

## Against Abjection

He locked me in a dog's cage when I was pregnant .... He jumped me in the kitchen window and pulled a knife to my throat. ... Um you know he would do so many things – like its sort of hard. He punched me. –You know like just – just normal things that um you know like made me have an abortion.... [The violence was] more or less every day ('Toni' in Kaye, Stubbs and Tolmie 2003: 41)

Why not develop a certain degree of rage against the history that has written such an abject script for you? (Spivak 1990: 62).

This article is about the theoretical life of 'the abject'. It focuses on the ways in which Anglo-American and Australian<sup>1</sup> feminist theoretical accounts of maternal bodies and identities have utilised Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection. Whilst the abject has proved a compelling and productive concept for feminist theory, this article cautions against the reiteration of the maternal (as) abject within theoretical writing and questions the effects of what Rosalind Krauss terms 'the insistent spread of "abjection" as an expressive mode' (1999:235). It contends that employing Kristeva's abject paradigm risks reproducing histories of violent disgust towards maternal bodies. In place of the Kristevan model of the abject, it argues for a more thoroughly social and political account of abjection. This would entail a critical shift from the current feminist preoccupation with the 'transgressive potentiality' of 'encounters with the abject', to a consideration of consequences of *being abject* within specific social locations. By asking what it might mean to be 'against abjection', the central aim of this article is to make an intervention into feminist debates about abjection and thus clear the way for alternative understandings and applications of this important concept to emerge..

The article begins with a critical account of Kristeva's theory of abjection, interrogating the matricidal premise on which it is grounded. The second part of the article details the characteristic features of the genre of feminist writing that I term 'abject criticism', focusing on how the abject has been taken up and developed as a way of addressing the disparagement of the maternal within particular theoretical traditions. It argues that the emphasis within this criticism on the subversive potential of 'abject parody' fails to address either the troubling premises of Kristeva's theory or the social consequences of living as a body that is identified as maternal and abject. Drawing on reports, interview data and testimonies of battered pregnant women from an Internet chat room, the final section considers how disgust for the maternal body materialises in acts of daily violence against pregnant women. In the conclusion, this article calls on feminist theory to resist the compulsion to abject, in Kristeva's words 'to vomit the mother' (1982: 47) and instead suggests that feminism might imagine ways of theorising maternal subjectivity that vigorously contest the dehumanising effects of abjection. Toril Moi and Iris Marion-Young have called for a re-centering of 'lived bodily experience' within feminist theory (Moi 2001, Marion-Young 2005). Following Moi and Young this article deploys accounts of lived maternal abjection in order to expose the limitations of the Kristevan model.

## The Kristevan Abject

In *Disgust: Theory and History of a Strong Sensation*, Winfred Menninghaus notes that:

In the 1980s, a new buzzword entered political and ... critical discourse... The word is `abjection,` and it represents the newest mutation in the theory of disgust. Oscillating, in its usage, between serving as a theoretical concept and precisely defying the order of conceptual language altogether, the term `abjection` also commonly appears as both adjective (`abject women,` `abject art`) and adjective turned into a substantive (`the abject`) (2003: 365).

The emergence of the concept and theories of abjection within theoretical writing in the 1980s was driven by the publication of an English translation of *Pouvoirs de l'horreur* (1980) in 1982. Whilst *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* is a theoretically demanding book that assumes familiarity with psychoanalysis and philosophy, it has had an extraordinarily wide impact. Indeed, rarely has the publication of a single book been so influential across both an immense range of academic disciplines and within wider spheres of cultural production, such as art curatorship and practice. One cannot underestimate the sheer amount of Anglophone academic scholarship which uses and cites Kristeva's theory of abjection. As Menninghaus notes, `an adequate account of the academic career of the abjection paradigm could easily fill a whole book in itself' (2003: 393). Whilst Kristeva's influence on Western thought is by no means limited to feminist theory and whilst the term `abject criticism` could be used to describe a diverse body of theoretical writing, my analysis focuses on a specific body of feminist theoretical writing (which I shall introduce shortly). The influence of *Powers of Horror* was largely a consequence of the way in which feminist theorists in the 1980s and 1990s appropriated the Kristevan abject, hailing it as an enabling concept for feminist research. Whilst many readers will be familiar with Kristeva's theory of abjection, its mass citation and oscillating usage requires that we return to her original account. This return to Kristeva is essential because it is Kristeva's premise of matricide (the structural requirement that the maternal functions as the primary abject) that is at the heart of my critique. For whilst Kristeva's theory of abjection is adapted and transformed within feminist applications, this fundamental premise is accepted and reproduced almost without question.

*Powers of Horror* is a theoretical account of the psychic origins and mechanisms of revulsion and disgust. Kristeva develops the concept of the abject to describe and account for temporal and spatial disruptions within the life of the subject and in particular those moments when the subject experiences a frightening loss of distinction between themselves and objects/others. The abject describes those forces, practices and things which are opposed to and unsettle the conscious ego, the 'I'. It is the zone between being and non-being, `the border of my condition as a living being` (1982: 3). Kristeva also suggests that abjection can explain the structural and political acts of inclusion/exclusion which establish the foundations of social existence. She asserts that the abject has a double presence, it is both within `us` and within `culture` and it is through both individual and group rituals of exclusion that abjection is `acted out`. Abjection thus generates the borders of the individual *and* the social body. Kristeva writes of encounters with the abject: `On the edge of non-existence and hallucination of a

reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. There, abject and abjection are my safe-guards. The primers of my culture` (1982: 2). As this passage suggests, for Kristeva the abject is a force which both disrupts social order and (in doing) operates as a necessary psychological `safe-guard, abjection...settles the subject within a socially justified illusion—[it] is a security blanket` (1982: 136-7).

Through a series of evocative accounts of abject encounters, Kristeva demonstrates that abject experiences are common within our everyday lives: you might experience an abject response when the skin that forms on top of warm milk unexpectedly touches your lips, or when you see blood, vomit or a corpse. As these examples suggest, Kristeva theorises abjection in distinctly phenomenological terms, associating the abject with all that is repulsive and fascinating about bodies and, in particular, those aspects of bodily experience which unsettle singular bodily integrity: death, decay, fluids, orifices, sex, defecation, vomiting, illness, menstruation, pregnancy and childbirth. Indeed, Kristeva primarily understands experiences of abjection in terms of bodily affect, moments of physical revulsion and disgust that result in `a discharge, a convulsion, a crying out` (1982: 1). What fascinates Kristeva is the jouissance of abject encounters, the exhilarating fall inwards into the monstrous depths of the narcissistic self: `The sublime point at which the abject collapses in a burst of beauty that overwhelms us—and “that cancels our existence”` (1982: 210). For Kristeva, it is the act of writing and in particular the poetic texts of the avant-garde, which are most productive of abject encounters.<sup>2</sup> The suggestive possibilities that arise from the ways in which Kristeva *employs* abjection as a methodological approach—an interpretive lens—for analysing cultural texts is central to the subsequent development of abject criticism.

In terms of the psychoanalytic cannon, *Powers of Horror* can be read as an attempt to challenge the increasing predominance of Jacques Lacan’s work in the post-war period. Indeed, Kristeva’s extensive work on the semiotic and the pre-symbolic stages of psycho-sexual development sets out to `correct` Lacanian accounts by forcing attention onto the role of the maternal in the development of subjectivity. Indeed, Kristeva’s introduction of the abject can be read as an attempt to problematize Lacan’s famous mirror-stage theory—a startlingly `mother free` account of the subject’s birth into the symbolic domain. For Kristeva, the abjection of the maternal is the precondition of the narcissism of the mirror-stage. Moreover, like the mirror-stage, abjection is not a stage `passed through` but a perpetual process that plays a central role within the project of subjectivity. Just as within Lacanian ontology all subjects are fundamentally narcissistic, so in Kristeva’s account all subjects are fundamentally `abjecting subjects`.<sup>3</sup> Kristeva draws heavily upon her earlier account of the semiotic when she links abjection to the earliest affective relations with the maternal body (*in utero* and *post utero*). Within the model of subjectivity she proposes, the infant’s bodily and psychic attachment to his/her maternal origins must be successfully and violently abjected in order for an independent and cogent speaking human subject to `be born`. Any subsequent `abjections` must therefore be understood as repetitions that contain within an echo of this earlier cathartic event—the first and primary abject(ion)—birth and the human infant’s separation from the maternal body/home. For Kristeva, abjection is thus always a reminder

(and the irreducible remainder) of this primary repudiation of the maternal. As she notes, `abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be` (1982:10). This memory of maternal dependency is deeply etched within the bodily and psychic lives of each of us: This primary abjection is the ultimate secret violence at the heart of all human existence. As she writes, `[f]or man and for woman the loss of the mother is a biological and psychic necessity, the first step on the way to autonomy. Matricide is our vital necessity, the *sine qua non* condition of our individuation` (1989: 38). So whilst the abject becomes attached to different objects, bodies and things at different times and in different locations, Kristeva nevertheless makes clear that all *abjections* are re-enactments of this primary matricide, an act that haunts the subject `unflinching, like an inescapable boomerang` (1982: 1).

On a meta-theoretical level, Kristeva mobilizes the abject to enact the *return of the maternal* upon psychoanalysis. Indeed this focus on the role of maternal in the formation of subjectivity is one of the reasons why the abject has such a strong conceptual draw for feminist theory. However, it is crucial to note that whilst Kristeva grants the maternal a central and formative role within her theory of subjectivity—a role that not only rivals but sequentially pre-empts the Lacanian Paternal/Phallic function—she uncouples `the maternal` from any specific `maternal subjects` or from motherhood. Whilst I have employed Kristeva's term, `the maternal`, in my account of her theory of abjection, within her work this term has an oblique and deeply ambiguous status. Indeed, her account of the development of subjectivity is in many ways as `mother free` as Lacan's.

The concept of the maternal evoked in Kristeva's writing is akin to a `subtext`, the fleshy underside of the phallic symbolic, as the Australian philosopher Michelle Boulous Walker states it/she barely surfaces `to the level of critical thought` (1998: 113). It remains patently unclear what, if any, relationship there is between this abstract maternal and actual maternal subjects. As Boulous Walker argues `even though much of her work focuses on the maternal `it is not clear that Kristeva's maternal is a category that has much to do with women` (1998: 125). Indeed the fundamental premise of the Kristevan abject is that there is and can be no maternal subject. She argues for example, that although women undoubtedly experience pregnancy, there is no pregnant subject: `no one is present [...] to signify what is going on. "It happens, but I'm not there." "I cannot realise it, but it goes on." Motherhood's impossible syllogism` (1993: 237). This claim begs the question of which (and whose) interests are served through loyal adherence to the argument that matricide and the accompanying taboo on maternal subjectivity is the `primary mytheme` of culture (Jacqueline Rose, 1993: 52). Might we question this foundational matricide, at least in this universalistic formulation?<sup>4</sup> For, as Judith Butler states: `what Kristeva claims to discover in the prediscursive maternal body is itself a production of a given historical discourse, an effect of culture rather than its secret and primary cause` (1999: 103). Feminist theory needs to ascertain what the structural and conceptual limits of the Kristevan abject are and the extent to which the abject is an enabling concept for theorising maternal subjectivity.

## Abject Criticism

Kristeva's theory of abjection has had an extraordinary influence on feminist theory. However, it is important to note that whilst Kristeva is frequently introduced in Anglo-feminist theoretical writing as a 'French Feminist' she is neither French in origin nor a feminist. Not only has Kristeva never identified herself as a feminist, she has never aligned her work with any larger feminist theoretical or philosophical project, on the contrary, she has repeatedly distanced herself from feminism. As Christine Delphy argues, it is Anglo-feminist theorists who invented "French feminism" (1995). The fact that Kristeva is still frequently celebrated as one of the leading feminist theorists of our time is perplexing. Whilst many philosophical and psychoanalytic concepts have been developed by feminist theorists in ways that are distinct from and even work against their original context and/or intention, rarely has a concept as influential as abjection been consistently misrecognised as *feminist in origin*. This raises questions about how we should interpret Kristeva's theory of abjection. If "French feminism" is an Anglo-feminist invention then in what senses is 'the abject', as it circulates within feminist theory, similarly an Anglo-feminist concept/invention? Certainly the idea that the abject is something that can be represented (or even deliberately created, as in 'abject art') would be nonsensical in Kristeva's account, where the abject is resolutely prior to and in excess of language and meaning. However, whilst there is significant deviation from Kristeva in feminist revisions of abjection, with a few notable exceptions<sup>5</sup>, Anglo-feminists not only consistently promote Kristeva's theory of abjection as 'a feminist theory' but have remained peculiarly obedient to the matricidal logic of her account.

The Anglo-feminist theory that advances the abject maternal falls into two main genres: theoretical and philosophical exegesis of Kristeva's theory of abjection and a body of literature that applies her theory of abjection to specific areas of cultural production. I shall focus on the latter and, in particular, on the development of the abject as an interpretive approach to the analysis of popular culture, art and cinema. As abject criticism developed in the 1990s, theories of the 'maternal abject' began to appear in a series of conceptual guises: 'the abject mother' (Oliver 1993, Bousfield 2000), 'the monstrous feminine' (Creed 1993, Braidotti 1994, Constable 1999, Gear 2001, Betterton 1996 and 2006, Shildrich 2002) 'the monstrous womb' (Creed 1993), 'the archaic mother' (Creed 1993) and 'the female grotesque' (Tamblyn 1990, Yaegar 1992, Russo 1994). What characterizes these feminist mobilisations of Kristeva's abject maternal is a concern with theorising and identifying the maternal (and feminine) body as primary site/sight of cultural disgust. Whilst Kristeva analysed the social and cathartic function of art and literature in order to ascertain what it reveals about human psychic development *per se*, this criticism is motivated by more immediate socio-political questions. In particular, it seeks out instances of the abject maternal within culture in order to explore, challenge, and in some instances, 'reclaim' misogynistic depictions of women as abject. What makes the 'abject paradigm' particularly compelling for feminist theorists is the promise that 'reading for the abject' within specific cultural domains can challenge and/or displace the disciplinary norms that frame dominant representations of gender. Indeed, what this theory shares is a political hope that 'cultural representations of abjection' (Covino, 2004:4) can be read against the grain in ways that will destabilise and/or subvert misogynistic representations of women. In contradistinction to Kristeva, for whom the abject is formless, pre-

symbolic and un-representable, feminist theorists thus imagine the practice of abject criticism as variously exposing, disrupting and/or transcoding the historical and cultural associations between women's bodies, reproduction and the abject.

One of the most influential texts of abject criticism is Creed's *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (1993). Indeed, *The Monstrous-Feminine* is frequently cited as evidence of the purchase of Kristeva's theory of abjection. This book analyses a genre which repeatedly produces maternal bodies as abject—horror film—and employs close analysis to expose the violent gendered codes of abjection. In a chapter entitled, 'Woman as Monstrous Womb' Creed cites Kristeva to argue that 'the womb represents the utmost in abjection' (1993:49). To support this claim, she offers examples from a cycle of Hollywood horror films, such as *The Brood* (dir., David Cronenberg 1979) in which the sight/site of horror is a massive womb on the outside of the woman's body, *The Manitou* (dir., William Girdler 1978), in which a womb 'appears as a displaced tumour growing on a woman's neck' and *Aliens* (dir., James Cameron 1986) in which the spectator is confronted with the site of an Alien womb, externalised in the form of a deathly birth chamber of awe-inspiring proportions. Echoing Kristeva's claim that every encounter with the abject is a re-enactment of a primary maternal abjection, Creed's central thesis is that 'every encounter with horror, in the cinema, is an encounter with the maternal body' (1993: 166). The narrative structure of these films, in which the maternal other is variously expelled/destroyed/punished, thus enables the audience to pleasurably and safely 'act-out' abjection. Indeed, Creed suggests that horror films offer their audiences psychic relief/resolution in the form of an intense 'abject fix' which temporarily sates the raging primal need to endlessly destroy the maternal other to whom we are in bondage. She writes:

The central ideological project of the popular horror film [is] purification of the abject through a 'descent into the foundations of the symbolic construct'. The horror film attempts to bring about a confrontation with the abject ... in order finally to eject the abject and redraw the boundaries between the human and non-human. As a modern form of defilement rite, the horror film attempts to separate out the symbolic order from all that threatens its stability, particularly the mother and all that her universe signifies. In this sense signifying horror involves a representation of, and reconciliation with, the maternal body (15).

Creed understands horror film as akin to the purification rituals described by anthropologists such as Mary Douglas (1966), whose study of the social role of defilement rituals is central to Kristeva's account of the cathartic function of art and religion. Creed thus not only employs Kristeva's account but furnishes her theory of maternal abjection with new cultural evidence. Creed proposes that the primary value of this application of abject theory is that it enables 'a more accurate picture of the fears and fantasies that dominate our cultural imaginary' (166). Indeed, she argues that the exposure of the monstrous-feminine at the dark heart of film, 'art, poetry, pornography and other popular fictions' unveils 'the origins of patriarchy' (1993: 164). Creed also suggests that the abject representations of the maternal as alien and monstrous can be redeployed to communicate 'real' maternal desire.

Kristeva argues that the abject is a force which disrupts the social world *in order* to secure social norms, including those of gender. Any ‘transgression’ functions to reinstate those norms: for example, by providing opportunities for punishment and the enforcement of psychic and social laws. Creed similarly acknowledges that ‘images which seek to define woman as monstrous in relation to her reproductive functions’ ultimately work ‘to reinforce the phallographic notion that female sexuality is abject’ (151). Indeed, Creed’s analysis reveals that the exhilarating encounters with the abject maternal proffered by horror cinema function to secure and authorise the (male) spectator through the violent punishment of the maternal other—therein lies the central pleasures of this genre. However, in a reversal of Kristeva’s argument, Creed further suggests that mapping the pejorative associations between the maternal and the abject can offer feminism resources with which to challenge the misogyny which underlies these cultural inscriptions. Menninghaus argues that this genre of abject criticism is underpinned by an affirmative logic in which what is ‘officially considered abject’ is provocatively embraced as a ‘positive alterity’ in order to challenge the legitimacy of discrimination (2003: 366). He quotes art theorist and curator Simon Taylor who states that: ‘I do not claim that the abject gives us access to radical exteriority, merely that its invocation, under certain historical circumstances, can be used to renegotiate social relations in a contestatory fashion’ (Taylor in Menninghaus, 200: 389). This affirmative logic, and specifically the idea that the maternal abject can be positively embraced as a means of challenging ‘the inadequacy’ of psychoanalysis is central to Creed’s project. However, throughout *The Monstrous-Feminine* it is assumed that Kristeva’s theory of abjection poses a useful feminist challenge to psychoanalytic orthodoxy. Creed fails to critically engage with Kristeva or question her account of maternal abjection. Indeed, Creed’s repetition and application of Kristeva’s claims risks affirming the universalism of this deeply problematic psychoanalytic account by furnishing the theory with empirical evidence—*the maternal is monstrous*.

In *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity* (1994), literary theorist Mary Russo warns that the risk of this affirmative abjection is precisely that it might reproduce rather than challenge the cultural production of women as abject. However, Russo, like Creed, Taylor and many others, is also hopeful about the political potential of abject criticism. As she notes, ‘[the] extreme difficulty of producing social change does not diminish the usefulness of these symbolic models of transgression’ (1994: 58). This argument depends upon a belief in the transformative potential of parody and Russo draws on the work of Russian philosopher and literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin to support her claim that parody can effect social change. In ‘Abject Criticism’ (2000) Deborah Caslav Covino summarises this belief in the transgressive potential of ‘abject parody’. She argues that within abject criticism:

the abject woman becomes a subversive trope of female liberation: she speaks an alternative, disruptive language, immersing herself in the significances of the flesh, becoming wilfully monstrous as she defies the symbolic order (2000)

Covino defines abject criticism as ‘a movement that marks a departure from ‘traditional aesthetics’ which has informed ‘significant feminist typologies’ and has proved ‘a triumph for women’. This

representation of the work of mapping abjection as *feminist work* is a recurrent theme within this genre of criticism to the extent that *being for the abject* is imagined as a form of political practice. As Covino writes:

A focus on shared abjection [...] allows us to continue to historicize and confront constructions of woman as objectified, mortified flesh, as well as to qualify our inspired hopes of throwing off such flesh; it allows us to read the burden of women's greater share of abjection [and] the subversive woman's desire to inhabit alternative bodies and spaces (2000).

I want to question the transformative potential of abject criticism, namely, the idea that affirming representations of abjection 'can be used to renegotiate social relations in a contestary fashion' (Taylor in Menninghaus, 2006: 389). Not all theorists of abjection are as effusive as Covino in embracing the logic of 'affirmative abjection', nevertheless many have been persuaded by the feminist possibilities of abject criticism. The following quotation from art theorist and performance artist Joanna Freuh details the ways in which a *typology* of the abject maternal has taken root within feminist theory in the way Covino suggests:

Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* ... has greatly influenced feminist theorizing of the body. Here the mother (-to-be) epitomizes abjectness: she enlarges, looks swollen, produces afterbirth, lactates, and shrinks; she is beyond the bounds of even normal female flesh and bleeding; she is breakdown, dissolution, ooze, and magnificent grossness. The mother is perfectly grotesque, a psychic monument to the queasy slipperiness that is the liminal reality of human embodiment (2001: 133).

Freuh's description highlights how abject criticism plunders and exaggerates the abject characteristics associated with maternal bodies in order to challenge the negativity of being aligned with the abject. The mother is now 'magnificent' in her 'grossness'. However, whilst this strategic repetition and mimicry focuses on the 'disruptive authority' of the 'monstrous maternal', the feminist theorists engaged in this critical work reproduce some of the most repulsive, pornographic, obscene and violent representations of the maternal. These accounts rarely question the underlying premises of Kristeva's theory: Namely that this 'mother' cannot exist as a subject in her own right but only as the subjects perpetual other, that 'liminal reality of human embodiment'. We need to consider what the risks of this strategic repetition are in terms of cementing phantasies of the maternal as necessarily abject and think about what impact this figuration of the maternal has on those subsequently interpellated as that abject. As Freuh argues, 'the abject mother is an imaginary figure, but as such she assumes an iconic presence that women may use against themselves' in forms of "intergenerational corporeal warfare" (2001: 133).

Interestingly it is not individual maternal bodies and beings *per se* that are most often identified as abject within feminist analysis of literature, art and film. For example, in the films cited by Creed, it is not the maternal body *per se* but rather the representation of dismembered reproductive body parts (and



in particular the disembodied womb), which are imagined as 'the scene of horror' (1993: 49). As queer theorist Judith Halberstam argues, it is the deconstruction of women into her messiest and most slippery parts, images of the reproductive body grotesquely unravelled, which constitute the maternal (as) monstrous (1995: 52). As Halberstam notes: 'The female monster is a pile of remains, the leftover material ... she does not signify in her own body the power of horror'(52). In other words, it is only 'once a woman has ... been stripped of all signs of identity' that she is reduced to a shapeless, bloody abject mass (47). It is when the maternal is no longer recognisable as a body and thus as a subject that it/she becomes abject. It is a subject-less maternal that is the sight/site of collective psycho-social disgust. What is crucial about this insight is that it reveals how maternal bodies are made disgusting through violent disassembling. The maternal can only be produced as a site of horror through representational practices which figure 'her' as in excess of a singular body/identity. Indeed, Creed's analysis of the abject maternal in horror cinema reveals that it is precisely the uncoupling of the maternal from maternal subjects that enables the production of 'her' as a thing of horror— a bloody mess of signs. This analysis echoes the story of (masculine) identity acquisition narrated by Kristeva in which the maternal is the 'constitutive outside' or as Butler puts it 'the unspeakable, the unviable, the nonnarrativizable that secures ...the very borders of materiality' (1993: 188). What these theoretical and cultural fantasies of 'fleshy maternal horror' depend on is a radical dismembering and/or disavowal of maternal subjectivity.

As Butler argues, the limits set by theory are problematic 'not only because there is always a question of what constitutes the authority of the one who writes the limits but because the setting of those limits is linked to the contingent regulation of what will and will not qualify as a discursively intelligible way of being' (1993: 190). Since the premise of the Kristevan abject is that the maternal cannot qualify as 'intelligible being', it is a strikingly affirmative translation of this concept that is cited, circulated and reproduced within these feminist theoretical accounts. Kristeva's theory of abjection is founded on the premise that the maternal *cannot be, cannot speak and cannot take up a subject position* which raises a series of unresolved questions for Anglo-feminist adoption of an abject paradigm to theorise maternal subjectivity. Moreover, as I shall argue, the myopic focus within feminist abject criticism on the transformative potential of excavating 'the cultural abject', particularly those accounts which celebrate the abject maternal as marking a feminist challenge, risk marginalising lived experiences of being the thing deemed abject. Furthermore, representations of maternal abjection are not simply a ritual playing out of the violent unconscious phantasies that underpin Patriarchal society, but are *constitutive of the desire for maternal abjection*. There is a failure to understand theory and criticism as productive fields within which the abject maternal is not simply described but more fundamentally reconstituted as a foundational norm of psychic and social life. As Butler notes, 'the production of the unsymbolisable, the unspeakable, the illegible is ...always a strategy of social abjection' (1993: 190). Abject criticism risks becoming another site in which a narrative of acceptable violence is endlessly rehearsed until we find ourselves not only colluding with, but more fundamentally believing in, our own abjection.

Donna Haraway notes that, 'Overwhelmingly theory is bodily, and theory is literal. Theory is not about matters distant from the lived body; quite the opposite. Theory is anything but disembodied' (1992: 299). Perhaps this is why Kristeva's sentence 'Matricide is our vital necessity, the sine-qua-non condition of our individuation' takes my breath away each time I read it. Does this theory describe a murderous hatred for the mother that we are compelled to live? In repeatedly insisting that the maternal is pre-symbolic, Kristeva's theory of abjection not only reiterates the taboo on maternal subjectivity but also legitimates the abjection of maternal subjects. Kristeva does not enable a new ethics of the maternal to emerge as some feminist philosopher have argued (see, for example, Harrington 1998: 139). On the contrary, her speechless maternal *disavows* the very possibility of vocalising lived accounts of maternity. The abjection of the maternal is not just a theoretical fiction, but speaks to living histories of violence towards maternal bodies.

Abjection, as any dictionary definition states, not only describes the action of casting down, but *the condition of one cast down*, that is *the condition of being abject*. Abjection is not just a psychic process but a social experience. Disgust reactions, hate speech, acts of physical violence and the dehumanising effects of law are integral to processes of abjection. Indeed, abjection should be understood as a concept that describes the violent exclusionary forces operating within modern states: forces that strip people of their human dignity and reproduce them as dehumanised waste, the dregs and refuse of social life (Krauss 1999: 236). The problem, as Butler states, is to imagine how 'such socially saturated domains of exclusion be recast from their status as "constitutive" to beings who might be said to matter' (1993: 189). The final section of this article thus shifts its focus from the theoretical violence of abject criticism to a consideration of lived accounts of maternal abjection.

### **Lived Abjection**

Pregnancy has traditionally been understood as a reified and protected time in women's lives but new research that reveals the scale of intimate partner male violence against pregnant women has exposed this to be an idealised myth. There have been over one hundred studies focused on intimate partner violence in pregnancy in the last decade (see for Jana Jasinski Jana 2004 and Rebecca O'Reilly 2007 for overview of literature). These vary considerably in terms of the size of the sample and methodology employed, but there is consistency in terms of the percentage of pregnant women reporting violence in a range of different national studies. Whilst interpretations of statistical data, methodologies and the implications of this research are inevitably contested and debated, the fact that battery during pregnancy is widespread is uncontested. Researchers in the United States have estimated that 332,000 pregnant women are battered each year by their male partners (in the context of 4 million life births each year) (de Bruyn 2003). A questionnaire survey involving 500 women in the North of England found that the prevalence of violence against pregnant women was 17% (with 10% of this group experiencing forced sexual activity as part of their battery) (Johnson, Haider, Ellis, Hay, Lindow 2003). Recent statistical research has revealed that pregnant women are more likely to be murdered than to die of any other cause (Decker, Martin and Moracco 2004: 500 and Chang, Berg, Saltzman and Herndon 2005) and analysis of mortality figures in the United States and the United Kingdom has exposed that up to 25% of deaths among pregnant women are a result of partner homicide (Campell, García-Moreno, Sharps 2004: 776). Since the first research findings were published in the 1990s, attitudes have shifted to the extent that is now widely acknowledged that is more common than conditions for which women are routinely screened (such as pregnancy induced hypertension and diabetes). As violence against pregnant women has emerged as serious public health issue it has begun to impact on governmental health policies. The World Health Organization now includes guidelines on tackling intimate partner violence within its 'Making Pregnancy Safer' initiative. Many European and North

American medical organizations now advocate routinely asking pregnant women about abuse, although debate continues about the most useful strategies for implementing screening.

Whilst pre-existing violence within an intimate relationship is a strong predictor of battery during pregnancy, Michele Decker, Sandra Martin, and Kathryn Moracco argue that pregnancy is a trigger for new instances of violence (2004: 498). Indeed, their research suggests that 30% of women experience their first physical assault by a male partner when they become pregnant for the first time and that when intimate partner violence already exists in a relationship the ferocity of the violence intensifies. As they state, 'partner violence that occurs during pregnancy may be a marker of increased risk of severe and potentially lethal danger for some women' (2004: 500). Physical assaults that begin or escalate during pregnancy often have a different pattern of violence, with pregnant women more likely to suffer multiple sites of bodily injury. Maria de Bruyn supports this analysis arguing that 'instead of receiving strikes against the head [pregnant women] suffer beatings directed towards the abdomen and chest' and in one North American study she cites, 'pregnant women were hit in the abdomen twice as often as non-pregnant women' (2003: 26). De Bruyn (2003) quotes an Australian woman, who states:

I was subjected to constant physical abuse throughout the marriage. But pregnancy was the worst time for me. I had five miscarriages. Every time I fell pregnant he would target the belly whenever he gets violent (2003: 25).

A British report quotes 'Mary' a 36 year old woman 'whose partner would sit on her belly saying he was trying to squeeze the baby out after he had hit and punched her' (Moorhead, 2004).

This suggests that the sight and meaning of the pregnant body invokes a specific and targeted physically violent response. This claim is supported by many midwives and healthcare workers. As Sandra Horley, chief executive of Refuge, a British charitable organisation which provides support for women who have endured violence, notes:

I've seen some appalling cases, including a woman six-and-a-half- months' pregnant who had been kicked so repeatedly in the abdomen that her baby was stillborn. Another woman had a baby who was born with three fractured limbs. It's often the breasts and abdominal area that the men go for when women are pregnant - they're the focus of their anger.

Under what social and cultural conditions does the pregnant body become a trigger for disgust, aggression, hatred and violence? Can violence that is targeted against the visibly pregnant body, be understood as a materialisation of the cultural disgust for the maternal body explored within abject criticism? Reviewing current research, US based medical anthropologist de Bruyn offers a number of speculative reasons why physical and sexual abuse might intensify or be triggered during pregnancy. She suggests, for example, that the battery of pregnant women by a male partner may be a way of forcing miscarriage for economic reasons, i.e. not wanting to bear the cost and responsibility of a child. Certainly, as Gillian Mezley and Susan Bewley (1997) document, violence against pregnant women is associated with increased rates of miscarriage, premature birth, low birth weight, fetal injury (including broken bones and stab wounds) and fetal death. However, research on domestic violence has demonstrated that contrary to popular belief, intimate partner violence is not bound by economic class:

educated, successful and wealthy men batter too. De Bruyn further suggests that male partners may feel jealous `when the pregnant woman is perceived to devote less attention to his needs and wishes` (2003: 22). In other words, the intensified nature of male violence against their pregnant partners may be a consequence of a desire to destroy the presence of the other, the child or imagined child who is occupying the space and body of the woman that `belongs to him`. This hypothesis suggests that the pregnancy inspires rage because men feel left out, are jealous or suffer from `frustrated sexual desire` when their partners are pregnant. What these speculative explanations for male violence against pregnant women ignore are the violent histories of disgust which frame the meaning of the maternal body. If abject criticism fails to consider the implications of lived experiences of abjection, medical and health research doesn't engage with psycho-social literature on the maternal, and the ways in which the reiteration of maternal as abject structures ways of seeing, feeling and acting towards maternal bodies. As one reports notes, `although cultural attitudes about pregnancy would seem to be relevant to abuse during pregnancy, they have not been measured` (Campbell, García-Moreno, Sharps, 2004: 776). The accumulation of sociological data and testimonial accounts of violence targeted towards pregnant women is of crucial significance for feminist theoretical research in the area of maternal subjectivity. Indeed, this previously hidden aspect of pregnant experience compels feminist theory to think about how histories of violent disgust for the maternal body, the disgust that abject criticism has been re-describing since the publication of *Powers of Horror* in the 1980s, materialises in women's lived experiences. Abjection has effects on real bodies; abjection hurts.

The violent male partner attempts to exert his control over the pregnant subject through acts of repeated verbal and physical abuse, which dehumanise his victim. Australian researchers, Miranda Kaye, Julie Stubbs and Julia Tolmie (2003) detail some of the ways in which the psychological violence, which always accompanies brute physical violence, manifests itself. They argue that psychological violence is always geared towards control mechanisms which aim to limit women's autonomy such as `isolating women within their homes and removing other forms of support` (2003:43). Being called derogatory names, being told over and again that you are worthless, being subjected to racist or sexist abuse along with death threats and the ever present threat of physical violence, erodes a subject's fundamental sense of who they are. In their Australian ethnography, Kaye, Stubbs, Tolmie explore the material forms of control which diminished women's agency. These included having to hand over wages: not being given any or enough money; being told what to wear; not being allowed to have an own opinion or finish a sentence; being locked in the bedroom at night; having to ask permission to watch a television show; all the windows in the house being bolted shut and sleep deprivation` (2003: 42-44). All of these acts constitute attempts to disable women of their ability to act as independent subjects. One interviewee noted that as time passes, identity is effaced through these control mechanisms so that: `you don't know who you are. You just follow ... the order so you just follow what he say because ... you don't think you are a person or human being` (2003: 44). Battered women's idea of themselves as individuals is gradually obliterated, they are literally pushed `toward the place where meaning collapses` (Kristeva 1982: 2). One battered woman in Kaye, Stubbs and Tolmie's ethnography notes, `you reach to the point [at] which you lose completely your identity. You don't know who you are.[...] you don't think you

are a person or human being' (2003: 41). For these women, repeatedly dehumanised and objectified, violence is experienced as banal. Indeed, what is truly horrific about these testimonies is that violence is 'every day'. This is *being* on the edge of non-existence. This is maternal abjection lived.

Kristeva argues that the abject emerges into sight when 'man strays on the territories of the animal' (1982: 12). This phrase is telling, for Kristeva thinks and writes abjection from the perspective of 'the man who strays' rather than the perspective of the subject who finds themselves interpellated as abject animal (less than human). Nevertheless, it is clear that if a person and their bodily appearance is designated the abject thing, that 'magnet of fascination and repulsion' they are subject to dehumanising violence (Kristeva 1995:118). The figuring of abject beings as animalistic (less than human) is part of the process of dehumanisation that routinely takes place in experiences of being abjected. The theme of being (made) animal repeatedly surfaces in women's accounts of intimate partner violence in pregnancy. In the quotation from Kaye, Stubbs, Tolmie's ethnography, with which I began this article, 'Toni' recalls,:

He locked me in a dog's cage when I was pregnant .... He jumped me in the kitchen window and pulled a knife to my throat. ... Um you know he would do so many things—like its sort of hard. He punched me.—You know like just—just normal things that um you know like made me have an abortion.... [The violence was] more or less every day (2003: 41).

These 'normal things', the vicious punch of the real, the brutal and sadistic slap, slap, thump, shuts 'Toni' up, turns her into an animal, a dog, a maternal aborting Thing.

What is at stake in acts of violence against pregnant women is control over the maternal body and control of sex and reproduction. The powerful story of abjection that Kristeva (and feminist theorists of abjection) narrates is one in which we are 'born' through a violent struggle over identity, a struggle which takes place over and through the bloodied and bruised maternal body. Kristeva's account of abjection can be usefully drawn upon in theorising the psycho-social mechanisms at play in lived accounts of maternal abjection. Her work is potentially useful, for example, in developing better understandings of why the visibly pregnant body is a trigger for violence. However, the deeply engrained psycho-social association between the maternal and the abject is an historical condition and not an unchangeable fact. Maternal abjection, in theory and practice, is that which feminism needs to articulate itself against

Whilst feminist theorists have demonstrated that war is waged over the reproductive body, the violence committed against pregnant women has remained largely unspoken within feminist accounts of reproductive politics. The social taboos surrounding intimate partner violence make it extremely difficult for pregnant women to speak about being battered, tortured and controlled. Given that pregnant bodies are so routinely monitored by the medical gaze, it is perhaps surprising that widespread violence has remained so invisible. However, as Brewer and Mezey note:

Changes in midwifery and obstetric practice designed to `empower` women and demedicalise childbirth may have reduced the possibility of [speaking about violence]. The traditional refuge of woman-only space in antenatal wards and labour wards is disappearing. The milieu of the antenatal clinic is not particularly conducive to facilitating disclosure of domestic violence, which women find difficult, shameful, and risky. Men often accompany their partners to clinics and in labour, and hand held notes mean that confidential documentation is no longer in the safe keeping of the hospital (1997: 1295).

Ironically the opening up of ante-natal spaces, such as clinics and hospitals, to men has potentially limited women's ability to speak out, whilst the marks of physical and psychological violence can be hard to detect: women disguise bruised skin and men often deliberately batter women on parts of their body that others will not see. If maternal subjectivity is impossible to conceive, intimate partner violence against maternal bodies was, until recently, unheeded and unheard.

### **Communities of the abject**

One of the few places in which women are able to share their experiences of violence without fear of retaliation is in Internet chat rooms. The Internet (and the imaginary promise of anonymity it offers) has the potential to be a safe(r) space for battered women to speak out. On the Internet site, *BabyCenter.com*, I found a discussion thread in which pregnant women discussed the violence they were enduring at the hands of their partners. *BabyCenter.com* is a website which offers 'expert' information and advice to pregnant women. It is a magazine style site that hosts reviews of consumer goods and is sponsored by links to on-line shops. However, behind this bright shopping façade, *BabyCenter* offers another perspective that penetrates the happy familial myths about maternity. Whilst the abused women who speak out in chat rooms must learn to 'cover their tracks' so their partners cannot trace their web histories, they have created on-line communities, founded in their shared abjection.<sup>6</sup> These women in chat rooms form 'communities of the abject' who, through the act of sharing and speaking their abjection, refuse their constitution as 'abject object'.

In a *BabyCenter* chat room pregnant women post accounts of the daily violence they are enduring at the hands of their partners. One woman calling herself 'worried mom' writes in a breezy chatty tone, which belies the content of her post:

Hi. I have a question. Since I found out I was pregnant, my husband and I haven't been getting along well. We used to call each other names, but I stopped. He still calls me stupid and a bad parent and he pushes me sometimes. The other day he slapped me across the face. I yelled at him before he did it. He sometimes pushes me so hard that I fall. Is that harmful to my baby? I'm a little over 7 months pregnant. What should I do? Please email me.<sup>7</sup> (Anonymous post 2004)

Women on this discussion site respond to each others with messages of recognition, solidarity and support: 'Amanda' writes, 'I'm almost eight months pregnant, and I left my husband two months ago. He was abusive emotionally before pregnancy, and became sexually and physically abusive after I became pregnant ... life is much better without the constant fear of your husband'. Some of the women write about approaching the police, telling friends, family or neighbours, but others warn of their experiences of failure when they sought outside intervention. As one woman notes, '[t]he police where no help, they told me that since I hit him first I would be the one to go to jail'. However, very little of the discussion on this site focuses on the practical means by which women can leave their violent partners. Perhaps because, as Angela Moe and Myrtle Bell argue, in their article 'Abject Economics'(2004) battered women are often caught in a vicious cycle of economic dependence on their abusers. Repeated physical and psychological violence undermines women's ability to work and maintain steady employment and this cycle of dependency is even more acute when the women is pregnant or a mother. One woman in the *Babycenter* chat room supports this in her description of the poverty she endured when she left her abusive husband. Moreover, research has consistently shown that women often endanger their lives when they attempt to leave the men battering them. Many simply cannot imagine leaving and express a deep ambivalence about their partners, writing about them with love and tenderness in the same sentences as they depict gut-wrenching scenes of psychological torture and physical violence. Reading through these posts, I felt that there central purpose was witness and visibility, a desire to reclaim a semblance of agency through sharing their abjection.

The *Babycenter* chat room operates as a means for women to acknowledge (to themselves and others) their shame at what is happening to them. More complexly, it is a means through which women attempt to re-humanise themselves, to identify with themselves as the subjects of violence, rather than the abject Thing that violence produces them as. In the following post, we can see how the writer begins, hesitantly, to acknowledge, through imagining the previous poster reading her words, 'that something has to be done'.

I just want to share my thoughts w you because reading what you said made me feel not so alone. I love my husband very much too and he started to become more physical ever since I became pregnant. ...He has pulled my hair, kicked, and pushed me. He has grabbed my arm so tightly that his thumb print was left on my arm. ...I know what others might think reading this. I am embarrassed to even talk about it. It makes me so sad and disappointed that I dont have the relationship that I thought I did. I dont think what he does is okay but I havent done anything to make my situation better. I was thinking getting a therapist but I dont even know myself (Anonymous post 2004).

The words, 'I don't even know myself' speak so much of *being abject*. In order for injury to be recognised, these women need to be recognised as subjects by another- as an 'I' that has experienced this violence. However, whilst these posts do enable these women's to narrate lived accounts of their experience, this is a tiny fragment of 'anonymous visibility' hidden in the margins of an website and

produced by subjects whose very sense of being is fragile in the extreme. These posts are weighted down with guilt, shame and blame, and express dazed and battered identities. 'He is battering my soul, my self-esteem, my identity' writes one woman. In the most disturbing post in the chat room, one woman signs her message with the words 'crying for help':

While I was pregnant he would hit me and throw me around. I don't know what to do, he does it even worse now. ...He kicked me with steel toe boots on and now I have a bruise the size of a softball, not to mention the rug burns on my elbows and the jaw pain and my sprained ankle. I don't know what to do. It just gets worse. The night before I had my daughter he threw an apple at me and it hit my belly. It left a bruise that you couldn't see but I could feel. The next morning I woke up with broken water. I don't know what to do anymore. When he gets mad he tells me he wants to kill me. He covers my mouth and nose so I can't breath. I am afraid I won't be around much longer. I am afraid one day he will go that far. And then say it was an accident. But I know it's not an accident. I just want someone to know before it does happen and no one knows who did it (Anonymous post 2004).

This post and its repetition of despair is heart breaking to read: 'I don't know what to do', 'I don't know what to do anymore', 'I am afraid I won't be around much longer'. What sort of recognition can a reader of these posts possibly grant to this anonymous woman and her plea, 'I just want someone to know before it does happen and no one knows who did it'? These women express what it feels like to be cast down, humiliated, debased, pushed to the point where you are no longer know yourself'. What these posts communicate is experiences of being made abject— experiences which, in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds, they manage to communicate.

### **Social Abjection**

For Kristeva, abjection does not signify living an unbearable life on the margins of social visibility, but something more akin to the writer's quest, the holy grail of the avant-garde. In the after-word to *Powers of Horror* she muses:

Does one write under any other condition than being possessed by abjection, in an indefinite catharsis? Leaving aside adherents of a feminism that is jealous of conserving its power — the last of the power-seeking ideologies — none will accuse of being a usurper the artist who, even if he does not know it is an undoer of narcissism and of all imaginary identity as well, sexual included (1982: 208).

These oblique comments are revealing of Kristeva's politics. Only the male artist 'possessed by abjection' can communicate the abject maternal at the limits of identity. The experience of abjection enjoyed in the work of these writers is unavailable to women writers and artists due to the different structure of their subjectivity, in particular their incomplete separation from their mothers, an unwillingness perhaps to participate in matricide (see Kristeva, 1989). Whilst the implications of this



argument, and the contradictions it exposes, are beyond the reach of this article, it is important to note that here, in the afterword to *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva makes clear she has nothing but contempt for a feminism which would question maternal abjection.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak asks: 'What are the cultural politics of application of the diagnostic taxonomy of the abject?' (1992: 55). Following Spivak's cue, this article has focused on the sexual politics of Kristeva's theory of abjection — it has questioned the constitutive matricide in which theories and accounts of abjection are grounded, explored what it means to diagnose something or someone as abject and considered what the effects of such a diagnosis might be. It has examined the feminist strategy of invoking a powerful tradition of disgust for the maternal body and questioned whether this 'affirmative abjection' can transform abject representational codes. It has argued that whilst feminist abject criticism has proved useful in mapping the ways in which abjection is communicated and transmitted, it has largely failed to consider the effects of abjection on embodied subjects and in this respect has been complicit with psychoanalytic and philosophical accounts which repeatedly disavow lived accounts of maternal subjectivity. For whilst Kristeva's account of abjection is compelling (at an explanatory level) what is completely absent from her account is any discussion of what it might mean *to be* that maternal abject, to be the one who repeatedly finds themselves the object of the others violent objectifying disgust. As I have suggested, Kristeva's account is dependent upon her ambiguous use of the term maternal. This article has troubled the distinction between the maternal as abstract concept and the maternal as lived and embodied by insisting that we take theory at its word. The maternal abject (and the matricide it assumes) is not a pre-historic, unchangeable fact but is a disciplinary norm which has been established through processes of reiteration and has taken on the appearance of a universal truth. However, the repeated framing of the maternal as abject shapes the appearance and experience of maternal bodies in the social world. Feminist theory needs to shift its focus away from 'observational reiteration' of maternal abjection as it manifests within cultural realms. This doesn't mean abandoning the concept of abjection, which is perhaps unique in its ability to articulate the psycho-social dimensions of violence. However, we need new theories of social abjection to wrench this concept from a purely Kristevan paradigm. Specifically, we need to document the role the maternal abject plays within intimate, inter-subjective, generational and social relations and challenge the forms and processes of abjection that are central to the social exclusion and marginalisation of women. As Spivak suggests: 'Why not develop a certain degree of rage against the history that has written such an abject script for you?'

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<sup>1</sup> From this point onwards I will use the term `Anglo-Feminism` for brevity.

<sup>2</sup> Kristeva repeatedly returns to the work of male avant-garde writers such as Céline, Joyce, Aragon, Sartre, Baudelaire, Lautreamont, who, in her estimation, immerse themselves in abjection through their writing practice.

<sup>3</sup> Whilst Kristeva's formulation of the abject challenges Lacan's distinction between the imaginary and symbolic realms it resembles his concept of `the Real` and the related concept of `jouissance`.

<sup>4</sup> This is precisely Amber Jacob's project in *On Matricide* 2007, which is a brilliant attempt to re-theorize matricide through feminist revision of Greek Myth.

<sup>5</sup> Judith Butler's account in *Bodies That Matter* is the most thorough feminist challenge to the universalism of Kristeva's account.

<sup>6</sup> See <http://thesafetyzone.org/security.html> for advice given to battered women on how to reduce the chances that net travels will be traced.

<sup>7</sup> I have refrained from giving specific dates or url links due to concerns about the participants safety and also a concern that the site administrators may desire to censure this use of chat spaces.