

Natasha Distiller

Am I That Name? Middle-class lesbian motherhood in post-apartheid South Africa

I belong to a so-called alternative family, one which is comprised of two women, two children, and three dogs. I am increasingly struck by how we are no different to what, in relation to our label, must be called ordinary families. Both those who are for us and those who are against us tend to invest in our difference. Homophobic interest groups insist we are not a family at all. The African Christian Democratic Party (ACDP), which opposed the South African Civil Union Bill of 2006 with its call for the extension of marriage rights to gays and lesbians, states on its website that, “Not a single person making or supporting such a call is a product of such an unnatural and sinful relationship. We are all products of heterosexual relationships and not homosexuality. As a result, we reject the notion of the so-called homosexual marriages based on our biblical and cultural beliefs as African Christians.” The party also has a policy on “The Family Institution”, which begins, “The family is an institution worthy of nurturing and protecting”. Clearly, my family is not a family at all in the eyes of the ACDP and my children, the products of homosexuality, fall outside of the realm of the intelligibly human. Historically, lesbians have been considered detrimental to the wellbeing of children, as the many custody battles lost by women who came out after having children attest (Tasker and Golombok, 1997, pp. 8-11; Lewin, 1993; Schwartz Gottman, 1990, pp. 178-9). In addition, many people still believe that homosexuality is something a child can catch, like a virus, or be damaged into, like a wound, so homosexuals raising children is seen to be (problematically) increasing the likelihood of producing more homosexuals. From the other side, much pro-lesbian writing produced mostly in Anglo-America celebrates our intrinsic difference from and threat to the patriarchal order of Western culture (for example Sullivan 2004, chapter 3; Laird and Green, 1996, p.360; Muzio, 1996; Mitchell, 1996; Muzio, 1993). Most of this literature explicitly or implicitly depends on what Muriel Dimen calls “difference feminism” (1995, p.306), that is, a way of thinking about sexual difference which assumes that women and men are fundamentally and essentially different, and which understands lesbian difference as the ultimate space for the development of a qualitatively different kind of femaleness.

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As much as I would like to believe that we are intrinsically revolutionary (no need to recycle, then, since our credentials for a better world are already ensured), the daily routines associated with raising children feel very, very ordinary, if no less challenging for being shared by most people on the planet. Of course, in terms of the dynamics of our relationship, there are some differences, most notably the lack of established gender roles. I do think, though, that there is increased complexity between theory and practice. The ambiguities and ambivalences of daily life and people's interactions are not always captured by grand theoretical narratives, however much they strive to name real dynamics accurately. Not all heterosexual relationships are exclusively structured by and for male subjectivity. Certainly the examples of the relationships of friends and siblings suggest that heterosexuals can be in equitable and happy relationships as much as homosexuals can be in inequitable and unhappy ones.

With the birth of our first child, conceived through alternative insemination, it seemed to me that we become even more like any other family, on both an affective and a practical level. I felt part of the world in a way I never have before.¹ The one significant difference is we have to engage with other people's assumptions about our difference, their definitions of who we are and are not, and what we should and should not be doing (this is congruent with the literature, which suggests that the world's homophobia is the only harmful or difficult aspect of being the child of a gay or lesbian parent (for example Bos et al, 2005)). The single article I have been able to locate which examines lesbian family functioning in South Africa emphasizes the difficulties caused for the children of the participating families by the ignorance and prejudice of the world around them (Lubbe, 2008). Notably, there is no existing social recognition of the relationship of the non-biological mother of our child, reflected in the lack of a vocabulary to describe her (see Sullivan, 2004, pp. 158-164). As a result we almost daily have to explain and describe who we three are to one another, in response to questions like, 'Which one is his mother?' or 'Are you his auntie?'

Our family's intrinsic sameness to most other families is denied by the assertions of our difference made both in our favour and in order to deny us our existence. At the same time, my declaration of sameness is not itself uncomplicated. For a lesbian to claim to be the same as in the context of a heteronormative patriarchal society is to allege an impossible relation, and so to participate in an act of social and self- denial. It is also a claim that can only be made by lesbians

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with the power to pass, whether that power is class-based or comes from maternity or the performance of a recognizable and approved femininity. Despite what I have written above, I am profoundly ambivalent about being “the same as” heteronormativity, whether that sameness is skin-deep or not.² This paper will think about the politics of definitions in the context of the debate about the problems of mimicking heteronormativity. What does it mean to be different or to be the same, in the context of post-apartheid South Africa’s Constitutional imperative to allow for difference? Can our post-apartheid language of rights accommodate the surprisingly complex relation between sameness and difference?³

I: Equally human in South Africa

The liberal humanist terms of a language of Constitutional rights have long vexed many queer activists. Eng et. al. (2005) place normative, monogamous gay and lesbian families alongside the worst political evils of the turn of the century, including Bush’s war on terror, international xenophobia, and the collapse of the welfare state. They object to what they call “queer liberalism”, a term that for Eng et al indicates an oxymoronic state of affairs, since a queer position should be the antithesis of liberal respectability.

The inclusion of the rights of sexual minorities in the South African Constitution (found in Article 9 (3), the ‘Equality clause’) in its liberal humanist terms has not been without its critics from within the gay rights movement itself (if one can even speak of ‘a’ movement in South Africa – another definitional dilemma). The work of inclusion was done by the erstwhile National Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality, which was largely white, male, and middle-class: the homosexuals with social and economic power. They strategically deployed a more conservative language of human rights, and did not focus on identity politics (See Cameron, 2005; Massoud, 2003; Oswin, 2007; 1996). Furthermore, the Coalition itself, South African as it was, was not without its internal politics of exclusion, revolving around race, class, and gender (Swarr and Nagar, 2003, Gunkel, 2010). The successful ‘respectability’ of the rallying cry for human rights is thus intertwined with the middle-class, white ‘respectability’ of a then-largely-Anglo-American oriented movement.

A human rights discourse, the deployment of the figure of the good citizen entitled to his or her place in the civic sun, can function to mask the lack of extension of these rights to less

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‘respectable’ or socially empowered citizens, or other national Others: “the idea of equal political rights attached to the concept of a ‘universal citizen’ as the bearer of rights masks the material social, economic and political inequalities of subjects” (Van Zyl, 2009, p.365. See also Stacey and Meadow 2009, p.18). Additionally, rights-based activism is limited in its ability to create opportunities for minorities (Stychin, 1996), not least because it tends to assert a coercive normativity. Local queer theorists have pointed out how, internationally, the extension of human rights to (certain) homosexuals has been used as evidence of their civility by governments implicated in other kinds of human rights abuses (Gunkel, 2010; Hoad, 2005).

The implications of the political compromises made by homosexual activists have been well-documented in the international LGBTI movement. For example, Nancy Polikoff, in an article entitled, ‘Why Legalizing Gay and Lesbian Marriage Will Not “Dismantle The Legal Structure of Gender in Every Marriage”’ (1993), discusses the strategies available to American queers to achieve social and political rights. Reviewing the debates about how the American community has approached marriage rights, the right to serve in the military, and drawing a parallel with the struggle for abortion rights, she argues that the strategic approach, such as that advocated for by Edwin Cameron (1993) in the context of the inclusion of the rights of sexual minorities in the Equality Clause, ultimately entrenches a gender hierarchy, and can never ‘dismantle’ it (see also Sandell, 1994). Claiming access to the system requires operating in the terms of the system.

On one level, then, the fact of the South African Constitution’s protection of same-sex rights is virtually guaranteed to assert the pressure of sameness on the citizens it aims both to protect and to construct. But South Africa also makes it clear why succumbing to this imperative to be seen as the same as may be a whole lot more radical than it looks to people like Eng and his co-authors. South Africa, like other parts of Africa, is currently knee-deep in state-sanctioned homophobia of the worst kind. The dominant discourse is that homosexuality is ‘unAfrican’, a ‘Western’ import or disease. Zimbabwe’s president, Robert Mugabe has called homosexuals ‘worse than pigs and dogs’ (see Croucher, 2002, p.316; Leatt and Hendricks, 2005; Oswin, 2007, p.101; Gunkel 2010, pp. 25-6). This straightforward denial of the shared humanity of homosexually-oriented people finds confirmation in attitudes of the leadership of Uganda, Namibia, and Malawi, to name a few. The current ANC leadership is also clearly not supportive

of gay rights. In 2006, then-deputy president Jacob Zuma told the *Sowetan* newspaper that same-sex marriages were “a disgrace to the nation and to God” (News24.com, 2006) and advocated violence against gays. He subsequently apologized, but in 2010, Minister of Arts and Culture in his government Lulu Xingwana called photographs by lesbian photographer Zanele Muholi, “immoral, offensive and going against nation building” (TimesLive, 2010). South Africa also appointed openly homophobic journalist Jon Qwelane Ambassador to Uganda in the middle of that country’s tabelling of a law which would have prescribed the death penalty for homosexuality. At the time of his appointment, Qwelane was facing charges of hate speech at the Human Rights Commission for an article he had written about homosexuals. And homophobia is not limited to those in political power. Jacklyn Cock notes the South African ‘paradox’ of a constitutional world-first entrenchment of gay rights together with the lack of support for these rights from the majority of the South African population (2005, p.188). She also points out that the gay rights movement in this country has never had mass participation of its own.

One form homophobia is taking in South Africa, one expression of the belief that homosexuals are not equally human and so not entitled to the citizenship rights of other South Africans, is the so-called corrective rape of black lesbians, sometimes deliberately by HIV-positive men. Of course, this particular form of discipline intersects with the huge levels of violence against all women in the country. As with most forms of oppression, it is mostly women who are working-class and black who bear the brunt.⁴ In this context, violence against lesbians is not reported, not taken seriously by community authority figures, and not given national attention or priority (Potgieter, 2006, p.5).⁵

Asserting the right to be the same as might be a way to accommodate difference by insisting on the shared humanity promised by a human rights discourse. This may not only be a capitulation to the status quo. It is literally a matter of life and death, not a theoretical squabble. It may also be the only way to force the heteronormative to change. Oswin (2007) has read the successful campaign for the inclusion of sexual orientation in the list of South African Constitutional protections as the realization of the queer potential of the 1955 Freedom Charter on which the Constitution is based. Sameness might be strategically used, in other ways, in a genuinely progressive manner.

The meaning of post-apartheid South Africa should by definition include re-conceiving,

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re-making, re-conceptualising. The country was born out of the construction and assertion of differences between people, in its colonial genesis (see Distiller and Samuelson, 2005; Ward and Worden, 1998; Elphick and Gilliomme eds., 1979) and went on to make a hierarchical system out of difference which reached into, and helped to structure, every level of state and psyche under apartheid. We have recently been given a chance to rework who 'we', as members of an imagined community, can be. The last 15 years have demonstrated that a clean break, a difference, from the past, is much more complicated to achieve than many of us realized. If we assert this break, we ignore the structural and psychological inheritances which then can continue to shape any future possible definitions unchecked and disavowed. But if we cannot find new ways to conceptualise ourselves and our relations to each other, new definitions, we remain bonded to a system we have struggled to overcome.

Post- the arms deal corruption scandal, post- the HIV/AIDS debacle, post- worsening poverty, graft, and unemployment, post- Jacob Zuma's rape trial and his 'traditional' attitudes to women and homosexuals, post-Polokwane, it is clear by now that post-apartheid South Africa is not somewhere over any rainbow, or indeed, over its past. Instead our society is firmly ensconced in the same class and gender dynamics, even if its racial aspects have shifted to some degree for some people. It is in this context, of promise and possibility as well as of despair and denial and disappointment, that the experience of being both different and the same acquires particular resonances and ironies.

I write this article fully aware that for most lesbians in South Africa, or more accurately, since this paper is about definitions (and their difficulties), for most African women who desire other women,⁶ the issues of sameness and difference are not at all theoretical. For most South African women-desiring women, the meaning of their identities, the meaning other people assert over their identities, is violent to a literal degree that finds no place in my experience of myself and my family. I acknowledge these women, and my difference from them. The choice to be a mother, the use of fertility treatment technology, the concept of the alternative family, all these originate with an experience and an identity which is foreign to many, if not most, South African women who are not heterosexually inclined. Some of these women have begun to tell their stories (Morgan and Wieringa (2005) provide narratives, as well as examples of the work of photographer Zanele Muholi; Brundrit n.d also features the work of Muholi). The story told here

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is a different one. It is a story of privilege and of the South African class elite. The comparatively minor discomforts with which I live, in the face of heterosexism more than homophobia, do bear some relation to the rapes and murders of working class black lesbians. We all face the results of our society's construction of homosexuals as different, albeit in very different ways. A hospital's refusal to facilitate the birth of my son, despite the existence of our Constitutional right not be discriminated against on the basis of our sexuality,⁷ is related to the denial of the humanity of the women who suffer far more brutally, and often in silence.⁸ Both experiences suggest that the Constitution's definition of citizenship, its implicit recognition of our shared humanity, is no guarantee that our fellow citizens will concede the same. Indeed, it is no guarantee even that the state which considers the Constitution its founding document will take the rights of working class or elite lesbians seriously: The Joint Working Group, a coalition of organizations working on LGBTI issues, launched the 07-07-07 Campaign Against Hate Crimes, to try and achieve systemic justice for women and men brutalized and murdered in South Africa because of their sexualities (<http://www.jwg.org.za/content/blogcategory/17/74>). And despite a Constitutional Court ruling that enforces their obligation to do so (handed down in 2004 and known as the J&B case to protect the privacy of the children concerned), it has taken almost four years (beginning in 2007), and countless engagements with a confused system, to get the Department of Home Affairs to put my partner's name on our children's birth certificates (see Bamford, 2009).

II: What the literature says (and doesn't say)

The (heteronormative, patriarchal) status quo asserts itself by the power of the myth of sameness as safety, of repetition as healthy, and of deviation as sinister (see Dollimore, 1991). The experience of being a white, middle-class lesbian mother in post-apartheid South Africa has been an object lesson in the affective power of sameness. What, exactly, is a lesbian mother? Is she somehow by definition different from a heterosexual mother? Is her relation to her child different? Is this difference, if it exists, fixed, so that all lesbian mothers will experience to same kind of difference, to whatever degree? Is it her relation to the world that makes her a different kind of mother? Is the difference intrinsic to her child's experience of the world, such that her label is in fact a marker of his positioning? Until recently, the phrase 'lesbian mother' was considered by many a contradiction in terms. Invoking the psychoanalytic vocabulary so useful to

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this topic, Cheryl Muzio describes the fundamental otherness of lesbian mothers. For lesbians to choose to become mothers, she says, is to choose “to inhabit a kind of psychoanalytic netherworld where neither their passionate nor maternal relationships are deemed to have substance”; as lesbians their desires are denied or masculinised; as women their identities are inconceivable to a patriarchal order which understands women in relation to men, and as mothers in a genealogy which must be patriarchal (Muzio, 1993, p.219): with the increase in lesbians having children, “We have witnessed the birth of the invisible (M)other” (ibid). On the other hand, in terms other than the psychoanalytic, in the daily performance of identity, being a mother makes one recognizable to society, allows for the expectations in terms of roles and behaviour that were absent from the lesbian relationship before the arrival of children:

In becoming mothers, lesbians join heterosexual women in a particular organization of identity which partakes of mainstream gender ideology... motherhood indirectly enables women (whether lesbian or heterosexual) to claim a specific location in the gender system (Lewin, 1993, pp. 15-6. For a detailed discussion on the meanings of lesbian motherhood, see Schwartz, 1998, pp. 121-154).

The literature that has emerged in the late 90s and early 2000s seems to agree that there has been a lesbian baby boom in Anglo-America. The first ‘wave’ of this process comprised those women who came out after marriage and child-bearing, and the second comprised children born to lesbian couples. Despite the revolutionary wishes of the more activist feminist writing on the subject, much of the social scientific literature has tended to focus on how lesbian families are not really different to heterosexual families, in order to secure respectable visibility and socio-political rights for these families. Studies of these families, examinations of the definition of the lesbian mother and the consequences of this definition, with an emphasis on the effects of this creature on her children, have overwhelmingly asserted that she is, in fact, the same as most other mothers in the effects of her mothering. From within the field of social work, family studies, psychiatry, psychology, nursing, and law, researchers have found that the children of lesbian mothers are the same as other children: their gender identities are mainstream, their gender roles and behaviours are standard and ‘correct’, their sexual orientation will tend to be hetero-, their development is ‘normal’ (see Golombok et al, 1983; Steckel, 1987; Schwartz and Gottman, 1990; Patterson, 1994, all of which overview the literature to their respective dates. See also Tasker and Golombok, 1997, which traces the development of children from 1976-1991; Bos et al; Brewaeys

and van Hall, 1997; Hoeffler, 1981). Recently, the political imperative of this literature has begun to receive attention. Jacquie Gabb (2004) was one of the first to make the point that the politics of the researcher will shape the findings, such that the coherent picture presented by the literature might conceal 'critical differentials'.⁹ Engaging with essentially the same limitation from a different point of view, Stacey and Biblarz (2001) critique the defensive starting points of most of the research, which by necessity has to 'prove' that gays and lesbians can parent and form recognizable families. They suggest this defensiveness, while politically understandable, has implications for the research methodologies and findings.¹⁰ They re-examine the studies which claim there is no difference between children of lesbian parents and others, in order to suggest that the political imperative to assert the 'normality' of our families has skewed findings which suggest that there are small but significant differences (see also Kirkpatrick, 2004).

And there are differences which have been charted so far, even as their implications have been minimized. One of the first studies to take the other mother seriously as a parent and to work with children who were born into lesbian partnerships, found that having two mothers results in a "qualitatively different separation experience" (Steckel, 1985, p.81). Children with a lesbian other mother instead of a father tended to be less aggressive, saw themselves as more lovable, and were more engaged with younger children, according to Steckel. The fact of a more involved co-parent, and a less dyadic relationship with the mother were factors that were theorized to influence the development of the children of lesbians (Steckel, 1987, p.81). However, while it in some ways endorses and in other ways interestingly complicates Nancy Chodorow's thesis (1978) that absent fathers create difficulties for boys' gender identification, imbuing masculinity with a fundamental anxiety which is an important source of the perpetuation of unequal gender relations, Steckel's study has not proven to be conclusive. Patterson's study of children born to out lesbians - what Patterson designates "'new' lesbian mother families" in order to differentiate them from the "old" way children found themselves with lesbian mothers, following the divorce of their parents (1994, p.156), found that Steckel's conclusion could not be confirmed (1994, p.168). She did find that lesbians' children "reported greater stress reactions than did children of heterosexual mothers (possibly a result of a homophobic world, possibly because they were more eloquent in their emotional vocabularies), but they also reported a greater overall sense of well-being" (Patterson, 1994, p.168).

Perhaps the most controversial findings have been that adolescents and young adults raised by lesbians might be more likely to be sexually explorative, before settling on their heterosexuality (Steckel, 1985), and that daughters of lesbian mothers are more likely to consider engaging in a lesbian relationship, even though they are not more likely to identify as lesbian or bisexual (Tasker and Golombok, 1995).¹¹ More than this, Stacey and Biblarz (2001, p.163) find it “implausible” that children of gays and lesbians would not have a sexual identity that was different to a heteronormative one. We could reasonably expect that children raised by homosexuals would more easily access and display homosexual desire, they suggest. This is an explicit challenge to the discourse of ‘normalcy’, designed to put the concerns of the courts at ease by assuring them that lesbians can be counted on to produce straight children.

None of this literature deals with the specificities of lesbian parent functioning in South Africa, or the differences that our particularly complicated history of the class/ race nexus will bring. Carien Lubbe’s (2008) pioneering study into the experiences of children of lesbian parents in South Africa offers an indepth account of the methodological complexities of the research process, but does not engage with race and class in any detail. I suspect that this is because, as I have suggested above, these concerns are the province of a minority in the country, protected by both class and race privilege (Lubbe’s sample contains some coloured families, which share in the protections that middle class status provides). The problems of definitions I am exploring here insert these privileged few South Africans into an international LGBT discourse, where they partially belong. At the same time, the issues of access to South African citizenship are relevant to all South Africans, and perhaps even more so to those same-sex-identified African women who are most marginalized in everyday practice. Much more work remains to be done on what aspects of the Anglo-American literature relate to the broader South African context, and what lenses need to be developed to explore lesbian family functioning here more fully. In the meantime, since to be South African is also to be in the larger world, and to be a middle-class South African is to participate in the global LGBT discourse to some extent, I use this international literature as a point of reference here, even if it is a partial point of reference.

For all our asserted differences, then, overall the literature that exists suggests that we are spectacularly ordinary parents. Most important is the political implication of this sameness and the power of belonging it confers. For the sake of the children we want to raise as happy and

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self-confident, it is imperative that we are recognized as part of the society they will have to navigate. Regardless of whether or not the definition of parenting needs to change such that the raising of children who are different is not seen as pernicious or unfortunate (a change which practitioners of Disability Studies no doubt would also welcome), the daily reality of lesbian parenting in the mostly middle-class and mostly white families the international literature has mapped seems to be that it is not, in fact, substantially different from heterosexual parenting, with all the implications for the construction of an acceptable homonormativity objected to by critics like Riggs who, as a gay parent himself, dislikes the defensive attitude of the current psychological literature.¹²

The normativity mapped in the majority of the literature on (overwhelmingly white, middle-class, lesbian) homosexual family functioning may well be because most of the lesbian relationships to which children are born or into which they are adopted in these Anglo-American studies are structurally similar to the monogamous heterosexual unit so important to the proponents of so-called family values (the realities for most South African lesbian parents are very different; see Morgan and Wieringa, 2005, p.320-1). The really alternative family structures, in an Anglo-American sense, enabled by queer lives (Sandell, 1994; Ainslie and Feltey 1989), and not only the lives of those who are sexually queer, are even further away from mainstream acceptance than the idea that two women who desire each other can and should raise children. Because of the association of femaleness with maternity, middle-class lesbian parents have somewhat of an easier path than their gay, trans-, or otherwise queer counterparts, especially of family units that are not comprised of a pair, and/ or are not monogamous. So, as the birth mother in a monogamous lesbian relationship, legally protected and theoretically socially legitimized by the Civil Union Act of 2006, I am able to feel, and to assert, a sameness of intention and experience that enables my family to claim access to the right to be recognized and respected. Our social positioning as privileged whites also has everything to do with this feeling of entitlement. What I have been amazed by is how important it has been to me to be able to claim this right. While for most South Africans, the equality written into the Constitution remains purely theoretical, it has had a real effect on our lives, in enabling us to be a family in the first place. In this privileged context of access to the rights of the Constitution which seeks not only to protect but respect difference, and so enables its freedom of movement, why do I need for us

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to be seen as the same as? In the context of my own politics, why do I want to feel the same as a system I did not think I respected? Having a child has meant entering into the social Symbolic in new and unexpected ways, and has made me aware of normativity's reproductive power. This has come as a shock to me, especially in a country where normativity was so perniciously perpetuated for so long.

This paper's concern with definitions is therefore in part an attempt to articulate an embodied realization of a theoretical moment: the implication of the self in the social has become inescapably apparent. Utopian dreams of living a privileged queer difference have been grounded in the adult reality of motherhood. The ironies and contradictions of achieving meaning, subjectivity, definition, are implicit in the Lacanian idea that we have to move through the shared, enter the always-already-social linguistic Symbolic, in order to be a person. I cannot be a mother, even, or especially, a lesbian mother, without implicating myself and my family in what other people say my motherhood means. The independence of difference my lesbianism conferred, its promise of self-definition in the disruption of gender and intimate gender roles it forced, has been replaced by the vulnerability of needing to be the same, for my child's sake. While the experience raises the implicated complicities of the sameness/ difference binary as I have described,¹³ it simultaneously deconstructs them. It does so by re-entering individual emotion into community, by emphasizing how experiences of care (motherhood, parenting, families, desire, partnership) insert us all in the shared realm of the human. This is to say, what the experience of being a 'lesbian mother' has left me with is the realization, on a cellular level which is difficult to articulate without entering into the limitations of cliché, of the meaning of humanness, which means of my sons' reliance on me and my, and our, reliance on you. At the same time, our status and definition as an 'alternative family', reminds me once more of the impossibility of being 'the same as' in the context of a structure whose function it is to define, which means also to exclude.

III: Differently human?

In *Undoing Gender* Judith Butler writes:

The terms by which we are recognized as human are socially articulated... And sometimes the very terms that confer 'humanness' on some individuals are those which deprive certain other individuals of the possibility of achieving that status...

These norms have far-reaching consequences for how we understand the model of the human entitled to rights or included in the participating space of political deliberation (2004, p.2).

Butler's 'we' here is generic, its referent the human in general. She goes on to make a more specific statement:

One of the central tasks of lesbian and gay... rights is to assert in clear and public terms the reality of homosexuality, not as an inner truth, not as a sexual practice, but as one of the defining features of the social world in its very intelligibility. In other words, it is one thing to assert the reality of lesbian and gay lives as a reality, and to insist that these lives are worthy of protection...; but it is quite another to insist that the very public assertion of gayness calls into question what counts as reality and what counts as a human life. Indeed, the task of international lesbian and gay politics is no less than a remaking of reality, a reconstituting of the human... (pp. 29-30).

Butler points out the significance of the individual's reliance on the social for recognition. This need for recognition has private implications, as I have been discussing. It is also central to the polis, to the public forum, and indeed, the argument here (both mine and Butler's) is that in the end the private cannot be removed from the public; they are co-constitutive. The importance of ensuring a safe family space for one's children involves not wanting them to carry the burden of a difference that actually has very little to do with them, and everything to do with their society's definitions of who is fully human. Central to the practical enactment of this recognition is the importance of public rights, which is why the theoretical citizenship conferred on gays, lesbians, and more recently, thanks to the work of Sally Grosz and the Intersex Society of South Africa, intersexuals,¹⁴ by the South African Constitution is so important. Lesbians who have no substantive rights in countries which actively discriminate against them clearly cannot be citizens. Ruth Morgan and Saskia Wieringa, in their work with same-sex-loving African women, stress that one effect of discrimination against these women is to deny them access to full citizenship of their countries (2005, pp. 17-18), and thus by implication to participation in the polis on the levels of both identity and action. South Africans are immensely fortunate to be in a better legal position, which makes an enormous difference to the lives of some gays and lesbians, and at least carries the hope of something better for the rest.

The inclusion of lesbians into the realm of the fully human, and from there the recognition of the sameness of lesbian mothers to other mothers, is an ontological problem. The assertion of sameness invariably entails buying into a system which by definition struggles to see lesbians as either citizens or humans. Entry into the concept of authentic citizen of democracy

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means entry in a patriarchal system, structured by sexual difference and so by a particular use of a gender hierarchy.

How then do we begin to engage with the reality of the need for the rights of our 'alternative' families when gender norms continue to structure full humanity so as to exclude same-sex-loving women, and especially, in the power relations of South Africa, poor, black, same-sex-loving women? How do we navigate the irony that motherhood conveys social recognition only through its relegation to a definition of womanhood that is reliant on its subordination to masculinity in a heterosexist binary?

We must occupy the space of what Tim Trengove-Jones has described as 'inbetweenness', the desire to both have a queer history and identity acknowledged; and to claim ordinary citizenship rights, which registers 'a not always unawkward blend of sameness and difference' (2005, p.136). This is to see, finally, over and above the ontological difference we represent, the mundane human sameness which also structures our desires as products of the system. To be 'the same as' is all that most alternatively-identified people want. In Potgieter's study of black lesbians' discourses, she noted the 'women's quest to be constructed as "everyday", "regular" women who are located within their communities' (2005, p.178). This desire to be the same as - that is, the reality that most homosexuals are not revolutionaries (so we do need to recycle) - raises an important question. Why do homophobia and its sibling misogyny continue to deny sexual minorities (and especially same-sex-loving women) their religious, civic and human rights when in by far the majority of cases granting these rights would reinforce the current patriarchal and capitalist system?

Damien Riggs has pointed out how the logic of sameness, asserting gay and lesbian parents' fitness as parents in the terms of the current system, reproduces not only heteronormativity but negative stereotypes about gays and lesbians. The constant desire to counter them only gives them life by conceding to them, he says. I read his article, with its critique of the reification of a certain kind of psychological knowledge, with agreement and with respect. And I find myself saying, yes but, yes but. Isn't the embracing of the marginal position, the assertion of the right to remain outside of the dominant signifying economy of humanness, something only the elite can afford?

Perhaps it is that my feelings fall sort of my politics, a sign of my age or my inescapable

bourgeois location. But I think we should start to reconsider the charge that to assert our sameness is only to collude with the system that excludes us and oppressed homosexuals and many others. We have to engage, especially those of us with privilege, in order to begin to effect some kind of real, sustainable, systemic (not theoretical or revolutionary) change. Butler theorises a new relationship to otherness and difference, one which would enable a 'process of remaking the human' (2004, p.4). In this new relationship, relational humanity is recognized. This means that for those who are recognized as humans and are able to live what she calls viable lives, the call is to open the self to the difference of the other without understanding it. It is to submit to change, not knowing how one will be changed. It is to agree to go in the direction of the unknown. On the other hand, Butler also insists that the misrecognised Other does have the capacity to critique the system which denies her her humanity. In other words, despite the system's refusal to recognize her language, her protestations and resistance are meaningful, not because they 'celebrate difference as such' but because they can 'establish more inclusive conditions for sheltering and maintaining life that resist[...] models of assimilation' (ibid). The human 'exceed[s]... its categorical definition' and there is always the possibility of 'opening up the category to a different future' (ibid, p.13).

So are some lesbian mothers, in South Africa and elsewhere, reworking human potential, fundamentally challenging patriarchal economic and psychological relations, and so laying the groundwork for the only genuine feminist revolution possible? Or are we entering the mainstream, trading radical alterity for respectability and co-optation? The emphasis on sameness comes at the cost of disabling change to the system which generates homophobia in the first place. On the other hand, the insistence on difference acquires more than a theoretical inflection when it is embodied in time, in place, and in lived experience. So, in post-apartheid South Africa, where as middle-class citizens we have some kind of access to the Constitutional protection of our right to exist even as, as lesbian women, we are problems for the terms of a liberal humanist framework, what are we? Can we enable one way for South Africans, as members of that powerful construct, a nation, to learn to do difference differently?

Notes

1. One of Maureen Sullivan's respondents in a study of lesbian families said, 'There's something about having children that really links you to every other person who has children. I really feel much more a part of the world' (Sullivan, 2004, p.188). The sometimes verbatim similarity to my statement is coincidental, although I believe the shared experience is not.
2. See Judge et al 2008 for more, and more detailed, narratives of queer ambivalence about inclusion in heteronormative family structures, specifically civil union.
3. On the topic of language: the terms used to denote non-heteronormative identities are even more vexed in a Southern African context than in an Anglo-American one. This article has, with the help of the anonymous reviewers, moved away from "queer" as an umbrella term to try and deal with this complexity, and has tried instead to use more or less specific terminology as the context determines. I want to acknowledge here the equally problematic umbrella quality of "LGBTI", and to point out that it has the advantage over "queer" for the purposes of this article of removing from the equation the ontological problematisation of definitions. I am specifically working on making a case for the development of a queer vocabulary for South Africa, but that discussion is beyond the scope of this article.
4. Since the achievement of the Constitution, violence against women in general seems to be on the increase, with violence directed specifically against lesbians also seeming to escalate since 1994 (Fester, 2006, p.108; Cock, 2005, p.200). As I wrote the first draft of this paper, the president of the ANC youth league, Julius Malema, was making headlines with his vicious comments about a rape survivor who is also a lesbian, comments which were cheered by university students (see Johnston et al 2009).
5. I would like to acknowledge here Cheryl-Ann Potgieter's point that it is important not to replicate racist stereotypes by representing black communities as more homophobic than white communities; her study of the experience of black lesbians revealed that there was no generalisable family or community response to coming out (2005, p.187).
6. For more information on the difficulties of naming same-sex desires and practices in the region, see Morgan and Wieringa (2005, p.310). They add, of their research project: 'At present there does not seem to be any word with a positive connotation in any of the indigenous languages used by the respondents in any of the countries represented in this project' (ibid, p.322) that is, South Africa, Botswana, Kenya, Namibia, Swaziland, Tanzania and Uganda. In terms of the point I go on to make in section III below about the importance of citizenship enabled by the Constitution's non-discrimination clause, it is highly significant that they found that 'The South African women seem to be the only ones who do not have problems identifying as a lesbian [sic]. This is probably the result of the progressive Constitution that prevents discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, although there is still a great deal of homophobia on the ground' (pp. 322-323). The definition of 'lesbian' is not only an issue for African or other non-Western women. See Schwartz (1998, p.13-40).

7. I was told, 'We don't help people like you' (see Bamford, 2007).
8. There is a growing weariness among black lesbians of being identified only with the figure of the silently suffering, raped woman. The outrage caused by corrective rape and by the state's lack of response and failure to prosecute easily fuels the presentation of the black lesbian only as a victim. Again, the difficulty is one of definitions: it is imperative to recognize the differences between the experiences of a protected middle-class white woman and many working-class black women in South Africa. At the same time, concentrating on the differences caused by race and class privilege risks overwriting the human sameness of the lives of poor black women.
9. Although it was twenty years ago that Sandra Pollack protested that "comparative psychological research", precisely because "favourable" to lesbians in finding for their fitness as mothers (that they are not different and do not produce children gendered differently) "defines lesbian mothers out of existence" (1987; discussed in Clarke 2008, p. 124).
10. Unfortunately this has also been noticed by those who would deny rights to gay and lesbian families (detailed in Stacey and Biblarz 2001, p. 160-2). See also Schumm (2004), who assumes reproductive heterosexuality is a "socially valuable outcome" and who entertains the idea that homosexuality might be "cured". He continues this critique in 2008, with concerns, amongst others, that no account was taken of "social desirability" in the studies which assert there are no substantive differences in gay parenting, and that evidence has been ignored which relates to children's sexual orientation as adults, ie. that a finding which shows children raised by gays and lesbians are more likely not to be heterosexual is implicitly a negative finding.
11. Schumm assumes that this finding means "open homosexuality may encourage consideration of homosexual conduct even in the absence of homosexual attraction" (2004, p. 423). His implication is that gay parenting promotes a mechanical kind of homosexual sexual behavior, one which cannot even lay claim to the justifications made by "real" homosexuality (he later considers the possibility of "successful interventions aimed at sexual orientation changes" [ibid]). Besides the obvious objections to his logic and the political implication of assuming that a society should and would prefer to discourage homosexuality, it is worth noting that he never considers how heterosexism and homophobia historically are far more adept at promoting heterosexual sexual behaviour regardless of the subject's desire.
12. See Gunkel 2010 for more on the problematics of homonormativity, particularly in a Southern African context.
13. I use the term 'complicities' in the sense developed by Mark Sanders (2002).
14. See <http://www.intersex.org.za>

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