Childfree across the Disciplines

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Academic and Activist Perspectives on Not Choosing Children

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Introduction

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DAVINIA THORNLEY

> I'm very interested in how you can write about what you love in a way that that love is conveyed.
> —Ludmilla Jordanova, quoted in Sword

I begin this introduction with Jordanova's quote precisely because this book performs service, and performing service is one expression of love. Here, the service that is performed works on several levels, and the labor is shared among a number of writers, each of whom has a unique perspective on childfreedom. I discuss these themes further in this introduction. However, it would be remiss of me not to first highlight the tireless work done by the childfree women and men before me, who have made it possible for a book such as this to exist. I specifically want to acknowledge Dr. Natalie Sappleton, who generously shared her extensive childfree contacts with me; Dr. Amy Blackstone, for charting the path; all the women involved with the 2017 NotMom Summit; and Cynthia Greenbrook, Louise Thornley, and Bronwyn Wylie-Gibb—three of my favorite childfree people. The penultimate award in this category goes to Dr. Pete Dulgar, my husband for a quarter century.

I have worked to include contributions from across a range of disciplines; I see interdisciplinarity as a major asset of this collection. Childfreedom (rather

than simply being bundled into "childlessness," as it has so often been in the past) is a newly recognized field and, as such, has very few dedicated primary or survey texts. Further, childfree people constitute a rising demographic; therefore, I see *Childfree across the Disciplines* as adding to this survey literature—from the specific political stance of recognizing and strengthening this field. This is also the reason I have included both original and reprinted work, from academics as well as those adjacent to or outside academia (activists, psychologists, executive coaches, authors, and so on). The purpose of such a structure was to bring together foundational articles on the childfree choice and put them in conversation with more recent works.

Readers may note some shifts in tone throughout these pieces: these shifts were a considered decision on my part. I chose not to require everyone in the group to significantly alter their writing in the hope of fitting into one academic mold; instead, I wanted these pieces to sit in relation to one another. I did request that all the authors of the reprinted chapters revisit and refresh their original pieces so they chime with our current debates around reproductive justice. It is sobering—and yet encouraging—to see the same concerns and questions occurring across work that spans thirty years and a wide spectrum of social activity.

For example, part I, Childfree Subjectivities, contains chapters that skewer current understandings of childfree people, in order to provide new psychological pathways and contracts that instead function to empower this group. This part transitions from traditional understandings of "the family" and serves as a natural segue into part II, Childfree Representation, which looks at the representation of childfree people using a sociological lens, through historical events and in the media. Part III, Childfree Economic and Environmental Perspectives, contains chapters addressing childfree positions on the current global economic and environmental uncertainty; these authors unequivocally advocate for new ways of understanding childfree people's contributions in these areas. In part IV, Childfree Redefinitions, the authors provide new definitions—new narratives—about being childfree that point toward a future when childfreedom is not simply an accepted life choice but instead is recognized for the pivotal role it can play in the healing of the planet. Rounding out all the previous parts, this one provides a "state of the movement" of childfreedom.

In her book *Voluntary and Involuntary Childlessness: The Joys of Otherhood?*, Sappleton also recognizes that an "out" (to borrow LGBT+ slang) childfree conversation has only just begun, stating that her anthology "represents the start of a transdisciplinary conversation on an issue that has wide implications and ramifications for individual lives, societies and economies" (6). Throughout each chapter in *Childfree across the Disciplines*, therefore, the focus is on the interplay between childfreedom, social ideologies, and activism, rather than

beginning from a justification of the childfree choice per se. Instead, the book asks how childfree people negotiate their subjectivity in a media-saturated landscape that is changing demographically, economically, and culturally, providing a still "too hard to find"—but necessary—space for childfree concerns. Or, as pithily summarized by one of the contributors, Berenice M. Fisher, via her study participant's comment, "Rachel described the time she was on her way to the zoo and was stopped by a friend who wanted to know 'who I was taking.' 'I said,' continued Rachel, 'I was taking *me*'" (chapter 1).

Recognizing and Honoring Childfreedom

> "Although I never felt abnormal, I always knew that others would see me that way" (Martinez and Andreatta 225).

For the past thirty years, academia has understood childfreedom in purely negative terms. Before that, the institution nullified the concept completely (Agrillo and Nelini; Chancey; Healey; Kelly; Lynch et al.; Shapiro). To zero in on one pertinent moment in history, the tumultuous 1970s, clear divisions were already in place between the U.S. national non-parent organization, NON, and majority feminist understandings. As Jenna Healey records in her article on the rise (and eventual demise) of NON, "although NON and liberal feminists found common cause in their denunciation of the 'motherhood mystique,' NON's complete rejection of reproduction clashed with those who identified motherhood as a fundamentally feminist issue" (143). And it is hardly only feminists who struggle with validating childfree concerns; many mainstream adherents are not aware of what those concerns *are*, or perhaps even that they exist.

An apt example can be seen in my process of publishing this anthology. I reached out to a range of publishers in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada; the majority were university presses, but a few were not. Most were enthusiastic about my remit; however, I received a response from one of the independent publishers that gave me pause. The editor for the series I was considering, while initially very supportive of the project himself, paraphrased the publisher's lack of interest: "I must confess that the publishers did not seem hugely excited by the theme of the collection. I guess the response could be summed up as 'sounds like first world/middle class problems.' . . . This is my summary of their response, not their words. In any case, this does not bode well."

Once I responded that childfree people were everywhere (even if they were not currently recognized by their own countries or classes)—and also mentioned that two university presses were interested at that time—the publishers rethought their initial position and requested sending the anthology out

for review. I declined. I share this story for a few reasons: first, to demonstrate the constant low-level apathy and dismissal that childfree people face (as Avivi, Brewster and Snow, and others eloquently describe here). Second, as evidenced by this publisher's initial response, there remains a great deal of misunderstanding and stereotyping about what being childfree entails. Rather, recent work on childfree people from developing countries such as India (Nandy) and, indeed, quite dated examinations of childlessness among the lower classes (a 1985 article by William Kenkel, for example), quickly precludes any suggestion that forgoing children is relegated to only certain countries or demographic groups. (Instead, the publisher's reluctance may just as easily point to the epistemological narrowness and methodological biases accompanying much academic gatekeeping.) And, third, I share the history of that publisher's reception of this anthology to show that the global conversation is changing—in fact, has changed. In the end, I was in the enviable position of choosing between several offers. I am grateful to the new vanguard of editors who welcomed this project, particularly Kimberly Guinta (as well as her assistant, Jasper Chang), whom I eventually chose and who has shepherded us so carefully throughout.

Despite the relatively uneasy relationship between childfreedom and feminism, Sappleton's collection also makes it clear that her work is unapologetically feminist; but—I would argue—hers is a feminism that recognizes, like the work of Ingrid Lynch and others, that feminists need theories of diversity and plurality rather than universality. Glenice Wood and Janice Newton are uncompromising in skewering "the failure of feminist approaches to really challenge motherhood, and in fact their tendency to valorize women's procreative potential and mothering practices" (347). The often totalizing discourse around womanhood equaling motherhood cannot account for the childfree, thus leaving feminism in the difficult position of not accommodating those for whom it professes to speak. Indeed, according to Rivka Polatnick, "voluntary childlessness represents an opportunity for women to opt out of a central component of women's oppression." This recognition challenges many feminists' basic tenets—often in uncomfortable ways.

Rejecting Deficit Thinking

> "Why we do or don't have children, now that most of us have a choice, is one of the most fascinating questions anyone can ask about human nature" (chapter 5).

As Tracy Morison and others have argued, much of the research on childfree people to date comes from a "problem perspective." These authors do not hesitate to suggest that this perspective stems from assumptions about who should be reproducing and who should not. That is, being childfree is seen as a problem

if those targeted as "ideal reproductive subjects" (e.g., married, White, middle-class, able-bodied, heterosexual women or couples) choose not to answer the call of duty and reproduce: "The project of pronatalism—the political, ideological, and religious system designed to encourage childbearing and retain high birth rates within nation-states—is designed to get us to be concerned only with populating the earth with people who share our national, cultural and racial identities. As a result, many nations and states worry that 'their people' are not repopulating 'their territory' at acceptable rates even though the global territory we share is already overburdened with too many of us" (12).

And the contest over reproduction is, despite Hallmark card ideologies and heavy-handed political incentives to reproduce, very much a battleground. As contributor Anna Gotlib defines it, those childfree "women most pressured to reproduce in the context of the bad moral luck of pronatalism" fight to abstain every day. I would go so far as to suggest that childfree people are conscientious objectors on this reproductive battleground. I arrived at this position from considering my (now deceased) maternal grandfather's experience as a conscientious objector during World War II. Family lore around his position was scarce, but I do know he received white feathers in his mailbox, spent time in jail because of his stance, and had to relocate his family from their small farming town to Auckland, the largest city in New Zealand and the only place he could still confidently find work, given his stance and—specifically—his home community's rejection of it.

I asked myself what it meant that men *had* war and women *had* babies—and what it meant that I did not want my own. I posit that many other childfree people have asked themselves similar questions. Thinking deeply about these issues led to me understanding myself as childfree, but I harbor no illusions that my grandfather would have aligned our causes, as I have here. (Not surprisingly, the subject was never broached while he was alive.) I imagine he would be distressed by my decision, and yet I have made it anyway. Across the world, in countless ways often unremarked upon, others are making the same choice. This book is not about justifying our choice. That said, childfree people are very often punished and ostracized for making such a decision.

Adi Avivi, another of the contributors in this collection, has written elsewhere about this treatment: "I was threatening to other women, as my childfreedom implied there was a choice involved in childrearing. The paved and familiar path for womanhood was not a must. I learned that some people are uncomfortable with unusual choices. But I also learned that being outspoken moves others. Women who demand public space despite being a sore spot for the hegemony might be appreciated and even loved by some, even needed for those who are different as well but for whatever reason could not be out (yet)" (145). And so, while this collection surveys the current childfree position and how it is understood, the book's primary focus is not a litany of

"stigma and negative sanctions" (Lynch et al. 34). The main focus, in fact, is celebration and recognition. We are here. We have always been here. We are not going away. We love and cherish our lives.

Terminology

> "I always thought that childless sounded as if you were deprived of something, like penniless or homeless. . . . Childfree is more, like, the dog is free of fleas" (participant's comment, Ball 51).

Talking about being childfree is difficult because parenthood is the norm. As Blackstone understands, we cannot "see" childfreedom clearly because our world is organized around parenting. She employs a quote from gender sociologist Judith Lorber to describe how hard it can be: "Talking about gender for most people is the equivalent of fish talking about water." The same can be said for pronatalism, as it is metaphorically the water we swim in; it constitutes our everydayness and, as such, it has only recently been up for examination. For the childfree, however, it can often feel as though there is an excess of water.

But Blackstone also recognizes that while she had originally understood childfreedom as an overlooked phenomenon (or simply a currently trendy media topic), in fact the movement is much more than that; as she states, "this cultural moment isn't just a moment" (xv). Childfree choices tap into everyone's choices about their reproductive lives but also into areas that may seem, on the surface, tangential but that are actually pivotal to all life experiences, such as family relations, concerns about aging, and how we organize and legislate both our work and our time away from work.

Since 2003, when Rosemary Gillespie interviewed twenty-five childfree women for an influential article published in *Gender and Society*, an understanding has developed that being childfree is not only (or simply) about lack or a "choice not to." It is just as wholeheartedly a movement toward "a positive feminine identity separate from motherhood" (133). So, reproductive refusal is reconstructed in positive terms, according to Denise Lievore, "as a desire for conditions conducive to a satisfying life, rather than simply a choice against motherhood or an absence of maternality" (37). This perspective is seconded by Gotlib, in her chapter concluding this collection, as she wholeheartedly embraces the possibilities that a childfree life represents.

That said, a focus on choice, while important and timely (given the current war on reproductive rights), risks individualizing and reducing what a childfree life stands for. As Sappleton suggests in her conclusion, "much existing research on voluntary childlessness attributes to the childless state a solidity and immutability that privileges the sphere of individual agency and overlooks the pre-structured contexts in which actors operate" (381). Such a focus also

disregards the fact that childfree decision-making never occurs in a vacuum and, further, that weighty pressures (race, class, gender, sexism, pronatalism, etc.) constrain childfree people's ability to ever make unfettered choices, just as they also constrain options for those who want children. Instead, as Gordon Carmichael and Andrea Whittaker recognize, "family formation is intimately negotiated, rationalized and experienced through dynamic interplay between material conditions, personal aspirations, gender relations, social values, and biological limitations" (140).

Therefore, in modeling my choice of terminology in this collection I am following the lead of Julia Moore, who coined the term "reproductive consciousness" in her 2014 article on LiveJournal childfree communities. Reproductive consciousness provides a way to understand "the shared activist mission of childfreedom" (173). This takes two forms: one, a recognition that childfreedom is not possible without access to reproductive freedom (including access to abortion, contraception, and sterilization), and two, the hope of childfree people that "all people will become conscious that having children is a choice, for too many people have children without considering the option not to" (174). But there is a further level of subtlety here, as childfree people understand that until there is equal respect from both sides (childfree and parents), no one, quite simply, is actually free. Both groups must accord the other side the space to make reproductive decisions that honor their own lives. And so reproductive freedom makes possible reproductive consciousness, which ultimately can lead to reproductive justice.

Morison et al. expand on the possibilities inherent in using such a term: "Potentially, a strategy of resistance may emerge that involves digging below the surface of "spoiled" identities and the norm of parenthood to relate them to wider structural, gendered, class- and race-based inequities. Placing arguments within such a social framework prevents nonadherence to the procreation imperative from being located in individual deviance or pathology; it allows for a critical view of the ways that pronatalist discourses impact on people in different ways, and it potentially helps to spotlight common causes and injustices" (195). As one example of this activism, *Childfree across the Disciplines* works toward a world where society accords the childfree the same centrality, respect, and ordinariness as parents.

Further, to specifically address the use of the term "childfree" in this book head-on, I make the argument that at this stage in history we have moved past having to defend the choice to use "free" (rather than "less") within this word. I align myself with Blackstone, who writes, "the terms we use are important. Having different terms for different circumstances allows us to better understand the particulars of each experience. In one case [childfree], the person is living the life they've chosen for themselves and in the other [childless], they are not" (49). Childfreedom is inevitable in the twenty-first century. And so,

Childfree across the Disciplines unequivocally takes a stance supporting the subversive potential of the childfree choice, allowing readers to understand being childfree as a sense of continuing potential in who—or what—a person can become (Doyle et al. 11). As Gotlib demonstrates, "this, in turn, creates space for perspective, depth, and nuance, making it possible to say 'this is who I am as a childfree [person]' without apology or accommodation of those who are uncomfortable with shifting normativities."

Chapter Summaries

Berenice M. Fisher's chapter was originally written thirty years ago, and yet the concerns she raises—and the solutions she suggests—seem prescient of our own time. Formally interviewing twenty-three women without children (as well as including informal discussions with approximately thirty additional women), Fisher examines three major themes in relation to this group: the social value of women without children; gender identity in relation to this role; and how symbolic time functions in the women's payment of a "social debt." The conversations can be, in fact, quite disheartening to read, if we take the position of realizing how little has changed in childfree people's lives since Fisher's time of writing, but this is not the reason I chose to include her chapter. Rather, harking back to the start of this introduction, Fisher's work caught my eye because of her clear love for her subject. She was writing about an identity and a set of ideals that still serve to show everyone—including people who may have or want children—"how to create valued and valuable lives." Like another contributor, Natalia Cherjovsky, Fisher understands that "childfree people are not a problem to be solved."

Melanie Elyse Brewster and Olivia Snow tackle some of these former assumptions about childfree people head-on, using the minority stress framework. This model highlights the difficulties of functioning as part of a historically disenfranchised group; childfree people are no exception. Akin to sexual orientation, reproductive and family building decisions are often dismissed as "lifestyle choices" rather than recognized or affirmed as a core part of one's personhood, values, and identity. As their decision not to have children is frequently dismissed as selfish or temporary, childfree people struggle to make others understand that their choice is a core part of who they are. Along these lines, I offer an apt example, one close to both the academic discipline I specialize in and to my own positioning as a childfree woman: it is clear that media and our collective culture support this institutionalized family narrative, without considering the possibility that some people would be in favor of choosing a less conventional life path if it was made more socially acceptable to do so.

Adi Avivi then makes a compelling case for the current struggle faced by childfree people, one marked less by outright discrimination and more by microaggressions, making it difficult for childfree people to find their way in the world as "fully met" individuals or, in Avivi's terms, to achieve intersubjectivity. Intersubjectivity allows each person to feel fully recognized in his or her own right, without being subject to the often constant control exerted by dominant society attempting to pin the childfree person down, often as an "other." Instead, Avivi suggests psychologists and others interacting with childfree people can act as advocates for them, "ensur[ing] that various states of self can be safely experienced." This "informed ally-ship" allows those with current social capital to speak up for childfree people.

While Avivi's chapter is directed outward, Amanda Michiko Shigihara reverses the lens, concentrating on the lived experience of childfree women themselves. In particular, she examines the benefits of being childfree by squarely reorienting the casual judgment that being childfree is "selfish" toward the much more useful category of self-care. Shigihara understands that childfree people have asked hard questions about one's ability to "do it all," recognizing that the statement is not only unrealistic but also damaging, to women particularly but also to everyone who cares for others (i.e., all people). One respondent from a related study agreed: "I'm one of those people who doesn't believe that you can do all those things [motherhood and career] equally well and everybody turns out all right. I think that's a fantasy. I think it's a delusion, the superwoman thing" (Kelly 163). Instead, the women in Shigihara's study classed themselves as "woke" (Shelby) in that they knew "when I'm healthy and happy, I can help my family and friends be healthy and happy" (Adelaide). That realization, in turn, is predicated on knowing "it's empowering to be able to say, no, I don't want children" (Billie).

Christopher Clausen's republished chapter leads off part II of *Childfree across the Disciplines*. Similar to several other contributors, Clausen shares his own perspective on being childfree; however, his overarching view stretches from the early 1970s through to the current COVID-19 crisis. Clausen has updated his chapter with recent statistics in order to drive home his original, still entirely valid thesis: that childfree people are often at the mercy of a much larger and longer-running cultural conversation that constantly rearranges where (or whether) they are allowed to fit in. Ranging gracefully across demographic reports, literary classics, pop psychology, internet forums, religious screeds, and research articles, Clausen concludes "most people fundamentally want to have children and do, almost regardless of circumstances, while a minority prefers not to and sees no good reason why it should. . . . Not everyone is wired the same way." In this way, Clausen forefronts a fundamental premise of the *Childfree across the Disciplines* collection: childfree people receive "uneasy tolerance"

rather than "full acceptance," but, at the same time, childfree people are ubiquitous and—in many important areas and ways—are thriving. Both facts are possible, even if only the former is commonly acknowledged. This collection aims to change that situation.

As a pertinent case study, Laura Carroll uses social movement theory to analyze the recently reinstated International Childfree Day (ICD) within the larger global context of the evolution and growth of the international childfree community. ICD, held on the first of August each year, is a day dedicated to childfree adults—putting into concrete action the premises outlined in both Fisher's and Clausen's chapters. Specifically foregrounding the contributions that the childfree make to society, the organizers also give "Winner of the Year" awards to both a "Childfree Person" and a "Childfree Group." Taking a historical perspective, Carroll looks back at the origins of ICD as Non-parents Day, examining the dissolution of that day and that organization and the reasons for this, as well as the reinstatement of the event in 2013. ICD contributes to the expanding narrative around the childfree, one that acknowledges and promotes the honored role they will play in solving many of our current concerns.

Taking up the representation of the childfree in another public, but more established mode, Natalia Cherjovsky looks at how television and cinema fail to adequately imagine childfree people and their lives. Ranging across a number of popular shows from the last few decades, Cherjovsky discusses *Sex in the City*, *Seinfield*, *Friends*, *Grey's Anatomy*, and *The Big Bang Theory*, among others. She then narrows in on what she sees as the most blatant offender of them all, the film *Four Christmases*, suggesting as it does that the childfree are "people who are simply in denial about their own desires and [will] end up realizing the folly of not procreating." There is a dearth of representations that make childfree people—and, in particular, women—sympathetic to the viewer, an issue of representation that powerhouse writers such as Shonda Rhimes understand all too well. Rhimes recognizes the value of seeing those not like yourself on screen, in order that you can learn from them and even perhaps, in time, "learn to love them." Cherjovsky's concern is that childfree people are *still* painted as flawed and in need of "repair," when, as she says, "the only thing in need of repair here is the way we think."

As the author of *An Atypical Chick: A Gay Man in a Woman's Body*, Rhonny Dam has written from firsthand experience about a number of touchy social subjects. She likewise confronts several environmental "elephants in the room" throughout this chapter, which begins part III of the collection. She cites the connection between climate crises and the world's unsustainable population growth, as well as "outing" the refusal of many people (both parents and parents-to-be) to acknowledge that their pronatalist aspirations have a wider—and more irreversible—impact than simply on their own family situation. Dam's

unflinching ability to call out these faulty assumptions is one of the reasons I chose her work for this collection, while another is the evident support that Dam shows for childfree people throughout her writing and her activism, both of which are firmly embedded in a lifelong commitment to Mother Earth.

Laura S. Scott then examines how financial considerations impact reproductive decision-making in the United States. Utilizing her original research and survey of 171 self-described childless-by-choice men and women, as well as interviews with female executives, professionals, and women in academia, Scott notes that for much of the national population, parenthood is a decision rather than an assumption. Scott's work sympathetically highlights the hard choices I wrote about earlier in this introduction, those urgent and ongoing economic shortfalls that restrict—and often completely curtail—people's ability to plan for any future family. While the purpose of this collection is to validate and support childfree decisions, it is imperative we understand that those decisions are always made in relationship to others' choices, including parents-to-be. We all swim in the same water. Tracing such demographic changes as the rise of female breadwinners, later marriages, and a growing recognition of the often severe opportunity costs of having children, Scott paints a picture of an American populace who increasingly feel the need, and the responsibility, to strictly limit their family size.

Erika Arias' work firmly aligns itself with the new cultural narrative suggested by both Dam and Scott, one in which the choice to be childfree is acknowledged as both responsible and timely, given the current environmental and economic crises. Like Dam, Arias recognizes that incipient and pressing connections need to be made between environmental activism and population sustainability. However, she also understands the conventional pressures that keep people from making such connections and, perhaps even more unsettlingly, from acting on that awareness. Intriguingly, she examines the psychosocial conditioning that occurs at a micro level in people's lives, suggesting that it is these "small," everyday decisions that complicate and impede macro environmental changes. Given that human evolution has reached a point "whereby the choice to parent demands reexamination," Arias makes a compelling case for childfreedom as one "means of open discussion about how procreative decisions influence the world outside the family unit."

For the final part of *Childfree across the Disciplines*, I chose to focus on work that fundamentally revisions how we can understand people who forgo having children. Laurie Lisle's book *Without Child: Challenging the Stigma of Childlessness* was a lifeline for me when I first picked it up in the early 2000s and has remained so over the past two decades. (My copy of her book bristles with no fewer than twenty sticky notes!) I have frequently found myself reaching for her work when I needed to orient myself over the often rocky terrain of pronatalism, as well as in relation to my own concerns regarding growing

up—and growing older. There is a graciousness inherent in her writing that also comes through in the chapter she has contributed here, which touches lightly on several interconnected subjects. Lisle echoes philosopher Margaret Simons's argument that "it's my belief that for feminism to be really 'pro-choice,' a woman must be able to choose not to be a mother without losing her self-respect or her identity as a woman," focusing instead on all the ways that women (and men as well) have cultivated different, bountiful lives. Speaking for myself, I never felt that I was missing out. However, perhaps most poignantly for Lisle's fellow academic contributors and potential readers, and in another example of the need to create a conversation between those inside and outside of the academy, she warns those who have dedicated their lives to developing and relying on an intellectual grasp of the world that *this focus alone* can be "perilous." Everyone needs a strong connection to "the stuff of life"; for childfree people, that link is often found through their non-natal bodily experiences, relationships, community belonging, the companionship of animals, and deep interactions with nature and art.

Anna Gotlib's chapter rounds out *Childfree across the Disciplines*. I began this introduction talking about the important of both service and love in relation to childfree people. This book is an unapologetic statement of love *for* childfree people and the worldview they represent, but the book makes this statement by foregrounding the love that childfree people share *for* and *with* the world through the service they perform. Gotlib's stance on both is clear throughout her chapter; in fact, she advocates moving beyond the current dichotomies present in mainstream terminology for this group. Narrative progress can be found through "an un-silencing, un-othering of the female body that neither desires children, nor wishes to be understood primarily in relation to those desires." And narrative progress, as this book has shown, leads to lived progress.

Rebecca Solnit, another childfree author of note, recognizes (across almost all of her oeuvre) that the ideologies we now uphold are *precisely* made possible by sustained rhetorical and political work, by steadfastly moving a particular vision into the mainstream. Childfreedom is one of those realities and it is made so by the commitment of childfree people (and those who support them) to carving out space in the current cultural conversation. We all move forward together.

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Part I

Childfree Subjectivities

1

Affirming Social Value

Women without Children

BERENICE M. FISHER

> I think it would be great if there was something like the Katherine Hepburn Society to honor women who don't have children.
> —Sylvia, interviewee

For many women like myself, who reached middle age without having children, the current idealization of motherhood recalls a similar trend of the 1950s. In that period, childless women were often portrayed as biologically and psychologically inadequate, as adults who had defaulted on their debt to family and society, as females who were not "real women." Women without children sometimes minimized this social devaluation by strengthening ties to traditional family or community life—helping to raise siblings' children, caring for aging parents, joining religious orders, or working as volunteers for philanthropic organizations. These women also challenged the belief that mothering was required to give their lives meaning by joining counterculture groups, devoting themselves to political activism, or pursuing careers.

Feminists produced a small literature on childlessness as well. At its margins, a few courageous voices argued against motherhood or explored the deeper meaning of childlessness (Allen; Klepfisz; Simons). However, most feminist

writing basically sought to normalize the choice not to have or raise children. Feminist social researchers in particular approached childlessness as a growing way of life with its own rewards and liabilities (Burgwyn; cf. Russo; Veevers). Their writing presented a strong critique of "pronatalism" and "mandatory motherhood": government policies and social mores that virtually forced women to become mothers in order to be deemed and treated like adult human beings. This literature effectively attacked the false belief that something was "wrong" with married couples who did not have children. By narrowing its perspective to such couples, however, this literature tended to perpetuate the assumption that parenting was irrelevant, inappropriate, abnormal, or immoral for unmarried individuals or couples. The emphasis on married couples also downplayed the fact that childbearing and raising children are still primarily women's business and that childlessness has especially profound implications for women.[1]

My purpose in this essay is to explore the meaning of not having children in the lives of childless women. In seeking interviewees, I avoided looking for the "average" childless woman. Rather, the interviews included many women whose voices are rarely heard: unmarried women with male partners, single heterosexual women, lesbians who are single or in couples, African American women, and disabled women. I spoke with women who were relatively "resolved" about being childless and currently did not expect to bear or adopt children.[2] These women saw not having children as more of a choice than a fate imposed on them. The line between choice and fate is not always clear, of course. Economics, changes in reproductive technology, laws and customs concerning abortion and adoption, political movements, adult socialization experiences, and personal relationships all interact in the choice or lack of choice about having children. This profusion of factors makes the effort to explain "why" women do not have children problematic. Moreover the focus on "why" sustains the idea that there is something "wrong" to be accounted for. My own approach places less emphasis on why women do not have children than on how women without children have created meaningful lives in the face of the direct or indirect disapproval or marginalization they experience. My approach invites us to question the assumption that childbearing or child-rearing is basic to women's social value. This approach suggests that we can learn from women without children not only how to survive social pressures, but how to create valued and valuable lives.

Family and the Social Value of Women without Children

Although women have always been elevated in terms of their capacity for biological reproduction, the development of industrial society led to a special loss

of social value for women without children. With the separation of work from home and the development of a "cult of domesticity" that equated the social value of middle-class women with their nurturing capacity, women without husbands, children, or both became social anomalies (Cott; Harris; Jeffreys; Matthaei; Vicinus).[3] Childless women could not easily play a central role in the family. They did not belong to a group of peers who could corroborate their social value; they had no social world of their own (cf. Glaser and Strauss, *Awareness* 38; Strauss, "Social World").

To this day, women without children have no common activity, no common language. They share a common stigma, but the meaning of that stigma often varies for the women themselves (cf. Goffman). As a result, women without children often hesitate to refer to their common childlessness (Faux 103). One woman I interviewed for the study feared talking to a close cousin who was also childless because the cousin, who wanted children, was having difficulty conceiving. "Sometimes I want to talk," said the interviewee, "but I don't know how." "I think," said another, "that there is a great silence that surrounds this issue."

Certain collective responses to the lack of a social world for childless people have emerged in recent years. Married couples who are voluntarily childless ("childfree," some prefer to say) have created organizations for non-parents (Veevers).[4] Lesbian and gay male couples have made strong claims to be treated as family units whether or not they have children (cf. Crawford 1987). Yet none of these efforts speaks directly to the social value of women as women without children. That question is one that many childless women have had to face alone—not because they are isolated individuals (many have very rich emotional and social lives) but because they lack a social world to support that particular aspect of their lives.

The most prominent issue that affects women without children is their relationship to the family system. Some childless women develop or maintain relatively traditional ties to family–even though other aspects of their lives take them quite far from traditional roles. Many of the women with whom I spoke were attached to traditional family units and played some part in nurturing children. Ariel helped raise her sister's son for several years when her recently divorced sister moved in with her. She related to one of her former students as a "daughter," and to the student's child as a "grandchild." Toni babysits her nieces and nephews, keep them overnight at her apartment, and takes them on trips. Miriam has become close to a child who lives down the street and considers her "my surrogate daughter." Pamela attended the birth of her friend Ella's son and has spent time with and taken care of him almost weekly since he was born.

Another relatively traditional path for women without children is to identify themselves with an institution that complements family life, such as a

family-orientated philanthropy or religious order. For Catholic women, joining an order has long provided a way to maintain social value without having children. Sally, for instance, contrasted her life as a nun with that of her older sister, who has continued to live at home with her mother. Although the sister, Peggy, has done some volunteer work with children, her contribution to the community is not valued as much as Sally's. As a nun who has taught for thirty years and who is planning to move into a residence that cares for children, Sally sees herself as having had a wider and richer life than she would have had as a wife and mother. But she also admires the "strength" it took for her good friend Mary to raise five children. By Sally's account, both their lives have value, complementing each other in the greater scheme of things.

In some family contexts, however, the definition of a woman's role and the particular life choices made by the woman herself render such accommodation more difficult. Barbara's Italian American family members viewed women's lives in terms of a "whole picture," a domestic ideal in which the husband earned enough so that his wife could stay home and care for the children. After Barbara's early marriage ended and she became a lesbian, there was no way she could live up to this familial ideal. After years of effort, she and her longtime lover Margaret had managed to get the family to accept their relationship. Barbara could not imagine introducing a child into this situation. But because neither she nor Margaret had an urgent desire for children, this did not pose a problem. They found that they could maintain a comfortable relationship with Barbara's family if they drastically reduced their contact with them. When she was married, Barbara said, she spent "70 percent of her time with family." Now, she noted, "my family is my friends."

For any woman whose ties to her family of origin have become strained or loosened, the redefinition of family becomes an important strategy for building a social world and maintaining a social value system (Fisher and Galler; Lindsey; Rubin). For women without children, friendship seems to play an especially important part. Researchers on voluntary childlessness note how often married woman without children view their husbands as their best friends (Veevers 117). The women I interviewed often referred to friendships with women as the relationships on which they relied to carry them through difficult times, including old age.

Friendship families may be particularly important to childless women who are cut off or alienated from their family of origin. The absence of such relationships sometimes promotes the fantasy creation of family. Sylvia, whose traditionally Jewish family pressured her relentlessly to have children, imagined sending them an announcement for her latest art show that pictured a stork delivering her paintings. Donna, whose only kinship connection consisted of her mother, had found her acting career a source of imaginary family relations as she played various roles: "I would make these little families wherever I went."

Hayden, who had suffered child sexual abuse by men in her family, had created a family of stuffed animals with her lover: "We have a whole fantasy world of 'the children'. . . . It's very charming, and it's really fun."

The women I interviewed variously maintained a sense of social value through attachment to traditional families, pursuing roles that were complementary to the family, reducing pressures on themselves by pointing to siblings who preserved family continuity, gaining special exemption from the motherhood mandate, reducing time spent with family, redefining family as friends, and projecting fantasy creations of family. Yet the strategies were neither merely instrumental (no one develops deep relationships with a child or with friends simply for the sake of maintaining social value) nor substitutes for motherhood (seen as giving women more authentic value). On the contrary, the women with whom I spoke had a strong sense of value despite the socially devaluing context in which they lived. Some expressed strong resentment that family in any form would be seen as the source of this social value. Assessing their rights to be valued as individuals, they emphasized the virtues of privacy and solitude: "I am my own best friend," said Toni. Even when solitude was not prized for its own sake, some women expressed resentment that childlessness was seen as precluding them from life pleasures. Rachel described the time she was on her way to the zoo and stopped by a friend who wanted to know "who I was taking." "I said," continued Rachel, "I was taking *me*."

Yet Rachel's claim to value as an individual was supplemented by her dream of living in a small community, where she could "be friendly to everybody and have everybody know my name." A number of other women also projected a version of a world in which their values and society's values meshed more easily. Some indicated that they might have decided to have children if the world had contained more available and responsible men truly to share child-rearing. Others thought they might have had children if they had had more money or lived in a social system in which they did not have to exploit other women (low-paid domestic and childcare workers) in order both to raise a child and to pursue their work. These remarks conveyed less sense of regret about not having children than resentment at living in a world in which women's choices were so constrained, in which their own choices had not been freer ones.

For no matter how strongly they affirmed their social value, many of the women reported continued devaluation. Some talked about being treated like children because they did not have children; others pointed to the fact that they were expected to support and praise parents and their children for accomplishments within the family system (births, graduations, weddings, etc.) without receiving equivalent support and praise for their own accomplishments. Thus, although several women expressed feelings of loss or mourning about not having children, it is difficult to tell how much of that feeling arose from childlessness itself and how much stemmed from the loss of social value entailed in

being a childless woman. While feelings of mourning over childlessness may increase as a woman reaches menopause (Burgwyn), so might the feeling that society has not sufficiently valued her life as she has lived it.

Childlessness and Gender Identity

For women without children, the "failure" to go through the expected status passage into motherhood renders gender identity especially contingent (Glaser and Strauss, *Status Passage*; Maines and Hardesty). The women I interviewed responded to the sense of contingency in two basic ways: by questioning the distinction between women and men and by challenging the centrality of motherhood in the social definition of woman.

The refusal to accept "woman" as a self-evident category grew out of life experiences. Shelagh noted that, from childhood, her younger brother had been nurturant, while she herself never wanted children. "Genderwise," she said, "we were backward." Although Shelagh had been married for several years, she later became a lesbian and now described herself as "androgynous." Rachel, who had had a series of affairs with men, disliked "woman" as an identifying term and thought of herself as "an adult human being." Barbara willingly identified herself as a woman but then defined "woman" in terms that minimized its gender implications.

Most of the women with whom I spoke were not eager to challenge gender categories, and feminist literature on disability suggests a possible reason for this reluctance (Fine and Asch). The status of "woman" is not automatically granted to female human beings; for some groups of women the status is especially difficult to achieve. Karen, who had been disabled from birth, described the situation clearly. Because her parents and others doubted whether she could fulfill many of the conventional expectations for women, she grew up in "a genderless state." For a long time, motherhood seemed irrelevant in comparison to her "unspoken desire" for male attention. Validation for her womanhood finally came through participation in a feminist consciousness-raising group and the support it gave her to become a psychotherapist—which she considers a nurturing profession. With the confidence gained from these achievements, she was able to risk looking for and finding male lovers. Although she saw her disability as no hindrance to motherhood, she had little interest in having children. Nor did she see motherhood as adding to her identity as a woman.

The women I interviewed mentioned many other factors that they variously took as central to their self-definition as women. Pamela saw sexuality as an alternative source of fulfillment. Vivian loved clothes and took great pleasure in wearing them. Others describe their nurturing relationships with friends as an important part of how they define themselves as women. But like Karen,

whose gender-associated view of her work played a crucial role in validating her womanhood, many of the women with whom I spoke saw their work as central in establishing their gender identity. In this respect, they followed the long-standing strategy of appropriating the nurturing role separate from mothering. This strategy has played a particularly important part in the historical development of the women's human service professions, through which women have been able to legitimate their gender identity at the same time that they established their independence from the family system (Fisher, "Alice"). Thus, Ariel, who had taught many students in the course of her own lengthy musical career, described them as her children: "I feel I am mothering and nurturing in that way."

Political activism also has provided women with opportunities for establishing gender identity outside motherhood. Hayden saw her dedication to environmental activism as an expression of her "maternal sense about the planet Mother Earth" and described herself as having "this very intense relationship with my valley [the valley she had fought to save] . . . All those trees were like children, and if they were ever to flood that valley, it would kill me." And finally, artistic creativity provided several women I interviewed with a similar opportunity to make gender-associated activity key to their identities. Hayden also saw her writing as "akin to what a woman gives to a baby when she's up late at night." Sylvia talked about her painting as "a birthing process."

Some of the women rejected this equation between gender identity and nurturing, while others found that they could not sustain high levels of nurturing activity. Hilla frankly declared herself as lacking that "caring, social thing" that women were supposed to have. Miriam had devoted herself to teaching for a number of years, and although she saw herself as "the best," burnout eventually caused her to shift her work: "Sometimes I felt like an enormous breast, and they were just sucking and sucking, and I was dried up and had no more to give."

Miriam's metaphor for nurturance suggests one final dimension of the struggle to sustain an adequate gender identity without having children: the meaning of a female-defined body. Because most women's bodies are valued, in part, for their reproductive potential, "failure" to fulfil this potential is seen as a kind of "body failure" (cf. Strauss, "Korperliche Storungen"). Sylvia captured this interpretation when she compared not having children to having "squandered something." Beatrice had been thrilled when her breasts produced milk before a terminated pregnancy and felt that having a hysterectomy had "killed part of what I can biologically do." While several women expressed curiosity or excitement about the gestating and childbirth process ("I would love the idea of letting my body do its thing"), only one, who had tried and failed to become pregnant, connected that curiosity to a strong interest in raising children.

For a number of women, reproductive potential was not central to their image of gender identity. Karen, whose disability affected her movement, focused on "grace" as the bodily indicator of womanliness. Lucille, a practitioner of kinesiology, had far more interest in "the mechanics of how the moving body works, the construction of it," than in the reproductive organs. For several women, body characteristics associated with maternity reminded them of the ways in which women's choices about motherhood were socially constrained. Pamela, who after years of not wanting children took an unsuccessful course of fertility treatment, resented the constant equation between her breasts and her potential for motherhood: "Everyone looks at me and they say, 'oh, you would be so fertile because you have big tits.'" Elizabeth, who chose tubal ligation in order to eliminate the possibility of pregnancy, saw herself as having an obligation to talk about the choice to other women, to help them normalize their image of this procedure.

Although occasionally women expressed concern that failing to give birth might cause some damage to the body (Alice mentioned the slightly greater chance of breast cancer among women who had not borne children), they were more likely to be concerned about the damage that childbearing and childrearing might do to the body (cf. Veevers 44ff.). Jill had lost two friends to complications she saw as associated with childbirth. Vivian had never forgotten her great-grandmother's warning that bearing children was like "passing death's doorway." Jill and Miriam both had health problems that drew their attention to the physical price they would pay for bearing a child.

Symbolic Time and the Social Debt of Childless Women

Time, as social philosopher George Herbert Mead pointed out, has immense symbolic meaning in our lives; it also plays an important role in the ways that women without children affirmed their own social value. Research on childless married couples identifies two temporal patterns in the decision not to have children: the "early articulation" pattern of those who make a clear, final choice early in their lives and the "postponement" pattern of those who keep postponing the decision until they believe it is "too late" (Houseknecht; Veevers). My interviewees included a few women who from their early years knew they did not want to have children, but for most of the others, the "postponement" pattern did not seem an adequate characterization. Rather than resulting from a series of postponements, their childlessness seemed to evolve out of an interweaving of the meaning of time in their lives with their sense of obligation to self and others.

Time was viewed in three symbolic frameworks: body time, family-community time, and life time. Body time may or may not focus on reproductive

capacity. Body time may involve attention to general health or some particular health problem or may focus on strength, endurance, looks, or a variety of other factors that make childbearing, raising children, or both more or less desirable. For example, Jill, whose reservations about pregnancy had included her extreme sensitivity to pain, noted that a series of operations had reduced this sensitivity and reduced her fear of childbirth. At the same time, new health problems had developed for her, so that the cost of pregnancy might now be higher to her body in certain ways.

Body time often interwove with family-community time in these accounts because most women learn about "when" women "should" have children in these social contexts. Cindy, for instance, was relieved when her family "finally stopped bugging me about it" when she reached the age of about thirty. But Sylvia's family had never stopped "bugging" her, even though she was in her late thirties. Vivian found herself making her way between two kinds of community pressure: the pressure from many women to begin childbearing at an early age and the pressure to postpone childbearing in order to complete one's education and become financially secure. For Vivian, it was better not to have children at all than to succumb to the pressures toward early childbearing.[5]

Many of the women I spoke with experienced some pressure from family, community, or both to have children before it was "too late," but, with a few exceptions, the fact that these women without children generally lived at some distance from their families and did not participate fully in the family system minimized the importance of family-community time schedules. Relief from such pressure was a mixed blessing, however. The less one is part of the family-community time frame, the fewer occasions one had to mark the passage of time, to celebrate, assess, reflect on what it means to be a certain age, to have entered a certain life stage. Some woman without children with whom I spoke viewed this lack as a loss. Others saw it as causing a certain confusion about one's age or life stage or as an indication that childless women need to develop their own marking points and ceremonies.

Life time played an especially important role in the ways women interpreted the meaning of not having children for their own biographies. By "life time," I mean a temporally orientated image of one's life, a sense of how it should progress or change. For instance, many of the women I spoke with were what is commonly called "goal oriented"—toward goals other than having children. Having children might be viewed as a possible goal but one not usually given priority. Accomplishment through work was often seen as the leading goal, but this did not always mean moving up a career ladder. Painting was Sylvia's passion, although she made her living in another field. She felt she had started her painting career so late that having children was now not very likely. Beatrice, who had assumed as a young woman that she would eventually have children,

also devoted much of her life to a career in the arts. With the approach of middle age, she added another career that she hoped would enable her to earn enough money to support herself in her later years.

In contrast to this sort of goal orientation, some women like Barbara had a more "presentist" interpretation of their lives. Although they acknowledged that children might have been, or still might be, a central concern at some other phase, these women did not see motherhood as a current source of fulfillment. Karen and Pamela also emphasized present time but viewed their stories through what I see as a "wave" interpretation: their lives were shaped by a series of enthusiasms for and involvement in certain projects or interests. Pamela, in fact, attempted to have a child during one of these "waves," although she had little interest in having children before that time and was now looking for another focus around which to organize her energies. Karen's waves were defined by work projects she initiated and to which she then recruited others to replace her: a "five-year cycle," she called it. Ariel's belief in reincarnation made her cycles much longer: "I believe in karma," she said, "and I think I've had children before."

Body time, family-community time, and life time intertwined with social and technological changes that affect women's attitudes toward having children. A change in reproductive technology might lead to a redefinition of body time. A new ethic (the movement toward older mothering) might lead to a reinterpretation of what is "too late." These temporal images gain additional meaning through their interplay with what I view as a sense of social debt. Three types of debt were suggested by the women's responses: a reflective debt, or a sense of obligation to take care of oneself; a relational debt, owed to the family, community, or both; and a global debt to society as a whole.

For a number of women, the determination to take care of oneself constituted a leading and constant theme in their lives. Hilla, who had grown up in Germany in the aftermath of World War II, saw herself as choosing between marriage (as the struggle to raise children in poor circumstances) and independence (which meant taking responsibility for herself and improving her life). "I wanted to live," she said, "and not survive." Rena laughed when I asked whether she had ever imagined somebody else taking care of her economically: when she was married, she could never imagine herself as a "housewife," and as a single lesbian, she could not imagine that "I could ever allow myself to be kept."

All of the women with whom I spoke prized their independence, but for some, identity and social value was strongly interwoven with notions of obligation to family, community, or both. Pamela and Sylvia had both had negative experiences with this relational debt. Pamela linked her lack of interest in having children to having had to raise her three younger siblings: "I felt I had done my time." Sylvia, the only child of a Jewish family that had lost many

members in the Holocaust, felt unable to dispel the sense of obligation to have children.

In contrast, Phyllis, an African American woman whose father had taken several neighborhood boys under his wing, had grasped early that traditional parenting was not necessary to fill her relational debt. Although her parents wanted grandchildren, her father, she said, "released me from guilt" before he died. Shelagh, a Jewish woman whose only brother had broken his tie with his family's religion, promised her father that she would recite the prayer for the dead (traditionally recited by men) when he was gone. Although she did not give her father grandsons, she preserved the link between him and his community. Toni showed the frank acceptance of obligation to community displayed by many African American women. Raised in a Southern community in which helping friends and relatives was "second nature," her professional and volunteer work had been strongly oriented toward helping poor Black families and children. "These people are tied to us," she said. "They are part of a chain."

This theme of indebtedness to family, community, or both was curiously reversed in the women's views of old age. Despite the sense of obligation to their own aging parents that many women expressed, they generally did not think that lack of children affected their future lives as aging women. "Nursing homes," remarked Toni, "are full of people who have children." Thus, Toni and most of the other women with whom I spoke saw financial security as the best defense against the problems of old age. Many women also mentioned the importance of emotional and social support from a variety of sources. At seventy, Ariel had a pension, a cozy apartment, a network of friends, and no fear that she would have to face illness alone. Hayden hoped her nieces and nephews would feel close enough to care for her in her old age, but she also imagined that she might die before she reached that point. Several lesbians talked about the possibility of a women's retirement community, while Alice expressed the belief that because she had given so much to others, "someone will look out for me."

In Alice's case, as for several other women with whom I spoke, the sense of social debt to community merged with the notion of filling a global debt to society as a whole. Alice saw her lifelong work in education as central to her contribution. Hayden talked about her "responsibility" to the planet being fulfilled in her political work and writing on ecology. None of the woman felt it necessary to have children in order to fulfil a debt to society as a whole. Some thought that having children would have been a positive disservice to society because their own childhoods had been unhappy or because they felt they had not sufficiently worked out their own life problems to raise happy children. Enid argued that women in general could improve society by not having children, by devoting their lives to making a world in which women were powerful enough to prevent motherhood from being an oppressive institution.

Enid's view of her vocation as a construction worker suggested the importance to a number of the women of making a concrete, visible contribution to society. Constructing buildings, said Enid, enabled her to see "the reflection of what I personally had contributed." Karen was pleased that she had developed "products like books, tapes . . . things that are concrete," which would last after she had completed her work on a given project. For other women, relationships had sufficient durability to give them a sense of having had an impact on the world, to give them the feeling that they would be remembered without having children to carry on their biological line or spirit. "I like to think," said Donna, "in any encounter with anyone something happens. And I think that if you do that well . . . any interaction is an important one. And that we do affect people more than we know. I know that I have been affected by the simplest kindness."

Conclusion

In our current form of social organization, women without children are defined as "other"—as lacking an essential component of (female) humanity (cf. de Beauvoir). Many childless women reject this interpretation. They affirm their own social value through close relationships, including, for some, relationships with children. Childless women create value through their work, politics, and numerous other activities. In constructing value, childless women struggle with socially imposed notions of gender adequacy. These women confront conventional timetables for women's development and refuse to allow the widespread disapproval of women who do not mother to narrow their lives.

This refusal calls into question the belief that the activities of childless women are mere "substitutes" for mothering, which is "the real thing." This response also calls into question the sharp dichotomy between women who are mothers and women who are not. The women interviewed revealed a wide range of attitudes and degrees of involvement with children, from great love and frequent interaction to positive dislike and avoidance whenever possible. As we know from experience (rather than ideology), mothers themselves display a wide range of responses to children. Indeed, if we could go beyond the ideal to the lived realities and meanings of motherhood and childlessness, we would uncover a sort of "mothering continuum" along which women (and men) could be located according to their degree and intensity of involvement with having and raising children (cf. Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality").[6] The place of individuals on this continuum would change as their relation to children changed. Moreover, if such a continuum were openly recognized, mothers who want to spend less time with children might feel the permission to do so, while women (and men) "without" children who want more interaction with

children would be encouraged in this direction. Women with and women without children would not be pushed into opposition to each other.

The experiences of women without children draws us into even deeper levels of social criticism. The socially reinforced distinction between mothers and childless women reflects the notion that "caring" is women's work and that motherhood represents the epitome of caring activity (Fisher and Tronto). But mothers and non-mothers suffer from this conceptualization. Because caring activities are seen as women's work and given inadequate support and reward, mothering suffers (cf. Ruddick). Because childless women are seen as excluded from the most essential form of caring, their actual caring work is devalued and rendered even more invisible than mothering. The woman without children who takes care of her aging parents, who gives years of care to a sick mate or a dying friend, who spends 10 or 30 or 50 years of her life teaching or healing or helping other people's parents or children may still be seen as suffering from a profound gender defect because she has not been a parent or has not had her "own" children.

Ultimately, then, the only way to prevent the distinction between mothers and childless women from perpetuating the oppression of women and undermining the quality of our social life is to question the overall organization of caring activities and the concept of gender on which they rest. Just as mothering work may be seen as a matter of relative involvement, caring also can be conceptualized in terms of a "caring continuum," which includes not only mothering but all other caring activities. Women and men could be located along this continuum according to their kind and degrees of caring work at different stages of their lives. The problem, from the feminist viewpoint, is how to develop structures that promote fair and effective participation in the many forms of caring. Women without children have an important and potentially powerful contribution to make to this project. They can challenge basic ideas about family, gender, and society and what is needed to lead a good and meaningful life.

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Notes

1 Social research on voluntary childlessness shows strong marks of the origin of this "problem" in the nineteenth-century eugenics movement and in the modern concern with overpopulation and population control. Groundbreaking research in this feminist wave critiqued "pronatalist" assumptions behind public policies on childbearing but shared the same concern with overpopulation (e.g. Blake).

2 For this study, I conducted formal interviews of between one and two hours in length with twenty-three women. I also engaged in informal discussions of varying length with approximately thirty additional women. The women formally interviewed ranged from thirty years of age (the minimum I set for volunteers) to seventy years of age. Four were African American; eight identified as Jewish (both Ashkenazic and Sephardic); four were raised Catholic (Italian and Irish American); the remainder came from White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) or mixed families. About one-third came from working-class or lower-middle-class backgrounds and the rest from middle-class or upper-middle-class backgrounds. Seven currently identified as lesbians. Seven were married or lived with a male partner. Three lived with a female partner. Six had high school diplomas; five had bachelor's degrees; nine had master's or professional degrees; and three had doctorates. All lived in a large, urban area. Two of the interviewees were not fully "resolved" on the issue of having children but comfortably talked about their potential for being women without children

3 I have adopted the term "social value" from a discussion by Glaser and Strauss (*Awareness*) of how hospital personnel define the value or social loss resulting from the death of a patient. In my use of the term "social value" to describe women with or without children, I have tried to capture its dialectical quality—that is, that many people, including women without children, both assimilate and struggle against what is represented as valuable in the society. Thus, the ways in which women without children assert their own value, reflect, to differing degrees, aspects of the prevailing value system. Also see my discussion of the appropriation of nurturance values by women human service professionals (Fisher, "Alice").

4 Although the term "childfree" is used by some advocates for voluntarily childless married couples, I find the expression misleading and morally problematic. As my interviews suggest, many women without children have strong connections with children, and feel and fulfill obligations to children in direct and indirect ways. Although a few of the women I interviewed either disliked children or had no interest in including children in their lives, these women did not necessarily fit the "childfree" image either. Veevers's pioneering study and several of the recent books on voluntary childlessness draw their interviewees from a primarily young (the average age of women in the original Veevers study was twenty-seven!) and affluent married group representing what some authors have called the "new class" or the "new elite" (see Faux). In Veevers's and similar work, the values of this particular generation of well-off heterosexual couples tend to be equated with the experience of not bearing or raising children.

5 Vivian's encounter with these conflicting pressures and counterpressures suggests the ways in which social class, family, community affiliation, and the like help shape the desire to have or to avoid having children. Her experience also points to the importance of comparing the experience of women who have more or less chosen not to have children, despite social pressure to become mothers, with

women who have more or less chosen to have children, despite social pressures *not* to become mothers (e.g., teenage mothers, lesbian mothers, disabled mothers).

6 My coining of the terms "mothering continuum" and "caring continuum" is inspired by Adrianne Rich's use of the concept "lesbian continuum" to describe the wide range of affective and erotic relationships that women have with one another. Rich's intent was to reduce the fear and conflict between heterosexual women and lesbians. My intent is similar with respect to mothers and women without children.

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2

Childfree Minority Stress

Considerations for Life at the Margins of Adulthood

MELANIE ELYSE BREWSTER

OLIVIA SNOW

Living as a childfree person in a culture that prioritizes parenting as a defining role of adulthood may be isolating for those who decide not to follow this path. Experiences of "otherness" are compounded by the limited depictions of childfree individuals in media and popular culture. Historically, women who are childfree have been portrayed as bitter witches or crones (e.g., Ursula from *The Little Mermaid*; the unnamed witch from *Hansel and Gretel*), lonely old maids or spinsters (e.g., Miss Havisham from *Great Expectations*), nuns, and—for men—Peter Pans (e.g., Will Freeman from *About a Boy*). In these depictions, and in society more broadly, the childfree person has failed the expectations of neoliberalism by not upholding traditional gender norms, not extending the longevity of their lineage, and shirking a "normal" biological trajectory; moreover, postponing or forgoing the "other-centered" role of becoming a parent is deemed a selfish prioritization of one's own happiness (Harden 257; Hill 165). Even the term "childfree" has been criticized for being too positive and implying that those who choose not to have children are carefree, childlike, and without responsibility (Letherby and Williams 723). Compounded, these attitudes

toward childfree people create a culture that normalizes marginalization and brands voluntary childlessness as deviant.

Understanding the marginalization of childfree people is critically important, because they are a growing population. Petula Dvorak writes that the birthrate in many countries is shrinking—for some nations it is at a historic low—likely because for the first time in human history, individuals have more choice about their decision to have a family. That said, choice and freedom to pick a life path may also be a stressor, particularly when the desired life path (a childfree one) is not socially acceptable. Regarding being childfree, Kimiko Tanaka and Nan Johnson suggest that "deviations from [a] normative life course negatively influence well-being," because children are a major source of social contact and community engagement; if you are without them, life may be more isolated and lonelier. Additionally, divergence from traditional life paths may attract criticism and disapproval, yielding feelings of failure (1030). Furthermore, some prior research with childfree women suggests that they experience a dip in health and well-being during their reproductive years (Graham 181), but it is unclear whether this is from stigma, stress, or biology.

This chapter positions childfree individuals within the broader *minority stress theory* framework (Brooks; Hatzenbuehler 707; Meyer 675). Minority stress theory was developed by Virginia Brooks in the 1980s and refined over the next twenty years to capture the experiences of historically disenfranchised groups such as lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals; members of religious groups; and people of color. The theory has also been applied more recently to a wide range of groups such as atheist people (Brewster et al. 557), students with learning difficulties (Geiger and Brewster 710), transgender individuals (Breslow et al. 253), and people living with HIV/AIDS (Breslow and Brewster 83).

The minority stress framework is helpful in illustrating the psychological impact of belonging to a marginalized group—such as childfree adults—because the framework suggests that negative experiences relating to minority group membership can result in poor psychological outcomes unless counteracting stress-ameliorating structures are put in place. Specifically, the theory explicates that there are factors that may buffer the impact of oppression on well-being, such as community involvement, collective action, or social support (Breslow et al. 254; Velez and Moradi 1133)—however, such resources are widely unavailable for childfree adults. Taken together, this chapter ties extant research about childfree adults into the minority stress framework—illustrated in figure 2.1—and proposes strategies for mental health and wellness professionals who may work with this population.

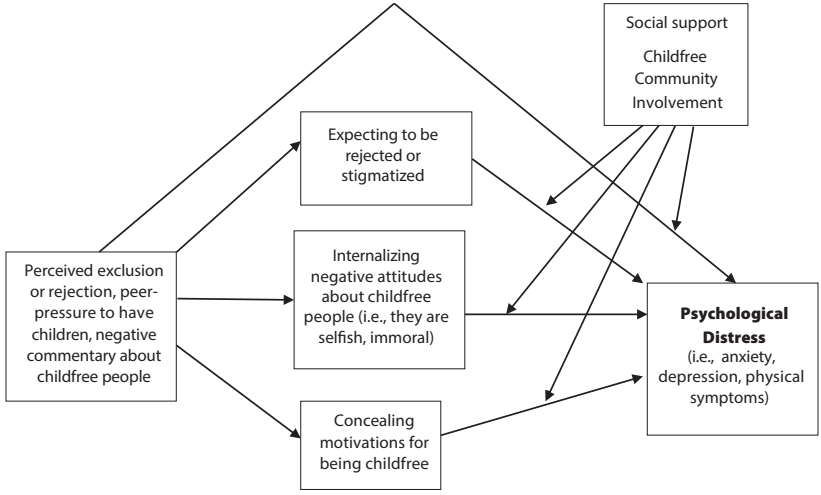

FIG. 2.1 The minority stress framework

Introduction to Minority Stress Theory

Minority stress is the result of both *distal* stressors (i.e., direct experiences of marginalization or systemic exclusion) and *proximal* stressors that stem from experiences of distal stressors (i.e., subjective internal psychological processes including stigma consciousness and expectation of rejection, identity concealment, and internalized negative attitudes about one's identity). Commonly utilized as a framework for understanding the experiences of LGB[1] people, distal stressors are generally factors such as heterosexist policies or laws (i.e. hostile work environments, no employment protections, or lack of marriage equality) or interpersonal hostility because of your sexual orientation (i.e., being called an anti-gay slur; not being invited to family gatherings; feeling subtle coldness from a server in a restaurant).

LGB individuals who experience these distal stressors may have their broader psychological state and expectations of the world impacted negatively, via proximal stressors. For example, they may become hypervigilant about stigma or anticipate that others will reject or mistreat them because of their sexual orientation. LGB individuals may also go to great lengths to manage how their LGB identity is revealed to, or concealed from, others as a way to defend against prejudice or discrimination. Finally, after being faced with societal- and interpersonal-level oppression, some LGB people may grow to internalize and believe that they deserve mistreatment because they are "deviant" or unworthy of love. Taken together, both distal and proximal minority stressors are generally related positively to poor mental health outcomes (i.e., depression, anxiety)

and negatively to dimensions of well-being (i.e., self-esteem, life satisfaction). Yet it is generally the *evaluation of* and *reaction to* a distal stressor that informs the weight of its impact (Hatzenbuehler 721).

While making direct comparisons between the experiences of marginalized groups should never be done without adequate nuance and sensitivity to their unique experiences, there are some commonalities across groups of people with stigmatized identities that warrant attention. Like LGB people, intentionally childfree individuals are often devalued and portrayed as amoral, unnatural, or threatening to "traditional" family values. As a result, childfree people may feel compelled to downplay or intentionally obfuscate their decision to not have children. This could occur in the form of deferring the decision to have children "someday" rather than outing their true childfree intensions. Also akin to sexual orientation, reproductive and family building decisions are often dismissed as a "lifestyle choices," rather than recognized or affirmed as a core part of one's personhood, values, and identity. Often being told that their decision to not have children is "selfish" or temporary, childfree individuals grapple with expressing the depth of importance given to their family building decision.

While entertaining the debate of whether having children is an innate or natural drive or purely a lifestyle choice is well beyond the scope of this chapter, it is important to acknowledge that there *are* individuals who report that they never wanted children or felt drawn to create a family of their own. Helen Peterson and Kristina Engwall used the metaphor of "the silent body" to describe the phenomenon of a body not feeling or communicating the biological urge to reproduce; they go further to discuss this silence as an embodied experience that is continually scrutinized by cultural forces arguing that the desire to reproduce is normative and natural (379). Indeed, across time and culture, the option of intentionally living as a childfree person was limited to nuns, clergy, or those wealthy enough to abdicate marital obligations. Even so, the commonplace nature of sexual assaults (and resultant pregnancies), and the necessity of having to care for children of deceased or functionally unavailable loved ones, created a system in which many individuals may have "ended up" with children, despite efforts to opt out (Holmes et al. 320; Gleeson et al. 304). Therefore, historical examples of individuals who have intentionally been childfree are limited, and there has been even less discussion of the best or most healthy way to achieve this state.

Considering the cultural ecosystems surrounding childfreedom that foster its invisibility (e.g., the childfree hidden away in cloisters or as spinsters) and impossibility (in the face of pressure to conform to societal expectations), it is unsurprising that many people may feel that being childfree is not a true choice at all. Particularly as reproductive technologies and social services have made it easier for people of all sexual orientations and genders—with access to financial resources—to have children (via gestational carriers, in vitro fertilization

[IVF], surrogacy, sperm banks, adoption), the decision to not have children is called into focus as a rarity. Currently, infertility may not even be deemed a compelling reason to opt out of parenthood. That said, the pressure to reproduce or build a family has not been evenly applied across demographically diverse groups (examples are forced sterilization for people of color or people living with disabilities and laws barring LGB people from fostering or adopting children). Such disparities highlight that some groups are devalued, while others are reified as "worthy enough" to spread their lineage.

Childfree Minority Stress

Turning to the experiences of childfree individuals, it is critical to understand the dominant discourses that permeate the sociocultural expectations and treatment of childfree individuals. *Pronatalism* has been defined as both a powerful motherhood discourse and a parenthood mandate that produces hegemonic ideological doctrines that shape our understanding of motherhood, femininity, and dominant life-course narratives (Gillespie 224; Matthews and Desjardins 31). Gemma Carey et al. (129) describe motherhood and nonmotherhood as dichotomous public and private experiences; pronatalist discourse impacts social interactions and experiences, while also influencing individual attitudes, emotional responses, and experiences. In Australian society, those who choose not to have children challenge these dominant perceptions, suffering social consequences and earning themselves the title of "moral deviants" (Carey et al. 130). Pronatalist discourse has the power to transcend the confines of the gender binary and also exists within the various intersections of one's ability, racial, socioeconomic, and sexual identity. Across macro and micro levels, such consequences form the backbone of distal minority stress experiences for childfree individuals.

Distal Childfree Minority Stressors

Looking specifically at dimensions of minority stress theory for childfree adults, distal stressors may be present in institutional supports and benefits that favor people with children (e.g., tax benefits, family medical leave, family-friendly workspaces). On a macro level, we see pronatalist discourse in population policies that aim to solve economic and social problems with procreation-based answers or within religious or political institutions that further legitimize a pronatalist agenda (Carey et al. 131). When one examines the tax difference between single and married individuals at the $50,000 income level, single individuals paid a penalty of 35 percent more in taxes than married individuals (DePaulo 227). Additionally, in "Policy Basics: The Earned Income Tax Credit," the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities showed that in 2019 the earned

income tax credit permitted working childless individuals to receive a maximum of $529, compared with a maximum of $6,557 granted to working Americans with at least two children.

Within the childfreedom movement, advocates such as Elinor Burkett, author of *Baby Boon: How Family Friendly America Cheats the Childless*, and Melanie Notkin, author of *Otherhood: Modern Women Finding Happiness*, have made an effort to acknowledge how systemic expectations may go beyond policy and manifest into discriminatory practices.

Distal stressors can also occur on a micro level, taking the form of childfree adults being excluded from social gatherings because they do not have kids or being expected to shoulder more tasks at work than colleagues who are parents. Within the workplace, childfree adults have identified instances of discrimination in relation to parenting professors being given first pick in scheduling courses or workers being denied extended leave outside of the confines of parental leave (Walker). For example, corporations striving for a veneer of family friendliness may result in married mothers getting vacation time to help create Halloween costumes for their kids while single, childfree women may not get time off to visit their parents (Marcotte). Debra Mollen (278) expands on this in her study, which showed that childfree women are often expected to compensate for other parents by working extra hours. In such micro level relations, Daniel Reidpath et al. (474) suggest that occurrences of deliberate social exclusion stem from a lack of reciprocal exchange: a person who is viewed as deficient in a certain area is perceived to have no means to "give back," resulting in the exclusion of the deficient individuals to ease social tensions. Taken together, childfree individuals are seen as unable to replicate a social balance that parents can, making it easier to exclude the childfree from social situations and opportunities. In a clear example of social exclusion within her peer group, Jody Day, author of *Living the Life Unexpected*, shared that a friend remarked, "I don't invite you because everyone else there is a parent and when parents are together there's a lot of talk about children . . . Not only might that be dull for you, I'm also concerned that it could be quite painful" (Carroll).

Proximal Childfree Minority Stressors

Stigma Consciousness

Outside of more concrete, external experiences, some research has begun to explore anticipated stigma or expectations of rejection experienced by childfree people. From a minority stress framework, such proximal stressors could include anticipating being judged poorly for not having children or expecting to be pressured into having children—both encounters that inherently speak to the "wrongness" of being childfree. Such stigma consciousness is particularly deleterious to mental health because it can be perceived by individuals even

when they are among loved ones who are affirming or supportive. For example, it may become so commonplace to hear negative remarks about childfreedom that one becomes hypervigilant for these comments. In one study, a twenty-six-year-old woman undertaking her seventh IVF attempt expressed fear of judgment and rejection, stating "without a child of my own, I am nothing . . . in the eyes of my husband, my family, my religion, my culture—I have no value or usefulness if I am unable to bear a child" (Daniluk). This example demonstrates that women without children are consciously aware of the pervasive stigma attached to their identity and experience pressure to avoid it.

It is no surprise that some childfree people reach a state of constant vigilance. Terminology itself around not having children is fraught and reflective of societal perceptions, with the evolution of terms shifting from "childless" to "voluntarily childless" to "childfree" to "childfree by choice" (Blackstone 68; Letherby and Williams 722; Settle and Brumley 4). The term "childfree" is believed to have emerged in 1972 to differentiate between choice and the biological barriers of infertility connoted by "childless" (Agrillo and Nelini 347). Indeed, there is certainly a difference in voluntary and involuntary childfree stigmatization (Kopper and Smith 2276; Lampman and Dowling-Guyer 219); specifically, some research indicates that voluntarily childfree women are viewed as selfish, while involuntarily childless women are viewed with pity (Letherby and Williams 722). Such findings highlight a clear distinction in what society is willing to accept with regard to one's procreative ability and whether choice factors into one's condition.

When childfree people live their lives with unabashed surety, Veevers noted that it is the combination of both *not having* and *not wanting* children that often causes the most animated and aggressive responses (quoted in Park 22). When presented with two scenarios, college students viewed a voluntarily sterilized childfree woman as less sensitive, less loving, less happy, less well adjusted, and ultimately less likely to be happy and satisfied at age sixty-five than a woman who chose to become a parent (Jamison et al. 268). The basis of this stigma may be moral outrage. In a world where parenthood is a social prescription, childfree individuals elicit disgust, anger, and disapproval as they threaten to tear the moral fabric of pronatalist norms (Ashburn-Nardo 396). A participant in Elise Matthews's and Michel Desjardins's qualitative exploration described this outraged reaction from a colleague: "'What do you mean? Yes, you're going to have kids.' . . . It got to the point where I just quit telling people. I said 'no we're not.' And he told me that 'a tree is only as good as the fruit it bears . . . My life is wasted if I don't have kids'" (36). Accompanying this approach, Kristin Park (25) explained that stigmatization of the intentionally childfree stems from an association of their life choices with the breakdown of nuclear families, individualism, and the increased prominence of impersonal relationships in society.

Data from empirical studies tends to suggest that the negative emotional response to those without children fuels a plethora of negative stereotypes attached to the childfree identity. A central theme of this stigmatization is a preoccupation with the childfree individual's experience in life. Leslie Ashburn-Nardo (398) found that moral outrage served as a mechanism via which a person's parenthood status was linked to perceived psychological fulfillment and adjustment, with childfree individuals being rated as both less fulfilled and less well adjusted. In a historical exploration of common beliefs about parenthood and childlessness, Thomas Hansen (29) identified the themes of childfree people living emptier, lonelier, and less rewarding lives—in other words, less meaningful lives—than parents. Kitty Bradshaw validates this finding with her personal experience of childfree stigma, noting that "if you are single with no kids, you're desperate, you're in a house, you're living with your parents, you're overweight or you're not a pretty girl. It's just very negative and in most cases, that's not the case" (Wallace). Although demographic factors may also play a role in how childfree stigma manifests and is felt, very few studies have addressed that question, and they have yielded varying results for gender, race, and social class (Koropeckyj-Cox et al. 421). Although demographic factors may also play a role in how childfree stigma manifests and is felt, very few studies have addressed this question—all of which yielded varying results for gender, race, and social class (Koropeckyj-Cox et al. 421).

Childfree Identity Management

In her powerful article, "'But You Would Be the Best Mother,'" Anna Gotlib argues that—beyond stigma—there is a burden borne by childfree people because their identity places them in a liminal space where the "single choice invariably defines them as transgressive in the eyes of others, and because this transgression cannot be undone by any other act (other than motherhood itself), it marks them as permanently and irrevocably liminal—on the periphery of the moral spaces whose language they no longer seem to speak" (342). The continuous social exclusion of childfree women leads to a complex experience in negotiating and subverting their deviant identity. Thus, childfree identity management is another proximal minority stressor; some childfree adults feel compelled to lie about their desire to have children ("maybe one day!") or fabricate positive reactions toward parenthood ("what a blessing it must be!"). Some theorists have gone as far as comparing childfree people who are not open about their decision as *closeted* and to describe talking about their decision as a coming out (Avivi 149; Durham 139).

In response to pronatalist discourse, people engage in information control and stigma management around particular audiences to divert attention away from their voluntarily childless identity (Park 372). In one qualitative study, childfree women noted having to continuously negotiate when and how to talk

about parenthood—specifically, "they routinely had to decide between honesty and self-censorship when talking about parenthood, feeling hesitant to be open and honest, anticipating that others would try to impose the notion that parenting was the only legitimate choice" (Avivi 156). Complex identity management becomes necessary for childfree individuals in order to maintain a sense of social approval. Park explains an array of impression management techniques, such as controlling information, constructing justifications or excuses, and reframing the situation (32–37). An aspect of maintaining control was via identity substitution. This would occur when participants received pressure for their childfree choice, leading them to feign infertility, as a substitute for their voluntary choice, to ease social pressure. "Passing" served younger participants who would maintain an illusion of future child-rearing as a way to subdue true childfree intentions.

For more common conversational interventions, justifications like pursuing "self-fulfillment" and "condemning the condemners" serve to counter the stigmatized title of "selfish" through childfree individuals' taking responsibility for their choice. Childfree individuals may also lean into rationalizations that serve to divert responsibility in the moment, instead leaning on a flaw in their (assumed) biological drive, claiming a missing "maternal instinct" or that they are "naturally childfree" (Park 36; Morison et al. 192). One woman was very clear in this approach: "Not liking kids is just the way I am. If I did have children, I'd just be going against my nature. I would say it affects every aspect of my life because it's not simply something I identify with. It's a core aspect of who I am" (Morison et al. 192).

An affirmative approach to identity management takes the form of redefining the situation to challenge the parenthood prescription, by introducing alternative paths to gaining the benefits typically associated with parenting (i.e., psychological fulfillment). We can see more of this tactic being used by childfree individuals who challenge stigma in a way that emphasizes and reconfigures their difference from normative identities (Morison et. al 186). This approach reframes their status as desirable and potentially superior in comparison with those who challenge the childfree choice. One couple shared experiences of receiving this feedback for their choice and critiqued the explicit meaningfulness of parenting: "All of our married friends have children and they go 'oh when are you having kids, when are you having kids, you've got to do it, it's the best thing you'll ever do.' And we're looking at them, they're tired, they've got no social life, they've got no money, they're really struggling, and we're looking and going 'umm, not anytime soon'" (Doyle et al. 403).

Specific methods of reframing one's status to maintain a positive social identity may follow two avenues of the rhetoric of choice. The first, "childfree-by-choice" script involves capitalizing on the power of choice by negotiating alternative positive positions and then questioning the social desirability of

parenthood—positioning parents in a less desirable context (Morison et al. 190). Individuals who align with this script may legitimize their choice by emphasizing their conscientiousness about bringing a child into the world, a decision that is just as respectable as choosing to have children. Inversely, the "disavowal of choice" script counters stigma by identifying voluntary childlessness as a biologically determined outcome or positioning parenthood as unacceptable because of the loss of freedom and the burden of child-rearing (Morison et al. 192). An example is the statement of a woman who has "known her whole life" that she was not meant to have children, citing a birth-given disposition. By leaning into choice or claiming omission of choice, childfree individuals are provided an avenue of identity management that negotiates their experiences of stigma within pronatalist environments.

Childfree Internalized Negativity

An additional proximal minority stressor for childfree people, and women in particular, is the deep internalized negativity that can occur from repeated exposure to the dominant narrative that "not having children is wrong." One aspect of this internalized negativity exists within the discrepancies between how childfree women actually experience the world and the socialized, hegemonic definitions of their sexual and motherhood identity—leading to guilt, fear, anxiety, and ambivalence (Letherby and Williams 719). Sexual and motherhood identity are major intersections of the overarching umbrella of ascriptions of feminine identity. A common experience of the centrality of motherhood within feminine identity leads many childfree women to report that they believe they are viewed as unfeminine, while some women simultaneously struggle with perceiving *themselves* as unfeminine, too (Kelly 167).

As discussed previously, countering stigma and identity management have sometimes taken the form of denying the choice in childlessness, at times because of biological reasons or because of the flaws within pronatalist rhetoric. Indeed, disclosing a lack of maternal instinct may serve as a creative excuse for childfreedom but also relays a fear within the self in which biological factors are seen as flaws. For example, one woman expressed her internal dilemma: "I do wonder what is not quite right with me that I have no desire whatsoever to have a child. Somehow that doesn't seem quite right. Because, you know, the persistence of the species demands that we procreate, to want children. And I have nothing there" (Park 36). This example illuminates an important—and often not talked about—aspect of childfree individuals' everyday experiences: that they can proudly espouse a narrative of childfreedom and still hold the deep-seated fear that there is something "wrong" with them. Undeniably, pronatalist discourses have led to internalizing negative attitudes that may take a toll on childfree people.

Social Support and Childfree Community Involvement: Buffers of Minority Stress

Social support from loved ones and involvement in like-minded communities can be critical buffers of minority stress experiences for people from marginalized groups (Breslow et al. 254; Velez and Moradi 1135). Without a doubt, childfree status influences interpersonal relationships. Some childfree adults maintain bonds with individuals in their social network who choose to have children, while others report that social ties suffer as life experiences diverge. A qualitative study with childfree women by Adi Avivi explained: "[Participants] reported that close friendships, especially with other women, changed or were even lost when those friends started having children. When people around them became parents, the CF women started feeling alienated, judged, and even pitied. Talking about childfreedom became off limits, and bonds that had previously been central to their social lives were lost. Sometimes this was due to logistical reasons, such as parents' schedules changing. Sometimes parents became so absorbed in their parental roles that they were unable to make room for non-parents in their lives" (157). By contrast, when childfree individuals experience the support of loved ones, this positive regard and respect for their life decisions can counteract some of the negativity felt from broader society (Mollen 277). Although there are growing bodies of literature and resources available as a result of "childfree by choice" campaigns, fewer in-person opportunities to connect with others on similar life trajectories may exist for individuals in smaller cities or rural areas or within more religious or patriarchal communities (in which parenting is an expectation). In Israel, voluntarily childfree women have tried to utilize Internet forums for access to new companions and esteem support after experiencing social disapproval from friends, family, and the general society (Yeshua-Katz 133).

As a result, online communities—in which childfree people are able to connect with the protection of anonymity, if they would prefer—have flourished. Such avenues enable members to vent, share, and experience catharsis via irreverent humor (Avivi 161). In early 2020, at the time of writing this chapter, the Childfree Choice Facebook group had nearly thirty-three thousand likes, and Childfree by Choice Meetup groups had more than nineteen thousand members in more than one hundred different groups across the world. Moreover, there are organizations such as NotMom: By Choice or by Chance that hold summits, compile local resources, and shed light on famous NotMoms who can serve as role models for others (e.g., Oprah Winfrey, Katharine Hepburn, Ellen DeGeneres).

Finally, Caitlin Gibson writes that we are seeing an unprecedented surge of individuals entering psychotherapy for help deciding whether they want

children and, if not, how to come to terms with closing this door. Therapists such as Ann Davidman have created support groups for women and men who are struggling with ambivalence and feel daunted by making such a final life decision in an unstable economic or political climate. Her fourteen-week Fatherhood Clarity course claims to address issues such as these: "Everybody says I'd be a good father. Does that mean I have to be one?" "My partner wants children and I don't, but I don't want the relationship to end over this." In 2016, Davidman and Denise Carlini coauthored a book called *Motherhood—Is It for Me? Your Step by Step Guide to Clarity* to encourage women struggling with this choice to form their own support groups. Indeed, navigating the process of deciding to be childfree can be turbulent for people without social, community, or professional support.

Outcomes of Childfree Minority Stress

Though life experiences vary for voluntarily childfree and involuntarily childless people, there are also notable commonalities in adverse outcomes associated with this marginalized identity. Judith Daniluk (85) explains that the consequences of not having children become more extreme in highly traditional cultures, in which it is not uncommon for women to be cast as an "other" within the larger community and at social gatherings, causing their social circle to shrink as they age. Within the family unit, failing to fulfill their parents' wishes leads to guilt and a stratification in the relationship between women and, particularly, their mothers who desire grandchildren and feel invalidated in their own choice to have children (Daniluk 86; Matthews and Desjardins 33). There is also some indication that intentionally childfree women experience regret in midlife (DeLyser 68).

However, current literature demonstrates a difference between the voluntary and involuntary childfree in psychological distress and well-being. For example, the impact of definite involuntary childlessness on coping, experienced support, anxiety, and depression presents as significant and long-lasting, even if the period of childlessness passes in some way (Lechner et al. 292). More findings show that the combination of infertility with involuntary childlessness for biological and social reasons is associated with significantly greater distress—with the risk of distress in this category being substantial (McQuillan et al. 1015). This distress is often associated with the tension within the intersections of the centrality of motherhood, feminine identity, and the social stigma of not having children. Furthermore, (voluntarily and involuntarily) childfree women are more likely to experience poorer physical health, poorer mental health, and lowered well-being during their reproductive years, which could be a response to marginalization, stigmatization, and social exclusion (Graham et al. 4; Graham 180). Given the potential for health and well-being

to be impacted by such oppressive social forces, we can begin to reframe childfree populations—particularly women—as vulnerable populations who may be in need of support.

Beyond adversity, research has also begun to explore the many positive outcomes of childfreedom (Corbett 9). Much of what the literature has already explored has taken qualitative accounts, subjective disclosures, and quantitative assessment to obtain a more accurate conceptualization. Contrary to the dominant narratives, childfree women showed no evidence of poor adjustment or different personality integration compared with pregnant and parenting women (DeVellis et al. 159). Looking deeper at the prevalent theme of the childfree woman being selfish, empirical analysis suggests that this stereotype is based on the understanding that childfree women's autonomy, independence, and freedom are unfeminine characteristics and are therefore unacceptable (Peterson 189). This conclusion further validates the thesis that negative judgments are placed on these positive characteristics because these qualities challenge pronatalist expectations, rather than being inherent character flaws among childfree women. Expanding more on the concept of freedom, childfree women reported experiencing more freedom in the context of greater geographical mobility; more time on their own; a nurturing relationship with their partner; spending time with special people; fulfillment; and more time to pursue goals (Matthews and Desjardins 36; Peterson 186).

Childfree individuals possess a number of advantages that promote well-being and/or effective adaptation and compensation (for the involuntary childless) in comparison with parenting individuals, whose stressors cancel or exceed their emotional rewards (Corbett 10; Hansen 51). Further supporting successful adaption, Matthews and Desjardins found that heterosexual voluntarily childfree couples "naturalized their voluntary childlessness, revealing the logic of their adaptation to their otherness and the complex of world, society, family, self, and sexualized body, which serves as a matrix of their understanding of themselves and of the place they occupy in the chain of life" (37). Online discussion has generated more conversations regarding fulfillment: "I never wanted kids and am very happy that I stuck with my decision. I have lost nothing, am no less of a woman and am the crazy aunty-friend to any number of kids who belong to my friends. I regret nothing" (Scott). Such rich, positive experiences suggest further exploration into the resilience and adaptation skills of childfree individuals, shifting the focus away from dominant societal expectations and toward greater knowledge of the potential benefits of being childfree.

Recommendations for Practitioners

This chapter has aimed to provide insight into the lives of childfree individuals and their spectrum of complex experiences within the minority stress model.

Across the academic disciplines, most research on childfreedom has focused on negative perceptions by others rather than direct experiences of childfree individuals in a pronatalist world. This chapter posits that the health and well-being of childfree people, much like the health and well-being of other minority or marginalized groups, are negatively impacted by pervasive stigma. Therefore, developing an expanded understanding of childfree people as vulnerable or oppressed may be a first step toward helping them build networks to strengthen coping strategies and foster resilience.

Current research demonstrates a need for greater sensitivity and support for childfree people who may be experiencing psychological distress or disempowerment. Mental health professionals can aid clients on this journey by offering compassionate support to work through their potential indecision, provide resources to connect with childfree communities, and support clients in redefining themselves as people, separate from reproductive expectations (Carlini and Davidman; Daniluk 88). Approaching clinical work with a critical multicultural and feminist lens is necessary to illuminate the systemic narratives that may impact how childfree individuals view themselves. Such a focus on social relations and institutions is useful in understanding how clients may be disadvantaged as a result of their incongruence with social standards (Carey et al. 132). Illustratively, using tools from multicultural feminist therapy, such as consciousness raising and power analysis, and encouraging clients to become involved in communities and grassroots organizations may be fruitful approaches. Psychoeducation about societal pressure to become a parent and portrayals of a "good life" always including parenting could be useful in sparking insight into how a client's own developmental trajectory, life and career goals, romantic partnerships, and self-esteem have been shaped by these pressures. Furthermore, creating a brave space where clients can explore the role of gender, sexuality, culture, and race in shaping their desires and outcome expectations is crucial. In terms of other specific interventions, a combination of mind-body interventions—consisting of mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR), loving-kindness meditation (LKM), and NTU (pronounced "in too" and refers to the spiritual essence at the core of physical existence) psychotherapy—specifically targeting strengths, stressors, and other contextual factors may be helpful (Woods-Giscombé and Black 121).

Cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) provides a framework that may be useful for clients who are struggling with black-and-white thinking or "catastrophizing" about their decision to be childfree. For example, a client might believe that being childfree is more acceptable for younger adults but that at an older age the client will be miserable and alone without a child. To counter this belief, therapists can task clients to find evidence to dispute the notion that all older childfree people are lonely and unhappy (i.e., turning to examples from the media or their own social networks). Clients may also express the belief that if

they do not become parents, they will not be able to have children in their lives in a meaningful way. To counter this dichotomous thinking, helping a client explore methods of continuing to engage with children—via babysitting for loved ones with kids, informal mentoring, or teaching—may be fruitful.

Additionally, tenets of existential therapy may be useful for some clients. Helping a client see that opting into parenting is simply a decision, and all aspects of life are choices balanced by responsibility and freedom, may be empowering for the client. Highlighting that there are many ways to make meaning, connect to personal values, and find purpose in life aside from parenting can decenter the pressure clients often experience when faced with a decision of this magnitude.

Finally, we would also recommend clients who are struggling with their journey to consider a letter from the acclaimed writer Cheryl Strayed. In this piece, she writes to a man who is conflicted about his decision to remain childfree. While she provides no answer for his internal debate, she clarifies that life is about choice and outcomes are often unknowable. She writes: "I'll never know and neither will you of the life you don't choose. We'll only know that whatever that sister life was, it was important and beautiful and not ours. It was the ghost ship that didn't carry us. There's nothing to do but salute it from the shore."

Note

1 Minority stress theory was initially developed to describe the experiences of sexual minority individuals but has since been applied to many other groups. Our use of the acronym LGB rather than the more standard LGBTQ is to more accurately reflect that such studies that may not have included or addressed transgender issues.

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3

"You Will Change Your Mind"

The Controlling Function of Microaggressions on the Minds of Parents and Non-parents

ADI AVIVI

In her 2018 documentary film, *To Kid or Not to Kid*, Maxine Trump places herself as the subject of her movie. Documenting her journey of self-discovery, the viewer is privy to Trump's complex decision not to have children. In her conversations with family, friends, mothers, and non-mothers, she opens a window onto the lives of women who do not want children, using contemporary and historical examples. Trump touches on some differences in the experience of childfree women and men and even on the experience of women who regret motherhood. In this movie we see how curiosity, lack of judgment, and the capacity to tolerate a multitude of wants, needs, and opinions allow one to have a rich and meaningful connection with self and others. The movie also shows that despite childfreedom becoming a movement in recent decades, people who elect to not have children—childless by choice, or childfree individuals—are often invalidated, criticized, and stigmatized by others (Calhoun and Selby, 183; Coffey, 22, 74; Donath, 6–7;

Giles et al. 2025; LaMastro 241; Letherby 10; Mollen 278; Reading and Amatea 255).

Trump's exploration of herself is foregrounded through her meetings with others. Throughout the film, she seeks encounters with affirming others who welcome her ambivalence and her state of not knowing. She measures herself in the mirror of others, those who are similar to and different from her in various ways. In this essay I will discuss the scarcity of a space for such self-discovery as a result of negative and rejecting attitudes toward those who do not want to have children. I will examine the role of devaluing, delegitimizing, and erasing comments in controlling the childfree and in protecting the hegemony of pronatalism. Using the framework of microaggressions, I will attempt to show how these messages serve as agents of control, functioning to limit the minds of those who produce them and those who receive them. I will conclude with an invitation to tolerate otherness as existing within self and other, allowing a meeting between fully human subjects—a meeting that expands rather than limits our minds.

Pronatalism

Pronatalism is a set of multifaceted attitudes, rules, demands, assumptions, and conventions that encourages every person to procreate. Pronatalism is rooted in multiple dimensions: politics and religion, nationalism, economic policies, entertainment and media, and the arts. Kristin Park quotes Alena Heitlinger's discussion of pronatalism:

> Pronatalism can then be seen as operating on several levels: culturally, when childbearing and motherhood are perceived as 'natural' and central to a woman's identity; ideologically, when the motherhood mandate becomes a patriotic, ethnic or eugenic obligation; psychologically, when childbearing is identified with the micro level of personal aspirations, emotions and rational (or irrational) decision-making (by women or couples); on the cohort level, when changes in the birth rate are related to the size of successive generations; and on the level of population policy, when the state intervenes, directly or indirectly, in an attempt to regulate the dynamics of fertility and to influence its causes and consequences. (344–345)

Pronatalism creates expectations for and within individuals and communities regarding having children and its meaning. These expectations are often disconnected from the reality of parenthood individually and communally.

Nuances in Pronatalist Messages

Some groups of people tend to have to explain why they want to have children (e.g., teenagers, poor people, other-abled people, single people, LGBTQIA+

minorities, etc.) (Peterson and Engwall 377; Park, 23). As Anna Gotlib recognizes, "the childbearing decisions of the more advantaged are often judged using criteria that differs from those whose motherhood is taken to be a priori less desirable" (328). Notably, White middle-class women and couples are not typically questioned regarding their desire to have children (Lynch et al. 13), while childfree people are often questioned and are expected to explain their wish to remain childfree. Lynch et al. examined the focus in the literature on explaining childfreedom and the attempts to address the assumptions that childfreedom means negative outcomes or some internal flaw; yet "these are questions seldom posed regarding parenthood" (14). As Letherby and Williams stated: "The desire of a lesbian or disabled woman who wants a child is likely to be questioned in a way that an able-bodied, heterosexual woman's is not. In these circumstances, a woman's inability or 'choice' not to have children may be welcomed by other people rather than defined as sad or selfish in the ways we have experienced, while women subject to racism face further complications" (727). These nuances are important to note, because they show who is considered a desirable mother and will likely be under more pressure from the dominant culture to procreate. These nuances are also important because of the nature of these questions—they are used to negate the legitimacy of what "the other" wants. Whether "the other" is other than the ideal mother and still wants to mother or is an ideal mother who does not want to mother, the individual's subjectivity is negated. The threat that their otherness poses to pronatalism is eliminated by rejecting their legitimacy.

Assumptions Embedded in Pronatalism

Laura Carroll discusses the pronatalist assumptions that contribute to the perception of childfree people as "others." She coined the term "Destiny Assumption" (220), reflecting the belief that we are all biologically wired to have children. The assumption suggests that those who do not want to have children are rebelling against nature. This assumption is in contradiction to the sense that not having children could be a natural, "wired" position for some individuals. As one example, Peterson and Engwall interviewed twenty-seven women exploring the embodied experiences of childfree women. The participants referred to their choice not to mother as "natural." The women struggled to provide an external reason for their choice, even stating that this was not "a decision" but an inner knowledge that they had held about themselves for a long time, with one of the subjects stating, "I simply have no desire to have children" (380–381). As a result of their research, Peterson and Engwall coined the term "silent bodies" to express a difference from those whose bodies "speak" a desire to have children. Looking at childfreedom as an embodied experience that one does not necessarily need to explain intellectually is novel. Intellect and embodiment are both important when approaching life decisions and choices.

I assert that having or not having children is not a destiny but rather an outcome of multiple circumstances. It is of great importance that people be allowed to listen to the body, to its speaking and its silence, and for that source of information to be a factor in the decision to have or not have children. The idea that parenthood is a destiny means that those who do not parent, whether by choice or by chance, are doomed to life that is "less than." The benefits of celebrating a life without children or mourning the loss of that option and carrying on with other joys are robbed under such a limiting assumption.

Another pronatalist assumption suggested by Carroll is the "Normality Assumption" (220). Carroll explains that the pronatalist viewpoint equates having children with physical and psychological health, adult maturity, and normal sense of identity. The idea that womanhood and motherhood are synonymous has been challenged.[1] However, hegemonic expectations that all women will become mothers persist (Gotlib 330). Finally, Carroll discusses the "Fulfilment Assumption" (221), which posits that having children is the ultimate self-fulfillment for each individual or family unit. Embedded in this assumption is the implication that the lives of those who elect not to have children would be barren or limited at best in terms of realization of their human potential.

These assumptions are in stark contradiction to the reports of childfree people—and even childless people—that they have a normal, happy, and fulfilled life without children (Allen and Wiles 211; Ireland 31, 153). If these assumptions are accepted as dogmas, which they typically are, they mark childfreedom as problematic and sad—and even abnormal and wrong. Met with such assumptions, the childfree are at risk of either losing the other or losing themselves (Donath 26). Maxine Trump showed how others who are welcoming of the childfree could create a space that would protect them from that toxic position. Trump interviewed Marcia Drut-Davis, who lost her job as a teacher after she and her husband spoke on television about their choice not to have children in the 1960s. Trump interviewed Drut-Davis with her best friend, who is a mother. This pivotal friendship provided Drut-Davis, and arguably her friend as well, with the space to be a complete self, as they were both known by an "other" who could recognize and tolerate both closeness and separation (Benjamin, *Like Subjects* 182).

The Childfree as the Other within Pronatalism

Those who choose not to have children, especially when that choice is made known, are "the other" within the pronatalist realm. Therefore, childfree people are often subjected to comments, reactions, and attitudes that might be invisible or unremarkable to those who do not belong to this community but that are hurtful and even damaging to the childfree individual. At the same time, however, these comments appear to be less overtly aggressive than direct name

calling or threats (Donath xvi). In fact, being dismissed and criticized when talking about one's childfreedom is so common that some childfree online communities have a term for the experience: "getting bingoed." The phrase was coined when a humoristic bingo board was published online (West), making light of the frequency with which childfree people encounter unpleasant reactions when indicating that they do not want children. Instead of numbers to be matched from randomly drawn balls, childfree people could collect dismissive statements plotted on the board, such as these: "You will regret it," "Only selfish people don't want children," "If everyone thought like you, the human race would be extinct," "Children are the future," and "Who will take care of you when you're old?"

Microaggressions

Microaggressions, such as micro-assaults, micro-insults, and micro-invalidations, are verbal and nonverbal slights and affronts directed at a person from an oppressed group (Torino et al. 3). For example, racial microaggressions can be described as "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color" (Sue et al. 271). The harmful effect of microaggression has been demonstrated in multiple studies (Sue 232–233); it results in a negative impact across multiple domains, including well-being, increased depression, negative affect, and low self-esteem. Although the experiences of childfree people have not been captured in the research of microaggression, as the concept was initially used to explore the lived experience of racial minorities (Pierce 65), aspects of the microaggression-related literature would appear to reflect the childfree experience.

Microaggressions: Specific Taxonomy

The taxonomy developed for microaggressions directed at different minority groups (Sue et al. 274, 276; Wegner and Wright 311) can be used as a model for creating a similar taxonomy for the types of reactions childfree individuals encounter repeatedly. I find Aasha Foster's 2017 taxonomy regarding asexual individuals' experience to be particularly useful for this discussion. The scope of this article will not allow for a review of asexuality; however, I would urge the reader to investigate Foster's paper, as it is filled with valuable information about both asexuality and the harmful impact of microaggressions. Foster's taxonomy is useful for the purpose of this discussion because in both cases—asexuality and childfreedom—one does not want what society claims one must want. Foster identified two dimensions, social invisibility and erasure, as commonly appearing in microaggressions toward asexual individuals (44). Within these two dimensions she identified more nuanced categories of

microaggressions: (1) denial of legitimacy, (2) conflation with LGBTQ experience, (3) harmful visibility, (4) expectations of sexuality, (5) assumption of pathology, and (6) presumed transience (43–44). This elegant taxonomy can easily be translated to capture the microaggressions experienced by childfree people. The social invisibility categories in this case are (1) denial of legitimacy, (2) conflation with involuntary childlessness, (3) harmful visibility, and (4) expectations of parenthood. The erasure categories consist of (5) assumption of pathology and (6) presumed transience. They will be outlined below in order.

Social Invisibility. Denial of legitimacy occurs when others make comments or behave in ways reflecting a belief that childfreedom does not exist. It is usually verbalized as a belief that everyone wants to, or must, have children—for example, others may state that "all women want to have children" or ask men, "Who will carry your family name?" A participant in Park's study reported of his experience speaking out in a traditional coal-mining area:

> Over there, it's real unusual to not have children. Over there, people are asking me, "why don't you have children?" and I would sometimes turn it around and ask them, "Well, why did you decide to have children?" And they'll look at me strangely. "I didn't decide to have children; you get married, you have kids!" And just try to get them to think about, this is a choice. And then explain to them that my choice was to not have kids. And yours was. And they usually go away looking confused. Sometimes I think they understand what I'm trying to say and other times they don't. (36)

In addition, denial of legitimacy can also present as denying the value in childfreedom—for example, expecting childfree people to work later hours or cover the workload for parents, reflecting the assumption that what fills the life of a childfree individual is less important. For more on this issue, see the 2002 book *The Baby Boon* by journalist Elinor Burkett, who provides a thorough account of how U.S. family-friendliness created legal and social realities that disadvantage those without children.

For women, denial of legitimacy might also take the form of using motherhood as a symbol of legitimacy—that is, seeing motherhood as a representation of fulfillment and power, a token of female superiority rooted in biological, social, and psychological femininity. Diana Meyers (758) coined the term "matrigyno-idolatry" to mark the overarching cultural admiration for motherhood, which often takes the form of a type of worship. In her seminal discussion, she explores how matrigyno-idolatry is omnipresent in multiple fields of study, including feminist theory and psychoanalysis.

The "conflation with involuntary childlessness" category covers comments reflecting disbelief that choosing childfreedom is possible; these are often

accompanied by pity from others. For example, Rosemary Gillespie's childfree subjects noted that others imposed conflation with childlessness as the "correct" explanation to not having children. One of her study participants reported how a relative directly asked whether she was barren, as she must be unable to have children (277).

Harmful visibility reflects the lack of positive examples or, on the other hand, prevailing negative examples of childfree individuals in media. Gotlib discusses how, even in unrelated media such as commercials, a woman's motherhood is portrayed as a given fact. She gives the example of a shampoo commercial in which a woman describes her motherhood as the reason to choose a shampoo brand (333). Harmful visibility can also be found in movies and TV shows, in which childfree people are portrayed as odd at best—or even as villains. For example, in the movie *Beethoven* (Levant) a childfree couple (Brad and Brie, portrayed by David Duchovny and Patricia Heaton) are portrayed as venture capitalists, rude, hateful, and exploitative. Harmful visibility, especially for women, denotes the childfree as outsiders, and "the result is often a lack of non-liminal spaces for the voluntary childless woman who has simply chosen not to mother" (Gotlib 330). Gotlib refers to Diana Meyers's work (760), in which she discusses the portrayal of childfree women as witches and as wicked. Their freedoms and ambitions are presented as evil, masculine, and harmful to others. If childfree women are not presented as strong, wicked women who managed to gain control and power typically reserved for men, then they might be shown as "defanged" (Meyers 760). "Defanged" childfree women are portrayed as "spinsters"—pitied, ridiculed, and treated with contempt for their failure in achieving feminine goals. Alex, portrayed by Glenn Close, in *Fatal Attraction* (Lyne) manages to be both: a pitiful woman who failed in her feminine goals of obtaining a man's love and a family—and a vicious, manly businesswoman.

The "expectations of parenthood" category reflects the mainstream assumption that parenthood must be the outcome of one's adulthood. Not having children does not seem to be an option. At times, the validity of childfreedom is negated; however, the childfree option is often simply absent from the social reality all together. That assumption is often delivered to the childfree individual indirectly, through means of the social invisibility dimension mentioned earlier. However, the assumption can also become a coercive, direct demand that the childfree reproduce, regardless of their feelings on the matter. For example, one of the participants in my own study reported: "S21: I'll never forget when the priest told me that, if I quit my job, stayed home, and had babies, things between me and my ex would be OK and he would "change" and be nice to me. I wasn't stupid enough to buy that line. Not from a man who doesn't even have sex himself!" (Avivi, "Childfree Women: Surviving" 165). The pressure from others can create a sense of isolation and many childfree individuals

elect not to disclose their status. Talking with others about this choice can resemble the "coming out" process that LGBTQIA+ individuals may go through. It is a delicate choice, which requires the childfree person to take into account stigma and potential rejection from close ones.

The expectation that one will have children might even affect one's life in areas outside of family planning: "S22: I worked for a US company for a while and was told to not mention anything about my CF (childfree) views to the higher ups as this could be "career limiting." Throw in being an atheist, then it seemed I'd be making Charles Manson look like Snow White. It's a pretty sad state of affairs that something that's unimportant to my job could have a negative impact. To me, that's blatant discrimination and bigotry" (Avivi, "Childfree Women: Surviving" 163). If the expectation of parenthood is internalized, the childfree individual might experience great shame about that part of the self, be motivated to hide it, or even deny it. That shame might lead one to comply with that expectation despite being childfree or might create a self-perception of one as flawed. Although one might feel uninterested in parenthood or, in other cases, might dread the idea, one might internalize the notion that parenthood is inevitable: "S20: I absolutely dreaded the possibility of having children and felt no desire whatsoever for it, but I still assumed that it was going to happen someday, simply because there seemed no other option" (Avivi, "Childfree Women: Surviving" 165). Park found similar self-perceptions in her study: "I do wonder what is not quite right with me that I have no desire whatsoever to have a child. Somehow that doesn't seem quite right. Because, you know, the persistence of the species demands that we procreate, to want children. And I have nothing there" (36).

The examples of microaggressions set out earlier convey an attitude of disbelief, stemming from the social invisibility of childfree people and the childfree lifestyle. These are often internalized by childfree individuals, leaving them feeling confused about the gap between the options presented to them in the world and their internal experience of themselves. In my 2012 study, participants noted the void in the external world, discussing the pain they experienced in not having space to explore their childfree self in interaction with others: "S21: I didn't have anyone—a mentor, teacher or family member—once tell me, 'You have a choice in the matter, and whatever you choose is okay.' I looked at parenthood as something that was necessary—something to dread. (79)

Erasure. A more overt and direct expression of microaggression toward childfree people can be captured in the domain of erasure, divided into two categories: "assumption of pathology" and "presumed transient" (Foster 44). Assumption of pathology involves others perceiving the childfree individual as somehow defective or flawed. "Those who are childless by choice are stigmatized by their blemished characters, while the sterile or subfecund are

stigmatized by their physical abnormalities" (Park 30–31). Not wanting children is perceived as a psychological or characterological problem. This is a particularly important point to emphasize for the mental health community working with childfree people of any gender identity and, in particular, with childfree cis women. Generations of writing—most commonly about heteronormative, female-assigned, cis women—equated womanhood with motherhood. Children's development, health, and pathology were typically presented as dependent on the mother: her maternal capacities, her attunement, and her own mental health. And parenthood was presented as the space in which adults, women in particular, develop psychologically (Harrington 24). Even in feminist critiques of psychoanalysis, motherhood tends to be a symbol of empowerment, health, and fulfillment (Meyers 760). It is therefore of utmost importance for mental health providers to become better educated about childfreedom and about the plight of childfree people; as Hird and Abshoff noted, "precisely because of the indelible association between women and parenthood, those women who do not view parenthood as a central life-goal are considered to suffer 'psychopathological disturbance' . . . . This 'psychopathology' has been variously explained to be the result of childhood trauma, poor parental role models, oppressive child-rearing, too much sibling childcare responsibility or negative identification with their mothers" (348). One of my participants shared: "S22: Put it this way, I've never had a childfree person accuse me of being psychologically disturbed because I don't like and don't want kids. I've had that from a parent, though. Now tell me, how do you have a reasoned discussion with that attitude?" (Avivi, "Childfree Women: Surviving" 163).

The message of being psychologically disturbed is highly damaging and derails the journey of self-discovery. Even if one chooses not to parent, shame, guilt, and confusion might take away from the permission to enjoy one's choice. In the dynamic of controlling "the other," this message might also be a projection of the anxieties of parents, who at times experience ambivalence regarding their role. That anxiety might be intolerable—given that the demand to be perfect parents, and in particular perfect mothers, is so pervasive (Donath 32). By naming the childfree "sick," one can externalize the internal dilemma of having complex feelings about one's own parenting. The childfree person is then used as an object rather than met as a subject. Symbolically rather than in reality, the childfree and the parent are both placed in the positions of controlled and controlling (Benjamin, *Like Subjects* 150). The option to recognize each other is halted.

In her discussion of the harms of assumption of pathology to the asexual community, Foster mentions that aside from trying to diagnose the asexual as depressed or trying to medicate them (although asexuality is not causing them any distress), others also suggested "corrective rape" (45) as a way to "heal"

asexual people. Similarly, Harrington found in her examination of Internet discussions of childfreedom venomous perceptions and violent suggestions directed at childfree individuals: "Here, childfree-by-choice women 'are selfish,' 'hate children,' 'don't know that they're missing out,' 'are greedy,' 'can't get a husband,' 'don't want to grow up,' 'are ugly and useless,' 'only care about money and material things,' 'are immoral,' 'only care about their careers,' 'will regret it,' 'will face a reckoning with God,' 'are dykes,' and 'will pay for it later when they have no one to take care of them.' *I've even seen ones that allude to rape as a solution to the childfree woman 'problem'*" (27, my italics). Such comments do not even fit the notion of microaggression, as they are plainly aggressive and frightening, but they warrant including as indicative of the ease with which microaggressions can morph into something much more troubling.

The last category in this typology is "presumed transient." Childfree people are often treated as if their identity is temporary, often being told: "You will change your mind." Gillespie's (228) subjects reported on the disregard with which they were met. Others reacted to them as if they were just immature, even not fully an adult. Her subjects were labeled "future mothers," rather than childfree. Moreover, childfree individuals might be punished socially for not changing their minds:

> S25: The first CF forum I signed up for was a little over two years ago. Two good friends had disappeared after I mentioned to them that I was planning to get sterilized. These two had been my pillars of support through some serious family drama some years prior—and seeing them disappear because of this was unsettling, disappointing, depressing and a whole lot of other things.
>
> S2: People who, a few years ago, were totally supportive now seem to get offended at the drop of a hat. Now that they are having babies, they take it personally that I haven't changed my stance on the subject, even though I have expressed nothing but joy and encouragement for them. (Avivi, *Childfree Women's Online Discussions* 97)

Often, the childfree individual will be met with the threat of regret. Anna Gotlib (personal communication 2020,) noted that those mentioning regret are likely imagining their own potential regret. They are not seeing the childfree person in front of them as a separate, different subject, able to not want things the speaker regards as essential. In that moment, the speaker is acting on a need to control the childfree person. The notion of regretting not having children threatens an important aspect of the speaker's psyche. Moreover, that speaker might need to deny multitudes within the speaker's own self, for if there is a part of the self that wishes to be childfree or even just feels ambivalence about parenting, that part might have to be split off—else the speaker might

experience internal conflict. And so the looming option of sadness or regret caused by not having children is presented as a terrible destiny, and avoiding such a catastrophe is more important than any reason the childfree person has for not wanting children.

Notably, regret over choosing to have children is rarely mentioned or discussed (Donath 47). This is curious, especially considering the importance of parental maturity and concern for children's well-being. With hosts of examples of poor parenting and its outcome, it would stand to reason that asking those who want to have children to reckon with the option of regret would be equally, if not more, important. Conversely, studies focused on regret among those who identify as childfree revealed that they did not typically experience regret (DeLyser 66). Allen and Wiles (211) found that their sample of older childless men and women, ages sixty-three to ninety-three, created rich and meaningful lives. They concluded that children were not necessary for life satisfaction or fulfillment.

Intersectionality

It is important to note that the taxonomy just described might not capture the nuanced experience of childfree people from diverse communities. Most writing about childfreedom is undertaken by Western scholars; most are White, cisgender, and might hold other privileges, such as higher education degrees, competitive incomes, and able bodies. Such is the case for this paper. I am part of the childfree community. And I am a cisgender, able-bodied, White woman, with a doctorate in clinical psychology. The volunteers for my study (Avivi, *Childfree Women's Online Discussions* 29) were all North American or European cis women, and almost all of them were White. However, not all women have the same reproductive options, and not all were born in a female-assigned body; experience of oppression frequently resides in the intersection of multiple aspects of identity (Crenshaw 140). Literature about the intersectionality of childfreedom with other identity factors is scarce, despite a few examples of studies focused on race, ethnicity, age, and LGBTQIA+ status (Clarke et al.; Hayfield et al.; Ngoubene-Atioky et al.; Rowlands and Lee; Uzun; Vinson et al.).

Not all childfree people are treated the same way or share the same experiences. For example, most same sex couples remain childless and it is difficult to discern who among them are intentionally childfree (Clarke et al. 4134). Pressure to procreate might present itself in nuanced ways among certain communities of color (Uzun 10), and manifest itself in unique ways in countries outside of North America and Europe (Nandy 54). For example, it is of utmost significance to acknowledge the role of the dominant culture and, in

particular, of colonialism in reproduction. Marlene Watson (155) shares a moving account of the role of slavery, racism, and class oppression in her own decision to remain childless. She discusses the conscious and unconscious messages she received from White culture and from the African American community that led her to choose to remain childless, without room to mourn the loss of motherhood. And in her 1997 book *Killing of the Black Body*, Dorothy Roberts discusses the racist history of contraception in the United States, noting that well throughout the 1970s, Black women were not only encouraged but also coerced to use contraceptives or go through sterilization (56). These were government-sponsored programs, which present as a dark mirror to White slaveholders forcing Black women to bear children for profit. In a December 2018 *Washington Post* article, Nickita Longman reviewed a class action lawsuit by sixty indigenous women in Saskatchewan, Canada. The women were suing the Canadian authorities for coercing, forcing, and pressuring indigenous women to undergo sterilization as late as 2017.

This chilling reality, even aside from its meaning for race relations and systemic oppression, is a message about the value of parenthood. The aforementioned messages, of parenthood being a destiny, self-fulfillment, and a token of normality, of children being "the future" and motherhood being "the most important job," appear cynical in light of who is pressured to have children, who is excluded—and how. As a Jewish Israeli, one clear message I received from the Israeli dominant culture was that my choice not to have children contributed to the "demographic problem"—that is, the fact that Arab people had more children than Jewish people and therefore the Jewish dominance in Israel was in danger. My experience as a childfree Jewish Israeli woman is, therefore, radically different from that of an Israeli-citizen Palestinian woman, not only within our respective subcultures but also in terms of how the dominant culture treats our choice.

Better understanding of the connection between microaggressions and intersectionality, especially in the field of psychology, is crucial if we are "to expand our knowledge about the subtle forms of oppression and their impact on the psychological well-being of marginalized groups" (Lewis 48). It is my hope that the taxonomy I suggested will be used to form scales that will enrich the study of childfreedom, especially for mental health purposes. But because pronatalism is a complex and intricate apparatus, affecting multiple facets of our lives (whether we choose to have or not to have children), it will not be enough to try to simply assess the accumulative pressure of any childfree individual who is also Black, transgender, or coming from limited financial means. When conducting studies with these groups, each individual must be approached as a whole to truly shed light on the individual's experiences of oppression (Lewis et al. 56).

Internalization of Cultural Messages and Intersubjectivity

Childfree individuals deserve safe spaces to explore their identity, allowing for ambiguity, playfulness, mourning of lost options, and celebration of those chosen. Repeatedly met with social invisibility and erasure from family, friends, the media, and even mental health providers, the childfree person is treated as an object to control rather than as a subject to be met with reciprocity. Attitudes that treat parenthood as essential, biological, and moral leave both parents and non-parents without "the self-knowledge that is necessary for autonomous decision making" (Meyers 763). Jessica Benjamin claims that a person, in order to develop a full and healthy sense of self, needs another person able to reflect back humanity and acceptance. To be human, for Benjamin, means being able to feel one's individuality while accepting someone else's individuality as well, even if that acceptance requires tolerating painful differences (*Bonds of Love* 47). Others' microaggressions toward the childfree can be understood as a way for those others to manage their own anxieties about the choices that they left behind, anxieties about the notion that life is full of options. By erasing the legitimacy of the childfree person and denoting her as aberrant, others protect themselves from the dread of not being merged, the dread of acknowledging their own separation. Finally, then, microaggressions are robbing both sides of the opportunity to be known, mirrored, and recognized by a truly complete other (Benjamin, *Bonds of Love* 47, 221).

At the end of her movie, Maxine Trump states: "I'm owning it. I'm not having kids. I'm lucky that I can finally own my decision. How many people out there can't? I now have to show everyone that embracing this choice is normal, and fine, and not weird." Indeed, being allowed to embrace one's choice is necessary. I am joining with Myra Hird through her beautiful article "Vacant Wombs," as well as with Harrington's work, in urging the clinical and academic community to start approaching childfreedom as a wonderful, mature, healthy, and complex way of life filled with options and worthy of dynamic exploration. I believe it is crucial to acknowledge microaggressions and their complex meaning for all subjects exposed to microaggressions—whether by producing them, seeing them in media, or being subjected to them. Such acknowledgment will open up the field of psychology, not only for the childfree but also for the involuntarily childless and parents. Everyone benefits from being recognized by fully separated and connected others. Everyone benefits from having choices.

Note

1 In her 1993 book *Reconceiving Women*, Mardy S. Ireland explored the multiple ways in which women relate to the concept of motherhood, unlinking motherhood from a fulfilling, creative life for women.

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4

Selfish Is Not a Four-Letter Word

Self-Care and Other-Care among Childfree Women

AMANDA MICHIKO SHIGIHARA

This chapter's unique contribution is the expansion of an empirical understanding of childfreedom in the United States, shown through narratives from a diverse group of women who voluntarily choose not to bear or rear children. I focus on the ways in which childfree women talk about and attempt to thwart or ameliorate negative stereotypes associated with childfreedom, an essential strategy in the wake of ongoing stigmatization of this group—in spite of media claims to the contrary.

Recently circulating news media articles tout high numbers of childless women with headlines such as "More Women Than Ever Are Childless, Census Finds" (Zezima) and "A Record Percentage of Women Don't Have Kids" (Gray). However, government statistics do not actually reflect these assertions. To explain, when one looks at the U.S. Census Bureau's nationally representative Current Population Survey (CPS) data for the group of people between fifteen and fifty years old, it does appear that there is the highest percentage (44.2 percent) of childless women in the United States since the survey began in 1976. Nevertheless, CPS data show that the percentage of childless women gets progressively lower as women age. Adapted from the latest

Table 4.1
Percentage of childless women in the United States by age

Age range	Percent
15–50	44.2
15–19	96.9
20–24	78.6
25–29	54.2
30–34	33.6
35–39	20.0
40–44	15.0
45–50	15.4

SOURCE: Adapted from the June 2018 Current Population Survey of the U.S. Census Bureau.

CPS data published in June 2018, table 4.1 shows the decline of childlessness among women in the United States by age. For instance, while young women 15–19 years old have an unsurprisingly high childless rate of 96.2 percent, only 15 percent of women are childless in the age range of 40–44. Moreover, research underscores that childlessness among U.S. women in their mid-40s is at its lowest point in twenty years (Livingston), while CPS data—as outlined in table 4.1—reveal that childlessness among these women is at its lowest point since 1988. Therefore, contemporary media insinuations that childlessness is at its all-time high and is fairly acceptable today belie the reality of the most current population data in the United States.

Even among women who presently do not have children, research indicates that about 16 percent of childless women who are forty to forty-four still report a plan to have a child, and the other women in this age range are equally likely to report being childless by choice or involuntarily childless (Abma and Martinez 1050). Notably, at the end of women's typical reproductive years (between forty-five and fifty years old), only 15.4 percent of women are childless (Current Population Survey), and it can only be speculated whether this absence of children is by choice or involuntary or whether having children has been postponed or has been delayed to the point of involuntary childlessness. Ultimately, most women in the United States have children or express a desire to have children, and there is limited knowledge about the reasons women have for voluntary childlessness. Further sociological research is necessary in order to unpack the experiences of childfree women. Going forward, I review literature on childlessness, establish a conceptual framework, discuss this study's methods, highlight participant narratives, and conclude with research implications.

Literature Review

Studies on voluntary childlessness began emerging in the mid-1970s, and they have steadily grown between the 1980s and 2000s. Although childfree research has explored both macro- and micro-level processes, the majority of childfree studies are quantitative, and few examine the lived experiences of childfree women (Rich et al. 228). Additionally, scholars voice the need for studies with greater sample diversity in terms of race, social class, and sexuality, as most studies on childfree women focus on White, middle-class, heterosexual women (Blackstone and Stewart 6; Settle and Brumley 18). One major theme in voluntary childlessness research is the prevailing negative view people have of childfree women. According to Blackstone, "research spanning from the 1970s to within the last few years finds that childfree women are believed to be maladjusted, unfeminine, too involved with work, and less warm than mothers" (89). In the next section, I discuss the widespread derogatory perspectives on voluntarily childfree women and highlight how they have attempted to resist and challenge these views.

Views of Voluntarily Childfree Women

"People are still expected to provide reasons not to have children, but no reasons are required to have them. It's assumed that if individuals do not have children it is because they are infertile, too selfish or have just not yet gotten around to it. In any case, they owe their interlocutor an explanation. On the other hand, no one says to the proud parents of a newborn, Why did you choose to have that child? What are your reasons? The choice to procreate is not regarded as needing any thought or justification" (Overall). Firsthand accounts of childfree women indicate unfavorable views of being voluntarily childless. Like Overall, other childfree women explain how they have been told that they are selfish, shallow, and self-absorbed (Daum 101). Moreover, people frequently tell childfree women that they will miss out, never understand the meaning of life, not understand true love, be incomplete, change their minds, regret not having children, and will never be real women (Kelly 166; Koehler). Negative attitudes and portrayals of childfree women bestow them with marginal, liminal, oppressive, and "otherhood" statuses (Sappleton 4).

Numerous studies show that people stereotype and stigmatize childfree women (Mollen 278; Morison et al. 184; Mueller and Yoder 901; Park 21; Somers 648). Childfree women are represented as careless, carefree, immature, childlike, wayward, and disobedient (Graham and Rich 512). Research indicates that people perceive childfree women to be less sensitive, less loving, less like American women, less happy, less likely to get along with parents, and less likely to be happy and satisfied (Jamison et al. 269). Other research underscores how people evaluate childfree women as hard, ruthless, and unfeminine

(Gillespie 227), psychologically unfulfilled and poorly adjusted (Ashburn-Nardo 398), and less well liked than women with children (Calhoun and Selby 183). Studies also reveal that childfree women elicit feelings of disgust and are regarded as less warm than mothers (Bays 148).

Among voluntary childlessness literature, a consistent stereotype that emerges is the idea that voluntarily childfree women are selfish (Carmichael and Whittaker 123; Letherby 17; Meyers 735; Motherwell and Prudent 149). Scholarship highlights how selfishness claims result in childfree women feeling perceived as "selfish," "immature," and "abnormal" for not desiring to bear children (Maher and Saugeres 13). Furthermore, Gillespie found that childfree women are considered deviant for their supposed selfishness because they allegedly focus only on their own needs (and freedom), rather than focusing on the needs of others by virtue of motherhood (230). Peterson explains that "the stereotype about selfishness is based on an understanding of independence, autonomy and freedom as utterly unfeminine characteristics, needs and behaviors . . . When drawing on the freedom discourse childfree women thus fail to conform to the feminine ideal about attachment, connectedness, dependence and concern for others" (189). In other words, when women choose to be childfree they are also purportedly choosing to be selfish because they are seemingly rejecting traditional gender roles, conventional femininity, and compulsory motherhood.

Resisting and Challenging Stereotypes of Voluntary Childlessness

Studies illustrate how childfree women resist and challenge negative stereotypes associated with voluntary childlessness. Research establishes that childfree women reject pronatalist language that both stereotypes voluntary childlessness as selfish and conflates motherhood with womanhood by challenging the existence of a biological or natural urge to bear children (Peterson and Engwall 387). Other research found that childfree women challenge stereotypes by constructing voluntary childlessness as necessary for positive well-being (Peterson 186). Specifically, the voluntarily childfree women contended that childlessness granted liberation, enjoyment, and avoidance of motherhood penalties (Peterson 187).

Past studies exemplify how childfree women reframe the meaning of childlessness to resist and challenge negative stereotypes. For instance, these women reframe childlessness as a thoughtful, considerate, and responsible decision, rather than a selfish choice (Rich et al. 237). Further, they discuss how not having children is less selfish than having them because of global social issues like hunger and overpopulation (Durham and Braithwaite 8). Research also reveals how childfree women redirect selfishness claims, such as by arguing that people bear children in order to have later-life caretakers (Park 35).

The literature additionally exhibits how childfree women resist negative stereotypes of voluntary childlessness by asserting their selfishness (Carmichael

and Whittaker 118). Settle and Brumley's study demonstrates how childfree women felt their personal autonomy and choices far outweighed any possible benefits of childbearing (10). In particular, these women acknowledged that their childfree choice was selfish but framed this selfishness in positive terms (Settle and Brumley 11). For example, the women discussed how childfreedom allowed for spending money, travel, sleep, and focus on education or careers (Settle and Brumley 14).

Although childfree women are negatively stereotyped and stigmatized, research shows no statistically significant difference in well-being between mothers and the childless (Jeffries and Konnert 102). Other research suggests that "childlessness has few costs for psychological well-being and may even be associated with enhanced well-being" (Umberson et al. 3). In fact, several studies highlight the benefits of remaining childfree, such as higher social mobility (Kenkel 511), self-fulfillment (Park 36), life goal achievement (Maher and Saugeres 12), and personal freedom attainment (Peterson 186).

Overall, childlessness and the study of childlessness are not new phenomena (Kreyenfeld and Konietzka 4), but there is limited qualitative research with diverse samples that provides a deeper understanding of how voluntarily childfree women negotiate, develop, and safeguard positive senses of self in the face of negative attitudes toward voluntary childlessness. The present study is important for highlighting social psychological processes that influence reproductive choices, such as considerations related to emotional, mental, and physical well-being. In addition, this research may help uncover avenues for reproductive freedom and prevention of reproductive regret. After all, there is unfortunately a growing number of studies that describe parents who regret having had children; some of these parents even admit that if they could go back, they would not have had children (Donath 47; Moore and Abetz 402). The purpose of this chapter is to examine how voluntarily childfree women reconcile negative stereotypes about childfreedom, as well as to develop a conceptual explanation for how selfishness is a rhetorical tool that can be used as a shield to protect women from societal pressures, uncertainty, turmoil, and regret.

Conceptual Framework: Selfish or Self-Care?

Both of the terms "selfish" and "self-care" place the self at the center of importance. However, the former holds a negative connotation and the latter comes with positive value. According to the Random House Unabridged Dictionary, the term "selfish" is synonymous with "self-interested," "self-seeking," "egoistic," and "stingy" and is defined as "devoted to or caring only for oneself; concerned primarily with one's own interests, benefits, welfare, etc., regardless of others; characterized by or manifesting concern or care only for oneself: *selfish*

motives." Additionally, some of the listed words that are related to the term "selfish" include "self-centered," "narcissistic," "greedy," and "self-indulgent." Although these synonyms, definitions, and related words are not necessarily derogatory sui generis, they have accumulated culturally assigned negative meaning. In a Google search of the word, it is apparent that "selfish" is represented unfavorably—for example, as lacking consideration for others or being excessively concerned for oneself—and is an adjective with which people would rather not be associated.

Alternatively, the term "self-care" has positive meaning and is seen as a desirable thing. The World Health Organization defines self-care as "the activities individuals, families and communities undertake with the intention of enhancing health, preventing disease, limiting illness, and restoring health. These activities are derived from knowledge and skills from the pool of both professional and lay experience. They are undertaken by lay people on their own behalf, either separately or in participative collaboration with professionals" (2). In other words, self-care is any activity that people engage in to take care of their mental, emotional, and physical health (Riegel et al. 2). A Google search of this word makes it evident that it is considered good, acceptable, and worthwhile to care for oneself and to make the self a priority.

Ironically, self-care is selfish, as to care for the self is to concern oneself with one's interests. The major difference is that the term "selfish" is predominantly defined as caring exclusively or excessively for the self with no or little concern for others, whereas the term "self-care" does not signify a lack of care or concern for others. In this chapter, I underscore how the participants reframe the term "selfish" as involving both self-care and other-care: being selfish helps one perform care on behalf of the self and others, because when people take the time for self-care, they can achieve the favorable well-being necessary to care for themselves as well as others (e.g., family, friends, and community).

Methods, Participants, and Data Analysis

This chapter draws on thirty in-depth, semi-structured interviews with voluntarily childfree women across the United States. I recruited participants by employing a snowball chain referral sampling procedure (Biernacki and Waldorf 141), which is a method particularly useful to research hidden groups of people, such as women who do not fit within hegemonic gender norms (Browne 48). Initially, I interviewed a few contacts in my personal network, but the vast majority of the sample is composed of referrals. This approach provided a more diverse sample than in past studies. Scholars have indicated a need for sample diversity in terms of race, sexuality, and social class (Blackstone and Stewart 6; Settle and Brumley 18); I highlight the diversity of these variables in table 4.2.

Table 4.2
Sociodemographic characteristics of participants ($N = 30$)

Characteristic	*N*	Percent
Race		
White	12	40.0
Black/African American	5	16.7
Asian	7	23.3
Hispanic/Latina	1	3.3
Biracial	4	13.3
Other	1	3.3
Sexuality		
Heterosexual/straight	22	73.3
Homosexual/lesbian	2	6.7
Bisexual	6	20.0
Social class upbringing		
Lower class	9	30.0
Lower middle class	7	23.3
Middle class	10	33.3
Upper middle class	4	13.3

The sample consists of eighteen (60 percent) members of racial minorities, eight (26.7 percent) members of sexual minorities, and twenty (66.7 percent) women from social class upbringings outside of the middle class. Those who reported a biracial designation are White-Asian, White-Black/African American, and White-Hispanic/Latina women, and the woman in the "other" category reported as Middle Eastern. This sample also varies by age, relationship status, highest level of education completed, current residential location, and job or occupation. Participants are between 21 and 59 years old ($M = 35.53$), are single, in a relationship or dating, partnered, married, or divorced, and differ in highest level of education completed from a high school diploma all the way up to a PhD. In addition, the women range in current American residential location by Pacific, Mountain, Central, and Eastern time zones, and they hold positions in service, legal, business, clerical and administrative, education, and health care occupations.

All interviewees were given pseudonyms, and no identifying information was documented. Interviews lasted between two and four hours; were conducted face-to-face, over the phone, or on Skype; were audio-recorded with permission; and were transcribed. The interview guide was composed of broad, open-ended questions. Major interview themes included (1) demographics, socialization, and life histories; (2) the childfree decision; (3) thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about children; (4) relationships with people who have and

who do not have children; (5) others' perceptions of the interviewee's childfree decision; (6) concerns about being childfree; and (7) activities, behaviors, goals, and aspirations. To permit conversational ease and follow-up questions, I covered all topics in the interviews but not necessarily in the same order.

After completing interview transcription and several reads of the transcripts, I analyzed the data with open and focused coding (Charmaz 57) to establish meaningful themes (e.g., negative stereotypes). During data analysis, I used memo writing (Charmaz 72) to help develop and clarify emergent categories and concepts (e.g., selfishness). Only after finding repetition throughout the interviews was I confident in the themes, categories, and concepts. Additionally, I evaluated and assessed data analyses by cross-checking and confirming them with interviewees. In this chapter, I focus on how the concepts of selfish, self-care, and other-care are central to the participants' accounts of their childfree decision.

Affirming Selfishness as Necessary Self-Care and Other-Care

Fundamental to the participants' negotiation, development, and safeguarding of positive senses of self, despite negative attitudes toward voluntary childlessness, is their reframing of the term "selfish," use of the term "self-care," and emphasis on other-care. These are rhetorical tools to protect the women from societal pressures, stereotypes, and regret. The childfree women do not accept the term "selfish" as an offensive, or "four-letter," word. Their "selfish," "self-care," and "other-care" narratives articulate thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that the women believe will generate emotional, mental, and physical well-being. In general, resistance to unwanted responsibility, dependence, uncertainty, and turmoil marks how the participants account for the benefits of voluntary childlessness that offset the perceived consequences of not having children. I will now discuss how childfree women affirm selfishness as necessary care for the self, the children they are not going to have, and others.

"You Gotta Take Care of Yourself"

The theme of the acceptability of selfishness relative to reproduction and the need for self-care emerged throughout the interviews. As Kaia (thirty-six, White, bisexual, lower-class upbringing) stated, "You gotta take care of yourself." She defended her statement: "I don't see anything wrong with that. I think *everyone* is selfish!" She then lightened the mood with an airplane safety reference: "I mean put your own mask on first, man [laughs]." Similarly, Fiona (thirty, biracial, heterosexual, lower-middle-class upbringing), in jest, noted that her friends with kids might perceive her as a "selfish bitch [laughs]" but then asserted,

> There's nothing wrong with being selfish. But, there's a negative perception of people who identify as selfish, and I don't think that's fair because I think we all should reflect on our flaws. There's a lot of people who have children *that should not*! There are selfish people, and they should not reproduce. Yet, they go ahead and do it, and they're horrible people, and their kids turn out crappy. But, anyway, I need to prioritize self-care so that I can take care of myself. All I can do is try to take care of myself financially, take care of myself physically and mentally, and hope for the best. And, I prioritize and take care of my emotional health, so, like with therapy, lots of exercise, I dance a lot, I just started yoga, trying to make sure I'll be mobile for as long as humanly possible, I volunteer, and a bunch of other stuff. All these things encourage my growth and challenge me in new ways personally and professionally. I just couldn't do all that with a kid.

The participants additionally discussed childhood reasons for needing to be selfish as well as self-care. For example, Kitty (twenty-nine, Asian, heterosexual, lower-middle-class upbringing) revealed:

> I have a little sister, I have always had to take care of her. I had to raise a child when I was a child. All I know is how much work it is, and I take the idea of raising a child really seriously. Like, you're in charge of that person, and basically, I want to be selfish for once. I'm the eldest child, I've always had a lot of responsibility, and I want to be free. I don't want to think about someone else, 'cause if I had a child, I know I'd put them first before me, and I know I want the opportunity to sort of put myself first [pause], like in my career.

Beyond childhood obligations and responsibilities, participants' childhood traumas also influenced their decision not to bear children. To illustrate, Mazzy (thirty-two, White, heterosexual, lower-class upbringing) explained how her "pretty crappy" childhood informed her childfree decision and the urge to take care of herself. Throughout the interview, Mazzy described experiencing childhood abuse, and she said:

> I want to be selfish in my adulthood 'cause I didn't have a good, I don't know, like 20-some-years of my life, you know? So I want the next 20-some-years to be mine and not have to give it to somebody else. And, like, it's just so much work, you know? I kinda just don't want to sacrifice my adulthood for a kid because children are so unpredictable and expensive. And, I'm so close to getting the career I've always wanted, establishing myself, you know? So, why would I interrupt all of that for this sort of really ambiguous, uncertain thing that I wouldn't want, that I would be bad at taking care of?

Previous research has indicated that childfree women construct voluntary childlessness as necessary for positive well-being (Peterson 186). Advancing this finding, my study's participants expose how *selfishness* and *self-care* are key in the pursuit of positive well-being.

"I Help Me and the Child"

Unexpectedly, the participants talked about how their selfishness was necessary for helping the children they were not going to have. Nia (thirty-three, Asian, heterosexual, lower-middle-class upbringing) said, "I'm not ashamed to say that I'm selfish about not having children. I help me *and* the child by not bringing the child into the world." She then divulged that "the number one reason for not having kids for me is that I know, in many ways, parents fulfill their unfulfilled dreams through their children. I actually think that's among the most selfish reasons in the entire world to have a child. Thinking about my childhood, I can see the things I was made to do, it seemed forced, so I don't like that part of it. I would not feel right telling a child what to do." Furthermore, Nia admitted, "I absolutely love sleeping. A child would totally take away sleep from me, not just at night, but any time of day. And this is a very selfish reason, but I am selfish, there you go [laughs]." She then added, "I'd rather spend my money on more productive things than raising a child, and that's not the right mindset for a parent, you don't want to hurt children, right? I don't want that." Here, similar to the other participants, Nia provided a selfless reason—do no harm to children—for being selfish in her reproductive choice. By building on past research (e.g., Settle and Brumley 14) and asserting a positive value around selfishness, the women maintained a positive sense of self and resisted negative stereotypes.

Other participants detailed why remaining childfree was the proper choice for the children they were not going to have. Galea (twenty-three, Hispanic/Latina, bisexual, middle-class upbringing), for instance, pointed out that her lifestyle was not conducive to child-rearing. She said, "Kids cost a lot, and with what I want to do, which is social work, or really just anything that's helping people who are vulnerable and probably don't have a lot of money, I'm probably not going to be able to take care of a kid." Galea expounded, "I want to travel a lot. I also have a kind of lifestyle [laughs] that I don't think would be good for a kid. I mean, I don't know, well, I, [pause] it's nothing serious, I mean, I don't use like hard drugs, but I smoke marijuana, a little bit [pause] [laughs], well, a lot, because it helps me with my anxiety and like with my [pause], I have a history of like real mental illness." In addition to lifestyle, participants described personalities they felt were inadequate for serving children's needs. Laudy (forty-seven, Asian, heterosexual, middle-class upbringing) confessed, "Let's put it this way, at this point, I'm very selfish. I want what I want. I only

want to do what I want to do." She then clarified, "I don't know if I'm selfless enough to give the child what the child needs to feel taken care of. Does that make sense?" Laudy elucidated, "There's nothing wrong with being selfish, but you can be so selfish that you're not nurturing to a child and you alienate the child, and you make the child neurotic or insecure. So, OK, there's nothing wrong with being selfish, but I don't think selfish is what you should do when parenting, though. Setting boundaries is what I think is a more appropriate word for parenting, so that the child knows that you need your space. But, me, I just don't want that responsibility of taking care of children."

Another other-care theme that emerged was about the current social and political climate. As Storm (twenty-two, White, heterosexual, middle-class upbringing) put it,

> I honestly think bringing up a kid in this world is selfish. You see this police brutality stuff, and you see like people getting shot and killed, and you see all this negativity, and you want to bring up a life in this world? Fuck no! I mean, I don't need to get into politics, but Donald Trump is our fucking president! I think that it's selfish to bring somebody up now in this time, I do, I don't think that's right. Plus, when you're a parent, I just feel like you always gotta worry when you have a kid, like it's not about you anymore, it's about your kid. And, so many moms look like shit because of it. And, that is not what I want, like at all. Like, seriously, it's better for all of us if I don't have a kid.

Storm's utilitarian sentiment—the greatest good for the greatest number of people—surfaced throughout the interviews. Not only did the participants consider their own mental, emotional, and physical well-being when discussing their decision not to have children, they also factored in the well-being of the hypothetical children as well as other people. For example, the interviewees spoke about childfreedom as a means to curb economic hardship, overpopulation, and environmental degradation that potentially affect all people (see also Durham and Braithwaite 8).

"When I'm Healthy and Happy, I Can Help My Family and Friends"

The participants also affirmed selfishness as necessary to help and care for family, friends, and the community. Adelaide (thirty-one, Asian, lesbian, lower-class upbringing) stated, "I'm not selfish in a bad way. I mean, I need to do things to take care of myself so that I can take care of my family and friends, my responsibilities, my job, you know what I mean? I mean, when I'm healthy and happy, I can help my family and friends be healthy and happy." She later listed her self-care activities: "I exercise, I volunteer, I garden, I meditate, I do all sorts of self-care stuff." She then explained, "as I have gotten older [pause], more mature, I have figured out all the things I need to do to take care of my

mental, and emotional, and like physical health." Adelaide went on to divulge another related reason for not bearing children: "Well, one reason is that I really can't stand the idea of working so hard to be healthy and having a relatively healthy body and then giving that all up for a child. And, I guess that does sound really narcissistic and selfish, but just I've seen a lot of people be treated different because of their weight, and I think that affects me a lot, too."

When participants talked about others' selfishness judgments, they provided an opposing depiction of selflessness. Shelby (twenty-one, Black, heterosexual, middle-upper-class upbringing) began by saying, "My mother says it is selfish for me not to have a kid. But, it's not selfish. I feel like I'm aware. I'm woke. I'm conscious of who I am, you know?" She then formed an image of her selflessness:

> I know who I am and what I want. There's just so much in the world to experience, to know, to travel, so much more. So, I want more time to do other things, to help people, so it's not actually selfish, but people say it is, people say it's selfish. But, selfishness is somebody who is just focused on themselves, particularly like vain, self-absorbed people, like the world revolves around them and nothing else. That's not me because I tend to give a lot. I try to like give money away here and there, like I'm really caring, I'm loving, I'm really affectionate, like I care about people, I'm really sentimental.

Moreover, Shelby placed a judgement of selfishness on certain people who have children:

> It's really selfish for people to have a child just because they want that emotional comfort. Like, I have friends who have children because they've said they don't feel that love from anyone, but they say a child is going to love them unconditionally [laughs], but there is no guarantee of that. It's also really selfish to have a kid for a family legacy, like, you're having a kid 'cause you want to expand your legacy? Like, excuse me? And, it's also really selfish to have a child 'cause you feel like you need someone to take care of you? That's selfish, that's *really* selfish.

Like childless individuals in prior research (e.g., Rich et al. 237; Park 35), the participants considered their choice not to reproduce a considerate, thoughtful and responsible decision, while they regarded some reasons people have for bearing children more selfish than reasons to go without children.

As a final example, Billie (twenty-five, Middle Eastern, heterosexual, middle-class upbringing) adamantly stated that it is "empowering to be able to say, no, I don't want children," but then said, "I'm a nurturing human being. I love taking care of my friends, my family. I love being that figure that they can go to

and they can rely on." She also described activities she loved to do but felt would be sacrificed if she had children: "I love to travel, and my job right now allows me to travel, and it's at any moment. I love only being responsible for myself. I love being physically active. I love playing sports, I love rock climbing, I love boxing, I love traveling, and I love motorcycle riding. Like, yeah, I feel like those are a lot of things that would change with [pause] with having a child." In sum, the interviewees maintained that selfishness is integral for self-care and other-care, both of which are essential for positive well-being. Importantly, the ways in which the women described their childfree decision paradoxically defied and reified cultural standards. That is, while freeing themselves from stereotypical maternal roles and responsibilities, the participants remained somewhat tethered to societal gender norms by engaging in nurturing, caregiving, attaching, and connecting outside of childbearing or child-rearing (e.g., helping family and friends, volunteering, and building relationships with co-workers).

Conclusion

Research has documented stereotyping and stigmatization of voluntarily childfree women (e.g., Ashburn-Nardo 398; Bays 148; Graham and Rich 512; Park 21). A particularly prevalent stereotype in the literature is that voluntarily childfree women are evaluated as selfish (e.g., Gillespie 230; Letherby 17; Maher and Saugeres 13; Meyers 735), which is based on the notion that they fail to conform to traditional gender ideals (Peterson 189). This chapter has aimed to address the gaps in the literature mentioned earlier by investigating the ways in which a diverse group of voluntarily childfree women negotiate, develop, and safeguard positive senses of self, notwithstanding unfavorable views of childfreedom. Data analyses contribute to scholarship on voluntary childlessness by highlighting how childfree women experience negative stereotypes and employ the reconciliation strategy of affirming selfishness as necessary for self-care and other-care. In other words, participants indicated the importance of taking care of the self and others to maintain their own healthy emotional, mental, and physical well-being. Additionally, participants revealed that positive well-being is salient for the ability to help the self and others. Ultimately, the participants' desire for favorable well-being necessitated self-care and other-care, rather than bearing or rearing children.

The implications of this research are fourfold and are applicable to people beyond voluntarily childfree women. First, this study has developed a conceptual framework with which to explain the importance of people's selfishness, self-care, and other-care. Second, the study highlights how the term "selfishness" can be turned on its head and used as a rhetorical tool to shield people from societal pressures, stereotypes, uncertainty, and turmoil. Third, the study broadens the understanding of people's sometimes paradoxical accounts of

decision-making relating to the social psychological considerations of emotional, mental, and physical well-being. Finally, the study underscores avenues for people's reproductive freedom as well as reproductive regret prevention. Future studies should examine self-care and other-care practices among larger and more diverse samples of voluntarily childfree women (and men), as well as among any group of people battling negative stereotypes based on decisions that oppose hegemonic traditions (e.g., unconventional religious groups).

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Part II

Childfree Representation

5

Childfree in Toyland

CHRISTOPHER CLAUSEN

On the threshold of thirty and divorce, the personable daughter of a South Carolina Baptist minister once informed me calmly that any child of hers would probably be a battered child. She was being neither neurotic nor more self-centered than people usually are, merely honest about her strong preference not to have children. The feminist movement was just starting to make such a choice familiar in places where it had influence, which included universities like the one in which we both had temporary jobs. Nonetheless, most of her friends had built their nests and were busy furnishing them with babies. Her parents, like most, were eager for grandchildren. Determined to be the hero of her own life, what their daughter wanted was a PhD and an academic career. Quite apart from professional ambitions, temperamentally she was one of those people for whom parenthood is an alien role. Her dramatic way of expressing her feelings, to a man whose own marriage ended because his wife wanted a child and he did not, might have been an expression of how inexpressible those feelings were in other circles of her life.

That was in the early 1970s. In the almost half-century since then, life and attitudes are widely assumed to have changed beyond recognition. More than half of married and unmarried women alike now work outside the home, or did until the COVID-19 lockdowns caused record unemployment. Birth control has improved dramatically. In intellectual circles the phrase "family values" decades ago became a term of ridicule, while the term "reproductive rights,"

like "choice," is an accepted synonym for legalized abortion. In fact, the story that opens this chapter almost seems too good to be true, although it is true. It seems to confirm a fashionable academic and journalistic stereotype of perennial conflict in Western societies: the religious right versus women's freedom to have professional careers or determine their own reproductive futures. An array of newspaper articles in the wake of the 2000 and 2010 U.S. censuses pointed out, sometimes with alarm about an aging society, that the number of temporarily or permanently childless adults has been rising significantly since the 1970s. Despite these fears, usually one implication was that—except in the most benighted company—nobody today needs to feel defensive about being "childfree," a term long used by advocates for the rights of non-parents.

"The admiration gained now by the child-free woman tends to demoralize women, otherwise contented with their normal functions," declared the *American Journal of Sociology* as long ago as 1913. The truth more than a century later is a lot messier, or at least harder to decipher, and has little to do with any ideology. As usual in controversies about social trends, a variety of sometimes ambiguous statistics fly back and forth as ammunition. Perhaps the most helpful are a series issued by the Census Bureau that display by age cohort the percentage of U.S. women who have never had at least one live birth. In 1976, the fraction of women in the cohort aged from forty to forty-four who had never given birth was 10.2 percent. (Few women bear a first child after their early forties.) The proportion of childless women in that cohort increased over time until the end of the 1980s. Since then, it the percentage has fluctuated with no consistent direction. For 2018, the comparable number was 15.0 percent. What changed just as much as the total figure were the ages at which women bear children. As the National Center for Health Statistics stated in its November 2019 report on 2018 births: "The birth rate for women aged 40–44 . . . has risen almost continuously since 1985." Even more striking, the birth rate for women over fifty, although still low, was about six and a half times as high in 2018 as it had been in 1997.

This succession of numbers may be interpreted in at least two ways. Enthusiasts for the childfree state, or observers frightened by its implications for future prosperity, can point out that the childless percentage among women who had reached their mid-forties increased by nearly half in forty-two years. The proportion who had never given birth grew even faster among women in their twenties and thirties. But those who doubt that things have changed radically can note with equal justice that the vast majority of U.S. women, between 80 and 90 percent, continue to have children, and that the permanently childless minority seemed to level off three decades ago. In its September 2000 report on the fertility of U.S. women, the Census Bureau stated that "childless levels are approximately the same now as they were a century ago," a generalization that remains valid today. While people marry later and have fewer children on

average than they did during the Baby Boom (if not later or fewer than during the Great Depression), the question of whether to have any children at all continues to be answered resoundingly in the affirmative.

Despite women's enormously larger participation in professional careers, despite the almost universal availability of reliable birth control, despite a half-century of feminists assuring women that reproduction is a matter of choice, despite decades of warnings about overpopulation and environmental degradation, despite the huge contemporary emphasis on personal freedom and self-gratification, despite the manifest economic advantages of childlessness—despite all these influences, having children is still overwhelmingly the norm. As the novelist Jennifer Weiner once put it, "You're supposed to have the career, you're supposed to have the guy, you're supposed not to wait to have babies—and you're supposed to do it all really well and look really good while you're doing it." What has declined most dramatically is not the number of people who choose to have children but the link between childbearing and marriage. Although eight out of ten Americans eventually marry at least once, according to a 2014 Pew study, the proportion of children who are born to unwed mothers now hovers around 40 percent and constitutes the most important cause of child poverty.

Like parenthood itself, the sentimentalizing of childhood that began with the Romantics more than two hundred years ago shows no sign of decline in public or private life. Since the 1980s, children have become a justification, and sometimes spokespeople, for every kind of political proposal or government initiative from controlling health care to enacting campaign finance reform to fighting global warming to gun control. In a famous flight of White House rhetoric from the mid-1990s, President Clinton announced, following an agreement to retarget Russia's ballistic arsenal, that not a single nuclear missile was now aimed at an American child. Education is perennially the most popular election issue except in times of extreme crisis, while displayable children—or, in recent presidential campaigns, grandchildren—are an almost mandatory prop for successful candidates. Starting with UNESCO in 1979, any number of organizations ranging from the Presbyterian Church to the state of South Carolina have proclaimed various twelve-month periods as the Year of the Child. Walt Disney World is the most popular vacation resort anywhere. Contrariwise, hardly anyone of any age talks about searching for his or her inner adult. "Adult language" means profanity; an adult community is a housing development for the elderly.

One of the most forthright criticisms of the childfree position came in 2000 from Amitai Etzioni, a well-known social theorist who is the leading figure in the communitarian movement. Writing in *USA Today*, Etzioni declared: "One may be tempted to treat this attempt to imitate social movements that address serious social grievances as a poor joke. However, growing work pressures and

the high costs of raising children already discourage many people from having children. Middle-class people are getting married later and are having fewer children as it is." Etzioni saw the declining birthrate as a threat to the whole society's future economic well-being, and he recommended that rather than cut back on what he described as "the meager benefits our society does provide parents," we should consider imitating France by offering bonuses to encourage Americans to have more children. Like most cheerleaders for childbearing, Etzioni emphasized that the benefits to society were not his primary motive. Few people have children out of a sense of civic duty. "As the childless by choice have doubtless heard before," this father of five declared, "the reason children are recommended—whether homemade or adopted—is that most of them turn out to be an unmatchable source of profound joy and deep pride. . . . Quite simply, I am sorry for those who swear off children."

If a mainstream liberal wrote this way at a time when the childfree movement seemed to be gaining steam, where are those who decide against becoming parents to look for moral support? Etzioni's attitude was and remains by no means unusual. Even on university faculties, people with children frequently still explain to any childless friend over the age of twenty-five, with a varying mixture of envy, flattery, and reproach, that not having children is selfish; that someone as smart as you are should pass those genes along to the future; that such a wonderful person would make an exceptionally wonderful parent; that a clinic could probably help. . . . As in other professions, the prevailing model today is having it all, even if that means the parents never sleep and the kids spend their early lives in day care. Female graduate students in my classes used to worry loudly and seriously about when the best time would be to "start a family." Before or after the PhD? After or before tenure? But you might be forty by then.

The biological clock seems immune to deconstruction. That clock's peremptory ticking, like mortality itself, seems to be one of those rhythms that unite the generations rather than divide them. Alarmist media stories on childless professional couples alternate with inspirational features about gentle, enlightened fathers who stay home to change the diapers while their wives earn millions as trial lawyers or investment bankers. The "not choosing children" alternative may be somewhat easier than it was half a century ago, but its status in most quarters is closer to uneasy tolerance than full acceptance.

Why we do or don't have children, now that most of us have a choice, is one of the most fascinating questions anyone can ask about human nature. To write on it is to write about oneself, whether overtly or by implication. In a fairly long life I have changed my mind about a great many things, but becoming a father was not one of them. Maybe it was the result of being the oldest of four sons and having my fill of responsibility toward siblings early in life. Or maybe not; many eldest children of large families happily rear happy children of their own.

In any event, I can recall shyly confiding to my father sometime before puberty that I thought I would probably not choose to be a parent myself. His response was that when I grew older I would want to perform the activity that led to the conception of children, and life would take its natural course. I doubted the last part. There was no single issue that led me at an early age to such an independent decision, certainly not a dislike of children, but I already felt sure that having them was for other people.

Among my parents' closest friends were a brilliant and sparkling young couple. The man had been my father's student at Cornell a decade earlier. When I asked my mother—even more shyly this time—several years after the couple's marriage when they were going to have children, she shook her head and answered that she was afraid they never would. They liked their freedom too much. Although the man was subordinate to my father at the National Institutes of Health, the couple inhabited a quirky eighteenth-century house in Georgetown instead of, like us, a standard three-bedroom in the suburbs. They had no need to worry about local schools or playgrounds. They took trips to New York whenever they wanted, and occasionally to Europe. They frequently ate in restaurants. After a few years the woman decided to go to law school and subsequently made a career for herself in labor law. This couple, whose way of life seemed so self-indulgent and immature to my parents, quickly became my closest adult friends and marital ideal.

College was an altogether different experience. There, virtually all my friends, regardless of career ambitions, looked forward to parenthood as a matter of course. At the age of twenty, I was a naively romantic youth who believed in commitment, devotion, marriage—in other words, with one exception, I was utterly conventional when it came to personal life. The exception, which seemed a small thing at the time, was merely the conviction that love and marriage were logically, as well as practically, separable from parenthood. By the time I graduated, the birth- control pill had come on the market. Two people who were well matched could find plenty of interesting ways to occupy their time; they had no need for a third or fourth or fifth. I never doubted that children could be a joy and satisfaction to parents who welcomed them into the world with enthusiasm, but my tastes were different. There was certainly no public reason or duty to replace oneself. It was already plain that the world was never likely to suffer from underpopulation.

Getting married prematurely to a bright, lovable fellow student, on the assumption that one of us would change our mind over the course of time, was an almost inevitable mistake. *Eventually* has a way of becoming *soon*; soon eventually becomes *now*. That biological clock again. Because it was not a subject on which I had ever experienced inner conflict, I thought very little about the matter until the woman in question began to hear hers ticking louder and more resentfully with every passing year.

I was sadder, wiser, and much luckier a decade later when I met the fourth daughter of a Latin teacher and a retired Navy officer. Although we found ourselves in instant accord on the question of parenthood—together with strong feelings about fidelity in the Age of Aquarius, that was one of the early bonds of temperament between us—our own parents could never quite believe it. Each couple had conscientiously reared four apparently sound, healthy offspring and ended up with only three grandchildren. Half their children never reproduced at all. When my mother, by now an urbane feminist who lived in Berkeley, California, got together with my conservative Southern mother-in-law, the one issue on which *they* were in perfect accord was the unfairness of having gone to so much trouble for such a meager return.

My oldest brother died of cancer in his mid-forties, leaving a widow and a son of eight. In the long aftermath, my wife and I happily assumed responsibility for our nephew two or three times a year and gave his mother a break from single parenthood. We did most of the predictable things—took him to restaurants and museums, played tennis and cribbage with him, read to him until he got too old, indulged his tastes in food and television, assembled a fiendishly complicated model of Fenway Park, explained the defects of the two-party system, talked to him about his father. For days or weeks at a stretch it was a delight to become the quasi-parents of a lively, brainy, exceptionally well-mannered kid, after which we were ready to return him to his mother. As he approached college age, the routine evolved into something more solid—less a matter of substituting for someone who has been lost than a bond among people who share indelible memories, interests, and affections. He and his wife now have four young children of their own. You can never tell how anyone will respond to a particular upbringing.

A lesson the childfree learn early in adult life is that when a friend or sibling asks accusingly why you have not had children yet, there is only one effective answer. "If I could be sure of getting ones just like yours, I'd do it in a minute" is guaranteed to deflect the attack and change the subject. Most people prefer flattery to imitation. Alas, it seldom works with your own parents. On one occasion my father, always an outspoken man, took my wife aside and blurted experimentally, "Chris should have given you a child." To which she responded, "I would have given it right back." My parents never raised the question again, but after Nancy and I had been married twenty years, my mother-in-law was still asking her youngest daughter when she planned to start a family.

While some men hear biological clocks too, the great majority of writers on childlessness are women. As their titles suggest, such recent books as *Childfree by Choice: The Movement Redefining Family and Creating a New Age of Independence* by Amy Blackstone passionately make the same argument as Madelyn Cain's earlier *The Childless Revolution* and Laura Carroll's *Families of Two*: not having children is quite all right, and indeed has (despite any evidence to the

contrary) become a major trend. Susan Jeffers's evocatively named *I'm Okay, You're a Brat* describes the burdens of parenthood in terms calculated to discourage all but the most determined. But it would be a mistake to assume that women who write on the subject, even those who are feminists and on the left, necessarily support the "childfree" position, or even understand it. They may instead, like Stephanie Mencimer, a former editor of *Washington Monthly*, complain that women are having fewer children because of the limited government benefits to which Etzioni alluded.

In "The Baby Boycott," a broadside dating from 2001 and frequently reprinted, Mencimer sneered at the possibility that some women might feel liberated by the prospect of not having children. (What men felt about it was not one of her concerns.) "The idea that mass childlessness is the product of a 'lifestyle choice' or a political movement defies common sense. We are, after all, highly evolved primates. Reproductive instincts are hard wired into our brains, and historically, only events of serious magnitude—wars, depressions, famine, and seismic shifts in the economic system, such as the industrial revolution—have caused large numbers of women to forgo having children." While conceding that a lower birthrate might be good for the environment, she announced: "America's disappearing children are the canaries in our coal mines, a warning that our social and economic system is seriously out of whack." "What women typically want, said Mencimer, echoing many other feminists, is both careers and children. Any situation that denies them either is oppressive. The solution would be to imitate Sweden, which experienced declining fertility rates and the prospect of a labor shortage in the early 1980s. "Swedish women are now guaranteed a year of paid leave after having a baby, the right to work six-hour days with full benefits until their child is in grade school, and subsidized child care." The result was that the birthrate in Sweden rose, though ironically only to the current American U.S. level. American women, Mencimer thought, should put their foot down, so to speak, and refuse to have any babies at all until similar policies were enacted here. Once that happened, men and women alike would return cheerfully to the instinctual pleasures of multiple progeny.

Given this sort of commentary from quarters that might be expected to show sympathy, it is hardly surprising that the tone of "childfree" publications and Internet sites tends toward extreme defensiveness. Most of them, like Blackstone's 2019 book, feel compelled to repeat once again a litany of reassurances familiar since the 1970s: willed childlessness is not selfish; childfree people are fulfilled and happy; most don't hate children; few end up regretting their choice. A 2015 volume edited by Meghan Daum was forthrightly titled *Selfish, Shallow, and Self-Absorbed: Sixteen Writers on the Decision Not to Have Kids*. Over the past several decades, a plethora of childfree websites have come and gone spanning multiple ages, nationalities, and political outlooks, most with upbeat titles like "No Kidding," "Free at Last," and "Childfree—It's a Choice."

"Childfree Families" insists almost hypnotically in its mission statement: "There's a website for the childfree because there's a need to get the word out: you do not have to have children. You do not have to want children. You don't. And it's perfectly OK." "We feel like freaks," confesses Childfree.net, one of the more durable sites. Others make the same points in much the same slightly desperate, coming-out-of-the-closet tone.

Some of these authors clearly loathe children, despite protestations to the contrary. Others take pleasure in nieces, nephews, and the children of friends. But they all feel estranged from what they perceive as a child-centered society. Perhaps the most abjectly beleaguered childfree site belonged to the British Organization of Non-parents (BON), a transatlantic version of an American group called the National Organization of Non-parents (NON) that went out of existence in 1982. For reasons that remain obscure, the United Kingdom, one of the most densely populated nations in the world, seems even more intolerant of intentional childlessness than the spacious United States. Anticipating scorn and abuse, the BON website began with a rhetorical preemptive strike: "BON is not a bunch of selfless, feckless, child-hating sociopaths, but simply a group of people from all kinds of backgrounds and all walks of life who have decided for various reasons that we do not want children, and who believe that that *choice* should be ours, and anyone else's, to make, free of any stigma, prejudice or pressure from other people." So there! Further, in order to counter another accusation sometimes made against the childfree, BON insisted its adherents had no objection to paying taxes that subsidize education, family benefits, and social services for other people's children.

Like its American precursor, BON no longer exists, but childfree advocates understandably continue to make the same complaints. Under the headline "Childfree by Choice: Stop Telling Me I'll Change My Mind Later," an Australian writer named Tory Shepherd protested in a 2019 *Guardian* article: "Some people find it so hard to believe I don't want a child that they insist on referring to my dog as a fur baby. . . . He's not. I love that dog, but he's a dog. . . . He's a dog, not a replacement baby." The feeling of forever having to repeat oneself to a hostile "pronatalist" majority pervades most defenses of the childfree state, regardless of country.

Although the Bible presents childbearing as part of God's punishment for the sin of Eve, literature offers few encouraging models for the non-celibate childfree. The best-known childless couple in English literature are the Macbeths. Moreover, unless one counts stepmothers, uncles without children of their own win the prize for the most unappealing fictional relatives. Many are outright villains—consider Hamlet's uncle, Claudius, or the most notorious uncle of them all, Ebenezer Scrooge. Others are simply ineffectual, usually with a comical hint of sexlessness: Dickens's Uncle Pumblechook, Maupassant's Uncle Jules, Faulkner's Uncle Buck and Uncle Buddy McCaslin. These last two

unworldly, indistinguishable bachelors have the unusual distinction of propagating (through the late, unwilling marriage of one) an even more helpless figure, Ike McCaslin, who in turn becomes "uncle to half a county and father to no one." Childless aunts fare a little better—a self-respecting woman could probably tolerate being compared with Auntie Mame or, at a later age, with David Copperfield's Aunt Betsy Trotwood. On the other hand, Fanny Price's Aunt Norris, in *Mansfield Park*, is the most unambiguously evil character in all the novels of Jane Austen, a writer with an ambivalent relationship to children.

Choosing not to become a parent means refusing to do something each of one's ancestors has done all the way back to the invention of sexual reproduction. An elderly Englishwoman who was a dear friend of mine thought any woman who passed up having children was "against life" (adding in the next breath that any man who never fought in a war was likewise missing out on his destiny). Taking this step as an act of will still requires determination, and not only for women. One is both violating unanimous family tradition and resisting a clear, if mostly unvoiced, consensus in contemporary society, however secular and seemingly liberated the immediate environment may be. An almost unchallenged emphasis on family and children is by no means confined to political or religious ideologues. Since the 1960s, in the toyland of popular culture, many of the tastes, interests, and clothing styles of children and adolescents have become norms for any adult who wants to avoid seeming antisocial or over the hill.

Why does a society whose members have so many opportunities continue to place such an emphasis on reproduction and its fruits? The British evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins maintains that human beings, like other organisms, are simply mechanisms contrived by genes to replicate themselves. For the "selfish gene," success in life means producing as many surviving offspring as possible. According to this theory, we are indeed hardwired to have children, although we can still choose not to, as Dawkins himself did. Few social scientists accept this kind of all-or-nothing evolutionary explanation for human behavior. At the same time, few social scientists have studied parents' reasons for having children in much depth, perhaps because explanations not rooted in genes usually end up being speculative, vague, or tautological. A 1997 article by five sociologists titled "Why Do Americans Want Children?" confessed that they could discover no rational motive, then portentously concluded: "We find that children are not seen as consumer durables; they are seen as the threads from which the tapestry of life is woven."

What really needs explaining, according to most researchers, is why a minority deviates from the norm by choosing *not* to become parents. If Etzioni's and Mencimer's conclusions seem farfetched—after all, the birthrate was at its highest during periods when virtually no government benefits existed for parents

or children—other explanations are available, most of them economic. One familiar theory holds that the higher a woman's educational attainment and potential earnings, the greater the "opportunity cost" of having children. By the same token, however, affluent families can afford children more easily than poorer ones, so that the two effects mostly cancel each other out. At bottom, according to a 1999 study by Tim Heaton et al., "the relationship between socioeconomic characteristics and childlessness is not strong." Women's career goals in themselves seem to have little impact on decisions about having children.

In closing, two crises in our still-brief century that could have affected women's feelings about choosing motherhood give some further evidence of what the childfree movement is up against, even in educated circles where few people today would dream of criticizing others' decisions. In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, *New York* magazine published an article called "Baby Talk," which quoted a string of women (relatively fortunate New Yorkers) in their twenties and thirties who suddenly couldn't wait to have children. "I know three women who told me they wanted to conceive on the day of the attacks," said one. "I totally felt a deep, primal need." Another added, "After it happened, all those families were out walking around and it made me realize how much I wanted to reproduce. I told my fiancé, 'I'm having *major* baby pangs.'" No one who remembers that the worldwide baby boom immediately followed the end of World War II should be surprised.

Fast forward almost two decades to the COVID-19 epidemic and the unprecedented lockdowns intended to tame it, which left tens of millions temporarily unemployed. In early June 2020, as the first lockdowns were easing, I had a conversation with a couple who were both emergency- room physicians in Pittsburgh at the height of the epidemic. The woman had recently completed her medical residency, and at thirty-six they were at last in a position to have the children they had always planned on. When she was about six months pregnant with the first, she had contracted coronavirus, most likely from a patient. Fortunately her case proved to be mild. She was away from work for only nine days and the fetus, who had already been named Zoë, was unharmed.

When I spoke with them, Zoë was due in another few weeks and making herself felt with every indication of health and vigor. Despite his own emergency- room duties and not having been isolated from his wife, the father had never contracted the disease. They were planning a move to a new house on a seventeen-acre property they had just looked at. Once installed there, they were looking forward to having another child. Admittedly, like the New Yorkers quoted earlier, this couple were more secure and affluent than most. Even so, the historical experience is that plagues, like wars, seem to have at most a temporary impact on childbearing. A year later Zoë was crawling energetically and a brother was already on the way.

Having or not having children is one of the momentous, irrevocable choices of human life, and those who know from an early age which alternative will make them happier are extremely fortunate. No doubt economic and demographic explanations for fluctuations in the birthrate have a certain statistical validity. They neatly account for its fall during the Great Depression and, to a lesser extent, during recent decades when so many women have been pursuing professional careers. The more education a woman has, the later she is likely to start bearing children and the fewer she is likely to have. But on the basic question of whether to reproduce at all, such explanations seem hopelessly shallow. Most people fundamentally want to have children and do, almost regardless of circumstances, while a minority prefer not to and see no good reason why they should. There is hardly any issue on which argument is more futile. The motivations on both sides are too deep and obscure. Though they may share the same house, each finds the other a mystery. Not everyone is wired the same way.

But why should we be? In ethical terms, neither alternative is inherently less or more selfish than the other. The most altruistic course would be to adopt a child who has no home. The only adults who deserve special sympathy in this intimate civil war are the undecided, the wavering, the conflicted, who depressingly often either jump too soon into parenthood or leave it until too late, regretting in the end whichever choice they finally made.

6

The Annual Global Childfree Event

International Childfree Day

LAURA CARROLL

The year 2013 marked the beginning of International Childfree Day (ICD), a special global event dedicated to celebrating the childfree choice and those who make it. The day has its roots in advocacy endeavors dating back to the 1970s. ICD has proved to be a distinctive way to educate society about childfree people and to foster acceptance of the childfree choice.

Origins of International Childfree Day

In 1972, Shirley Radl and Ellen Peck founded the nonprofit organization National Organization for Non-parents (NON) in California. At the time Radl was serving as the executive director of the organization Zero Population Growth, which exists today as Population Connection and continues to have the mission of promoting education, birth control, and policy regarding population stabilization "at a level to sustain the Earth's resources" (Starkey). Radl, a mother of two, is the author of a book on the realities of motherhood, *Mother's Day is Over: Shed Your Guilt and Learn How to Accept Yourself*. Ellen Peck, who died in 1995, was a teacher, writer, and activist. She published several books,

including *The Baby Trap*; *The Parent Test: How to Measure and Develop Your Talent for Parenthood*, with professor and sexologist scholar William Granzig; and *Pronatalism: The Myth of Mom and Apple Pie*, co-edited with reproductive health advocate and researcher, Judith Senderowitz.

NON described itself as an "educational organization to make the childfree lifestyle a realistic and socially accepted and respected option and to eliminate pronatalist social and economic discrimination" (*Annual Report* 1). "Pronatalist" refers to a larger ideology and set of social and cultural beliefs called pronatalism and goes back many generations (Carroll, *Baby Matrix* 9–12). Peck's book *Pronatalism* defines the concept as "an attitude or policy that is pro-birth, that encourages reproduction, that exalts the role of parenthood" (Carroll, *Baby Matrix* 15). At its core, pronatalism promotes the glorification of parenthood.

NON members included people with and without children who shared the belief that the childfree choice should be respected and recognized as a contribution to society. Its board of directors and advisory council were composed of interdisciplinary experts from a wide range of professional backgrounds, including psychology, counseling, sociology, medicine, population, academia, and the law. NON's goals included eliminating the cultural bias against non-parents; ensuring legal equity for non-parents; promoting responsible parenthood by dispelling myths and educating on its realities; informing the public on the dangers of continued population growth and the importance of population stabilization (NON, *Brochure*).

In 1978, NON renamed itself the National Alliance for Optional Parenthood (NAOP) and rebranded to focus more on the parenthood decision itself, helping people make the most informed choice about whether and when to become a parent. During its existence, NON/NAOP expanded to have offices in states from California to Maryland, Washington, D.C., and Missouri. The organization grew to two thousand members in sixty-one chapters in the United States, Canada, England, India, and South America (Chrastil 75). One of its notable and innovative accomplishments involved a national advertising campaign, "You *Do* Have a Choice." Partnering with the nonprofit organization Public Media Center, the campaign ran public service announcements that stressed parenthood is optional on more than 730 television and radio stations. The campaign also ran a print ad that appeared in college and university newspapers across the United States. The ad had a picture of a baby with the headline, "Just whose idea was this, anyway?" The text next to the picture read:

> By the time we're old enough to have children, we've been thoroughly sold on the idea.
>
> By our parents, our grandparents, our friends and neighbors, the media, everyone.

> It's hard to remember we ever had a choice in the first place.
> But there is a choice. Having a child is a tremendous responsibility and an important decision. Probably the most important decision we will ever make.
> And once it's made, it can never be undone.
> Just remember . . . you do have a choice.
> So think about it, and do what's right for you. (NON, *Annual Report* 6)

An annual event NON created also received national attention. Each year on August 1, NON celebrated Non-parents Day by awarding a male and female National Non-parent of the Year ("National Alliance for Optional Parenthood"). For example, in 1973, the winners were Stewart Mott, a thirty-five-year-old bachelor and philanthropist, and Anna Silverman, a twenty-five-year-old teacher and coauthor (with her husband, Arthur) of *The Case Against Having Children*. Mott and Silverman rode down New York's Fifth Avenue in an open-top cab and were crowned Non-parent King and Queen of the Year near the Plaza Hotel. The coronation called attention to non-parenthood as a "valid alternate lifestyle." However, the *New York Times* reported that "opinion from onlookers was mixed": from a twenty-nine-year-old who remarked, "Kids are great—after they reach the age of seven," to a fifty-seven-year-old who shook his head and said, "Those people are unfair to unborn children" (Klemesrud).

NON also developed the resource "Am I Parent Material" for use in a variety of educational settings. The publication applied concepts from Ellen Peck and William Granzig's book *The Parent Test* to a younger audience, and was designed to help them assess their aptitude for parenthood. NON produced more than one hundred thousand copies that were distributed to more than three hundred "religious, health family planning, population, child welfare, educational, [and] women's groups throughout the country" (NON, *Annual Report* 3). The organization also provided local and national speakers to schools, organizations, and the media.

NON was well aware that in academia, widespread "pronatalist norms blinded social scientists to the fact that the childfree choice even existed, let alone warranted study" (Healey 139). To counteract these attitudes, NON made it a priority to encourage and sponsor childfree-related research. The organization offered a research award "to encourage research and to increase public awareness by making research results available to [NON] membership" (Healey 139). NON members also participated in research studies, which played a significant role in childfree-related research in the 1970s (Healey 139).

In addition to membership dues, donations, sales of educational materials, and convention revenues, foundations helped fund the work of NON/NAOP. The Rockefeller Brothers Fund and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation

were two major foundations that funded NON/NAOP. In 1975, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund awarded NON a grant of $22,000 as a contribution toward the organization's national advertising campaign (Rockefeller Brothers Fund, *Grant Proposal* 1). NON's work fit into Rockefeller Brothers Fund's philanthropic objectives at the time, which sought to move "beyond contraceptive technology to the complex social, political, cultural and economic conditions which affect population motivation" (1). According to the Rockefeller Brothers Fund's grant proposal, "the grant to NON would attempt to address motivation through still experimental, but rapidly growing, use of the media for public education" (Rockefeller Brothers, *Grant Proposal* 1). In 1977, this foundation also awarded NON $50,000 in equal amounts for two years (Rockefeller Brothers, *Annual Meeting* 1977 K-9).

In 1981, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation awarded NAOP $60,000 over two years for a general support grant to "help the Alliance continue its education work and develop programs and resources for special target populations, such as teachers and counselors who work with adolescents" (William and Flora Hewlett 38). NAOP's work fit with this foundation's interest in funding efforts that addressed population, including efforts that reflected the importance of societal and personal approaches to population issues.

A year later, on August 1, 1982, NAOP closed its doors. According to Bill Ryerson, president of Population Media Center, who served on NON's board of directors, the organization "suffered from being ahead of its time." Because "only a small number of people joined the organization to promote the childfree lifestyle or to help support advocacy for non-parents' rights" (Ryerson), membership revenues suffered, as did general member support for the organization and its efforts. In its last newsletter to members, NAOP "pointed to financial troubles as the cause of its demise" (Healey 148) and reflected on its accomplishments regarding the recognition and acceptance of childfree people and promotion of parenthood as a choice. Through a decade of educational and activist efforts, NON had succeeded in bringing the childfree choice into the "mainstream of American thought" (Healey 131). The organization looked to the future with hopeful optimism that the message of optional parenthood would carry on through NON/NAOP's educational materials and allied organizations (Healey 148). Ryerson shares this optimism, believing that more people today might join an organization like NAOP (Ryerson).

More than thirty years later, in 2013, I created ICD as a way for part of the NON/NAOP's mission to live on. In particular, ICD has revitalized the education about and promotion of the childfree lifestyle inherent in NON/NAOP's mission. As Peter Cott, the 1977 president of NON, wrote, NON/NAOP—and now ICD—create a "worldwide ethic which not only understands those who choose to be childfree, but endorses their choice, and admires those who make it" (NON, *Annual Report* 3).

The Creation, Mission, and Goals of International Childfree Day

When I was conducting research for *The Baby Matrix*, I learned of NON/NAOP's work and was inspired to resurrect the annual August 1 Non-parent King and Queen of the Year awards. Since NON/NAOP's time, the term "childfree" has been more commonly used than "non-parent," and because I wanted to expand the reach for the annual awards to be celebrated globally, I decided to name the day International Childfree Day. In early summer 2013, my childfree colleague Patricia Pedraza-Nafziger (author of *Being Fruitful without Multiplying: Stories and Essays from around the World*) and I created ICD's first website and Facebook page. I brought together an initial cadre of childfree authors and bloggers in addition to Patricia at the time to begin outreach for August 1 as ICD and the day on which the annual Childfree Man and Woman of the Year awards would be announced. The group also included Marcia Drut-Davis, who had recently published *Confessions of a Childfree Woman: A Life Spent Swimming against the Mainstream*, and Amy Blackstone, childfree sociologist and cofounder (with her husband, Lance Blackstone) of the blog and website werenothavingababy.com. The word about ICD was spread to scholars, authors, media, and the growing online childfree community; all were encouraged to promote ICD through their websites, blogs, and social media channels. In the spirit of NON/NAOP's Non-parent of the Year awards, this year marked the beginning of an endeavor to once again bring childfree people into the spotlight in a celebratory fashion.

Since its inception, ICD's mission has been to provide a forum for recognizing outstanding childfree people and their lives, while promoting acceptance of the childfree choice in today's society. In the larger context of social movements, its mission has been to support the first two stages of the development of a childfree movement. There are four stages of social movements: emergence, coalescence, bureaucratization, and decline (Christiansen 3). ICD has supported the emergence and coalescence stages of the childfree movement. In the emergence stage, people are unhappy with a particular policy or social condition, but they are not organized toward collective action. During this stage, there may be an increase in media coverage of the issue or problem, highlighting the specific area of discontent. With regard to societal nonacceptance of the childfree choice, since the year 2000 we have seen a rise in more people using their voices online, in print, television, and radio media to educate and give exposure to the childfree choice, as well as to outline the judgments, misconceptions, and discrimination childfree people face. In the coalescence stage of a social movement, the discontent becomes more "focalized and collective," and people become "more than just random upset individuals" (3). The advancement of the Internet since the year 2000 has not only supported the growth of the online childfree community but the development of an informal web of forums,

social media platforms, and websites for childfree people to find one another and form their own collective. ICD has added a unique sub-collective to the larger, growing childfree community in this stage of movement development.

Rather than engaging in adversarial efforts, ICD's support of the emergence and coalescence stages of building the childfree movement has been affirming and festive in nature. ICD has created collective action by coordinating the international process of nominating childfree winners of the year, encouraging people from around the world to nominate candidates and spread the news of each year's winners. More locally, ICD has inspired childfree people to have events on August 1 in their own geographical areas to celebrate the winners and themselves, as well as to increase awareness of the childfree choice. Amid the childfree movement's efforts to debunk myths and negative stereotypes of childfree people, ICD has focused on calling attention to shining stars in the childfree collective.

The childfree movement has yet to transition to the bureaucratization stage of the social movement life cycle. When this transition occurs, formal organizations are created, and higher levels of coalition strategies are seen (Christiansen 3). Examples in the childfree movement could include the founding of organizations with goals of eliminating inequitable workplace policies that favor those who are parents or legislative policies that give tax advantages to people with children. ICD could support these types of efforts, as it annually highlights childfree winners and various aspects of their lives. The last stage, the decline stage, does not necessarily mean a movement has failed. Social movements can decline for a number of reasons, including success, organizational failure, co-optation, repression, or establishment within mainstream society (3). The decline stage of the childfree movement will involve the attainment of mainstream acceptance of the childfree choice. ICD's annual event, and activities that occur the rest of the year in support of the event, will play a role in reaching this achievement.

The goals of ICD include the continued support of the childfree movement as a "collective, coordinated action that attempts to change the public sphere" (Weekley 3). For example, ICD is a specific, movement-building strategy that attempts to expand global recognition of ICD by increasing outreach annually, encouraging more people from around the world to engage in the winner nomination process, and widening the international scope of winners chosen each year. ICD contributes to the normalization and global societal acceptance of the childfree choice.

History of International Childfree Day

Early in 2013, preparations for the first International Childfree Day began. As the selection panel chair, my first priority entailed forming a volunteer selection

panel. The first year it included the cohort of colleagues that helped get the initial word out about ICD: childfree authors Patricia Pedraza-Nafziger; Marcia Drut-Davis; and Amy Blackstone and her husband, Lance Blackstone (who together had one vote). After that year, the selection panel was composed so it would have a five-member vote. From 2014 to 2015, in addition to myself, Amy Blackstone and Lance Blackstone, and a childfree advocate, winners from the previous year were part of the selection panel. In 2016 and 2017, we added a childfree advocate with excellent outreach capacity, Jessica Wade (founder of the Facebook page "The Childfree Choice"). Immediate outreach benefits were seen. Not only was Wade an effective member of the selection panel, at the time "The Childfree Choice" Facebook page had thousands of people following it. Furthermore, at the time of this writing, Wade's Facebook page had more than thirty-five thousand followers. ICD's reach to the online childfree community was broadened by this kind of following. To continue this strategy, in addition to myself and Amy Blackstone and Lance Blackstone, in 2018 and 2019, the panel included Jessica Wade and two childfree advocates with broad outreach capacity: Chelsey Wren, founder of the website and Facebook page "Childfree Is Not a Dirty Word," with more than forty thousand followers, and George Davis, part of the team who administered the website "Why No Kids." In 2020, Maxine Trump, award-winning director of the film *To Kid or Not to Kid*, replaced Amy Blackstone and Lance Blackstone, while Lucas Chaney, founder of the popular childfree merchandise business Buy Childfree by Childfree, replaced George Davis on the panel.

ICD Winner Nomination Process

The first year of ICD, I led the development of the winner nomination rules. For the first five years of ICD, the nominations were for a Childfree Man and Woman of the Year. The rules for those who could be nominated were as follows: (1) nominees were childfree; they did not want children at that time or in the future; (2) the nominators knew or were acquainted with the person(s) personally or professionally, and renominations of a person(s) who previously did not win were accepted; and (3) self-nominations were accepted. The nomination itself was a written submission of five hundred words or less that answered these questions: (1) What about your nominee makes the person an ideal candidate for the Childfree Man or Woman of the Year award? (2) How does the person show what an amazing childfree life can look like? (3) How has the nominee helped the acceptance of the childfree choice?

In the interest of making the winners of the year more gender-neutral and expanding the variety of nominations, in 2018 the selection panel changed the nominee categories to the Childfree Person of the Year and the Childfree Group of the Year. The winner nomination rules remained the same. The Childfree Person of the Year was defined as a person of any gender identification, and the

Childfree Group of the Year was defined as a couple, duo, trio, or group. Examples of a childfree group include but are not limited to childfree romantic partners, childfree Meetup groups, social media groups, forum leaders, and website founders.

With the new nominee categories, the written submission guidelines for the Childfree Person of the Year remained the same as those for the Childfree Man and Woman of the Year. Nomination submission guidelines for the Childfree Group of the Year include answering these questions: (1) Why is your nominee group an ideal candidate for the Childfree Group of the Year award? (2) What is exemplary about the group's goals and accomplishments? (3) How has the group's purpose or goals helped the acceptance of childfree choice?

Since ICD's founding, the call for nominations has been from June 25 to July 22. As nominations come in during this period, the selection panel chair contacts nominees to inform them that they have been nominated and ensure that if they win, they will be willing to participate in winner festivities. Nominees can opt out if they wish. If they do, they are taken off the list of nominations to be reviewed. As of this writing, however, no one has opted out, and all winner nominees have enthusiastically participated in ICD.

All nominations are sent directly from the nominators to the selection panel chair via email. During the nomination collection period, outreach strategies are employed to drive people to the ICD site and encourage nomination submissions. Guest posts on the ICD site are published by childfree experts, authors, and previous-year winners and are circulated via a range of social media channels. An effort is made to present posts on creative and interesting topics, such as posts highlighting prominent people from history who did not have children, lesser-known people who had no children using lessons from different periods in history, and childfree people the post writers greatly respect and admire. The posts are not only educational but also designed to inspire people to nominate someone they know, with the possibility of the nominee being chosen for the global childfree spotlight.

ICD Winner Selection Process

Once the nomination deadline passes, the selection panel chair collates and distributes the nominations to the members of the selection panel. Each member reviews and submits a winner choice to the rest of the selection panel. Once all member choices have been submitted, a full panel discussion ensues until the panel reaches consensus on the given year's winners. Panel members consider several criteria when making individual and final group selections. The panel looks at how well the submission answers the questions within the word-count rule. The panel also considers how well the nominee is already known—for example, within the online childfree community or more publicly. Rather than spotlighting those who are already somewhat well known, ICD attempts to

shine light on those who are less well known and would likely not otherwise get this type of recognition. The panel is also sensitive to nominations that are a bit too focused on the promotion of a personal or professional endeavor. The panel is careful not to have the ICD event be seen as a public relations or promotional venture but rather as foregrounding exemplary childfree people and their lives within a larger context of supporting social change. With an eye toward doing so on a global scale, the panel considers the country in which a nominee resides to be an important consideration. The panel plans to have the group of winners expand to as many countries as possible, allowing for international exposure for childfree people from around the world.

International Childfree Day Winners

Since ICD's start, nominations have been submitted by a wide variety of childfree people across a range of countries. Table 6.1 lists the ICD winners at the time of this writing and a brief description of each. All winners have been announced via ICD's website and its social media channels on August 1 of the given year. Nominations in full can be found on the website internationalchildfreeday.com.

The selection panel can also vote to give a special winner award, should the opportunity present itself. For example, in 2014, the selection panel received multiple nominations for Marcia Drut-Davis and voted to give her a Lifetime Childfree Contribution Award. Drut-Davis has been an advocate for the childfree choice since the 1970s. In 1974, she was fired from her teaching position, lost friends, and was persecuted after being interviewed on *60 Minutes* about her choice to have no children (Carroll, *60 Minutes*). At the time of Drut-Davis's nomination, she was also the author of *Confessions of a Childfree Woman*, while her strong online presence had helped build community and a growing forum of support for childfree people. The selection panel elected to award her special recognition for her lifetime accomplishments.

Winner Participation and Custom Award Packages

Once winners for a given year are selected, they are contacted directly to inform them they are winners. In addition to being featured on the ICD website and its social media channels, each winner has the opportunity to select gifts from a collection of winner awards to create a custom award package. Since ICD's beginning, the award package has included signed copies of books by childfree authors on childfree topics, books by popular figures who are childfree, and products with a childfree theme such as coffee mugs and clothing. Each year there is an effort to grow the award package and increase its variety. In 2019, winners had the largest array of gifts to choose from: the *To Kid or Not to Kid* documentary by Maxine Trump; the *No Kids For Me, Thanks!* documentary by Magenta Baribeau; *The Childless by Choice Project* documentary by Laura

Table 6.1
International Childfree Day winners 2013–2020

Year	Winner and country	Description
2013	Jennifer Thorpe-Moscon, PhD, United States	Social science researcher, author of *How Geek Girls Will Rule the World*, which is designed to inspire women to not be held back by patriarchal notions of what women should do with their lives
2013	Théophile de Giraud, Belgium	Writer-activist, whose activities include organizing events to educate people on childfree, pronatalist, and population-related issues
2014	Magenta Baribeau, Canada	Producer and director of the documentary *Maman? Non merci!* (roughly translated as *No Kids for Me, Thanks!*) about childfree women in Western society, which includes stories of childfree women from Canada, France, and Belgium
2014	Dann Alexander, Canada	Author of *Planned Unparenthood: Creating a Life Without Procreating*, which broke significant ground as the first book about being childfree from a male perspective
2015	Laura LaVoie, United States	Writer; leader in the tiny-house movement; and former coordinator of the NotMom Summit, a national conference for childfree and childless women
2015	Mario Amaro, United States	Veteran with successful military career, including winning many naval awards; leader of volunteer groups focused on improving Navy personnel's lives; foster pet owner; and animal shelter volunteer
2016	Crystal Money, United States	Academic researcher; instructor; and TEDx Talk presenter of "Southern Discomfort: Choosing Childfree," highlighting the cultural expectations and pitfalls for southern women
2016	Vinny Ciaccio, PhD, United States	Writer of dissertation on stereotypes regarding childfree persons in comparison with childless people and parents; has appeared in television, radio, and print media discussing the childfree
2017	Krystal Brown, United States	Singer-songwriter and author of *Tales from the Gutter*, which chronicles her life as a young black woman growing up in Virginia; many of her songs and lyrics deal with how childfreedom is not socially acceptable in many circles
2017	Karim Akerma, Germany	Philosopher on the ethics of having children and author of several books, including *Antinatalismus—Ein Handbuch* (Antinatalism—a Manual)
2018	Emma Palmer, United Kingdom	Psychotherapist, eco-psychologist, and author of *Other than Mother: Choosing Childlessness with Life in Mind*

(*continued*)

Table 6.1 (*continued*)

Year	Winner and country	Description
2018	Bev and Chris Franz, United States	*Married without Children: Living a Childfree Marriage* podcast hosts
2019	Soot Liang Woo, Thailand	Retired finance executive and founder of the Furget Me Not Sanctuary, which rescues, rehabilitates, sterilizes, and rehomes thousands of stray dogs and cats in Thailand
2019	Raphael Samuel and Pratima Naik, India	Key members of Childfree India, an activist group that promotes the childfree choice, antinatalism, the Voluntary Human Extinction Movement, and Efilism
2020	Elizabeth Hintz, United States	Childfree academic, doctoral candidate
2020	Overheard by Childfree, Russia	Internet childfree support group with more than 60,000 followers

Scott; a T-shirt from the Buy Childfree by Childfree Shop; an autographed copy of childfree Chelsea Handler's book *Life Will be the Death of Me*; signed copies of *An Atypical Chick* by Rhonny Dam; *The Baby Matrix* by the author of this chapter; *Being Fruitful Without Multiplying* by Patricia Yvette, Catherine Treadgold, Renee Ann, and Janice Lynne; *Childfree by Choice* by Amy Blackstone; *A Childfree Happily Ever After* by Tanya Williams; *The Childfree Society Club* by Jaclyn Jaeger; *Confessions of a Childfree Woman* by Marcia Drut-Davis; *Other Than Mother* by Emma Palmer; *Two is Enough* by Laura Scott; and a custom digital illustration of the winners designed by Patricia Flaviana, founder of Childfree Doodles.

International Childfree Day Challenges

ICD has seen much success since its founding. This annual global event has also dealt with an array of challenges in the pursuit of its goals. While international recognition has grown since ICD's inception, the event has depended solely on volunteer efforts, which fluctuate from year to year. Global outreach would be more effective if ICD had a small paid staff to assist with website administration; conduct widespread promotion and social media twelve months of the year; and coordinate activities leading up to, on, and after ICD annually.

Since 2018, there has been an effort to raise funds for this purpose as well as for other promotional, production, and administration needs of ICD. Included in the update of ICD's website that year, a donations section was created that links to PayPal. As of this writing, donations have been largely used to finance

the offering and administration of winner awards. However, there is a goal to grow the donation amount in order to offer winner awards that expand beyond those given through 2019. Examples of winner awards requiring more funding include free tickets to events or destinations. It is predicted that having the funds to offer these sorts of awards would entice more people to nominate potential winners and increase global promotion of, and participation in, ICD even more effectively.

Similarly, ICD has been working on achieving more ways to reach international platforms for exposure and increased numbers of nominations from different countries. In 2019, ICD began to see fruits from these efforts, having received more international nominations than in years past and awarding winners from Thailand and India for the first time. There is optimism that the more ICD receives international exposure, the more nominations the event will receive from around the world, which will grow recognition of ICD—in turn, growing its donations to enable the overall growth of the event.

Given that the childfree choice is not fully accepted around the world, one might predict a challenge to the growth of ICD in terms of dealing with opposition and critics. However, little opposition or criticism has occurred. Since the year 2013, there have been social media comments and tweets that judge ICD, but these have been only occasional. They have related to common stereotypes associated with people who make the childfree choice. For example, some comments and tweets have reflected the notion that childfree people are self-involved, so that they have to have their own "day." Another theme behind judgmental comments, although not common, has had to do with childfree people needing their own day to cope with being victims of societal judgment and to justify their existence. Dealing with these kinds of stereotypes and criticism has not hindered the positive impacts ICD has had on the childfree community or the event's place in the childfree movement.

International Childfree Day Impact and Vision for the Future

ICD is the only organized effort that annually showcases childfree people and their lives, with the goal of doing so around the world. ICD has helped society become even more educated about and exposed to the childfree choice, specifically highlighting all the ways people can live meaningful, full lives without the experience of parenthood. The ICD event, through its ever-growing online presence, continues to show people firsthand who childfree people are and the kinds of lives they lead.

This event has also helped deflate myths about childfree people and parenthood. ICD winners are living examples that the pronatalist notion of people not having a truly purposeful life unless they have children is false. ICD highlights amazing people who are serving the betterment of the world, each in their

own way. ICD also helps to show that, contrary to pronatalist myths, there is nothing wrong with people if they choose not to become parents.

In addition to addressing myths about childfree people, ICD has also provided a unique arena to support the growth of the global childfree community. The evolution of the digital world has led to an ever-increasing number of online forums and social media that do so as well, but ICD stands out as supporting the childfree community in a way unlike all others. ICD has been an annual, inclusive event that encourages the social change required to fully accept the reality that parenthood is a choice; like the choice to become a parent, the life choice of being childfree should be celebrated.

With each year, ICD seeks to strengthen this special event. As it becomes more known, in addition to the winner announcement spreading across the world on August 1 each year, there is determined optimism that the future will bring more local, organized events celebrating ICD. Events like these were seen in 2019 and 2020 in Australia (Williams) and India (Childfree India) and, as ICD grows, more such events are predicted. Now and in the future, ICD also strives to encourage more childfree individuals to do something special for themselves on August 1 of each year, as a way to acknowledge their choice to go against norms and make the reproductive decision that is right for them.

In the larger picture, ICD will continue to strive to grow its global participation, to support the advancement of the childfree movement, and to be a memorializing addition to social and cultural change efforts related to the childfree choice. As long as there is International Childfree Day, it will be part of a dedicated effort to have the choice to not reproduce be recognized as just as worthy and legitimate as the choice to reproduce. When this day comes, ICD will have played a part in our global society reaching a significant pinnacle of reproductive freedom.

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7

Reproductive Villains

The Representation of Childfree Women in Mainstream Cinema and Television

NATALIA CHERJOVSKY

Whether one believes in some version of the notion of a biological imperative to reproduce or not, one must at least concede the existence of a societal push to procreate. The evidence is clear, from the baby dolls thrust into little girls' hands through to the narratives in the texts we consume during our formative years that make having children seem less like a choice and more like an inevitable certainty, especially for women. As professors Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels point out in their book *The Mommy Myth*, the media and our culture participate in a new "momism" that, despite acknowledging a woman's agency, proposes that "the only truly enlightened choice to make as a woman, the one that proves, first, that you are a 'real' woman, and second, that you are a decent, worthy one, is to become a 'mom'" (5). Our culture and our media help direct us toward the path of parenthood.

This is no timid nudge, but a shove toward compliance with a somewhat heteronormative expectation that is definitely gendered, since childfree women bear the brunt of the backlash in a world where motherhood is often

interchangeable with parenthood. The version of life that involves reproducing is presented not only as the norm, especially for women, but also as the key to unlocking real happiness. Douglas and Michaels suggest, "Women without children, wherever they look, are besieged by ridiculously romantic images that insist that having children is the most joyous, fulfilling experience," and that women without children "are leading bankrupt, empty lives" (8). Well-adjusted, normal adult women have children. That is what we do. To balk at that mandate and choose to be childfree, as opposed to being childless through circumstances beyond one's control, must therefore be a sign of fallibility. The disavowal of this perceived moral duty seems to many a violation of our societal code, one that inspires indignation. In a piece entitled "The Outrage Against Childfree Women Is Real—and Needs to Stop" on the site *Bust*, Therese Shechter and Amy Blackstone discuss the results of their research that found three-quarters of childfree respondents "faced criticism or other forms of moral outrage from family, friends, coworkers—and even strangers" based on their decision not to procreate. The writers also discuss professor Leslie Ashburn-Nardo's research findings, which demonstrate that parenthood is perceived to be a moral imperative and "reveal just how deeply embedded the cultural, political, and ideological project of pronatalism really is." This embeddedness may explain why an analysis of popular media texts demonstrates that the representation of childfree people, especially women, has historically been inaccurate and limited.

When it comes to how society perceives childfree women, "pop culture certainly doesn't help," journalist Kelly Wallace reports in a piece for *CNN* called "Check Your 'Cat-Lady' Preconceptions About Childless Women." She urges us to consider some examples: "There's the singularly focused career woman (think Peggy Olson on 'Mad Men'), the frivolous fashionista waiting for Mr. Right (Carrie Bradshaw on 'Sex and the City') or the crazy cat lady, who sits home, with her cats, depressed and lonely." And it is not just in television shows; advertising also largely ignores this segment. One of Wallace's interviewees noted, "There is a real opportunity for brands to capture this market by simply acknowledging it. It's a powerful opportunity when done authentically." One may think that there are many representations of characters without children, but there are vast differences between people who have yet to have children, those who are unsure, those who cannot, and those who are certain they do not want kids. Acknowledgment of this last category needs substantial improvement. As pointed out by Wallace and discussed later, depictions of people who do not desire to have children range from self-indulgent, immature, selfish quasi-adults to the aloof, power-hungry types; they are unflattering, facile, and insulting. These may also not be the most pernicious depictions. The worst characterization is that of people who are simply in denial about their own desires and who end up realizing the folly of not procreating. It is time to

bring fair and varied representations of childfree people into the mainstream media to help normalize a completely acceptable, reasonable, and respectable choice—for which no one should be marginalized or vilified.

If you count yourself among those who have chosen not to procreate, you do not need studies to tell you that you may be looked at as an oddity. This view is especially taken of women, since procreation is a highly gendered and heteronormative issue, with the concept of parenthood traditionally thought of as the birthright and business of women. This tradition is obviously in part the result of the biological role of cisgender women in carrying and feeding the child, but also historically relates to the cultural norms and circumstances that made women primary caregivers. In an article published on *The Conversation* site, professor of human sciences and psychology Sarah Schoppe-Sullivan, shares her research, which shows that "new mothers allocated twice as much of their available time to routine child care activities than fathers." This imbalance has been shifting, with more men becoming involved. In fact, Schoppe-Sullivan reports that "over the past half-century, fathers in America nearly tripled their child care time from 2.5 hours per week in 1965 to seven hours per week in 2011." Nevertheless, this shift is not always recognized or respected in the media. It is still commonplace to see men represented as bumbling idiots when it comes to taking care of the home front and their offspring. This kind of depiction is prevalent in advertising, for example. Author Seth Stevenson reflects in an article entitled "The Reign of the Doltish Dad," published by *Slate*, that "ad after ad makes doltish Dad the butt of all jokes. He's outwitted by his children. He's the target of condescending eye rolls from his wife. He's a dumb, incompetent, sometimes even selfish oaf." These depictions are not limited to marketing, however, as Stevenson points out: "This pop culture trope has been around forever. From Ralph Kramden to Homer Simpson to Phil Dunphy, sitcoms have long featured goofball dudes married to much shrewder women." And yet we are still asked to believe men are nonetheless completely competent to run the world.

Despite the changing currents, it is still customary to regard the desire to procreate as starting within women. In fact, as author Justin Myers writes in "It's Hard to Be a Man Who Can't, or Won't, Have Children," published by *GQ*, "traditionally, a man making middle age without having children might be congratulated on being a player, or a hero, for dodging a bullet." This may be the reason why men do not tend to be the subjects of an inquisition about their desire, or lack thereof, to have children. If you are a woman, however, your reproductive choice often leaves you open to feeling poked and prodded at, at least verbally (which does not necessarily feel any less invasive). While some may claim that others do so out of curiosity, the questions and comments habitually seem to be less about insight and more about judgment and coaxing. Often people's comments drip with pity, condescension, or even anger as they trot out

all the tired phrases we have heard before—gems like the ideas that we will miss out on real happiness, that we are skipping the most meaningful part of life, that something must be wrong with us, that we will regret it later, or that we are selfish, as Pope Francis himself proclaimed to the world in a speech in 2015 (Kirchgaessner).

Even if we are not directly being interrogated, our culture is rife with references to parenthood as the epitome of fulfillment and the standard path to take as an adult. We use the term "family" to mean children, as in asking someone about starting a family, or deeming a place to eat family-friendly. People refer to their firstborn as the child who made them a family, as if a couple is not sufficient as a family unit. People who are in the position to affect millions of lives, like politicians or people who are being honored for their achievements, often refer to being a parent as their most important job or accomplishment. While I understand the sentiment, it often feels contrived, perfunctory, and even inaccurate. While raising your 2.5 kids may be meaningful to you, curing an illness (for example) is a bigger accomplishment, objectively speaking. However, it is not surprising that people would feel compelled to make these declarations. As Douglas and Michaels explain, there is a "myth—shamelessly hawked by the media—that motherhood is eternally fulfilling and rewarding, that it is always the best and most important thing you do" (3–4). Saying otherwise would mean you are terribly off-script.

Even when people tolerate your status as a childfree person, there is an array of acceptable behaviors and assumptions that come with that designation. You are often excluded from conversations because there is a supposition you cannot relate, despite the fact that you were once a child, have had parental figures, and generally do not live under a rock. The idea that you are barred from sharing your opinion because you are not a parent presupposes a need to have lived experience that is not necessarily demanded in other situations. There is also an insidious notion that no matter how demanding your life becomes, nothing can compare to how busy and tired parents are. Likewise, at work, people may assume that you would be the appropriate person in the team to take on more work, given that you have no children to consume your free time. In "The Brutal Truth About Being Childless at Work," published by *Fortune*, author Laura Carroll points out that "when it comes to work-life balance, the 'life' part has often been synonymous with personal time related to parenting," meaning that "typically, what non-parents do with their personal time has been viewed as not as 'important' as parent time." What is more, Carroll outlines two common assumptions present in the workplace: people without children must have a lot of free personal time, therefore work-life balance does not really apply to them. She continues: "These two perceptions create common workplace expectations that non-parent employees can and will pick up the slack for their parent colleagues when asked." In truth, the fact that childfree people

may have leisure time and a social life seems to sometimes cause resentment, expressed in derisive comments that it "must be nice" when you share plans to get a massage, catch a movie on a weekday night, or travel abroad, as if you are somehow getting away with something, cheating the system, and getting to enjoy life only by eschewing your civic duties.

Perhaps backlash is to be expected when research has begun to show that childfree people are—surprisingly to some—happy, fulfilled individuals. In 2013, a *Time* magazine cover that featured a couple lounging contentedly on the beach posited, "The Childfree Life: When Having It All Means Not Having Children," while the article inside offered reasons people were deciding to skip parenting and examples of happy childfree women without regrets (Sandler). In an article published on the website for the Institute of Family Studies, the author declares, "an enduring finding of the social science literature is that parents are less happy than childless adults" and "nowhere is the parental happiness gap larger than in the United States" (Wolfinger). The reasons for these findings are complex, but it is a fact that the connection between fulfillment and parenting is not as straightforward as the apparent cultural campaign to try to recruit more parents-to-be would make it seem.

Childfree people are not a problem to be solved. Whether it is a gynecologist who continues to use the phrase, "when you decide to have children," despite the multiple times someone has expressed, forcefully even, that this would never happen, or a celebrity mouthing from the cover of a magazine that having a child finally showed them what love means, being a childfree adult brings about its own special brand of hell in terms of being othered by the world. Nevertheless, this condition may change, given the birthrate trends reported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which show a continued decline in births, having reached the lowest level in thirty-two years (Linda Carroll). The reasons why people may be choosing to opt out of parenthood are multifaceted, including the ever-rising cost of having and raising children, a desire for more educational and work opportunities, and even just not liking children. Still part of the decision may lie with the anxiety caused by the prospect of the monstrous task we have turned parenting into. Elizabeth Weiss wrote an article for the *New Yorker* entitled "Selling the Myth of the Ideal Mother," where she stipulated that "our current parenting culture of taxing schedules, organic snacks, and profound emotional involvement—motherhood as a contact sport—pressures women to perform to impossible standards." In and of itself, having children is demanding. However, the advent of attachment parenting, helicopter parenting, and the ludicrous expectations of perfection placed on parents appears to be enough to tip many of those on the fence over toward the childfree side.

The growing trend of passing on parenthood may come as a surprise to many based on the media's portrayal of those who are childfree. The reason is that

there is a dearth of representations of people who have made up their minds that they do not want to procreate. If you question whether this is true, take a second to think about the number of characters in mainstream shows and movies you can conjure up who are childfree. The trick here is that you may think of a lot of characters who do not have children, but this does not put them in the same category. Many of these characters may be childless but not childfree: people who actually want kids but not just yet, who are still making up their minds as their lives unfold, or even those who are unable to have children. Nevertheless, when the existence of characters who firmly stand in the baby-free zone and maintain that position despite circumstances changing is indeed rare, the deck does seem a bit stacked.

As a major agent of socialization in our culture, the media have helped construct and transmit ideas of parenting and motherhood and hence have been partly responsible for helping establish their preferential status as the paragon of happiness and virtue. Media outlets have been at the forefront of influencing young girls' minds through a barrage of imagery and messages connected to the pronatalist ideology that permeates our culture and that has had a resurgence with the decline in births. In a 2017 article from the *Atlantic*, the author points to the fact that policymakers seem to have reached the conclusion that we need more babies, pushing for measures that can be seen as "the seeds of a nascent pronatalist movement, a revived push to organize American public policy around childbearing" (Green). From commercials that sell young girls realistic baby dolls to journalists who ask women running for office who will raise their babies, these images and words help reify and support socially constructed gender roles that dictate that a woman's worth resides in her ability to give birth and bring up her children. Everywhere we look, we are pelted with glamorized images of motherhood, from social media gender reveals and celebrities gushing about their babies to tear-inducing commercials glorifying the roles of mothers (even to the exclusion of fathers). Social media have become a repository for images of this aspirational motherhood. In a piece for *Harper's Bazaar*, "The Rise of Picture-Perfect Motherhood," Lisa Przystup explains that while she and her friends know "motherhood is excrement-filled, sleep-deprived, heart-crushing, messy work . . . the number of stunning women with effortlessly gorgeous packs of children filling my Instagram feed would suggest otherwise." The constant exposure to these messages normalizes, romanticizes, and essentializes motherhood as part of womanhood. This messaging creates a sense of duty—despite the centrality of agency that the individualistic United States supports—that may be hard to contend with for those who do not feel inclined to procreate.

To be fair, not all depictions of parenting are idealized. In fact, there is an encouraging amount of accurate representations of just how mundane, grim, or plain exhausting it can all be. Beyond fictional depictions of fed-up mothers,

as in the film *Bad Moms*, we should be thankful for shows like *Teen Mom*, which provide us with an unflinching look at how hard having a child can be, as well as people on social media who refuse to toe the line and add to the myths that surround motherhood. *USA Today* senior news director Ginger Rough, in a piece titled "Celebrity Moms and Dads Who 'Keep It Real' on Social Media," listed celebrities such as Drew Barrymore, Jessica Biel, Chrissy Teigen, and Pink, among others, who use their Instagram accounts in a way that doesn't always "airbrush away the chaos that is parenthood." Still, the overwhelming majority of these depictions are wrapped in the sentiment that no matter how challenging it all is, parenthood is always unequivocally worth it. Far scarcer are the instances in which there is no redemption, no comical twist to the misery that parenthood can bring, and there is a distinct shortage of texts that allow for the ultimate taboo—the admission that one may regret becoming a parent.

While the media have been dependable allies in the framing of motherhood as the epitome of womanhood, the media have played an equally important role in ostracizing and denigrating women who are childfree. The first prominent examples of childfree women in a popular show that I remember latching on to were Samantha and Carrie in *Sex and the City* (Star). Is it any surprise, however, that out of the four women on the show those two would be the ones to choose to take a pass on children? As opposed to tradition-minded Charlotte, eager to marry and have children, and dutiful Miranda, who gives into the life she did not think she wanted after considering an abortion, Carrie and Samantha fit the stereotypes that childfree people are often assigned. Carrie is a self-indulgent shoe addict with a penchant for bad boys, late nights, and cigarettes. She is a writer who gets invited to parties with famous people and lives a bohemian lifestyle that hardly broadcasts Future Mom. Samantha also falls in line with the media's stereotypes of a childfree woman. She is a successful business owner who is also the wildest of the bunch. Often portrayed as a colder woman who lacks any maternal feelings and is generally uncomfortable with emotions, Samantha is obsessed with sex and balks at the notion of a committed relationship. She is, in fact, portrayed in a traditionally masculine way in terms of how she approaches life. It therefore "makes sense" that she wouldn't want kids, and maybe the implication is that we wouldn't want her or Carrie to procreate anyway.

Another mid-to-late 1990s example of a childfree woman comes from the famous show *Seinfeld* (David and Seinfeld). In episode 136, "Soul Mates," Elaine Benes, who is clearly made uncomfortable by the rantings of her friends to convince her that she has to "move to the suburbs and have a baby, already," affirms her stance as someone who thinks the whole idea of children is perhaps overrated. And even though, when her enthusiastic new beau decides to commit to the idea and get a vasectomy, we see Elaine walk back her certainty by

explaining there is a chance she could want kids, the show ends without any of the characters having children. However, all the characters in *Seinfeld* are deeply flawed, selfish people, whose behavior could be seen as antisocial, even bordering on misanthropic, so it "makes sense" they would not be considered fit to be parents.

Likewise, on the show *Friends* (Crane and Kauffman), the more traditional and mature characters had children, while the less conventional ones did not. Joey and Phoebe are seen as the least responsible two in the group, with less established or traditional careers, more child-like personalities, and less common sense. In the land of media these qualities mean that they would be less likely to be good parents, even if they can both take on the role of the fun and quirky aunt and uncle.

It may be reasonable to consider these examples as a product of their time, when television was still waking up to the idea of diversity. While that view holds for a lot of identity markers, it does not quite apply to being childfree. Fast-forward to the present: we continue to experience a dearth of representations of childfree people, especially women, and we are often still stuck with the same clichés. The female characters who clearly state that they are not up for procreation have a sneaky tendency to be career-focused, power-hungry, and less nurturing—or they are depicted as women of a more esoteric disposition, wild forces of nature who mystify men and might be more prone to break them than have their offspring. Characters who choose not to have children are also frequently seen as having a darker side, perhaps harking back to unresolved family issues that have damaged them enough that they would shy away from the most natural of inclinations: having a child.

Prime-time icon Shonda Rhimes, who is known for advocating for the fair portrayal of a diverse cast and characters, has given us an example of a childfree person in Cristina Yang, a main character in the meteorically successful *Grey's Anatomy*. Nevertheless, Yang's stance was hardly a surprise since she is the epitome of some of these stereotypes. She is calculating, ruthless, competitive, a pathological perfectionist, and logical to a fault, often coming across as rather severe. Despite being decidedly childfree, Cristina gets pregnant twice. Both times, her decision is to have an abortion, even if the first time the pregnancy is not viable and she miscarries. Unsurprisingly, Cristina struggles in relationships; she has a hard time giving men the connection and place they deserve, going to the extreme of keeping her apartment as a way out when she moves in with her boyfriend, and hiding out at her best friend's home after getting married. This marriage inevitably ends in divorce, in large part because of the anger between the couple about her decision to abort their child.

Another childfree character from the "Shondaland" family is Olivia Pope, the lead of *Scandal*, a show that captured our imagination. Again, no one could have been surprised when Olivia decided to have an abortion. She, like

Cristina Yang, is married to her job, and she goes toe-to-toe with people at the highest echelons of government. Her life is chaotic and, to be honest, dangerous—clearly not suitable for motherhood. Unlike Cristina, however, Olivia also has questionable morals. After all, she is sleeping with a married man, and her job requires that she be unscrupulous and engage in all sorts of deceit and violence. The notion that she could be a mother is almost laughable. Not to mention that she has an abnormally twisted relationship with both of her parents, which is another way to explain away her lack of motherly instincts.

Crowd favorite *This Is Us* (Fogelman), which is all about family ties, brings us Zoe, the temporary love interest of one of the main characters, Kevin Pearson. Once again, while a compelling character, Zoe tracks multiple stereotypes of the childfree woman. She is a documentary filmmaker, a job that often requires her to travel around the world at a moment's notice. She is an artist, in love with her work and with her nomadic life. She also has a complicated, painful past; her father sexually abused her, and she still has a hard time letting people in and feeling safe around them. Consequently, she has struggled with relationships, and she has a way, as her cousin warns her new beau, of damaging men. While Kevin ultimately chooses to sacrifice his desire for children for a life with Zoe, in a couple of scenes, he attempts to point out to her that she may not know what she really wants and may change her mind, a pattern that has been typical in story lines involving childfree people. Thankfully, Zoe does not budge, eventually deciding to leave Kevin because she knows this may be a recurring issue. All too often, however, characters give in to the mandated mother role as part of the sanctioned script of life.

For example, take Arizona Robbins, from *Grey's Anatomy*: a perky, lovable, goofy, and nurturing pediatrics surgeon for whom kids are a no-go. This feels like fresh territory, since Robbins eschews the typical take on the childfree woman as devoid of qualities such as tenderness. She deals with kids and parents daily. This is definitely not someone who cannot tolerate children. Callie, her girlfriend, is therefore aghast when she realizes that Arizona does not want kids. This preference spells trouble for the pair, who eventually separate over this incompatibility. At that point, Arizona seems to be shaping up to be an exceptional role model for childfree women. However, there are still numerous instances of Callie trying to reason with Arizona, which could really feel insulting to anyone watching, since there seems to be an underlying assumption that this well-functioning, intelligent, mature adult cannot possibly have made such a poor decision. When Callie claims to understand that her partner's trauma as a child has made her not want to have kids, Arizona is incensed at the idea that she is somehow defective and that this is the basis for her choice. This makes for a powerful moment of vindication for childfree people and an acknowledgment of this familiar experience.

Yet, in what is one of the most vexing about-faces in this area of representation, all of this character's self-possession, self-knowledge, and courage melt away after a traumatic experience that makes her magically decide to throw away her entire belief system as it relates to having children and acquiesce to being a mother. The story line for this character continues to twist away from her initial steadfast adherence to her desire to be childfree. After a subsequent breakup, Callie gets pregnant by a friend, and yet Arizona comes back to her and agrees to be a mother to Callie's child. As their relationship continues, they decide to have a second child, and it is Arizona who will carry the baby. And when they finally separate, Arizona sues for full custody. She is barely recognizable as someone who used to be childfree. This twist is rather infuriating.

Another popular character who went from childfree to mommy was Bernadette of *The Big Bang Theory* (Lorre and Prady). After making it clear to her fiancé, Howard, that she does not want children, she seems to rethink her stance, all within the same episode, and proposes a deal: if they have children, she will continue to work and have a life while he can stay at home with the little ones. While this proposal is meant to poke at the status quo of gender roles and reaffirm her perception of motherhood, and it is understood that Howard will not cash in on this offer (he produces a condom when she suggests makeup sex), it is still highly inappropriate to suggest that a tiny amount of pressure would make a woman abandon her worldview and relinquish her agency. Bernadette also falls in the category of someone whose family experience made her not want to have a child—not because she had bad parents, but because she experienced the stress of taking care of her siblings, which could be read as placing part of the blame on a workaholic mother.

Overall, Bernadette is not painted in a very positive light in terms of her motherhood experience, and this depiction upset some fans who claimed she was a poor role model for mothers. On the parenting site *BabyGaga*, an article lists behaviors Bernadette enacts that, as the title of the piece lets you know, "Good Moms Would Never Do," and they include her not seeing the upside of staying at home with the baby, asking others to take care of the kid so she can have a life, focusing on her job, and not being excited about motherhood (Gibbons). Despite Bernadette's stereotypical portrayal as a colder, work-obsessed woman, and her choice to have children despite her clear reservations, we should perhaps be thankful for her clear articulation of the drawbacks of motherhood and her very unvarnished and refreshing take on pregnancy and parenting.

Not content with one instance of a metamorphosis from non-mother to mother, the people behind *The Big Bang Theory* also chose to spring the surprise of Penny, who was vehemently against having children, being pregnant during the series finale. In a piece in *Vanity Fair*, Laura Bradley points out that while it is true that some women change their minds, the fact remains that "the

uncharitable read on all this would be that both a female character's emotional experience and the option of abortion were both rendered invisible." While what the author suggests is accurate and is especially relevant in a world where reproductive justice and rights are still being fought over daily, Bradley is, ironically, also helping erase Penny's original firm stance. That is, the option to be childfree—whether an abortion is involved or not—is legitimate and should be validated by more media examples of people who stick by the choice they have made for themselves. The 180-degree turns in Bernadette's and Penny's lives did not escape audiences, who took to social media to vent about their frustrations with these two characters' decisions, which seemed entirely incongruent with their convictions. In a childfree subreddit (ThisIsMyRental), a poster wrote a self-proclaimed rant about how, upon having their second child, Bernadette and Howard start working on convincing Penny and Leonard to join them on the dark side, and the 268 comments that follow tear apart the choices the show runners have made when it comes to the representation of childfree people.

The most blatant offender in the category of childfree people changing their minds is the movie *Four Christmases* (Gordon). The entire raison d'être of the film is to teach us that our appalling experience with our own dysfunctional families is what prevents us from submitting to our destiny. In the end, only by taking the leap to parenthood can we achieve the ultimate fulfillment we were meant to experience as humans. The one thing to be thankful for in *Four Christmases* is the accuracy in the depiction of how idyllic being a childfree couple can feel. At the start of the movie, Kate and Brad seem blissed out. They are truly in love and committed, while still enjoying each other's company, as evidenced by the fact that they seem to do everything together, such as taking dancing lessons, and that they still have a satisfying sex life, as indicated by their little role-playing game at a restaurant.

Stereotypes begin to appear as we find out from an early exchange that the reason they do not want to have kids is that they come from divorced families, and they do not wish to re-create that kind of situation. We also learn that they have been escaping their adult responsibilities as members of their respective clans by avoiding ever visiting their families during the holidays. When a fluke forces them to endure Christmas in four different households in a matter of days, they are exposed to the mayhem and pitfalls of parenting and domestic life with children that they have been circumventing. Interestingly, instead of this experience reaffirming their belief system and their choices, it somehow serves only to reveal the shortcomings of their own togetherness. Kate becomes convinced that what she considered a worthwhile relationship only a few days ago is clearly nothing more than a sham, a poor's man version of an adult union, and that the couple lack the depth and commitment that can be achieved only by first marrying and then being open to children. While some may interpret this as a heartwarming message and a coming-of-age story, this portrayal of

childfree people as overgrown teenagers who need to get over their fears, give up their self-indulgent lifestyles, and fully engage with adulthood by moving from the sidelines into the game of life is insulting.

In the midst of all this madness, Regina Howard, a main character from newcomer show *A Million Little Things* (Nash), is perhaps poised to be a more legitimate representation of a childfree woman. Thus far, despite her husband's desire to reconsider not having children (although they had agreed to be childfree when marrying), Regina has not wavered. In an article on the childfree site *TheNotMom*, the author calls her story line refreshing, but there is some understandable caution, which I suspect comes from being disappointed time and again, when she says, "my only hope is the writers don't take away Gina's agency with an easy 'baby' story line. Make her show that women who don't want children actually know themselves well enough to make that decision" (LaVoie). I share LaVoie's concern for the character's future, but my apprehension goes further, because I already see some of the aforementioned uninspired tropes making an appearance. Regina has a truly complicated and negative relationship with her mother, and her uncle molested her. While I understand that these elements make for good drama and that they are prevalent issues that affect women regardless of their procreative decisions, the continued reliance on this pattern cannot be considered anything but suspect at this point. What would be truly refreshing is a childfree female character who has not had any of the trauma and baggage that someone could point to as a reason for her irrational choice.

Another aspect of Regina that could be seen as expected of childfree women is that she is very passionate about her work. She is a driven chef who is in the midst of opening a new restaurant, which is her dream. Nevertheless, the good news is that Regina cuts a sympathetic figure. She is involved in a long-term, committed, happy, healthy relationship, and she is not portrayed as aloof, self-absorbed, or any other of the stereotypes that we are used to. While that fact should be celebrated, it should still be of concern that she may be more of a unicorn than a common occurrence.

It is abundantly clear that the representation of childfree people, especially women, is problematic. The characterizations are limited, stereotypical, and sometimes disparaging. Beyond being unfair to childfree people, these narratives create a climate where people who do not procreate continue to be seen as flawed. In *The Year of Yes*, Shonda Rhimes explains, "The goal is that everyone should get to turn on the TV and see someone who looks like them and loves like them. And just as important, everyone should turn on the TV and see someone who doesn't look like them and love like them. Because perhaps then they will learn from them. Perhaps then they will not isolate them. Marginalize them. Erase them. Perhaps they will even come to recognize themselves in them. Perhaps they will even learn to love them" (235–236).

Representation matters. It tells us about the world in which we live, and it helps shape it as well. Therefore, there should be more examples of childfree people, and women in particular, in the media, and these characters should be representative of the wide variety of people who consciously elect to not become parents. In fact, it is time there was a concerted effort from writing rooms to create childfree women who are made more sympathetic to the viewer. Characters should not fall into stereotypical categories that send a message to the masses that this decision is aberrant or unacceptable or that it denotes someone who is irretrievably broken.

The only thing in need of repair here is the way we think.

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Part III

Childfree Economic and Environmental Perspectives

8

Excerpts from *An Atypical Chick: A Gay Man in a Woman's Body*

RHONNY DAM

Why the Questions?

When a woman says she doesn't want a child, her womb is instantly open for discussion. This is irritating and fascinating at the same time. Why is this anyone's business? Why do people probe and try to impose their religious, cultural, or moral views?

Childfree-by-choice women hear it everywhere. "When you meet the right man, you'll want kids." When I meet the right man, he won't want kids either. Duh. That's how I'll know he's the right man. When you say you don't particularly care for kids, the response is inevitable: "It's different when they're your own." Really? Maybe, but I won't take that risk. Can they promise I'll change if I had a child? No. It's not like kids are the kind of thing you can return if not satisfied. You can't get your money back. You can't exchange them for a cat. I'll stay safe and get the cat.

Then there's the classic: "Who'll take care of you when you get old?" Yeah. I have seen plenty of elderly people that have kids who ignore and don't care for them. Another time-honored oldie but goodie, "You're young. You will change your mind." When? Exactly how old must I be before you believe me?

Give me a time frame: when I'm thirty? Forty-two? Would you like to check back with me then?

When you say you can't have kids, you get sympathy. When you say you don't want kids, you get scorn. You're selfish. Wrong. *Weird*. You don't know what you're talking about, you don't mean it.

Maybe they're just jealous.

I have a list of roughly 2,498 reasons why I don't want kids. Getting hemorrhoids during the whole pregnancy part is high up there. Also, there's something larval about the whole thing for me. Someday I'll put the whole list down on paper. Number 1 will be, "I don't want kids." It could end there, but won't. Knowing I didn't want children was just the beginning of many indications that I was wired for a different purpose. It's a life fending off those who insist that I be "normal." Unless you don't want kids, you have no idea how much social pressure there is to do just that.

I was meant for something else.

Bypassing Baby Showers

I avoid baby showers like the plague. All that ooo-ing and aww-ing and women dripping estrogen in envy of the pregnant one, swapping baby tales and dispensing sage experience about poop . . . yeah, go ahead and kill me instead, thank you.

The one baby shower I attended was for a cousin. It was, as expected, full of females all in full-on mombie mode, smiling big smiles but in reality so jealous of the cousin's marriage and the larval creature in her body that I could feel it from a room away. What I know about pregnancy, birth, and babies is pretty much nil, so I had nothing remotely valuable to add to this gathering. Plus, all the crap women gift at baby showers horrifies me. All that plastic. All that stuff that will be used only slightly and discarded. Bringing another human into the world creates a giant carbon footprint.

So, there I was, on the fringe, as usual. You'd think I would have been used to it by now. I had nothing to say to any of these women. I cracked a slight pop-culture joke at one point and they all just stopped and looked at me. I felt all the differences between these women and me. I never went to another one after that. I will always have an excuse to not go. I'll send an eco-friendly gift, but don't expect me to be forced into close quarters with a bunch of moms. I can't do it.

I'm selfish. That's what society tells us. Selfish is not the worst thing in the world to be. We make selfishness out to be a negative thing, and it's not. I knew I didn't have the time it takes to properly raise a child and do the other things I felt were important. I like my time, I like quiet. Kids take time, and they aren't quiet. See the logic here? It's hilarious when new parents claim they didn't know it was going to be so hard. They must be some special kind of flat-out delusional.

I knew that and I don't have any. I thought everyone knew having kids was hard. No one in history said: "Kids? Yeah, piece of cake." If anyone does say that, they are lying and want you to be as miserable as they are.

Love Our Future Children Enough to Not Have Them

I was positive I did not want a kid of mine to go through a world with all the increasing threats. I started saying, "I love my children too much to bring them into this world." I see the earth's climate getting more disruptive and destructive year by year, and I'm relieved I stuck to that. I'm so glad I didn't bring a kid into this mess. I don't think I would be able to forgive myself.

Why can't we start asking women, "Why, on this overpopulated and overheating planet, do you want to put more innocent children in harm's way?" Maybe we should. Alas, it's too politically or culturally incorrect to ask that, even though it's the right question. The world has gone from 2.5 billion people in 1950 to over 7.9 billion today. Carbon dioxide levels have soared from 281 parts per million (ppm) before the industrial revolution to over 410 ppm now. The future looks grim. Yet somehow it's OK to grill childfree women with personal questions about their choice, and not OK to ask women who push out kid after kid that question.

When someone tells you they're pregnant, "On purpose?" is not an appropriate response. I've had to suppress a "Why?" more than a few times. I've been known to blurt out, "Were you trying?" You know what? It's not wrong to make people think about this. It's our planet too. Justify yourself.

Many women want kids and that's perfectly fine, but it's also true that too many women feel pressure to do so. They don't know there's an alternative. It's time to change that.

Putting the Brakes on Pronatalism

I'm childfree, but that doesn't mean I don't feel with the breadth and depth that other women feel. I do. Because I don't have all my love and protection wrapped up in children of my own, I am free to care about so much more.

A mother is so fiercely protective of her child that she will put it above everything, including herself, to the exclusion of many other things. That's the role of a mother. It's wonderful, beautiful, and necessary.

But I cannot comprehend that kind of compartmentalized love. How can we have the capacity for so much love for a child, yet ignore the pain of others? I can't understand that. Keeping your care in one small circle? That's another kind of selfishness.

Have you seen how busy today's parents are? They don't have time to be activists with all the soccer games and dance recitals and softball and baseball and

Scouts and on and on. I get tired just listening to it. Who has time to be an activist after all that? Which is the pinnacle of irony considering their kids are the ones to inherit this mess.

It's not in me. Yes, I care about my husband and family and my cats more than anything. People have told me that I would have made a good mother. Nope. I never for a moment wanted that. That doesn't shut me out from loving that poor baby elephant in Africa, or the child bride in the Middle East killed by her husband, or the kid in the cancer ward at the local hospital. I have room in my heart for them all. Childfree people I meet are the same way.

Perhaps if we all worried about more things, we wouldn't be in this mess. Rising rates of autism are increasing because of mercury, lead, and pesticide pollution in our food chain. "Rare childhood disorders" aren't so rare anymore; they're happening at unprecedented rates. Otherwise intelligent people are not awakened to all this. I don't get it.

I argue that I care more about the world than people who have children care about the world. Why is that? Maybe most parents are too busy to look at the evidence. It's someone else's problem. Until it's theirs. Then comes "my kid has this so everyone should know all about it because it affects my life so it should affect yours, even though I don't care about that thing that's affecting you." I'd like to say that kind of attitude is the exception to the rule, but I've observed it often.

It takes copious amounts of ignoring things to be a parent. I can't do it.

No one asks parents to defend their decision to have children, yet their choice creates a burden to the resources on the planet. With a population of 7.9 billion people growing by 4.3 new births per second (2018 estimate), they say we are selfish to choose childlessness. Is it not more selfish to expect everyone else to sacrifice so they can have too many kids?

It's time we start asking the hard questions. Ask people why they want to have kids. Sometimes the answer is: "Because. I just do." That's not good enough anymore.

Saving the World, One Less Child at a Time

We are in a finite system on a finite planet with finite resources. If you are going to consume more resources and create more humans to also consume those resources, then the rest of us need a reason why. We need to have justification for this. There is no more "so my genes continue."

Overpopulation is destroying our ability to live on this planet. Adding more doesn't help. Humans aren't endangered. Everything else—including our way of life—is.

A pro-population argument is that we need to keep having lots of kids, because what if one of them is the one to fix everything but then that baby isn't

born? That makes my head hurt. I can't even debate that because it is void of logic.

Meanwhile, every child who comes into this world brings another giant carbon footprint. Untold amounts of plastic, disposable diapers that require oil to be manufactured and aren't really disposable (they never go away), water and more water used . . . The best thing we can do for the planet is to have fewer babies.

The childfree role is important and noble, and it's time we realize that and encourage more women to be childfree—to support them if they have felt motherhood isn't for them but haven't been offered that choice. Being a mom is not the only calling women have. A woman can independently realize what she has to offer, and society must accept what we are doing and respect us for it—instead of trying to convert us into being another mother.

The role of a mother is not our role. Mothers will want to argue and say that they have more to fight for than others, especially those of us without children. Let me be clear: I know a mother will fight to the death for her child. A Colorado mother jumped on top of a mountain lion that attacked her son. She wrestled the lion and saved her son, who was severely injured and rushed to the hospital by his father. (The mountain lion was then killed because we have pushed them out of their habitat. Yay humans.)

The mother won't have that same drive for other creatures. Or for a child who isn't hers. If it comes down to the choice between her child and some faraway unknown child, or the child of another creature, she will naturally and rightly protect her child. We've seen the memes, we've read the posts: "I trampled ten kids to get to my little angel when I saw he fell off the thing that's two inches off the ground!" I wish I were exaggerating. Where's the care and love and concern for the ten trampled kids? Don't they matter? We regard it as noble when a character in a movie is ready to kill the world to save their child. Is it?

People have kids to carry on for the future. But if anyone cared about the future, wouldn't they give a shit about the future their kids will face? Don't they think about what kind of world it's becoming for their children and how bad the world is going to be for their grandchildren? That's closed-loop parenting: a loop that keeps on the same track, repeating and repeating while blocking external inputs and ignoring clear signals of approaching storms. Continuing to make the same mistakes. The only way to move forward is together. Please accept us and please stop trying to make us what you are. We are not. We've moved farther apart rather than standing for each other.

A Cliff Notes' Version of How We Got Here

During the war years, it was Rosie the Riveter: strong, self-sufficient women making a difference. Then in the 1950s and 1960s, women were whisked back

into the kitchen and bedroom and set to popping out kids. Then came in-the-streets bra-burning feminism and the so-called empowerment of the sixties. I was still in grade school in the 1970s, and I was miffed by a particular perfume commercial: a pretty lady singing, "I can bring home the bacon, fry it up in a pan, and never ever let you forget you're a man, 'cause I'm a Woman . . . Enjoli." Let me get this straight. We are supposed to have the kids, go to work, still cook and clean on top of that, and then even still be some object to please our man? What exactly is the man doing in this scenario of the supposed superwoman? Am I less of a successful woman if I don't do all of the above?" This ad seemed to point to feminism, but it really didn't. Hey ladies, stay in the kitchen and get me my beer but, oh—while you're at it, we'll let you go out and earn the money, too. Yes, we can do all that crap in the commercial. Should we have to? Hell no. Is this all I'm good for, in the eyes of the advertisers and society in general? Buying Tupperware and running the kids to their various activities to keep them busy—is that all there is? Is that success? Is that what a woman is? Makes me wonder how that commercial ever got aired. I'm going to guess that men wrote it.

Along the way, we have gotten completely separated from the ultimate female: Nature. I don't understand how this has happened. Can't we see what it has done to us? Mother Nature gives us so much and all we do is turn our backs on her. That's not how mothers raise their kids—to turn their backs on their own mothers once they're grown. I take the insults we heap upon Nature very personally. I feel them very deeply. How do others not? Is this what we call "progress"? We have lost the nurture in Nature. We must be willing to fight the human "lions" threatening Nature with the same courage as that Colorado mother. We must listen to all of Nature speaking to us. Are we listening?

We cannot expect Nature to sustain us if we have turned our backs on her.

Asking the Unaskable Questions—Facing the Future, Head On

Can we childfree band together and ask other women to not become mothers? To come with us instead, to become stewards for Mother Nature, for Earth? Or for mothers to stop at one child? It's OK to choose this path. We must. The planet needs us . . . the world needs us.

Now, if we were seven-billion-plus awesome people who were living in peace and harmony with the planet, rather than destroying it and one another, then it wouldn't matter how many of us there were. But this is not the case. Face it: we suck. Just watch the news. It's brutal. Shootings, drugs, killings, drunk drivers, beatings—we aren't a good species. We went for quantity instead of quality. We should focus on quality again. Our population grows and consumes at the expense of all other life-forms. Bees are dying, bats are dying, dolphins

are dying, polar bears are dying. Our oceans are dying. Lots of tiny creatures we don't think about, like oxygen-producing phytoplankton, are dying.

We will be on that list too if we don't do something different fast. What makes us think we can avoid the same fate? Hubris? That our technology will save us? That's a big one. It goes back to that notion that we have to have as many babies as possible because, if we don't, we might just miss out on that one that was going to invent that thing that saves us all from our own plastic. Call me obtuse for still not getting that.

Childfree people are being called to correct this. If we're past simply correcting—and I believe we are—at least we can help ease the pain a little while we do what we can to stop it from getting even worse. If the system was not so broken (it is), we would not be called. I stand in defense of this beautiful world that I have enjoyed so greatly. We are destroying the very thing that gives us the reason to be here, and my people everywhere must join the fight. I have wondered what it's going to take for people to get that it's all on the line. Daily, it becomes clear that nothing short of total collapse will be enough to convince them. We just aren't getting it. It would be nice to avoid complete hell on Earth. I'm not sure we can, but I have to try. There have been many times in the past when there have been valid concerns about what we face. This is different. This is a fundamental breakdown of everything. We've never faced a mass extinction spasm before. This is a tipping point. We're over the tipping point. It's downhill from here.

Logically, I would think that parents think about the future lives of their kids, but I see too much evidence to the contrary. We've become very shortsighted. We're killing the future. Everything is right now and instant, and we can't be bothered to think too far ahead. They want grandchildren, but they are too busy working and taking Joe and Susie to a million different pointless activities all the time to have the time to do the most basic actions that might add up and help. So, we pile up plastics and chemicals and processed crap, because life has to be convenient: screw the future. We're busy right now. Recycle? Who has the time? Cook? Fresh food? Gardening? Too busy. Soccer. Baseball.

I could say: "Hey, I don't have kids. I have no stake in the future of this planet. I can just live my life and enjoy myself and to hell with the future. Pass the wine." It would be so easy. It's the "I got mine" attitude that seems to be enjoyed so easily by others. I can't—I want to, but I can't. I am hardwired for this role for some reason. I could have just faded into my small hometown life. Go to a job, come home, get little vacations here and there, run the rat race. That seems to work for the majority out there. Apparently, though, cosmically I signed on for something bigger. Yes, I care about the dolphins. The bees. The bats. The plastic in the ocean. The BPA in the plastic. The BPA in breast milk, to become

the BPA in kids. The flame-retardant chemicals in polar bears. (Yes, flame-retardant chemicals are found in the bloodstreams of polar bears. I shit you not.) I can't close my eyes and ears and heart to what's happening to this world, where I found so much joy on Earth and heard so much music in Nature. I look at kids and my heart breaks to know their future is at such a risk. See, the planet would be fine without us, but what we are doing is putting in jeopardy the future of humanity.

Rhonny Dam to the Rescue!

But what was *my* cause?

Everything already has its champion. All I could do, it seemed, was echo others already saying those things. I felt there was more I could be doing, saying. I'm more than an echo. I have more to offer and more to say. I can't believe how much many don't know that I take for granted as common knowledge. News flash: none of it is common knowledge. You will always run into someone who has no clue that monarch butterflies are threatened. That aspartame is wildly horrible for you. That there's probably more mercury in your tuna sandwich than in an old thermometer. That there are gyres of plastic soup in every ocean.

I signed up for the Climate Reality Leadership Project. This was good, really good, but still I felt the presence of the elephant in the room: overpopulation. Within our climate discussions, there is not enough material addressing that completely and forcefully. It's about stopping fossil fuel usage and turning to clean energy. It's about ending our wasteful ways, about looking at what we are doing. It's about cutting down on plastics and chemicals and remembering Nature again. And yet it's more than that. It is about us and how many of us there are. If it weren't for the unsustainable population growth, most threats would be diminished. It's cool to talk about using too much, but it's not cool to talk about the fact that there are too many of us.

I will say it and not stop. We need to put the brakes on in a big way to reverse the population of the planet. It is unsustainable. We are killing ourselves. There is no social, economic, environmental problem we have here that can be fixed if we ignore overpopulation. Not one. I have said this and thought it even harder for a very long time. I can't keep quiet any longer. Logic is on my side. Any arguments to the contrary are based on emotion or religion. Emotion and religion do not employ logic, so they cannot be used in this debate. These are things that are not serving the planet's sustainability. Overpopulation is a touchy subject, but the time has passed for it to be tackled. There are few environmental issues we face that cannot be solved by a reduction in numbers. If we do not correct overpopulation ourselves, Nature will do it for us with enormous consequences for the next generations.

Facts matter.

Fact: We live in a world rife with poverty, starvation, disease, waste, and overconsumption of resources. We dump too many greenhouse gases into the atmosphere and are altering it in ways that will make life here much harder through droughts, floods, excess heat, and pestilence. All of these issues and others—such as waste, plastic in the ocean, overflowing landfills, factory farming, and overuse of antibiotics—are population-related threats.

Fact**:** We face shortages all over the world. We try to find solutions to the shortages instead of addressing the problem. That's like treating the symptoms and ignoring the disease. Some argue that there is enough to go around, that there is enough to sustain ten billion people, but that the problem is it's not distributed properly. In a world that is increasingly stressed by climate change, ocean acidification, and loss of topsoil, that's simply false. Food shortages cause suffering. The methods we seek to fix the problem can be devastating to the ecosystem. Genetically modified crops pose health concerns and are not the answer.

Fact**:** Fresh water is scarce in some regions and getting more so every day. If there isn't enough water for the number of humans here now, why would we add more? Also, the more people there are, the more the remaining water gets polluted. Illogical. Same with every shortage we face. It defies logic to state a problem, see a sound solution, and yet disregard it.

But if the "threat" is a cute, chubby face of an infant, how can we possibly argue against that? Whenever one brings up the topic, the immediate visceral emotional response is that having kids is a "God-given right." Let's stop right there. I'll never say people don't have the right to have children. Just because we can, doesn't mean we should. It is said, "Your rights end where my nose begins." Here's my nose. Here are the resources my nose and I require for survival. If you have 3–13+ children, you are using way more resources than am I. You are dipping into the resources I need to survive. The rights you claim to have are now affecting my rights to resources. When you use more than your share of the water allotted to all of us because you had to have more children than would just be replacing you, then your rights are stepping on mine, and you no longer have the right.

It has been argued that it's no one else's business outside the family how many kids anyone wants. It's a personal choice, especially if they are well cared for. What business is it of mine? It is my business in that every additional child added to the existing masses consumes more resources and adds more waste to the environment and more consumption to the equation. Think of summer days when it hasn't rained and water restrictions go into effect. Each person is allowed only so much water. You have more people in your house, so you are using more water than am I, with just myself and one other person. If there

were fewer people in your household, perhaps we would not be running out of water so quickly, and I would not have to ration in the first place. Now expand that out to the whole world.

Another thing that happens when one dares whisper of overpopulation is that people immediately think we mean putting oppressive laws in place, like China and its one-child policy (which the Chinese have abandoned). It's an alarmist attitude of overreaction to an emotional issue. I am not suggesting that at all. There is a very easy way to encourage people to have fewer children. It requires an overhaul of the system, but we are talking about a paradigm shift here, so overhauls are necessary.

Overhauls for an Overtaxed Planet

Here in the United States, we simply have to adjust the tax system. The proposal would keep the current tax break for one child. A second child would have no tax break. A third child would require a resource tax to be paid by the parents. When people add a burden on resources that others are not adding, the people adding the burden are required to support the systems they are causing strain to. This adjustment would also ensure that people put way more thought into procreating, rather than just doing it "because we want to"—or because they had too many drinks one night. The more children one insisted on having, the more resource taxes the parents would have to pay. This way, there would be no laws forbidding procreation, but there would be a responsibility and thought process behind it at last, and no more mindless reproducing. Hopefully.

I know no matter what I say, this notion gets in response the wailing and gnashing of teeth that it is against the poor: "I must surely be suggesting that only rich have children, and am discriminating against the poor." Again, this is an emotional reaction. We're speaking of logic here. It is not logical to have a child if one lacks the necessary resources to provide for that child. This logic gets me into trouble every time. Suddenly, I'm shaming women. But people who say that are either lazy thinkers or bad at debating. Generally, they're both. Pointing out truths is not "shaming." When did that happen, anyway? It is stated that if everyone waits until they can afford a child, no one would have a child. Maybe that's something to ponder, seeing the situation in which we find ourselves. After all, humans aren't endangered, so what's wrong with that?

What's wrong is that I say it. Having a child is some holy grail against which we dare not speak. There are so many sick, starving, suffering children out there that, yes, we can dare. We have only ourselves to blame for how messed up everything is, including our children. Another rabidly unpopular view, by the way—"because children are sacred and anything wrong with them is God's divine will." It doesn't go over well to suggest that our very lifestyles are

causing all this harm to our children. That all the chemicals we've been using for years and years have caught up to us, causing cancers and other health and neurological issues.

That said, all discussion of tax and planning is easy to say in the industrialized world. What about where women don't have access to birth control or education? That is where a good deal of overpopulation comes into play. This is our calling. This is when we need to rise to be the warriors for the planet. We need to help women who do not have access to health care and education and family planning, contraceptives, basic rights. Men have had control over many women for way too long; stories appear on the news every day about how women are treated in poverty-stricken countries. We need to rise to help our sisters and thereby help our Mother.

Children who go without food or warm clothing or a home are suffering. Why would we subject children to suffering and abuse? Spend all your love on one, and then give some back to Earth. Further, if one is unable to maintain a stable relationship with another human being, how are they to properly nurture a brand new one? Shouldn't something as important as raising and loving that human have the utmost thought and devotion put into it? It's the single biggest, most important responsibility I can think of, and we are not treating it as such.

This is not antihuman, but pro-Nature, pro-planet, pro-quality of life, pro-survival. Many take my message to be negative. It is not.

"We Stand Together to Fight"

I cannot fathom how women out there aren't completely enraged by what happens to our sisters. Is it a kind of willful blindness? Jealousy? "I got mine"? That last one is pervasive. It causes us to think we have to hold on and stand apart. This is not the case. Instead, we have to band together. I find childfree women to be overflowing with love and compassion. We just didn't want to have children of our own. We must harness this incredible energy to help those who need us. We can help the population issue by assisting women who don't have—but want and need—access to education, birth control, medical care, and so on. The mothers in developing countries do not want to see their children suffer. But they need help. Women are being shot for attempting to attend school, stoned for using cell phones, forbidden to drive or even walk alone.

We will not put up with this. We must empower our sisters all over the planet, so that we may cause a paradigm shift. Clearly, this one we are in is not working out too well.

Young women in these countries don't have access to basic sanitary products. When they begin menstruation, they have to drop out of school because they don't have things like sanitary napkins. They are shunned because they

are becoming women. This is an easy fix. It's ridiculous that it is still happening. Women don't have access to simple family planning and health services. In developing countries, mothers would like access to birth control so that they can reduce the number of children they have, so instead of having ten-plus kids who are unhealthy or in danger or not able to go to school, they can have four or five who are healthy and can attend school. It's so simple. It just takes education and spending money on women instead of, say, war.

We need to stand together. Not against men, not against other women, but together and united for the better. We stand together to fight. We stand together to empower, to spread strength and support.

We may not be able to turn this around, but we can make it a little bit better—or at least try—while we still can. There's no other choice. The alternative is to just run full-on into the void. I've argued with myself about this. What good are all my little tiny fights and contributions doing? We're not going to avoid the really bad shit. But we have to make the effort. We have to at least try to help, to make it better, try to reconnect.

I don't know how to not try. I can't not.

9

The Breadwinner Dilemma

The Real and Opportunity Costs of Children

LAURA S. SCOTT

Recently I was driving home from work and listening to a radio talk show. The host was asking for significant stories of events that changed thinking or behavior. One listener had emailed the host about an issue that he and his new wife were struggling with. The listener was a childless man newly married to a woman with one child. Both of them wanted to have a child together, but they could not see how they could financially manage the added expenses. As a voluntarily childless woman with a post-divorce budget, I understood. I sometimes struggle to support a one-person household! However, I was different: I was happy and content without children of my own. This man was not. His anguished email confirmed what I have long suspected: financial considerations were playing a more significant role in reproductive decision-making, even for those who wanted children.

Postponing Parenthood

When I began research on my book *Two is Enough: A Couple's Guide to Living Childless by Choice*, I noted that the choice to have children had moved from an assumption to a decision for many couples. As I began interviewing

self-described childless-by-choice heterosexual couples, most of whom were under fifty, I saw that these couples fell into one of four categories that I identified as early articulators, postponers, acquiescers, and the self-described undecided. Early articulators are those who decide to remain childless early in their lives; postponers are those who delay having a family and stay childless by choice; acquiescers are those who choose to stay childless primarily because their partners want to be childfree; the undecided are those who are still in the decision-making process.

The early articulators told me they had voiced the desire to remain childfree before age twenty, independent of the influence of a partner. Seventy-nine percent of the early articulators cited a lack of maternal or paternal instinct or lack of desire as the primary motive for remaining childfree. As the majority of these early articulators were still living with parents or attending college or university when they first expressed their desire to be childfree, the economic costs of having children were not a significant motivator. At this stage in these individuals' lives, they were more concerned with the opportunity costs of having children and the experiences they would have to give up to be responsible parents.

The decision-making process for the postponers was entirely different, as these young couples assumed they might one day have children but had mutually decided to postpone parenthood and set deadlines for making the decision. John and Kathy described their decision process similarly to other postponers. John thought it was important that they agree on a deadline: "We set a deadline for ourselves that, in our early thirties that was going to be the deadline for us because we didn't want to have children later in life and be older parents. So, we set a date, and reached that date . . ." Kathy interjected, "And we set another date . . ." John continued, "And then another date and another date . . . Also, then we took a look at ourselves and said, 'Wait a second. What's going on here?' There's a bigger picture here. So, we examined it and decided that kids just weren't in the cards for us. And we like the way our lifestyle was going and progressing at that point. And so that's when we made the final decision, in our early thirties, to remain childfree." Kathy could easily produce a long list of motives for remaining childfree, but John stated: "I would just add in addition to not having a motivation to have kids, and the financial aspect played a big part in it as well. When you start crunching the numbers and looking at what it takes to raise a child, put him through college and all that. And you're thinking, 'Gee whiz! I could retire when I'm fifty, if not earlier if I were to forego those expenses.' So, I have to admit; the financial aspect played a big part in my decision."

As I continued to interview more postponers, I began to understand why these young couples had chosen to wait until they felt sufficiently "ready" for the role of parent. The rationale for the postponement was often their perceived

lack of emotional or financial readiness for parenthood. These couples could not imagine how it would be possible to responsibly and successfully raise children at this point in their lives. Even though they had observed that their parents and other couples had or were having children without consideration of financial or emotional readiness, they did not think it was a good choice for them. Some expressed bewilderment or judgment of those who had children "without thinking" of the economic and emotional consequences. Others expressed empathy as they told stories of their parents or siblings struggling to raise children with limited resources or a lack of emotional maturity. These postponers told me they did not want to "default" into parenthood just because everyone else was doing it. They were committed to waiting until they felt the time was right. As a group, the postponers also acknowledged, if they came to the point where they felt sure they would never feel ready and willing to take on the role of parent, they were fully prepared to forgo the experience of parenthood altogether.

When I described the decision-making of these postponers to Dr. S. Philip Morgan, a human fertility expert at Duke University, he identified this postponement behavior as "sequencing," or a way to manage competing goals and opportunities:

> This is a standard strategy or schema in our heads about dealing with conflicting goals; it's sequencing. And it's normally typically accepted if you ask your children about, 'Why aren't you having children now?' they'll say, 'Well we want to have children. But because of, we're trying to buy a house; our jobs are very demanding right now, my job is uncertain right now . . .' It's all about sequencing, about when is the appropriate time. And given that we have contraceptives that allow us to postpone, it's very easy to see how people will continue to postpone. And postpone until the time is right. And the time may never be right.

Over the course of interviewing postponer couples for the book and documentary, I came to see that this was true. The majority of these couples were prioritizing financial stability, the acquisition of academic degrees, stable paid employment, and other commitments they had made to themselves or others, including military service, over the opportunity to raise their own brood of children.

When I interviewed Mark and Debb for *The Childless by Choice Project* documentary, they were both working as university professors in the northeastern United States, but they had initially met at Mark's family farm in the rural Northwest when Debb took a summer harvest job there. Mark joked, "I was accused of trying to keep a harvest crew together by just marrying her." Debb laughed and said,

> The assumption is that we would marry and have kids. It's that very traditional pattern from a working-class family. You graduate high school, you may go to a community college, you marry, and you have two children. I got married at nineteen, so we were headed in the right direction, but when we left the farm, financially it really wasn't an option. First, we had to get Mark through school. Then we bought a horse trailer and we had to pay off the horse trailer, then we bought a pickup and we had to pay off the pickup, and then we were up at Washington State [University] and just decided this wasn't going to work, and this wasn't something really either of us really wanted.

Mark reflected on what it would have been like had they not left the farm to pursue their academic degrees. "On the farm where we were, was rough. It was a bad situation financially. I think that if we had kids right when we first got married, it would have been hard to leave that situation, leave the farm." Debb agreed: "We would have been tethered to that community, whether it be day care support, emotional support, or financial support, we would have been really tethered. We both got to get graduate degrees in things we enjoy. We moved to Washington State, and I got a postdoc in Massachusetts, we wouldn't have been able to do that. Let's be realistic; we couldn't have afforded this with a kid."

Except for the few couples who ultimately went on to have a child, by choice or by circumstance, the time truly never was right for the couples I interviewed. For some, their decision to postpone became the choice to forgo the experience of parenthood. As Dr. Morgan noted during our interview, fertility postponed may be fertility lost, as "sometimes postponement leads to unanticipated childlessness" for women. Dr. Morgan also acknowledged that, increasingly, both women and men have competing opportunities that may be more enticing than child-rearing, particularly if you are a young adult: "As you postpone childbearing, something fills the gap, there are experiences that a person has during those years when they don't have children that can compete with childbearing; that is, they can develop careers or leisure interests that they see childbearing would compete with. Moreover, that, for them, raises the cost of having children and may tip the balance in favor of either continual postponement, or not having children at all."

The Real Cost of Raising Children

The real financial cost of having children has increased significantly in the United States. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the cost of raising a child to age eighteen in 1960 was just over $25,000; adjusted for inflation, that total cost amounted to more than $200,000 in 2018 (Hur). Today, parents in the United States can expect to spend at least $230,000 to raise a

child to age eighteen, and neither of these totals includes any college education costs, which would likely add another $40,000–$100,000 of tuition costs for each child graduating with a four-year bachelor's degree (Goldy-Brown).

Not surprisingly, this increase in the cost of raising children has forced many married mothers into the workforce. In 1960, 26.3 percent of married mothers living in the United States participated in the workforce. In 2017, workforce participation had increased to 68 percent of married mothers (Hur).

Single and divorced mothers have always had higher rates of labor force participation. In 2016, 75.9 percent of unmarried mothers with children under eighteen years old were in the labor force, compared with 68.6 percent of their married peers ("Women in the Labor Force: A Data Book"). Unfortunately, much of the income brought in by working mothers is being offset by childcare costs, which in the United States ranged from $7,000–35,000 a year per child in 2018 (Marx). The childcare cost burden disproportionately impacts the financial well-being of the single working mother, particularly when there are no alimony payments or financial child support from the fathers of the children.

The Female Breadwinner

The vast majority of single mothers have no choice but to find paid work, and the high cost of childcare in the United States leaves little money left over for anything but the bare necessities of life, particularly if you have more than one child. It did not surprise me, then, to learn that most of my acquaintances who were single mothers have very consciously limited themselves to fewer children than they might otherwise have welcomed into their lives had they been married and more financially secure.

Janet, a single mother of one son, had her first, and only, child six months before her fortieth birthday. She told me that she would have liked to have had more children but that she had "aged out." When I spoke to her recently, she was approaching her seventieth birthday, and her son was thirty-one years old. As she reflected on her choices, she was grateful that her career provided her the flexibility, as well as the discretionary time and income, that allowed her to be the mother she wanted to be: "I was the sole primary breadwinner for my son. [Working as a] college professor allowed for flexible scheduling. I'm not sure I could have pulled it off, otherwise. I had an au pair until [my son] went to school. Having only one child provided a manageable single mother household and gave us the financial freedom to travel, choose a good college, invest in real estate, and other opportunities that have enriched our lives."

After I pitched the idea of this paper to the editor of this anthology, Davinia Thornley, she emailed her story to me, which I share here as it illustrates how people consciously sequence their desired life experiences in a linear way.

Though Davinia was inclined to remain childfree in her early thirties, at one point she attempted to entertain the idea of a child, simply as an option:

> My thinking followed this logic: I have a number of things I really want to do, that are essential to my understanding of myself and my marriage, and most of them are fairly incompatible with children. These were things like gaining advanced degrees, moving between countries (because I was from New Zealand and living in the United States, and my husband was American), and dedicating myself to learning more about cinema (because that is my work and area of academic focus).
>
> I actually sat down and made a big five-year timeline at that point, which included all my doctoral studies; buying our first house; eventually preparing for being on the academic job market; travelling to see our families; accommodating my husband's work (which at that time included a semester-long stint leading a study abroad program that I accompanied him on)—and I kept trying to fit in a baby after I'd listed everything. I literally tried to tuck the baby in as an after-thought . . . I realized then that babies and academic life (particularly cinema studies, i.e. "you can't take babies to the movies") don't mix well.

Motherhood for women in academia has always had challenges given the rigors of tenure career track, but with the recent 10 percent decline in childcare facilities on United States campuses in the last decade, it has become harder to find affordable childcare (Carter). It is even more problematic for working women outside of academia, most of whom have to hire full-time nannies or work with agencies to hire foreign-born au pairs as contracted caregivers for the children because these working women have no other choice. In 2016, only 7 percent of United States workplaces offered on-site day care, so unless single mothers have family members who will function as volunteer caregivers or have access to subsidized day care, these mothers will have to pay anywhere from $25,000–$50,000 per year for an au pair or full-time nanny—a daunting expense considering that in 2014 single mothers in the United States earned, on average, less than $40,000 (Trautner). In contrast, "traditional two-parent families earned an income that was more than three times higher than for households headed by a single mother," noted Aparna Mathur, reporting on 2014 U.S. Census data for *Forbes* magazine.

Shortly after we published *Two is Enough: A Couple's Guide to Living Childless by Choice*, and I finished editing the *Childless by Choice* documentary (which documents the decision-making process of two "undecided" couples I had interviewed for the book), I returned to my work as a coach. My coaching clients are primarily U.S. and Canadian executives and entrepreneurs (ranging in title from managing directors to chief executive officers of their companies). About half of my female executive coaching clients are divorced single

mothers who serve as the primary breadwinners of their family and must outsource some childcare responsibilities to nannies, babysitters, or their own mothers or other family members. Outsourcing childcare is a significant financial burden and a logistical nightmare, as important business meetings and traveling take these women out of town, while arrangements for transporting children to school and events often require extensive planning that involves multiple caregivers and detailed calendaring (using sophisticated planning tools like spreadsheets and project management software). FaceTiming bedtime stories, FedExing breast milk, showing up late for school plays and pretending you saw the whole show are not uncommon. Sometimes these coaching sessions feel like confessionals, but instead of Hail Marys, I prescribe self-care, as guilt does not do any good.

The situation is much the same for married women. Most of my married female clients have shared with me that they are the primary breadwinners for their families. In some cases, their husbands are stay-at-home dads or have businesses that they can manage out of the home or have flextime work schedules; yet these women retain many responsibilities for the home and childcare. Women come home to their "second shift," leaving little opportunity for intimate couple time. Date nights are scheduled, babysitters are hired, but all the parents want to do is enjoy a quiet meal, sip a nice glass of wine, and go straight to sleep.

I live near the water in Tampa, Florida, and the morning routine in this urban coastal city usually includes a walk or run along the paths and sidewalks tracing the rivers or bays. When I moved to this city in 2011, I was amazed by how many men I saw pushing strollers. Economists had noticed, too, and sounded the alarm. In the most recent U.S. recession (which began in 2008), a disproportionate amount of men had lost their jobs. Heather Boushey, senior economist at the Center for American Progress, noted in her 2009 article "Women Breadwinners, Men Unemployed,"

> the reason that more married couples now boast women as the primary breadwinners is that men have experienced greater job losses than women over the course of this recession, losing three-out-of-every-four jobs lost. This puts a real strain on family budgets since women typically earn only 78 cents for every dollar men earn. What's equally worrisome is that most families receive health insurance through the employers of their husbands. So that when husbands lose their jobs, families are left struggling to find ways to pay for health insurance at the same time [as] they are living on just a third of their prior income.

In 2019, the economy improved, and employers were feeling the pinch of near historic low unemployment. Although many of the previously unemployed

men went back to work in this tight labor market, the anticipated wage increases had not yet materialized. Wage increases in the United States are barely outpacing inflation. For most families, two incomes are a necessity for covering all the expenses associated with supporting a family with one or more children in the household, particularly in urban areas with high housing prices (Jacobson).

In my coaching practice, many conversations with executive women and business owners concern the incredible pressure they feel to be both successful as a parent and financially successful as a businessperson. Almost all of these working mothers, at some point, feel guilt at not being able to spend as much time as they would like with their children and families. They are acutely aware that their income is critical to maintaining the lifestyle that their families have become accustomed to and the decisions these mothers make reflect that awareness. Male breadwinners also feel this pressure, but the difference is that many executive women do not have a "wife" like their male counterparts and still feel the pressure to maintain the role of the mother in the gendered ways their own mother served the family unit. These women are high achievers who want to feel successful as "partner," "caregiver," and "breadwinner," and they feel profound disappointment, or guilt, when they cannot honestly claim success in all these roles simultaneously.

Sandy, an executive in a successful privately held company, had come to an agreement with her husband that she would be the primary breadwinner and he would be the "CEO of the house." They had one son, and then Sandy told me she had a "deeper conversation with my spouse about whether we were going to try for *another* baby . . ." They came to the conclusion that "time is a resource; we didn't think we had enough of it to split it for two children." The additional financial resources required for the second child were considered as well. "One of us would stay home to raise it, nurture it . . . limit[ing] our income both then and permanently. We wanted to provide good schools, summer camp opportunities, etc. and we couldn't do that for more than one child."

The arrangement has worked well for them, and Sandy has served as the primary breadwinner for twenty-three of their twenty-five years as a married couple, focusing on her career while her spouse focused on raising their child. Paramount in this arrangement was time for each other and time for friends. "Our marriage has remained strong because we had enough time for us; we were lovers and friends before parents. Our friendships with our life-long friends have remained for thirty-plus years because that aspect of our well-rounded life has remained strong along the way. With one child [that] was possible."

As I recall my reasons for remaining childfree, I realized that I could be a successful mother or I could be a successful businessperson, but I seriously doubted I could claim success in both roles. I could not see how I could pull that off and stay reasonably sane. My decision was not based on economics, but

rather on how I wanted to experience my life and my success. I also noticed that, unlike my friends, I had difficulty imagining myself as a parent. I used to joke with friends, saying, "I like kids; I just don't want to own one." However, I do feel an affinity and a high level of regard and respect for my clients who aspire to be successful both as a mother and as a businessperson. If I had wanted children, I would have figured out a way to do both, too, despite the ever-present threat of failure.

Much of my time coaching executive and professional women is spent on deciding where to allocate their most important resource: their time and their focus. Not surprisingly, self-care is often sacrificed in that allocation, and my job as their coach is to bring the focus back on my client's well-being. I sometimes have to run the worst-case scenario with clients. "Imagine you were too sick or burned out to take care of your family or your business, what would happen then?" I ask. I remind clients that the most valuable asset in their business is them, and if that asset ceases to function, their business is in peril. This comment often does the trick because it is irrefutable.

You do not have to look far to find evidence of the pain and consequences of the loss of one income: poverty, bankruptcy, even homelessness. I was surprised to learn that some women in one of the homeless shelters in Tampa had jobs, but the wages from these jobs did not allow them to transition to subsidized housing, so they remain in the shelter. For me, and many of the people I interviewed, the experiences of their friends, family members, and random strangers continue to serve as cautionary tales.

The Economic Motive

Like 70 percent of those I surveyed for *Two Is Enough*, Bryan had at least three compelling motives for remaining childfree, but it was the fear of getting a girl pregnant that initially drove him to get a vasectomy in his twenties.

> As I got older and learned about the ineffective success rate of the birth control pill, and my distrust for women who just wanted a baby so bad, I decided I needed to be in charge of the birth control. I was having trouble enjoying my sex life not know[ing] what might happen.
>
> I also started seeing a growing trend of my friends getting divorced, paying child support, going broke, losing their house, truck, toys, self-esteem, etc. Watching a grown man move back into his parent's house or an RV at the family farm because they couldn't afford their new life was tough to watch. Those friends never come camping, don't go to the pub or barbeques anymore, and eventually stop being friends. I still struggle to remain friends with other parents. They can never do anything. Always stuck at home or doing kids' activities.

Bryan was forty-three years old when he responded to my survey, employed in Northern Canada as a heavy equipment field mechanic and working outdoors in the cold—or freezing—weather, twelve hours a day, six days on, six days off. When not working, he likes to travel, fish, camp, and go to honky-tonk bars and music festivals. By his admission, his lifestyle is incompatible with parenthood.

> My job is extremely physically demanding and is hard on my body. I'm very good at my job, and I like it. I've been doing it for twenty-four years now. I have built up an unheard of amount of seniority (for my age) and get the first pick of jobs, holidays, overtime, etc. I feel like if I had kids, I would not be where I am today. My plan is to retire at fifty-three. I was aiming for fifty-one, but an expensive ex-girlfriend pushed my plans back a bit. If my company comes at me with an impressive buyout, I could go earlier as I have no debt.

Bryan has been able to afford many things his friends with kids cannot; things like an extensive collection of recreational vehicles, including a Harley motorcycle, and his "dream acreage" in the mountains, where he has built an enviable "man cave" with rooms to store all his "toys." He adds that he did this "without the help from parents, or a second income from a wife or girlfriend. I'm also able to rent out my basement for additional income because I don't have any kids and my house is quiet and empty most of the time."

Outside of the economic motive and the financial restraints that come with raising children, Bryan's primary motivation to remain childfree is his love of freedom; a value inked onto his torso for everyone to see.

> I go everywhere I'm invited: barbecues, parties, concerts, weddings, trips, cruises, holidays, sporting events, road trips, etc. I am so free it's almost comical. I have a $1,000 tattoo on my rib cage depicting freedom. My tattoo artist has me on call when his clients cancel, and I can usually be there in twenty minutes to fill the spot. The only time I ever decline an invite for something fun is because I'm already doing something fun, or I'm at work.
>
> On an interesting side note, my sister is a single mother of twins. She struggles every single day to make ends meet, stay sane, get enough sleep, and feed her kids. Her useless baby daddy is very little help if any. In fact, [he] causes more grief than helps. My sister is currently pricing out a house cleaner and an occasional babysitter that I have agreed to pay for to give her some much-needed rest. I had a vasectomy at age twenty-six, so I wouldn't end up with unwanted children and child support payments, but I have signed up for the payments, so my sister's kids have a sane, happy well-rested mother to raise them.

In his twenties and thirties, Bryan lost most of his friends to parenthood, and now he sees the pain of the financial struggles and social isolation with his sister. "I just wanted a better life for myself. I had a pretty good childhood. My parents never divorced. They were both well respected in their fields and within our community. My decision to stay child-free was strictly freedom and financially motivated. I have never for one second regretted my decision. But people ask me all the time if I do."

Mary, a forty-two-year-old who has lived alone for the past fifteen years and currently resides in New York City, told me:

> Honestly, I would probably rank economics/financial consideration to be one of very top considerations as to why I have been childfree. I have also never been with a partner with whom having a child would be a legitimate or sensible option. I've read stories about how single women have children all the time—"you don't need a man to have a child"—and I think to myself, "how is that even possible financially?"
>
> I think my decision was heavily influenced early on as I grew up in a single-parent household. I was the classic latchkey kid, and my mom had to work two, sometimes three, jobs just to make ends meet. Watching this growing up, I made a promise to myself that I would never put myself through the same hardships.

Mary describes herself as "solidly upper-middle-class" but not wealthy and says she can take annual vacations and save for retirement, things she would not have the money to do if she was a single mother. Career mobility was another factor Mary cited as a definite benefit of remaining childfree, as she was able to say "Yes!" to a cross-country career move without consideration of any family members.

Shae is another forty-two-year-old woman who currently works freelance in the United States and also values the opportunity to make career changes and follow her happiness.

> I am single and pay all my own bills. Once upon a time, I was married, and he supported me while I went back to school. [My husband] resented my happiness and held it against me that he "had" to support me, even though it was his suggestion. Never again. I recently had a major career change. I went from a comfortable job as an editor and writer of language learning courses to working as a game writer and narrative designer in the video game industry. I'd never have taken the leap if I had children or a relationship. I would have had to focus on them and stay in a job that was going nowhere professionally.

Shae, who describes her current financial situation as "uncertain," said she thought about financial considerations "every step of the way" in her decision to remain childfree. Even now, as she is undergoing cancer treatment, she has no doubts she has made the right choice: "I was just thinking the other day how incredibly difficult it would be if I had to watch children. Chemo is knocking me on my butt for the first few days after I get it, and there's no way I could take care of another person. Having no children means I can focus on my own healing right now."

Tough Times, Tough Choices

The prevailing assumption is that those who remain childfree by choice do so because of "selfish" reasons. They want the freedom, the money; they are just lazy and want to stay up late, get drunk, and sleep in—and they do not want the stress and responsibility of raising kids. Somewhere in that mash-up of assumptions are the real motives. Freedom is essential to Bryan, and Shae is so very grateful not to have the responsibility of caring for kids during her cancer treatment. However, those assumptions do not tell the whole story. The real story is less sexy and much more pragmatic. It is a story of trade-offs. It turns out you really cannot have it all. If you want total freedom, you forgo marriage and kids. If you want kids, you give up freedom and late nights out at the bars. If you are a woman, and you want a career and kids, you let go of the goal of perfection. If you live in a country or community where the cost of living is high, and you want financial security, you limit yourself to one or two kids or forgo the experience of parenthood altogether.

Limiting the number of children one has or remaining childless is not a new phenomenon, as couples in the United States made the same choice during the Great Depression (1929–1939). During that time, total fertility in the United States hit a historic low (without the help of reliable birth control) as couples chose to abstain from sex or use improvised methods or illegally acquired contraceptives to limit the number of children they had. During that time, destitute couples who did have more children made the brutal choice to leave newborns they could not afford to care for at the doorways of orphanages.

The recession that began in 2008 in the United States also led to a decline in the general fertility rate (total average number of births per thousand women ages fifteen to forty-four) as shown by a Pew Research Study that compared each state's general fertility rate just before and during this recession. This round we had relatively good access to birth control, as the Pew study found: "This state-level look at fertility illustrates the strength of the correlation between lower birth rates and economic distress. States experiencing the largest economic declines in 2007 and 2008 were most likely to experience relatively

large fertility declines from 2008 to 2009, the analysis finds. States with relatively minor economic declines were likely to experience relatively small declines" (Livingston). The general fertility rate continued to steadily decline from a twenty-first century high of 69.3 births per thousand women in 2007 to 59 in 2018 (Belluz). This trend shows no inclination to reverse, even as the economic indicators improve and unemployment remains historically low. Despite a robust economy, young adults in the United States and Canada feel increasingly more "economic distress" than their parents as a result of lingering student loan debt, the high cost of living, and stagnant wage growth. It is hard to think about starting a family when you are still massively in debt or living in your parents' basement.

A survey of men and women ages twenty to forty-five, sponsored by the *New York Times*, reported that "about a quarter of the respondents who had children or planned to said they had fewer or expected to have fewer than they wanted. The largest shares said they delayed or stopped having children because of concerns about having enough time or money." Indeed, 64 percent of the 1,858 respondents said that they had fewer children than they wanted or expected because "childcare was too expensive." Forty-four percent said they "can't afford more children," and 43 percent said they postponed having children because of "financial instability," compared to the 27–38 percent that were worried about population growth, climate change, or political or global instability (Miller).

So, can this new generation of prospective parents afford to have more than one or two children and maintain a household, without the burden of crushing debt and the threat of financial ruin? Increasingly, young adults are posing this question. In my book, I observed the change in the value we have placed on children historically. I noticed that in the past one hundred years, children had moved from an economic asset to a cherished luxury. It does appear that, indeed, children are perceived as a luxury that many have decided they cannot afford. That realization, along with a lack of desire or opportunity, and the time and financial constraints felt by female breadwinners, poses a potent mix of rationales for having fewer children than intended, or remaining childfree.

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10

Voluntary Childlessness

An Upstream Choice in the Anthropocene

ERIKA M. ARIAS

Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection is a cornerstone in the history of science (Costa 886). From the gene's-eye perspective, the perpetuation of the gene via survival and reproduction is the very essence of all biological life on Earth (Rifkin).[1] Some would go so far as to claim that biological reproduction is the only way toward true progression (Rifkin). However, we find ourselves in a critical environmental situation and it is unknown how long we can continue exceeding our ecological budget (Wackernagel and Beyers 116). Food and water shortages precipitated by climate change and negative health impacts are but some central issues of concern (Butler 64; De Rose and Testa 195; Rieder, *Small Family Ethic* 4–5). While the social desire to have genetically related children is well understood (Rieder, *Procreation* 302), interspecies survival is intimately dependent on the stability of the planet (Hancock e252) and its ability to provide for future generations (Dow 666–667). Perhaps human evolution has reached the point where the assumption of parenthood demands re-examination. The assumption that all men and women will become parents, allowing for procreation to occur mechanically, puts us all in great jeopardy. This chapter will thus explore environmental, ethical, and social viewpoints that advocate and celebrate voluntary childlessness in a modern context.

Parenthood in the Anthropocene

With a global population of more than seven billion people (O'Neill et al. 88; Rieder, *Procreation* 294), and one that is expected to reach astronomic numbers by 2100 (Bongaarts and O'Neill 650; Singh et al. 439), concerns about whether the world can support continuous population growth remain unanswered (Rieder, *Small Family Ethic* 2–3). There is also a consensus among the scientific community that climate change, perhaps one of the greatest threats to humanity and outside species, is largely anthropogenic (De Rose and Testa 194; Pelletier and Coltman 1). As human beings, we inherently emit carbon into the atmosphere, which has a collective impact on climate change (Rieder, *Small Family Ethic* 6–7). Yet, we also maintain a competency for strategic and informed decision-making that should responsibly lead our actions, for these actions are vital to preventing against future deterioration to the planet (Butler 59).

The decision to parent, for example, continues moral and ethical debates that should be critically examined. While it has become unwise to deny that human numbers have little or nothing to do with the heating planet (Bongaarts and O'Neill 650–652; Ehrlich and Holdren 1212), the issues associated with the relationship between population growth and the environment are complex. Further complicating this relationship is the unintended pregnancy rate, where 45 percent of pregnancies are unintended in the United States alone (Finer and Zolna 843). In addition, there continues to be a number of global communities without adequate access to education and family planning services (Bongaarts and O'Neill 651).

The moral implications surrounding the choice to procreate is a contentious topic of discussion. Procreative ethics concerns not only the decision-makers, or those considered prospective parents, but also the well-being of unborn children and of joint societies (Dow 653; Rieder, *Procreation* 295). Technological advancements such as assisted reproductive technologies are to be further considered, given the modern cultural shifts that have allowed the traditional family unit to be inclusive of blended families, single parents, and same-sex parents (Peterson 282). Overall, equal opportunity for anything considered a human right should be encouraged as a genuine and moral good, including the right to have (or not have) children. However, in asking whether the choice to parent is an ethically responsible choice in the face of a number of environmental concerns, one would do best to critically analyze what is the source of their desire to have a child(s), and whether it is possible to fulfill personal desires through alternative means (Rieder, *Procreation* 299–300).

As one example of this decision-making in action, citizens from Spey Bay, Scotland, exercise what is called an "ecological ethic of reproduction" that encourages an environmental perspective, focusing on reducing pollution,

climate-related deterioration, and species endangerment (Dow 653–667). Through ethnographic interviews, Katharine Dow's research suggests that the citizens of Spey Bay prioritize passing on stable environments to the next generation over their personal choice to reproduce (Dow 653). Also interesting is the way in which this society approaches infertility. In opposition to normative responses to fertility complications, citizens of Spey Bay consider infertility an ominous sign that the environment is not stable enough to support unborn offspring and further deny that fertility is an unconditional aspect of the human experience (Dow 666–667).

Artificial Reproductive Technologies, Fertility, and Ethics

An "ecological ethic of reproduction" (Dow 666–667) is in stark contrast to the common stigmatization against infertility, and the blame typically placed on women. The growing prevalence and availability of artificial reproductive technologies (ART) not only reinforces the notion that infertility is a problem but has become further reflective of social influences on both procreative desires and the holistic reproductive decision-making process. Efforts toward reducing unequal access to ART are also becoming another topic of interest, given the uncertainty surrounding equity (Peterson 280) and accessibility for those in developing nations (e.g., issues about whether it is realistic to see a reduction in the cost of ART and whether public funding for ART will become available to all) (Vayena et al. 415).

Extending the ethically contentious debate surrounding ART is the profitable industry of commercial surrogacy, which largely employs women in developing countries such as India (Pande 244–258). A critical examination of commercial surrogacy uncovers short-term benefits and long-term costs. While some women feel empowered via a decision that financially contributes to their household income, commercial surrogates essentially lend their reproductively abled bodies to women in wealthier nations, provoking moral dilemmas around a practice and industry that further sustains the status quo and contributes to massive global inequality (Pande 244–255). Some argue that the availability of ART (and perhaps surrogacy as well) only exacerbate an uneven distribution of already depleting resources in the world, taking away from the children already in need in order to support those yet to be born (Dow 660–661).

Procreative Ethics

The human right to bear children is typically shielded against any significant criticism or disapproval, but should our pronatalist bias be protected indefinitely (Rieder, *Procreation* 293–294)? The morality behind procreation is not obvious, yet those advocating for population contraction as a means of

preserving the planet and its systems are often (erroneously) subjected to what can be described as anti-humanist rhetoric (Henderson and Loreau 32). The controversial relationship between population growth and climate change, for example, additionally raises ethical dilemmas for researchers and policy makers. A fine line exists between proposing effective mitigation responses for a changing climate that the public will accept and the understanding that population is one of many factors in achieving a sustainable future for all people (Bongaarts and O'Neill 651–652; Rieder, *Small Family Ethic* 5–7)

For example, the Limits to Growth (LTG) perspective introduced in 1972 predicted that civilization would collapse by the year 2100 if adequate social reforms were not prioritized to meet the ecological demands of a growing population with limited resources (Butler 60). This perspective followed Thomas Robert Malthus's projection surrounding the relationship between human population growth and the rate of food production that was interestingly recognized by the fathers of evolutionary theory, Darwin and Wallace (Butler 60). Unfortunately, the rise of neoliberalism and the green revolution encouraged population growth over ecological sustainability (Butler 60), and this continues to be the case today.[2]

Population policy raises even more ethical concerns when it prioritizes reducing fertility in the developing world by means of family planning, women's empowerment, and accessible education (Bongaarts and O'Neill 651–652), even though those in more developed regions of the world are responsible for emitting significantly more greenhouse gases (Rieder, *Small Family Ethic* 30–31). This approach is problematic on several fronts. For one, it removes responsibility from developed nations to consider their own family size decisions and wrongfully imposes blame on less environmentally privileged nations that consume significantly less resources and expel a fraction of the greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions into the atmosphere in comparison to more developed countries (Wackernagel and Beyers 195; Rieder, *Small Family Ethic* 30–31). Further, addressing population and environmental concerns in this way not only breeds inequality but also continues to promote the very capitalistic agendas that are at the root of overconsumption, biodiversity loss, and the impact these both have on climate change (Butler 63–64). In sum, this predicament requires further understanding, as well as modification of the pervasive ideologies that share a part in maintaining the status quo.

In addressing ecological footprint reduction, extremists have suggested implementing a one-child policy, while technological enthusiasts trust that scientific advancements will save humanity and the planet (Henderson and Loreau 39). Provided that acting within our own rights is not necessarily morally acceptable (Rieder, *Small Family Ethic* 51), there is a compelling argument to be made about choosing smaller families and limiting our procreative desires to one, or perhaps even two children (Rieder, *Small Family Ethic* 66). A small

family ethic, however, does not advocate for an exact number of children one should have, making this ethic drastically distinct from coercive one-child policies enforced by the government.

In contrast, another powerful view offered by Rieder (*Procreation* 293–305) is called the Anti-Natal Pro-Adoption (ANPA) model. This perspective is based on three main arguments. First, in considering environmental concerns such as unsustainable population growth, adding another person to the planet contributes to moral problems and that person may perhaps live to struggle through these problems (Rieder, *Procreation* 294). Second, adoption allows people the ability to provide for children in need, as opposed to creating new people (Rieder, *Procreation* 294). Third, the ANPA suggests there may be moral obligations against procreation, but there are not moral obligations to procreate (Rieder, *Procreation* 294). In sum, this view offers an opportunity to examine whether parenthood desires can be fulfilled through adoption (Rieder, *Procreation* 293–305).

The Childfree Choice

For decades, women have continued to fight for reproductive justice and the freedom to do what they choose with their own bodies (Ziegler 707). Reproductive health initiatives and reproductive rights organizations not limited to Planned Parenthood and the SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective, have done their part in protecting a women's right to choose (Luna 350–352; Ziegler 707). It seems only fair to point out, however, that these groups and the entire public health discourse have failed to recognize voluntary childlessness as an acceptable option that is independent from family planning and contraception options made available (Waisberg 190). This reality thus supports an indirect endorsement of an outdated narrative based on the assumption that all women will eventually become mothers, and perhaps more generally, that all people will become parents.

Whom do we blame for these assumptions? At what point do children assume they will become parents? It goes without saying that media and our collective culture further support an institutionalized family narrative without considering the possibility that some people would choose a less conventional lifestyle if it were made more socially acceptable to do so. The marginalization of childfree men, women, and families, and the concurrent adoption of traditional family ideology further support social institutions over the well-being of individuals (Peck 66–67).

For example, as places where most students begin questioning who they are and how they relate to greater society, colleges and universities have an opportunity to present inclusive and accurate depictions of diverse families (Chancey and Dumais 206–207). In one content analysis of U.S. marriage and family

textbooks published between the 1950s and 2000, Chancey and Dumais found that a majority of textbooks provided in schools failed to adequately make mention of the voluntarily childfree choice (Chancey and Dumais 211–212). A total of fourteen textbooks out of twenty contained content on voluntary childlessness (Chancey and Dumais 211), but shame rests on the ongoing stigma against individuals without children, and especially those voluntarily without children, that continues to exist (Ashburn-Nardo 393; Bays 138; Chancey and Dumais 219; Koropeckyj-Cox 155). Further, researchers found that content surrounding voluntary childlessness did not consume more than 3 percent of any of the marriage and family textbooks that were included in their content analysis (Chancey and Dumais 211).

Social Expansionism

Conventional expansionism and pronatalism dovetail each other, as both rest at the core of the world's social, economic, and political systems (Peck 26). The idea that growth is essential to individual health, well-being, and success is a difficult one to challenge. Yet, childfree individuals reject the nuclear family structure, and this rejection ultimately defies the expansionist model wealthy nations were built on (Waisberg 181–182). Furthermore, if everyone around the world lived the way most Americans live and consume, we would need about four Earths to sustain seven billion people (McDonald).

"Earth overshoot" essentially describes the current conditions, in which humanity consumes more resources than the planet is able to replenish (Wackernagel and Beyers 71). Unlike those living in developing nations, citizens living in ecologically privileged nations are generally shielded from a large proportion of harsh effects that result from being in a biocapacity deficit because ecologically privileged, and thus, wealthier nations, can afford to borrow from the ecosystems of other, less wealthy nations; rely on imports; and release waste into the global atmosphere (Wackernagel and Beyers 71). Since the 1970s, human impact on the planet has become more noticeable (Bongaarts and O'Neill 650), and climate scientists and environmentalists continue to warn the public of the critical imbalance between world population and environmental resources (Pimentel et al. 9). Until a sustainable population is achieved, mass hunger, waterborne disease spread, as well as food and water shortages, will increasingly threaten the health and wellbeing of individuals living in poverty (Pimentel et al. 9–14). It is thus time for a cultural divorce, in which societies reconsider the relationship between prosperity and infinite growth.

While it may be tempting to trust that human intelligence and cooperation can fully avert anthropogenic threats and climate-related issues through technological advancements, these advancements are not enough. A study

conducted by Henderson and Loreau (32) adds to the literature concerning the connections between population growth, technological progress, and land coverage. It cannot be denied that impressive technological advancements—from the development of antibiotics to the green revolution—were instrumental in reducing mortality, and new advances in technology are crucial to the continuous survival of humanity (Henderson and Loreau 40). However, is it sustainable to assume indefinite population growth?

Not surprisingly, if more people had fewer children, there would be fewer workers and therefore, fewer consumers, which would ultimately disrupt the sustenance of social programs that fundamentally rely on a growing population. Aging populations are another source of concern in developed countries with declining birth rates, but isn't it reasonable to resolve these concerns by opening boarders to create more spaces for climate refugees and immigrants in search of social and economic opportunities outside of their home countries? Moreover, should policy makers ignore the long-term consequences that result from unsustainable growth, it is only a matter of time before the perils of climate change no longer discriminate between developed and developing nations (Wackernagel and Beyers 116). Furthermore, to focus on the sustainability of the global population, and the planet that supports all people, is arguably one of the most humane things people in privileged societies can do. All human beings deserve a safe place to call home and denying people citizenship from spaces not experiencing the harshest effects of climate change does not solve the problem.

Pronatalism

Adherence to the belief that parenthood is an inescapable and necessary part of every woman's life is incompatible with the notion that we live in a finite planet with finite resources. Society's influence on the incessant adoption of pronatalist ideology has been described by the National Organization for Non-Parents, also known as NON, as a "hidden persuader" in which maintains the assumption that all women (and to a lesser degree, men) should have children (Healey 136). On the contrary, social scientists have maintained that fertility behavior is best understood through various social institutions centering around contraceptive health services and access to these services, child care, schools, and labor markets for women (Montgomery and Casterline 157). Incentivizing couples to have children is another way governments influence family planning and shape the decision-making process of men and women globally (Holodny; Kuo; Schwartz; Stone). Whether these incentives truly support families in the long term, and whether the incentives offer enough monetary and social benefits to continuously drive reproductive decisions, have yet to be determined (Stone).

Pronatalist policies and government incentives given to couples because of apprehensions concerning national birthrate declines stand to be further evaluated. Who are the couples being incentivized? When considering reproductive policies afforded by such economic means as tax breaks, cash grants, loan subsidies, and other benefits aimed at increasing birthrates, it seems these incentives are typically offered in developed counties not facing extreme environmental degradation (Holodny; Kuo; Schwartz; Stone). Moreover, rather than focusing on social reform, less restrictive immigration policies, and funding more family planning programs in locations where there is an unmet need, governments in developed nations are encouraging their own citizens to have more babies (Holodny; Kuo; Schwartz; Stone). Failure to recognize the ethical issues surrounding governmental incentivization aimed at increasing birthrates in developed nations further widens the gap between economically privileged and underprivileged nations.

Determinants of Reproductive Decision-Making

In teasing out the social mechanisms within the human reproductive decision-making process, my goal is to better understand the desire to procreate. Better understanding would make way for a new cultural narrative that no longer stigmatizes against the choice to be childfree. Identification of what these mechanisms are and how they operate is valuable at the micro level but also has the capacity for explaining macro-level childbearing patterns (Billari et al. 12). In one study, fifty-four Italian women were interviewed about their fertility preferences and the ways in which their preferences were influenced by social interaction (Bernardi 427–555). This study suggests that reproductive preferences and choices are uniquely affected by the processes of social learning, social pressure, subjective obligation, and contagion, and these affects vary across different relationships with close peers and family members (Bernardi 550). In another study, researchers used data from the 2005 Generation and Gender Survey (GGS) and applied the theory of planned behavior (TPB) model to examine determinants of reproductive intentions in childless individuals and one-child families in Romania (Ciritel et al. 1). This study further suggests the role social pressure has on influencing reproductive intentions (Ciritel et al. 19). Moreover, given the possibility that there is a lack of opportunities in society for people to see how voluntary childlessness plays out in a positive way (Bernardi 550; Chancey and Dumais 209–210), parenthood is the assumed norm, and this provides some insight into why certain behaviors are adopted throughout society and why others, such as voluntary childlessness, are not (Ashburn-Nardo 394; Bays 138; Bernardi 551; Healey 148; Koropeckyj-Cox 158).

The TPB has also been applied by scientists interested in examining micro psychological factors involved in reproductive decision-making (Ajzen and

Klobas 203; Mencarini et al. 14). In short, the TPB model is dependent upon the attitudes of a particular behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (Ajzen and Klobas 205–206). Attitudes toward a given behavior, such as the prospect of becoming a parent, involve an analysis of the costs and benefits and whether there are enough benefits to enhance the likelihood of engaging in this behavior (Ajzen and Klobas 209–210). Alternatively, subjective norms are defined by an individual's perceived support or pressure from his or her significant other, family, and social support group for performing a given behavior (Ajzen and Klobas 210–211). Subjective norms have been shown to significantly affect the timing of childbearing intentions among both parents and childless individuals (Dommermuth et al. 42). Finally, perceived behavioral control relies on the individual perception of being able to perform a given behavior, which includes financial adequacy and access to resources (Ajzen and Klobas 211–212).

In a second study conducted by Alessandra De Rose and Maria Rita Testa (198–209), researchers analyzed the 2011 Eurobarometer surveys carried out in twenty-seven European countries and hypothesized a negative relationship between individuals' environmental concerns and their family size preferences. Further, it was expected that those with greater environmental concerns, such as climate change, would have a preference for larger families, and this effect would be mediated by education level (De Rose and Testa 198). However, in a sample of 8,278 people ages twenty to forty-five, researchers did not find a negative relationship between environmental concerns and childbearing intentions, and education level did not play a significant role in mediating this relationship (De Rose and Testa 208).

A Perilous Assumption: Womanhood Equals Motherhood

Celebration of the childfree choice—while considering voluntarily childfree individuals and families valuable in the same way as parents with children are accorded respect in society—is one way humanity can take a step forward in creating a more just world for future generations (Dow 666; Waisberg 200). As such, I propose that the perils of environmental degradation and climate change are perpetuated by the wealthiest nations of the world, all of which are uniquely and firmly attached to expansionist ideals and the assumption that womanhood equals motherhood. In today's political, economic, and environmental conditions, not only is it unwise to neglect the consideration of whether parenthood is a true desire for oneself, but it could also harm future generations who may be left with the problems current generations could not resolve. Moreover, unintended pregnancy should not be as common as it is in privileged nations where educational and family planning resources exist—and should be made accessible to all people.

Social barriers that limit a woman's ability to take control of her body, such as policies restricting reproductive rights, beg the question of whether the population-environmental connection resonates with policy makers. Or is this simply another way power is asserted over historically marginalized groups of people, and specifically women of color and individuals with lower socioeconomic status, for the purpose of benefiting the few over the many? Ultimately, the responsibility lies with governments to provide affordable reproductive health care services to all people.

The world's most pressing ecological concerns—not limited to resource depletion and climate change—are impacted by unsustainable population growth (Ehrlich and Holdren 1212; O'Neill et al. 92–93; Pimentel et al. 9; Shragg 89). Further, if global climate change threatens the survival of the human species, it follows that a humane reduction of human numbers through personal empowerment and choice will at the very least reduce CO_2 emissions, creating one upstream solution (Rieder, *Small Family Ethic* 6–7; Shragg). Likewise, I argue that the decision to parent should be critically evaluated and not be left to chance or induced by social pressure. Inclusion of the childfree choice as a viable option available to all people seeking reproductive health care would be the beginning of true equality among diverse identities and families in society.

Future Directions

In exploring the ways voluntary childlessness relates to population growth and environmental sustainability, this chapter argues that without proper recognition of the childfree choice within environmental, women's rights, and social policy sectors of public debate, we continue to support the status quo and marginalize non-normative lifestyle choices. Instead, wealthier nations have a moral responsibility to recognize their historical privilege by expanding their conceptualization of self-interest to include the safety and well-being of the planet and all its occupants (Butler 64). Upstream ways of achieving this recognition require a shift in our cultural beliefs and global priorities. As suggested, the future of humanity would greatly benefit from the adoption of a new cultural narrative in which the choice against procreation is considered environmentally responsible and a humane stand against global warming, resource insecurity, and gender inequality (Waisberg 196–198). We must take a further step and realize that childfree people contribute to the future of society through social reproduction and supporting those who are not their own biological children (Blackstone 170–171).[3] Finally, if it is reasonable to consider the possibility that the human species is in jeopardy of overpopulation, which could contribute to a number of environmental catastrophes ultimately resulting in our own extinction, then perhaps not having children is one conscious way of preserving our species (Rifkin).

In the simplest terms, the childfree movement seeks to create a new future that is inclusive of all choices surrounding parenthood, creating equal opportunities for those with and without children (Blackstone 19). The movement does not stand for coercion in any way but has the potential to become a means of open discussion about how procreative decisions influence the world outside the family unit (Waisberg 200). Those who have been historically stigmatized for opting out of parenthood should be recognized in the same way societies unquestioningly support and encourage parents and people who want children.

Future research directions could involve an examination of the micro factors surrounding reproductive decision-making among the voluntarily childfree (VCF), parents, and those uncertain of having children. This will in turn contribute to our macro understanding of environmental sustainability and global population balance. Although there are reasons besides environmental concerns for choosing to be childfree (Blackstone 39), investigating these questions can shed light on the impact individual decisions have on the environment. All in all, encouraging thought-provoking conversations surrounding voluntary childlessness, and ultimately, creating more inclusivity in a complex world, hold potential for benefiting global communities and humanity as a whole.

Notes

1 The gene's-eye perspective refers to the gene as the ultimate beneficiary of selection and the only unit to survive across generations (Ågren 660).

2 The classical liberalism of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century policies extended into what is currently known as neoliberalism, which is often associated with the global financial crisis of 2008 (Labonté and Stuckler 312–313). Systems of power such as neoliberalism (backed by capitalistic agendas) not only depend on and benefit from urban population growth but also promote a fast-growing market. The pressure to feed a growing population led to the green revolution in the 1960s: massive technological advancements, agricultural research, market development, infrastructural improvements, and policies were relied on to generate greater crop production (Pingali 12302). Neoliberalism paired with the green revolution ultimately resulted in unintended environmental consequences (Pingali 12303–12304).

3 Social reproduction is the spread and influence of ideology via social means, in contrast to biological reproduction. Engaging in the development and rearing of children not biologically related to us contributes to the greater society and serves as a viable alternative to procreation (Blackstone 170–171).

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Part IV

Childfree Redefinitions

11

Recognizing Our Womanhood, Redefining Femininity

LAURIE LISLE

Even though there are more women, married and unmarried, without children today than ever before, little serious or sustained thought has been given to the meaning of femaleness outside of motherhood. Misperceptions abound: mothers sometimes suggest that women without children are not real women or that we cannot really love unless we have given birth. Such attitudes are uncomprehending and hostile, of course, reflecting the enduring divisions among women. But if those of us without children also associate womanliness exclusively with motherliness, our efforts to claim our feminine birthright will be difficult. We may wonder whether we are truly womanly, or we may question how to relate to the ancient pattern of women's lives.

Doubts like these can make our struggles for self-acceptance intense, confusing, and interminable, since we are, indeed, intentionally or unintentionally violating epochs of female experience and even the laws of nature itself. There are, however, a number of ways we can affirm our femaleness outside of motherhood: we can recognize that our non-natal bodily experiences validate us as whole and even vibrant female beings; relationships with family and friends, as well as connections to the natural world, are also affirming. Although femininity and maternity have been entwined since the Garden of Eden, the

nature of woman in all its dimensions can be better understood by examining its varied expressions in the lives of women without children.

Growing up in the 1950s in a patriarchal New England family, I was given the perplexing message that my budding femininity was both unimportant and dangerous. On the one hand, it seemed negligible because there was no real recognition or appreciation of it, but on the other hand it appeared perilous because after pubescence my mother warned me that I could become pregnant extremely easily. I felt I had to hold myself in abeyance, certainly not venture to flaunt my young body, which now contained a strangely invisible female power. I was also bewildered by womanly images that seemed unappealing or incomplete, like the wounded nature of my mother and the invincible demeanor of my grandmother.

One day in the early 1960s, when I was in my late teens, I felt a sudden shock of understanding about another kind of femininity when I saw a magazine photograph of First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy holding a sleeping infant and wearing a fashionable Chanel suit, a matching pillbox hat, and immaculate white gloves. She appeared to me as a gorgeous modern madonna. It was a ladylike look fresh out of the 1950s that affected girls of my generation. One of us, Susan Brownmiller, expressed her conflicts about that particular type of femaleness in a book called *Femininity*; she described it as an artifice that was playful or tyrannical by turn—a little bit, she wrote, was amusing and useful as a survival strategy, but too much was restrictive and inhibiting, even "a desperate strategy of appeasement" (15).

In the midst of these influences, I attempted to piece together an inclusive and positive female identity that embraced the first lady's aesthetics, my mother's kindness, and my grandmother's strength, as well as the movie star Elizabeth Taylor's sex appeal. To add to the difficulty of this task, I pondered the motto of my girls' boarding school—"to think, to do, to be"—an idea that assumed no inherent conflict between intellectuality and active or passive femininity, a concept that indicated that clear thoughts and bold actions created a womanly life. My exposure to feminism further complicated my efforts to integrate everything I admired about womanliness. Gender typing, of course, has traditionally assigned inborn qualities to males and females, usually with the more admirable cerebral ones being assigned to men and the lesser emotional ones to women. As a young feminist, I naturally rejected those old stereotypes. While patriarchs attributed female inertia to knowledge of the inevitability of motherhood, I believed that any passivity reflected confining expectations: I understood that the young woman who was denied a promotion because she might become pregnant might find the prospect of child-rearing more appealing than a dead-end job. When I attended the large neo-feminist gathering in Manhattan in 1969, which raised far-reaching questions about many aspects of modern women's lives, words on a blue flyer went so far as to urge the liberation of

all females from the conventional "Feminine Image" in order "to create a new and fully human concept of Woman." The invitation was intriguing to me.

My desire to express my femininity was complicated, because womanliness had usually been associated with willingness to bear and care for children or at least to engage in social mothering. Because of my feminist awareness, I did not believe that the reproductive role was essential to the attainment of a female identity; instead, motherhood seemed to be a natural if not inevitable *expression* of femaleness. But I was troubled because non-natal femininity within marriage had long been regarded as a sign of a woman's evil or ineffectual character. Familiar roles help give the illusion of order and stability, so childless women, by establishing their femaleness outside of motherhood, inadvertently challenge old assumptions about biological law and feminine nature. The beautiful Queen Guinevere, for instance, the barren wife of King Arthur in the legendary tale of courtly love, symbolized a weak woman, an eternal maiden captivated by romantic illusion, since her seduction by Lancelot led to the dispersal of the knights of the Round Table.

Not giving birth can certainly be a crisis in feminine identity if a woman without children regards herself and others as a female manqué, someone who has failed to fulfill herself. In fact, psychologist Mardy Ireland has described three kinds of women without children who experience differing and disturbing senses of absence: those who simply lack the desire for a child, those who miss having their own child, and those who mourn not being mothers (138). Philosopher Margaret Simons has rightly argued for "a philosophical justification for the choice not to be a mother. For it's my belief that for feminism to be really 'pro-choice,' a woman must be able to choose not to be a mother without losing her self-respect or her identity as a woman" (349).

The birth of a baby can be, of course, a way to establish femininity: "I, who was never quite sure / about being a girl, needed another / life, another image to remind me," wrote the poet Anne Sexton, who gave birth to two daughters. "And this was my worst guilt; you could not cure / nor soothe it. I made you to find me" (53). When mature womanliness is defined by maternity, it can make a woman feel compelled to have a baby, regardless of the cost to herself and those around her. Anne Taylor Fleming, a California journalist, has written about her failed efforts to become pregnant in her late thirties, which were motivated partly by her desire to end an identification with men and to find "some sense of reconciliation with my own femaleness." She said she "wanted to let go, swell up, take on flesh, to be fully female, fully fleshed female" (62–63). In this way, when nurturant qualities are embodied by the female torso enlarged by pregnancy, natal motherhood becomes effectively mandatory. This kind of thinking can lead to all sorts of distortions. One analysis of almost two hundred women seeking in vitro fertilization found that many of them overidealized the old-fashioned female role; the authors of the study, sociologists Victor J.

Callan and John F. Hennessey, theorized that the women's "exaggerated sense of femininity" (defined by qualities like warmth and expressiveness), along with their certainty that they would be excellent mothers, were psychological defenses or compensations related to their inability to conceive (105). Others have noted a completely different phenomenon: that a strong sense of femininity can transcend the usual female roles. Shirley Radl, a mother and author of *Mother's Day Is Over*, has recognized the possibility that childfree women have greater gender confidence because their femininity does not depend on motherhood.

What I did not know until recently, though, is that throughout the ages, the elements of womanliness have rarely been agreed upon. Some theorists have long been suspicious of absolute assignment of sex-linked traits, regarding them as more political than hormonal. "What is now called the nature of woman is an eminently artificial thing—the result of forced repression in some directions, unnatural stimulation in others," wrote British philosopher John Stuart Mill in the nineteenth century. A hundred years later, social scientists have still not fully explored how women without children experience their own femininity. But as the Freudian view of womanhood as a triad of passivity, masochism, and narcissism has been attacked, anthropologists and others have concluded that masculinity and femininity are more cultural stereotypes than universal principles. The view, for instance, that childlessness is a conscious or unconscious denial of womanhood is "simplistic," according to Boston psychiatrists Malkah T. Notman and Carol C. Nadelson. They have made the provocative point that childbearing in itself is not essential to feminine identity or personal self-esteem. What is important is the assumption of the *ability* to reproduce: "It seems that femininity itself (and masculinity as well) is a fluctuating and variable concept, intimately related to the awareness of the capacity to bear and nurture children, but not depending on this for realization" (187). Although they did not apply their theory to the infertile, these psychiatrists' thinking implies the importance of recognizing the procreative *purpose* of the body over actually reproducing.

In the years since I began to think about femininity, no one concept of womanliness has emerged and gained dominance among feminists or any other group of women. The word "feminine" still carries narrow and negative connotations such as weakness and inertia for some people, while for others the word suggests specialness and superiority. In my attempt to loosen the concept from its old moorings, I have found that it is sometimes preferable to use unusual words for womanhood like "muliebrity," or to use those with negative connotations in conventional usage, such as "womanlike" or "womanish," in a deliberately affirmative manner. The writer Alice Walker has advocated the use of the word "womanist" for all positive and powerful female behavior—a term, she explains, that African American mothers use to praise a daughter's behavior

when it is "outrageous, audacious, courageous, or *willful*" as well as inquisitive, serious, and grown-up (xi–xii). Whatever it is called, the essence of our gender is eternal, if elusive, but at the same time it is essential for those of us who are women without children to experience and express our womanliness if we are to achieve a sense of wholeness.

As we examine the nature of femaleness apart from motherhood, our physicality—rooted in the rhythms of nature by our menses, our eroticism, and other aspects of our corporeal beings—is very important. Every woman's body is troublesome, Adrienne Rich has stated, in "its clouded meaning, its fertility, its desire, its so-called frigidity, its bloody speech, its silences, its changes and mutilations, its rapes and ripenings" (284). But the body of the woman without children has its own challenges: whether we have girlish or motherly figures, we often struggle with nature either to avoid or to achieve conception; we may feel lingering sorrow for the unused reproductive mechanisms of our bodies; and we must contend with a heritage that condemns sexuality outside of maternity. Frida Kahlo's painting *Roots* has red veins emanating from an anatomy resembling her own, which become green vines and branches in a dry, rocky landscape, indicating the barren artist's ambivalent view of the female torso as both helpless and nourishing. But as we examine the reality of our authentic physical experiences, those of us who are non-mothers realize that our physiques do not need to be problematic simply because of their willed or unwilled unfruitfulness.

At times, however, even those of us who are intentional non-mothers may mourn not using our wombs and breasts as nature intended; sometimes we feel, regardless of the many ways we use and enjoy our bodies, that they remain untested, underused, even immature. Bodily grief seems to exist for some who have not experienced gestation, labor, and lactation. During the year artist Georgia O'Keeffe reluctantly realized she would remain childless, she decided to devote herself to "magnificent beauty" and rendered images of alligator pears resembling pregnant torsos. Once when I was in my twenties and visiting a pregnant friend, I was surprised that her physicality, her evident corporeal expectancy, seemed more powerful than my earnest efforts to develop a profession, which suddenly seemed flimsy in comparison to the miraculousness of her swelling stomach. A friend of mine who is adopted and without offspring spoke of her desire for a biological bond with another being. Another woman told me that she regretted being unable to pass on her particular genetic imprint; such women, as well as only children and those with half or stepsiblings like myself, are indeed organically apart, but it is a fact that we can experience as isolation, uniqueness, or something in between.

Inhabiting flesh that has never given birth is different from having a body that has undergone one or more deliveries, yet it is a difference that is often invisible to others. In my experience, gynecologists' offices are full of statuettes

and pictures of mothers and infants, as if the only activity of the female body is giving birth; I have often wondered at the lack of illustrations of amorous couples or graying menopausal women. Mothers tell us that bringing a child to term changes the figure irrevocably, while those of us who are women without children know that our bodies retain their familiarity. In one recent study, young mothers were significantly less satisfied with their physiques than those who had not yet given birth. Nonetheless, it is unnecessary to be alienated from other females and our female legacy because we have not gone through labor. Although my mother delivered four infants and I delivered none, I identify with her physicality because I inherited her body: our arms, legs, hands, and feet are identical except in regard to the fleshy changes caused by age.

In other ways, all females share important bodily experiences. The summer before I turned thirteen, I had a mysterious bellyache that soon resolved itself with my first menstrual period. I became infused with wonder that my young body could produce a baby, but I was content to keep it as a potential, a promise. My mother told me that I now had "the curse," reflecting the widespread negative attitude toward menarche. In some cultures or castes, menstruating women go into seclusion either by their own volition or because of imposed taboos; my mother used to scorn her friends who took to bed each month as weak or foolish, but perhaps she would have regarded her periods as more than a curse if they had been times for rest and rejuvenation. For me, monthly bleeding eventually became a reassuring reminder of my healthy femaleness, the capability of fertility, and my body's groundedness in nature.

During menstruation, many women feel their bodies undergoing a tidal transition that is cleansing and recharging; each cycle is experienced and even enjoyed like a little gestation, moving predictably from premenstrual heaviness and moodiness, through menstrual aches, to postmenstrual vitality. The unhappily childless may be distressed to be reminded each month that they are infecund, but Elizabeth Corey, known as Bachelor Bess, a turn-of-the-century midwestern schoolteacher and homesteader, referred to her menses in letters home as a time of "celebration," apparently a reference to her freedom from childbearing (Gerber xvii). Bleeding on a lunar cycle is sacred in some Native American tribes as a time of heightened female power because of the appearance of life-giving blood. Some young women, both those who have borne children and those who have not, have advocated celebrating monthly menses with rituals, relaxation, and bright red clothing.

Many women, mothers and non-mothers alike, ground their feelings of femininity in another aspect of physicality—eroticism. Centuries ago, the sensuality of females was considered suspect because it was related to empowerment: the disreputable ladies in medieval literature were "almost always associated with female sexuality, assertion, and creativity," according to literary historians Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (7). Women without children, married

as well as unmarried, have a troubling history in this regard, since female carnal desires outside of wedlock or motherhood have been regarded as profoundly immoral and dangerous. In the fourteenth century, Geoffrey Chaucer had his five-times-married, earthy, feisty, worldly Wife of Bath reveal that she "fear[ed] that her barren sexuality resembles wild fire, destructive and insatiable" (Martin 39).

Three hundred years later, prelates and poets continued to worry about the supposed unnatural eroticism of non-mothers. In 1616, for instance, Ben Jonson criticized a court lady for preferring lovemaking over mothering in his poem, "To Fine Lady Would-bee," in which he accused her of using contraceptives: "The world reputes you barren: but I know / Your 'pothecarie, and his drug sayes no." The poet gratuitously tries in verse to reassure this lady that she will soon forget the pain of childbirth and that she can restore her faded looks with paints. When she expresses reluctance about losing her freedom and pleasures, he is less sympathetic: "Oh, / you live at court: / And there's both losse of time, and losse / of sport." Finally, he cruelly admonishes her to write on her "wombe" that it is actually a "tombe" because of her buried but unborn children (Parfitt 53).

In the nineteenth-century United States, in the wake of modern ideas about the importance of erotic gratification, a few rebels practiced free love, often with the result of bearing out-of-wedlock children. It was widely assumed that woman's strong sexual nature was satisfied and kept in bounds by motherhood, a view related to the biblical belief that her original sin is redeemed by the pain of childbirth. "At the end of the nineteenth century, we were told that when a woman enjoys sex but declines motherhood, she is worse than a beast," says psychologist Louise Kaplan. "We were warned of the terrible evils that might emerge from the Pandora's box if women did not contain their sexual fires and murderous potentials in the tender eroticism of motherhood" (408).

There is another tradition, albeit a more hidden and libertarian one, that severs the customary link between sexuality and procreativity. This tradition exists, of course, among homosexuals. Among married heterosexuals, the practice has ancient roots in the Old Testament and the Jewish tradition, which teach compassion for the barren wife and assert the husband's obligation to have marital relations with her. Only a few radicals in the last century, like anarchist Emma Goldman and suffragette Victoria Woodhull, openly declared that women had the right to amorous passion outside of marriage and motherhood. As Freud's writings about the female libido began to circulate in the twentieth century, Margaret Sanger became motivated in her drive for legal, inexpensive, and reliable contraception by her belief in a woman's right to erotic fulfillment without fear of pregnancy.

The female libido is also strongly affected by a woman's attraction and attitude toward her partner. This view is illustrated in mythology by the story of

the nymph Daphne, who turned herself into a tree to avoid being raped by Apollo, suggesting a blocking of her eroticism out of fear and outrage. Love is a powerful aphrodisiac, and testimony from happy marriages in the sociological literature suggests that many childfree partners are more sexually active and pleased by their sex lives than parents are. Regardless of childbearing status, there certainly can be immense enjoyment of one's own or another's body as an object of desire; in my experience, the fact that my womb was never used precisely as nature planned has made little difference.

For women without children of earlier generations, it often remained difficult to disregard centuries of cautionary teachings about carnality apart from maternity. Sometimes these women downplayed sex or retreated from it altogether. Georgia O'Keeffe, born in the Midwest in the Victorian era, was deeply discomforted by erotic interpretations of her gigantic floral stamens and petals. (One reviewer wrote that her early charcoal abstractions of forms within forms simply revealed that she wanted to have a baby.) Virginia Woolf noted that women of her generation felt inhibited about writing about the body's desires and that she, herself, had not revealed the truth about her own "experiences as a body" (288). Although Woolf predicted that no female would write honestly about her sexuality for years, it was only two generations later that Erica Jong, while still childless, wrote the explicit and high-spirited *Fear of Flying*. Although the judgmentalism toward, if not disparagement of, nonmaternal eroticism seems to have eased in secular society, even today women without children are suspect, as if they are perverting or denying their sexual natures: one young woman who did not want a baby was told by a boyfriend that she was opting for "self-castration," as if she were undergoing a clitoridectomy, or female circumcision.

The ways women's bodies are perceived and the ways we live in them are often surprisingly divergent. Erik Erikson has described what he calls the empty or disappointed womb, but he seems unaware that the uterus, vacant or not, is an active organ with its menstrual and sexual sensations; he has also ignored spiritual, intellectual, and imaginative interpretations of what he regards as female inner space. Another psychologist, Mardy Ireland, has more recently noted that the nonpregnant womb can be viewed as a metaphor for "holding and bringing forth"—if not an infant then an emotion or an insight from the fermenting unconscious (138). Instead of living with the idea of an empty inner space, all women—especially childfree ones—can hold it as a symbol of internal fecundity, inner richness, and the possibility of renewable life, whether we are sexual or celibate, with or without child.

A body that has never been pregnant can be regarded as potent, still in anticipation, invested with self-potential and self-possession. From the skeletal to the circulatory systems, the female torso is prepared for a pregnancy every two years for three decades, allowing women who suppress their fertility the

possibility of using all their physiological energy and endurance for lovemaking, dancing, running, or other forms of bodily exertion. For me, the digging and planting of a garden are a ritualistic, instinctive, harmonious, absorbing form of physicality. Whatever the many ways we use our bodies, it is important for those of us who have never given birth to experience them as womanly, sensual, strong, energetic, and even eloquent.

Another aspect of womanliness besides our physicality is our sociability—the web of human relationships that enhance and enrich our lives. As a writer and an introvert, my mind's eye instinctively turns inward; but whereas my work and an aspect of my nature call for quiet apartness, another part of me seeks connection, company, love. Affiliations, in fact, are especially important to counteract the isolating effect of writing, an intense activity that demands the utmost attentiveness. Yet, paradoxically, my alliances with female friends have helped me to understand and justify my need not to be with others at times. Although this kind of withdrawal has been called uncaring and, hence, unfeminine, I have found that as I express myself, and inevitably my womanhood, through relationships with everyone around me, my femininity is constantly revealing itself. Others' needs and desires—as well as intrusions—both deepen my inner resources and expose my limitations. As I listen, care, and try to comfort, I draw on old lessons learned at my mother's knee and new insights arrived at as an adult. This is a nurturing and sustaining stance that I enjoy today, one that takes a slightly different form with every person; it is also a response that demands much imagination, tact, insight, and patience. It is the outward, social face of personhood, one that has long been associated with femininity. It is also an attitude available to mothers and non-mothers alike, and one that links women without children to our womanly legacy of nourishing maternal figures.

In the past, unmarried women often lived in extended families or gathered together as social workers in settlement houses, as nuns in convents, or as faculty at women's colleges. Some single females developed intense friendships, living together for years in "Boston marriages," which were sometimes erotic in nature. Others waited until middle age to marry and entered into childless marriages. Even so, most women who did not want children never married, and at times they suffered from a lack of intimacy; in the spring of 1828, for instance, when New England novelist Catharine Sedgwick was thirty-nine and in low spirits after turning away another suitor, she wrote that her "solitary condition" felt "unnatural" and lonely since she was "first to none"; then, however, she quickly recovered and acknowledged that she was "second to a great many" relatives and friends. Despite such moments of doubt, spinsters in the nineteenth century were much more likely to write in diaries and letters about the deep pleasure they took in their unwed states and in the strong alliances they created within the female sphere. In that pre-Freudian era, they apparently did not

feel that chastity was a difficult burden to bear in light of the dangers associated with childbirth.

In our era, when so many women without children live alone or among unknown neighbors in large cities, most of us feel a strong need for community. Those of us without children often form "friendship families," according to Berenice Fisher (87), a professor at New York University, especially if we are single and live apart from our relatives. Experts have many theories about this desire for connection. Psychiatrist Martha Kirkpatrick, the editor of two books on women's sexuality, has observed that the quest for intimacy appears to be "an even greater imperative in the lives of lesbians" (who, of course, are less likely to have children) as "an unconscious effort to reinforce or complete their feminine development" (141). Relatedness is so important to women, in fact, that it frequently fuels the fear of childlessness. Certainly, I feel that my lifelong desire for closeness with a partner, female friends, and certain children is intensified because I do not have progeny, particularly as I anticipate old age.

Relationships with males, of course, are extremely important to the heterosexual non-mother's ability or inability to enjoy her femaleness. When I was in my forties, I confided in my journal that I was still looking for a relationship with a "manly man," one who would "allow the lightness and the femininity" to surface within myself, who would let me be soft and vulnerable with him. Having finally found such a man in my third husband, my womanliness now feels enhanced in a way that both strengthens my sense of self and enables me to discover myself in another way. Like Chaucer, who praised the independent, childless young widow Criseyde as "Wommanly," such men do not associate a woman's lack of maternity with a lack of femininity and, in fact, sometimes they find an inverse relationship between the two. And, as studies have shown, most husbands in childfree marriages seem happy and well adjusted. Perhaps that is because some non-mothers regard their relationships with men as the most important ones of all. This is the kind of woman who gladly remains without children in order to cement and celebrate a successful alliance with a male. Diarist Anaïs Nin, for one, felt it her destiny to be a muse and a mentor to men: "Nature connived to keep me a man's woman, and not a mother; not a mother to children but of men. Nature shaping my body for the love of man, not of child" (346).

Women without children tend to be more androgynous than other women, according to Sandra Bem, a research psychologist and the creator of a sex-role test. The word "androgyny" was coined by the early Greeks—from *andros*, male, and *gyne*, female—to describe creatures like the goddess Artemis who engaged in both warfare and midwifery. Today the term is often used to describe a psychological, not a physical, state that transcends gender definitions. More than a century ago, Alexis de Tocqueville admired such breadth in American women, who "often exhibit a masculine strength of understanding and a manly energy,

generally preserve great delicacy of personal appearance and always retain the manners of women, although they sometimes show that they have the hearts and minds of men" (212).

Childfree women also tend to express their empathy in the traditional way of symbolic mothers. In Joan M. Offerle's 1985 study, women without children were found to be nurturing through paid or unpaid teaching and through work in environmental, civil rights, and humanitarian causes. I found my own style of social mothering when I served for six years on the volunteer ambulance squad in my village, an activity that required diagnostic skill, ability at comforting, physical strength, and even bravery as we swooped in like ministering angels at all hours of the day and night to transport an elderly person to the hospital, stabilize the broken bone of a child, or rescue an injured person from a wrecked car.

Friendships with other females are also essential to our developing and ongoing senses of womanliness. Female friendship often draws on the practice of talking about ourselves and others in empathic ways; this instinct for common ground and comparable experiences expands our scope and knowledge as females. Women without children often have a quiet commonality in which we talk little about being nulliparous. Recently, over a period of several years, a group of women who paint, sculpt, photograph, and write gathered in my home on Sunday evenings to talk about the ways the creative process intersected with their personal lives. Oddly and completely by chance, almost all of us were childless; we were motivated partly by a desire for collegiality, since we were creating alone in our studios and homes, and partly by a desire to receive inspiration, affirmation, and information from one another. The end result of all these exchanges with other women over the years has been greater enhancement and expansion of my sense of womanliness.

In the past, females habitually bonded because they were mothers; historian Gerda Lerner has argued that the paucity of women's intellectual history "has kept [women] for far longer than was necessary from developing a consciousness of their collectivity in sisterhood, not motherhood" (281). Indeed, many childfree females have agonized over the way the demands of young motherhood cripple close friendships. As in the nineteenth century, when a first pregnancy raised the specter of death, today those of us without children usually expect a painful loss when a sister or a close friend announces that she is going to have a baby. The way many childless women tell it, the experience is a one-sided injury, one the new mother does not notice because she is so absorbed in her infant. Although a few non-mothers deliberately befriend mothers as a way to know children, most women without children remain, by necessity or preference, closest to friends who are also without young children. This is not because childlessness is a strong link between us, but because our daily lives are more alike.

The femininity of childless women, while it can be expressed through the body and through relationships, can also be expressed in the natural world. Over the centuries, women's relationships with nature have been both enslaving and empowering: nature may take over the female body for the purpose of perpetuating the species, but nature's gardens and forests have also provided her with solace and sustenance. The intimacy and identification of women with nature is a persistent theme in fiction by women as well as in women's letters, novels, paintings, diaries, and notebooks. Georgia O'Keeffe, the daughter of a Wisconsin farmer, wrote that "my center does not come from my mind—it feels in me like a plot of warm moist well-tilled earth with the sun shining hot on it" (211). As the industrialized "gray world," to use ecologist Gary Snyder's phrase, threatens to destroy the natural green one, so-called ecofeminists have called for an ecological revolution to preserve what some call "sister Earth," a phrase that suggests an ethical and egalitarian relationship with nature.

My hours in my garden affirm me in a non-natal femaleness, partly because gardening is what I learned from my mother. When I became intimately acquainted with the goings-on in my garden, I noticed its profligate ways, its excess of seeds, its cycles of growing and dying. It is about more than propagation—it is also about blooming and tenacity, loss and adaptability. Ignoring the natural world, especially if we are not part of the ongoing generational reproductive process, can be perilous. A friend once perceptively observed that in my garden I actively participate in the earth's annual rebirth. We can become too intellectual or isolated or ignorant about the rhythms of life. Each year I find that my garden deeply involves me in physicality that complements the intellectuality of writing.

In the decades since I first struggled to understand femininity, I have realized that the unwed women of New England experienced a rich and rewarding sense of womanliness outside of motherhood. Emily Dickinson expressed the radical view that the creation of art was the true fulfillment of womanhood, more so than marriage or maternity. The concept of the feminine also has broader meanings in different cultures and castes. The so-called divine feminine, a force that represents creativity or originality, exists in a number of spiritual traditions, including Native American; in fact, Laguna Indians use the word "mother" for the most evolved person in the pueblo—whether a parent or not—because he or she inspires symbolic ritual rebirth. Furthermore, the Shaker concept of spiritual motherhood, which transcended biological maternity, invested celibate women with religious authority in the belief that so-called female virtues (like sensitivity, subjectivity, intuitiveness, and irrationality) made women more receptive than men to God.

Femaleness, I believe, is neither a flimsy construct nor narrow or restrictive, and it is more than a code of behavior. Femaleness is a sensibility that evolves in tandem with dreams and desires, a set of values influenced by hormones and

upbringing, which may or may not involve motherhood. True femininity, as opposed to female impersonation, is so deeply rooted in our psyches that it cannot be affected by whether or not we give birth. "If I am myself, I am feminine," declared a friend of mine, a childless wife. "I never *for a moment* thought that I had to have children to be a woman or to be feminine." I believe that my life is a feminine one, enriched by my husband, my home and garden, my work, and the people, including a number of children, I care deeply about. Writing allows a full expression of what matters to me as a woman, and it feels womanly to work at home, where I can integrate writing with such pleasurable aspects of daily life as cutting flowers, making soup, walking the dog, working alongside my artist husband, drinking tea with a friend, and greeting neighbors at the post office. I have come to believe that femininity is expansive enough to encompass enabling others *and* expressing the ego. If we as childless women can courageously accept our inclinations and interests as unquestionably legitimate and womanist, we can enlarge what it means to be a woman.

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12

Refusing to Be Othered

Redefining the "Silent Bodies" of Childfree Women

ANNA GOTLIB

> We can be redeemed only to the extent
> to which we see ourselves.
> —Martin Buber

Women without children—those who do not, or do not wish to, become biological or adoptive mothers—have been subject to a number of identity-constituting labels, including "voluntarily childless" (Gillespie, "When No Means No"; Gotlib, "But You Would Be"; Houseknecht), "childfree" (Gillespie, "Childfree and Feminine"), and "childless by choice" (Paul; Veevers, *Childless by Choice*; Veevers, "Voluntarily Childless Wives" 1). Some have argued that in order to preserve a woman's agency, "childfree" ought to be the term of choice, emphasizing the freedom such a label represents rather than focusing on the missing parts, the less-ness, of one's status as a non-mother. I take the "childless" versus "childfree" distinction to be useful for marking the differences between those who desire children but, for a number of reasons, are not parents and those who do not desire children (without regard to their ability to have them)—as well as for signaling the agential freedom that a choice not to

reproduce entails. However, I argue that this language alone does not sufficiently or accurately convey the position of not insignificant numbers of women who do not desire to be defined in terms of their relationship to their childbearing wishes, potential, intentions, or status.

Specifically, relying on Helen Peterson and Kristina Engwall's characterization of these non-mothering women as "silent bodies" who assume "a natural childfree position" through "a body that does not speak a longing for children" ("Silent Bodies" 376), I argue that the kinds of contested identities that mark non-mothering selves require narratives that seek to undo the damage of not only external pronatalism but also the internalized stories that insist that understanding female identities requires centering their relationship to children and to mothering. My arguments are grounded in narrative feminist moral theory that takes seriously the idea that personal identities are constituted through first-, second-, and third-person discourses, and that the very words that are used in naming one's choices matter as signifiers of a self, a personhood that is neither defined nor circumscribed by the normativities that pronatalist master narratives demand. Narrative resistance to pronatalism, therefore, cannot be limited to just choosing to label oneself "childfree" over "childless," as both point to identities still fundamentally bound up in motherhood or its absence. The next reparative move, it seems to me, requires something more: an un-silencing, un-othering of the female body that neither desires children nor wishes to be understood primarily in relation to those desires. What I call for is nothing short of a reification of new kinds of narratives about being female that speak to many longings, dreams, fears, and (self)understandings—without any of them (necessarily) including considerations of motherhood.

Pronatalism as Master Narrative

The "childless" versus "childfree" distinction is no mere semantic argument and has its roots in a deeply ingrained and hegemonic pronatalism. I thus begin with a brief discussion of how these terms came to be; why the difference between them matters; and why we need to look beyond them to both understand, and to resist, the othering of women who do not wish to be defined by their childbearing circumstances or choices.

Pronatalism is the master narrative—the story told in public and in private, by powerful political figures and by well-meaning aunts alike—about what it means to be a woman. And what it means is nothing less than (the "preferred" kind of) motherhood—whether through "traditional" reproduction or, increasingly, through novel medicalized methodologies and adoption. Moreover, pronatalism is not only a set of claims about who, and what, women are: it is also the normative foundation of various sociopolitical, economic, and other kinds of policies that reify the claim that female identity ought not be separated

from its essential motherhood role (Gillespie, "When No Means No"; Hird and Abshoff). Pronatalism has become the unabashed, official endorsement of woman-as-essentially-mother through various direct and indirect means of social narrative shaping (Gotlib, "But You Would Be"). And as much as broad pronatalist narratives tend to offer the mother as an image of female self-actualization and the fulfillment of essential, natural roles (Lindemann Nelson), these narratives also paint the woman without children as either a menacing presence, "portrayed as an outcast, and her freedom and vitality are branded wicked, or else as the pitiable spinster . . . , a failure" (Meyers 122). Indeed, one need not look too far either within sociopolitical discourses or popular culture to find everything from outright pronatalist policies, to "family-friendly" (rather than woman-, man-, or person-friendly) regulations, to films and television programs in which the childless woman is either the pitiable (or frightening) presence or else is redeemed through a surprise, and life-repairing, pregnancy or adoption. And even when no such pregnancy takes place before the credits roll, if the protagonist is still rather young, the audience can at least leave with the thought that "there is still time." It is a rare (popular) film indeed in which the childless woman is past her most fertile years and the audience is encouraged to see her as anything other than unfortunate, strange, or at best quirky.

Thus, to be a woman in the world of hegemonic pronatalism—whether in the Global North or the Global South—is to be most likely viewed as a mother, as a potential or future mother, or as a liminal figure who, either through misfortune or incomprehensible choices, is without offspring. Of course, what is missing from this rather general description are its hidden premises: only "preferred" women ought to be mothers, and in fact some ought not procreate at all for reasons of poverty, illness, disability, racist hatreds, or heteronormative prejudices (Roberts). The (often White, middle-class, cishet) women whose motherhood is not othered as a result of these prejudices, but who nevertheless are without offspring, are often divided into "involuntarily" childless (IC) and "voluntarily" childless (VC) categories. Those in the former category—those willing but unable to have or raise children—merit pity and support, while those in the latter—able to procreate or raise children but choosing not to do so—merit criticism, anger, and often, marginalization (even though the latter category is increasing with each passing decade).[1] Indeed, as Gilla Shapiro notes, "while childlessness describes a person or couple who does not have children for various personal, biomedical, or situational reasons, voluntary childlessness is characterized by an active choice, commitment, and permanence regarding the decision not to parent" (2).

The IC women, often distraught and traumatized by numerous attempts to conceive or adopt, are thus figures who are granted compassion, offered well-intentioned—if clumsy—alternatives ("you can always be a foster mom!"), and

generally allowed to grieve what the pronatalist master narrative considers worth grieving: the loss of one's central meaning-making role as mother. The VC women, on the other hand, receive no such understanding or acceptance: as willful rule-breakers—as nonconformists who chose their childlessness with deliberate disregard not only of the master narrative about who they are but also of their very essence as women—the voluntarily childless are othered in ways that are quite personal and quite damaging to their sense of self. That is, unlike women who desire but cannot have children, VC women lack the normative uptake from others of the women's stories and their choices (Park, "Stigma Management"). With many VC or VC-tending women, the assumption is often that if one is not infertile, then one is either irredeemably selfish or else too unfocused (and will eventually get around to procreation when the unfocused woman "grows up" and the baby fever takes hold). Indeed, a VC woman often hears that, surely, if she were more "adult" and "knew her own mind," she would rethink her choices and be less "deficient" and more attuned to the "real world" (Gillespie, "When No Means No" 228; Rich et al. 235). Otherwise, she cannot simply decide not to procreate without that choice discrediting her as a moral agent (Overall 2). Quite often, "compared to the involuntarily childless and to parents, the voluntarily childless are seen as less socially desirable, less well-adjusted, less nurturant, and less mature, as well as more materialistic, more selfish, and more individualistic. Childfree women's lives have been seen as less rewarding than those of mothers of any number of children, and they have been judged to be less happy in the near future and in their elderly years than have mothers" (Park, "Choosing Childlessness" 376).

In fact, women who, whether through actions, words, or both, contradict the pronatalist narratives of mandatory motherhood are often rejected "as selfish, deviant and ultimately unfeminine. . . . As Morell . . . has argued, the normalising of motherhood has been perpetuated through discourses that deprecate childless women. Thus, women who choose to remain childless have been "called upon to account for themselves" in ways that women who become mothers have not. . . . Dyson . . . has emphasized that chosen childlessness is often incomprehensible to others who feel the need to express their bewilderment" (Gillespie, "When No Means No" 230). And thus, the VC woman becomes in many ways liminal, othered. To be liminal is to be in-between—invisible, unheard, cast out, on the outskirts of communities and societies that view VC women, at best, as shadows and, at worst, as unwelcome and other. No matter what the VC woman does, says, or attempts to prove, her initial and unforgivable crime cannot be undone—unless she, like a member of a conspiracy trying to avoid prosecution, actively renounces her VC status and joins her sisters in embracing (some kind of) motherhood. The alternative, especially when viewed as a rejection of the ideology of pronatalism, is the kind of othering that can last far past a woman's reproductive years.

So, what does the liminal-making process of the othering of VC women look like? There are a number of perspectives and discourses from which to consider this question. However, because I am a narrativist by training, I will turn to stories as a way of engaging with the kinds of moral practices that can create, maintain, and in this case undo another's personhood. And how this undoing of VC women happens in practice is indeed a complicated story—a combination of official, political, medical, and social narratives about women, motherhood, and family, and less-official, personal microaggressions that a VC woman often encounters. I will limit myself to two kinds of stories: the first, a personal one that exemplifies the kind of verbal and behavioral indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, denigrating messages to VC women because of who they are perceived to be; second, some more broadly directed master narratives that shape attitudes toward those women who dare to disregard the motherhood mandate (Gotlib, "But You Would Be").

I have never known myself to want children. As a child, I rarely played with dolls, preferring instead to run around with (usually older) children, climbing up tall objects that no doubt made my grandmother's long summer afternoons a lot less peaceful. As I grew older, the idea of motherhood still remained something of an abstraction, a strange obsession that I watched some of my friends develop, with which I could find no common ground. I neither hated the idea of children—in fact, I did quite a bit of babysitting—nor viewed motherhood as a way of betraying my budding feminist intuitions. It was simply, like football and accounting, something that I did not see as a part of my developing ideas about who I was, what mattered to me, and how I might engage with the world. The idea of motherhood was, for me, an empty set.

As I have noted elsewhere, even once married, I became a classic "not now" postponer: not now—not until we are more settled into our careers; not until we take that cross-country trip; not until I earn tenure, and so on (Gotlib, "Wanting"). And while I waited for that motherhood alarm to start ringing, I watched as friends heard it, and responded; they gave birth, went through difficult trials of IVF, adopted. And I held their children, played with them, always ready for the suggestive questions while politely smiling in response. "Soon," I would sometimes say. "We are really just considering the timing." But I felt a strange nothing—while the concept of motherhood did not fill me with panic, my body simply did not possess the language, the desire, or the motivation to do what so many of my friends embraced so willingly, and some with so much longing. Not helping matters was my partner's relaxed, noncommittal attitude toward parenthood (Gotlib, "Wanting").

Yet everything about my circumstances seemed to point to a secure, normative motherhood: I was not burdened by the kinds of medical conditions that might threaten childbearing; I was employed and married to a supportive partner; there were simply no practical barriers to embracing the pronatalist

narratives—I was, in fact, one of the White, educated, privileged women that such narratives favored. And yet, motherhood, while so clearly realized and lived by so many of my peers, for me remained an abstraction. Thus, I became one of those women who, failing to respond to her "essential" nature, must be reminded of the unacceptability of her choices and, indeed, of her choosing self.

And reminded I was. Aside from the expected parental guilt-laden exhortations to think of "the future" and of their desire for grandchildren, the common, casual intrusions into not only why but how I could imagine my future without motherhood—from complete strangers, from co-workers, from parents of friends, from friends themselves—became part of the waters in which I swam. "Are you unable to conceive?" one would ask, pity already marking her face. "How will you balance your job—are you going to take time off?" another would wonder, ready to suggest a book, a website, a blog—anything that would be helpful to me as a future "professor mom." When I shared my partner's and my summer plans, I would hear, "I cannot even remember when I went on a non-kid-friendly vacation—and I love it!" This was often followed by the ever familiar appeal to regret: "Aren't you going to regret, it, even if just a little bit—don't you want a family?" Perhaps it is mischaracterization to call these passive-aggressive, and sometimes hostile, interactions "microaggressions." In fact, I am fairly certain that for a significant number of women, they are anything but "micro"—and, indeed, they would at times send me down rabbit holes of self-doubt, sadness, and fear of impending and unbearable regret. However, these acts of personal gaslighting, while distressing and often damaging, often pale before the larger, deliberately destructive public master narratives about the failure of women who deliberately reject the motherhood mandate.

These public narratives come in a variety of forms, most of them variations on the theme of mandatory motherhood. For instance, in his book *What to Expect When No One's Expecting*, Jonathan Last focuses on what he takes to be a coming demographic disaster resulting from the refusal of U.S. women to produce enough (or any!) children. Similarly, Steven Kramer argues with even more urgency that wealthy nations of the Global North with low fertility rates ought to adopt pronatalist policies that might mitigate the threat of ever fewer workers supporting increasing numbers of retirees (CBS/AP). These pronatalist fever dreams are not limited to socioeconomic worries. Caroline Gatrell, focusing on women in employment, found that a not-insignificant number of employers consider VC women "to be cold and odd, refusing to promote them, since their deficiency of maternal instinct is seen as tantamount to a lack of 'essential humanity'" (Sunderland 2). And these master narratives do get through: "For 15 years at four different universities, demographer Stephanie Bohon has asked students if they intend to have children. 'They all raise their hands,' she says, 'and then I ask why—and no one has an answer for me. That's what a social imperative does'" (Sandler and Witteman 21).

Unsurprisingly, the United States is not alone in its concern. As Melissa Graham and Stephanie Rich note, "prevailing pronatalist discourse in Australian society has led to fertility being shifted from a personal issue to a public concern. . . . For more than a decade, Australian readers have been exposed to pronatalist ideology in the Australian print media. . . . This pervasive pronatalism within the print media has implications for the way in which Australian women who are not fulfilling pronatalist aspirations, such as childless women, are represented in this same media realm" (8–10). Moreover, as I have argued earlier (Gotlib, " But You Would Be"), whether we consider advertising or other kinds of shared public narratives, pronatalism predominates in explicit and implicit messages not only that VC women are liminal, and outside the spaces of acceptable social discourses, but also that their lack of desire to mother is both illegitimate and transgressive.

VC women are often simply written out of the daily media stories of who exists and who matters:

> Companies don't consider their preferences when they make sales pitches. I saw an ad for a pregnancy test where the woman is happy to find out she's not pregnant, says Shannon Peterson, a married 27-year-old from Sunnyvale, California. The commercial could have ended there, but of course, she [the actress] has to add, 'But I want to get pregnant someday.' Peterson, who had a tubal ligation in January, offers another example. One ad for Ragù shows this new microwaveable pasta being eaten by kids, and the voice says, 'For your family!' I said to my husband, 'Why aren't they marketing to me? I work, I'm on the go, I can't cook. I would eat something like that.' (Paul 10)

What is more, the message that "all women are mothers" (or at least potential mothers) finds support in the most consequential of public spaces—the physician's office. Annily Campbell, having studied childfree women who chose sterilization, "described encounters with (mostly male) doctors in which they were put in the position of explaining their desire to become sterilized and convincing the doctors that their decision was well thought out and not whimsical and spur of the moment. Many reported being laughed out of the surgery, meaning the doctor would not take them seriously and dismissed them as foolhardy. . . . While choosing to have children is instantly accepted, choosing not to have children defies belief" (Vesper 19). What emerges out of these public and private stories is the idea that those who choose to turn away from the master narratives of hegemonic pronatalism will be excluded, gaslighted, made liminal—indeed, written out of the story of normative womanhood.

But before moving on to considerations of what might be done to counteract these master narratives, a further clarification is necessary. Thus far, I have been using the IC and VC designations for involuntarily childless versus

voluntarily childless women, and this distinction requires a bit more refining. While IC women are those who clearly desire but are unable to have children (and in some cases are also unable to adopt), VC women are a bit more complicated: although there is quite a bit of interchangeable use of voluntarily "childfree" and "childless" terminology, the two terms have, I believe, more than a semantic difference. There are those women who want to make it clear to all that their voluntary childlessness is not a state of being "less" or of being "without" something that they otherwise desired—indeed, they are focused on distinguishing themselves from women who take themselves to be negatively impacted by their childlessness by emphasizing the freedom from motherhood which these women actively, agentially chose (Blackstone).

Thus, a number of women who choose not to be mothers—who take their being without children as a significant and identity-constituting choice, rather than as a tragedy or bad luck—insist on the "childfree" terminology, leaving the "childless" to those on the IC side of the motherhood divide (Vesper). The childfree woman then shapes her narrative in a way that honors the involuntarily childless woman's strife, while at the same time making space for herself that, while neither comprehensible nor relatable to the pronatalist society in which she finds herself, nevertheless centers what she takes to be fundamental to her decision: her choice and her freedom from the motherhood mandate. In other words, the voluntarily childfree woman is making both a moral and an epistemic claim: she claims to know herself as a moral agent, as a person who has access to, and understanding of, her own desires; she also accepts these desires as a kind of good, even if they might make her liminal within a wider pronatalist universe.

But of course, this is not the end of the story. There is something perplexing about labeling as simply "freedom" one's not wanting something that one has not experienced (and likely will not experience). I say "perplexing" rather than "wrong" not because I am casting doubt on the sincerity of the childfree—indeed, as one of them, I know the depth of this sincerity first-hand. Instead, I am suggesting that when a VC woman insists that she is childfree, she could be engaged in several different kinds of narratives about her relationship to her childfree status—and these distinctions matter when we consider how to offer different stories, better stories, in response to hegemonic pronatalism. I now turn to a brief consideration of the possible meanings of childfreedom.

Wholehearted, Ambivalent, or "Silent"?

Who are these childfree women, and how do they define themselves in relation to their (non)mothering choices? While answering a question of this magnitude would require quite a bit more time and space than I have here, I would like to focus on three different categories of the childfree: those who are

wholehearted, open, and consistent in preference for a life that does not include children; those who are ambivalently childfree; and those who, as Helen Peterson and Kristina Engwall have argued, possess "silent bodies." In this section, I will draw distinctions among the three childfree positions and suggest that the "silent" body articulation seems to be a promising approach to discourses about women for whom motherhood is both an unwanted and distant universe.

Wholehearted Childfree Women

In speaking of wholehearted non-mothers, I have in mind what Mardy Ireland calls "transformative women," rather than those who are childless by delay ("transitional women") (Ireland) or "postponers" (Heaton et al.). These women are the early and constant articulators (Kelly) of their desires for non-motherhood. What I mean by "wholeheartedness" is that their kind of child-freedom is the result of both being attuned to and acting out of their considered desires and free will. The term itself is borrowed from Harry Frankfurt's influential theory of free will as a uniquely human capacity. Frankfurt argues that given that what human beings ought to want is to be free, this kind of uniquely human freedom requires a particular attunement to our desires. If a desire is truly one's own, he claims, one has to possess a higher-order (second-order) desire (or volition) that one's initial desire be controlling and fully (wholeheartedly) satisfy the agent, thus becoming her active will. Only in this case are the agent's will and actions truly her own, free, and autonomous (Frankfurt).

There are many kinds of VC women who are wholehearted about their child-free status. There are some like Beatrice, who is simply not attuned to motherhood: "You are supposed to love children just because they are children. But I can't say that I genuinely like something in a general manner like that. . . . The only thing that I can say, almost say, that about is cats. Just as other people get silly with babies, I get like that with cats" (Peterson and Engwall, "Why Would You" 126). Others, like Margaret, are simply not interested in children: "Like when mothers would bring babies by, and people would go ooh and aah, and I'm like you must be joking. . . . You know, the maternal instinct? I mean what does it feel like? I have no idea" (Park, "Stigma Management" 36). And still others, like Rebecca (a Big Sister to an economically disadvantaged girl) wholeheartedly reject motherhood for sociopolitical reasons: "You know, people say it's selfish to not want to have children. I think it's selfish to have children. Oh, I want to create a little product that came from me. I want to create something that I can shape and mold. No. I don't want that. I want to love somebody else's child. And just be a good adult role model for them, or something" (Park, "Stigma Management" 35). Finally, some childfree women wholeheartedly value freedom above attachments—and those attachments certainly include

children: "Nora: I think children, you know, it had . . . it had also cropped my freedom. I've had some cats . . . And I was thinking about getting a cat again, but . . . if I want to travel or do this and that . . . who would take care of the cat?" (Peterson and Engwall, "Why Would You" 126).

My claim, then, is that there are certain kinds of childfree women who not only have been, but continuously are, certain of their desires to be non-mothers and for whom such desires are controlling. They are childfree in that their sense of freedom can be understood as a kind of Frankfurtian wholeheartedness, totally committed to non-motherhood in a way that some of our deepest commitments are made: after everything else is considered, evaluated, and, internally debated, one's autonomous choice, the choice against motherhood, is what remains.

Ambivalent Childfree Women

But not every childfree woman is wholehearted about her choices. Indeed, unlike wholehearted childfree women, my personal story is one of a postponer, who later became what I call an ambivalent childfree woman. For a number of years, if I had a mantra, it would be "not now," sometimes edited to sound more like "not yet" when confronted by curious others. While I desired the epistemic and moral certainty of an early articulator—indeed, the wholeheartedness of one both sure of her desires and in possession of the will to act on them—for a long time, I was capable of neither. Aside from professional ambitions and a desire to travel, I did not have any grandiose plans for my future that would necessarily exclude children. And so, I was that odd creature, somewhere in the middle: a lukewarm, ambivalent potential parent with no particular desires or plans to become one. Most of all, however, I feared becoming one of Frankfurt's wantons.

Frankfurt's wantons are pitiable creatures and about as far from a wholehearted moral agent as one could get. Even though a wanton might possess first-order desires, she does not care which of them motivates her actions—that is, she does not care about the contents of her will, what she does, or why. In her non-committed remove from her own choice and actions, Frankfurt does not take her to be a person in the fullest sense of the term. Thus, a childfree wanton might not care about the desires or motivations behind her non-motherhood and also might not care enough to offer reasons when asked.

Without engaging with his rather troubling claim about personhood itself, I am fairly certain that I, and so many other ambivalent VC women, are not Frankfurt's wantons. After all, we care about the choices that we make, even though we might not be entirely clear about which ones we ought to choose. As I have written elsewhere, for a while I wanted to want to be a mother (or to be certain about my not-wanting)—I cared about my second-order volitions, but was stuck between them. My will was, subsequently, also frozen in indecision,

and while not fully unfree as a wanton might be, I was not entirely free, either (Gotlib, "Wanting").

Being ambivalently childfree—not exactly desiring motherhood but not wholeheartedly endorsing one's lack of desire—is a precarious position epistemically, morally, and socially. When the master narratives of hegemonic pronatalism are on one side, a desire for certainty on the other, and moral confusion in the middle, it can sometimes seem that the simpler path, the way of least resistance, is to dive headlong into motherhood (as a number of ambivalent VC women do) or to declare one's childfreedom as the desire to have finally found one's "side" grows ever stronger. While childlessness is a burden for the involuntarily childless and a voluntary choice for the wholehearted, the ambivalent VC are just that—between moral categories, an othered minority even among the already liminal. These women are somewhere between ambivalently *wanting to want*, having internalized the narratives of how "wrong" they are for not wanting, and declining motherhood altogether (Gotlib, "Wanting"). As Ireland notes, some are "becoming childless" in a long, often complicated process "involving the tension between living one's life and giving one's life particular meaning" (quoted in Wager 393). These VC women, Carolyn Morell notes, "speak about being 'wistful' about not being a mother, or having unsettling 'rumblings', 'musings', 'twinges' or 'passing thoughts' about the path not taken. It is common for even the most dedicated intentional not-mother to have her temporary moments of wavering. For example, Cynthia Minden (1996), in her essay 'Other than Mother' . . . concludes that it is 'impossible to sail through your fertile years without at least a tiny pondering, a momentary musing about "what if". Societal messages are so pervasive that we seldom recognize the subtle ways in which we have been influenced and directed'" ("Saying No" 316–317).

Yet, what if clarity does not come? A central question then is why—why do some women who are otherwise able to make myriad complicated decisions about their lives, feel so stuck, so caught between internalized narratives and the odd way in which those narratives do not resonate with their deeper selves, where they hear no desire crying out for motherhood? And what might happen if an ambivalent VC woman quiets all the conflicting voices, and simply listens—to *herself*? What if she gives up any hope for an identity defined by wholehearted motherhood, by the anguish of childlessness, or even by a childfreedom that pointedly celebrates her life as an antithesis to hegemonic pronatalism? What if what she finds instead is the steady, calm silence of her own body—a body that simply does not speak the language of children or motherhood? I now turn to this third way of conceptualizing childfreedom.

"Silent" Childfree Women

We are left with a potentially identity-constituting question: to which "sisterhood" does the ambivalent VC woman belong? Indeed, "women are always

'reading' our bodies through various interpretative schemes or scripts" (Peterson and Engwall, "Silent Bodies"). Is one not a "real woman" if not a mother, as per pronatalist master narratives? Is she "childless," and thus not truly "childfree," if her non-motherhood is insufficiently wholehearted, consistent, and without twinges and passing thoughts? Is she just selfish, immature, a bad person? (Houseknecht; Rich et al.). Is her body simply somehow broken, inadequate, wrong?

Peterson and Engwall offer a third option—a female identity that is marked not by what she lacks, and not even necessarily by what she declares, but by silence. They note that "embodied claims about the absence of all 'desire whatsoever to have a child', 'baby fever', 'maternal feelings' or a lack of 'a call to motherhood' appear in some previous studies on voluntary childlessness but have not been further analysed or theoretically investigated (Fjell 2008; Hemnell 2010; Morell, 1994; Park, 2005). We introduce the metaphor 'the silent body' in order to capture how childfree women make sense of their childfreeness. They constitute a 'natural childfree position' for themselves by using embodied knowledge about a body that does not 'speak' a longing for children, i.e. a 'silent body'" ("Silent Bodies" 376).

Indeed, what Peterson and Engwall are suggesting is that what has been read as epistemic ambiguity and moral lostness is just the deep physiological (and perhaps psychological) silence of one's body when it comes to any identification with childbearing. Thus, when asked why she does not have children, a woman responds: "I don't know. No. No. I have . . . I can't put my finger on why. It has just been a natural thing that: 'No'" [woman 14] (Peterson and Engwall, "Silent Bodies" 380).

Yet, unlike the uncomfortable, anxiety-inducing ambivalence that I (perhaps mistakenly?) thought I saw within myself, this is what Peterson and Engwall describe as a "natural childfreedom": "These difficulties should not be interpreted as reflecting uncertainty or hesitation concerning whether to remain childfree or not. Although [women] seemed to find it difficult to explain why they were childfree they consistently described it as 'obvious' and 'natural': 'It has been a natural choice quite simply. So, it's not like a big deal' [woman 15]. The stories about living a childfree life are thus characterized by a lack of drama: 'It goes without saying. I should not have kids. It's not a problem or a crisis' [woman 9]."

As a consequence, voluntary childlessness was not even described as an explicit or conscious choice: "'It's been a non-issue in my life because I've never wanted children' [woman 20]. One woman, who described being childfree as something that was 'almost self-evident,' could not recall that she 'ever really took a decision' to remain childfree [woman 30]. Another woman explained it in a similar way: 'It's not correct to call it a decision. I've never imagined myself as a parent or as having kids' [woman 25]. One woman found it difficult to

explain to her own mother why she did not want children and had no other explanation than: 'It's just that I have zero desire to have children' [woman 11]" (Peterson and Engwall, "Silent Bodies").

What comes through these responses is a different kind of attunement to not knowing why one does not wish to become a mother: the silence that one hears regarding one's childbearing choices is not uncertainty at all—it is *the affirmative response itself*. The body just is silent in regard to wanting children, and this silence ought to be taken as a natural, biological, wholehearted, agential response. Not hearing the ticking of a biological clock is then not an absence, not a lack of decision, but precisely the answer that one seeks: some bodies are ready and willing to be reproductively active; others are just as ready not to be. Both are kinds of embodied knowledge; both are the products of women properly reading their very different bodies. Indeed, "it becomes evident that the women understood themselves as communicating with their body and listening to it, although without hearing anything but silence" (Peterson and Engwall, "Silent Bodies").

Peterson and Engwall's claims are a powerful response to both VC ambivalence and pronatalism because their argument not only gives "voice" to the silent, ambivalent body but also challenges the pronatalist hegemony of woman-as-mother. A woman's body that does not speak the desire for children is just as legitimately central to her identity as any commitment to motherhood—but not as motherhood's destructive mirror image. Instead, this silent body is its own agent, with its own moral self-understanding, and is as sure of itself as a wholehearted mother or a wholehearted childfree non-mother; the silent body is just another kind of womanhood that does not respond to the same desires, or engage in the same narratives, for its constitution. The image is both liberating and transgressive: no longer ambivalent, lost, or othered, childfree women are freed from narratives competing for and demanding their endorsement. Instead, listening to their own silence, they find, understand, and endorse themselves as both essential and natural.

And yet, for all of its appeal (given VC ambiguities), this view, grounded in biology and nature, is also a bit troubling. I will conclude by considering what might be the next steps in incorporating the insights of the silent body narratives into less essentializing—and more liberating—conceptions of the VC woman.

"Holding" Oneself as a (Silent?) Body

So where does all of this leave us? Even if we grant that a woman's body is "silent" about her longing for children, and if this constitutes what Peterson and Engwall call "a natural childfree position" ("Silent Bodies")—and I take their "silent" body narrative to be in many ways convincing—we still have to

consider how these silent-body-having women might situate themselves in an otherwise very vocally and hegemonically pronatalist world. In other words, while the conversations that the VC woman has with her body are characterized by an openness and careful listening, they can neither be internal monologues nor be grounded solely in the respect a woman has for her "natural" biological difference from mothers (Peterson and Engwall, "Silent Bodies").

To begin, I am troubled by the suggestive concept of biological difference as it points to a kind of essentialism about the childfree woman's body (in fact, about all women's bodies). That is, there is an important distinction, followed by a worrying metaphysical leap: the childfree woman is narrated as essentially, biologically, not defined by her embodied desires to have children, setting her apart from both the child-defined despondent childless and the child-defined mother. But then these distinctions among differently embodied knowledge and desire—which are indeed central to personal identity and a sense of self—are muddied by oddly essentialized metaphysics, reducing this self to a particular relationship to biology. That is, while the body certainly plays a central role in both shaping and understanding the self, it is difficult to see how hearing a desire to have children, or its lack, is essentially and centrally grounded in the "biological" rather than also in the social, cultural, economic, or political. And what is more, it seems disturbingly anti-feminist to assume that the women whose bodies are silent regarding childbearing would find both solace and support from the realization that their lack of desire for motherhood is, in important ways, biological. Indeed, it seems to me that if I find my lack of desire grounded in other passions or sociopolitical views, or some other nonbiological sources, I am no less set and affirmed in my position than if I assumed its biological basis.

Another worrying claim about the "silent" body paradigm has to do with the emphasis on its "naturalness": "upholding the naturally childfree position . . . entails leaving the door open to the possibility that the biological urge to reproduce could suddenly appear in their currently silent bodies. To maintain the body's natural ability to trigger a longing for children becomes central to positioning oneself as naturally childfree" (Peterson and Engwall, "Silent Bodies" 386). On the one hand, the focus is on the narrative of the non-motherhood-desiring childfree body as just as "natural" as that of a mother; on the other, this "naturalness" is imagined as necessarily "leaving the door open" for motherhood. Aside from concerns about essentialist concepts like "natural," which have been sources of gender, racial, religious, and other kinds of violence, I wonder why the authors left the door open to potential motherhood as a part of their conceptualization of the silent childfree body. While, of course, the fact that a non-mother might wish to become one is neither impossible, nor regrettable, nor perhaps even unusual, it also seems to be too

much of a deliberate nod to the motherhood mandate in a paper that centers women whose bodies rather clearly do not speak of such longings. Why make this "natural ability to trigger [such] a longing" so fundamental to the childfree woman's constitution of her identity? Why insist on reminding the reader that her silence, too, can be interrupted at any time by procreative desires?

Indeed, this move seems all too close to the common scenarios in which VC women who express a lack of a desire for motherhood are gaslighted, either deliberately or as a common microaggression, as "unnatural," and are told that they are just entirely too unfocused, too young, too *something*—and that they will eventually get around to it when they "grow up," hear "the clock ticking," get in touch with their femininity, and so on. Moreover, this kind of essentialist "positioning" of VC women also neglects the possibility that such a woman might become a mother but might do so not because she has a longing, but, say, out of desperation, out of necessity (for example, the need to raise someone else's child), or even by accident (see Donath). And even though it is, of course, possible that she might become someone who longs for a child for reasons that are simply reflective of her desires to procreate, it nevertheless remains unclear how this possibility is central to her self-conception as a "naturally childfree" body that is "silent" in its desire for offspring.

This unsettled position on the "silent" body of the VC woman leaves us in an uncomfortable place. On the one hand, the "silent" body is an apt, and powerful, narrative that clears the needed moral space for the types of identities that "childless" and vague "childfree" labels failed to reify. Epistemically, morally, and socially, this narrative situates women who do not desire to be defined in relation to their status as mothers. On the other, its biological essentialism, and affinity for an odd metaphysical embrace of the "natural," seems to gesture more directly toward the desire to normalize the childfree body—and to normalize it in a way that focuses on its intelligibility to proximate and distal others. And yet it seems that the women whose bodies require such careful interpretation already understand what it is like to be themselves—their silence is deeply intelligible to them and is a part of their self-conception.

What damages this self-intelligibility is a combination of external pronatalist messages, lack of understanding from others, and finally an internalization of these master narratives of their own brokenness. I am thus worried about the consistency of the authors' claims that they are "resisting gendered discourses" about womanhood, while at the same time insisting on leaving the door open for VC women to claim their "femininity," biological naturalness, and even potential readiness for procreation. Such qualifications mold their self-constituting narratives as childfree into more acceptable versions that might shift the attitudes of those questioning their very womanhood itself. Indeed, Peterson and Engwall conclude that

> the naturally childfree position allows the childfree women to recognize and accept the biological reproductive urge simultaneously as they refuse it and detach themselves from it. It is a position that illustrates how persistent the idea of the close link between womanhood and motherhood is but also how this relationship can be challenged. We would argue that women can resist gendered discourses through constructing an embodied childfree identity. . . . Although reinstating a belief in a true essence of the female body the childfree women show how this essence can be transgressed. Their way of using biological determinism increases their possibilities to position themselves as naturally childfree *and* feminine, albeit a 'sterile femininity.' ("Silent Bodies" 387)

This turn toward childfree-woman-as-feminine seems to attempt to let go of some of the tropes of proper womanhood, while reaching for yet others. And while broadening the category of normative female bodies, and thus normative female identities, is a deeply valuable goal, I am uncertain about this particular articulation that centers both biological determinism and femininity—"sterile femininity" at that—as adequate responses to the hegemonic master narratives of pronatalism.

Thus, if what Peterson and Engwall offer is a kind of epistemic, moral, and social repair to the childfree woman, it is at best insufficient. The next reparative move, it seems to me, requires something more: an un-silencing and unothering of the female body (Young, *On Female Body Experience*; *Intersecting Voices*) that neither desires children, nor wishes to be understood primarily in relation to those desires, nor cares about remaining "feminine" or "natural" within the scope of biological essentialism. In constructing an "embodied childfree identity," what is needed, I suggest, are new counternarratives to hegemonic pronatalism that speak of many longings, dreams, fears, and (self) understandings—without any of them (necessarily) including considerations of motherhood, essential femininity, or other tropes of normative womanhood. In other words, the silent body of the childfree woman, rather than reifying her identity through the familiar mazes of readymade narratives about who she is (or ought to want to be), must embrace her liminality as a source of power, as a source of her identity itself. For what it means to respect the silences of her body regarding procreation also requires listening for what her body *does* say about what matters to her, what she desires, and what might be all those other aspects of who she is that have very little to do with motherhood.

What women with these silent, childfree bodies actually might say is beyond the scope of this paper—perhaps beyond the scope of any single paper. Their stories will be varied, different, strange, alarming, sad, boring, unusual, joyful, liberating—and their own. But it will not be sufficient for them to just tell them—they need to be heard, and granted uptake, by those near and far, by those with little social influence and by those weaving the grand master

narratives of who we all are. And for that, these women will need to tell the kinds of stories that characterize their personal identities (Schechtman). These identity-constituting counter narratives are not only descriptively informative but also normatively vital to connecting a particular life with the rest of a moral community (or communities), making the story and the storyteller both intelligible and open to normative analysis.

One can also resist harmful master narratives through such a counter story, whose purpose it is to "root out the master narratives in the tissue of stories that constitute an oppressive identity and replace them with stories that depict the person as morally worthy" (Lindemann Nelson 150). If the childfree woman can be said to be negotiating a new identity—where by "negotiating," I mean engaging with others who may not be inclined to grant her uptake or to grant her the right kind of uptake—then engaging with others by telling them who she is, how she arrived at her view of herself, and why this matters allows for the development of a "thick" kind of account of self. This, in turn, creates space for perspective, depth, and nuance, making it possible to say "this is who I am as a childfree woman" without apology or accommodation of those who are uncomfortable with shifting normativities.

These counter narratives remind us that different participants carry the burdens of different histories, epistemologies, and moralities, not to mention desires. And stories of childfree women are told not merely in order to decide among competing conceptions of womanhood, but as self-contained and context-rich reasons to revise moral understandings, to negotiate solutions, and to continue seeking the ever-elusive common ground (Walker). Narratives, in other words, can help childfree women not only to be defined by their body's silences but also to center themselves as full moral beings who are defined by other things—by things that are more important to them—that call on the listener to hear and to understand.

But, as I noted earlier, this work cannot be done alone; it is many things, but it is not a monologue. The childfree woman tells her story, but there must be someone there to hear it and also to accept it as deeply and fundamentally the woman's own. And when nobody is there to hear, the childfree woman must be able to accept herself and her body's silences and stories, in order to recognize herself as a member of the moral community. In the end, this process of narrating one's self into moral agency—as something more than a silent, childfree body—is nothing short of what Hilde Lindemann called a kind of "holding" of others, and oneself, in personhood (*Holding and Letting Go*). In a nontrivial way, this means that moral communities constitute what and who we are, as they work to create or to undo themselves as well as their individual members. We hold each other well, not so well, or not at all; but it is in these many acts of holding that our identities and our personhood form, change, and sometimes disappear. It is out of this practice of initiating human beings into

personhood by treating, hearing, and responding to them as persons, and then holding them there, that identities emerge, and it is how they survive (Lindemann). The moral work of holding a childfree woman in her personhood, then, requires the flexibility of recognition and response to her changing identity—an identity that is no longer defined by mere silence.

Note

1 For further discussions about the distinctions between childlessness, voluntary childlessness, and childfreedom, see Basten; Blackstone and Stewart; Hara; Iwasawa; McAllister and Clarke; Merlo and Rowland; Park ("Choosing Childlessness"); and Shapiro.

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Concluding Thoughts

DAVINIA THORNLEY

I want to use this conclusion to look at just a few of the constantly opening paths for childfree research. There are many, and they are branching; as Ellen Peck and Judith Senderowitz recognized, almost fifty years ago now, "a dearth of knowledge about nonparents contributes to socialization for parenthood" (258). One of the primary aims of this collection has been to provide a combination of writings about research on the self and on others in relation to childfree subjectivities. Such work allows childfree people to see themselves from a number of perspectives, an essential piece of self-making only recently won. As Adi Avivi acknowledges in her essay, "being allowed to embrace one's choice is necessary." The following sections outline other (but by no means, all) pressing areas still to be examined, providing one possible blueprint for future research by researchers and social justice advocates.

Making a New World

> "That the child is the supreme aim of woman is a statement having precisely the value of an advertising slogan" (Simone de Beauvoir, 1972).

In a remarkable paragraph from Nancy Leong's article on negative identity—which warrants quoting in full—she acknowledges the gap in American legal provisions when considering the childfree and their (un)equal access to employment benefits:

> Beyond the realm of caregiving, it is worth discussing why neither federal nor state law provides equivalent leave to childfree people who would use that time to volunteer hours and expertise to those in need, engage in political activism, travel, or write a novel. [fn. 338] The claim that having a child or engaging in other caregiving warrants a leave, yet these other pursuits do not, is certainly defensible, but we should recognize it openly as a normative judgment that requires justification. Thus far, such policies are, as Case and others describe them, "undertheorized." [fn. 339] The argument that child-rearing is a social good in excess of all other human activities is not entirely satisfying. [fn. 340] Carol Sanger acknowledges a range of reasons that people have children aside from social good: "because they love them or the idea of them, to keep a marriage together, to meet social, spousal or parental expectations, to experience pregnancy, or to pass on the family name, genes, or silver," or "to keep someone from being an only child" [fn. 341]. (1411)

Again, Leong's concluding argument mirrors the comments of Julia Moore's participants (covered in the introduction): a recognition and understanding that "protection of a class should include protection for its opposite" (1419). In this case, protection of parenthood and families should also extend to protection of childfree people under the law, in all countries. As we move into the third decade of the twenty-first century, sadly, this is hardly ever the case. Amy Blackstone notes: "While rates of childlessness have nearly doubled since the advent of reliable birth control in the 1960s, our cultural norms, values, and beliefs haven't caught up to this reality" (xvii).

Approaching this understanding from the perspective of research that investigates the experience of mothers who regret having children, Orna Donath suggests many women share the desire to find in motherhood something they feel that they are missing, putting aside the possibility that motherhood might make things worse. Such desires are partly socially dictated. But they also reflect what she terms *institutionalized will*—a will shaped both by one's own desires and by social expectations. "Thus, a woman might feel that she truly wants to become a mother, but this feeling is often awakened through the internalisation of images and messages that depict motherhood as an exclusive means to what she actually desires—peace of mind, acceptance, wholeness. These images close doors that might otherwise be open to women while obstructing any challenge to the idea that motherhood is the only gateway for a woman to change her life for the better" (21). One might read this impasse as a failure of our sociological imagination, a failure to imagine—for women, but also for childfree people more generally—the multitude of ways it is possible to make a good life. Through these essays, I hope readers begin to glimpse that not only is it

eminently possible to be childfree and fulfilled but also that childfreedom may prove one of our most valid and sustainable ways of life as we collectively face an uncertain future.

That said, what is clear throughout this collection (and in looking at the literature more widely), is that there is still a critical need for broader perspectives on childfreedom than those only provided by middle- to upper-class, White, able-bodied women. While I touched on this concern in my introduction (mentioning that there are several groups of childfree people who are not yet recognized or adequately represented in the current conversation), more research is needed to bring those voices out further. In calling for contributions to this anthology, I cast a wide net worldwide, including posting to past NotMom conference attendees, a number of scholarly organizations and listservs in a range of disciplines, and several childfree forums. However, I am limited by my own standpoint in this regard and acknowledge that there are many other organizations and countries I may have overlooked. That said, it also matters who responds to my call, and I cannot help but wonder how many other potential contributors missed the deadline or decided not to apply in the end. Given that work on childfreedom is still an emerging corner in a set of disciplines, I welcome feedback and engagement from many more childfree people, particularly those, as Avivi notes, "who are different as well but for whatever reason could not be out (yet)." The more we speak up, the less we can be silenced.

Finally, and somewhat personally for me, it is also important to recognize and "out" a subtle but damaging assumption about childfree people: that they are *more* committed to their communities, their jobs, other people. Received wisdom suggests they should be, at least—as though to somehow counter their "lack"? This "divide and conquer" approach benefits no one and continues to pit parents against non-parents in unhealthy and unproductive ways. As discussed earlier, just as we need to understand that until everyone is free to make the reproductive decisions appropriate for their lives, no one is, so it is important to extend that understanding to other aspects of everyday life. Although it may strike the reader as verging on facetious to point this out so blatantly, childfree people are actually simply people. Sometimes they overachieve, sometimes they are slackers: most of the time, they are somewhere in between—just like parents and those who want children. As Amy Blackstone suggests, "by noticing the flaws in sweeping generalizations, understanding our commonalities, pushing for better work-life balance policies for all, and letting go of the name-calling" (82), we can begin to recognize the common humanity we share. We can make space for choice and growth in all of us, most especially when our choices *differ*. We can provide that service through showing love. And when we do so, our new world becomes possible.

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LAURA CARROLL, MS (Psychology), is an internationally known expert and leading voice on the childfree choice. She has conducted qualitative research on this topic since the late 1990s. Carroll is the author of *Families of Two: Interviews with Happily Married Couples Without Children by Choice*, which received international recognition. Her books, which have been used in college curricula, also include *The Baby Matrix: Why Freeing Our Minds from Outmoded Thinking about Parenthood and Reproduction Will Create a Better World*, which examines and challenges long-held social and cultural assumptions about parenthood and reproduction, and *Voluntary and Involuntary Childlessness: The Joys of Otherhood?* (contributor), a key resource for scholars, students, and policy makers. Her next work will present findings on a ten-year longitudinal study on childfree women. For more than twenty years, Carroll has been featured on network television and international radio, digital, and print media. She served on the advisory board for the award winning documentary film, *To Kid or Not to Kid,* and since 2013, has headed the International Childfree Day event, a global endeavor to foster acceptance of the childfree choice in today's society.

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RHONNY DAM shares her story as a childfree-by-choice woman, putting a call out to "atypical chicks." Childfree women have a distinct and important role to fill in this overpopulated twenty-first century world. They are the ones who must be willing to create a paradigm shift to confront the need for a smaller population on Earth and to ease the adaptation to our changing world by serving others. Dam makes a call to the fellow childfree to serve as role models, to speak and teach, and to light a new way. She enjoys a sustainable lifestyle with her husband, dog, and two cats, with lots of gardening and speaking on climate change.

BERENICE M. FISHER, professor emerita at New York University, is the author of the prize-winning work *No Angel in the Classroom: Teaching Through Feminist Discourse*. Her latest book is *Unhappy Silences: Activist Feelings, Feminist Thinking, Resisting Injustice*. For nearly two decades, she participated in a weekly antiwar vigil held by her Women in Black group. During this same period, together with the other members of her feminist theater ensemble, Shock of Gray, she created and performed plays based on their experiences as lesbians. She also developed programs for The Crystal Quilt, a nonprofit organization that was founded and directed by her life partner, Linda Nathan Marks, and that provided unique cultural and political events for women. From the late 1970s on, Fisher's feminist articles and book chapters have covered a wide variety of topics, including "Shame and Guilt in the Women's Movement" (*Feminist Studies*) and "Wandering in the Wilderness: The Search for Women Role Models" (*Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*). Her current writing in progress focuses on the concept of vulnerability.

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