

Nontraditional Family: Exploring Artistic Expressions of Queer Love

By

Matthew Grace Cottrell

Honors Thesis

Appalachian State University

Submitted to the Department of Anthropology

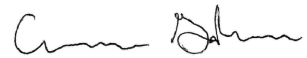
and The Honors College

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Science

May, 2022

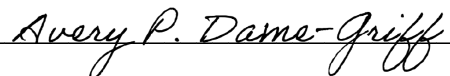
Approved by:



Cameron Gokee, Ph.D., Thesis Director



Andrea Burns, Ph. D., Co-Second Reader



Avery Dame-Griff, Ph. D., Co-Second Reader



Timothy Smith, Ph. D., Departmental Honors Director

Jefford Vahlbusch, Ph.D., Dean, The Honors College

Acknowledgements:

I wish to express my sincere gratitude to the faculty of the ASU Anthropology Department for their support and willingness to continually challenge my academic limits. In particular, I am grateful to Dr. Gokee for helping me every step of the way of this thesis, and to Dr. Valentinsson and Dr. Wright for their passion and analytical skills. Thanks to Dr. Burns for helping me turn a vague interest in museums into a true passion, and to Dr. Dame-Griff for giving me many wonderful resources for and about the LGBTQ+ community. I am honored to have been in each of their classrooms. I would also like to thank my parents, Leslie and Eugene Cottrell, as well as my sister Sydney, for their support throughout this process. They listened to many brainstorming sessions, went digging in bookstores for resources with me, and helped me remember to rest, among many other priceless contributions. Thanks to Master Travis Hallman, who taught me perseverance, the power of showing up, and the strength of community. Last but not least, I would like to thank the countless other teachers I have had the privilege to learn from, and who helped me get to the place I am today.

Abstract:

This project focuses on queer love and the families which are formed by it. The purpose of this project is to collect and display art by and about queer family in order to draw attention to queer love in mainstream public and academic spaces. I define the term queer family as units of people that are bonded by commitment and love, but fall outside mainstream cis-, monogamous, and hetero-normative expectations. As for art, I define it as any act of creation which springs from expression of self, and/or human experience and emotion. As such, this project seeks to explore people who are bonded outside mainstream expectations via creative expression. In this project, I follow guidelines laid out by Bounia 2020 as the Ethics of Care in order to fulfill my understanding that the purpose of museums is to educate, and create and engage in conversations in order to better their educational intentions. My participants are Holli, and Zella and Mina. Holli submitted the song she wrote for the First Dance at her wedding, and Zella and Mina submitted their wedding photos. The project concludes with a discussion of the final design of the exhibition case, the common theme of marriage among participants' contributions, and by detailing how the project completes the Ethics of Care.

Introduction

A question that has come to drive my academic focus over the course of my time at Appalachian State University is “what is the purpose of a museum to the public?” In other words, what should museums DO? To me, the purpose of museums is to educate, and create and engage in conversations in order to better their educational intentions. In “Museums, activism, and the ‘Ethics of Care,’” a book chapter by Alexandra Bounia (2020), the author writes about activism in museum spaces and elucidates an aligned perspective, suggesting that activist museums should apply an ‘Ethics of Care’ in order to enhance their contributions to the public. The Ethics of Care go as follows:

- 1) Recognizing need and offering attention and support
- 2) Acting on the understanding that something can be done for the object of care
- 3) Being practically involved in offering care
- 4) Making sure that the work has been done, “acknowledging the difference in perceptions of care, and allowing for responsiveness, which often means recognition of difference and listening to others, as well as creating space for different views and ideas” (Bounia 2020, 42-43).

Drawing on the Ethics of Care, my thesis project is a museum exhibit exploring queer family relationships through the production of art. In my thesis project, I applied a slightly modified version of the above Ethics of Care. I am particularly positioned for conducting research about queer family for a few reasons. First and foremost, I am a queer person myself, and so have access to the spaces wherein this research needs to be done. I feel drawn to work for the good of my LGBTQ+ community by bringing our voices into museum spaces as well as wider cultural conversations beyond basic questions of human rights.

First, more often than not, queer stories- particularly those about love and family- are editorialized by non-queer perspectives. This exhibition will allow queer families to tell their own stories, and have those stories publicly displayed. In allowing the lived truth of a few queer families to shine, this study will make steps toward bringing queer visibility into mainstream academic and public spaces. This is in line with the first aspect of the Ethics of Care, recognizing the need for support.

Second, this project acts on this understanding because it is an ethnographic exploration of queer families, resulting in a museum exhibit highlighting participants' artistic expressions of/about their relationships. For the purposes of my work, queer families are defined as units of people that are bonded by commitment and love, but fall outside mainstream cis-, monogamous, and hetero-normative expectations. This project entails asking queer people to make art about their families, however they define that term within their own lives. For instance, they may create art about a romantic partnership, a network of platonic connections or some combination thereof. For my work, art is the result of any act of creation which springs from expression of self, and/or human experience and emotion. Using art to express emotion can be incredibly powerful and more accessible than long blocks of text; as such, the project involves displaying the art- with the needed supporting information- with the intention of allowing it to speak to viewers about each individual represented from the LGBTQ+ community. Art gains meaning as others perceive it. Under this definition, art ranges from literature, collage and painting, music writing and performance, and theatrical performance, to architecture and the recording of recipes (when done with the intention of preserving them for future use due to their personal meaning to the recorder). This research is not about the artistic skill of any particular participant; it is about them and their families, and my goal is to encourage people to create something which feels true.

Finally, my practical involvement in offering care comes in the form of the physical exhibition which this paper accompanies, as well as my intention to continue this work in graduate school and in my professional career. I come into this work with a passion for advocacy and social justice. I have experience volunteering with my local Democratic Party, as well as the Haw River Learning Celebration, an environmental advocacy group. I have worked in social media, outreach, and organizing. Additionally, I have academic experience in gender studies, material culture, and arts-based research.

Of course, the fourth step of the Ethics of Care has not yet been completed, as step three is still in progress! Nonetheless, I intend to making sure that the work has been done, acknowledge the difference in perceptions of care, and allow for responsiveness, by listening to feedback from my thesis committee, my participants, and others who view the display in Anne Belk Hall in order to inform my future work intending to bring queer families into museum spaces.

In the following thesis I first discuss the theoretical background I am engaging with. Within the theory section, first, I address Queer Family, then the question of ‘Why Art?’, Art as a Multisensory Experience, and finally Museums. The second major section of this thesis is devoted to outlining my Methods for data collection. I then discuss specific outcomes by tracing individual participants from initial interview to final creation. In the discussion/conclusion section, I address themes from my data, the final design of the exhibition case, Fulfilling the Ethics of Care, and lessons for future research.

Theory

Queer Family

My desire to focus on queer families sprung from two books: “Stories From The Polycule: Real Life in Polyamorous Families” (2015), and “Gender Outlaws: The Next Generation” (2010). “Stories From The Polycule” is a collection of personal stories told by people in the polyamorous community. It highlights the real life of people in non-monogamous relationships/families without fetishizing their sexual lives or demonizing their choices. The stories range widely in emotional content; varying from intensely optimistic to heart wrenchingly painful, and they all seek to normalize poly family relationships.

“Gender Outlaws” highlights the experiences of transgender, gender non-conforming, and queer people. Each chapter reads like a journal entry from a different person, and together they coalesce into an emotionally touching experience for the reader. Entries include poetry, comics, and pictures as well as essays and transcripts of conversations.

In Figure 1, a person comes to terms with what their gender is and what it means to them. The image from pages 172-172 of Gender Outlaws depicts struggle with labels such as “boy,” “girl,” “trans-gender,” and “lesbian.” This struggle is strongly impacted by external voices; in the top frame, the person is chastised for wanting a label at all, as they are “divisive.” This makes the person question their personal drive to label themselves, and leads to interesting self-reflection. On the flip side, on the lower page, they are repeatedly and uncomfortably labeled by various people around them. This page succinctly depicts a struggle many non-conforming people face; being told that their choice to label themselves is wrong, while also being unable to escape labeling from a society which struggles to understand their expression of self. A comic is more effective for transmitting this message than written text alone because the images allow the reader to take

in the body language and other visual cues which indicate the intensity of the impact the words have on the character.



Figure 1: “transcension,” by Katie Diamond and Johnny Blazes

On this page, the images show the sexual participants’ faces, legs, backs, and covered crotches. In each image where a face is visible, the expression is of pleasure and/or comfort.

These images are intimate and evocative, and capture a series of sexual moments beyond the words that could have technically described it. The (queer) sexual partners have been celebrated, humanized, and brought to life in the images.

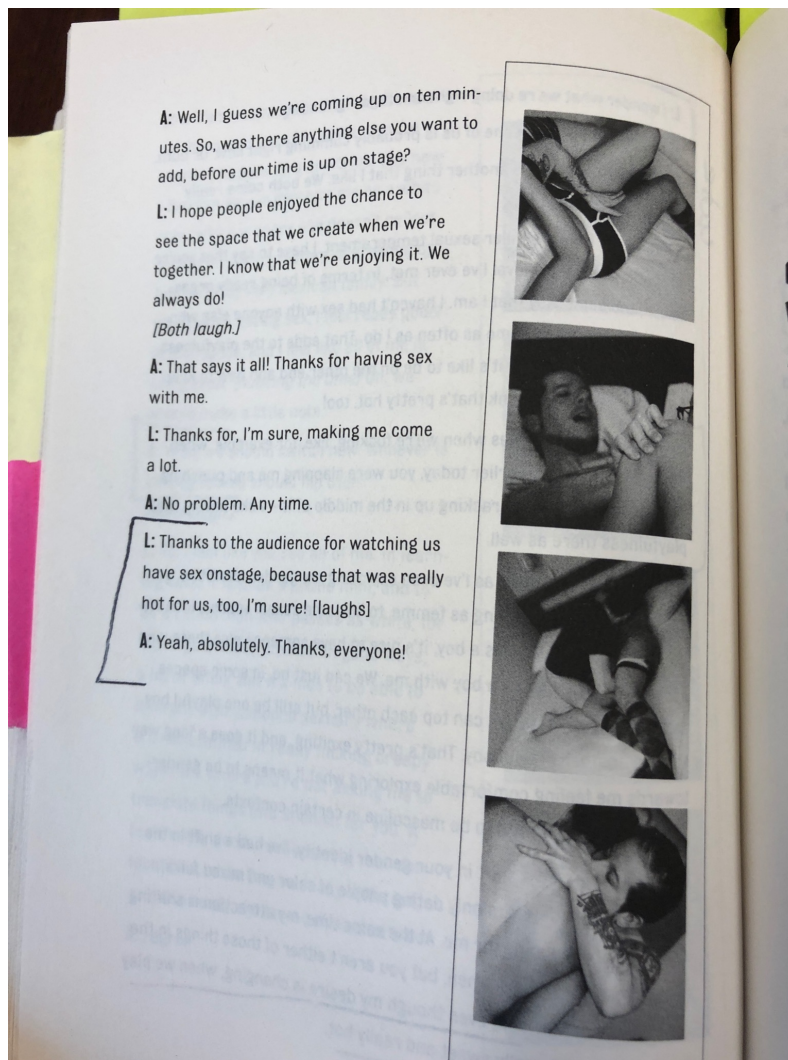


Figure 2: A sexual scene between A.P. Andre and Luis Gutierrez-Mock, photographed by Shilo McCabe. The images are accompanied by a transcript of a conversation between Andre and Gutierrez-Mock.

The emotional impact of these glimpses into queer life and family is immense and I want to bring a similar impact to my final thesis museum exhibition. Likewise, in my thesis, I am

aiming to demystify and destigmatize nontraditional relationships by displaying the internal workings of them to the public eye. These books help to situate my thesis in a wider discourse of nontraditional family.

Why Art?

The use of Art-Based Research (ABR) is not new to anthropology. Since the 1990s, ABR has been engaged in anthropological research in order to complicate ethnographic practices. ABR helps to integrate multiple voices into an ethnographic narrative, thus pushing back against the limitations of the ethnographers' perspective (Leavy 2017, 517). This is a key part of my intentions with my research; I want to allow the art to speak for its creator, rather than creating the narrative solely from my own perspective on my participants.

ABR is a set of tools “based on *aesthetic knowing* [italics in original]...the beauty elicited by ABR is explicitly linked to how it fosters reflexivity and empathy in the consumer (and researcher) (Dunlop, 2001). Aesthetics are linked to advancing care and compassion (McIntyre, 2004)” (Leavy 2017, 3). Additionally, Leavy (2017, 3) notes that art can convey truth about self and others which may be pre-verbal and include multiple ways of knowing such as sensory and imaginary knowledge. ABR is frequently used to highlight the experiences of marginalized groups (Leavy 2017, 314). Leavy writes that under-representation in art occurs in two primary ways: first, when people cannot find themselves represented in socially legitimized art, and second, when the representation that is present is distorted and stereotyped. However, “art can propel people to look at something in a new way, which is critical to social change...art can jar people into *seeing* something differently. This kind of consciousness-raising, unleashed by images, may not be possible in textual form” (Leavy 2020, 240). Art evokes responses which

“occupy an elevated place in memory,” and has a high capacity for containing and transmitting ideas which may challenge and transform beliefs (Leavy 2020, 236-237).

Leavy also writes about allowing for a holistic research process wherein research goals and methods align closely with each other, and the “creative process and verbal follow-up could be an empowering experience for research participants as well, where they retain control, share their experiences, and have their feelings and perspectives taken seriously” (Leavy 2020, 252).

As previously noted, ABR has the capacity for speaking in many voices; this, combined with arts’ ability to advance empathy, care and compassion, as well as empowering participant creators, make it a useful tool for highlighting marginalized experiences. This aligns with the Ethics of Care (Bounia 2020) in that there is an emphasis on creating personal and impactful connections between a wider audience and the people in need of representation and support.

Art as a Multisensory Experience

Imagination and bodily experience of art is subjective to the individual; a person with in-depth understanding of color and design theory may feel the effects, but be more aware of the reason that a sensory experience has been triggered. This is a significant reason why art has a lasting place in the memory and can instigate perspective shifts (Leavy 2020, 236-237). In the article “Speaking of Art as Embodied Imagination: A Multisensory Approach to Understanding Aesthetic Experience,” authors Joy, Mick, and Arnould write about the sensory experience of viewing art, and how that experience influences how people think about art. They write that:

Perception is both a physiological and intellectual judgment, for perceiving an object requires grasping the object as a whole as well as in terms of its parts. It is also closely linked with imagination, for it is through virtual body en- actments that creative projections are possible and an individual’s skill acquisition improves. Although one acquires knowledge primarily through the eye and the act of seeing, many participants found themselves in situations where see- ing allowed them to

engage in other sensations—touch, taste, and smell. The order in which these sensations are experienced depends on the stimuli in question. For instance, at the moment when seeing becomes touching, the latter becomes the figure, and seeing becomes the background. Tom’s experience of smelling the flowers (because they jumped out at him from beyond the frame) illustrates how virtual body explorations allow for vision to be replaced by smell as the flower approached him and took him by joyful surprise (Joy et al. 2003, 278).

In other words, perception involves more than the obvious senses in any given situation; for instance, when looking at the image of a flower, part of the sensory experience is in knowing that flowers smell fresh, make sound when they touch each other in wind, and have soft petals. Viewers of the image of the flower have the power to focus more on the non-visual senses, thus moving the background to the foreground and changing the experience of the art. In a poetic phrase, the authors say “Imagination is thus at the heart of perception and is closely tied to the incarnate body” (Joy et al. 2003, 264). A casual observer is likely to describe their experience in terms of “visceral experience of color...’jumps out’ from the canvas and ‘gets under [her] skin,’ implying that the color is in motion while her body is stationary... [and] [incorporate] the painting into her body in a way that alters both her consciousness and her metabolism” (Joy et al. 2003, 272). Awareness of the intense connection between art and the observer is key to using art as activism.

Museum Spaces

Museums are spaces of social learning and thus contain enormous potential for social realignment, be that alignment ideological or otherwise. In inclusive museum practices, people are of paramount importance; inclusivity is performance, and thus has an audience of people; what are their interests? How can museum practitioners “work to better understand the specificities of social diversity” of both who it is representing and who is viewing it? (Coffee

2008, 267 and 271). Museums need to “examine inclusion or exclusion... [with intention] to confront, at least episodically, the social forces [past and present] that underlie or overlay its existence” (Coffee 2008, 261). Self-reflective inclusivity is an ongoing process which cannot be addressed in one exhibition; museums must make their ideologies inclusive, so that “its collections and programming activities, and... specific narratives privileged by the museum” are all working together to create a truly inclusive space (Coffee 2008, 271).

There is a balance to be struck between community and museum contributions to social life and change. Museums remain educational spaces; nonetheless, communities should have a voice in “the packaging of information and the priority order of what new avenues of discovery should be attempted” (Emery 2001, 75). In the article “The Integrated Museum: A Meaningful Role in Society?” Emery (2001) writes about his work in the Canadian Museum of Nature (CMN) to create a “continuous loop demand[ing]... constant evolution of the museum, always in touch, both with nature, and with the human community, to create an integrated whole—The Integrated Museum” (Emery 2001, 80). Emery is specifically writing about applying this approach to natural history museums; nonetheless, the many of the concepts which he discusses are applicable to broader museum spaces (Emery 2001, 70).

Emery suggests employing the question “[w]hat opportunity can museums provide for discussing society’s questions in a guided conversation?” as answering it demonstrates the inadequacy of superficial ‘interactions’ such as button-pushing and panel-lifting. To have a meaningful role in society, museums must ensure that “visitors must recognize themselves and their questions in the exhibits and programs” (Emery 2001, 73-75). Two clear examples of this philosophy being put into practice are:

- 1) “Museum programs... defined as temporary, and liable to continuous modification, based on the reactions of society in this guided conversation with our own experts... our successes were necessarily measured by the reactions of the communities, not by traditional approaches of measuring performance” (Emery 2001, 78). By making all programs temporary and measuring success by community reaction, Emery made both an ideological and practical move toward creating a social-museum feedback loop.
- 2) In the measurement of community reaction, activities such as “pretend newspaper articles the visitor would write, or a pretend radio broadcast written and spoken by the visitor about a subject within an exhibit” were employed; these products were eventually sent to “decision-makers in government and industry” in order to facilitate public input into governmental shaping of society (Emery 2001, 78).

In short, Emery sees museums as spaces which should work in conjunction with society in order to “help people to become sensitive and informed about... the cultural world to develop a much-needed science and culture literacy... museums as a group can reach out to have a significant impact on a large proportion of people” (Emery 2001, 81). Museums are not meaningfully successful unless they are effectively partnered with society and responding to many audiences in order to foster society’s future. This theory of museums role in society strongly correlates with the Ethics of Care; in particular, it resonates with the fourth step outlined by Bounia which emphasizes “acknowledging the difference in perceptions of care, and allowing for responsiveness, which often means recognition of difference and listening to others, as well as creating space for different views and ideas” (Bounia 2020, 42-43).

Summing Up

These sources create a basis for my ethnographic study of queer families. I will use the LGBTQ+ sources to guide my interviews and data collection. I will use the design, museum aesthetic, and Art Based Research sources in order to allow the lived truth of a few queer families to shine. My intention in employing the sources discussed above is to create an aesthetically pleasing exhibit in which the design more-or-less fades into the background to allow for the art and relationships of queer participants to take center stage.

Methods

The crux of this research is simple: I collected art from members of queer families, about their families, for the purposes of displaying it and highlighting the individual nature of each family, as well the themes that tie them together. This data is not meant to be generalized; rather, I intend to humanize the queer community, look at different forms of family within it, and bring their voices to a wider audience via art. My interviews were semi-structured, aligning with anthropological practice such as demonstrated by Rathwell (2020), and Monks et al (2021). Rathwell writes of her work that “The artworks presented or discussed here are central to my research. However, my analysis focuses on the meanings that artists themselves create around the artworks... Interview procedures allowed for conversational and storytelling opportunities (Kvale 1996)” (2020, 70). Monks et al. write that “A semi-structured interview guide was used to focus the discussion... Reflexivity is an important part of feminist research, with a comprehensive understanding and awareness of the researcher's personal history being seen as integral to the research process... may have assisted in facilitating rapport with participants” (2021, 224). In Monks et al. study, the interview was of the same gender as participants (female)

in order to draw on a connection of personal history; in my research, I allowed the shared social group of the LGBTQ+ community to facilitate trust and thus create dialogue within the semi-structured interview format. Like Rathwell, they also emphasize seeking thick description for meaning-making (2021, 224). In my research, the semi-structured interview format was essential because it allowed for a more natural flow of conversation wherein individuals stories and artworks were spotlighted.

Over the course of creation, I interviewed participants about their families, lives, struggles, and joys. Following ethnographic best practices, my interviews were semi-structured with the following questions:

- 1) What piqued your interest about this project/why are you interested in participating?
- 2) Can you tell me a little about yourself and your family/relationship?
 - i) How many partners do you have? How long have you been in the relationship(s) you intend to create art about?
 - ii) What do you enjoy within your relationship(s)? Do you mind discussing some struggles you have faced?
 - iii) What does being in a queer family mean to/for you?
- 3) What are your creative interests?
 - i) What does your creative process generally look like?

In this interview, I also informed participants in detail about the expectations of their participation:

1) ongoing conversations with 1 or more people in the relationship/family regarding relationship/family structure, and what your relationship/family means to you. These conversations will be recorded for research purposes. Only answer so far as you feel comfortable; these conversations inherently involve personal questions and there is no pressure to answer beyond your comfort level.

2) You are expected to create art, be it visual art, poetry, or any art they feel is applicable to represent a key aspect (or the entirety of, or however they feel so called!) of their relationship/family.

- a) The art should be smaller than 12 ½ by 9 ½ inches!
- b) If this is not a traditional visual art, such as song-writing, video creation, ect, that is a-ok! We can work together to figure out the best way to display your art.
- c) I will need to collect the art, so please make something you are comfortable mailing or emailing and having printed! Should it be needed, shipping will be paid for.

3) Throughout the creative process, please journal/record your process and feelings around the art in a text form! I will be collecting this as part of the display/data.

4) The final museum exhibition will be displayed in the Anthropology Hall of Appalachian State University for a maximum of a semester. All participants have the option of using a pseudonym!

This project took approximately 12 months to complete. At the end of the Spring 2021 semester, I contacted my committee members, with the knowledge that I wanted to do anthropologically oriented research about queer people, and create a museum display as part of

my final product. Thus, I reached out to Dr. Burns, a museums and history professor with whom I had taken two classes, Dr. Dame-Griff, an LGBTQ+ professor with whom I took one class, and Dr. Gokee, an anthropology professor with whom I have taken 3 classes. Having received their affirmative emails and suggestions, in the summer of 2021 I began intensive research in order to narrow down the interests and goals of my thesis. In the Fall 2021 semester, having selected queer families and art as my linked focuses, I dove into more detailed research and assembled an annotated bibliography. In this semester, I also located my participants. I found four participants overall; two participated together and will be discussed as a unit. My participants are Zella and Mina, Chris, and Holli. In December 2021 I did my initial interviews, using the questions outlined above. Over the course of the Spring 2022 semester, I conducted follow-up interviews with my participants, and collected their final art pieces.

Outcomes

Introduction

As previously mentioned, my thesis participants are Zella and Mina, Chris, and Holli. In this section, they will be discussed in detail. I will lay out their background information and how they define their family, as well as their creative process and final creations.

Zella and Mina

Zella (she/they) and Mina (she/her) participated as a unit. They are a couple that have been together for 5 ½ years with a short break in the middle of that time. Zella is employed as a nanny, and Mina as a cook. Mina is British, and Zella is American, so much of their relationship has been long distance. On Mina's most recent trip to the United States, the two got married.

They went through some significant brainstorming during our first interview. Mina is employed as a cook, and says that:

my cooking is probably my most creative thing... yeah, I mean the main thing I would probably categorize as creative that I do is cooking and baking and that's like my outlet [Zella: you have a passion for that, that's a legit passion] yeah, I have a very intense interest in, a nerdy, geeky interest about all of that.

I then suggested that if she was drawn, Mina was totally welcome to create a recipe or to cook something and take pictures of it. At this, Mina whispered something to Zella:

Zella: so.. We, we're planning on, uh, during this trip while Mina is here, getting married. To start the visa process so that she can live here and work here. And next week, we are going to get married! Which is very exciting! We are doing like a courthouse wedding, it's very exciting (skipping forward)

Zella: yes, that is what I want for my wedding day. But we wanna take, we want to have like [younger sibling] take some- cause [younger sibling] is actually really into photography- we were going to have him take some pictures of that process for us, whatever it may be. And then Mina just whispered in my ear 'I could bake a wedding cake' and like write down the recipe and take some pictures of it.

Thus, they settled on their art being wedding photos and the creation and recording of a wedding cake. However, by the time of my second interview with them, the cake/baking aspect fell to the wayside and Zella said:

so we took a bunch of pictures, and they are kind of beautiful, and I am happy to...share those with you.



Figure 3: Wedding photos submitted for the project by Mina and Zella.

Chris

Chris (they/them) is 46 years old, parent of 5, and is polyamorous. They live with two of their children, their husband, and their partner. They work full-time in the anti-sexual violence field, and have guest lectured at UNCG.

Chris was unsure of what their art would look like in our initial interview. They love storytelling, ecstatic dance, and making weird things. As Chris explains, “my spouse is very patient and let me put a floor-to-ceiling papier-mache tree in our bedroom once that I built from

scratch and wired with clips and greenery and it was a little bit absurd.” As for their creative process, Chris is inspired by the idea of flow:

When you find that middle zone just right it’s like an altered state of consciousness and that’s where I usually find that I enjoy myself the most is just figuring out exactly what it takes to be absorbed in the story or the words or whatever and then seeing where it leads me.

As with Zella and Mina, Chris’s family is currently in the process of change; in short, they and their husband are divorcing. However, the two of them, their younger children, and Chris’s partner will remain living in the same household. Despite this change being the legal inverse of the change happening in Zella and Mina’s family, to Chris

It’s like these things that our culture has this perspective of it as being something that breaks down, are actually in our case building. So I was thinking of something, maybe trying to track the intersection of that tension.

When asked about the idea of a ‘non-traditional family,’ Chris says

I’ve been queer for a really long time and our family still looked pretty traditional for a lot of that time...the subjectivity of nontraditional is determined by the person making the call, not necessarily by the person being described. I think in my community, being in a poly family is seen as being definitely non-traditional. But if you break it down to what is nontraditional about it, beyond the sense of three adults, y’know, we eat dinner together every night and ask the kids how their day went and y’know what I mean, like, we watch stupid shows together every night as a family on Netflix...The queerness or the nontraditionalness is defined in terms of distance from an arbitrary point that was set by people long before us who didn’t share the same values as us...When I am like ‘what about us is nontraditional, does my community think it is nontraditional?’ depends on which parts, y’know? My Republican, Evangelical Dad thinks it’s pretty weird. He still had dinner with all of us this summer; we all still went and met him at a restaurant for dinner outside. My homonormative lesbian friends who have children the same age as my older children, are kinda like ‘sounds weird, but whatever.’ and then I have some friends who are more to the left of me on some of these issues who are like complete anarchists with like 400 people in their polycule if you start counting their partners and their partners partners and FWB and they are like ‘you are barely polyamorous at all’ so, I don’t know, it depends on who is making the judgement call.

In our second interview, they confirmed their intention to create a timeline of how their understanding of family has changed over time. Unfortunately, due to personal complications, they were unable to complete the artistic aspect of this project. As such, they were not included in the final exhibition or the discussion and conclusion of this paper.

Holli

Holli (she/her) is an education enthusiast who has recently finished her second Masters Degree. She has a Divinity degree, as well as a Masters in Mental Health counselling, and wants to work with queer people who face religious trauma. She defines her family as her wife to whom she's with for 6 years (married for 4), as well as their two dogs and six chickens. She was drawn to participate in this research for the sake of representation and LGBTQ+ normalization and acceptance in educational spaces.

the [Divinity] school that I went to was not very excited that I was there as someone who not only was a gay student...but [a student who was] wide-openly out. So, here I go, busting through the doors, at a divinity school, but the reason that I wanted to do that was to prepare to work with LGBTQ humans who have gone through like, religious trauma, cause I know there is a ton. Like, an endless population probably that you could find that's gone through some type of religious trauma and if not that then societal... my intention was always to just become well-rounded and educated in these topics... for the purpose of educating people.

In my initial interview with her, Holli stated that her creativity is about

Trying to tell the message, having meaning, using it to get something out of yourself and say something from within you. It's like an outlet, that's going to be a theme for everything. I'm drawn to music-- I was looking over here at the music stuff. And I like to do songwriting and poetry...painting, all kinds of stuff. It just pops up into my head sometimes, it's sporadic like that. Sometimes it's where I am playing guitar and then something comes to mind when you write it down-- I don't know-- it's all over the place. It's definitely solo, it's very reflective and deep.

In line with this philosophy/practice of creativity, she did not settle on a form of art early on. Eventually, she decided that the art which best represents her family had already been created; namely, a song she wrote and recorded for her and her wives' first dance on their wedding day.

I asked my wife if I could choose the song for our first dance as a surprise for her on the wedding day at the reception. She rolled her eyes and told me I could do it, but nothing too crazy or wild. So, secretly, I planned on writing a song for our first dance... Thus began the biggest lie I have ever told my wife- making up excuses as to where I was going for a few hours at a time. I was working at a church at the time and made up tasks that I had to work on there. So, I was at the church, but I was recording this song with the help of a friend of mine on piano.

When it came to writing the song, Holli started by playing the chords, and eventually found a melody. In a way, this song was more intentional than other things she has created.

I was intentionally writing this song, but I didn't really know what it was gonna turn out to be as I was doing it... I was just sitting there thinking, and I wanted it to capture the moment. All the feelings of the day, all the feelings of that moment of having the first dance as Mrs and Mrs... It's a special day, and I just wanted to capture that moment for us.

She doesn't consider the song complete. It was recorded on amateur equipment, with fewer instruments than it has in her mind.

In my mind, I can hear violins and drums and if I could get it all I would do it all. But I knew one person who could play the piano and had recording equipment, so that's all we got the chance to add... My friend just got on the piano and started fiddling around, so that part was still very much within my creative process... I would say that the song is still growing, it's TBD, it's not in its final form.

The lyrics to the song go as follows:

*This is more than I could ask for.
This is more than I could dream.
It's our happy ever after
In a diamond wedding ring.*

*And I have waited my whole life to find someone like you
To have, to hold until we die,
Today we say I do.*

*So dance with me, beautiful.
You already have my heart.
Together, we are beautiful.
Nothing can break a love like ours.
So hold me inside your arms.
I vow to be only yours,
Forever.*

*So for richer or for poorer,
If you are well or you are weak,
I promise to stay right beside you
Until the final breath I breathe.*

*Hand in hand, we become one
A home, a family
Share life, share love beneath the sun
In peaceful harmony.*

*So dance with me, beautiful.
You already have my heart.
Together, we are beautiful.
Nothing can break a love like ours.
So hold me inside your arms.
I vow to be only yours,
Forever.*

*This is more than I could ask for.
This is more than I could dream.*

The link to listen is here: https://www.canva.com/design/DAE5Am-Lcbs/re4LNh0QjgUXpZ_HY-soJA/watch?utm_content=DAE5Am-Lcbs&utm_campaign=designshare&utm_medium=link&utm_source=publishsharelink

The lyrics of the song strongly reflect traditional wedding vows: “To have, to hold until we die,” “So for richer or for poorer/If you are well or you are weak,” as well as explicitly citing the term ‘family,’ the concept of a shared life/becoming one, and monogamous commitment.

They also highlight attributes of her relationship which Holli thus associates with family; physical intimacy such as holding hands and being held in her wife's arms, as well as a peaceful home space. Holli says that the intent of her song is to bring people into a intimate moment, and draws on the culturally recognizable moment of the First Dance at a wedding in order to do so:

It's just me and you; kinda like an us against the world kinda moment... Like, you are watching a movie and two people are dancing and everything else fades into the background, literally. They do that on purpose, because that's how it feels inside. So... I would ask people to imagine that feeling. That's why I wanted the title to be 'First Dance' because it's a moment people know, the first dance on the big day, so I would want them just to be in that moment... Even if they never want to get married, or don't believe in it or whatever, they can feel those feels.

Being queer, for Holli, is about being loved as herself. Her love as represented in this song has the dual intention of expressing it to her wife, and opening the hearts of the close-minded to seeing that queer love is no less important or beautiful than straight love.

There are not a lot of queer, LGBTGIA+, rainbow world love songs, love stories that get told and celebrated and I wish there were more...I hope that if anyone does listen to my song, that they are turned on their head a little bit, because y'know, it is coming from a girl's mouth, and I am saying 'dance with me, beautiful,'... My hope is that it does that, and also still captures the 'only you and me' moment where everything else fades out into the background so that people can relate to that and therefore maybe understand some sort of love that is maybe not the kind that they have experienced or understand or support or whatever. But if you can get that moment, then maybe you could get it!... I want them to see something innocent and pure, it's not overtly sexual; it's the heart and emotion behind it.

Discussion/Conclusion

Exhibition Case Final Design

Keeping with the Ethics of Care, the goal of the exhibition was to highlight the participants and their families. I used the idea that art is a multisensory experience in order to make maximum possible use of the space available to achieve this goal. Awareness of art as a

multisensory experience allowed for greater effectiveness in applying the principles covered in universal design. Universal design addresses the nuts and bolts of aspects of visual appeal including color use, and text size, font and alignment (Lidwell et al, 2010). These aesthetic elements are important because “[p]ositive relationships with a design result in an interaction that helps catalyze creative thinking and problem solving... [Aesthetic designs] are more readily accepted and used over time, and promote creative thinking and problem solving. Aesthetic designs also foster positive relationships with people” (20). Fostering positive relationships with people, as well as encouraging them to think creatively, is important for creating empathy and compassion (Bounia 2020, Leavy 2020, Leavy 2017).

Additionally, an overarching theme of universal design is alignment. Aspects of a design being in alignment with each other creates a sense of unity and cohesion, which contributes to the design’s overall aesthetic and perceived stability. When it comes to color use, the authors emphasize the importance of being conscious of how color choices may impact the experience of the audience; this emphasis aligns with Joy et al, 2003. In my thesis, the art on display is that of participants and therefore the colors within them will be outside of my control. Nonetheless, I used the guidelines suggested by Lidwell, Holden, and Butler such as limiting the color palette to about five colors, and using background elements to visually group aspects of the exhibit together without taking active attention away from the participants' art (48).

The complex visual guidance of text alignment means that how it is used is a calculation best done after data has been gathered. General guidelines include that right and left aligned paragraph text provide clear information alignment cues to the viewer, and “center-aligned text blocks, conversely, provide more visually ambiguous alignment cues, and can be difficult to connect with other elements” (24). The authors also note more complex visual organization

strategies such as along diagonals, or circular/spiral arrangement. On this matter, they state that “along diagonals, for example, the relative angles between the invisible alignment paths should be 30 degrees or greater; separation of less than 30 degrees is too subtle and difficult to detect... In spiral or circular alignments, it may be necessary to augment or highlight the alignment paths so that the alignment is perceptible” (24). Alignment, of course, has to do with more than text, and these principles were applied to all aspects of the final exhibition.

In the final display case, I used a yellow background; this is a bold choice, as a bright background risks drawing attention away from the art on display. I made this choice because the art I ended up receiving was primarily in black and white. By having a yellow background, I am intending to keep the display cheery and engaging while also contrasting with the art.

Over the yellow, I created a gray diagonal stripe from the top left to bottom right corner. This stripe serves two purposes. The first is to dampen the intensity of the yellow. The second is to provide visual guidance to the viewer. The top right corner contains background information on the project itself; anything on or below the stripe is from or directly related to the participants in my thesis. Thus, the stripe provides visual segmentation and an engaging visual alignment.

I also make use of color to distinguish the contributions of each participant; contributions from Holli are backed with a light green paper, and those from Zella and Mina are backed with a light blue. This is particularly important for Holli, as her art is accessible through and thus displayed as a QR code, while Zella and Minas’ art is more clearly distinguishable from other aspects of the case. Background information about the project, placed above the gray stripe, is backed with a pale yellow. This serves to distinguish the text from the background, while not distracting from the participants.

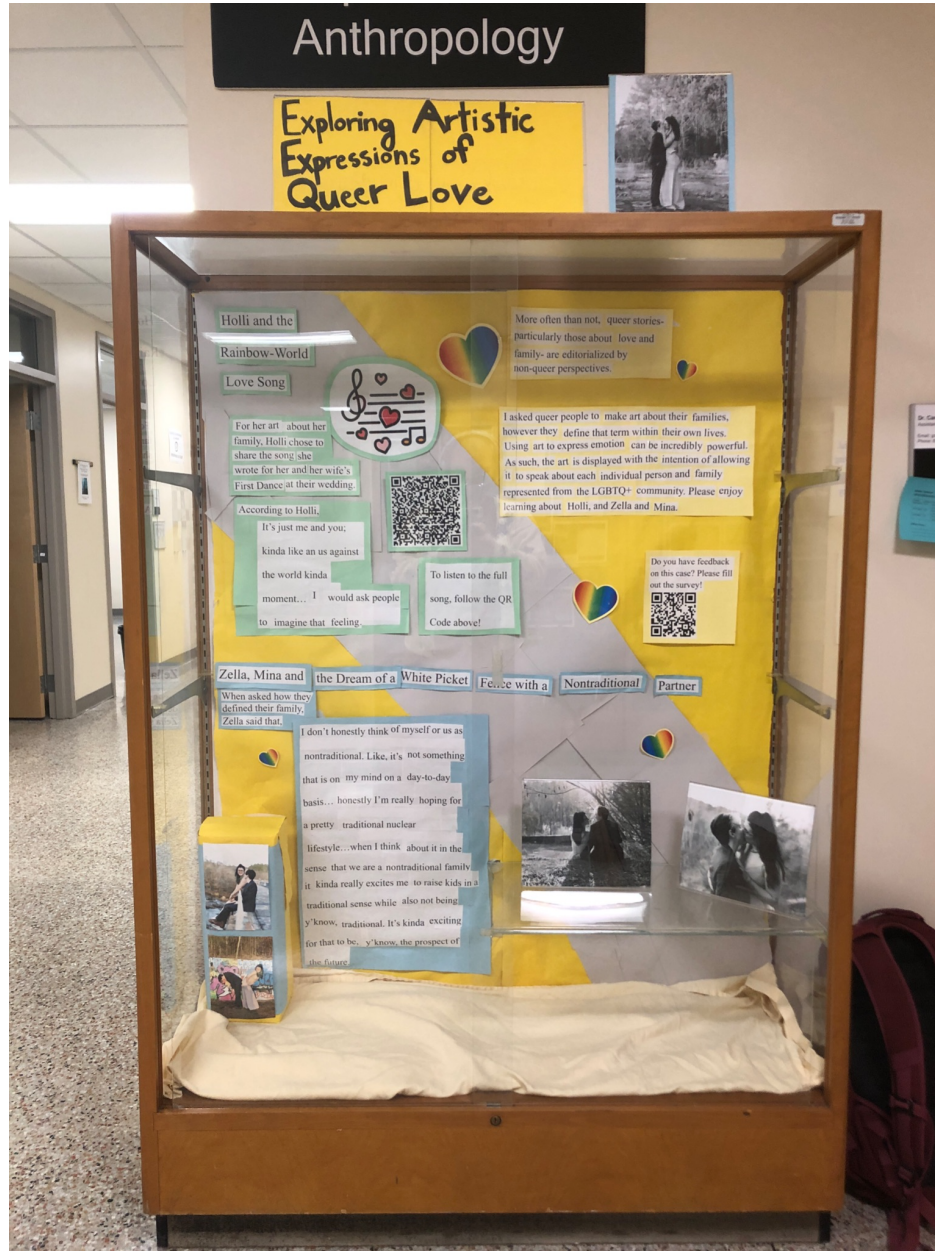


Figure 4: Display Case

Marriage

As stated early in this paper, the center of my research goal is simple. I want to use art by queer people to highlight the individual nature of each family, as well the themes that tie them together. The intention behind my work is to humanize the queer community, look at different forms of family within it, and bring their voices to a wider audience via art. This data is not

meant to be generalized; nonetheless, the art and interviews from this thesis did bring out a clear through-line. Holli and Zella and Mina each used their weddings as a reference point for their family, and thus their art.

In their interviews, participants emphasized wanting to be accepted for their true selves, and wanting to not be seen as inherently different for who they love. The participants in my thesis emphasized joy and connection between the members of their family. This can be seen in Holli's song when she says "Together, we are beautiful/Nothing can break a love like ours," and in Zella and Mina's wedding pictures in that they are intently focused on each other with palpable love. The focus on marriage in their art indicates to me how deeply the idea of marriage as a symbolic and literal commitment is embedded in the American cultural mind.

It was only seven years ago that gay marriage became recognized by the US government. In 2015, the Supreme Court ruled, based on the Fourteenth Amendment, that legally recognized marriage is a right guaranteed as part of American citizenship in the Constitution, regardless of the genders of the people involved. Marriage is important for many reasons; firstly, it grants the married people legal rights in relation to each other such as Social Security payments, the ability to make decisions for an incarcerated or incapacitated partner, and immigration rights. Secondly, marriage is a cultural institution which lends social credibility, recognition and commitment to partnerships (Rich and Wagner, 2018). Holli and Zella and Mina's focus on marriage as a key moment in the formation of their family aligns with the above legal and cultural significance of marriage.

Fulfilling the Ethics of Care

The first step of the Ethics of Care is recognizing need and offering attention and support. In this project, I highlighted queer love stories because such stories are too often highly editorialized by non-queer perspectives. In allowing the lived truth of a few queer families to shine, this study makes steps toward bringing greater queer visibility into mainstream academic and public spaces.

The second step of the Ethics of Care is acting on the understanding that something can be done for the object of care. I come from a place of privilege because I have a foothold in academia; combined with my passion for advocacy and queer rights, I have the ability to act on my desire for greater levels of queer inclusivity in academic and public spaces.

The third step of the Ethics of Care is being practically involved in offering care. This project acts on the aforementioned understanding of my ability to do so. It is an ethnographic exploration of queer families, resulting in a museum exhibit highlighting participants' artistic expressions of/about their relationships. This project actively highlights art about queer love; it is not about the artistic skill of any particular participant. My goal is to encourage people to create something which feels true and to amplify their expressions of self.

The fourth step of the Ethics of Care Making sure that the work has been done, “acknowledging the difference in perceptions of care, and allowing for responsiveness, which often means recognition of difference and listening to others, as well as creating space for different views and ideas” (Bounia 2020, 42-43). In pursuit of fulfilling the fourth aspect of the Ethics of Care, I created a Google Form (linked [here](#)) on which I ask the following questions:

- 1) What are your pronouns?
- 2) Do you consider yourself part of the LGBTQ+ community?

- 3) If yes, please provide some details you are comfortable with disclosing.
- 4) Please tell me about something you found appealing or feel that you gained from seeing this display.
- 5) Please tell me something that you feel would improve this display, and a brief explanation as to why.

As of the time of writing this, I have not received any responses. I chose to ask the above questions because the Ethics of Care emphasizes creating space for differences in perceptions of care, and allowing active responsiveness (Bounia 2020, 42-43). I feel that it is important to establish if a respondent is part of the LGBTQ+ community because that is the community to which I am intending to provide care. If a respondent is part of the LGBTQ+ community, their feedback is of particular importance. My intention is carve out inclusive space for queer love stories, and to do so without internal diversity is to do a disservice the LGBTQ+ community. I will use the feedback I receive to improve future projects about nontraditional families by taking into consideration and integrating a wider variety of perspectives and families.

References

Averett, K. H. (2015). The Gender Buffet. *Gender & Society*, 30(2), 189–212.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243215611370>

Bergman, S. B., & Bornstein, K. (2010). *Gender Outlaws: The Next Generation*. Seal Press.

Bounia, A. (2020). *Museums, Activism, and the “Ethics of Care”: Two Museum Exhibitions on the Refugee “Crisis” in Greece in 2016*. Arc Humanities Press.

<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv14161jz.6>

Coffee, K. (2008). Cultural inclusion, exclusion and the formative roles of museums. *Museum Management & Curatorship*, 23(3), 261–279.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09647770802234078>

Education & Interpretation. American Alliance of Museums. (2021, September 17). Retrieved March 10, 2022, from <https://www.aam-us.org/programs/resource-library/deai-education-interpretation/#Learning>

Emery, A. R. (2001). The Integrated Museum: A Meaningful Role in Society? *Curator*, 44(1), 69–82. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2151-6952.2001.tb00030.x>

Joy, A., Sherry Jr., J. F., Mick, D. G., & Arnould, E. J. (2003). Speaking of Art as Embodied Imagination: A Multisensory Approach to Understanding Aesthetic Experience. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 30(2), 259–282. <https://doi.org/10.1086/376802>

Leavy, P. (2017). *Handbook of Arts-Based Research*. The Guilford Press.

Leavy, P. (2020). *Method meets art: Arts-Based Research Practice* (3rd ed.). The Guilford Press.

- Monks, H., Costello, L., Dare, J. et al. “We’re Continually Comparing Ourselves to Something”: Navigating Body Image, Media, and Social Media Ideals at the Nexus of Appearance, Health, and Wellness. *Sex Roles* 84, 221–237 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-020-01162-w>
- Rathwell, K. J. (2020). “She is Transforming:” Inuit Artworks Reflect a Cultural Response to Arctic Sea Ice and Climate Change. *Arctic*, 73(1), 67.
<https://doi.org/10.14430/arctic69945>
- Rich, A. K., & Wagner, G. (2018). Same-Sex Marriage: An Overview. *Salem Press Encyclopedia*.
- Sheff, E. (2015). *Stories From The Polycule: Real Life in Polyamorous Families*. Thorntree Press.
- William Lidwell, Kritina Holden, & Jill Butler. (2010). *Universal Principles of Design, Revised and Updated : 125 Ways to Enhance Usability, Influence Perception, Increase Appeal, Make Better Design Decisions, and Teach Through Design: Vol. [2nd ed.]*. Rockport Publishers.