



## CHAPTER 1

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# Conceptualising Non-Motherhood

*Jenny Björklund and Julie Rodgers*

Selfish, unfeminine, unfulfilled, crazy, and desperate are some of the qualities that have been erroneously and indiscriminately applied to women who do not have children. Parenthood is often viewed as the

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This chapter is written in collaboration. We have listed the author names alphabetically to indicate that we have contributed equally and want to attribute an equal share of credit to each author. The authors would like to thank Dovilė Kuzminskaitė who has given valuable feedback on earlier versions of this text.



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ultimate life goal and the expected trajectory, especially for women, since motherhood is positioned at the core of femininity. While feminist theory has paid close attention to motherhood and mothering, there has been a much less rigorous focus on non-motherhood. This failure on the part of feminist thinking amounts to a double sense of marginalisation for non-mothers. In the first instance, they are excluded by mainstream society which continues to assume that all women will or at the very least want to become mothers. In the second instance, non-mothers are overlooked by the very structure that one would expect to support them, namely, feminism. Thankfully, however, the first two decades of the twenty-first century have witnessed a marked surge in the number of publications on the topic of non-motherhood to the extent that a clear theory of non-motherhood is evolving and, moreover, becoming established as an integral component of academic scholarship on the maternal. This volume contributes to this effort and is committed to both overturning the negative connotations that are frequently aligned with non-motherhood as well as working to find new descriptions that are respectful of and empathic towards the diverse range of forms that non-motherhood may take.

At first sight, it may seem contradictory for feminist motherhood studies to devote its attention to women who are not, in fact, mothers. However, as this volume demonstrates, motherhood and non-motherhood are more closely intertwined than one might realise, with non-mothers often having spent substantial time questioning and examining their relationship with motherhood than actual mothers themselves. For example, the voluntary non-mother often engages in deep reflection on the institution itself and the ongoing prevalence of pronatalism in culture and society. Similarly, the involuntary non-mother observes and yearns for an experience that she cannot be part of. Being outside of motherhood, whether through choice or not, does not, therefore, necessarily imply a lack of interrogation of and interaction with both the experience and the institution. Indeed, it is through the figure of the non-mother that we can gain a better appreciation of motherhood as it is defined in culture and society as well as the central role that it continues to play in assumptions and expectations of womanhood.

The title that we have chosen for this volume is *Negotiating Non-Motherhood: Representations, Perceptions, and Experiences*. To explain our rationale for this title, it is important to first reflect on the range of alternative terms that currently exist to designate women who are not mothers for one reason or another. As has previously been noted in numerous

scholarly publications, the terms that are commonly used to refer to those women who do not have children remain largely problematic and indicative of negative social attitudes. The main ones in current usage include 'non-mother' (also seen as 'nomo'), 'unchilded', 'without child', 'childless', and 'childfree', not to mention the now outdated but still iterated 'barren'. It is unfortunate that so many of these terms insist on lack and deviance, with the inclusion of suffixes such as 'less' or prefixes such as 'un' and 'non'. Even the term 'childfree', coined as a more positive alternative to the negative labels listed above carries the potential to aggravate the tension between the childless and the child-bearing majority. The term 'childfree' came into circulation to distinguish voluntary non-parenthood from involuntary non-parenthood. Although the term is useful in this respect, it is not without its critics as it seems the addition of 'free' implies a desire to get rid of children. What is clear from the ongoing debate concerning the terminology then is that non-motherhood continues to be a contested identity and, to a certain extent, one which language has failed to adequately capture.

While we acknowledge that there may not be any one, ideal term to designate the woman without children and that all terms may in fact contain fault-lines, in this volume, we have opted for non-mother and non-motherhood. We have deliberately retained the hyphen in the terms non-mother and non-motherhood as it denotes, we feel, a specific theoretical position. The hyphen very importantly indicates both separation from but also involvement with ideologies of motherhood. Given that both the choice not to mother and the inability to do so are often bound up with careful reflection on the practice and experience of mothering itself, it is essential that the terms used to signify those who are not mothers effectively convey the double-coded nature of this particular identity, an identity which is at once outside but also connected to maternal discourse. And yet, those women who choose not to have children are also keen to articulate their distance from the societal expectation to mother. To remove the hyphen from the terms non-motherhood and non-mother would collapse the non-mother into the dominant figure of the mother, whereas the hyphen, on the other hand, preserves the destabilising potential of the non-mother with regard to normative constructions of womanhood. Following a similar logic, the woman who is involuntarily childless has no doubt devoted immense psychological and physical energy to the endeavour of one day becoming a mother. The term non-mother as hyphenated, therefore, comprehensively conveys a sense of connection to

maternal identity, the pain of being excluded but also the deliberate decision to stand outside of motherhood. Finally, the hyphen is suggestive of an identity in transit or in flux, an identity that is still evolving, establishing its own voice and gradually claiming its own space.

This is where the choice of the word ‘negotiate’ comes into play. Given that non-motherhood continues to be poorly understood by society at large and that the experience itself can manifest in different ways, sometimes shifting from one position to another within the spectrum of non-mother, we felt that ‘negotiate’ was the verb that best conveyed the individual experiences of the range of non-mothers who appear in this volume. For some, it is about negotiating ostracisation, for others it is about negotiating pain and suffering. It is about negotiating the right to speak and tell their own story, the right to language and the right to legitimacy. It is also about negotiating their position with societies that continue to consider motherhood as the norm, thereby relegating the non-mother to a status of invisibility.

Finally, the non-mother is a subversive figure who has the potential to derail traditional genealogical structures and essentialised ideas of womanhood. As some of the chapters in this volume demonstrate, the non-mother can force us to think about alternative forms of care and relationality beyond reproduction and the heteronormative family. There is a power within non-motherhood in its rupture with hegemonic norms. As the chapters unfold in this volume, this power becomes increasingly evident and the figure of the non-mother gradually asserts herself and claims her identity on her terms through a process of writing back, talking back—enacting a negotiation of her own non-motherhood as well as telling stories about a life experience that has been rendered invisible in mainstream culture and society.

## MOTHERHOOD STUDIES AND NON-MOTHERHOOD

During the last century, feminist researchers have paid close attention to motherhood and mothering and analysed them as social constructions. In her ground-breaking work *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir (1949/2010) argues that motherhood should not be seen as women’s sole life purpose and, moreover, the key to women’s happiness. Motherhood, as it was understood in post-war France, limits women’s possibilities for self-realisation; women should be able to combine motherhood and professional life, and society needs to take greater

responsibility for child-rearing. Motherhood and mothering were also key issues for second-wave feminists, such as Adrienne Rich (1976), who analyses motherhood as socially, culturally, and historically constructed and an institution in which patriarchal power is maintained and sustained. In the decades that followed, feminist motherhood studies were primarily concerned with how cultural ideals of motherhood limited women and confined them to their homes (e.g. see DiQuinzio 1999; Hays 1996), but some researchers also highlighted how the care work that mothers do should be upgraded and seen as an important force in society (e.g. see Ruddick 1989). Motherhood studies have flourished since the emergence of the canonical texts in the mid-to-late twentieth century and, moreover, expanded into new domains such as single motherhood and queer motherhood. Lately, there has been a notable surge in scholarly interest in motherhood. This scholarship represents a variety of new perspectives on motherhood and often dives into its more complex and darker sides, such as ambivalence, rage, and regret (e.g. see Björklund 2021; Bodin 2023; Bourdeau 2019; Donath 2017; Heffernan and Stone 2021). It also acknowledges diverse experiences and representations of motherhood by focusing, for instance, on migrant mothers (Kačkutė 2023; Lombard 2022), mothers with disabilities (Gevorgianienė et al. 2022), single mothers (Åström and Bergnehr 2021; Bergnehr and Henriksson 2021), LGBTQ+ mothers (Goldberg and Allen 2020; Park 2013), teenage mothers (Rodgers and Gorman 2023), and motherhood in different geopolitical contexts (Akujobi 2011; Henriksson et al. 2023; Herrera and Sanmartín 2015; Rye et al. 2018).

Less scholarly interest has been devoted to non-motherhood. Furthermore, existing research has typically focused on either involuntary or voluntary non-motherhood, disregarding Gayle Letherby's work from the turn of the twenty-first century which states that the boundary between involuntary and voluntary childlessness is not clear-cut: "It is perhaps more appropriate to refer to a continuum of childlessness with some individuals being definite in their place at each end of the continuum and a group in the middle whose position is likely to change over time" (2002b, 8; see also 1999, 2002a; Letherby and Williams 1999). Other researchers have pointed out that reproductive 'choices' are not always conscious (Engwall 2010), or that the decision-making process is complex; it may not be seen as a one-time decision but rather as decisions that are made and remade across the life course (Blackstone and Stewart 2016; Morell 2000; Shaw 2011).

Such deconstructive approaches to the rigid categorisation of non-motherhood and childlessness, however, remain uncommon and research on childlessness continues to be polarised into involuntary and voluntary and separated out into different disciplines. Involuntary childlessness is often linked to infertility and infertility treatments and is studied primarily in medicine or psychology (e.g. see Buhr and Huinink 2017; Gameiro et al. 2014; Rotkirch 2013; Volgsten et al. 2010; Wirtberg et al. 2006), although some work has been done from humanities and social science perspectives. Rebecca Feasey (2019) analyses media representations of infertility and non-traditional family building and finds that these tend to promote miracle-baby-in-the-end narratives that contrast with the medical reality, where infertility treatments often fail and the chances for women over 40 to become pregnant are small. Other scholars have studied representations of involuntary childlessness in film, literature, social media, reality TV, and print media (e.g. see Archetti 2019; Björklund 2023; de Boer et al. 2022; Edge 2015; Graham and Rich 2014; Striff 2005). Cristina Archetti (2020) and Melanie Notkin (2014) have done ethnographic work on women who move on with their lives after failing to have children.

If involuntary childlessness has more often been studied in the medical sciences, voluntary childlessness has caught more scholarly interest in the humanities and social sciences. In fact, in the last two decades, there has been a surge of publications on women who choose not to have children (Clarke et al. 2021). While research from the twentieth century tended to focus on definitions and reasons for being childless (e.g. see Gillespie 1999; Houseknecht 1987), twenty-first-century research often has a more critical perspective. It has shown how women who choose not to have children are still viewed as suspects by society and are victims of various stereotypes, and these analyses are sometimes empowering as they suggest various possibilities and trajectories for women that do not include motherhood (Rodgers 2021). Feminist researchers have analysed societal structures, such as pronatalism, that marginalise and stigmatise women who have chosen not to have children, as well as their impact on their everyday lives (e.g. see Addie and Brownlow 2014; Cummins et al. 2021; Doyle et al. 2012; Fjell 2008; Gillespie 2000, 2003; Kelly 2009; Morison et al. 2016; Park 2002; Peterson and Engwall 2013; Peterson and Fjell 2010; Rich et al. 2011; Turnbull et al. 2016; Vinson et al. 2010).

Unlike the majority of texts on non-motherhood which choose to focus on the experience as either voluntary or involuntary, this volume seeks to deconstruct the barriers between these two positions and, instead, allow

them to enter into dialogue with each other. Rather than pitting the voluntary non-mother against the involuntary non-mother, we believe it is more fruitful to consider the experience of non-motherhood in a more processual and interconnected way. As highlighted by Ruby Warrington (2023), for too long, non-motherhood has been approached through a binary lens. Warrington writes, “Non-Moms tend to exist in the two-dimensional either/or space: we are either grieving something we never had the chance to hold OR we are cold-hearted, delusional and self-obsessed” (72). Warrington argues that non-motherhood should, however, be seen as a “full spectrum of opinions, projections and conflicted states” (72) as it is experienced in a multitude of ways and subject to fluctuations. This volume, therefore, adopts a non-binary approach and works to expand the definition of non-motherhood by including representations and experiences that are not usually discussed as part of the research field on non-motherhood, such as secondary infertility, miscarriage, and perinatal loss. It unites scholars from different disciplines and national contexts in the study of non-motherhood across a variety of materials and from many different perspectives. Existing scholarship has tended to focus on either representations or experiences, and this volume includes the use of different methods to study a diverse material in order to give wide-ranging new knowledge on non-motherhood.

### THIS VOLUME

In 2020, a group of researchers from Vilnius University (Lithuania), Uppsala University (Sweden), and Maynooth University (Ireland) were awarded funding from the EU Horizon 2020 Twinning research and innovation programme to carry out collaborative and interdisciplinary cutting-edge research on contemporary motherhood (grant agreement No 952366). The project has since become known as MotherNet and has promoted the establishment of research clusters, publications, summer schools, mentoring, scientific missions, knowledge dissemination, and public outreach activities, all in connection with the theme of motherhood. One of the specific research collaborations that was established within MotherNet was the Negotiating Non-Motherhood research cluster. Over the course of various meetings and discussions, it became evident to us that any comprehensive research project on motherhood should also attend to the issue of non-motherhood, both voluntary and involuntary, hence the incentive for this edited volume.

The contributions in this volume are diverse and innovative in their exploration of the concept of non-motherhood. Not only does the volume bring different disciplinary perspectives, such as literary studies and sociology, into dialogue with each other, the contributions also carefully engage in the probing and widening of the term ‘non-motherhood’ itself which, of course, is the central aim of this volume. The various chapters gathered here present detailed analyses of a range of ‘non-motherhood’ narratives across a spectrum of European cultures and societies. It is crucial, however, to bear in mind that non-motherhood, just like motherhood, intersects with a multitude of other factors that can impact on how it is negotiated, such as race and class. Pragya Agarwal’s (2021) astute observation in relation to motherhood can also apply to the experience of non-motherhood. Agarwal notes that while there is no single narrative of motherhood and what it means for women, more often than not we only hear one kind of story. She emphasises the importance, therefore, of paying attention to differences “across race and class [...], social and historical differences [...], oppression, diversity and inequality amongst women” (8). If we think of non-motherhood, the ability to choose voluntarily to remain childfree is not necessarily a choice that all women have, depending on their social and cultural background. Additionally, the stigma and suffering attached to experience of infertility can equally vary widely across different contexts. This volume attempts to tease out some of these complexities but it is true that, as stated by Agarwal, close attention to intersectionality needs to infuse future studies of both motherhood and non-motherhood (8).

While there are national differences in how non-motherhood is understood and experienced, there are also similarities. One of the overriding features shared by all chapters is the importance placed on the negotiation of the experience of non-motherhood via story-telling from a first-person perspective. There is a clear desire on the part of the narrators/non-mothers (both fictional and real) to articulate either their deliberate life-choices or their encounters with loss. It is evident from the chapters that there is an urgent need on the part of these women to take ownership of their individual narratives and, by doing so, to challenge the reductive stereotypes of non-motherhood that continue to exist in contemporary culture and society. The articulation of their experiences is both personally therapeutic but also educational, in that these stories show us that the nature of non-motherhood is by no means homogenous, but, rather, complex, layered, and expansive. While some chapters focus on women for



whom non-motherhood tends to be a stable identity, other chapters depict shifting figures of non-motherhood who embody a certain fluidity in relation to their status. What emerges then, from this collection, is that any definition of ‘non-motherhood’ must be inclusive and flexible if it is to capture the heterogeneity of the experience.

The multifarious nature of non-motherhood comes to the fore in Jenny Björklund’s chapter which approaches the experience from a multitude of angles: involuntary childlessness and infertility; childlessness by choice; childlessness by circumstance. Employing an angle that aims to revalorise non-motherhood as a life position, Björklund tackles a broad span of contemporary literary texts, including fiction, autofiction, and personal essay and carefully contextualises these within Swedish culture and society. What emerges from this chapter is that Swedish women writers are keen to challenge the negativity that is regularly associated with non-motherhood and one of the ways that this is achieved in their writing, Björklund argues, is through the use of laughter. At the same time, Björklund is aware of the marginalisation that non-mothers are subjected to and deftly employs Kristevan theory to demonstrate the way in which they are abjected from society and labelled aberrant. In the texts selected for analysis in this chapter, Björklund notes a tone of defiance throughout the various narratives of non-motherhood whose purpose is to deconstruct society’s reductive image of the women without children and reposition non-motherhood as an actual liveable life.

Remaining in the domain of literature but moving to a Spanish backdrop, Dovilė Kuzminskaitė’s contribution approaches non-motherhood, like Björklund’s chapter, from a multidirectional perspective. Kuzminskaitė introduces us to a woman who already has two children but decides to abort the third as she does not want more children. Furthermore, it is important to note that the character concerned used IVF to conceive the first two children. In this respect, Kuzminskaitė presents us with a character who fluctuates between non-motherhood (involuntary), motherhood, and then back to non-motherhood (voluntary). Kuzminskaitė’s chapter, therefore, shows us that it is impossible to polarise mother and non-mother given that both experiences can exist within the one person. Kuzminskaitė also draws our attention to falling fertility rates in Spain and increased awareness of feminism and bodily autonomy among Spanish women, factors which, she suggests, are intertwined with the protagonist’s choice to abort her third child.

The rapidly decreasing birth rate in Spain is the focal point of the following chapter which engages with the emerging phenomenon of non-motherhood as an active and desired life choice. Anna Morero Beltrán and Elisabet Almeda Samaranch carefully examine the factors that have led to such a cultural mutation in Spain, a country which, up until the 1980s, was traditionally associated with high birth rates and large families. In comparison to Kuzminskaitė, they acknowledge the influence of feminism on the increase of women who are choosing to be childfree. However, they also list other reasons for voluntary non-motherhood such as personal circumstances, finances, and lack of public services/support systems. Based on a series of interviews with women who have chosen not to have children and employing a qualitative method, Beltrán and Samaranch, in comparison with many of the chapters in this volume, point to the importance of listening to the voices of women whose stories have previously been silenced and allowing them to articulate their experience in their own words. Beltrán and Samaranch adeptly show us that having a space for talking about and reflecting openly on non-motherhood is undeniably essential in today's society. It is restorative for the women concerned, provides recognition of their identity, and is something that, unfortunately, is not found in public policy or popular opinion. Indeed, as previously mentioned, this is one of the central aims of this particular volume, that is, to create a text where different experiences of non-motherhood can be freely expressed and then potentially better understood by society, and moreover, accepted as valid life-paths.

Lina Šumskaitė's chapter adopts a similar approach to Beltrán and Samaranch but situates it within the Lithuanian context where pronatalist norms and pressures continue to prevail. Like Beltrán and Samaranch, Šumskaitė works with a series of interviews conducted among women without children and employs a qualitative method. However, unlike Beltrán and Samaranch who focus only on voluntary childlessness, Šumskaitė considers non-mothers who are both voluntarily and involuntarily childless. Through close analysis of the interviews, Šumskaitė endeavours to unpick both the micro and macro factors that are embedded in a woman's choice not to have children as well as a woman's experience of being involuntarily without children. As we read these autobiographical reflections, we become aware of the myriad of issues, circumstances, feelings, and reactions that are bound up in the experience of non-motherhood. Taking all of these mixed and sometimes ambivalent attitudes and responses into account, Šumskaitė, like many of the other

contributions in this volume, questions the possibility of rigidly defining non-motherhood, instead promoting a more hybrid interpretation. Similar to Beltrán and Samaranch, Šumskaitė highlights the importance of allowing non-mothers to narrate their personal experiences in their own words.

Story-telling is also a central trope in the following chapter where we move into a discussion of non-motherhood from a more unconventional perspective. Tackling the poorly understood phenomenon of secondary infertility and the idea of the incomplete mother, Julie Rodgers's contribution adds further subtlety and refinement to our understanding of the non-mother. Focussing on British author Helen Davies' *More Love to Give* (2017), this chapter highlights the silence that exists around experiences of secondary infertility and reveals the way in which women suffering from the condition often feel unauthorised to recount their story due to the fact that they are caught between motherhood and non-motherhood. However, as this chapter demonstrates, not only does the woman who suffers from secondary infertility share much of the same pain and sense of loss as the involuntary non-mother, the fact that she is displaced and discounted from discussions of non-motherhood further heightens her sense of nothingness and non-existence. Rodgers makes a strong case, therefore, for validity of secondary infertility as a form of non-motherhood. Furthermore, in line with the other contributors to this volume, Rodgers argues that secondary infertility shows us that defining non-motherhood as a singular and absolute state is both impossible and counterproductive. On the contrary, as exemplified by non-motherhood, becoming and being a non-mother can present as a much more labyrinthine state, assume many shapes and, what is more, has the potential to shift and fluctuate.

Another chapter that nuances our interpretation of the non-mother is Laura Lazzari's exploration of narratives of miscarriage and perinatal loss in contemporary Italophone women's writing. Like secondary infertility, there is little empathy in society for the anguish caused by this specific reproductive trauma and, as a result, those experiencing it feel that their stories and suffering have been ignored and silenced. Lazzari selects a wide corpus of texts and examines the role played by writing and journaling in the recovery of the women concerned and once again, as observed by several other contributors, the therapeutic qualities of simply being able to speak. In line with Rodgers's position, Lazzari also argues that non-motherhood must become more inclusive and encompass women who

have either not had children or not had the desired number of alive children due to episodes of miscarriage and stillbirth. Similar to women suffering from secondary infertility, women who experience pregnancy loss find themselves in a liminal position where they are caught between motherhood and non-motherhood and without any language to articulate their identity. This volume, therefore, aims to open up the definition of non-motherhood so as to incorporate all of these disparate and dislocated subjects.

The contribution by María Sebastià-Sáez introduces a further angle to the complex negotiation of non-motherhood through her discussion of surrogacy as a response to infertility. The focus of her analysis is the novella-play *Dos madres* (1920) by Spanish author Miguel de Unamuno. The social, political, and historical context of the text is the early twentieth century in Spain, a time of great change and transformation, particularly in relation to women's rights. Sebastià-Sáez interrogates the good and bad dichotomy that exists in relation to fertility/infertility with the infertile non-mother viewed as incomplete and lacking. Infertility in the text causes pain and suffering and gives rise to feelings of 'otherness' and exclusion. Subsequently, desperate measures are pursued in the quest to transition out of non-motherhood and into motherhood, with the pathway chosen in this instance being surrogacy. Although the text may appear to promote a normative trajectory for women through the use of surrogacy as an entry point to motherhood and out of abject non-motherhood, Sebastià-Sáez argues that the unusual family model that emerges from this form of reproduction can, in fact, be viewed as progressive and innovative. The women involved in the surrogacy establish what might be described as a 'queer' family based on shared motherhood, whereby mothering together becomes the response to non-motherhood more so than the actual surrogacy itself.

Jasmine D. Cooper's chapter shifts the cultural context to France through her analysis of Amandine Gay's personal essay in book form, *Une poupée en chocolat* (2021). If Sebastià-Sáez touches on the idea of an alternative family unit through surrogacy and shared mothering, Cooper's contribution expands the possibilities for alternative forms of relationality even further. A staunch rejection of pronatalism, the essentialised female body, and the traditional family model underpins the text examined in this chapter. Cooper explains that this determined choice not to become a mother is closely linked to Gay's experiences as a transracial adoptee in France, her quest for bodily autonomy and the fact that she herself was conceived through rape. Her own mother then becomes the original

figure of the non-mother as she bore a child involuntarily and Gay's non-motherhood becomes a product of this. As well as reflecting on the personal experiences that have led to her decision not to mother, Gay's essay also engages in careful reflection of the heteronormative family at large and tackles important issues such as sterilisation, adoption, and more radical and subversive forms of kinship which would allow the figure of the non-mother to be recognised as legitimate.

Staying with the trope of radical resistance to motherhood, Orlagh Woods' chapter engages in a thoughtful discussion of *We That Are Young* (2017), the debut novel by British-Indian writer, Preti Taneja. The central narrative, Woods informs us, is based on a postcolonial adaptation of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, which the author has very effectively recast in modern-day India. Against this backdrop of a fervently pronatalist society which presents motherhood as the highest criterion of female success and disdainfully disregards those who fail to achieve this goal, Woods focuses on the subversive figure of the childfree woman by choice and the way in which her very existence challenges the heteropatriarchal structures of Indian society and, what is more, calls into question the very foundations of the nation itself. Woods examines the tensions that emerge when women assert control over their reproductive capacity within a culture that reifies motherhood and expects them to have children, thereby preserving the nation. The voluntary non-mother, Woods argues, becomes representative, therefore, of insubordination to and defiance of a maternormative society that tries to deprive her of bodily autonomy.

The final two chapters in this volume move into the realm of the visual and explore the role of the image, both still and moving, in the negotiation of non-motherhood. The chapter authored by Mercedes Carbayo-Abengózar tackles the topic of voluntary childlessness through the lens of the contemporary graphic novel, in particular Irene Olmo's *No quiero ser mama* (2020). The argument is structured around the unique potential of graphic autobiography to offer a robust response to the taboo of a freely chosen childless life. Via clever manipulation of colour space and the fantastic, *No quiero ser mama* transports the reader into the imagination of the protagonist and, as a result, this facilitates readerly appreciation of the various pressures to which non-mothers are subjected both from society at large and close friends and family. Like other chapters in this volume, Carbayo-Abengózar draws our attention to the specific pronatalist context of Spain where motherhood is expected of women and those who do not conform are cast as outsiders. Against this backdrop, therefore, the non-mother is positioned as a kind of 'killjoy' by refusing to adhere to the

normative conception of ‘natural female fulfilment’ and instead exposing the institution of motherhood as a form of imprisonment for women when it is enforced. While most of this chapter concentrates on the isolation and marginalisation of the protagonist once her decision not to have children is assumed and made known, in the final section, there is a discussion of the possibility of a collective of non-mothers that can emerge once the silencing of their individual experiences has been overcome, an act to which the graphic novel in question strives to contribute.

From the static image on the page, we transition to the moving screen in Valerie Heffernan’s chapter which closes the volume. In her discussion of the adaptation of a German language short story by Swiss writer Peter Stamm (“The Natural Way of Things”) into film by Austrian film-maker Ulrike Kofler entitled *What We Want* (2020), Heffernan examines the representation of a couple who have been struggling with infertility. What is perhaps most interesting in this chapter (and also pertinent to the overall aim of the volume) is the shift that occurs within the filmic narrative from one of being childless due to infertility to a reconciliation of sorts with this status which almost presents as a choice to be childfree, or, at the very least, a decision to move forwards as couple and assume their identity as non-parents. By highlighting this particular plot development, Heffernan’s chapter works to deconstruct the polarised the more traditional opposition of voluntary and involuntary non-motherhood, instead pointing to the feelings of ambivalence that are often inherent to the experience. In conjunction with this, Heffernan also carefully explores the differences that exist between the textual and screen versions of this couple’s life-story and alerts us to a further shift which requires unpacking. While the textual version presents a couple who are childfree by choice, the film complicates this by introducing the tropes of infertility and regret before allowing the husband and wife to move into a state of acceptance. Heffernan suggests that the occurrence of such a digression from the original genre of the short story to the screen adaptation no doubt signals an ongoing discomfort in popular culture with voluntary childlessness, a point that is also emphasised in Carbayo-Abengózar’s analysis of the same topic in the graphic novel.

When approached collectively, it is clear that, in spite of the inherent diversity of the range of narratives and experiences of non-motherhood recounted, there are, nonetheless, a number of common threads binding together all of the chapters included here. In turn, these common threads can be said to constitute the core aims of this volume. First and foremost, the volume seeks to draw attention to the fact that non-motherhood

cannot be defined as a singular experience. On the contrary, as is evident in the volume, it manifests in multiple figurations and can present as contradictory, unpredictable, and changeable for the non-mother concerned. Secondly, the contributions in this volume demonstrate the fact that the contextual factors involved in non-motherhood are often just as hybrid as the experience itself, and range from the macro (social, cultural, historic) to the micro (biology, trauma, choice, circumstance). However, regardless of the differences between each separate narrative and each individual experience presented in this volume, there are similarities and connections between the diverse narratives of non-motherhood. One underlying trope is the sense of isolation, marginalisation, silencing, and judgement that many non-mothers feel, whether they are voluntarily childless or childfree through choice. This points to a third aim of the volume, on the part of both the contributors and the authors of the material selected for analysis, that is, the deconstruction of the harmful stereotypes that are often associated with the non-mother and a reconfiguration of this identity in more affirmative terms. In conjunction with this, the volume interrogates the norms and expectations of cultures and societies across Europe that continue to conflate motherhood with womanhood, thereby causing the non-mother to feel like an outcast and an aberration. Finally, this volume highlights the necessity of creating a space where the silenced stories of non-mothers can be both articulated and heard and where they can claim an identity that is legitimate. The volume is concerned with promoting a form of non-motherhood that is inclusive and which does not create a hierarchy of suffering or pit different versions of the non-mother against one another. Perhaps then, as is reiterated throughout the volume, the key to fully unravelling non-motherhood is to first accept that it cannot be rigidly defined. Subsequently, the reader of this volume should expect to find their preconceptions challenged and their understanding of non-motherhood expanded well beyond one static and homogenous model.

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