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QUEERING THE HOME

The domestic labor of lesbian and gay couples in contemporary England

ABSTRACT In the West, the private sphere of the home is traditionally associated with the heterosexual nuclear family. Through social, cultural, and legal processes, the heterosexual bond has been constructed as central to the family home. Despite these dominant discourses, the home is also a space in which heteronormativity (or the unacknowledged assumption that heterosexuality is *the* natural and normal form of sexuality) may be subverted. This article considers how the domestic lives of lesbian and gay couples in England challenge the heteronormativity prevalent in dominant discourses of the home. Drawing on in-depth interviews with lesbians and gay men, the article continues to extend and build on the existing literature on queer domesticity by focusing on how lesbian and gay couples divide and

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understand domestic labor in their homes. The perceived normativity of coupled domesticity and childrearing means that on the one hand the lesbian and gay participants in this study could be seen to fit in with normative ideals of domestic family life. On the other hand, I show how these couples subvert heteronormative assumptions about gendered household practices through their approaches and attitudes towards domestic labor and parenting. In particular, the article focuses on the complex ways in which lesbian and gay couples destabilize traditional domestic gender roles and queer the spaces of the home through the seemingly unremarkable, mundane practices and negotiations of domestic labor and childcare.

KEYWORDS: lesbian, gay, home, housework, domestic labor, queer, sexuality

INTRODUCTION

The home cannot solely be thought of as a physical location or dwelling providing shelter. Rather, it has social and cultural meaning (Blunt and Dowling 2006). The home is a site in which particular societal ideals are sustained or contested through domestic practices. Most importantly for this article, the home is a site in which acceptable forms of sexual identity and behavior are normalized or subverted (Gorman-Murray 2007; Baydar 2012). In the West, the private sphere of the home is traditionally associated with the heterosexual family. Governmental policy, popular culture, and media discourses construct an ideal notion of the home as a detached, suburban house owned and occupied by a heterosexual nuclear family (Blunt and Dowling 2006). However, the entrenched heterosexualization of the home is challenged by the domestic lives of lesbian and gay couples, whose day-to-day household activities work to queer the home. I use “queer” to refer to the ways in which lesbians and gay men resist normativity and challenge the hegemonic heterosexualization of home through their domestic practices, following Pilkey (2013), Kentlyn (2008), and Gorman-Murray (2007).

Drawing on in-depth interviews with lesbians and gay men, this article considers how lesbian and gay couples in England queer or challenge heteronormative discourses of the home through the everyday practices of domestic labor and childcare. On the one hand, the perceived normativity of coupled domesticity means that, by sharing responsibility for domestic labor within a household that they identify as their family home, cohabiting lesbian and gay couples could be seen to fit in with normative ideals of domestic family life. On the other hand, in this article I show how these couples also subvert

heteronormative assumptions about gendered household roles through their everyday divisions and negotiations of domestic labor.

Whilst the focus of this article is on domestic labor as a means to queer the home and challenge its heterosexualization, it also serves the important function of extending and building on the existing social research on the day-to-day couple and family life of lesbian and gay people.¹ A vibrant scholarship has addressed many aspects of queer lives over the last twenty years in the social sciences—including significant articles and monographs from Bell and Valentine (1995), Brown and Knopp (2003), and Browne *et al.* (2010). Although much of the existing literature on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) lives has focused on public and community spaces, some academics have also considered the experiences and meanings of home for queer couples and families (examples include Oerton 1997, 1998; Carrington 1999; Elwood 2000; Gorman-Murray 2006a, 2006b, 2007; Kentlyn 2008; Pfeffer 2010; Pilkey 2013; Scicluna 2013; Cook 2014). My article extends this existing body of literature on queer domesticity by focusing on the day-to-day domestic labor of lesbian and gay couples in contemporary England.

For the purposes of this article, domestic labor is defined as the physical tasks and household management activities that go into maintaining people's everyday lives, relationships, and homes (Eichler and Albanese 2007; Lachance-Grzela and Bouchard 2010). Physical domestic labor includes the household tasks that are most visible, and tend to be most readily defined as "work" in studies of domesticity, such as cleaning and laundry (Eichler and Albanese 2007). However, domestic labor is not reducible to these physical tasks and it is also important to consider the less visible household management dimension of domestic labor. Day-to-day life involves management, from planning meals to arranging appointments or managing household finances (Lachance-Grzela and Bouchard 2010). These activities play a vital role in the functioning of the household. For those participating couples who have one or more children living at home with them, the physical and household management tasks involved in looking after these children are also considered.

This article will begin by introducing some background literature on the home as a space imbued with social and cultural meaning. This will involve a consideration of the home as a (hetero)sexualized space. I will suggest how this article builds upon existing feminist and queer arguments, helping to challenge heteronormative understandings of the home by drawing attention to the everyday domestic lives and practices of lesbian and gay couples. Next, I will discuss the methodological approaches used and provide a qualitative analysis of the empirical work that forms the basis of this article, before concluding.

CONCEPTUALIZING THE QUEERNESS OF HOME

Traditionally, the home and its associated domestic practices were not thought of as worthwhile topics for serious academic study because of their associations with women (Johnston and Longhurst 2010). In addition, the discipline of geography was historically male-dominated and masculinized, and so for decades the home was ignored by geographers. However, in the late 1970s and early 1980s a specifically feminist geography began to emerge, criticizing the marginalization of women and exclusion of issues such as household labor, childcare, and the home from geographical studies (McDowell 1999). Beyond the discipline of geography, other literature in sociology, anthropology, and architecture has addressed similar topics and debates since the 1970s and 1980s (Oakley 1974; Hayden 1980; Erickson 2005; Crompton 2006; Rotman 2006).

This literature has drawn attention to the importance of the home, not only as a physical location, but as a space imbued with social and cultural meanings (Blunt and Dowling 2006). Most importantly for this article, the home is a deeply heterosexualized space. Popular culture and the mainstream media (re)produce the dominant discourse of the domestic sphere as a space in which heterosexual couples consolidate their relationships, reproduce, and raise their children (Blunt and Dowling 2006; Gorman-Murray 2007). So, too, do housing design and layout reflect the hegemonic heterosexuality of home. For example, Johnston and Longhurst (2010) note that it is common for homes to feature one larger or master bedroom, designed for a (presumably) heterosexual couple, and two or three smaller bedrooms, designed for their children. They argue that these layouts are specifically designed with the traditional nuclear family in mind and do not suit the needs of many people living in domestic spaces, such as extended families or friends who live together and might prefer evenly sized bedrooms.

As well as the hegemonic heterosexuality of home being sustained through policy, popular discourse, and design, the practice of looking after the home through domestic labor is similarly heterosexualized. This is largely due to long-lasting cultural traditions and social structures, which mean that the gender ideology linking women to the domestic sphere has retained some sociocultural hold in the West (McDowell 1999; Crompton 2006; Lachance-Grzela and Bouchard 2010). Despite an increase in female employment, a rise in qualifications amongst women, and a more supportive policy context in recent decades, the notion that domestic labor is part of the “natural” role of the woman remains persistent in societies such as the UK (Crompton 2006). As well as being patriarchal, this traditional view of the gendering of domestic labor equates the home with a nuclear social unit made up of heterosexual parents and their children and assumes that men and women take on separate, gendered roles within this space (Crompton 2006).

Some authors have considered the implications of the heterosexualization of home for gay and lesbian people living within this space. For example, Valentine (1993) noted that lesbians living within the family home (who are completely, partially, or not “out” about their sexuality to other members of the household) may feel oppressed or alienated within this heterosexual family space. In 2003, she built upon this argument with Tracey Skelton and Ruth Butler by considering the experiences and implications of lesbian and gay youths “coming out” in the family home. Valentine *et al.* (2003) argued that the persistence of homophobia meant that coming out to the family was seen as a risk for many lesbian and gay youths. They also found that some lesbian and gay youths who were not “out” to their parents experienced feelings of isolation within the family home or ran away in order to avoid negative family reactions. Although Valentine *et al.* (2003) found that some families were accepting of a gay or lesbian family member, they explained that others reacted with verbal abuse, physical violence, or by making the youths feel that they were no longer part of the family.

Despite the dominant discourses of the home as a heterosexualized—and at times homophobic—space, there is growing recognition of the significance of home for lesbians and gay men. A body of literature is emerging, informed by feminist and queer concerns of challenging heteronormative understandings of the home and family. Most commonly, these studies focus on lesbian and gay living spaces, and the varied meanings and experiences of home for lesbian and gay people (Elwood 2000; Gorman-Murray 2006a, 2006b, 2007, 2008; Pilkey 2013; Scicluna 2013; Cook 2014). Gorman-Murray (2008) notes that the heterosexual nuclear family home is not necessarily an oppressive space for young people who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual. Whilst acknowledging that some youths do experience homophobia after coming out at home, he emphasizes the fact that others receive support and reassurance after coming out to their families. He argues that these positive, supportive reactions work to queer the family home. The space becomes one in which non-heterosexual identity development is encouraged.

Gorman-Murray (2006a, 2006b, 2007) has also researched the meanings and importance of home for lesbian and gay adults living in Australia. These articles have examined the ways in which home-space is used by lesbians and gay men in non-heteronormative ways, in order to affirm their identities. For example, they may invite other lesbians or gay men into their home, creating a space of queer socialization (Gorman-Murray 2006a); or use the spaces of the home to accumulate and arrange particular objects, which they feel affirm their sexual identities (Gorman-Murray 2006b). In the context of the urban area of Minneapolis and St Paul, Minnesota, Elwood (2000) has similarly considered the meanings and experiences of home for

lesbians. She found that lesbians may simultaneously experience the home as a safe space, and a space of surveillance and oppression. Elwood (2000) argued that the home is a space in which many lesbians can express their sexual identity through symbols such as rainbow flags, or lesbian books and posters; however, she emphasized that some lesbians might feel pressure and harassment from visitors or neighbors for displaying such obvious signs of their sexuality within the home. As such, this supposedly private space becomes subject to public control.

Both within and beyond the discipline of geography there has also arisen a small but growing body of work exploring domestic labor in LGBT families (Dunne 1997, 2000; Oerton 1997, 1998; Carrington 1999; Kamano 2009; Kentlyn 2008; Pfeffer 2010; Rawsthorne and Costello 2010). Much of this literature highlights the ongoing gendering of domestic labor. For example, Kentlyn (2008) examined domestic labor in lesbian and gay households in Brisbane, Australia, from the theoretical perspective of “doing” domestic labor as a way of “doing” femininity. In their² article, Kentlyn highlights that domestic labor continues to be viewed as low-status, women’s work. As such, they argue that the queer home can function as a space in which lesbians and gay men can subvert gender norms, through their performances of domestic labor. Whilst acknowledging that lesbian and gay families destabilize these traditional gender norms, Oerton (1997, 1998) emphasizes the notion that gender norms still play a central role in structuring the division of labor. For example, she notes that there might be an expectation for some lesbians to perform a greater amount of family and household work within extended networks of family and friends, because of their position as unmarried women. Additionally, Carrington (1999) notes that lesbians who perform little domestic labor, or gay men who perform the majority of it, may be subject to stigma for subverting gender norms in the home. Thus, their position as gendered subjects influences their domestic experiences.

Other studies have indicated that the absence of traditional gender scripts opens up the possibility of a more egalitarian division of labor within LGBT homes. In their study of the domestic labor of lesbian couples in Australia, Rawsthorne and Costello (2010) found that many couples consciously based their relationship, as well as their division of labor, on the principle of equality. In these relationships, domestic labor is typically characterized by negotiation and flexibility. However, Carrington (1999) suggests that, whilst there is a desire for egalitarianism in many lesbian, gay, and bisexual couples, the reality for many is that domestic labor is not shared equally. A similar finding was reported by Pfeffer (2010) in her study of the division of domestic labor and emotion work between transgender men and their cisgender³ female partners living in the United States and Canada. Many of the participants reported that domestic labor in

their relationship was divided along traditionally gendered lines but they tended to conceptualize this in terms of choice and preference, rather than gender norms. Carrington (1999) argues that same-sex couples tend to describe unequal divisions of domestic labor in terms of choice and fairness, with an understanding of fairness based upon factors such as preferences or the time each partner spends in waged employment. The current article extends this existing body of literature by focusing on the domestic labor performed by lesbian and gay couples in contemporary England.

METHODOLOGY

This article draws on data from twenty-one semi-structured in-depth interviews with thirty-three lesbian and gay participants—sixteen women and seventeen men—who live with a partner. The twenty-one interviews include twelve couple interviews and nine individual interviews, with participants aged between eighteen and sixty. Data collection took place between July 2012 and August 2013. These interviews are part of my ongoing project on domestic labor and childcare in LGBT families in the contemporary UK. Within this article, I present some preliminary findings, focusing on self-identified lesbian and gay participants. Twenty participants live in Southampton, whilst the others live in Winchester, London, Bristol, Norwich, Sheffield, Liverpool, and Hull. The majority of the interviewees are White British and middle-class, and thus clearly do not represent the entirety of the lesbian and gay experience. However, the specificity of the sample allows for an in-depth exploration of domestic labor within this socially specific group of predominantly White, middle-class gay and lesbian couples.

Three participants consider themselves to have a disability. Howard and Vicky are both dyslexic, whilst Olivia is partially sighted. In addition, Jackie reported that her partner Valerie has compartment syndrome, which can cause pain in her legs. However, none of these participants reported that disability has a significant impact on the division of domestic labor or childcare in their household. Three couples pay for some portion of their domestic labor to be done. Wendy and Debby, as well as George and Alan, pay for somebody to come into their homes once a week to vacuum and clean; whilst Dale and Hal have a live-in nanny to help look after their children. In this article, I recognize that having children can have a significant impact on couples' understandings and divisions of domestic roles. Four couples in the study have children under the age of eighteen living in their household. Three couples in the sample have had children together, through surrogacy or adoption. At the time of their interviews, Dale and Hal had four-month-old twin sons; Olivia and Isobel had a two-year-old daughter; and Liam and Bradley had a one-year-old daughter. Meanwhile, Wendy and Debby live with eighteen-year-old Pippa and thirteen-year-old Bonnie, who are Wendy's daughters from a previous

relationship. In addition, three participants have adult children who do not live with them. Jackie and Valerie, a couple from Norwich, each have adult children from previous relationships. So, too, does Susan, who now lives with her partner Lara in Southampton.

Ethical clearance for the study was granted by the University of Southampton. All participants gave their written consent to take part and their identities have been kept anonymous through the use of pseudonyms. As a lesbian researcher, I was well placed to begin recruiting LGBT participants through my personal social networks. Whilst these networks were useful, only four of the participants who are discussed in this article were known to me prior to the research project commencing. I found further research participants by approaching LGBT groups, advertising the project on my website and Twitter page,⁴ and through word of mouth.

The interviews each lasted around an hour. We discussed a number of topics, including the participants' understandings and experiences of domestic labor and childcare. I recorded the interviews using a Dictaphone, before transcribing them. I used NVivo software to code the data, based on recurring themes from the transcripts. The subsequent analysis section of this article is based upon these themes. I focus on the division of domestic labor and childcare amongst participating couples, and the ways in which these everyday activities can serve as a means of destabilizing heteronormativity and expressing queer identities within the spaces of the home.

QUEERING DOMESTIC LABOR

As noted, the private sphere of the home in the West is traditionally associated with the heterosexual nuclear family. Within this heterosexualized space there are entrenched notions about how domestic labor should be divided, as traditional gender norms associate waged work with men and unwaged domestic work with women (Crompton 2006). However, lesbian and gay relationships disrupt this understanding of the gendered division of labor. These relationships are not structured by the same hierarchical male/female gender relations that heterosexual couples are, giving lesbian and gay couples the scope to base their role division on something other than dichotomous gender norms (Dunne 2000; Rawsthorne and Costello 2010).

A number of participants remarked that there is a lack of social scripts for how lesbian and gay couples should approach or divide domestic labor in their home. Kim (banker, twenties) commented:

In a straight relationship...there's a gendered divide and women are expected to do more whereas with a lesbian couple, you're not told what you have to do as such. You can decide that for yourself, because there isn't an expectation.

Megan (HR business partner, thirties) also reflected on this:

We've muddled through as a couple to work out which bits we do best, whereas if you're embarking on a straight relationship I wonder if it might be easier that the expectation is that you go out on a date, he pays. You live together, you cook.

Justin (police officer, twenties) added:

I don't think there's any expectations in a gay couple of how you should keep the house. There is more in a heterosexual relationship.

These participants suggested that, as part of a lesbian or gay couple, they avoided the normative expectation that domestic labor would be divided along traditionally gendered lines in their home. Indeed, all three argued that these expectations are largely absent for lesbian or gay couples, and that there are no set norms as to how domestic labor should be divided between partners. This supports the findings of other studies of the division of domestic labor and childcare amongst lesbian and gay couples in Australia (Rawsthorne and Costello 2010), Japan (Kamano 2009), Israel (Shechory and Ziv 2007), and England (Dunne 2000), which have argued that these couples have greater freedom and choice over the division of domestic labor and childcare, because there is no dominant societal model of how lesbian and gay relationships should function in terms of role division.

Nevertheless, my study also found that in the absence of an alternative model for the division of domestic labor in lesbian and gay homes, the entrenched heterosexualization of this activity means that its division between lesbian and gay partners is frequently interpreted through a heteronormative lens. As argued by George (academic researcher, thirties):

There is a common conception or misconception that in gay relationships there is a "male" and "female" role...so therefore you might expect for the "female" character within that relationship to be more inclined to keep the house. But I think that's a bit of a generalization to be honest, and I think that housework roles might be defined more by a range of other factors, not just "male" and "female" roles within the relationship.

The assumption that traditionally "male" and "female" roles can be straightforwardly mapped onto lesbian and gay relationships is reflective of a heteronormative culture, which interprets itself as the natural and normal state of affairs. This culture is what Warner (1993) described in his introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet*. He suggested

that the logic of heterosexual order is embedded in various social discourses and institutions (such as the family and home).

The lesbians and gay men I interviewed are familiar with these heteronormative understandings of domestic roles and relationships, and deploy their agency to create and perform different domestic roles and relationships in their homes. They all rejected the notion that the division of domestic labor in their home could be understood in terms of one partner taking on the domestic tasks that are traditionally thought of as female (such as vacuuming and laundry) and the other partner performing the tasks that are traditionally thought of as male (such as car maintenance and DIY [do-it-yourself]). Dale (professor, forties) and Hal (academic researcher, thirties) challenged such normative understandings of dichotomous domestic roles by highlighting that they share domestic tasks, regardless of their traditional gendered associations:

Dale: In some respects I'll do the more traditionally masculine things like taking the car for the brakes [i.e. getting the brakes repaired]...But then, I'll do the dusting and vacuuming and laundry...So we have a division of labor, but fifty percent of my chores are masculinized and fifty percent are feminized, and same for Hal.

Hal: Or roughly. To the traditional stereotypes.

Similarly, my interview with Vicky (mental health advocate, thirties) and Paula (student, thirties) revealed that the couple do not structure their relationship or role division according to dichotomous gender roles:

I don't think we've got any particular gender roles in our relationship. We don't fall into those stereotypes...we kind of switch it around a little bit.

Vicky and Paula explained that there are periods of time in their relationship when one partner or the other will assume greater responsibility for domestic labor, and that this is typically influenced by the relative hours they are spending in waged employment or studying. The couple added that they recognize when one partner takes on greater responsibility for tasks around the home, and consciously seek to even out the domestic workload over a longer time frame of weeks or months. As such, the domestic roles in their relationship shift and change over time and are not normatively gendered.

Throughout the research, it became clear that lesbian and gay couples may subvert normative gender roles in the home, through their attitudes and approaches towards domestic labor. Kentlyn (2008)

has previously considered how this subversion of domestic gender roles operates. In their interviews with lesbian and gay couples from Brisbane and southeast Queensland, Australia, they found that most participants saw domestic labor as a low-status, feminized activity. As such, they conceptualize domestic labor as a way of “doing” femininity and argue that how lesbian and gay couples engage with domestic labor is illustrative of their subversion of gender norms and evidences the construction of queer identities. My study, too, indicates that the mundane practices of domestic labor play an important role in challenging gender norms and expressing queer identities. However, in contrast to the findings of Kentlyn (2008), the lesbian and gay couples that I interviewed did not articulate using domestic labor to enact a traditional form of femininity (or other tasks around the home to enact a traditional form of masculinity). The majority of participants resisted the idea that domestic labor is a feminized task. Their attitude towards domestic labor is one of destabilizing its association with women or the feminine, as they see this association as reflective of heteronormative gender roles. For these couples, questioning the feminization of domestic labor is a way of challenging heteronormative ways of living in and looking after the home, as I will illustrate later. Domestic labor itself then becomes a queer activity, through which lesbians and gay men can subvert gender norms and bring forth a queer identity within the spaces of the home.

For some interviewees, the queering of domestic roles was treated as a source of humor. They were aware of the traditional gendered associations of various household tasks, and playfully discussed how the division of domestic labor in their home might be perceived through a heteronormative lens:

Susan: We do have a laugh about that, actually...I don't touch the washing, I don't do any ironing, so I *must* be the man!

Megan: When we're doing a DIY project, I tend to be in charge of that, and I'll wander round with power tools and people will take the mickey and say I'm being the boy...I've got a brilliant response to “who's the boy in your relationship?” I say it's like asking which chopstick is the fork!

Due to the division of domestic labor in each of their relationships, Susan and Megan joked that they might be interpreted as taking on the “male” role. Both women used humor to reject this heteronormative reading of their relationships, a strategy which has been identified in other studies of domestic labor in lesbian households (Rawsthorne and Costello 2010). Meanwhile, other participants presented the queering of domestic roles as a serious outcome that they seek to achieve through their attitudes and behaviors in the home. These participants were more explicit in arguing that they see their relationship, and

associated domestic activities, as a direct critique of normative gender roles. Wendy (academic researcher, forties) asserted:

I think we're very conscious of it as well. Gender. So we would, you know, if I found myself in a stereotypically gendered context, I would recognize it and I think I would say, "hang on, what's going on?"

Positioning his relationship in contrast to the traditional heterosexual relationship, in which men and women assume separate, gendered roles, Justin (police officer, twenties) said:

We're pretty modern in the respects that we do it equally and try and do our fair share...We live with pretty much all aspects of life shared. Shared lives, shared money, shared housework.

Whilst Marnie (academic researcher, thirties) reflected:

In the home, whatever split you've got, it kind of is just what works for you as a couple, isn't it? But at the same time, if there was something about it that reinforced normative perceptions of gender, I'd be really pissed off about it as well!

These participants reject heteronormative ways of living in and looking after the home by remaining conscious of their division of domestic labor; and seeking to avoid any divisions that are based on hierarchical gender roles. Instead, the majority of couples that I interviewed indicated that they deliberately base their division of domestic labor on the principles of equality or fairness. This finding is in keeping with existing literature, which indicates that a strong ideology of equality tends to underlie roles and power relations in lesbian and gay relationships (Patterson 2000; Perlesz *et al.* 2010; Rawsthorne and Costello 2010).

In the households where children are present, childcare is another practice through which couples produce queer identities and homes. They do so by disrupting the logic of heterosexual order that is embedded in normative discourses of childcare. According to these discourses, it is the woman's role to care for children within the context of the heterosexual family home (Dunne 2000; Rawsthorne and Costello 2010; Patterson and Farr 2011). However, none of the parents that I interviewed described themselves as taking on normative gender roles when it comes to looking after their children. For example, Liam (charity worker, thirties) and his partner Bradley (chef, thirties) adopted a baby girl at the end of 2012, when she was just under a year old. For Liam, taking primary responsibility for the

childcare is not a way of enacting femininity, or taking on a female gender role. As he expressed:

It's not only a woman's job...Just because I'm doing more of the washing up and I've got the kind of primary carer bond with our baby, it doesn't threaten my masculinity.

Liam and Bradley's attitude towards childcare is one that destabilizes its association with women or the feminine. The couple challenge the notion that childcare is necessarily or naturally women's work, through their domestic childcare practices. This finding adds to an existing body of research on parenting in the social sciences, which challenges the notion that women are naturally more nurturing than men. For example, in the context of masculinities more broadly, rather than gay masculinities specifically, Stuart Aitken (2009) puts forward this argument in *The Awkward Spaces of Fathering*.

Other parents in my study argued that it is not assumed that childcare will fall to a particular partner. Rather than being structured by dichotomous gender roles, the division of childcare is clearly something that is discussed and negotiated by these couples. For example, when I interviewed Olivia (teacher, twenties) and Isobel (project manager, twenties), the couple were in the process of adopting their two-year-old daughter, who had lived with them in their home in Winchester for around seven months. Before adopting, the couple were both in full-time employment and decided that one partner would take parental leave. Olivia explained how they decided which partner should become a stay-at-home mum:

We thought it was going to be me, and then [Isobel], and then me, and part of the reason why was because I really enjoy doing all the mum stuff, like basically you just spend your whole day sitting on the floor singing, and I really like doing that...It wasn't a given that I would be the one who was off.

Stay-at-home mum Olivia now performs the majority of childcare and domestic labor in their household, including meal preparation, laundry, and general household cleaning, whilst her partner Isobel continues to work in full-time employment. Nevertheless, both women emphasized the contribution that Isobel makes to looking after their daughter and helping to maintain their household in the evenings and at weekends, thereby complicating normative understandings of distinct and dichotomous breadwinning and homemaking domestic roles.

Meanwhile, the queering of parenting roles is also obvious in the case of Dale (professor, forties) and Hal (academic researcher, thirties), whose twin boys were four months old at the time of the

interview. As academics, the couple both have flexible working hours and can work from home for much of the week. They also have the income to be able to afford paid help with their childcare. Dale and Hal share the childcare between them, as well as having a live-in nanny, Duncan. As such, their everyday parenting practices challenge the societal expectation that the division of childcare will be based upon dichotomous gender roles (while nevertheless reinforcing class norms). Dale described the routine that the couple has developed to care for their sons:

We're very lucky to have the three of us to take care of the children...Essentially what we do is we divide up the hours, we pretty much do five hour shifts each. So Duncan might take...8[am] to 1[pm], and then I might take 1 to 6[pm], and then Hal might take 6 to 11[pm], that sort of thing. And it's not exclusive, but it's like, that's the time that I'm predominantly responsible for watching them.

During their interviews, the parents quoted earlier resisted the idea that childcare is necessarily women's work; and suggested that lesbian and gay parenting cannot be understood in terms of heteronormative gender scripts. This attitude indicates that childcare is another activity through which heteronormative ways of living can be rejected. Even where one partner takes primary responsibility for the childcare, this is not articulated in terms of dichotomous gender roles. Instead, it is presented as something that is discussed and negotiated based upon practicalities, preferences, and the career choices of both partners.⁵ Indeed, the emphasis that all parents in the study placed upon planning and discussions indicates that they do not rely on normative gender scripts to structure the division of childcare in their relationships. Childcare thus becomes a queer activity, through which lesbian and gay parents can subvert gender norms and affirm their lesbian and gay identities. Previous studies have similarly argued that lesbian and gay parenting undermines the heteronormativity of dominant discourses of parenting roles and childcare (Dunne 2000; Ciano-Boyce and Shelley-Sireci 2002 Rawsthorne and Costello 2010; Patterson and Farr 2011).

I add that this also has implications for the spaces of the home in which childcare takes place. As reported by Luzia (2010), the specific spatialities of day-to-day parenting practices—particularly those of non-heterosexual parents—have been under-attended to within academic literature on parenting and the family. Yet parenting practices take place within the realm of the spatial. In her study of lesbian parents based in and around the major metropolitan area of Sydney, Australia, Luzia (2010) points out that parenting impacts upon parents' everyday geographies or the spaces that they inhabit day-to-day, such as the

home. She suggests that it is in and through these everyday spaces that people's identities—parental, familial, sexual, or otherwise—intersect and are brought forth. Luzia (2010) positions the home as a space in which the lesbians in her study learn how to parent and also how to “be” a parent. In other words, these lesbian parents bring forth a parental or familial identity through their parenting practices within the spaces of the home. Building upon this argument, my article emphasizes that it is a decidedly queer (or non-heteronormative) parental identity that lesbian and gay parents bring forth through their parenting practices in the home. The lesbian and gay parents in my study reject heteronormative roles, identities, and ways of living in the home through their day-to-day childcare practices. These practices, and the associated identities that are brought forth, work to challenge the entrenched heterosexualization of the home. By raising a child within a household that they identify as their family home, lesbian and gay couples firmly situate their lives, relationships, and identities within the home. Thus, childcare may be seen as another activity through which lesbian and gay parents affirm their identities and belonging in the domestic sphere, which works to queer this space.

Analyzing the domestic labor and childcare practices of lesbian and gay couples can help us to understand normative ideologies of the home, and the ways in which these might be subverted. The perceived normativity of coupled domesticity and childrearing means that on the one hand the lesbian and gay couples in this study could be seen to fit in with normative ideals of domestic family life. Indeed, many couples remarked upon how the division of domestic labor in their home might be perceived through a (hetero)normative lens. On the other hand, these couples subvert (hetero)normative domestic ideals by destabilizing the traditional gender norms, which associate domestic labor and childcare with women. As my analysis shows, the couples interviewed do not structure their division of domestic labor according to normative gender roles. Rather, domestic labor and childcare function as activities through which lesbians and gay men can subvert normatively gendered domestic roles, and bring forth queer identities within the spaces of the home.

CONCLUSION

This article has sought to challenge heteronormative discourses of the home, by drawing attention to the domestic lives and practices of lesbian and gay couples in contemporary England. In doing so, it has also helped to extend and build on the existing literature on domestic labor by looking at the day-to-day couple and family life of lesbian and gay people. Coupled domesticity, childrearing, and everyday performances of mundane household tasks may not appear to be particularly “queer” at first glance. However, throughout my analysis I have shown that the lesbian and gay couples in this study disrupt the

logic of heterosexual order that underlies normative understandings of dichotomously gendered domestic roles. This article argues that the mundane practices of domestic labor and childcare can serve as activities through which the entrenched heterosexualization of the home is subverted, but in complex ways, where on the surface some lesbian and gay couples seemingly fit in with normative ideals of domestic family life. One of the key findings of this article is that these couples did not articulate using domestic labor or childcare to enact a traditional form of femininity. Instead, their attitude towards domestic labor and childcare is one of destabilizing the traditional gendered associations of these activities, as they see these associations as reflective of heteronormative ways of living in and looking after the home. Most notably, it is often through their deliberate negotiations and conscious decision-making regarding their respective domestic responsibilities that the lesbian and gay couples in this study produce and maintain homes which affirm their queer identities.

Whilst this study has focused on lesbian and gay couples, it is also important to acknowledge the wider significance of understanding domestic labor as an activity through which heteronormative domestic ideals can be challenged. The conceptualization of domestic labor as a queer activity might speak to new meanings of domestic life and labor, which are not based upon heteronormative gender roles, beyond the lesbian and gay community (see also Rawsthorne and Costello 2010). In other words, the queering of domestic roles is not necessarily limited to lesbian and gay couple households. Regardless of their sexuality or household formation, domestic labor is one activity through which people who live together can potentially challenge normative ways of living in and looking after the home, thereby queering this space.

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NOTES

1. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for assistance on this point.
2. Kentlyn's preferred pronouns are they/their (personal communication, 2014). Gender-neutral pronouns can be used when a person is neither female nor male, genderqueer, or does not want to be referred to using gendered pronouns such as she/her or he/his.

3. A term used to describe people who identify as the gender they were assigned at birth.
4. www.carlabarrett.co.uk and @CarlaGeog.
5. In step-parent families, the step-parent tends to perform less childcare because they are perceived to have less responsibility for the child's well-being (Moore 2008). In the case of Wendy and Debby's family, Wendy takes primary responsibility for the parenting because she has cared for her teenage daughters since they were babies; whereas she and her children have only lived with Debby for around a year. The couple explained the role division in their home in terms of negotiating and navigating a new (queer) domestic situation. I have not focused on their family in my analysis of parenting roles, because it was the only step-family within my sample.

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