universität innsbruck

AAAS

Journal of the Austrian Association for American Studies

Vol. 5, No. 1, Fall 2023

Special Issue

The Childfree Woman in Literature, Film, and Television

edited by Cornelia Klecker

Journal of the Austrian Association for American Studies

Vol. 5, No. 1 | 2023

About

The Journal of the Austrian Association for American Studies (*JAAAS*) is a peer-reviewed gold open-access journal which provides an interdisciplinary space for discussions about all aspects of American studies. The journal functions as a forum for Americanists in Austria and the global academic community. Published twice a year, the journal welcomes submissions on a wide range of topics, aiming to broaden the multi- and interdisciplinary study of American cultures.

Aims

Interrogating the notion of "America" and looking at the U.S. within its transnational and (trans-)hemispheric interconnections, JAAAS seeks to challenge disciplinary boundaries by bringing together original and innovative work by scholars who focus on topics as diverse as literature, cultural studies, film and new media, visual arts, ethnic studies, indigenous studies, performance studies, queer studies, border studies, mobility studies, age studies, game studies, and animal studies. Apart from offering insights into trans- and international American literary and cultural studies and offering European perspectives on America, the journal also solicits scholarship that deals with history, music, politics, geography, ecocriticism, race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, law, and any other aspect of American culture and society.

ISSN

2616-9533 (online)

Media Owner

Austrian Association for American Studies
c/o Department of English and American Studies
University of Salzburg
Erzabt-Klotz-Straße 1
5020 Salzburg
Austria
contact@aaas.at

Special Issue

The Childfree Woman in Literature, Film, and Television

Edited by Cornelia Klecker

Book Reviews

Journal of the Austrian Association for American Studies
vol. 5, no. 1, 2023, pp. i-ii
doi: 10.47060/jaaas.v5i1.205

Note from the New Editor

It is with great pleasure (and a twinge of nervousness) that I introduce myself as the new Editor-in-Chief of *JAAAS: Journal of the Austrian Association for American Studies*. I am taking the baton from my predecessor, Michael Fuchs, and promise that I will strive to steer this journal with the same dedication and enthusiasm he has shown. With this – the ninth – issue, the journal is still in its early years and yet much has been achieved under the first editor. The previous eight issues show both the breadth and depth of scholarship in American Studies, not just in Austria but well beyond. As one of the founders of this publication, Michael Fuchs has played an irreplaceable role in shaping the journal into what it is today, and his guidance and unwavering support (as well as seemingly endless patience with my limited technological literacy) have been instrumental in making this transition a (near) seamless one. At the beginning of his editorial in the very first issue, he quoted the Shakespeare scholar Terence Hawkes, who lamented: "It is never a good time to start a new journal" (v). Fortunately, such a task does not fall upon me. Instead, primarily thanks to Michael Fuchs, my job as editor – while undoubtably still challenging – has been and will be so much easier than it was for him.

I am also grateful for the generous support provided by the members of the editorial board, who have luckily decided to stay on and offer me guidance. Rest assured that I do not take lightly the trust that they have placed in me to help shape the future of this journal. Christian Quendler deserves particular thanks (and/or culpability?) since he was the first to approach me with the possibility of taking over the role as editor. Most importantly, he not only promised to support me, should I take up that offer, but has more than followed through.

When *JAAAS* was founded, a conscious decision was made to establish it as a diamond open-access journal since it maximizes accessibility to knowledge and also lets authors retain the copyright of their work. But "free" for readers and authors certainly does not mean that there are no costs involved in the publication of a journal. For that reason, I would like to thank the members of the Austrian Association for American Studies, who have supported this journal in the past with their membership fees. I am also immensely grateful to the University of Innsbruck and, more specifically, the Faculty of Language, Literature, and Culture, which provides substantial

funding for the project "Open Journal Publishing Office (OJPO)" that aids the publication of open-access journals edited by members of the Faculty. It is due to this financial support that we were able to take on two exceptional editorial assistants, Anna Kofler and her successor Maja Klostermann. Their meticulous attention to detail, dedication, and innovative problem-solving made the process of publishing my first *JAAAS* issue an absolute joy.

You may already have noticed that our journal has undergone a few transformations. For one, it migrated servers and is now hosted by my home university, the University of Innsbruck. The more obvious change is the journal's new look. While the new design might not be revolutionary in its appearance, it represents a purposeful evolution that aims to enhance the reading experience of our journal. The redesign seeks to emphasize the importance of clarity, allowing our contributors' articles to take center stage.

As we move forward, I encourage you to continue submitting your groundbreaking research and thought-provoking articles. I am excited to witness and contribute to the growth and success of our journal in the years to come.

As some planning but also a bit of luck would have it, my inaugural issue is at the same time a special issue on the childfree woman in literature, film, and television that I guest-edited. I hope that you, dear readers, will consider it a fitting start for my tenure.

Cornelia Klecker

Works Cited

Fuchs, Michael. "Editorial." *JAAAS: Journal of the Austrian Association for American Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2019, jaaas.eu/jaaas/article/view/103/63.

Journal of the Austrian Association for American Studies
vol. 5, no. 1, 2023, pp. 1–18
doi: 10.47060/jaaas.v5i1.199

Childfree Female Characters: Narrating Pronatalism

Cornelia Klecker

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 childfreeness in the context of nontraditional family forms. Perhaps, the most comprehensive 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 historical 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 mentions 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 protagonist 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 childfree 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

I would like to thank Erika Niederlechner and Stefanie Pörnbacher for their helpful research assistance as well as Sonja Bahn and Ben Robbins for their valuable feedback.

About the Author

Cornelia Klecker is Assistant Professor and Deputy Chair of the Department of American Studies at the University of Innsbruck, Austria, and editor-in-chief of *JAAAS: Journal of the Austrian Association for American Studies*. She authored *Spoiler Alert! Mind-Tricking Narratives in Contemporary Hollywood Film* (2015), and co-edited, with Gudrun M. Grabher, *The Disfigured Face in American Literature, Film, and Television* (2022). Her journal publications include "Female 'Lone Wolves': The Anti-Social Heroine in Recent Television Series" in *The Journal of Popular Culture* and "Trump as the 'Kardashian of Politics'? Daniel J. Boorstin's 'Pseudo-Event' and the Rise of Donald

Trump" in *The Journal of American Culture*, which won the Carl Bode Award for the Outstanding Article (2021).

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Works Cited

Abma, Joyce C., and Gladys M. Martinez. "Childlessness among Older Women in the United States: Trends and Profiles." *Journal of Marriage and Family*, vol. 68, no. 4, 2006, pp. 1045–56.

American Civil Liberties Union. "Access Denied: Origins of the Hyde Amendment and Other Restrictions on Public Funding for Abortion." *ACLU*, 1 Dec. 1994, www.aclu.org/documents/access-denied-origins-hyde-amendment-and-other-restrictions-public-funding-abortion.

Archetti, Cristina. "No Life without Family: Film Representations of Involuntary Childlessness, Silence and Exclusion." *International Journal of Media and Cultural Politics*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2019, pp. 175–96.

Arnold-Baker, Claire. "Birth Strike: Holding the Tension between Existence and Non-existence." *Eco-Anxiety and Planetary Hope. Experiencing the Twin Disasters of COVID-19 and Climate Change*, edited by Douglas A. Vakoch and Sam Mickey, Springer Cham, 2022, pp. 57–65.

Bailey, Stephanie. "BirthStrike: The People Refusing to Have Kids, Because of 'the Ecological Crisis.'" *CNN*, 26 June 2019, edition.cnn.com/2019/06/05/health/birth-strike-climate-change-scn-intl/index.html.

Beaujouan, Éva, et al. "Has Childlessness Peaked in Europe?" *Population and Societies*, vol. 540, no. 1, 2017, pp. 1–4.

Blackstone, Amy. *Childfree by Choice: The Movement Redefining Family and Creating a New Age of Independence*. E-book ed., Dutton, 2019.

Cain, Sian. "Why a Generation Is Choosing to Be Child-Free." *The Guardian*, 25 July 2020, www.theguardian.com/books/2020/jul/25/why-a-generation-is-choosing-to-be-child-free.

Chancey, Laurie, and Susan A. Dumais. "Voluntary Childlessness in Marriage and Family Textbooks, 1950–2000." *Journal of Family History*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2009, pp. 206–23.

Cherjovsky, Natalia. "Reproductive Villains: The Representation of Childfree Women in Mainstream Cinema and Television." *Childfree across the Disciplines: Academic and Activist Perspectives on Not Choosing Children*, edited by Davinia Thornley, Rutgers UP, 2022, pp. 112–26.

Clausen, Christopher. "Childfree in Toyland." *Childfree across the Disciplines: Academic and Activist Perspectives on Not Choosing Children*, edited by Davinia Thornley, Rutgers UP, 2022, pp. 87–97.

"The End of STR Laurie." *The Good Fight*, season 6, episode 7, Paramount+, 20 Oct. 2020.

"Eleven Years Later." *Will and Grace*, season 9, episode 1, NBC, 28 Sep. 2017.

Gamio, Lazaro, and Amy Schoenfeld Walker. "Where Trump Counties in Ohio Voted to Support Abortion Rights." *The New York Times*, 8. Nov. 2023, www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/11/08/us/politics/ohio-abortion-rights-county-vote.html?searchResultPosition=5.

Gaviola, Anne. "Canadian Teens Are Pledging Not to Have Children to Fight Climate Change." *VICE*, 16 Sep. 2019, www.vice.com/en/article/43ka5n/canadian-teens-are-pledging-not-to-have-children-to-fight-climate-change.

Gee, Alastair. "Anti-Abortion Laws Gain More Ground in the USA." *The Lancet*, vol. 377, no. 9782, 2011, pp. 1992-93, doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(11)60848-9.

Gobbi, Paula E. "A Model of Voluntary Childlessness." *Journal of Population Economics*, vol. 26, no. 3, 2013, pp. 963–82.

Graham, Melissa, and Stephanie Rich. "Representations of Childless Women in the Australian Print Media." *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2014, pp. 500–18.

Greer, Amanda. "'I'm Not Your Mother!': Maternal Ambivalence and the Female Investigator in Contemporary Crime Television." *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2017, pp. 327–47.

Hamad, Hannah. "'I'm Not Past My Sell by Date Yet!': Sarah Jane's Adventures in Postfeminist Rejuvenation and the Later-Life Celebrity of Elisabeth Sladen." *Women, Celebrity and Cultures of Ageing*, edited by Deborah Jermyn and Susan Holmes, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, pp. 162–77.

Harrington, Rebecca. "Childfree by Choice." *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2019, pp. 22–35.

Heffernan, Valerie, and Gay Wilgus. "Introduction: Imagining Motherhood in the Twenty-First Century – Images, Representations, Constructions." *Women: A Cultural Review*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2018, pp. 1–18, doi.org/10.1080/09574042.2018.1442603.

Hellstrand, Ingvil. "The Shape of Things to Come? Politics of Reproduction in the Contemporary Science Fiction Series *Battlestar Galactica*." *Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2011, pp. 6–24.

Helm, Sabrina, et al. “No Future, No Kids – No Kids, No Future?” *Population and Environment*, vol. 43, no. 1, 2021, pp. 108–29, doi.org/10.1007/s11111-021-00379-5.

“Henceforth Known as Property.” *The Good Fight*, season 1, episode 4, CBS All Access, 5 Mar. 2017.

Houseknecht, Sharon K. “Voluntary Childlessness.” *Handbook of Marriage and the Family*, edited by Marvin B. Sussman and Suzanne K. Steinmetz, Springer, 1987, pp. 369–95.

Kaklamanidou, Betty-Despoina. “The Voluntarily Childless Heroine: A Postfeminist Television Oddity.” *Television and New Media*, vol. 20, no. 3, 2019, pp. 275–93.

Kelly, Maura. “Women’s Voluntary Childlessness: A Radical Rejection of Motherhood?” *Women’s Studies Quarterly*, vol. 37, no. 3/4, 2009, pp. 157–72.

Krähenbühl, Mathilde. *‘Environmental Childlessness?’: Reproduction and (Im)possible Futures amidst Environmental Crises*. Graduate Institute Publications, 2022.

Kreyenfeld, Michaela, and Dirk Konietzka, editors. *Childlessness in Europe: Contexts, Causes, and Consequences*. Springer, 2018.

Letherby, Gayle. “Childless and Bereft? Stereotypes and Realities in Relation to ‘Voluntary’ and ‘Involuntary’ Childlessness and Womanhood.” *Sociological Inquiry*, vol. 72, no. 1, 2002, pp. 7–20.

Liptak, Adam. “In 6-to-3 Ruling, Supreme Court Ends Nearly 50 Years of Abortion Rights.” *The New York Times*, 24 June 2022, www.nytimes.com/2022/06/24/us/roe-wade-overturned-supreme-court.html.

Macklin, Eleanor D. “Nontraditional Family Forms.” *Handbook of Marriage and the Family*, edited by Marvin B. Sussman and Suzanne K. Steinmetz, Springer, 1987, pp. 317–54.

Managan, Dan, and Kevin Breuninger. “Supreme Court Overturns *Roe v. Wade*, Ending Fifty Years of Federal Abortion Rights.” *CNBC.com*, 24 June 2022, www.cnbc.com/2022/06/24/roe-v-wade-overturned-by-supreme-court-ending-federal-abortion-rights.html.

Mandujano-Salazar, Yunuen Ysela. “It Is Not That I Can’t, It Is That I Won’t: The Struggle of Japanese Women to Redefine Female Singlehood through Television Dramas.” *Asian Studies Review,* vol. 41, no. 4, 2017, pp. 1–18.

Martinez, Gladys, et al. “Fertility of Men and Women Aged 15–44 Years in the United States: National Survey of Family Growth, 2006–2010.” *National Health Statistics Report*, no. 51, 12 Apr. 2012, pp. 1–28.

McBride, Dorothy E., and Jennifer L. Keys. *Abortion in the United States*. 2nd ed., Bloomsbury, 2018.

McIntosh, Heather. “Representations of Female Scientists in *The Big Bang Theory*.” *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, vol. 42, no. 4, 2014, pp. 195–204.

Merz, Eva-Maria, and Aart C. Liefbroer. "The Attitude toward Voluntary Childlessness in Europe: Cultural and Institutional Explanations." *Journal of Marriage and Family*, vol. 74, no. 3, 2012, pp. 587–600.

Moore, Julia, and Patricia Geist-Martin. "Mediated Representations of Voluntary Childlessness, 1900–2012." *The Essential Handbook of Women's Sexuality*, vol. 1, edited by Donna Castañeda, Praeger Publishers, 2013, pp. 233–51.

Nakkerud, Erik. "Choosing to Live Environmentally Childfree: Private-Sphere Environmentalism, Environmental Activism, or Both?" *Current Psychology*, 22 Mar. 2023, doi.org/10.1007/s12144-023-04295-9.

———. "'There Are Many People Like Me, Who Feel They Want to Do Something Bigger': An Exploratory Study of Choosing Not to Have Children Based on Environmental Concerns." *Ecopsychology*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2021, pp. 200–09.

Osaka, Shannon. "Should You Not Have Kids Because of Climate Change? It's Complicated." *The Washington Post*, 2 Dec. 2022, www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2022/12/02/climate-kids/.

Planned Parenthood. "*Roe v. Wade*: Its History and Impact." *Plannedparenthood.org*, Jan. 2014, www.plannedparenthood.org/files/3013/9611/5870/Abortion_Roe_History.pdf.

Rainey, James. "For Some Millennials, Climate Change Clock Ticks Louder Than Biological One." *NBC News*, 21 Apr. 2019, www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/some-millennials-climate-change-clock-ticks-louder-biological-one-n993331.

Rice, Lynette. "*Will and Grace* Revival to Pretend Finale Never Happened." *Entertainment Weekly*, 2 Aug. 2017, ew.com/tv/2017/08/02/will-grace-revival-finale/.

Rieder, Travis N. *Toward a Small Family Ethic: How Overpopulation and Climate Change Are Affecting the Morality of Procreation*. Springer, 2016.

Robinson James D., and Thomas Skill. "Five Decades of Families on Television: From the 1950s through the 1990s." *Television and the American Family*, edited by Jennings Bryant and J. Alison Bryant, Lawrence Erlbaum, 2001, pp. 139–62.

Rowland, Donald T. "Historical Trends in Childlessness." *Journal of Family Issues*, vol. 28, no. 10, 2007, pp. 1311–37.

Schneider-Mayerson, Matthew. "The Environmental Politics of Reproductive Choices in the Age of Climate Change." *Environmental Politics*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2021, pp. 1–21.

———, and Kit Ling Leong. "Eco-Reproductive Concerns in the Age of Climate Change." *Climate Change*, no. 163, 2020, pp. 1007–23.

Shead, Sam. "Climate Change Is Making People Think Twice about Having Children." *CNBC*, 12 Aug. 2021, www.cnbc.com/2021/08/12/climate-change-is-making-people-think-twice-about-having-children.html.

Silberner, Joanne. “Unborn in the USA: What Happened and What’s Next for *Roe v. Wade* and Abortion Rights?” *BMJ*, vol. 377, no. 1184, 2022, doi.org/10.1136/bmj.o1184.

Snitow, Ann. “Feminism and Motherhood: An American Reading.” *Feminist Review*, no. 40, 1992, pp. 32–51.

Steinke, Jocelyn. “Cultural Representations of Gender and Science: Portrayals of Female Scientists and Engineers in Popular Films.” *Science Communication*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2005, pp. 27–63.

"Sweatshop Annie and the Annoying Baby Shower.” *Will and Grace*, season 9, episode 13, NBC, 8 Mar. 2018.

Thornley, Davinia, editor. *Childfree across the Disciplines: Academic and Activist Perspectives on Not Choosing Children*. Rutgers UP, 2022.

Totenberg, Nina, and Sarah McCammon. “Supreme Court Overturns *Roe v. Wade*, Ending Right to Abortion Upheld for Decades.” *NPR.com*, 24 June 2022, www.npr.org/2022/06/24/1102305878/supreme-court-abortion-roe-v-wade-decision-overturn.

Webb, Samuel. “Stop Having Kids? What Is Antinatalism and How Does It Relate to the Climate?” *The Independent*, 27 Jan. 2022, www.independent.co.uk/climate-change/infact/antinatalism-population-climate-b2001946.html.

“The Wheel.” *Mad Men*, season 1, episode 13, AMC, 18. Oct. 2007.

Williams, Alex. “To Breed or Not to Breed?” *The New York Times*, 20 Nov. 2021, www.nytimes.com/2021/11/20/style/breed-children-climate-change.html.

Journal of the Austrian Association for American Studies
vol. 5, no. 1, 2023, pp. 19-37
doi: 10.47060/jaaas.v5i1.175

Shallow Narcissist or Sad Spinster? Childless Female Characters in Contemporary Popular Film and Television

Camilla Schwartz

ABSTRACT

The article charts the way childless women are portrayed in contemporary US-American popular film and television. I argue that these representations can be summarized as two distinct figures: The shallow narcissist and the sad spinster. Both figures are unworthy of recognition. The shallow narcissist refers to the voluntarily childless woman, who is being depicted as selfish, childish, and manipulative; the sad spinster refers to the involuntarily childless woman, who is depicted as asexual, lonely, sad, and pathetic. Both figures are founded in the discourse of "reproductive futurism" (Edelman) and teaches us that only a child can give meaning to women's lives. Without a child, there is no proper identity and no fulfilling relations or kinships. I also point out, though, that there are exceptions, such as Tanya McQuoid from *The White Lotus* and Diane Lockhart from *The Good Fight,* that bring important nuances to the prevailing stereotypes.

KEYWORDS

Voluntary and involuntary childlessness, feminism, queer theory

Once, having children was a necessity for survival: "In the preindustrial era, the survival of the community and economic wellbeing depended upon high fertility." However, "today, children no longer offer demographic or economic advantages" (May 2). In fact, one of the world's primary problems is overpopulation, an issue we, according to Donna J. Haraway, have to address, even at the risk of "a slide once again into the muck of racism, classism, nationalism, modernism, and imperialism" (6). Against this gloomy backdrop, one might think that women opting out of motherhood today would be depicted as messianic figures or at least as women who take responsibility for the future of the planet. The very opposite is the case. Despite several waves of feminism, the proliferation of LGBTQIA+ movements and insights of queer theories, in the eyes of Western culture, a woman with no children remains a morally questionable outcast, a ridiculous or even monstrous figure, because she challenges what Lee Edelman refers to as the "reproductive futurism" of our Western culture. As the Canadian poet Lorna Crozier writes in the essay collection *Nobody's Mother*, "when we speak of a woman without children we're speaking of the Other, one of those who lives on the edge of what our language and culture feel comfortable with" (29). In popular film and television, opting out of motherhood will lead to a conception of her as a failed woman who lacks not only family and child but also, and more fundamentally, the ability to mother altogether.[1] In real life it is rather difficult to distinguish between voluntary and involuntary childlessness: "Some people have no children due to economic barriers or to the circumstances of their private lives, although they would have wanted them; and vice versa . . ." (Chollet 101). In popular culture, things are less ambivalent and blurry and the distinction between the one and the other is more straightforward. In this article I argue that, while both women who are involuntarily and voluntarily childless are portrayed as Other and unworthy of recognition in contemporary US film and television, they are framed rather differently. In general, the involuntarily childless woman is depicted as sad and ashamed of her inability to properly fulfil her role as a woman (i.e., to have a child) and thus has the right moral values whereas the woman who chooses not to be a mother corrupts the natural order of things with her disturbed and self-absorbed personality.

Accordingly, in what follows, I will elaborate on the differences between two character tropes that I will identify as *the sad spinster* and *the shallow narcissist*. In contemporary US-American film and television, both are seen as lacking, wanting, and missing out, i.e., neither are portrayed as "child*free*," the neologism that attempts to describe the state of having no children less negatively than "childl*ess*." The shallow narcissist as a character trope refers to a voluntarily childless woman who is

[1] "'To mother' or 'mothering' refers to the tasks motherhood requires – 'mothering' may be performed by anyone who commits him- or herself to the demands of maternal practice" (O'Reilley 5).

beautiful, rich, and successful but also utterly childish and narcissistic. We meet her in twenty-first-century films such as *Gone Girl* (Amy Dunne), *Young Adult* (Mavis Gary), and *Blue Jasmine* (Jasmine) but also in earlier films such as *Fatal Attraction* (Alex Forrest) and *Basic Instinct* (Catherine Tramell). She also features prominently in recent series such as *The White Lotus* (Tanya McQuoid-Hunt), *House of Cards* (Claire Underwood), and *Succession* (Siobhan "Shiv" Roy). The shallow narcissist is a riff on the character trope of the *femme fatale*. As such she is sexy, cunning, and dangerous. At the same time, she has traits in common with the character trope of the bad mother or the witch mother in that her dangerousness is related to her lack of maternal instinct.[2] This is very much in opposition to the sad spinster, who is not a successful woman but a woman who has failed, is plain-looking, asexual, sad, and pathetic. She can be found in films such as *Girl on the Train* (Rachel Watson), *Notes on a Scandal* (Barbara Covett), and *By the Sea* (Vanessa) and series such as *The Secret She Keeps* (Agatha Fyfle). She is almost always depressed and, as a consequence, addicted to alcohol and suffers from both low self-esteem and self-hatred. Despite their obvious differences, both tropes are systematically represented as unworthy of recognition and both stand in opposition to the caring mother figure. As Joselyn K. Leimbach points out, "mothers are seen as 'proper' women, while women without children are perceived as 'improper' and treated as 'other'" (723). This, in turn, legitimizes a (female) fantasy of devaluing, at times even annihilating, the childless woman because she poses a threat to the heteronormative middle-class order. Below, I will examine these two character tropes separately, focusing specifically on middle-aged protagonists.

Voluntarily and Involuntarily Childless Women as Pathological Failures

My point of departure for charting the general conception of voluntarily and involuntarily childless women is popular film and television, where prevailing tropes and narratives are both represented and reproduced. In *Hard-Core Romance: Fifty Shades of Grey, Best-Sellers, and Society*, Eva Illouz stresses that a bestseller "articulates the core cultural values and key experiences of the society in which it circulates." Thus, popular culture reproduces "the familiar," but in doing so also "formulates something that *many* people want to say but are unable to say, either because they do not dare say it . . . or because they do not have the language to say it" (22). Surprisingly, perhaps, Illouz also maintains that "in contradistinction to high culture, popular texts not only enact a problem but resolve it as well" (22–23). Unlike works of high culture,

[2] In *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama*, E. Ann Kaplan stresses that mothers are depicted as either good mothers (angels) or bad mothers (witches). As in Melanie Klein's psychoanalytical theory of the split between the good and evil breast, there is a split between "the ideal nurturing mother" and "the evil phallic denying mother" (Kaplan 21).

popular texts do not open ambiguous and ambivalent registers of emotion. In line with self-help books, they offer directions, logic, and order in a chaotic world. They cannot, however, perform this work for the non-normative person. On the contrary, popular texts typically legitimize stigmatization in that they reproduce the normative order and the othering of nonconforming individuals. Popular culture proceeds from a conception of what "the general subject" thinks, feels, and fantasizes about. Non-general subjectivities are examined and evaluated from this point of view by the norm-setting culture, including the viewer or reader. As Leimbach puts it: "Analyzing pop culture text provides important insight into discursive constructions of nonnormative identities" (157). Thus, social deviants are typically not seen from the inside but from the outside. We are *not* supposed to identify with them. This is a key device in popular representations of both voluntarily and involuntarily childless women. As regards the former, there are very few nuanced depictions of them, and they are evaluated according to the hegemonic discourse of "reproductive futurism" (Edelman). As Julia Moore and Patricia Geist-Martin point out, they typically "end up having children or are never explicitly identified as permanently and voluntarily childless, leaving their childbearing status open to interpretation" (234). The voluntarily childless woman may also regret her choice and end up as an involuntarily childless woman who lacks not just a child but any identity and meaning in life. In contemporary popular film and television in general, voluntarily as well as involuntarily childless women are typically represented as abnormal, pathological, and socially and psychologically challenged. The pathology is very often related to some childhood trauma that functions as an explanation – sometimes also an excuse – for their abnormal life. However, their pathological behavior can also be related to their childlessness. Often, the involuntarily childless woman is mentally ill from longing for a child, while the voluntarily childless woman has opted out of motherhood precisely because she is mentally ill. Common features of this childless pathology in general are paranoia, depression, mania, and addiction and these women often suffer from borderline personality disorder or are on the autistic spectrum. They can be very ambitious and competent but are still considered failures. Cornelia Klecker identifies the character trope "the antisocial heroine" or "female lone wolf," a woman who, for a variety of reasons, has chosen to live outside the heteronormative family structure and is either childless or a bad mother. Unlike her male equivalent, who is idealized for his ability to cope on his own, the antisocial heroine is almost always depicted as abnormal. As Klecker stresses:

> Severe psychological problems, such as bipolar disorder and PTSD, seem to be the common reason employed by these series as justification for the behavior of antisocial heroines and their rejection of fulfilling relational roles. Unlike the way male lone wolves

> tend to be portrayed, many of these television shows choose to emphasize the failures caused by the female protagonists' antisocial behavior. (450)

Not unlike the way same-sex desire is marked by a long history of association with failure, as Heather Love points out (*Feeling Backward* 21), childless women are depicted as abnormal sad failures, because they are unable or unwilling to reproduce the heteronormative family model or adhere to chrononormativity.[3] The general link between childlessness and failure makes identification and recognition less likely, since viewers cannot imagine a good life for a childless female character. Inspired by Halberstam, Alexandra M. Hill writes:

> In neoliberal society, I argue, the childless woman is regarded as a failure – in failing to reproduce, she has failed to uphold traditional gender norms, to extend the longevity of her family and nation (not to mention her social class), and to discipline her body into proceeding along a "normal" biological trajectory. (165)

As I intend to demonstrate in a close reading of the television series *The White Lotus*, failure can sometimes be understood the other way round: Failure can refer to various forms of queer resistance, such as the failure to reproduce stereotypical character tropes. In general, however, the viewer is left with the expectation that women must reproduce or, at the very least, engage in other forms of caretaking in order for them to have a meaningful life and an acceptable identity – not least to minimize the lonely state of old age.[4]

Childless Women: A Historical Context

In order to understand why childless women today are seen as unworthy failures or "others," we need to conceptualize the childless woman as a queer figure who, in the course of Western history, has suffered stigmatization in much the same way as queer and trans persons have. Historically, being unmarried was essentially equated with being childless since childlessness was typically related directly to unmarried women, such as the spinster, the witch, and the nun. And an understanding of the childless (and unmarried) woman as sad and/or dangerous has been dominant throughout Western history. As historian Lee Virginia Chambers-Schiller explains, in the seventeenth century, singlehood was considered a sinful state, "an evil to be exorcised from community life because solitary women menaced the social order" (11),

[3] Elisabeth Freeman identifies chrononormativity as "the use of time to organize individual human bodies towards maximum productivity"(3).

[4] Until recently, women who are no longer fertile were rarely given leading roles in film unless they were either someone's mother or grandmother or an enemy to eliminate. Middle-aged and elderly women were depicted as threatening or paltry, as if, in Mona Chollet's words, "ageing reveals women's fundamental darkness and malignity" (179). This was particularly pertinent if the women in question were still sexually active and, in a historical context, "appeared as immoral and threatening forces in the social order" (180). In more recent years, popular film and television does feature more middle-aged and elderly women in leading roles but still very few women without children.

and childless and unmarried women risked being considered witches. The eighteenth century saw this image change to some extent; unmarried and childless women were now looked upon with pity: "To be unmarried was disgraceful, a reproach rather than a sin, society regarded the spinster with more scorn than fear" (11).

The childless woman has in many ways been forgotten in historical and literary scholarship, cultural studies, queer studies, and feminist theory despite the fact that, as historian Richard Wall points out, women "who head households, live entirely alone, or never marry are clearly key elements of the social structure of any society" (141). According to historian Amy M. Froide, it is problematic that so little historical scholarship deals with unmarried and childless women, thus setting a norm (or reinforcing a norm) where married women are "the people who mattered" whereas unmarried and childless women are positioned as stigmatized others (3). Froide also emphasizes that the plight of unmarried and childless women in the past can shed new light on how we perceive minority groups today. In early modern England, for example, "married and widowed women [would] sit together in the matron's pews, while single women [were] seated separately" (1). Froide also stresses that "our present-day preoccupation with class, race, and sexuality has obscured the fact that marital status shaped in profound ways the life experiences of early modern women" (1). Pointing out the queer potential of these historical figures, she encourages more scholarship in this field since single women of the past created alternative forms of life and kinship. Figuratively speaking, childless women are still being seated separately and because of our present-day preoccupation with race, class, and sexuality, we do not acknowledge their contemporary queer potential either. As Froide points out:

> Focusing on singlewomen also changes the way in which we view the nuclear family and kinship . . . Singlewomen reveal the importance of a wider definition of family and of the ties of kinship . . . once we cease to view married adults as the norm . . . we find that spouses and children did not always form the most important connections in people's lives. (7)

Even today childless women remain underexposed in the cultural narratives of the West, and when they do appear, they usually, as I will demonstrate, just imitate or rehearse old scripted stereotypes. Thus, according to Heather Love, the childless spinster can be seen as a figure who reminds us about "knots, silences, and fractures that indicate the still unfinished business of feminism" ("Gyn/Apology" 306).

The Sad Spinster

The sad spinster is typically involuntarily childless and from the start of the narrative painfully aware of her sad situation. She is lonely, utterly depressed as well as

decidedly less rich, successful, and attractive than the shallow narcissist. She often belongs to the middle class and has a job in which she functions as either helper of or opponent to a traditional nuclear family, such as nun, nurse, or teacher. Whereas the shallow narcissist refuses to see her life as meaningless, the sad spinster considers her life empty. For example, *By the Sea* is a film about an unhappily childless couple, who move to Southern France to try and heal their wounds. Vanessa (Angelina Jolie) is depressed and suffers from alcoholism, but at one point she reaches a somewhat paradoxical redemption by yelling: "I'm barren!" (01:47:00). She seems to realize and accept that her life as a childless woman is meaningless. According to Elaine Tyler May, "'[b]arren' is a term laden with historical weight. It carries negative meanings: unproductive, sterile, bare, empty, stark, deficient, lacking, wanting, destitute, devoid. It is the opposite of fertile, lavish, abounding, productive" (11). The sad spinster is a "failed Madonna" and is thus related to a general conception of the body of the mother as asexual. As Jacqueline Rose points out: "A mother is a woman whose sexual being must be invisible" (36). The lesbian spinster Barbara Covett (Judy Dench) from *Notes on a Scandal* is an important example. Like a destructive parasite, she lives off and for the destruction of other people's families and says about herself: "I'm an imposition, to be tolerated" (00:58:56–01:00:00). She suffers from a lack not only of sex but also of any kind of human contact, psychological as well as physical. As Barbara Covett describes the extreme loneliness of the spinster herself:

> People like Sheba [the woman Barbara Covett is in love with] think they know what it is to be lonely. But of the drip drip drip of long haul, no-end-in-side solitude . . . they know nothing. What it's like to construct an entire weekend around a visit to the launderette . . . or to be so chronically untouched that the accidental brush of a bus conductor's hand sends a jolt of longing straight to your groin. Of this Sheba and her like have no clue. (01:05:00–06:00)

The narratives of the sad spinster are usually centered around a voyeuristic situation in which she watches other people's lives in envy. Sometimes she even stalks women living a "normal" healthy life in a nuclear family, or women who are about to create such a family as is the case in *By the Sea.* The voyeuristic set-up is typically very concrete. *The Secret She Keeps*, *By the Sea*, *The Girl on the Train*, and *Girl at the Window* all feature sad spinsters watching, through holes in the wall or binoculars, families or lovers who are engaged in creating or nurturing a family. Often the sad spinster ends up kidnapping other people's children. This is how the male profiler from *The Secret She Keeps* characterizes the psychology of the traumatized childless woman, who has just stolen a child from the couple the profiler is talking to:

> [H]istorically a classic reason for a woman to steal a baby is that she can't have one or/and she is possibly trying to keep her relationship together . . . what we probably are

> looking for is a woman who is an outsider – she will seek a behavior to fill out an emotional hole in her life. ("Episode 4" 00:17:09–12)

These depictions of sad spinsters are driven by unambiguous reproductive futurism: Only a child can give meaning to a woman's life, and only children can keep couples together, which means that women without children are by definition envious of women who have children. As Rachel (Emily Blunt) in *The Girl on the Train* says about the women she watches from the train every day: "She is everything I want to be" (00:25:00–03).

The sad spinster is out of touch with reality and locked in pathological patterns of compulsory repetition, such as the traumatized murderer Susan Edwards (Olivia Colman) from the television series *The Landscapers*. She upholds a glamorous fantasy world, living for her imagined correspondence with the French actor Gérard Depardieu. The general cultural background for these conceptions is the idea that childless women, because of their lack of a child, are deprived of adulthood altogether. They are childlike and isolated women, who have lost their grip on the real world. In line with this, the sad spinster does not keep up with current technology and fashion. She could serve as a positive example of a person opposed to chrononormativity, but popular film and television resist such a reading by making her unworthy of recognition and identification.

The sad spinster also often suffers from a diffuse feeling of paranoia. She feels watched and judged from all sides. Interestingly, the cultural history of paranoia links it with masculinity. Sianne Ngai even calls it "a distinctively male form of knowledge production" (299). However, the moment a woman – in this case the sad spinster – acts on her paranoia, it loses its power and thereby the link to "thinking" and "knowledge production." This suggests that the paranoia felt by the sad spinster points back at her and loses its energy and power, even though her feeling of being judged and stigmatized for being childless is well-founded.

The Shallow Narcissist

The shallow narcissist epitomizes the voluntary choice to not have children. Occasionally, she can be involuntarily childless, but this state will turn out to be self-inflicted: She has been too focused on her career or she has had too many abortions. And so, she herself is to blame for her miserable and empty life. The abortions and the more permanent opting out of motherhood are depicted as expressions of a pathological childishness and egotism. Unlike the sad spinster, the shallow narcissist is rich and successful but almost always also incapable of postponing her own desires and too emotionally flawed to sustain any healthy long-term relationships. She will often live alone or in destructive relationships, both of which are conditioned by

what, in the logic of the filmic narratives, appears to be hypersexuality.[5] In other words, voluntarily childless women are seen as oversexed, are "often blamed for being too sexual," and their aggressive and allegedly deviant sexuality legitimizes the viewer's dislike of them (Ségeral 182). For example, in *A Bigger Splash* the mute rockstar Marianne Lane (Tilda Swinton) is characterized thus by her ex-husband: "She can fuck and fuck and fuck and fuck" (00:25:00–05).

The shallow narcissist is also either someone who cannot grow up or who mourns the loss of youth excessively, such as the evil queen in *Snow White and the Huntsman* or Mavis Gary in *Young Adult* (both Charlize Theron). Even though the shallow narcissist is depicted as infantile, she is usually highly intelligent, but this trait is rarely depicted in a positive way. On the contrary, she uses her gift to manipulate and destroy other people in thoroughly materialistic games about power, sex, and money. These games are typically set in urban upper- or, at the very least, upper middle-class environments. The tendency to, as May puts it, present parenthood as "a major marker of adulthood" (9) applies to both tropes but their childishness is expressed in different ways. As explained above, while the sad spinster acts like a small child, the shallow narcissist behaves more like a teenager and is seen as an unruly or overgrown child. "Women who have no children," Leimbach writes, "are considered to have no responsibilities and thus to be like children themselves" (158). In this way, childless women can also come to symbolize general modes of subjectivization in the neoliberal epoch: "infantilization" (Barber), "pornofication" (Preciado), and "adulthoodphobia" (Schwartz). One representative example is the thirty-something adulthoodphobic character Mavis Gary in *Young Adult*, who is all dressed up in Hello Kitty gear. Except for the last season, "Shiv" from *Succession* is another prime example of a highly intelligent and yet infantilized childless figure. Rich, well-groomed, and elegant, Shiv would be classified "respectable" in Beverley Skeggs's vocabulary of performances of femininity (*Formations of Class and Gender* 103–10). At the same time, she is unsympathetic, manipulative, and castrating in the infantile incestuous battle with her brothers for the favor of their father. So, despite the performance of gendered respectability, she is depicted as an overgrown child who does not do her gender right. This is particularly visible in her marriage with Tom, whom she dominates completely – "the trophy wife," as her brothers call him. On more than one occasion she toys with his wish to have a child. She plays along to have sex and then takes it back afterwards. She manipulates and degrades him and afterwards admits: "I was being horrible – just for fun" ("Chiantishire" 00:41:18–45:00). Shiv is a woman viewers are unlikely to empathize with and despite her seeming respectability, she is depicted

[5] In rare cases, such as in *Blue Jasmine*, the shallow narcissist is actually depicted as frigid – but still deviant and pathological.

as pathological in her general lack of empathy and her overall lack of interest in becoming a mother herself. And yet, unlike the more murderous and abject depictions of the shallow narcissist from the 1980s and 1990s, whom the viewer is suppose to fear, hate, and dread, Shiv is, like many other overprivileged shallow narcissists, also an amusingly bizarre and humorous character, intended to make the viewer laugh. However, in the last season, Shiv actually becomes pregnant and decides to keep the child. Therefore, in a way, the series returns Shiv to "a woman's proper place" in the end. But Shiv stays in the bad mother paradigm since she refuses to mother herself. As she tells her own mother: "No, I'm not going to see it. I'm just going to do it the family way" ("Church and State" 01:01:55–02:00). "The family way" refers to Shiv's own upperclass childhood in which she was brought up by nannies and housekeepers. Shiv, in other words, intends to give birth but she does not intend to become a "proper mother." The show thereby illustrates how intertwined the paradigms of voluntarily childlessness and the bad mother are, and how all women in different ways participate in the normative notion of the good mother.

The classic example of the shallow narcissist is Catherine Tramell (Sharon Stone) from *Basic Instinct*. She is a hyperintelligent, cunning psychologist and bestselling writer of novels. As she puts it herself: "I am a writer. I *use* people for what I write" (00:29:24–27). She has a fortune of 110 million US dollars and lives an extravagant life with an original Picasso in the house and expensive cars in the driveway. She very much takes pleasure in sex, including SM and bisexual acts. However, she is not vulgar, a staple convention when sexually active women from lower classes are depicted. Like Shiv from *Succession*, Catherine Tramell dresses discretely, femininely, and expensively in silk and cashmere. Her make-up is natural, which, according to Skeggs, is read as respectable from a middle class perspective (*Formations of Class and Gender* 101). She is ice cold, sly, cynical, perhaps even dangerous – and, unlike Shiv, not in a humorous way. When her lover is killed with an ice pick in the beginning of the film, she shows neither grief nor compassion. In the legendary interrogation scene, she deliberately spreads her legs enough for the four officers (and the male gaze, as it were) to see her pantyless crotch under the expensive clothes. Asked whether she is sad that her lover is dead, she says: "Yes, I liked fucking him" and "I wasn't dating him. I was fucking him" (00:12:14–16 and 00:12:35–38). She appears to be only interested in sex and thoroughly indifferent to middle-class family values. "I hate rugrats," she exclaims in the last scene of the film that reveals her to be the cold-blooded murderer herself (02:02:00–02). Much like Shiv, whose behavior may be explained by her mother's rejection of her,[6] Catherine Tramell's oversexed pathology is grounded

[6] This is how Shiv's mother puts it: "Truth is, I probably should never have had children. Some people just aren't made to be mothers" ("Chiantishire" 00:27:45–53).

in – and thereby excused by – childhood trauma: Her parents died in a car accident. In the end, then, she is not so much a privileged psychopath as a sad figure. "I can't allow myself to care . . . I lose everybody," she sums up her life near the end of the film (02:00:00–02). As I will explain below, the degrading of the shallow narcissist is a stable convention of this paradigm.

Claire Underwood (Robin Wright) from *House of Cards* is another prime example. She, too, is a white, beautiful, cold, intelligent, and cunning woman. Her voluntary childlessness is distinctly marked and cannot, as Betty-Despoina Kaklamanidou points out,

> be seen as a positive representation as it is the trait of a thoroughly malevolent character. In fact, it may even be argued that Claire's choice not to have children adds to her abject female identity as patriarchy dictates that motherhood is a natural instinct. (287)

The shallow narcissist is routinely depicted as driven by equal measures of envy and disgust at the boring and conformist family life of the middle- or working-class family. In *Gone Girl*, the rich and highly intelligent Amy (Rosamund Pike) calls the local pregnant women "idiots" with "humdrum lives" (01:06:56–07:02). In *Young Adult*, Mavis refers to the nuclear family as being "trapped with a wife, kid and some crappy job" (00:15:12–15) whereas, as she says to a friend, "we got out, we got lives" (00:15:30–32). Frequently, this disgust gives way to or turns out to be a self-deluding coverup for envy in the course of the narrative. This change from successful and arrogant to envious and self-loathing is a key component in popular narratives about the shallow narcissist. The envy and disgust felt by childless women says very little about those towards whom these feelings are directed but a lot about those who have them, which corresponds with Ngai's view on how envy is being depicted in cultural representations. "[I]t has been reduced to signifying a static subjective trait: the 'lack' or 'deficiency' of the person who envies" (21). The shallow narcissist will almost always be at least eventually taken down from her pedestal and punished for trying to live a more enviable life of luxury than the one led by members of a middle-class nuclear family. *Blue Jasmine* is a good example: Near the end we find Jasmine sitting alone on a bench, babbling incoherently to herself. She is no longer superior but has become a silly, harmless figure. As becomes apparent from these examples, the shallow narcissist is almost always white and almost always upper-class. This has several reasons and meanings. According to Skeggs, the white middle class defines and practices what they consider to be the right values and gender performances, not least "natural" femininity, moderate sexuality, (nuclear) family values, and moderation in reproduction (*Class, Self, Culture* 99). Both the lower and the upper classes represent deviations from this norm, mainly but not only in terms of sexuality and reproduction. As Skeggs point out: "Excessive sexuality . . . is the thing which, par excellence,

is a threat to the moral order of western civilization" (100). From a middle-class perspective, the working and lower classes are considered vulgar, dirty, over-sexualized, and over-fecund. The upper class is deemed either lascivious or frigid and therefore depicted as women who either have too much or too little sex and thereby transgress the values of the middle class. Furthermore, both the upper class and the lower classes are deviant when it comes to motherhood. The lower classes are represented as dirty, disgusting, and reproducing too much (4), and the upper classes are often depicted as too clean and disciplined. They lack emotions and empathy and are therefore either absent bad mothers or voluntarily childless. This may explain why voluntarily childless female characters tend to be upper-class. It adds to their deviant "nature" and is another way of emphasizing that childlessness is abnormal, something for 'proper women' to avoid.

In popular US film and television series, it is hard, if not impossible, to find voluntarily childless women from the working and lower classes; the same goes for women of color.[7] The logic seems to be that people of color and poor people, due to their "lack of discipline and self-control" (Skeggs, *Class, Self, Culture* 102) are expected to bear too many children. Women from the upper class have too much discipline and are too ambitious, and therefore have none or too few. The depiction of the voluntarily childless woman as someone who is wealthy and successful but utterly shallow and lonely makes it evident for the female viewer that she is supposed to stick with middle-class values and to breed properly. The lesson seems to be that rejecting motherhood makes you a shallow person, and that you can avoid that by having children. Moore and Geist-Martin studied this from a sociological perspective:

> Recent research exploring intersections of voluntarily childless identities indicate that heterosexual white women face the most pronatalist pressure to have children . . . demonstrating a subtle but persistent cultural belief that certain women should be having fewer children. (244)

The stereotypical depiction of the shallow narcissist is an example of such pressure since this figure is only worthy and respectable on the surface, and nobody in their right mind wants to be a shallow narcissist. She often appears glamorous and celebrated, for instance, as a rock star in *A Bigger Splash* or writer in *Basic Instinct.* She is typically wealthy either from old money or her own ambitious choice of career, such as lawyer, psychologist, or bestselling author. In some instances, she has married into this status, as is the case in *Blue Jasmine*, but for her, too, entrepreneurship and materialistic superficiality are key character traits. In a sense, the shallow narcissist represents neoliberal values – but never gets any credit for this determined and

[7] There are rare exceptions, such as Kalinda Sharma (Archie Panjabi) from *The Good Wife* and Cristina Yang (Sandra Oh) from *Grey's Anatomy*.

ambitious lifestyle. On the contrary, in popular film and television this lifestyle is depicted as too excessive and at the same time too controlled and too materialistic. Catherine Tramell (*Basic Instinct*), Alex Forrest (*Fatal Attraction*), Tanya McQuoid-Hunt (*The White Lotus*), Claire Underwood (*House of Cards*), and Shiv Roy (*Succession*) are all successful but have somehow – and in very different ways – also failed as women. They are all presented to the viewer as too excessive, morally bankrupt, and unsympathetic.

In some rare cases, however, successful childfree women are, to some degree, being depicted as feminist heroines. Diane Lockhart (Christine Baranski) in *The Good Wife* as well as its spin-off *The Good Fight* is one example and Samantha Jones (Kim Cattrall) in *Sex and the City* is another. Both Diane and Samantha have a lot in common with the typical shallow narcissist. They are white, rich, successful, intelligent, and cunning, and Samantha is also a hypersexual character. And yet they are both at the same time likeable and empathetic persons. Diane, for instance, is an idealistic feminist fighting for the rights of women and people of color. As her co-worker Lucca Quinn (Cush Jumbo) explains, she is not "a witch" but just a woman who "knows how men work" ("The Gang Deals with Alternate Reality" 00:23:32–33). Diane is a more complex and ambivalent character than the usual shallow narcissist. "She's passionate, idealistic and cunning," Lucca points out ("Inauguration" 00:40:33–36). However, even if Diane is less shallow and less self-absorbed, she still works "too much," and the story about her in many ways remains the story of a workaholic who lacks something essential in her life. As she temporarily loses her job, she breaks down and cries to her ex-husband: "I'm unemployable. How is that possible? How is my life suddenly so fucking meaningless? . . . How can you work so hard every single day of your life and have nothing to show for it? Not a friend?" ("Inauguration" 00:32:15-24).

Catherine Tramell and Alex Forrest in the 1980s and 1990s depictions of this trope are supporting characters and antagonists or even villains whom both male and female viewers are supposed to fear and despise. But today the childless woman can take the lead. In *The Good Wife*, Diane was still in more of a supporting role while the main female character was the rejected but loveable former homemaker and mother Alicia Florrick (Julianna Margulies). Since Diane is mainly seen through the eyes of the 'good mother,' she is depicted as more cynical and cunning and frequently antagonistic towards Alicia. In *The Good Fight* Diane gains more allegiance and also recognition because viewers are more often given the opportunity of siding with her perspective. As Rita Felski puts it:

> *Allegiance* speaks to the question of how ethical or political values – that is, acts of evaluating – draw audiences closer to some figures rather than others . . . Alligiance . . . is in play whenever we find ourselves siding with a character and what we take that character to stand for. (96)

Allegiance is not the same as identification, but the enhanced sense of allegiance at play in some contemporary examples may point to new conceptions of the voluntarily childless woman. As mentioned above, Diane Lockhart defies many of the negative characteristics of the shallow narcissist trope, which turns her into somewhat of a feminist heroine. Another new iteration of the voluntarily childless woman is what I call the failed shallow narcissist, which is a caricature or a drag version of the shallow narcissist.

The Failed Shallow Narcissist

Despite being childless, the shallow narcissist is in a sense a "bad mother" and can as such be seen as a riff on archetypal figures such as the biblical Eve, the phallic mother, the demonized *femme fatale*, and the whore. This sheds light on a general and important point emphasized by Adrienne Rich: "[A]ll women participate in the concept of motherhood – the childless woman to the same extent as the mother, insofar as they are nonetheless defined in relation to motherhood and to heteronormative patriarchy" (qtd. in Ségeral 181). However, as I have suggested above, the depiction of the shallow narcissist has changed over time, which the difference between Alex Forrest and Catherine Tramell and Tanya McQuoid illustrates well. Traditionally the shallow narcissist is someone we are supposed to fear; she is the enemy partly because she is oversexed and tries to steal other women's husbands, often the father of their children. This is the case in *Fatal Attraction*, in which the threatening behavior of the childless woman legitimizes that the good mother of the film eliminates the threat in the end. The obvious moral of these narratives is that the male protagonist should return to his wife and the nuclear family, still full of guilt but also now utterly aware of the true values in life. Viewers will likely not side with Alex Forrest but with the male protagonist Dan Gallagher (Michael Douglas).

In *The White Lotus* the childless female character Tanya McQuoid (Jennifer Coolidge) is more difficult to categorize since she is not at all threatening but rather a laughable character or, as I would suggest, a failed shallow narcissist. The fact that she fails in her role as shallow narcissist adds an ambivalence to this otherwise rigid character trope. Tanya McQuoid shares many characteristics typical of the shallow narcissist: She is white, extremely rich, self-absorbed, and infantile. She cries when she cannot have her way and has no inhibitions and self-control when she tries to have her own needs fulfilled. But she is not in any way respectable (in Skegg's sense) or hyperintelligent, for that matter. She is vulgar, transgressive, and intrusive but also lazy, depressed, exhausted, simple-minded, and completely lost. As she describes herself: "I am a very needy person, and I am deeply, deeply insecure . . . I am like a dead end" ("The Lotus Eaters" 00:51:13–18). Being a dead end, she is not able to fool

or con anyone and, just like the sad spinster, seems paranoid but maybe not paranoid enough – since everybody around her, including the viewer, is in fact judging her, laughing at her and/or trying to steal from her. Unlike the traditional shallow narcissist, who is depicted as the perpetrator, Tanya becomes the victim. Interestingly, the fact that she refuses to be overlooked and insists on her right to take up space, both in the narrative and physically on the screen, gives her failure as a childless woman queer potential. She is a caricature or is undertaking what Judith Butler would identify as "drag" because her overdoing of stereotypical roles undermines and even ridicules heteronormative conceptions of childless women. She is in some ways hyperfeminine (e.g., she wears a lot of makeup and colorful dresses) but also acts inappropriately, is loud and unpredictable and, unlike the traditional shallow narcissist, who "behaves" according to her class and gender, she fails in every possible way. However, by failing, i.e., by misbehaving, overdoing, and caricaturing the stereotypical traits we recognize from the shallow narcissist, she – like Butler's drag – imitates something "for which there is no original" (214). Thus, Tanya demonstrates that the shallow narcissist only exists in the imagination of heteronormative discourse. Additionally, her failure also becomes her victory because, unlike the traditional shallow narcissist, the viewers side with her. They do not hope for her final destruction but actually cheer her on. Viewers feel an "ethical engagement" and allegiance, "a felt affiliation or solidarity with certain others" (Felski 97 and 84).

This feeling of allegiance is enhanced by her failure. Not just her failure as a woman but also her failure to live up to the stereotypical interpretation of the overprivileged childless woman. Tanya is not subversive or queer because she overcomes the clichés, as in the case of Diane Lockhart, but because she overdoes them and thus fails to do them correctly. As Halberstam writes about queer failure:

> We can also recognize failure as a way of refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline and as a form of critique. As a practice, failure recognizes that alternatives are embedded already in the dominant and that power is never total or consistent; indeed, failure can exploit the unpredictability of ideology and its indeterminate qualities. (88)

Conclusion

In this article, I have identified two character tropes in the depiction of childless women in contemporary film and television: the shallow narcissist and the sad spinster. Both, in different ways, portray childless women very negatively. While these two tropes have been rather predominant, I have also observed potential signs of change when it comes to the shallow narcissist. Even if these cases are rare, they point to the possibility of new conceptions of the voluntarily childless woman. Diane

Lockhart, in particular, is an example of such a departure. She shares many key characteristics of the trope but also breaks with them, not least with the unlikable traits usually associated with the shallow narcissist. Furthermore, some contemporary shallow narcissists, such as Siobhan "Shiv" Roy from *Succession* and Tanya McQuoid from *The White Lotus*, are depicted as humourous rather than dangerous figures – even though that does not make them less abject. Tanya is also an example of a drag version of the shallow narcissist, who I call a failed shallow narcissist. But it may be specifically this practicing of failure, the failure to reproduce stereotypical character tropes, that can contribute to drawing the childless woman out of her deadlock.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank the Carlsberg Foundation, grant number CF21-0203, for supporting the work on this article.

About the Author

Camilla Schwartz is Associate Professor at the University of Southern Denmark and has published many articles on the connections between literature, culture, and subjectivity. Her book *Take Me to Neverland: Voksenfobi og ungdomsdyrkelse i skandinavisk samtidslitteratur* (Engl. *Take Me to Neverland: Adulthoodphobia and Youth Worship in Contemporary Scandinavian Literature*) was published in 2021 by Spring Publishing. She is currently working on a new book about childless female characters in modern film and literature.

Peer Review

This article was reviewed by the issue's guest editor and one external reviewer.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Works Cited

Barber, Benjamin R. *Consumed: How Markets Corrupt Children, Infantilize Adults, and Swallow Citizens Whole*. W. W. Norton and Company, 2008.

Basic Instinct. Directed by Paul Verhoeven, Le Studio Canal +, 1992.

A Bigger Splash. Directed by Luca Guadagnino, Cota Film, 2015.

Blue Jasmine. Directed by Woody Allen, Perdido Production, 2013.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1990.

By the Sea. Directed by Angelina Jolie, Universal Pictures, 2015.

Chambers-Schiller, Lee Virginia. *Liberty a Better Husband: Single Women in America: The Generations of 1780–1840*. Yale UP, 1984.

"Chiantishire." *Succession*, season 3, episode 8, HBO, 5 Dec. 2021.

Chollet, Mona. *In Defence of Witches: Why Women Are Still on Trial*. Picador, 2022.

"Church and State." *Succession*, season 4, episode 9, HBO, 21 May 2023.

Crozier, Lorna. "A Woman Without." *Nobody's Mother: Life without Kids*, edited by Lynne van Luven, Touch Wood Editions, 2006, pp. 26–66.

Edelman, Lee. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Duke UP, 2004.

"Episode 4." *The Secret She Keeps*, season 1, episode 4, Network 10, 13 May 2020.

Fatal Attraction. Directed by Adrian Lyne, Lansing Production, 1987.

Felski, Rita. *Hooked: Art and Attachment*. U of Chicago P, 2020.

Freeman, Elizabeth. *Time Bind: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*. Duke UP, 2010.

Froide, Amy M. *Never Married: Singlewomen in Early Modern England*. Oxford UP, 2005.

"The Gang Deals with Alternate Reality." *The Good Fight*, season 4, episode 1, CBS, 9 Apr. 2020.

The Girl on the Train. Directed by Tate Taylor, Marc Platt Productions, 2016.

Gone Girl. Directed by David Fincher, TSG Entertainment, 2014.

The Good Wife. Created by Robert King and Michelle King, CBS, 2009–2016.

Halberstam, Jack. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Duke UP, 2011.

Haraway, Donna J. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke UP, 2016.

Hill, Alexandra M. "The Childless Woman as Failure; or, the 'Spinster Aunt' as Provocation for the Future." *Women in German Yearbook*, vol. 30, 2014, pp. 164–74.

House of Cards. Created by Beau Wilimon, Netflix, 2013–2018.

Illouz, Eva. *Hard-Core Romance. Fifty Shades of Grey, Best-Sellers, and Society*. U of Chicago P, 2014.

Inauguration. Directed by Brooke Kennedy, CBS, 2017.

Kaklamanidou, Betty-Despoina. "The Voluntarily Childless Heroine: A Postfeminist Television Oddity." *Television and New Media*, vol. 20, no. 3, 2019, pp. 275–93, doi.org/10.1177/1527476417749743.

Kaplan, E. Ann. *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama*. Routledge, 1992.

Klecker, Cornelia. "Female 'Lone Wolves': The Anti-Social Heroine in Recent Television Series." *The Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 53, no. 2, 2020, pp. 431–53, doi.org/10.1111/jpcu.12901.

The Landscapers. Created by Ed Sinclair, HBO, 2021.

Leimbach, Joselyn K. "Queering Cristina Yang: Childfree Women, Disrupting Heteronormativity, and Success in Failed Femininity." *The Truth about (M)otherhood: Choosing to Be Childfree*, edited by Helena A. Cummins et al., Demeter, 2021, pp. 155–78.

"The Lotus Eaters." *The White Lotus*, season 1, episode 5, HBO, 8 Aug. 2021.

Love, Heather. *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*. Harvard UP, 2009.

———. "Gyn/Apology: Sarah Orne Jewett's Spinster Aesthetics." *ESQ: A Journal of Nineteenth-Century American Literature and Culture*, vol. 55, no. 3–4, 2009, pp. 305–34.

May, Elaine Tyler. *Barren in the Promised Land: Childless Americans and the Pursuit of Happiness*. Harvard UP, 1995.

Moore, Julia, and Patricia Geist-Martin. "Mediated Representations of Voluntary Childlessness, 1900–2012." *The Essential Handbook of Women's Sexuality*, edited by Donna Marie Castaneda, Praeger, 2013.

Ngai, Sianne. *Ugly Feelings*. Harvard UP, 2005.

Notes on a Scandal. Directed by Richard Eyre, DNA Films, 2006.

O'Reilley, Andrea. *21st-Century Motherhood: Experience, Identity, Policy, Agency*. Columbia UP, 2010.

Preciado, Paul B. *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era.* Feminist P, 2013.

Rose, Jacqueline. *Mothers: An Essay on Love and Cruelty*. Straus and Giroux, 2018.

Schwartz, Camilla. "Loving Friends in a Time of Neoliberalism." *Love Etc.*, edited by Rita Felski and Camilla Schwartz, U of Virginia P, 2023, forthcoming.

Ségeral, Nathalie. "Mothers, Interrupted: Reframing Motherhood in the Wake of Trauma in Contemporary French Women's Writing." *The Truth about (M)otherhood: Choosing to Be Childfree*, edited by Helena A. Cummins et al., Demeter, 2021.

Sex and the City. Created by Darren Star, HBO, 1998–2004.

Skeggs, Beverley. *Class, Self, Culture.* Routledge, 2004.

———. *Formations of Class and Gender: Becoming Respectable*. Sage Publications, 1997.

Wall, Richard. "Women Alone in English Society." *Annales de Démographie Historique*, vol. 17, 1981, pp. 303–17.

Young Adult. Directed by Jason Reitman, Mandate Pictures, 2011.

Journal of the Austrian Association for American Studies
vol. 5, no. 1, 2023, pp. 38-55
doi: 10.47060/jaaas.v5i1.172

The Abortion Road Trip Film and the Pronatalist Discourse in the Post-*Roe v. Wade* US

Marina Zigneli

ABSTRACT

With the overturn of the landmark *Roe v. Wade* decision, which protected the constitutional right to abortion for almost 50 years, women in America are now faced with extreme difficulties when seeking an abortion. Given this dramatic pronatalist shift that seems only to be getting worse, more and more women will now have to travel through "abortion deserts" in order to seek safe and legal abortion care. Cinema has sought to mediate the troubles and struggles of women "on the road" to safe abortion. Thus, in recent years, we have watched a surge in the representation of abortion within the realm of the road-trip film genre in US-American cinema. Since 2015, several films, such as *Grandma* (2015), *Little Woods* (2018), *Never Rarely Sometimes Always* (2020), *Unpregnant* (2020), and *Plan B* (2021), have tackled this issue. Interestingly, only one of those films was directed/written by a male individual, highlighting the way female filmmakers are currently reshaping reproductive health narratives. Additionally, three of these films, namely *Grandma*, *Unpregnant*, and *Plan B*, also fall under the comedy-drama genre, particularly the road trip-buddy comedy genre. This paper aims to explore how the road-trip film genre, which has featured predominantly male characters, is now helping women to share their stories and gain more visibility regarding reproductive rights and how comedy is being used to subvert the overtly dramatic representation of abortion that enhances the pronatalist ideology in most film and television narratives.

KEYWORDS

Abortion, childfree women, abortion comedy, abortion road trip, pronatalism, reproductive health care, abortion deserts, female filmmakers

An 18-year-old girl in Los Angeles visits her grandmother to ask for money in order to cover the cost of her abortion. A single mother in North Dakota embarks on a road trip to Canada with her older sister to have a legal abortion. A 17-year-old girl in Pennsylvania finds out she is pregnant but cannot have an abortion without parental consent unless she travels to New York. Another 17-year-old girl in Missouri faces the same problem and has no other option than to travel to Albuquerque to have a safe and legal abortion. A high school student from South Dakota is in search of the morning-after pill, which she is denied at the local pharmacy due to the conscience clause, and embarks on a road trip to the nearest Planned Parenthood facility. These are all young females who live in the contemporary US and are faced with limited or non-existent abortion access and reproductive healthcare. More importantly, these are all film characters that might as well be real people.

The common ground that lies underneath all the above narratives is that these abortion stories have now shifted away from the dilemma of whether or not to have an abortion to the immense barriers women face when seeking safe and legal abortion healthcare. What also ties these film narratives together is the fact that the road trip here is not depicted as a mere option but as an absolute necessity. In 2015, Paul Weitz's film *Grandma* became the first film to interlace the already established road trip film genre with the issue of abortion access. Following that, the films *Little Woods* (2019), *Never Rarely Sometimes Always* (2020), *Unpregnant* (2020), and *Plan B* (2021) formed what is now hailed in public discourse as the "Abortion Road Trip Movie" (Colangelo). The present article aims to establish the genre of the abortion road trip film by examining what these recent film representations add to the long history of abortion narratives, how the road trip genre has evolved in order to accommodate more abortion stories, how comedy functions as a destigmatizing agent for such narratives, and finally the ways the pronatalist ideology can still be detected within these stories.

Before delving into this discussion, it is important to examine how abortion narratives first appeared in early US American cinema. Kat Sachs highlights that "cinema's formative years coincided with the spread of anti-abortion legislation across the country" (Sachs) as, according to Planned Parenthood, by 1910, abortion was completely illegal with very few exceptions in all states of the US. However, this does not seem to have impeded filmmakers from commenting on abortion legislation through their work as early as the 1910s. In 1916, Lois Weber co-wrote and co-directed (with her husband, Phillips Smalley) *Where Are My Children?*, one of the first silent movies in US-American film history dealing with abortion and women's reproductive rights. The film begins as a prominent district attorney prosecutes a doctor who has been providing women with illegal abortions. When the attorney finds out that his wife is

also among the women who have visited the doctor repeatedly to obtain an abortion, he confronts her by furiously exclaiming the titular phrase of the film, "where are my children?" (00:56:55). Birth control and abortion lie at the center of the film but in a pronatalist manner that renders the film's message problematic. As Shelley Stamp argues, the film presents abortion "as the selfish, unilateral decision of spoiled society wives unwilling to let pregnancy or motherhood curtail their social calendars" (273). In *Where Are My Children?* birth control and abortion do not necessarily reflect "pregnancy prevention per se" but "family planning," which is deeply rooted in the theory of eugenics (275). Nevertheless, it should be noted that this is one of the first films to tackle birth control and abortion access when abortion was still illegal and to acknowledge the desire of women to remain voluntarily childfree. The following year, Weber and her husband wrote, directed, and starred in *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle* (1917). The film was released in the midst of a controversy around contraception and was based on the real-life activist Margaret Sanger, who advocated in favor of birth control (Sloan 341). The same year, Frank Beal's film *The Curse of Eve* (1917) was released, whose main female character has an abortion. A year after its release, the film was considerably re-edited so that the medi-cal procedure was not specified as an abortion, and it was then re-released under the name *Mother, I Need You*.

In the following decades, onscreen abortion had to overcome another significant obstacle. The Motion Picture Production Code (Hays Code), Hollywood's self-imposed censorship system that was established in 1930, made it almost impossible for creators to integrate an abortion plotline into their stories, even though, as Sachs highlights, abortion was not explicitly included in the Code (Sachs). However, some filmmakers defied censorship and public commentary and chose to at least insinuate abortion practices. *Men in White* (1934) was one of the first abortion films to cause a public uproar because it followed the story of a woman whose health is in great danger following an illegal abortion. As David Kirby observes, the film was also one of the main reasons for the formation of the Production Code Administration (PCA), which was responsible for the enforcement of the Hays Code after 1934 (468). However, still without any particular mention of abortion within the Hays Code, maintaining a coherent stance towards abortion plotlines in cinema proved to be a challenging task for the PCA (469). The key to the release and distribution of the films that included abortions was vagueness and narrative ambiguity, i.e., the abortion was never explicitly referred to or portrayed. This is how films such as *Leave Her to Heaven* (1945) and *The Doctor and the Girl* (1949) made their way to the movie the-aters. Still, most of these representations were usually aimed at condemning the deviant, immoral women who sought illegal abortions. This kind of representation left its

imprint on the history of abortion in film, which proved difficult to overcome in the following decades, even after the legalization of abortion in 1973. In fact, both film and television struggled to come up with new ways to accommodate abortion stories and portray the difficulties in accessing safe and legal reproductive healthcare.

To this day, there is still an ongoing, heated political debate around abortion access. The election of Donald Trump in 2016 and his conservative administration allowed for harsher attacks on women's bodily autonomy, as more and more states across the US imposed barriers on their access to abortion. Unfortunately, these continuous attacks against reproductive health rights culminated on June 24, 2022, with the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* (1973). Since the beginning of this post-*Roe* era, according to data by Planned Parenthood, at least twelve states have enacted a complete ban on abortions, thus rendering them illegal, while 32 states have banned abortion after a specified period during pregnancy. That translates to more than 36 million women of reproductive age who no longer have access to safe and legal reproductive health care (Planned Parenthood). The re-criminalization of abortion strips bodily autonomy away from women and leads them back to "back-alley" alternatives, which were widely spread before *Roe v. Wade*, or extended travel across states for those who can afford it. It is true, however, that even before this most recent change in law, abortion was not accessible to everyone, even though it was – at least in theory – a constitutional right. In 2017, Alice F. Cartwright et al. conducted a systematic research across the US and found that there were 27 "abortion deserts" – 27 cities with more than 100,000 permanent residents from which women had to travel 100 miles or more to reach the closest abortion facility (9). The 2022 Supreme Court decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade* has made things even worse since it transformed entire regions of the country into abortion deserts. According to Marielle Kirstein et al., "66 clinics across 15 states have been forced to stop offering abortions . . ." (Kirstein et al.) within 100 days since the Supreme Court decision.

These continuous harrowing shifts in abortion legislation have found their way into the film world. There has been a slow but steady surge in film narratives that highlight the stark reality of women needing to navigate across abortion deserts in the contemporary US and spending money they do not have in order to obtain a safe and legal abortion. In *Grandma*, Elle (Lily Tomlin) is visited by her teenage granddaughter, Sage (Julia Garner), who has recently found out that she is pregnant and wants to have an abortion she cannot afford. The two women embark on a road trip in order to try and collect the money for Sage's abortion. According to B. J. Colangelo, it was *Grandma* that "introduced the Abortion Road Trip Movie to the mainstream." In their 2022 article, Olivia Engle and Cordelia Freeman discuss "abortion mobilities" as well as "how the road trip narrative conveys the experience of forced travel of

people for abortions in the US" (298). They draw on examples of road trip narratives both from film and novels to examine if and how the medium affects the representation and consider the abortion road trip a "recent narrative device" (2). Raluca Andreescu analyzes the changing depictions of abortions in film and television and focuses specifically on two films – the drama *Never Rarely Sometimes Always* and the more comedic *Unpregnant* (2021) (121). She examines the role genre plays in these representations and points out that teenage abortion stories are often closely linked with mobility (124).

The abortion road trip film has also received increasing attention in popular film criticism that frequently celebrates its significance to the pro-choice movement. Kayla Kumari Upadhyaya notes, in reference to the aforementioned films, that "while the abortion road trip trend may be a symptom of Americans' growing concern around limited abortion access, depicting it in a realistic and responsible way can help bring awareness to the issue too." As for the question of whether it should be thought of as a sub-genre or a film trope, she observes that "an 'abortion road trip' isn't so much a trope as it is a dark reality of American healthcare . . ." (Upadhyaya). Emily Clark considers the abortion road trip film a genre that "attempts to remove the stigma surrounding abortion and paint it as something to be celebrated, not mourned" (Clark). Kylie Cheung concludes that there is "a growing trend of movies in which seeking abortion or other reproductive care through tremendous cost, geographical and legislative barriers isn't just a subplot – it's the main storyline" (Cheung), while Kristina Deffenbacher also discusses how these narratives subvert the "generic expectations" of road trip films, in which, up until now, female characters had almost no agency (Deffenbacher). Overall, as sociologist Gretchen Sisson notes, "there's a much greater range of characters getting abortions across a greater range of genres" (qtd. in Haynes). Essentially, the basic narrative structure of road trip films has not really changed. Film characters still sit behind the wheel, usually with another person seated next to them, and together they travel long distances for a specific purpose while facing a number of obstacles and challenges along the way. The major shift that has taken place is that the US-American road trip film is now even more willing to put women behind the wheel, following the paradigm of the breakthrough film *Thelma & Louise* (1991). By now, these films have gradually become the means to explore not only the abortion stories of long-repressed female characters, but also the different parameters that determine a woman's abortion experience, such as age, race, and financial stability. However, those fictional depictions of women who choose to obtain an abortion and thus remain voluntarily childfree are still affected by the existing pronatalist ideology that is evident across film and

television. As Shari Roberts argues, "the masculinist genre of the road film works to limit the solutions for the female protagonists" (66).

However, it is still important to look for the roots of the road trip film, which can easily be found in the literary world, in novels and non-fiction books interested in traveling and voyaging around the world. As David Laderman explains, the road narrative has a long filmic as well as literary history and saw great success, particularly after World War II ("What a Trip" 42). For example, Jack Kerouac's 1955 novel *On the Road* is thought of as the quintessential road narrative in US-American culture, which shaped a distinct category of US-American road trip films that appeared in the late 1960s (42). The road trip film has also been considered inherently US-American and an essentially male genre for decades. It was established as a distinct genre also in post-war America, since it combined the ever-evolving automobile manufacturing system in the US with the unquenchable desire for freedom (Laderman, *Driving Visions* 38). This was, as Michalis Kokonis explains, a result of "the dissolution of the homogenized audience in the post-war years [that] brought about the differentiation of the Hollywood product" (178). Located within what was in retrospect called "the Hollywood Renaissance" in the late 1960s and 1970s, the road trip film, just like the already established western, placed masculine figures at the center in order to highlight "men's fear of losing their mastery, and hence their identity" (Tompkins 45).

Through popular films such as *Easy Rider* (1969), *Two-Lane Blacktop* (1971), and *Badlands* (1973), the road trip film became closely linked with strong, masculine figures, who act as the main agents in those narratives and are able to disregard traditional social values and the status quo. In these films, as Laderman observes, female characters usually act as accomplices or mere distractions from the protagonist's main goal, which is ultimately his freedom ("What a Trip" 42). Ridley Scott's 1991 film *Thelma & Louise* reintroduced the road trip film by focusing on the adventure of two female characters. That was a breakthrough moment for the genre, as the director "took the classic formula of the road narrative and infused it with feminist social critique" (Andreescu 125). However, even in those rare cases where the road trip film placed the spotlight on women, Roberts observes that "while male protagonists use the road to flee femininity, women cannot similarly flee the masculine because of the gendered assumptions of the genre" (62).

Since the road narrative stands as an integral part of US-American culture that has the ability to challenge the already established values in a non-conformist manner, it should be no surprise that it also became a powerful tool in the hands of filmmakers for the representation of abortion stories. Except *Little Woods*, all films discussed here begin with a teenage girl protagonist finding out about or suspecting an unexpected pregnancy: eighteen-year-old Sage (Julia Garner) in *Grandma*, seventeen-year-old

Autumn (Sidney Flanigan) in *Never Rarely Sometimes Always*, seventeen-year-old Veronica (Haley Lu Richardson) in *Unpregnant*, and high school student Sunny (Kuhoo Verma) in *Plan B*. Sage appears at her grandmother's doorstep having already booked her appointment for her abortion, while Autumn, Veronica, and Sunny immediately start researching their abortion options nearby, making it clear from the very beginning that they want to remain childfree at this point in their lives. Soon afterward, they all conclude that they will need to travel in order to be able to obtain an abortion. Sage needs to travel because neither she nor her grandmother, to whom she turns for financial support, has the money to cover the costs of the procedure. So, they embark on a road trip to visit some of her grandmother's old friends and raise the money they need. Autumn finds out that she cannot have an abortion in her home state without a parent's consent, so she decides to travel to New York. Similarly, Veronica finds out that in Missouri abortions are forbidden without parental consent, so she needs to go to Albuquerque, New Mexico. Finally, Sunny, in fear of being pregnant, decides to get a morning-after pill, only to find out that pharmacists can deny selling this or any other birth-control pill if doing so goes against their moral conscience. As a result, Sunny's only solution is to travel to the nearest Planned Parenthood clinic, where she will be able to get a morning-after pill. What differentiates *Little Woods* from the above narratives is the fact that the abortion journey is an important part of the film but not its main narrative arc. Deb (Lily James) informs her sister Ollie (Tessa Thompson), who is the protagonist of the story, that she is pregnant with her second child. Deb is a single mother working as a waitress when she finds out about the five-figure cost of the prenatal care she will need if she decides to continue her pregnancy. It is at this moment that she realizes she needs to terminate her pregnancy and shares her decision with her sister. The two women travel together from North Dakota to Canada in order for Deb to obtain a safe and legal abortion.

Another significant detail that brings all these stories together is the fact that each of these female heroines in search of an abortion finds comfort in the presence of another woman. Sage starts a road trip with her grandmother, Autumn travels with her female cousin, Veronica and Sunny share their journey with their female best friend, and Deb travels with her sister. Like most male-dominated road trip movies, abortion road trip films are also buddy films but female characters are portrayed very differently. As Melanie Leigh Nash observes, in the buddy films of the 1960s and onwards, women are usually put in the margins of the stories, and sometimes they are even abused, since they stand "as representatives of the social rigidity which the buddies . . . have come to resent" (30). However, female characters in abortion road trip films have the opportunity to reclaim their space and "challenge masculine,

direction-less journeys" that were considered the norm within the road trip genre (Engle and Freeman 298) since these women's journeys have the specific purpose to enable the women to regain control over their own bodies by terminating an unwanted pregnancy. However, this re-imagining of the genre does not come without cost for these women, who repeatedly face various obstacles throughout their journeys. As Laderman observes, in male-driven narratives, those obstacles impede men from breaking free from all societal barriers and finding their true identity outside of traditional conventions ("What a Trip" 47). However, in the abortion road trip film, those obstacles can easily be translated as attacks on women's bodily autonomy and female reproductive rights.

In *Grandma*, Sage and Elle visit Elle's ex-husband to ask for the money needed for the abortion but he denies their request. Veronica and Bailey in *Unpregnant* meet a young couple that offers them a ride to Albuquerque but turn out to be pro-lifers who want to dissuade her from having the abortion. While trying to escape, a car chase is initiated, which becomes the "pretext for [a] bit of genre self-referentiality, as the protagonists envision themselves as the two outlaws Thelma and Louise . . ." (Andreescu 133). In *Plan B*, Sunny, after having unprotected sex, visits the nearest drugstore to buy the Plan B pill. However, she is met with the pharmacist's denial to sell her the pill, since that would go against his personal conviction. As he explains with his mannered condescending smile: "It's a little thing called the conscience clause. Any medical professional in the great state of South Dakota can refuse to sell birth control drugs to someone if it goes against their beliefs" (*Plan B* 00:30:07–17). Through these instances, the abortion road trip genre highlights the fact that women are confronted not only with practical challenges in their decision to remain childfree, such as travel expenses, but also with the dissenting opinions of others around them.

Interestingly, three out of the five films discussed here, namely *Grandma*, *Unpregnant,* and *Plan B*, explore contraception, abortion, and reproductive health rights through a comedic lens. Until recently, dramatic film representations were at the helm of abortion stories by portraying abortion decision-making as a life-changing event in a woman's life. While television saw some of the most significant humorous portrayals of abortion on screen, beginning with the sitcom *Maude* (CBS, 1972–1978), which, according to Lewis Beale, featured one of the first abortion stories on television, the film world was still hesitant to deal with this rather heated and controversial subject in a more comedic manner.

Juno (2007) still stands as a representative example of a film that attempted to shake things up and portray abortion as a human right. When 16-year-old Juno finds out that she is pregnant, she calls her best friend and they immediately discuss *where* she would have her abortion and not *if* she is going to have one. Therefore, *Juno*

initially appears to be one of the first films to normalize having an abortion, only to rather quickly return to conservatism by having Juno choose to have the baby and give it up to adoption after all. As Pamela Thoma argues, *Juno* reveals a "commercialization of motherhood" partly since abortion is portrayed "as a 'bad' consumer choice" (415–16). The film spends little time weighing the notion of having an abortion and focuses mostly on Juno's quest to find the perfect mother. Nonetheless, *Juno* paved the way for other comedies that dealt with abortion in a more progressive manner.

Gillian Robespierre's *Obvious Child* (2014) was the first film that used humor to tell an abortion story. Donna (Jenny Slate), the main character of the film, is introduced to the audience as a 28-year-old stand-up comedian whose boyfriend (Paul Briganti) has just broken up with her. Later that night, heartbroken by the turn of events, she meets Max (Jake Lacy) at the bar and has a one-night stand with him. After a few weeks, Donna finds out that she is pregnant and soon after visits a Planned Parenthood clinic to schedule her abortion. By the end of the film, it becomes clear that Donna obtained a successful abortion and feels relieved. In other words, unlike Juno, Donna actually goes through with the abortion and this is not portrayed as something particularly dramatic nor does she regret her decision by the end of the film.

Film critics considered *Obvious Child* a "progressive" (Lyttelton), "refreshing" (Debruge), and "stigma-free movie" (Dry) and it quickly gave rise to the question: "Can abortion be funny?" (Lipsitz). Interestingly, even in those rare cases of abortion comedy in film or television, women are not portrayed as choosing an abortion lightly, even though, as Jenny Singer notes, abortion is way too common nowadays to be so dramatically portrayed through fictional narratives. Therefore, it is notable that "[t]here is no mainstream comedy movie that laughs gleefully at the personal and often very painful decision that one out of every four women will make in her lifetime to have an abortion" (Singer). Even this limited, yet significant group of films that can fall under the label of abortion road trip comedies, and belong to a larger abortion comedy category, are evidence of the fact that now more than ever filmmakers want to provide the audience with a different take on abortion stories. Rachel Lee Goldenberg, director of *Unpregnant*, commented on her decision to portray abortion through comedy and highlighted that:

> So some of the criticism that we're making fun of abortion or laughing at abortion is sort of bad faith because that's not actually where any humor is coming from. The comedy that is coming from this journey is pointing out the difficulty, which I'm completely comfortable criticizing. (qtd. in Garcia-Navarro)

Whether it is the abortion procedure that is thoroughly explained in one of the most memorable scenes in *Unpregnant*, or contraception and access to the morning-after pill, as it is portrayed in *Plan B*, filmmakers are now embracing witty humor, which has the power to "undermine the authority of misogyny and sexism in constructing cultural narratives about women who have abortions" (Lane-McKinley) while at the same time highlighting and embracing the absurdity of all these obstacles. In other words, despite the fact that those narratives rely on the familiarity with the already established and well-known genres, such as the road trip film, comedies, and the rom-com, they aim, as Melissa Hair highlights, to challenge the viewers' perspective on reproductive politics (386). Both *Unpregnant* and *Plan B* were released after the country had already started watching continuous attacks on women's reproductive health rights, such as the Targeted Restriction of Abortion Provider (TRAP) laws enacted in Utah and Indiana in March 2020, or Florida's parental consent law that was put in effect in July 2020 (Ellmann). In fact, Jenni Hendriks, the author of the titular novel on which *Unpregnant* is based, was inspired to write that story due to her own dismay when she found out about the 72-hour waiting period that was imposed in South Dakota in 2011 for any person wishing to get an abortion (Roshell).

A pivotal moment occurs in *Unpregnant* when Veronica appears to be completely fed up with all the challenges she and Bailey have faced on their journey to the closest clinic in Albuquerque where parental consent is not a requirement for minors who wish to obtain an abortion, and she finally exclaims:

> This is a joke. I shouldn't be here! I should be able to just walk down the street and open a door and waltz right in and say: 'Hello, my name is Veronica. My boyfriend is an asshole. Here's my 500 dollars. Oh, oh, yes, I would love a cup of water, thank you so much. That's so sweet of you.' But no, nope! Instead, I literally had to drive 996 miles and now I'm stranded in this freaking field in the middle of nowhere. Why in the hell do you need parental consent to have an abortion, but not to actually birth a human child? Fuck you, Missouri State Legislature! (01:06:36–07:46)

The humor in these cases seems to act as a cultural and political commentary against the backdrop of the Trump administration in the US and the pronatalist discourse embedded in it. So, it is safe to say that the comedic nature of these films not only serves to amplify the voices of young women who desire to have an abortion and/or remain childfree, but also portray, as Hair observes, the experience of being a woman in the contemporary US-American political and cultural landscape (386).

One of the exceptions among this corpus of selected films and the newly formed canon of abortion road trip comedies is *Little Woods*. While being a road movie, *Little Woods* does not deal with the subject of abortion humorously. It is a female-centered film that highlights how the rise of anti-choice legislation during the Trump administration affected particularly women in North Dakota, one of the six US states with

only one abortion clinic (Jones et al. 134). Ollie is a woman of color whose probation is about to end after being incarcerated for dealing opioids, while her half-sister Deb lives in a trailer with her son and becomes pregnant by her abusive boyfriend. After Deb asks for Ollie's help in order to have an abortion, both women face enormous obstacles. *Little Woods* explores the limitations of the comedic mode and reveals that a film that deals not only with abortion bans but also the opioid crisis, poverty, race inequality, domestic abuse, and family relationships, cannot so easily rely on humor to tell a story. However, regardless of whether films choose a humorous depiction of the abortion issue or not, they reveal the exact same sentiment: a feeling of desperation on the part of women when they want to be in control of their own bodies but are denied that basic right.

What all these recent films discussed above show is that the focus of the narratives has shifted away from the discussion of whether or not to have an abortion and the trauma and regret of having had an abortion to the difficulties in obtaining one. Ollie never questions her sister's need and desire to have an abortion. Sage's grandmother is not interested in how or why her pregnancy occurred and immediately embraces her decision to have an abortion. When she finds out about Autumn's pregnancy, Autumn's cousin, Skylar, steals some cash from the grocery store she works at in order to buy bus tickets to New York for her and Autumn. Veronica's friend Bailey, as soon as she realizes her now estranged best friend is pregnant, offers to drive her to the nearest abortion clinic. Sunny, after realizing she will not be able to buy the morning-after pill at her local pharmacy, follows Lupe suggestion, and the two of them set off for the nearest Planned Parenthood facility. The overly dramatic representation of a woman's interior conflicts regarding the decision to have an abortion has now given place to external conflicts, such as restrictive abortion laws, the cost of the procedure, and the lack of trusted healthcare providers and organizations that promote and protect reproductive health rights. The comedic portrayals and the trope of the abortion road trip in general have contributed significantly to the effort to strip abortion of its stigma and provide a more realistic depiction of abortion nowadays.

The abortion road trip film has created a space for filmmakers to experiment with the conventions of abortion narratives by redirecting the focus of their films to the journey and the familial or friendship relationships between the female heroines, and not the decision-making around abortion or the procedure itself. However, the films highlighting the significance of solidarity and understanding between female characters can also obscure the very systemic problems these films seem to want to address. As Stephanie Herold et al. argue, "over-emphasizing the value of interpersonal support may take focus from the real legal, social, and cultural barriers that women

seeking abortions face" (944). Furthermore, even though these films offer a more nuanced depiction of the abortion issue than their predecessors, they still perpetuate certain stereotypes to the detriment of abortion reality for a lot of women in the US. *Grandma*, *Little Woods*, *Never Rarely Sometimes Always*, *Unpregnant*, and *Plan B*, each in its own way, "unintentionally obscure the demographics of people who seek abortions" (Singer) resulting in the misrepresentation of who is more impacted by the current abortion legislation. The most common demographic discrepancy is the fact that most abortion road trip films feature white female characters seeking an abortion, even though, according to Jenna Jerman et al., the majority of actual abortion patients in the US are people of color (6). The overrepresentation of white women in these narratives seems to continue the decades-long tradition of US-American road trip films, which almost all focused on white characters (Engle and Freeman 308). In fact, *Little Woods* and *Plan B* are the only of these films to feature women of color, although they constitute the demographic that is disproportionately affected by the racial injustices when seeking reproductive care. However, even when the character seeking an abortion is a person of color, Herold et al. observe that onscreen abortion depictions usually fail to address the challenges that systemic racism poses for non-white people of reproductive age (934). Furthermore, only *Little Woods* and *Never Rarely Sometimes Always* truly touch upon the financial barriers to abortion healthcare and "the economics of owning your own body" (Da Costa) by portraying female characters who do not have the means to have a safe and legal abortion, when faced with an unwanted pregnancy. While *Grandma*, too, features a female character who cannot afford an abortion, Sage is still depicted, as Hair observes, as a middle-class young woman from a highly educated family, who has the privilege of asking one of her family members for financial aid (392).

What is also underrepresented in abortion road trip films is the medication abortion. Among the five films discussed here, Sunny in *Plan B* is the only character to not seek a surgical abortion. However, she does not have or want a medical abortion either but, in fear of being pregnant, tries to have access to emergency contraception. Filmmakers showcase a certain preference for surgical abortion in films, even though medication abortion accounted for 53% of all US abortions in 2020 (Jones et al. 136). Of course, this narrative choice also has its upsides. For one, it allows viewers to witness the harsh realities that surround many abortion clinics in the US and explore "the impact of the zealous anti-choice movement in varying tones and degrees" (Upadhyaya). In *Grandma*, *Little Woods*, *Never Rarely Sometimes Always*, and *Unpregnant*, the female protagonists come across anti-choice protesters that usually stand outside the abortion clinic. *Never Rarely Sometimes Always* actually depicts a so-called crisis pregnancy center. They intentionally appear to be an abortion clinic but

are really a front for anti-abortion activists. For another, it lets filmmakers include an authentic depiction of an abortion procedure by actually entering the procedure room and placing the focus on the character's state of mind. In *Unpregnant*, a medical staff member describes the whole procedure step by step in order to put Veronica's mind at ease. What makes this scene particularly compelling is the way the preparatory process and the actual procedure are depicted step by step in a calm manner as the physician explains everything in an unexcited voice-over narration (*Unpregnant* 01:30:19–32:10). The certainty and peacefulness of the physician's voice stand in stark contrast with the previous chaotic unfolding of events in the film. As Andreescu highlights, this "aims to show that the abortion procedure itself is not difficult, what is difficult is getting there" (134). Both Autumn in *Never Rarely Sometimes Always* and Veronica in *Unpregnant* experience a quiet moment within the four walls of the surgical suite and among the medical practitioners around them. As is to be expected, the two women look stressed before the procedure begins but they stand by their choice and do not back out of their decision to obtain an abortion.

Finally, what all these five films have in common (and share with many filmic depictions of abortions since they first appeared in the film world) is the fact that the female characters who decide to have an abortion are either teenage girls or young women. Thus, the number of obstacles they face in their attempt to access a safe and legal abortion is depicted as a result of their own irresponsibility caused by their young age rather than the legal and medical system that has failed to support them. As Lane-McKinley points out, "the figure of the pregnant white teenager, in this sense, distracts from the correlation between abortion and poverty, and the reality that six out of ten women who have an abortion already have at least one child." Indeed, this observation reveals another significant factor that is commonly ignored or underrepresented in onscreen portrayals of abortion. Among the five films discussed here, Deb in *Little Woods* is the only character that is already a parent. Meanwhile, data shows that in the US more than 59% of abortions are obtained by women who have given birth at least once in their lifetime (Jerman et. al 6).

These discrepancies across race, class, and age between abortion road trip films and real data continue to make it difficult for viewers, especially female audiences, to relate to these fictional characters. In fact, it becomes even more challenging to define whether those inaccuracies serve the purpose of constructive criticism against the current wrongdoings in reproductive health care, or if they simply perpetuate the pronatalist ideology that has been in place for so many decades. Nonetheless, the abortion road trip film is extremely timely since abortion rights in the US are again under increasing attack. It has also provided the opportunity for a number of different genres, such as comedy, romantic comedy, road movie, and buddy film, to inter-

sect and interact with each other. Through its engagement with a number of problems and challenges of our era, the road trip film has evolved in order to accommodate more diverse and relevant narratives. At the same time, an abortion film renaissance took place, just as *Roe*'s vulnerability became evident in the eyes of filmmakers. Consequently, the abortion decision-making process is not necessarily the central narrative arc anymore. Each plot of the films discussed here focuses on the political and legal challenges women face when attempting to access reproductive healthcare in the US. These five abortion road trip films ultimately act as counter-narratives to earlier representations of abortion on screen and contribute to the formation of a general consensus, which requires narratives that do not validate the taboo around abortion choice and abortion discussion, but instead normalize and destigmatize abortion. Nonetheless, filmmakers still have a long way to go in order to be able to rid their stories of the dominant pronatalist ideology that keeps re-appearing due to the current sociopolitical circumstances. Even more than that, the political landscape needs to transform in ways that a zip code will no longer determine a woman's access to reproductive health care.

About the Author

Marina Zigneli is a graduate of the Department of English Language and Literature and holder of a Master's degree from the Film and Television Studies program at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. In her MA thesis, she discussed abortion narratives on contemporary US-American television. Since 2021, she has been working on the first doctoral thesis in Greece on Maria Plyta, the first female Greek director, and her oeuvre. In early 2023, she was appointed as a Visiting Researcher at Harvard University's Center for Hellenic Studies in Greece. Her research interests include audiovisual representations of gender, feminist theory, and film genres.

Peer Review

This article was reviewed by the issue's guest editor and one external reviewer.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Works Cited

Andreescu, Raluca. "Abortion Travels in Contemporary American Cinema: Parental Consent and the Bumpy Ride to Termination in Eliza Hittman's *Never Rarely Sometimes Always* and Rachel Lee Goldenberg's *Unpregnant*." *American, British and Canadian Studies*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2022, pp. 117–38, doi.org/10.2478/abcsj-2022-0007.

Beale, Lewis. "Maude's Abortion Fades Into History." *Chicago Tribune*, 13 Nov. 1992, www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1992-11-13-9204130017-story.html.

Cartwright, Alice F., et al. "Identifying National Availability of Abortion Care and Distance from Major US Cities: Systematic Online Search." *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, vol. 20, no. 5, 2018, doi.org/10.2196/jmir.9717.

Cheung, Kylie. "From 'Plan B' to 'Grandma,' 5 Abortion Road Trip Movies That Reflect Our Frustrating Reality." *Salon*, 6 June 2021, www.salon.com/2021/06/06/abortion-road-trip-movies-plan-b-unpregnant-grandma/.

Clark, Emily. "The New 'Abortion Road Trip' Movie Trend Seeks to Normalize Abortion for Young Girls." *Plugged In*, 29 Sept. 2020, www.pluggedin.com/blog/the-new-abortion-road-trip-movie-trend-seeks-to-normalize-abortion-for-young-girls/.

Colangelo, B. J. "The Growing Cinematic Trend Of The Abortion Road Trip Movie Is Our Bleak Reality." *SlashFilm*, 3 May 2022, www.slashfilm.com/852167/the-growing-cinematic-trend-of-the-abortion-road-trip-movie-is-our-bleak-reality/.

Da Costa, Cassie. "With Plan B, the Teen Pro-Choice Road Trip Movie Rolls On." *Vanity Fair*, 28 May 2021, www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2021/05/the-teen-pro-choice-road-trip-movie-rolls-on.

Debruge, Peter. "Sundance Film Review: 'Obvious Child.'" *Variety* (blog), 26 Jan. 2014, variety.com/2014/film/markets-festivals/sundance-film-review-obvious-child-1201071042/.

Deffenbacher, Kristina. "Reproductive Rights in Road Narratives and Comedies." *PopMatters* (blog), 29 June 2022, www.popmatters.com/reproductive-rights-road-narratives-comedies.

Dry, Rachel. "Jenny Slate, Gillian Robespierre on 'Obvious Child,' Their Abortion Movie – with Jokes." *Washington Post*, 13 June 2014, www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/jenny-slate-gillian-robespierre-on-obvious-child-their-abortion-movie-with-jokes/2014/06/12/3c8cbac8-f240-11e3-9ebc-2ee6f81ed217_story.html.

Ellmann, Nora. "State Actions Undermining Abortion Rights in 2020." *Center for American Progress*, 27 Aug. 2020, www.americanprogress.org/article/state-actions-undermining-abortion-rights-2020/.

Engle, Olivia, and Cordelia Freeman. "'All This Way, All This Money, for a Five-Minute Procedure': Barriers, Mobilities, and Representation on the US Abortion Road Trip." *Mobilities*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2022, pp. 297–311, doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2022.2092887.

Garcia-Navarro, Lulu. "Rachel Lee Goldenberg On Directing A Road Trip Comedy About Abortion." *NPR*, 13 Sept. 2020, www.npr.org/2020/09/13/912424771/rachel-lee-goldenberg-on-directing-a-road-trip-comedy-about-abortion.

Grandma. Directed by Paul Weitz, Sony Pictures Classics, 2015.

Hair, Melissa. "'I'd like an Abortion Please': Rethinking Unplanned Pregnancy Narratives in Contemporary American Cinema." *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 19, no. 3, 2019, pp. 380–95, doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2018.1465444.

Haynes, Suyin. "How a Crop of New Movies Is Changing the Narrative About Abortion." *Time*, 13 Mar. 2020, time.com/5799385/abortion-onscreen-representation/.

Herold, Stephanie, et al. "'I Can't Believe Your Mixed Ass Wasn't on the Pill!': Race and Abortion on American Scripted Television, 2008–2019." *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 22, no. 4, 2022, pp. 932–48, doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2020.1856908.

Jerman, Jenna, et al. "Characteristics of US Abortion Patients in 2014 and Changes Since 2008." Guttmacher Institute, May 2016, www.guttmacher.org/report/characteristics-us-abortion-patients-2014.

Jones, Rachel K., et al. "Abortion Incidence and Service Availability in the United States, 2020." *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health*, vol. 54, no. 4, 2022, pp. 128–41, doi/10.1363/psrh.12215.

Juno. Directed by Jason Reitman, Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2007.

Kirby, David A. "Regulating Cinematic Stories about Reproduction: Pregnancy, Childbirth, Abortion and Movie Censorship in the US, 1930–1958." *The British Journal for the History of Science*, vol. 50, no. 03, 2017, pp. 451–72, doi.org/10.1017/S0007087417000814.

Kirstein, Marielle, et al. "100 Days Post-*Roe*: At Least 66 Clinics Across 15 US States Have Stopped Offering Abortion Care." Guttmacher Institute, 2022, www.guttmacher.org/2022/10/100-days-post-roe-least-66-clinics-across-15-us-states-have-stopped-offering-abortion-care.

Kokonis, Michalis. "Hollywood's Major Crisis and the American Film 'Renaissance.'" *Gramma: Journal of Theory and Criticism*, vol. 16, 2008, pp. 169–206, ejournals.lib.auth.gr, doi.org/10.26262/gramma.v16i0.6435.

Laderman, David. *Driving Visions: Exploring the Road Movie*. U of Texas P, 2002.

———. "What a Trip: The Road Film and American Culture." *Journal of Film and Video*, vol. 48, no. 1/2, 1996, pp. 41–57, www.jstor.org/stable/20688093.

Lane-McKinley, Madeline. "'Comediennes' (III): Abortion Comedies." *Blind Field Journal*, 2015, blindfieldjournal.com/2015/09/23/comediennes-iii-abortion-comedies/.

Leave Her to Heaven. Directed by John M. Stahl, 20th Century Fox, 1945.

Lipsitz, Raina. "Can Abortion Be Funny?" *Al Jazeera America*, 6 July 2014, america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2014/6/abotion-comedy-obviouschild.html.

Little Woods. Directed by Nia DaCosta, Neon, 2019.

Lyttelton, Oliver. "Obvious Child Review – Smart, Progressive and Sensitive." *Little White Lies*, 29 Aug. 2014, lwlies.com/reviews/obvious-child/.

Men in White. Directed by Richard Boleslawski, Metro Goldwyn Mayer, 1934.

Nash, Melanie Leigh. *The Woman's Film, the New Women's Cinema, and the Women's Buddy Film*. 1994. U of British Columbia, PhD disseration.

Never Rarely Sometimes Always. Directed by Eliza Hittman, Universal Pictures, 2020.

Plan B. Directed by Natalie Morales, Hulu, 2021.

Planned Parenthood. *Red Alert: Abortion Access Is at Stake for Nearly Half of US Women and People Who Can Become Pregnant*, 2021, www.plannedparenthood.org/uploads/filer_public/8e/24/8e241a38-af52-4c89-b299-5a02c0453adf/210927-2021-red-alert-report-english-v4.pdf.

Roberts, Shari. "Western Meats Eastwood: Genre and Gender on the Road." *The Road Movie Book*, edited by Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark, Routledge, 1997, pp. 45–69.

Roshell, Starshine. "'Unpregnant': Born of Political Rage." *The Santa Barbara Independent* (blog), 17 Sept. 2019, www.independent.com/2019/09/17/unpregnant-born-of-political-rage/.

Sachs, Kat. "Notebook Primer: Abortion in Cinema on Notebook | MUBI." *Mubi*, 14 Oct. 2022, mubi.com/notebook/posts/notebook-primer-abortion-in-cinema.

Singer, Jenny. "From 'Unpregnant' to 'Obvious Child,' 'Abortion Comedies' Are Here to Stay." *Glamour*, 10 Sept. 2020, www.glamour.com/story/unpregnant-obvious-child-abortion-comedies.

Sloan, Kay, et al. "The Hand That Rocks the Cradle: The Original Continuity, with Introduction." *Film History*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1987, pp. 341–66, www.jstor.org/stable/3814988.

Stamp, Shelley. "Taking Precautions, or Regulating Early Birth-Control Films." *A Feminist Reader in Early Cinema*, edited by Jennifer M. Bean and Diane Negra, Duke UP, 2002, pp. 270–97.

The Curse of Eve. Directed by Frank Beal, State Rights, 1917.

The Doctor and the Girl. Directed by Curtis Bernhardt, Metro Goldwyn Mayer, 1949.

The Hand that Rocks the Cradle. Directed by Lois Weber and Phillips Smalley, Universal Film, 1917.

Thoma, Pamela. "Buying up Baby: Modern Feminine Subjectivity, Assertions of 'Choice,' and the Repudiation of Reproductive Justice in Postfeminist Unwanted Pregnancy Films." *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 9, no. 4, 2009, pp. 409–25, doi.org/10.1080/14680770903233001.

Tompkins, Jane. *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns*. Oxford UP, 1993.

Unpregnant. Directed by Rachel Lee Goldenberg, HBO Max, 2020.

Upadhyaya, Kayla Kumari. "How The 'Abortion Road Trip' Movie Became An Instant Classic." *Refinery29*, 20 Oct. 2020, www.refinery29.com/en-us/2020/10/10015436/abortion-road-trip-movie-trend.

Where Are My Children? Directed by Phillips Smalley and Lois Weber, Lois Weber Productions, 1916.

Journal of the Austrian Association for American Studies
vol. 5, no. 1, 2023, pp. 56-77
doi: 10.47060/jaaas.v5i1.177

'Damned If We Do, Damned If We Don't': Ageist Narratives of Reproductive Control

Sandra Tausel

ABSTRACT

Women who grow up in Western societies are confronted with media, cultural, and literary narratives conveying the notion that motherhood is "natural" and an integral part of womanhood from a very young age. Thus, having a child is frequently presented as the only option for adult women. Nancy Felipe Russo calls this "the motherhood mandate," which problematically suggests that every woman wants to become a mother and that this "is a woman's raison d'être" (144). The normative conflation of womanhood with the obligatory assumption of motherhood is ingrained in North American society and reinforces rigid gender norms while exposing hegemonic reproductive expectations. These norms also extend into efforts to control reproduction and produce condemning, frequently ageist narratives that stigmatize those whose reproductive choices do not comply with heteropatriarchal norms. Therefore, this article proposes that age is a crucial lever of reproductive control and examines how ageist facets of such controlling efforts affect characters' lives in Brit Bennett's *The Mothers* and Sheila Heti's *Motherhood*. Based on the reproductive choices in *The Mothers* and *Motherhood*, I will argue that the ageist reproductive norms and concomitant stigmatizing narratives aim to exert reproductive control, on the one hand, by suggesting that young women are damned if they become pregnant, mothers, or have an abortion, and, on the other, by condemning adult women who decide to remain childfree.

KEYWORDS

Reproductive justice, abortion, childfree by choice, ageism

From a very young age, women[1] who grow up in Western societies are confronted with media, cultural, and literary narratives conveying the notion that motherhood is "natural" and an integral part of womanhood. Thus, having a child is seldom presented as one option among many. The language surrounding reproduction can create ageist, pronatalist pressure that situates having children not as a question of *if* but *when*. In her book *(M)Otherhood: On the Choices of Being a Woman*, Pragya Agarwal recounts a car ride during which her three-year-old daughter explains that Susie, presumably her preschool teacher, told her that one day she "will have a baby in [her] tummy" (17). Agarwal resents Susie "for drilling . . . into [her] child that every woman will be pregnant one day" (18). Agarwal's anecdote suggests that the conceptualization of womanhood in Western societies not only implies but demands motherhood as reflected in (popular) culture, literature, film, and television. Building on this patriarchal demand, Nancy Felipe Russo has coined the term "motherhood mandate" to critically interrogate the notion that every woman wants to become a mother and that motherhood "is a woman's raison d'être" (144).

Importantly, socio-cultural expectations also enforce a duality of temporal restrictions determining *when* a woman *should* become a mother. While children assigned female at birth are incentivized early, as Agarwal's daughter is, to imagine future motherhood, young adult women-identified persons are vehemently discouraged from and stigmatized for becoming pregnant. In adulthood, this form of ageist discrimination is juxtaposed by the stigmatization beleaguering women and individuals who may not want to have children. Thus, the normative conflation of womanhood with motherhood, ingrained in North American society, reinforces ageist gender norms while exposing heteropatriarchal reproductive expectations. These norms ultimately aim to control reproduction and produce condemning narratives stigmatizing those who make "deviating" choices.

This article proposes that age is a crucial lever of reproductive control that determinately affects actual and fictional lived experiences. Therefore, my aim is to examine how ageist facets of such controlling efforts affect the characters' lives in Brit Bennett's US-American novel *The Mothers* (2016) and Sheila Heti's Canadian autofictional novel *Motherhood* (2018). While gender and economic status crucially influence the analysis of characters' reproductive choices in both works, they also echo

[1] Writing about women, motherhood, and reproduction is accompanied by terminological difficulties and exclusionary heteropatriarchal thought structures. Therefore, I want to clarify that my usage of "woman/women" includes cis, trans, and queer women, white, Black and Indigenous women, women of color, women living with disabilities and neurodivergence, and all women-identified individuals. However, my use of "woman/women" does not assume that women's lived experiences with womanhood, motherhood/parenthood, or reproduction are the same. I also want to acknowledge the continued marginalization of trans and non-binary individuals in discussions surrounding reproductive issues. While the characters in the novels analyzed in this article identify with their gender assigned to them at birth, I will include gender-neutral language wherever applicable.

Rickie Solinger's assertion that "reproductive capacity" (1) carries "different meanings, depending on the age of individuals, [and] their race . . ." (1). Focusing on different meanings based on age, I will argue that *The Mothers* and *Motherhood* highlight ageist reproductive norms by addressing two stigmatizing narratives: what I call "damned-if-we-do" and "damned-if-we-don't" narratives, which both fault women for not complying with heteropatriarchal and chrononormative reproductive choices. The former illustrates that the societal stigmatization of young women (characters) who become pregnant, mothers, or have an abortion function as a controlling measure of young reproduction. *The Mothers* exemplifies how young adult women's reproductive choices are racialized, complicated by the lack of comprehensive sex education and low-threshold access to reproductive health care, and ultimately controlled by the stigmatization of young adult pregnancy and motherhood. Therefore, I propose expanding Russo's notion of "the motherhood mandate" to include normative socio-cultural and patriarchal structures that hegemonically prescribe *not* having children up to a certain age. Meanwhile, *Motherhood*'s "damned-if-we-don't" narrative illustrates that the promotion of pronatalist norms continues to forcefully orient adult women's lives towards motherhood. Women like Heti, who consider remaining childfree[2] by choice, therefore, frequently experience harmful stigmatization and devaluation based on the gendered reproductive expectations tied to age. Thus, the "damned-if-we-do" and the "damned-if-we-don't" narratives suggest that the societal perception of (women's) age functions oppressively and produces ageist forms of reproductive control.

(Ageist) Reproductive Control

In the US, women's bodies are construed as sites of social control, and the stigmatization of women whom society perceives to transgress heteropatriarchal gendered norms forcefully extends into discourses of reproductive health and motherhood. Angus McLaren, for instance, argues that fertility was "*always* controlled" (2, original emphasis) and that reproductive control is a universal facet of social life (3). These controlling mechanisms are inextricably linked to social identities, such as gender, race, class, (dis)ability, and age, and are evident in women's reproductive choices. Dominant discourses frequently stigmatize young adult pregnancies and disparagingly refer to young pregnant women as social problems, illustrating the discriminating instrumentalization of age. According to Jenna Vinson, age is one of the factors that determines how pregnancy and motherhood are perceived (xiv). Thus, while women bearing children between the ages of approximately twenty-five and thirty-

[2] I will use the term "childfree" throughout the article to avoid the implication of lack inherent in "childless." However, I also want to reject the sometimes-suggested implication that "childfree" implies a dislike of children.

five represent the norm, Vinson argues that hegemonic ideologies tied to reproduction and age detrimentally affect the societal perception of "young" (aged twenty and younger) and "older" (aged thirty-five and above) mothers (xiv). Accordingly, women who choose not to have children also experience a unique form of reproductive oppression. As such, a woman's age determines societal reproductive expectations, and deviations from these ideological norms frequently entail condemnation, discrimination, and stigmatization.

Examining how ageist discourses function to control reproduction presupposes an understanding of how age intersects with other social identity categories to obstruct reproductive justice[3]. According to Loretta J. Ross, one of the twelve Black feminist activists who coined "reproductive justice" in 1994, the term "is rooted in the belief that systemic inequality has always shaped people's decision making around childbearing and parenting . . ." (291). Ross (291) and Himani Bhakuni (1) assert that structural forces (e.g., colonialism, racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and poverty) and intersecting social identity categories (e.g., gender, gender identity, ethnicity, sexual orientation, [dis]ability, carceral status, and age) continuously impact women's bodily autonomy and reproductive choices. Therefore, age is not an isolated factor but a category that powerfully intersects with other oppressive forces to create unique forms of reproductive control. Ageist controlling mechanisms produce conflicting narratives that have the potential to negatively affect a woman's reproductive choices and broader issues of reproductive justice tied to systemic inequalities. Accordingly, the damned-if-we-do and the damned-if-we-don't narratives, stigmatizing non-normative reproductive choices, reflect the dominant hegemonic attitudes toward reproduction and bodies with reproductive capacity. Therefore, young women's pregnancies, mothering, and abortions are typically framed as mistakes. Meanwhile, adult women who remain childfree, especially between twenty-five and thirty-five, but also later in life, experience the potentially harmful effects of pronatalist reproductive imperatives. Accordingly, both narratives create a societal divide that aims to regulate women's reproduction through different forms of stigmatization.

Damned If We Do

Pronatalist socialization and the introduction of hegemonic ideas of motherhood in early childhood often stigmatize younger individuals who have (un)intended

[3] In *Reproductive Justice: An Introduction*, Loretta J. Ross and Rickie Solinger explain that the concept of reproductive justice exceeds US-American pro-life and pro-choice discourses (9) and in her article "Reproductive Justice as Intersectional Feminist Activism," Ross further specifies that reproductive justice has its basis in "three interconnected sets of human rights: (1) the right to have a child under the conditions of one's choosing; (2) the right not to have a child using birth control, abortion, or abstinence; and (3) the right to parent children in safe and healthy environments free from violence by individuals or the state" (290).

pregnancies and engage in the practice of mothering. Such mothering, according to Adrienne Rich, may conform to or resist the patriarchal institution of motherhood (13), which Lynn O'Brien Hallstein et al. assert to be "male defined and controlled and . . . deeply oppressive to women" (2). A return to Agarwal's example shows that pronatalist ideas of motherhood influence children's upbringing, are internalized, and reproduced later in life. While Russo's motherhood mandate may be introduced during childhood, US-American society is equally intent on exerting reproductive control by preventing young women's pregnancies. These prevention programs, albeit important, very often neglect the Guttmacher Institute's recommendation to provide "evidence-based, holistic and nonstigmatizing information, education and services" ("Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health"). Instead, many efforts, such as the infamous 2013 NYC Human Resources Administration campaign, aim to control young people's sexuality and reproduction by promoting abstinence or employing scare tactic statistics, shameful tropes of teenage pregnancy, and young mothers' stigmatization.

Such practices reflect the US-American ideological divide regarding (young) women's bodily autonomy, reproductive health, justice, and choices. Leslie M. Kantor and Laura Lindberg assert that deep-seated disagreements on young people's sex and reproductive health education result in varying degrees of information depending on school district and state (147). Tellingly, the US-American abstinence-only-until-marriage (AOUM) approach[4], implemented at the end of the 1990s, is still a content requirement in sex education today. Despite its ineffectiveness (Santelli et al. 400), AOUM remains relevant alongside more comprehensive sex education approaches in forty US-American states (Guttmacher Institute, "Sex and HIV Education"). Kelli Stidham Hall et al. assert that the AOUM approach "withholds information about condoms and contraception, promotes religious ideologies and gender stereotypes, and stigmatizes adolescents with nonheteronormative sexual identities" (595). The approach is also exclusionary because it marginalizes LGBTQIA+ identified, transgender, and nonbinary individuals and stigmatizes sexually active young people. Promoting sexual abstinence in sex education exerts reproductive control by positing extramarital sex and sexual activity as shameful. John S. Santelli et al. argue that the religious connotations of AOUM frame abstinence as virtuous and necessarily juxtapose having sex as the opposite (402). Thus, the stigmatization of young pregnant individuals and mothers stems from the widespread societal belief in youthful abstinence and the stigma associated with unintended pregnancies and young motherhood.

[4] Today, this approach is also known under "sexual risk avoidance programs," however, as the goal, preventing sex before marriage, remains the same AOUM will be used throughout the article.

Accordingly, the damned-if-we-do narrative – having sex, becoming pregnant, having an abortion or becoming a mother, and mothering or parenting during adolescence or young adulthood – is a societal and institutionally condemned narrative tied to age-based patriarchal motherhood standards. Positing young unintended pregnancies as (traumatizing) cautionary tales has time and again been employed as a ubiquitous trope or storyline. Correspondingly, Vinson argues that teenage pregnancy and young motherhood are predominantly depicted as "the downfall of a woman's life" (4). She further states that any deviation from the hegemonically acknowledged narrative is typically framed as a failure (4). Meanwhile, young motherhood or choosing not to have a child by obtaining an abortion are often also heavily stigmatized. According to Katrina Kimport, abortion stigma in the US builds on preexisting gender inequalities and defies patriarchal ideals "of women as innately maternal" (619). Kimport further asserts that stigma is based on assumed deviance from dominant socio-cultural values and norms, which subjects people who have an abortion to marginalization and social shaming (615). Measures of reproductive control involving the devaluation of bodily autonomy in reproductive health care choices influenced by societal values, religious convictions, policies, and judicial decisions (especially the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in 2022) as well as ageist norms, entrenches young pregnant and mothering people in damning narratives intent on reaffirming hegemonic ideas of motherhood.

These narratives are reproduced in literary works, which frequently deal with their young protagonist's pregnancies. Especially contemporary Young Adult novels, such as Isabel Quintero's *Gabi, Girl in Piece* (2014), E. K. Johnston's *Exit, Pursued by a Bear* (2016), and Angie Thomas's *Concrete Rose* (2022), address pregnancy and abortion as a reproductive health care choice. However, such portrayals are often controversial and, thus, convey the power of pronatalist discourses. According to Elizabeth Podnieks's and Andrea O'Reilly's research in *Textual Mothers / Maternal Texts*, adult fiction authors, alongside scholarship in motherhood studies, have "contributed to reconceptualizing motherhood" (4). Podnieks and O'Reilly advocate for unmasking motherhood as an institution and foregrounding mothering as a diverse practice and experience (5). Indeed, contemporary novels emphasize diverse experiences and bodily autonomy while negotiating contested reproductive issues. Michael Burke's argument that fictional mothers consistently elicit a significant affective response during reading (103–06) further emphasizes their cultural, societal, and literary significance. Age, especially during adolescence and young adulthood, complicates mother-ing narratives because it is crucial in exerting reproductive control and influencing women's reproductive choices.

Brit Bennett's *The Mothers* is an excellent example of how age functions in a narrative that highlights the expression and internalization of reproductive control applicable during young adulthood. Bennett's novel, set in Southern California, frequently switches from the present to narrate past events. The plot initially focuses on the Turner family and emphasizes the importance of mothers, motherhood, and forms of mothering within the Black church community of Upper Room. *The Mothers*, therefore, shows how shaming and hegemonic racialized reproductive discourses contribute to controlling young characters' reproductive choices. Bennett juxtaposes Elise Turner's past narrative of young motherhood with her young adult daughter's unintended pregnancy and abortion in the present. The characters' decisions are positioned against the backdrop of Upper Room's community and, specifically, the church mothers, whose voice personifies some of the US-American (religious) tenets of reproductive control.

"We didn't believe when we first heard because you know how church folk can gossip" begins Bennett's novel (7), letting readers in on a secret that the church mothers talk about in one unified voice. Resembling a Greek chorus, they invoke the knowledge of multiple generations of Black women and their experiences with religion, men, relationships, pregnancy, motherhood, and mothering. The unique narrative perspective of first-person plural narration situates the mothers as the collective voice of Upper Room. What Natalya Bekhta calls the "we-narrative" "expresses multiple subjectivities in their unity" (loc. 15). According to Bekhta, we-narratives thematize communal conflicts involving confrontation with "an outsider or misfit" (loc. 16–17). In *The Mothers*' case, the "misfit" is Elise Turner's seventeen-year-old daughter, Nadia Turner. Through the church mothers' eyes, the novel's beginnings focus on Nadia's growing alienation from Upper Room after her mother's suicide. After the funeral, the shocked church mothers dote on Nadia and her father, thereby illustrating a community-based understanding of mothering involving (child) care and bringing food to grieving community members (Bennett 33). The mothers – "some by heart, some by womb" (33) – form a network of women who mother Upper Room Chapel and its community. Brit Bennett's novel, thus, centralizes women who become mothers by choice, circumstance, and necessity, those who are present and absent, and also women who choose to remain childfree.

The mothers, the novel's unified narrators, are not omniscient but claim a morally authoritative, often judgmental, stance that casts Nadia as a misfit due to their limited insight. Accordingly, they call her a "reckless daughter" (Bennett 56) and surmise she is "wild" (55) after the young woman drunkenly crashes her father's truck. However, in an instance of dramatic irony, readers know that the car crash happens after Nadia has an abortion and her boyfriend, Luke Sheppard, abandons her at the clinic

after her appointment. Nadia also distinctly remembers that her adolescent behavior often elicited the church mothers' disapproval. One specific flashback illustrates the Upper Room community's efforts to control young women's sexuality. Mrs. Sheppard, the pastor's wife and Upper Room's first lady, caught the thirteen-year-old Nadia kissing a boy behind the church. At the time, Mrs. Sheppard tells her that "nice girls don't do that" (69), while the Sunday school teacher makes Nadia write out "[*m*]*y body is a temple*" (69, original emphasis) a hundred times. The church community enforces religious and traditionally gendered sexual norms that reprimand and shame young women for their perceived non-conformity. Learning about what happened, Elise, who had Nadia as a teenager, also emphasized, if not abstinence, then the need to be smart and especially not to "end up [pregnant] like [she] did" (70).

Nadia's memory shows that kissing, being sexually active, and especially becoming pregnant as a young woman are heavily stigmatized within her (religious) community and framed as a failure by Elise. Instead of suggesting preventative measures that involve evidence-based sex education, Nadia's environment emphasizes the abstinence-only-until-marriage approach and propagates damning controlling narratives. Contrary to Russo's motherhood mandate, young Nadia faces a specific form of reproductive control mandating chastity and non-motherhood. The stigmatizing and shameful rhetoric surrounding sex and pregnancy, as well as her mother's words, profoundly impact how Nadia perceives her mother's life in relation to her own:

> But her mother was seventeen when she'd gotten pregnant. She must've known from experience how that had hurt her own parents. And if getting pregnant was the most harmful thing Nadia could do, then how much pain had her unexpected arrival caused? How much had she ruined her mother's life, if her mother told her that a baby was the worst thing that could happen to her? (Bennett 70)

Nadia's storyline begins to mirror her mother's once she secretly starts dating Mrs. Sheppard's son, Luke, and becomes pregnant unexpectedly. However, unlike Elise, Nadia decides to have an abortion as soon as she discovers her pregnancy. On the one hand, she does not "want to be heavy with another person's life" (345), indicating a desire to be childfree. Conversely, "heavy" may also allude to the societally emphasized difficulties of being a young mother. Nadia decides not to "let this baby nail her life in place when she'd just been given a chance to escape" (22) by going to college. Nevertheless, the young woman's pregnancy, only disclosed to Luke, triggers internalized stigmatizing discourses surrounding young adult pregnancy. Nadia also recalls her own evaluative perception of pregnant classmates she has known: "She had seen them waddling around school in tight tank tops and sweatshirts that hugged their bellies. She never saw the boys who had gotten them that way . . . but she could never unsee the girls, big and blooming in front of her" (20). Nadia's poignant

awareness of societal stigmatizing but also racialized rhetoric surrounding teenage pregnancy is particularly evident at the free pregnancy center:

> [The nurse] must've thought Nadia was an idiot – another Black girl too dumb to insist on a condom. But they had used condoms, at least most times, and Nadia felt stupid for how comfortable she had felt with their mostly safe sex. She was supposed to be the smart one. She was supposed to understand that it only took one mistake and her future could be ripped away from her. . . . she should have known better. She was her mother's mistake. (20)

In this paragraph, framing young adult pregnancy as a mistake undergirded by persistent racial stereotypes related to young Black women's pregnancies shows that Nadia has internalized a uniquely damning narrative. Accordingly, Shameka Poetry Thomas argues that reproductive stratification, caused by racist commodification and devaluation of Black reproductivity during slavery, still creates reproductive injustices and reprimands Black women's reproduction today (18). Therefore, Nadia's shame surrounding her pregnancy is racialized and connected to ageist parameters of white patriarchal reproduction. In this context, Wendy Luttrell notes that the societal emphasis on a linear life path involving education, secure employment, marriage, and parenting, frames non-linear conceptions of young people's lives as "abnormal, problematic, or deviant rather than adaptive or resilient" (x). Accordingly, Loretta I. Winters and Paul C. Winters assert that the alarmist overemphasis on deviance has institutionalized adolescent and young adult pregnancy as a social problem (1). It is significant that such racialized and ageist narratives remain dominant (Winters and Winters 1), even though scholars, including Isaac Maddow-Zimet and Kathryn Kost, have found that young adult pregnancies are steadily declining[5] (3).

Since the 1990s, young adult pregnancies have also been framed as the cause of poverty, especially among young Black women (Vinson 62). This supposed causality has since been criticized among scholars. For example, Winters and Winters assert that Black young adults have problematically been depicted "as the model for the problem of teen pregnancy" (11). While the CDC records a disparity in birth rates among fifteen- to nineteen-year-olds that correlates with race and ethnicity (Division of Reproductive Health), Winters and Winters as well as Lee Smithbattle emphasize that preceding structural inequalities, including socio-economic precarity, poverty, and racism, affect these rates and limit access to all forms of reproductive health care (76; 11). Nadia's thoughts, therefore, reflect the internalization of alarmist media and political rhetoric that associates Black young adult pregnancy with a lack of individual responsibility, failure, and a less-than-prosperous future. Her mother's reproductive history further complicates the young woman's perception. Already

[5] In fact, 2017 marked the year of the fewest pregnancies for women aged twenty-four or younger in the United States (Maddow-Zimet and Kost 3)

accepted to the University of Michigan, Nadia is sure she wants to have an abortion, but her thoughts, nevertheless, align with socially and racially discriminatory stigmatization and specific ageist mechanisms of reproductive control. Aware of her environment's stigmatizing discourses and religious convictions, Nadia keeps her unintended pregnancy and abortion secret, while Luke discloses the pregnancy to his parents, who pay for the abortion. The baby that could have been becomes the catalyst for the varying antagonistic relationships between Nadia, Luke, her father, her best friend, Aubrey, Mrs. Sheppard, and the mothers at Upper Room.

Years later, when Nadia's abortion becomes public, the mothers are "disgusted but not shocked" (Bennett 350), highlighting the stigmatization of abortion in their community – a potential mirror of US-American culture. Race crucially influences the politics and narratives of reproductive control and directly affects Nadia before, during, and after her abortion. In that regard, Patricia Hill Collins argues that racism propelled by slavery, forced removals, exploitative labor, and draconian immigration policies still affects Black, Native, Indigenous, Latine[6], and Asian American women's pregnancies, motherhood, and mothering (57–58). Hill Collins further asserts that Black women have continuously struggled for bodily autonomy (e.g., the right to decide whether to have children or not) and maternal empowerment (e.g., the right to keep wanted children) while raising their children in a racist, predominantly white society (63–64), as reflected in *The Mothers*. Angela Davis also asserts that the eugenics movement and sterilization abuse during the 20th century lastingly shaped Black reproduction (353–65). Consequently, the racist history of reproductive control exerted on Black communities and religious beliefs may influence Bennett's church mothers' stance. They also articulate how dominant ageist narratives and scare tactics influenced their views on young pregnancy, mothering, and abortion from a young age:

> We'd seen pregnant women before but pregnancy worn on a girl's body was different, the globe of a belly hanging over cotton panties embroidered with tiny pink bows. For years, we'd flinched when boys touched us, afraid that even a hand on our thigh would invite that thing upon us. But if we had become sent-off girls, we would have borne it like they did, returning home mothers. The white girls ended up in trouble as often as us colored girls. But at least we had the decency to keep our troubles. (Bennett 350–51)

Ultimately, the mothers' opinion is informed by a discriminatory history that deprived Black women of bodily autonomy while simultaneously personifying religious viewpoints that employ age-based reproductive control by advocating abstinence and pronatalism. Their unified narrative voice makes it clear that Nadia's choices are

[6] I use "Latine" instead of "Latinx" in an effort to better adhere to English and Spanish pronunciation (particularly in the plural) and to support efforts aiming to provide gender-neutral option by using -e instead of -o and -a. For more information see Samantha Schmidt's "A Language for All."

incongruous with her community's values. Nadia does not regret her decision to have an abortion, and the novel suggests that she remains childfree by choice as an adult. However, Nadia still occasionally imagines the course of her unborn baby's life. When her best friend, Aubrey, happily becomes pregnant with Luke's child years later, Nadia compares their differing situations, thinking "magic you wanted was a miracle, magic you didn't want was a haunting" (345). Consequently, Nadia is haunted by her mother's unlived life and that of her unborn baby. However, Bennett's novel is also about reproductive choices within a Black church community, where the mothers, or as Hill Collins would call them, "community othermothers" (380), figure prominently and personify religious and societally conservative discourses of ageist reproductive control. Nadia's exposure to racialized, stigmatizing, and ageist narratives of young adult reproduction suggests that young women who deviate from a normative reproductive life may be damned *whatever* they do.

Damned If We Don't

Age becomes a determining factor that shifts reproductive demands as time passes in *The Mothers*. While Nadia's reproductive choices are partly controlled by her youth, her best friend, Aubrey, experiences fertility issues compounded by the social imperative for a married adult woman to have a child only a few years later. According to Rebecca Harrington, women who do not have children due to circumstance (i.e., infertility or other involuntary reasons) primarily elicit pity (28). Nevertheless, a devout Aubrey is confronted with pronatalist expectations within her community and desperately wishes for a child. Until she eventually becomes pregnant, Aubrey blames herself[7], which illustrates how the motherhood mandate affects the character's well-being and can trigger shame as well as an involuntary alienation from the norms of heteropatriarchal womanhood. The church mothers also continue to scrutinize Nadia's adult life from afar and strongly disapprove of her implied decision to remain childfree, which perpetuates the character's status as a misfit within her former congregation. The charged language used to describe Nadia, who, in her thirties, has seemingly "*never settled down*" because she was "*flitting around* the world . . . *never resting* anywhere" (Bennett 353, my emphases), conveys the ageist devaluation of childfree adult individuals based on pronatalist anxieties and biases. Similarly to Nadia, thirty-seven-year-old Sheila Heti observes the shift of reproductive expecta-

[7] In the novel, Aubrey blames herself and her body for not being able to conceive, because she knows that her husband, Luke, "had made a baby before, accidentally . . ." (Bennett 261). Unbeknownst to Aubrey, Nadia is the young woman who was pregnant with Luke's baby. This secret and Nadia and Luke's eventually revealed affair, while the latter is married to Aubrey, creates an antagonistic relationship between the three characters.

tions according to age in *Motherhood*. The novel reveals predominant ageist and pronatalist biases, which trigger a firm insistence on motherhood.

Motherhood is a work of autofiction, which Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf defines as the interrelation between real life and fiction that creates an experimental space for self-exploration (7–21). Fittingly, the novel's narrator and protagonist, arguably Heti herself, is a writer who composes stream-of-consciousness diary-like entries that explore the (im)possibility of having a child. The entries consist of the protagonist's intimate reflections but also include her friends' experiences and address North American societal prescriptions to have children as an adult. An intricate coin-flipping game, reminiscent of *I Ching*, divines answers for the many (reproductive) questions Heti poses and structures the narrative as she conducts a dialogue inside, as Alexandra Schwartz writes, "a divided mind." *Motherhood* results from the protagonist's dedication to her writing and preoccupation with (not) having a child. As in *The Mothers*, age-related measures of reproductive control play a crucial role in the novel, which becomes Heti's "wrestling place" (284), where she tests the societally propagated consequences of resisting mandated reproduction and narratives of pronatalism against her desire to remain childfree.

While the author veers on the side of remaining childfree by choice, personal insecurities, detailed reflections on motherhood, and the effects of ageist reproductive stigmatization guide her vignettes. Her deliberations on the topic also clearly reflect Dorothy E. Roberts's assertion that "women experience tremendous pressure, both systemic and ideological, to become mothers" (34). Expanding on such underlying pressures, Heti writes that "[t]here is a kind of sadness in not wanting the things that give so many other people their life's meaning" (23), addressing the power of pronatalist pressure on adult women and the precariousness of remaining childfree. Whereas ageist stigmatization is employed to deter young women from becoming pregnant and mothers, starting in their mid-twenties, women like Heti frequently experience distinctly reverse effects of reproductive control. Roberts identifies "[m]otherhood [as] virtually compulsory" (34), and Russo's coinage "the motherhood mandate" directly addresses the expectation that women should (want to) have children. Correspondingly, Leslie Ashburn-Nardo's 2016 study finds that most participants believe parenthood to be "a moral imperative" (400). Indeed, Heti, who is, at best, ambivalent about having children, pertinently describes the pressure to live a "conventional life" (22) according to cis and heteronormative (reproductive) conventions. Thus, *Motherhood* juxtaposes the desire to remain childfree with the omnipresent stigmatizing and controlling social narratives, including ageist biases, suggesting that adult women are damned if they do not have children.

Indeed, Heti notes that defying reproductive conventions by delaying or deciding against having children as an adult woman creates age-based anxiety and elicits unsolicited reproach. Believing that writing *Motherhood* might help her make a decision, the author is keenly aware of how the societal perception of age affects and aims to control reproductive choices and shifts reproductive expectations upon the transition from young adulthood to adulthood. Tellingly, she states that in her late thirties, "time is running short on making certain decisions" (21). As Heti observes the "linear" progression of her friends' lives, she also feels as if "other people were suddenly ahead of [her]" (22), implying a sense of being left behind owing to her reproductive choices. At the same time, recent societal developments reflect Heti's continued ambivalence toward having a child and her concomitant decision to wait despite the socio-cultural prescription of motherhood. Ashburn-Nardo notes the lagging change of pronatalist demands for motherhood, despite her findings that more and more individuals delay or decide against parenthood entirely (400). A 2021 Pew Research Center Report also states that the number of US-American adults (aged 18–49) "not too likely or not at all likely" to have children has increased by 7% from 37% in 2018 to 44% in 2021 (Brown). However, according to Ashburn-Nardo, childfree adults still experience stigmatization and moral outrage (394) for making this choice. In this regard, Heti states that "the woman who doesn't have a child is looked at with the same aversion and reproach as a grown man who doesn't have a job. Like she has something to apologize for. Like she's not entitled to pride" (270). The author's observation corresponds to Ashburn-Nardo's findings, noting a gender-specific evaluation of women who remain childfree (394). Pondering motherhood under ageist pronatalist pressure, Heti is aware of the devaluating rhetoric surrounding childfree-by-choice narratives. In fact, the insistent devaluation of childfree adults in life and fiction and the seemingly inviolable motherhood mandate imposed by US-American mainstream society fuel the author's extensive deliberations:

> Do I want children because I want to be admired as the admirable sort of woman who has children? Because I want to be seen as a normal sort of woman, or [as] the best kind of woman, a woman with not only work, but the desire and ability to nurture, a body that can make babies, and someone another person wants to make babies with? Do I want a child to show myself to be the (normal) sort of woman who wants and ultimately has a child? (Heti 22)

This passage illustrates how dominant pronatalist narratives – motherhood as the most valid, "normal" life path – influence Heti's contemplations. According to Harrington, this perpetual essentialization of motherhood problematically ties a woman's societal value and perception of completeness to her maternal status (25). Diana Tietjens Meyers and Ashburn-Nardo also suggest that women who choose to remain childfree during their reproductive years face unsolicited pity, accusations of

immaturity and selfishness, biases about their character, stigmatization, and moral outrage (735; 394). Harrington's study even shows that overall, people believe that voluntarily childfree individuals should have

> an unhappy life for straying from the mainstream and . . . rejecting . . . the heteronormative (and now homonormative) status quo, the social order, patriarchal culture, and the dominant pronatalist message that parenthood is an essential aspect of a fulfilling life. (28)

Accordingly, Heti herself contends that society renders the value of childfree women's lives invisible (95–96). One of the author's acquaintances puts it even more succinctly by saying that a childfree woman is required to have "some big plan or idea . . . [of] what the arc of [her] life will be" (51) that justifies foregoing motherhood (51). Heti also returns to this claim, questioning if "there is anything more important for a woman to do than mother" (134). The author's musings expose the persistent binary gender norms that position women as inherently nurturing and maternal. In this context, Betty-Despoina Kaklamanidou argues that "patriarchy dictates that motherhood is a natural instinct" (287), which, as Heti illustrates, causes childfree adult women to question their "(ab)normality" in the face of ageist societal reproductive prescriptions. The internalization of ageist mechanisms of reproductive control causes the author, who scarcely ever recalls a genuine desire to have a child throughout her adult life, to contemplate why she *should* nevertheless become a mother. Heti juxtaposes "the joy of children" with "the misery of them" and reflects on "the freedom [that] not having children" might bring (21). However, she is almost painfully aware of society's pronatalist conventions that cast a woman's childfree life as an "unlivable" and "unwritable" aberration.

In negotiating the childfree experience, *Motherhood* also demonstrates how society's age-based mandate for motherhood penetrates the realms of women's adult friendships. Many of the author's friends are pregnant or mothers in the novel. Most of these friends are in their thirties and have, in a way, already aligned their lives with pronatalist ideology, and some encourage Heti to do the same. For example, her pregnant friend, Erica, sends Heti a painting by Berthe Morisot titled *The Cradle* (1872). Erica sees the woman in it looking "*tenderly and protectively*" (27, original emphasis) at her sleeping baby and believes that Heti would look similar as a mother. Meanwhile, Heti thinks the woman looks "a little bored" (27), indicating her dispassionate stance on children and the desire to remain childfree. However, Heti experiences anxiety about how her reproductive choices might alienate her from her mothering friends. Especially her relationship with Nicola, a mother of three, illustrates Heti's conflicted feelings. Leaving after a visit, she feels better off than Nicola, yet she is instantly ashamed of that thought and believes her friend might judge her for not having a

child. In the following paragraph, Heti seemingly directly addresses her readers and concludes that one choice does not devalue another and vice versa:

> Living one way is not a criticism of every other way of living. Is that the threat of the woman without kids? Yet the woman without kids is not saying that no woman should have kids, or that you – woman with a stroller – have made the wrong choice. Her decision about her life is no statement about yours. One person's life is not a political or general statement about how all lives should be. Other lives should be able to exist alongside our own without any threat or judgment at all. (134)

Heti's proclamation reflects an ideal approach toward another person's reproductive choices during adulthood, which currently seems to have no place in US-American society. At the same time, Heti inhabits a privileged position where reproductive choices can seemingly exist unencumbered by politics. Although many contemporary fictional, autofictional, and autobiographical childfree-by-choice narratives aim to complicate patriarchal and ageist reproductive expectations, they are predominantly written by and about white, upper-middle-class, cis women within the socially prescribed reproductive age range. In accordance, Gill Rye et al. find that, contrary to the expectations of contemporary life, "normative discourse on motherhood based on white, bourgeois, heterosexual family models . . . that penalizes and stigmatizes those who depart from such templates" (2) has persisted. Nefertiti Austin also explicitly addresses the harmful predominance of the conception of white motherhood. Rye et al. and Austin's findings suggest a continued insistence on cisnormative, white, and appropriately-aged motherhood. The combined force of the motherhood mandate, normative notions of motherhood, and recent developments in the United States render all non-pronatalist reproductive choices and the retention of bodily autonomy ever more difficult. Moreover, Meyers argues that even the rhetoric promoting contraception, such as "family planning," also only suggests that "the *timing* of reproduction is a matter of choice" (736, my emphasis). Returning to Heti, *Motherhood* shows that, albeit having a choice and being subject to different laws as a Canadian citizen, the author struggles and experiences judgment for making the stigmatized choice to remain childfree.

As Heti's choice not to have children solidifies throughout the novel, contemplative entries demonstrating the power of pronatalist narratives more often give way to passages rejecting reproductive control and challenging often-unquestioned pronatalist attitudes. Heti, for example, remembers an abortion at twenty-one and how her doctor falsely prescribed a waiting period before terminating her pregnancy. While Heti describes that "there was no gap between finding out [about the pregnancy] and knowing what [she] wanted to do" (30), her story illustrates how even medical professionals, as Harrington states, sometimes impose pronatalist values on their patients (32) and are not immune to "personal and cultural bias" (32). Reflecting

on her doctor's appointment, Heti believes he showed her the sonogram against her will to persuade her to keep the pregnancy (32). By recounting the appointment, Heti illustrates how her reproductive decisions were infringed upon in favor of a pronatalist agenda. She also states that such narratives of reproductive control, as the one advanced by her doctor, harmfully suggest that she was "actively and selfishly denying" (42) human life with her decision to remain childfree. In *Motherhood*, Heti, therefore, struggles with the societal expectation to have a child and rages against the measures of pronatalist reproductive control.

Reflecting on such stigmatizing societal perceptions of childfree women, Heti also affirms that heteropatriarchal, capitalist society has a vested interest in controlling (the age of) women's reproduction. For example, the author recounts an evening at a literary festival where a fellow writer stated that "[*m*]*en want to control women's bodies by forbidding them from abortions, while women try to control other women's bodies by pressuring them to have kids*" (Heti 95, original emphasis), thereby enforcing pronatalism. Consequently, these controlling efforts render terminating a pregnancy and remaining childfree undesirable from a patriarchal standpoint. Following Rich, Emilie Lewis argues that the institution of motherhood functions as a reproductive controlling mechanism that upholds patriarchal power structures within society (124). In *Motherhood*, Heti first moves from feeling guilty about her indecision to addressing the pain that accompanies resisting pronatalist norms, saying, "[t]here can be sadness at not living out a more universal story . . . there is a bit of a let-down feeling when the great things that happen in the lives of others – you don't actually want those things for yourself" (23). Once Heti allows herself to claim her choice to remain childfree, she more vehemently questions the devaluation of womanhood untied from motherhood and criticizes pronatalist stigmatization and the constructed aberrant status of childfree women.

Moreover, the author criticizes the insistence on pronatalism that goes hand in hand with the attempts to curtail reproductive rights, while women – including mothers – increasingly become afterthoughts. She writes, "I know a woman who refuses to mother, refuses to do the most important thing, and therefore becomes the least important woman. Yet the mothers aren't important, either. None of us are important" (Heti 134). In the same vein, Simone de Beauvoir's words still have uncanny relevance when she asserts in *The Second Sex* that "our society, so concerned to defend the rights of embryos, shows no interest in the children once they are born; it prosecutes the abortionists instead of undertaking to reform that scandalous institution known as 'public assistance' . . ." (468). Seventy-five years after Beauvoir's criticism, Heti acknowledges the devaluation and negligence of women and people capable of childbirth and their children once born and points to the societally imposed

hierarchy that devalues women who are not mothers. The author's statement also indicates how societal prescriptions influence her deliberations in *Motherhood* and complicate her choice to remain childfree.

At the same time, Heti considers the potential rooted in remaining childfree, and the novel illustrates the perceived danger emanating from a childfree adult woman. Laurie A. Rudman and Kimberly Fairchild correspondingly assert that violating expectations based on shared cultural stereotypes, such as becoming a mother, may result in perceivers' backlash (157–58). Trying to explain this backlash, Heti proposes that "[t]here is something threatening about a woman who is not occupied with children. There is something at-loose-ends feeling about such a woman. What is she going to do instead? What sort of trouble will she make?" (32). Despite the damning narratives about childfree adult women, Heti knows she wants to remain childfree, leading to her deliberations on being childfree in *Motherhood*. Heti's decision to resist a normative life path triggers the contemplation of what such resistance means within a society enforcing ageist pronatalist control and motherhood. Ultimately, *Motherhood* becomes Heti's way to resist dominant Western narratives of reproductive control that affect adult women, as she calls the novel her "prophylactic . . . a boundary . . . between [her]self and the reality of a child" (193) as well as a life raft that will carry her into a childfree life. Age is consistently addressed in Heti's musing as she seems to realize that prolonging the completion of *Motherhood* might preclude her from having children, relieving her of an active choice. As Gretchen Shirm argues, the autofictional form "often involves the reclaiming of identity through the act of writing the self" (318), and Heti seems to (re)claim her identity as a happy, voluntary childfree woman throughout the writing process. Thus, the conclusion of *Motherhood* comes to signify an artistic birth – the only birth Heti truly longs for – and helps her embrace the choice to remain childfree.

Damned to Do

Brit Bennett's *The Mothers* and Sheila Heti's *Motherhood* can be read as examples of two different but equally ageist reproductive narratives. The former "damned-if-we-do" narrative aims to control reproduction through the age-specific stigmatization and shaming of young pregnancy, motherhood, and mothering. Thus, in *The Mothers*, Nadia Turner has to confront the stigma projected onto pregnant Black young adult women who decide to have an abortion. Bennett's novel importantly highlights a frequently marginalized and discriminatorily racialized perspective of a young Black woman raised in a religious context and faced with the prejudices imposed by hegemonic mothering norms. Meanwhile, in adulthood, Nadia's best friend Aubrey Evans experiences the feeling of reproductive obligation and the possibility of infertility,

thereby introducing the "damned-if-we-don't" narrative that Sheila Heti's *Motherhood* most productively illustrates. Heti's autofictional deliberations on the (im)possibility of having a child powerfully reflect on the pronatalist prescription to procreate as an adult woman and intimately detail the damning narratives surrounding the decision to remain childfree by choice. Thus, age pertinently influences the societal perception of reproduction in both novels and influences how Nadia, Aubrey, and Heti think about their (un)willingly "deviant" reproductive decisions.

While the characters resist the ageist controlling narratives placed upon them by the expectations of a heteropatriarchal, pronatalist society, both novels, nevertheless, echo Pragya Agarwal's assertion that women's bodies are "a battleground, desired and lusted upon, but also considered a monstrosity, defiled regularly, stigmatised and not their own terrain to navigate" (3). Thereby, it is crucial to consider that Heti and Bennett's characters not only diverge in age but also nationality, race, and class. Heti, as a white Canadian woman and successful author, confronts being childfree by choice from a position of relative privilege, or as Hallstein et al. would say, from the vantage point of "the hegemonic mothering norm – white, [upper-]middle class, heterosexual, and cisgender" (4). Meanwhile, Bennett's Nadia has to confront her young adult pregnancy from an already stigmatized subject position as a young Black woman. By discussing Heti's *Motherhood* side by side with Bennett's *The Mothers,* this article aimed to make different autofictional and fictional reproductive experiences visible while proposing that age is *one* of the crucial mechanisms aiming to control women (characters') reproductive decisions by the dissemination of stigmatizing ageist narratives.

The "damned-if-we-do" and "damned-if-we-don't" narratives delineated throughout this article emphasize that mechanisms of societal reproductive control influence women (characters) throughout their lives. However, these narratives illustrated in *The Mothers* and *Motherhood* show that heteropatriarchal reproductive expectations and prescriptions shift from adolescence and young adulthood to adulthood and, accordingly, affect Nadia Turner, Aubrey Evans, and Sheila Heti differently due to their age. The novels effectively illustrate a divide between individual reproductive choices, after all, Bennett's characters and Heti are content with theirs, and the unrelenting heteropatriarchal efforts to control reproduction that triggers the devaluating societal perception and evaluation of individuals who resist these controlling narratives. Heti puts it most succinctly by writing, "[o]f course a woman will always be *made to feel* like a criminal, whatever choice she makes, however hard she tries. Mothers feel like criminals. Non-mothers do too" (44, my emphasis). Thus, societally predominant ageist narratives of reproductive control ultimately suggest that women and people capable of childbirth might be damned whatever reproductive choice they make.

About the Author

Sandra Tausel (she/her/hers) is a university assistant and PhD candidate in the Department of American Studies at the University of Innsbruck, Austria, where she teaches courses in literary and cultural studies. Her dissertation project titled *Reproductive Ageism: Narratives of Age-Based Reproductive Control* delineates ageist reproductive discourses that create controlling narratives affecting women, trans, and nonbinary characters' reproductive choices during different life phases in contemporary US-American fiction. Her research interests include women's, gender, and sexuality studies in US-American culture, politics, and feminist literary criticism. She holds BA degrees in English and American Studies and German Studies from the University of Graz, Austria, and a Joint Master's Degree in American Studies from the University of Graz and the Université Paris Diderot, France. Before joining the Department of American Studies in Innsbruck, she was a Fulbright Grantee at Gettysburg College, PA, USA, and an OeAD grant recipient with an appointment at the Corvinus University Budapest, Hungary. She has published articles in *libri liberorum* (the journal of the Austrian Society for Research on Children's and Youth Literature), *WiN*: *The EAAS Women's Network Journal*, and in the Routledge anthology *The Disfigured Face in American Literature, Film, and Television* (edited by Cornelia Klecker and Gudrun M. Grabher).

Peer Review

This article was reviewed by the issue's guest editor and one external reviewer.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Works Cited

Agarwal, Pragya. *(M)Otherhood: On the Choices of Being a Woman*. Canongate, 2021.

Ashburn-Nardo, Leslie. "Parenthood as a Moral Imperative? Moral Outrage and the Stigmatization of Voluntarily Childfree Women and Men." *Sex Roles*, vol. 76, no. 5–6, 2017, pp. 393–401, doi.org/10.1007/s11199-016-0606-1.

Austin, Nefertiti. *Motherhood So White: A Memoir of Race, Gender, and Parenting in America*. Sourcebooks, 2019, www.sourcebooks.com/uploads/1/1/5/5/115507011/9781492679011.pdf.

Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Jonathan Cape, 1956.

Bekhta, Natalya. *We-Narratives: Collective Storytelling in Contemporary Fiction*. Ohio State UP, 2020. Kindle.

Bennett, Brit. *The Mothers*. Riverhead Books, 2016.

Bhakuni, Himani. "Reproductive Justice: Non-interference or Non-domination?" *Reproductive Justice: Inequalities in the Global South*, special issue of *Developing World Bioethics*, vol. 23, no. 2, 2023, pp. 93–98, doi.org/10.1111/dewb.12317.

Brown, Anna. "Growing Share of Childless Adults in US Don't Expect to Ever Have Children." *Pew Research Center*, 19 Nov. 2021, www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/11/19/growing-share-of-childless-adults-in-u-s-dont-expect-to-ever-have-children/.

Burke, Michael. *Literary Reading, Cognition and Emotion: An Exploration of the Oceanic Mind*. Routledge, 2011.

Davis, Angela Y. *Women, Race, and Class*. Random House, 1982.

Division of Reproductive Health. "About Teen Pregnancy." *CDC Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, 15 Nov. 2021, www.cdc.gov/teenpregnancy/about/index.htm.

Guttmacher Institute. "Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health in the United States." *Guttmacher.org*, Sept. 2019, www.guttmacher.org/fact-sheet/american-teens-sexual-and-reproductive-health.

———. "Sex and HIV Education." *Guttmacher.org*, 1 Dec. 2022, www.guttmacher.org/state-policy/explore/sex-and-hiv-education.

Hall, Kelli Stidham, et al. "The State of Sex Education in the United States." *Journal of Adolescent Health*, vol. 58, no. 6, 2016, pp. 595–97, doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2016.03.032.

Hallstein, Lynn O'Brien, et al. "Introduction." *The Routledge Companion to Motherhood*, edited by Lynn O'Brien Hallstein et al., Routledge, 2020, pp. 1–16.

Harrington, Rebecca. "Childfree by Choice." *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2019, pp. 22–35, doi.org/10.1080/15240657.2019.1559515.

Heti, Sheila. *Motherhood*. Vintage Canada, 2019.

Hill Collins, Patricia. "Shifting the Center: Race, Class, and Feminist Theorizing about Motherhood." *Representations of Motherhood*, edited by Donna Bassin et al., Yale UP, 1994, pp. 56–74.

Kaklamanidou, Betty-Despoina. "The Voluntarily Childless Heroine: A Postfeminist Television Oddity." *Television & New Media*, vol. 20, no. 3, 2019, pp. 275–93, doi.org/10.1177/1527476417749743.

Kantor, Leslie M., and Laura Lindberg. “Pleasure and Sex Education: The Need for Broadening Both Content and Measurement.” *American Journal of Public Health*, vol. 110, no. 2, 2020, pp. 145–48, doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2019.305320.

Kimport, Katrina. “Pregnant Women’s Experiences of Crisis Pregnancy Centers: When Abortion Stigmatization Succeeds and Fails.” *Symbolic Interaction*, vol. 42, no. 4, 2019, pp. 618–39, doi.org/10.1002/symb.418.

Lewis, Emilie. “Voluntary Childless Women: A Look at Western Society and the Definition of Motherhood.” *The Routledge Companion to Motherhood*, edited by Lynn O’Brien Hallstein et al., Routledge, 2020, pp. 122–29.

Luttrell, Wendy. “Foreword.” *Re/Assembling the Pregnant and Parenting Teenager: Narratives from the Field(s)*, edited by Annelies Kamp and Majella McSharry, Peter Lang, 2018, pp. ix–xiv.

Maddow-Zimet, Isaac, and Kathryn Kost. “Pregnancies, Births and Abortions in the United States, 1973–2017: National and State Trends by Age.” *Guttmacher.org*, 2 Mar. 2021, doi.org/10.1363/2021.32709.

McLaren, Angus. *A History of Contraception: From Antiquity to the Present*. Blackwell, 1992.

Meyers, Diana Tietjens. “The Rush to Motherhood: Pronatalist Discourse and Women’s Autonomy.” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 26, no. 3, 2001, pp. 735–73, doi.org/10.1086/495627.

Norris, Alison, et al. “Abortion Stigma: A Reconceptualization of Constituents, Causes, and Consequences.” *Women’s Health Issues*, vol. 21, no. 3, 2011, pp. 49–54, doi.org/10.1016/j.whi.2011.02.010.

Podnieks, Elizabeth, and Andrea O’Reilly. *Textual Mothers / Maternal Texts: Motherhood in Contemporary Women’s Literatures*. Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2010.

Rich, Adrienne. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. Norton, 1995.

Roberts, Dorothy E. “Mothers Who Fail to Protect Their Children: Accounting for Private and Public Responsibility.” *Mother Troubles: Rethinking Contemporary Maternal Dilemmas*, edited by Julia E. Hanigsberg and Sara Ruddick, Beacon Press, 1999, pp. 31–49.

Ross, Loretta J., and Rickie Solinger. *Reproductive Justice: An Introduction*. U of California P, 2017.

Ross, Loretta J. “Reproductive Justice as Intersectional Feminist Activism.” *Souls*, vol. 19, no. 3, 2017, pp. 286–314, doi.org/10.1080/10999949.2017.1389634.

Rudman, Laurie A., and Kimberly Fairchild. “Reactions to Counterstereotypic Behavior: The Role of Backlash in Cultural Stereotype Maintenance.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 87, no. 2, 2004, pp. 157–76, doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.87.2.157.

Russo, Nancy Felipe. "The Motherhood Mandate." *Journal of Social Issues*, vol. 32, no. 3, 1976, pp. 143–53, doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.1976.tb02603.x.

Rye, Gill, et al. "Introduction: Motherhood in Literature and Culture." *Motherhood in Literature and Culture: Interdisciplinary Perspectives from Europe*, edited by Gill Rye et al., Routledge, 2018, pp. 1–14.

Santelli, John S. et al. "Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage Policies and Programs: An Updated Position Paper of the Society for Adolescent Health and Medicine." *Journal of Adolescent Health*, vol. 61, no. 3, 2017, pp. 400–03, doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2017.06.001.

Schmidt, Samantha. "A Language for All." *The Washington Post*, 5 Dec. 2019, www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2019/12/05/teens-argentina-are-leading-charge-gender-neutral-language/?arc404=true.

Schwartz, Alexandra. "Sheila Heit Wrestles with a Big Decision in 'Motherhood.'" *The New Yorker*, 30 Apr. 2018, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/05/07/sheila-heti-wrestles-with-a-big-decision-in-motherhood.

Shirm, Gretchen. "Sheila Heti, Melanie Klein and *Motherhood*." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 63, no. 3, 2022, pp. 309–20, doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2021.2024128.

Smithbattle, Lee. "Teen Mothering in the United States: Fertile Ground for Shifting the Paradigm." *Re/Assembling the Pregnant and Parenting Teenager: Narratives from the Field(s)*, edited by Annelies Kamp and Majella McSharry, Peter Lang, 2018, pp. 75–88.

Solinger, Rickie. *Pregnancy and Power: A History of Reproductive Politics in the United States*. Revised edition, New York UP, 2019.

Thomas, Shameka Poetry. "Trust Also Means Centering Black Women's Reproductive Health Narratives." *A Critical Moment in Bioethics: Reckoning with Anti-Black Racism through Intergenerational Dialogue*, supplement to *Hastings Center Report*, vol. 52, no. S1, 2022, pp. 18–21, doi.org/10.1002/hast.1362.

Vinson, Jenna. *Embodying the Problem: The Persuasive Power of the Teenage Mother*. Rutgers UP, 2018.

Wagner-Egelhaaf, Martina. "Einleitung: Was Ist Auto(r)Fiktion?" *Auto(r)Fiktion: Literarische Verfahren Der Selbstkonstruktion*, edited by Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf and Eric Achermann, Aisthesis, 2013, pp. 7–21.

Winters, Loretta I., and Paul C. Winters. "Black Teenage Pregnancy: A Dynamic Social Problem." *SAGE Open*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2012, pp. 1–14, doi.org/10.1177/2158244012436563.

Journal of the Austrian Association for American Studies
vol. 5, no. 1, 2023, pp. 78-99
doi: 10.47060/jaaas.v5i1.170

Motherhood as Narrative: Sheila Heti's Wrestling with the Burden of Choice

Martin Holtz

ABSTRACT

Burdened with the choice whether to become a mother or not, the protagonist of Sheila Heti's autofictional work *Motherhood* develops a thoroughgoing critique of the notion of having to make that choice in the first place, encompassing philosophical musings on the impossibility of controlling one's existence by making decisions and astute commentary on social pressures on women to fulfill expected roles. It identifies pro-natalism as a culturally pervasive narrative, which is subtle but rigid in its exclusionary binarism and consequent pressure and divisiveness it imposes upon women. Heti dismantles the narratives that make up the concept of motherhood and redefines it as an inclusive, non-divisive, non-coercive concept. Maintaining its relational basis, she reverses its temporal trajectory and suggests the relationship with the mother as its central concern. Mobilizing the creative potential of writing, she rewrites the narrative of motherhood as the reconstruction of ancestral bonds between women through literature. Via this reversal, she undermines the one-directional conception of motherhood and allows for the term's inclusiveness of all women. In this way, she deflates the notion of decisional compulsion and so creates a spirit of egalitarianism and tolerance from which all mothers, non-mothers, and non-non-mothers can benefit.

KEYWORDS

Sheila Heti, *Motherhood*, autofiction, cultural narrative, decisional autonomy

In Sheila Heti's autofictional novel *Motherhood* (2018), the unnamed protagonist wrestles with the decision of whether or not to have a child and in the process encounters various personal, social, biological, and cultural pressures which affect her decision-making process. Understanding herself as a relational person, she does not simply dismiss these influences, but interrogates them as narratives, which have an undeniable effect on her. She perceives motherhood as an accumulation of narratives and by deciding to write a book about it, i.e. by crafting her own narrative, broadens the very meaning of the term beyond the singular meaning of having a child in order to overcome its coercive and divisional effects on identity. By addressing these coercive and divisional effects of motherhood discourses, this autofictional novel has a timely significance in the context of recent developments. The overturning of *Roe* in the US also reinvigorated the debate in Canada, a country in which unrestricted access to abortion has enjoyed a strong institutional support since the 1980s (BBC)[1]. Despite Canada's support of decisional autonomy and full health care coverage of abortion, the debate has highlighted the ubiquity of underlying pro-natalist discourses in both countries. Even though the National Abortion Federation (NAF), a professional association of abortion providers in both countries, proclaims in its ethics statement that "[n]o woman or person capable of pregnancy should ever be coerced, manipulated, or intimidated into unwanted childbearing" (4), one could argue that (complete) decisional freedom is a myth, because every decision is made within a discursive context. The issue of abortion is indivisibly tied up with the cultural narrative of motherhood as (female) obligation. So the very emphasis on decisional freedom highlights that, in order to come close to it, it is not enough to establish the legal basis for its existence, it is furthermore necessary to understand and deconstruct the narratives within which these decisions are made.

Julia Moore and Patricia Geist-Martin argue that "pronatalism permeates cultures across the globe, perpetuating the belief that all people should procreate" (233). In a North American context, despite a greater tolerance towards childless women in the wake of second-wave feminism (242–46), the cultural framing of childless women as "irresponsible" (236), "imperfect" (238), and "immature" (238–39) has lingered on until today (244). Gill Rye et al. understand motherhood as "shifting, constructed, and in process," which "explains how discourse is regulatory, but also points to ways in which identity and subjectivity can be opened up and transformed" (4). They point

[1] The abortion debates in the US and Canada are strongly intertwined. Both had seminal court cases in the second half of the twentieth century seemingly securing the right to choose but without guaranteeing the unalterable protection of this right and without stopping a continuous debate of and challenge to it. The Canadian equivalent to *Roe v. Wade* (1973) is *R. v. Morgentaler* (1988), a Supreme Court decision which ruled that abortion no longer requires the approval by a committee of doctors (Gollom).

to Adrienne Rich's influential understanding of motherhood as split between "experience" and "institution," "highlight[ing] the gap between, on the one hand, ideologically informed understandings of what mothers should be and do, as determined by dominant discourses, and, on the other, individual experiences of being mothers" (7–8). In this split understanding, "such experiences can subvert the hegemony of the institution, by which they are nonetheless influenced" (8). Rich was among the first feminist scholars who pointed out how women's control over their own bodies is essential for the establishment of social equality and how the persistence of pro-natalist discourses inevitably cause anger and guilt among those women who fail to live up to the ideals of motherhood as institutionalized by social expectations (27–40). Following Rich's lead, successive scholars have corroborated and refined several aspects of her argumentation. Sathyaraj Venkatesan and Chinmay Murali argue that pro-natalism is a coercive, crushing ideology which "not only deprives individuals of their freedom to make reproductive choices but also constructs a rigid social value system centred around procreation" (109). In the useful parlance of many scholars, pro-natalism is a "script" (Venkatesan and Murali 110) dictating the performance of womanhood. Yet, it is precisely this concept of the script which also suggests the possibility of rewriting the narrative. Venkatesan and Murali (110) as well as Julie Rodgers (92) call for the advocacy of childlessness as a counter-narrative of female identity, because only the egalitarian existence of this narrative alongside the pro-natalist norm allows for a culture in which decisional autonomy in procreational matters can be achieved. And it is in this spirit that Sheila Heti's *Motherhood* constitutes a valuable and productive contribution to the debate.

In an interview, Heti stated about the word "mother" that

> I just never felt it was a fair word. I thought, How can the world get this word so wrong? The category has felt off to me my whole life. . . . The whole category just has never had any stability for me. I could never trust it. When people would tell me they wanted to be mothers, I would think, What are you even talking about? What is it you want to be? How do you even know what that is, a mother? I've just always hated the word. I felt so much resentment around it. (qtd. in Dey)

Her dissatisfaction with the word points to her dissatisfaction with the encompassing categorization which dismisses the individuality of experience. Instead of accepting the word and its implications as a given, Heti aims to deconstruct and destabilize its meaning and the coercive narratives it has spawned in order to reconfigure it as something broader:

> [I]t doesn't reflect the scope of what I feel the word 'motherhood' could encompass, which is an existential relationship to life, to yourself, to other people. Or a relationship to one's own mother, one's own grandmother. Ideas about nurturing and bringing things into being more generally. (qtd. in Reese)

The novel combines an awareness of the language and the discourses that affect one's individual performance of identity with a deep skepticism of these discourses and their thorough interrogation. Its very title suggests that motherhood is a narrative and that she, as its author, has assumed control over its meaning. The novel is both the tool for the redefinition of motherhood and the signifier of this redefinition. Motherhood becomes *Motherhood*. For Heti and her protagonist, this reconfiguration of the concept entails a shift from biological *pro*creation to a reconnection with her own mother, which is achieved by narrative *re*creation of ancestral ties. This contribution seeks to trace the way in which the book deconstructs normative understandings of motherhood as coercive narratives and redefines the concept to encompass a broader and less divisive understanding of the term. In this way, the book provides a beneficial contribution to the debates over decisional autonomy in procreation by advocating a more egalitarian, tolerant, and liberal understanding of motherhood.

The Role of Narratives in Autofiction

Even if Heti is not overly enamored with the often applied categorization of her writing as "autofiction" (Miller and Bailar 157), the implications of the category provide a helpful frame for describing general features of her work and more specific features of *Motherhood*. The term was first used by French writer Serge Doubrovsky in 1977 in reference to his own life writing as a philosophical reflection about the impossibility of avoiding the fictitious in autobiographical texts, which "construct" a life story (Gronemann 243). It has since become a designated term to refer to texts which feature a "purposeful elision between the author and the author-character" (Worthington 2) as the author "project[s] himself or herself into a text without an autobiographical pact" (Schmitt 96) so that the text "signal[s] a deliberate, often ironic, interplay between the two modes [of fiction and autobiography]" (Smith and Watson 261). Heti says about her own work:

> Writing, for me, when I'm writing in the first-person, is like a form of acting. So as I'm writing, the character or self I'm writing about and my whole self – when I began the book – become entwined. It's soon hard to tell them apart. The voice I'm trying to explore directs my own perceptions and thoughts. But that voice or character comes out of a part of me that exists already. But writing about it emphasizes those parts, while certain other, balancing parts lie dormant – and the ones I'm exploring become bigger, like in caricature. (qtd. in Dey)

This "entwining" of real and fictional self draws attention to the ambivalence with which the text positions itself to "the real," both in terms of what and how much is reflected about the author and in terms of how much the text has an impact on what the author explores, finds out, and calls into being about herself. This sense of (fictional) text creating reality points to the way autofiction blurs the lines between fact

and fiction in both directions, the way in which autofiction signals an impact that texts have on the real world and real people (Wagner-Egelhaaf 23, 30–32). The implication of autofiction's deliberate two-way blurring of the lines between reality and fiction is that narrative is inescapable, that the conceptions of our selves, whether written down or not, cannot avoid a sense of deliberate construction and imagination. Autofiction playfully exposes what is an otherwise covert feature of non-fictional life-writing, namely that

> there is no coherent 'self' that predates stories about identity, about 'who' one is. Nor is there a unified, stable, immutable self that can remember everything that has happened in the past . . . which leads to an approach of looking into autobiographical telling as a performative act. (Smith and Watson 22)

The self, the notion of identity, is "an effect of language" (Smith and Watson 215) and hence involves a creative act, a narrative ordering of experience, and therefore an element of fictionality, as Martin Löschnigg explains:

> [F]ictionality is seen as an integrative element of the creation of a sense of identity, since identity conceived as a narrative construct involves the projection of possible selves which are open to revision. Through the narrative medium, the autobiographer explores alternative versions of "self" and "other", constructing and revising concepts of self and identity in the same way as characters/agents are construed in fiction. (108)

Hanna Meretoja points out that autofiction's awareness of the inescapability of narrative in identity creation arrays it with an inbuilt "metanarrative" dimension (121–22), which again points in two directions simultaneously. On the one hand, this metanarrative awareness makes autofiction an ideal explorer of and commentator on the ubiquity of narratives/scripts, which impose themselves on the individual via the social discourses they are enmeshed in. On the other hand, this reflectiveness in combination with the deliberate infusion of fictional elements signals an assumption of control over one's own narrative in oppositional challenge to the implied passivity of being a discursive subject. Meretoja refers to this effect of autofiction as "narrative agency":

> The concept of narrative agency signals that culturally mediated narrative interpretations play an important role in constituting us as subjects capable of action, while simultaneously alerting us to how narrative agency is socially conditioned. Our narrative agency means our ability to navigate our narrative environments: use and engage with narratives that are culturally available to us, to analyze and challenge them, and to practice agential choice over which narratives we use and how we narratively interpret our lives and the world around us. (123)

By assuming awareness and control over one's narrative, pointing out and challenging cultural scripts, and inventing a self creatively, autofiction allows authors to discover and create themselves in the process of writing.

Motherhood

The opening paragraphs already make the pressure of narrative a topic. The nameless protagonist introduces herself as an unformed, not yet begun character, out of touch with the world and its demands of having a direction or at least a perspective on it. "I lived only in the greyish, insensate world of my mind, where I tried to reason everything out and came to no conclusions" (Heti 1). She is, to use an accusation often leveraged at childless women, "aimless" and "infantile," ignorant of supposed social obligations and responsibilities as a person, let alone a woman (Moore and Geist-Martin 238–39). At almost 40 she realizes after an encounter with a 12-year-old and after mistakenly calling a hot dog a banana that she is too old to be so out of touch with the world and decides "to transform the greyish and muddy landscape of [her] mind into a solid and concrete thing, utterly apart from [her], indeed not [her] at all, . . . to create a powerful monster" (Heti 1). The formulations suggest that the protagonist struggles with a belated pressure to enter a, in the Lacanian sense, Symbolic Order in which a definite and separate relation between the self and the world is established via language, and identity is manifested as a narrative of stable views and choices made. In this way she questions the very concept of identity by stylizing it as something intrusive and artificial, something "apart," a "monster" even. Her self resists the intrusive imposition of a narrative order, as much as the book does, it seems, even though both mutually attempt to approach a provisional structure, but one that allows for ambivalence, contingency, and openness.

The structure of the book is meandering, hinting at some formal principles only to discard them and trying out others. The "chapters" consist of fragmented episodes often using encounters between the protagonist and other characters as a springboard for her personal reflections of a philosophical, social, cultural, or very personal nature. The first 44 pages self-reflexively question whether to write a book at all, defeating the very idea of narrative progression by the paradox of a meta-literary dead end. Larger sections are divided into smaller segments, often headed by a tilde. The tilde suggests an absence or ellipsis of sorts, alternatively also an approximation, as if to highlight the fragmented, disordered, and non-definite nature of the writing. Their very form (~) simultaneously suggests a singular spermatozoon as if the individual sections collectively constitute a contingent but also egalitarian fertilizing process at the end of which stands the book as the creative (but messy) result. Later, the chapters have actual titles, at first designating places as a sort of geographical anchor: "New York," "Home," "Book Tour," "Home," then discarding these in favor of stages of the menstrual cycle: "PMS," "Bleeding," "Follicular," "Ovulating," which are then repeated. Not only is this structural element reflective of the topic of childbearing and provides a biological template for the protagonist's reflections on urges and

resistance, it also resists the teleologically oriented conventions of (male) narratives in favor of a more open-ended cyclicity. As Heti says:

> The narrator is not a hero and there is no journey, but also the traditional hero's journey structure feels like a fundamentally masculine form. . . . It's frustrating to return, but there's also beauty in the exhaustion, in the eternal return or the return of the same. I visualized this kind of spiral where you end up back in the same place but not quite. . . . There's progress and not progress at the same time, which I think is life. (qtd. in Millar and Bailar 172–73)[2]

The cycle integrates two seemingly exclusive binaries by suggesting the simultaneity of "progress and not progress," thus undermining the (male) insistence on an either/or dictum of decision-making. In fact, the final three chapters return to the tilde as a heading, suggesting the absence of decisional definiteness in favor of a more vague, inclusive openness, a "muddiness," as it were, to evoke Heti's formulation from the beginning of the book.

The resistance against a forced decision-making and its implications of directedness and binary exclusivity is also evoked by one of the main formal features of the book. Especially in the first half, long passages depict the protagonist asking questions about her life, about what to do (having a baby, writing a book, fixing her relationship, etc.), when to do it, where to do it, why to do it, how to feel about it, what the effects could be, etc., and then tossing three coins: "Two or three heads – yes. Two or three tails – no" (Heti 5). With this, she follows a highly simplified version of the Chinese I Ching technique, a sophisticated "divination system" here broken down into simple yes or no answers. Consider the opening of the book:

> Is this book a good idea?
> *yes*
> Is the time to start it now?
> *yes*
> Here in Toronto?
> *yes*
> So then there's nothing to be worried about?
> *yes*
> Yes, there's nothing to be worried about?
> *no*
> Should I be worried?
> *yes* (5)

This device, on the one hand, illustrates the deep insecurity of the protagonist as she struggles to gain some decisional direction. On the other hand, the device can also be seen to resist the very idea of decisional direction by presenting the epitome of

[2] See also Stanford Friedman (76–77) for suggesting the inclination towards cyclicity in female life writing.

contingency as a veritable narrative, a philosophy even, though simultaneously parodying the systemization of the accidental by the reductive bastardization of the I Ching. Heti makes clear in a preliminary note that "[i]n this book, all results from the flipping of coins result from the flipping of actual coins." In an interview she confirmed that the questions she asked and the coin results she got in response were real: "The book doesn't work if you think they are [made up]. At least, I don't think it works" (qtd. in Wolf). Taking this at face value, Heti, as Mark Currie points out, "incorporate[s] unpredictable variability into the writing process itself, and consequently, . . . ensure[s] that contingency is part of the experience of a reader" (118). This "aleatory writing . . . break[s] the connections that link writing to completed action, necessity and fate" (118). Thus it undermines narrative certainty, elevating the contingent and degrading the necessary (Currie 129, Shirm 310). The insecurity of the protagonist, which is seemingly expressed by this device, is only superficial though. In fact, the coin tosses do not simply provide directions for her to follow, they always spawn more questions in a productive cycle of self-reflection, forcing her to consider differing perspectives on and explanations for her actions and feelings at the same time as they lead her away from making any definite decisions. Consider the continuation of the opening:

> What should I be worried about? My soul?
> *yes*
> Will reading help my soul?
> *yes*
> Will being quiet help my soul?
> *yes*
> Will this book help my soul?
> *yes*
> So then I'm doing everything right?
> *no* (Heti 5–6)

It is not the answers that are the point, it is the questions that are spawned by the accidental response. As the protagonist recognizes later in the book:

> I feel like my brain is becoming more flexible as I use these coins. When I get an answer I didn't expect, I have to push myself to find another answer – hopefully a better one. It's an interruption of my complacency – or at least that's what it feels like, to have to dig a little deeper, to be thrown off. My thoughts don't just end where they normally would. (Heti 77)

So the incorporation of the contingent is a spark for more reflectivity and creativity without taking away agency. In this way the coin toss also signifies the nature of fiction as a way to explore "possible realities" (Heti qtd. in Miller and Bailar 169). Fiction is by definition something provisional, something unimplemented, unreal-

ized, and therefore undecided. It retains a sense of optionality in which several versions of potential realities are in play. In this manner the protagonist retains a control over the coin tosses, by being aware of their "randomness, without meaning" (Heti 131) except for what she is "projecting onto [the coins]" (77) and eventually discarding them when they lose their purpose (191). They are a helpful vehicle to explore herself and a humbling reminder of the contingency which frames our existence and undermines the authority of prescribed narratives. In this way they challenge not only the existence of social scripts but also their implications of judging people by following them or not: "We are judged by what happens to us as though our deciding made it happen" (30), especially when it comes to having children, because "a woman will always be made to feel like a criminal, whatever choice she makes, however hard she tries. Mothers feel like criminals. Non-mothers do, too" (44). By drawing attention to the contingency which not only frames the decision-making process but also the realization of decisions, the book challenges the forced necessity and division that decision-making entails, suggesting that "if something can be debated endlessly and without resolution, it *cannot* matter" (177). In this spirit, the book sets out to dissect and undo the pressures of decision-making forced upon women regarding motherhood.

The protagonist is introduced as struggling with the pressures of decision-making in general. In her effort to strive for existential adequacy she tries to balance various life areas: the relationship to her boyfriend Miles, which suffers from her insecurities (Heti 19), the relationship to her mother, whom she feels she has caused pain, which she wants to remedy by turning her "sadness into gold" (16), the pressures of having a child about which she has always felt ambivalent ("a secret I keep from myself," 21), and her desire to create art by writing, which to her seems the more appealing way to "pass on one's genes" (25). The question of having a child emerges as a central concern, tying all the others together, and the pressure manifests itself in recurrent dreams about potential children and other pregnancy-related issues. With the decision in the air, the protagonist provokes and becomes sensitive to an array of narratives surrounding the pressure of decision-making. On the one end of the spectrum is society, manifested in the doctor who performed an abortion on her when she was 21 but only after "advis[ing] [her] to keep the baby" (31) and letting her wait so that she might "change [her] mind" (32). The doctor's pro-natalism is supplemented by the efforts of what she calls "dangerous and beautiful sirens," a number of female friends and acquaintances, with whom the protagonist interacts in individual episodes throughout the book. The majority of them represent various incarnations of a persuasive pro-natalist ideology, advertising the joys of having a child. The protagonist calls them sirens because they make "appeal[s] that [are] hard to resist, but that,

if heeded, will bring one who heeds [them] to a very bad end" (34). On the other end of the spectrum is Miles, who has a child from an earlier relationship and, though loving the child, bemoans the challenges it has created. While emphasizing her decisional autonomy, he regards the desire to have children as culturally constructed and reminds her continually of her love for art and says that "one can either be a great artist and a mediocre parent, or the reverse, but not great at both, because both art and parenthood take all of one's time and attention" (35). With this kind of rhetoric he assumes the voice of cushioned patriarchal presumption. Nadine Bieker and Kirsten Schindler bemoan exactly this sort of either/or discourse surrounding being a mother vs. being an artist as crushingly restrictive and ask the question why a woman is so rarely allowed to be both (260). Heti's novel critically addresses this issue by assigning the divisional rhetoric to the character of Miles. Rephrasing the question "why not be both?" as "why be one or the other?," the book strives to embrace inclusivity. The protagonist confronts both narratives, the sirens' and Miles's, skeptically. She regards childbearing as a "once-necessary, now sentimental gesture" (42), a convention which has outlived its biological necessity but lingers on as an inauthentic desire needlessly propagated by social tradition. At the same time she is also wary of Miles's advice, pointing out how the male artist enjoys privileges of childlessness the female artist is not granted, that the man is allowed to be selfish when he creates while the woman is admonished for it. She wonders whether Miles is pushing her into the identity of "pale, brittle women writers . . . who never leave the house" (38) when he suggests to her to "write a book about motherhood" (43) thereby delaying or avoiding it altogether. By positioning the sirens and Miles as either socially sanctioned or enlightened, "rational" narratives alongside those of dreams, fortune tellers the protagonists consults, and tossed coins, the book essentially empties all of these narratives of authority at the same time as it highlights their (undue) influence on the individual (Currie 118). The multiplicity and equivalence of these narratives, which urge a decision one way or another, once again challenge the very notion of being forced into an identity-defining decision at all. In an effort to render and to dodge the pressure of having to make a decision, the protagonist compares her extended deliberation with the biblical story of Jacob wrestling with an angel, in which Jacob, despite being injured in the struggle, continues forth until he is blessed by the creature. The protagonist interprets the point of this story as "not to strengthen oneself from the struggle, or to win, but to overcome" (Heti 59). Just as with the coin-tossing, the point is not the making of a fixed decision but the spiritual growth in the process of deliberation, which is both "humbling" and formative (68). The wrestling with the angel makes Jacob see God, and the place of his struggle he names Israel, the promised land. Hence, the promised land is the place of

optionality and pondering. In order to undermine the decisional coercion surrounding motherhood, the book sets out to undermine the narrative of child-bearing as defining a woman's identity.

The "sirens" she encounters in the course of the book embody the various incarnations of this narrative and constitute both ideas of motherhood as experience and institution, in Rich's influential delineation. Where, as a collective, the sirens exert subtle or not so subtle pressure on the protagonist to have a child in line with a coercive, normative ideology, it is precisely the multiplicity of these coercive promptings, which expose the individuality of their experiences, as they are reflected and deconstructed by the protagonist, and thus undermine the uniformity of motherhood as institution (Rye et al. 8). In the way the protagonist positions herself towards these sirens, the book also presents a modification of the concept of relationality. Smith and Watson's understanding of relationality as an awareness of how "the narrator's story is often refracted through the lives of others" (217) is certainly applicable here, but where Stanford Friedman's notion of "fluid ego boundaries" (79) suggests a cherished interdependence in women's life writing[3], the protagonist is keen on differentiating herself from the sirens' narratives. It can be described as a dynamic of separation through contact, deflating the assumption of universality of their narratives, thus approaching a Bakhtinian "heteroglossic dialogism" (Smith and Watson 219) in which different narratives exist side by side, "wrestling" with each other, but without one assuming dominance over another. The protagonist encapsulates her relational resistance when she says: "The feeling of not wanting children is the feeling of not wanting to be someone's idea of me" (Heti 22). Having children is so loaded with discursive imposition, with sirens' scripts, that it annihilates a sense of self which feels authentic.

At first, there is Erica, who is a friend about to have her first child. She sends the protagonist a painting by Berthe Morisot, a French impressionist painter, showing a woman leaning on a crib and looking at the baby sleeping in it. Erica interprets the woman's gaze as "interested" (Heti 27) and imagines this is what her friend would "look like if you had a child" (27). The protagonist, on the other hand, interprets the woman as looking "a little bored," possibly "careless" (27). This fairly innocuous passage points to an important insight. Via a work of art, the scene illustrates how views of how the world is or should be are essentially interpretations, projections of own convictions that are imposed upon others. Erica's projection of a universal joy of motherhood emanating from the painting and enveloping her friend is undercut by

[3] Drawing on Chodorow, Stanford Friedman writes that where male life writing tends towards establishing an identity of separation and exceptionality, female autobiographies show a "consciousness of self in which 'the individual does not oppose herself to all others,' nor 'feel herself to exist outside of others,' 'but very much with others in an interdependent existence'" (77).

the protagonist's wry deflation correcting the narrative imposed upon her. In this way the passage encapsulates the protagonist's approach to the grand narratives circulating around motherhood in culture and personified by the sirens as well as highlighting how the vehicle of art and its interpretation illustrates the provisionality and tenuousness of meaning that characterizes all cultural narratives.

Theresa brings in the cultural narrative of biology, which is of course crucial to pro-natalism, by advocating "being sensitive to the life that wants to be lived through you" (Heti 28). The protagonist acknowledges the biological basis of certain urges "pulling on the strings of your life" (104). After all, the menstrual cycle, as one manifestation of what the protagonist calls the body's "ancient song" (104), is a prominent structuring device of the book, confronting protagonist and reader alike with the constant reminder of the female body's capacity and function to bear children, which she interprets as her "body . . . demanding a child of [her]" (103). But the protagonist also reinterprets this demand, wondering if longing for a pregnancy, "something lodged inside me" (102), is really just a craving for sex, "wanting [Miles's] cock" (101). Currie sees the conflict between will and bodily necessity as central in the book, and indeed the resistance to biology becomes an important factor in the protagonist's rewriting of the pro-natalist narrative. She associates the submission to a desire for children with "deceitfulness," because it requires the subordination of "morality" to the "breed[ing] and rais[ing] of children" (111). Yet, for her, it is the childless woman whose honest disregard of biological urges is stylized as "bad" by society. She writes: "What if I pursue being a bad woman and don't breed – pursue failing biologically? . . . Only in the pursuit of failure can a person really be free. Losers are the avant-garde of the modern age" (113). Not only does this insight reframe the resistance to biological urges as a resistance to social demands, it also transforms the notion of failure into a triumph. To fail biologically and socially means to attain a freedom from encaging narratives.

Along the lines of adherence to social norms Sylvia believes that a child has a positive character-forming influence on a woman, making her less "narcissistic" by "bring[ing] the man closer": "*[I]t's more relational*, she said, and it makes you into a better person, *because you are not necessarily good the way you are*" (Heti 82). The argument of humbling an innate narcissism suggests that having children is less about the children per se, but more about controlling and regulating the personality of women while men are allowed a free reign of their overflowing egos. The protagonist identifies society's conception of women as "not an end in herself. She is a means to a man, who will grow up to be an end in himself, and do something in the world. While a woman is a passageway through which a man might come" (158). In other words, pro-natalism reduces women's value to the ability to produce someone else

who passes through her. She is not enough in herself. Hence, "[t]o not be a mother is the most difficult thing at all. There is always someone ready to step into the path of a woman's freedom, sensing that she is not yet a mother, so tries to make her into one" (168–69). In this way she connects a history of patriarchal attempts to control women's bodies with anti-abortion legislation to the sirens' superficially benevolent encouragement to have children.

> *Men want to control women's bodies by forbidding them from abortions, while women try to control other women's bodies by pressuring them to have kids.* It seemed so strange and true, and I realized they were both working towards the same end: children. One side spoke from the point of view of the imagined desire of the fetus to live, while the other spoke from the point of view of the imagined joy and fulfillment of the woman, but they both reached the same end. (95)

By drawing this connection the book points to the prevalence of pro-natalism despite the superficial condemnation of radical anti-abortion rhetoric in liberal Canada (and most other Western cultures) and identifies the more subtle ways in which pro-natalist positions continue a culturally deeply lodged tradition of encumbering female autonomy and freedom. The protagonist arrives at the insight that "[i]t suddenly seemed like a huge conspiracy to keep women in their thirties – when you finally have some brains and some skills and experience – from doing anything useful with them at all" (Heti 90). She addresses the value and potential that a life without children can have for a woman, to develop as a person unencumbered with the burden of living for someone else: "In a life in which there is no child, no one knows anything about your life's meaning. . . . Your life's value is invisible . . . How wonderful to tread an invisible path, where what matters most can hardly be seen" (96). This reference to invisibility evokes notions of a provisionality of identity, a freedom from set narratives, which makes life to oneself as much as to others surprising and productive in ways closed off by a pro-natalist ideology.

By understanding pro-natalist narratives as a way to limit female autonomy, the protagonist plays up the subversive potential of resisting these narratives: "There is something threatening about a woman who is not occupied with children. There is something at-lose-ends feeling about such a woman. What is she going to do instead? What sort of trouble will she make?" (Heti 32). One the one hand, these questions are satirical reminders of the quasi-criminalization of the childless woman. On the other hand, these questions are taken to be an inspiration for a resistance against the pressure "to be virtuously miserly towards oneself": "Having children is *nice*. What a great victory to be *not-nice*. The nicest thing to give the world is a child. Do I ever want to be that nice?" (170). To be not-nice is to be non-conform, and in the spirit of non-conformity, she inverts the benevolence of conformity by presenting the niceness of

having children in unflattering, even destructive terms. If Sylvia proclaims that children are the cure for narcissism, then the protagonist turns it around by pointing out that

> the egoism of childbearing is like the egoism of colonizing a country – both carry the wish of imprinting yourself on the world, and making it over with your values, and in your image. . . . It feels greedy, overbearing and rude – an arrogant spreading of those selves. (84–85)

She rewrites the narrative of child-bearing by reinterpreting its implications. This rewriting is particularly pronounced in the context of her Jewish identity. With the historical trauma of the Holocaust, the argument goes: "*If you don't have children, the Nazis will have won*" (162). So the threat of genocide has been turned into its opposite: the compulsion to reproduce. Both extremes the protagonist identifies as coercive, so she suggests a counter-narrative: "Rather than repopulating the world, might it not be better to say, . . . *We will make no more aggressors, and no more victims, and in this way, do a good thing with our wombs*" (162). Having children is identified as the problem, not the solution.

The egoism of motherhood also finds an expression in a story from the protagonist's Swedish editor, whose circle of friends includes one woman who is childless and whose very childlessness becomes a focus of discussion whenever she is absent from the group. The protagonist observes that she is "the one they can feel sorry for, and feel sort of superior to . . . They need someone who they feel their lives are better than. She serves an important role" (Heti 89). Motherhood is depicted as fostering arrogance, while childlessness, sarcastically so, is presented as serving an important social purpose: making others feel better about themselves. This arrogance of motherhood has other incarnations in the book. As friends around her keep getting pregnant and having children, sometimes happily like Nicola (133–34), sometimes feeling trapped and impeded like Libby (163, 174) and Marissa (114–15), the protagonist feels that having children is a "turning away from the living – an insufficient love for the rest of us" (164). So rather than stylizing motherhood as the epitome of selfless altruism, the protagonist recognizes it as a sometimes mutually frustrating abandonment of already existing social bonds and emotional connections. But this arrogance even extends to the child itself. The sensibility towards the life that wants to be lived through you is undercut by the experiences of Libby and Marissa. Life is a gift no one has asked for, so giving birth is not an act of generosity but rather has a coercive quality, not just for the woman giving birth, but also for the child. In reference to Libby, the protagonist compares her baby with a fish having been pulled out of water or a fly having been caught in a spider's web: "[T]his web has caught another soul in it, to trap it here for so many years, then finally let it go again" (237). This metaphor

describes giving life paradoxically in terms of lifting you out of the life-giving environment, snatching you away from where you belong, and the protagonist wonders: "What could ever persuade me to do such a hopeful thing – pull a glittering fish out of the deepest sea, to trap it in this beautiful life, a shimmering fish in a silvery net?" (237). The use of paradox undermines the value of giving birth by framing it in images that suggest a deadly trap that is life.

So the protagonist's resistance to pro-natalist narratives is expressed by, on the one hand, defending the integrity of the childless woman and, on the other hand, challenging the institution of motherhood. This approach is essentially geared towards correcting the imbalance which she recognizes in society's regard for the mother as opposed to the non-mother, to do away with the opposition that society has erected between these two, which allows for a skewed valuation of women (Miller and Bailar 167–68). In reference to Nicola, whose happiness with the children she envies, she comes to the insight that "[l]iving one way is not a criticism of every other way of living. . . . One person's life is not a political or general statement about how lives should be" (Heti 134). The protagonist thus recognizes the impasse of taking other lives as a model for one's own life. She believes "that having a child reflexively or not having one doubtfully are equal lives" (239) and that "to battle nature and to submit to nature, both feel very worthy" (182). But she feels that language in relation to motherhood is not adequately equipped to express this egalitarianism of existences. Rather than discriminating between "mother" and "not mother" she strives for a unifying rather than excluding term that everyone, regardless of whether they have children or not, can share, because "in this way, we can be the same" (158). It is this sense of being "the negative of someone else's positive identity" (157), which she resists. To be "not *not* a mother" (157) is her inclusive suggestion, which only illustrates the problem. She grapples with how childlessness is equated with absence and lack, with inaction and incompletion (Currie 125).

> My lack of the experience of motherhood is not an experience of motherhood. Or is it? Can I call it a motherhood too? . . . How can I express the absence of this experience, without making central the lack? . . . Maybe if I could somehow figure out what *not having a child* is an experience of – make it into an active action, rather than the lack of an action. (Heti 159–60)

She proposes to think of one's relation to motherhood as a sexual orientation in order to be able to "come out" actively with an affirmation of identity rather than the confession of a lack. Yet all these reflections only highlight how deeply embedded the framing of not having children as an inadequacy is in our social and linguistic conceptions of motherhood and it is this imbalance of framing having children as active presence and not having children as inactive lack, which pits women against each

other in needless competition in a destructive pro-natalist frame, which is "deeply divisive, placing women into opposing camps" (Rodgers 88).

The protagonist's reaction to these insights is to redefine motherhood in more inclusive terms and to rewrite absence as presence and inaction as action, and writing is precisely the tool and the manifestation of achieving this. At the gateway to this rewriting are a dream, a recognition, and a callback. In the dream she follows a character called Tou Charin, who, similar to Charon, the ferryman to Hades, bears her away "farther from my mother friends" (Heti 250) after the protagonist has paid with three coins for her passage, thus rejecting both the sirens and the deliberative phase of contingency. She has made her decision: "*I don't want a child!*" (265), but this does not mean that she rejects motherhood. The recognition concerns Miles, with whom she has numerous fights and conflicts in the course of the book, but she recognizes that he values her "as a full and final person" (271), not as a passageway. His support of not having a child was not a selfish presumption of teaching her about herself, but "revealed a deeper respect for [her] and for women than even [she] had" (271). Turning around the agentive implications of their relationship, she realizes that she "wanted to be with a man who would not make it easy for [her] to have [her] own baby" (271). In the callback, the protagonist is on vacation with Miles, his daughter, and the daughter's mother, and she goes out for a swim with the latter, which the child watches from the shore (259). In this moment, mother and not-mother are united in the sea from which the child has been lifted, echoing and reversing the metaphor she used to describe giving birth in reference to Libby's baby. The protagonist returns to the sea in a symbolic rejection of the exclusionary, encaging narratives that the life on the shore stipulates. This image also captures what the writing process is to her. A metaphor she uses to describe the state she is in when she writes is the cocoon. The cocoon is simultaneously a barrier from the outside world, signifying a retreat from the social discourses and siren narratives which surround her, as much as it allows her to turn into "mush," to disintegrate within and become a "self without form, unimprisoned" (228). The isolation from the world creates freedom, an interior freedom to explore the self unencumbered from encaging narratives. These two images of fluidity, her floating in the sea and turning into mush in a cocoon, suggest a dissolution of personality constraints, a rebirth of sorts, so that motherhood is reimagined as a self-transformation. The protagonist writes herself into (a new) existence after returning to a quasi-pre-birth state and thus becomes both mother and daughter to herself.

The relationship between mother and daughter is seen as essential by the protagonist to the experience of motherhood. Just as the writing redefines motherhood as a turning inward as opposed to an outward expansion, the protagonist turns towards

reconfiguring the nature of the mother-daughter relationship from forward to reverse. If being a mother means living your life for someone else, then "[w]hat is wrong with living your life for a mother, instead of a son or daughter?" (Heti 120). "Art is eternity backwards. Art is written for one's ancestors, even if those ancestors are elected, like our literary mother and fathers are. We write for them. Children are eternity forwards. My sense of eternity is backwards through time" (120). Art thus becomes the inverse image of having children. Both are "creative" actions, but one is projected into the past, the other into the future. Rather than projecting her creative capabilities into the future with the creation of a child, the protagonist seeks to project it into the past with a reconnection and recreation of the relationship to her ancestors, particularly her mother and grandmother, a "reparation of the matrilineal bond" (Shirm 316). To cultivate and, as it turns out, complete this relationship is the circular redefinition of motherhood's traditional teleology.

The protagonist's relationship to her mother is initially strained, even distanced. Akin to the raising of a child, she seeks to understand where her mother is coming from and how to establish a mutually fulfilling relationship between them. In fact, the very unearthing and explication of ancestral dynamics becomes the way in which this relationship is mended and forged into a mutual motherhood. To this end, the protagonist explores the life stories of her grandmother and her mother and their own complicated relationship. The grandmother, Magda, was an Auschwitz survivor, married to the son of an older woman she comforted in the camp and hampered in her aspirations to become a lawyer in Communist Hungary when her husband's misdemeanors spelled an end to her career. To compensate for this life of privations, she wanted her daughter to make use of the professional opportunities that became available to her. So the protagonist's mother was born with a sense of obligation of living the life that was kept from her mother. Wanting to be a good daughter she became a medical professional, but in order to do so she had to abandon her mother and go to Canada. The sense of abandonment, despite Magda's support, grew further after Magda died of cancer: "[M]y mother felt so guilty, as though by abandoning her mother, she was the murderer" (Heti 73). This feeling of guilt makes her focus her entire life on her career, which means that her involvement in the raising of her own daughter is limited to trying to instill a sense of "achievement and work" (75) in her along the lines of her own sense of duty to her mother. The protagonist, however, fails to meet her mother's demands, valuing a sense of "wonder and play" (75) instilled by her father, who takes over most of the child raising obligations. As a consequence, the protagonist is filled with a feeling of inadequacy, of not meeting the expectations of her mother. "That is the way I have always felt: helplessly wrong, and so desperate to live as a person beyond criticism, whatever that might mean; to prove

that I was better than any of the ways she saw me, to do one thing she might admire" (80). So this genealogy is a chain of guilt and inadequacy over trying but failing to live the life the mother has envisioned for the daughter. If motherhood is understood as a projection into the future, then this sort of projection appears to be merely a prolongation and amplification of said guilt and inadequacy, a constant transfer of the inability to meet an impossible ideal, trying to please the mother by becoming her imperfect copy. How can this chain be broken? The protagonist articulates the problem and a consequent solution:

> I think I don't want our flesh – my mother's flesh, my grandmother's flesh – to just be divided and replicated. I want their life to be counted. I want to make a child that will not die – a body that will speak and keep on speaking, which can't be shot or burned up. You can't burn every copy of a single book. . . . A book lives in every person who reads it. . . . I want my grandmother to live in everybody, not just in one body from between my legs. (Heti 199)

Instead of producing another imperfect copy of her grandmother in the form of a child, the protagonist envisions the reconstruction of her grandmother in the form of writing. In this way, she completes what her mother and herself were striving for, to give their own mothers' lives meaning:

> Maybe motherhood means honoring one's mother. Many people do that by becoming mothers. They do it by having children. They do it by imitating what their mother has done. By imitating and honoring what their mother has done, this makes them a mother.
>
> I am also imitating what my mother has done. I am also honoring my mother, no less than the person whose mother feels honored by an infant grandchild. I am honoring my mother no less. I do as my mother did, and for the same reasons; we work to give our mother's life meaning.
>
> What's the difference between being a good mother and being a good daughter? Practically a lot, but symbolically nothing at all. (Heti 200)

This is the core of Heti's reinterpretation of motherhood, a motherhood backwards, honoring one's mother through one's work, not by having a child but by writing the ancestral maternal line back into existence. Gretchen Shirm points out that with this redefinition of motherhood the protagonist affirms an identity which is "deeply relational . . . without repeating the pattern of also bringing children into the world" (319), thus avoiding a crippling imitation in favor of a measured relationality. In this way, her writing reshapes the narrative of motherhood and expresses a redefined motherhood at the same time. The very life story of mother and grandmother that we read about constitutes the protagonist's claim to motherhood, as it takes the place of the imagined child as an alternative way to create maternal meaning. By fulfilling her role as daughter in "validat[ing] [her] mother" (Heti 276) she simultaneously becomes a mother. This backwards conception of motherhood is anticipated in the book

in several ways. The fortune teller's prophecy about her life turns out not to be applicable to her but to her grandmother's life. So it looks backwards instead of forwards, a reverse narrative (48, 275). In a dream, the protagonist envisions her menstrual blood flowing upwards into her brain, reversing its direction and there figuratively creating the literary child which will make her a mother. As Currie points out, these reversals surrounding the book's reconfiguration of motherhood blur the lines between mother and not-mother and so undermine social binaries: "[F]or Heti it is childbirth that is the realm of infinite repetition of what was, and writing that restores possibility to the future" (133). So from a different point of view, having children is backwards, repetitive motherhood, and writing to honor one's mother is forward, "future-proof" motherhood.

The book closes with the mother's validation of the daughter's work, sealing the circularity of motherhood. In a letter she writes:

> You never knew [your grandmother], and you are the one who will make her alive forever.
> It is magical! And yes, the universe is back to perfect.
> Thank you, Sweetheart. I love you very much. (Heti 283)

This reference to perfection and the acknowledgment of the mother's love for her daughter suggest a level of closure by which the alternative narrative of motherhood trumps the frustrating divisiveness of traditional motherhood narratives. Echoing the story of Jacob wrestling the angel, the protagonist names her own "wrestling place" "Motherhood" (Heti 284), the promised land in which she struggled with a decision and found fulfillment in the struggle itself, not by making a decision for or against motherhood, but by redefining motherhood as an inclusive concept.

This redefinition makes the book an important contribution to the discourse of decisional autonomy in matters of pregnancy and maternity, because it identifies pronatalism as a culturally pervasive narrative, which is subtle but rigid in its exclusionary binarism and consequent pressure and divisiveness it imposes upon women. Heti dismantles the narratives that make up the concept of motherhood and redefines it as an inclusive, non-divisive, non-coercive concept. Maintaining its relational basis, she reverses its temporal trajectory and suggests the relationship with the mother as its central concern. Mobilizing the creative potential of writing she rewrites the narrative of motherhood as the reconstruction and "eternalization" of ancestral bonds between women through literature. Via this reversal, she undermines the one-directional conception of motherhood and by introducing the concept of "non-non-motherhood" allows for the term's inclusiveness of all women. In this way, she deflates the notion of decisional compulsion and so creates a spirit of egalitarianism and tolerance from which all mothers, non-mothers, and non-non-mothers can benefit. The

book's contribution to the debate over decisional autonomy in matters of reproduction is to advocate women's self-determination in their understanding of motherhood, whereby it opens up pro-choice arguments towards not just giving women the right to choose but also towards controlling the discursive and narrative frames and implications of their choice: a freedom to invest their choice with their own meaning. In other words, it is not just "her body, her choice," but "her body, her choice, her narrative."

About the Author

Martin Holtz earned an MA and a PhD in American Studies from the University of Greifswald in Germany. He has published two books: *American Cinema in Transition: The Western in New Hollywood and Hollywood Now* (2011) and *Constructions of Agency in American Literature on the War of Independence: War as Action, 1775–1860* (2019). He currently teaches American literature and film at the University of Graz in Austria.

Peer Review

This article was reviewed by the issue's guest editor and one external reviewer.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Works Cited

BBC. "Fierce Abortion Debate Spills Over into Canada." *BBC*, 11 May 2022, www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-61416354.

Bieker, Nadine, and Kirsten Schindler. "Wenn Frauen Kinder bekommen – Mutterschaft als Schreibblockade." *Schreiben, Text, Autorschaft II: Zur Narration von Störung von Lebens- und Schreibprozessen*, edited by Carsten Gansel et al., V+R, 2021, pp. 259–74.

Chodorow, Nancy. *Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*. U of California P, 1978.

Currie, Mark. "Maybe Baby: Uncertainty and Decision in Sheila Heti's *Motherhood*." *Textual Practice*, vol. 36, no. 1, 2022, pp. 116–34, doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2020.1789207.

Dey, Claudia. "The Child Thing: An Interview with Sheila Heti." *The Paris Review*, 26 Apr. 2018, www.theparisreview.org/blog/2018/04/26/the-child-thing-an-interview-with-sheila-heti/.

Gollom, Mark. "Why Canada's Roe v. Wade Didn't Enshrine Abortion as a Right." *CBC News*, 4 May 2022, www.cbc.ca/news/canada/abortion-rights-canada-morgentaler-court-1.6439612.

Gronemann, Claudia. "Autofiction." *Handbook of Autobiography/Autofiction: Volume I: Theory and Concepts*, edited by Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf, De Gruyter, 2019, pp. 241–46.

Heti, Sheila. *Motherhood*. Vintage, 2018.

Löschnigg, Martin. "Narratology." *Handbook of Autobiography/Autofiction: Volume I: Theory and Concepts*, edited by Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf, De Gruyter, 2019, pp. 103–10.

Meretoja, Hanna. "Metanarrative Autofiction: Critical Engagement with Cultural Narrative Models." *The Autofictional: Approaches, Affordances, Forms*, edited by Alexandra Effe and Hannie Lawlor, Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, pp. 121–40, doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-78440-9_7.

Miller, Michael F. and Melissa Bailar. "An Interview with Sheila Heti." *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 60, no. 2, 2019, pp. 146–73.

Moore, Julia, and Patricia Geist-Martin. "Mediated Representations of Voluntary Childlessness, 1900–2012." *The Essential Handbook of Women's Sexuality Vol. 1: Meanings, Development, and Worldwide Views*, edited by Donna Castañeda, Praeger, 2013, pp. 233–51.

NAF. "Revised Ethics Statement." *National Abortion Federation*, Dec. 2018, members.prochoice.org/iweb/upload/naf%20ethics%20statement%202019.pdf.

Reese, Hope. "'What Kind of Responsibility Is It to Sentence Somebody to Life?' Sheila Heti on Motherhood." *Vox*, 10 May 2018, www.vox.com/conversations/2018/5/10/17337426/motherhood-sheila-heti.

Rich, Adrienne. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, Norton, 1986.

Rodgers, Julie. "On the Margins of Motherhood: Choosing to Be Child-Free in Lucie Joubert's *L'Envers du landau* (2010)." *Women: A Cultural Review*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2010, pp. 75–96, doi.org/10.1080/09574042.2018.1425537.

Rye, Gill, et al. "Introduction: Motherhood in Literature and Culture." *Motherhood in Literature and Culture: Interdisciplinary Perspectives from Europe*, edited by Gill Rye et al., Routledge, 2018, pp. 1–13.

Schmitt, Arnaud. "The Pragmatics of Autofiction." *The Autofictional: Approaches, Affordances, Forms*, edited by Alexandra Effe and Hannie Lawlor, Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, pp. 83–99, doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-78440-9_5.

Shirm, Gretchen. "Sheila Heti, Melanie Klein and *Motherhood*." *Critique*, vol. 63, no. 3, 2022, pp. 309–20, doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2021.2024128.

Smith, Sidonie, and Julia Watson. *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 2nd ed., U of Minnesota P, 2002.

Stanford Friedman, Susan. "Women's Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice." *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, edited by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, U of Wisconsin P, 1998, pp. 72–82.

Venkatesan, Sathyaraj, and Chinmay Murali. "'Childless? Childfree? Neither, Just ME': Pronatalism and (M)otherhood in Paula Knight's *The Facts of Life*." *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2021, pp. 108–21, doi.org/10.1080/21504857.2019.1617179.

Wagner-Egelhaaf, Martina. "Of Strange Loops and Real Effects: Five Theses on Autofiction/the Autofictional." *The Autofictional: Approaches, Affordances, Forms*, edited by Alexandra Effe and Hannie Lawlor, Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, pp. 21–40, doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-78440-9_2.

Wolf, Kate. "A Fundamentally Absurd Question: Talking with 'Motherhood' Author Sheila Heti." *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 7 May 2018, lareviewofbooks.org/article/a-fundamentally-absurd-question-talking-with-motherhood-author-sheila-heti/.

Worthington, Marjorie. *The Story of "Me": Contemporary American Autofiction*. U of Nebraska P, 2018.

Journal of the Austrian Association for American Studies
vol. 5, no. 1, 2023, pp. 100-122
doi: 10.47060/jaaas.v5i1.173

"Marriages ought to be secret": Queer Marriages of Convenience and the Exile Narrative

Ben Robbins

ABSTRACT

In histories of exile and migration, LGBTQ+ people have often entered marriages of convenience. Within these arrangements, a gay man and lesbian woman typically enter a marriage to expedite immigration processes or to placate conservative family members. Most commonly, these relationships do not produce children, and they consequently call into question the pronatalism that is often associated with heteronormative conceptions of marriage. This article explores the complex dynamics of these relationship structures through an analysis of childfree married women in the novels of two female queer exile writers: Jane Bowles and Patricia Highsmith. In Bowles's *Two Serious Ladies* (1943), a US-American upper middle-class couple, Mr. and Mrs. Copperfield, journey to Panama, where Mrs. Copperfield begins an affair with a female sex worker called Pacifica and refuses to return to the United States with her husband. In Highsmith's *Ripley Under Ground* (1970), the union between the US-American Tom Ripley and the French heiress Heloise Plisson provides a cover for Tom's ambiguous sexuality, as well as his diverse criminal activities, and allows Heloise to enjoy a life of aimless pleasure. In both these novels, queer marriages of convenience permit transnational mobility within unions that are markedly non-procreative and thereby occupy non-future oriented temporalities. This article demonstrates how these writers used the alternative temporal organization of the marriage of convenience plot to undermine the conventional structures of patriarchal genres, including the modernist quest narrative and suspense or crime fiction.

KEYWORDS

Networks, queer literature, queer theory, transnational literature, modernism, crime fiction, romance fiction, temporality

Marriages of convenience between LGBTQ+ people have been a recurring feature in histories of exile and migration. In these relationships, most frequently between a gay man and lesbian woman, a marriage is entered out of neither romantic nor sexual motivations, but in order to provide a public front that may allow for immigration or the acquisition of citizenship with greater ease (Acosta 21–22) or to appease family members within repressive cultures (Acosta 22; Huang and Brouwer 140).[1] Generally speaking, these unions do not have a reproductive impetus, and they therefore challenge the pronatalist ideology that often accompanies heteronormative conceptions of marriage. Such arrangements were common in the exile communities of Europe and North Africa from the 1900s to the 1960s, which attracted queer British and North American writers escaping legal oppression in their native countries. Many gay men and lesbian women from these countries went into exile as a result of social and historical pressures, since to be homosexual in Great Britain or the US during this period was largely criminalized (Houlbrook 19–20; D'Emilio 14). Consequently, in order to pursue same-gender encounters or relationships, queer people frequently felt forced to flee their native countries in favor of more permissive foreign locations, such as Paris or Tangier.[2]

The exile communities that developed in these diverse locations attracted many artists and writers, who made important contributions to lively international subcultures, and marriages of convenience between queer exile writers were a frequent phenomenon. Such unions enabled these figures to cross borders and resettle more readily in foreign environments by drawing on the diffuse queer international networks of which they were a part. However, queer exile writers not only engaged in alternative relationship structures, but they would explore these ambiguous marital dynamics in their fiction. This article will particularly focus on the presentation of childfree married women in the novels of two female queer exile writers: Jane Bowles and Patricia Highsmith. Both left the United States in the mid-twentieth century for more tolerant climes in North Africa and Europe. While Highsmith never entered a marriage of convenience, she was inspired by her friend Bowles to at least contemplate acquiescing to a proposal for a platonic heterosexual marriage.

[1] These types of marriage of convenience between gay men and lesbian women have also been termed "lavender marriages," particularly with reference to unions between celebrities in the entertainment industry in the first half of the twentieth century that masked queer identities (Stephens 18).

[2] In these parts of the world, at different points during this period, homosexuality was either legal or tolerated. Due to the Napoleonic Code, France had no legal framework for the punishment of homosexuality, and by 1900 the city had garnered "an international reputation as the capital of same sex love among women and was designated 'Paris-Lesbos'" (Benstock 47). Tangier detached from Morocco and was governed by a coalition of European powers from 1923 until 1956 as an "International Zone" (Mullins 4). This coalition resulted in "a weak administration incapable of enforcing laws efficiently, so illegal commercial activity flourished," including the buying of queer and non-queer sex by international tourists (4).

The article will begin by discussing the benefits and challenges of marriages of convenience through a brief analysis of accounts provided in the letters and diaries of Bowles and Highsmith. It will go on to explore how such marriages were presented in fiction through a discussion of Bowles's novel *Two Serious Ladies* (1943) and Patricia Highsmith's novel *Ripley Under Ground* (1970). In *Two Serious Ladies*, a US-American upper middle-class couple, Mr. and Mrs. Copperfield, journey to Panama, where Mrs. Copperfield begins an affair with a female sex worker called Pacifica and refuses to continue travelling or return to the United States with her husband. In this text, the Copperfields' marriage primarily serves as a front that grants Mrs. Copperfield the guise of "respectability," which allows her to pursue same-gender encounters. In *Ripley Under Ground*, the union between the US-American Tom Ripley and the French heiress Heloise Plisson similarly provides a cover for Tom's ambiguous sexuality, as well as his diverse criminal activities, and it offers Heloise a life of objective-less pleasure without orientation towards the future, with her family money supporting their life of luxury in rural France. As Tom says of their pragmatic decision to wed: "Marriages ought to be secret . . . as private as the wedding night" (Highsmith, *Ripley Under Ground* 389), suggesting that marital unions should be kept mysterious in order to provide a cover for the sexual activities that are presumed to underpin them. As I will demonstrate, in both these novels, queer marriages of convenience permit transnational mobility within unions that are markedly non-procreative and thereby occupy queer, non-future oriented temporalities. These texts' use of queer time also undermines established narrative structures. Bowles's radical commitment to non-sequentiality in a queer travel novel subverts the typical arrangement of the masculinized, modernist quest narrative, while Highsmith's focus on the queer present in the lives of married couples resists the future-directed orientation of the masculinist suspense or crime fiction genres.

The focus on time and narrative is crucial to understanding how the presentation of characters in marriages of convenience enables Bowles and Highsmith to question the traditional conventions of patriarchal or masculinized literary genres, such as experimental modernism and crime fiction. Through the absence of a reproductive impetus, the unions depicted by these writers challenge normative temporalities of the family and the procreative futurity of marriage, since "[t]he wedding purports to emplot bodies into linear time, to represent an unbroken chain of causal events continuing into an unchanged future" (Freeman, *Wedding Complex* 34). The marriage of convenience offers the possibility of alternative temporal plotting within the narrative, severing the supposed casual links between love, matrimony, cohabitation, and child-rearing. In a common project, *Two Serious Ladies* and *Ripley Under Ground* both make use of the alternative structure of the marriage of convenience plot, which has

been widely deployed in the romance genre. Romance fictions typically conclude with the "happily ever after" resolution of betrothal or marriage (Ramsdell 89). As Elizabeth Freeman summarizes, "[l]iterary critics have long described the wedding in terms of aesthetic, social, and psychic closure" (*Wedding Complex* xi). However, the focus on marriages of convenience inverts the traditional temporal sequence of the romance plot, since courtship begins *after* the act of marriage. As Kristin Ramsdell summarizes, "the protagonists agree to wed for reasons of inheritance, respectability, social pressure, security, family considerations, or other motives not related to love or personal feelings. It is at this point that the actual courtship process begins" (89).[3] These motivations are evident in the marriages of convenience depicted in Bowles and Highsmith's fictions, which demonstrate how characters may wed to provide an "acceptable" social screen for queer sexualities, sometimes under social duress. Similarly, Bowles and Highsmith focus on life after marriage for couples. However, they do not dwell on practices of courtship, paying attention instead to the rituals of domesticity and international leisure that succeed conjugal unions in these cases. It is particularly the temporal disruptions of the marriage of convenience plot that appear to have appealed to these writers. They both draw on the reversed temporality of the romantic subgenre, particularly its avoidance of closure, to challenge the traditional progression of generic structures.

Queer Motivations to Marry

The correspondence and diaries of Bowles and Highsmith provide first-hand insight into their understanding of these unorthodox arrangements, as well as the mutual benefits they believed could be derived from these unions, none of which would produce children. Jane and Paul Bowles met in 1937 and married a year later. Their relationship was initially sexual, but they soon settled into a companionate marriage, both preferring to have same-gender encounters outside of their marriage. They travelled extensively together to places such as Panama and Mexico, and Paul settled in the port city of Tangier in 1947. Jane followed him to Morocco in 1948, and in the letters she wrote to Paul while she remained in the US, she is open about her numerous affairs with women. Jane also suggests that her motivation to travel was in part informed by her sexual impulses, telling her husband that he "would be bored hearing about Iris and Cory and Louisa and Sister Bankhead. . . . I am more and more crazy about the Scotch and the Irish and think seriously of paying a visit to those countries and getting it over with" (*Out in the World* 42). Within the model of erotically motivated travel, Jane finds comfort in the privacy her marriage to Paul affords her. When

[3] The device most commonly appears in historical variations of the romance genre in order to convey a more socially constrictive period, circumvent the need to convey sex before marriage, or appeal to more conservative past or contemporary readerships (Ramsdell 89).

they begin to make plans for her move to Tangier, Jane expresses her fears about their new residence: "I don't of course know about the Arab town of Tangier . . . It may be filled with European and American eccentrics in any case. That is all I would mind, being conspicuous" (62). It appears important to Jane that the domestic sphere should remain inaccessible and uninterrogated, which a heterosexual marriage allows to a degree, while she is still free to pursue affairs outside of that sphere. After she settled in Tangier in 1948, Paul engaged in a period of travel outside of Morocco. In a letter Jane wrote to him from Tangier, she provides her definition of their queer marriage of convenience as a constant interplay between restriction and freedom:

> I feel both things at once. That you are completely free and someone who will help me when he can, out of affection, and yet also that you are a husband. I don't think about the husband part very much but I am trying to be *very* honest. I am not sure either that being confined a bit by the social structure is altogether bad for either one of us. (*Out in the World* 80–81)

Of course Jane recognizes that the freedoms these kinds of relationships grant are a clear benefit, but significantly she senses that the restrictions of the institution may also be of advantage to them both, as they function as a form of protection.

Patricia Highsmith was acquainted with Jane and Paul Bowles and even had a passing romantic interest in Jane. It was, in part, the Bowleses' arrangement that led Highsmith to contemplate the benefits of a marriage of convenience for herself. Highsmith first met Jane Bowles in late 1944 in New York, when she had returned from living in Taxco, Mexico, but the two would go on to meet frequently during the summer of 1947, when Highsmith was going through a break-up. As her biographer Andrew Wilson states, "[i]n [Highsmith's] diaries she talks of [her] brief flirtation [with Jane Bowles] – at one point they had even planned on travelling to Africa together – but the relationship came to nothing" (135). Highsmith documents these encounters in her diaries and notebooks, but she suggests that the heavy drinking the pair engaged in proved a barrier in establishing any real connection (*Diaries and Notebooks* 394). A few years later in March 1950, Highsmith received a postcard from a lover, the socialite Natica Waterbury, informing her that she was in Paris with Jane Bowles and would be in North Africa next summer: "Why don't I hop over, she asks" (*Diaries and Notebooks* 477). It was perhaps Bowles's movement between global queer subcultures under the conventional guise of marriage that prompted Highsmith to consider whether a similar arrangement might be beneficial to her and whether she should marry the writer Marc Brandel, with whom she had a short relationship and who knew she was homosexual. As Highsmith noted in her diary in September 1950,

> Marc came over at 8:30. He is bored with his wealthy and very ideal girl, and wants to marry me . . . again, now on flatly companionable basis. Like putting a thin, slack leash on me. He in fact no longer wants a heterosexual marriage. . . . We shall have something

> like Jane and Paul B. [Bowles] For I think I may do it. It will not interfere at all with London this winter – which I dream of – or anyone or anything else. (*Diaries and Notebooks* 493)

Although Highsmith seems aware of the restrictions of this queer marriage proposal as a potential method to control her – and she would ultimately reject the suggestion – she appears to recognize that it would place no obstacles before her in terms of sex or travel. Indeed, if the models provided by the Bowleses can be taken as representative, a queer marriage of convenience may even have afforded her greater mobility

Queer Transnational Journeys and *Two Serious Ladies*

Jane Bowles's only novel, *Two Series Ladies* (1943), illustrates how queer marriages of convenience may permit transnational mobility within unions that are markedly non-procreative. The text focuses on two wealthy women in early middle age based in the New York area, Miss Christina Goering and Mrs. Frieda Copperfield,[4] who attempt to distance themselves from their conventional lives through different forms of mobility: Miss Goering sells her house to move to a nearby island and Mrs. Copperfield travels to Panama with her husband and begins an affair with a local teenage prostitute named Pacifica. This journey was in fact inspired by Jane and Paul Bowles's honeymoon trip; the couple were married on February 21, 1938, and travelled to Panama the next day on a small freighter on Jane's twenty-first birthday (Dillon 51). In the novel, the two women meet at a party near the beginning of the novel, where Mrs. Copperfield announces her travel plans. After this point, the novel narrates the lives of the two women separately, before they are reunited in a New York restaurant at the close of the narrative, where they share what they have learned from their parallel attempts to expand the horizons of their claustrophobic lives. Strikingly, very little attention is paid to children in this novel.[5] In the case of Mrs. Copperfield, both her marriage and lack of children allow her to move more freely around the world, the former enabling her to cross borders with greater ease as a moneyed queer traveler, the latter permitting her to make sudden spatial relocations unencumbered. When children are referenced, it is often metaphorical. Both Mrs. Copperfield and other characters in the novel repeatedly use the term "baby" to describe her identity. I would like to suggest that this character is viewed as representative of childhood in

[4] The novel always includes titles before the women's surnames, which I therefore also adopt in this essay.

[5] On the brief occasions that children do appear, they are presented as an imposition or an aberration in the lives of the principal characters. For example, when Mr. and Mrs. Copperfield walk through the streets of Panama, they are irritated by "the children . . . jumping up and down on the wooden porches and making the houses shake" (Bowles, *Serious Ladies* 41). In a similar scene, Miss Goering embarks on a train trip along the island, and while at the station she is disturbed by children "hopping heavily first on one foot and then on the other," with the result that "the little wooden platform shook abominably" (*Serious Ladies* 125–26). In all cases, the narrative is not invested in developing the characterization of children.

adulthood due to her resistance towards the normative, future-oriented expectations of heterosexual marriage: namely that the union should be procreative. Instead, Mrs. Copperfield occupies an alternative temporality, in relation to which queer people have historically been associated with negative qualities of "backwardness" or arrested development.

An exception to the general lack of children in *Two Serious Ladies* can be found in its opening scenes, which are concerned with the early years of Miss Goering, a character who is not identified as queer in the narrative, as she will later pursue a series of unfulfilling, non-marital encounters with men as an adult. Bowles uses these framing scenes to contrast the queer childishness of Mrs. Copperfield as an adult with the unsettling precocity of Miss Goering as a child who will grow up to be straight. In childhood, Miss Goering, who is simply called Christina at that point in her life, is unpopular at school, which the narrator attributes to her interiority and lack of ability to adapt to her social environment; she is described as having "an active inner life that curtailed her observation of whatever went on around her, to such a degree that she never picked up the mannerisms then in vogue" (Bowles, *Serious Ladies* 3). Her precocity manifests in an early attraction to dictatorial leadership. She exercises these desires by staging morally didactic, religious games. Christina initiates her sister's shy friend Mary into one of them, which she calls "'I forgive you for all your sins'" (*Serious Ladies* 6). The rules of the game are that Mary should take off her dress, wear "an old burlap sack" with two eyeholes over her head, and repeatedly chant "'[m]ay the Lord forgive me for my sins'" (6). As the game escalates, Christina tells Mary she will have to stand in a stream for three minutes if she wishes to be purified of her sins. At this point, Mary complains that she is "'freezing to death'" (7), and she continues to shiver even after she takes a bath once Christina decides the game is over. Christina possesses a strangely accelerated and militant fanaticism, as well as a bizarre sadism. Bowles will later contrast Mrs. Copperfield, an "immature" adult queer woman, with the threatening and untimely advancement of Miss Goering, who seems to correspond to Freudian descriptions of the "dangerous" child as "remarkably, threateningly precocious: sexual and aggressive" (Stockton 27). As I will show, Bowles counterpoints Miss Goering's advancement with Mrs. Copperfield's queer refusal to advance or grow. Furthermore, Mrs. Copperfield's association with lack of advancement is spatialized in the novel through her acts of delay and diversion on a transnational journey.

The trip to Panama initially appears to have been instigated by Mrs. Copperfield's husband, but she will come to embrace the queer possibilities of international travel and transcultural encounter. At a party, where the couple describe their plans, Mrs. Copperfield's husband flatly announces that "[w]e will go to Panama and . . . penetrate

into the interior" (Bowles, *Serious Ladies* 18). Pavlina Radia historicizes such journeys to South America from the United States in the 1940s, which she frames as part of an attempted escape by cultural intellectuals from the consumerism and commercialism of mid-century America into what was perceived as a rural idyll. She observes how these associations were echoed in literature from the period, as "the often exoticized and eroticized visions of South America" pervaded "modernist narratives in which characters set out on emancipatory quests, eager to make themselves new, as it were, through an encounter with culturally different, racialized others" (Radia 754). Mrs. Copperfield is not at first open to the potential for "renewal" in their voyage to South America. After her husband's announcement, she presses Miss Goering's hand with fearful anticipation. As Kathy Justice Gentile has observed, dread is a recurring motif in Bowles's work, and typical of modernist female characterization more broadly. Gentile comments that, since female characters were often presented in spatially limited, domestic environments in the nineteenth-century novel, "[a] twentieth-century character who ventures into the world may experience a dread that assumes the psychological symptoms of agoraphobia" (50). However, upon reaching Panama, Mrs. Copperfield begins to open up to this new environment, particularly through her encounters with women in the sex-work industry. We observe a character caught between her husband's plans for the journey and the new directions in which she wishes to move, representative of a central tension in Bowles's work between convention and deviation. As Gentile comments: "When Bowles's characters manage to overcome habit, socialization, and fear and push themselves to the edge of the abyss, they totter agonizingly between the rule-bound world behind them and the unbounded world before them" (52).

Mrs. Copperfield most directly challenges convention and the "rule-bound world" through her connections with female prostitutes in the Panamanian port town of Colón. The exploration of these types of cross-cultural encounter were central to the shaping of North American modernism. Michael Trask argues that the literary movement should be "defined with reference to the social transformations that brought genteel and upper-class [US-]Americans into encounters, either forced or chosen, with their social 'inferiors'" (*Cruising Modernism* 1), which included those at the sexual margins, such as prostitutes. Modernist writers in the US recirculated an elitist discourse that "chose to couch class difference in the language of sexual illicitness, viewing innovative and unsettling social arrangements as an extension of the irregular or perverse desires that sexology deliberated" (*Cruising Modernism* 1). Similarly, sexual deviance in *Two Serious Ladies* is conflated with Mrs. Copperfield's engagement in class "slumming." Her marriage to a wealthy man is crucial to these activities, since it lends an "acceptable" public face to her transgressions. Mr. Copperfield chooses a

hotel for them “right in the heart of the red-light district” (Bowles, *Serious Ladies* 38) in order to save money, and they begin to explore the area together, “walking through the streets arm in arm” (41). Mrs. Copperfield is quickly approached by women, and she engages with their advances, going into the room of a woman who she guesses is from the West Indies (42). Her husband actively facilitates this exchange, offering to explore the area further and return to pick her up, as well as giving her some money for the encounter. As Mrs. Copperfield enters the room with the woman, she exclaims “‘I love to be free’” (43), but her ability to engage in queer sex tourism is very much dependent on the protection, financial support, and respectability granted by her marriage.

There are clear overlaps here between the Copperfields’ marriage of convenience and that of the Bowleses themselves. In the same letter to her husband where she talked of her concerns about being “conspicuous” in Tangier, Jane Bowles went on to compare herself to her character from *Two Serious Ladies*: “As for worrying about comforts – as you know or should by now, that is not the kind of thing that concerns me. Have you forgotten Mrs. Copperfield?” (*Out in the World* 62). Similarly, it is not the discomfort of living in a cheap hotel in a seedy district that inspires fear in Mrs. Copperfield. In the novel, female anxieties are instead directed at the world that lies outside the conventional bounds of marriage. When the Copperfields first meet the Panamanian prostitute Pacifica in Colón, the young woman complements Mrs. Copperfield’s appearance, and when she replies that she looks “terrible tonight,” Pacifica insists “it does not matter because you are married. You have nothing to worry about” (Bowles, *Serious Ladies* 47). Women in this novel believe marriage promotes financial security and easeful transnational mobility, but nowhere does the text suggest that it should necessarily produce children nor preclude the pursuit of queer desires. Mrs. Copperfield expresses the twin desires to be both anchored by conventions and to test their limits, which is explored through her ambivalent relationship to place in the text. In a trip to Panama City with her husband, Mr. Copperfield insists, in typical fashion, on “a walk towards the outskirts of the city” (59), but Mrs. Copperfield reflects that she “hated to know what was around her, because it always turned out to be even stranger than she had feared” (59). The conventional and the strange can coexist in a state of irresolution in the queer marriage of convenience.

Mrs. Copperfield most actively pushes against the spatial boundaries of convention when she moves into Pacifica’s room at the Hotel de las Palmas, a gritty pension in Colón. Mrs. Copperfield begins to contemplate moving to Colón, bringing an end to her travel plans with her husband. It is here that the Copperfields’ itineraries diverge substantially from one other. When Mrs. Copperfield insists that she wants to stay indefinitely in the city with Pacifica, Mr. Copperfield challenges her wishes by

asserting that "you can't plan a trip that way" (Bowles, *Serious Ladies* 108). The journey is essentially analogous to plot here, since Mrs. Copperfield's adamance that she will not continue the trip as planned disrupts the sequential progression of the narrative. Gentile observes that Bowles's "characters' urgent and idiosyncratic quests for liberation and fulfilment break the sequence and restructure the trajectory of events in the female plot" (50). As part of this causal disruption, female figures from Bowles's fiction depart from normative, gendered trajectories that move towards the raising of children.

It is in this sense that the marriage of convenience enables Bowles to disrupt the patriarchal structures of modernist narrative. Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs place Bowles within a second generation of female anglophone experimental writers who both challenged literary traditions and subverted patriarchy, since their writings, "reflecting a radical disengagement from patriarchal modes, satirize or attack traditional structures and in some cases presuppose their dissolution" (17). Bowles's writing primarily achieves this through its radical commitment to non-sequentiality, which is enacted spatially by Mrs. Copperfield's refusal to follow the itinerary she had initially agreed upon with her husband. Taken more broadly, Mrs. Copperfield's actions serve to disrupt the outcomes and trajectories of the quest narratives fundamental to patriarchal modernism. As Friedman and Fuchs comment, Bowles's presentation of characters who do not move towards a specific goal "parodies traditional novelistic structure," since "[i]n patriarchal fiction salvation and happiness are commonly depicted quests that Bowles has here [in *Two Serious Ladies*] decentered and thus sabotaged" (22). The quest narrative was central to masculinized modernism, and it allowed male writers to identify with the image of the alienated hero, perceiving themselves to be social outsiders and participating in what Jennie Skerl calls "the legend of the artist . . . with women playing supporting roles as muses, mistresses, or wives" (263). In contrast to her male contemporaries, Skerl argues that Bowles "presents the artist's spiritual quest from a female point of view and laughs at the grotesque 'lack of fit' between female experience and the male visionary quest" (264). In *Two Serious Ladies*, journeys veer off their plotted course and away from marital commitments as a result of same-gender desire, disrupting the established conventions of modernist narrative in the process.

Additionally, Mrs. Copperfield's deviation from an itinerary unsettles the masculine community of the text. When he leaves Panama to continue his tour of Central America alone, Mr. Copperfield sends his wife a letter in which he makes a series of accusations against her character and perceived lack of development:

> You . . . spend your life fleeing from your first fear towards your first hope. Be careful that you do not, through your own wiliness, end up always in the same position in which

> you began. . . . I believe sincerely that only those men who reach the stage where it is possible for them to combat a second tragedy within themselves, and not the first over again, are worthy of being called mature. When you think someone is going ahead, make sure that he is not really standing still. (Bowles, *Serious Ladies* 110–11)

Mr. Copperfield accuses his wife of stasis, immaturity, and a lack of development due to her refusal to move on to the next stage of their planned journey. These features have frequently been attributed to queer people within modernity. As Heather Love observes,

> [w]hether understood as throwbacks to an earlier stage of human development or as children who refuse to grow up, queers have been seen across the twentieth century as a backward race. Perverse, immature, sterile, and melancholic: even when they provoke fears about the future, they somehow recall the past. (6)

Mr. Copperfield identifies his wife's refusal to move on to the subsequent port of call in their trip with a kind of queer backwardness, a spatialization of her perceived resistance to development and maturity. Mrs. Copperfield's failure to "grow up" is observed through what Kathryn Bond Stockton calls "a short-sighted, limited rendering of human growth, one that oddly would imply an end to growth when full stature (or reproduction) is achieved" (11). We should instead pay attention to queer forms of development from childhood to adulthood to interrogate "the vertical, forward-motion metaphor of growing up" and emphasize "the many kinds of sideways growth" (11) that queer people engage in.

Conceptions of personal growth are clearly framed spatially in terms of moving forward through space. But what happens when a character refuses to grow or move in this way? Echoing her husband's accusations, Mrs. Copperfield is pejoratively associated with childishness many times in the novel, which appears to be bound up with her refusal to move around the world as is expected or planned. In this sense, her "childish" stasis, trying to stay on in Colón, can also be allied to her childlessness. Freeman describes how,

> [i]n a chronobiological society, the state and other institutions, including representational apparatuses, link properly temporalized bodies to narratives of movement and change. These are teleological schemas of events or strategies of living such as marriage, accumulation of health and wealth for the future, reproduction, childrearing, and death and its attendant rituals. (*Time Binds* 4)

By refusing imperatives towards "movement and change," which includes reproduction and child-rearing, Mrs. Copperfield cannot shed the tag of immaturity. In a gin-fueled night of revelry at the Hotel de las Palmas, Mrs. Copperfield exclaims: "At a certain point gin takes everything off your hands and you flop around like a little baby. Tonight I want to be a little baby" (Bowles, *Serious Ladies* 71). In the final scene, when Mrs. Copperfield introduces Pacifica to Miss Goering, Pacifica asks: "What can

I do with [Mrs. Copperfield]? She is like a little baby" (200). By ignoring the normative pressures placed on women within heterosexual marriages, Mrs. Copperfield is perceived by those around her as a figure of arrested development, a derogatory association that she herself appears to have internalized. As a narrative type, Mrs. Copperfield aligns with Stockton's definition of the "grown 'homosexual,'" a negative label used "to describe the supposed sexual immaturity of homosexuals: their presumed status as dangerous children, who remain children in part by failing to have their own" (22). This characterization may be cemented within marriages of convenience, since Freeman elsewhere argues that within "[a] state that promotes marriage" those who cannot function within a traditional couple form may be stigmatized and stereotyped as "immature and/or sexually indiscriminating" (*Wedding Complex* 2). On the one hand, Mrs. Copperfield offers a queer counterpoint to the propulsive, procreative expectations of marriage, resisting demands that she should progress to the next stage of her life's journey until its queer possibilities have been fully explored. However, by doing so, she cannot escape the stigmatization and stereotyping of her "childish" behavior by those around her.

International Crime, Queer Performativity, and the Ripley Novels

Similar to the ways in which Bowles uses the marriage of convenience to undermine the masculine modernist quest narrative, Patricia Highsmith's foregrounding of a queer couple in an equivalent arrangement in *Ripley Under Ground* subverts the patriarchal structures of crime or suspension fiction. Highsmith was a female author working within a genre that has often been charged with presenting "an effective façade of gender conformity" (Plain 25), particularly through its adoption of masculine, hard-boiled registers. Highsmith overcomes such gender norms in *Ripley Under Ground* through her focus on the transnational lives of the married couple Tom Ripley and Heloise Plisson. The movement of these characters reflects Highsmith's own experiences of exile. From the early 1950s, Highsmith lived a highly transatlantic life, travelling back and forth between the United States and Europe; she would settle permanently from 1963 in France and Switzerland, distancing herself strongly from her Southern Texas roots. Highsmith's letters and diaries from the 1940s to the 1990s show how the author traversed many international queer exile communities; Highsmith can be found spending time with Paul Bowles in Tangier or on a night out at the gay club Chez Romy Haag in West Berlin in the late 1970s. Highsmith's five novels about the main character Tom Ripley and his circle, published between 1955 and 1991 and known unofficially as the "Ripliad," also connect these transnational queer networks through the mobility of their criminal protagonist and his wife, the wealthy French heiress Heloise. In *The Boy Who Followed Ripley* (1980), which was dedicated

to Highsmith's French lover Monique Buffet, Tom has a criminal rendezvous in a Berlin gay bar dressed in drag, and in *Ripley Under Water* (1991), Tom and Heloise are pursued on a trip to Tangier by a man who wishes to expose Tom's history of murder. Throughout these novels, Heloise is often the motor behind their mobility, insisting that they engage in international travel to escape scandal or place distance between themselves and Tom's criminal activities.

In the second Ripley novel, *Ripley Under Ground* (1970), Tom and Heloise's marriage of convenience serves both to mask Tom's career as an international criminal and to allow Heloise to pursue a life of aimless pleasure. Underneath the camouflage of the Plisson dynasty, Tom engages in a career of forgery, fraud, and murder, activities that take him to Austria, Greece, England, Germany, and Morocco. His marriage to Heloise grants him membership of the wealthy classes of French society, and the couple enjoys a life of leisure in their home Belle Ombre, a rural idyll, the upkeep of which is supported largely by the allowance Heloise receives from her parents. Despite its European setting, Tom is a quintessentially US-American literary figure, who rapidly climbs the social ladder though techniques of impersonation. He resembles Jay Gatsby, a rich US-American whose background remains mysterious to those around him and whose conspicuous wealth conceals criminal activities. In the first novel in the Ripley series, *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1955), the working-class protagonist is sent on an errand from New York to Italy by the shipping magnate Herbert Greenleaf to return his son Dickie to the US to work for the family. Instead, Tom resolves to stay in Europe using Dickie's money after he murders him, and then temporarily takes on his identity.

His relationship with Heloise seems to be a further stage in Tom's impersonation of transnational elites, since it provides him with an appearance of what he calls "French respectability" (Highsmith, *Ripley's Game* 599). This is a performance in which Heloise is also complicit, as Tom observes in *Ripley Under Ground*: "Her propriety was a veneer only, Tom knew, or surely she'd never have married him" (576). Tom considers how he has managed to keep

> his name and his reputation clean, amazingly clean, considering all he did. It would be most embarrassing if it were in the French papers that Thomas Ripley of Villeperce-sur-Seine, husband of Heloise Plisson, daughter of Jacques Plisson, millionaire owner of Plisson Pharmaceutiques, had dreamed up the money-making fraud of Derwatt Ltd . . . (*Ripley Under Ground* 300)

This distinction between public and private is part of the queer performativity of Heloise and Tom's marriage, which, in part, offers a cover for Tom's ambiguous sexuality. In her earliest note from her diaries on *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, written on March 28, 1954, Highsmith describes Tom as

> [a] young American, half homosexual, an indifferent painter, with some money from home through an income, but not too much. He is the ideal, harmless looking, unimportant looking . . . kind of individual a smuggling gang would make use of to handle their contacts . . . He gets into deeper water, this careless, carefree young man (who is able to have affairs with both men & women) . . . Like Bruno [from her first novel *Strangers on a Train*], he must never be quite queer – merely capable of playing the part if need be to get information or to help himself out in an emergency. (*Diaries and Notebooks* 622–23)

Tom's queerness confounds as it appears, at times, to be performed for criminal ends.

As Tom observes in the final novel in the Ripliad, *Ripley Under Water*, in "the realm of sexual relations" matters can be "so different in privacy from what the pair might show the public" (Highsmith 68). This discrepancy appears to have produced severe discomfort in Tom during the act of marriage itself. As Highsmith describes

> Tom had turned green at the wedding, even though it had been a civil wedding with no audience in a courtroom of some kind. . . . Marriages ought to be secret, Tom thought, as private as the wedding night – which wasn't saying much. Since everybody's mind was frankly on the wedding night anyway at weddings, why was the affair itself so blatantly public? There was something rather vulgar about it. (*Ripley Under Ground* 389)

Tom believes that audiences at weddings are fixated on the sexual activity that is presumed to follow the ceremony, despite the fact that carnal intimacy between Tom and Heloise is in fact limited. Feeling exposed, even by the presence of the limited audience for a civil wedding, Tom wishes for the ceremony to be made private in order to screen the "vulgar" sexual theater of marriage, which attracts the prurient interest of onlookers. Highsmith's exploration of the unsettling linkage between public and private through the wedding is arguably part of the novel's queer political project, which engages in "exposing links between the 'private' sphere and various 'public' techniques of control" (Freeman, *Wedding Complex* xiv). Tom articulates a desire to restrict the public sphere around marriage, appearing to resent the sporadic performativity that is essential to marriages of convenience, as well as the discomforting erotic voyeurism of the ritual itself. As Shuzhen Huang and Daniel C. Brouwer analyze within a contemporary Chinese context, heterosexual marriages where one or both parties are queer require "episodic but felicitous performances of heteronormativity from queer subjects" (141), which may, in the case of Tom on his wedding day, place excessive stress upon members of these couples.

In *Ripley Under Ground*, Tom gives a number of reasons as to why his relationship with Heloise functions as a successful mask for his criminality and ambiguous sexuality. First, Heloise subscribes to a form of moral relativism that allows her to overlook his activities. Tom considers her morals to be "next to non-existent" (Highsmith, *Ripley Under Ground* 300) and believes that they are "disrespectful of the same

things" (*Ripley Under Ground* 459). He even goes so far as to say that "Heloise was that curious bit of a crook herself" (*Ripley Under Ground* 538), meaning that she is willing to look the other way and not ask questions when confronted with criminal behavior, and perhaps also his sexual transgressions. When Tom confesses to her that he has murdered someone, she is not fazed, rationalizing that there can be plural accounts of the same event: "What is true, what is not true?", she ponders cynically (*Ripley Under Ground* 574). Throughout the novel, she displays a curious detachment from the complex situations in which they find themselves. As Tom reflects, "Heloise had a marvellous air of not being much interested in the situation, but of being polite enough to be present" (*Ripley Under Ground* 536). This position relates to her attitude to their collective finances, since Heloise "was interested in money, but not particularly in where it came from" (*Ripley Under Ground* 456). For Heloise, indifference to crime and indulgence in decadence go hand in hand, and it is precisely this relationship that also marks her as a queer character whose investment in immediate pleasures, rather than long-term goals, resists the normative futurity of the couple arrangement.

Heloise's queerness is partly established by her unconventional gender identity and acceptance of Tom's relative lack of sexual interest in women. Although Tom is attractive to women, he is passive to their advances: "the girls had liked him well enough, and in fact Tom had felt a bit pursued. Heloise Plisson had been one of the ones who had liked him. And from Tom's point of view, she wasn't a piece of cement, orthodox, or far out, or another bore" (Highsmith, *Ripley Under Ground* 389). Part of Heloise's unorthodoxy is her embrace of sexual unconventionality. There are suggestions in the novel that she would be open to non-monogamy, and she tolerates and is amused by Tom's young male protégés. There are also hints of youthful experimentation with sexual norms on Heloise's part: "The stories she'd told Tom about her adolescent intrigues with girl schoolmates, and boys, too, to evade her parents' surveillance, matched the inventions of Cocteau" (*Ripley Under Ground* 499). In a later Ripley novel, *The Boy Who Followed Ripley*, Heloise even demonstrates her knowledge of queer subculture and literature, dancing to Lou Reed's music and reading a "well-worn copy" of W. H. Auden's *Selected Poems*, whose work she likes because it is "'clear'" (287). It is important to note here that Highsmith's association of criminality and female sexual transgression may have been informed by the author's attitudes towards women. Her friend Barbara Roett stated that "'[i]f [Highsmith] were a man I would have no doubt in saying that she was a misogynist'" (qtd. in Wilson 300). As Nathan Tipton also points out, Highsmith "had little truck with feminism, gay liberation, or, for that matter, any organized sociopolitical movement" (135). Highsmith's

depiction of the amoral selfishness of Heloise and Tom can, in part, be read as an expression of her lack of solidarity with women and queer people.

Although their relationship still has a sexual component, it is not a priority for either of them. Their attempts to have sex while on honeymoon in Spain are repeatedly interrupted by a parrot in their hotel singing *Carmen* badly (Highsmith, *Ripley Under Ground* 335), which sets an early precedent for the irregularity of sex in their marriage. In *The Boy Who Followed Ripley*, Tom reveals that "[t]hey didn't often make love," but "[t]he infrequency of their making love didn't seem to bother her at all. Curious . . . But convenient too, for him" (144). A detailed description of their sex life appears in *Ripley Under Ground*:

> Tom lay with Heloise on the yellow sofa, drowsily, his head against her breast. They had made love that morning. Amazing. It was supposed to be a dramatic fact. It was not so important to Tom as having fallen asleep with Heloise the night before, with Heloise in his arms. . . . Tom felt odd sometimes making love with her, because he felt detached half the time, as if he derived pleasure from something inanimate, unreal, from a body without an identity. (458)

Tom derives pleasure from sex with Heloise, but the physical closeness to his wife appears more important than the act itself. Additionally, there is a curious sense of detachment, as he objectifies and depersonalizes his wife. Trask observes that Tom's feelings in this passage confirm "not only our intuition of Tom's queerness but also Highsmith's commitment to eroticizing impersonality even in the midst of a relation as ostensibly intimate as the conjugal tie" ("Highsmith's Method" 609). The freedom Heloise gives to Tom appears to be reciprocal, as his impersonal detachment from her gives her space in which she can escape a conventional female role within an ostensibly heterosexual marriage, as Tom recalls "Heloise had once said to him that she liked him, or had she said she loved him, because he let her be herself, and gave her room to breathe" (Highsmith, *Boy Who Followed* 255). The benefits Tom and Heloise derive from their relationship are consistent with Huang and Brouwer's finding that queer marriages of convenience can paradoxically further heteronormativity and challenge gender and sexual norms simultaneously, thereby troubling "the perception that cultivation of same-sex desire and participation in a male-female marital relationship must be discontinuous and sequestered from each other" (141).

The benefits of this arrangement for Heloise may be less pronounced, since her sexuality is not consistently coded as queer, and she does not marry Tom for material advantages, as he is not himself from a wealthy background, deriving his income from the Greenleaf estate and his involvement in the Derwatt art forgery operation run out of London. However, her attachments to instantaneous enjoyment associate her with a queer form of stasis. The Ripley novels suggest that Heloise enjoys a "queer" relationship with Tom, which resists what Love calls the "future-oriented

temporality of the family" (67). Both characters strongly resist future-directed imperatives, including the raising of children, existing instead in a pleasure-based present, similar to the failure of Mrs. Copperfield to stick to the advance planning of her husband's travel itinerary, part of Bowles's representation of "quests . . . that contradict their declared objectives" (Friedman 246). It is Heloise and Tom's lack of objectives that stretch into the future that partly marks this marriage as queer.[6]

In the case of Heloise, this manifests particularly in her pursuit of short-term consumerist pleasures. Her materialism seems to be bound up with her resistance to long-term planning. As part of this trend, she has a particular attraction to disposable items and superficial cultural symbols. The narrator tells us that "Heloise loved London – English sweaters and Carnaby Street, and the shops that sold Union Jack wastebaskets and signs that said things like 'Piss off'" (Highsmith, *Ripley Under Ground* 309). Her interests remain primarily within the material realm, which manifests through a superficial engagement with other cultures through the purchases she makes, as the novel summarizes, "[i]f she had any passions, they were for travelling, sampling exotic food, and buying clothes. The contents of her two closets in her room looked like an international costume museum without the dummies" (*Ripley Under Ground* 352). Such pleasures have often been negatively associated with the absence of children in the lives of queer people, as Lee Edelman argues, capturing this stigmatizing logic: "If . . . there is *no baby* and, in consequence, *no future*, then the blame must fall on the fatal lure of sterile, narcissistic enjoyments understood as inherently destructive of meaning" (13).

Apparently lacking orientation towards the future, Heloise is ascribed a temperamental childishness, similar to that of Mrs. Copperfield, as well as an uncanny agelessness. Highsmith's novel describes Heloise's uncontrolled outbursts of anger with little cause behind them: "She had tempers and tempers. . . . The more serious tempers were caused by boredom or a minor assault upon her ego, and could occur if a guest had bested or contradicted her in a discussion at the table" (*Ripley Under Ground* 459). Heloise is judged by others to lack advancement through her apparent ability to regulate her "uncontrollable, unreasonable" (*Ripley Under Ground* 535) emotions. As a reflection of this queer form of arrested development, Heloise appears to age very little across the four Ripley novels in which she appears, which are set between 1968 and 1988 (Sutherland xvii). In *The Boy Who Followed Ripley*, Tom struggles to remember Heloise's age: "she was only twenty-seven, or was it twenty-eight?" (144). However, in *Ripley Under Water* – the subsequent novel in the series set around ten years later – the text states that she expresses herself "sounding and looking like

[6] Mrs. Copperfield also has few objectives apart from generalized pleasure. *Two Serious Ladies* describes how "Mrs. Copperfield's sole object in life was to be happy" (Bowles 40).

a teenager instead of someone in her late 20s" (26). Heloise's unnatural youthfulness may simply be a product of an authorial oversight to iron out inconsistencies between novels in the same series, but her surreal preservation against aging also speaks to a queer form of stasis and the stigma of developmental delay.[7]

As discussed in the previous section, queer theorists have shown how LGBTQ+ people may stand in opposition to normative temporal systems of organization. Jack Halberstam explains that

> [q]ueer uses of time and space develop, at least in part, in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction. . . . "Queer time" is a term for those specific models of temporality that emerge within postmodernism once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance. (1, 6)

Queer time stands in counterpoint to what Edelman calls "reproductive futurism" (2). He elaborates that

> [e]ven proponents of abortion rights, while promoting the freedom of women to control their own bodies through reproductive choice, recurrently frame their political struggle, mirroring their anti-abortion foes, as a "fight for our children – for our daughters and our sons," and thus as a fight for the future. (Edelman 3)

Edelman offers a queer challenge to discourses of pronatalism, arguing against "the singular imperative . . . to embrace our own futurity in the privileged form of the Child" (15).

In addition to Heloise's tastes, character traits, and apparent lack of aging, we can observe this resistance to futurity in her relationship with Tom, when her husband contemplates that

> [h]e could not make out [Heloise's] objectives in life. She was like a picture on the wall. She might want children, some time, she said. Meanwhile, she existed. Not that Tom could boast of having any objectives himself, now that he had attained the life he had now, but Tom had a certain zest in seizing the pleasures he was now able to seize, and this zest seemed lacking in Heloise, maybe because she had had everything she wished since birth. (Highsmith, *Ripley Under Ground* 458)[8]

Highsmith contrasts the aggressive, posturing upward mobility of the US-American Tom with the staid, entrenched class privilege of the European Heloise. In reference to the "pleasures" of Tom's life of leisure, Victoria Hesford comments that he is "an

[7] The childishness of stigmatized characters was also explored by Alfred Hitchcock in his 1951 film adaptation of Highsmith's novel *Strangers on a Train* (1950). Hitchcock referred to the queer character Bruno from Highsmith's text as "rather a child" (qtd. in Greven 146), and David Greven argues that in the film both queer male and sexualized, heterosexual female characters are associated with "childlike and therefore regressive behavior," which manifests through their "sensual childlike appetites" (150). Such presentations are reflected in the luxurious and shallow materialism of Heloise in the Ripley novels.

[8] Mrs. Copperfield also seems to be aligned with a lack of futurity, when she comments that "[t]he longer I live, the less I can foresee anything" (Bowles, *Two Serious Ladies* 71).

accumulator of things . . . acquired for the pleasure they give now rather than the promise they offer for the future" (111).

Tom and Heloise's investment in the immediate additionally unsettles the temporalities of crime or suspense fiction. Suspense fiction is driven by "the uncertainty of an expected outcome" and, within the context of narrative, it is the technique of "delaying or postponing (and, to a certain extent, concealing) the outcome of a certain action or situation" (Prieto-Pablos 100). Its orientation, therefore, is squarely towards the future, with suspense propelling the plot forward and helping to regulate its pace; as Juan A. Prieto-Pablos asserts, quoting Meir Sternberg, "suspense (and curiosity) constitute 'perhaps the most propulsive forces a storyteller can rely on'" (109). The crime writer's handling of time serves to either rapidly accelerate or slow down the pace of the narrative. Tony Hilfer argues that time within this genre is "decentered" and "[t]he narrative pace is either headlong (fast forward) or excruciatingly protracted (frame advance) as the protagonists struggle to stay a step ahead of the big clock for fear that they are about to be caught in its machinery" (39). Highsmith's focus on the resistance to futurity of a queer married couple grounds the text in the present moment, and thereby subverts the temporal organization of crime fiction itself, specifically its predilection for speed or painstaking delay.

Although Highsmith does suggest that Heloise has an abstract desire to have children, this never materializes across the four Ripley novels in which she appears. Instead of subscribing to a normative ideology of reproductive futurity, Heloise and Tom are invested in the present moment.[9] In a scene of non-sexual intimacy from *Ripley Under Ground* where the couple decadently drink champagne in bed, Tom considers that

> [i]t was not an evening for making love, but Tom felt very happy, and not at all worried about tomorrow . . . Then his cheek was against her breast. Heloise, you're the only woman in the world who has ever made me think of *now*, Tom wanted to say . . . (Highsmith 498)

Their queer investment in the present is highly disruptive of the conventions of suspense fiction; when with Heloise, Tom's lack of anxiety for the future undermines the uncertain anticipation that is supposed to propel this genre forward. Heloise, as a relatively minor character in the Ripley series when compared to Tom, introduces stasis into the plot, to an extent that it comes to violate the governing principles of

[9] In an interview from 1984, Highsmith expressed the misogynistic view that women who married, had children, and then complained about the "drudgery" of their lives should themselves bear responsibility: "'And she didn't foresee that [if] she got married and had the two kids, she'd be stuck in this particular trap [?]'" (qtd. in Wilson 300). In contrast to what seems to be a conscious decision not to have children on Heloise and Tom's part, Highsmith would elsewhere condemn her female characters' "passive" acceptance of normative expectations for womanhood. In relation to this passivity, Fiona Peters argues that "what is striking about [Highsmith's] approach to women, both protagonists and objects, is the lack of will or, in some cases, the annihilation of choice" (130).

suspense fiction itself. Highsmith herself commented on the potential impact of smaller characters on narrative pace: "The trouble with [minor characters] may be that they do not advance the plot, and suspense novels can scarcely afford such characters in spite of the writer's feeling that they vary the pace of the story" (*Suspense Fiction* 106). Heloise's presence therefore works against the propulsive movement of suspense fiction, and, additionally, through her relationship with Tom, Highsmith presents a queer vision of coupledom and physical intimacy without orientation towards the future. This desexualized married couple continue to live in a queer temporality that evades future-directed objectives, including the raising of children, in both life and narrative.

Conclusion

In *Two Serious Ladies* and the Ripley novels, Bowles and Highsmith drew on their own experiences to explore how queer marriages of convenience may facilitate the movement of exiles. While they produced highly mobile narratives, neither of these texts moves towards a clear destination, typical of the marriage of convenience plot and its resistance towards closure. The plots of this romantic subgenre are temporally disruptive since they focus on courtship *after* marriage. Similarly, Bowles and Highsmith are not concerned with conventional progression from courtship to marriage to parenthood, but rather the unorthodox sexual arrangements that may lie behind the public face of conformist, heterosexual coupledom. Their shared focus on alternative temporalities of marriage allowed them to deconstruct the organization of the patriarchal genres of experimental modernist fiction and crime or suspense fiction. In *Two Serious Ladies*, Mrs. Copperfield's refusal to continue on the planned and plotted path her husband has chosen for her, choosing instead to pursue a queer affair in Panama, undercuts the deliberate, premeditated steps of the masculinist, modernist quest narrative. Similarly, in *Ripley Under Ground*, Heloise and Tom's investment in a pleasure-based present disrupts the propulsive structures that generally accompany suspenseful crime narratives. In both cases, a lack of orientation towards the future in narrative is linked to Mrs. Copperfield's and Heloise's lack of children within their chosen relationship structures. While these narratives offer queer alternatives to pronatalist ideology within heterosexual marriage, both characters are stigmatized by those around them as "childish" or "undeveloped" through their disengagement from procreative, future-directed imperatives. Nevertheless, these texts demonstrate that journeys may deviate from their expected paths through the experience of exile or that normative goals can be discarded in the lives of transnational women like Mrs. Copperfield and Heloise, since their queer motivations to marry produce unions whose outcomes can neither be conventionally plotted nor predicted.

Acknowledgements

This research was funded in whole by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF): 10.55776/P35199. For open access purposes, the author has applied a CC BY public copyright license to any author-accepted manuscript version arising from this submission. I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers of this article for their helpful feedback, and Cornelia Klecker for her insightful comments on different versions of this essay.

About the Author

Ben Robbins is a senior postdoctoral researcher in American literary and cultural studies within the Department of American Studies at the University of Innsbruck and project leader of "Networked Narratives: Queer Exile Literature 1900–1969," which is funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF). He is the author of *Faulkner's Hollywood Novels: Filmic Womanhood on Page and Screen* (University of Virginia Press, forthcoming 2024). His work in the research areas of modernism, popular culture, and queer and gender studies has appeared in the *Journal of Screenwriting*, the *Faulkner Journal*, and *Genre*, and in the edited collections *Faulkner and the Black Literatures of the Americas* and *Hipster Culture*. He was the recipient of the Christopher Isherwood Foundation Fellowship in 2022–23 to complete research at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California.

Peer Review

This article was reviewed by the issue's guest editor and two external reviewers.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Works Cited

Acosta, Katie L. "'Everything Would be Solved if Only We Could Marry:' Queer Marriages and US Immigration Policy." *Sexual Politics of Desire and Belonging*, edited by Nick Rumens and Alejandro Cervantes-Carson, Brill, 2007, pp. 21–40, doi.org/10.1163/9789401204705_003.

Benstock, Shari. *Women of the Left Bank: Paris, 1900–1940*. U of Texas P, 1986.

Bowles, Jane. *Out in the World: Selected Letters of Jane Bowles, 1935–1970*, edited by Millicent Dillon, Black Sparrow Press, 1990.

———. *Two Serious Ladies. My Sister's Hand in Mine: The Collected Works of Jane Bowles*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005, pp. 1–201.

Dillon, Millicent. *A Little Original Sin: The Life and Work of Jane Bowles*. U of California P, 1998.

D'Emilio, John. *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940–1970*. U of Chicago P, 1983.

Edelman, Lee. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Duke UP, 2004.

Freeman, Elizabeth. *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*. Duke UP, 2010.

———. *The Wedding Complex: Forms of Belonging in Modern American Culture*. Duke UP, 2002.

Friedman, Ellen G. "Where Are the Missing Contents? (Post) Modernism, Gender, and the Canon." *PMLA*, vol. 108, no. 2, 1993, pp. 240–52, doi.org/10.2307/462595.

Friedman, Ellen G. and Miriam Fuchs. "Contexts and Continuities: An Introduction to Women's Experimental Fiction in English." *Breaking the Sequence: Women's Experimental Fiction*, edited by Friedman and Fuchs, Princeton UP, 2014, pp. 3–51.

Gentile, Kathy Justice. "'The Dreaded Voyage into the World:' Jane Bowles and Her Serious Ladies." *Studies in American Fiction*, vol. 22, no. 1, 1994, pp. 47–60, doi.org/10.1353/saf.1994.0025.

Greven, David. *Intimate Vio6lence: Hitchcock, Sex, and Queer Theory*. Oxford UP, 2017.

Halberstam, Jack. *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York UP, 2005.

Hesford, Victoria. "Tom Ripley, Queer Exceptionalism, and the Anxiety of Being Close to Normal." *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2018, pp. 102–15, doi.org/10.1080/0969725X.2018.1435382.

Highsmith, Patricia. *Her Diaries and Notebooks, 1941–1995*, edited by Anna von Planta, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2021.

———. *Plotting and Writing Suspense Fiction*. St Martin's Griffin, 1983.

———. *Ripley's Game*. [Ripley Novels I-III], by Patricia Highsmith, Everyman's Library, 2001, pp. 593–877.

———. *Ripley Under Ground*. [Ripley Novels I-III], by Patricia Highsmith, Everyman's Library, 2000, pp. 291–592.

———. *Ripley Under Water*. Bloomsbury, 2010.

———. *The Boy Who Followed Ripley*. Virago, 2015.

Hilfer, Tony. *The Crime Novel: A Deviant Genre*. U of Texas P, 1990.

Houlbrook, Matt. *Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918–1957*. U of Chicago P, 2006.

Huang, Shuzhen and Daniel C. Brouwer. "Negotiating Performances of 'Real' Marriage in Chinese Queer *Xinghun*." *Women's Studies in Communication*, vol. 41, no. 2, 2018, pp. 140–58, doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2018.1463581.

Love, Heather. *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*. Harvard UP, 2007.

Mullins, Greg. *Colonial Affairs: Bowles, Burroughs, and Chester Write Tangier*. U of Wisconsin P, 2002.

Peters, Fiona. *Anxiety and Evil in the Writings of Patricia Highsmith*. Routledge, 2016.

Plain, Gill. *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction: Gender, Sexuality and the Body*. Edinburgh UP, 2001.

Prieto-Pablos, Juan A. "The Paradox of Suspense." *Poetics*, vol. 26, no. 2, 1998, pp. 99–113, doi.org/10.1016/S0304-422X(98)00014-X.

Radia, Pavlina. "The Tawdry Frontiers and Nomadographies of Jane Bowles's *Two Serious Ladies*." *Women's Studies*, vol. 39, 2010, pp. 747–64, doi.org/10.1080/00497878.2010.505151.

Ramsdell, Kristin. "Romance: Marriage – Convenient or Not." *Library Journal*, vol. 134, no. 3, 2009, pp. 89–91.

Skerl, Jennie. "The Legend of Jane Bowles: Stories of the Female Avant-Garde." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, vol. 41, no. 3, 1999, pp. 262–79.

Stephens, Chuck. "Scarlet Nights and Lavender Days." *Film Comment*, vol. 49, no. 1, 2013, p. 18.

Stockton, Kathryn Bond. *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*. Duke UP, 2009.

Sutherland, John. "Chronology." *The Boy Who Followed Ripley*, by Patricia Highsmith, Virago, 2015, p. xvii.

Tipton, Nathan. "Others from a Southern Mother: Southerning the Queer in Patricia Highsmith's *Strangers on a Train*." *South: A Scholarly Journal*, vol. 48, no. 1, 2015, pp. 129–50.

Trask, Michael. *Cruising Modernism: Class and Sexuality in American Literature and Social Thought*. Cornell UP, 2003.

———. "Patricia Highsmith's Method." *American Literary History*, vol. 22, no. 3, 2010, pp. 584–614, doi.org/10.1093/alh/ajq038.

Wilson, Andrew. *Beautiful Shadow: A Life of Patricia Highsmith*. Bloomsbury, 2003.

Journal of the Austrian Association for American Studies
vol. 5, no. 1, 2023

Book Reviews edited by Joshua Parker

Jesmyn Ward: New Critical Essays. Edited by Sheri-Marie Harrison, Arin Keeble, and Maria Elena Torres-Quevedo. Edinburgh UP, 2023, 368 pp.

Jesmyn Ward: New Critical Essays (2023) is a meticulously researched and thought-provoking anthology of literary criticism which takes a multifaceted approach to exploring the works of the critically acclaimed US-American and Mississippi-based author Jesmyn Ward. The collection of twenty critical essays is edited by three scholars: Sheri-Marie Harrison, an Associate Professor of English at the University of Missouri, Arin Keeble, a lecturer in Contemporary Literature and Culture at Edinburgh Napier University, and Maria Elena Torres-Quevedo, a trade union organizer based in Edinburgh.

Blending exciting new scholarship from twenty authors from across mainland Europe, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada, the volume provides comprehensive analyses of the first three of Ward's novels, her memoir, and her essays. At the same time, it delves into topics and themes in Ward's writing, some of which have not yet been properly considered by critics, let alone published in an anthology of this length.

Harrison, Keeble, and Torres-Quevedo open the volume by commenting on Ward's heartbreaking essay "On Witness and Respair: A Personal Tragedy Followed by Pandemic" (2020) in which, among other things, Ward describes losing her husband, the father to her children, one of many tragic losses in the writer's personal life. This introductory commentary on Ward's essay stresses how she considers her inner and outer world as interconnected – after Ward experiences this personal loss at the beginning of 2020, the world is forever changed by the Covid-19 pandemic as well as the worldwide protests resulting from continuous police brutality in the United States and other countries. As Harrison, Keeble, and Torres-Quevedo aptly highlight in their introduction, Ward seamlessly weaves these personal narratives with significant public events.

Based on this introduction and the editors' knowledge of Ward's work, it should not be surprising that this anthology of literary criticism takes a multifaceted approach to analyze Ward's works. While the editors rightfully acknowledge the

significant role of trauma studies and poverty realism in terms of the existing body of critical volumes examining Ward's fiction and nonfiction, the collection of essays contained in this volume offers much more diverse perspectives on Ward's literary works. Examining various aspects such as Ward's portrayal of community and family relationships, the role of nature and the environment in her novels, as well as the historical and intertextual elements of her writing, the essays provide insightful perspectives on how Ward's work reflects on the human experience, from the dynamics of human relationships to the connection between humanity and nature.

Not only does the range of approaches included in this volume deserve praise, but also the range of different scholars and works by Ward that are evaluated in individual essays is worthy of accolades. While the first chapter in this collection, Wendy McMahon's "Bois Sauvage as Biotope in the Novels of Jesmyn Ward," offers an introduction to Ward's fictional and recurring community and natural landscape of Bois Sauvage by interpreting the environment of it as a biotope, Jay N. Shelat's essay, "Wayward Kinship and Malleable Intimacies," focuses on the human relations in Bois Sauvage by proposing that family and community play a crucial role in Ward's literary works by being instrumental in the characters' survival. The third chapter, "Determination in the Wake of Dispossession: Jesmyn Ward's Literary Depiction of Black Resistance to Outmigration," is written by Donald Brown, whose attention is drawn towards Ward's portrayal of Black farmers, the concept of land ownership, and how these concepts are connected to the Great Migration and the ongoing efforts of the civil rights movement.

I specifically name these first three chapters to showcase that the editors' choice in the order of their chapters is not accidental. On the contrary, this first quarter of the book works well as a follow-up to the editor's introduction and the notional "welcome" not only to Ward's fictional and personal life and history but to key themes in Ward's works and to the existing criticism of her work – such as Ward's strong connection to nature, US Southern history, and Southern American literature written about and for Black communities living in the South. This manner of careful and above all knowledgeable editing then weaves through the entire volume.

Ward's often overlooked first novel, *Where the Line Bleeds* (2008), is analyzed in several essays from various perspectives. In the fifth chapter, "Mapping the 'Ungeographic' in Jesmyn Ward's Where the Line Bleeds," Beth Beatrice Smith highlights the (albeit often forgotten) significance of Ward's first introduction of Bois Sauvage to the world and examines how Ward brings together the components of the old and the new South while striving to tackle issues of injustice and discrimination.

Other essays explore Ward's other novels, namely *Salvage the Bones* (2011) and *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017), as well as her memoir *Men We Reaped* (2013). These

include Zsuzsanna Lénárt-Muszka's "The Weather and the Wake: Maternal Embodiment and Peril in Jesmyn Ward's Salvage the Bones," which explores the protagonist's pregnancy and motherhood, and Michelle Stork's "Experiencing the Environment from the Car: Human and More-than-Human Road Trippers in Jesmyn Ward's Sing, Unburied, Sing," which offers an ecocritical and social evaluation of Ward's third novel. Maria Elena Torres-Quevedo's essay, "'Life had promised me something when I was younger': Biopolitics and the Rags to Riches Narrative in Jesmyn Ward's Men We Reaped," is one of many essays in this volume which focus on Ward's memoir. It puts forth the argument that Ward challenges the typical pattern found in US-American autobiographies where the author is seen as an independent entity. Instead, as Torres-Quevedo discusses in her essay, Ward introduces a biopolitical subject that is posthumanist in nature.

Overall, *Jesmyn Ward: New Critical Essays* greatly expands the field of literary criticism as well as the existing scholarship on Ward's works, both fictional and non-fictional. The essays are meticulously researched, thoughtfully written, and provide readers with a deeper understanding of Ward's work, offering unique insights into the complexity of Ward's writing and exploring both the already uncovered and for the first time unearthed meanings that emerge from it.

Karla Rohová, University of Ostrava
doi: 10.47060/jaaas.v5i1.201

Before Modernism: Inventing American Lyric. By Virginia Jackson. Princeton UP, 2023, 304 pp.

Virginia Jackson's most recently published book, *Before Modernism: Inventing American Lyric* (2023), is widely praised as a vital re-examination of American poetics' origins and development. This appraisal is based on the fact that the author, the Endowed Chair of Rhetoric at the University of California, Irving, argues for the visibility of female Black US poets in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. More precisely, Jackson discusses how Phillis Wheatley Peters significantly shaped the development of modern American poetics by inventing so-called *deep design*. Besides intentionally including several lesser-known poets in her book, another important Black

female writer Jackson focuses on is Frances Ellen Watkins Harper. By selecting these two Black poets, whose names were dictated by slavery and patriarchy alike, she highlights their significance in the invention of the American lyric.

Jackson's primary focus on Black poets in North America is a rather innovative one, because she also suggests that poetry developed independently of a transatlantic influence at that time. Indeed, what makes Harper and Wheatley exceptional are the socio-political circumstances in which they pursued a writing career, since Black people (or, more precisely, mostly slaves) were prohibited by law from obtaining literacy skills in a great number of US states. Yet, by aspiring to be recognized as poets, Watkins Harper and especially the enslaved Wheatley reclaimed their agency and raised their voice in a world dominated by men and governed by principles of white supremacy. In addition, by specifically focusing on Black US poetics in her third project on lyrical theory, Jackson argues decidedly against the narrative of white poetics from the eighteenth century onward and, thus, critically examines this very white idea of lyric that is a raced illusion.

Before Modernism is also a book-length response to John Keene's criticism, which he raised after reading Jackson and Yopie Prins's *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology* (2014): Why "is the academic version of modern lyric theory represented by that anthology so White?" (qtd. in "Virginia Jackson"). According to Jackson, she considered this substantial criticism that in turn resulted in a rethinking process. In fact, what Jackson had originally intended to be a book about almost all-white nineteenth-century American poetry became one about Black poets' interventions in public American poetry in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (8).

Before Modernism has a tripartite structure. Jackson begins to trace the dialectical process by initially concentrating on the work by Black poets in the aforementioned centuries. Afterwards, she focuses on the early nineteenth-century poetics of whiteness. Lastly, the racialization of Black and white poetics in the middle of the nineteenth century is discussed by intertwining them. According to Jackson, "[t]his structure places the poetics of whiteness in a secondary rather than primary position, emphasizing the ways in which lyricization of early American poetics was an uneven and unfinished process" (9). It is not so much the intentional marginalization of white poets that represents a strength of *Before Modernism* but the discussion of both Black and white poets in the context of white supremacy and white fragility. By opting for this focus, Jackson aims "to retell the history of American poetics as the history of gendered and racialized lyricization" (54).

Before Modernism provides an answer to Keene's legitimate and thought-provoking criticism, which is echoed by Dorothy Wang and Sonya Posmentier (qtd. in "Virginia Jackson"), regarding the white canon of poetry, a criticism voiced in the earlier

question that Jackson also explicitly addresses in chapter one (52-53). She also explains that she capitalizes the terms *Black* and *White* in order to show her awareness of how systemic racism and white supremacy has affected US-American poetry. Even though capitalizations certainly do not solve these problems, they aim to emphasize "the intransigent mess of the discourses attached to race in America" (18).

A vital aspect in this context is another consideration put forward by Jackson: the use of names. As a scholar of historical poetics, she emphasizes that "these Black women poets [, e.g., Wheatley and Watkins Harper] will *never have names of their own*" (xiii, my emphasis). Here, Jackson hints at the phenomenon of Black people not knowing their ancestors' names because they were robbed of them when enslaved. Thus, being given names dictated by slavery (e.g., the name of slave ships that brought them to the 'New World' or their master's name) is a fate not only Wheatley and Watkins had to bear, but it also negatively affected generations after them. Jackson suggests that, although Wheatley and Watkins Harper "invented American lyric, the genres of their proper names have not yet been invented" (xiii).

In the preface of *Before Modernism*, Jackson links Mnemosyne, the Greek goddess of memory and mother of the nine muses, to the invention of American lyric by discussing Wheatley's lyric poem "On Recollection," which was published in her collection *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773) and she wrote while in her teens as a slave. In "On Recollection," the poet, who informally addresses the muse with the nickname "Mneme," does not ask her to stand in her place as, for instance, white male British Romantic authors typically did. On the contrary, Wheatley asks "memory to tell a story that has yet to be told: the story of the invention of American lyric" (2). Jackson describes a time in the history of American poetics that has not been so thoroughly discussed when compared to the history of British or French poetry at that time. The aim of *Before Modernism* is "to give an alternative account of the ways in which early Black poets inspired the direction that American poetics has taken over the past two and a half centuries" (3). This motivation explicitly questions the narrative of the unidirectional influence of European poetry on American poetry and also corrects the narrative that American poetry began with Whitman's poetry collection *Leaves of Grass* (1855). Black poets, who followed in Wheatley's footsteps, from Watkins Harper to Langston Hughes, Georgia Douglas Johnson, and Audrey Lorde to Amanda Gorman inspired and continue to inspire the direction of American poetics.

To analyze poems such as "On Recollection," Jackson applies what she calls a "slow reading practice." This formal technique derives from historical prosody and historical poetics and "focuses on unspoken incidental or eccentric details that tend to emerge from poems when you linger with them long enough" (8). By resorting to this

technique, the author intends to answer the subsequent question: "How did the poetry of the many become the poetry of the one over the course of the late eighteenth and first decade of the nineteenth centuries?" (59).

In chapter one, "What History Does to Us," Jackson introduces another and, when compared to Wheatley, significantly less-recognized poet: Ann Plato. At the center of attention in this section is her abolitionist poem "To the First of August," which was included in her only publication *Essays; Including Biographies and Miscellaneous Pieces, in Prose and Poetry* (date unknown). According to Jackson, Plato's poem is rather challenging to read and analyze, since it poses only few interpretive challenges for readers and does not express or arouse much emotion (16). Against the background of the previously mentioned poem, Jackson investigates the role of personal abstraction within historical poetics and lyrical theory.

After discussing the mother of the nine muses, Mnemosyne, in the preface and examining Britannia, "a giant feminized White supremacist being" (30–31) in chapter one, Jackson focuses in chapter two, "Apostrophe, Animation, and Racism: Pierpont, Douglas, Whitfield – and Horton," on Apostrophe. The latter is a key Romantic figure of address in modern lyric theory that has been central in the literary oeuvre of Plato's fellow American Romantics. Here, Jackson examines the use and meaning of apostrophic poetic address in greater detail.

Chapter three, "Personification: On Phillis Wheatley's Memory," returns to Wheatley's poem that she introduced in the preface of *Before Modernism*. By reverting to the poem that became "On Recollection," Jackson aims "to consider the many ways in which her [Wheatley's] poetics saw the threat of Romantic apostrophe coming in the privileged eighteenth-century figure of personification" (60).

Chapter four, "Prosody: William Cullen Bryant and the White Romantic Lyric," deals with the poetry of "the American Wordsworth," William Cullen Bryant, and the Romantic prosody this poet borrowed from his transatlantic fellow writers, the British Romantics. Besides influencing the development of American cultural institutions, e.g., the New York Public Library, the creation of the transatlantic white Romantic lyric in the early nineteenth century was one of his most important ideas (61).

Jackson's surprising comparison of the use of the nineteenth-century figure of the Poetess in the works of the Black poet Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in chapter five, "The Poetess: Frances Ellen Watkins, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper," is innovative. Even though both deployed the trope of the Poetess in their poetry, what clearly distinguishes them is how they adopt it differently, which is carefully outlined and examined.

The closing chapter, "Coda: The Prophecy," offers a final lesson to the reader when discussing Watkins Harper's third poem "Ethiopia" in her first collection of poetry, *Forest Leaves* (c. 1845), which was considered to be lost for more than a hundred years. Jackson's decision to end *Before Modernism* with a slow reading of this poem is quite significant. This is because her main line of argumentation in this book is the following:

> [W]e do *not* know how to read a work like *Forest Leaves*, since the norms of lyric reading that Watkins and other early Black poets saw coming now make the work hard to see, even when the evidence of very different special practices, very different relational aesthetics, is staring right at us. (237)

Yet, at the same time, poets like Watkins and their oeuvre can also educate the reader to understand and interpret those social practices and relational aesthetics (238). Finally, Jackson returns to the beginning of her book. While "On Recollection" asks Mnemosyne to tell the story of the invention of American lyric that has yet to be told, "Ethiopia" represents a redress. It "stretches towards a rearranged future in which genres of poems and genres of persons could disappear or be changed at any moment by a muse, by a goddess, . . . by an American Lyric" (241).

Before Modernism re-embeds late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century American poetics in the transatlantic history and theory of poetics and examines how especially Black poetics, as opposed to white poetics, provided the conditions for the development of the American lyric (17). Not only does Jackson argue for highlighting nineteenth-century American poetics, but she also comes to terms with the fact that the idea of American lyric is essentially a racialized and gendered illusion (19). A great strength of this book is that the author reflects on her past work and the criticism it has received and indeed tries to address the latter in *Before Modernism* by using it as a starting point for her own anti-racism journey. By examining primarily female Black poets, like Wheatley and Watkins, she outlines how Black poets inspired the direction of the modern American lyric. Moreover, well-known past and present representatives of Black writing in the USA and Great Britain, such as James Baldwin, Kara Walker, Zadie Smith, Ibram X. Kendi, Saidiya Hartman, and Ta-Nehisi Coates, are continuously referenced in order to integrate their voices and perspectives in *Before Modernism* as well as to support Jackson's line of argumentation. For instance, she incorporates phrases from Kendi and Hartman so as to use terminology explicitly defined by members of Black communities.

If there are limitations of this book, one can criticize that Jackson only discusses a very specific period in American poetry history and does not include enough poems from each poet. This is because of the method Jackson employs, i.e., slow reading, when examining the selected poems. This technique, on the one hand, encourages a

thorough analysis of individual literary texts, but, on the other, prevents a discussion of a larger corpus of poems per poet. Nonetheless, these reservations cannot or can only minimally eclipse the considerable benefits of this book on the invention of modern American poetics in which Black poets took a pioneering role.

Works Cited

"Virginia Jackson." *UCI Faculty Profile System*, www.faculty.uci.edu/profile/?facultyId=5852. Accessed 6 Sept. 2023.

Lena E. Leßlhumer, University of Salzburg
doi: 10.47060/jaaas.v5i1.200