Childfree Female Characters: Narrating Pronatalism

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ABSTRACT

On June 24, 2022, the United States Supreme Court officially overturned the landmark 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision thus ending the constitutional right to abortion. Much of the subsequent mainstream media narrative has focused on the fact that this decision does not even carve out exceptions for victims of rape and incest, which, while important and horrifying, diverts attention away from the actual issue: a person's right to decide not to give birth for *any* reason. This reframing of the abortion debate around the most extreme cases is clearly informed by a pronatalist ideology that is still pervasive in US culture. However, it is not just the news media that frequently buys into this pronatalist narrative by evading the inclusion of, if not actively undermining, a woman's right to be childfree. Depictions of abortions are rare in popular fictional narratives, be it in television, film, or literature, and so are voluntarily childless female characters, not only but particularly when it comes to lead characters. This introduction to the special issue on childfree female characters in fictional narratives frames the issue of childfreeness, i.e., voluntary childlessness, in the still dominant pronatalist ideology and examines some stereotypical depictions in recent US-American television series.

KEYWORDS

Childlessness, television series, abortion, *Roe v. Wade*, feminism, *Will and Grace*, *The Good Fight*

When creators David Kohan and Max Mutchnick decided to bring back the Network sitcom *Will and Grace* eleven years after its original final episode aired in 2006, they were faced with an unusual dilemma. Back then, the series, that for eight seasons had focused on their childless title characters, ended with a flashforward that showed Will Truman (Eric McCormack) and Grace Adler (Debra Messing) take their respective children to college. However, as Kohan explained, since parenthood would have fundamentally changed the show (Rice), the writers exercised their artistic license by 'pretending' that the storyline of the two characters having children never happened. In order to explain this to viewers, the first episode of the reboot, which aired in September 2017, had Karen Walker (Megan Mullally) tell Will, Grace, and the fourth main character, Jack McFarland (Sean Hayes), about a dream she had:

> Karen: Oh, I had the craziest dream . . . In the dream, Will was living with a swarthy man in uniform, and Grace was married . . .
> Will: Yeah, well, we were. But we're single now.
> Karen: That tracks [chuckles]. What happened to the children you had, who grew up and got married to each other?
> Will: That never happened.
> Karen: Oh, what a relief! Nobody wants to see you two raise kids.
> Jack: Yeah, I mean, what would be funny about that?
> ("Eleven Years Later" 00:01:17–02:02)

When we look at the landscape of contemporary scripted US television and also film and literature, most writers, showrunners, and producers seem to fiercely disagree. Particularly *female* characters who choose not to have children are still a rare occurrence, which is why I decided to dedicate an entire issue to fictional depictions of childfree female characters.

The idea for this special issue was initially – please forgive the pun – born out of the abortion debate in the US, which had never quite stopped but has certainly intensified again in the past few years. As many readers will likely know, the situation culminated on June 24, 2022, when the United States Supreme Court issued its decision on *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*. The majority opinion argued that abortion is not a constitutionally protected right but that states have the authority to regulate it. Thus, this decision overturned not only the 1973 landmark decision *Roe v. Wade*, which first made abortion legal on a federal level, but also *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, which, among others, confirmed this right in 1992. As many in the media also commented (Liptak; Totenberg and McCammon; Managan and Breuninger), this effectively took away a right that people living in the US had had for almost five decades. While this is technically true, chipping away at this right started only three years after *Roe* with the passing of the first Hyde Amendment that took effect in 1977, as Ann Snitow reminds us (39). Named after Henry J. Hyde, the

Congressman who first introduced this amendment, it prohibits the use of federal funds for abortions unless the pregnancy threatens the life of the woman (American Civil Liberties Union). In other words, people with low income who rely on the public health insurance program Medicaid have to pay for the abortion themselves. As Snitow sums it up: "Abortion . . . was only affordable for all classes for four years before this barely established right began slipping away again" (39). In the following decades, many attempts to restrict abortions and/or create additional hurdles for people to access abortions succeeded despite *Roe* being the law of the land (see, for instance, McBride and Keys; Planned Parenthood; Gee; Silberner).

When *Roe* was overturned, which opened the floodgates for states to impose further and even the most draconian abortion restrictions, much of the subsequent mainstream media narrative focused on the fact that this decision gives the states absolute power and does not even carve out exceptions for victims of rape and incest. While this fact is as important as it is horrifying, it also diverts attention away from what, in my view, is the actual issue: a person's right to decide not to give birth for *any* reason including the desire to remain childfree. This reframing of the abortion debate around the most extreme cases is clearly informed by a pronatalist ideology that is still pervasive in US culture. For decades, even the "pro-choice" movement frequently focused on abortion to control *when* to have children rather than not to have them at all. As Snitow observed in 1992,

> it's been some time since feminists demanding abortion have put front and centre the idea that one good use to which one might put this right is to choose not to have kids at all. Chastised in the Reagan years, pro-choice strategists – understandably – have emphasized the right to wait, the right to space one's children, the right to have each child wanted. They feared invoking any image that could be read as a female withdrawal from the role of nurturer. (41)

Little has changed in the three decades since Snitow wrote this. Even the probably most vocal and well-known abortion rights advocate organization, Planned Parenthood, which has done incredibly important work to provide safe and affordable abortions, has "parenthood" right there in its name.

However, it is not just politics and the news media that frequently buy into this pronatalist narrative by excluding or even actively undermining a woman's right to be childfree. Depictions of abortions are relatively rare in popular fictional narratives, be it in television, film, or literature. Voluntarily childless female characters, not only but particularly when it comes to lead characters, are likely even more uncommon. While in the field of sociology, the childfree woman has received considerable academic attention and there are a handful of studies on their mediated representations, to the best of my knowledge fictional depictions of childfree women have largely remained unexplored. The aim of this special issue is, therefore, to contribute to

filling this gap by analyzing such childfree female characters as well as the narratives that produce them.

Generally, in this special issue, "child*free*" should be understood to mean women who are voluntarily without child. This distinguishes them from child*less* women, i.e., women who either want to have children but (regardless of the reasons) cannot have them or who do not have children right now but plan to have them in the future. (Contributors who chose to use a slight variation of this terminology will explain their rationale behind it in their respective articles.) According to Julia Moore and Patricia Geist-Martin, the neologism "childfree" was first used by feminists in the 1970s "to denote themselves from 'childless' individuals. The suffix free indicates agency and a freedom from a social obligation, where the suffix less indicates a lack" (241). Of course, as Rebecca Harrington also stresses,

> both of these terms are flawed. "Childfree," with its neoliberal implications, suggests choice but can also (falsely) imply a negative attitude toward children, while "childless" signifies an absence or infertility. Both terms, unfortunately, fail to capture the complexity of "childlessness" (for lack of a better word) and reflect a pronatalist, patriarchal culture wherein having children remains at the core of identity. (23)

Additionally, it is important to acknowledge that in real life the distinction between childfree and childless can sometimes be difficult because the line between choice and circumstance can be blurry. However, this terminology works well to describe fictional characters because circumstances do not simply happen to characters since everything is a deliberate narrative choice.

As mentioned above, a fairly great number of sociological studies on people who do not have children have been conducted even though many of them do not distinguish between childfreeness and childlessness. In the reports that do differentiate, the stated percentages of childfree women vary slightly but they are all in the single-digit range and have changed only marginally over the past decades. For example, in their 2017 study, Éva Beaujouan et al. claim the number in the US (and France) to be as low as three to five percent (4). The CDC's (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) "National Health Statistics Report" found that in the years 2006 to 2010 six percent of women living in the US were childfree, which also meant that this percentage held relatively steady since the early 1980s: "6.2% in 2002, 6.6% in 1995, 6.2% in 1988, and 4.9% in 1982" (Martinez et al. 9). Joyce C. Abma and Gladys M. Martinez, however, detected a little more fluctuation over roughly the same time period. According to them, "[v]oluntary childlessness grew 1982 (5%) to 1988 (8%), was stable up to 1995 (9%), and fell slightly in 2002 (7%)" (1045). Some studies discuss childfreeness and childlessness not just in the US but also other countries (e.g., Rowland; Kreyenfeld and Konietzka; Merz and Liefbroer). Paula Gobbi focuses on the

(historical) reasons that lead to childfreeness and Eleanor D. Macklin analyzes child-freeness in the context of nontraditional family forms. Perhaps, the most compre-hensive recent investigation of this issue is the collection of essays *Childfree across the Disciplines: Academic and Activist Perspective on Not Choosing Children*, edited by Davinia Thornley and published in 2022. Its contributors address childfreeness in a variety of manifestations including fictional representations. Amy Blackstone in her *Childfree by Choice: The Movement Redefining Family and Creating a New Age of Independence*, published in 2019, considers childfreeness a movement. She not only traces its history and explores its impact but also offers a decisive defense of the choice to not have children. Most recently, the number of publications that focus on climate change as cause of or at least factor in the decision to remain childfree have increased noticeably in both academia (e.g., Arnold-Baker; Helm et al.; Krähenbühl; Nakkerud "'There Are Many People Like Me'" and "Choosing to Live Environmentally Childfree"; Rieder; Schneider-Mayerson; Schneider-Mayerson and Leong) and the news media (e.g., Bailey; Cain; Gaviola; Osaka; Rainey; Shead; Webb, Williams).

Since this special issue is not about actual childfree women, however, I will not go any further in providing a lengthy literature review of all the sociological and histor-ical research done on that subject since this would distract too much from the issue at hand. Instead, let me simply point to some helpful literature reviews already out there (Houseknecht; Heffernan and Wilgus 12-14; Harrington 27-28; Moore and Geist-Martin) and move on to (fictional) depictions of childfree (and/or childless) women.

As Moore and Geist-Martin observe, "research on voluntary childlessness has yet to fully consider mediated representations of women who have chosen never to have children. One reason for this is the lack of fictional voluntarily childless characters . . ." (234). Even though this publication is from 2013, not too much has changed on either front: mediated representations themselves or research on them. Some studies merely reference this issue while actually focusing on something else. For example, Jocelyn Steinke's analysis of female scientists and engineers in popular films released between 1991 and 2001 only briefly points out that these characters were frequently "single, and if they were married or later married in the films, most did not have children" (54). Similarly, Cristina Archetti's exploration of childlessness in film men-tions childfreeness only once (179). In their analysis of Australian print media, Melissa Graham and Stephanie Rich include representations of both childless and childfree women. They conclude that their portrayal could be categorized into four stereotypes: "'sympathy worthy women'; 'childless career women'; 'the artefact of feminism'; and 'reprimanded women'" (514–15). Amanda Greer's article on maternal ambivalence in three British crime television series discusses the childfree protago-nist of *The Fall*, Stella Gibson (Gillian Anderson), at some length and concludes that

the series, due to the way she is depicted, "takes a staunch anti-motherhood approach" (339). Some publications focus on both childfree women and men in media, e.g., in literature (Clausen) and marriage and family textbooks for US-American undergraduate courses (Chancey and Dumais). In 2001, James D. Robinson and Thomas Skill published their study on what they called "childless families," which they defined as a married couple without children, in scripted prime-time network television series. Even though they unfortunately did not distinguish between childfreeness and childlessness, their observations are highly relevant to gauge the pervasiveness of pronatalism in television series. They found that an astounding development took place between the 1960s, when 25% of family series featured childless families, and the first half of the 1990s, when the percentage dropped to only 2.3%. In fact, Robinson and Skill call this decline "one of the most dramatic changes in family configuration over the past 45 years" (146). Some explorations of specifically childfree women in television are essentially case studies of specific series, e.g., four Japanese television drama serials (Mandujano-Salazar), the British *Dr. Who* spin-off *The Sarah Jane Adventure* (Hamad), and the remake of the US-American science fiction series *Battlestar Galactica* (Hellstrand).

Since the scope of this special issue in terms of media and methodology is very broad and its focus has wide-ranging implications, as the five contributions to this special issue also demonstrate, instead of establishing a prescriptive framework in this introduction, I would rather like to briefly zero in on 'my medium of expertise.' Besides, frequently, when we talk about childfree women, we almost inevitably end up talking about mothers and motherhood instead. I would like to attempt to avoid this in at least a few pages in this introduction by reviewing, as it were, childfree women in recent scripted US-American television series. For that purpose, I first need to explain how I distinguish between childfree and childless characters. I consider characters childfree when they either explicitly express their wish not ever to have children and/or do not express actual regret about not having any. Furthermore, characters are deemed childfree when they are at a stage of their life when societal norms consider them to be towards the end or even past reproductive age and parenthood is not something they ever bring up one way or the other. Importantly, "having children" here means raising them and not giving birth. In other words, a female character who adopts a child is clearly not childfree but, maybe a little less obviously, a character who gives up a child for adoption could still be if the other criteria apply.

The two most extensive discussions of fictional childfree women in contemporary US television are "The Voluntarily Childless Heroine: A Postfeminist Television Oddity" by Betty-Despoina Kaklamanidou and "Reproductive Villains: The Representation of Childfree Women in Mainstream Cinema and Television" by Natalia Cherjovsky.

Focusing on prime-time scripted network television from 2010 to 2015, Kaklamanidou found that these series do not only avoid including childfree women but foster a pronatalist ideology (277). Given that the same time period showed an increase in female-centered television shows, this (near) lack is all the more curious (282). The two most notable examples of childfree women she found are Robin Scherbatsky (Colbie Smulders) of *How I Met Your Mother* (2005–2014) and Cristina Yang (Sandra Oh) of *Grey's Anatomy* (2005–). However, she considers neither a good representation. Robin repeatedly states that she does not ever want children but eventually it is also revealed that she cannot biologically have any, which she is rather upset about. This, as Kaklamanidou also argues, at the very least undercuts the notion of choice (283). She is what I would like to call "eventually childless," i.e., the character starts out as childfree but ultimately pronatalist expectations are still fulfilled. By introducing her inability to physically bear children, the narrative drowns out her childfreeness and replaces it with the more palatable childlessness. In other words, the woman did not actually choose to defy the norm.

Unlike Robin, Cristina does remain childfree. She never doubts that she does not want children but struggles with and is punished for her choice because her husband does. Therefore, she can only truly live out her desire to remain childfree once she moves to Switzerland. With that, of course, her appearance on the series ends, too, so audiences have little time to actually see a childfree woman on the show (Kaklamanidou 286). Kaklamanidou considers both characters

> textbook examples of [Angela] McRobbie's double entanglement. They share professional ambition and achievement as well as exceptional abilities in their chosen fields, afforded by a neoliberal postfeminist agenda. Yet, they are not afforded the choice of becoming mothers or not. (287)

Cherjovsky also argues that Cristina displays many of the stereotypical (and disagreeable) character traits of childfree women: "calculating, ruthless, competitive, a pathological perfectionist, and logical to a fault, often coming across as rather severe" (119). However, even though I do not entirely disagree with this description, I do not think that she is portrayed as an unlikable, unsympathetic character either, especially if we follow her trajectory over the seasons. If it had not been for her leaving, she could have made one of the few interesting and complex childfree women on television. Granted, she is focused on her career but also depicted nothing like, for example, Claire Underwood (Robin Wright) in *House of Cards* (2013–2018). As Kaklamanidou also elaborates, Claire is or at least becomes in many ways the villain of the series and her childfreeness contributes to this portrayal (287).

What these stereotypes show is that many series need to provide a reason for a woman's childfreeness – either the circumstances and/or her character flaws. Proba-

bly unsurprisingly, many of these stereotypes correlate with the prejudices that non-fictional childfree women encounter in everyday life. As Gayle Letherby maintains, they are frequently considered "selfish and deviant" (10). Further attributes that Cherjovsky identifies in childfree female characters are "career-focused, power-hungry, and less nurturing" as well as having had a difficult childhood (119). In her view, *Scandal*'s Olivia Pope (Kerry Washington) is a prime example because not only is she singularly focused on her very dangerous career but she also had a challenging upbringing and has a still trying relationship with her parents (119–20). *Mad Men*'s Peggy Olson (Elisabeth Moss) is another example Cherjovsky mentions (113). Set at a well-known New York ad agency in the 1960s, the series portrays her as a young woman trying to pursue a career in a male-dominated world at a time when women simply were not supposed to. Peggy becomes accidentally pregnant, which she only realizes when she goes into labor. She has a boy but refuses to hold him even briefly before she gives him up for adoption ("The Wheel" 00:42:31–43:09). Apart from the understandable shock about only finding out about a pregnancy while already giving birth as well as the added difficulty of being an unmarried mother at that point in time, she also clearly chooses her career, into which she pours all her time and effort, over motherhood.

Cherjovsky's observation that many of the few childfree female characters in television are career-focused is true, however, one should be cautious about considering this 'automatically' problematic. For one, many television shows are work-place dramas or comedies and/or focus on the job of the main characters. So, characters who focus on their careers come with the territory. Furthermore, the television landscape is packed with singularly focused careermen, which is usually not considered a negative or even one-dimensional portrayal.

One example of such a career-focused childfree woman is Kate Wyler (Keri Russell) of the 2023 Netflix series *The Diplomat*, a low-profile career diplomat who becomes US Ambassador to the United Kingdom almost overnight. She is very accomplished and prioritizes her job and the subject of having or not having or not having had children never comes up – at least not during the first season. Since the show has already been renewed for a second season, it will be interesting to see how this will play out as the series continues.

Another compelling and probably the longest-running childfree female character is Diane Lockhart (Christine Baranski), a highly successful, liberal, feminist lawyer on *The Good Wife* (2009–2016) and this character's spin-off *The Good Fight* (2017–2022), both legal dramas. Diane is extremely passionate about her court cases, law firm, colleagues, friends, and political issues. She is definitely an empathetic figure but also flawed – or complex as male characters tend to be called. The fact that this main

character does not have children is never made an issue in seven seasons (156 episodes) of *The Good Wife* and comes up briefly only twice in the run of six seasons (60 episodes) of *The Good Fight*. In other words, it is simply accepted as an uncontroversial given that she does not have children. The two instances the subject is raised, it is done so in a completely uncontentious way. In episode four of season one, Diane shares a drink with her colleague Barbara Kolstad (Erica Tazel):

> Barbara: Do you regret not having children?
> Diane: Sometimes, not often.
> Barbara: When are the sometimes?
> Diane: With my husband. I mean, it's too late for us now but, ah, I look at him and I wonder what, you know, what his son would be like. Or my daughter. Yeah, it's interesting, most people think I didn't want kids and that's why I made my work my life. But they don't realize it's, it's really just the opposite.
> Barbara: Yes, work is what gives it all meaning.
> Diane: The only difference is kids survive you.
> Barbara: That's not always a good thing.
> ("Henceforth Known as Property" 00:38:34–39:42)

Even though Diane 'admits' to sometimes wondering, she is clearly happy with her life choices, and her colleague's questions as well as reaction to the answers do not seem critical, let alone judgmental. The only other instance when Diane's childfreeness is brought up happens in episode seven of the sixth and last season. Her friend and colleague Liz Reddick (Audra McDonald) cautions her about getting a divorce:

> Liz: [D]ivorce is hell.
> Diane: Yeah, but you seem happy.
> Liz: 'Cause I love my son. Oh, he is so much fun.
> Diane: Well, I don't have that.
> ("The End of STR Laurie" 00:42:00–20)

After this brief mention, they go back to discussing what Diane should do about her relationship with her husband. The fact that she does not have children is mentioned only in passing before moving on to more pertinent issues.

So, while such childfree female characters exist, to the best of my knowledge, they are rare. The list of problematic depictions I have found is certainly longer. In many ways, an evidently common representation of female childfreeness in television is what I would like to call "temporarily childfree" women, i.e., female characters who explicitly (and often repeatedly) express their choice not to have children only to suddenly change their mind. Perhaps, this should come as no surprise. Maura Kelly argues that four typical reactions to being childfree that non-fictional women are confronted with are "the assumption that the woman will change her mind, the charge that the woman will regret her decision not to mother, the accusation of selfishness, and the perception of childless women as unfeminine" (165–66). The first

appears to be most frequently expressed in television narratives when we encounter childfree characters.

For example, Joan Watson (Lucy Liu) in *Elementary* (2012–2019), an adaptation of Sherlock Holmes set in contemporary New York City, does not express any interest in having children for five long seasons but after finding out that her deceased therapist thought that she would make a good mother, she tries to adopt a child. One season later, viewers learn that she gave up on having a child because her work as a private detective was too dangerous. The show's final episode, however, flashforwards three years to her and her little boy. Thus, pronatalist demands are met once again. After 'allowing' her to pursue a dangerous profession for a few years, the woman is returned 'to her proper place.' *Grey's Anatomy* also includes two temporarily childfree women with Arizona Robbins (Jessica Capshaw) (see also Cherjovsky 120–21) and Emilia Shepherd (Caterina Scorsone), who, viewers eventually learn, did not want children due to a past trauma caused by bearing a child without a frontal lobe that died shortly after giving birth. Once she learns how to deal with this trauma, she more than happily becomes a mother. In *Station 19* (2018–) a current *Grey's Anatomy* spin-off, Maya Bishop (Danielle Savre) tells her wife that she does not want children because motherhood makes pursuing a career as a firefighter, which is her number one passion, too difficult. Her wife is extremely upset and they fight over it but Maya remains adamant – until four episodes later she changes her mind and wants a baby, too.

Almost a subcategory of temporarily childfree female characters are the 'accidentally pregnant' ones. Yet another Shondaland production, *Private Practice* (2007–2013), an early *Grey's Anatomy* spin-off, features two strong and accomplished women who clearly state that they do not want children but change their minds after becoming accidentally pregnant: Violet Turner (Amy Brenneman) and Charlotte King (KaDee Strickland). In both instances, abortion is not really considered an option. Charlotte actually hopes that her IUD will cause her to miscarry but it does not, so she has triplets. *The Big Bang Theory* (2007–2019) follows a remarkably similar pattern. Bernadette Rostenkowski (Melissa Rauch) (see also Kaklamanidou 184-85 and McIntosh 200) and Penny (Kaley Cuoco) (see also Cherjovsky 121-22) are childfree until they both have an unplanned pregnancy and decide not to end it. While Bernadette had already changed her mind about motherhood, at least to some extent, even before she got pregnant, Penny stood out as a female lead in a Network sitcom who declared that she did not want any children. Even more, she remained steadfast despite being pressured not only by her husband and father but also by her two closest female friends (one of them Bernadette, who was already a mother at this point). And yet, the series concluded with a double-episode during which her unintentional

pregnancy was revealed, a fact that is celebrated by her friends. Even Penny herself is only very briefly surprised and worried but never actually unhappy. Notably, having an abortion is not given a moment's consideration; it is not just no choice but not even a procedure that seems to exist in the series' story world. Thus, her identity as a woman, which is still so persistently linked to motherhood, is restored and the pronatalist ideology normalized once more.

With abortion not being an option – in fiction due to deliberate narrative choices and in reality thanks to the *Dobbs* decision – we have come full circle. So let me actually end where I began. The first season of the *Will and Grace* reboot included an episode that summarized the controversy about childfreeness very well. The child-free Grace is invited to a baby shower of her friend Ellen's niece but dreads attending it because of the judgmental looks, questions, and comments she always feels subjected to at such events. She decides to go nonetheless and a fight between Grace and the mothers in attendance erupts. Grace tries to explain:

> Grace: It's just that baby showers are hard for me, you know. Because I know that you're all thinking, "How could she be fulfilled without children?" . . . I guess, just, what I'm trying to say is I am feeling really judged.
> Ellen: You feel judged? I feel like you judge me, Grace. Every time you see me, you're always, "How are the kids?" Like that's all I am.
> Grace: I don't think that.
> Other female attendee: Try telling people you've got a master's in chemistry and spend the day making homemade slime.
> Grace: Oh my God! Why do we keep doing this to ourselves? I mean, look, if I wanted kids, I would've had kids. I mean, there are a million ways to do it, you know . . . What I'm trying to say is I'm happy. Which means that I made the right choices. And if you're happy, that means you did, too. And we should be applauding each other. I have an actual, actual wish for this baby. I hope that whatever she chooses to do with her life, that she never has one second of worrying about what other people think . . . To being happy with our choices and having everything we need.
> ("Sweatshop Annie" 00:18:01–20:18)

What else is there to add? Perhaps, the fact that in the first episode of the third and final season of the reboot, Grace finds out she is pregnant. The viewers see her sobbing loudly on the subway on her way home from the doctor's office. She is extremely upset about this pregnancy and expresses many doubts about having a child – for the length of one episode. By the end of that same episode, she could not be more excited about becoming a mother and the rest of the season mostly focuses on her pregnancy. Another temporarily childfree female character. As I said, I am not sure what else there is to add.

Fortunately, the five contributors to this special issue certainly do know what else to say – not about *Will and Grace* but about the great variety of fictional narratives they chose to focus on. Their articles demonstrate that childfree female characters

are frequently depicted in stereotypical ways not just in television series but also (autofictional) novels and popular film. However, they also, and importantly so, discuss instances in which these narratives and characters break from the pronatalist norm and thus construct new conceptions of childfreeness and female identity. And some even challenge traditional genre conventions along the way.

In the first contribution "Shallow Narcissist or Sad Spinster? Childless Female Characters in Contemporary Popular Film and Television," Camilla Schwartz continues and expands the discussion of US-American television series (*The Good Fight* among them) and also Hollywood films. She compares and contrasts the stereotypes of childfree versus childless women by establishing two distinct and rather negative character tropes: the "shallow narcissist" and the "sad spinster." However, she also argues that more recent iterations, such as the "failed shallow narcissist," show how these stereotypes may be overcome.

In "The Abortion Road Trip Film and the Pronatalist Discourse in the Post-*Roe v. Wade* US," Marina Zigneli demonstrates how, in the past few years, the traditionally male-dominated genre of the road trip film has been transformed to accommodate female-centered abortion narratives. By focusing on *Grandma* (2015), *Little Woods* (2018), *Never Rarely Sometimes Always* (2020), *Unpregnant* (2020), and *Plan B* (2021), she, furthermore, argues that these more recent films are markedly different from earlier abortion depictions, not exclusively but particularly in how they deemphasize the struggle to make the decision to end a pregnancy and instead focus on the difficulties of obtaining an abortion.

In "'Damned If We Do, Damned If We Don't': Ageist Narratives of Reproductive Control," Sandra Tausel introduces ageism to the discourse of reproductive rights and shows how the expectation to be with or without child dramatically changes depending on a girl's/woman's age. By analyzing Brit Bennett's US-American novel *The Mothers* (2016) and Sheila Heti's Canadian autofictional novel *Motherhood* (2018), she explores what she calls "damned-if-we-do" and "damned-if-we-don't" narratives and demonstrates how they both blame women for not adhering to heteropatriarchal norms.

In "Motherhood as Narrative: Sheila Heti's Wrestling with the Burden of Choice," Martin Holtz approaches Heti's *Motherhood* from a different angle. He argues that the novel deconstructs the concept of (actual) motherhood by suggesting that it is a mere narrative, too. Thus, Holtz maintains, Heti can exercise control over its meaning and assign it a more comprehensive definition that focuses on reproductive autonomy and permits the inclusion of all women.

With "'Marriages ought to be secret': Queer Marriages of Convenience and the Exile Narrative," Ben Robbins completes this special issue by focusing on childfree female

characters in the context of (usually) entirely non-procreational queer marriages of convenience. He argues that in both Jane Bowles's novel *Two Serious Ladies* (1943) and Patricia Highsmith's novel *Ripley Under Ground* (1970) childfreeness is mirrored in the narrative's lack of a future-oriented direction. Thus, these novels not only challenge the link between marriage and procreation but also the traditional narrative structures of patriarchal genres due to their unconventional temporal organization.

All contributions included here invite us to pay attention to and think differently about the depiction of childfree women in North American novels, films, and television series. As I attempted with my analysis of childfree, temporarily childfree, and eventually childless female characters in recent television series, these five articles, too, highlight how fictional narratives can deconstruct prevailing views of reproductive rights and choices but also demonstrate how pervasive pronatalism still is. As I write this, four US states have enshrined abortion rights in their state's constitution (Ohio, Vermont, Michigan, and California) and two very conservative states (Kansas and Kentucky) voted against a constitutional amendment to explicitly remove abortion rights protections (Gamio and Schoenfeld Walker). Obviously, these are reactions to the *Dobbs* decision but whether this is an indicator of a general turn of the tide (back) towards reproductive freedom – including the freedom to be childfree – remains to be seen.

Acknowledgements

About the Author

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Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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