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'Damned If We Do, Damned If We Don't': Ageist Narratives of Reproductive Control

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ABSTRACT

Women who grow up in Western societies are confronted with media, cultural, and literary narratives conveying the notion that motherhood is "natural" and an integral part of womanhood from a very young age. Thus, having a child is frequently presented as the only option for adult women. Nancy Felipe Russo calls this "the motherhood mandate," which problematically suggests that every woman wants to become a mother and that this "is a woman's raison d'être" (144). The normative conflation of womanhood with the obligatory assumption of motherhood is ingrained in North American society and reinforces rigid gender norms while exposing hegemonic reproductive expectations. These norms also extend into efforts to control reproduction and produce condemning, frequently ageist narratives that stigmatize those whose reproductive choices do not comply with heteropatriarchal norms. Therefore, this article proposes that age is a crucial lever of reproductive control and examines how ageist facets of such controlling efforts affect characters' lives in Brit Bennett's *The Mothers* and Sheila Heti's *Motherhood*. Based on the reproductive choices in *The Mothers* and *Motherhood*, I will argue that the ageist reproductive norms and concomitant stigmatizing narratives aim to exert reproductive control, on the one hand, by suggesting that young women are damned if they become pregnant, mothers, or have an abortion, and, on the other, by condemning adult women who decide to remain childfree.

KEYWORDS

Reproductive justice, abortion, childfree by choice, ageism

From a very young age, women[1] who grow up in Western societies are confronted with media, cultural, and literary narratives conveying the notion that motherhood is "natural" and an integral part of womanhood. Thus, having a child is seldom presented as one option among many. The language surrounding reproduction can create ageist, pronatalist pressure that situates having children not as a question of *if* but *when*. In her book *(M)Otherhood: On the Choices of Being a Woman*, Pragya Agarwal recounts a car ride during which her three-year-old daughter explains that Susie, presumably her preschool teacher, told her that one day she "will have a baby in [her] tummy" (17). Agarwal resents Susie "for drilling . . . into [her] child that every woman will be pregnant one day" (18). Agarwal's anecdote suggests that the conceptualization of womanhood in Western societies not only implies but demands motherhood as reflected in (popular) culture, literature, film, and television. Building on this patriarchal demand, Nancy Felipe Russo has coined the term "motherhood mandate" to critically interrogate the notion that every woman wants to become a mother and that motherhood "is a woman's raison d'être" (144).

Importantly, socio-cultural expectations also enforce a duality of temporal restrictions determining *when* a woman *should* become a mother. While children assigned female at birth are incentivized early, as Agarwal's daughter is, to imagine future motherhood, young adult women-identified persons are vehemently discouraged from and stigmatized for becoming pregnant. In adulthood, this form of ageist discrimination is juxtaposed by the stigmatization beleaguering women and individuals who may not want to have children. Thus, the normative conflation of womanhood with motherhood, ingrained in North American society, reinforces ageist gender norms while exposing heteropatriarchal reproductive expectations. These norms ultimately aim to control reproduction and produce condemning narratives stigmatizing those who make "deviating" choices.

This article proposes that age is a crucial lever of reproductive control that determinately affects actual and fictional lived experiences. Therefore, my aim is to examine how ageist facets of such controlling efforts affect the characters' lives in Brit Bennett's US-American novel *The Mothers* (2016) and Sheila Heti's Canadian autofictional novel *Motherhood* (2018). While gender and economic status crucially influence the analysis of characters' reproductive choices in both works, they also echo

[1] Writing about women, motherhood, and reproduction is accompanied by terminological difficulties and exclusionary heteropatriarchal thought structures. Therefore, I want to clarify that my usage of "woman/women" includes cis, trans, and queer women, white, Black and Indigenous women, women of color, women living with disabilities and neurodivergence, and all women-identified individuals. However, my use of "woman/women" does not assume that women's lived experiences with womanhood, motherhood/parenthood, or reproduction are the same. I also want to acknowledge the continued marginalization of trans and non-binary individuals in discussions surrounding reproductive issues. While the characters in the novels analyzed in this article identify with their gender assigned to them at birth, I will include gender-neutral language wherever applicable.

Rickie Solinger's assertion that "reproductive capacity" (1) carries "different meanings, depending on the age of individuals, [and] their race . . ." (1). Focusing on different meanings based on age, I will argue that *The Mothers* and *Motherhood* highlight ageist reproductive norms by addressing two stigmatizing narratives: what I call "damned-if-we-do" and "damned-if-we-don't" narratives, which both fault women for not complying with heteropatriarchal and chrononormative reproductive choices. The former illustrates that the societal stigmatization of young women (characters) who become pregnant, mothers, or have an abortion function as a controlling measure of young reproduction. *The Mothers* exemplifies how young adult women's reproductive choices are racialized, complicated by the lack of comprehensive sex education and low-threshold access to reproductive health care, and ultimately controlled by the stigmatization of young adult pregnancy and motherhood. Therefore, I propose expanding Russo's notion of "the motherhood mandate" to include normative socio-cultural and patriarchal structures that hegemonically prescribe *not* having children up to a certain age. Meanwhile, *Motherhood*'s "damned-if-we-don't" narrative illustrates that the promotion of pronatalist norms continues to forcefully orient adult women's lives towards motherhood. Women like Heti, who consider remaining childfree[2] by choice, therefore, frequently experience harmful stigmatization and devaluation based on the gendered reproductive expectations tied to age. Thus, the "damned-if-we-do" and the "damned-if-we-don't" narratives suggest that the societal perception of (women's) age functions oppressively and produces ageist forms of reproductive control.

(Ageist) Reproductive Control

In the US, women's bodies are construed as sites of social control, and the stigmatization of women whom society perceives to transgress heteropatriarchal gendered norms forcefully extends into discourses of reproductive health and motherhood. Angus McLaren, for instance, argues that fertility was "*always* controlled" (2, original emphasis) and that reproductive control is a universal facet of social life (3). These controlling mechanisms are inextricably linked to social identities, such as gender, race, class, (dis)ability, and age, and are evident in women's reproductive choices. Dominant discourses frequently stigmatize young adult pregnancies and disparagingly refer to young pregnant women as social problems, illustrating the discriminating instrumentalization of age. According to Jenna Vinson, age is one of the factors that determines how pregnancy and motherhood are perceived (xiv). Thus, while women bearing children between the ages of approximately twenty-five and thirty-

[2] I will use the term "childfree" throughout the article to avoid the implication of lack inherent in "childless." However, I also want to reject the sometimes-suggested implication that "childfree" implies a dislike of children.

five represent the norm, Vinson argues that hegemonic ideologies tied to reproduction and age detrimentally affect the societal perception of "young" (aged twenty and younger) and "older" (aged thirty-five and above) mothers (xiv). Accordingly, women who choose not to have children also experience a unique form of reproductive oppression. As such, a woman's age determines societal reproductive expectations, and deviations from these ideological norms frequently entail condemnation, discrimination, and stigmatization.

Examining how ageist discourses function to control reproduction presupposes an understanding of how age intersects with other social identity categories to obstruct reproductive justice[3]. According to Loretta J. Ross, one of the twelve Black feminist activists who coined "reproductive justice" in 1994, the term "is rooted in the belief that systemic inequality has always shaped people's decision making around childbearing and parenting . . ." (291). Ross (291) and Himani Bhakuni (1) assert that structural forces (e.g., colonialism, racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and poverty) and intersecting social identity categories (e.g., gender, gender identity, ethnicity, sexual orientation, [dis]ability, carceral status, and age) continuously impact women's bodily autonomy and reproductive choices. Therefore, age is not an isolated factor but a category that powerfully intersects with other oppressive forces to create unique forms of reproductive control. Ageist controlling mechanisms produce conflicting narratives that have the potential to negatively affect a woman's reproductive choices and broader issues of reproductive justice tied to systemic inequalities. Accordingly, the damned-if-we-do and the damned-if-we-don't narratives, stigmatizing non-normative reproductive choices, reflect the dominant hegemonic attitudes toward reproduction and bodies with reproductive capacity. Therefore, young women's pregnancies, mothering, and abortions are typically framed as mistakes. Meanwhile, adult women who remain childfree, especially between twenty-five and thirty-five, but also later in life, experience the potentially harmful effects of pronatalist reproductive imperatives. Accordingly, both narratives create a societal divide that aims to regulate women's reproduction through different forms of stigmatization.

Damned If We Do

Pronatalist socialization and the introduction of hegemonic ideas of motherhood in early childhood often stigmatize younger individuals who have (un)intended

[3] In *Reproductive Justice: An Introduction*, Loretta J. Ross and Rickie Solinger explain that the concept of reproductive justice exceeds US-American pro-life and pro-choice discourses (9) and in her article "Reproductive Justice as Intersectional Feminist Activism," Ross further specifies that reproductive justice has its basis in "three interconnected sets of human rights: (1) the right to have a child under the conditions of one's choosing; (2) the right not to have a child using birth control, abortion, or abstinence; and (3) the right to parent children in safe and healthy environments free from violence by individuals or the state" (290).

pregnancies and engage in the practice of mothering. Such mothering, according to Adrienne Rich, may conform to or resist the patriarchal institution of motherhood (13), which Lynn O'Brien Hallstein et al. assert to be "male defined and controlled and . . . deeply oppressive to women" (2). A return to Agarwal's example shows that pronatalist ideas of motherhood influence children's upbringing, are internalized, and reproduced later in life. While Russo's motherhood mandate may be introduced during childhood, US-American society is equally intent on exerting reproductive control by preventing young women's pregnancies. These prevention programs, albeit important, very often neglect the Guttmacher Institute's recommendation to provide "evidence-based, holistic and nonstigmatizing information, education and services" ("Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health"). Instead, many efforts, such as the infamous 2013 NYC Human Resources Administration campaign, aim to control young people's sexuality and reproduction by promoting abstinence or employing scare tactic statistics, shameful tropes of teenage pregnancy, and young mothers' stigmatization.

Such practices reflect the US-American ideological divide regarding (young) women's bodily autonomy, reproductive health, justice, and choices. Leslie M. Kantor and Laura Lindberg assert that deep-seated disagreements on young people's sex and reproductive health education result in varying degrees of information depending on school district and state (147). Tellingly, the US-American abstinence-only-until-marriage (AOUM) approach[4], implemented at the end of the 1990s, is still a content requirement in sex education today. Despite its ineffectiveness (Santelli et al. 400), AOUM remains relevant alongside more comprehensive sex education approaches in forty US-American states (Guttmacher Institute, "Sex and HIV Education"). Kelli Stidham Hall et al. assert that the AOUM approach "withholds information about condoms and contraception, promotes religious ideologies and gender stereotypes, and stigmatizes adolescents with nonheteronormative sexual identities" (595). The approach is also exclusionary because it marginalizes LGBTQIA+ identified, transgender, and nonbinary individuals and stigmatizes sexually active young people. Promoting sexual abstinence in sex education exerts reproductive control by positing extramarital sex and sexual activity as shameful. John S. Santelli et al. argue that the religious connotations of AOUM frame abstinence as virtuous and necessarily juxtapose having sex as the opposite (402). Thus, the stigmatization of young pregnant individuals and mothers stems from the widespread societal belief in youthful abstinence and the stigma associated with unintended pregnancies and young motherhood.

[4] Today, this approach is also known under "sexual risk avoidance programs," however, as the goal, preventing sex before marriage, remains the same AOUM will be used throughout the article.

Accordingly, the damned-if-we-do narrative – having sex, becoming pregnant, having an abortion or becoming a mother, and mothering or parenting during adolescence or young adulthood – is a societal and institutionally condemned narrative tied to age-based patriarchal motherhood standards. Positing young unintended pregnancies as (traumatizing) cautionary tales has time and again been employed as a ubiquitous trope or storyline. Correspondingly, Vinson argues that teenage pregnancy and young motherhood are predominantly depicted as "the downfall of a woman's life" (4). She further states that any deviation from the hegemonically acknowledged narrative is typically framed as a failure (4). Meanwhile, young motherhood or choosing not to have a child by obtaining an abortion are often also heavily stigmatized. According to Katrina Kimport, abortion stigma in the US builds on preexisting gender inequalities and defies patriarchal ideals "of women as innately maternal" (619). Kimport further asserts that stigma is based on assumed deviance from dominant socio-cultural values and norms, which subjects people who have an abortion to marginalization and social shaming (615). Measures of reproductive control involving the devaluation of bodily autonomy in reproductive health care choices influenced by societal values, religious convictions, policies, and judicial decisions (especially the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in 2022) as well as ageist norms, entrenches young pregnant and mothering people in damning narratives intent on reaffirming hegemonic ideas of motherhood.

These narratives are reproduced in literary works, which frequently deal with their young protagonist's pregnancies. Especially contemporary Young Adult novels, such as Isabel Quintero's *Gabi, Girl in Piece* (2014), E. K. Johnston's *Exit, Pursued by a Bear* (2016), and Angie Thomas's *Concrete Rose* (2022), address pregnancy and abortion as a reproductive health care choice. However, such portrayals are often controversial and, thus, convey the power of pronatalist discourses. According to Elizabeth Podnieks's and Andrea O'Reilly's research in *Textual Mothers / Maternal Texts*, adult fiction authors, alongside scholarship in motherhood studies, have "contributed to reconceptualizing motherhood" (4). Podnieks and O'Reilly advocate for unmasking motherhood as an institution and foregrounding mothering as a diverse practice and experience (5). Indeed, contemporary novels emphasize diverse experiences and bodily autonomy while negotiating contested reproductive issues. Michael Burke's argument that fictional mothers consistently elicit a significant affective response during reading (103–06) further emphasizes their cultural, societal, and literary significance. Age, especially during adolescence and young adulthood, complicates mother-ing narratives because it is crucial in exerting reproductive control and influencing women's reproductive choices.

Brit Bennett's *The Mothers* is an excellent example of how age functions in a narrative that highlights the expression and internalization of reproductive control applicable during young adulthood. Bennett's novel, set in Southern California, frequently switches from the present to narrate past events. The plot initially focuses on the Turner family and emphasizes the importance of mothers, motherhood, and forms of mothering within the Black church community of Upper Room. *The Mothers*, therefore, shows how shaming and hegemonic racialized reproductive discourses contribute to controlling young characters' reproductive choices. Bennett juxtaposes Elise Turner's past narrative of young motherhood with her young adult daughter's unintended pregnancy and abortion in the present. The characters' decisions are positioned against the backdrop of Upper Room's community and, specifically, the church mothers, whose voice personifies some of the US-American (religious) tenets of reproductive control.

"We didn't believe when we first heard because you know how church folk can gossip" begins Bennett's novel (7), letting readers in on a secret that the church mothers talk about in one unified voice. Resembling a Greek chorus, they invoke the knowledge of multiple generations of Black women and their experiences with religion, men, relationships, pregnancy, motherhood, and mothering. The unique narrative perspective of first-person plural narration situates the mothers as the collective voice of Upper Room. What Natalya Bekhta calls the "we-narrative" "expresses multiple subjectivities in their unity" (loc. 15). According to Bekhta, we-narratives thematize communal conflicts involving confrontation with "an outsider or misfit" (loc. 16–17). In *The Mothers*' case, the "misfit" is Elise Turner's seventeen-year-old daughter, Nadia Turner. Through the church mothers' eyes, the novel's beginnings focus on Nadia's growing alienation from Upper Room after her mother's suicide. After the funeral, the shocked church mothers dote on Nadia and her father, thereby illustrating a community-based understanding of mothering involving (child) care and bringing food to grieving community members (Bennett 33). The mothers – "some by heart, some by womb" (33) – form a network of women who mother Upper Room Chapel and its community. Brit Bennett's novel, thus, centralizes women who become mothers by choice, circumstance, and necessity, those who are present and absent, and also women who choose to remain childfree.

The mothers, the novel's unified narrators, are not omniscient but claim a morally authoritative, often judgmental, stance that casts Nadia as a misfit due to their limited insight. Accordingly, they call her a "reckless daughter" (Bennett 56) and surmise she is "wild" (55) after the young woman drunkenly crashes her father's truck. However, in an instance of dramatic irony, readers know that the car crash happens after Nadia has an abortion and her boyfriend, Luke Sheppard, abandons her at the clinic

after her appointment. Nadia also distinctly remembers that her adolescent behavior often elicited the church mothers' disapproval. One specific flashback illustrates the Upper Room community's efforts to control young women's sexuality. Mrs. Sheppard, the pastor's wife and Upper Room's first lady, caught the thirteen-year-old Nadia kissing a boy behind the church. At the time, Mrs. Sheppard tells her that "nice girls don't do that" (69), while the Sunday school teacher makes Nadia write out "[*m*]*y body is a temple*" (69, original emphasis) a hundred times. The church community enforces religious and traditionally gendered sexual norms that reprimand and shame young women for their perceived non-conformity. Learning about what happened, Elise, who had Nadia as a teenager, also emphasized, if not abstinence, then the need to be smart and especially not to "end up [pregnant] like [she] did" (70).

Nadia's memory shows that kissing, being sexually active, and especially becoming pregnant as a young woman are heavily stigmatized within her (religious) community and framed as a failure by Elise. Instead of suggesting preventative measures that involve evidence-based sex education, Nadia's environment emphasizes the abstinence-only-until-marriage approach and propagates damning controlling narratives. Contrary to Russo's motherhood mandate, young Nadia faces a specific form of reproductive control mandating chastity and non-motherhood. The stigmatizing and shameful rhetoric surrounding sex and pregnancy, as well as her mother's words, profoundly impact how Nadia perceives her mother's life in relation to her own:

> But her mother was seventeen when she'd gotten pregnant. She must've known from experience how that had hurt her own parents. And if getting pregnant was the most harmful thing Nadia could do, then how much pain had her unexpected arrival caused? How much had she ruined her mother's life, if her mother told her that a baby was the worst thing that could happen to her? (Bennett 70)

Nadia's storyline begins to mirror her mother's once she secretly starts dating Mrs. Sheppard's son, Luke, and becomes pregnant unexpectedly. However, unlike Elise, Nadia decides to have an abortion as soon as she discovers her pregnancy. On the one hand, she does not "want to be heavy with another person's life" (345), indicating a desire to be childfree. Conversely, "heavy" may also allude to the societally emphasized difficulties of being a young mother. Nadia decides not to "let this baby nail her life in place when she'd just been given a chance to escape" (22) by going to college. Nevertheless, the young woman's pregnancy, only disclosed to Luke, triggers internalized stigmatizing discourses surrounding young adult pregnancy. Nadia also recalls her own evaluative perception of pregnant classmates she has known: "She had seen them waddling around school in tight tank tops and sweatshirts that hugged their bellies. She never saw the boys who had gotten them that way . . . but she could never unsee the girls, big and blooming in front of her" (20). Nadia's poignant

awareness of societal stigmatizing but also racialized rhetoric surrounding teenage pregnancy is particularly evident at the free pregnancy center:

> [The nurse] must've thought Nadia was an idiot – another Black girl too dumb to insist on a condom. But they had used condoms, at least most times, and Nadia felt stupid for how comfortable she had felt with their mostly safe sex. She was supposed to be the smart one. She was supposed to understand that it only took one mistake and her future could be ripped away from her. . . . she should have known better. She was her mother's mistake. (20)

In this paragraph, framing young adult pregnancy as a mistake undergirded by persistent racial stereotypes related to young Black women's pregnancies shows that Nadia has internalized a uniquely damning narrative. Accordingly, Shameka Poetry Thomas argues that reproductive stratification, caused by racist commodification and devaluation of Black reproductivity during slavery, still creates reproductive injustices and reprimands Black women's reproduction today (18). Therefore, Nadia's shame surrounding her pregnancy is racialized and connected to ageist parameters of white patriarchal reproduction. In this context, Wendy Luttrell notes that the societal emphasis on a linear life path involving education, secure employment, marriage, and parenting, frames non-linear conceptions of young people's lives as "abnormal, problematic, or deviant rather than adaptive or resilient" (x). Accordingly, Loretta I. Winters and Paul C. Winters assert that the alarmist overemphasis on deviance has institutionalized adolescent and young adult pregnancy as a social problem (1). It is significant that such racialized and ageist narratives remain dominant (Winters and Winters 1), even though scholars, including Isaac Maddow-Zimet and Kathryn Kost, have found that young adult pregnancies are steadily declining[5] (3).

Since the 1990s, young adult pregnancies have also been framed as the cause of poverty, especially among young Black women (Vinson 62). This supposed causality has since been criticized among scholars. For example, Winters and Winters assert that Black young adults have problematically been depicted "as the model for the problem of teen pregnancy" (11). While the CDC records a disparity in birth rates among fifteen- to nineteen-year-olds that correlates with race and ethnicity (Division of Reproductive Health), Winters and Winters as well as Lee Smithbattle emphasize that preceding structural inequalities, including socio-economic precarity, poverty, and racism, affect these rates and limit access to all forms of reproductive health care (76; 11). Nadia's thoughts, therefore, reflect the internalization of alarmist media and political rhetoric that associates Black young adult pregnancy with a lack of individual responsibility, failure, and a less-than-prosperous future. Her mother's reproductive history further complicates the young woman's perception. Already

[5] In fact, 2017 marked the year of the fewest pregnancies for women aged twenty-four or younger in the United States (Maddow-Zimet and Kost 3)

accepted to the University of Michigan, Nadia is sure she wants to have an abortion, but her thoughts, nevertheless, align with socially and racially discriminatory stigmatization and specific ageist mechanisms of reproductive control. Aware of her environment's stigmatizing discourses and religious convictions, Nadia keeps her unintended pregnancy and abortion secret, while Luke discloses the pregnancy to his parents, who pay for the abortion. The baby that could have been becomes the catalyst for the varying antagonistic relationships between Nadia, Luke, her father, her best friend, Aubrey, Mrs. Sheppard, and the mothers at Upper Room.

Years later, when Nadia's abortion becomes public, the mothers are "disgusted but not shocked" (Bennett 350), highlighting the stigmatization of abortion in their community – a potential mirror of US-American culture. Race crucially influences the politics and narratives of reproductive control and directly affects Nadia before, during, and after her abortion. In that regard, Patricia Hill Collins argues that racism propelled by slavery, forced removals, exploitative labor, and draconian immigration policies still affects Black, Native, Indigenous, Latine[6], and Asian American women's pregnancies, motherhood, and mothering (57–58). Hill Collins further asserts that Black women have continuously struggled for bodily autonomy (e.g., the right to decide whether to have children or not) and maternal empowerment (e.g., the right to keep wanted children) while raising their children in a racist, predominantly white society (63–64), as reflected in *The Mothers*. Angela Davis also asserts that the eugenics movement and sterilization abuse during the 20th century lastingly shaped Black reproduction (353–65). Consequently, the racist history of reproductive control exerted on Black communities and religious beliefs may influence Bennett's church mothers' stance. They also articulate how dominant ageist narratives and scare tactics influenced their views on young pregnancy, mothering, and abortion from a young age:

> We'd seen pregnant women before but pregnancy worn on a girl's body was different, the globe of a belly hanging over cotton panties embroidered with tiny pink bows. For years, we'd flinched when boys touched us, afraid that even a hand on our thigh would invite that thing upon us. But if we had become sent-off girls, we would have borne it like they did, returning home mothers. The white girls ended up in trouble as often as us colored girls. But at least we had the decency to keep our troubles. (Bennett 350–51)

Ultimately, the mothers' opinion is informed by a discriminatory history that deprived Black women of bodily autonomy while simultaneously personifying religious viewpoints that employ age-based reproductive control by advocating abstinence and pronatalism. Their unified narrative voice makes it clear that Nadia's choices are

[6] I use "Latine" instead of "Latinx" in an effort to better adhere to English and Spanish pronunciation (particularly in the plural) and to support efforts aiming to provide gender-neutral option by using -e instead of -o and -a. For more information see Samantha Schmidt's "A Language for All."

incongruous with her community's values. Nadia does not regret her decision to have an abortion, and the novel suggests that she remains childfree by choice as an adult. However, Nadia still occasionally imagines the course of her unborn baby's life. When her best friend, Aubrey, happily becomes pregnant with Luke's child years later, Nadia compares their differing situations, thinking "magic you wanted was a miracle, magic you didn't want was a haunting" (345). Consequently, Nadia is haunted by her mother's unlived life and that of her unborn baby. However, Bennett's novel is also about reproductive choices within a Black church community, where the mothers, or as Hill Collins would call them, "community othermothers" (380), figure prominently and personify religious and societally conservative discourses of ageist reproductive control. Nadia's exposure to racialized, stigmatizing, and ageist narratives of young adult reproduction suggests that young women who deviate from a normative reproductive life may be damned *whatever* they do.

Damned If We Don't

Age becomes a determining factor that shifts reproductive demands as time passes in *The Mothers*. While Nadia's reproductive choices are partly controlled by her youth, her best friend, Aubrey, experiences fertility issues compounded by the social imperative for a married adult woman to have a child only a few years later. According to Rebecca Harrington, women who do not have children due to circumstance (i.e., infertility or other involuntary reasons) primarily elicit pity (28). Nevertheless, a devout Aubrey is confronted with pronatalist expectations within her community and desperately wishes for a child. Until she eventually becomes pregnant, Aubrey blames herself[7], which illustrates how the motherhood mandate affects the character's well-being and can trigger shame as well as an involuntary alienation from the norms of heteropatriarchal womanhood. The church mothers also continue to scrutinize Nadia's adult life from afar and strongly disapprove of her implied decision to remain childfree, which perpetuates the character's status as a misfit within her former congregation. The charged language used to describe Nadia, who, in her thirties, has seemingly "*never settled down*" because she was "*flitting around* the world . . . *never resting* anywhere" (Bennett 353, my emphases), conveys the ageist devaluation of childfree adult individuals based on pronatalist anxieties and biases. Similarly to Nadia, thirty-seven-year-old Sheila Heti observes the shift of reproductive expecta-

[7] In the novel, Aubrey blames herself and her body for not being able to conceive, because she knows that her husband, Luke, "had made a baby before, accidentally . . ." (Bennett 261). Unbeknownst to Aubrey, Nadia is the young woman who was pregnant with Luke's baby. This secret and Nadia and Luke's eventually revealed affair, while the latter is married to Aubrey, creates an antagonistic relationship between the three characters.

tions according to age in *Motherhood*. The novel reveals predominant ageist and pronatalist biases, which trigger a firm insistence on motherhood.

Motherhood is a work of autofiction, which Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf defines as the interrelation between real life and fiction that creates an experimental space for self-exploration (7–21). Fittingly, the novel's narrator and protagonist, arguably Heti herself, is a writer who composes stream-of-consciousness diary-like entries that explore the (im)possibility of having a child. The entries consist of the protagonist's intimate reflections but also include her friends' experiences and address North American societal prescriptions to have children as an adult. An intricate coin-flipping game, reminiscent of *I Ching*, divines answers for the many (reproductive) questions Heti poses and structures the narrative as she conducts a dialogue inside, as Alexandra Schwartz writes, "a divided mind." *Motherhood* results from the protagonist's dedication to her writing and preoccupation with (not) having a child. As in *The Mothers*, age-related measures of reproductive control play a crucial role in the novel, which becomes Heti's "wrestling place" (284), where she tests the societally propagated consequences of resisting mandated reproduction and narratives of pronatalism against her desire to remain childfree.

While the author veers on the side of remaining childfree by choice, personal insecurities, detailed reflections on motherhood, and the effects of ageist reproductive stigmatization guide her vignettes. Her deliberations on the topic also clearly reflect Dorothy E. Roberts's assertion that "women experience tremendous pressure, both systemic and ideological, to become mothers" (34). Expanding on such underlying pressures, Heti writes that "[t]here is a kind of sadness in not wanting the things that give so many other people their life's meaning" (23), addressing the power of pronatalist pressure on adult women and the precariousness of remaining childfree. Whereas ageist stigmatization is employed to deter young women from becoming pregnant and mothers, starting in their mid-twenties, women like Heti frequently experience distinctly reverse effects of reproductive control. Roberts identifies "[m]otherhood [as] virtually compulsory" (34), and Russo's coinage "the motherhood mandate" directly addresses the expectation that women should (want to) have children. Correspondingly, Leslie Ashburn-Nardo's 2016 study finds that most participants believe parenthood to be "a moral imperative" (400). Indeed, Heti, who is, at best, ambivalent about having children, pertinently describes the pressure to live a "conventional life" (22) according to cis and heteronormative (reproductive) conventions. Thus, *Motherhood* juxtaposes the desire to remain childfree with the omnipresent stigmatizing and controlling social narratives, including ageist biases, suggesting that adult women are damned if they do not have children.

Indeed, Heti notes that defying reproductive conventions by delaying or deciding against having children as an adult woman creates age-based anxiety and elicits unsolicited reproach. Believing that writing *Motherhood* might help her make a decision, the author is keenly aware of how the societal perception of age affects and aims to control reproductive choices and shifts reproductive expectations upon the transition from young adulthood to adulthood. Tellingly, she states that in her late thirties, "time is running short on making certain decisions" (21). As Heti observes the "linear" progression of her friends' lives, she also feels as if "other people were suddenly ahead of [her]" (22), implying a sense of being left behind owing to her reproductive choices. At the same time, recent societal developments reflect Heti's continued ambivalence toward having a child and her concomitant decision to wait despite the socio-cultural prescription of motherhood. Ashburn-Nardo notes the lagging change of pronatalist demands for motherhood, despite her findings that more and more individuals delay or decide against parenthood entirely (400). A 2021 Pew Research Center Report also states that the number of US-American adults (aged 18–49) "not too likely or not at all likely" to have children has increased by 7% from 37% in 2018 to 44% in 2021 (Brown). However, according to Ashburn-Nardo, childfree adults still experience stigmatization and moral outrage (394) for making this choice. In this regard, Heti states that "the woman who doesn't have a child is looked at with the same aversion and reproach as a grown man who doesn't have a job. Like she has something to apologize for. Like she's not entitled to pride" (270). The author's observation corresponds to Ashburn-Nardo's findings, noting a gender-specific evaluation of women who remain childfree (394). Pondering motherhood under ageist pronatalist pressure, Heti is aware of the devaluating rhetoric surrounding childfree-by-choice narratives. In fact, the insistent devaluation of childfree adults in life and fiction and the seemingly inviolable motherhood mandate imposed by US-American mainstream society fuel the author's extensive deliberations:

> Do I want children because I want to be admired as the admirable sort of woman who has children? Because I want to be seen as a normal sort of woman, or [as] the best kind of woman, a woman with not only work, but the desire and ability to nurture, a body that can make babies, and someone another person wants to make babies with? Do I want a child to show myself to be the (normal) sort of woman who wants and ultimately has a child? (Heti 22)

This passage illustrates how dominant pronatalist narratives – motherhood as the most valid, "normal" life path – influence Heti's contemplations. According to Harrington, this perpetual essentialization of motherhood problematically ties a woman's societal value and perception of completeness to her maternal status (25). Diana Tietjens Meyers and Ashburn-Nardo also suggest that women who choose to remain childfree during their reproductive years face unsolicited pity, accusations of

immaturity and selfishness, biases about their character, stigmatization, and moral outrage (735; 394). Harrington's study even shows that overall, people believe that voluntarily childfree individuals should have

> an unhappy life for straying from the mainstream and . . . rejecting . . . the heteronormative (and now homonormative) status quo, the social order, patriarchal culture, and the dominant pronatalist message that parenthood is an essential aspect of a fulfilling life. (28)

Accordingly, Heti herself contends that society renders the value of childfree women's lives invisible (95–96). One of the author's acquaintances puts it even more succinctly by saying that a childfree woman is required to have "some big plan or idea . . . [of] what the arc of [her] life will be" (51) that justifies foregoing motherhood (51). Heti also returns to this claim, questioning if "there is anything more important for a woman to do than mother" (134). The author's musings expose the persistent binary gender norms that position women as inherently nurturing and maternal. In this context, Betty-Despoina Kaklamanidou argues that "patriarchy dictates that motherhood is a natural instinct" (287), which, as Heti illustrates, causes childfree adult women to question their "(ab)normality" in the face of ageist societal reproductive prescriptions. The internalization of ageist mechanisms of reproductive control causes the author, who scarcely ever recalls a genuine desire to have a child throughout her adult life, to contemplate why she *should* nevertheless become a mother. Heti juxtaposes "the joy of children" with "the misery of them" and reflects on "the freedom [that] not having children" might bring (21). However, she is almost painfully aware of society's pronatalist conventions that cast a woman's childfree life as an "unlivable" and "unwritable" aberration.

In negotiating the childfree experience, *Motherhood* also demonstrates how society's age-based mandate for motherhood penetrates the realms of women's adult friendships. Many of the author's friends are pregnant or mothers in the novel. Most of these friends are in their thirties and have, in a way, already aligned their lives with pronatalist ideology, and some encourage Heti to do the same. For example, her pregnant friend, Erica, sends Heti a painting by Berthe Morisot titled *The Cradle* (1872). Erica sees the woman in it looking "*tenderly and protectively*" (27, original emphasis) at her sleeping baby and believes that Heti would look similar as a mother. Meanwhile, Heti thinks the woman looks "a little bored" (27), indicating her dispassionate stance on children and the desire to remain childfree. However, Heti experiences anxiety about how her reproductive choices might alienate her from her mothering friends. Especially her relationship with Nicola, a mother of three, illustrates Heti's conflicted feelings. Leaving after a visit, she feels better off than Nicola, yet she is instantly ashamed of that thought and believes her friend might judge her for not having a

child. In the following paragraph, Heti seemingly directly addresses her readers and concludes that one choice does not devalue another and vice versa:

> Living one way is not a criticism of every other way of living. Is that the threat of the woman without kids? Yet the woman without kids is not saying that no woman should have kids, or that you – woman with a stroller – have made the wrong choice. Her decision about her life is no statement about yours. One person's life is not a political or general statement about how all lives should be. Other lives should be able to exist alongside our own without any threat or judgment at all. (134)

Heti's proclamation reflects an ideal approach toward another person's reproductive choices during adulthood, which currently seems to have no place in US-American society. At the same time, Heti inhabits a privileged position where reproductive choices can seemingly exist unencumbered by politics. Although many contemporary fictional, autofictional, and autobiographical childfree-by-choice narratives aim to complicate patriarchal and ageist reproductive expectations, they are predominantly written by and about white, upper-middle-class, cis women within the socially prescribed reproductive age range. In accordance, Gill Rye et al. find that, contrary to the expectations of contemporary life, "normative discourse on motherhood based on white, bourgeois, heterosexual family models . . . that penalizes and stigmatizes those who depart from such templates" (2) has persisted. Nefertiti Austin also explicitly addresses the harmful predominance of the conception of white motherhood. Rye et al. and Austin's findings suggest a continued insistence on cisnormative, white, and appropriately-aged motherhood. The combined force of the motherhood mandate, normative notions of motherhood, and recent developments in the United States render all non-pronatalist reproductive choices and the retention of bodily autonomy ever more difficult. Moreover, Meyers argues that even the rhetoric promoting contraception, such as "family planning," also only suggests that "the *timing* of reproduction is a matter of choice" (736, my emphasis). Returning to Heti, *Motherhood* shows that, albeit having a choice and being subject to different laws as a Canadian citizen, the author struggles and experiences judgment for making the stigmatized choice to remain childfree.

As Heti's choice not to have children solidifies throughout the novel, contemplative entries demonstrating the power of pronatalist narratives more often give way to passages rejecting reproductive control and challenging often-unquestioned pronatalist attitudes. Heti, for example, remembers an abortion at twenty-one and how her doctor falsely prescribed a waiting period before terminating her pregnancy. While Heti describes that "there was no gap between finding out [about the pregnancy] and knowing what [she] wanted to do" (30), her story illustrates how even medical professionals, as Harrington states, sometimes impose pronatalist values on their patients (32) and are not immune to "personal and cultural bias" (32). Reflecting

on her doctor's appointment, Heti believes he showed her the sonogram against her will to persuade her to keep the pregnancy (32). By recounting the appointment, Heti illustrates how her reproductive decisions were infringed upon in favor of a pronatalist agenda. She also states that such narratives of reproductive control, as the one advanced by her doctor, harmfully suggest that she was "actively and selfishly denying" (42) human life with her decision to remain childfree. In *Motherhood*, Heti, therefore, struggles with the societal expectation to have a child and rages against the measures of pronatalist reproductive control.

Reflecting on such stigmatizing societal perceptions of childfree women, Heti also affirms that heteropatriarchal, capitalist society has a vested interest in controlling (the age of) women's reproduction. For example, the author recounts an evening at a literary festival where a fellow writer stated that "[*m*]*en want to control women's bodies by forbidding them from abortions, while women try to control other women's bodies by pressuring them to have kids*" (Heti 95, original emphasis), thereby enforcing pronatalism. Consequently, these controlling efforts render terminating a pregnancy and remaining childfree undesirable from a patriarchal standpoint. Following Rich, Emilie Lewis argues that the institution of motherhood functions as a reproductive controlling mechanism that upholds patriarchal power structures within society (124). In *Motherhood*, Heti first moves from feeling guilty about her indecision to addressing the pain that accompanies resisting pronatalist norms, saying, "[t]here can be sadness at not living out a more universal story . . . there is a bit of a let-down feeling when the great things that happen in the lives of others – you don't actually want those things for yourself" (23). Once Heti allows herself to claim her choice to remain childfree, she more vehemently questions the devaluation of womanhood untied from motherhood and criticizes pronatalist stigmatization and the constructed aberrant status of childfree women.

Moreover, the author criticizes the insistence on pronatalism that goes hand in hand with the attempts to curtail reproductive rights, while women – including mothers – increasingly become afterthoughts. She writes, "I know a woman who refuses to mother, refuses to do the most important thing, and therefore becomes the least important woman. Yet the mothers aren't important, either. None of us are important" (Heti 134). In the same vein, Simone de Beauvoir's words still have uncanny relevance when she asserts in *The Second Sex* that "our society, so concerned to defend the rights of embryos, shows no interest in the children once they are born; it prosecutes the abortionists instead of undertaking to reform that scandalous institution known as 'public assistance' . . ." (468). Seventy-five years after Beauvoir's criticism, Heti acknowledges the devaluation and negligence of women and people capable of childbirth and their children once born and points to the societally imposed

hierarchy that devalues women who are not mothers. The author's statement also indicates how societal prescriptions influence her deliberations in *Motherhood* and complicate her choice to remain childfree.

At the same time, Heti considers the potential rooted in remaining childfree, and the novel illustrates the perceived danger emanating from a childfree adult woman. Laurie A. Rudman and Kimberly Fairchild correspondingly assert that violating expectations based on shared cultural stereotypes, such as becoming a mother, may result in perceivers' backlash (157–58). Trying to explain this backlash, Heti proposes that "[t]here is something threatening about a woman who is not occupied with children. There is something at-loose-ends feeling about such a woman. What is she going to do instead? What sort of trouble will she make?" (32). Despite the damning narratives about childfree adult women, Heti knows she wants to remain childfree, leading to her deliberations on being childfree in *Motherhood*. Heti's decision to resist a normative life path triggers the contemplation of what such resistance means within a society enforcing ageist pronatalist control and motherhood. Ultimately, *Motherhood* becomes Heti's way to resist dominant Western narratives of reproductive control that affect adult women, as she calls the novel her "prophylactic . . . a boundary . . . between [her]self and the reality of a child" (193) as well as a life raft that will carry her into a childfree life. Age is consistently addressed in Heti's musing as she seems to realize that prolonging the completion of *Motherhood* might preclude her from having children, relieving her of an active choice. As Gretchen Shirm argues, the autofictional form "often involves the reclaiming of identity through the act of writing the self" (318), and Heti seems to (re)claim her identity as a happy, voluntary childfree woman throughout the writing process. Thus, the conclusion of *Motherhood* comes to signify an artistic birth – the only birth Heti truly longs for – and helps her embrace the choice to remain childfree.

Damned to Do

Brit Bennett's *The Mothers* and Sheila Heti's *Motherhood* can be read as examples of two different but equally ageist reproductive narratives. The former "damned-if-we-do" narrative aims to control reproduction through the age-specific stigmatization and shaming of young pregnancy, motherhood, and mothering. Thus, in *The Mothers*, Nadia Turner has to confront the stigma projected onto pregnant Black young adult women who decide to have an abortion. Bennett's novel importantly highlights a frequently marginalized and discriminatorily racialized perspective of a young Black woman raised in a religious context and faced with the prejudices imposed by hegemonic mothering norms. Meanwhile, in adulthood, Nadia's best friend Aubrey Evans experiences the feeling of reproductive obligation and the possibility of infertility,

thereby introducing the "damned-if-we-don't" narrative that Sheila Heti's *Motherhood* most productively illustrates. Heti's autofictional deliberations on the (im)possibility of having a child powerfully reflect on the pronatalist prescription to procreate as an adult woman and intimately detail the damning narratives surrounding the decision to remain childfree by choice. Thus, age pertinently influences the societal perception of reproduction in both novels and influences how Nadia, Aubrey, and Heti think about their (un)willingly "deviant" reproductive decisions.

While the characters resist the ageist controlling narratives placed upon them by the expectations of a heteropatriarchal, pronatalist society, both novels, nevertheless, echo Pragya Agarwal's assertion that women's bodies are "a battleground, desired and lusted upon, but also considered a monstrosity, defiled regularly, stigmatised and not their own terrain to navigate" (3). Thereby, it is crucial to consider that Heti and Bennett's characters not only diverge in age but also nationality, race, and class. Heti, as a white Canadian woman and successful author, confronts being childfree by choice from a position of relative privilege, or as Hallstein et al. would say, from the vantage point of "the hegemonic mothering norm – white, [upper-]middle class, heterosexual, and cisgender" (4). Meanwhile, Bennett's Nadia has to confront her young adult pregnancy from an already stigmatized subject position as a young Black woman. By discussing Heti's *Motherhood* side by side with Bennett's *The Mothers,* this article aimed to make different autofictional and fictional reproductive experiences visible while proposing that age is *one* of the crucial mechanisms aiming to control women (characters') reproductive decisions by the dissemination of stigmatizing ageist narratives.

The "damned-if-we-do" and "damned-if-we-don't" narratives delineated throughout this article emphasize that mechanisms of societal reproductive control influence women (characters) throughout their lives. However, these narratives illustrated in *The Mothers* and *Motherhood* show that heteropatriarchal reproductive expectations and prescriptions shift from adolescence and young adulthood to adulthood and, accordingly, affect Nadia Turner, Aubrey Evans, and Sheila Heti differently due to their age. The novels effectively illustrate a divide between individual reproductive choices, after all, Bennett's characters and Heti are content with theirs, and the unrelenting heteropatriarchal efforts to control reproduction that triggers the devaluating societal perception and evaluation of individuals who resist these controlling narratives. Heti puts it most succinctly by writing, "[o]f course a woman will always be *made to feel* like a criminal, whatever choice she makes, however hard she tries. Mothers feel like criminals. Non-mothers do too" (44, my emphasis). Thus, societally predominant ageist narratives of reproductive control ultimately suggest that women and people capable of childbirth might be damned whatever reproductive choice they make.

About the Author

Sandra Tausel (she/her/hers) is a university assistant and PhD candidate in the Department of American Studies at the University of Innsbruck, Austria, where she teaches courses in literary and cultural studies. Her dissertation project titled *Reproductive Ageism: Narratives of Age-Based Reproductive Control* delineates ageist reproductive discourses that create controlling narratives affecting women, trans, and nonbinary characters' reproductive choices during different life phases in contemporary US-American fiction. Her research interests include women's, gender, and sexuality studies in US-American culture, politics, and feminist literary criticism. She holds BA degrees in English and American Studies and German Studies from the University of Graz, Austria, and a Joint Master's Degree in American Studies from the University of Graz and the Université Paris Diderot, France. Before joining the Department of American Studies in Innsbruck, she was a Fulbright Grantee at Gettysburg College, PA, USA, and an OeAD grant recipient with an appointment at the Corvinus University Budapest, Hungary. She has published articles in *libri liberorum* (the journal of the Austrian Society for Research on Children's and Youth Literature), *WiN*: *The EAAS Women's Network Journal*, and in the Routledge anthology *The Disfigured Face in American Literature, Film, and Television* (edited by Cornelia Klecker and Gudrun M. Grabher).

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