The Game of Queer Family Life: Exploring 2SLGBTQI+ parents’ experiences of cisheteronormativity, racism, and colonialism through digital storytelling in Ontario, Canada

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Abstract

In this article we describe and analyze five videos created through an arts-informed research project, *Precarious Inclusion: Studying Ontarian 2SLGBTQI+ parents’ experiences childrearing in a post-legal parity framework*. *Precarious Inclusion* used interviews and digital storytelling to investigate Ontario 2SLGBTQI+ parents’ current experiences of inclusion and exclusion when navigating institutional and social interactions in everyday life in a post-legal parity context. The study centrally explored how intersecting identities with regards to sexuality, gender, geography, disability, class, race, Indigeneity, and ethnicity intersect with structural forces to influence 2SLGBTQI+ parents’ inclusion and exclusion experiences. We examine research creation activities that supported 2SLGBTQI+ parents in making short videos about their experiences of parenting. Our analysis of the five videos created by Indigenous, racialized, trans, nonbinary, two-spirit, and disabled parents show how consistent experiences of exclusion mark 2SLGBTQI+ parents’ everyday lives. We deepen theorizations of the material and psychological impacts of exclusion for 2SLGBTQI+ families through foregrounding three themes: 1) the operations of racism, white supremacy, and colonialism in makers’ lives; 2) misrecognition and its psychic effects of bifurcation and disjuncture; and 3) love, joy, and multi-species kinship as powerful sites of healing and
belonging. We further demonstrate how parents used their videos as self-advocacy for resisting precarious inclusion.

**Keywords**

2SLGBTQI+ parenting, digital storytelling, exclusion, intersectionality, bifurcation, multi-species kinship; white supremacist colonialism

**Introduction**

In 2016, Ontario 2SLGBTQI+ parents (Two Spirit, lesbian, gay, trans, queer, and intersex plus) gained equal legal parental status via the passing of the All Families Are Equal Act (*Grand vs. Ontario*, 2016; Ontario. Legislative Assembly, 2016), yet since this time the province has witnessed a rising tide of conservatism. What does it mean to be a 2SLGBTQI+ parent in this contradictory moment of legal parity rubbing against socio-political and economic push-back? How does cis-“heterosexual dominance” (Ryan & Berkowitz, 2009) continue to operate and intersect with other forms of discrimination in Ontario today? To study these questions, we—a team of white settler 2SLGBTQI+ researchers, parents, and grandparents with intersectional identities in relation to disability, gender, and family forms, each of us contributing to the research, analysis and writing of this paper—conducted an exploratory arts-informed research project, *Precarious Inclusion*. *Precarious Inclusion* aimed to investigate the gaps among law, policy, and practice that dwell in the texture of daily life for diversely positioned 2SLGBTQI+ parents in Ontario, Canada. Specifically, we sought to learn: 1) how 2SLGBTQI+ parents’ experience inclusion and exclusion when navigating legal, institutional (government, healthcare, education, recreation) and social interactions in everyday life; 2) how intersecting axes of power and difference including sexuality,
gender, geography, disability, class, race, Indigeneity, and ethnicity, influence 2SLGBTQI+ parents inclusion/exclusion experiences, and; 3) how 2SLGBTQI+ parents’ values and strategies for protecting and caring for their children are shaped through and against exclusion experiences.

Contemporary 2SLGBTQI+ family studies scholarship has excavated some of the ways that population governance operates through the social institution of “the family,” with its accompanying sexuality and gender politics (Hull & Ortyl 2018; Smith, 2020; Wood, 2018; Gruson-Wood et al., 2022). A corpus of literature now exists examining how power circulates in and across family structures to reify cisheteronormative kinship arrangements as natural and desirable (Gibson, 2014; Gibson & Gruson-Wood, 2020) and how 2SLGBTQI+ parents make and mobilize social spaces, feelings, and actions to resist these regulating forces (Pyne, 2012; Vinjamuri, 2016). Too often, however, researchers’ contributions to this corpus address parents’ experiences as if gender and sexuality operate in isolation from other axes of difference/identity such as race, Indigeneity, class, and disability. Although some scholars have critiqued the field for underrepresenting racialized, low income, and disabled 2SLGBTQI+ parenting experiences (Moore, 2011; Tarasoff, 2016) and over-representing those of propertied, non-disabled, white parents (Carrol, 2018; Hunter, 2010), few have investigated distinct forms of inclusion/exclusion experienced by 2SLGBTQI+ families at the nexus of intersecting differences. One exception is found in Indigenous scholarship, which has documented the settler imposition of cisheteropatriarchy into Indigenous kin networks as an integral part of white settler nation-building (Simpson, 2017; TallBear, 2018).
While this paper adopts a structural approach interested in documenting the ways that resistance is mobilized and structures press down on families from intersecting equity-deserving communities who already have children, it is important to synthesize the corpus of queer cultural studies literature that engages with the politics of reproduction and figure of the child. Lee Edelman, for example, in/famously condemned the futurity politics of The Child as a testament to the insidiousness of neoliberal logics. In Edelman’s anti-generational view in the time of AIDS, “The Child” serves as antithetical to queer resistance and queer lives. While critiquing Edelman’s negative politics and tacit centering of whiteness, Jose Esteban Munoz also considered reproduction as inherently heteronormative and capitalistic. For these reasons, childhood has been charged as being “just another name for heteropatriarchy” (Gil-Peterson, Sheldon, Stockton, 2016, p.497).

The dovetailing of cultural studies and child studies literature has led to an appreciation of the child as an ambivalent innocent/erotic, queer/heteronormative subject (Bruhm & Hurley (2006). The “production of modern childhood” biopolitically manifests as protected identity reserved for colonial white innocence which sedimentes the “economy towards a fully consumer mode of demographics and leisure (Gil-Peterson, Sheldon, Stockton, 2016, p.496). Importantly though, the colonial white construct of modern childhood has always had its “other:” the child who is Indigenous, Black, racialized, trans, disabled, and/or the child from the global south. These children are excluded from the realm of leisure, innocence, and biopolitics, and instead subjected to hard labour, state sanctioned violence, slow or fast deaths, and family separation via incarceration and institutionalization. In the case of residential schools for
Indigenous children in Canada and the United States, for example, cisheteropatriarchy was enforced on Indigenous children as part of the colonial process, stamping out nonheteropatriarchal Indigenous ways of thinking and doing sex, gender, and family structure. We can think here of how Edelman’s neoliberal child is rooted in fraught histories of colonial reproduction that systemically and violently enforced such a construct into being, and of how the materiality of “no future” was inflicted on Indigenous families by the colonial state via forcibly removing the right of reproduction, the right to raise children.

We engage with this corpus of literature in a fraught way, especially as our study begins with and only includes 2SLGBTQI+ parents from equity deserving communities who in most cases, worked very hard to have their children and articulated profound love for them. While careful of the affective and symbolic weight we assign children here, this article is not concerned with evaluating the political and ethical merits of 2SLGBTQI+ having children. What are interested in is the ways in which colonialism, racism, and cisheteropatriarchy is enacted on and resisted by 2SLGBTQI+ parents from intersecting equity deserving communities.

To this end, our staged research began with interviewing parents from 32 2SLGBTQI+ families across Ontario and followed with invitations to parents from 13 of these families to make short (two to five minutes) videos about their experiences of inclusion and exclusion in their daily lives. In this article, we analyze five of these “microdocumentaries” (Rice et al., 2018a) created by 2SLGBTQI+ parents with multiple intersecting identities as they traverse legal, institutional, and social domains that are not only cis and heteronormative but also white, ablest, and colonial. We thus offer a
rigorous yet preliminary exploratory account of how these parents understand and respond to precarity, discrimination, erasure, community, belonging, misidentification, and joy in everyday parenting within the larger frame of legal parity.

In our close reading of five films from our collection, we argue that consistent experiences of precarious belonging mark 2SLGBTQI+ parent’s everyday lives, bringing viewers into the psychologically tender and difficult reality of never knowing whether the storytellers’ identities and family will be welcomed or excluded. We deepen theorizations of the psychic and material impacts of precarious inclusion for Ontario 2SLGBTQI+ families through three overarching themes that punctuate the videos: 1) the operations of racism, white supremacy, and colonialism in the storytellers’ lives; 2) misrecognition and its psychic effects of bifurcation and disjuncture; and 3) love, joy, and multi-species kinship as powerful sites of recognition, healing, and belonging.

In what follows, we give a detailed overview of our story-making method followed by a close reading of the videos in this collection.

Materials and Methods

Research Design, Recruitment, and Process

After receiving ethics approval (#19-08-029) from the University of Guelph ethics board, we recruited and interviewed an ethno-culturally and economically diverse population of 32 2SLGBTQI+ parents. Our sample included 30 parents currently with children under age five plus two key informants with older children who possessed in-depth knowledge of the shifting social and institutional landscape 2SLGBTQI+ parents navigate. We chose to focus on parents with children under the age of five to examine if and how the All Families Are Equal Act impacted their parenting experiences. To reach
Ontario 2SLGBTQI+ parents with intersecting identities across rural, mid-town and urban contexts, we recruited through many outreach channels: social media networks; 2SLGBTQI+ advocacy organizations; and non-2SLGBTQI+ focused community organizations (disability/sex worker, HIV/AIDS, anti-poverty/racial justice, newcomer). We implemented an intersectional tally to prioritize participants typically underrepresented in 2SLGBTQI+ parenting literature (Indigenous; disabled; parents of colour; newcomers, non-status; refugee; trans and gender diverse; working class; multi-parent or single-parent households). We applied an intersectional screening matrix to determine our interview participants (Rice et al., 2019), which involved inputting demographic information from each screening questionnaire into a spreadsheet and analyzing each questionnaire in relation to the larger sample to ensure we invited participants who represented a diverse range of socio-geographic locations, experiences, family arrangements, and identities. We opted to not interview some parents (white, cis, gay, lesbian, middle-class) to avoid replicating hegemonic orders which would miss an analysis of what life is like for many Ontario 2SLGBTQI+ parents. Our semi-structured interviews were divided into five sections: 1) pre-conception experiences: the journey to parenthood; 2) institutions, policies and bureaucracy; 3) social interactions; 4) family, wellbeing, community, and parental identity; 5) legal rights. Each interview participant was provided with a $25 grocery card.

During the second phase, 13 family interviewees from diverse socio-geographic locations were invited to participate in one of two online multimedia story-making workshops. We prioritized inviting trans and non-binary, Indigenous, racialized, rural, disabled, and working-class interviewees as well as parents who had unconventional
parenting relations and non-biological children. Each parent who participated in the
story-making workshop was provided an honorarium of $300. We designed these
workshops through the Re•Vision: the center for art and social justice at the University
of Guelph. Re•Vision is an arts methodology hub that centres creative and artistic forms
of self-expression to grapple with and transform systemic injustices in healthcare,
education, and the arts (Rice et al., 2018a). The workshops provided teaching, technical
support, and tools (computers, sound/video equipment, editing software) for participants
to create two to five-minute videos in collaboration with artists/videographers/social
workers trained by Re•Vision (Rice et al., 2015). We also hired an artist consultant Kat
Singer to provide additional creative support. Research assistant and second author,
Kael Reid, who is a professional working musician, composed original music and
arranged cover songs and recorded them to accompany participants’ stories.

We chose multimedia storytelling for its dual functions of data creation and
translation and for its emphases on participant empowerment and community-building
through collaborative story-making. Multimedia stories have been used as effective
tools for social change in healthcare, education, and the arts (Rice et al., 2021, 2018a;
Douglas et al., 2020). The method emerges from important interventions on subjectivity,
praxis, and power within critical race theory, posthumanism, decolonizing movements,
feminist methodology, and elsewhere (Rice et al., 2015, 2018a). Following the tenets of
critical and decolonial pedagogies, we designed our workshops as creative, reflexive
spaces that invited self-reflection and becoming via video-making. We encouraged
makers dig into “the liminalities, marginalities, and privileges as well as uncertainties
and changeabilities of [their] bodily selves and lives” (Rice & Mündel, 2018b). Drawing
on the work of critical methodologists Rice and Mündel (2018b; 2019), we wanted to investigate how story-making in a queered space might build community, shift the dynamics of authorship within research practice, and illuminate how neoliberal colonial constructs operate at micro and relational levels. We also saw multimedia videomaking as a powerful method for making change; indeed, the videos produced offer an intimate-affective view of existing injustices that have the potential to inspire new ideas and practices in makers and audiences (Rice & Mündel, 2018b; Rice et al., 2022). Besides being circulated by the participants themselves, many of the videos created by the storytellers in our workshops are currently being used in various equity training workshops across sectors, have been integrated into course material in postsecondary settings, and some have been viewed in film festivals.

Before the spread of COVID-19, multimedia storytelling at Re•Vision involved intensive 3-to-5 day workshops that brought makers together in local institutional and community spaces. When the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic, the Re•Vision team quickly pivoted its methodology to an on-line format by designing, building, and testing an interactive digital workshop infrastructure (Rice et al., 2022). Our study followed suit. We hosted two virtual multimedia storytelling workshop series (February and April 2020), each consisting of four weekly sessions, running three hours long each Saturday of the month. The first week included a storytelling circle, creative writing session, music presentation on forms of music storytellers could layer into their stories, and an interactive art demonstration on photo archiving and creating character with found objects. During the second week, the team introduced WeVideo (videomaking software), and provided a photography tutorial and one-on-one support
with storyboarding, filming, and archiving images. The third week focused on video editing. During the second and third weeks, Gruson-Wood, Reid and members of the Re•Vision team also worked one-on-one with makers to develop the creative, visual, and musical arc of their stories. The fourth week culminated in a screening of all participants’ videos.

Analysis

We transcribed our audio-recorded interviews, and organized, coded, and analyzed them through MAXQDA, a software program for qualitative and mixed methods data analysis. Coded data was analyzed using a constant comparative method in conjunction with memos and fieldnotes, to explore patterns in parents’ actions and narratives, and how these reproduce, resist, and transgress cis-heterosexual dominance. We applied an intersectional lens throughout, to uncover how gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, social class, geographic location, and embodiment inflected and organized parents’ inclusion/exclusion accounts. Our analysis of the videos emerged from our in-depth analytic discussions and interview coding. The themes we identified through coding—particularly as related to the intersection of racism and trans- and homophobia, experiences of misrecognition and bifurcation, and the surfacing of love, joy and interspecies kinship—shaped our sense of which stories to focus on in our writing. We draw on RC’s ethic of analyzing multimedia stories, which insists on attending to the stories as a whole; we do not fragment them for meanings or theorize them. Our writing here thus aims to present the story and draw on the central threads the storytellers themselves have weaved together for us so that we may bear witness
(Rice et al., 2021; Boler 1999) to the lives of the families who graciously participated in this study and amplify their experiences of exclusion/belonging.

Notably, we interpret connections that formed during the workshops as an important part of the method and impact of this project, particularly within the pandemic context. Our Saturday gatherings provided a rare and welcoming social opportunity for 2SLGBTQI+ families across Ontario to connect and discuss their heightened isolation and fear during the COVID-19 lockdown of schools and the already meager offerings of 2SLGBTQI+-friendly services. The method itself thus enhanced the lived experience of families by creating a space of belonging, filled with the sights and sounds of laughing, eating, napping, and playing as babies, toddlers, children, and many cats joined in our videomaking. This space also became an emotionally expressive and layered one that provided a container for makers’ expressions of love and joy, and of the pain and isolation that results from experiencing homophobia, transphobia, ableism, and racism. The significant legacy of the method is the continuity of this community through a newly established Facebook group, friendships, and alliances. When working with storytelling, methods are meeting places for meaning, kinship and co-creation.

Results

In this section, we provide a close reading of five multimedia stories which underscore the nexus of racialization and non-cisgender parenting experiences. These stories focus on some of the distinct yet discursive experiences of exclusion that our participants faced and their acts of resistance in response.
The Game of Queer Family Life by Summer Sands-MacBeth and Janet MacBeth

Upbeat, retro ‘80s game show music begins as the cover of The Game of Queer Family Life boardgame—created by a small-town family of two moms, a First Nations non-binary queer woman (Summer) and a white trans woman (Janet)—emerges on screen (to access: https://revisioncentre.ca/game-of-queer-family-life, password: Precarious). On the side of the board is a spinner. One-fourth of the spinner is a smiling sun, and the other three-fourths is a frowning poop emoji, demonstrating how the odds of a positive spin are stacked against the players. A game card image with instructions on how to play the game appears as we hear Janet’s voice:

This is the game of queer family life.
The Game board comes with a spinner, scenario cards, round pegs for square holes.
You move around the outside world and have affirming and oppressive experiences.
To win the game: just don’t let adversity bring you down.

We are introduced to the family on a stage with dancing spotlights as the audience cheers. All eyes are on the family and their journey, which they begin from a safe place: home. The family is pictured as round game pegs, and each member introduces themselves to audience cheers: Janet, (Mama), Summer (Mommy), Zhaazhaawan and Whishkpimin (the two children), and Emily, Cloudy, and Blue (the three cats). Throughout the video, the audience serves as a chorus, hyperbolically narrating, with applause and boos, the emotional crosscurrents of affirming and oppressive experiences. Along with the images of the family’s three cats, the chorus
operates as an invisible, yet audible empathetic group of supportive companions who accompany the family through their experiences of misrecognition, discrimination, and joy.

As the game starts, the screen flashes to the game board and the family members stand side-by-side in the home spot, ready to begin. There are four places ahead, each bearing three question marks, where the family will pick up corresponding mystery scenario cards representing the places and people they encounter when traversing the outside world.

As a bell sounds, the family moves to the first mystery location. They spin the spinner, landing on the poop emoji. Their scenario card reads “Restaurant.” The scene begins with their three cats sitting as customers at the table. Then, the mystery scenario card reveals a white, blonde-haired waitress standing opposite the family who is now seated at the table. Everyone is smiling and the waitress comments on how lovely the children are and follows with, “I can tell which one is whose.” The family frowns, and the children have question marks beside their heads. The family remains silent as the waitress continues, “Would you like the bill together or separate?” A loud “wrong answer” buzzer sounds (indicating the waitress’ heteronormativity) and the audience lets out a chorus of sad “awws.” One cat proceeds to knock over the waitress and sits on top of her to end the scene.

The screen switches back to the board game and the family moves to the second mystery location. The scenario, “Doctor’s Office” flashes with the three feline protagonists lurking in the medical room. The spinner lands on the poop emoji again. Janet, Summer, and Whishkpimmin appear on one side of the screen while a white cis-
male doctor appears on the other. The doctor engages in a one-way dialogue punctuated by silence as Janet, Summer and Whishkpimin frown and back away from him:

Okay so you said you were both biological parents. So, who’s the father?

I need to know who the biological father is.

Yes, I know you are transgender.

I am not treating you any different, I ask the same questions to everyone.

The “wrong answer” buzzer blasts again as another cat knocks over and sits atop the fallen doctor.

The screen flashes back to the gameboard and the family moves to the third mystery spot. The spinner lands on another poop emoji as the “Emergency Room” scenario card appears and the cats are present again. As the cats disappear, Janet, Summer, and a crying Zhazhawaan appear on the screen with a blonde, white, cis-female healthcare provider. In another one-way dialogue punctuated by silence from Janet and Summer, the healthcare provider asks:

Which one of you is the mom?

Well, which one of you has custody?

I don’t understand.

Oh, Okay!

Janet and Summer frown. Low, menacing arcade game instrumentals start playing. In response to the building tension of this encounter, Janet and Summer remain rigid and silent. The “wrong answer” buzzer blasts again in unison with a disappointed
chorus of “awws.” The third cat pushes over the healthcare provider and sits on top of her.

The screen returns to the game and the family moves to the final spot. This time, the spinner lands on a sun emoji and the chiming of a celebratory bell signals a forthcoming positive encounter. The “Bkejwanog Children’s Centre: Local Daycare” scenario card flashes onto the screen. Three daycare teachers, who are culturally coded as racially diverse, appear on one side of the screen with the family on the other. A warm voice begins:

Okay, so you are Mommy and you are Mama.

Would you like us to have your child make Two Mother’s Day cards?

Let us know if there’s anything else we can do.

As the daycare teacher speaks, triumphant game show music plays as the family and daycare teachers stand side-by-side. Janet and Summer’s eyes turn into hearts and the cats appear pulsing along to the music beat as a giant cartoon heart thumps along with them.

The game board flashes once more and the family is back home, hearts in their eyes and a heart continuing to pulse on the screen. The three cats are there too, and they grow larger and larger until they cover the entire screen and the game ends.

As the credits roll, we hear Wiishkpimin’s happy voice say:

What I like about my two moms is: I very love them, and they’re the best. My name’s Zhaazhaawan. Get pillow fights, kittens, and pet kitty and kitty run away.
As Zhaazhaawan speaks, there is series of photos: one of her and Whiishkpimin holding up two mother’s day cards: their painted handprints morph into flowers on a stem with “Mino Gashi Giizhgad” written on them, untranslated Anishinaabemowin words that perhaps might signal the family’s return address of gratitude to those teachers from their Anishinaabe daycare who recognized and welcomed them. Other photographs depict the family together, smiling.

As the credit reel begins, we hear Zhaazhaawan singing while Whishkpimin plays the shaker: “Two ma’s, my two ma’s, my two ma’s” over and over again. The story ends with “and Zhaazhaa loves you.”

**COVID Testing Mistake (Anonymous)**

Set in an urban centre, this anonymously made film, *COVID Testing Mistake*, describes a common yet heightened experience that many racialized participants in our study told of confronting: that of being erased and misrecognized when accessing healthcare (To access: [https://revisioncentre.ca/game-of-queer-family-life](https://revisioncentre.ca/game-of-queer-family-life), password: Precarious). As this video begins, we see a screen divided into three horizontal sections, with two sets of eyes appearing in the bottom two sections, while the top section remains empty. The pairs of eyes belong to a married couple who identify as East-Asian and are parents to a young child. A voice states: “Hi, we’re here for our COVID tests.” Here, and throughout the video, the viewer can’t tell which mom is saying what.

The top section of the screen turns from black to show the eyes of a visibly-coded white, healthcare provider wearing glasses. Unlike the parents, the colours used in the healthcare section are black and white, perhaps denoting the binary thinking of
health institutions. As the scene continues, this top section transforms to the kind of over-saturation effect used to in true crime documentaries.

“I’ll need your names please, and what’s the father’s name?” the healthcare provider asks, as menacing grungy guitar plucking punctuates the narrative. The eyes of the parent on the bottom of the screen squint in a painful expression, while the eyes of the parent above are wide-open, looking straight at—what we can imagine to be—both the viewer and the healthcare provider.

The healthcare provider disappears from the screen. The top section turns black before filling with both mothers’ collective thoughts manifested as spoken words on the screen: “This makes us feel like you assume every family has a mother and a father.”

The image of the healthcare provider returns, and the mothers respond in a non-oppositional, controlled tone: “There is no father. We’re both moms.”

“Oh, okay. I guess I’ll take your name then,” the provider responds.

Both mothers’ eyes wince in frustration and then open wide in surprise. It becomes clear that the provider is asking for the name of the parent she assumes is biologically related to the child. The provider disappears, and text fills the top section as a collective thought between to the two moms: “This makes us feel like you don’t recognize us as a family.”

The provider’s eyes return to the screen. Separating one of the mothers from her family, the provider then instructs: “You can go over there for your test.”

“We’ve been registered,” one mom responds.

“Oh, is this your child?” the provider asks, confused.

“Yes, and this is his mama,” the other mom responds.

Her image disappears and the top section fills up with the internal dialogue of the two parents: “This makes us feel like you didn’t hear us and aren’t listening to us.”

The rhythmic distorted strumming of the acoustic guitar becomes more pronounced with each exchange between the two mothers and the healthcare worker. The pounding music highlights the mounting level of frustration and anger that the two mothers are experiencing.

“No, that’s ‘Mama,’” the steady voice of one of the mother’s replies. The eyes of both mothers become more distressed, shifting their gaze to all corners of the screen, as if they are trying to look for some way to make sense of what they are experiencing. The screen takes on a boxy, claustrophobic quality, signaling the feeling of being trapped and looking for an escape.

The healthcare provider responds: “Okay, so let’s get your test done. Grams, can you stand over here while I do the test for mommy and child?”

As her image disappears the internal dialogue returns: “This makes me feel like you aren’t letting me be a part of this family. I’m his Mama.”

“Oh, okay got it. So, it’s your turn now, Nona,” the provider says in a polite, infantilizing, robotic tone. Her image disappears and once again, we hear and read one mother’s internal dialogue: “This makes me feel like you are ignoring my wishes. I’m still his Mama.”

The heads of both moms begin to shake. This subtle action is almost imperceptible, even with this intimate view. We see just how slight their expressions of anger must be.
“Okay, here we go, I’m inserting this in your nose now” the provider states. We see one parent’s eyes squint in extreme discomfort to depict the insertion of the swab into her nostril.

The provider disappears, and we hear and read this mother’s internal dialogue: “This makes me feel vulnerable and violated when you can’t even recognize who I am.”

“All done now. Was it… ‘Nana?’” the provider asks in a patronizing tone. As she disappears, a voice states: “This makes me feel like you’re not letting me be a mother to my child.”

“No. I’m. His. Mama,” one of the moms says slowly and deliberately for the final time as the music peaks into loud, fuzzy, belligerent strumming.

“Oh. ‘Ma-ma.’” the provider repeats with a smile.

The video ends with a rhetorical question: “How many times do we have to tell you ‘I’m Mama’ for you to hear us?”

*We Aren’t Here* by Joelle Barron and Wynne Degagné

Nonbinary lesbian couple Joelle and Wynne (Joelle is white, Wynne is Filipino) created our third film, *We Aren’t Here* (to access: https://revisioncentre.ca/game-of-queer-family-life, password: Precarious). Joelle and Wynne launch a visual account of resistance through a series of intimate snapshots of family togetherness that assert 2SLGBTQI+ presence in their small northern town, whilst narrativizing myriad ways the world communicates that their family does not exist.

The video begins with the title *We Aren’t Here* emerges with a close-up of a dog lying calmly on the living room floor. Lilting finger-picking strains of an acoustic guitar begin and continue like a steady heartbeat throughout the video—never swelling or
changing pace—as if holding space for tranquility as a persistent and gentle force throughout this video. Next, the scene cuts to a close-up of a child’s hands cuddling a well-worn, sewn teddy bear as she lays on a couch in rainbow pajamas, her face only partially visible. As we watch this tender, quiet moment, a voice states: “Our family isn’t real.” Throughout the video the parents take turns saying each line:

- **We are lacking an essential ingredient**
- **Our family is confusing**
- **We are too much or not enough**
- **We want special treatment**
- **Our family isn’t real**
- **Our skin doesn’t match**
- **Our chosen names and pronouns are an inconvenience, a burden**
- **We didn’t create our family**
- **When you see us together—**
- **You’re missing a part of the story that would make us make sense to you**
- **We owe you an explanation of our bodies, minds, hearts**
- **Our family isn’t real**
- **We aren’t here**

While this is narrated, the viewer watches a series of family scenes unfold within and around their cabin-like home, which is nestled amongst snowy evergreens in the stillness of winter. We see a child’s hand hold and stroke the hand belonging to Joelle and then see them together on the couch, arms intertwined and cozy under a fuzzy blanket. The scene cuts to the other parent, Wynne, who has short brown hair and
brown skin, and is dressed in a T-shirt and loose-fitting jeans. Wynne is standing by the oven with their child, who is in pajamas and has long blond hair and white skin. Wynne flips a toasted bagel on the stove, and their child jumps and hugs them. Wynne smiles and puts their free hand around their child. Next, we see a close-up shot of the dog again, gazing at the camera and sitting calmly while enjoying a big hug from Joelle, whose face is hidden in the brownish-black fur.

We see an iron kettle boil on the electric stove. Hot water is poured onto a teabag in a mug. A puff of steam from the mug evokes a sense of warmth and comfort; honey is added, summoning sweetness. As the family converses with one another at a wooden table eating breakfast we see the child’s warm-socked feet twist around the legs of her wooden stool. There is a feeling of connectedness, of the shared simplicity of daily life.

The last scene takes us to the family’s forested backyard. We see a wood stump with a statue on it, a snow-covered landscape with lush scenes of gently swaying balsam branches, laden with snow. Wynne and the child sway on a rope tied between trees. Their dog frolics around them, carrying a large stick. Joelle and the child embrace, swaying together in snow suits, and Joelle cups the child’s face with woolly-mitten hands. In final shot, the family walks off into the wintery woods together, all three holding hands. Wynne’s voice narrates the last sentence of the narrative, “We are not here,” and the scene cuts to a black empty screen.

*The Myth of Mother by Michel Dumont*

In its collision with the controlling image of cisheteronormative motherhood, Michel Dumont’s *The Myth of Mother* presents an alternative image-scape of the life
and love of a single disabled Two Spirit gay father raising his son in their northern city despite the sexism, homophobia, and anti-Indigenous racism that threaten to pathologize and criminalize him (to access: https://revisioncentre.ca/game-of-queer-family-life, password: Precarious). The story begins with Michel holding his swaddled baby on a black leather sofa chair, and then cradling him as a toddler in the same chair. Pictures of their life unfold. They decorate a snowperson, relax on a pool floaty, lounge by a lake, read together in bed, share a candle at a vigil, make silly faces at the camera, hug. We see Michel standing proudly behind his son who presents a framed mosaic he created to his class. His son opens Christmas presents, rides a merry-go-round, drives an electric toy car, learns to ride a bike, sits on a rock with the Gitchi-Gami (Lake Superior), walks across an ice lake, smiles as he rides on Michel’s shoulders. Evident in these pictures is Michel’s proud, visible queerness and Indigeneity. He sports a purple mohawk, blue streaked hair, a bridge piercing between his eyes; he wears Pride, AIDS, and Che Guevara T-shirts; sports a red bandana; wears leather Rough Trade, Smokey the Bear, and newboy hats as well as leather vests and wrist cuffs.

Interspersed and juxtaposed with these joyous, intimate portraits of family and identity are stock images of well-groomed, cisgender, heterosexual women who embody what Michel refers to as “the myth of mother.” These images antagonistically personify domesticity and ideal motherhood as the white middle-class able-bodied, apron-wearing, recipe-sharing, grocery-shopping wives of 1950s North American suburbia.

The narrative in The Myth of Mother tells a very different story than the family photos of Michel and his son that populate this video. Michel offers a detailed account of
how pervasive experiences of anti-gay, sexist, and cisheteronormative colonialism have left an indelible mark on him and his son. Michel begins by recounting his struggle to find potty training books that included fathers. He talks about searching every library, community space, daycare, and bookstore in Thunder Bay until, one day on a trip in Minnesota, he found one page of a book that illustrated a father cheering on his son who is sitting on the toilet. While the caption read, “Dads potty train on the weekend too,” the existence of the representation of a father potty training his son, despite its heteronormative implications and the insinuation that fathers “help” their wives with parenting, was a marvel. This experience indicated how “pervasive the myth of mother was going to be” in Michel’s life as a “single, gay, Two-Spirited father.”

Michel reveals to the viewer: “The myth of mother loomed over my shoulder throughout my parenting experience” and recounts several stories that demonstrate how social, educational, and legal domains converged to reinforce this myth. There was the time he organized a fifth birthday for his son and was told by the other parents that it was “shocking” to have a dad invite their children to a party. This resulted in only one other child attending his son’s party, who was also Indigenous and whose mother accepted Michel as Two-Spirit. There was the time Michel’s son came home upset after his substitute teacher forced him to make a Mother’s Day card. When Michel called to complain, the school stated that “all children need their mothers,” and equated Michel’s situation to families whose mothers have “died from cancer.” There was the time police interrupted Michel’s joyful teaching of his son to ride a bike, pulling his son aside to ask if Michel was his father. Then there was an instance when Michel and his son were stopped and questioned at the border because his son had a different
last name than him. When the guards seized and searched Michel’s computer, they found a photo of Michel’s son potty training which “raised suspicions of bestiality and child pornography.” As Michel’s experiences spanned social exclusion to discrimination to criminalization, he recounts how he was “guilty” and “suspect” for “being a male with a young child.” Michel’s story ends with the statement, “My family, perpetually under scrutiny, as I was just simply trying to parent my son under the rainbow of love.”

*A Love Letter by Anonymous*

We end with an anonymized cis and nonbinary East Asian-Canadian couple’s *A Love Letter*, which juxtaposes the love flowing throughout family life with the racist-cisheteronormativity these mothers regularly confront living in an urban landscape that excludes and misrecognizes them (To access: [https://revisioncentre.ca/game-of-queer-family-life](https://revisioncentre.ca/game-of-queer-family-life), password: Precarious). This video begins with a mother’s hands writing the words, “A Love Letter” on a piece of white paper as a warm acoustic guitar melody begins. Reid’s voice sings the following lyrics, which were composed with the two mothers and arranged by Reid, as the mother’s hand continues to write: “To Our Monkey”:

*Even if the world is determined*

*To see you as something else*

*We want you to know that we’re determined too*

*So we’re going to be something else, right along with you*

*And whatever side you choose*

*We’ll be giving you our love*

*We’ll be hoping for a better world for you*
'Cause you are worth any storms we may face
We will do all we can to protect you and to lift you
And don’t let our fears be your fears
Don’t let our fears be your fears x 2
Be the change you want to see.

After the song, we hear a mother speak:

He loves rainbows, muddle puddles and trucks.

He thinks unicorns are so funny.

His favourite colors are yellow and black because those are construction vehicle colors.

He has been skating and big boy biking since he was 2 ½ years old.

He sometimes likes to wear dresses
And declares that he will be a “man” when he grows up.

He fits in easily and I am ashamed that I am relieved.

He is fiercely protective.

He gives me kisses and hugs to put in my pockets in case I miss him.

I can take those out to put on my heart whenever I want, he tells me.

We want a world where his family isn’t unique.

Where he is looked at for who he is.

Where his biracial status doesn’t invite questions of whether his two moms are his nannies.

Where we don’t get asked why we wouldn’t just have sex with a man to conceive him because that is cheaper.
Where a mother doesn’t physically remove her child from playing with him just because his mommy isn’t married to a man.

Where I don’t have to fight for my wife to be present at my mother’s funeral.

Where the boy is presented joyfully as a grandchild, just like his cousins.

As the mother speaks, a series of images of the young boy fill the screen. He lurches jubilantly from his blanketed bed wearing a ski mask with goggles. The goggles and mask hide his face as he goes about his daily life: standing at the bathroom sink using a toothbrush to pretend to brush his teeth but brushing his goggles instead while facing one of his mothers who is doing the same; sitting at his desk wearing a pink dress with a lemon pattern while trying to eat a bagel; jumping and falling on the couch in delight; riding his bike across an open field; putting on a snowsuit; making snow balls, rolling around and drawing lines in snow with a stick; climbing up a snowy hill and tobogganing down with one of his moms; and then lying on his stomach, shrieking with joy as he is whisked down the hill, alone on his toboggan.

Following this image, the song repeats as we see black and white footage of him learning to skate, first not knowing how to stand without his mother’s help and then gradually gliding across the ice on his own.

The story ends with the boy and one of his mothers, both in ski helmets, masks, and googles now, demonstrating that she is “going to be something else, right along with [him].” She asks him: “What do you think we should say when people say we can’t get married?” “Uh, stay home,” the boy defiantly answers.
As the credits roll, we hear him sing, “Old Macdonald had a farm and bingo was his name-o. B-I-N-G-O” and “A jelly in the bowl, jelly-ho and lemon more, with jelly in the bowl.”

Findings

Here we nuance each of the three themes we have identified—1) the operations of racism, white supremacy, and colonialism in the storytellers’ lives; 2) misrecognition and its psychic effects of bifurcation and disjuncture; and 3) love, joy, and multi-species kinship as powerful sites of recognition, healing, and belonging—recognizing that they overlap in all of the videos to create a multilayered portrait of 2SLGBTQI+ family life in the current context.

The operations of racism, white supremacy, and colonialism in makers’ lives

Our first theme captures how racism, white supremacy, and colonialism intersect with cis-and hetero-normativity to create distinct yet divergent experiences of precarity for storytellers. The five microdocumentaries indicate how systemic forces shaping parents’ experiences overlay racism and colonialism with cisheteronormative dominance in ways that cannot be untangled or delineated. The videos together reveal how white supremacist colonial structures and logics operate together as a tacit presence undergirding daily 2SLGBTQI+ family life.

In The Game of Queer Family Life, for example, the scenario card format represents the layered array of misrecognition experiences Janet, Summer, and their children are subjected to when traversing socio-institutional domains. First, they are misrecognized as being friends by the white waitress. Then, Janet’s gender and parental identity are misidentified by the white cisgender doctor who applied liberal
rationales of equality to double-down on cisheteronormative dominance after asking “who the father is.” Then, there is the white emergency healthcare provider who weaponizes polite niceties (see DiAngelo, 2021) unaware of the existence of non-cisheteronormative families when saying things like, “I don’t understand…Oh, okay!” Through these experiences, we observe the children’s confusion—with question marks over their heads—as they witness and learn that their family is often illegible to the outside world.

In *Covid Testing Mistake*, we learn that even in a culturally diverse urban center, the logic of normative whiteness coupled with the logic of cisheteronormativity permeates the healthcare experiences for these 2SLGBTQI+ racialized storytellers. In fact, this story exemplifies a key finding from our interviews, which is that parents of colour were less likely to be read as 2SLGBTQI+ due to the dominance of white liberal homonormative discourse, which invisibilizes racialized and Indigenous expressions of queerness (Duggan & Muñoz, 2009; Smith, 2020; Carroll, 2018). Indeed, the racialized parents we interviewed were more likely to be mislabelled as “nanny,” “sibling,” “friend,” “grandparent,” or even (as noted in *The Myth of Mother*) “predator.”

As we see through images of 1950s white motherhood and the story about the birthday party in which only the Indigenous family attended, *The Myth of Mother* demonstrates the sexism inherent in structural white supremacist cisheteronormative dominance. Through Michel’s story, we come to understand how experiences of anti-Indigenous cisheteronormativity inflict intergenerational harm, such as Michel’s son being consistently subjected to stigma manifesting in his erasure and isolation. Furthermore, we learn how the reading by police and border patrol of Michel’s identity
and appearance as a “visibly gay,” two-spirit, single, gay father brought him face to face with carceral systems of criminalization and pathologization via the narrative that gay men are pedophiles, particularly if they take on the feminized role of nurturer. In these encounters, Michel’s personhood is repeatedly called into question. He is forced to explain himself and his relationship to his son—to schoolteachers and school administration; to families in his neighbourhood; to the law enforcement officers in the park; and to the Canadian border patrol. Michel must not only to verify his right to be a parent, and defend against his criminalization, while finding ways to protect himself and his son.

Misrecognition and its psychic effects of bifurcation and disjuncture

Our second theme foregrounds the persistent experience of being misrecognized and its pernicious effects, particularly for racialized storytellers. While misrecognition can seem insignificant, these stories point to the very real harms, risks, and wounds—both immediate and existential—that this experience produces: for example, the pain of the swab in the nose; the crying sick child in an ER witnessing his family being questioned instead of receiving prompt care; the absence of children at a birthday party; the threat of police detention. This is all more than discursive and representational for the families: misrecognition is psychically and materially injurious.

As highlighted in We’re Not Here, The Myth of Mother, and A Love Letter, for instance, misrecognition can produce psychic bifurcation: the splitting between what families know to be true (that they are whole and complete) and how they are systemically and interpersonally understood (deficient, confusing, wrong). Bifurcation shows up in the fraught contradiction between image and word. While storytellers
created imagery depicting intimate portraits of family love and connection, they wrote storylines that simultaneously emphasized exclusions. We understand this contradiction between image and word as representing a splintering between the internal and external. We suggest that by bringing this internal/external binary to life, storytellers mobilize the artful technique of contiguity to illuminate disjuncture as a definitional psychic experience of 2SLGBTQI+ family life while using their storywork to “unlock or liberate affective responses” (Gallagher 2016) in this post-legal parity era of continued discrimination.

COVID Testing Mistake, along with The Game of Queer Family Life, further display how accessing essential services, such as healthcare, involves opening oneself and one’s family up to layered experiences of invalidation. The physical discomfort of a COVID test is coupled with the emotional impact of polite but aggressive misrecognition, for example. Further, the separation of the mothers on the screen in COVID Testing Mistake, not knowing which parent the healthcare worker is referring to, can be viewed as an act of resisting attempts at bifurcating the family along cisgender dominant lines: when one parent is invalidated, the whole family is invalidated. All the parents who participated in our research articulated feelings of fear and vulnerability when being subjected to these types of experiences—with healthcare as the primary site of cisgender dominant dominance—anytime they navigated or anticipated navigating the world outside their homes. They carried the emotional and cognitive load of anticipating these encounters and in this way, were never free from them. 2SLGBTQI+ parents consistently laboured over experiences of misrecognition and erasure, whether actual or
projected. This is the emotional, mental, and relational impact of cisheterosexual dominance.

What is not seen or heard in *Covid Testing Mistake* is the couple’s child, who we know through the dialogue is a silent witness to this erasure experienced by his mothers on account of the healthcare provider. His presence also constrains how the mothers can respond to the provider. That the storytellers depict their internal responses as radically different from their dialogue with the healthcare worker demonstrates the chasm between what is felt and what can be said, without being cast as rude and confrontational. White supremacist cisheteronormative dominance constrains and tempers the ability to speak back (hooks, 1986), leading to extreme forms of self-management and hypervigilance, or what might be called “queer labour” (Cherry-Reid, 2020). Like the family in *The Game of Queer Family Life* who expressed anger and confusion only through frowns and question marks, the mothers in *COVID Testing Mistake* engage in micro-resistance through facial expressions and the enactment of an oppositional gaze (hooks, 1992; Ong, 1995). The close-up of their eyes further denotes a hyper-focused gaze onto 2SLGBTQI+ families—an experience of being closely surveilled without being seen. Yet the eyes could also be read as a technique for bringing viewers up close to the pain that is otherwise masked by disciplined, micro-expressions of anger, frustration, and sadness. Seeing their discomfort so closely offers an ‘eye’ography of pain and resistance.

*Love, joy, and multi-species kinship as powerful sites of healing and belonging*

Our third theme focuses on storytellers’ use of their videos as a method for resisting persistent experiences of exclusion. All videos illustrate deep family bonds thus
foregrounding how affective relations become powerful sites of joy, love, validation, and belonging. Their videomaking further reveals how 2SLGBTQI+ families extend beyond human membership. Rather than figuring as a narrative backdrop, cats, dogs, blankets, snow covered forests, lakes, trees, and steam from a kettle are kin in these videos: sites of mutual recognition, comfort, safety, and belonging as parents work to erect a sacred inviolable queer family space against the backdrop of invalidation and discrimination. Humanist modes of hierarchizing and categorizing may produce harm, but the affective and sensory interconnections that permeate the sonic and visual landscapes of the films offer queer and decolonial openings for re-imagining queer families as needed havens of renewal, intimacy, and love.

For example, while *The Game of Queer Family Life* highlights the tacit presence of whiteness as part of the backdrop of exclusion, erasure, and microaggressions inflicted upon Indigenous, queer and transwomen, the last scenario of inclusion in an Indigenous-led daycare points to the dovetailing of 2SLGBTQI+ belonging with—in this instance—decolonial and Indigenized spaces. The hyperbolic elation enacted by the family during this encounter derives from finding an inclusive space of their identities and relationships. It is a comment on the desperation for belonging, and the feelings of relief that comes with legibility. It also provides an example of how simple acts of inclusion can be tremendously impactful for 2SLGBTQI+ families, especially those who experience intersecting forms of discrimination.

Importantly, Janet and Summer’s family experiences misrecognition, but the chorus in the video is there, serving as voices of validation that supportively accompany them on their quest to find a welcoming world. Their cats, Emily, Cloudy, and Blue, are
there too and these kin-counterpart-alter-egos embody agential allyship, enacting resistance in a way that the family—with trans, queer, and Indigenous parents who need to protect their children—cannot always afford to do without the fear of reprisal. Not only are the cats protagonists in this story, they were active agents of making, doing, and participating in the storymaking process. They moved across our computer screens and keyboards, appeared through open windows during our Zoom sessions; became the focus of conversations and text exchanges; they perched on shoulders, snuck licks of our food, and nuzzled on laps. While colonial systems of cisheteronormativity operate through hierarchical species-racial taxonomies, becoming-with companion species can be a resonant form of (not uncomplicated or uncritiqued) queer and decolonial kin-making (Haraway 2008; Haritaworn, 2015). *The Game of Queer Family Life* is as much a story of white supremacy, misrecognition, and microaggressions, as it is a story about the inter-species kinships that urge the family to “not to let adversity bring you down.”

*We’re Not Here, The Myth of Mother,* and *A Love Letter* also speak back to misrecognition and erasure by consciously mobilizing technologies of multimedia storytelling, such as creating a disconnect between image and word to illuminate bifurcation and disjuncture as contiguous definitional experiences of 2SLGBTQI+ family life. Braiding heart-warming visuals of parenting and family life with words that narrate social exclusion shows how persistent external forms of invalidation attempt to punctuate and taint everyday parenting experiences and expressions of familial love and connection.
*We Aren’t Here* foregrounds the embodied, relational routines of a family to counter the harms of their erasure. It is a powerful attestation to the impact of constantly “being in question” (Ahmed, 2016) and a gentle, yet potent refusal of the same. This video evoked tears from members of the research team and participants alike because the ordinariness of daily living bursts with the spectacularity of intimacy and love. The visuals read as a form of poetry that double as a political statement in which the completeness of Joelle and Wynne’s family is undeniable yet often unrecognizable. Yet there is also sorrow in this story. The places where the family feels whole and real are not places in which they find outside human connection. Instead, the family envelopes themselves in the warmth of their home to escape the racist, sexualized, and cisgendered systems that deny their existence. Their kin are their loyal dog, fuzzy blanket, the warm kettle and its rising steam, and the tranquil wintry forest. They find solace in their rich inter-species relations as they soak in the minimalist opulence of their love.

To close this analysis, we focus on the depiction of the child in *A Love Letter*. It likely feels constraining and is unusual to wear a ski mask and goggles in a home environment but throughout the video the child playfully interacts with it, seemingly unbothered, almost as if it isn’t there: he waves his bagel away when he realizes he can’t eat it and finds new uses for his toothbrush (brushing his goggles). We might read the ski mask and goggles as symbolic of the constraint that materializes in the daily lives of 2SLGBTQI+ parents even as the child’s continued joy and ability to go about his daily life reads as the work of finding freedom within constraint. The use of the ski mask was about the mothers’ fears of recognition: the structural forces that could punish the
child and the parents for their family identities. The mask could also be read as symbolically related to the COVID-19 context of masking, in which people are masked to protect others as well as themselves from a form of harm that can spread from person to person, often without their knowledge. Within these thickly layered forms of harm and precarity, the love and care the child experiences from and feels for his mothers, while not able to undo cisheteronormativity and racism, has, as expressed in the song composed for the video, protected and lifted him. Despite the intergenerational impact of these interlocking systems of discrimination, his mothers’ labour to create “a better world” for him. He is not just “the change [they] want to see,” he is the result of the change they’ve made through the everyday hard work of loving him through ubiquitous white supremacist cisheteronormativity. While not always the case and certainly not for queer families who do not have the opportunity or desire to have children, within the context of A Love Letter, and the videos analyzed here, children and the parent-child relationship were storied as powerful sites of joy and belonging. The love shared between parents and children in these videos is what affirmed for these storytellers that—despite all odds and how difficult these odds may be—our families are real, and that we are, indeed, here.

Conclusion

Even with the ratification of the All Families Are Equal Act by the Ontario legislature in 2016, the stories discussed here reveal how pervasively 2SLGBTQI+ parents and families experience various forms of exclusion, never knowing whether they will be welcomed, discriminated against, misidentified, or invalidated as they move through urban, rural, social, institutional, recreational, and educational spaces. The
chasm between legal parity and social-institutional intelligibility and inclusion is a void that each 2SLGBTQI+ family must traverse by way of daily experiences that pose challenges to their relationships and subjectivities. Indeed, their lives “remain shaped by that which they fail to reproduce” (Ahmed, 2006, p.152): norms of cisheterosexual whiteness. And yet, these storytellers consciously mobilized their videos as a platform for speaking back and intervening on past experiences of systematic misrecognition, invalidation, and erasure. By narrating their lives on their own terms, parents created a space of agency and self-advocacy, unfastening the grip of discriminatory experiences while ushering in new emancipatory possibilities for their own and their children’s futures. The videos become a way for 2SLGBTQI+ parents’ stories to move from the realm of the personal to exist “in the public domain of knowledge” for the purpose of social change (MacDonald, 2007, p. 18).

Data Availability Statement

The authors confirm that most data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article and its supplementary materials. Interview data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, Julia Gruson-Wood, upon reasonable request.

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