
Lesbian Solo Motherhood: Emma Brockes's *An Excellent Choice*

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The 1978 delivery of the world's first IVF baby, Louise Brown, created what anthropologist Sarah Franklin termed a 'bridge to new kinds of life' – and, indeed, IVF and other forms of Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART) have facilitated a wide range of family formations, such as lesbians choosing to have children with the help of sperm donors. Much could be expected, then, of one particular memoir – Emma Brockes's *An Excellent Choice* (2018) – which details Brockes, an English lesbian journalist living in the USA, becoming a solo mother by choice via sperm donation and Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART). However, my paper combines close reading with queer and feminist criticism in order to suggest that Brockes's attitudes regarding motherhood reveal a disengagement with queer politics in favour of an espousal of homonormativity – which is defined as a privatised, depoliticised gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them (Weiss, 2018). Such a positioning is a highly privileged stance that potentially 'blots from view' (Weiss, 2018: 111) the much more numerous and socially vulnerable members of the North American LGBT+ community.

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Lesbian Solo Motherhood: Emma Brockes's *An Excellent Choice*

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The 1978 delivery of the world's first IVF baby, Louise Brown, created what anthropologist Sarah Franklin termed a 'bridge to new kinds of life'¹ – and, indeed, IVF and other forms of Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART) have facilitated a wide range of family formations, such as lesbians choosing to have children with the help of sperm donors. Scholarly research into such families has investigated accordingly, for example, sociologist Susan Golombok et al.'s work demonstrates that children from lesbian homes are as psychologically healthy as their heterosexual-raised peers.² Such studies usually focus on lesbian couples, however, and that gap is echoed within life-writing regarding lesbian families. To give just two examples: *Broken Horses: A Memoir* by six-time Grammy winner Brandi Carlile details raising two children with her wife,³ and Amie Klemptauer Miller's *She Looks Just Like You: A Memoir of (Nonbiological Lesbian) Motherhood* is written from the point of view of a woman raising a child with her female partner.⁴ Relatedly, as Elia Psouni et al. highlight, the one-parent family (of any sexual persuasion) is intensely studied, but research most often centres the heterosexual single woman who unwillingly stands alone; much less considered is the straight woman who chooses to have her own family, let alone the lesbian who chooses to do so.⁵

Autobiographies written by single lesbian mothers who had hoped to raise their child in a couple are scarce, but there is one memoir published by a mainstream publisher that depicts the experience of the solo-by-choice lesbian mother: *An Excellent Choice: My Solo Path to Motherhood* by Emma Brockes.⁶ Far from being the progressive document that those interested in queer family formations might have wanted or expected, Brockes's portrayal of becoming a solo lesbian parent is that it involves little more than making 'an excellent choice' – the phrase that the lab technician at her preferred sperm bank delivers

¹ Sarah Franklin, *Biological Relatives: IVF, Stem cells and the Future of Kinship* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), p.22.

² Susan Golombok, Beth Perry, Amanda Burston, Clare Murray, Julie Mooney-Somers, Madeleine Stevens, Jean Golding, "Children with lesbian parents: A community study." *Developmental Psychology* 39:1(2003), p.20.

³ Brandi Carlile, *Broken Horses: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 2021).

⁴ Amie Klemptauer Miller, *She Looks Just Like You: A Memoir of (Nonbiological Lesbian) Motherhood* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011).

⁵ Elia Psouni, Julia Berg and Hanna Persson, "Solo mothers' by choice experiences during pregnancy and early parenthood: Thoughts and feelings related to maternal health-services." *Sexual & Reproductive Healthcare* (2022).

⁶ Emma Brockes, *An Excellent Choice: My Solo Path To Motherhood* (London: Faber, 2018).

‘with the smoothness of a sommelier fielding a wine order at dinner’⁷ when she tells him her donor’s number. As her title suggests, Brockes’s account eschews engagement with queer or feminist politics in favour of an espousal of homonormativity – which is defined as a privatised, depoliticised gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them.⁸ This paper will argue that *An Excellent Choice* locates Brockes most saliently as a keen, individual-minded consumer in a largely unregulated marketplace, and her highly privileged positioning ultimately ‘blots from view’⁹ the much more numerous and socially vulnerable members of the North American LGBT+ community.

Neoliberal subjects, according to sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, are ‘atomised individuals, presumed autonomous, entrepreneurial and free, unfettered by increasingly disassembled social relations and community identities’;¹⁰ the logic being that a society one is ‘unfettered’ from is also a society that one is unaccountable to and for. A lack of social care, for want of a better phrase, troubles cultural anthropologist Margot Weiss, who argues that neoliberalism celebrates, endorses, and supports some aspects of sexuality, while at the same time limiting, policing, and punishing others.¹¹ This regime has fuelled homonormativity, which is, broadly, where members of the LGBT+ community uphold and perpetuate traditional heteronormative strategies: pursuing individual and family-based rights (such as same-sex and family recognition rights) and turning away from liberationist or radical demands for dismantling oppressive systems or promoting sexual freedom or pleasure.¹² *An Excellent Choice* illustrates the combined forces of neoliberalism and homonormativity acting on the individual, with Brockes’s journey towards motherhood presented as a highly individualistic project.

A Singular Enterprise

Early in her narrative, Brockes states that: ‘Motherhood made sense to me, the way books made sense to me and equations did not’.¹³ Such a statement aligns childbearing with academic study, which naturally leads to the world of professional work. This is an

⁷ Brockes, p.123.

⁸ Margot Weiss, “Queer Politics in Neoliberal Times (1970s–2010s).” *Routledge History of Queer America*. Ed. Romesburg, D. (New York: Routledge, 2018), p.111.

⁹ Weiss, 2018, p. 111.

¹⁰ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000). p.109.

¹¹ Margot Weiss, “Gay Shame and BDSM Pride: Neoliberalism, Privacy, and Sexual Politics.” *Radical History Review* 100 (2008), p.89.

¹² Ibid, p.109.

¹³ Brockes, p.10.

alignment that sharpens throughout her book: 'I also want a baby because I function best when there is some kind of resistance to overcome. Having a child is supposed to undermine one's ability to work, but [...] In the tiny chamber of my brain dedicated to pure self-advancement, I think a baby will maximise my performance.'¹⁴ A baby, according to Brockes, is the equivalent of a personal trainer for her career. The idea of a child being 'some kind of resistance' for a single lesbian parent to enjoyably 'overcome' illustrates Brockes's lack of knowledge or sensitivity regarding people in a similar situation: same-sex couples with children in the USA have lower household incomes (\$12,000 lower per year) and a 15 per cent lower home ownership rate than different-sex parents.¹⁵ Furthermore, LGBT+ single people also frequently suffer poor finances: 'more than one in five LGBT+ people who live alone report an income at or below the poverty level. In 2013, 2.4 million LGBT+ American adults did not have enough money to feed themselves or their family.'¹⁶ Rather than admit a baby as a potential site of struggle – particularly for the single LGBT+ person – Brockes is relishing the prospect of becoming a harder-working employee when her baby arrives, conforming to both neoliberal and homonormative principles.

Brockes's hard-working and individualistic spirit is one that has served her well and has allowed her to develop a lucrative journalism career. As such, she can seemingly make any choice she wants in order to pursue pregnancy. When her health insurers balk at her being single and enquiring about fertility costs being covered, she capitulates instantly: 'It's selfish [...] to make a lifestyle choice that deviates so spectacularly from the norm and then expect other people to pay for it seems to me a bit bloody much [...] Insurance be damned, I'll pay for it myself.'¹⁷ A lesbian and/or feminist critique could well have argued with the insurer – why should someone that 'deviates so spectacularly from the norm' be denied the chance to reproduce? Who has devised and ratified this 'norm'? Instead, Brockes embraces the mainstream – heterosexual, coupled – view of procreation, and funds her fertility treatment herself. Such a decision causes her no problems, though, as: 'I'm forty. I have a lot of savings. I've never spent more than I earn. I own property in one of the most valuable markets in the world [...] I even relish the prospect of a little financial pain; it will reboot my ambition [...] how expensive can one tiny baby be?'¹⁸ As with her hope that a baby would maximise her performance, the idea of a child 'rebooting' one's

¹⁴ Ibid, p.161.

¹⁵ Laura Mamo, *Queering Reproduction: Achieving Pregnancy In The Age of Technoscience* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), p.242.

¹⁶ Weiss, p.111.

¹⁷ Brockes, p.79.

¹⁸ Ibid, p.80.

ambition places childbearing as a spur to success in a harsh capitalist workplace: this way of thinking could be judged as either pluckily optimistic or dangerously naïve. Similarly, looking forward to ‘financial pain’ can only be an anticipation felt (or joked about) by the comfortably wealthy. Again, Brockes’s comment shows a demonstrable lack of understanding or recognition of wider issues affecting her community.

Motherhood may be an enterprise Brockes is keen on embarking on by herself, for career or other reasons, but it is one that she shares with a significant other. She has a partner, referred to as L, who has a three-year-old child conceived with a sperm donor when Brockes begins ART. Brockes is adamant that ‘I did not want a baby as a reflection of my love for her. I wanted a baby because I wanted a baby.’¹⁹ Yet she also admits that: ‘I am not, by some definitions, even single. I call L my ‘partner’ because what else can I say, but that doesn’t really cover the ground [...] the need for separation [...] is real.’²⁰

The need for separation – punctuated by the emotional and practical support a partner can bring – is fulfilled when a property in the serviced Manhattan apartment block upstairs from the one in which L lives becoming available. The rent is much higher than Brockes is used to, but that poses no great obstacle:

You might wonder how ‘I can’t afford it’ changed overnight to ‘I’ll take it’ and the answer is fantasy maths [...] after signing the lease and, by drawing on every creative fibre of my being, I use it to rationalise an extra \$24,000 on my annual rent bill. I’ll cut my gym membership. I’ll make my own sandwiches at home. I’ll cancel HBO. I’ll have my babies and never go out again: no booze, no dinners, not movies, no takeaway [...] If things get really tight, I’ll sell my apartment in London [...] worst-case scenario – and this is the real psychological enabler of middle-class life – there is always the parental spare room.²¹

Brocke’s revelation that, overnight, she can commit to spending a huge amount of money indicates how materially and psychologically distanced she is from a huge number of LGBT+ people and solo mothers: listing minor cost savings, such as sandwiches and takeaways, suggests there is a comical aspect to her decision. Such relatively small savings will not, obviously, total anywhere near the sum needed, and giving up a London property in order to cover a rental bill seems as unlikely as the independent, and highly successful, Brockes abandoning her partner to move continent with two small children to live with her father. Questions over Brockes’s account of her financial situation are compounded when her twins are discharged from hospital and she employs a \$2500 a

¹⁹ Brockes, p.3.

²⁰ Ibid, p.85.

²¹ Ibid, p.221.

week 24-hour live-in nanny for a month.²² One thing is clear: for Brockes, a traditional version of motherhood – two children, a loving partner living in close proximity, hired help – is achieved through her respect for, and presumably adroit manoeuvres within, the neoliberal capitalist system.

No Fucking Father

The attitude that an individualistically-minded lesbian who seeks to reproduce may have towards potential fathers of her child is summed up by two elements of Brockes's memoir. The first is the bluntly pragmatic title of one of her chapters: 'Sperm.' The second is her uncharacteristically vulgar response to a question posed by a male acquaintance during her pregnancy: 'I'm not being funny but who's the father? Who's the father? For fuck's sake. There *is* no fucking father.'²³ Men are no more than carriers of the fluid that will provide Brockes's children's genetic material – but they are subjected to the fiercest attention:

I want someone with a background similar to my own, to minimise the possibility of my child glamorising the donor and also lessen the number of items on my to-do list – take her to Peru; teach her Mandarin – to fill in the missing parts of her identity. This means a white, Anglo-Saxon (or, at a pinch, Catholic) American with Western European origins, educated to the same or higher standard as I was.²⁴

Brockes's explanations of her racial choices are only superficially persuasive – sensible and skilful parenting would prevent her offspring from 'glamorising' an African American or Asian American donor. Requesting a white donor does not make Brockes unusual – as Laura Mamo notes: 'The women I interviewed selected socially and physically dominant donors, assuming that their sperm would help "build" socially dominant offspring.'²⁵ Mamo does not mention race as a key indicator, but does quote Schmidt and Moore's argument that 'this is the ghost of eugenics reappearing as genetic selection.'²⁶ The eugenic dimension of her decision-making is admitted by Brockes: 'the act of choosing a sperm donor sadly flushes out the fascist in all of us.'²⁷ Eugenicist fascism is, perhaps, a logical consequence of what literary scholar Catherine Rottenberg calls 'hyper-

²² Ibid, p. 297.

²³ Ibid, p.197.

²⁴ Ibid, p.103.

²⁵ Mamo, p.214.

²⁶ Ibid, p.214.

²⁷ Brockes, p.107.

individualising neoliberal feminism, which construes women not only as entrepreneurial subjects but also as individual enterprises.²⁸ Such an individual simply, devastatingly – or ‘sadly’ (the underpowered adjective that Brockes uses when judging her own hard right-wing instincts) – makes the genetic selection that they believe will serve them best as citizens of the neoliberal USA.

A Consumer in A Marketplace

Brockes is an English native who moved to New York in her early thirties, and quickly decides to attempt to conceive via ART in her adopted country for reasons of expediency: ‘In Britain, as a single woman seeking a child, I am the subject of concerned official guidelines and head-shaking dismay. In the United States I am simply a consumer in a marketplace, not because I want a designer baby, but because that is how healthcare works, full stop.’²⁹ Her assessment is fair, given the chasm of differences between the regulatory approaches taken by the two countries. In the UK the advent of IVF led to the creation of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority, which directs and regulates Britain’s policies and laws. In the United States, by contrast, every attempt at creating a national policy on reproductive technology has failed.³⁰ In appreciating the latter regimen, Brockes positions herself as arch neoliberal consumer – ‘[I] consoled myself with the thought that I was in America – America! – where it is practically unconstitutional not to get what you want’³¹ and ‘I am weepingly, convulsively grateful to be in a country where the comfort of the mother comes first.’³² There is one cohort for which these statements may be correct – the wealthy white. For others, such as Black people, Brockes’s declarations appear infuriatingly obtuse; this group is twice as likely as white people to be infertile, ‘but IVF is not promoted for black couples, nor has anyone openly advocated covering the procedure by Medicaid for poor infertile couples.’³³ Lack of access to fertility services for communities of colour could well combine with a suspicion of the enterprise among individuals of colour, given reproductive medicine’s tortuously racist history. J. Marion Sims’s development of modern gynaecology was based on surgical experiments

²⁸ Catherine Rottenberg, *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020) p.8.

²⁹ Brockes, p.72.

³⁰ Margaret Marsh and Ronda Ronner, *The Pursuit of Parenthood*. (Baltimore, MA: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019). p.8.

³¹ Brockes, p.45.

³² *Ibid*, p.257.

³³ Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*. (New York: Pantheon, 1997). p. 254.

that he conducted on unanesthetized enslaved women.³⁴ Unlike Brockes, Americans of colour have good reason to not regard their country as invested in fulfilling their desires or enabling their comfort.

Brockes is aware of the risks presented by the American fertility industry, but is willing to accept, even champion, them in her bid to become a mother: 'While I laugh with my friends at the reckless Americans, I'm secretly, almost hysterically, grateful. It might be alarming to have produced a high-bordering-on-insane number of eggs this month, but [...] If I want a result, these are the breaks. I want a result. I will take my chances.'³⁵ The neoliberal potential mother is one who is willing to sacrifice everything, even potentially herself, in order to achieve her goal: a baby. Brockes is not an outlier in taking this stance: she is laughing with her friends, which suggests a group acceptance of the mores of North American ART. This chosen community is a rarefied one; one that could well only be available in Manhattan. As Brockes admits: 'Living where we do, it feels as if the girls [the twin daughters she conceived via Intrauterine Insemination] and I are one expression of a majority trend rather than the manifestation of a failure to get married. Psychologically, this makes a big difference.'³⁶ While Brockes does not reveal how much her fertility interventions cost, she admits that the costs of child rearing in her chosen city are substantial: 'There is no universal free anything. It is grindingly hard to raise two children on a single income in New York, and I say that as someone who is relatively prosperous.'³⁷ Ultimately, they are costs that she can meet: we can conclude that if one has the means to live in the epicentre of American cosmopolitanism, one can achieve the neoliberal, homonormative family life that Brockes narrates in her memoir.

An Excellent Daughter

While a memoir is necessarily a record of an individual's life – and that individual is free to provide a version of their existence as they see fit – an account such as Brockes's feasibly comes at the expense of other, more vulnerable, members of the LGBT+ community. As Weiss has argued: 'The myth of gay affluence, which promotes the image of the acceptable gay consumer-citizen, blots from view the many LGBT+ people who are manual workers, sex workers, unemployed, and imprisoned, queer and trans youth thrown out of their

³⁴ Harriet Washington, *Medical Apartheid* (New York: Harlem Moon, 2008). p.65.

³⁵ Brockes, p.145.

³⁶ Ibid, p.307.

³⁷ Brockes, p.302.

homes, homeless adults, and trans and queer poverty.³⁸ Brockes makes some gestures which suggest that she understands that the path she has taken cannot be easily trod by others: 'Of the roughly two million single parents in the UK, most of whom are women, nearly more than half live below the poverty line'.³⁹ However, she fails to make any such comments regarding would-be or actual parents within the LGBT+ community. Brockes's sperm-related choices may be 'excellent' but that word – and its connotations – are emblematic of her route to motherhood. In sum, in her memoir – which could have demonstrated a financial and emotional way forward for solo lesbians also hoping to start a family of their own – Brockes's choices are first and foremost punishingly expensive. In her narration of making them, Brockes does not attempt to challenge any inequalities or injustices perpetuated by a heterosexual-dominated, neoliberal society; instead, she reveals herself to be its most committed and energetic daughter.

³⁸ Weiss, 2018, p.111.

³⁹ Ibid, p.4.

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