WHITE, INTENTIONALLY CHILDLESS WOMEN: PRIVILEGES AND PENALTIES

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
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Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis locates the meanings of intentional childlessness for professional and/or middle-class, white, European-American women within the framework of stratified reproduction. It also provides an example of the importance of moving beyond a notion of gender essentialism into the theory of interlocking systems of oppression.

Using qualitative research and the narratives of five intentionally childless, white women, I complicate the picture of gender and illustrate how white women, who exercise reproductive choice, locate themselves in positions of both accommodation and resistance. I argue that various systems of domination position women simultaneously as powerful and powerless, and that it is from this contradictory place that women shape their strategies.

This thesis contributes to feminist theory by articulating the feminist worlds of white, intentionally childless women, and locating their experiences within the existing power/knowledge relationships, in an effort to transform women’s highly regulated relationship to reproduction.
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This thesis is written in loving memory of Jim

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Chapter One

Introduction

White, Intentionally Childless Women as a Project

"Any woman who believes that the institution of motherhood has nothing to do with her is closing her eyes to crucial aspects of her situation" (Rich 1976, p. 251). The biological and social experiences of motherhood have at different times, and in different contexts, had different meanings. Whatever the meaning, however, and whomever the woman, motherhood has been constructed as a centrally defining experience for women. In other words, whatever meaning has been constructed for "mother," women, whether they are mothers or not, are measured against that meaning. The meanings assigned to intentional childlessness exist in opposition to the meanings assigned to mother. In order to be respectful of the lives of women who do not mother and the lives of those who do, "it is necessary to explore the complex nature both of the desire for and experience of motherhood and nonmotherhood" (Letherby, 1994, p. 528).

This thesis has two principal agendas. The first is to locate the meanings of intentional childlessness for professional and/or middle-class, white European-American women within the systems of "transnational inequalities on which reproductive practices, policies, and politics increasingly depend" (Ginsburg and Rapp, 1995, p. 1). The second is to demonstrate the critical role subjectivity plays in the production of knowledge. The project arises from my assumption that the voices and experiences of intentionally childless women have significant contributions to make, both to our understanding of gender regulation and to the potential for transforming women's understanding of reproductive options available to them. I also adopt the following assumptions from Morell (1990): remaining childless is not simply a personal act but is a social practice which takes place in a highly politicized arena; intentional non-mothers have a great deal to tell us about the power of hegemonic ideology and the human capacity for resistance; and "the very
existence of this group sustains pro-mothering ideology (by providing the negative image) and yet challenges that ideology (by providing a clear alternative)” (p. 21).

I am an intentionally childless woman. I am heterosexual, white, of European descent, 42 years of age, from a working-class background, and currently in a professional occupation. I am in a monogamous, long-term relationship. I have never wanted to have children. To be more specific, I have never wanted to give birth to a child, adopt a child, or be the primary caregiver of a child. I experience myself as set apart from the world around me, a world that reflects women’s lives and experiences as being centred on, and fulfilled by, their reproductive capabilities.

When I arrived at graduate school in 1990, I expectantly sought out readings and discussions about intentionally childless women. It surprised and disappointed me to find my experience absent in the classroom, in the literature generally, and particularly in feminist theory, the one place I was certain it would be reinforced. Notice, I state that my experience was absent. This is because I did find social science research on intentionally childless adults. The material I found, however, reinforced the notion that women, particularly heterosexual, white women3, if able, will become mothers. The research consistently sought out “causes” for intentional childlessness, placing intentionally childless heterosexual, white women in the realm of the unnatural. This literature characterized this group of women as selfish, unfulfilled and incomplete. They were the antithesis of the selfless, all loving, all giving, fulfilled mother. Intentionally childless women were constructed to be developmental casualties, and pathological.

Rich (1976) summarises the dominant perception of childless women as follows:

Throughout recorded history the “childless woman” has been regarded (with certain exceptions, such as the cloistered nun or the temple virgin) as a failed woman, unable to speak for the rest of her sex, and omitted from the hypocritical and palliative reverence accorded the mother. “Childless women” have been burned as witches, persecuted as lesbians, have been refused the right to adopt children because they were unmarried. They have
been seen as embodiments of the great threat to male hegemony: the woman who is not tied to the family, who is disloyal to the law of heterosexual pairing and bearing....The unchilded woman, if such a term makes any sense, is still affected by centuries-long attitudes–on the part of both women and men–towards the birthing, child-rearing function of women. (p. 251)

These images and findings about intentional childlessness did not resonate for me. I knew I was neither unnatural nor pathological. What I had a clear sense of was that I was a woman who did not intend to have children. This felt comfortable for me. It was my truth. Yet the literature rendered my knowing invalid by assuming dysfunction. As I wove my way through feminist courses, it became apparent that some feminist theory itself was maintaining and reproducing the notion that motherhood is the centrally defining experience for women. The theory inadvertently did this by not explicitly indicating that motherhood is a critical experience for some women but not for all women. Hooks (1984) comments on this:

Romanticizing motherhood, employing the same terminology that is used by sexists to suggest that women are inherently life-affirming nurturers, feminist activists reinforce central tenets of male supremacist ideology. They imply that motherhood is a woman’s truest vocation; that women who do not mother, whose lives may be focused more exclusively on a career, creative work, or political work are missing out, are doomed to live emotionally unfulfilled lives. While they do not openly attack or denigrate women who do not bear children, they (like society as a whole) suggest that it is more important than women’s other labour and more rewarding. They could simply state that it is important and rewarding. Significantly, this perspective is often voiced by many of the white, bourgeois women with successful careers who are now choosing to bear children. They seem to be saying to masses of women that careers or work can never be as important, as satisfying, as bearing children. (p. 135)

It is important at this point to follow on hooks’ comments and specify that it was primarily heterosexual, middle-class, white European-American liberal, feminist theory that was reinforcing these notions. The focus was on reproductive rights, and much attention was paid to “taking back our bodies” through pro-choice struggles, sexual liberation, and resisting the patriarchy’s management of new reproductive technologies. The intent of the literature framing these issues, however, was to provide women with options about when
to have children, how many children to have, and about how to define their family. The goal has largely been towards enabling women to “manage” motherhood and career simultaneously. This approach has not proved to be a satisfying one for mothers or non-mothers alike. Hooks is critical of assumptions that motherhood is an essential, defining characteristic of motherhood. Hooks (1984) cautions:

This is an especially dangerous line of thinking, coming at a time when teenage women who have not realized a number of goals are bearing children in large numbers rather than postponing parenting; when masses of women are being told by the government that they are destroying family life by not assuming sexist-defined roles. Through mass media and other communication systems women are currently inundated with material encouraging them to bear children. Newspapers carry headline stories with titles like ‘motherhood is making a comeback’; women’s magazines are flooded with articles on designer clothing for the pregnant woman; television talk shows do special features on career women who are now choosing to raise children. Coming at a time when women with children are more likely to live in poverty, when the number of homeless, parentless children increases by the thousands daily, when women continue to assume sole responsibility for parenting, such propaganda undermines and threatens feminist movement. (p 135)

Hooks’ cautionary examples of the social pressures encouraging women to bear children, juxtaposed against the lived reality of motherhood in some women’s lives, underscores that motherhood does indeed affect women differently. Women in different social locations are positioned differently in relation to motherhood and, similarly, are positioned differently in relation to intentional childlessness. This thesis furthers the work on intentionally childless women by exploring the meaning of intentional childlessness for white, European-American, professional and/or middle-class women. In the process of doing this, I provide an example of movement from a notion of gender essentialism to a theory of interlocking oppression, a theoretical journey which I describe in Chapter Two. That is to say, both intentional childlessness and motherhood are negotiated across all of the dimensions of a woman’s subjectivity, her race, class, sexual identity, and physical and mental ability. I do not claim, however, to be exploring the subjectivity of the research participants in a complete way. Instead, I endeavour to complicate gender wherever
possible. I propose to explore intentional childlessness as a position negotiated across these dimensions, dimensions that structure women as simultaneously privileged and disempowered.

In this chapter, I introduce the intention of the project and the research process, describing my role as the researcher, explaining the genesis of the project, introducing the participants, exploring the interview process, detailing the approach taken with the analysis, and finally describing the influence that both post-structuralism and the writings of women of colour had on my work.

Chapter Two provides a literature review and argues that both motherhood and intentional childlessness must be considered from within their historical, geographical and social specificities. I draw on feminist mothering literature, literature on intentional childlessness from the social sciences, and writings of feminists of colour to lay the context for my argument. I begin by establishing the contexts of pronatalism and compulsory motherhood. From this context, I describe feminism and provide a brief overview of feminists’ approaches to theorizing patriarchy and motherhood. I review the social science literature on intentional childlessness. Finally, in this chapter, I introduce the framework of stratified reproduction. This is the concept that will be used to give meaning to the intentional childlessness of white women within the larger realm of reproductive practices.

Chapter Three provides an example of what happens when intentional childlessness is not considered within the historical, geographical or social specificity within which it occurs. I critique an analysis I developed in 1993, the pilot project for this thesis, in order to demonstrate how subjectivity becomes flattened when the researcher operates through the myopic lens of her own subjectivity, and does not carefully take into account the subjectivity of the research participants.

Chapter Four draws on the interviews of five white intentionally childless women in order to argue that, for white women in North America, the social practice of intentional
childlessness has elements of both privilege and penalty, accommodation and disruption.

Chapter Five is the concluding chapter of the thesis. Here I provide a detailed account of the concept of stratified reproduction. With this concept, and the narratives of white, intentionally childless women, I further complicate the picture of gender and illustrate how various systems of oppression can simultaneously position us as both powerful and powerless. It is from this contradictory place that women shape their strategies.

Feminism

This thesis is written from a feminist poststructural theoretical perspective. I endorse Morell’s (1994) definition of this as being an approach recognizing that “women’s individual lives are lived in a political context of oppression, accommodation, and resistance, that the personal and political are thus intimately linked, and that social constructs have political purposes and are not neutral descriptors” (p. 13).

Jane Flax (as cited in Razack, 1992) offers a four-fold task of feminist theory. The first task is to articulate feminist viewpoints of and within the social worlds in which we live. The second task is to think about how we are affected by these worlds. The third task is to think about how our thinking about these worlds may itself be implicated in existing power/knowledge relationships. The fourth task is to think about the ways in which these worlds ought to and can be transformed. This project is undertaken within the framework of these tasks. Articulating the feminist worlds of white, intentionally childless women, and locating their experiences within the existing power/knowledge relationships, can help transform women’s highly regulated relationship to reproduction.

Another responsibility of feminist research is for the researcher to acknowledge and give meaning to her own subjectivity. This research takes place through the lens of my heterosexual, middle-class white privilege. Subjectivity is examined throughout the thesis, but I will focus particularly on whiteness because of its general invisibility in the writings
about white feminists, and the inherent privilege of whiteness and its "invisible package of unearned assets" (McIntosh as cited in Collins, 1990, p. 190). I also examine class because it emerged in the narratives of the research participants as a significant aspect of their intentional childlessness. The fact that this project does not explore sexual identity in the same way is not intended to discount my heterosexual privilege or to deny the oppression of lesbians, particularly in relation to motherhood. Rather it exposes a flaw in this project. The research participants, though homogenous in regards to race and class, are not so in regards to sexual identity. Consequently, I am not able to explore how the women in this study negotiated their sexual identities in relation to intentional childlessness. I do however, in my theorizing, incorporate issues of sexual identity as inclusively as possible. My project touches on many aspects of subjectivity and intentional childlessness.

As a white women participating in feminist research, it is critical that I not only name my race privilege but that I struggle to not reproduce it in my work. Hooks (1994) challenges me not to be content simply to say that my work is coming from a white perspective but to describe what that actually means in my work. For me it is critical to acknowledge the inherent privilege of my "whiteness" and to explicitly incorporate into my work anti-racist, and other theories of anti-oppression and domination. I concur with Frankenburg (1993):

Whiteness is a set of locations that are historically, socially, politically, and culturally produced and moreover, are intrinsically linked to unfolding relations of domination. Naming "whiteness" displaces it from the unmarked, unnamed status that is itself an effect of its dominance. Among the effects on white people both of race privilege and of the dominance of whiteness are their seeming normativity, their structured invisibility. This normativity is, however, unevenly effective. (p. 6)

I rely heavily on, honour and respect, and interact with the theories of women of colour to challenge my own thinking and analysis about my racism. I do not appoint myself as the white woman who has figured it out, but challenge myself to find the blind spots in order to open myself to them and work with them. My challenge is to move through my
research not assuming a normativity to my experience nor an invisibility of meaning in the race of the research participants or the researcher. I conclude the discussion on whiteness with a quote from Frankenburg (1993) pointing out how the white Western self, as a racial being, has for the most part remained unexamined and unnamed. My project is an attempt to name whiteness, explicitly, as a meaningful aspect in the identities of white, intentionally childless women.

Studies of racial and cultural identities have tended to view the range of potential subjects of research as limited to those who differ from the (unnamed) norm. On the other hand, whiteness has elsewhere been simultaneously ignored and universalized: studies of members of the dominant race and culture, unless focused on racism per se, bracket the issue of race and culture, and presume by implication the racial neutrality of the subjects of the study. (For example, a study of the workplace involving Chicana workers will probably address race and culture; a study of white women workers will probably not.) Further, such studies at times then go on to falsely generalize from a group of white subjects or to draw conclusions about women in general—a procedure for which white North American and West European feminist scholarship has been heavily criticized. (pp. 17-18)

In the same way that I have just outlined the importance of naming my race privilege, it is also essential to name my heterosexual privilege. Heterosexuality is also invisible and also contains an invisible package of unearned assets. I am challenged not to reproduce heterosexism in my writing. By heterosexism I mean “the continual promotion by institutions of the superiority of heterosexuality and the simultaneous subordination of homosexuality. Heterosexism is also the assumption that everyone is heterosexual unless known otherwise” (Canadian AIDS Society, 1991, p. 6). In writing about intentional childlessness and motherhood, it is particularly critical to acknowledge my heterosexuality and how that positions me, and women like me in relation to motherhood, because the experience of lesbians in relation to motherhood is often invisible in this literature. In order not to render the experience of lesbians invisible it is essential that I acknowledge the fact that in this thesis I will not be exploring the sexual identity of the participants and to explicitly point out why. It is also critical that I point out the absence of sexual identity as
an aspect of subjectivity in the sources that I am using in the thesis.\textsuperscript{5}

Finally, and in the same way as I have discussed with my whiteness and my heterosexuality, it is also critical to explicitly point out my privilege in relation to both my class and physical ability. In order to complicate gender and work with an understanding of the interconnectedness of oppression, it is critical to incorporate all aspects of subjectivity. As previously mentioned, however, although both childlessness and motherhood are negotiated across all dimensions of subjectivity, I am not claiming to explore each dimension in an equally thorough manner.

**Language of Childlessness**

It is important to be specific about the language used when discussing intentional childlessness. For the purposes of this thesis, when I use intentionally childless women, I am referring to women who do not want to conceive, give birth to, or have primary responsibility for rearing children in their lives. These distinctions are very important because there are different constructs used to categorize childless women who want to conceive and bear children but are unable to and so remain childless; women who have not conceived a child but who choose to adopt children; women who have not conceived a child and step-parent children due to intimate adult relationships they enter into; and finally women who are mothers due to a variety of new reproductive technologies.

**The Research Process**

What knowledge we are able to observe and reveal is directly related to our vantage point, to where we stand in the world. Our interaction with the social world is affected by such variables as gender, race, class, sexuality, age, physical ability etc. This does not mean that facts about the social world do not exist, but that what we see and how we go about constructing meaning is a matter of interpretation. (Kirby and McKenna, 1989, p. 25)

This chapter will outline the research process. First, I will explain my perspective as the researcher and give an introduction to the project. Then I will report the research process detailing the selection of participants, the interview process, and the analysis.
Finally, I will describe the influence of feminist poststructuralism on this project.

This project was undertaken as a form of passionate scholarship. By this I mean that as a heterosexual, white, intentionally childless feminist from a working-class background “my biography was thoroughly intertwined with the research project. I cared how it would turn out and what it might change” (Kirby and McKenna, 1989, p. 19). As an inside member of the participant group, I was concerned about how to maintain some distance from the research topic.

In this regard, Kirby and McKenna (1989) offered some insights. They describe research as an opportunity to “create knowledge” and assert that the experience of the researcher is a key element in this creation. They outline a research process that respects and incorporates the experience of the researcher but that maintains the voice of the participants as the priority. Kirby offers her personal experience as a retired high-performance athlete conducting research with other retired, high-performance, female athletes. Initially, she attempted to distance herself and be objective as the researcher, but eventually came to realize that her “research self” and her “athlete self” were at the centre of the whole research process (p. 19).

Kirby’s initiative to research retired high performance athletes came from the dearth of literature available to help her understand her own experience. My research topic was realized in the same way. Unable to find my experience reflected in the literature, I decided to interview intentionally childless women to learn from them about their experiences and their understandings of the meanings of intentional childlessness in their lives. Consequently, I am aware that my “research self” and my “childless” self are at the centre of this work, and that I straddle a feeble line between researcher and member of the participant group. From the beginning I also knew that, as the researcher, my perspective was as contextually specific as that of the participants (Stanley and Wise, 1990).
From this awareness, I began my research process using two tools for self reflection. Firstly I kept a journal of my own “conceptual baggage” (Kirby and McKenna, 1989) or thoughts, feelings and preconceptions about the research, as a way of downloading and keeping these issues in my awareness. Secondly, I arranged to be interviewed by a colleague, using my own interview prompts, again as a way of examining my own responses to the interview prompts in order to be mindful of my biases and how they might blur the gaze I cast upon the data. Rather than distance myself from the group of women I interviewed, I explicitly include myself in this body of work by frequently using the words “we” and “our”, rather than “they” and “theirs”, when referring generally to intentionally childless women.  

This study is exploratory, qualitative research using unstructured interviews as data. Unstructured interviews were chosen as the method of data collection in order to explore the lives of intentionally childless women, from their own perspectives, in their own words. Even though as Opie (1992) points out, “textual appropriation of the other is an inevitable consequence of research” (p. 67), she suggests that a deconstructive analysis that accesses the participants world in a detailed way might “mitigate the uses of authority and ideological appropriation” (p. 57). She suggests that one way to minimize this inevitable consequence is to tape and transcribe the entire interview and identify and question one’s own ideology as well as that of the participants. By clearly identifying the investment of the researcher, and collecting data via a method that gives voice to the participants self-defined realities, this project aspires to reduce the opportunities for the researcher to unknowingly appropriate the experiences of the participants.

There are two stages to this project. The first stage was conducted in the winter and spring of 1993. The objective of the project was to explore both the experiences of women who have made a conscious decision to be childless and the impact this decision has had on
their lives. I wanted to explore the following issues: at what point in their life they knew about their intention to be childless; if there were any critical events that they consider connected to their decision; if and how their family of origin may have influenced their decision; if they had any concerns or regrets they may have had about the decision; and how being childless affected their self-image. The intention of the original project was simply to establish a profile of intentionally childless women. It was anticipated that the project would be completed within that year and that there would only be one phase, a descriptive analysis of the lives of intentionally childless women from their perspective. While this project was being completed two developments ensued, resulting in a redirection of the work.

Firstly, I became aware of Carolyn Morell’s Ph.D. thesis, *Unwomanly Conduct: The Challenges of Intentional Childlessness*. This thesis filled the gap in the English language literature that my project had intended to fill, but on a much larger scale. Not only did she introduce the voices of intentionally childless women into the literature on a significant scale but she did so within a feminist poststructural framework. It was necessary for me to look beyond Morell’s work to determine what I might now contribute. Secondly, in the process of exploring options for a new thesis topic, personal circumstances dictated taking a leave of absence from academic work for over two years. When I returned to the project, I had two objectives. I wanted to continue to explore some aspect of the lived realities of intentionally childless women, and I wanted in some way to build on the five interviews already coded and analyzed.

In the period of time that I had been absent from academia, there had been more attention paid to the lives of intentionally childless women. Their experiences and the reality of their existence was beginning to trickle into both feminist discourse and mainstream culture. I noticed that in both of these mediums it was largely the lives of white, professional, middle-class heterosexual women that were being profiled. The images of
intentionally childless women that emerged in most of this writing created a picture of the autonomy, freedom, and independence that their childlessness afforded them. This picture mirrored the findings that arose from my initial set of interviews, and I experienced a level of discomfort with it. From my own experience as an intentionally childless woman, I had a conception that we were a group of women who were rupturing entrenched notions of gender and manifesting alternative possibilities for women to motherhood. Instead, intentionally childless women were, from my perspective, coming across as privileged individuals whose focus was on autonomy and freedom. Even in the analysis of the interviews I had conducted, I did not succeed in moving past this construct. I reproduced a profile of intentionally childless women as privileged, free, autonomous individuals and uncritically posited the profile as a positive one. In exploring my personal discomfort, I consulted with a number of sources and came to the realization that both of these realities were probably true. Intentionally childless, white, well-educated women in North America explicitly articulated their desire for freedom and autonomy. At the same time, their very existence challenged the notions that all women must mother in order to fully realize their humanness and demonstrated alternative options of how women can live their lives. This realization of the contradictory and complex nature of childlessness became the germ for my current project. I determined to reinterview the original participants a second time. The objective of the second set of interviews, and the new, evolved project, was to explore the complexity of the subjectivities of white, well-educated, feminist women in North America who were intentionally childless. This would enable me to explicitly interrogate whiteness as a privilege, particularly in the area of reproduction for women, to explore the complex realities of women who live this privilege and to reject the mandate for them to mother. I wanted to know how the participants understood their feminism, and if their feminism connected to their intentional childlessness. I wanted to find out if they saw any
contradiction between their feminist ideals and the profile of liberal individualism that emerged from the first interviews. In addition, I wanted to explore their understanding of their subjectivity in relation to their intentional childlessness.

The Participants

The research sample consists of five intentionally childless women who are over forty years of age and are self-identified feminists. They are all white, from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, have post-secondary educations and describe themselves as coming from working-class backgrounds. One of the participants is a single lesbian, two are single heterosexuals, one describes herself as having had a variety of relationships with both men and women but is currently in a relationship with a man, and one woman is married. Relationship status was not a criterion for my sample. I included women from a range of relational situations in order to acknowledge the experiences of intentional childlessness in women, regardless of their relationship status, and to move past the current confines of married women that exists in the bulk of the childless literature.

The sample criteria initially required that the participants be white, over forty, and intentionally childless. My criterion was designed to involve a homogenous group of white women because the sample was going to be very small. I decided that with such a small sample a homogenous group would at least allow me to control for race, but as my project developed, the homogeneity of the sample proved to be a focal point for the research.

The age requirement was based on an unsubstantiated assumption that most women who are still intentionally childless by the age of forty are unlikely to change their minds because of the approaching of the end of their reproductive years. So although I knew there was no guarantee that all of the participants would never have children, I endeavoured to minimize the possibility that they were not firm in their choice by limiting my sample to women over forty.
The definition of intentional childlessness for my purpose was women who do not now, or in the future, intend to give birth to, adopt or be a step-parent to children and who do not have genetic or biological reasons for this intention.

Research participants were easily recruited by word of mouth through the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) and my workplace. All of the women participated in this research voluntarily. Three were women I already knew, and two were women who volunteered to participate in the research after hearing about the project. I contacted all of the participants initially by phone, explained the purpose of the study, screened them for the above mentioned criteria and guaranteed them a copy of the finished product.

There were some challenges associated with the fact that so many of the research participants were associated with either my workplace or educational institute. The first issue was confidentiality. Would it be possible to ensure the confidentiality of the participants when the communities that they operated in were so closely associated with mine? I had used pseudonyms for all of the participants but could not guarantee that if someone from the workplace or educational institution read the thesis that they would not be able to identify a participant from their biographical data. There were also fears that participants would not be happy with, or agree with, the final analysis and that my relationship with them might in some way be affected from the process.

I remain troubled about the issue of confidentiality. I have changed the names and some identifying features of the participants but cannot be sure that they would not be identifiable to a reader. I also remain unsure about how to be accountable to the participants of this study. I have to the best of my ability reflected what I heard in their words. I hope they find themselves accurately reflected in these pages.

The Interview Process

I interviewed each of the five participants twice for a total of ten interviews: once in the winter of 1993 and then again in the summer of 1997. One interview was conducted at
OISE, six were conducted in the participants' homes, one at a participant's office, and one at my home. Between the two sets of interviews, one of the participants moved to England. In order to include her in the second stage of the project, I mailed her a prompt sheet and a tape. She sent me back a tape recorded response to my prompts, and then I followed up with a phone call to clarify issues.

The interviews ranged from one hour to ninety-five minutes. The settings were very comfortable, and there was always tea and snacks to sustain us through our efforts. Field notes were made immediately after each interview. The experience of each interview enabled me to revise and adjust my interview prompts for the subsequent interview. Each interview was meticulously transcribed verbatim as soon as possible after the interview and returned to participants for input. Contact was then made by phone to review the transcript and make any requested revisions. All of the participants were open to being contacted during the course of my analysis if I needed to clarify an aspect of their interview or request further information.

The participants knew that during the interview they could refuse to answer any particular questions, discontinue the interview, or discontinue their involvement in the research process at anytime. The tape recorder was turned off on more than one occasion so a participant could make "off the record" statements or seek clarification.

I spent a substantial amount of time developing my approach to interviewing. I was particularly influenced by Oakley's (1981) rejection of the textbook principles of objectivity, detachment, hierarchy and the "science" of interviews, especially when interviewing women about significant issues in their lives. She described the level of rapport and the relationships she established with her participants and the value that she perceived this approach had to her outcome. Her experience reinforced the importance of establishing a level of trust and mutuality during the interview. I adopted her stance that the interview is "a condition under which people come to know each other and admit people
into their lives" (58) and that “the goal of finding out about people is best achieved when the relationship of interviewer and interviewee is non-hierarchical and when the interviewer is prepared to invest his or her own personal identity in the relationship” (p. 41).

I viewed the participants narratives as storytelling and saw my role as not only listening to the story, but also as facilitating the telling of the story (Mishler, 1986). As a result, the interviews were very relaxed, conversational events. Clearly I was directing the conversation and had an agenda to cover, but my agenda was clearly articulated and there was an exchange of ideas. I do not claim to have taken life histories of the participants, but rather I facilitated the telling of their story about one aspect of their identity—their intentional childlessness. I attempted to create a “context in which women [felt] comfortable exploring the subjective feelings that give meaning to actions, things, and events” and that would “allow women to explore ‘unwomanly’ feelings and behaviours, and ... encourage women to explain what they mean in their own terms” (Anderson, 1991, p. 17).

Analysis

The interviews were all transcribed and coded using Hyperqual, a textual analysis program. They were analyzed using grounded theory methods combining common elements and themes to determine codes according to methods suggested by Bogdan and Bicklen (1982), and Kirby and McKenna (1989).

In reviewing the interviews and coding the transcriptions, I paid attention on a variety of levels. I listened for pauses and noticed any unwillingness or inability to respond to questions. I tried to pay attention to the issues participants were grappling with and how they understood the meaning of their choice to be intentionally childless in the broader social context (Anderson, 1991). As Moussa (1993) indicates, narratives are not to “determine whether stories are true or false but rather to illustrate what and how people want to share about their lives” (p. 34). In order to facilitate the hearing of their stories, I was attentive to my responses, paying particular attention to those areas in which I thought
I already knew what the participant was saying. As Jack (1991) indicates when, I think I already know what an interviewee is going to say, "this means I am already appropriating what she says to an existing schema, and therefore I am no longer really listening to her" (p. 19).

On the other hand we cannot assume "that women's remembered experience lies outside officially constructed texts, as definably separate, 'purer' commentary" (Scott cited in Pierson, 1991, p. 91). Pierson explains:

[The stories we tell to explain ourselves to others and even to ourselves are shaped in myriad ways not only by narrative devices and conventions of storytelling but also by cultural notions of believability and hegemonic explanatory theories, of which we, as storytellers, may or may not be aware. (91)

In light of this the Personal Narratives Group (1989) explain that researchers cannot collect and record the stories of others uncritically. We must recognize that the stories are mediated by cultural/historical contexts. Women's narratives must be thoughtfully located in time and place in order to be understood. In the second set of interviews this understanding was a key component of my perspective as researcher.

In the initial set of interviews, I was a less skilled listener. I tended to listen through the frame of existing models and what I already assumed I knew. I heard the "expected stories, predicted by existing models" and "the temptation was to interpret the stories according to concrete norms" (Jack, 1991, p. 18). Consequently, as I will explain in Chapter Three my findings were somewhat flat and predictable. The analysis did not move the story of intentionally childless women outside the existing frames. For the second set of interviews, I was more confident, less afraid of prying, less afraid of naming my agenda, and better able to hear the participants stories with the possibility of new meanings. I listened with an awareness of my subjectivity and with an agenda of locating the subject positions of the participants.
Feminist Poststructuralism

Feminist Poststructuralism provides a framework for this research. Poststructuralism does not have one fixed meaning and is applicable to a wide range of theoretical positions, but as Forcey (1994) explains it can be generally defined as:

... a broadly interdisciplinary approach that disputes the underlying assumptions of most social sciences—epistemological foundations, the Enlightenment heritage (faith in the ideal of progress and rationality), and a social science methodology modeled after the hard sciences, with its search for generalizations, simplifications, and the verifications. Rather than focusing on personality, behaviour, attitudes, goals and choices, it turns attention to language, symbols, alternative discourses and meaning. (p. 368)

Within this framework I am committed to question the belief that there is some form of “innocent knowledge” to be had, or “some sort of truth which can tell us how to act in the world in ways that benefit or are for the (at least ultimate) good of all” (Flax, 1992, p. 449). According to Flax, feminist poststructuralism is “deconstructive”, meaning that it resists the taken-for-granted meanings about truth, knowledge, power, self, and language that have formed dominant ideologies in Western culture (as cited in Morell, 1990).

The following description of feminist poststructuralism relies largely on Chris Weedon (1987) who defines feminist poststructuralism as:

[A] mode of knowledge production which uses poststructural theories of language, subjectivity, social processes and institutions to understand existing power relations and to identify areas and strategies for change. Through a concept of discourse, which is seen as a structuring principle of society, in social institutions, modes of thought and individual subjectivity, feminist poststructuralism is able, in detailed, historically specific analysis, to explain the working of power on behalf of specific interests and to analyze the opportunities for resistance to it. (p. 41)

In poststructuralism, language is a key element used to analyze social organization, social meanings, power and individual consciousness. Language produces meaning rather than reflects it. Consequently, language constitutes our social reality.

Language is the place where actual and possible forms of social organization and their likely social and political consequences are defined and contested. Yet it is also the place where our sense of ourselves, our subjectivity is constructed. The assumption that subjectivity is constructed implies that it is not innate, not genetically determined, but socially produced. Subjectivity is produced in a whole
range of discursive practices—economic, social, and political—the meanings of which are a constant site of struggle over power (p. 21).

Subjectivity, or the “conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding the world” (p. 32), is central to poststructuralism. Feminist poststructuralism posits that our subjectivity is produced by the society and culture within which we live and that our subjectivity changes with shifts in time and place and within the range of discursive fields (a term used to signify the relationship between language, social institutions, subjectivity and power) that constitute it. Discourses represent political interests and in consequence are constantly vying for status and power. “The site of this battle for power is the subjectivity of the individual and it is a battle in which the individual is an active but not sovereign protagonist” (p. 41). An individual is constantly subjected to discourse and interprets an event in her world according to the discourses available to her at any particular moment.

My work is informed by a feminist poststructural framework, in that I understand “remaining childless is not simply a personal act, but is rather a social practice which takes place in a highly politicized arena” (Morell, 1990, p. 20). Like Morell, I understand that “non-mothering women are involved in contests over the meaning of reproduction and non-reproduction: internal, interpersonal and institutional contests” (p. 21). Intentionally childless, able-bodied white women in North America exist at a site of contradictory positioning. They are the group of women who are most stringently regulated by discourses of heterosexual femininity that equate womanhood with motherhood. They are entitled as the legitimate reproducers. By rejecting their reproductive possibilities, they provide us with a site of challenge and disruption to the dominant discourse and an opportunity to examine that site for meanings and possible transformations.

The Writings of Feminists of Colour

The writings of feminists of colour have also provided a critical framework for this
work. Their writings have challenged mainstream feminist thinking in North America to look beyond the universal notions of white, middle class, heterosexual experience. "Looking beyond" provides a broader perspective that acknowledges the differences between women and theorizes about how those differences locate women differently in relation to systems of domination (racism, sexism, heterosexism, capitalism/global economy and ableism). This important shift has been pivotal in moving feminist theory away from notions of gender essentialism to one that reconceptualizes race, class, and gender as interlocking systems of oppression. This concept is explored in more detail in Chapter Two and Chapter Five but has been vital to the shift in my thinking, as demonstrated in the postscript in Chapter Three.

Referring to Black women specifically, but applicable to all women, Collins (1990) neglects sexual identity as an aspect of oppression. She explains:

Viewing relations of domination for Black women for any given sociohistorical context as being structured via a system of interlocking race, class and gender oppression expands the focus of analysis from merely describing the similarities and differences distinguishing these systems of oppression and focuses greater attention on how they interconnect. (p. 222)

Working from within this framework, I am committed to acknowledging subjectivity, as indicated in my earlier discussion about whiteness, and to examining the simultaneity of systems of oppression and how they depend on each other in order to function. Recognizing the interdependence of these systems helps us to focus on strategies for transforming the systems.
Notes

1. Specificity of language becomes very complex when attempting to write from specific subjectivities. There are two key issues regarding subjectivity and language with the women I interviewed for this thesis:
   i) All of the research participants were white. Frankenburg (1993) indicates:

   Using “European American” to describe white Americans has the advantage that it parallels and in a sense semantically equates communities of a range of geographical origins in relation to the U.S. By the same token however, this gesture “deracialized” and thus falsely equalizes communities who are, in terms of current reality, unequally positioned in the racial order (p. 231).

   For the purposes of this paper I interchange the terms or frequently use both terms together. This way I hope to be explicit about the racial identities involved and at the same time to maintain the geographic specificity of North America.

   ii) Regarding class, I interchange between using professional and/or middle-class, often using both together, when referring to the research participants and feminists like them. The reason is that with the exception of one participant, the women in this study identity as working-class professional women. They originate from working-class families and still locate themselves there. Their educational and professional opportunities and experiences, however, provide them an aspect of privilege that is usually not associated with working class women.

2. Rich (1983) indicates that it is not until we name a practice and give conceptual form and definition to it, that people whose lives are affected by it be able to define their experiences. By naming intentional childlessness as a social practice, perhaps intentionally childless women will be provided more opportunity to be able to define their experiences.

3. I specify this group because the bulk of the research focused on this group of women.

4. I use this term as used by Frankenburg (1993). She says,

   If race shapes white women’s lives, the cumulative name that I have given to that shape is “whiteness”. Whiteness, I will argue ... has a set of linked dimensions. First, whiteness is a location of structural advantage, of race privilege. Second, it is a “standpoint,” a place from which white people look at ourselves, at others, and at society. Third, “whiteness” refers to a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed (p. 1).

5. I particularly want to thank Helen Lenskyj for her invaluable assistance in this regard.

6. Gottlieb and Bombyk (1987, P. 26) cite DuBois, 1983 and his use of the term “passionate scholarship.” They define it as reflecting “the feminist scholar’s intent to conduct research for feminist reasons—to document, so as to change, the social conditions of women.”

7. I borrow this approach from Collins (1990, p. 17)

8. Some examples are:
Dhooma, R. (1997, August 18) Not planning to have kids. The Toronto Sun, p. 55


9. I rely here on Collins (1994, p. 62). Collins uses the words “women of colour” and “racial ethnic women” interchangeably. She explains that “racial ethnic women” implies more solidarity with men involved in struggles of racism, while “women of colour” emerges from feminism where racial ethnic women, committed to feminist struggle, attempted to distinguish their history and issues from middle-class white women. She acknowledges that neither of these terms captures the complexity of African-American, Native American, Asian American and Hispanic women’s experiences.
Chapter Two

The Literature

Introduction

This chapter provides background and context for the thesis by drawing on a few key bodies of literature. The sources of literature incorporated into this review are feminist literature focusing on motherhood, social sciences literature focusing on intentional childlessness, and the literature of women of colour that challenges universal assumptions about women and motherhood.

This chapter begins by establishing the contexts of pronatalism and compulsory motherhood and the role they play in reinforcing an essential notion of motherhood as a central, defining, and compulsory experience for women. From this context, I describe feminism and provide a brief overview of feminists’ approaches to theorizing patriarchy and motherhood. I argue the discourse of heterosexual, middle-class white women has largely dominated feminism in North America, presuming a universalness of women’s experience. This discourse is both exclusionary of the experiences of intentionally childless women and the experiences of women other than those same heterosexual, middle-class white European-American women.

I move then to the social science literature on intentional childlessness in order to demonstrate both the inconsistency and inadequacy of the body of work and to highlight the role it plays in reinforcing compulsory motherhood by characterizing the intentionally childless as pathological and deficient. Morell (1990) and Veevers (1980) are presented as two studies that move away from these discourses of pathology and deviance to examine intentional childlessness as a socially meaningful experience for women. Finally, the chapter will introduce the concept of stratified reproduction in order to provide a framework for examining intentional childlessness within the historic, and social specificities within which it exists.
**Pronatalism and Compulsory Motherhood as a Context**

Parenthood is almost universally lauded as an intrinsically desirable social role. (Veevers, 1980, p. 1)

Women exist within the context of pronatalism. Peck and Senderowitz (1974, p. 9) define pronatalism as the "strong and heretofore unquestioned social force which has produced both the universal parenthood ideal and its attendant discriminations." The belief that all married couples want to have and will have children; the belief that children are compatible with, and a requirement of, women's self-fulfillment and adult development (Veevers, 1973); the use of idealised images of mothers for marketing (Schwartz, 1993; Gale, 1992); the medicalisation of women's reproductive capacities (Petchesky, 1995; Arnup, 1991), are practices and beliefs that fortify pronatalism. Although the definition of pronatalism focuses on "parenthood", assuming a married man and woman, motherhood is much more closely associated with the definition of "woman" than fatherhood is to the definition of "man". In fact, woman's status as a childbearer is a major defining fact of her life (Rich, 1976). "Woman is conflated with mother, and together appears as an undifferentiated and unchanging monolith. (In contrast, men appear in all of their historical specificity in a variety of roles and contexts.)" (Glenn, 1994, p. 13). As is evidenced from the examples provided, pronatalism is heavily reliant on the patriarchal construct of compulsory heterosexuality that dictates that a man and woman marry and produce children.

Motherhood is tied to femininity and often signifies adult status for women. The meanings and lived realities of motherhood vary according to the specific time and place in which they are experienced. Pronatalism also manifests itself in historically and geographically specific ways. Within these specificities, however, pronatalism is a constant that has been theorized in a multitude of contexts. An illustration of this is provided by the way in which motherhood, in many contexts, signifies adult status for women and,
consequently, relegates childless women to a state of non-adulthood. Examples of this have been reported in a wide range of contexts. Collins (1990) indicates that even though there is recognition and status for women who choose not to become biological mothers, strong pronatalist values exist in African-American communities. She suggests these values may stem from traditional Black values vesting adult status on women who become biological mothers. Colen (1995) describes how motherhood, regardless of race and class, is a major organizing principle of West Indian women’s identities and that biological motherhood is also a marker of adult status for West Indian women. Lewin (1994) found that “the notion that having a child signifies adulthood, the acceptance of social responsibility, and demonstrates that one has ‘settled down’ appears in the accounts of many lesbian mothers in the United States” (p. 339). A final example comes from Pearce (1995) who explains that in Nigeria, even today and even within educated circles “a barren Yoruba woman is generally considered worthless by her husband’s family, a burden to the lineage and an enemy of her mother-in-law” (p. 198). Except for the example provided by Lewin, each of these examples relies heavily on heterosexism. They refer to “women” as a universal category and do not take into account how lesbians who do not have children are constructed in each of these contexts.

May (1995) states, “To be sure every society on earth is vitally interested in the procreation of its people. But each culture has its own history, beliefs, traditions and values that influence the public and private stakes in reproduction” (p. 3). May’s discussion of pronatalism points out the contradiction inherent in North American, and I would suggest the Western world’s, manifestation of it. She says:

One of the fundamental paradoxes of reproductive culture in late twentieth-century America is that powerful beliefs about reproductive choice and the right of every individual to make that choice go hand in hand with widely held and institutionalized beliefs about who should and who should not become a parent, and under what circumstances. As a result, heated controversies have erupted over such issues as compulsory sterilization, access to birth control, abortion, voluntary sterilization, reproductive
technologies and adoption. (p. 8)

Pronatalism, then, exists universally to publicly regulate women’s private reproductive capacities but is historically and contextually specific. At particular times, and in particular contexts, it prescribes different mandates for different women. Most women do become mothers, and women who deliberately remain childless are constructed in opposition to mothers, as “other”. This happens within a global context that assumes “woman” is synonymous with the desire, need, and biological imperative to be a mother, in spite of the reality that throughout history, and in every context, there have always been individuals who have questioned and ultimately challenged this assumption.

In summary then, pronatalism is imbedded with the ideology of maternalism, “the notion that femaleness is rooted in motherly qualities requiring women to become mothers in order to realize themselves” (Morell, 1994, p. 2). This ideology renders motherhood as an unquestioned, compulsory corollary of womanhood, thereby signifying motherhood as a defining or essential characteristic of woman. Pronatalism is also dependant upon the ideology of heterosexism, which assumes that all women are sexually oriented towards men.

**Feminism, Motherhood and Childlessness**

Feminist activism then, is thus charged with enabling women to reduce the impact of motherhood and reproduction on their public lives but not to eliminate it all together. (Lewin, 1995, p. 106)

Feminists have long argued that patriarchy and capitalism both depend on pronatalism. Adrienne Rich (1976), for example, describes how dependent patriarchy is on women becoming mothers. She has developed the idea of the “compulsory” nature of both motherhood and heterosexuality. She draws a parallel between the compulsory nature of motherhood and the compulsory nature of heterosexuality by distinguishing between the institutions of motherhood and heterosexuality and the lived experiences of women’s
She points out how both institutions "create the prescriptions and the conditions in which choices are made or blocked... Both the experience of maternity and the experience of sexuality have been channelled to serve male interests" (p. 42). She details the compulsory nature of both motherhood and heterosexuality as arising from the way in which the related social rewards and punishments associated with having or not having children, and being a heterosexual or a lesbian "deny human experience freely chosen and lived" (p. 219). She says:

Patriarchy could not survive without motherhood and heterosexuality in their institutional forms; therefore they have to be treated as axioms, as "nature" itself, not open to question except where, from time to time and place to place, "alternate life-styles" for certain individuals are tolerated (p. 43).

Rich (1976) made a crucial contribution to feminism's understanding of motherhood with her theorizing of motherhood as more than an individual or essential experience. She illustrates that motherhood is both an individual experience and an institution. She establishes that the prescriptions and conditions that constitute the institution of motherhood serve the interests of men, and that any behaviour threatening this order is considered deviant. She explains that the institution of motherhood "demands of women maternal 'instinct' rather than intelligence, selflessness rather than self-realisation, and relation to others rather than the creation of self" (p. 42). She details the components of the institution. She says:

Rape and its aftermath; marriage as economic dependence, as the guarantee to a man of "his" children; the theft of childbirth from women; the concept of the 'illegitimacy' of a child born out of wedlock; the laws regulating contraception and abortion; the cavalier marketing of dangerous birth control devices; the denial that work done by women at home is a part of 'production'; the chaining of women in links of love and guilt; the absence of social benefits for mothers; the inadequacy of childcare facilities in most parts of the world; the unequal pay women receive as wage earners, forcing them often into dependence on a man; the solitary confinement of full-time motherhood; the token nature of fatherhood, which gives a man rights and privileges over children toward whom he assumes minimal responsibility; the psychoanalytic castigation of the mother; the paediatric assumption that
the mother is inadequate and ignorant; the burden of emotional work borne by women in the family — all these are connecting fibres of this invisible institution. (p. 276)

Rich’s social construction of the institution of motherhood provides a foundation for conceptualising both pronatalism and the depth and scope of, and investment in, society’s reign over the definition of woman as mother. She also acknowledges that the negative status assigned to childless women is a key component of the construction.

Although some feminists have provided a critique of the institution of motherhood, there has in fact, been a consistently prominent focus on reproductive issues for heterosexual women in both feminist theory and activity in North America. This focus, along with a dearth of explicit support of intentional childlessness as one option, has contributed to the persistent hegemony of maternalist ideology (Lewin, 1995). Gimenex (1984) explains how a focus on reproductive issues, without an explicit adjoining focus on the possibility of completely sidestepping motherhood, unwittingly contributes to pronatalism. She explains:

Statements proclaiming women’s right to control their bodies or their reproductive behaviour without including in the content of that right the possibility of opting out of motherhood altogether are, by omission, supportive of prescriptive motherhood, because they are bound to be interpreted in the context of the dominant ideology surrounding motherhood. There are no neutral statements in the context of ideological and political struggle. Unclear, ambiguous, or unspecified concepts support the dominant social arrangements by default, because the social arrangements tend to rule out interpretations of the concepts that might radically challenge the status quo. (p. 290)

Even though L.S. Hollingsworth, a feminist, challenged compulsory motherhood as early as 1916 in an article called Social Devices for Impelling Women to Bear and Rear Children (as cited in Houseknecht, 1987, p. 385), early white, North American birth control crusaders such as Margaret Sanger were more interested in preparing women to be better mothers for the children they had than in exercising reproductive choice that might include refusing motherhood altogether (Rich, 1976). In the early 1900s in Canada, during
what has been labelled the first wave of feminism, Canadian women’s rights activists also embraced motherhood at the expense of women who might have preferred the option to remain childless. Women’s suffrage was lauded as a sign of respect for motherhood and a stable family life, as well as a way of making women better and happier mothers. This strand of thinking in the first wave of Canadian feminism became known as maternal feminism (Adamson, Briskin & McPhail, 1988; Faux, 1984). Nellie McLung (as cited in Adamson et al., 1988) explains it this way:

The woman movement ... [is a] spiritual revival of the best instincts of womanhood—the instinct to serve and save the race ... Women are naturally the guardians of the race, and every normal woman desires children ... It is woman’s place to lift high the standard of morality. (p. 31)

Maternal feminism such as that of Nellie McLung’s had, of course, obvious implications for how childlessness was understood. As historian Cecile Benoit (1990) noted in her work on a small community in Newfoundland, at the turn of the century childlessness was pathologized.

A society which measured a woman’s status according to the frequency of her pregnancies within marriage gave little praise to a woman who did not make her biology her destiny. Such a woman was labelled an ‘old maid’ and remained a servant and perpetual minor in her parents’ house, despite her age, life experience and productive labour. Even the married women tended to view her a somehow “abnormal” since she did not mother children. (p. 111)

The first wave of feminism in North America was led by middle-class white women. According to Strong-Boag (as cited in Adamson et al., 1998), their perspective and values dominated, “making it at times intolerant of ethnic and class diversity and often unwilling to confront profound inequities in capitalist society” (p. 35). This was reflected particularly in the values of nurturing and superior morality that not only perpetuated heterosexist assumptions requiring all women to marry and then to become mothers, but also defined who was “fit” to be a mother. Gordon (as cited in Davis, 1983) explains how the birth control movement of the time and its principle of “voluntary motherhood” were
advocating “more children from the fit, less from the unfit” (p. 214). The unfit included Black women, poor women, immigrant women, lesbians, and anyone else who did not reflect the “whites of solid Yankee stock” (Davis, 1983, p. 210).

The second wave of feminism in North America, the period beginning in the late sixties, was not initially considerably more diverse than the first wave of feminism. It began, and remained for a considerable period of time, a movement dominated by heterosexual, middle-class white women. At its inception, there was a rare and brief challenge to the universal ideal of woman as synonymous with mother. This challenge has been categorized as anti-mother. Shulamith Firestone (1970), for example, advocated that women free themselves from reproduction altogether and that societal reproductive responsibilities be removed from women and be taken over by technology. She perceived that childbearing under patriarchy was a victimizing experience for women.5 On the whole, however, the early second wave feminist texts remained primarily critical of the centrality of motherhood in women’s lives and exposed what they considered to be the perils of motherhood. They did not explicitly concern themselves with theorizing about intentional childlessness.

One of the most influential texts of this period was Betty Friedan’s (1963) The Feminine Mystique. Friedan exposed how, at the time of her writing, middle-class, white, heterosexual mothers in the United States were regulated by a particular construct of femininity that was both isolating them and limiting them. She is referring to this group of women when she says:

They were taught to pity the neurotic, unfeminine, unhappy women who wanted to be poets or physicists or presidents. They learned that truly feminine women do not want careers, higher education, political rights—the independence and the opportunities that the old-fashioned feminists fought for....A thousand expert voices applauded their femininity, their adjustment, their new maturity. All they had to do was devote their lives from earliest girlhood to finding a husband and bearing children. (p. 11)
Friedan dared to indicate that suburban American women might need something more than their homes, their husbands, and their children in order to feel fulfilled and realize their human potential. She encouraged women to look beyond their identities as housewives and mothers and to develop personal life plans to reach their full creative potential. She called for a “drastic reshaping of the cultural image of femininity that will permit women to reach maturity, identity, completeness of self, without conflict with sexual fulfilment” (p. 351).

The writings of feminists such as Friedan, and Firestone provided a valuable challenge to pronatalist hegemony that tied femininity to motherhood. Their work, however, also sometimes left women who were mothers feeling personally criticized and unsupported by feminism. Snitow (1992) indicates that in some ways this is understandable because in feminist literature of this early period of the second wave, motherhood itself was an unacceptable and rare topic of feminist analysis. Snitow reviewed feminist texts from the period of 1963-1975 that she has referred to as the “demon” texts’ or texts that were considered to be anti-mother. Among these texts were both Firestone (1970) *The Dialectic of Sex* and Friedan (1963) *The Feminine Mystique*; From her reading, Snitow was unable to find any evidence of what she called “mother-hating” or an explicit critique of individual women who were mothers. My reading of these early texts concurs with her observation that these books were break-through books that “dared to speak” of “women alone or women without men”, so that they made the important contribution of challenging the centrality of motherhood in all women’s lives.

Firestone and Friedan characterize the brief challenge to motherhood as the centrally defining experience of women’s identities that occurred early in second wave of feminism in North America. By the late 1970s, however, “mothering as a primarily positive characteristic of women reappeared in feminist thought” and “[f]or many women, the public space was a demoralizing place; motherhood, even with all its complexities,
promised greater satisfaction” (Morell, 1994, p. 5). This comment refers largely to the heterosexual, middle-class white feminists who were privileged with the option of working in the public sphere, or becoming mothers and working in the private sphere, while maintaining children and a husband. Many women of colour, working-class women, and lesbians had always worked in the public sphere and would continue to do so. During much of the period of feminism I am about to describe, while heterosexual, middle-class white women were grappling with gaining sexual equality and reproductive freedom, lesbian mothers were struggling to maintain custody of children. Lewin (1995) points out that many of them wanted to be invisible (as lesbian mothers) for fear that “any sort of public acknowledgement of their situation would bring down the forces of the state to remove their children from their custody or otherwise undermine their families” (p. 103). She further explains that, even if they were public about their sexual identity and their motherhood, they still were not noticed because “motherhood and lesbianism simply cancelled each other out in the popular imagination” (p. 103).

In summary, the first wave of feminism and the very early stages of the second wave of feminism in North America, were primarily dominated by the lived experiences of white, heterosexual, middle-class women. This group of women assumed that their experiences reflected those of all women. During these periods, with the exception of some resistance from feminists such as Friedan and Firestone, motherhood was primarily tied to femininity and constructed as a centrally defining experience for all women. The experiences of non-white, lesbian, working-class, or intentionally childless women were not incorporated into this image of mother and/or woman. Consequently, other groups of women, including intentionally childless women, were often constructed as non-feminine and reflective of some form of pathology or deviance.
**Feminists and Reproductive Options**

When reviewing feminism's relationship to reproductive issues, it is essential to be clear about which feminists and which mothers one is discussing. Friedan and Firestone, for example, would each be located differently on a map of feminism. The second wave of feminism in North America is largely characterized by three central key strands of feminism. Each strand of feminism approached the issues of reproductive options differently, but no strand paid particular attention to, or seriously theorized, intentional childlessness. Further, some feminists deeply valued motherhood. Each strand of feminism covers a wide scope of theory and strategy. Each strand has changed and developed, looking different at different times and in different places. They are not frozen in time. The brief discussion that follows is intended to describe the key underlying principles for each strand, particularly in relation to heterosexual women and reproductive issues.

The goal of liberal feminism has been to apply liberal principles to women as well as to men. "The most fundamental liberal value is a belief in the intrinsic dignity and worth of every human individual, a worth grounded in each individual's capacity for reason" (Jagger, 1983, p. 173). Liberal feminism ascertains that power is diffused unequally throughout society (Ramazanoglu, 1990). From this perspective, women as a group are oppressed on the basis of their sex, "without regard for their individual wishes, interests, abilities or merits" (Jagger, 1983, p. 176). Liberal feminists reject the notion that men are by nature more rational than women and men, therefore, should have more access to self-determination and power (Weedon, 1987). The goal of liberal feminism is to reform existing societal structures to accommodate women, and for society to provide equal opportunity for everyone, regardless of sex. Weedon states:

[Their key political objectives are to create the material conditions necessary to ensure women's self-determination....Liberal feminists argue that domestic labour and childcare offer little scope for self-development and self-realization. This is due to the nature of domestic labour, women's]
economic dependency and their lack of choice in the sexual division of labour. The answer to these problems is seen to lie in the professionalization of domestic labour and childcare on a commercial basis. It is assumed that those who undertake such work for payment do so on the basis of individual, free choice. (p. 16)

Liberal feminists understand women's underrepresentation in public life and in certain spheres of society as a lack of equal opportunity, not as something that women necessarily freely choose (Jagger, 1983, p. 181). Therefore, one primary focus of their activity is on their own individual, autonomous rights to regulate their personal reproduction. This is one avenue they believe will lead to equality. Consequently, liberal feminists are involved in political activities that ensure equal rights and access to birth control and abortion. Liberal feminism does not challenge existing systems of domination. They take the nuclear family for granted and argue that "family life, and the decision to have children should result from free, individual choice and those who choose to have children should be responsible for them" (Weedon, 1987, p. 16).

Radical feminism is a much more difficult strand of feminism to define than liberalism because it includes a diverse range of concepts and strategies. Ramazanoglu (1990) explains that the commonality that characterizes radical feminism, however, is their view that the key political problem is women's relations to men. This problem from their perspective is best dealt with through an assault on the whole of male-dominated society.

Radical feminists posit that the oppression of women is biologically based. "The central political issue for radical feminism is for women to reclaim from men control of their own bodies" (Weedon, 1987, p. 17). Ramazanoglu specifies that the feminist slogan "The personal is political," originated in radical feminism and has led women to redefine the most intimate of human relations, such as sexuality and reproduction, as political. Some radical feminists maintain that conventional sexuality, and women's vulnerability to pregnancy, are symbolically annihilating women (Lewin, 1995).
"Radical feminists reject the liberal strategy of gaining more justice for women within the existing social order. Rather, they question the legitimacy of any social order which creates and maintains the oppression of women by men" (p. 13). Radical feminists determine that male power exists in the structures and ideology of patriarchal society. Jagger (1983) explains:

Even those radical feminists who regard the distinction between the sexes as being ultimately a social construct claim that, in contemporary society, as in all other know societies, an individual’s sex is the single, most influential factor in determining her social position, her life experiences, her physical, and psychological constitution, her interests and her values. The distinction between the sexes, a distinction defined originally by reference to procreative function, is used to structure every aspect of human nature and human social life. (p. 249)

This division in male and female experience, according to Jagger, results in there being two distinct cultures in society, “the visible, national, or male culture and the invisible, universal, female culture” (p. 249). Radical feminists assert that female culture has values which include: life, nature, women’s work as mother’s and nurturers, emotional expressiveness, flexibility, and acceptance of the body. It further asserts that these values have not been respected or valued by patriarchal society. Their intent is to design a new culture and in some cases a separate culture based on these feminine values. Jagger describes that motherhood is central to some radical feminist analyses of women’s situation, and Weedon (1983) concurs with this by stating that radical feminism identifies the family as a key patriarchal instrument in the oppression of women due to their analysis of how it serves to control women’s sexuality and mothering.

On the one hand, motherhood is seen as the source of women’s special values and characteristics, the basis of female culture....On the other hand, motherhood, as it is institutionalized under patriarchy, is one of the bases of women’s oppression. (Jagger, 1983, 259)

Marxist and socialist feminism are sometimes considered as separate ideological strands and are sometimes collapsed into one version of feminism. For the purposes of this discussion, I will consider socialist feminism as independent from Marxist feminism and
will not include Marxist feminism in the discussion. Jagger (1983) indicates that although both strands stem from traditional Marxist philosophy, they draw very different implications from it. She points out that socialist feminists, unlike Marxist feminists, acknowledge the “historically determined and changing character” (p. 302) of the production of people and of goods and services. They also “go beyond the conventional definitions of ‘the economy’ to consider activity that does not involve the exchange of money” (p. 302).

Socialist feminists understand male power as existing both in the organization of systems of production (within which they include the procreative and sexual work that is done by women in the home) and in the structuring of gender relations (Jagger, 1983). They maintain the Marxist notion that human nature is not essential, but socially produced, and changing. They understand the systems of oppression such as sexism, racism, and capitalism as being interconnected and changing. Weedon (1987) explains that the goals of socialist feminism include:

...the elimination of the sexual division of labour and the full participation of men in child rearing; reproductive freedom for women, that is, the right to decide if and when to have children...; the abolition of the privileging of heterosexuality, freedom to define one's own sexuality and the right of lesbians to raise children; the eventual abolition of the categories ‘woman’ and ‘man’, and the opening up of all social ways of being to all people. (p. 18)

Jagger (1983) explains that socialist feminists believe in reproductive freedom. By this they mean that women should have control over whether and under what circumstances they bear and rear children, and that women should have options other than choosing between childlessness and the “alienation of contemporary motherhood” (p. 321). Sexual freedom is also a component of this.

Although there are in fact many connections between sexuality and procreation in women’s lives, sexual and procreative freedom are possible only if the expressions of women’s sexuality are viewed as activities which need not result in procreation (p. 322).
In summary, then, the three strands of feminism each theorized patriarchy and the effect of motherhood in women’s lives differently. Liberal feminists did not challenge the notion of motherhood as being a centrally defining experience for all women, but following in the footsteps of Friedan, strove to find meaning for women outside of what they considered the limitations of motherhood. Radical feminists, like Rich, did challenge the compulsory nature of motherhood at the same time, however, some radical feminists associated certain qualities as essentially connected to motherhood and femaleness. Socialist feminism, with its thesis of the social construction of gender, challenges both compulsory motherhood and the notion of universally female characteristics.

The narratives of the women interviewed in this study indicate that their initial feminist influences came largely from liberal and radical feminism. Their narratives also tell a story of experiences unfolding within a context in which motherhood was tied to femininity. As women who did not want to be mothers, they felt obligated to justify their womanness. For this reason I would like to highlight three feminists whose work contributes to the construction of a universal notion of female qualities and motherhood. Their contribution to motherhood, being understood as a centrally defining experience in women’s lives, unintentionally fosters the marginalization of women who intentionally do not become mothers.

Chodorow (1978), Gilligan (1982) and Ruddick (1989) are examples of feminist theorists who stress the relational and nurturing capacities of women, as laid out in the radical feminist agenda, thereby contributing to a universal or singular perspective on women. Chodorow (1978, 1995) comes from a psychoanalytic, theoretical perspective and asserts that the essential differences in men and women exist not because of a biological imperative but because women, and not men, are involved in the parenting of infants and young children. The process of differentiating from the mother differs for boys and girls.
Chodorow explains that as boys get older they are required to stop identifying with the mother and to begin identifying with the father. Girls, on the other hand, maintain their identification with the mother and consequently reproduce the nurturing and caring qualities of women. Chodorow asserts that women continue to mother because women’s greater relational potential is reproduced through the mother role. So, although her work dispels a notion of a biological imperative, Chodorow maintains her view that a particular scenario of parenting is universal and that this affects all people in the same way. “[W]e can define and articulate certain broad universal sexual asymmetries in the social organization of gender generated by women’s mothering” (1978, p. 10). Chodorow (1995) acknowledges that:

Psychoanalytic feminism, feminist psychologies, and feminist psychoanalysis and therapy (the last of these not so much noticed by academic feminists) have not paid sufficient attention to differences and variation among women and to the variety, instability, multiplicity, and contested nature of gendered meanings. Psychoanalytic feminism and other feminist psychologies also often claim a single factor for aspect of psychology as most important in defining women or femininity. (p. 516)

Her theory of the reproduction of mothering, however, still relies on an ahistorical, heterosexual, middle-class version of the mother-child dyad, which does not reflect the lived reality of many women.

Gilligan’s (1982) work explores the moral development of women. She moves on from Chodorow’s theory and asserts that, due to their differential sex role development, women are socialized to be both more nurturing than are men, and to be more moral and just than are men. She uses words like relational, caring, connectedness, empathetic and nurturing to characterize women. When it comes to conflict, Gilligan ascertains that women are more concerned with relationship, and the individual involved, than with any outcomes or causes of the conflict. She concludes:

The sequence of women’s moral judgement proceeds from an initial concern with survival to a focus on goodness and finally to a reflective understanding of care as the most adequate guide to the resolution of conflicts in human relationships. (p. 105)
Ruddick (1989), in a similar vein, develops a concept called “maternal thinking” to articulate her theory that mothers have a special perspective because of their social role of rearing children. Ruddick defines the work of mothering as maternal practice and specifies that “preservation, growth and social acceptability “(p. 17) are the commitments inherent in it. She further explains that preserving life is the pre-eminent responsibility of a mother. Women have learned this from their mothers and are therefore more peaceful than men. She suggests that men who parent could also develop this perspective. “Mothering is a focused work that can be undertaken by men as well as women” (p. 197). Ruddick’s work is aimed largely at the peace movement and at a woman-centred approach to resisting war.

The work of the afore-mentioned theorists has served to move gender differences away from a biological reductionism by looking more towards social and psychoanalytical sources. In doing so, however, these theorists have both valourized and universalized what they determine to be essentially womanly characteristics. They are universalizing the experiences and impact of mothering from a limited sexual identity and class base of experiences (Glenn, 1994). The specificities of women’s subjectivities become reduced to essential characteristics and qualities that women develop. Segal (1987), characterises this literature as the mothering literature. She explains:

I have been arguing that in the mothering literature, and all the work it has inspired, there is an exaggerated focus on difference between women and men. This has meant a minimal interest in conflicts and contradiction as they are experienced within feminine identity, a false universalizing of our own gender categories and disregard for other social practices. (p. 148)

By constructing such general notions about women as mothers, and in the case of Ruddick people who parent, these theorists establish an image of women who choose not to mother as not having these qualities. This perspective undermines the self-determination of women by reinforcing the idealised image of mother that feeds into the woman-equals-mother equation. They thereby reinforce a concept of gender that “polarizes men and women into two distinct and unified categories with motherhood as the central defining
characteristic of women” (Morell, 1994, p. 10). These views also construct motherhood as a “transcultural condition bridging epochs and cultures” (Arnup, 1991, p. 6) and, as in the first wave of feminism, also serves to construct and reinforce the notion of the fit mother.

Motherhood is being more tightly structured; the category ‘fit mother’ is a more carefully and narrowly defined concept. It is monitored from antenatal care onward and involves medical personnel, health visitors, teachers, social workers, social security or welfare workers, housing officials, and lawyers. The state directly shapes and supervises the “fit mother” as concept and individual....There is no corresponding “fit father” (Corea, Hanmer, Klein, Raymond & Rowland, 1987, p. 9).

Colen (1995) determines that during the second wave of feminism, and into the nineties, heterosexual, middle-class white women in the Western world were still being constructed through an aspect of 1950’s gender ideology that “assigned reproductive labour to women, held motherhood and waged work in opposition and prescribed that mothers ‘stay home’ to raise their children” (p. 86), even though economic shifts required mothers to work outside of the home. The social reality was changing, but there was no corresponding shift in the gender ideology. By the mid-eighties, pregnancy, birth, and having babies was explicitly presented through cultural representations as the “defining and most meaningful women’s experiences” (p. 89). For white, middle-class, heterosexual women in North America, the focus shifted from women-as-workers to women-as-mothers and jugglers of family and work.

Heterosexual, middle-class North American feminists today might debate how many children they would or should have, the spacing of births, gender options, whether to stay at home or to work, but rarely do they question whether or not they should have children. The debate, framed in this way, supports pronatalism by assuming motherhood is the primary experience for this particular group of women. It expresses considerable concern for the challenges of combining motherhood with another career. Although the debate constructs motherhood as a fulfilling, rewarding, and desirable experience that is critical to a woman’s self-actualization, it does not construct motherhood as sufficient in
itself for maximum self-actualization (Vevers, 1980). Therefore this particular group of women are pressured to produce both children and maintain a career, and the task for these women is to advocate for social change to support women to do both. Lewin (1995) asserts that the "centrality of motherhood in defining what women are and what women must be" (p. 104) has never disappeared, despite the social and technological changes of the past decades. This frame of heterosexual, middle-class white women in North America is in contrast to women of colour and working-class women who have always worked outside the home in large numbers, and of lesbians who have both worked outside the home and have had to struggle for the right to their children. Mullings (1995) gives an example: "The obstacles that confront all working mothers are intensified for African-American women who find themselves in the ambiguous position of being primary wage earners in a society where the official ideology designates men as the primary breadwinners" (p. 125).

Pronatalism requires heterosexual, middle-class white women in North America to have children. In this way, it is a key component of heterosexism, classism, and racism. Within this dynamic, lesbians, working-class women and racial-ethnic women have had to struggle for the right to mother and for the survival of their communities. Intentionally childless women are positioned outside of the frames of femininity and are assigned qualities and characteristics that are opposite to those that are assigned to mothers.

**Constructing The "Other": The Literature and Intentionally Childless Women**

That the silence has persisted despite the presence of the women’s movement is both appalling and enigmatic, since the decision not to have a child shapes both a woman’s view of herself and society’s view of her. I have read a great deal about woman as mother, but virtually nothing about woman as non-mother. (Klepfisz, 1990, p. 3)

Motherhood and childlessness exist in hierarchical opposition to each other. This means that since motherhood has consistently been a primary essentializing feature of women, women who have deliberately rejected motherhood have been consistently viewed
as the antithesis of mothers. The prevailing ideology dictates that it is natural for women who marry to become (and want to become) mothers. Consequently women who are childless must explain themselves (Morell, 1990). Houseknecht (1987, p. 385) presents a historical continuum that illustrates this, starting with Hollingsworth’s 1916 statement that “the desire for the development of interests and attitudes other than the maternal is stigmatised as dangerous, melancholy, degrading, abnormal [and] indicative of decay”; then moving on to Popenoe’s 1936 research conclusions that those close to voluntarily childless couples perceive them as individualistic, competitive, economically consumptive, infantile, and self-indulgent with a frequently neurotic attitude toward life; and finishing with Rainwater’s 1965 research findings that the image of deliberately childless women is that they are completely negative, and either totally self-involved or in poor health.

Consequently, the initial conceptualizations of intentionally childless women were of pathology and deviance. Faux (1984, p. 11) quotes Eric Erickson from a 1964 article published in Daedalus entitled Inner Space and Outer Space: Reflections on Womanhood: “The woman who does not fulfil her innate need to fill her ‘inner space’ or uterus with embryonic tissue is likely to be frustrated or neurotic.”

There has been very little feminist research or writing on the issue of intentional childlessness, so I move to the social sciences to find a body of work. My literature search on intentional childlessness uncovered a body of work whose focus was to determine what characterized the childless, particularly intentionally childless women. This work also focused primarily on married, middle-class couples in North America. The focus of this work reinforced my assumption that intentionally childless married middle-class white women were considered a deviation from the supposed norm of motherhood. The focus also led me to realize that it was only this very particular group of women who were of interest to the researchers. Other groups of women (lesbian, working-class, single, non-
white) were not considered in the research.

Women who want children but are unable to conceive or bear them for biological reasons are constructed differently than intentionally childless women. The infertile or physically incapable non-mothers are assumed to have the desire to mother and therefore categorized within a framework of acceptability. Their childlessness is understood as being beyond their control and a disappointment in their lives. Women who are capable of bearing children, but who choose not to, are an enigma.

My literature search also indicated that there was very little literature on intentional childlessness appearing in social science literature until the 1970s, and most of it appeared after 1975 (Houseknecht, 1987). This is in spite of the prolific amount of research done regarding the family and mothering. Researchers indicated that there were not enough intentionally childless individuals to warrant study, that they did not know where to find them, and that if they did interview them it would be too difficult to separate their real reasons for being childless from their rationalizations (Faux, 1984). Even a current, literature search on childlessness resulted in endless references to infertility and its consequences, sprinkled with one or two references to intentional childlessness. The early social science research reproduced the sexist, heterosexist and racist biases of the researchers. The earliest references to intentional childlessness were not from the social sciences but rather from journalists offering their personal experiences and opinions.\(^8\)

It is very difficult to determine the correlates of intentional childlessness because the studies to date have been very inconsistent in their terminology and methodology. Sharon Houseknecht (1987) details this in a project that examined 47 studies in order to integrate and consolidate the work on childlessness up to that point. She demonstrates that some of the studies involve only childless women, some of the studies involve childless couples, and some of the studies involve only childless men. There is no consistent criteria to define
voluntary childlessness, and most of the studies rely on a limited sample of white, married, highly educated women, suggesting that there is no relevance to childlessness in other women (Ireland, 1993). There is little distinction made between, or even a consistent definition of what constitutes voluntary and involuntary childlessness.

Houseknecht documents these inconsistencies in the studies she examined and relates them as serious methodological concerns that prevent generalizable results from that body of literature. The most commonly applied criterion for study participants were that they had no biological children at present, that it was an intention or choice not to have children, and that there were no children expected in the future. Six of the studies, however, did not include the second and third criteria. Infrequently applied criteria that Houseknecht considers to be important are the ruling out of biological and genetic reasons for childlessness, the ruling out of children who are not one’s own, and ascertaining attitudes and certainty regarding childlessness and the age of participants.

Inconsistency regarding marital status was another methodological concern Houseknecht discussed. Although many of the studies did require that participants be currently married, a large number of them totally neglected marital status as a factor. She suggests that controlling for marital status is not only important, but that for it to be most effective, it is necessary to consider all the different categories separately in order to determine if there are any differences between married, separated, divorced, or widowed intentionally childless women. I would add never married, common-law, and lesbian women to this list.

Houseknecht determines the need for some theoretical frameworks and methodological consistency to be established in order to be able to validate and generalize research findings in the area of voluntary childlessness. Her work is a first step toward “clearly define[ing] both conceptually and operationally, what is meant by voluntary childlessness” (Houseknecht, 1987, p. 369). The lack of theoretical frameworks and
methodological consistency has resulted in a lack of consistent and decisive conclusions about intentionally childless women. There are inconsistent findings in the literature on childlessness regarding both educational and professional differences between mothers and non-mothers (Houseknecht, 1987). Patterns of family background and significance of birth order vary, and there is no indication of particular patterns of identification with parental figures (Ireland, 1993).

There are, however, some consistent findings in Houseknecht’s summary of studies of the intentionally childless. These are that the voluntary childless tend to be middle or upper class, to live in urban centres, and to be unreligious. The had high levels of commitment to their work and held relatively high-status jobs with earnings far above the average for women. They demonstrates a relatively high level of autonomy and valued their independence and freedom. Additionally, they tended to have a less traditional view of the female role than other women.

Also consistent in the literature on childlessness are the references to the consequences of deliberate childlessness. Interviews with intentionally childless women indicate that they experience societal discomfort with their childlessness in the words used to describe them. The words like barren, selfish, self-centred reflect the stereotypes of emptiness and unfulfillment (Veevers, 1980, Burgwyn, 1981; Lang, 1991; Reti, 1992; Faux, 1984). Childless couples are not even considered families and until the 1980s were absent in family research (Eichler, 1988).

The reasons that women decide not to have children are not explicit and do not involve a series of clear-cut decision points, any more than do the reasons that women decide to mother (Veevers, 1980; Lang 1991; Burgwyn, 1981). Houseknecht (1987) provides a cumulative list of the reasons people choose childlessness, in order of frequency mentioned: freedom, desire for a more satisfactory marriage, female career considerations,
monetary advantages, concern about population growth, general dislike for children, early socialisation experience, doubts about ability to parent, concern about the physical aspects of childbirth and recovery, and concern for children given the world’s current state.

Boyd (1989) reviewed the differences in childlessness between Blacks and whites over the past century. He points out that historically there has been a greater rate of Black childlessness and that this has been assumed to be due to sterility or pregnancy loss due to Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs), poor health or malnutrition, while white childlessness was always assumed to be due to deliberate choices related to education, the sex-role revolution, and effective contraception. He concludes that childlessness in both groups has been shaped by the same factors, including social mobility, birth control, and changing norms.

Adult development theory supports the hegemony of motherhood. Morell (1990) cites three studies of women’s life cycle development that construct intentionally childless women as deviant and pathological. Gutman and Griffin, 1980s, conclude that childless women are developmental casualties; Johnson, 1981, finds that older childless women in psychotherapy are locked into the daughter role and are vulnerable to late-onset paraphrenia, and that older non-clinical childless women most strongly identify with their fathers and reject their femininity; Burgwyn (1981) profiles childless women as having unhappy childhoods, problems with growing up, and fear of too close identification with their mothers.

The largely invisible and somewhat derogatory body of literature that focuses on the intentionally childless is deficient in some critical ways. Firstly, it universalizes the meanings of intentional childlessness by not being historically and contextually specific. Secondly, it neglects to explore the possibility that deliberately childless women regardless of their context, rupture the assumptions about woman’s prime source of meaning and identity being motherhood. Finally, as previously mentioned it reproduces the hegemonies
of the white, heterosexual, pronatalist, middle-class contexts within which it is conducted.

One key study from this body of literature at least began the process of incorporating the voices of intentionally childless women into the literature and constructing their lives in a more complete way. Jean Veevers interviewed 120 intentionally childless wives and 36 intentionally childless husbands in an urban centre of Canada in order to “describe and analyze the nature and meaning of childlessness as seen from the perspective of the childless themselves” (Veevers, 1980, p. x). She concludes that “at least some of the voluntarily childless couples do achieve high levels of personal, marital and social adjustment” (p. 159) and that “for many of the childless the maintenance of sound mental health is not achieved in spite of being childless but is predicated upon continued avoidance of parenthood” (p. 159). This contradicts societal pronatalist assumptions that children are a requirement for fulfilment and removes intentional childlessness from the realm of deviance and pathology.

Veevers frames her work in the context of “parenthood” rather than motherhood, and although her work acknowledges that pronatalism has much more impact on women’s identities, than on men’s, she does not focus solely on intentionally childless women. She looks at childlessness within the institution of marriage and excludes common-law relationships. She says:

Since unmarried persons are expected to remain childless, and since, with some exceptions, most of them deliberately do so, the social significance of voluntary childlessness focuses mainly upon married persons who choose not to have children in spite of being licensed to do so. (p. 171)

The above statement reflects the sexist, racist and classist nature of Veevers’ work. She did not step outside the patriarchal structures that assumed only certain groups of people were “licensed” to legitimately have children. She was very particular about her definition of voluntary childlessness as only including people who had been married for at least five years and had no aspirations to parent. She defined parenthood as a social as well
as a biological state and, therefore, did not want to include participants who had ever assumed the role of parent either by adoption or as a step-parent.

Veevers contributions to the literature on intentional childlessness are important. She added the voices of the intentionally childless to the literature. She presented images of intentionally childless adults that portrayed them in dimensions other than the absence of parenthood. Veevers provides concise working criteria for selecting intentionally childless research participants and opens the door for future research that takes up intentional childlessness as a challenge to pronatalism. Her work does not theorize intentional childlessness in a way that acknowledges the multiple subjectivities that exists amongst the intentionally childless, and thereby she does not acknowledge the specificities of diverse contexts that produce pronatalism and intentional childlessness.

Reconceptualizing Intentionally Childless Women

The more recent study of thirty-four voluntarily childless women by Morell (1990) locates itself as a feminist work and approaches intentional childlessness from a poststructural perspective. She describes her approach as follows:

My approach, then, has been to view intentional childlessness as a social practice taking place in a highly politicized context, a practice which creates personal challenges for not-mothering women, and creates analytical challenges to existing theories about women (p. 141).

Morell states her agenda is a political one that is intended to “undermine the beliefs which collapse the words ‘woman’ and ‘mother’” (p. 2). She stipulates two main goals. The first goal is “to commit to print the voices of women who are not mothers” (p. 2), and the second is “to use the stories of childless women to critique cultural constructions of childlessness within and outside feminism to illuminate the culture of reproduction in which all women reside” (p. 2).

Morell’s contributions are numerous. She points out that adult development theory organises growth and change for women around childbearing and child rearing even
though at the time of her writing 15% of all women between the ages of forty and forty-four in the United States were childless. She makes an important distinction in relation to childlessness and class by indicating that it may be out of the experience of their class of origin, as opposed to their current class, that many of her respondents chose to be childless. She ascertains this from her research findings and suggest this is an area for future investigation.

Morell establishes a theoretically significant precedent by acknowledging the potential contributions that the existence of intentionally childless women can make instead of focusing on their supposed deficiencies and deviance. She identifies how the dominant construction of intentionally childless women is a building block in pronatalism by defining three specific deficiency discourses which shroud the intentionally childless: compensatory discourse, derogation discourse, and regret sentences.

Compensatory discourse establishes that whatever a childless woman has or does is merely a compensation for the lack she must feel by not having the real experience of motherhood. Derogation discourse assumes that childless women are morally flawed because they apparently do not live up to the nurturing, self-sacrificing stereotypes that construct mothers. Regret discourse assumes that regret is what is in store for childless women.

Morell identifies the value of the existence of intentionally childless women as follows:

Investigating the lives of women who do not fit society’s notion of the average expectable women, offers an opportunity to rethink both traditional and feminist promotions of universal womanhood. Since this group exists in conflict with prevailing constructions of gender and the institutional and social practices which such constructions maintain, their lives offer a rich source of insight. (p. 11)

Morell’s sample, like Veever’s, is exclusively married women, but Morell includes common-law relationships under the banner of marriage. Her participants, with a few
exceptions, were white, European-American, able-bodied, well-educated professional women from first- or second-generation immigrant families. She acknowledges the homogeneity of her sample and recommends that race and class be areas for future research with the intentionally childless.

Veevers' and Morell's studies challenge the dominant discourse of compulsory motherhood by establishing the contradiction between it and the self-described, lived experiences of voluntarily childless women. Both studies highlight the contributions that exploring intentional childlessness makes to understanding the oppressing mechanism of the institution of motherhood, and to providing alternative life models for women to choose from.

These studies, however, have limited their samples to white women in married, heterosexual couples without explicitly interrogating the relationship between their race privilege, the privilege of their heterosexuality, and their status as intentionally childless individuals. As previously discussed, North American society is pronatalist in very particular ways, and there is a hierarchy of who is encouraged to become a mother and who is a “fit” mother. The cultural association between marriage and parenthood dictates that parenthood is only legitimized within the context of marriage; therefore, research on voluntary childlessness has consistently focused on married women who do not have children even though they are “licensed and expected to” (Veevers, 1980, p. 171). The limiting of these samples to the context of marriage, in these studies reinforces the notion that single women or women in same-sex relationships are not deliberately childless but are childless as a result of their circumstances. Although the homogeneity of the samples is justified by both authors, the methodology does not expose the fact that single women or lesbians are affected by the stereotypes and consequences associated with childless women and that they are in fact discouraged from having children. These assumptions serve to maintain the current construction of “woman times marriage equals mother.” Finally,
neither of these studies examines the "whiteness" of their participants as a significant aspect of their identity.

**Complicating Intentionally Childless Women**

[But] different meanings are attached to having certain characteristics, in different places and at different times and by different people, and those differences affect enormously the kinds of lives we lead or experiences we have. (Spelman, 1988, p. 129)

Dominant North American feminist discourse has universalized the experiences and gender-oppression of heterosexual, economically privileged, white women (Spelman, 1988). It is these women who have largely constructed the dominant discourses of North American feminism and who in the process have dismissed and marginalized, or perhaps not even noticed, women whose lives reflect a different reality. Spelman points out how the lack of awareness of aspects of one's identity is in itself a reflection of that identity. In the case of feminism, it did not occur to white feminists of the time to note their whiteness, nor were they required by convention to note it. Their reality became the "default position" (p. 76) of feminist inquiry. One context in which this myopic perception has been particularly evident is Women's Studies. Although feminist theory has challenged the dominant discourses of white men, it has also ironically suppressed the ideas of women other than the heterosexual, middle-class, white women whose values and experiences generated the theory and advanced it as universally applicable to all women. Collins (1990) cites Nancy Chodorow's 1974 and 1978, work and Carol Gilligan's, 1982 study as examples of feminist theories that relied heavily on heterosexual, middle-class white samples and comments: "While these two classics make key contributions to a feminist theory, they simultaneously promote the notion of a generic woman who is white and middle class" (p. 7) and I would add, heterosexual.

It stands to reason that if feminist theory has been dominated by the experiences of heterosexual, middle-class white women, then the construction of motherhood within this
theory has also been grounded in the same standpoint and consequently has also universalized the experience of motherhood. For example, although feminist theory provided an effective critique of the relationship of white males to the motherhood experience of heterosexual, white feminists, they “rarely challenged controlling images such as the mammy, the matriarch, and the welfare mother and therefore fail to include Black mothers” (Collins, 1990, p. 160). Neither did they challenge Western cultural representations of lesbian women which tend to “dwell on her exclusion from the adult feminine world of motherhood and nurturance. She is imagined as living a life of transitory relationships and as ending her days in isolation, possibly exacerbated by illness or poverty” (Lewin, 1995, p. 107). Women, however, mother in societies that are not only sexist and heterosexist but that are also racist and classist. Women’s mothering is not only informed by their experiences of living in a male-dominated heterosexual society, it is also informed by their relationships to people of other classes and races and their experiences of living in a society in which these things exist in a hierarchical order (Spelman, 1988).

Collins (1994) specifies two problematic assumptions perpetuated by the heterosexual, middle-class white feminist experience in North America and indicates how these assumptions affect political action. First there is the assumption that mothers and children have a certain level of economic security. Second there is the assumption that all women are able to consider themselves as individuals in search of personal autonomy instead of as members of communities struggling for survival. These assumptions lead to disparate sets of priorities. White women focus on the effects of isolation on mother-child relationships, and the possibilities of an idealized motherhood free from patriarchy, while women of colour are working for the survival of their children and their communities, and the significance of self-definition in constructing individual and collective racial identity. Lesbian mothers are struggling to have their relationships with other women and rights as co-parents acknowledged as well as the rights to their own children (Rich, 1983, p. xxxi).
The racism, heterosexism, ableism and classism that predominate heterosexual, middle-class, white, Euro-American feminism’s tunnel vision, both historically and currently, has been challenged and exposed repeatedly by Third World women, women of colour, lesbians, disabled women and poor women (Collins, 1990; Davis, 1983; Mohanty et al., 1991; Rich, 1976; hooks, 1990; Anzaldúa, 1990; Glenn et al., 1994). Their writings have compelled heterosexual, middle-class, white feminists to confront problems of difference and relations of domination (Flax, 1992). It is from their lived experiences and their exclusion from the dominant discourse of North American feminism that the concepts of interlocking oppressions and multiple subjectivities developed.

The notion of interlocking oppressions is best represented by Collins (1990). She discusses the meaning of interlocking oppressions juxtaposed against the additive model of viewing oppressions. In the additive model, oppressions are quantified and categorized so that one must fit into an either/or situation. She explains that this search for certainty is firmly rooted in the dichotomous thinking of Eurocentric, masculinist thought and that it requires one oppression to be privileged while the other oppression is denigrated.

Thinking about oppressions using the model of interlocking oppressions enables one to recognize all of the systems that both oppress individuals and relegate them to the category of “other”. Race, class, gender, age, sexual orientation, place in the global economy, ethnicity, religion, and ability can all be incorporated into understanding an individual’s identity and location in the world. Collins further explains that the interlocking oppressions model leads to a paradigm shift that opens up the analysis so that an individual can be viewed as living within a variety of these locations, thereby holding multiple subjectivities. An example of how this might occur is in the situation of white women. Within one subjectivity, like race, a white woman can be in a privileged position, while in another subjectivity, like gender, the same woman can be in an oppressed position. She states:
Although most individuals have little difficulty identifying their own victimization within some major system of oppression ... they typically fail to see how their thoughts and actions uphold someone else’s subordination. Thus white feminists routinely point with confidence to their oppression as women but resist seeing how much their white skin privileges them. African-Americans who possess eloquent analysis of racism often persist in viewing poor white women as symbols of white power.... Oppression is filled with such contradictions because these approaches fail to recognize that a matrix of domination contains a few pure victims or oppressors. Each individual derives varying amounts of penalty and privilege from the multiple systems of oppression which frame everyone’s lives. A broader focus stresses the interlocking nature of oppressions that are structured on multiple levels from the individual to the social structural and which are a part of a larger matrix of domination. (p. 229)

Fellows and Razack (in press) have coined the phrase “race to innocence” to describe the situation of an individual determining that her own claim to subordination is the most urgent, thereby not implicating herself in the subordination of others. They stress that there are relationships among the hierarchical systems of oppression and that these systems are dependant upon one another for survival. For this reason women cannot expect transformation to occur by focusing on one front only.

When a woman fails to pursue how she is implicated in other women’s lives and retreats to the position that the system that oppresses her the most is the only one worth fighting and that the other systems (systems in which she is dominant) are not of concern, she will fail to undo her own subordination. Attempts to change one system while leaving the others intact leaves in place the structure of domination that is made up of interlocking hierarchies. (p. 3)

With the assertion that differences among women are as important as the commonalities among women, more complex views of motherhood and reproduction have emerged. It is clear that the dominant construction of motherhood is centred on gender and that the interconnectedness of gender with race, class, sexual orientation, and place in the global economy has been rendered invisible. This narrow view of women’s oppression not only invalidates the reality of the majority of the women in the world, but it does not acknowledge the complexity of oppressions that interact on women.
Barbara Smith (1990) defines feminism in a way that incorporates the reality and complexity of all women:

Feminism is the political theory and practice that struggles to free all women—women of colour, working class women, poor women, disabled women, lesbians, old women—as well as white, economically privileged, heterosexual, women. Anything else is not feminism. (p. 25)

As has been the case historically, this more recent configuration of feminism(s) that recognizes the multiple subjectivities of women and the interconnected systems of oppression that affect women has focused predominantly on reproduction and mothering. Reproductive technologies have irreversibly altered both the cultural meaning and experience of motherhood (Arnup, 1990). Much theorizing has occurred about the range of reproductive experience in very historically and culturally specific ways (Ginsburg and Rapp, 1995; Glenn, 1994). The intersection of the recognition of multiple subjectivity and predominance of reproductive issues and women’s role in them can be found in the concept of stratified reproduction. The notion of stratified reproduction exposes “the arrangements by which some reproductive futures are valued while others are despised” (Ginsburg and Rapp, 1995). Stratified reproduction has been described by Colen (1995) as follows:

I mean that physical and social reproductive tasks are accomplished differently according to inequalities that are based on hierarchies of class, race, ethnicity, gender, place in a global economy and political forces. The reproductive labour—physical, mental, and emotional—of bearing, raising and socializing children and of creating and maintaining households and people (from infancy to old age) is differently experienced, valued and rewarded according to inequalities of access to material and social resources in particular historical and cultural contexts. Stratified reproduction itself reproduces stratification by reflecting, reinforcing and intensifying the inequalities on which it is based. (p. 78)

I would add sexual orientation to Colen’s list of inequities within which physical and social reproductive tasks are accomplished. Colen (1995) explains that experiences of reproduction are shaped by a variety of cultural ideas and practices that are hierarchically organized in such a way that appropriate and inappropriate parents are categorized and stratified. She uses a poignant example of West Indian childcare workers working for
American families in New York city, as a way of “unpacking the cultural construction of parenting and childcare with attention to gender, class, race/ethnicity and articulation into a global economy” (p. 98). She points out that though motherhood is central to the lives of both West Indian childcare workers and female employers in New York city it held varied meanings and was experienced differently by each group. She illustrates how the female employers are privileged at the cost of the childcare workers. For example, the childcare workers leave their children behind in the West Indies when they come to New York to look after someone else’s children, for low wages, while enduring race and class oppressions. Her deconstruction clearly details the “transnational, interracial, intercultural, cross-class” (p. 98) influences on the relationships between the childcare workers and their employers.

Stratified reproduction is critical to an understanding of intentional childlessness. Interrogating who is privileged to intentionally reject motherhood is as pivotal as interrogating who becomes a mother. In order to avoid motherhood, issues of access to birth control, abortion, sterilization procedures are all relevant. De Beauvoir (1952), for example, discusses how contraceptive knowledge was widespread in the middle classes and how the existence of a bathroom privileged middle-class women over peasant women who lived without running water and the privacy of a bathroom. The convenience and privacy of a bathroom enabled middle-women to exert some control over their reproduction. Davis (1983) discusses the mass sterilization campaigns of Black and Hispanic women that took place in the United States, while at the same time white middle-class women who wanted to be sterilized were refused. “While women of colour are urged, at every turn, to become permanently infertile, white women enjoying prosperous economic conditions are urged, by the same forces, to reproduce themselves” (p. 221).

Lesbian mothers have often lost their children in custody cases. In situations where they have won, it is often under compromised situations that sometimes include the child not
seeing the mother's partner (Lewin, 1994). In Fellows et al. (1994) a woman with disabilities states:

Women with disabilities have been systematically and legally deprived of the right to have children, to raise children that they have had, through all kinds of force. A couple who decides to marry can lose their disability benefits, a woman with a disability who gets pregnant is often compelled to either abort or to give up that child after it's born. (p. 1064)

Mullings (1995) provides yet another example by describing how African American women who head households are bound up in strongly held ideologies of race, class, and gender. They are constructed as promiscuous women and inadequate mothers (race ideology); the cause of their own poverty (class ideology); and pathological due to their non-traditional family forms (patriarchal ideology of gender). This bind, which African-American women who head households find themselves in, arises out of gender constructions that emphasize motherhood for Euro-American women but emphasize sexuality for African American women. Mullings concludes that in this way motherhood, womanhood, and race are symbolically intertwined and contested. A final example can be found in the many studies that have illustrated the class determinants of early parenthood. (Ward, 1995). Poverty and basic skills are more relevant factors to early parenthood than is race. “Having sex does not sort out by class; having babies does” (p. 11).

Reproductive technologies and the way in which they are developed and controlled are a pivotal tool in stratified reproduction. Their existence has increased the pressure on some women to reproduce and has vividly delineated who is privileged to reproduce. Privileged women who are infertile are expected to expend enormous amounts of time, resources and emotion in order to avail themselves of very expensive and invasive procedures in order to achieve fertility. Infertile women who choose not to participate in these activities are classified as lazy, or not worthy because they have not chosen to exhaust every last option in pursuit of their fertility. These technologies, however, are not equally
accessible to all women or in all parts of the world. Lesbian women, disabled women, women of colour, and poor women are not equally encouraged to access these opportunities. White, heterosexual, married, able-bodied women of European descent are most actively encouraged to become mothers (Spallone & Steinburg, 1987).

Intentional childlessness, like any social relation, is embedded in the specific histories and politics of systems of interlocking oppressions. A discussion about motherhood for a woman of colour of any class in North America is also a discussion about both the literal and figurative survival of her community. Therefore, a discussion about choosing not to be a mother, or about intentional childlessness, is also about the survival of her community. A discussion about motherhood for a lesbian woman includes her legal right to parent her own child. The meaning of both motherhood and intentional childlessness changes based on the subject position. Stratified reproduction provides a framework with which to understand how some women’s desires and practices (to mother or not to mother) are honoured and other women’s desires and practices (to mother or not to mother) are not honoured.
Notes

1. Collins (1990, p. 130), for example, cites from Giddes, 1984, p. 108, an 1894 edition of the Woman’s Era “some of us have not the temperament for family life....clubs will make women think seriously of their future lives and not make girls think their only alternative is to marry.”

Lisle (1996) cites letter from 1905 between a man and a woman planning for a childless marriage.

Lang (1991) interviewed a woman in their seventies, eighties and nineties. One 100 year old woman who very firm about her childlessness and had been all her life said, “I never wanted children. Why should I bother? I could never see why everyone wanted children. Why should everyone have them? That would be terrible. Stop asking me about children. I don’t want children. I never wanted children and I don’t want them now” (p. 17).

2. Neither Rich, nor I, are insinuating that the penalties resulting from childlessness parallel the penalties experienced as a result of being lesbian. The comparison is made in order to indicate that it is critical to recognize the difference between a social construct and a woman’s lived experience, in both cases.

3. Arnup et al. (1990) provide a useful example of this through an historical analysis of the construction of the ideology of motherhood by documenting the shift of control of various stages of reproduction from women at home to professionals in hospitals.


6. Chapter Four contains a discussion of liberal values and their influence on liberal feminism.


8. Veevers (1980) cites Greene’s 1963, A vote against motherhood; Balchen’s 1965 Children are a waste of time; and Rollin’s 1971 Motherhood, who needs it? as examples of this.

9. An earlier study done by Veevers (1980) and a later study by Lang (1991) mirror this finding.
10. See Lewin (1994) for a few brief examples of such cases.
Chapter Three

Constructing White, Intentionally Childless Women as Resisting Patriarchy: The Myopic Gaze

Introduction

In Chapter Two, the importance of considering both motherhood and intentional childlessness from within their historical, geographical, and social specificities was addressed. I asserted that neither motherhood nor intentional childlessness are experienced by all women in the same way. I demonstrated that in feminist literature the perspectives of heterosexual, middle-class, white women dominated the discourse, and I argued that their experiences of motherhood were assumed, by them, to be the experiences of all women. Consequently, intentionally childless women, or women who did not fit the universal ideal of motherhood, were considered pathological or deviant in some way. This chapter provides an actual example of how I unwittingly reproduced my own heterosexual, middle-class, white perspective in the analysis of the original interviews conducted for this thesis.

In 1993 I conducted a thesis pilot project. I interviewed five intentionally childless women and performed a cursory analysis. The analysis was uncritically conducted through the lens of my own subjectivity, a subjectivity that was both similar to and different from those of the research participants. I was aware of, and wished to challenge, the images of pathology that are usually assigned to intentionally childless women, which I outlined in the last chapter. Yet in the analysis of the first interviews I worked with the same notion of gender as uncomplicated by race, sexual identity, and other aspects of identity. I did not contextualize pronatalism or compulsory motherhood and assumed that these ideologies affected all women in the same way. I did not explore how my own subjectivity influenced the research, nor did I contextualize the participants’ individual experiences. The result was that my first attempt to explore childlessness as something more than pathology relied on a universal notion of gender and flattened the subjectivity of the participants.

I did learn some things from the first analysis. I learned, for example, that the intentionally childless women I interviewed were aware of the pressures of compulsory motherhood and
intimately felt the social censure they faced as a result of not being mothers. I learned that in spite of the pressures of compulsory motherhood, and the consequent pathologizing of childless women, the women I interviewed had strong self images. I learned some of the reasons why women decide not to become mothers and how important freedom, autonomy and individual possibility contributed to this decision. These learnings, however, were superficial. They did not answer my questions about how intentional childlessness might disrupt entrenched notions of gender. Nor did they provide a fully illustrate all of the dimensions of intentional childlessness.

What I did not learn, however, is more important. I did not learn how individual women are positioned differently in relation to motherhood and intentional childlessness based on their subject position. I assumed, instead, that women who are intentionally childless were doing so in a context contracted solely of gender. I did not learn how women are positioned differently in relation to intentional childlessness. I did not learn how systems of domination intersect to support and maintain each other or how this intersection limits the range of possible strategies individual women can employ to resist oppression. Finally, I did not learn how an individual woman’s subject position can simultaneously position her as both powerful and powerless.

This chapter includes the analysis from those original five interviews conducted in 1993. At that time, I had not yet incorporated the notion of interlocking oppression into my work, and I had not yet been introduced to the concept of stratified reproduction. I discuss the first stage of the research project with several objectives in mind. I want to portray the limitations of a gender essentialist perspective in understanding intentional childlessness. I also want to suggest where the analysis must go in order in order to represent intentionally childless women in all of their dimensions and not flatten their subjectivity.

This chapter begins with an introduction to the participants as described and understood from the initial interviews, a brief overview of the original interviews, and the resulting implications and summary. Up to that point in the chapter, the information is verbatim from the 1993 pilot project. I am aware that the analysis is minimal and presents a simplistic, generalized picture of the research participants. It is included here, however, not for the actual content of the
analysis, but rather, in order to provide the reader with an example of how subjectivity becomes flattened when universals are applied. The chapter concludes with a postscript where I critique the original analysis and establish the rationale for the second set of interviews and the new project.

The Participants

Karen

Karen is a white cultural worker currently pursuing her Ph.D. She is the 43 year old only child of British working-class parents who immigrated to Canada when she was six-and-a-half years old. She has been involved in a number of relationships with both men and women, has been married once and is currently in a long term relationship with a man. She has never been in a relationship where she has been pressured to have children and has never been pregnant.

According to Karen, her arrival at “this place” of being childless has not been a tumultuous one for her. There has, however, been a difference for her in the last ten years because of her connection with friends who have had children. When she is with these friends and their children, she takes the opportunity to tap in to the experience to review her feelings in relation to her childlessness to determine if there is a longing. She has found that these interactions have made her position clearer. The two friends that Karen spends most time with do not have children currently in their lives.

Karen states that she has located herself marginally in many aspects of her life, professionally, economically, and in her relationships. She says:

But here is somebody who is not in a traditional relationship, in that sense, and in terms of working as a feminist performance artist, which is also not a particularly common job area, So ... I’ve sort of located myself in these ... these kind of marginal maybe...

She views her childlessness as another aspect of this positioning and points out the privilege inherent in being able to make these choices. This location is also the source of fears about being poor and alone as an elderly childless woman.

Khirsten

Khirsten is a white, 46 year old heterosexual therapist in private practice who places a high value on freedom. She has been married twice, been pregnant once, terminated the pregnancy,
and is currently single. She describes herself as coming from a mixed Jewish/German lower-working-class family and is the oldest of three children. Her siblings are both male.

Khirsten describes herself as a seeker, a journeyer, and a strong aggressive woman who identifies with her father. She experiences herself in the world as a self-contained, dominant individual. She has not had a deep understanding or connection with women who have had children except through her work as a therapist.

From her early years, about age twelve, she can recall having a negative impression of what it was like to be a mother and has come to an understanding that she would never have children. Through the process of psychotherapy she has affirmed this reality. There has not been pressure in her life to have children. Her closest friends are childless. Khirsten is very vocal about being a childless woman and characterizes the people she’s involved with as a “different breed.” She and they have opted out of the social norm in many ways.

Ellen

Ellen is a 43 year old lesbian massage therapist from French and Irish heritage. She is the eldest child of three, one brother and one sister, with whom she assumed a maternal role. Ellen is not currently in a relationship, has been pregnant once and terminated the pregnancy.

Ellen very much considers her childlessness as a decision that is constantly in process. She relates that being around pregnant women can create a situation for her to romanticize about “the trappings” of being pregnant and giving birth. This also encourages her to check in with herself about her feelings, affirming them. She also acknowledges that there is an economic element to her decision. She has experienced some pressure from her mother to have children because neither of her siblings has children, and her mother wants to have grandchildren. Ellen loves children and sees herself in an aunt role with them, being a positive, alternative role model, who treats children with respect, as equals.

Ellen recalls that she has always been a rebellious person who has done her own thing, and although historically she has been a people pleaser, she is much more authentic to herself now. She describes herself as a creative, meditative individual who needs alone time. She has
always seen herself as an “Amazon” or a strong independent woman on her own.

**Gina**

Gina is a white 45 year old heterosexual free-lance editor who comes from a working class Italian/American background and is a practising Buddhist. She is the oldest of two children, although her mother lost one child in infancy before Gina was born. She has never been married, was never pregnant and had a tubal ligation at the age of 24 to insure she would never get pregnant.

Gina’s parents expected her to receive an education. Now that she is an adult, they are concerned about her finding a partner to spend her life with, but they have never pressured her to have children. Gina considers her decisions to be single and to remain childless as the two most important decisions she has made in her life, and she incorporates them as part and parcel of her identity as a feminist. As she gets older, she is being called upon more frequently to defend these choices, most often by women with children. Most of her friends are childless. She has few relationships with children and prefers adult company and conversation.

Gina describes herself as a creative, reflective person who has an intense need for solitude, privacy, and thinking time. She says that she is easy to make a caricature of and that the image of the eccentric lady with cats has been hung on her. She is, however too ferocious to accept the spinster image; she fights back.

**Rose**

Rose is a white 40 year old heterosexual graduate student from a British, middle class, “Victorian” family. She is the oldest of three children and grew up in a sheltered private school environment. She is currently in her third marriage, was pregnant once and terminated the pregnancy. Rose can never remember wanting to have children, and has never felt that it is part of her psyche to be maternal. She describes herself as an autonomous, masculine, independent person who is very alone in the world. As a middle-aged woman without children, she finds it difficult to sort out an identity in a society that places so much emphasis on the mother role.

She deliberately leans toward childless friends. Her family would like her to have
children, because to them it would be a sign that she has finally settled down. It would also confirm their own life choices. She, however, sees the world as being in a very precarious state, both environmentally and economically, so has no desire to bring a new life into it. Also, as a woman without children, she feels less controllable, more free from patriarchal constraints. Generally, however, she does not think much about the childless aspect of her life, unless people bring it up.

Overview of the Interviews

All of the women in this study recall childhood memories of not wanting children. They are all confident of their decision to be childless but refer to a process, an awareness of this as a decision, and they regularly check in with themselves to examine this decision. There is a variance in the amount of pressure the women feel from their friends and family about having children, but they all comment on the pressures placed on women generally in this regard.

A variety of themes emerges from the interviews, but for the purpose of this paper, only a few will be discussed. These themes are those related to self image, the decision to remain childless, and the consequences of the decision.

Analysis of the Interviews

Self Image

"I consider myself a nurturing person" Gina

Women live in a pronatalist society that not only defines women in relation to their role as mothers but constructs motherhood in a particular way. Intentionally childless women exist outside of this discourse and must negotiate their own self images in relation to it.

The women in this study describe themselves in ways that indicate they largely have not internalized these images. When asked to describe themselves or their self image, all but one woman mentioned their great capacity for love, openness and creativity. Without being specifically directed in the interview, Gina, Khirsten and Ellen referred to their mothering or nurturing aspect. Khirsten equates mothering to nurturing in her comment about recognizing this characteristic of herself in relation to her work and friends. She says:
I get some pleasure out of being a good mother with my clients and my friends and this is a new insight. So some part of me that I never thought was there or existed or available to be satisfied is.

Later in the interview she questions the definition but continues the association of her caring nature with maternalism when she says, “I don’t know what maternal love is, but I certainly have experienced it … with other people, and didn’t feel a need to have it with my own children.” Gina, on the other hand, makes a clear distinction and resists this equation. She states: 

So I mother my cats and I mother my plants. I hate the use of that word because I consider myself a nurturing person. I love nurturing things, I love cooking, I love petting my cats, I love bathing my cats, I love, well I used to tend an herb garden, I enjoy that sort of thing, and I don’t see that that’s mothering activity.

Ellen does not associate her nurturing characteristic with mothering but does recognize the importance of giving expression to it. She explains:

In my work, since I work with people who are dying, I can be that very gentle, very supportive, very caring, very loving person and I can release those parts of me that need a voice because for me they do need a voice. Its very important for me to nurture.

“I see women who get up at six” Ellen

The women in this study contrast themselves, and their understanding of their needs, with their images of what mothers do. They find themselves looking at mothers and asking, “Can I do that and do I want to do that?” They all refer to the pleasure of time alone and freedom to pursue their interests, things they perceive having children would negate. Ellen refers lack of patience or capacity for constant parenting and then adds:

I see women who get up at six and you know, get their kids ready and then they take the kids to daycare and they go to work and they come and pick up the kids. Like I don’t have the stamina to do that.

Gina clearly establishes that her range of interests are outside of where being a mother would require her attention to be. She explains:

I am keenly aware how middle-aged I am you know, how narrow the range of my interests are. I really like adult company and adult conversation and I have absolutely no interest in the Simpsons and Madonna and, you know, all of that youth cult stuff.
"In many ways I’ve opted out of the social norm" Khirsten

All the women I interviewed understood themselves to be individualistic and outside the norm, and in some cases marginal. Their childlessness fits into this construction but is only one element of it. Karen, as an artist, describes herself as living on the edge. Recognizing the complexity of the notion of resistance, and being careful not to make too great a claim in using the word rebel she reflects, “I think partly what I’ve done is I’ve constructed a place for myself, an image for myself which has to do with … it has something to do with rebel.”

In a similar vein Ellen says, “I’ve always been a rebellious person and done my own thing.” Finally, this comment by Khirsten eloquently captures and summarizes the range of comments on this theme:

In many ways I’ve opted out of the social norm. Where I am now in my life’s journey I’ve opted out of career, I’ve opted out of family, I’ve opted out of buying into the social system for my future support and that’s different than a lot of people I know. So I at one time thought that being successful in a career and monetarily successful was important to me, but that’s not important to me. So what’s important to me is being free. Freedom is worth everything to me, and I’ll make any adjustments in my lifestyle in order to keep my freedom at a very high level. Freedom to be honest, freedom to respond, freedom to be available whenever the need is there.

Part of the participants’ perceptions about their individualness relates to the expectations and images of women held by society and their perception of their own differentness in relation to this. Rose describes herself as masculine and as feeling cut off from women’s power. Khirsten has felt it from an early age and expresses:

I definitely didn’t want to be a girl from a very, very early age. Almost as early as I can remember, I didn’t want to be bothered with the girl’s world, makeup and clothes, and I had a very intellectual inner world, so I was a very solitary child and the friends that entered my solitary world were girls like myself who never spoke about dolls, or makeup or boys. So that, you know, I’m sure it all started there. I’ve always felt like the dominant, like the prince in the fairy tale, not like the princess.

Ellen further contributes to this point with the following description of herself:

I think I’m always considering myself or felt like deep in my soul like an Amazon, you know, and an Amazon to me very much is a strong independent woman who is, I always see her on her own. And that was the model that I responded to.
The participants in this study largely describe themselves in positive terms and are aware of their relationship to society’s expectations of women to be mothers. Their childlessness is seen in a larger context in which they have stepped outside of society’s norms at many levels. There are, however, references to themselves with regard to stereotypical female characteristics such as being nurturing, caring, and maternal. I find myself wondering if this is, at least in part, a resistance to society’s negative images of childless women.

The Nature of The Decision to be Childless

“I love being childless, I love my life” Gina

There was a great deal of certainty among the women interviewed about their life decision not to be mothers. Khirsten, Ellen, and Rose had been pregnant and terminated their pregnancies in the context of this decision. Khirsten captures the overall comments of the three women: “I once had a pregnancy and couldn’t terminate it fast enough. I didn’t feel good about it, I didn’t have any joy around [the pregnancy] at all.”

Ellen had a tubal ligation at the age of twenty-four as a result of her decision to be childless. Karen has never been pregnant, is not even sure of her ability to get pregnant, but is certain of her position not to be a mother and realized that in all of her significant relationships, including her current one, her partners have felt the same as she has. Gina says of her decision:

I’ve made some difficult decisions in my life, and being single and being childless, it’s difficult for me to separate those two, because I have made a conscious choice to be both, and I think that the two together are the most important decisions I’ve ever made. I think it influences every aspect of my day-to-day working life... my walking around and scratching life, I can’t think of an area of my life that it hasn’t affected. So it’s one of those very difficult situations where I don’t have a sense of how my life truly would have been different had I made other choices. It’s just pervasive, I love being childless. I love my life.

Rose, Ellen, Khirsten, and Gina all had memories, from an early age, of their awareness that they would not have children. Gina says:

I had an uncle who said something very patronizing. We were talking about what I wanted to be when I grew up and he said one day the biggest miracle of all will happen right in your womb and I wanted to slug him. I was like twelve you know, or thereabouts, pubescent any way. Certainly I knew what a womb was and I damn well sure knew that no fruit was ever gonna come out of my womb.
"Is there a longing?" Karen

Virtually all the women interviewed referred to the process of checking in with themselves regarding their decision and reaffirming the strength of their decision. Compulsory motherhood constructs a reality in which childbearing and child rearing are the expected and accepted paths for women to follow. This creates a conflict for women who follow other paths. The research participants, although confident in their decision, felt compelled to review it periodically. The nature and stimulus of this processing varied. Khirsten systematically reviewed her decision as an aspect of her personal therapeutic process. She explains:

So I re-examined that later, in therapy, 'cause I did question, I did go through a period of questioning. Have I made these decisions because of false information or wrong information? Is it inner misogyny that has caused me to make these decisions? I had to go through a couple of years of really examining that, trying to leave myself open. What if I had taken the other road of children ... why wouldn’t that have been OK, and after I examined that I discovered that this is definitely the stronger road for me. You know, although I can see that as an option, I can’t find an inner longing to match it.

Karen also refers to her lack of longing for children and takes the opportunities of being with women and their children to reexamine her feelings about her decision. Ellen also indicates that it is when she is with women who have made other choices that she reflects on her decision and that part of this decision is the commitment to herself to process on an ongoing basis.

Karen and Khirsten both have important insights into the notion of choice and the context within which childlessness exists. Karen talks about the importance of subjectivity and questions the use of the word choice and says:

I keep using this word choice and I’m a little bit questioning around that word, 'cause I think there’s so many arenas for women where I don’t think there is choice, or we use the word choice for women where I don’t think there is choice, or we use the word choice and what does that actually mean.... So what I’d like to say about that is that maybe I won’t use the word choice, maybe I’ll use the word decision for now. But that decision has been formed out of you know, particular subjectivity and it isn’t made in some kind of free isolated space that I can make this all-knowing decision in.

Khirsten refers to it in light of options available to women and says, "I believe that women not given the option to consider different lifestyles are not making good choices in some cases or don’t have the information to make a choice."
Reflections on Reasons for Making the Decision

The participants of this study have a variety of insights and suggestions as to their decision to be childless. They refer to economics, their class positioning, their understanding of the consequences of motherhood, and role models or memories they have from childhood, among other factors.

"Nannies and things like that" Ellen

Morell (1990) concludes from her research that class of origin may have some influence on a woman’s choice not to have children. She states:

When the subject of intentionally childless women appears, the assumption is nearly always made that this “choice” is the province of middle- and upper-class women. Researchers support this assumption by looking at present class status only. An unexpected finding of my research was that a full three-quarters of the women identified themselves as coming from either poor or working-class backgrounds. And they often connected their upward class mobility directly to the decision to remain childless (p. 19).

Karen considers her class as an aspect but indicates she has not thought it through, “I think another piece for me is class, my class background.” Ellen considers it in relation to her current class position:

I mean for me not having children also is very much, has always been very much, an economic consideration also, which I didn’t mention before … I think that possibly if I would have had lots of money and if I would have been able to have nannies and things like that and have other people being able to take care of the children that I would have, but I think that’s my need again to nurture.

“It’s so hard for women to be mothers” Khirsten

The research participants all had perceptions of what I refer to as the “consequences of motherhood.” These perceptions of what is required of women who are mothers are often related to their experiences of their own mothers or other women they know who are mothers. The women comment on the amount of time, energy, and commitment required to mother. Rose suggests that intentionally childless women are less controllable, and therefore describes her relationship to her intentional childlessness as partially “resistance against being a woman in a women-hating society.” Karen in particular describes the no-win situation that mothers are placed in by the reality that mothers are both “valorized” and “denigrated” in our society. Khirsten states:
It's so hard for women to be mothers. I see that in my clients. I see that in people I know. It's so hard and the toll is so unnecessary that I would like to see the bringing up of children supported a lot more socially in order that women don’t have to give up so much.

The insights into the consequences of motherhood that the intentionally childless women in this study had were referred to many times in every interview and I suggest are factors to be considered regarding women being intentionally childless. All of the women referred to their impressions of their own mothers. Gina explains it like this:

I think I decided pretty early in life that I didn’t want my life to be like my mother’s. I was asked about that when I went to see the psychiatrist to get permission for my tubal. We spent a lot of time talking about my birth family and I found him quite sympathetic. He agreed with me that I would find that kind of existence intolerably claustrophobic.

As mentioned earlier by Khirsten, there are not many options presented to women. Motherhood is largely the only role model available, so having access to role models of intentionally childless women presents a different world view. Ellen refers to an aunt whom she admired and respected, and Karen in particular had strong role models that she credits with influencing her. She states:

I could see that it was possible and that these people were still very much a part of my parents’ lives, my parents’ circle, and they didn’t seem to be stigmatized, in my memory anyway of them and their relationship in our family.

“So, kids haven’t fit once into this story” Khirsten

During the interviews, the women reflected on numerous aspects of their lives that may have influenced their decisions to be childless. Khirsten asserts that for her it is simply another way of being, that she is just a different type of person than someone who decides to have children. Rose comments on the precarious state of the planet as factor in her decision. Karen recalls that she was a sickly child and wonders if somehow she has developed an association of having babies with bodily difficulty. Gina places it in the context of her feminism and indicates that, for her, feminism was always childlessness and moving away from biological determinism for women. Ellen makes suggestions as to why some women have children and indicates that in those arenas she feels complete. She explains:
I think that some women have children to get in touch with that part of themselves and I feel that I'm quite intimately in touch with that sensual part of myself. You know, I mean if having children could be seen as an expression of one's femininity and expression of one's sensuality, I don't feel at all robbed of not having children and of choosing not to have children. I mean, I feel complete in that sense ... I guess I've never really thought of having a child to continue my life legacy.

Consequences and Management of the Decision

"The great divide" - Gina

The challenges of maintaining relationships with women friends who have children is a consequence referred to by all the women in this study. They each tell stories of relationships with female friends that have drifted apart, or are different, due to a friend having children. There is also a recognition of the changed needs and foci that occur when a friend has children and a sense of the loss around these changes. The heading for this section, the great divide, comes from a comment by Gina:

There's a tremendous difference in the day-to-day texture of our lives that makes it difficult to share in a way that was very easy when we were students; you know, those of us that were destined to marry and have children and those of us who were destined to be single. There was no great divide and I guess that's how I would describe it when a women has made the decision to have a child; it is a great divide that's going to become the main focus of her life, and if you don't share that focus with her it's difficult to be intimate.

Ellen offers a poignant story of her experience with her best friend's decision to have children and what it meant to her:

I can remember when she was pregnant and she was at my house and we were drinking tea like we always drank tea. And she was sitting behind, like, the table so I would only see really her face and we were talking and then she moved back and I saw her stomach and I remember just this overwhelming feeling of sadness that I had lost her, that she was no longer the same as me, that something dramatic had changed and the change was that she was now married and going to have a kid. And that changed our friendship, just in terms of what we did with our lives.

"Friends in the same boat" Ellen

One of the significant themes relating to the shift in female friendships when friends become mothers is that all of the women referred to the fact that most of their friendships or people they spend the most time with were other childless women. This was described both in terms of developing a support group for themselves and in terms of being with people with similar
interests and needs. She expresses the following:

So I have this freedom, but I mean it's nice to have freedom with other people that are in kind of the same boat. So I think being around people and having friends that are in the same boat.

Karen explains it this way:

It's interesting to me that I am in fact probably closer and spend more time with women, who [don't have children] and I think you know, that is indicative of forming a support, kind of a support system around myself for the choice I made.

“Funny hats and many cats” Gina

Another consequence for intentionally childless women is that they must live with the stereotypes imposed upon them by society. The women interviewed were very aware of the stereotypes and the words selfish, barren, unfriendly, unhappy and unsensual were used in relation to the stereotypes, Gina plays with the images:

I think the one that they successfully hang on me for a bit [she laughs] it is because part of it is true, the eccentric lady with cats. Cat lady. I wear funny hats and I have many cats and it's very easy to make a caricature of me and you know, I am silly about them.

Ellen expresses the following:

I mean, certainly the myth of the old maid is one that is a strong image. You know it’s an image for me of somebody who couldn’t, well traditionally, who couldn’t find a man. You know an old maid was less than [complete]. There was something wrong with them. [Ellen]

“Children are an expected part of the package” Rose

Rose mentioned the “do you have children” question without being asked about it. Married to an established executive, she feels she is now expected to have children, and she says that children are seen by most women in the context of relationship. Karen hasn’t had pressure from her parents for a long time, but she does remember her father talking to her about it once and recalling that he was relating it to the carrying on of the family name. She also indicates that since she is not married to her male partner, she is less likely to be pressured because people assume children are only relevant in the context of marriage. Both Kirsten and Gina mention that friends and family were more concerned with their finding life-long partners, so they won’t be alone, than they were about them having children. Ellen says:
I’m a lesbian, which doesn’t please my mother. I mean, sometimes she’s OK with it and other times she isn’t, you know, because she won’t be having grandchildren, at least from me. So periodically she gives me that pressure, you know, like she won’t have grandchildren.

"It can be difficult to be an older woman in our society" Karen

It was recognized by the women interviewed that it was difficult to be an older woman in our society in terms of health, economics, and support. Although some of the women expressed fears about this, there was general recognition that these things would happen whether or not they had children. Karen describes her fear as follows:

So I see myself alone without an immediate family and no children. So, there are fears about that, no question, but I would say for me it’s kind of an imbricated fear in that it’s not just about being without family and being childless ... it’s also about poverty.... It can be very, very difficult to be an older woman in our society. So I do have, and I think that the reason I’m saying this is that I think that fear does have something to do with the decision to be childless. It does have an impact on knowing that there isn’t somebody else coming along behind me.

(At this point I would like to remind the reader that the above analysis does not in itself reflect the experiences of the participants in a meaningful way. It and the following section is included in the thesis to provide an example of what can happen when subjectivity is not taken into consideration. In this case, I was viewing intentional childlessness solely through the lens of gender.)

Implications and Summary of the Initial Analysis (written in 1993)

Western society, as with most societies, perpetuates a pronatalist philosophy that constructs an equation of women = mother. Women are valued largely in light of their reproductive capabilities. Mother is the image against which women are measured, the norm, placing childless women in the position of “other.” Women who have not had children, who are not mothers, are placed in opposition to mothers, as their antithesis, thereby serving to reinforce the women = mother equation. Intentionally childless women are constructed by society as selfish, unfeminine, mean, unsensual, barren, unhappy, dissatisfied people. Feminist theory, or adult growth and development theory, just to name a few, do not reflect the experiences of intentionally childless women, but rather serve the pronatalist hegemony by centring their theories around motherhood. In the case of adult growth and development theory, women’s lives are
focused around childbearing and child rearing, and in the case of feminist theory there has been little challenge to the central role of motherhood in women’s lives. Feminism has challenged the institution of motherhood but has not explored the ongoing desire of women to become mothers, despite society’s lack of real support for this role.

The women in this study have made conscious decisions not to have children in spite of the images that they knew would be associated with them. They have not internalized these negative characteristics but rather see themselves as individuals who have rejected society’s expectations and regulations for women. They describe themselves as strong individuals who have made different decisions at many levels in their lives, including the decision to avoid reproduction. This recognition of their difference began early in their lives, and they have processed this decision, periodically or in an ongoing way, to insure its relevance for them. They are pursuing many different and varied interests and value their freedom. Their lived experience, as described by them, belies the societal stereotypes of barren old spinsters and presents a group of women who are aware of the lived realities of mothers and have chosen another path. They have reflected on the reasons for their decision and have individual understandings of the factors that influenced them. They are all well aware of the price they pay for their decision in terms of being considered as “other” and not being considered as complete women, or fulfilled women, by society at large. They are, though, also convinced that the rewards are significant, and they have established mechanisms to manage the consequences.

These voices of intentionally childless women are important instruments of change that can contribute significantly to transform women’s understandings of options available for them. Their lived experiences expose the fallacies constructed by pronatalist society about the potential for women outside of motherhood. This is not to suggest that no women should be mothers. Quite the contrary. It is to suggest that by understanding that there are options available to them women can make informed choices about options in their lives, thereby also becoming mothers out of choice. By presenting positive role models, childless women contribute significantly to a fuller understanding of women’s potential. For a more complete picture to be painted, it is important for
the lives of voluntarily childless women of other races and differing abilities to be included with these voices.

**Postscript**

The above analysis was written in 1993. Reading it again, in 1997, I am struck by the lack of complexity and the myopic lens through which it was constructed. As a white, European-American, heterosexual, professional, intentionally childless feminist from a working-class background, I inadvertently constructed the experiences of the research participants through the frame of my own subjectivity. In the analysis of the interviews I did not identify or explore the role my subjectivity played in the research nor did I contextualize either the participants’ individual experiences as women or their individual experiences as intentionally childless women. In essence, the analysis provided a friendly home for heterosexual, middle-class, white privilege (Spelman, 1988). Spelman neglects to include sexual identity as an aspect of oppression. She explains:

> We have to be very careful: the oppression white middle-class women are subject to is not the oppression women face “as women” but the oppression white middle-class women face. Their race and class are not irrelevant to the oppression they face even though they are not oppressed on account of their race and class. (p. 77)

The final section of this chapter will explore the ways in which the preceding analysis is myopic and an example of “white solipsism.”¹ Spelman (1988), citing Rich, explains that white solipsism involves thinking, imagining, and speaking as if whiteness describes the world. It is not necessarily a concept of racial superiority, but rather a tunnel vision that does not see the significance of non-white experience. In the case of the initial analysis, the tunnel vision excludes more than just race. It also excludes class and sexual identity. The initial pilot project only considered intentional childlessness in the context of gender, consequently reproducing a notion of the universal woman.

The initial analysis is inadequate and reflects a limited perspective in some key ways. Firstly, I do not contextualize the concepts of pronatalism and compulsory motherhood. I say, “Compulsory motherhood constructs a reality in which childbearing and child rearing are the expected and accepted paths for women to follow.” With this statement, I assume that pronatalism
and compulsory motherhood have an impact on all women in exactly the same way, the way they affect me. In this way, I project my experience as a heterosexual, professional, white woman onto the research participants; simplifying and universalizing the meaning of intentional childlessness. From my place of white skin and heterosexual privilege, I assumed that all women would experience the same pressure to procreate as I did. There is no acknowledgement that in different contexts pronatalism and compulsory motherhood affect women differently and that some women are discouraged from procreating.

Secondly, as previously stated, I do not examine the intentional childlessness of the research participants in light of their individual subjectivities. Similarly I do not explain the relevance of my own subjectivity to the research. This approach does not take into account interlocking oppressions and the reality that capitalism, sexism, racism, heterosexism, ableism are all woven into a complex web within which intentional childlessness exists. Such an omission serves to flatten the subjectivities of the participants and assumes that intentional childlessness only exists within the context of gender oppression. Alarcón (1990) states:

> With gender as the central concept in feminist thinking, epistemology is flattened out in such a way that we lose sight of the complex and multiple ways in which the subject and object of possible experience are constituted. The flattening effect is multiplied when one considers that gender is often solely related to white men. There is no inquiry into the knowing subject beyond the fact of being a woman. (p. 361)

All of the research participants in this study are white. I did not interrogate how, in a society embedded with racism, whiteness might play a role in intentional childlessness. All but one of the participants came from working-class backgrounds. I did not interrogate how, in a world embedded with capitalism, class might play a role in intentional childlessness. One of the participants was a lesbian, two participants were heterosexual and two were open to sexual experiences with both men and women. I did not explore how, in a world embedded with heterosexism, sexual identity might play a role in intentional childlessness. Privilege has the capacity to blind an individual to the meanings encompassed in differences. Jeffery (1994) explains:
Gender cannot be discussed separately from other forms of oppression since they are not simply offshoots of patriarchy ... Theories of feminism built on foundations of gender alone are insufficient. Hooks reminds us that for those of us who do not experience race or class oppression, it is easiest to focus solely on gender. (p. 68)

Finally, my intention was for this project to be a contribution to feminism and to interview feminists, but I did not make that explicit in my analysis, nor did I probe the meaning of feminism with the participants. I did not elicit what feminism meant to the individual research participants, consequently universalizing feminism to a dimensionless concept. Along with this negation, I did not interrogate the liberal individualistic framework that emerges from the participants' narratives, nor did I consider how and if it is possible for liberalistic notions and feminism to exist within the same frame. This is a significant component of the myopic gaze with which I conducted the initial project. In my place as a heterosexual, intentionally childless white woman, I had a desire to find feminist meaning within my intentional childlessness. I wanted to understand intentional childlessness as an aspect of resistance to patriarchy. I did not want to know that my intentional childlessness might place me in a position that could be construed as complicit with patriarchy. The liberal, individualistic framework that emerged from the original interviews were cause for further consideration and a more complex perspective on white women and intentional childlessness.

The analysis begins by introducing the reader to each of the project participants. In these initial descriptions, I outline each woman’s individual subjectivity. I paint a picture of each woman by describing her race, her class of origin, and her sexual identity. I do not, however, make use of this information in any critical way, nor do I attempt to examine the intentional childlessness of each woman in light of these particular subjectivities. In Karen’s introduction, for example, I refer to how she has constructed her life, and I say that she “points out the privilege inherent in being able to make these choices.” I do not, however, examine this any further or use it as an opportunity to explore privilege and/or how it connects to the notion of “choice.”

In this same vein, I identify each participant’s race as white, but do not follow up with an interrogation of whiteness in order to explain how it positions women in relation to intentional
childlessness. Toni Morrison (1992) stresses the importance of analyzing the affect of racism on the perpetrators of racism, white people. She says, "It seems both poignant and striking how avoided and unanalyzed is the affect of racist inflection on the subject" (p. 11). The inattention to whiteness, my racial identity and the racial identity of the participants in the initial analysis, is an example of what Frankenburg (1993) is referring to when she says, "white, feminist women, accounting for our experience were missing its 'racialness' ... we were not seeing what was going on around us; in other words we lacked an awareness of how our positions in society were constructed in relation to these women—and men—of colour (p. 9)." Women are variously located in relation to motherhood and reproduction based on race. Consequently, it is crucial to explicitly investigate whiteness as a site of race privilege when discussing intentional childlessness.

A similar lack of specificity and critical acknowledgement of meaning occurs in the analysis regarding class. Major assumptions are made about the class of the participants based on my own myopic vision of class. I ask the participants how they identify the class of their parents. Then, without any substantiation from the interviews, I read the professional status and education of the participants as an indication of their middle-class status. I did not ask them to identify or verify my understandings about their current class identity, because I was operating with an assumption that intentional childlessness was a vehicle for class mobility, presuming that all but one of the participants had indeed shifted from their working class origins to the status of middle-class.² At the time I understood class solely as an economic definition and considered anyone with a post-secondary education and/or a professional occupation as middle-class. That is how I experienced myself. I had not yet made more than an isolated conceptual connection between race and class. It was only as I began to talk to other women about class, and explore my own class identity, that I reached a broader understanding of class. Brown (as cited in hooks, 1984) explains:

Class involves your behaviour, your basic assumptions about life. Your experience (determined by your class) validates those assumptions, how you are taught to behave, what you expect from yourself and from others, your concept of a future, how you understand problems and solve them, how you think, feel, act. It is these behavioural patterns that middle class women resist recognizing. (p. 3)
Race, class and sexual identity create many differences in life possibilities for women including quality of life, social status, and lifestyle. Women are privileged or not in relation to reproductive possibilities based on class identity. Therefore the class identity of the research participants must be explored, in relation to their intentional childlessness, as a potential site of privilege. Similarly I did not explore the sexual identity of the participants in relation to their intentional childlessness. I was trying to demonstrate that all women are affected by intentional childlessness in a similar way but did not consider how sexual identity, particularly, positions women differently in this regard.

By only identifying the distinct and multiple subjectivities of each woman, without giving meaning to these subjectivities, this analysis universalizes the images and concepts of women in general and intentionally childlessness women in particular. This is what I refer to as the "discourse veneer" trap. This trap is an easy one to fall into and assumes that in order not to reproduce dominant culture discourse it is enough to just use the words, race, class, sexual orientation, etc. This trap does not require one to examine the meanings behind the words or to place oneself amidst the complicated web of lived experiences within the words. It is not possible to make sense of women in their entirety with this approach. The outcome is flattened subjectivity. Race, class, sexual identity, gender, and location in the global economy are historically and politically structured and reproduced by social, economic, and political systems (Colen, 1995). These systems are all interwoven, rely on each other for existence, and therefore must be examined in an interwoven fashion in order to be understood.

The myopic gaze, and the resulting flattened subjectivities, gives rise to broad generalizations and assumptions about the universality of women's experiences. In the segment of the analysis describing the theme of self-image, for example, I begin by saying, "Women live in a pronatalist society that not only defines women in relation to their role as mothers but constructs motherhood in a particular way." With this very universal and non-specific statement, I am identifying and isolating gender as an aspect of women's oppression and am assuming that all mothers, everywhere in the world, of every race, of every class, of every sexual identity, in every
location of the global economy, and at every time in history, all experience their gender construction in the same way and are equally valued as mothers and have equal access to motherhood.

A generally consistent notion, however, is that woman equals mother. Mother equals nurturer. Therefore, woman equals nurturer. The maternal, nurturing, loving image of motherhood has become predominantly synonymous with woman, regardless of location. Therefore, when a woman does not have a child, she has to use means other than the identity of "mother" to establish the nurturing, loving aspect of her gender identity. Mothers are automatically assigned these qualities. In the segment of the analysis describing the theme of self-image, I describe the participants' reinforcement of themselves as nurturing and maternal individuals. I use this as evidence that the participants have not internalized the negative images of intentionally childless women, rather than recognizing that these same statements may actually signify the way compulsory motherhood plays itself out for heterosexual, middle-class, white women in North America by creating different kinds of images about mothering, for different kinds of women.

All of the participants were able to fulfill their desire for intentional childlessness via access to abortion and/or birth control when it was necessary and required. This was a taken-for-granted reality in the analysis. In the segment of the analysis discussing the theme of the nature of the decision, the concept of "decision" and "choice" and the privilege inherent in these terms is not interrogated. Once again Karen provides a critique of the concept of choice and comments on subjectivity when she says:

I keep using this word choice and I'm a little bit questioning around that word, 'cause I think there's so many arenas for women where I don't think there is choice or we use the word choice for women where I don't think there is choice and what does that actually mean ... So what I'd like to say about that is that maybe I won't use the word choice, maybe I'll use the word decision for now. But that decision has been formed out of you know, particular subjectivity and it isn't made in some kind of free isolated space that I can make this all knowing decision in.

Neglecting a discussion on the issue of choice and privilege is part of a larger gap in the analysis that does not explore the theme of liberal individualism that emerges. The profile that the
analysis painted of the research participants was one of free, autonomous human beings. This theme emerges in a number of ways. It is evidenced by the participants’ frequent use of the descriptors “autonomous”, “self-contained,” “free” and “independent” throughout the analysis. It is also evidenced by the participants’ descriptions of having constructed places for themselves outside what they describe as the norms of society and of having “opted out.” On the one hand, the participants’ narratives uncovered themes of freedom and choice, yet in their narratives of themselves they described aspects of marginality that they experienced in their lives. These contradictions in the narrations were not explored.

As both a rationale for exploring the meaning of intentional childlessness, and as a conclusion to the analysis, I say, “This is not to suggest that women should never be mothers. Quite the contrary, it is to suggest that by understanding that there are options available to them, women can make informed choices about options in their lives, thereby also becoming mothers out of choice.” This concluding comment is, without specifically stating so, intended for white, middle-class women in North America, yet I just say “women.” This generalization provides another example to illustrate the following comments by Spelman (1988):

Privilege cannot work if it has to be noted and argued for. For someone to have privilege is precisely not to have to beg for attention for one’s case. For feminist theory to express white middle-class privilege is for it to ensure that white middle-class women will automatically receive attention. How can it ensure this without making explicit what it is doing?... By making the default position of feminist inquiry an examination of white middle-class women: unless otherwise noted, that’s who we are going to be talking about. (p. 76)

In reviewing the initial analysis and considering the shortfalls as described I knew I had to reconsider the framework I was working from. It was clear that I had been operating from an additive type of analysis but that I had shifted to incorporate the framework of interlocking oppression. In other words, I was shifting from an either/or approach to understanding subjectivity that searches for quantification and categorization, to a both/and framework that provides for inclusivity. Collins (1990) explains that the advantage of understanding subjectivity through the lens of the interlocking framework is that it allows for “a conceptual stance in which all groups possess varying amounts of penalty and privilege in one historically created system”
This model recognizes, for example, that a white woman experiences gender oppression while at the same time experiencing race privilege.

The new lens of interlocking oppressions enables me to reconsider the data from the initial interviews and to understand the complexities of the research participants’ subjectivities. Originally, for example, I experienced contradictions in Karen’s descriptions of herself as having “opted out” by choice and as having located herself within a marginal framework. Looking at this with an and/or framework, Karen would need to be either marginalized or privileged. By acknowledging the complexity of subjectivity, however, it is possible to understand that Karen positions herself as marginal and in doing so is resisting regulation—perhaps both gender regulation (compulsory motherhood) and class regulation (capitalism). In this framework, Karen is both marginal and privileged. She experiences class and gender oppression but race privilege. How do these complex currents in the lives of the research participants relate to their intentional childlessness? This question initiated the new project for the thesis.

In order to complete the project I decided to reanalyze the initial set of interviews and reinterview the participants from within the new framework. The second set of interviews, therefore, had the specific agenda of exploring some key areas. First of all, I wanted to make my feminist agenda explicit and to inquire of the participants if they were feminists, what exactly feminism meant to them, and how, if at all, their feminism was connected to their intentional childlessness. I intended to determine if the profile of liberal individualism that emerged from the first interviews was accurate from the participants’ perspectives and if it, in their minds, conflicted in any way with their understanding of their feminism. I intended to acknowledge whiteness as a site of privilege to explore the meaning of whiteness in the context of intentional childlessness and to explore the class identities of the participants. Finally, I planned to investigate both the privileges inherent in the intentional childlessness of white, professional women in North America and also the penalties incurred from rejecting gender regulations.
Notes

1. Spelman (1988) explains, "In the philosophical literature, solipsism is the view according to which it is only one's self that is knowable, or it is only one's self that constitutes the world. Strictly speaking of course, Rich's use of the phrase 'white solipsism' is at odds with the idea of there being only one self, insofar as it implies that there are other white people; but she is drawing from the idea of there being only one perspective on the world—not that of one person, but of one 'race'" (p. 207).

2. Rose had identified herself as having middle-class origins and, therefore, did not fit into the class shift that I had constructed.
Chapter Four

THE FEMINIST NARRATIVES OF WHITE, INTENTIONALLY CHILDLESS WOMEN

Introduction

This chapter begins the analysis of the second interviews, which were conducted in the summer of 1997. The research background and process is found in Chapter Two of this thesis. I begin by reintroducing the research participants and alluding to any significant changes that have occurred in their lives and their understanding of their childlessness in the four years since the first interview. The discussion then begins with an overview of liberal individualism and colonial domination as a context within which to further explore the liberal, autonomous profiles of the participants that emerged from the original interviews. The chapter then draws on the narratives of the research participants to explore their understandings of, and relationships to, feminism and if and how feminism has influenced their intentional childlessness. The chapter then explores if intentional childlessness can be understood in terms of rejecting motherhood as an aspect of gender regulation and how this relates to the individualistic profiles of the participants that emerged. The costs of intentional childlessness are then outlined.

Reacquaintance with the Participants

Karen

There has been no change in Karen's status as an intentionally childless woman or in her relationship status in the last four years. She is now 47 years old, a student working on her Ph.D., and still "scrambling to find work so I can finish my work as a student." Karen identifies herself as a feminist and a white, "working-class academic," although she is constantly renegotiating her class identity. She clearly articulates in the second interview that her feminism provides her with the theory base from which she recognizes that her intentional childlessness exists within a world that is determined by heterosexism, racism, classism, and other oppressive systems.
Karen questions her use of the word “marginal” in the first interview and prefers to use the word “unusual” to describe her professional, economic, and relationship situations in the second interview. She indicates that the shift in language enables her to more specifically acknowledge both placing herself with some degree of “choice” (although she uses that word hesitantly) outside the contexts of “white middle-classness” and accepting that her life is also full of entitlements.

Khirsten

There has been no change in Khirsten’s status as an intentionally childless woman or in her relationship status in the last four years. She identifies herself as white, Jewish and middle class in values but currently “poverty class, by choice.” She is now 50 years old and is still a therapist in private practice although now she is also teaching and administering in a school for therapists.

In the four years since the first interview, Khirsten has undergone an intensive investigation of her gender identification. She travelled for two years and lived for six months of that time as a man. Her intention was to undergo gender reassignment at the end of the two years but this plan was thwarted by her body’s inability to tolerate the required hormones. From this experience Khirsten realized that she had gone on a “journey of self-discovery about being masculine” but that she “hadn’t gone on a self-discovery of being a woman.” The journey of exploring her sense of herself as a woman has been a focus for her during the last few years. Consequently Khirsten indicates that she is much more in touch with the physical feeling of being a woman than she was before; much less “fiercely independent” than she was before; much more collaborative and connected to other women than she was before; and more community oriented.

This investigation of her gender identification has left Khirsten in “a coasting zone in terms of what sexually is attractive to me in a person.” Consequently Khirsten asserts that although she probably feels more bisexual than she did before, she does not feel
“specifically sexual.”

Khirsten has always had a relationship with feminism and it has had different meanings for her at different times in her life. She indicates that feminism has taken on a much more spiritual aspect for her now in that she is “coming to see that the values associated with women are very important values.” Although on the one hand Khirsten says of her current relationship with feminism, “I’m not ultimately a feminist,” she further indicates “I am a feminist now because of the imbalance still in our society” and that “because people aren’t listening to the aspect of the feminine, I need to be a feminist still.”

Ellen

There has been no change in Ellen’s status as an intentionally childless woman or in her relationship status in the last four years. She is now 48 years old and still working as a full time massage therapist. Ellen indicates that she is talking more about her childlessness than she did before and that she is currently exploring the ecological value inherent in not having children.

Ellen identifies as a white, working-class, lesbian feminist but has caveats for these categories. In terms of lesbian feminist, which is one word to her, Ellen says that “four years ago it would have been much easier for me to, without a thought, without a blink, without anything, say yes, I’m a feminist.” She explains that due to changing definitions in the lesbian community “I’m kind of sitting back with my arms folded right now wondering who I want to be.” In terms of class, Ellen acknowledges that she is in a professional job that gives her a good salary and that may cause others to see her as middle-class, even though she has never felt like a middle-class woman. She specifies that this is so because she has no financial security or outside support to fall back on. Finally, Ellen does have white skin, but to her the word “white” signifies White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP). In this regard she identifies herself not as WASP, but rather, as an Irish French-Catholic woman.
Gina

There has been no change in Gina’s status as an intentionally childless woman or in her relationship status in the last four years. Gina is now 49 years old and still works as a freelance editor. Since the last interview, Gina has “given almost no thought to this issue,” because the first interview served as a “kind of solidification for me, or closure.” She indicates that the most significant change in her status is that she is reaching menopause, and “that has moved onto front stage as my concern as a woman.”

Gina describes herself as a very old fashioned feminist who believes that gender is an entirely social product and is “profoundly disturbed by the Carol Gilligan school of thought that women have something intrinsic about them that makes them more nurturing or more relation-oriented or something.”

Gina identifies as a white, working-class, professional woman.

Rose

There has been no change in Rose’s status as an intentionally childless woman or in her relationship status in the last four years. Since the last interview Rose has completed her Masters degree and moved back to England, her home. She is now 44 years old and employed full-time in a housing project that matches young people with elderly people for supportive housing.

Rose identifies as a white, middle-class, heterosexual feminist. Her feminism provides her with a political view of the world that locates oppression in racist, classist, and sexist structures. She states that her experience indicates that “in Canada somehow it’s easier to be a feminist. There are certain ideas about human rights that we in Britain are still slowly catching up with.” She has, through a therapeutic process, connected her intentional childlessness to the “very negative ideas about motherhood and childhood that I had from my own experience as a child.”
Liberal Individualism and Colonial Domination as a Context

The women in this study are white, educated women who were influenced by the second wave of feminism in North America and Britain in the 1960s and 1970s. Four of the women identify as having working class-origins, and one of the women identifies as having middle-class origins. Three of the women continue to identify as working-class, one of them identifies as "poverty-class by choice" and one as middle-class. All of the women have post-secondary education and are professionally employed. Two of the women identify as heterosexual, one is single and one married; one of the women identifies as a lesbian and is single; and two of the women are open to sexual relationships with men and women, one being in a monogamous, long-term relationship with a man and the other being single.

The narratives of the research participants indicate a diverse range of subjectivities and reflect a variety of definitions of, and relationships to, feminism. The narratives also, however, reveal a commonality among the participants. Their intentional childlessness can be construed as an aspect of rejecting gender regulation. Also, they share a commonality in the images painted through their narratives of their lived experiences. At first glance, these images seemingly typify what has been defined as a white, middle-class, liberal version of feminism that speaks of liberal individualism and that generally lacks an emphasis on systems of domination.

In order to provide a context for the rest of the analysis, a discussion of liberalism, and liberal values and of how the emergence of Western feminism occurred within a culture formed via colonial domination and liberal individualism is required.

Goldberg (1993) maintains that liberalism is "modernity's definitive doctrine of self and society, of morality and politics" (p. 1). He stipulates that although there are a variety of philosophical strands there is a "core strand of central ideas common in varying degrees" that characterizes liberalism. He details the common goals of liberalism as being:
individualism, which places the moral, political and legal claims of individuals over those of the collective; universal principles that are applied to all human beings or rational agents; and equality which recognizes a common moral standing regardless of individual differences. Goldberg further states:

In this liberalism, seeks to transcend particular social, historical and cultural differences: It is concerned with broad identities which it insists unite persons on moral grounds, rather than with those identities which divide politically, culturally, geographically or temporally. The philosophical basis of this broad human identity, of an essentially human nature, is taken to lie in a common rational core within each individual, in the (potential) capacity to be moved by Reason....liberalism takes itself to be committed to equality....From the liberal point of view, particular differences between individuals have no bearing on their moral value, and by extension should make no difference concerning the political or legal status of individuals. (p. 5)

Ensuing from, and critical to, the attainment of the liberal goals of individuality, universality and equality is the notion of rights. Razack (1992) describes the paradigm generally associated with liberal rights as having three stages. It begins with the notion that we all have rights as rational human beings to pursue our own interests. It then moves to the next stage by asserting that we would each be entitled to equal consideration if my interests collide with another person’s interests. In the final stage, “no one else’s interests should inflict harm and when harm is unavoidable, the individual whose claims inflict the least harm wins the right to assert their claim” (p. 2).

Razack (1992) critiques liberalism and its inherent rights by pointing out firstly, that “the liberal self is a being without defining links to community, that is, someone who is not socially constituted” (p. 3); secondly that liberalism isolates individuals from their communities with the result that individuals are unable to see how group membership affects individual choices and opportunities; and finally, that liberalism blinds us to a broader focus on power structures and regulation. She summarizes by saying:

The concept of an independent, decontextualized individual functions to suppress our acknowledgement of the profound differences between individuals based on their situation within groups and the profound
differences within groups. Without a theory of difference, we also cannot make clear what the relationship is between groups or communities. Finally, what this notion most inhibits is our understanding of power as something other than the power of one individual to assert his or her claim over another’s. (p. 3)

In other words, by focusing on the individual and the individual’s freedom to act autonomously, liberalism ignores the contexts within which individuals operate. Razack cautions that “if the contexts in which individuals must make their choices are not carefully deconstructed, we easily deny rights to those whose realities we do not wish to, or are ill-equipped to acknowledge” (p. 4). In order to illustrate this point, she provides the example of an argument often heard, which states that immigrants coming to Canada should not be entitled to the same rights as the French and English in Canada. This argument is made within the liberal philosophical context that assumes since immigrants choose to come to Canada, they should relinquish their right to conditions that might sustain their cultural identities. As Razack points out, however, this thinking does not take into consideration the conditions under which most people immigrate. She questions how much choice actually exists when one is fleeing war or poverty. Rothman (1994) supports Razack’s critique by asserting:

But liberal thinking, with its emphasis on rationality, does not seem equipped to understand the more subtle forms of coercion and persuasion, whether psychological or economic, so the “choices” people make out of their poverty or need, choices individuals may experience as being coerced, liberals tend to see as being freely chosen. (p. 147)

Since Western culture functions predominately within a liberal philosophy, liberal feminism comes the closest to the culture’s mainstream values (Rothman, 1994). Mainstream Western feminism drew upon the liberal values of universality, individual freedom, choice, and autonomy in order to struggle for women’s ability to exercise freedom of choice. Liberal feminism concentrated on earning women, as individuals, the rights “to be like men, to enter into men’s worlds, to work at men’s jobs for men’s pay, to have the rights and privileges of men” (Rothman, 1994, p. 152). I will clarify here that in
previous sentence, “men” should read “white, middle-class, heterosexual men.” Hooks (1984) makes the following comments of the impact liberal philosophy has had on Western culture and feminism:

The ethics of western society informed by imperialism and capitalism are personal rather than social. They teach us that the individual good is more important than the collective good and consequently individual change is of greater significance than collective change. This particular form of cultural imperialism has been reproduced in feminist movement in the form of individual women equating the fact that their lives have been changed in a meaningful way by feminism ‘as is’ with a policy of no change need occur in theory and praxis even if it has little or no impact on society as a whole, or on masses of women. (p. 28)

Liberal feminism’s belief in the autonomy of the individual denies the structural and institutional oppression of women and believes “that if I as a rational sovereign subject freely choose my way of life on the basis of my individual rational consciousness which gives me knowledge of the world, then I am not oppressed” (Weedon, 1987, p. 84). Razack (1992) furthers Weedon’s point and states that “the constraints on individual choices are in reality far more pervasive and deeply embedded than we realize” (p. 7). She reminds us that the cultural and linguistic narratives within which we decide how to live our lives are organized to benefit some and not others.

Freedom, choice and autonomy are all concepts that impose a particular kind of order, a structure that violently suppresses those details that do not fit; in particular, the details surrounding the persistent domination of men over women, rich over poor and whites over blacks. (p. 7)

It is in light of these shortcomings that Western, liberal feminism has been “challenged on the grounds of cultural imperialism and of shortsightedness in defining the meaning of gender in terms of internal racism, classism and homophobia” (Mohanty, 1991, p. 7). Ramazanoglu (1990) explains that women of colour criticized the feminism of white, middle-class Western women for its assumption of common sisterhood and for being rooted in a narrow version of western experience; an experience that does not acknowledge that women have different histories and live different relationships to prevailing power
structures or that prevailing power structures exist due to the historical experience of the expansion of European domination into the rest of the world. Colonial domination has led to cultural conceptions of white as superior and black as inferior and to the legitimation of racist beliefs and practices. In North America, feminism was located within Western culture, a culture that “takes white experience and values to be normal. It takes racial and ethnic hierarchies for granted and does not acknowledge its inherent racism” (p. 125).

The feminist adage “the personal is the political” was initially adopted by feminists to express the reality that women’s everyday reality is informed and shaped by politics and is therefore political. Hooks (1984) asserts that this adage became a means of “encouraging women to think that the experience of discrimination, exploitation, or oppression automatically corresponded with an understanding of the ideological and institutional apparatus shaping one’s social status” (p. 24). She stresses however that much of white, western feminism got stuck there. She acknowledges that the ability to be cognizant of one’s own reality is an important first step - it must then be broadened to then include the politics of society as a whole and the global politics. Hooks explains:

Feminism is a struggle to end sexist oppression. Therefore, it is necessarily a struggle to eradicate the ideology of domination that permeates western culture on various levels as well as a commitment to reorganizing society so that the self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion and material desires. (p. 24)

Hooks (1984) further comments that “a central tenet of modern feminist thought has been the assertion ‘all women are oppressed’” (p. 4). She contends that this tenet implies all women share a common experience, and, therefore, it denies the reality that class, race, religion, and sexual orientation create differences in experience that determine the extent to which sexism is an oppressive force in an individual woman’s life. Two assumptions result from this implication: firstly, that feminism’s goal is to make women the social equals of men, and secondly, that all men have equal power. For women of colour, working-class and poor women, social equality with men from their own groups would not be liberatory
because these men do not have social, economic, or political power.

It is with an awareness of liberal, Western culture as both the hegemony within which the women interviewed for this project exist and the roots of their feminism that I begin the analysis of the second set of interviews.

Beginning with Feminism

The initial analysis, which was written in 1993 and which comprises Chapter Three of this thesis, did not explicitly examine the relationship of the research participants to feminism or the influence, if any, of feminism on the intentional childlessness of the participants. Consequently, in the initial analysis, I imposed my subjective experience as a white, heterosexual, intentionally childless feminist onto the experience of the participants and assumed their relationship to feminism was the same as mine. This unconscious overlay is an example of how white, professional feminist hegemony can be reproduced.

In the second interviews I attempted to be mindful of my subjective relationship with feminism and provided an opportunity for the participants to define theirs. Participants were asked whether they would identify themselves as feminists, and if so, to reflect on their feminism in a number of ways. They were asked to describe what feminism meant to them, how feminism influenced their daily lives, and finally if and how their intentional childlessness was connected to their feminism. From these questions I was interested in exploring if the white, professional, intentionally childless women in this study were actually embracing a goal of autonomy and freedom. Did they see their desire for autonomy and freedom as a feminist goal?

Virtually all of the women in this study identified themselves as feminists and described both the influence of feminism in their lives and in their intentional childlessness. The women, however, expressed a range of meanings and understandings about feminism. As pointed out in Chapter Two, feminism means different things, to different women, at different times. Four of the women in this study were influenced by the second wave
feminism of the 1960s and 1970s in North America and one of the women was influenced during this same period in Britain. Although the participants developed their feminist frameworks from a variety of class and sexual orientation locations, they all experienced the emergence of feminism within the privilege of whiteness.

The heterosexual, middle-class, white agenda that dominated the second wave of feminism in North America isolated gender, as a mechanism of oppression, to be resisted. Hooks (1984) reminds us that the focus was on gaining “social equality with men in their class; equal pay for equal work; others wanted alternative lifestyle” (p. 7) and perpetuated an ideology of “competitive, atomistic liberal individualism.” The research participants emerged from this context. Some of them still define their feminism from this framework, and some of the women interviewed clarified that their relationship to feminism was a continually shifting one.

Karen, for example, declares that when she first became involved in feminist politics in 1969, “there was a particular flavour based upon what was happening historically in terms of feminism at that time, which was very much a white, middle-class feminist movement focused on ‘women’s rights.’” Her current understanding however, has shifted, and she reports that, for her, feminism now means “the desire to look at social relations and social regulations and how those differently affect ... women who are differently located based upon ability, sexuality, age, race, class, and so on.” She acknowledges that “feminist politics and activity are constantly changing and shifting over time depending upon the historical conditions and depending on which particular women are engaging in those feminist activities.” For Karen, the critiques of white, middle-class feminism that came from women of colour were salient in opening up more critical understandings of what we mean by feminism and “who was being left out, and for whose benefit certain women were being left out of that picture, or those feminist pictures.”
Karen describes that, for her, feminism is:

... a passion and a possibility. It offers me a passion about participating politically in the world, thinking about the complexity of women’s lives, the oppressions of women’s lives and what I want to be able to recognize about those inequalities and I can, in my measly little ways participate... towards social change, social changes. It gives me a passion about relationship to women in terms of a connection, a sense of community; at various points in time it has offered me that, with different women in different contexts... Through feminists and feminist thinking I have come to develop some understanding and to work at understandings around anti-racism, for example, or the disability movement.

Khirsten also related a relationship to feminism that shifted over time, but the shift has remained largely within a framework of gender oppression and the liberal individualistic notion that embodies the language of “choice.” In her early years,, Khirsten identified as a feminist because it was a category that seemed able to accommodate her sense of herself as different. She had no tolerance for women who became mothers and stayed at home, because she thought they were imprisoned by lack of choice. Khirsten says:

I was very much interested in people self-actualizing, and so in that sense feminism was an interesting thing for me in my youth... it also kept me in that frame of mind that women who didn’t make choices were less than women. So I had to go through that painful period where I was confronted by women from other cultures and had to go through a long period of coming to terms with that.

Khirsten is currently moving into a notion of feminism that embraces the importance of honouring what she defines as feminine qualities and characteristics. She indicates that, for her, feminism is now about coming to terms with the power of the feminine and recognizing the importance of the values associated with women. She describes qualities, such as the ability to feel at a deeper level, contemplation and introspection, as examples of these values and asserts that though these values are not exclusive to women, they have been assigned to women by society and are largely devalued by society. Since women are stereotyped by these values, they are also largely devalued. She says, “because in our time and place women are still second-class then I will
continue to speak on behalf of the feminine, not speak on behalf of the masculine, at this point in time.”

Ellen also discusses the shifting meaning of feminism in her life. She describes herself as a lesbian and a feminist who came out of the closet in the early seventies. She has identified as a lesbian feminist for most of her life, but currently due to what she experiences as the changing definitions in the lesbian community, she is not sure what the word feminism means anymore. She is disappointed with how the lesbian community is embracing motherhood and adopting the nuclear family model. She explains:

as a lesbian when I question other women, like, why are you having children and why are you having these little heterosexual relationships, or what looks like a heterosexual relationship model, or why are you doing this when we already know it doesn’t work, why are you reinventing that? You know, the questions aren’t popular.

Feminism has provided Ellen with a world view that she assumed was shared by all other feminists. This assumption has periodically caused her to experience conflict with other women. For her, feminism has always meant being defined “from the feminine principle,” which for her means being defined from her own experience. Ellen has always linked the personal and the political; “when I draw the dots together and they make any sense to me, it’s always from the sense of having a feminist consciousness, which means an anti-oppressive consciousness.” Ellen’s definition of oppression is “not having the freedom to do and think and be who you are.”

Gina has had a less shifting sense of her feminism and says that she is a “very old-fashioned feminist” who believes in socialization as the key factor in shaping gender. She is adamantly opposed to essentialist notions of gender and the forms of feminism advocating that belief. The goal of feminism, for Gina, is economic equality for women as a route to emotional independence. She acknowledges economic equality is not the sole route to emotional independence, but indicates that women’s economic realities are a significant influence on their decisions to be in or out of a relationship. She emphasizes that
this is especially true for women who have children.

According to Gina, women are not socialized with a healthy sense of autonomy and often view and value themselves in relation to a man. As an example, Gina describes a book that she edited and that caused her to think about the way some girls are raised. The book is about adolescent girls who have fallen prey to violence. The girls in the study are largely from blue-collar families where both parents work and where there is a distinct gender imbalance in the parental relationship. Gina reports that in the families of the research participants, “the father always dominates by dint of fear or being louder or being physically abusive. The mother always, even if she fights back physically or verbally, always submits to father’s will.”

Gina concludes that a truly feminist society would not produce fourteen-year-old girls who are engaging in the kind of behaviour and have the kind of value systems that the girls in this study have. She explains that one of the girls in the study plays with Barbie dolls, how most of the music they like is misogynist. She explains:

[T]he number one female role model that they selected, all of them independently selected Madonna because they perceived her as being strong and powerful without seeing at all the kind of image that she projects as fundamentally that of sex object and all of them had as their highest goal and aspiration not anything that related to education or careers, but they all see themselves in traditional marriages with children.

Rose’s relationship with feminism over time, was not evident in her interview,¹ but currently in her life feminism is connected to notions of choice, feminist consciousness and beliefs, and a certain political view of the world that she defines as “a feeling that people should be equal and not structured in a hierarchical way according to race, class, gender, etc.” The actual lived advantages of feminism in her life stem from what appears to be a liberal individualistic notion of equality, but her understanding of oppression and the intertwining nature of systems of domination paint a picture of a broader framework.
The women interviewed for this thesis all connect their feminism to the way they live their everyday lives. These descriptions reflect their individual subjectivities and mirror their understandings of feminism. Rose and Ellen, for example, both report that their feminism is played out in their daily lives in the way they do their work, the values they bring to their everyday activities, and their understanding of oppression and power. Rose has worked largely with women in social service projects that affect women's lives. Living in Britain, however, and in her current workplace, she finds that she has to make compromises and is not as vocal or active as she was able to be while in Canada in a graduate student environment. Ellen works with people who are dying and says that her feminist values dictate that she live in a thoughtful way. “I work with people who are dying, so it’s a very vulnerable time. I have to be very conscious of that vulnerability, what that vulnerability means, the power imbalances.”

Gina expresses that her feminism is evident in every aspect of her life. It has lead to her unwillingness to “navigate a relationship with a man” because she has not found men she has associated with to have a perception of roles and values that is similar to hers. This has extended into every area of her life.

So my decision as a feminist is to live my life as free of males and that whole patriarchal structure. And part of that is not being in the corporate world for example, so that extends to my business life and my economic life also. I’ve tried to separate myself from patriarchy as much as possible. I suppose that’s a reflection of my deciding that there’s very little that I can do to change the structure but I can certainly opt out of it. And I guess that’s probably the theme of my life in that I’m currently opting out of more things than I’m participating in, in a very conscious way.

For Karen, feminism is a daily, ongoing process of social justice and social change in all of the oppressive structures in society. Karen indicates that she does not imagine that in her lifetime the world will be fair and equitable for everyone. She prefers to think about it on a micro level and has been excited by the tremendous gains that occur in community contexts all over the world. She provides the example of her own participation in the Dyke
March in Toronto this year and expresses how that particular march is an example of how shifts can occur at a community level.

As evidenced in their comments about feminism and how their feminism affects their lives, the women in this study exemplify a variety of understandings and approaches to feminism. All of the participants, except Karen, rely on the liberal language of “choice,” “freedom,” and “equality” in relation to feminism. Ellen’s, Gina’s and Khirsten’s definitions of feminism, and understanding of it in their daily lives, are predominately an individualistic one that focuses on resisting gender oppression as a primary route to equality. Additionally, for Ellen, an aspect of gender oppression includes her sexual orientation, and Karen’s understanding of feminism has incorporated a fairly profound understanding of the systems of domination that cooperate to maintain and benefit from gender oppression.

The influence of liberal individualism embedded in heterosexual, middle-class, white feminism is also apparent in the participants’ narratives of how feminism influenced their intentional childlessness. All of the women in this study indicate that there is a connection between feminism and their intentional childlessness. Rose, for example, believes that women who do not have children are considered less controllable. She explains:

I definitely see it as there are issues of control there. I mean it is a very, very complex thing for me and for everybody.... I can walk out on my husband any time I want to and there’s nobody I have to think about except him and me. But obviously once you have children that becomes a whole different thing... you’ve got to believe in the whole patriarchal thing in order for any of this to make sense but, that men exist, that men are able to dominate women through relationships, heterosexual relationships and through economic things and especially when that’s related to children. So yeah, I see dependency and control as issues.

Consequently, Rose specifies that there is a definite link between her feminism and her intentional childlessness and says:
it all hinges around the ability to choose, the idea that I would not use my body, or myself as a chattel, the idea of patriarchal family, property, being used simply as a breeder or allowing myself to be used as a kind of implement for breeding.

Gina contends that her tubal ligation in 1974, her commitment to intentional childlessness, was a direct outcome of her connection to the women’s movement. Gina explains that 1972, and her university days in Winnipeg, were a “hotbed of feminism” where “sisterhood was truly powerful.” She details that she was strongly connected to a group of women who spent their times together “reassessing everything that had happened to us in our lives, in light of what we now knew about patriarchy.” This was a time Gina describes as being a very optimistic one in which she and her women friends believed they could “change a lot very, very quickly.” “So I think I sorted out my own stuff as a woman,” she explains, “who felt in her bones that she would certainly never have children and would probably never marry.”

Although feminism and her feminist circle provided the context within which Gina realized her intentional childlessness, not all of these women approved of Gina’s tubal ligation. One of the women expressed to Gina that although it was Gina’s body to do with as Gina pleased, she was still appalled at Gina’s choice to permanently close off her reproductive options. Gina summarizes:

So there you have it, an early 70’s feminist group, people who liked and respected one another, who had rather a wide spectrum of attitudes. That wasn’t strange. There were many heated debates about what was the true nature of feminism. But I was certainly one of those who felt that being married and having children was going to compromise my view of the way I wanted to live my life.

Gina has often been disappointed by women whom she regards as recidivists; women who consider themselves feminists yet who, in her calculation, chose a very traditional lifestyle. In her mind, “feminism was always inseparable from freedom from biological necessity.”
It seemed to me that one of the great things that we were fighting for was that biology was not destiny. That you were not a walking womb [laughs again]. Intellectually I can appreciate women who say well you know, I’ve organized my life and I have this wonderful life and now I’m going to have children and in my gut I can’t understand how they can sell out like that because it eats up so much of your life in terms of hours in the course of the day. So for me feminism was always childlessness.

Karen clarifies that for her, the connection of her feminism to her intentional childlessness, is that her feminism offers her “perhaps justification, perhaps an analysis of the position that I’m in, this childless position. That I can say well, there are multiple ways women live their lives.” She continues:

I think there is a way that for some particular women there are expectations of living with men in married relationships and living with children. So, partly, I’m talking about hetero-normativity which is clearly everywhere, but also within that hetero-normativity I think that a piece of it is ... that part of a definition of women-is-mother. That’s a piece of it, so I think that what feminism offers me is a way to kind of name it in kind of those theoretical terms—in terms of having an option to locate yourself differently. To name it, an option to, it gives me a body of theory that I can apply to my context. It gives me a way to say, OK, me being childless is not just ... it’s not operating in some kind of vacuum. It’s operating within particular social relations and conditions and then, and so I can think about that in terms of applying it, applying feminist theory so that makes me say well, I’m doing this within a world that is determined by heterosexism, I’m doing this within a world that is determined by racism. So what does it mean for me to be childless in light of heterosexism, racism, classism, what is that about? That’s for me the link of feminism to my position.

Khirsten thinks that she probably associated childlessness with freedom at a very early age. She does not believe that feminism, in any way, set the stage for her intentional childlessness. She does, however, indicate that feminism, via its promotion of body autonomy, did support her decision not to have a child and not to feel criticized by society because of her choice.

When Ellen came out as a lesbian, very few lesbians had children, except for those who had come from heterosexual partnerships. So her identity as a lesbian feminist always included not having children. “I guess I thought it was something lesbians didn’t do, and I was quite happy about that.”
For the white, professional, intentionally childless women in this study, the second wave of feminism in North America and Britain provided the context for their understanding of, and experience with, gender oppression. It was through the predominately liberal ideology which hooks (1984) refers to as bourgeois, that they initially encountered feminism. Although some of the participants have had shifting relationships with feminism over time, their descriptions of their intentional childlessness reflect the discourse of liberalism that has predominated heterosexual, white Western feminism. It would seem that it is from this framework of freedom and autonomy that feminism influenced their intentional childlessness. When gender equality is the primary mode of oppression experienced by a woman, it is understandable that achieving gender equality would become a prime objective. Intentional childlessness is one tactic that white, professional women can employ to advance their goals for gender equality. The subjectivities of the research participants locates them within sufficient privilege to access the services and supports required to maintain their desire to be childless. So at this point in the analysis we begin to see the unfolding of white feminists’ intentional childlessness as being an act supported by privilege and a tactic to resist gender oppression.

**Intentional Childlessness as Rejection of Gender Regulation**

Participants in this study had perceptions and experiences about the expectations of women and mothers in society. In the second interview I asked each participant their views on the roles women in their lives were expected to fulfil and if they perceived their childlessness was a rejection of this role. Each woman had perceptions of the way in which women are regulated in society based on their individual locations. Motherhood was an aspect of the regulation that they identified. The narratives reflect a definitive rejection of what they each perceived, from their own personal experiences, as gender regulation. They each described experiences in their own lives, their impressions of their mothers’ lives, and their impressions of the lives of other women they knew, as factors that shaped their
understandings of the costs involved for them if they were to become mothers. As Rich (1976) states, “women’s choices—when she has any—are made, or outlawed, within the context of laws and professional codes, religious sanctions and ethnic traditions, from whose creation women have been historically excluded” (p. 128).

Rose explains that her intentional childlessness is a rejection of what she perceives to be the load of the traditional woman and adamantly states that “resistance to regulation” and resistance to “being a woman in a woman-hating society” provide about ninety per cent of her motivation for not having children. She considers that her intentional childlessness has a lot to do with the very negative ideas about motherhood and childhood that she has from her own growing up. Karen perceives motherhood as a way that women can “be positioned and neatly understood” and considers that motherhood is both valorized and denigrated in society, while Khristen explains that she rejected what she calls the “girls’ world” from a very early age.

Ellen clarifies that her intentional childlessness is based on what she did not want in life and that she was not rejecting her gender, but the regulation of her gender and the norm around family. She declares:

[I was] rejecting the whole fucking thing...the little families, the little nuclear families. I never saw myself in a nuclear family...It was the norm around a life style I did not want and I knew early that if I would ever marry, have children or live in Scarborough, that I would have committed suicide.

The following comments from Gina not only provide a poignant example of rejecting gender regulation, but clearly illustrate the link between her feminism, her perceptions of gender regulation, and her intentional childlessness:

It was very evident to me in the late ‘60s and early ‘70s, when I was doing most of my early reading in the area of feminism, talking with other women .... that the choices that my mother’s generation made were the choices that accounted for the limitations in their lives later on.
The perceptions and images of gender regulation that influenced their intentional childlessness, as described by the women in this study, involved images of women in struggle, who had lack of control, lack of power, lack of freedom, lack of personal fulfilment. Participants experienced gender in a particular way because of other aspects of their particular subjectivities. Their gender experiences were interwoven with both their class realities, their sexual orientation realities, and the reality of their white-skinned privilege.

Khirsten, for example, states that we live in a misogynist society in which women are invisible. She explains how her culture has shaped her understanding of the role of women:

Culturally, the Jewish tradition is one that values men over women. Culturally, women play a secondary role. Now, probably, Jewish women would really argue with me about that so it's my perspective ... what I saw was children being valued especially boy children being valued, and women as being valued as support systems. So the traditional learning in my, in my cultural tradition, does have to do with being the childless woman.

Her memory is that of her mother giving up her own life and dreams for her family. Consequently when Khirsten was growing she had the impression that pregnant women were not seekers. From her perspective this meant that motherhood prevented women from exploring their intellectual or spiritual potential. Her understanding of the costs women incur from motherhood continues to be informed by recent events. She has watched women in her life, women she defines as “professional women in professional marriages,” raise children in a model in which they are isolated with little or no social support and heavily discriminated against in our society. Khirsten sees that women with children experience intolerance in many social settings and that it is hard for women to be mothers. She would prefer a society that would support the bringing up of children more, so that it did not exact such a toll on women.
Gina recollects that in the community that she grew up in, the women, including her mother, were very down-trodden, subservient to domineering husbands with “very few material or social advantages.” She saw her mother as “miserably unhappy” in her marriage. Gina perceives that women who have children make a tremendous sacrifice in their own lives. She has seen many of her friends who became mothers later in life and who “had significant lives to set aside,” give everything up for their families.

Rose sees motherhood as a way of women being controlled. She obtained what she describes as a very realistic notion of motherhood when she was 17 or 18 years old and spent a few years as a nanny. She says, “doing that kind of work and then seeing the thanklessness of it and the hard work and the twenty-four-hour-a-day type of responsibility, I think it probably impacted on me.” Rose tells the story of her neighbour who was pregnant at the time of the second interview. She describes her as thirty-something, very successful, career women. Rose says, “I think she’s got quite a tough road ahead of her, in terms of being thrown onto her own resources, being at home.”

Ellen’s view of the load of the traditional woman in North America is evident in her awe of women who have children and can both work and look after their children. She views them as being constantly exhausted. Part of her understanding about the plight of mothers is that this society is anti-children:

Children are not welcomed into most situations. I mean, I’m appalled and disgusted at the way that women get what, six months off work to have a kid or something like that and then have to immediately go back to work. I mean, why places don’t have daycare where mothers could go and nurse their kids and see their kids

Ellen’s culture of origin which she describes as “working-class, Irish, French Catholic” has definitely influenced her intentional childlessness, she says:

I was definitely brought up to view motherhood as the end all and be all to everything. That was certainly women’s role, that was certainly what you got: that was certainly what my family gave you credit for. It was babies. I always remember babies. If somebody had a baby they were doing OK... but after two or three years old it was no more a baby, now let’s ship them
off to the orphanage. It was almost that kind of an attitude, but that whole thing of the babies and my mother’s family was all young when they first had their kids, like 19, so they started all their families, like very young. So to have children was a big part of how they expressed themselves.

Another aspect of the narratives that illustrate the images participants have of the role of women, and in particular mothers, is their descriptions of what they think their lives might have been like if they had children. Gina, for example, imagines that if she had children every aspect of her daily life would have been affected, and in particular that she’d be racked with guilt over having been an awful and resentful mother.

Rose also imagines that if she had children her life would be very different. She envisions that she would not have gone to university, that her life would not have been as easy as it has been and that she would not have had the same amount of freedom she has had. She says, “I’d be terribly poor, and terribly sort of downtrodden, probably wouldn’t have gone to university, I guess…. I think my life would have been very different, very difficult.” Finally, Rose indicates that even if she had children, she would not be able to cope with being a stay-at-home mom—she would have to have daycare for her children.

Khirsten imagines that she might be like her friends if she had children and attempt to parent and have a career, wanting to contribute one hundred per-cent to both activities. She imagines that if she had kids, she would simply be working twice as many hours and be middle-class, because she would have wanted to perpetuate those values in her children. In other words, Khirsten’s current, self-described economic class of “poverty-by-choice” is possible because she is alone. She would not want to impose that lifestyle on children. Consequently if she had children she would want to provide them with a middle-class lifestyle, and would therefore have created such a lifestyle for herself and them.

Ellen imagines that if she had children, she’d have more struggles in her life and did not even want to imagine what her life would be like. “I think it would have impacted everything…. I can’t even go there.”
The views of motherhood as a serious obstacle to women's liberation that unfold in these narratives reflect the race and class and, with the position of the participants, support the value of examining intentional childlessness from within very specific contexts and subjectivities. Hooks (1984) asserts that Black women for example would have named problems such as racism, availability of jobs, or lack of education—not motherhood—as serious obstacles to freedom. She also clarifies:

While there are white women activists who may experience family primarily as an oppressive institution (it may be the social structure wherein they have experienced grave abuse and exploitation) many black women find the family the least oppressive institution. Despite sexism in the context of the family, we may experience dignity, self-worth and a humanization that is not experienced in the outside world wherein we confront all forms of oppression. (p. 37)

Although the lens differs slightly for each of the women interviewed, an awareness of gender oppression in their environments was evident early in their lives. They were aware that, as women, there were particular expectations of them. Motherhood was one of the expectations. Their perceptions of what was expected of women and mothers played a role in their intentional childlessness. The narratives reflect an apparent lack of or very limited experience of either heterosexual or same-sex couples who successfully share parenting and housework responsibilities. They understand their intentional childlessness as a rejection of gender regulation as they experienced or observed it. At the same time, the profiles emerging from their narratives of rejection are framed within a discourse of liberal individualism. So on the one hand, they are reacting against a system that they feel oppressed by; on the other hand, the outcome of their response to their gender oppression places them within a framework of personal autonomy and freedom that seemingly makes them complicit with the very system they are rejecting. Razack (1992) explains that when we dispense with a framework of choice and freedom [I would add universality], and begin to perceive “power as a net organizing how individuals are constituted in any one context” (p. 10) then we can begin to see oppression as “a story of ‘struggle’ and ‘submission’
[Foucault, 1980: 92], of how what is present is made possible by what is absent” (p. 10). In this framework, intentional childlessness for white, professional and/or middle-class women becomes a tactic for struggle. The struggle occurring within the context of freedom and autonomy becomes an aspect of submission. So the picture becomes one of both disruption and accommodation.

**Disruption and Accommodation**

In order to understand the paradox of disruption and accommodation, participants were asked to reflect on the profile of individualism and freedom that emerged from the first set of interviews, and if they thought the profile contradicted feminist notions of community or their beliefs in social change. In order to determine if they understood their rejection of gender regulation as socially relevant, I wanted to know if they thought their intentional childlessness made a difference to anyone else in the world besides themselves and if, within the liberal individualistic profile that emerged, they thought their existence as intentionally childless women contributed to social change.

Gina perceived no tension between the individualistic profile that emerged in the initial analysis and her feminism. She resists the liberal individualistic label because, to her, liberal individualism means that the individual transcends all other currents. To illustrate this, she explains that her ability to freelance as an editor is an example of the autonomy in her life. Within this option she acknowledges that there are factors, such as the economy and the social climate, that exist due to a particular government, that she cannot control in her life. She explains:

So when I say autonomy it doesn’t mean that I am the master of my ship and the author of my own fate [laughing]. I really see the social and economic and political currents that make it difficult for people to be autonomous. But for me the kernel of being autonomous is understanding those factors to the best of my ability and make choices according to my knowledge of myself.
Gina describes the path to her intentional childlessness as not being fuelled by the desire for economic success but rather more about putting her emotional life first. She says:

For me autonomy is a clear understanding, or as much as that is possible, an understanding of the causes and conditions of our behaviour and the recognition that we are “free” to change things. Not that change is something that you walk into one day with a mind of determination and walk out the other end the next day. But understanding that nothing is graven in stone, that we can take responsibility for all the choices we make. We may often make difficult choices or compromised choices but that there’s always a sense that we’re the only ones that we can fall back on to make those decisions well. So that pertains to every area of life, whether that’s to get into a romantic relationship, to have children, what kind of career to choose and how much time to devote to it.

Karen indicates that a lot of feminism has been embedded in liberal individualism. She was disturbed by the liberal individualism she saw reflected in her first interview. She says that the words “choice,” “autonomy,” and “freedom” come from the discourse of liberal individualism and maintains that her “choice,” “autonomy,” and “freedom” are available to her at the cost of the lack of the same for some other people. She says, “they don’t operate separately. So the entitlements that I can have in my life are at the cost of others who don’t have those entitlements.” She says that there is a conflict for her between that “self-focused movement” and the socialist frame of community and working for others that she grew up with in her home.

Khirsten acknowledges her individualism and believes that, as a woman, she has survived by ignoring the parts of the system that were not open to her. She explains that the system is based on the freedom that men have and that, consequently, any woman entering the system is playing by men’s rules. Her freedom means that all the decisions she makes she makes for one person, “So I have freedom in every sense; that I can allocate my money the way I want, allocate my time the way I want, and make whatever commitments I want on behalf of one person.”

For Ellen freedom is about being able to make choices about work, how she spends her money, where she goes on holidays, etc.; being able to make choices that allow her to
be a balanced individual. She says that she is an individualist who likes to make contributions to society. Regarding any perceived tension between her individualistic life and feminism, Ellen says:

Well, it's like what are the alternatives, you know? When I see my lesbian friends who have children, they're in coupled relationships with one or two children. They're to me, ... they haven't redefined, they've just recreated a heterosexual relationship. Well, since that is never a relationship I would have chosen as a heterosexual woman or as a lesbian woman, I find myself pulled.

Rose does see a tension between feminism, what it stands for in terms of social transformation, and the kind of autonomy that is lived out in the lives of intentionally childless women. She indicates, however, that freedom is very important to her. She does not feel bound by her relationship; she has financial freedom, she has no debts, and she does not have to stay in any work situation if it becomes too difficult or oppressive. Her husband, for example, was having a difficult time at work during the time that we conducted the second interview. She felt good about him being able to leave the situation if things got really bad, because she knows they can manage financially. She says:

individuality and freedom mean the ability to make up your own mind and not necessarily just go with the flow and the freedom to make choices ... but of course the choices we make are invariably conditioned by our circumstances, and you can't really separate those, I don't think.

The participants all acknowledge that their rejection of motherhood as an aspect of gender regulation has provided them with freedom and autonomy. Rose and Karen view this freedom in a broader context that incorporates their subjectivities and acknowledges that their autonomy may be at the cost of others not having autonomy and freedom. Gina resists the notion of liberal individualism because, she maintains, that her "choices" and autonomy exist within a broader context over which she has no control. Khirsten explains her individualism and freedom by acknowledging that she has played by "men's rules."

Finally, Ellen (along with Gina and Khirsten) explains that it is from her individualism that she is able to make contributions to society at large. Her individualistic life is a result of
feeling that she is doing the best she can within the options that are available to her. In other words, she is not aware of any alternative lifestyle options available to her.

The participants all consider that, as women who have rejected motherhood as an aspect of gender regulation, they are to some degree contributing to social change. Karen, for example, thinks that her existence as an intentionally childless woman offers "possibilities and advantages," but only for a very select few. Her unique relationship, and her childless status, offer an example of a way of living in relationships that we do not hear a lot about. Karen says:

And it might be interesting to folks who are thinking about issues around children or not children who have perhaps ... you know perhaps white, middle-class women, you know some of the things that we've been talking about, women who are thinking about, well children or not children in the same way, or monogamy or living together or not living together, so they're ... working that out, what that means to them, then they might think well here's somebody for whom it has been possible and how has it been possible for her and how has she lived it?

Ellen has lived for 16 years in a co-op and feels that her presence has been an example for the children in the co-op. She tells the story:

Well, this one kid told me the other day, we were out doing a general clean-up and she was yelling at some kids because they were on the trees. I looked at her and she said "you used to do that" and I said, "I used to do what?" She said, "oh, you used to yell at us all the time" and I said, "what did I say?" She said, "well one time we were jumping on this tree and we were breaking it and you came out and you asked us if we knew that the tree was alive, and we didn't know and ever since you said that now I know that tree is alive, and when I see kids jumping on it I go tell them."

Ellen also sees herself as an example for the children because they see her contribute. She states:

[They] see that I'm not always with somebody else, that I'm alone, that you know I'm at meetings, that I know how to talk, that I know how to talk to them, that I know how to talk to their fathers, their mothers, you know. So I just think as woman, as woman alone, woman who has my own identity.

Participants feel that they make a number of other significant contributions that contribute to social change. Gina says, "I think I have a very strong influence on a very
small corner of the world.” She specifies that she has always brought her feminist ideals to her workplace. As an example, she explains that in her editorial work she would not make a judgement that would go against her feminism. She describes a colleague who is very sensitive about anything being perceived of as “feminine” because she thinks that is negative. In one situation, the colleague rejected on this basis, particular colours being suggested for the cover of a manuscript. Gina called her colleague to task for what she perceived to be misogyny.

Gina also explains that, even though she is a freelance editor, she does not work in isolation because she is always working with a team that might include an author, a publisher, a designer, a printer and others. She uses a relational approach with any team she is working with, and goes out of her way to give work to women. Gina declares:

Working well together, to me, doesn’t simply mean meeting the budget and the schedule. It means that the team functions fairly, efficiently, humanely, that there’s give and take, that personal priorities and personal crisis are respected and that deadlines are met so that people take up the slack for one another. I am a fierce champion that those who work for me be paid well.

Another contribution she makes is her volunteer work with AIDS. Gina indicates that she has a clear conscience in her working life. Being able to make a difference at this level helps her “to live with the frustration of not being able to do anything on a larger scale.” Gina sees connection to community as very important, but for her there is also a question of boundaries in community. She asks:

Community at what expense? Does that mean that I buy a house with six friends and then we proceed to drive each other crazy? How are the ways that I can be a good citizen? Where are the areas that my skills and the amount of time that I have available, my personal inclination, where are the areas that I can participate in community building without violating my own sense of autonomy or doing detriment to myself financially or otherwise?

As a result of her feminist values, Karen indicates:

[I am] involved in … what I would call political and community activities that could be called feminist activities and thinking about particular advantages women have in the world and particular kinds of disadvantages based upon how they’re located, located differently in the world in terms of
oppression and privileges.

Khirsten describes that, in her therapy practice, she works with men and women to recognize the devaluing of feminine qualities and to balance the masculine and feminine aspects of their personalities. In the last few years particularly, Khirsten has made a move towards more community and more commitment. She is actively participating in a spiritual community and a couple of boards of directors that are relevant to her life. Khirsten sees her life as one of service, afforded to her due to her childlessness. She specifies:

So I feel in a way like a nun. You know, I guess in the sense that I’m available to do work you know in a broader sense. Not in a particular family, not in my particular family. So I’m not interested, home life is not of value for me...the world is more of value for me.

The women in this study recognize that on one hand they do live autonomous lives. They indicate, however, that their personal values include contributing to social change in a variety of ways. Their intentional childlessness as a rejection of gender regulation is contributing to an aspect of social change, even if in a small sphere.

The Costs of Intentional Childlessness

In the second interviews, I asked the women I interviewed to once again discuss the costs associated with being a woman who does not have children in a pronatalist society. The participants reiterated some of the issues that they discussed in the original interviews. They reiterated the impact their intentional childlessness has on their relationships with women, the stereotypes and stigma of being a woman without children, and the fears they had about aging and poverty.

The second set of interviews uncovered some new insights about the costs of intentional childlessness for the women in this study. These new costs include a sense of not “having a place” as a woman, not having credibility as a woman, parental disappointment, and the requirement to justify one’s life.
The participants articulated the disappointment, or at least lack of appreciation, from their parents in relation to their intentional childlessness. Ellen and Rose both expressed their parents’ disappointment about not being able to have their desire to grandparent fulfilled. For Gina, “My parents are puzzled by my lifestyle. I think they would prefer to see me, they have said, that they sort of expected that I would somewhere along the line marry and settle down.”

Ellen articulates that motherhood provides women with a place in society. She says:

I think privilege comes from having children because then you have a place ... I mean if you do anything of the traditional things that society allows then you’re given all the credit for that, so I would say that, that’s the privilege. To not have children is not a privilege. To not have children is to be on your own and society does not like “on your own” ... But what I’m saying is the dichotomy is this society also does not support women who choose not to have children and I think when push comes to shove, society gives the credit to the woman who has chosen the traditional routes. The society does not give any credit to people who have chosen differently.”

Ellen continues by explaining that only the proscribed traditional life events are paid attention to. She explains the impact of this on her life:

There’s just this whole path that I chose not to go on and that’s marriage, graduation actually. I wouldn’t do that, marriage, children, divorce, all of those. I chose not to go on those routes. And those are the routes that you get most of your attention. So I don’t feel as ... if I get a hell of a lot of attention ... you’re invalidated.

Rose expresses a similar concern. “Somehow as a middle-aged woman without a child, it’s somehow more difficult to somehow sort of create, maintain, believe in an identity because somehow part of the identity of a middle-aged woman is as a mother.”

This “place” or role in society provides gender credibility to a woman. A sense of fitting into their gender. Rose explains:

The kinds of criticisms that one feels are so subtle. They’re, it’s more that you are not allowed into a club, but I think fairly definitely a club that I wouldn’t really want to join, I’m not interested in joining.

Karen echoes this experience but clarifies that the critique is more focused on women not having the desire to have children than from simply being childless. She says
the criticism comes from all sectors of society, even "feminists of all stripes," and that the presumption is that lack of desire is an indication of not being a "natural" woman.

Being an intentionally childless woman requires justification in most societies. Consequently the intentionally childless women in this study expressed that they were constantly being required to justify their lives. Rose, for example, says:

I felt in many ways a very masculine woman in my sort of, a lot of my thinking ... I'm quite aggressive sometimes, I don't see myself as being very nurturing, though I think I am. Yeah, I don't know and how much that has to do with I am childless because I'm like that or I think of myself as being like that because I'm childless. I don't know which come first, the chicken or the egg.

Karen says she experiences pressure to justify it, "both externally, and to understand it internally." Karen also describes the requirement for justification:

Yeah, I have had to defend it within and I've had to defend it without. So I've had to defend it to other women who are if not overtly critical are clearly, critical or dismissive and women who you would think of as being very political. But then that doesn't surprise me because for all of us we may have all kinds of ... we may have done all kinds of work in developing say gender analysis for example and yet still be very imbedded in our racist attitudes and practice or somebody who has done all kinds of anti-racist work but is embedded in heterosexism. So working in one thing doesn't necessarily give you access to a sense of justice in another area. So a woman can, I could be talking to a woman who's a strong anti-racist, heterosexist feminist for example and she could be like, you know kind of puzzled in a dismissive way that I am not interested in having children or haven't had children, so yeah, it can happen in those contexts and clearly it can happen in family contexts ... where you would, where the kind of 'conservatism' would be more expected."

The penalties experienced as a result of the intentional childlessness of the women in this study would not fall into a category of oppression. Hooks (1984, p. 5) states, "Being oppressed means the absence of choices. It is the primary point of contact between the oppressed and the oppressor. The women in this society clearly do have choices (as inadequate as they are)." The women in this study clearly have acted out of their individual subjectivities to develop and maintain a practice of intentional childlessness. The penalties are related more to social stigma and social pressure, in response to their tactic of
childlessness, as a way of circumventing one aspect of white women’s gender regulation, compulsory motherhood.

**Conclusion**

The white, intentionally childless women interviewed in this study, with few exceptions, have described their relationships to feminism, and their understandings of their intentional childlessness, within the discourse of the white, Western, liberal feminism. Although the participants exist within a range of class and sexual identity locations, their privilege as white women in the Western world exists as an aspect of the colonial domination from which western culture emerged. Rejecting motherhood as an aspect of gender regulation is at least partially made possible as a result of this same privilege. The autonomous, individualistic, lived realities of the participants that result from their intentional childlessness reflect the philosophy of liberal individualism, on which the very gender oppression (as well as capitalism, racism, heterosexism, and ableism) from which they are escaping, depends. Their lived realities, therefore, constitute a complicit relationship with oppressive structures that make similar possibilities unavailable to women of other subjectivities.

Madonell (cited in Alarcón, 1990) says, “complicity arises where through lack of a positive starting point either a practice is driven to make use of prevailing values or a critique becomes the basis for a new theory” (p. 360). For white, professional and/or middle-class women, the starting point is gender oppression, lack of equality with white men. The practice, or in this case tactic, of intentional childlessness as resistance to the prescribed gender role of mother, makes use of the prevailing ideas of liberalism. This comprises complicity. Within this complicity, however, white, intentionally childless women still face social censure as childless women.

In summary, for the white, intentionally childless women in this study, the social practice of intentional childlessness contains aspects of both disruption of gender regulation
and complicity with dominant structures. The women sought to resist a prescribed gender role through childlessness. Their life experiences, and the observations of the life experiences of other women, led them to understand that in order to avoid being oppressed as women, they would have to avoid the penalties that come with childbearing and child rearing. The women articulate this decision as a form of resistance. At the same time, they pursue a life of autonomy and freedom that has been critiqued by some feminists as reflective of the masculine ideal of patriarchy and dominance. Some of the women are aware of this contradiction and broaden the meaning of their intentional childlessness to incorporate an aspect of social change.
Notes

1. Rose's second interview took place across the Atlantic. She sent me a taped response to my questions and then we had one quick telephone conversation. Consequently I was not able to follow up on particular issues the way I did in the interviews with the other women.
Chapter Five

White, Intentionally Childless Women and Stratified Reproduction

Introduction

I began Chapter One by stating that the two key objectives of this thesis were: to locate the meaning of intentional childlessness for white, European-American, professional and/or middle-class women within the stratified system of reproduction, and to demonstrate the critical role subjectivity plays in the production of knowledge. I began my task by establishing that women exist within a context of pronatalism and compulsory motherhood that defines women (both women who have children and women who do not have children) through motherhood. The dominant feminist discourse of North America has predominantly reflected the experiences of heterosexual, middle-class, white women. Their experiences, and the resulting theoretical frameworks and political activities, have been projected into a universal notion of women. In other words, the experiences of the dominant group of women were assumed to be the experiences of all women.

Throughout the thesis, I have cautioned against this notion of an essential[1] woman and argued that it is crucial to consider women, motherhood, and intentional childlessness within their historical, geographical, political and social specificities. I demonstrated this first by providing an example of how subjectivity becomes flattened when the particularities of the participants and/or the researcher are left unnamed and unanalyzed. Flattening subjectivity in this way essentializes the subject, reproduces hegemony and consequently does not acknowledge the ways in which systems of domination interconnect. Trinh (1990) articulates the dangers in flattening subjectivity:

Hegemony works at levelling out differences and at standardizing contexts and expectations in the smallest details of our daily lives ... [i]t all depends on the context in which an act is carried out or more precisely, on how and where women see dominance. Difference should neither be defined by the dominant sex nor by the dominant culture. So that when woman decide to lift the veil one can say that they do so in defiance of their men’s oppressive
right to their bodies. But when they decide to keep or put on the veil they once took off they might do so to reappropriate their space or to claim a difference in defiance of genderless, hegemonic, centred standardization. (p. 372)

Secondly, I demonstrated what it means to have a subjectivity through the analysis of the narratives of white, intentionally childless feminists. I illustrated how their subjectivity, in particular their race privilege and their place in the global economy, positions them in relation to motherhood. The narratives of women of a different subjectivity would result in a different positioning.

In this chapter, I will conclude with a discussion of how stratified reproduction is a tool to consider and unpack subjectivity, and in the case of the narratives of white, intentionally childless women, whiteness. I will outline the concept of stratified reproduction and draw on the narratives of the participants to locate the experiences and perceptions of white, intentionally childless women within this concept. I argue that the women in this study are located very specifically. It is by examining each woman’s specific subject position in all of it's complexity that we are able to see how she can be simultaneously positioned as oppressor and oppressed. In this particular study, however, I am not claiming to have interrogated each woman’s subjectivity thoroughly. In Chapter Two I outlined the flaws in the research by pointing out the lack of homogeneity of the sexual identities of the research participants. This lack of homogeneity meant that I was not able to explore how this group of women negotiated their sexual identity in relation to their childlessness.

Within the complicated frame of subjectivity, women exercise agency and employ specific strategies, in response to domination. In this regard I provide class as an example, because, it surfaces in these interviews as a notable example of how subjectivity is lived. It provides one final opportunity to explore how women are multiply located in several systems. This chapter details how, in the process of exercising reproductive choice,
privileged women enter into a complicated relationship of accommodation and resistance that both privileges and penalizes them.

**White Women, Subjectivity and Intentional Childlessness**

Stratified reproduction refers to the power relations by which some categories of people are empowered to nurture and reproduce, while others are disempowered (Colen, 1995). In all contexts, women are positioned differently in relationship to motherhood. Ginsburg and Rapp (1995), for example, ask, “who is normatively entitled to refuse childbearing, to be a parent, to be a caretaker, to have other caretakers for their children, to give nurture or to give culture (or both)?” (p. 3). Asking these questions is essential in order to understand how groups of women are located differently around reproductive issues. They are also essential in order to understand how an individual woman can be located differently in relation to different issues based on particular aspects of her subjectivity. Walkerdine (1990) indicates that “an individual can become powerful or powerless depending on the terms in which his/her subjectivity is constituted” (p. 5).

Spelman (1988) offers a helpful approach to working with the differential locations of women’s subjectivities. She explains that the criterion we use to determine similarities and differences between specific groups of women is crucial to understanding how factors, other than gender, have an impact on women’s lived realities and to determining how much economic and political power particular groups of women have in particular contexts. She indicates that one criterion is simply to ask if women have economic and political power equal to that of the most powerful men. She suggests, however, that a more useful criteria is to “investigate the degree to which and ways in which different groups of women have access to such power, even if on borrowed terms” (p. 141). To illustrate her point she uses the historical example of the wives of white slave-owners in the United States. The wives were a different race and class and had more privileges than the Black women who were their slaves. She says:
If my working criterion is the kind of power women lack rather than the degree of power they have, then I have to say that the wives did not have the economic and political power their husbands did, and hence, that there is no significant difference between them and the Black slave women. But by the second criterion, I do not discount the power women have (however derivative it might be) while neither the white wife nor the Black female slave had the power the white male slave-owner did, this did not mean they were subject to the same abuses of his power, it did not mean that the women were equally powerless in relation to each other. (p. 141)

Spelman gives a more recent illustration of using her suggested criteria. She indicates what is left out of the analysis when we assume that upper-class, married, white women in the United States are as subject to the whims of their husbands’ desire to abuse them, as poor married, white women are. What is left out is the power that upper-class white men and women have over poor white men and women. Spelman’s criteria, as an approach to differences in subjectivity help us to not only recognize the differences, but to locate ourselves within the system of interlocking oppressions and recognize our own contradictory positioning within the interlocking systems of domination.

Collins (1990) provides a context to these relations by describing the different historical relationships white women and Black women have had with white men. Black women have historically been rejected, exploited, and objectified by white men. “Because white male power is largely predicated on Black female subordination, few delusions of sharing that power and enjoying the privileges attached to white male power have existed among Black women” (p. 189). White women, on the other hand, have been offered a share of white male power. The price they pay for this power sharing is subordination. The benefits of power sharing often blind white women to their complicity in other forms of oppression. Although Collins does not specify sexual identity in her example, it is necessary to state that this example only holds true for heterosexual white women.

Stratified reproduction takes place within historical contexts, locates women in the contradictory positionings of privilege and penalty, and requires women to exercise agency in an effort to maintain control over their reproduction desires, or lack thereof. Glenn’s
(1994) discussion of mothering is a good example of how this occurs. She says:

Mothering occurs within specific social contexts that vary in terms of material and cultural resources and constraints. How mothering is conceived, organized and carried out is not simply determined by these conditions, however. Mothering is constructed through men's and women's actions within specific historical circumstances. Thus agency is central to an understanding of mothering as a social, rather than biological, construct. (p. 3)

Glenn argues that mothering is not just gendered, but also racialized, and provides evidence of one way in which heterosexual, middle-class white women, due to race, sexual identity and class privilege, have benefited from this. She describes how, although motherhood has universally been women's work, different pieces of the work have been assigned to different groups of women. Historically, white working-class women and women of colour have been assigned the more physical and taxing parts of the work. White middle-class women get the benefit and status of being mothers, being "mother managers" and working outside of the home, if they wish. In North America, women of colour were largely valued as cheap labour, particularly as domestic labour in white households, or in lower-level service positions in institutions as wet-nurses, child care workers and care providers for the elderly and infirm. Their value in these roles took precedence over their value as mothers, and they were not expected to be full-time mothers. She indicates:

[T]he construction of some women as full-time, stay-at-home, and worthy rests on the construction of other groups of mothers as employable and unworthy of public support. The divergent constructions also follow from the different values placed on children of different races and classes. White, middle-class children have the highest value, and are deemed worthy of full-time, stay-at-home mothers to nurture them to their full potential. (p. 20)

Glenn concludes her discussion by pointing out that because of the benefits they receive from existing arrangements, privileged women are less likely to challenge them, even though they are also being oppressed by them. So, although both groups of women are affected by patriarchal control, that control is experienced differently by each group because of their different subject positions. Those benefiting the most from the system have
the least interest in acknowledging the differences, because such an acknowledgement would implicate them.

Collins (1994) supports Glenn’s framework and points out how heterosexual, middle-class, white feminism, due to the privilege inherent in the subjectivities of the women developing the theory, has not acknowledged these significant differences in positioning. Consequently, heterosexual, middle-class feminist theory has projected the concerns of this group of women as universal. These assumptions have contributed significantly to the existing stratification of reproductive activities globally. In relation to motherhood and issues of reproduction, Collins explains that these assumptions also include that “male domination in the political economy and the household is the driving force in family life and that understanding the struggle for individual autonomy in the face of such domination is central to understanding motherhood [Eisenstein, 1983]” (p. 46).

According to Collins, the patriarchal notion of family divides family life into two oppositional spheres. One is the “male” sphere of economic providing; the other is the “female” sphere of affective nurturing, which refers mainly to mothering. From this division arises the nuclear family model of the father who works to support his spouse and children. The assumptions that arise from this normative construction of the family imply that all mothers and children have a degree of economic security and that all women have the luxury of seeing themselves as individuals in search of personal autonomy.

Collins specifies that these kinds of assumptions direct feminist activity away from issues of concern to women of colour. Work and family have rarely functioned as separate spheres for racial ethnic women in North America, and the “locus of conflict lies outside the household, as women and their families engage in collective effort to create and maintain family life in the face of forces that undermine family integrity” (p. 47).

Consequently rather than engaging in a search for autonomy, this group of women has concerned itself with the significance of self-definition in constructing individual and
collective racial identity. They focus on the importance of working for the physical survival of the community. "Racial ethnic women's motherhood reflects the tensions inherent in trying to foster a meaningful racial identity in children within a society that denigrates people of colour" (p. 49).

Glenn (1994) explains how the family serves as a source of alternative values and competition to societal authority. Consequently, they have been a target for colonizers to break down resistance. Glenn describes how this has taken place by breaking down communal systems of land ownership, or breaking down the authority of elder members of a community over the younger members. The assaults on family systems of people of colour in the United States has had a variety of forms. Glenn describes it in the following manner:

From the mid-nineteenth century until the 1950s Asian immigrant male labourers were prevented from forming nuclear households by laws and practices that barred entry to women. Mexican families in the Southwest were often broken up by men being forced to migrate to remote labouring camps alone in search of work. Under slavery, bondsmen and bondswomen were individual chattel; marriage, reproduction and household arrangements were all manipulated by slave owners to maximize their economic return. (p. 18)

The above are only a few examples to demonstrate how divergently women are positioned from one historical period to another, and from one community to another. Their opportunities are regulated through a number of interlocking systems in which they are sometimes advantaged and sometimes not. Most of all women are positioned hierarchically to each other. The above examples do not include how lesbian women have similarly been oppressively positioned in relation to motherhood. The role that family and community play in the lives of different women has a significant impact on the meaning of reproduction in those women's lives and where they are located in that strata. If a woman has spent her life struggling for the survival of her community within a culture that devalues her and her culture, bearing children and working towards the maintenance and survival of the
community can be a signifier of resistance. For a woman in North America who is a member of the dominant heterosexual, middle-class, white culture, who has been supported, to the point of regulation, to reproduce children and to reinforce the dominant culture through family systems, remaining childless could be viewed as a form of resistance.

As previously mentioned, and as illustrated by the above discussion, stratified reproduction can be characterized by three factors: it is historically specific, it exposes how reproductive issues can locate women in the contradictory positionings of privilege and penalty, and it offers examples of how women exercise agency in an effort to maintain control over their reproductive desires, or lack thereof. Colen's (1995) research involving English speaking, Afro-Caribbean women who migrated to the New York area and performed household and childcare tasks at some point after 1965, provides a concrete illustration of the aspects of stratified reproduction. Her research focuses on the differential experiences of stratified reproduction for the West Indian workers and their white, U.S. born employers and exposes the transnational experience of stratified reproduction. She explains:

In this system, West Indian women confront the legacies of slavery, colonialism, underdevelopment, and Caribbean articulation into a world capitalist system and the constraints these place on fulfilling their gender-defined obligations. They face, on the one hand, un- and underemployment, rising costs of living, and limited educational and occupational opportunities, and, on the other, gender expectations that they bear, raise, and carry the bulk of the financial responsibility for children and other kin. (p. 79)

Colen provides the historical context and explains that at the same time of her research, social and economic shifts in North America, such as the baby boomers' baby boom, the rising labour-force participation of mothers, and the continued expectations of women as being primarily responsible for reproductive labour, created an acute need for childcare. The white, U.S. born employers were living in a context in which reproductive
labour was devalued and "overflowing datebooks and 'dressing for success' were in vogue and careers were valorized" (p. 88). The availability of low cost reproductive labour enabled the employers to manage their dilemma. Colen cites Bolles and D'Amico-Samuels who have "shown the direct relationship between worsening economic conditions, including those induced by International Monetary Fund policies, and women's productive and reproductive strategies in Jamaica in the 1970's and 1980's" (p. 80).

Migrating was a strategy employed by the West Indian workers to keep their families together and create improved economic, education, and employment options for their children and kin in the future. Colen's work demonstrates that:

in a transnational system in which households have vastly disparate access to resources (according to class, race/ethnicity, gender and place in a global economy), inequalities (themselves historically structured by social, economic, and political forces) shape and stratify experiences of reproduction. (p. 97)

Colen's work illustrates how stratified reproduction unfolds within a specific historical context, according to different women's race, class, and place in the global economy. Both groups of women operated from within their own subjectivities, and established strategies, exercised agency to function with the systems acting upon them.

Colen's work also methodically illuminates how experiences of reproduction are shaped by a variety of cultural ideas and practices that are hierarchically organized and in which appropriate and inappropriate parents, and the oppositional categories of childlessness are stratified. She points out that since, in Western culture, white children have the highest value, then heterosexual, middle-class, white women are the group of women most supported, encouraged and rewarded for producing children.

From the framework Colen provides we can examine the position of white, intentionally childless women within stratified reproduction. Since they are the women most regulated to reproduce the dominant culture, they are the group of women most stigmatized for not fulfilling their gender obligations. It is out of their place of racial
privilege that they are afforded the capability to strategize in regards to their lived reality of gender oppression. As privileged women, they are exercising reproductive choice. It cannot, however, be seen merely as a privileged act. White women who intentionally do not produce children are at the level of the individual, rebelling against an expectation and, consequently, experience societal censure. As we saw in Chapter Four, the narratives of the white, intentionally childless women reveal a much more complex picture of the contradictory positioning of accommodation and resistance.

Lewin’s (1995) work provides one final example of the key aspects of stratified reproduction and depicts how this contradictory positioning is lived. From her interviews with lesbian mothers, she describes how, historically, lesbians “were assumed to be creatures defined by their sexual appetites and that this was seen to be at odds with the kinds of selfless devotion expected of mothers” (p. 103). Lewin reports that motherhood allowed lesbians to fit into traditional gender markers and therefore “undermine a system that makes them outsiders to womanhood because of their sexual orientation” (p. 110). The initial achievements of lesbian mothers were perceived to have the potential to counteract the notion that lesbianism and motherhood are contradictory positionings and to redefine and desexualize what it meant to be a lesbian. At the same time, the real life complexities of living as mothers “required lesbian mothers to reinstate the dichotomy of natural/unnatural and mother/non-mother that their redefinition of lesbianism sought to subvert”(p. 335). She states:

Becoming a mother (for a lesbian) represents a sort of conformity with conventional gender expectations. At the same time, to the extent that becoming a mother means overcoming the equation of homosexuality with unnaturalness, then this transformation allows the lesbian mother to resist gendered constructions of sexuality. The act of resistance is paradoxically achieved through compliance with conventional expectations for women, so it may also be construed as a gesture of accommodation. Placing motherhood at the centre of one’s ability often involves, as we have seen, simultaneously placing other aspects of the self, most notably lesbianism at the margins. Demanding the right to be a “mother” and a “lesbian” as inherently incompatible identities, the former natural and intrinsic to
women, organized around altruism, the latter unnatural, and organized around self-indulgence. But living as a mother means making other choices and these choices reinscribe the opposition between “mother” and “lesbian.” (p. 339)

Lewin explains the outcome of this contradictory positioning:

Gender boundaries are still firmly in place, along with underlying concepts of the “natural” though they have stretched a bit to accommodate a new group of mothers. In this incarnation of reproductive stratification, lesbians are no longer automatically denied access to the system of meanings we call motherhood: so while this new inscription expands the category of “woman” it does nothing to change the definitions associated with it ... women are still mothers (or potential mothers). Non-mothers are still not quite women. (p. 115)

Lewin’s discussion of lesbian mothers provides a framework within which to view white, intentionally childless women. She discusses how lesbian motherhood “involves the deployment of parallel, and apparently contradictory, constructions of gender” (p. 117).

The increasingly public face of lesbian mothers is shifting popular notions of who can reproduce or what constitutes a family. The patriarchal family model adopted by some lesbian mothers however does not disrupt popular notions of family. Lewin (1994) argues that both of these meanings can be used at the same time and that their synchronicity must lead us to challenge the opposition constructions of resistance and compliance.

The model I would suggest based on the accounts presented here is that lesbian mothers are neither resisters nor accommodators—nor perhaps they are both. A more accurate way of framing their narratives is that they are strategists, using the cultural resources offered by motherhood to achieve a particular set of goals. (p. 350)

Lewin cautions us not to limit our analyses of women’s lives to accounts of victimization, but at the same time not to be complacent when we encounter evidence of resistance and subversion. We must recognize the complex ways in which resistance and accommodation are interwoven and interdependent on each other. From her analysis of the accounts of lesbian mothers Lewin suggests, “Lesbian mothers are, in some sense, both lesbians and mothers, but they shape identity and renegotiate its meanings at every turn, reinventing themselves as they make their way in a difficult world” (p. 350).
In the above discussion I have established that stratified reproduction is historically specific and it positions individual subjectivity with a complex system of privileges and penalties. In response, women develop strategies for negotiating their subjectivity. I demonstrated how women are differently positioned in relationship to family and the meanings of reproductive choices, particularly motherhood. I included the work of both Colen and Lewin as illustrations of how stratified reproduction operates in the lives of different women. Colen described how Afro-Caribbean women employ a strategy of migrating to the United States as a means of constituting their families and fulfilling their reproductive tasks. Lewin outlined how lesbians have employed a strategy of becoming mothers as a method of mediating the heterosexist construction of lesbianism being oppositional to motherhood. The narratives outlined in Chapter Four have included the voices of white, professional women in North America to this picture and illustrated how they employ intentional childlessness as a central strategy to undermine the gender regulation within which they exist. The next step is to draw on the narratives of the research participants to explore specifically how they understand their own individual subjectivities within the system of stratified reproduction.

The white race of the women in this study is an aspect of their subjectivity that is significant to their intentional childlessness and to the strata that they occupy in the hierarchy of reproductive possibilities. Recognizing and naming the entitlements of white women to reproduce and become mothers is one opportunity to expose a mechanism by which white racial privilege is constructed. Roman (1997) clarifies:

While all whites do not benefit equally or, as Lipsitz [1994, 26] argues, “in precisely the same way[s]”, it is wrong to suggest that possessive investment in whiteness does not positively advantage the economic and political power of whites across social classes and genders. (p. 275)

Although the participants in this study exist within a diversity of class and sexual identity locations, their white skin provides them with a particular status within systems of
domination, particularly with relation to reproduction and motherhood. Even though they are not oppressed on account of their race, their race has meaning and is not irrelevant to the oppression they face (Spelman, 1988). Participants were asked how they viewed the meaning of their particular subjectivities in relation to their intentional childlessness and their access to the information and services that have enabled them to maintain it. All of the women interviewed recognized that their individual social location was an advantage in being able to have access to the services and information required to maintain their intentional childlessness. Rose, Khirsten, and Ellen all had access to abortions when they required them. Their narratives of this experience are all straightforward and signify a sense of entitlement. The narratives did not include any obvious struggle regarding access, to or information about, abortion. In fact, in Ellen’s case, she learned she was pregnant during a visit to a gynaecologist for another reason and was offered an abortion as an option.

Gina had a tubal ligation at 24, and although she had a difficult time obtaining it, she eventually managed to find a sympathetic doctor. She indicates that if she were not in the category she was in (white and educated) that she probably would have had a more difficult time obtaining her tubal ligation. At the same time, however, the fact that she was white and educated and young required justification of her decision. Regarding her privilege, Gina states:

My economic and social options have been somewhat limited by some of my choices. I am still very privileged in terms of being able to make that kind of a decision and live with it, and when I tell you that I no longer think of it (referring to her childlessness), well hell, I no longer think of it because I’m sufficiently privileged that it’s not an issue. If someone were coming down on me in an oppressive way about it and not advancing me in my corporation because I was not a wife and mother, I’d be thinking about it, but I’m privileged to the extent that I don’t have to worry about that. I don’t have any authority figure of any kind hanging over me saying “thou should have done otherwise.”

When asked what she thought being a straight, working-class white woman rejecting the gender regulation of motherhood meant, Gina saw it as a challenge to the
existing gender constructs within which she exists. She said it meant she was “a maverick”. She explains:

... we all [referring to the women I interviewed] come from that background and we’ve all rejected it. But I think far and away the majority go with it ... they’re still essentially living out that script in the sense of man and woman and two children ... so anybody who chooses not to follow, continue in that pattern is definitely a rebel of some kind. I would think of myself these days more of a maverick than as a rebel, if it’s possible to make a distinction. Rebel has clenched fists and a little more squelched up energy and a maverick just doesn’t give a shit [laughs], so is off on the side and is just doing what she wishes to do.

Rose describes her subjectivity and positions herself within her privileged subjectivity as follows:

My location? We’re both white, both heterosexual, it all sounds very patriarchal doesn’t it, talking about my husband, but in fact we, I sort of see us as a unit really, in many ways connected to this decision. Well, I suppose privilege again. We come back to these things of privilege, choice, freedom, freedom to make choices, ability to have information about what the choices are and make decisions based on that ... I sound like an awful white, middle-class feminist to say that I have all of these freedoms. The more privileged I am the more choices I have, and then I justify my choices.

Rose describes her status as an intentionally childless woman from her position as a married, heterosexual. She states:

I’m married to a man who’s, very established in his career. He’s a senior executive with an international organization and I’m very much, I have a role very much as a wife, and part of that role, I think, children are an expected part of the package, and I’m frequently faced with the question which I find very offensive: “Do you have children?”

Karen is a white, working-class academic in a monogamous, heterosexual relationship. Karen acknowledges that there are many arenas for women where there is no choice. So, for her intentional childlessness, she prefers the word decision. She specifies that the decision is formed out of a particular subjectivity and “it isn’t made in some kind of free, isolated space.” She also acknowledges that as a white, educated woman, there is some privilege there that enables her to write her relationships differently or to not have children. Not every woman is in a position to determine those factors in her life. Karen
acknowledges the systems of domination and how they include privileges and penalties.

She says:

For some particular contexts, for some particular women, there are expectations of living with men in married relationships and living with children. So, partly, I'm talking about heteronormativity. I think that a piece of it is that women are part of, that part of a definition of "woman" is "mother"... I'm doing this in a world that is determined by heterosexism. I'm doing it in a world that's determined by racism. So what does it mean for me to be childless in light of heterosexism, racism, classism? What is that about?

Khirsten, as a white, Jewish, single woman feels that her privilege comes largely from her cultural background. She was given expectations that she could be whatever she wanted to be. Her Jewish heritage values education. Khirsten does not believe that every woman wants to have a child, and says that when women are not given the option to consider different reproductive possibilities, they do not have the information to make a choice. She is aware that in society there is still the idea that a single woman is an unfortunate. Khirsten refers to the negative association of the single mother and indicates that when women began to intentionally have children on their own, it was a very bold thing for them to do.

Ellen is a white, single lesbian. She struggles with the changes in the lesbian community that involve lesbians becoming parents and reproducing what she refers to as the "heterosexual model" of the family. She had always assumed lesbians wouldn't have children. Ellen reacts against the images of lesbian mothers described by Lewin (1995). She clearly articulates that positioning herself as an intentionally childless women comes as a resistance to the nuclear family model.

I was even more miffed when they got into what I saw as the heterosexual [model] and I still find that a little difficult to compute because its like, part of me says why bother, like why bother being a lesbian... but there's something there, there's a model... it's like things aren't challenged.

When I asked Ellen to describe her subject position and I referred to her as a white women, she resisted the label. "To me white is WASP and I do not identify myself as a
WASP. I'm actually an Irish-French woman." She does, however, acknowledge that within a hierarchy of privileges she has more privileges than some others. She describes a white, working-class woman who uses the park that she goes to:

There's a woman about my age there who is definitely working class. I think they're on welfare, however we label them, I'm not quite sure. So, if we're talking about her working class, me working class, I definitely would come out as the white, middle-class professional in that comparison. Also, this woman has five children and each year I see her and she's had another one. I realize that, for her, that's part of how she gets stronger. You build forces, right?

The above narratives indicate that aside from the particularities of sexual orientation, the participants in this study recognize their privilege in making choices and in the autonomy they have constructed in their lives. There is a sense of entitlement that arises from their place as white women living in the Western world, in their achievement of intentional childlessness, and at the same time, as is evidenced in Chapter Four, their intentional childlessness is a concrete strategy, or planned action that is used in order to achieve the specific outcome of freedom from the gender oppression experienced by white women in the Western world. The narratives substantiate my argument about the necessity of understanding women's intentional childlessness from the viewpoint of stratified reproduction. They demonstrate how this group of women, from their particular locations, employ agency to respond to multiple systems of domination.

I would like to provide one final example of this by moving to an analysis of the research participants' narratives on class. Class surfaced in the interviews as a notable illustration of how within the complicated frame of subjectivity, women exercise agency and employ specific strategies in response to domination. This discussion will provide one final opportunity to explore how subjectivity works to position individuals.

Class

Adamson et al. (1988) explain that class fundamentally refers to differential amounts of social and economic power that can take a variety of forms. They explain that in
the classic Marxist sense, it means power over the means of production: what is produced, how it is produced, and how the product is controlled. This economic power also frequently controls political, ideological, and military decisions. At the level of lived reality however, Adamson et al. indicate that class refers to “differing degrees of access to choice, be it over type of employment, extent of education, location of residence, kind of vacation and leisure activity, or type of medical treatment available” (p. 104).

Rita Mae Brown (cited in hooks, 1984) comments on class:

Class is much more than Marx’s definition of relationship to the means of production. Class involves your behaviour, your basic assumptions about life. Your experience (determined by your class) validates those assumptions, how you are taught to behave, what you expect from yourself and from others, your concept of a future, how you understand problems and solve them, how you think, feel, act. (p. 3)

Penelope (1994) expresses that, in many ways, a woman’s class of origin is invisible to her when she is young. It is so much a part of her daily reality that it often is not something she can explore or describe. Individuals do, however, learn their place and where they stand with respect to others socially and economically. Steedman (1989) reflects this when she describes class as “a learned position, learned in childhood and often through the exigencies of difficult and lonely lives” (p. 13).

This view on class has been largely mirrored by the women in this study. They refer to both attitudes and economics when locating their class identities and comment on the impacts of their classes of origin. The research participants revealed a sense of class insecurity; a feeling of tenuousness about their current economic situations. This was particularly evident in their fears about being aging women in this society and facing the reality of poverty. With the exception of Rose, the women interviewed in this study in spite of their educational and professional designations, live in economically precarious situations. The partnership status of the participants is particularly relevant around this issue. Three of the participants live alone and are not partnered, one lives alone and is
partnered and one is married. With the exception of Rose, all of the participants commented on the fact that women, and particularly aging, single women, are among the poorest people in society.

In the initial set of interviews, I had neglected to explicitly ask participants about their class identity. Based on their educational levels and their professional capacities, I made an assumption, from my own framework of class, that all of the participants were middle-class. In the second set of interviews, participants in this study were specifically asked about their class status.

Karen is from a working-class British family who immigrated to Canada when she was six. Even at that age she had an understanding and a sense of what it meant to be working class. The class distinction became more pronounced when she immigrated to Canada and no longer had to wear a uniform to school. She explains:

Certainly from my father a very strong sense of needing to fight politically to make other people’s lives better ... I come from a very socialist background and context so that is in operation, that was in operation even as a child, that sense of community, working for others, that kind of socialist from along with this sense of struggle to move out of the working class which you do as an individual as well as through trying to make change for a bunch of folks.

Karen currently identifies herself as a “working class academic.” Her definition of herself as a working-class woman includes the labour history of her family, who have all had jobs in labour and in the service industry, and her own labour history, which has been a combination of service and artistic endeavours. Even now that Karen is an academic, she works on a contract basis and, therefore, indicates that she is without particular entitlements. She says:

The way that I would talk about class analysis is to say that there are different mobilities and entitlements that are possible of, as a result of the individualism and freedom and, independence, as a result of education, support systems, as a result of being white, as a result of being able-bodies, predominately heterosexual. I mean all of these things have enabled me to get kind of middle-class mobilities and entitlements. However that does not mean the affects of working-class upbringing are gone. They are lived.
Rose had a very “Victorian” middle-class upbringing, with private schools and a very sheltered life. She was brought up by her mother and au pair girls. Her father is from a working-class background, and her mother is middle-class. Rose indicates that she was brought up in an ideological middle-class family, who were materially quite comfortable. She now identifies as educated middle-class because both she and her husband have degrees.

Gina is from a working-class family and, even though well educated, she defines herself as working-class, not middle-class. She thinks this because she comes from a “downtrodden family” and, consequently, has the “point of view of a person who is always looking out for justice.” Her parents always expected that she would go to college and be educated, “which, for working-class people, I think that’s quite a reach. They were ambitious for us in a way that; that does them credit.”

Gina tells the story of being about 12 and going out with her dad. They went to an office where the employees were on strike, and her dad crossed the picket line. A man stopped her dad and said “buddy, I can tell by the way you’re dressed that you’re a working man just like me. Why are you crossing the picket line?” Her dad answered something to the effect that the strike had nothing to do with him. And the man responded, “buddy, you don’t know where your own interests lie.” Gina knew the man was right and that her father was wrong. For Gina this story is evidence that, even though her family was working-class economically, they were not politically so. Gina says, “I was aware that my family was anything but privileged you know, that everywhere we went we seemed to be working against the current and I still see that ... and although I’m educated and am earning far more money than they ever did when they were my age, I’m still working-class in that I have that perspective.” Even when she’s been in management positions, she has always been very aware of the link above her and the link below her and her place in it.
Khirsten’s family were lower-working class immigrants. Her mother is from an educated family and carried middle-class values; her father is from a working class family. Economically they were a working class family. She indicates that she has working-class values, particularly in relation to money. She either undervalues or overvalues it. Class is an attitude for Khirsten. She says that working class people don’t think in terms of expansiveness or of comfort and wealth. “My mother lived at poverty level, but she never felt at a poverty level. My father lived at a poverty level, and he died at a poverty level.” Khirsten says, “I think I’ve lived out the conflict that existed within my family, both the over-valuing of money and the sense of having had a little bit of privilege that my mother carried in her system, which has caused me to be very unrealistic in my life.” Khirsten currently identifies as middle-class in values and “poverty-class by choice” economically.

Ellen defines class as “economics and attitude.” “Money and privilege. Family money, I call it.” She talks about how a lot of the single women she knows bought houses with help from their families, or from a divorce settlement or something. She identifies as a working-class woman, even though she has a professional job, because she has no economic security or back-up. Her mother is poor, and she would like to be able to assist her mother financially as well.

Each woman in this study identifies her class identity in her own way. Four participants identify as having working-class origins and one participant identifies herself as having middle-class origins. All of the participants, however, are educated and professionally employed in a way that privileges them and offers them possibilities beyond what most working-class women experience. These findings are similar to those of Morell (1994), who reports that three-quarters of the 34 intentionally childless women she interviewed were from working-class or poor backgrounds. Morell says of her participants, “In the stories they constructed, ‘wanting more and different’ is linked to desires for class mobility” (p. 37). She indicates that the women from working class
backgrounds in her study did not grow up with the same expectation of counting on a good marriage for economic security as the middle-class women in her study did. She concludes, "the desire to transcend class of origin and the limitations associated with it required rebellion from the mandate of gender" (p. 38). Morell says:

My findings echo those of Barbara Levy Simon who, when studying the lives of never-married women, found that the African-American women in her sample grew up with a stronger imperative to get out of poverty than to marry.... (p. 39)

Steedman (1988), through a very moving account of her own working-class background, links her own childlessness to her class background. She points out that historically, when there were limited ways in which women could refuse conceiving and bearing children, their act of refusal became the refusal to mother. Now that there is the possibility, working-class women may reject motherhood as a means of class mobility and as a refusal "to reproduce themselves or the circumstances of their exile" (p. 7). By this I assume she means their oppression.

The research participants in this study were all women with race privilege, but not with class privilege. Their perceptions of women's lives and the struggles of mothers, as outlined in their narratives in Chapter Four, emerge from working-class experiences. Their ambivalence about motherhood parallel those of the women in Morell's and Simon's studies and of Carolyn Kay Steedman's story. Their search for autonomy and freedom could be perceived as a form of insurance, a mechanism for securing things that their working-class backgrounds may not have automatically entitled them to. Intentional childlessness, then, in the case of this group of women, is a strategy for rejecting class regulation as well as gender regulation.

Conclusion

This thesis began with my search for an understanding of the meaning of intentional childlessness in my own life. As a white woman from a working-class background, my
subjectivity mirrors that of the research participants. My heterosexuality mirrors that of two of the research participants. My feminism was born out of a desire for equality and freedom, and my experiences of, and perceptions of, the women in my life informed my understanding that motherhood was not the most logical path to equality and freedom. Consequently, I can now begin to frame my intentional childlessness at least partially, as a strategy undertaken to side step what I experience as heterosexual, white, Western women’s gender oppression.

At the same time, it is clear that privilege existed in my life in a way that made it possible for me to fulfil and maintain my desire for childlessness. These privileges included my whiteness, my heterosexuality, my location in the Western world, and the opportunity for education made available to me as a working-class woman living in a province in Canada during a brief window of time when generous student grants were provided. Like the women in my study, I also have a tenuous hold on middle-class privilege, as a result of my education and profession. My particular race, sexual identity, class of origin, place in the global economy, and history all converge to create a very specific and particular meaning of intentional childlessness for me as a woman and for women like me. Through the privilege of my whiteness, heterosexuality, and education I am able to sidestep gender restrictions that exist, specifically the reproductive requirement of motherhood. Within this negotiation, however, I face social censure. The freedom and autonomy within which I construct my life mirrors the liberal individualistic framework that supports Western, patriarchal, capitalist systems of domination. This is how I negotiate my particular subjectivity.

The experiences of intentionally childless, white women, provide a useful illustration of how Collins’ (1990) matrix of domination functions and of how “depending on the context, an individual may be an oppressor, a member of an oppressed group, or simultaneously oppressor and oppressed”(225). Collins explains that domination operates
by seducing, pressuring, or forcing members of oppressed groups to “replace individual and cultural ways of knowing with the dominant group’s specialized thought” (p. 229). She points out that most individuals can easily recognize their own victimization within some major system of oppression, but do not so easily recognize how their actions might uphold someone else’s subordination. She says, “Oppression is filled with such contradictions because these approaches fail to recognize that a matrix of domination contains few pure victims. Each individual derives varying amounts of penalty and privilege from the multiple systems of oppression which frame everyone’s lives” (p. 229).

The narratives of the white, intentionally childless women in this study provide insight into the ways in which systems of domination not only restrict us, but also actually limit the possibilities within which we operate, and shape our strategies of resistance. For white women in the Western world, intentional childlessness is a strategy used to achieve very specific goals, and at the same time, intentional childlessness for white women in the Western world supports very specific constructs. As a strategy, intentional childlessness provides white women with an opportunity to attain economic and political equality with white men. It enables us to become autonomous human beings with freedom and choices. This strategy is a rejection of gender regulation and challenges the patriarchal script that equates “woman” with “mother.” As a consequence of this strategy, white, intentionally childless women face social censure.

In the very same breath, the freedom and autonomy\(^2\) afforded white, intentionally childless women, because of the privilege and possibility inherent in our whiteness, accommodates the liberal individualistic frameworks upon which Western imperialism stands. In this way, we gain and maintain our privilege on the backs of other women who are affected by different systems of domination than those that affect us, or at least affect us differently. In struggling to overcome the very real limitations imposed by gender, white,
intentionally childless women do challenge gender regulation and participate in furthering our definitions of gender. This challenge, however, must be understood in the very specific frame of white, Western women.

This same strategy would not serve women of colour or lesbians in the Western world in the same way. Stratified reproduction works to prevent women of colour and lesbians from becoming mothers by weakening and annihilating their family structures and/or communities. Consequently, women of colour and lesbians strategize in ways that build family and/or community. It is within these types of differences that each group of women struggle to “exist positively at this nexus of contradictory positioning” (Walkerdine, 1990, p. 58).

Ginsburg and Rapp (1995) provide a helpful summary of the importance of complicating subjectivity, and understanding it in terms of the simultaneity of resistance and accommodation.

Analysis depends on a careful accounting of the processes by which accommodation and opposition to dominant discourses are intertwined …. Minimally, the notion of transformative action requires a recognition that human agency (and limits to it) can be seen in even the smallest activities. From such actions the consciousness and intentionality commonly identified as resistance can be constructed. (p. 11)

Like motherhood, intentional childlessness has different meanings for women at different times in history, and in different contexts. Each aspect of a woman’s subjectivity must be historicized and examined in context in order to understand its impact. A task for future researchers is to examine very specific cohorts of women and explore the historical relevance of their subjectivity in relation to their intentional childlessness. Razack (1995) clarifies:

The point of theorizing differences among women is not for the sake of inclusion but for the sake of anti-subordination. There is little chance of disturbing relations of domination unless the relations of privilege and penalty and how they structure our various responses are examined. (p. 14)

I have argued throughout this thesis that recognizing subjectivity in all of its complexities is an essential component of the theorizing of differences that Razack is
referring to. This thesis has contributed to that project by providing an example of how various systems position us simultaneously in positions of being oppressed and of being the oppressor. Consequently, these same systems influence and limit the strategies of resistance we are able to employ.

The white, intentionally childless women who were interviewed for this study have, with intent, subverted gender regulation by not becoming mothers. This rejection is based on their analysis of the costs of motherhood to women. They have made this assessment based on the lived realities of their white, largely working-class subjectivities. The second wave of North American and British feminism has influenced and/or supported their understanding of gender oppression. The privilege of their positioning as white, professional women living in the Western world has enabled them to realize their desire to be childless and to maintain it. In Gina’s words, they are indeed “mavericks.” They are women who have established lives as free, autonomous human beings outside of the regulation of motherhood.

They experience social censure for positioning themselves in this way, because their presence challenges existing relations. Their freedom, autonomy, and individualistic lifestyles are on a level complicitous with existing systems of domination, which rely on individualism and sameness as a strategy for control. On the other hand, though, when as a woman you do not have freedom and autonomy, or are not supposed to have freedom and autonomy, achieving it becomes a meaningful objective, hence, the complex and contradictory reality of subjectivity.

   the notion that there is a single woman’s, or Black person’s, or any other group’s experience that can be described independently from other aspects of the person—that there is an “essence” to that experience. An essentialist outlook assumes that the experience of being a member of the group under discussion is a stable one, one with a clear meaning, a meaning constant through time, space and different historical, social, political and personal contexts.

2. Fellows & Razack (1994) say, “On whose backs does my freedom rest: The freedom to act autonomously very easily can maintain the status quo, leaving many relations of domination untouched and even strengthened, because those who have choices and can pursue them most easily are invariable of the dominant groups” (p. 1065).
References


APPENDICES
Appendix 1

Interview Guide for First Interviews - Winter 1993

The purpose of this research is to give voice to women who have made a conscious choice to remain childless and to examine the impact this decision has had on their lives and their perceptions of themselves.

**Open interview with demographic information:**
- date
- location
- person's name and age
- any other pertinent information

**Initial - Open ended question:**
I would like to hear about what being a consciously childless woman means to you, and how you think it has affected your life.

**Prompts:**
- how and when was the decision made
- when did you become conscious that this was a decision/choice?
- critical events connected to it
- family of origin - relationship to parents
  - relationship to siblings
- current relationships with children in their lives
- current/past partner status
- partner's involvement in decision (if relevant) and feelings about it
- concerns/regrets about decision
- anticipated regrets about decision
- responses/pressure(?) from friends and family about decision
- self image in relation to childlessness
- how do you think society general views you in relation to this decision?
- form of resistance?
- how do you handle “do you have children” question?
Appendix 2

Interview Guide for Second Interviews - Summer 1997

Before the interview discuss the project with participants and discuss the finding from the first set of interviews. Remind them about the purpose of this interview.

1. First interview was ________________.
   * Have you had any changes in your life since then?
   * Have you had any insights or reflections on yourself as a woman who has made a decision to be voluntarily/deliberately childless or childfree?

2. Do you describe yourself as a feminist?
   * What does this description mean to you?
   * How is it played out in your daily life?
   * Is there a link between feminism/childlessness for you?

3. How do you feel that your decision not to have children, not to be a mother is lived? How does it affect your day to day reality?

4. What would your life have looked like if you had children? How would it be different?

5. What do the words equality, freedom, autonomy mean to you?

6. Is the choice/decision to be childless one that you have had to defend?

7. There was an aspect of resistance or rebellion that came across in the first interviews–more of a rejection of an expectation - can you talk about this.
   * Do you see this decision as an act of resistance?
   * How does this act of resistance change anything for anyone but you?
   * How do you understand the tension between this and individuality/freedom?

8. Some would say that women seek to maximize their advantages through childlessness? Would this be true for you? How is this different from patriarchal values of liberal individualism and autonomy?

9. Do you see yourself in community? How?
   * What does community mean to you?

10. What price do you think you have paid for making this decision?
    i.e. economics, supports, belonging/community

11. How does your location (race, class, sexual orientation etc) connected to this decision?
    * How do you understand your class?
    * What class was the family you grew up in?
    * How would you define your class status now?

12. Is there anything else you would like to add?