**Women’s contentions with reproduction in the Global North: Experiences of reproductive racism and biopolitical control through pronatalist and antinatalist doctrine**

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Pronatalist doctrine suggests that women’s most valuable contribution to the world is that of reproduction, and to negate this contribution is to be a *failed woman* [emphasis mine] (Gillespie, 2000; Gotlib, 2016; Meyers, 2001, Morrell, 2000; Parry, 2005; Peterson & Engwall, 2013). In contrast, antinatalist conviction suggests that there are certain marginalized groups such as BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of colour) that are not ‘worthy’ of reproduction (Hossain, 2021; Fikslin, 2021). Notably, the intersection of racism, gender, and expectations of motherhood is productive of egregious antinatalist doctrine (Davis, 2019, Fikslin, 2021). In strong opposition to these ideologies, the present research paper will contend with women’s experiences of pronatalism, antinatalism, and the biopolitical control of their bodies through a feminist post-structural analysis of motherhood, childfree practices, family, and kinship. This analysis will specifically present women’s experiences of racism and reproductive injustice (Davis, 2019; Fikslin, 2021; Hossain, 2021) and their struggle for bodily autonomy and personhood (Gillespie, 2000; Meyers, 2001; Morrell, 2000) in their resistance to childbearing—drawing a clear connection between racism, struggle for autonomy, and both pronatalism and antinatalism. Through the presentation of the afore mentioned discourses, this analysis refutes the sociopolitical motherhood imperative, and questions what it means to exist in a world in which one embodies the identity of the *failed woman.*

I will first highlight the important distinction of the use of the terminology *women* when contending with childbearing discourse. This is not to minimize the vitriol that all people with uteruses experience through reproductive and pronatalist discourses, but instead to highlight the very different experiences of all individuals able to bear children. Moreover, to conflate the experiences of cisgender women to that of all people with uteruses would be unjust in all regards. Further, the scope of the present paper is not comprehensive enough to present a fulsome analysis of both experiences. I recognize and call attention to the need for more qualitative research surrounding queer, non-binary, and transgender experiences and resistances of motherhood and childbearing.

Progressing through the present analysis, I will begin by situating the political pronatalist discourse in the Global North for both BIPOC and white women. Further, I will progress to analyze the scholarship of feminist authors (Davis, 2019; Fikslin, 2021; Gillespie, 2000; Hossain, 2021; Meyers, 2001; Morrell, 2000; Parry, 2005), calling attention to the sociocultural justifications through which women contend with pronatalist and antinatalist discourse. In closing, I will propose how we may foster caring communities and equitable policies which support child free women while simultaneously making it safe to bear children and reproduce.

This analysis presents women’s ways of knowing through two distinct epistemological standpoints—through experiences of racism, and through the individual desire to preserve autonomy and selfhood. While the two positionalities and ways of knowing irrefutably interact, it is important to distinguish the political basis of the former from the latter. That is—it is pertinent to discuss the existence of antinatalist discourses for BIPOC populations, and to contrast this discourse with the experiences of pronatalism that white populations often experience (Fikslin, 2021). Dána-ain Davis (2019) analyzes underpinnings of slavery in the present day, suggesting that “the afterlife of slavery is a critical framework that makes it possible to talk about the continuation of racism in the medical management of Black women’s reproduction” (p. 13). That is, Black women experience egregious antinatalist discourses coloured with eugenic undertones and motivated by the institution of reproductive racism. Further, women of low socioeconomic status may also be victim to these antinatalist discourses, although arguably not as egregiously as the experiences of BIPOC women, by virtue of the deeply entrenched sociopolitical consequences of racism compounded with poverty. Notably, Davis suggests that a high socioeconomic status for Black women is not in that of itself combative of racially motivated antinatalist discourse; racism is far too malicious for the protective effects of wealth and social capital.

In contrast to the experiences of antinatalism that many Black women face (Davis, 2019; Fikslin, 2021; Hossain, 2021), white women of the Global North often experience pointed pronatalist rhetoric (Fikslin, 2021; Meyers, 2001; Morrell, 2000). As theorized by Elaine Tyler May (1995), a ‘new pronatalism’ rose in the Global North as a predecessor of second wave feminism. The second wave feminist movement decentralized and challenged the motherhood imperative, as evidenced by feminist scholar Shulamith Firestone (1970). Firestone suggests the laborious nature of reproduction to be detrimental to women’s liberation and autonomy. In her seminal piece “Revolutionary demands”, Firestone posits that “women, biologically distinct from men, are culturally distinguished from ‘human’” (p. 101). Feminist critics of the motherhood imperative, such as Firestone, fought for women’s liberation from motherhood. Thus, a ‘new pronatalism’ was born in attempt to preserve the biopolitical control of the female body (May, 1995). Such pronatalist doctrine is often motivated by the motherhood imperative, and common feminized stereotypes that motherhood is natural and necessary (Morrell, 2000). The consequences of such pronatalist doctrine are often detrimental; denying women bodily autonomy, pronatalist policies close abortion clinics, criminalize abortion, and denounce personal worth to one’s capacity to reproduce (Meyers, 2001; Morrell, 2000).

Moreover, it is critical to note that there are nuances in women’s experiences of pronatalist and antinatalist discourse— the inverse can also be true, white women may experience antinatalist discourse, while Black women may experience deeply pronatalist discourses. Diana Meyers (2001) succinctly connects the experiences of women combatting discourses of both pronatalism and antinatalism within the feminist movement:

Because motherhood decisions are singularly personal and unsurpassably important, feminists have long struggled to secure women’s autonomy over these decisions. Demanding that women’s rights to procreate be respected, feminists have opposed coercive methods of curbing fertility, such as forced sterilization and withholding welfare supplements for new babies. In addition, they have campaigned for the right to choose not to procreate—that is, for fully funded contraception and unrestricted access to abortion. (p. 736)

Drawing from the critiques of feminist scholars (Davis, 2019; Fikslin, 2021; Morrell, 2000), I argue that both pronatalist and antinatalist discourses motivate women to remain childfree. This is a critical distinction to make as those who remain child-free are often portrayed as self-determining, liberated, white women (Fikslin, 2021). As Rachel Fikslin (2021) and Carolyn Morrell (2000) critique, BIPOC women, neurodivergent women, and gender diverse peoples often remain childfree not in noble resistance to pronatalist doctrine, but as a result of egregious antinatalist ideology that deems their reproduction *undesirable.*

In her feminist ethnography titled *Reproductive Injustice: Racism, Pregnancy, and Premature Birth,* Davis (2019) examines the consequences of racism and Black motherhood. Davis’s research focuses on Black mother’s experiences of giving birth prematurely in the United States. Specifically, she examines a population of nearly fifty participants in Neonatal Intensive Care Unit’s (NICUs) in hospitals in New York, Louisiana, Florida, Minnesota, New England, and Ohio. Davis’s participants were comprised of Black mothers, fathers, NICU nurses, certified nursing assistants (CNAs), physicians, birth workers, and activists. Utilizing qualitative interview methodology, Davis engages in powerful conversations with participants that have experienced, cared for, and witnessed Black birth and prematurity.

As it is pertinent to the present analysis, Davis is working towards the concept of reproductive justice, which she presents as a framework which supports women to have or not have children freely. Davis further emphasizes the importance of the provision of the necessary resources to raise children. She suggests that reproductive racism and the afterlife of slavery are both significant constituents in women’s decisions to remain childfree. Moreover, her analysis focuses on connecting the existence of reproductive racism to the legacy of slavery. Davis explains that during the Antebellum era, Black women’s reproduction was strictly valued on the basis of procuring the subsequent generation of enslaved Black peoples. Inspired by Davis’s analysis, I suggest that many BIPOC women of the Global North are resistant to pronatalist discourse not only due to a desire to preserve bodily autonomy, but in protection of their own lives and of the lives of their unborn children. This fear is substantiated in the present day, as Black life is continuously met with egregious violence (Davis, 2019). Black women’s reproduction has been continuously exploited and undervalued, garnering birth outcomes rampant with prematurity, developmental turmoil, and maternal health complications.

Further, Fikslin (2021) also posits that the antinatalist discourse survived of slavery uniquely affects Black women in the Global North, influencing their resistance to otherwise rampant pronatalist discourses. Importantly, Fikslin suggests that “pronatalist social norms prescribe not only *that* women are supposed to reproduce but prescribe *which* women are supposed to reproduce” (p. 308). She draws upon this analysis to propose that such pronatalist prescriptions are “reflected in patterns of stratified reproduction based on interlocking forms of marginalization” (p. 308). Drawing upon the theorizations of Shellee Colen (1995) and her concept of stratified reproduction, Fikslin succinctly articulates that BIPOC women’s contentions with remaining child-free are synonymous with a desire to avoid racist critique and shame. Stratified reproduction refers to inequities associated with BIPOC reproduction as compared to white reproduction, as they are based upon disparities in ethnicity, class, and health (Colen, 1995). Fikslin employs Colen’s terminology of stratified reproductionto describe the violence associated with BIPOC motherhood, in contrast to white pronatalism:

Pronatalist expectations are disproportionately applied to high-status women in the U.S., with the prototypical woman expected to bear and parent children being white, middle, or upper class, heterosexual, able-bodied, neurotypical, married, monogamous, and a citizen … Those who deviate from this hegemonic idea of a prototypical mother may disproportionality encounter antinatalist expectations. (p. 308)

Taken together, the analysis of the afore mentioned feminist scholars sheds light upon the detrimental truth of many BIPOC reproductive narratives in the Global North—that is, Black women are forced to contend with the otherwise pronatalist doctrine of the Global North through specific antinatalist underpinnings, which are profoundly influenced by racist doctrine.

Moreover, while there are racist, systemic reasons as to why women forgo childbearing, there are also deeply intrapersonal motivations to remain childfree. As evidenced by Meyers’ feminist analysis (2001), women’s desire for bodily autonomy contributes to their decisions to abstain from childbearing. As it is commonly experienced by women with children, motherhood becomes their central identity (Morrell, 2000), while the self is lost in translation. However, the decision to remain child-free is not without consequence; women are often diminished and ridiculed through socially dominant ideology which suggests that “a childless life is not… a viable or appealing choice” (Morrell, 2000, p. 314). Guided by a feminist post-structuralist approach, Morrell suggests that the devaluation of nonreproduction is inevitable if scholars are uninterested in the narratives of childfree woman’s lives. Critical of the devaluation of a childfree life, Morrell argues that patriarchal ideology undermines the legitimacy of choosing to forgo reproduction. Similarly, Meyers (2001) condemns pronatalist doctrine, suggesting that it is primarily detrimental to women as it perpetuates the deterministic discourse that it is the principal role of women to reproduce. Speaking to such rhetoric, feminist scholar Rosemary Gillespie (2000) articulates, “the nurturance of children has historically been seen to be what women *do,* and mothers have been seen to be what women *are,* constituting the central core of [women’s identities]” (p. 225). Thus, women are reduced not only to the role of motherhood, but are stripped of their personhood, diminished to the reproductive body (Parry, 2005).

So, why is it that despite experiencing the sociopolitical notion of a ‘failed identity’, that women make the decision to remain childfree? Gillespie (2000) conducted qualitative research to better understand the positionality of childfree women. Gillespie’s participants self-identified as being significantly affected by rampant pronatalist doctrine but remained steadfast in their decisions to remain childfree. Analysing the interview transcripts and inspired by Sawicki (1991), Gillespie presents a Foucauldian analysis of the participant narratives, and suggests that while discourse is significant, neither pronatalist nor antinatalist discourse is totalising. Rather, she views women’s deviance from reproduction as a site of transformation at which women refute and challenge such patriarchal notions. Gillespie (2000) refutes pronatalist essentialism, which suggests that “motherhood is fixed, unchanging, natural, fulfilling, and in particular, central to feminine identity” (p. 224). Thus, Gillespie signifies that women are increasingly opting to remain childfree in effort to preserve their personhood and autonomy. In contestation of such deterministic discourses and drawing from the contributions of Meyers (2001), Morrell (2000) and Gillespie (2000), the present analysis is supportive of the position to remain childfree, condemning the loss of autonomy prevalent within pronatalist doctrine.

Embarking on this research paper, I believed that I would discover literature surrounding women’s resistances of pronatalist political control in justification of remaining childfree. While the existence of pronatalist doctrine and women’s resistance to childbearing in preservation of autonomy has been well documented within the literature, the effect of antinatlism is not as prominently evidenced (Fikslin, 2021). I was deeply disheartened by the alternative finding—women of colour are often motivated by self-preservation and fear (Davis, 2019, Hossain, 2021) in their abstinence from childbearing. Thus, the purpose of this analysis is to demonstrate the consequences of biopolitical reproductive control, whether from pronatalist or antinatalist doctrine. When reproduction is valued in excess, women suffer; when reproduction is devalued, women suffer. So long as the politics of the body are made the opinion of the state, women cannot make autonomous reproductive decisions. Through the presentation of critiques of both pronatalism and antinatlism in feminist literature, I suggest that social and political discourse surrounding reproduction is detrimental to both mothers and childfree women alike.

Drawing upon the critiques and concerns of the afore mentioned scholars, I will now complete this analysis by presenting a call to action in resistance of the pronatalist and antinatalist biopolitical control of the reproductive body. The sociopolitical construction of reproductive discourse must facilitate “social conditions that *support* motherhood but that do not require it” (Morrell, 2000, p. 321). Morrell further posits that it is pertinent to recognize that empowerment of reproductive justice is a deeply interpersonal movement, underlining that reproductive choices and injustices are profoundly socially determined. That is, to facilitate caring communities, freedom *from* and freedom *to* reproduce are both integral to the liberation of women.

As evidenced by the present feminist post-structural analysis of the biopolitical control invoked by reproductive control, the present analysis and further research are critically important. As the Global North is increasingly abject to egregious pronatalist and antinatalist policies, freedom from reproductive injustice (Davis, 2019; Fikslin, 2021; Hossain, 2021) and the upholding of bodily autonomy (Gillespie, 2000; Meyers, 2001; Morrell, 2000) are critical ideological contributions of feminist scholars. Above all, conducting a literature review of reproductive discourses has unveiled one fundamental truth—the mere existence of discursive reproductive control is detrimental to the well-being of women alike. The sanctity of women’s knowing and personhood are undermined by both pronatalist and antinatalist discourse alike. Taken with the present analysis, I implore families, friends, and policy makers alike to consider the consequence of demanding to know *why you don’t have children.* As childfree women continue to be conceptualized as incomplete and deficient *unwomen* (Atwood, 1985), argument against these deterministic discourses is paramount.

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