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Regretting Motherhood: A Sociopolitical Analysis

Over the past few decades motherhood in Western societies has been widely discussed, challenged, and polemically reworked in gender and queer studies and in feminist scholarship.[1] The bodies of knowledge produced by these intensive inquiries have made it possible to discuss the mother and motherhood as cultural and historical constructs by which women are treated as a natural caregivers and through which womanhood and motherhood are considered to be synonymous (McMahon 1995; Arendell 2000). Whereas within this ideological construct, "the mother" connotes a falsely pan-class, pan-ethnic, pan-gendered phenomenon, the works cited in note 1 have conceptualized the diversity of mothers as flesh and blood subjects, with their own feelings, needs, and desires along intersecting axes of race, ethnicity, nationality, disabilities, religion, and class, and in relation to heteronormative and queer social arrangements (e.g., Collins 1994; Kocher 1994; Park 2013).

This proliferation of literature, and the thorough conceptualization that followed it, has contributed to more realistic portrayals of motherhood and has assisted in deessentializing mothers as a unified category, indicating that "mothering is neither a unitary experience for individual women nor experienced similarly by all women" (Arendell 2000, 1196). That is, there is no sole connotation or unified experience of motherhood (McMahon 1995) and no single emotion that children inspire in their mothers (Arendell 2000).

According to these nuanced portrayals, motherhood may be a font of personal fulfillment, pleasure, love, pride, contentment, and joy (Arendell 2000). It may be one of the few interpersonal relationships that women from different races, ethnicities, and social classes view as a source of power

[1] See, e.g., Beauvoir (1949 [1993]), Firestone (1970), Rich (1976), Chodorow (1978), Ruddick (1989), Snitow (1992), Collins (1994), McMahon (1995), Hays (1996), DiQuinzio (1999), Forna (1999), Arendell (2000), O'Reilly (2006), and Park (2013).

and support, as a site of affirmation against oppression (Collins 1994; Arendell 2000; hooks 2007), where they can assume a feminine and moral identity (McMahon 1995). Motherhood may be a resource for transformation (McMahon 1995) and liberation and a way to dislodge heteronormative notions on kinship (Park 2013) and challenge the political order (Ruddick 1989; O'Reilly 2006; Park 2013). Nevertheless, motherhood may simultaneously be a realm of distress, helplessness, frustration, hostility, and disappointment, as well as an arena of oppression and subordination (Beauvoir [1949] 1993; Rich 1976). It was Adrienne Rich (1976) who expressed this conjunction of deprivations and abundances so profoundly: "My children cause me the most exquisite suffering of which I have any experience. It is the suffering of ambivalence: the murderous alternation between bitter resentment and raw-edged nerves, and blissful gratification and tenderness" (21).

Yet while it has been well acknowledged that the landscape of mothering may be replete with dialectical tensions (Arendell 2000), there has been little recognition that these tensions may lead women to foreground an emotive and cognitive stance of regret toward their motherhood. In mainstream and media discourse, this stance of regretting the transition from being a nonmother, and the wish to undo motherhood, tends to be seen as an abject maternal experience and an object of disbelief. But this disregard is not found only in media and mainstream discourse. It also appears in feminist and sociological literature, and it continues to be an unexplored maternal experience.[2]

In this article I seek to contribute to the ongoing inquiry and growing body of literature regarding the various ways individual women experience motherhood by addressing this empirical and conceptual lacuna. In what follows, I shall present an interpretive sociological and feminist framework for the accounts of twenty-three Israeli mothers—some of whom are already grandmothers—who regret becoming mothers.

There is a dual purpose to this article: First, I hope to establish regret as a distinct stance from other conflictual and ambivalent maternal emotions. The second is to suggest a sociopolitical analysis of regretting motherhood that will adhere to earlier deconstructive explorations of maternal emotions that dispute pronatal imperatives and the good mother paradigm (e.g., Rich 1976; Quiney 2007; Hager 2011). In this analysis I suggest that the

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[2] It should be noted that while Rich (1976) refers to her despair about being destined to carry out an unfitting role, she does not conceptualize this in terms of regret. Some writers, such as Patrice DiQuinzio (1999), have mentioned the possibility of regret over motherhood, but the issue has not been elaborated.

participants' accounts of regret negotiate with systems of power governing maternal feelings in two ways that indicate the intensity of the social and cultural mechanisms that institutionalize the path toward good woman-hood and good mothering: First, participants' accounts create a categorical distinction between object (the children) and experience (maternity) in their target of regret, which utilizes the cultural structure of mother love in accordance with the maternal feeling rules. Second, by wishing to undo the maternal experience, they are opposing the very essentialist presumption of a fixed female identity that, come what may, naturally befits mothering, or progressively adapts to it and evaluates it as a worthwhile experience.

Obviously, focusing on these defined aspects of regretting motherhood does not tell the whole story, and it may raise questions that cannot be answered within the scope of the current article. This article will not engage with aspects such as maternal temporalities, maternal practices consequent upon regret (e.g., continuing to have more children, or refusing to continue), and the emotional work following the discrepancy between being mothers and regretting motherhood. Likewise, the participants' introspections regarding maternal moral responsibilities and the relations between regret and the notion of accountability and agency will be addressed elsewhere. Nevertheless, I believe that the narratives that will be presented from this data set, and their suggested sociopolitical analysis, do have the potential to mark some starting points for further analysis and wider discussion.

Regret in various social realms

According to *Webster's Dictionary*, the word "regret" has its roots in the Scandinavian word *grata*, meaning "to weep," and specifically to weep for something that has been irretrievably lost (Landman 1993). As it bridges the past and the present, the actual and the desirable, regret is a counter-factual emotion consequent upon actions as well as inactions. It is "an experience of felt-reason or reasoned-emotion" (Landman 1993, 36) that incorporates both cognitive elements (such as imagination, memory, judgment, or evaluation) and emotional aspects (such as sorrow, grief, or pain) following what are perceived as losses, transgressions, shortcomings, or mistakes (Landman 1993).

Similarly to other emotions, regret incorporates another dialectical process, namely one that fluctuates between psychological and social dimensions. In Western thought, emotions are largely understood as internal states and as a private psychological matter (Landman 1993). But emotions are not presocial entities lacking in cultural significance. They are formed

in the context of the society, and they can demarcate the cultural ethos, norms of behavior, and gendered ideologies. This trinity—subject-society-emotion—can be seen in subjects' efforts to regulate their emotions and to act in accordance with society's feeling rules, that is, the "rules about what feeling is or isn't appropriate to a given social setting" (Hochschild 1990, 122). Such an emotional regulation frequently offers social rewards such as honor, esteem, and acceptance (Hochschild 1990).

Regret—which is considered to be one of the moral emotions, alongside shame and guilt—comes equipped as well with cultural norms, or feeling rules, prescribing when it is required or unfounded, appropriate or unreasonable. In religion and law, for instance, regret is seen as essential for mediating between crimes, transgressions, and sins in the past and the possibility of a more moral future. It is considered a necessary condition for forgiveness, rehabilitation, and preservation of the social order.

In other social arenas, a dominant cultural ethos demands that we not look back (as in the expressions "let bygones be bygones" and "don't cry over spilled milk"), unless our gaze is nostalgic or one that can improve the future. Looking back in anguish, and not nostalgically or with the aim of improving the future, tends to be viewed as violating the requirement to live in the here and now and might be seen as a paralyzing, and thus even socially dysfunctional, state the subject must overcome (Landman 1993).

In practice, regret is thought, felt, and expressed in different social spheres following decision making in different aspects of life such as education, employment, leisure, friendships, health, and finances (Roese and Summerville 2005), as well as in the realms of reproduction and the family. Studies have shown that regret is felt after the medical procedures of tubal sterilization (Henshaw and Singh 1986; Ramanathan and Mishra 2000), vasectomy (Jequier 1998), and abortion (Appleton 2011; Hoggart 2012), as well as after a surrogacy agreement or the surrender of a child for adoption (Appleton 2011). It is felt regarding the timing of childbirth (Jeffries and Konnert 2002; Dijkstra and Barelds 2008; Hoggart 2012) and regarding decisions not to have more children (Jeffries and Konnert 2002) or not to have children at all (Alexander et al. 1992; Jeffries and Konnert 2002).

In the context of parent-child relationships, studies have pointed to regret regarding the practices of child raising and education: it has been felt as a result of overly strict education, of imposing limitations on one's children's freedom, and of punishing one's children, especially physically (Ruff 2006). Regret has also been expressed for not having spent enough time with one's children or for not spending that time on enjoyable and playful

activities (Jeffries and Konnert 2002; Roese and Summerville 2005; Ruff 2006).

These studies—each in its own way—indicate, inter alia, that "emotion vocabularies serve social functions" (Morell 1994, 96), meaning that emotions, including regret, tend to be constituted and prescribed in a way that sustains and endorses cultural systems of values and beliefs. As such, for women who choose not to be mothers, the assignment of regret is almost impossible to escape. Regret is used as an effective instrument to threaten women with fearful images of living outside the norm and to provide them with gloomy scripts for a future in which they will inevitably lament their decision and long for their unborn children (Morell 1994). As in a vicious circle, the usage of regret as a powerful reproducer of the ideology of motherhood may indeed cause older nonmothers to experience regret, as they may judge their lives by a culturally constructed standard in which having children is their calling, since motherhood is still considered to be the taken-for-granted path any woman should follow and integral to the notion of a life well lived (Alexander et al. 1992).

But what about regretting a normative act, meaning motherhood itself? In Israel, as in other countries, such a stance is unacceptable to the point that its very existence tends to be disavowed. Motherhood itself is rarely associated with regret, and the potential presence of regret is disregarded. Women considering motherhood do not have to reckon with discourses that intimidate them with future regret if they become mothers (Morell 1994), since maternal experience is institutionalized as a rewarding and worthwhile experience despite the difficulties, come what may. In sum, whereas modes of regret may be evoked following any retrospective evaluation of life experience that entails human relationships and decision-making processes, since "misfortunes, losses, and mistakes are an inevitable part of life" (Landman 1993, 34), motherhood is framed in many societies, Israel among them, as a mythical nexus that lies outside and beyond the human realms of regret.

Politics of reproduction in Israel

The social presumption that every woman should want to become a mother, or needs to become a mother at some stage in her life, is deeply embedded in various countries, including Israel. As Larissa Remennick (2006) puts it, "Motherhood is the chief ideological icon and primary identity for most Israeli women" (25).

Total fertility rates in Israel are the highest in the developed world, and another indication of the centrality of childbirth in the Israeli society is the

intensive use of reproduction technologies.[3] Israel is a global superpower as far as reproduction technologies are concerned, since it makes a greater use of them than any other country.[4] This situation "is sustained by an unprecedented public health policy, posing hardly any restrictions on the eligibility of Israeli citizens for infertility treatments within the National Health Insurance (NHI) system" (Shalev and Gooldin 2006, 151).

An equivalent government policy that supports women with such benevolence and affluent subsidies *after* childbirth is rare, emphasizing that the exalted status of motherhood is mostly emblematic. The literature teaches us that motherhood in Israel has held a place of honor in the public discourse from the prestate period; all through the 1950–70s, when internal class and ethnic discourses shaped a differential fertility policy for Ashkenazi and Mizrahi Jews (Hashash 2004; Melamed 2004); and up to the present day.[5] The obligation to be a mother is present in religious commandments, such as "be fruitful and multiply," which have been given secular ideological validity as well, and is present in militaristic, nationalist, and Zionist ideological decrees. As the power of women's childbirth in Israel's Palestinian population has also been politicized, and motherhood is anchored in nationalist discourses (Kanaaneh 2002), the cultural belief systems relating to Jewish women's reproductive abilities are deeply rooted in the memory of the Holocaust and in a consciousness of conflict and wars. Within such a social climate, most Jewish women's reproductive abilities are exploited by the state to advance a nationalist plan.[6] Their wombs are perceived as a "national womb," to be recruited for the greater Jewish good.[7]

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[3] According to data published by the Central Bureau of Statistics (2013), on average an Israeli woman will give birth to 3.03 children (the total fertility rate). This rate is higher than the average for member states in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, which stands at 1.74.

[4] See Remennick (2006), Shalev and Gooldin (2006), Hashiloni-Dolev and Shkedi (2007), Gooldin (2008), Teman (2008), and Ivry (2009).

[5] The ethnic definition of "Mizrahi" is commonly used in Israel to refer to Jews of Middle Eastern and North African origin; "Ashkenazi" is commonly used to refer to Jews of European origin (Mizrachi, Goodman, and Feniger 2009).

[6] There are exceptions in the Israeli reproductive discourse, as there are women who are exposed to degrading attitudes about their maternal abilities, such as blind women (Hammer 2012), or are discouraged from having "too many" children, such as Ethiopian women (Eyal 2009).

[7] While the view of the womb as a national asset has a local rationale and character, it is not unique to Israel. In 2004, for instance, Australian finance minister Peter Costello issued a call encouraging Australian women to have more children for the sake of the country on account of low birth rates and the increasing costs of pensions: "'One for the mother, one for the father and one for the country.' [He] instructed them 'to go home and do your patriotic duty

The ideological impetus to be a mother is also expressed in liberal imperatives regarding the right to happiness, where the realization of this right is considered to be accomplished through children (Gooldin 2008). The obligation is expressed in psychological injunctions as well, according to which children lie on the proper developmental pathway to a normal adult personality, and in gendered directives, according to which children are the raison d'être and the culmination of women's existence, proving the proper development of a feminine identity (Hazleton 1977).

Within this ubiquitous discursive environment, Israeli women who do not want to be mothers tend to be reproached in various social circles. Their humaneness, femininity, and sanity are questioned, and they are inundated with messages suggesting they will naturally adjust to the maternal experience (Donath 2011). As Tamar Hager (2011) recounts: "You don't have to learn it because it is part of you, imprinted on you, caring for a child, worrying about it, feeling close to it. If you don't feel it now, they said, it will come with pregnancy and birth and along with it, the feeling of responsibility which is natural, and the love, and then, your priorities will suddenly change. Although your life will be completely different, it won't matter to you" (35).

These messages and assurances of a natural adjustment to the maternal experience, while disregarding the possibility of regretting it, might be further clarified in the following concrete example. For the past thirty years, Efrat, a religious and ideological antiabortion organization, has been active in Israel. Efrat sees itself as an organization dedicated to "saving lives in Israel" by increasing childbirth rates and decreasing abortion rates among Jews in the country. The organization states that its objective is to provide relevant, though noncoercive, information to women considering termination of pregnancy. In practice, Efrat runs massive and wide-ranging campaigns in the press, on the radio, on billboards, and through pamphlets distributed to people's homes and in hospitals—all of which are aimed at encouraging Jewish women to refrain from abortion.

A cornerstone of Efrat's doctrine is a truism, alleging that though numerous women regret having had an abortion, no women has ever felt regret

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tonight'" (quoted in Read, Crockett, and Mason 2012, 12). Women's reproduction has long played a central role in British nationalist projects as well, as we can learn from the guiding edict "Close your eyes and think of England," which advised women of the Victorian era to endure sex for the sake of the national good (Brown and Ferree 2005). While this saying today appears as an outmoded joke, Jessica Autumn Brown and Myra Marx Ferree (2005) examine how British newspapers still frame the falling national birthrate as a social problem. See also Yuval-Davis (1980), Portugese (1998), Berkovitch (1999), and Kahn (2000).

for a child born. Dr. Eli J. Schussheim, the chairman of the organization, is quoted in one of the pamphlets as saying, "The only medical procedure I can guarantee anything about is to promise a pregnant woman that if she will not have an abortion, she will never regret it."[8]

Although there is public resentment toward the organization's tactics, Efrat's position vocalizes a generally accepted mind-set of public attitudes toward childbirth and motherhood in Israel. It encapsulates both the religious and Zionist vision of encouraging childbirth among Jews, and it promotes the notion that women naturally possess a set of qualities that ensure enjoyment and happiness from the maternal experience. Thus, although motherhood is fraught with uncertainty, and it is irreversible, the cultural imperative to have children in Israel is tenacious to the extent that it is supposedly already known that for any woman who is socially perceived as normal and healthy, the status of motherhood is preferable to any other.

Method

The data and analysis presented in this article are based on in-depth interviews I conducted between 2008 and 2011 with twenty-three Israeli biological mothers. In sum total I interviewed twenty-eight mothers, all of whom were willing to participate in the study and articulated from the outset "regretting motherhood." Five of them related their ambivalent maternal experiences and deep difficulties yet said that they did not regret becoming mothers. Therefore, I did not include their empirical data in the study.

The twenty-three mothers ranged in age from their midtwenties to their midseventies; five of them were also grandmothers. All of them were Jewish. Five of them defined themselves as atheists, twelve as secular, three as belonging to various religious sectors, and three refused to label what they saw as a hybrid religious identity.

Seven of the mothers defined themselves as working class, fourteen as middle class, and two as upper-middle class. Eleven of the interviewees held a college or university degree, eight had graduated high school, three had a professional qualification, and one was studying for her BA at the time of the interview. Sixteen of the interviewees defined themselves as Ashkenazi, four as Mizrahi, and three as of mixed ethnicity. Twenty of the interviewees had been employed at some point, and some were still employed at

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[8] During 2011 this pamphlet, titled "Butterflies in the Stomach: Knowing, Understanding, Deciding," was distributed to residential mailboxes.

the time of the interview; three were not, for various reasons such as neurological disability.

Five of the women had one child, eleven had two children (one of them had twins), five had three children (one of whom had twins, and one of whom had triplets), and two had four children. Their children's ages ranged from one year old to forty-eight. Out of the interviewees' fifty children, nineteen were younger than ten years old, and thirty-one were older than ten. None of the fifty children had any physical disabilities, and five were defined as having special needs (on the autism and ADHD spectrums). Five of the women had used assisted reproductive technologies in order to get pregnant.

One interviewee defined herself as a lesbian and had had relationships with men, through which she had her children; the other interviewees did not specify their sexual identity but mentioned their heterosexual relationships. Eight of the women were married or had a long-term partner, fourteen were divorced or separated, and one was a widow. None of them became a mother as a teenager or was a single mother from the outset. Of the fourteen interviewees who lived apart from the father of their children, three did not live with their children (the children lived with their fathers).

Contact with the interviewees was made in four ways. First, I placed a notice in Israeli online forums related to parenthood and family. Second, I spoke and wrote about the research project in various media outlets and lectures, following my own standpoint as a woman who does not want to be a mother; some pioneering research I had conducted was published as a book (Donath 2011) regarding intentional nonparents in Israel. Third, I used an informal word-of-mouth method. And finally, I used the snowball method, by which interviewees connected me with other mothers whom they knew and who shared similar feelings regarding motherhood.

Although I did try to reach out to non-Jewish mothers in Israel, I failed in doing so, and they are not represented. The power relations between Palestinian, Druze, Bedouin, and Jewish citizens of Israel; racism and discrimination; as well as the difference in languages and in cultural values may result in justified suspicion and mistrust facing me as a Jewish researcher and may explain why all the participants in the study are Jewish, even though there may well be women in these social groups who also regret their motherhood.

Of the twenty-three interviews, twenty-one were carried out at the interviewees' homes or at meeting places they had chosen. The two remaining interviews were conducted by correspondence, in keeping with the interviewees' request. The interviews lasted between 1.5 and 2.5 hours and were recorded and transcribed with the participants' consent. Before writing up

my research findings, I approached each of the interviewees, some of whom I had interviewed more than two years earlier, and invited them to choose a pseudonym under which their quotes would appear.

At the primary stage of the qualitative coding, I sorted and categorized segments of the data that were repeated and that portrayed common themes as part of a knowledge production process (Charmaz 2006). In the second stage of the analysis, the interpretive theorization of these key themes grounded the participants' understandings and their situated accounts in sociocultural systems, those that shape these women's everyday lives.

The data presented above indicate that each participant carries out her motherwork under different conditions: Some are mothers to infants, others to teenagers, and several to adults, and they are already grandmothers. Some are mothers under poverty, others under economic prosperity. Several are carrying out their motherwork on a daily basis, since they are the main caregivers; others are less involved, since the father is the main nurturer; and several see their children only a few days a week or occasionally, as the children live with their fathers, or as the children are independent and live apart—in Israel or abroad.

Nevertheless, in spite of these different contexts, regretting motherhood crosses the boundaries of their different locations and circumstances. This is not to say that there are no features that differentiate between these mothers or that motherhood constitutes a single analytic category. Rather, I suggest that regretful mothers from different social locations established common narratives about regret as they share a common placement as women who have children.

Ambivalence within motherhood and accounts of regretting the transition into motherhood

Writings portraying the bodily, emotional, and cognitive upheavals of mothering—mostly to neonates, infants, and young children—address a wide range of consequential emotions and maternal ambivalence arising from the emotional demands and cultural restrictions of child rearing (Rich 1976; Shelton and Johnson 2006; Quiney 2007). By turning to a fuller elaboration of maternal ambivalence from mothers' subjective points of view, different writers reframed mothers' paradoxical experiences and were able to give painful maternal emotions other meanings than natural female masochism, as Helene Deutsch, for example, labeled it (in Raphael-Leff 2010).

Rozsika Parker (1994), from a psychoanalytical prism, relates the maternal ambivalence—the coexistence of love and hatred—as a part of nat-

ural mothering and as constituting "the unacceptable face of mother-hood" (14). According to Parker, ambivalence is not a static state of mixed feelings but "a dynamic experience of conflict with fluctuations felt by a mother sometimes almost moment by moment at different times in a child's development and varying between different children" (4). This dynamic state is well illustrated in Nikki Shelton and Sally Johnson's (2006) study, as mothers who participated in their research used terms such as "positive"/"negative," "upside"/"downside," "nice things"/"problems," and "loss"/"gain" in order to articulate the double-edged-sword quality of their maternal ambivalence.

In these thorough explorations and writings on mothers' ambiguous experiences, *if* the very transition to motherhood is questioned, the findings show that despite the conflicts, the difficulties, and the ambivalences within motherhood, as well as momentary fantasies of departure from it, women say they would still prefer to be mothers than nonmothers (e.g., McMahon 1995).

Whereas these accounts are clearly of importance when inquiring into mothers' experiences, there are women who assessed their transition into motherhood otherwise. Numerous mothers in the current study accounted for both the grim and the satisfying aspects within their motherhood, but the participants' feelings boiled down to a different emotive and cognitive stance, according to which they regret becoming mothers.

The first stage of identifying regret was made by the participants as they decided to take part in this study. In other words, regret was primarily self-identified, self-acknowledged, and self-reflected. The second stage included reflecting on the imaginary undoing of the maternal experience and evaluating it from the mothers' points of view, as I will elaborate below.

Writings on regret indicate that it is often associated with imaginative cancellation or nullification of experiences regarded as mistakes and thus imagining undoing them. Hence, counterfactual thoughts of "what if" and "if only" are common responses to the experience of regret (Landman 1993). Because undoing and regret are concomitant, because they may emerge together in the context of reflecting on a particular scenario (Landman 1993), I asked each of the participants in the study the following question: "If you could go back in time, with the knowledge and experience you have today, would you be a mother?"

Several women said that in accordance with the public image of non-motherhood in Israel, they would have felt a sense of emptiness and loss if they did not have children, but only if they had not known what they currently know. Following their existing understanding and feelings, all of the participants answered in the negative, albeit in different ways.

Atalya, age forty-five, is divorced, and her three teenage children live with their father. Though she is not involved in the intensive and daily labor of childcare, her motherhood is enunciated as being consciously present in her head, as "*it hangs over all the time*, lies down my soul."[9] She described the transition into motherhood as "automatic," meaning that she became a mother without weighing the consequences of whether to have children or not.[10] "If today I could go back," she said, "obviously I wouldn't have children. It's *totally obvious* to me."

Tirtza, age fifty-seven, divorced, a mother of two and a grandmother, said—as Atalya did—that she does not recall thinking at the time whether she wanted to become a mother or not and that the transition into motherhood was a sort of a "natural" step following marriage. Her reply to the question was: "Every time I talk to my friends I tell them that if I had the insights and the experience I have today, I wouldn't have created even a quarter of a child. The thing that is the most painful for me is that I can't go back in time. Impossible. Impossible to repair."

Doreen, age thirty-eight, divorced, and a mother of three, described having felt no need or will to become a mother before she got pregnant. Yet she became a mother despite her initial disinclination, as her spouse made the continuation of their relationship conditional on having children. She vehemently answered before I had finished asking the question:

Doreen: I'd totally forgo having children.
Me: All three of them?
Doreen: Yes. It hurts me very much to say that, and they'll never hear that from me. They couldn't possibly understand it, even when they're fifty, maybe then, but I'm not sure. *I'd forgo them, totally.* Really. Without batting an eyelid. And it's difficult for me to say that, because I love them. Very much. But I'd do without. . . . There was a long period of time when I was seeing a psychologist. And it's funny. If there's something I feel utterly at one with, it's that. The feelings. The process of becoming a mother isn't round [whole, complete] for me—but I feel *entirely* at one with what I'm saying. And with the dichotomy of, wow, I've got children and I love them, but I'd forgo them. So in answer to your question—*if* I could choose otherwise, I would.

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[9] The words in italics signify that the interviewee raised her voice or stressed certain words.

[10] Analysis of the data shows that of the twenty-three interviewees, eight mothers described the transition into motherhood as "automatic," eight women knew they did not want to become mothers before they got pregnant, and seven mothers said that they had wanted to have children. These three routes to motherhood are thoroughly portrayed in other studies. See, e.g., McMahon (1995) and Meyers (2001).

Doreen's account is a representative example of a significant aspect in the participants' articulations of regret: its target. The interviews gave rise to a categorical distinction that the majority of the participants explicitly insisted on and emphasized, sometimes over and again, namely the distinction between object (the children) and experience (maternity). Most of the mothers stressed that they love their children but hate the maternal experience and that they regret becoming mothers but that this regret has nothing to do with the children themselves. Charlotte, age forty-four, divorced, and the mother of two, who became a mother without considering it, as it was the "natural course in the religious community I used to live within," tried to explain the complexity of this distinction:

> Look, it's complicated because I regret becoming a mother, but I don't regret *them*, who they are, their personality. I love these people. Even though I married that imbecile, I don't regret it because if I'd married someone else I'd have different children and I love them, so it's really paradoxical. I regret having had children and becoming a mother, but I love the children that I've got. So yes, it's not something you can really explain. Because if I regretted it then I'd not want them to be here. But I wouldn't want them not to be here, I just don't want to be a mother.

This categorical distinction between an object and experience is narrated in Jessie Bernard's (1974) accounts from poor and affluent mothers at the beginning of the twentieth century, who "dar[ed] to say that although they love children, they hate motherhood" (14). The distinction is further elaborated in the current study, as the interviewees articulated a wish to undo the maternal experience.

According to their accounts, this wish was evoked at different stages in motherhood, sometimes even before the child was born, prior to their acquaintance with their children and independently of their children's characteristics. Odelya, for example, age twenty-six, divorced, and a mother of one, said that since she was a child she knew she did not want children but that "the option of not having children didn't even cross my mind." This is how she articulated her feelings and understanding, which stress regret as being disconnected from the specific child:

> *Odelya:*   Already during pregnancy I have sensed regret. I understood that what is about to happen—the birth of this creature—is not . . . is not . . . I'm not going to connect; I'm not going to be there. . . . I understood it was a mistake, yes. . . . It is redundant. Just redundant for me. I would have relinquished it.

Me: Can you recall what made you feel this way before the birth?

Odelya: I understood that it doesn't matter whether he will cry and I will get angry or not, or tolerate it or not—rather, it is simply to give up my life. It is giving up too much, as far as I'm concerned.

Odelya's account of giving up her life reverberates with one of the central themes in contemporary mothers' accounts on motherhood, especially during the first years of infancy: loss. That is, loss of self and the sense of freedom and control, as well as loss of time.[11] Yet even though the experience of motherhood, as well as the sense of loss that may accompany it, may change at different stages of the family life cycle (McMahon 1995), there were mothers in the study who described experiencing regret as a persistent feeling, lingering all through the years, since the moment the child was born into grandmotherhood:

Me: Can you recall when you felt and/or understood that you regret becoming a mother?

Tirtza: I think since the first weeks after the baby was born. I said it was a catastrophe. A catastrophe. I immediately saw that it is not for me. And not only that it is not for me, it is the nightmare of my life. . . . I had no interest in being a mother. It was *anomalous* for me. Even this concept when a child calls me "Mommy." *Till this day.* I look around to see who is calling me, to what mother it concerns. I did not relate to the concept, nor to the role, the meanings, the consequences of the . . . this responsibility and commitment.

Other participants said that they felt regret only several years after they became mothers. They, as well, did not refer to the children's characteristics but rather to the maternal experience and its ramifications. This is what Danit, age thirty-five, married, and a mother of two—who, like Tirtza and Atalya, recounted that "I became a mother without giving it any consideration"—wrote:

After the first birth I understood that the coupledom relationship will never be the same, that from this day on I need to look after another human being beside me, I understood that my life has been changed forever.

After the second birth I finally understood that this is not for me. Let me explain: After the first birth I thought that something was

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[11] See, e.g., Rich (1976), Shelton and Johnson (2006), Quiney (2007), and Hager (2011).

wrong with me, that I am not ready enough, that I need therapy. And so I did go to therapy and I dealt with painful places inside, but I missed the real source of the problem, the fact that it's parenthood I am struggling with. I wrote you that I thought that the second birth would be a corrective experience, that now that I have grown up and went to therapy and the people around me (mostly my husband) are sensitive and supportive—I'll be able to do it differently. I didn't understand that the problem wasn't in me, but in the decision to become a parent.

Danit's account, as a representative example, implies that there may be numerous explanations as to why each one of the participants finds being a mother an ordeal that she regrets. Thus, it would not be accurate, or possible, or even required, to pin down a single explication that led to regret for all mothers in the study.

This mélange of paths that lead to regret over motherhood might be further clarified by Achinoam's account. She is in her thirties, married, a mother of two, and she eagerly wanted to become a mother before she did. During the interview she integrated several difficulties within her maternal experience that led her to realize, "It was a mistake, it is not me, it doesn't suit me. . . . It turns out that what's right for one person isn't right for another." Two of the difficulties Achinoam stressed were an overwhelming sense of loss of self and an overwhelming sense of loss of freedom. Another encumbrance was her experience as a mother in a racist society, which shaped the context in which her motherwork is carried out, a context that requires preparing her children to survive within a system of racial oppression (Collins 1994; hooks 2007):

I see my daughter, and her appearance resembles mine: her skin is dark, she has curly hair—an unusual appearance. And I say to myself, Good Heavens! I am going through this *once more. I am experiencing it all again*. I remember myself as a child, I always dreamed of becoming thirty: "I want to be an adult already. I want to be through with childhood and adolescence and all this rubbish and to become a stable person." And here I am, at thirty and going through it *again*. She [her daughter] is going to school, and it makes me anxious: Will she be accepted? Will she fit in? Will she be miserable like I was? So this is another thing that is killing me, totally. . . . Do you know what a heartbreak it is when you sit with your child in the bathtub, when she's three years old, and she says to me: "Mommy, it doesn't come off. Here you've done well [Achinoam points to the inner side of

her palm, the white part]. Here it is too brown [Achinoam points to
the external side of her palm and rubs it].” The following two weeks
I was *on the floor*, I didn’t know what to do with myself, I didn’t
know what to do with it [*Achinoam’s voice trembled, and her eyes filled
with tears*]. Suddenly all my anxieties from childhood came back to
life. . . . Experiencing my disgusting childhood all over again is an-
other thing that doesn’t make me feel good.

The participants’ longing to erase the maternal experience from their bi-
ographies may lead to an assumption that their maternal experience
was somehow extremely painful and oppressive. But the data show that
these accounts are closely related to those laid bare by second-wave fem-
inists and others since then, about the difficulties embedded in mother-
hood in different social contexts.[12] Their accounts are closely related to
those that appear in contemporary examples in literature and media por-
trayals of mothering (e.g., Quiney 2007).

In this manner, the mothers in the current study, like many other moth-
ers, shared the complexity and the conflictual aspects of maternal experi-
ence, including an intensification of the emotions bound up in family and
coupledom, mothering under structures of racial domination and economic
exploitation, an encumbrance of responsibility and concern, conflicts be-
tween family life and paid employment, and conflicts between personal
needs and family obligations. However, unlike mothers who think and feel
that the difficulties and disadvantages are unequal to the benefits of moth-
erhood, unlike mothers who think and feel that the difficulties and disad-
vantages are closely equal to the benefits of motherhood but nevertheless
do not regret becoming mothers—the women in this study assessed their
situation otherwise. Their accounts of the maternal experience were not
necessarily exceptional or anomalous; rather, they foregrounded a differ-
ent emotive and cognitive stance toward their transition into motherhood.

As regret entails a subjective retrospective evaluation of the advantages
and disadvantages of decisions within social circumstances (Alexander et al.
1992; Landman 1993), mothers in the study evaluated their maternal ex-
periences. Several of them noted that although *there are* positive aspects to
motherhood—such as “personal growth,” “a challenging experience,” “en-
joyable moments,” and “being accepted in the Israeli society”—their overall
assessment was negative. Brenda, age fifty-seven, divorced, and a mother of
three, for example, who recounted becoming a mother due to “massive

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[12] See Rich (1976), Collins (1994), Hays (1996), Forna (1999), Hager (2011), and Park
(2013).

pressures," wrote that she can see certain benefits to motherhood, yet she pointed with cynicism to its social roots: "In my opinion, there are some benefits of being a mother. After giving birth you feel a kind of overwhelming happiness. The closeness and intimacy with the children, the sense of belonging, the pride in yourself, you've realized a dream. It is other people's dream, but you've still realized it."

Thus, all of the women in my study concluded that as far as they are concerned, the disadvantages outweigh the benefits. Moreover, several of them said that for them there is nothing benign about the maternal experience but rather they see it as "adding virtually nothing to life, apart from perpetual difficulty and worry," as Tirtza expressed. Charlotte, for example, said that for her motherhood had no benefits and added that "it's dealing with the inevitable." Atalya related to the negative as well, referring to the symbolic meanings attributed to children (Donath 2011): "The truth is that I can't see any benefit. Honestly, nothing. I can't find . . . from my personal point of view . . . all these things that people are talking about are not appealing to me at all. I don't understand what are they talking about when they talk about the next generation, and when we'll grow old. . . . From my personal perspective? No. For me it is only an unbearable burden."

Jane Aronson (1992) points out that several of the interviewees in her study observed that the idiosyncratic context of the interview enabled them to reflect on their resistance to normative expectations in a way that cannot be publicly expressed and therefore may postpone social change. Drawing on this tension between silenced emotions and social change, in the next section I discuss some sociopolitical meanings of regretting motherhood. As Arlie Russell Hochschild (1979) points out, working with emotions is not simply the evocation of them. Rather, the analysis of the laws governing the evocation "can become, in varying degrees, the arena of political struggle" (568).

The "power of backward thinking" and systems of power: A discussion

In her book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* Sara Ahmed (2004) suggests that instead of asking "What are emotions?" she will ask "What do emotions do?": "What role do emotions play in acts of speaking out and in the 'spectacle' of demonstrating against . . . forms of power?" (168).

Following Ahmed's remark, I suggest that integrating regret into mothers' repertoire of experiences, as participants in my study identified and articulated, may shed a light on the "power of backward thinking" (Kahneman and Miller 1986, 137) and on the role regret plays in speaking out against the very existence of systems of power. As regret is a stance that

reflects on roads not taken, it embodies contemplation on systems of power, on systems that institutionalize which roads are forbidden from being taken. Thus, although regret may be regarded as socially dysfunctional (Landman 1993), it may have a function in that it compels us to reflect on the forbidden road to nonmotherhood and on the systems of power governing maternal feelings, which exclude motherhood from the realm of human regret.

The aim of the next subsection is to contemplate the ways in which participants in this study maneuver within the boundries of these rigid systems, both responding to and opposing the cultural ideas concerning motherhood and maternal feeling rules. This maneuvering may indicate the intensity of the social and cultural mechanisms, which are hard to undermine due to their institutionaliztion.

Utilizing the cultural structure of mother love

In the current social climate, agonizing maternal emotions and experiences, such as self-blame and guilt, may notify women of the "right" ways in which to mother. As Aminatta Forna (1999) notes, the emotion of guilt, for instance, has become associated with maternity to such an extent that it is sometimes publicly considered to be natural, or even proof of good mothering, as in, "the guiltier the better" (76).

Based on the data presented above, it seems that maternal self-expressions of regretting motherhood and loving the children are not devoid of these subjectively and socially anticipated maternal feelings. It should be explicitly stated that the following proposed analysis does not intend to challenge the veracity of the mothers' feelings toward their children. As Martha McMahon (1995) points out, to argue that social rules govern emotions does not mean that the feelings of love expressed are not genuinely experienced, or that they are "mere acts of conformity to social expectations. . . . It does mean that to understand fully people's expressions of emotion, we must analyze them in their social context" (136).

In the contemporary Israeli social context, as in other Western societies, love toward children in general and toward ones' children in particular is considered sacred and regarded as a feminine moral test. The strong association between love and motherhood is institutionalized, and expressing one's love is structured as representing an achievement in terms of one's feminine moral identity and social position as a good mother (McMahon 1995). Failing to emphasize the emotion of love toward one's children might be regarded as immoral and unfeminine, as an evidence of being what Vanessa May (2008), following Erving Goffman, calls a woman with a "spoiled identity" (478) or an unfit mother.

Within this social context, the stance of regret is likely to be regarded as a testimony to the lack of maternal love. As Doreen noted, "People immediately presume that if you don't want [children], or if you didn't want but have them—you don't love them." Furthermore, it might also be regarded as a testimony to neglectful and harmful behavior toward the children, as can be seen in the following excerpt, which was written in response to a newspaper article I wrote on the subject (Donath 2009): "It's horrible. [Regret] as a legitimization not to take responsibility for the children's lives . . . a legitimization to drown them in the tub or in the sea" (comment no. 4).

This supposedly obligatory linkage between one's feeling (regret) and the socially attributed meanings of this feeling (indifference, hostility, hatred, neglect, or violence) might lead to an alteration in rhetoric and to a reregularization of the experience of regret in order to align oneself with cultural expectations and to avoid a violation of maternal feeling rules. In other words, it is suggested that letting the children off the hook by stressing the centrality of love toward them may reduce, in the individual and in the public eye, the severity of the transgression. If "love becomes a sign of respectable femininity, and of maternal qualities narrated as the capacity to touch and be touched by others" (Ahmed 2004, 124), then emphasizing the target of regret (i.e., motherhood, not the child), using the structured notion of mother love, may allow the participants in this study to reclaim not only their right to be regarded as moral women but also their right to be regarded as humans.

Furthermore, as opposed to the social binary according to which a woman either loves her children or regrets having children, I suggest that the split that the mothers in the current study have created is an alleged split. Underneath there is a wish to merge, to integrate, to create a continuum in their subjective experience, one within which they do not need to be binarily sorted in a way that leaves behind pieces of their emotions due to regret.

Opposing the cultural narration of adapting to motherhood

While the participants may well be responding to the social expectations around mother love, they are opposing the progressive story, another main aspect of the social systems of power and the maternal feeling rules. The literature teaches us that women who have ambiguous feelings toward the maternal experience may develop progressive stories of "a movement towards a positive end point of an integrated maternal identity" (Shelton and Johnson 2006, 327). This progressive story is articulated in Parker's psychoanalytic analysis of "manageable maternal ambivalence" (1997, 21),

according to which ambivalence has a purpose, a positive contribution to the mother and to her child, and a creative role, since in its very anguish it "continually pushes a mother into the creative seeking out of reparatory solutions" (8).

With accounts that differed from this kind of linear movement, mothers in the current study articulated regret by rejecting the progressive story of a female figure who is unavoidably bound to motherhood or who gradually adapts to the maternal experience. Utterances such as, "It's not me" or "I immediately saw this is not for me," as well as feeling "entirely at peace" with the idea of regretting motherhood, articulate one option out of many to a movement away from a positive end point of integration, away from assigning a purpose to their anguish that would maintain the status quo. Through subjective evaluation of the motherhood experience as superfluous (even when the mothers in the study acknowledge the pleasant emotions and the social rewards of motherhood), regret embodied a different female identity, one that departed from culturally expected evaluations of mothering as adaptable and therefore untouchable and moved toward a wish to undo it.

As such, the fruitfulness of maternal ambivalence (Parker 1994) stands against what regret implies: a "pain rooted in fruitless longing" (Morell 1994, 96) for what has been irretrievably lost. Furthermore, their weeping over their losses, to which the etymology of the word "regret" alludes, was not directed only at the irretrievable losses that accounts of motherhood tend to entail but rather at the lack of subjective meaning afforded to those losses. Thus, regret, as articulated by the participants in this study, questions the pronatal dogma according to which claiming a maternal identity will infuse women with a will to remain mothers without bewailing this claim.

I would like to conclude by noting that even though the mythography of motherhood is increasingly being vexed, and although there is now some legitimacy to rocking the cradle, opprobrium is still poured upon mothers who dare to complain about mothering (Quiney 2007). Public airing of abhorrent maternal experiences may still be regarded as obscene and "may even indicate pathology on the part of the woman concerned" (Quiney 2007, 26). Similarly, regret may be seen as the result of a personal failure to adapt to motherhood in general and to the good mother paradigm, with its implication that the mother should try harder, in particular.

But staying oblivious to the emotional and cognitive stance of regret over motherhood—by leaving it at the personal level, excluding motherhood from the realms of human regret, and culturally encouraging and even ensuring regret on the part of nonmothers while ignoring the possibility of it on the part of mothers—may prevent us from reflecting on

the sociopolitical meanings of regretting motherhood, as motherhood and mothers are not outside of culture, nor are their regrets. Treating the institutionalization of motherhood as an untouchable experience with regard to regret reveals a structure of emotion and thought and allows us to note that the participants' accounts of motherhood as an unworthy experience are worthy of meaning-making.

Lady Macbeth argued that "things without all remedy should be without regard; what's done is done." In contrast, this article suggests that including mothers' testimonies about regretting "what's done" may in itself lead to a social remedy by providing another prism within the ongoing inquiry into the politics of reproduction and motherhood. If emotions and their regulations are "the 'bottom side' of ideology" (Hochschild 1979, 566), and if consensus can be constructed in a locus of silence as well as in a locus of speech (Gooldin 2008), then regretting motherhood tells a significant sociopolitical story that needs to be carefully listened to and further addressed.

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