

The Pregnant Pause:
**Exploring Expectations and Experiences of Pregnancy and
Motherhood in a Cape Town Body Positive Community**

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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree.
It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the
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Research Question

How do practitioners of body positivity navigate expectations and or experiences of pregnancy?

Abstract

This dissertation explores the concepts of pregnancy and motherhood held by women in body positive communities in Cape Town, South Africa. By focusing on their expectations and experiences of these concepts within body positive communities and their wider social circles, the research examines what it means for women **to want** or **not to want** to be pregnant; what it means to be pregnant; whether pregnancy and motherhood are experienced as socially-ascribed performance, and what it might look like to challenge the social conventions around pregnancy and motherhood. The contextual landscape where the perception of women is typically polarized into contradictory identities through pro-natal social convention, frames the research.

I collected data over a six month period through multi-sited ethnography and the qualitative anthropological techniques of participant observation, semi-structured interviews and auto-ethnography. Through an overarching lens of intersectional feminism I drew from an interdisciplinary body of literature, focusing on body positivity, embodiment, gender identity roles, sexuality and resistance, to consider each woman's lived experiences and the ways in which they inhabit or don't inhabit the conflicting identities that society impresses upon them. The research revealed a number of themes: Firstly, within these communities, the exploration of body positivity is inextricably fused with the project of reclaiming female sexuality. Secondly, expectations and experiences of pregnancy and motherhood revealed tensions and paradoxes between the expectation of the 'ordentlike', natural mother as a social object and the individual subjective self and her rights and desires. Thirdly, body positive communities enable members to enact both overt and tacit forms of resistance in opposition to South African gender norms and roles. The research demonstrates that, body positive communities provide safe spaces and support for these women in terms of personal expression, growth and healing.

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Chapter 1 – An Introduction: Conceiving the Research

Context

In late June of 2017, Vanity Fair released a cover story about Serena Williams's pregnancy (Bissinger, 2017) with both cover photos and story content that strongly echoed the controversial cover story, produced by the same magazine, of Demi Moore in 1991. The Cover photo in each is the image of the celebrity, nude and obviously pregnant, in profile. In 1991, the image of Moore caused public outrage, not at the nudity, but at the pregnant nudity. The image was considered by some as obscene, by others as high art (More Demi Moore, n.d). This image and its polarizing effect has subsequently been the subject of ongoing academic study¹ questioning what it is about a naked, sexualized, pregnant body specifically that evokes such a strong sense of taboo. Nearly two decades have passed and we have witnessed a string of celebrity pregnancy shoots come and go. They are now, it would seem, *de rigueur*, yet none so naked, or drawing as much attention as this latest, the nude image of Williams. This begs the question: Why is a naked, pregnant female body still taboo?

Beyond the imagery used of both Moore and Williams, there is also a similarity in terms of the content of the cover stories. In both instances the cover image of the naked form was used for sales impact, and yet neither their pregnancy nor their sexuality are the main foci of the conversation: their love relationships are. In Moore's interview, the focus is on her relationship with Bruce Willis, and her son: there is very little to do with her ongoing career or even the child growing inside her. (More Demi Moore, n.d) Similarly, one reads about how Serena Williams met her fiancé and how they plan to make their relationship work, and while in this case more emphasis is placed on William's career, there is also the suggestion that her determination to go back to the pro circuit after birth is 'wishful'. (Bissinger, 2017) The pregnancy is an aside, and the sexuality implicit in the cover page images is ignored.

Explicit in these two examples, (almost twenty years apart, and yet unaffected by feminist advances), is the powerful social and cultural force that relegates pregnant women, and consequently, mothers, no matter how independent or progressive, to little more than their maternal identities and their roles in their heteronormative relationships. There is no question that they are in relationships with the fathers of their children. This fact is aggressively romanticized, and little interest is paid to their career plans or futures beyond motherhood. Pregnancy and motherhood are portrayed as the inevitable outcomes of a heteronormative love relationship. Despite the increased awareness in contemporary global society of

¹ (Goldenberg *et al.*, 2007; Longhurst, 2000; Tyler, 2011)

women's rights to choice and autonomy, women it seems, are still very often viewed as 'impending mothers' (Malacrida & Boulton, 2012: 750). Pregnant women are viewed as either asexual objects, fully enveloped by the moniker of maternity and all its socially incumbent meanings, or as medicalized objects, with no identity beyond the physicality of their pregnancy. In each case there is a particular identity which is systemically ascribed to the woman, and which is then expected to be performed by the woman, not only for the duration of pregnancy, but into motherhood. These identities rarely intersect. (Oliver, 2010: 764)

I considered this in terms of my own experiences as a woman in South Africa in 2019, a country which is decidedly pro-natal, and in which pregnancy is still viewed in the very heteronormative, very inevitable terms described above (Chadwick & Foster, 2012: 333). I had known from a relatively young age that I had no desire to have children of my own, yet, in my twenties I had conceded that, should I meet the 'right partner' I would consider having children in order to fulfil the 'nuclear family' dream. This, I recognised in hindsight, was largely promulgated by social expectation: the barrage of happy nuclear families in pop culture and media; the experience of watching most of my peers pairing off, getting married and starting to have babies; and the constant fielding of questions to the tune of "when are you going to settle down and have kids" from well-meaning family, acquaintances, and even, on occasion, complete strangers in public spaces. After I passed the thirty mark these questions transformed to statements of "Don't worry, your time will come", and when I started to assert my disinterest in being pregnant, earnest yet patronizing comments of "just wait, you'll change your mind when you meet the right man". Why, I wondered, did people feel the need to continue projecting this particular set of heteronormative maternal expectations onto me, in spite of my own clearly-stated autonomous choices?

A recent conversation with a friend, Miriam, ignited similar thought processes. Having struggled for many years with reproductive issues, she had finally accepted her inability to conceive and opted to have her "tubes tied". Two months later, owing to further complications with her already compromised system, she was once again in hospital, this time for an emergency hysterectomy. The experience was a conflicting one: Miriam felt immense solace at finally being relieved of the source of a lifetime's physical and emotional pain; but at the same time she felt traumatized by the loss of her womb, which she felt was the center of her sexuality as a woman. This raised further questions for me: what did it mean that Miriam's sense of her own sexuality was so conflated with her possession of a uterus? What did it mean that she had merged the loss of reproductive capacity, which she acknowledged she had had conflicting

desires around, with a loss of sexual expression? Was it the discreet pressure of existing in a pro-natal society that had created this focus for her on her capacity for reproduction even when it wasn't something she had necessarily wanted?

Miriam imparted that her involvement in the body positive burlesque community in Cape Town enabled her to renegotiate and rediscover her sense of her own sexuality, de-linked from her reproductive organs; that this had been an unexpected but beneficial facet of an ongoing project of body positivity which had been sparked when she had first joined burlesque dance classes. It occurred to me that my own experience of social pressure had declined following my immersion within a number of body positive communities, including the burlesque community. Our conversation segued into a discussion about a recent performance by one of our mutual friends. Chilli D'vine is one of a number of women within the burlesque community who opted to perform throughout her pregnancy for public audiences. She had danced repeatedly, displaying her partially nude, obviously pregnant body to the public, and the overwhelming response she had received from the burlesque community and audience had been one of acceptance, encouragement and celebration of her body and the decisions she was making around her body.

Here then was a different public experience of pregnancy, motherhood and even sexuality than that of the taboo surrounding the images of both Williams and Moore. I was curious; how were Miriam, Chilli and I each able to negotiate and enact different outcomes for ourselves in terms of the perceived social norms surrounding pregnancy, motherhood and sexuality? It seemed that the common denominator between us was our involvement with and in the burlesque dancing community, as both students and performers. But in order to explore the possible links between these experiences and burlesque I realised I would need to frame body positivity, the burlesque community and its South African context.

Burlesque is a descriptor covering multivarious dance and performance art forms which globally, both historically and contemporarily, centers on the use of the body and often, but not always, striptease, in playful, provocative and often sexualized ways to empower the performer, make tongue-in-cheek social and political statements and to reclaim space for bodies and identities outside of perceived and expected social norms,² through entertainment. This reclaiming of space, is broadly speaking, what is meant when talking about body positivity, and comes from a drive to normalize, accept, appreciate and celebrate bodies of all shapes, sizes, ages, colours and abilities regardless of socialized norms.

² (Buszek, 1999; Ferreday, 2007 & 2008; Fargo, 2008; Careless, 2012; Gilmore & Wheeler, 2012)

Burlesque's position in relation to South African society is a complicated one. It sits awkwardly juxtaposed to the multiple, but typically conservative, standards around performance, beauty, gender and sexuality, consciously resisting while at the same time often inadvertently pandering to them³. In Cape Town specifically burlesque dancing and performance explicitly promotes female empowerment, sexual empowerment and expression, the concerns of the LGBTQI community and body positivity. It is of course impossible not to be influenced by social norms given that members and performers must also exist in spaces outside of this dance community, but individuals seem to navigate between and around both socially perceived and expected norms, and the ideologies that have developed from being a part of a body positive community. This navigation is especially evident in relation to pregnancy, motherhood and sexuality.

In light of both the article about Williams and Moore and my conversation with my friend I wondered in what ways being part of a body positive burlesque community might have provided these women with different experiences and perceptions regarding pregnancy, motherhood and sexuality? Additionally, how might these experiences or perceptions of pregnancy, motherhood and sexuality differ, if at all, from the social norms of the social environments they inhabited?

Exploring these questions in a society where the perception of women is typically polarized into contradictory Madonna/whore identities⁴ is a valuable means to gaining a deeper and more varied understanding of women's lived experiences and the ways in which they inhabit or don't inhabit the conflicting identities that society impresses upon them. For this research, I wanted to consider what it means for women to want or **not** want to be pregnant; what it means to be pregnant, to perform while pregnant, to challenge the social conventions around how one behaves during pregnancy; and finally whether pregnancy and motherhood themselves can be viewed as a socially-ascribed performance, all in a landscape where body positivity and pro-natal social convention abut, and often, conflict.

³ South African society is by no means homogenized, given the historical and contemporary diversity within its population both ethnically and culturally and so standards, expectations and interpretations of beauty and gender roles do vary from group to group. That being said, the influences of patriarchal euro-Christian hegemonies from both colonialism and apartheid are in evidence in general attitudes toward binarised genders and gender roles, aspirational aesthetics and sexual conservatism, but this is discussed more thoroughly throughout this thesis.

⁴ (Friedman *et al*, 1998: 782; Tobler, 2000: 87; Coy & Garner, 2010: 663; Malacrida & Boulton, 2012: 752)

Methodology

Theoretical Framework

I did not approach this project with a particular predetermined hypothesis, nor was I looking for specific answers in the data. I rather wished to explore what emerged from the data as or after it was collected. That being said, it was necessary to consider the frameworks and lenses I wanted to use, given that these would ultimately shape the ways in which data was received and perceived. I have outlined some of these below:

As the research being conducted was going to explore the lived realities of women, I felt that the primary lenses through which to frame all inquiry should be those of feminist anthropology and intersectional feminism. Penzhorn points out that “academic feminism [is] not only a socio-political tool for change but also an intellectual activity for the construction of new knowledge” (2005: 345) and this is true of both feminist anthropology and intersectional feminism. Naidu, quoting Appadurai, notes that while Anthropology is the “archive of lived actualities”, it is Feminist anthropology which “offers particular vocabularies to allow one to interrogate the so-called givens of cultural realities” (2008: 80), which is expanded on by Davis and Mulla, who indicate that drawing on “diverse forms of feminist theorizing within and beyond anthropology, [suggest] paths for injecting critical insight into the discipline.” (2020: 5) In this sense then, feminist anthropology and intersectional feminism can sit in conversation with each other, uniquely informing on and expanding perspective, praxis and analysis. (ibid) The value of Intersectional feminism as opposed to other forms of feminist inquiry is that it posits that while women may “share common histories of (male) oppression” (Penzhorn, 2005: 346)⁵, the diversity of lived experiences based on race, ethnicity, socio-economic class and sexual orientation is such that representation cannot be essentialised into a ‘universal woman’⁶. Intersectional feminism requires that the researcher approaches the possibilities of discrimination, disadvantage, subordination and representation as multi-dimensional, potentially intersecting across multiple axes of identity. The original mention of intersectionality⁷ was presented by Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989 as a “black feminist criticism” (139) challenging the erasure caused by the reduction of black women’s specific experiences within the limitations of “otherwise-privileged” groups of race and gender (140) within legal practices. However, the analytical conceptualization, framework and methodologies of intersectionality have

⁵ (Oyewumi, 2005: 463 & 468; Boydston, 2008: 565)

⁶ (Penzhorn, 2005: 346; Naidu; 2008: 80; Lugones, 2010: 753; Gilmore & Wheeler, 2012: 184)

⁷ (Nash & Warin, 2017: 72) cites Crenshaw as originally coining the term.

subsequently come to include class and sexuality as additional social identities⁸ which ultimately inform women's individual life experiences, chances and views differently through "distinctive yet interlocking structures of oppression". (Collins, 1993: 26)⁹ In this sense then, intersectional feminism can be applied within varied and diverse contexts in order to dismantle notions of unitary or universal female experience, and to expand on our understanding of the nuances and complexity of individual women's experiences. Thus, even where the subject matter points to an analysis of what is perceived to be a dominant hegemonic group¹⁰, as was what ultimately emerged as the case within this context, I believe that approaching from an intersectional perspective is vital.

I chose a grounded theory approach, in which the data and narratives I received guided the trajectory of the research via ongoing analysis and comparison with theory. I attempted to produce work that is both conceptually and descriptively "rich", and which is subject to the "fluidity" of which Strauss & Corbin speak that comes from grounded theory methodologies (1994: 279). Having been a student, public performer, role model for fuller figured dancers and mentor in the Cape Town burlesque community since 2012, and as someone who has been able to choose not to have children in large part because of the support afforded by the friendship and support networks within this community, I was aware that I might harbour subjective blind spots or biases. In this sense then I believe that a grounded theory approach assisted in providing a measure of objectivity which was necessary while researching a community in which I am deeply enmeshed. With the continuous comparison and reevaluation of the conceptual relevance required by grounded theory, it was possible to discard concepts and data that did not demonstrate "repeated proven relevance to the phenomenon under question" (Corbin & Strauss, 1990: 420).

As this study related to each participant's lived and day-to-day experience, I incorporated methodologies used to consider corporeality and phenomenological studies into my analytical framework. Approaching the research as a phenomenological study allowed me to consider the "dynamic way that individual actors shift between differing attitudes in the context of their engagements with their social and physical worlds" (Desjarlais & Throop, 2011: 88). In addition, it

⁸ Collins also references Age and Religion within this list.

⁹ (Lugones, 2010; Meer & Müller, 2017; Mosher; 2017; Nash & Warin, 2017; García-Del Moral, 2018;

¹⁰ In this instance, white women

allowed an analytical entry point via the body and embodiment as the primary “locus” from which the world is experienced, rather than as an object within it¹¹.

In the article *The Commodification of the Body and Its Parts*, Sharp indicates that the body has long been a site of particular interest within the discipline of Anthropology (2007: 289). This interest has, in more recent years turned to the theorization of embodiment, and its problematization of notions of “Cartesian mind-body dualism” (ibid)¹². Embodiment and lived experience being central themes of the research, I looked at the theoretic notions of embodied agency posited by Merleau-Ponty who proposes that individuals shape their lived worlds through intention, and how this is contrary to embodiment as imagined by Foucault, who indicates that individuals lived worlds are shaped by the discourses of external power relations, and Bourdieu, who suggests that lived worlds are shaped reciprocally through the expression of both internal and external agency via habitus.¹³ Csordas expands further on the notions of embodiment posited by Merleau-Ponty, Foucault and Bourdieu, weaving them together and then “fleshing” them out with his theories of corporeality, body-world relations and sexual difference¹⁴, saying that “embodiment is an attempt to gain purchase on the understanding of culture and self from the starting point of our bodies as being-in-the-world, and requires recognition that our bodies are at once the wellspring of existence and the site of experience”(Csordas; 2011: 137), thus linking these disparate discourses of embodiment and lived experience.

Robert Dunn states that “Interesting parallels exist between the thought of George Herbert Mead and some of the writings of contemporary poststructuralists. Both stress the importance of language, the dynamic character of social and cultural life, and the unstable relations of difference.” (1997: 687) I have drawn on this idea in exploring aspects of both symbolic interactionism and phenomenology, with attention paid, albeit with varied foci, to actions or acts produced by actors, and the interactions between actors, by and through which the actors then created and expressed social meaning and a sense of self¹⁵. As Jones points out “An anthropological gaze focused on the lived-body can help contextualize and ground human behavior by asking not only the what, but the how and why of people’s actions and beliefs.”(2011: 73) Thus, I looked for and at the kind of daily performances, discourses and

¹¹ (Csordas: 2011; Desarlais & Throop: 2011)

¹² Also (Germillion, 2005)

¹³ (Csordas, 2011: 138)

¹⁴ (Csordas, 2011)

¹⁵ Also (Carter & Fuller, 2015: 5 &12)

interactions which each of my participants engaged in in order to produce and make meaning of their lived experiences, identities and of society at large.

In terms of identity, I drew on the theoretical frameworks proposed by Foucault and later amplified in the work of Butler. McLaren states that Foucault “views identity as restrictive and limiting... (he) held little regard for consistency of identity” (2002: 122) and similarly Salih says that Butler believes “identity is a contingent construction which assumes multiple forms even as it presents itself as singular and stable” (2003: 2). I proposed to explore these ideas further in relation to their applicability in the context of body positive identity and social notions of maternal identity. Butler’s concepts of gender performance and performativity (Butler & Salih, 2003: 344-345)¹⁶ were of particular significance in terms of adaption around ideas of pregnancy as a form of identity performance. Additionally, in her book *Gender Trouble*, Butler touches on the notion of “the discursive production of the maternal body” (1990: 125) as something which is produced, in the same way that gender is produced or performed. Similarly, Longhurst (2000) also draws on and links Butler’s theories of performativity to the performance of pregnancy in terms of her studies of pregnant women who entered a bikini pageant in Wellington New Zealand in 1998. This aided in framing pregnancy as a “performed” identity and not merely a biological occurrence; an experience which is deeply shaped by the cultural, sexual and social conventions that exist within a woman’s social environment¹⁷.

In addition, as a practitioner of body positivity, a performer and an active spokesperson within multiple body positive communities, I felt I had valuable experiences and insights to contribute to the research through a form of “Activist anthropology”, which Ortner describes as “work in which anthropologists themselves are not simply doing the research, but are directly involved in the movements” (2016: 63)¹⁸. In the interests of developing a relationship with the reader that was subjective and intimate, which, I believe embodied experiences are, I opted to include some auto-ethnographic aspects into my work¹⁹. Lancaster points out that “As phenomenological inquiry, [auto-ethnography] turns to lived experience in a deeply reflective way to bracket “the taken-for-granted meanings” of an ethnographer’s life and self. (2011: 46) By conflating the researcher/subject position, research becomes more emotive and relatable, demonstrating how subjectivity can be seen as a resource, an indication of the multiple ways in which lives can be both experienced and represented. My hope was that auto-ethnographic aspects would

¹⁶ Also (Butler, 1990 & 1993)

¹⁷ (Butler, 1990; Woliver, 2002; Thomas, 2003)

¹⁸ Also (Kulick, 2006: 936; Urla & Helepololei, 2014: 443)

¹⁹ (Lancaster; 2011: 46)

create a space where the reader could see the researcher not as a clinical outside observer, but through a “sense of the writer as full human being” (Gergen & Gergen, 2002: 14), one who is choosing to share her specific experience and opinion while still being committed to conscientious and diligent analysis and self-examination. The intention was to attempt to break down the hierarchical barriers created by ‘objective’ writing and allow conclusions and stories to be interpretive, open ended and discursive.²⁰

Initial Research Design, Process & Emergent Changes

My initial ethnographic research design incorporated the qualitative methods of participant observation, informal in-depth one-on-one recorded interviews, note taking within the interviews, auto-ethnography and possibly focus-groups utilizing a sample of women from the Cape Town burlesque community.

As a member of the burlesque community since 2012 I have long-standing, and close relationships with many of the people I proposed to interview. Thus I felt uniquely positioned to be able to speak about and receive poignant and important data about their lived experiences, which might not otherwise have been available to someone outside of the community, but I was acutely aware of the burden of trust and responsibility placed on me in dealing with sensitive and personal information. I was also distinctly aware of my own positionality, the potential for bias and ‘blind-spots’, given my proximity to the subject, social environment and individual participants. I recognised very early into the process that it might be difficult for all parties to differentiate between my roles as researcher, friend and prominent member within the burlesque community. I was concerned that the blurring of my own experiences and recollections of conversations and interactions, which spanned considerably a long period both before and after the research period, along with the slippages between public and private conversations, which often occur when one is enmeshed not only in research relationships, but also friendship relationships, might inadvertently impact commitments I had made to respect each participant’s agency in terms of deciding what information would and would not be included. Thus I made the decision to implement clear boundaries for myself in terms of what would and would not be used as primary data. One of these was to use only what was recorded in the interviews to represent participants’ experiences, and not any previous or subsequent communications, discussions or opinions, as this allowed for a clear division between research and personal conversation. Where I needed additional information in this regard, I conducted secondary interviews, but the primary interviews were so rich in data that this was only

²⁰ Also (Short, Turner & Grant, 2013)

necessary where new questions arose in later interviews and which I then wanted to give earlier participants the opportunity to answer.

I conducted this series of recorded interviews over a period of 6 months, spanning from 5 October 2017 to 18 April 2018. I began by emailing each of the women who indicated interest in participating, explaining the research reasons and intentions, their rights in terms of ethics, and asking for their consent to participate²¹. Once this had been responded to I arranged individual interviews. These took the form of casual conversations, dinners, coffees and or lunch meet ups either at participants' homes, my home, or in public spaces chosen at the convenience of the participant. My intention was to keep the experience informal and to use conversational questions to explore each participant's perceptions, expectations, experiences and desires with regard pregnancy and motherhood. I opened each interview by introducing myself as researcher, clarifying the intent of the research and receiving formal verbal consent to record and use the information given during interview. I checked in consistently during the recorded conversations for ongoing consent, particularly when topics of a sensitive nature arose. I incorporated life history information into my interview questions, along with open-ended questions on body positivity, pregnancy, motherhood, social expectation, burlesque performance and community experiences. In some instances I had additional ideas of prompts based on previous discussions with individual participants, or on information they had previously given me and indicated might be of interest to me in the interview process, but predominantly each interview took the form of loose and free flowing conversation as I did not want to prompt particular outcomes. I made it clear that I was only interested in what findings unfolded from the data.

Participant-observation took place through day-to-day interactions in both social and dance class environments and performance events, as well as through general group conversation (unrecorded), social media posting, and note-taking during interviews. Because of my personal immersion within body positive communities²² I acknowledged that "the field" and home were merged to a large extent for the duration of my research. Once again I implemented boundaries for myself, actively capping my observational data gathering after completion of my last interview and ensuring that I treated both my participants and my own sensitive or personal information with careful consideration.

²¹ See Appendix B for an email example

²² By immersion I mean that in terms of my personal life, the vast majority of my social engagements, friendships and interactions on a personal level are within the burlesque and other body positive communities.

For the auto-ethnographic aspects of my research, I drew from personal experience, recorded my own thoughts on aspects of the subject of research and made notes from my interactions in social environments, events, conversations and through social media that were of interest, along with paying attention to my own comments made during the recorded interviews with participants. I found it difficult to approach the task of auto-ethnography in a formal way, and found that I tended more toward an intuitive and narrative accessing of memory and thought, rather than strictly relying on written and recorded data for myself.

My initial proposal had been to work within only the burlesque community as a source of body positivity, but quite early into the interview process a number of elements emerged which I deemed necessitated an adjustment in my research parameters. Firstly, I realised that for many of my participants, there was a noticeable conflation of body positivity with sexual expression which suggested that I would need to pay closer attention to why this was so for these participants.²³ Secondly, many of my participants were involved in more than one self-described body positive community, and while burlesque might be their primary avenue of expression for this, I realised that it would be beneficial to consider the intersection, impact, involvement and possible differences in understandings of body positivity across multiple body positive communities. Thirdly, I realised that I had limited my initial sample set only to women who had been pregnant or had children, which then limited the outcome of the research question, and excluded my own and other women's experiences as consciously childless women. Finally, I realised that in order to protect the potential anonymity of those participants who requested it,²⁴ it made sense to have a wider and more varied pool of participants, pulled from multiple body-positive communities.

For these reasons, I opted to focus predominantly on those communities which were both body positive, sex positive²⁵, and to which I had the most ready access, these being the burlesque and the

²³ This is explored in more detail in Chapters 2, 3 & 4.

²⁴ See the Participants section for expansion on anonymity and naming conventions. Also see Ethics section.

²⁵ Mosher defines sex positivity thus: "sex and sexuality involve complex and dynamic interpersonal and intrapersonal behaviors within dynamic sociopolitical environments. Sex positivity acknowledges such complexities as positive forces in human interactions and experiences, rather than as risk factors, deviance, and pathology." (2017: 487) In this sense then, to be sex positive, much like, being body positive, indicates that you accept and respect sexuality, sexual proclivities and sexual expression in any of its forms, removing those forms from discourses of deviance or judgment.

kink/bdsm²⁶ communities,²⁷ and I opted not to use focus groups as their inevitable reduction of anonymity would have compromised certain participants.

Participants

The sample set of 18 participants was chosen based on my personal networks within both the burlesque and kink/bdsm communities. The intention of selecting a large and varied group was to open the research up to a wide range of lived experiences and perceptions, as I felt this would be beneficial in providing rich and detailed information about the complexities of each individual's experience and expectations of pregnancy and of body positivity. As indicated above, I first approached those women who I knew had performed burlesque while pregnant, but realised that this might be too narrow a lens. Subsequent to this I approached individuals semi-randomly, limiting my selection to cis-female²⁸ women within the community, who were willing and available for interview. I attempted to ensure that I had an even spread of women who had had children and women who had not had children.

For the full list of participants and basic demographics, see appendix A.

With regards general demographics, ages ranged from 26 – 47 and there was a wide range in terms of sexual orientation. 10 out of the 18 participants had children and 13 of the 18 participants were in relationships with men, although this did not necessarily correlate to self-reported heterosexuality. The entire group of participants were educated and considered themselves to be 'middle classed'. There was a predominance in terms of conservative religious upbringing. Only one participant was a woman of colour. This was not intentional, as race was simply not a factor I had actively considered in the selection of my participants, my parameters being only the categories of woman, burlesque performer and/or member of the kink/bdsm community, but at the time of interview there were very few women of colour within the community and to whom I had reasonable access, and only one who had performed while pregnant. Subsequent to my fieldwork window, the burlesque community has seen an uptake in women of colour joining classes, however, historically in Cape Town both communities appear to have

²⁶ While kink and bdsm are considered to be separate generally, and have different connotations, the existent Cape Town community with which I have contact is small and has encouraged an inclusive environment which is accepting and encompassing of all manner of 'safe, sane & consensual' sexual and non-sexual 'play'. In this instance both terms are used rather loosely by the community members to describe themselves and so I felt that it might be best to use both to represent the community in this context.

²⁷ This is not to say that these were the only communities I gleaned information about, only that I chose not to actively seek access to other communities. As mentioned above, most of my participants were involved in, or had at least explored, a number of these communities

²⁸ Cis-female refers to a woman who identifies with the gender assigned her at birth.

been predominantly white spaces, despite efforts and yearnings within each community toward greater inclusivity.²⁹ What this demographic detail unexpectedly revealed however was the additional theme of white middle class women's lived experiences, which seems under-researched in South Africa.³⁰

Given the conservative nature of South African society in general, open participation in communities such as burlesque and kink/bdsm, which both encourage a deep exploration of individuals' relationships with the sensory/sensual/sexual, can and often does lead to stigmatization within wider family, social and business environments. I have witnessed incidents in both communities in which members have had relationships with friends, family and communities end or become strained, or have had their employment threatened or terminated, owing to the discovery or disclosure of their involvement in these communities, which are often read as taboo.³¹ It has been my experience that there is a heightened awareness of and impetus placed on the notion of consent in both communities, not only in terms of physical interaction, but also in terms of how we use names and personal information, because being 'outed' can have very real consequences. Because of this I was especially aware of ensuring that each participant had access to as much anonymity as they felt would provide them adequate safety and protection, dependent on their individual circumstances. This was in line with my ethics commitments to protect each participant's information and identity where desired/required. To this end, I asked each participant how they would prefer to be referenced within the study, giving them complete autonomy in this regard. Three participants asked for outright anonymity, which has been provided. Four participants indicated that they wished to be referred to only by their pseudonyms³². One participant wished to be

²⁹ While these topics were not included or discussed during the interview process with my participants, it has been my experience that significant and ongoing discussion is had within both communities as to the failures at inclusivity. The reasons for this may be myriad and undoubtedly complex. I speculate that these include different cultural understandings of body image and sexuality, religious beliefs, continued economic, gender and racial inequalities, patriarchal conservatisms, and a South African history fraught with colonial fetishisation, oppressive power dynamics, and segregation. I further believe that the reasons for this could provide the basis for a sizeable and valuable line of inquiry which could constitute a thesis in and of itself, but fell outside the scope of this current project.

³⁰ See Chapters 2 and Chapter 4 for more in depth discussion on this.

³¹ More on this in chapters 2, 3, 4& 5.

³² In Burlesque each person takes a 'stage name' for their performance character. These names often become quite interchangeable within the community/performance/friendship environment. For example, my stage name is Jezzy Belle, and I am quite accustomed to being referred to both as Jodi or Jezzy, in both private and public spaces. That being said, for some performers it is necessary to maintain distance between their stage personas and real life identities because of the potential ramifications in terms of career and/or external community (as mentioned above).

In the kink/bdsm community it is customary to have a 'nic'. This is done for safety and confidentiality, but can also be for pleasure/fantasy. A large amount of initial communication is done online through various social media-like

referred to by her first name only. One participant indicated that she would prefer to be referred to by her given name rather than her pseudonym and the remainder of the participants indicated that they did not have a preference. This proved to be particularly tricky in terms of a final naming procedure, and some time was spent negotiating and clarifying preferences with the participants in order to come to a solution which reflected and honoured participants conflicting desires. We settled on the following process: I used only a first name for the participants who requested anonymity, or who indicated that they wished to use a first or given name. For those who requested their pseudonyms, I used these, but have shortened them in the text³³, where possible, to a single/first name for ease of flow and continuity. For those who indicated that they did not have a preference, I have also used either their pseudonyms or first names in keeping with the above. This, I felt, made the naming convention as regular as possible while still providing sufficient identity protection for those who requested it and a final check confirmed that all participants were satisfied with this procedure.

And finally, as an additional dimension in terms of anonymity I chose to remove all the participants' children's names and specific age references.

Ethics

Where this research is auto-ethnographic, I ensured that I practiced and maintained the relevant self-care, and have not revealed anything of a personal nature without being absolutely aware of and comfortable with any potential repercussions. With regard participants, as per the Anthropology Southern Africa's Ethical Guidelines and Principles of Conduct for Anthropologists (Ethical Guidelines and... n.d.), I ensured that protection of their rights and privacy was paramount. I ensured that each person was fully aware of and understood the research intentions, and was involved within the research process and the production of the final paper to the best of my ability. With regards consent, I ensured that I received ongoing informed consent from each person and constantly re-confirmed that it was given, making it clear that consent could be withdrawn, at any time, with no repercussions. I ensured that all informants were aware at any given time that the information given was for research purposes

platforms and anonymity is preferred. These 'nics' are maintained and adhered to even in real life community settings until individuals indicate otherwise, for whatever reason. It is a sign of trust and intimacy to be on a first name basis with someone. Most members make great efforts to be conscious and protective of each other's naming preferences and the environments in which different names may and may not be used. (as mentioned above)

I use the term pseudonym instead of 'stage name' or 'nic' here for two reasons. Firstly it is an appropriate catchall term for both concepts, but secondly, because it provides a further layer of contextual anonymity if I do not differentiate between which are 'stage names' and which are 'nics'.

³³ Full pseudonyms are listed in Appendix A

and for public dissemination via the UCT archive, and, in instances of personal, private or friendly conversation I asked very clearly as to whether information was on or off record. I also disseminated my final paper to all participants, in order to take any revisions into consideration and to edit, retract or remove any information the participants no longer wished to share. I treated all information given by and the representation made of my participants and the community with respect, honesty, fairness and care (San Code of... n.d) to the very best of my ability.

The primary ethical concerns which were raised during the course of the project were those of identity and information protection. While I anticipated the potential need for anonymity, I did not foresee the complexity with which I would have to approach the naming procedures³⁴. This was further complicated by my decision to widen my participant pool across two body positive communities, both of which deploy pseudonyms, for similar reasons, but in very different ways, and with widely varying degrees of consequence. Widening the pool meant that I had to become aware not only of sharing identities and information external to the community, but also across and within communities. While there is a significant amount of 'cross-pollination' in terms of both people and ideas traversing and straddling multiple communities, they are nonetheless, distinct and separate communities, and thus it was necessary to consider each individual participant's levels of inclusion, involvement and visibility within each environment, and with every other participant. For this reason I opted to treat participant involvement as anonymous and forego any data collection methods that required group involvement³⁵. I understood that where I was working with groups of friends or acquaintances, they would likely discuss their involvement amongst themselves, and that those slippages are unavoidable, but I endeavored to ensure that any indication of involvement in the project was decided and controlled by the participants themselves.

A further complication was the realization that I would need to be very aware of the delineations between what had been shared with me prior to and post the research window, versus what was shared with consent during the interview process, in terms of private information. When you have long term relationships and friendship groups, there is a 'taken-for-grantedness' that occurs in terms of what you know about that person, what is 'commonly known'³⁶, and the lines between what knowledge is

³⁴ See Participants section for the fuller discussion

³⁵ Focus groups

³⁶ By 'commonly known' I refer to ideas of common knowledge within intimate friend groups, social environments and professional environments, and the differences between what is and is not common knowledge in each context.

intimate or for public consumption. I did not want to inadvertently share more information than participants were comfortable with and thus I opted to work strictly with only that data what was collected via interview and observation during the research period.³⁷

³⁷ See Initial research design, Process & Emergent Changes

Chapter 2 – The Literature: Foregrounding Core Concepts

Framing Body Positivity

There is no academic research specifically pertaining to the notion of ‘body positivity’ in South Africa, and very little globally, thus I have taken an interdisciplinary approach, drawing from psychology, sociology, philosophy, feminist theory and anthropological scholarship to thread together theories from which to make an entry point for the conversation. To begin to explore the idea of what body positivity might mean, we need to consider literature on body image, and on the making of value assertions such as positive and negative in relation to bodies in this context, as these are the primary themes which body positive praxis purports to engage with.

There is a wealth of research on Body Image³⁸, both positive and negative, which was developed in large part as a response to the growing prevalence of body image related eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia, along with research encompassing those aspects which are purported to produce and perpetuate negative body image including debates surrounding globalized western beauty and ‘thinness’ ideals,³⁹ and fat stigma⁴⁰.

Cash, in his article *Body Image: Past, Present and Future*, offers a comprehensive definition of body image as “the multifaceted psychological experience of embodiment, especially but not exclusively one’s physical appearance [...] It encompasses one’s body-related self-perceptions and self-attitudes, including thoughts, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors” (2004: 1-2). In this sense then, the value judgments of negative and positive⁴¹ are applied to body image in relation to the levels of dissatisfaction or appreciation individuals experience with their bodies, in terms of how they perceive their physical appearance, and how this then translates internally to their sense of well-being and self-esteem. Thus,

³⁸ (Cash, 2004; Cafri et al, 2005; Downey *et al*, 2010; Pauleta et al; 2010; Overstreet, Quinn & Agocha, 2010; Kazmierczak & Goodwin, 2011; Greenwood & Dal Cin, 2012; Sepúlveda & Calado, 2012; Tiggemann, Coutts, Clark, 2014; Gillen; 2015; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015; Pellizzer, Tiggemann & Clark, 2016; Strübel & Petrie, 2016; Nash & Warin, 2017; Swami et Al, 2017; Dunaev, Markey & Brochu, 2018)

³⁹ (Cafri et al, 2005; Frith, Shaw & Cheng, 2005; Craig, 2006; Grabe, Ward & Hyde, 2008; Overstreet, Quinn & Agocha, 2010; Greenwood & Dal Cin, 2012; Sepúlveda & Calado, 2012; Yan & Bissell; 2014;

⁴⁰ (Germillion, 2005; Brewis. *et al.*, 2011; Mosher, 2017: 494; Nash & Warin, 2017)

⁴¹ It is important to note that in terms of the literature, body image is not perceived to operate on a sliding scale of negative to positive, but rather operates as distinct constructs of either negative or positive. Ergo lowering ones negative body image does not automatically translate to having positive body image, and similarly, a lower positive body image does not immediately indicate negative body image. However the fostering of positive body image perspectives and practices is indicated in countering the effects and harms of negative body image. (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015:121-122)

to have a negative body image means to be dissatisfied or discontent with your physical appearance such that it reduces your sense of self-worth, self-esteem and overall well-being, while having positive body image is defined as “individuals’ appreciation for, protection and acceptance of, and connection with their physical selves”. (Gillen, 2015: 67). Here we see that positive body image practices also do the work of reframing the making of value, encouraging individuals to focus not only on appearance, but also on the ways their bodies operate, function and feel as indicators of value.⁴²

Following this, Tylka & Wood-Barcalow’s 2015 article, *What is and What is Not Positive Body Image?* proved valuable for my research as it linked the concepts of positive body image and embodiment together, providing a theoretical framework for the ideology of body positivity. Positive Body image theory was developed through feminist discourse and activism related to embodiment as a means to address negative body image and eating disorders. It proposes that by moving “beyond the study of appearance” through a more complex and varied understanding of embodiment, it is possible to develop and “experience positive body image.” (118) Positive body image is thus considered to be multifaceted and holistic and is cultivated through a variety of embodied practices and activities that incorporate both internal and external behaviours which include “unconditional body acceptance by others, and [...] individuals’ multiple social identities” (127) This mode of approaching positive body image is central to body positivity and correlates to Csordas’ understandings as defined earlier in the framework section.

Gqola states in *Yindaba kaban' u'ba ndilahl' umlenze* that “The body is centred in many of the lessons girl and boy children imbibe about aesthetics, value and being-in-the-world” (2005: 3)⁴³ thus reiterating the notion of embodiment’s centrality in positioning us within our worlds. Through this line of thought then we understand body image to be a construct of both individual and socio-cultural factors. Primary amongst the sociocultural factors in producing negative body image are unrealistic Westernised beauty and body ideals which have been mobilised, disseminated and perpetuated over the last few decades through ever more globalized and pervasive modes of mass media and popular culture.⁴⁴ Current

⁴² (Tiggemann, Coutts & Clark, 2014; Gillen, 2015; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015; Swami *et al*, 2017;

⁴³ Also (Craig, 2006: 160)

⁴⁴ (Cafri *et al*, 2005; Frith, Shaw & Cheng, 2005; Grabe, Ward & Hyde, 2008; Overstreet, Quinn & Agocha, 2010; Greenwood & Dal Cin, 2012; Sepúlveda & Calado, 2012; Sastre, 2014; Yan & Bissell, 2014; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015; Pellizzer, Tiggemann & Clark, 2016; Strübel & Petrie, 2016)

Western beauty and body ideals privilege, amongst other characteristics, slenderness or thinness⁴⁵ as desirable and aspirational. The discussion surrounding the 'thinness ideal' and its impact on women's well-being, particularly in relation to body image and disordered eating, has existed since well before Naomi Wolf's iconic book, *The Beauty Myth*, was published in 1991. However, it has developed in different and somewhat contradictory ways in the last 30 years. Initially authors argued that all women were affected⁴⁶, while later others have suggested that white or western women are more affected by the demands of these ideals than any other demographic, or at the very least, that assessments of the impact of beauty ideals are 'anchored' in white women's experiences⁴⁷. Further, some research assumed that non-white women were less affected by western beauty ideals because of their own cultural beauty standards⁴⁸, while again, later research indicated that pressures to conform are simply taken up in different ways depending on those specific cultural and environmental contexts⁴⁹.

Gremillion's paper, *The Cultural Politics of Body size* outlines various anthropological and sociological studies which have engaged in researching social and cultural attitudes toward body size. In it she states that "comparisons between contemporary "Western" ideals of slimness and "non-Western" preferences for large bodies [...] are unavoidably a product of Eurocentric preoccupations that shape an interest in the topic at hand. (2005: 14) Similarly In her 2005 chapter *Visualizing the body*, Oyewumi makes the argument that privileging the body, and thereby prioritizing the visual in terms of value judgment, is particular to Euro-centric ways of being. (458)⁵⁰ On this point I agree. However this does not detract from the contemporary realities of the impact of Western beauty and body ideals and their contradictory colonial legacies of both casting value judgments in biological and bodily terms, and diminishing the value of embodiment. Craig articulates this, stating that "Discourses of race and beauty are often intertwined" (2006: 160), and goes further by later adding notions of class into this already complicated conversation⁵¹. Thus I would argue that, regardless of which *view* one chooses to adopt in terms of the impact of western beauty standards, an impact exists nonetheless. In their article *Beyond*

⁴⁵ (Wolf, 1991; Cafri et al, 2005: 421; Ferreday, 2007; Grabe, Ward & Hyde, 2008: 460; Overstreet, Quinn & Agocha, 2010: 92; Greenwood & Dal Cin, 2012: 220; Sepúlveda & Calado; 2012, 53; Goldenberg *et al*; 2007: 213-214; Sastre; 2014, 939; Tiggemann, Coutts & Clark, 2014: 199; Gillen; 2015; 68; Pellizzer, Tiggemann & Clark, 2016: 36; Strübel & Petrie, 2016: 347; Nash & Warin, 2017: 74

⁴⁶ (Craig, 2006; Grabe, Ward & Hyde, 2008; Sepúlveda & Calado; 2012; Yan & Bissell, 2014)

⁴⁷ (Cafri et al, 2005; Frith, Shaw & Cheng, 2005; Overstreet, Quinn & Agocha, 2010)

⁴⁸ (Greenwood & Dal Cin, 2012)

⁴⁹ (Frith, Shaw & Cheng, 2005; Craig, 2006; Frith, Shaw & Cheng, 2005; Overstreet, Quinn & Agocha, 2010; Greenwood & Dal Cin, 2012; Yan & Bissell, 2014)

⁵⁰ Also (Fox, 2012)

⁵¹ Also (Magubane, 2008: 701-702)

Thinness: The Influence of a Curvaceous Body Ideal on Body Dissatisfaction in Black and White Women
Overstreet, Quinn & Agocha sum up this fundamental and overarching concern:

As socio-cultural theory highlights, unrealistic standards of beauty often become a comparison point against women's own evaluation of their physical attractiveness [...]. Moreover, when women evaluate themselves against media ideals of unattainable beauty standards and find a discrepancy between their own attractiveness and that of an idealized image, the consequences can be costly (2010: 92)

And so we circle back to the importance of positive body image.

What research has been done on body positive movements in Europe⁵² and the USA⁵³ is situated around organized social activism projects and movements on online social media platforms. Lane's thesis, *Body Positive Movement: How can the Body Positive Movement Continue to Develop as a Successful Social Movement that Reaches its Goals?* (2017) which is based in Australia, has looked at the impact of Body Positive Organisations [BPO's] on young women and girls at the YWCA. But none have taken up qualitative research on the embodiment and praxis of body positivity within body positive communities. In her thesis however, Lane argues that cultivation of positive body image is essential to BPO's, utilizing Tylka & Wood-Barcalow's article as the foundation for her argument.

Once again, in terms of body positive communities, there has been little research done either locally or globally. However, a handful of studies have been produced on the connections between positive body image, embodiment and dancing or movement, particularly in female-centric communities⁵⁴, most of these focusing on belly dancing, pole dancing, hip-hop and to a lesser degree, burlesque. Each of these articles explore the concepts of embodiment through these dance forms and indicate strong correlations between these dance forms, their communities, embodiment and the positive effects they have on body image, and by extension, self-confidence and improved self-esteem ergo empowerment. Additionally, Ferreday (2007 & 2008) and Downey *et al* (2010) explore the ways in which these dance forms present "substantial challenges to traditional gender identities" (2010: 379) and trouble "mainstream notions of femininity on multiple levels." (2008: 61)

⁵² (Alentola, 2017)

⁵³ (Sastre, 2014)

⁵⁴ (Ferreday, 2007; Whitehead & Kurz, 2009; Downey *et al.*, 2010; Giuffre, 2011; Tiggemann, Coutts & Clark, 2014; Pellizzer, Tiggemann & Clark, 2016; Strübel & Petrie, 2016; Just & Muhr, 2019)

A number of these texts also explored these dance forms in terms of the relationship between positive body image, sexual empowerment, and the potential benefits of self-sexualization within body positive environments⁵⁵ Owen for example engages with the way in which the burlesque community creates a safe, playful and accepting space for women and also men to explore ideas of sexuality and gender. (2014: 33-38) With regard the kink/bdsm community in South Africa, I was able to find exactly one article and it has been noted by some authors⁵⁶ that there is a “general dearth” of research relating kink/bdsm and embodiment globally. I am proposing in this research however that owing to the embodied nature of kink/bdsm practices, and the level of body acceptance and inclusiveness within this particular community, that it can be framed along similar lines to the abovementioned dance forms in terms of its potential for positive effect on body image, self-esteem and sense of self-empowerment.

Pregnancy, Motherhood and Sexuality

An essential part of the research is engaging with the concepts of pregnancy, motherhood and sexuality, of which there is a wealth of research globally. A number of texts deal with the intricacies of reproductive politics, from the medicalization of women’s bodies, to the “centrality of maternity and maternal capacity to womanhood” (Denbow, 2014: 110), looking at issues of consent, control and autonomy within Western Societies where notions of “power and control over women’s reproductive agency” are constantly in flux (Woliver, 2002: 1)⁵⁷. Similarly I found the arguments of some authors in framing the split between motherhood and sexuality and the ways in which these are socially constructed valuable⁵⁸. Oliver’s 2010 article *Motherhood, Sexuality, and Pregnant Embodiment: Twenty-Five Years of Gestation* was particularly useful in referencing the ideas of Iris Young, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray, unpacking their theories on the conflict of motherhood and sexuality, and demonstrating how these and the dominant discourses of biological motherhood and heteronormative relationships are both re-imagined and perpetuated. Oliver’s ultimate argument however is to indicate that despite twenty five years of change and advancement in attitudes toward motherhood and sexuality, many discourses and attitudes continue to be reinforced, and that feminist theory and analysis are still vital in the addressing of these. (2010: 776)

⁵⁵ (Downey *et al.*, 2010; Owen, 2014; Tiggemann, Coutts & Clark, 2014; Pellizzer, Tiggemann & Clark, 2016; Strübel & Petrie, 2016; Swami *et al.*, 2017)

⁵⁶ (Mosher, 2017; Swami *et al.*, 2017; Langdrige & Parchev, 2018; Moore Le Franc, 2018)

⁵⁷ (Woliver, 2002; Denbow, 2014; Phipps, 2014)

⁵⁸ Woliver, 2002; Friedman *et al.*, 1998; Malacrida & Boulton, 2012)

In terms of social reaction to the display of pregnant bodies, Betterton (2006) and Goldenberg *et al* (2007) offer studies investigating why the pregnant body is received negatively. Their findings were that “creatureliness”, or the reminder of a human’s similarities to an animal, along with the fear of the female body both in terms of its power and its animalism/mortality, were the primary motivators for negative perceptions of pregnancy and for viewing pregnant women as less competent.⁵⁹ Longhurst’s paper ‘*Corporeographies of pregnancy: ‘bikini babes’* focuses on the “ambivalences and contradictions surrounding pregnant bodies in public places” (1998: 455). Using Butler’s framework of performativity, Longhurst considers the social construction and expectations of pregnant women’s behaviour in public, all of which has relevance to this project. On a different track, Tyler (2011) contemplates the sexual politics of maternity within neoliberalism, outlining and problematizing the ways in which pregnant bodies have become more visible, more sexualized and more deeply commodified in the past two decades.

Regarding Pregnancy, Motherhood and Sexuality in South Africa, there is an abundance of research relating to teen or unwanted pregnancy⁶⁰, gender norms, gender based violence and sexuality⁶¹, and sexuality education within schools⁶², but nothing that I could find pertaining to pregnancy and sexuality in particular.

Middle-Class South African Womanhood

Reproductive politics and motherhood, as with everything else in South Africa, have been deeply shaped by its history and politics⁶³, thus it is not possible to begin a conversation about these topics without touching on the ways in which race and class are implicated in their production. A number of studies provided valuable insight and overviews into the gender roles⁶⁴ which frame social expectations around maternity, motherhood and women’s sexuality in South Africa, all of which are deeply entangled and largely premised around prioritizing reproduction and motherhood as the imperative social, cultural and biological functions of womanhood⁶⁵. As mentioned in the participant section, while I did not

⁵⁹ (Goldenberg *et al*, 2007: 214)

⁶⁰ (Francis, 2013; Mkwanazi, 2014; Shefer & Ngabaza, 2015)

⁶¹ (Posel, 2004; Kalichman *et al*, 2005; Penzhorn, 2005; Naidu, 2008; Sathiparsad, Taylor & Dlamini, 2008; Mantell *et al*, 2009; Jewkes & Morrell, 2010; Mkwanazi, 2014; Epprecht, 2018)

⁶² (Francis, 2013; Shefer & Mcleod, 2015; Shefer & Ngabaza, 2015; Salo, 2018)

⁶³ (Walker, 1995; Kaufman, 2000; Klausen, 2010; Chadwick & Foster, 2012; Worthington, 2013; Mkhwanazi, 2014; Ferriera, 2016; Salo, 2018)

⁶⁴ (Epprecht, 1996; Salo, 2003; Kalichman *et al*, 2005; Magubane, 2008; Tobler, 2000; Sathiparsad *et al*, 2008; Mantell *et al*, 2009; Worthington, 2013; Bower, 2014; Ferriera, 2016; Salo, 2018)

⁶⁵ (Walker, 1995; Tobler, 2000; Salo, 2003; Ichou 2006; Chadwick & Foster, 2012; Bower, 2014).

consciously factor race into my participant selection process, what unfolded was a study on predominantly white, middle-class women.

Within South Africa, race and class are deeply implicated in the formation of identity, with class distinctions being drawn largely along racial lines⁶⁶. Colonialism in general, and the Apartheid regime in particular, positioned whiteness as the apex of human biological, cultural and social evolution⁶⁷. Within that apex, existed further divisions of class. Colonialism dictated that the upper classes and gentry were the pinnacle of aspirational civility, however in the Apartheid era, Afrikaner volkdom was what set one above the rest. Internally, there were significant tensions and nuances to differing constructions of both British and Afrikaans whiteness⁶⁸. However, externally, they did the work of universally privileging the biological 'fact' of whiteness, and within that, certain levels of civility, class and moral behaviour, as superior. These became the norms against which all else was assessed as other, and to which the 'other' was expected to aspire⁶⁹. While Aspirations of biological 'whiteness' were virtually⁷⁰ impossible, the carrot of something akin to social whiteness was dangled within reach of coloured, Indian and Asian communities⁷¹, provided individuals did the work of self-improvement financially, educationally and through respectability. The harder one worked to emulate and assimilate whiteness, the more likely one's chances of achieving a foot in the door of the middle-class, which was predominantly white.

That is not to say however that all white South Africans were considered middle-classed. In fact, Fox, in his paper *Race, Power and Polemic: Whiteness in the anthropology of Africa*, (2012) states that the

⁶⁶ (Erasmus, 2000; Teppo, 2004; Penzhorn, 2005; Magubane, 2008; Erasmus, 2010; Fox, 2012; Nyamnjoh, 2012; Ferreira, 2016; Salo, 2018)

⁶⁷ (Magubane, 2004; Posel, 2004; Teppo, 2004; Gqola, 2005; Erasmus, 2010; Fox, 2012; Nyamnjoh, 2012)

⁶⁸ (Walker, 1995, Teppo, 2004; Klausen, 2010; Fox, 2012; Salo, 2018)

⁶⁹ (Nyamnjoh, 2012: 70-71)

⁷⁰ Virtually, but not entirely. Elaine Salo points out that "During segregation, many wealthy and skilled members of the coloured petite bourgeoisie who sought better economic, educational and other social opportunities changed their identification to white and began mixing exclusively within the better-off social classes. This was common, although disparagingly, referred to as 'passing for white.'" (Salo, 2018: 56)

⁷¹ Within the dominant Eurocentric ideology, these possibilities were largely denied "blacks" or people of African descent because of the ways in which the hierarchies and binaries of civilized/primitive and White/Black were produced and placed blackness at the opposite end of the spectrum to whiteness. That being said, Zimitri Erasmus points out in her article *Contact Theory: Too Timid for "Race" and Racism* that "Research and fictional accounts reveal lay interpretations of who is "White on the inside," due to their cultural and political practices, despite visible somatic markers (Erasmus & de Wet, 2003; Matlwa, 2007; Soudien, this issue). These reveal judgments about the fit between class, the cultural effects of racially heterogeneous schooling, and racial membership. Such interpretations of contemporary intersections of race and class make wealthier Black South Africans "culturally White," and defy notions of race as visible. They confirm that what it means to be "Black" is contested, not given." (2010: 390)

instability and conflicts that arose between separate white groups throughout South African history have “served to complicate the already vast South African racial landscape” which has led to the reification of negative representations of all racial groups, including whites themselves. He argues, further, that because of these struggles, defining whiteness has become “a daunting and complicated project” for the most part because post-Apartheid white South Africans don’t know how to make sense of their own identities, or the complicity of those identities in the “systemic advantage and disadvantage” which occurred historically. (2012) This is further problematized by the lack of research on certain types of white identities. As Nyamnjoh points out in his article *Blinded by Sight: Divining the Future of Anthropology in Africa* (2012), “Somehow, anthropologists who study Africa seldom bother to “know” white Africans, almost as if being white and African were a contradiction in terms”. (2012: 69). What little research has been conducted on whiteness⁷², has largely centered around those white groups who might be construed as disenfranchised, such as ‘poor whites’⁷³ or ‘ethnically other’ such as Afrikaans-speaking whites, and thus capable of being ‘studied down’ upon. The trouble, Nyamnjoh suggests, is the seeming discomfort or animosity of South African anthropologists with studying horizontally or up. But as Fox states “ignoring the topic of whiteness in the anthropology of Africa would compromise our appreciation of the social memory, hidden histories, and hybridized cultural practices through which power relations are regenerated.” (2012) In terms of these arguments, I agree that by ignoring or avoiding the topic of whiteness, and specifically middle or upper-class whiteness, we inadvertently perpetuate the privilege and norms attributed to these groups, and continue to mystify and reify them. This does disservice to our understanding of the nuances and complexities of African pasts and presents. Further I agree that we should not shy away from ‘studying horizontally or up’ if we are able, and for this reason, I am grateful to be able to utilize my privilege as a middle-classed white woman to do so.

The descriptor ‘middle-classed’ seems to mean different things to different people.⁷⁴ In her book *Respectable Mothers, Tough Men and Good Daughters: Producing persons in Manenberg Township South Africa*, Salo describes her own experience of growing up in the “small middle class” (2018: 8) of her coloured community:

⁷² Worthington too comments that “In South Africa, there is a significant gap in the literature concerning the multiple paradoxes that white, middle-class South African mother’s face in post-apartheid South Africa”. (2013: 10)

⁷³ “whites who have failed to live up to the comforts of being white” (Nyamnjoh, 2012:70)

⁷⁴ It was interesting to me that despite a number of the authors I read engaging in discussions about the middle-class, none set out to define what middle-class meant. It was assumed obvious.

I learned that English-speaking communities were considered to be socially and economically superior to Afrikaans-speaking communities. My experiences of racial homogeneity were also coloured over by our privileged class access to privately owned swimming pools in relatives' and neighbours' backyards, my family's ability to purchase books and magazines fairly freely and the economic ability to travel. Young women's education was considered as important as that for men, even while domesticity was still regarded as a core aspect of my own and other girls' upbringing. [...] I spent my afternoons reading, playing the piano or completing homework rather than cooking or cleaning house. Later, as I shared these experiences with middle-class white English-speaking or Afrikaner girlfriends, or with middle-class Black, Xhosa-speaking girlfriends, who grew up in the same economic circumstances, albeit on the other side of the walls or the tracks, we discovered that in retrospect, my experiences were no different from their own. (Ibid: 9)

Here, Salo speaks to middle-classed-ness as a particular blend of social, economic and educational privileges which are, it seems, to some degree homogenized regardless of the community in which it exists. Salo's description certainly reflects my own upbringing, and those of many of the participants within this study. It also suggests that the middle-class was the one space in which it might be possible to traverse, or at a minimum, narrow the gap between Apartheid's racial divides, at least in terms of its opportunities⁷⁵. That being said, it is important to recognize that this homogeneity was Eurocentric: it was produced through the aspiration and pursuit of sociocultural whiteness, and through conforming to Eurocentric ideals, as typified by Salo's mentions of swimming-pools, travel and piano lessons⁷⁶. It is this understanding of upbringing then that serves best in defining what is meant here by 'middle-classed'.

As indicated by Salo in the above quote, "domesticity was still regarded as a core aspect" (2018: 9) of girls' upbringings within middle-class environments. Salo has written extensively on the concept of respectability or "ordentlikheid" within the coloured communities of Manenberg, and speaks to the gendered project of producing respectable and respectful daughters, mothers and wives, whose responsibility it is to exemplify a household's dignity and respectability⁷⁷. Similarly, Botha (2010), who draws and adapts her argument from Salo's, investigates the use of ordentlikheid in a school designed to house and treat poor white teen-age pregnancy. Klausen (2010) explores the ways in which, through pregnancy and motherhood, women became responsible for the Afrikaner Nation's purity, morality and

⁷⁵ It must be acknowledged that even within the middle class there were/are subsets of lower, middle and upper – which are largely defined by income and economics, but for the purposes of this research the participants self-identified broadly as middle-classed, with no further differentiation, and so I will be using the broadest version of the term as an indicator of general environment and opportunity.

⁷⁶ From personal experience and the anecdotes from participants, I would include ballet lessons as another typical indicator of middle class and white aspirations.

⁷⁷ 2004 & 2018 (See also Ross, 2010 & Ferriera, 2016 for discussions about ordentlikheid within other Cape Town coloured communities, and Erasmus, 2000 & 2010 for discussions about coloured identity, gendered roles and culture)

honour. Similarly again, Chadwick & Foster (2012) and Worthington (2013) produced works looking at the construction and performance of motherhood and white femininities through the making of the “good mother” within middle classed white English speaking communities. What these texts point to, is an overarching valuing of women’s reproductive and maternal capacities through the notion of respectability and responsibility. While this may present differently within individual communities, the underlying premise burdens all South African women with the responsibility of sociocultural respectability through their capacity as child-bearers and child-raisers, and values them only insofar as they are successful within those roles.

A Feminist Conversation: Exploitation versus Empowerment

In September 2016, a self-confessed radical feminist and founder of Rape Crisis heard that Rape Crisis had been accepting substantial donations from Burlesque companies. She took to the blogosphere to decry in horror, this public alliance of her hard-won radical feminist organization with “the enemy”: women who “strip and gyrate in sexually suggestive ways for the ‘enjoyment’ of others”. (Bower, 2016)

Words like “disrespected”, “dishonoured” and “discounted” were hurled into the ether, in a swirling vortex of hurt feelings in response to what was, to this woman, a complete betrayal of the politics she had worked so very hard to implement during her active years within the organization. That ‘her’ organization had stooped to the level of accepting funding from “the objectification of women’s bodies and sexuality” (Bower, 2016) was simply untenable, and in the end, she declared that “The Rape Crisis which I was instrumental in establishing and of which I was the first-ever director is no more. So I remain sad, angry and feeling that it is no longer a place where I am proud to be” (Bower, 2016), ultimately leveling a scathing denunciation of both the organization, its current directors, and the burlesque community with which it was involved. Her letter was swiftly followed by a second, written by one of her original cohort, which was equally as condemnatory and critical as the first, if couched in more academic terms.⁷⁸

Many of the burlesque dancers in question, most of whom consider themselves to be feminists, were incensed, and what followed was a two week long virtual mud-slinging match between the old and the new guard: radical feminists from the ‘second wave’ of the 60’s to 80’s, and liberal or ‘third wave’

⁷⁸ (Mayne, 2016)

feminists of the present era⁷⁹, casting aspersions and rallying their defensive arguments based on equal parts academic theory, lived experience and bruised ego. Body positivity and freedom of expression were at the heart of the disagreement, but what was unfolding here was another iteration of an ongoing debate between schools of feminist thought about what performing sexuality, or sexual performance means.⁸⁰

It is not a new argument. Commonly referred to as ‘the sex wars’, the debate between anti-pornography feminists and pro-sex feminists in the global north in raged in the 80’s and has continued to flare up from time to time since.⁸¹ One such flare up was shared in Gilmore & Wheeler’s 2012 journal article *Getting ‘Down and Dirty’ at the Berks: A Conversation about Feminism, Queer Politics, and the Many Meanings of Sexual Performance*, in which a collective of conference attendees and performers discuss via email the various implications and repercussions reflected in attendees’ responses to a burlesque performance held at the Berkshire Conference of Woman Historians. A primary topic of conversation was the idea that putting on something like *The Down and Dirty Show* at an academic conference was a clear signal, to some, that the ‘sex wars’ had been won by pro-sex feminists, while to others it indicated that, to a large degree, ‘second wave’ feminism had simply been silenced (ibid: 174). This discussion in and of itself is strong indication that nothing has been ‘won’, and that the tensions between these different schools of thought still remain.

In her 2008 thesis *“The fantasy of real women”: New burlesque & the female spectator*, Emily Fargo sums this debate up:

There are two schools of thought currently dominating the discourse surrounding burlesque and striptease performance. The first, more conservative view is that sexual, physical display of this kind is demeaning and antithetical to feminist goals. Critics of burlesque allege that it is exploitative of women, and not so different from other types of sexually-oriented work

⁷⁹ The terms second and third wave are used to differentiate between different schools and generations of feminist thought, such as to indicate Eurocentric vs Intersectional feminism, trans-exclusive vs trans-inclusive attitudes, anti-objectification vs sex-positivity, but what falls within the categories of differentiation can be quite amorphous. To my mind, third wave is a catch-all referring to later forms of feminist thought that have been influenced or guided by the inclusion of queer theory and/or intersectionality/decolonialism, while second wave refers to earlier feminist theory predicated upon the Eurocentric binarization of biology and gender and a more universalized imaginary of female experience. Further to this Kathy Dey 2016, does a synopsis of popular understandings of feminist evolution in her commentary on Rape Crisis, which precedes both Bower and Mayne’s letters.

⁸⁰ (Buszek, 1999; Ferraday, 2007; Fargo, 2008; Ferraday, 2008; Whitehead & Kurz, 2009; Coy & Garner, 2010; Giuffre, 2011; Careless, 2012; Gilmore & Wheeler 2012, Owen; 2012: 80; Tiggemann, Coutts & Clark, 2014; Pellizzer, Tiggemann & Clark, 2016: 37; Just & Muhr; 2019)

⁸¹ (Glick, 2000; Queen & Comella, 2008; Echols, 2016; Altman, 2018: 1251)

(stripping, porn, even prostitution) as some in the neo-burlesque community might like to think. The second view, now growing in popularity, is that burlesque performance, because it allows women to publicly express their sexuality, is actually a positive, empowering, and even feminist act. (2008: 2)⁸²

For 'second wave' feminists all feminist action is part of a greater political whole. Individual expression is not as important as meeting these political goals. In this view, the phrase "the personal is political" implies that all behaviour should reflect an antithetical stance to patriarchal systems, a complete rejection of anything that resembles the political and representative structures within it. This means that any display of sexuality that even vaguely resembles those perceived to be directed at or for the male gaze or male objectification, in their eyes, is a contravention of this stance. However, "the personal is political" can be read another way, and for 'third wave' feminists, who are generally also strong proponents of queer theory, individual expression and personal agency IS political. By their argument, even if you are performing in a way that could be read by some as sexually exploitative, if done consciously and with intention, and if the power rests in the hands of an autonomous and conscious actor, then it is not considered to be perpetuating patriarchal systems. 'Second wave' feminists seem to believe that personal expression of sexuality is undermining everything that they fought and stood for⁸³, while 'third wave' feminists believe that their right to personal sexual expression is built upon those foundations and that they are now evolving forward. (Gilmore & Wheeler, 2012: 184)⁸⁴

What is troubling about the former stance is that, while well intentioned, it inadvertently sets up a template for the 'right' kind of female behavior, which can inevitably be dictatorial and has ultimately been read, in many regards, as just another form of bodily and behavioural policing, not dissimilar to

⁸² Burlesque's relationship with sex work has indeed been contentious. In some instances a level of branding and sanitizing has taken place (I am thinking here of the 2010 film of the same name) in order to create palatable mass appeal and, in a marketing sense, the ways in which schools do often focus on the benefits of body positivity, rather than the art form's links to sex work. That being said, in general, burlesque performers do not shy away from admitting both their historical and contemporary associations with stripping. Anecdotally a common joke in burlesque communities is that the only difference between burlesque artists and strippers is that "strippers get paid better". This is of course an oversimplification. However many burlesque performers supplement their incomes by stripping in male oriented strip clubs, and have noted the distinct differences between the two forms of performance in terms of audience, gaze, situated-ness of power, objectification, self-image and types and levels of nudity. Certainly all the burlesque dancers I know or follow both locally and internationally are actively pro sex-work. Overall however, the burlesque/sexwork conversation is nuanced and ongoing, as evidenced by the conversations here.

⁸³ (Just & Muhr; 2019, 3)

⁸⁴ Also (Glick, 2000: 20; Fargo, 2008: 83; Queen & Comella, 2008: 278-279; Giuffre, 2011: 312; Echols, 2016: 12)

patriarchal systems, and ultimately exclusionary in practice. Perhaps 'second wave' feminists meant to ask "what would female sexuality look like if it was not influenced by the patriarchy?" which is a fair question. The trouble is that they don't seem particularly happy with the possibility that the answer might be: "quite similar". This is summed up by Stryker who says "For me, the issues are not "pro-sex" or "anti-sex," but rather that some feminists feel entitled to declare themselves legitimate bearers of feminist discourse who are entitled to delegitimize others, while other feminists are less willing to define others based on practices they have engaged in." (ibid: 186) Though it may not be the intended message, the stance of the 'second wave' feminists comes across as though, despite claims to want to give women the right to choose, there is a caveat attached: 'Choose what *WE* think is the right choice for the greater good. Not what *YOU* want as an individual.'⁸⁵

A concern with the stance of 'third wave' feminists, however, is that in their efforts to evolve through the incorporation of queer theory, to be more inclusive and to consider the needs of the individual, it is possible for one to lose sight of how tenuously close to the edge of patriarchal capture personal sexual expression can creep, and it assumes that a subjectivity entirely separate from people's lived experiences within normative systems is possible.⁸⁶ Friedman, points to this ongoing argument saying that,

"Every day I struggle between my commitment to sex positivity and my horror at the lessons my child is learning about how to treat women. [...] Parenting has taught me in new and intense ways about the complexities of sexual spectatorship. Perhaps I am simply stating the obvious, but one of the things that I think should not be lost in any "victory" of the sex wars is that sex is always about both pleasure and danger, self and its loss, ecstasy and death, and maybe the discomfort that haunts many experiences of sexual spectatorship should be taken seriously as a reminder of that" (ibid: 181).

Raunch culture⁸⁷ does flirt with commodification. (Fargo, 2008: 90)⁸⁸ Self-objectification is simply another form of objectification⁸⁹. Sexual expression does indeed depend on the perception of sexual

⁸⁵ (Queen & Comella, 2008: 276; Echols, 2016: 14)

⁸⁶ (Glick, 2000: 20; Queen & Comella, 2008: 278-279)

⁸⁷ Whitehead and Kurz define raunch culture as the following: "the specific ways in which 'supersexualized' (Gill, forthcoming) representations of female sexuality have become mainstreamed in recent decades have been argued to represent a degree of cultural shift towards what Levy (2005) refers to as 'raunch culture'." (2009: 228)

⁸⁸ See also (Whitehead & Kurz, 2009: 228; Coy & Garner, 2010: 659; Gilmore & Wheeler, 2012: 191)

⁸⁹ With the advent of 'raunch culture', and with the rise of social media platforms, self-objectification and self-commodification have become a normalised aspect of people's lives. Authors such as Pellizzer, Tiggemann & Clark, 2016 and Strübel & Petrie, 2016 have researched objectification theory, and the ways in which objectification and sexualization are internalized to produce self-objectification and self-sexualization which can and often do reinforce patriarchal power structures. However their research has also indicated that there can be positive

spectatorship, and it is easy to see where ‘second wave’ concern for the erosion of their hard-won political stance comes from. (Gilmore & Wheeler, 2012: 191) The possibilities of patriarchal capture in this sense seems viable. But what does it mean for this argument about spectatorship when one considers that contemporary Burlesque seems to draw a predominantly queer and female audience? How does this argument translate if the spectators are majority women?⁹⁰

For these performers and for most ‘third wave’ feminists, engaging in acts of sexual expression is not a black and white process. Performance of sexuality and sexual expression can be utilized not only as a means of self-expression but also as a weapon of resistance. Spear points out that “Creating safe spaces to be able to feel, enjoy, and question our own sexualities can be a powerful tool to combat the misuse and abuse of sex work and erotic labor. (ibid: 188) Dr Lukki corroborates this thinking in Fargo’s Thesis stating that, “the reclaiming of a potentially ‘oppressive’ representation of women in the public sphere” (2008: 41-42) is a dynamic way of challenging and problematizing perceptions of women’s sexuality.⁹¹

It seems perhaps then that what ‘second wave’ feminists might miss in ‘third wave’ feminists’ arguments, is a strong awareness of and a calculated grappling with the problematic nature of sexuality and sexual expression. Many performers and ‘third wave’ feminists are very aware of the contentious nature of female sexuality or sexual expression, and their links, both historical and contemporarily, to exploitation and disempowerment. Dr Lukki, a female drag queen, points out that just “Because something is empowering to someone does not mean that it doesn’t circulate in an economy of exploitation,” (ibid: 41-42) and Spear, a performer and director of burlesque shows says “I do not think that all erotic work is empowering. There is still a huge amount of commodification, manipulation, abuse, and horror in the pornography and sex work industries.” But she is also quick to point out that “this does not mean that all eroticism is inherently misogynistic. Lust, erotic charge, and desire—these things are not inherently evil.” (Gilmore & Wheeler, 2012: 188)⁹². As Bronstein says, it is difficult to reconcile “a feminist orientation that wants to view sexuality as a source of autonomy, pleasure, and

correlations between self-sexualization when combined with embodied activities and actions, including certain forms of dancing, such as hip-hop, pole, belly and burlesque.

⁹⁰ (Fargo, 2008; Ferraday 2007 & 2008; Gilmore & Wheeler, 2012) In the context of Cape Town, both Black Orchid Burlesque and the Rouge Revue (the primary Burlesque companies and schools in Cape Town) claim 60-70% female viewership, and are run by queer women. That is not to say that many of the dancers are not heterosexual, but certainly the environment, both in class and at public shows is not just queer friendly, but actively inclusive, and very female-centric. These demographics are certainly accurate to my experience as a performer over the last 7 years, which has been to perform to a largely female audience.

⁹¹ (Buszek, 1999; Glick, 2000; Ferraday, 2007; Queen & Comella, 2008: 283; Hanna, 2010: 218; Careless, 2012; Mosher; 2017: 497)

⁹² Also (Queen & Comella, 2008: 278-279; Echols, 2016: 12-13)

political power, but has been primed to connect sex work, including burlesque and live sex shows, to feminist theory about the objectification and commodification of women's bodies, no matter the spectator." (ibid: 185). But this reconciliation is exactly what contemporary feminists are attempting to do.

Ultimately, both are valid points of view. One of the differences, it seems, lies in the question of who sexual expression is for. Is it for men? Is it for women? Or is it for oneself: for one's own pleasure and for one's own empowerment?

Another question could well be asked: can there be a middle ground? As Bronstein says "Many of us are trying to find a livable space between second and 'third wave' feminism, and between theoretic perspectives that emphasize the potential for sexual objectification and those that celebrate personal and political agency achieved through resistant identities", (ibid: 192) and Glick raises an interesting perspective saying that

"pro-sex feminism is much closer to the ideologies of radical feminism than its proponents acknowledge [...] Ultimately, both pro-sex and radical feminists reproduce the ideology of personal emancipation within contemporary capitalist society by making the liberation of sex a fundamental feminist goal." (2000: 21-22)

For many younger or contemporary feminists, there is a desire to break away from the "polarizations of the 1980s" (ibid: 186) and to "question the idea that there was a second wave that was anti-sex and a third or fourth wave that is pro-sex." (ibid: 175). It is also important to note that these questions and debates are all produced from within the particular set of structures, processes and histories that are entirely focused through the lenses and experience of women and feminism in the global north.

Therefore one has to consider; "How might one translate these debates and concerns in a South African context? How might our own structures, processes and histories differently influence these debates, when situated in this particular climate?"

This research sits firmly within the perspective of the 'third wave', and has been conducted within the framework of this approach: it makes no apologies on that account. Davis and Mulla point out that "To be a feminist scholar in the public sphere is to become a lightning rod for suspicion, ire, punishment and surveillance. It also signifies a commitment to visionary leadership, transformative futures, and on-going struggles against inequality." (2020: 5) In this sense then what it means for an anthropologist to be so firmly located in third wave feminism is a choice to travel a particular critical path, utilizing specific feminist insights, in order to "demonstrate the radical possibilities of feminist analysis" (ibid: 5). In saying that however, it is also important to acknowledge that alternative perspectives, feminist or

otherwise, exist, including those that problematize the post-feminist, 'third wave' feminist, pro-sex feminist approach, and which can be used as a counter-measure, a reflexive tool to temper the passionate subjectivity of these arguments lest they fall into the traps of their own blind-spots, and perpetuate the systems they claim to be challenging.

Chapter 3 - Body Positivity: A Cape Town Example

We clinked our knives and forks together, resting in parallel. An indication that the meal is done. This particular cutlery lay out has always transmitted a vaguely military feel to me, like soldiers resting after battle. It reminds me of my childhood, of formal Sunday roast lunches around the dinner table with my step-mother, of indoctrinated table manners, of guilt and portion control. I cleared the plates and Anya reached for the Shiraz, it gurgle into our glasses. The movements and sounds were familiar, companionable, a routine borne from friendship and many shared evenings of food, wine and conversation.

I glanced at the phone, still quietly recording. “How do you understand the concept of body positivity?”

Anya gave me a wry smile, “I’ve recently discovered that what it means to ME is not necessarily in line with the “official” definition of body positivity.”

Her statement, decidedly sardonic, surprised me. “Is there an “official” definition of body positivity?”

She cocked her eyebrow at me, “Well, apparently, SOME people think that they have the official definition, but it’s one of those amorphous terms.”

Anya, a 31 year old burlesque performer, corsetress and body-positivity advocate, is not the only one grappling with the concept. Scholarship on body positivity as a construct is scarce and the global socio-political “movement” from which it stems is awash with contradictions, factions and a fair amount of infighting. Emerging in the wake of the global online phenomenon of fat-activism, or the fat acceptance movement, body positivity seeks to challenge unrealistic and limiting western beauty standards concerning weight, body shape and driven by the ‘male-gaze’,⁹³ by making visible and normalizing bodily diversity. People, but particularly women, are encouraged to ‘get in touch with’ their own bodies through acts and practices of embodiment, learning to appreciate and value themselves, rather than attempting to conform to existing norms. In psychology, embodiment refers to a “strong awareness of and sense of connectedness with one’s body” (Pellizzer, Tiggemann & Clark, 2016: 38) as a primary means of self-expression, empowerment and interpersonal relatedness. Many studies suggest that

⁹³ (Sastre, 2014; Alentola, 2017; Lane, 2017)

embodiment has direct links to a more positive body image, which fosters an overall improved sense of wellbeing at every level.⁹⁴ In anthropological terms, embodiment is the lived-experience of being bodies in the world. It is, as Csordas says “our fundamental existential condition, our corporeality or bodiliness in relation to the world and other people.” (2011: 137). Mascia-Lees argues that embodiment is the way in which each body inhabits the world through lived experience, and is also “the source of personhood, self, and subjectivity, and the precondition of intersubjectivity” (2011: 2). Both disciplines ultimately are concerned with the lived experience and the making of meaning from within lived experience, and both disciplines demonstrate that embodiment and selfhood, ergo self-esteem, are inextricably linked.

However, as Tylka & Wood-Barcalow said, “there is no unitary positive body image construct that applies to all groups within all social identities” (2015: 127); the conceptualization of body positivity and its understanding occur through the “intersection of various social identities” (ibid: 127). In Csordas’ writings on embodiment and cultural phenomenology, he considers embodiment as a tri-part experiential process concerned with the intersections of agency, sexual difference and corporeality. (2011: 147-148) He demonstrated that there are different loci for agency, differences in gendered experience and multiple modes of corporeality, all of which can be combined to produce one’s bodily experience of self, self in the world and self in relation to the world. Tylka & Wood-Barcalow suggest that this is because “culture-specific experiences may lead to variations in embodiment and how individuals relate to their bodies, which in turn can result in various conceptualizations”(2015: 127). This was certainly true of the Cape Town body positive communities within this research. Understandings of body positivity were not uniformly expressed across all communities,⁹⁵ each has its own dialectic interpretation and emphasis. Yet there were certain core tenets around self-worth and feeling empowered that remained the same regardless of the iterations I encountered.

Body positivity in these communities seems to be a direct response to the various gendered South African sociocultural imaginaries of the female body which these women experienced. These imaginaries appear to be defined in large part by two primary influences: globally dominant western

⁹⁴ (Cash, 2004; Gillen, 2015; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015; Swami et Al, 2017; Dunaev, Markey & Brochu, 2018)

⁹⁵ I recognize that owing to the limitations in scope of a Masters Project, I was not able to explore every iteration of body positivity in the Cape Town/South African context. In this instance I am able only to speak of body positivity as it is experienced by the predominantly white communities I had access to. I believe that attempting to understand the potential variances that might arise along racial and class lines in terms of body positivity would provide invaluable insight and dimension to the topic, but would be material for a much larger research project.

beauty ideals, and conservative, traditional gender norms. These influences result in the internalization of various problematic socio-culturally perpetuated ideals.

The effect of globalized western beauty ideals on women's body image is a well-documented phenomenon and one of growing concern.⁹⁶ Strübel & Petrie point out that "body image and psychological wellbeing are global issues for women that transcend ethnicity and cultural group membership due to the diffusion and acceptance of U.S. body, beauty, and gender ideals that are propagated through international media outlets" (2016: 350). There is substantial evidence of the ways in which these unrealistic standards, often referred to as the 'thin ideal', have had detrimental effects on women's overall sense of wellbeing and physical and mental health.⁹⁷

Additionally there is more to the desire to be slim than simple aesthetic value or health. There are deeply imbued socio-cultural implications attached to both body size and gender, which have often been significant in terms of the "reflecting and shaping [of] identities and the broader social order" (Brewis *et al.*, 2011: 269). In contemporary Western terms slimness, or thinness is associated with health, beauty, wealth, self-discipline, control and goodness, while fatness is associated with laziness, greed, lack of self-control, ugliness and undesirability⁹⁸. These concepts and value statements have largely been represented and reinforced in global mass-media by the predominant use of images of models whose size and shape are unrealistic and unattainable without serious dietary or medical intervention,⁹⁹ although this does appear to be slowly changing.

The negative effects of internalized slim ideals and weight bias are compounded by patriarchal systems which attach disparate values to their notions of masculine and feminine. South Africa like much of the rest of the world, is patriarchal. The country has a long history of various, intersecting yet inherently patriarchal influences¹⁰⁰, ranging from pre- and post-colonial African social systems¹⁰¹ to the

⁹⁶ (Ferraday, 2007)

⁹⁷ (Overstreet, Quinn & Agocha, 2010; Brewis. A. *et al.*, 2011; Sepúlveda & Calado, 2012; Greenwood & Dal Cin, 2012; Yan & Bissell; 2014; Tiggemann, Coutts & Clark, 2014; Gillen; 2015; Pellizzer, Tiggemann & Clark., 2016; Strübel & Petrie, 2016; Dunaev, Markey & Brochu, 2018).

⁹⁸ (Brewis *et al.*, 2011; Sepúlveda & Calado, 2012)

⁹⁹(Brewis. A *et al.*, 2011; Sepúlveda & Calado, 2012; Greenwood & Dal Cin, 2012; Yan & Bissell; 2014; Gillen; 2015; Pellizzer, Tiggemann & Clark, 2016; Strübel & Petrie, 2016).

¹⁰⁰ (Bozzoli, 1983; Epprecht, 1996; Gqola, 2005; Penzhorn, 2005; Sathiparsad *et al.*, 2008)

¹⁰¹ While some authors such as Oyewumi (2005) and Boydston (2008) have argued that pre-colonial societies were not necessarily Patriarchal, or, at the very least, that their hierarchical order did not prioritize gender, others such as Mama (2001) and Epprecht (1996) suggest that there is ample evidence that "gender, in all its diverse

conservative Euro-Christian values first delivered by Dutch and British colonists and missionaries, and later inculcated by nationalist Afrikaner Calvinism through Apartheid¹⁰². These systemic institutions continue to reverberate through South Africa's young democracy, resulting in a complicated interplay of tradition and modernity in terms of hegemonic gender norms, which still largely conform to religiously conservative and traditionally patriarchal mores¹⁰³. Within this hierarchical context, men are deemed dominant, and masculine norms are defined by functionality, strength and control, while women are viewed as subordinate, and feminine norms are defined by aesthetics, modesty and sexual docility. Evidence from various studies¹⁰⁴ suggests that while gender norms are slowly starting to change, these deeply embedded, socio-cultural roles continue to be perpetuated and internalized by both men and women, and that while women are beginning to recognize the "co-existence of traditional constructions of gender that operate to constrain [their] freedom" (Mantell *et al.*, 2009: 139), they may still be expected by parents and partners to subscribe to traditional gender-role hierarchies that characterized their parents' generation." (ibid: 141)

Modern Western mass media, fueled by these patriarchal structures, has a predilection for presenting women not only as thin but also as sexualized objects. According to Malacrida and Boulton "Women are expected on one hand to remain slim, childlike, and docile and on the other hand to convey an attitude of constant sexual readiness and appetite (Bordo 1995)." (2012: 751). This leads very often to women internalizing their roles as sexualized "body objects" (Sepúlveda & Calado, 2012: 52). The result of 'self-objectification'¹⁰⁵ is that for many women, value, and therefore self-worth, stems primarily from one's physical and sexual attractiveness.¹⁰⁶ Chadwick & Foster, while discussing white, middle class, South African women's construction of femininity expand on this, saying:

Feminist literature on gendered power relations has shown that women's sexual lives are negotiated in relation to a gendered technology of doubling whereby women live their own bodies as potential objects subject to an outsider's gaze, judgment and appraisal (Bartky, 1990). Such gender technologies do not only work by objectification, but (in line with Foucauldian

manifestations, has long been one of the central organizing principles of African society, past and present." (Mama, 2001: 69)

¹⁰² (Walker, 1995; Epprecht, 1996; Penzhorn, 2005; Botha, 2010; Klausen, 2010)

¹⁰³ (Penzhorn, 2005; Sathiparsad *et al.*, 2008; Mantell *et al.*, 2009; Botha, 2010; Jewkes & Morrell, 2010; Bower, 2014; Mkhwanazi, 2014)

¹⁰⁴ (Walker, 1995; Kalichman *et al.*, 2005; Sathiparsad, Taylor & Dlamini, 2008; Mantell *et al.*, 2009; Shefer & Ngabaza, 2015)

¹⁰⁵ (Pellizzer, Tiggemann & Clark, 2016; Strübel & Petrie, 2016)

¹⁰⁶ (Downey *et al.*, 2010; Sepúlveda & Calado, 2012; Tiggemann, Coutts & Clark., 2014; Pellizzer, Tiggemann & Clark, 2016)

theories of power) produce feminine modes of subjectivity which internalize such representations and actively 'take them up' as parts of the feminine self. (2012: 326)

This conflation of physical and sexual attractiveness suggests that it might not be possible to explore body positivity without also unpacking its relationship to sexual expression¹⁰⁷, which became evident in the research.

Sexuality, and sexual expression, by extension is informed and controlled by these same conservative and traditional systems. Conventional Christian mores dictate very specific beliefs in terms of monogamy, modesty and chastity, beliefs which are expressed with more consequence in terms of a woman's behavior than a man's. Kalichman *et al.* point out that multiple studies concluded that "South African women are expected to fulfill a stereotypical female gender role by being docile, especially in sexual relationships" (2005: 304) and in their research, Mantell *et al.* found that for the women in their study "male sexual pleasure was central to their narratives. Physical sexual pleasure for women was not mentioned by any participants; however, they continuously made reference to male pleasure." (2009: 151)¹⁰⁸ Further to this Shefer & Ngabaza's found that "pleasure or any positive aspects of sexual intimacy as associated with sexuality, at least within sexuality education, are rendered unimaginable or unspeakable", (2015: 69) and that there appears to be an underlying "regulatory imperative to control and discipline young people's sexualities and desires, in particular young women." (ibid: 64) These combine to produce a space where discussion about sex, and specifically female sexuality is largely taboo, and that there is a distinct dearth of literature and discourse, either in public or in scholarship that represents women's pleasure, sexuality or desire positively, speaks to this.

Thus it seems that for most South African women, their sense of their own value, whether socially or internally, is deeply entrenched within specific notions not only of aesthetic, bodily attractiveness, and thinness but is also conflated with notions of being sexually 'good', subservient and selfless. This is in line with Mosher who claims that "Sexuality cannot be separated from body size or body image (see Barnard, 1999)" (2017: 494)

Anya sipped her wine and said "So my understanding of body positivity is that you have a right to take up space in the world, you have a right to access joy and pleasure and to enjoy

¹⁰⁷ (Mosher, 2017)

¹⁰⁸ Also (Barker, Gill & Harvey; 2018: 1338)

interacting in the world without discrimination based on your appearance, you have worth, and that your worth is not determined solely by the way you look.”

Finding Your Self-Love: Exploring Access to Body Positivity

Much like feminism, body positivity is often best described by that which it stands in opposition to. Globally and locally, body positivity is ultimately engaged in attempting to undo the negative and exclusionary effects of unrealistic western beauty standards and fat stigma¹⁰⁹. Emily, a 47 year old mother of 2 working as an administrative co-ordinator, encapsulated this poignantly saying, “What society gives you is self-loathing. [Being] overweight gives you self-loathing.” Almost all the women I spoke with had a version of this story to tell. For Mr Jay, Starr, Emily, Juanita, Lady Raven and myself it was memories of being shamed, teased or criticized by mothers, sisters¹¹⁰, extended family or friends for being overweight. The internalization of weight bias¹¹¹, and the fear of fat stigma¹¹² dominated and motivated many of our younger lives.

For both Dorothy and Chilli it was being made to feel like “ugly ducklings”: Dorothy was told she was “too big, too tall and too dark” as a child, by her petite blonde step-mother. Chilli, a 33 year old doctor, burlesque performer and mom of 1, similarly felt judged for not being a “light skinned, straight haired, green eyed, Coloured child” like the rest of her friends¹¹³. She recalled as a child being told by her teacher in ballet class, “it’s a shame about your body because you have such wonderful stage presence”. Sarah too recalls that “body image issues” were dominant throughout her childhood and into her twenties, which were overshadowed by eating disorders. Lady Magnolia’s commentary was similar, saying,

¹⁰⁹ (Brewis *et al.*, 2011; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015: 120; Mosher, 2017: 494)

¹¹⁰ (Barker, Gill & Harvey; 2018: 1339) speak specifically of a ‘gynaeoptic surveillance’ or ‘girlfriend-gaze’ which refers to the perpetuation of patriarchal body and sexual norms by women on women. Kalichman *et al.*, 2005; 304 echo this when speaking of the ways in which South African women “endorse” gender norms and attitudes at rates which did not substantially differ from men.

¹¹¹ (Dunaev, Markey & Brochu, 2018: 9)

¹¹² (Brewis *et al.*, 2011)

¹¹³ Similar to Elaine Salo, Chilli, was raised in a middle classed coloured community, albeit in Johannesburg. Many of Chilli’s recollections reflect aspirational whiteness in terms of her activities, aesthetics and expected behaviours growing up. Ballet, Medical school and even the critique of her darkness all speak to an innate drive to conform or assimilate to South Africa’s then white Eurocentric norms in order to gain purchase and opportunity.

“I spent my teen-age years wanting to be thinner, thinking that I wasn’t sexy enough, attractive enough, and having a very strong connection in my mind, that attractiveness, being beautiful, sexy, is directly related to one’s weight, simply because that is what we see all the time.”

Hers and the voices of the other participants speak of consistent exposure to rigid and narrow aesthetic standards, a ‘thin ideal’ which is “virtually unattainable for most women through healthy means”, (Pellizzer, Tiggemann & Clark, 2016: 36) impressed from a young age and deeply internalized to create what authors refer to as a pervasive sense of “body dissatisfaction,” (ibid) one which becomes embodied¹¹⁴ and has significant impact on individual’s sense of self-worth and value.¹¹⁵ Dorothy, who is a 41 year old journalist and sex columnist, highlights this, saying “I had no issues with my body up until the age of five or six. What child does? There is no human who is born self-hating. [...] it was just this gradual hucking away.”

Participants’ first encounters with the concept of body positivity occurred in multiple different ways, but each involved experiences or activities, which would be considered ‘embodied’. Embodied activities or experiences are those which traverse the mind-body dichotomy and produce a sense of empowerment from within the body and through physical expression.¹¹⁶ For Lady Magnolia, Sarah, Chilli, Anya and I, body positive experiences began with belly dancing. Despite belly dance’s historical associations with the sexualized and patriarchal gaze, the contemporary dance-form has a strong focus on technical skills, female community and connection with the feminine aspects of one’s own body, and perhaps, most importantly, it was one of few dance forms which actively invites and accept dancers of all sizes, shapes and ages. Lady Magnolia, who is 37 and both a belly dance and burlesque instructor, pointed this out recalling that the women in belly dance classes she first attended as a student “were people that you see on the street every day of varying heights and weights and shapes and sizes. Belly dancing extends an open invitation to people who do not fit into the norm, who would never be comfortable joining a ballet class”. Belly dancing has been recognized in a number of studies as a largely female-centric, embodied activity with strong links to improved self-confidence, self-esteem and body image amongst dancers.¹¹⁷ Sarah, a 41 year old mother of 1, echoed this saying “belly dancing was a very important rite of passage into feeling like a woman for me. It helped me start accepting myself.”

¹¹⁴ Csordas refers to this as “internalized as a second nature and so forgotten as history” (2011:140)

¹¹⁵ (Pellizzer, Tiggemann & Clark, 2016; Dunaev, Markey & Brochu, 2018: 9)

¹¹⁶ (Strathern & Stewart, 2011: 389; Tiggemann, Coutts & Clark, 2014: 199)

¹¹⁷ (Downey *et al.*, 2010; Hanna, 2010: 220; Tiggemann, Coutts & Clark, 2014; Pellizzer, Tiggemann & Clark, 2016: 42-43)

Similarly, burlesque dancing was experienced by many of the participants as an empowering activity, and one which either introduced or strengthened the concept of body positivity. Anya offered her agreement, saying

“The burlesque scene in Cape Town has been a very big influence on my understanding of body positivity; it was really my introduction to a body positive space. I’d been in spaces before that were body positive, and my general upbringing was body positive, [...] but burlesque really made the space for crystallizing some of those thoughts”.

For many of the participants, the appeal of burlesque is that it explores the empowering aspects of belly dance and additionally, a safe, encouraging and judgment free space to explore feminine sexuality. Even more so than Belly dancing, Burlesque is hotly debated: It reinscribes sexualized masculine ideals and the hegemonic performance of femininity; it is an act of radical, liberatory, feminist protest; it is an art-form; it is sex-work, it is objectifying, it is empowering.¹¹⁸ The arguments go for and against, depending on which side of the line you stand. However in terms of the embodied experiences of the participants, burlesque was described by each one as life and perspective changing. Cookie, a 33 year old mom of 1, actress and doula¹¹⁹, summed this experience up saying that she found herself,

“looking around and realizing “I don’t think anyone has that thing that has been presented to us as the norm!” It was really nice to see various different shapes, and to see various different shapes being sexy and sensual in a way that I hadn’t anticipated they could be, because we are presented with the one version of what sexy looks like. And I knew I didn’t fit that, so it was quite empowering”

Sarah explained that for her burlesque meant, “an ability not to feel ashamed of my sexuality. To feel in charge as a woman, to feel positive about how I embrace and how I hold myself as a woman without the sense of societal prescription of what that should be.” Sweet-Cheeks, who is a 26 year old researcher and burlesque performer, also observed that through exposure to other women’s bodies of different shapes and sizes, burlesque has helped her to be “more accepting of other people's bodies, not transferring these socialized judgements onto other people.” For many, like Starr, Mr Jay, Chilli and I burlesque too provided a space of healing from traumas of various kinds. Chilli described this as

¹¹⁸ (Buszek, 1999; Ferraday, 2007; Fargo, 2008; Ferraday, 2008; Careless, 2012; Gilmore & Wheeler, 2012, Owen; 2012: 80; Bower, 2016; Pellizzer, Tiggemann & Clark, 2016: 37)

¹¹⁹ Cookie was also the first burlesque performer in South Africa to perform visibly pregnant. She performed up until her 8th month of pregnancy.

regaining her power, Mr Jay who is 29 and works as an au pair and seamstress talked about feeling she was “enough”.

It was interesting to note that for most of these women, exploring, expressing or reclaiming their sexuality was as much a part of the body positive project as exploring and accepting their physical appearance was, which seems to reinforce the statement that “Sexuality cannot be separated from body size or body image”(Mosher, 2017: 494), particularly where women are concerned. While some feminist theorists have argued that sexualization of the female body is dominated by the male-gaze, making it inherently oppressive, and that self-sexualization is simply a form of internalized patriarchy, Mosher points out that “sex and sexuality are integral to positive, healthy human growth and development” (ibid: 488), and therefore women have the right to choose how to include sexuality and sexual expression within their lived-worlds.

Given the conflation of body positivity with sexual expression, it is perhaps unsurprising then that the kink/bdsm community in Cape Town is also considered to be largely a body positive community. Kink too, is an embodying activity by virtue of the fact that, regardless of the specific kind of expression, all practices of kink are inherently sensory, sensual and physically “in” the body. Much like belly dancing and burlesque, kink/bdsm communities are contested terrain in terms of empowerment versus exploitation, and with good reason, as being a mixed gender space, it brings with it different understandings and experiences of gaze, safety and embodiment. Added to this is the reality that the kink/bdsm communities traverse, play with and often up-end concretized social norms around gendered sexuality and sexual expression.¹²⁰ The prevalence of whiteness within kink/bdsm communities is also a problematizing factor, and Juanita, who is 43, an IT professional, counselor and mom of 2, comments on this saying,

“sadly it doesn’t extend to people of people of colour, or race, in our community. I think people would like to think it does but I don’t think it genuinely does, and I don’t think it covers disability, and again, to be truly body positive it would include everything, and I don’t think it extends to that”.

However, Juanita’s comment speaks to a deeper tension that seems to run through many kink/bdsm communities globally.¹²¹ Moore LeFranc argues that this is because “The broader transformative potential of kink is itself mitigated by social inequality, [...] as dynamics of race, gender, class, and so on

¹²⁰ (Mosher, 2017: 488)

¹²¹ (Mosher, 2017: 495; Langdridge & Parchev, 2018: 669)

affect the ability of players to establish a scene space characterized by mutual power as a baseline for exploration. (2018: 250), while Mosher points out that a general dearth of research on kink sexualities, and the specific exclusion of diverse research participants, can lead to “problematic and incomplete conclusions about kink sexualities.” (2017, 495)¹²² Notwithstanding these tensions, which are, as Juanita pointed out, still present within the kink/bdsm community at large, the commentary from each of the participants of this study with regard their experiences of body positivity was very similar: the kink/bdsm community is a space that is accepting of all body shapes, and in which there is a strong practice of non-judgement and a high level of inclusivity¹²³. Lady Raven, a 34 year old mother of 1 who works in the service industry, summed this up saying that “What I found in the real community was people of all shapes and sizes. Not one person was excluded on that basis.” For some of the women I interviewed, like Emily, Juanita and Lady Raven, the kink community was their first point of exposure to the concept of body positivity. For others, like Dorothy, Anya, Sweet-Cheeks, Mr Jay and myself, kink/bdsm is simply one of multiple body positive communities which we traverse.

This is not to say that participants could only access the concept of body positivity through sensual forms of dance or non-normative sexual practices. For some, their encounters with body positivity began with the more ‘ordinary’ experience of pregnancy. Pregnancy is a deeply embodying experience. Both Chilli and Sarah said that their pregnancies were beneficial in expanding their understanding of body positivity, and that, reciprocally, body positivity was beneficial in the processing of their pregnancies. Interestingly, for Emily, Juanita and Lady Raven, who all deem themselves to be very overweight, pregnancy was their first experience of an internalized bodily appreciation of self. Emily recalled her experience:

“I think I didn’t have any body love for myself, until I started using my body to make another body, because I couldn’t deny that my body was doing a fantastic job of making another body. So as much as I could deny that it was a good looking body, because obviously it was an overweight one, and know you can put yourself down a lot, when you start making somebody else’s pancreas every day, and you have no idea what a pancreas even does, but you are making one, somehow, without thinking, your body is doing something that your mind can’t

¹²² I believe, like Mosher, that this would be an excellent and valuable area of further research particularly as it pertains to South Africa, body positivity and body image. My feeling is that the reasons for the continued prevalence of whiteness in these areas are similar to those I cited in footnote 25 with regards Burlesque.

¹²³ It is worth noting that the participants in this study who are involved in the kink/bdsm community, are involved in a particular circle within the community. Thus this small cross section is not representative of the whole community.

understand. I was in awe of my body then! It was incredible. It was one of the nicest things about that pregnancy.”

In terms of body positivity, each of these women found positivity in the functionality of their pregnant bodies, and, for the first time, comfort and acceptance in their size, without shame.

In this sense then, the women within this study constructed the value assertion of positivity as a ‘coming to terms’ with, being comfortable with, feeling safe within and acceptance of their own bodies, and the bodies of those around them aesthetically, physically and sexually, regardless of, or even in spite of, their non-adherence to perceived bodily norms and expectations, which then improved their sense of self-worth and self-esteem. Further to this, what they seem to mean by empowerment is the ability to experience this level of positive-ness to the extent that they are able to celebrate, express and feel confidence within themselves, their bodies and their sexuality.

How Do I Love Me? Different Iterations of Body Positivity

The differences in the ways that individuals and communities understand and express body positivity were brought home to me on the night of my dinner interview with Anya. Discussing the success of burlesque as a body positive space, I asked

“Don’t you find that the BDSM space is the same?”

“No, not entirely. Up to a point, yes. By admitting that you have a sexual interest that is considered taboo, you’ve already made yourself quite vulnerable in a public space, and I think that that breeds empathy for other people in a similar situation. That empathy and recognizing that somebody else might be quite different to you but that they are also human and you have a sensitivity for them going through that experience, is quite a bonding thing. So you sometimes strike up connections with people that you might otherwise have nothing to do with. It creates a moment of understanding, which is body positive, but not in the same way that burlesque is. In the case of Burlesque it is very explicitly stated and it’s also framed in a way that is very much about individual development and individual. So burlesque is very inward focused, whereas BDSM is very accepting of everybody, but ultimately you are trying to find other people to connect with.”

What Anya’s commentary points to is the difference in the production of embodiment, and while the research did not produce clean delineations between different communities’ interpretations, I would venture that this might be because, at an individual level, there is a large degree of cross-over between

communities, meaning that body positive practitioners tend to belong to more than one community and are thus exposed to multiple interpretations. However, this would need to be explored with further research to be confirmed. This research did produce two distinctly different interpretations at an individual level: those that viewed body positivity primarily as an internal process, and those for whom it was both an internal process and also a world-view extended to others.

For some, the primary focus of body positivity seemed to be the practice of learning to love oneself, and ultimately internalizing that practice until it became an embodied state. In psychology, a positive body image starts with developing a love and respect for one's physical self, which then cultivates a love and respect for one's emotional and psychological well-being, which results in better practices of self-care. (Gillen, 2015: 68) This came through when I posed the question of how one understands the concept of body positivity to Sarah.

“The way I understand that, it's about being, not just accepting, but embracing who you are however you are, in terms of your physical side. And not allowing the social norm, the so called social standard to almost shame you into thinking that your body isn't acceptable because it doesn't conform to a specific way of being.”

Sarah, Anya, Juanita, Starr, Lady Raven, Lady Magnolia and Scar-lit each explicitly referenced body positivity as a personal and ongoing journey in resistance and response to external forces, to socio-cultural norms and judgments. In terms of embodiment theory, this aligns with Csordas' interpretation of Foucault's concept of agency as a response to external, or social-cultural forces, via power relations and discourse. It speaks to the experience of agency as located in the resistance to the world, the world upon the body. (2011: 138)

Others, like Miriam, Cookie, Chilli, Dorothy, Sweet-Cheeks and Sophia spoke more in terms of self-love alongside, and even through, the recognition and acceptance of one's own imperfections. In this respect, agency is located more in each individual's existence and the intentionality of that existence in keeping with Merleau-Ponty's expression of the body “being-toward-the-world”. (Csordas, 2011: 138) Cookie summed this up saying,

“I would say it's an acceptance of your body as it is, not as you wish it would be, and being able to revel in your body. Because everybody, every BODY is an incredible magical thing. And being able to enjoy yours for what it is and what it gives you. That's not to say that you may not wish

your bum was smaller or whatever, but being able to feel comfortable in your own skin, and more than just comfortable, enjoying your own skin as it is.”

It was noticeable that some of the women interviewed spoke in terms of “loving” their bodies, while others spoke of “accepting” or “appreciating” their bodies. While Tylka & Wood-Barcalow define variable differences between “body appreciation” and “body acceptance” (2015: 122) in terms of positive body image, I found that the participants used these concepts interchangeably suggesting that the overall interpretation of body love was uniform.

In many instances, the project of self-love, the practice of body positivity, extended beyond oneself to the acceptance of others. There was a drive not only to love and accept oneself but also to express that compassion and empathy toward others, and ultimately to disseminate the concept of body positivity to others. This was slightly different to that which Anya outlined to be her understanding of body positivity in the kink/bdsm community, in that it speaks to a reciprocity of agency as discussed in Csordas’ outline of Bourdieu’s theory of embodiment located in praxis and bodily hexis. (2011: 143) The participants expressed not only a sense of self-acceptance, but also a respect and acceptance for those around them. Both Sweet-Cheeks and Sophia spoke of the practice of respecting and accepting other women’s bodies along with their own. Sophia, who is 40, a mother of 2 and works as both a burlesque performer and in the service industry responded saying,

“To me body positivity is the acceptance and embracing of your body regardless of what it looks like. And other women’s, and not shaming them for it. It doesn’t matter if Jane has gained 5 kg! It’s none of your business! If she is happy leave her alone.”

Both women held the same understanding: that body positivity is not simply a love of self, but is something that one extends to others. This was echoed by Starr, Lady Magnolia, Scar-lit, Anya, Dorothy and, I realized, myself. Further to this, each of these women actively taught or encouraged the practice of body positivity or at the very least strongly advocated for it. Starr, a 36 year old burlesque teacher and performer recalled,

“Burlesque has become so much a part of me, and just the amount of love and warmth and happiness that I get from watching those women come into class like shy little dormice, and walk out owning the world, even if it’s just for five minutes, I think it’s just the most beautiful thing. I love watching women blossom”

Lady Magnolia explained it similarly:

“I feel fulfilled by seeing women transformed from shy, insecure, self-conscious people who would rather hide at the back of the class to flamboyant women who you absolutely can’t take your eyes off because something inside has switched. It’s the switch inside that says “I am worthy, I am beautiful, I am valuable, I am important, I am allowed and entitled to take up this space”

When I embarked on the interview process, I had been surprised to discover that my understanding was different from that of many of the other women I interviewed, that there were only a handful of us whose natural inclination was to think of body positivity not only in terms of the self, but also as something to be encouraged in, extended to and shared with others. Thus examining this difference became part of the process of unpacking what body positivity meant. Ultimately, it is a matter of what Csordas outlines as a temporal aspect of the corporeality of embodiment. (2011: 148) Simply put, those of us who think in terms not only of self-love but also demonstration and encouragement of self-love, do so because we have been doing, and living, body positivity, the longest. While the links between longevity in a body positive space and disseminatory drive are not conclusive it is worth noting that in their research on embodiment and belly dance Downey *et al.*, observed that “dancers at more advanced levels are more likely to seek ‘involvement in a women’s community’”(2010: 387) and that “generally, more advanced dancers who drive socialization processes tend to embrace a greater sense of collectivity and emphasize perceived benefits that emphasize healthier norms”(ibid: 388). Tylka & Wood-Barcalow also reported that women who embodied body positivity tended to practice a form of ‘reciprocity’ in which they “changed, shaped, and altered their behaviors and environments in growth-enhancing ways”, sought out the company, friendship and partnership of people who “accepted their bodies in order to maintain their positive body image” and “served as mentors and role models to others [...] about the importance of having a positive body image and self-care (2015: 124), which ties in with Bourdieu’s concept of agency through ‘reciprocity of body-world’ as outlined by Csordas. Anya confirmed this, saying,

“I think body positivity in some ways is reinforcing things in one’s own head, and in some ways there is a certain amount of activism. If you believe that thing, if you believe those ideas, even if you are not out there protesting on the street with a placard, you want to tell this to other people. You want to impart that, you want to share that with other people”.

Chapter 4 - Body Positive, Pregnant & Sexy? Discussing South African Attitudes toward Pregnancy, Motherhood and Sexuality

“Growing up in the church gave me a very good idea of what the norm is.” Dorothy stated matter-of-factly as she set down her coffee with a clink on the table between us.

In the background the display fridges buzzed and stuttered their purple fluorescent light over the delicacies on the shelves, and an overtaxed coffee machine hissed its way through a steel jug of frothy milk and crunched the fragrances of espresso beans through the room. She leaned forward.

“South Africa is largely Christian. We follow largely Christian mores.” She paused for emphasis. “And the stereotypes around that, regardless of what your demographic is, regardless of race is, there are very similar set-ups: Women is subject to man, woman is there for a purpose, which is either to pleasure man, or bear a child.” She sat back now, picked up her coffee cup, “and I think it is safe to make that a generalization.”

In her article *Conceptualising Motherhood in Twentieth Century South Africa*, Walker said “the historical construction of women and of motherhood in South Africa in the twentieth century has cut across rigidly racialised cultural boundaries”(1995: 418), and this is borne out in Dorothy’s statement, which implies that the historically and culturally produced, gendered notions of the roles of South African women have been forged in such a way that they often eclipse the bounds of South Africa’s vastly differing socio-cultural groups. Further to this, that Dorothy is making this statement today in 2018, which so strongly echoes commentary written over 20 years ago, suggests that little has changed for women in terms of their lived experiences of the expectations of motherhood and childbearing which are placed upon them within South African society, despite the dramatic and progressive political and constitutional changes that have occurred in South Africa within the last twenty to twenty five years.

South Africa is a “deeply religious country” (Joseph, 2013: 12), and one in which this profound religiosity has not only previously dictated, but continues to inform social behaviour, roles, perceptions and mores. The complex entanglement of politics, organized religion and the lingering impact of historical governing policy has informed the ways in which the dominant discourses of motherhood and the social identities

of all women in South Africa have been shaped.¹²⁴ South Africa is also a deeply patriarchal country and, as Dorothy says above, this means that there is an assumption within larger society that women are subordinate to men. This subordination plays out in a multitude of implicit and explicit ways through often clearly delineated gender roles, in order to maintain unequal access to power and control.¹²⁵ This is not to say that there is no challenge to this system, and indeed, with the abolition of Apartheid, measures were constitutionalized to begin the work of balancing these social inequalities, however:

“The Zuma presidency from 2009 to the present day has been characterised by a deep patriarchal conservatism (cf. Morrell *et al.*, 2012, p. 17). The Zuma era conservatism has thrown into question many of the gains made towards gender equality, in the earlier years of ANC rule” (Mkhwanazi, 2014: 334).

In addition, while the legislature and constitution may have changed, those changes will take significantly more time to trickle down through the patriarchal monoliths of South African society into the lived realities of the individuals within it.

There is an abundance of literature to support the idea that one of the primary technologies of systemic patriarchy, often but not exclusively produced through religious or biological narratives, is the regulation and control of both reproduction and sexuality, albeit with different, gendered foci, which promote the dominance of man over woman.¹²⁶ In this framework, men’s value and status is achieved through virility and female value is attained through fertility, although always at a lesser and subordinate degree to men.¹²⁷ This is especially true in a South African context with its “patchwork quilt of patriarchies” (Bozzoli, 1983: 155) and religions.¹²⁸

Focusing on the concept of reproduction in this context, it is fair to assume that childbearing is of primary importance to the patriarchal agenda. This being the case, it is easy to see why South Africa is a

¹²⁴ (Bozzoli, 1983; Walker, 1995; Epprecht, 1996; Erasmus, 2000; Salo, 2003; Gqola, 2005; Penzhorn, 2005; Magubane, 2008; Naidu, 2008; Botha, 2010; Jewkes & Morrell, 2010; Mkhwanazi, 2014; Ferriera, 2016; Salo 2018)

¹²⁵ (Bozzoli, 1983; Walker, 1995; Epprecht, 1996; Tobler, 2000; Penzhorn, 2005; Sathiparsad, Taylor & Dlamini., 2008; Mantell *et al.*, 2009; Jewkes & Morrell, 2010; Klausen, 2010; Worthington, 2013; Bower, 2014; Mkhwanazi, 2014; Shefer & Ngabaza, 2015; Ferriera, 2016).

¹²⁶ (Walker, 1995; Kaufman, 2000; Oyewumi, 2005: 461; Ichou, 2006; Tobler, 2000; Naidu, 2008; Oliver, 2010; Chadwick & Foster, 2012; Owen, 2012; Myers, 2014; Strübel & Petrie, 2016; Mosher, 2017; Just & Muhr, 2019)

¹²⁷ (Kaufman, 2000; Tobler, 2000; Hlatshwayo, 2004; Ichou, 2006; Naidu, 2008; Whitehead & Kurz, 2009; Mantell *et al.*, 2009; Jewkes & Morrell, 2010; Oliver, 2010; Chadwick & Foster, 2012; Mkhwanazi, 2014; Shefer & Ngabaza, 2015; Mosher, 2017)

¹²⁸ (Walker, 1995; Kaufman, 2000; Tobler, 2000; Hlatshwayo, 2004; Kalichman *et al.*, 2005; Ichou, 2006; Sathiparsad, Taylor & Dlamini., 2008; Mantell *et al.*, 2009; Botha, 2010; Jewkes & Morrell, 2010; Mkhwanazi, 2014; Shefer & Ngabaza, 2015)

pro-natal country.¹²⁹ Mkhwanazi points out that “Reproduction is political” (2014: 326), particularly in reference to the Apartheid era, in which reproduction was wielded as a weapon through ‘population policies’ which were “explicitly designed to prevent political domination and racial “swamping” of the minority by the majority population’ (Chimere-Dan, 1993, p. 32).” (ibid: 328). Succinctly put, during the Apartheid era, government policies were created to curb black women’s fertility and reward white women’s fertility. (ibid: 328)¹³⁰. The manipulation of women’s fertility to further political agenda, however, can be seen both historically and contemporarily in South Africa. In pre-colonial South African societies, “pronatalist ‘traditional’ practice” (Kaufman, 2000: 106), and under the subsequent Euro-Christian colonizing agendas, procreation was encouraged, and women prized primarily in their capacities as fertile child bearers.¹³¹ Thereafter came the Apartheid government, with its abovementioned explicitly racially motivated population policies.¹³² While the politics and agendas around who should and shouldn’t procreate have once again shifted in post-apartheid South Africa,¹³³ the legacy of women’s primary function as mothers, and the expectation that women will have babies, has remained.¹³⁴

Another idea intrinsically linked to South African attitudes toward pregnancy and motherhood, and which works hand in hand with the concept of pro-natalism, is the notion of biological motherhood. Biological motherhood is constructed around the idea that having children is a “biological imperative”. The embedded meaning in this is twofold. First, it implies that the capacity to bear children equals a requirement to do so, and second that it also equals a desire to do so. Thus the assumption being made from within this biological framework is that procreation is not only inevitable, but is universally desired.¹³⁵ While the notion of biological motherhood is contested, both internationally¹³⁶ and locally¹³⁷, the reality is that “contemporary reproductive politics continues to base itself around biological motherhood” (Phipps, 2014: 114). In the South African context, this view stems once again from the

¹²⁹ (Walker, 1995; Kaufman, 2000; Hlatshwayo, 2004; Mkhwanazi, 2014; Evens *et al.*, 2015)

¹³⁰ Also (Kaufman; 2000: 106; Posel, 2004: 54; Klausen, 2010: 42)

¹³¹ (Bozzoli, 1983; Bell, 1995; Walker, 1995; Kaufman, 2000; Klausen, 2010)

¹³² (Kaufman, 2000; Klausen, 2010; Mkhwanazi, 2014)

¹³³ through the abolishment of population policy and the implementation of a number of acts during early ANC rule which issued women with improved reproductive rights

¹³⁴ (Worthington, 2013; Mkhwanazi, 2014; Evens *et al.*, 2015)

¹³⁵ (Longhurst, 2000; Tobler, 2000; Denbow, 2014; Evens *et al.*, 2015)

¹³⁶ (Longhurst, 2000; Oliver, 2010; Denbow, 2014)

¹³⁷ (Tobler, 2000; Worthington, 2013)

unique synthesis of religious, political and cultural beliefs which inform social behaviour and gendered roles, and is perpetuated in the lived experiences of many of the participants of this study.

The same can be said for sexuality in South Africa, which, regardless of gender, has been intrinsically molded by the confluence of its patriarchies, religions and politics¹³⁸ to produce powerful, gendered distinctions in terms of acceptable social behaviour, norms and mores. This is especially true of women's sexuality, whether internationally or locally, which is often framed in terms of its benefits to upholding patriarchal systems through reproductive function or, additionally, in its relationship to male pleasure or the male gaze.¹³⁹ Female sexuality is further complicated when viewed in relation to pregnancy and motherhood, and there is a wealth of feminist literature spanning more than seventy years which tackles various readings and analyses of the entangled relationships and tensions between the patriarchal gaze, maternal desire and sexual desire.¹⁴⁰ Yet, despite these ongoing feminist debates, the lived realities of most women still reflect the antagonisms of these polar concepts. In their article, Malacrida & Boulton report that women in North America still experience "tensions embedded in normative femininity; conflicting ideas relating to purity, dignity, and the messiness of birth; and contradictions about women's bodies as heteronormative sites of pleasure and sexuality on one hand and of asexual, selfless sources of maternal nurturance on the other." (2012: 748)

Dorothy's eyes flashed as she sipped her coffee.

"I think a lot of people aren't able to see women as holistic things. They are either, you know," she flapped her hand in the air, "the mother, or, the fucking slut. Women are either there for men's pleasure or to give birth." She paused, "and I think that has seeped down into many women's understanding of their body, many women's understanding of sexuality and pregnancy."

¹³⁸ (Epprecht, 1996; Tobler, 2000; Naidu, 2008; Klausen, 2010; Jewkes & Morrell, 2010; Francis, 2013; Mkhwanazi, 2014; Mokobocho-Mohlakoana, 2014; Shefer & Mcleod, 2015; Shefer & Ngabaza, 2015; Epprecht, 2018)

¹³⁹ (Tobler, 2000; Sathiparsad, Taylor & Dlamini, 2008; Mantell *et al.*, 2009; Hanna, 2010; Jewkes & Morrell, 2010; Malacrida & Boulton, 2012; Owen, 2012; Shefer & Ngabaza, 2015; Mosher, 2017; Barker, Gill & Harvey, 2018; Just & Muhr, 2019)

¹⁴⁰ (Butler, 1990; Friedman, Weinberg & Pines, 1998; Longhurst, 2000; Tobler, 2000; Betterton, 2006; Ichou, 2006; Jewkes & Morrell, 2010; Oliver, 2010; Worthington, 2013; Denbow, 2014; Mosher, 2017).

The Good Mother: Nature, Medicine and *Ordentlikheid*

When asked about their experiences of pregnancy and motherhood, and the expectations which they felt were placed on them, there were three themes which predominated in the stories of the research participants. Each of these themes illustrate the embodied and experienced gender roles which both perpetuate and are perpetuated by the patriarchal nature of South African society.

The first and most prominent narrative, experienced in some way by every woman interviewed, was the idea that motherhood is a naturally occurring fact, and should be inevitable. This ties directly into concept of pro-natalism, described above, and which speaks to the persistent gender expectations reflected on women in South Africa around “doing normative femininity” (Chadwick & Foster, 2012: 333) through the “gendered project of motherhood”(ibid: 333). In her thesis, Worthington says:

“The idea that ‘traditional’ gender expectations continue to exist for women in South Africa is further supplemented in Walker’s (1995) analysis of motherhood in South Africa. In her work, Walker concludes that South African mothers are considered nurturers, hence meaning that a woman’s identity is inextricably linked to motherhood. (Worthington, 2013: 11)”

Within the interview group, women expressed a wide range of desires in terms of motherhood. Some, like Lady Raven, Chilli, Starr, Mr Jay and Cookie, professed that they had always “wanted children”, while others like myself, Anya and Scar-lit, distinctly expressed that we had no interest in childbearing, for a variety of reasons. The majority, however, had very mixed or complicated sentiments, often vacillating between feelings of uncertainty, fear of loss, social conformity and desire. There was however, an overarching sense that every woman had experienced at some point in their lives the inherent understanding that pregnancy and motherhood are natural and normal.

Satine, a 38 year old actress and drama therapist with 2 children, admitted that in her conservative Afrikaans upbringing she “grew up with a narrative that I am a natural mother”. Juanita confessed that she “grew up believing that women were meant to have babies”, while Miriam, revealed that, at least from age twenty five to thirty, she “thought the purpose of a woman is to have children.” Sophia stated that having a child is a “natural state of being” and Mr Jay, who has not yet had children, revealed in her interview that she “wanted to be a mum since before I could remember.” However, Sophia also spoke about the intense social pressure women perceive, even from a young age, with regards the inevitability of motherhood. She stated that,

“As woman we are, especially my generation, we are very, I don't want to use the words brainwashed, but from a young age, from little kids, we are expected to have children one day.

Nobody ever mentions that there is a second option; that you don't have to have children. Nobody says that ever to you growing up. You are always given the baby dolls to play with and told “look at the cute little baby. One day you're going have a baby”. So it's constantly being reinforced in our psyche that, as a woman, that is ultimately how you are going to end up. You are going to end up being a mother.”

This was echoed by Mr Jay who said that “I think one of my earliest childhood memories is me with a baby doll trying to breastfeed with my flat little chest”. This relates to Franke’s concept of “repronormativity” as described in Denbow’s article, as the “normative framework that encourages reproduction and takes reproductive desire as a given” (2014: 108). This also ties in with Tobler’s recitation of Rich, who proposes that the “scientifically substantiated” notion of a woman’s “biological imperative” of natural motherhood, “effectively obfuscate[s] the reality that women are socialised into wanting children (1993: 208)”(Tobler, 2000: 89-90). Notably, with the exception of three participants, who, interestingly, were already mothers, every woman interviewed explicitly expressed that they had experienced or perceived significant social pressure on women to have babies.

For most of these women, the concept of natural motherhood was reinforced from a young age through the strongly gendered roles represented within homes, communities and media, which are prevalent across social-cultural boundaries in South Africa. However, because all of the participants of this study fall into the category of ‘middle class’, their experiences of this pressure increased according to the specific gendered trajectory of, in South African terms, “ordentlikheid”¹⁴¹. Botha¹⁴² describes “ordentlikheid” as translating to “common decency” or “respectability”. Fashioned from the Dutch Reformed Church’s ideas of how a respectable Afrikaans-speaking person should behave, ‘ordentlikheid’ closely aligns with Christian Victorian mores. According to Botha, “This type of person is patriarchal, strives to be middle class, and is conservative in terms of overt sexual behaviour.” (2010: 1). She goes on further to say that ‘ordentlikheid’ is “especially true of females” (ibid). Worthington also points out in her thesis, which focuses on middle class white mothers in Cape Town, that “white South African women were influenced by “Victorian morals and values” (2014: 11) which promote the Christian values of marriage and then motherhood as the primary goal and achievement of every respectable woman.

¹⁴¹ See Also (Salo 2003 & 2018; Ross, 2010 & Ferreira, 2016)

¹⁴² Botha drew her understanding of respectability from Salo’s seminal work on ordentlikheid in the coloured community of Manenberg, adapting it to relate to white Afrikaans notions of respectability in her thesis *Sick with Child*

For many of the participants, the social pressure is to have children not before and only within a marriage. “Until you’re with a partner and married you’re expected not to fall pregnant, and then, the minute you get married that’s all people expect from you” said Mr Jay in her interview, an idea which was further implied in Emily’s interview when, talking about sexual activity and pregnancy, she said “Things that are, just would be the end of your life if they happened at sixteen, are perfectly fine if they happen at twenty six.” It is additionally worth noting that this kind of pressure is not restricted only to heteronormative relationships. Starr, who is in a same-sex marriage, experienced pressure from both her mother to “produce a grandchild of some sort”, and her friends, saying, “once you get married, people kind of feel it’s the next step, literally. Within two years of getting married, everybody was like ‘well, when are you doing this?’ ”

Women who were uncertain about motherhood or who were expressly child-free experienced the view that, at some point, they are expected to change their mind. Anya, who ‘admitted’ that she does not want children at all, reported that, despite her certainty, she is still often met with the response of “Oh you’re young, just wait, you’ll see”, while Sweet-Cheeks said “I have voiced that I am unsure about wanting to have kids, and everyone has said, ‘oh don’t worry, at some point you will. Don’t stress, womanhood will be fulfilled at some point’”. For many of the participants, the trope of fulfilled womanhood is enmeshed within this socially-projected and imagined concept of ‘the natural mother’. Lady Magnolia, Sweet-Cheeks, Emily, Miriam and Juanita have all experienced the sentiment, in one way or another that, as Mr Jay said, “A woman is only a woman if she has children”. In white, middle-class South Africa, this imperative stems directly from both the Colonial Victorian and Afrikaner doctrines pertaining to motherhood, which dictate that motherhood is a “woman’s destiny, the source of their deepest fulfilment”. (Walker, 1995: 432) and that a woman should be “a self-sacrificing wife and mother” who “fulfilled her racial/national duty to reproduce and nurture the *volk*”, or nation. (Klausen, 2010: 43)

In this way, we see that “cultural understandings that align female identity with motherhood play a role in producing and reinforcing ideas about the naturalness and inevitability of reproductive desire,”(Denbow, 2014: 108) which serves to perpetuate South Africa’s pro-natalist ideologies through the concept of natural motherhood.

The second narrative encountered within the interview group, and one that is intrinsically enmeshed with the concept of natural motherhood, is that of biological motherhood. Where the idea of natural motherhood is centered on gendered social constructs which link maternal desire with ‘gendered

femininity', Biological Motherhood locates maternal desire within the "identification of female physiology." (Denbow, 2014: 108) Thus, biological motherhood, stemming from the concept of 'biological determinism' is the notion that, because the female body *can* produce babies, this must be its primary function, and the desire to do so must be a biological imperative.¹⁴³ If anything, the idea of biological motherhood is the premise upon which the concept of natural motherhood is formed, the underlying framework upon which reproductive political argument is built¹⁴⁴, rather than "reconceptualiz[ing] procreation as a cultural preference" (Denbow, 2014: 108) and not a biological imperative¹⁴⁵. Juanita, Miriam and Sophia's comments about their experiences of motherhood and pregnancy as 'natural' and 'inevitable' speak to this sense of biological imperative, and Dorothy echoed this, saying "the process I and my body will be going through is ancient. Millions of women have squatted and dropped out another baby". Anya echoed the ways in which the narrative of biological motherhood permeates these women's lived experiences, saying "I supposed I feel a bit annoyed by the assumption that all women want to have children. That this is something we are all driven to. Because it's not."

Both natural motherhood and biological motherhood are implicated in perpetuating the pro-natal norms that exist in South Africa and which serve to support ongoing patriarchal systems. In her interview, Sweet-Cheeks described it as "a deep underlying expectation that if you have a vagina and have a uterus that at some point in your life you should be pregnant and have children and that you should want those things and that if you don't want those things there is something wrong with you". This is reinforced through Evens *et al.*'s observations during their research on South African women's pregnancy intentions, saying that "The expectation that all women have at least one child was widespread and desire for childbearing was universal." (2015: 379-380)

One of the ways in which this narrative of biological motherhood plays out in the participant's lives is through the medicalization of women's bodies, particularly during pregnancy. That women's bodies have become primarily identified as and associated with their biological capacity for reproduction¹⁴⁶, is not a new concept. As Denbow mentions, "Reproductive bodies— which have become synonymous in many ways with women's bodies— have become a site in which the state, as well as medical and social

¹⁴³ (Longhurst, 2000: 460)

¹⁴⁴ (Phipps, 2014: 114)

¹⁴⁵ (Butler, 1990; Longhurst, 2000; Tobler, 2000)

¹⁴⁶ (Worthington, 2013; Denbow, 2014; Phipps, 2014; Sharp, 2017: 293)

science experts, may intervene” (2014: 115), and this attitude has filtered into social consciousness.

Cookie points this out in her interview saying

“It comes in the way that people treat pregnancy as an illness, and the whole culture around pregnancy and birth. You know the minute you are about to give birth, people want you to go to hospital, which is where people go when they are sick and when they are dying.”

Both Chilli, Sophia and Miriam echoed this sentiment during their interviews, each retelling the ways in which they experienced people treating pregnancy as though it were an illness or a sickness, rather than a natural state of being.

Within the concept of biological motherhood there is an interesting tension between the reification of women’s bodies as naturally reproductive, and the subordination of those same women’s naturally reproductive bodies as incapable or ill. Longhurst points out that “claims that pregnancy is natural run counter to discourses that medicalise pregnant embodiment,” (2000: 461) while Goldenberg *et al.* comment that “Although women’s role as child bearer has been celebrated; it has also been used as a means to discriminate against them.” (2007: 214). Chilli alluded to this, saying “everyone tries to do everything for me and around me, which is endearing and lovely, but I feel like people treat pregnancy as an illness more than just a natural part of life.” Tobler proposes that this tension stems from “male fear of women’s reproductive power” which presents women as signifiers of “human embodiedness and mortality.”(2000:78) While Goldenberg refers to similar associations as “creatureliness”(2007: 214), and Longhurst (2000: 466), Betterton (2006: 82) and Oliver (2010: 764) frame it as “abjection”, in each case they theorise that women’s capacity for reproduction both reinforces and threatens the hierarchical constructs of the Cartesian duality from which patriarchal and biomedical systems draw their authority¹⁴⁷. In this way, motherhood plays into larger tropes around the institutionalization of motherhood within patriarchal systems as a means of maintaining the subordination and control of women.¹⁴⁸

It seems evident that “The medical regulation of the female body can be thought of as, in Judith Butler’s words, a “mechanism for the compulsory cultural construction of the female body as a maternal body” (Denbow, 2014: 115 - 116) and that both the biological and social worlds are conflated to create the

¹⁴⁷ Many authors problematise Cartesian duality and its prominence in the production of those binaries which sustain patriarchal and biomedical thought. (See Csordas, 1990: 4; Epprecht, 1996: 188; Longhurst, 2000: 462; Tobler, 2000: 78; Oyewumi, 2005: 461; Boydston, 2008; Jones, 2011: 74; Denbow, 2014: 109; Sharp, 2017: 289

¹⁴⁸ (Walker, 1995; Tobler, 2000; Ichou, 2006)

assumption that “motherhood lies at the core of women's identity,” (Walker, 1995: 418) particularly in this South African context.

Finally, the third theme which featured prominently in participants’ interviews had to do with the treatment of pregnant bodies in and as public spaces. Women’s reproductive bodies on the whole are sites of contention insofar as they are both reified and subverted for their biologically creative capacity. But these tensions and ambivalences are particularly noticeable in attitudes surrounding the visibly pregnant body in the public sphere¹⁴⁹. Oliver observes that “The seemingly contradictory cultural valuation of pregnancy and motherhood as good and proper for women and the abjection and debasement of the maternal body have gone hand in-hand. (2010: 764)

The participants’ overarching experiences was a sense that they had become “public property”, which manifested itself in a number of ways. For some, this came in the form of being told what they may and may not do, both by concerned friends and family, and by complete strangers. Both Miriam and Lady Raven observed that people seemed to feel they had the right to give advice and dictate the behaviour of pregnant women. Chilli and Cookie recalled being criticized for continuing with their dancing while pregnant, and similarly, Sophia related having to struggle with her in-laws over her right to have a home birth. Cookie spoke of feeling “infantalised” once she became pregnant, recalling:

“I remember being at my sister’s party [...] I must’ve been seven months, and I had a glass of champagne and I wanted another glass of champagne, and some man at the table said “No! You can’t have another glass, you’re pregnant! You shouldn’t have even had the first one!” and I just found it really interesting that this man was so sure of his place in the world that he could tell me what I could and could not drink.”

This is supported by Goldenberg *et al.*, who state that “Even when attitudes toward women are seemingly positive, they are often perceived as incompetent (i.e., in need of having doors opened for them, etc. (Glick & Fiske, 2001).” (2007: 226) And as Longhurst points out, “in many ways the bodies of pregnant women are considered to be a public concern” (2000: 468), and are therefore available for intervention. Similarly, for many of the participants, the sense of being public property was also experienced as a desire by strangers to touch women’s pregnant bellies. Both Lady Raven and Starr commented on the ways in which people often disregard the personal space, privacy and consent of

¹⁴⁹ (Longhurst, 2000; Goldenberg, 2007)

pregnant women in public spaces, in a manner that simply would not be conceived of if the women in question were not pregnant. Lady Raven noted of her experience while pregnant that,

“They [people] want to put their hands up and touch your belly and then ask questions like “how old?”, “how long?”, “how many times?” You know, just everybody decides that now because you're pregnant your life is their business! Like they never come up to you in the street and be like “oh what colour are you dying your hair next?” It's just suddenly you become, everything about you becomes, other people's information.”

Once again, Longhurst suggests that this kind of behaviour comes from the “notion of the fetus as public property,” and goes on to propose that this is because of the widely held belief that “pregnant woman's primary concern ought to be for her fetus,” (2000: 468) which of course ties in to the previously mentioned discourses around natural motherhood, the fulfillment of a woman's purpose as a reproductive body, and the double-edged sword of maternal creation and maternal incompetence¹⁵⁰.

For some of the women, however this public desire to instruct and touch was seen as nurturing, and provided a sense of comfort and inclusion. Satine recalled this saying: “I think that's why I liked being pregnant, because I was in the spotlight. People looked at me and touched me and cared for me”, while Sarah agreed, saying that “when I was pregnant, people wanted to touch me. Not just in my community, people in Checkers. I actually really like that”. She then went further, saying of her community that “People just accept you in a way that they haven't accepted you before. There is something about having a child that is integral to one's sense of belonging in the space.” Both Satine and Sarah's experiences speak to Worthington's observation regarding middle class South African mothers' need to be recognized as good and natural mothers (2013:25)¹⁵¹, and suggests that, while there is a sense of loss of agency and control in public spaces when a woman is pregnant, the payoff can be, for many, a sense of nurturing, safety and inclusion. Nonetheless it is still indicative of a distinct dismissal of pregnant women's corporeal agency and agentic function.

This censoring and control of pregnant bodies in public spaces manifest in multiple ways, not least of which is through the concealment of the pregnant body itself. Goldenberg *et al.* point out that, amongst other things, women are expected to conceal all evidence of their “reproductive functioning” (2007: 214) which is especially true of pregnant women. Certainly in modern history the pregnant body has

¹⁵⁰ (Goldenberg *et al.*, 2007; Oliver, 2010)

¹⁵¹ (Also Chadwick & Foster, 2012: 333; Ferreira, 2016: 39)

often been treated as something improper, which should be covered up and hidden from view¹⁵². Chilli echoed this sentiment, saying that “Nobody wants to really see someone pregnant flaunting”, which is supported by Longhurst’s research showing that while “Constant contestation” (2000: 458) has shifted public perception to a degree over time, there is still an overarching expectation that pregnant women will dress demurely and “in ways that disguise their swelling stomach when occupying public space” (2000: 467). Juanita described this as being “buried under maternity wear” and, in line with this observation, both Starr and Cookie pointed out in their interviews that one will, for example, very rarely see a pregnant woman wearing a bikini in public. Longhurst supports this, saying that for many, the act of appearing pregnant and semiclad or in a bikini is in and of itself a controversial act, even today. (2000: 467)

We see from these women’s lived experiences that there is perceived social pressure to perform and present motherhood and pregnancy through what Longhurst refers to as a “range of competing gendered discourses”, (2000: 456) which are socially coded and which stem from the “reiterative practice of regulatory sexual regimes” (Butler, 1993: xxiii), in which “the female body is required to assume maternity as the essence of its self and the law of its desire” (Denbow, 2014: 116) through the narratives of natural and biological motherhood. These ‘technologies’ of gender or femininity are utilized for the discipline and surveillance of female, and particularly pregnant, bodies¹⁵³ as a means of maintaining the normalizing gaze of the patriarchal status quo, perpetuating “ways of doing white femininity in a South African context” (Chadwick & Foster, 2012: 318) which have been socially, historically and politically shaped to privilege the notions of natural and biological motherhood, and to value modest, selfless or ‘ordentlik’ mothering. As Longhurst says: “Becoming mothers [are] constructed as modest, decent, coy, and private rather than as confident, forward, sexy, and public. (2000: 467)

Pregnant Sexuality: Madonna’s, Whores and the Case for Immaculate Conception

When discussing the idea of pregnant sexuality with my participants, there was a unanimous understanding that, as far as the wider public, or society was concerned, these two concepts were mutually exclusive. “You see that split that happens between woman and sexual being to mother” said Cookie, which was echoed by Mr Jay, Sweet-Cheeks and also Miriam, who said “Well, that’s the problem with society. That they don’t relate pregnancy with sexuality.” Oliver speaks of a “traditional separation

¹⁵² (Longhurst, 2000; Goldenberg *et al.*, 2007)

¹⁵³ (Longhurst, 2000; Chadwick & Foster, 2012)

between maternity and sex” (2010: 764)¹⁵⁴ which occurs within society, and the ongoing struggles women have faced with the choice between the “apparent either/or” (2010: 775) of sexuality or motherhood, and, while she admits that the global debate has shifted in recent years from an either/or scenario to a question of “how to have both/and”(2010: 775), the lived realities of the participants in this study were that there still exists a distinct schism between these two aspects of female embodiment.

Woliver points out in *The Political Geographies of Pregnancy*, that “Women’s experiences of sexual relations, pregnancy, birth and motherhood are enormously shaped by the social meanings constructed around them in different cultures, times, and societies, (2002: 18) and Friedman, Weinberg & Pines comment that “The split between them [motherhood/sexuality] is a social product. (1998: 784) So, given South African societies’ particularly Christian Victorian and patriarchal influences, it stands to reason that these still sculpt gendered expectations and behaviour regarding pregnancy and sexuality. Foucault’s “image of the imperial prude”, (1978: 3) mingles precariously with what Friedman, Weinberg & Pines refers to as “the duality between sexuality and motherhood represented by Lilith and Eve” (1998: 782) to create a messy space of normative femininity in which women’s bodies are expected to be sites of ready sexuality and pleasure for their partners, or spaces of selfless and unconditional maternal giving, but never at the same time. In her interview, Scar-lit, a 33 year old pole dance instructor and burlesque dancer, mused over the idea that “It is almost like women are seen as asexual when they are pregnant. It’s seen as dodgy to want to have sex”. This was reiterated by Mr Jay, Dorothy, Juanita and Miriam who said “that shocks me, to be quite honest with you. I mean, what, the moment you become pregnant you become a nun? Can’t you enjoy sex at all?” Sweet-Cheeks too, observed that “there is an expectation that as soon as you become a mother then your female sexuality shrivels up and dries.”

Malacrida & Boulton suggest that “Women are persistently seen as bodies and are subject to a wide range of competing discourses about feminine embodiment”. (2012: 748) This was also true of the experiences of the participants in terms of pregnant women and for many, these discourses of embodiment became reduced to the singular and essentialised identity of “Mother”, which was applied to and experienced by pregnant women. Cookie indicated that “There was this constant suggestion that now that I was pregnant, I was to be ‘mother’ and that was all I was good for”, while Satine said that “I’m first and mostly a mother of two children”. Juanita admitted that “I think the kids were almost 3

¹⁵⁴ Also (Malacrida & Boulton, 2012: 752; Friedman, Weinberg & Pines, 1998: 784)

before I came out of that thinking of 'I am just a mother right now' and I realized, oh wait, I'm here still, there is me as well, not just the mommy!" Similarly, this idea of being no more than a 'vessel' or 'incubator' was commonly experienced; the idea that a woman's body was simply the container for the fetus growing within. During our interview, Emily pondered: "I think there is the societal thing which says that pregnant women are the containers for perfect, unborn children, who should be protected from everything", which was echoed by Mr Jay, Sophia, Cookie and also Juanita who said,

"I think there is a huge perception that a pregnant woman ceases to be a person, she becomes a vessel for carrying a new life. And I think even I felt that, as the pregnant woman. I was just the body that was carrying these babies, and that was my purpose for that period of time."

Juanita demonstrated how deeply entrenched this perception was in her own consciousness when, later in the interview, she accidentally referred to herself as "it", saying "I think [my husband] would almost feel a sense of pride in showing off his pregnant woman with his babies inside it. Her. I just used it to refer to myself." This ties back to the idea of good and selfless, or 'ordentelik', mothering which is so prevalent in South Africa, and which impresses that a pregnant woman or mother's primary concern should be her child or fetus, to the exclusion of all else. Longhurst, drawing from Julia Kristeva and Iris Young, maintains that the social perception of pregnant bodies still often assumes that "Pregnancy does not belong to the woman herself. It is a state of the developing fetus, for which the woman is a container." (2000: 468)

For some of the women, pregnancy or motherhood escalated them to an almost sacred or religious space, in which they were expected, as mothers, to perform a version of asexual innocence which entirely belied the very means required to achieve pregnancy. Lady Raven described it as being expected to "be the saintly person who doesn't do anything immoral" and to "be the epitome of all things nice and proper and lady-like" while Emily described it as being "move[d] into the sort of Madonna phase" in which people elevated pregnancy into a "religious zone" in order to make sense of its mystery. This "sacralization of the feminine" (Tobler, 2000: 86-87) once again speaks to the common conception of the female body in which women's reproductive function is at once reified and denigrated, in this instance through a 'spiritual' or sacred lens. Tobler, citing feminist theologian Meredith Underwood, points out the ongoing question: "is woman Eve or Mary? Temptress or Madonna?" - or, for that matter, is she virgin or whore?" (2000: 87-88), which reinforces the polar and mutually exclusive binaries of motherhood and sexuality through the discourse of the sacred, and which in turn acts to fortify the

existing status quo of double standards pertaining to sexuality, and woman's position within patriarchal society.¹⁵⁵

In contrast to the religious elevation of the pregnant body, and following on from earlier discussions around abjection, a number of the women interviewed were aware of a socially projected sense of shame that surrounded pregnancy and sexuality. Mercer speaks about the power of shame as a "mechanism for social and personal control" (2018: 1305), and this was evident in many of the conversations with these women. Sarah, for example, described how her husband was a key factor in her ability to relinquish feelings of shame around her heightened sex drive during pregnancy,

"He made me feel like [sexuality during pregnancy] wasn't something I should feel ashamed of. He made me feel that this was something amazing and wonderful. But I was aware that other pregnant women were not necessarily experiencing what I was experiencing."

Similarly both Lady Raven and Starr raised the issue of the social shaming of pregnant women for any expression of their sexuality during pregnancy, while both Cookie and Chilli, who each performed burlesque publicly until well into their third trimesters experienced some significant resistance to their performance as pregnant women. Chilli fielded questions such as "are you still taking your clothes off?" while Cookie noted that "you're not allowed to be sexy, there is something grotesque for people about pregnant women, I think, who feel sexy." These admissions suggests that shame is the normative frame of experience for pregnant women when it comes to sexuality, which is in line with the overall experience of sexuality in South Africa, but is perhaps magnified because of the complex and contradictory attitudes toward the female body generally, and the reproductive female body specifically. Mercer, describing shame says it is "a powerful (and negative) emotion often associated with sex and sexuality," and that it is "internalized, pervasive and pacifying, we both feel shame and are subjected to shame." (2018: 1305)

As Mercer's statement suggests, it is not only the projection of shame by society, but also the internalization of shame which was evident in the narratives of the women interviewed. Satine admitted that she herself could not "marry mother and sex" while pregnant or even after childbirth. Similarly Dorothy commented that she "definitely had deep beliefs that were like "oh, you can't be sexy and you can't be mobile [while pregnant]" while Mr Jay mentioned in conversation with a recently pregnant friend that she experienced the feeling that for this woman, "She's a mother now and therefore sex isn't

¹⁵⁵ (Friedman, Weinberg & Pines, 1998; Tobler, 2000; Woliver, 2002)

important". Miriam, a 42 year old consulate worker and mom of 2, summed it up clearly saying, "it's funny because we self-impose our own thoughts and beliefs. How many times do you hear "I don't feel sexy" when they are pregnant, or when they are breastfeeding. It's common. I hear it all the time." Once again it is Mercer who points out that,

Shame has a peculiar, even uncanny power over those it inhabits and the discourses of pro-sex feminism, sex positivity or indeed gay pride have not dislodged its pervasive influence on the ways we make meaning out of sex. (2018: 1305)

which was clearly the case when noting the contradictory and nuanced feelings many of these women held with regard to their own and other's pregnant sexuality, despite inhabiting largely body positive spaces and body positive communities. Friedman, Weinberg & Pines observe that "The motherhood/sexuality split is particularly curious in light of the fact that the two are so central and so closely connected in women's experience", (1998: 784) which was echoed by Juanita when she noted that "Most people get pregnant through sex, so why does sex cease to be a viable or realistic or acceptable thing when you are pregnant. That's how you got that way."

In fact, based on the participants' narratives, largely there seemed to be only one acceptable avenue in wider society through which to contemplate pregnancy and sexuality within the same context, and that was through the lens of the partner's pleasure. Cookie, who serves in local hospitals as a doula observed that conversations with expectant mothers are often framed around their partner's experience saying,

"If you have a natural birth your vagina is going to be destroyed. It's always in the context of what it feels like for the partner and their experience. They never say to the woman, "well you know you might be in discomfort". It's always framed in terms of 'tightness' for the partner."

This closely resembled the findings of Malacrida & Boulton, who noted that, in their research group, many women made birthing choices with higher regard for their capacity to still please their partners sexually than in terms of the possible medical risks. This points to an "uneasy relationship between competing ideals of motherhood as asexual and selfless and the necessity of remaining young, tight, and sexually attractive", (2012: 752) with no regard for their own pleasure, and stresses the "normative notion that women should owe their partners [penetrative] sex"(2012: 765) lest they risk the security of their relationship. By this argument then, the only recourse to sexuality which is appropriate while pregnant is via one's (presumably heteronormative) partnership and for that partner's continued loyalty and pleasure. For Cookie, Sarah and Juanita, it was a source of reassurance and security that their individual partners continued to desire them, and reveled in their sexual expression during pregnancy.

Even so, it is worth noting that their enjoyment was still predicated on the pleasure of their partners, albeit in a more mutual and reciprocal way.

However, the more common narrative was that of partner rejection or fear. Sophia confessed that through both of her pregnancies her ex-husband “would not touch me with a large pole”, that “he told me it freaked him out” and that ultimately this led to her feeling “very rejected as a human being”. Indeed, Cookie, Sarah and Juanita all admitted to recognizing that their circumstances with their partners as contrary to the norm. Juanita mentioned that even in the sex and body positive communities in which she circled she had “encountered people getting pregnant and even their partners not wanting to have sex with them because now this body must be protected”, while Starr intimated that “I heard from one of my male friends that it was because he was petrified. He was afraid of hurting the baby. And he put his wife up on a pedestal and treated her like a fragile thing. Like a little doll”. The fear and rejection described by these women corresponds with both Friedman, Weinberg & Pines and Tobler’s discussion of male fear and envy of women’s reproductive power and sexuality, and also with the ways in which these fears are utilized as reason for and means of exerting control over women¹⁵⁶. Friedman, Weinberg & Pines state that “this envy is transformed to a basic disregard for women and constant attempts to limit their sexuality and direct it into motherhood,” (1998: 783) and it is the corralling of female sexuality into the selfless roles of procreation within the “family sphere” which provide a women with access to “full legitimacy”.¹⁵⁷

Some would argue that the absolute split between motherhood and sexuality exists purely in the minds of and imaginations of men¹⁵⁸, and Iris Marion Young is famously quoted as saying that “Patriarchy is founded on the border between motherhood and sexuality” (Oliver, 2010: 760). The lived realities of the women interviewed for this research would suggest that this notion is accurate. Within South Africa’s heteronormative, patriarchal society, female sexuality is framed as a tool for reproduction or for male pleasure, while female pleasure for its own sake is viewed as licentious, dangerous and shameful.

Dorothy agreed, stating,

“As a woman, you have to do a lot of work. You have to go through the process of questioning those stereotypes and finding those support-systems that are going to help you break down those prejudices around your sexuality of being a woman.”

¹⁵⁶ (Friedman, 1998; Tobler, 2000)

¹⁵⁷ (Friedman, 1998; Woliver, 2002)

¹⁵⁸ (Tobler, 2000: 87-88; Friedman, Weinberg & Pines, 1998: 783)

Chapter 5 – Pushing Back: Pleasure, Resistance and the Birth of Safe Spaces

Cookie's home reflected her; down-to-earth, comfortable yet tastefully elegant. It smelled of baking, mac 'n cheese and bath-soap. I poured the wine, checking the recording function on my phone and handed her a glass. We cozied ourselves on the slate grey couch, with Frank, her neurotic pavement special at our feet. Cookie sipped her wine,

"I did a show when I was a few months pregnant, and I wasn't showing at all, and a guy I went to drama school with, a proper performer, seen it all, not conservative or naïve, came to me after the show and said "god that was so sexy and I was so confused because I know you are pregnant and I couldn't believe it"." She paused, I watched a mixture of incredulity, amusement and frustration flit across her face,

"I wasn't even showing yet and already something had started to change in his mind, and I remember being quite shocked by that. I was blown away that a performer could be confused by that. Particularly because I wasn't even showing. It was a switch that had been turned in HIS head. Because I was now a mother and an incubator, how could I possibly be a sensual being and performer? Which I thought was really interesting". She smirked.

"And it began a thing in my head that said "well, just you wait"."

Cookie's defiant attitude reminded me of Abu-Lughod's description of "unlikely forms of resistance, subversions rather than large-scale collective insurrections, small or local resistances not [necessarily] tied to the overthrow of systems or even to ideologies of emancipation. " (1991: 41)¹⁵⁹ In Cookie's case, she was acting in resistance to the socially codified notion that pregnant women couldn't or shouldn't be sexy. Was her single act of defiance going to overthrow "the patriarchy"? No. But, it points to an "implicit resistance, an alternative view of the world already developed beneath the dominant ideology," (Weller, 1994: 10) a resistance which was evident throughout the narratives and experiences of the participants. Scott defined resistance as "actions by subordinate classes that aim to mitigate or deny the material and symbolic claims the dominant classes made upon them (1986: 22–31)."¹⁶⁰ This

¹⁵⁹ Also (Urla & Helepololei, 2014: 431-432)

¹⁶⁰ quoted from Urla & Helepololei, 2014: 433

definition was later expanded to include not only overt rebellion and protest, but also tacit strategies of everyday resistance and “hitherto ignored or suppressed ways in which subordinate groups actively respond to and resist their situations.” (Abu-Lughod, 1991: 41)¹⁶¹ Additionally, if, as Abu-Lughod says, forms of resistance indicate the ways in which power is exercised, (1991: 43) then it is unsurprising that there is resistance enacted in opposition to South African gender norms and roles, given that “women's subjectivity and agency are repressed and subjugated within the social realities of patriarchal society,” (Tobler, 2000: 87) particularly in terms of pregnancy, motherhood and sexuality. For the participants, this push-back was expressed in both overt and tacit ways, through the creation of safe and supportive spaces and through acts of private and public resistance.

In framing this chapter, I was asked, surely what these women do is not just for resistance, but also for pleasure? And the answer is yes, of course. But, in an environment in which there is still significant implicit and explicit control, manipulation and suppression of female sexuality, of female body image and of female reproductive outcomes, I would like to suggest that the act of taking pleasure, the act of celebrating one's own body, the act of claiming any sort of autonomy over one's own body, pregnant or otherwise, just for oneself, as a women, *IS* an act of resistance. As Mosher points out, in a world of patriarchal, heteronormativity and heterosexism, “the effects of oppression are implicit in expressions of sexuality” and thus “sexual self-awareness, is a political act.” (2017: 492) In this instance, pleasure and resistance are not mutually exclusive.

By looking at resistance in this way we are then able to understand “the extraordinary range of creative ways in which challenges to the existing order can be constructed” (Ortner, 2016: 66)¹⁶² even when they don't result in an explicit ‘call to arms’.

“I didn't intend to perform until I was seven and half, eight months pregnant” Cookie shrugged her shoulders, leaned back. “But when that actor said that thing to me; *that* was when I knew I wasn't going to stop because society thinks I should stop. I wasn't going to play that role. I was going to see how far I could take it!” and no one in the burlesque world suggested anything different.”

¹⁶¹ Also (Weller, 1994; Urla & Helepololei, 2014; Ortner, 2016)

¹⁶² Also (Weller, 1994: 3)

Safe Spaces, Tacit Resistance and the Reproduction of Ideologies

Lady Magnolia commented that “Everybody comes to burlesque for different reasons, but MANY women come to burlesque seeking THAT thing, that space, to feel good.” This was reiterated by Anya who stated that “Lady Magnolia’s contribution has been creating that [safe and accepting] space for women. It is hugely important and there are far too few spaces like that. And I think you can see that in the way her business has consistently grown over the years. There is a huge need for it. Women are desperate for those spaces.” Likewise, Sarah, when talking about her time in Lady Magnolia’s classes agreed, saying “The thing about burlesque that I love is that there is a space for everybody. Everybody looks beautiful. And I think to myself, well if everybody else looks beautiful, I must look beautiful too.” It is not only Lady Magnolia’s burlesque classes which are experienced as safe spaces however. Whether in burlesque or kink/bdsm environments, each participant spoke of body positive communities as having come to represent a safe space in terms of personal exploration, expression and often healing.

Although there is no academic literature on experiences within burlesque classes, and relatively little in terms of kink/bdsm spaces, research on similar body positive environments such as pole dancing and belly dancing has revealed similar sentiments,¹⁶³ and the commentary of the research participants bore this out. Emily, Juanita, Miriam and Cookie each described body positive communities as safe spaces in which to explore and simply be themselves, to trust themselves and to express agency. Interestingly, Cookie also commented that, in terms of burlesque,

“I never felt objectified on that stage in the way that I do, walking down the street. It always felt like a very safe space. I’ve done a lot of performing, and I’ve done a lot of living in the performance space and the performance world, and I have NEVER experienced anything like that. That safety and support.”

Additionally, many of the participants described body positive spaces as safe spaces for healing. For Lady Magnolia, Dorothy, Chilli, Sweet-Cheeks and I, amongst others, each had experienced body positive spaces as safe spaces for dealing with personal traumas which ranged from illness, violence, physical, emotional and sexual traumas, to abuse, social ostracisation, divorce and grief. Miriam explained that “Going through the process of not falling pregnant and having my uterus and my ovaries taken, and changing my whole hormonal system, if I hadn’t already been prepared, if I wasn’t already dealing

¹⁶³ (Whitehead & Kurz, 2009: 240; Downey et al, 2010: 389; Giuffre, 2011: 312; Gilmore & Wheeler, 2012: 188; Tiggemann, Coutts & Clark, 2014: 199; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015: 124; Just & Muhr: 2019: 12)

positively with my femininity and that side of me, I think I wouldn't have been able to deal with it the way I dealt with it." Similarly, Chilli shared that,

"Going to class every week and viewing yourself full on, face on in the mirror, actually just having to look at yourself in barely anything and be okay with that, that was a big turnaround for me. I didn't really look in the mirror before that, except for fleetingly. I've had a few, but one very terrible sexual assault happen to me and it was kind of about regaining my power."

In the previous chapter, Dorothy mentioned "finding those support-systems that are going to help you break down those prejudices around your sexuality of being a woman", and it seems that within body positive communities, these are the support-systems¹⁶⁴ that are being formed. In this sense I would suggest that these body positive spaces have in some ways begun to construct what Tobler referred to as Irigaray's "separate, independent discursive space for women," (200: 92) a space in which the seeds of counterhegemonies might be sown.¹⁶⁵ Downey *et al* point out that "the stronger the sense of collectivity and community among a group, the stronger the collective identity – and the greater the potential for enforcing norms and shaping members' individual identities," (2010: 386) and we see this at play in terms of theories around social practice and constructionism,¹⁶⁶ in which "widely-held beliefs in a community provide a basis for shared social understanding and practices". (Sathiparsad, Taylor & Dlamini, 2008: 8) However it is Ortner who points out that "if we make the world through social practice, we can unmake and remake the world through social practice". (2016: 63) Thus, it appears that through the 'sense of collectivity' within body positive communities they are unmaking and remaking their 'shared social understanding and practices' around particular gendered roles and norms concerning sexuality and pregnancy¹⁶⁷. Sweet-Cheeks confirmed this saying,

"Being in a Community of women who are supportive of any decisions I make does make it easier to make those decisions. I have been exposed to so many different ways of being a woman or being feminine, and being exposed to that makes me feel more supported and more affirmed in my choices, because I can see there are so many different options out there. I feel like I have more freedom to choose and to listen to myself and know that there is nothing wrong with that. I can make choices around pregnancy and those will be supported."

This was particularly evident in participants' commentary around pregnancy and motherhood, many

¹⁶⁴ (Downey et al, 2010: 388)

¹⁶⁵ Also (Weller, 1994: 9-10)

¹⁶⁶ (Sathiparsad, Taylor & Dlamini, 2008: 8; Ortner, 2016: 63)

¹⁶⁷ (Downey et al, 2010: 387 – 388; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015: 124)

echoing what Sweet-Cheeks mentioned regarding exposure to “different ways of being”. Emily pointed out that being part of a body positive community had “made additional modes of pregnancy and motherhood accessible to my understanding. So I have seen people who can be role models for a different way of being pregnant,” which was reiterated by Mr Jay, Lady Raven and Juanita and was something I experienced too. Dorothy agreed saying,

“Seeing other women who are moving through all the spaces they would normally move in, whether it’s that woman dancer, or people in the bdsm community, or people in the tantra community, seeing them do that has certainly helped and supported the idea that nothing ends. I’m just going to be moving through all the things I move through, tantra, bdsm, burlesque, it’s just now going to have a baby bump.”

Similarly Satine mentioned that burlesque was “quite significant. I found like-minded women and, particularly two women in my class who are mothers as well, and who are dancing, and that’s been hugely helpful and supportive” Thus it appears that these body positive communities are resisting socially prescribed narratives relating to choice and inevitability of pregnancy and to scripts of pregnant and motherly behaviour and performance.

Another area in which the communities are offering tacit resistance to these prescribed norms is in the area of pregnant sexuality. Posel tells us that South Africa is “a society long accustomed to the secretion of sex to the margins of public debate and exposure, banished by a potent mix of moral/cultural taboos and politico-legal prohibitions,” (2004: 60) particularly so in the cases of discussion around pregnancy and sexuality. Many of the participants observed that, generally, conversations about pregnant sexuality were limited either to brief medicalized discussions with Doctors about function and discomfort, or to media, magazines and books which, again limited the conversation to health related discussions. As Sweet-Cheeks said, “so often in women's magazines you see these question answer things asking “can I have sex while pregnant?” and I think, “surely the conversation should have expanded beyond asking can I, to how do I, and what's gonna make me feel the best?”” Additionally many, like Cookie, Juanita, Mr Jay, Lady Raven, Sophia and Sweet-Cheeks indicated that conversations with mothers or family, and even within certain friendship circles would be at best uncomfortable and at worst entirely unheard of. For almost all of these women however, their experience was that body positive communities would be safe and open spaces in which to have conversations about sex and pleasure during pregnancy. Lady Raven pointed out that online kink platforms allowed her to have “lot of discussions about pregnancy and libido,” while both Mr Jay and Sweet-Cheeks stated that their immediate choice for conversation

about sex and pregnancy would be friends within body positive communities. Cookie encapsulated this, musing,

“It would have been interesting, if I hadn’t been involved in burlesque, to see how my experience of my pregnancy and sexuality and sensuality would have unfolded. I think it probably would have been very different. And I am very pleased I had that, because it helped highlight a part of myself that I didn’t want to lose and it forced me to acknowledge that I didn’t want to lose that part of myself.”

The reproduction of these shared social understandings also seems to extend outside of immediate body positive communities. Chilli, Sophia and Sue indicated that having children, especially girls, meant that they had become far more aware of role-modelling body positivity and empowerment in their every-day lives. Each of these women resist reproducing conventional gender role stereotypes for their daughters in different ways. For Sue, a 42 year old casting agent, it was through inhabiting body positivity in front of her daughter, while for Sophia it comes in the form of reminding her daughter that she has agency and choices. Chilli, expanded on this saying of her daughter’s interaction with the body positive community,

“I feel more than ever that it has opened her eyes to this bevy of women who are all so different and overall positive and feminist. I mean who doesn’t want that for their child? Who doesn’t want them to be surrounded by strong, fierce women who can also be vulnerable, who can also show their feeling but just overall be so fucking awesome?”

In this way, these mothers are attempting to resist or mitigate the effect of the dominant patriarchal narratives of gender roles which their children are exposed to within their family, community and school environments, in the hopes that they will effect change, no matter how small, through this resistance¹⁶⁸.

Role-Modelling Resistance

In a world where, as Ferreday says, “every part of the female body is subject to endless surveillance and control,” (2007) one of the most explicit forms of resistance demonstrated within these body positive communities is the performance of pregnant burlesque. As Longhurst mentions, pregnant bodies in public places elicit a provocative confluence of ambivalences and contradictions (2000: 455), and as I have already discussed there are significant tensions and conflicts which arise from the intersections of pregnancy, sexuality and the public space. Pregnant bodies are allowed to be neither overtly visible nor

¹⁶⁸ (Theodossopoulos, 2014: 425)

sexual, as far as South African society is concerned, yet they are public social projects in which the public may intervene and in which they are conceded little autonomy¹⁶⁹. Pregnant bodies in public spaces elicit strong reactions, and sexualized pregnant bodies in public spaces, even more so, as was demonstrated by the reactions to both the Moore and Williams Magazine covers. Yet Cookie, Chilli, Satine, Sarah and Sue all pushed against these strictures by performing during their pregnancies, to largely positive response. Their motivations ranged, but each spoke to a subtle interplay of both tacit and explicit resistance.

For Cookie, who performed right into her eighth month, continuing burlesque was a “deliberate push back” in resistance of the social attitudes she encountered that implied that once pregnant she should stop pursuing her own interests. She said “People just assumed that I would stop the minute that I started to show and that got my back up a little bit. So it became a thing. I refused to be shelved in the way that I think mothers very often are and can be.” Conversely Sue performed only until she began to show. Interestingly, her feeling was that she didn’t want to “involve my daughter in my act without her consent. Because that is not something she has any say over. So as long as it just looked like me that was fine, but as soon as somebody else is evidently there then I didn’t know I could make her be in my burlesque act if she didn’t want to be.”

Satine admitted that she had no agenda in wanting to dance pregnant other than feeling good within herself, while Sarah’s desire to perform came from being in a space which allowed her to feel empowered, sensual and safe. She explained that

“Performing pregnant I felt like a superstar. The women were so supportive. They made me feel amazing, they looked after me. I felt protected. I felt nurtured. I felt like a goddess. It was the most incredible experience for me. It felt extremely powerful and liberating. I felt extremely sexually potent when I was pregnant. I felt like this symbol of fertility and on stage I just felt like I was that. Like I was my most powerful.”

Chilli encountered some judgment around her continued burlesque performance, but her decision to continue was made out of a desire to engage with her embodiment, and also to role-model that embodiment for others. She commented that “burlesque is something that I love to do, it helps me to maintain some of my sensuality, and it’s about helping me feel good about myself really. Helping me normalize my pregnancy.” But also that because

¹⁶⁹ (Longhurst; 2000, 468)

“Burlesque is the type of art form where there are however many shapes and sizes that women go up onto stage with and be flawed and love themselves with. Pregnancy is another one of those shapes. Why should we stay in the curtains or the audience? I think it’s also a body shape and form that people don’t see often enough in the flesh, in public, out of clothing, and it’s beautiful.”

Regardless of the individual motivations of each of these women, the impact of presenting pregnant bodies that were visible, sensual, sexual and also autonomous, was the production of a normalizing effect. This normalization, at least within the communities and their immediate reach, upended the notion of pregnant bodies as sites/sights of abjection, creatureliness and vulnerability,¹⁷⁰ by defying globally dominant western beauty ideals, and rejecting conservative, traditional gender norms, even if just in those moments on stage.

Longhurst points to the performance of nude or semi-nude public pregnancy as a “contestatory and controversial act,” (2000: 467) and this was clear in the responses of some audience members after watching Chilli perform pregnant. Starr, the producer, recalled that,

“Some people came up to me afterwards and said “how can you let her perform in that state!” and I was like “what state is that? Beautiful? Female? Empowered? Conscious?” But then I had a whole lot of women come up to me, young women, and say “wow, that was phenomenal, I really never thought I’d ever see something so beautiful”.

But as with the discussion around safe spaces, placing pregnant bodies on stage exposes the audiences to ‘different ways of being’ which allows them to see a mother as “neither asexual nor animal, but rather a speaking, desiring subject.” (Oliver, 2010: 763) Similarly, Richardson indicates that “There is pleasure in the challenge to the audience’s own sexual desires” and that performance allows the audience to be “temporarily co-opted into that community.” (Gilmore & Wheeler, 2012: 183) Burlesque, has long been associated with the staging of multiple forms of femininity in surprising and non-conforming ways in resistance of ideals, and has a long historical relationship to the concepts of women’s liberation and of sexual freedom,¹⁷¹ which has extended into the body positive space. This creates particular opportunities, as Just & Muhr indicate “for resisting sexualization while performing sexuality,” (2019: 14) which in turn “problematizes but ultimately enriches and revitalizes

¹⁷⁰ (Longhurst, 2000: 466; Tobler, 2000; Betterton, 2006; Goldenberg *et al*; 2007)

¹⁷¹ (Ferreday, 2007 & 2008)

conceptualizations of resistance". (Ibid) Cookie highlighted this, remembering one of her final performances,

"That night, I could feel the audience waiting for me to take my clothes off, because by then I was fucking pregnant! People weren't sure what was happening. And the moment I took down my dress, the response I got from people, was just the best. I think people seeing someone enjoying their pregnant body, showing them that you can be sexy so heavily pregnant, that you can love your body and that it is ok to love your body in a gratuitous fashion whilst pregnant. They loved it. So I think to see someone in this context completely owning and sitting in it was both a great experience for me and the audience."

Chapter 6 – Concluding Thoughts

In her thesis, Fargo concluded that,

“Despite its ironic and transgressive intentions, burlesque does reiterate and promote entrenched images of femininity, which originated within this dominant male economy and, even when they are not being used with the intention of catering to men, cannot ever be entirely divorced from their associations with misogyny and subjugation.” (2008: 92)

But as Theodossopoulos points out, “In real life, it is hard to find subaltern spaces completely uncolonized by power, while in resisting domination, subalterns also (partly) reproduce the categorical structures of domination (Keesing 1992).” (2014: 419)¹⁷² The reality is that body positive communities are ‘subaltern spaces’ and thus cannot fully extract themselves from the dominant discourses which prevail in South Africa. The women in this research attempt to navigate these ‘structures of domination’ in ways that allow them to make sense of their lived worlds, by “weav[ing] intricate and contradictory positions between compliance and resistance to normative gender scripts.” (Chadwick & Foster, 2012: 333)¹⁷³ For some, the forms of femininities these women adopt may read as ‘pandering to a patriarchal gaze’, yet they are still femininities based on resistance: resistance of internalized “appearance ideals and messages,” (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015: 120) and resistance to oppressive attitudes toward emancipatory female pleasure and sexuality, both of which stand in defiance of hegemonic patriarchal heterosexual norms.¹⁷⁴ Just & Muhr state that “rolling back sexual freedom is neither an option nor would it be desirable; rather, we need to consider how to push beyond current notions of female sexual empowerment,” (2019: 14-15) and Anya put this in practical terms:

“One has to push for access to one’s own sexuality generally as a woman. I think it’s just another one of the ways that women’s sexuality is sidelined for male sexuality and for the idea that our purpose is to breed and not to just experience pleasure for its own sake.”

These women do push for that access, even in small ways, and have succeeded in creating safe spaces that manage to foster encouragement, knowledge, healing and empowerment in the face of systemic social norms.

Similarly, Oliver, quoting Margaret Simons suggests that “few women in our society experience motherhood as a real choice” (Oliver, 2010: 769). Even today, women’s choices within patriarchal

¹⁷² Also (Foucault, 1978: 95; Abu-Lughod, 1991: 42; Ortner, 1995: 179)

¹⁷³ Also (Ortner, 1995: 179; Jewkes & Morrell, 2010: 3; Urla & Helepololei, 2014: 434)

¹⁷⁴ (Jewkes & Morrell, 2010: 3)

cultures are still often, even though sometimes imperceptibly, restricted by cultural and social expectations. Yet within this group of women there is resistance and support enough to allow some of those women to entertain different choices, whether for or against pregnancy, over the terms of their pregnancies and in the ways they choose to inhabit motherhood. They are, in a sense, unmaking and remaking their worlds through social practices,¹⁷⁵ As Emily said in her interview:

“I think that the best woman is a ‘whole’ woman. So regardless of whether it’s pregnancy or being a mother, or being bereaved, or any other massive life event, I think a woman has a right to be whole. And feminist and body positive environments should give her that right and make space for her.”

This is almost certainly a large part of what allowed Miriam, Chilli and I to make the choices we did, and to feel supported and empowered in those choices.

Whether these practices will be lasting, or world-changing, or whether they develop into larger social movements, one cannot say. Certainly it can and has been argued that the body positive spaces of both burlesque and kink/bdsm can be problematized. Dorothy reiterated this saying:

“The reason why I think there’s a ‘yes but’, is because you still take your and society’s social issues in with you. [...] So yes, in general they are body positive spaces, they make allowances, they are inclusive, but I think they can, like every other space, also be a space for people to compare and to feel bad about themselves”

But as Urla & Helepololei point out, “contradictions and embeddedness in larger discourses are the stuff of most acts of defiance.” (2014: 434) In the end, I am reminded of Ortner’s observations on resistance:

“one can only appreciate the ways in which resistance can be more than opposition, can be truly creative and transformative, if one appreciates the multiplicity of projects in which social beings are always engaged, and the multiplicity of ways in which those projects feed on as well as collide with one another.” (1995: 190-191)

¹⁷⁵ (Ortner, 2016: 63)

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Appendix A:

Participant List and Demographics at time of interview:

	Name	Age at time of Interview	Education	Profession	Self specified Orientation	Self specified Relationship Status	Children at time of Interview	Place of Birth/ raised	Upbringing	Current religion
1	Anya	31	Tertiary	Seamstress & Corsetière	unspecified	Long term partnership with a man	none	Born and raised in CT	Non-religious upbringing	Non-religious
2	Chilli D'Vine (Chilli in text)	33	Tertiary	Medical Doctor	unspecified	Married to a man	1 girl (adolescent) from prior relationship Pregnant with 2 nd Biological	Born and Raised in JHB.	Very Christian upbringing (Protestant).	Non-religious
3	Cookie Von Tastee (Cookie in text)	33	Tertiary	Actress & Doula	unspecified	Married to a man	1 boy (toddler) Biological	Born in Margate, and raised in CT.	Christian upbringing (Catholic).	Lapsed Catholic.
4	Diva Disastar (Starr in text)	36	Tertiary	Burlesque Teacher & Dancer	Lesbian	Married to a woman	none	Moved around SA growing up.	Unspecified upbringing	Non-religious
5	Dorothy Black (Dorothy in text)	41	Tertiary	Writer & Sex Columnist	Hetero-but sexually fluid	Married to a man	none	Born and raised in CT	Very Christian upbringing (Apostolic). Left Church at 18	Non-religious
6	Emily*	47	Tertiary	Co-Ordinator*	unspecified	Married to a man (2 nd)	2 boys (teen) from 1 st marriage. Biological	Not born in SA, Raised in SA*	Non-religious upbringing,	Non-religious
7	Jodi (myself)	37	Tertiary	Student, Researcher & Burlesque Dancer	Pansexual	single	none	Born in DBN, raised in PMB	Non-religious upbringing.	Non-religious
8	Juanita	43	Tertiary	IT Professional & Councilor	straightish	Married to a man	Twins –(1 girl & 1 boy) (adolescent) Biological	Born and Raised in JHB	Unspecified upbringing	Non-religious
9	Lady Magnolia	37	Secondary	Burlesque Teacher & Dancer	unspecified	Divorced from a woman. In a relationship with a woman.	none	Born in CT. Raised in Sedgefield	Non-Religious upbringing. Christian Teen.	Non-religious
10	Lady Raven	34	Tertiary	Service Industry	Pansexual Ethically non-monogamous	Married to a man	1 boy (toddler) Biological	Born in Israel, raised in JHB	Jewish upbringing.	Jewish
11	Miriam	42	Tertiary	Consulate Worker	unspecified	Married to a man	1 boy & 1 girl (adolescent) Adopted	Born and raised in Spain	Non-religious upbringing	Non-religious
12	Mr Jay Catsby (Mr Jay in text)	29	Tertiary	Au Pair & Seamstress	Queer – bisexual - monogomish	Divorced from a man In a relationship with a man	none	Born and raised in Namibia	Conservative Christian upbringing.	Non-religious.
13	Sarah*	41	Tertiary	Researcher	unspecified	Married to a man	1 boy (toddler) Biological	Born and Raised in PTA	Non-religious upbringing*	Orthodox religious*

14	Satine	38	Tertiary	Actress & Drama Therapist	unspecified	Married to a man	1 girl (toddler) & 1 boy (under 2) Biological	Born and raised in PTA	Very Conservative, Afrikaans, Christian' upbringing (NG Kerk). Left the church.	Non-religious
15	Scar-lit Hearts (Scar-lit in text)	33	Tertiary	Pole dance Instructor/ Burlesque dancer	straight	single	none	Born and raised in JHB	Christian upbringing (unspecified)	Non-religious
16	Sophia Von Syren (Sophia in text)	40	Secondary	Service Industry	Bisexual	Divorced from a man. Long term partnership with a man	1 girl & 1 boy (teen) Biological	Born in NW province, raised in JHB	Conservative Afrikaans Christian upbringing.	Non-religious
17	Sue Cubus (Sue in text)	40	Tertiary	Casting Agent	Unspecified	Long term partnership with a man	1 girl (toddler) Biological	Unspecified, Moved around Internationally	Non-religious upbringing	Non-religious
18	Sweet-Cheeks	26	Tertiary	Researcher / Burlesque dancer	Hetero-flexible/ fluctuating	Single	none	Born and raised in CT	Conservative Christian upbringing	Non-religious

* Name changed and/or details limited at Participant's request to protect anonymity

Appendix B:

Dear

My name is Jodi Le Roux and I'm currently doing research toward my masters in social anthropology at the University of Cape Town. The research I will be conducting centers around the question of how practitioners of body positivity (ie burlesque dancers or bdsm community members) navigate their expectations and or experiences of pregnancy within a South African context. By looking at relationships between pregnancy, body positivity, sexuality and performance, I hope to gain a deeper and more varied understanding of women's lived experiences and the ways in which they inhabit or don't inhabit the world around them within different socially and personally ascribed identities in South Africa, and, whether this is in any way affected by their concepts and understanding of body positivity. My hope is that this research will benefit both body positive communities and the First Thousand Days of Life and the Concepts of Life Projects, under which it falls, by contributing a deeper understanding of women's' lived experiences through and around the concept and or embodiment of pregnancy within South Africa.

As a performer and member of multiple body positive communities I would like to interview you for the purposes of this research. This will involve one or more interviews which may be used as data within my research, which will ultimately be published online on the UCT postgraduate archive which is available to the public. Once published, this research may, at any point be used or cited in a thesis / academic journal/ book / website in the future. The research has been approved by the Anthropology Ethics Committee in keeping with UCT's ethical guidelines and policies.

I will ensure that your privacy and confidentiality is respected to the degree that you wish it to be. Should you prefer not to be named in the research I will take all appropriate measures to anonymize your contribution, by changing names and the details of your information. All interviews will be handled, transcribed and read only by myself. They will be stored on my personal laptop and on one back up hard-drive which will remain in my possession at all times. Should you wish, I will provide you with copies of all transcripts of your interviews in order that you are able to change/rephrase or adjust any previously given answers. I will also provide you with a copy of the final thesis before final submission, for you to peruse and amend your input in any way, should you wish.

Should you agree to participate, your involvement will be entirely voluntary. You can ask me any questions you want before or throughout the interview(s) and you can opt not to answer any questions

you are uncomfortable or unhappy with. You can also withdraw or retract at any stage, any part or all of your interview(s) without giving a reason and without any negative consequences.

Are you happy for me to collect your personal data?

Do you have any questions?

Are you happy to consent to being interviewed?

I look forward to your response

Kind Regards