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Krista McQueeney
University of Wisconsin - Whitewater
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The New Religious Rite: A Symbolic Interactionist Case Study of Lesbian Commitment Rituals

Krista B. McQueeney

SUMMARY. Despite the legal and religious establishment's denial of rights and recognition to same-gender couples, many lesbians and gay men are adapting and/or creating their own rituals to affirm their commitments to each other. This article uses participant observation of a black lesbian couple's shower and holy union ceremony to explore the multiple and competing meanings attached to the ritualistic symbols and narratives they incorporated. I seek to complicate the existing framework, in which rituals are held to produce feelings of belonging for participants and serve as vehicles for the social transformation of marginalized groups (e.g., Driver, 1991). By adapting and appropriating ritualistic ele-

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Krista B. McQueeney is a graduate student in sociology at UNC-Chapel Hill. Her dissertation uses participant observation and in-depth interviewing to examine religious experiences, strategies for reconciling religious and sexual identities, and collective identity negotiation in two LGBT-affirming mainline Protestant congregations in the South.

Address correspondence to: Krista B. McQueeney, Dept. of Sociology, UNC-Chapel Hill, Campus Box 3210, Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3210 (E-mail: kristamcq@msn.com).

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ments often used in heterosexual weddings, I argue that this couple and their ritual coordinators succeeded in creating a sense of social order, "communitas" (Turner, 1969), and personal and social transformation for some participants. However, I also suggest that the achievement of these functions hinged on the creation of symbolic out-groups and the reproduction of social conventions around gender, the family, and the "appropriate" expression of sex in marriage, which diminished the experience of communitas and social transformation for other participants. Future research should focus on the competing expectations and interpretations participants bring to their experiences of rituals and the ways in which existing structures of power and authority may limit rituals' social functionality, creation of communitas, and revolutionary potential.

KEYWORDS. Ritual, lesbian, African American, religion, commitment ceremony

Debates over gay and lesbian marriage have raged through courts, legislatures, religious bodies, businesses, and a host of other U.S. establishments in the past decade. In response to this unprecedented dialogue, some employers, insurance companies, and municipalities have begun to offer domestic partner benefits, and the state of Vermont created a legal category of civil union to recognize same-sex couples. In the face of this political advancement, political and mainline religious institutions have been resistant to the notion of formally recognizing same-gender relationships. In 1996, the United States Congress passed and President Clinton signed into law the Defense of Marriage Act, which prohibits federal acknowledgment of same-gender unions and permits states to disregard licenses issued in other states. Thirty-five legislatures have also enacted state level "defense of marriage" laws restricting marriage to heterosexuals only (Ferdinand, 2001). Moreover, none of the historically established, mainline religious denominations in the United States has officially come out in support of gay and lesbian unions (Witham, 2000). Perhaps not surprisingly, increased visibility and acceptance of lesbian and gay people and their families in society at large has given rise to a backlash in political and mainline religious circles (Mohr, 1997). This backlash rests upon the assumption that gay and lesbian relationships are subordinate, if not inherently threatening, to family life based on heterosexual marriage (Oswald, 2000).

Despite these retrenchments, gay and lesbian couples across the nation are planning and performing their own ceremonies to celebrate their love for and commitment to each other, albeit with few or no accompanying legal benefits (Lewin, 1998; Sherman, 1992). As well, many ministers and rabbis have begun to perform "holy union" ceremonies in noncompliance with their denominational policies. Through ethnographic case study this article examines the multiple religious, cultural, and racial identity meanings incorporated in and emanating from one such celebration of commitment–a black[1] lesbian couple's "shower" and holy union ceremony. By analyzing the meanings this couple attempted to evoke in their celebrations of commitment–which occurred within the larger context of a predominantly black, LGBT[2]-affirming, ecumenical Christian church in the South–as well as the meanings ritual narratives and symbols may have held for those who attended the ceremony, I explore several questions. First, why was a holy union ceremony important to this couple, even when they gained no tangible social privileges or legal rights as a result? Second, what rituals and symbols did they choose to incorporate, and how did those who attended experience these ritualistic elements? Third, what do their ritual practices and narratives suggest about the intersections of race, sexuality, and religious ritual? And finally, did the rituals they employed in their holy union challenge, reconstruct, or reproduce social conventions?

METHODOLOGY

The shower and holy union ceremonies analyzed for this paper were drawn from a larger ethnography of a 65-member LGBT-affirming Christian congregation in the South conducted between August 1998 and September 2001. Almost all active congregation members identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. Seventy percent were African American and 30% were white. Over 90% of regular worshippers were female, and their ages ranged from 14 to 71.

Founded in 1997, the church was a self-described ecumenical Christian congregation that embraced one triune God composed of three "persons"–God, the Parent-Creator; Jesus Christ, Son of God; and the Holy Spirit, Sustainer. The central idea in the church's theology was faith, and many of the African American lesbian pastor's sermons and congregation members' testimonies incorporated Biblical and experiential lessons regarding the benefits of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Liturgically, the congregation celebrated an open communion every Sunday, frequent baptisms and laying on of hands, and the pastor occasionally presided over holy union ceremonies, which were usually held outside the context of worship services. While members drew from a variety of religious traditions, church practices were distinctive in the recurrent use

of charismatic healing, lay testifying and witnessing, a call-and-response style of praise, and the performance of spirituals and civil rights anthems.

The shower and holy union ceremony were observed on two consecutive weekends during July of 2001. Both members of the united couple were active leaders in the congregation, and one was the congregation's pastor. Both had extensive social ties to the local LGBT community. The holy union ceremony was held on the sixth anniversary of the day they met, and they had been in a committed relationship for almost five years at the time of the ceremony. As a congregational ethnographer and friend, I attended the shower by invitation and the holy union through an open invitation that was extended to all worshippers in the congregation. Members of the congregation were aware of my research objectives and I requested their consent to be quoted anonymously when appropriate. Following the holy union ceremony, I spoke with both members of the couple to gain clarification on some aspects of the ceremony, and both read and commented on an earlier draft of this paper.

Following Blumer (1969), I employed a symbolic interactionist perspective in my fieldwork–I immersed myself in participants' social reality and analyzed the processes, communications, and practices in which they engaged. Comprehensive field-notes were collected immediately upon exiting the field and were supplemented and refined by continued questioning of and informal conversation with church members and the lesbian couple for whom the shower and holy union were celebrated.

Approximately 32 pages of field-notes were collected and transcribed based on observation of these events. In coding and analyzing the data, I focused on aspects of the rites that informed the dominant scheme of ritual functionality–order, *communitas*, and transformation. A perspective of intersectionality (Collins, 1998) also informed the analysis. As Collins notes, an interpretive framework that focuses on the intersectionality of unjust power relations seeks to understand how connected systems of oppression shape individuals' experiences and to go beyond race-, class-, or gender-only approaches to social phenomena. To the extent that the "initiated" couple was positioned within intersecting systems of racism, sexism, and heterosexism, I tried to pay particular attention to whether and how they positioned themselves within these intersecting systems of oppression. My findings are not generalizable to any larger population, and are not intended to represent all holy union ceremonies for gay and/or lesbian couples in the United States.

DESCRIPTION OF THE SHOWER AND HOLY UNION CEREMONY

Both the shower and holy union ceremony were held on church grounds because of the religious significance it held for the couple. The shower occurred

on a Saturday night in a large, open room in the church's office space and was attended, via invitation, by approximately 25 friends (21 women, both lesbian and heterosexual, and 4 gay men). A congregation member, also a black lesbian, who was a close friend of the couple, organized the shower. She cooked, decorated the room, made opening and closing remarks, organized interactive activities, and decorated a large chest bearing a photograph of the couple and the painted slogan, "Swept away by friends and family," where the gifts were placed.

The mood at the shower was relaxed and casual. It involved no pretense of secrecy–both members of the couple were aware of when and where the shower would take place, had input into the activities and the menu, and had established gift registries. They entered together at the time the shower was scheduled to begin and mixed and mingled until all the guests arrived, at which time the hostess welcomed everyone with an opening speech. She congratulated the couple and voiced her support for their upcoming holy union. A buffet supper was then served, before which the partner who was the congregation's pastor said a blessing. Guests ate at two large tables set up in a narrow "V" formation in the center of the room so that they could interact with those across from and beside them. No alcohol was served by request of the couple.

After supper, the hostess directed everyone to the left of the room, where chairs and couches were organized for seating. First, the hostess explained the "jumping the broom" ritual to make certain that everyone understood its meaning and historical roots. Then guests lined up to add their own decoration to the broom using the white ribbons, flowers, and small plastic doves provided. Next the hostess led guests in a series of break-the-ice types of interactive games. After approximately an hour, the hostess directed everyone into the area to the far right of the room where the gifts were stacked (inside the chest and overflowing onto the floor) and both partners opened their gifts. They made it clear that they had separate gift requests–one partner for the household supplies and the other for gadgets such as an indoor grill and DVD player. As they opened their gifts and collected them in their separate heaps, the hostess made a list of the gifts while another guest attached the ribbons and bows onto a paper plate for a mock bouquet one partner was to carry during the ceremony rehearsal. Finally, the pastor thanked everyone for coming and for showing support and love for her and her partner. The shower lasted slightly over two hours.

The holy union ceremony was held on the following Saturday afternoon in a large sanctuary adjacent to where worship services were usually held. The couple and their holy union party (attendants, soloists, ushers) had attended a rehearsal dinner the previous evening as is customary in many heterosexual weddings. Approximately 150 friends, co-workers, and church members at-

tended the ceremony and reception. Written invitations had been sent, and announcements had been made at church during the weeks preceding the holy union inviting all worshippers to attend. Immediately outside the door of the sanctuary in the church foyer stood an easel on which photographs of both brides' deceased parents were displayed. "Songs from the Heart" played as guests entered; two ushers in white dresses escorted guests to their seats. Six attendants–five women and one man, all close friends of the couple–participated in the ceremony wearing black tuxedos. There was an enclosed room in the rear of the sanctuary for latecomers–the couple was determined that the ceremony would begin on time and did not allow latecomers to enter the church–and this room became quite full after the service began. A white lesbian UFMCC minister, also a close friend of the couple's, officiated. The ceremony was relatively reserved in tone and included several religious symbols and rituals. It began with the officiate lighting a candle to the tune of "Love Never Dies." Then came the entrance of two attendants in succession, each of whom proceeded down the aisle and onto the altar to light a candle, first in remembrance of one partner's deceased parents and the next in remembrance of the other's deceased father. The remaining four attendants then proceeded down the side aisles, and next entered the couple, arm in arm down the center aisle to the song "Beautiful Girl." Both wore champagne-colored dresses and carried small bouquets of flowers (one a traditional cream-colored rose bouquet and the other a small bouquet of two hot pink and yellow flowers, tied with multicolored ribbons). After welcoming the guests, the officiate read two Scriptures–1 Corinthians 13 and Song of Songs 4–both of which emphasized the supremacy and spiritual transcendence of love. Next the couple exchanged personal vows each had written, and then they exchanged rings. Before serving communion to the partners, who knelt at a small white wooden altar constructed for the ceremony, the minister made a "charge to the congregation" requesting a congregational vow of support for the couple. Finally the minister pronounced them united in holy union, saying "I present to you [the couple], life partners" and they kissed. At various junctures in the ceremony, several guests, as well as both partners and the minister, began to cry. In all, the ceremony lasted about 50 minutes.

Following the ceremony, guests moved outside to the patio separating the two church sanctuaries for a champagne toast. In the center of the patio area was a small table, where a tall circular wire frame covered with white translucent material resembling a bride's veil stood. Inside the frame were several butterflies–participants were invited to raise the veil to release a butterfly and say a prayer to bless the couple's new life together. Caviar and other hors d'oeuvres were served and glasses of champagne handed out by two male "waiters" and a female "champagne attendant," all of whom were dressed in

tuxedos. Although the sky was gray and it was drizzling slightly, all of the attendants, ushers, and soloists made toasts as guests stood outside, congratulating and wishing the couple spiritual blessings. A few referred to the rain with toasts like "to the wet and the dry" and "rain is a blessing because it washes away all the bad and makes room for the sun." After about 15 minutes of toasts, everyone filtered inside to the smaller sanctuary, where a buffet dinner was laid out on a long table to the far right of the sanctuary. The "head table" where the brides and attendants sat–and in back of which a multitiered white wedding cake was placed–ran horizontally along the altar space at the back of the sanctuary. About 20 long tables were arranged pointing vertically toward the head table for open seating among guests during dinner. After dinner, tables were pushed back to clear a space in front of the altar for dancing.

ANALYSIS

The Creation of Order

Rites of passage, according to van Gennep (1960), lessen the social disorganization inherent to the liminal, or in-between, phase of status or position changes. Apprehension and a lack of structure characterize the liminal phase, and rituals reduce the sense of chaos by reestablishing order and dividing time into discrete and recognizable periods (Leach, 1966). Rites of lesbian commitment-like other rites of passage–can organize the progression of same-sex relationships and reduce the anxiety that may inhere in the act of committing oneself to a life partnership. Here, I will discuss two aspects of order created by the observed rituals–what Rappaport (1979) calls "symbolic" and "factitive" order.

Symbolic order. According to Rappaport (1979), rituals create a sense that the world is structured by explicitly marking transitions of time and space. Rites of commitment may mark the seasons of lesbian relationships and life stages more explicitly than private vows or markers of commitment such as moving in with a partner. They are formal acts in which two people intentionally pledge their devotion and love for one another in front of a community of supporters and, in religious ceremonies, in front of God. The social nature of commitment rituals presents an opportunity for lesbian couples to find validation and support from their families of origin and friends (Lewin, 1998), as well as to express and unite around group identities linked to race, religion, sexuality, family tradition, and/or other sources (Oswald, 2001). The clarity of the couple's intentions, the formality of the occasion, the ritual's expressive

character, and the public forum in which it occurs all signify the commitment as an important life transition and a vehicle to a higher state of being.

Two sub-rituals within the commitment ceremony also contributed to a sense of order. The first was the memorializing of deceased parents through the display of photographs and performance of candle lighting. This not only evoked a sense of order in their family tradition and heritage, but also a sense of stability in and connection to their racial identities. No living family of origin members attended the shower or holy union ceremony, and one partner spoke openly about her family's continuing disapproval of their lesbian relationship. Said one partner when I asked why they paid homage to their deceased parents:

> If they had been alive they would have been with us physically, but they were with us in spirit instead and we wanted to honor that.

By paying homage only to their deceased parents, they may have attempted not only to convey their continuing attachment to and respect for their families of origin, but also to create the image that their families were actually supportive of their decision to join in holy union. Had they paid symbolic respect to the partner's mother who was still living or to their siblings (all of whom chose not to attend), it may have stimulated questions about family members' absence from the union and the lack of approval and support their absence implied.

While many parents of gay and lesbian couples do not attend holy union ceremonies (Lewin, 1998), the act of showing respect to their families of origin, even when they were not present and may not have supported their union, may be an especially critical imperative for lesbians of color. The values of paying respect to one's elders, family, and heritage have particularly strong roots in black churches (Brown, 2000) and the display of photographs definitively linked the couple to and declared pride in their family and racial heritage. Furthermore, it constructed the couple as respectful, aware and appreciative of their roots, and as supportive of–and supported by–their families. Through this symbolic act, the couple attempted to challenge the stigma that gay and lesbian relationships threaten the nuclear family and that black lesbians have "sold out" to white society or "forgotten where they came from" due to their homosexuality (Icard, 1985, p. 86). Their symbolic displays of respect to deceased family members also created a sense of order by anchoring them in the social continuity of their nuclear families (Kahn & Antonucci, 1981).

The similarity of these rites to conventional heterosexual weddings and bridal showers also contributed to the creation of social order. One of the partners recounted all the measures they had taken so that their shower and holy

union would be free of "heterosexual content"–their choice of dresses, the decision to include both partners in the shower, their opposition to having a traditional "bachelorette party," and their rejection of various gifts recommended for the holy union party which they deemed too heterosexual. Despite the couple's attempts to send the message that "you don't have to look heterosexual in order for the ceremony to be real," as one partner asserted, the irony was that they co-opted symbols and meanings that were deeply entrenched in heterosexual weddings and bridal showers. Their desire to evoke a sense of these events as being "traditional," "special," and "spiritual" may have limited how inventive and nonconformist they felt they could be while still adhering to convention and eliciting a positive response from the various guests who attended.

In both the shower and the holy union, the couple appropriated and/or adapted several elements from traditionally heterosexual rites of commitment. Why would they do this, given their resistance to traditionally heterosexual symbols? As a rule, rituals must provide some vestige of familiarity and reflect shared values so as not to be perceived as "hollow" (Roberts, 1988). According to Roberts, a ritual can be considered "hollow" when the symbols constructed are not congruent with the symbols desired. Commitment ceremonies are new and sometimes unique adaptations of traditional rites of commitment, but the ritual coordinators' and participants' notions of the "symbols desired" were still shaped by their previous experiences with other ritualistic celebrations, for example weddings, bridal showers, and the conventional phases of commitment more generally. The couple and their ritual coordinators were cognizant of this in planning the ceremony, and they attempted to incorporate ritualistic elements that guests would recognize as exalting love and showing their respectfulness and dignity, while simultaneously acknowledging their lesbianism.

With few exceptions, the rituals they incorporated were co-opted and/or adapted from African American and modern heterosexual weddings–jumping the broom, the Native American custom of releasing the butterflies to signify liberation in their new life together, the multitiered white wedding cake, the exchange of rings, the attendants dressed in tuxedos symbolically "giving away" the brides (adaptive of the father's traditional role), and a host of more subtle ritualistic elements in both the shower and holy union ceremony. In addition, although they used various displays (e.g., both wearing dresses) to make it clear that they identified as a female-female couple, one aspect of the vow may have struck some participants as reminiscent of the bride's vow of "obedience" to the groom. One partner (the office manager) said to the other (the pastor), "I promise to cherish, respect, protect, nurture, honor, and be your love slave forever." This statement was intended to be comical, but its ambiguity left it up to individual interpretation as to whether it was reminiscent of the

bride's vow of obedience, sought to poke fun at the bride's submissive duty, or bore no relation to it and was purely in jest.

The couple also incorporated various elements illustrative of the consumerism that pervades heterosexual weddings such as the photographer, the videographer, gift registries, diamond wedding bands, and caviar and other gourmet hors d'oeuvres. Just as many heterosexual couples consult bridal planners for various items that will give their weddings a personal touch (Currie, 1993), this couple attempted to personalize their ceremony by researching rituals, dresses, tuxedos for the attendants, color schemes, decorations, and other accoutrements that would make the ceremony unique and reflective of their values and identities. One outcome of this planning was that, although the ceremony was relatively modest and certainly drew attention to the religious nature of their commitment, aspects of the consumerist wedding culture were integrated that made costs higher than the couple had anticipated. The couple included these elements to signify their celebrations as special and to evoke a sense of the familiar and traditional, all of which contributed to the sense of symbolic order they hoped to achieve through these ritualistic enactments.

As well, the couple's desire for a sense of the "familiar" guided their ritual enactment. The sequence in which rituals are performed is essential to their function of creating order (Driver, 1991; van Gennep, 1960). Their progress from pre-commitment, commitment, and post-commitment rites was intended to evoke a sense of familiarity, adherence to convention, and to order time into discrete periods. Friends organized a shower to celebrate their upcoming union, the couple held a rehearsal dinner for the holy union party the evening before the ceremony, and they took a short and unpretentious honeymoon afterwards. Although it is less common for lesbians to conceptually order their commitments according to what might be considered traditionally heterosexual cycles, there is a sense of order and timing inherent in these enactments that places the more ambiguous stages of lesbian commitment within an established moral structure.

The enactment of the holy union ceremony itself also contributed to and reflected the sense of order the couple tried to evoke in committing to each other. As one member of the couple told me, "You know when you're a little girl, you just have these dreams and you plan what your wedding's going to be like . . . I wasn't going to let my sexuality get in the way of having everything I wanted." Her statement suggests that she viewed the holy union as a form of resistance to heterosexism–she was entitled to a wedding (of sorts) and she wasn't going to allow the law, social prejudice, or anything else to prevent her from having it. At the same time, her comment implies a striving for order and validation that recalls traditional feminine socialization. She grew up "dreaming about what [her] wedding [was] going to be like," and experiencing a holy union cer-

emony enabled her to claim a sense of order in and absolute commitment to her relationship, as well as a sense of fulfilling traditional expectations as a woman. Her comments calls to mind the lesbian mothers that Lewin (1994) interviewed, who simultaneously resisted gendered constructions of sexuality by challenging the equation of homosexuality with unnaturalness and reproduced them by complying with conventional feminine expectations of motherhood.

Moreover, the couple's friends held a shower before the holy union, similar to a heterosexual bridal shower, which again marked a key point in the liminal phase–their embrace into a supportive community of LGBT friends and family. It should be noted that most shower guests were long-term couples. While Cheal (1988) characterizes the female heterosexual bridal shower as a rite of passage into the adult female community, the shower for this couple might be better characterized as initiating the couple into a community of committed same-sex couples. Rather than marking a transition into adulthood, this shower seemed to signify the couple's entrance into a mutually supportive community of lesbian and gay partners, some having been consecrated by holy union and others not yet having done so, but all seemingly bound by that expectation.

Factitive order. In addition to symbolizing order, ritual creates the scaffolding that enables organization to appear (Driver, 1991). This constitutive aspect of ritual is what Rappaport (1979) called factitive order, and I observed it in several aspects of the commitment ceremony. First of all, congregational support and solidarity promoted the emotional, psychological, and spiritual well-being both of the couple and their guests. Because the couple's families of origin were not present at or supportive of their union, their chosen LGBT family, particularly in the church, provided the nurturance and validation of their relationship that their families of origin were unable or unwilling to provide. Because black churches have provided significant refuge from societal racism (Comstock, 2001) the fact that this family was both supportive and spiritual may have been particularly important to the couple themselves and to many members of their chosen family.

Another element of factitive order was gift exchange. Although they had already lived together for over two years before these events, the use of gift registries provided material support for their relationship that had been previously unavailable. In addition to promoting solidarity between the couple and their shower and holy union guests (see Cheal, 1988), the provision of gifts reproduced the material benefits of marriage, and the contemporary capitalist notion of "family" as a unit isolated from communal living. It also firmly embedded this ceremony within the astoundingly prosperous wedding industry, which was estimated to bring in profits between $30 to $50 billion dollars in 2000 (Dixon, 2000).

In addition to materializing their relationship and promoting solidarity within their specific community, the shower and holy union ceremony contributed to the dominant social order by reproducing conventions around monogamy and couplehood. Certainly, these celebrations challenged the exclusivity of heterosexual marriage and made claim to a vision of commitment, love, and marriage that included same-gender couples. However, moral and legal regulations defining marriage as the exclusive domain of two mutually committed persons and the exaltation of couplehood were clearly not in question. Such rituals therefore perpetuate the notion that monogamous couplehood is the morally superior way to live and form intimate attachments–the familiar jibes often heard at heterosexual weddings about "who would be next" were abundant. In fact, both of the partners passed on their bouquets–one by throwing it into an expectant crowd of lesbians and the other by making an official presentation to an attendant she called her "white husband." In this way, the ritualistic celebrations of holy union and commitment reestablished monogamy and couplehood as relational ideals that all couples, heterosexual and non-heterosexual, should strive for and exalt.

PERSONAL AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

Ritual has the potential not only to bring about personal transformations into a new–and generally higher–state or position, but also to engender social change through ritual processes of transformation (Baumann, 1992; Driver, 1991). By creating an alternate world in which lesbian commitments are supported, ascribed dignity and value, and recognized as important life cycle transitions, the commitment rituals described here did bring about feelings of personal transformation. One member of the couple asked me:

> Do you see any change in me since the holy union? . . . A few people have said that I seem more at peace and happy with my life and settled in our life together. I even unpacked these boxes I've had in the closet the whole time [my partner] and I have been living together. I just really feel so much more at peace and settled here and just in our life together.

Her comments indicate that the holy union rituals brought her into a state of stability and contentment. Thus, these ritualistic ceremonies facilitated personal growth and conversion into a new, deeper, more assured level of commitment and connection.

While scholars have articulated ritual's potential to bring about social liberation, especially for marginalized groups (e.g., Driver, 1991; Turner, 1986;

Wink, 1986), little empirical research has been conducted to investigate the conditions under which such transformations might be possible. I acknowledge that ritualistic celebrations of lesbian commitment may serve to increase social acceptance of non-heterosexual relationships and possibly even lead to the eventual legalization of same-gender unions or marriage. However, my observations suggest that scholars have not paid adequate attention to how existing social norms and sources of authority may shape, and in fact limit, ritual's potential for social transformation.

One problem is that definitions of adequate social transformation may vary. Some participants in these ritualistic ceremonies surely defined this celebration of lesbian holy union as a social transformation–it involved a broadening of social definitions regarding who is fit to marry and may actually lead to the elimination, or at least the reduction, of stigma on gay and lesbian people and the social and moral value of their relationships. However, I would argue that this is a relatively limited vision of social transformation. As we have seen, this lesbian couple and their supporters did not question the authority of monogamy, the "private and consuming" family, or the moral supremacy of couplehood. In fact, they appealed to and reinforced these sources of existing authority in order to legitimate their union. Perhaps because these were formal, community-wide events in which guests' expectations were presumably shaped by their previous experiences with weddings and bridal showers–and because the couple depended upon dominant ideologies for their own sense of themselves as decent people–their ability to challenge generally accepted norms around monogamy, couplehood, and the isolated nuclear family was thwarted. In their pursuit of order and legitimacy, the lesbian couple and their supporters reinforced and reproduced some of the same oppressive dynamics that contributed to their own oppression, which I would argue constrained their rituals' potential to achieve more fundamental social transformation.

THE QUESTION OF COMMUNITAS

Few scholars have questioned Turner's notion of *communitas*, which posits that ritual actors experience themselves as part of an "undifferentiated, homogeneous whole" (1969, p. 177; but see Baumann, 1992; Oswald, 2001). In this section, I examine the limits of *communitas* by showing how commitment rituals both heightened and diminished a sense of undifferentiated belonging through the marking of symbolic boundaries.

A central dynamic of collective identity formation is the drawing of symbolic boundaries that differentiate in-groups from out-groups (Baumann, 1992; Smith, 1998; Taylor & Whittier, 1992). There were two ritualistic ele-

ments of the commitment celebrations in which symbolic boundaries were drawn and feelings of *communitas* produced for some and possibly weakened for others. The first was the traditional African American custom of "jumping the broom," which was included both in the shower (when the broom was decorated) and in the ceremony reception (when the broom was jumped). The custom of jumping the broom was popularized by the televised version of Alex Haley's *Roots*, which depicted rites of self-marrying that slaves initiated in the face of legal prohibitions against slave marriage (Pleck, 2000). In the wake of increased public consciousness, some African Americans began to incorporate the custom in their weddings. Pleck characterizes this custom as a sign of racial consciousness emerging from the Black Nationalist movement and as an implicit statement that black Americans could adopt traditions from slavery instead of searching their "ancestral" African origins for traditions (Pleck, 2000, p. 230). For this lesbian couple, jumping the broom served as both an assertion of their racial identities and an allusion to the subversive nature of their own self-marrying rite. It also heightened bonds of *communitas* for the couple's supporters by drawing symbolic boundaries between themselves and those who denied their ancestors and themselves the right to marry.

At the shower, the hostess made a point of explaining the custom for those who were unaware of its meaning. She said:

> [Jumping the broom] goes back to the times of slavery, when slaves weren't allowed to marry. Later it was used for other illegal marriages, like for mixed-race couples [looks over at a mixed-race lesbian couple]. During slavery, just like it is for us today, the whole community celebrated a wedding. Both the men and the women would make quilts for the bride and the groom, and the women would decorate a broom the night before the wedding. They would put the broom on the front door of the house, and that would be the sign that a wedding was being planned there. Then on the wedding day, the couple would jump over the broom to start their new life together and to sweep away all the ghosts of their past. The wedding was a time of joy and celebration in the community, so we're going to celebrate that with [the couple] right now–what we're going to do next is everyone's going to tie your own ribbon on the broom. . . . That way we can give them our blessings and welcome them to the family as they start this new phase of their lives together.

By explaining the ritual, the hostess attempted to make all present feel involved in its meaning and significance. She also tried to construct all participants as a family whose support was crucial to the couple's sustenance amidst systems of oppression. Further, by identifying the slave self-marrying rituals

as a historical precedent to lesbian holy unions, she attempted to impose a sense of order and liberation on the ritualistic celebrations. By evoking symbolic boundaries between blacks and whites and then implicitly between LGBT people and heterosexuals–but then defining these distinctions as less important than family unity–the hostess attempted to heighten bonds of *communitas* among participants in the shower.

Probably, the performance of this custom and the explanation she gave for its connection to the present occasion did heighten most participants' experience of *communitas* by stressing the vital role of community in supporting the lesbian couple in this rite of self-affirmation. All participants were made mutually aware of the subversive nature of the custom and, correspondingly, of lesbian commitment rites. This constructed participants in the shower as the in-group. By emphasizing the antagonism and bigotry of other groups, bonds of mutuality and belonging were amplified among participants. To the extent that the ritual defined whites and heterosexuals as outsiders–i.e., those who denied blacks and/or lesbians the right to marry–it is possible that these ritually constructed boundaries caused some participants in the ritual to feel disconnected from the group. However, it seemed that the hostess' explanation of the custom and her emphasis on the crucial role of community support contributed to feelings of belonging and equality. One shower participant's comments reflected this feeling:

> To be honest, I didn't know what to expect because usually wedding showers are just so phony and I don't want to have anything to do with them. This was the first time I really felt like we were all there to celebrate what's important–their love for each other and God, and our support for them–not just the material gifts or whatever. We have to come together at times like this to support each other's love because we don't get that from too many other people in our lives.

Thus, the broom ritual contributed to participants' feelings of solidarity and *communitas* in part by creating symbolic boundaries between themselves and those who discriminated against LGBT people and/or people of color.

At the beginning of the holy union reception when the couple actually jumped the broom, an attendant explained the ritual in much less detail. She said, "I present to you the happy couple . . . and as in old African traditions, they will now come and jump the broom." Here, the custom was still defined as an expression of racial identity, but its subversive nature was omitted. This may have been intentional, so as not to make whites and/or heterosexual guests feel excluded, or it could have been simply in the interests of brevity. In any event, the lack of explanation caused some guests to feel left out of the ritual

enactment. Several guests surrounding me turned to one another with quizzical expressions or to ask each other what the ritual was all about, though I did not overhear or participate in any sustained discussion of the ritual. Those white and/or heterosexual guests who were aware of its significance may also have felt like ritual outsiders, even when they may have respected its performance as an expression of racial identity. I would argue that the ritual succeeded in creating feelings of solidarity, belonging, and communitas for LGBT and/or black guests, particularly those who had been invited to the shower, because they were defined as ritual "insiders." However, its effect was probably not equally constitutive of *communitas* for all guests, and may have actually made those defined as ritual outsiders feel disconnected and left out. My intention here is certainly not to suggest that such expressions of racial and sexual identity are discriminatory or inappropriate, but rather to suggest that they may not have evoked feelings of belonging and solidarity for everyone who participated.

The second set of ritual elements that sought to create *communitas* by drawing symbolic boundaries revolved around traditional constructions of morality. Both celebrations incorporated multiple references to God, Christian morals, and exaltation of Biblical texts as a means of expressing the couple's spiritual identities. By integrating religious symbols, texts, and moral guidelines, the couple and their ritual coordinators sought to construct these occasions as sacred events and to show that they were respectful, honorable people. These ritualistic elements indicated that they were not out to challenge traditional Christian morality, but rather to celebrate a loving, committed, moral relationship that glorified God. I will discuss two ritualistic elements through which the couple attempted to establish themselves as moral while simultaneously defining others as immoral.

One way the couple created symbolic boundaries between themselves and those who were less worthy was by excluding what they defined as the profane from their celebrations, except at times when its inclusion was appropriate according to a traditional Christian framework. By exalting elements of the sacred–such as romantic notions of true love and religious references–and defining elements of the profane–such as sex and alcohol–as off-limits, they attempted to show their adherence to moral order and to define their union as sacred. I will argue that the incorporation of rituals demanding adherence to Christianity and traditional Christian morals drew symbolic boundaries between the ritual in-group of righteous Christians and those who deviated from these ritually constructed norms.

The couple insisted that no alcohol or sexual content be incorporated in the shower. The shower hostess explained to me that at first she had been envisioning the shower as more of a bachelorette party where strippers and alcohol

would be involved. When she discovered that both partners would be attending, she had planned interactive activities she thought would be fun but that would still involve sexual content such as giving the couple sexual advice or games that would require some physical contact among guests. However, the couple objected to her plans because they wanted the shower to be respectful and devoid of sexual content, which they associated with heterosexual bachelor and bachelorette parties. Perhaps because the shower occurred during what van Gennep (1960) and Turner (1969) call the liminal phase–the phase of ambiguity before God's blessing had made their union official and authentic–the couple felt that references to sex and the inclusion of alcohol would be inappropriate. When I asked about her reaction to this, one guest at the shower responded:

> Well, I actually agree because when a lot of people think about gays and lesbians, they think promiscuous. We're about love, and we just want our love and commitment to be recognized. We know that God recognizes it, but we have to be careful about what messages we send to other people. We don't want to reinforce anybody's ideas about us–we love and hurt and have sex just like the rest of the world, but we have to let people know that we do it in a way that glorifies God.

Her comments suggest that the exclusion of sex and alcohol was a kind of ritualistic performance through which the group attempted to repudiate stigma. By associating sex and alcohol with heterosexuality, and then defining them as profane and off-limits, the couple attempted to signify the shower and holy union as sacred celebrations of spiritually transcendent love.

On one hand, these ritualistic separations of the sacred from the profane sought to challenge stigmas against gay and lesbian people as hypersexual and threatening to traditional morality. On the other hand, they created symbolic boundaries that distanced ritual participants from those who engaged in drinking or premarital sex. Through the exclusion of these so-called profane elements, the couple intended to signify their shower (and later the holy union ceremony) as different from–and in turn more respectful and authentic than–analogous heterosexual rites such as bachelor and bachelorette parties. However, it might be also said that the couple distanced themselves from supposedly deviant LGBT people who rejected traditional morals around sex and/or drinking. To the extent that these rituals reinscribed symbolic boundaries concerning what kinds of people–heterosexual and non-heterosexual–are to be considered virtuous and allowed full membership, their potential to create a truly inclusive *communitas* was undermined.

Another way the couple sought to show that sacredness characterized their relationship and to reinforce traditional Christian morality as the path to sacredness was through their veneration of Biblical texts in the holy union ceremony. The couple chose two readings: Song of Songs 4 and 1 Corinthians 13, both of which emphasized the spiritual transcendence of love and the "appropriate" expression of sex in marriage. Because of space limitations, I will focus on Song of Songs 4 as an allegory of the lesbian relationship being celebrated and sanctified by God's blessing.

Song of Songs features a dialogue between a simple Jewish woman and her lover, King Solomon. It is a highly intimate expression of their feelings for each other and longing to be together, a dialogue that places sex in its "proper, God-given perspective" (Life Application Study Bible, 1991, p. 1152). It paints their love as ecstatic–Solomon focuses on his lover's beauty and purity and his strong feelings of admiration for her. Using eloquent imagery Solomon tells her:

> You have stolen my heart, my sister, my bride/you have stolen my heart/ with one glance of your eyes,/with one jewel of your necklace. (4:9)

Solomon then goes on to say

> How delightful is your love, my sister, my bride!/How much more pleasing is your love than wine,/and the fragrance of your perfume than any spice! (4:10)

In verse 4:12, Solomon describes his beloved as "a garden locked up," praising her virginity and putting sex in the "appropriate" context of love and marriage (Life Application Study Bible, 1991, p. 1159). Finally, he compares her to a:

> Garden fountain,/a well of flowing water/streaming down from Lebanon. (4:15)

She makes him feel as no earthly pleasure–i.e., wine or fragrant spices–can and is as refreshing to him as a fountain in her purity. Taken together, these verses emphasize Solomon's overwhelming feelings for his beloved and the experience of rebirth she provides him in her purity and sexual innocence. Moreover, this dialogue between the lovers occurs within a broader context of class boundaries between the lovers that cause the bride to feel insecure about her dark skin, which has been interpreted to mean that she probably worked outside in the vineyards (Life Application Study Bible, 1991, p. 1154). But their tremendous love for each other and God's blessing enables the lovers to over-

come social barriers and personal adversity to attain what many have interpreted as an ideal Christian union embodying the purity and sacredness of love.

The couple chose this passage because it epitomized their own love and commitment to each other in the face of wider social constraints–constraints the Biblical narrative exposes as socially constructed and unjust. By placing their love in a liberatory and religiously sanctioned context–one that involved sex only within the context of marriage–they attempted to show their adherence to traditional Christian morals and to reestablish those morals as the path to liberation and sacredness. Just as the power of King Solomon and his unnamed bride's love-with God's help-enabled them to conquer the falsely imposed class boundaries that separated them, so too could the rite of holy union before God sustain the lesbian couple's love for a lifetime in the face of the unjust restrictions placed upon same-gender love. By showing that they adhered to biblical proscriptions against sex before marriage, the couple defined their path as a sacred duty–one that, if followed, would guarantee the eternalness of lesbian unions and God's protection from worldly injustice.

Through what Driver (1991) calls the "ritual mode of performance," the couple stressed the power of true love to overcome social barriers and directed attention to the sacredness and transcendence of their love. At the same time, they and their ritual coordinators defined the path of traditional sexual morality and Christian faith in God as the true vehicle to liberation and sacred connection. By establishing themselves as righteous, traditional Christians who adhered to Christian prohibitions against premarital sex, the couple created symbolic boundaries between themselves and the less worthy, which may have weakened the experience of *communitas* for those in attendance who did not adhere to traditional Christian morality.

CONCLUSION

In a society that exalts couplehood, marriage, and weddings, it should come as no surprise that some LGBT people–like the overwhelming majority of heterosexuals–seek to honor and validate their relationships through rites of commitment. Although same-gender commitment ceremonies in the South entail no conferral of legal rights or wider social recognition, they nevertheless hold significant symbolic value for some gay and lesbian couples in structuring their relationships and lives, providing an opportunity to celebrate their relationships with family and friends, and in being recognized as morally worthy people who make bona fide life commitments to the person they love. In addition, rites of commitment are perceived by many LGBT people as acts of

agency that promise transformation, as something that can be "done" to challenge oppressive institutions and to attain a higher level of commitment and spiritual connection in their relationships. To the extent that Americans pay tribute to and are on many levels judged by their ability to exhibit the individualist attributes of autonomy, self-reliance, and self-improvement (Bellah, 1985), commitment rites offer some gay and lesbian couples the opportunity to determine the course of their own relationships, to achieve a higher status, to choose how and with whom to create families, and to decide how to articulate their identities. Commitment ceremonies may indeed represent an important step on the journey to finding and expressing one's "true self."

Despite the promise lesbian commitment rituals hold for facilitating personal growth, affirmation, and even transformation, I believe it is important to consider their limitations. Because lesbian commitment rituals depend in large part on established rituals and existing sources of social authority for recognition and legitimacy, their potential for transforming existing structures of inequality and creating truly inclusive, equal bonds of *communitas* is constrained by existing norms, ritualistic visions, and the culturally and religiously pluralistic world we inhabit. At the risk of sounding cynical, I would venture to say that perhaps Turner's vision of *communitas* is not an attainable goal or even one we should strive for in the contemporary United States. Surely, as humans we all share a common search for meaning and a sense of belonging. But rituals, by their very nature, exalt some values–to the exclusion–of others and may be incapable of meeting every participant's expectations for belonging.

Despite these limitations of ritual, we should recognize the importance of creating vehicles to consecrate lesbian life. The fact that a mutually supportive, spiritual community of LGBT people of color even exists at all in the South holds promise for the continued molding of visions and questioning of dominant norms and worldviews. Such locales of sustained interaction among people with multiple and competing viewpoints hold promise for social change that grapples with the tensions between sameness and difference. Whether these communities will transform the world is yet to be seen, but their ritual practices, in this author's view, are a step in the right direction.

NOTES

1. One member of the couple has expressed her preference for the term "black" over "African American" because in her view "African American" suggests that black people are not fully American. Accordingly, I use "black" as a descriptive term in this paper.

2. "LGBT" is the term church members use to describe lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people and is therefore the term I employ in this paper. Clearly, identity la-

beling, as with race, is controversial and problematic, particularly because some of the transgender members of the church identify as heterosexual. My intention is not to suggest that there is some inherent similarity among all LGBT people or all people of various races. Rather, when exploring the relationship of LGBT people to social conventions and institutions such as marriage–and the legal and social rights and privileges therein–it is meaningful to distinguish between heterosexuals and non-heterosexuals (see also Oswald, 2000).

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