

THE CRUELTY OF KIN: REJECTION AND ABJECTION IN REBECCA BROWN'S REPRESENTATIONS OF PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS

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1. Introduction

The work of the contemporary lesbian author Rebecca Brown can be read as a dramatization of the *chosen* nature of biological kinship ties —ties that are, in popular belief as in academic circles, still often considered “natural” and, therefore, dependable. The power of the idealization of a historical and natural biological kinship is apparent from the widespread “popular nostalgia for [...] breadwinner-homemaker nuclear family life” (Stacey 1996: 9) or the “contemporary romanticization” of those “happy, homogenous families that we ‘remember’ from the 1950s” (Coontz 1992: 29, 31), which continue to shape people’s expectations and hopes for family life. Such romanticized images wield an enormous influence, perhaps understandably so, given the vulnerability of many present-day family arrangements. Some theorists even believe “[i]t is through the families we live *by* that we achieve the transcendence that compensates for the families we live *with*” (John Gilles in Stacey 1996: 87). This idealized form of kinship is, of course, generally reproductive and heterosexual (thus also creating a default assumption of heterosexuality for the gay and lesbian children who grow up in these families and internalize their values). We should note here that Brown’s fictional engagement with this topic has been influenced by her experiences “coming of age as a gay person in the late seventies and eighties” (personal interview). Her background

obviously differs from that of contemporary LGBT youth: at least in the West, recent times have seen a rise in public attention to gay marriage and reproduction. Brown acknowledges that the idea that “gay people are having families” is “more respected and seen by others” now (personal interview). Yet these recent developments should not be glorified or overestimated. Brown knows that “the idea of ‘it’s all easy now’” is particularly powerful in America and tends to obliterate continuing, shameful social injustices. Her observation is valid in the realm of kinship, where gays and lesbians are not always “respect[ed] as parents” while they are “actually doing some serious heavy lifting for the culture” (e.g. by adopting “AIDS babies”), but also in the cultural sphere. “Lesbian authors”, for instance, “are out there, but it’s like our culture hides them”, Brown thinks (personal interview).

The type of kinship that continues to be idealized despite recent homopositive (or at least “homoneutral”) attitudes is considered natural because it is seen as the result of the biological phenomenon of heterosexual procreation. At least since David Schneider, however, whose name is widely associated with the “death of kinship” in anthropology (Franklin and McKinnon 2001: 4), academic thinking on this topic has been forced to admit the circularity of such argumentations

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The notion of a “base in nature” creates a self-justifying and untestable definition of kinship: “kinship” as a sociocultural phenomenon is [...] defined as entailing those “natural” or “biological” facts which it is at the same time said to be “rooted in” or “based on”. (Schneider in Franklin and McKinnon 2001: 2)

By drawing out such circularity, Schneider has exposed kinship as an artificial construct of anthropologists eager to establish a universal standard for people’s social organizations. In addition, queer theory has a history of problematizing kinship—think of Kath Weston’s early intervention in these issues with *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* (1991). In the public imagination, though, an idealized version of the heterosexual family continues to reign supreme, still including assumptions about the naturalness and autonomy of, as well as people’s emotional well-being in, the nuclear-family unit. Despite important shifts in mainstream acknowledgement of gay and lesbian families, biological kinship is still often thought to be “naturally given”, as opposed to the chosen and, therefore, “pretended” families of gays and lesbians. Feminist philosopher Cheshire Calhoun, for instance, even notes that merely “protecting [queers] against hate crimes may be interpreted as dangerously close to attacking the family” (2000: 153). She points to the 1990 Hate Crime Statistics Act—modified only in 2009—that covers crimes committed because of the victim’s sexual orientation. Meant to “encourage the well-being, financial security, and health of the American family”, the Act nevertheless explicitly states that “[n]othing in this Act shall be construed,

nor shall any funds appropriated to carry out the purpose of the Act be used, to promote or encourage homosexuality” (in Calhoun 2000: 153).

People are supposed to lack choice as to the selection of relatives they (have to) relate to—you can choose your friends, but you can't choose your family, or so they say—which theoretically offers them a unique level of security. However, Brown's de-idealized or demythologized depictions of biological kinship serve to remind us of the fact that people have the choice to imaginatively construct, or refuse, biology as the groundwork for their intimate kin relationships. The homophobic parents she depicts, for instance, obviously feel free to denounce the “natural” bond mothers and fathers are believed to share with their own “flesh and blood”. They deny their homosexual offspring the sanctuary from the harsh outside world a family home is supposed to provide. The institution of “home”, in these cases, redoubling the shunning strategies of society at large, perpetuates the stigmatization of gays and lesbians, so that queer kids can find themselves subjected to homophobia almost everywhere they turn. Brown further contests the naturalness of biological kinship through horrifying descriptions of what is thought to be a natural female destiny, namely childbirth, and through portrayals of her mother characters' lack of attachment to their babies. Presenting children as abjects, Brown also steers clear of the passivity of the motherly “vessel” that is taken for granted in standard theoretical accounts of abjection, which inevitably relegate the *mother's* body to the realm of the abject.

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When babies grow bigger in Brown's oeuvre, moreover, they frequently turn out to be veritable monsters, so that to love them involves enormous amounts of what Arlie Hochschild refers to as “emotion work” on the part of their poor mothers (1983: 7). Enlightenment thinkers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau have been a crucial influence in the process of investing kids with innocence and helplessness, but, according to sociologist Viviana A. Zelizer, in the American context the romanticization of childhood only came about between the late 1800s and the 1930s. Around the turn of the century, legal changes removed many children from the workplace and children were consequently endowed with sentimental (rather than monetary) value—a situation that further entailed “a cultural process of sacralization of children's lives” (Zelizer 1985: 11). The influence of the ensuing images of children's idealized “natural goodness” can be felt to the present day, as these notions are supposed to move adult (political) decision makers into creating a safe future world “for our children”, even if in reality this often amounts to an excuse for defending reactionary measures. The safeguarding of the future rights of this ideal child citizen generally happens at the expense of the protection or even the creation of rights for present homosexual (or other non-heteronormative) citizens, whose “sterile” sexuality is supposed to signal the end of futurity, and

whose company is deemed dangerous and damaging for the vulnerable child that is growing up. In her writings, Brown will be seen to oppose this ideology, which Lee Edelman has termed “reproductive futurism” (2004: 2), by radically embracing an incompatibility of homosexuals and children. Portraying the latter as monsters, she divests the dogmatic machinery of reproductive futurism (as well as the political agents appealing to it) of the beneficiary it so desperately needs to remain operative: the innocent child-saint.

The image of the monster that has appeared in the previous paragraphs is significant, in that it is still part and parcel of the way lesbians are presented for instance in popular horror films and fictions, which build on more general societal and cultural clichés about the lesbian as performing “the role of the breaker of social and sexual taboos that is conventionally assigned to the monster” (Palmer 1999: 13). The monstrous has therefore frequently been appropriated in “lesbian/feminist revision[s]” as “a signifier of female power” (101). Think, for instance, of eccentric figures like Winterson’s Dog-Woman in *Sexing the Cherry* or Villanelle in *The Passion*—even though the latter’s monstrosity is quite subtle, residing as it does in the secret of her webbed feet. At times Brown, like Winterson in *Sexing the Cherry*, focuses on the “monstrous [...] produced at the border between human and inhuman” (Creed 1994: 11). For instance in *The Dogs* (1998), the anonymous female narrator gives birth to a puppy and shares her bed with a certain “Miss Dog”. Yet Brown also extends the realm of the lesbian monstrous when she portrays her women-loving heroines as having “monstrous kids” (Brown 1998: 89).

The demonization of kids is not radically new; in a 1986 book chapter titled “The American Nightmare”, Robin Wood drew on Marcuse to theorize the vilification of children in the American horror film of the seventies as an aftereffect of the “surplus repression” required to turn all citizens “into monogamous heterosexual bourgeois patriarchal capitalists” (71), as befits members of “a society built on monogamy and the family” (80). Yet Brown’s evocation of this theme in her fiction does assume heightened importance in the contemporary context of homonormalization. This ideology, which is promoted in assimilationist gay subcultures, promises inclusion into the mainstream to those who do not stray too far from the ordinary, such as monogamous same-sex couples or—as we will see in the theories of Corinne Hayden and Gillian Dunne—gender-conforming lesbians who opt for biological motherhood. Brown herself has named “the assimilationist stuff” one of the most disappointing aspects of contemporary queer culture, emphasizing that “[w]e aren’t all exactly alike”. “I don’t like the taming of queer culture”, she goes on to add. “Why don’t we get a little bit more out there maybe?” (Mickelson 2009).

Before, however, exploring my claims about Brown's representations of parent-child relationships at greater length, I should probably devote a brief paragraph to introducing this lesser-known writer to unfamiliar readers. Rebecca Brown (1956 –) is a lesbian author, based in Seattle, whose oeuvre comprises a dozen works of a wide generic diversity: with *The Dogs* she has written “A Modern Bestiary”; for *Woman in Ill-Fitting Wig* (2005) she chose the format of prose poems and collaborated with the painter Nancy Kiefer; and her most recent work, *American Romances* (2009), consists of a variety of (fictional) essays. Brown is most famous for her autobiographically inspired and emotionally intense novel-in-stories *The Gifts of the Body* (1994), narrated by a homecare worker assisting people with AIDS, which earned her several awards, including a Lambda Literary Award. Note, finally, that the author whose work I am discussing here is not to be confused with the Rebecca Brown who is a homophobic religious conservative writer of books on topics such as Satanism.

2. Familial homophobia

Brown is very much aware of the recurrent societal idealization of the family, typically understood as a middle-class, intact nuclear unit consisting of a husband (a biologically male breadwinner) and a wife (a biologically female, economically dependent homemaker and childrearer), who are legally married and who have dependent children, approximately two, and an obligatory pet — a unit of loving and caring relationships that naturally shelters its members and provides them with emotional and physical comfort. Brown reveals how this “ideological code” (Bernstein and Reimann 2001: 3), embedded legally and socially in a plethora of institutions, as well as psychologically in most people's minds, is especially hard to escape. Throughout her oeuvre, she engages with the concept of “family mythology”, which can be defined as

[...] an image to live up to, an image shaping the desire of the individual living in a social group. This myth or image —whatever its content may be for a specific group— dominates lived reality, even though it can exist in conflict with it and can be ruled by different interests. (Hirsch 1997: 8)

One of many examples is to be found in *The Haunted House* ([1986] 2007), Brown's novel exploring the continual impact of a traumatic past on a lesbian woman's life, in which the narrator Robin is given to fantasizing about perfect kin in a “comfortable old family home”, while her own familial situation is far less idyllic. In Robin's dreams, her “handsome, confident young brother, now at State U, beams with pride and tells the American TV public he wants to be a doctor”. Her mother, predictably dressed in a “blue-checked dress and apron”, is performing

her wifely duties, so their cozy home is enveloped in the “smell [of] the just-baked freshness of the apple pie Mom has cooling on the kitchen windowsill”. The narrator’s father, in turn, is a proud “middle-American, all-American Pop”. In reality, however, her soon-to-be-divorced parents always “ignore one another completely” (Brown 2007: 18), her dad spending his days on the couch with “his sweaty glass of whiskey” (20). Here the biological family is exposed as a unit that is far from perfect, while its continual attraction (the narrator’s idea that “Every family wants to be like us” [19] is part and parcel of her fantasy) threatens to stigmatize those unable to live up to it.

Moreover, the biological family unit, as the locus of a child’s social identity formation, generally presents heterosexuality as the only available relational option, which makes the family just another one of those institutions directly involved with underwriting “the heterosexual assumption”, the “all-embracing [...] presumption in favour of heterosexuality” (Weeks et al. 2001: 41). *The Haunted House* once more provides us with a striking example of the performative and discursive workings of heteronormativity, also allowing us to throw light on the processes of (heterosexual) identity development which begin as soon as children are born into their nuclear families. First, it is important to point out the essential vulnerability of these small children who are immediately heterosexualized: the narrator’s mother enumerates the caring activities she performed when Robin and her brother were still very young and, consequently, helpless. Childcare is, tellingly, a maternal activity in *The Haunted House*.

I made you little mittens so you couldn’t scratch yourself in your sleep. I watched you sleep. I sat in a chair next to your beds and waited for you to turn and kick the covers. I pulled the blankets over you again. I held your head when you were sick. I woke up when you wanted a glass of water. I held your sweet warm head when you drank. (Brown 2007: 144)

In addition to being highly vulnerable, children have particular desires that function as “key forces in shaping identity” (Howard 2000: 385); to stick to *The Haunted House*, Robin’s mother discusses her children’s “tug of need and love, the brutal love of need” (Brown 2007: 145). Judith Howard, drawing on Lauren Langman, mentions a few such needs, like wanting “to seek attachments to others; the pursuit of recognition and dignity”, and “avoiding fear and anxiety” (2000: 385). These guarantee the creation of proper citizens: combined with the relative powerlessness characterizing infancy, desires for closeness and the avoidance of anxiety make children amenable to “the moulding of cultural prompting” (Jamieson 1998: 119) or the assumption of a proper identity. This ensues via socialization, “the transmission of behavior, roles, attitudes and beliefs to the next generation [by] direct prescription, by example and by implicit expectation”

(Weinreich 1978: 18). Norbert Elias' concept of "habitus" is relevant here: as Jeffrey Weeks helpfully explains, it refers to those "aspects of a personality that are not inherent or innate, but are acquired in the course of development: the thinking, feeling and believing that are learnt from early childhood, so that they become ingrained as a second nature" (2011: 77). Assuming an identity, then, takes place through an internalization of societal values and norms as passed on to the child by the significant others it identifies with. Weeks, Brian Heaphy, and Catherine Donovan aptly summarize the matter as follows:

[...] the private arenas of early home and family life have a key role to play in informing individuals with a sense of what are appropriate and inappropriate ways of being. First home is a strategic space where habits are learned and values instilled. [...] [F]amily and home are likely to follow modes of operation that are structured in line with particular social and cultural values. (2001: 79)

Such values, which children absorb and, as a result, apply "naturally" (which is to say, unthinkingly), reproduce the social structure to which they belong and thereby may come to seem "primordial" principles (Todd 2005: 433). Many of Brown's narratives, by contrast, expose such seemingly natural givens as social constructs.

One of the most striking sets of behaviors to be internalized as a "natural given" is that of heterosexuality. The fact that identity formation in the family traditionally supposes a heterosexual outcome is exemplified by the likelihood of readers being surprised when, in *The Haunted House*, it turns out that Robin comes home not with a boyfriend but with a girl instead. Her alcoholic father teaches "Robbie" how to mix drinks, remarking that, "until [her] boyfriends grow up", she will need "Coke for rum and Coke" rather than serving rum straight (Brown 2007: 43). Like the narrator's father, then, many readers at this point will assume Robin to be "straight", yet after two pages (which cover several years of the narrator's life), they learn the error of this assumption: "I'm visiting friends from college whom I haven't seen in years. We joke, we tell my lover Carrie that we all met 'in the trenches'" (45). Readers—especially if they happen to be themselves heterosexual—quickly realize that they, like Robin's father, had expected her to get a boyfriend, which reveals how frequently socialization equals heterosexualization, and how the standard family predominantly functions as "a site where normalizing rules of gender and sexual conduct and performance are taught on a daily basis" (Cantú 2001: 113). As Hayden rightly concludes, "heterosexuality, gender, and kinship are mutually constituted" (1995: 43).

Yet Brown not only takes issue with the default assumption of heterosexuality in heteronormative family life; her oeuvre also devotes repeated attention to the painful severance that can occur when this assumption is disrupted in the act of coming out in "the family unit", which Palmer describes as a regular site of

concealment or discrimination for gays and lesbians (1999: 11). One of Brown's former colleagues at the Master of Fine Arts Program in Creative Writing at Goddard College (Vermont), the lesbian novelist and playwright Sarah Schulman, claims that "disapproval by a member of the family in some way or another" is the sole experience most homosexuals have in common. Yet, she maintains, it is "least spoken about", because it is so painful (De Moor and Gydé 2002: 35; my translation). Familial homophobia continues to be, indeed, "one of our ugliest social secrets" (Walters 2001: 354). Brown agrees that aversion towards homosexuality within the family is "little documented in literature, especially when compared to themes such as coming-out and AIDS". She notes that Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* and Rita Mae Brown's *Rubyfruit Jungle*, two of the most successful and best-selling lesbian novels from the 1970s and 1980s, were remarkable writings on being cast out by your own family. "However, both books are comedies, and this subject has not been given similar treatment as a tragedy in our literature", she adds (De Moor and Gydé 2002: 35; my translation). With a fair share of her own work, Brown can be said to attempt to fill part of this gap, and to demonstrate how the family is often a loaded concept, and a loath-laden place, for gays and lesbians. In *The Gifts of the Body*, for instance, one of the nameless narrator's clients, an elderly woman, recounts how her husband John was unable to come to terms with their son Joe's homosexuality and how, when John died, "[t]here were things left unresolved. He hadn't seen Joe in ages. And he'd only met Tony [i.e. Joe's lover] that once" (Brown 1994: 158). Homophobia clearly impeded the full acceptance of Joe as a family member; his father refused to speak to him after Joe's love relationship with Tony made his homosexuality an undeniable reality.

In one of Brown's latest stories, "The Music Teacher" (2010) (online publication only, at the Richard Hugo House website), which revolves around a gay teacher's inability to come out and the importance of his example for the lesbian narrator and her school mate Sam, the latter's parents even send their son to the military academy because of his homosexuality. Rumor has it that "he had gotten into some horrible kind of trouble" and that he is "a huge disappointment [...] to his family". "Sam was also their only son, which made it even worse", as the narrator paraphrases popular opinion (Brown 2010). Such exclusions from the family as Sam experiences clearly challenge what Schulman calls the "private/public dichotomy on which society's safety net depends". Queers frequently slip through this net which expects the family to shelter an individual whom the larger community treats cruelly, and which expects society, in turn, to be a person's refuge from possible familial abuse. Towards gay boys like Sam, though, both "the family and the larger society enact the identical structures of exclusion and diminishment", so "the individual has no place of escape" (Schulman 2009: 14).

The chances of the larger community protecting Sam from his family —influential “Texas royalty”, to make matters worse— are very slim indeed (Brown 2010).

Such negative parental responses to the disclosure or discovery of a child's homosexuality are likely to mentally damage her or him. One of the more influential gay theorists, David Halperin, judiciously warns us about using the term “internalized homophobia” too readily, because it may amount to an excuse for continuing to associate homosexuals with “psychopathology”, and because attention to homosexuals' self-hatred risks shifting the focus away from heterosexuals' homo-hatred (2007: 35-36). Nevertheless, the psychologically damaging effects when gays and lesbians internalize their environments' negative views of their sexuality cannot be glossed over either. “Aspects of the Novel”, an essay in which Brown creatively engages with E.M. Forster's work of the same title, demonstrates that we should not be too quick to dismiss internalized homophobia as merely one of those “pop-psychological clichés” (Halperin 2007: 43). The narrator of this story from Brown's 2006 collection *The Last Time I Saw You* seems to have incorporated the familial homophobia she probably encountered throughout her youth when she says:

Maybe some of us do not deserve to breathe. But also aren't worth, as my mother used to say, “the dynamite it would take to blow you up”.

NB: I do not wish to suggest that any of this was in any way at all her (my mother's) fault. My mother was a very good human being [...]. I don't know where in Jesus' name I ever came from. She didn't deserve what happened. (Brown 2006: 70)

Blaming family members for having “caused” an individual's homosexuality — usually through inappropriate upbringing— is a common phenomenon, as becomes painfully clear to the narrator of “Aspects of the Novel”, whose mother was apparently faulted for her daughter's lesbianism. Weston acknowledges how homophobes who blame relatives for a lesbian woman's or a gay man's sexuality continue to deny adulthood or maturity to this person by acting as if they were still in command of her or his “self-definition”. Such aetiological scenarios for a person's homosexuality, often inspired and supported by decades of American popularized strands of psychoanalysis, exert a continual attraction for homophobes who believe that “the power to do implies the power to undo” (Weston 1991: 70).

Even those parents in Brown's oeuvre who are somewhat more tolerant of their child's homosexuality still tend to *reconfirm* the kinship bond they have with their lesbian daughter or gay son, rather than to assume its natural continuation after she or he comes out to them. Weston detects a “specter of terminability of kinship ties in the very of act of affirming a solidarity that endures” in exclamations like “You're still my son! You're still my daughter! I still love you!” (1995: 96). Such striking disavowals-in-affirmations occur also in “A Good Man”, Brown's moving

AIDS narrative from the 1993 short story collection *Annie Oakley's Girl* which focuses on the anonymous lesbian narrator's close bond with her friend Jim. After the latter's death of AIDS, Jim's father says, "There were things about Jim it took us a long time to understand, *but* he was a good son" (Brown 1993: 134; my italics). Symptomatically, moreover, despite the acceptance his parents eventually displayed, Jim's friends want to get to his apartment before his mother and father do, "in case there's anything we need to 'straighten up'". The narrator adds that they do not "expect to find anything shocking", but still she thinks that "if we were to run across something, even a magazine or a poster, it might be nicer if the Carlsons didn't see it" (138). Katrien De Moor calls the practice of "straightening up" a "commonplace post-mortem care gesture" that recurs in many AIDS narratives. The verb refers to straightforward cleaning up as well as "straightening" in the sense of removing "'explicit' gay signals" so as not to upset heterosexual parents (De Moor 2004: 89). Thus Brown reveals that, even when the relationship between gay sons or lesbian daughters and their parents is reasonably sound, it does not therefore measure up to the familial contact these parents (would) maintain with heterosexual offspring. Schulman shrewdly detects a "coping mechanism" in homosexuals' pretense that their families are "fine". She explains that, "when you ask for details, this means, basically, that the gay person has not been completely excluded from family events. Or that their partner, if they have one, is allowed in the house". Even if such acts do not bespeak explicit homophobia, the fact remains that few homosexuals have the feeling that "their personhood, lives, and feelings" are as valuable as those of heterosexual family members. But because many gays and lesbians know of others whose families are much more prejudiced —just as Jim is among the more fortunate in Brown's work— they often deem themselves, with their "continued compromised inclusion" in their biological families, unbelievably lucky (Schulman 2009: 19). This is why Weston calls familial "acceptance" a "residual category" that covers every stance lying between reluctant tolerance of, and affirmative pride in, a relative's homosexuality (1991: 62).

Brown's literary depictions of the disruptions of biological kinship ties due to a daughter's or a son's homosexuality are thus crucial as well as socially valuable both in view of the taboo that still surrounds familial homophobia and given the fact that, in Schulman's words, "how gays and lesbians are treated IN families is far more influential on the quality of individual lives and the larger social order than how we are treated AS families" (2009: 1). Such representations help to show, furthermore, how biological kinship is by no means "natural" or, to put it somewhat differently, how sharing biogenetic material does not automatically create a bond worthy of the term "kinship". Coming out to relatives proves to be a test for the unqualified love and continuing affection that is supposed to typify

biological kin relations, because, even when a break does not in fact ensue, the fear that it *might very well have* is shared by almost all gays and lesbians. Regardless of “the outcome of disclosure”, they share a “recognition of the potential for the termination of ostensibly indissoluble ties” (Weston 1995: 96). For homosexuals, many of whom at least *consider* coming out, the unconditional love that is stereotypically perceived to characterize and symbolize biological kinship loses much of its “unconditional” or “naturally given” quality. Straight relatives, in turn, may equally be disowned by their families, yet such a rejection typically happens in individual cases —as a reaction to particular acts— rather than on the basis of something as essential to a person’s identity as their sexuality and gender.

Because for gays and lesbians (be they out to their relatives or not), rejection is a danger that lurks beneath the surface of every family gathering, homosexuals understandably have been among those to call attention most frequently to the element of “choice” that is at the heart of kinship ties routinely supposed to be grounded on the undeniable facts of nature and biology. With Weston, we may conclude that

In the specific context of coming out, blood ties may be reduced conceptually to mere material substance with little bearing on future kinship, making the enduring quality of kin ties something to be established in practice through verbal affirmations and signs of love. The drama and emotional anticipation hinges on the unresolved issue of whether solidarity will endure as the familial character of a tie comes into question. (1991: 77-8)

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3. Representations of children. Childbirths and newborn babies: Scenes of ultimate abjection

In addition to pointing up the chosen nature of biological kinship by means of portrayals of familial homophobia, Brown’s work repeatedly dissolves the supposed naturalness of family relationships through grotesque representations of childbirth (typically regarded as a woman’s “natural calling”), after which her lesbian mother characters are frequently seen to lack the love for their newborn babies that is just as stereotypically thought to come spontaneously. Instead of the “natural development from gendered womanhood to pregnancy and motherhood” that ostensibly constitutes “female fulfillment” (Berlant 1997: 99), Brown’s oeuvre presents readers with descriptions that are closer to the horror movie genre, as *The Dogs* makes eloquently clear. Offering its readers “dog births” rather than childbirths, Brown’s “modern bestiary” turns scenes of childbearing into monstrous spectacles; as Creed has convincingly argued, the monstrous typically “signifies the boundary between the human and the non-human”, in this case, the

dog (1993: 5). *The Dogs* is alternately realistic and fantastic, featuring dogs that are sometimes actually present and at other times probably imagined by the narrator, who fears she is losing her mind.¹ When the narrator's pet, Miss Dog, gives birth to her puppies, the narrator's entire apartment

smells horrible. Like blood and sweat and shit. [...] At first I can barely make [her] out but then horribly, awfully, I do. Miss Dog is on the bed. [...] The sheets are bloody and black around her. Her belly's up, her legs are spread, and there in the hole between them, is a head. I try to blink the sight away but I can't. Miss Dog is writhing. [...] Her teeth are bared and gnashing and drool's dripping out and she's making horrible rumbling noises like the girl in *The Exorcist*. [...] Her body is wracked like she is deformed, like her insides are coming out. (Brown 1998: 53-55)

A little later, the narrator herself has to endure a similar "exorcism" but, conspicuously, she gives birth to a dog *and* she does this via her mouth, where "it hurts like crazy" (58). Brown thus once again demythologizes and defamiliarizes the biological in her work, occupying it in clearly fantastic ways here.

Rosemary Jackson calls attention to the fact that fantasy is not "inherently transgressive", but she avows that its "subversive function" can be uncovered when we go beyond a "merely *thematic*" to a "*structuralist*" reading of fantasy. Thus the fantastic can become "an art of estrangement" which directs "attention to the relative nature of the [...] categories [by which we organize experience]" and which "moves towards a dismantling of the real" (1981: 175). These traits pertain to the fantastical as it is put to use by a writer like Brown, who once described her task as an author as follows: "You want to make art, you need to make art because of some basic discontent or discomfort with the world. You need to reimagine or refashion a world that is an alternative to or a respite from the awful one you inhabit" (Stadler 1999: 7-8). Judith Butler's theorizations of the fantastic are appropriate in this context too. She argues that fantasy, which is not "equated with what is not real, but rather with what is not *yet* real, what is possible or futural", has the vital "task of (re)thinking futurity" (1990: 105). She adds that what fits "the description of the real" is actually "contingent, contrived" (106) so that the "failure of the mimetic function", for instance in fanciful works like *The Dogs*, "has its own political uses" (1993: 10). Biological "kinship" in Brown's bestiary is obviously artificial rather than natural, and the dystopian quality of the reality thus created is clearly heightened and, thereby, widely revealed.

Moreover, giving birth quite literally becomes an animalistic act in *The Dogs*. Brown's excessive, Rabelaisian images of the body in labor are "grotesque", to evoke Mikhail Bakhtin's term for representations characterized by an emphasis on "the body as a whole and o[n] the limits of this whole" (1984: 315) through a preoccupation with "that which protrudes from the body" (316), "that which

leads [...] into the body's depths" (318), or that which is associated with "inner life" and emergence from the body (such as "defecation", "pregnancy, childbirth" [320-321]):

[...] there's this incredible pain in my throat, like ripping apart, like I'm on fire then I hear this rumbling low inside me, then I'm sputtering and gagging [...]. There's a scrape like a rake and this thing prods up to the top of my throat. I shove in my fist to keep it down. [...] I feel it tearing up through me and it heaves itself up and out like a concrete vomit projectile. I choke and gag. [...] My lips and cheeks have stretched apart and my skin is ripped. There's blood everywhere. [...] I see a long black dripping stick sticking out of my mouth. [...] My insides push and my bloody broken throat and mouth are stretched again and there's another paw and I pull and it squeezes out in a pool of muck. (Brown 1998: 57-59)

After this horrifying experience, the narrator calls her body "[t]he place from whence the waste, the nothing came" (59), which already more than hints at her negative attitude towards her infant offspring.

Brown indeed violates a taboo by having the narrator turn away from her "baby", despite its look of "pure, adoring love". When her offspring searches for its mother's body, she pushes it away to "see it tremble, newly cold" (Brown 1998: 59). This shocking gesture stems from the fact that she deems the infant a punishment, as is also suggested by the title of the chapter recounting its horrible birth, "HOLE: in which is illustrated Justice". Both Miss Dog and the narrator feel they are transformed into mere receptacles through their pregnancies and childbirths; the narrator even refers to her companion animal as a "vessel" (56). The view that having children may turn women—or female dogs, for that matter—into cogs in a (procreative) machine is taken up again in *The Last Time I Saw You*. The narrator of the latter collection metafictionally refers to *The Dogs* after saying "doggedly", by means of a casual aside: "Hey! there's a little in-joke there for any old reader friend who may still be with me". Though not explicitly in the context of pregnancy, the narrator there does compare her younger self to a "possessable passive vessel" (Brown 2006: 28). With such imagery, Brown may be referring to the classic view of women as passive receptacles that can be traced back all the way to Plato. Butler summarizes Plato's "received notions" (1999: 53) on the subject as follows:

This receptacle [...] is not a metaphor based on likeness to a human form, but a disfiguration that emerges at the boundaries of the human both as its very condition and as the insistent threat of its deformation; it cannot take a form, a morphe, and in that sense, it cannot be a body. (1993: 41)

Such images install the feminine as the prerequisite for human procreation while simultaneously *excluding* it from the human as such, as well as from active

participation in the formation of the beings who are then merely “produced through it”, so to speak (Brown 1993: 42). Despite the obvious fact that both men and women contribute equally to their offspring’s biogenetic structure, ideas of activity and “biological creativity” historically and ideologically remain bound up with the male input in procreation, so that the theory of female receptivity — and thus, a “symbolic asymmetry” in ideas of reproduction— persists (Hayden 1995: 51). Rather than “a femininity that makes a contribution to reproduction”, Butler summarizes, “we have a phallic Form that reproduces only and always further versions of itself, and does this through the feminine, but with no assistance from her” (1993: 42).

As a result of such patriarchal thinking, the feminine is permanently excluded from oppositions like “form” versus “matter”: as Butler paraphrases Plato’s view, a woman “will neither be the one nor the other, but the permanent and unchangeable condition of both” (1993: 42). This view of the maternal bears an interesting resemblance to Butler’s definition of the abject, that prerequisite for the subject which is nevertheless denied a position in the opposition between subject and object. Abjects are “those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the ‘unlivable’ is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject” (Butler 1993: 3). When Julia Kristeva developed the concept of abjection in *Powers of Horror*, she defined it as “the impossible [that] constitutes its [i.e. the subject’s] very *being*” (1982: 5). So for her, too, abjects “threaten *at the same time* that they constitute the self’s proper borders” (Keltner 2011: 44). Unsurprisingly, then, the maternal body is explicitly located in the realm of the abject in Kristeva’s theory, where (one type of) abjection is specifically “understood as an expulsion or rejection of the mother”. It is a method used by the child —which, before its entry into language, is fused with its mother and therefore sees her as a part of itself— to ensure the necessary differentiation from its mother. Abjection creates “a border that must be established for a subject or ego to emerge” (Barrett 2011: 70). The growth of the ego, from this perspective, consists of

the development of “healthy” narcissism that permits love of the m/other as separate from the self; in other words it establishes social relations and social bonding while *at the same time* accommodating the immediate identification that occurred prior to object loss. This is made possible by an anterior process of expulsion of the archaic mother (the thing or the abject). (Barrett 2011: 73)

Another way of formulating this is that the child has to pursue a “struggle against what, having been the mother, will turn into an abject” (Kristeva 1982: 13). To conclude with Kristeva, the “maternal space can come into being [...] only as an *abject*” (1986: 257).

Such psychoanalytically driven accounts that “make the maternal *vessel* coalesce with the abject” (Beardsworth 2004: 92; my italics) frequently limit themselves, however, to the perspective of the child, the central character that has to struggle against a fusion with its “container”, the mother. The latter’s standpoint is not commonly considered, and her function is thereby reduced to that of the supposed vessel from which the child must free itself. She is, to invoke Kristeva once again, the child’s “natural mansion” (1982: 13). I would argue that Brown’s oeuvre interestingly avoids the resulting diminishment and passivity of the mother figure by turning the tables and portraying the newborn child, rather than the maternal body, as abject. Thus Brown can be said to translate the image of an infant as “an extension of [the] self”, as some mothers see their children (Skolnick 1973: 65), into the terms of abjection normally reserved for the mother. When we seek to apply Kristeva’s own account of abject material substances like feces or menstrual blood to the baby as it is perceived by Brown’s average mother character, we start to understand that the figure of the baby is something —neither subject nor object— that the mother violently ejects but can never entirely cast out because it is so much part of her. Kristeva calls the abject “something rejected from which one does not part” (1982: 2). It is something of the mother’s own —“My flesh and blood”, is the narrator’s clichéd way of putting it (Brown 1998: 59)— that she deems dirty and disgusting, and for which she feels distaste, horror, and “revolt” (Kristeva 1982: 45). The narrator of *The Dogs* is typical in that she turns away from her baby, which she regards as “waste” (Brown 1998: 59).

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Kristeva stresses that abjection refers not only to that which is unclean: “filth is not a quality in itself, but applies only to what relates to a *boundary*” (1982: 69). Abjection is, above all, what “disturbs identity” or what “does not respect borders” (Kristeva 1982: 4), in the sense that the boundary between self and abject is continually threatened. As a result, abjection carries two basic significations. In its positive sense, which often speaks from theorizations that consider the child’s point of view and see the mother as abject, abjection is precisely what allows an ego to emerge through a process that establishes the necessary borders between mother and child —here, processes of abjection are what Kristeva calls “safeguards” (1982: 2). Brown, however, works with the more negative implication that the rejection of the repulsive abject (in her case, the infant) can never be complete and that “abjection emerges when the borders between subject and [abject] are threatened or break down” (Keltner 2011: 45). To transpose this once more to the relationship between Brown’s mothers and their babies, as depicted in *The Dogs*, for instance, the former are at risk of being reduced to mere “vessel[s]” that bore the latter and are afraid of never being able to “get away” from their progeny (Brown 1998: 56, 74) —her oeuvre presents women, and bitches, who are “drain[ed]” by their offspring (56). So, whereas Kristeva analyzes “the subject’s fear of his very own

identity sinking irretrievably into the mother” (1982: 64), Brown repeatedly shows how the latter’s identity is equally in jeopardy.

4. “When Children Are Monsters”: Opposing reproductive futurism

While the newborn babies Brown portrays are often abjects that their mothers seek to eject and are disgusted by, children’s repulsive qualities seem only to increase along with their age in Brown’s writings, as the toddlers and small children she portrays frequently turn out to be horrible. Brown explores what happens “when children are monsters”, as she entitled her review of Doris Lessing’s *Ben, in the World* for the Seattle newspaper *The Stranger*. It is, for instance, telling that the lesbian narrator of *The Dogs*, metafictionally working on a setting for her tale, invents children to create a cheerful atmosphere, yet does not want them anywhere near: “far enough away so I don’t have to see or talk to them, I hear the delightful shouts and cries and yips of little children”. She adds that surely “[e]very one of them” must be “an angel” (Brown 1998: 52). Readers cannot fail to hear the sarcasm in the last remark, especially given the narrator’s experiences with her own “monstrous kids” (89). They devour her when she cannot offer them food (62) and they “bite till they drew blood” (74). In this they resemble the female narrator’s kids in *The Children’s Crusade* (1989), Brown’s earlier book that relates the acrimonious divorce of the narrator’s parents: “the monstrous little shits have cleaned us out. Of our hearts and our homes and our lives and both our cheque books”, the narrator laments (Brown 1989: 115). She knows her children’s “greedy mouths, their sucking lips, their sticky hands they rub in anticipation” all too well (112), yet nobody else sees them as they are or notices, as the narrator puts it, “the dripping shit the children shit” (116).

Here, Arlie Hochschild’s notion of “emotion work” provides us with a useful tool for uncovering the effort that is required to make a family work—or, as is the case in *The Children’s Crusade* and *The Dogs*, the energy that is wasted on unsuccessfully trying to make a family “work”. Far from being a spontaneously loving and natural bond, the family is a demanding unit that entails an enormous amount of what we might call “construction work”. A variety of (difficult and demanding) expressive activities fall under the umbrella of “emotion work”, like establishing or developing relationships, mending them after quarrels, recognizing, anticipating, and empathizing with the feelings of others, comforting and trying to understand them. Throughout, such labor is combined with the “morally compelling demands to share, give up, or exchange”, with the work involved in the “invariably precarious transformation of duty into authentic emotional motivation”, as well as with the

possibility of experiencing a demoralizing difference between expectations and reality (Peletz 2001: 434). Hochschild explains how “the subterranean work of placing an acceptable inner face on ambivalence is actually all the more crucial [in the family]” (1983: 68), where for example “parental love [...] is so important to security and sometimes so difficult to sustain” (69). The mother role indeed involves an unbearable amount of “emotion work” for the narrators of *The Dogs* and *The Children's Crusade*. It is safe to say that many of Brown's mother characters, as in the latter novel, suffer emotionally and materially, robbed of their “hearts”, “homes”, and “cheque books” (Brown 1989: 115).

Brown's narrators not only suffer at the hands of their kids; sometimes they themselves become children who are far from innocent or sweet. For instance, Robin, the adolescent narrator of *The Haunted House* we have already met, miraculously transforms into a drooling six-year-old when her mother does not show up at the airport after Robin's yearlong trip to Italy. The servant her mom eventually sends to pick Robin up sees a little girl who is, like “Shirley Temple”, “just too adorable for words”. But Brown immediately disrupts the illusion of purity and lovability usually haloing children—or, in Edelman's words, “the sacralization of childhood” (2004: 121)—by having the narrator “snap”: “Forcissake, it took you long enough”, and “snarl”: “Cut the crap buddy, [...] just offer me a piece of candy and I'll get in your car with you” (Brown 1986: 94-95). Robin's initial “cuteness”, like that of most of Brown's child characters, was undoubtedly “studied” rather than genuine (50). Edelman extends this observation to children in general, asserting that they are well-versed in “the ideological labor of cuteness” (2004: 137).

Even though children may “look like child saints, not the nasty knee-high hoods they are” (as the narrator from *The Children's Crusade* discovers [Brown 1989: 115]), and even though people think “the voices of the children [are] full of hope, the bright sounds of the future, and so forth” (to cite the narrator of Brown's fictionalized autobiography *The End of Youth* [2003: 117]) her oeuvre repeatedly exposes these clichés as mere illusions. Moreover, the “national anthem” evoked in Brown's quotes —“that children are our future” (Edelman 2004: 143)—is frequently used to diminish queers, who are still often figured as non-procreative and thus regarded as a threat to the future of family and nation characteristically embodied by the icon of the vulnerable child. Butler's observation on “the deathlike quality of those loves for which there is no viable and livable place in culture” is thus valid in more than one sense (2000: 24)—although it should be kept in mind that, while her assertion is compelling in the context of Brown's work, this claim is not automatically equally legitimate everywhere today, given the visibility and (at least partial) acceptance of gay

and lesbian marriage and reproduction in many Western contexts. Heterosexuals—or, as the narrator of “A Good Man” tellingly labels them in *Annie Oakley’s Girl*: “breeder[s]” (Brown 1993: 110)—are still frequently valued because they supposedly carry the sole responsibility for a better future. Following this line of thought, they alone are capable of perpetuating the human race by obeying the “logic of reproductive temporality” (Halberstam 2005: 4). Brown invokes the familiar opposition between life-giving heterosexuality and “barren” homosexuality in “Nancy Booth, Wherever You Are”, a story from *The End of Youth* that recounts the young narrator’s love for one of her counselors at girl scout camp. The narrator characterizes her straight girl scout leaders as “long-haired counselors who were going to have kids” (Brown 2003: 40) and contrasts them with the butch staff members who “would never, as far as anyone could imagine, have babies of their own” and whom she therefore envisions as “women without families” (38).

In scenarios created in the popular mind, such as those voiced by the narrator of “Nancy Booth”, gays and lesbians simply do not have babies —“straight is to gay as family is to no family”, Dennis Altman famously asserted (1979: 47). Hence homophobic statements like François Abadie’s, the ex-mayor of Lourdes who notoriously expressed his disgust at “the gravediggers of society, those who care nothing [for] the future: homosexuals” (in Edelman 2004: 74). Such claims have led Edelman to the astute observation that “the queer comes to figure the bar to every realization of futurity” (2004: 4) and, thus, to stand for the “destructor” of the child. As a result of this attitude, anxiety about the future of children frequently forestalls more tolerance for queers. Lauren Berlant considers the fantasies of the world people think they are creating for their offspring, or for future children in general, extremely compelling motivations for their actions (1997: 261). Because kids are usually —though obviously not in Brown’s oeuvre— constructed as “innocent of knowledge, agency, and accountability”, they are invested with “ethical claims on the adult political agents” and often provide these agents with an excuse for reactionary measures (Berlant 1997: 6). Unable to speak for themselves, children become “the representative’s fondest dream” (Haraway 1992: 311). Berlant imputes American “reactionary culture” to the fact that the country’s inhabitants invest all their efforts in “a future American, both incipient and pre-historical”: the American child (1997: 6). The protection of the future rights of this ideal citizen comes at the cost, arguably, of the installation or safeguarding of the present-day rights of a number of flesh-and-blood (gay and lesbian) citizens.

The idea of the saintly child as our hope for the future to which everything has to be sacrificed in an ever-deferred futurity is an ideology that Joshua Gamson evokes

by means of his “‘what about the children?’ mantra” (2001: 80), and that Edelman has described in these terms:

[...] the image of the Child invariably shapes the logic within which the political itself must be thought. That logic compels us [...] to submit to the framing of political debate [...] as defined by [the terms of] reproductive futurism: terms that impose an ideological limit on political discourse as such, preserving in the process the absolute privilege of heteronormativity by rendering unthinkable [...] the possibility of a queer resistance to this organizing principle of communal relations. (2004: 2)

This view of “the Child as the preeminent emblem of the motivating end” and “the telos of the social order” (Edelman 2004: 13, 11), even in a secularized society, is exactly what Brown appears to be opposing through her representations of monstrous kids. I would argue that in much of her work she refuses to waste precious energy and self-esteem in trying to prove how child-friendly homosexuals are, as Schulman thinks many gays and lesbians have been in the habit of doing, “[e]ven to the point of feeling that [they] have to have children to be fully human, or to be treated as fully human by [their] family and government” (2009: 7). The theories of Hayden or Dunne, who applaud the fact that lesbian mothers are considered *mothers* rather than lesbians, can be seen as prime examples of this assimilationist approach: Hayden promotes “biological motherhood [to] re-naturalize a lesbian’s womanhood” (1995: 55), while Dunne trusts that “the presence of children helps make intelligible a lifestyle that can appear strange and ‘other’ to heterosexual observers” (2000: 31). Thus these theories threaten to turn the *freedom* and *choice* of lesbian women—to have kids, in this case—into instruments in the service of (homo)normality or normativity, rather than deploying these concepts as the means with which to question or oppose such ideological regimes.

Brown’s work can be said to counter possibly futile or re-excluding strategies like having children to gain mainstream tolerance, which, for obvious reasons, still does not amount to a complete acceptance of lesbians *as lesbians*. Rather than participating in the widespread conservative anxiety over “what happens to the child, the child, the poor child, martyred figure of an ostensibly selfish or dogged social progressivism” (Butler 2002: 21), she radically takes another direction, signaling how “*queerness* names the side of those *not* ‘fighting for the children,’ the side outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism” (Edelman 2004: 3). Brown embraces, through representations of “the fascism of the baby’s face” (Edelman 2004: 151), the stigmatic notion that homosexuality is incompatible with childrearing, thereby effectively depriving the ideology of reproductive futurism of the beneficiary it so desperately needs to remain operative: the innocent child-saint.

5. Conclusion

We have seen how Brown is very much aware of the idealization of the biological family, for instance when she lets the narrator of *The Haunted House* indulge in romanticized portrayals of a loving family life, only to subsequently disrupt them with images of her actual, and far less rosy, familial situation. In anthropological theorizations of biological kinship such as Schneider's, famously defining ties between biological relatives as bonds of "diffuse, enduring solidarity" (1980: 61), the emphasis is mainly on the connection kinship is thought to ensure. This, Susan Franklin and Catherine McKinnon realize, "has often led to a neglect [...] of acts of disconnection or rupture" (2001: 18). Brown may be said to redress the balance by focusing precisely on those aspects of biological kinship that bring to the fore the violence or cruelty at its core. Moreover, the experiences Brown portrays frequently highlight the element of selectivity that is equally part of "blood" ties. Through topics like familial homophobia and the absence of a natural bond between mothers and their children, Brown exposes the chosen nature of biological kinship. Her work, then, offers an opportunity to rethink the biology in biological kinship as a cultural construct —albeit an exceptionally authoritative one— that is, as described by Schneider, employed in various "symbolic" ways to demarcate relations (1980: 38). Clearly, nothing in the naturalized bonds of biology guarantees enduring solidarity or a feeling of inevitable kinship between relatives.

Brown's de-idealized and demythologized depictions of parent-child relationships further allow us to expose the passivity that is naturally expected of the mother, who is typically reduced to her body, which then gains meaning solely as a home and carrier for her baby. Such feminine passiveness continues to hold sway in popular thought as in academic theories on abjection that transform the infant into an agent who has to rid her or himself of the oppressive bond with its to-be-abjected motherly "container". In Brown's work, by contrast, the baby can more accurately be aligned with the abject: her lesbian mother characters frequently, and rightly, perceive their infants as filthy or disgusting and as a threat to their identities. Unsurprisingly perhaps, the somewhat older children figuring in Brown's oeuvre are far from innocent either. Brown typically represents child monsters who are in many ways undeserving of our protection or our efforts to sacrifice anything to create a better future for their sake. So her work goes against the installation and perpetuation of "reproductive futurism", an ideology that thrives on images of the vulnerable child, which Brown refuses to supply. Insisting rather on "the negativity that pierces the fantasy screen of futurity" (Edelman 2004: 31) by depicting lesbians who buckle under children's reigns of terror, Brown's work seems to exclaim, in Edelman's consciously provocative terms, "Fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we're collectively terrorized" (2004: 29).

Notes

¹. Brown underwrites this opposition between reality and fantasy via a conspicuous stylistic contrast between long, rather maximalist sentences signaling self-delusion and minimal syntactical structures in which the I-narrator gains insight into the fact that she is using language to obscure the truth —after all, the dogs are not the only thing the narrator fantasizes about. One of the most obvious examples of this stylistic mechanism occurs in a Little Red Riding Hood-like scene in which she is about to visit her grandmother. The narrator uses long, winding sentences to try and push the reality of the latter's illness to

the back of her mind, but her chatter is brought to an abrupt end by means of a short sentence expressing a desire for honesty: "We will walk in the garden and look at all her lovely vegetables and herbs and flowers and the pond and she'll be looking strong and great and tell me how good it is to see me and she'll be fine and strong and lucid and coherent and continent and —Who am I trying to kid?" (Brown 1998: 30) Thus the thematic alternation between fantasy and reality that characterizes *The Dogs* as a whole also informs the stylistic aspects of Brown's bestiary.

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