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The logic of Mrs. Madrigal: Queer mothering at 28, Barbary Lane

Abstract: The paper focuses on the portrayal of the character of Anna Madrigal in Armistead Maupin's series *Tales of the City*. Reflecting on the intersection of gender-nonconformity and motherhood, we will investigate the influence of the structure of Ballroom Houses on how Maupin portrays the concept of chosen family, which he calls 'logical family.' As the home of 28 Barbary Lane has come to represent a utopistic space for queerness and otherness in LGBTQ culture, we will also see how the different on-screen adaptations of the series have dealt with the issue of trans representation, conveying subversion through optimism. Through an analysis of Maupin's style and manner of outlining the character, we will see how the portrayal of Anna Madrigal represents a milestone in queer literature as a rare example of non-struggling, non-tragic trans figure.

Keywords: Queer literature; Trans representation; Melodrama; Utopia.

1. Introduction

With his book series *Tales of the City*, Armistead Maupin established several firsts in American queer literature. He built a world that assumed a non-straight audience as its primary readership, without relating to straight readers in a confrontational way. He wrote the first literary account which explicitly mentions AIDS. He is also, and perhaps most famously, the creator of a character that stands alone in the queer literature of his time and, in many ways, still does today. Anna Madrigal, the landlady of 28, Barbary Lane, represents an example of non-suffering trans portrayal which was as rare as it was groundbreaking, particularly in the Seventies when it was written. Mrs. Madrigal is also the matriarch of what Maupin would later define as 'logical family', in opposition to 'biological family'. In the pages that follow, we will discuss the significance of the character and the implications of its portrayal, both on the page and on the screen.

In the late 1970s, when Maupin started to publish *Tales of the City* in novel form, the way the queer experience was portrayed in LGBTQ

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literature tended to involve themes such as identity struggle, often laid out in coming-out stories. Compared to his contemporaries, Maupin frames it differently. *Tales of the City* started to be published on the pages of the *San Francisco Chronicle* as a regular column in 1976. The stories followed Mary Ann Singleton, a naive straight young woman from Cleveland who, while vacationing in San Francisco, impulsively decides to stay. Mary Ann is the vehicle for Maupin to portray life in the city through the eyes of a newcomer, a guide for the reader through dimensions of the social and urban space which at the time were not much discussed in literature. Unconventional characters populated Maupin's world more and more, particularly after Mary Ann's move to 28, Barbary Lane, a fictional address on Russian Hill. Apart from the landlady, who will be the focus of this analysis, the house counts among its residents Mona, a bisexual hippy who is later discovered to be Mrs. Madrigal's biological daughter, Michael, a sweet gay man known to his friends as Mouse, Brian, a straight womanizer, and Norman, a slightly creepy man who occupies the small apartment on the building's roof. I will refer to the series as being composed of three thematic trilogies, as I see a change not only in the last three novels, published almost twenty years after the others, but also a sharp difference – maybe an even bigger difference – between the first three and the second three – that is, before and after the AIDS epidemic entered the picture. With *Tales of the City*, Maupin is one of a few authors who went from describing the post-sexual liberation queer world of the 1970s to portraying the AIDS era and beyond. The first book reuniting the columns in novel form came out in 1978, the same year that saw the publication of Larry Kramer's *Faggots* and Andrew Holleran's *Dancer from the Dance* - a time Christopher Bram defined the 'Annus Mirabilis'[1] of queer literature. Compared to these two novels, which both framed the gay experience in a context of struggle, *Tales of the City* offered an optimistic depiction of queer life. The queerness of Maupin's characters is portrayed in a matter-of-fact way, as an unremarkable aspect of life. The experience of these people, especially in the early books, is represented with much more positive tones than in other contemporary works by gay authors.

[1] Cf. Bram 2012: 175.

2. Mrs. Madrigal

Mrs. Madrigal was developed in an unusual way for a queer character: her queerness incarnates in any possible way what John Champagne called «knowledge of the Other» (1995: 90) and allows her to embody an identity that is freeing for herself and others – mostly through the act of community building. This is particularly remarkable considering Anna Madrigal's identity as a trans character. In his book *Trans**, Jack Halberstam argues that

> the media dealt with transsexuality as an exotic phenomenon for which the public was not ready. The mainstream media represented transgender people as 'dysphoric,' dishonest, disoriented, or worse, and this sense of disorientation, rather than being folded into a general postmodern condition, was cast as uninhabitable and pathologically unstable. Transgender bodies, indeed, represented a condition of radical instability against which other gendered identities appeared legible, knowable, and natural. (2018: 96)

Maupin has acknowledged that he knew Anna Madrigal was a trans woman from the beginning, and that he was asked by his editor at the *Chronicle* to hold off the reveal – a request he obliged. This entails that the mystery surrounding Mrs. Madrigal is one of the main plotlines of the first novel. It also means, however, that Maupin had time to develop the character in depth, in a way that was not necessarily defined by her gender identity or her medical history. Another result of this delay is that the readers had time to get attached to the character before they found out about her past, hence they were less inclined to reject her after discovering her identity. They empathized with Mrs. Madrigal before relegating her to a category of 'Other'. All these factors contributed to what, also according to Maupin himself, was an ultimately positive outcome for the series: Anna Madrigal became a more complex, more nuanced, more human figure thanks to the extra time Maupin took to develop the character.

It is important to point out that, particularly compared to other examples of trans characters, Mrs. Madrigal did not have her identity connected to any negative or troubling aspect of her past or her inner life. In a cultural landscape in which trans people tended to be portrayed as deviant, dangerous or tragic figures, Maupin's way to outline Mrs. Madrigal represents a breath of fresh air. She is an accomplished woman, sure of herself and maternal toward others. In his book *Eminent Outlaws*, Christopher

Bram remarked that «Anna Madrigal is so entirely herself that her sex change feels secondary. She is literature's first nonthreatening, nonsuffering, three-dimensional androgyne. Maupin told his editors at the *Chronicle* her secret before he began the series. They accepted her but asked that he not tell readers until the second year. It was inspired advice» (2012: chap. 13). Granted that the editors' request had originated out of concern about not upsetting readers, Maupin ended up writing a better character because of it.

When the first novel of *Tales of the City* was adapted for PBS in 1993, the character of Mrs. Madrigal was taken on by Olympia Dukakis. The TV adaptation maintained the defining features of the novels, and therefore offered a remarkably different portrayal of a gender non-conforming character compared to the most well-known of the time – above all, Buffalo Bill in Jonathan Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs*[2]. Halberstam argues that at the time «most films featuring trans* identities still cast transgenderism as a kind of aberration, as something in need of explanation, or as a symbol for illegible social identities» (2018: 92). Anna's identity as a trans woman is not a source of pain or anguish, even when Norman Williams threatens to reveal her secret. Moreover, the fact that the TV adaptation was produced so many years after the publication of the novels enveloped it in an aura of nostalgia for the 1970s. Anna's loving parenting, often expressed through the gift of marijuana from her garden to her children, intertwines her queerness with her being the symbol of a time in which being 'other' represented something positive and interesting. It also represents, as we will see below, a reconciliation on the part of queer culture with the sexual liberation era which preceded the epidemic.

[2] Although not explicitly described as transsexual in the film (in fact, Hannibal Lecter says of him «our Billy wants to change too. […] Billy is not a real transsexual. But he thinks he is, he tries to be. He's tried to be a lot of things, I expect. […] Billy hates his own identity, you see, and he thinks that makes him a transsexual. But his pathology is a thousand times more savage and more terrifying»), the character of Buffalo Bill has frequently been received in popular culture as trans due to the «vague, confusing, […] incoherent (Doty 2000: 7) manner in which he is portrayed. Alexander Doty notes how the presence of several signifiers in the film («Bill's murdered male lover, desire to be a transsexual, nipple ring, colorful silk wrapper, made-up face, tucked penis, and dog named Precious») point to «something (or many things) non heteronormative about him» (2000: 156). To a mainstream audience, it is safe to assume, a non-heteronormative character can easily be read as a trans character: as Halberstam puts it, in *Silence of the Lambs*: «gender confusion becomes the guilty secret of the Silence of the madman in the basement» (1995: 116).

3. 28, Barbary Lane

The house at 28, Barbary Lane could in a sense be considered as an extension of Mrs. Madrigal's personality. It represents, as we will see, a safe haven for every character to be 'Other.' The landlady introduces herself in a friendly albeit unusual way:

> «You're one of us, then. Welcome to 28 Barbary Lane».
> «Thank you».
> «Yes, you should». Mrs. Madrigal smiled. There was something a little careworn about her face, but she was really quite lovely, Mary Ann decided. «Do you have any objection to pets?» asked the new tenant.
> «Dear . . . I have no objection to anything». (1978: 16)

After Mary Ann moves in, Mrs. Madrigal officially welcomes her with her tradition: a joint taped to her door. The word 'family' appears in the text pretty soon, when Mary Ann meets Mona and they discuss their bizarre landlady: «she wants you in the family, Mary Ann. Give it a chance, OK?» (1978: 27). At this point, no LGBTQ tenants have been introduced in the narrative (not explicitly, at least). However, the fact that this building is synonymous with non-traditional kinship is made clear early on.

The word 'mother' also makes an early appearance in the same dialogue between Mary Ann and Mona, in which the latter calls her «our landlady. The Mother of Us All» (1978: 26). The environment of 28 Barbary Lane is thus framed as an alternative version of family from the beginning. Mrs. Madrigal embodies two different kinds of queer motherhood, as (similarly to what happens in Ballroom Houses) she represents two kinds of queerness: she is not the biological mother of her children, and she also is a trans woman. Mark Rifkin frames queerness as «a particular sort of space/place that enables modes of relation that do not conform to the dictates of enfamilyment» (2022: 147-48). Barbary Lane is a sort of through the looking glass, 'other' world in this sense, with structures and values free from the impositions and expectations of heteronormativity. Maupin shapes this principle into a physical 'space/place' that exemplifies Muñoz's argument about «the essential need for an understanding of queerness as collectivity» (2009: 11). Anna Madrigal is running a home populated by younger people «who have to leave it when they mature and form lasting one-to-one relationships, whether hetero or homo. To that extent if no further, Mrs Madrigal's family home is no different from

those they all left in the first place, the homes of their parents. However, once they have left, they do tend to keep in touch more with her than with their parents» (Woods 1999: 356). Throughout the series, any time there is a parallel between traditional and chosen family, the latter always comes out as the better one.

Particularly in the first book of the series, there is an explicit tension between two family models. Beside the unconventional family at Barbary Lane, the Halcyons, wealthy owners of the agency where Mary Ann works, represent the stereotype of the traditional family. The dynamics that govern this family are, however, deeply dysfunctional: the mother, Franny, drinks heavily, the daughter Dede is a socialite and unhappy wife to Beachump Day. Dede gets back at her husband's infidelities by going to bed with a young Asian delivery boy. Beachump works for his father-in-law and cheats on his wife with Mary Ann. He is also a closeted gay man. Edgar Halcyon, the patriarch, is a kind man and, although his family does not know, he is terminally ill. In the last few weeks of his life he embarks on an affair with Anna, and embraces her identity once she tells him the truth. Throughout the series, the Halcyon family is gradually deconstructed in favor of queer plotlines: after Edgar passes away and Beachump dies in a car crash, Dede gives birth to her mixed-race twins and raises them with her lesbian lover, D'orothea. Queerness – both in the form of relationships with Barbary Lane residents and in general – seems to be the only thing that improves the lives of the Halcyons.

Throughout the book series, the concept of family is articulated in a more and more detailed way. The architect of this kinship is always Mrs. Madrigal. Toward the end of the first novel, Mary Ann receives an invitation from her landlady for a Christmas party:

> Mary Ann,
> If you haven't made plans, please join me and the rest of your Barbary Lane family for a spot of eggnog on Christmas Eve.
> Love
> A.M.
> P.S. I could use some help in organizing it.
>
> That news—and the joint attached to the note—boosted her spirits considerably. It was good to feel part of a unit again, though she rarely regarded her fellow tenants as members of a 'family'. (1978: 235)

As we will see, the tenants embrace this definition of their relationship more and more in the subsequent books. In the seventh book of the series, *Michael Tolliver Lives*, Maupin goes as far as to give a definition to the concept of relationships that are chosen and go beyond blood ties: «my biological family, that is — as opposed to my logical one — as Anna likes to put it» (2007: 88). The concept of 'logical family' is so central to Maupin's poetics that he used the definition as the title of his 2017 autobiography. This idea, although explicitly articulated only in the third trilogy, is present throughout the series. Besides coining the term, Mrs. Madrigal is always clearly the head of this logical family.

4. Houses

The character of the landlady and her relationship with her tenants – or, as she calls them, her children – is reminiscent of some of the dynamics governing the Houses in the world of Ballroom[3]. In the case of Barbary Lane, the strays that are taken in by Mrs. Madrigal are not outcasts rejected by their families. They are also all white, while the world of Ballroom is populated by people of color. The conditions of the lives of the Barbary Lane tenants are much less extraordinary or glamorous than the ones portrayed, for instance, in *Paris is Burning*: Mary Ann and the others have not faced the struggles that have brought people to Houses in the ballroom world, and they do not engage in any dazzling activity comparable to the balls. Despite having a trans woman at the head of the family, 28 Barbary Lane offers a sense of shelter to people who feel 'other' for different reasons: many of the tenants are part of the LGBTQ community and have difficult relationships with their biological families, but their struggles are not the same. The sense of kinship, on the other hand, is similar. In Jennie Livingston's film, Ballroom

3 Amy Herzog and Joe Rollins describe the house system as follows: «with a nod to the glamour and the patronage system of the great fashion houses, the drag houses instituted their own family structure, headed by mothers, and sometimes fathers, who oversaw their 'children,' some of whom faced rejection from their biological families or their working-class African American and Latino communities» (2012: 9). Ricky Tucker highlights the importance of the correlation between ballroom houses and the concept of family: «built out of the human need for lineage and legacy, the house system is a clan barreling toward posterity with a common cause: freedom. And on an individual level, just like with biological families, these houses, Lanvin, Ebony, LaBeija, Pendavis, Mugler, et al., provide LGBTQ BIPOC youth an opportunity to metabolize centuries of generational trauma. Every gay parent, every gay child, is a chance to start anew» (2022: chap. 4). The most celebrated and influential incarnation of this world is the one that developed in New York City, and has been immortalized in Jennie Livingston's documentary Paris is Burning.

legend Dorian Corey remarks, «a house – they are families for a lot of people who don't have families; but this is a new meaning of family. The hippies had families, and no one thought nothing about it. It wasn't a question of a man, a woman, and children, which we grew up knowing as family; it is a question of a group of human beings in a mutual bond» (Livingston 1990: 24'41"). This observation, which Halberstam calls a «remade understanding of family, kinship, and cross-generational care in the context of drag houses[, which] was one of the most important legacies of the film» (2018: 65), could also be a fitting description for the dynamics at 28 Barbary Lane.

The family structure that we find at Barbary Lane, and particularly the role of Anna Madrigal as a mother, can be found to have some features in common with the House Mothers of the Ballroom scene. Given that these houses are mostly the expression of Black and Latino communities, it is also possible to recognize in this structure the influence of othermothering, a crucial practice in African-American culture. Othermothering is described by Rosalie Troester as the presence of «other adult women who help guide and form» the child, usually a girl, who for any number of reasons needs it. These women, whom Troester calls 'othermothers' (as opposed to 'blood-mothers'), may or may not be biologically related to the child, and can «live different lives and exemplify values widely divergent from the biological mother. Othermothers provide a safety valve and sounding board and release the teenage girl from the confines of a single role model» (1984: 13). This concept certainly influenced the figure of the House Mother, but it is possible to recognize its echoes in the character of Mrs. Madrigal as well.

Particularly in the early novels, Mrs. Madrigal could be described, in the words of Marlon M. Bailey, as a 'platonic parent,' that is, a mother «who, regardless of age, provide[s] parental guidance» (2013: 25) to the members of the family. Writing about the Ballroom scene, Bailey describes Houses as «family-like structures that are configured socially rather than biologically» (5), a definition that perfectly fits Maupin's idea of 'logical family.' Moreover, the leaders of the houses generally identified with the definition of 'mother' independently of their gender identity[4]. Thus, the very concept of motherhood is subverted by their presence. Throughout the series, Mrs. Madrigal refers to her tenants as her «ersatz children—Mary Ann, Michael and Brian» (1982: 10) and, when confronted by the mother of her biological

4 Cf. Champagne 1995: 105.

daughter, Mona, she says that «I have many more children than Mona» (321). Once she discovers Mrs. Madrigal's identity, Mona herself embraces the kaleidoscopic relationship with her parent/landlady: «and her *father* would be there! Her father, her mother, her best friend and her landlady, all rolled into one joyful and loving human being!» (156). The manifold roles Mrs. Madrigal holds as head of the Barbary Lane family are therefore not just acknowledged, but celebrated by her tenants and Maupin alike.

Mrs. Madrigal calls the tenants her children, and the characters repeat in several instances that they consider each other family. In the early pages of *More Tales of the City*, Mary Ann describes life at 28 Barbary Lane as follows:

> this was home now—this crumbling, ivy-entwined relic called 28 Barbary Lane—and the only parental figure in Mary Ann's day-to-day existence was Anna Madrigal, a landlady whose fey charm and eccentric ways were legendary on Russian Hill.
> Mrs. Madrigal was the true mother of them all. She would counsel them, scold them and listen unflinchingly to their tales of amatory disaster. When all else failed (and even when it didn't), she would reward her «children» by taping joints of home-grown grass to the doors of their apartments. (1980: 5)

Although – as noted above – the key traits that identify this as a chosen family already appear throughout the first book, we can notice how this concept becomes more articulated, more explicit and detailed as the series progresses. As Robert Kellerman argues in his analysis of Maupin's series, «'family' in this context means a set of people who have chosen to be in relationship as they choose to define those relationships» (2016: 47). The freedom of choice in entering a relationship not defined by blood ties is an important aspect which has been identified by critics in different ways: Kath Weston writes about 'families we choose' in her seminal book, describing how «the subjective agency implicit in gay kinship surfaced in the very labels developed to describe it: 'families we choose,' 'families we create'» (1991: chap. 7), while Judith Butler frames the dynamics outlined by Weston as «consensual affiliation» (2000: 74). The theme of choice when it comes to family resurfaces several times in the series, and it is particularly significant when it has to do with caretaking. From the first novel, when Mary Ann burns Norman's file containing Mrs. Madrigal's secret, to *The Days of Anna Madrigal*, in which the former Barbary Lane residents look after their aging former landlady, the care the characters exert on one another is constant and reciprocal. This becomes particularly evident, however, when health is involved.

Maupin celebrates an expanded idea of family – literally – in sickness and in health. While discussing the inner dynamics of Houses, Bailey notes that «houses also take on the labor of care that the biological kin of Ballroom members often fail to perform» (2013: 80). An early example of this is to be found in *More Tales of the City* when Michael gets diagnosed with Guillain-Barré syndrome. While he is cared for by his logical family[5], Michael ends up being at the center of what is perhaps the best-known passage in the whole series, that is, his coming-out letter to his parents:

> Being gay has taught me tolerance, compassion and humility. It has shown me the limitless possibilities of living. It has given me people whose passion and kindness and sensitivity have provided a constant source of strength.
> It has brought me into the family of man, Mama, and I like it here. I like it.
> […]
> Mary Ann sends her love.
> Everything is fine at 28 Barbary Lane. (1980: 234)

This sense of belonging to the chosen family becomes more and more present as the series progresses, particularly in light of the AIDS epidemic. In the third novel, *Further Tales of the City*, Michael's on-again, off-again lover Jon has a conversation with Mrs. Madrigal which articulates the solidity of these relationships despite the absence of blood ties:

> 'I want what's best for my children.'
> A long pause, and then: 'I didn't know I was still part of the family.'
> The landlady chuckled. 'Listen, dear . . . when you get this old lady, you get her for life'. (1982: 327)

The feeling is subsequently echoed by Michael himself, who again clarifies to Jon that he is part of the family. Maupin's idea of family, hence, reflects Butler's description of Ballroom Houses: these people «'mother' one another, 'house' one another, 'rear' one another, and the resignification of the family through these terms is not a vain or useless imitation, but the social and discursive building of community, a community that binds, cares, and teaches, that shelters and enables» (1993: 137). As aforementioned, this dynamic becomes particularly significant once the epidemic enters the picture.

In the fourth novel, *Babycakes*, we learn that Jon has died of AIDS. The mourning for his death haunts the entire novel, as we learn that each one

5 Jon, Michael's lover, tries to get his parents' number to warn them but get shut down: «"Michael, I think your family deserves to—" "This is my family," said Michael» (1980: 207).

of the Barbary Lane tenants had cared for him. His ashes have been buried in Mrs. Madrigal's garden. The loss of Jon, as it is described by Maupin, is first and foremost Michael's loss, but it is also a collective loss for everyone at Barbary Lane. Further on in the series, at the end of the seventh novel, *Michael Tolliver Lives*, Michael is confronted with the ultimate existential dilemma when, about to board a plane to go visit his dying mother, he receives the news that Anna is in a coma after suffering a heart attack. He immediately decides to stay and calls his brother:

> '. . . I won't be coming back, Irwin. My friend Anna has had a heart attack, and… I have to be with her. I'm sorry.'
> A long silence, and then: 'Mama's got two days at the most, Mikey.'
> 'I know that, Irwin.'
> 'I don't understand.'
> 'Yes, you do, Irwin. Anna is family to me.'
> 'More than your mama?'
> I took a breath and said it: 'If I have to choose… yes.' (2007: 308)

This passage in which Michael chooses his logical family over his biological one is probably the most explicit statement about kinship in the whole series.

An important aspect to point out is that, although Maupin started the series in the 1970s, most of the books have been produced during the 1980s, in the cultural landscape of Reagan's America. This means that the portrayal of Maupin's logical family was largely developed against the backdrop of the 'family values' rhetoric of the Reagan Era. As eloquently argued by Barbara Ehrenreich, «sometime in the Eighties, Americans had a new set of 'traditional values' installed. It was part of what may someday be known as the 'Reagan renovation,' that finely balanced mix of cosmetic refinement and moral coarseness which brought $200,000 china to the White House dinner table and mayhem to the beleaguered peasantry of Central America» (1990: 3). In particular, Ehrenreich observes that

> the kindest – though from some angles most perverse – of the era's new values was 'family.' […] Throughout the eighties, the winning political faction has been aggressively 'profamily.' They have invoked 'the family' when they trample on the rights of those who hold actual families together, that is, women. They have used it to justify racial segregation and the formation of white-only, 'Christian' schools. And they have brought it out, along with flag and faith, to silence any voices they found obscene, offensive, disturbing, or merely different. (1990: 4-5)

Considering this rhetoric as the dominant, mainstream narrative of the time, the portrayal of the logical family at Barbary Lane is arguably Maupin's most militant statement. In an interview, the author admitted:

> I have a gay agenda. I always laugh when gay people fight the Christian Right over that term. Of course we have an agenda: to change the mind of the world, and we are doing that. Which is precisely why Jerry Falwell and company are so upset. We should admit to it. I can be more subversive about it in the context of *Tales of the City*, because I am creating the illusion of equality. But of course I come with my own baggage. I have my own prescription for the way the world should work. (in Canning 2001: 172)

The fact that his logical family echoed the structure of a traditional family (mother and children) has a particular significance if considered as a critical deconstruction of the nuclear family. The concept of 'logical family' itself evokes subversion, if we interpret it as an implication that the heteronormative, biological family would then be illogical – an assumption supported by the rarely positive descriptions of blood ties in Maupin's series. Weston argues that «by defining these chosen families in opposition to the biological ties believed to constitute a straight family, lesbians and gay men began to renegotiate the meaning and practice of kinship from within the very societies that had nurtured the concept» (1991: chap. 2). This renegotiation of kinship also applies to Houses: in his analysis of family relationships in *Paris Is Burning*, Denis Flannery considers that while evoking traditional family structures «could be said to reconstitute the very institution — the family — which has violently repudiated the members of the houses», one could also argue that «within that reconstitution, opportunities for a different kind of behavior, for a very affirming, life-enhancing and indeed life- saving forms of love abound» (1997: 175). This position is echoed by Bailey, who writes that «while Ballroom houses do not break entirely from dominant family norms, they find ways to appropriate some and transform other aspects of these norms» (2013: 105), and the role of those he calls 'platonic parents', in particular, «is helpful in illuminating the subversive potential of houses and kinship in Ballroom culture» (104). Once again, this dynamic is applicable to Barbary Lane as well: as Butler argues, «it is in the elaboration of kinship forged through a resignification of the very terms which effect our exclusion and abjection that such a resignification creates the discursive and social space for community, that we see an appropriation of the terms of domination that turns them

toward a more enabling future» (1993: 137). Maupin's resignification and appropriation of the concept of family certainly has the effect of subverting the heteronormative structure. However, as we will see below, his idea of subversion is unusual compared to most queer writing of the time.

5. The logical mother

When it comes to queer families, the question of motherhood is particularly complicated as the idea of traditional family is closely tied to the concept of procreation: Weston argues that «the very notion of gay families asserts that people who claim nonprocreative sexual identities and pursue nonprocreative relationships can lay claim to family ties of their own without necessary recourse to marriage, childbearing, or childrearing» (1991: chap. 2). The concept theorized by Lee Edelman, which equates queerness with «the negativity opposed to every form of social viability» (2004: 9), i.e., heteronormative procreation, evokes a similar approach. Queerness, Edelman argues, embodies the social order's «traumatic encounter with its own inescapable failure» (26), and this failure goes through the deconstruction of its fundamental unit, that is, the family. In this context, the dynamic that brings queer people to, effectively, mother other people's biological children is arguably one of the most disruptive elements of chosen families. Patricia Hill Collins writes about how othermothering can represent a challenge to the system (2014: 182). This disruption is essential in queer relationships. The identification of motherhood with a bond that, we saw, is antithetical to procreation has historically been as subversive as it has been life-giving. Halberstam highlights the importance for younger queer generations to have contact with older people who belong to their community: «cross-generational contact has been crucial for trans* people over the past four or five decades, making it possible for young people to imagine themselves as trans* adults» (2018: 64). Although a direct cross-generational contact does not happen until the last trilogy, particularly with the character of Jake, a young trans man who moves in with an aging Anna and, while taking care of her, also benefits from her wisdom as an older trans person, Anna's role as the queer elder is constant throughout the series, as in different ways each tenant of Barbary Lane identifies as 'other.'

An important feature of *Tales of the City* which often is overlooked is the presence of both men and women in Maupin's world, in contrast with

a literary landscape where most queer works are generally set in a ghetto[6] and the gender of the characters tends to reflect the gender of the author. As a choral text, *Tales of the City* includes male and female, gay, bisexual and straight, cis and transgender characters. Each of these characters is or feels as an outsider: this is pretty clear with Michael or Mrs. Madrigal, but it is also the case with Mary Ann – this is the reason why she moves from Ohio in the first place. Unlike, for instance, the children of Ballroom Houses, Barbary Lane tenants are all adults not necessarily in need of 'parental guidance', and they do not all come from a similar background or a similar kind of 'otherness', which makes this chosen family unlike what is generally referred to as family or community in LGBTQ literature, a family in which Mrs. Madrigal is «both mother figure and parent of a disparate family of misfits» (Brook 2018: 59). In *Eminent Outlaws*, Bram observes that «everybody is Other in Maupin. The free-and-easy attitude toward all sex, gay and straight, was a welcome relief from the guilty dramas of Kramer and Holleran, which weren't very different from the guilty erotics of Updike and Roth» (2012: 192). Moreover, the otherness displayed by these characters seems to be effortless: the world portrayed by Maupin at 28 Barbary Lane is a utopia that does not need to be yearned for but is simply achieved, where everyone just *is* in their otherness.

Despite being portrayed as outsiders, the Barbary Lane tenants are not outcasts in the sense in which, for instance, the people we see in *Paris Is Burning* are. The struggle and marginalization that some of them may experience is sometimes hinted at, but rarely explicitly displayed. In this context, the space in which Maupin sets his novels has a particularly significant role. In general, the city of San Francisco represents a more utopistic landscape than New York does, particularly in queer culture. 28 Barbary Lane, then, represents the ultimate utopian space[7]. In his *History of Gay Literature*, Gregory Woods argues that

> the most popular of the fictional communes — if that has not become too pejorative a word - is Mrs Madrigal's household in Armistead Maupin's San Franciscan soap opera, the *Tales of the City* sequence of novels (1978, 1980, 1982, 1984, 1987, 1989). From the moment that Mrs Madrigal says to her new tenant Mary Ann Singleton, 'I have no objection to anything', her household becomes *the* fantasy home for gay readers to retreat to (or advance to), even if only in

6 Cf. Woodhouse 1998: 1-5.

7 Cf. Muñoz 2009: 35.

> their reading lives. Her motley collection of waifs and strays — notably not just gay ones — becomes Maupin's model of a kind of evolving permanence, a way of maintaining long-term relationships without chaining anybody to the floor. (1999: 356)

The fact that the house at 28 Barbary Lane represents a utopian space is closely connected to the style the author adopts in the series. Maupin's decision to portray queer life in a way that is positive, light and optimistic is crucial to how the world of Barbary Lane is shaped.

6. A queer optimism

With *Tales of the City*, Maupin occupies a peculiar space compared to other LGBTQ literary works. From the beginning of the series his prose stands out as more journalistic than literary, a consequence of the early days of *Tales* being published in the *Chronicle*: Maupin uses a language that flows lightly, and is notably dialogue-oriented. The tone of the novels is much more positive, light and optimistic compared to the majority of queer texts of the time. David B. Feinberg, one of the most notable names among the authors who wrote harsher, politically engaged prose, described Maupin as «a master of compression, Mr. Maupin crams information into short, delectable, addictive chapters» (1989). In a review for *The Days of Anna Madrigal*, the last novel of the series, Charles Isherwood wrote about the «candy-box addictiveness of Mr. Maupin's books» (2014). This difference in tone, however, should not be interpreted as reassuring or innocuous. The world portrayed by Maupin often offers, in fact, a more varied tapestry of characters compared to other LGBTQ works of the time. The optimism in *Tales of the City* carries its own element of subversion, and can therefore be interpreted as a way to challenge a mainstream narrative that wanted gay people to hide in shame. His gay characters are not tame, unchallenging figures, but well-rounded, profound, sexually active people. The lightness of Maupin's style should not be mistaken as lack of substance.

The plots of the novels sometimes bring the reader all over the place, particularly in the first trilogy. Ultimately, however, things always resolve with a happy ending. All the pieces eventually fall into place: Maupin can employ his journalistic, straightforward prose to convey deliberately artificial narrative elements, for example getting away with every character, including the secondary ones, making an appearance in each book no matter the weirdness of the circumstances. The author seems to have a tacit

understanding with the reader that everything can be plausible – Jim Jones secretly living in Golden Gate Park, a cannibalistic cult at Grace Cathedral. Not even the darkest plotlines are portrayed with the heavy tones which might be expected from the circumstances. In its artificiality, the tone of the series is decidedly indebted to melodrama, which

> presented a world without confusion or complexity- yet filled with wonderfully thrilling events. The world of melodrama was an ideal world in which the good were very, very good, and rewarded for being so, and the bad were very, very bad, and punished accordingly. Through melodrama, the audience could experience vicariously, and in a form simple enough to be grasped immediately, the principal human emotions, from terror to love and from pathos to joy. (Bargainnier 1980: 50)

By embracing the conventions of melodrama, Maupin embarks on a process of disidentification[8] of sorts, thus using the series to «contribute to the function of a counterpublic sphere» (Muñoz 1999: 7) and employ the code of the majority «as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture» (31). The adoption of a melodramatic style therefore allows the readers to empathize with the characters and experience a world they might not be familiar with but which speaks, in a way, a language they can understand.

The fact that *Tales of the City* is structured as a series, and not a single book, is also of primary importance when it comes to its new incarnation of the word 'family'. The fact that characters are introduced slowly, particularly in the case of Mrs. Madrigal, and that readers can spend years in their company makes it easier to become emotionally attached to them – and thus more difficult to reject them because of their queerness. Robyn Warhol argues that *Tales of the City* employs serial narrative conventions «not only to enlist its audience's readerly devotion (that is, to sell newspapers, ads, and books), but also to restructure readers' attitudes toward sexuality, and particularly toward what might be called 'sexual diversity'» (1999: 383), thus shaping the potential for a subversive narrative. As the series goes on, Maupin acknowledges, «it becomes more gay-themed, it becomes darker; and I am carrying with me an audience that isn't expecting it, but can't put the books down» (in Canning 2001: 172). In the first

8 Muñoz outlines disidentification as a concept «descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship» (1999: 4).

trilogy the most political moment is without question Michael's letter to his parents. The second trilogy is darker and more involved in contemporary struggles because of the advent of the epidemic. In both cases, the fact that these events happen to characters who are part of a series makes it so that readers feel more involved with their struggles, be it Michael's coming out to his parents or his grief following the loss of Jon.

The serial format also allowed for a similar dynamic of empathy with the TV series. The first 1993 adaptation, developed by Channel 4 and PBS, encountered harsh criticism in the United States due to its gay content. As a consequence, PBS backed out from adapting the subsequent books. It is worth noting, however, that most of the criticism from the Christian right had more to do with the depiction of gay sex and nudity than with a non-punitive portrayal of a trans character. Two more adaptations followed, in 1998 and 2001, produced by Showtime, both pretty faithful to the novels. In all the iterations of the miniseries, Mrs. Madrigal was portrayed by Academy Award-winning cisgender actor and gay rights activist Olympia Dukakis. Dukakis reprised her role for the 2019 new series based on *Tales of the City*, this time produced by Netflix and with an original screenplay. The new series included a broader, more diverse portrayal of gender, sexuality and race, with more trans characters, characters of color, non-binary characters. This iteration, *Armistead Maupin's Tales of the City*, was reviewed in *The New York Times* as being reminiscent of an «extended TED Talk, … resolutely square,» largely centered on «flat, safe conversations about gender and queerness» (Hale 2019). While the efforts of being more inclusive have at times made the narrative a bit didactic, the new series also became a chance to give more space to trans representation. While, according to producer Alan Poul, it would have been «a huge act of disrespect» (quoted in Longo 2019) to recast the part played by Dukakis, a new space was carved by including an episode on Anna Madrigal's early days in San Francisco, in which the role is played by trans actor and activist Jen Richards. This move opened a nuanced conversation about the issue of cisgender actors playing trans characters, a subject that has become prominent in recent years both in the context of work opportunities for gender-non-conforming actors and of public perception of trans identity, as the cis actors who get usually cast to play trans parts belong to the character's biological sex and thus have to act in drag. On this subject, Richards pointed out the difference between having a male and a female cisgender

actor playing a trans woman, and observed that the presence of Dukakis was not inappropriate because «when you watch Olympia as Anna, you walk away with the sense that trans women are women» (in Longo 2019). The cultural impact of the character, however, has not been analyzed as much as its implications and influence would suggest. It is interesting to notice, for instance, how Sam Feder's 2020 Netflix documentary *Disclosure: Trans Lives on Screen* offers an in-depth study of the portrayal of trans characters in movies and TV shows but fails to include Mrs. Madrigal in the analysis – despite the participation of Richards in the documentary.

7. Logical subversion

In *Families We Choose*, Weston observes that «the stereotyped tragedy of «gay life» revolves around [...] presumed isolation, the absence of kin and stable relationships. Walking paradoxes in a land of marriage vows and blood ties, lesbians and gay men are popularly supposed to incarnate this most sexual and least social of beings» (1991: chap.1). The act of challenging that loneliness is therefore subversive in and of itself: in a society that would wish for queer people to disappear, and that tends to portray them as tragic figures, happiness is in a way the most revolutionary thing a queer character can do. The tenants of Barbary Lane «behave as though in some way they belong to each other» (Woods 1999: 356), and these relationships are what allows them to navigate all the circumstances and challenges that come their way. The «circuit of queer belonging» (Muñoz 2009: 111) is the defining trait of the whole narrative. In the interview «Friendship as a Way of Life,» Michel Foucault argues that this kind of belonging might be what really is controversial in the eyes of mainstream society:

> I think that's what makes homosexuality 'disturbing': the homosexual mode of life, much more than the sexual act itself. To imagine a sexual act that doesn't conform to law or nature is not what disturbs people. But that individuals are beginning to love one another – there's the problem. [...] This notion of mode of life seems important to me. [...] It seems to me that a way of life can yield a culture and an ethics. To be 'gay,' I think, is not to identify with the psychological traits and the visible masks of the homosexual but to try and develop a way of life (1994: 136-38).

The development of a queer way of life has included, particularly in the post-Stonewall era, a social dimension as one of its defining traits. This is certainly one of the aspects at the center of Maupin's work. We can

consider the logical family of *Tales of the City* as an expression of what Elizabeth Freeman calls 'queer hypersociability:' «the hypersocial, by contrast, is not just excess sociability but sociability felt and manifested along axes and wavelengths beyond the discursive and the visual—and even beyond the haptic, for the synchronization of bodies does not require their physical touch, but rather a simultaneity of movement in which the several become one» (2019: 14). The concept of 'several becoming one' represents a crucial feature of queer activism, particularly starting from the 1980s with organizations such as ACT UP. While Maupin has never been as politically engaged as Larry Kramer, for example, the portrayal of queer relationships as family-building can be considered the most militant theme of his work.

Because of this positive, optimistic approach, *Tales of the City* has managed to become a «Trojan horse»,[9] able to portray the most pressing (and often taboo) themes in gay life, eventually bringing them to a broader audience. Apart from being a popular book series, *Tales of the City* is also a non-stereotypical queer story that made it to American TV screens in the 1990s – a rare occurrence. This ability to reach out is ultimately an ability to change minds – to carry out, in Maupin's words, a gay agenda. In the review for the closing chapter of the series, *The Days of Anna Madrigal*, Isherwood points out that «when Mr. Maupin began writing the columns in *The San Francisco Chronicle* that became the first *Tales of the City* novels, they were in a sense radical social manifestoes sneakily disguised as popular entertainment» (2014). In an interview in 2000, Maupin had remarked on how the presence of *Tales of the City* on TV had, once again, an aura of subversion, and spoke about the importance of proudly reclaiming gay history and culture. He focused, in particular, on the complex heritage of the years of the sexual liberation:

> some of the first reviews of the *Tales of the City* miniseries in San Francisco said it's rather sad to look back on the time before AIDS and realize that all that irresponsible activity was going to lead to the epidemic. There was a very moralistic view of the time, which we simply stared down. The attitude of the show was: 'Fuck you—it was a time of great joy and self-discovery, and we will not have a revisionist view of what we did then because of what happened later'. (in Canning 2001: 167)

Maupin's display of queer optimism and community, both on the page and the screen, can therefore be read as subversive, particularly if we

9 This is how Neil Gaiman defines it in J. Kroot's *The Untold Tales of Armistead Maupin* (28'09'').

consider his optimism as a way to lure readers and viewers who do not belong to the queer community into embracing a different experience, a process he calls the 'slowly opening flower:' «that's what I mean about the slowly opening flower. […] Whereas the subject matter of the *Tales* is sometimes described as nostalgia, because it's about twenty-one years ago, the form of its presentation is completely modern, because people are doing things that have never been seen on film before in a way that is accessible to the entire culture» (in Canning 2001: 166). Despite being, at first glance, less challenging than other queer works, one may very well argue that the world of 28 Barbary Lane has had one of the most impactful influences on popular culture of the late Twentieth century – and the character of Mrs. Madrigal is at the center of that impact.

8. Conclusion

Maupin's world of simultaneously subtle and brazen, funny and moving, marginalised and mingling outsiders makes it so that the appeal of *Tales of the City* transcended its time and community. Maupin does not tame his themes, but allows the outside world to take a peek in, and Mrs. Madrigal represents one of the most interesting encounters a reader has at 28 Barbary Lane. The effectiveness of Maupin's approach is proven by the fact that even a writer who could be considered as one of the angriest, most subversive voices of queer literature fell in love with Barbary Lane: in his *New York Times* review of *Sure of You*, David B. Feinberg describes Maupin's writing as «light as a souffle, whimsical, cozy and charmingly innocent» (1989). Feinberg adds, «but Mr. Maupin writes for everyone: gay, straight, single, married, hip or square. His most subversive act is to write in such a matter-of fact manner about his gay characters. There is nothing exceptional or lurid about them: acceptance is a given» (1989). The same is true of Mrs. Madrigal. Her character is never observed with a morbid or fetishistic gaze. Apart from the origin of her name in the last novel, the details of her transition are never discussed. It never is an issue whether the tenants will accept her after learning about her gender identity. Despite the fact that the mystery surrounding her is a major plotline in the first novel, what is interesting about Mrs. Madrigal is her presence, not her past. And her presence is inextricably tied to the rooms of the home on Russian Hill and, most importantly, to the logical family they house.

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