Unmotherhood

Harriet Malinowitz

It was late one afternoon in August, 1999; I was standing beside a lighthouse at the end of a hiking trail at the tip of the Gaspé Peninsula in Quebec. I was looking into the earnest and concerned face of a man named Bob from Virginia, whose family members—wife, kids, dog—romped on the grass while we talked. “But I find life very meaningful already,” I was saying to him. “I feel perfectly fulfilled, and content, and purposeful.” An exaggeration, to be sure, but it effectively underscored my point, which I hoped to advance with rationality and empiricism rather than defensiveness—which was that I didn’t need Jesus Christ in order for my life to be okay.

Bob, a self-described Billy Graham-style traveling evangelist who mainly worked the North American university circuit, nodded thoughtfully. He had seemed a bit taken off guard by my initial response to his own story—a chronicle of wanton and evil deeds that had brought him to the very brink of suicide, at which point God had intervened by speaking to him and changing his life. (My observation: “A pretty classic narrative of sin and redemption, pivoting on an apocalyptic moment.”) Bob in turn established his positivist scientific credentials (he had a PhD in biology, as well as a degree in ministry), and I told him about how, as a Jewish atheist, I had read the bible for the first time while preparing to teach a literature survey course. “My favorite character, without doubt, was Jesus,” I asserted generously and truthfully. I explained that I loved Jesus’ value system and felt far more profoundly touched by the New Testament than I did by the Old, with its petty, punitive, ego-troubled God who bullied everyone. But, I hastened to explain, my appreciation was for the story, for its stunning power as myth, and I cheerfully added that I taught other compelling religious parables—Mesopotamian, Aztec, Buddhist—alongside it for contrastive value.

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I don’t usually carry on these sorts of conversations with absolute aliens, by the way, but I was feeling expansive in my paradisical surroundings on this first of three solitary days between traveling companions. After about an hour, Bob’s wife—who had retreated with their baby to a nearby picnic table—came over and he introduced us: “This is Harriet Malinowitz. She teaches the bible at Long Island University in Brooklyn.”

Being a New Yorker—which, as feminist writer Ellen Willis has pointed out, is tantamount to being a citizen of a country that is not the United States—I feel far less engulfed by Christianity than I would if I lived most other places (xii). Raised in the Jewish petty bourgeois ghetto of Queens, sent to Jewish summer camps in the Catskills, I was early on imbued with the idea of Jewish normativity and the otherness, or even ickiness, of non-Jews. So while I groaned inwardly at Bob’s pitch, it didn’t touch any vulnerable nerves. My resistance to it was fully bolstered by the community values and public discourses in which I’d long been ensconced.

What actually did feel threatening, though (in that I lacked this interior insulation against self-doubt, and despite the fact that it ostensibly had nothing to do with our conversation), was the spectacle of the married couple in that institution’s most cornily stylized form: the acting-upon-the-world husband; the patient, diffident wife; the burbling baby; the blond kids frolicking with the cute dog (which, I might add, bit a Québécois hiker during our conversation); the SUV back at the trailhead’s parking lot with five hundred copies of Bob’s evangelical treatise in the back. (He said several times that he’d love for me to read it, that he really wanted my honest critique; I assured him that he had no idea what he was asking for.) I felt myself speaking not only to a person, but to a person framed within the certifying tableau of the American family on vacation—while he spoke to someone unframed, the tacked-up edges of canvas showing. I kept waiting, with a familiar clench in my stomach, for him to ask me, as people often do, if I was married and had children. I had already told him, outwardly breezy, that I was Jewish, an atheist, and pro-choice. Surely that was enough for one afternoon. Had he asked if I was married, I would have replied with that same apparent will to accuracy that I always display in the voir dire proceedings at jury duty: “You mean in the conventional, legal, heterosexual sense?” (I recommend this response for anyone, regardless of sexual orientation, who does not want to serve on a jury.) And I would have gone on to inform him briskly that I was a lesbian and that I didn’t want kids. But I wasn’t really looking
forward to telling him all this—not because I thought he’d kill me (I didn’t think he would, he was on vacation), but because I was already depleted from volubly celebrating all the meaning and fulfillment that permeated my life. Even to my own ears, I protested too much. Yet, what is one to do when seeking to portray a reality flattened by the tidal wave of mass mythology? It’s probably best under such circumstances to heed Nietzsche’s aphorism: “When one is misunderstood as a whole, it is impossible to remove completely a single misunderstanding. One has to realize this lest one waste superfluous energy on one’s defense” (178).

Very much like being a nonbeliever, being an unmother usually means that one is misunderstood as a whole, and for good reason—our existence simply doesn’t figure in public discussion, except by exemplifying lack at its most tragic and poignant. The unmothers who usually enter public consciousness are no longer the “old maids” of the nineteenth century, but either single career women with ticking biological clocks or the infertile—mainly white, middle-class women engaging in desperate, expensive quests to conceive or adopt. Yet, while unmothers who were of childbearing age during the high-pressure baby-boom years were mostly infertile or single, and the majority of those born after the boom are infertile, the greatest number of unmothers of my own baby-boom generation are childless by choice (May 6, 205-06).1

The Concept of “Choice”
This causal distinction is an important one, raising as it does the specter of that quintessential, but usually reductively delimited, reproductive rights notion: choice. In the narrowest and most popular sense, “choice” is understood as a woman’s right to decide when not to have children—a decision that would be enabled by safe, effective, and legal contraception and abortion. Expanding from there, we have the idea of “choice” as a woman’s right to decide if she will have children. In order for this latter “choice” to be viable, two inversely related conditions must obtain: there must exist both the freedom for women to refuse the childrearing role altogether, and the freedom to refuse to be sterilized. Impediments to both of these liberties have roots in the eugenics movement.

The choice not to become a mother for white, middle-class women who might wish to exercise it was generally hamstrung in the twentieth century by the legal and health professions. The sharp rise of xenophobia that accompanied successive waves of immigration from Europe led President Theodore Roosevelt to declare in 1903 that Americans were
committing “race suicide”; Anglo-Saxon women who selfishly refused to procreate were to blame for their race’s diminishing birthrate and were putting the future of the nation at risk. The new batches of college-educated women proved to be especially unfruitful (May 61–64, 73). However, in the postwar era, with Nazi “race-building” propaganda still fresh in everyone’s minds, the U.S. citizen’s duty to create a nuclear family was cautiously disentangled from “race” rhetoric; cold war patriotic and national security concerns instead became the justification. This “duty,” however, was now conflated with the notion of “personal happiness,” the feasibility of which was itself underwritten by economic plenitude; individuals’ “natural” propensities for pleasure (as rigidly defined by the baby boom zeitgeist), when realized, would in turn bolster the health and wholesomeness of the nation (May 127–34). Illegitimate white babies thus became valuable commodities on the adoption market as infertile white couples, panicked by the stigma of personal deficiency yet armed with the capital to rectify their lack, vied to acquire them.

This fervor for the acquisition of white babies led to a revaluation of the white unwed mother. Until the 1940s, she (like the black unwed mother) was considered morally defective; nonetheless, she was expected to raise her illegitimate children (who were believed to have biologically inherited her deficiencies) while bearing the lifelong taint of turpitude. But in the postwar era, with white infants suddenly in great demand, her deficiencies were recast as temporary and curable by psychotherapy; by giving up her bastard child and putting the whole unpleasant experience behind her, her candidacy for the future role of legitimate mother could thus be restored. In fact, keeping the baby, should she want to, was now an option generally denied her (see Solinger).

In very recent years, with adoptable babies born to white American women growing scarce and with infertility on the rise, a new transaction has surfaced in the marketplace: egg donation. In sparse existence since 1984, egg donation became a booming industry in the late 1990s; private agencies and clinics supply affluent infertile couples with databases of eligible women who, for a fee, will forfeit their eggs via a physically arduous procedure. The “eligibility” of donor candidates is, of course, determined by the law of supply and demand. And in demand, unsurprisingly and overwhelmingly, are the eggs of women who are white, educated, and middle-class.

In a 1999 New Yorker article called “Eggs for Sale,” Rebecca Mead points out that the “cultural definition of parenthood” is changing to
accommodate this new phenomenon. Citing a legal case in which a couple, both infertile, procured the egg and sperm of another couple left over from a prior in vitro fertilization and hired a surrogate "mother" to bring it to gestation (after which the infertile couple separated and the husband unsuccessfully attempted to disavow the responsibilities of paternity), Mead argues that the implication here is that "parenthood is not a biological category but a conceptual one: its defining characteristic is that of intent." In fact, she says, the reasoning born of the lucrative new technologies "makes for some pretty slippery values":

A woman who bears an egg-donor child is encouraged to believe that carrying the fetus is the crucial component of motherhood. But a woman who hires a surrogate to carry her fertilized egg to term for her is encouraged to believe the opposite: that the important thing is the genetic link to the baby, and not the womb out of which the baby came. Biologically, an egg donor’s situation is identical to that of a woman who uses a surrogate. But egg donors are encouraged to believe that what makes a woman into a mother is the wish to be a mother—to be what is known in the infertility business as "the social parent." (64)

Reigning rhetorics of parenthood are, then, responsive to the shifting prevailing interests of those possessing relative wealth and social advantage.

If ensuring that healthy, middle-class white women produced (or, if need be, acquired) as many babies as possible was a dominant aim throughout the twentieth century, the compulsory sterilization of poor, disabled, and minority women constituted the other side of the same coin. Compulsory sterilization grew in the first half of the century as a eugenicist practice aimed at the ill and disabled (people suffering from epilepsy, tuberculosis, blindness, deafness, or alcoholism were among the targeted groups [Rodriguez-Trias 13]), as well as those deemed "feebleminded"—a broad term that mainly subsumed women who were white and poor, and many of whom were immigrants. (Poor and immigrant women were believed to be sexually licentious and of low intelligence; moreover, they were regarded as members of "other races" and, thus, as genetically inferior.) Compulsory sterilization was effected through the passing of state laws, which in 1927 were upheld as constitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court (May 96).

During the post-World War II heyday of the white nuclear family, there was actually an upsurge of involuntary sterilizations, now performed chiefly on women of color and those on welfare. Abroad, U.S.
government agencies such as the Agency for International Development (AID) financed population control (touted as "family planning") programs among poor people in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, claiming that "U.S.-funded sterilization programs in the Third World [would] cure 'social unrest' by diminishing the numbers of dissatisfied people" (CARASA Sterilization 9; CARASA Attack 9). In Puerto Rico, thirty-five percent of the women of childbearing age were sterilized over a thirty-year period under the auspices of U.S. government-funded programs. The "free service" was forcefully promoted—along with misinformation about the reversibility of sterilization—at a time when large numbers of women were entering the work force and had few alternative routes to managing their own fertility (for example, legal and safe abortion, contraception, and family support services) (Rodriguez-Trias 25; La Operación).

These policies were mirrored in domestic programs targeting mainly Hispanic, Native American, African American, undocumented, and poor white women (the latter particularly in areas of extreme poverty, such as Appalachia). In the 1970s, government health agencies such as Medicaid financed ninety percent of the cost of sterilizations, and Indian Health Services (also a federal agency) oversaw the sterilization of thousands of Native American women without informed consent; meanwhile, public funding for abortion was being cut off, women were frequently threatened with loss of welfare benefits if they refused sterilization, and sterilization was often made the condition for an abortion (CARASA, Attack 51–53; Rodriguez-Trias 12, 16). Under these circumstances, the rate of female sterilization shot up dramatically, increasing three hundred and fifty percent between 1970 and 1975 alone (CARASA, Attack 49). (Elective sterilizations, on the other hand—that is, those requested by women themselves—were prohibited until the 1973 Roe v. Wade decision, which held that sterilization, like abortion, was a matter of a woman's right to privacy [May 113]). It wasn't until the 1970s that feminist and other activist groups, putting sterilization on the reproductive rights agenda, created an outcry about the practice, which led to regulatory legislation. Even then, the regulations often went unenforced, and—perhaps most shocking of all—were opposed by some of the most prominent abortion rights groups (among them Planned Parenthood and the National Abortion Rights Action League), which generally supported population control (CARASA, Attack 54).

Rationalizations for mass sterilization were accompanied by a concomitant rhetoric that continued to vilify women of color who bore
children out of wedlock. Unlike white unwed mothers—whose pathology was reclassified as psychological and as not heritable so that the adoption market could flourish unimpeded—black unwed mothers in the postwar years continued to be regarded as biologically damaged, possessors of an innate and unchangeable depravity that they purportedly passed on to their illegitimate offspring. This view was not considered incompatible with the view that black families loved and wanted to keep their children as “naturally” as they loved promiscuity and thus were best suited to raise them, even out of wedlock. The problem of black illegitimacy, politicians and white middle-class taxpayers proclaimed, inhered in black (biologically based) culture, something social programs could not hope to benignly affect; thus was the lack of services for poor black mothers justified (Solinger 470–71).

One’s entitlement to “choose,” then—following upon the radical realization that reproductive “choices” had rarely been in the hands of the women they affected—became a rallying cry for reproductive rights advocates in the last quarter of the twentieth century. (So, too, did it become a rallying cry for those with quite different agendas, such as the national gun lobby and proponents of school vouchers. In fact, even as I write these words, the mail has arrived, bearing a notice from the electric company proclaiming with some fanfare that the method of receiving and paying for service is entirely my own “choice.”) More recently, the idea of reproductive “choice” has been employed by the increasingly family-oriented lesbian and gay movement, raising a host of new legal questions. Is a sperm donor a father? Is a nonbiological parent a mother, and can she claim custody rights, or kinship on her health plan? These sorts of questions are similar to questions prompted by the new reproductive technologies (and suggested earlier in my brief discussion of egg donation). Can a surrogate mother “choose” for her baby to be her baby after all? Can a woman claim custody of her eggs if they have been frozen after in-vitro fertilization and are now desired by her divorced husband and his new, infertile wife? Should people have “the right to choose” the gender and other traits of their children? (A lesbian couple I know tried to inseminate from an anonymous donor who was described as a mathematician and a poet, though they were ultimately successful with one whose chief attribute was listed as “good sperm.”) As reproductive rights historian Elaine Tyler May points out, these sorts of choices usually hinge
on who can be presumed to possess the greatest social "worth"; at issue is "who should raise the nation's future citizens," as well as who is the optimal citizen in a "diverse" society (3).

I think it's important to remember within this context that the notion of "choice" is virtually erased in contemporary discussions of teenage pregnancy (except, that is, when a minor is forced to bear a child she doesn't want). Like unmotherhood, teenage pregnancy is usually depicted in mass discourse as a "problem" and a pathology rather than as a solution often ardently sought by poor young women for whom motherhood may be the only available avenue of fulfillment. Of the many poor, teenage mothers I've known as students, almost all have written and spoken with gratitude about the advent of their children, describing them as sources of intense love and pleasure in otherwise exceedingly difficult lives. What an unmother like myself has in common with them is precisely this: that we are commonly portrayed as damaged and, ultimately, as a drain on society—teenage mothers because of the problems inherent in supporting a child while working and obtaining higher education, unmothers because we will supposedly have no one to care for us in our old age. We are both held to be careless—teenage mothers in that they are shortsighted and irresponsible, and unmothers in that we are cold, narcissistic, and unfeeling—that is, lacking in the instinct of care. The lack of publicly supported daycare, education, and health care (including eldercare)—as well as of housing and work arrangements that make daily life feasible for those who are not rich—is, on the other hand, a "lack" that is rarely portrayed as deranged, depraved, debased, or care-less.

To expand the reproductive rights notion of "choice" to include voluntary unmotherhood or voluntary teenage pregnancy becomes a little tricky because neither of these is currently expressly prohibited by law. (I'm deliberate in my use of the word "currently": even before the twentieth-century history I recounted earlier, there was the reproductive economy of slavery.) Despite options based on technical legality, however, there are hosts of laws and social conditions that seriously constrict the "choice" a woman can make to become or not become a mother, and their ramifications vary hugely depending on a woman's age, race, class, sexual orientation, and able-bodiedness. What I want to look at here is, more specifically, the notion of "choice" in the psychosocial sense—the sense in which certain behaviors become thinkable or unthinkable, rewarded or punished, enabled or foiled by the social fabric. Toward that end, I'll say a little about myself, one particular product and producer of that fabric.
**Virtual Motherhood**

I was born in 1954 to parents extraordinarily different from each other: a baby-enthralled mother of copious emotions whose innermost desires were, as far as I could ever tell, seamlessly melded with the values of the postwar zeitgeist; and a father who, profoundly affected by his traumatic war experiences but also probably nuts to begin with, spent all his leisure time hunkered down in a solitary trench of books and bitterness, my mother his only social and emotional conduit to the world. In part because of the vast disparity between my parents’ modes of existence, reality never felt obvious or coherent to me. On the other hand, because my mother was the really luminous figure in my life, the one who raised me practically as an emotional single parent (despite my father’s bodily and financial presence) and who saturated my little consciousness with the conviction that her worldview was the correct one, I internalized her view, not only of the world, but of myself.

It’s easy to convince a child that almost anything, even a trip to the supermarket, is exciting; I quickly came to feel very excited, just as my mother did, whenever someone had a baby, and I loved being included in the rituals of admiring and cuddling that she and other adult women engaged in. This excitement further fueled my absorption with dolls, though I was always disappointed by dolls’ incredible lack of verisimilitude—their inertia, their synthetic bodies, their inability to gaze back at you and respond the way real babies did. (And I was a white kid. I imagine that they would have seemed far more unconvincing had I not been.) Being part of the intimate female cult of baby-love made me feel wonderfully connected. Conversely, baby-doll play was usually a solitary activity for me; with friends I’d stick to non-anthropomorphic games like Candyland, Red Light–Green Light, and Crazy Eights.

Mother-daughter love loomed above all other loves in my imagination. Once I asked my mother, “If there were a fire, and you had a choice between saving your mother or your daughter, whom would you choose?” (It never entered my mind that she might choose to save her husband, her father, or even her son, though my brother had been born two years after me and she loved him, too.) When I asked my mother this question, I didn’t even really mean her in particular; I meant the generic woman, with her as my representative example. And I didn’t ask this out of worry that she wouldn’t choose me; I asked because I couldn’t imagine her *not* choosing me, just as I couldn’t imagine *not* choosing her if I ever faced such a dilemma—though my presumption that I, too, would someday have a daughter competing for my heroism made the hypothetical
situation inherently disorienting. When she answered, "I think you'd save your daughter," I felt anxious, because though her theoretical behavior met with my expectations, I couldn't imagine myself forsaking her for some other, nebulous being. I couldn't visualize having a daughter who was actually a person, an entity with an identity, to whom I would feel as connected, devoted, and responsible as my mother did to me. I would save my mother for myself, to keep the world in orbit; but the world was already quite securely in orbit without my daughter. How could I ever feel as desperate to preserve her life?

Throughout my childhood, I loved hanging out and talking with my mother. (In fact, I think my capacity for conversation exhausted her.) Among a million other topics of discussion, I loved hearing stories of my own birth and how happy it had made her, and I also loved the things she told me about the day in the future when I would have a baby and how happy that would make me. (In my mind, this was never entirely separable from how happy it would make her.) That such a day would come was an absolute given in both of our minds, and the romantic luster of this shared fantasy by far eclipsed that of the marriage fantasy. In fact, though marriage was also heralded as a joyous experience, it was apparently so only insofar as it was instrumental to having babies. My mother never indicated that marriage in itself, between two people alone, could be fun, intense, or passionate; marriage was a state in which I would be tremendously happy, but the substance of that happiness, except as a space filled with babies, remained obscure.

As I got a little older and began to play with Barbie dolls—always with friends—the scenarios that were enacted became those of young adulthood before marriage and children. Though Barbie is now generally held in feminist disrepute, her status that of a retrogressive icon, I consider Barbie-play to have been an essential part of my development as a writer. I was never into Barbie for the fashion thrills. My Barbie had a limited number of outfits, but an unlimited number of psychosexual dramas in which she could be occupied. Along with Ken, Midge, and Skipper—and, of course, other Barbies disguised in other hairstyles—Barbie plumbed the vicissitudes of human relationships. There were no babies in Barbie's world, only lateral affinities rooted in the pursuit of narcissism and pleasure.

But if playing Barbie can be a good segue into young adulthood, you might say I regressed with the next stage. In junior high school, too old to play with dolls but too immature and too bewildered by adolescent heterosexual norms to interact properly with my peers, I entered upon an
extended shared fantasy with my best friend, Miriam, called "The Kids." In this fantasy, we were both mothers of families whose huge size varied, but tended to stabilize at about twelve children apiece. We had our kids named, aged, and described to some extent based on hair color, personality, and interest. In order to make my kids more realistic to me, I would buy magazines such as *Family Circle* and *Women's Day* and cut out pictures—usually from the ads—of children engaged in commonplace activities. The blond playing tennis in the Tampax ad was my eldest, sixteen-year-old Connie; the dark-haired girl smiling shyly from behind the family Buick was my introspective twelve-year-old, Barbara. Miriam and I each had children who acted in television, too. I was always rushing to the set with my little twins, the real-life Erin and Diane Murphy, who played Tabitha on *Bewitched*. (Finding pictures of these real-life children in fan magazines was always a coup.) Miriam’s brood included Buffy and Jody from *A Family Affair*. We each, of course, had a husband, though hers was a boy named Randy she liked, while mine was Mr. Santo, our music teacher, who, I realize in retrospect, was eminently gay. In phone conversations and notes passed in classes, we’d ask each other in a jaded matronly fashion, “So how are the kids?” and respond with lengthy anecdotes full of the dullest imaginable details of domesticity.

For Miriam, these fantasies bore some connection to real desires and future life: she became the very enthusiastic mother of three children and a militant activist in La Leche League. For me, they bore a connection only to my lifelong immersion in virtual realities. That’s the only way I can explain my penchant for books and articles that recounted prosaic litanies of family dailiness. I was fascinated by the persona of mothers who indulgently smiled upon the amusing scrapes their children got into, women who bore themselves with an ironic martyrdom that was deliberately transparent so as to reveal their true underlying contentment.

Drudgy maternal beatitude beguiled my pubescent imagination, in fact, in much the same way that the Jesus story did years later: I was fascinated by the characters and their mythic journeys (even if the journey was only around the block to drop off the babysitter). But I myself had no more desire to babysit for actual children as an adolescent than I did to go to church as an adult. What I really wanted to do was to write about these things. Thus, in seventh grade I began a novel—untitled, undirected, and uncompleted, written in daily installments handed over to Miriam—that was simply the ongoing pedestrian saga of these two families, mine and hers. Even though much of the action took place down at the *Bewitched* set, it was centered on backstage life in the dressing room, where I
attended to pulling on and off my twins’ boots and jackets, and helped the
older children, who were stuck there after school, with their homework.
I never thought about the glamorous aspects of having child stars, such as
taping episodes, or interacting with celebrities, or being pursued by fans
and media; in my novel, only on very rare occasion would the actors who
played Samantha and Darrin so much as poke their heads into the dressing
room to say hello. In many ways, my novel was born of the same paradox
as baby boom television itself: famous people (Donna Reed, Robert
Young, Patty Duke) achieved celebrity by impersonating characters
immersed in the ordinariness of family life. Millions of people wanted to
watch portrayals of this ordinary life and to buy products ensconced in its
aura. We all have heard people bemoan that their lives were not like Leave
It to Beaver or The Brady Bunch, but I can’t recall anyone ever lamenting
that she had not been a modern-day witch or a flying nun. Magical powers
gave Samantha a vehicle for having a television show, but it was her cute
outfits, fully equipped suburban house, and inventive ways of appeasing
her kvetchy husband that made her life worth watching.

Feminists have argued persuasively that having rape fantasies doesn’t
mean you want to be raped; manufacturing a scene in your head where you
have total control bears no correspondence to a reality that by its very
nature leaves you denigrated and utterly out of control. By a similar logic,
I would argue that having motherhood fantasies doesn’t mean you want
to be a mother. During the entire period that I talked on the phone with
Miriam about “The Kids,” wrote notes and chapters about them, cut
pictures of them out of magazines, and made updated lists of their
attributes, I never changed a real diaper, never had my sleep disturbed by
a crying child, never had to forego anything in my own life to deal with
a toddler’s ear infection. In fact, had I had to do these things, I would have
been deprived of the time I craved to fantasize and write about them.

Nobody assumes that someone who writes a fictional account of a
murder, or a plane crash, or starvation really wants to live out these events.
Nor are the legions of avid readers of such fare suspect. You could almost
say that writing about childrearing was, for me, like creating a horror
story, except the “horror” here was composed of sheer tedium, and—as
a murder may be for others—there was something perversely thrilling to
me about this tedium. But as with murder stories, the thrill only existed
because of the comforting unreality of my relationship to the material. It’s
probably accurate to say that this comforting unreality extended from the
earlier one in which my mother was my companion—or, I should say,
instigator—in imagining the fun of the babies I would someday have.
While my mother may have been indulging in the pleasures of contemplating more babies to fill her life—babies that I would produce—I, I believe, was indulging in the pleasures of fiction. Thus, I could have my babies and avoid them, too; I could put my false consciousness to good use; or, in feminist literary theorist Patrocinio Schweickart’s terms, I could have a bifurcated reading of my own life, simultaneously identifying with my mother’s rendition of myself and resisting it (43). Or perhaps you could say, in a crazy misappropriation of W.E.B. DuBois, that I was undergoing the trials of “double unconsciousness,” sidestepping two realities at once, each of which was terrifying at that point: my destiny to become a mother, and my destiny not to become one. The former was terrifying because an identity I didn’t really feel was being slapped on from the outside, while the latter was terrifying because it would mean, as in the saddest of fiction, that my life wouldn’t have a happy ending.

I’ll now skip over many years to the point where, in my twenties, some of my peers—though not the very close ones—were getting married and having babies in earnest. I say “not the very close ones” because by this time I had developed enough of a countercultural identity and community to bolster me with social as well as personal reasons for refusing conventional behaviors. Whenever I spoke with my mother, she would sound the refrain that had by now become quite tense: “When am I going to be a grandmother?” Though this strikes me now as an incredible invasion into the life and selfhood of another person, at the time it simply passed as the accepted discourse of the Queens Jewish community. It wasn’t just her right to ask, to wheedle; it was her role, as written into the script. The women in her office had pictures of their grandchildren sitting on their desks, and “kvelled” about them at lunch. I was depriving her of realizing her manifest identity.

The years passed. I came out as a lesbian. My mother died. One Saturday, when I was a graduate student in my early thirties, I sat in NYU’s Bobst Library and had difficulty concentrating on my book because all the things I wanted to do in my life kept whirling through my head. I wanted to write fiction. I wanted to write a play. But I also needed to finish my dissertation. I had to teach the classes I taught as an adjunct. I wanted to get another PhD. I wanted to travel. I wanted to go back to playing the piano. I wanted to learn how to build a house. I wanted to hike
throughout the west. I wanted to study the behavior of bears. I wanted to help build a labor movement. I wanted to take courses in political science, media, psychology, cinema, musicology, art history. I wanted to run more than three miles. I wanted to read all the nineteenth-century novels I hadn’t read. I wanted to go to every film festival that passed through New York. I wanted the world to stop for awhile so I could catch up with contemporary fiction—catch up, in fact, with the contemporary newspaper. I wanted to discover the remote neighborhoods of the outer boroughs of New York City. I wanted to become more confident and secure. More than anything, I wanted to read, and read, and read, and write, and write, and write.

Leaving the Bobst Library, I walked directly out into the weekend chaos of Washington Square Park. Mixed in with the roller bladers and dope dealers and students and food vendors and street musicians and chess players, there were, of course, a number of adults with kids. The sight of them, with their strollers and baby backpacks, brought me to a funny realization: amid all the burning personal ambitions I had ticked off, I had completely forgotten about having children! Wanting children wasn’t even a desire that competed with other goals; it just wasn’t a desire.

I personally find it hard to refute those who say that unmothers are neurotic and selfish, because I am neurotic and selfish. But as the prep courses advise law school-bound test-takers to bear in mind, “correlation is not causation.” After all, my parents were neurotic and selfish, albeit in some very different ways than I am, yet that didn’t stop them from reproducing. Nor, as a cursory glance at American society will tell you, has it stopped most people.

But I want to stop myself here from launching into a liberal etiological argument, much like those that abound on the subject of queerness, because that line of reasoning is too tiresome. The “different but equal” thesis of normality has certainly been driven home by the onslaught of recent books on lesbian and gay families that reassure America that, having been declared mentally healthy back in 1973, queers are now in the vanguard of the cultural trek back to the fifties. A glance at some of the titles of these books gives you the idea: Love Makes a Family; Rainbow Family Values; Our Families, Our Values; Lesbian Step Families: An Ethnography of Love; Women in Love: Portraits of Lesbian Mothers and Their Families. Individually and collectively, they convey the mood of the Democratic Party trying to trump the moral iconography of the Republican Party—rectitude with a fin-de-siècle twist. Many of
these volumes are lavishly produced, with photographs of smiling GAPKidoids and their cul-de-sacish queer parents.

Confronted with such radically heartwarming opportunities, knowing that the "choice" to be an American Mom is now truly mine to make, I find myself driven to home in on the true reason I don't have children: I just don't want them.

It is not because I have an environmental opposition to further overpopulating the planet, or a political opposition to creating another guzzler of an obscenely disproportionate amount of the world's resources, or a spiritual opposition to bringing an innocent being into a nasty world. It's not because having a child would interfere with my career, or my art, or my leisure pursuits, or my disposable income. It's not because I had a rotten childhood, or am struggling financially, or because I don't like children, or because I'm antifamily, or because mothers are especially hard-hit in a patriarchal world. It's not because I'm afraid of pregnancy or childbirth, and it's not because I prefer pets. It's not because I'm single and can't do it alone, it's not because I waited too long and my biological clock stopped ticking, it's not because I have a partner who doesn't want children, and, as I believe I've made abundantly clear, in this day and age it's certainly not because I'm a lesbian.

Some of these hypotheticals are true for me and correlate conveniently with my reason for not wanting children: it's great to give myself environmental kudos, to have more time to write, more money to travel. But they are not causative factors. Other items on the list are not true, and thus are certainly not causative factors: I'm allergic to pets, I had to persuade my partner to forego children, I could have procured some viable sperm the way all those procreating lesbians do, and I frequently find children touching and pleasurable.

My reasons for not wanting to be a mother may seem, in fact, rather mundane: I need a great deal of solitude, and I don't like to be bored. As Molly Peacock put it in *Paradise, Piece by Piece*, her memoir about choosing not to be a mother, "Being with children, for me, always meant being in a blurred state. Focused on them, hyperaware of their safety and progress, my own inner life receded to a pinprick, and as a self I was lost" (308). I like kids—there are some I love—but the unremitting contact required to raise them is beyond the pale of the imaginably bearable. This is due in large part to my extreme lack of interest in their culture. My experience has been that even an hour of engagement with kids' games, toys, videos, playgrounds, books, stories, finger painting, school lessons—to say nothing of their mode of dining, their potty training, their
limited and repetitive conversation in the early years, their vacation destinations—drags on torpidly. I find the physical maintenance of my own life to be tedious; I can hardly imagine dealing with the brushing of someone else’s teeth, the washing of someone else’s hair, when I rush through these tasks myself, eager to move on to something more compelling.

Once, when I broke my ankle and had to spend twenty minutes just pulling my jeans on or off over my cast, I raged at the time wasted, at my deprivation of an interesting life lived higher up the hierarchy of needs. My therapist at the time said sagaciously and enigmatically, as therapists do, that I would discover through this experience that putting my jeans on was one of the most important things I did. To this day, I have no idea what she was talking about. The whole point of a hierarchy of needs is that the things on the bottom are the most fundamentally important—you need food before you need love—but to be reduced to spending your life negotiating with those, rather than grappling with that highest tier, self-actualization, seems unbearably sad to me. (In fact, our most valorized survivors—Primo Levi, Harriet Jacobs, Rigoberta Menchú, and Frank McCourt are a few that come to mind—deliberately put the lives they fought to preserve to higher-level use when they could, spinning out of their self-preservation some of the world’s most notable literary and rhetorical achievements.)

If having kids, then, is something that is integral to your sense of self-actualization—and I know that for many women, including many brilliant, creative, high-achieving women, it is—then those bottom-rung children’s needs that must be attended to are, if not a small price to pay, at least a tolerable one. (Thus, people speak about the rewards of having children—that is, the joys are payback for the toils and sacrifices.) But if having kids simply never occurred to you as a vehicle of self-actualization—and if all your self-actualizing drives and desires take you elsewhere—then the quotidian life of childrearing can amount to one Sisyphean punishment. Probably that’s why the only mothers I really identify with are those who fall into postpartum insanity.

Of course, many women live between these two clear ontological positions: bell hooks has posited the idea of “revolutionary parenting,” in which others besides a child’s official parents participate in childrearing (144–46); and Berenice Fisher has suggested that we conceive of a continuum of mother- or unmother-identification analogous to the ones Alfred Kinsey and Adrienne Rich have posed for sexual identity (“Affirming” 102; “Grain” 50). And I know that deciding whether to mother
or not is most difficult for those women lodged somewhere between the two poles of the continuum. I know that for many women, there are competing needs for self-actualization; this dilemma has been popularized as women's need to "have it all," to have both career and family, public and private satisfactions, transcendence and immanence, newly won and traditional forms of expression. I can understand that having to juggle these needs amidst the exigencies of contemporary life—which, despite the success of the women's movement, leave women still shouldering unfair burdens at work as well as at home—must be tremendously difficult, and I genuinely sympathize with those women.

In fact, they and I may have more in common than we realize.

The Right to be Happy
As May very powerfully argues, the decision to have children, just like the decision not to—just like all matters of "meaning, status, and happiness"—has increasingly come to be understood as an artifact of the privatization of American life and the belief that personal fulfillment is best pursued in the private sphere (258). As citizenship becomes more and more defined by how one manifests one's private life—rather than by one's participation in civic life—one's right to "freedom of choice" (including familial decisions such as reproductive choice) takes on a greater aura of consecration. Within that scheme, the voluntarily childless may be seen as entitled to fulfill their desires not to have children, just as the parenting majority is entitled—via technology and other methods, if not by nature—to the children who will make their lives complete. Among the people May interviewed, she found that

The postwar parents and their childfree children shared one common goal: happiness in private life. . . . Although the childfree gave many different reasons for their choice, most expressed a common theme: They wanted to find happy, fulfilling lives in a private world of love, intimacy, and enjoyable pursuits. Although the route to that desired life differed among them, remaining childless was central to the effort. It is surprising that the values they expressed were remarkably similar not only to one another, but to those of the infertile women and men who desperately wanted children. (208)

May's findings may be usefully juxtaposed with the work of Lauren Berlant, one of a growing number of cultural theorists who are examining the idea of "cultural citizenship." "Cultural citizenship" is a concept that holds that while one's technical "rights" may be determined legally, one's
ability to access them—or even be publicly imagined to possess them—depends on the extent to which one fits within the symbolic structure that determines who is a “real American.” The iconic building blocks of this symbolic structure are personal attributes rather than public acts. Berlant, like May, argues that there is no longer any mass participation in a true public sphere, and that the intimate details of private life—one’s sexuality, marital and reproductive status, fidelity to one’s spouse, perusal of pornography, and other matters of “personal morality”—are now considered the cornerstones of a healthy nation and, thus, the essential arena in which good citizenship is determined and panics about national decline are centered. (Note, for example, Andrew O’Hagan’s remark in the New York Times Book Review about the symbolic currency of real estate as national identity marker: “In the United States, owning a house means you’re an American. Tending a lawn is patriotic” [6].)

Unmothers in the contemporary ideological milieu of the United States are ensnared in much the same public relations paradox that lesbians and gays are—that is, we are both more and less accepted than ever before. That is because we are caught between two deeply held yet competing American beliefs that have both reached their historical apogee: one, the belief in the inviolability of the right to privacy—which includes the right to the pursuit of personal happiness, as I described before—and the other, the belief that one must manifest a personal life that ornamentally bolsters the image of a secure nation. In other words, we are intelligible and sympathetic (though still always marginal and weird) figures when we are imagined in terms of what most Americans hold to be fundamental rights (privacy and happiness); and yet we are simultaneously dangerous, liminal figures by virtue of our failure to symbolize popular notions of patriotism and social responsibility.

**Childfree Nation**

Historically, those who exist outside the mold of American iconicity—the “others” against which patriotic, socially responsible American identity consolidates itself (Japanese Americans, African Americans, Moslems, Jews, lesbians and gays, immigrants, for example)—have appropriated these very same beliefs and images to bolster their own status as citizens. Claiming their “right” to personal happiness and donning the symbolic adornment of the “true” American (service in the armed forces, the maintenance of a stable nuclear family, having one’s group represented in some visible public office) have been two common responses of outsiders seeking a place at the table. Similarly, dissenters,
Harriet Malinowitz

nonconformists, and rebels often make the case that the mainstream has failed to live up to its professed values, and charge it with the responsibility of more deeply and authentically fulfilling its own creed.

It wasn’t until, in the process of researching this essay, I discovered a host of Web sites dedicated to the “childfree” that I realized how many had self-consciously gathered under the banner of this designation, fashioning themselves as an oppressed minority and a so-called radical movement. Particularly striking was their inflammatory rhetoric. Like many militant rebels before them, the childfree (or “CFers,” as some call themselves) that I found online vented rage at those people and policies they deemed oppressive, with diatribes drenched in quintessential American sensibilities. They were outraged that some people (“breeders”) could claim “special rights” and privileges, presumably at the expense of others. And like many Americans, they righteously insisted that alien types (children) stay out of their space.

Discussion groups and message boards—such as one called Brats!—had miles of text to scroll through in which childfree folk excoriated the reproducing world. Most of their wrath—even when the writers described themselves as feminists—was aimed at women and children. I discovered, too, an astonishing lexicon of vitriolic terms. Children were most often called “sprogs”—a word which appears neither in my current unabridged dictionary nor in my OED, although one Web site explicitly claims that the OED defines “sprog” as “a youngster, a child, a baby,” deriving from a nautical term that used to mean “new recruit, a trainee, a novice’ on a ship” (Unruly). Some other terms contributors to the message boards commonly used for children were “spawns,” “shrieklings,” “brats,” “crotch-fruit,” “cretins,” “sproglets,” “sprogplings,” “sproglinga,” “demon sprog,” “anklebiters,” “yard apes,” “hellspawn,” “runts,” and “fuck-trophies,” as well as more technically straightforward appellations such as “income sappers,” “lice spreaders,” “pediatric abominations,” “snot drippers,” “germ mongers,” “crying machines,” “parasites,” “plagues,” and “oxygen wasters.” Parents were generically referred to as “breeders,” and sometimes “parunts,” but it was mothers who were overwhelmingly singled out as “breeder sows,” “breeder bitches,” “breeding vessels,” “sow-cows,” “moomies,” “mommies,” “baby poppers,” and, for the philosophically sophisticated, “übermoms.” (Mothers in the office were called “cow-workers”; women who gave birth were said to have “popped the sprog.”) A frequently appearing logo was a picture of a baby inside a red circle with a slash through it, analogous to the familiar signs which mean “no smoking” or “no left turn allowed.”


This was, I gathered, a subculture that had constructed a sort of childfree nationalism and separatism. As I read on, the writers—most of whom were women—seemed increasingly wacky, woman-hating, and militia-like in their political orientation. And the logic by which sweeping statements were supported was stunning: one writer, for instance, reminded her readers that Jeffrey Dahmer’s and Charles Manson’s parents also thought the world would be better if filled with the love of children.

While it was the childfree women who seemed to direct their greatest hostility toward mothers, it was the men who expressed the most sadistic feelings toward children. One man wrote, “I have this recurring urge to show up at a toy store. It’s just before they open on a day when a new beanie [baby] is scheduled to be released. I would hand out hockey sticks to all the die-hards waiting in line, then sit back and watch the fun as the store opens.” Another man said that he bought the most highly sugared candy for trick-or-treaters’ bags because he enjoyed the thought of how sick and bonkers it would make them later.

Most disturbing to me, though, were the voices of self-proclaimed feminists. More than anything, these women echoed the familiar conservative American discourse of taxpayer rebellion, with its attendant indictment of big government spending and leeching welfare mothers, all nestled within an individual rights and responsibilities ideology. Simultaneously, they employed the liberal tradition of condemning inequity—though, as with many liberals, their logic of fairness was a reductive one, overwhelmingly rooted in their notion of unfairness done to themselves:

The breeders expect the whole world to take care of their sprogs free of charge. These people get the tax breaks for popping out kids while the CFers pay higher taxes, yet these assholes expect the government to fund “affordable” daycare which would mean even higher taxes for CFers. Health insurance policies, whether the policies are private or employer provided, are subsidized for families. Breeders with children pay the exact same rates as CF married couples!

I work my ass off for everything I have. No one EVER gave me anything. Schooling I paid for myself while these breeder bitches get grant after grant just because they were dumb enough to have bebbehs. . . . I did not work this hard for women’s rights just so you breeders can get knocked up and get government subsidies!

I consider myself a hardcore CF feminist. But I have no sympathy whatsoever for women who choose (note the word CHOOSE) to breed.
. . . With all of the birth control options we have today, there is no excuse. It's not the man's responsibility to make sure that you care enough about yourself to take your birth control pills or get your Depo shots. . . .

[This from an academic at the University of Chicago]: I'm a CF woman and a hard-core feminist, but I am sure as hell not one of those people who sympathizes with female academics who sprog and then try to pursue an academic career. Sorry, mommies, you can't do both. And you can't then whine and shriek about how research institutions owe it to you to transform themselves into "womyn-centered universities" (read: daycare centers for breeders who fancy themselves thinkers after they've lost all their brain cells popping the little shrieklings).

There are also the old eugenicist perspectives, alive as ever:

Everything I see in life and the news leads me to believe that it is usually the most STUPID people who do the breeding in our society. In a recent abuse case the mother of a seven year old had an IQ of 55 . . . I would love to give to the WWF or the SPCA but not to support people who got into the situation they are in simply because they were too stupid to use birth control. Did you hear . . . on a recent documentary it was stated that seventy-five to eighty percent of the people on welfare nationwide are childrun. Would that make the other twenty to twenty five percent the dumb sows?

I'm amazed that people continue to churn out kids with disabilities. . . .

Why in the world would a woman in her late 40s, early 50s want to breed with the inherent risks of producing a deformed, defective sprog? . . . What could possibly be more selfish than to get pregnant at an advanced age knowing full well the sprog is probably going to have Down's Syndrome or some other impairment due to late age pregnancy?

You get the idea.

I do want to acknowledge that some of the inequities that prompt the indignation of the childfree militants have also prompted my own. For example, I have often resented the economic "privileges" others may draw upon (such as maternity leave, child tax breaks and health benefits) and for which I'm offered nothing comparable—mantras of "equal pay for equal work" notwithstanding. Socially, I've certainly resented the extent to which child behavior such as screaming and throwing ketchup in restaurants, kicking in crowded airplanes, and whining during attempted telephone conversations has encroached on my happiness and
well-being. Being regaled with accounts of the myriad ways that friends’ children surpass their peers—in attractiveness, intelligence, talent, timeliness of development, wisdom or hilarity of utterance—has not been fun, either. All these things can, indeed, leave one feeling very, very irritated.

Yet more fundamentally, I believe very strongly in the importance of hard-won benefits for the stressed parents who receive (and desperately need) them. To live in a diverse society means, most basically, understanding that one’s own life is not the only sort of life being lived. Although parents themselves often seem gallingly oblivious of this fact, I would rather try to alter their consciousness than have them annihilated. Particular groups may usefully extrapolate from their own condition to broaden democratic structures and humane social practices, but simply turning their vengeance upon policies that don’t directly benefit them is as shortsighted a measure as a sprog’s tantrum.

“The Saving No”
So, yes, nasty thoughts have crept through my own mind in those most vulnerable moments of feeling inconsequential in a pronatalist culture. Yet, recognizing this highlights—indeed, warns me back from—precisely the pitfalls of purely identity-based and single-issue politics that I believe feminists, like everyone else, need to steer away from. The point, it seems to me, goes beyond simply certifying the childfree as the latest incarnation of the downtrodden, entitled to all the unfairly withheld rights and privileges thereof. Public entitlements are, of course, crucial, but the underlying values they manifest are revealed in the particular rhetorical trajectory we generate in claiming them. It is always temptingly cathartic for have-nots, resenting invalidation and opprobrium, to find deliverance in clobbering the haves. But as feminists we err in taking a short cut toward “validation” when our real work lies in analyzing and redressing the collectively damaging idea that each condition—motherhood and unmotherhood—profoundly negates the other.

A similar short cut to validation was involved in my reflexive endeavor, that summer day on the peninsula, to convince Bob the Evangelist of my supreme contentment, atheism and all. One’s simple lack of a popular object of fulfillment can theoretically be remedied with a little help in finding the means to obtain the object, as Bob was eager to offer. More disturbing to others is one’s lack of the very desire for that object, whether the absent desire is for God, for a man, or for a child. This is not a lack of having, but rather one of wanting. This lack is pernicious because, in the view of many, it exists as an expression of one’s very
being: the sort of being frequently perceived as twisted, deviant, or, at the very least, insufficiently developed, dumbly unwilling to participate in its own rescue.

Molly Peacock tries to make this mystifying “lack” intelligible as a self-actualizing presence by explaining what it meant to her to say “no” to having children: “It was the saving no. . . . That No can’t be confused with loss, or the painful emptiness of not having what you need. . . . [T]he affirming refusal invites life. It’s a room, not a womb. Like a womb, it harbors life, but unlike a womb, it leaves room to create the rest of life” (314). Similarly, the Australian writer Drusilla Modjeska reflects upon the work of the Australian modernist painter Grace Cossington Smith—a woman who lived alone, had neither husband nor children, and who, in mid-twentieth century, painted rich, unpeopled interiors bathed in warm yellows and reds:

Do we see here the representation of a spinsterly existence: single beds, neat cupboards, empty hallways? Or the riches of solitude: empty rooms filled with possibilities? Doors opening onto hallways, windows opening onto verandahs and gardens, drawers and cupboards allowing us to glimpse their treasures? To my eye these interiors are . . . [those of] a woman who has fully withdrawn from the gaze of the world to discover not a defensive retreat, but the fullness of a solitude that society deems empty. (136–37)²

It’s in the “rooms” of Peacock, Modjeska, and Cossington Smith that I lay this argument, for now, to rest.⁶

Long Island University
Brooklyn, New York

Notes

1. I strongly suggest that anyone interested see May, the best book I read on the subject, and one on which I rely heavily here.

2. Needless to say, this was originally written well before September 11, 2001.

3. See, for example, Alt.Support; No Sprogs; Society; Brats!; and Unruly. Because these sites are updated frequently, the “rants” included here—which I noted on September 27, 1999—have been replaced by other, more current rants, but the flavor of those presently posted is much the same. For a more sober, less rant-oriented discussion, see Childless.
4. See, for example, Child Free <www.fred.net/turtle/kids/kids2.html>.

5. See also Stravinsky's Lunch, Modjeska's biography of Grace Cossington Smith and her contemporary Australian artist, Stella Bowen. (Sydney: Picador/ Pan Macmillan, 1999)

6. This essay is an outgrowth of a featured talk at the Second Biennial International Feminism(s) and Rhetoric(s) Conference: “Challenging Rhetorics: Cross-Disciplinary Sites of Feminist Discourse,” October, 1999, Minneapolis. I would like to thank the Research Released Committee and the Trustees of Long Island University for supporting this project.

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