

## **Queer Kinship**

### **“Exposed to the Other as a Skin is Exposed to What Wounds It”**

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#### **Abstract**

Categories of kinship and relationality govern how and to what extent persons become visible in public discourse. Visual culture, given its critical role in regulating the notions of kinship that gain currency, is particularly fertile ground for interrogating how categories of relationality are constituted. This article mines representations of queer families in the photography of Catherine Opie and in Lisa Cholodenko’s film *The Kids Are All Right*, moving beyond considerations of relationships between queer persons to investigate affects that are themselves queer, perverse. Informed by scholarship on sexual citizenship, homonormativity, and affect theory, this essay examines forms of kinship in Opie and Cholodenko's work that exist in ambivalent relation to domesticity, and that ultimately signal the inadequacy of discourses of happiness in representing the self in intimate relation to the Other.

#### **Keywords:**

Queer Relationality, Queer Kinship, Queer Families in Visual Culture, Affect Theory



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*“I feel like I am going around picking things apart, forcing people to look at places and communities that they really don't want to look at.”*  
– Catherine Opie (Reilly 86)

The barbaric “zero tolerance” policy toward unauthorized migration into the United States has resulted in the inhuman separation of thousands of families, with no accountability for reuniting them. The cruelty of the systematic separation of families at the border has rightly provoked revulsion and condemnation from around the world. The brutal consequences of regulating kinship at the divide between nations should also prompt an examination of the consequences, sometimes no less brutal, of regulating kinship at the divide between categories of gender and sexuality. Categories of kinship and relationality govern how and to what extent persons become visible in public discourse, and can thereby become the subjects of advocacy. Visual culture, given its critical role in regulating the notions of kinship that are sanctioned and gain currency, is particularly fertile

ground for interrogating how categories of relationality are constituted. In the discussion that follows, I mine visual representations of queer families that offer productive contrasts, examining the terms under which they regulate and disseminate representations of queer kinship. First, I consider the work of art photographer Catherine Opie. Opie's body of work encompasses a wide array of subjects and formats, but she is perhaps best known for her portraits of queer families and their community contexts, and these will be the focus of my discussion. Alongside Opie's work, I consider director Lisa Cholodenko's film *The Kids Are All Right*, exploring the moments when its largely homonormative narrative becomes suggestively unruly for what they reveal about the queerness of kinship.

In the discussion that follows, I draw from scholarship on sexual citizenship (Berlant, Reddy, Puar), investigations of reproductive technologies and non-normative families (Farquhar, Eng), and explorations of viable forms of sexual and affective relationality (Levinas, Butler, Muñoz, Ahmed) in order to consider what the juxtaposition of Cholodenko's and Opie's work reveals about the constitution of "family." The framework I bring to bear on my discussion is inflected by theoretical currents in queer theory, critical race theory, and film studies. Drawing from the richness of this interdisciplinary scholarship, I turn now first to the photographs of Catherine Opie.

**"My work is always close to home": Catherine Opie (Reilly 86)**

Photographs may be said to convey an affective temporality specific to the medium. In contrast to the narratable sequence characteristic of film such as the work by Lisa Cholodenko that I will examine later in this essay, a photograph functions, in Roland Barthes' well-known term, as a "wound" that disrupts narration (Barthes 21). For Barthes, the essence of the photograph is to announce "that has been"; it is a relation with the temporal structure of loss. "The important thing," he notes in *Camera Lucida*, "is that the photograph possesses an evidential force, and that its testimony bears not on the object but on time" (Barthes 89). The photograph

gestures toward what exceeds its borders, temporally and spatially. In continually reiterating a moment to which one can never return, the photograph shares the structure of trauma, as Ulrich Baer argues in his book *Spectral Evidence*. Just as the traumatized psyche is haunted by persistent images that resist integration into a narrative of selfhood, the photograph reproduces a moment that can never be reexperienced. In possessing a structure homologous to that of trauma and of loss, still images evoke indeterminacy perhaps more readily than film.

This inherent evocation of the marginal within the medium of photography intensifies the impact of many of Catherine Opie's photographic subjects. The images that first brought her to international attention in the mid-1990s and that remain her best known are her portraits of leather dykes, daddy/boy couples, drag kings, and icons of queer performance art and S/M subcultures. This body of work represents vital contributions to the creation of queer sexual counterpublics that expand notions of kinship and challenge normative modes of gender identification and sexual expression.

In the three decades since those early works, Opie's photographs have encompassed a vast range of both subject and form, from portraits to spaces emptied of human presence, and from 9-foot high Polaroids to postcard-size platinum prints. Her series have taken as their subjects "Icehouses" (2001), "Surfers" (2003), and "700 Nimes Road" (2015), the home of Elizabeth Taylor. Although at first glance the wide-ranging subjects of Opie's camera might appear to be unrelated, they have in common a persistent interest in family, home, and community. From her 1988 master's thesis project, "Master Plan," which focused on planned suburban communities in Southern California, to her 2004 series "In and Around Home," she has explored the formation of homes and communities in an array of contexts. In particular, she has pursued the constitution of American identity, as underscored by the title of her mid-career exhibition in 2008-2009 at the Guggenheim Museum, *Catherine Opie: American Photographer*. Here, I will focus on works that directly

address the representation of kinship, domesticity, and citizenship. How are family and community constituted? What is the relation between queer corporeal experience and communal belonging?

In her series “In and Around Home” (2004-05), Opie challenges investments in domestic privacy. This series features large color portraits of queer family life.<sup>1</sup> In the photograph *Sunday Morning Breakfast*, the viewer is situated inside Opie’s own kitchen, looking past plates of food on a table and a refrigerator covered in post-it reminders and through a doorway into the adjoining room, where her toddler son Oliver sits in a pool of sunshine playing with the family dogs. *Portrait of Julie and Myra* presents Opie’s partner Julie Burleigh standing on their porch, flanked by their dog and surrounded by assorted potted plants and pairs of shoes. Tellingly, at the edge of the frame lies the door to their house, and directly behind Julie’s head lie the windows of their neighbor’s house. Just as the viewer of *Sunday Morning Breakfast* looks from the locus of the hearth out towards an adjoining room that is only partially visible, so too does the perspective in *Portrait of Julie and Myra* guide our eyes from the intimacy of one house toward the thresholds of others.

This relational move is asserted more emphatically when the series is considered as a whole. As its title announces, “In and Around Home” unites scenes of domestic interiors with images of the communities of which they are a part. *The Bloods, Memorial* documents a doorstep shrine to a fallen gang member. *In Protest to Sex Offenders* depicts demonstrators outside a neighborhood home serving as a halfway house. There are scenes that underscore the de facto racial segregation of community rituals, e.g. contrasting images of *Homecoming USC 2004* and *M.L.K. Parade 2005*. The multiplicity of racial, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural identities that cohere in these neighborhoods is rendered particularly vivid in images such as

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<sup>1</sup> The series is reproduced in its entirety alongside a prior series in *Catherine Opie: 1999 & In and Around Home*, exh. cat. (Ridgefield, CT: Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, 2006).

*Monica Lewinsky Mural*, which captures a cluster of signs advertising “Bar-B-Q, Beer, Ribs,” “Su Agencia de Viajes,” and a paint supply store sign written in English, Spanish, and Korean displayed over a graffiti-covered wall, all behind a mural of Monica Lewinsky painted next to a mural of Jesus. As in her earlier “Mini-malls” series, Opie here frames the interrelated identities and relations of power at the crossroads of local neighborhoods.

Conversely, “In and Around Home” also traces the penetration of discordant voices through the walls of the private home and into families’ living rooms. Almost half of the prints in the series are Polaroid pictures, many shot off television screens. There are portraits of news reporters standing outside homes, preparing to deliver live coverage, and a portrait of a television set itself. These images insistently underscore the interpenetration of communities and the relational nature of representation. Inside homes, the television set emblemizes the intersection of a cacophonous gamut of discourses. On streets that back porches and windows abut, goods are bought and sold in languages some local residents understand, but others don’t.

This representation of home and family as porous and invariably adjoining other, perhaps radically differing lives is conveyed perhaps most emblematically in this series by the photograph *Me and Nika by Julie*. This work positions the viewer on a doorstep, looking into a home through a wide open door. On the other side of that doorway is Opie herself, sitting on the floor in house slippers with a dog in her lap, looking directly at the camera. The viewer’s gaze is thus greeted with utmost informality, interpellated as neighbor, family member, friend, or lover – the work’s title announces that it was in fact shot by Opie’s lover, Julie (Burleigh). The image is not a representation of a discrete family, but of *familiarity*. It depicts an invitation and a promise of receptivity, inflected by a relation that is at once intimate and disassociated. Moving beyond the portraits of differing families in her “Domestic”

series, “In and Around Home” instead frames the liminal spaces that bind together individuals, families, and communities across thresholds of difference.

I contend that this mode of relationality -- of liminality as integral to intimacy -- is also a crucial but unrecognized feature of one of Opie’s most iconic works, *Self Portrait/Pervert*. This work presents Opie seated, her torso unclothed and her hands folded in her lap. Her arms are pierced with a series of 18-gauge needles, 46 in all, that enter and exit her flesh in orderly rows from her wrists to her shoulders. A leather collar circles her neck, and her head is completely encased in a black hood. Across her chest, the word “Pervert” has been carved into her skin in elegant lettering, the cutting so fresh it is still weeping blood. With Opie centered squarely in the frame, before a sumptuous backdrop of black and gold drapery, the image is a breathtaking corporeal embrace of alterity.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Unmistakeably, the 1994 photograph is a defiant affirmation of sexual deviance and a bold outcry against a confluence of contemporaneous conservative forces: AIDS phobia and social panics about HIV-positive blood and the congressional inquisition against queer art funded by the National Endowment for the Arts. These first two issues – AIDS-phobia and the campaign against the funding of queer artists through the National Endowment for the Arts – came to bear forcefully on the life of Opie’s friend and collaborator Ron Athey the same year (1994) she created her photograph *Self Portrait/Pervert*. That year, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis had hosted Athey’s performance *Excerpts from Four Scenes in a Harsh Life*. In a segment of this performance called “Human Printing Press,” Athey, who is HIV-positive, used a scalpel to cut into the back of his co-performer, Darryl Carlton. Athey then placed pieces of surgical paper over the cuts and pressed, creating imprints of the cuts in blood. These pieces of paper were then hung on a clothesline attached to a pulley behind the audience, and the clothesline was pulled so that the blood prints traveled over the heads of the seated spectators. One audience member later complained to the state health department of having been put at risk of HIV infection by the performance. The complaint was first reported on the front page of a local paper (see Abbe 1994), then was picked up by the Associated Press and given widespread coverage that included erroneous accounts of the paper dripping blood on the audience, and spectators attempting to flee the venue in fear. Carlton, whose blood was used to make the prints (and who was actually HIV-negative), is black, suggesting race-based dimensions to this hysteria that are mentioned in only one of the many accounts I have come across (see O’Dell 1998). Although Athey’s performance received only \$150 in support from the National Endowment for the Arts, it became a lightning rod for Christian conservative groups waging war against public arts funding, resulting in the Senate cutting NEA funding by 5% the following fiscal year – a cut that actually represented more than 40% of the funding for theater and the visual arts (see Grimes 1994). The controversy also had a chilling effect on even staunchly supportive performance venues; when Athey staged the same performance at New York’s P.S. 122, audience members had to sign a release and a registered nurse was present (see Brantley 1994). For more on this controversy, see Trebay 1994: 38 and Landi 1994: 46. For insightful essays on the politics of art in the context of the AIDS pandemic, see the collection of essays in Gott 1994. The photograph also unmistakably defies the



Catherine Opie, *Self-Portrait/Pervert*, 1994.  
Chromogenic print, 40 x 30 inches.

Opie's *Self Portrait/Pervert* is often described in terms that evoke a magisterial and militant aggressiveness. It has been characterized as “[p]erhaps her most confrontational work” (Trotman 2008, 73), “an angry picture, rage seeps from its surface” (Budick 2008, 13), featuring Opie in a pose that is “imperial” (Nelson 2011, 198). The image is unquestionably defiant, and its subject, seated squarely in the center of the frame, is indeed highly dignified in her bearing.<sup>3</sup>

However, there is a striking irony in characterizing as bellicose and “imperial” a figure prominently wearing a slave collar, whose flesh is covered in wounds and whose head is effaced by a hood. I wish to suggest that instead, *Self*

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mainstreaming of queer social movements demonstrated by the privileging of campaigns for gay marriage and for gays to serve openly in the military, and the rise of the kind of politically unthreatening images of gays in popular culture. See Opie, quoted in Suzanne Muchnic, 1998: 152; Dykstra 2008: 128; Opie, quoted in Ferguson 2008: 106.

<sup>3</sup> As has been widely noted, Opie has been influenced in her portraiture by the work of Hans Holbein the Younger, the painter to King Henry VIII in the sixteenth century. In intertextual relation to Holbein's sumptuous, highly detailed portraits, Opie portrays her own “royal family” of perverts and queers. See, e.g., Muchnic, 1998: 150-53; Ferguson 2008: 105. See also Opie 1997: 10.

*Portrait/Pervert*, precisely by presenting us with a body that is both defiant and wounded, in fact troubles the opposition between sovereign and subject. Here, the photographer is an unseeing figure that demands to be seen.<sup>4</sup> Her skin is broken by needles that mark her as a sexual outlaw, outside the norm, while also marking her as belonging to a vulnerable human collectivity. The figure in this photograph is one who, in the terms of Emmanuel Levinas, is “being torn up from oneself in the core of one’s unity” (Levinas 1997, 49). In his meditations on the ethics of relationality, Levinas posits that “one is exposed to the other as a skin is exposed to what wounds it, as a cheek is offered to the smiter” (Levinas 1997, 49). Each needle that pierces through Opie’s skin in this photograph reiterates a breach of the divide between self and Other. Confounding notions of coherent subjectivity and stable identity, the self is here constituted in intimate association with a painful alterity. The implication is that pain is not only integral to relationality, but also perhaps a defining characteristic of relationality.

In Levinas’ characterization, the subject’s “being ‘turned to another’ is this being turned inside out.” In *Self Portrait/Pervert*, the photographer, the sovereign, is turned inside out to become the subject, exposed and lacerated. The vulnerability etched on her body convenes Others hailed by the epithet carved across her chest: the defiantly irrepressible pervers and the stewards of public sexual cultures. On the most intimate register, the piercings and cutting on the photographer’s skin evoke the presence of those Others whose skill and care created them just before the camera’s shutter was released, and who must have been standing just outside the frame.<sup>5</sup> The self is here constituted in relation to those Others who remain just

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<sup>4</sup> It is therefore ironic that in their reception of Opie’s self portraits, critics across the conservative, progressive, and queer press have at times evinced an inability to see the “Pervert” cutting for what it is, instead perceiving it as a tattoo. See Solomon 1995: A12; Danto 1995: 803; Luby, 2007: D3.

<sup>5</sup> For this observation, I am indebted to Jennifer Blessing, who notes in her introduction to the catalogue of Opie’s Guggenheim exhibit that the cutting for *Self Portrait/Pervert* was conducted by Raelyn Gallina, an iconic figure in lesbian S/M cultures, and the piercings done by Opie’s friends Melissa and Jo, a sitter in Opie’s “Portraits” series. See Blessing 2008, 17.

outside the field of vision. The ruptured body bears the sign of “pervert” through which Others are constituted; it is a condition of being that Levinas characterizes as “one-penetrated-by-the-other” (Levinas 1997, 49).

Opie’s portraits of leather dykes, drag kings, and queer performance artists powerfully address a national public from their respective representational standpoints. However, I contend that Opie’s oeuvre as a whole enacts a rupturing of identitarian subjectivity homologous to the rupturing of the self depicted in *Self Portrait/Cutting*. It emphatically occupies queer cultural spaces while simultaneously insisting on the porousness and mutability of the borders that demarcate them. The photographer’s own body, standing in for the divergent communities it convenes, is both the pierced, cut, and hooded pervert, and the neighbor sitting in her house slippers in the open doorway. Her images explore the specific cultures of various lesbian communities, while refusing to specify what “lesbian” or “community” necessarily mean in these cultures. They defiantly assert a lesbian subjectivity while at the same time disavowing homonormative lesbian politics as well as mourning exclusion from anti-S/M lesbian camps. Both inhabiting and rejecting coherent iterations of lesbian identities, Opie’s lens also ranges into the cultures of high school football, surfers, and suburban planned communities, reciprocally refracting an array of American modes of belonging. Rather than consolidate minoritarian identities as stable standpoints for bids for social legitimacy, her images explore a multiplicity of dissonant modes of being.

The image *Oliver in a Tutu* conveys this approach with compelling economy. This 2004 photograph, part of the “In and Around Home” series, is of Opie’s toddler son standing in the sun-lit kitchen of her home, wearing an outfit that combines an athletic college insignia shirt, a silver tiara, and a bright pink tutu. Here, “home” is a space that enables and sustains an enmeshment of divergent codes of gender identity and social belonging.



Catherine Opie, *Oliver in a Tutu*, 2004.  
Chromogenic print, 24 x 20 inches.  
Guggenheim Museum exhibition announcement materials.<sup>6</sup>

In *Oliver in a Tutu*, the (white) queer family is jubilantly affirmed. This iteration of gay and lesbian domesticity is one with considerable cultural currency, as evinced by the fact that this image was chosen to advertise Opie's 2008 major exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum, and was thereby reproduced in newspapers and magazines with national circulation. In New York City, ads for the Guggenheim show bearing this portrait of emancipated domesticity appeared in subway cars, alongside "public service" signs exhorting passengers to do their part to defend the American way of life: "If You See Something, Say Something."<sup>7</sup> That these two messages could coincide in the New York City subway, a space that is arguably the epitome of U.S. urban pluralism, calls to mind Wendy Brown's

<sup>6</sup>Guggenheim Museum, Schedule of Events. <[http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/education/works-andprocess/eventsschedule?option=com\\_calendar&task=showevent&mt=1229835600&mh=%20@%207:30&nbsp;p.m.&aid=2470&tmpl=component&print=1](http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/education/works-andprocess/eventsschedule?option=com_calendar&task=showevent&mt=1229835600&mh=%20@%207:30&nbsp;p.m.&aid=2470&tmpl=component&print=1)>.

<sup>7</sup> The "If You See Something, Say Something" campaign was begun by the MTA in 2003. It has since licensed it to the Department of Homeland Security. The phrase is now officially trademarked, and is in use in anti-terrorism campaigns around the country and abroad. See "If You See Something, Say Something Campaign," Department of Homeland Security, <<http://www.dhs.gov/if-you-see-something-say-something-campaign>>. For an array of critical perspectives on this campaign, see the issue of *Women's Studies Quarterly* devoted to responses to this campaign: Schaffer and Pitts-Taylor 2011.

observation that U.S. imperialist aggression is waged, in part, in the name of tolerance (Brown 2006, 2). In *Regulating Aversion*, Brown describes the discourse of tolerance as “a domestic governmentality producing and regulating ethnic, religious, racial, and sexual subjects” as well as a “civilizational discourse distinguishing Occident from Orient, liberal from nonliberal regimes, ‘free’ from ‘unfree’ peoples” (Brown 2006, 6). The Guggenheim Museum, as one of the premier national arts institutions, certifies the national character of the image of the liberated, radiantly free child as the work of “Catherine Opie: American Photographer.” Considered alongside the discourse of securing national borders against invasion by the Other, the queer white child here looks out from the safe space of his home(land), a symbol of the tolerance and freedom the military aggression toward ethnic Others purportedly aims to defend. The queer domestic space here heralds what Chandan Reddy terms the “liberal egalitarian national state”; the image hails the mission and celebrates the triumph of an idealized neoliberal pluralism (Reddy 2011).<sup>8</sup>

*Oliver in a Tutu* depicts the child standing next to a washer/dryer, while someone appears in the background sweeping with a broom. These evocations of household order and cleanliness remind us of Mary Douglas’ admonition in her classic work *Purity and Danger*: “Where there is dirt, there is system” (Douglas 2003, 36).<sup>9</sup> The scene of family that can effectively circulate as a symbol of idealized national values is also the scene of containment. In striking contrast, Opie’s 1993 photograph *Self-Portrait/Cutting* fills the frame with the body’s bloody excretions. It is an image of Opie’s back, into which has been carved a stick-figure drawing of two women holding hands in front of a house. The artists’ blood

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<sup>8</sup> For a helpful, related discussion of official liberal and neoliberal antiracisms as mutually constitutive of U.S. global ascendancy, see Melamed, 2011.

<sup>9</sup> For a valuable study of the ways that housework has structured relations of race, ethnicity, sexuality, and class in specific U.S. historical contexts, see Palmer, 1989.

transgresses the borders of her body, confounding distinctions between interior/exterior, self/Other, native/alien.



Catherine Opie, *Self-Portrait/Cutting*, 1993.  
Chromogenic print, 40 x 30 inches.

Rather than a sunny, clean household and a happy, emancipated child, *Self-Portrait/Cutting* presents a queer subject who is maladjusted, wounded, scarred, and exiled from the basic comforts of normal life. The stick figures conjure notions of stalled development, a self that is out-of-step, a child's scribble irrupting into the space of high art. And the perverse body is turned in the "wrong" direction, personifying Heather Love's contention that queers, "[w]hether understood as throwbacks to an earlier stage of development or as children who refuse to grow up," have been viewed as "a backward race" (Love 2007, 6). It is a portrait of queer existence that resists what Love terms "the progress narrative of queer history" (Love 2007, 8).<sup>10</sup> The promise of queer domesticity, far from realized, is a thwarted

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<sup>10</sup> Several recent works offer insightful related discussions. See Freeman 2010; Bond Stockton, 2009; Halberstam, 2011.

yearning. The lacerated body exposes the underside of the idealized egalitarian nation, supplying corporeal evidence of the wounds its unrealized promises inflict. By standing with her back turned to us as she bleeds, the subject of *Self-Portrait/Cutting* enacts a queer politics of mourning that resists privatization, “positive” visibility, and assimilation into egalitarian neoliberalism.<sup>11</sup>

Particularly when viewed from the perspective of *Self-Portrait/Cutting*, the deployment of *Oliver in a Tutu* in national advertisements for the Guggenheim’s exhibition of Opie’s photography exemplifies the constitution of what Jasbir Puar calls “regulatory queer subjects” produced “against queerness” (Puar 2007, xxvii, emphasis in original). The queerness of the grieving body and the queerness of its grievances as presented in *Self-Portrait/Cutting* must be elided in order to promote a vision of the liberated queer subject in *Oliver in a Tutu*, a queer subject compatible with national security imperatives to “say something” if one “sees something” where it (or s/he) does not belong; to police borders against the threats of the alien Other. As instruments of what Puar terms “homonationalism,” regulatory queer subjects bolster U.S. exceptionalism by constituting the nation as ultimately democratic, tolerant, and egalitarian.

In eliding queerness in favor of regulatory queer subjects, nonnormative forms of kinship and social belonging are rendered illegible. Thus the critical reception of Opie’s first series of portraits, “Being and Having,” notes the “fierce” gazes on the faces of its masculine dyke subjects (see, e.g. Dykstra 2008: 128), but does not register the vulnerable, guarded, desirous, or jocular facial expressions — an emotional range that evokes the affective bonds of collective identifications. The same reductive reading characterizes the reception of Opie’s third self-portrait, *Self-Portrait/Nursing* (2004). In this photograph, Opie is again sitting shirtless

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<sup>11</sup> José Muñoz develops points from Douglas Crimp’s essay “Mourning and Militancy” to articulate mourning as a queerly productive force in fomenting not private but communal bonds “that helps us (re)construct identity and take our dead with us to the various battles we must wage in their names – and in our names” (Muñoz 1999, 74).

before the camera with the word “pervert” etched across her chest, now as an ornate scar. But this time she holds in her arms her son Oliver as he nurses at her breast. The image is one in which the sentimental Western iconography of Madonna and child collides with the representation of the socially abjected figure: the butch dyke, scarred and tattooed. But its reception is marked by a telos of personal maturation that subsumes alterity into maternity. Opie has undergone a “personal transformation” that moves her beyond the “anguish and pain” of her earlier work, and now, “with her career in full bloom she finally achieved her dream of a family,” and can revel in the “rapturous contentment” of her new life (Trotman 2008, 73). Having attained professional and domestic stability, “pervert” is an insignia only of a past she has left behind, “a marker of her own history” (Trotman 2008, 73). The portrait is viewed as “a tender representation of love and domesticity” (Nairne and Howgate 2006, 20).



Catherine Opie, *Self-Portrait/Nursing*, 2004.  
Chromogenic print, 40 x 32 inches.

This shift in reception of Opie's portraiture occasioned by the inclusion of her son highlights the intractability of the normative structuring of relationality produced by the figure of the child. Below, I examine how this normative structuring of relationality is negotiated in the work of another queer artist, Lisa Cholodenko's film *The Kids Are All Right*.

### **Being "All Right"**

Lisa Cholodenko's feature film *The Kids Are All Right* (2010) narrates the disruptions in the bonds of a family headed by lesbian parents when the donor whose sperm they used to conceive enters the scene. The film is a particularly productive text in which to ground discussions of the constitution of family in part because it dramatizes not only queer parenting, but also the use of assisted reproductive technologies. Technologies enabling artificial insemination, sperm donation, egg donation, in vitro fertilization, and gestational surrogacy destabilize normative definitions of family as a private realm of consanguine relationality. As Dion Farquhar notes in her study of discourses of assisted reproduction, these technologies "undermine ahistorical narratives about the natural, the private, the romantic and dyadic nature of sexual reproduction, along with their attendant classical binaries such as nature/technology, private/public, affective/commodified, sexual/asexual" (Farquhar 1996, 10). As same-sex parents, the lesbian couple at the center of Cholodenko's film challenges conventional definitions of family. Yet their decision to each become pregnant also demonstrates a continuing investment in a biological basis for filiation – an investment made even more salient by their choice to each become pregnant using sperm from the same donor. In conceiving children that would be half-siblings, they chose to establish a biological link between them. Nonetheless, the person acting as this link – the sperm donor – was to remain an absent and anonymous figure. These reproductive choices and their consequences typify a compelling ambivalence towards notions of kinship and domesticity.

A further aspect of this film that invites consideration alongside Opie's work is its exploration of queer intimacies; forms of relationality not only shared by persons who identify as queer, but affects that are themselves perverse. While *The Kids Are All Right* in some ways depicts the queer family as a model of a "happy family," it also probes the inadequacy of discourses of happiness to account for the self in intimate relation to the Other. In a sense, the film both weaves and unravels a triumphant representation of queer intimacies, exposing the gaps and ruptures in its construction. In what follows, I mine these ruptures to explore the relational possibilities the film's narrative forecloses, and those that it perhaps creates.

Nic (Annette Bening) and Jules (Julianne Moore), a married couple, are middle-aged, upper-middle class white women. Nic, who is authoritarian and at times insensitive, supports the family on her income as a physician. Jules, who is more demonstrative and unconstrained, paused her professional life in order to raise her children, and is now launching the latest of several attempts to operate her own business. Laser (Josh Hutcherson), their 15-year-old son, is a thoughtful and earnest youth who plays on sports teams and rides his bicycle through the neighborhood. Joni (Mia Wasikowska), their 18-year-old daughter, is a quiet and courteous honor student about to move away for college. The household is portrayed in tones meant to convey stability, conventionality, and appealing imperfection.

Initially, it is only Laser that is interested in learning the identity of the sperm donor with whom he and his sister were conceived. But the sperm bank does not accept requests for contact with its donors until the child making the request reaches the age of 18. Laser persuades Joni to make the request on his behalf, which she does without their mothers' knowledge. Upon meeting the donor, Laser is guarded but Joni is surprised at the rapport she establishes with him. The donor, Paul (Mark Ruffalo), turns out to be a motorcycle-riding free spirit. He owns a restaurant where he serves produce from his organic farm, and he exudes a youthful vitality and warmth. Joni wishes to see him again. But when Nic and Jules discover

that their children have met their sperm donor, Nic forbids any further contact until she and Jules meet him. When he comes to their home for lunch, Paul ends up offering to be Jules' first client for her new landscaping business. Soon thereafter, the two initiate a furtive, passionate sexual relationship. When Nic discovers Jules' betrayal, the entire family turns back on itself defensively, shutting Paul out. At the end of the film, Paul is left alone and despondent, mourning the loss of a family he now realizes he desires.

Notably, Cholodenko's film locates the possibility of Paul's claims on the family exclusively in biology. From the first moment Paul appears on screen, he is associated with nature, vitality, and fertility. In the film's first shot of him, Paul is bathed in sunshine and standing in the lush fields of his organic garden, cradling a basket of produce. One after another, women respond to his earthy vigor as he makes his way from his garden to the restaurant where he nourishes guests with his fresh, organic food. The film explicitly references this association between Paul and natural abundance just before the pivotal scene in which a passion between him and Jules ignites. Jules' physical desire for Paul irrupts with such force that it veers into compulsivity and violence. The sex scenes between her and Paul are played with a vicious urgency in which she pulls his hair, orders him to pull hers, and crushes his face with her hand as she climaxes. Paul's allure is primal, animal, irresistible. This representation of Paul exemplifies the film's ambivalence about normative notions of family and kinship. On the one hand, the film subverts ideologies of gender by displacing discourses of nature, fecundity, and derangement from the female to the male. On the other hand, at times, it also suggests that the bonds of kinship are rooted in the carnal and the biological.

Of the members of her family, Nic alone remains guarded against Paul. Her hostile resistance to his efforts to insinuate himself into their lives results in considerable conflict. For Nic, Paul is behind every subversion of her authority over her children. When she threatens Laser with withholding a planned outing if he

doesn't complete a chore, he informs her he has already made alternate plans with Paul. Nic has expressly forbidden her children to ride motorcycles, but Joni readily accepts a ride home from Paul on his, and responds to Nic's reprimands by arguing that she is no longer a minor and therefore Nic has no authority over her. Eventually, Nic resolves to transcend her aversion to Paul and attempt to mend the divisiveness that has riven her family. In a grand, conciliatory gesture, she proposes that her family gather for dinner at Paul's house so that she may embrace his presence in their lives as well as admire all the work Jules has done landscaping his grounds.

The scene of this dinner is the fulcrum of Cholodenko's film. It represents a vertiginous moment poised on the threshold of new relational possibilities, receptive to exploratory conceptualizations of kinship. For a moment, Nic ceases to function as gatekeeper to her family, lowering her defensiveness long enough to notice emergent bases for affinity with he whom she had heretofore regarded only as an intruder. As Jules, Laser, and Joni chat while they prepare dinner, Nic settles on Paul's couch and looks through his record collection. There among his albums, she finds a musical work she cherishes: an album by Joni Mitchell, an artist so meaningful to her that, as the film soon reveals, she has named her daughter after her. Once dinner is served, Nic engages Paul in a conversation about their shared love of Joni Mitchell. The two trade the titles of favorite songs and are soon reaching across the table to press their palms together in a gesture of intimate affinity. Transported by the moment, Nic launches into a rendition of one of Mitchell's songs, singing exuberantly at the table. Coming to the song's end, she pauses to take in the sight of her assembled family, with Paul convening them around the dinner table, and solemnly announces: "I like this guy." The intrusion of biological filiation into her family has here resolved into kinship grounded in affiliation, shared sensibilities, shared meals, a shared commitment to the children. This emotive transformation is conveyed in the film by a heady disequilibrium shifting across both aural, visual, and affective registers; it moves from Nic's sung

melody to the discordant sounds of clanging utensils at the dinner table; from extreme close-ups of Nic's face as she sings to long shots of the dinner table within the interior of Paul's home; from the emotional intensity of personal aesthetic response to the mundane rituals of dinner at home.

But in the very next sequence, the transformational promise of this heady moment implodes. Nic rises from the table to use the bathroom. There, at the sink, she discovers her wife's distinctive long, red hair in Paul's hairbrush. She finds more of the same in the drain of his bathtub. Slipping out of the bathroom and into Paul's bedroom, she finds there confirmation of her dreaded suspicion: Jules has become Paul's lover. Returning to the table, she conceals her devastation. Paul raises his glass in a toast: "Cheers!" he celebrates. "To an unconventional family!" Nic joins the others in the toast. But their collective triumphant gesture is a parody of what might have been. The very possibility of the "unconventional family" they salute has already been undermined. The vision of a family not bounded by normative biological filiation but porous to it, one not limited to a parental dyad but reaching beyond it to embrace a third parent – in the cascading ruins of treachery discovered, these vertiginous possibilities have already been foreclosed.

Tellingly, *The Kids Are All Right* is a film that is largely staged around dinner tables. The primary visual focal point of this movie is the hearth around which the family gathers.



*The Kids Are All Right*, dir. Lisa Cholodenko, 2010

The events it narrates answer questions about who has a legitimate place at the family table, who is entitled to be seated with the family. When we first see Jules and Nic, they are sitting down to dinner with their children. Later in the film, when Paul is provisionally invited into the family circle, it is around a table, sharing a meal, that the negotiations take place: coming to meet Nic and Jules for the first time, Paul is invited to join them for lunch. The table is set outside the house, on the porch, with the window and door left open, blurring distinctions between outside and inside, public and private, filiation and affiliation. And finally, when Nic and Jules take the kids for dinner at Paul's house, the table is the site both of the destabilization and restabilization of the nuclear family model.

A concomitant drama of exclusion unfolds at the corollary of the hearth: the doorstep. In the film, the threshold of the family home is the antithesis of what it is in Opie's *Me and Nika by Julie*. In place of the promise of familiarity through the inviting liminal space of the open doorway in Opie's photograph, Cholodenko's film depicts a door slammed shut. After Nic discovers that Jules is sleeping with Paul, all the members of the family revolt against him. He is repulsed from their lives and from their home. On the eve of Joni's departure for college, fearing he may not ever see her again, Paul arrives at their house unannounced and knocks on their door, interrupting the family gathered around the dinner table. He attempts to reconcile, but the family rebuffs his attempt. Finding himself shut out of the family home, Paul stands outside in the dark and looks in through the window. Inside, he sees Laser, the person whose desire to meet his biological father was the catalyst for Paul's entry into their lives. Laser is the last member of the family remaining seated at the table. Through the window's dark glass, Paul offers him a chummy smile. But Laser's response is to stand and exit the room, leaving Paul to look upon an empty table. Together with the film's visual discourses of dinner tables to police the boundaries of the family, its representation of doorways produces the family as property to be guarded. As Nic stands guard at the door while Paul stands helplessly

on the doorstep, she tersely informs him of his status: “you’re a fucking interloper!” “This is my family!” she shouts at him before slamming the door. “If you want a family so much, you go out and make your own!”

This moment of violent exclusion of the indeterminate kinship he represents and of militant reassertion of family as possession seems at first to restore the hearth as a space of order and security. However, behind the family’s closed doors, provocative ambivalences emerge in the affective responses of its members. If the scene of the dinner at Paul’s home is, as I have argued, the fulcrum of this film’s narrative, then the aftermath of his expulsion from the family unit is the nadir in this story of queer kinship. The point at which the narrative is furthest from a portrayal of a happy (queer) family is marked by an extended monologue by Jules to her family, a speech that is essentially a treatise on the institution of marriage.



*The Kids Are All Right*, dir. Lisa Cholodenko, 2010

As her children and her wife are slumped dejectedly on the family sofa, Jules stands before them and proclaims, “I need to say something.” Addressing her children first, she says “It’s no big secret. Your mom and I are in hell right now.” She does not say that they were cast into hell by any particular action, or failure to act. Instead, her voice cracking, she implies that the condition of marriage is itself, by definition, a state of hell: “And, uh, bottom line is, marriage is hard. It’s really fucking hard. Just — just two people, slogging through the shit, year after year, getting older,

changing. It's a fucking marathon, okay?" Expressing deep regret for her actions, she ruefully observes: "Sometimes you hurt the ones you love the most. I don't know why." It is the most profoundly unhappy scene in *The Kids Are All Right* — and also the most profoundly intimate.

Considering the unhappiness of the family at this moment alongside the intensified degree of intimacy can lead us to explore what is at stake in discourses of happiness in general and of familial happiness in particular. In *The Promise of Happiness*, Sara Ahmed argues that discourses of happiness regulate desire, providing a basis for rewarding certain life choices and punishing others. "It is not simply that we desire happiness," she points out, "but that happiness is imagined as what you get in return for desiring well" (Ahmed 2010, 37). In *The Kids Are All Right*, the scenes that most vividly portray the family as happy are the scenes in which each of its members is anchored in their place, assembled around their dinner table in fixed roles: Nic, the authoritarian breadwinner; Jules, the nurturing homemaker; Laser, the respectful teen; Joni, the honor student. But the scene of most palpable intimacy is a scene not of shared happiness, but of shared "hell." Rather than being anchored in place, the family members are unmoored, at sea. Nic, Laser, and Joni are slumped awkwardly on the sofa, shrouded in darkness. Standing before them, Jules looks lost and alone, framed against a background that is almost completely black. In *The Kids Are All Right*, this is what love looks like.



*The Kids Are All Right*, dir. Lisa Cholodenko, 2010

This rich ambivalence in this filmic text is fertile ground to explore, with Ahmed, “what it might mean to affirm unhappiness” (Ahmed 2010, 89), particularly that of “unhappy queers.” Queer subjects know well that the most compelling and meaningful life choices may lead not to comfort but to rejection, not to cheer but to crisis. For Jules, affirming unhappiness means unrestrained affective exposure. Her speech to her family is a moment of raw candor unparalleled in the narrative. For Nic, affirming unhappiness means she finally gives her family the gift of her vulnerability. Her body is no longer the solid, immovable guard at the door, but is instead pliant, liquid, slumped on the sofa awash in tears. No longer facing down her rival, she can afford to efface herself, burying her face in both her hands, as open to the Other as the hooded, pierced, and bleeding figure in Opie’s *Self-Portrait/Pervert*. She is bound to her kin not through her authority as arbiter and enforcer of familial boundaries, but through her affect, as a listening, caring, and vulnerable presence. It is the affirmation of unhappiness — of intimacy as a hellish experience of “slogging through the shit, year after year, getting older” — that has made possible this queer intimacy. “To kill joy,” Ahmed writes, “is to open a life, to make room for life, to make room for possibility, for chance” (Ahmed 2010, 20). For Nic and Jules, to shatter the pretense of their happy queer family is to make room for the possibilities inherent in their queer kinship.

Ironically, a byproduct of the increasing social acceptance of queer families is that it has obfuscated such queer forms of kinship. Reviewing *The Kids Are All Right*, the late Roger Ebert writes “It’s a film about marriage itself, an institution with challenges that are universal. [...] I refuse to call it a ‘gay film.’ I toyed with the idea of not even using the word “lesbian” and leaving it to you to figure out that the couple was female” (Ebert 2010). For him, the characters in the film blend so seamlessly with normative constructions of family that their story is perceived as universal. His response suggests that gays and lesbians might at last have achieved some measure of what Lauren Berlant has termed “the freedom to feel unmarked”

(Berlant 1997, 2). Perhaps, at this historical juncture, the volume of images of gays and lesbians circulating in the media has succeeded in promoting social acceptance to such a degree that sexual difference has become unremarkable. If this is so, it is surely only the case for those whose sexual orientation is the only difference that distinguishes them from other markers of privilege.

The film's representation of a white same-sex couple as custodians of middle-class liberal values is consistent with the apparent trend to constitute queer women, as long as they are white, as a new "model minority." As we have seen, on the surface the film may be interpreted as a story not about difference, but about the expulsion of difference. The indeterminate form of kinship represented by the sperm donor is violently repulsed, and Jules' apparent bisexuality is elided. Moreover, by the end of the film, every person of color has been dismissed in one way or another.<sup>12</sup> Luis, the Latino gardener, is fired. Paul leaves his lover Tanya, who is black. Even Jai, the young South Asian man Joni has been romantically interested in, is abandoned; no sooner does Joni kiss him than she turns her back to him and walks away.

Yet beyond this homonormative reading, *The Kids Are All Right* productively raises an array of important questions: Can kinship be claimed on the basis of genetic contribution, alone? What unruly affective investments would lead same-sex parents to conceive with sperm from the same donor, yet regard the biological connection with this donor as dispensable? What forms of kinship might emerge if the donor were embraced as a member of the family? What social, political, and economic infrastructures would enable or hinder the development of a family that included a donor? And finally, how might these forms of kinship enable or require an affirmation of unhappiness to reveal new forms of relationality?

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<sup>12</sup> This element of the film has been noted by Duggan with Stockton 2010; Hernández, 2010; and Puar and Tongson, 2012.

Readings of Cholodenko's film such as Ebert's demonstrate the risk that even homonormative families cannot elude assimilation into discourses of the neoliberal egalitarian nation state. All the more reason, then, to be alive to readings such as Ahmed's, that illuminate those forms of kinship that remain in more ambivalent relation to domestic security. "A revolution of unhappiness might require an unhousing; it would require not legitimating more relationships, more houses," Ahmed writes, "but delegitimizing the world that 'houses' some bodies and not others" (Ahmed 2010, 106). In the U.S., the campaigns for same-sex marriage, consistent with the exercise of tolerance as a civilizational discourse, ultimately met with breathtaking success. In sharp contrast, initiatives in defense of undocumented migrants, whose labors and communities are not protected by the global neoliberal order, are meeting ever-increasing hostility. Networks of care that resist integration into traditional family structures and formal economies of wage labor risk being rendered unintelligible.

If the success of *The Kids Are All Right* exemplifies how queer relationality may be occluded by imperatives to produce stable queer subjects, the same may be said of some responses to the work of Catherine Opie. As we have seen, her photograph *Self-Portrait/Nursing* has been interpreted as evidence that the entry into maternity means the perverse past has been left behind, leaving only a "faint" residue as memorial. But even so, the "stain" of perversion persists; in a review in *Art in America*, a critic asks parenthetically whether Opie's child is "a little too old for nursing?" (Colpitt 2006, 75). This anxiety about the appropriateness of a child suckling at a queer body is surely not unrelated to other images in Opie's oeuvre. However, the remark also evinces, more broadly, an anxious occlusion of how care networks and public sexual cultures have been mutually sustaining, as demonstrated by responses to the AIDS crisis. As I have argued in this essay, the relation of care itself resists the containment of the abject. Ultimately, the dependent relation brings to the fore anxieties about care: who may have it, who will provide it, and under

what terms. At stake is the legibility and survival of non-normative structures of kinship that, in remaining exposed to the Other, are recalcitrantly queer.

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