

DESIRE LINES:  
TREADING TRAILS AND TELLING TALES OF LESBIAN MOTHERING

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Elizabeth Bailey, candidate for the degree of Master of Arts in Women's and Gender Studies, has presented a thesis titled, ***Desire Lines: Treading Trails and Telling Tales of Lesbian Mothering***, in an oral examination held on March 15, 2016. The following committee members have found the thesis acceptable in form and content, and that the candidate demonstrated satisfactory knowledge of the subject material.

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## ABSTRACT

This study highlights the ways in which the marginalization of lesbian families in Canada and the United States is perpetuated by heterobias and exacerbated by the legislation that continues to exclude non-hetero families. As demonstrated in this study, however, this marginalization is actively being countered as lesbian mothers disrupt the hegemonic notions of motherhood and family by seeking to make their voices heard and stories known in the public sphere. The focus on lesbian parented families in this thesis is important and timely in its engagement of the social debate that continues to surround the queer community as a whole.

Data was collected online by accessing five publicly posted blogs authored by self-described lesbian mothers, with narrative inquiry and grounded theory used as methodological approaches. Reading the blogs with a queer feminist critical lens and using an intersectional framework studying the dynamics of queer(/)mother identities as they have been presented within the blogs, the primary questions I ask in this study are: how do lesbian women go about creating and maintaining personal and family identity despite the prevalence of heterobias and homophobic attitudes that comprise their social context?; and, what stories are being told about their experiences in an online, blogged setting? The question of how opportunities for community building are introduced by sharing these stories online also emerged as I conducted this study. In considering the dearth of research that includes the voices of lesbian mothers as expressed through blogs (Hunter 2015), this study is important in its ability to capture, document and analyze existing and emerging counter-narratives.

As a central theme, I offer the notion of blogging as activism, both in terms of the act of storytelling, and also where bloggers have challenged the hegemonic notions of lesbian/mother/family in the context of every day interactions with others. The rationale for blogging as described within the data fell under the themes of information sharing, support seeking and community building. In examining the blogs, themes emerged that described the experience of trying to conceive outside of a heteronormative context; the difficulties of living in a heterobiased culture; and strategies for resistance. Despite the fundamental challenges described in the blogs with regard to living and parenting on the margins of the dominant culture, this study demonstrates blogging as a form of rebellion in disrupting the silence/silencing of queer lives through the public offering of counter-narratives.

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## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my family:

To my children, Maddox and Jude, who help me to see the world in a new way every time they ask me to explain it to them.

To my partner, Joce, who is the vital link here. Simply put, I could not have done this without you, my love.



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Now I'm tucked in nice and tight / Mommy and Mama kiss me goodnight.

– Léslea Newman, *Mommy, Mama, and Me*

For the second time in as many days, [Republican politician] Rick Santorum waded into the issue of gay marriage, suggesting it was so important for children to have both a father and mother that an imprisoned father was preferable to a same-sex parent. Citing the work of one anti-poverty expert [unnamed in article], Santorum said, “He found that even fathers in jail who had abandoned their kids were still better than no father at all to have in their children's lives.” ... Allowing gays to marry and raise children, Santorum said, amounts to “robbing children of something they need, they deserve, they have a right to. You may rationalize that that isn't true, but in your own life and in your own heart, you know it's true.”

– Michael Memoli and Mark Barabak, “Santorum Dwells on Gay Marriage”

The vast majority of scientific studies that have directly compared gay and lesbian parents with heterosexual parents have consistently shown that the same-sex couples are as fit and capable parents as heterosexual couples, and that their children are just as psychologically healthy and well adjusted.

– American Psychological Association, “Answers to Your Questions About Same-Sex Marriage”

[A]nti-gay group One Million Moms is up in arms about a new ABC Family show ... posting on its website: *ABC Family reported the comedy-drama pilot, working with the title The Fosters, is about two women raising a “21st century,” multi-ethnic mix of foster and biological kids. While foster care and adoption is a wonderful thing and the Bible does teach us to help orphans, this program is attempting to redefine marriage and family by having two moms raise these children together. One Million Moms is not sure how the explanation will be given on how the biological children were conceived. None of this material is acceptable content for a family show.*

– Hillary Busis, “Anti-Gay Group Protests Jennifer Lopez Series”

This parenting thing really raises this shit up to the surface.

– Nat, “Injection Reflections” blog

## CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

This study serves as an exploration of how lesbian motherhood is experienced in Canada and the United States. As lesbian parented families increase in number,<sup>1</sup> it is critical that we consider the ways in which family, motherhood, and parental identities are understood and represented in Canada and the United States. The visibility (and viability) of these families is directly impacted by the social attitudes, policies, and varying legislation that surrounds and polices them. In examining the landscape in which lesbian women experience motherhood, I am also able to highlight the ways in which they disrupt the normative scripts. I describe here the ways in which the marginalization of lesbian families is perpetuated by heterosexism and exacerbated by the legislation that excludes them. I also highlight the ways in which marginalization is countered by the persons and communities that seek to make their voices known. The focus here on lesbian parented families is important and timely in its engagement of the discussion that continues to surround the queer<sup>2</sup> community as a whole.

When depicted in mainstream culture and as a topic of research study, queer families in general are often scrutinized under the criteria of (hetero)normative ideals. Researchers work to determine whether queer persons are fit to raise children as compared to the idealized nuclear family structure. While research outcomes

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<sup>1</sup>According to Statistics Canada (2012), for example: “The 2011 Census counted 64,575 same-sex couple families, up 42.4% from 2006.” This reflects not only an increase in the number of families, but also an increasing *intention to count* same-sex parented families in the census data, and a *willingness to be counted* on the part of families.

<sup>2</sup> I use the term “queer” to encompass the LGBTTIQ2S (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, intersex, questioning, queer, two-spirited) community. The specific focus of this thesis is on lesbian parented families.

overwhelmingly point to “yes,”<sup>3</sup> the question of how heterosexism informs such a question is generally ignored. In addition, the way in which queer families have to work to create their own fit within (or on the margins of) heteronormative culture is left unaddressed. Queer persons are tasked with realizing their way through the challenge of becoming/being parents and creating family while often finding themselves on the fringe of current social norms and legislation. This creates an additional hurdle in the already challenging world of parenting, but also an opportunity to alter the categories of family, parent, and self in a broader sense.

In researching and writing this thesis, I have been mindful of the ways in which homophobia and heterobias can often stem from a place of misinformation rather than a place of malevolence. My aim is to introduce narratives as they have been presented online in order to open a dialogue, introduce ideas and incite change. In order to do so I chose to explore publically posted, personal blogs written from the perspective of a lesbian parent. The blogs I chose for this study often provide intimately detailed narratives of experiences in lesbian mothering, allowing for the presentation and affirmation of parenting outside of the traditional scheme.

It is important to acknowledge the variations in the ways lesbian women present, categorize, and understand themselves. In her research with regard to pregnancy outside of heterosexual relationships, for example, Laura Mamo (2007) notes that while twenty-one of her participants (making up more than half of her sample) identified as lesbian, fourteen did not. The latter chose terms such as queer, gay, dyke and so on. In addition,

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<sup>3</sup>In 2004, the American Psychological Association’s Council of Representatives adopted a resolution which supported queer families. They noted that “[o]verall, results of research suggest that the development, adjustment, and well-being of children with lesbian and gay parents do not differ markedly from that of children with heterosexual parents” (Paige 2004).

the title “mother” is also problematic in that not all lesbian parents identify as such. I recognize that there is no easy categorization or terminology that effectively represents the variety of potential identifications and family forms. For the sake of continuity I refer to the bloggers<sup>4</sup> in this study as “lesbian” while acknowledging variations for self-identification. By “lesbian family,” I refer here to the unit formed when two women in an intimate relationship raise children together.<sup>5</sup> While families are created in a variety of ways, I have restricted my focus here to families created through accessing the gametes of a known or an anonymous sperm donor where the donor will not be taking on a parenting role.

Broadly, the questions I ask in this study are: how do lesbian women go about creating and maintaining personal and family identity despite the prevalence of heterobiased and homophobic attitudes that comprise their social context?<sup>6</sup>; and, what stories are being told about their experiences, and specifically here, what stories emerge in an online, blogged setting? In their very existence, lesbian mothers challenge normative understandings of gender, sex, sexuality, and parentage. Given the differences in legislation both at federal and state/provincial levels, Canadian and American lesbian family units are legally recognized as equal parents to a variable extent depending on their physical location.

Despite the laws, what remains consistent within the larger culture, as reflected in this study, are unquestioned heteronormative attitudes. This is seen in the way

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<sup>4</sup> A “blogger” is the primary narrator in a blog, or one of the voices if a blog is co-narrated.

<sup>5</sup> I acknowledge, also, that families come in any variety of forms, and are not tied to a set number of parents or particular living arrangements.

<sup>6</sup> I wish to make a distinction between blatant, aggressive homophobia and homophobia that is perhaps less overt and instead stems from unquestioned heteronormative ideology, e.g. questioning (even if unspoken) whether queer persons should be parents, and/or surprise that the couple/individual has the intention to parent.

governments regulate reproductive technologies and in what context they will recognize two women as sole and equal parents. As Rachel Epstein (2014) describes, for example, lesbian couples in Ontario using sperm from a known donor and inseminating with the help of a fertility clinic are legally required to leave the sperm in quarantine for six months. A heterosexual couple using sperm from the male partner is under no quarantine requirement. Without having a doctor perform the insemination, however, lesbian mothers leave themselves open to paternity claims should the donor decide to want a parental role in the future. Laura Mamo (2007) writes that in having legislation requiring that a doctor perform the insemination in order to remove parental claims from a known donor, "...in practice, clinics and professionals stand in for 'paternity,' highlighting the close coupling of biomedicalization and the legal parameters of stratified reproduction. Institutionalized heterosexism and the professional authority of physicians are both embedded in jurisprudence and biomedicine" (111).

Heteronormativity is also seen on a social level in the idealization of the traditional (heterosexual) parental unit that is deeply embedded into cultural framework. This is demonstrated through the anticipation that in queer relationships and families there would be a maintenance or mimicry of the heterosexual family form – I have been asked, for example, whether it is my partner or I who takes the role of the "guy" in our relationship, and also which of us takes on more of a "dad" role. I argue here that beyond specifically challenging the legal system, one of the most effective strategies in undoing heteronormativity is performed at the ground level in being unapologetically out as a lesbian, and as a mother. In doing so, there is the opportunity to actively challenge stereotypes that generally consider lesbian motherhood to be oxymoronic, "deriving from

the ‘fact’ that lesbians are presumptively non-procreative and that mothers are presumptively heterosexual” (J. Thompson 2002, 6).

Canadian and American culture is steeped in heteronormative ideology, which maintains with a sense of urgency a definition of “normal” personhood that relies on the belief in “naturally” sexed bodies (male/female, with no variation) at birth, from which specific and fixed gendered identities are expected to be exhibited (male/man; female/woman), and a heterosexual orientation to intrinsically follow. As Judith Butler (1990) observed, within the current ideology, “‘persons’ only become intelligible through becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility” (22). The existing, constructed and normalized categories (“properly” sexed bodies, “normal” gender identity, “hetero”-sexual identity) are individually loaded with criteria and expectations, and also inextricably linked to form the complicated structure that is heteronormativity, creating the basis of traditional law, social education and social custom. Jeffrey Weeks (2010), in discussing heterosexuality and by extension relevant to heteronormative expectations, notes that heterosexuality is “...so much taken for granted as the norm that it is rarely questioned. It is the given of sexual theorizing, the natural form by which we judge others” (92). The danger of such ideology is in its invisibility, which allows for the notion of a natural order rather than seeing the construction of a system using heterosexuality as a benchmark by which any variation is assessed.

It is important to note, however, that as social citizens we are not necessarily unwitting puppets enacting heteronormative ideology but rather our relationship with these norms is convoluted. Jaya Sharma (2009) writes that “we subscribe [to] and challenge norms simultaneously; we perform norms – what appears complete compliance

with norms could in fact be at some level strategic; performance of norms cannot be neatly separated from internalization of the norms” (53). Take, for example, the following excerpt from the blog entry “Donor Uncle” by blogger Sandra, posted on the queer parenting site VillageQ.com:

We created our family in a fairly unconventional way. Well, not that unconventionally – we met, fell in love, built a home and life together and made each other so happy we thought it would be great to share our love with another person – so we came to the decision to have a baby in a pretty normal way. But once the decision was made to expand our family – that’s where we hit a snag. You see, we didn’t have any sperm. Not an insurmountable obstacle, but definitely something that required a little planning.

This entry exemplifies our complicated relationship with heteronormative ideals. The blogger outlines the socially defined, legitimated, and naturalized script of (“straight”) Canadian/American life, relationships and the expectation of the creation of family. She fits herself and her family into this script, but in an adapted form. This adaptation, of course, is not uncontested.

Queer persons and their families often find the legitimacy of their identities and their families debated publically, including – and perhaps especially – in the political realm. The reference to Rick Santorum in the quote that opens this thesis is offered again here for emphasis. It comes from a 2012 *Los Angeles Times* article, where Michael Memoli and Mark Barabak reported that,

[Republican politician] Rick Santorum waded into the issue of gay marriage, suggesting it was so important for children to have both a father and mother that an imprisoned father was preferable to a same-sex parent. Citing the work of one anti-poverty expert [name unspecified in article], Santorum said, “He found that even fathers in jail who had abandoned their kids were still better than no father at all to have in their children’s lives.” Allowing gays to marry and raise children, Santorum said, amounts to “robbing children of something they need, they deserve, they have a right to. You may rationalize that that isn’t true, but in your own life and in your own heart, you know it’s true”.

Such political messages and the personal beliefs of politicians cannot and should not be blandly dismissed as inconsequential as they shape policy and legislation of sexuality and the rights of queer persons and their families.

Santorum's words sting. They represent the depth of the homophobia that can encircle queer persons and families, whether they face it overtly or in more subtle ways. As a lesbian mother with two small children, I am at this time making my way through the world I describe within this body of work. I am deeply aware of the ways in which the silencing of queer identities through the unquestioned privileging of heterosexuality has shaped my life. As a young child, I had no language with which to express the niggling feeling that I did not quite fit. I had only a vague understanding of what a lesbian was. Starting in the third grade, a set of boys at school took to calling me "Lizzy the Lezzy" in a loud, singsong voice. I knew early on that it was not an identity that was positively offered nor one I thought I could safely explore as I got older. I did not know any queer people and I did not see any reflection of various and multiple sexual identities in the social world around me.

Growing up, this lack of visible, affirmative queer presence contributed to my intense struggle as I pushed my way through adolescence. I was unable to align myself with what had been presented as the only available (heteronormative) model – and entirely unsure of what to do about it. So, I coped as best as I could. In short, I spent my adolescence in therapy and in a variety of in-patient and out-patient treatment programs for self-abuse, anorexia, bulimia, and depression. I alternated between trying to survive and trying to self-destruct. I found myself not only trying to come to terms with my sexual identity, but also uncomfortable with expectations of a feminine gendered identity

while simultaneously not drawn to a traditional masculine identity either. In the summer before the twelfth grade, I had cut my hair very short and was quite thin at the time. My mother had sent me on an errand to pick up a carpet she was having cleaned. The woman at the shop counter looked me over disapprovingly when I greeted her, walked to the back room of the shop and announced loudly, “There’s a... boy? girl? I’m not sure... here to get that blue carpet.” I remember the moment vividly and recognize it now as having been the first time that I felt freed of the girl-ness that had never felt quite right for me – in that moment of ambiguity, I felt seen for the first time.

While I attribute my experiences in part to the way in which my social upbringing disallowed the adoption, understanding or even the possibility of non-heterosexual identities, I also acknowledge that my struggles were the combined result of personality, life circumstances, and social/familial messages.<sup>7</sup> In the many years since coming out, however, I have yet to meet a queer person who reached adulthood unscathed by the experience of growing up in a heteronormative world. Emphasis on the telling of coming out stories underlines this – we would have no need to tell such stories if we did not feel that there was an important, life-altering story to tell. These stories are often ones that are of freedom and excitement with regard to being able to stop hiding one’s sexual identity; simultaneously they are often of fear, burden, rejection, and potential danger in asserting one’s identity as one that does not match the embedded heteronormative construction. While experiences and approaches vary, I have commonly seen that the adoption of a (“healthy”) sense of self in adolescence and beyond is often significantly marred by the marginalization and stigmatization of queer identifications. In

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<sup>7</sup> To be clear, my family is not homophobic in the least. Sexual orientation was simply not a topic I remember being discussed in my home when I was growing up.

2012, Egale Human Rights Trust ([www.egale.ca](http://www.egale.ca)) hosted a Summit on LGBTQ youth suicide prevention, reporting that for

LGBTQ youth, suicidal ideation and behaviour originate primarily because of external, environmental factors (i.e. homophobia and biphobia / heteronormativity; transphobia / cisnormativity), which may in turn cause mental health concerns (e.g. anxiety, depression, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), increasing one's risk for suicide. (Dyck 2012, 5)

In a survey of American youth, The Human Rights Campaign ([www.hrc.org](http://www.hrc.org)) reported that

Compared with their non-LGBT peers, LGBT youth in this survey report much lower levels of happiness, a higher incidence of alcohol and drug use, and less connection to adult support during personal problems. They also are much more likely than their non-LGBT peers to say they can be more honest about themselves online than in real life. When asked to describe their most important problem or one thing they would like to change, LGBT youth describe the challenges they face as being directly related to their identity as LGBT.” (n.d., 6)

In considering the way in which these youth reported a sense of freedom online, I saw in my research how this was also expressed by the bloggers in this study. Being present online can be seen as empowering to individuals working to cultivate and maintain a sense of self that may be more easily supported, matched, inspired and/or validated through online interaction that knows no geographical boundary.

In my late twenties, as my partner and I made plans to start a family, I had a familiar feeling of having no set path to follow. This time, however, I felt armed with the resilience provided by life experience and the power of the Internet with which to do the searching. Without a wide circle of lesbian parents around us, Internet access was critical when researching our options, both logistically and legally, as we embarked on parenthood as a same-sex couple. Through the online world, especially through blogs, I found the voices of others who were making a similar journey. These online narratives

were invaluable to me, and I was encouraged to see that many of the same fears and challenges we faced were being reflected back at us. Along with deciding whether we were ready to start a family, my partner and I were challenged by the process as it strayed from the normative understanding of creating a family with which we had each been raised. We had to wrap our heads around how we would go about it; we had to come to terms with the idea of buying sperm from an anonymous donor from an online catalogue; we had to meet with doctors and nurses and wonder whether they would be homophobic or not; we had to decide how we would present and name ourselves as parents; we had to negotiate our own understanding of family and motherhood, and our partnership in it along the way.

My experiences have caused me to stop and reflect on how a heteronormative upbringing failed to prepare me for my own life and have been a driving force in my research. I have also come to understand that I have an opportunity to profoundly question my perception of myself as a person, partner, and parent, given that I am challenged every day by the hegemonic expectations of these roles. My goal is to stir the pot, question the unquestioned and be the visible, vocal presence I did not have growing up. The importance of this research is clear to me as my partner and I raise our children in a culture where we, and our family structure, remain on the fringe.

The focus within the gay and lesbian movement over the last several decades has often been on the specific rights attributed to queer persons. In terms of partnership and family, we ask: Can we marry? Can we claim each other as dependants? Can we (and how might we) have children together, whether in bringing new life to the world or through adoption? Can we be seen as equal parents under the law? Are there any

restrictions to know of? Can we make medical decisions for each other and our children in times of emergency? Outside of legalities, the questions continue. Do others, and do we, see ourselves as equals in terms of our roles as co-parents? Are we reflected in our social world through media, books, parenting classes, questionnaires, and in daily assumptions about our lives? Does anyone think to ask a child about their family structure prior to asking about their mommy and daddy? Do we have access to childcare and a school system that reflects, integrates and offers something other than traditionally structured families and identities; do we feel justified in seeking this out? These questions fall into the realm of social attitudes rather than legislation and are of special interest in my research.

Living in Canada, where my partner and I are “allowed” to marry; where we are both listed as “parent” on our children’s birth certificates and can equally claim them as dependents as well as act on their behalf in case of a medical emergency – one might ask, should we consider this good enough? Is this equality, especially compared to the legislation in the United States, which does not always allow for these same basic rights for queer persons and their families? In short, the answer is no. Queer families in Canada (and increasingly in the United States) may be able to squeak their way into the realm of allowability thanks to changes in legislation in recent decades, but that does not assure a warm reception - equal under the law does not translate to equal in social attitudes. Queer persons and the families they create remain the exception to the heteronormative rule. So long as heterosexual privileging continues, queer persons will remain excluded no matter the legislation.

Online culture, as opposed to depictions of queer families on television, offers the

opportunity to be visible as a family in one's own words. The Internet has evolved into a powerful tool with which individuals can become both producers and consumers of media, allowing queer persons to locate community online as a source of information, connection and entertainment. In this way, as part of the Internet, the blogosphere<sup>8</sup> acts not only as a place to post stories and locate others in a similar position, it also acts as a much needed dissemination of knowledge to the queer community who might lack these informational resources in their every day lives – offering answers to those wondering how, for example, does one find and interpret state/provincial/federal laws that determine parenting rights and possibilities? How does one go about finding a sperm bank; choosing a donor; go through the process of a second parent adoption? How might one respond to someone questioning their family structure, and where can one find examples of those who can relate to this experience? The blogs and other resources that outline these incredibly personal experiences serve as information sharing and support, perhaps especially for those in communities without a visible and accessible queer community. The narratives in the blogs explored within this work are rife with accounts of situations where the effects of inequality are felt, especially for those who are writing from the United States where the laws are less inclusive and “gay marriage” rages as a hot topic of debate. The blogs also, however, provide strategies for resistance through pushing back against the structures that oppress, as well as resistance through storytelling and making the inequities known.

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<sup>8</sup> The blogosphere refers to the entire collection of blogs found on the Internet. While in this thesis I have not related the blogs in this study to what is termed the “mamasphere” (the collection of mother-written, family-driven blogs within the blogosphere), the growth of “mommy blogging” is an interesting phenomenon. For example, see May Friedman (2013) for a discussion on mommyblogs, the mamasphere, and the challenge this type of blogging poses to “the stability of the mother subject” (11).

## CHAPTER TWO: Problematizing the Family Form

The family lot runs adjacent to the side of the enormous maze-like store and the lot consists of about 40 parking spots for families. However, the markers on every space consist of a representation of a hetero-normative family. Vomit. At first, I was like: oh well that stick figure in something like trousers could be me and that stick figure in something like a skirt could be [my partner], but really we know who they are depicting and it is not a family like mine. (Nat, "Injection Reflections" blog)

The presence of queer parented families is problematic in a culture that privileges the idea of the one mother/one father family structure. Consciously redrawing the family frame – rather than finding ways to have queer families fit the existing structure – means not only acknowledging but allowing for the fact that queer parented families are not the same as hetero parented families. The intention here is not to compare and contrast, which would simply highlight the binary, but rather to note, as Jacqui Gabb (2004) does, “[t]here is an evident need to publicise the fact that lesbian families are neither normal, nor alternative, but *essentially different*” (126). The current mainstream understanding of “family” does not generally make space for the presentation of non-normative family forms. This is seen in a variety of ways, one example being the depiction of family in children’s storybooks which in large part fail to present children with portrayals of families parented by queer parents. Queer families often find themselves needing to explain or make visible their family structure in a variety of scenarios (Naples 2004; Epstein 2010). For example, I have been asked by multiple people at my children’s current daycare what my relationship is to my children and to my partner; I have been asked by several children where my children’s “daddy” is and why they have two moms. These are not always questions I feel like answering in that moment, but as Nancy Naples (2004) writes, “[q]ueering family and parenting, and destabilizing the powerful

hegemony of heteronormativity, involves daily negotiations, strategic choices, and a commitment to challenging heterosexual privilege in everyday life” (683). In not representing the traditional mother-father family, lesbian mothers like myself may be scrutinized but we also have the opportunity to play with the boundaries. We have/take the space to create, represent and introduce new ideas about “family” to not only the larger culture but to others within the queer community who may be seeking a model to work with as they transition into parenthood.

Lesbian women create their families in a number of ways, whether it be, for example, in blending families existing from previous relationships; through Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART) such as intrauterine insemination (IUI), in-vitro fertilization (IVF) or a home-based approach with donor sperm; through adoption; surrogacy; or various forms of co-parenting arrangements (Wright 2001; Mamo 2007; Ryan-Flood 2009; Luce 2010; Park 2013; Epstein 2014). While all are viable avenues for building family, the focus here is on families created within the context of an existing lesbian relationship with the use of donor sperm. These particular families can also take on a wide array of forms, especially when children are conceived through anonymous-versus known-donor sperm. An anonymous donor may never be identified<sup>9</sup> while a known donor could play a significant role in the life of the family.<sup>10</sup> The purpose here, however, is not to focus on precise family-formation methods. Rather, the focus is on exploring how lesbian mothers work to create a visible space for their families and for

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<sup>9</sup>It is possible to have an anonymous donor be an open-ID donor, where both the donor and the family would sign consent forms allowing the children, generally once they are adults, to contact the donor. For an example of this see the Xytex Cryo International website, where they provide information on this process in their Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) (<https://www.xytext.com/sperm-donor-bank-patient/sperm-donor-bank-patient-faq.cfm>).

<sup>10</sup>This may be in a co-parenting context, or in some cases the donor may play the role of an uncle figure, or he may not have a place in the family at all (Epstein 2014).

themselves as parents, as well as the challenges they face in doing so in the context of heteronormativity. This, of course, is done while already negotiating the challenges of parenthood independent of family structure and sexual orientation such as a lack of affordable, quality childcare; achieving a work-life balance for those in the workplace; learning to parent, etc.

Children who are conceived within the context of a heterosexual relationship through ART (whether a donor was used or not) may or may not be told of their origins, and no one beyond medical staff may know (Licker Feingold 2011; Bleyer 2013). In doing so, the guise of normative conception is quietly upheld. In contrast, within a lesbian-parented family, the traditional story is disrupted. In my own experience, for example, in one-on-one or small group settings the question of how we conceived is often asked in hesitant tones and often there are follow-up questions about the identity of the “father,” how we came to the decision of who would carry the child, and whether the non-biological mother might carry a child next. The curious posing of the questions generally points to a lack of mainstream knowledge about achieving pregnancy outside of straight, fertile, traditional conception. It also reveals an anticipation that normative scripts would be upheld, for example in expecting that my children have a “dad”<sup>11</sup>, and that as women, my partner and I might each want to experience pregnancy.

In facing assumptions about conception in lesbian families and the shape of the family, the most important act of everyday activism is in our ability to make ourselves visible. Lesbian parents, and queer parents in general, continue to find themselves on the

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<sup>11</sup> My partner and I, like many others with families like ours, are clear that our children have a donor, not a dad.

periphery while immersed in the day-to-day requirements of raising children. As Laura Mamo (2007) writes, however,

Nothing within biology demands the nuclear family. It is a cultural and social system enforced by regulations and reinforced by legal discourse, medical practices, and cultural norms. Yet in the United States it is the nuclear family, bound by blood and legal arrangements of marriage and adoption, that represent social order, idealized kinship, and legitimate relations. But, as Gayle Rubin (1975) argued, cultural rules are alterable rules. (5)

I offer here examples of my own experiences as a lesbian mother in a small, Canadian prairie city. Although there are times I would rather not have to explain myself and my family in everyday situations, a sentiment echoed in the blogs studied here, I also recognize the importance in doing so. Recently, for example, my partner and I were out browsing for new glasses. Chatting with the woman who was assisting us, I said we would make a final choice another day as we were due to pick up our boys from daycare. She seemed to only then consider, or perhaps confirm for herself, that my partner and I are a couple. Curious, she asked the ages of our children and whether we had “gotten them” at the same time. I was puzzled for a moment, then realized that she assumed we had adopted. I clarified that they were turning two and four and were not adopted. She took a moment to reply. Clearly, this went beyond her realm of experience. I took a breath, sensing where this would go. The conversation went like this:

“Well, who is the mom?” she asked quietly.

“We both are. Are you asking me who carried?” I replied.

She nodded “yes” in response and I considered saying that it didn’t matter, we are both their moms. In the end, I replied that I had carried them. Her curiosity grew, and I took a second breath. I reminded myself that this was important, although all I wanted

was a new pair of glasses from this transaction. The saleswoman asked me, suddenly louder in her disbelief, how we had done it? How had we gotten me pregnant?

“We used an anonymous donor,” I told her. “It’s just a simple procedure called an IUI, they do it at the hospital here. It’s a quick injection, really.”

“Oh!” she said. Then even more loudly, “Oh! You mean, you mean...*like animals?*”

I cringed. Her hands flew up to her face to cover her mouth, clearly horrified at her own words. I considered my reaction. This was new to her, as it had been to me at one point. I wanted to be angry but instead managed to level my voice. I replied that I supposed the science behind it is similar. I also pointed out that assisted reproduction was really quite common, and not just in lesbian-parented families.

“I’m sorry,” she said between bouts of loud, embarrassed laughter. “I just...” she trailed off.

The conversation was uncomfortable, to say the least, and a sharp reminder of the way in which my status as a lesbian mother often makes me an object of curiosity when not one of disdain. While these experiences can be difficult, I remind myself that often the interactions like this can have a major impact on changing social attitudes and expectations. This saleswoman had clearly never considered that two women could create a family in this way. Our conversation had opened a door for her and made families like mine all the more visible.

Published works that focus on the legalities of what is allowed for queer persons, both for themselves and as parents, are quickly dated, especially now in the United States as rights in terms of marriage, reproduction and parenting are changing. While law and

social attitudes may not always meet up, they are certainly intertwined. During the months in which I prepared this research, same-sex marriage was legalized in the United States. In the months that followed, there was both celebration on the part of same-sex couples and allies who supported the ruling, and disregard for the new law on the part of those who disagreed. At the present time, the case involving Rowan County, Kentucky clerk Kim Davis has been the most widely publicized and debated account of refusal to adhere to the new ruling. Davis cited religious reasons for denying marriage licences to same-sex couples. As reported by an October 4, 2015 *Associated Press* article that described the law firm representing Davis as being recently labeled a hate group, “As Davis defied a series of federal court orders and was sent to jail [for five days], [her lawyer] cast her as a heroine called into battle by God. He compared her actions to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Abraham Lincoln. She received 20,000 pieces of mail in jail, he said.” The case involving Kim Davis acts as a social representation of the struggle for and against same-sex marriage and rights for queer people generally.

Although Canada’s laws with regard to allowing same-sex marriage have been in place for a decade now, this does not mean that the question of where and how queer people and their families fit into Canadian culture has been resolved. While my home province of Saskatchewan legalized same-sex marriage in 2004, it wasn’t until years later that same-sex couples could be listed as parents on a birth certificate, and only after lesbian women pushed for this change.<sup>12 13</sup> The privileging of biology continues,

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<sup>12</sup> My partner and I are friends with a couple who were involved in this process and the story was relayed to us in personal conversation. They were a significant resource to us as we looked in to starting a family.

<sup>13</sup> I note the legalization of marriage because of the conflation of marriage and parenting in the traditional scripts. Debates over same-sex marriage often encompass or stand in for debates over queer-parented families. While marriage often affords rights to queer persons as parents and their families, with rapidly changing laws this is not always the case.

however: for example, my partner and I are both listed as parents on our children's birth certificates. While we are both listed as parents, when completing the paperwork to register the births of our children, my status as birth parent was honoured under the heading "mother" whereas my partner, fully and wholly a mother to our boys, is relegated to the category "other parent."<sup>14</sup> According to Saskatchewan's *Vital Statistics Act, 2009*:

"father" means the person who acknowledges himself to be the biological father of a child;

...

"mother" means the woman from whom a child is delivered;

...

"other parent":

- (a) in relation to a live birth, means a person other than the mother or father who is cohabiting with the mother or father of the child in a spousal relationship at the time of the child's birth and who intends to participate as a parent in the upbringing of the child;

...

"parent" means a mother, father or other parent...

It is important to note that in order to be recognized as parents in this way, we had to first either be legally married prior to the birth of our first child or be able to attest to being in a spousal relationship, meaning having cohabitated as a couple for two years or more. Despite having happily cohabitated for close to a decade, we chose to marry as it seemed to provide the smoothest legal route. We celebrate our wedding date as our "family anniversary" since our formal marriage was one step towards eventual parenthood.

When my oldest child was born in 2011, the clerk completing the birth registration form during our hospital stay placed my partner's information in the section

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<sup>14</sup> With the intention of including the "Registration of Live Birth Form" as an Appendix to this document, I contacted the Government of Saskatchewan's Vital Statistics office in December 2015 for a voided copy. The Registrar's Office refused my request as the document is not one that has been made publically available for use outside of registering births.

labeled “father”. We told her that we’d like her to fill in the section for “other parent” instead, which required her to turn the paper over and see the additional box there on the form for that purpose. The clerk, whose job it was to complete this form for all births at the hospital, was surprised and told us that she had yet to notice that option. As a lesbian couple with a newborn, nary a father in sight, we knew we had the hospital employees flustered. We were asked, in our twelve-hour postpartum stay, at least three times whether we were “actually” married, and most often those questions were asked while legal paperwork was being completed.

The legitimacy of our new family was questioned less than a day into our lives as parents. Our son’s bassinette tag, which asked only for child’s name and mother’s name, identified his first and last name, with my partner (the non-biological parent) listed as “the” mother, presumably because they share a last name. I was not mentioned on the identification tag, my status as new mother suspended in that identity paperwork, despite the baby at my breast and my bruised and battered post-birth body. At the same time, however, baby and I, also as mother and child, wore matching hospital bracelets that had to be verified upon discharge from the hospital. Even if in presumable error, the way in which the records were produced was quietly satisfying to me as the hospital unknowingly named us both as “mother” to our newborn in a significant way – even when they didn’t quite know what to make of us. The bassinette ID card and ID bracelets went into our son’s baby book.

I tell these stories because they are examples of queer parenting “troub[ling] the normal” (Mamo 2007, 6) in everyday scenarios. Talking about our families should be easy; filling in forms and writing up ID tags should be some of the simplest parts of a job

– except when the stories to be told and blanks to be filled in don't match the norm.

Despite changes in legislation, Canada and the United States continue to grapple with issues of love, gender, sex, identity, family and marriage outside of a heteronormative paradigm. The creation of family outside of the traditional structure (straight, cisgendered and preferably married) is mired down by refusing to move away a fixed tradition of family model, and the conceptualization of parents as being genetically linked to their child. In the United States where, if both mothers cannot be listed on a birth certificate (thereby recognizing only the biological mother as a parent), a second parent adoption (the process where the non-biological mother formally adopts her child) may be required. This is a formal, costly, and lengthy process that is in many American states still contested. Until the adoption – if legally allowed by the state, and if the couple can afford the fees and wish to proceed – is complete, no legal parental rights are given to a non-biological parent. By extension, then, no legal rights are given to the child, which leads to limited access to health insurance as well as other economic and legal supports from the non-biological parent.<sup>15</sup>

Within the confines of the traditional, heteronormative family structure, a non-biological lesbian mother and her contributions to the conception, pregnancy and growth of the child are rendered invisible. Despite her intentions to parent, she is limited in title

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<sup>15</sup> There is variation in legal standing for non-biological mothers/parents in the United States. Some states allow for both mothers to be listed on a birth certificate, others do not. As such, the rights a non-biological mother has varies depending on the state she is in at that time, no matter what the law says in her home state. In reading blogs for this research, I found it not uncommon to hear of non-biological mothers pursuing a second parent adoption regardless of being listed on the birth certificate (see for example “The Mamas Rapsallion”, one of the blogs used as data in this study). A non-biological mother who is recognized on a birth certificate in her home state is not guaranteed parental rights when travelling to another state. Second parent adoptions are federally recognized, and therefore she remains legally tied to her child (and able to, for example, make decisions for the child in a medical emergency) no matter which state the family travels/moves to and what that state's laws are with regard to recognition of non-biological parents. For a resource on state by state information about rights and legislation in the United States, see The Human Rights Campaign (HRC) website, <http://www.hrc.org>.

to one that emphasizes otherness. Should her relationship with her partner end, a legally unrecognized non-biological mother could be in a precarious position with regard to parenting rights (for examples and discussion see Jenni Millbank (2008)). Without a model for parenting that emphasizes roles other than that of biological mother and father, non-biological mothers are forced to blaze a trail all their own.

Ideologies of (good) motherhood are constructed and deeply ingrained, much like the binary categories of gender with emphasis on biological connection and heterosexual orientation (Ward Gailey 2000).<sup>16</sup> Both biological and non-biological lesbian mothers, then, are excluded from obtaining “good mother” status. The construction of the mother identity is linked to performativity, and will be taken up further in the review of the literature (Chapter Three). Given their legitimated biological ties, it has been argued that lesbian birth mothers are more readily accepted as parents in the social realm.<sup>17</sup> I agree that non-biological mothers are often in a position of having to push against the heteronormative structures that deny them a legitimated parental identity. In conducting research for this study I found several examples of scholarly work focused on the challenges, roles and parental rights for non-biological lesbian mothers (for examples see Dundas 1999; Sullivan 2001; Comeau 2004; Millbank 2008; Padavic and Butterfield 2011). We must also question, however, the way in which we might understand lesbian biological motherhood as a significantly more comfortable social location. Certainly, a pregnant/birthing/nursing lesbian is more recognizable as a mother. In the early, formative years when solidifying a parental identity, this could be advantageous as her status as mother is not questioned. We can presume, however, that not every case of

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<sup>16</sup> See also Adrienne Rich (1976) on motherhood as institution.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Maureen Sullivan (2001).

mother-recognition in public spaces is one that involves lactation and telling of birth stories. Beyond pregnancy and infancy, one's body changes and birth stories begin to fade into the background. Does this idea of one parent passing more easily also begin to fade as we move beyond babyhood? If I am walking through a mall with my family and our child refers to my partner as "mama," it is unlikely that anyone who overhears would assume that she is anything *but* "mama" (and then, perhaps, assume that I am *not*).

The argument that a biological mother is afforded easy social recognition through passing and the ability to transition into a recognizable "mother" role is dependent upon her meeting and accepting (or successfully negotiating) the norms of femininity that accompany the mother identity. It assumes that she can be "properly" gendered as feminine and therefore recognized as a mother, both to herself and to others. As she does this, her partner cannot as she is left with the masculine role given the binary on which parental roles are based in a way that her partner cannot.<sup>18</sup> In effect this relies on a stereotypical image of lesbian partnership in which one partner is identifiably feminine (and thought likely to bear the children) and the other not. As Raine Dozier (2014) notes,

While there is now a sizeable body of research examining lesbian parents and their children, virtually none of it discusses gendered behavior and identities among mothers. In addition, what butch, stud, genderqueer, trans, or masculine-of-centre individuals bring to parenting and family structure is largely unexplored. (131-132)

Lesbian parenting further challenges the normative script when the biological parent refuses the title "mother," as well as when a traditional feminine identity has not been adopted. Kris Quinones, featured in a 2013 issue of *The Advocate*, self-identifies as a "lesbian dad" and chose the moniker "mama," tearing apart the general conceptions of

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<sup>18</sup> See Shelley M. Park (2013) and her exploration of the way in which children are expected to have only one mother, which she refers to as "monomaternalism". This is discussed in the Literature Review in this thesis.

“lesbian,” “dad,” and the title “mama”. While one might assume that her partner carried their twin sons, Quinones is the biological parent (Dorsey 2013). In the manner in which, as previously discussed, Jaya Sharma (2009) described how we simultaneously accept and reject norms, Quinones is challenging the traditional script while also subscribing to it (consciously or not). This can be seen with her comments on instincts and traditional mom/dad roles in their approaches to their children. She tells *The Advocate*,

It’s weird because sometimes I don’t consider myself the mom ... I consider myself the person who had the babies, and then sometimes I’m the dad because of all the things I do with them. But internally, there’s still that motherly instinct where we go out and I always want to, like, rub their heads and have them real close to me and have people say that these are my sons.

Seeing variation to the traditional mother/father roles encourages further exploration in considering how to “be” a parent. It is through the sharing of these stories – as can be done through blogs – that we further disrupt normative scripts of genders, sexualities and parents. In doing so, we make new family forms readily visible to both onlookers and those who are making their way through similar territory. Within this work I am mindful always of social roles, concepts of who we are, our relation to the larger culture in which we are immersed. We are perpetually reminded of the romanticized cultural emphasis on finding ourselves; on being ourselves. In the same breath, however, we are chastised for the ways in which who we are doesn’t fit the celebrated norm in some (or many) way(s) – be it in terms of gender, sexual orientation, size, skin colour, language and such. A precarious place to be, indeed – but sharing our experiences also presents a chance to trip things up, locating new possibilities along with new opportunities to inspire new forms of parenting and parental identity.

### CHAPTER THREE: Literature Review

Heterosexism, with its assumptions of what constitutes normal and deviant behaviors, desires and lifestyles, continues to shape social-science literature, social policy, and social ideas. (Mamo 2007, 7)

In terms of the existing literature, the topic of queer/ing motherhood is vast when we consider the multidisciplinary connections. When treated and studied separately, as “queer” and “mother”, the literature available is even greater still. When we examine the ways in which identities intersect – consider, for example, Audre Lorde’s self description of choice, “Black lesbian feminist warrior poet mother” (quoted in Kraft 2004, 146) – we are wading into complicated, fascinating bodies of work that cross the boundaries of any one discipline. The influences and contributions from scholars of queer theory, feminism, sociology, psychology, anthropology, economics, geography, philosophy and multiple other disciplines make for a rich source of literature to review. The review provided here cannot be considered exhaustive, nor does the topic encompass all that it could – issues such as trans\* identities and parenthood, race/class/social location, media representation of queer identities, relationships between donor sibling families, loss/infertility, and relationship dissolution after having children are all examples topics for further consideration in other studies.

In Canada and the United States, the social and legal aspects of what is allowed, protected, contested, visible and denied with regard to queer persons and families are in a state of constant flux, as well as being variable between the countries, provinces and states. An evaluation of the literature must keep this in mind. Scholarly work can be either timeless or dated, and at times they can be both. Adrienne Rich (1976), for example, and her examination of motherhood is simultaneously dated and timeless: dated

in the examination of the specific cultural situation of her experience as a mother with young children, where wives generally stayed home with the children and put the husband's careers first; yet timeless in the concept of motherhood as institution. Heterosexism continues to maintain its dominance in Canadian and American culture, in both traditional and new ways with regard to reproductive technologies and the laws that regulate them (Mamo 2007).

Within the existing literature, beyond the laws of what is and is not allowed with regard to queer rights and parenting, what emerges are themes both shaped and reinforced by the dynamic relationship between laws and social attitudes. A selection of themes as they relate to my work, both broadly and specifically, will be taken up in greater detail below. These include: notions of biology and reproduction; feelings of invisibility/dislocation as a queer person and family; the social perception of incongruent mother/lesbian identities; and assimilationist concerns with regard to same-sex marriage and the "domestic spaces and practices of nuclear families" (Park 2013, 9). I have also included here a section on research bias. As described in that section, research involving same-sex parented families is generally concerned with the fitness of queer persons as parents, asking whether queer persons are able to raise socially and cognitively healthy children (Kranz and Daniluk 2002).

### **Biology & Reproduction**

The privileging of, and preference for, biological connection between parent and child in American and Canadian family structure necessarily excludes lesbian families. In disrupting the ideals of the traditional white, middle-class nuclear family, "[l]esbians and

gay men have to sift the words and syntax of social discourse in order to find an appropriate language that may legitimise our family relationships” (Gabb 2004, 125). As is demonstrated below, this section is important in its consideration of the ways in which biological connection influences social and legal concepts of parentage, especially as it relates to non-biological mothers. As Dawn Comeau asked, “In a society which heavily values the biological bond between mother and child, how does a [non-biological] mother explain her relationship to uninformed onlookers?” (2004, 156). As is demonstrated in this study, it is not only that “uninformed onlookers” question the role of the non-biological mothers, but also something that the mothers themselves grapple with as they define their relationships to their children and their role within the family.

In order to introduce a discussion of the literature as it relates to the ways in which biology and reproduction are linked to social and legal concepts of family and parentage, I begin here with an example of the trumping of biology over the intention to parent. Recently, the State of Kansas sued a known donor for child support. This occurred after the child’s lesbian parents separated and the biological mother filed for state support. Despite the fact that the donor and both of the child’s (lesbian) parents had signed a document releasing the donor of all parental responsibility, the state viewed the donor as a father. As the non-biological mother was not legally recognized as a parent, the state could not sue her for support in the same way (Celok 2012). In 2014 the ruling came down that the donor was indeed a “father” and liable for child support as he “did not qualify for sperm-donor protection under Kansas law because a licensed physician did not perform the artificial insemination” (Winter 2014).<sup>19</sup> While it is unclear why the

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<sup>19</sup> Note the terminology, “artificial insemination” which privileges conception through heterosexual intercourse as “natural”.

couple did not seek the assistance of a doctor (prohibitive costs? access to a willing doctor? the desire to conceive at home as a couple versus having the assistance of a doctor or nurse in a sterile room?) the court's ruling in this instance makes the case for biology over intention to parent.

This type of ideology poses a problem for lesbian parents as the heteronormative system does not easily allow for two mothers. Shelley Park (2013) breaks this down in describing what she calls *monomaternalism*: the ideological assumption that children can have only one true mother. Monomaternalism, she argues,

resides at the intersection of patriarchy (with its insistence that women bear responsibility for biological and social reproduction), heteronormativity (with its insistence that a woman must pair with a man, rather than other women, in order to raise children successfully), capitalism (in its conception of children as private property), and Eurocentrism (in its erasure of polymaternalism in other cultures and historical periods). ... [Monomaternalism] is so taken for granted that it has received slight attention even from feminist theorists. (7)

Park explores the way in which our cultural understanding of "real" mothers and our assumptions about who is allowed to lay claim to the title is based partly in "biocentric theories of motherhood" (4). Given that only one parent can bear the child, in a lesbian relationship this leaves one partner without a recognized tie to the child she intends to parent. As Jacqui Gabb writes, "...living outside this biologically determined paradigm is not easy. It often resigns you not only to a life of social exclusion, but also to one of linguistic absence" (2004, 125). Park (2013) and Gabb (2004) both advocate a challenge to the traditional notions of kinship by calling for acknowledgement of these systems as being culturally constructed. They argue that by dismantling and de-naturalizing the existing structure we begin to make space for queer families.

Similarly, Laura Mamo (2007) explores issues of biology and the ways in which lesbians create families with the use of reproductive technologies. Like Gabb (2004) and Park (2013) she maintains that “[n]othing within biology demands the nuclear family. It is a cultural and social system enforced by regulations and reinforced by legal discourse, medical practices, and cultural norms” (5). She points to the way in which those nuclear relationships are idealized and legitimated in Canadian and American mainstream cultures, to the exclusion of any other familial formations. Importantly, Mamo also recognizes change is occurring:

...while lesbians and other nonheterosexual actors and groups variously push and pull their way into normativity, doing so does not solidify the normal, but instead makes its borders far more porous and opaque, thereby recasting the meaning of reproduction itself. The stability and assumed naturalness of reproduction, and by extension the family form, has undergone substantial cultural reworking and is today finally queered. Lesbian reproductive practices have contributed significantly to this destabilization (5).

In her work, Mamo explores the ways in which lesbian couples creating families simultaneously challenge and reinforce the norms – for example, a lesbian parented family may be challenging the norms through the two-mother structure of the family form, but also maintains the norm of the two-parent home (124). Mamo’s work is important to my study in its examination of the way in which access to and regulations around reproductive technologies impact lesbians as they attempt to form families. She outlines the growth of fertility clinics into big business, terming it “ a key trend in recent decades [in Canada and the United States] ... Fertility Inc., [is] a large-scale biomedical service sector so powerful that it threatens to displace the low-tech options often used by lesbians” (2007, 24). By low-tech, Mamo refers to at-home inseminations, as opposed to medicalized, regulated and costly procedures available through fertility clinics. By

choosing to forgo the fertility clinic, however, lesbian couples can find themselves in a legal bind should paternity rights be later sought by the donor<sup>20</sup>; or if his obligations are challenged, as exemplified in the case described above where a Kansas sperm donor sued by the State for parental support. As was made apparent in this story, regardless of intention and any contract drawn up between known donor and would-be parents, paternity rights can be challenged – especially if a doctor is not involved in the insemination. Mamo focuses on heterosexism and patriarchy in her work as she argues that “...clinics and professionals stand in for ‘paternity,’ highlighting the close coupling of biomedicalization and the legal parameters of stratified reproduction” (111).

In her 2014 study, Rachel Epstein explores the experiences of queer Ontario residents attempting to get pregnant with the assistance of a fertility clinic. As Epstein notes, fertility clinics are generally becoming more welcoming towards queer clients, and as a result, there is an assumption by queer persons that they can “be assisted by clinics in their reproductive journeys, including assistance with insemination with a known donor” (30). Epstein describes her participants’ shock with regard to the cost, barriers and delays they encountered, especially when attempting to use a known donor. Epstein reports on the discrimination that exists with regard to the regulations surrounding known donors versus using a male partner’s sperm: if, when accessing ART services, a woman intends to use fresh sperm from her male partner, she can be inseminated when her body is ready.

In Canada, if a woman intends to use sperm from someone who has agreed to act as a

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<sup>20</sup> As outlined on the website Fertility Law Canada, provincial laws vary in terms of what rights a donor may have should he decide, in the end, that he would like to have a parental role. The site states that “While there is no definitive caselaw in Canada as to the legal rights and obligations of a sperm donor, some provinces in Canada (such as Alberta and British Columbia) have taken steps to amend their legislation to reflect that a sperm donor is not a parent without something more. In other provinces, such as Ontario, legislation is silent as to the rights and obligations of a sperm donor. A sperm donation agreement will be the best evidence all parties will have as to the intention of the parties at the time of the child's conception.” (“Sperm Donation Law in Canada” n.d.)

donor, that sample must be frozen and quarantined for six months prior to being used for insemination. As Epstein notes, this leaves a queer woman/couple in a bind: does she follow the guidelines, freeze the known donor's sperm (thereby also risking its motility and lowering chances of conception) and pay the fees set out by the clinic, above and beyond the cost of the insemination?<sup>21</sup> Does she take a risk and forego the clinic, inseminating at home with her partner with the potential of leaving her family open to legal issues should the donor decide that he does, in fact, want to parent? Does she choose to use an anonymous donor instead, even if not what she wants, in order to avoid these delays and legal implications/complications? Or, does she, as Epstein explores, put herself in a psychically complex position and lie to clinic staff, indicating that the sample is coming from a male partner, rather than a donor? Epstein indicates that this option is one that has been suggested by clinic staff, one that allows queer women to get around the cost and wait times, but leaves her female partner/potential co-parent vulnerably absent from the process, unnamed as an intended parent, and also incorrectly lists a male partner in the clinic records (32). Epstein, borrowing from Charis Thompson (2005), remarks that this culminates in a "violation to personhood" (39-40) in having to misrepresent oneself and one's life in the process of attempting to create a family. In Epstein's study participants were asked what changes they would like to see with regard to using a known donor and accessing a fertility clinic to aid with conception, and the consensus was a

...desire to have their ties with the known donor recognized *as a relationship*. People framed their discontent within a framework of discrimination, equity, rights and/or choice. Many perceive the root of the problem lying in the lack of

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<sup>21</sup> Costs can include, for example, the cost of testing, freezing and storing the sperm, as well as access fees to retrieve it once deemed acceptable to be used. Fees are set by the clinics.

recognition of the known donor and the consensual *relationship* that is involved. (2014, 43, emphasis is original)

When a known donor decides to petition the courts for formal parental recognition, the complex ways in which heteronormativity informs and influences legal systems and decision-making is revealed. As Fiona Kelly (2011) writes,

Where conflict arises with known donors, attempts by lesbian mothers to assert that a donor is not a father have largely failed. In fact, while courts have expressed a tentative willingness to extend limited forms of legal recognition to planned lesbian families who conceive using the sperm of an anonymous donor, they remain resolutely resistant to excluding a known donor from a lesbian family if it means the child will not have a “father”. (37)

Kelly cites a Quebec case where a known donor was used by a lesbian couple to conceive a child by assisted reproductive techniques performed by a doctor. The couple had held a civil union prior to the baby’s birth and both mothers were listed on the birth certificate.

When the donor petitioned the courts for parental rights, the courts sided with the donor,<sup>22</sup> with the judge

viewing the family as inherently incomplete ... [and] treated the inclusion of the donor as a *positive* rather than destructive. In fact, the donor was understood to add something to the family that was lacking: a father. In a final affront, [Justice Courteau] accused the non-biological mother of having created her parental relationship with the child “artificially,” particularly with regard to her appearing on the child’s birth certificate. (39)

The views expressed by the judge, as described by Kelly (2011) and also by Jennifer M. Kilty (2014), are layered with assumptions about the importance of particular parental figures, the trumping of biology over intention to parent, and the shaky ground on which non-biological mothers stand when it comes to their ability to claim their rights as intended parent. As Kilty (2014) reports, Quebec law allows for only two legally recognized parents, making the donor’s “bid for legal-recognition a zero-sum game.

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<sup>22</sup> The final decisions are not publically known as there was a publication ban put in place on this case.

Either he or [the child's] non-biological mother could be recognized as parents, not both" (260). Despite having co-parented the child since birth, the non-biological mother's social connection (as opposed to the biological connection the donor shared with the child) was dismissed by the judge, despite existing laws in Quebec that are designed to protect parents who do not share a biological connection with their child (Kelly 2011). This privileging of biology and denial of rights to non-biological mothers was important in my study. One blog described choosing an anonymous donor partly in fear that a known donor could try to gain access to the child (blog "Beginning From the Start"); while another blog described the frustration and heartache of not being recognized as a parent given her social rather than biological connection to her daughter (blog "Injection Reflections"). As Jenni Millbank (2008) emphasizes, lesbian families are often not seen as equal to heterosexual parented families in what is considered their inherent lack of a father in the household. Millbank (2008) writes that in legal disputes between known donors and lesbian mothers,

... because it is same-gendered parenting, the addition of a male parent is not seen to take away anything from the family (for example, by intruding on their autonomy or invalidating their family form), it only adds to it. The mothers are viewed as inexplicably trying to deny their child something good, something special and something that their family lacks: a daddy. The mothers' behaviour in resisting a third parent in their family is therefore selfish, non-child centred and weird; while the donor/father's behaviour in trying to join or control that family is natural, understandable, and loving. (quoted in Kelly 2011, 120)

As discussed in the section above, the continued emphasis on biology, traditional family models, and importance placed on having both (biological) mother and father figures as primary parents speaks to the importance of challenging the persistence of heteronormative systems in social conversations and legal decisions in Canada and the United States.

## **Feelings of Invisibility/Dislocation**

What I remember most of all now is that we were not just like all the other parents. Our family was not just like all the other families. That did not keep us from being a family any more than our being Lesbians kept Frances and me from becoming parents. But we did not have to be just like all the rest in order to be valid. ... We were very lucky to have the love and support of other Lesbians. ... That support was particularly important at those times when some apparently insurmountable breach left us feeling isolated and alone as Lesbian parents. (Lorde 2009, 78–79)

Audre Lorde's 1986 reflection on parenting outside the normative nuclear family continues to ring true for many queer parents. It is important to consider the way in which parents continue to find themselves on the periphery while immersed in the day-to-day requirements of raising children, and the impact this has on families as is described in this study. Feeling invisible can happen in times where we are, in fact, highly visible. A queer family out in public can often feel quite acutely their displacement in a culture that does not automatically recognize, accept or see the unit as a family. While the family may not be visibly represented in the accepted cultural scripts surrounding family and kinship (thus rendered invisible through misrecognition) the family can also become uncomfortably visible when outed. As Epstein (2010) notes, queer parents are often outed by their children in every day scenarios, whether the parents want to be recognized as a unit in that instance or not. In that moment, Epstein remarks, queer parents can be challenged by their own discomfort. She writes,

As queer people we carry shame with us in complex ways. As parents we are forced to notice the places we get caught, the places our shame sneaks up on us and makes us not want to tell people about our families, about how we brought children into our lives, about our relationships and our sexuality. Of course, most of the time it's none of their business, and we also want to teach children to be strategic about where and with whom one chooses to 'come out'. But as parents we can't control when our children will come out for us, when we're picking berries, on an airplane, in the supermarket. We have to always be prepared to acknowledge our relationship and our families...otherwise our children learn that there is something not okay about us, and therefore not okay about them. (2010, 101–102)

Even in the midst of a celebration of queer persons, however, families can find themselves unable to find their footing. Gabb (2004) tells of attending a Pride Parade with her partner and child, feeling displaced as a family knowing that they could blend in with the onlookers or identify themselves as queer by joining the parade, but neither option provided space where she could locate their space as a family. She describes the “...initial sense of displacement as overwhelming, and is arguably typical of the experience and identities of lesbian families” (123). What Gabb and Epstein are each describing are different situations where queer parents may feel acutely aware of the ways in which they don’t quite fit, feeling like outliers both when immersed in straight culture and even when surrounded by queer persons. Gabb noted that it wasn’t until they had met up with other queer families at the Pride celebration that they felt comfortable (123). Prior to being parents, Gabb and her partner may very well have felt at home blending into the queer community at the Parade, however as a family found themselves unsure of their place, the duality of “lesbian mother” not reflected in the crowd of onlookers or in those marching.

As Nancy Naples (2004) writes, “the salience of the heteronormative family form is evident everywhere we turn” (682). Even Naples and her partner, scholars in the fields of gender and sexuality, were surprised by the way in which being parents “as a lesbian couple foregrounds [their] relationship” (682). Like Maureen Sullivan (2001) and Epstein (2010), Naples remarks on the multiple everyday situations in which they must define their relationship. In many situations, the question falls into Park’s (2013) description of monomaterialism as discussed above, namely, who the “real” mother is (Comeau 2004), the very question exemplifying the privileging of biological connection and denying the

existence of a legitimate two-mother family. Sullivan (2001) argues that the traditional family model, consisting of mother, father and child, hold the title of the “real” family, recognizable and the structure to strive for. These “real” families form what Sullivan refers to as “a kind of truth regime... Those who do not conform ... are not socially intelligible within this truth regime. Mother-mother-child families are literally inconceivable” (231). As noted previously, the counted number of lesbian headed households is growing, and this indicates both a growing visibility, willingness, and also increasing intention to acknowledge and count such families in the data collected in census reports. The concept of the “real” family is deeply rooted, as is the privileging of the traditional family. The idealization of “real mother” (stated as such or not) is linked to biological connection. We continue to add modifiers to our parental titles when they don’t fit the traditional model (lesbian-/ lesbian co-/ adoptive-mother...), emphasizing the difference of these social locations occupied by these “others”.

The way in which the concept of “father” and “donor” are significant and variable within lesbian families make them important to consider. Epstein (2014) asks: “How does one conceive of a person who is in some cases like a father, in some cases NOT a father, sometimes sort of a father, sometimes like an uncle, and sometime a complete stranger” (43)? As we continue to ask who the “real” mother is in lesbian families, we also continue to ask who “the father” is – and when met with that question, be it from a person or on a form asking for names of a child’s mother and father, the existence of the lesbian family is denied. Queer families are left to try to create space for themselves despite the hetero-paradigm (ie. on forms crossing out “father” and adding a second “mother”); finding a way to respond that feels right when a strangers asks if baby got their blue eyes

from “daddy”). Speaking of queer persons’ experiences with fertility clinics, Epstein (2014) argues that “[p]eople need space to define their identities and to create narratives separate from the heteronormative assumptions currently embedded in clinic practice” (44). This, by extension, also pertains to the larger culture where in order to address the feelings of invisibility and dislocation felt by queer families, there needs to be a way to “reconcile the paradox of the ‘queer family’” (Gabb 2004, 125).

### **The Lesbian/Mother Paradox**

The social hesitation to accept the ways in which lesbian and mothering identities intersect is reflected in mainstream culture and is important to consider in the way it excludes lesbians from visible motherhood and mothers from a visible lesbian identity.

This is exemplified by Shelley Park (2013), who observed,

As someone who mothers outside of heteronormative contexts, I have been struck by how infrequently the scholarship of motherhood questions the heteronormative boundaries of kinship and maternal practice. Too often, studies of motherhood, including feminist studies of motherhood, require the reader to leave her queerness behind. At the same time, in seeking to find a scholarly home within queer theory, I frequently have to bracket my interest in mothering. Insofar as mothers are “breeders” and breeders are the presumed antithesis of queer, the notion of queer mothering is rendered oxymoronic. (1)

Outside of academia, the separation of mother/lesbian identities continues. Liza Barry-Kessler (2009) remarked of the internet, “Searching for ‘pregnant’ and ‘lesbian’ is not for the faint of heart” (141). After reading this, I conducted my own Google search using the terms “pregnant lesbian”. This search resulted in pages upon pages of links to pornography aimed at a heterosexual male audience, with a few non-pornographic links scattered in between.<sup>23</sup> While an interpretation of these search results cannot be done

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<sup>23</sup> Unsurprisingly, the search terms “teen lesbian”, “old lesbian”, “young lesbian”, and “mom lesbian” give their own multiple-page listings of similar links. Interestingly, the search term “lesbian” on its own actually results in significantly different results including definitions, news articles, dating websites, social

justice to here, what can be said is that the focus on the pregnant lesbian as pornographic figure and the lack of non-pornographic search results points to the way in which pregnant lesbians and their resulting families are not represented in the larger culture.

The lesbian/mother paradox is a persistent, recurring theme in the literature (Weston 1991; Gabb 2004; J. Thompson 2002; Comeau 2004; Naples 2004; Mamo 2007; Epstein 2010; Park 2013). As Dawn Comeau (2004) notes, “Lesbian mothering is considered by some to be an oxymoron: women who spend their lives with other women, and who don’t have sex with men, are thought to be unlikely to have children” (155). We can consider the pregnant lesbian theme in pornography as a sign of male conquest, and visible proof that the lesbian has (somehow) come into contact with sperm, compromising her lesbian status and restoring the heterosexist order.

The difficulty in computing the joining of lesbian + mother is not exclusive to the heterosexual population. Within the queer community it is not difficult to find expressions of disdain when lesbians choose to become mothers. Outspoken freelance journalist Julie Bindel, in a 2006 article in *The Guardian*, opens with support for Mary Cheney and Heather Poe, who were expecting a baby. Bindel’s support for Cheney and Poe notes that multiple studies have concluded that lesbians make great parents. Bindel is clear that her support for lesbian parents is political - women should be able to choose parenthood. She delights in the conservative outrage and discomfort surrounding the pregnancy given Cheney’s father’s conservative position in the White House at the time. Bindel then promptly changes gears:

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websites and the like, with virtually no links to pornographic content in the first several pages of the search results. Searching for “mother” results in, mostly, news headlines, and stories about mothers (especially the “bad” ones). All searches took place in February 2015 using the Google.ca search engine.

Although I find the homophobes' attitude towards lesbian pregnancy and motherhood utterly abhorrent, then, I still believe that lesbians were not really made to breed. Why? Because lesbian feminists have traditionally provided a critical analysis of heterosexual family life, pointing up the fact that it is oppressive to women, and limits their opportunities. The lesbian mothers I know are always knackered, broke, and can never come out to play spontaneously because they have to organise childcare.

Bindel's critique of lesbian motherhood is as political as her support for it. While a woman has a right to choose parenthood, she argues, in doing so lesbian mothers choose to be "submerged in hetero-sexual-style hell." While the article certainly has an element of satirical slant to it, Bindel's comments are not in jest nor are they unique in the way they isolate lesbianism from motherhood. While there is no question that lesbians can become mothers, the social question of whether they *should*, from both a lesbian feminist and a right-wing conservative standpoint continues to "artificially separate" (Gabb 2004, 125) lesbian/mother identities.

In contrast, scholars such as Gabb (2004) view lesbian parenthood as the "cutting edge of queer politics, radically challenging traditional categories of gender and destabilizing the hetero-normative within society" (125). Mamo (2007) argues that in accessing reproductive technologies, lesbians disrupt heteronormativity, and Weston (1991) contends that "[b]abies conceived after a woman has come out demand a reconciliation of a nonprocreative lesbian identity with procreative practice. Any such reconciliation will be complicated by the notions of gender and personhood embedded in particular ideologies of kinship" (169). I agree that lesbian motherhood disrupts rather than imitates hegemonic understanding of parenthood, family and personal identity, shaping new, personalized conceptions of each.

Extending from Judith Butler's (1990) suggestion that gender is performed rather

than being innate, the performativity of mothering can similarly be explored, as has been done by Emily Jeremiah (2006), who notes that “[v]iewed in the light of Butler’s work, maternity is a practice, and maternal subjectivity is not static, but rather in process, constantly constructed or ‘performed’” (24). Drawing on the work of Adrienne Rich (1976), Jeremiah describes the distinction between essentialist notions of *motherhood*, which denotes a fixed identity, versus *mothering*, which suggests something that one “does,” linking it to Butler’s theorizing of gender performativity. Mamo (2007) argues that “[l]esbian reproductive practices have subverted the logic of the heterosexual matrix in part by delinking gender and parenthood. More specifically, if masculinity-fatherhood and femininity-motherhood are delinked, gender is reconfigured, revealing the ways gender is something done or performed” (123).

Reconceptualizing the way we think about mother identities in viewing them as something we do rather than being something we inherently are, “make[s] room for the idea of maternal agency.” (Jeremiah 2006, 25) It is an important argument for lesbians as they take on a parental role – both for the inherent expectations of biological motherhood, and for the non-biological mother for whom the door is at least partially closed in having not carried the child. As Shelley Park (2013) observed,

A failure to recognize the ways in which various interlocking systems of privilege and oppression shape our claims about who has the right to claim the social and legal status of mother stems, in part, from biocentric theories of motherhood. All too often, claims about “real mothers” equate maternal reality with participation in a particular set of biological processes such as pregnancy, birthing, and lactation. Because of participation in these biological processes, a mother is frequently thought to possess a special bond with a child such that loving and caring for that child is natural, a matter of “maternal instinct”. (4)

Seeing mothering as something one does transforms it from a prescribed identity into something both adaptable and adoptable. This is advantageous for lesbian women who may not meet the traditional criteria of motherhood.

In their 2011 study, Irene Padavic and Joniann Butterfield focused on gathering information about “parental identity” rather than a “mother identity”, asserting that we cannot assume that all women want to take on a “mother” role. The researchers were interested in the way in which non-biological parents work to create space for themselves, which can at times take the form of a sort of hybrid mother-father form as was described by a group of women interviewed for their study. These women had struggled to find their place as non-biological mothers and collectively coined the moniker “mather”: “Respondents saw the term as a flexible, dynamic word that captured a larger idea about parenting outside the rigid, gendered mother–father dichotomy, and each co-parent could mold the term as she saw fit” (Padavic and Butterfield 2011, 190). In having collectively chosen a title and in carving out space for oneself, the mathers reported mostly positive outcomes for themselves as compared to the other groups in the study, “illustrat[ing] the power of language, social support and a collective identity” (192). Creating legitimate space for non-biological mothers is vitally important. As Comeau (2004) writes, “[a]lthough not biologically connected, she shares responsibility in raising, loving, and economically supporting the child. Her role is particularly complex because without a biological connection many have a hard time imagining her relationship with the child” (156). While some are comfortable in this role, it can be daunting for others. As Susan Dundas comments, “I had no idea how to be a non-biological second parent to my first-born child. I had no references or mirrors to view my

reflection. The sense of separateness or confusion about my role in my son's life began at the beginning" (1999, 37). This very profound sense of uncertainty about her role in her child's life, and the lacking support within a culture that can hardly come to grips with the idea of lesbians as mothers – never mind lesbians as non-biological mothers within a relationship where a couple chooses to conceive a child – has lasting impact on one's perceptions of self as parent. The shortage of terminology with which to present oneself, as well as having a lack of non-traditional roles to emulate as a parent "signifies the rigidity of socially constructed roles" (Comeau 2004, 158).

As noted previously, it has been argued that in the social sphere, biological lesbian mothers have an easier time than non-biological mothers, able to connect with straight parents and essentially "pass" in a way that a non-biological mother cannot (see Sullivan 2001). This assumes the normative adoption of feminine presentation of self. In contrast, Karleen Pendleton Jiménez (2014) writes of her experiences as a butch-identified lesbian attempting to get pregnant, her feelings of mis-fit and discomfort not only with being a lesbian in a fertility clinic, but in attempting to maintain a sense of self in her butch identity while having her legs up in the stirrups. She writes, "(t)here are gaps in understanding and miscommunication between my butch, lesbian self and a fertility clinic that largely caters to heterosexual clients" (69). Whatever the social reality, the traditional "mother" identity is created and maintained in binary relationship with the traditional "father" identity – she nurtures, he roughhouses; she is the hearth and home while he brings home the bacon; she is the primary parent to the children *and* parents the hapless husband who can barely be trusted to "help out" with the kids. The stereotyping of the mother-father household is brought forward into the stereotyping of the mother-

mother family, neither of which truly hold their water when families are examined closely.

### **Assimilation**

The fear of folding or dimming “queerness” to access hegemonic cultural systems forms the assimilationist concerns when considering parenthood or marriage.

Inevitably, queer persons are forced to negotiate their way through, and locate themselves in, a heterosexually-centered social sphere. In the United States, same-sex marriage is now legal as of June 2015, and this opens doors for important legislation to be revisited as same-sex couples marry and seek rights afforded to married couples – this includes legal recognition as a couple, and potentially then as a family unit, partners registered as next of kin; extension of benefits to family members, and so on.<sup>24</sup> While this legal recognition is presumably good, it is based in the assumption that legal equality is to be achieved through attempting to gain space within the existing boundaries of kinship.

Lisa Duggan (2003) challenges the selective envelopment of queer persons into the realm of acceptable identities, terming it “the new homonormativity” which refers to “a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them” (quoted in Park 2013, 14). She argues that attempts to mimic the normative expressions of identity and forms of relationships (eg. monogamy), creating hierarchies of queer persons with regard to who will/can and won’t/cannot subscribe to such norms, are misplaced. Duggan (2008) focuses instead on the importance of placing our attention on breaking down the linking of church and state, offering various types of equally valued unions that afford matching rights and do not

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<sup>24</sup> See, for example, the Human Rights Campaign’s “Marriage Equality FAQ: Frequently Asked Questions about the Supreme Court’s Marriage Ruling” (2015) regarding the impact of the same-sex marriage ruling.

require an adoption of traditional, conservative ideals. While rights afforded to married couples are rights that are needed by queer persons as well, the case being made by Duggan is that accessing such rights through a “one-size-fits-all marriage” (2008, 156) is not the way to go about it. The argument surrounding marriage and concerns about assimilation into mainstream culture will not be undertaken to a large degree in this thesis. Although relevant and connected to the topic at hand, it is an immense subject requiring its own space to unfold and cannot be fully examined here. I think it is important, however, to acknowledge the debate, as well as to ask how such a debate over “assimilationist practices” in and of itself creates gaps within the queer community particularly around parenting.

Park (2013) states that “the resistance to heteronormativity embodied in lesbian mothering is recuperated by the assimilationist politics of gay marriage and replications of the domestic spaces and practices of nuclear families” (9). Meanwhile, even in adopting the structure of the two-parent family, one must consider the ways in which the use of donor sperm, whether or not the intention is to have the donor play some sort of a parenting role, is in itself a direct challenge to hegemonic, nuclear, family structures. Does the legal marriage of a lesbian couple eclipse, or “neutralize”, this non-normative parenting scheme? What factors equate to assimilation—what ratio of queerness to straightness must be observed? What about the intentionality behind the marriage? I, for example, am married in large part because it was the surest way to have both of our names on our children’s birth certificates. Had my partner and I married out of a simple desire to do so, would this whitewash our lesbianism more than a marriage out of

necessity and legal purposes for our family? I am inclined to agree with Raine Dozier (2014) who writes,

Same-sex parents don't need to engage in decidedly different practices in order to queer motherhood—they are always visible, thus queer, regardless of intention. Some queer parents have no interest in radical mothering or alternative family structure, instead aspiring to a more typical family form; yet their families can never be fully assimilated into heteronormative structures. (130)

Nancy Naples (2004) argues that in asking whether the push for same-sex marriage is one that will result in assimilation or transformation of the current scheme, we are posing the wrong question. She asks us to reframe our thinking: “How can we harness the political energy that has been unleashed by the debates over same-sex marriage and queer parenting to destabilize the taken-for-granted notions of what counts as a family and what can be in the best interests of children in a resilient and inclusive society?” (682). By focusing on the ways in which we can question the existing structures we can reimagine ideas of kinship, challenging the boundaries of “family”. As Margaret Gibson (2014) notes, it would be “a mistake to think that queering motherhood is only and inevitably a matter of addition, of bringing parents who identify as ‘queer’ and/or ‘trans’ into existing, unyielding frameworks” (6).

The diversity of experience and the range of family forms are dizzying. The way in which queer women go about their lives and create families and parental identity is layered and unique to each family in the choices they make. Intentional or not, queer families queer “family”: in the way that they challenge biology and biological connection; in simply being a family, recognized or not; in weaving together and reinventing lesbian/mother identities; and in carving out space in the social world for the

family to reside alongside hetero-parented families as well as queer, childless individuals and couples.

### **Research Bias**

It is important to also explore the way in which bias in research studies, as well as in the way in which findings are interpreted and disseminated, play a role in the social view of queer families. Karen J. Kranz and Judith Daniluk (2002) argue that studies looking at queer families in Canada and the United States have often focused on the family outcomes, namely “the healthy psychosocial and *psychosexual* development” of children raised by queer parent(s) as compared to children with heterosexual parent(s).<sup>25</sup> With regard to lesbian parented families, it has been consistently found that “children raised in fatherless families since their first year of life were no more likely to develop emotional or behavioural problems than [*sic*] children residing with their fathers” (Kranz and Daniluk 2002, 62) and no more likely to develop a lesbian or queer identity themselves as compared to children raised by heterosexual parents (Gibson 2014). The research itself has been motivated, as Margaret Gibson (2014) notes, by an urgent need “to support queer parents’ efforts to access reproductive and adoptive service systems, or to obtain custody of their children after divorce or separation. Researchers have been routinely summoned by lawyers and legislators to demonstrate the fitness of queer parents” (3). In this way, the research and its outcomes have helped to shape the current legislation and movement toward greater social equality – but the comparison made is to that of the heterosexual norm with its attendant nuclear family structure. This is problematic given that the acceptable outcomes within the research “...accepts the terms

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<sup>25</sup> For study examples assessing childrearing and outcomes for children when raised by lesbian versus heterosexual parents, see Green et al. (1986), Flaks et al. (1995), Brewaeys et al. (1997), MacCallum and Golombok (2004).

of the existing systems that would view ‘normalcy,’ particularly regarding sexuality and gender, as a ‘good outcome’”(Gibson 2014, 3). The notion that a queer person can prove themselves to be a good parent if they can raise a child to be as intelligent, socially competent and “well adjusted” and *no more likely to be queer* (“normal”) as expected of peers raised by heterosexual parents is problematic in its drive to (hetero)normalize the outcomes of queer parenting.

In the groundbreaking article “(How) Does the Sexual Orientation of Parents Matter?,” rather than asking whether queer persons are fit to parent, researchers Judith Stacey and Timothy Biblarz (2001) explore the way in which heteronormative ideology pervades and restricts the research and its findings. They argue “it is the pervasiveness of social prejudice and institutionalized discrimination against lesbians and gay men that exerts a powerful policing effect on the basic terms of psychological research and public discourse on the significance of parental sexual orientation” (160). The authors note that anti-gay researchers have used discredited research studies in the courts as justification to remove children from the home of a queer parent (160). In addition, anti-gay researchers also argue for continued restrictions on foster care placements that allow for placement with heterosexual parents only. Meanwhile, social science researchers making the case for the rights of queer parents are coming from a defensive, although well-intentioned, standpoint. Stacey and Biblarz found that “[w]ith rare exceptions, even the most sympathetic proceed from a highly defensive posture that accepts heterosexual parenting as the gold standard and investigates whether lesbian and gay parents and their children are inferior” (162).

Suzanne M. Johnson (2012) has discussed the ways in which the research on queer families has occurred in waves:

The first wave of research, begun in the late 1970s, focused on women who became parents within heterosexual relationships, then subsequently identified as lesbian. The second wave, in the 1980s and 1990s, studied women who became parents within the context of a lesbian relationship. These second wave studies generally looked at family functioning and child outcomes of lesbian-headed families in comparison to heterosexual-headed families. The objective of these studies was to determine whether lesbian-headed families put children at risk for developing psychological or social problems. Given this, the emphasis in these early studies was on the many ways that lesbian-headed families functioned in the same way as did heterosexual families. The third wave, which is just underway, looks at lesbian-headed families in their own right, with less emphasis on how they compare to heterosexual families and more emphasis on the dynamics and unique variables within these families. (45-46)

Examples of comparative “second-wave” arguments and thinking, however, continue to emerge. In 2011, *The Globe and Mail* published a piece by Denise Balkissoon entitled “The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Lesbian Families,” which heralds lesbian parented households as ideal, even suggesting in its opening paragraph that when it comes to raising a “self-confident, self-aware being who deals well with challenges and can get the most out of life... [perhaps] ...female couples have found the secret.” Balkissoon cites research claiming that in comparison to heterosexual parents, not only do lesbians make good parents, they make fabulous parents – and she goes on to list “seven lesbian lessons in raising happy, healthy kids.” Along the lines of Stacey and Biblarz’s (2001) argument, however, one can point to this type of article as an example where “sympathetic researchers defensively stress [the] absence [of harm to children]” (Stacey and Biblarz 2001, 160). In this case Balkissoon is over the top in her praise of lesbian-parented families, citing them as the gold standard. The list of “secrets” provided reflects choices and actions that can be made by any couple or individual parent, regardless of gender

identity or sexual orientation. It erases any possibility of difference amongst lesbian couples and attempts to place these families on an uncomfortable pedestal from which any fall from grace would be thoroughly scrutinized.

In its effort to highlight the positives, the article fails to acknowledge the difficulties. Balkissoon recounts the story of 13-year-old Darius (pseudonym) who, after feeling ostracized at his elementary school, effectively closets himself when starting junior high when “he chose not to tell anyone about his moms. He doesn’t have friends over to his house – not even his closest friends know.” Balkissoon does not explore the enormity of this statement, the impact of being closeted and living with the potential anxiety of being found out. Rather, she glosses over it as a matter of fact, reporting that Darius’s two years in junior high – closeted – have been his best years in school. Balkissoon argues that this omission doesn’t equate shame about his family, but rather, as Darius says, “I don’t feel like I’m keeping a secret. I feel that I’m discreet about my personal life.” While I’m sure Balkissoon’s words are well-intentioned the piece excludes any discussion of difficulties that queer families face, no matter how wonderful a job of parenting they may be doing.

Generally speaking, in comparing family forms, pro-gay researchers are arguing that queer families are at very least no different from the nuclear family. This effectively works to maintain the status quo as families are assimilated into heteronormative social structures as best as possible. For Stacey and Biblarz, the approach erases any challenge to the normative scheme as researchers work to defend queer families and make them fit the existing framework. Researchers are drawn away from exploring how “differences in adult sexual orientation might lead to meaningful differences in how individuals parent

and how their children develop” (162), focusing instead on proving the capabilities of queer parents.

While none of the studies are reporting a difference in outcome in terms of the sexual orientation of children raised by queer parents, “none ... attempts to theorize about such an implausible outcome” (163). Stacey and Biblarz point out that of all the theories of sexual development, no researcher would expect those children to turn out the same as those raised by straight parents: “[f]or example, biological determinist theory should predict at least some difference in an inherited predisposition to same-sex desire; a social constructionist theory would expect lesbian parents to provide an environment in which children would feel freer to explore and affirm such desires” (163). Stacey and Biblarz examine nearly two dozen comparative studies of queer and straight families.<sup>26</sup> They highlight the differences they found (e.g., children’s preferences and behaviour indicating less strict gendering in lesbian-parented families) that were continually minimized by the original researchers. The article was groundbreaking in its attempt to highlight rather than negate the ways in which queer families differ, without an anti-gay slant. While the researchers recognized that in taking this stance they were perhaps adding fuel to the anti-gay activist agenda, they concluded that,

...the case for granting equal rights to non heterosexual parents should not require finding their children to be identical to those reared by heterosexuals. Nor should it require finding that such children do not encounter distinctive challenges or risks, especially when these derive from social prejudice. (178)

The Stacey and Biblarz article is key not because it makes a case for or against the parenting abilities of queer persons, but because it sparked for some the need to shift the focus of the research and arguably marks the beginning of the third wave of research on

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<sup>26</sup> See Stacey and Biblarz (Table One, page 160) for a complete list of sources.

same-sex parented families as described by Johnson (2012). It also highlights the ways in which personal bias works to inform how we go about approaching, interpreting, and presenting academic research.

## CHAPTER FOUR: Methodology

Like consciousness raising groups of the past, mothers who blog have room to dissect their own experiences in chorus, to (potentially, at least) find the political in the shared personal and examine their lives critically. (Friedman 2013, 11)

As has been noted, much research has been conducted on the topic of queer families.<sup>27</sup> When it came to my thesis work I found myself uninterested in conducting similar interview/questionnaire-based research. Blogging has always been intriguing to me and I considered instead the possibility of data being accessed through publically-posted, personal blogs. Queer-authored blogs abound, offering untapped narratives from various localities and perspectives. As rationale for her own research on Canadian “Lesbian Mommy” blogs, Andrea Hunter (2015) notes, “there has been little research or discussion outside online spaces where lesbian bloggers gather, that deals particularly with lesbian parents who blog” (214).

Originally, my research questions centered on the exploration of the experience of lesbian women becoming/as mothers. In choosing to use blogs as data, however, my focus shifted to secondarily include the ways in which blogs acted as unmoderated spaces where stories were being shared and connection with others could be sought. The importance of blogging as an outlet and place for community building became clear in my readings of these blogs and these findings were supported as well by Hunter’s (2015) research.

The Internet can be a great resource for researchers. Annette Markham (2004) observed that “[a]s a communication medium, a global network of connection, and a

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<sup>27</sup> For examples, see Stacey & Biblarz (2001); Kranz and Daniluk (2002).

scene of social construction, the Internet provides new tools for conducting research, new venues for social research, and new means for understanding the way social realities get constructed and reproduced through discursive behaviours” (95). For Internet users, the online world provides avenues of resistance, with blogs narrated by lesbian mothers being an example. These narratives work as voices that describe experiences, disseminate and seek information (for example, in asking readers to comment), and altogether challenge heteronormative hegemony - as well as providing a sort of cathartic release for the storyteller.

Narrative, as Margaret Gibson (2014) writes, “offers a way to bring ‘everyday experiences’ into scholarly analysis, and also encourages us to see ‘texts’ such as films or press releases as the products of particular people, in particular moments, with particular audiences” (8). Blogs can be seen as “texts” fitting that description and provide here a rich opportunity to explore what has been said about the experience of lesbian parenting. What I appreciate about blogs is that they offer stories that have been potentially allowed time to unfold, or written quickly and published immediately. Narrators have the opportunity to draft, edit, save, and publish at will. Posts can be thought out in a way that may not be possible with interviews, allowing for time to decide what to share and how to present oneself – and there is the ability to edit existing posts as well. Content is freely offered, as opposed to following a questionnaire or responding to set interview questions. In this way, blog posts present what is salient to the narrator in that moment and less reliant on memory if recounting stories as they have recently occurred. In addition, rather than being one-sided (unless chosen to be), blogs offer autobiographical accounts with a

twist – comments can be made by readers, either in real time or after moderation by the blogger, creating an interactive environment.

Queer persons are found in all communities, but not all communities have a visible queer presence. In this way, queer persons and their families can feel isolated (Hunter 2015). No matter where one resides, access to the Internet can be key to locating community, whether seeking local, offline resources and events or a connection that doesn't extend beyond WiFi – or both. While the ability to participate in such forums can be limited to those who can access the online world, the blogosphere provides an online space for connection, information seeking and sharing experiences (Calixte and Johnson 2009; Friedman 2010). In addition, the way in which the Internet can provide a sense of anonymity can be incredibly freeing. This was alluded to by a blogger in my study (Sarah, “The Mamas RapsCALLION”) who described blogging as a place where she felt less burdened by social anxiety.

May Friedman (2010) argues that the isolation of new motherhood can be greatly alleviated through online connection, adding that it can be even more so for marginalized mothers:

...one of the great strengths of maternal identity on the Internet is the sheer multiplicity of its presentation. Although mainstream mothers may dominate the bandwidth, it is diverse mothers who may take most advantage of new forms of connectivity. Lesbian mothers, disabled mothers, trans-parents, parents of children with special needs, and myriad other diverse families are represented on the Internet. If the condition of modern motherhood is alienating and overwhelming to parents who may see themselves represented within mainstream media, it is only more so for parents whose lives remain silenced and erased. In this respect, while Internet motherhood may still include ghettos, at least sites exist for the maintenance and creation of community. (359)

In considering the aim of my research (to explore the experiences of lesbian mothers in Canada and the United States) and the dearth of research that includes the voices of lesbian mothers as expressed through blogs (Hunter 2015), my research here is important in its ability to capture, document and analyze these existing narratives. While acknowledging my own subjectivity and experiences as a lesbian mother, using a queer feminist critical lens I offer my interpretation in documenting what is being presented in a public forum by queer parents who, to varying degrees, live in physical communities that may embrace, shun, be confused by, or be indifferent towards them.

As can be expected, there are limitations and exclusions. To echo Friedman (2013), in order to access and create blogs, of course, one needs Internet connection, computer skills and the time to be online. In speaking of blogs created by mothers, Friedman acknowledges that “[c]ertain experiences are grossly overrepresented as a result of class and other privileges” but also that there are “moments of hope, spaces where people who have been historically silenced or disenfranchised have found voice online” (17). Regardless of the Internet not being wholly inclusive, the benefits to Internet connection remain for those who have the privilege to access it.

### **Criteria**

Blogs were located using Google searches with search terms such as “lesbian mom blog” and “queer mom blog” which brought me to individual blogs as well as compiled lists of blogs, such as that provided on VillageQ.com. I went through individual blogs as well as the compiled lists using a snowball sampling technique. Many bloggers provide a sidebar list of blogs they follow (a “blogroll”), acting as a virtual referral. From one blog I was able to access several more, and from those several links I continued on

through their own blogrolls, and again through the blogrolls of those blogs, etc., bookmarking blogs that looked to be potentially suitable. From my bookmarks I chose the top five that most closely met my criteria as outlined below. These were:

- 1) “Gay Girls Make Great Moms” ([queermommy.wordpress.com](http://queermommy.wordpress.com));
- 2) “Beginning From the Start” ([beginningfromthestart.wordpress.com](http://beginningfromthestart.wordpress.com));
- 3) “Injection Reflections” ([injectionreflections.blogspot.ca](http://injectionreflections.blogspot.ca));
- 4) “The Mamas Rapsallion” ([mamasrapsallion.com](http://mamasrapsallion.com)); and,
- 5) “The Chronicles of a Non-Belly Mama” ([thechroniclesofanonbellymama.wordpress.com](http://thechroniclesofanonbellymama.wordpress.com)).

I sought out publically posted blogs with fewer than five password protected entries, written by self-professed lesbian/butch/queer mothers who located themselves in Canada or the United States. Initially, I attempted to rule out any blogs that had password protected posts. What I found, however, was that many blogs have some posts that are protected. Password protection on particular posts was often described in the blogs as having been put in place in order to share details with select readers, whether known to them offline or not. I chose to limit password protection to a total of five posts per blog. Three blogs (“Gay Girls Make Great Moms”, “The Mamas Rapsallion” and “Injection Reflections”) had no password protected posts, while the remaining blogs each had under five at the time of study. With well over 100 posts each, any password protection on “The Chronicles of a Non-Belly Mama” and “Beginning From the Start” represented a very small portion of the published materials on their blogs. While I could have requested the password to their protected posts I chose to exclude the protected posts from the study.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> When bloggers use password protected posts they often leave contact information for readers, such as an email address, where readers can send a request to access the protected posts.

I made this choice because I was seeking blog content that was publically available for anyone to find, without a filter like a password.

As defined by the criteria I set in the spring of 2015 for this study, the blogs chosen for this research were active within the 2014 calendar year or beyond and created by a narrator who pursued parenthood within the context of an existing lesbian relationship, with at least one of the partners being biologically related to the child(ren). Blogs were single-authored, with some having a “guest post” written by the blogger’s partner appearing here and there. In addition, I filtered out blogs where couples were not yet parents but were either expecting their first child or still trying to conceive (TTC) as the experience of parenthood is altogether different from the expectations one has about being a parent before the baby arrives. Blogs chosen were focused on family and personal life, rather than, for example, being mainly a travel blog that happened to be written by a lesbian travelling with a family in tow. I chose to exclude blogs that contained sponsored posts where bloggers were compensated to provide product reviews, as I assume bloggers might tailor or censor posts in order to attract/maintain advertisers and increase the potential for financial gain. Finally, I chose blogs that were detailed in a personal journal style – beyond, for example, a superficial summary of what the baby ate for lunch that week and whether they had a good time at the beach.

### **Framework**

An intersectional framework was used, looking specifically at the dynamics of queer(/)mother identities as they have been presented within the blogs. In this study I considered the interactions of sexual orientation, gendered identifications/expectations, and mother identities, as represented by the blogs in this study. As I am limited in scope

to what has been offered as self-identification in the blogs, I am unable to take up additional intersections such as social class as there was insufficient data to do so, and of ethnicity as only one blogger (Sammie, “The Chronicles of a Non-Belly Mama”) self-identifies in describing her Latina heritage.

Anna Carastathis (2014) warns that “the appropriation of intersectionality by ‘women’s studies’ and ‘feminist theory (which remain white-dominated discourses) can serve to obscure its origins in Black feminist thought” (304), reminding readers to “recognize the roots of intersectionality in the political movement of Black women, Chicana and Latina women, and other women of color – most of them lesbian-identified” (306). Despite its origins, as Kathy Davis (2008) describes it, in its “vagueness and open-endedness”(69) intersectionality “promises an almost universal applicability, useful for understanding and analysing any social practice, any individual or group experience, any structural arrangement, and any cultural configuration” (72). As a theory that looks critically at the construction and maintenance of inequality and power relations in the social world, intersectionality fits the vision I had for this thesis, especially as a theory that has practical application in the day-to-day world and “is a product of seeking to have our voices heard and lives acknowledged” (Dill and Zambrana 2009, 3). The blogs I chose to follow for this thesis attempt to do the same, give some depth and perspective to the complex lived experiences may otherwise go unseen, or may be viewed with too narrow a focus.

Using an intersectional approach here, we can contemplate the different ways in which one can self identify in terms of their gendered self – in the context of this study, participants self-identified as butch, femme, queer, non-gendered conforming and

feminine-appearing (as opposed to identifying as “femme”); as well as looking at different entry points into motherhood, either as biological or non-biological mother – and sometimes both, as one blogger wants to carry children after her partner does, and another was pregnant and miscarried before becoming a non-biological mother. In this way we can explore the ways that queer/mother identities intersect and are shaped by the way in which we self-identify and participate in those particular categories of identity. As lesbian mothers, the bloggers’ experiences were similar in their non-normative approach to parenthood and family building. As lesbian women and mothers, they described and compared their experiences to heteronormative conceptions of the categories “woman” and “mother”. Their experiences, however, were simultaneously unique in that they were coloured by their own particular set of multiple identifications. In my reading, I asked, for example, how does Sarah’s (“The Mamas Rapsallion”) experience as a biological mother differ from that of Sea’s (“Beginning from the Start”) as a non-biological mother? How does Sammie’s (“The Chronicles of a Non-Belly Mama”) experience as a butch, non-biological mother who wishes to carry children in the future, differ from Nat’s (“Injection Reflections”) experience as a butch, non-biological mother who never intended to be the one to carry a baby?

A larger study would have been able to include a more diverse range of experience that includes various parental identifications (such as a lesbian who self-identifies as dad; stories of adoptive motherhood) as well as various identifications and experiences of ethnic heritage, disability, and social class. The size of this study, while narrower in focus, does not detract from the presence of intertwining, varying identities described and experienced in the blogs described here.

## **Methodological Approach**

While originally I had chosen to approach the data using grounded theory, as a study based on blogged accounts of lesbian mothering, I later came to see this work as grounded in narrative. While the data collection and coding was undertaken using the grounded theory guidelines provided by Kathy Charmaz (2014), my theming and analysis is rooted in narrative inquiry. Given that narrative inquiry does not include formal guidelines for approaching the data (Josselson 2011), I consider Charmaz' instruction an asset to my work here as her guidelines aided me in organizing the data I had amassed. This combining of grounded theory and narrative inquiry has been undertaken by Charmaz (1999) herself (Lal, Suto, and Ungar 2012). It has been noted that “[q]ualitative researchers are increasingly combining methods, principles, and processes from different methodologies in the course of a research study as opposed to operating strictly within a delineated qualitative tradition” (Lal, Suto, and Ungar 2012, 1).

Narrative inquiry is an interdisciplinary methodology that does not stem from one particular source, but rather has emerged from a variety of disciplines such as anthropology, psychology, literary theory, philosophy and education, among others (Clandinin and Connelly 2000; Josselson 2011; Lal, Suto, and Ungar 2012). Rather than being based on “a set of techniques and procedures, [narrative inquiry is based in] ways of thinking about inquiry, modes of exploring questions, and creative approaches to offering one’s constructed findings to the scholarly community” (Wertz et al. 2011, 66). Coding the data, as is done in grounded theory and is described below, is suggested as one potential method for approaching the data (Josselson 2011). Researchers are concerned with the way participants make meaning of experience through the stories they

tell about their lives rather than the process used to review the information (Josselson 2011). As is the approach in this study, “[f]rom a narrative view of experience, we attend to place, temporality, and sociality within our own life stories and within the experiences of participants. Within this space, each story told and lived is situated and understood within larger cultural, social, familial, and institutional narratives” (Caine, Estefan, and Clandinin 2013, 577). Narrative inquiry allowed me to focus on storytelling, meaning making and the description of events as they were understood by bloggers in this study.

Grounded theory offers the flexible yet structured approach that aided me in organizing the data. First developed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in the 1960s, grounded theory is a “method designed to encourage researchers’ persistent interactions with their data, while remaining constantly involved with their emerging analyses” (Bryant and Charmaz 2007, 1). As a method of analysis in qualitative research, it has proven useful across a variety of disciplines, including feminist research (Clarke 2007). In grounded theory, “theorizing is generated abductively by tacking back and forth between the nitty-gritty specificities of empirical data and more abstract ways of thinking about them” (Clarke 2007, 346). I followed Kathy Charmaz’ (2014) approach in terms of phases of coding and memo writing as described in the second edition of her book, *Constructing Grounded Theory*.

Reflexivity on the part of the researcher is important in both grounded theory and narrative inquiry (Clandinin and Connelly 2000; Clarke 2007; Lal, Suto, and Ungar 2012; Charmaz 2014), as well as within feminist research (Clarke 2007). As with grounded theory, narrative inquirers are reminded to be mindful of their own choices and motives in the retelling and meaning-making of the stories that have been relayed (Charmaz 2014;

Connelly and Clandinin 1990). In conducting this study, I was often reminded of my own experiences and spent significant time checking my own assumptions, expectations, and analysis against what was being reported by bloggers. As D. Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly emphasize with regard to narrative based study,

[Narrative inquirers] work within the space not only with our participants but also with ourselves. Working in this space means we become visible with our own lived and told stories. Sometimes, this means that our own unnamed, perhaps secret, stories come to light as much as do those of our participants. This confronting of ourselves in our narrative past makes us vulnerable as inquirers because it makes secret stories public. In narrative inquiry, it is impossible (or if not impossible, then deliberately self-deceptive) as researcher to stay silent or to present a kind of perfect, idealized, inquiring, moralizing self. (2000, 61–62)

In this thesis I have presented myself as an individual with history and experiences as a lesbian(/)mother in Canada, as well as having maintained a professional balance as a researcher in reading and contextualizing these blogs. My focus throughout has been to describe the stories being told in the blogs, maintaining the unique voice of each storyteller.

#### *Approaching and Organizing the Data*

Upon selecting the blogs, I printed them in their entirety in order to more easily take notes and code (label) the data. I kept a Word document for each of the blogs as I was introduced to them, noting information about the blogs as the narrators presented it (age, location, partner's name, etc.) as well as initial thoughts and potential emerging themes. I read through each blog from start to finish and coded the data as I read. As I got further into the reading, I found myself with numerous reoccurring codes and decided it would be easiest to create a spreadsheet of the codes to maintain a consistency of language. After the initial coding stage for each blog, I returned to the data again and concentrated on Charmaz' second stage, focused coding. She describes this as the process

of revisiting the data and the initial codes, deciding which are the most important or frequently-occurring codes. Focused coding is conceptual and “condenses and sharpens what you have already done because it highlights what you find to be important in your emerging analysis” (138).

Given that my data was either online (and not always searchable) or on paper in numerous duotangs, I lacked a way to easily return to my data and to any particular quotes, words or themes that stuck in my mind as I went through the process. After some trial and error, I found that the best remedy was to do my focused coding in a Word document. I created a document for each blog, gave the date of the post, the focused codes associated with the post and any relevant quote I wanted to be able to access in the future. In using my spreadsheet of codes, and in adding subcodes, as well as creating these Word documents, I was able to create a searchable document. At times I returned to original posts to reread them in their entirety. Having the documents I created was immensely important to my analysis as they allowed me to re-visit particular themes in the blogs without going through hundreds of printed blog posts looking for words or phrases as my ideas emerged. These documents were also part of my memo writing. Memo writing, which is essentially note-taking about thoughts and ideas the researcher has in going through the data, as Charmaz describes it, is a crucial step in the analysis: “memos catch your thoughts, capture the comparisons and connections you make, and crystallize questions and directions for you to pursue” (162). My memo writing generally took the form of my initial Word documents created in the first stage of coding, notes jotted down in a notebook beside my computer, and of bolded text in the Word documents containing my focused codes.

As described in Chapter Seven (Discussion), my review of the focused codes and the data that accompanied them pointed me to places where my preconceptions became evident. I worked to step back and reconsider the stories I was reading and my initial thoughts on them. Using the spreadsheet of codes I had created, I mapped out categories with focused codes and subcodes as a starting place for my writing. As I drafted Chapter Six (Research Findings), I revisited the data and memos often, sometimes re-coding as new thoughts emerged, and shifting my analysis as I re-read blog posts as required.

## CHAPTER FIVE: The Blogs

The Internet has always been a special place for freaks, geeks, queers and other alienated populations. Online, these marginalized members of society created communities that relished their idiosyncrasies. Collectively, they helped one another take pride in their identities and practices ... The result is an infrastructure of support for a new form of social solidarity — a set of collective beliefs, practices and values — that operates outside of the dominant culture. (boyd 2005)

The Internet is dynamic and ever-changing, and while the number of traditional blogs, such as those published on WordPress or Blogger, is declining, some argue that blogging is simply shifting in form to include other social media including Facebook and Twitter (see, for example, Kottke 2013; Bump 2015). In the current social world, Canadians and Americans are plugged-in. Phillip Bump (2015) cites Pew Research reporting that 58% of Americans over the age of eighteen are on Facebook, and that 89% of those under the age of thirty are using social networking sites (M. Duggan et al. 2015; Pew Research Center 2014). Whether taking the form of traditional blogging, as I describe in this study, or through evolving social media networks, every day people are becoming activists – steadily publishing, communicating, and story telling at will.

As narratives, the blogs in this study describe for a reader the experience of lesbian mothering in Canada and the United States. As a central theme, I offer the notion of blogging as activism, whether the blogs are framed in this manner or not. Blogging serves as a method of elevating the voices of the every day people who make their way through our social world (Calixte and Johnson 2009; Friedman 2010). Through blogging,

narrators tell stories and create community networks both in having and engaging with readers.<sup>29</sup>

While I do not consider myself a blogger, I did keep a blog years ago. The writing, the bloggers I corresponded with, and the blogs I followed served a purpose at that time in my life – I have always been a storyteller and also curious about people, and the blogosphere gave me the space to be both. In considering blogs for this study, I read through blogs without partaking in the conversation,<sup>30</sup> feeling a bit like someone overhearing a private conversation on the bus. While these blogging conversations may not be changing the world as we know it on some grand scale (Stadtman Tucker 2009) they are, arguably, changing the worlds of those who participate (even in lurking) in the blogosphere – and that change can have a ripple effect. I am asserting here that the words of one person need not be sensationally reported and shared to have an impact on those who read them.

While acknowledging literacy and computer/Internet access is required to take part in the written connections made possible online, May Friedman (2010) asserts that “With respect to diversity ... the Internet is a great boon to families. If knowledge is power, then the ability to transmit and retrieve the knowledge with just a few keystrokes has the capacity to render mothers, especially those who have been systematically disenfranchised, much more powerful” (359). This power, in combination with danah boyd’s (2005) emphasis on social connection for marginalized groups, translates into

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<sup>29</sup> Engaging with followers can take the form of conversing through the comments or talking directly to readers within a post. In addition, bloggers can follow and comment on the blogs of their readers, which creates a more reciprocal relationship.

<sup>30</sup> In blogging this is referred to as “lurking”.

strategies for resistance and change. Internet access can be a key tool in community building, activism and the dissemination/acquisition of knowledge.

The possibility for connection is especially vital for marginalized groups who crave the “social solidarity” (boyd 2005) that the online world has to offer through the loss of geographical boundaries. Online, there is the opportunity to present oneself and connect with others, simply in a different capacity. In their potentially transient nature we might consider the connections formed online as trivial. I offer, however, the analogy of someone who relocates often. Moving from one town or city to other often enough potentially means that friendships are made and not maintained down the road as a person moves on. The nature of the friendship, as brief as it may be, does not diminish from the potential for meaningful connection – friendships need not be lifelong commitments to have an impact on one’s life. Blogging can be seen as a way to experience the world differently with a wider reach into the global population. The Internet has created a space for important and perhaps difficult stories to be written and shared.

While I did not directly interview the narrators of the blogs used in this study, I was, however, thoughtful in the process of selecting the blogs. I was able to easily locate three of the five narrators in an online context separate from their blogs, as they were not blogging under complete anonymity, if at all. I treat the data in this study as I would any data based on narratives, whether told face-to-face or read online: as stories, relayed by a narrator who describes a setting and whose stories are subject to memory, interpretation, mood, third-party description of additional characters, embellishment and omission. In short, a story is as told by the teller, through whatever medium it is delivered. In referring to the “bloggers” in this study, I refer to the narrator who gives the blog its voice. In

discussing what they refer to as their real or offline lives, I am referring to their own accounts of stories of the physical world. I allow for both fabrication and sincerity in the stories they tell, just as I would from someone I might interview by telephone, face-to-face, or through a questionnaire.

The study conducted here relays the narratives presented in five blogs, chosen for their reflection both inwardly and outwardly in the way they place their gaze on cultural norms, messages and expectations. These are blogs that demonstrate the rupturing of the traditional family form, allowing for the emergence of a reimagining of parental roles and family presentation. These stories are raw, filled with excitement, fear, pride, confusion, sadness, joy and grief – all giving a vital emotional context to an academic presentation of lesbian motherhood. Within this chapter I take up the themes that emerged with regard to the motivation to create and maintain the blogs as expressed by the bloggers; I give a general overview of the blogs; and I present a deeper, individualized look into the stories relayed in each.<sup>31</sup>

### **Why Blog?**

Why go “public” and start a blog, especially when a blog is created under a pseudonym? In reading these blogs I was struck by the way each blogger described having some sort of supportive community around them offline. These important people were variously comprised of families of origin, families of choice, supportive employers and generally queer-friendly neighbourhoods. In short, it wasn’t that the bloggers were reaching out online having absolutely no sense of strong social connections offline. Rather, in blogging, they sought *further* connection on a road that was often described in various ways as turbulent and emotionally exhausting. In their own way, each of the

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<sup>31</sup> Refer to Appendix A for a quick reference sheet listing the blogs/bloggers.

bloggers described why they chose to write. Generally, the reasons that emerged fell under the categories of information sharing, support seeking, and community. These themes are taken up below.

### *Information sharing*

Sara (“Gay Girls Make Great Moms”) shares her experiences in a relatively one-sided manner, as she doesn’t generally engage with her readers. What she shares, however, are moving accounts that make visible the struggle to parent as “a queer mom in a predominantly straight world.” Her information sharing is relatable and valuable to her readers, and they often thank her for it.

After her miscarriage, Nat (“Injection Reflections”) finds that the resources for lesbian women experiencing a miscarriage are scant. While she is not saying that the resources available (aimed at heterosexual women, she notes) are not relatable at all, she was looking for something that would more closely match her own experience. In the end, she sees blogging as an opportunity to fill that void with her own voice and experience for others to find, noting that “we, who have been through it, are creating [these resources for queer women] informally through the blog world.”

Sammie (“The Chronicles of a Non-Belly Mama”) in describing her attempts to induce lactation and breastfeed as a non-biological mother, ends up acting as a resource for readers who were unaware of this possibility. Sammie is happy to share her knowledge, engaging in conversation with her followers through the comments. In addition, she receives information from followers who comment with their own experiences and reply to her own questions. This is helpful to Sammie who has not had much success in producing milk, despite her committed efforts.

### *Support Seeking*

Sarah (“The Mamas RapsCALLION”) purposely starts blogging to help her find connection and a place to talk about her experiences and difficulties in trying to conceive as she described often feeling “isolated and alone” despite her strong connection to her partner and her parents. As a self-described socially anxious person, Sarah writes that through anonymous blogging she felt freer to share and delve into the obsessive cycle she finds herself in while trying to conceive. In blogging she is able to make friends outside of a physical setting, and she is able to find and follow blogs written by others (queer or not) who can relate to her situation of trying to get pregnant.

Additionally, other than Sara (“Gay Girls Make Great Moms”), all of the bloggers use their blogs as a place to frequently seek advice. These ranged from general advice like opinions on strollers (“Beginning From the Start”); to more difficult decisions such as deciding between costly in vitro fertilization (IVF) options offered by the fertility clinic (“The Mamas RapsCALLION”).

### *Community building*

In developing relationships with their readers, the bloggers in this study created a community for themselves where they could share details they indicate might not be shared in offline. PartnerA (“Beginning From the Start”) writes,

Reading other blogs motivated me originally [to start blogging]. Also, I realized really quickly that the world of reproductive technology was full of funny and infuriating moments. I didn’t (and don’t) want to talk to my friends about this process, but I had to share the stories somewhere! I like sharing stories and seeing how people respond, and I love connecting with other people going through similar processes and experiences around the world.

In attempting to blog anonymously, PartnerA and her partner (“Sea”) indicate that they disclose details that they might not have if they were worried about who was

reading. PartnerA writes of their discomfort in finding that people they knew offline had discovered the blog, and they were left with a dilemma. PartnerA and Sea considered password protecting the blog and giving out the password selectively to followers who asked for it. PartnerA decides instead to allow herself the vulnerability and to keep posting publically as the information sharing aspect was more important to her, while Sea remained ambivalent. PartnerA writes,

As I've mentioned, I'm a fairly private person. I write about many things that I don't talk about. Knowing that people who know me are reading this makes me deeply uncomfortable (with the general exception of people we've told about this blog). My first instinct is not to write. My second instinct is to password protect everything. But then I look at the search terms used to get here and see how many people have searched "lesbian pregnancy", or "non-gestational partner", or even "follicle size", and I think about how much I want this blog to be found by the people doing those searches. All of the blogs I read and all of the stories I've connected with are so important to me: I don't want to cut off that possibility for somebody else.

And I don't know what to do with that contradiction– the simultaneous need for privacy and desire to be found– except to sit with it, feel vulnerable, and keep writing.

Meanwhile, for Sammie ("The Chronicles of a Non-Belly Mama") the initial idea in blogging was to chronicle her experiences so that she would have something to share with her children down the road, as well as using the blog as a place to "[e]xpress my fear, joy, expectations and disappointment." In the process, however, Sammie found herself surprised by the community that she had found. She says,

I never thought that I would become a part of such an incredible community and that my life, my laughter, my tears, would be embraced the way that they have been. That I would have connected on such a deep level with people that I technically don't know. That I would care so much about their lives and their triumphs and sadness, and feel what they feel right with them. Never in a million years did I anticipate words connecting with so many souls. Simple words..."

One of the most touching stories of friendships developed comes from Sammie as she recounts the story of “one of the scariest days” of her life. Her partner Callie, at six months pregnant and already on bed rest after previous complications, was bleeding and they rushed to the hospital:

This whole time, I didn’t know what to do. I reached out to a fellow blogger and vented. I shared my fears and she reassured me. I told her what was going on and she let me know it would all be fine. She asked what was happening and touched base. She asked how I was doing and if I needed anything. 30 minutes later, a nurse comes in and says there is something for us. A young man walks in, with a vase full of beautiful flowers and a card that read “We are thinking of you. Cook those babies a little longer so one day our twins will hang out. Love, Ashley and Devan.”<sup>32</sup> This touched our hearts in a way that we can’t explain. There are no words. Perfect strangers, connected, by intangible emotions and a shared experience. Sharing each other’s pain and helping to lessen the load. What they have done for us today, simply by brightening a room and by sharing their love and support has reminded us that this community is real. That these people are real and that we truly do care about one another and that these rooms have power and love and light. But love...mostly love...

What struck me most about this story was that Sammie describes herself as being very social. She writes about her large, close-knit extended family and lists not one but three best friends as being incredibly important people in her life. Yet, in that moment, she “didn’t know what to do” and reached out to blogger friends who had experienced similar situations with their own family. Despite Sammie and Callie’s vast social circle and strong friendships, these “perfect strangers” were the ones Sammie chose to contact in those hours of terror and uncertainty at the hospital.

### **General Overview of Blogs**

Five Canadian or American authored blogs were chosen for this study. As previously listed, these were: “Gay Girls Make Great Moms” (GGMGM), “Beginning

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<sup>32</sup> Ashley and Devan Davis blog at “Bs and Babies” (<http://bsandbabies.com>). They describe themselves as lesbian mothers and write about struggles with infertility, experiences with the stillbirth of their first child, and their twin babies born prematurely after a high-risk pregnancy.

From the Start” (BFTS), “Injection Reflections” (IR), “The Mamas RapsCALLION” (MR) and “The Chronicles of a Non-Belly Mama” (CNBM).

Given that I am examining existing blogs and unable to ask follow up questions for further information or clarification, the type of information and depth of stories told varies from blog to blog, experience to experience. While each blog provides sufficient detail for a strong examination in this study, the information I have on the blogs varies and this is reflected in the type of description I provide in this chapter.

Often the bloggers use pseudonyms, and while some reveal their specific physical location, others try to keep this information private, with varying degrees of success. I refer to the narrators here as they refer to themselves in order to maintain whatever level of anonymity they attempt to cultivate online. While each of the blogs are unique in their story, there are commonalities. Here I provide a brief overview of the blogs, with a more detailed description of each provided in subsections below.

Each of the blogs describes the narrator as being in a committed relationship<sup>33</sup> with length of relationship ranging from five to fifteen years. Each describes their respective relationship as strong, loving and supportive. Four of the five noted a university or college education. Three of the blogs were authored by women who identified themselves as biological mothers (i.e. the gestational carrier of the children), the remaining two gave the perspective of a non-biological (non-gestational) mother. Only one of the non-biological parents of the five couples intended to also carry a child in a future pregnancy. One blogger self-identifies as femme, three as butch or as non-gender conforming/queer, and one does not self-identify. Of the five blogs, each couple is

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<sup>33</sup> Some refer to their significant other as “wife,” others use “partner”. I have chosen to use the term “partner” here for the sake of continuity.

comprised of a butch or non-gender conforming/queer partner, and a feminine appearing/femme identified partner. The exception is the couple at the blog “The Mamas Rapsallion” where gender identity of the partners is not described.

The age range amongst bloggers is described as being mid-twenties to late-thirties. None of the bloggers have carried to term more than one pregnancy, although one family has twins. Age range of the children runs from newborn to early elementary age, with the majority of children being under the age of four.

While each blog had different stories to tell, some of what was said was very similar.<sup>34</sup> It was difficult not to get caught up in the compelling stories these bloggers told. What I appreciated was the willingness to share candidly with readers as in doing so they add to the public story of queer persons, their families and their experiences in getting there. Sharing stories like these in such a public way is an act of vulnerable abandon. As discussed further below, their willingness to be open in this way – even if blogging anonymously – helps to reflect queer narratives back at a queer population that is “starving for queer content” (Sara, “Gay Girls Make Great Moms”) in a heterobiased culture.

### **Blog One: “Gay Girls Make Great Moms” (GGMGM)**

Sara, the narrator of “Gay Girls Make Great Moms” (GGMGM) locates herself in Vancouver, British Columbia. She does not post anonymously although she does not name her son in her posts, nor does she give him a pseudonym. Sara is a professional writer with a university teaching position. She describes her blog as being “about the

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<sup>34</sup> Regrettably, only Sammie (“The Chronicles of a Non-Belly Mama”) comments on her Latina identity, and as such a discussion of the intersections of ethnic heritage with lesbian-mother identities cannot be undertaken, except, however, in noting the absence of the blogger’s mentioning of their particular backgrounds.

everyday joys and challenges of being a parent, through the distinct lens of being a queer mom in a predominantly straight world.” Sara is married to Amanda, a social worker/therapist, who she has been with for over twelve years. Together they have a son who was conceived through anonymous donor.

Amanda has a significant presence in the blog through Sara’s recounting of events, although the blog is authored solely by Sara. Amanda is a follower of the blog and posts some comments. The blog begins in August 2010 when their son was a toddler. Sara posts just under twenty entries, with the last post being published in May 2014, at which time her son was in the first grade. The blog reads like a series of short stories with Sara writing about their experiences and encounters with heterosexism and heteronormativity.

Over a few of her posts, Sara describes her experiences with secondary infertility, being unable to conceive again despite having already carried her son. She explains the experience as being too private and painful to share details online. She describes the focus of her blog as one of queer parenting and that she did not want it to “mutate into a blog solely about secondary infertility.” As it relates to her son (bringing him to appointments when necessary; explaining to him that his mommy and mama were trying to make a baby; her grief over being unable to give him a sibling), Sara describes a bit of their experience with secondary infertility that spanned several years, and the heartache that accompanied it. Sara describes secondary infertility as a “private, personal struggle. An unrecognizable, unspoken grief.” Interestingly, in describing an encounter with a mother at her son’s school who assumed that Sara would sometime bear a second child, to which Sara did not respond. She writes, “I wasn’t even going to begin to go there with

a virtual stranger,” yet, here she was online sharing bits and pieces with any “virtual stranger” who happened across her blog. I read this as a sense of connection to the blog and it’s followers, as well as a willingness (and decision) to share experiences with a readership that seeks stories like hers.

Sara also describes the way in which her son is teased for not always conforming to the expected gender norms especially when it comes to his interest in toys, and how she and her partner both support him even when they fear he will be bullied or teased as a result. With regard to the gendering of toys and her son’s ungendered play, Sara expresses both pride and parental worry, writing,

Our son has grown up in this same world [as other children] with the same societal messages, and yet he has no sense of being limited by categories and labels. And yes, we’re proud that we’ve managed to raise him this way, to be so free and open-minded and quintessentially himself. But at the same time, we can’t help but worry that we’ve set him up to be bullied.

This tone runs throughout Sara’s blog; simultaneously proud of her family and deeply aware of the culture that surrounds them, even in her self-described queer-friendly “bubble” of a neighbourhood and community. She describes the fears she has for her family and the way in which constantly explaining the family’s structure is tiring. Sara recounts experiences with heteronormativity before their son was born, for example in pregnancy and birthing classes. She describes her partner Amanda’s “butch mama” role, her own identification as femme, and their son’s negotiation of that in combination with his desire to have a “daddy”. Sara also gives examples where they face homophobia, heterosexism and heteronormativity; and also parental fears as they navigate their way through the social world of daycare and the public school system.

Despite a significant readership,<sup>35</sup> in contrast to some of the other bloggers described below, Sara does not engage much with her followers in terms of replying to comments. While remaining personable, her style is reflective rather than interactive, and her blog serves to promote the visibility of queer families. Through writing about her experiences, she brings to the forefront issues such as marriage equality, gender norms (including expectations for children and toys); and normative assumptions they have (en)countered as a lesbian parented family.

### **Blog Two: “Beginning From the Start” (BFTS)**

“Beginning From the Start” (BFTS) is anonymously authored. The primary author is referred to only as “PartnerA”. PartnerA describes herself as being employed in a position supporting LGBTQ youth in her city. She lives with her partner (known as “Sea”) who also makes enough of a contribution to the writing in a guest post capacity that she has a distinct voice within the blog. They do not post photos revealing their faces nor do they reveal their location, however as PartnerA notes after having blogged for a year, she is “fairly terrible at keeping an anonymous blog.”

While Sara’s blog (GGMGM) reads like a series of short stories, BFTS reads like a novel. It is written mostly in a straightforward timeline with some posts recounting past events to provide context (for example, background on PartnerA’s overbearing mother; Sea’s intense fears of becoming a parent and replicating cycles of abuse she experienced at the hands of her father). Often humorous and incredibly detailed, PartnerA and Sea document in their blog the start of their journey into parenthood that began in July 2012 as they weighed the pros and cons of the fertility clinics they had to choose from. Over a two-year period, they publish over 150 posts with PartnerA as the primary author.

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<sup>35</sup>Sara has 480 followers and averages roughly three to seven comments per post.

The blog gives a detailed account of their experiences attempting to get pregnant, the pregnancy itself and the intertwining of queer identities in all of it. They reflect on the way in which both experience uncomfortable situations in which people expect Sea, as the more gender conforming of the two, to be the one to become pregnant. PartnerA later has difficulty being recognized as pregnant in part due to her weight at the time of pregnancy, and also because it is not expected of her as a non-gender conforming woman. In PartnerA's words, "I don't identify as butch – far from it, in fact – but I do almost exclusively wear clothes designed for men. My gender identity is closer to sissy, maybe. Or dandy. Or ruffled teenage boy." She does self-identify as "queer" at times.

After four intrauterine inseminations (IUIs) and two anonymous donors, PartnerA becomes pregnant. Their baby (pseudonym "Bingo") was eight months old at the time of the last post in July 2014. BFTS maintained a strong readership with followers often commenting and offering words of encouragement, especially when PartnerA or Sea ask for advice. While no number of followers is provided, the posts regularly have between four to ten comments, and more at times where bigger news is announced (such as their pregnancy announcement).

### **Blog Three: "Injection Reflections" (IR)**

"Injection Reflections" (IR) is authored by "The Injector", Nat. Nat is very public with where she lives (Ypsilanti, Michigan), posts photos of herself and of her partner who she refers to as "KK". Nat blogs quite openly about her life and her work.

In comparison to GGMGM and BFTS, in its rawness, Nat's writing reads like poetry. While her tone does relax as the blog became more established, she vacillates between flowery language ("Our hope is resting on the life that is shaking off the thawing

soil and breaking through for a grasp of light and the birds who are returning and opening their voices to the day—chirping us through the mornings and singing sleepy tunes in early evening”) and crudeness (“I tell it like I see it. I cross the boundaries of properness on a frequent basis. . . . Shit and puke and piss and ejaculate are frequent bodily fluids that find their way into topics of conversation when I am involved in those conversations”).

Nat is passionate about her role as an advocate for prisoner’s rights in Michigan, and is a self-described “butch from southeastern Michigan, hell-bent on making this world a better place.” She draws similarities between herself as a lesbian non-biological parent, in a state that does not recognize her parental rights, and the prisoners she works with, noting that she often encourages them to parent their children even from behind bars.

At the time the blog begins in May 2007, she was excited to be venturing towards parenthood with KK, whom she had been with for seven years at the time. Nat published over 230 posts<sup>36</sup> between 2007 and 2014, with the majority of the posts published between 2007-2010. Like BFTS and The Mamas Rapscaillon (MR), posts become less and less frequent after the baby was born and the demands of parenting began.

Of the five blogs examined here, Injection Reflections was the only blog that wrote of trying to conceive at home using the sperm from a known donor. In doing so, KK and Nat had the ability to easily switch roles as KK becomes “The Injector” after 18 months of trying to get KK pregnant. To their surprise, Nat becomes pregnant on their first try, a development neither really expected and went against their original expectations of how they would create their family. Weeks later, Nat miscarried and

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<sup>36</sup> While no number of followers is available, roughly an average of five to nine comments are made per post.

struggles to regain her footing afterwards. Over a year later, KK does finally become pregnant with their daughter, Willa, who was born at home in late 2010.

In comparison to the other blogs, Nat's writing gives a fuller picture of her as a person, including details of her interests in gardening, cycling, and community. While after her miscarriage she took a hiatus from blogging about any update about trying to conceive, although she does maintain a steady rate of publishing about other aspects of her life. She develops a relationship with her followers, she responds in comments and asks advice of her readers through several years of blogging.

#### **Blog Four: "The Mamas RapsCALLION" (MR)**

"The Mamas RapsCALLION" (MR) is authored by Sarah and began in December 2012. Sarah blogs anonymously and does not post photos that would reveal her identity or location within the United States. Sarah, who indicates that she is in her mid-twenties, is married to Tammy, her partner of about seven years.

Sarah began blogging well into their TTC journey, having already eight failed IUIs and a miscarriage at five weeks. Her blogging marks that her mood is low as they are running out of money and their insurance covers none of the procedures. She notes that she is rapidly losing hope. After two more unsuccessful IUIs they made an attempt at IVF. Sarah became pregnant with their daughter, with a total out-of-pocket price tag for all procedures of approximately \$45,000 US. Their child is given the pseudonym "Ellie" for which Sarah, apologizing to her followers, explains: "For reasons of privacy and self-comfort, Tammy and I have decided not to share her real name. I hope you understand that this is not done in an effort to keep you out of an important part of our life, but to protect our daughter from some of the scarier elements of the world."

Sarah writes about using the blog as a place to connect with others, not knowing anyone in the offline world experiencing the same struggles conceiving. She describes herself as anxious in social situations, as someone who doesn't like change, and who has a history of depression, therefore finding the online world to be the ideal place for her to reach out as the social anxieties fall away. While many of her early posts focus on trying to conceive, she also blogs about gender norms, homophobia, heterobias, and about using a donor to conceive. While Sarah does not discuss gender identity with regard to herself and Tammy, she does post about gender norms and expectations for gendering children.

Blog posts have been sporadic since Ellie was born in February 2014, which as noted above is common amongst blogs that started prior to a baby's arrival.<sup>37</sup> Sarah continues to engage with her followers when she does post, however, asking for feedback and advice. While Sarah often uses curse words to punctuate her blog posts, her tone is less gritty than Nat's (IR). Her blog reads somewhat more like PartnerA's (BFTS). PartnerA and Sarah, who announced their pregnancies within weeks of each other, follow and comment on each other's blogs.

#### **Blog Five: "The Chronicles of a Non-Belly Mama" (CNBM)**

"The Chronicles of a Non-Belly Mama" (CNBM) is authored by Sammie. While the names in her blog are pseudonyms, Sammie is open about living in the suburbs of New York City and posts photos of her family and friends. She also posts a link to a magazine article that she and her family are featured in, which gives away their real names and specific location. Regardless, I refer to them here by their pseudonyms as Sammie does in her blog.

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<sup>37</sup> Prior to Ellie's birth, Sarah published several blog posts a month, and approximately 90 posts in total between December 2012 and March 2015. No number of followers is available although the blog receives an average of approximately 10-14 comments per post.

Sammie is married to Callie, who she has been with for about five years. Together they have twin boys who were born in January 2015. Sammie describes herself and Callie as being “super close to our families and have a tight knit group of amazing, supportive and loving friends.” Sammie describes having a varied work history, and that both she and Callie have worked extensively with children. Sammie mentions having worked as a carpenter for the city of New York but left that post when entering a treatment program after a depressive episode several years ago. Her current position involves shift work, often in the night or early morning, leaving her and Callie on opposite schedules much of the time.

Originally, I was not going to include this blog in this study as Sammie and Callie also became foster parents in the last few years, with the intention of fostering-to-adopt where possible. In this study, I was specifically looking for first-time parents. At the time that the blog started, in June 2014, their foster daughter, Mary, had been with them for two months and was expected to be a short-term placement. As time went on, however, circumstances have changed and Sammie hopes that they will be able to adopt Mary.

I chose to include CNBM in this study because Sammie describes Callie’s pregnancy and their 16-month journey trying to conceive (TTC) as their journey into motherhood, despite their experiences fostering. Initially, at least, Sammie drew a distinct line between guardianship and motherhood. For that reason, I chose to include the blog here. In reading the posts, one can understand the line she draws as self-protective, avoiding the grief of bonding with a child who is later placed elsewhere. As she notes,

Every other placement we had, we were told that the children would likely be freed for adoption, but within a few short weeks, they were all transitioned to a relatives home, and Callie and I were left licking our wounds, sad and crying on our couch, as we cuddled and caught up on weeks of TV that were impossible to

watch when you have toddlers who would not benefit from watching the latest season of RuPaul's Drag Race.

Unique to CNBM is Sammie's desire to also carry a child in the future. The other four blogs considered in this study had only one partner who expressed the desire to become pregnant. This is in contrast to Nat (IR), who was never actively desiring to become pregnant and remained ambivalent about her experience. Sammie, on the other hand, feels strongly about wanting to carry. Like PartnerA (BFTS), she finds that people have a hard time reconciling her butch identity with her desire to carry a child. Also unique to Sammie's blog and approach to parenting is her attempt to induce lactation in order to breastfeed the twins Callie was carrying. Sammie explains,

Everyone has always known me to be the sporty type, always overweight, not ever feminine, more like the dad than the mom. I have pretty horrible PCOS<sup>38</sup> which makes body hair my ultimate curse (especially in places that they shouldn't be on a female and highly noticeable). I don't think that anyone in a million years would think that I would want to carry (when I tell people this their usual reaction is "Really?!?! You?!?!"), and the people that I told I was inducing lactation give me this face like, "Isn't that gonna be weird for you? or "seriously?" Why? Because I prefer to wear jeans, polo's and boat shoes over skirts and heels? Is it because of my outward appearance? I'M STILL A WOMAN PEOPLE!

In contrast to the other blogs in this study, CNBM reads like social media, often receiving a rough average of 20-30 comments per post.<sup>39</sup> Sammie carries on back and forth conversations with followers in the comments, she engages with them consistently and more often than other bloggers. She describes herself as very social and as someone who is "pretty freaking hilarious and get[s] a whole lot of joy in making people laugh." Sammie has dealt with depression and addiction in the past and details her struggles and triumphs in her blog. Generally, she maintains a bubbly demeanor despite the frequent

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<sup>38</sup> Polycystic Ovary Syndrome, a disorder of the endocrine system, which could make it difficult for Sammie to get pregnant.

<sup>39</sup> Like in the majority of the other blogs examined here, no follower count is provided.

upset in their lives. Examples of this include challenges in being foster parents; Callie having been let go from her job while on bedrest with the twins; and having to manage Sammie's shift work schedule.

In reading these blogs and hearing the distinct perspectives and stories that emerged, a trend amongst the bloggers developed in their individual realization of how introducing children into their lives brought queerness to the forefront, a sentiment shared by Nancy Naples (2004). This takes the form of an outsider's view into the family; how the mothers perceived their families and their place in the world; and their awareness of their misfit status. While united in their status as lesbian/queer mothers, however, they expressed a diversity of attitudes and parenting styles. I saw this as a strength to this study as I was able to examine a set of blogs that were expressing many of the same issues and frustrations when it came to lesbian parenting.

## CHAPTER SIX: Research Findings

Are there others like me who have walked this road? How do I find my sisters? (Reader comment, “Gay Girls Make Great Moms” blog)

This chapter provides an analysis of major themes as they related to my research questions that emerged in the close reading of the blogs chosen for this study. As I read through the blogs, the broad focus I applied was on exploring how the bloggers, representing themselves as lesbian mothers, described their experiences in family-building despite the prevalence of heterobias and homophobic attitudes that surround them. The major themes presented in this chapter are: “Trying to Conceive”, “Accept vs. Reflect”, “Lived Experience of Heterobias”, “Anticipation, Worry”, and “Everyday Acts of Activism”.

My exploration of these themes begins with the section “Trying to Conceive”, often referred to as “TTC” online in blogs and websites that focus on fertility and conception. The significance of the TTC journey could not be ignored – it was a clear focus for each of the bloggers as they described the frustration, confusion, anticipation, disappointment and excitement of trying to start a family. The theme that follows, “Accept vs. Reflect”, makes the distinction between being *accepted* as queer persons and families, versus having those identities and families *reflected* back at them in daily life. Next, in the section “Lived Experiences with Heterobias”, I have included a selection of stories that represent the ways in which these bloggers describe their experiences with heterobias as they and their families challenge the normative expectations of gender; pregnant bodies; parental roles and figures; recognizable intimate partnerships; the impact of legislation that disadvantages queer families; and the potential financial burden

on queer families who are accessing the aid of fertility specialists in order to start their families. From here I move to the section “Anticipation, Worry”. Emerging from the blogs was a distinct type of anticipation and worry for the bloggers and their families that transcended common parental concerns. For example, Sara and Amanda (GGMGM) worried not only in general about their son’s transition into the school system as he started kindergarten, but also as it related to his status as a child with two mothers. The final theme presented in this chapter, “Everyday Acts of Activism”, explores the ways in which the bloggers spoke out and acted out in everyday scenarios when confronted by heterobiases.

As outlined in this chapter, despite the uncertainties, the difficulties, and inherent worry that accompanies parenthood that is also tinged with concerns about raising a family that goes against the normative scheme; and despite the roadblocks presented by heteronormative, heterosexist and homophobic attitudes, each of the bloggers took on the task of challenging and negotiating the boundaries of motherhood and family. As Laura Mamo argues, “while lesbians and other nonheterosexual actors and groups variously push and pull their way into normativity, doing so does not solidify the normal, but instead makes its borders far more porous and opaque...” (2007, 5). Through the exploration of the themes presented above, this chapter describes the socially constructed roadblocks the bloggers met in their parenting journeys, which resulted in the blurring of the boundaries of “normal”.

### **Theme One: Trying to Conceive (TTC)**

Each of the bloggers wrote about their experiences with trying to have children. Some wrote about portions of the process in retrospect (GGMGM, CNBM), and others as

they journeyed through it (MR, BFTS, IR). I have broken down this major theme into several subsections: “Long Journey”, “Financial Burden”, “My Body Failed Me”, “Sperm Donors”, and “Control and a Spiritual Something.”

I begin with “Long Journey”, an exploration of the difficulties many of the couples encountered with achieving and maintaining a pregnancy. Next, in “Financial Burden” I explore the financial impact of attempting to create a family using donor sperm, especially for those accessing the services of fertility clinics. The following subsection, “My Body Failed Me”, describes the way in which despite various methods, treatments, and technologically advanced attempts to conceive, three of the five women in these blogs specifically express feeling as though her body has failed her in being unable to conceive easily or within an expected timeframe. From here I move to the subsection “Sperm Donors”. All but one blogger (Sara, GGMGM) described the process of choosing a donor and the decision making that was involved – bloggers wrote about the physical characteristics they sought in an unknown donor; the decision to have an unknown donor who might be willing to be contacted in the future; and the potential legal challenges in using a known donor through home insemination as his parental rights may be upheld should he or governing bodies attempt to assert him as a parental figure.<sup>40</sup> The TTC discussion here concludes with the final subsection “Control and a Spiritual Something”, exploring the ways in which the bloggers describe a lack of control over the process of conception and pregnancy, and the ways in which they sought to gain a sense of stability. In some cases I found that this was tied to what I coded as a “spiritual something”. Whether it be formal prayer combined with religious affiliation (CNBM) or

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<sup>40</sup> See, for example, the story of a Kansas sperm donor who was sued for child support by the State despite having an agreement between himself and the child’s mothers that he would have no parental role. (Celok 2012; Winter 2014)

a developed ritual before medical appointments (BFTS), the intention was to try to find some footing in uncertain times.

### *Long Journey*

While PartnerA and Sea (BFTS) did not struggle with infertility, their blog was active and descriptive as they interviewed clinics, chose a donor and attempted to become pregnant. Their posts were punctuated with the uncertainty of the process, which was left in the hands of the clinic as the doctors read test results and decided when to inseminate. The wait times at the clinic, the uncertainty of timing and the two-week wait after insemination was described as stressful. Paraphrasing a voicemail from the clinic, PartnerA writes,

*Good afternoon, it's Random Nurse from Dr. Text's office. Dr. Text reviewed your bloodwork, and it looks like you may be surging. But Dr. Text doesn't really know. So, come in tomorrow and if you are actually surging then you might have to do an insemination tomorrow.*

After a third, unsuccessful IUI, PartnerA and Sea are advised by their doctor that it might be wise to introduce fertility medications. As PartnerA writes,

[The doctor] explained that, if somebody asked, he wouldn't be able to say I was infertile – that, in fact, he didn't actually think that I was. But, he continued, he understands that this is costing a lot of money and, repeating one of his oft used lines, he can't just tell us to go home and have sex.

Although they do not particularly want to introduce fertility medications, PartnerA concedes, “After three months of trying, there's really nothing to suggest I'm infertile and not just unlucky. At the same time, I'm learning very quickly just how emotionally and financially draining this process can be.” While the medication may have been the factor that helped them conceive in their next IUI, potentially shortening the journey for them, the medicalization of the TTC journey for lesbian women and the escalating

interventions as time goes on where pregnancy is not achieved (Mamo 2007; Ruth 2008) is apparent here.

I was surprised to read that the remaining four bloggers name their TTC experiences as ones engaged with infertility. For Sara (GGMGM) this is in the form of secondary infertility. She blogs about it in retrospect, calling it a private grief that she did not want to overtake her blog. She explains to her readers, "...in order to keep blogging, I first need to account for my time away. Not to apologize for my absence or dwell over what happened, but to speak to that first year of grief and to honour it, as I now move forward."

Sammie (CNBM) begins her blog after her partner Callie becomes pregnant. In her opening post she describes

...our crazy 16 month journey. Our emotional rollercoaster, 2 week cycle living, anonymous donor searching, Dr. visit infested, I can't believe this is happening, is IVF our last option, OMG THIS IS FINALLY HAPPENING 16 month journey!"

Her focus in blogging is on the pregnancy itself and the birth of the twins, but when she does mention trying to conceive it is often in remembering how long and hard those sixteen months were.

Sarah (MR) begins her blog several months into their attempts to conceive, her posts increasingly despairing,

Some days I think it will never happen. That it will never come true. That I'll never see the second line again,<sup>41</sup> or it will never go past a few weeks. Sometimes, a tiny voice, barely more than a whisper, tells me to give up. To stop trying. That it isn't meant to be. And other days I'm filled with Hope. ... like honey, Hope is almost impossible to fully clean up, wipe off, get rid of. I'm always thinking that this vitamin is IT! Or this shot will do the trick! Or this procedure! Or this new donor! But it never is."

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<sup>41</sup> Sarah had one positive pregnancy test but miscarried very early on. A second line appearing in the test window indicates a positive result.

Sarah is advised by her doctor that she should move to IVF, writing that her doctor tells her that she “should be pregnant by now and they aren’t sure why I’m not. She also told me I shouldn’t waste my money on another IUI cycle. Can’t get clearer than that.” While they do get pregnant with IVF, the stressful preceding months are not forgotten. In a check-in post well after their daughter Ellie is born, Sarah writes,

And how are her mamas? We’re well. We’re both a little shell shocked from her infancy, and honestly, we’re just starting to recover. Tammy gets visibly upset if anyone mentions having another baby (because obviously it would be the easiest and cheapest thing to get pregnant) and is adamant about wanting to be one and done with Ellie. I go back and forth on the issue but don’t want to commit myself one way or another. There are pros and cons to both.

Nat (IR) documents their unanticipated struggle to conceive at home using the sperm of a known donor. The blog begins at the start of their attempts to become pregnant and chronicles their TTC journey over the course of a few years. With their donor living close by, Nat and KK<sup>42</sup> are able to inseminate at home several times each month. In spite of this, after eighteen months of trying and eighty inseminations, KK was not pregnant. They visited a reproductive endocrinologist (RE) for help and attempted to get pregnant, again at home, with the aid of the fertility drug Clomid, but with no success. Using a known donor, Nat blogs about not being able to access fertility services in the same way a heterosexual couple would. As noted in the review of the literature, Rachel Epstein (2014) references the Government of Canada’s *Processing and Distribution of Semen for Assisted Conception Regulations* (1996) and describes how in Canada, sperm from a donor must be quarantined for six months before being used for insemination in a

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<sup>42</sup> Nat refers to her partner in no consistent manner – she calls her KK, K, k or kk. In quoting Nat, I have left her writing intact; in my own words I have referred to her as KK for consistency.

fertility clinic. According to Nat, the same was true for her and KK in Michigan.<sup>43</sup> No such restrictions are placed on heterosexual couples. For example, the Canadian fertility clinic and sperm bank ReproMed ([www.repromed.ca](http://www.repromed.ca)) offers information about the various services offered in the clinic, including intrauterine insemination (IUI), which is commonly offered as a first route to conception for lesbian couples using fertility clinics (Corbett et al. 2013). In their information section, ReproMed explains on their website that for an IUI, “The semen specimen must be produced preferably in our Andrology Laboratory, 90 minutes prior to the insemination.” While ReproMed does help same-sex couples achieve pregnancy,<sup>44</sup> the heteronormative context of the information provided on IUIs fails to acknowledge the possibility that the reader is using donor sperm, which cannot, by law, be produced for same day insemination at the clinic. ReproMed’s webpage outlining the use of a designated (known) donor clearly states that there is “screening of the Designated Donor; a semen analysis; laboratory work; and a 6-month quarantine of the semen specimens, [all of which is a] regulatory requirement.” The absence of this information in the context of the general IUI information page speaks to the heteronormative overtones in fertility clinics that can alienate lesbian couples seeking assistance in creating their families (Corbett et al. 2013).

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<sup>43</sup> For an example of quarantine practice in the United States, see The Sperm Bank of California’s website which outlines their process for using known/directed donor sperm. For a minimum initial fee of \$1725, an “account” can be opened where the potential recipient can choose to have the donor sperm quarantined and released approximately 7 months after deposit (“Directed Donor”), or choose to not quarantine the sperm, instead the donor is required to undergo STD testing every 7 days (“Known Donor”). The bank’s Medical Director can override the decision of the recipient and quarantine the sperm. The website notes that in either case, donors are required to undergo medical testing as mandated by the FDA. Unquarantined sperm is not available for use until testing is complete 30-90 days after deposit; and the bank notes that not all fertility clinics will agree to inseminate using unquarantined sperm. (“Directed Donor” n.d.; “Known Donor” n.d.)

<sup>44</sup> ReproMed even offers a home insemination program using donor sperm, which acknowledges that not all clients require the services of a fertility specialist and only require access to sperm.

Nat describes their long journey as having taken her to a place of “despair”. They begin to discuss the possibility of Nat becoming pregnant instead, although she had never desired to carry a child: “I just never really contemplated a vision of my birth experience or the reality of having a wee critter living inside of me.” She writes that trying to get KK pregnant,

is all a bit emotionally exhausting and for some reason i seem to take it worse than my lovely. i mean i have even started seriously contemplating what it would be like for me to be pregnant for 9 months and how i would need to learn to pack my fears in a tight little bag and banish them to the place beyond the atmosphere. this contemplating is strange territory for me and very premature, but these visions of a pregnant me are haunting my head and they are weird indeed!

Given their home insemination approach without the aid of a clinic, KK and Nat had the ability to switch roles as KK became “The Injector”<sup>45</sup>:

...the one time on a whim when kk thought me fertile and our donor and kk ... planned in sinister and loving cahoots the injection of me ... my love shot me up with this potential life giving fluid. She did it so gracefully and passionately my heart sprung a leak of everlasting love.

As Nat describes it, her one and only encounter with sperm in her body resulted in a pregnancy. Weeks later, however, as they were settling in to the idea of Nat carrying their child, Nat miscarried. Mourning, Nat writes:

I keep contemplating how there are two wombs involved here. I mean how lucky am I that the first time some sliders of life were sent up my vagina they clicked with my egg and I found myself pregnant? But, please remember that we have been trying with kk for almost two years. And we have been let down over and over and over again. And for just once we had a respite from the negative test.

Their experience with infertility, pregnancy and loss differs from the others in this study in their use of a known donor and ability to easily try on a “whim” to get Nat pregnant instead of KK. In the medicalized environment of fertility clinics this would have

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<sup>45</sup> On her blog, Nat introduces herself as “The Injector”, referencing her role (using a syringe to inject the sperm into KK), in the process of trying to get KK pregnant.

required time and planning as Nat would have required a doctor's referral, medical testing, and insurance coverage or funds to cover the treatment (Mamo 2007; Corbett et al. 2013).<sup>46</sup> The joy of a pregnancy was coupled with the grief of having been unable to get KK pregnant. It was also a source of conflict for Nat in having to negotiate her butch, pregnant self and for KK as well in becoming "The Injector". Combined with the miscarriage, the experiences brought Nat to a self-described place of "fragility". She declares that she needed a break from trying to have children, and from blogging about it: "i am focusing on things far away from the creation of children. i have to to keep my sanity." It would be another year before they tried again to conceive, and eventually KK does become pregnant.

The stories of infertility and difficulties in trying to conceive in general are important here because, as Sara (GGMGM) remarks,

...my experience of secondary infertility is very much coloured by my queerness. Would it have been such a struggle to conceive if we'd had unlimited access to semen and the ability to try at home, several times a cycle? How much precious time was lost waiting for test results, for vials of sperm, and for our son's donor to reappear? Right out of the gate, we were operating at a disadvantage.

While Sara might wonder whether she would have been successful in conceiving again had she more control over timing and access to sperm, both the at-home and medicalized scenarios for lesbian reproduction are evidenced here to have their own roadblocks. Nat and KK at Injection Reflections *were* able to try at home several times a month thanks to their known donor, although this did not help them when they had difficulties getting pregnant. Would Sara and Amanda (GGMGM) have conceived again using the sperm of a known donor, performing home inseminations? Would Nat and KK's (IR) experience

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<sup>46</sup> For a discussion on the way in which fertility clinics have changed the way lesbian women create families see Mamo (2007).

have been different had they the desire and the funds to use an anonymous donor; or if they had not been restricted by the quarantine policy regarding donor sperm? Given the laws in Michigan at the time of Nat's writing, as the non-biological mother Nat was not allowed to pursue a second parent adoption nor could KK and Nat legally marry. I was reminded of Epstein (2014) when a follower of Nat's blog suggests that they lie to the fertility clinic and have KK indicate that the donor is her sexual partner, which would lift the requirement to quarantine the sperm. As Epstein notes and Nat does as well, the lie misrepresents the woman trying to conceive as a heterosexual woman and erases her partner, an intended parent, entirely. The already shaky parenting position afforded to a non-biological second parent in a same-sex relationship is made even more precarious in attempting to lie to get through the system.

### *Financial Burden*

The long journey, especially for those using anonymous donor sperm and accessing the services of a fertility clinic, is one that is punctuated by the cost of the process. The cost of trying to conceive using a fertility clinic left some bloggers describing significant debt (MR, GGMGM) on top of the emotional toll of trying to conceive. The cost also set up a tiered system of accessibility as not all bloggers were able to/willing to take on the debt load in pursuing escalating fertility treatments, while medical insurance plans, for those with coverage, varied in what they would cover. For example, Sammie (CNMB) had an insurance plan that covered her partner's IVF treatment up to \$50,000; Sarah's (MR) insurance covered none. As noted previously in the blog overview, Sarah indicated that they spent approximately \$45,000 to have one child.

For Sammie and Callie (CNBM) the cost of infertility treatments was covered only once Sammie started a new job with benefits that offered such coverage, although getting the coverage extended to Callie as Sammie's same-sex partner was not easy<sup>47</sup> and came after significant out-of-pocket expense. Sammie writes,

After 7 failed IUI's with our reproductive endocrinologist [at a cost of \$2300 per cycle], 2 months off for a second opinion [at a cost of \$5000], a crapload of tests which were all inconclusive, 5 failed artificial inseminations at home (mind you all out of pocket), I had a battle trying to communicate with my insurance company to get my domestic partner insured so she can qualify for IVF treatments.

Sara (GGMGM) writes that she and Amanda spent thousands trying to conceive a sibling for their son, leaving them with "nothing but financial debt and an incredible physical toll on my body." For Nat and KK (IR), the cost was described as being beyond their reach. While Nat wrote that they preferred to be trying at home with the use of a known donor, they did eventually seek the help of a fertility specialist, as the visit was covered by insurance since they had been trying to conceive for over a year. Nat reported that the specialist indicated that it would be simpler for everyone if they would agree to use an anonymous donor and have IUIs performed at the clinic. Not only does this negate Nat and KK's preference for using a known donor, it comes with a higher price tag and Nat comments, "I refuse to get locked up in the big business of reproduction unless we absolutely have to. Our insurance only covers so much and we are far from wealthy people." Should they decide to go the route of quarantining the sperm of their known donor, Nat says, they are responsible for the cost of testing, freezing and storing the sperm. Nat fumes about this:

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<sup>47</sup> One of the requirements was to register as domestic partners with the state. New York did not allow same-sex marriages at the time.

Fuck the government...essentially they are once again giving straight people a financial break. The implications of their flawed health code do more than simply demoralize me as a gay woman; they also place an unfair financial burden on me--it would be much, much cheaper to use fresh sperm for the in office IUI.

Sea (BFTS), also frustrated by the cost of conceiving as a lesbian couple using a fertility clinic, writes:

I feel like we're starting at a disadvantage. Barring infertility (which is not the case in our situation), straight people can try an infinite number of times for free, and save their money for parental leave, for daycare, for infant necessities and fun baby accessories, for their child's education fund. If we try just nine times, we're already down \$7200 [the cost for the sperm alone] plus the cost of the actual IUI and we could potentially have nothing to show for it.

PartnerA (BFTS), who had no indications of infertility as noted above by Sea, writes of their decision to take their doctor's suggestion and introduce potentially unnecessary infertility medications to their attempts:

Sea and I have spent thousands of dollars on sperm, procedures and various pills, powders, oils and suppositories with nothing to show for it – not even a lousy t-shirt. I'm sure that the ends will justify the means and our kid will be worth every penny, but we would prefer to get there sooner rather than later.

After they do conceive, however, they describe being left with a dilemma: they discover that their donor is no longer active in the program and they will be unlikely to find vials of his sperm left for future pregnancies. They decide that they would like their children to share a donor if possible, and so they buy all of the stock they can find:

Sea and I are now the proud parents of one fetus and four vials of sperm. We will pay several hundred dollars a year to store this sperm until we decide what to do with it, in addition to the \$2392.80 just paid for the sperm itself ... It's a high cost for babysitting, but it feels worth it to leave that door open.

For the bloggers in this study, many experiences and decisions in trying to conceive involved the financial aspect of the process. Sarah (MR) polls her readers, asking for advice on costly IVF options; Nat (IR) balks at the cost of fertility treatments; PartnerA

and Sea (BFTS) watch their “baby fund” savings dwindle; Sammie (CNBM) celebrates her good fortune in having insurance that covers IVF treatments; Sara and Amanda (GGMGM) are left not only with the heartache of being unable to conceive again, but also the debt accumulated in trying. The financial aspect of conception for lesbian women is apparent here, and forms a significant part of the journey and the choices made along the way.

### *My Body Failed Me*

Three blogs, “Gay Girls Make Great Moms”, “Injection Reflections” and “The Mamas Rapsclion”, reference the idea of one’s body failing her by not becoming pregnant as easily as originally anticipated. The appearance of this sentiment is not surprising given the cultural emphasis on women’s bodies as naturally ready to conceive and the notion of infertility as impairment (Ulrich and Weatherall 2000). Sarah (MR) grieves for herself, “for this idea of myself as a healthy and complete woman, whose body had never let her down before.” Sara (GGMGM) describes the inability to conceive again as a shock. For nearly three years, she writes, she and her partner Amanda tried to conceive a second child before finally giving up. There was a heavy grief in conceding an end to their attempts for a second child, Sara indicated, and she comments that, “the straight parents at preschool made it look so easy” in their ability to conceive again (presumably without medical intervention) compared to her own medicalized experience.

For Sara,

...the infertility was always there, spilling a grey wash over everything. Everywhere I looked in my life, from the daily, sibling stroller brigade outside our son’s elementary school to friends and close family giving birth, there were constant reminders of what I did not have, of how my own body had failed me.

Nat (IR) describes her partner's vulnerable emotional state when KK begins to question her body in a way that KK indicates she otherwise might not have. Doubts surfaced in trying (and failing) to conceive, she tells Nat. Although in a later post Nat remarks that something must be amiss, at the time she is quick to defend KK's body:

My kk's body is just fucking fine. And to all of you out there trying, your bodies are fine too.

While I want to create a kid with my girl and I want it real bad, I do not want to get hung up in this thinking that something is wrong with kk's body. ... But, because we have decided to participate in the over-population of the american human landscape does not then make my baby's body all fucked up cause it is not happening asap. Her inability to get pregnant right now is not life-threatening. it is not an illness.

Nat's words speak to the way in which a woman's difficulty conceiving is loaded with cultural baggage with regard to women, their bodies, and the expectations of motherhood.

As Miriam Ulrich and Ann Weatherall (2000) write,

'Infertility' is not a neutral term: the words used necessarily invoke particular frameworks of understanding. For example, medical jargon such as 'hostile mucus', 'blocked Fallopian tubes', 'incompetent cervix' and 'failure to conceive' show the ways in which women's infertility has been constructed as physical impairment. In comparison, male causes of infertility are described in less conclusive terms, using concepts such as subnormal or low sperm motility." (324)

For Sarah (MR), the memory of those feelings of her body having betrayed her are later assuaged by her feelings of empowerment in being able to breastfeed,

I was (and am!) so damn proud of myself for being able to feed my daughter *from my very own body*. After all the shit infertility put my sense of self through, being able to nourish and sustain my long fought for child *from my very own body* (sorry, that needs to be repeated) went a long way toward healing.

### *Donors*

To begin this section I would like to acknowledge the paradox of bloggers simultaneously derailing the normative family structure and also adhering to scripts

regarding biological connection and/or seeking out familiar traits in a donor. Traditional notions of “family” might be unhinged through lesbian parenting, however in choosing donors that look like the non-biological mother; in placing importance on being able to use the same donor to have multiple children in one family; and in seeking out donors who agree to be contacted in the future, these bloggers demonstrate the deep-seated, perhaps unacknowledged way in which they continue to be influenced by the traditional social scripts.

The choices made in choosing donors and the heartache expressed in having to use a donor at all as is described in these blogs acknowledges the emphasis placed on biological connection within a family. The blogs also echo what is reflected of lesbian parenting within the media. On television, biological connections are upheld as lesbian couples often use known donors (Hallowell 2015), giving a face (if not a name and a role) to the donor.<sup>48</sup> In the movie *If These Walls Could Talk 2* (2000), lesbian couple Fran and Kal (played by Sharon Stone and Ellen DeGeneres) are trying to get pregnant and beginning to go through donor profiles. Fran comments that she wishes that they could avoid choosing a donor and that Kal could just get her pregnant. Kal has a dramatically quiet moment where she clearly has the same wish. In another scene, when Fran suggests that maybe they should have an “ethnic” baby, Kal comments that she would like to choose a donor that looks like her, as she will not share a biological connection to the child.

While lesbian parents are parenting outside of the traditional family structure, they do so while engaged and immersed in the larger culture that continues to emphasize traditional notions of family. Despite crossing over the boundaries of traditional family

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<sup>48</sup> For example, *One Big Happy* (2015), *The Fosters* (2013- ), and *The L Word* (2004-2009).

formation, the ways in which a hetero-normalized upbringing engrains the importance of shared heritage within the family, is reflected in the choices that are grappled with in donor selection.

In this study, all but Sara (GGMGM) spoke at least once about how they came to choose their donor. In choosing an anonymous donor, PartnerA (BFTS) and Sammie (CNBM) spoke about the importance of choosing someone with a physical resemblance to the non-biological mother. PartnerA (BFTS) writes,

... it was fairly clear from our first sort through who our first choice was going to be. It wasn't his high SAT score, impeccable medical history or interest in mixed martial arts that set him apart – about 90% of the donors seem to have high SAT scores, impeccable medical histories and an interest in mixed martial arts. Instead it was the uncanny resemblance to Sea that won us over.

For Sea, this resemblance was incredibly important in helping her feel connected to the process and the potential baby (which she refers to as “The Impending Fetus”, or TIF).

While physical resemblance was the major factor, Sea was also concerned with the future impact of their choice,

The only additional factor that I considered as I was reviewing donors' profiles were the donors' general temperament, as much as one can glean from internet profiles. The reason for my interest in general temperament is because should the donor be an 'Identity Release' donor, and should TIF one day wish to seek information about the donor, and should the donor and TIF someday have contact with one another, I would prefer that the donor not be some southern Catholic whose motivation for jerking off into a cup twenty years prior was to share the God-given gift of life with infertile heterosexual couples. I'd prefer that the donor not be a gay-hating bigot.

While PartnerA and Sea had considered using a known donor, PartnerA explains that they did not have a suitable candidate in mind and worried that the donor would perhaps change his mind and want to take a parenting role in the future. Given Sea's self-described extreme trepidation in becoming a parent and already questioning her (non-

biological) role in the entire process, Sea and PartnerA indicated that the use of an anonymous donor suited them best.

Sammie and Callie (CNBM) chose a donor that looked like Sammie, who is the non-biological mother. In looking at a sonogram photo of their twins, Sammie says, “It looks like Noah has Mama’s profile and Levi has Mommy’s and that’s exciting! Glad we chose a donor that looks like me!” She indicates that they plan on future pregnancies, with Sammie intending to carry using Callie’s eggs. She notes that “for us it was most important that they resemble me. I mean, there are 7 frozen embryos and if I’m gonna carry at least one of them and none of my own, we knew that it was a definite that he look like me. Donor matching is awesome!”

Nat and KK (IR) use a known donor. While they could not choose a donor based on physical characteristics as they might have done with an anonymous donor, Nat acknowledges that it would be nice to have some sort of connecting physical feature. She says, “while the kid up in k will not look like me (lack of DNA) it would be cool to have a curly headed baby.”

Sarah (MR) wrote that the most important thing for herself and partner Tammy was choosing a donor who had consented to be contacted<sup>49</sup> in the future: “She will know half of her genetic heritage, and we chose a donor specifically because he had agreed to be contacted when any offspring turn eighteen, should they want to know more about that side of their genetics.” Sarah quotes a fellow blogger, who writes under the name bionicbrooklynite ([www.bionicismamas.com](http://www.bionicismamas.com)), regarding the decision to use an open-ID donor: “The biggest reason we chose a willing-to-be-known donor is that we wanted to

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<sup>49</sup> Donors who have consented to be contacted in the future are generally referred to as open-ID donors, identity release donors or willing-to-be-known (WTBK) donors, depending on the terminology used by the sperm bank.

be able to say to the Bean that even before he was a bean, we were thinking of him as his own person, whose thoughts and desires might well be different from our own.” While Sarah acknowledges the fear of their child romanticizing the donor and considering him a father, she also acknowledges the importance they place on wanting to at least provide transparency for their child in the future. In choosing an identity release donor they are attempting to provide answers to questions their child(ren) might have in the future, beyond the bits of information provided by him in his profile.

Cultural emphasis on biological connection, as previously discussed, can be considered here in reviewing what the bloggers wrote in terms of their decision making in choosing a donor. The sharing of physical attributes influenced the choices that bloggers made in seeking out a donor that resembled the non-biological mother; purposeful selection of an open-ID donor ensured that the donor could be contacted in the future. In both cases, the cultural emphasis on genetics permeates the decision making in selecting a donor (Luce 2010). In the context of a longitudinal study it would be valuable to ask lesbian women who chose donors based on these types of criteria (physical resemblance; open identity donor) whether they thought those to be important attributes in the long run as we deconstruct the traditional conceptions of the family tree. Did a physical resemblance foster a greater connection between child and the non-biological mother? Did it matter whether they had children who shared a donor? Did the child(ren) yearn to meet their donor; and if they did meet, what was the outcome for those involved? While the bloggers in this study did speak to the choices they made and the process involved in

making those decisions, this was one area where I would have liked a chance to ask them questions.<sup>50</sup>

### *Control and a “Spiritual Something”*

The inability to control the process of attempting to conceive or have a grasp on how long it might take to get pregnant is a significant theme throughout each of the blogs. For those accessing fertility clinics, the details of the process are transferred to the judgement of the doctor reading the ultrasounds, recommend medications and make the decision of when to inseminate. While of the five bloggers only Sammie (CNBM) labels herself as being religious, all but Sara (GGMGM) describe using what I coded as a sort of a “spiritual something” to help them stay tethered as they made their way through a journey that is full of uncertainty. Sara (GGMGM) does, however, speak of a lack of control and significant uncertainty, especially in their attempts to conceive a second child. Sara writes that even “the end” of trying was beyond their control, making the entire process all the more difficult. With one remaining vial of sperm in storage they decided to try one last cycle,

...for closure, but due to bizarre series of twists that were completely beyond our control – including the sudden, permanent closure of our long-standing fertility clinic less than two weeks before we were due to inseminate, which precipitated the long, arduous, costly process of getting our records and donor sperm transferred to a new clinic – the end kept getting postponed.

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<sup>50</sup> I am not arguing that genetic connections don't or shouldn't matter, but am mainly curious about how ideas of what is important can change over time. It seems important to add my own experience here in choosing a donor – my partner and I chose a donor who shared similar heritage to my partner; we signed the papers agreeing to an open-ID donor but didn't specifically seek one out; and our children share a donor. In the time of decision-making, those seemed like important considerations, however that was at a time where our family was an abstract concept. As my family solidifies I find myself less concerned with those things – however some of the most common questions I get (Do the boys share a donor? Do they look like my partner? Will you know the donor?) are reflections on all of those choices and remain salient within the culture.

While Sammie (CNBM) describes prayer as a given in her life (“[my kids will] see their Mamá cry, breakdown, pick up the pieces, pray, laugh, dance, and love”), for others, the “spiritual something” emerged as a response to a specific need for tethering rather than out of a particular religious affiliation. PartnerA (BFTS) spoke of uncertainty, especially when it came to the fertility clinics – she often wrote about being unsure when the inseminations would take place, which doctor would see them that day, how long a wait there would be at the clinic, whether they would have a positive pregnancy test result, and so on. PartnerA receives a bottle of holy water from a friend’s mother and takes a sip before the insemination that results in a pregnancy. The holy water becomes a ritual, a quick assurance to bolster her luck and her sense of stability. She notes that she takes a sip before each test, ultrasound and medical procedure that follows. She also notes a ritual of wearing brightly coloured, mismatched socks to her appointments. The continuity of each of these rituals helps create and maintain a sense of control in what PartnerA describes as an otherwise emotionally draining and unsteady time.

While Nat and KK (IR) were not accessing the services of a fertility clinic, Nat wrote of times where they had very little control over the factors that needed to come together to get KK pregnant. Early into their TTC journey, their donor moves to Chicago. While at first they tried to coordinate trips to Chicago when KK was thought to be ovulating, Nat described the situation as unmanageable, leading them to seek out a new donor. Nat blogged about having arrived at the new donor’s house to pick up the sample, where “he handed off a too cold jar of jiz, which I promptly stuffed down my shirt.” Nat and KK then get stuck in traffic on the freeway on the way home, with “a baby food jar that once contained pureed sweet potatoes now full of potentially perishing sperm.” The

too-cold sperm, the donor, the traffic, the inability to easily predict KK's ovulation and whether or not a pregnancy will be achieved are all factors that cannot easily be controlled. When KK does become pregnant, for Nat, a "spiritual something" takes the form of a type of prayer to the universe. She writes in the early, cautiously optimistic days of KK's long awaited pregnancy:

Caution keep me close, weight of worry stop strangling my esophagus, hearts of the beloved community keep thumping to the pulse of the planet, day keep dawning, night keep falling, kid keep growing...stay alive, stay alive, stay alive..."

In describing having a lack of control, Sarah (MR) writes about her experiences with fertility clinics in a way that echoes PartnerA (BFTS). Both bloggers noted that the fertility clinics give the same responsibility to their patients: on the day of the IUI, it is the obligation of the patient to be sure the sperm was thawed on time. Sarah writes, "... the morning of the IUI I have to call them to thaw the sperm – I'm sorry, you need reminding? I'm paying you over three thousand dollars and you can't remember to thaw the sperm?" Like PartnerA, Sarah says she has difficulty reconciling the feeling of being just another number to the large fertility clinic, with the impersonal approach leaving little time to ask questions and feel involved in the process. She writes that she often felt confused, ill informed, and rushed out the door by clinic staff:

What I don't like about this clinic is that it is so big; I end up feel [*sic*] a bit like a number. ... I've never had the same person do my ultrasound, which makes for a lot of people viewing the ol' lady garden. And *man* do they move quickly. Not the wait for the ultrasound itself (they're running behind 90% of the time) but the ultrasound itself. It might be more efficient if I entered the clinic, spread eagle on a conveyer belt.

When Sarah's pregnancy is finally a reality, she writes that there is still no sense of control and all she can do is hope that all will be well. This feeling of hope does keep her somewhat grounded. Like Nat (IR) she says her own prayer to the powers that be,

Overall I'm overjoyed that we've made it this far. I'm cautiously optimistic that A Good Thing might come out of this, and I've devoted significant energy to sending out thoughts/prayers/vibes to the universe at large, saying nothing more than 'please' and 'thank you'. I hope all of you [still trying to get pregnant] get your 'thank you' soon.

The bloggers in this study clearly relayed the ways in which trying to conceive can be a stressful time, especially when reliant on the decision making of doctors and other professionals and/or when conception does not come easily. The ways in which the bloggers in this study found ways to quell their anxiety through some sort of ritual, prayer or "spiritual something" was an interesting finding in the reading of the blogs.

### **Theme Two: Accept vs. Reflect**

In talking about their son's experience in the school system, Sara (GGMGM) quotes her partner Amanda as having said: "There's a huge gap between seeing your family accepted and included by the school, and seeing your family reflected back at school as the norm." This is a critical point that goes well beyond the school system. The lack of reflection can leave existing/potential queer parents and their families with a "sense of dislocation" (Gabb 2004, 123) in the larger social body. In the world of pregnancy and parenting, gender norms and the unquestioned privileging of hetero-parented families leaves queer parents having to explain themselves and their families time and time again (Gabb 2004). Not only this, but they must also face their own expectations, disappointments and fears that arise as they create a family in a way that goes against the dominant social scripts. As Sara (GGMGM), for example, writes of her own coming out experience and rethinking her ideas of what her future family might look like, "I found myself inexplicably flooded with grief as I kissed goodbye some

mainstream, hetero-, white-picket-fence image of marriage and family. An image that had never really fit, to begin with.”

I have divided this theme into three subsections: “Origins”, which considers the norms of biological connection, normative conception and adaptation to the script; “Starved for Queer Content”<sup>51</sup> describes the effect living in a heterosaturated culture has on queer families while “A Place at the Table” speaks to the way in which the bloggers worked to carve out a space for themselves as parents outside of the mother/father binary.

### *Origins*

Both Sarah (MR) and Nat (IR) speak to the heartache caused by having to find, choose, and use a donor. This did not surprise me, given the way in which Canadian and American culture socializes it’s citizens to see their future children as a product of the two parents who intend to raise the child. As Sarah writes,

Do I resent the fact that Tammy and I cannot combine our genes to create a child? Yes. Selfishly, deep down in my reptilian heart, I’m damn angry that we cannot have a child that is created out of our deep love for each other. I’m angry that our child will not look like both of us. I’m angry that all of the little quirks that combine to make Tammy the lovable, exasperating, funny, and gloriously wonderful human being she is will not be reflected in our child.

Nat writes,

When I wake in the morning to the teary eyed gaze of the love of my life leaning over and whispering, "I wish you could just roll on top of me and make me pregnant," I have to wonder about this desire for offspring in conjunction with the inability for our bodies together to create new life. Of course, we have the wonderful muscle push of my hand surrendering someone else's sperm into her special parts, but it is nothing like the jiz really belonging to me.

Adaptation of the heteronormative script is not easy – Nat wonders above about their desire for children coupled with their inability to conceive together; PartnerA and Sea

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<sup>51</sup> “Starved for queer content” is quoted from Sara’s blog, “Gay Girls Make Great Moms”.

(BFTS) describe the “crazy” process of the business of fertility clinics and using donor sperm to conceive. In reflecting on the memory of their final IUI, Sea remarks,

Frankly, the whole process *is* crazy what with the whole being inseminated by a strange man with another strange man’s sperm. It’s all rather bizarre that this is a thing that people do. That this is a thing that *we* have done. Indeed, we have done it while grinning and bopping our heads in unison to the latest catchy sugar-sweet teeny-bopper pop hit [on the radio station played in the clinic].

*Hey, I just met you,  
And this is crazy,  
But here’s my number,  
So call me, maybe?*

As demonstrated above, reconciling the ideas of conceiving and parenting outside of dominant understandings of creating and raising a family is a challenge when having been socialized with particular models and teachings of each. PartnerA (BFTS) writes that her mother was insisting that she share details about the donor (who Sea and PartnerA have nicknamed “Lefty”). PartnerA writes,

I refused to answer. The truth is that a lot of time, thought and discussion went into picking our donor(s) ... The choice was partly made because he resembled Sea, partly because we wanted a Jewish donor, mainly because a lot of his quirks and comments just made him feel right. But it’s also the truth that it doesn’t matter who Lefty is: Lefty’s sperm isn’t going to be the parent of our child. Bingo may end up with my dimples or large head or Lefty’s nose, it’s true, but Bingo is also going to end up with the values, habits, expressions and quirks that will come from being raised by me and Sea. ... So I told my mother that we had closed our eyes and pointed. That we had flipped a coin. She wasn’t satisfied, but those are the only answers that she’s going to get. And, at the end of the day, how much difference is there really between a coin toss and a spreadsheet? All that we can do is make the best choices that we can, and trust that Bingo will be who Bingo is meant to be.

PartnerA’s response illustrates the way in which she and Sea had found a balance between genetics (seeking a donor that resembles Sea) and the impact of parenting. Sarah (MR), in a similar manner, writes,

Our child will grow up knowing a kind man, called a donor, gave a small bit of himself to help Mama and Mommy make her. Parts from Mommy and parts from

the donor made her who she is. She will know that Mama and Mommy are her parents, and that families come in all shapes and sizes. I'm a firm believer that genetics are only a part of who you are...but it's easy for me to say that, as a person who knows all about her family.

The ambivalence noted at the end of that quote speaks to the emphasis placed on knowing one's origins, and the way in which conception using donor sperm challenges the social scripts. In raising children conceived through donor sperm, lesbian women are working against the model of family that underscores the importance of roots traced through a family tree, while also making choices that often reflect their social upbringing having taken place within that traditional system.

#### *Starved for Queer Content*

An important theme emerging from the data was that of a lack of reflection in mainstream culture. Queer parents and their children look for themselves (and their families) in the larger culture, and without finding this reflection a feeling of disquiet is evident (Gabb 2004). Even when immersed in an urban, queer positive environment, Sara notes that,

Just like his mommies, who will religiously watch the latest dyke flick or devour the latest lesbo-novel even if it got panned by the critics, our son, too, is starved for queer content that reflects his experience of the world back at him. He can see for himself that he's the only one in his class who made a collage with two moms, and that most of the other kids have a mom and a dad at home.

Sara's was the first blog I read and these words of being "starved for queer content" stayed with me as a read through the remaining blogs. This experience was expressed in a variety of ways, both in terms of hunger for and the lack of queer representation. Sea, for example, wrote lengthy posts about her struggle to understand where she fit as a parent, especially at the beginning of their TTC journey. Sea confides in her readers,

Every time these damn forms [at the fertility clinic] emphasize my lack of maleness. Every time my therapist equates me to a not-quite-‘father’. Every time PartnerA’s mother insists that PartnerA must expressly forbid me from having any genetic relation to *PartnerA’s* someday-baby. I want to cry. No, sob. Who am I, really? No one. Nothing. Who am I kidding, claiming that PartnerA’s child will be equally mine? That’s a lie. She’ll always have biology on her side.

Would the struggle haven been so intense for Sea if non-biological lesbian motherhood was socially represented and readily accepted? The theme of hunger for representation re-occurred in Sara’s blog (GGMGM) when a follower comments,

I really appreciate your posts about the experiences you and your partner have had raising your son. Thank you. Im [*sic*] so hungry for them. I’m struggling to find stories and experiences like my own. ... I’m so proud to be creating our family together ... It does feel like the most natural thing and the most radical notion all at once. Are there others like me who have walked this road? How do I find my sisters?

The thanks that were reflected here, the search for more connection, and “hunger” for examples of counter-narratives were common themes in the comments left by followers of the blogs in this study.

Nat (IR) describes her experience, in terms of the saturation of heterosexual representation and invisibility of queer persons, as being stifling. She also describes feeling conflicted as she and KK attempt to create their own family within the structure of a monogamous relationship, worrying about participating in the system that oppresses her:

yes heterosexual privilege is a beast looming over my shoulder. it has hot breath and it stinks. and guess what i am tired of it not being looked at or dissected or challenged. can you all even believe that some of the robo calls for prop 8 said things about there being an overwhelming amount of gay characters on television. yeah right, sometimes i crave queer representation in pop culture or in my day-to-day life so bad that i have to watch [the movie *But I’m a Cheerleader*] for the umpteenth time or re-read [*Annie on My Mind*] again and again to get my fix.

The blogs studied make queer families and the issues they face more visible through the public sharing of stories online. As described previously with regard to her motivations in maintaining a blog, PartnerA felt the need to keep blogging even when feeling vulnerable in doing so. She indicated that she understood that often the people finding her blog were those seeking information and validation of their experiences. As one follower of Sarah's (MR) wrote, "It's great to read your posts and feel like we are not traveling through this new world all alone. This isn't a time to be crippled with fear of rejection or judgment, it's a time of celebration and showing off the small miracles we have inside of us."

#### *A Place at the Table*

With the exception of "The Mamas RapsCALLION" (Sarah and her partner Tammy) where gender identity of the parents was not specifically addressed, all bloggers self-identified in some gendered way, using terms such as butch, gender non-conforming, queer or femme/feminine presenting. As lesbian mothers, the bloggers in this study describe how they and their partners are displaced by the hegemonic expectations of gendered appearances: feminine-presenting biological mothers are often assumed to be heterosexual mothers (Stein 1997); non-biological mothers (however they present in terms of gender) are often a puzzle to those trying to place them within the family structure (Naples 2004); and non-gender conforming biological mothers rupture the boundaries of the mother identity altogether (Dozier 2014; Jiménez 2014). None of the bloggers in this study chose to identify as "dad" although some of the non-gender conforming bloggers made mention of being "more like the dad than the mom" (Sammie, BFTS). Sara (GGMGM) acknowledges Amanda's amusement in their son calling her a

“Mama Daddy”. Dominant conceptions of “mother” and “motherhood” are held rigid with expectations of heterosexual and normatively-gendered identifications (Park 2013), and all of the women in this study work to adapt this role for themselves as they build their “mother” identities.

Nat (IR) says of her role as a non-biological parent with no officially recognized role or title, “I am this floater. I am an interloper. I am a third wheel. I am a parent defining my own path as I go along.” The significance of Nat’s reflection is summed up in both her description of the way she views the world around her as well as her determination to move past it all:

I know I am not less than. I know I am totally capable of co-parenting well, but institutional hate and oppression are strong forces and these forces can impale people with a distinct set of hurts that in turn keep us, at times, wallowing in dangerous cycles of sadness, nihilism, and violence. Of course, I also am resilient and contrary. I am willing and able to rise above these circumstances. But, all of this has given me pause and the need to reflect and reframe in order to survive these times.

Sea (PartnerA’s partner, BFTS), as a potential non-biological mother, struggles with the lack of a role or a place to occupy as she and PartnerA begin the process of choosing a fertility clinic. Already unsure that she wants to embark on parenthood at all, she writes in a guest post of their first visit to a fertility clinic,

I counted my calm in milligrams, pushed the revolving door around with my forearms, and channeled a new character – Prospective Non-Bio Parent. My existence now is a negative. An anti-hero, perhaps, PNBPN printed across my chest, cape draped and limply hanging, weighted down with its own inadequacy. ... Today, wearing Superman underwear for courage, I stepped into a mirrored elevator and stared myself in the eye as though meeting the gaze of a stranger. ‘Superheros fly,’ I reminded my reflection, then I took a deep breath and jumped.

The extent to which Sea’s entry into parenthood is met with what she describes as a void is a significant obstacle to negotiate. With Sea describing herself as presenting as more

feminine in gendered appearance and PartnerA describing herself as non-gender conforming, families like theirs significantly push the boundaries of motherhood. Both PartnerA and Sea write about the frustrations of misrecognition, stemming from expectations that a biological mother would have a feminine appearance (and so Sea is assumed to be pregnant). In many instances, they indicate, these encounters took place within medical establishments; most notably in the fertility clinic that they had chosen in part for being described as the most queer-friendly by friends and acquaintances. As PartnerA writes of an encounter with a clinic staff member at the beginning of their journey,

...he felt the need to pause and ask, ‘So, you’re the patient?’ This is the third or fourth time this question has been asked by various staff at [the clinic], and I find it infinitely annoying. They may just want to know how a couple with two uteri and no sperm decide on how to have a baby: a coin toss? Rock, paper, scissors? But I can’t help but read it as a comment on gender. Really? You? Yes. Me.

Sara (GGMGM), who self-identifies as femme, felt challenged when it came to the ultra-feminization of maternity wear. She also acknowledged, however, that in comparison to her partner, “it was much easier for me, the pregnant dyke. My bulbous belly gave me instant access to the private club of expectant moms [in the prenatal class] – there was no question what my role was in the coming birth dance.” PartnerA and Sea (BFTS), however, describe their entire journey as marked by the social confusion over a queer-identified biological mother and feminine-presenting non-biological mother. The blog receives comments thanking them for sharing their experiences, especially from those who are in similar positions and struggling to make space for themselves.

Sea does eventually settle in to the TTC experience and she seems to find her footing. She says when they do get a positive pregnancy test that she is “rather excited

about [the pregnancy].” One notable shift came after a post she wrote where she tells readers that she didn’t plan to attend the appointments at the fertility clinic as she felt that she had no physical role to play in the process. In the post, she also talks about the baby as “really” being PartnerA’s:

... ‘our’ baby is in reality Partner A’s baby. Full stop. Partner A’s baby created by a doctor with a syringe of a stranger’s semen beneath a paper gown, ankles shackled in metal stirrups in a clinic exam room after a battery of mandatory invasive and painful medical procedures designed to treat the clinically infertile at a cost of potentially tens of thousands of dollars. My existence is literally purposeless. The worth of my presence in all of this is merely my credit card limit.

Several comments followed from readers who indicated the importance of her presence and sharing in the experiences as she and PartnerA build their family together. A particularly long and thoughtful comment left by a reader about the experience of being a non-biological mother was poignant in its description of parenting outside the norm, an excerpt of which is provided here:

Critter shares the genes of someone I’ve never met, and he doesn’t share mine. He never will. That is the truth, and it’s a strange thing to think of occasionally. But this is also the truth: there is no possible way that any child could be more mine than Critter is. I could clone myself and the result would not be more my child than he is. A parent is one who parents, and it’s all about the doing. Every experience that we share, every one of my habits he emulates or faces he makes, those are informing the person Critter is becoming. The stories that he inherits will be our families’ stories, both [my partner]’s and mine.

These comments may have helped Sea in piecing together a vision of her role in the TTC process and as a parent without genetic ties to her child. She goes from describing herself as “purposeless” to, in the end, attending appointments, indicating that she felt it important that she be there, and writing about her excitement about the pregnancy as things progressed. In the end, she shaped her vision of herself as a mother with the help of the support from the blogging community who could understand her ambivalence.

As demonstrated by the information provided above and in the analysis of these blogs, the breadth of identification and the adaptation of mother/father roles work to broaden the social categories related to parenting. Publically blogging about the experience of challenging these roles highlights the binary and the difficulty in creating a space outside of the normative categories, and it also provides reflection and models to readers seeking to define their own parental space.

### **Theme Three: Lived Experiences of Heterobias**

Each of the bloggers recounts stories that describe times where they have been challenged by normative expectations. Grouped by blog title, I have included below a selection of these stories as examples that demonstrate the various ways in which gender norms, heteronormativity, heterosexism and homophobia are faced in the lives of these bloggers.

#### *“Beginning From the Start”*

PartnerA (BFTS) writes on several occasions about having a difficult time being recognized as being pregnant, even in her third trimester. She describes herself as always having been a bit “chubby” but chalks it up to more than that, given that she does not fit the traditionally feminine mold. She notes that even at seven months pregnant, “... people don’t expect to see me pregnant – so they don’t.” She recounts how meeting someone on the street can be an uncomfortable experience of misrecognition and confusion, writing that when “[h]earing that we’re going to become parents, the acquaintance or stranger will look from me, to Sea, back again, only to ask if we’re using a surrogate, adopting, etc.” Her experience as a non-gender conforming woman is recurring topic in posts about their TTC and pregnancy journey.

Sea, as the feminine-presenting, non-biological mother, is also misrecognized and questioned. Sea writes of an uncomfortable encounter when mowing the lawn and being stopped by their neighbor, aghast that Sea is mowing “in her condition”. Sea then has to clarify for the neighbour, who made assumptions based on gendered appearances, that PartnerA is the one who is pregnant.

Late in her pregnancy, PartnerA goes for an ultrasound. Sea describes the experience in the waiting room at the clinic:

I chose a seat against the far wall as PartnerA approached the reception desk to check-in. Immediately, the receptionist curtly announced that I, not PartnerA, would need to complete the patient intake paperwork. PartnerA ignored her and printed her name at the top of the form. Her undeniably female name. Then PartnerA handed over her insurance card bearing the same undeniably female name. The receptionist glanced at the form, then glanced at the card, then glanced up at PartnerA, then glanced back at the form, and a switch flipped in her head. “Oh, uh, uh, um-” she stammered. Then, “How many weeks are you?” she inquired, eyeing PartnerA’s rounded belly beneath her men’s polo shirt, undoubtedly attempting to reconcile reality with her initial perception of PartnerA as male. Embarrassed and uncomfortable, the receptionist then swiped PartnerA’s intake form from the desk and dashed away out of sight down a hallway toward the exam rooms, perhaps to warn the ultrasound technician of the apparently baffling gender presentation of her next patient. To warn the technician that our fetus might be a tiny male with a tu-tu or a tiny female with a tool belt as though straight women’s uteri glow gently in reassuring, sex-conforming blue or pink and ours? Green? Purple? RAINBOW?!!”

Both Sea and PartnerA describe the misrecognition as uncomfortable and tiresome, and it continues throughout the blog.

### *“Gay Girls Make Great Moms”*

Sara (GGMGM) describes an experience of being unrecognized as a couple in a maternity wear store. The clerk, in trying to place their relationship, refers to Amanda as Sara’s mother. The clerk is flustered when Sara corrects her, and for Sara it is the first hint at their misfit status in the world of parenting:

This was my first inkling that as expectant queers, we'd entered a whole other world. We were interlopers in the hetero-normative zone of pregnancy, childbirth and parenthood. Our maternity care providers were a pair of lesbian midwives, so we'd been sheltered from this reality for the first few months, until my growing belly started outing me as a mom-to-be and strangers were left scrambling to figure out where Amanda fit into the equation.

Several years into their parenting journey, the questioning and explanation of the family continues. Sara describes her son's first full day of elementary school where she watched with conflicted emotions as her child entered the school with his peers. As she did so, she was questioned by another mother about Sara's relationship to her son, given that another, mother-seeming woman had accompanied him to visit the school the day before. Sara explains to the stranger that she and Amanda were both mothers to their son. Sara writes that the woman then wanted to know who the birth mother was, a question that Sara indicates tested her patience in that moment. She writes:

It wasn't as though she was trying to be rude – her heteronormative assumptions had simply been smashed by my family unit and, to her credit, she was doing her best to take it all in stride. But today, the heaviness of my son's first proper day of school weighed on my heart and I wasn't in the mood to explain my family's queerness. In fact, at that very moment, I was irritated by the fact that I perpetually have to do so.

Sara writes that the stranger "smiles knowingly" at hearing that Sara is the birth mother, saying that she could tell based on the tears in Sara's eyes as she watched her son go. In doing so, I read this as the woman reinventing Sara and Sara's family for herself. She fits Sara into the scheme of natural mother-ness, confiding that she felt the same when her daughter started kindergarten and saying to Sara, "It's so hard when we've carried them in the womb." In elevating Sara to the true-mother status, she excluded Sara's partner Amanda from the equation. This was not lost on Sara, who describes how she finds herself

... at a loss for words. Clearly, she's just trying to be sympathetic, wanting to forge a connection with a fellow mother. But she's unwittingly pushed some major buttons. Yes, watching my son take this crucial step away from me towards independence is heart-wrenching – but his transition into kindergarten has also been really intense for Amanda, his non-biological mom. And having watched queer friends go through the same process with their adopted son a year earlier, I know that it's equally loaded for adoptive moms, too.

While Sara indicates that she wants to say something about this to the other mother, she does not, saying, "...today I'm just too tired. Today I just want to be left in peace, to deal with my own feelings around my son's fleeting childhood – not deliver a crash-course on Diverse Families 101." Sara acknowledges that she is sensitive in this interaction as she finds herself "raw with grief" having recently come to terms with their inability to conceive a second child. As she watches her son reach these milestones, she writes that she is saddened to know that she will not experience these steps again with a second child.

*"The Chronicles of a Non-Belly Mama"*

Sammie (CNMB) has twins who were carried by her partner Callie. Sammie attempts to induce lactation in order to share in the breastfeeding of the babies. She notes that Callie is ambivalent about breastfeeding and so the arrangement suited them both. She also expresses a desire to carry their next child, using Callie's eggs. Sammie describes how people tried to reconcile the idea of butch-identified Sammie as pregnant, as well as choosing to breastfeed babies that she didn't birth. Knowing that her outward appearance doesn't match the expectation of a nursing mother, she worries about inducing lactation, "But how comfortable will I really feel when I'm at a public park and my 3 month old starts wailing cause he's hungry, and it's time to whip my boob out and nurse him? Will I hide my head in shame even though I know I'm doing the right thing?"

Sammie works to reconcile her fears of being questioned with her desire to breastfeed her twins and carry their next child. In voicing those fears, she receives much support and reassurance from the readers who leave comments.

*“Injection Reflections”*

Heterobias and homophobia are significant, oft-occurring topics in Nat’s blog. She remarks on the everyday reminders, such as the mother-father-child depiction of family found on the “family parking” designated spots in parking lots. She describes the discomfort of being with her baby daughter at the mall in a conservative town, “I felt like a rhino on the loose amidst florescent lights and too much stuff. I really did get scowls and disapproving stares.”

Nat comments more than once about her inability to marry KK legally, as well as on the ban on second-parent adoptions in her state. While she indicates that she does not want to be married,<sup>52</sup> saying that she is “critical of the institution of marriage”, she is also aware that without a legal marriage to KK and without the right to a second-parent adoption, her rights to guardianship are unprotected. In talking about the laws that stop Nat and KK from being able to access the services of a fertility clinic and have KK inseminated with fresh, known donor sperm via IUI, Nat remarks that,

all in all, there are just so many layers of shit to wade through for queer folks (and many other groups of people) because so many lawmakers are either not expert enough at looking at the ramifications of their lawmaking, deliberately make laws that oppress whole groups of people, or make laws without really thinking about how those laws impact their whole constituency. ... i know i should not get my panties in such a bunch about a simple little clause in the health code that makes it illegal to shoot fresh sperm directly into the uterus, but frankly if government is so worried about the spread of stds shouldn't they create laws that stop strangers from going home together and fucking...oh maybe that is on the horizon--no fucking for straights. shouldn't we station cops at bars and have them hound the

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<sup>52</sup> Instead, she and KK decide to celebrate their partnership by inviting their friends and family to an “unwedding”.

boys and girls sniffing each other out for sex? oh, wait gay folks have already been subjected to this kind of monitoring...and still are.

Of all of the bloggers, Nat and KK are the only ones using a known donor and attempting at-home inseminations. Laws that prevent them from marrying and each being recognized as full and equal parents to a child resulting from their efforts leaves them in a potentially vulnerable position. This is true for Nat especially and she is acutely aware of this fact. As they do become parents, Nat describes in one of her last posts feeling hurt and vulnerability when her toddler daughter was in a long phase of preferring KK over Nat. As Nat explains, “I do not need the state to recognize me, but when the words out of my daughter’s mouth reflect the rhetoric of state policies and laws (not you, not you, not you), the damage is amplified in a turn of the screw, a shove of the blade, a kick to the shin.”

Nat (IR) mentions the way in which her partner KK has no trouble in being perceived as mother to their daughter, and how difficult it is to be a non-biological mother. She confides in her readers,

And, when I am totally honest, it is so very difficult living in a place where there are not very many other people like me...Ultra-butch and parenting a young child with a cis woman partner who presents as femme. There is no doubt that [KK] is Willa’s mama. There is doubt from bystanders and the public and maybe even friends and even my own self that I am Willa’s mama.

Eventually, years into becoming a parent, Nat does manage to secure an adoption of Willa. She says that she has decided not to post details about the process but notes that she would be happy to provide details via private messages with those seeking information about how they might go about doing the same. What she does emphasize, however, is how in the process of fighting for a recognized place as a parent, she has

... experienced layers of quiet and internalized trauma that I am only just recognizing as having psychological and physical ramifications. Homophobia and heterosexism ravage real harm on people. I have known this, and I get this now more than I ever did before because I have felt the harm to my psyche in these last few years in real concrete ways.

*“The Mamas Rascalion”*

One of the topics that came up again and again for Sarah (MR) was the cost of their pregnancy attempts. This is not surprising, given that as previously noted Sarah and Tammy spent approximately \$45,000 on fertility treatments to have daughter Ellie. Before deciding to move on to IVF treatments, Sarah writes, “...we are rapidly running out of money. This [IUI] cycle is being paid for by my year-end work bonus, and next cycle (please GOD let there not be a need for a next cycle) will be paid for by our tax returns. After that we’re shit out of luck.”

Eligibility for insurance coverage for fertility treatments varies from state to state and Sarah does not reveal which state they live in. As of June 2014, fifteen states have laws in place requiring “insurers to either cover or offer coverage for infertility diagnosis and treatment. Thirteen states have laws that require insurance companies to cover infertility treatment” (“State Laws Related to Insurance Coverage for Infertility Treatment” 2014).<sup>53</sup> This requirement does not come without provisions, however. Maryland, for example, is included in the list of states requiring that insurance coverage for fertility treatment be provided, including IVF treatments – to the exclusion of lesbian patients among others, as the “law includes a requirement that only the husband's sperm can be used in any covered in vitro procedure” (Dresser 2015), a requirement that is

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<sup>53</sup> In Canada, “Provinces generally pay for the investigation of infertility and some surgeries (e.g. to remove endometriosis or repair blocked fallopian tubes); some also cover at least part of the cost of ovulation induction and/or intrauterine insemination, while only Quebec and Ontario pay for IVF” (“Insurance/IVF Funding” 2015).

being contested in Maryland at the time of this writing. Sarah writes that their insurance would have been more comprehensive had they not left the state they had lived in previously and had they not been lesbians:

We used to live in a state where there was coverage but HA HA SUCKERS it didn't apply to us. It applied to those individuals who used their husbands sperm i.e. no lesbians or single women or hetero couples with severe MFI<sup>54</sup> who decided to use a donor. Because obviously, those of us in the previously mentioned categories do not deserve to have children. Obviously.

After successfully conceiving through IVF at an out of pocket cost of \$22,000, Sarah writes that it was profoundly frustrating to know that some of the same drugs she was taking to get pregnant (and was still required to take in the first bit of her pregnancy to help maintain the pregnancy), which she reported costing her hundreds of dollars a month, were suddenly covered by her insurance given her new "pregnancy 'status'".

#### **Theme Four: Anticipation, Worry**

A trend amongst the bloggers emerged in the realization that as a family, the lesbian status of the mothers was brought to the forefront. This took the form of the outsiders view into/curiosity about the family, as well as how the mothers perceived their families and their place in the world. This theme is divided into two sections: "Waiting" and "(Quieting) Internalized Homophobia and Fears". The first section speaks to the guardedness felt by the bloggers as they described anticipating the potential for difficulty for themselves and their families as they moved through the social world, whether these scenarios were actualized or not. The second section notes the ways in which these bloggers grappled with internalized homophobia as it relates to raising a family outside of the traditional scripts, but also their resilience as they worked to quell these fears.

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<sup>54</sup> Male Factor Infertility

## *Waiting*

In describing the experience of creating a baby shower registry at a big-box baby store, Sammie (CNBM) writes, “The whole same sex parents thing wasn’t even noticed, which has always been a concern of mine. Being the non-belly mama, you sort of expect to get overlooked often, and luckily, that hasn’t really happened to me yet. Still waiting though.” Whether or not these concerns come to fruition, they suggest a level of social monitoring (watching and “waiting”) undertaken based on an awareness of breaking with normative social expectations.

More often than not the bloggers described a heightened sense of sensitivity to social situations as they became pregnant and subsequently became parents. Generally, PartnerA (BFTS) describes herself as someone who is content in her non-conforming gender identity and blind to the stares of others as she makes her way through the world. She describes a significant shift when she becomes pregnant; she worries for the family they were creating and the way they will be received by the world around them. Nat (IR), too, notices a shift, “As a parent, I never realized how in my face gender expression (which I have thought deeply about—and actively performed—for the better part of my life) would be. ... And, now I am thinking and living through it all so much more forcefully in the mama context.”

Parenting concerns ranged from general, such as Sea’s (BFTS) concerns about “good” parenting: “I’m scared that I don’t know what to do because the only parents I’ve ever experienced were mine. What if I don’t know how to be loving? Nurturing? Selfless?”; to more specific concerns about being a two-mom family as expressed in Sea’s same post: “What if it’s a boy and, uh, penis? Is there a ‘So You Know Nothing

About Penises 101' wikiHow or something?! Seriously though, how do you learn these things?!"

Bloggers also expressed concern about how they and their children would be received by the culture that surrounds them. Sara (GGMGM) talks about the specific fears lesbian mothers have for their children as they grow and make their way into the social world, as well as the general fears parents have as their children grow into further independence: "As queer parents, there's always that additional, niggling worry – how will our family be received by the school? And most importantly, how will our gentle, sensitive, trusting boy continue to grow and make his way in a world that doesn't always smile kindly on queer families?"

At times, this unkindness comes from families of origin. Sarah (MR) and her partner Tammy struggle with homophobia in Tammy's family, particularly with her sister. The sister, Sarah writes, already refuses to acknowledge Sarah and Tammy's marriage and leaves the room with her children if it is brought up. As Sarah tells it,

She can ignore the fact of our marriage if that's what gets her rocks off, but she cannot, let me repeat that, cannot, ignore our child. Our child is going to be a member of her family, like it or not. The second she makes my child feel any less than is the second we have a serious, serious problem. I don't even really know what I would do in that situation, but given her reaction, and her behavior surrounding our wedding, I feel like I should be prepared.

Whether or not these potentially difficult situations do arise or not, all of the bloggers indicated a level of, as Sammie noted above, "waiting", but also the willingness to "be prepared" (Sarah, MR) to defend one's family.

#### *(Quieting) Internalized Homophobia and Fears*

Despite the readiness to defend the family, it is important to also note the self-doubt expressed by the bloggers. This was especially so for the non-biological mothers

and was significant in comments made about the “real mom”. As Sea (BFTS) writes, “Some days I’m convinced that I’m a hopeless, worthless excuse for a human being and I’ll screw up and I’ll traumatize the child and it will hate me and it will run to its ‘real’ mommy and PartnerA and the baby will abandon me and live happily ever after far, far away.” Sammie (CNBM) fears that her bond with her children won’t be as strong since she lacks the “biological” connection. She also worries that her place as a parent will be rejected by them:

I have some issues not being the belly-mama. I always feel like my bond with my tykes probably won’t be as strong or as prevalent as it is with Callie, who carried them. I know that it is probably ludicrous, but it’s a legitimate fear. ... [they might say] things like ‘I don’t have to listen to you! You’re not my REAL mother!’ Even the thought of that boils and freezes my blood all at the same time.

Nat’s experience of her daughter, a toddler at the time, going through a phase of preferring KK, the biological mother, stirs up a lot of painful emotions. She writes,

I have been trying to sort out why, some of the time, I react so badly to Willa’s normal (according to so many parenting sources) toddler rejection behavior. And, the more I search, the more I directly relate my reactions to the layers of internalized homophobia and insecurities that ride side car to all of my own internalized oppression.

Nat describes how she struggles with her daughter’s rejection of her and the State’s refusal to name her as a parent. She finds herself at times doubtful of her place, writing, “There is no doubt that k is Willa’s mama. There is doubt from bystanders and the public and maybe even friends and even my own self that I am Willa’s mama” yet she also works to defend her place,

I came into this after much study, deliberation, thought, reflection, conversation, and seeking with my beloved. We decided to have K work to conceive a kid. I aided throughout. I joke that my spit mingled with the sperm, and willa has my stubborn streak to prove it. I have been with willa always, from the get go. My name should have been on her birth certificate from the day she came tumbling out onto our sheets.

The fears and internalized homophobia are not limited to the non-biological mothers. Sarah (MR), in grieving a miscarriage and also worrying over her difficulties conceiving, writes, “I’m grieving because of the questions that pop up in my head at particularly bad moments; questions like ‘am I really a woman if I can’t even perform a basic goddamn biological function?’ Questions like ‘are the haters right? Is there a god, and is s/he punishing me for being a lesbian?’” Sara (GGMGM) indicates that she and her partner live in a part of Vancouver that is noted for its queer presence. They choose daycares and schools that come recommended by other queer parents. Yet, even in a queer-friendly area of Vancouver, their son’s lack of a “daddy” is not lost on him. He tells his mothers that he wants a daddy too, and his desire for this parental figure is significant for Sara, who writes,

As I crossed the school parking lot clutching my son’s little hand, his simple yet oh-so-complicated want still ringing in my ears, I could picture the entire Christian Right wagging their righteous fingers at Amanda and me, proclaiming: “We told you so!” I momentarily kicked myself. We’d had the best intentions to surround my son with positive, male role models, pseudo-Daddy figures, but had been sorely falling short. We’re a bunch of dykes, after all – there are not a lot of men in our close, inner circle. My son’s grandfather and uncles live so far away, and we’ve fallen hopelessly out of touch with our closest gay friends, all of whom are childless. Then I quickly got a grip: my son’s got two loving parents and a supportive, nurturing home. He’s growing up just fine.

These concerns about a father also extend towards concerns about a child’s donor. As Sarah (MR) writes,

I worry that our child will at some point start to romanticize the donor, or think of him as her dad. Will she wish that she was growing up with him and not us? Probably at some point she will. She will probably say something along those lines to us when she is angry at us. But as much as I try to prepare myself for that moment (or those moments) I know that hearing it will be like a knife in my heart. What happens if our daughter feels like we robbed her of something? What if she resents us? What if her life is less than, because she didn’t grow up knowing what Tammy and I both knew about our families?

While expressing their fears, several parents also assuage themselves as Sara (GGMGM) does above (“Then I quickly got a grip: my son’s got two loving parents and a supportive, nurturing home. He’s growing up just fine.”) and as Sea does below,

But so long as your kid makes it to adulthood with the understanding that you were well-intentioned, so long as your kid becomes a reasonably well-adjusted and self-sufficient contributing member of society, so long as your grown kid loves you, you probably did okay. I’ll probably do okay, huh? And I’m not in this alone. PartnerA and I will do okay. Right?

Sammie makes similar comments in her own posts, reassuring herself that her parenting skills are good and her relationship with her partner strong, “We might just do alright! I might just be cut out for this ‘mom’ business.”

In the stories bloggers tell, what was apparent was that there is a delicate balance to strike: these bloggers worked to move beyond the fear with often fierce, mama-bear protectiveness of their roles and their families while also negotiating the internalized messages of their own heteronormative social upbringing.

### **Theme Five: Everyday Acts of Activism**

While each blogger describes difficult situations, each also describes ways that they engage in what I coded as “everyday acts of activism”. The activism here took the form of being unapologetically visible as individuals and as a family, and in correcting heteronormative assumptions. Essentially, accounts of everyday activism took the form of “talking back” to the larger culture and stemmed from the fundamental desire to be recognized as mothers, partners, and as a family in situations where their existence was denied, unseen, erased, or downplayed. Their actions are important strategies for resistance to the dominant cultural expectations, and the ripple effect such resistance can have in initiating change.

Sarah (MR) describes the experience she and Tammy had in a Lamaze class. As the only lesbian couple there, Tammy's place as a (non-biological) mother was made invisible as the instructor generally referred to the non-pregnant partners as "husbands" and "dads". Sarah tells of an incident where the class was split into two groups - pregnant mothers and fathers/partners - for a conversation about birth and parenting. Tammy was instructed to stay with the pregnant women. As Sarah notes,

I know [the instructor] was coming from a good place ... but honestly, as Tammy told me later, she would have felt much better with the partner group, even though she would have been the only woman. The pregnant women group mostly talked about physical ailments of being pregnant, feeling the baby move, concerns/hopes/fears about the delivery, postpartum recovery, etc. Tammy can relate to that, but only as much as the rest of the partners could. Yes, she's a woman who is the proud owner/operator of a uterus, but that uterus has never been occupied by a fetus, and there are no plans that it ever will be. When the partners came back into the room and we shared lists, Tammy sat there thinking, "yep, I have that fear. Yep, I'm excited about that, too."

While in that moment Tammy wasn't comfortable voicing this to the instructor, they did decide to email the instructor to suggest that in the future, she ask a non-biological mother/partner which group she might want to join. In doing so, they allowed for a conversation with the instructor as well as potentially initiating a less alienating experience for subsequent lesbian couples in the class.

Experiences with pregnancy and birthing classes such as this were also described by Sara (GGMGM). Amanda was placed in a similar position to Tammy (MR) and she also felt too uncomfortable to challenge the situation in the moment. Sara and Amanda (GGMGM) later voiced their thoughts to the instructor and eventually, the clinic developed

a special LGBT Birthing From Within course, based on feedback they'd received over the years from dykes like us. Amanda's fantasy of a bunch of queers and their pregnant partners sitting around the circle, shooting the shit, is now a reality,

at least here in Vancouver. The organization even approached me and Amanda personally for input as they shaped the new curriculum.

Notably, a place in which families made space for themselves often came in the shape of modifying intake forms. Enrolling their son in kindergarten, Sara writes, “Amanda took a deep breath, crossed out ‘Father,’ and penned in ‘Mother.’ Here we go, we thought. Welcome to the next twelve years of tirelessly advocating for our right to exist as a family.” In challenging the forms as they exist, however, Amanda and Sara made themselves known and in doing so created the opportunity for change. In this case, the teacher receiving the paperwork, who happened to be gay, brought them to the attention of the principal, ensuring that the forms be updated for the next round of intake. Simply making visible the inequity in the forms, which may not have been on the radar of the person maintaining them, creates the opportunity to change them.

Fertility clinic intake forms were noted in this study as being notoriously heterobiased. Nat (IR) makes reference to making “snarky” comments on intake forms when she and KK visit a fertility specialist. She writes, “The questionnaire [KK] filled out for these people was totally void of questions regarding queer people’s sex lives or practices or anything at all about gayness. I wrote a snarky comment on the back of the sheet and I am sure all the doctors and students and residents got a chuckle.” While Nat doesn’t elaborate, her actions give her a chance to respond, and at least make her visible, where she might otherwise have been invisible (as non-bio mom and not a father), in the process.

Already indicating that she felt out of place in a fertility clinic, Sea (BFTS) describes how she attempted to use some humour in the modification of forms, which were written for a male partner, that she was required to complete. In interviewing three

clinics, she wrote that two had forms that ignored the possibility of her presence to varying degrees. She says of one clinic's heterobias forms,

I tried, anyway, to swallow the lump in my throat and find an ounce of humour in it, modifying the word 'MALE' in the header of the intake form with the prefix 'FE-'. It was an ounce of humour, or tears. I bit my lip and opted for the former. ...PartnerA and I debated what to write on the line requesting my sperm count. 'Zero' seemed appropriate.

Struggling with the idea of becoming a parent, these forms emphasized the feelings of doubt she already held:

Welcome to reality: heterosexism hurts. Every question on 'my' intake form to which I was forced to write 'not applicable' hammered home my inadequacy as a human being. I do not have sperm. I can never be enough. Necessary: Partner A's body, stranger's semen, doctor. Unnecessary: me. I am worthless.

While she doubted her role, she did nonetheless fight for a place for herself in completing them as she did. Her experience is one that speaks to the importance of challenging these forms and their assumptions for personal benefit as well as for others' benefit. Her relief in completing the forms at the clinic they chose, written in a genderless fashion ("those forms, those beautiful forms", she writes), also speaks to the importance of having such inclusive language, as they represented one less barrier on the road to parenthood.

As Margaret Gibson (2014) writes, "the perspectives of queer-identified parents allow us to see how our existing sociocultural scaffolding is constructed. They can point to the gaps or weakened joints that merit our attention as we build and dismantle identities and relations in the everyday"(5). The bloggers in this study do exactly that – in publically posting their stories of lesbian mothering, they knock down the existing heteronormative frameworks for parenting and family. Their words play a role in closing the gap that exists in the reflection of queer identities in the larger social world, refusing to have their stories go unacknowledged.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: Discussion

Representing *is* intervening. (Hacking 1983 paraphrased in Clarke 2007)

### On Entering the Blogosphere

As is appropriate in a feminist reading and analysis of the blogs in this study, my approach was reflexive (McIntosh and Cuklanz 2014). My goal was to balance the acknowledgement of my own context and history while also taking the perspective of the narrators in this study (Charmaz 2014). The posts acted as a view into the narrators' respective worlds, simultaneously similar and dissimilar to each other. Posts represented the bloggers' own interpretation and selective presentation of their respective social worlds; my readings of the blogs were my own interpretations still, and I did my best to consider my preconceptions in the process (Charmaz 2014).

I read and re-read the blogs from start to finish, immersing myself in the data that represented so many personal experiences. My heart sank for bloggers who, in old posts, were hoping for a positive pregnancy test – I had a feeling of being able to see into the future, already knowing the heartache that awaited them. This was especially true for Nat and KK as the blog “Injection Reflections” opened with such optimism and excitement, only to later find such heartache. Although I wasn't a follower or a commenter on any of the blogs, I felt connected to the stories I read. In reading the interactions between bloggers and followers, I could see the importance of the community that was formed, often across blogs as some of the followers were reading and commenting on more than one of the blogs within my study.

I have grouped this chapter into three sections and conclude with suggestions for future research. The first section, titled “Unexpected Outcomes”, discusses the unanticipated findings and trends in my research. The second section, “An Emphasis on Variety”, underscores the impossibility of pinpointing a fixed lesbian/mother identity. The third section, “Agents of Change”, continues the discussion from the previous chapter and emphasizes the way in which the blogs serve as strategies for resistance through representation.

### **Unexpected Outcomes**

I have acknowledged that I come at my research with my own experiences and interpretations of the world around me. As Adele E. Clarke writes, “[t]he material world, including our own embodiment, is present and to be accounted for in our interpretations and analysis.” (2007, 348) Given my own experiences as a lesbian mother in Canada, I had some ideas of what I thought I might find in my reading of these blogs, but I also focused on letting the blogs speak for themselves. There were aspects of the findings of my study that surprised me, challenged me, and forced me to reconsider my expectations. In that, I consider this study a success as I felt able to represent the stories that were examined here by coming back to the data often and re-thinking my findings, checking for my own assumptions as I went along. I describe some of these unexpected outcomes below in three subsections, beginning with “Blogging and Existing Connection” where I explore how I had initially thought I might mainly find examples of bloggers who blogged to alleviate feelings of isolation, however I did not find that to be the case. Next, in “Hunger Despite Urban/Positive Environment”, I found myself reconsidering my assumption that a large, urban, diverse, queer presence was enough to meet the

representational needs for queer parents and their families in their every day lives.

Finally, in “Trying-to-conceive (TTC) Focus, Experiences with Infertility” I describe how my research focus was unexpectedly shifted to emphasize and include the TTC journeys of the bloggers in this study.

### *Blogging and Existing Connection*

As I noted in the previous chapter, many of the bloggers in this study and their followers indicated their great hunger for a reflection of their queer selves and families in their social worlds. The bloggers each described being connected socially to a strong community in their non-virtual lives, whether this came in the form of friends, family, or both. This came as a surprise to me as I expected that I would mainly find examples of bloggers who described feeling isolated offline. While Sarah (MR) described the TTC experience as isolating, it wasn't for lack of support in her daily life as she describes her partner and parents as being supportive and empathetic. She describes her feelings of isolation as more generally attributed to her difficulty conceiving, indicating that was looking for stories of those who were walking the same path. This theme of extension of existing supports and seeking stories that were similar to their own existed in the majority of the blogs as a reason for blogging. As PartnerA (BFTS) writes, “I like sharing stories and seeing how people respond, and I love connecting with other people going through similar processes and experiences around the world.”

In essence, what I found was that it was not that bloggers were looking to find community because they completely lacked it in their daily lives, but rather that blogging enhanced the social supports they already had. As described in Chapter Five (“Data”), blogging provided a different type of outlet for voicing concerns, frustrations, fears, and

joys. It served a journal-style space to reflect that had the added bonus of feedback and conversation with readers. For some, it was a place to speak freely where they might not in real life; for others, it was a place to pass on information and raise issues of queer parenting in a heterobiased culture. Whatever the motivation behind blogging, the end result opens up the potential for connection. As one follower comments after Sea (BFTS) writes a long post exploring her fears in becoming a parent, “You’re not alone in feeling the way you do.” Sea’s post resonated deeply with a number of the blog’s readers, evidenced by the feedback from readers posted in response.

#### *Hunger Despite Urban/Positive Environment*

Originally, my own assumption was that those in smaller communities, with a presumably smaller queer population and presence, would express a greater need for online connection. I cannot comment on this directly as the majority of the bloggers placed themselves in urban areas. I was surprised, however, that it was Sara (GGMGM), living in self-described, queer-positive area of Vancouver, who used the words “starving for queer content.” As described in Chapter Six (Research Findings), this was a common sentiment among the bloggers. Both Sara (GGMGM) and Nat (IR) describe their communities as a queer-positive “bubble”. Each express an appreciation for this when describing homophobic experiences occurring outside of their home communities. It surprised me that those two bloggers, despite their respective “bubbles”, still described themselves as hungering for queer presence/reflection in their lives. Nat writes about the importance of lesbian-themed fiction as an escape for her,

i've been reading any other lesbianesque novel i can get my hands on. I go through these phases once in a while. these times when i cannot handle anymore straightness since it circulates around us like dandelions and grass and wind, essentially it is everywhere.

As previously mentioned, Sara writes about the way in which her young son who, despite the queer community that surrounds them, could not understand why he does not have a father. It was interesting to see that despite the urban, queer-positive daycare and community Sara describes, as well as having uncloseted mothers and being surrounded by other queer families, her son still wondered about “daddy”. At just about three years old, my older son was beginning to question me more often about where his own daddy was (and then, despite my answers, he insisted that his daddy was named Patrick and that he lived in his own house at the other end of the city). When my son was a baby, I had prepared smooth answers to these conversations that I had anticipated occurring. When the questions really began, and I found that he didn’t like my answers, at times my confidence wavered. For this reason, I appreciated Sara’s words as they reflected my own experience back at me despite the difference in our respective community make-up. Nat (IR) and Sara’s (GGMGM) words exemplify the way in which the size of the city and the size of the queer community are not necessarily enough to level out the effects of heteronormativity, especially when it comes to raising children.

*Trying-to-conceive (TTC) Focus, Experiences with Infertility*

The online world is rife with TTC blogs, and specifically queer-themed TTC blogs abound as well.<sup>55</sup> I was not looking for TTC blogs – in truth, I would rather have avoided them as a TTC blog tends to be more narrowly focused on the science of conception. I was looking for blogs narrated by lesbian mothers who had already moved from TTC to parenthood. My rush to move beyond the TTC process was likely a reflection on my own experience: I was lucky to have been easily and quickly pregnant

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<sup>55</sup> A Google search in November 2015 for “TTC blogs” resulted in 5,180,000 hits; “Lesbian TTC blogs” resulted in 215,000 hits; “Queer TTC blog” resulted in 108,000 hits.

with both of my children, never hovering in the limbo of trying and failing to conceive; and as we do not have a fertility clinic in my city I was accessing the limited cycle monitoring at the local hospital. TTC blogs, however, comprised a significant portion of the blogs I found – or, they had started out as TTC blogs and morphed into pregnancy and parenting blogs – and as I read them I understood and appreciated the experience in a new way.

Beyond the science of conception, would-be queer parents are also required to consider the legal, financial and emotional factors that go along with creating family outside of the heteronormative context. All of these factors remain once the child is conceived and born – parents often *continue to* have to consider the legal, financial and emotional factors. The money that was saved is now spent; the loans taken out to achieve conception need to be paid back; the monitoring of the legal status of parentage is ongoing, and perhaps something that needs to be explained to persons outside of the family; and the emotional toll must also be considered as the family negotiates, and perhaps defends, structuring their family outside of a hetero-context. As Nat (IR) notes,

While pursuing conception might not be all that much physical work (that mostly involves driving to retrieve the seed and then relying on the work of the [donor's] hands--or [his] boyfriend's hands--to ejaculate the seed), it is a hell of a lot of emotional work.

While I had no difficulty locating blogs about lesbian mothering, I struggled to find blogs that met my criteria and featured families with children who were somewhat older. I wondered if the proliferation of TTC and early childhood-focused blogs versus blogs written by mothers with older children could be partially attributed to the immediacy and newness of TTC and parenting. Did potential/new mothers have more to say and ask when in the planning and adjustment stages of parenting, versus being knee-

deep in it all (and more experienced as a parent) as children grew? Most often in the blogs I reviewed, writing was detailed and most prolific in the TTC and pregnancy stages, and understandably the writing often drops off once the child is born and the demands of parenting take over. As Sarah (MR) writes, “Sorry for going MIA. I plead newborn”. Later, having returned to work after a short maternity leave, she says,

Hi there. Long time, no post.

I would say I’m sorry (because I am) but I have no real words to offer up in defense. I think of posting often, and have many things I’d like to say to you. But by the time I’ve run through my day of up early/commute/work/pump/commute/pick up baby/home/put baby to bed/eat dinner/sit on couch with no pants I’m totally spent, you know? After dinner is when I could totally try to make something of the dozen-odd half formed posts that live in my drafts folder, but at that point It’s all I can do to keep my eyes open while I prep the baby and myself for the next day.

Like Sarah, previously prolific blogger PartnerA (BFTS) struggles with finding the time to write. After baby “Bingo” is born, she writes, “[t]here are many posts that I want to write. I want to tell you about queerness in queer and parenting communities alike, about donor siblings, about visitors, about no longer blogging anonymously, about everything.” As people tend to warn me, the hectic pace of parenthood only increases – perhaps this is also part of why I was not finding blogs that met my criteria with children of a slightly older age. PartnerA’s words are examples of how blogging beyond the basic details of life takes time, and perhaps the newness and business of parenting in general leaves those with children often unable to publish the posts they get halfway through drafting before being called away. As the children grow and time between blog posts lengthens, a blogger’s connection to their blog and their followers may fade, perhaps replaced by other connections that meet the needs of the blogger.

In this study, of the blogs that began prior to the child(ren) being born, only Sammie (CNBM) managed to keep up with her blogging after the twins arrived. She expressed frustration with blogs that become sporadic or abandoned. She notes that prior to starting her own blog, when reading blogs about lesbian parenting she found herself wanting the rest of the story, especially from butch-identified non-biological mothers like herself. Unlike the other bloggers in this study, Sammie has managed to maintain a relatively consistent rate of published posts on her blog, even during the chaotic first months of welcoming home their newborn twins.

Eventually, I came to appreciate the TTC portions of these blogs as they signify the beginning of a journey that is filled with both roadblocks and joy. One of the most memorable quotes for me came from ParterA's (BFTS) opening post, where she recounts the story of being asked by an ultrasound technician whether she and her presumed husband had already been trying to conceive:

As [the] brusque technician silently squirted gel across my lower belly and began to poke and prod, she asked how many times I had been pregnant. 'Never', I answered. But was I trying to conceive? An interesting question. When does that begin? When a partner relents? When a family doctor makes a referral? When you expose your stomach to a brusque technician and her ultrasound wand? I stumbled over the answer. No, we hadn't started trying. I was in a same-sex relationship, I explained. We needed sperm before we could try to conceive, and to get sperm we needed access to a fertility clinic. As part of the referral to the fertility clinic, my family doctor had sent me to her. First comes love, then comes marriage, then come 32 difficult steps between you and a baby carriage. Silence, again.

All in all, perusing queer-authored TTC blogs makes quite obvious the way in which trying to get pregnant outside of the normalized context of conception can be all consuming. If accessing the aid of a fertility clinic, the medicalization of conception

begins right away with cycle monitoring, which can include frequent ultrasounds,<sup>56</sup> blood tests, and potentially, fertility medications. If trying to get pregnant at home with the aid of a known donor, the daily charting of temperatures and general cycle tracking begins and continues through the month. Again, potentially, there are fertility medications in this case as well. I found in reading these blogs that as time goes on and pregnancy is not achieved, the medical interventions and potential costs increase – a finding also noted by Laura Mamo (2007) – while feelings of hope often plummet. As Sarah (MR) laments,

I'm tired of the two week wait.<sup>57</sup> It fucking blows. I'm tired of feeling like I'm going crazy. ... I'm tired of leaping out of bed to pee on a stick, only to be disappointed. I'm tired of never having any money to spend on anything other than 100% essential items (mortgage, utilities, food). I'm tired of lurking on infertility boards. I'm tired of thinking about the state of my uterus...

The extent to which the TTC portion of the journey was all-encompassing in each of the five blogs, whether described after the fact or not, showed me that it could not be ignored. The journey was significant, as well as being tinged by ever-present heterobias and sometimes homophobia. In a 2014 article for *MUTHA Magazine*, Jennifer Berney (who blogs at [goodnightalready.com](http://goodnightalready.com)) recounts the story of how she and her partner accessed the services of a fertility clinic, bought ten vials of donor sperm, and experienced ten unsuccessful IUIs. Berney writes,

[The doctor] never wished us luck, and no matter how many times we came back, he never expressed concern or curiosity about our lack of success. Ten months later, after we had used our last specimen, I worked up the nerve to ask him a question. It had been nearly a year and we still weren't pregnant. Did he have any suggestions for us? I was hoping he might recommend a pill or a test, something that might cure me or, at the very least, shed some light on the trouble we were having. He looked down at his manila folder and replied, "After six failed

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<sup>56</sup> PartnerA (BFTS) keeps track of her total ultrasound count as part of her blog. It takes four months of trying for them to get pregnant. By the time they had their first ultrasound to check on the baby, she writes that she'd already had 28 ultrasounds in the process of trying to conceive.

<sup>57</sup> The two-week wait (TWW) is the end of the cycle after insemination, the period of time in which the couple can do nothing more but wait to take a pregnancy test.

inseminations, we typically recommend in vitro fertilization. You've failed ten times, so there you are."

While not explicitly said, I read Berney's description of the encounter as homophobic. In the end, she and her partner went on to conceive their children using a known donor, rather than using IVF. The article made me think about the stories of the bloggers in this study and the high rate of infertility reported therein. In the quote above, neither the doctor nor Berney mention switching to a different donor, yet Berney did get pregnant once they changed donors and went with at-home insemination. What other factors are not being considered when there is difficulty conceiving? Of the four infertility cases in this study, only Sara (GGMGM) noted that she was given an official cause of her secondary infertility. Sarah (MR) had used different donors and had medical tests that all came back normal, giving no indication of why she was not getting pregnant. She comments that "... the doctor didn't know why, except to ever so helpfully point out that maybe I wasn't 'the most fertile person' she'd ever seen."

I wonder about the level of consideration given to lesbian fertility care, both for these bloggers and generally within Canadian and American culture. In 2012, *The National Post* reported that as many as sixteen percent of heterosexual Canadian couples are experiencing fertility issues. Not surprisingly, no statistics were provided for same-sex couples, although rates of infertility in the queer population have been reported to be potentially higher for a variety of socio-cultural reasons, including a lack of early detection and/or visits to a physician (Walks 2007). In the present study, the bloggers' reports of heterobias within the world of fertility clinics and other pregnancy-related offices suggest that there is much to be done to fully acknowledge their lesbian patients and the uniqueness of their TTC situations.

## **An Emphasis on Variety**

Given the traditional representation of mothers as feminine, heterosexual women, I had originally envisioned presenting here distinct sections that explored the bloggers' experiences based on gender identity intertwined with biological and non-biological motherhood. I found myself unable to do so, however, as the variety of intersecting identities and family make-ups made it impossible to group bloggers and their partners in any manageable or coherent sort of way. As I grappled with how to present the data, I was reminded that the bloggers represented what May Friedman described when she wrote that "a queer analysis of motherhood allows for an unfixed subjectivity to emerge" (2013, 110).

In this study, the bloggers' experiences of motherhood are intertwined with gendered identifications, ideals of traditional motherhood, and the cultural climate that surrounds them (both in a national sense as well as the regional social environment). Here lay a commonality - not in a particular experience of gendered or parental identity, but in holding or claiming those personal identifications while making one's way through "a world that doesn't always smile kindly on queer families" (Sara, GGMGM). The bloggers in this study collectively challenge heterobased social conceptions of gender, motherhood, sexuality, and the privileging of genetic familial ties. Their distinct gendered and maternal identities (biological, non-biological) however, among other varied and intersecting identifications, make for diverse experiences within these social roles.

In presenting the findings of my analysis, rather than working to group the bloggers in some way, I found that I needed instead to acknowledge the uniqueness of each story in their disruption of the traditional mother/lesbian identities. Julie Thompson

(2002) writes that “The fact that the contestation of lesbian maternal identities occurs in multiple public forums may indicate the extent to which hegemony, rather than locating itself at one cultural site, is instead negotiated at various sites” (122). Similarly, here, the contestation of maternal identification comes from a variety of queer and mothering (ie. biological, non-biological) sources, indicating that lesbian mothers challenge “motherhood” from a variety of angles rather than with a static, singular lesbian voice. As a queer-identified biological mother, for example, PartnerA’s (BFTS), experience differed from the description of motherhood for butch-identified, non-biological mother Amanda (partner to Sara, GGMGM). Despite a shared experience of walking through the world presenting in a non-normatively gendered body, the experience each has as a mother (biological versus non-biological) challenges beliefs about the mother identity in particular and distinct ways. PartnerA defies notions of flowery, feminine pregnant bodies; Amanda challenges notions of both motherhood (in not carrying a child) and fatherhood – Amanda does not identify as a father despite a masculinized identity, although she does, as Sara notes, take some pleasure in their son referring to her as a “Mama Daddy”.

The experiences of feminine-presenting Sara (GGMGM) and Sea (BFTS) differed based on their respective biological and non-biological mother identities. Nat (IR), has a frame of reference that differs from all of the other bloggers when you consider her status as a butch-identified, non-biological mother in combination with her pregnancy and subsequent miscarriage. In that her desire for parenthood did not necessarily include a desire to be pregnant, Nat’s experience contrasted that of butch-identified Sammie (CNBM). Sammie is the only non-biological parent who is waiting for her own turn to

experience pregnancy. She is also the only non-biological parent who wanted to induce lactation to help breastfeed the twins that her partner Callie was carrying. These and other differences amongst bloggers made it impossible to cleanly section out experiences based on a particular gendered or maternal identity. Each of the bloggers and their partners, despite the divergence in their paths, carve out a parental space for themselves outside of the normative schema. Their stories highlight how lesbian mothering is experienced through the muddled intertwining of individual experiences, backgrounds and identifications.

The overarching theme in the blogs, however, was always the same: the weight of heteronormativity, the sting of homophobia, and the heterosexist attitudes that surrounded these families placed a significant burden on them. While their legal status as a parent and/or partner varied from person to person and blog to blog, the feeling of being an “interloper” (Nat, IR; Sara, GGMGM) was commonly shared. While laws that allow for a recognized variation of family formation are emerging, heteronormativity and heterosexism remain.<sup>58</sup> Changes in laws such as lifting the ban on same-sex marriage are often made in the context of human rights, not in a breaking and broadening of social categories of acceptability. Consider, for example, that in 2005 gay marriage was legalized in Canada. Just four years earlier, former Prime Minister Paul Martin had voted against same-sex marriage on the basis of his personal beliefs. In a grand yet problematic speech supporting the legalization of same-sex marriage in 2005, Martin reassures religious groups that their Charter rights would be protected:

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<sup>58</sup> This is seen, as discussed previously, in the case of county clerk Kim Davis refusing to marry same-sex couples despite the United States declaring same-sex marriage legal.

Religious leaders who preside over marriage ceremonies must and will be guided by what they believe. If they do not wish to celebrate marriages for same-sex couples, that is their right. The Supreme Court says so. And the Charter says so.

Martin then places his support for the legalization of same-sex marriage in the context of equality of persons and rights – not in a context of acknowledging a spectrum of acceptable sexual identities. He says,

Four years ago, I stood in this House and voted to support the traditional definition of marriage. Many of us did. My misgivings about extending the right of civil marriage to same-sex couples were a function of my faith, my perspective on the world around us. ... To those who would oppose this bill, I urge you to consider that the core of the issue before us today is whether the rights of all Canadians are to be respected. I believe they must be. Justice demands it. Fairness demands it. The Canada we love demands it. (“Address by Prime Minister Paul Martin on Bill C-38 (The Civil Marriage Act)” 2005)

Martin’s focus on pushing for equal opportunity might *legally* give queer persons the same right to be married (barring being turned away by a religious leader who refuses) but it also maintains a divide with the privileging of heterosexual identities as the primary, default orientation going unchallenged.

### **Agents of Change**

Recently, and not unusually, over the course of three days I faced three situations of explaining and/or outing myself or my family. The first involved my son’s friend at daycare asking why my son didn’t have a daddy; the second was a casual daycare worker who had mistaken my partner and I for sisters (who just happened to always be picking up children together) and our children for cousins; the third being the cashier at the grocery store laughing while telling me a story about a colour-blind friend who had been pranked with a gift of rainbow coloured t-shirt (making him look gay), to which the friend had taken great offense when he found out. All of these experiences took place in casual, every day conversation and are a product of social expectation (all kids have a

mom and a dad; two women together are friends/sisters not partners; “gay jokes” are funny). Knowing that I am not alone in experiencing these types of interactions on a frequent basis makes it somewhat less burdensome, a sentiment shared with the bloggers and their followers in this study. Blogs, and the online world generally, are filled with examples that are like mine, in addition to examples that involve violence both in a physical and emotional sense.

Drawing on José Ortega Y Gasset’s (n.d.) discussion of “finding room” for oneself in the social realm, Nicola Chiaromonte (1958) wrote,

*Not finding room* is an agonizing experience. It means to feel oneself shut out, or at least to risk that; the others are already there, they occupy all, or almost all, the available space. To find room, an effort is necessary; one is obliged to make room for oneself. ... But no one guarantees it to us, apparently, since the simple presence of others in a crowd obstructs and prevents it. And it is also clear that others have the same right as we do. (370)

As a site of “making room” these blogs serve as that effort to create space in the social world, and bloggers know that they may or may not come up against resistance from “others in [the] crowd”. The effects of homophobia and heterobias are present not only in their actual presentation but in the anticipation of such possibility. Sammie (CNBM), as quoted in Chapter Six (“Research Findings”), in her experience of creating a baby registry at a big-box store, describes the experience as uneventful although she went into the situation anticipating that she could be challenged in her status as mother-to-be. Her words, that she was “still waiting” for the challenge to her status in a future encounter, speaks to the constant social monitoring echoed by other bloggers in this study. At times, the result of that monitoring is finding simply that they didn’t fit with the context of the situation and felt acutely aware of it. As Sea (BFTS) describes of a waiting room in an ultrasound clinic,

The clients at this ultrasound clinic were statistically likely to be pregnant via the traditional method. You know, one passionate evening and bam, a fetus! A free, run-of-the-mill, traditionally-created fetus. The reception staff referred to the clients in the lobby as ‘patients’ and ‘husbands’, as though the men in the room could not in this context be anything but. Indeed, seated near the entrance was a straight man in dress slacks and a tie talking business into his cell phone as a straight woman in a sundress beside him crossed her sandled feet at the ankles and gazed glazed-eyed toward the carpet. They wore wedding rings. PartnerA and I do not wear rings, nor did either of us arrive that afternoon with a husband. Uh oh.

Sea’s sarcasm is a deflection because of the discomfort of not meeting normative expectations. PartnerA writes of the same visit, “A bored receptionist handed us a series of forms, which we stumbled through under [her] watchful gaze ...[the receptionist] had no shame about staring at the pregnant ‘boy’ in her waiting room.”

PartnerA, who had previously described herself as clueless to the stares that might come her way as she made her way through public spaces, writes about the way in which her own social monitoring was heightened dramatically once she became pregnant. She gives an example in blogging about having been followed and questioned by a store employee who thought she was a man entering the women’s washroom. PartnerA writes that she was herself “shocked” at her own embarrassment and anger over the event, and that the clerk’s “only apology came by way of blaming my haircut for her mistake.” This is significant as the way in which bloggers understand (and perhaps accept) themselves, view their place in the social realm, and feel challenged by normative expectations, was emphasized by the bloggers as they brought children into the picture. PartnerA, in her post about finding herself practicing a higher level of social monitoring, writes,

At 30, I get sir-ed as often as I get ma’am-ed. I get stared at in bathrooms. I hear slurs and snickers. I’m so used to navigating the world in my body and my identity that I don’t notice the stares, though when Sea and I go out together she points them out. These microaggressions are a part of my daily life. The thing is, for the most part, I don’t care. ... I’m so used to not caring, in fact, that I was shocked a few weeks ago when I did. ...So what’s changed?

We're having a baby.

As Bingo grows, diligently turning cartilage into bone, totally oblivious to the jerks who exist outside my body, I begin to see how homophobia will impact our child and our family. I see it in the woman drawing my blood who asks— for a second time— when I'm going to start wearing dresses. I see it in Sea's cousin, demanding to know who the "daddy" is. And I imagine what it will look like when Bingo arrives: people chiding us over the lack of male role models, Bingo's classmates asking whether I'm a mommy or a daddy, strangers wondering who the "real" mother is. And I suddenly, I care more about the looks and insults I experience. Not for me, but for our family.

I am confident that Bingo will be just fine. If Bingo ends up with some combination of Sea's intelligence, my relative calm, our shared stubbornness, then we'll really have little to fear. Bingo will also have a supportive family, a strong community, good friends. But I also wish that Sea and I could spend all of our time worrying about what shade of white to paint the baby's room, without also having to worry about how the world will treat our little family.

I don't believe that homophobia is any reason for queer people not to have babies, any more than I believe that sexism is any reason to not have girls. I do believe however, that it is a very good reason to advocate fiercely for our families. To say, "Look, here we are!" in the face of judgment. And I believe that our families are one of the most important reasons to fight against homophobia and to confront hatred in all of its forms.

Don't worry kid, you just keep working on building bone density and growing eyebrows: we've got this.

PartnerA's words sum up the way the bloggers in this study were simultaneously apprehensive and fierce in their attitudes as they created their families and parented their children. They experienced homophobia in their daily lives and understood the potential for danger. They also understood that they needed to monitor their surroundings and teach their children both pride and "street smarts", as Sara (GGMGM) writes,

...I'm reminded that being a queer parent puts me out there in the world in a much more visible way than I have ever experienced in my almost twenty years as an out, proud lesbian – either individually or with a partner. I have no qualms about holding Amanda's hand in public, for example, but I also have street smarts – i.e., I can (and do) choose to drop her hand in potentially sketchy situations .

Being a parent, however, means being out there 24/7 as a queer family. In public, as in my son's private universe, I am without question his Mommy, and Amanda his other mom, his Mama. Neither of us is willing – or able – to momentarily disguise these roles, in the way that I might casually release Amanda's hand as a group of drunken, red-necked thugs approaches on the street. We don't ever want to cause our boy doubt or shame about who we are as his parents, and about our place in society as a family. No doubt, he'll get plenty of those messages from other sources as he grows up. It's our job to foster his sense of confidence and self-worth so that he can deal with such messages, down the road, and to model how we are a family just like any other – essentially, to just be ourselves.

Sari Dworkin and Huso Yi argue in their article describing the social climate of 2002,

a person identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (hereafter referred to as LGBT) or perceived to be LGBT not only faces ridicule, shame, disenfranchisement, and possible criminal charges, but in most of the world including the United States (U.S.), can face violence and even death. An LGBT identity is hazardous to one's health, mental and physical.

While the above quote is certainly true in the very real potential for significant, repeated, emotional and physical violence against queer persons, I am careful in the framing of my work here as I wish to also point to the strategies for resistance. My response to the authors of the quote above would be place the emphasis on heteronormativity, heterosexism, and homophobia as being the problematic issues at hand, rather than queer identifications themselves as being “hazardous” to one's health. The bloggers in this study, for all their varied experiences, were not victimized by their lesbian/queer identifications; they were not victims at all. Those instances of doubt and fear described in this study speak to the way in which homophobia, heterobias and continuous social monitoring act as constant stressors. The women were not victims, but they were annoyed, shocked, frustrated, fiercely aware, and challenged by the attitudes that surround them.

Resistance, here, comes in the power of storytelling. Both PartnerA (BFTS) and Sammie (CNBM) speak of other blogs as influential in starting their own. They

understood the importance of sharing their stories and hearing of other's experiences both to relate to, and learn from, them. Each blogger challenges the systems that oppress them – they empower themselves and others through sharing stories and engaging in conversation; they offer visible examples of lesbian families. As Sammie (CNBM) writes,

It's really awesome to be able to go outside, holding my wife's hand, [wearing the twins in carriers while our daughter] Mary rides [on her scooter]. ... I love the idea of giving LGBT families a face and a presence in our community, and since so many people know us individually and not really as a couple, it's nice to show them that these 2 'really nice young ladies' are together and raising a beautiful family.

The bloggers in this study are active agents in a move towards representing a greater diversity of personal and family identities. Whether they understand themselves in this way or not, they serve as templates, and their blogs as cultural artifacts that record this particular time in social history. They are setting the scene for those to come and their blogging acts as a form of rebellion in disrupting the silence/silencing of queer narratives. The voices of the bloggers in this study are examples of dialogues that have the power to be part of a social revolution – one form, insemination, pregnancy/birthing class, and clarifying encounter at a time.

### **Suggestions for Further Study**

The possibilities for further study are many as queer identities and families are varied and changing. I chose to present three issues below which I believe to be important for continued and expanded exploration. As the landscape shifts, it is also important to revisit and reassess existing work on these topics.

*Reproductive Health in the Queer Community*

Clearly, given that four of the five blogs described experiences with infertility, fertility care in the queer population is a concern. Only Sara (GGMGM) noted an official cause for her secondary infertility and was unable to conceive again. Sarah (MR) and Callie (BFTS) became pregnant through IVF, while KK (IR) finally conceived after a long break from trying and with the addition of a new fertility drug. While Sarah (MR) may not have met the criteria for infertility when starting her blog, as they had not been trying for a year (“Diseases and Conditions: Infertility” 2014), she does frame her experience in this way early on. The fact that she does so brings up the emotional journey for lesbian women entering into a highly medicalized process. This is especially so as three of the blogs in this study made mention of their bodies “failing” them in being unable to conceive within a few months of trying. Laura Mamo’s (2007) work is an example of where this question of the emotional impact of fertility treatments has been considered. I have also previously noted the *Herizons* article written by Elizabeth Ruth (2008) which presents a powerful critique of contemporary practices with regard to conception support for lesbian women. I suggest a continuation of the conversation to monitor not only the experiences of lesbian women as they try to conceive but also the policies and processes of big-business, high-cost fertility clinics as we move forward.

### *Diblings*

“Diblings,” or donor siblings, are children born of the same donor to different families. Unfortunately, the blogs in this study did not discuss these relationships. PartnerA (BFTS) mentions donor siblings as a potential blog post but notes that she has no time to write it. This is important given that in the existing literature, the mention of diblings is generally focused on the mathematical model used to determine the limit on

offspring from a single donor, which is done in order to minimize the risk of consanguinity (for example, see Sawyer and McDonald 2008). Joanna Scheib and Alice Ruby (2008; 2009) maintain that the considerations being made when deciding on the allowable number of offspring are misguided. The authors argue instead for reflection and focus on the significant number of lesbian and single mother families accessing sperm banks, noting that these parents are more likely to disclose to their child(ren) that they were conceived through sperm donation as compared to couples using sperm donation as a result of infertility. Scheib and Ruby note that more and more dibling families are connecting with each other and that

[m]eeting a few or even ten donor-linked families can be joyous and incredibly positive; the impact of meeting 25–50 families may be more challenging and even negative. We suggest that birth limits may be better determined by psychologic factors primarily, and then secondarily informed by modeling based on consanguinity risk. (2009, e12)

My children share a donor and my family is in touch with a number of our dibling families around the world via a private Facebook group. Our donor has long maxed out on the number of allowable families resulting from his (paid) “donation”. This means that any remaining donor vials can be sold only to families who already have a child by this donor, no new families can be created. In the spring of 2015, I discovered through a conversation with a representative of the Xytex sperm bank that the laws in the United States had changed and the maximum number of families increased, meaning that my family is one of at least sixty created using this donor. Given that a number of the families in my Facebook group now have two children by this donor, the number of diblings my children have is likely somewhere around one hundred, all under the age of

six years old.<sup>59</sup> I wholeheartedly agree with Scheib and Ruby's (2009) suggestion for a shift in focus as quoted above. In future research I would like to explore the various relationships that exist as a result of being connected by an anonymous donor, as well as the way in which the relationship between the couple choosing the donor is affected, as is suggested by Lucy Hallowell (2015) below.

### *Media and the Lesbian Mother*

Media portrayal of lesbian characters on mainstream television and other media is important here, especially in considering the emphasis in this study on reflection of self in the social world. As Nat (IR) writes,

i do not want to rely on pop-culture or other media representation for any kind of assurance that people like me are out there, and at the same time, my heart yearns for the familiar, for that which feels like home--for the beauty of women sharing passion and lust and love.

As Nat describes in her blog, there is a general lack of representation lesbian characters in the mainstream media. I, and others (for example see Warn 2003; Bendix 2011) have observed that when lesbians do appear in mainstream media, they are often confined to/by a script involving her ticking biological clock, her search for sperm, and the man who might provide it.<sup>60</sup> Echoing Sarah Warn (2003) I emphasize here the way in which the reoccurring pregnancy storyline on mainstream television works to make lesbian

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<sup>59</sup> As was relayed to me in that 2015 conversation with a customer service agent at Xytex, given that no one can know how many units will be required to achieve a pregnancy, and whether the pregnancy will come to term with a healthy baby, clinics rely on self-reporting by families to register the live birth of their child and the donor number used to achieve the pregnancy. I imagine that there is a likelihood that births go unreported as there is no consequence for failing to report. One hundred diblings, then, in sixty or more families, is perhaps even a low estimate. I know of new babies being born to our existing dibling families every few months.

<sup>60</sup> For recent examples, see the short-lived sitcom *One Big Happy* (2015) which features a lesbian character, Lizzy, and her straight best friend/roommate, Luke. Both still single, the pair decide to try to have a baby together. Luke suddenly meets and marries another woman (Prudence) who then moves in with them, and Lizzy discovers that she is pregnant with Luke's baby. See also the movie *Seeking Dolly Parton* (2015) where Cerena and her girlfriend Charlie attempt to find a sperm donor with Cerena deciding to ask her (recent) ex-boyfriend Josh to donate. Josh, who is still in love with Cerena, agrees and comes to stay with the couple.

characters recognizable, if not acceptable, to a straight media consumer. The character's focus on having a child makes her more overtly and conventionally feminine (she is, of course, already portrayed as at least recognizably feminine) and her pregnancy makes her safely maternal. Her (deviant) sexual identity (Gabb 2004) is overshadowed and/or temporarily forgiven through biological imperative; her apparent disregard for men is appeased by her search for sperm, her need for a man in some form to fulfill her drive towards motherhood propels her towards the borders of heterosexuality.

In March 2015, Lucy Hallowell summed up the challenges of the portrayal of lesbians and lesbian mothers on television. While her tone is casual, her critique of media portrayal of lesbians on television is fierce. As she has done previously,<sup>61</sup> Hallowell challenges the media representation of lesbian mothers:

The tropes are tired. How about instead of taking a couple like Stef and Lena [*The Fosters*] and focusing on their decision to have a baby with Lena's co-worker, let's look at what choosing an anonymous donor does to them as a couple. Let's stop looking outside of these couples when we can just as easily look inside them for interesting stories. What assumptions do they make about the type of donor they would like? While picking our sperm donor my wife and I grappled with feeling incredibly racist. How did we know that this white guy with light hair and blue eyes was more like us than this multi-racial guy? We couldn't know that and it challenged us to think about what we valued and what we wanted for our children. Even picking an anonymous sperm donor was difficult for me. I didn't want a man in our family. I didn't want one in my bed. I didn't want any guys in the vicinity of my lady junk and it was a significant hurdle for me to get to the point where I was like "fine, you can put that crap in my vagina." Let's talk about that. How does having a baby fuck with your conception of yourself as a lesbian? Play it for laughs or write it to be heartbreaking. Or write it to be both.

A continued monitoring and critiquing of media representations of lesbians, childless or as mothers, and also of lesbian parented families, is critical as we work to create and represent queer spaces in the social sphere.

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<sup>61</sup> See Hallowell (2012).

## Concluding Remarks

The experience of conducting this research was very different from my expectations at the outset. I was challenged by the sheer volume of the data – I found myself with hundreds of blog posts, printed double-sided, that filled 25 duotangs. I wondered how I would go about coding, categorizing, organizing; I was concerned about maintaining the unique voices of the bloggers and the perspective they brought to the study. I also marveled at how much they had to *say*. The contents of those unassuming duotangs stacked at my desk became part of my daily life over the last year. I thought of the blogs as I went about my days off, I thought about the stories, the comments, the followers, and the friendships that had been formed. While a number of the blogs sit dormant, the words live on to be discovered by others making their way through a similar journey.

I admire the boldness that these bloggers displayed in presenting their stories. What I found here were encouraging examples of social critique, activism, community, and empowerment achieved through keystrokes at a computer screen. While the completion of this study was at many times challenging, it has also been rewarding as I have “seen” so much through the words of others who were willing to share so much. As Sara Ahmed (2006) writes,

... in landscape architecture they use the term “desire lines” to describe unofficial paths, those marks left on the ground that show everyday comings and goings, where people deviate from the paths they are supposed to follow. Deviation leaves its own marks on the ground, which can even help generate alternative lines, which cross the ground in unexpected ways. (19-20)

The experiences of trying to conceive and of parenting as described by the bloggers in this study represented the ways in which lesbian women push beyond the established

paths designated for mother/lesbian identities. The importance of these counter-narratives was evident to me as I read the blog post and the comments left by followers; and as I reflected on the ways in which the narratives both intersected and differed. As lesbian mothers, the bloggers in this study were primarily concerned with telling their stories – in the ups and downs of mothering, their experiences in creating their families, and their struggle to be seen as mothers in a social world that was not always prepared to greet them. Despite the possibility for difficulty and heartache, there is also opportunity to push beyond heteronormatively-informed notions of sexual, parental, and family identities in a public way, marking new paths that create new “desire lines” in the social, familial landscape.

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## Appendix A

### Blog Reference Sheet

<b>Blog Name</b>	<b>Acronym</b>	<b>Blogger</b>	<b>Partner's Name</b>
Gay Girls Make Great Moms	GGMGM	Sara	Amanda
Beginning from the Start	BFTS	PartnerA	Sea
Injection Reflections	IR	Nat	KK or K
The Mamas Rapsallion	MR	Sarah	Tammy
The Chronicles of a Non-Belly Mama	CNBM	Sammie	Callie