

“But You Would Be the Best Mother”: Unwomen, Counterstories, and the Motherhood Mandate

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Received: 11 June 2014 / Accepted: 18 October 2015 / Published online: 21 January 2016
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Abstract This paper addresses and challenges the pronatalist marginalization and oppression of voluntarily childless women in the Global North. These conditions call for philosophical analyses and for sociopolitical responses that would make possible the necessary moral spaces for resistance. Focusing on the relatively privileged subgroups of women who are the targets of pronatalist campaigns, the paper explores the reasons behind their choices, the nature and methods of Western pronatalism, and distinguishes three specific sources of some of the more lasting, and stigmatizing attacks: popular culture, law and policy, and medicine itself. I then argue that because they are construed by motherhood-essentializing, and increasingly popular, pronatalist narratives as, among other things, “failed” or “selfish,” voluntarily childless women are subsequently burdened with damaged identities that can leave them personally othered and uniquely liminal in ways that are destructive to moral agency. Finally, I conclude with a challenge to the pronatalist master narratives by suggesting the possibility of counter narratives to the voluntarily childless woman's liminality that might serve as the ground of moral and political solidarity among differently situated women, regardless of their motherhood status.

Keywords Pronatalism · Voluntary childlessness · Narrative · Marginalization · Feminist moral theory · Moral agency

“We lived in the gaps between the stories.”
—Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*

Introduction

In Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, veiled female figures move silently through the streets and the bedrooms of the Republic of Gilead, their identities reduced to the sum total of their reproductive parts, their only task conceiving and bearing children for the Wives of the ruling Commanders. Indeed, the Commander households, served by older, infertile, and compliant domestic workers called Marthas, offer a clear view of Gilead's version of “legitimate” womanhood: “Handmaids,” products of a brutal re-education process for fertile women who have rejected the laws of mandatory procreation, are trained and monitored by infertile “Aunts” who never fail to remind them that they are only a few failed pregnancies away from the illegitimacy of Unwoman-hood, marked by exile to the environmental apocalypse of the Colonies; or else from the forced sex work as “Jezebels.” This division of labour bears the desired fruit. Members of the various “levels” of legitimate womanhood harbour a distrust, and often outright hatred, towards each other individually and

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collectively (Atwood 1998). But this paper is not about the grossly overt gender-based oppressions of modern-day Gileads. In fact, I am deliberately setting aside the more obviously cruel and barbaric practices deployed against women worldwide in order to focus on a specific trend within the Global North.¹ Instead, I focus on a set of moral dilemmas that have a family resemblance with Atwood's totalitarian misogyny, but reflect its subtler, and, I suggest, already realized fears. Specifically, I want to examine the policies, practices, and consequences of Western pronatalism and address the unique threats its rapid development poses to nonconforming voluntarily childless (or childfree) women (herein after, VC). For reasons that will be made clear in the next section, I mostly restrict my inquiry to women who are less likely to suffer from other intersecting oppressions, such as economic instability, hetero- and cis-normativities, and so on. By saying that I "mostly" focus on the privileged, I do not imply that I ignore wholesale the unique challenges of less-privileged Western VC women and those residing in the Global South. Instead, I focus more deliberately on the kinds of impediments to moral agency that are likely to be experienced by the more advantaged. Thus, my discussion ought to be construed less as explicitly *excluding* the socially, economically, or politically disadvantaged (as pronatalist laws, medical practices, the media, and other loci of power affect us all), but more as focusing tightly on the advantaged because (1) the less advantaged can face the kinds of challenges that are beyond the scope of this paper and (2) the childbearing decisions of the more advantaged are often judged using criteria that differs from those whose motherhood is taken to be a priori less desirable. Furthermore, my focus on more advantaged women is not intended to ignore the crucial intersectionalities inherent in childbearing choices (and in their consequences) made by women, regardless of their background or circumstances—these connections will become important to the overall discussion of VC, especially when I turn to the considerations of response and repair.

Thus, I suggest that it is these otherwise privileged women who may most often bear pronatalism's heaviest burdens as its failed "best mothers," now marked as incomplete women who are selfish, empty, or

emotionally and psychologically immature (Shriver 2005). And although it is their socio-economic, heteronormative privilege that often shields these non-cooperators from some of the more egregious and obvious oppressions of poverty, race, or other divergent identities, I argue that it is this also "privilege" that places them in a uniquely compromised and marginalized position of modern-day Unwomen: construed as they are by pronatalist power structures and institutions as failed Handmaids, while not threatened with the unsubtle punishment of the Colonies, they nevertheless are burdened with damaged identities that can leave them personally othered and socially liminal in ways that are destructive to moral agency. It is important to note that I consider the ways in which these women *might* (rather than *must*) be damaged and by means of "proof" offer an exploration of the cases where this damage seems to have taken place. Thus, while I take moral damage as a distinct possibility, I also insist on empirical proof: in addressing the claims about the harms to VC women's identities and moral agency, I turn to empirical evidence in part to further substantiate the theoretical claims of pronatalist damage, and in part, by making a phenomenological turn, to illustrate what this social, political, moral, and psychological assault looks—and *feels* like—to those who are its targets. This places my discussion here well outside of any global or necessary claims about voluntary childless women, while at the same time making space for the strong possibility that liminality and marginalization can, and do, happen as a non-trivial matter. Because my worries about voluntary childlessness and its consequences largely rely on existing empirical data and testimony, they ought to be considered as located within the scope of feminist moral theory, broadly construed, rather than within primary empirical research. My claim, then, is that the potential of this moral damage calls for both philosophical analysis as well as for a sociopolitical response in that we need not only to understand the background conditions that make this othering possible, but also to place significant pressure on the sociopolitical practices that create the necessary moral spaces for resistance. I thus divide this paper into five parts. First, I examine and define the cultural meanings and practices of Western pronatalism, challenging its social and moral elevation of motherhood as the apotheosis of womanhood. Second, I examine some motivations for voluntary childlessness. Third, I consider the nature and meaning of some of the broader cultural master narratives of deliberate deviance of the

¹ Although these trends are also very much present in varying ways in the Global South, due to space limitations and theoretical focus, I am limiting the scope of this paper geographically.

voluntarily childless woman. Fourth, I argue that the nonconforming childless woman is, in the end, a liminal figure against the background of persistent pronatalism and suggest that the damage to her identity and sense of self is much more complicated and devastating than the usual worries about familial and social pressures. Finally, borrowing Hilde Lindemann Nelson's claims about the efficacy and power of counterstories, I conclude by offering a way to challenge the pronatalist master narratives in ways that not only offer a counter narrative to the voluntarily childless/childfree woman's liminality but also that opens the possibility of that which Atwood's dystopia made nearly impossible—moral and political solidarity among differently situated women, each facing differing, but no less damaging, oppressions. Indeed, I suggest that a challenge to the current expressions of pronatalism can serve as a rallying cry for women, regardless of their status as mothers, to claim, and reclaim, their own stories.

Scope and Motivations

I begin with a few clarifications about the limits and the background motivations of this paper. First, I have already noted that my claims focus on, and are mostly limited to, the relatively privileged women of the Global North. Not at all intended to exclude other voices and experiences, my reasons for so doing are grounded in my desire to closely examine some of the more hidden, less obvious moral damage, borne by those who in other contexts number among the less obviously oppressed. I must also add that, as a VC member of the in-group addressed here, some of the motivation for this paper in fact originated with first-hand experiences of what I call here marginalization and liminality. By VC, I am making the kind of distinction favoured by Gilla Shapiro:

While childlessness describes a person or couple who does not have children for various personal, biomedical, or situational reasons, voluntary childlessness is characterized by an active choice, commitment, and permanence regarding the decision not to parent (Shapiro 2014, ¶2, citing Houseknecht 1987 and Park 2002).

Indeed, recent empirical studies indicate that well-educated, employed (or otherwise reasonably financially secure) women make up the typical profile of a

voluntarily childless person (Park 2005). My rather limited focus on this subset of pronatalism's targets not only exposes how powerfully pronatalism undermines the moral agency of more traditionally advantaged groups, but also connects this undermining with pronatalism's oppression of less advantaged others. In fact, I will conclude that taking pronatalism as a serious threat to the women who fit its "preferred" maternal profile can serve as the rallying call for women of all socioeconomic, racial, and gender status to claim their authentic agency regarding one of the central decisions affecting their lives.

Second, I must say something about my decision to address solely those who are voluntarily childless, as well as my use of "childfree" and "childless."² It is thus the language of "childless" and "childfree" is often a point of contention, with those who are voluntarily childless at pains to distinguish themselves as "free" (rather than "less") from those who are desperate to have children, and are therefore indeed "less" without them. Although I recognize the intent implicit in the different terms and acknowledge the identity-constituting significance of declaring oneself to not be "less" something one does not desire in the first place, I nevertheless find myself troubled by the "less" versus "free" distinction because of its divisive and hierarchy-enforcing effects. I say "hierarchy-enforcing" because within the pronatalist master narrative, the stories of the two kinds of non-mothers have markedly different trajectories: the story of a "childless" woman who desires children but is unable to bear them (or to have them through other means, such as adoption, although I will not address these distinctions here) is one of understandable pain and shareable strife—a narrative of the tragic and, crucially, helpless, but still morally "good" kind of childlessness. She is truly "less" the life she desired, and we are to empathize with her plight. The other story of the one who desires no children and acts on these desires is neither comprehensible nor relatable, for it celebrates the lack of something that ought to be at the core of her womanhood. She is "free" in ways that some hold to be immoral while others, amoral, for her moral valuations seem to be alien and deliberately non-responsive to the

² For further discussions about the distinctions between childlessness, "voluntary childlessness," and "childfreedom," see Shapiro (2014), Blackstone and Stewart (2012), Hara (2008), Iwasawa (2004), Merlo and Rowland (2000), Chancey and Dumais (2009), Park (2005), Basten (2009), and McAllister and Clark (1998).

larger narratives of mandated, essentialist motherhood. Although declaring herself to be “free,” her story is of a moral universe not shared by the majority of others. The difference lies in the perception of “choice” and in the pronatalist essentializing equivalencies between proper, “natural” womanhood and motherhood: the childlessness happened to the involuntarily childless, while the voluntarily childfree intended and caused their condition.

My worries about divisiveness have to do with moral damage and political disempowerment: damage, because of the simultaneous essentializing of mothering and the normalizing of the narratives of non-mothering as failure; disempowerment, because of the divisions and schisms that are created among women around the issue of motherhood and personhood itself. The greater the incidences of falling into the semantic, and subsequently moral, traps of the “less” versus the “free,” the fewer opportunities for solidarity against the pronatalist master narrative itself. And because I take such solidarity to be crucial for the well-being of women regardless of their reproductive choices or circumstances, and as a way to try to trouble and bridge the socially constructed moral hierarchy between them, I will use the two terms interchangeably when describing those women without children for any reason, while employing the term “voluntarily childless” (or VC) when addressing those women who, for a variety of reasons, decided against motherhood.

Pronatalism: Motherhood as Mandate and Ideal

What is pronatalism and how does it exert its force? And what are its new, modern forms? One way to view pronatalism is on the one hand, is a set of claims about who, and what, women are, and on the other, an implementation of policies to perpetuate said claims. Thus, fundamentally, pronatalism is a view, shaped by political, social, economic, and medical narratives (Lindemann Nelson 2001), that motherhood is *naturally* synonymous with womanhood, and that female identity cannot be (and ought not be) extricated from its motherhood role (Hird and Abshoff 2000; Gillespie 2000). Indeed,

[i]n answering Simone de Beauvoir’s (1949) question—“what is a woman?”—the response seemingly remains that “women= mother= womb.” [...] As Rich [...] explains, “a woman’s status as childbearer [is] the test of her womanhood

[...] motherhood [is] the enforced identity.” The construction of womanhood as motherhood has been established through social, political, medical, and religious institutions. In so doing, motherhood has become constructed as a “fixed” and “natural” practice that is central to feminine identity (Shapiro 2014, 10).

Practically pronatalism, then, is the official endorsement of women-as-mother—or of woman-as-essentially-mother—through various policies, programs, propaganda, and other means of social narrative-shaping. And as much as broad pronatalist narratives tend to offer the mother as an image of female self-actualization and the fulfilment of essential, natural role (Lindemann Nelson 2001), they also paint the woman without children as either a menacing presence, “portrayed as an outcast, and her freedom and vitality are branded wicked,” or else as the pitiable “spinster [...] a failure” (Meyers 2001, 122). The result is often a lack of non-liminal spaces for the VC woman who has simply chosen not to mother.

This is not to say that pronatalism is a singularly organized set of beliefs and policies. Indeed, as soon will be made clear, it is a broad set of attitudes, behaviours, and messages that define, and signal, compliance or deviance. Thus, how pronatalism is manifested can vary greatly, and I begin with a story that perhaps illustrates not the most powerful reification of its beliefs, but its quotidian nature.

Imagine the following: a professional in her late thirties—after much distress over failed IVF attempts, medications with debilitating side-effects, and a number of invasive treatments—decides, with her partner, to forgo any more painful and expensive procedures, and instead, turns to adoption. After several years of bureaucracy, paperwork, home visits, anxiety, and disappointments, she and her partner have accepted the possibility that parenthood might not be in their future. However, only a few weeks after their decision not to continue to pursue parenthood, they receive a phone call that soon finds them on their way to meet their new infant son. Overjoyed, they post photographs of themselves holding their baby on social media, and one of the first congratulatory comments they receive exclaims: “He is gorgeous—and now you really have the perfect family!” A number of other well-wishers similarly emphasize the sudden and wonderful completeness and wholeness of the no-longer-childless couple. A few

more suggest that the couple can finally call themselves a “family.”

Yet imagination is not required here: this story, although edited and anonymized, is real. My reasons for not merely taking these reactions to be expressions of happiness for a longstanding wish at last fulfilled have to do with two considerations: the words choices of the congratulators and the subtext of what was said. If one were to be congratulating someone for, say, successfully completing a degree program, or defending a thesis or a dissertation, simply saying “congratulations!” or “well done!” might be what one would expect to hear. If, however, what one instead heard was “well done—*now* you can indeed be proud of yourself” or “congratulations—*now* you can finally call yourself successful!” a different message emerges: If, for some reason, one could not complete one’s degree, does one have no legitimate cause for pride? If one could not defend one’s thesis or dissertation, would one then not be successful, full stop?

The same analysis can be applicable in the adoption case above: why only a “family” *now* or a “perfect family” *now*? Perhaps a baby is deeply desired by the parents—and I am not at all neglecting this fact here—but the emphasis on the adoption event as a perfection-making one seems to subsume the happiness-making functions of the congratulatory expressions. In fact, this emphasis becomes a kind of a microaggression in that it, perhaps unintentionally or unconsciously, reminds the no-longer-childless couple of (1) the non-family status of their pre-adoption selves and (2) re-emphasizes the normative and perfection-making power of parenthood. “*Now*, you can breathe a sigh of relief” seems to be the subtext of the congratulatory reaction. “*Now* is the moment when you can legitimately be proud of your now-normal(ized) life.”

This story also reflects a small instantiation of a larger reactive pronatalism that is pervasive, damaging, and increasingly a part of the cultural discourse amid the moral panic about falling birth rates in the Global North (Pew 2013; Siegel 2013). In his book, *What to Expect When No One’s Expecting*, Jonathan V. Last, a senior writer at *The Weekly Standard*, describes a “coming demographic disaster” from “America’s baby bust.” Even more dramatically, Steven Philip Kramer, a professor at the National Defense University, argues that rich countries with low fertility should adopt “pronatalist” policies to close “the baby gap” and arrest a spiral of ever fewer workers supporting ever more retirees (CBS/AP 2014). Indeed, the worry about the “baby bust” has even crossed political lines:

A new poll [...] from Lake Research Partners and The Tarrance Group for the National Partnership for Women & Families, found that over 85 percent of voters think it’s important for lawmakers to consider taking action on family friendly policies. [...] Almost two-thirds say it’s very important. This cuts across party lines. Nearly three-quarters of Republicans felt this way, as did 87 percent of independents and 96 percent of Democrats (Covert 2012, ¶10).

In fact, “even the usually sober *Economist* recently warned about ‘the vanishing Japanese’” (Teitelbaum and Winter 2014, ¶5).

The sources of these pronatalist worries seem to be grounded, among other considerations, such as nationalism and fears about the sustainability of the workforce, in the perceived “coldness” inherent in the choice about childbearing—a rejection of “natural” womanhood itself in an act of decadence, laziness, or else a selfish unreasonableness made by otherwise successful women who have “opted out” of motherhood (Basten 2009). And although the former, more sociopolitical considerations play central roles in the perpetuation of the motherhood mandate, it is the perception of a personal, moral failure that sets the VC woman off from the rest of her cohort, making pronatalism more than mere hand-wringing over falling birth rates. Generally speaking, it stands for a set of moral claims about women, motherhood, and the politics of the body. By “pronatalism,” I mean an attitudinal stance that favours and encourages childbearing, as well as supports policies and practices that construe and venerate motherhood as the *sine qua non* of womanhood. Women, it insists, must be implicitly and explicitly led, motivated, or, if necessary, compelled towards the realization of motherhood as not only a social good, but, importantly, as something that is essentially in their own best interests as women. It is, in short, a motherhood mandate (Parry 2005; Ulrich and Weatherall 2000).

Perhaps not surprisingly, although the role of the father has changed and evolved over time, the focus of this latest brand of pronatalism is still the woman-as-mother (Park 2005, 380). Indeed, as Parry notes,

[w]hile pronatalist ideology is thought to impact upon all adults, women, in particular, are targeted by its assertions. Despite the broadening roles available to women in North America over the past three decades, motherhood is still emphasized

as their primary social role. [...] In short, a pronatalist ideology perpetuates the belief that a woman's worth and social role is tied to motherhood (Parry 2005, 134).

In fact, at a time of contraceptive choice, voluntary childlessness nevertheless remains the deviant identity, with personal and professional consequences, for those women who have made the “wrong” choices. In fact, a

book by Dr. Caroline Gattrell, based on several years of research on women in employment, found some bosses consider those who choose not to have kids to be cold and odd, and refuse to promote them, since their deficiency of maternal instinct is seen as tantamount to a lack of “essential humanity” (Sunderland 2009, ¶2).

Regardless of her career plans or other circumstances, an otherwise successful, yet childless, woman will eventually live to regret her choices, eventually becoming depressed, bitter, regretful, and frightened of the looming loneliness of old age: in a pronatalist world, most women are fundamentally and essentially mothers. Or so the story goes. I now turn to the mechanisms through which pronatalist beliefs become controlling practices.

Motherhood as Fetish

Although a majority of American (and other western) women find their way to motherhood, the proportion which remains childless has grown to about 20 per cent of the population (Dye 2008). In the face of this small, but growing, move away from tradition, or perhaps as a response to it, the fetishization of all things related to pregnancy, childbirth, and mothering has only intensified. By “fetishization,” I mean a near-totemic veneration of motherhood that is both officially endorsed and privately embraced. Rather than contributing to the normalization of the childfree woman, such apotheosis of motherhood—and the vilification of its opposite—can border on a narrative violence that valorizes a single aspect of a woman's life as entirely constitutive of her personhood itself. As Felice Batlan notes:

Although we expect more from the *New York Times* than from *People*, its Sunday “Modern Love” column is endlessly devoted to stories of the laments of middle aged career women yearning desperately for children. Each of these articles

is like a warning bell screaming to other women—watch out do not follow in my footsteps. We never hear from the voices of women who consciously decided not to have children and are content or even thrilled to be childless. The decision not to be a mother is instead perhaps silently tolerated but certainly nothing of which to be proud or discussed in civilized company. [...] Like the 1950s, motherhood is required to reach one's full potential as a woman (Batlan 2013, ¶1).

I suggest that this fetishization of motherhood-as-ideal takes place in roughly three forms: first, within the claustrophobic bubble of popular media and culture; second, within legal and political discourses; and third, within the practices of women's medical care itself.

Popular Culture and Motherhood

To say that pregnancy and motherhood have become a cultural fetish is not to indulge in hyperbole. In fact, to experience this particular kind of sociocultural obsession, all one needs to do is simply dip one's toe in the ongoing pronatalist multimedia narratives.

The broad cultural discourse about maternity occupies a number of fronts. From the breathlessness of magazines, websites, blogs, and television programs dedicated to individual pregnancy stories, to the struggle of challenged fertilities, to the “reality television” celebrations of alarmingly large families, to the “baby bump watch” of celebrities, motherhood is presented as the solution to a multitude of personal, familial, and social dilemmas, the greatest of which is childlessness itself (Sandler and Witteman 2013). And the pronatalist panic is not at all limited to sources that blatantly target “women's issues” (Abrams 2012).

For instance, the release of a *Time* magazine article charting the rise of voluntary childlessness provoked an avalanche of cries against “childfree propaganda,” glorifying adult immaturity, and invariably leading to devastating mistakes by misguided childless women (Sandler and Witteman 2013; Walshe 2013). What appears as autonomous choice now, critics claimed, will only become a too-late realization of inevitable personal emptiness and wasted potential for a truly fulfilling life.

When not warning of personal regret, pronatalist narratives are sometimes cloaked in the guise of scientific research concerned with the well-being of childless women. Often, the message is delivered via an alarming

headline, declaring the ill effects of childlessness and the (medically) redemptive power of motherhood. Thus, *The Atlantic* article confidently proclaims that “Childless Men and Women May Die Sooner” (Abrams 2012). However, when one takes a closer look at the Danish study the article cited that tracked couples undergoing IVF treatment for infertility, one must tread carefully: First, the authors admitted to being unable to prove causation. Second, buried beneath the headline is the fact that this study only considered the welfare of people who were *involuntarily childless* (Abrams 2012). The former fact ought to caution us to draw careful distinctions between correlation and causation, while the latter is a troubling reminder how childlessness, without regard to a woman’s attitude towards it, is painted as uniformly bad: bad for society, bad for the economy—and bad for the non-mother, *even if she never wanted children in the first place*.

Of course, the United States is not alone in its concern. As Melissa Graham and Stephanie Rich note:

Prevailing pronatalist discourse in Australian society has led to fertility being shifted from a “personal” issue to a “public” concern. [...] For more than a decade Australian readers have been exposed to pronatalist ideology in the Australian print media. [...] This pervasive pronatalism within the print media has implications for the way in which Australian women who are not fulfilling pronatalist aspirations, such as childless women, are represented in this same media realm (Graham and Rich 2012, 8–10).

Aside from narratives of worry about the childless themselves, the pronatalist discourse extends to the general welfare of the collective. For instance, *The Weekly Standard*’s Jonathan V. Last, in *What to Expect When No One’s Expecting*, argues that the voluntarily childless are not merely self-harming, but pose an external threat to the collective consumer-taxpayer balance of the American economy by jeopardizing its sociopolitical integrity (Last 2014). And such othering observations are not limited to conservative sources. A recent article in *The New York Times*, promisingly entitled “The Changing American Family,” celebrated the increasing diversity and variation within the constitution of American families (Angier 2013). All kinds of familial arrangements were noted and legitimized: “traditional” nuclear families, adoptive families, LGBTQ families, multiracial, multi-ethnic families, cohabiting partner families, single-parent families, and so

on. Yet for all of their diversity, they all shared a trait: every single family grouping featured, prominently and unfailingly, the children of the most recent generation of adults. Blatantly missing was a family that consisted of two (or more) adults without children. While this sort of exclusion may be differently motivated than the right-leaning Jonathan V. Last, the emerging message seems to be clear: while childless couples might count as something, they are not a part of an otherwise broad and increasingly flexible conception of “family.” And as such, they are, via explicit and implicit master narratives, forced to the social periphery.

Outside of print media, one does not have to look far to notice similar messages of marginalization. Television commercials filled with wise and thrifty mothers making the most of their grocery budgets, wiping their children’s tears, or worrying about their calcium intake while pregnant, are ubiquitous. Other than clearly business, youth, or elder-oriented advertising, rarely does one see a woman in a commercial without at the same time being a “mom” who must “balance” her choices, her budget, her diet, and so on. Even rarer is the happy childless couple, unless the target audience fits the older, empty-nester demographic. In fact, a female participant in a study observes that

advertising seems to be needlessly oriented toward moms. Like one time I saw an ad for Suave Shampoo. And the message was something along the lines of, ‘perfect for busy moms’ and I thought, ‘...this is a shampoo.’ I can understand marketing diapers or baby food to ‘busy moms’ but when they advertise SHAMPOO as being “perfect for busy moms” I find it off-putting. The end result is that I draw the conclusion that this shampoo is NOT perfect for ME, and I choose another product. It would be nice if advertisers didn’t make the assumption that all or most women are moms, because so many every day products seem to be marketed only to moms (Vesper 2008, 12, *emphasis original*).

Moreover, companies and organizations have organized around the need to “market to moms.”³ To be

³ See Mom Central (<http://www.momcentral.com/>), *The Huffington Post* (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/10/04/katherine-wintsch-on-mark_n_993944.html), and Appelbaum (2013) for some advertising industry discussion about how to market to mothers, as well as some of the more popular marketing campaigns aimed at mothers. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for questions and critiques that encouraged this line of inquiry.

sure, my claim is not that VC women are ignored or neglected by the advertising industry wholesale—indeed, they are not. Yet what even a brief look at the various media sources (in this case, particularly television and magazines) suggests is that their presence is either limited (in the sense that there are fewer ads targeted directly at them), or else it is marginalized by ads for products that could be construed as being useful for women in general, but which are explicitly (by its claims about being “good for moms”) or implicitly (by making invisible the presence of non-mothers in an ad) designed to appeal to the mother-centric, nuclear family demographic. (Chambers 2001).

Thus, although my claim is not that VC women are wholly written out of the commercial world, it is that they are marginalized. By “marginalized,” I am not suggesting that there ought to be explicit or implicit indicators of products and services marketed specifically for VC women (although one could argue that scenarios of women mentioning their non-childbearing choices in an ad, however that choice relates to a given product, are not beyond the realms of possibility). What I am suggesting is that the basic products that the average consumer purchases, such as shampoo, cleaning supplies, cars, and even food (does cereal really need to be “mom-approved”?) ought not be coded as something specifically marketed to mothers, or made better because mothers would be approving of it (even if the product itself, such as soap, sunblock, or soup does not have anything uniquely to do with mothering or child care). And thus VC women too often simply do not see themselves in the world marketed on general media:

[They] complain that companies don't consider their preferences when they make sales pitches. “I saw an ad for a pregnancy test where the woman is happy to find out she's not pregnant,” says Shannon Peterson, a married 27-year-old from Sunnyvale, Calif. “The commercial could have ended there, but of course, she [the actress] has to add, ‘But I want to get pregnant someday.’” Peterson, who had a tubal ligation in January, offers another example. “One ad for Ragú shows this new microwaveable pasta being eaten by kids, and the voice says, ‘For your family!’ I said to my husband, ‘Why aren't they marketing to me? I work, I'm on the go, I can't cook. I would eat something like that’” (Paul 2001, ¶10).

Finally, in case the message of the motherhood prerogative has not been made rather apparent, the last few decades have enlisted scores of celebrities who, through a variety of methods, have become mothers, and whose every “motherly” habit is carefully recorded and publicized by an ever-eager media. The idea is clear and unambiguous: these successful “superwomen,” with lives clearly busier and more complicated than the average woman's, still make time for motherhood—in fact struggle and sacrifice for it, in explicit narratives available at every supermarket checkout stand. The message is clear: it is (almost) never too late to have children; women are never too busy, too consumed by their work or relationships, or otherwise occupied to have children; and children are the greatest joy and priority that a woman can experience.

As Maushart notes,

[i]n traversing the distance between June Cleaver and Murphy Brown, we've come a long way, baby, without making any appreciable progress at all. Today's media has shifted to the celebrity Supermom, She-who-has-it-all (Maushart 2000, 9).

But the message goes one step further still: even though high-profile women, celebrities or business executive or other fitting tropes of (at least social and financial) success are presented as proof of the triumph of women in the public sphere, these icons are nevertheless packaged as “complete” only when images and references to home and children are a part of their life narratives. As independent and savvy as these women may be, the story seems to go, they are successful in large part because they are also able to accommodate motherhood. Thus recast as examples of “doing it all,” they do not run afoul of the pronatalist imperative—they are neither suspiciously deviant nor pitifully bereft. They are, in fact, the reification of the bargain that pronatalism has struck with feminism: succeed in the workplace, certainly, but never forget where the cornerstone of your identity resides. The effects of such narratives become ingrained earlier, and more powerfully, than could be imagined:

For 15 years at four different Universities, Demographer Stephanie Bohon has asked students if they intend to have children. “They all raise their hands,” she says, “and then I ask why—and

no one has an answer for me. That’s what a social imperative does” (Sandler and Witteman 2013, ¶21).

And thus an in-culture and an out-culture are created, leaving the outsiders wondering whether, buried in their paeans to motherhood, the makers of the shampoo, of the commercials, the writers of the books are saying something quite clearly and distinctly. The voluntary non-cooperators simply do not belong.

The Law and Politics of Motherhood

To examine fully the breadth and depth of the intricate relationships between pronatalism and the various legal and political systems of the Global North would not only be overly ambitious, but would, indeed, require a number of tomes. Thus, while the discussion that I offer here merely scratches the surface of the discourse, it does present a glimpse into the political climate in which women find themselves in the midst of their childbearing decisions.

The current sociopolitical obsession with reproduction and motherhood is, unsurprisingly, not new. In the 1970s, and even earlier, feminist scholars recognized, and challenged, the social constructions of parenthood, and specifically, of mandatory motherhood (Lovett 2007). However, what is noteworthy is the uncritical and newly frenzied embrace of pronatalism by the political classes. In fact, what one finds among some political theorists—and certainly among many politicians—is an apocalyptic fear of a shrinking population of the industrious (and healthy) young, in turn precipitating political, economic, and for some, moral collapse. For instance, Phillip Longman, a senior fellow at the New America Foundation, makes three claims in *The Empty Cradle: How Falling Birthrates Threaten World Prosperity and What to Do About It*: (1) given the combination of modern medicine and reduced fertility, the world’s population might actually shrink; (2) as a result of the shrinking workforce, the world markets will be negatively impacted; (3) an aging, and long-lived, population will, eventually, lead to a collapse of the American healthcare system; and thus (4) the state must provide economic and other incentives for young families to continue growing. Or else (Longman 2004).

While the motivations and interpretations of this call for motherhood “incentives” vary, one finds a number of unambiguously pronatalist narratives across the

political spectrum. In the United Kingdom, beginning in the 1980s, the Thatcher and Major governments, as the Party of the Family, initiated a “Back to Basics” campaign. And even though France currently leads continental Europe in births per woman, it is nevertheless in the midst of a national crusade to rapidly increase birth rates, placing the winner of the President’s “motherhood medal” on the cover of *Paris-Match* (Saunders 2007).

The Australian pronatalist narrative is not far behind, with “Baby Bonus” policies, the Victorian State government’s Infertility Treatment Act 1995, as well as the public call of senior politician Peter Costello to produce “one for mum, one for dad, and one for the country” (Rich et al. 2011, 228). And the Portuguese Prime Minister José Sócrates, as a part of his social reforms, proposed tying tax rates for pensions to the number of children a worker has, with rates for those with two offspring remaining constant, while falling for those with more than two, and rising for those with fewer than two children (Gross 2006).

In an increasingly pronatalist Russia, a powerful socio-moral panic has also taken hold: no mere worry, this is a deep social anxiety about “disappearing”—about the fading away of the Russian people, institutionally, spiritually, and physically. Given abysmally poor healthcare combined with narratives of moral decay, and, as Michele Rivkin-Fish (2005) notes, of “low levels of culture,” particularly pertaining to the status of the family and rates of reproduction, Russian women, this narrative insists, were incapable and fearful of reproduction, produced “defective” children, or else, bolstered by “outsider” notions of market freedoms and personal autonomy, were simply unwilling to reproduce, refusing to save Russia from extinction. Thus the female body—the perceived symbol and source of cultural and physical reproduction, and now, of its degradation—became the focus of pronatalist panic in response to which President Vladimir Putin has, among other things, offered a bonus of 250,000 roubles (about \$9,200) to women who would have a second child (Gross 2006).

Finally, pronatalism is very much endemic to the neo-liberal and conservative narratives within the United States, supporting a “pro-family,” “traditional” values that have largely focused on the restriction of the availability of abortion and other birth-control measures. Indeed, according to a report by The Guttmacher Institute, fourteen states introduced laws seeking to ban abortion before viability; ten states have introduced laws

to ban all, or nearly all, abortions; eight states have passed “personhood” laws; and eight states have also introduced laws to limit “the morning after” pill (The Guttmacher Institute 2014).

Yet even if these laws were to fail, the political rhetoric that celebrates, rewards, and enforces motherhood is omnipresent. This pronatalist narrative was recently on full display at the 2012 Republican National Convention, where Ann Romney, the wife of then-presidential candidate Mitt Romney, declared: “It’s the moms of this nation [...] who really hold this country together,” only to be echoed by vice presidential candidate Paul Ryan, who claimed his mother as his role model, and by Chris Christie, the controversial governor of New Jersey, who proudly labelled himself above all a “mama’s boy” (Valenti 2012; Walshe 2013). Indeed, from Pennsylvania, Governor Tom Corbett’s advice that women who object to invasive ultrasounds before an abortion ought to just “close [their] eyes” (Valenti 2012), to the comments made by political representatives that unflinchingly refer to the well-being of “families” (rather than individuals or couples) and “mothers,” or more commonly, “moms,” the message seems clear: women ought to embrace lives that include motherhood, and only by so doing will they find their rightful place within a well-ordered society.

Still, might one simply conclude this is merely convenient political positioning in the current era of sound bites, Twitter, and twenty-four-hour media? But positioning is not created out of whole cloth—it is usually predicated on the verified and focus-grouped evidence that voters will react positively to one’s message. Thus, the political pronatalist messaging, rather than an expedient trope, is arguably a part of an ongoing feedback loop between an already primed electorate and a position-endorsing candidate. Moreover, if elections were in fact the only occasions to encounter such extreme pronatalist rhetoric, one might make a possible case for doubting its power and influence. However, when this rhetoric is combined with expanding laws and practices whose explicit goals include the disparate treatment of “good” versus non-cooperating women, the sociopolitical paradigm that not only limits a woman’s childbearing choices, but delegitimizes opting out of motherhood, is unambiguous. Perhaps nowhere are these practices more in evidence than in the ostensible privacy of a physician’s office. It is to this third kind of fetishization of motherhood that I now turn.

Motherhood and Medicine

That pregnancy and childbearing have become largely medicalized, closely monitored rituals of well woman visits, testing, and ever-growing lists of behavioural “musts” and “must nots” is both worrying and well-documented (Kukla 2005). The female body over the decades (and especially within the for-profit medical climate within the United States) has largely been medically storied as “pre”: pre-menstrual, pre-pregnant, pre-menopausal, and more broadly, always pre-disease (Kukla 2005). What this suggests is that female bodies have become highly moralized spaces of repair, saving, prohibiting, preventing, and regulating—always on the brink of breaking down, and usually requiring normalizing medical intervention. This state of suspended animation—always between one “condition” and another—renders the female body as incomplete, untrustworthy, and in need of constant and diligent supervision. And no conditions elicit more powerful master narratives of medical rescue and control than pregnancy and motherhood—or their lack.

Within institutional medicine, the fetishization of motherhood translates directly into its medicalization. The story of medicalized motherhood, too long to be properly attended to here, is nothing if not one of paternalism, excessive control, and, among other things, the subjugation of women’s bodies to the ever-expanding “needs” and “safety” of real, as well as hypothetical, offspring (Kukla 2005). Because these invasive practices bear greatly upon the treatment and status of VC women, I first turn to a brief discussion of medicalized maternity.

The notions that pregnancy and motherhood possess absolute, objective value—and that women are the handmaids of the sacred task of their reification—are broad, and their impacts deeply felt within the theories and practices of modern medicine. The kind of pronatalism that one finds here stems not only from the historical narrative of the female body as always a potentially childbearing one, but also from paradigmatic pathologizing of any deviation from its “essential” functions as brokenness. As a result, biomedicine has a troubling relationship with those women who desire children, but are unable to bear them, as well as with those who are willingly non-compliant. While both “are considered deficient, incomplete, or unfilled” (Parry 2005, 134), the former are taken

as a medical problem to be fixed, while the latter are deemed morally and psychologically suspect.

What does this medicalization of the “deficient” look like in practice? Infertility itself, rather than being descriptive of a condition, becomes serious female dysfunction—or even wilful, personal failure:

Ulrich and Weatherall [...] suggest this notion is reflected in the medical terms used to describe physiological causes for women's infertility, including “hostile mucus” or “incompetent cervix.” Terms such as “barren” or “sterile” are also used to convey the inadequacy of women who encounter infertility problems, which in turn reinforces the value of motherhood to “true womanhood.” Furthermore, discourses surrounding motherhood label women with infertility problems as disempowered, bereft, depressed, and even suicidal because of their struggle to achieve motherhood. [...] As further evidence of how pronatalist ideology targets females in particular, infertility continues to be considered a woman's health issue despite research that clearly indicates the physiological cause of infertility is split equally between men and women (Parry 2005, 135).

Unsurprisingly, this combination of the medicalization of childbearing and the fetishization of motherhood often pushes women to commit to years of painful and psychologically devastating testing, aided by the ever-rising age limits, courtesy of emerging technologies and the giddy media and medical stories of anything-is-possible (O’Callaghan 2014; Hall 2006; Hill 2013; Goldman et al. 2014; Chorley 2014). As a result, the message is that women are not finished with the childbearing part of their lives until quite late, thereby depriving themselves of closure. And for those beyond medical assistance—or those simply too exhausted physically, psychologically, and financially to continue—turning to foster care or adoption, although preferable to childlessness, is nevertheless viewed as a glaring lack in some fundamental qualities that make for “real” motherhood (Parry 2005, 135, citing Wolf 2001).

Yet even when women are fertile and willing to conceive, the narrative of female insufficiency and potential defectiveness predominates. The message is quite clear: in the Global North, where motherhood has been a largely socially mediated, revered, psychologized, and regulated practice, what it has become is a public act. What this means for actual and potential mothers is

invasive procedures and behavioural controls. As Rebecca Kukla argues in *Mass Hysteria: Medicine, Culture, and Mothers’ Bodies*, the female body is necessarily “other-directed” (Kukla 2005, 221). In fact, she notes that

[d]uring their pregnancies, contemporary North American women are for the most part treated as having unruly bodies—bodies rendered transparent so that their insides can be properly displayed, publicized, and disciplined in line with the common good (Kukla 2005, 220).

These bodies, always to be ready for birth and motherhood, Kukla argues, do not seem to possess the kinds of inviolate social or medical boundaries that (some) male bodies have historically claimed: from strangers touching pregnant women’s stomachs without permission to the biomedical over-testing, over-monitoring, and over-emphasizing the “protection” of the fetus from the mother’s self-regard and thoughtlessness, the female body is constructed morally as paradigmatically public and epistemically as a sum total of its other-serving functions (Kukla 2005, 221). In fact, Kukla suggests that throughout the early motherhood process, neither in the period of pre- nor of post-birth “does the mother herself emerge as a coherent focus of medical care and attention” (Kukla 2005, 221). She remains, instead, a fragmented figure with porous personal boundaries.

But what if a woman is neither currently pregnant nor intends to be? Unlike a woman suffering from infertility, she is not seeking a “cure”—she simply refuses to participate in motherhood altogether. Her intentions, however, matter very little to pronatalist medicine. On the one hand, her actual choices matter less than her potential as mother: in 2006, the term “pre-pregnant” emerged in a *Washington Post* story addressing a recommendation from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) that all American women of childbearing age begin to take positive steps towards caring for their “pre-conception” health: from the time of their first menstrual period until menopause, they are to take folic acid supplements, not smoke, not “misuse” alcohol, maintain a healthy weight, refrain from drug use, avoid “high-risk” sexual behaviour, and never miss a “well-woman” check. In other words, the

CDC was asking women to behave as if they were already pregnant, even if they had no intention of conceiving in the near—or distant—future. For

the first time, a U.S. government institution was explicitly saying what social norms had always hinted at: All women, regardless of whether they have or want children, are moms-in-waiting. Telling women that what is best for a pregnancy is automatically best for them defines motherhood as a woman prioritizing the needs of a child, real or hypothetical, over her own (Valenti 2012, ¶6).

Thus, in addition to pregnancy being routinely treated as a medical condition, these recent developments escalate medicalization to the totalizing regulation of all women's bodies by treating women of childbearing age, regardless of desire or intent to enter motherhood, as always, and necessarily, pre-pregnant (Kukla 2005).

On the other hand, if she does dare to radically opt of decades of “pre-pregnancy,” she has to confront the open hostility of medical professionals not at all receptive to her non-cooperation, reified through her request for sterilization. Indeed, Annily Campbell's study of twenty-three childfree women who chose sterilization, revealed

described encounters with (mostly male) doctors in which they were put in the position of explaining their desire to become sterilized and convincing the doctors that their decision was well thought out and not whimsical and “spur of the moment.” Many reported “being laughed out of the surgery,” meaning the doctor would not take them seriously and dismissed them as foolhardy. [...] While choosing to have children is instantly accepted, choosing not to have children defies belief (Vesper 2008, 19).

In fact, women who were childless when making sterilization requests were often refused by doctors who believed that they might, at some future time, change their minds, or who deemed them too young, or unready, or rash in their decision-making (Campbell 1999; Gillespie 2000). Save for a few important exceptions, similar worries about age or decisional capacities are notably absent when adult women express a desire for motherhood (Gillespie 2000, 228). What is more, when men of a similar age (and lower educational level) request sterilization, very little resistance is offered, and after a brief consultation, the procedure is usually performed (Richie 2013).

The medicalization of motherhood not only robs a woman of the ownership and agential control of her

body, but also normalizes the pronatalist master narratives, cloaking them in the white coat respectability of medicine. And since the story being told is one of essentialist motherhood, the nonconformist is not only unworthy of trust, but is regarded with the kind of suspicion normally reserved for young children who deny the pilfering of a cookie with the jam still on their lips. An unreliable narrator of her own desires, she is to be granted neither trust of others, nor is to be encouraged in her own agency and self-trust. At best, she is to be dismissed. At worst, her claims are reduced to the absurd and the abnormal—sometimes to the extent that she begins to doubt her own agential legitimacy and standing. Indeed, the voluntarily childless woman is not merely medically pathologized—she is the pathological other itself. For the rest of this paper, I turn to the phenomenology, and to the effects, of these practices of othering.

Some Motivations for Voluntary Childlessness

In order to distinguish the various reasons for voluntary childlessness, initial background commitments to motherhood offer a fruitful start. They can be parsed by considering a woman's general intent regarding childbearing and childrearing. Mardy Ireland, in *Reconceiving Women: Separating Motherhood From Female Identity*, proposes three distinct attitudes towards childlessness: first, there are “traditional” women; second, “transitional” women; and third, “transformative” women. Those in the “traditional” category do not choose to be childfree, but are unable to do so for biological reasons. These are also the women who are more likely to label themselves as “childless,” emphasizing a narrative of grief, disappointment, and a thwarting of life-plans. The “transitional” women, on the other hand, are either unsure about their desire to have children, or, for a variety of social, economic, and personal reasons, delay childbearing until conception becomes impossible (Ireland 1993). As Ireland notes, these women are “living in the stream of social change. They want to pursue the social and career possibilities that are now open to women, but they also want, or think they might want, to have a family” (Ireland 1993, 41). Once the biological barriers are reached, some transitional women declare themselves happily childfree, viewing their life's trajectory as acceptably not inclusive of offspring, given

all of their other pursuits and priorities. Others, regretful, either turn to adoption or remain without children, their identities taking on the more fatalistic tones of undesired childlessness. Finally, “transformative” women are early articulators, making the active choice early in life to remain childfree, and, even given potential periods of reconsideration, in the end confidently affirming and reaffirming their original decision. Many voluntarily childless women fall into the third category (Kelly 2009).

But this taxonomy is only explanatorily sufficient if we do not take the more individuating details of voluntarily childless women’s lives to be epistemically vital. Why some women choose to remain childless is a question that is complicated by the increasing sociocultural diversity of the members of this group, as well as by the intricate web of intersectionalities of social, political, and personal changes that preceded, and continue to accompany, these choices (Wilkerson 2004; Shaw 2011).

Gillespie offers a helpful way to approach the multivocality of reasons given for VC status: a woman might be attracted or pulled towards being childfree, or she might be rejecting, and pushing away from, motherhood altogether (Gillespie 2003). In the case of the former, women’s empowerment movements of the 1970s, access to birth control, the increasing numbers of women in graduate education and the workforce—all of these could be credited with contributing to a normalization of the idea that a woman’s life just might be about more than reproduction and motherhood. In fact, many VC women found that their passions lay not in motherhood, but elsewhere—the world of ideas, travel, career, music and the arts, other people—and that the notion of parenting, while not repugnant, was nevertheless foreign to their notions of the good life (Casey 2007). For others, it is the articulation of freedom itself to choose one’s life without regard to tradition, to pronatalist narratives, or to the unspoken, and ongoing, expectations of womanhood. It is the desire to be spontaneous and geographically nimble, to explore life’s other potentialities, to broaden and deepen other relationships, and to create identities that are not born of motherhood (Casey 2007). In the case of the latter, and perhaps too heavily invested in the myth of a selfless, expectant motherhood, some women express concerns about their lack of a “maternal instinct” or lack of worries about a “biological clock.” Others cite concerns about out-of-control population growth; or, indeed, a combination of many of these reasons for their chosen childlessness (Park 2005, 397; Houseknecht 1987;

Gillespie 2003). Morell found that study participants had “desires for economic and emotional autonomy and self-expansive activities” (1994, 62) that were inconsistent with the kinds of commitments motherhood requires (Park 2005, 380). Finally, the darker side of the VC story includes worsening economies and the subsequent need for two incomes in order to sustain a middle-class lifestyle; the resulting stress and subsequent divorce rate; the expenses involved with for-profit medical care (mostly within the United States); the difficulties and expenses of the adoption process, and so on.

There are also other reasons—less prudential, less sharply defined. One might have been noncommittal about having children, postponing the childbearing decisions until biological procreation is no longer viable, and passively, rather than actively assumed VC status, albeit without much regret. Alternatively, one might have planned to be in a reliable partnership before pursuing parenthood, but the circumstances of one’s life proved to be otherwise. Perhaps the hesitation to be a mother is grounded in particular socioeconomic circumstances where a woman might very well desire motherhood while at the same time seeing it as exactly the kind of burden that will keep her, and her offspring, in the cycle of poverty—a calculated step towards upward mobility, where her commitments lead to, rather than begin with, childlessness. Or else she is hesitant for reasons that have more to do with past witnessing or experiences of infertility—her family’s, her friends’, or her own—where a desire to avoid the witnessed suffering born of fertility-related struggles simply overrides a desire to be a mother. In this case, while a woman is, strictly speaking, voluntarily childless, this voluntariness is grounded in a desire to avoid a particular set of experiences rather than an intent not to parent.

Of course, most women’s lives and childbearing choices cannot be so easily grouped into discrete categories, and I do not intend to do so here. I do wish to suggest, however, that voluntary childlessness is epistemically and morally nuanced—it is something at which women arrive both by choice and by circumstance, and to demand an unambiguous answer as to why is to simply neglect the complexity of life itself. Moreover, given powerful pronatalist forces, seeking out reasons for childlessness can become particularly insidious if such categories lead to claims about “good” cooperating childless women who suffer their loss versus the more morally vague “transitional” women—not to mention

the “cold” and non-cooperative “transformatives.” It is the latter two that are often placed in a position that demands a justification of their choices. How this is demanded, and what the effects of such demands are, will be the focus of the next two sections.

Voluntary Childlessness as Deviance

Christine Overall (2012) suggests that having children is not just a practical, contraception-driven choice, but a moral one. Yet, as has been shown, it is not construed as a choice between equal conceptions of the morally good—indeed, it is VC women who must regularly justify their choices. As Overall notes,

[i]t is assumed that if individuals do not have children, it is because they are infertile, they are too selfish, or they have just not yet gotten around to it. In any case, they owe their interlocutor an explanation. They cannot merely have decided not to procreate (Overall 2012, 2).

Given the evidence thus far, I take Overall to be largely correct. Indeed, I have sought to make the case (1) that women in the Global North tend to experience ongoing, ubiquitous pressure to become mothers, grounded in pronatalist notions of the moral and epistemic primacy of womanhood as motherhood, or, Meyers puts it, “culturally transmitted mythologies of rapturous motherhood” that “subsidize this blithe refusal to reflect” (Meyers 2001, 34); (2) that this pressure emanates from some of the most powerful and ubiquitous sociopolitical domains; and (3) that the category of “VC” is complex, and not just a matter of motherhood rejection. I have suggested that, as a result of focused and unyielding pressures, significant fissures within women’s lives can, and do, develop. Specifically, I claimed that this motherhood mandate threatens women’s moral agency, which I define here not as an abstract capacity to make rational choices under ideal circumstances, but as ongoing practices of identity enactment in non-ideal worlds—to which uptake may, or may not, be granted. In this section, I explore the moral consequences of uptake denial. I begin with an analogy.

Elsewhere, I have argued that the external invisibility of certain conditions, such as chronic pain, lead to reliance on patient testimony as epistemic ground of their existence. Too often, the result is a lack of

empathetic uptake, leaving the patient in liminal, agency-destroying isolation (Gotlib 2012). Without a clear aetiology or obvious clinical classifications as properly ill, the chronic pain sufferer is pathologized and stigmatized as an epistemically opaque and deviant “other” (Gotlib 2012).

Pronatalism devalues testimony and experience in ways that are curiously similar to the rejection of pain narratives. Only it accomplishes its goals by reversing the direction of fit between a non-normalized act and its stigmatization: while those in chronic pain are viewed as marginal because their suffering is largely invisible, VC women’s suffering is rendered invisible because they are already perceived as marginal. And while I grant that not all VC women are thus marginalized, I do take the stories of such marginalization (discussed below), combined with the pressures to conform to the demands of motherhood (discussed earlier) to be serious signs of moral danger for the nonconforming. Indeed,

[c]ompared to the involuntarily childless and to parents, the voluntarily childless are seen as less socially desirable, less well-adjusted, less nurturant, and less mature, as well as more materialistic, more selfish, and more individualistic. Childfree women’s lives have been seen as less rewarding than those of mothers of any number of children, and they have been judged to be less happy in the near future and in their elderly years than have mothers (Park 2005, 376).

So how and why does this marginalizing process of VC women take place? If we take pronatalism to be a kind of an ideology—a set of intersectional master narratives about woman-as-mother that direct not only political, but social, economic, and medical discourses—then the “why” has to do with a need for control of not only the central message of mandatory motherhood, but also of the boundaries of how women are constituted. Thus,

[w]omen who transgress discourses of what constitutes suitable “normal” behavior for women come to be constructed as selfish, deviant and ultimately unfeminine. [...] As Morell [...] has argued, the normalising of motherhood has been perpetuated through discourses that deprecate childless women. Thus, women who choose to remain childless have been ‘called upon to account for themselves’ in ways that women who

become mothers have not. [...] Dyson [...] has emphasized that chosen childlessness is often incomprehensible to others who feel the need to express their bewilderment (Gillespie 2000, 230).

And if the ideology is to remain vital as a socializing narrative that attaches not only to public institutions, but to private selves, it has to be robust enough to challenge any boundary-pushing, nonconforming threats to its hegemony. Thus, it is precisely the openly non-compliant non-mothers—VC women—who must not just be made to account for their choices, but be subsequently discredited as subjective account-givers. Indeed, if they normalize their VC status through the counter narratives that allow them to imagine, and come to know, themselves as *legitimately* otherwise, then the master pronatalist superstructure might very well collapse (Meyers 2001; Lindemann Nelson 2001).

This brings me to the question of “how” the “deviant” label marginalizes VC women. I suggest that the process is one of deliberate, as well as unintentional (what I call “default”), marginalization practices. On the one hand, those openly committed to the pronatalist narrative—often those within politics, medicine, and other public institutions—employ the kinds of oppressive methodologies I noted earlier to force compliance (or, at the very least, to discourage non-compliance). On the other, those who are our friends, family, or casual strangers whom we encounter most often, tend to exhibit the default acceptance of the pronatalist narrative that is expressed through a lack of uptake of VC stories. At best, this lack of uptake simply reflects an unthinking acceptance of official ideology; at worst, they serve to delegitimize and silence the VC woman.

What this “default” marginalization looks like can be broken down into (roughly) four parts. First, despite the supposed agential freedoms granted by access to contraception, VC women are nevertheless made to justify their “discrediting” choices as normative and non-aberrant (Overall 2012; Rich et al. 2011, 236).

Second, when VC women respond to the justificatory demands, they are disbelieved, discredited, and told that while they may take themselves to be acting as self-knowing agents, they are simply, and tragically, succumbing to an epistemic opaqueness in regard to their own desires. They are thus not granted uptake—and thus the moral agency—to be considered credible articulators of their choices, priorities, and needs (Lindemann Nelson 2001). Indeed, the discrediting of

VC women as competent and empathetic moral agents becomes the norm, as Rich et al. note (2011, 236):

And if you don’t have kids by a certain age, then there’s something wrong with you (Tamara, 44).

That is the discrediting thing, that’s the thing that actually takes away from you. It’s a nil thing, it’s a minus, it’s not an attribute that’s worth anything (Kate, 34).

It is thus not unusual for a VC woman to hear that surely, if she were more “adult” and “knew her own mind,” she would rethink her choices (Gillespie 2000, 228). If only she joined the rest of her community “in the real world,” she might be somehow less “deficient” (Tamara, 44) (Rich et al. 2011, 235).

Third, partly because of the disbelief of VC narratives—and perhaps because of the need to offer alternative explanations for their “deviant” choices—they are reconceptualized as “selfish” and self-regarding.⁴ This message of selfishness and of marginality is also heard, understood, and internalized by VC women (Kelly 2009, 165–167).

Through trying to avoid such condemnation, the VC woman may attempt to establish, or preserve, her identity as a non-deviant moral agent. This, however, requires at best creative storytelling, and at worst, defensive lying. One might try (1) passing as a postponer, assuring others that motherhood is simply delayed, for good reasons, such as education or career development, rather than rejected (Kelly 2009; Graham and Rich 2012; Park 2002; Morell 1994); (2) lying about one’s fertility status, for an involuntarily childless woman is much more likely to find both empathy and understanding—as well as privacy—than a voluntarily childless one (Veevers 1973; Gillespie 2000; Park 2005); (3) emphasizing the possibilities for selflessness and altruism of childless women; and, finally, (4) claiming that one simply lacks the requisite maternal instinct to properly mother a child, thereby making the indirect argument that instead of “selfishly” focusing inward, the childless woman is in fact pre-mothering and protecting a hypothetical child—even at the risk of appearing odd and “unfeminine” to others (Campbell 1999; McAllister and Clark 1998; Morell 1994; Park 2005; Kelly 2009).

⁴ In fact, Mary Ann Glendon, a Harvard Law School professor, has noted that “[p]eople without children have a much weaker stake in our collective future” (Goldberg 2002, ¶18).

If one fails at thus “rescuing” one’s agency, three choices remain: retreat into the periphery of one’s community with the hopes of avoiding any future confrontations; boldly defy the discrediting and the disbelief of others and proceed as proudly “childfree”; or move to further justify one’s choices as morally intelligible. As might be expected, in an attempt to morally “rescue” one’s self-narrative, many turn to the third option (Rich et al. 2011, 237–238). Yet many of these attempts at regaining normative uptake tend to fail (Park 2002). This in itself leaves VC women marginalized, burdened with (1) the unilateral justificatory demands to be intelligible that are not similarly placed on non-VC women; and (2) the lack of uptake of any justifications that she proffers. She thus remains marked as irredeemably deviant, unable to locate herself within the normative discourses of womanhood.

Finally, as a fourth step, the marginalized VC women’s identities are damaged. By “damaged” here, following Hilde Lindemann Nelson, I mean trapped within a master narrative that creates “a picture [of who we are] that hold us captive” (Lindemann Nelson 2001, 146). But these are no ordinary pictures: as Lindemann Nelson (2001) notes, not all identity-constituting pictures are marginalizing or oppressive or false. Some might convey necessary moral norms; others might not be at all oppressive; still others might be accurate (Lindemann Nelson 2001, 148–149; 2002). But the kinds of pictures I am worried about here—the sort that do damage—“hold us captive [...] when they improperly identify certain social groups as useless, dangerous, or necessary means to a more powerful group’s ends, since this produces or licenses diminished moral regard for members of the group” (Lindemann Nelson 2001, 149). And so it is for many VC women: individual identities are damaged when justifications are demanded, and then routinely dismissed; when accusations of selfishness and excessive self-regard are supplanted for whatever authentic explanations are offered. Minimally, the consequences of such marginalization ought to be troubling. And if one allows that for a not insignificant number of VC women this marginalization is simply lived experience, the question transforms from an epistemic to a moral, and perhaps political, one: what now?

The Liminal Self and the Possibility of Other Stories

To be liminal is to be in-between: to be seen and invisible; to speak, but not necessarily to be understood; to exist

within a community but to not necessarily be of it. The burdens borne by voluntarily childless women locate them in a unique position within the intersectionality of social and political oppressions: regardless of whatever else they do, this single choice invariably defines them as transgressive in the eyes of others, and because this transgression cannot be undone by any other act (other than motherhood itself), it marks them as permanently and irrevocably liminal—on the periphery of the moral spaces whose language they no longer seem to speak.

In a pronatalist society, they are at once pressured to repeatedly explain and defend their choices. Yet because a great number of such justificatory attempts fail, the VC woman becomes not only nonconforming, but also not morally intelligible in her attempts to situate her nonconformity within the shared normative landscape. And because the justification/non-uptake cycle is fundamentally disruptive of her view of herself—after all, how many times can one be discredited until one begins to believe it—once internalized, it is also powerfully constitutive of a new liminal identity, at its core harbouring the awareness of an unrelenting otherness. In other words, voluntary childlessness matters, but only as a marginalizing, discrediting characteristic. This, then, is the liminality of the VC: neither at home in the world of normative womanhood, nor able to claim her own moral spaces, she is in-between, on the borderlands, stitching her identity, piece-by-piece, out of what remains⁵: interestingly, many VC women, initially comfortable with their decisions, only become aware of their liminal status once their choices reveal them as nonconforming to the pronatalist hegemony (Rich et al. 2011, 242). And, even with supportive partners, they then often navigate the burdens of their choice mostly alone, “Unwomen” within the world of the norm-abiding.

But this is not where I want to leave this discussion. Being liminal does not mean being voiceless, and being marginalized does not condemn one to sociopolitical isolation. Hilde Lindemann Nelson noted that to contest damaging master narratives, we need effective counter narratives—not only those which merely try to resist or “refuse an oppressive identity,” but those that “aim to free not only individuals but the entire group whose

⁵ One might note that VC women, especially more recently given the benefits of the Internet and social networking, have become aware of each other and of their shared struggles. While this is certainly a development of great interest to the VC and theorists alike, it is far from the hegemonic hold of pronatalist orthodoxy, and interestingly enough, it is internally weakened by the solitary nature of the VC experience.

identity is damaged by an oppressive master narrative” (Lindemann Nelson 2001, 170–183). What this might require, as Meyers suggests, is a reconfiguration of a “dissident self-figurations as articulations of [a ...] distinctive sense of self” that does not take motherhood as mandated or inevitable, and that does not accept the painting of VC status as marginal, deviant, or liminal (Meyers 2001, back cover text). I suggest that this requires two distinct narrative moves: the first challenges the narrow conception of woman-as-mother by broadening one’s individual moral imagination with respect to motherhood and womanhood itself; the second counteracts pronatalism’s divisive effects on women’s collective solidarity, regardless of motherhood status.

The first narrative move is one that Meyers calls “lyric transfiguration and appropriation/adaptation,” where the former “involves exploiting literary techniques to fashion individualized imagery expressing one’s subjective viewpoint and one’s sense of one’s identity” (Meyers offers Julia Kristeva’s “Stabat Mater”), and the latter calls for creatively appropriating a trope of the master narrative (here, Meyers offers Judith, a VC photographer who calls the help she offers younger women artists as her “midwifery”) in a performative act where one becomes “a discursive rebel” by refuting the womanhood-as-motherhood story, thereby offering a self-concept free of the bonds of pronatalist dogma (Meyers 2001, 765–766). Through an act of imagination, artistic or otherwise, a woman expresses her identity—indeed, tells her own story—and “enriches and individualizes her self-portrait, defines herself in her own terms, and makes her desire her own” (Meyers 2001, 767). Similarly, elsewhere, I have argued that in order to break the hold of monolithic, damaging master narratives, we might look to certain kinds of literature, and engage with them creatively and performatively, thereby making possible the moral spaces for identity-redefining acts of rebellion (Gotlib 2014). Perhaps if more women begin to see and crucially, to empathetically *imagine* themselves as legitimately women *and* as non-mothers, then they might be better able to resist the marginalizing effects of public and private practices of pronatalism.

However, both Meyers’ and my own analyses of resistance are largely focused on the restoration of individual moral agency. But if one intends to further challenge as powerful a master narrative as pronatalism, individual empowerment is far from sufficient. What is

required, I suggest, is a turn towards mutual solidarities among *all* women, regardless of their motherhood status, whose lives and agency are affected by pronatalism. What I mean is this: while my focus has been on women who are pressured into motherhood, there is a significant number of women who are not—but not because they have somehow escaped the pronatalist dogma. Instead, these women—members of the LGBTQ communities, the “too young,” the “too old,” some who are single, those fighting addictions, the disabled, the ill, the poor, and so on—are systematically excluded from the ranks of desirable motherhood, and are either not encouraged to become mothers, or, as mothers, are stigmatized, ridiculed, and punished for their irresponsible, selfish, or unacceptable actions (Hirsch 2002). The kinds of barriers to motherhood that I have in mind are not difficult to locate: everything from arguments for the Defense of Marriage Act, grounded on the premise that banning same-sex marriage led to “responsible procreation,” to the targeted persecution of poor, largely minority mothers for drugs and other offenses (Ford 2013). In fact, Roberts notes that

[p]rocreation by Black mothers [...] is devalued and discouraged. [...] The devaluation of Black motherhood is a way of disregarding Black humanity. The value society places on individuals determines whether it sees them as entitled to perpetuate themselves in their children (Roberts 1992, 11).

To this, we must also add the relative dearth of empirical and theoretical work exploring the complex dynamics of minority and LGBTQ VC choices. The implications seem dire: first, there is a bias towards encouraging white, heterosexual, economically stable motherhood over others, and, second, the discouragement (or at least a lack of positive interest in) these non-privileged women’s reproductive choices tells us something more about pronatalism’s explicit Gilead-like sorting of women into desirable and non-desirable mothers.⁶ In so doing, it not only creates a master

⁶ For example, in 1994, California passed the Maximum Family Grant rule, denying financial support to children born while their families were receiving California state welfare (see <http://www.cdss.ca.gov/calworks/>). Even though this was an explicit attempt to reduce the number of births by poor women, and, in fact, punish them for reproducing in the first place, no pronatalist outcry took place. This is just one not-so-subtle official message about desirable versus non-desirable motherhoods.

narrative of “women-as-mother,” but also one of “a particular-kind-of-woman-as-mother.” As a result, pronatalism perpetuates racist, heteronormative, and classist narratives about motherhood, separating women not only into VC versus non-VC classes, but also into classes premised on the relative “desirability” of motherhood.

Thus, aside from the obvious moral wrongs of prejudice and bigotry, what we also see is a developing moral hierarchy of motherhood whose coded messages of “desirable” and “undesirable” are largely responsible for not only the sociopolitical schism between mothers and non-mothers, but for a growing lack of female solidarity around the politics of motherhood itself. Indeed, these master narratives of who ought, and ought not, become a mother not only harm the specific subgroups of women marked by pronatalism as cooperators or non-cooperators, but also contribute to significant moral and political damage to women as a collective by dividing them into oppositional motherhood “camps” of mutual distrust. This division tends to promote bitter and deeply polarizing conflicts—the “childless” versus the “childfree,” the biological versus adoptive mothers, the relatively well-off “desirable” mothers versus poor “irresponsible” ones, the heteronormative and cisgendered versus LGBTQ—without allowing for the shared moral spaces necessary for the building of solidarities (Bailey 2008). Perhaps Atwood foresaw precisely this schism in Gilead’s rabid pronatalism, deliberately separating and regulating women through a patriarchal order that manipulated gendered networks of control, simultaneously damaging individual women’s identities through brainwashing and abuse, and driving apart the “classes” of women in ways that made the realization of collective female identities through the mutualities of rebellion impossible. Instead, the result was largely fractured bonds and lack of solidarity among those most victimized by Gilead’s pronatalist totalitarianism.

But what if women were able to turn their backs to these ubiquitous pronatalist narratives, and see them for what they are: a reification of a moral panic that essentializes womanhood, and in so doing, divides and disempowers women, regardless of their motherhood status? What if they were to turn away from both proximate and distant echoes of the motherhood mandate, and offer other stories, counterstories, about the multivocality and variations of womanhood, and of the complexities of choice? Following Lindemann Nelson, I

suggest that this kind of solidarity can begin with counter narratives that

don’t try to free one group by oppressing another. [...] They are credible because they offer the best available explanation of who the group members are. [...] By pulling apart the master narratives that construct a damaged identity and replacing them with a more credible less morally degrading narrative, counterstories serve as *practical* tools for reidentifying persons. They serve to repair the damaged identity (Lindemann Nelson 2001, 183–186, *emphasis original*).

In the case of VC women, these narratives might start with public and private rejections (through testimony, through performative acts, through the written word, through the encouragement of similarly situated others) of the labels of “selfishness,” “coldness,” “deviance,” and more generally, with a refusal of the call for justifications. While this, by itself, does not guarantee moral repair, in the face of a powerful and pervasive pronatalism, I nevertheless take it to be a necessary start. More broadly, pronatalism-challenging counterstories should include all women, regardless of their childbearing status: those who have been told that they must, and those who were reprimanded for mothering; those who could not, and those who accepted the master narrative as an inflexible duty; those who were told that they are too old, too fat, too poor, not straight, not partnered, and so on. It seems to me that only when women can grant genuine uptake to each other’s mothering choices, and in so doing, challenge the pronatalist agenda, can the epistemic and moral spaces open up for the kind of sociopolitical solidarity that reduces the pronatalist master narrative to simply *just another* narrative, allowing women to constitute themselves, individually and collectively, into communities of moral understandings and allegiances that they themselves endorse.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that Western pronatalism, in its latest incarnation, presents itself as especially morally, socially, and politically problematic for VC women. And while my claims are not meant to be universalizing in the sense that I do not take all VC women to be thus marginalized, I nevertheless believe that the danger is

quite clear, and for some, already quite present. It should also be noted that the counter narratives which I suggest as an opening salvo against pronatalism already exist in a number of forms, found not only within the work of feminist theorists, but within the lived experiences of women whose lives belie reductionist labels and social dogma. However, I do not think that a critical mass of these stories and experiences has yet reached a broader audience, and that much more work remains to be done. The task before us, then, is to boost the signal—and this, more than anything else, requires an act of moral and social solidarity. What this might mean in practice, I leave for another time.

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