluidity of sexuality, I felt like a unique variation, not a freak of nature. It was then that I started to refuse to keep my medical past a secret, and instead wanted to bridge my personal experience with intersex and professional passion in sociology in an in-depth analysis of the ways intersex

people, their parents, and medical experts define, experience, and contest intersex in contemporary U.S. society. That project has evolved into my book, *Contesting Intersex: The Dubious Diagnosis*, where I tell the complicated story of how intersex was reinvented as *disorders of sex development* in order for medical providers to escape critiques from intersex activists over medically unnecessary and irreversible surgeries providers force intersex people to endure.

My research also reveals that some intersex people, encouraged by medical providers who wanted to make sure our gender identity aligned with the sex they surgically constructed, looked to heterosexual partnering to validate their gender identity. This was especially the case for those who were not exposed to feminist ideas about sex, gender, and sexuality, and more specifically, bodies and embodiments.

As it was in my case, marriage was a path by which intersex people learned to accept themselves as “real” women, or in some cases “real” men, while also pleasing their parents, medical providers, and others in their lives by assuring them they made the correct medically unnecessary and irreversible surgical decisions.

On June 26, when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled same-sex marriage was a constitutional right, my social media exploded with rainbows and excitement. Many of my intersex friends from around the world also shared these celebrations. But marriage has historically functioned as a heteronormative institution, and one of the primary ways intersex people have validated their gender assignment and normalized their selves. So I wasn’t surprised that the marriage equality ruling also seemed to cause some discontent or uneasiness among a few, albeit a minority, of intersex people and parents of intersex children. For decades now, many medical providers viewed their medically unnecessary and irreversible interventions as successful when those they “fixed” enacted or engaged in

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heterosexual relationships, which was formally achieved with marriage.

This theme even came up in my own medical records. After a routine exam soon after my marriage, the doctor who removed my testes wrote in my chart: "She has recovered well from surgery and is married and doing well."

The marriage equality decision leaves me, as both an intersex person and as a feminist sociologist, with a number of questions. What will happen, I wonder, to intersex people who would have or do seek gender validation through the institution of marriage? Because marriage is now more inclusive than it once was, will it no longer serve as a viable path to gender validation? What other state-sponsored institutions will rise to become mechanisms of gender validation? What new markers of successful gender assignment

will medical providers rely on as they seek to (problematically) categorize intersex people?

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## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Cherlin discusses the institution of marriage in his response. What does he argue has changed about marriage? In the future, what are different ways the institution of marriage may (or may not) be affected by the legalization of gay marriage?
2. All of the author's reactions to the legalization of gay marriage mention that the fight is not over. What other important issues are mentioned in terms of policy?
3. Which response stuck out the most for you? Why?