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"But at the end of the day it's about me as well": Navigating the 'good lesbian' and 'good mother' discourses

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Abstract

This working paper interrogates how two of the lesbian mother participants from the author's doctoral study navigate the conflicting hegemonic discourses of the good mother ideology and the imperative to be out. The analysis draws on in-depth narrative interviews based on the participants' subjective cityscapes of Cape Town and their sexual life stories. An examination of how they construct and perform their mothering identities and manage their relationship with their children as lesbian mothers produces the counter-narrative, 'private resistance/public complicity with good mother ideologies'. The working paper explores the participants' evaluations and decisions taken as they negotiate their, at times, conflicting interests while mothering and enacting their lesbian sexuality. These negotiations reveal the dynamic, complex understanding required of coming out processes and performing motherhood in their constructions of their queer worlds. Their queer world making reveals lesbian motherhood as a site which does not reinforce the binaries of being in/out of the closet, a lesbian/mother, good/bad mother. As such, this paper claims that lesbian motherhood should be considered through the lens of 'borderlands'.

Introduction

Motherhood is fundamental to the construction of successful womanhood and femininities within all races and cultures in South Africa (Moore, 2013; Morrell, 2000; Potgieter, 1997; Walker, 1995). Across cultures in South Africa, the figure of the mother is normatively constructed as a heterosexual woman. In the context of patriarchal hetero-normativities in the country, dominant discourses in all cultures construct being a lesbian as either unnatural, and against religious beliefs, as well as unAfrican (Gunkel, 2010; Sanger & Clowes, 2006; van Ewyk & Kruger, 2017). For these reasons, when a lesbian becomes a mother, or a mother becomes a lesbian, it is unsurprising that the juxtaposition of 'lesbian' and 'mother' are often seen as paradoxical (Gabb, 2005), as undermining a core signifier of heterosexuality (Dunne, 2000) and as disrupting the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990/1999).

Lesbian mothers in my doctoral study[1] navigated a range of normative discourses in their everyday navigations of Cape Town. For the purposes of this working paper, I will focus on two specific normative discourses, that of the 'good (heterosexual) mother' and 'the imperative to be out'. I will consider how lesbian mothers negotiated and navigated these normative discourses in relation to how they inhabited and enacted their gender identities and sexualities. Notably, I will examine how they construct and perform their mothering identities and manage their relationship with their children as lesbian mothers. These navigations will be taken up as demonstrations of constructions of their queer life worlds and queer world making (QWM). I will elaborate on what is meant by QWM later on, but for now, it is sufficient to note that it refers to how the lesbians in the study produce their racialised gender and sexual identities and enact their sexualities in relation to normative notions of gender and sexuality.

Discourses of motherhood foreground cultural beliefs and social values which inform and order mothering practice. A fundamental ideology which underlies mothering and motherhood, and which is linked to racialised and culturally-specific notions of hegemonic motherhood, is the discourse of 'the good mother' (Hays, 1996). Krane & Davies (2007) argue that the good mother is a key social construct which pressures women to conform to their particular culture's standards and ideals. Mothers are measured and evaluated against this hegemonic ideal by others, and importantly, also judge themselves against it. They add that the good mother discourse is institutionalised in a particular culture's social arrangements and social practices, and therefore operates beyond the beliefs, practices and choices of individual women. Walker (1995) outlines how the good mother discourse is bound up with ideas about womanhood and a woman's gender identity, as well as childhood and the nature and needs of children. Ultimately, although the actual content of this discourse and expected practises will be constructed in specific historical contexts and cultures, which are informed by the interlocking structures of race, culture, class and gender (Hill Collins, 1994: 45), in general, good mother discourses and practices centre on the (heterosexual) mother prioritising the needs of her husband and children (Donaldson & Wilbraham, 2013; Goodwin & Huppatz, 2010; Hays, 1996; Johnston & Swanson, 2003). In the South African context, where heterosexual marriage levels are low, and many mothers do not cohabit, or are not in a

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[1]The doctoral study explored lesbians' modes and meanings of queer world making in Cape Town. Notably, it explored lesbian participants' productions of counter narratives in Cape Town as they navigated a series of dominant discourses in a number of interrelated sites of contested gendered and sexual normativities. These sites included sexual subjectivities and sexual practises; lesbian motherhood and finally, the material and symbolic constructions of Cape Town as home. These counter narratives were conceptualized as modes of queer world making (QWM).

relationship with the father of the child, the 'good mother' discourse emphasises her need to prioritise and meet the needs of the children.

However, it is important to note that lesbian mothers do not only navigate their lives in relation to dominant discourses which underpin racialized hegemonic gender and sexuality identities and relationships. They also navigate a series of dominant discourses and normativities which have come to constitute 'authentic' lesbian, gay, bisexual and queer (LGBQ) identities in South Africa. One of these normativities is the strong imperative to 'come out' of the closet and openly assume one's lesbian, gay or queer identity. To visibly perform one's non-normative sexuality is seen to demonstrate the authenticity of one's sexual identity and to render one a well-adjusted, healthy lesbian, gay or queer person (Klein et al, 2015; McCormick, 2015). This focus on coming out has become positioned as 'the' canonical narrative with which lesbians can and should speak to their processes of recognising and performing their non-normative sexual desires and identity (Gibson & Macleod, 2014).

International literature demonstrates how psychologists and sociologists have focused on writing and theorising about the identity development of young LGBQ people since the 1970s (Cass, 1979; Chapman & Brannock, 1987; Ponse, 1978). Most of these researchers have posited linear staged models of development, which describe initial stages of confusion, defensiveness, shame, gradual recognition and tolerance, experimentation and final acceptance of an openly displayed homosexual identity (Klein et al, 2015). Openly assuming one's homosexual identity is portrayed as not only morally superior, but as politically desirable, as this contributes to troubling, disrupting, and eventually breaking down the heteronormative fabric of society. These models, along with the superiority of coming out and the attendant visibility discourses, have been critiqued by a range of authors (Gibson & Macleod, 2014; Klein et al, 2015). These critiques include how the imperative to come out does not recognise how situational variables can endanger people's lives if they were to disclose their sexuality, and also assumes the desirability of always wanting to, or having to come out. It also assumes stable and coherent identities. These critiques notwithstanding, openly assuming one's non-normative sexuality is still normatively privileged as a sign of an authentic and modern LGBQ identity.

What happens if one considers these two hegemonic discourses alongside and in relation to each other – that of the paradoxical position of the lesbian mother and her troubled ability to perform and comply with the ideology of the 'good mother' as it manifests in her particular culture, and that of the imperative to 'come out', and live a visibly lesbian identity? In order to consider how lesbians have navigated these two hegemonic discourses in their everyday lives of mothering as lesbians, my analysis will draw on in-depth narrative interviews

based on two of my participants' subjective cityscapes[2] of Cape Town and their sexual life stories.

Lesbians represented their navigations of these dominant discourses in their everyday life through a series of counter narratives (Bamberg and Andrews, 2004). These counter-narratives are conceptualised as evidence of their constructions and enactments of queer world making (hereafter referred to as QWM). A concept coined by Berlant and Warner (1998), I take it up and use it to refer to the varying ways in which the lesbians in the study resist and (re)shape hegemonic identities, discourses and practices, revealing 'a mode of being in the world that is also inventing the world' (Muñoz, 2009: 121). Thus, an invented world is constructed alongside, and in relation, to a project of normalisation – at times complicit, at times transgressive (Foucault, 1978).

I do not, however, uncritically adopt Berlant and Warner's conceptualistion of QWM. Rather, in order to address the 'blind spots' (Muñoz, 1999:10) produced by their sole application of the heterosexual/homosexual binary, I adopt an intersectional (Crenshaw, 1991; Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016; McCall, 2005) reading of queer theory. This reworked concept of QWM ultimately incorporates an analysis of the lesbian participants' navigations of a 'wide field of normalisation' (Warner, 1993). Notably, this considers QWM in terms of how sexuality and its 'normalisation' project is connected to other axes of difference, such as gender, race, class status, motherhood status and generational position as the participants navigate social institutions in their everyday lives.

Before continuing, it is important to elucidate on the use of the category lesbian as an identifier when discussing the project of queer world making. My use of the term queer refers to a theoretical perspective as non-normative (Halperin, 1995), as well as an analytical approach (Epprecht, 2008). It has not been used in the sense of queer as an identity label. The use of lesbian or gay woman, however, does refer to the specific positionality of a lesbian identity within such a non-normative project. Highlighting the category 'lesbian' in this sense, draws one's attention to a lesbian participant's particular imbrication in networks of power, and to reflect on the specificities of that identity label. In this sense, my employment of lesbian is as both a category of knowledge and a social positionality from which to explore embodied subjectivities.

Having said this, I do recognise that lesbians are not a homogenous category. Noting the intersectional perspective with which I will be exploring the project of queer world making, a lesbian positionality needs to be explored in relation to

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[2] Participants were asked to draw and speak to a representation of their daily navigations of Cape Town which were conceptualised as their subjective cityscapes.

how it is interwoven with the social relations of gender, race and class (Bennett & Reddy, 2007; Browne & Ferreira, 2015; Gqola, 2005). In this way, I am cognisant that one's experiences of being a lesbian will depend on one's age, including at what point in one's life cycle one began to enact and embody a lesbian identity; one's race and class; one's lesbian gender identity and/or gender performance; physical and mental abilities; health status; geographical location; religious affiliation, and so on. All of these other social markers will contribute to one's life experiences as a lesbian. Specifically, they will mark a lesbian's relationship to power, and the opportunities, privileges and exclusions, discrimination and violence one may experience depending on one's intersectional location(s) within the matrix of sociality in Cape Town at any given time. In this way, I am cognisant that a lesbian identity or performing a lesbian sexuality is constructed within particular social relations, in particular moments in time and in particular contexts i.e. the category is fluid, spatial and temporal (Browne & Ferreira, 2015).

The use of *queer* world making is useful in this working paper, even for people who self-identified as lesbian or gay women, because I am referring to modes and processes of world making based on participants' display and practices of non-normativities. Here I am concerned with modes and practices which engage and negotiate with hegemonic norms, i.e. what is seen to be 'normal' or culturally/religiously dominant. In particular, I am interested in their processes of resisting, transgressing, subverting and/or being complicit with dominant notions of racialised and classed womanhood and heteronormativity. These processes will necessarily be influenced by their specific positionalities as raced, classed and gendered lesbians in Cape Town.

Context

The South African Constitution protects the rights of LGBQT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer and trans) people, and their right to equality is enshrined within the Equality Clause. This right to equality has been translated into an enabling legislative framework which decriminalised homosexuality, notably the practise of sodomy and the use of the dildo and opened the passage for a range of protective laws to be written. One of these laws contemplates the rights of LGBQT people to form families by marrying and/or by having children. Same-sex couples, and individual adoption, assisted contraception, and the protection and promotion of all kinds of LGBQ families are contemplated in the legislative framework.[3]

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[3] Conception by egg and sperm donation is governed by two laws in South Africa - the Human Tissue Act (1983) and the Children's Act (2005). The Human Tissue Act extended

Alongside the recognition of legal protections that lesbians and their families enjoy, there is also a recognition of the range and diversity of types and forms of families in South Africa. However, people's cultural and religious milieu and the hegemonic norms associated with these (heteronormative and patriarchal) are very important influences on people's everyday experience. Thus, in spite of these legal protections and people's lived experiences of family diversity, the heterosexual family is still considered the cultural and religious hegemonic norm, and the nuclear heterosexual family is foregrounded at policy level (Department of Social Development, 2012; Morison et al, forthcoming). The overall effect of this is that the normative family form is a heterosexual one, and one which should be headed up by (at least) a mother and a father. Thus, family forms which are lesbian-headed households, or heterosexual women-headed households, are commonly pathologised as 'missing' a man/father. At a hegemonic normative level, the existence and the presence of a man/father is considered to be socially and culturally essential for a child's healthy psychological and emotional development and for effective family functioning (Donaldson & Wilbraham, 2013; Kruger, 2003; 2006; Lubbe, 2007; 2008; Morison et al, forthcoming).

In addition, wider cultural beliefs regarding the family in South Africa reveal the commonly-held belief that heterosexual biological conception is the 'natural' ideal method of contraception. In this vein, it is often argued that other means of conceiving a child would undoubtedly cause psychological harm to the children (Kruger, 2003; Donaldson & Wilbraham, 2013; Youngelson, 2006). Thus, same-sex parented families, along with other non-normative family types, confront a range of social discourses which challenge same-sex couples' right to become parents, and question the acceptability and appropriateness of being one (Lubbe, 2007; Morrell, 2000). Essentially, these resistances to lesbian parenting centre on traditional heteronormative notions of the family and the alleged negative effects that alternative family formations may have on the children (Lubbe, 2007). Within normative constructions of South African cultures, therefore, a lesbian-headed household is rendered unsuitable for parenting a child, and the lesbian mother (or couple) is constructed as dysfunctional or disordered (Morrell, 2000). Within this context, the lesbian mother is hegemonically

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legal access to assisted insemination in registered ART clinics to all women, regardless of sexual orientation or relationship status (Isaack, 2003). The Children's Act (2005) fully protects all South African children, including donor conceived and surrogate children. It also covers parenting rights and responsibilities. It outlines how any single person may adopt and same sex couples may jointly adopt children (www.justice.gov.za). In 2003, a Constitutional Court ruling granted full parental rights to both members of same sex couples of a child(ren) conceived through assisted insemination (Isaack, 2003). Same sex civil unions were legally recognised as marriages in 2006.

constructed as unable to achieve 'good mother' status, or to effectively perform as a 'good mother'.

Lesbian mothers constructing queer worlds through their counter narratives

It is commonly held that these hegemonic racialised and gendered ideologies of gender and sexuality inform, but do not constrain, women's gendered sexual subjectivities and practices (Bryant & Schofield, 2007; Crawley & Willman, 2017). When people's own experiences do not reflect that of the master narrative(s), as Andrews (2004) argues, they come to question the foundation of the dominant perspective. The challenge becomes to understand how people make sense of themselves and their lives, through the stories they tell, finding meaning outside of the 'emplotments' ordinarily available (Andrews, 2004). These reveal stories from the margin, from members of 'outgroups' which reveal a 'counter-reality' (Delgado, 1995 cited in Andrews, 2004). Their engagements and navigations of dominant narratives, the ways in which 'these available meanings are taken up, resisted and/or (re)negotiated' (Taylor and Littleton, 2006 cited in Morison & Macleod, 2013: 571) reveal the work of constructing counter-narratives.

My doctoral study explored lesbians' productions of counter-narratives in Cape Town as they navigated a series of dominant discourses in a number of interrelated sites of contested gendered and sexual normativities. These counter-narratives were conceptualised as modes of queer world making (QWM). Its analysis drew on the narratives of 23 self-identified lesbian, gay women and queer people. Participants ranged in age from 23 to 63, were racially diverse, and were mostly middle or lower middle class. There were two working class participants. They subscribed to a range of religious affiliations: Christian, Muslim, Jewish, African traditional religions and atheism. They lived in townships, the southern or northern suburbs of Cape Town. There were three foreign nationals. One participant was living with HIV and one participant used a wheelchair to navigate her movement. Eight participants were mothers, two of whom conceived their children while in lesbian relationships.

Participants were asked to draw and speak to a representation of their daily navigations of Cape Town noting the main sites and places which they navigated in their everyday lives. These representations and narratives were conceptualised as their subjective cityscapes. These generally included representations of the participant's home(s), the different neighbourhoods that they moved through or occupied, noting where they worked/studied/accessed money, sites of leisure

and sport, religious sites and places, hospitals and sites of access to health, main means of transport and/or transport routes. Some included symbolic representations of parts of the city and its iconic symbols such as Table Mountain. Some cityscapes were wholly symbolic and did not assume the form of figurative maps. Participants were then asked to speak to their subjective cityscapes, which was followed by an interactive discussion with myself.

My methodological focus entailed looking for, and interrogating, the counter narratives in the lesbian participants' life stories. I understood these counter narratives to be the 'stories which people tell and live which offer resistance, either implicitly or explicitly, to dominant cultural narratives (Andrews, 2004: 2). Plummer (2001 cited in Squire et al, 2008) notes the trend towards 'intimate disclosure narratives', where the storytelling of the less powerful operate as bids for representation and power from the oppressed and exploited. Similarly, Scott (1991) shares how a common strategy of oppressed groupings like women, black people, LGBTI communities and so on, is 'to make visible their experience, providing evidence of a world of alternative values and practices' (Scott, 1991:26), in this way challenging hegemonic constructions of social worlds.

One such counter narrative of two lesbian mothers within the sample highlighted the complex and contradictory nature of the range of normativities which they were navigating. These emanated not only from within their communities and families, but also circulated within their lesbian communities. An exploration of their negotiations with themselves, their families, children, and lesbian communities exposes the multifaceted nature of their life worlds, and the complexity and creativity of their decisions and actions. Their constructions of their queer life worlds as lesbian mothers show how they are living in borderlands (Anzaldúa, 1987), between and across patriarchal heteronormative demands to perform 'good motherhood' and the imperative to perform an 'out', visible lesbian sexuality, the embodiment of a normatively constituted authentic modern lesbian identity. Their borderlands reveal themselves to be symbolic, emotional and material, constructed and produced through the mediations of their own and their children's needs and interests, in relation to these dominant narratives.

Considering the counter narrative private resistance/public complicity with good mother ideologies

Conflicts between some of the lesbian mothers and their children arose specifically as a result of the mothers being *lesbian,* with the children therefore having to navigate racialised heteronormativities. Two of the mothers, Denise

and Light Blue, share how they managed the emotional crises and conflicts with their children after they began lesbian relationships. Both mothers conceived their children while in heterosexual relationships. Their narratives reveal their simultaneous resistance to and complicity with the 'good mother' ideologies that frame motherhood within their respective cultures in South Africa.

Denise is a white, Afrikaans, lower middle-class woman in her late thirties. She has three daughters, Emma (12 years old at the time of the first interview) from a previous heterosexual relationship, and twin daughters, Jonene and Jolene (9 years old at the time of the first interview) from her previous heterosexual marriage. The children have been living with Denise and her partner, Mary, for about seven years.

Light Blue, a black woman in her mid-forties, is a divorcé with two children, a son, Dineo (27) and a daughter, Lesego (17) from a previous heterosexual marriage. For reasons unrelated to her sexuality, the children had lived on and off with Light Blue's mother, both during her marriage and after her divorce. Light Blue lived with her children for some years in Pretoria, and then moved with them to Cape Town three years ago.

Denise and Light Blue's narratives reveal that their parenting while in lesbian relationships is exercised through a juggling of their and their children's conflicting needs and interests. One such conflict entails their management of the expressed need of their children *to be seen* to have heterosexual mothers and heterosexual families, which contradicts their need to enact their lesbian sexuality while mothering. This makes evident that, similar to lesbian mothers, children of lesbians have to negotiate the 'disclosure' of their non-normative family situation. This has resulted in the children's fear of rejection and being ostracised, as well as fear of being 'tainted' as being lesbian, or at the very least perceived to be abnormal. These concerns and considerations contribute to Denise and Light Blue, in similar ways, to unevenly resist the imperative to be 'out', and to move in and out of a visibly recognisable and legible lesbian sexual identity. In this way, they choose to situationally perform the 'good heterosexual mother'.

Denise and her partner, Mary, had never hidden their sexual and emotional relationship from their children. Denise comments that the twins 'had never really known any different' and had essentially grown up within their lesbian-headed household. She feels that they had unquestioningly accepted their relationship, and their household, from the start. Denise notes, however, that her eldest daughter, Emma, is not so accepting of Denise's lesbianism and of assuming Mary as a second mother. Emma is angrily confrontational, demanding that Denise be 'normal':

> '[…] and she says she actually **hates** me for being a lesbian. She's **upset** with me for being a lesbian. 'Why can't I be normal and have also a father, like a man, like the other kids?'

Unlike the twins, Emma does not have a relationship with her biological father and does not seem to have a father-daughter relationship with the twins' father. Emma frames her rejection of her mother's lesbianism as her need to have a father and for Denise to be a 'normal' mother. When she was younger, after Denise had initially come out to the family, Emma had been taken by Denise's grandmother to live with her. The grandmother had initially been openly homophobic and rejecting of Denise's relationships with women. It is unsurprising that growing up in such a household, Emma could hold similar views. However, perhaps it is not only learnt homophobia at play in Emma's reactions. After returning to live with Denise and Mary, Emma was old enough to witness and understand Denise and Mary's conflictual relationship issues, marred by jealousy, infidelities, violence, break ups and reconciliations.

Denise shares how Emma began acting out at school when she and Mary went through a particularly bad break up. They had all continued to live together. Mary had moved her new lover into the family home. Denise had moved into Emma's bedroom, to which she would bring her own casual lovers. Denise shares how her emotional stress at this time had led her to withdraw from mothering. Commenting that 'she went bonkers', she had left Mary to assume the parenting role.

Within this context, Emma had forbidden Denise and Mary to publicly assume their lesbian relationship at her school. Denise shares that Emma had told her that her fellow learners at school are quite homophobic. Denise adds later that she attributes Emma's negative reactions to Denise's lesbian sexuality to Emma getting older and becoming more conscious of, and influenced by, what her friends are saying and thinking. From what Denise tells me, Emma does not want her non-normative and relatively chaotic home life displayed at school. These concerns are mirrored by the children in Lubbe's (2008) study on children growing up in lesbian-headed households in South Africa and their decision whether to openly assume their lesbian-headed families at school. These decisions were heavily influenced by whether they perceived their school environments to be tolerant. The study also highlighted how children might become homophobic as they get older and become more conscious of their peers, especially within the school environment.

Denise shares her negotiations with herself and with Emma:

'But I'd still said to Emma, […] 'Do you want me to be with a man? Because if that will make you happier I'll definitely go, then I'll be with a man'. But at the end of the day it's not gonna, it's about **me** as well. And I mean to be honest, I don't think she'll even be happy if I did take a man'.

Ultimately, Denise resists the demands of her daughter to comply with their heteronormative Afrikaans community and culture, and 'to be normal and give her a father'. She also resists the good mother ideology within Afrikaner culture which requires her to prioritise the needs of her children over her own, and to provide them with a father in a heterosexual home. Instead, Denise prioritises her needs to enact and perform her lesbian sexuality. Her construction of her queer life world sees her choosing to meet her emotional and sexual needs to be a lesbian, specifically with Mary, over and above her eldest daughter's desire for her to be a heterosexual mother, and to live within a heterosexual household.

Confronting similar tensions and negotiations within her own household, Light Blue shares how her children and family were 'disappointed and hurt' when she discussed her lesbian sexuality with them. She comments they felt this way 'mostly for not understanding and not knowing what to do with that (her sexuality)'. Initially, she shares, her children were confused and asked her 'why choose to be that?' As is commonly practiced within black families in South Africa, Light Blue shares that her children had also lived with her mother (their grandmother) while growing up. Her family considers homosexuality as something 'un-African', and she is sure that this attitude was transferred to her children. She comments on her family's response to her lesbian sexuality:

'… it was just a foreign concept at home and maybe [they were] just not expecting it from their mother who's lived with their father. […] It has been a really great painful thing for them'.

Like Emma's demand that Denise gives her a father like a 'normal' person, Light Blue shares how her daughter had commented how 'she wished that maybe someday she would have a daddy too'. Because the child already has a father, Light Blue interpreted this as another way of asking her 'to go back' to being heterosexual. Light Blue shares the negotiations she had with herself on whether to grant her daughter her 'wish':

'I thought of, of, I mean, dating men is still an option, uhm, I thought about it and I thought maybe, you know, I will normalise my life, uh but for their sake, definitely for their sake. But I mean, I had, I had never really said to myself that I am [long pause] a **woman** only person. Like I'm not totally, totally lesbian. I'm very open-minded uhm. The only reason that I'm here [in lesbian relationships] is because my feelings have

been, uh, migrating to […] women only. My attraction has been to women for quite a while now, and uhm, [pause] **thus** I'm in this space, and, and embracing it fully, I must say. I love where I am. So I had thought about that and, and more for their sake uhm, but then I thought, 'I, I don't think it's the right thing to do', you know?'

Light Blue frames her negotiations with herself about returning to relationships with men within the common dictum, 'for the sake of the children'. After considering the vagaries of her sexual desires and identity, Light Blue finally chooses *her* emotional and sexual needs over the needs of her daughter (and family). In this way, she ultimately resists the heteronormative requirement to perform the good (heterosexual) mother of her Sesotho culture. Light Blue's queer world making parental practice sees her transgressing normative maternal demands to be self-sacrificing and to prioritise her children's needs over her own.

Light Blue adds another layer of complexity to her argument when she argues how men, particularly step fathers, can be potentially dangerous for girl children in these times. Here, she seems to be implicitly referring to the high rates of sexual abuse and rape of young girls and women in South Africa (Jewkes et al, 1999). She justifies her refusal to return to men by arguing that she is doing so because she is considering her daughter's wellbeing. In this way, she rescues her status of 'good mother' through a discourse of being a responsible and protective mother:

> 'The risk of being a girl child, bringing in a male, strange male into, into her **environment** as well, you know, I thought no, I will not do that. She has a father, you know […] and I said to her, "You do have a dad, my child. And your dad is enough".'

Light Blue emphasises that her daughter's request for a father makes no sense when she already *has* a father. She challenges her daughter's need to have a relationship with a father *through* her mother. In this way, she is deflecting the social expectation that a mother should resolve her children's emotional needs. Even though her daughter is a teen, she is nearly of age, and so Light Blue pushes her daughter to take some responsibility for building her own relationship with her father, independent of her mother.

However, both Denise and Light Blue, out of consideration for their daughters' feelings, *do* accede to their daughters' requests to perform situational heterosexuality in certain public spaces. As mentioned earlier, Denise shares how Emma specifically asked her not to tell the school authorities and teachers that Denise is a lesbian and in a relationship with Mary. Denise shares how

when she and Mary go to school plays or attend teacher/learner evenings everybody assumes that Mary is Emma's aunt and that Denise is single. This performance of situational heterosexuality leaves Denise feeling constrained and untrue to herself.

Light Blue's negotiations of her mothering role also see her adopting strategies to manage her children's negative reactions and homophobia. Light Blue performs a series of time/place management strategies which see her performing 'situational heterosexuality' in public spaces which involve her children. These allow her to exercise her lesbian motherhood in a manner that simultaneously meets her daughter's need to be seen to have a heterosexual mother and Light Blue's needs to exercise her lesbian sexuality. She shares: 'as much as I'm out, I try to protect her from having to deal with my sexuality with her peers'. Light Blue explains that her strategy entails living between two homes and two worlds. She lives in her partner's home in Parklands, where she lives as an out lesbian with her partner and socialises with friends, and her family home with her children in Goodwood, where she lives as a mother who is perceived to be heterosexual. Light Blue relates how this public enactment of heterosexuality sees her avoiding overt displays of affection for her partner like holding hands or kissing, or of bringing her lesbian relationship and community home to Goodwood.

In a similar manner to the black lesbians in Mignon's (2011) study, who are concerned with conforming to 'acceptable' images of motherhood, but who also defend their sexual agency and right to perform their lesbian sexuality, Denise and Light Blue's counter narratives to the good mother ideology can be framed as narratives of private resistance and public complicity. Their performances of lesbian motherhood see Denise and Light Blue resisting the good mother ideologies of their respective heteronormative cultures in the private spaces of their homes. In these private spaces, they both centre their own needs to assume their lesbian sexuality and to maintain affective, sexual and intimate relationships with their respective partners. However, in public spaces, both mothers accommodate their children's need to appear to have a heterosexual mother. In this way, they prioritise their children's needs to be seen to be part of a family that complies with the heteronormativities of their Afrikaans and Sesotho cultures. Through these practices they comply with the 'good mother' ideologies of their respective cultures. This sees them choosing to withstand the imperative to 'out and proud' as a sign of their lesbian authenticity. However, these choices to 'appear' heterosexual are motivated by the need to fulfil their children's needs for sameness and conformity, rather than out of shame, guilt and confusion regarding their lesbian sexuality. Thus, their choice to perform situational heterosexuality, to be 'in the closet', is an empowered and informed one. It is one informed by motherly love and care for their children. Both Denise

and Light Blue consciously submit to these 'straightening devices' (Ahmed, 2006) and regulatory regimes of heterosexual public behaviour (Valentine, 1996; 2000) as part of their parental practice. They both perform 'situational heterosexuality' in order to 'protect' their children from stigma and discrimination.

Both, however, in different ways, refuse to provide their children with the 'good father', a socially required complement to the 'good mother'. Light Blue asks her daughter to build a relationship directly with her own biological father, while Denise argues that having a father would not provide her daughter with the happiness that she is seeking. In this way, their narratives reveal how their queer world making as lesbian mothers simultaneously resists (in private) and re-inscribes (in public) the good mother ideology and heteronormativities that exists within hegemonic versions of their different cultures.

Conclusions

The paper has demonstrated a number of ways in which lesbian motherhood is a site of intense negotiation, conflict, stress, agency and creativity. The counter narratives of lesbian motherhood have revealed that the category of 'lesbian mother' is a complex one. The participants' queer world making practices reveal the multiple ways in which they have been complicit with, reworked and re-signified and/or resisted the ideology of the 'good mother'. Their experiences and the meanings which they ascribe to these processes of negotiating lesbian motherhood trouble the binary set up in queer theory between sameness/difference with heterosexuality and assimilation/transgression of heteronormativity.

A number of international studies have attempted to demonstrate how lesbian mothers take mothering 'as seriously' as heterosexual mothers and are just as good at it. Lewin (1994) argues, for example, that for many lesbian parents, motherhood is *the* focus of their identities. However, unlike these tendencies to over emphasise the positive stories of 'progressive practices in order to promote the potentialities of lesbian families' (Gabb, 2004: 174), this paper highlighted the 'uneasy complexities' that the lesbian participants encountered when practising mothering while lesbian. Although these two participants in my study shared times in their lives when they chose to prioritise their children's needs over their own, akin to the argument posited by Rodríguez (2014), an examination of their queer world making practices reveal that they 'speak the unspeakable'. Their narratives reveal that they don't only talk to the 'joy' of having children but highlight the tensions and contradictions which arise for mothers when they struggle with the social expectation to give up their social,

affective and sexual autonomy. However, their narratives also highlight their management of these familial conflicts and internal self-doubt, and how they devised ways to resolve these conflicting interests.

Their negotiations of the imperative to 'come out' highlight the rigidity of the traditional approach to coming out which only considers the heterosexual/homosexual binary. The participants' management of moving in and out of the 'closet' requires one to understand the dynamic and complex nature of these processes within social contexts where coming out is not always in and of itself inherently good or morally superior. Rather, the participants' evaluations and decisions about when to prioritise their own needs,[4] and when to prioritise the needs and interests of their children, reveal the dynamic and complex understanding that is required of coming out processes which do not reinforce the binaries along the lines of being in/out the closet, a lesbian/mother, good/bad mother.

Their constructions of their queer life worlds revealed in their counter narratives demonstrate a queer world making that is ephemeral and contingent, always produced in relation to, alongside and within dominant narratives. For this reason, their queer life worlds show themselves to be contradictory, multivalent and incomplete. Their queer world making ultimately speaks to a politics of belonging (Yuval Davis, 2006) – both within socialities of the family and kinship systems, as well as within constructions of 'authentic' and culturally-recognised subjectivities, practises and relationships.

Queer world making has revealed itself on the same three levels as outlined in Hill Collins (1990) – individual consciousness, cultural context and social institutions. At the level of *individual consciousness*, the lesbian participants' constructions of their queer life worlds position them as simultaneously complicit with and countering the range of dominant narratives which prop up racialised patriarchal heteronormativities. For these participants, complicity took on several meanings and relations to regimes of power, ranging from its perpetuation and reproduction, a re-inscribing of dominant narratives, to Oswin's (2005) formulation of a more ambivalent complicity. These can be found, for example, in their stories about motherhood and private resistance and public compliance. Participants' complicity and simultaneous resistance of these dominant narratives can be read as 'ambivalent and porous, as an undetermined set of processes that simultaneously enables both resistance and capitulation' (Oswin, 2005:84).

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[4] In this case, to the decision concerned performing her lesbian sexuality and maintaining emotional, sexual relationships with women with the knowledge of their children. But this is relevant for any decision which speaks to her autonomy and ability to meet her own needs as a person, irrespective of her 'duties' as a mother.

Their negotiations of the racialised codes and disciplinary regimes of gender and sexuality within the contours of their respective cultures position them as inside and outside of the range of *cultural contexts* of the multiple communities to which they belong. They reshape and shift (albeit temporarily, unevenly) the institutional norms, practices and power relations performed and enacted within the social institutions of the family, and simultaneously reproduce and resist the disciplinary regimes within education, religion, media, and ultimately the state.

Their productions of queer life worlds as lesbian mothers bring to mind Anzaldúa's (1987) concept of 'borderlands'. 'To live in the borderlands', according to Anzaldúa (1987: 194), ultimately means constructing and producing queer life worlds which are testament to the breaking down of clear cut divisions and boundaries. Borderlands does not speak to the creation of two worlds merging to form a third country, but rather speaks to those contingent spaces that exist around borders where one lives within the possibility of multiple plotlines (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2006).

These multiple plot lines are guided and shaped by dominant narratives within multiple communities. Their life worlds, as mothers, are informed by and produced in relation to the 'good mother' discourses. Their life worlds, as lesbians, are informed and produced in relation to the 'imperative to be out'. Their life worlds are produced and constructed in relation to contrasting and contradictory normativities. Their constructions of their life worlds show how they are on the inside, while simultaneously being on the outside, of these dominant normativities and worlds.

Their queer world making is not so much about worlds with clearly defined borders and boundaries, but rather speaks to 'porous' worlds. This can be seen in how they choose to meet their children's need 'to be seen' to have a heterosexual mother during their everyday navigations of heteronormative institutions such as the school and family of origin, and in how they take up the imperative to be out. Through a frame of 'motherly love', the lesbian mothers share how their need to protect their children from heteronormative discrimination and stigma leads them to prioritise their children's needs to be seen to have heterosexual mothers, and to have 'normal' families. They choose to publicly display heterosexual motherhood in spaces occupied by their children – the school, in their relationships with school peers and families, and in spaces dominated by their children's networks. They choose to succumb to these straightening devices (Ahmed, 2006), both as acts of motherly love, and as empowered lesbian mothers. Their agentic and informed choices reveal 'borderlands' – the constructions of new meanings of being a lesbian and being a mother, a contingent belonging in multiple worlds. They are reframing being

lesbian – choosing to publicly perform what could be read as 'being in the closet' from an empowered space, and simultaneously reframing motherhood, as they publicly perform heterosexual motherhood *a*s lesbian mothers.

Their bordered existence – their lesbian queer life worlds – are also 'porous' and responsive to their agentic reworkings of the dominant narratives of hegemonic motherhood and the good mother discourses. This can be seen in their productions of counter narratives as mothers with sexual and emotional needs, as mothers who build affective and sexual relationships with women partners. Here, they refuse to accommodate their children's desires for a hegemonic mother – one who will provide them with a father, and who unquestioningly and consistently prioritises their children's needs over their own. As lesbian mothers, they evaluate the 'risk' of danger, hurt and disadvantage to their children of their performances of lesbianism within their homes and relationships. They conclude their emotional and sexual needs are an important part of them being a good mother (Denise), and that they in fact are being good mothers by protecting them from the possible dangers of step fathers and potential sexual abuse (Light Blue). As lesbian mothers in the borderlands, they negotiate their sexual identities and needs, not only with themselves and their partners, but also with their children and families.

Their productions of lesbian mothers' queer life worlds speak to their 'sense making' within their borderlands, worlds constructed within heteronormative social institutions of family of origin, educational institutions, heterosexual communities, but also within lesbian communities and scene spaces. These show how the category of 'lesbian mother' is a complex and contingent one as they rework, re-signify and/or resist the demands of the good mother discourses and the imperative to be out. Their queer life worlds are characterised by a tolerance for 'contradiction and ambiguity, by the transgression of rigid conceptual boundaries, and by the creative breaking of the new unitary aspect of new and old paradigms' (Anzaldúa, 1987: 34). Their counter narratives of lesbian motherhood reveal how their everyday practice sees them attempting 'to make place' for themselves, and their children, within their families and lesbian communities. Their presence, also, undoubtedly, reshapes and reforms both lesbian communities, and heteronormative institutions such as the family, and school.

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