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## Introduction

### NORMALIZING CHILD FREEDOM

#### *Affect, Reproductive Doxae, and Childfree Rhetorics*

*“Falling Birthrates: The Threat and the Dilemma”*

—Reuters, December 7, 2012

*“The U.S. Fertility Rate Just Hit an All-Time Low. Why Some Demographers are Freaking Out”*

—Washington Post, June 30, 2017

*“A Surprising Reason to Worry about Low Birth Rates: They’re Linked to an Increase in Populist Sentiments”*

—Atlantic, May 26, 2018

*“Birth Rates Are at an All-Time Low in the U.S., and Experts Fear It Could Turn the Country Into a ‘Demographic Time Bomb’”*

—Insider, August 1, 2019

*“U.S. Birthrate Falls to Its Lowest Level in Decades in Wake of Pandemic”*

—Washington Post, May 5, 2021

*“Why American Women Everywhere Are Delaying Motherhood”*

—New York Times, June 16, 2021

It’s been clear for a long time, at least from the headlines, that some people—notably women—aren’t performing their reproductive duties by producing tax-paying citizens. Even articles that present a balanced look at falling birth rates, such as the ones above from the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*, have clickbait headlines that predict sociopolitical failure. These headlines are inserted into a United States sociopolitical environment of heightened anxiety around reproductive

rights, LGBTQIA+ rights, racial equity, and immigration in the midst of threats of environmental catastrophe and global war, highlighted in part by the murders of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Breanna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Tony McDade, and many other Black Americans that spurred the ongoing Black Lives Matter protests in the late 2010s and early 2020s; the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting rise in unemployment, loss of childcare, and schools shifting online that affected many women in particular; the devastating effects of the United States abruptly removing military forces from Afghanistan in 2021; new laws in Texas, Florida, and other states banning the recognition of queer identities (colloquially known as “Don’t Say Gay” laws); Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine; and the Syrian, Afghan, and Ukrainian refugee crises that have highlighted the effects of global war on the displacement and relocation of people around the world. For some, living through these times has made it even more likely they would choose not to have children, even as there has continued to be sociocultural backlash against those who make this decision.

On the surface, concerns over falling birth rates are largely tied to decreasing tax-generated government funds, in particular to support the Baby Boomer generation, and fewer workers, and graying countries in Asia and Western Europe have already been grappling with these problems. The *Atlantic* headline suggests readers should also fear cultural shifts from declining birth rates, which increase the prevalence of racist and nationalist ideologies. Indeed, as activist and reproductive justice scholar Loretta J. Ross (2006) claims, reproductive politics shape entire communities “by controlling how, when, and how many children a woman can have and keep” (61). As those women<sup>1</sup> seen as productive citizens—mostly white middle- and upper-class women—have fewer children, tensions about who will inherit the country surface. Journalist Olga Khazan (2018) argues in the *Atlantic* article that such tensions contributed to populist sentiments that fueled the election of leaders such as Donald Trump. Indeed, immigration resistance, a core feature of Trumpism, is common in times of falling birth rates even though immigration might solve some of the economic problems of population decline (Zavodny 2021).

While at least some might prefer to avoid both the economic complications of an aging population and increasing nationalism and racism, in a country that tries to define itself around “liberty and justice for all,” ideological tensions quickly arise in matters of reproductive choice. *Childfree women*, a term I deliberately use throughout this project to point to the personal and political implications of choosing not to have

children (see later discussion of the term *childfree* in this chapter for a more nuanced analysis of this term and similar terms), names a fairly homogeneous group that is typically white, college educated, and middle to upper class (Dykstra and Hagestad 2007; Gillespie 2000; Hayden 2010; Park 2005). These are privileged positions that provide them with the affordances to make choices about their reproductive lives despite common beliefs about reproduction—or reproductive *doxae*—in circulation. Yet when childfree women make decisions they view as largely personal (such as the decision not to have children), such personal choices quickly become linked to discourses of nationalism, race, class, and so on that complicate the idea of personal reproductive freedom, as they highlight systemic social problems with declining birth rates, particularly as the childfree group has grown in number and has increasingly become visible in the past several decades. Arguments about childfreedom become increasingly complex as public claims about particular women becoming mothers—which are tied to rhetorical articulations of selflessness, care, and happiness—are connected with arguments about capitalist structures, citizenship, and immigration. These arguments make visible often-hidden *doxae* about reproductive expectations for some women, as they intersect with *doxae* about nationalism, citizenship, and xenophobia.<sup>2</sup>

Because motherhood has been inscribed as the natural and preferred—or happy—state of womanhood, contributing heavily to gendered happiness scripts in the United States, those women who choose not to have children are viewed as deviant or outside typical gender constructions. Although childfree women do not embrace motherhood, they still identify with womanhood; these identities are hard to separate in a society that ties women's gender to reproductive functions. Since the mid-twentieth century, “postwar Americans approached patriotic parenthood as a major source of joy and satisfaction in life. Happy families became synonymous with the ‘American way of life’” (May 1995, 134). Not having children was associated, and continues to be associated, with unhappiness. Work by other scholars further explains how the childless, particularly childless women, are ostracized in different parts of the world. In a study of five childless women in Australia, Stephanie Rich Ann Taket, Melissa Graham, and Julia Shelley (2011) concluded that “the reproductive status of women is still made to be relevant to how women are perceived, defined and valued, in contemporary Australian society. Importantly, lived experiences of childless women revealed in this research of feeling discredited and undervalued, and being perceived as unnatural and unwomanly, demonstrate that

misconceptions and negative stereotypes about childlessness continue to pervade” (244). Studies with larger samples in other geographical locations have had similar results (Gillespie 2000; Kopper and Smith 2001; Mueller and Yoder 1999).

More recently, a study by Leslie Ashburn-Nardo (2017) asked 197 undergraduates at a midwestern US university about their perceptions of childfree people. She found this group perceived childfree people “as leading less fulfilling lives than do people who had chosen to have children. Moreover, their decision to forgo parenthood, arguably individuals’ most personal choice, evoked moral outrage—anger, disgust, and disapproval. Moral outrage in turn served as a mechanism by which targets’ parenthood status affected their perceived psychological fulfillment” (398). While Ashburn-Nardo, like Rich et al. (2011) and others, have focused on particular groups’ perceptions of childfree people, a growing amount of research suggests that, at least in some places, childfree women (and people more generally) are negatively perceived and have often been seen, as sociologists Pearl A. Dykstra and Gunhild O. Hagestad (2007) put it, as deviants. Because their disidentification as mothers works against doxae about women’s reproductive lives as reflected in gendered happiness scripts, society casts childfree women as unhappy in order to reinforce gendered doxae and to marginalize them.

At an individual level, childfree women can struggle to articulate why they do not want children to family, friends, colleagues, and even strangers in rhetorically effective ways. The ideological threads wrapped up in why some women are encouraged to become mothers and others are not (see Fixmer-Oraiz 2019; Harper 2020), as well as the sociocultural baggage that attends becoming a mother, constrain what arguments others will hear and respond positively to. Childfree women’s careful rhetorical positioning of their decision in such a complex sociocultural milieu provides one avenue for rhetorical scholars to explore how a particular group of women is speaking back to *doxic* understandings of reproduction as underpinned by hegemonic mothering ideologies.

Drawing on interviews with thirty-four childfree women and analyses of texts about childfree women, this book examines the ways childfree women’s rhetorics are constrained and opened up by affectual circulations of reproductive doxae. In so doing, this book shows how feminist rhetorical scholars can use affect theory frameworks, which draw attention to the often-invisible threads that bind our actions and reactions, to interrogate how reproductive doxae affect the discourses that construct, support, and reject particular women’s identities. I argue that childfree

women's rhetorical interventions into these doxae demonstrate the difficulty of contesting and shifting these beliefs about their reproductive decisions. Ultimately, I claim that reproductive doxae limit the rhetorics available to childfree women so they feel forced to work with these threads even as they weave them in different patterns. These restrictions constrain the ways various people and groups, including childfree women themselves, rhetorically construct childfree women's identities and call for new theorizations of their identities that move away from or complicate the binds of motherhood, selflessness, and care. This approach also demonstrates how feminist rhetorical scholars can use affect theory frameworks to make doxae about gender visible for critique as they operate on rhetorics used by and about women.

### DOXAE AND AFFECT IN REPRODUCTIVE RHETORICS

Although much of the work in feminist rhetorics deals with doxae about women and their bodies, explicit focus on gendered doxae and how they affect women's rhetorics has been rare. This may be, in part, because doxae can be tricky to analyze; in his well-known work *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Pierre Bourdieu (1977) suggests why: doxae typically operate at an undiscussed or undisputed level, often affecting our lives without our even being aware of them. Doxae about women's reproductive lives and the pressures for women to become mothers operate in this unseen space, making it sometimes difficult to pinpoint particular affordances and constraints on childfree women's rhetorics. What I offer here is an attention to the affectual circulations of gendered reproductive doxae; this type of attention to affect and doxae can demonstrate the binding power of doxae and, therefore, make them more available for analysis and critique.

Several central tenets about doxae underscore the kinds of constraints and affordances seen in discourses by, about, and around childfree women. First, echoing Bourdieu, scholars such as Karen LeFevre (1986), Thomas B. Farrell (1993), Dana Anderson (2007), and Caddie Alford (2016) draw attention to the often unspoken and unexamined nature of doxae. Anderson (2007) claims that doxae are "those ideas we think *with* rather than think *about*" (8), and Alford (2016) claims they are "the discursive glue that both roots and insulates a community." Common assumptions made about childfree women's lives form part of this glue that makes them feel separated from others and that limits their rhetorics.

Second, many scholars (Bourdieu 1977; Crowley 2006; Farrell 1993; Holiday 2009; LeFevre 1986; Richards 2017; Ritivoi 2006; Thimsen

2015) claim doxae reflect a community's social understandings of ideas and knowledge, forming an epistemological web that unconsciously or subconsciously supports what those in a community do and think. For example, LeFevre (1986) claims that "the inventing 'self' is socially influenced, even socially constituted" (33), such that doxae influence what people say, do, write, and so forth. Doxae can form not only what epistemologies a community accepts but also obscure those it does not (Richards 2017), sometimes forcing them outside the realm of possibility. Even people not explicitly opposed to women choosing not to have children may repeat or at least fail to notice or object to discourses about women's lives that presume they will choose to have children.

Third, doxae are often circulated by people with power who are reluctant to make them visible (Bourdieu 1977; Crowley 2006; Thompson 1999; Thimsen 2015; Richards 2017). Equating doxae with commonly held beliefs as I and other scholars do, Sharon Crowley (2006) argues "that beliefs are views or attitudes or assessments about nature (including human nature) that serve the interests of the believer and/or some other person, group, or institution" (68). As operations of social systems, doxae often carry forward epistemologies that serve those in power and, as such, are better for those in power when doxae are less available for critique. Any attempt at making doxae visible, such as resisting and publicly questioning gender roles, must be countered because this forces doxae into the open and makes them susceptible to change, change that can harm existing social structures.

Fourth, although making doxae visible can be difficult, doxae do shift and evolve across different places and times whether made explicit or not (Richards 2017). However, some scholars (Hariman 1986; Muckelbauer 2008; Ritivoi 2006; Thimsen 2015) argue that the concept of doxae also speaks to the collective reputation needed to change doxae. John Muckelbauer (2008), for instance, claims doxa can mean both "a sense of subjective conviction" and "an objective quality similar to that indicated by the word 'reputation' (and also similar to the concept of *ethos*)" (150). A. Freya Thimsen (2015) echoes Muckelbauer's understanding. What is at stake for childfree women, then, is whether and how they can gain enough collective reputation to shape and change doxae about women's reproductive lives.

These four central ideas about doxae can be found moving through some feminist rhetorical scholarship, although doxae are not often directly analyzed through this lens. In the next section, I trace how reproductive doxae have been taken up in feminist rhetorical scholarship and made way for further work into how such doxae circulate

and operate on and through women's rhetorics. I then draw on Sara Ahmed's theory of happiness scripts to develop a framework for analyzing how reproductive doxae are both affectually and discursively circulated through childfree rhetorics.

*Circulations of Reproductive Doxae in Studies of Feminist Rhetorics*

Feminist rhetorical scholars have already explored the affordances and constraints different women or groups of women have experienced as rhetors, particularly in inventing new or different platforms and spaces, positions, and rhetorical strategies for themselves. Scholars such as Karlyn Kohrs Campbell (1989), Andrea Lunsford (1995), Cheryl Glenn (1997), Wendy Sharer (2004), and Lindal Buchanan (2005) have analyzed many platforms and spaces in which women rhetors have found an audience. However, the types of platforms and spaces granted to women rhetors can depend greatly on their positions and intersectional identities, which feminist rhetorical scholars have also examined (Logan 1999; Royster 2000; Gold 2020). In response to the constraints women rhetors experience because of the platforms and spaces available or unavailable to them and their perceived authority as rhetors based on their positions and identities, different individual women and groups of women have developed a broad variety of rhetorical strategies to influence the discourses around and about them, such as silence (Glenn 2004), rhetorical listening (Ratcliffe 2006), and rhetorical impatience (Cary 2020).

Feminist rhetorical scholars have also built rhetorical approaches out of feminist principles that reshape how rhetoric is viewed and open up for further analysis the rhetorical practices of everyone, including invitational rhetorics (Griffin and Foss 2020). In all these contributions, feminist rhetorical scholars have developed new methodologies for studying rhetoric, expanding what researchers can examine and how they can account for their own personal investment in their research (Booher and Jung 2018; Glenn 2018; Jarratt 2009; Restaino 2019; Royster and Kirsch 2012; Schell and Rawson 2010). Collectively, this body of scholarship reflects a deep attention to the ways women rhetors have individually and collectively found platforms and spaces where they could speak, acknowledge, and leverage how their identities shape their discursive practices, and to the ways they have developed unique strategies for talking with others. Throughout these texts, scholars show how women rhetors have constantly had to respond to, speak back against, and work with evolving doxae about their gendered identities as women. This work also shows how women rhetors have been active in shaping



and reshaping the discourses at work around them about gender, race, sexuality, medicine, politics, and so on. In other words, women rhetors have found ways to resist doxae even as they understand the need to negotiate them in speaking with others.

Within this body of work, a growing number of feminist rhetorical scholars in writing studies, as well as related fields such as communications, have specifically studied the constraints and affordances reproduction (pregnancy, motherhood, infertility, etc.) presents to women rhetors. Like much of the work of other feminist rhetorical scholars, such studies often relate to specific platforms and spaces, positions, and rhetorical strategies women use, examining how women navigate their own and others' reproductive lives, as well as the reproductive rhetorics that circulate around them. This growing area of research—exemplified by Maria Novotny, Lori Beth De Hertogh, and Erin Frost's *Reflections* special issue in Fall/Winter 2020 about reproductive justice and Hannah Taylor's (2021) *College English* book review "Complicating Reproductive Agents: Material Feminist Challenges to Reproductive Rhetorics"—has brought together scholars from rhetorical studies who have focused on feminist rhetorics, digital rhetorics, and the rhetorics of health and medicine in the pursuit of a better understanding of how women rhetors are shaped by and themselves shape reproductive rhetorics and, as a result, their own and other women's reproductive experiences. Feminist rhetorical scholars' attention to reproductive rhetorics has paved the way for more scholars such as myself to examine the ways reproduction works on, around, and through women's rhetorics. Thus far, however, these studies do not explicitly theorize how doxae affectually circulate through women's rhetorics, particularly when examining their reproductive experiences, such as the case of childfree women. Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa E. Kirsch (2012), in *Feminist Rhetorical Practices*, call for examinations of "social circulation," which refers to "the social networks in which women connect and interact with others and use language with intention" (101). Here, I trace how existing scholarship about reproductive rhetorics—specifically women's reproductive capacities, pregnancy and childbirth, motherhood, and infertility—intersects with reproductive doxae, even though these studies do not typically theorize or analyze doxae in these ways.

Several texts examine how reproductive doxae are circulated in arguments about women's bodies' reproductive capacities and how some women have created alternative platforms, positions, and tools to undermine such doxae. Only one text explicitly examines circulations of reproductive doxae: Kristin Marie Bivens, Kristi Cole, and

Amy Koerber's (2019) work "Activism by Accuracy: Women's Health and Hormonal Birth Control." This book chapter traces how doxae about hormonal birth control (HBC) are used to "control and sanitize women's bodies (and hormones)" by repressing information about how hormonal birth control actually works (163–64). They claim that some of the doxae circulated through twenty-first-century advertisements for HBC emphasize its ability to not only effortlessly prevent pregnancy but to also "cure" acne, take away the menstrual period, reduce menstrual pain, and even prevent certain kinds of cancer" while blocking "women from accessing accurate health information" (164) that would help women understand how HBC works and, as a result, what physiological side effects they might experience when using it. Altogether this doxa "prioritizes expediency and effectiveness of preventing pregnancy over hormonal, physiological health" (164). Alternatively, Bivens, Cole, and Koerber analyze how some "alternative medical and naturopathic arguments and texts provide a powerful counterdiscourse capable of productively disrupting the *doxa* about HBC; this accurate information on hormonal health might empower patients by providing them with increased and more accurate information about the bodies and the potential consequences of taking HBC" (164). Their work demonstrates how studies of reproductive doxae can make visible the constraints operating on women's lives and how some women have recognized and spoken back to these, which this book takes up.

Bivens, Cole, and Koerber's work picks up themes from Koerber's (2018) book *From Hysteria to Hormones: A Rhetorical History*, although this book does not directly theorize circulations of reproductive doxae. It's clear, though, that Koerber's exploration of the evolution of understandings of women's bodies that shifted from discourses of hysteria to discourses of hormones is about the ongoing circulation of doxae about women's bodies. The doxa she traces is the belief—underpinning early understandings of hysteria and transferring to more contemporary diagnoses of hormones—"that women are motivated by something inside themselves that they cannot control, whereas men control themselves through rationality and the male brain" (xiv). In short, Koerber argues that this doxa has not changed for millennia, but the ways this doxa is explained, particularly by the modern scientific community, has. The result is that "today's experts remain committed to a belief that the hormone-brain relationship in women's bodies is more difficult to control and understand than it is in men's bodies" (xvi–xvii). Lydia M. McDermott's (2019) *Liminal Bodies, Reproductive Health, and Feminist Rhetoric: Searching the Negative Spaces in Histories of Rhetoric* links the ways

women's bodies are pathologized with a feminist disability rhetoric framework, identifying the womb as a bodily space used to pathologize women: "Both the wandering womb narrative and ultrasound technology used as a routine aspect of prenatal care are meant to discipline the female reproductive body. As a medical theory, the wandering womb punished the woman who was not reproducing. As a surveillance technology, the ultrasound searches inside the reproducing woman to monitor her creation of a fetus" (15). Like Koerber, McDermott traces the ways women's bodies—whether "hysterical from lack of children, or insanely driven by desire from pregnancy"—are contrasted with supposedly "well-formed, clearly bounded, able to be touched and seen" men's bodies (145). McDermott primarily examines historical texts, but reproductive doxae continue to circulate these ideas, as Koerber's book examines. Koerber's (2018) and McDermott's (2019) books highlight a masculine fear of a lack of control over women's bodies that circulates through reproductive doxae. In chapter 1, I take up my own analysis of the ways theories of the wandering womb and hysteria have contributed to the pathologization of women without children by reinforcing the doxae that women's bodies naturally need to experience reproduction in order to be healthy and normal.

When women become pregnant and go through childbirth, their bodies are often marked differently from women who are not pregnant, and they can face increased scrutiny and interference from others, often men who purport to be experts despite having never experienced pregnancy or childbirth themselves. Marika Seigel's (2014) *The Rhetoric of Pregnancy* analyzes how pregnancy manuals such as *What to Expect When You're Expecting* describe pregnant women's bodies as systems that must be cared for through the rhetoric of risk management. Seigel identifies three assumptions, or what I call aspects of reproductive doxae, that underlie the structure of prenatal care.

The first is that what we as a society consider to be the "work" of pregnancy has the potential to have an impact on the bodies and practices of not only pregnant women but also potentially pregnant women and that pregnant bodies can become the sites through which social, political, and environmental risks are managed. Second, there is a supposition that in cases where the pregnant woman is seen not to be adequately working to discipline her own body and practices, the role of doctors, employers, law enforcement officials, fathers, and other "enforcers" of prenatal care practices is to impose such discipline. Finally, the telos, or goal, of the work of pregnancy as informed by the medical-technological system of prenatal care is assumed to be not only a healthy fetus (or a healthy mother) but also a normal fetus. (13)

Such doxae affect the types of care available to pregnant women and how they and their fetuses are positioned in a medicalized environment focused on producing a normal fetus, not on supporting a woman through her pregnancy. Seigel concludes with ways pregnant women can push against such doxae and construct pregnancy and birth experiences that are woman centered and that complement the baby's health (143). Taking up this question of agency, and in some ways picking up where Seigel's book ends, Kim Hensley Owens's (2015) *Writing Childbirth: Women's Rhetorical Agency in Labor and Online* recounts how women assert agency over childbirth through their written birth plans and online birth narratives. She claims these written texts are a way for women to speak back to a medical field that often undervalues their desires, as Seigel's book also demonstrates. Much as my own project examines how childfree women negotiate childfree rhetorics, Owens's book "explores *how women accept, negotiate, and/or resist various subject positions* in and through their birth writing" (14). Chapter 1 of Owens's book explores what she calls the "commonplaces of modern American childbirth advice" (18), or what I see as reproductive doxae circulating through childbirth advice. The central commonplace or belief is that "childbirth was exceedingly and inherently life-threatening for women and that it is safer now only because of the advent of modern obstetric technologies and methods" despite evidence showing childbirth is safer now due to "improved sanitation, improved access to food, and improved understanding of germs" (19). This belief that childbirth is dangerous has led to a host of shifts in childbirth practices (such as changes from midwives to mostly male physicians, from home births to hospital births) and innovations (such as fetal heart monitoring) that have not necessarily improved childbirth outcomes for mothers or babies. Seigel's (2014) and Owens's (2015) work demonstrate how reproductive doxae construct and constrain women's bodily experiences and how some women have tried to resist such doxae and assert agency over their bodies.

Pregnant women in particular workplaces or professions can grapple with specific types of reproductive doxae that circulate even in spite of policies that ostensibly should make those workplaces more amenable to pregnancy and childbirth. Megan D. MacFarlane's (2021) *Militarized Maternity: Experiencing Pregnancy in the U.S. Armed Forces* draws attention to the dichotomy between the policies in the US military intended to support pregnant members of the armed forces and the actual reproductive doxae that circulate about pregnant servicewomen. She argues that this dichotomy is a result of a disjuncture between policies and culture—which I see as underscored by doxae—that reinforce

“responsibilization,” or the need for individuals to make choices that support themselves and others without consideration of the material constraints on those “choices.” In the US military, servicewomen “become cocreators in what [McFarlane calls] the circuit of discipline in which responsibilization is institutionalized, communicated, and performed by systems and individuals in the military” (17), such that doxae about what makes good military members and good pregnant women come into conflict and are unresolved by policies. MacFarlane’s work demonstrates some of the limits of policy when reproductive doxae remain unchanged.

Once mothers, women continue to grapple with the ways reproductive doxae inform who they are as women and how they can leverage this role to build their own ethos in public spheres. Several scholars have examined how motherhood has circulated through women’s rhetorics and has both constrained and offered opportunities to women rhetors. Nan Johnson’s (2002) *Gender and Rhetorical Space in American Life, 1866–1910* examines how some women who were public speakers in the late 1800s took on a “mother-of-the-nation” role as a way to legitimize their presence in public. This role allowed them to claim that they “were watching over the affairs of the nation as they would their own households” (113) and that their public engagement was not inappropriate or out of line with their positions as women. Such moves countered doxae about women’s roles as confined to private, domestic spaces and opened up ways for them to legitimate their participation in public spaces. Similarly, Lindal Buchanan (2013), in *Rhetorics of Motherhood*, analyzes how various women speakers, including Margaret Sanger, Diane Nash, and Michelle Obama, use motherhood rhetorics, and to what effect, whether beneficial or detrimental to the arguments they are making. Although in some cases using motherhood rhetorics can contribute to the ethos of the woman speaking, these rhetorics also are built on gendered doxae about women’s roles, as with the women speakers Johnson discusses. Lisa Mastrangelo (2017) similarly takes up the affordances and constraints of ideographs of motherhood for American women during World War I. She claims that ideographs reflect cultural beliefs, or what I call *doxae*, one of which is that women are the “inherently morally superior sex, responsible for education and defense of the home” (217). Ultimately, she concludes, like Buchanan, that the motherhood rhetorics used during this time did not ultimately empower women; instead, women “were increasingly silenced and disempowered overall” (229). Johnson’s, Buchanan’s, and Mastrangelo’s work demonstrates how reproductive doxae circulate through and around women’s rhetorics,

offering both opportunities and limitations on how women are positioned and what kinds of agency they have in their own and others' lives.

More recently, scholarship has examined how different reproductive doxae can circulate through motherhood rhetorics depending on women's intersectional identities. Three pieces in particular examine women's race and ethnicity in relation to reproduction: Natalie Fixmer-Oraiz's (2019) *Homeland Maternity: US Security Culture and the New Reproductive Regime*, Kimberly Harper's (2020) *The Ethos of Black Motherhood in America: Only White Women Get Pregnant*, and Lori Beth De Hertogh's (2020) "Interrogating Race-Based Health Disparities in the Online Community Black Women Do Breastfeed." Tying together US nationalism with motherhood, Fixmer-Oraiz (2019) argues that in a post-9/11 landscape, motherhood has been linked to what she calls "homeland security culture" by specifying "how *national security is tethered to securing the domestic and reproductive body*" (4). The reproductive doxa she traces through several discursive sites is "that white, heteronuclear domesticity remains central to the flourishing of the nation, that reproduction and mothering outside of these contexts are constituted as a public threat" (145). This text takes up how this reproductive doxa circulates around different women's bodies, most notably stratified by race and socioeconomic class, and influences our understandings of motherhood as tied to US nationalism. Examining Black mothers' experiences in particular, Harper's (2020) book analyzes how reproductive discourses revolve around concerns for white women's bodies and babies, eliding Black mothers in an erasure of their humanity, continuing an erasure embedded in US history. Part of the reproductive doxae circulating among researchers who have studied the health disparities facing Black mothers in the past is the belief "that the high rate of infant mortality could be attributed to the choices of poor, less educated Black women. It was assumed they were not taking care of themselves or their newborn" (xv). More recently, researchers have become more critical of this doxa and have found that "Black women, regardless of education or class, are not exempt from the dangers of receiving poor maternal healthcare" (xvi). Harper analyzes how reproductive doxae about Black mothers have positioned them as "bad" in contrast with white mothers who are "good" (55), drawing on characterizations of Black women as breeders, mammies, matriarchs, welfare queens, and crack mothers that span hundreds of years to trace how such doxae has circulated. She also points to the work of activists such as the Black Maternal Health Momnibus as offering counterdiscourses that can change health outcomes for Black mothers (and all mothers).

De Hertogh's (2020) chapter similarly points to the work done on social media platforms "to create activist health texts that challenge and rewrite race-based health disparities rooted in sociocultural and medical epistemologies that pathologize breastfeeding among Black women" (188). Such pathologies are built on doxae such as "Blacks have a higher pain tolerance than whites" (194) and on historical contexts such as the forcing of enslaved women to act as wet nurses to their white slave-owner's children. De Hertogh's examination of what she calls "counter-activist" and "parallel activist" health texts demonstrates different ways women try to speak back to these beliefs even as they are also limited by the platforms on which they speak and the ways they position various choices women may (have to) make about breastfeeding or using formula. These texts force attention to the ways reproductive doxae circulate differently through women's lives depending on their own positionalities and identities.

Studies of reproductive rhetorics have also extended to those women who struggle to become pregnant due to infertility, whether their own or their partner's. This work demonstrates how reproductive doxae circulate through all women's lives, regardless of their reproductive experiences. An early work in this vein is Elizabeth C. Britt's (2001) *Conceiving Normalcy: Rhetoric, Law, and the Double Binds of Infertility*. In this text, Britt argues that the "normalization" of fertility is communicated through the double bind of fertility and infertility women who seek out fertility treatments must navigate; the normality of having children is reified through the argument that all women should be able to go through fertility treatments so they can have children (as seen in arguments in Massachusetts for fertility treatments to be covered through insurance). Such arguments circulate doxae that all women should have the opportunity to become mothers and, in fact, that women have a right to have children even if medical intervention is required. As Britt (2001) claims, these arguments further ingrain doxae about women's reproductive experiences even as they recognize the method by which infertile women become mothers is not "natural" (144). Building on Britt's work, Karen Throsby (2004) analyzes how reproductive "normality" becomes vexed in situations in which reproductive technologies are used by women who operate outside reproductive norms (such as queer women, women of color, and poor women) and when women choose to stop fertility treatments because they have not led to pregnancy. Although some of the women Throsby interviewed eventually identified as childfree, most found "themselves occupying an ambiguous liminal space between social conformity and transgression: they have tried to conceive but have



been unable to; they desire children, but are no longer actively pursuing that desire; they have brought technology into the ‘natural’ process of reproduction, but without the counterbalancing ‘natural’ outcome of a baby” (9). Throsby’s examination of those in this liminal space points to some of the gaps that emerge when people try to conform to but ultimately cannot align with doxae, which puts them outside social norms they want to embody. Extending the work of Britt and Throsby, Kristin J. Wilson’s (2014) *Not Trying: Infertility, Childlessness, and Ambivalence* further explores the liminal positions of socially marginalized women who experience infertility. Unlike women in other studies of infertility or in my own study of childfree women, women in Wilson’s book do not definitively identify as “infertile” or “childfree,” instead living in a more liminal space in which not having children operates against social norms but is a positionality to which they more flexibly identify. Wilson’s book points out sociocultural commonplaces about infertility—such as that it is a “yuppie disease” (3) and that it is a “life crisis” (6)—and the normalization of motherhood, pushing against such straightforward and simplistic views of women’s reproductive experiences.

More recently, work on infertility by feminist rhetorical scholars has analyzed how beliefs about reproduction point to biomedical technologies as a way for any woman to experience motherhood. Robin E. Jensen’s (2016) *Infertility: Tracing the History of a Transformative Term* traces rhetorics of infertility and how they have evolved over time to establish what infertility means and to rhetorically constrain how people use the term *infertile*. By examining how the medicalization of infertility overlaps with moralizing about it, Jensen demonstrates how reproductive doxae circulating through infertility rhetorics “[situate] subjects as both responsible for their health and yet inherently incapable of meeting that responsibility on their own” (4). Much as I contend in chapter 1 and as Koerber (2018) posits in her book, Jensen also argues that “old ideas and arguments do not disappear when their chronological time . . . has passed but, instead, percolate at subsequent, often seemingly disconnected moments to combine and contend with newer arguments, appeals, and narratives” (5). Grounded in assumptions about gender and reproduction, reproductive doxae perniciously circle back around time and again, albeit in new forms, to constrain women’s lives. Some of the newer forms of reproductive doxae that have circulated include women’s ability to significantly delay when they conceive and have children due to technologies such as egg freezing. However, as Kylie Baldwin (2019) examines in her book *Egg Freezing, Fertility, and Reproductive Choice: Negotiating Responsibility, Hope and Modern*



*Motherhood*, such doxae, while seemingly empowering women to make their own reproductive choices, minimize the significant possibility women older than age thirty-five will be unable to have children even with the assistance of biomedical interventions such as egg freezing. The interactions of personal and biomedical form new types of reproductive doxae that circulate through women's lives and shape their experiences with reproduction and infertility. Indeed, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, reproductive technologies have become an even larger part of sociocultural beliefs about reproduction. Maria Novotny and Elizabeth Horn-Walker (2020) argue that one central reproductive doxa is that "infertility is a disease that can and must be beaten [through medical procedures] so as to fulfill one's desire to become a mother/parent" (45), a doxa that contributes to the stigmatization of infertility and the silence and isolation those who are infertile often experience (46). Novotny and Horn-Walker discuss a traveling art exhibit they created called *The ART of Infertility* that seeks to act "as a disruptive discourse expanding cultural assumptions of infertility . . . calling attention to the gendered pathology of infertility and reproductive loss" (46). Similar to some of the counternarratives and counteractivist texts discussed by other scholars focused on reproductive rhetorics, this art exhibit holds the potential to help "the general public . . . revise common beliefs and become more culturally sensitive to the stigmatization of infertility" (59). The stigmatization of those experiencing infertility also points to reproductive doxae about the normality of women's lives as mothers that speak to the stigmatization childfree women often experience as well, although of course the reasons for this stigmatization and the effects on women differ because of their personal desires to become or not become mothers.

These scholars have collectively examined the reproductive doxae circulating through women's lives in the United States in particular and have examined how some women have tried to speak back to the ways such doxae constrain their reproductive experiences. However, besides Bivens, Cole, and Koerber's (2019) article, this work has not explicitly theorized the question of how reproductive doxae circulate through women's lives and affect the ways they interact with others about and define for themselves their reproductive experiences. By extending this work to analyze how reproductive doxae circulate through the affective as well as discursive experiences of childfree women, I offer a framework for better understanding how doxae circulate through women's lives and how women negotiate these doxae both privately and publicly.

*Happiness Scripts as Affectual Interpellations of Gendered Doxa*

Feminist rhetorical scholars' glimpses into how reproductive doxae circulate paves the way for further attention to how these doxae work in childfree rhetorics. However, this work does not fully account for the invisibility of doxae and how childfree women bring doxae about women's reproductive decisions to light. In order for rhetorical scholars to do this work, we must understand doxae through an affectual lens. As affect scholars such as Brian Massumi (2002), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003), Adam Frank (2007a, 2007b), John Protevi (2009, 2013), Lauren Berlant (2011), Sara Ahmed (2006, 2010), and Lauren Berlant and Kathleen Stewart (2019) theorize, building on work by Silvan Tomkins (1962) and Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987), among others, affect involves attention to the body and its ways of belonging to the world, including through relational capacities between bodies and objects that lead to motion of some kind. Affect, as Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (2010) define it, "arises in the midst of *in-between-ness*: in the capacities to act and be acted upon" that "is found in those intensities that pass body to body (human, nonhuman, part-body, and otherwise), in those resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds, *and* in the very passages or variations between these intensities and resonances themselves" (1). Affect forces our attention as rhetorical scholars to the things not easily identified or seen that influence the discourses around us.

The invisible yet weighty force of affect aligns in some ways with scholarly conceptions of doxae; both are unseen forces on the ways we think and both are often socially circulated. However, affect is one way doxae are circulated in minute, often imperceptible exchanges among bodies, spaces, surfaces, objects, and so forth. Those exchanges in accretion can affect rhetorics, actions, emotions, and so on. As Gregg and Seigworth (2010) claim, "Cast forward by its open-ended in-between-ness, affect is integral to a body's perpetual *becoming* (always becoming otherwise, however subtly, than what it already is), pulled beyond its seeming surface-boundedness by way of its relation to, indeed its composition through, the forces of encounter" (3). Affect thus is one vehicle that often invisibly circulates doxae through childfree women's lives, constraining the rhetorics they use to think and talk about their decision not to have children.

Affect theorists commonly argue that once affect rises to the level of consciousness, it transforms into something else. At this point, affect can become rhetoric; in other words, at this point, the imperceptible exchanges occurring between, within, and around people can become

visible through discourse. Although affect theorists may view these affects as having been transformed when this occurs, rhetorical scholars make some common connections between rhetoric and affect (see, for example, Blankenship 2019; Gross 2007; Marinelli 2016; Pruchnic 2017). One of the most recent studies of affect and rhetoric is Lisa Blankenship's (2019) *Changing the Subject*. In this book, she reframes pathos as "rhetorical empathy" that often powerfully leads to "persuasion and change" (5). This framing offers rhetorical scholars a way to focus on emotions and empathy as rhetorical, in the case of empathy whether experienced "on a deliberate, strategic, conscious level or on an affective level influenced by experience" that is "encompassed, created, and expressed within and through language and cultural codes" (10). Blankenship's attention to the links between affect, or the unexpressed, and rhetoric opens up the productive connections that can be made in this work and paves the way for my own explications of doxae through affect.

Other scholars have made connections between affect and doxae that also inform this project. Peter Simonson (2014) argues that the attention to "arguments, words, and cognitions" when examining invention ignores its connection to "affects, things, and bodily sensations" (312). These affects can make doxae more or less persuasive to others. Crowley (2006) makes this case in asserting that "rhetorical effect is achieved by means of affect: the beliefs and behavior of audiences are altered not only by the provision of proofs but by establishment of ethical, evaluative, and emotional climates in which such changes can occur. . . . While persuasion can of course be effected by means of reasoned argument, I posit that ideology, fantasy, and emotion are primary motivators of belief and action" (58–59). Affect thus does have a strong influence on the rhetorical strategies used by rhetors, even though this effect is often minimized or unaccounted for.

Although some affect theorists such as Massumi (2002) claim ideologies do not influence affect, others, including Frantz Fanon (2005) and Claudia Garcia-Rojas (2017), emphasize that the translation of affect through language ties it to cultures, ideologies, and subjectivities. Following this argument, Phil Bratta (2018) argues that ideology and affect are connected and that rhetoric offers one of the best ways to see this connection: "Identifying the connection between affect and ideology can often best be located in various arguments, hence making rhetoric—in its common definition of the study and use of persuasion—a promising object of analysis for studying both affect and ideology" (93). I argue here that, like affect, doxae, as one reflection of

ideologies at work in a sociocultural milieu, can be made more visible and available for critique through a study of rhetoric. Since childfree women's reproductive decisions still come out of the doxae at work in a society and the gendered ideologies informing these doxae, examining affect and doxae in tandem with their rhetorical strategies brings to light often hidden constraints and affordances at work in the ways childfree women position their decision not to have children. This type of analysis offers one framework for rhetorical scholars to study the ways affect and doxae influence and circulate through each other and inform the rhetorics used by different rhetors. While other scholars have explored gender and shame specifically (Fischer 2018; Monagle 2020), the most useful theory of gender and affect I have found in my building of theory about reproductive doxae and affect in childfree women's rhetorics is Sara Ahmed's (2010) theorization of happiness and happiness scripts in *The Promise of Happiness*. Here, I briefly explain her theory and how it interacts with doxae to bring to the forefront the constraints operating on rhetorics by and about childfree women.

Ahmed's (2010) book presents a queer theory of happiness and its sociocultural role in constraining individuals. She argues that happiness is not a state of being but the way social norms are seen as good and goods (11). Those people who create happiness by submitting to and illustrating happiness according to social standards (or doxae) are then viewed as "good" people with "good taste" (34) who contribute to the common good. In other words, they conform to doxae and are rewarded by those in power, both literally (through systemic support) and figuratively (through the labeling of "happy" and "good"). Happiness is framed as a responsibility in that everyone is supposed to want to be happy, and being unhappy or not fitting other's people's definitions of happiness is seen as selfish (9).

Objects, positions, and actions such as cars, jobs, houses, marriage, children, and so forth acquire value as they point to happiness, not because people view them as happy in their own right. Instead, people associate these things and choices with happiness because they directly relate to our society's ideas about who someone should want to be or become, often in keeping with doxae. According to Ahmed (2010), we desire the objects, positions, actions, and so forth that we do because we think some objects will bring happiness (203), whether those objects are two children or a Porsche. Connecting happiness with gender, Ahmed posits that what she calls "happiness scripts" govern happiness for individuals based on their gendered identities. In her view, these scripts "[provide] a set of instructions for what women and men must

do in order to be happy, whereby happiness is what follows being natural or good. Going along with happiness scripts is how we get along; to get along is to be willing and able to express happiness in proximity to the right things” (59). Such happiness scripts can vary depending on particular sociocultural beliefs or doxae about what is “natural or good” for different genders. In other words, gendered happiness scripts are not universal and can vary by location, community, and even from family to family.

Those who do not conform to gendered happiness scripts (or doxic gender identities) are frequently portrayed as unhappy and deviant<sup>3</sup> (or heterodoxic). Ahmed (2010) posits that because gendered happiness scripts are linked with ideologies about gendered subjectivities, they can be extremely limiting: “Happiness scripts could be thought of as straightening devices, ways of aligning bodies with what is already lined up. . . . To deviate from the line is to be threatened with unhappiness. . . . In this way, the scripts speak a certain truth: deviation can involve unhappiness. Happiness scripts encourage us to avoid the unhappy consequences of deviation by making those consequences explicit” (91). To think of this in another way, happiness scripts reinforce doxae, further pushing those who don’t conform to gendered doxae to the margins by presenting those without heteronormative gender identities as deviant or unhappy. Although there are happiness scripts that link motherhood with womanhood (Buchanan 2013), women’s intersectional identities shape how these scripts are written on different women’s lives (Collins 2000; Fixmer-Oraiz 2019; Harper 2020; Solinger 2005). Ahmed (2010) claims that “ideas of happiness involve social as well as moral distinctions insofar as they rest on ideas of who is worthy as well as capable of being happy ‘in the right way’” (13). Happiness therefore is contextual, relying on sociocultural ideas about individual bodies, whether these bodies should be happy, and whether they can be happy in ways society approves of. Happiness scripts about motherhood not only reflect doxae about women’s reproductive lives but also doxae speaking to women’s intersectional identities in ways that overlap with race, class, sexuality, (dis)ability, and so on. While this project focuses on childfree women, other conclusions about how happiness scripts and doxae are interpellated would necessarily result from analyzing different women’s rhetorics.

In short, through doxae about families in the United States, children are typically viewed as the ultimate “good” that bring happiness not only to oneself but to others, including family, friends, communities, and even the government, which wants tax-paying citizens. Children also

hold the promise of future happiness and make current unhappiness palatable for parents: “Parents can live with the failure of happiness to deliver its promise by placing their hope for happiness in their children” (Ahmed 2010, 33), a form of “expectant” (181) or anticipatory happiness. As a necessary part of the childbearing and child-rearing process, women’s lives are tied to motherhood because their becoming mothers contributes a good to society that brings happiness to others. Becoming a mother, then, is the ultimate selfless act society says will bring them and many others happiness. Happiness scripts for women reinforce the necessity for them to become mothers and the unhappiness that can result from not assuming this role; women without children are selfish, will regret their decision later, will leave no legacy, and will die alone.<sup>4</sup> In order for doxae about motherhood to maintain their power, society must constantly reinforce, through affectual circulations of these doxae, the messages that women’s happiness revolves around motherhood and that there are sociocultural consequences for deviating from this script.

Because childfree women voice their arguments against the ideology of compulsory motherhood, unique doxae have circulated about their reproductive decisions. While many women experience constraints on their reproductive decisions (see Harper 2020), childfree women have recently gained enough collective voice to be recognized in contemporary media channels. The privilege that adheres to women with the power to make the choice not to have children provides them with physical and virtual platforms other women with less reproductive choice may not be able to access, and these platforms have created growing communities of childfree women that further strengthen their identification as women without children. Their rhetorical strategies for eliding, countering, or appeasing others’ expectations about their reproductive decisions offer rhetorical scholars an opportunity to study the often-hidden constraints these women must work around or with as they articulate their decision to be childfree to themselves and others.

#### AFFECTUAL AND DOXIC ARTICULATIONS OF REPRODUCTION

Childfree women often recognize the gendered happiness scripts working on them and try to use these scripts or push against them as a way to discursively disrupt doxae, even as they are caught up in the affects surrounding reproductive doxae. Up to this point historically, however, childfree women have not had the collective power or ethos themselves to change doxae about gender and reproduction. Given the emergence of a collective identity for childfree women evidenced through websites

such as The Not Mom (n.d.), local meetup groups for childfree people, and social media groups such as The Childfree Choice, this may be changing. Childfree people—and childfree women in particular—are becoming more outspoken and more active in working against the happiness scripts that seek to constrain them.

Childfree women as a group have frequently been erased from both popular and academic view. As Tasha N. Dubriwny (2013) claims, “this group, as well as women who are not fully engaged in the heterosexual matrix,” is “at the edge of discourse, invisible, next to the equally invisible ranks of poor women and women of color” (141). The research on childfree women is likewise thin. Indeed, at this point, little data is available in the United States that accurately pinpoints the number of women who are childfree in the sense that they chose not to have children. The United States Census generally lumps all women without children together without regard for the reasons. As seen in table 0.1, the US Census Bureau (2017) in 2016 found that a high number of women in the United States do not have children, and the number of twenty-five- to twenty-nine-year-old women without children was the highest in history. The only national survey that separates the reasons women do not have children, and therefore the best source of this information for now, is the National Survey of Family Growth by the CDC (Centers for Disease Control n.d.). From 2015 to 2017, through in-person interviews with a national probability sample of 5,554 women, this survey found that 41.9 percent of women ages fifteen through forty-nine were childless; of those, 31 percent were temporarily childless and expected to have at least one child in the future, 3.3 percent were involuntarily childless because they were physically unable to have children, and 7.6 percent were voluntarily childless or childfree.

Despite the growing prevalence of childless and childfree women, articulations that connect gendered ideologies about women with reproduction and mothering persist. Crowley (2006) claims that articulations are “the form of the connection that can make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions” (60), such as between religion and politics. She claims that completely new articulations “are relatively rare” (60) but that “rearticulation and disarticulation of common elements occur all the time within a given community, and these processes constitute rhetorical lines of force” (61). As Harper (2020) argues, articulations between women and motherhood shift depending on the positionality of the women being discussed, including race/ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, gender identification, (dis)ability, and so on. The US Census Bureau in 2016 found that 44.9 percent of white women,



Table 0.1. Number of women without children in the United States (US Census Bureau 2017)

Age	Percentage without children
15–19 years old	96.2
20–24 years old	75.8
25–29 years old	53.8
30–34 years old	30.8
35–39 years old	18.5
40–44 years old <sup>5</sup>	14.4
45–50 years old	17.1
15–50 years old (total)	43.4

40.6 percent of Black women, 38.8 percent of Hispanic women, and 47.6 percent of Asian women did not have children by choice, chance, or circumstance.<sup>6</sup> However, a study of voluntarily childless US women suggests white women are more likely to consider themselves childfree by choice; this study found 72 percent of childfree women were white, 11.1 percent were Black, 8.8 percent were Hispanic,<sup>7</sup> and 3.3 percent were Asian, even though the groups represent approximately 60 percent, 13 percent, 18 percent, and 6 percent of the US population (Martinez, Daniels, and Chandra 2012).<sup>8</sup> No research has broken down the data respecting women without children by other identity markers such as class or sexual orientation, thus shedding no light on the intersectional identities represented among childfree women. However, particular women's experiences can vary broadly depending on the power dynamics at work upon them that differ according to their subject positions, reflecting intersectional lived experiences.<sup>9</sup>

Challenging reproductive doxae and making them visible is a difficult task because they are so embedded in US culture through a complex web of articulations. Multiple strands of ideological thought bind together to construct motherhood, including selflessness, care, and happiness, and these strands become part of the reproductive doxae in a community through their repetitive use. Childfree women's rhetorics undertake a process of rearticulation and disarticulation in deconstructing the ties among womanhood, motherhood, selflessness, care, and happiness.

Throughout this book, I use the metaphor of weaving to explain how childfree women rearticulate and disarticulate different threads of ideological thought about womanhood in order to create tapestries—or ideologies that are “connections made between and among moments (positions) that occur or are taken up within ideology” (Crowley



2006, 60)—about their lives that make sense to themselves and others. Weaving is a tactile experience, speaking to the embodied and lived experiences that influence how childfree women make and interpret arguments about childfreedom. Despite the ways language imperfectly mediates these embodied and lived experiences, it is an important way for childfree women to construct identities that are legible and acceptable within the confinement of the articulations they are entangled with. Childfree women's rhetorics thus are tied to rhetorical threads about gender and motherhood that attach to and adhere to their own, including rhetorics of happiness, selfishness, and care. I call these the weavings of childfree women's discourse, involving threads in many ways entangled, interwoven, and inescapable. Our temptation may be to try to pull apart these strands, but they cannot be disentangled or examined separately because they constantly and continuously twist and weave around each other when childfree women try to enact discursive identity work. Other articulations function similarly; for example, T J Geiger (2013) identifies "the intersection of religious and sexual discourses" as saturating "ideological formations" (249) in his work on pedagogical approaches to these discourses. Rhetorical scholars may more productively seek to examine the entanglements of these rhetorics and their relationships with affect and doxae to better understand how these rhetorics present constraints and affordances to those using them.

Some of the articulations or weavings childfree women contend with revolve around rhetorics of care. As Joan C. Tronto (2013) argues in *Caring Democracy*, care work, including care for children, is much more often "ascribed to women and people of lower class and status" (99). Because men are released from shouldering their share of care work, women's identities are much more readily tied to care, specifically of children, and motherhood is the ultimate symbol of care and selflessness. The interweaving of these creates an ideology that reinforces the passive status of women without disrupting the status quo, which allows childfree women the possibility of rearticulating or reweaving these threads in a recognizable way while simultaneously downplaying their power to create new articulations or ideologies in making doxae visible. Another way childfree women try to present their identities is by disarticulating and creating new strands (similar to but slightly different from the old, much like someone might combine different strands of thread when weaving) that push at narrow definitions of care to include self-care, placing themselves rather than others at the center of their identities, and by constructing supportive communities around themselves. These new strands support childfree women by working against

negative discourses in circulation about falling birth rates and population issues, discourses that blame systemic social problems on women's individual reproductive decisions—decisions sometimes influenced by a lack of adequate systemic support for mothering—instead of critiquing the oppressive power operating on some women's reproductive lives.

For some childfree women, the affectual and doxic links between motherhood and selflessness, care, adulthood, duty, and morality create hegemonic ideologies, or an intricately woven tapestry of constraints, in which they struggle to assert their own agency. These constraints can vary by the intersectional identities of these women, although childfree women are often perceived as broken, physically and even psychologically or emotionally incapable of motherhood. Dykstra and Hagestad (2007), in their introduction to a special issue of the *Journal of Family Issues* about childless older adults, discuss how the childless are often “viewed as deviants. Overwhelmingly, they are perceived in a negative light, as problem cases. Moreover, the childless are seen as being disadvantaged” (1284). The normalcy of motherhood casts childfree women into a binary that works against them, reinforcing their deviancy and putting the onus on them to explain why they have failed to follow expected life patterns (1277). It also supports discourses in “a society that often equates adulthood with parenthood” and places the childless outside “the adult norm” (May 1995, 222).

Women with different intersectional identities can experience different affectual, doxic understandings of their childlessness.<sup>10</sup> For poor Black women after enslavement and other women of color, reproduction has historically been used as a racist, weaponized power to control their communities (Collins 2000; Davidson 2017; Solinger 2005; Taylor 2011). Choosing whether or not to have children in this context could open a woman up to criticism from her own communities about this choice (Davidson 2017; Martinez and Andreatta 2015). Queer women's reproductive decisions are differently complicated. Charlotte J. Patterson and Rachel G. Riskind (2010) claim, “Parenthood has long been seen as a formative aspect of adult development, and this is increasingly the case for gay and lesbian as well as heterosexual adults” (336). However, other scholars point out the ideological tensions at work when weaving the discursive threads of “lesbian” and “mother” (Ryan-Flood 2009; Thompson 2002), opening up queer women's mothering to interrogation. Poor white women's reproductive decisions have also been scrutinized in different ways (Guglielmo 2013). They are often criticized for raising their children rather than relinquishing them to wealthier people to parent through adoption (Collins 2006). What

these examples show is how articulations about childfreedom and, as a consequence, the affectual, doxic web constraining childfree women's rhetorics, vary depending on a childfree woman's intersectional identity. This book cannot account for all these differences as they work on individual women's lives. Instead, it focuses on one group of thirty-four childfree women to examine how these articulations affect the rhetorics they use to talk about their childfreedom to others and themselves and to explain how they contend with the affectual, doxic understandings of motherhood at work on their rhetorics.

In its examination of this group of childfree women, this book extends the ways feminist rhetorical scholars view doxae by connecting them with the affectual theory of happiness scripts. My examination of childfree women's rhetorics through this lens demonstrates how this theoretical approach makes doxae about women's lives visible and more readily available for analysis and critique. In doing this work, it asks,

- How embedded in doxae are gendered happiness scripts and how do these scripts constrain or open up women's rhetorical practices?
- When rhetors are embedded in happiness scripts, what must happen in order for them to challenge or even change the doxae underlying these scripts?

This book also calls on rhetorical scholars more broadly to explore how affect adds to our understandings of the doxae at work on individuals and groups in particular sociocultural contexts. Affect underpins doxae and circulates often invisibly, but, as seen in this book, it has profound effects on the ways people construct rhetorics about their lives. Ultimately, this study asks how possible it is to shape or change doxae that circulate in part through often-invisible affect and what must rhetors do in order to make such shifts possible.

#### **INTERVIEWEES' INTERSECTIONAL CHILDFREE IDENTITIES**

The ways childfree women experience privilege and power affect their experiences with systemic issues such as access to healthcare and child-care, economic resources and working conditions, and so on that affect the reproductive choices available to them. Some childfree women, such as childfree women of color, may see deciding not to have children as resistance to the oppressive power that has historically operated on their reproductive decisions (Collins 2000; Harris 2015; hooks 1990). Other childfree women may view their decision not to have children as a radical resistance to reproductive doxae because they are supposed

to supply children to the nation (Fixmer-Oraiz 2019). Here, I highlight the lived experiences of four interviewees to illustrate the diverse backgrounds they come from and how reproductive doxae broadly circulate through their lives.

Grace,<sup>11</sup> fifty-four, identifies as a Black woman whose family is from the Caribbean. Her family moved from England to New York City when she was a child. She told me that she did not “really [understand] a lot of American things” and that she felt like an outsider socially at school. Her British accent marked her as different to her Brooklyn classmates, which led to her being “singled out.” Later her family moved to Miami, but she moved back to New York by herself when she was nineteen. She described her extended family as “huge,” encompassing both “blood family” and “the mystery family”—people who had been “adopted into the family” for so long “nobody remembers how they got there.” Her family seemed to assume for a long time that she would have children, but they had moved on from that assumption: “After thirty went by, and forty went by, I think they were like, ‘I think it’s a wrap with this one.’” Being childfree was not the only reason she felt out of place in her family, as she considered herself an introvert and her family to be comprised of extroverts. She said, “There’s still kind of that energy of, ‘You’re odd, you were an odd child and you’re an odd adult.’” She said this perception of her manifested as not exactly tension but a sense of strangeness: “You’re unfamiliar to me, I’m unfamiliar to you no matter how long we’ve been related. So I feel like there’s a little gulf there that we can’t lose.” This sense led her family to assume she is a lesbian, which she is not. Grace also mentioned strangers tend to assume she is a mother, something she attributes in part to race. Her experiences show how being a childfree woman, and how someone’s identity, whether race, sexual orientation, sociality, and so on, can shape the ways others interact with someone and influence their perception of that person’s positionality as a childfree person.

Another interviewee, Shanna, was a first-generation college student who earned a PhD and has been teaching in a university for eight years. She has what appears to be a solidly middle-class lifestyle, although she is the first in her family to go beyond high school, and her family was working class. Her maternal grandfather was Native American, and her family has largely worked in blue-collar jobs. She said that being from “a very enclave community” and being a first-generation college student made her “experience different from some of [her] other friends’ experiences.” The gender dynamics in this community were quite traditional, as Shanna recounts: “Most of the women in my family were stay-at-home

mothers and didn't . . . there was a prevailing attitude that women didn't work outside the home. The men worked in blue-collar jobs . . . and the women when they had jobs, they were these sort of little stop-gap jobs, like a couple of months at JC Penney, or my sister worked at a doctor's office for a couple of months." These gender dynamics influenced how she thought about the expected scripts people follow in their lives. Shanna said she was unusual in her extended family in that she had left her community of origin and that she felt "banished" with little connection to her family because she left: "My mother's father grew up on a reservation, he was Cherokee. And so that absolutely rooted them to place, and it kept them sort of in the area. And then also the industries, the extractive industries, kept them in the area. So, as far as family background, very rooted to place, and the people who moved away was sort of, it was sort of seen as, 'Why would you ever want to leave this place?'" Shanna's rejection of a central aspect of the gender dynamics at work in her community—motherhood—alongside her physical distance from this community influenced the sense of separation she felt from this community and highlighted the sense of difference she felt in being childfree.

Sarah is a white woman who knew she didn't want kids from the age of fifteen. One of two interviewees who did not identify as heterosexual, she aligned her childfree identity with her sexual identities: "Like I said, I [am] bisexual, polyamorous. We should just add childfree on there. . . . It's the biggest part of my life and my personality." She views her childfree status as a central thread in her identity, one that works upon many other parts of her life. Sarah had also been a stepmother while in a long-term relationship, which she said was "very difficult." She had joined a childfree stepmoms' group "because no one else was really in my situation. I had other friends who were stepmoms, but none who didn't want kids and then had ended up with one, someone else's. So that was kind of a unique situation that I found myself in, and I really found that I needed some support because even other stepmoms who have kids or who want kids can't understand what it's really like. So that group was very, very helpful for me." Her experiences illustrate some of the complicated threads that can become snarled for childfree women and how she navigates through these as she maintains a child-free identity.

Finally, Claudia is a Latina woman whose family immigrated to the United States from Panama when she was a child. She described her leadership role in a Christian Reformed Church and how it interweaves with her childfreedom.

So I felt called into ministry as a freshman in high school. And I remember, I felt that all the women that I knew that were in ministry, once they had children they left ministry. They left work and really focused on staying at home and raising their children. And I just felt very strongly that . . . not necessarily that I didn't want children but that I didn't want to give up the thing that I felt that was what I was meant to be doing. And for me at that time there were no examples of women in ministry that weren't leaving work in order to raise their children at home, and so I really struggled with that.

Claudia felt that the more fundamentalist “strands of Christianity” she had known in her past “viewed the world of women” in a traditional way and said this view “really shaped just [her] desire in some ways to push against that, to challenge that.” Claudia had found a church where she felt her choice was accepted, but she remembered being asked in a job interview at a previous church, “What’s gonna happen when [you] become pregnant?” She recalled, “I just said to him that when my husband and I had made our decision about family planning I’d be sure to let him know, and that ended the conversation.” This interviewer seemed to think her reproductive choices were their business and assumed she would have children. Claudia has also experienced these types of assumptions at work from congregants in church who have told her she was not faithful to God because “God expects husbands and wives to multiply.” She noted that it was unlikely anyone would say something similar to her husband and that such comments were painful as well as making her feel defensive. On the other hand, she was optimistic: “I think that has changed. I think it changes where you are in terms of the type of church you’re going to, and where they are culturally. And I think that it is—that has been less of the case where I work now.” Claudia’s experiences illustrate how religious affiliation constructs yet another set of beliefs that affects how childfree women interact with others around their decision not to have children.

These four snapshots illustrate the many different threads at work in childfree women’s lives; their childfree decisions take on different meanings for them as they reflect on their backgrounds and as they interact with those around them. Although it is impossible to fully account for the ways childfree women’s intersectional identities affect childfree rhetorics, these snapshots provide a road map for complicating some of the ways we think about reproductive doxae and the rhetorics childfree women use as they talk about childfreedom in the rest of the book. Women who are expected to have children—typically white middle- and upper-class women—and who have chosen not to have children fail to reach this important benchmark for women’s adulthood and are often

isolated and stigmatized through rhetoric that reinforces their marginal status in society. Such marginalization can be seen in the lack of representation of child-free women in popular culture and in studies that describe the negative judgments women without children face (Bute et al. 2010; Morell 2000; Park 2005). Alternatively, for women who have less privileged positionalities, including women of color, poor women, queer women, and so on, motherhood represents a vexed identity, one they are alternatively forced into and denied as power structures work to constrain their reproductive freedom (Harper 2020; Solinger 2005).

This book takes up how doxae can constrain child-free women because they face a complex web of socioculturally bound expectations, which are further complicated through intersectionality and the expectations differently layered on them through doxae about their lives depending on their race, sexual orientation, class, (dis)ability, and other facets of their identities. I then triangulate these expectations with doxae about women's gender roles and the affects that circulate these doxae through sociocultural expectations and women's lives. By examining the affects and discursive acts that circulate doxae about motherhood and child-free women's rhetorical resistance to these doxae, this book demonstrates how affect and doxae can work coterminously to constrain women's lives and how women can make affect and doxae visible and available for critique. Rhetorical scholars can use this type of analysis to study the ways this group—and other groups—make affect and doxae visible to explain whether and how rhetorical interventions in doxae in small communities have the potential to lead to the evolution of similar rhetorical interventions on a broader scale.

#### **AFFECTUAL AND DOXIC CIRCULATIONS OF CHILD-FREE WOMEN'S RHETORICS**

Through analysis of interview material from thirty-four child-free women located in the United States, Canada, and Britain, historical analysis of moments when childless women became objects of scrutiny, and brief textual analysis of work by or about child-free women, this book examines the reproductive doxae circulating by and around child-free women and offers happiness scripts as a way to understand the constraints and affordances reproductive doxae place on these women's rhetorical practices. I trace how reproductive doxae about childless/child-free women have contributed to understandings of their positions, particularly in relation to mothers. I demonstrate how child-free women are rhetorically strategic in their positioning of their decision and how they pick

up different rhetorical threads to try to make their decision legible to themselves and others. Finally, I argue contemporary childfree women are gathering force as a group, calling into question reproductive doxae and offering potential changes to common beliefs about reproduction.

To further build my theorization of reproductive doxae through happiness scripts and to analyze the rhetorics of childfree women, I start with a brief historical examination of moments throughout the last two thousand years when reproductive doxae became more visible. Chapter 1, “Hegemonic Mothering Ideologies and Gendered Happiness Scripts,” explains how articulations of happiness, selflessness, care, and motherhood bind together to form a hegemonic construction of womanhood/motherhood that is not often explicitly recognized but that has a near-exclusive hold on how women’s lives are viewed. It then examines two sets of ideological beliefs about reproduction that continue to circulate in the twenty-first century and constrain how childfree women are situated in a Western sociocultural context. Chapter 2, “Reproductive Commonplaces and Rhetorical Roadblocks,” builds on chapter 1 to introduce my interview methodology and data and to explore what commonplaces about motherhood and childfreedom are contemporarily circulated that reinforce the hegemonic constructions of women’s identities explored in chapter 1. These two chapters demonstrate how millennia of reproductive doxae have created a hegemonic view of women’s reproductive lives and continue to influence how childfreedom is viewed.

Following this understanding of reproductive doxae, chapter 3, “Reproductive Arguments and Identity Work,” explores how childfree women take their recognition of the reproductive doxae circulating around them and negotiate what this circulation means for their identities as childfree women of different races, socioeconomic classes, religions, and geographical areas and cultures. This chapter also asks what happens when a person’s choices rewrite happiness scripts not only for themselves but also for others by examining grandparenting as a happiness script interrupted by childfree women. Taken together, the chapter demonstrates how childfreedom threatens the hegemonic construction of women’s reproductive lives, breaking open the many values and emotions that come along with these beliefs. Chapters 4 and 5 then examine how reproductive doxae influence childfree women’s rhetorical practices through the happiness scripts explicitly and implicitly imposed on them and their rhetorical strategies in negotiating and speaking back to these scripts. Chapter 4, “The Limits of Rearticulating Hegemonic Reproductive Beliefs,” claims that one strategy childfree women use to



negotiate reproductive doxae is built on their attempts at rearticulating care as something all women, even those without children, can exhibit. This chapter focuses on how happiness scripts shape interviewees' interactions with others about their reproductive decisions and their attempts to work against negative rhetorics about childfreedom while also working with some of the rhetorical articulations of motherhood.

Moving beyond constraints into some of the affordances of happiness scripts, chapter 5, "New Articulations of Childfree Women's Identities," claims there are some relationships or even communities in which childfree women can speak back to and challenge reproductive doxae and create identifications with others that may lead to new articulations of women's lives apart from motherhood in these smaller networks. Interviewees discuss using humor, directness, and strategic explanations to try to speak back to happiness scripts that limit other people's views of the interviewees' reproductive decisions. They also formed positive communities that circulated new rhetorics about reproductive choices that could support broader changes in doxae about childfreedom and motherhood. As the conclusion, "No Regrets? Happiness and Reproductive Doxae," examines, the question remains concerning to what extent it is possible for a particular group to reshape doxae and how we can reconceive of rhetorics invoking happiness and regret. It also asks feminist rhetorical scholars to continue to connect theories of reproductive doxae and affect in order to make some of the invisible beliefs circulating around us visible and to give us the opportunity to examine the ways these close down and open up the rhetorics people use.

In bridging the gaps between doxae and affect, this book claims these exist in an intricately connected, often-invisible relationship with each other. Because both affect and doxae typically circulate beneath the surface of consciousness, their effects on people's rhetorics can be hidden. However, as this book demonstrates, the interconnections between affect and doxae can be examined and made visible through careful attention to the discursive threads that constrain people's rhetorics. Through further attention to these threads, rhetorical scholars can dig beneath the surface of the rhetorics in circulation to consider the maelstrom of beliefs that underlie these and limit not just people's rhetorics but, in the process, the ways they present their identities and lives to each other and themselves. This work could open up new avenues for research in the field and calls on rhetorical scholars to develop new approaches for investigating and analyzing these connections.

## REARTICULATING TERMINOLOGIES FOR CHILDFREE WOMEN

Many terms in popular and scholarly discourse describe people without children. Thus, choosing which term(s) to use and how is not a simple decision but, instead, one that has consequences for the ways people view women who choose not to have children. Childless people also develop their own vocabulary of terms for describing themselves, often with slightly different meanings, which makes assigning a name to this group difficult. Without such a label, however, it is difficult to discuss people who choose not to have children without overly belabored syntactical constructions that still cannot adequately account for the complexity of the identities of people without children.

Mardy Ireland (1993) was perhaps one of the first scholars to openly address the labels placed on or used by specifically women without children. She positions childless women into three categories: the childless who are infertile or cannot conceive due to health problems; the childfree and childless who delay making a decision about childbirth until it is too late; and the childfree who actively choose not to have children (15). Despite her use of these words, Ireland argues that “using ‘child-free’ or ‘childless by choice’ as words to categorize women is inadequate. ‘Childless’ or ‘child-free’ still focuses our attention on the identity of woman in terms of attachment to a child; they still define her in relation to mothering rather than as an individual and separate person making choices” (156). She claims that this “deficiency model” of naming womanhood must change in the future so women are described by “*what is* rather than *what is not*” (157). The importance of language in identity construction highlights Ireland’s insistence that women without children be identified in other terms, although she does not offer such alternatives herself.

Other scholars have also taken up the difficulty of naming those people who choose not to have children, with almost every scholar who discusses this group explicitly talking through the term(s) used to describe them. Kristin Park (2005) notes, in “Choosing Childlessness,” “A variety of terms are used by activists, scholars, and voluntarily childless individuals for the status of choosing not to parent. These terms include voluntarily childless, intentionally childless, childless by choice, and childfree. The choice of term may reflect scholarly conventions of objectivity, personal identity constructions, or political positions that proactively respond to pronatalism. For example, some researchers, activists, and nonparenting individuals prefer ‘childfree’ to emphasize a positive experience of choice rather than the sense of loss or deficiency that they believe ‘childless’ connotes. Others dislike ‘childfree,’ seeing it as artificial or

reinforcing of stereotypes about dislike of children” (399). Any decision to use one term over another risks reinforcing some stereotypes and rejecting others. The term used can also offend certain groups; *childfree*, for instance, also seems to suggest people in general should want to be free from children.

Different members of the nonparent community have differently embraced terms such as *childfree* or *childless* that may have negative connotations for some. For example, the popular website The Not Mom (n.d.) uses “*childfree*” to describe all women without children but further explains the website sometimes uses “*childfree*,” as I have been, to mean women who choose not to have children, whereas “*childless*” indicates being unable to have children. Like Ireland (1993), The Not Mom realizes language choices about nonparents matter. In writing this book, I have sought to use a term in this project that clearly labels the group of women who actively choose not to have children. Originally, I used the term *childless by choice* to frame the study, which some of my interviewees liked and others did not; later, I switched to using the term *childfree* because it seemed more commonly used across the literature and in popular sources to describe people who choose not to have children. Because the term *childfree* seems to be stabilizing as a term for those who specifically have chosen not to have children, I ultimately chose to use it throughout this text, although not all people who have chosen not to have children would use this term themselves. There are still problems with this term; as Ireland (1993) claims, it defines *childfree* people in terms of who they are not rather than in terms of who they are.

As a rhetorical scholar and a *childfree* woman, I yearn for a term that more accurately describes the identities of nonparents. But I recognize that, unfortunately, there is not yet a word for this group that does not rely on deficiency and that Gregory Coles’s (2016) observation that minority groups infrequently have the power to eliminate words from the majority group’s vocabulary means it would take widespread use for another term to persist. Until *childfree* individuals gain a more critical mass and their identities become more familiar, the language used to describe them will be largely defined through the terministic screen of parenthood familiar to our society. The term *childfree* thus, for me, does the work of indicating the group of interest. While this group includes many different women with different motives for not having children, these women reject society’s insistence that their adulthood is tied to motherhood<sup>12</sup> and create deliberate and complex rhetorical strategies for making their identities legible.

**PERSONAL AND POLITICAL INTERWEAVINGS OF CHILDFREEDOM**

Finally, I must address my own investment in childfree rhetorics and how it informs this study. Catherine Molloy, Cristy Beemer, Jeffrey Bennett, Ann Green, Jenell Jonson, Molly Kessler, Maria Novotny, and Bryna Siegel-Finer's (2018) article "Dialogue on Possibilities for Embodied Methodologies in the Rhetoric of Health and Medicine" offers a heuristic for researchers working on topics in the rhetoric of health and medicine to which they have a personal connection. In this article, Maria Novotny, one of the coauthors, describes how it feels more natural for her to be open about her personal connections to her research on infertility: "I tend to examine infertility from an intersectional methodological perspective. By bringing in cultural and feminist rhetorical perspectives to my RHM [rhetoric of health and medicine] work, I find it difficult to not be upfront about my own positionality in terms of infertility. By not disclosing, I feel as if I am not practicing this intersectional methodology" (356). The heuristic offered helps researchers examine their personal connections and whether these can be used to productively advance a project's rhetorical aims; it also speaks to the need to be ethical in representations of our own and other's experiences and to consider the personal effects of researching these topics on those we work with and ourselves. In this closing section, I briefly recount my own experiences as a childfree woman to try to be transparent about my own life experiences and how these necessarily inform the work I do in this book.

My experiences as a childfree woman have necessarily informed my interest and ongoing investment in the ways those women who have chosen to be childless experience their identities. I made the decision not to have children in my midtwenties after a period of time during which my husband and I considered having children while I was in graduate school. We both came to the realization—perhaps belatedly—that having children was socioculturally expected, particularly given his family's close ties to the Christian faith that tells couples to "go forth and multiply" and my own parents' decision to have six children (of which I am the oldest). At the time, we also had close friends who were contemplating parenthood, were pregnant, or had recently had children, which reinforced the idea that having children at that time was normal and perhaps even expected. After close introspection, however, we knew having children was not something we ourselves wanted for a variety of reasons, including our intense desire to be able to focus on our relationships with each other and others in our lives (including children such as our niece and nephews), our desire to be able to move and travel at will without worrying about the effects of these travels on children, and

our drive to maintain the rhythms of life we had already established and enjoyed.

At the time, perhaps because of my privileged position as a white woman who appears to be heterosexual (even though I'm bisexual) and thus does not often face social censure for many parts of my life, I did not realize how political this decision would be or how much scrutiny I would endure because of this decision. Naïvely, I thought telling people I didn't want children was not a big deal. But I found family and friends generally told me that I would "change my mind" or that I "wasn't old enough yet" to know what I wanted. Even acquaintances or strangers often asked when we were going to have children and expressed disbelief when we said we didn't want children. As I've grown older, those around me have increasingly scrutinized what I'm doing and why I might not want children. It appears they can hear my biological clock ticking even if I can't. Academia generally acts as an insulating bubble in which people are overall accepting and supportive of this decision; outside this bubble, however, people often struggle to understand this decision.

I recount my experiences here not to focus on my own life as an example of a childfree woman. Instead, I want it to be obvious that I do have a stake in the arguments circling around childfree women and that this project is what I consider an important step toward recognizing the rhetorical identity work childfree women are doing. Being part of this group of women may prevent me from being aware of some aspects of their lives, but it allows me to highlight those aspects of their identities' discursive constructions that remain ongoing concerns when childfree women attempt to make their lives legible to themselves and those around them. My hope is that other feminist rhetorical scholars will identify ways they can use affect as a lens through which to critique and identify how doxas present constraints and affordances on the rhetorical practices of women every day. I also hope to make childfree women as a group, and the rhetorical threads they use to construct their identities, more visible so scholars invested in reproductive rhetorics can continue to identify how these threads work on different groups of women in different ways.