

DIONISIUS, SARAH CHARLOTTE: *Queere Praktiken der Reproduktion: Wie lesbische und queere Paare Familie, Verwandtschaft und Geschlecht gestalten*, Bielefeld: transcript, 2021 (Queer Studies; 30). – 338 S.

It is a matter of fact that the concept of the nuclear family has been changing dramatically in the last decades. Even for average Catholics who are fully aware of this fact and consider themselves to be open-minded, Dionisius's empirical study might still entail provoking insights into a rather unknown world: the world of twenty-one queer and lesbian couples who have used all forms of reproductive practices to found a family – from assisted reproductive technology in the clinical context to private do-it-yourself-



applications like the “cup method”. Based on Feminist Science and Technology Studies (FSTS) in combination with New Kinship Studies, D. has asked these couples about their concepts of family, kinship, reproduction, and gender. For background: New Kinship Studies emerged from the work of sociologist David Schneider in the 1960s. In contrast to thinking kinship in terms of genetic and biological ties, they explore the constructionist character and the denaturalization of family ties, thus executing the poststructuralist turn in social and cultural sciences. It goes without saying that D.’s research work starts with a reference to Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, the latter being the pioneer of Queer Studies.

Queer Studies have been proven to be highly innovative, exploring worlds beyond binary and heteronormative thinking, and D.’s study is an excellent example. By choosing methods of qualitative social research (problem-centered interviews) and grounded theory she manages both to reconstruct the living environments of her interview partners as well as to develop a theory on reconfigurations of reproduction and kinship. I would recommend interested readers to start with chapter 5 and 6 to get acquainted with the way the author works: By presenting interview excerpts, she describes the long and challenging path of lesbian women “to constitute themselves as reproductive subjects” (121), partially by dealing with heteronormative concepts of “natural” reproduction, partially by deconstructing them. In 5.2 she presents three couples reporting authentically about their personal way of experiencing a lesbian act of procreation. In 5.3 she reflects upon different ways of doing kinship like the social/emotional practice of “co-pregnancy” or the deconstruction of “true motherhood” along biological ties. Chapters 5 and 6 show the strength of this study: The link between the real-world approach of social science and the theoretical concepts of Queer Studies. The interviews are exciting to read, humorous and touching at the same time.

After research projects like Andreas Bernard’s “Kinder machen” (2014) or Marlene Arlamovsky’s movie “Future Baby”, D. takes

the next step forward. The former gave the impression that the use of reproductive technology consolidates and affirms traditional gender and family structures. D.’s research shows that this is not the whole story. Lesbian and queer couples cannot simply rely on the well-known forms of the traditional nuclear family. Their creative and sometimes exhausting trials to search for new ways of doing family are characterized by redoing, undoing, and transgressing familiar structures (281). The venture is risky. Reinterpreting parental and gender arrangements often meets with social rejection.

Many issues explored in the study deserve discussion from an anthropological and ethical perspective. I can name only two here: (1) There are a lot of normative constructions of parenthood presented, and sometimes you can see very clearly that the author does not agree with the normative constructions of her interview partners: As soon as they rely on heteronormative interpretations of naturalized mother- or fatherhood (and this happens quite often) D. voices her disagreement (248). Sometimes I had the impression that not even the appeal to one’s own hormones during pregnancy would be permitted in this constructionist world where everything must be exclusively a question of social practice. The body is neither existent nor desired, every little reference to it is suspected of being “naturalizing” or “essentializing”. (2) The selection process of the sperm donor is clearly characterized by racist and eugenic motivations (chapter 6.1). I was surprised to read that a group which suffers from a lack of social recognition adopts such uncritical preferences as whiteness and genetic health. To be fair, it should be mentioned that the author herself keeps a distance from these ideas (191). Besides, the highly selective practice of egg and sperm donation unites queer and heterosexual couples.

All in all, this is a thorough and highly interesting research about a “world at the margins”, seen from a Roman Catholic point of view. It deserves even more respect and attention in times where gender backlash is producing new gender-based exclusions, and right-wing politics favors the re-traditionalization of the family. This book proves that

the world of 21st century families is colorful
and full of love and labor.

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