

Reconfiguring family: the politics of love

Michelle Elmitt

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University of Canberra

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Abstract

This is a study that investigates what happens when people are unexpectedly thrown together to live the life of a family. Based on field research, the study explores the ways adults are performing in loving relationships with non-biological children in contemporary Australia. I have sought to examine how people are making these relationships intelligible when language does not always allow articulation of the intersecting lines of desire, conflict and loss that they bring. This involved analysing ten face-to-face interviews and interpreting the emotional and psycho-social phenomena they revealed through a creative writing process. Key to both the analysis and the creative work has been my engagement with Judith Butler's work and in particular her book *Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death* (2000). Butler's writings have helped me discover tensions and ambiguities when relationships form amid a current of opposing discourses, in a society that persists in privileging the nuclear family model. Her concept of performativity provides a means of understanding why each family is doing things differently. These texts have helped me to think through radical possibilities in the cultural intelligibility of kinship.

The dissertation package includes three items: an essay providing discursive analysis of the fieldwork (ten interviews with adults parenting children in step, adoptive or blended living arrangements), a novella on these same themes, and ten short stories (each of the latter correlating to one interview and written with a specific eye to that interview's impact upon this researcher). I have chosen to use discourse analysis to review my fieldwork archive as it is a way to capture the effects of the many power-plays that influence this group of people. The interviews involved responses to questions about family rituals on the grounds that ritual plays a large part in a subject's organisation of emotional and social life by allowing for the integration of psychological and cultural elements. It was my intention that such a focus would cast some light on the way processes of love and aspects of the unconscious interact. The creative writing methodology, on the other hand, allowed me both to work through some of the more immeasurable emotional phenomena, and to highlight moments of conflict, confusion and ambiguity revealed in the analysis.

The findings were revealing in that, while these relationships can be confusing and fragile, people are reworking discourses to find ways of making loving kinship relationships intelligible. The two discourses of most interest were those of: “Meritorious parenting,” where adults hyper-performed in roles in an effort to earn the right to a parental position unproblematically attributed those in a nuclear family, and of “one big family”, where non-related groups of people interacted to meet the needs commonly ascribed to family. Just as *Antigone’s Claim* anticipates a social revision of kinship — where the unwritten rules are examined and new possibilities of fulfilling family relationships can emerge — this fieldwork supports theory in Adoption scholarship and Queer theory that find possibilities of love between adults and non-biological children outside of hegemonic discourses.

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To my own “big family.”

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