

By Any (M)other Name

Once Married Mother-Lesbians

BY DOREEN FUMIA

Cet article explore ce qui unit les "autres" mères, celles qui se situent hors de l'hétéro-normalité, telles les mères lesbiennes déjà mariées. Il s'agit de créer des liens au coeur des systèmes d'oppression qui marginalisent toutes ces mères qui sont hors de l'hétéro-normalité.

Canadian social policy presently uses 25 categories to describe mothers (Eichler). I would like to add "mother-lesbian" to this list. This category, to which I belong, refers to women who have become mothers in the context of heterosexual marriage then made a transition to live as lesbians. Placing the word mother before lesbian distinguishes mother-lesbians from lesbian mothers who have had their children in the context of a lesbian relationship. Creating ever-increasing categories of mothers is useful in that it expands the possible ways in which individual mothers can legitimate their identities.

Additive methods of increasing categories can also be limiting as they do little to address the systems of oppression which restrict legitimizing identities in the first place. Each "added" category deployed for the purpose of destabilizing the boundedness of motherhood, will always exclude those who remain outside the newly expanded category. As Judith Butler says, categories always leak.

This interrogation is the beginning of a research project intended ultimately to address interlocking systems of oppression that limit our capacities to mother and that pit

Paying attention to some of the many layers of how any one woman is positioned reveals how women are regulated and resist being regulated, socially, legally, and politically.

women against women—white middle-class able-bodied, married, single, Black, poor, disabled, lesbian, teenaged mothers measured against each other. How do mothers come to be constructed outside normalized discourses of motherhood? In this paper I restrict my discussion to the women who make the transition from heterosexual mother to mother-lesbian and how that change affects familial relationships, amongst them the mother-daughter relationship.

Subject positions

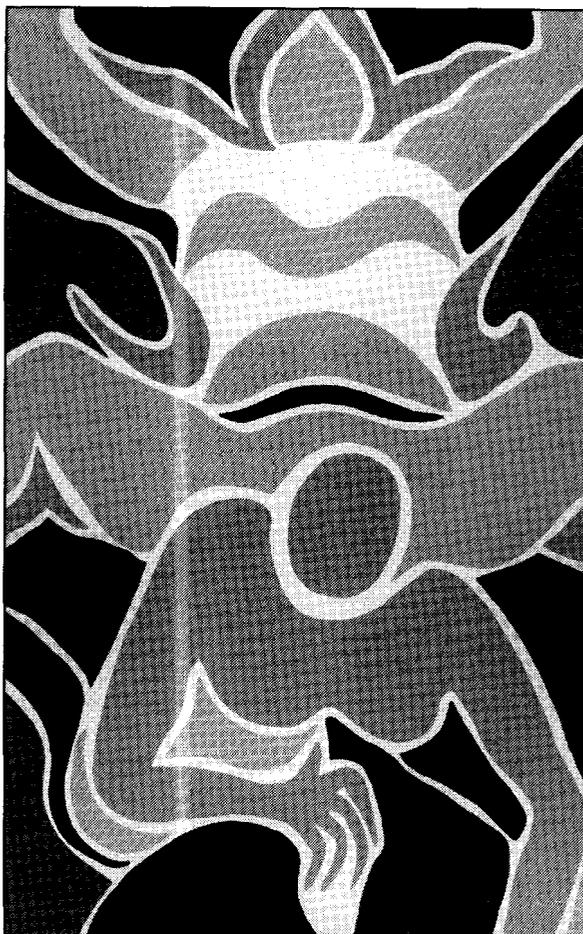
Mothers find themselves juggling identities within heteronormative

frameworks of patriarchy that position women as caretakers of the private sphere and as if they were all white and middle-class. Within this motherhood framework, women negotiate multiple subjectivities in an effort to understand their subject positionings as mothers. I borrow from Bronwyn Davies' and Valerie Walkerdine's working definitions of "subject positions." They suggest that subject positions are personal *and* political spaces within which we understand and negotiate our lives. These personal and political spaces are constituted by and through us within social and historical moments in which we live. The "positions" we inhabit are different for each of us depending on the specificity of how our bodies are marked and represented and how we are located in the social world. Paying attention to some of the many layers of how any one woman is positioned reveals how women are regulated and resist being regulated, socially, legally, and politically. In an example I discuss below, that of two mothers who share an intimate sexual relationship with each other and the man with whom they live, the mothers do not confine themselves to heteronormative maternal standards yet they position themselves in ways that allow them access to heterosexual privileges. In this way they comply with and resist both traditional heterosexual marriage and lesbian coupledom.

Mother-lesbian construct

Mothers' bodies are marked, among other things, by age, race, ethnicity, able-bodiedness, (hetero)sexuality, and class. The details of those subject positions are influenced greatly by what is perceived or known to be possible (Pratt). Pratt says that our eyes let in only what we have been taught to see. How do mothers know which subject positions are available to them? What makes it possible to make a transition from "wedded wife to lesbian life"?¹

As I struggled to find language that would accurately reflect the subject position of "mother-lesbian," I learned firsthand how categories cannot contain the realities of people's lives. While gathering data for my master's thesis (Fumia) I used a snowball method in order to obtain interviews with once married mother-lesbians. I attempted to unsettle traditional nuclear family ideology by looking more closely at identity transformations within and outside heteronormativity. Two women referred to me for this study did not easily fit the confining category of "once married mother-lesbian." They are same-sex lovers with



Audrey Ilah Scott-McKee, "Giving Birth to Self," acrylic, 48" x 30", 1994. Photo: Cranbrook Photo

six children between them, from heterosexual marriages. One of the husbands had died, and the other husband lives with them. All three adults—the two women and the husband of one of the women—love each other and all maintain intimate, sexual relationships. The nine of them, adults and children, are committed to living as a family unit. The public performance of this family unit is two separate families living together, one an opposite-sex couple with two children and the other a widow with four children. Although the women are same-sex lovers they are also opposite-sex lovers. They are not "once-married" since one is still married. They are not simply mother-lesbians; in fact, they rejected the term "lesbian" altogether. What term could I use to define the motherhood in which these two women were engaged?

The category I had drawn in order to rupture a normalized category of heteronormative motherhood and differentiate mother-lesbian from lesbian mother was an already-ruptured category. I began to notice that identifying an individual subject position had its limitations. I asked: is it possible to unsettle systems of domination through individual life experiences? What discourses were available to think through these mother identities?

The language formed to service heterosexual mothers seemed inadequate when I tried to explain the complexi-

ties of this arrangement. I still search for language and discourses that will allow me to articulate subject positions inhabited by homosexual, bisexual, or transgendered mothers—subject positions that rest outside normative motherhood. How do the constraints of language shape motherhood discourses and how are maternal subject positions constrained and shaped through what is both available and unavailable? The mothers mentioned above said during an interview,

Unfortunately, I mean, it's society that's the problem; it's not our relationship. It's hard to tell the kids that this is totally normal and this is okay but don't talk about it. One daughter got herself in trouble. [When we talked to them about us] she advertised to all and sundry that we are lesbians, she did it in such a way "You know what, my mothers are GAY!!" After some reaction from her friends and their mothers we told her she should be a bit more discreet, she may be judged, unfortunately. She was fine with that, but there were a couple of incidents.

These women carefully negotiated the performance of their particular motherhood. They instructed their children to perform a normalized family in order to avoid any possible hurt inflicted by those who did not legitimize their family.

Good/bad mother

There is no shortage of literature that documents the form, appearance, and behaviour required in order to lay claim to legitimate families. Academic critiques on "the family" and "motherhood" refer to them as institutions steeped in heteronormativity, racism, and classism (Adams; Chunn; Coontz; Davin; Stoler).

Through her work on the development of Family Courts in Ontario around the turn of the century, Dorothy Chunn emphasized the rehabilitation of families to the middle-class ideal of a monogamous, heterosexual, nuclear family unit. Families unable to conform to this ideal were subjected to "a spate of criminal and quasi-criminal legislation" (Gavigan 268). The "good" mother was one who stayed at home to raise her children, contained her husband's sexuality in the family home, and was the moral caretaker of her children's bodies and minds. The "good" mother was married to a male provider and physically able to reproduce her pure white race. Many families were unable to meet the standards set by this ideology. Unemployment and low wages made it impossible for families to exist on a single male wage. A woman outside middle-class respectability would always find it difficult to be viewed as a "good" mother.

Interpal Grewal explains that "aesthetic discourses" of beauty that began just before the turn of the century focussed on the face as the representation of "good" or "bad" moral character of a woman (27). Thus that Trollope's Hatty Carbury, in *The Way We Live Now*, was

a good woman was affirmed by the perfection of her physical features. If moral perfection were possible only through an “aesthetic” version of “white transparent beauty” then it would never be attainable for poor women who tarnished their transparent whiteness with the dirt of their work or women marked by skin colour.

The legacy of the moral woman and the traditional nuclear family continued into the twentieth century and re-grouped in force during the years following the Second World War. Stephanie Coontz states that continuing to hark back to the “good old days” of a postwar *Leave it to Beaver* family model is a creation of a fantasy that never existed. This version of “family” and motherhood is a mythical construction that evokes an invented nostalgia. Mary Louise Adams supports this and further states that the traditional nuclear family was romanticized during the six years following the Second World War in a way never before or since.

That such a romanticized version of the family and motherhood persists is evident in the language, laws, social policies, and children’s literature that continues to (re)circulate it. The capacity to be creative in order to form family units and support those units is constrained once we step outside a middle-class heteronormative model. The vitality of romanticized heteronormative motherhood regulates women in ways that make us *feel* like “good” or “bad” mothers.

Mother-lesbians, like many women, travel back and forth between understanding their identities as “good” and “bad.” One middle-class Jewish mother I interviewed made her transition to a “once married mother-lesbian” at the age of 50. She made the following comment when reflecting on the reactions of her husband, children, and sister to the news that she is now a lesbian,

I think that I spent my whole life doing what I was supposed to do. I was a good wife, a good mother, a good daughter, and suddenly I wasn't playing by the rules anymore. So I wasn't so nice in everybody's eyes. You know, which makes you feel that you count only because of what you did rather than who you are.... I feel really strongly that I used to be a good girl and now I'm a bad girl ... my family thinks I'm a bad girl.

“I spent my whole life doing what I was supposed to do. I was a good wife, a good mother, a good daughter, and suddenly I wasn’t playing by the rules anymore.”

(M)others both resist and comply with the institution of motherhood and in doing so may be positioned as “good” and/or “bad.” In order to feel like a “good” mother, a white, middle-class mother-lesbian might perform herself as a “heterosexual mother”—a position that continues to be available to her through the mothering of children.

However, the assumption of heterosexual privilege is no longer guaranteed.

Respectable identities

My same-sex partnership is not legitimized through the legal system nor is it socially accepted with the same ease that my heterosexual marriage was. My identities as “spouse” and “mother” that were built upon heteronormative assumptions do not hold firm in institutional spaces driven by heterosexual privilege, for example, my children’s schools or the Canada/United States border crossing to my home of origin in Massachusetts. The systems that shape the “good/bad” mother dichotomy operate in ways that exclude women (differently, multiply, and hierarchically) from mothering, employment, or living independently from men. The dichotomy works because it is only possible to shape what is “good” in opposition to what is “bad.” The “good” mother construct needs to be contrasted to its oppositionally positioned “bad” mother construct. As Kate Davy says,

[w]hite women signify hegemonic, institutionalized whiteness through their association with a pure, chaste, asexual before-the-fall womanhood ... attained and maintained via middle-class respectability with its implicit heterosexuality. (212)

The fallen or “bad” woman, she says, is “embodied by some white women (prostitutes, white trash, lesbians) and all women of colour” (212).

Interlocking discourses

The “bad” mother/woman is interlocked with other marginalized positions of (bad) motherhood. I will not elaborate on the various theoretical narratives operating at each specific site imagined by this discussion other than to make a general reference to dominant positions of heterosexuality as dependent on the purveyors of deviance—lesbian, prostitute, disabled, Black, immigrant—and you can fill in the blanks.² These discourses interlock with each other and support the dominance of the respectable white “good” woman, white “good” male provider.

In seeking privileges reserved for “good” mothers—such as economic benefits or the “right” to mother unquestioningly—a connection to or an appearance of “respectable mother” must be performed. Mary Lou Fellows and Sherene Razack call this a “toe-hold of respectability”. The slim connection, or “toe-hold,” allows marginalized groups access to privileges of the dominant group through the slim association that hooks them to it.

This “toe-hold of respectability” comes at a cost, however. Connections with other marginalized groups must be disavowed. I have listened to countless conversations (especially on Pride Day) with mother-lesbians, lesbian mothers, and lesbians who fervently disavow connections

with transvestites or slimly clad “queers” (“I don’t want my child or neighbour to see “them” and think that I am like that!”). Those positioned as more marginal have to work harder in order to gain benefits than those who sit closer to the centre. The struggle of those furthest from the centre often carves the space for those who sit closer to the centre to comfortably slide into. Middle-class, white lesbians with children sit close enough to the heteronormative centre to be able to grab a “toe-hold” with relative ease—at the expense of the more marginalized.

Razack says that if we understand that oppressions are interlocked, we have to begin to see our own complicity. The systems need each other. Only if we disavow connections with other marginalized groups, can we begin to attach to the privileges of the dominant group. Each oppression or marginalization we experience places our bodies in the positions of feeling legitimized or not. Razack contends that, paradoxically, the more privilege we have, the greater we feel our oppression. By this she means that we understand our own oppression in ways we cannot understand another’s.

The more present the oppression, the easier it is to feel and the harder it is to acknowledge that in a given moment anyone else is being oppressed as much, or at all. As a mother-lesbian, I live the oppression of homophobia with which I am presented daily. When in a room, it is the oppression I detect before all others as I seek to protect my children, my partner, and myself. Fellows and Razack identifies the process of declaring ourselves innocent of oppressing others as a “race to innocence.”

(M)other and daughter

How does a “race to innocence” affect the relationship between mother-lesbians and the daughters of mother-lesbians? I use some of my own story to think about this question. Three years ago I told my husband and then we told our four children, two girls and two boys then aged 16, 14, 11, and 9 that I am a lesbian. At the same time they received the news that we were separating. Although they struggled to understand the change in their mother’s identity, the fact that they had several positive lesbian and gay figures in their lives buffered the disclosure. I do not want to develop a “coming out” story in this paper, nor do I wish to romanticize the agony each of us experienced (and continue to experience) as we fragmented a traditional nuclear family in order to reconfigure a new familial constellation. What I want to do is explore how the changing identity of one family member, in this case the mother, caused the identities of each family member to shift.

First, we divided our one household into two. I live with my partner full-time, her two children when they are there, and my children half-time. My ex-husband remarried and his wife lives with him part-time. Our four children live with him half-time. My sons reacted with support yet caution. Did I hate men if I was not a lover of men? Would this affect my love for them?

When I announced my lesbian identity I became concerned about the confusion my “new” identity would create in my daughters. Would they view men differently and negatively because their mother is the lover of a woman? Would their identification with me distort/enhance their own process of forming their woman/mother identities? Would the presence of another woman in my life as a primary partner be an unusual threat to our mother-daughter relationship? The exploration of these questions is not simple and the thoughts we have and share flow with the moods our relationships tolerate.

I have two daughters. One is away at school this year. As I was writing this paper, I spoke with my now 13-year-old. I learned more about her as we talked through some of the changes and experiences she has had as the daughter of a once married mother-lesbian. These are her words.

I was exposed to issues of homosexuality before you came out. It was hard for me to watch [my partner’s daughter] because she was so homophobic. I felt I should be doing the same as her but I didn’t care enough about whether someone was homosexual or not. I still loved you. But everything else was different: my life, the separation and divorce, you and Dad and then another house. Life works a different way in each house. People criticize in a different way. At school people back off more. I openly said to my friends when they used “gay” as an insult, “Don’t.” They try not to say it in front of me, but I know they haven’t stopped saying it, they just don’t say it in front of me. So I’m not really making a difference.

I think that some people, my friends, are not bold enough to say, but I sense they are homophobic. They used to say that I had the best family—that my mom was so great and my dad was so great. Now only one person says it. Friends don’t come over because my home is odd, especially your house and when dad’s wife is at dad’s house.

As I listened to my daughter speak it became clear to me that the “normal” family she once experienced as “good” and desirable had to be mediated with a “different” and “bad” concept of family. The family separation and my identity change from heterosexual to lesbian required her to grapple with new identities. I wonder how she will connect heteronormative discourses of family and motherhood with her specific experiences as a daughter of a once married mother-lesbian?

Conclusion

This paper ends at the beginning point—wondering if an exploration into individual experiences brings us closer to understanding how each of us is positioned within webs of oppressions. Does the addition of the category (white middle-class) “mother-lesbian” help to untangle the systems of oppression that pit women against women or does it simply allow one more group a “toe-hold of respectabil-

ity" at the expense of the more marginalized? Mother-lesbians are positioned in ways that resonate with and distance us from "other" mothers—single, Black, teenage, poor, and/or (dis)abled. Is it possible to think about interrupting discourses that continue to privilege the notion of heteronormative motherhood in ways that make the connection between all marginalized positions of motherhood? Or will such efforts continue to be confined to "adding" just one more acceptable, respectable definition of "mother" to the already 25 to which Eichler refers?

Doreen Fumia is a Ph.D. student at OISE/UT in the Department of Sociology and Equity Studies in Education. She recently reconfigured her family arrangements and psychic identities when she left a long-term, heterosexual marriage. She now lives with her female partner who also left a long-term marriage and with their six children, part-time.

¹I take this from the title of Abbott and Farmer's book, *From Wedded Wife to Lesbian Life* (1995).

²For a more detailed discussion, see Davin.

References

- Abbott, Deborah, and Ellen Farmer. *From Wedded Wife to Lesbian Life: Stories of Transformation*. Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1995.
- Adams, Mary Louise. "The Trouble With Normal: Post-war Youth and the Construction of Heterosexuality." Diss. University of Toronto (OISE), 1994.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- Chunn, Dorothy. *From Punishment to Doing Good: Family Courts and Socialized Justice in Ontario 1880-1940*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992.
- Coontz, S. *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*. New York: Basic Books, 1992.
- Davies, Bronwyn. *Shards of Glass: Children Reading and Writing Gendered Identities*. New Jersey: Hampton University Press, 1993.
- Davin, Anna. "Imperialism and Motherhood." *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*. Eds. Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997.
- Davy, Kate. "Outing Whiteness: A Feminist Lesbian Project." *Whiteness: A Critical Reader*. Ed. Mike Hall. New York: New York University Press, 1997.
- Eichler, Margaret. *Family Shifts*. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Fellows, Mary Louise and Sherene Razack. "Race to Innocence: Confronting Hierarchical Relations Among Women." *Iowa Journal of Gender, Race, and Justice* (1997).
- Fumia, Doreen. "Normalized Family Ideology Interrupted: Once Married Mother-Lesbians." M.A. Thesis. University of Toronto (OISE), 1997.

- Gavigan, Shelly A.M. "Familial Ideology and the Limits of Difference." *Women and Canadian Public Policy*. Ed. J. Brodie. Toronto: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1996.
- Grewal, Interpal. *Home and Harem: Nation, Gender, Empire, and the Cultures of Travel*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996.
- Pratt, Minnie Bruce. *Rebellion: Essays 1980-1991*. New York: Firebrand Books, 1991.
- Razack, Sherene. *Looking White People in the Eye: Gender, Race, and Culture in Courtrooms and Classrooms*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998.
- Stoler, Ann Laura. *Race and the Education of Desire*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995.
- Walkerdine, Valerie. *School Girl Fictions*. New York: Verso, 1990.

RENEE NORMAN

Daughters

against the stone wall
 youthful girlish bodies lean
 making plastic horses gallop
 along the long ledge
 of their fancy ...

...today she turned away
 from my kiss
 the schoolroom door open
 & classmates gaping

but tonight i will kiss her
 doubletime
 doubletime
 the notation of my love
 recorded on her cheek
 invisible
 permanent

Renee Norman is a poet, writer, and part-time teacher currently completing her doctorate at the University of British Columbia.