

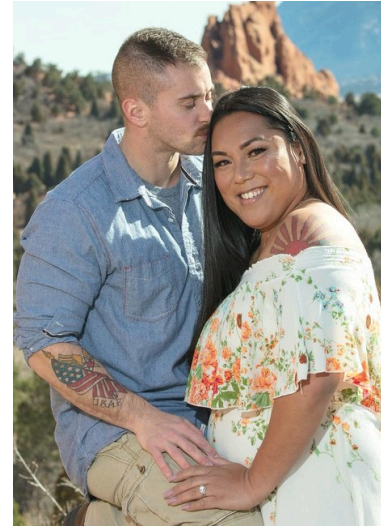
ECAY 6005

TRANS FAMILY

Jonah Montgomery



JONAH & DEEJAY (top left)
Fathers with their daughter, Anuhea.
- LAS VEGAS, NEVADA



LOGAN & LAILA (top right)
Active duty Air Force. US Army
Veteran. Both deployed twice to the
Middle East.
- GARDEN OF THE GODS,
COLORADO



T & BELLA (bottom left)
Both trans activists. T is an assistant
manager of a gym. Bella's goal is to be
a fashion designer.
- BUFFALO, NEW YORK



OWEN & BLUE (bottom right)
Transgender fathers awaiting the birth
of their first child.
- LAS VEGAS, NEVADA

#2409796
Jonah Montgomery
ECAY6005
Assessment 2
Portfolio

Identify 4 images which represent families in the 21st century. Then compare and contrast these images to explore, in depth, how social media can influence current representations of family within society.



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Written Component: The Transition to Post-Modern Family Structures

The photographs simultaneously raise questions and provide answers and hopefully open doors that have been closed far too long. Is a lesbian who becomes a transgender man and is in a relationship with a cisgender woman now straight? Does it matter? Why do labels need to define one of our deepest human emotions? Why does love even need to be explained? It just is.

Transcending Love, B. Proud (2019), page 5

The concept of family is far older than any attempt to define it. In the same way, the complex and dynamic nature of gender identity and expression has evaded scientific explanation and the binding of labelling for centuries. Some non-Western societies have tied diverging gender identities to spiritual significance or found other ways to explain the natural variance that has existed for as long as humans have (Robinson, 2019). From Darwin's theories of social development and selection to Durkheim's commentary on social reproduction, gender roles have served as a necessary pillar to determine the duties one has to the human race. However, in the past twenty years, young people have rebelled against these prescribed paths, bucking the binary system and rapidly expanding the fields of gender studies, sexual liberation, and feminist theory. Through the prevalence of social media, a new generation is being raised with increasing exposure to diverse communities and endless access to resources on identity to navigate their thoughts and feelings at younger and younger ages (Fisher et al., 2024). While opinions on the merit of this self-discovery are mixed, there is no denying that society is beginning to adapt and represent a wider spectrum of families, parents, and communities.

In the 2019 photo project 'Transcending Love' by Barbara Proud, better known by her nickname B. Proud, the artist seeks to create a mood of intimacy and acceptance. The photographs star couples from across the United States of America who have identities that fall outside of cisgender-heterosexual pairings. Fluid and changing gender identity have transformed traditional conceptions of sexuality as previously-straight couples become queer, or inwardly queer couples appear straight to outsiders. B. Proud emphasizes that the labels and expectations we may have for others' relationships are often missing the incredible depth and nuance that only years of introspection and affirmation can yield.

Using four images from this diverse portfolio of images, we will seek to explore the ways that family can appear through post-modern paradigms of gender, sexuality, and technology. How do transgender families align with traditional definitions of family? What traits do they fulfil and which do they subvert? By considering four dimensions: biological, sociological, environmental, and legal, we hope to elucidate the evolving meaning of family, and the ways that individuals blaze their own paths through love, acceptance, and legacy.

Perhaps the most prevalent belief about marriage is that it is a unification to pursue the purpose of reproduction. For cisgender men and women, questions about having children are commonplace, with some societies regulating reproduction based on population and economic variables. Whether encouraging or discouraging childbearing couples, government and social perceptions of family still place heavy emphasis on the ability to procreate. Bioessentialist arguments may simplify heterosexuality to one 'man', assigned male at birth, and one 'woman', assigned female at birth. However, it is rarely that clear-cut, and many heterosexual couples still struggle with fertility, are unable to bear children due to health complications, choose to avoid passing on consequential genetic conditions, or simply prefer to live without children.

For transgender couples, it is a complex conversation. Many factors can contribute: the status of one or both individuals' transitions, the biological capabilities to achieve and sustain pregnancy, and the mental capacity to handle the gender dysphoria that follows. Transgender folks or couples may choose to abstain, use a surrogate, freeze eggs or sperm for later use, or adopt (Ker and Shaw, 2024). Transgender people often do not have family planning or fertility conversations with their providers before undergoing medical transition, in a large percentage of situations due to a lack of knowledge from their doctor. Even choosing to preserve reproductive material may have drawbacks: Mamo (2013) mentions that there is a sense of superiority surrounding biological relations which can transform transgender folks to 'parents-in-waiting' as they wait to become ready for inevitable parenthood (Mamo, 2013; cited in Ker and Shaw, 2024).

Those who choose to go through with childbearing and birth are often a rare case for fertility and delivery clinics and may face discomfort or discrimination. The association with an incongruent identity when undergoing heavily gendered care can be significant enough to dissuade the desire to access these services. Medical improvements have not yet come far enough to allow transgender women to bear children, so existing cases of transgender pregnancy are seen most commonly in transgender men. One example of a transgender father going through the childbearing process is Owen, captured in the *Transcending Love* project (Appendix 1). He describes the process as a 'serious commitment and sacrifice' as it required him to discontinue his hormone treatments (Proud 2019). With such a powerful cultural norm of women experiencing pregnancy and motherhood, it is a subversion of the nuclear family not only for a man to bear children but to consider himself a father after experiencing that process. Situations like Owen and Blue's force us to disconnect the ideas of pregnancy and motherhood and rather consider a broader definition of parenting and biological birthing capacity. Ker and Shaw's (2024) examination of fertility services in Aotearoa finds a plethora of obstacles to accessing fertility care and information. From bioessentialist labelling of genitalia to a lack of knowledge about alternative pregnancy and fertility treatments, and even the desire to pursue queer styles of family through non-biological relations through fostering and adoption, queer couples have a wide variety of perspectives surrounding reproduction (Ker and Shaw 2024).

Owen and Blue have decided to raise their child, Finley, as 'gender-neutral', and their birth certificate is the first in Nevada to bear an 'X' gender marker (Proud 2019). As fathers living outside of the binary and representing a diverse family style, the ability to create an inclusive environment for their children presents a unique opportunity to divorce traditional gender roles and expectations. The potential of queer parenthood in developing a more open-minded society has yet to be explored but has major implications for the future of our cultural frameworks.

Our society has not yet progressed to the point of mainstream acceptance for queer couples. Even in couples that appear straight, racial identity or gender may fuel unfounded assumptions. Appendix 3 shows an image of T and Bella, a couple living in Buffalo, New York. T, a transgender man, is all too familiar with the struggles of being queer and Black. While Bella is incredibly supportive of his changes, he has described his transition as moving him 'lower on the spectrum of life... [people] automatically feel threatened without even knowing me' (Proud 2019). T has had negative experiences with the police intensified by his race and gender identity. Family can become a sanctuary to find affirmation and support after discriminatory experiences.

Even in activist circles, T and Bella feel that there is division. While representation in person and media is improving, there are still disagreements within the LGBT community about who is welcome and the ways they must present themselves. When the couple participates in community action, they mention that it feels like "L-G- B and then slash T" (Proud 2019). Transgender folks may face backlash when more privileged groups distance themselves and use minorities as scapegoats to further societal acceptance. This can make it more difficult to create strong bonds and mutual aid networks amongst queer populations, who already struggle with discrimination on the structural and individual level.

Luckily, the biological family can also fill in gaps in a transgender person's support network. For T and Bella, their families are very supportive. T's mother was his 'biggest supporter' during his transition, and his sisters, nieces, and nephews all accepted and adored him (Proud 2019). Bella has also been welcomed into the tight-knit group and has a spread-out network of her own that has supported their union and T's transition. Bella recounts that 'Pops is full of questions for T, even giving him the moniker "Mr. T"' (Proud 2019). Family, whether biological or chosen, can serve as a foundation for shifting the societal mindset surrounding queer and transgender folks. With greater exposure to LGBT matters through loved ones, those who initially may resist ideas of queerness can experience and begin to understand the affirmation and euphoria that come from living authentically.

Families are not the only organizational blocks that can benefit from queer authenticity. Appendix image #3 displays Logan and Laila Ireland, who are what is known as a transgender-for-transgender, or T4T, couple. They met at a conference for transgender military service members, got married in 2016, and both work tirelessly to increase the acceptance and understanding of transgender service members (Proud 2019). Logan and Laila strive to improve

the representation of transgender service members and bring greater awareness to the policies and procedures the military can implement to make the experience of transitioning smoother. They have appeared in multiple documentaries (*Transgender, at War; Trans Military*), on the Ellen DeGeneres show, in PEOPLE magazine, and on the Secretary of Defense's announcement of 'open service for transgender military members' (Proud 2019). They also collaborate with SPART*A, the organization providing support for transgender members.

Logan, who served as a transgender man in Afghanistan, was treated with incredible dignity and respect by his fellow airmen and officers. It has been his mission to serve as a mentor for other service members 'trying to navigate the process of transition, both socially and professionally' (Proud 2019). As the political environment shifts rapidly in the United States, transgender people must build safe spaces for themselves and foster strong bonds of loyalty and respect. Supportive niches, both for young LGBT folks and older adults coming into the queer community, can build resilience against discrimination and reduce risks of mental illness and substance abuse (Fisher et al, 2024). For Logan and Laila, the fight for acceptance stems from a desire to raise their family free of fear and discrimination. Respect and dignity are the basis of a more just and equitable society, and as Laila explains, 'We are creating the future that will tell our story' (Proud 2019).

Greater inclusion in all aspects of society is found to lead to an improvement in individual attitudes towards transgender people, and in turn, more accepting policies. Lewis et al. (2021) found that following the approval of transgender service members, a positive narrative has been created surrounding their service and patriotism. Polling even found that in 2019, following Trump's ban on transgender military service, Republican approval for transgender military members had increased (Blake, 2019; cited in Lewis et al., 2021). Thus, the exposure to queer identity both within and outside of the military has improved social attitudes, which in turn increases the likelihood of policy that is supportive of transgender matters.

Allowing access to equal services is a relatively new, and incomplete, process. While gender recognition can be found outside of legal affirmation, the uphill battle that transgender folks face to have their identities affirmed and medical care approved is strenuous. Appendix image #1 shows Jonah and DeeJay alongside their daughter, Anuhea. Their family came along by chance; DeeJay struggled to afford consistent hormone treatment as well as gender-affirming surgery, and in the five-year gap away from testosterone, he began his relationship with Jonah. These circumstances led to an unintended pregnancy, which they went through with and had a beautiful daughter whom they adore (Proud 2019). Many transgender people, especially those who occupy a strenuous socioeconomic position, lack the insurance or funding to consistently access hormones and undergo sexual reassignment surgeries. Additionally, some folks simply choose not to use certain tools, either due to inability or lack of desire. Health issues can also be an obstacle when attempting to pursue procedures for gender affirmation (CITE).

Both Jonah and DeeJay enjoy subverting gender presentation and have drag personas, 'Alel'Aloha and Zion Savage' (Proud 2019). They initially met while Jonah was in drag, and DeeJay describes that he liked his 'female energy, but... still favor[s] another man' (Proud 2019). Their relationship blossomed, and they have become pioneers in their community, even earning the title of Miss and Mr. Las Vegas Pride in March of 2019 (Proud 2019). This rejection of stereotypical binary presentation emphasises the decreasing necessity of heterosexual frameworks within which relationships can develop. With improved recognition of queer couples in legislation, such as the Marriage Bill of 2013, increasing assimilation and acceptance of non-traditional families can spread from more progressive queer centres to less diverse communities (GOV.UK 2013). Unfortunately, many fields still lag when it comes to the addition of queer individuals, and discrimination and violence still affect LGBT folks at much higher rates (CITE). For society to fully integrate and include queer lifestyles, both individual and organizational paradigms of defining social norms must adjust.

One aspect of the process of uplifting transgender experiences is remembering those whose lives have been lost. While meeting couples and celebrating their love and acceptance, it is crucial to pay homage to the transgender advocates who came before. T and Bella recall a beloved transgender woman named Tonya who welcomed them to Buffalo when they moved. Tragically, Tonya was murdered a few months before the *Transcending Love* photoshoot (Price 2019). This led to B. Proud creating a subset of images known as *Say Their Names*, documenting the locations where violence has claimed the life of a transgender person (Proud, 2019). The tender and beautiful shots of queer couples exist in tandem with the tragic losses of queer individuals taken too soon by transphobic and homophobic hate crimes.

Through this beautifully intimate tribute to the diversity of love and connection, it is possible to imagine a progressive society with greater inclusion of alternative identities. As scientific understanding expands and biologically dominant attitudes fade into the background, the restriction of family and childbearing opportunities will hopefully diminish as well. The development of a sociological imagination that encompasses non-traditional manners of presentation can improve attitudes towards transgender individuals and couples. This can lead to the expansion of programming to facilitate smoother transitions and integration into a professional environment. As we saw with military support to service members after the advocacy of Logan and Laila, to the awarding of Las Vegas Pride winners to Jonah and DeeJay, society has inched forward to the acceptance of transgender couples into the mainstream. Despite generations of social norms defining the makeup of kin, new representations of love and relation are redefining the meaning of family in the post-modern era. As Owen rationalizes in his *Transcending Love* interview, 'Every family is valid. Whether it's chosen or blood, there's one thing involved. Love.' (Proud 2019). By placing love at the heart of community building, child-rearing, and political legislation, we can pave the way for a truly just society—one that embraces and nurtures the myriad definitions of family.

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Assessment 2

Appendix 1: Jonah and Deejay



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Assessment 2

Appendix 2: Logan and Laila Ireland



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Assessment 2

Appendix 3: T and Bella



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Assessment 2

Appendix 4: Owen and Blue



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