

Book Review: *Childfree and Happy: Transforming the Rhetoric of Women's Reproductive Choices*

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Wooten, C. A. (2023). *Childfree and happy: Transforming the rhetoric of women's reproductive choices*. Utah State University Press.

Courtney Adams Wooten's *Childfree and Happy: Transforming the Rhetoric of Women's Reproductive Choices* explores women's resistance to reproductive doxae (commonly held or popular beliefs) that reinforce that the only way for a woman to live a happy and fulfilling life is by becoming a mother. Wooten's study draws on interviews with thirty-four childfree women in order to examine "the ways childfree women's rhetorics are constrained and opened up by affectual circulation of reproductive doxae" (p.7). Wooten builds on the work of feminist rhetorical scholars who examine the ways doxae construct women's bodies, by drawing specific focus to the unconscious doxae that circulate around women's reproductive lives. The book "calls on rhetorical scholars more broadly to explore how affect adds to our understanding of the doxae at work on individuals and groups in particular sociocultural contexts" (p.29) and ultimately asks whether or not it is possible to change or to reshape these often-unconscious doxae. As a childfree woman in her early thirties, this book gave me a language to articulate the pressure I often feel when

trying to explain my own reproductive choices both within and outside of academia.

Childfree and Happy is broken down into five chapters plus an introduction and conclusion. The introduction outlines Wooten's exigence for the book and situates her research within feminist rhetorical theory and discourse. In chapter one, "Hegemonic Mothering Ideologies and Gendered Happiness Scripts," Wooten explains how common articulations about happiness, selflessness, care, and motherhood work together to "form a hegemonic construction of womanhood/motherhood" (p.33) that binds views of womanhood almost exclusively to motherhood. Chapter two "Rhetorical Commonplaces and Rhetorical Roadblocks" introduces Wooten's interview methodology and data collected from the thirty-four women in her study, which she uses to explore commonplaces about motherhood and being childfree that continue to circulate throughout society. These first two chapters work to explain how reproductive doxae continue to construct a limiting view of women's reproductive lives and how these same doxae influence view of childfree women. Chapter 3, "Reproductive Arguments and Identity Work" articulates how childfree women identify these reproductive doxae in circulation around them and negotiate what they mean for their own identity.

The final two chapters explore how reproductive doxae specifically influences childfree women's rhetorical practices through happiness scripts^[1] imposed on them, and how childfree women may speak back to those scripts (p.33). Wooten concludes by arguing that though some women are able to speak back to limiting happiness scripts and constraining doxae, "childfree women can still struggle to make legible their happiness identities apart from motherhood" (p. 194). This is due in part to the fact that these happiness identities undermine traditional gendered happiness scripts that still hold power in society.

The first chapter of the text connects reproductive doxae to gendered happiness scripts. Gendered happiness scripts typically connect women's happiness and overall fulfillment solely to motherhood.

Consequently, childfree women are left with no other choice but to define their own identity in terms of the children they lack. This chapter traces how articulations of these happiness scripts and their relation to ideas about selflessness, care, and motherhood combine to form a “rhetorical cloth of ideology of hegemonic motherhood that generally rests on racist, classist, heteronormative assumptions”(p.46). A woman’s ability to resist or rearticulate ideological strands is constrained to a certain extent by her positionality (p.47). In this chapter, Wooten also traces the historical articulations of mothering ideologies and the racialization of reproduction. In doing so, Wooten challenges rhetorical scholars to grapple with the ways reproductive control has been used against women, specifically women of color. She argues that “historical and cultural beliefs about race, immigration status, class, disability, and so on continue to shape individual women’s reproductive experiences and the reproductive ideologies circulating through childfree rhetorics” (p.61). The chapter concludes on a more optimistic note stating that while these beliefs continue to shape individual women’s experiences, women are beginning to find a collective voice that intervenes in these arguments about childfreedom and offers new perspectives on women’s reproductive identities (p. 63).

In chapter two, Wooten describes in detail her methodology and data collection method for the study she reports on in the book. In this chapter, she analyzes how hegemonic reproductive beliefs and ideologies “circulate through media outlets in the twenty-first century and through commonplaces childfree interviews often hear that seem to align their bodies with happiness scripts” (p.64-65). In the discussion of her methodology, Wooten writes that the qualitative data for the study was gathered through non- probability and random sampling (p.65). The study participants tended to be white women (62%) and have advanced degrees (76%). While these study demographics tend to reflect what other scholars have found when studying childfree women, what sets Wooten’s study apart is that her study looked at participants’ class growing up. This category allowed Wooten to see that participants actually had more variability than the previous demographics would suggest. Wooten’s study focused largely on “the background of [her] interviewees and the interactions

they had with others [...] about their decision not to have children” (p.67). This approach allowed her to focus more attention on the rhetorical nature of the interactions her participants had around child freedom. Wooten found that more than three quarters of her interviewees mentioned, “the scripts that they saw around them reinforced hegemonic mothering ideologies and articulations of selflessness, care, and happiness tied to motherhood” (p.72). Some women also noted that because of their decision not to have children, they felt a sense of othering even from their own families. While many women reported that they felt a sense of othering from their families based on their choices, some women also noted that they faced questions from their doctors about their choice. One woman discussed experiencing confusion from her OB/GYN about her decision not to have children. The women in the study realized in making the choice not to have children, they would need to work to try to make this decision decipherable in a culture that privileges hegemonic mothering. This work often meant untangling for themselves and others the beliefs and identities surrounding women’s bodies, while also arguing for their choice to be seen as valid.

Chapter three explores how the women in Wooten’s study grappled with the judgments others made about their decisions to be childfree and what role that played in these women’s individual identities. Building on the work done in the previous two chapters, chapter three identifies the ways “hegemonic beliefs about reproduction have been reinforced for millennia and continue to circulate” (p.89). The chapter also discusses the ways in which people’s identities can interact through happiness scripts and the challenges that come along with navigating these interactions. Because childfree women are making choices that are seen as out of alignment with the hegemonic beliefs ascribed to motherhood, they are often aware of how reproductive ideologies are circling around them and the effect that these ideologies have on them (p.95). Articulating these ideologies and untangling oneself from them can be, as some interviewees noted, exhausting work (p.96). Then, because motherhood is seen as the “norm,” women who choose to live outside this norm find themselves having to articulate and, in a sense, defend

their choice. A few of Wooten's interviewees "spoke about how tiring it was to feel as if they had to respond to the expectations and questions of others about their childfreedom" (p.99). Some women noted that on occasions they were made to feel selfish for not having children.

One area where these feelings came up was in relation to the culture of grandparenting. Just as women face pressure to ascribe to societal scripts, so too do our parents. Older adults who are done raising their own children may feel pressured to take on the role of grandparent. Wooten notes that "when a childfree woman's parents are unable to do so, this inability creates conflict because childfree women are viewed as those whose refusal of reproductive ideologies prevents their parents from" being part of the community of grandparents" (p.113). This means that in refusing happiness scripts associated with parenting, childfree women are in a sense not allowing their parents to ascribe to grandparenting happiness scripts. Almost three quarters of Wooten's interviews mentioned grandparenting in some way, meaning that this was one script that most participants grappled with.

Chapter four identifies the limits of rearticulating hegemonic reproductive beliefs. One way that the women in the study redefined hegemonic beliefs was by redefining care and its relationship to motherhood. The topic of "Care was brought up by 94% of the interviewees, demonstrating their awareness of the ways care is linked to gendered happiness" (p.128). Some interviewees talked about the roles they took on in caring for pets or about taking on caring centered careers. Women in the study also talked about the happiness and fulfillment they got from their careers. Over a third of the women in the study said that they had decided not to have children because they saw "having children and maintaining their careers as incompatible" (p.131). Others noted the lack of affordable childcare options as reason they saw having a career and family as incompatible. Women also discussed taking on caring responsibilities in their families of origin, such as caring for an elderly parent or relative. This rearticulation of women's role as caregiver expanded the notion of "family" beyond biological children to anyone for whom

they perform ongoing care work (p.144). This chapter highlights that even when working to reframe or revise gendered happiness scripts, women may inadvertently rearticulate these same happiness scripts.

The final chapter of the book speaks to the strategies that women use to make gendered doxae visible and to ultimately challenge those doxae. Challenging long held doxae does not happen on a large scale – at least not initially. These long held societal beliefs “Instead must shift for individuals and smaller communities first and then, eventually become part of a larger sociocultural shift in ideologies” (p.161). The women in the study crafted their own unique strategies for speaking back to happiness scripts when confronted with them. These strategies often included humor, directness, and strategic explanations of their position (p.161). One of the other ways in which women settled articulations of happiness around motherhood was by assuming another personal identity: “Aunt.” While these Aunts may not be as involved in children’s day to day lives, “their labor may be vital to the wellbeing of young people” (p.183). While this tie maintains the care relationship ascribed to womanhood, Wooten argues, “it represents a new happiness script that has historically been recognized and has gained more support contemporarily” (p.184). Reinforcing Aunthood as a path to happiness is offered up as another option for women.

The conclusion of the book, aptly titled “No Regrets?,” argues that the book opens up new directions for rhetorical scholars when it comes to analyzing affect and doxae. Examining doxae and its relation to affect allows rhetorical scholars to better understand how doxae influences discourse. In connecting happiness with reproductive doxae, Wooten makes visible the ways in which “reproductive rhetorics are entangled in discourses that reinforce oppressive power structures and [work to] maintain the status quo” (p.195). The doxae underlying gendered ideologies provide a fertile ground for feminist rhetorical scholars as these doxae constrain the ways in which women relate to themselves and the world around them. Wooten ends the conclusion with a call to undertake research projects that allow for more people’s reproductive experience to gain public attention. Such work, she argues, “provides pathways through which

more people's reproductive experiences are valued and centered in public rhetoric" allowing rhetorical scholars to center a more diverse range of experiences.

I want to thank Courtney Adams Wooten for taking on this project. I found myself in many of the stories that the interviewees shared. This book offered me a way to understand not only that my own decision not to have children was a valid one, but, more importantly for me, it allowed me to see that in deciding not to have children, I was in a sense taking away my parent's opportunity to serve as grandparents. This allowed me to see that they too are working within happiness scripts that constrain their lives and shape their expectations. Something I wished was addressed in the book, but was understandably beyond the scope of the project, was how we as women can see both the decision to and decision not to have children as valid options. At times when I was reading, it seemed as if childfree women were positioned as those who were able to break free of these gendered happiness scripts, or to at the very least resist them, but it makes me wonder about the women who do find personal fulfillment in being mothers. While I understand that motherhood has been seen as the ONLY way to achieve a fulfilling life for women, I think it is vital to take into account that this choice may make some women truly happy.

Footnotes

[1] Happiness scripts are define in the book as “ a set of instructions that men and women must do in order to be happy” (Ahmed 2010 cited in Wooten 2023 p.21)

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