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The Childless Woman as Failure, or The "Spinster Aunt" as
Provocation for the Future

Alexandra M. Hill

Abstract

Inspired by recent scholarship and discussions about motherhood in German literature and media, this article considers the conspicuous absence of the childless woman in contemporary culture. Considered a failure according to neoliberal expectations for women, the childless woman has no place within the nuclear family (which is both undermined and reified under neoliberalism) and is at odds with futurity discourse. Nor does she find a place in Judith Halberstam's theorization of failure, which, in its focus on the queer, does not necessarily fit the case of the childless woman. Drawing instead on Sarah Ensor's articulation of "spinster ecology" and Halberstam's call for alternative networks of kinship and care, I interpret the childless woman as the modern "spinster aunt," a part of a more complex model of social interconnectedness.

One of the great strengths of Women in German as an organization is that it creates a space within academic and political work for personal experience, for one's experiences as scholar, colleague, student, teacher, friend, and son or daughter.¹ It was my daughterly perspective that I brought to my scholarship on Julia Franck and motherhood, including the motherhood/demography debate from 2008. My mother died at the beginning of my graduate studies and certainly my research was inspired, at least in part, by the desire to give voice to my mother's subjectivity (a desire repeatedly frustrated, as I found that I only have my words to tell her story).

As I continued to research good mothers and bad mothers, domestic spaces and maternal images, I gradually became aware of the relative dearth of representations of the childless woman. Again, my own experience informs my search: as a childless adult whose friends and family have had nearly thirty children in the past five years, I find myself in a minority, seeking examples of other such women in popular culture, literature, and the world around me. Two examples are most prevalent. First, the single, sexualized woman (as in Sex in the City) experiences or represents childlessness as a transitional phase, located in a place between the single life and the settled life.

Second, and much more promising is the "spinster aunt," who can inhabit a number of points on an avuncular spectrum, from that of a primary care-taking role (for example, David Copperfield's wonderful aunt Betsy Trotwood) to that of a relative whose lifestyle serves as an alternative (positive or negative) to that of a parent. (Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick points to the significant role that a queer aunt or uncle can play in the life of a niece or nephew in Tendencies.) For both personal reasons--because of my own beloved aunt, and because I myself am an aunt-in-law of three--and for political reasons--as a model of kinship distinct from that of parent-child--I examine here the childless woman, who is regarded as a failure according to neoliberal expectations. I argue, however, that the aunt is of crucial importance as a disruption of the relentless forward progress of futurity and creates a more complicated web of interconnectedness in a society in which neoliberalism is dismantling systems of family and of care.

In this essay, I turn a critical eye to neoliberalism's expectations for women, especially with regard to reproduction. Much scholarship has been devoted to considering the ways in which women are affected by neoliberal policies and attitudes towards the body. In what follows, I provide a brief overview of these critical

feminist approaches, particularly with regard to motherhood, but this serves as my jumping-off point for investigating the role of the childless woman. In neoliberal society, I argue, the childless woman is regarded as a failure--in failing to reproduce, she has failed to uphold traditional gender norms, she has failed to extend the longevity of her family and nation (not to mention her social class), and she has failed to discipline her body into proceeding along a "normal" biological trajectory.² It is at this point that I turn to Judith Halberstam's theorization of failure to consider the childless woman as a failure in a feminist, liberating, non-hierarchical, anti-establishment sense, as a means of escape from neoliberal mandates. I conclude, however, by drawing from Sarah Ensor's theorization of "spinster ecology" as a model of considering a more complex model of social interrelatedness.

In approaching this material, I understand neoliberalism according to Michelle Leve's definition:

Neoliberalism is a political-economic ideology and practice that promotes individualism, consumerism, deregulation, and transferring state power and responsibility to the individual [...]. Neoliberal citizens are expected to be "empowered to take control

of their lives" [...], and their bodies, with such empowerment usually expressed through consumptive practices. (279-80)

For women in particular, neoliberalism presents a paradox, guaranteeing "women's equality," while qualifying this as "a notional equality that is to be achieved, however, through personal choice and responsibility rather than through social provisions, which neoliberalism aims to dismantle" (Baer, "German Feminism" 371). Many have already pointed out that German neoliberal policies have had "disproportionate effects on women" (359) in their roles as workers, consumers, and caretakers at the same time that "public discourse blames women for the effects of such policies, for example holding women responsible for falling birth rates" (360). Just as neoliberalism creates a climate that seems to promote the freedom to choose--be it careers, lifestyles, or consumer goods--in reality, these choices are limited by structural inequalities (e.g., disparity of pay) created by this same neoliberal society.

Furthermore, gender roles are at once opened up for resignification under neoliberalism and, simultaneously, reified by neoliberal policies: "Gender diversity is on the one hand welcomed in this way [women in the workforce, for example], on the other hand, however, the binary sex and

gender system is still an institutional imperative” (Woltersdorff 173). This can explain in part the postfeminist critique of traditional notions of domesticity and the concurrent uncritical adoption of the institution of marriage.³ Under neoliberalism, despite a climate of freedom, there is little incentive to reconceptualize the nuclear family; the dissolution of the family can mean for some a total dissolution of care networks, as those care services “formerly [but no longer] provided by social welfare” could have served as a social support network in the absence of family connections (Baer, “Precarious Sexualities” 13). As such government-funded care-giving social systems are dissolved, citizens must either purchase private care for those in their family who need it, such as infants or the elderly, or reinvigorate family care networks as a less expensive alternative. The precarity of care cultures can thus be seen as a means of bolstering the appeal of the heteronormative family even in a time of flexibility of gender roles and (sexual) partnerships.

Neoliberal policies also serve to underscore the connection between identity and the body. As Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff explain, referring to Anthony Giddens’s Modernity and Self-Identity (1991):

Secure and stable self-identity no longer derives automatically from one's position in the social structure, and in its place some argue that we are seeing attempts to ground identity in the body, as individuals are left alone to establish and maintain values with which to live and make sense of their daily lives. (8)

What social role is more closely connected with that of the body than the role of mother? Thus, in a neoliberal climate of instability, choosing to become a mother is a way of grounding one's identity in a biological process, creating care networks (i.e., the nuclear family, extended family, friends with children, and paid caretakers), and participating in the consumer culture of motherhood.

Neoliberal motherhood is very much about consumption: mothers can--and must, if they want to be "good" mothers--buy the right food for their children, the right clothes, and access to the right schools. Feminist scholars have long been highly critical about this connection between motherhood and consumption. Barbara Katz Rothman goes so far as to say that "there is no place of purity, no 'outside' [of consumption] to stand [...]" and laments the absence of a language free of the flavor of economics with which to speak of conception, birth, and raising a child

(288). At the same time, participation in this consumer culture grants automatic access to an identity (the mother) and a community (of mothers) that provides stability and a social support network in precarious times.

It must also be noted that, according to this discourse, one's ability to become the perfect parent is closely connected to one's socio-economic status.⁴ The result is a classed and racialized conversation about motherhood that overlooks structural disadvantages in favor of individual (in)ability to earn that buying power. For example, a fascinating study of Canadian mothers who buy organic food for their children shows that middle-class shoppers feel considerable pressure to make organic and healthy food purchases. Women of lower socio-economic standing are not immune to these discourses, but the results of the study indicate that they do not have the luxury of meeting this ideal when faced with limited means (Cairns, Johnston, and MacKendrick 111-12). As I pointed out in the Women in German Yearbook 24 in 2008, the alarmist discussion surrounding the falling birth rate in Germany questioned "whether feminism has encouraged women to become more selfish in pursuing careers over starting families, an attitude toward women that fundamentally undermined the right to choose a career, children, or both"

(212). Under neoliberalism, however, this "choice" to have children is often a myth; in reality, structural inequalities (e.g., of pay, of job security) are trapping some mothers into dead-end employment, while others privileged enough to prioritize their careers may delay or even forego having children.

Recognizing that race and class fundamentally limit access to this practice of motherhood based on consumption, we must be critical of the newly touted ability to "purchase" even the biological experience of motherhood through alternative reproductive technologies (ARTs). As more and more women struggle to conceive (and these are, statistically speaking, women in their 30s and 40s, who are well educated and have advanced in their careers), they are able to avail themselves of medical approaches that facilitate conception. Following the neoliberal ethos of blaming the individual for failure (failure, in this case, to have a child), the fertility industry has mushroomed into a "4 billion dollar a year business in the United States" (Mamo 178), in which "reproduction becomes another do-it-yourself project enabling us to transform our selves, identities, and social lives through consumption" (176). As Leve points out, it is important to avoid "either/or" interpretations when it comes to asking whether women who

avail themselves of these options are savvy participants in the "Fertility, Inc." (Mamo's term) system or whether their agency is limited by that system. If we consider a "both/and" model, in which women are both empowered to take control of conception and also suffer from limited agency within neoliberal reproductive discourse, we would get closer to the truth (286). Certainly, ARTs are opening up some possibilities for a small group of women to have children, although access to these reproductive technologies is limited to any who fall outside this category of access.⁵ "Yet," as Mamo points out, "the more these 'free choices' are expected, the less choice remains. With a vast array of choices (IVF, egg donor, sperm donor, home insemination, IUI, etc.), the choice is the same: biological reproduction" (189). In other words, alternative models of parenthood (e.g., through surrogacy or adoption) are lower on the reproductive totem pole, and any discourse questioning the neoliberal appropriation of fertility and biological motherhood is still only emerging. "Fertility, Inc." therefore serves to reify the categorical divide between mothers and non-mothers, preying on desperation and grief, while heightening the desire for children and the cult of motherhood to a hysterical degree.

What about women who cannot or choose not to have children? In the United States, 28% of female college graduates are childless (as opposed to only 10% of women who did not complete high school) (Badiner 147). In Germany, the numbers are slightly higher, with between 21 and 26% of women overall remaining childless--among the highest rates of childlessness in Europe. Writing in France, social theorist Elisabeth Badinter attributes Germany's remarkably low fertility rate--an average of 1.3 children per woman--to two primary causes (132): first, the especially strong cultural image of the mother, which is such an impossibly high ideal that it discourages potential mothers from trying; and, second, the "lack of family policies that are specifically helpful to women" (133). Certainly, one must also take into account the relatively long years of university education typical in Germany and the series of pre-professional internships that have become a must for job applicants. Add to this mix the ongoing sexism of Germany's workplaces,--i.e., that

in Germany, women are slightly less likely to be in leadership roles (28 percent versus 32 percent in the EU 27), earn less (23 percent less than men working similar hours compared to 17 percent less in the EU

27), and are much more likely to be working part-time (47 percent versus 31 percent) (Ferree 198)-- and we have some clear reasons to explain a reluctance on the part of Germany's women to have children. Of course one can debate causes for declining birth rates ad nauseum. I am less interested in how or why women are childless than I am in investigating the social spaces that childless women (or, if you prefer, the euphemistically upbeat "child-free" women [Gilbert 40]) inhabit.

I find it provoking that there does not seem to be a place for childless women in neoliberal society. With the neoliberal emancipation of women from the family and its paradoxical revaluing of motherhood, these women are left unmoored. There is no tradition of extended families in which they can contribute and provide care. (Think of Jane Austen's heroines before marriage, such as Anne Elliot in Persuasion, who moves from household to household, helping one married sister or another.) Neither do they belong to a "mommy" culture that creates their identity. Other than through shopping, the value and worth of childless women in neoliberal society is unclear.

Up to this point, I have mostly refrained from distinguishing between lesbian and heterosexual childless women because my focus is implicitly on the heterosexual

childless woman. This perspective became clear to me when I turned to queer theory for a way of theorizing an alternative system of kinship to the neoliberal family. I have found that there is no time or place for childless, heterosexual women in this model. In a Queer Time and Place, Halberstam writes of those who reject or live separately from "those paradigmatic markers of life experience--namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death" (2). "[A]ll kinds of people," she claims,

especially in postmodernity, will and do opt to live outside of reproductive and familial time as well as on the edges of logics of labor and production. By doing so, they also often live outside the logic of capital accumulation: here we could consider ravers, club kids, HIV-positive barebackers, rent boys, sex workers, homeless people, drug dealers, and the unemployed. (10)

The separation into these two groups, i.e., those who live according to heteronormative time and those who reject it, paints neoliberal society in strokes that are too broad for my investigation. The heterosexual spinster aunt (if she is indeed heterosexual) is non-gender-normative, but she is not queer and thus belongs in neither group.

However, in critiquing Lee Edelman's book No Future in The Queer Art of Failure, Halberstam opens up possibilities for an in-between space:

But Edelman always runs the risk of linking heteronormativity in some essential way to women, and, perhaps unwittingly, woman becomes the site of the unqueer: she offers life, while queerness links up with the death drive; she is aligned sentimentally with the child and with "goodness," while the gay man in particular leads the way to "something better" while "promising absolutely nothing." (Halberstam Failure 118)

This image of woman is closely connected with her reproductive power--the reproducing woman, therefore, is the site of the unqueer. The childless woman can, however, be located somewhere in the middle--she is not aligned with the child (at most with the absence of the child) and does not offer life (although she may provide care for it). This begins to blur and complicate the binary division of heterosexual reproducers and the homosexual childless.

Yet the model of queer time that Edelman and Halberstam continue to promote is characterized "as somehow operating against the logics of succession, progress, development, and tradition proper to hetero-familial

development" (Failure 75). Those living in queer time live according to "other subordinate, queer, or counterhegemonic modes of common sense," which are characterized by "nonconformity, anticapitalist practices, nonreproductive life styles, negativity, and critique" (Failure 89). Ensor argues that this rejection of future-driven, reproductive discourse is

ultimately no more radical and no less normative than is the steadfast promotion of child-rearing--in large part because it continues to concretize and externalize the future, to treat it as the grammatical object of our transitive acts. (412)

In other words, "[v]ehement rejection is ultimately no less invested in futurity than is the process of wholehearted embrace" (412). In her analysis of Rachel Carson and "spinster ecology," Ensor finds that neither futurity nor a queer rejection of the future accurately reflects the situation of the spinster aunt: "For the spinster, we might say, is legible as a kind of social outsider precisely insofar as she has been abstracted from time" (414). Traditionally unmarried the spinster is no longer defined by her future, in which she will marry or have children, or her past, "in which a future, or the desire for one, [n]ever existed" (414).

Although Ensor uses the term "spinster" in its more traditional sense of the word, i.e., unmarried and childless, I feel that the marital status of the woman is of less importance in neoliberalism than her childlessness. Partnerships and families take many more forms today than in earlier times when the term "spinster" was commonly used. Today, having children--more than having a husband or forming a nuclear family--is what indicates participation in neoliberalism's linear notion of progress. What the spinster aunt offers, however, is vital: it is an alternative to futurity and a disruption of the primacy of transmission from parent to child. She "stands in a slanted relationship to a place and time that she will tend but will not--and cannot--directly pass on." If one imagines a family tree, it becomes clear that the spinster aunt represents relationships that are not primarily vertical (with children) but horizontal (with siblings) and slanted (with nieces and nephews). In doing so, she

challenges the notion of the future as a readily reachable and readily identifiable realm out there, as an entity that can straightforwardly appear or arrive. That is to say, down the avuncular path there is no way to get directly from here to there; it leads only

from one person's present to another person's future.

(Ensor 417)

If we regard these relationships as a complex web that proceeds in all directions, it is possible to see that the child (as symbol of the future) is "in fact the result of processes and conditions more entangled and polydimensional than we typically allow ourselves to acknowledge" (419). It also becomes clearer that every member of a family--or any kinship network--is shaped from multiple directions and by multiple persons, regardless of the biological relationship between them. This model, in addition to diffusing the strongly linear sense of progress towards the future, also diminishes the sole importance of the parent-child relationship and makes room for--and values--a variety of relationships and interconnections.

Ensor's articulation of "spinster ecology," in which spinster aunts serve as an important alternative to the models of neoliberalism and futurity, can find a parallel in the alternative societies (perhaps we can call them "spinster societies") that Halberstam sees in animated films such as Shrek, Chicken Run, Finding Nemo, and Monsters, Inc. In these films, it is not every man (ogre, chicken, fish, monster) for himself, but instead the creatures value an ethos of collective action, mutual

support, and kinship networks that are based not on biology but on group affiliation or friendship. A donkey can love a dragon, a monster can care for a human child, a fish can love a baby fish without becoming its mother--these alternatives to the model of the nuclear family, like the spinster aunt, can be important alternative models of networks of connection. If we understand spinsters, i.e., childless women, as failures, we are accepting the neoliberal interpretation of these women and even unintentionally supporting the cult of motherhood that neoliberalism advocates. We are also unquestioningly bolstering the value of the future without considering the complex networks of cause and effect that work not just vertically but horizontally and diagonally.

In Gaga Feminism, Halberstam proposes "alternative intimacies [that] stretch connections between people and across neighborhoods like invisible webs, and [...] bind us to one another in ways that foster communication, responsibility, and generosity" (111). While Halberstam's critique here is of marriage itself as a social structure that promotes insularity, I would shift the focus slightly in the context of neoliberalism and futurity and critique the family as a potentially insular and isolating unit. I do not find having children to be antithetical to the

development of kinship networks, although I would argue that it is of critical importance to extend connection beyond the nuclear family. There is no reason why families cannot participate in "alternative intimacies" that connect them to others in their community--many do! However, kinship networks that extend beyond the family unit are imperative under neoliberalism, regardless of whether a family has a child or children. As government-funded care networks are being dissolved, as social support becomes increasingly privatized (and prohibitively expensive), we would all benefit from new systems of connection in order to create communities that include those unrelated to us, unfamiliar to us, and perhaps even previously unknown to us. To return to the personal as I conclude this essay, I see such networks forming all around me, beginning in my North Portland neighborhood or on my Catholic campus, and spreading outwards. And, of course, I see it in WiG: a community of people who come together to care for and support each other, completely independent of any biological connection.

Notes

1. It is also a great strength of Women in German that it brings together a community of scholars to participate in

inspiring conversation. My thanks to Kyle Frackman, Maria Stehle, and especially Hester Baer for providing feedback and food for thought that shaped this article.

2. One could argue, however, that all women fail to meet the expectations set out for them under neoliberalism.

Thanks to Maria Stehle for this insight.

3. Some of the most interesting critiques of marriage have arisen from movements to legalize gay marriage across the United States. Halberstam speaks to this issue explicitly in Gaga Feminism, to which I return later in the article.

4. See, for example, Littler's astute article on the "Yummy Mummy" phenomenon in UK pop culture.

5. Socio-economic status is probably the first consideration that comes to mind, but this is just one factor. Mamo, for example, explores the outsider status of lesbians seeking access to reproductive technology in the United States.

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