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Gay Families in the Media in the Age of HIV and AIDS

Sheri Zernentsch

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

Communication Studies

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ABSTRACT

Gay Families in the Media in the Age of HIV and AIDS

Sheri Zernentsch

This thesis investigates print media discourse on gay families in the context of HIV/AIDS and the gay rights movement. Comparing and contrasting reports from the mainstream heterosexual press, the mainstream gay press, and the gay community press, revealed a moral discourse on AIDS that implicated gay men throughout the 1980s. At the same time, a resurgence appeared in religious conservative forces working to recuperate the traditional nuclear family ideal through a family values agenda. The importance of family in gay communities during the 1980s meant that the existence of gay families, legal and social discrimination, and caregiving support, became important components in the gay/AIDS movement. As cases of HIV and AIDS surfaced in heterosexuals in the late 1980s, and AIDS factored into the traditional home and family domain, a discourse on gay families also started to emerge in the mainstream press. Unlike the media images projected in the previous decade of single promiscuous gay men with AIDS, gay families were presented as normalized: sanitized, monogamous, and AIDS-free, much like the traditional nuclear family. The issues around HIV, AIDS, AIDS stigmatization and discrimination in gay families were left unmentioned in these reports. The contextualization of HIV/AIDS and gay families also waned in the gay community press during the 1990s as a result of changing attitudes around disease, death, and the family, although gay families continue to be talked about in the context of gay rights.

**This thesis is dedicated to my father, Richard,
to my brother, Mark, and to Stefan Lynch**

TABLE OF CONTENTS

GAY FAMILIES IN THE MEDIA IN THE AGE OF HIV AND AIDS

<u>Section</u>	<u>Page</u>
Introduction	1 - 14
Chapter One: The 1980s: The Circulation of a Discourse on AIDS/Gays	15 - 35
1.1 An Epidemic of Meanings or Signification	15 - 22
1.2 The "Gay/AIDS Movement"	23 - 25
1.3 The Representation of PWAs in the Media	26 - 32
1.4 AIDS Enters The Home	32 - 35
Chapter Two: The 1990s: Mainstreaming Gay Families in the Age of HIV/AIDS	36 - 55
2.1 The Family Constituted in the Age of HIV and AIDS	37 - 43
2.2 HIV and AIDS in My Gay Family Life	43 - 47
2.3 Gay Family Discrimination	47 - 51
2.4 Gay Rights	51 - 55
Chapter Three: Gays, AIDS and the Family: The Gay Community Response	56 - 75
3.1 The 1970s: The Faggot Father in an Anti-Family Era	58 - 64
3.2 The 1980s: Lesbian Mommies and AIDS Daddies on Trial	65 - 70
3.3 The 1990s: Gay Families in "Post-AIDS Culture"	70 - 75
Conclusion	76 - 87
Bibliography	88 - 104

Introduction

This thesis project started in November, 1996, when I came across a current issue of *Newsweek* magazine that talked about gay families. The *Newsweek* issue (November 4, 1996) featured an interview with Melissa Ethridge and her pregnant partner, Julie Cypher, as well as a report on gay families. I was disappointed in *Newsweek's* choice of questions for Ethridge and Cypher, which were conservative and slightly judgemental. Through questions like, "Is it important to be able to marry in a conventional sense?...How did your families react?...Some people will ask, 'What about the father's role?' Isn't that an important part of raising a child?" (p. 55), *Newsweek* forced a non-traditional family to identify themselves within frameworks set out for a traditional nuclear family.

My instinct was to challenge the assumptions being made in this interview (that a father figure should be present, for example), and the contradictions and discrepancies in the report on gay families. I also questioned the sudden visibility of gay families in the mainstream press at this particular time. After all, gay community presses had been talking about gays in the family for decades prior to this and other mainstream reports.¹

It was this thirty years of discourse on gay families in the gay community press that helped me frame and contextualize my analysis of the discourse on gay families in the mainstream press. Three specific contexts also informed the direction of this analysis: my concern for gay rights and the gay rights movement; the contextualization of this discourse within the age of HIV and AIDS; and my experience growing up with a gay parent who is HIV-positive. I used my personal experiences throughout this project as a way to approach and challenge media reports, and as a way to organize this thesis. The autobiographical

¹ The label 'gay family' may be used more widely than ever before, and the use of the term 'gay' is relatively new to this century, but gays in the family have always existed.

components of this thesis were especially challenging to write, since my father went on a harsh drug regime of Protease Inhibitors as I finished researching and began writing this thesis.

Prior to writing this thesis, I had to find an operational definition of gay families, and define the notion of community. For the purpose of this thesis, I defined gay families to be a relationship involving child(ren) where at least one parent identifies as gay, lesbian or bisexual, or where one or both parents are engaged in a same-sex relationship.² I chose to specify gender distinctions, such as gay father and lesbian mother, where it was necessary, otherwise the use of the term 'gay' in this thesis was attributed to gay men, lesbians and bisexuals. I also chose to include children and single gay parents in this definition of gay families because all of the mainstream media reports that discussed gay families included at least one child.³ Moreover, my perspective as a child of a single gay parent informed the way I approached these articles and the writing of this thesis.

By using the plural, 'communities,' I have attempted to eradicate the problem of essentialism that results when the term 'community' is used to define lesbian and gay populations. The debate around the use of the term 'community' has been led by cultural critics like Stuart Hall in anthologies such as *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies* (1996), and in previous works. Hall has contested the notion of community as a reductive signifier of cultural identity, and in doing so, has explored ideas around

² Although the scope of my research does not allow for a discourse on chosen families, the concept of chosen families emerged as AIDS became equated with gays, and gays were separated or estranged from their biological families when in need of health care and mental and economic support.

³ Debates over the legal definition of family do include same-sex couples without children, and have been covered by gay community press sources such as *Xtra!* and *Xtra Supplement* ("Y Makes a U Turn." 30 Oct. 1992, and "We Aren't Family." Sept. 1990, respectively). I did not include these media reports in my thesis because they were beyond the scope of my analysis.

hybridity, marginalization, and fluid boundaries. Work on communities has also been conducted by Raymond Williams (See Grossberg et al., 1992, p. 5), and by writers like Roberta Marie Munroe in gay community newspapers like *Xtra!*.⁴

Research and Analysis

The research that I conducted for this project involved collecting a diverse body of print media discourse on gay families.⁵ I collected approximately 53 articles from mainstream heterosexual magazines, newspapers, and on-line resources. I went to the libraries at Concordia University to find back issues of magazines like *Newsweek*, *Life*, *Maclean's*, and *US News & World Report* that were relevant to my topic. The newspapers that I used in my analysis include Canadian publications such as *The Globe and Mail* and *The Gazette*, and the American newspaper, *The New York Times*. I also used reports from two of Montreal's alternative papers, *The Mirror* and *Hour*. Through this research I realized that most of the reports on gay families in these mainstream heterosexual presses were written in the 1990s, and featured gay couples with unborn, newborn, or very young children -- under the age of seven, for example. One exception was a May, 1983 issue of *Life* magazine that featured a report on two gay fathers and their children. Although I dealt with this report only peripherally in the final version of my thesis, it helped frame the scope of this project. In my first draft of Chapter Two I wrote an entire section on this specific report. I chose to narrow my investigation of gay family discourse to the 1990s because

⁴ Munroe wrote the essay, "A Community of Love: Given our differences, why do we keep pretending we're one big happy family?" *Xtra!* 21 July 1995: 26.

⁵ For the purpose of this thesis, I have defined the mainstream heterosexual press as those magazines and newspapers circulating in mainstream cultures that exclusively address a heterosexual reader in reports. I have defined the mainstream gay press to mean commercial magazines such as *The Advocate* and *Out* that circulate in both mainstream and gay cultures and address heterosexual and gay and lesbian readers.

this *Life* report was the only one I found in the mainstream heterosexual press during the 1980s, and it was unlike any other mainstream report that I had researched. That is, the article was longer, more detailed, and the reporter included references to gay male erotic icons (such as pictures) in the household, displays of affection and love, and other gay male sensibilities in the context of the family.

Although *The Advocate* and *Outweek* were in circulation in the 1980s, a higher volume of articles on gay families were produced in the mainstream gay press during the 1990s as well.⁶ One exception was an article in the December 8, 1987 issue of *The Advocate* that dealt with gay men fathering children. I chose to use this article for background knowledge because it was out of the scope of my analysis, but it contextualized HIV/AIDS and gay families. It helped in the framing of my argument that HIV and AIDS should be included in the discourse on gay families, and that this contextualization did occur in some of the gay press. Most of the mainstream reports, both gay and straight, left AIDS out of the discussion of gay families.

To collect back issues of *The Advocate*, *Out*, and *Outweek*, I spent many evenings at the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives in Toronto. I also conducted research on-line, since current issues of *The Advocate* and *Out* were published electronically at this time. These publishers have since changed the format of their on-line sites to a more commercial appearance with less content. All of the mainstream gay magazines that I collected are American, since Canada's one glossy magazine, *Fab*, is relatively new (issue number four was published in April/May of 1997), and it is not as popular as its American counterparts.

⁶ *Out* magazine had considerably fewer articles dealing with gay families than *The Advocate*.

I wanted to include mainstream gay press sources in my analysis as a way of comparing and contrasting the coverage of gay families in both categories of mainstream press. The gay glossies were often on their own in covering gruesome court custody battles between same-sex partners or former husbands and wives. The presses converged in reportage on articles that addressed gay parenting, and the topic of parenting and family almost always included pre-adolescent children. Where children did not factor in, or where the child was much older, the magazines focused on the issue of gay marriage. A June 1996 report in *Out* magazine entitled, "Love and Marriage," included a photograph of a gay father, his partner, and his twenty-four year old daughter under the heading, "The Family". Their domestic situation was described as a long-term monogamous relationship that involved child-rearing.

Both categories of print media share a mass readership, as the gay glossies sit alongside the popular press on major newsstands across North America. Many gays and lesbians reading *The Advocate* and *Out* may also read *Time* and *Newsweek*. *The Advocate* and *Out* have similar layout designs as the heterosexual press, as well as glossy pages, and advertisements for liquor, fashion, tobacco, and cosmetics. These mainstream gay magazines are now heavily endowed with advertising that targets singles and couples with high disposable incomes.

This advertising in the gay glossies also conveys images of health, non-sexual activity, and moral values. The advertising by pharmaceutical companies for HIV-therapy drugs, for example, no longer show two men in bed together. Instead, a muscle-bound young athlete is shown mounting climbing.⁷ I didn't see these drug advertisements in the

⁷ This is a print advertisement for the drug Crixivan by Merck pharmaceuticals. This advertisement was placed on the inside cover page in the first issue of *Out Extra: A Consumer's Guide to HIV Care* (Summer 1997).

heterosexual press, which prompted me to question whether or not the gay magazines have perpetuated the association between gay men and AIDS, or if the heterosexual press are simply choosing to not address the issue of AIDS in their advertising. I did not include this analysis in my thesis, as it was beyond the scope of my research. I focused instead on sources from various gay community press to determine shifts in attitudes and community discourse around AIDS, gay rights and the family. I also used the gay community press to back up my claims that HIV and AIDS, in fact, were being discussed in the context of the family.

I narrowed my focus to three gay community newspapers, since the archive of alternative press in North America is endless. I chose articles from Toronto's *The Body Politic* and *Xtra!*, and Boston's *Gay Community News*, because these papers were referenced in some of the books and articles that I read, they were accessible at the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives, and in the case of *The Body Politic* and *Xtra!*, they were ornaments on my coffee table throughout my childhood. I had to leave publications like *New York Native* out, since I did not have access to its entire run. Overall, I collected about 150 articles that dealt with gay families and HIV and AIDS.

The entire run of *Gay Community News* was researched at the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives. The Archives had every issue available from its launch in 1973 to its demise in the early 1990s. Reports in *Gay Community News* had a legal focus, and the contextualization of AIDS and gay families usually occurred in reports on gay fathers in court custody battles, where legal efforts to use AIDS as a reason to deny custody were being fought.⁸

⁸ Much artistic, academic, and activist work is being debated in the areas of spousal benefits, gay marriage, and other legal rights issues. In fact, huge case study analyses could be determined on the legal frameworks that inhibit gay men and lesbians from adoption, parental custody, and visitation rights. Although a complete analysis in the area of law and social policy does not fit the scope of my work, I do draw upon the events that

I collected 65 articles from *Xtra!*, and approximately 11 articles from its predecessor, *The Body Politic*, at the office of *Xtra!* and The Pink Triangle Press. They let me sit in the office and scan every single newspaper for articles on gay families and HIV and AIDS. Like *Gay Community News*, *The Body Politic* reported on the use of AIDS to discriminate against gay parents. Unlike *Gay Community News*, the overall body of discourse on the family in this Canadian publication focused on personal experience, discrimination against gay parents and children within the community, and personal reactions to anti-gay media discourse and social policy. Gay fathers like Michael Lynch wrote articles on the effects of HIV and AIDS on their lives, incorporating insight and commentary from their own personal situations. This commentary informed the content of *Xtra Supplement* (the insert in *The Body Politic* that evolved into *Xtra!*) before many of the men writing for *The Body Politic* and the early editions of *Xtra!* died of AIDS-related diseases in the 1980s and early 1990s. These losses to AIDS may account for the shift in content and political activism that occurred when the paper evolved from *The Body Politic* into *Xtra Supplement* into *Xtra!*. Political discussions of death and disease diminished in the nineties, and a more entertainment-based discussion of life and living took over.

I used discourse from the gay community press on the AIDS pandemic as a comparative tool in my investigation of what was not being discussed in mainstream media reportage, mainly the affects of HIV and AIDS on gay families. AIDS was being addressed in the mainstream heterosexual press in the context of the family, but the representation was generally reduced to heterosexual hemophiliacs in the mid-1980s. *Time* magazine published multiple reports on AIDS, discussing medical, social and historical issues surrounding the pandemic. I had to leave references to *Time* out of this thesis, though, because HIV and AIDS were never discussed in the context of gay families. In fact, I could not find any articles on gay families in *Time* magazine.

.....
have deterred and/or prohibited gay men especially from parental contact with their children due to HIV/AIDS stigmatization.

Likewise, *US News & World Report* did not address issues around AIDS until July 25, 1983, when they featured a report on AIDS transmission through blood transfusions. The report dealt with the lack of blood donation in the United States, and the impact of this blood scare on (heterosexual) hemophiliacs. Where families were mentioned, it was assumed that 'family' meant heterosexual, white, clean, and AIDS-free:

In hospitals, the demand by patients for *blood from family members only* has increased dramatically...Seventy-one percent of AIDS victims are male homosexuals, 17 percent intravenous-drug users. AIDS has also been diagnosed in Haitian immigrants – many of whom were homosexuals or drug users... (Mann. pp. 71-2, my emphasis).

It was the dichotomization of gay men and the family in value-laden articles such as this one in *US News & World Report* that prompted me to address the discourse on AIDS in the 1980s. As I compared reports in the mainstream heterosexual press, the mainstream gay press, and the gay community press, the complex web of opinions and agendas on the family, gay families, gay rights, homosexuality, and disease quickly became apparent. Discussion around alternatives to the nuclear family, for instance, has been met with resistance by many political and religious agencies advocating a return to a Christian-based morality, through an agenda that is often referred to as 'family values'. Anita Bryant and her 1977 Save Our Children campaign is a good example of how the media has been used to further moral agendas. I used the first chapter of this thesis to challenge these moral agendas that resurfaced in AIDS discourse in the 1980s.

Chapter One also sets up my analysis of how the family is being constituted in the 1990s and why HIV and AIDS are separated from the discourse on gay families after fifteen years of directly associating gay men with the disease. In Chapter One, *The 1980s: The Circulation of a Discourse on AIDS/Gays*, I pay particular attention to discursive formations on gay men and AIDS, the moral meanings dispelled around the disease, and the dichotomization of gays and the family in the media. Within this chapter I argue that

AIDS did, in fact, start to affect families in the 1980s, but that the labeling of AIDS as a gay disease, and of the family as a bastion place of heterosexuality and sanitization, left AIDS out of the discussions of family. Where AIDS was discussed in the family was in the context of hemophiliac husbands, who were viewed as 'innocent' contractors of the disease.

My analysis of the body of mainstream press reports on gay families in Chapter Two, *The 1990s: Mainstreaming Gay Families in the Age of HIV/AIDS*, reveals discursive formations on gays and the family that have emerged in the 1990s. I argue here that because gay families resemble the idealized nuclear family prototype in reports, issues around HIV and AIDS are not being addressed. I have used my experience in a gay family to challenge one-dimensional reportage, and the lack of discussion on issues such as discrimination and AIDS stigmatization in media reports. My discussion of the effects of HIV and AIDS on families points to the need to address issues that are specific to families within gay communities, and to widen the boundaries used to discuss the family in the heterosexual press. The increased visibility of gay families in the mainstream gay and straight press in the nineties does not account for the needs and experiences of this non-traditional family form.

I have used Chapter Three, *Gays, AIDS and the Family: The Gay Community Response*, to point to issues affecting gay families over the last three decades. I analyzed gay community counter-discourse to show that gay families are not merely an offshoot of heterosexual nuclear families, that gay and lesbian sexuality in the family is not a new concept, and that discrimination against gay families continues to be challenged. Reports in the gay community press addressed tensions within gay communities, discrimination, and changes in attitude around death, disease, and family relations. Whereas the focus in the mainstream heterosexual press is on lesbian mothers, the gay community press discourse

on gay families was often written by gay fathers, such as Michael Lynch. HIV and AIDS, as a result, were being contextualized in the discourse on gay families. As community reports indicate, the disease also affected lesbian mothers; women did acquire HIV, and AIDS did influence the lives of many gay families throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

Theoretical Framework

Gay families are not the only segment of people that media sources have overlooked in their discourse on HIV/AIDS. Hispanic communities, for instance, are not featured in mainstream press reports, nor are Black communities, Chinese communities, or Jewish communities. I have not been able to address all families affected by AIDS within the scope of my research, and I have not discussed the various racial, religious, economic, and gender considerations that are particular to multicultural families dealing with AIDS. Further work on the cultural, social, and political organization of parenthood in non-traditional families could also be conducted, because very little literature on this topic has been published.

Likewise, the literature on gay families, and children of lesbians, gays and bisexuals, is still very limited. Literary resources intended for gay families, such as the *Lesbian and Gay Parenting Handbook* (1993), by April Martin, do circulate, but are not always readily available or publicized outside of gay and lesbian communities. Most of the sociological studies on gay families are conducted using a heterosexist framework, and limited to lesbian moms.⁹ Although the body of work conducted on these topics has expanded in the last decade, more research needs to be conducted from gay and gay-

⁹ Defined by Kenneth Plummer, *heterosexism* is a "diverse set of social practices...in an array of social arenas...in which the homo/hetero binary distinction is at work whereby heterosexuality is privileged." (1992, p. 19).

positive perspectives. I talked with some gay parents and kids of gays in the process of writing this thesis, but I did not have the space to include interviews. I focused instead on the work of cultural theorists and critics on issues surrounding AIDS, gays, family, and media representation.

I could not find any complete books on gay families and HIV/AIDS from a communications, cultural studies, or media studies perspective. I ended up assembling bits and pieces of information on gay families, AIDS media discourse, and the gay rights movement from sources such as Paula A. Treichler, Cindy Patton, Simon Watney, Keith Alcorn, Dennis Altman, and Carol Levine. I also included the sociological work of Frederick W. Bozett in my thesis, but on a peripheral level. I used articles written by Paula A. Treichler on AIDS discourse and the construction of meaning around the disease to help me understand how social institutions were using AIDS to perpetuate a heterosexist agenda that is harmful to gays and to the gay rights movement as a whole. As Treichler makes clear, these agendas are based on society's most fundamental cultural, social, and moral values (1992, p. 87). Her work on fiction constructions and how they dictate social positioning, rights, and power was useful to my analysis of discursive formations on AIDS/gays and gay families (ibid., p. 85).

The books and articles that Cindy Patton has written on the politics of AIDS helped me understand the current media discourse on gay families and the contextualization of these reports in the 1990s. Patton makes it clear in her work that the HIV/AIDS pandemic coincided with a politics around sex, sexuality, and gay rights, and that AIDS discourse has played an important role in mapping a hierarchy of power and privilege. She is quite familiar with media discourses on AIDS, as she wrote for *Gay Community News* in the 1980s. In her books on AIDS, she discusses the media focus on groups and lifestyles that marked gays as single, promiscuous, and AIDS-ridden, and the family as married,

monogamous, heterosexual, and clean. In reference to media treatments of the AIDS pandemic, she states, "[t]he media's crass summary of the situation is that we should stop having sex outside of marriage" (1989a, p. 250). Her contextualization of the right-wing call for reformation of traditional moral values (heterosexuality, monogamy, marriage, procreation, family) through the media is relevant to the discussion of AIDS moral discourse in the 1980s and the discourse on gay families in the 1990s.

I used Simon Watney's 1987 publication, *Policing Desire*, to understand how discursive formations on gay men and AIDS have been constructed through the press, and how this has affected the discourse on gay families. His work was useful in articulating the discrepancy that exists between what is promoted in media discourse and actual lived experience. I applied his notions to my own experience growing up in a gay family affected by HIV, which has been very different from the popular media discourse on gay families. To describe the discourse on gay families in the mainstream gay and heterosexual press, I borrowed some thoughts from Watney on what he discerns as "the ideological operation of familialism" (1988, p. 59).

Most of my references to Dennis Altman came from his book, *AIDS and the New Puritanism* (1986), which I used to contextualize the moral discourses on AIDS, gays and gay families. It was also Altman who coined the term, "the gay/AIDS movement" (1993, p. 2), in reference to the mobilization of activist forces in gay communities when AIDS was used as a tool for anti-gay discrimination. His work was useful to my analysis of legal issues concerning gay parents and families in the context of the gay rights movement. I applied his research on legal discrimination against gay fathers in the 1980s to media discourses circulating in the 1990s. As Altman has pointed out, moral discourses have allowed for legal discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation to continue (1986, p.

61). Altman's work was also useful in the framing of the gay community press response, to which he dedicated an entire chapter in *AIDS and the New Puritanism*.

References by Keith Alcorn to the historical use of sexuality as a subject of social control (1988, p. 71) helped me to contextualize legal issues, and the relationship between discrimination and the discourse on AIDS/gays and gay families. As court battles indicate, the discourse on AIDS/gays merely heightened the contempt for gays, gayness, and gay culture already circulating throughout North America. The courts were not restricting rights to heterosexual parents who happened to have cancer, or to heterosexual hemophiliac parents who acquired HIV through blood transfusions. In analyzing the reports on gay families I have considered the notion that history repeats itself, and have used Alcorn's research to back up the claim that discourse does discriminate, especially when it involves gay sexuality and the powerful institution of the family.

Finally, Carol Levine's writing greatly informed the autobiographical sections of this thesis, and I used her work to organize my thoughts and frame my experience in this discursive analysis. My experience often mirrored her discussions of how AIDS affects non-traditional families. I used Levine's work to frame my argument that issues around AIDS in the family are being masked in the mainstream discourse on gay families because HIV and AIDS continue to be associated with single gay men and separated from the traditional household and family realm. As a result, issues such as how gay family members are involved in palliative care needs, premature grieving, mental and financial support, and drug therapies, have not been fully realized in the press.

My research and analysis confronts the issues surrounding AIDS and gay families, and the discrepancies between media representations of gay families and actual lived experience. In this thesis I have paid specific attention to how social reactions to

HIV/AIDS, gays, and the changing constitution of the family have shaped the discourse on gay families in the 1990s. Above all else, this project offers an alternative perspective to the dominant discourse circulating in the 1990s around the topic of gay families.

Chapter One

The 1980s: The Circulation of a Discourse on AIDS/Gays

AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) was first reported by medical authorities in 1981 as a disease afflicting young gay men¹⁰ in North America. These reported cases of AIDS were concentrated in large American cities like New York and San Francisco, and Canadian cities like Toronto. The devastation of gay communities as a result of AIDS-related deaths continued for two full years before the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) declared AIDS as lethal.¹¹ During this same period, AIDS was declared a sexually-transmitted disease by medical authorities, which limited ideas around transmission to sexual acts associated with gay men, specifically anal sex. The discourse on AIDS that came out of this time period, as a result, quickly translated the disease into a gay destiny, and prompted researchers like Paula A. Treichler to call the *discourse* on AIDS "an epidemic of meanings or signification" (1987, p. 32).

1.1 An Epidemic of Meanings or Signification

Treichler describes AIDS discourse as "the entire apparatus -- through which utterances about AIDS are produced and interpreted and speaking positions are made possible...in the light of processes of signification" (1992, p. 88). She explains, as does cultural critic Jan Zita Grover, that AIDS discourse represents nothing more than interpretations of what AIDS is and what AIDS has been made to mean (Grover, 1989b, p.

¹⁰ The average age of men contracting HIV or AIDS at this time was thirty-five years old.

¹¹ The disease had been given many names before the CDC made the term "AIDS" official. These official and unofficial names will be dealt with in more depth in Part Three of this chapter. A handful of AIDS activists and cultural critics believe that this waiting period prior to the medical recognition that AIDS is a general health concern correlates with the initial appearance of AIDS in gay men, a despised minority population.

10). Treichler pinpoints the different cultural uses and understandings of AIDS in North America as both a material and linguistic entity. Early characterizations of AIDS involved a network of circulating discourses, all of which situated disease, and in many cases, gay men, as common denominators. Interpretations and meanings were often constructed out of the interrelationship between biomedical, cultural, political, social, economic and media discourses, as well as through their independent depictions of the disease. At times, biomedical statements about AIDS transmission through unprotected sex and needle sharing were often upstaged by a focus on the so-called lifestyle of young gay men.¹² At other times, medical researchers claimed AIDS to be a disease partial to the gay community, the Haitian community, prostitutes, and IV drug users.¹³ Paula A. Treichler has stressed the importance of these initial discourses on AIDS, and the ways in which meanings have been constructed beyond the disease itself.

The media played a key role in the circulation of multiple and contradictory discourses on AIDS in the early 1980s, disseminating information from American medical centres like the CDC (Centers for Disease Control) and NIH (National Institutes of Health) to the Western world as authorities made efforts to "make sense of" the disease (Treichler, 1987, p. 34). Various intersecting, overlapping, and even subverting narratives and discourses (ibid., p. 42) saw AIDS as a problem for particular groups rather than a general health concern. Major institutions of medical and social authority, such as the CDC, solidified this idea by creating the '4-Hs' list of 'high-risk' groups in the time between 1981 and 1982. This '4-Hs' list conveyed the idea early on that "the major risk in

¹² Simon Watney has poked fun at the ridiculousness of such a label, and the various interpretations that 'lifestyle' can mean apart from sex, such as eating the wrong foods, smoking, lack of exercise and stress (1990a, p. 28).

¹³ These social groups constituted the famous '4-H's: Homosexuals, Hemophiliacs, Heroin addicts and Haitians. In the early 1980s, these groups were understood to be at 'high risk' of AIDS transmission. If you didn't fall into one of these categories, you were supposedly not at risk of 'getting AIDS'.

acquiring AIDS is being a particular kind of person rather than doing particular things" (ibid., p. 44). Laden with this type of "symbolic baggage" (Altman, 1986, p.192), media reports on the disease became influential in the interpretations and significations of AIDS.

Media discourses on AIDS in the early 1980s focused on gay men to define what AIDS is (it is gay), who is transmitting the virus (gay men), who is acquiring the virus (gay men), and how transmission occurs (gay sexual behaviour/anal sex). The bulk of AIDS discourse circulating in the mainstream media borrowed from historical stereotypes of the rampant homosexual, placing emphasis on a lifestyle consumed by sex, conflating gay identity with promiscuity and mental and physical illness (homosexuality and AIDS, respectively). Media images of the gay male in North America as single, promiscuous, irresponsible, and prone to STDs (sexually transmitted diseases) also induced the negative association of the homosexual subject with AIDS. This identity marker not only increased the visibility of the gay male stereotype, but informed the direction of AIDS discourse for the rest of the decade. Indeed, the social and historical conditions of AIDS, and its association as a gay male disease, also caused moral questions to arise (Treichler, 1992, p. 87) and many moral messages to be delivered through our social institutions.¹⁴

The impact of AIDS discourse written by religious constituents, for instance, continued to shape the presentation of knowledge on the disease, and the strategies offered to eliminate its spread.¹⁵ Discourses that took a moralistic tone marked the categories of homosexual and heterosexual that were being used to make sense of sexual and social

¹⁴ Simon Watney has discussed this phase in terms of a moral panic, a time in which tales of morality were embedded in AIDS discourse, and the sexualization of AIDS had just begun. See Watney, "AIDS, 'Moral Panic' Theory and Homophobia," *Social Aspects of AIDS*. Eds. Peter Aggleton and Hilary Homans. New York: The Falmer Press, 1988.

¹⁵ Gay critics and activists have questioned if calls for the 'elimination of spread' is in reference to AIDS or to homosexuality, or both.

relations in the age of AIDS. Categories of the homosexual and the heterosexual, for example, have been clearly defined in AIDS moral discourse as natural semantic oppositions in which a certain right (heterosexuality) and a definite wrong (homosexuality) is determinable.¹⁶ This way of organizing Western twentieth-century thought (Sedgwick in Plummer, 1992, p. 4) has allowed not only for moral categorization, but for the assessment of groups as either prone to or exempt from HIV/AIDS according to sexual orientation, drug use, race, class, etc. Indeed, moral discussions around AIDS and who acquires it gave special attention to social groups that deviate from the norm. The translation of gay sexuality into a type of deviance, if not a solid belief before, was certainly substantiated in AIDS moral discourse of the early 1980s.

The repercussions of this "rhetoric of AIDS," as Simon Watney (1987, p. 4) defines it, called for the elimination of contamination sources -- namely, gay men, gay culture, and gay lifestyles -- for health purposes, and the securing of institutions of monogamy (read: heterosexuality) to ensure protection.¹⁷ According to Kyle W. Mechar, this situation of polemicizing about sex, of pitting the promiscuous gay male body as cultural signifier of AIDS against the monogamous heterosexual as signifier of health, reinforced the sanctity and privilege of the nuclear family in the media (1994, pp. 82-3). Indeed, the moral majority were given a venue in popular AIDS discourse to link promiscuity and permissiveness to AIDS/gays and the breakdown of the traditional family.¹⁸ When it comes to AIDS, as Allan M. Brandt asserts, "society's response reveals

¹⁶ These oppositions took on special significance in the bathhouse debates of 1984, which divided populations sexually according to straight or gay, and morally according to good or bad sexual behaviour.

¹⁷ The "rhetoric of Aids" (1987, p. 4) is what Simon Watney calls this epidemic discourse, referring to a specific commentary which often took the tune of a health alert.

¹⁸ A moral message was delivered through the media from a former government minister, Sir Rhodes Boyson, in Britain, who stated, "...AIDS is, to me, a part of the fruits of the permissive society. The regular one-man, one-woman marriage would not put us at risk with this in any way..." (in Weeks, 1989a, p. 12).

its most fundamental cultural, social, and moral values" (in Treichler, 1992, p. 87). These values continue to be played out through a familialist discourse on AIDS and gays. Embedded in this familialist discourse, according to Ian Parker, is "a history of the family and the way that history is reinterpreted to legitimate the Western nuclear family form..." (1992, p. 16).

An understanding of phenomena considered natural in North American culture has been delivered since the nineteenth century through this particular family institution. It was within the framework of the family that these parameters of acceptable and abhorrent sexualities were initially laid out, and the construction of a sexual norm took shape (Alcorn, 1988, p. 68). Although attitudes may seem more generally tolerant and accepting of social and sexual diversity in the twentieth century, the heterosexual family continues to be a central arena of discipline in establishing "the normal order of things" (Weeks, 1989a, p. 10).¹⁹ And this establishment of a 'normal order of things' through the heterosexual family influenced the social responses to AIDS. As Cindy Patton points out, "The solution for those who [didn't] want to catch one [HIV/AIDS or STDs] [was] not to have sex outside a monogamous relationship (preferably a heterosexual marriage)" (1986, p. 8).

A discussion of the family institution within these boundaries not only reinforces traditional social mores, but confines the notion of family to heterosexist tradition: opposite sex marriage, (hetero)sexual identity and uniform (hetero)sexual behaviour. Embedded within familialist discourses on AIDS and sexuality are the set of assumptions that monogamous sexual practice implies heterosexuality and that gay lifestyles are therefore separate from the family. The homosexual figure resurfaced strongly in AIDS discourse to

¹⁹ "The way the metaphors of family are used are not only to describe other forms of life, but also often to reinforce the notion of the family as natural, as going back to the beginnings of civilisation" (Parker, 1992, p. 16).

embody the threat of AIDS, and the fear of AIDS quickly became fear of the gay man. The immunity of heterosexuals, monogamous married couples, and traditional families from AIDS is one response that surfaced at this time, displacing anxiety around AIDS and gay sexuality back onto gay men. According to Kyle W. Mechar, this form of minority scapegoating has been occurring throughout history (1994, p.83).

The heightened visibility of AIDS/gay male sexuality that resulted from society's moral responses to the disease posed many problems in a wider social context, for this particular visibility accompanied a general loathing of homosexuals that already existed in the United States and Canada. Gay men became a major target of violence. Cindy Patton makes it clear in her book, *Fatal Advice* (1996), that reported increases in queer bashing, as well as the expansion of more diffuse negative stereotyping, resulted from individual ignorance and fear of AIDS (p. 109). Other critics have argued (See Katz in Blumenfeld and Raymond²⁰) that this relationship between gay visibility and violence, as well as persecution, punitive measures, and a "promised invisibility,"²¹ has historical relevance, and that acts of gay hatred are just more clearly marked in the age of AIDS.²² Regardless,

²⁰ As gay historians have asserted:

American homosexuals were condemned to death by choking, burning, and drowning; they were executed, jailed, pilloried, fined, court-martialed, prostituted, fired, framed, blackmailed, disinherited, declared insane, driven to insanity, to suicide, murder, and self-hatred, witch-hunted, entrapped, stereotyped, mocked, insulted, isolated, pitied, castigated, and despised. (They were also castrated, lobotomized, shock-treated, and psychoanalyzed.)...When simply working, living, and loving, homosexuals have been condemned to invisibility (Katz in Blumenfeld and Raymond, p.12).

²¹ The representation of gays as the most visibly ill presented a guaranteed extinction of the gay male segment of society. As Leo Bersani explains:

[t]he heightened visibility conferred on gay men by AIDS is the visibility of imminent death, of a promised invisibility. Straight America can rest its gaze on us, let us do our thing over and over in the media, because what our attentive fellow citizens see is the pathos and impotence of a doomed species (1995, p. 21).

²² Those engaging in sexual phenomena perceived as socially different are known to have been persecuted. This persecution often took the form of government inaction when it

the AIDS path to an inevitable death was not short or quick enough for some. At best, the fear of homosexuals as monsters of contagion kept homophobes at a distance. The situation at its worst meant that gay bashing became a national sport in the United States, Canada, and elsewhere.²³

Linda Singer's account of the relationship between gay visibility, social privilege and the dominant representation of difference incorporates these thoughts. She argues that "...sexual political struggles over the past two decades have not just been struggles over sexual activities as such, but have also been concerned with contesting the order of privilege and visibility defined by the operative political organization of sexual differences" (1993, p.116). Singer's statement is a reminder of the pivotal role sexual difference has played in shaping the politics of representation, and the role of the media in shaping the visible presence of sexual difference through illness and the homosexual body.²⁴ As Larry Gross contends, the manner of a certain visible representation reflects the biases and interests of select elites who define the public agenda: "And these elites are (mostly) white, (mostly) middle-aged, (mostly) male, (mostly) middle and upper-middle class, and entirely heterosexual (at least in public)" (1991, p.20). Where AIDS is concerned, meanings are often linked directly to political agendas, and can be viewed as such when representation

came to lending government funds to the production and research of drugs for people with AIDS, and swiftness in finding a cure. As Michael Lynch asserted in 1982, "The medical profession replaced the church in collaborating with the state as oppressors of homosexuals. If originally we had been criminal because we were sinful, we now were criminal because we were sick...What used to be a psychiatric pathology is now an infectious one" (pp. 35-36). For a historical perspective on the criminality of homosexuality, also see Jeffrey Weeks, "Discourse, Desire and Sexual Deviance: Some Problems in a History of Homosexuality," in *The Making of the Modern Homosexual*. Ed. Kenneth Plummer. Totowa, New Jersey: Barnes & Noble Books, 1981.

²³ Gay bashing by local authorities became an acceptable form of disciplining queers that acted out in major cities, such as Montreal, Canada and San Francisco, USA.

²⁴ See also Cindy Patton, "Dirt and germs serve an important symbolic role in the social organization of difference" (1986, p. 11).

even indirectly affects things like funding for AIDS research and access to drug therapies.²⁵ In Simon Watney's view, "AIDS has...encouraged a *politics of representation*" (1990, p. 170), and this representation is being used

as a pretext throughout the West to 'justify' calls for increasing legislation and regulation of those who are considered to be socially unacceptable...[f]rom very early on in the history of the epidemic, Aids [AIDS] has been mobilised to a prior agenda of issues concerning the kind of society we wish to inhabit. These include most of the shibboleths of contemporary 'familial' politics, including anti-abortion and anti-gay positions. It is therefore impossible to isolate the representation of Aids [AIDS], or campaigns on behalf of people with Aids [AIDS], from this contingent set of values and debates (1987, p. 3).

Not surprisingly, AIDS representation in the 1980s tended to reinforce which constituencies sat where on the power map, according to sexual identity, race, and class factors. Such biases are apparent in AIDS discourse where the word "epidemic" is used to describe the disease. As Treichler points out, "An epidemic disease is prevalent within a specific community, geographical area, or population at a particular time...a pandemic disease is present over the whole of a country, a continent, or the world" (1987, p. 40). AIDS supposedly had not reached "pandemic" proportions until the dangers of heterosexual transmission were declared by public health authorities in 1986 (*ibid.*, p. 40). As Treichler affirms, this discourse "protects not only the sexual practices of heterosexuality but also its ideological superiority" (*ibid.*, p. 49).

²⁵ Funding for AIDS was scarce in the early and mid-1980s when those most debilitated by the disease also happened to be the socially undesirable (Treichler, 1987, p. 43).

1.2 The "Gay/AIDS Movement"

The "gay/AIDS movement" (Altman, 1993a, p. 2)²⁶ was a mobilized response to this heterosexism, and to the use of AIDS to protect institutional practices of heterosexuality that, in turn, limited rights for gays and lesbians. In response to the increased (and increasingly limited) visibility of AIDS in association with gays, the "gay/AIDS movement" became the largest gay rights activist movement since the struggle over the official classification of Homosexuality as an illness by the American Psychiatric Association, and since Stonewall (Treichler, 1987, p. 40). This strong political force reflected the sense of medical emergency and political urgency involved with AIDS in the early and mid-1980s, as gay men were being wiped off the planet at unbelievable rates and calls for anti-gay measures accelerated. Members of the movement rebuked homophobic assertions made by so-called AIDS experts in the medical and pharmaceutical industries. Gay activists also addressed the problem of government (in)action on issues such as welfare, employment benefits, subsidized drug programmes, and disability pensions, and attacked religious organizations that used AIDS as 'evidence' that homosexuality is indeed a social and medical illness. Invariably, this political fervor in the gay movement also increased the visibility of gay men and lesbians, and the visibility of countercultural activism in the movement itself.

Many cultural critics, like Kenneth Plummer, used this moment of increased mainstream visibility as an opportunity to speak out about queer issues, especially as they related to AIDS and health care.²⁷ The complex interventions resulting from these social

²⁶ It was Dennis Altman who coined the phrase, "the gay/AIDS movement" (1993, p. 2), in an article on HIV/AIDS policy in *AIDS: Facing the Second Decade* (1993).

²⁷ Kenneth Plummer recognized this increased visibility and its potential for the gay rights movement when he stated that "[t]he love that dared not speak its name has now become a major public discourse," (1992, pp. 24-5).

conditions in the gay population helped shape the discourse on AIDS (Treichler, 1987, p. 40). These interventions also caused many questions to emerge both in and outside of the gay communities themselves, with particular attention focused on "the central determining role of the mass media in fixing widespread perceptions [of AIDS and People who have HIV/AIDS]..." (Watney, 1990, p.170). Gay/AIDS activists were concerned with how media perceptions served to "make large numbers of people *increasingly* vulnerable to HIV" (ibid., p. 171), for although AIDS "brought issues of central concern to the gay movement onto the mainstream political agenda" (Altman, 1988, p. 313), these issues were framed as gay concerns, and were therefore often ignored. Cultural critics and AIDS activists like Dennis Altman, Cindy Patton, and Simon Watney reacted to dominant media representations of the early eighties by formulating their own sets of gay-inspired, activist discourses. Writers, grass roots videographers, photographers, and other media activists, created their own representations of AIDS and people with AIDS that addressed and critiqued the stigmatization of gay men in the age of AIDS.²⁸

The actions of gay leaders in the gay/AIDS movement were also a factor in the rather exclusive association of AIDS with the single gay male population, in that many leaders claimed ownership of the disease as a political and a spiritual issue (Manning, 1990, p. 17). The sense by media sources that a highjacking of AIDS by gays was taking place, or that the power of the gay lobby was in full force (Altman, 1993a, p.10), reinforced this gay/AIDS association.²⁹ This limited perspective of the heterosexual press, and the sometimes reductive nature of AIDS discourse in the gay press, had an effect on meanings dispelled around the disease. At the same time, a shift in the gay movement

²⁸ Examples of these artist activists include Lola Flash and other members of DIVA, and ACT UP.

²⁹ "These phrases are usually used by those who are most certain AIDS is a homosexual disease, but seem to resent the gay community playing any role in its control" (Altman, 1993, p.11).

occurred, as members of gay communities desperately sought answers and a cure for AIDS. The reinforcement of a right-wing tradition of family values in the Reagan-Bush era also found support through a segment of gay conservatives advocating for monogamy and a return to more traditional values.³⁰ Former activist critiques of authoritative and, at times, homophobic, medical discourses were replaced by a dependence on medical authorities in the mid-to-late 1980s (Altman, 1993a, p. 2). The renewed sense of strength in the gay rights movement was lost to a desperation faced by men and women who watched friends, lovers, and family members die. As a result of these struggles and competing political positions within the gay rights movement itself, HIV and AIDS became more visible to a widespread population,³¹ although it was still perceived (along with homosexuality) as a social threat to the heterosexual population rather than as a disease that affects everyone indiscriminately.

³⁰ This conservatism signifies what Eva Pendleton calls a "rightward turn" in lesbian and gay politics (1996, p. 376). As she points out, many of the enforcers of morality were gay men:

In the writing of gay reactivists, the blame for the spread of AIDS lies almost solely with gay promiscuity...The only hope for ending the AIDS crisis lies in closing sex clubs and winning sanctions for gay marriage...the only mature expression of sexuality is monogamy (p. 383).

The San Francisco Bathhouse Debate of 1984 (Kinsella, p. 264) is also a good example of the influence of the gay conservative movement and the various moral agendas on AIDS, for the different sides taken within gay communities had cultural signification beyond the bathhouse debate itself.

³¹ Some of this visibility can be attributed to the fight for PWA (People with AIDS) rights in gay and lesbian communities, and the increase in the number of prominent gay men with HIV and AIDS who came out as spokespersons for the gay/AIDS rights movement.

1.3 The Representation of PWAs in the Media³²

Kyle W. Mechar has discussed the function of "the queer male body...as a sign for a culture...in the age of epidemic, warding off anxiety and fear among those portions of the population who are now only beginning to feel the psychic and physical effects of this disease" (1994, pp. 82-3). Indeed, the body of the homosexual has stayed central to the AIDS narrative, to such an extent that the representation of the homosexual in the mainstream media has been *the* site for a discursive investigation of AIDS. Both medical authorities and the press (both heterosexual and gay) have propelled an image of gayness around AIDS, with scientists in the early 1980s announcing a "gay-plague theory" that (Grover, 1989b, p.11) linked gay sexuality with the illness. Words and phrases used to talk about and symbolize AIDS in science research made their way into mainstream cultures, popularized through the print media; they include GRID (Gay-Related Immunodeficiency), the Gay Plague, CAID (Community Acquired Immune Deficiency) and the Gay Cancer. More unofficial names for the disease associating AIDS with gay sexuality often circulated within gay communities as well, a prime example being WOG (Wrath of God), a gay black-humour term (ibid., p. 16). Meanings surrounding the body of the male homosexual as both the disease-inflicted and the disease-inflicting body have been generated for centuries within specific sociohistorical contexts (Alcorn, 1988, p. 72). The medicalization of homosexuality in the latter nineteenth century saw a diagnostic category created for the otherwise unspeakable sexual perversion, re-diagnosing homosexuality from a sin and a crime to a mental sickness and physical illness (Altman,

³² The terms PWA (People/Person with AIDS), and then PLWA (People/Person Living with AIDS) were created to end the use of the phrase 'AIDS victim,' a degrading and offensive term commonly used in the popular press and in social and medical commentary dealing with infected individuals. In the late 1990s, the term PHA is more commonly used to refer to people who have HIV and AIDS, making a distinction between those infected and those who are affected.

1986, p. 40). As Dennis Altman points out, since the late 1960s gay men "have come to symbolize every confusion about sexuality in modern history" (*ibid.*, p.58-9).

The homosexual designation informed the construction of the faggot persona in the popular media of the 1970s and 1980s, characterized in terms of an insatiable desire to have sex with (many) other men, as morally deviant, ideologically different, and in the advent of AIDS, a vision of walking death and the personification of disease. The homosexual/faggot type was easily conflated with AIDS in the discourse of the 1980s, since these designations continued the tradition of treating gay sexuality itself as a sickness and as a disease.

Attempts to 'give AIDS a name' and to 'put a face on AIDS,'³³ further solidified the homosexual body in popular media representations, starting with the death of Rock Hudson from AIDS-related illness in October, 1985.³⁴ Rock Hudson's 'scandalous' secret gay lifestyle was revealed in the press across Canada and the United States at the same time as he announced his illness. Popular magazines plastered unrecognizable photographs of the star in his debilitated condition across their front covers,³⁵ with one report going as far as to present before/after portraits of the dying film star.³⁶ Hudson was a catalyst for a significant turn of events in the representation of people with AIDS in the media, for he was the first gay male figure to give "'AIDS a face everyone could recognize'..." (Meyer, p. 274):

³³ Douglas Crimp asserts that this is a standard media device in the construction of AIDS as a morality tale (1992, p. 129).

³⁴ Rock Hudson, known for his movie roles as an illustrious male macho, was a household name in the fifties and sixties. His sexuality remained unspoken in American culture until his death from AIDS-related disease in 1985.

³⁵ See "The New Terror of AIDS," *Maclean's* 12 Aug. 1985; "The Other Life of Rock Hudson," *People* 12 Aug. 1985.

³⁶ In "Faces," *Life* Sept. 1985.

Although Hudson's homosexuality had been common knowledge in Hollywood, *USA Today* editorialized on the day of his death, October 2, 1985: 'Many of us are realizing that AIDS is not a 'gay plague,' but everybody's problem.'... 'Rock Hudson was the first one [person with AIDS] we all knew and cared about'... (Kinsella, p. 145).³⁷

The death of Rock Hudson is just one example where the media brought AIDS into mainstream culture. His death conflated categories of self (general population) and not-self (AIDS victim), us (the heterosexual majority) and them (the homosexual minority) so heavily embedded in AIDS media discourse, bringing AIDS closer to home in terms of who is considered at risk. On the other hand, Hudson remained distanced from the realm of deviant homosexual status as his image continued to be portrayed in congruence with his Hollywood film persona as a heterosexual hero. His death seemed to launch the mourning not of a man with AIDS, but of the loss of a legend: the tall, dark, and handsome heterosexual bachelor; and his role as every woman's dream catch for a husband and family-man in 1950s America.

Most popular representations of PWAs were not nearly this glamorous, and focused on transmission source to determine appropriate moral categories around AIDS.³⁸ The AIDS narrative focused on sexuality, sexual behaviour, IV drug use, and blood transfusions. An August 10, 1987 issue of *Newsweek*, for example, presents fourteen pages of photographs -- mini-obituaries -- showing faces of the dead, marking "One Year In the Epidemic" in America. In this report, the female face of AIDS was either "an i.v. drug user" or "infected by her bisexual fiancé" ("One Year In the Epidemic, p. 24); the

³⁷ Hudson's illness prompted President Ronald Reagan to utter the word "AIDS" publicly for the first time in his presidency (September, 1985) and to boost the US AIDS budget after intending to cut it. It should also be noted that Reagan's speech coincided with the upsurge in media reportage on the heterosexual scare that took place in 1985, and that he uttered "AIDS" in the context of "he can understand why parents do not want their children 'in schools with these kids' who have 'AIDS'" (Kinsella, p. 266).

³⁸ Even though in some cases, source of transmission is multiple, and in many cases, indeterminable.

infant face of AIDS was "contaminated [from a] blood transfusion" (ibid.); the heterosexual male face of AIDS was "a hemophiliac" (ibid., p. 25), and the gay male face of AIDS was associated with a gay organization, such as "a founder of Gay Men's Health Crisis," and presumably died of causes related to his homosexuality (ibid., p. 35). *Newsweek's* so-called compassionate look at faces of AIDS tied the disease and the source of transmission to particular social groups: gay men, intravenous drug users, and the much less demeaning hemophiliac, which did nothing more than "'edit' PWAs into appropriate moral categories" (Wellings, 1988, p. 89).

Fitting PWAs into moral categories in this way tended to obscure, and in the case of gay men and intravenous drug users,³⁹ taint how people living with AIDS were viewed and consequently treated on a wider social scale.⁴⁰ Douglas Crimp and Cindy Patton both view this tendency in the media to collapse AIDS with gay sexuality and lifestyle as an emblem of "the representational crisis of the 1980s" (Patton, 1996, p. 10); a political decade in which the picture of AIDS as the face of death was being portrayed out of context. As Douglas Crimp states,

images of people with AIDS created by the media and art photographers alike are demeaning...overdetermined by a number of prejudices that precede them about the majority of the people who have AIDS -- about gay men, IV drug users, people of color, poor people (1992, pp. 125-6).

Art photographers and the press presented PWAs as the living dead, as debilitated and suffering victims of AIDS. Some of the first examples of the AIDS victim in American art photography can be seen in exhibitions by Nicholas Nixon (*Pictures of People*, 1988,

³⁹ IV drug users were also referred to as 'drug abusers' at this time.

⁴⁰ It can be estimated that ill-informing representations of PWAs had an effect on health and welfare, emotional support, drug treatment, etc., for those both infected and affected by the disease.

Museum of Modern Art, New York) and Rosalind Solomon (*Portraits in the Time of AIDS*, 1988, Grey Art Gallery). The face of the homosexual AIDS victim soon became the generic portrayal of PWAs (Crimp, 1992, p. 119), presented as a figure of disfigurement who, "...ravaged ...and debilitated by the syndrome...[was] resigned to their 'inevitable' death[s]" (Crimp, 1992, p. 118).

The circulation of morality discourses on the AIDS victim quickly led to a "blame-the-victim" (Treichler, 1987, p. 37) narrative that reinforced the healthy heterosexual versus the sick homosexual dichotomy already circulating in popular representations of gay male sexuality. The attachment of moral significations (innocent versus guilty) presented the idea that "a 'leakage' of infection from a culpable minority to a blame-free population" (Wellings, 1988, p. 87) was also possible. Dominant dichotomies of good versus bad, innocent versus guilty, and the heard majority versus the silenced minority were then used to determine the status of high-risk groups: hemophiliacs, heterosexual women partners of bisexuals, blood transfused PWAs, and children, were labeled innocents, and homosexuals, hookers, and heroin addicts were the guilty parties.⁴¹ Within these moral categories of innocent versus guilty was a ranking of innocence based on class, race, age and sexual identity, "the most innocent of all [being] the white, middle-class hemophiliac children" (Crimp, 1992, p. 120). What this labeling meant for people with HIV and AIDS was that gay men and IV drug users were understood as deserving of the disease since transmission unquestionably involved either sex or drugs or both. Female prostitutes, also socially undesirable, became known as vectors of the disease, while hemophiliacs -- presented as heterosexual males -- were labeled the innocent victims of AIDS.

⁴¹ Although the Haitian population of North America was often categorized as a guilty party, Haitians did not fit into either category of the moral dichotomy laid out for PWAs, since transmission was viewed as sexual (guilty), but the virus tended to be acquired through heterosexual (innocent) rather than homosexual sexual relations. Haitians were later taken off the CDC's '4-H' list.

Heterosexual women, generally the girlfriends or wives of hemophiliacs, also remained the innocent victims of AIDS, unless, of course, they contracted the virus and passed it on to their unborn child. In the case of horizontal transmission, the child born with HIV was considered the innocent victim and the mother was considered simply selfish for bringing an HIV-infected baby into the world.⁴²

The complexity of these categorizations and their representation in the media indicates the nexus of social, cultural and political influences involved in the construction of AIDS discourse and meanings around AIDS. The consignment of gay men into categories of sexual singledom, women into categories of motherhood, and hemophiliacs into categories of family in these early years strongly divided men from women, faggot from family, and the guilty from the innocent in media reports. This framing affirmed that those-at-risk remained separate from traditional mainstream culture, which reinforced "the central category of mainstream or public as naturally and literally HIV-free..." (Patton, 1996, p. 46). In cases where categories collapsed, such as gay sexuality in the context of the family or parenthood, the assignment of a guilty or innocent label on the PWA was evaluated according to traditional moral values of marriage, monogamy, and the nuclear family. The mini-obituary for Chuck Hammond in *Newsweek's* depiction of the dead, for example -- "A divorced dad who had gay 'encounters'" (p. 29) -- insinuates that if AIDS was the direct result of promiscuous gay sex, a homosexual or subcultural lifestyle was the crime and redemption could be found in a lifestyle of monogamous heterosexual marriage.

⁴² In cases where a woman acquired the virus through sexual contact with a man who was not a hemophiliac, the man was presumed to be bisexual, or, at the very least, had a history of sexual promiscuity with both men and women. Lesbians tended to be completely neglected in the literature on AIDS, since woman-to-woman contact was presumed to be safe in the early years of the epidemic.

The uncertainty around how diseases are actually transmitted led to depictions of AIDS as "a *disease of lifestyle*" (Alcorn, 1988, p. 74) in early media reports.⁴³ The initial discussion of lifestyle denounced the use of poppers (amyl nitrate) by gay men as the AIDS culprit. Following the medical declaration that poppers were not to blame, attention shifted to sex. A CDC editorial note was published early on in the pandemic, attempting to explain why pneumocystosis was occurring in five "previously healthy individuals": "The fact that these patients were all homosexuals suggests an association between some aspect of a homosexual lifestyle or disease acquired through sexual contact..." (in Treichler, 1987, p. 52). This stamp of medical approval reinforced AIDS as a disease of "homosexual lifestyle," which meant that much of the AIDS discourse that blamed gay men went unquestioned. This early medical discourse effectively distanced AIDS from heterosexuality, and from heterosexual institutions of marriage, procreation, and the family.

1.4 AIDS Enters The Home

A quote in the popular American magazine, *Newsweek*, "We are tolerant mostly by long distance; closer to home we start to squirm" (Leland, 1992, p. 42), articulates the spawning of social fears and prejudice around gay sexuality and AIDS that was occurring in both America and Canada during the 1980s. It also articulates the sense of distance -- a comfort zone -- afforded the heterosexual majority when dealing with AIDS and the gay population. So what happens when *The New York Times* prints a story that begins, 'Some children may have contracted a deadly disease of the immune system from 'routine close contact' with their families,' (Streitmatter, 1995, p. 261), and that disease happens to be

⁴³ The targeting of gay male sexuality through lifestyle reportage was kick-started by a 1982 NBC report that stated, "the lifestyle of some gay male homosexuals has triggered an epidemic" (Kinsella, p. 261).

AIDS? For the first time in North America, the home became a potential site of contagion, rupturing the notion of home as a bastion place of safety and protection for the nuclear family.

These first moments of scare to the heterosexual population, what Cindy Patton refers to as "the Heterosexual AIDS Panic, Phase One" (1990, p. 47), began as early as fall of 1982, when the case of an infant with AIDS was announced in the US media (Kinsella, 1989, p. 18), and continued into late 1984, when more than six cases of AIDS among heterosexuals appeared.⁴⁴ Although AIDS had been affecting family life since the inception of the disease, choices made by the popular press in relaying this information seemed to take two different directions. The first direction saw a surge in media coverage of the pandemic in the final quarter of 1985, the same period of Rock Hudson's death. As James Kinsella points out, this rise was not tied to medical developments or the death toll to date, but rather "to the extent to which the threat to mainstream Americans seemed to be increasing" (1989, p. 156).

As the demographics of HIV/AIDS transmission broadened, AIDS discourse echoed the idea that a social turn was taking place, a general shift away from understanding AIDS as a gay problem and towards understanding AIDS as a global concern that threatens heterosexual cultures and communities.⁴⁵ Following the medical confirmation that heterosexuals in North America were indeed at risk of infection (Altman, 1986, pp. 191-2), popular press reports accentuated the threat of AIDS to the socially desirable, that is, to

⁴⁴ The presentation of, for instance, an elderly heterosexual couple with AIDS (Kinsella, p. 157), or other presumably monogamous, non-IV drug-using heterosexuals who had acquired AIDS.

⁴⁵ AIDS was already considered a heterosexual disease in many parts of Africa, but this did not seem to weigh heavily on the minds of those living in North America, in part because media sources often positioned Africans as very different from people living in Western cultures.

those individuals positioned outside of the original high-risk groups. AIDS discourse concerned with the home therefore addressed "white, middle-class, and definitely heterosexual middle America" (Crimp, 1992, p. 119). In cases where heterosexual sex was confirmed as the only possible means of transmission, the PWA represented was more than likely a hemophiliac male living a nuclear family lifestyle.⁴⁶ A July 1985 *Life* cover story, "NOW NO ONE IS SAFE FROM AIDS," was one of the first to confront the issue of AIDS in the family. The front cover of this report showed photographs of the Burk family (a hemophiliac man, his wife and child), a military official, and a young woman, all representative of heterosexual America.⁴⁷ The letter from *Life's* managing editor began, "For a long time it seemed possible to exclude ourselves and our families from the threat..." (in Altman, 1986, p. 8). By December, 1986, the majority of American and Canadian news magazines were issuing cover stories on the threat of AIDS to the heterosexual population (Treichler, 1987, p. 39), voicing concern with its spread to "non-homosexuals" (Wellings, 1988, p. 87).

The second direction taken by the heterosexual press explained away the possibility of heterosexual sex as a route of transmission by ignoring "the cases of AIDS among monogamous homebodies" (Treichler, 1987, p. 47). What resulted was the casual or household contact scare used to explain the transmission of HIV in the so-called innocent (non-sexual, supposedly non-promiscuous) mainstream population.⁴⁸ The idea of casual

⁴⁶ When mothers started giving birth to HIV-infected babies, the mode of transmission was assumed to be blood related, as in the case of heterosexual hemophiliacs, such as the widely publicized Burk family, who faced the 'unintentional' transmission of the virus from the hemophiliac father to the mother, and then from mother to child.

⁴⁷ This was especially effective alongside the campaign to ban gays from the United States military, and reinforced assumptions in the popular media that gays are segregated from the institution of the family and parenthood.

⁴⁸ The idea that one could 'catch AIDS' from toilet seats, saliva, etc. was disseminated in press reports such as *Newsweek's* "Sex in the Age of AIDS" cover story on March 14, 1988.

or household contact worked for many reasons, since it fit the framework of a familialist discourse already set in place to talk about the family in contemporary society. The discussion of the household contact scare kept "the ideological operation of familialism" (Watney, 1988, p. 59) in place, and its strict boundaries around social and sexual categories. This traditional operation continued to link transmission by drug use and sexual behaviour to gay men and socially undesirable groups (prostitutes, junkies), and non-sexual and blood-related transmission to babies, hemophiliacs, married persons, and family-oriented heterosexuals.

The moral disparity between categories of desirable and undesirable ensured the condemnation of gay men, and the separation of gay men from the family values agenda set by the Reagan-Bush administration at this time. The household contact scare kept the belief in place that, for heterosexuals, transmission was 'clean' and confined to the household within the context of the family. At the same time, though, the reportage on AIDS in the mainstream that divorced gay sexuality from the family, home, and domestic realm, also touched the lives of those of us living in gay families. Popular media reports on the heterosexual scare echoed the feelings rampant within gay families that one could not escape AIDS, that AIDS was a major driving force toward safer sex changes, and that life was valuable in the twentieth century. As the 1990s approached, media sources increased their reportage on AIDS and family life, but this time in the context of the nuclear family, and generally with a tone of incredulity and disbelief that kept a traditional family values agenda in place. As a result, any possibility for a discussion of families affected by AIDS that did not adhere to the nuclear model was completely eliminated, and the complex reality of HIV and AIDS for many family members remained masked (Watney, 1990, p. 173).

Chapter Two

The 1990s: Mainstreaming Gay Families in the Age of HIV/AIDS

The mainstream discourse on AIDS/gays in the 1980s was an indication of the wider social climate in which views were being articulated on gay and lesbian culture, lifestyle and rights issues. AIDS media discourse revealed the network of moral commentary involving social, cultural, political, religious, economic and legal institutions that generated an association between AIDS and gay lifestyles in the 1980s, and that undermined the gay rights movement more generally. Targeting risk groups rather than risk behaviours placed gay men rather than unsafe sex in the media spotlight, and marked gay lifestyles as a source of danger.

By the early 1990s, this lifestyle discourse had increased the mainstream visibility of gays and lesbians in North America, albeit a limited visibility. The moral solutions posed for the control of AIDS in the 1980s, that is, sexual abstinence for gays and lesbians, and a continued tradition of monogamy and nuclear family life for heterosexuals, seem to be influencing the mainstream discourse around sexuality and gay rights in the late 1990s. Critics who in the 1980s saw homosexuality as an attack on the ideal heterosexual family model (Plummer, 1992, p. 19) are indeed making waves in the current discourse on gay lifestyles. This commentary is heard in the discourse on gay marriage, gay families, adoption rights and other issues that signify diversification and social change in our dominant "mainstay" institutions.⁴⁹ Similar to debates for and against the inclusion of gays in institutions of marriage and the military – institutions in which gays and lesbians are

⁴⁹ Jeffrey Weeks writes critically about "the centrality since the nineteenth century of the norm of the monogamous, heterosexual family" (1981, p. 104) while an article in *The Globe and Mail*, "Family Matters", reinforces the family as "[t]he mainstay of Canadian social order" (October 5, 1996, p. D1).

gaining visibility and demanding rights -- gay families now constitute a group whose desires have been marked as a site of mainstream discursive investigation (Singer, p. 116).

A flourishing of reports appeared in the heterosexual and mainstream gay presses in the mid-to-late 1990s using a discourse on gay families to point to the changing composition of one of the most historically dominant and powerful of heterosexual institutions, the family. As seen through these reports, the larger issues being dealt with involve the politics of sex, sexuality, and power in a changing social and political climate, as gay parents dethrone the notion of a natural existence of the nuclear family, and disembody the notion of gays and lesbians as anti-family, unable to have children, and separate from institutions of heterosexuality. This reordering of dominant belief systems has been met with resistance by Christian fundamentalists, right-wing politicians, family values moralists, and those crusading for the recuperation of the traditional nuclear family. This resistance is not surprising, for the notion of the nuclear family has been instrumental in the promotion of a favoured version of social relations throughout history (Treichler, 1992, p. 84), and gay families challenge the limitations of this favoured definition.

2.1 The Family Constituted in the Age of HIV and AIDS

Kenneth Plummer has pointed out that "...the ideology of *the* ideal heterosexual family is not the same as the myriad of ways of living together that are an increasing feature of late modern societies...An idealized family may be just that: an idealization" (1992, p. 20). Yet this idealization continues to be perpetuated by media sources that exonerate spokespersons and institutions that function according to a set of outdated "heterocentric assumptions" (Rich, p. 180) about sexuality in the family. Hard-nosed conservatives like Dr. Laura Schlessinger are commonly featured on the covers of press sources like *US News & World Report*, promoting their mission to venerate the nuclear family, recuperate

heterosexual family values [what Schlessinger calls "restoring decency to a wayward world" (July 14, 1997, p. 48)] and reassert the moral plight of the homosexual in these times of family diversification.⁵⁰

The idea that the heterosexual "family is natural" (Plummer, 1981, p. 65), that the nuclear family is better than any other family form, and that homosexuality is incompatible with the family (Strommen, p. 9) permeate this literature. Articles like the one, "Heterosexual Families Are Best For Kids," by Dr. Laura Schlessinger (1997, p. D6), exemplify the use of a familialist discourse in the mainstream media that promotes a heterosexist politic on the family. As Simon Watney contends, media campaigners using traditional (and outdated) familialist ideologies are "obliged to fight a rearguard action in order to disavow the social and sexual diversity of a culture which can never be adequately pictured in the traditional guise of the family" (1988, p.59). In this context, it is not surprising that *US News & World Report* offers its own commentary in support of traditional norms on the family, referring to Schlessinger's views as a "brand of common sense" for callers to her national radio show and to readers of their popular magazine, "who often seem wholly unaware of *basic social rules* their *grandparents* took for granted" (Schrof, 1997, p. 51, my emphasis). Indeed, the print media are proving an effective tool in the recuperation of a "1950s dream of normalcy" (Patton, 1996, p. 18) in the wake of social change.

⁵⁰ The plight of the homosexual sends the message that "[homosexual] people do not have to make families and can live without them," and that "[homosexual] life can be led without children" (Plummer, 1981, p. 65). The moral plight of the homosexual also sends the message that lesbian and gay lifestyles *should not* involve children. Schlessinger categorizes the homosexual as different, deviant, and morally wrong, and heterosexuality as the norm, the right, and the morally good, separating gays and lesbians from the family unit.

Throughout history, issues of diversity and the readiness in our society to accept behaviours and values that transcend the boundaries of the dominant social order have been at issue. The exoneration of heterosexual nuclear family values are reminiscent of the anti-gay backlash of the 1970s, when conservative figures like Anita Bryant used the popular press to advocate her Save Our Children campaign against gays and lesbians,⁵¹ and more recently with religious fundamentalists like Jerry Falwell (Moral Majority, Inc.) and his right-wing media blitz against homosexuality. The heterosexual press have historically played a role in the network of social and political systems known to members of gay and lesbian communities as "anti-gay machinery," for the press is one system through which social roles associated with sexual identity and the family are continuously being defined and controlled (Gross, 1991, p. 26).

Rodger Streitmatter believes that "[t]he rise of slick, upscale [gay] magazines reflected a larger change in society's attitudes toward gay people" (1995, p. 311), but a closer look at the discourse generated by gay glossies like *Out* and *The Advocate* reveals the focus on advertising to gay, lesbian, and liberal heterosexual consumers, and an increased wave of conservatism that echoes the familialist discourse featured in the heterosexual press. The recent headway being forged by gay conservatives in North America in the 1990s is certainly apparent in the discourse on gay families in the mainstream gay press. A strong sense of longing for approval, acceptance, and assimilation underlies the imaging of gay families as a "reinvention" of the nuclear family prototype.⁵² Some of the commentary in the mainstream gay press has even gone so far as to decree that gay families mimic the traditional nuclear family: "...in general, queer

⁵¹ Anita Bryant's Save our Children campaign took place in Dade County, Florida, in 1977 (Gross, 1991, p. 29).

⁵² *Out* magazine refers to gay families as the "reinvention of the American nuclear family" (Gooch, 1996, p. 92).

families have followed the contours of the heterosexual model immortalized in the jump-rope rhyme: First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes baby in the baby carriage" (Miles, 1997, p. 103).

Fitting gay families into heterosexist practices of coupledness, monogamy, procreation, and the institution of the married heterosexual family is limited not only for gay families, but also for the multitude of non-nuclear family forms functioning in society today. A comment in *Out* magazine referring to single gay parents exemplifies the current paradigm shift back to traditional family values: "A few single parents sneak into the picture, as pitied and wondered about as they are in the straight world..." (Miles, 1997, p. 103). The mainstream gay press, like that of the heterosexual press, are using gay families to channel sexuality into "an institutionalized pattern of 'normal' heterosexual monogamy" (Marshall, p. 139). At the same time, these sources are also normalizing the family institution in general. Normalizing the family in this way reinforces outdated gender roles, methods of procreation, penetrative sex, and heterosexual notions of love (Plummer, 1992, p. 19), which ultimately reinforces the heterosexually-constituted family as the accepted social unit (Rich, p. 200). The exclusion of gayness from the married heterosexual family model nullifies the possibility -- and the reality -- of gay and lesbian sexuality that can be inherent in the family. A resistance to discussing gay parents raising children from previous heterosexual relationships not only ignores the changing composition of families, but excludes the fact that gay and lesbian sexuality has been a part of family life throughout history.

Similar to the moral discourse addressing the 'AIDS crisis' in the 1980s, solutions offered to the so-called 'crisis of the family' limit the family to institutions of monogamy and marriage. The notion of "sexually responsible adulthood (heterosexual, monogamous, married, procreative, white)" (Patton, 1996, p.43) in the 1980s suggested that "securing

one's heterosexuality [was and is] in itself a form of safe sex" (ibid., p.19). The association between gays and AIDS, and the disassociation of gayness from the family by organizations like The American Family Association⁵³ led to the belief that HIV/AIDS could not enter the cocoon of the nuclear family unit. This basic understanding of the nuclear family as a "prophylactic social device" (Mechar, p. 83) in the age of HIV/AIDS now informs the discourse on gay families in that moral delineations of sanitization, HIV-seronegativity, and good mental and physical standing are attributed to the heterosexualized gay family.

The process of heterosexualization may be one answer to why, if AIDS has indeed "invaded every dimension of gay life" (Streitmatter, 1995, p. 245), the disease and its social aspects have been ignored, and in some cases, poignantly disassociated from gay family life in mainstream reports. The June 1997 issue of *Out* magazine exemplifies the lifestyle discourse separating homosexuality and AIDS from the family:

The night Emma was born, I went to the hospital, and I met a friend who was admitting his friend with AIDS. *My life has become very different from theirs.* He pauses. 'I wouldn't necessarily recommend that other gay men do this...' (Miles, p. 102, my emphasis).

The message that gay families remain untouched by the life-threatening virus that has affected gay communities for over fifteen years sustains the stigmatization of AIDS as a gay-related ailment amongst single men, and homosexuality as not healthy; myths that support anti-gay constituencies like The American Family Association.

⁵³ The American Family Association sustains the stigmatization of AIDS as a gay-related ailment, and homosexuality as "not healthy" and "not natural" (in *Out*, on-line, Nov. 19, 1996).

A discussion of the effects of HIV on gay family life began to emerge in the late 1980s,⁵⁴ but was cut short in the 1990s. This disruption was instigated by a number of factors. First, the myth that AIDS is a single gay male disease, and that women do not contract AIDS, still circulates through the mainstream media. Reports that contextualized HIV in the late 1980s dealt with gay fathers, while reports in the 1990s have dealt primarily with lesbian mothers. Not only are gay fathers virtually invisible in current media reports, but gay fathers with HIV or AIDS remain non-existent. And the general disregard for women with HIV and AIDS (especially lesbians) has kept the lesbian mom with HIV or AIDS a non-issue.⁵⁵ Second, as discussed above, the lack of reference to HIV and AIDS in gay family discourse maintains the myth that (nuclear) family life is absolved of sexually-transmitted disease, and reinforces the importance of traditional social order in a time of crisis. Third, the risk of contracting HIV from sharing needles has not been discussed in this discourse on sexuality, sanitization and the family, even though HIV through needle-sharing is on the rise, in families as well as amongst singles.⁵⁶ Fourth, AIDS as a disease affecting hemophiliacs and their heterosexual families is seen as a problem that earmarked the 1980s, and that is now resolved.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ A December, 1987 issue of *The Advocate* entitled "Gay Dad: Alternative Ways You Can Become a Father" discussed HIV in the context of gay family life in the 1980s.

⁵⁵ Ironically, women now constitute the fastest growing segment of the population acquiring HIV antibodies. AIDS now ranks fourth among leading causes of death for women ages 25 to 44 (Tawa, 1994, p. J1). Many of these women are choosing to have children. See the cover story for the Nov./Dec. 1997 issue of *Positively Aware*, entitled "She's Having a Baby?: Why Women With HIV Consider Pregnancy," pp. 34-39.

⁵⁶ Reports in *The Globe and Mail* in 1998 feature discussion on the rise of HIV infection amongst IV drug users in Vancouver, B.C., but depict the infected as drug abusers, single, and without child and family responsibilities, again imaging the institution of the family as sanitized and safe from drugs and disease.

⁵⁷ The Krever Commission in Canada gave its closing remarks and apologies for the tainted blood scandal in late 1997 and media reports on hemophiliac AIDS have grown more and more scarce in the late 1990s. The battle underway in 1998 has shifted from AIDS to hepatitis C.

The discourse on AIDS makes it apparent that AIDS has tested the boundaries established for social and sexual relations in the family. HIV and AIDS in the gay family has complicated the definition of the family, and has indeed defied the moral determination of who 'gets' AIDS and under what set of circumstances. Gay men with HIV raising children, for example, have presented a whole new perspective on the family. AIDS, as Carol Levine sees it, "is a catalyst in efforts to expand the definitions of 'family' to reflect the reality of contemporary life" (1991, p. 51). And she further points out, "Those most affected by AIDS and HIV infection -- gay men, intravenous drug users and their sexual partners, largely from poor, minority communities -- are also those most likely to have nontraditional living or family arrangements" (ibid., p. 50).

2.2 HIV and AIDS in My Gay Family Life

The separation of AIDS and HIV infection from the family has certainly affected my life, as there are very few organizations to turn to for support, and even less general awareness and visibility of the issues surrounding AIDS in the family.⁵⁸ Moreover, those of us affected by HIV and AIDS in gay families have been condoned to living in a double closet. As Levine asserts, because gays "are generally (and often inaccurately) considered to be isolated from family life, the impact of AIDS on internal family functioning and mental health has not been fully appreciated" (ibid., p. 52).⁵⁹ Discourse on gay families is void of the complexities of pain, personal loss, suicide, hospice care, and other factors that members of gay families may have to consider in the context of HIV/AIDS. A new set of

⁵⁸ The Teresa Group in Toronto, Ontario is one exception. This organization helps parents, children and families cope with HIV/AIDS illness, stigmatization, discrimination, economic burdens, etc.

⁵⁹ This has been prudent in the popular press, for "[e]ditors who gave reasons for not covering the AIDS story [in the 1980s] most often stated that news about homosexuals would not interest the great majority of 'family newspaper' readers" (Kinsella, 1989, p. 2).

concerns about chronic medical care, drug therapies, caregiving and financial support accompany challenges to mental and physical well-being and changes in lifestyle not only for the person living with HIV, but for their family and friends as well.

I have been living with my father's HIV for over ten years now, and have undergone various stages of mental adaptation, coping, premature mourning and fear around his illness. And although very little discussion of HIV in gay families circulates in either mainstream or gay community circles, HIV and AIDS remain a part of my everyday life. Growing up in my household, for instance, I was not allowed to touch any of my father's belongings in the bathroom. And my father's lover at the time, who lived with us, had his own set of eating utensils, plates and cups designated for 'sick' days. My teenage years in the 1980s were filled with talk about death and the inevitability of death, with my father frequently uttering the words "When I'm gone...". Discussions over the will, crematorial procedures, and home nursing care, were regular topics around the house. Such contemplation over health care and my father's premature death is something that most teenagers are not trained nor are ready to do, but yet are forced to deal with in the case of HIV/AIDS. A piece of anonymous writing by a young person affected by HIV/AIDS has circulated amongst us children of lesbians and gays across North America, and resounds familiarity:

I was 14 when one of my dads, an AIDS researcher, died of AIDS...In Montreal I held a watch in my hand and screamed, "time has run out". In Vancouver, Desiree held a crematorial urn. My other dad was too sick to be at the conference, I'm glad Desiree's dad was there with her.⁶⁰

The effects of AIDS on sons and daughters of infected parents is slowly being recognized by a small body of AIDS cultural critics in North America and abroad. Douglas

⁶⁰ From personal correspondence with Stefan Lynch, former Director of COLAGE (Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere).

Crimp, for example, in his analysis of the photoimaging of PWAs in the 1980s, talks about a young woman standing

outside a MOMA photographic exhibition that includes pictures of 'AIDS victims'...hold[ing] a snapshot of a smiling middle-aged man. The caption reads, 'This is a picture of my father taken when he'd been living with AIDS for three years' (1992, p. 118).

And Alexis Danzig has written about the effects of AIDS on her family life prior to and following the death of her gay father (1989, p. 5). My close friend and former Director of COLAGE (Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere), Stefan Lynch, is writing a resource book for the daughters and sons of lesbians and gay men that includes a chapter on AIDS.⁶¹ His father died of AIDS-related causes when Stefan was nineteen years old. In reference to growing up with his father's illness, Lynch writes,

My own dad didn't tell me for several months after he tested HIV-positive. The fact that he didn't feel comfortable telling me was more hurtful than that he was HIV-positive (I myself, as well as him, had assumed he was positive even before the test, since so many of his ex-lovers and friends were dying.)...when he woke up one morning and started talking about coffins at the front door and babbling about things I didn't understand I knew something had happened to his mind overnight...One time that week he stared at me with a smile on his face, like he should know who I was but just couldn't place me. He died, thank goodness, exactly a week later.⁶²

The mid-to-late 1980s was a time when gay men were dying of AIDS-related causes at drastic rates, and communities were vaguely aware of viral transmission or how to stop its spread. Experience with quick death was common to those in my household, as in the case of our friend Brian, who came over for a haircut one evening (my father was a hair stylist in the eighties) and two weeks later he was dead: something about a gay cancer.

⁶¹ Sections in this chapter will tentatively include, "Ourselves and AIDS," "When Our Father Is HIV-Positive," "When Our Fathers Have AIDS," and "When Our Fathers Die Of AIDS".

⁶² Excerpts from the draft copy, with permission, of *A Resource Book for the Daughters of Lesbians and Gay Men* by Stefan Lynch. As of July, 1998, his working title is *Queerspawn*.

And even after I went away to university in the early 1990s, AIDS continued to devastate Toronto's gay communities. What had changed, though, was the attitude towards this devastation, as gays, lesbians, and families grew tired, strained, and banal towards the topic of illness and death. Upon returning to Toronto for summer break one year I asked about Richard, my father's ex-lover. Rather nonchalantly – as if ad nauseam -- my father answered, "Oh, he's gone. He got sick".

In the 1990s, our checklist of deceased friends continues to grow, and talk about 'getting sick' and the emotional confusion around illness and AIDS still hits close to home for those of us in gay families. I sat in a lecture hall at Concordia University in the winter of 1997 listening to a speaker discuss the general symptoms for a male person with full blown AIDS. For the dictates of my research these observations made sense. As I visually skimmed the overhead that listed the symptoms, my eyes stuck on the word "shingles". My father had already experienced shingles three times. Yet this didn't mean that my dad had full blown AIDS, or that he would die sooner rather than later...Or did it? My father is considered one of the 'lucky' individuals, since he is part of a minority of HIV-positive individuals who can maintain the harsh regimen of drug therapies currently on the market. On the other hand, the side effects from these drugs can hinder one's quality of life, including the ability to work, and I wait in angst for the drugs to build up resistance to his HIV virus before they eat away at my father's vital organs. And as scientific research now indicates, over time, the effectiveness of these drugs wears off.

For those who can stomach the triple drug therapies, they are the current source of hope for families dealing with HIV-related illness. The various illnesses that accompany HIV (including side effects from drugs) are compounded by the increasing complexity of stigmatization and discrimination against people with AIDS. The general lack of awareness and non-understanding about the effects of HIV and AIDS can indeed manifest

discrimination against HIV-positive parents and their children. Personal stories, literature, and critical commentary on the effects of HIV/AIDS discrimination on kids of gay parents and members of gay families, although limited in circulation, indicate the ongoing stigmatization and the general lack of resources available for children whose parents are HIV-positive or who have AIDS. As Stefan Lynch recalls, "When I told my friends about my dad, several of them wouldn't speak to me anymore, and some of my teachers didn't react much better. The only thing my guidance counsellor did was to clip articles about miracle cures for AIDS in the newspapers and give them to me now and then".⁶³ Groups like The Teresa Group in Toronto, and COLAGE⁶⁴ in San Francisco, are two of a very small number of organizations in all of North America that address the needs of kids and teenagers whose parents are gay and HIV-positive.

2.3 Gay Family Discrimination

Many Americans are still very uncomfortable with the idea of gay parents -- either because of religious objections, genuine concern for the welfare of the children or bias against homosexuals in general.⁶⁵

The history of discrimination against gay families stems from heterosexist attitudes that treat homosexuals as deviants, gay mothers and fathers as non-existent, and gay families as enigmatic. These attitudes are invariably fostered by outdated legal definitions of the family, and religious and moral beliefs, which inform institutions of social policy,

⁶³ From a draft of *A Resource Book for the Daughters and Sons of Lesbians and Gay Men*, Chapter X: AIDS.

⁶⁴ AIDS and HIV remain important topics in the COLAGE newsletter, *Just for Us*, geared towards kids and young adults with gay parents. The winter 1996-97 issue, for example, included a story entitled "My Dad," written by seven-year-old Breana Dickson, that chronicled the process of illness that her father and her family endured, that resulted in his AIDS-related death when she was five years old.

⁶⁵ *Newsweek* 4 Nov. 1996: 52.

and affect family constitution, adoption laws, etc. The Salvation Army, for example, continues to be "vitaly concerned with strengthening [a limited definition of] family life" and believes that "[B]oth male and female homosexual behavior, promoted and accepted as an alternative life-style, present a serious threat to the integrity, quality and solidarity of society as a whole."⁶⁶ And figures like Anita Bryant in the 1970s, who depended greatly on the mainstream media for her Save Our Children campaign, influenced US state laws that banned adoption by gays and lesbians. The repercussions of this discrimination continued to be seen in the 1980s in cases where the term 'practicing homosexual' was used against gay foster parents.⁶⁷ It is not surprising that it is through the family institution that this discrimination has been occurring, for the family institution is a very powerful instrument for the maintenance of a status quo. Gay-related discrimination that members of gay families deal with regularly in our lives, whether on the street, in the courts, through the press, or in more indirect and subtle ways, reveals the inadequacy of legal and social systems in responding to the needs of gays and lesbians, and of gay families in particular (Levine, 1991, p. 54).

Systematic forces behind the longstanding disembodiment of gays and lesbians from family life include standard media representations, legal restraints on the family constitution, and social and religious bias. This disembodiment, I will add, is perpetuated by a combination of anti-gay attitudes that circulate in heterosexual mainstream cultures, and anti-family attitudes still circulating within gay communities. Assumptions that separate gays from the family can be detected in advertising targeted to gays and lesbians in commercial magazines like *The Advocate* and *Out*, whereby gay consumers are addressed as childless and single, with large amounts of disposable income. While this may be true

⁶⁶ From The Salvation Army - Positional Statement published in *Xtra!* 25 Jan. 1991: 5.

⁶⁷ This case occurred in New Hampshire in 1985 (Vardatira, 1985 and 1985a).

in some cases, this target marketing does not acknowledge the number of gays and lesbians who have familial relationships with children, who are gay parents, or the many heterosexual consumers without children. These assumptions also do not consider the shifting demographics of the family, the history of gay parents in heterosexual family relationships, and the complexity of coming out as a gay parent, and in many cases, coming out of a double closet when this involves HIV or AIDS.⁶⁸

This lack of AIDS contextualization is especially ironic in the context of the mainstream gay magazines, for as Levine points out, the increased visibility of gay and lesbian custody cases in the mainstream gay and even heterosexual press instigated more gay parents – and more HIV-positive parents – to emerge from failed marriages, heterosexual relationships and same-sex unions, seeking custody of their kids (Levine, 1991, p.62). Since HIV and AIDS intensified these processes of change already underway (ibid., p. 46), the mention of the virus would indeed complicate the discourse on gay families and add another level of stigmatization to the already existing gay family enigma.

Where gay sexuality *and* AIDS have been associated with the family, particular social responses have been set into motion; responses which have either disassociated AIDS from gay families, or responses which have used HIV and AIDS to legally discriminate against gay families for over fifteen years. As Simon Watney made clear in the 1980s, AIDS is "effectively being used as a pretext throughout the West to 'justify' calls for increasing legislation of those who are considered to be socially unacceptable" (1987, p. 3). The rights of gay parents continue to be undermined in court battles over child custody because of their sexual orientation. The case of Sharon Bottoms, a lesbian mom in

⁶⁸ As stated in *Beehive*, the Toronto People with AIDS Foundation newsletter, "For many, marginalization as a result of HIV infection simply adds to the marginalization they already face in other contexts" ("The End of AIDS?," 1997, p. 1).

Virginia, is a good example.⁶⁹ The rights of gay men in particular have been undermined in court custody battles when their sexual orientation and AIDS have been used against them. In some custody cases, mainly in the United States but also in Canada, the court has demanded that gay fathers be tested for HIV before stating a verdict. This discrimination affects not only the gay father, but also their children. Dennis Altman has described a case where a mother refused contact with the kids, as they lived with their father, who was HIV-positive (1986, p.60).

This correlation between AIDS and gay family discrimination in the legal system throughout the 1980s was an important catalyst in the mobilization of a family diversity movement. As a result of legal discrimination, gay families were catapulted into the gay rights movement in the 1990s, and have become a driving force alongside issues of gay marriage and gays in the military. How judges implicate HIV status in making custody decisions charges the debate over gay family rights. Not only has HIV/AIDS strained the definition of the family, but the highly politicized nature of the disease has intensified the debate around who is and who is not considered a member of the family institution.

Issues around AIDS and gay families have broadened the debate to include same-sex spousal benefits for health and medical care, family allowances, caregiver support, inheritance, adoption, and other rights accorded heterosexuals and legally-recognized family members. Of course, as traditionally powerful institutions like the family are challenged and re-ordered by gays and lesbians, negative social responses will continue to occur. These negative responses may also inform the visibility of gay families, and shift the lines of social, political, and economic power to include gays and lesbians in these

⁶⁹ See the November 26, 1996 issue of *The Advocate*.

institutions. But is gay family visibility in the framework of a sanitized heterosexual family model the most effective way to achieve equal rights status in North American society?

2.4 Gay Rights

As the discourse on gay families conveys, the nuclear family remains dominant and central to the gay rights movement. Nikki Gershbain contends that, "Whether it's adoption rights or spousal benefits, the sub-text is the nuclear family" (1997, p. 27). The use of the nuclear family to define the normal order of familial relationships does not account for gay and lesbian relationships, and as a result, reinforces the invisibility of gays in the family. The mainstream visibility of gays and lesbians is a contested area of debate, for the compromises involved in gaining this visibility, some critics argue, undermine gay rights. The visibility of gay families, for instance, has increased in the 1990s following press coverage of high profile custody court battles and rock stars having babies.⁷⁰ But this visibility is occurring at the expense of gay culture, for gay families are being used to recuperate the nuclear family and the moral values that accompany this most powerful of heterosexist institutions.⁷¹ This discourse simply extends heterosexually-legitimated morals and values to gays and lesbians, without accounting for cultural variations, sensibilities and differences. For example, would a non-monogamous gay father be made invisible in the mainstream? Would he be considered an unfit parent? Would he have his

⁷⁰ One example of a high profile custody case is that involving lesbian mom, Amanda Bearse, featured in *The Advocate* 4 Feb. 1997, and the reference to a rock star having a baby in a same-sex relationship is Melissa Ethridge, featured on the cover of *Newsweek* 4 Nov. 1996.

⁷¹ Some examples of this discourse include, "The big discoveries about parenting or adoption tend to be pretty much the same for gay men as for straight couples," and "[our family lifestyle is] very heterosexually oriented..." (Gooch, 1996, pp. 118, 120).

children taken away by the courts? The answer in most American states and Canadian provinces would still be yes.⁷²

As gay families are labeled a new, emerging cultural phenomenon in 'the gay nineties,' the long history of gay family life remains invisible. The sexually promiscuous gay father, for example, has always been invisible in the mainstream press. Leo Bersani has referred to gays and lesbians as the "[i]nvisibly visible" of mainstream culture (1995, p. 32). And what remains invisible in mainstream networks is as important – if not more so – than what is being seen. What is not being seen in the context of gay family life is gayness, faggots, dykes, gay agency and identity, self-representation, freedom of expression, HIV/AIDS issues, gay communities, the radical side of the gay rights movement, and the power of gay families in heading constitutional change. In the late 1990s, gay families are at the same time "everywhere": in domestic bliss on the covers of major news magazines,⁷³ and "unlocatabl[e]": in AIDS hospices, and in households across North America where families are dealing with the realities of living with HIV-positive family members (ibid.).

The mainstream press have been major vehicles in the perpetuation of a heterosexualized visibility. The fact that the mainstream gay media are also advocates of this compromised visibility has repercussions on the advancements of the gay rights movement as a whole. Magazines like *The Advocate* and *Out* that are reducing gay family visibility to a conservative redefinition of the nuclear family seem more concerned with showcasing gay conservatism and assimilation into mainstream culture than vying for gay

⁷² A ruling in Virginia to deny Sharon Bottoms, a lesbian mother, custody of her biological child was made on the basis of her sexual orientation. Simply identifying as a lesbian, according to the courts, makes her an unfit parent (Bull, 1993, p. 24). In 1998, Bottoms is still being denied custody of her son, Tyler.

⁷³ For example, *Newsweek* 4 Nov. 1996.

and lesbian rights and powerful community voices. This promotion of gay assimilation more closely resembles acculturation, a process whereby "a minority accepts and takes on the values, language, and societal norms of the dominant group" (Blumenfeld and Raymond, 1988, p. 40). Taking the direction of acculturation in discourse has major implications on the gay rights movement. As Streitmatter contends, "By becoming mainstream in their editorial content, design, and advertising, the gay glossies slipped away from the most fundamental purpose of a movement press: securing equal rights for their readers" (1995, p. 337).

Conforming to the rule that "society is willing to give a gay man[/woman] equal opportunity if he[/she] makes his[/her] gayness invisible" (Bersani, 1995, p. 67), mainstream gay discourse on families shows the deep heterosexism that is embedded in media institutions, both straight and gay. Statutes on gay families, such as adoption laws, are not far off from anti-gay ordinances like the 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' in United States military policy,⁷⁴ that prohibits gayness within the institution, and renders gay sexual orientation invisible.

Therefore, while gay parents are demanding parental, custodial, and visitation rights, and gay families are a part of the gay rights movement unlike ever before, the increased visibility of gay families does not necessarily translate into gay rights. Conversely, visibility can be understood to be a "precondition" of the surveillance, disciplinary intervention, and social control of minorities (Bersani, 1995, p. 11). The seizure of children from gay parents in court battles in the United States and Canada also attests to this control; otherwise, sexuality would not be considered an issue in court

⁷⁴ In Canada, for instance, these institutional biases are translated into policy, and these policies are communicated through press headlines such as, "Keep Ban On Gays, Military Urged" (*The Globe and Mail* 26 Feb. 1996: A14).

custody battles involving gay parents. Sexuality isn't an issue when the battle involves heterosexual parents. Information that is being edited out and not discussed in mainstream reports attests to the control of discourse. Religious institutions as well are not shy in pointing out their desire to control gay and lesbian lifestyles that deviate from the status quo. The Salvation Army, for instance, outwardly contends that "Homosexual behavior, like any deviant behavior, is capable of control. Not all homosexuals are incapable of normal heterosexual relationships. Some homosexuals achieve a happy heterosexual marriage".⁷⁵

By containing the rights of the family in a culture of heterosexism -- what Kenneth Plummer sees as a *straightjacket* (1981, p. 56) -- the marginalization and social control of gays and lesbians is also preserved. Gay marriage, for instance, remains illegal in Canadian provinces and American states except for Hawaii; family benefit allowances still do not fully recognize gay families; adoption by gay men and lesbians is still difficult, and the only hope for adoption is to apply as a single parent whose sexuality remains unstated. Foster children continue to be pulled from gay and lesbian guardians, and visitation and custody battles over biological children continue to feature gay sexual orientation as the basis for decision.

These institutional ordinances view gay family life from a heterosexist perspective, which irrevocably undermines gay rights. Buying into this heterosexism contains rather than opens up the grounds for equal status, overlooks partnerships in gay and lesbian relationships, and has caused internal friction within gay communities for over twenty years. Moreover, heterosexist discourse continues to be a catalyst for gay community activism, and has propelled the creation of gay and gay-positive networks that work

⁷⁵ From The Salvation Army - Positional Statement published in *Xtra!* 25 Jan. 1991: 5.

towards minority rights. The gay community press, for instance, has been an important activist vehicle in responding to the systematic heterosexism that has affected gay families for over twenty years.

Chapter Three

Gays, AIDS and the Family: The Gay Community Response

The rich history of gay community newsmaking across North America includes discourse on the family that dates as far back as the inception of *The Body Politic* (Toronto, Canada), in 1971. Discussions of gay families circulated in the United States as well, through community sources like *Gay Community News* in Boston, which began its publication in 1973. As these early sources indicate through topics of parenting, custody battle, discrimination, and the right to care for child(ren) as the partner of a gay parent, gay families in their various forms have existed for decades. Articles that have discussed the relationship between gays and lesbians, children, and notions of the family, since the 1970s, make the accuracy of *Newsweek's* claim that "[o]nly a few [kids of gays] have reached school age" (1996, p. 53) highly questionable. The increased visibility of gay families that included children in the 1970s and 1980s was often a result of gay parents who publicized their court cases and the discrimination they experienced within the judicial systems.

As discourse from the 1970s makes clear, the creation of families by gays and lesbians is not a newly emerging cultural phenomenon.⁷⁶ Rather, it is the *visibility* of gay families, gay parents, and kids of gays and lesbians in mainstream media that is a growing phenomenon. It is my intention, in this last chapter, to focus on community discourse on the family from the 1970s through to the 1990s. The strong voices of gay parents that were heard in the early 1970s carved out a niche for gay families, and paved the way in the

⁷⁶ What is also more recent is the ability to procreate in ways alternate to male-female intercourse (artificial insemination, surrogate motherhood, etc.). Reportage in the mainstream heterosexual press tends to focus on these forms of family-making rather than on male-female couples with children who have forged same-sex unions following separation or divorce.

fight to end discrimination against gay parents and their children in both mainstream heterosexual cultures and within gay communities as well. Parents often used print media as an outlet to voice reaction against the hostility towards gays and lesbians in heterosexual society and towards gay parents and their kids in gay communities. *The Body Politic* article, "lesbian mother" (Jeanne, 1974, p. 21), for example, was followed by a number of articles on parenting, most of which mixed feminist thought with gay rights activism in the context of women having babies.⁷⁷

The article that I will focus the most attention on in Part One of this chapter is Michael Lynch's cover story, "Faggots as Fathers," and his inside report entitled, "Forgotten Fathers: Gay Men With Children May Be More Common -- and More Important To All of Us -- Than Anyone Has Yet Guessed," (1978, pp. 1, 10-12). This article reinforced many feminist principles, but unlike previous reports, it dealt exclusively with gay fathers. "Faggots as Fathers" acknowledged the existence of gay families, and addressed the internal discrimination against gay parents that persisted within gay communities. It was in this eminent cover story that Lynch bucked the dominant anti-family trend in gay communities in the 1970s and led the way to a redefinition of gay male culture to include children and domestic life as an integral part of the gay rights movement. It is also in this article that he demanded recognition for gay fathers in both mainstream heterosexual and gay communities.

⁷⁷ Both in Canada and the United States, there was a strong connection between the feminist and gay movements in the gay community press. Family rights was especially strong in *Gay Community News* in the 1980s, in which the argument surfaced, "Our families do not and will not qualify for approval in a society without reproductive freedom" (24 May 1986: 12). In *Gay Community News* a connection was formed between "'our [women's] right to choose whether to bear children' and 'our [women's] right to choose in what sort of homes we will raise them'" (8 Feb. 1986: 1).

3.1 The 1970s: The Faggot Father in an Anti-Family Era

The out-of-the closet gay father is looked upon by heterosexuals and even by gays as a slightly ridiculous, bizarre creature. He doesn't fit any current conventional pattern of behaviour [in both heterosexual and gay cultures] and in that sense is considered weird and unacceptable [in both heterosexual and gay cultures]. Many gays, particularly in the gay movement, regard parenthood as a retrograde step. The out gay father is seen as someone who has not quite rejected or escaped the family'.⁷⁸

Michael Lynch's writing in *The Body Politic* addressed his feelings of ostracism and isolation that accompanied his status as a father in Toronto's gay community.

"Faggots As Fathers" contextualized the plight of gay fathers in a society that pits the party-goer (faggot) against the family breadwinner (father), with little option for anything in-between. The sexual lifestyle dichotomy in place in the 1970s meant that gay parents with children did not fit into and were not accepted by either mainstream heterosexual culture (being gay) or minority gay culture (being a parent). He cites Brian Miller, a sociologist studying gay fathers:

'Every [gay] father I've talked with experiences a gap between his life as a father and his life as a gay man. As a parent he is part of his children and they of him: as a gay man he finds that the available social structures discourage the presence of children -- or exclude them flatly' (1978, p. 1).

Michael Lynch responded to this void felt by many gay fathers within the Toronto gay community by directly targeting the invisibility of gay fathers and these anti-family attitudes in his writing.⁷⁹ In asking, "When was the last time you read about gay fathers in the press, straight or otherwise?," and, "Why, if they are so many, are they so invisible?" (ibid.), this article exposed the power play at work that subordinated gay parents in their own communities, and forced them into what Lynch referred to in this article as a "double

⁷⁸ Maurice, a gay dad, quoted in Michael Lynch's, "Faggots As Fathers," *The Body Politic* April 1978: 1.

⁷⁹ "Gay men may no longer be invisible, but gay fathers remain so." (Lynch, 1978, p. 11).

closet" (ibid., p. 12). He criticized his own community for adhering to the limited representations of gay men in the media (both straight and gay) and for shunning gay fathers in particular (Lynch states that in his experience he had only one offer to babysit from any gay man).

The advertisements in *The Body Politic* and other gay community newspapers are a prime example of the lack of address to gay men with children at this time. Advertisements often took the form of sex ads, personals, and the promotion of bath houses that were geared towards a late-night singles crowd. The topics of children and family were considered to be unsexy, unliberating and restricting at this time; definitely not a selling feature in advertising to gay men.

In the 1970s, being a gay parent had major political implications attached to it, for the presence of parenting was understood within gay communities to counter sexual liberation and the gay rights movement. At times, anti-family attitudes forced gay men and women with children to ally themselves with heterosexual parents. Michael Lynch was instrumental in the changing of these views, fighting for a place within the gay community because he did not want to turn to heterosexual culture for support. Instead, he wrote about his life as a gay father in his gay community and what that meant for him, offering alternative models of family that celebrated gay cultural sensibilities, inclusion, and gay pride. He created a relationship between gay sexuality and the family that paved the way to a perspective on gay male life that included children alongside trips to Fire Island, disco dancing, cruising, and park sex.

Lynch's melding of fatherhood with gay sensibilities in "Faggots As Fathers," and his union of the two identities, gay and father, was revolutionary, as it countered internalized anti-family, anti-parenting attitudes that predominated the gay (male)

communities at this time. This is one reason why Michael Lynch's discourse on gay fathers in *The Body Politic* was an activist endeavour. Another reason may have been his contextualization of gay family rights with gay fathers and feminist discourse on gender and patriarchy. The core of opposition to gay fathers, Lynch believed, was a sexist core: one that prohibits any transcendence of the boundaries constituting maleness and fatherhood in the traditional family:⁸⁰

Fathers in general, and faggot fathers in particular, suffer from an assumption, an ideology, that separates men and maleness from the nurturing of children, except to pass on patriarchal traditions of 'cultural sexism': authority, emotional distance, toughness, competition (1978, p. 11).

As one of the founding editors of *The Body Politic*, Michael Lynch contributed to its activist mandate by addressing issues of family, parenting, and gay rights. He was one of the more prominent voices heard in the Toronto gay community at a time when gay men were viewed as perverts, pedophiles, and a potential threat to children. Following "Faggots as Fathers" (April 1978), *The Body Politic* moved into a branch of activist writing that covered both gay family issues and concerns voiced by hard-nosed insurgents against heterosexual culture who rejected the family in any shape or form. These anti-family articles constituted the bulk of discourse in *The Body Politic* throughout the 1970s. The writing was counter-cultural, activist, and liberationist, and established gay (mostly male) culture in opposition to dominant heterosexual traditions. Similarly, the grassroots newspaper, *Gay Community News*, in Boston, used a "counter-discourse" (Dyer, 1991, p. 187) to address anti-gay, homophobic and heterosexist sentiment in mainstream America at this time.

⁸⁰ Most of the discourse on gay families (what there was of it) during the 1970s dealt with lesbian moms who gained custody of their child(ren) after the break-up of a heterosexual union. This still poses a problem in the 1990s, and will be discussed further in Part Three of this chapter.

Indeed, the 1970s saw a body of alternative media channels emerge in response to the discrimination against gays and lesbians in their own communities and in wider society. Gay community newspapers became popular tools of resistance, lending voice and agency to an otherwise oppressed and despised minority. These media acted as vehicles for the dissemination of "lesbian/gay discourse from a lesbian/gay position" (Dyer, 1991, p. 191), and helped develop a language of opposition that was both proactive and reactive to inaccurate representations, discrimination, and gay rights issues.

Gay community press sources were also responding to the upsurge in religious right-wing lobbies and their anti-gay media campaigns in the 1970s. Campaigners such as Anita Bryant posed a threat not only to parents, but to gays and lesbians in general, by forging alliances with authorities from the fields of medicine, law, and government agencies.⁸¹ The alliance of the American Family Association with right-wing members of the medical establishment (Altman, 1986, p. 67) is another example of a merger that targeted gays and lesbians. This time, gays and lesbians were the catalysts in efforts to recuperate the crumbling nuclear family. For these groups, the answer to changing demographics of the family was to demonize gays through a discourse on moral values, to intensify messages of hatred -- such as the pedophilia myth -- circulating across North America, and to separate them from the notion of family and other heterosexual domains.

⁸¹ The repercussions from these alliances caused many problems for gay men and women in years to come. The United States organization, the American Family Association, sought support for a petition to the Surgeon General, Dr. Everett Koop:

"Dear Family Member:

Since AIDS is transmitted primarily by perverse homosexuals your name on my petition to quarantine all homosexual establishments is crucial to your family's health and security...If you want your family's health and security protected, these AIDS-carrying homosexuals must be quarantined immediately...These disease-carrying deviants wander the streets unconcerned, possibly making you their next victim. What else can you expect from sex-crazed degenerates but selfishness?" (in Altman, 1986, 67).

As these anti-gay lobbies reinforced derogatory labels and widened the gap between gay culture and heterosexual lifestyle, many gay men responded by veering away from interaction with children. Gay culture soon became a culture that rejected children and other dependents, as activists in the gay and lesbian rights movement advocated for gay social freedom through a culture of sexual liberation and increased individualism. While growing up in Toronto's gay communities, I became quite familiar with the verbal rejections of anything related to or involving children, and the 'what are you doing here?' attitude that was sometimes directed at my brother and I when out in public with my father.

Much of the discourse in *The Body Politic* reflected this sharp turn away from powerful heterosexual institutions of marriage, family, parenting, children and domestic life. The writing in the community press and the derogatory attitudes that circulated -- terms such as "breeders" became commonplace ways to slander heterosexuals and heterosexual culture -- led many gay men and lesbians to simply accept the idea that they would never have children.⁸² Michael Lynch's work was certainly the exception. And as he pointed out, these internalized ideas kept images of gays and lesbians limited, and images of gay parents and families invisible. In Richard Dyer's discussion of self-representation he also analyzes the idea of internalizing one's own myth in the quest for identity (1991, p.191), and contends that

Lesbian/gay culture has always had for the sake of political clarity to include assertions of clear images of lesbian/gay identity, but it has also carried an awareness of the way that a shared and necessary public identity outstrips the particularity and messiness of actual lesbian/gay lives. We have felt a need to authorize our own images, to speak for ourselves, even while we have known that those images don't quite get what any of us is or what all of us are" (ibid., p. 200).

The fight for gay liberation through a self-defined visibility has at times reduced gay culture to a sexual lifestyle, leaving out the domestic realm and the family almost

⁸² Many gay men and women that I have spoken with learned to simply block out the option of parenthood in correlation with their coming out.

completely. As Dennis Altman has pointed out in the context of the gay rights movement, "...gay leaders may draw too much from their own partial (meaning less than full) knowledge of their own community and thereby miss the variety and diversity which exists *among* gay men..." (1993a, p.5). The rejection of traditional institutions simply reinforced the separation of gays from the family that the religious right-wing had been advocating. The attack on the family left gays and lesbians out of the largest and most powerful of institutions, and reinforced notions that gay men are unfit in the family realm, unsafe around children, do not want families, etc. This strong anti-family stance had an adverse effect on the gay rights movement, and caused internal opposition to the deliberate privileging of certain gays and lesbians over others; actions and attitudes that further isolated gays and lesbians who were raising children in the community.

The emergence of disease among young gay men in the early 1980s spawned a re-evaluation of attitudes within gay communities. The rapid speed at which gay men were dying, and the urgency around the disease, changed the landscape of gay culture as it was known in the 1970s. As quick, multiple deaths depleted gay communities, gay men in particular were re-evaluating the meaning of sex, life, community, family and children. The sense of urgency around AIDS and the effects of AIDS/gay stigmatization also created a stronger sense of community and a stronger, more dependent bond between gay men and lesbians. It was often the case in the 1980s that lesbians took care of their dying gay male friends who were estranged from or rejected by their biological families. Lesbian, bisexual, and straight women also often constituted the backbone and longevity of the AIDS activist movement, and organizations like ACT UP (AIDS Coalition To Unleash

Power)⁸³ were driven largely by the strength and perseverance of women's communities.⁸⁴

At the same time, anti-gay organizations were using AIDS to reinforce the separation of gay men from women, children, and the family. Using AIDS as 'evidence' that homosexuality was a sin, right-wing religious groups renewed their campaigns against homosexuality by invoking punitive measures, calling for quarantine, and in one case, a minister from the Pro-Family Christian Coalition suggested "...we should do what the Bible says and cut their throats" (in Altman, 1986, p. 68). As these ideas filtered into institutions of politics, government, science, and medicine, and the AIDS epidemic⁸⁵ began to be used as a way to condemn gay lifestyles⁸⁶ and slow the process of treatment, AIDS took on a highly political dimension in the context of gay rights:

As the spread of AIDS became linked in the public imagination to the very presence of homosexuals -- including lesbians -- the gay visibility and affirmation of the past decade allowed for some very nasty scapegoating. AIDS came along just when the old religious, moral and cultural arguments against homosexuality seemed to be collapsing. The 1970s saw a whole series of shifts in the dominant ideology concerning sexuality, making the status of homosexuality increasingly problematic... (Altman, 1986, p.13).

⁸³ See The ACT UP/NY Women & AIDS Book Group. *Women, AIDS & Activism*. Toronto: Between the Lines, 1990, for an in-depth retrospective of women's contribution to the AIDS movement.

⁸⁴ This has led to many debates on women's constant contribution to a male-centric world, and the less than adequate contribution made by gay men, for example, to the fight against breast cancer. As Dennis Altman has pointed out, "AIDS is said both to have increased a sense of community between gay men and lesbians and to have sharpened the divisions" (1986, p.94).

⁸⁵ See Chapter One, Part One, page 22, in reference to the use of the term 'epidemic'.

⁸⁶ Simon Watney quotes Scottish Health Minister, John MacKay, as saying, "we are going to spend a lot of money on a disease which could easily be prevented by people changing their lifestyles...I think this is a straightforward moral issue." (1987, p. 48).

3.2 The 1980s: Lesbian Mommies and AIDS Daddies on Trial

As discussed briefly in Chapter Two in the context of the mainstream heterosexual and gay press, one of the ramifications of this equation made between sexuality and disease was the increased discrimination that gay fathers and lesbian mothers faced in the court and legal systems.⁸⁷ This discrimination directly affected the rights of all gays and lesbians, in fact, for the outcome of court battles involving gay parents set precedences for same-sex couples vying for family status, couples waiting to collect spousal benefits, and those wishing to adopt. A report in *Xtra!* quotes the Canadian Council for Treasury Board in the legal debate over the definition of family, which excludes gay men entirely on the assumption that they will never parent:

'family in our day-to-day life and in the context of the collective agreement implies certain traditional values and one common denominator seems to be children...There is no need to argue that there will be no children in the type of relationship between Mr Mossop and his lover'.⁸⁸

According to this definition of family, many heterosexual couples would be excluded as well. However, where AIDS became a factor (willingly or unwillingly), the discrimination against gay men and women intensified. Gay fathers in particular were forced to deal with discrimination and stigmatization in their lives, for throughout the 1980s, AIDS was invoked as a reason to deny custodial rights to gay fathers in several American courts.⁸⁹ It was the advent of this legal bias in the mid-1980s that positioned gay

⁸⁷ Discrimination based on sexual identity was at its worst in the case of Mary Ward and the Florida court system in 1995. A judge took away Ward's custody of her daughter because she was a lesbian and granted custody to her ex-husband, who was a convicted murderer. Ward died of a heart attack on January 21, 1997 ("Sudden Death," 1997, p. 13).

⁸⁸ From the article, "Victory For Equal Rights," *Xtra!* 28 April 1989: 7.

⁸⁹ Source: Francis Flaherty, "A Legal Emergency Brewing over AIDS," *National Law Journal* 9 July 1984.

parents and families as important components in the gay/AIDS movement. And it was the gay community press that indicated early on in the AIDS pandemic that AIDS was being used against gay families and gays and lesbians in general, especially in areas involving children.⁹⁰

Unlike mainstream sources, the community press was making efforts to include gay family issues in the discourse on rights. Reports in *Gay Community News* pointed to the anti-gay bias in the American judicial system, and the way in which AIDS was conveniently used to foster and legitimize homophobia.⁹¹ Opposition to several gay rights bills was justified in the courts through a correlation drawn between AIDS, gay sexuality, the breakdown of the traditional family, and the dissolution of America's moral fibre. *Gay Community News* followed a Chicago-based custody case that involved the acquisition of a mandatory HTLV-III test for a gay father seeking child custody.⁹² According to one report, "His ex-wife, Susan Doe, asked Judge Richard Jorzak to require Doe to first take an HTLV-III antibody test, claiming her children could contract AIDS from their father *because he is gay*" (Phibbs, 1986, p. 1, my emphasis). Although the verdict in this case made for positive headlines,⁹³ Attorney Benjamin Schatz of National Gay Rights

⁹⁰ AIDS was invoked as a reason to fire gay men working in fields of child care (Altman, 1986, p. 61). And former speechwriter for Pres. Nixon later hired to work for Reagan, Patrick "Buchanan [in a *NY Post* column] invoked hepatitis and parasites as well as AIDS to argue that gays should be banned from food handling, donating blood and child care" (Altman, 1986, p.59).

⁹¹ Guilfooy, Christine. "Mass. House Crushes Gay Rights Bill, 88-65," *Gay Community News* 5 Oct. 1985: 1, 3+; and Kiely, Jim. "U.S. Memo Claims AIDSphobia Is Not Illegal," *Gay Community News* 29 June - 5 July 1986: 1, 3.

⁹² Phibbs, Anne. "Mandatory HTLV-3 Test for Gay Father Overturned," *Gay Community News* 29 June - 5 July 1986: 1, and Burks, William. "Chicago Bid to Force HIV Test of Gay Father Nixed," 5-11 Oct. 1986: 1.

⁹³ Burks, William. "Chicago Bid to Force HIV Test of Gay Father Nixed," *Gay Community News* 5-11 Oct. 1986: 1.

Advocates reinforced the fact that "'AIDS is still an issue in the case'" (in Burks, 1986, p.1).

AIDS discrimination against gay fathers was also occurring in Canada, where agendas advocating traditional family values informed many legal battles. The prevailing notion that AIDS and gayness were separate from the family was provoked early on by AIDS discourse that followed and perpetuated the moralist argument that gays should not be in contact with children. The repetition of these ideas meant that gay men and women were often internalizing them. A report in *The Body Politic*, for example, mentioned attempts by gay fathers to avoid gay/AIDS discrimination through heterosexual marriage (Joyce, 1986).⁹⁴ This internalized discrimination was being fostered by the same set of biases against gays that caused friends and families to turn away from friends and relatives who had HIV or AIDS. As Dennis Altman contends, "People with AIDS are neglected and abandoned by their friends, relatives and lovers..." (1986, p.60). He points to one case "where a mother has refused to have any contact with her two teenage children who live with their father, who has AIDS" (ibid.). Lawrence Fisher is an example of a gay man whose family (ex-wife and two children) turned away from him after he disclosed his HIV-positive status (ibid., p. 13).

Fisher's experience proved that living in a heterosexual marriage did not eradicate the stigmatization and the discrimination against people who have, or are affected by, HIV or AIDS. Instead, the deep-rooted history of opposition to gays and lesbians in many segments of mainstream culture meant that AIDS was quickly translated into an opportunity to withhold children from parents, to implement heterosexist social policy, and to subordinate gay men. In an age of illness and death allegedly induced by an irresponsible

⁹⁴ "He [Lawrence Fisher] chuckles about a fellow PWA who claims he was rescued from homosexuality by a recent marriage to a woman..." (Joyce, 1986, p. 13).

sex-laden gay lifestyle,⁹⁵ gay men and lesbians were routinely being denied the right to inclusion in the legal definition of family⁹⁶ (and the economic benefits that accompany this inclusion), the right to spousal benefits (which were and continue to be used for expensive HIV drug therapies), and the right to raise children.

The mainstream media was a major source of contention for activists trying to target and counter this discrimination. "Dissatisfaction with media treatment," writes Dennis Altman, was "a long-standing grievance of gay activists, and...AIDS...rekindled these dissatisfactions" (1986, p. 108). After all, it was through the mainstream media that right-wing moralists voiced their opinions and furthered their campaigns against homosexuality, which impacted upon the lives of gay men and women in subtle and explicit ways. As Michael Lynch often debated (1982, p. 35), references made to AIDS, such as the reference in *New York* magazine to 'The Gay Plague,' diminished the sense of urgency in mainstream heterosexual circles, and lessened governmental action and support. He often stated that it was government inaction, not AIDS, that was killing gay men. The blame-the-victim discourse that circulated around AIDS and gay male sexuality in the press seemed to correlate with the slow speed at which the medical establishment worked to find the virus, a vaccine and a cure in the early 1980s.

The American mainstream gay press often maintained this blame-laden discourse. Michael Lynch criticized *The Advocate* publisher, David Goodstein, of perpetuating the idea that AIDS was a consequence of gay lifestyle, and of fostering guilt around the idea that gay lifestyles led to death.⁹⁷ Lynch has described the "awesome responsibility" the

⁹⁵ "...non-gay moralists sought to blame gays for the disease -- the Anglican Dean of Sydney was quoted as saying gays have blood on their hands" (Altman, 1986, pp. 25-6).

⁹⁶ See "Breaking Into the Family," *Xtra!* 15 April 1988: 3; "Not a Real Family," *Xtra!* 17 March 1989: 5; and "Victory For Equal Rights," *Xtra!* 28 April 1989: 7.

gay press had in countering this discrimination, and in writing about illness, loss, and the most critical choices being made by gay men and entire communities (1982, p. 31). These critical life choices constituted reason enough for *The Advocate* to avoid making moral accusations about gay lifestyles at this time, and in response to this type of moral discourse, the gay community press became a key activist tool in this era. Reports on the lives of people with HIV and AIDS dominated the community press, focusing on the emotional, psychological and political impact of AIDS and AIDS stigmatization. AIDS was conveyed as a disease that hit very close to home for many, including those in lesbian families. A review of a lesbian parenting book questioned the direction of parenting in the face of AIDS and in the face of unrelenting opposition from the pro-family right:

The other task of the '80s has been to defend the gay community against the dual assault from the pro-family Right and AIDS. We have been fighting to maintain the gains of the gay liberation movement. I wonder if choosing parenting represents a step forward or a step backward for us. I conclude, conveniently, that it's both (Rice, 1988a, p. 8).

A rethinking of the family took place within gay communities in this era; a rethinking that transcended the notion of family as limited to a traditional heterosexual institution. Chosen families formed out of the need for support networks, health care, family nurturance, medical assistance, and around-the-clock drug programmes. Children began to be welcomed, rather than shunned, and members of the gay rights movement viewed the family, whether biological or non-biological, as an important political venture. These shifts were not only reflected in the gay community press, but articles and personal essays by parents in the community presses were instrumental in defining and solidifying these changing attitudes.⁹⁸ This is not to say that anti-family tensions in the gay

⁹⁷ Goodstein stated that "our lifestyle...can become an elaborate suicide ritual" (in Altman, 1986, p. 2506).

⁹⁸ These community press articles include Corrie Campbell's, "Coming to Terms: Closing the Gaps and Charting New Frontiers of Family Life," in *The Body Politic* (Sept. 1986), Ellen Herman's, "The Communities We Create: Lesbians and Kids," in *Gay Community News* (24 May 1986), "Interview With a Gay Father," also in *Gay*

community were completely dispelled. Within gay communities, gay men dying of AIDS were still not being thought of as fathers. AIDS was so separated from family life by this point, and so connected to singles gay culture, that quotes like Robin Metcalfe's in *Xtra!* in the late 1980s that "I'm like a lot of gay men: my involvement with pregnancy ended when I was born" (1989, p. 5), constituted the norm rather than the exception.⁹⁹

3.3 The 1990s: Gay Families in "Post-AIDS Culture"¹⁰⁰

The switchover in Toronto's gay community press from the activist and controversial news magazine, *The Body Politic*, to a more information and entertainment-based *Xtra!* in 1987 was itself indicative of a shift in attitude and wavelength within the Toronto gay community after the AIDS-crisis years of the 1980s. New definitions of family that developed out of the AIDS era have become the mainstream media's hot topics, and according to an article in *Xtra!*, the "emotional punch of 'family'" makes family rights a "sexy issue" (Brown, 1994a, p. 18). In-depth issues that were raised in *The Body Politic* are not being dealt with in current reports in *The Advocate* and *Out* magazines. These issues include parenthood in gay male culture, the economic and social demands of single parenting, and how to raise children in a homophobic society.

The mainstream glossies, as well as *Xtra!*, are more focused on sensational topics of gay marriage, and the ways in which same-sex couples are making babies together. At

Community News (Dec. 1989), and Shawna Gnutel's, "We Are Family," in *Xtra!* (31 March 1989).

⁹⁹ As the article "We Are Family," in *Xtra!* 17 March 1989, states, "The law is still guarding the ramparts against the invasion of homosexuals into family life" (p.5).

¹⁰⁰ Simon Watney used this phrase in *Policing Desire* to talk about the need to create a whole new culture after the crisis years of the 1980s, one that is geared to specific needs and one that respects diversity (1987, p. 134).

least in the mainstream glossies, these topics are seen as trendy and will sell magazines to a widespread market. The gay community press still tends to discuss gay diversity to a much higher degree than more mainstream sources.¹⁰¹ Articles in the early 1990s in *Gay Community News*¹⁰² and *Xtra!*¹⁰³ followed the decade of AIDS with discussions around rights, privileges, and benefits in the context of the family. As these articles indicate, the family has been recognized in gay communities as a powerful tool for social policy and social change, for the harnessing of the family as a gay rights issue includes issues of marriage, spousal benefits, adoption rights, custody battles, and the fight against judicial bias and legal discrimination in the courts. As Levine contends, "AIDS [heightened] the creation of nontraditional family relationships, while at the same time making them all the more powerful and necessary" (1991, p. 68).

It seems, though, that changes to the landscape of gay culture as a result of AIDS have seldom been acknowledged through a discourse that involves gay families. Possibly due to burnout, and possibly due to death and illness of many of the prominent activist writers of *The Body Politic* years (November, 1971 to February, 1987), articles featured in *Xtra!* in the 1990s reflected the general appeasement of activist politics when it came to HIV and AIDS in gay communities.¹⁰⁴ A discourse celebrating life and living replaced a

¹⁰¹ An article in *Xtra!* on "Raising Kids In An SM Household," (Shrout in Giese, 1994a, p. 11), acknowledges not only SM households, but the fact that "Many of the activists involved in gay family rights would love it if the SM and leather community would hide, but...it's important for us to be out there as well, talking about family" -

¹⁰² Articles in *Gay Community News* include, "Gay father Wins Case in Iowa," (18-24 March 1990: 3); "Mass. House Votes To Ban Gay Foster Parents," (27 May - 2 June 1990: 1, 6); "Lesbian Seeks Visitation Rights in Custody Battle," (25 Nov. - 8 Dec. 1990: 1, 6); "Lesbian/Gay Parents Dealt Legal Setback," (12-18 May 1991: 1, 6), and "Family Protection Loses in Boston," (7-13 July 1991: 1, 6).

¹⁰³ Articles in *Xtra!* include, "We Aren't Family," (*Xtra Supplement* Sept. 1990: 4); "This 'No' Means 'Maybe'," (5 March 1993: 1, 9); "Getting in a Family Way," (11 Jan. 1991: 1, 5); and "Family Matters," (10 June 1994), that includes a full-page advertisement that states, "We *are* Family: Lesbian and gay rights are human rights. Don't let this chance slip by!," on page 4.

discourse on death and dying.¹⁰⁵ When AIDS was discussed, talk of living with HIV replaced the discourse on death.

There were exceptions, of course, and Toronto's *Xtra!* did acknowledge that less than forty per cent of persons with HIV can stomach the supposed miracle drugs in Canada, and that many people who have HIV and AIDS in the United States do not have access to these expensive therapies. An article in *Xtra!* made the point that HIV-positive people are still dying of AIDS, even though government cutbacks and media talk of a cure would indicate otherwise (Greer, 1996, p. 17).¹⁰⁶ However, in most media sources that covered the campaign for equal families, neither HIV or AIDS were mentioned.

The focus on lesbian moms is one probable reason for this lack of discussion around HIV and AIDS in gay family discourse in the 1990s. Gay families have been associated largely with lesbians, and lesbians as a social group are still marked as immune to the transmission of HIV. This assumption has stayed in the 1990s, based on the very few reported cases of HIV or AIDS among women in the 1980s. Understood to be a gay male disease, AIDS was consistently left out of the family context and handed back to the gay male community.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ See articles in *Xtra!* that opposed this shift, such as "Owning AIDS," *Xtra Supplement* July 1990: 17-8, and "AIDS: The Forgotten Cause," *Xtra Supplement* Nov. 1990: 15.

¹⁰⁵ Articles like "Necessary Measures Necessary Pleasures: We Are Family," *Xtra!* 15 June 1990: 9; "The Mouth of Babes: Lesbian Moms Take Us All One Step Forward," *Xtra!* 21 Jan. 1994: 25; "Fit For Parenthood," *Xtra!* 11 Nov. 1994: 14; "All In the Family," *Xtra!* 20 June 1996: 60-1, and "The Facts of Life: A Teenager Accepts Her Lesbian Mom," *Xtra!* 18 July 1996: 21, reflect this change.

¹⁰⁶ As Cindy Patton illustrates, "The media compete for viewers and readers...The sudden appearance of disease is reported, and sometimes the cure sees its way into print if it is bizarre or dramatic, or saves babies" (1986, p. 22).

¹⁰⁷ These articles in *Xtra!* are good examples of gay family invisibility in the context of HIV/AIDS: "The Great Divide: Gay Men Consider One Another From Across the HIV

Another reason for the exclusion of HIV/AIDS issues in the family may be the legal context in which gay families are now being discussed.¹⁰⁸ It seems that neither HIV nor AIDS are being implicated in custody battles to the same extent as in the 1980s, and that AIDS is being kept silent in cases where it could be used as a tool for discrimination. As well, the social attitudes around HIV have changed in the nineties, and have inevitably influenced representations of gay families. The idea that HIV-positive men and women are no longer dying of AIDS was provoked by pharmaceutical companies, AIDS service organizations (ASOs), and certain activist groups with the emergence of so-called miracle drugs, such as DDI, 3TC, Protease Inhibitors, and the tri-therapy treatment in the mid-1990s.¹⁰⁹ And after ten years of AIDS, the idea of not talking about death was welcomed in gay communities. This prompted me to ask, are people in gay communities trying to forget about AIDS and simply go about living their lives? Are HIV and AIDS being pushed to the wayside in efforts to bring positive representations into the fore? Or is the invisibility of AIDS in the context of the gay family intended to advance gay rights?

A focus on AIDS as it affected the family brought gay families to the gay rights movement, just as AIDS brought central issues of the gay movement onto the mainstream political agenda in the 1980s (Altman, 1988, p. 313). I am therefore not convinced that the invisibility of AIDS in the family constitutes a step forward for the gay rights movement in the long term. AIDS is not being mentioned in press reports that announce the accordance of equal rights to gay parents for family benefits in Canadian provinces like Nova Scotia or British Columbia (Matas, 1988, p. A1), yet some of those benefits may be used to support

Test," *Xtra!* 16 Oct. 1992: 23; "Death Is A Constant Companion: AIDS Has Irrevocably Altered the Face of the Lesbian and Gay Community," *Xtra!* 25 Nov. 1994: 25.

¹⁰⁸ An example of this discourse is Tracey Clark's article, "Fifty-Year-Old Laws Don't Fit Today's Families," in *Xtra!* 19 Dec. 1996: 22.

¹⁰⁹ The idea that one could enjoy a prolonged life as an HIV-positive person just by taking the appropriate drugs was soon popularized by the pharmaceutical companies that manufacture, advertise, and sell these very expensive products.

HIV drug therapy programmes, individual and family counselling, or crematorial costs of the deceased. Darren Greer has recognized the importance of conjoining the idea of AIDS death with family life in the 1990s with his quote of a child who wrote, "I lost my Daddy to AIDS – now I'm living with the ashes" (1996, p. 17). Greer merges the notion of dying that dominated the eighties with the idea of life and living that is the focus of gay communities in the 1990s to show that HIV and AIDS continue to affect our families.

A resurfacing of many of the problems that Michael Lynch talked about around representation, plus an entirely new set of concerns around HIV, AIDS, and families, can be detected through this general lack of discussion on HIV/AIDS in the context of gay families. Some of the same issues that were being dealt with twenty years ago around the separation of gay sensibilities from the family, the moral discourse on gay lifestyles, and the invisibility of gay fathers, are being dealt with again in the discussion of gay families in the 1990s.¹¹⁰ Since most of the articles now featuring gay families are about lesbian mothers, the sexist core of discourse on the family that Michael Lynch talked about in *The Body Politic* in 1978 can still be pinpointed. The family values backlash against feminism, working women, and stay-at-home dads continues today, reducing babies and unpaid domestic labour to woman's domain in gay communities as well. Anita Bryant and her Save Our Children campaign has simply been replaced by figures like Dr. Laura Schlessinger, whose article in the *The Gazette*, "Heterosexual Families Are Best For Kids,"¹¹¹ makes her position on women's roles and gay families absolutely clear:

¹¹⁰ For instance, "The Family Values Thing," *Xtra!* 4 Sept. 1992: 13; "Over the Rainbow: April Martin Sees the Politics Behind the Right's Anti-Gay Machinery," *Xtra!* 17 Sept. 1993: 29; "Who's Recruiting Whom?: Focus On The Family Wants to Help Kids Be Straight," *Xtra!* 10 April 1997: 16, and "Reform Party Visits Church St: 'We Consider the Family a Mom, a Dad & a Kid.'" *Xtra!* 27 Feb. 1997: 15.

¹¹¹ Schlessinger, Dr. Laura. "Heterosexual Families Are Best For Kids," *The Gazette* 25 May 1997: D6.

The world is filled with races, each with two genders. That is the norm. However, with respect to gender identity, heterosexuality is the functional norm. I see homosexuality as a biological faux pas -- that is, an error in proper brain development with respect to potential reproduction...it is too great, bizarre and regrettable a leap to go from compassion and tolerance for an individual who is 'afflicted with homosexuality' to declaring that nuclear, heterosexual families have no importance or advantage over any other form of family (1997, p. D6).

By not opening up the discourse to include men -- in the mainstream presses as well as the gay community press -- traditional gender roles and divisions are being solidified, and gay men continue to be isolated from the realm of parenthood, fatherhood, and the home. The "faggot father," as it stands, still exists in his "double closet" (Lynch, 1978, p. 12), and the diversity of families in North America today remains unacknowledged, or repudiated, as in the case of moralists like Dr. Laura Schlessinger. The event that AIDS changed the cultural landscape for single gay men also applies to fathers and mothers, to bisexual men and women, to the children of gays, and to all denominations of the family. The affects of three separate pandemics: HIV infection, AIDS, and the social reaction to the syndrome (Mann in Frankenberg, 1989, p. 23), have yet to be realized in the discourse on gay families, even while movements to end AIDS discrimination and stigmatization have involved the parents, families, and kids of gays as well. The children of gays and lesbians came out of the woodwork as AIDS interfered in our lives, infected our parents and friends, and affected us. The ways in which the HIV infection, AIDS, and social reactions to the syndrome have affected both parents and children still needs to be talked about, especially within gay communities.

Conclusion

This thesis was my first piece of writing on gay families. When I began writing, I thought that I would be able to include all of the findings from my research and analysis, all of the shortcomings that I found in reports, and all of the issues that concern gay families. Although the issues around gay families that I have covered in this thesis are much more comprehensive than the previous work that I have done on panel discussions, conducting school lectures, and as a guest on the Women's Television Network, the length of a Master's thesis, I soon found out, meant that I was constantly condensing my work. The writing of this thesis became a process of elimination. I took out my analysis of private versus public in media reports, and a discussion of gay family stigmatization, in order to make room for issues such as legal discrimination against gay parents and the backlash against gay rights in the age of AIDS. I was able to target discursive formations on gay families across three categories of print media, find contradictions in reports, and recognize discrepancies between what was written in these reports and my own personal experience.

There were large differences between the way gay families were being talked about in the mainstream press (both gay and straight), and my experience with kids that have grown up in gay families. First of all, the gay families that I know are very diverse in structure and form. Unlike the uniform portrayal of families in the mainstream press, children with gay and bisexual parents in the Toronto chapter of COLAGE (Children Of Gays and Lesbians Everywhere) live in households where their biological parents are still in a heterosexual marriage, where heterosexual marriages have broken up, where same-sex parents have split up and both have new partners, and where mothers decided to have a child as a single parent. And the diversity of these households only represents the Toronto chapter of COLAGE. Other chapters across North America include kids with transsexual parents, and kids with more than two parents.

Reports in the mainstream press feature a limited segment of same-sex couples who are now choosing to have children without marital ties or through heterosexual sex.

Because the children in these reports are very young, the experiences of my generation of kids from failed marriages are not being taken into account. My experience as a teenager in Toronto's gay community in the 1980s differs from the experience of gay families in the 1990s, for example. In the late 1990s, friends of the family aren't dying every week from some mysterious disease. But people are still dying from AIDS-related disease, and this includes parents and children. Families of all types are still affected by illness, death, and mental and physical stressors related to HIV and AIDS. In the case of gay families affected by HIV and AIDS, the invisibility of illness and death in our families is compounded by anti-gay discrimination, stigmatization, and silence around issues such as financial needs and caregiving support. I am also affected by anti-gay social, political, and religious (not to mention legal and medical) agendas that have accompanied AIDS.

These issues surrounding AIDS and gay sexuality in the family are not being confronted in mainstream reports, and the way in which families deal with these stressors has not been acknowledged in the majority of media reports. To prove that discrepancies between media discourse and experience do indeed exist, I turned to the work of Simon Watney, who states that "[t]here is a yawning chasm between the world as it is imagined by the designers [i.e. the media]...and the real world in which gay men live and have sexual relationships..." (1993, p. 21), and that of Cindy Patton, who understands that "[u]nlike...crude media models, lived experience makes each of our encounters with AIDS immensely complicated" (1989, p. 261).

The lack of media discussion around HIV and AIDS in the family in the 1990s was the biggest discrepancy between media reports and my experience. It is quite a

contradiction that after fifteen years of associating gay men with AIDS in the mainstream press (and in the gay community press as well), AIDS was left out of the discussion of gay families. I found that discursive formations focused more on representing the family than eradicating the association of AIDS as a gay male disease. Where HIV/AIDS was mentioned in reports, such as the June 1997 issue of *Out* magazine, it was dissociated from the family and assigned to the single gay man:

The night Emma was born, I went to the hospital, and I met a friend who was admitting his friend with AIDS. *My life has become very different from theirs.* He pauses. 'I wouldn't necessarily recommend that other gay men do this...' (Miles, p. 102, my emphasis).

Similar to this report, representations of people with HIV and AIDS who did not fit easily into representations of the single gay male category were "re-conceptualized editorially" (Wellings, 1988, p. 88). In the context of the family, AIDS has been re-conceptualized outside of the family structure, and reports in *Newsweek* sounded a lot like the familialist discourse used to frame and discuss the traditional nuclear family. *Newsweek* portrayed gay families as models of domesticity, monogamy and family values. Gay families, as a result, were fit neatly into an outdated yet idealized notion of a nuclear family structure and lifestyle. They resembled my own family in the first nine years of my life when my mother and father were still married, and my household was considered 'heterosexual' and 'nuclear,' even though one of my parents was bisexual. In these mainstream reports, gayness in the family, and the gay parent figure especially, were treated as a contradiction and enigma. Gays and lesbians have always been family members, yet an in-depth exploration of what it means to be gay in various domestic arrangements is still evaded in these reports.

Tom Kalin contends that media representations of the family are "deliberately managed" (1990, p. 22), and points to limitations for gays and lesbians that result from the media's use of the heterosexual nuclear family to morally evaluate all families:

positioning vis-à-vis the nuclear family virtually erases the fact that most gay men and lesbians have lives that integrate alternative formulations of the family, that ...most lesbians and gay men do not lead desperate, lonely lives, alone with their uncontrollable, predatory promiscuity (ibid., p. 23).

Although *Newsweek* alludes to the changing constitution of the family, nowhere in its November 1996 report does the magazine acknowledge that the nuclear family model now constitutes the minority of domestic situations in North America today.¹¹² The media focus on a heterosexist notion of the family in the age of AIDS, using Raymond Williams, is "based on a...deep desire for stability, [and] serve(s) to cover and to evade the actual and bitter contradictions of the time" (in Grover, 1989a, p. 262).

Both the mainstream heterosexual press and the mainstream gay press use a conservative discourse to talk about gay families in the nineties, and in so doing, evade discussions of gayness or HIV/AIDS in the family. *Out* magazine, for instance, makes a point of defining gay families as a reinvention of the heterosexual nuclear family: "Few ventures in the '90s are as radical as this reinvention of the American nuclear family" (Gooch, 1996, p. 92). *Out's* use of the word 'radical' to describe gay families contradicts their conservative estimation of the gay family in this report, and in reports that followed. A year and a half later, *Out* (June 1997) again defines gay families in the framework of a traditional heterosexual model by saying that

...in general, queer families have followed the contours of the heterosexual model immortalized in the jump-rope theme: First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes baby in the baby carriage" (Miles, p. 103).

I had a lot of problems identifying with the articles in *Out*, for the simple reason that gay cultures, gay identities, and the particularities of living in a gay family were left

¹¹² The *Globe and Mail* article, "Family Matters," contends that married couples with children represent less than half of all Canadian families (Smith, 1996, p. D1).

unexplored. Moreover, I did not agree with *Ou*'s notion that gay families are following the lead of the heterosexual nuclear family.

The body of discourse on gay families in the mainstream gay and straight press indicates that the family is still being treated as a bastion place of Christian-based moral values, such as heterosexuality, monogamy, marriage and procreation. Assertions that Cindy Patton talked about in the 1980s on the use of the family to serve right-wing agendas are still accurate. As Patton understood it in 1986, "The family is the galvanizing symbol of the new right, and engenders programs that aim to reverse the trends that are perceived to have attacked the nuclear family" (p. 98). This wave of conservatism in gay and straight circles has informed media reports throughout the 1980s and 1990s, and these media reports, in turn, have served particular moral and social agendas on sexuality and the family.

My analysis of the link between anti-gay opinions and media campaigns to recuperate the nuclear family point to right-wing press columnists like Barbara Amiel, and Dr. Laura Schlessinger, who advocate for heterosexual privilege and traditional family values. *US News & World Report*'s cover feature of Dr. Laura Schlessinger showed how mainstream heterosexual press sources promote moralist doctrine on the family. In certain sections of this report, *US News & World Report* affirms Schlessinger's moral judgements, adding that they are a part of a cultural shift towards increased morality and family values. Author Joannie M. Schrof contends that "she [Schlessinger] offers her brand of common sense to callers who often seem wholly unaware of basic social rules their grandparents took for granted...Many callers, it seems, could benefit from a basic course in moral reasoning" (p. 51). Although this particular report contends that Schlessinger condones 'homosexuality' (p. 55), Schlessinger's own writing in the mainstream press would indicate otherwise. Her article in *The Gazette*, entitled,

"Heterosexual Families Are Best For Kids" (1997, p. D6), makes it quite clear that the construction of moral discourses from a conservative position not only places limitations on all sorts of non-traditional family forms, but that media reports that assemble and disseminate these bits of moral 'information' often lack important detail.

As Eva Pendleton has pointed out, these right-wing agendas have also involved gays and lesbians, and this conservatism within gay communities has caused quite a bit of internal debate. The mainstream heterosexual and gay presses did not acknowledge the conservatism that Pendleton cites, even though many of these journalists are a part of gay communities. Many of them also turn to gay community papers for ideas when writing their reports, as journalists did in the 1980s for reports on the AIDS pandemic (Kinsella, 1989, p. 45).¹¹³ When I researched and compared the different presses, I found that many of the mainstream reports on gay families in the 1990s resembled earlier reports written in the community presses. Reporters didn't go as far as to copy the actual report, like they did in AIDS reportage, but ideas around legal battles and adoption rights that I read in *Xtra!*, *The Body Politic* and *Gay Community News* in the 1970s and eighties surfaced in *The Advocate* in the late eighties and nineties. Reports in *Gay Community News*, for example, on adoption trials and custody battles in the mid-1980s have been discussed in *The Advocate* in the 1990s through television personalities like Amanda Barse.¹¹⁴

The differences that I found between reports in the community presses and those in the mainstream press was that the community papers went into more depth, and

¹¹³ Kinsella writes that "[b]y 1986, some reporters in the mainstream media admitted to watching the gay press for tips on the epidemic. Scores of journalists across the country, like Associated Press science editor, Paul Raeburn, said they regularly read the *Native* or other gay publications" (1989, p. 45)

¹¹⁴ An article on Barse and her "custody woes" is in the February 4, 1997 issue of *The Advocate*.

personalized the issues by featuring only one family in each report, instead of four or five, for instance. Whereas the mainstream press focused on the conservative side of gay family life, community press sources like *Xtra!* made a point of discussing different sides of debate on issues affecting gays and lesbians in the fight for spousal status, gay marriage, and family status. Opposing sides of the debate were often laid out on the same page in the community press, with each report directly addressing the views discussed in the counter-report. The mainstream gay press, on the other hand, simply laid out the issues in chronological order. Aligned with the jump-rope theme cited in *Out* magazine, the report on gay marriage was followed by a report on gay and lesbian parenting.¹¹⁵ Articles in the mainstream press did not reference each other, and points of friction or debate in the communities they reported on were not discussed.

Tensions around the notion of community that were discussed at length by gay fathers like Michael Lynch were only briefly alluded to in some of the mainstream reports. *Out* magazine did mention some of the internal tensions that Michael Lynch talked about for gay fathers in gay communities in the 1970s and 1980s, but whereas Lynch dedicated a four page (full newspaper length) article to the expression of these complex issues, *Out* allotted one sentence.¹¹⁶ The difference between what Lynch talked about in *The Body Politic* and what Sarah Miles discussed in her report in *Out* magazine is that Lynch challenged the anti-children and anti-family attitudes that ostracized him from Toronto's gay community, and Miles simply described one father's choice to ostracize himself from his gay community and align himself instead with the suburban heterosexual crowd. Whereas Lynch challenged the strict definitions of gay and straight community, and pointed to the

¹¹⁵ See *Out* Dec/Jan 1997, and *The Advocate* February 4, 1997.

¹¹⁶ The sentence from *Out* magazine is part of a quote by Bob, a gay dad, who states, "...sometimes I wish I didn't have to leave my home and my family to be with the person I want" (1997, p. 103).

tensions between gay men in his community, Miles didn't challenge any of the tensions that were present. In fact, her use of conventional categories and dichotomies to discuss this gay family formed these tensions.

It was the gay community press that tackled the issues that divided gay communities, and the issues that pointed to the diversity of domestic arrangements within communities. The relationship between stigmatization and isolation for gay parents in both gay and straight communities was part of the discussion layed out by Michael Lynch in *The Body Politic*. Similar to Lynch's claims, my father has talked about some of the obstacles that he faced being a single gay father in a society where you do not adhere to the proscribed sets of cultural values embedded in either the single gay male or heterosexual father categories. Activists like Michael Lynch wrote about fatherhood from a gay perspective because very few gay institutions, organizations, or support networks responded to the needs of gay families in the 1970s and 1980s.

In the 1980s, HIV and AIDS found a place in this discourse on gay families, as more families (both chosen and biological) in gay communities were affected by the virus and the disease. A lack of support for gay fathers was now compounded by ill health, an uncertain future, and stigmatization. For my father, coping with his HIV-positive diagnosis coincided with raising two adolescents. Since my brother and I were not yet eighteen years old, he had to make legal provisions concerning guardianship in the event of his death, asset and estate management, and inheritances. Mental support was much harder to find. Even in the late 1990s, adequate support for HIV-positive gay fathers has yet to be fully realized, and HIV will remain hidden unless more awareness is generated around the issue, and media representations -- gay and straight -- include HIV in the family. By this I mean all representations of the family, for AIDS throws families of all denominations into

crisis (Levine, 1991, p. 51). In the words of Dr. Jonathan Mann, former director of the International AIDS Center of Harvard AIDS Institute in Boston,¹¹⁷

'Regardless of which people, with whatever behaviors, were first affected in a community, HIV has demonstrated its ability to cross all social, cultural, economic and political borders. The HIV pandemic is in the process of reaching all human communities...The decade of the 1990s will be [has been] more difficult than the very hard 1980s have been. HIV and all the problems it entails is an accelerating problem, gaining momentum worldwide' (in Corea, 1992, p. 328).

This worldwide problem that Mann spoke about at the turn of the decade is still being realized through the homosexual body in 1998.¹¹⁸ The increased visibility of gay families in the mainstream press has not altered the image of the single, promiscuous, gay white male as AIDS carrier, nor has it accounted for the increase of HIV in women. Most mainstream reports on gay families feature lesbian mothers, the social group targeted as the least likely to acquire and transmit AIDS in the 1980s. The focus on lesbian mothers may be one reason why HIV/AIDS is left out of the discourse on gay families.

Another reason may be that the reportage on AIDS and people with AIDS in the 1980s was a catalyst for increased activism in the gay rights movement, and heightened the visibility of gays and lesbians. HIV and AIDS surfaced during a time of urgency and political fervor around issues of sex, death, sexuality, and gay rights. Conversely, the discourse on gay families did not surface at a time of political urgency, and activist endeavours have waned in 'Post-AIDS Culture'. The representation of gay families in the mainstream press may have increased visibility, but this visibility does not solve problems of heterosexist legal policies on the family, anti-gay advocacy, or discrimination against gays and lesbians. Unlike the protests, die-ins, and street marches of the eighties, this

¹¹⁷ Jonathan Mann and his wife, also an AIDS researcher, were two of the people killed on the Swissair 111 crash near Peggy's Cove, Nova Scotia on September 2, 1998.

¹¹⁸ An article in *The Globe and Mail* (17 June 1998: A14) that states, "Homosexual contact is still the leading cause of infection with HIV...," indicates that this media focus on homosexuality still applies.

visibility does not further gay rights in North America. Rather, gay families are now a target in the backlash against gay rights. Cindy Patton has argued that the increased visibility of gays and lesbians in the media in the eighties and nineties has actually increased anti-gay violence and discrimination.

A movement by the kids of gays and lesbians surfaced in response to anti-gay discrimination, violence, and stigmatization. Children, adolescents, and adult kids of gays and lesbians continue to address their needs and concerns through organizations like COLAGE, by editing book anthologies, participating in Gay Pride parades, through media outreach, public speaking, and through support groups. Support networks and services for kids and youth dealing with HIV and AIDS were not readily available in the 1980s. My friend, Stefan Lynch, found this out very quickly in the mid-1980s when he approached his school guidance counsellor about his father's illness. Counsellors and therapists had their own set of biases and apprehensions around gays, lesbians, and the transmissibility of the disease. At the time of the casual contact scare, telling your guidance counsellor that your father has AIDS might have you kicked out of school. Stefan wasn't kicked out of school, but mental and emotional support were not given, and the best his guidance counsellor could do was to hand Stefan articles on the latest cure from the *National Enquirer*.

Stefan was nineteen years old when his father died, and Stefan helped care for him from the age of fourteen. An around-the-clock care team of forty people was set up to look after Michael Lynch, since traditional care services proved inappropriate for people with AIDS at this time. Stefan also told me about a young girl named Desiree who attended an International AIDS conference in Vancouver with one of her dads, held in a crematorial urn, when she was eleven. Her other dad was too sick to attend. Caring for a sick parent under the age of forty is a strange experience for young people in their teens or twenties,

not to mention planning medical arrangements before death and funeral arrangements after death, researching drug therapies and food combinations to complement drug regimes, and contemplating the loss of a parent before you yourself are thirty, or in some cases, ages five, or twenty.

For those of us in gay families, the trials and tribulations of HIV illness and AIDS in the home are compounded by the unrelenting stigmatization and discrimination against people with AIDS, and gays and lesbians in general. This includes internalized stigmatization, which this excerpt from *Gay Fathers* makes clear:

When they [the children] finally had realized their father was a real person, it was too late. He was dying. I think they believed that Otis got sick with AIDS because of his 'immorality.' They might have been more compassionate if he had been dying of cancer or some other disease. It was real hard for them to accept that their father had AIDS (Barret and Robinson, 1990, p. 125).

In the 1980s, this stigmatization meant that I didn't talk about my father's HIV status with others, and that he didn't speak of his health unless it was in the context of legal provisions. Support networks would have helped me learn how to cope with the unpredictable and individualistic nature of HIV, as well as the stigmatization that is attached to it.

Organizations like The Teresa Group in Toronto, and The Miriam Group in Burlington, formed in response to the needs of families infected with and affected by HIV and AIDS. More of these support networks are needed, as well as research on the diversity of families affected by HIV and AIDS. I've touched on diversity in my discussion of gay families, and the need for diversity within gay communities and gay families to be acknowledged in the mainstream press. *Newsweek's* definition of what constitutes a family certainly didn't account for single mothers, childless couples, or even gay families. I would be curious to see how this magazine would portray AIDS in gay families. For more personalized and accurate representations to be written in the press, more voices from

within gay families need to be heard. I have only touched on the complexity of issues surrounding gay families in the media in the age of AIDS. To understand the full scope of the issues, including social policy issues and how these affect gay families, a larger body of work would need to be researched, written and published. In future efforts this is certainly a goal that I would keep in mind. Until then, I hope that someone in North America or elsewhere is already working on such a project.

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