AUTONOMOUS WOMEN: AN EXAMINATION OF THE LIVES AND EXPERIENCES OF CHILDFREE, NEVER-MARRIED SINGLE WOMEN OF COLOR FROM A DECOLONIAL FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

By

© Kimberly Martinez Phillips

A dissertation submitted to the

School of Graduate Studies

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Sociology

Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador

October 2025

St. John's Newfoundland

Abstract

The number of childfree and never-married women continues to increase globally. However, we know very little about their subjective experiences and identities outside of the traditional heteronormative frameworks, and we know even less about women of color (WOC) outside of these contexts. The discourse of patriarchy is often limited to white women's experiences and perceptions. Viewing the oppression of women through the prism of patriarchy only does not allow for the understanding of the differences between white women and women of color (WOC). My study examines how childfree, never-married single WOC have created a separate space for themselves as a challenge to the paradigms of patriarchy and colonization. The experiences of WOC are uniquely situated due to the intersection of colonialism, sexism, and racism.

My research applies the theoretical frameworks of Feminist Standpoint Theory and Decolonial Feminism through an intersectional lens to examine the social, economic, and cultural contexts that shape the identities of childfree, never-married single WOC in the United States. I answer the question - how do childfree, never-married single WOC experience and feel about romantic love, singleness, sex, and attachments in society? I interviewed forty women of color using a qualitative, inductive inquiry approach. The women in my study are aware of the history of oppression associated with heteronormative marriage within a colonial context.

My findings include that childfree, never-married single women of color (WOC) have rejected cultural expectations and constructed their own boundaries; they do not ascribe to the traditional heteronormative gender roles, heterosexual marriage and conventional motherhood; they use education as an essential aspect of their path toward independence and

unconventionality and their family histories shape their decisions about work and financial stability; they successfully operate through some colonial institutions while circumventing others; they do not center romantic love in their lives; and they receive very little support from social institutions, which creates more precarity for them in a society that centers whiteness, capitalism, and normative heterosexuality.

I have created new terminology (Autonomous WOC) to discuss and explain how these women live a life contradictory to cultural norms and create their own norms based on what is important to them. They live a life of independence and freedom from social and cultural limitations. I argue that childfree, never-married single WOC have collective experience and knowledge that is rooted in group identity situated in a common history and shared social oppression. These women have a distinct standpoint, and their narratives could provide pertinent information to the variances and cultural shifts in gender norms, patriarchy, capitalism, and heterogender family structures in American society.

Acknowledgments

I acknowledge the coloniality of the educational institution I voluntarily partake in but continue to resist from within because representation matters. I want to thank all the women who generously gave their time and their stories and allowed their experiences to be my guiding force in this research. I must thank my supervisors, Dr. Nicole Power and Dr. Allyson Stokes, for their direction and advice. I want to give a special thank you to Dr. Liam Swiss, who joined my committee in the ninth inning. I am forever in your debt for taking this on so quickly. In honor and appreciation to all my children, current and past, Liam Neeson, Sebastian Tiberius, Kyra Snow, and Serena GreyBelle, for their love and companionship that helped me through the Ph.D. process and the hard months/years of COVID-19. They are my family and my research assistants. I want to thank Keif for letting me run my crazy ideas by him and for tormenting him through this often-difficult journey. I would also like to recognize the squirrels of Lachine and Longueuil, who humored me, besieged me, and gave me a purpose I didn't know I needed. Lastly, I want to forever thank the underground railroad of academic women of color for offering unconditional support and advice.

In Memorandum: I would like to acknowledge my dear friend Ifeoma, who I met during my Ph.D. journey and who was always full of light and laughter. For a short time, she allowed me to be a part of her family, and she became a part of mine. She will be forever missed.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND

Never-married women are a growing segment of the United States population. In 2003, 14% of women aged 35-39 and 12% of women aged 40-44 had not married (Hamilton, Gordon, and Whelan-Berry 2006) In 2009, the percentage of married women in America was less than 50% of all women. Therefore, 2009 was the first time in American history that single (divorced and widowed) women outnumbered married women. This trend has continued with 3.9 million more single women in 2014 than in 2010 (Traister 2016). At the same time as more women remain single, the number of childfree women is also increasing (Coontz 2016). A 2010 Pew Research Report estimates that 1 in 5 women in the United States will remain childfree during their lifetime. This ratio is up from the 1 in 10 women who remained childfree in the 1970s (Harrington 2019). However, the Pew Research Center does not indicate how many women are childfree by choice (Harrington 2019).

A declining birth rate is not just happening in the United States. Birth rates are declining throughout Europe, China, and Japan (Ashburn-Nardo 2017). In the United Kingdom, 25% of women born in 1973 will not have children (Gillespie 2003). Koropeckyj-Cox and Call (2007) found that 19% of American women born in the 1950s were childless in their early 40s. Although the voluntarily childfree are still a minority of adults, they represent a noteworthy percentage of the United States population and their numbers continue to grow (Harrington 2019). The percentage of childfree women in the United States has been on the rise in the last forty years, with an increase of childfree women aged 15-44 from 35% to 49%. This increase was more prevalent for women aged 40-44, and by the 1990s, 20% of women 65 and older were childfree (Stahnke, Cooley, and Blackstone 2023). As the number of never-married women and

childfree women continues to increase, we know very little about their subjective experiences and identities, and we know even less about the experiences of women of color (WOC). There are fewer studies that I have found that include women who have remained childfree, never-married and single all in one category (Mandujano-Salazar 2019). This absence demonstrates the limitations of the current research (Harrington 2019).

In my research, I am studying childfree, never-married, and single women together as one group. In many studies, childfree women, never-married women, and single women have been studied, but separately, as childfree women, never-married women, and single women are distinct categories that can be studied independently. My dissertation examines the experiences of WOC who are childfree, never-married and single. In the context of patriarchal, heteronormative social institutions and practices that compel women to be wives and mothers, the lives of women have often been defined in reference to heterosexual marriage and conventional motherhood (Volsche 2017; DePaulo and Morris 2006; Park 2005). However, not all women marry or have children. This creates a space for childfree, never-married single women of color to redefine their social roles and their purpose to other members of society. Thus, my research studies women who are not defined by whom they marry or the children they raise.

Childfree, never-married single WOC are often an ignored and invisible group in the academic literature on the institutions of work, family, and education that still struggle with how to classify and accommodate women who are not wives and mothers. These women do not have societal occasions to demark their relationship life choices. Childfree, never-married women are not only forgoing marriage, but they are also relinquishing the expected societal role of wife and mother. Without the institutional privilege that marriage sometimes provides in monogamous,

heterosexual marriage, never-married women are left vulnerable to society's judgments (Coontz 2016).

As eras change, women have been cast in a multitude of roles, including innocent virgins, martyred wives, sainted mothers, sympathetic widows, and sad spinsters. Childfree, never-married single women have been described as everything from insatiable nymphomaniacs to sexually repressed Victorians (Garland-Thomson 2002). Furthermore, the norms of marriage and motherhood are historically situated and intersect with gender, race, and class. Therefore, the lives of childfree, never-married WOC must be understood within the context of the larger historical experiences of colonization and how decisions about where they live, who they marry or if they have children were frequently not of their own making. There has also been an inadequate examination of the lives of childfree WOC in the current literature (Stahnke, Cooley, and Blackstone 2023; Reuter, 2018).

There is less research that studies childfree, never-married single WOC as a singular category. Therefore, researchers have used overlapping terminology to study these women's lives. The term single can include the categories of never-married, divorced, separated, and widowed. Studies have also identified groups such as never-married, unmarried, single, childfree, childless, and voluntarily childfree. Childfree women, never-married women, and single women are distinct categories that have and can be, studied independently. Studies on singleness and never-married persons can include a variety of samples from persons who are unpartnered to unmarried persons who have a current partner. Therefore, some studies could be considered a study on singleness, including persons with partners (Poortman and Liefbroer 2010).

Hence, I am creating a new group to be analyzed. Forsyth and Johnson (1995) state that the biggest barrier to studying never-married individuals is that they comprise a poorly defined minority group. I argue throughout my dissertation that the participants are a minority group in the United States, not only in terms of their ethnic background but also by their statuses of being women, childfree, never-married, and single. The majority of my sample ended up being in the middle-class, which was not a criterion for my study; however, my participants are still women and women of color, which makes them a minority group (Davis 1983).

As the literature is not homogenous in the sample or terminology, some studies identify singles (men and women), single women, never-married women, childless women, or childfree women. The phrase never-married singles was coined by (Lamanna and Riedmann 1994). The term childfree, as opposed to childless, is used to describe persons who did not have children voluntarily and not due to an inability to conceive. My participants identified as single – meaning they are not in a current committed relationship with another person or cohabitating with a romantic partner. When discussing the literature, I use each scholar's terminology in their work. For example, some of the research studied both single men and women, some studied single women, but not necessarily childfree women, and others studied single women who had been married at some point in their lives.

The women in my study have all self-identified as voluntarily childfree, never-married (including common law marriage), single women of color. Scholars have created terms to refer to single and singleness, such as seriously single, voluntarily single, and singles by choice (Kislev and Marsh 2023). In China, women have challenged the negative connotation of singlehood as being described as a “leftover woman” to take their identity into their own hands and refer to themselves as “victorious women.” Victorious women are autonomous and self-

reliant, and they are proud of that fact (Zhang 2020). I will refer to my participants throughout this dissertation as *Autonomous women of color (WOC)* for clarity and simplicity.

I have used the term Autonomous to describe the women of color I interviewed. I use this term as a short-hand descriptor and title to refer to my cohort (childfree, never-married, single women of color) and also as a concept. I do not propose that Autonomous WOC should refer to all childfree, never-married single women or all childfree, never-married single women of color. **This term is only being used to describe my cohort in my research**. However, I am proposing that the concept of *Autonomous* can be an alternative to describing women as childfree and/or never-married. I am not using autonomous in the literal definition of the word, but I am using it more as a status that I am applying to women who do not marry or have children and who do not define their lives by the relationships they do or do not have. Using the word autonomous to identify the women in my study is more reflective of their identity and behaviors because the absence of a romantic relationship or children is not how they view themselves. I define autonomous as being a distinct person not defined by their relationship choices.

Therefore, Autonomous is not just a noun to refer to these women but a title I am ascribing to them. I understand that some scholars may find using this term to be controversial or problematic because autonomy has often been correlated with capitalist individualism (Harvey 2020). However, I am associating this term with women of color who have walked through some of the barriers of colonization and patriarchy to claim their own identity and space and are practicing a form of protective individualism. As part of my research is about expanding and changing the lexicon in how we define women, I hope I am granted some latitude in using this term that goes beyond the literal masculine philosophical definition (Coontz 2016).

Childfree, never-married single WOC are never entirely free from heteronormative restraints, as they, like other women, will always feel the weight of those expectations, but they are freer. They are freer in part because they have removed themselves from the traditional gender roles of wife and mother. I will refer to the women in my study as being “free.” However, I want to acknowledge that they are actually more free or freer from cultural expectations and limitations than if they had been married or had children.

I am also using the term women of color (WOC), which has been used as a descriptive and political phrase. Black feminists such as Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks discuss their work in the context of Black women. I will be using their terminology when discussing their work specifically. However, I will refer to the women in my study as WOC. Although they come from a myriad of ethnic/racial backgrounds, Zavella (2022) contends that WOC "reflects racialized women's political subjectivity even as women articulate their pride for specific racial-ethnic-national, gendered, sexual and other identities."

Childfree women have only recently been studied as a separate group. Studies on women without children have rarely differentiated between being childfree by choice or childless due to difficulties with fertility or other personal or medical issues (Blackstone and Blackstone 2019; Nandy 2017). Understanding what it means to be childfree or single in a given society also behooves us to examine the social structures that women participate in, either by choice or by mandate. Various studies have a marginalized view of single women as dysfunctional to the social order, as it has been a long-held belief that if you are single lifelong, there must be something wrong with you (Reynolds and Wetherell 2003).

My research examines the reasons why WOC decide to remain childfree, never-married singles and how that impacts all their attachments in society, including their romantic relationships and sex lives. The framing of childfree, never-married single women's choices from a Feminist Standpoint and Decolonial Feminist framework allows for an examination of the social processes and structures that have shaped these women's lives and how they have challenged heteronormative expectations of becoming wives and mothers. This allows me to answer my research questions about how childfree, never-married single WOC experience and feel about romantic love, singleness, sex, and attachments in society from a lens that takes into account institutional barriers and social and cultural boundaries. My dissertation studies the complexities of childfree, never-married single WOC lives from an intersectional lens that focuses on gender, race, socioeconomic status, marital status, age, and decisions surrounding motherhood. I have highlighted some of their differences surrounding issues such as race, class, feelings about dating, and decisions about motherhood. However, my research focuses on the commonalities between the participants.

Historically, the experiences of marriage and motherhood have been dissimilar for WOC in comparison to their white counterparts (Davis 1983). Therefore, the focus on single, white women's experiences dismisses the challenges and particularities that face WOC. Due to this shortfall in the current scholarship, I decided to focus on WOC. My research applies the theoretical frameworks of Feminist Standpoint Theory and Decolonial Feminism through an intersectional lens. Crenshaw (1989) coined intersectionality to examine the intricacies of different forms of discrimination, such as racism, sexism, and classism and how they intersect. Intersectionality allows me to examine the social, economic, and cultural contexts that shape the identities of childfree, never-married single WOC. Because white women often share the same

social classifications as white men, they may overlook race in the discussion of patriarchy, which is what keeps much of feminist theory centered on the experiences of white women (Crenshaw 1989). Consequently, inequitable norms and structures frame white women's and WOC's experiences, and this truth belies the claim of common oppression from white feminists (Bettie 2003).

Patriarchy cannot alone differentiate the experiences of women in relation to class and race (Walby 1989). I utilize Feminist Standpoint Theory to discuss childfree, never-married single WOC's perspectives and experiences and to assert that they are a marginalized group that shares a group identity. Collins (1997) stated that feminist standpoint does not refer to a stagnant position but refers to the social conditions that construct groups, not individual experiences. With the application of Feminist Standpoint Theory, I am able to discuss how Autonomous WOC have shared social conditions that create a shared group identity. Intersectionality refers to the multiple forms of discrimination, such as racism, sexism, and classism, that impact a person's life (Crenshaw 1989). My study focuses on how class, gender, race, sexuality, age, and marital status intersect to contribute to the marginalization of never-married childfree WOC (Few-Demo and Allen 2020).

My study focuses on how childfree, never-married single WOC construct their identity through their personal experiences, which are historically and culturally positioned and rooted in self-reliance (Simpson 2016). As the current scholarship needs to capture the full experiences of WOC, my research builds on the small body of research already available. These women, who have remained childfree and never-married, have a distinct point of view, and their narratives can demonstrate how patriarchy, capitalism, and heterogender family structures operate. bell hooks argues that the experiences and knowledge of WOC should be at the center of feminist theorizing

and activism to have an improved understanding of all lived experiences (Ferguson 2008). Thus, in obtaining the perspective of people who have the least power, you are able to see social structures in a way you would not if you were only getting the viewpoint from the people at the top of the social ladder.

1.2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The reasons why women remain childfree, never-married and single range from macro-social forces, such as women's increased participation in the labor force, to micro-level motivations, such as the desire for more independence and freedom (Marsh 2023). The feminist movement and increased reproductive choices such as birth control and abortion/health care for women are interconnected to women's choices to remain autonomous (Blackstone and Stewart 2012). My research determines the social conditions, economic contexts, and cultural environments that facilitate the possibility of childfree, never-married single women of color. These factors include family responsibilities and emotional stresses as children, which necessitate a desire for personal space, privacy, and protective individualism; access to educational opportunities; and exposure to knowledge that provides alternatives to heteronormative frameworks and expectations.

I determined these influences by asking the following main research question, which allowed for a more significant discussion of these issues: How do childfree, never-married single WOC experience and feel about romantic love, singleness, sex, and attachments in society? Moreover, I examine three sub-questions: 1) How do social, economic, and cultural contexts shape the identities of childfree, never-married single WOC?; 2) How do their experiences within these contexts construct a sense of self for childfree, never-married single WOC?; and 3)

How does racialized femininity shape childfree, never-married single WOC's decisions around marriage and motherhood.

1.3 DATA AND ANALYSIS

I employ a qualitative research methodology. This methodology allows for in-depth information to be gathered through semi-structured interviews. In addition, qualitative studies based on Feminist Standpoint Theory place positionality at the center of methodology. A goal of feminist qualitative research is to allow for more knowledge production from marginalized groups such as Autonomous WOC (Blum and Deussen 1996). My interviews took place between January 2022 and July 2022, during the COVID-19 pandemic. I interviewed forty-two women. However, two interviews are not included in my data because they did not fit within the age range, and being never-married required of my research criteria. The interviews were conducted remotely using Zoom.com. This allowed me to interview women from different geographic regions within the United States. The interviews lasted approximately one to two hours and took place in one meeting. The examination of the literature helped to inform my research questions.

My research analyzes what commonalities these women share, their differences, and what can be learned from their experiences. Semi-structured interviews are less scripted and create space for more open-ended questions and responses, allowing for follow-up and more candid conversations. I used an iterative data collection process, including qualitative data coding, analysis, and review of data collected to determine evolving themes and modification of interview questions. This ability to modify my questions and analysis was central to my work, as I analyzed topics of study (never-married, singleness, and childfree) that have previously been studied separately. Consequently, I am merging previously separate categories and literatures.

1.4 CHAPTER DESCRIPTIONS

The following are brief summaries of the chapters in this dissertation, including a brief discussion of my findings.

1.4.1 *Chapter 2: Literature Review*

In this chapter, I discuss the current literature relevant to my research on Autonomous WOC. The literature on childfree women and single studies are often separate. Therefore, I discuss these two topics independently and together when appropriate. I provide a brief history of the study of the family, focusing on patriarchy and marriage. As my research falls within the study of the family, understanding the history of the family, its connection to a property system, and the oppression of women is important contextually to my work. I address the studies on singleness and the childfree. I cover topics that will become relevant to my findings, such as the feminization of love, emotional labor, and symbolic boundaries. I also distinguish my study from other research. For example, much of single studies has been examined within a life course framework. Lastly, I summarize my theoretical frameworks of Feminist Standpoint Theory, intersectionality, and Decolonial Feminism.

1.4.2 *Chapter 3: Research Design and Methods*

In this chapter, I connect the theoretical perspectives of Feminist Standpoint Theory and Decolonial Feminism to my choice of methodology and methods to study Autonomous WOC's lives. My research was designed to gather information about the development of Autonomous WOC as an identity and to answer my research questions. I describe my sample, research setting, and methodology of an inductive approach. In this chapter, I also explain my process of qualitative, in-depth interviews, a discussion of my interview process and procedure of analysis,

my positionality as a researcher, ethical issues, challenges and limitations, and an introduction to my participants with germane demographic information.

1.4.3 *Chapter 4: Family, Education, and Work*

In this chapter, I apply a Feminist Standpoint and Decolonial Feminist paradigm to discuss the concepts of heteronormative gender roles, patriarchy, white supremacy, and emotional labor. This chapter focuses on how social, economic, and cultural contexts shape Autonomous WOC's identity and how their experiences within the social institutions of the family, education, and work construct their sense of self and positionality. I separate this chapter into three sections: 1) family, 2) education, and 3) work. In the family, I show how the women in my study have rejected cultural expectations and constructed their boundaries. In the section on education, I demonstrate how education has been an integral part of Autonomous WOC's path toward independence and unconventionality. Institutions of education are where these women found validation as children. In the section on work, I discuss their family histories and how they impact adult decisions about work and financial stability.

Women of color in the United States must work within colonialism and patriarchal institutions. I find that the women in my study have been able to successfully operate through the colonial institution of education while circumventing heteronormative marriage. My data reveal that Autonomous WOC challenge standardizing gender roles by pursuing educational opportunities and economic independence. Autonomous WOC do not want to negotiate their idea of happiness, which includes personal and financial independence. These women witnessed how their families struggled, and they do not want to replicate that dynamic as adults. Therefore, these women use their education to gain more economic opportunities for financial independence to live the lives they choose. The women I interviewed were not looking to gain wealth for the

sake of wealth and materialism. Autonomous WOC redefine what success means to them, and they have centered their own happiness and health above titles and material wealth.

1.4.4 *Chapter 5: Love, Identity and Relationships*

In this chapter, I address how Autonomous WOC experience and feel about romantic love, singleness, sex, and their attachments to society. My participants discuss how they experience love and relationships and how they create a divergent pathway that allows them to exist on the boundaries of heteronormative marriage and romantic love. As a marginalized group, women of color have a unique perspective on the history of oppression associated with heteronormative marriage, and that has informed their own decisions about relationships.

Autonomous WOC also do not find a focus on romantic love to be personally advantageous. These women saw a way out of the confines of the social constructs through a form of independence and freedom I call the feminization of freedom. My participants have a common love of travel and learning, which I argue is a form of feminist praxis. These women must meet their own financial, emotional, and healthcare needs. Autonomous WOC receive very little support from social institutions, which creates more precarity for them in a society that centers whiteness, capitalism, and normative heterosexuality.

1.4.5 *Chapter 6: Women, Race and Nurturing*

In this chapter, I discuss how WOC decide to remain childfree and what they feel about their position in society as a childfree WOC. In order for women to be independent, they needed to be able to control their own reproduction. This chapter addresses Autonomous WOC's sense of self and their decisions surrounding motherhood, and how those decisions have been received by their family and larger communities. I also examine how race, trauma, and reproductive health intersect in the decisions about children and fertility for Autonomous WOC. I consider the

untangling of the concepts of nurturing and mothering. I have coined the concept of a motherhood fault line to address how women are often defined by their fertility, children, and family. The motherhood fault line is a symbolic boundary that creates a defining line between women who have become mothers and those who have not.

Lastly, I address the childfree social movement and how Autonomous WOC are practicing a form of resistance to the systems of colonization and capitalism that have often made decisions about their bodies and fertility. Decolonial Feminism emphasizes the colonial nature of the heteronormative expectations for women and how those colonial constructs have shaped their lives. The systems of Christianity and colonialism have contributed to the subjugation of women generally and the oppression of WOC, specifically.

1.4.6 *Chapter 7: Conclusion*

In this chapter, I summarize my findings and contributions. I highlight my findings that focus on my use of Feminist Standpoint and positionality, Intersectionality, and Decolonial Feminism, centering the lives of WOC. I detail my conception of the Autonomous woman to describe women who have remained childfree, never-married and single. This concept and my analyses explain how these women live a life contradictory to cultural norms and create their own customs based on values that are important to them. Autonomous WOC build their foundation on a form of protective individualism that focuses on self-care and personal space which offers a break from colonial practices such as heteronormative marriage. The goal of Decolonial Feminism is to confirm the life and opportunities of racialized women (Ramirez, Vélez-Zapata, and Maher 2024). Thus, these women are not breaking from obligations or connections to their communities or society; instead, they are turning away from oppressive institutions (Lugones 2010).

In this chapter, I also address the limitations of my research and future directions, as well as my work's contribution to the literature in the study of the family, single studies, and Feminist Standpoint Theory and Decolonial Feminisms. I contribute to the existing literature by using Decolonial Feminism, which allows me to examine the social norms and structural barriers that create obstacles for Autonomous WOC. I can recognize how Autonomous WOC live their lives outside the cultural and institutional norms and relate how they are not interested in living their life in service to institutions that do not always function in their best interest. In addition, an Intersectional lens allows me to analyze connections between gender, race, class, sexuality, marital status, age, and choices about motherhood. Reproductive health is as important now as ever with the overturning of Roe v. Wade in the United States and the continual attacks on women's reproductive health, which will harm marginalized women the most.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I discuss some of the key themes in the sociological literature on the family, the current literature on single studies and the childfree, and the theoretical paradigms of Feminist Standpoint Theory and feminism that I utilize in my analysis. As my research falls within the study of the family, understanding the history of the family, its connection to a property system, and the oppression of women is important contextually to my work. Therefore, in this section, I also discuss patriarchy and oppression within marriage. Single women have been the subject of several studies (Reynolds and Wetherell 2003; Byrne 2003; Reynolds 2005; Bay-Cheng and Goodkind 2016; Sharp and Ganong 2007; Simpson 2016; Budgeon 2016). Studies about single women have primarily focused on the experiences and perceptions of middle-class, white women and white family dynamics (McRobbie 2009; Sharp and Ganong 2007; Boyd 1989). However, research has not carved out childfree, never-married single WOC from the other categories to stand alone. My research fills this gap in the literature as I study childfree women, never-married single WOC.

As the literature on single and childfree studies are separate, I have also discussed them separately in this chapter. I consider the concepts of symbolic and social boundaries and how these boundaries are used to separate women based on marital status and fertility. As freedom and love are substantial elements in my dissertation, I consider the work of Coontz (2016) and Cancian (1986) about the feminization of love, female domesticity, and the gendered nature of individualism. Subsequently, I distinguish how my research unites single studies and childfree

and centers on the experiences of WOC. I also detail how using a critical analysis, such as Decolonial Feminism, differentiates my work.

Lastly, I summarize the feminist frameworks I use in my analysis. This section includes a discussion about Feminist Standpoint Theory, intersectionality, and Decolonial Feminism. In this section, I discuss the gendered nature of emotional labor, and issues surrounding WOC and reproductive justice. The literature in single studies and childfree studies are often separate. Therefore, I have attempted to discuss these topics independently when applicable and also unite them when appropriate.

2.2 BRIEF HISTORY OF RESEARCH LITERATURE ON THE FAMILY

Here I address aspects of the family literature that are related to my discussion of the history of marriage and its roots in a property system, patriarchy, white supremacy, and colonization. This discussion of the family structure and subjugation of women is also a significant element in my use of Feminist Standpoint Theory and Decolonial Feminism in my analysis of how Autonomous WOC make decisions about love, marriage and motherhood. I briefly discuss the family from the canonized perspectives of Functionalism and Marxism. I also examine the oppression of women within marriage and under a property system.

Durkheim believed that the division of labor between the sexes was necessary to maintain marital life, and if that division did not exist, then the relationships within marriage would not be as viable. Consequently, the economic necessity of the division of labor created the circumstances that led to heterosexual marriage (Durkheim 1953). Not only was there a division of labor in marriage, there was also a division between the emotional and the cerebral spheres of society. Men were associated with the intellectual world, while women were more aligned with the emotional one (Durkheim 1953). Due to these convergences, a woman's life was limited to

the roles of wife and mother. Although some took to this role of wife and mother with passion, others were not so keen on being reduced to the private domain and found their lives narrowed in consequence and limited in scope.

Class politics about the family can be discussed in terms of women being removed from the public sphere and delineated to be caretakers of the private sphere but being subordinate in both (Engels 1884; Crompton 2008). Davis (1983) added that one of the economic transformations of capitalism was the birth of the housewife. This partnership of patriarchy and capitalism within marriage came at women's expense, which would continue as women were not valued for the work they were doing within the confines of the domestic sphere and continued to lose economic and cultural capital (Bettie 2003). Later, the neoclassical economic explanations of labor and sex segregation added to the discourse that women's obligations to their families would limit their work production (Reskin 1993). These boundaries were even more pronounced for women of the working class and WOC (Davis 1983).

This property system either proceeded or coincided with patriarchal institutions, such as monogamous marriage (Lerner 1986). Hence, Lerner (1986) details that a discussion of patriarchy is more relevant from a historical perspective. She sees women as the first slaves and their enslavement being the first hierarchical dominance in human history, which led to the establishment of a market economy. Women have long been defined by the success of their family. Traditional marital unions have often been compared to a form of servitude or drudgery for women and historically have been the home of labor for most women. However, whether marriage is a union of genuine affection or a pragmatic arrangement there is an undeniable connection to a property system established and reinforced under capitalism (Engels 1884; Davis 1983; Coontz 2016).

2.2.1 *Oppression and the Politics of Marriage*

In The Promise of Happiness, Ahmed (2010) discusses the objects of happiness, which can include the family. However, the family is not a happy place for everyone, as some women and men experience domestic violence and emotional trauma within the family structure (Davis 1983; Coontz 2016; Blum and Deussen 1996). Gender has been argued to be the primary variable of oppression for women in the family, as well as society. Davis (1983) states that the separation of home and public life shaped by industrial capitalism firmly established female subordination. This subordination has had severe ramifications for women's autonomy. Women have been ensconced into a property system in which they are the object.

In a structure of monogamy and heteronormative ideals, women are either the property of their fathers or their husbands, but historically were rarely able to own property themselves (Lerner 1987). Therefore, to be a woman separate from father and husband is a form of rebellion. de Beauvoir (1949) believed that women do not assert the status of the subject because they do not have the essential resources, and without financial, political, and material resources, they feel obliged to a man to sustain their status as the other. As women are considered a social category, marital status creates a hierarchical subcategory as married women are seen to conform to the patriarchal order, and never-married women do not (Ashburn-Nardo 2017). Unfortunately, family scholarship often ignores the lives and experiences of the never-married (Ferguson 2008).

2.3 SINGLE STUDIES

The purpose of this section is to demonstrate my understanding of the current literature in single studies. As a growing number of people are remaining single globally, there is an argument for the study of singleness in academic research. The category of single itself is not homogenous, as women are single for different reasons, such as by choice, a divorce, or being

widowed (Taylor 2012). Single women have been included in all of the following categories: never married, divorced, separated, or widowed. These categories of singles are often intertwined in social research. DePaulo and Morris (2006) coined the term singlism to describe the stigmatizing of adults who are single. Comparable to sexism and racism, singlism can have an impact on a person's social and personal well-being. Since the meaning of being single is a socially constructed category, there are multiple variables in studying singleness. Lahad (2013) describes the category of singlehood as a dependent identity, meaning singlehood can vary by gender, ethnicity/race, class, age, ableness, and sexual orientation.

Women who are never married and are voluntarily so have infrequently been carved out from the other categories to stand alone. This is significant to do, as it will lead to a distinct point of view and narrative for this group of understudied single, never-married WOC. This section is separated into the following subsections based on the main themes in the existing literature: 1) Singleness and Social Norms, 2) Discrimination and the Deficit Identity of Singleness, 3) Singleness as a Social Identity and Lifestyle Choice, 4) Singleness and Social Networks, and 5) The Independent Single Woman Narrative.

2.3.1 *Singleness and Social Norms*

Reynolds and Wetherell (2003) contend that the state of singleness is socially constructed and is historically and culturally situated, and argue for more research to be conducted to adequately address how single women construct their identity. Never-married single women still live in a society where heteronormative gender norms center the lives and experiences of the heterosexual couple (Budgeon 2016). Women who choose not to marry have a distinctive and often contradictory position in society. They are women without a place. Single women can be seen as challenging a patriarchal ideology that exists in part on misogyny (Eastwood 2004). This

view of single women as threatening is a common theme in the literature. Single women are either a threat to the social order of coloniality or are seen as uncontrollable or dangerous to patriarchy (Lahad 2017). Bokek-Cohen (2019) states that the social position of spinsterhood is a social phenomenon that threatens the well-being of men and masculine domination, making never-married women feel responsible for the emotional stability of men. Thus, these spinsters should feel guilty for not fulfilling their social assignment as wives and caretakers.

As women age, they are no longer seen as marriageable, as marriage is often associated with the youth and beauty of women (Lahad 2017). When the subject of single women is addressed, women are often defined as suffering psychopathological disturbances that are the consequence of childhood trauma or poor role models (Hird and Abshoff 2000). A single woman has historically been defined as chaste and childless in society (Reynolds and Taylor 2004). She is also described as a woman disinterested in relationships with men. Never-married women were defined as neither maidens nor wives (Eastwood 2004).

Within heteronormative society, singleness has primarily been seen as a transitory state but not meant to be a permanent status. Ingraham (2008) further argued that heterogender demarcation will not change unless there is an institutional transformation in the beliefs surrounding heterosexuality. Feminist social movements have created social changes in all aspects of social life (Swank and Fahs 2017). These movements challenge social norms and institutions. As singleness is challenging the heteronormative standards, women who remain single can be described as being part of a feminist social movement.

As women are encouraged to pursue their education and career, a single woman may be afforded a certain amount of license, but only for a period of time. However, once a woman has aged out of the timeframe for when normative singleness is acceptable (typically over 30 years

old), she is subject to the judgments and ridicule of society (Budgeon 2016). Kaiser and Kashy (2005) explored the idea of there being a societal function to singleness, and they made a distinction between normative and non-normative singles, with non-normative singles being over the age of 36.2. Normative singles are people who are still young enough where the status of single is seen as being acceptable. Never-married singles can be unnerving to people. They threaten the status quo. Society places people in pairs, and singles upset the numerical order. Discussions are had about where to place them at a dinner table, a wedding, on a cruise ship, or whether to invite them at all. Therefore, the unfavorable attitudes toward non-normative singles place even more pressure on individuals to marry and be considered responsible members of society (Kaiser and Kashy 2005).

2.3.2 *Discrimination and the Deficit Identity of Singleness*

Traditionally, there has been an assumption that single women are single because no one chose them (Reynolds, Wetherell, and Taylor 2007). There are various studies that demonstrate a marginalized view in society of single women as dysfunctional to the social order (Reynolds and Wetherell 2003). Sharp and Ganong (2011) found that female adult single children felt ignored by their families of origin. People also often (wrongly) assume singles are lonely and alone (Addie and Brownlow 2014). Williams and Nida (2005) theorize that ostracism of singles does not have to be punitive in nature. However, it can be oblivious ostracism, meaning that a culture becomes entrenched in the idea that people should live as couples. If singles are ostracized, they may deal with that isolation in one of two ways: becoming the sycophantic single or the spiteful single. The sycophantic single tries to fit in and works hard to be accepted, and the spiteful single becomes antisocial and wants to force society to recognize their selfhood (Williams and Nida 2005).

For heterosexual women, being single can be seen as a personal failure because they have not adequately performed heterosexuality (Taylor 2012). Single women over the age of 25 can experience a deficit identity defined as the lack of being married and linking the stigma of singleness with age (Addie and Brownlow 2014). My research challenges the idea that as a woman gets older, she is more likely to suffer the stigma of singleness. The stigma of singleness can affect a man as they can be seen as immature, fearful of relationships, or disliking women. However, they are not perceived as fulfilling the social roles of husband and father. Therefore, the deficit identity is gendered in that women are identified as not following the normative roles of wife and mother (Reynolds, Wetherell, and Taylor 2007). In a content analysis of news media stories in China, the responsibility of being single is attributed to women but not men (Gong, Tu, and Jiang 2017). Femininity has been entwined with compulsory heterosexuality, which for women often means marriage and motherhood. Therefore, Simpson (2016) argues that the women who remain single are met with resistance and negative narratives due to their singleness being perceived as an act of defiance.

Happy single women challenge normative gender identities, which may explain why single women are more likely to be associated with unhappiness and unfulfillment than happiness (Simpson 2016). In order for women to feel mandated to fulfill their normative gender roles, they cannot see being single as an alternative path to happiness. A single woman is often depicted in popular culture as a personal failure in society, socially awkward, or hostile to others, even if she is successful professionally (McRobbie 2009). An example of this is the Sandra Bullock film, The Proposal, where she portrays a successful businesswoman incapable of intimate relationships. The narrative is that a single woman cannot be happy in all aspects of her life if her primary identity is singleness.

It is still a couple's world, and as we still prioritize coupledom, singles face discrimination and exclusion, such as tax penalties and not being allowed to buy a single ticket for events (Simpson 2016). A common theme in the current research argues that the concept of singleness is a social construct in which women can experience discrimination, as social institutions favor couples more than singles (Sharp and Ganong 2011). This discrimination, although to a lesser extent, can impact the lives of singles in a similar fashion to sexism and racism. Stahnke, Blackstone, and Howard (2020) found that their participants felt stigmatized and isolated from others in their workplaces. Their participants indicated that they felt out of the loop when coworkers were sharing stories about their personal lives, and something as simple as sharing photographs of anniversaries, baby showers or children's parties at work can be isolating for those who are not coupled or without children. Morris, Sinclair, and DePaulo (2007) found anecdotal evidence that employers often expect single people to work longer hours, assuming they have fewer obligations and more free time. However, being single does not mean that you have fewer connections to your community. Bokek-Cohen (2019) determined that single, never-married women compose a distinct social subgroup that is stigmatized, and their life choices are often discussed within a negative context in comparison to married women.

2.3.3 *Singleness as a Social Identity and Lifestyle Choice*

The framing of singleness as a decision and lifestyle is a relatively new social phenomenon (DePaulo 2024). As the characterization of adult romantic relationships has evolved, the meaning of singleness has also gone through a transformation (Reynolds and Taylor 2004). Much of the literature on single women focuses on their relationships and not on their perceptions of being single themselves (Bay-Cheng and Goodkind 2016). Adamczyk (2017) found that for those who remained single voluntarily, there are two main reasons: 1) a voluntary

choice to remain single (desire for independence, pursuit of career, disappointment in love), and 2) circumstantial factors (loss of parents, financial constraints, or health problems). Whereas some research has distinguished between voluntary and involuntary singleness, this has not been the case for all studies.

Being single is more often described as a transient state, but staying single life-long has historically been pathologized. The identity of singleness also struggles from being an ill-defined minority group in contrast to the dominant value system of American society (Forsyth and Johnson 1995). As more people remain never married, the deviant label placed on singles is being questioned, and remaining single is being considered a result of dissatisfaction with traditional marriage (Forsyth and Johnson 1995). In order for marriage to be attractive, it must satisfy social and psychological needs beyond the sexual and structural functions. Therefore, Forsyth and Johnson (1995) argue for challenging the stigmatizing status of singleness as a character flaw of the single woman and reframing singleness as a legitimate choice in opposition to marriage.

Adamczyk and Segrin (2015) studied never-married, heterosexual university students. They found that the lack of strong intimate relationships during young adulthood may have a more significant impact on one's well-being than their marital status. Lesch and Watt (2018) found that a woman's level of education influences her decision and the likelihood of remaining single. Poortman and Liefbroer (2010) established that people with more liberal values have more positive feelings about being single than those with more conservative values. There is also a difference between the mental health of involuntary and voluntary singles. Voluntary singles report fewer mental health problems, such as depression and anxiety, than people who are involuntarily single (Adamczyk 2017). Therefore, persons for whom singleness is a status of

choice are much more content with that decision than those who felt the decision to be single was thrust upon them.

2.3.4 Single Women of Color

Kislev and Marsh (2023) argue for singlehood to be described as an independent social category and identity, not just a relationship status, as many singles today see singleness as part of their identity, social roles and behaviors. This argument also allows for a more intersectional approach to discussing singleness, race, gender and age. McCutcheon (et al. 2022) discovered that even though Black women value marriage and place a great significance on getting married, they are less likely to marry. When they do marry, they marry at an older age. Marsh (et al. 2007) confirms that by the year 2000, nearly one in six Black middle-class households where the householder was between the ages 25-44 was a SALA (single and living alone) household. The moving away from marriage has been more prominent for Black individuals than other racial groups Marsh (et al. 2007). Black women are more likely to remain single due to socioeconomic factors such as they are more likely to have a college degree and earn more money than Black men (Moorman 2020). Other research focused on the correlation between the desire to marry and the want of a career for Black women with no definitive conclusion . Therefore, more research should be done on the social relations of single WOC.

Ferguson (2008) interviewed Chinese American never-married women. She examined how their racial-ethnic identities have shaped their views of singleness. Similar to my study, Ferguson (2008:236) found that Chinese American women live “at the crossroads or intersection of many social categories and identities.” These never-married Chinese American women were dealing with the issues of disappointing their families and not being accepted in their communities. They were also contending with how they fit within the Chinese culture and how

being a Chinese American has impacted their decisions from a generational viewpoint. Although more research is being done on people who are single or never-married or are childfree, fewer studies reflect the experiences of WOC who fall within these identities. Studies have remained largely homogenous, focusing on white European and North American women (Freeman 2023). DeLoach McCutcheon (et al. 2022) also found that the examination of the experiences of never-married Black women lags behind the studies of their white counterparts.

In China, men who remain single are referred to as "diamond bachelors," and the women who remain single are referred to as "leftover women." However, these "leftover women" have reclaimed their identity and have defined themselves as "victorious women" (Zhang 2020). Zhang (2022) also found that the childfree, never-married women in China who identify as "Victorious Women" are reconstructing their identity as a form of resistant behavior, and this new identity allows for different forms of womanhood to be constructed.

In *The Love Jones Cohort: Single and Living Alone in the Black Middle Class*, Marsh (2023) examines the Black middle class who are single and living alone (SALA). Marsh (2023) discusses intersecting social identities and structures that influence SALA's decisions about remaining single and living alone. This study is one of few studies that focuses solely on Black Americans, with 62 persons interviewed; women and men were interviewed between the ages of 25 and 60. Marsh (2023) focused on how SALAs define family and friendships and how they identify their economic stability and mental health. Marsh (2023) found that friends were more important than family connections in having a sense of well-being to the Love Jones Cohort. Many of the participants also had financial responsibilities to family members and sometimes felt that it was a burden to support others financially.

2.3.5 *Singleness and Social Networks*

DePaulo and Morris (2006) were some of the first to argue that the study of adult relationships has focused on romantic relationships and that other adult relationships (friends, siblings, colleagues) should be included in social science research. Marriage is seen as a social and cultural institution fostering social unity; therefore, singles are less merged into the community (Sarkisian and Gerstel 2016). However, when you look at the issue of marital status and community and account for sex, there are substantial differences. Marriage is more integrative for men as it improves their social connections to the community. Married men have more familial connections than single men that help them establish more connections to the community via their extended family members and their children. However, Sarkisian and Gerstel (2016) found that there is less of a link between marriage and assimilation into the community for women and marriage and motherhood can actually be more isolating for women. Married women often focus more time on their husbands and children and have less time for their friends and other community members (Sarkisian and Gerstel 2016). As women are likely to feel more isolated in marriage than men, they obtain more social benefits in remaining single.

Lesch and Watt (2018) established that never-married women have a larger social network than their married counterparts. Sarkisian and Gerstel (2016) determined that single people have more friends and are more likely to socialize with their neighbors, and yet, there continues to be an assumption that singles have fewer connections to the community. Stokes and Moorman (2018) found that marital status is not connected to a person's social support network, and singles frequently have more social connections than their married peers. Single, never-married women also have responsibilities and relationships. Some research has attributed the breakdown or disconnect of community with less successful marriages; however, little evidence

supports this. Singles can have larger community support than their married counterparts (Coontz 2016; Marsh and Iceland 2010). The research also indicates that a sense of belonging and community is correlated to better physical and psychological health, especially for older women. A person's sense of trust is associated to the concept of social cohesion (Young, Russell, and Powers 2004). Thus, how people perceive their singleness has a lot to do with how they identify social networks (Poortman and Liefbroer 2010).

Pudrovska, Schieman, and Carr (2006) researched the strains of remaining single and whether race and gender impact singles as they age. Their research found that Black adults do not depend on their relationships with their nuclear family as much as white adults. Pudrovska, Schieman, and Carr (2006) found that Black singles have a more extensive social network they rely on for support, such as friends and extended family members. A society that values marriage and interpersonal partnerships can perpetuate a negative perception of those who remain single and continue a sentiment that single people must also be lonely. However, research shows that loneliness results from a lack of social networks such as peers, friendships, and intimate relationships, not simply the state of singleness (Adamczyk 2017).

2.3.6 *The Independent Single Woman Narrative*

The Independent Single Woman discourse describes a woman living outside of the typical marital restrictions, and she can make her own choices (Addie and Brownlow 2014). She is happy, liberated, and embracing her own agency, or she is sad, lonely, and unattractive. Single women without children have historically been shamed by society for being selfish or unsympathetic, but this new definition includes a woman who is unashamed and privileged. Addie and Brownlow (2014) refer to this characterization as an asset identity. This asset identity allows for a social identity of the single woman as someone who is not deviant or dysfunctional.

Williams and Nida (2005) also are challenging how society perceives single, never-married persons. They describe someone committed to a lifestyle of singleness by choice as seriously single.

Singleness is often assumed to be an expression of individualization and the expanded freedom of people's choices (Adamczyk 2016). If women have more choices, some women will choose the path less taken, and the more that happens, the more that path will become worn. Byrne's (2003) study on Irish single women, she found that single women value their independence, engage in non-traditional gender roles, and determine their futures. Married women are more likely than never-married single women or divorced women to embrace traditional gender norms. Single women often do not seek traditional gender roles if those roles come with restrictions on their freedom (Swank and Fahs 2017). The rise in singleness can be attributed to a higher level of independence and expanded freedoms that feminism has helped produce (Simpson 2016; Byrne 2003; Reynolds and Taylor 2004). Individualism can be defined in two ways: 1) an increased freedom of choice to shape one's own life, and 2) by creating more individualistic approaches that lead to less connections to others (Poortman and Liefbroer 2010). Single women have embraced the former and have more freedom and choices (Poortman and Liefbroer 2010). Bay-Cheng and Goodkind's (2016) research indicated that women of low socioeconomic status obtain social capital from marriage and that marriage becomes the easiest way for women to acquire economic mobility. Bay-Cheng and Goodkind (2016) coined the term commercialized feminism as a women's independence being construed only in terms of economic and emotional self-reliance and empowerment.

Marsh (et al. 2007) argues that because professional Black women are now achieving middle-class status without marrying, marriage may no longer be viewed as providing much financial benefits. Henderson (2020) introduced the term marriageocracy, which combines the concepts of marriage and meritocracy. She argues that marriage, similar to the American Dream, is not an equitable marketplace where hard work will get you to the promised land. As men and women experience marriage differently, Black women and white women also experience marriage differently. During times of slavery, marriage was an institution withheld from Black people, and when something became withheld or made out of reach, it made marriage an aspirational relationship that signifies success and assimilation into polite American society (Henderson 2020). Thus, marriageocracy is dependent on cultural scripts and representations of womanhood and femininity that disadvantage Black women and other WOC (Henderson 2020).

2.3.7 *Summary of Singles Studies*

The literature described in this section reflects how single studies are often situated within psychological frameworks (Adamczyk 2017; Ann Byrne and Carr 2005; DePaulo and Morris 2006; Kaiser and Kashy 2005), but it also demonstrates that singleness is a social construct that is historically and culturally situated (Reynolds and Wetherell 2003). As American society still centers heteronormative gender norms, the lives and experiences of the of the never-married are often ignored (Ferguson 2008; Budgeon 2016). Therefore, single women are challenging a patriarchal ideology (Eastwood 2004). Some literature has described how singleness is pathologized, but other scholars have documented an affirmative interpretation of singleness (Addie and Brownlow 2014; Reynolds and Wetherell 2003; Sharp and Ganong 2011). The framing of singleness as a lifestyle choice is relatively new in scholarship, and the arc type of the Independent Single Woman as a woman who can make her own choices has emerged

(Addie and Brownlow 2014). Consequently, DePaulo and Morris (2005) assert that the term relationship more likely centers on a specific kind of relationship (romantic relationships) in a person's life and that single studies can offer a study of multiple relationships without focusing solely on romantic connections.

2.4 CHILDFREE WOMEN

In this section, I address the research on women who are childless and childfree. The concept of childless typically references persons who wanted to have children but could not do so; childfree refers to persons who never wanted children, decided they did not want children, or came to the conclusion that having children was incompatible with their lifestyle. The number of childfree adults in the United States population varies dramatically based on studies, methodologies, and samples (Neal and Neal 2022). The term childfree has more recently been used to indicate an active choice by women who do not have children of their own (Gillespie 2003). Settle (2014) studied the decision-making pathways of childfree women and the social construction of motherhood. They state that shifting ideas about what a woman's role is at home and work has led to more women choosing to become childfree. They also contend that the ideals of mandatory motherhood are not universal (Settle 2014). Research has shown that childfree women face stigma and negative perceptions and can be labeled as selfish, abnormal, immature, or neurotic (Vinson, Mollen, and Smith 2010). Park (2002) discusses how the intentionally childless are stigmatized due to a negative association with individualism and their lifestyle being counter to the roles of wife and mother.

The academic literature has not always distinguished the voluntarily childfree from the involuntarily childless (Blackstone and Dyer Stewart 2012) and the inability to distinguish adequately between them has been problematic for previous studies (Park 2002). By the 1980s,

studies started to distinguish the voluntary from involuntary childless, and later, scholars started to use the term childfree to indicate choice. This distinction is significant as it impacts how women perceive their status and identity as childless or childfree (Stahnke, Blackstone, and Howard 2020). My research centers the experiences of voluntarily childfree, never-married. This section is divided into two subsections: 1) Womanhood and Motherhood, and 2) Cultural Norms of Marriage and Motherhood.

2.4.1 *Womanhood and Motherhood*

Historian Barbara Welter has defined the nineteenth-century Western notion of true womanhood as being piteous, pure, submissive, and domestic. She stated that if you "put them all together and they spelled mother, daughter, sister, wife – woman" (Coontz 2016:71). Pronatalism returned in the face of a growing feminist movement of the 1970s. This push toward pronatalism, in the form of pressure from conservative groups for women to not work outside the house, was to remind women their place was at home with their children (Blackstone 2019). Today, most American women expect to choose their own partners, and have agency to make personal decisions about birth control, which means they pose a threat to the heteronormative conventions of gender roles that expect women to be mothers and wives (Lahad 2013:24). Variables such as higher levels of education and affluence are factors in women remaining childfree and in women desiring an identity independent from motherhood (Gillespie 2003).

In Judith Blake's (1974) book *Pronatalism: The Myth of Mom & Apple Pie*, she asserts that parenthood is the customary presumption for women. Gender essentialism refers to the belief that women are innate nurtures and should naturally gravitate toward behaviors associated with caring for others (Blackstone 2019). When a woman reaches the upper echelons of society in the public sector, affirming her status as a mother is a way of softening her and making her

more palatable to people who see motherhood as akin to humanity. This form of humanizing was most recently notable during Ketanji Brown Jackson's confirmation hearing for the United States Supreme Court. This public job interview should have been about her legal expertise, intellectual decision-making, and accomplishments. However, a considerable amount of time was devoted to discussing her being a wife and mother. Hence, defining her in terms of motherhood made her acceptable and gave her opinions more respectability. Motherhood also added more value to her as a person.

The study of women and motherhood has led to new terminology. Nandy (2017) coined mater-normativity to explain the idealization that women are naturally maternal, and that motherhood should be their primary motivation. As motherhood became the feminine ideal, Nandy (2017:60) states that mater-normativity "leads to the normalisation of women's reproductive capacities and the naturalisation of their social, political, and economic roles." Nancy Felipe Russo refers to the centering of motherhood as the motherhood mandate (Blackstone 2019). Meyers coined the term matrigynoidolatry to refer to the phenomenon of pronatalist imagery; Meyers states that matrigynoidolatry limits women's agency as individuals outside of motherhood (Nandy 2017).

2.4.2 *Cultural Norms of Marriage and Motherhood*

Cultural norms continue to stigmatize and marginalize women who remain voluntarily childfree. Blackstone (2019) states that women who decide they do not want to be mothers have become one of America's preferred scapegoats. Ashburn-Nardo (2017) found that childfree women may experience social and moral outrage in response to their lack of childbearing. Ashburn-Nardo (2017) uses backlash theory to argue that childfree women suffer a form of backlash due to their decision not to have children in a pronatal society. Backlash theory details

how cultural stereotypes can create injunctive norms that identify what behaviors are more likely to be approved or disapproved by the other members of a community. Ashburn-Nardo (2017) postulates that the only women more vilified than women who choose not to be mothers are the women who are pregnant and unhappy about the pregnancy. Therefore, there is an expectation that women should have children, and motherhood is seen as normative.

Freeman (2023) found that there is a strong link between having children and religion, and to have children is to fulfill your obligation as a woman. In not having children, women are not fulfilling their duty to society, but also their duty to God. Koropeckyj-Cox (2007) claims that parenthood provides a heightened social status, which creates more access to social capital. Consequently, a woman's social and personal value is defined by her ability to have children (Freeman 2023). Therefore, women who forgo motherhood limit their social capital and their possible advancement in social institutions. Childfree women are also excluded from the benefits of a family-friendly workplace available to parents, such as flex time and on-site daycare (Park 2002).

Hafford-Letchfield (et al. 2017) study of single, childfree women (solo women) in the United Kingdom found that these women felt marginalized by political rhetoric, such as the hard-working family. Solo women felt their contributions to society as workers, volunteers, and caregivers were not respected. They also spoke of the financial precarity of a woman living alone without children to care for them as they age. They felt discriminated against by the government for not being eligible for some governmental safety nets as other families, even though they have paid into the system through their employment. Hafford-Letchfield (et al. 2017:325) sought a word that best exemplifies single, childfree women. They decided on "solo" and referred to their

participants as solo women. Solo women discussed how important friendships are in their lives and that these relationships are a vital support system for them.

Vinson, Mollen, and Grant Smith (2010) studied an overlooked variable: the effect of a woman's ethnicity on their perceptions of women who choose motherhood and those who choose childfreedom. Vinson, Mollen, and Grant Smith (2010) looked specifically at African American and Caucasian women. As women who remain childfree are often branded as deviant, race/ethnicity is important to study to determine any correlations between race, gender, and childfreedom (Vinson, Mollen, and Grant Smith 2010). Lisle (1996) determined that more white women are childfree than WOC. She theorized that WOC suffer more scorn due to cultural and historical factors such as forced sterilizations and separated families (Vinson, Mollen, and Grant Smith 2010; Lisle 1996). There are also more cultural and religious pressures placed on women of color to have children (Lisle 1996).

Settle (2014) maintains that mandatory motherhood is not the same for all women, and there are different societal expectations for women of different ethnic backgrounds and socioeconomic statuses. Ray (2018) studied feminist ideologies of empowerment and risk narratives of young motherhood among marginalized Black and Latina women. She found that feminist responses to teen sexuality and parenthood are defined in two classifications - feminist empowerment and reproductive justice. The feminist framework underscores a woman's independence, experiences, and self-development. Positioned within women of color feminism, the reproductive justice perspective emphasizes the ramifications of racialized, classed, and gendered narratives that pathologize young Black and Brown girl's bodies. Gillespie (2003) interviewed twenty-five childfree women. All twenty-five participants were white. Gillespie (2003) brings attention to the fact that while white, middle-class women have had to fight for

their rights to terminate or limit pregnancies, women of color have been forced to endure government-sanctioned sterilizations. Accordingly, the lives of WOC have been understudied in many areas of social life; singleness and being childfree is just another example. Future research should include an examination of how race, class, and sexuality shape women's choices to be childfree.

In a recent study, Stahnke, Cooley, and Blackstone (2023) found that stigma still exists toward childfree women and that the United States very much remains a pronatalist society. Mitchell (2004) worried about declining fertility due to the women's equal rights movement and the rise of feminism. As my research focuses on women who do not marry or have children, I focus on the deliberate choice, as well as the contextual circumstances that influence women from forgoing motherhood and the societal implications of those actions.

2.5 IDENTITY, SYMBOLIC AND SOCIAL BOUNDARIES

In this section, I address the topics of symbolic and social boundaries, self-identity, and social identity. I use symbolic boundaries in my analysis of the social divisions between women, specifically women who are mothers and women who remain childfree. I utilize self-identity and social identity in my analysis of women and their relationships. Lamont and Molnár (2002) discuss the difference between symbolic and social boundaries. Symbolic boundaries are conceptual distinctions that can catalog people, practices, objects, time, and space. The separation between women who are mothers and those who are not has become a symbolic and social boundary. Neumann and Moy (2018) state that symbolic boundaries are drawn in society to classify individuals or groups conceptually. Women who are not mothers have been characterized as selfish and have weak family relationships. Mei (2023) also argues that

symbolic boundaries generate social distinctions that help distinguish between objects and people.

These symbolic boundaries have also been integral in creating social boundaries between women who are not mothers and women who are mothers. Childfree women are often considered more expendable and less respected as they are not providing the social role of bearing and socializing children (Blackstone and Blackstone 2019; Nandy 2017). For example, mothers receive more work leave benefits or time off than women who do not have children. Also, women who are mothers may be seen as more responsible and mature (Morris, Sinclair, and DePaulo, 2007). Therefore, these social differences between women who are mothers and women who are childfree are demonstrated in social boundaries such as the unequal access and distribution of material and non-material resources and social opportunities (Lamont and Molnar 2002).

As with symbolic and social boundaries, the distinction between self-identity and social identity are concepts I use to discuss the personal and social divisions between women who are mothers and those who do not. Byrne (2003) discusses the difference between a self-identity and a social identity. Self-identity refers to an individual's values and preferences and characterizes how that person is distinctive. Our social identity is how we are classified in social terms such as gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, and marital status. Social identity is what we share in common with others. For example, childfree never-married single women have a shared social identity. Byrne (2003) argues that when self-identity is distinguishable from social identity and analyzed through the lens of gender, there are implications for the capacity of choice and agency. The social identity of women is often rooted in their experiences in heterosexual marriage and motherhood. McCann and Allen (2018) state that there is complexity in when and

how individuals experience roles and transitions such as marriage and motherhood. More research must be conducted to adequately address how single women construct their identity (Reynolds and Wetherell 2003). Therefore, I assert that childfree, never-married single women are creating a new social identity of womanhood.

2.6 FREEDOM, LOVE AND INTIMACY

In this section, I discuss how Autonomous WOC view romance, dating, sex, love and attachments. A woman can still want relationships or love in her life even if she is childfree, never-married and single. In Cancian's (1986) article The Feminization of Love, she argued that the style of love known as romantic love is actually a feminized form of love, and this type of love keeps women preoccupied with interpersonal relationships and limits their productivity in the public sphere. She refers to this phenomenon as the feminization of love.

Cancian (1986) further states that the majority of academic studies on love and intimacy often frame their work in typical feminine terminology, such as talking about feelings, emotions, and being vulnerable. She states there are actually two styles of love: expressive and instrumental (Cancian 1986). Women have traditionally been associated with the home, family, and expressive forms of love such as love letters, poetry, public declarations of love, and gifts. Therefore, the focus on love (finding it and keeping it) has become a preoccupation with women and leads them to focus on interpersonal relationships instead of economic or political gains. This fixation is to the advantage of men and the disadvantage to women (Cancian 1986).

Swidler (2001) states that social power comes from the demonstration of one's independence. A dependent person is not considered a person who possesses power in a society that values dominance. Dependence is seen as a liability. Coontz (2016:65) advances this case by arguing that "once people are defined as essentially self-reliant and independent, due nothing by

virtue of their common dependencies but earning rewards solely for their individual efforts and achievements, then families and love affairs become the only place for noncontractual giving of services." As women have been more associated with family matters, they are less likely to be rewarded for their individual achievements. Their successes come in relation to the family and the accomplishments of the family unit, whereas individual achievements in the public sphere define a man's successes.

Coontz (2016) discusses the creation and division of female domesticity and male individualism. Similar to Cancian, Coontz considers how men and women have been socialized to perceive love differently. She contends that love became a relationship outside of a cost analysis rationality. This perception also allowed women to feminize the behaviors associated with love and nurturing (Coontz 2016). This individualism manifested itself outside the family and was only possible when men did not have familial responsibilities. Therefore, women made it possible for men to be independent. She states that men could focus on self-reliance and independence because women were dependent and taking care of other responsibilities such as emotion or compassion. Consequently, men could afford to discount any emotion or compassion in the political and economic spheres because women were assigned these attributes in the personal sphere (Coontz 2016).

WOC have often been absent from the academic discourse of love and marriage. For example, Swidler's *Talk of Love* (2001) discusses how middle-class Americans view love and describes what she calls the culture of love. She explores how Americans think and talk about love. She interviewed eighty-eight men and women. All the participants were white and in the middle and upper-middle class. The focus on middle-class and white participants is problematic in that it delineates who gets to represent the American mainstream. Swidler (2001) justifies this

sample because it allows for analyzing a different dimension in cultural life that other studies had failed to do. Subsequently, WOC and women from poor families, such as those in my study, are repeatedly nonexistent in the literature concerning marriage and love.

2.7 SITUATING MY RESEARCH

This section delineates how my research builds on and contributes to the current literature in single studies and childfree singles. I detail how my use of Feminist Sandpoint Theory, Intersectionality, and Decolonial Feminism distinguishes my work from the studies that apply the Life Course Perspective. Feminist social movements have created social changes in all aspects of social life (Swank and Fahs 2017). These movements challenge heteronormative social norms and institutions. For example, the life course perspective is often used to discuss issues of singleness and marriage because it emphasizes transitions and timing (Umberson, Pudrovska, and Reczek 2010; Band-Winterstein and Manchik-Rimon 2014). This perspective studies our lives over time and the cultural milestones that mark our social evolution (Florian 2018). For example, being single is considered more acceptable at certain times in our life course, principally when we are in our twenties. The life course perspective also focuses on analyzing well-being through different stages in one's life (Umberson, Pudrovska, and Reczeb 2010).

Therefore, from a life course perspective, childfree, never-married single women are skipping the main course of life. Because Autonomous WOC skip the transition from single woman to wife and mother, they lack social significance and must justify their presence (Reynolds, Wetherell, and Taylor 2007). Childfree, never-married women will not go through the typical life course transitions and rituals expected of women. Autonomous WOC will not partake as the principal in the ceremonies of femininity such as an engagement party, bridal

shower, a wedding day, a baby shower, a gender reveal, childbirth, or the death of a spouse. Therefore, examining singleness from a life course perspective, the social location of being childfree, never-married, and single is regarded as a transitionary social placement, not a permanent social identity (Brand-Winterstein and Manchik-Rimon 2014).

Historically, the system of heterosexual marriage privileges men and disadvantages women, as men dominate women and exert their power over social organizations and institutions in patriarchal structures (Collins 1993). Thus, the structure of the family and the rituals and practices that go with the institution of marriage reinforce patriarchy as the supremacy of men over women (Ingraham 1994). A patriarchal system's intention is to subjugate women and prevent women from obtaining equality with men (Connell 2009). Therefore, the first patriarchal lesson is to divide and conquer. This tactic has also been used to pit white women against WOC, married women against never-married women, and mothers against childfree women. The social structures and ideologies that help to create these divisions between women are a theme throughout my research.

Marriage is viewed as the most fundamental organizing institution in society, which also normalizes patriarchal gender relations (Wolkomir 2009). Consequently, patriarchy helps to produce heterogender divisions, which traditionally have advantages over men and exploit women (Ingraham 1994). Heterosexual, monogamous marriage is considered heteronormative because it provides a specific structure of sexual and gendered practices and ideologies that are viewed as normal or appropriate and this system of patriarchal marriage naturalizes the regulation of sexuality through the institution of marriage and uses state domestic law to enforce those restrictions (Ingraham 1994).

The decision to never marry has implications for the future of gender roles and norms, individual agency, and the changing structure of the family. My research is distinctive in that I am studying the identities of childfree, never-married single WOC, not as a transitionary position or from a deficit identity perspective. I focus on how these women have been able to carve out a new path separate from the identities of wife and mother, irrespective of the transitions of life. My research demonstrates how studying childfree, never-married single women from a feminist standpoint and a decolonial feminist perspective allows for an examination of the social processes and structures that have shaped these women's lives and how they have challenged heteronormative expectations. Focusing solely on WOC, my research aims to discover how their position as WOC determines their choices and experiences.

2.8 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) argued for a feminist theory application to gender. One of de Beauvoir's (1949) contributions to feminist thought was her restating of Hegel's concept of the other versus the self. *The Second Sex* is often referred to as the most prominent modern feminist work, in it de Beauvoir details her idea of women being defined as the other, meaning that women are defined in reference to men. Man is the subject, and woman is the other. Therefore, he is essential. She is not. Thus, the othering of never-married women is the marginalizing of a group that is already a part of a marginalized group - women (Bokek-Cohen 2019). Feminists can apply this analysis to study childfree and never-married single women. The married woman who is a mother is essential. However, the never-married single woman and especially the childfree woman is not.

My research examines the narratives of WOC who are childfree, never-married, and single. I detail how they choose to live their lives in ways that do not conform to cultural expectations or social roles of being a wife or mother. This section outlines the theoretical framework I use in my analysis. I begin with a discussion of Feminist Standpoint Theory. I then discuss using an intersectional lens and how my research employs a conversation about emotional labor and work. Lastly, I engage in a discourse about coloniality and Decolonial Feminism, highlighting the subject of reproductive justice.

2.8.1 *Feminist Standpoint Theory*

Academia often credits Sandra Harding with coining the term Standpoint Theory. I argue that Anna Julia Cooper, W.E.B. Du Bois, Dorothy Smith, and Patricia Hill Collins have all contributed to the formation of standpoint theory in their discussions on class, race, and gender from a perspective of shared characteristics, experiences, and knowledge (Phillips 2023). Harding (2004) states that politics is a research method and that standpoint theory changes the question from how to eliminate politics from science to a question about which politics get to advance or hinder the development of knowledge and who that helps. Feminist Standpoint Theory asserts that knowledge is socially situated and argues for more marginalized groups to participate in the methodological process, and hooks (2000) reasons that when you study the marginalized members of a society, you are also expanding the idea of what knowledge is and how it is created. When you expand the process of knowledge production, you are allowing all members of society to have more dimension.

Cooper (1892) acknowledges that those who are ignored have a better vantage point to observe and critique the social structures and processes that subjugate them. Cooper (1892) knew that these distinctive perspectives made knowledge more of a subjective rather than objective

reality. She addressed that different groups have distinct positionalities, which determine their viewpoints. Aptly, in highlighting the experiences and perceptions of childfree, never-married single WOC, I am intensifying the spotlight on all women's lives. Black feminists such as Cooper (1892) speak of voice literally and symbolically. Standpoint theory also lends itself to a discussion of voices and who has the right to be heard.

Ferguson (2008) contends that the literature on the family often ignores the experiences of the never-married. She also argues that never-married women should be studied from a critical feminist perspective. Ferguson (2008) advocates for the scholarship on the family to utilize a more intersectional approach and to study more than the traditional white families, expanding the analysis to more marginalized groups. The prevailing image in mainstream media of a single woman is a white, heterosexual, middle-class postmodern feminist (Taylor 2012). The postmodern feminism that proffers to represent all women belies the reality that all women are not represented equally. Therefore, the cultural representation of a white, never-married single woman depicts women through the lens of privilege and whiteness (Taylor 2012).

I attest that childfree, never-married single women of color's voices have yet to be adequately highlighted in the current academic research. Black feminists have also broadened the discussion to allow for other marginalized women, such as Latinas, lesbians, and WOC, to become a part of the larger conversations regarding social structures, inequality, and social processes. However, Collins (1997:375) warned that feminist standpoints should not be confused with a woman's point of view. Standpoint is not a stagnant position, but "standpoint refers to historically shared, group-based experiences." Therefore, academic scholarship should emphasize the social conditions that construct groups and not individual experiences. My dissertation makes a case to include Autonomous WOC in the discussion of feminist standpoints

due to their shared social position to discern what we can learn from their experiences and the revolution of family dynamics and gender roles.

2.8.2 *Intersectional Lens*

In the 1980s, Black feminists started to assert their narratives in the feminist discourse. Theorists such as Davis, Collins, Crenshaw, and hooks argued for a more holistic approach to gender studies that included gender, race, and class. Black feminists maintained that there is no common oppression among women and that white feminists did not fully understand how race played a role in the gender discussion (Connell 2009). Thus, Kimberlee Crenshaw (1989) coined the concept of intersectionality. WOC feminists are critical of a feminist universalism and see the intersection of class, gender, and race as crucial to understanding the experiences of all women (Lugones 2010). Hence, intersectionality refers to the complexities involved in the multiple forms of discrimination and how they intersect to magnify a group's marginalization. Crenshaw (1989) also discusses how social institutions such as the legal, political, and medical complexes have been formed to maintain these oppressions. Intersectionality demonstrates how oppression is "experienced, maintained, and reproduced in social relationships, belief systems, and institutions, policies, practices, and culture" (Few-Demo and Allen 2020:335).

Crenshaw outlines three systems of intersectionality: 1) representational intersectionality is described as the effects of public misrepresentation and disparagement; 2) structural intersectionality is explained as an examination of how social and economic policies produce and maintain historical inequalities among groups; and 3) political intersectionality is the examination of identity politics across and within groups (Few-Demo and Allen 2020). My study focuses on structural and political intersectionality and how race, class, gender, sexuality, age, marital status, and reproductive decisions intersect to impact how Autonomous WOC live their

lives and how society views and reacts to them, not just as individuals, but as a group with a specific social location.

2.8.2.1 *Emotional Work, Emotional Labor and the Black Tax*

I am using emotional labor, emotional work, and the black tax in my analysis. I engage these concepts in my discussions of the intersectionality of race, gender, and work. This discussion allows me to place single and childfree women in dialogue with the sociology of work literature to demonstrate how these women have to expend additional emotional labor and/or work, whether at paid work (labor), or in their communities and at home (unpaid work). Hochschild first used emotional labor to discuss how flight attendants had to display performative non-verbal language to assuage the public into feeling comfortable (Humphrey 2022). Hochschild (2012:7) defines emotional labor as labor that "requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others." Hochschild (2012) states that the transmission of the private use of feelings affects men and women differently. Emotional management, in which we determine when and with whom one is free to share their feelings, is most used by women of the middle and upper classes.

A similar concept to emotional labor which is exerted during paid labor, is the black tax—a concept used by Armour (2020) to describe an extra burden placed on Black people. The black tax is defined as the emotional price Black people must pay in their encounters with white people and some Black people because of negative stereotypes. The concept of a black tax plays off the expression that the only things in life that are absolutes are death and paying taxes. This discernment of a perpetual reality of taxes can also be applied to racism and discrimination, as racism and discrimination can be pervasive and cannot be avoided (Armour 2020). Whereas

emotional labor was initially coined to refer to women's labor and the Back tax was to signify the burden of Black people, they both were developed in order to recognize the additional weight of biases, discriminations, and aggressions that marginalized communities often take on that make their daily lives more challenging.

2.8.3 *Decolonial Feminism*

Tuck and Yang (2012) state that there is a hollowness to the calls for disentangling the creation of knowledge from the creators of knowledge in academia. The fight for women's rights and feminism did not emerge from the women who were in the most need of emancipation (hooks 2000). Ahmed (2017) asserts that white fragility can work as a technique of defense for white feminists who focus on the plight of middle-class white women. Therefore, those who are benefiting from the structures of white supremacy also benefit from their obliviousness to oppressive systems. In basic terms, if you cannot see white supremacy, you cannot address it, and if you cannot address it, you cannot eradicate it. White women share the same cultural and social characteristics and norms as white men, which makes them less inclined to acknowledge the practices and structures that benefit them (Ahmed 2017). Decolonial Feminism challenges Western reason. Decolonization is not an idealized belief that you can go back in time before colonization. However, it addresses the truth that people existed prior to colonization with established cultures of their own (Maldonado-Torres 2011; Velez and Tuana 2020).

Decolonization opposes the monism of Western knowledge and practices and aims to bring awareness to a greater spectrum of standpoints. Decolonial Feminists discuss how there were white men and white women who wanted to civilize the savages and earnestly thought they were doing so to the benefit of the people they colonized (Lugones 2010; Velez and Tuana

2020). However, in seeing the colonized as inferior, to begin with, the colonizers were setting up a system of superiority, oppression, and victimization (Segal 1993).

The term heterogender has been used by materialist feminists to de-naturalize the sexual to understand how heterosexuality is connected to the gender division of labor, and the patriarchal relations of production (Ingraham 1994). Consequently, there cannot be a discussion of heteronormative gender and WOC without the acknowledgment that sexism, racism, and classism are arrangements of marginalization and oppression that have been informed by Western philosophy (hooks 2000). WOC feminists claim that white feminists do not fully engage with how racism, heteronormativity, and classism intersect to marginalize WOC and those who depart from a prescriptive feminist ideal (Ray 2018). In a patriarchal society, a woman's femaleness determines the objectification of her sexuality. In a racist culture, a woman's whiteness demands her participation in maintaining a system of white supremacy (Donaldson 1992). Therefore, in using Decolonial Feminism, my research looks at how WOC's choices are determined by their experiences within social institutions and intersectional oppressions (Lugones 2006).

Lugones (2010) argues that the purpose of European colonialism was to insert a heterosexual and Christian agenda, as the structure of the family is dependent upon the cultural norms and needs of a society. Collins (2009) also agrees that intersectionality's most persuasive case is discussing how colonialism regulates gender. Cultural imperialism is to change a colonized people's way of life, self-expression, and materialism without any regard for them as a people or a community, and the appropriation of knowledge and the destruction of knowledge are integral to the colonial process, as colonialism often employs racism as an ideological justification (Maracle 1996).

2.8.3.1 *Race, Sterilization, and Fertility*

The government of the United States has had a part in the forced sterilization of Native American women and other WOC. During a Senate committee hearing, Dr. Connie Uri testified that by 1976, approximately 24 percent of all women identified as Indian, and of childbearing age, had been sterilized (Davis 1983). In 1939, President Roosevelt's Inter-departmental Committee on Puerto Rico issued a statement stating that the island's economic difficulties were due to the problem of overpopulation. The government then initiated a sterilization campaign (Davis 1983).

This campaign resulted in a government policy that resulted in over 35 percent of all childbearing Puerto Rican women being surgically sterilized by the early 1970s (Davis 1983; Blackstone 2019). Also in 1939, the Birth Control Federation of America planned a Negro Project. The focus of this project was to bring attention to a perceived problem that the "mass of Negroes, particularly in the South, still breed carelessly and disastrously, with the result that the increase among Negroes, even more than among whites, is from that portion of the population least fit, and least able to rear children properly" (Davis 1983:214). Unfortunately, this dehumanization of WOC have been a throughline of American history and not isolated incidents.

Bokek-Cohen (2019:83) argues that symbolic violence "is exerted not only against married women but against unmarried women as well, when they challenge the ultimate nature of marriage as the 'natural' position of a woman in society, therefore threatening the normative patriarchal order." Therefore, my research is informed by how symbolic and physical violence has been used to force women to conform to social and cultural standards. Lastly, in studying Autonomous WOC, I am expanding on the knowledge that already exists about never-married single women, childfree women, and women of color. Autonomous WOC have a unique position

in society, for they are a minority (women of color), and within a minority (never-married single), within another minority (childfree women).

2.9 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have outlined the relevant literature in family studies, including single studies and childfree studies. Sociological studies on gender are often rooted in established models, and single women challenge social norms and institutions. Bokek-Cohen (2019) argues that women's subordination within the context of heterosexuality is the opening salvo for feminist analysis. A feminist approach to examining singleness offers a critical perspective on how marital status and sex affect one's sense of belonging (Lesch and van der Watt 2018). I lay the foundation for how Autonomous WOC create a feminist social movement that has and will continue to create social change in all aspects of social life (Swank and Fahs 2017). When members of society follow the prescribed social path ascribed to them, society has a sense of stability. However, when people step outside that path, society can become destabilized. These changes in social behavior and relationship choices can create a sense of destabilization but also open the door for social change.

I also discuss my use of feminist frameworks, including the theoretical perspectives of Feminist Standpoint Theory, intersectionality, and Decolonial Feminism. I use Feminist Standpoint Theory and Decolonial Feminism as a means of analysis. Unlike the Life Course Perspective, which lends itself to a deficit identity with a debate of what childfree and never-married women have missed or lacked in their lives (Reynolds, Wetherell, and Taylor 2007). My use of Feminist Standpoint Theory opens the dialogue to a shared identity based on shared social conditions. Standpoint is defined as groups with a shared history based on a shared location and their relation to power (Collins 1997). Therefore, Feminist Standpoint Theory and Decolonial

Feminism allow for discourse about how colonialism has created the designations of sex, sexuality, gender, and race.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I connect the theoretical perspectives of Feminist Standpoint Theory and Decolonial Feminism to my choice of methodology and method to study Autonomous WOC's lives. Childfree, never-married single WOC have a unique viewpoint of the heteronormative roles of women regarding marriage and motherhood in society. In this chapter I introduce my methodology of an inductive inquiry approach. I describe my method of in-depth interviews and my process of analysis. Lastly, I discuss my positionality as a researcher, ethical issues, challenges, and limitations, and describe my research sample.

I chose my theory, methodology, and methods to answer my central research question: how do childfree, never-married single (Autonomous) WOCs experience and feel about romantic love, singleness, sex, and attachments in society? My three sub-questions are: How do social, economic and cultural contexts shape the identities of childfree, never-married single WOC? How do their experiences within these contexts construct a sense of self for childfree, never-married single WOC? And how does racialized femininity shape their decisions around marriage and motherhood?

3.2 METHODOLOGY

The purpose of my study is to examine the lives of Autonomous WOC to understand their perceptions and experiences regarding romantic love, singleness, relationships, sex, and children. Therefore, a qualitative research methodology was the most appropriate way to gather in-depth information through semi-structured interviews. A large number of studies regarding single women and their choices to remain childfree utilize qualitative methods comprising semi-structured interviews (Nandy 2017; Swidler 2001; Marsh 2023; Blackstone 2019; Reynolds and

Taylor 2004; Reynolds, Wetherell, and Taylor 2007; Simpson 2016; Sharp and Ganong). Nandy (2017) interviewed 51 women aged 24 – 62, with the interviews occurring over two to four meetings. For *The Love Jones Cohort*, Marsh (2023) conducted 62 semi-structured interviews, which were about 60 minutes long. Blackstone (2019) also completed a qualitative study, conducting interviews for her book *Childfree by Choice*, and Swidler (2001) interviewed 88 men and women. The qualitative nature of these studies allows the participants to describe their experiences and choices in their own words.

I use an inductive inquiry approach. An inductive approach allows for me to look for similarities and form themes from my data without having a predetermined hypothesis. This approach best suits my study because it allows me to explore emerging data without being constrained by specific hypotheses. This freedom is important in my research because I am examining the lives of Autonomous WOC, which merges three different scholarships (family studies, single studies, and childfree literature) and centering the experiences of WOC. The current literature on singleness and childfreeness informed my research methodology. My research analyzes the commonalities and differences in the narratives of Autonomous WOC and examines what can be learned from their experiences. Semi-structured interviews are less scripted and create space for more open-ended questions and responses, which allows for follow-up questions that flow from the participants' answers. Inductive inquiry also allows qualitative researchers to construct meaning from participants' experiences and place them within social contexts to better understand their lives and further social propositions (Gavidia and Adu 2022).

The design of a semi-structured interview process allows for themes to emerge from the participants' responses. Through the lens of my research questions, I could identify common social contexts and themes. This approach allowed me to analyze my data without forcing a

predetermined result (Azungah 2018). This data analysis process allowed me to have more fluidity with my data and to make changes to the interview questions, order of questions, and follow-up questions as I was interviewing (Walsh et al. 2015). In utilizing Feminist Standpoint Theory, I am able to shine a light on these women's experiences with the understanding that what emerges from each story can be analyzed and located within different contexts such as social, cultural, economic, and institutional narratives (Gavidia and Adu 2022).

Qualitative research that uses Feminist Standpoint Theory puts positionality at the center of methodology. Positionality refers to the principle that we always occupy a social position, such as a teacher, sister, researcher, or friend. These positions then help shape our interpretations of interactions and affect how we perceive the world around us (Timmermans and Tavory 2012). Standpoint theory indicates that marginalized positionalities can provide insights that other groups cannot about social structures and dynamics. Therefore, studying WOC who have remained childfree and single can help reveal the inequity in social structures, systems, and practices (Collins 1997). By examining the lives of the WOC who live outside of the heteronormative structures of marriage and motherhood, we can better understand how those structures and systems do not serve all women. These practices may not be acknowledged or identified if the only point of view we recognize is that of the privileged. Giving voice to silenced and unseen factions has also been a goal of feminist qualitative research and Black feminism (Blum and Deussen 1996; Davis 1983).

In using Decolonial Feminism, I am able to argue that gender and sexuality should be considered alongside colonialism and that they are interconnected (Harding 2017). As colonizers move into a territory, they bring their values, beliefs, morals, and norms, as well as a whole machinery to force those values and norms on a people they do not understand. This type

of colonization has impacted how WOC can move within the spaces created by colonization. WOC feminism claims that white feminists do not "fully and critically engage how racism, heteronormativity, and classism intersect to marginalize those who diverge from normative feminist ideas of empowerment" (Ray 2018:459). Therefore, examining Autonomous WOC from a decolonial feminist perspective frames the issue not in terms of society's perceptions of them or in their usefulness to capitalism or colonialism but as a political affirmation of their autonomy and freedom from coloniality.

In using Decolonial Feminism, I can examine the social norms and structural barriers that may create obstacles for Autonomous WOC, and I can explore the pathways these women use to navigate through the colonial vestiges of heteronormative expectations and white supremacist ideologies. I am able to identify how Autonomous WOC live their lives outside the cultural and institutional norms and relate how they are not interested in living their life in service to institutions that do not operate in their best interest. In addition, intersectionality allows me to analyze any connections between gender, race, class, marital status, age, and choices about motherhood.

3.3 RESEARCH DESIGN AND DATA COLLECTION

Single women have been the subject of published qualitative research studies. Reynolds, Wetherell, and Taylor (2007) interviewed single women about their interpersonal relationships and asked them to describe how their lives had progressed. Simpson (2016) used a life history approach where single women were asked about their education, employment history, relationship history, current statuses and motivations. Park (2002) asked single women questions about identity and whether they felt judged by others, and Forsyth and Johnson (1995) questioned never-married women about their birth order, the age at which they left home, the

reasons they never married, as well as their positive and negative feelings about never marrying. Lastly, Byrne (2003) wanted to ascertain how single women experience and feel about their singleness and asked questions such as "Who are you? And how would you describe yourself?"

After reviewing the literature, I crafted eight (8) primary questions to ask my participants. The questions were wide-ranging inquiries about what one does in one's daily life. The questions focused the conversations around work, education, family, love, and happiness. My primary interview questions were: 1)What do you do for/at work?; 2) What do you do when you get home from work?; 3)What do you do on a typical weekend?; 4) What do you like to do on vacation?; 5) Who, if anyone, do you spend your free time with?; 6) How would you describe your childhood?; 7) How would you describe your sex life?; 8) Do you think there was a time or event that you decided not to marry or have children or do you feel not to marry was a decision at all or more of happenstance? I chose these questions to help answer my research questions and to determine what can be learned from these women's experiences.

During the first round of interviews and data collection (approximately 6-8 interviews), I determined if the questions provided data that would enable me to answer my research questions. After reviewing my notes from these early interviews, I decided to change the order of some questions and omitted others. For example, I changed a question about what my participants did after work as many were working remotely due to COVID-19. Therefore, that question was less relevant to their lives and choices. After analyzing some of the primary interviews (approximately twelve interviews), I saw some common themes emerge, and I continued with that line of questioning. At the same time, I phased out those questions that needed to provide more insight into the lives of my population. I continually reassessed this process as the interviews continued. For example, a question about vacations and what the participants did on

vacation did not offer much useful data for answering my research questions. Therefore, after about 15 interviews, I stopped asking that question. Some women were more curious about the research process, and I answered their questions when asked (McGrath, Palmgren, and Liljedahl 2019).

Qualitative methods allow the researcher to engage with their participants, creating the opportunity for human interaction, affecting our understanding of their experiences (Brinkmann and Kvale 2005). Developing rapport with the women I interviewed was imperative in researching personal and sensitive topics such as mine. I developed a camaraderie by making small talk, telling them about myself and why I was doing this study. I was honest about why I was studying this topic and informed them that I was also an Autonomous WOC. My similar positionality and experiences helped create an environment that allowed my participants to feel comfortable sharing their meaningful personal experiences (McGrath, Palmgren, and Liljedahl 2019).

3.3.1 *Recruitment Process and Research Setting*

I employed a passive recruitment strategy using social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and in Facebook groups. I posted information flyers on these platforms every week beginning in December 2021, inviting possible participants to contact me if they were interested in being interviewed. I also utilized my personal website (www.ichoosefeminism.com) to solicit participants. I was successful in having women who were interested in the study contact me via email, social media messaging, or phone message. When a woman contacted me, I emailed her an introduction letter and a consent form, asking them to read it carefully and to let me know if they were still interested in participating. I would then ask them for some available dates and times and schedule the interviews based on their convenience. Participants were free to schedule

the interviews at any time of the day they preferred. Some interviews had to be rescheduled or adjusted due to the participant's schedule. No participant canceled an interview once it was scheduled. Once the interviews were scheduled, I sent reminders and follow-up emails to each participant. The participants were not paid for their involvement in the study.

I directed the recruitment invitation at WOC between the ages of 40-60 and who live in the United States. I did not include women who were considerably outside of my age criteria. The age criteria aimed to study women who had remained Autonomous for most of their child-bearing years. Most of my participants were in their forties, with my youngest being thirty-six and my oldest being sixty-one. Due to restrictions with in-person research because of the COVID-19 pandemic, I conducted interviews via Zoom, and I recorded the interviews using audio and video recording functions on Zoom. I transcribed each interview using AI with otter.ai.

I saved each participant's video recordings and transcripts in separate files under a pseudonym. I watched each interview before and after I edited the interview and the transcripts to capture the accurate substance of the interview. I began interviewing in January of 2022. By early summer of 2022, I had completed all interviews. I interviewed women living across the United States, including in California, New York, Florida, Colorado, Michigan, and Illinois. I conducted the interviews while in my home office in Torbay, in the Canadian province of Newfoundland and Labrador. In May of 2022, I moved to Montreal, Quebec, and completed my remaining interviews there. As a side note, my data was collected prior to Roe v. Wade being overturned in the United States in June 2022. Therefore, I could not ask my participants about the ruling and any possible impact on their lives.

With COVID-19 restrictions, online interviews became useful in qualitative data collection. Howlett (2022) determined that her participants were more comfortable during their online interviews because they could be in their own homes, wear comfortable clothes, and have more flexibility in the interview schedule. My research recruitment, interviews, and data collection all took place during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although interviewing via an online platform has its limitations, such as not having a personal connection, interviewing my participants in their own homes was advantageous to my study. The use of online interviews, particularly the Zoom platform, has been found to help with rapport and allow for more flexibility in qualitative data collection (Oliffe et al. 2021).

Researchers who conducted online interviews found that participants were more relaxed and candid when discussing personal matters, partly due to their ability to control their surroundings (Howlett 2022; Oliffe et al. 2021). For my participants, their personal space was significant to them. They want to decide how and when they spend time with other people, so being able to be in their homes for the interviews, where they are most comfortable and the most themselves, allowed for more forthright conversations. Some women would drink coffee during the interview, while others would drink wine. Some would have a pet by their side, or they would be lying on the couch in their pajamas. My participants did not have to get dressed to be somewhere for our interviews, which allowed for more flexibility. This flexibility also extended the duration of our conversations, with the average interview lasting approximately 90 minutes and some interviews lasting over two hours.

3.4 SAMPLE

The Autonomous WOC interviewed were all from the United States and between 36 and 61 years old. I had initially planned to interview women from Canada and the United States. However, I decided to only interview women from the United States as there may have been too vast of cultural differences between women from Canada and the United States. Also, as I am from the United States, I thought I would have more rapport with WOC from the United States. The intentional older cohort was to gather information from women who have remained Autonomous throughout most of their lives as shown in **Table 1**. The sample was inclusive to all gender identities and sexual orientations including heterosexual, lesbian, bisexual, trans women and cis women who have never-married, including a common-law marriage, and who are currently single (not living with a romantic partner or have been in a committed dating relationship for at least 6 months prior to the interview). Some of the women had lived with a partner for a year or more, but none of the participants were ever in a long-term (10 years plus) cohabitation relationship or in a common-law marriage. I did not have any trans women contact me to participate in the study. Two participants identified as bisexual, one as queer, and one as "straight-ish." The study encompassed celibate, asexual, and sexually active women. The women self-reported their sexual history and activity.

Approximately 55 women contacted me, and I ended up interviewing 42 women. I decided to include women in their late thirties, as my goal was to interview women who have remained Autonomous during their twenties and thirties. Two of the women interviewed were not included in my study, as the women did not meet my research criteria – one woman had been married previously, and the other was younger than my sample parameters at thirty years old. I asked participants if they would like to choose their pseudonyms. Some women had a preference

for a specific name. Some women did not have a preference and asked me to choose one for them. I collected some demographic information, including their age, ethnic background, income, sexual orientation, and what they do for work. My participants were able to self-identify their ethnic backgrounds (refer to **Table 2**). As shown in **Table 3**, the participants are listed by pseudonym, age at time of interview, self-identified ethnicity, and profession at time of interview. I have described workplaces and titles in purposely vague language to ensure individual women cannot be identified.

My cohort overwhelmingly represented highly educated women, with twenty-nine (29) having advanced degrees consisting of Master's degrees, Doctorate degrees, MBAs, and law degrees. Twenty-two (55%) make over $75,000 USD a year. Being in the middle-class was not a part of my criteria, as I hoped to interview women of all socioeconomic statuses; however, most of the women who contacted me were in the middle-class. I also had participants who were unemployed, underemployed, or worked sporadically. Education was an important aspect of these women's lives as children. Eighteen of my participants (45%) have worked, or continue to work, in educational roles such as administrators, teachers, professors, deans, and counselors. Others worked part-time, lived with family members, and had recently graduated or left careers. So, while the women were highly educated, they were not all high-income earners.

Table 1: Ages of Participants (at time of interview)

Age Range	
36 – 39	5
40 – 44	21
45 – 49	12
50 – 54	0
55 – 59	1
60 – 61	1

(*N = 40)*

The sexual behavior of my participants varied, with twenty-six (65%) of the participants reporting they were either celibate or not engaging in sexual activity with another person. Many of the participants were not currently sexually active due to the COVID-19 pandemic and not being able to socialize as they normally would. They referred to this time as being "celibate by circumstance." Thirty-four (85%) are heterosexual. Four participants (10%) identified as being either bisexual, queer, or "straight-ish," and two (5%) described themselves as virgins. The study included any person who identified as cis and trans women and did not exclude anyone based on sexual identity or sexuality. However, no trans women contacted me to be a part of the study.

3.4.1 ***My Terminology: Autonomous Women of Color (WOC)***

I am using the term women of color (WOC) for my research. Collins (et al. 2021:702) defines WOC as "a vast and vague category that comprises differently interpellated and situated groups of U.S.-based and non-US-based women of color." The term was coined at a National Women's Conference in 1977 when Black women wanted to create a coalition with other minority women. The identity of WOC was created through social activism to include the discussion of racialization about white supremacy (Zavella 2022). However, some debate the implications of the phrase. Zavella (2022:2) argues that the identity of women of color is a phrase meant to "mirror racialized women's political subjectivity. The phrase also allows for women of color to identify themselves in terms of their specific racial-ethnic-national, gender or sexuality."

The phrase *women of color* allows for coalition-building and social activism among all women of intersecting subjugations. Therefore, throughout my dissertation, I use the phrase women of color, and the abbreviation WOC, as a defining concept that describes all the women who participated in my study. When referring to a specific woman, I will refer to her with the

term(s) in which she self-identifies. For example, some of my participants refer to themselves as Black, African American, Latina, Latinx, Asian, or South Asian. I acknowledge that the women in my study come from different racial/cultural backgrounds and may have different relationships to colonialization and patriarchy.

As I stated in my introduction, I am using Autonomous WOC to describe the women in my study. To reiterate, the women in my study are voluntarily childfree, never-married single women of color and Autonomous WOC will serve as a shorthand description of these women. I will expand on my use of this terminology in the conclusion of my dissertation.

Table 2: Ethnic/Racial Breakdown of Participants

Self-Identified Ethnicity/Race	
African American, Black, Black American	15
Afro-Caribbean, Haitian American	3
Latina, Latinx, Mexican American, Ecuadorian, Columbian, Dominican	11
Asian, Asian American, Indian, Indian American, South Asian, Chinese American,	7
Multiracial/Biracial	4

(*N = 40)*

Table 3: Research Participants in Order of Date Interviewed

Name	Age	Ethnicity/Race	Profession/Work
Maria	47	Multiracial	Works as data specialist
Lourdes	38	Latina	Works as social scientist
Nikka	41	African American	Works in public health
Devi	48	Columbian	Works in finance
Jackie	43	Black/African American	Works in administrative services
Dora	47	Mexican	Teacher
Daria	56	African American	Instructor
V	39	Indian American, Asian	Professor
Lisa	49	African American	Mental health specialist
Lala	40	Black	Works in marketing
Amanda	40	Haitian American	Works in marketing
Francesca	36	Biracial/multiracial	Graduate student
Toya	47	African American	Works in higher education
Sankofa	61	Black American	Attorney
Brandy	41	Black/African American	Business coach and public speaker
Martha	45	Black	Works in real estate
Eartha	40	Black/African American	Data manager
Flor	42	Latina	Researcher
Beatrice	41	Mexican American	Educator
Nancy	44	Afro-Caribbean	Professor
Sandy	44	Dominican	Works in higher education
Louise	44	Black	Self-employed
Sam	38	Latinx	Graduate student and researcher
Gertrude	47	Black	Works in theatre
Sonia	42	Latina	Professor
Alana	41	Latinx	Caregiver
Geraldine	46	Black American	Writer
Mia	41	Asian	Works in finance
Sasha	42	Black/Hispanic	Executive of non-profit
Laury	40	Asian	Secretary
Dela	45	Afro-Caribbean	Works in quality assurance
Natasha Fatale	46	Indian	Teacher
Karina	45	Asian American	Educator/tutor
K Maria	42	African American	Consultant
Willie	45	Black	Philanthropist
Erica	43	Ecuadorian	Payroll analyst
Charlotte	39	Mexican American	Unemployed
Samantha Lee	43	Chinese American	Advisor
Mina	42	South Asian	Professor
Sierra	44	South American/Black	Professor

3.5 DATA ANALYSIS

The first phase of my analysis was to take the recorded videos from Zoom and have them transcribed using the otter.ai platform. As I verified the accuracy, I developed preliminary categories to group them into theoretical themes later. This phase of my analysis was iterative, allowing me to create and revise my descriptive data (like kneading dough), and I was able to develop my eventual theoretical arguments (Tracy 2020). I wrote down some similarities or common experiences as I went through the transcripts. As I continued to do this, some categories became expanded upon, while others became enveloped into another category. For example, the importance of independence and freedom in these women's lives became categories I expanded upon as I reviewed more interviews. I coded for independence and freedom and then created new codes for personal, economic, and social freedom. The significance of having a romantic or sexual partner was less noteworthy to the women interviewed, so I ended up collapsing codes to encompass romance and sex.

I analyzed the data using inductive coding techniques, creating categories within the data and analyzing themes. After I watched the interviews for a second time and edited the transcripts, I pulled quotes and information that were significant in answering my research questions. I used these notes to form what I was calling an after-interview or after-action file. This file comprised the bulk of what I would use to create different coding categories based on emerging themes in connection to my theoretical frameworks. After placing some quotations and information into the after-action file, I noticed themes from the interviews and separated the data into individual files as those themes developed. Once I developed a new theme, I created a new file. Most topics ended up having multiple subcategories. I then linked these topics to my research questions. At the end of this process, eight categories materialized: 1) feelings about

love, romance, sex, marriage, and dating, 2) personality and/or personal lifestyles, 3) freedom – economic – social – personal, 4) feeling about/reactions to social institutions 5) issues that define their culture and racialized femininity, 6) family backgrounds, responsibilities, pressures, 7) feelings about being childfree and motherhood, and 8) feelings about community. These eight categories were then divided into subcategories and connected to specific research questions.

To answer my research questions and interpret my findings, I separated my data into categories that would address my main question and three sub-questions. For example, in my data, I was able to see the connections of being racialized and how this had an impact on WOC's decisions to marry or have children. After coding my data, I analyzed my findings through the lens of Decolonial Feminism and Feminist Standpoint Theory. These theoretical frameworks helped me understand and organize my themes, as it became clear that the women interviewed did not see their choices as one of happenstance. Autonomous WOC advocated for a more self-governing life and found traditional gender roles as limiting and reductive. Therefore, their decisions to lead independent lives free from the heteronormative expectations of marriage and motherhood can be seen as a form of resistance against a colonial project and a turn toward social justice. I also determined that Autonomous WOC held a unique perspective on the familial frameworks of marriage and motherhood. Once I coded the final categories, I went back through the transcripts and searched for words/phrases that corresponded to those categories. After doing this numerous times for all the interviews, I gathered sufficient and accurate data to place within my existing coded classifications. I gathered a tremendous amount of data and not all of it ended up being in the final analysis for this dissertation. I focused on the data that addressed and answered my research questions.

3.5.1 *Reflexivity*

Reflexivity refers to being authentic with yourself, your research, and your audience (Gavidia and Adu 2022). I was mindful of my positionality and the intersubjective nature of my interactions with my research participants, the power relations, and my biases and preconceptions. Since my sample was a minority within a minority within a minority (childfree, never-married, single, and WOC), I wanted them to feel in control of their own narrative at all times (Arsel 2017). In accord with Feminist Standpoint Theory, it was crucial to record their experiences accurately, so that their knowledge would be trusted (Smith 1987). I wanted them to be able to describe themselves in their own words about their profession, ethnicity, and other demographic data, such as sexual orientation. The relationship between interviewer and interviewee is a delicate balance of symmetry and asymmetry. In my interviews with my participants, I informed them I was also an Autonomous WOC. It was important to acknowledge that I was also a co-participant in the process of knowledge production (Gavidia and Adu 2022). Therefore, being attentive to my positionality and possible biases was essential throughout the process of data collection and analysis.

As I could identify with my sample, I could empathize with some of their experiences. I was also aware that my familiarity with the subject could hinder me because I may look to have my own experiences validated by the women I interviewed and become too attached to particular narratives. As I was conscientious about my role in the research process, I understood how being an Autonomous WOC of a certain age opens one up to condemnation and judgments from family members, co-workers, and their communities. Therefore, I wanted to ensure I was not asking questions they could perceive as critical of their stories or perceptions.

I also informed my participants that they did not have to answer every question, and if a question made them uncomfortable, we could move to another subject. I also understand that in not having children, there are also stereotypes women experience, such as being selfish, immature, or a failure. These stereotypes can be hurtful, and I did not want them to associate the interview experience with adverse feelings. I would often ask my participants if they needed a break during the interview process or if they wanted to end the interview. During my analysis, I questioned my interpretations of the interviews to determine if I was being too critical of the participant's perceptions or decisions. I also wanted to be careful that I was not conveying any personal bias in my findings and, for example, highlighting the experiences that resonated with me more than others.

Some participants were curious about what brought me to study this subject, and I would inform them of my educational background and why I wanted to study this group specifically. When asked, I would inform them of my educational background, ethnic background, and relationship experiences. When studying positions, we often analyze them through the lenses of class, race, and gender. However, there are more complexities to one's life, and I wanted my participants to feel comfortable exploring those. I would sympathize with my participants when discussing difficult or very personal subjects. When appropriate, I would inform them that they were not alone and that I had heard similar stories from the other participants. Some participants were researchers themselves and were inquisitive about the research process and why I was attending a university in Canada.

3.5.2 *Ethical Considerations*

I submitted and received clearance from Memorial University's Interdisciplinary Committee on the Ethics in Human Research (ICEHR) that complied with Canada's Tri-Council

Policy Statement on the Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2). The committee reviewed and approved my project before I could begin recruitment. There were also consent requirements that I had to adhere to for my participants' protection. My consent form included the name of my study, An Examination of Never-Married, Voluntarily Childfree Women of Color, and the purpose of my study: “to examine the lives of single, never-married, voluntarily childfree women of color and examine their perceptions and experiences about romantic love, singleness, relationships, and sex” using the qualitative analysis method of semi-structured interviews. My research will study what commonalities these women share, what makes them different, and what can be learned from their experiences. I hope to discover themes in these women's lives that will add to the discourse in the current feminist literature.

Confidentiality was an important consideration. I informed my participants that while anonymity cannot be ensured, participation in this study will be confidential. The interviews were recorded and watched to authenticate that the transcripts were accurate. I changed their names to pseudonyms, and the interview transcripts were saved in Microsoft Word documents and kept in a separate folder from the information with the participant's recorded videos, names, and email addresses. I kept all information on my personal computer, which was password-protected. I kept this computer in my home, and I monitored its access. The consent form also included information about "what you will be asked to do in the research," "risks and discomforts," and statements about COVID-19, benefits of the research, voluntary participation, and withdrawal from the study. I asked the participants to verbally agree to participate in the study that was audio recorded during the interviews. Some women also signed the confidentiality agreement and emailed it back to me.

My topic concerned personal information such as women's feelings and experiences concerning sexuality, romantic love, familial backgrounds, and their opinions about motherhood and children. My participants could end the interview at any time with a verbal request. Participants could turn off their cameras if they wished not to be video-recorded. I was aware that discussing personal experiences may cause my participants to become emotional and feel vulnerable. Therefore, I provided written information to support networks such as mental health services, sexual assault support groups, suicide prevention hotlines, eating disorder support groups, and substance abuse networks. Participation in this study was voluntary, and participants could stop participating at any time.

I submitted all my recruitment materials and consent form to ICEHR. I include these forms as appendices to this dissertation: Interview Questions (Appendix A), Social Media Outreach Flyer (Appendix B), Recruitment Flyer (Appendix C), and Informed Consent Form (Appendix D). I submitted an amendment request to allow for recruitment through my website (www.ichoosefeminism.com), and I have to submit annual updates to the committee on the progress of my research.

3.6 CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

I determined my research questions are best answered utilizing qualitative methods. However, I understand the limitations of qualitative work and that making large generalizations is not the goal of qualitative research. Subsequently, I cannot make macro-statements about the lives of Autonomous WOC with my sample of 40 women. However, I could gather detailed information about the women I interviewed within the timeframe and financial constraints of completing this dissertation. In doing so, I was able to accurately detail the information provided to me, and I was able to elucidate the women's stories, which allowed me to answer my research

questions. I can also make conclusions about how broader social structures organize these women's lives and identify some practices that facilitate their independence.

I was also able to ascertain data that reflects my population and can be consequential for future research on Autonomous women, particularly for WOC. A study with a larger sample size and the use of mixed methods may be able to expand upon what I was able to do in this dissertation. For Example, in Ferguson's (2008) study of never-married Chinese women, there was an overrepresentation of women with advanced degrees. Therefore, more study needs to be done if Autonomous WOC are, in fact, more likely to be highly educated or if recruitment models skew more toward this population.

The limitations of my study include being conducted during the time of COVID-19. My recruitment procedures were altered by the inability to travel, and remote interviews became the solution. I also ended up with a highly educated sample. This may have to do with my recruitment methods, or that this sample of women are more likely to be educated. Therefore, my study cannot reflect the full scope of experiences of childfree, never-married single WOC, and further research needs to be done in order to have a more complete picture of this population.

3.7 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have detailed my research methodology, research methods, a form of data analysis, providing information about my research participants, and my justification for using an inductive inquiry approach. This approach allowed me to gather detailed, in-depth information from semi-structured interviews, which allowed me to study my participant's lives and choices. Feminist Standpoint Theory and Decolonial Feminism provided a framework to place my observations and analysis, which was more reflective of my sample of WOC. Standpoint Theory (Smith 1987) led to new lines of analysis about who gets to determine

knowledge. Sweet (2020) contends that discounted knowledge can have more emancipatory potential because the marginalized are disconnected from the powerful. Consequently, marginalized groups are not invested in maintaining the current power structures and can be more honest about their faults. However, Sweet (2020) does caution that there is a danger in assuming that all marginalized populations offer a truthful or epistemic privilege, and there is no evidence that all marginality yields hidden or undetermined knowledge.

CHAPTER 4: FAMILY, EDUCATION AND WORK

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on how Autonomous WOC navigate the social institutions of the family, education, and work. I explore the social, economic, and political pressures that pull women toward heteronormative standards of womanhood, as well as the ways they resist those pressures in each of these spheres. Specifically, Autonomous WOC have redefined success and happiness to include liberatory social configurations, such as living childfree, and finding meaning in educational pursuits and solo work. However, stepping outside the norm is not without cost, which I refer to as the emotional toll tax. This chapter is separated into three sections: 1) family, 2) education, and 3) work.

The women in my study have been able to successfully maneuver through some colonial institutions, such as education, in order to sidestep others, such as heteronormative marriage. Women of color do not have the luxury to opt out of institutions because they are embedded in colonial and white supremacist ideologies. People of color in the United States are forced to work within institutions and practices with roots in colonialism and patriarchy. For example, women are more likely to be murdered by a male partner than a stranger, and yet they still marry. African Americans joined the United States military even though, historically, they have not reaped the benefits of their service. Therefore, Autonomous WOC have figured out how to live their lives within the cracks of social conventions. Education is a colonial institution that has often been a hostile place for women of color, and yet Autonomous WOC have been able to find their own path forward toward living a life within and outside the boundaries they are most comfortable. You cannot work around racism; you have to work through it.

When I discuss Autonomous WOC and individualism, I am not referring to a Marxist, capitalist individualism, where each person is out of themselves (Harvey 2020). I am describing a form of self-protection individualism these women utilize to guard themselves against social institutions that were not designed to work for them. These institutions (family, education, work) often work against Autonomous WOC, and they have had to develop a form of defensive independence. Previous research on education and work has also affirmed that WOC have been negatively impacted in social institutions like education and work (Arday and Mirza 2018; Crozier 2023).

In concentrating on the family, I show how the women in my study have rejected cultural expectations related to marriage and motherhood and how their childhood experiences within the family shape their responses to familial arrangements as adults. Autonomous WOC family histories have shaped how they view marriage. The institution of heterosexual marriage and family is not seen as being in the best interest of the women I interviewed. In the section on education, I demonstrate how education has been an integral part of their path toward nonconformity. Education became a safer space in which my participants found support, validation, and accomplishment as children, and many continued to work in and around education as adults.

In the segment on work, I discuss how family histories can shape adult decisions about jobs and financial independence. Most of my participants were raised in poor or lower to middle-class families. They did not come from families of wealth or influence. I also address how gender, race, and work are interconnected and have shaped Autonomous WOC's views about work, happiness, and peace. The main findings of this chapter include how Autonomous WOC are deconstructing the patriarchal and colonial system of heteronormative marriage and the

motherhood ideal that has oppressed them historically and continues to marginalize them today. They are doing this by designing alternatives to marriage, renouncing motherhood, and relying on – self-reliance. Women of color historically have not been able to trust social institutions to protect or serve them. Therefore, Autonomous WOC have had to depend on their protective individualism and self-determination to defy the expectations for women of color.

4.2 FAMILY

In this section, I discuss how Autonomous WOC exist and thrive by the rebuffing of social and cultural expectations. I demonstrate how childhood experiences are connected to Autonomous WOC's choices to resist cultural expectations and how having either single or childfree role models in their lives provided a roadmap for how to oppose the social roles of wife and mother and live outside the social institution of marriage. I also discuss family dynamics and how emotional work is gendered in the family structure. Lastly, I consider how these women are able to find happiness in alternatives to traditional marriage and motherhood.

4.2.1 *Resisting Cultural Expectations*

Many of the women in my study had performed a caretaker role as children and theorized this might have impacted whether they wanted to be married or have children as adults. For example, K Maria acted as a caretaker from when she was a young child. She relayed how she had to help her parents take care of her grandmother. K Maria's parents separated when she was seven, and her father moved out of state. The family could not afford a caretaker so they started leaving K Maria to take care of her elderly grandmother. Her grandmother was in her nineties and K Maria helped clean the house, cook, feed and bathe her. She stayed with her grandmother until she passed away when K Maria was eleven. K Maria also took care of her aunt, who raised her, when she had cancer. She took care of her aunt's husband as well. She was also in the home

when her aunt's husband attempted suicide by shooting himself. K Maria recalls that this was very traumatic for her. Thus, K Maria spent her childhood caring for adults instead of the adults in the family taking care of her:

> I had a well-rounded childhood. In the early years, as I started to get older, though, I felt like my childhood faded away, I had to become a grown up very quickly. Maybe this is a reason why I really don't. I never really wanted kids because I was taking care of all the adults in my family. *K Maria, 42*

Martha related that she often took on a motherly role to her much younger brother. She was twenty-four when he was born, and his birth was "the best form of birth control." Although Martha did not expand on what she meant by this, I would assume she came to understand the constant care a baby needs and how daunting that is. Martha had a stressful childhood with a lot of loss. She was very close to her father when he passed away. Her younger sister passed away a year after her father died due to lung illness. Martha stated that this caused her to have to think about her life in more serious terms. Therefore, K Maria and Martha had adult responsibilities as children of lower socioeconomic families. They saw the societal roles of wife and mother, in a disadvantaged socioeconomic family, as difficult and often unfulfilling. The economic reality of being a wife and mother made them evaluate if those roles were right for them. They often witnessed their mothers working in and outside the home for long hours. They also saw them doing most domestic tasks such as cooking, cleaning and doing the laundry, as well as childcare responsibilities of getting the children ready for bed or school.

Beatrice also spoke of performing a caretaking role in her traditional Mexican family. She understood the implications of continuing a subservient role in the family structure, even though she reported she did not support that dynamic:

> Making food for my brother or, you know...caretaking work that I know that, you know, especially like in a Mexican household, like, the men always eat first, and they got the biggest portions, and they did nothing around the house. And that's still the case. *Beatrice, 41*

Beatrice said she was not resentful of these responsibilities because they were not daily obligations. As an adult, she could leave when she wanted. She did say that if it were expected of her every day, she would feel differently. Feminists have long held that the structure of the family benefits men more than women, especially if that family is built on the foundation of patriarchy (Coontz 2016). Flor experienced that some men want a passive Latina wife:

> They also want this like passive Latina, like submissive Latina. And I can't, I can't figure out what that looks like. I'm not like that. And so, you know, every time that I've interacted with them, it just doesn't go well. Um, because of that, because they want me to be quiet or because they don't like the way that I think. I think it's also because I'm very, I'm very open about sex and talking about that ... So, they think I'm not normal. *Flor, 42*

Dissimilar to the Black women in my study, the Latina women spoke about how what a Latina woman *should* be was a significant influence on them growing up. With many sharing a culture that socialized women to be subservient to their husbands, living a life of unconventionality was not just breaking a norm; it was breaking a dam by upending generations of cultural expectations. Sonia's cultural background expected her to be a wife and a mom because that is just what you were to do:

> That's the peak, you're somebody's wife or somebody's mom. And I was always so frustrated. I'm like, I am way more than someone's wife and mom, like, why is that the peak trajectory for me as a woman, you know, as Latina, like, why is that the highest I can go? And why can't women do everything they want to do? *Sonia, 42*

Sonia and the other Latina women in my study were forthright about the cultural expectations they were born into, and they knew what their lives should look like according to their cultural histories. However, Sonia was shown another way. She describes her mother as a very strong woman and a feminist. When she was eleven, she told her mom she wanted to be Clarice Starling from Silence of the Lambs. Clarice Starling was a woman of a modest upbringing with a history of trauma, and she was able to join the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), where she solved an important and high-profile case. She viewed this fictional character as a role model. Sonia describes how supportive her mother was and would even sign her Christmas gifts to Clarice. Her mother created a space for her to dream of her future. Sonia is thankful that she had the support of her mother, and her mother's support shaped how she saw success and happiness.

Alana was also aware of the expectations of her. "If you're a woman, you have ... like you want to have kids, and you want to be married. So, I think both gender and culture kind of intersect in that point." Freedom to define life on their terms is a prevalent theme in my data. This freedom often meant being able to choose who they spend time with and for how long, including their family. Sandy stated that:

> It's also liberating that I can define my life and define who I want to be without you know, these not the burden, but the expectations that my parents had placed on me. *Sandy, 44*

Sandy is speaking about her freedom in living without the weight of a history of cultural and social expectations, cultural expectations for the Latina women in my study center around the providing of services or performing duties for others which women have done for generations in their families. Although all my participants spoke to the cultural expectations of being a wife and mother, the Latina women articulated more how their family histories and structure

facilitated an expectation of motherhood. These women felt pressure from their families to have children as that is what women are supposed to do in their culture.

Latina women's identity is often positioned around motherhood and their children's lives (Montano et al. 2023; Moorman 2020). Therefore, Latina women who are not married or mothers have the freedom and the burden to navigate what their role is in family dynamics. The Black women in my study also spoke of expectations to be wives and mothers, but the pressures they spoke of were more social and institutional; few spoke of parental pressure to have a lot of children. However, both Black and Latina(x) women are defying hundreds of years of culture and history, a fact they are not unaware of, but they are not defiant for the sake of being rebellious. Autonomous WOC did not want a life that was preordained for them.

4.2.2 *Autonomous Role Models*

Some of the women had role models of a female troublemaker; a woman who gets in the way, either intentionally or not, of the happiness of others (Ahmed 2010). Some women related that they had an aunt or uncle who never married or had children. Many also had at least one sibling who had not married or had children. Devi informed me that she has four siblings, none of whom have children. Francesca had a never-married uncle who demonstrated a lifestyle she now appreciates as an adult. These role models were not afraid to say no or make others upset. If they did not want to do something or go somewhere, then they did not. Autonomous WOC saw that these role models were not afraid to break from convention.

Martha's parents broke up when she was a baby, but she was very close to her paternal grandparents and would visit them often. Martha stated that her grandparents were not divorced but lived in separate houses. Her grandmother lived on the east side, and her grandfather lived on the west side of New York. They lived completely different lives. Martha said, "I think that

greatly impacted how I felt about marriage." Martha remembered thinking – why does a couple have to live together? Martha realized that marriage with two people living in the same house did not work for everyone. Martha's grandparent's relationship helped shape how she viewed marriage.

Lisa was raised by her mother, grandmother, and her aunt. Lisa's aunt was never-married and childfree. During our interview, Lisa stated that she had never made the connection between her aunt's life and her own choices:

> No, she's like me, huh? That's hilarious. I've never noticed the, the parallel there. Yeah, she is single with no kids. She never married. She was dating a guy for a while they were serious. And then he died early at an early age of a heart attack. And she never really got with anybody else after that. *Lisa, 49*

Although Lisa may not have consciously followed the example of her aunt, she was raised with an example of a woman who lived outside heteronormative expectations and being exposed to these examples impacted her relationship choices as an adult. Therefore, I argue that we can be profoundly influenced by people and events in our lives, even if we do not make that connection until years later, if at all. Gertrude also had an aunt who was never-married and childfree:

> The one who's my mom's younger sister, like, she was also the kind of like, she would pick me up from school. And she was always, you know, she was never married. She was always working. She would have to, like remove files off the front seat of the car. So, I could sit in it, you know, like, so like, being raised in like, kind of that environment and being surrounded by that. Definitely. Definitely was a part of kind of like what I absorbed, culturally environmentally. *Gertrude,* 47

Gertrude and Lisa grew up with role models of a never-married, childfree woman, and they were able to have a first-hand glance of what their lives could be without a husband or children. Their family dynamics also gave them a blueprint of how to have interpersonal relationships that do not center romantic love. Whereas Gertrude and Lisa had role models, other

women were reverse engineering their lives, not wanting to repeat patterns of their childhood. Autonomous WOC did not necessarily aim to be disrupters, but that is what they became by resisting the roles of wife and mother.

4.2.3 *Opposing the Social Roles of Wife and Mother*

My interviews revealed that my participants did not feel as much trepidation about marriage as they did about motherhood. In fact, many of my participants stated they would be open to marriage. However, the women feared that having a marriage or family would place boundaries on what they could or could not achieve such as being about to travel, go to school, take a job in a different state or just be able to spend a large amount of time alone. And even if Autonomous WOC could "have it all," they realized they did not want it all. Men had assumed Francesca would settle into a more domestic, subservient role once they married. However, no one told Francesca that she was supposed to fill that domestic role:

> I had guys who thought like, oh, when we settle down, or when we get married, you're going to do this, and this and this, which are typically like feminine, or the wife tasks of a relationship or a household; and that was not really, didn't really appeal to me.
> *Francesca, 36*

Francesca was not interested in that type of relationship. Brandy also did not want to be someone's caretaker or mother, and she did not think it was her job to make a man ready to be in a relationship:

> Some WOC are realizing I don't have to settle ... I do not desire to be your mom; I don't desire to mold you. I, I would like you to be healed before getting in a relationship.
> *Brandy, 41*

Brandy was not interested in being a mother or caretaker for a partner. She also wanted a partner to come to a relationship healed. For her, that means not bring negativity into her space. Sierra was a child when she had friends whose parents were getting divorced. She realized that marriage was a social construct and that she would be "okay" if she did not fit into it. She could

still have a very rich and fulfilling life. Sierra knew she would not necessarily be happy being married and having children: “Being married with kids doesn't automatically make people happier, particularly women, because even in communities of color, like there's still there's still some gender inequities, right.” Brandy is speaking to the reality that in communities of color, there is still a struggle with patriarchy where women are in relationships that are harmful to them physically or emotionally (Davis 1983). In addition, most of my participants came from economically disadvantaged families, so the reality of trying to support a family economically was omnipresent. Therefore, being married and having children does not mean a woman’s life will be happier or more complete.

While some women may be uncomfortable or embarrassed by their single status (Adamczyk 2017), the women I interviewed were neither. These women were resourceful, content with their lives, and looked forward to their futures. Autonomous WOC go against the heteronormative idea that the way to gain comfort, stability, and happiness is to couple and bear children. As more women are forgoing the expectations of their gender, they are discovering that singleness does not have to mean being lonely or alone, and not having children does not make their lives less worthy. Sonia was agitated when people would ask why she was not married because she was an amazing catch:

> I have no idea why you're not married. I have no idea why. And I'm like, you know, taking away the fact that maybe I had something to do with this choice, like, why is it left to other people is select me or pick me. This is also my choice not to marry someone who I don't want to marry or, you know, maybe there are other things I'm interested in doing. And so, it's that whole kind of idea that's very antiquated about like, it's not even your choice. *Sonia, 42*

Sonia is referring to an outdated idea that if a woman is not married, she is somehow defective (Reynolds and Taylor 2004). Although the Autonomous WOC in my study did not feel this way, they still live in a world where they encounter these heteronormative expectations and

feel they are asked to defend their choices. The idea that women have agency and can choose not to marry and choose not to have children and still be fulfilled as individuals is still difficult for some people to reconcile in a patriarchal, pronatal society. They also face the institutional and social barriers of being a single woman in a society that is not always kind to them. Thus, the freedom these women speak of was not given to them, and many had to carve out a space where they could stand in their own biosphere.

Brandy stated she was "walking in the most freedom I've ever walked in. I still, you know, we're all on a journey and all that stuff. But when I say freedom, just freedom to show up as who I am." She also expressed that it is more difficult being a Black woman in America. In America, where there are the vestiges of colonization, slavery, and white supremacy, women of color do not always feel comfortable being themselves in all situations and settings. The Autonomous WOC in my study, like Brandy, have given themselves permission to live their lives with a sense of ease and freedom that previous generations of women of color did not have such as living independent lives separate from the social and cultural expectations of marriage and motherhood. However, this is not to say their choices were easy to make. Alana discussed how her childhood was stressful and violent and that the amount of chaos in her childhood directly affected her decisions on relationships:

> Absolutely. [okay] I think it's, if I hadn't had, I think if I had had more peace as a kid, I'd be a little more open to the idea of marriage and relationships... It was so stressful. And it was so violent. And I remember I was always scared. You know, and I didn't like the idea of marriage. And it almost seemed like an obligation. And like, especially for my mom, it always seemed like she was obligated to stay in a relationship because she was married, and she had kids. I remember thinking I never want to be in that position. Where I can't leave somebody because of I have kids, or I can't leave somebody because I'm married. *Alana, 41*

This instability caused Alana to fear a relationship in which she would be obligated to stay because of cultural or financial reasons. Geraldine and Devi talked about the emotional

work of being in a relationship. Emotional work is not only gendered, it is also racialized, and similarly to gender, racialized emotional work is an unobserved burden (Humphrey 2022). Geraldine felt that even as a girlfriend, she often found relationships exhausting:

> The way we have set up relationships for men and women, even unless you are fighting against it, you can easily become this person's emotional crutch, that all this labor you give men and how you make their life easier. That's, that's exhausting. So, I think men benefit more. *Geraldine, 46*

Geraldine is speaking to the institutional and social expectations within heteronormative marriage and how it did not align with how she wanted to live her life. There is a distinction between emotional labor and emotional work, where emotional labor refers to paid labor whereas emotional work refers to unpaid activities one engages in (Humphrey 2022). Devi detailed the fatigue of the emotional work of forcing yourself to be in relationships that are not in your best interests. She is also speaking to how the benefits of a romantic relationship are different for men and women:

> I think, for me, and I think if individuals want a peaceful union, there has to be equitability across the table for both sexes. And I think removing or figuring out a way to come to terms with contribution is one of the biggest struggles men and women have because it feels unequal to both of them. For men, it's monetary. For women, it's emotional labor. And until that gets sorted out, I don't know if we're ever going to find an equilibrium. *Devi, 48*

Devi was not interested in having a relationship in which she felt economically dependent, or one in which she was expected to expend more emotional labor. The literature on race and emotional work speaks to burnout and how people of color are more likely to deal with individuals questioning their role or authority, which can create more stress on the job and in the home (Humphrey 2022). WOC have historically been marginalized due to the fact they are women and that they are non-white. My participants did not frequently define their lives or describe being a woman of color. However, their experiences are experiences of being a woman

of color, and that often went without being blatantly said, but it was expressed within answers that addressed race. Therefore, the emotional work these women speak of is twofold: 1) being a woman, and 2) being a woman of color.

4.2.4 *Review*

The structure of the traditional family in Western society, including the rituals and practices, reinforces patriarchy as the supremacy of men over women (Ingraham 1994). The family can also be an object of happiness or unhappiness for women. Ahmed (2010). For the women in my study, their happiness is not immersed in the traditions of monogamy and coupling, where the female narrative of happiness and success is steeped in heterosexual romance and marriage. Ahmed (2010) argued that following customary arrangements such as marriage and motherhood can, for some women, be living your life going through the motions without any real investment in your future. My data corroborate that some women are concerned they would not be the main protagonists in their lives and that their story would become a side note to someone else's narrative. They wanted to write their own history.

For Autonomous WOC, happiness was not found in being a caretaker for others. Some of the women had families who had certain expectations of them - of what it meant to be a woman and of what it meant to be a happy family; and some had families that were fraught with financial hardship, chaos and abuse that allowed them to hide within the cracks of the possible. This gave them the wherewithal to follow their own journey toward happiness. However, their journey was not easy, but they faced institutional and cultural obstacles head on.

4.3 EDUCATION

In the following section, I discuss how education has been an anchoring institution for the women in my study, both as children and as adults. Education has also provided a space in which

they could find support and knowledge to help combat social inequities. I acknowledge that education has historically been a site of oppression and inequality for many people of color (Arday and Mirza 2018). However, in my study, I found that Autonomous WOC often found more comfort and support in school than their homes. This section is divided into two parts. In the first part, I discuss how education created a safe space for Autonomous WOC as children and how they found acceptance, validation, and support within this institution. Secondly, I examine how education has continued to be a part of many of the women's lives and how they have been able to use their education to provide a pathway to protective individualism and independence.

4.3.1 *Education, Childhood, and Safe Spaces*

The women talked about education being an important part of their childhood. They excelled at school, and school was where they felt safe. Autonomous WOC did not see education as a way to a better life of riches and fancy cars but more a vehicle for a life of financial independence. The women did not speak of their accomplishments in a haughty manner. School is where my participants received validation and positive reinforcement, as many did not receive that at home. Sam talked about school being an escape from her chaotic upbringing:

> School was my escape when I lived with my mother. So, um, I excelled at school. I think as much for the positive attention as anything else. Um, so it was you know, it was my safe space when I was a kid...this safe refuge and like, having, you know, I was a teacher's pet. I think also just like I crave that like, positive adult attention. So, there was some happy moments too, even though it was incredibly stressful and traumatic. *Sam, 38*

Sam grew up in a chaotic family environment, and she remembered school being a big part of her happy childhood memories and where she felt safe from the turmoil.

Lourdes detailed how her father was not working, and her mom would work three jobs to keep her enrolled in a better school. Although the times were difficult, Lourdes felt that "the financial insecurity couple(d) of all the different forms of trauma and survival, like, probably are

why I am as disciplined as I am." Observing her mother's financial struggles to keep her in a better school helped Lourdes appreciate not only her education but her mother's dedication to provide it for her. Lourdes is not only acknowledging the importance of education here but also recognizing her mother's financial struggle in providing it for her. Lourdes being able to attend a better school would afford her opportunities, opportunities her mother did not have such as access to more knowledge, better technology and opening a door to better jobs. Lourdes understood the financial hardship having a good education cost her mother, and she knew that with her education, she would be able to have more financial stability. This reality is often bittersweet for WOC who come from lower socioeconomic families because they understand the struggles their parents made for them to have a better life (Ray 2018).

Sandy applied to a boarding school program in the third grade, but her parents would not let her attend. This boarding school would open Sandy's world up to more opportunities and connections which could lead to a better education and more employment opportunities. Undeterred, she applied to the same program again in the fourth grade, and her teachers convinced her it was not a good fit for her. At a young age, Sandy was already advocating for herself, her education, and her future:

> I think my parents knew very early that I wanted to beat my own drum, right. Like, I applied to go to boarding school when I was in third grade. I don't know, like, and when I talked to people, I realized, like, that was a very unusual thing to do. But it's something that I wanted to do. And my parents were very opposed to it. They were not going to let me go away. And I did it again when I was in fourth grade. But my teachers were telling me it wouldn't be a good thing for me. So, I was like, okay, I want to do what my teachers are saying, like, you know, I could get a better education... I tried advocating for myself, but my parents were not having - I've always known that I was a little different. *Sandy, 44*

From a young age, Sandy was exerting her agency, and she could advocate for herself. She is a woman who has fulfilled the possibility. Lugones (2020) describes that possibility as a

woman who does not mindlessly follow the desires of white men. However, she questions all the systems that subjugate her, such as whiteness, capitalism, normative heterosexuality, and neo-liberalism (Lugones 2020). Lamentably, the systems of whiteness, capitalism, and normative heterosexuality are beneficial for some, and it is in their self-interest to maintain these arrangements.

Erica also spoke of school being a safe space where her parents allowed her to spend more time away from home. School was "a safe setting with kids that were all about school and features. And so that was my childhood, like getting involved doing school activities. Um, that's what I remember. I remember school; everything was around school organizations, clubs, and volunteering because all of that meant I could go out." For Erica, school was also where she had some freedom and was not alone. Dela spoke of being raised in a very strict family, and her only modicum of freedom was when she attended school activities. Therefore, going to school and school events is when Dela had some independence in her life. As a first-generation Mexican American, Charlotte spoke of education being very important to her family:

> My childhood education was very important. And getting good grades, being involved in extracurricular activities. Um, those things were more important than anything else. So, so my parents would always tell my sister and I, your job is to get good grades, do well in school, and our job is to raise you girls well, and my dad would tell ... you're the role model for your younger sister. *Charlotte, 39*

Charlotte would serve as a substitute for her parents during teacher-parent conferences for her sister because her parents did not speak English and she also had the pressure of being a role model for your younger sister. Charlotte had to take her education seriously for herself, her parents, and her sister. Charlotte's parents wanted their children to have more economic opportunities than they had and thought education was the way to get them there.

Karina talked about being from a family of immigrants and how managing the financial necessities were top priorities for the family. However, education was also important:

> I was born in Vietnam, and my family emigrated to the US when I was like, three. And so, I mean, I feel like this story, this is a POC story. Being the, being the child of immigrants. They were working very hard... the priority was house, clothes, food, education. *Karina, 45*

Karina is a first-generation immigrant. Karina stated that her parents worked hard to provide for the family financially, but were emotionally absent during her childhood. As an adult, Karina reflects that her parents were probably dealing with their own trauma of being an immigrant moving to a different country. For many of the women who were first-generation Americans, they understood how hard their families had to work to meet the economic necessities of living in a new country and providing for their children. Their families saw education as a way for them to be successful in America, with or without a husband.

Sasha talked about being in school and her vocabulary being a topic of conversation when she was growing up. As Sasha's parents were trying to create opportunities for their children, she said other students would make fun of her and her sister "because we talked white, whatever that meant. So, there was some of that, right? And that was also problematic. But you know, the house is full of love. Like I just, you know, again, my mom did what she could." Sasha's mom tried to protect her from blatant racism, but that was difficult growing up in a rural environment:

> I grew up in the middle of nowhere, where me and my sister at one point were really the only Black kids in the, in the school... it was a very white environment. And so that was difficult, especially rural Virginia, still a lot of like, Confederate flags flying to this day. That was already a stressful environment to be in... I think my mom was just really making sure that we were safe. And so, we didn't really talk about it a lot until it came to our front door, right? I remember, like, when I was like, third grade, some little white kid called me a nigger. *Sasha, 42*

Childhood comes with its own burdens for each person. However, being a person of color in America adds an additional toll. Therefore, Decolonial Feminism allows me to capture the foundational experiences of Autonomous WOC, draw attention to their intersectional marginalization, and how these experiences shape their decisions about relationships. The stress placed on children, particularly Black children, having to see Confederate flags on a regular basis and being called derogatory and hateful words associated with the time of slavery in American history cannot be quantified. The emotional damage is etched in their memories. For Toya's parents, her education was non-negotiable. There was no question of whether she would go to college:

> I'm, both my parents have advanced degrees. I realized that is not necessarily a given me being a woman of color. I am third generation college attending, my grandmother went to school. My maternal grandmother went to ... They were most concerned about us getting our education. That was, that was a that was not negotiable. We were going to graduate school, all of us are going to grad school, all of us have advanced degrees rather than masters. So that was not negotiate. That was not negotiable. For my parents, they were more concerned about that than anything else. *Toya,* 47

Education has been an integral part of Toya's life. She was aware of her positionality as a Black woman, and the women in her family instilled how important it was for her to succeed in school. In a society with a history of white supremacy and slavery, Toya having opportunities as a Black woman was important to her family. Those lessons were well learned as she currently works in higher education, helping students maneuver the bureaucracy of the university system. Dora also stated how her father felt very strongly about her being educated, which he thought would afford her opportunities to have a more independent life:

> I think what my dad instilled in me, I, my dad, we, I mean, I joke with my sisters that my dad is a feminist, because he was very much like, you're going to school, you need to succeed, you need to be successful on your own. So, you don't depend on a man like, you know, he said that. *Dora, 47*

For Dora's dad, education meant freedom from being dependent on a man for financial security, and this was something he wanted for his daughters. Eartha detailed how she was good at school, and that became her identity in the family. She was never taught to believe that she would meet Prince Charming and get married, so it was not something she expected growing up. She did not feel nurtured or understood as a child. Therefore, being good in school was her sanctuary. For Sonia, her mother stressed the importance of education and thought that becoming pregnant would derail her future:

> I think she kind of living vicariously through like, me in terms of, you know, stressing from a young age, don't get pregnant ... but as a kid, I associated being a parent with like, not being able to pursue my dreams, right. Because that's what happened to her. So, she was very big on education, and very big on getting having security, independently. And, you know, so for her, it was a huge deal for my dad, not so much. *Sonia, 42*

The idea of education being a gateway to opportunity is not new. For Autonomous WOC, some of whom come from immigrant families, migrant workers, and chaotic households, education became a powerful tool to chip away at the discrimination and poverty these women experienced as children. These women also used their education as a means for investing in a more liberatory adulthood.

4.3.2 *Education, Protective Individualism, and Independence*

As I noted previously, my participants did not come from wealthy families. There were no legacy admissions in my sample, yet twenty-two of my participants make over $75,000 a year, and thirty-six out of the forty had college degrees, while twenty-nine had an advanced degree. Beatrice is the child of migrant farm workers and education was important to her. Today, she has a Ph.D. Sasha said that she "always wanted to be the boss." However, Sasha did not want to be the boss in order to control other people or have all the power and more money. She wanted to be the boss so that she could control her own life. The pursuit of a college education is

linked to her desire to be financially independent and self-reliant. Ray (2018:458) argued that feminist studies show that women who grew up after the women's movement were driven "to employ feminist ideals of independence, self-development, and self-respect as they make decisions regarding work, motherhood, and marriage." The women in my study echo these conclusions. Francesca talked about education being important not only as a child but as an adult:

> I felt like my career was a little stagnant. Like I was getting good opportunities to do different things. But I wasn't going to be a CFO, I wasn't going to be an executive. So, and you know, education was always really important. A Ph.D. was something I always wanted to do. And so, I just quit and went and did it. *Francesca, 36*

Francesca could quit her job and go back to school because she was not responsible for supporting a family. She had the freedom to make individual choices. Protective individualism plays an essential role in the lives of the women in my study, mainly by being able to shape their future. Poortman and Liefbroer (2010) state that individualism can be defined in two ways: an increased freedom of choice to shape one's own life or creating more individualistic approaches that lead to fewer connections to others. Although individualism is historically linked to capitalism and neoliberalism, Autonomous WOC do not embrace a kind of free market individualism where they are out to gain as many resources as possible (Harvey 2020). Autonomous WOC like Dela are looking for freedom from constraints and are practicing a form of protective or defensive individualism to protect against harm and trauma. Dela felt she lived in "a maximum-security prison" growing up and was not afforded much freedom. She saw going to college as her chance to get away from her confinement:

> When I was 18, and it was time to pick schools, I deliberately picked one far, far away, I thought it was my one chance of freedom... So, I went from being over-monitored and micromanaged, to having all the freedom in the world. And I couldn't find any balance there. *Dela, 45*

Although Dela craved freedom, she found the adjustment out of her confinement difficult, which took some time for her to figure out as an adult. Some of my participants spoke about childhood trauma due to witnessing an abusive relationship between their parents. These women felt their mom was trapped in a circumstance that was harmful for herself, and also for them. This belief that their moms were "trapped" in a marriage was often tied to the idea of being financially dependent on someone else. Beatrice talked about how she saw education as a way to be independent and free from traditional relationships:

> Education is, is your way of being independent. And not having to, you know, maybe be in an abusive relationship or have to tolerate situations that you don't want to tolerate ... living a single life with, you know, opportunity to travel and being educated and not being tied down, the way that my mom had to be tied down in a traditional marriage, to kind of set the foundation in terms of thinking of myself as, you know, feminist and being independent. Being able to travel by myself, learn different kinds of things, learning, you know, how to fix some stuff in my car, and how to, you know, do certain things that were not associated with, like women's work, that kind of thing. *Beatrice, 41*

Beatrice saw education as a way toward independence and having more opportunities than her mother had. She saw marriage as being tied down, but education would give her the financial means to live a life outside of heteronormative expectations. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) describe the archetype of a man as being dominant, powerful, and aggressive. They refer to it as hegemonic masculinity. They also define *emphasized femininity* as the perfect wife and mother and a picture-perfect woman seamlessly suited for motherhood and marriage. This imagery is often part of the hidden curriculum of education that reinforces heteronormative roles. Geraldine and Eartha both spoke of being WOC and the role education, patriarchy, and race have in their lives:

> That's always a complicated question. I think for Black women, especially Black women who choose to date Black men ... And Black women not knowing their place. And it's some, in some ways intensify more in that group, because they are men who have been denied the benefits of patriarchy where their white counterparts have. So, they want to be white men and get all those spoils. But the Black men and their, their female counterparts, as a group, are superseding them in so many ways. So, it's going to be harder to convince Geraldine, who has the Master's degree, who has a passport, has traveled all around the world, and who is clear that she can take care of herself without much effort to convince her to submit and be a traditional docile woman, because literally, I don't need you for those things. And a certain level of emotional support that we have not trained men to work on. *Geraldine, 46*

Geraldine doubts she is a very suitable marriage partner to Black men because she is an educated Black woman who can take care of herself. Her education provides her with a level of experience and financial freedom to live her life without a partner, and she finds that very difficult to give up. The challenges for educated Black women to find Black men to date are well documented (Collins 1990; Marsh 2023; Blum and Deussen 1996). However, most of the Black women in my study are not actively pursuing relationships with Black men or any man. Geraldine is not fearful a man will not choose her. She is expressing her reluctance to be in a partnership and that she will have to be "convinced" to enter into a traditional marriage. Geraldine feels she has more to lose than gain from entering a traditional marriage. Eartha spoke of being an outsider and how she realizes she is part of a small minority within a minority:

> Yeah, I definitely still feel like an outsider, I do, I have a lot more pride attached to it now... And I absolutely realize it as a woman of color, who is never married, and doesn't have any kids. But that's a really specific, small category... And that, that and also, like, being college educated, I have two Master's degrees. I'm an outsider in a lot of ways. And that just like, as an adult, I just embrace that I am not like everybody else, and I am different from other people. And that's not a bad thing. *Eartha, 40*

Eartha is giving voice to the fact that she is a minority of women in many respects. She is a woman of color; she is childfree and never-married. She is also college educated. Eartha did not speak of her education in terms of elitism or arrogance. Eartha framed education in terms of the possibilities and freedoms it afforded her such as financial independence. Education has also

been a lifeline to Lourdes throughout her life. She went to boarding school with her sister when she was fourteen years old on a scholarship. She also spent her summers away from home traveling to other countries:

> One of the reasons I chose a PhD way back when I was first generation was because I just loved the idea of reading and writing for a living, just being the face in the classroom I didn't see growing up, and I mentioned that because like, I didn't want to go work for the man... idea of working 80 hours a week for the hustle like just wasn't that thing, my mom used to joke my sister and I both have PhDs she was like, Why didn't you go get like a law degree or MBA, and we're like well you kept telling us education was the way to change things ... we're gonna do this forever. *Lourdes, 38*

Lourdes is another Autonomous WOC with a mother or maternal figure who instilled the importance of education. Many women spoke of their mothers and their influence on their education. Although most of the women in my study did not come from affluent families, twenty had a mother with more than a high school education. Many of them received their degrees after their children were in primary school or after they graduated high school. Education was also a factor in how Autonomous WOC viewed future generations. Sandy was concerned about raising children in a society fraught with white privilege and was worried she would raise her children in line with the messages she had received as a child:

> There were a lot of, so when I say raising the kids the way I would want them to be raised, it would be I think I've internalized a lot of like, upper, like working class upper white messages about how to raise children, you know? *Sandy, 44*

Women like Sandy are concerned that a primary school curriculum in the United States would inevitably, or subconsciously, teach children white normativity. White normativity is defined as the cultural models and practices that make whiteness the standard-bearer for what is human, standard, and right (Humphrey 2022). Francesca also did not want to be part of an institution(s) that aligns with values she disagrees with, and she stated that “white supremacy and patriarchy that comes along with, you know, marriage and kids, a lot of that is not what I want to

be a part of." Therefore, Autonomous WOC are deciding when, and to what degree, they participate in colonial institutions. People of color must go to school, work, and raise families in a country that was founded on genocide and coloniality. These women can only limit the impact of that history on their lives (Ramirez, Vélez-Zapata, and Maher 2024).

Sandy and Francesca are speaking to what Lugones (2010) refers to as the purpose of European colonialism - to inject a structure of the family that furthers the heterosexual and Christian agenda. Therefore, as education has been an important influence for my participants, it is not surprising that they, as WOC, would be concerned about the hidden curriculum in education for children. Geraldine has been a lifelong educator and writer. She has taught in the United States and abroad, then the COVID-19 pandemic happened:

> I taught for up to the pandemic, basically back here in New York and had a come-to-Jesus moment, like a lot of people across the world and just realized, I've gotten all I'm going to get out of teaching. My mission here is done. *Geraldine, 46*

Geraldine took her role in the educational process of others seriously, but she also knew when that profession no longer served her. The experience of living through a global pandemic gave her the extra push to walk away. As she was furthering other's education, she was also cognizant of her personal growth and what she was learning from her choices.

4.3.3 *Review*

For women today, marriage may not be as attractive to them if they can fulfill their personal, sexual, social, and economic needs without tying the knot (Forsyth and Johnson 1995). The literature has shown that a woman's level of education influences her decision and the likelihood of her remaining single (Lesch and van der Watt 2018). Hence, education and economic viability provide women with more opportunities. Autonomous WOC also talked about school being a place of validation and where they felt safe.

Many of my participants have had a life-long relationship with education and continue to work in education as adults. Some are university professors, school counselors, administrators, deans, and teachers. Others have worked to create opportunities for children through non-profit organizations or government entities. Not only did the women in my study have non-normative views on relationships, but they also had uncommon ideas of what they wanted to do for a living and how to structure their work lives. The women used the knowledge and the resources that education provided them as a way through and a way out of heteronormative traditions.

This section demonstrated how Autonomous WOC view education as an escape from cultural limitations and how it became a haven during tumultuous times during their childhoods. Hence, education became the vehicle, the journey, and the destination. These women could apply their education to gain knowledge and experience, which helped them construct their lives separate from marriage and motherhood. However, education is not the only factor in living an autonomous life. Autonomous WOC were able to utilize their education in work environments that allowed for more independence and protective individualism.

4.4 WORK

This section discusses Autonomous WOC's experiences of work and finances and why Autonomous WOC have chosen work that is often remote, unconventional, or part-time to live in unconventional arrangements. The women in my study are employed in a range of professions. Many of the women work in higher education in roles such as university professors, graduate students, researchers, deans, and administration personnel. Other Autonomous WOC work as data specialists, public health workers, mental health specialists, writers, business coaches, non-profit professionals, real estate agents, and in marketing. Lastly, some women are working as caregivers for a family member, are in between jobs, or are unemployed. Although my

participants are overwhelmingly in what is deemed white-collar professionals, their incomes range from high to low earnings and include women who were unemployed and underemployed. The women in my study often watched their parents work under difficult circumstances both in and outside the home.

In this subsection on work, I examine how financial independence is a necessary component for women to explore self-governing lives outside the traditional heteronormative structures and how Decolonial Feminism explains Autonomous WOC's desire to be free from traditional conventions. Feminism has opened the door for more opportunities for women in all aspects of life: personally, culturally, economically, and politically. However, mainstream feminists have often been incapable of tackling systemic racism and the social and historical issues (Rodrigues 2022). This section also highlights the intersectionality of my research. I establish how gender, race, and work are interconnected and that WOC pay an additional emotional toll tax. Finally, I detail how Autonomous WOC have prioritized their mental health over monetary successes.

4.4.1 *Childhood Experiences Shape Views on Work and Employment*

The women I interviewed spoke of family financial hardships and how, as children, they were aware the family was struggling to pay bills. For most of the Autonomous WOC, financial security was not a part of their socioeconomic experiences as children. Flor worked alongside her mother at flea markets:

> She worked like three jobs at one point, you know, she was an immigrant so she did all kinds of jobs, right, sold all kinds of things. We, you know, I remember being in the flea market and selling stuff. You know, we sold flowers, my mom sold jewelry, I mean, all kinds of stuff that I would see her do and I would do alongside her or help her with. So, you know, I think I think there was a it was a combination of just probably doing things that were too adult when I was a little kid. I grew up really fast. I mean, I just you know, I took care of my brother when we were little because my mom would work a lot so I was really responsible when I was younger. *Flor, 42*

Flor's experiences with her mom framed how she saw work and finances. She had to grow up fast and, help support the family financially and help take care of her brother. She was seeing her mother's struggle and what was needed to take care of a family. Flor did not want to be in that financial precarious situation as an adult. Children of immigrants or laborers also suffered from an institutional system that exploited their labor:

> My dad. But I think also it was because of his own experiences in the workforce. He worked in construction his whole life as a laborer. And so, he would share some of it, not all of his experiences with us, but he would share some of his experiences in the workforce. And he would tell us that it was very hard. And with low pay. So, we so we lived in a low-income family household with a one-bedroom apartment, and we moved to Fresno, we were able to buy our house. But that took a while. Plus, he was sending money to his mom, my grandma, and his siblings in Mexico. *Charlotte, 39*

Charlotte saw and heard her father's experiences in a society that values hard work, but not necessarily those who do the work especially if those persons are Brown immigrants. She also experienced what it meant to be poor and to move out of those circumstances and then be able to financially support extended family members. Being able to support less fortunate family members and economic mobility was an important lesson for Charlotte. Charlotte would later talk about not wanting to have children if it meant she would financially struggle. Lourdes also spoke of the "immigrant struggle."

> So, you know, like the immigrant struggle, right? Like it's not a you know, the way my sister and I defined, and like, like building on the legacy of my mother, my grandmother were just like, we just want to make choices that benefit us as humans versus like, just going after the bigger paycheck *Lourdes, 38*

This quote exemplifies that although economic security was important to Autonomous WOC. They were not seeking riches in order to have extravagant lifestyles. They wanted to be able to take care of themselves and the people that were important to them. Both Charlotte and Lourdes are voicing how WOC often feel a responsibility to recognize and honor the sacrifices

their families had to make. Charlotte is a full-time caretake for her mom. She is the only one in her family that was willing to take on that responsibility. Lourdes states it is important to her to be a role model for other Latinas and women of color. Their positionality as a WOC often means extra burdens and responsibilities, both culturally and financially. Sharp and Ganong (2007) state that more research needs to be conducted on the lives of never-married women, encompassing more diversity and differing social locations. They also urge researchers to study any connection between singleness and ethnicity/race.

4.4.2 *Work, Independence, and Protective Individualism*

In economic systems where men have the majority of financial resources and control the means of production, they are more likely to be dominant in the family and in society (Durkheim 1953). However, Autonomous WOC like Lala are changing that social script. Lala had an unexpected reaction to her newfound financial independence:

> I ended up getting, you know, as the amazing job offer, and it's like, okay, and I wasn't expecting that I wasn't expecting my mind to shift. Once I started making money. That was the big surprise for me that I got less interested in marriage, like, immediately. Right, dropping an offer letter like, Oh, here's an unexpected consequence. It's like, now I can I can be independent, like, I don't have to depend on it on someone else, like, oh, well, then what I need to do that for? *Lala, 40*

Lala did not realize how much her newfound financial stability would impact her views of marriage. Once she knew she could support herself, marriage became less appealing. Marriage became an option, not the only option, and definitely not a necessity. When Lala realized she could financially support herself, her idea of what was possible became grander.

Whereas Sasha knew early in life that her path would be one without motherhood. Sasha related that her parents got married young. Her mom had just turned eighteen right when she got married, and her dad was in the army and about to be shipped off to Germany. Sasha has two younger sisters. One is not married and never wants to have children. She recalls her parent's

marriage being really rocky and that they argued a lot. Her father would leave the house and be gone for long stretches of time. Her mother would work hard so the children had what they needed. Sasha stated that "on paper, we were poor."

Sasha has a large extended family that she would see often. She reported a lot of cousins, uncles, and aunts. When her parents got separated, she was around seven years old, and she took the separation really hard. Her mother took her to group therapy to help Sasha work through her feelings about her father. She recalls that therapy was helpful for her to process what was happening in her family. Her parents would have an on and off again relationship for years and then finally got divorced after she graduated high school. She is not opposed to marriage and would consider it if it was the right situation. However, Sasha has a high-profile job with a six-figure income, which allows her power of choice:

> Yeah, I mean, it was, it was very important for me to prove, I guess, that I could do life right on my own. And so, I will tell you, like, at my age eight, I knew that I didn't want to get married or have children. And so like, always knew that I was like, I'm gonna figure this thing out. And I need I'm going to do it without anyone's help. And so, it was really important for me also to be like, financially independent. I did not want to have to rely on anyone to for my livelihood. And that was really, really important to me. *Sasha, 42*

Sasha was not interested in making money just to have a lot of money, what she wanted was the financial stability she lacked once her parents separated. Lala and Sasha spoke of how financial independence impacted their thoughts on marriage, motherhood, and being dependent on another person. Lala and Sasha see financial independence as a necessary tool for women to live a life outside the norms of marriage and motherhood.

Also living lives of unconventionality, three of my participants live or lived a digital nomad lifestyle. These women did not have to go to an office or even a building to work and could work from anywhere, including outside the country. Amanda stated that not being married or having children gave her the freedom and flexibility to live outside the country:

> So, a digital nomad is someone who works remotely. And because they have the freedom to work wherever they want in the world, as long as they have access to Wi Fi, they can just work wherever. And typically, a digital nomad will like, work, live somewhere for about two to three months, and then go on to another country, depending on where they want to go. Now, I've been doing this for six years, but like three years officially, because three years before that, I was I was still based in the US. Um, but I ended up giving up my apartment. So, I don't have any ties. Well family ties, but you know what I mean? I don't have to like, rush back. *Amanda, 40*

Amanda talked about not having ties that would keep her in the United States. She is referring to financial and personal connections that would necessitate her remaining in one place. She now had the resources and freedom to live wherever she wanted to live. Amanda also talked about there being a gender and race component to the digital nomadic life:

> I feel like the silver lining if you want to say, of the pandemic is a lot more people are doing it. When I first started doing it, it was not common at all, especially for women of color. You know, it wasn't that common. It was mostly like, you know, you think about like, the like us like frat guys or whatever like those bros. It was mostly them. They were like the face of digital nomad life. Um, and now there's a lot more people doing it. *Amanda, 40*

Amanda is addressing how gender, race and work are interconnected. Amanda now can work as a digital nomad, a white, male-dominated form of work. As more employees are able to work remotely, the chance for women of color and other marginalized groups to have more control over their work settings is increasing. Therefore, deciding when and where you work is not just for the powerful and wealthy anymore. In her experience, the COVID-19 pandemic expanded her opportunities. Lala also enjoyed the freedom of working as a digital nomad; working remotely allowed her to travel and live outside the United States. She was aware this was not the type of freedom that many women of color experienced:

> I don't have a lot of friends who have the level of freedom that I have, even if it comes down to I'm not only just not having children, or a husband, but my job affords me just even being able to work remotely, and to have a comfortable salary... And, and I was able to do that, you know, that's that, that freedom and flexibility that comes with, again, not only not being a caretaker for anyone, but also having the funds and the flexible job to be able to do that. *Lala, 40*

Lala understands that she is living a life that many WOC do not have the opportunity to do so, and she is not unaware of how that opens her world. Amanda and Lala understand they now have the ability and resources to enter the worlds that white men have previously dominated, and although they are now in a privileged socioeconomic class, they are still women of color in a colonial society that privileges whiteness. The refrain that 'it's class, not race' is a cornerstone of white supremacy (Davis 1983). Therefore, multiple factors shape the lives of Autonomous WOC.

Because the women I interviewed were childfree, never-married single they were able to live a life according to their own counsel. They often confronted decisions between what society told them they were supposed to want and what they wanted for themselves. Karina had a highly-paid job working as a director of a company and had all the objects she was told she should want - a high-esteemed position, great pay, and a nice apartment. However, she found she was not happy with her life. Even though she had wealth, Karina desired freedom from social obligations:

> So, I like had the title that I had the success on paper that everybody else was talking about. And I loved the job. It paid well had the apartment in ... east side of New York. And all I wanted to do was to quit my job, sell the apartment, and travel and leave. *Karina, 45*

Karina did quit her job and sold the apartment to travel abroad. The predictable path is not what these women took. Autonomous WOC wanted financial stability, but they also wanted it on their terms. At least five of the women in my study left higher-paying jobs for work that was more personally satisfying to them or more conducive to the lifestyle they wanted. Therefore, the high salary is not the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow for all of the women in my study. They spoke of independence more than income. This type of freedom has not been

afforded to most WOC historically (Collins 2000; Davis 1983), and these women are well aware of this fact. Autonomous WOC focus on education and financial independence helped to shape their life choices, but it did not define them. Eartha spoke about her advantages:

> I would add is that, particularly when it comes to WOC ... is the freedom that it [being educated and being able to support herself] gives me. I, one thing that I like about my life is that I can make choices and do things and it doesn't affect anybody but me, like my decision to go to grad school, my decision to go to work, and then be like, I can go to grad school again and do it again. And the first time after I got my Master's in social work degree, I couldn't find a job. And I was sleeping on my mom's couch for nine months. I could do that because I didn't have kids and I didn't have a family and I didn't have responsibilities, responsibility to take care of other people. And I can live my life the way that I want to. And I can take risks, and I can fail because I can catch myself. I don't have to worry about taking care of other people. And so that for me is one of the important reasons why I live the life that I do is because I have that freedom to take risks. And I'm not dragging other people down with me if I if I fail. *Eartha, 40*

Eartha spoke of another aspect of freedom and individualism. She was able to take risks. She could make choices about her life, with her mother's support, without worrying how they negatively impacted others. Although Autonomous WOC are primarily independent, it should also be noted that this is also a precarious financial situation if an individual has no family ties or support. Eartha could make the decisions she did because she had the backing of her family, because support can come from other people than a romantic partner. Autonomous WOC want freedom from conventional expectations and the ability to make individual decisions. However, many are able to make their own decisions due to help of those around them.

Singleness has been tied to individualism, especially for single women. The Autonomous WOC I interviewed are not driven by greed to accumulate more things, but they are motivated by obtaining a certain amount of control over their future. Devi provided astute commentary on the inequity of relationships between men and women and how the institution of the family has helped to maintain a patriarchal system that has prevented women from obtaining powerful positions at home and work:

> I think there is such immense dignity in building one's own kingdom. And I think it's a secret that men have held on to very purposely, and very secretively for so long, because it can feel so powerful. *Devi, 48*

Devi is directly speaking about how a system of patriarchy has prevented women from obtaining a sense of empowerment that would provide them with a greater path to independence. She felt this path had been purposefully cut off for women. Patriarchy can be used to explain the relationship between sex, gender, power, and oppression, and its purpose is to subjugate women and prevent them from obtaining equality with men (Connell 2009). Willie also did not want to invest copious amounts of time in finding a partner and then relinquishing her independence to become her partner's assistant. She had her own plans:

> I really did value my independence. And that I wasn't interested in like organizing my partner's life in a way that I think women are oftentimes expected to and so there was just like a lot of things that I was like, I'm just really not interested in doing that. *Willie, 45*

These women were not interested in doing what was expected. Autonomous WOC want to direct, write, and star in their own stories, and they also want the freedom and flexibility to make mistakes or change their minds. The women I interviewed knew that by remaining childfree and never-married, they would be able to write their own stories with themselves being the protagonists. Women who have children and are married can also live lives of determination and make decisions about their futures. However, Autonomous WOC found the life they wanted to lead challenges the social and cultural expectations of coloniality, and thus their decisions were not just about being independent or the lifestyle they wanted to have. They are living lives that are unconventional and push social and cultural boundaries. Autonomous WOC want to be in control of their lives, as much as anyone can be, and they are willing to take the steps and make any necessary sacrifices to make that happen. Consequently, their employment and family decisions are interrelated.

4.4.3 *Race, Emotional Labor, and the Emotional Toll Tax*

Women of color have many demands placed on them, including the emotional labor expected of women generally and women of color in particular. They are pushed and pulled by personal limitations, social restrictions, and institutional barriers. Autonomous WOC deal with sexism, racism, and social injustice, which becomes an added burden on them emotionally, but they must still engage with a world designed more for their failures than their successes. How they engage in that world and how other people react to them can become a daily reminder of the colonial and patriarchal realities of their lives. Therefore, I refer to this reality as the emotional toll tax.

Although most of the women in my study do not perform working class jobs or domestic work including physical labor professionally, some women have family members who have been migrant farm workers and domestic workers and have performed physically demanding duties. Therefore, the practice of physical and emotional hard labor is not foreign to them. A couple of the women in my study came from families of migrant farm workers. Sandy's family moved frequently for work. "So, my parents are immigrants from the Dominican Republic. Okay. And so, we pretty much traveled that lived up and down the East Coast." Beatrice also experienced the harmful consequences of her parents having to work for long hours and being away from the family:

> A lot of the bad stuff that happened to them [the children] was when the parents were at, at in the fields are in the parking houses and they'd be gone like, more than all day they'd be gone like 12 hours a day. *Beatrice, 41*

Beatrice's experiences inform her choices and understanding of how gender, race, and class are connected. The children of immigrants are left vulnerable due to their parents having to work for long hours and being absent from their children. When Black women and WOC were

often working unsatisfying jobs to help support their families financially, these parents often had to be absent from their own children's lives. Collins (2000) contends that Black women were then characterized, unfairly, as being bad mothers who were not invested in their children's lives. Charlotte also spoke of her understanding of hard work:

> My dad would say I'm putting you girls through education in so that you can work in a in a much easier job setting that I work in because he worked in construction, his whole life. So, it was hard labor. So, he would tell us that he was putting us girls in education, so that we could have a job that was easier than the one he had. *Charlotte, 39*

Charlotte's father did not want her to have to do the kind of physical labor he had done his whole life. He thought she would have better chances of working in less physically demanding jobs if educated. Charlotte's father wanted his daughters to not have to work blue collar jobs and to give them the opportunity for class mobility.

Mina spoke about being dehumanized. She stated that she cares a lot about kindness and social justice. However, she believes it is problematic if kindness is not coupled with justice. Mina is a college-educated woman, and is employed by a large organization. However, she lives in an expensive city and constantly worries about money. Although Mina has an advanced degree, she is not wealthy and has to live on a budget. She does not have much patience for people unaware of social inequities. "I think, I just like, am out of patience, like, I'm like it for people who have systemic advantages. And I want like a more robust understanding of those." Mina also expressed a disdain for performative kindness. "I don't care if you bring me a casserole if you vote against my humanity." Mina is advocating for people to practice a system of conscious kindness, which also underscores how intersectionality is necessary to get to the complexities of gender, race and class.

Mia speaks to the challenges of these intersections:

> It's really complicated, because I do feel I have quite a diverse friend group. However, some of my closest friends are also white. And we have the same viewpoint, when it comes to you know, these racial issues that are happening in our city, but they don't have as just like me, as an Asian person, I don't have the same viewpoint as a Black person in Minneapolis, it's very different. But I can see, like, I can empathize with them. And it's sort of the same way, when speaking to a white person who also emphasizes they really don't actually understand. So that can be like a point of disconnect between people. *Mia, 41*

Mia is speaking about what DiAngelo (2022) calls white fragility. White fragility works as a defense mechanism which allows persons not to change that which they cannot face or understand. The events in her city deeply impacted Mia after the killing of George Floyd. This event also magnified the differences between how she sees the world and how some of her white friends see the world. Although her white peers share the same socioeconomic status as her, Mia felt they did not always understand the issues WOC face in reference to race. Sam stated she wants to be able to talk about the issues that are important to her at work, and that includes anti-racist causes:

> I just it was like that critical consciousness of intersectional issues just wasn't there. And that was like something that I feel like I need in my environment, like if not [be] afraid to say racism in a space and talk about anti-blackness. *Sam, 38*

Sam gives voice to an additional work or labor that WOC must perform in some work and social settings. When Hochschild (2012) introduced the concept of emotional labor, she was explaining the additional labor that women often are asked to perform beyond their actual work duties, such as smiling at customers or laughing at jokes they find offensive. This emotional labor aims to elicit more comfortable experiences by making others feel more at ease in your presence. Hochschild infers that middle-class and upper-class women use more emotional labor than lower-class women. This is affirmed when she states that "lower-class and working-class people tend to work more with things, and middle-class and upper-class people tend to work

more with people" (Hochschild 2012:21). However, subsequent research has expanded this concept beyond middle-class and upper-class women (Humphrey 2022).

My participants also spoke of being depleted of energy by the daily re-positioning within white-collar professions. These women are seen as too much or not enough, too vocal and aggressive, or too meek and insecure. Willie was a Black woman working in academia who decided to leave her job. Although she worked very hard to gain her position, she felt the hardship of the emotional labor to maintain that role was not tenable:

> But being a Black woman in a faculty position was pretty difficult at times, and are actually obviously like the majority of the time. And so, the difficulties just never are, I guess the benefits just never really outweigh the difficulties. And so, I think a lot of times, like people are really surprised that I would leave a faculty position, but I think the people who are most surprised are like white people, and then white men and then white women. *Willie, 45*

The idea of a Black woman needing to leave her position due to the extra labor and strain of discrimination in the workplace is not unique. Sadly, many women who have suffered similarly cannot leave their positions and are forced to remain in jobs that take an extra toll on them (Collins 2000). These women are forced to pay an extra emotional toll tax just to live their lives. WOC often have to expend additional emotional labor due to being racialized and being expected to perform to standards that exceed their white counterparts (Davis 1983). In order to meet this burden, WOC must pay a significant amount of their time and energy to prove they are as capable as white women or they can fit into social institutions not built for them. Thus, this creates an extra burden (toll) WOC must internalize and the tax is what they have to pay to live their lives daily.

This emotional toll tax then has an impact on how they maneuver through the social processes of society. For example, WOC may be more hesitant to take on a high-stress position at work due to the emotional toll tax WOC are already paying on top of their current work and

personal responsibilities. Brewer (1999) found that although Black and white women do the same work, Black women are more likely to be supervised by white women. In a sense, white women are in the fast-pass lane, while WOC are in a traffic jam of intersecting oppressions. Daria and Sasha spoke about being judged for how they talked, and many attributed their diction to "talking white." Daria is an educator, and in the classroom, students would ask her about her family background:

> So, when I speak, and I talk like this, they'll ask me is your mom or dad white? What do you mean? You sound like white people? What do you mean? I enunciate and I have a vocabulary. I'm like, so, so what am I supposed to sound like if I'm quote unquote, Black? *Daria, 56*

This persistent debate about one's diction impacts WOC, while growing up and in the workplace. On top of Daria having to fulfill her job duties, she also has to explain and defend how she speaks. This is an example of the emotional toll tax. Mohanty (1988) argues that women of color feminists in the United States have described a form of appropriation of their experiences by a hegemonic white women's movement and argues that concepts such as family, marriage, sexual division of labor, and reproduction must be discussed within a cultural and historical context. Mia talked about being a person of color and a person *and* of color:

> And just seeing things more through the eyes of a person of color as a person and of color, maybe that I didn't see before. It can, it can be hard speaking out about things like that, in the environment I live in. *Mia, 41*

Mia is expressing the challenges of being a WOC, trying to live your life, and being a person of color living in a world that often asks you to justify your humanity. Dela, who identifies as Afro-Caribbean, discussed a common trope of women of color, and how she has been called aggressive and told to be nicer:

> I guess, what's been called an aggressive attitude…, it comes across as being hyper-aggressive ... So again, it's always a balance. I figure, most women deal with this, when you're assertive you really have to just ignore people, because even women will tell you that you should be nicer, or you should just deal with things. *Dela, 45*

WOC have to think about how they react in a white world. They must be cognizant of seeming too aggressive or confrontational, especially in work settings. They cannot react as a white woman would, or they run the risk of being labeled the angry Black woman or the dramatic Latina. White women may also find their behavior threatening and will not want to work with them (DiAngelo 2022). Thus, WOC have to relentlessly think about how they are perceived in white spaces, and this type of emotional labor takes an emotional toll on them. Being misunderstood is something my participants experience routinely, and when they were younger, they were more affected by others' perceptions of them. As they have gotten older, they have become more comfortable with who they are and what they can offer. They do not feel a pressure to conform or change themselves to better fit-in.

As WOC work toward finding ways to combat the prevailing social and economic injustices, they also have to perform routine everyday tasks. The emotional toll tax has no forbearances or payoffs and can also be passed down from generation to generation. Therefore, Autonomous WOC are a group that has cultural, social, and economic disadvantages. The Autonomous WOC in my study have detailed how the emotional toll tax has impacted their lives. The weight of those concerns may not be the reason why these women decided to be childfree and never-married single. However, they did detail the need for personal time and tranquility to decompress from the pressures of going through life being a woman of color and questioned if having children or a partner was compatible with the amount of alone time they desired in their lives.

4.4.4 *Social Justice, Success and Mental Health*

Collins (2000) explains that the exploitation of Black women's labor was essential to United States capitalism and represents the economic aspects of oppression. The exploitation of Black women and women of color's labor is an integral part of the history of the United States of America. Therefore, Autonomous WOC are upending generations of forced and demeaning labor (Davis 1983). In their decisions about work, Autonomous WOC were not interested in the corporate ladder, nor did they have the "greed is good" mindset. Financial success was more about practicality than vanity. Brandy works primarily with other WOC. She is an educator and motivational speaker. She helps other WOC to gain confidence to have the "freedom to show up." She stated that:

> For various reasons, WOC have not often been given permission to be who we are fully with all our essence and culture and beauty and all of that. And so, it is so important for me to give my clients permission to show up. *Brandy, 41*

Brandy works to help other WOC find their voice and live to their full potential. Brandy has decided to spend her time helping other WOC to feel the same freedom to be themselves as she does. Sam also cares about "contributing to our society being less racist and sexist and classist and phobic." She challenges herself to think more expansively and worries about society. She stated that it makes her feel angry and sad about the state of world today. The women in my study are concerned about social justice and are drawn to causes and professions that help their communities. Some of the women were involved in local organizations in their community, helped others in their community know their rights, and volunteered for causes that were important to them. Autonomous WOC enjoyed making money that allowed them the freedom and space to live more independent lives and also afforded them the ability to travel and take time off. However, that is not incompatible with caring about their communities.

Autonomous WOC do not only worry about their marginalization or oppression but also the subjugation of others. Sam stated she is "regularly engaged in meaningful work that I feel has a positive impact on the world." Their work is often intentional, personal, and meaningful. Because Autonomous WOC are not in a romantic relationship or have children, they have been able to prioritize their mental health in making employment decisions. Prioritizing their mental health meant that they were able to leave work if they felt exploited or unwelcome. They could take advantage of opportunities or create opportunities to allow for work more conducive to their well-being. Autonomous WOC do not have to move for a spouse's job or their children to attend a better school. However, they also know they are their own backup plan and their own guardians. This reality has created an extra layer of determination and intention in their lives:

> I value my mental health, first and foremost, and having peace in my life. That is like, core and I will protect that part of my life to no end... I also value just being intentional with my life and sort of what I put out into the world. *Nancy, 44*

Dela also discussed how her definition of success has changed to include a more well-rounded life, and not just financial success or career advancement. Dela had a corporate job. A job that made her parents happy but not her. Once she left the job, she thought she was supposed to have, Dela began to live the life she wanted:

> I used to think being successful at a job was important, but the older you get your idea of successful changes. So, I used to work in a corporate environment as a cost accountant, and the work life balance was crap. So, for this, the work life balance is amazing. Because I have a lot more time to do things, I'd like at 45. I have started to I guess really enjoy my life. I learned to swim when I was 40-42. I bought roller skates at 43. Because while I could skate forward, I wasn't really coordinated enough to dance and it almost looks so amazing. So, I'm starting to enjoy my life. *Dela, 45*

Once Dela let go of her white-collar job and the life she thought would make her parents happy, she could make decisions based on her own interests and happiness. Both Lisa and

Lourdes also spoke of their mental health and happiness, and how that impacted their work decisions. Lisa was in a job that made her miserable:

> Because my job made me miserable. I - people have said that I am glowing. Like, I've heard this from numerous friends. They're like, Oh my God, you are glowing like what's going on? They think I am having sex. But I'm not. It's because I'm happy. Graduate school is done. I finished my dissertation. I got out of CPS. I am doing a job that I totally enjoy that I love. I love going to work every morning. I'm not dreading. I'm not sitting in the parking lot for 15 minutes going, oh my god, I gotta go in here and deal with these kids and administration and lesson plans. And I am extremely happy right now. *Lisa, 49*

After completing her education and obtaining her Ph.D., Lisa can now do work she finds fulfilling and joyful. Doing work is that meaningful and joyful was important to Autonomous WOC. Samantha Lee stated she enjoys her work and likes being identified by what she does. However, she is very cognizant of having a healthy work-life balance. She believes in doing meaningful and purposeful work, and something that aligns with her values. Samantha Lee wants to know that she has contributed to consequential conversations and growth for others. She does not work just to make money or have an important title.

> I think I'm first gen. immigrant parents, we grew up poor, we grew up in the projects and within the Woodside housing projects in New York. So, we like never had a lot... there was like many articles written about your how the happiness salary, like the salary to achieved joy, you know, barring, you know, kind of all of the adjustments for cost of living and inflation, blah, blah, blah, was like 70k. So, for the longest time, I think, probably still now I was like, 70k, I just needed to make it to 70k. *Samantha Lee, 43*

Samantha Lee grew up poor, but her goal was not to make as much money as possible. Her goal was to make enough money to make her as happy as possible. Lourdes also is able to shrewdly decide what work she does and who she has to engage with on a daily basis. She cares about society and wants to make a positive impact with her work, but she also cares about her mental health and protects it diligently:

> So, a lot of the decisions that I make around how like how I decide to live and how I decide to work is really just based on like, what's interesting to me what's actually going to make society better? And what's not going to like burn me out or piss me off. *Lourdes, 38*

Lourdes balances her desire for doing work that interests her, work that makes society better, but also not harming her mental health. For Lourdes, this meant being "the face" in the classroom. She loved the idea of writing and reading for a living and wanted to be a role model for other women of color. Lourdes mentioned she did not see a lot of Latinas as professors when she was in school. Dora articulates the sentiment of many in my study, including Lourdes. The balance of work and personal time leans more toward the personal for Autonomous WOC. Solitude, peace, and serenity are all essential elements of these women's lives:

> I value my peace above everything now. Because I know like, it's, it's how I thrive. If you know, if work gets too stressful, I know that I come home and light a candle, I put music, whatever, and I am at peace and everything's fine. *Dora, 47*

Autonomous WOC are not lonely because they are alone, and they do not crave mindless discourse, whether personally or professionally. Therefore, these women's work-life reflects their personal and social objectives. Autonomous WOC have cultivated the skill sets that allow them to work independently and the resources to work remotely. My participants work when necessary but also have the time and space to replenish their energy tanks. This is a luxury for many people, but it is a necessity for them.

4.4.5 *Review*

Autonomous WOCs are not afraid to live alone, travel alone, or imagine a future without a partner. Many of them are cognizant of the financial realities for single households and are planning for their retirements or when they will work less. Autonomous WOC do not work to work, but as Geraldine stated, to have "a life that affords me the privilege of rest." Their mental health, time, and peace are highly valued over money. For Autonomous WOC do not only face

sexism, they also face racism. Racism forces people of color to explain their presence in white spaces. For racism is not only dehumanizing, it is demoralizing. Racism is also exhausting. For it is tiring to constantly defend yourself from visible and invisible biases. At the intersection of race and gender, women of color have been forced to do this for generation after generation in the United States and most countries around the world (Collins 1990).

Autonomous WOCs now add childfree and never-married to this junction, and they no longer want to have those conversations about why they exist. They do not want to have to defend their presence. They want to live in the present. They are saving energy to support themselves, their loved ones, and their communities. They prioritize their mental health and value their time. They do work that is meaningful and impactful for their communities. Autonomous WOC can take work that allows them to feel valued and provides them some distance and comfort from the social structures and processes that would exploit their labor and marginalize their worth. This section demonstrates that these women have met the challenge of living a solo life financially. Autonomous WOCs are not looking for a way out of marriage; they cannot find a rational reason or way in.

4.5 DISCUSSION

Betty Friedan (1963) discusses the reality or fantasy of the happy housewife in The Feminine Mystique (Davis 1983; hooks 2000). The discussion of whether one can find satisfaction in the fulfillment of household work seems quaint today, but Friedan was not speaking to the experiences of all women. Feminist Theory (hooks 2000) refers to Betty Friedan's The Feminist Mystique and the idea of the housewife being a middle-class invention. Friedan argues that only middle-class and upper-class women had the time, money, or leisure to identify as feminists under the decree of the Feminist Mystique. Therefore, one's socioeconomic

status determined how much mystique women could afford. But Friedan mainly was speaking to the experiences of white women. Many of these women did not need to work to support their families but wanted to work to have a sense of identity and worth (Davis 1983). However, women of color were already in the workforce in working-class roles because they supported their families financially. Thus, for many WOC, work was not a place of fulfillment, but a destination of necessity (hooks 2000).

The Autonomous WOC I interviewed support themselves but do so in a way that provides them the leisure that would not have been thinkable for most WOC in the 1950s (Coontz 2016). The women in my study did not have privileged upbringings or additional opportunities. Most of the women came from lower-income to lower-middle-class income families. Two women came from migrant farm-working families and had to travel extensively as children for their parents to make a living. Therefore, their views on family, education, and class are different than the women to whom Betty Friedan was speaking. Autonomous WOCs are not only reevaluating if a traditional marriage serves them, but they are also rethinking their role and participation in other social institutions like education and work, and they have decided that they are not falling in line with the systems built on foundations that historically oppressed their ancestors. The women I spoke to were able to distinguish between social structures that could advance their freedom and those that inhibited their autonomy. For example, although education is an inherently unequal institution, Autonomous WOC were able to use their resourcefulness to gain advantages in a system fundamentally built to exclude them from the spaces of higher education.

Other women such as Sasha, Nikka, and Brandy experienced divorce or separation in their childhoods in which their family's households and finances were divided. This caused a

financial strain on their mothers. The women did not necessarily draw a parallel between the end of a marriage and financial insecurity to their own status as Autonomous WOC. However, I argue that experiencing this kind of precarity as a child due to the dissolution of an institutionalized relationship could cause these women to forgo those attachments. These women have experienced that social institutions do not protect or save them from financial hardship. Therefore, they may decide they are better off making financial arrangements outside of marriage.

Many of the women saw education as a means to be financially independent and chose professions that provided the flexibility or nonconformity they preferred. Historically, never-married, childfree women took on caretaking or nurturing roles in society, such as nuns, nurses, and teachers, and these roles provided women a certain amount of cover from any social disdain. These women were still considered valuable and productive – to and for others. Some may question why some WOC choose to be Autonomous while others do not, and I do not proffer that Autonomous WOC's lives are more fulfilling than other women who followed a more traditional path, but it does mean their lives are possible. I have spoken about the cultural and social conditions that have caused these women to seek a more unconventional life, and I have also been able to elucidate the how. These women have applied their experiences and used educational opportunities to find a way.

In identifying the terrain, utilizing their resources, and conserving their energy, Autonomous WOC have been able to defy expectations by engaging in white supremacist and colonial institutions when they need to and disengaging from social and cultural expectations when they can. They have created space for themselves to be freer from the restraints of coloniality by prioritizing their happiness and mental health. They have excelled in education to

expand their options to work in a biosphere of their own making. Autonomous WOC do not live conventional lives or work a standard 9-5 schedule. Many of the women work from home, have their own businesses, and have quit more stable jobs to either take a less demanding job or go back to school in their thirties and forties. They do not have all the answers, but they have identified some of the questions, and the questions for them center around whether heteronormative traditions serve them in a positive and healthy way. Autonomous WOC uniformly have answered that they do not.

Autonomous WOC do not exist by chance and they exist in the face of much social and cultural resistance. They endure by placing themselves in positions to gain financial independence, devising novel definitions of success, and keeping a laser focus on personal health and happiness. By remaining childfree and never-married, Autonomous WOC are participating in a form of feminist social justice praxis, as feminist work has always had a connection to social justice and in the form of social activism (Few-Demo and Allen 2020). To marry or have children is thought to be a very personal choice. However, there are a myriad of social, economic, and political factors that go into these decisions. My analysis utilizes Decolonial Feminism, in which European, bourgeois, and colonial men created a public life led by their rule to insert a heterosexual and Christian mindset, which included patriarchy (Lugones 2010). Consequently, the institution of the family and heterosexual, monogamous marriage exists in conjunction with the continuance of patriarchy and white supremacy (Davis 1983). Marsh (et al. 2007) further this argument when they discuss how professional Black women are now achieving middle-class status without marrying and how marriage may no longer be viewed as providing much financial benefits.

European colonization brought with it the ideologies that dehumanized non-Western people. The systems of racial and gender binaries were often reinforced by institutions such as the Roman Catholic Church (Ramirez, Velez-Zapata, and Maher 2024). Therefore, there are social processes that work against the best interests of WOC, and it is not surprising that women in the twenty-first century would hesitate to enter institutions with a history of oppressing them. Lugones (2020) contends that you cannot resist coloniality based on gender alone; that in order to combat coloniality, you must recognize the world you live in and your participation in the practices or processes that aid and abed coloniality. Autonomous WOC are doing just that.

Decolonial Feminism would argue that debunking heteronormative gender roles, patriarchy, and white supremacy has shaped Autonomous WOC decisions to not to marry or have children. They have used the system of education, once the underpinning of keeping Black and women of color separate and not equal, to gain the knowledge and skills necessary to achieve economic independence from patriarchal family structures that would mandate their subservience (Davis 1983). Autonomous WOC can then shape their identity from their own experiences to construct their sense of self and positionality outside the systems of marriage, coloniality and white supremacy (Lugones 2010). They are women who have what Lugones (2020) calls “fulfilled the possibility.” Autonomous WOC follow their lead instead of deferring to a husband’s decisions. They question institutions of power that would restrict their choices (Collins 2000). They decided that marriage and motherhood were not their calling. However, they are not throwing bricks in windows. They are taking those bricks to build their own house.

4.6 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I establish that the women in my study are not afraid to be alone or to live alone. Autonomous WOC have found power in their ability to be self-sufficient. These women

have assembled the resources they used to build their model of success and happiness. Furthermore, I discuss how Autonomous WOC's emotional labor is expended as they maneuver through the constraints and boundaries of the institutions of the family, education, and work. My data establish how Autonomous WOC negotiated life by challenging normative gender roles, pursuing educational opportunities, and financial independence. As children, these women frequently observed institutions that did not serve their mothers, siblings, and themselves well. Autonomous WOC spoke of financial hardships, feelings of isolation, and emotional traumas. Therefore, my research intersects race, gender, and class in discussing how these women have challenged traditional patterns and resisted oppressive social arrangements.

Sociologists have often situated the concept of individualism within a Western ideology that prioritizes the individual over the collective (Davis 1983). This system of individualism makes each person accountable for their own well-being and the state is alleviated of any responsibility under neoliberal capitalism (Harvey 2020). However, Autonomous WOC are not individualistic in this sense. During their developmental years, some of the women had unstable family dynamics, while others had overprotective parents. Therefore, Autonomous WOC find it uncomfortable to be dependent on others, and they prefer to depend on the person they trust the most – themselves. They place a high value on self-sufficiency and self-reliance as a form of protection against the social institutions they recognize were not designed to work for them and, in fact, often work against them. Still, they also remain committed to their chosen communities.

Most Autonomous WOC realized from a young age that a heteronormative family structure was not going to be a part of their lives. Although they acknowledge the difficulties and discrimination for WOC within institutions such as work and education, they have been able to utilize these systems to attain more self-sufficiency. Their recognition that institutions like the

education system are built on white capitalist and colonial principles is reflected in previous research that found WOC develop a distrust of social institutions and their agents due to inequitable treatment (Collins 1990). Autonomous WOC are able to sufficiently navigate the systems of education and work to facilitate an independent life. One way in which they do this is by seeking unconventional career paths. They often work independently, remotely, or have jobs that allow for more freedom of time in their scheduling. Their strategy of leveraging some colonial institutions (education, work) to free themselves from others (family, motherhood) denotes micro forms of everyday resistance. This finding raises an important empirical question that future research should explore: When the institutions of education and work have long been shown to disadvantage WOC, how do these women harness these institutions to their advantage, becoming exceptions to the rule?

These WOC are leading their caravan over dangerous ground and paying an extra emotional toll tax along the way. Autonomous WOC may not be the Black women who worked as domestic workers for white families in the 1950s and 1960s, who were exposed to racist ideology on a daily basis. Nevertheless, they are women who have felt the discomfort of living in a world that openly campaigns for their suppression, and this knowledge has shaped their experiences and informed their decisions about family, education, and work.

CHAPTER 5: LOVE, IDENTITY AND RELATIONSHIPS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Fewer Americans are marrying today, with forty-five percent of adults not married, and that percentage is even higher for African Americans (Tumin and Zhen 2018; DeLoach McCutcheon et al. 2021). DeLoach McCutcheon et al. (2021) state that little is known about the socialization processes that shape women's lives outside the context of heteronormative romantic love and marriage. This chapter contributes to the small but growing knowledge about these social processes by describing the experiences and understandings of love and sexuality among Autonomous WOC. These women are financially independent and their successes come from the public sphere instead of the domestic sphere. Autonomous WOC are not planning a wedding but thinking of their next adventure. They live not under woeful solitary confinement but with enthusiasm. Autonomous WOC are not a hostage to the whims of romantic love, and that has allowed them to expand their ideas of what life can offer and what they want in return.

In this chapter, I discuss how the culture of love in North America is interconnected to heteronormative structures such as heterosexuality, marriage, and Christianity. I move from these discussions to examine how Autonomous WOC are challenging these heteronormative arrangements by remaining never-married single, and how they are able to establish their identity by releasing themselves from the pressures of participating in romantic relationships and dating. Autonomous WOC have lived in between the lines of conformity and rebellion meaning they are able to conform to social norms when necessary and also exempt themselves from social and cultural expectations when possible. They see a way out of the social constructs through a form of independence I call the Feminization of freedom, a reclaiming of freedom from social expectations and conventions. This newfound freedom allows them to spend their time on

individual interests such as travel. They have also prioritized their health and happiness. They do not center romantic love but have meaningful connections to people in their lives. Autonomous WOC are creating new pathways to happier and healthier lives surrounded by community and individualized purpose.

The decision to forego the possible benefits of marriage and the social respectability of motherhood makes Autonomous WOC a group worthy of study from a feminist standpoint perspective. Heteronormative social structures are the instruments that maintain inequality which results in group creation. Therefore, my study is not about individual experiences but how a shared social positionality shapes WOC's experiences similarly. Collins (1997) maintains that the ideology of standpoint refers not to an individual's viewpoint but to a group's historically shared experiences.

The findings in this chapter detail how Autonomous WOC have a unique position in their shared experiences of living outside the heteronormative standards of romantic love and dating experiences for women. Although they have different views on dating and sexuality, with some Autonomous WOC enjoying dating while others do not, and some enjoy having sexual relationships whereas others have no interest, they are all undoubtedly on the boundaries of cultural and social norms.

5.2 CULTURAL AND SOCIAL EXPECTATIONS

This section establishes my participant's understanding of the cultural and social standards for women in order for them to fulfill the heteronormative benchmarks of marriage, dating, and sexual behavior.

5.2.1 *Heteronormative Standards and Experiences*

Ingraham (1999), Swidler (2001), and Wolkomir (2009) have all studied love and analyzed how our romanticism of heterosexual marriage has impacted all relationships and arrangements. Swidler (2001) states, with the culture of love, that love is rooted in the structure of marriage. As the institution of marriage is the primary model for love relationships, the pressure to connect love, marriage, and sex is tangible. Sierra articulated her understanding of this pressure to adapt to these heteronormative models:

> I think the thing that has evolved is my understanding of how much like socialization in the sense of like, broad sort of mainstream US cultural socialization tries to orient people towards romantic relationship being the centerpiece of their life. *Sierra, 42*

Monogamy and romantic fairytales do not entice everyone. The women in my study are not afraid to go against convention and style their own relationships, but that does not mean they do not feel the pressure to do so. They have had examples of women in their lives who remained single and thrived, and they have experienced abusive and unstable relationships in their family of origin. Therefore, they have had role models of both good/bad relationships and successful singlehood. These experiences have informed their adult possibilities and decisions. Eartha was not looking for the *one*. In fact, she wasn't even looking for one partner:

> And so, I've been in non, non-monogamous relationships for most of my adult life. And I really prefer that especially as somebody who really values my independence and spends a lot of time home alone, by choice. Having to be the sole need of like entertainment or companionship for any one person ... a very equal exchange of finding the relationship type that works for you in that particular person, and not having to fit all of your relationships into the specific mold of what our society says a relationship should look like. *Eartha, 40*

Love can be a great experience and many of the women said they enjoy romance, but what makes them different is they are not basing the foundation of their life on a romantic relationship. Feminists have focused on gender as the genesis of discussions about sexuality,

race, class, and inequality (Davis 1983; Collins 1990). The model of compulsory heterosexuality has been a driving force in women's lives (Thorne 1982). It also places heterosexual romantic relationships at the center of normative adult relationships (Butler 1993; Sharp and Ganong 2011). Women like Gertrude talked about her feelings about love and romance changing as she became older:

> I think there was definitely the like, someday I'm gonna get married right? There was a whole kind of like, and there's gonna be a dress and it's gonna be a wedding and it's gonna be great and we're gonna have the daddy-daughter dance. And then the like older I got and the more I like, found myself in like the dating world... like, I just didn't want to pursue it, right? Like I just wasn't interested in like, making all the compromises that it would take to create a relationship with someone to then be like to just head down that path, right? *Gertrude, 47*

Gertrude thought she would marry but then found that she was not interested in dating or marriage. Ingraham (2008) argues that the institution of heterosexuality is organized around the concept of gender, and gender sets the norm for all male/female relationships. Heterogender refers to the norm in relationships. Therefore, with the centering of heterosexual marriage and heterogender relationships, romantic love and the want of romantic partners are prolific throughout American culture from our movies, advertisements, music and children's toys. Alana experienced being labeled the "failed daughter" and dislikes that she is introduced by her mother to other family members by her marital status first. She wants to be seen as more than this and to be appreciated for her personhood and not whether she is married or a mother:

> I'm like the failed, failed daughter. Because even with like talking to relatives and stuff, like the first thing relatives, especially like, relatives abroad will ask is ... how's your family? Oh, you know, good. And my mom, the first thing she'll say is, you know, my boys are married and have kids, my one of my girls is too but one of them, you know, still hasn't. Like, that's how it's presented before anything else before Oh, she's got a Master's degree. And she's working on her PhD and takes care of me every day, like before any of that, that sometimes that ends anyway. It's always about the marital status first. *Alana, 41*

Unlike Gertrude, it was important for Louise to be in a relationship. She referred to it as being "my ultimate goal. That was the one thing I wanted more than anything else... Yeah, if you know, I am not that person that says Oh, I'm so glad to be single. I love it. I have accepted it. And I've had to go through mental counseling to accept it." However, she said she had to fire two therapists who encouraged her to continue dating, even though she wanted to work on being happy with her life as it was and not what a partner could bring to it:

> The hardest problem I had was seeing counselors who did not want to help me accept it. They wanted me to …Well, you know, what, if you, why don't you go out a little bit, you know, if you go and put a profile. *Louise, 44*

It was not unusual for Autonomous WOC to have people in their lives who do not accept their single status, as marriage is the mainstage for sociosexual relationships – a relationship that reproduces and interlocks the current gender dynamics of what are appropriate behaviors for men and women (Wolkomir 2009). Whereas some Autonomous WOC were more comfortable with their single status than others, the women universally spoke about how family members and even strangers would ask about their relationship status and future. Sasha relayed a story of an Uber driving asking her why she isn't married yet:

> I think that it's also an assumption that if you're not married, and if you're not having you don't have any kids that you just haven't yet. It's not a conscious decision. It's just like, oh, what's wrong with you? I had to tell my Uber driver the other day... Oh, I'm sorry. I'm so I'm like, What? No, you and you are now invested in like my relationship status, now come on. *Sasha, 42*

This quote signifies how women are more likely to be asked about their marital status in the framing of why were they not off the market. This framing can cause feelings of shame and insecurity for some women. Marriage is a heteronormative invention that creates a space in which sex is acceptable, and yet, these women are finding sexual avenues outside of these

prescribed relationships. Mia thinks sexuality and gender are more fluid, and that a person's desires can fluctuate throughout their lives:

> Very fluid and with gender, both gender and sexuality, I think people can choose at different points in their life, what they're feeling like. I don't think people should be held in these social constructs for their entire lives, you know. *Mia, 41*

As detailed in the previous chapter, in heteronormative relationships, women are often taught to be a good wife or a good woman. They must be nurturers and caregivers to others, as women, and men are socialized to believe that the social systems of heterosexuality and patriarchy are normal and natural (Arvin, Tuck, and Morrill 2013). However, Daria stated she was not interested in being a caretaker:

> I didn't get to move out until I could find a decent job. And that was tough to do, because I was chained to the house. I guess part of me is concerned that if I marry someone, and he gets sick, I'm going to be chained to that too. Yeah, that could be a thing. So having been made to help care for someone I didn't exactly plan on makes me even more, not so much into the whole marriage thing. Because if he's my husband, I'm obligated to take care of him and look after him, or visit him. And I think I've had enough of that for one lifetime. And so, you know, my I don't want to go through that again. So not getting married, so I don't have to worry about. *Daria, 56*

Daria related a story about her uncle having a major stroke. Her mother moved him into their house because he could not care for himself. Daria was forty then and felt having to help take care of her uncle was keeping her in her mother's house. Daria knew that she would be considered a horrible person if she said she did not want to help. Daria believed her uncle should have been in a home to help with long-term care, and taking care of him in their home held her back from leaving. This situation made Daria realize she did not want to be a caretaker for a partner.

Willie was in her thirties when she realized that dating as a Black woman may be problematic in the city she was living because of the lack of single Black men (Collins 1990). She considered that she may never marry. Willie was reading bell hooks and other books about

feminism and love, which caused her to think about what she wanted. Willie was coming to terms with what the social expectations were for her were not aligned with her desires for her future and what she wanted out of a relationship. She did not want to be a partner's assistant and arrange her life around someone else's schedule. Willie's perceptions of what a relationship would be like for her were not appealing. Therefore, she started thinking about what she was pursuing:

> How we can try to really think about, you know, like, is what we're pursuing, really love, or is it this patriarchal thing. And then I had also come across, like Bella DePaulo's work about, like, the singlism. And one of the things or I guess a number of revelations that came about was part of the issues that had come up again and again, in several of the relationships that I had had is that I really did value my independence. And that I wasn't interested in like organizing my partner's life in a way that I think women are oftentimes expected to and so there was just like a lot of things that I was like, I'm just really not interested in doing that. *Willie, 45*

Some of the women discussed how other heteronormative structures, such as the Catholic Church, have had an impact on relationship decisions and choices. Some of the women were raised Catholic and there is an expectation to marry and procreate to appease, not only your family, but God. Byrne (2003) argues that living as a single woman is an act of political and ideological resistance. By maintaining an autonomous self-identity, single women challenge prevailing social identities such as wives and mothers. Dora used to attend church and felt good about being part of that community, but then COVID-19 forced churches to close. So, Dora started praying on her own:

> I started praying and, you know, like doing things on my own, like praying, I meditate every day. So, like doing my prayers, it just felt more personal, I feel more spiritual now without having the structure of religion. But more so on my own. And then, you know, obviously, I started really questioning the church and, you know, they're still sexual abuse cases, the residency school, you know, remains of children that they've, they're finding Pope Francis saying that, you know, women who choose pets are selfish. It's just one thing after another. I, I can't support that. I mean, it's not I can't say I'm pro that I'm a feminist and I'm a child advocate and then practice Catholicism. It just doesn't feel right. *Dora, 47*

Dora felt she could no longer be a Catholic, follow the doctrine of church, and also be a feminist. Lugones (2010) argues that the European, bourgeois, colonial, and modern man created a public life led by his rule to insert a heterosexual and Christian mindset, which aided and abetted the structure of patriarchy. The social structures and procedures that men dominated led to the system of patriarchy, which paved the way for the continual subjugation of women (Walby 1989). Erica was also raised in the Catholic Church and spoke of her experience and with the expectations of marriage:

> So, I think in high school, I started going...it was a youth group at a church at a Catholic Church. Right. So yes, so there was the idea of like, getting married, having a family, too, cuz that's kind of like what you do in life, right? And the church says like that, that's what you do. So, I think in my 20s, I was looking to get married, looking to fall in love, but always like doing it the right way. Right. And so that means like, getting married in the church, then having a family. *Erica, 43*

Erica believed that she would be married if it was God's will. Therefore, she has not consciously decided not to marry because even today, Erica believes that if God sends her the right person, she is open to marriage. However, now she believes that a husband would have to add value to her life. Lala talked about leaving the Church. She was raised as a Christian and knew Christianity heavily emphasized women to marry. As her views on marriage changed, so did her views on the Church. She ended up leaving the Church and does not ascribe to any particular religion now. However, Lala says she is spiritual:

> I'm happy where I'm at now with that, but that released a lot of obligation to get married. So, then I was able to really kind of figure out like, that was phase one because it's always been dictated how I'm supposed to go about this. So that's why, again, why the freedom plays and huge, huge, huge and all of that, because even freeing my mind has just made everything open up the possibilities of what I could have for my life. *Lala, 40*

As Engels (1884/1972) has connected a system of private property, monogamy, marriage, and Christianity to the subjugation of women by men, the women in my study who grew up

within a religious doctrine started to question the role religion had in their lives, and if Catholicism could coexist with how they wanted to live their lives. Autonomous WOC question the heteronormative structures in their lives and what purpose they serve. Swidler (2001) claims that the culture of love is necessary to provide hope that adult, loving relationships are possible, and without the culture of love, people would not aim to fulfill the expectations of lifelong relationships. People would have relationships, lovers, and children, but they would not feel beholden to make marriages work.

Autonomous WOC are not beholden to a marriage or children, but they do find meaning in platonic relationships such as friendships. Some Autonomous WOC also enjoy dating, romance, and sex but their lives are not centered around only these romantic relationships. Autonomous WOC have meaningful friendships and often spend time with their parents, siblings, and nieces and nephews. They are not fearful of relationships or intimacy; however, they are more particular in how and with whom they spend their time because they do not mind being alone. In fact, they often enjoy their own company over the company of others.

5.2.2 *Romantic Love and Dating*

Love is supposed to keep heterosexual relationships together. However, most of the women in my study did not ascribe to this mythology, and dating does not always have the same objective for them. Because Autonomous WOC can be the odd woman out in social settings and family engagements, they can observe social relationships in ways others may not. They have a distinctive viewpoint of how society is structured around heteronormative relationships and how persons are treated who do not fit that mold. However, not all the women in my study felt the same way about dating and intimacy.

For some Autonomous WOC, dating is a way to get to know people, others see it as an avenue to sexual activity, and for some women, dating has become more a burden than a desire. The majority of women in my study self-reported as heterosexual. However, there was a variation in sexual behavior from being sexually active, celibate by circumstance, and asexual. Four participants identified as bisexual or queer. Geraldine stated that she felt it was a disservice to yourself as a woman to center your life around romance over all other relationships:

> But even in the best circumstances, when those romantic relationships work out, I feel like as a woman, you are doing yourself a great disservice if you set your romantic relationships with men, over the myriad of other interpersonal issues, dealing with family, with friends, etc. *Geraldine, 46*

Geraldine stated she always felt strange because she was not interested in relationships. She had good relationships with men, and she did not have any traumatic relationships or dating experiences. However, she was not that interested in dating. Geraldine stated she found dating tedious and did not feel like putting effort into it. Geraldine is not opposed to romantic relationships, but she does not place them ahead of other connections in her life. Nikka spoke about her strict upbringing and her inability to date in high school. She was allowed to have a boyfriend when she turned sixteen. However, even after Nikka turned sixteen, she felt she had to sneak around to date:

> I didn't even really bring any guys home like that, because I feared, you know, her what her reaction would be, um, even in college, like, right when I was, you know, I was dating guys. She was like, she didn't want to meet them... My mom was, like, in my mom and my brothers. They both didn't embrace the fact of their little sister and their young daughter and her baby girl dating a guy. Like that was never. That was never something that I was comfortable with doing inside of my family structure at all. *Nikka, 41*

Nikka says she still doesn't feel comfortable bring men home to meet her family, but that she does not date much so it is not an issue for her. Nikka wonders if her teenage experiences of not being allowed to date has impacted her dating life as an adult. Nancy talked about not being

in a relationship just to be in a relationship. In order for her to even consider a partnership, it would have to be a situation that enriched her life in some way:

> And I think for me, it's more about making sure that I have, that I'm in a relationship that is healthy, fruitful, and you know, a good partner. Because outside of that, my life is pretty awesome and pretty rich. And so that has shifted, you know, how I approached dating. *Nancy, 44*

These women do not have perfect lives, but they are not dating with the desire to redesign their lives either. They are looking for someone who can add something positive to their already full life. Louise addressed how the pursuit of love can be self-destructive and she did not want to continue harming herself:

> I probably went on every single dating app. It just, it just never worked. Never worked. And I got tired of that constant disappointment, because you don't feel good about yourself when things don't work out, you put all this work in ... So, it was just I just I can't I can't keep doing this to myself. *Louise, 44*

Louise said she was mentally exhausted from dating. When Louise was in her twenties, she used to date for the purpose of finding a husband. Every date would be an audition for a husband. Louise later found a therapist who helped her realize she was putting too much energy into each relationship that when the relationship did not work out, she felt like she was losing her future marriage – family – home. When Louise decided that dating was more harmful than heartening, she made the decision to focus on what made her happy. She knew the fantasy of a handsome prince galloping on his equally handsome horse to sweep you off your feet, and solve all your problems was a bourgeoisie fairytale. However, not every woman is interested in that fairytale. Nancy never saw marriage as a priority for her:

> No, marriage was never a priority for me ... Did I make decisions right with the expectation right, that marriage would happen? And the answer's no, I think my priority was always centered on ... just more about the, the quality of the life that I wanted to live. And I think I've made decisions based on does this align with the lifestyle and the life that I want to have for myself. But I've never thought about, you know, marriage as a priority. *Nancy, 44*

For women like Nancy, marriage was never a priority. Autonomous WOC may not want the perceived confines of marriage, but some women still want love and romance (Taylor 2012; McRobbie 2009). Jackie, for example, was able to juggle multiple dating partners:

> It's like, all bets are off. Like, I'm totally fine dating, like, I just my maximum is probably like, four or five, because after that, it just gets confusing. Ideally, it's like three, but for some reason, that seems to be a magic number for me, like I feel it's really nice to have like three guys around. *Jackie, 43*

Jackie enjoys dating and dating multiple people at the same time. Jackie's views are in line with modern love relationships being about personal choice and motivations instead of social obligations such as ending family feuds, uniting alliances, or financial advancement for a community (Swidler 2001). Ingraham (2008) recognizes an imaginary form of romance. She describes this as an illusion that is focused on heterosexual imagery and is recreated through romantic mythology. This mythology helps to create gender and normalizes heterosexual relationships (Wolkomir 2009). However, women can now seek out a romantic relationship without relenting to the social pressures of marriage:

> I don't go out looking for romance. But if love knocks at my door, and I'll give it a chance, you could come in and visit for a while. We'll see where it goes. *Sankofa, 61*

Sankofa is open to having love in her life, but she is not sure if she wants it to visit, or move in. Therefore, she is not beholden to a particular practice of romantic love, and is open to exploring new configurations of relationships. Mina is also open to romance, and unlike Sankofa, she longs for a romantic partner in her life:

> The thing about my life that I am saddest about...Um, but like I do, okay without it, right? Like I'm not like wandering around sad and crying all of the time or anything. But I think it's very important and it's something that I don't have. *Mina, 44*

Not all single women are happy about being single and although Mina does lament the absence of a romantic partner in her life, the overall sentiment of my participants is that the

pursuit of love has become more of a problem than a pleasure. They discussed their disappointments in dating, such as the uncertainty of online dating, men who lie to them, the fear of rejection, and the overall energy it takes to be on the dating market. Autonomous WOC decided their time was better served elsewhere.

Coontz (2016) reasons that the gender divisions that led to the idealization of romance for women created the circumstances that men could be more angry or violent toward women who do not meet that ideal. Although none of the women in my study reported they were in physically abusive relationships, some spoke of emotional abuse and the emotional toil of dating. Jackie stated that romantic love is important "but not so important that I'm gonna hurt myself to do." Natasha Fatale, who is Hindu and Indian, said she does not date Indian men. She said that in her culture, men are thought to always be right, and it is the role of women to take care of the men. She does have a good and loving relationship with her dad and said that if she were to marry, she would not change her last name, out of respect for her father. Natasha Fatale stated that her mother was supportive of her not dating Indian men because the women she knew who had dated Indian men were not happy:

> The woman must take care of the man and I've seen a bad turn, bad for a lot of women. And none of those women seem happy. And so, I'm just like, if you don't seem happy, I'm not doing that. *Natasha Fatale, 46*

Natasha Fatale comes from a culture where women are taught to care for the men. However, she saw happiness as the most critical relationship outcome and if a relationship did not make her happy she was not interested in it. Flor addressed how she felt about abusive partners and emphatically stated she would not be in a physically abusive relationship:

> If you mistreat me, or if you harm me, I'm not going to be with you. Me. You know, I don't. I know a lot of women do. But I'm, I don't tolerate that. I've never been in a relationship like that. Never will. can't even imagine it. Right. So, there are conditions to love and to a partnership like that. *Flor, 42*

Although some of the women spoke of emotional abuse in their relationships and how they had to delineate boundaries with their partners or end the relationship. Autonomous WOC did not avoid relationships because they were afraid of being abused, but rather, they had created lives in which romantic relationships were not the main focus, and they can be more discerning with whom they share their lives. Autonomous WOC have other interests and goals that have taken precedence over finding a partner. Similarly, these women do not see their sexual behavior as being bound to the sole purpose of finding a mate. WOC have often been barred from enjoying the freedom to live their lives according to their dictates. Although there have always been childfree, never-married women throughout history, the Autonomous WOC in my study are keenly aware of their unique positionality. They are women who have remained free from the heteronormative obligations to a husband or children, and they are also women who have not had the privileges of some of their white counterparts. In addition, these women are often ignored in social settings, offering them a better vantage point to observe and critique social structures and processes (Cooper 1892/2017).

5.2.3 *Sexual Experiences*

There was no consensus among the women about their sexual behavior. While some women were sexually active and reported enjoying sex either alone or with a partner, some of my participants were celibate or asexual. Many of the women spoke about being "celibate by circumstance" or sexually inactive due to COVID-19. My interviews took place in 2022 during the COVID-19 pandemic where people had already been working from home and isolating for approximately two years. Some of the women spoke with excitement about getting back "out there" and finding sexual partners again. Two of the women in my study were virgins. Brandy,

who is forty-one, talked about her decision to remain a virgin and about sex being associated with power:

> So I'm a virgin. And for me, that was a very intentional choice. It was on purpose. I think sex is very powerful. I think people have the right to do whatever they'd like to do. But the reason I've chosen initially to abstain was connected to the word like I need to be married. The other part of it is the big part of it. It's powerful. Like it is powerful. I have seen the impact of sex on so many people I know. And they had sex with folks that they can't stand ... But I was like, no, if I ever choose to do that, and, and I see how powerful it is, oh, no, somebody but somebody who deserves that part of me. *Brandy, 41*

Brandy believed that her body was sacred and she was not willing to share it with anyone. However, there was not a consensus on this issue. Most Autonomous WOC did not share Brandy's view on sex and sexuality. Some were able to enjoy having a sexual relationship without having a romantic relationship. For example, Willie stated that she was not interested in dating online but that she wanted to find a sexual partner. "I want to find a partner...it would be nice to have like some, like sexual partner, but not like romantic partner." Sasha can separate sex and love and does not think the two need to be found in the same relationship:

> I love sex. And so, I try to have as much as possible. So, you know, sometimes that means dating one person, sometimes that means, you know, dating around. Right now, I'm dating one person, and it's getting more boring. So, we'll see how long that lasts. But, yeah, I mean, I think I've always had an active sex life. I lost my virginity at a really young age, younger than I would have liked. But, you know, I don't know, I never really saw the stigma around sex. I also didn't necessarily make the connection between sex and love. And so, I can have sex and not worry about relationships, because I don't think you need them to have what you need to have one with the other. *Sasha, 42*

She worries about getting bored with one person because Sasha is not dating to find a marriage partner, and she does not need to be married to financially support herself. Therefore, she is able to separate sex and love from marriage. Geraldine is concerned about finding a male sexual partner as she grows older:

> I think my therapist called it being touched hungry, is something that I experience. So even if I don't have the deepest, this is my soulmate connection with a man, it would be very difficult for me not to have that option for a long period of time. And that's the one thing I said that it concerns me as I grow older, is if I don't have someone who's already in my pocket, in a sense, the older you get, the less attractive you become to men. So having a start off with finding a lover who you respect and care about, and vice versa, when you're 55 and 60 might be harder. And that does concern me. *Geraldine, 46*

Geraldine is speaking to how race, gender and age intersect to make dating more challenging for women of color, especially for Black women who want to date Black men because there are more Black eligible women than Black eligible men (Collins 2000). As she gets older, finding a male intimate partner will be more difficult in a patriarchal society that values youth. Dora also thinks sexual satisfaction is important, but she does not think women need to be in a relationship to find sexual gratification:

> I think sexual satisfaction is important, whether you're in a relationship or not, so I take care of myself. Um, I do miss the companionship piece, you know, and the affection piece. And the love, obviously. So yeah, that's why, you know, I, like I said, I'm, I'm open to it, and at some point, I will actively pursue that again. But I think women should own their sexuality. *Dora, 47*

Autonomous WOC are varied in their attitudes about sexuality, with some women being very comfortable and expressing their ideas of how sex and sexuality impact their lives. Jackie said she was not going to deprive herself of sex just because she is single:

> I'm a grown person and I like what I like, and I will engage with you, if I feel as though I would like to engage with you in that way. And if you want to come along on the journey, then fine. Um, but I'm not. I decided a long time. You know, just because I'm, you know, single or whatever, I'm not gonna, you know, deprive myself of that. Um, so, it's, it's, it's, it's good *Jackie, 43*

Whereas Jackie enjoys having a sexual partner on her terms, Lourdes doesn’t long for an active sex life with a partner. Like with other aspects of her life, she is content with satisfying her own needs:

> If by active sex life you mean having sex with a man on a regular basis, it is not important. And like it's again another it's a joke with my life, heterosexual, like, how do you I was like, if I waited until I was 29 to have sex, I really don't care. I am a person who's driven by life of the mind. And like, my argument is, is most people can take care of their orgasms better by themselves than with a partner. So, like, if that's what I'm looking for, there are ways around this. *Lourdes, 38*

Lourdes does occasionally have sex with men, but it is not important to her. She is challenging heteronormativity in that she decides if and when she wants to engage with another person in a sexual context. Lala enjoys having sex, but she also does not want to be responsible for the sexual satisfaction of another person. Lala is satisfied with her sex life, which includes solo sex and sex with a partner. She does not prefer monogamous relationships and does not want to be beholden to anyone else's desires. Lala wants to be able to do what she wants with whom she wants and not feel guilty about that. Although Lala enjoys sex with a partner, she also stated that she does not have to have it every day:

> I'm not going to be everything you want or need sexually. Um, I don't want to be responsible for that. So, at the end of the day, like when he says some of this stuff, and I'm like, that sounds like a personal problem. If you haven't. You either wait till I want to do something, or maybe something your way, but I'm not keeping you from, from doing anything. And that's so liberating. *Lala, 40*

Mina talked about trusting other people being difficult for her, and if trust is not present in a relationship, sex is not something that is fulfilling. Mina is interested in having an active sex life only if it is connected to an active romantic life. For Mina, trust, romance, and sex need to be connected, and trust is the more important of the three. She did try more casual sexual relationships, but they were not satisfying because Mina finds it difficult to separate romance from sex:

> So, I guess I have a hard time imagining being with somebody who I trusted enough to have a satisfying sex life and not falling for them. And so that seems potentially like a bad idea to me if that's like part of the contract, right. But for me, I have, if I don't trust a person, I have a hard time relaxing enough to enjoy the sex and so like, it just seems like a lot of risk for less fun. *Mina, 44*

The women in the study have different views about sexuality and what a good sex life looks like. However, what does unite Autonomous WOC is they are exploring their sexuality for their own purposes. Because not all Autonomous WOC associate love with sexual behavior, they are open to having sexual relationships without the conventions of monogamy or intimacy. They do not feel guilty that they are having premarital sex because they do not ascribe to the idea of pre and post-marriage. Their lives are absent of marriage, so sex becomes more about their comfort and pleasure instead of a social arrangement.

Also, for those Autonomous WOC who do want monogamy with a sexual partner, they are more concerned with trust and not an engagement ring. The Autonomous WOC who are not sexually active are free to be celibate without having to modify their desires or behaviors to the wishes of a partner. Eartha talked about the importance of having a good sexual relationship with herself:

> It's really important to me. It's, uh, you know, I am a big, I like sex, I enjoy sex. And, but I'm also like, if I don't have a partner, I'm also very open to like, I have vibrators. I go to sex toy stores. And so having a good sexual relationship with myself is also important. And, you know, sex? I think it's yeah, it's a good it's a wonderful expression of pleasure and everyone should have access to good sex including me whether or not you have a partner. *Eartha, 40*

As romantic relationships were not the focus of the women I interviewed, sexuality was also not important for most of the women. Although some reported being sexually active, most spoke of sex with a partner as being something that is nice but not necessary to have a fulfilled life. When sex is disconnected from marriage or motherhood, women are able to play within a space of sexual freedom, and while some will choose to play with others, some will prefer solo playdates.

5.3 CONFORMITY AND IDENTITY

In this section, I discuss the pushes and pulls toward conformity and rebellion for Autonomous WOC and how they move through the choppy waters of social expectations. The women in my study do not define themselves, plan their futures, or frame their successes based on their relationship status. Autonomous WOC do not derive their validation or purpose in being a wife or a mother. There is variation in how meaningful romantic relationships are to them, but Autonomous WOC are overwhelmingly not the women you see in romantic comedies searching for their Mr. Right.

5.3.1 *Cultural Representations of Single Women*

In this section, I detail how Autonomous WOC have a social identity rooted in protective individualism, allowing them to pursue their own interests. Autonomous WOC feel pressure to conform to heteronormative and social standards from their communities, families, and the media to make romantic love the center of their lives. I examine how Autonomous WOC talk about relationships and how their lives are often in conflict with the cultural narrative of single women. Autonomous WOC are not the quintessential singleton that Bridget Jones' Diary made famous. They are not wailing about their singleness and wandering the city, hoping to find the one. Most the women I interviewed do not cry to their friends about when "will it be my turn" or "what is wrong with me?" Although some Autonomous WOC thought they would marry and are still open to marriage, they are not waiting to live their life until they have a partner. Others had relationships that they thought would be lifelong, but when those relationships ended, they found the breakups painful they did not want to open themselves up to that kind of pain again.

Geraldine, at forty-six, realized that she was never really that interested in romantic love. "So yeah, it's never been something that I truly have wanted, in a very quiet way, just never

really wanted it." Autonomous WOC go to dinner alone, go on vacation alone, buy their own homes, and decide with whom to spend their time. Their time is precious, and they prefer to spend it in their own company. Maria spoke of not being what men want and also being happy with who she is, and she saw no reason to change:

> One of the things I always say about me not getting along with men, is that I don't I don't fit into the what I consider the triad of things that men want... And I always say, I'm not skinny, white and helpless. And as long as that's what men want, then I'm just going to do my own thing because I'm not trying to be either any of those things. Obviously one of those things I'm never going to be but honestly, none of those things will I ever be and I'm not going to change myself. For the sake of just getting a man who's probably going to be useless anyway. Like, like I'm kind of, I guess I'm a little too content with who I am to care. *Maria, 47*

Maria acknowledged that she is not "skinny, white and helpless," and she was never going to conform to what the traditional white model of beauty. Therefore, instead of trying to fit a model that was not made for her, Maria decided to be satisfied with herself. Black women and women of color have the pressure of other women to be attractive and youthful. However, they have the extra burden of conforming to a standard of beauty that is fixated on white criteria of beauty, which often means lighter hair, skin, and eyes. When members of society frequently hold you to a standard of beauty that you cannot meet, it can have a negative impact on your identity. Autonomous WOC like Maria have decided not to spend their time, money, or energy on trying to conform to a standard of beauty to be more attractive to a dating pool.

Brandy also realized she never had a strong desire for a romantic relationship. She was following the predetermined path of heteronormative relationships until she recognized that she really didn't want one:

> Honestly, I think I think I forced myself to desire that, because that's what I thought I was supposed to desire. And so, I would say yes, short answer is yes. There have been some times where I did desire that but I had to look back and say, what's the desire really from me? Or was it a desire that I thought I had to have? *Brandy, 41*

Brandy not only questions the purpose of heteronormative relationships but also if she ever really wanted to be in one at all. Sam's mother was mentally ill and Sam did not have a stable upbringing. She thought having a romantic partner would bring her security and stability. Sam stated she had self-worth issues and would cling to a relationship once she had one. Sam is working on healing and has a healthier view of relationships. Romantic love is still important to her, and she would like it in her life, but only if it is a nourishing relationship. Sam also recognized that she was making concessions to be in a relationship:

> And I don't see myself ever having children. I don't see myself ever getting married. And I hope that I stopped making so much of what I want in my life open for compromise, just to be with someone because I want relations. *Sam*, *38*

Swidler (2001) argues that love may not be an all-consuming emotional rollercoaster for everyone. Sankofa likes to get up and have a nice cup of coffee. She is not sociable and would not have many people at her house. On a regular Saturday, she sits on her sofa surrounded by books and magazines. Sankofa refers to them as her pretty magazines with pretty pictures of homes. Sankofa was raised by her grandmother, and her grandmother was a seamstress. So, Sankofa carries on that legacy by sewing and doing crafts, crocheting, and knitting. She also likes to hang out with her animals and talk on the phone with friends. Sankofa's life is not less-lived because she does not have a romantic partner. The women in my study, like Sankofa, Lala and Dora did not want to center their lives around romantic love, but they still found it challenging to break from tradition. Lala understood that as a woman, she was socialized to want romantic relationships, even when she knew she was not interested in them:

> Well, growing up just that same conditioning, that you got to get married, you're going to get married, you're going to have this whole life, um, made romantic relationships, like the constant undercurrent of being a woman is like, Okay, we've got to find the one. *Lala, 40*

Lala also stated that she did not mind being single:

> I remember one of my friends from college... She said, you're one of the most, you're the most comfortable woman being single that I know, or something to that effect. And because when I was when I had a boyfriend, that was cool, but when I didn't have a boyfriend, I was cool, too. And I enjoy dating. And that was fun. But I wasn't I never lamented the single part. But still also, assuming somewhere along the way here, I'm going to be married. *Lala, 40*

Lala has a nontraditional view of relationships. Lala said she did not want the "constraints and the restraints of traditional relationships." Lala did not think you had to be in a relationship to have sex, nor did you have to have one monogamous relationship at a time. She also does not think she should center a romantic relationship over her other friendships. Geraldine discussed how in movies and television you rarely see single women who are enjoying their lives:

> It's never about single being the destination and not the journey on what it looks like to be an older woman who will prefer not to live in a house with her man, and be married to him. She may have a boyfriend, sometimes she may not, but she's enjoying her life. And that is not the central relationship, I think is very intentional, we never see that - it's not an accident. *Geraldine, 46*

Popular cultural portrayals of single women are often of women who are unsatisfied in their singleness and as women who are abdicating normative femininity (Taylor 2012). Amanda does not live a normative feminine life, as she lives abroad and will move from country to country every three to six months. The thought of sharing her life and having to consult with someone before making plans was not appealing to her:

> Because I've been single for seven years now, as the longest I've been single. Um, it's actually the most-happiest I've ever been. So, the idea of having to consult with someone, I don't know. You'd have to be an incredible guy. *Amanda, 40*

Amanda found that she is the happiest being single. Prince Charming is a fantasy, and these women live in reality. Autonomous WOC are no damsels in distress or Wonder Woman. Autonomous WOC are the narrators of their own stories. With the relentless stream of reality

television shows about finding love, such as Love Island, Love is Blind, The Bachelor, The Bachelorette, Love on the Spectrum, and Married at First Sight, I think it is not insignificant that all of the women in my study are not placing love at the center of their lives.

5.3.2 *Self-Identity, Social Identity and Protective Individualism*

Discussing self-identity and social identity has been associated with the discourse surrounding singleness (Byrne 2003; Brand-Winterstein and Manchik-Rimon 2014). There are complexities of self-identity and a social identity and how they are interconnected in studying Autonomous WOC. As self-identity refers to an individual's values and preferences and the characteristics that make them distinct, social identity refers to the traits we share with others (Byrne 2003). My use of Decolonial Feminism and intersectionality allows me to see how class, gender, race, sexuality, age, and marital status intersect to contribute to the marginalization of childfree, never-married single WOC (Few-Demo and Allen 2020). Autonomous WOC have similar self-identities and a shared social identity. This shared social identity of being childfree, never-married, and single is also the basis for their discrimination, and their similar self-identities provide insights into how they deal with the intersectional oppressions of racism, sexism, and classism that impact their lives (Crenshaw 1989).

Many describe themselves as sensitive, empathic, authentic, honest, funny, nerdy, opinionated, and independent. Daria said that she is "honest to my detriment." They prioritize their health, which includes engaging in nature, therapy, exercise, and performing activities that make them happy, such as taking walks, knitting, reading, going on vacations, and spending time with their pets. Sankofa works in a field that allows her to help other families, and she enjoys her work but also understands it comes at a cost for her:

> So, I'm 61 years old, I've had a lifetime to kind of know who I am and understand myself. I'm basically an introvert. But have this compelling me to work with other people to get things done. So yes, if I'm not careful, the it can be draining if I haven't, like fortified myself, but I'm always, you know, very clear about that possibility. But it is also very energizing, because fortunately for me, I get to work on things that I'm passionate about. So, the interaction is both necessary and uplifting, because I most often find myself in the company of other people who are also looking to make positive changes. So, it's very exciting most of the time, although I do have to take sufficient downtime to revive and regenerate myself. *Sankofa, 61*

I have found that the similar self-identities and a shared social identity of Autonomous WOC hold answers to how these women maneuver through their lives in all aspects, separate from their decisions about marriage and motherhood. Reynolds and Wetherell (2003) argue that singleness needs to be studied not only as a set of personal narratives, but also as a subjective position. As the participants described their behavior and lives in response to some of the interview questions, a common profile emerged. Overwhelmingly, the women were very introspective and had spent significant energy learning to accept themselves, many see a therapist, meditate or have sought spiritual guidance. Louise expressed her individualism in that she does not need to communicate with others as much as they do with her:

> I've just put so much energy on everybody else. And I'm just like, when they call or when I go over there. It's just a chore. Every single time that I talk to these people, it's just a chore. It's like, gosh, I just really don't, I don't mind talking on the phone, barely text, barely email. I just don't communicate with people. And I'm perfectly fine with that. But other people aren't. *Louise, 44*

As individualism is associated with a sense of personal uniqueness and privacy, the women in my study often spoke of how they spend their time and how it is important to them to live their lives based on a set of principles. Autonomous WOC choose to live a solo life. However, they do have meaningful relationships and are connected to their communities. Integrity and ethics are crucial to them, and they care about social justice issues. Many volunteer their time to community activities or work in a field that helps others. Geraldine cares about

being authentic. Geraldine says she does not care about luxury and hoity-toity things. She cares about comfort and wants a simple life. She is not that interested in social media and what are the latest trends:

> Authenticity being exactly who I say I am, while working towards exactly who I want to be. interconnectedness, I think just connected in solidarity with other humans again, even those who are not like me. Joy and happiness like a real sustainable, unshakable happiness. And again, always developing the courage to be as compassionate as possible, like a deep abiding compassion for the other humans. *Geraldine, 46*

Instead of looking for a partner, or a perfect job, or a new car Geraldine is looking for happiness. Mia states she is a very pragmatic person. Mia is also very direct and self-aware. She knows she can be viewed as difficult and can be too reactionary. Mia admits this has caused issues in her relationships, but she is also passionate about issues she cares about and has a good sense of humor. Mia also stated that authenticity was very important to her:

> Authenticity and honesty are really important to me. And that has a lot to do with my upbringing as well. If I even catch a whiff, that you might be on, inauthentic in some way, like I'm out. I don't have a ton of tolerance for stuff like that. *Mia, 41*

Mia does not have a tolerance for injustice. Similarly, Laury stated that one of her "core personality traits that's been with me for as long as I can remember is a general sense of fairness." The idea that there should be more honesty and integrity in relationships, both personally and professionally, was a frequent topic for Autonomous WOC. For Autonomous WOC, it is imperative that people are who they represent themselves to be. This is significant because some of these women have not been able to depend on their parental figures to care for them financially or emotionally; therefore, they have had to learn to care for themselves, and in doing so, they have learned to trust themselves. This also illustrates how privacy and individuality are integral to their sense of stability. Because of this need for personal space and

privacy, some of my participants said that the COVID-19 pandemic and the necessary lock-downs were not that difficult for them:

> My lifestyles really minimized out of choice. And my personality. I'm, I'm very self-sufficient, very independent. I think a lot of that comes from my experiences as a child in my family unit. I'm very much keep to myself, I have friends. But I think because of COVID things have just shrunk. I'm really good at being solo anyway... So COVID actually been very nice for me, and I would consider myself an introvert. And I'm able to maneuver into an extrovert type of shell when I'm required to, but I prefer you know, just the life of pared down simplicity and *solo-ism. Devi, 48*

Many of the women describe themselves in terms of being an introvert or ambivert. This description also coincides with their need for more personal time. Flor talked about the complications other people have in their lives and she did not wish to have those complications. Autonomous Women like Flor did not seek relationships that required a lot of energy or what we might call drama. As I have already demonstrated, many of them had enough drama as children and were not looking to replicate those dynamics. Flor enjoyed having a simpler life without a lot of drama:

> People have really complicated lives. I do not. Like, you know, folks that are married or have a lot of turmoil or, you know, people that are dating have, you know, baby mamas and God, you know, are cheating, like, I hear about all these things, right? And I just don't have any of that. And so, I love I like to live my life like that. *Flor, 42*

None of the women described themselves to be anti-social. Although the women I interviewed prefer to spend much time alone, they can also be friendly and gregarious in group settings. Autonomous WOC do not hate people. They just like themselves more. However, some admit they can come off as being aloof or rude to others who do not know them well. When asked, "When you have free time, who do you like to spend your free time with?" Sankofa answered, "Myself." Sonia also said that being alone never stopped her. "I've never let the idea of going by myself stopping me from going somewhere," Lala said that she has no problem going out and having a drink by herself:

> Not because people are not available to go, I actually I owe, I owe some time with some people that are just waiting for me to pick up the phone. It's like, I actually just want to go have dinner with me. You know, I do that often, like, more often than not. *Lala, 40*

Whereas some people dislike going to dinner alone, Lala prefers having herself as her only dinner companion. My participants describe a sense of comfort and being at ease in their own company. Autonomous WOC are not hiding away or lacking social skills. Many of them are highly communicative, and they can be incredibly charming. Autonomous WOC prefer to pick and choose when they engage with other people:

> So, what I've learned is that having the quiet time is so important for me for stress management and things like that. So, I tend to be much more reserved in that I'm very protective of my private space, and my private life. And only like my small circle knows that, that like, I won't divulge a lot of information about my life. And all the sudden I'm like, oh, yeah, I took a trip to Bali and like you never told us and so I tend to be really private, and I appreciate my solitude. *Nancy, 44*

Autonomous WOC have had their trials and tribulations like anyone else. My data suggest that they have a need and ability to remove themselves from social encumbrances to find solace in their silence. The women I interviewed are not irresponsible; they prefer a simplified lifestyle. They value their privacy and peace of mind. They are thoughtful in how they spend their time. Many of the women talked about being an introvert or an ambivert. When called upon, they can engage with others during social settings but prefer more individual activities or the company of a few friends. Similar to DePaulo's (2024) concept of "single at heart," Autonomous WOC are comfortable in their fortress of solitude, and like Superman, this is where they have accepted their true identity. Therefore, Autonomous WOC can be social when needed or when the situation calls for it. These women also care about people and community and are often in professions that help marginalized communities, but their demand for personal space and privacy demonstrates their protective individualism.

Hence, Autonomous WOC are creating a new social identity of womanhood (McCann and Allen 2018). I contend that their shared social identity is rooted in their values and beliefs about social norms and their experiences outside of heteronormative constructs such as heterosexual marriage and conventional motherhood. Therefore, I am placing the concepts of self-identity in dialogue with the issues of choice and agency, which has implications for the social identity of Autonomous WOC (Byrne 2003).

5.4 CRAFTING NEW PATHWAYS

In this section, I detail how women live outside the boundaries and expectations of romantic love and marriage. I illustrate how these women are crafting a divergent path by focusing on their freedom and prioritizing their health and healing while cultivating communities supportive and restorative community.

5.4.1 *Travel as Feminist Praxis*

Autonomous WOC self-identify as oddballs and misfits. All the cliches fit – they take their own path – follow the beat of their own drum – and they run their own race. They have been the odd woman out most of their lives, and they have grown accustomed to the moniker. They embrace their quirks which they know does not always make them the most liked or popular. Daria has a great sense of humor and is an avid watcher of science fiction. She stated that she has been weird her entire life. Gertrude is in the creative arts and enjoys the ridiculousness of life:

> Being able to like play. You know, just be ridiculous. is definitely a part of who I am. And I believe in it. Like, I don't ever want to stop playing. Just in general. Like I don't ever want to stop laughing. I don't ever like. Yeah. I want to have a good time. I'm only here for a short while. I love a good time. *Gertrude, 47*

Autonomous WOC are not afraid to be themselves, enjoy themselves, and to live an expansive life. An interesting and unanticipated finding of my research is a love for knowledge and travel was almost universal. The idea of a man traveling the world alone is not shocking, nor does it evoke fear for the person's safety. However, women have been socialized to fear going out into the world alone because the world is a scary and threatening place for women. Therefore, traveling alone for Autonomous WOC is a form of exploring the world on their terms. It is a statement that they will not have their movements restricted by the noose of patriarchal conventions. They are not traveling to colonize but to reclaim their place in the world without being constrained.

Autonomous WOC's ability to travel is multifaceted as it is related to their socioeconomic status of being financially independent, their ability to travel individually without children or spouses, and their interests and curiosity about the world. Durkheim (1953) speaks of a division of labor in marriage and a division between society's emotional and cerebral spheres. Whereas men are associated with the intellectual world, women were thought to be more aligned with the emotional one. However, Autonomous WOC can engage in both the emotional and intellectual domains. Autonomous WOC talked about their love of travel and joy in having new experiences.

Francesca would travel with her mom. They will go on vacation together. Francesca also travels alone "I have gone on all kinds of vacations, a lot of times it is with myself, usually going to visit like a friend that's moved away to a different state or different country." She likes to go to historical sites and walk around a new city. She also would travel internationally for her work. Amanda is a digital nomad and lives abroad. She stated that she has a comfortable lifestyle. She

likes nice things and experiences and says most of her money goes to traveling excursions and food. Dora stated she would rather plan a trip than a wedding:

> I never thought of marriage and kids as number one on my priority list, like it was there. But it wasn't - there was never this urgency. And when I was little, I never, that was never me, like planning a wedding. Like, I plan trips, like, where do I want to go? What, you know, what do I want to see? *Dora, 47*

Women have routinely been the focal point of romance and romantic love, not men. This focus on romantic relationships makes finding love a preoccupation with women, leaving little room for thoughts of government, politics, and economics (Cancian 1986). However, Autonomous WOC are challenging this notion, and they have the time to explore their interests. Charlotte has many hobbies. She enjoys visiting new places, taking pictures, cooking, and crafts. She was also able to work as a teacher outside the United States. She could travel to different countries during her off time, which was a really happy time for her:

> I did a lot of traveling. So that was awesome. I met a whole lot of new people from different backgrounds, different countries, and different languages and tried new foods, and it was awesome, just being able to explore new places and learn from other people and other cultures. Charlotte, 39

Several of the women interviewed either have worked or lived outside of the United States for a considerable amount of time, either by teaching or being able to work remotely. Autonomous WOC see no reason to wait for a partner to do the things that make them happy. In fact, Autonomous WOC are able to live their lives because they do not have a partner. For example, Louise talked about a trip to Switzerland:

> I was in Switzerland and just walking around. And it probably seems like when I don't have anything else to do when I can just enjoy life even by myself because sometimes you know sometimes I kind of wish someone else was there with me but yeah, I think because I got so much going on that when I stop and enjoy myself seems to be that I'm pretty happy and doing it with a lot of money. *Louise, 44*

Louise acknowledges that she sometimes would like to have someone to share experiences, but she does not let that stop her from doing things she enjoys. K Maria spoke of her resourcefulness and being able to do things she loves, including traveling. She figured out how to live her life according to her wants and needs, and sees no reason to change that:

> But you just are living for a living, like having these rich experiences. So, the freelance work gives me an opportunity to do things that I love, and not even really care about. You know, I'll make money with some of these things ... But the fact that I'm resourceful, and I could figure out ways to make money and I'm not tied down, you know, that means I could, I could travel, I could learn, take some time off to learn if I want to take a course. You know, just, just do things that I know that many people don't have an opportunity to do. Especially those people, my friends that have kids and husbands. *K Maria, 42*

K Maria talked about her freedom to take time off as a freelancer and work when she wants. She stated she does not have student loan debt and sold her house, which allowed her even more freedom without "being tied down." Samantha Lee stated she wouldn't have a dog because it would prevent her from being able to just get up and go whenever she wanted:

> And I don't even have animals because I've wanted a dog. I cannot do the responsibility, the accountability, creature, anything that impedes my sense of independence around travel or just being out whenever I want. The dog is highly unlikely to happen. I mean, it's cute, but it's so needy... I can't even have a plan. Like, I mean, I have a cactus and that's about it. *Samantha Lee, 43*

Samantha Lee says she cannot do the responsibility or the accountability of having an animal, and she is wary of anything that impedes her sense of independence or being able to travel. She is active on social media, and that is enough for her to feel connected to people. Autonomous WOC's lives might seem careless and irresponsible from the outside, but these women are not waiting for the right relationship or the right time to do the things they want to do.

Autonomous WOC understand that in not having a relationship or children, they can make decisions based on their interests. This is not by accident or happenstance; this is intentional. Thirty-six out of forty (90%) women have traveled extensively, and many describe their travels as vital to their lifestyle. Two women have worked as digital nomads outside of the United States, where they did not have a permanent residence. These women do not ask for permission to travel or have individual experiences.

Decolonial resistance can be practiced by different means (Paramaditha 2022). The majority of Autonomous WOC have all described a love of learning and for travel. Therefore, solo travel for WOC is a mechanism by which they can temporarily emancipate themselves from the standards of male domination and colonial rule. As these systems reinforce a cultural system that views women of color as subordinate, being able to travel allows them to choose their own destination, their own itinerary, and their own pleasure. They are performing a method of resistance as "reexistance" where resistance takes the form of a refutation of the colonial mindset (Paramaditha 2022).

5.4.2 *Health, Happiness, and Healing*

One of the characteristics of my sample is their desire for personal space. For these women, their time, peace, and serenity are sacrosanct. As outside forces often work to narrow women's opportunities, creating a personal world of serenity is what has centered Autonomous WOC to be then able to meet the intersecting challenges of sexism, racism and classism these women face (Collins 1990). The Autonomous WOC spoke of the joys of living alone and being able to create their sanctuaries. They enjoy reading, knitting, and watching their favorite television shows without disruption in their own company. They create a space that is free from the social constructs that place demands on their time and energy. Where others may enjoy life with all the

complexities of intricate social interactions, these women enjoy their piece of mind above all else. Brandy says, "I protect my peace at all costs; boundaries are important." Devi expressed that she does not like the word happiness. "I honestly really don't even like the word happiness. I think for me, my biggest life goal is peace of mind." Moreover, Amanda also values her peace of mind and being unencumbered. "I value peace. Like inner peace, of course, peace around the world. But yes, I value peace."

Lisa was a public school teacher in Chicago for 20+ years and returned to school to get her Ph.D. to work in the mental health field, which she described as her passion. She stated, "Even now, with the job that I have. I'm making a little bit less than I was as a teacher. But it's all about peace of mind. So, I'll take peace of mind any time over money." Lisa stated that her "happiness and peace of mind are more important than money." When Lisa refers to her peace of mind, she is talking about limiting outside aggravations that drain her energy. Furthermore, Lala concurs, "There's those few things that I'm very protective of, and my time is definitely one of them. It's easier to get money out of me than to get my time." Lisa and Lala are similar to many of the women in my study. Living in a money-driven and status-oriented society such as the United States where people are always looking to trade-up, it is noteworthy that this population values peace and tranquility over the ownership of material goods. At one time, Francesca was motivated by more materialistic things and liked the idea of making more money. However, now she does not think those things are that important. Francesca drives a car that is 13-14 years old because it was the car she bought her first year out of college, and it still runs.

Autonomous WOC have people in their lives that they care deeply about - some are family members, and some are friends. However, they do not compromise on their yearning for personal space and time. Autonomous WOC are also extremely intentional with how they spend their

time. Brandy believes in helping people and works with women to assist them in reaching their full potential. Brandy speaks of her personal boundaries and how she limits encounters that cause stress or anger. She is very protective of whom she spends her time with and situations that require her energy. Brandy is also very protective of her space and home; she states “I am led to give myself care that is non-negotiable. I protect my peace at all costs, boundaries are so important. And so that is a huge, huge value of mine.” Brandy also asks her guests to be mindful of conversations around stress and worry:

> Please be mindful of your language as little derogatory language as possible in my space. And I just know me I'm very sensitive to energy. I'm very sensitive, and I can't control who you are. I can't control what you do. But I can do my best to control what happens in my space, because this is my space. And I don't want any of the heaviness. *Brandy, 41*

Brandy told me she had a woman she was mentoring over to her home during the summer. The woman started talking about a man she was dating. Brandy's guest was talking about how this man tried to control what she wore. Brandy said she shut the conversation down and did not want to hear about him. Brandy felt that this man’s energy was coming through her guest into her home and she did not want that.

What Autonomous WOC have in common and what defines their positionality in society is their ability and want to live on the outskirts of cultural norms and standardized relationships. This discussion of peace of mind (an ability to be alone with their own thoughts) is a throughline in all my interviews. These women have made a commitment to their tranquility. The pursuit of internal harmony is one of the attributes that signifies them as a group. Autonomous WOC monastics who put the peacefulness of self above material items. Autonomous WOC are not in survival mode and are not living at a sustenance level. They appreciate the experiences that money allows them to have, like being able to travel, learn new things, or live by themselves. However, they are not driving a Lamborghini or renting private yachts. Although many people

care about their peace of mind, my participants have followed it like an internal compass that points north. Nancy described it this way:

> I'm at the point in my life where I've defined that success is like, do I feel like what I do is meaningful, right, and, and centered, with what I feel are important values in my life. *Nancy, 44*

Mia recalls that her childhood was both chaotic and normal. She was adopted by a white family when she was about six months old from South Korea. Mia's adoptive parents already had a son and a daughter. Mia was molested by her older brother, who was ten years old than her. She stated that her childhood was traumatic and chaotic and not a good environment. Therefore, Mia has strong beliefs about social justice and being on the right side of history, and if she feels people are not on the side of justice and equality, she will cut them out of her life. Mia reported that she does not speak to a lot of her extended family, like aunts, uncles, and cousins, for that reason. For Mia, authenticity and honesty are really important. She believes that has to do with her upbringing. She believes she is a good judge of who she wants in her life. Mia describes how she sees success:

> If you're doing something that makes you either content or happy, and contentedness and happiness is different for each person, right? So just being authentic to yourself, and not allowing, you know, outside forces to kind of color that for you. Like, for me, that is what makes a person successful. *Mia, 41*

Women who do not marry or have children are sometimes described as selfish or immature. Yet, these women are mindful of their words and their choices. Autonomous WOC are not wondering through life making hapless decisions. As they face institutional and social barriers to being childfree and single women in a society that is not always kind to them, they must be more intentional in their decisions. Sam talked about doing meaningful work and self-care:

> I care ... if I'm doing something meaningful, I care about the impact of the work. And I care about my own well-being, which I have, like, severe anxiety issues, and like bouts of depression and childhood trauma. And like, I really care about living life in a way that feels like, I enjoy living in the moment and I'm present, I'm working on doing more present and being more like, attuned to taking care of my needs and stuff like that. *Sam, 38*

Sam wanted to do meaningful work but she also wanted to take care of herself. She did not see this as being selfish or childish. Self-care was something that Autonomous WOC talked about frequently. Many described being in therapy or made a reference to their theorist, for example, Dora stated that she was "just talking about this with my therapist," about a topic we discussed. Natasha Fatale spoke of her self-nurturing:

> I think one of the biggest things that people, especially as humans, you have to kind of stop and just kind of say, like, my ability to trust myself and take care of myself, like, I got a whole new level of respect for myself at that point. You know, it's, uh, like, I, most humans walk around, I think not liking themselves very much. I can trust myself. I mean, I really do. You know, it's like, I have taken really good care of myself considering everything I've been through, you know. And so, I don't think a lot of people can say that, though. *Natasha Fatale, 46*

Natasha Fatale is referencing the form of defensive individualism she must employ as she lives her life because she needs to rely on her abilities more because she does not have a partner. Geraldine even wondered if she loved herself too much. As a woman you are socialized to put other's needs above your own. This group of women are not doing that. The majority of Autonomous WOC I interviewed are not people-pleasers:

> But I remember that moment so vividly. Because I laugh at it now and think like I literally was, was wondering if I love myself too much. That was my concern. I was concerned about if I love myself too much. Why am I not attaching all of this anxiety to someone choosing me? What's wrong with me? *Geraldine, 46*

Jessica Moorman found that Black women are engaging in a form of singlehood called strategic singlehood. Strategic singlehood refers to those who intentionally remain single as a means to further their personal growth and well-being (Marsh 2023). Brandy stated that she was

thirty-two when she had a relationship break-up. She wanted to give herself time to heal. She recalled thinking that she was going to remain single longer than she thought:

> I remember calling or texting my best friend. And I said, Girl, I think I'm, I've been called to be single, or I'm going to be single for a lot longer than I initially thought. And that just gave me some peace. They're like, wait a minute, single is such a blessing. Marriage is a blessing too, be single is such a blessing. So yes. Did I have that in my - marriage at 25 Kids 28 Absolutely *Brandy, 41*

Brandy thought she would be married and have children before she was thirty, but now at forty-one Brandy chooses to see her singleness as a blessing instead of a curse. She accepted her singleness, not a transitional phase of life, but as her identity.

In addition to their positionality of being a marginalized group, Autonomous WOC also contend with the expectations that women center the aspirations of others above their own. Traditional marriage is often thought to be the normal state of relationships, and this notion is reinforced by society, family, and friends (Sharp and Ganong 2007). In films such as *The Proposal*, single women are depicted as filling that perceived void with work. The implication is that if she is good at her job, it makes sense that her romantic relationships will suffer. However, the Autonomous WOC in my study are not filling a void, nor are they uber-focused on their work. They are not deciding between being a good wife and mother or a cutthroat businesswoman. They are choosing a third option or door number 3. This door opens into spaces with different expectations and where Autonomous WOC can spend time doing things that bring them peace and comfort.

Autonomous WOC are practicing a form of Decolonial resistance. Decolonial resistance is the act of confronting and challenging the judgments of coloniality to create new ways of existing (Lugones 2010; Chaudhary 2024). "Decolonial resistance is an enactment of resistance that centers rejection, reimagining, and reexistance, and forges spaces and/or strategies for

reclaiming and reimagining ways of belonging and thriving that differ from Eurocentric notions of resistance and healing" (Chaudhary 2024:210). Autonomous WOC are not placing themselves last. These women are placing their health and healing first. Autonomous WOC know that social systems are not always conducive to their well-being, and their activity provides them time to decompress. Autonomous WOC are not looking for someone else to complete them. They are using their resources and their energy to become their best selves. Not to be someone's partner but to be a better person.

5.4.3 *Centering Community and Connections*

The women in my study did not want to have children or necessarily be in a committed relationship, and they also did not want to just contribute to the capitalist empire that is the United States. They want better lives for themselves and the people they love, which includes their friends, extended families, pets, and communities. Because they are not dedicated to a nuclear family structure, they can expand or compress who is important to them based on the value of the relationship. Many Autonomous WOC also feel a sense of responsibility to other women of color and care about doing work that is meaningful to them. They care about their communities, and many do some form of paid or volunteer work that benefits the people they care about. Autonomous WOC may not focus their time and energy on large structural or institutional changes, but they do care about others. Because they value their time, they want to spend it doing work that is meaningful to them. They are not trying to change the world, but they do want to make their place in it a safer space.

Autonomous WOC find meaning in being valuable members of society. It is essential for many of them, as WOC, to be a positive force within their respective communities. Charlotte is a Mexican American with a Master's degree, and she dreams of going back to school to earn her

doctorate and teach overseas. She is currently unemployed and is the primary caretaker for her mother. She has been taking care of her mother since 2011. Before that, she worked with a nonprofit organization to reunify families who had been separated during the Trump administration's family separation policy. She found that work rewarding, but also stressful. She believed the work was necessary and was glad to be part of the reunification process. K Maria feels it is important for her to have people in her life who care about something other than themselves:

> Like for me, I have to be involved in something that's outside of me or my family. And I'm with my friends and even my significant other, I need some, I need someone in my life and I need people in my life who are committed to causes. *K Maria, 42*

K Maria wants people in her life, but not just anyone; she wants people who are aligned with her values. Sankofa is an attorney and she works for the government. She works in developing public policies to help parents who have been accused of abusing or neglecting their children. I asked Sankofa if she saw herself as a helper and supporter of others, but she also did not want to have someone else's life in her hands. She responded, "that is a very good encapsulation of it … we bring value to society, as a result of, you know, not being tied to certain expectations." Sankofa is giving voice to the idea that Autonomous WOC have a unique perspective and can provide insights into the changing cultural norms (Collins 1997). She is a caretaker without being responsible for the primary care of another person and that is how she wants it. She also feels it is important to do work that helps the Black community:

> Because I feel like the work that I do in support of children and families, and my community, the Black community, is infused in whatever job I might have. Right, the job that I the jobs that I've had, from law school on through have always been about, you know, children and families and focusing on that. So that's real. I mean, in terms of success, it's really important that I do my job well, and that it makes a difference, a positive difference, you know, for the broader community. *Sankofa, 61*

Sankofa, like K Maria, cares about social causes and helping others. The theme of doing meaningful work is prevalent throughout my data. Samantha Lee also believes it is important to feel connected to others, doing work that is meaningful to her. She works for a university and provides support for her students. She talked about a life well-lived and what she would like to see at her funeral:

> If it could just be populated by kind of so many former students like that, that would mean like, for me like a life well lived, right. And also, I suppose, including faculty and staff, where again, we had some conversation, we talked about something meaningful, and then they kind of like took their life in a certain direction or reflected on something that they'd never reflected on. *Samantha Lee, 43*

Samantha Lee describes herself as a sociable introvert who has connected to other women through a Ladies Adventure Club. Samantha Lee feels that social media allows her to have the amount of social contact she needs, and she still feels connected to people even if she does not see them in person. Gertrude is a writer and artist. She did not see being a wife and mother as consistent with how she wanted to live her life. However, she sees herself as a storyteller. Someone who can tell stories for people who cannot, fulfilling an important purpose for others:

> The world that I lived in, like, as an artist, it definitely, like, didn't make space for it. And it also like, geared me towards just being more of like a care giver to others, you know, like, not for me, but for others, like storyteller of others. *Gertrude, 47*

Gertrude saw her role as being a voice for others. Someone who could share the stories of other people, and in this way, be a caregiver of their memories. A tenant of Black feminism is being able to have your voice be heard (Cooper 1892; Collins 2000). Although these women choose to be childfree and never-married single, many of them have significant attachments and affections for people in their lives.

Some of the women talked about the friendships in their lives and how they rely on their friends to provide emotional support. Dora stated that she is very independent but does have a small circle of close friends. They are her emotional support system. She says they get together for what they call Galentine's Day weekend. Dora says that they like nature so they will be getting outdoors to go hiking in a nearby park. Eartha and Toya both have friends they consider family. Eartha states that most of her friends are WOC:

> I have family friends who I consider family members. And those are the people that I usually ... if I'm on the phone with somebody or talking to somebody or texting somebody throughout my day or something exciting has happened. And I want somebody to know, it's more of those few friends who I consider family members, and its mostly women. Yeah, and its mostly women, mostly WOC that I've met either through school or through work that you just build that bond with. *Eartha, 40*

In Mary Helen Washington's essay *Working at Single Bliss*, she contends that "single Black women should view their singleness as an attitude, not a status, thereby allowing them to focus on strengthening their non-romantic relationships with other Black women" (Marsh 2023:87). Toya is part of a group of WOC she calls "The Council." The purpose of the council is to provide support, guidance, and a sense of community:

> I think I want more people in my life that are like me. Because to me, the relationships, although they don't have the flexibility that I do, those people are my rock, they have a name, they are called the Council ...They are my they are my cross check. They are, you know, and understanding that and the role that they play in my life. *Toya, 47*

Being an Autonomous WOC does not mean you have no connections to society, as Lesch and van der Watt (2018) found that never-married women have larger social networks than their married counterparts. Relationships come in many different forms and can profoundly shape our lives. People might remember a teacher they bonded with, a friend who stayed with them during a difficult time, or even a stranger who provided a kind word or act at the most unexpected moment. Western society determines that the nuclear family should be the cornerstone of all

relationships. Marriage is usually viewed as a link to a larger social network, and therefore, singles would be less merged into a community. However, married women may be more isolated from community (Sarkisian and Gerstel 2016). Thus, Autonomous WOC are demonstrating that life can be whole, meaningful, and rich with interpersonal relationships outside of the heteronormative arrangements of marriage and motherhood.

5.4.4 *Feminization of Freedom*

Francesca Cancian (1986) argued in Feminization of Love that the style of love known as romantic love is a feminized form of love. Men are socialized to believe their value in the world comes from what they do, not who they love or how they love. On the other hand, women are defined by their relationships and the success of those relationships. For example, if a husband cheats, it is the wife's fault because she was not giving him what he needed. However, if a woman cheats, then that is a lack of character and morality on her part, or if a child acts out violently, then the mother was not providing the structure that they needed at home.

Cancian (1986) claimed that men are more likely to show love in instrumental ways and women in expressive ways. However, the focus has been on romantic or expressive love, which is manifested in romantic feelings, verbal declarations of love, and public gestures such as those found in poetry, music, and movies. Whereas men love in more instrumental ways, such as changing their tires or fixing the washing machine. Therefore, women show love by doing things that are useful or needed. Cancian (1986) relates that work outside the home became associated with what men do for money, and love signified a woman's role in the domestic sphere. Consequently, love correlated the expression of emotion with powerlessness.

Women are defined by the love they attract or lack. Traditionally, there has been an assumption that single women are single because no one chose them (Reynolds, Wetherell, and

Taylor 2007). For Natasha Fatale, self-reliance is something she takes pride in; “I like myself enough to know that I can take care of myself, and I trust myself enough to know I can take care of myself.” For Geraldine, she worried traditional marriage would be stifling:

> So, what I think it would have to be, I cannot, I can never really fully articulate how important my ***autonomy*** is to me ... But I cannot ever explain how much my freedom means to me. And how suffocated I would feel if I did marriage in the way that everybody says you supposed to do it. *Geraldine, 46*

Geraldine is expressing how her freedom and autonomy are the criteria for success, not a husband. A man's success has been rooted in his career, his professional pursuits, winning championships and trophies, his bank account, and, to some extent, the success of his children. A woman's interpersonal relationships measure her success (Cancian 1986; Coontz 2016). However, Lourdes does not believe her life is a failure. She stated "I didn't fail at life because I didn't find a partner." Willie relayed a story of being at her cousin's wedding and being asked to hold the bouquet, and her brother said, "That's the only time you'll hold a bouquet." Willie described this interaction, and those like it, to be aggressive and not a micro-aggression. Willie also bemoans the way women's accomplishments are not acknowledged:

> I don't know why I guess it would be like sometimes the set of emotions around not having married feel more complicated not because of what I have truly desire. But just like the ways in which society does not recognize or like reward your accomplishments if you haven't been married. And the same thing for having children. *Willie, 45*

Marsh (2023) found that the most common characteristics identified by the Love Jones Cohort (single African Americans) were a positive outlook on their lives and that they valued freedom, self-reliance, and independence. My participants would be in accord with these characteristics. The feminization of love is the inspiration and foundation for what I am referring to as the *feminization of freedom*. This concept is meant to explain how these women are not powerless and have made freedom acceptable and expanded on what is possible, not just for men

but also for women of color (Coontz 2016). Autonomous WOC are financially independent. They are normalizing women being able to live and thrive outside heteronormative standards (marriage and motherhood). The expectations for women to become girlfriends, wives, and mothers still exist, but also do Autonomous WOC. Therefore, they are the personification of what is possible.

With the reality of women being less financially dependent on men, there is possible destabilization for a culture that relies on heteronormative romantic ideals and patriarchal capitalism. Thus, popular culture has become the field of play to reinforce the symbolics of heterosexual romance (Taylor 2012). However, now they are on their own without the protection or comfort of a family unit. Autonomous WOC are unpartnered and without dependents. They are navigating the direction of their lives through difficult terrain. Therefore, the feminization of freedom represents Autonomous WOC reclaiming freedom from heteronormative expectations to marry and have children, but it does not mean they do not love. Romantic love may not be the center of their lives, but they have other loves, such as the love for family, friends, animals, causes, interests, time, peace, and solitude. The feminization of freedom is freeing oneself from romantic love and the pursuit of romantic love being the focus of your life and allowing for the possibility of broader opportunities.

Autonomous WOC prove you do not have to be a mother or a wife to care about others. Some spend their time and money improving the lives of the people who are important to them, and they do not waste their time on people who actively try to make their lives worse. As RuPaul (a Black man, gay icon, and drag queen) says, “I got no time to hate people who hate me. I’m too busy loving the people who love me.”

5.5 DISCUSSION

This chapter addressed that freedom from constraints is significant to the women in my study, and most report a love for learning and travel. They do not have conventional lives and are not apt to join social groups with strict requirements or dogmas. In traditional social norms, a woman who is not a companion or a caregiver but takes on a role outside of the heteronormative archetypes is a woman without a social purpose. Therefore, Autonomous WOC are uniquely positioned to discern social structures and power dynamics (Collins 1997). Autonomous WOC can scrutinize social structures from the outside looking in, which provides them with a different vantage point. They have observed marriage and motherhood without engaging in the activity firsthand. Therefore, they have some distance from these social arrangements that allow them to see the complexities of these relationships without personal involvement. Their identity is more expansive than just the social roles they provide. This shared social location provides a basis for studying their collective histories and experiences through the lens of Feminist Standpoint Theory.

Autonomous WOC have decided they will not spend their time searching for a partner who may or may not enrich their lives, and they have also made decisions that have permitted them to live a life independent of traditional roles and relationships. Autonomous WOC do not have to be coupled for their lives to have meaning. These women shape their identity not from their romantic relationships with others or the roles they fulfill for society but from their own agency and actions. However, this battle for agency is not an individual war; as Lugones (2020) stated, WOC cannot get to victory alone. Barriers had to be broken, and bridges had to be crossed for the modern WOC to stand in their agency. Therefore, these women have a shared history.

In this chapter, I discuss how Autonomous WOC contend with the challenges of being an individual in a society where there are cultural and social expectations that they partner, marry, and bear children. Individual freedom, capitalism, and the structure of a heteronormative, patriarchal family have historically benefited men (Davis 1983; Coontz 2016). But long after white women were able to make some gains in pursuing their individual interests, WOC were often left behind (Davis 1983). Autonomous WOC have been able to achieve their independence from oppressive institutions, such as heteronormative family structures that have historically diminished their choices, and they have also been able to remain connected to their communities.

Autonomous WOC have been able to carve out their own paths to freedom, but they have not been able to make fundamental changes to the institutions they have abandoned. Although Black women and women of color have been on the frontlines of the civil rights movement and the feminist movement in the United States, Autonomous WOC are not taking the weight of the responsibility to change social structures on their backs. I assert that these women are fighting against colonialism and capitalism by not taking on the responsibility to change social structures they did not create. They have claimed the freedom to be free from carrying the burden of social change agents. Yet, they have not abandoned their communities and care about making positive contributions to society, but they also feel liberated enough to center their own wants and interests.

Autonomous WOC are not worried about keeping up with the Jones'. They are not using their economic successes to purchase more capital and fulfill the American capitalist doctrine of always having more. They are using their purchase power to have new experiences, make their own choices, and enjoy learning and traveling. Autonomous WOC have used their financial power to work less, vacation more, live abroad, go back to school, and try new activities. Some

have left more demanding jobs to minimize the stressors in their lives, others have lived below their means to save for their future, and some left unfulfilling careers to do work more in line with their values. However, they all use their financial means to live of self-determination and freedom from the oppressive forces (institutional, social, and cultural) that have traditionally prevented WOC from personal, professional, and economic achievements.

The Autonomous WOC are not just resisting the social and cultural pressures to become wives and mothers; they are also relinquishing the ideology that WOC should be actively engaged in combating social injustices on institutional, social and personal fronts. Women can have varied methods in how they deal with colonial trauma and coloniality (Chaudhary 2024). Autonomous WOC are not a modern-day Harriet Tubman. They are not running back into the dark den of colonization and slavery to rescue enslaved women, men, and children. This is not because they do not care about others as they often have observed the fight and fear through the eyes of others in their lives. However, they have decided on a different path – a ceasefire that allows for some peace. They are not turning the other cheek or forgiving those who have abused their ancestors, but their resistance comes in the form of challenging the creed that says they must engage in the battle. They have chosen the resistance of living a life that Black and Brown women were never meant to live in a Western society (Davis 1983). A life of freedom from patriarchal arrangements and a life of personal tranquility.

Thus, I argue that maybe Autonomous WOC are tackling the intersecting systems of sexism, racism, and classism, and white supremacist ideologies that help to structure our feelings about singlehood, marriage, and motherhood by not engaging in the fight. By prioritizing their peace of mind, mental health, and happiness, they have left the battlefield but have not abandoned the fight. By their choices and contributions, they are enriching the lives of those

around them and empowering other WOC to engage in personal growth and serenity. Their lives are not perfect and they have days where they need to focus on themselves before they can think of the needs of others. However, they are showing there is another option. Autonomous WOC have removed themselves from the expectations of marriage and motherhood, but they have also removed themselves from the fray of social discontent.

Remaining never-married and childfree is not just about one's relationship status. These women lead very intentional lives. Autonomous WOC desire the sanctity of deliberate solitude more than they want to share their life with a romantic partner or sexual companion. Romantic love is not a pivotal concern for every woman. Every year, women are met with a new barrage of movies where the plotline is about a single woman who must go home for the holidays and how awful that is going to be for her, with all the family members feeling sad or disappointed that she is still not coupled. Therefore, these women are not only going against the grain of cultural norms; they are rewriting heteronormative storylines.

When romantic love is not the focal point of a woman's life, Autonomous WOC can devote more time and energy to other relationships in their lives and the communities they care about, allowing women to explore their interests and ambitions. Sandfield and Percy (2003) found that harmful narratives about singleness suppress a woman's agency and individualism. These narratives can be a hindrance to unmarried women embracing their lifestyles and presenting them as an acceptable alternative to marriage. These descriptions also do not allow for the possibility that women may actively choose to remain single. Remaining an Autonomous WOC is not an easy road to take, and they have taken it anyway.

All of these women have described living a lifestyle conducive to their health, happiness, and healing. As Collins (1997) warns, feminist standpoints should not be confused with a

woman's point of view, and that standpoint should not describe a stagnant position. The emphasis should be on the social conditions that construct groups, not individual experiences. This group is constructed by the social conditions they protect themselves from or rebel against. The social conditions of misogyny, white supremacy, and coloniality have necessitated WOC maintaining their defenses (Davis 1983).

Some of the women indicated that they do find the idea of marriage appealing, but the type of marriage that they would be open to is one void of a gender power hierarchy. However, they are pessimistic that it is a viable possibility, and they are not willing to risk their freedom and agency on a bet they feel they are more likely to lose. The women I interviewed were not materialistic or over-concerned with luxury items, but they did care about being free from the struggles they witnessed as children. My participants saw how their parents struggled financially and emotionally and decided they did not want to repeat the cycles of abuse they witnessed or suffer emotional and financial hardships.

As Engels (1884/1972) believed monogamy was never meant for men, Coontz claims that individualism was never meant for women. The sentimentalization of the family is "historically and functionally linked to the emergence of competitive individualism and formal equalitarianism for men" (Coontz 2016:50). I argue that Autonomous WOC have created a feminized freedom. As women took over the caretaking role of the family, self-sufficiency was denied them, for this type of individualism was intended for men only (Coontz 2016). Women were then defined by their love relationships, and men were associated with their work. This led women to take more pride in their romantic relationships, as well as feeling the pressure to keep those relationships intact. However, my participants have different ideas about what should be important to their lives.

Autonomous WOC have claimed a right to self-governance that has been previously denied them. However, this is not to say that married women do not have freedom, or the ability to make their own decisions. Too often, social norms have pitted women against each other who have made different choices or who have led different lives. These dichotomies are used to divide women and create hostilities and chasms between them, which helps to maintain a patriarchal arrangement that yields heterogender divisions.

The Autonomous WOC in this study are representative of women who are free to explore the world and themselves. Historically, few WOC have had the resources and freedom to live as independently as this group of women. This is particularly relevant for WOC, who have a past riddled with the historical experiences of forced relationships and sexual victimization (Davis 1983; Collins 1990). To have that freedom (legally and institutionally) is different than living that freedom (individually and culturally). Autonomous WOC have done both. I assert these women have demonstrated they have a unique perspective.

As Autonomous WOC are a racialized group in the United States, their interactions with social institutions can be traumatizing due to racism, white supremacist ideologies, and misogyny (Davis 1983). Therefore, Autonomous WOC have an internal dialogue that provides them safe harbor from a world of intersecting demands on their time and energy. I employ Feminist Standpoint Theory (Collins 1997) to discuss how the women in my study have a shared location, and they can provide crucial information on how they have been able to build their own ecosystem by being cognizant of the demands on their energy and time and being attentive to their own interests and health. As men have been encouraged to pursue self-fulfillment, women have not always been afforded that space. Thankfully, freedom and independence are no longer associated only with the political and economic causes of men, it is also being applied to

women's intimate lives and choices (Budgeon 2016). Therefore, the masculinity of rationality is being questioned by the feminization of freedom.

Autonomous WOC have a social identity that is in disagreement with heteronormative expectations for women. This social identity is based not only on this opposition to marriage and motherhood but also on their ability to create new pathways to independence, protective individualism, and freedom. These pathways include a focus on their health, happiness, and healing, centering nonromantic relationships in their lives, and having the freedom to explore their own interests and pursuits separate from the domestic sphere. Facing institutional and social demands and barriers that encourage WOC to be wives and mothers, Autonomous WOC are questioning if marriage should be on a list of "to-do" or a "why do"?

5.6 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have examined the heteronormative structures surrounding love and marriage and why Autonomous WOC have abandoned the cultural expectations of romance and marriage. These women are constructing a new identity. I have applied Feminist Standpoint Theory to a discussion of heteronormative structures that can be created to support inequality which results in group creation and identity. My concept of the feminization of freedom furthers the case for a unique positionality for Autonomous WOC. This idea acknowledges that these women have utilized their freedom and independence in such a way as to break from heteronormative constructs and cultural expectations. This freedom is particularly relevant for WOC, who have a past riddled with the historical experiences of forced relationships and sexual victimization. To have that freedom (legally and institutionally) is different than living that freedom (individually and culturally). Autonomous WOC have done both. I assert that these women have demonstrated they have a distinctive social location.

CHAPTER 6: WOMEN, RACE AND NURTURING

Untethered from the Expectations of Motherhood

6.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I discuss how WOC decide to remain childfree and what they feel about their position in society as a childfree woman of color. The independence of women is linked to their ability to control their own bodies and reproductive choices. If women can prevent and plan for pregnancies, they can control their bodies and their lives. This chapter discusses the motherhood ideal, or universal motherhood, and how women are divided by symbolic and social boundaries. It also addresses the family obligations and influences that impact these Autonomous WOC's choice to be and remain childfree.

I use Decolonial Feminism to examine how race and reproductive health intersect to influence some of the WOC's decisions on having children. Lastly, I consider how some women never wanted to be mothers and do not associate nurturing with mothering. I have coined the concept of a motherhood fault line to address how society often defines women by their fertility, children, and family. The motherhood fault line is a symbolic boundary that creates a defining line between women who have become mothers and those who have not.

Two of the women have power of attorney for ailing parents, and others are caretakers for a parent or other family member. They are not immature or selfish. Caring for one's self, including physical and mental health, should not mean being "selfish" in the conventional sense of the word. Motherhood is also not the only essential role in the socialization and integration of social norms. Women fulfill a myriad of roles that help to make society better.

6.2 THE MOTHERHOOD IDEAL AND SYMBOLIC BOUNDARIES

In this section, I review how Autonomous WOC are challenging the idea of a universal motherhood. I describe how the women in my study have made decisions about fertility, motherhood, and being childfree based on what they individually wanted for their lives and not grounded in cultural expectations or social mores. Symbolic boundaries form identities that separate one group from another (Neumann and Moy 2018). Symbolic boundaries are evidenced in Nancy's experiences with expressing her feelings about motherhood. Once she made it clear that she did not want to have children, she encountered some negative experiences, including men walking out on dates:

> It was around that time we're probably between 29 and 33-34. was very difficult to date... But I personally didn't want to have children and hearing the most awful things... literally someone walked away in the middle of a date. I've had that happen several times...I don't want kids. I've been told the most awful things by people. I'm selfish. I'm arrogant...was an awful, awful time especially in dating and just hearing men say all kinds of mean things to me about choosing to be childless. *Nancy,44*

Nancy was deemed a woman who did not deserve the same kind of respect as women who wanted to be mothers. The academic literature on this population has infrequently distinguished the voluntarily childfree from the involuntarily childless. However, society has made a clear distinction – one is worthy of sympathy and respect (childless), and the other is met with disdain and cynicism (childfree). There is also a gendered nature to the voluntarily childlessness (Blackstone and Dyer Stewart 2012). Women are under pressure to conform to the gender norms that place them in dependent and subservient circumstances and that also expect them to perform a socially prescribed notion of femininity. Therefore, these symbolic boundaries also lead to social boundaries between women who mother and those who do not.

Symbolic boundaries are conceptual distinctions that can catalog people. The separation between mothers and childfree women has become a symbolic and social boundary. Symbolic

boundaries conceptually classify individuals or groups (Lamont and Molnar 2002). Western society often characterizes childfree women as self-centered and immature (Neumann and Moy 2018). Symbolic boundaries then create social distinctions that distinguish between objects and people. Social boundaries are then formed between mothers and childfree women. For example, mothers receive work leave benefits such as being able to leave work early to take their children to doctor appointments or attend teacher conferences. Employers may also expect childfree women to work later hours or holidays. Thus, these social differences create unequal access and distribution of material and non-material resources and social opportunities (Lamont and Molnar 2002).

Sonia also saw a divide happening between her and one of her closest friends. Whereas she did not want to be a mother, her friend did:

> I think it looks a little different these days, in a good way, in terms of, you know, commitment and different things. And, you know, I've never felt like, I use one of my closest friends as an example. I mean, since we were kids, she's always been like, I want to be someone's wife, I want to be a mom - always. *Sonia, 42*

By the 1980s, studies started to distinguish between the voluntary from involuntary childless, and later, scholars started to use the term childfree to indicate choice. Voluntary and involuntary childlessness are not always distinct categories, and the inability to distinguish adequately between them has been problematic for previous studies (Park 2002). Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett and Holly Baxter called childless women who are happy the “unicorns of society” (Blackstone 2019:32). But Autonomous WOC are not unicorns (mythical creatures that do not exist) because these women do exist.

There are women, like those in my study, who did not want children and knew they did not want children from a very early age. These women have been told their whole lives that they would change their minds. Autonomous WOC are not regretful or in angst about not having

children. Autonomous WOC became even more secure in their decision as they got older. Some of the women have faced ridicule from family members or their extended communities. Maria stated that the "door has long since been closed and dead-bolted regarding having children. They lost the key." She specified that she is forty-seven and children are an absolute no:

> There a couple of times that my sister-in-law had made comments about, like, oh, I can see your mom's heartbreaking when you, you know, say you don't want kids. And my response is, I can't have kids to please her. *Maria, 42*

Maria received pressure from her family to have children, but she decided she was not going to mother to make other people happy. She also stated that she did not want to have to defend her decision. "I don't like to have to, you know, defend my life decisions to people who know me especially." When women challenge heteronormative gender standards like deciding not to mother, they can receive disapproval and hostility from their family members, coworkers, to even strangers on the street (Blackstone 2019). Sam talked about how she felt demeaned when people would tell her she would change her mind about not having children:

> I had to have so many people telling me, I'm just young. I'll change my mind. Wait till my clock starts ticking. So, patronizing. And it would just make me sick every time like I would just get so annoyed by people doing all that bullshit. It's like, I know what I want. Thank you very much. Like, no, this is real. As late as to like my, into my early 30s I had people telling me that shit and I was just like, how fucking rude are you. *Sam, 38*

Mia finds it difficult to relate to women who center their self-identity around motherhood. Mia was angered by how motherhood defines women, and she talked about a social identity of a "motherhood personality." Mia wants to be a well-rounded person, and she did not think that was possible if she was solely viewed as someone's mother:

> I think that ... motherhood now has kind of morphed into this, like whole personality type. Meaning, like, once a woman has a child, like that's the only part aspect of her life that matters. And I think that's fine for some people, but I don't see how you can't be a multi-dimensional person and be happy or content. Like just having that one thing, it seems. It seems abnormal to me... Whenever I do go and go out in social situations where I'm having to interact with people maybe that I haven't seen in a really long time, I don't

> know. Like, the first thing they ask about me is like, whether I have children or not, like, and that is such, like, an antiquated, like social aspect that like a woman can only be a mother ... it's almost offensive to me when somebody asks me that. And then when I say no, like they act like, like they get like, they don't know what to ask next. You know what I mean? And it's like, okay, I don't know, even if I did have kids, I wouldn't be totally defined by them. Were like, that would be the first thing I would ask somebody that I don't know. It's, it's angering. *Mia, 41*

Mia does not want to be identified by whether she has children or not, and she is perplexed at how others reduce her existence to a vessel for procreation. Sasha said she might get married, "but the baby thing has never been a regret." As women are socialized to want children, the social identity of womanhood often gets conflated with motherhood (Byrne 2003). Therefore, many women feel shame if they do not want to be a mother. Blackstone (2019) states that childfree people are not incomplete or missing something in their lives. Although there are differences in how some of the women came to embrace their social identity as being an Autonomous WOC, they do agree that the decision to not mother was, in fact, a choice:

> I've seen a lot of my friends and other like female contemporaries, who did have kids and how different people that they are after they had kids, which is also a very big turnoff to me. I don't want to be one of those people. *Francesca, 36*

Francesca remembers making a decision that she did not want to have children. She did not want to become a different person. Gillespie (2003) argues that some women have a radical rejection from motherhood and any association with hegemonic perceptions of femininity. Many family members see one of the purposes of women is to bear children so they can continue the traditions of their ancestors. Therefore, women who do not have children, and even worse, those who do not want to have children, are seen as an affront to everything the family should stand for:

> Not only is it hard for some women to say, because I think it's hard for them because of the reactions that we get. And, you know, I've been called selfish, because I don't ... I've had people, I even had one of my best friend's mom. I'll never forget, this was years ago in the 90s. Because like I said, I've always known I didn't want children. And she was one of those religious people. And she was like, well, what do you have a womb for? That's why God made a womb you're supposed to procreate. You know, and I think that's selfish. And I was just like, wow, are you kidding me? What are we in the 1950s? ... That was in a conversation with her that I will never, ever forget. As long as I live. *Lisa, 49*

Lisa was responding to the religious view that women's purpose is to have children. Nandy (2017) asserts that what we see as an exemplification of womanhood is often deep-seated within the social identity of being a wife or mother. This preordained identity can make it challenging to think of women as individuals, separate from the boundaries of family structures.

6.2.1 *The Motherhood Ambivalence*

In this section, I discuss how Autonomous WOC are going against cultural and social expectations to challenge the motherhood ideal. However, that does not mean they all came to that decision without some having some doubts and disappointments. Autonomous WOC are considering what mothering would look like for them and what choices they would have to make. Karina was worried about what being a mother would mean for her if she had to work full-time to support herself:

> The amount of time spent away from the child, the child would need a lot of, if I'm to be a single parent, I would need to work a lot to have the money to raise that child, which means I would have to also be away from that child for a good deal of the time. And so, it wasn't a it, I didn't want to do that. It feels like the joy of spending time with the child would be taken away from by having to work to take care of the child...Yeah, I wasn't willing to change course, and what I was currently doing or sacrifice anything that I wanted to do in my life to dramatically make room for, for the child. *Karina, 45*

Karina is questioning what motherhood would look like in the face of financial realities. She thought of having children but realized that she was not interested in making the changes in her life necessary to make motherhood a priority. Choice is frequently related to agency, and the choice to be childfree can be a sign of agency, but it can also result from socio-economic

circumstances. Some women choose not to have children because they are not in a financial situation to raise children in an optimum environment. For example, being able to live in a safer neighborhood with better quality schools. Some women were concerned about being in a single-earner household and what that would mean in terms of spending time away from their children (Nandy 2017). Consequently, we need to fundamentally rethink how we view and describe women, fertility, and their choices.

Jackie had experienced a miscarriage, and that affected the way she thought about pregnancy and motherhood. Jackie stated that her last official relationship ended when she was thirty-one, and having a miscarriage led her to some deep soul-searching about whether she wanted to be a mother or not. She reported there was a history of miscarriages in her family. Her mother had several miscarriages, and Jackie was born two months early. Therefore, she knew if she was going to have children it was not going to be easy. Although Jackie is not giving up on the idea of marriage, she is at peace with not having biological children:

> I kind of knew or had an inkling after I had that first miscarriage, it was like, okay, if I want to do this, it's probably not going to be easy. And do I want to put myself through that. And I kind of decided no, like, I really did not, especially like, or put another way, motherhood was not more important, then the foundation, like the foundational relationship to get me there, I could have easily recruited some sperm donor. But I didn't want that. It was like, if I'm going to have a child, I want to do it in the context of, at the very minimum co-parenting with someone. But yeah, I was not going to put my body and my mind through all of that, unless I knew I had that support. Because I knew that history. And I knew how much my mom had gone through with that. I'd seen cousins go through the same similar things ... I wasn't going to do it. *Jackie, 43*

Jackie was concerned with the physical and emotional toll if she decided to become a mother. If she were going to have children, she wanted to do that with a partner and that was not negotiable for her. Jackie did not want to be a mother at all costs. There has been recent debate about the dropping fertility rates globally. Blackstone (2019) states that the steep decline in fertility rates after the Great Recession can be attributed to a cultural shift away from romance

and marriage being child-centric. Consequently, women are now reexamining more than ever what role children and marriage play in their lives, if any. Erica also made decisions about motherhood based on how she wanted to live. She envisioned a life of independence. A life she was not willing to compromise to have children:

> And that went into all of my 30s I think, in my 20s I got heartbroken and all these other things. And I was like, you know what, focus on yourself, focus on, on what you've always wanted, which is being independent, right, and living the life you wanted. And then seeing the world... I said, I don't want to be in a situation where all of a sudden, my life becomes having to take care of a child. That wasn't the life that I envisioned for myself. I envision having an independent life, that was always my goal, to be independent, to be able to stand on my own, and do as I want, right, because of the strict upbringing that I had. *Erica, 43*

Erica is giving voice to the decisions women need to make. In order to be a mother, it requires making substantial changes to one's life. Flor babysat for her nephew and niece when she realized how exhausting having small children was. She understood that she would have to dramatically change her world if she had children. For example, she would not have as much time to visit friends or take care of her health:

> When I got back to Houston, you know, my mom was ill, and I was also I would also babysit my nephew niece who are tiny, right. Like were babies, year and a half, two. And that was a lot of work... That was eye opening to because I, that was a lot of work. And to this day, when I babysit them or when they, when they hang out at my house for a weekend, I'm exhausted, totally exhausted, and my life changes that, that whole weekend. I can't, can't talk to my girlfriends can't go out for coffee can't go out jogging. I mean, nothing, nothing. I can't do anything. Right. It's just, it's just like all consuming kids. *Flor, 42*

Flor worried if there would still be time for her if she took on the role of motherhood, and if she could be the driving force in her own life. For Dora, it was not an easy decision, but she realized that she felt more the weight of the expectation of having children than any actual desire to have them herself:

> I have this information. I really have to make a decision. And that's when I sat down and it was you know, it wasn't an easy decision. But I just felt it was more of the expectation versus the desire. And, you know, pros and cons but at the end of the day I just I didn't I see myself with kids. And so, you know, I did, it was hard, it was a hard time to let go of that, you know, to let go of the idea of myself as a mother because even though I had never really actively pursued being a mother, I just felt like it was going to be part of my journey. And so having, having sought that out and actively deciding, no, I felt relief, but at the same time, there was a sadness. *Dora, 47*

Dora acknowledged she felt sorrow in deciding not to have children, but she also recognized she did not have a strong enough desire to have children to pursue that path. Charlotte related that there was a time when she thought she would be married and have children. She thought she was going to marry a man she dated for ten years. She was twenty-five when that relationship began. Charlotte stated that the relationship ended due to them having different goals. She wanted to go back to school, but he did not want to join her in returning to education. Charlotte strongly believes in traditional heteronormative family structure with children being raised by a mom and a dad. If she had been married, she would have had children.

Charlotte still believes in marriage and would marry but has closed the door to having children. Charlotte decided she did not want to have children alone in her early thirties. Even though she thought she would have children, Charlotte now says she does not feel pressured to have children. However, Charlotte did reveal some ambivalence in her decision about children. She has bought a mermaid doll and keeps it in a box with other items, like a picture frame she thought she would give to her child. Now, she says she will probably give the doll to her niece.

Sandy visited a fertility doctor to explore her possibilities, but she eventually decided she was not in the healthiest situation to raise a child on her own:

> I got closer to 40, or maybe I was 41, or I decided to go and see a fertility doctor. And I went to a fertility clinic and did some tests, multiple tests, actually genetic testing, I'm looking at my ovaries and all this type of stuff, to see if what the viability was of pregnancy for me at that stage… that is when I made the decision. I think that's when it was a formal decision for me that, no, I'm not going to have a child on my own. Had I been with a partner. And I wasn't at the time, and still not. Maybe that the decision would have been different. But at that point in my life, I had just been promoted to Assistant Dean, and I didn't feel emotionally healthy, or I didn't see the possibility of raising a child on my own given what, you know, given my life circumstances. *Sandy, 44*

Sandy relayed that she had two abortions when she was in college. She sometimes wonders if she had children what her life would be like now. She also thinks that is why she was so careful about pregnancy after that timeframe. Sandy stated that if she could go back, she would make the same decision not to have children. She did not think she was ready to have a child and give the child the life that she would have wanted them to have. Sandy thought that if she had partner, she might have been in a more advantageous situation to raise a child. She may have been able to work less to spend more time with the baby, or she may have had more resources for childcare. She also would have had the more legitimacy in a heteronormative society for following the predicted family arrangements.

For the Autonomous WOC described in this section, they have crafted a life in which motherhood was not conducive to their goals. Even though these women were not focused on motherhood, they still made a choice based on their preferred lifestyle, and Autonomous WOC are at peace with that decision. My participants sensibly considered if motherhood would play a role in their lives and concluded that they did not want to pursue that undertaking. Autonomous WOC have accepted that motherhood and having children would not be a part of their social identity or their lives.

6.3 CLASS AND MOTHERHOOD

In this section, I discuss how Autonomous WOC often have family histories of financial adversities that influenced their decisions about parenting. Autonomous WOC detail how they did not want to raise children in a financially unstable situation and in a society that does not offer adequate support systems. I also examine how becoming caregivers, or observing caregiving at a young age impacted their decisions about becoming a mother.

6.3.1 *Impacts of Financial Instability on Parenting Decisions*

In this section, I demonstrate how my participants' decisions were partly influenced by financial instability in their childhoods. Francesca communicated that her parents were older when they had her and her brother. She remembers how tired her mother was and how expensive it is to have children today. Francesca was also worried about the environment and whether there would be enough drinking water with global warming. She stated that in recent years, these concerns have weighed on her mind. After watching her mother's hardships, Francesca considered multiple factors in her decision to not have children, such as time, expense, quality of life, and environmental factors:

> We have political structures and systems where we're not taking care of people, and do you want your kids to be exposed to that, or, you know, be left in a world where they're not really being taken care of, or there's not enough resources for them to care for themselves? I think a lot of that, in recent years has weighed on my mind, and I don't really want that. And then yeah, it just, it doesn't really interest me. It's very expensive and thoughtless. *Francesca, 36*

Francesca is speaking about the economic factors and climate change that influence a woman's decision today to have children and what kind of life they would have if they were not financially secure or able to live in a healthy and safe environment. Francesca is mindful of having children in a world that does not offer much support for people in need. Alana was the eldest of four children and her family lived through a lot of financial struggles when she was a

child. These experiences helped shape her views on parenthood. “We were homeless for a while when I was little. It was just so difficult to have all of our needs met. And I remember feeling that stress as a kid.” Her family also lived in their car and at a shelter during her childhood:

> I think I had this very strong idea of wanting to be prepared. I want to be like, in a good place before having a kid ... I think right before like junior high. I was like, oh, no, I’ll have kids and but then at a certain point, maybe right before high school, I realized like, it's not something of interest to me. *Alana, 41*

Alana’s decision not to be a mother was impacted by her childhood experiences and the stresses of being a child in a financially unstable family. These experiences informed Alana’s decision on what kind of future and family she would have as an adult. Alana did not want to have children without being in a financial position to care for them comfortably.

Nikka stated that her mom and dad never married. Her father was separated from his wife when he met her mom. Her mother and father were together for several years, but he left the family home when she was around nine or ten. Nikka recalls her mother being very strict with her because she was a girl. She has two older brothers who had a lot more freedom. Nikka described her mother as working a lot and that she was definitely a latchkey kid, but she remembers being a happy child. Nikka remembers a very strict and restrictive childhood. Her mother would not let her do after-school activities like joining the school’s basketball team. She also was never allowed to go trick-or-treating for Halloween. Nikka stated she did not realize how strict her childhood was until she heard what other children were doing. Nikka’s childhood may have influenced her decisions on remaining childfree and being able to control her own life because she had little control of her life as a child and teenager.

Brandy, unlike most of my participants, grew up in what she called a Cosby family, an African American family where the father was a doctor and the mother was a lawyer. Her family was the only Black family in the neighborhood and were middle-class or upper-middle-class. She

recalls having a really happy childhood, and the family traveled all the time. However, Brandy's parents divorced when she was in the 10th grade, and her life changed. Her mother was not able to keep up with the lifestyle they were living, and things were difficult. After the divorce, Brandy was not in the same socioeconomic location she was used to, and this had a detrimental effect on her self-esteem.

Brandy said this transitioned her into hiding things. She did not tell her friends that her parents got divorced for nine months. Even though Brandy relates that this was a difficult time, she states that her parents still did their best to make sure they were at every band competition or football game supporting the children. Even though Brandy's parents did the best they could for their children, Brandy's childhood framed how she saw motherhood. She did not want to raise children in a situation where the parents were living in separate households. Louise's experiences as a child also had a significant impression on her:

> My sister had her first kid when I was 15. And she got married, they're falling apart. So, she moved back home. So, I got the experience the whole feed on the belly. I was there when he was born. She went back to work. So, I did the 4am feeding. So, I got to experience the whole child thing. That was the best birth control you ever have in your life. I never after that, I just didn't. I knew how much trouble they were. I knew how much work they were... No. Regrets not being married. Yes. No regrets not having kids. No, none of those. *Louise, 44*

Louise did not have regrets about making the decision not to have children. She observed the tensions between being a working mother and the motherhood ideal. She believed that being a mother was more attractive if you were in a higher income bracket with means to hire outside help. Louise's family could not afford childcare so she took on some of that caretaking role.

In examining motherhood from an intersectional lens, Nandy (2017) states that heterosexuality is united with gender, class, and religion by way of the institution of marriage. Autonomous WOC understand that there is still an advantage in raising children in the United

States if you are a part of a traditional, heteronormative family structure with a stable income that places the family in the middle-class to upper-class. In this section, I have defined some of the circumstances in which Autonomous WOC came to their decisions about not having children of their own. Whether they came from a divorced household or a single-parent home, Autonomous WOC realized that raising children was more manageable if you had more money and additional help, either from a partner or other family members. Some of the women I interviewed also spoke of the stigma of being a single mother and a woman of color, and how they did not want that indignity for themselves or their children. Autonomous WOC understood that it was challenging to have children and raise them well without the financial means to do so, as they had witnessed the economic struggles of their own families while growing up.

6.3.2 *Childhood Experiences with Motherhood and Caregiving*

Many of the women in my study had either been a caregiver as a child or had witnessed caregiving that shaped how they saw the roles of wife and mother. K Maria talked about living with her aunt and learning how difficult it was to raise children and how that led to a parallel decision for her:

> It seems like when I was in elementary school, I you know, toyed with the fact of Oh, yeah. You know, have kids you know, the girls in my class. I remember they would talk about what they want to name their kids and things like that. And by the time I was a fourth or fifth grade I fantasize about adopting kids. And by middle school, I was like, Nope, it's not happening. Yeah, I don't know if it's because my aunt, so my aunt - I moved in with my aunt when I was 12. And she raised me and she was a teen mom. She talked about all of the, all of the challenges of being a teen mom and all these other things, how she wants to do everything, sit and make sure that I didn't make the same mistakes. *K Maria, 42*

K Maria saw the realities of being a teen-mother with not much education or financial mobility. K Maria worried about how she would be able to support a child without having a high school diploma or how she would be able to afford childcare to go to school or work. Nandy

(2017) discusses how Judith Blake's book Pronatalism: The Myth of Mom & Apple Pie outlines how American policies that support patriarchal motherhood demonstrate a cultural connection between capitalism and women's fertility. Although America says it values motherhood, the mothers that are most supported are middle-class and upper-class white women in heteronormative marriages. Therefore, there are intersecting factors such as gender, race, and class that go into a woman's decision to have children. If Autonomous WOC did not have to help their families raise children at a young age, they may have had a different view of motherhood. However, K Maria did not have the socioeconomic position that allowed her to have a more carefree childhood:

> So, I've been taking care of adults, it seems my whole life. You know, my mom was very dependent on me. My brother, just everybody dependent on me, so I felt like I have kids in these grownups. *K Maria, 42*

I asked K Maria if she felt like the movie character Benjamin Button, who ages backward in that she was a caretaker as a child. Now, as an adult, she can make her own decisions that include having fewer responsibilities. Thus, she is having her childhood now by living a more carefree existence. K Maria responded: "Yeah, that sounds, you know what, that sounds right. And, you know, I never really like put them together like that. But that is the truth, the Absolute Truth." Erica also had a hands-on role in raising her younger siblings, which saddled her with a lot of responsibility. This led her to feel that she had already had the experience of raising children:

> I remember, like my little brother calling me mom, because I was changing - as my parents used to sell jewelry, so they would like go, and they will leave him with me. And so, I was like, changing diapers, putting them to sleep. And, you know, the kid's calling me mom. So even though I didn't have kids, I feel like, I did my part in raising someone with my two youngest siblings, because we were older than them... And so like, I feel like I had some part in raising the last two. And I'm good. Like, I don't feel like I need anything else. *Erica, 43*

Erica did what was expected of her in a traditional Latin family by caring for her younger siblings. Everyone needed to do their part for the family's best interests. However, as a child, Erica decided that she had already fulfilled her obligation to family and as an adult she gave herself the freedom to make her own choices beyond the dictates of tradition, which meant not having children or being a caretaker. Nikka also details how taking care of family members as a child impacted her decisions on motherhood. She would help care for her older brothers' children:

> My, both of my brothers have a daughter, um, and they're close in age. So, one is 26 and one is 27. And so, um, so maybe I sort of got that mothering feeling out of the way because I cared about them so much when I was in high school and younger and then when I got to college, like I would send for them to come out and visit me in school and stuff. *Nikka, 41*

Nikka said not having children was how her life panned out, but she is excited for her twenty-seven-year-old niece to have children. She gave her a Christmas card with a baby as a hint. So, even though Nikka did not have children, she was excited about being a great-aunt. Charlotte would attend parent-teacher conferences for her sister. She was acting as a stand-in for her parents, who did not speak English. She felt it was important to be there for her family:

> When whenever there were parenting conferences in high school, because we went to a private Catholic school. I would I would go to my sister's teacher parent conferences, and the teachers would ask, "Where are your parents?" And I was, I would tell them oh, I'm, you know, I'm substituting for my mom and my dad because they don't speak English. So, um, so I'm here to represent them. *Charlotte, 39*

Therefore, Charlotte was not only a student, she was also acting as a translator for her parents. Although she stated she was happy to help the family, she was also taking on an extra burden when she was a child herself. Flor's mother taught her if she got pregnant it would change her life in the short-term, but also change her ability to makes choices in the long-term:

> My mom used to take care of my cousin in her teens, and she got pregnant at about 15 years old. And my mom was really freaked out that I would that I would follow that path. Right. So, she would always stress to me, she's like, you gotta you can't do that. Like, she's like, sex is really nice. But it has a lot of consequences... but I think that that experience really, really made me really conscious of pregnancy and having kids and how, how an important step it is and how it can change your life and truly change your life. Right. And so at least to live the life that I was living as a college student as a graduate student, I was enjoying and I didn't want to stop that. You know, I didn't want anything to stop that. *Flor, 42*

Flor saw first-hand that the life of a teenage mother was difficult, and she believed it was in conflict with her continuing her education. She was enjoying her life, and the consequences of motherhood were more harmful than heartfelt. Some Autonomous WOC have had their fill of taking care of others or worrying about others, and now they want to think about themselves. Although society has viewed this as a form of selfishness, Flor was also thinking about raising a child in an economically disadvantaged family and did not think that was what would be best for the child. Therefore, these women have every right to live a self-governing, solitary life if they choose to do so.

Autonomous WOC already had a role in raising children, and they felt they had already fulfilled that responsibility to their families. This also explains why some Autonomous WOC chose to have a more idiosyncratic adulthood in which they can make their own decisions. The women in my study who had an integral role in raising children while they were children indicated that these experiences affected their decisions not to be mothers. Some of their mothers were women who were not traditional stay-at-home mothers or were women who struggled with financial insecurity and abusive partners. Therefore, motherhood was not always associated with positive experiences. Autonomous WOC were not looking for a child to make their life fulfilled or complete as they had already undergone the role of caretaker and did not feel a need or desire to have children of their own.

6.4 REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS

In this section, I examine how motherhood is not only gendered and classed, it is also racialized. Autonomous WOC have concerns about pregnancy, their physical health, and mental health that white women do not have. I discuss how WOC have historical trauma that can result in physical and mental health concerns when making decisions about having children. WOC have to consider the inequity of our health care system in which they have higher risks of complications, as well as the emotional impact of raising children in a society that still values whiteness.

6.4.1 *Racialized Motherhood*

Kimberlee Crenshaw (1989) coined intersectionality, which applies an analysis of gender, race, and class. Intersectionality refers to the multiple forms of discrimination, such as racism, sexism, and classism, that impact a person's life (Crenshaw 1989). Intersectionality was created to discuss the inequity of the legal systems in the United States and explain how institutionalized racism affects how laws are written, enacted, and enforced. Black feminists have also used intersectionality to discuss the marginalization and oppression of WOC. Sankofa, a sixty-one-year-old Black woman, talked about her choice not to have children goes against her cultural norms:

> I actually think that my cultural background would suggest that I wouldn't want that, I would have to whether I wanted to have children or not, right, that but that I would have children. Right. So, I think that my choice is actually sort of, if I can use this term, anti my cultural background, like it's, it goes against the grain of what the expectation, you know, at least my sense of what the expectation of my culture is. *Sankofa, 61*

Sankofa understands that according to her cultural history, she would be expected to have children whether she wanted them or not. During slavery, Black women could not refuse sexual advances, and Black women were expected to bear as many children as possible to allow this

system to continue. Therefore, WOC have been the means of production and the product (Davis 1983). As a Black woman, Sankofa was claiming her identity in terms of her fertility at a time when that was not typically done. Gertrude explicitly stated that she did not want to become another statistic of a Black teen mother, meaning she did not want the shame that is often associated with being a Black teen mother. She has seen other women in her neighborhood and family have children young, and she knew how difficult that was to do and how society would view her as a Black woman:

> I think, like growing up ... a person of color, like, especially Black person in America, like teen pregnancy and like, crack and all that stuff right was huge right? So, like, I knew that's why I went to Catholic school. My mom was like, you shall remain untouched. I was like, I need to stay like, I don't want to be a statistic. Like, don't be a statistic. Right. So, like, you're not getting pregnant at 16. Like, you're not doing any of those things. And I think like, as that kind of morphed into me, like living in a world of like, just arts and theater and creativity and like, storytelling. *Gertrude, 47*

Gertrude recognized that her pregnancy, as a Black woman, would not be viewed the same as a white woman's pregnancy. Sasha knew she did not want to have children, but that did not mean her family agreed with her:

> So, for reference, my mom is black. My dad's family is from Puerto Rico...brown families in general want to procreate. Right? And so big families, lots of cousins and things like that. And it I mean, I probably was being asked early teens, by like my mom, grandmother on my dad's side, like, you know, when are you gonna get a boyfriend? When are you gonna get married? Is he a nice Puerto Rican boy? *Sasha, 42*

Sasha knew from a young age that she was expected to marry and have children as part of a Puerto Rican family. Fulfilling the role of the ideal woman would mean providing many children for the family. However, Sasha was not interested in fulfilling this role. Dora also knew what the expectations were for her as a Mexican woman. She was to get married and have children:

> I'm Mexican ... That's the expectation. And my contemporaries, my cousins, they all you know, that are, that are on my age, they got married pretty quickly. I'll remember one of my cousin's was four years older than me, she was going to turn 30. And she was freaking out. *Dora, 47*

Sasha and Dora knew the importance of getting married younger was so that they could have more children for their families. These women are expected to continue the cultural traditions of having many children whether they want to or not.

The experience of being a Black/WOC teen mother or Black/WOC single mother was something my participants spoke of often. Many had witnessed it first-hand and saw it as a formidable deterrent. Eartha was also adamant that she did not want to raise children on her own:

> If my choice is between raising kids by myself and not having kids. I don't want to have kids. And as I grow older, of course, I got more nuanced around the way our society structures motherhood and what that means. *Eartha, 40*

Eartha discussed the challenges of being a Black woman and how that factored into her decisions about motherhood and marriage. She grew up on the south side of Chicago in Inglewood, a rough neighborhood. Eartha's mother was a single mom, and Eartha told her that marriage was a fairytale and fairytales do not always come true for Black women. Fairytales were for white women like Cinderella and Snow White, but not for women like them. Eartha's mom told her that she needed to learn how to care for herself and be independent. Black women like Eartha are going against culture, history, and social norms to remain childfree. Therefore, their decisions and motivations are important to examine and to determine what we can learn from their unique standpoints.

6.4.2 *Reproductive Rights, Culture, and Concerns*

In this subsection, I discuss the concerns of WOC when making decisions about their body, fertility, and health care. African American women have been less able to claim their own bodies and reproductive rights than white women (Davis 1983). K Maria is very cognizant of the racial disparities and health risks of pregnancy for WOC:

> I don't want to give birth ... I have a fear and I have like, issues with pregnancy... I just don't ever want to be pregnant. I think it comes from just knowing what I know about health disparities, especially among WOC. I worked for a university for six years, and we had a whole new center built just to address health, health care disparities. And part of it was, you know, hypertension, and diabetes, but also just the challenges that WOC face in the birthing process, and … I know that there's a lot of movement toward having doulas and natural and home births. waterbirth and all this other stuff, but yeah, I'm good. Even when I was a little kid, it just felt foreign to me. This like weird. I won't even get into elevators with people who were visibly pregnant. Nope. *K Maria, 42*

There is a fear associated with pregnancy and giving birth for WOC that is not on par with white women. K Maria understands the racial disparities in the health care system, and she has to think of that actuality when making reproductive choices. The systems of coloniality and patriarchy prevent WOC from obtaining control of their own bodies and lives. This actuality can be seen playing out today with the overturning of the fifty-year-old ruling *Roe. v. Wade* in the United States. Roe v. Wade was the law of the land that allowed women legal protection to obtain abortions under a federal decree. This is the first time in United States history that a constitutional right, once given, was taken away.

The fact that repealing this ruling will harm WOC and poor women the most is no surprise to decolonial feminists. The use and abuse of WOC's fertility is a continuous theme of colonialism (Lugones 2010; Davis 1983). The government policies and laws restricting abortion and women's healthcare are controlling women's decisions and choices about their fertility, bodies, and lives. Lugones (2010) argues that the purpose of European colonialism was to insert

a heterosexual and Christian agenda, as the structure of the family is dependent upon the cultural norms and needs of a society. Collins (2009) also agrees that intersectionality's most persuasive case is discussing how colonialism regulates gender. Sasha was having to fight for bodily autonomy on multiple battlefields, including with her parents, grandparents, and her gynecologist:

> And similar to my gynecologist, I had to tell them, I was like, hey, I've already told you I'm not having kids, and I'm not getting married. So, if you keep asking me, I will be coming around less. And it wasn't until then they were like, oh, I think she's serious. And that was probably in my 20s Like, mid 20s one, I just don't need to be badgered, like for that. Like it doesn't, it's not healthy for anybody. *Sasha, 42*

Sasha said she could probably get married, but "the baby thing has never been a regret." Sasha was not the only woman to refer to the blatant sexism in the health care system that assumes women cannot make reasoned decisions about their own bodies and reproduction. Davis (1983) contends the women's political movement for equality coincided with women becoming more conscious of their own reproductive power. Although the women in my study would not say they are trying to make a political statement with their lifestyle or choices, they are aware that their position as an Autonomous WOC is unique in a larger capitalistic, colonial context. Lourdes was defiant in proving to her family that she could have a successful life as an Autonomous WOC:

> Wait, you're over 30 and you don't have babies? What's going on? Let alone my Puerto Rican grandmother...especially coming from immigrant families, where it's just like, how are you a woman without a partner and children, and I'm like, I will show you how. *Lourdes, 38*

Blackstone (2019:31) states that "women who opt out of parenthood have quickly become one of America's favorite scapegoats." They have been blamed for the decline in fertility rates and the breakdown of the family unit; "Perhaps the only targets stigmatized more than those who were voluntarily childfree were women who were pregnant and unhappy about

it" (Ashburn-Nardo 2017:394). There is an expectation that women should have children, and motherhood is seen as normative, and a woman's value is defined by her having children (Freeman 2023:57). A woman's identity is also defined by her relationships or the lack of relationships. Sharp and Ganong (2011) found that female adult single children felt unseen by their own families of origin.

These adult women were often invisible in a family of grandchildren and in-laws. Koropeckyj-Cox (2007:1056) claimed that "parenthood may also provide enhanced social status, access to social capital." Controlling Black women's reproduction is essential to the creation and perpetuation of capitalist class relations (Davis 1983). Cultural imperialism is to change a colonized people's way of life, self-expression, and materialism without any regard for them as a people or a community, and the appropriation of knowledge and the destruction of knowledge are integral to the colonial process, as colonialism often employs racism as an ideological justification (Maracle 1996). Toya made her decision about pregnancy based on real concerns about life and death consequences in a racist health care system:

> I also had some, some reproductive problems. I had fibroids, because, you know, I'm black and female. So, they cut me open twice to get them. And, you know, they were like, well, you know, this is gonna make you high risk pregnancy that I'm okay, whatever. You know, I just right now, this is a quality-of -life issue. I don't like walking around, like, I got a gunshot in the abdomen. And this is not how you want to do life. *Toya, 47*

The notion of pregnancy being a loaded gun pointed at your abdomen is a powerful imagery for how some WOC feel about their bodies and the importance of reproductive justice. Unfortunately, this is a real concern for Black women and women of color in America. The capitalist-patriarchal perspective is built upon the colonization of women, their land, and their children. Posey (2023) states that the policy of breeding enslaved people was a conscious decision of enslavers to preserve their labor force once the slave trade had ended. Slavery could

only thrive once an individual was deprived of their identity as a person. Thus, these women were simply a commodity by which to produce more merchandise for the producers of capital (Davis 1983). Lamentably, the systems of whiteness, capitalism, and normative heterosexuality are beneficial for white men and women, and it is in their self-interest to maintain these arrangements. Therefore, women of color are right to be apprehensive about a classist and racist health care system that often does not take their concerns seriously (Collins 2000).

Black women were seen as manufacturers for which to beget a product (Crenshaw 1989). Slavery and the treatment of women under that system proved to what extent women's bodies were allowed to be abused for a state-sanctioned economic system (Marx 1990). Women who were enslaved were not considered women or mothers. Supreme Court Justice Taney wrote in his opinion of the 1857 Dred Scott Decision that "the Negros have no rights which the White man was bound to respect" (Posey 2023:3). This case allowed for the bodies of enslaved women to be used as a breeding fleet of forced labor. These women had no rights or power, and sexual violence was a part of their everyday existence. These were not crimes, as the women who were enslaved were not persons with autonomy or rights but bodies to continue the capitalist state.

6.4.3 *Reproductive Rights, Trauma, and Mental Health*

Autonomous WOC are not only concerned with their physical health when it comes to pregnancy, but they are also concerned with their mental health. In this section, I outline some of the anxieties WOC have in making reproductive health care choices. Koropeckyj-Cox and Pendell (2007) found that women are more likely than men to view pregnancy and parenthood as limiting. Devi did not want children and reported that the stress of worrying about an unwanted pregnancy was interfering with her being able to enjoy sex. Therefore, she decided to become sterilized:

> I was tired of worrying about it at 32. From you know, because I didn't, I lost my virginity at 18. And so, the fatigue of worrying about whether I was going to get pregnant or not, I was done with it. And I just didn't want to worry about that anymore. And that was if it was anything that was driving me it was no longer to have that worry. I wanted to be burden free that way. *Devi, 48*

Devi took her reproductive health into her own hands. She did not want to continue to worry about having her life upended and decided to have the medical procedure. Dela spoke of her challenging experiences as a teen and trying to negotiate more independence with her father. She decided that her history of emotional trauma was not something she wanted to transfer to a child:

> I talked to my father specifically, about changing my restrictions, curfews and allowing you more freedom of choice in my life, and just the way that went nowhere fast like just instantly No, I realized that you – there's so much I'm carrying around that I didn't want to dump on a child. And I feel like that was inevitable. I wasn't healing, I wasn't really able to understand or fix my situation. And I didn't want to do that to somebody else. I remember how miserable I was as a child, and how stressful it was for my parents. So, I couldn't do that for another person. *Dela, 45*

Therefore, not only were Autonomous WOC concerned about the physical ramifications of their pregnancies, but also the generational transmission of trauma. Dela was still healing from her own painful childhood, and she did not want to take the chance of having a damaging effect on her children, whether consciously or not, so she decided not to have them. Sam also felt she was not emotionally healthy enough to raise a child and thought it would be selfish of her to raise a child without first raising herself. Sam had a traumatic childhood. Her mother had a mental illness and she experienced much instability in her surroundings:

> I think my mother never should have had kids, like she wasn't capable of raising and caring for beings the way they need. Um, and then the other part is, like, you know, I would call it somewhat jokingly being selfish, but like, I have so much work to do re-raising myself, and putting it like, that I didn't have as a kid ... I am the one, the only one I can get that from. So, I'm already raising a person and it's me. *Sam, 38*

Sam may have been joking (somewhat), but the role of nurturing can be multifaceted. Sam is not incorrect to acknowledge the role we play in nurturing ourselves. For some people, it may take a lifetime of self-care to make them whole. Sankofa detailed a traumatizing experience of taking care of an infant that affected her decision on motherhood. She was five years old when she was left to baby-sit a newborn:

> It was a newborn baby; it was probably like a week old. Just going to the corner store, like five minutes away. But the baby started crying during you know, like that short, brief period of time and I didn't know what to do. Like I started patting the baby like a baby And, you know, my aunt came back and everything was fine... But I think I was so traumatized. I mean, I, the reason I say I think I was so traumatized is because I remember that. So, to this day, even as we're talking about it, I'm feeling the anxiety of that. And then subsequently, you know, I was kind of like her helper, my aunt's helper with the baby... But yeah, I think that is one of those experiences that kind of probably set the tone for me like, no, don't feel like doing that. *Sankofa, 61*

This experience of being unprepared and unassisted stayed with Sankofa, and it shaped how she viewed motherhood. For her, motherhood would become intertwined with fear and anxiety. Consequently, it is not surprising that motherhood was something that did not appeal to her. The blaming and shaming of Black women for the problems within their communities, by the simple fact that Black women stepped up to take control of their families, has sexist, classist, and racist underpinnings.

The 1965 government study of Black families, the Moynihan Report, linked social and economic problems of the Black community to a matriarchal family structure (Davis 1983). Black women were forced to bear the burden of raising their families and then bore the brunt of the blame for any social problems within the Black community. Therefore, it is significant that "Black women are leading the way in carving out alternative strategies for establishing emotional, sexual, nurturing, and reproductive needs" (Marsh 2023:53). Black women and WOC have always been on the front lines in the fight for reproductive justice.

6.5 CHILDFREE SOCIAL MOVEMENT

The Autonomous WOC in my study are part of a larger social movement that advocates for the rights and equality of childfree persons. In Lugones's (2010) case for Decolonial Feminism, she states there is not enough examination of everyday resistance from women who do not self-identify as activists. Although the women I interviewed do not necessarily identify with being part of a social movement, there is no denying their individual choices to not parent are part of a choir of voices who are challenging the heteronormative expectations of womanhood. Nancy talked about never wanting children and wondered if there was something wrong with her because she never felt the ticking clock:

> Um, I have never wanted children. That's something that I have known. Gosh, since I was young. And I'll you know, and I think norms are cultural norms. And society kind of puts a lot of pressures. And I know, I've gone through a stage in my life where I've questioned it. Even when I was 38-39. I remember seeing my, my doctor and I was like, can you do like a hormone check to maybe like, check, because I've never had this like, ticking clock. I just never had had this desire to have children. *Nancy, 44*

Nancy works with children as a school counselor and stated she loves children, but she still worried something was wrong with her because she did not hear a baby-ticking-clock. Nancy is an Afro-Caribbean woman who related that she was tired of the negative narratives about women who are childfree and single. She knew she was not mean, or anti-men, or selfish. Nancy believed that it was her life to live the way she wanted, and that meant not having children. Nancy does not think her life was meaningless. Eartha knew from a young age that she would not have children even though her family expected that she would:

> I was raised with the idea that you want to have kids, it's good for the community to have kids and so forth and so on. And I was just never, ever interested in having kids at all. Personally, I can think back. At least since I was 11 years old, I knew I didn't want to have kids. *Eartha, 40*

Many of the women in my study also knew from a young age that they did not want to be a mother. Gillespie's (2003) research indicates that women who actively decide not to parent often made that decision while they were still children. The perception of childfree persons wanting to have children and then coming to terms with not having children later in life is not born out in the recent literature that determines most childfree adults decided not to have children early in their life (Watling Neal and Neal 2023). My research also concurs with this conclusion, as most women interviewed knew they did not want to have children when they were still teenagers. Lisa knew she did not want to have children, and her mom was supportive of her not becoming a mother:

> I never wanted children. Um, I just never wanted kids. It's not something that I desired. And my mom was okay with that, you know, she wasn't one of those. She's never been a mom to be like, I need grandchildren. You know, she and my brother. He doesn't have any kids either. And she's never tried to pressure either one of us into having kids. I knew that I knew from a very early age, I didn't want children. *Lisa, 49*

hooks (2015:135) feared that romanticizing motherhood and using "the same terminology that sexists use to suggest that women are inherently life-affirming nurturers" is dangerous for all women. She stated there is a danger of falling into essentialism and implying that motherhood is akin to womanhood. The women in my study prove that not all women want to be mothers, and their lives are not unfulfilling, nor do they regret their decisions. Sam talked about being a child and being asked if she would have children. Sam said she would answer yes and say she wanted four children – two boys and two girls like her mother, who had four children, and it was not until she was nineteen when she realized she had a choice:

> I realized that was like a society image of what we're supposed to do, and that I didn't have to do that. Like I actually had choice. And then it's like, what do I do? I want to do that. And I was like, no, no, I don't. So, I realized I could choose. Thought about what I wanted and decided I did not want to have children since I was a teenager. *Sam, 38*

Sankofa and Amanda have lived very fulfilling lives and never wanted children. Sankofa stated she "never wanted to have children. I never planned to have children." Geraldine talked about knowing she did not want children in the same light that she knew she was Black or a girl. She just knew:

> But I knew from the time I was a child I would not be raising a child. And again, I knew it in that quiet way where I knew I was Black, and knew I was a girl. I knew I liked ice cream. It was one of those things that you know people ask you know, when your child free by choice, especially when you're vocally, you're right about it. Like when did when did you know it? How did you know? I was like, well, I didn't, I don't know what I knew I was Black. So yeah, I've known since I was a kid that I would not be having kids. *Geraldine, 46*

Geraldine was raised as a fundamentalist Christian in the Bible Belt in the South. She stated that she knew in late elementary school, fifth or sixth grade, that she did not want children. Geraldine said the children would play a game on the playground at school, and the girls would have to name their future children. Geraldine remembers thinking she did not need to do that. Geraldine said it was that moment when she knew she would not have children: "But just to be back to that moment, oh, I'm not going to name my children. I'm not going to, be very aware in that moment that I didn't see that for myself." Natasha Fatale is another woman who knew from a young age that she did not want children. She was around eight or nine-years-old when she knew motherhood was not in her future:

> How old I remember being like, eight or nine. And, and I saw this man in a minivan. And he just like life had broken him so bad. He just looked so sad. And he was like this one man driving this thing minivan. And I just said, Oh, God, no, never. Mm hmm. You know, I and I knew at that point, I didn't want kids. *Natasha Fatale, 46*

Natasha Fatale, in her early thirties, went to her doctor and asked for a hysterectomy. However, she stated that her doctor was hesitant to perform the procedure until she was older. Natasha Fatale got her hysterectomy when she was around forty-three. Willie stated she did not have a firm idea when she knew she would not have children, but she recalls being in graduate

school and thinking being a mother was not something she wanted. She thought she would marry but hoped to find someone who did not want to have kids:

> It was actually never something that I really wanted to do... because I didn't want kids and therefore, especially as I got closer to my 30s, and in my 30s would try to find men who had already had children, because I didn't want to like have kids. *Willie, 45*

Nancy, Eartha, Lisa, Sam, Geraldine, Natasha Fatale, Willie, and Amanda are only some of the Autonomous WOC who expressed that they knew, from a young age, they did not want to be mothers. Amanda also knew early in life that she did not want children. She knew from the time she was 16 that she did not want to have children. Amanda found it humorous that her mother was concerned about her becoming pregnant as a teenager because she made her feelings clear to her parents. She was not interested in having children:

> Since I was like, young, like, my parents knew that I was not interested in the idea of having children. When I was like, 16, I would say, I'm not having kids. I had friends that were getting pregnant, and my mom was just like, you know, very, like, strict and not wanting me to go out, you know, because I don't want to get pregnant. That is the last thing that's gonna happen, because I don't want to, I don't want to I don't want any kids like kids. No. *Amanda, 40*

Although most of my participants have children in their lives in some capacity – nieces, nephews, younger brothers or sisters, or the children of other family members or friends, there were some Autonomous WOC who did not enjoy being around children:

> I don't think that it ever was a decision because I don't think that it wasn't ever a consideration. Because all the children are loud. They're slimy. They're sticky. They smell. They are, in my opinion, annoying is shit. *Laury, 40*

Laury was not alone. Francesca and Maria also did not love being around children. Laury stated she did not even enjoy being a child herself: "I got to a point in my early 30s, where I was like, you know what, I don't really like kids. I didn't like being a kid when I was a kid." Francesca wishes people were more open about not wanting children and sometimes feels attacked when she says she does not like children. Laury, Maria and Francesca have strong

feelings about children, but they are in the minority in my study. Most of the women did not report negative feelings associated with children; they simply did not want to have children of their own. They were not looking to nurture or a replacement for motherhood. For the women discussed in this section, they knew unequivocally that motherhood would not be a part of their lives.

The childfree movement has momentum and there are a plethora of childfree organizations and social media accounts to choose from (Blackstone 2019). They have brought attention to the conventional but inaccurate notion that only people with children have a life of purpose. More people are now questioning pronatalism and how the motherhood ideal has merged motherhood and womanhood into one identity (Nandy 2017). Separating the two, a new way to talk about motherhood and womanhood is possible (Blackstone 2019).

The term childfree was meant to be descriptive, but it has taken on a political meaning to represent happily childfree persons. They have made an intentional choice not to be parents. The term was also a parallel term to childless. The childless are often described as persons who wanted to be parents and could not do so because of biological, physical or environmental reasons (Blackstone 2019). Where childless sounds sad, childfree is meant to sound happy. However, these choices may not be joyful for everyone, and some women may resent the idea of being without children makes them freer. Some women say motherhood has expanded their world, not limited it, and that having children has added another dimension to how they see the world.

Some women desperately wanted children and may feel that not having children has made their world smaller. However, my research is not about either of those groups of women. My research focuses on the women who did not have children, and did not have children because

they made a choice to lead a different life. Although some women thought about becoming mothers at different times in their lives, and some women had pregnancies that informed their views on motherhood, most of them knew they were not going to become mothers and did not regret that decision.

6.5.1 *The Motherhood fault line*

I am creating a concept, the motherhood fault line, to discuss the symbolic boundary between women who mother and women who do not. A symbolic boundary is created between mothers and non-mothers. Social expectations have created unnecessary divisions between women who mother and women who do not (McRobbie 2009; Nandy 2017). A fault line is a fracture in two blocks of rock that allow the blocks to move in relation to each other. Women who mother/nurture and those who do not want to mother/nurture move in the same spaces and are defined by their position to each other. The two groups are often pitted against each other, with both trying to prove their lives and choices are worthy of respect and validation.

bell hooks (2015) contends that the romanticization of motherhood was in reaction to feminist critiques and an attempt to give mothers the respect they deserved. However, the dividing of women along the motherhood fault line is a burden for both groups. Therefore, the motherhood fault line is a symbolic boundary between women who become mothers and actively want to nurture others and women who do not want to become mothers or nurture others.

6.5.2 *Childfree Nurturers*

The women in my study detailed how they care for people, including their family members, friends, students, communities, and pets. Consequently, women who remain childfree are not free from caring about people or their community. Charlotte and Sankofa worked in professions that united families. Blackstone (2019) found that women without children often

engage with children by way of their profession. Alana thought about motherhood and her life goals. She wanted to go to college and then graduate school. Alaina knew she would be a very good mom, but she thought if she had a child, that child would become her priority, and she was unsure what that would look like. Alana sees a clear distinction between nurturing and motherhood:

> I have kind of like a, a nurturing, but I think that's different than maternal. Because even my work with kids, like I love working with kids. But it's not maternal. It's like, caring and nurturing, which I think is different. And I think people kind of confuse the two or kind of the overlap enough that people think same thing. Because I'll get them a lot like, oh, you work with kids, though. You must want lots of kids. *Alana, 41*

Alana is describing what hooks (2015) labeled as child-rearers. A child-rearer does not have to be a parent. hooks refers to people who help with the caretaking of children, and the notion that you do not have to be a parent, or even want to be a parent, to care for children. V, who is a professor, could be considered a child-rearer. She does not think she is missing out on having children because she cares about her students:

> I don't feel like I'm missing out on kids because I've kind of filled that in other ways. But like, not all of my students are younger than me, but I kind of see them as my quote unquote, kids, because I do mentor, I do provide support when I can *V, 39*

Therefore, V does not have to be a mother herself to embrace the role of child-rearer. V does not feel she is missing something by not having children because she has relationships that give her the same kind of fulfillment. V refers to herself as a PANK (professional aunt, no kids). She enjoys helping with her nephews. V will watch them overnight, help with homework, and make lunches, which she finds very rewarding. Erica is involved in her community. She does volunteer work as a community organizer and is also a co-founder of a resident-led group where she supports residents on issues they may have. In her free time, Erica connects with residents to

help them bring attention to the problems in their community and figure out how to work towards a solution with our elected officials.

Erica lives on the same block as her parents and reports that she is two doors down from them. Her father is in the beginning stages of dementia and Alzheimer's. Erica helps her parent with their grocery shopping and getting back and forth from appointments. She is working on finding more time for herself. She stated that others have described her as nurturing, even if she does not see her behavior in that manner:

> So, it's a lot of like nurturing and, and one lady said it best, you don't have kids, but the community are your kids, like you have, I don't feel like I'm a nurturer like, No, you know, but what people see in me, they say it's nurturing. *Erica, 43*

Whether Erica sees herself as a nurturer or not, she provides a role for others in her community. In a survey of seven hundred childfree women and men, one-third of respondents were involved in some form of civic life, such as community organizations, animal rights groups, human rights societies, and environmental associations (Blackstone 2019). Many of the women in this study fulfill other vital societal roles, and they could be described as providing the role of social reproduction, which is different from biological reproduction. Social reproduction refers to all the actions required to make productive members of society, and the people who have an active role in that process (Blackstone 2019).

Less than ten of the women had any pets. However, for those who did have pets, they saw them as their children and an important part of their families. Sonia spoke about her love for pets and how she never wanted to be a mother to human children, but she takes seriously her role as a pet mom:

> I have always had pets in my life, you know, family pets, and I had a senior rescue dog. He died about a year ago. But he has been my little buddy. And, you know, I adopted him, he has special needs. And you know, a little grumpy guy, but I, you know, was I loved it. Because it's funny, never really having this innate desire to have to be a mom, but a very nurturing person, no less. So, I think that I cared for him. I was responsible for him. I took it very seriously. And I loved it. And so, I think I will always be the type that adopts, you know, the little unadoptable doggy at the rescue. And that's kind of my thing. I love having pets in the home. *Sonia, 42*

Sonia stated there was a time in her thirties that she thought about having children. She said she remembered sitting with the idea for a little while, but she examined where she was. Sonia was in her thirties and starting a Ph.D. program. Sonia decided that she would not have children, and from then on, she never wavered from her decision. She said it was during this time that she had made the "solid decision" not to have children. Laury found solace and happiness in spending time with her animals and friends:

> I couldn't be happier with you know with my work, my fostering of the kittens, love the cats, taking care of my animals. Hanging out with my friends. Like I said, today I'm hanging out at my friend's apartment. *Laury, 40*

Daria spoke about the societal obligation to be maternal that is placed on women and although she does not have children, she enjoys the flexibility and the less responsibility of being an aunt:

> Kids can be the reason you propel yourself or keep going, or they can be the thing that stops you in your tracks because you have to take care of kids and there's a whole society's obligation that if you're a mother. You must be maternal above all other things. I enjoy being an auntie you can borrow them and give them back. *Daria, 56*

Lastly, Charlotte argues that she does not have to be a mother to be a caring human being. "I'm caring. I care a lot about how other people feel...So I care a lot about my family and other people's family. Making sure they're okay." It should not have to be said, but Charlotte is correct. These women care about their families. They care about their communities. They care about making the world a better place, and they also care about themselves. They are not putting

themselves last. They are putting themselves first, and in doing so, they are better able to be a well-adjusted individual who can contribute to society in a positive way.

6.6 DISCUSSION

Feminists have focused on gender as the generating force for discussions about sexuality, race, class, and inequality. The model of compulsory heterosexuality has been a driving force in women's lives (Thorne 1982). It also places heterosexual romantic relationships at the center of normative adult relationships (Butler 1993; Sharp and Ganong 2011). However, women can now choose their partners, and they have agency to make personal decisions about birth control. This agency poses a threat to the heteronormative conventions of gender roles that expect women to be mothers and wives (Lahad 2013). Some women who choose not to mother view motherhood as a sacrifice or a burden, and they also worry about a loss of freedom, time, and identity. Some women also associated motherhood with unappealing hard work (Gillespie 2003).

Angela Davis details in *Women, Race and Class* (1983) how the popularization of motherhood during the nineteenth century did not extend to enslaved women. The slaveholders did not even see these women as mothers. The women who were enslaved were serving a purpose, an economic purpose – to grow the labor force. These women had value only in terms of what they could produce, their children who would later enter the labor force. These women were valued for their ability to produce more capital for their enslavers and not for their humanity. Their children were also seen as property and not family members, for there was not even a recognized family unit to separate (Davis 1983). Therefore, given this historical context, reproductive rights are momentous for WOC, whether they want children or not. Whatever women decide, there are socioeconomic factors that come into play. Some women do not want

children because they cannot afford to raise them on their own, and some women do not want children because of their lifestyle choices.

Autonomous WOC have good reason to be concerned about their reproductive health. Early trials for the birth control pill were conducted on women in Mexico, Puerto Rico, and Haiti. These WOC were chosen as they were considered inferior populations (Blackstone 2019). Due to this egregious conduct and denial of reproductive rights, WOC feminists began to write about and emphasize the academic and policy benefits of adopting reproductive justice frameworks (Ray 2018). Even the famed Margaret Sanger, who pioneered women's reproductive rights and was a founder of Planned Parenthood, appropriated some eugenic ideologies. Sanger sought out the support of some physicians who thought it was their right to determine which women should and should not bear children. The group of women whom the doctors determined were not to bear children was mostly poor women and WOC (Blackstone 2019).

Arvin (2013) believes it is important to note that settler colonialism and patriarchy are structures, not events, and racism and misogyny are not parts of human nature; they are part of a process. This understanding is an important distinction because institutional structures are intentionally constructed for manifest purposes, and one of the manifest purposes of colonialism is to exploit WOC and especially African American women's bodies as both the machinery and the product to benefit the owners of capital (Davis 1983). To create social structures and employ social processes in which Autonomous WOC are expendable is to create a caste system of women as breeders. This is not a new phenomenon, as women have been prized for their young, fertility, and beauty, while older women and infertile women have been placed on the furthest periphery of the motherhood fault line.

Maldonado-Torres (2011) refers to a *decolonial turn* discussed earlier by W.E.B. Du Bois. The decolonial turn refers to multiple positions that all share the view that coloniality is problematic and that decolonization or decoloniality is necessary. The decolonial turn recognizes the "linkages between colonialism, racism, and other forms of dehumanization in the twentieth century" (Maldonado-Torres 2011:2). The concept of *otherwise* is present in decolonial work. It refers to knowledge opposing the conventional Western ideology of the binary of gender, sexuality, and race (Harding 2017). I assert that you can take that Western ideology of binaries and apply *otherwise* to motherhood. Autonomous WOC are in opposition to the conventional heteronormative knowledge and expectations for women, and it is a woman's body that becomes the battlefield for which the cultural war of motherhood vs. non-motherhood is waged.

Even though women have made huge gains – economically, politically, and culturally, this caste system persists. Society has created divisions within divisions, and the divisions between women are seemingly endless: women who mother and those who do not, women who gave birth vaginally and mothers who had cesarean births, women who breastfed and women who bottle fed, women who received an epidural and those who did not, women who carried their baby in their body and women who used a surrogate, and this does even begin to address the women who do not have children voluntarily and the women who wanted children and were not able to conceive.

With the understanding that womanhood and motherhood are not synonymous and should be viewed as separate identities, this would allow for a broader landscape in which to describe and define women who choose not to have children. The terms childless and childfree both center on the word "child," which is problematic, it also creates a moral division between women who want to have children and cannot and women who never want children. Although

these terms have been used for political reasons, they can have harmful connotations for women. Nandy (2017) contends that rejecting the role of a mother is different than rejecting other social roles, and the decision to not have children is more judgmentally questioned by other members of society. In a pronatalist society, there is the assumption that women want to have babies and should want to have babies, so mothers are not asked why they are having a baby. However, women are asked to explain why they do not want children. The reasons a woman may not want children can be very personal.

I maintain that women should not be divided along the motherhood fault line of childless and childfree, where there is a suggestion that motherhood is the more important and rewarding aspect of womanhood (hooks 2015). This also supposes a moral boundary of childless women being more sympathetic and loving and childfree women being more selfish and unlikeable. Two of the women in my study have power of attorney for ailing parents, and others are caretakers for a parent or other family member. They are not immature or selfish. Caring for one's self, including physical and mental health, should not mean being "selfish" in the conventional sense of the word.

Motherhood is also not the only essential role in the socialization and integration of social norms. Women fulfill a myriad of roles that help to make society better. As women become more independent from the family structure and patriarchy, their value becomes less tied to their fertility, allowing women to be accepted for what they contribute to society outside of motherhood. Therefore, we can have a dialogue about motherhood and nurturing separate from the established dichotomies assigned to women, such as the virgin/whore, selfish/selfless, essential/expendable, and mother/childfree.

6.7 CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have addressed the issues of identity, race, and the childfree. I discussed how Autonomous WOC's familial experiences have profoundly impacted their feelings and decisions about motherhood. I argued that women should not be divided along a motherhood fault line of childless and childfree. There should not be a suggestion that motherhood is more valued and honorable than being childfree. While there was variation in the participant's feelings toward marriage and being partnered, most participants were clear that their decision to not mother was a choice. Many Autonomous WOC knew they did not want to be a mother before graduating high school. There was a universal agreement that motherhood was difficult, and they did not want to raise a child alone. They were very mindful of how motherhood is gendered and racialized, as well as the social, economic, and political complications of being a single mother. There is more work needed in this arena of the WOC and childfree. I hope my study about Autonomous WOC creates a space to move those conversations forward.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I provide a summary of my findings, and I also detail my contributions to the current literature. I then discuss the larger context of my work, including my use of Feminist Standpoint and positionality, the lens of Decolonial Feminism, and centering the lives of WOC. I also detail my concept of the Autonomous WOC. Lastly, I discuss my study's limitations, future directions, and final remarks.

7.1 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Throughout my dissertation, I have addressed the social conditions, economic contexts, and cultural environments that have created the likelihood of WOC choosing to become Autonomous. I have determined that the choices these women make are in response to childhood experiences, educational opportunities, and the financial ability to live outside heteronormative frameworks and expectations. I have put forth data and analysis that have provided insights into the choices and perceptions of Autonomous WOC. The following section is a summary of my findings.

In Chapter 4, I have described the familial, educational, and economic factors that go into the decision to marry or have children. I also detail how the women in my study do not want to compromise their vision of happiness for motherhood or marriage. Some of the Autonomous WOC witnessed how their families struggled financially, and they did not want to repeat that cycle. Autonomous WOC challenge heteronormative gender roles and have redefined what success means to them, and they have centered their own health and happiness.

Most of my participants did not come from wealthy or even middle-class backgrounds. A college education was not a given or guarantee, yet they are an overwhelmingly educated sample. As children, they excelled in school because school was their safe space or as a way to

deal with family trauma and take ownership of their own fate. Autonomous WOC were curious, precocious, and determined. Geraldine expressed her philosophy this way, "I think it's very important for me to feel like I'm spending each day on tasks that are meaningful to me, than not." She also related a story about the famous actress Eartha Kitt. "Eartha Kitt was like, darling, I told you before, I do not have a dream job. I don't dream of labor." Geraldine agreed with that notion – that there are no dream jobs, but there are life passions.

In Chapter 5, I discuss how Autonomous WOC are defiant in the face of patriarchal social institutions and a society that centers romantic love. Autonomous WOC do not center romantic love in their lives, and they have varied views about sex and sexuality. They are comfortable with their lives as single women and are more interested in their peace and serenity than finding a partner. Their definition of happiness is infused with personal and financial independence and freedom from gender and cultural expectations. Autonomous WOC have people and causes they care about, and they are very selective with whom they spend their time. They are not inclined to place decisions about their lives in the hands of others, and it is important to them to be able to control their own reproductive decisions. Autonomous WOC wish to disabuse anyone of the idea that they are unhappy, unwanted misfits.

In my examination of love and relationships, Autonomous WOC question the systems that marginalize and oppress them, and they also recognize that they require time and space to decompress from institutional impediments and cultural limitations. As these women must meet their own financial, emotional and healthcare needs, there is a level of precarity to their lives. Autonomous WOC receive little support from social institutions, and they are more vulnerable in a society that values heteronormative standards. I also introduce my concept of the feminization of freedom, which furthers the case for a unique positionality for Autonomous WOC. I detail

how Autonomous WOC experience freedom and independence in a new context, and I assert that these women have a distinctive social location.

Their cultures have informed their perceptions and garnered strength from a history of intersecting oppressions. Autonomous WOC have experienced adversities as children and made cognizant decisions about not wanting to repeat cycles of abuse or suffer emotional and financial hardships. Some come from very happy childhoods, and some from very traumatic childhoods, but they navigate their lives in a similar fashion. The Autonomous WOC I interviewed did not have privileged upbringings, and yet they were able to find avenues to better lives. Autonomous WOC utilized education to their advantage and obtained the skills necessary to be financially independent. They were diligent in determining a path forward that prioritizes their mental health.

In Chapter 6, I address identity, race, and the childfree issues. I examine how Autonomous WOC's experiences have shaped their decisions about motherhood. Autonomous WOC did not want to have a family and a career. Although some women questioned their decisions about motherhood, most had removed those expectations and freed themselves from the cultural norms of being a selfless vessel for others or a go-getting corporate climber. Not because they are lazy or unmotivated but because they like the view from where they are. They have been criticized and vilified for being selfish or cold. Yet they are neither. Autonomous WOC love and nurture and find joy just not in the traditional places.

Women should not be divided along a motherhood fault line of childless and childfree, and challenge the idea of a universal motherhood. I coin the concept of a motherhood fault line to assess how women have been defined by their ability to have children and their roles as mothers. The motherhood fault line is a symbolic boundary that creates a line separating the

women who have become mothers and those who have not. I addressed the childfree social movement and how childfree WOC are practicing a form of resistance from the systems of colonization and capitalism that have often made decisions about their bodies and fertility.

7.1.1 *Summary of Childfree, Never-Married Single Women of Color (Autonomous WOC)*

My sample comes from diverse familial backgrounds, with some having very close, bonded family ties and others who are estranged from their family members. Seventeen (43%) are the youngest in their family, and seventeen (43%) are the oldest. Although many saw domestic abuse in their family of origin, none of the women reported being in a physically abusive relationship. However, some alluded to being in unhealthy or emotionally abusive relationships. Despite the lonely cat lady stereotype, only eight of the forty (20%) participants had pets. The love for travel was a unifying signifier of this group. Another shared factor was that thirteen women (33%) have been in therapy or currently have a therapist.

Autonomous WOC have learned the hardships of coloniality first-hand. They have had the weight of cultural expectations placed on them by their families and communities, and they have found it burdensome. As Audre Lorde (2003:27) unwaveringly understood, "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." The women in my study are not captivated by the master, his tools, or his house. Autonomous WOC do not want to compromise their vision of happiness, which includes personal and financial independence, freedom from gender and cultural expectations, and the ability to be their own master, which (for them) means forgoing motherhood and marriage. However, this was not viewed as a sacrifice these women were making but as a solution.

Autonomous WOC share a love for learning, travel, and independence from limitations. Women who are childfree, never-married, and single have been described in a multitude of ways,

from using deficient vocabulary such as spinsters, screws, dangerous, barren, infertile, unfruitful, sterile, sad, lonely and selfish, to asset verbiage such as carefree, independent, and liberated (Reynolds, Wetherell and Taylor 2007; Addie and Brownlow 2014). However, the women in my study defy most of these deficit characterizations and exemplify the characteristics of self-reliance, independence and rationality.

7.2 MY CONTRIBUTIONS TO SCHOLARSHIP

Mainstream feminisms such as liberal feminism are more often the result of privileged women from dominant social groups. However, these women have very little in common with unprivileged women, such as women of color and immigrants (Rodrigues 2022). Hence, Paramaditha (2022) reminds us that Decolonial Feminism is a process and not a final destination and that the connection between coloniality and feminism is conceptualized from academia and therein implies an intrinsic complicity of mainstream feminisms with coloniality. Therefore, there needs to be a disruption in the centrality of Euro-American universities in order to expand and reimagine other resisters beyond Euro-American academia (Paramaditha 2022).

My research centers on the experiences of WOC. Using Feminist Standpoint Theory and Decolonial Feminism, I was able to gather and analyze data that is different from previous studies that focused on the life course perspective. I was also able to see a distinct positionality among Autonomous WOC. Decolonial Feminism enabled me to see the institutional barriers that WOC encounter when making decisions about marriage and motherhood. In centering the lives of WOC, I pulled from the literature that details the historical circumstances and how past and current events impact their lives today.

Black feminist theory has had difficulty in "linking the everyday to the structural constraints of institutions and political economy" and detailing the relationship between agency

and social structure (Brewer 1999:32). My research bridges this gap by demonstrating how WOC's lived experiences and agency challenge the expectations of heteronormative social structures, and how these women have created a workaround through their choices to lead self-determining and happy lives. My analysis indicates that Autonomous WOC should not be analyzed only in reference to their absence of marriage or motherhood. Throughout this dissertation, I have put forth an argument that a clear identity materializes of an Autonomous WOC.

7.2.1 *Shared Positionality*

Park (2002) argues that beyond being more independent, there is no empirical evidence of other common traits among childfree women. Although my research is not in comparison to Park's, as she was looking at only childfree women, and my study encompasses more categories such as being never-married, single, and women of color, my research provides empirical substantiation that Autonomous WOC do have a unique positionality. I establish the common social conditions and cultural circumstances among the women I interviewed, such as childhood obligations and traumas, the attaining of validation through educational achievements, and a desire to find alternatives to heteronormative structures and colonial contexts. These women have individual identities but also social identities due to their similar experiences with societal prejudices and institutional barriers. Therefore, Autonomous WOC have a group-based experience.

Autonomous WOC are not celebrated in social locations or ceremonies. There are no bridal showers, weddings, anniversaries, baby showers, or Mother's Day. Yes, there are birthdays, but most people celebrate birthdays. There is no separate and distinct celebration or ceremony that commemorates their life choices. Some women have created their own

ceremonies, wherein one woman married herself (This Morning 2021). She received a lot of public attention, but I am not sure it pushes the conversation forward in a constructive direction. For example, to call atheism a religion when in fact, it is the absence of a religious affiliation or belief system, to have a woman marry herself to demonstrate some form of autonomy is again situating her within heteronormative standards from which she has intentionally removed herself.

Consequently, whether these women are celebrated or not, their lives have worth. Collins (1997) states that race, gender, social class, ethnicity, age, and sexuality should not solely be descriptive classifications of identity but elements of social arrangements. These categories are not individual descriptions, as much as they are accounts that distinguish a social group. For example, if one woman's experience is removed from the narrative, the category of sexuality or race would still exist. I have argued that Autonomous WOC should be considered a unique standpoint. This category demarks the positionality of women with a common history and social identity. As more WOC remain childfree, never-married, and single, they are creating a shared history of experiences that will continue and inform future generations of women after these individual women have passed.

The Autonomous WOC who participated in this study could distinguish between the social conditions that benefited them and those that limited them. For example, these women understood that economic independence was crucial to live a life of self-sufficiency. Thus, Autonomous WOC sought out and were able to find or create working environments that suited their needs. Autonomous WOC have intentional interpersonal relationships, but they also place boundaries on when they share time with others. Recognizing the social conditions that may

have led these women to their decisions can further the conversation about the social processes that influence the lives of all childfree, never-married women.

7.2.2 *Freedom and Decolonial Feminism*

In examining Autonomous WOC through the lens of Decolonial Feminism, I could see the cultural and institutional obstacles that impact the lives of Autonomous WOC. WOC feel restricted by the cultural, social, and institutional barriers they are confronted with on a daily basis. Therefore, it makes sense that Autonomous WOC would purposely carve out a place where they feel safe and at peace. The women I interviewed expressed that this is a priority for them and that creating a life according to their values and standards was important to their well-being. WOC are often struggling with conflicts in multiple arenas. Therefore, for them to reprieve from the fight and take off their armor is how they can tolerate the ongoing scrutiny they receive for challenging the social structures designed to oppress them.

My participants all spoke of needing time, space, and a place that allows them to disengage and rejuvenate from the institutional barriers and cultural restraints they habitually encounter. I argue that their desire to spend time alone and their joy of traveling and trying new activities are forms of feminist praxis. Autonomous WOC find solace in their resistance to oppressive social expectations, but they also take on the full burden of their decisions. There are few social safety nets for childfree, single women. These women must meet their own financial, emotional, and healthcare needs. This absence of support from social arrangements creates more precarity for women who are already living in a world of coloniality and white supremacist dogma.

In centering my research on the experiences of WOC, it would be impossible to talk about WOC, motherhood, and fertility without addressing the historical context of rapes, forced

births, and forced sterilizations during slavery and beyond in America. Although the women may not have specifically addressed these issues by name, it was an undercurrent throughout the conversations. There is an unspoken understanding that Autonomous WOC have options and rights that other WOCs, in the past, did not have and that they can say no to motherhood and marriage because others were forced to say yes. Black women, Puerto Rican women, and Native American women's fertility has been under attack in the United States of America. The WOC in my study are aware of gendered and racialized histories.

Therefore, one of my significant findings is that for WOC, remaining childfree is a form of resistance from the systems of colonization and capitalism that have often made decisions about their bodies and fertility. Autonomous WOC do not see womanhood and motherhood as synonymous, and as they become more independent from the structures of oppression, they are able to redefine what nurturing means to them, and they can embrace the ways in which they decide, if at all, to nurture.

7.2.3 *Feminization of Freedom*

I also introduce my concept of the feminization of freedom, which furthers the case for a unique positionality for Autonomous WOC. I detail how Autonomous WOC experience freedom and independence in a new context, and I assert that these women have a distinctive social location. My participants value freedom, self-reliance, and independence above having an intimate, romantic relationship. I am addressing how the concepts of independence and freedom are not just for men anymore (Coontz 2016). Autonomous WOC are financially independent and do not seek social or personal value from their romantic relationships. They have redefined what success means to them, and it is not an engagement ring, a large wedding, or a white picket fence. I do not mean to infer that married women or women with children are somehow not in

control of their lives or that their decisions are not based on core principles. However, a woman's life is in a different trajectory when they are childfree, never-married, and single.

Autonomous WOC carve out individualized lives in which they have the freedom to make mistakes, travel, live independently, and invest their time and money in the activities they choose. Freedom from heteronormative romantic ideals and patriarchal capitalism can have a disrupting effect on a culture that expects women to play the roles of wives and mothers. These women are cognizant that they defy expectations for women of their socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. However, Autonomous WOC are not here to fulfill any preordained social role, which is why there are so many damaging narratives about singleness to suppress a woman's agency and individualism (Sandfield and Percy 2003). Social and cultural norms have historically associated ambition and aggression with masculinity and passivity and subservience with femininity; Autonomous WOC have embraced a life with a certain level of freedom that is uniquely theirs.

7.3 THE AUTONOMOUS WOMAN

The focus on single women's perceptions of their own lives has been overlooked in the current literature (Sharp and Ganong 2011). Throughout this dissertation I have introduced the archetype Autonomous WOC. This term serves to characterize the life experiences and choices of the women in my study. This exemplar is not intended to represent all women of color or all women who are never-married, single, or childfree. However, the term Autonomous Woman can be used to represent women for whom independence and freedom are the foundation of their life choices. Autonomous Woman also is representative of women for whom agency and the ability to self-govern outside the paradigms of heteronormative relationships is their guiding force.

Autonomous WOC are autonomous because they have chosen a life of economic independence, distanced themselves from institutional arrangements such as heteronormative marriage and traditional motherhood, and detached themselves from the cultural expectations that have historically befitted women of color in Western societies. They are not sitting at the back of the bus or driving the bus for others. They have decided to walk their own path. Autonomous WOC are never entirely free from colonialization or the constraints of heterogender expectations, as these expectations affect all women in society.

I am defining the concept of the Autonomous Woman as a woman who is self-governing. She is able to make decisions without the consultation of others. Many before me (DePaulo and Morris 2006; Blackstone and Blackstone 2019; Marsh 2022; Nandy 2017; Simpson 2016; Byrne 2005; Budgeon 2016; Sharp and Ganong 2007) have moved the conversation forward regarding singleness and being childfree, but work still needs to be done in how we think about the women who live outside normative social and cultural parameters. With the emergence of women who have remained childfree, never-married, and single, a new way to describe these women is necessary.

The study of women and non-motherhood also utilizes problematic terminology. If we could separate the concepts of womanhood and motherhood, that should suffice, and womanhood could be used to describe women as individuals. However, mothers are also women, so the term womanhood is used to describe women who have children and those who do not, and motherhood is used to describe women who only have children. So, how do we describe the women who have no children? Childfree is the moniker of the moment, but this language continues to center on the word child.

As I have detailed, the current terminology is imperfect, and although there may not be just one way to refer to these women, I argue that these women should not be defined by the children they chose not to have or the marriages they did not enter. These women are a separate group with a unique standpoint on to themselves. This group of women should not be merely viewed as never-married or childfree but as Autonomous. Autonomous women have the power to make their own decisions. The concept of autonomy has been thoroughly considered within the scope of political philosophy and single studies (Dimova-Cookson 2003; Budgeon 2016). Autonomy is the ability to have self-determination and to be able to pursue self-fulfillment (Budgeon 2016).

These women are not free from burdens as self-governance is hard, and they have responsibilities to other people. Autonomous women are not liberated as they have nothing and no one to be released from. They did not gain their independence by eradicating themselves from a bad marriage or an unhappy relationship. Autonomous women have chosen not to be mothers, but they are no martyrs. This was not a tortured decision fraught with doubts and fears but a choice to live a singular life than what might be expected – an autonomous life.

Although some of the women in my study perform work or volunteer with community organizations that work toward social justice and equity, they did not describe themselves as social activists. They care about their communities and protecting the rights of others, but in their personal lives, they have mostly removed themselves from the stresses of combat. Autonomous WOC decide when and where they participate in battle with oppressive structures and processes. For the battle is tiring and difficult and the face of resistance can come in many forms. Autonomous WOC have chosen a path that provides a reprieve from the perpetual fight against colonization.

I appreciate that Autonomous WOC may not be a satisfying description to all readers. However, it is my attempt to carve out new terminology to describe women who have been too long defined by the absence of their relationships with children and husbands. Autonomous women should not be placed in competition with other women. These women are also not man-hating, child-hating demons. They harbor no ill will toward married women or women with children. Many have active roles in caring for people in their lives. Autonomous WOC are also cognizant of their unique otherness as autonomous WOC.

Other than seasons, holidays, and personal birthdays, the days we choose to commemorate are when we celebrate our relationships with others. These events are how we structure our lives. These days we are supposed to be happy; to show others that we are happy – with ourselves, our choices, and the people in our lives. Celebrating singleness in a social world is antithetical to how we imagine happiness in the United States. Happiness is meant to be shared and celebrated with others - so we have been told, but for some people, happiness is an individual sport. For Autonomous WOC, happiness is about how they live, not only with whom they spend time. Although there has been a recent push to celebrate a childfree day or single person day, these have yet to become a part of the fabric of our social and cultural tapestry. With more people deserting the heteronormative life plan, we may create ways of celebrating relationships and individual personhood. However, that day has yet to come.

As many of the Autonomous WOC in this study never wanted children and they knew they did not want children from as young age, as early as nine years old, I'm not sure if any improvements in social structures such as more equitable childcare or an economic system that values both paid and unpaid labor would make a difference in their decision-making. However, I

would agree with Marsh (2023) who states that we need to rethink family structures and if there should be a recognized family of one. Autonomous WOC who live alone are identified as a household but not as a family in the United States Census (Marsh 2023). The American 1950s ideal of a nuclear family with a picket fence and a dog named Spot does not exist for most Americans, and Coontz (2016) examined if it ever did.

As we accept more forms of what a family is and can be, a family of one should be part of that conversation. Autonomous WOC have lives that have value, and they have relationships that have value. They may not be a "family" as how it is defined currently, but if we can expand the definition of the family to include the most marginalized (family of one), all other formations of the family will benefit. As Feminist Standpoint Theory argues, knowledge from the most marginalized can sometimes provide the most insight into the social structures that oppress women (Collins 1997).

In the 2021 film Stowaway, Anna Kendrick plays an astronaut. The plot centers around the idea of not having enough resources for the number of people on a spaceship and whose life is worth saving. Four people are on board, and three of them have partners or children or are the primary caretakers for a family member. One woman is childfree and single. The film ends with Anna Kendrick's character scarifying herself for the sake of the others. The inference is clear – her life had less value to the people on the ground. Autonomous WOC are challenging this ideology. You do not have to have a partner or children for your life to have value or for your life to have meaning.

Recognizing a family of one will also help us move away from the patriarchal, Christian, colonial version of what the family is and what its purpose should be (Lugones 2020). A family structure that is not about procreation or establishing a new generation of consumers and laborers

but a family that exists nonetheless. A family of one can choose who their next of kin will be, who will inherit their material wealth, and who will be their power of attorney or make medical decisions for them if necessary. Autonomous WOC and all single households exist and their lives and chosen family structure deserve recognition.

7.4 LIMITATIONS

In my research, I have focused on the lives of women of color. Therefore, I am limited in what I can say about all women, as I have not included the experiences of white women. The decision to only include women of color was a methodological and theoretical decision. In the tradition of Black Feminism, I center the experiences of childfree, never-married single women of color. Black feminists started to assert their narratives in the feminist discourse and argued for a more holistic approach to gender studies that included gender, race, and class. Therefore, my findings may not be generalizable to other populations. My research findings are limited to the experiences and perceptions of my sample population of forty childfree, never-married single (Autonomous) women of color (WOC). My study is intended to fill a gap in the current literature that focuses on the experiences of childfree white women, never-married white women, and single white women.

As I did not study white women, I cannot speak to how similar or different their experiences may be to women of color. However, the historical events of colonialism and patriarchy have impacted women of color in ways that are distinct from white women (Collins 1990; Davis 1983). Therefore, Autonomous WOC may have added barriers to consider when they make social, cultural, financial, and personal decisions about remaining childfree, never-married and single.

Another limitation of my research is that the majority of my sample identifies as heterosexual. I did not exclude lesbians, bisexuals, and other women who identify as queer in my study. Although 10% of my sample does identify as queer, this is a limitation in my work. As my work focuses on the resistance to heteronormative constructs such as marriage and motherhood, queer women may have felt they were not to be included due to the subject of my study and the language in my recruitment materials. However, this was not my intent, and the experiences and lives of queer women are an essential facet of any discussion of heteronormative paradigms. Therefore, more research should be done to capture the experiences of queer women regarding these frameworks.

My research group also contains a large sample of women with advanced degrees. Similarly, in Ferguson's (2008) study of never-married Chinese women, there is also an overrepresentation of women with advanced degrees. Therefore, more study needs to be done if Autonomous WOC are, in fact, more likely to be highly educated or if recruitment models skew more toward this population.

My study is also limited by this dissertation's financial and time constraints. A larger study would be necessary to ascertain the full scope of childfree, never-married single WOC's lives. Lastly, my study was conducted during COVID-19, with limitations on person-to-person contact and travel. Consequently, I was forced to conduct virtual interviews for my study. Although I do believe there are benefits to this method of qualitative study, I do not know how my study may have differed or benefited from face-to-face interactions. Further study needs to be conducted on the lives and experiences of childfree and never-married women of color to obtain the complete picture of these women's lives. This subject could benefit from a study with a larger sample and applying a mixed methods approach.

7.5 FUTURE DIRECTIONS

My research falls within the literature on Single Studies and Decolonial Feminism. The categories of childfree, never-married single women have been studied, albeit independently. Therefore, this distinction is one of my contributions to the literature. I argue that my participants are a marginalized group, not only in terms of their ethnic background but also in terms of their status of being childfree, never-married, and single. This is what furthers my case for a group positionality of Autonomous WOC. Therefore, my research contributes to and expands upon the current literature in Sociology of the Family and Single Studies. My sample group is a significant characteristic of my research because I am studying a group that has received little attention from scholars.

As a Western, patriarchal society defines women in terms of their sexuality and marriageability, a woman is most viable when her worth is at its height, and that is when she is the most sexually appealing. As a woman ages, she frequently becomes less sexually attractive according to societal norms and, therefore, invisible to the greater community. This shift can be disquieting, but it can also be liberating. These women can live without the pressures their younger counterparts experience. As their societal value diminishes, their self-worth may actually increase. More research is necessary to determine if this is a germane course of study.

My future research interests are in Single Studies, Sociology of the Family, Feminist Standpoint Theory, and, more broadly, studying WOC's lives through the lens of Decolonial Feminism. As WOC are frequently left out of the discussion in the singleness and childfree literature, it is important to include their experiences and perceptions to develop a more accurate picture of how childfree and never-married single women navigate their lives while challenging heteronormative structures. bell hooks (2000) argues that no feminist reforms can lead to positive

changes for all women without challenging the philosophical structure of white supremacy. I hope to continue to produce research applying the frameworks of Feminist Standpoint Theory and Decolonial Feminism that allow me to focus on the lives of WOC.

I was writing the edits to this dissertation in the aftermath of Trump's second election to president of the United States. Whereas women of color overwhelmingly voted for Kamala Harris, the majority of white women voted for Donald Trump. This is another example of how women of color cannot rely on colonial institutions or the good grace of white women to protect them from discrimination and harm. Women of color will inevitably be harmed by the policies and practices under a Trump administration, and Black women, in particular, will suffer the most. Therefore, this election has led many Black women to reexamine if they are in a fight for equality alone and if a unity of women can protect them from white supremacist ideologies when those ideologies ultimately benefit white women.

7.6 FINAL REMARKS

Western paradigms and colonialism have often determined the choices of WOC. My study intended to give voice to the women who go unnoticed. These women are not grandiose, nor have they claimed to have all the answers. They have just asked different questions. Autonomous WOC question their place. Their time. Their energy. Their peace. What relationships cost, and what they are willing to pay. This is of note because WOC have not been afforded the same measures of dignity and respect as white women or men. Their reproductive rights have been stolen from them time and again. Therefore, Autonomous WOC are taking the decisions about their body and their ability to conceive, not just babies, but their ideas under their own consideration. Therefore, Autonomous WOC are a part of a more significant feminist social movement.

Autonomous WOC are fearless in being unlikeable. However, I found them mostly interesting, engaging, funny, and caring. They are not afraid to be in a relationship, nor are they in denial about what they want. They are not too damaged to be in a relationship. Autonomous WOC are in a relationship. The one they have chosen. The one that brings them peace and happiness. The one that allows them to make their own decisions about where they live, what work they do, and what kind of love fills them. That relationship is with themselves. As Maya Angelou memorably said, "My mission in life is not merely to survive, but to thrive; and to do so with some passion, some compassion, some humor, and some style." I hope I have given voice to the lives of childfree, never-married, single (Autonomous) WOC, and that I have done so with a little style.

References

Adamczyk, Katarzyna. 2016. "An Investigation of Loneliness and Perceived Social Support Among Single and Partnered Young Adults." *Current Psychology (New Brunswick, N.J.)* 35 (4): 674–89. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-015-9337-7.

Adamczyk, Katarzyna. 2017. "Voluntary and Involuntary Singlehood and Young Adults' Mental Health: An Investigation of Mediating Role of Romantic Loneliness." *Current Psychology* 36:888 904.

Adamczyk, Katarzyna, and Chris Segrin. 2015. "Perceived Social Support and Mental Health Among Single vs. Partnered Polish Young Adults." *Current Psychology (New Brunswick, N.J.)* 34 (1): 82–96. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-014-9242-5.

Addie, Elizabeth, and Charlotte Brownlow. 2014. "Deficit and Asset Identity Constructions of Single Women without Children Living in Australia: An Analysis of Discourse." *Feminism & Psychology* 24 (4): 423–39.

Addie, Elizabeth, and Charlotte Brownlow. 2014. "Deficit and Asset Identity Constructions of Single Women Without Children Living in Australia: An Analysis of Discourse." *Feminism & Psychology* 24 (4): 423–39.

Agonito, Rosemary. 2014. *Last Taboo: Saying No to Motherhood*. 1st ed. New York: Algora Publishing.

Ahmed, Sara. 2010. "Killing Joy: Feminism and the History of Happiness." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 35 (3): 571–94. https://doi.org/10.1086/648513.

Arday, Jason, and Heidi Safia Mirza. 2018. *Dismantling Race in Higher Education: Racism, Whiteness and Decolonising the Academy*. 1st ed. 2018. Cham: Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-60261-5.

Armour, Jody David. 2020. "Introduction. 'Rational' Discrimination and the Black Tax." In *Negrophobia and Reasonable Racism*, 32:1–18. New York, USA: New York University Press. https://doi.org/10.18574/9780814707821-002.

Arsel, Zeynep. 2017. "Asking Questions with Reflexive Focus: A Tutorial on Designing and Conducting Interviews." *The Journal of Consumer Research* 44 (4): 939–48. https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucx096.

Arvin, Maile, Eve Tuck and Angie Morrill. 2013. "Decolonizing feminism: Challenging connections between settler colonialism and heteropatriarchy." *Feminist Formations 25*(1): 8-34.

Ashburn-Nardo, Leslie. 2017. "Parenthood as a Moral Imperative? Moral Outrage and the Stigmatization of Voluntarily Childfree Women and Men." *Sex Roles* 76 (5–6): 393–401. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-016-0606-1.

Azungah, Theophilus. 2018. "Qualitative Research: Deductive and Inductive Approaches to Data Analysis." *Qualitative Research Journal* 18 (4): 383–400. https://doi.org/10.1108/QRJ-D-18-00035.

Band-Winterstein, Tova, and Carmit Manchik-Rimon. 2014. "The Experience of Being an Old Never-Married Single: A Life Course Perspective." *International Journal of Aging & Human Development* 78:379–401. https://doi.org/10.2190/AG.78.4.d.

Bay-Cheng, Laina Y., and Sara A. Goodkind. 2016. “Sex and the Single (Neoliberal) Girl: Perspectives on Being Single Among Socioeconomically Diverse Young Women.” *Sex Roles* 74 (5–6): 181–94. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-015-0565-y.

de Beauvoir, Simone. 1949. *The Second Sex*. Vol. I. New York, New York: Vintage Books.

Bettie, Julie. 2003. *Women without class: Girls, race, and identity*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Blackstone, Amy, and Lance Blackstone. 2019. *Childfree by Choice: The Movement Redefining Family and Creating a New Age of Independence*. New York, New York: Dutton.

Blackstone, Amy, and Mahala Dyer Stewart. 2012. “Choosing to Be Childfree: Research on the Decision Not to Parent.” *Sociology Compass* 6 (9): 718–27.

Blum, Linda M., and Theresa Deussen. 1996. “Negotiating Independent Motherhood: Working-Class African American Women Talk about Marriage and Motherhood.” *Gender & Society* 10 (2): 199–211. https://doi.org/10.1177/089124396010002007.

Bokek-Cohen, Ya’arit. 2019. “‘Marry a Camel, a Mouse or a Parakeet! The First Guy Who Passes You on the Street!’: Genderizing Marital Status by Othering Jewish Israeli Never-Married Women.” *Journal of Family Studies* 25 (1): 79–100. https://doi.org/10.1080/13229400.2016.1200116.

Boyd, Robert L. 1989. “Minority Status and Childlessness.” *Sociological Inquiry* 59 (3): 331–42. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-682X.1989.tb00110.x.

Brinkmann, Svend, and Steinar Kvale. 2005. “CONFRONTING THE ETHICS OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH.” *Journal of Constructivist Psychology* 18 (2): 157–81. https://doi.org/10.1080/10720530590914789.

Budgeon, Shelley. 2016. “The ‘Problem’ with Single Women.” *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 33 (3): 401–18.

Budgeon, Shelley. 2008. “Couple Culture and the Production of Singleness.” *Sexualities* 11(3): 301-325.

Burnley, Cynthia and Susanne Kurth. 1992. “Never Married Women: Alone and Lonely?” *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations* 18(2): 57-83.

Butler, Judith. 1990. Gender Trouble, Thinking Gender, Routledge Publishing, New York, New York.

Butler, Judith. 1993. *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’*. New York: Routledge.

Byrne, Ann, and Deborah Carr. 2005. “Caught in the Cultural Lag: The Stigma of Singlehood.” *Psychological Inquiry* 16 (2/3): 84–91.

Byrne, Anne. 2003. “Developing a Sociological Model for Researching Women’s Self and Social Identities.” *The European Journal of Women’s Studies* 10 (4): 443–64.

Cancian, Francesca M. 1986. “The Feminization of Love.” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 11 (4): 692–709. https://doi.org/10.1086/494272.

Chaudhary, Nabiha. 2024. “Examining Meaning-Making and Decolonial Resistance in Pakistani Women’s Stories of Navigating Coloniality and Gender.” *Feminism & Psychology* 34 (2): 207–27. https://doi.org/10.1177/09593535241233845.

Collins, Patricia Hill. 2000. *Black Feminist Thought*. New York and London: Routledge.

Collins, Patricia Hill. 2009. “An Interview with Patricia Hill Collins.” *International Sociology* 24(2): 185–90.

Collins, Patricia Hill. 1993. “Toward a New Vision: Race, Class, and Gender as Categories of Analysis and Connection.” *Race, Sex & Class* 25–45.

Collins, Patricia Hill. 1997. "Comment on Hekman's 'Truth and Method: Feminist Standpoint Theory Revisited': Where's the Power?" *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 22 (2): 375–81. https://doi.org/10.1086/495162.

Collins, Patricia Hill, Elaini Cristina Gonzaga Silva, Emek Ergun, Inger Furseth, Kanisha D. Bond, and Jone Martínez-Palacios. 2021. "Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory: Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory." *Contemporary Political Theory* 20 (3): 690–725. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41296-021-00490-0.

Connell, Raewyn. 2009. *Gender: In World Perspective*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Polity.

Coontz, Stephanie. 2016. *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*. Revised and Updated edition, 2016. New York: Basic Books, a member of the Perseus Book Group.

Cooper, Anna J. 1892. *A Voice from the South: By a Black Woman of the South*. 1st ed. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Library.

Crenshaw, Kimberlee. 1989. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1 (8): 138–67.

Crompton, Rosemary. 2008. *Class and Stratification*. 3rd ed. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Crozier, Gill. 2023. *Racism and Education in Britain: Addressing Structural Oppression and the Dominance of Whiteness*. 1st ed. 2023. Palgrave Studies in Race, Inequality and Social Justice in Education. Cham: Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-18931-9.

Cwikel, Julie, Helen Gramotnev, and Christina Lee. 2006. "Never-Married Childless Women in Australia: Health and Social Circumstances in Older Age." *Social Science & Medicine (1982)* 62 (8): 1991–2001. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2005.09.006

Davis, Angela. 1983. *Women, Race and Class*. New York: Vintage Books, Random House.

DeLoach McCutcheon, Kendra P., Karen Y. Watkins, Eboni V. Burton, and Arlaina C. Harris. 2022. "African American Women's Marital Attitudes: A Qualitative Study on Never Married Women." *Journal of Family Issues* 43 (11): 2868–87. https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X211035582.

DePaulo, Bella, and Wendy Morris. 2005. "Should Singles and the Scholars Who Study Them Make Their Mark or Stay in Their Place?" *Psychology Inquiry* 16 (2 & 3): 142–49.

DePaulo, Bella, and Wendy L. Morris. 2006. "The Unrecognized Stereotyping and Discrimination Against Singles." *Current Directions in Psychological Science: A Journal of the American Psychological Society* 15 (5): 251–54. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8721.2006.00446.x.

DePaulo Bella. 2024. *Single at Heart: The Power, Freedom, and Heart-Filling Joy of Single Life*. Apollo Publishing.

DiAngelo, Robin J. 2022. *White Fragility: Why Understanding Racism Can Be so Hard for White People: Adapted for Young Adults*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Dickson, Lynda, and Kris Marsh. 2008. "The Love Jones Cohort." *Black Women, Gender & Families* 2 (1): 84–105.

Dimova-Cookson, Maria. 2003. "A New Scheme of Positive and Negative Freedom: Reconstructing T. H. Green on Freedom." *Political Theory* 31 (4): 508–32. https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591703254386.

Donaldson, Laura E. 1992. *Decolonizing Feminisms: Race, Gender & Empire Building*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Dow, Dawn Marie. 2016. "Integrated Motherhood: Beyond Hegemonic Ideologies of Motherhood: Integrated Motherhood." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 78(1):180–96. https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12264.

Durkheim, Emile. 1953. *The Division of Labor in Society*. New York: Free Press.

Eastwood, Adrienne L. 2004. "Controversy and the Single Woman in 'The Maid's Tragedy' and 'The Roaring Girl.'" *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature* 58 (2): 7–27. https://doi.org/10.2307/1566550.

Ekelund, Malin, and Karl Ask. 2021. "Stigmatization of Voluntarily Childfree Women and Men in the UK: The Roles of Expected Regret and Moral Judgment." *Social Psychology (Göttingen, Germany)* 52 (5): 275–86. https://doi.org/10.1027/1864-9335/a000455.

Engels, Frederick. 1884. *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. New York, New York: International Publishers.

Ferguson, Susan. 2008. "The Crossroads of Identity: Never Married Chinese American Women." *International Journal of Sociology of the Family* 34 (2): 235–56.

Few-Demo, April L., and Katherine R. Allen. 2020. "Gender, Feminist, and Intersectional Perspectives on Families: A Decade in Review." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 82 (1): 326–45. https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12638.

Firestone, Shulamith. 1979. "Chapter 1." in *The Dialectic of Sex; the Case for Feminist Revolution*. London: Women's Press.

Florian, Sandra M. 2018. "Motherhood and Employment Among Whites, Hispanics, and Blacks: A Life Course Approach." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 80 (1): 134–49. https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12448.

Forsyth, Craig, and Elaine Johnson. 1995. "A Sociological View of the Never Married." *International Journal of Sociology of the Family* 25 (2): 91–104.

Franzen, Trisha. 1995. *Spinsters and Lesbians: Independent Womanhood in the United States*. 1st ed. Vol. 6. New York: NYU Press. https://doi.org/10.18574/9780814728925.

Freeman, Shona. 2023. "African-Caribbean Women Ageing without Children: Does African-Carribean Culture and Religious Identity Shape Their Experiences?" *Journal of Women & Ageing* 35 (1): 49–64.

Friedan, Betty. 1963. *The Feminine Mystique.* Norton.

Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. 2002. "Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory." *NWSA Journal* 14 (3): 1–32. https://doi.org/10.2979/NWS.2002.14.3.1.

Gavidia, Pino, Lisbeth A., and Joseph Adu. 2022. "Critical Narrative Inquiry: An Examination of a Methodological Approach." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 21:160940692210815-. https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069221081594.

Gillespie, Rosemary. 2003. "Childfree and Feminine: Understanding the Gender Identity of Voluntarily Childless Women." *Gender & Society* 17 (1): 122–36. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243202238982.

Gong, Wanqi, C. Tu, and C. Jiang. 2017. "Stigmatized Portrayals of Single Women: A Content Analysis of News Coverage of Single Women and Single Men in China." *Journal of Gender Studies* 26 (2): 197–211.

Hafford-Letchfield, Trish, Licky Lambert, Ellouise Long, and Dominique Brady. 2017. "Going Solo: Findings from a Survey of Women Aging without a Partner and Who Do Not Have Children." *Journal of Women & Aging* 29 (4): 321–33.

Hamilton, Laura and Elizabeth Armstrong. 2009. "Gendered sexuality in young adulthood, double binds and flawed options." *Gender & Society* 23(5): 589-616.

Hamilton, Elizabeth A., Judith R. Gordon, and Karen S. Whelan-Berry. 2006. "Understanding the Work-Life Conflict of Never-Married Women without Children." *Women in Management Review* 21 (5): 393–415. https://doi.org/10.1108/09649420610676208.
Harding, Sandra. 2004. "A Socially Relevant Philosophy of Science? Resources from Standpoint Theory's Controversiality." *Hypatia* 19 (1): 25–47. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2004.tb01267.x.
Harding, Sandra. 2017. "Latin American Decolonial Studies: Feminist Issues." *Feminist Studies* 43 (3): 624–36. https://doi.org/10.15767/feministstudies.43.3.0624.
Harrington, Rebecca. 2019. "Childfree by Choice." *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 20 (1): 22–35. https://doi.org/10.1080/15240657.2019.1559515.
Harvey, David. 2020. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford Scholarship Online. Oxford: University Press.
Henderson, Aneeka Ayanna. 2020. *Veil and Vow: Marriage Matters in Contemporary African American Culture*. 1st ed. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press. https://doi.org/10.5149/9781469651781_henderson.
Hill Collins, Patricia. 1990. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. 2nd ed. Vol. v.No. 2. Perspectives on Gender. Florence: Taylor & Francis Group.
Hird, Myra, and Kimberly Abshoff. 2000. "Women without Children: A Contradiction in Terms?" *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 31 (3): 347–66.
Hochschild, Arlie Russell. 2012. *The Managed Heart*. University of California Press.
hooks, bell. 2000. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press.
hooks, bell. 2015. "Escolarizando Homens Negros." *Estudos Feministas* 23 (3): 677–89. https://doi.org/10.1590/0104-026X2015v23n3p677.
Howlett, Marnie. 2022. "Looking at the 'Field' through a Zoom Lens: Methodological Reflections on Conducting Online Research during a Global Pandemic." *Qualitative Research : QR* 22 (3): 387–402. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794120985691.
Humphrey, Nicole M. 2022. "Racialized Emotional Labor: An Unseen Burden in the Public Sector." *Administration & Society* 54 (4): 741–58. https://doi.org/10.1177/00953997211037583.
Ingraham, Chrys. 1994. "The Heterosexual Imaginary: Feminist Sociology and Theories of Gender." *Sociological Theory* 12 (2): 203–19.
Ingraham, Chrys. 2008. *White Weddings: Romancing Heterosexuality in Popular Culture*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203931028.
Kaiser, Cheryl, and Deborah Kashy. 2005. "The Contextual Nature and Function of Singlism." *Psychology Inquiry* 16 (2 & 3): 122–26.
Kislev, Elyakim, and Kris Marsh. 2023. "Intersectionality in Studying and Theorizing Singlehood." *Journal of Family Theory & Review* 15 (3): 412–27. https://doi.org/10.1111/jftr.12522.
Koropeckyj-Cox, Tanya, and Vaughn R.A. Call. 2007. "Characteristics of Older Childless Persons and Parents." *Journal of Family Issues* 28 (10): 1362–1414.
Koropeckyj-Cox, Tanya, and Gretchen Pendell. 2007. "Attitudes About Childlessness in the United States: Correlates of Positive, Neutral, and Negative Responses." *Journal of Family Issues* 28(8): 1054–82. https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X07301940.

Koropeckyj-Cox, Tanya, and Gretchen Pendell. 2007. “The Gender Gap in Attitudes About Childlessness in the United States.” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 69(4): 899–915. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2007.00420.x.

Lahad, Kinneret. 2013. “Am I Asking for Too Much?” The Selective Single Woman as a New Social Problem.” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 40:23–32.

Lahad, Kinneret. 2017. *Facing the Horror: Becoming an “Old Maid,” A Table for One: A Critical Reading of Singlehood, Gender and Time*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Lamanna, Mary Ann, and Agnes Czerwinski Riedmann. 1994. *Marriages and Families: Making Choices and Facing Change*. Fifth. Belmont, Calif: Wadsworth Pub. Co.

Lamont, Michèle, and Virág Molnár. 2002. “The Study of Boundaries in the Social Sciences.” *Annual Review of Sociology* 28 (1): 167–95. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.28.110601.141107.

Lerner, Gerda. 1987. “Single Women in Nineteenth-Century Society: Pioneers or Deviants?” *Reviews in American History* 15 (1): 94–100.

Lerner, Gerda1986. n.d. “Chapter 4: The Woman Slave.” In *The Creation of Patriarchy*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Lesch, Elmien, and Alberta S.J. Watt. 2018. “Living Single: A Phenomenological Study of a Group of South African Single Women.” *Feminism & Psychology* 28 (3): 390–408. https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353517731435.

Lisle, Laurie. 1996. *Without Child: Challenging the Stigma of Childlessness*. 1st ed. New York: Ballantine Books.

Lorde, Audre. 2003. *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. London: Pandora.

Lugones, Maria. 2006. “On Complex Communication.” *Hypatia* 21 (3): 75–85. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2006.tb01114.x.

Lugones, Maria. 2010. “Toward a Decolonial Feminism.” *Hypatia* 25 (4): 743–59.

Lugones, María. 2020. “Gender and Universality in Colonial Methodology.” *Critical Philosophy of Race* 8 (1–2): 25–47. https://doi.org/10.5325/critphilrace.8.1-2.0025.

Maldonado-Torres, Nelson. 2011. “Enrique Dussel’s Liberation Thought in the Decolonial Turn.” *Transmodernity* 1 (1). https://doi.org/10.5070/T411000003.

Mandujano-Salazar, Yunuen Ysela. 2019. “Exploring the Construction of Adulthood and Gender Identity Among Single Childfree People in Mexico and Japan.” *SAGE Open* 9 (June):215824401985584. https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244019855844.

Maracle, Lee. 1996. *I Am Woman: A Native Perspective on Sociology and Feminism*. Second. Vancouver, B.C: Press Gang Publishers.

Marsh, Kris. 2023. *The Love Jones Cohort: Single and Living Alone in the Black Middle Class*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316672754.

Marsh, Kris, William A. Darity, Philip N. Cohen, Lynne M. Casper, and Danielle Salters. 2007. “The Emerging Black Middle Class: Single and Living Along.” *Social Forces* 86 (2): 735–62.

Marsh, Kris, and John Iceland. 2010. “The Racial Residential Segregation of Black Single Adults Living Alone.” *City & Community* 9 (3): 299–319. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6040.2010.01338.x.

McCall, Leslie. 2005. “The Complexity of Intersectionality.” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 30(3): 1771-1800.

McCann, Bandy, and Katherine R. Allen. 2018. “Romantic Forecasts in Later Life: Older Single Women’s Perspectives on Family and Kin Relationships.” *Journal of Family Issues* 39 (3): 747–70.

McCutcheon, DeLoach, Kendra P., Karen Y. Watkins, Eboni V. Burton, and Arlaina C. Harris. 2022. “African American Women’s Marital Attitudes: A Qualitative Study on Never Married Women.” *Journal of Family Issues* 43 (11): 2868–87. https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X211035582.

McDill, Tandace and Sharon K. Hall and Susan C. Turell. 2006. “Aging and Creating Families: Never-Married Heterosexual Women Over Forty.” *Journal of Women & Aging* 18(3): 37-50.DOI: 10.1300/J074v18n03_04

McGrath, Cormac, Per J. Palmgren, and Matilda Liljedahl. 2019. “Twelve Tips for Conducting Qualitative Research Interviews.” *Medical Teacher* 41 (9): 1002–6. https://doi.org/10.1080/0142159X.2018.1497149.

McRobbie, Angela. 2009. “Chapter 1: Post-Feminism and Popular Culture: Bridget Jones and the New Gender Regime.” In *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*.

McRobbie, Angela. 2004. “Post-Feminism and Popular Culture.” *Feminist Media Studies* 4(3): 255-264.

Mei, Xiao. 2023. “Positive Experiences in Emotional Labor: Deep Acting, Symbolic Boundaries and Labor Autonomy.” *Chinese Journal of Sociology* 9 (3): 453–76. https://doi.org/10.1177/2057150X231185926.

Mitchell, Juliet C.W. 2004. “Procreative Mothers (Sexual Difference) and Child-Free Sisters (Gender): Feminism and Fertility.” *The European Journal of Women’s Studies* 11 (4): 415–26.

Mohanty, Chandra. 1988. “Under Western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses. *Feminist review* (30): 61-88.

Montano, Melody, Lauren Mizock, Carmen Pulido, and Esther Calzada. 2023. “The Maternal Guilt of Working Latina Mothers: A Qualitative Study.” *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences* 45 (3): 149–71. https://doi.org/10.1177/07399863241239991.

Moorman, Jessica D. 2020. “Socializing Singlehood: Personal, Interpersonal, and Sociocultural Factors Shaping Black Women’s Single Lives.” *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 44 (4): 431–49. https://doi.org/10.1177/0361684320939070.

Morris, Wendy L., Stacey Sinclair, and Bella M. DePaulo. 2007. “No Shelter for Singles: The Perceived Legitimacy of Marital Status Discrimination.” *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 10 (4): 457–70. https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430207081535.

Nandy, Amrita. 2017. *Motherhood and Choice: Uncommon Mothers, Childfree Women*. New Delhi, India: Zubaan.

Neal, Zachary P., and Jennifer Watling Neal. 2022. “Prevalence, Age of Decision, and Interpersonal Warmth Judgements of Childfree Adults.” *Scientific Reports* 12 (1): 11907–11907. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-022-15728-z.

Neumann, Rico, and Patricia Moy. 2018. “You’re (Not) Welcome: The Impact of Symbolic Boundaries, Intergroup Contact, and Experiences With Discrimination on Immigration Attitudes.” *The American Behavioral Scientist (Beverly Hills* 62 (4): 458–77. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764218760370.

Oliffe, John L., Mary T. Kelly, Gabriela Gonzalez Montaner, and Wellam F.Yu Ko. 2021. "Zoom Interviews: Benefits and Concessions." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 20:160940692110535-. https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069211053522.

Paramaditha, Intan. 2022. "Radicalising 'Learning From Other Resisters' in Decolonial Feminism." *Feminist Review* 131 (1): 33–49. https://doi.org/10.1177/01417789221102509.

Park, Kristin. 2002. "Stigma Management Among the Voluntarily Childless." *Sociological Perspectives* 45 (1): 21–45.

Park, Kristin. 2005. "Choosing Childlessness: Weber's Typology of Action and Motives of the Voluntarily Childless." *Sociological Inquiry* 75 (3): 372–402. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-682X.2005.00127.x.

Pattillo, Mary. 2005. "Black Middle-Class Neighborhoods." *Annual Review of Sociology* 31(1): 305–29. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.29.010202.095956.

Phillips, Kimberly Martinez. 2023. "'We Come Not Here to Talk'—Revisiting the Work of Anna Julia Cooper: An Analysis of Standpoint Theory and Her Placement in the Academic Canon." *Symbolic Interaction* 46 (3): 311–31. https://doi.org/10.1002/symb.632.

Poortman, Anne-Rigt, and Aart C. Liefbroer. 2010. "Singles' Relational Attitudes in a Time of Individualism." *Social Science Research* 39:938–49.

Pudrovska, Tetyana, Scott Schieman, and Deborah Carr. 2006. "Strains of Singlehood in Later Life: Do Race and Gender Matter?" *The Journals of Gerontology. Series B, Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences* 61 (6): 315–22. https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/61.6.S315.

Ramirez, Jacobo, Claudia Patricia Vélez-Zapata, and Rajiv Maher. 2024. "Green Colonialism and Decolonial Feminism: A Study of Wayúu Women's Resistance in La Guajira." *Human Relations (New York)* 77 (7): 937–64. https://doi.org/10.1177/00187267231189610.

Ray, Ranita. 2018. "Identity of Distance: How Economically Marginalized Black and Latina Women Navigate Risk Discourse and Employ Feminist Ideals." *Social Problems* 65 (4): 456–72. https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spx025.

Reskin, Barbara. 1993. "Sex Segregation in the Workplace." *Annual Review of Sociology* 19 (1): 241–70. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.so.19.080193.001325.

Reuter, Shelley Zipora. 2018. "Intersecting Ethics of Responsibility: Childless Academic Women and Their Ambivalence in Reproductive Decision-Making." *Women's Studies International Forum* 70:99–108. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2018.07.011.

Reynolds, Jill. 2005. "Patterns in the Telling: Single Women's Intimate Relationships with Men." *Sociological Research Online* 11 (3): 1–13.

Reynolds, Jill, and Sharon Taylor. 2004. "Narrating Singleness Life Stories and Deficit Identities." *Narrative Inquiry* 15 (2): 197–215.

Reynolds, Jill, and Margaret Wetherell. 2003. "The Discursive Climate of Singleness: The Consequences for Women's Negotiation of a Single Identity." *Feminism & Psychology* 13 (4): 489–510.

Reynolds, Jill, Margaret Wetherell, and Sharon Taylor. 2007. "Choice and Change: Negotiating Agency in Narratives of Singleness." *The Sociological Review* 55 (2): 331–51.

Risman, Barbara and Georgiann Davis. 2013. "From Sex Roles to Gender Structure." *Current Sociology 61*(5-6): 733-755.

Rodrigues, Laís. 2022. “Decolonial Feminism: María Lugones’ Influences and Contributions.” *Estudos Feministas* 30 (1): 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1590/1806-9584-2022v30n184278.
Sandfield, Anna, and Carol Percy. 2003. “Accounting for Single Status: Heterosexism and Ageism in Heterosexual Women’s Talk about Marriage.” *Feminism & Psychology* 13 (4): 475–88. https://doi.org/10.1177/09593535030134013.
Sarkisian, Natalia, and Naomi Gerstel. 2016. “Does Singlehood Isolate or Integrate? Examining the Link between Marital Status and Ties to Kin, Friends, and Neighbors.” *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 33 (3): 361–84.
Segal, Lynne. 1993. “Changing Men: Masculinities in Context.” *Theory and Society* 22 (5): 625–41. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00993539.
Sergio A. Silverio and Laura K. Soulsby. 2019. “Turning that Shawl into a Cape: Older Never Married Women in their Own Words – the ‘Spinsters’, the ‘Singletons’, and the‘Superheroes.’” *Critical Discourse Studies.* DOI: 10.1080/17405904.2019.1656654.
Settle, Braelin. 2014. “‘It’s the Choices You Make That Get You There’: Decision-Making Pathways of Childfree Women.” *Michigan Family Review* 18 (1): 1-. https://doi.org/10.3998/mfr.4919087.0018.102.
Sharp, Elizabeth, and Lawrence Ganong. 2007. “Living in the Gray: Women’s Experiences of Missing the Marital Transition.” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 69 (3): 831–44.
Sharp, Elizabeth, and Lawrence Ganong. 2011a. “I’m a Loser, I’m Not Married, Let’s Just All Look at Me: Ever-Single Women’s Perceptions of Their Social Environment.” *Journal of Family Issues* 32 (7): 956–80.
———2011b. “I’m a Loser, I’m Not Married, Let’s Just All Look at Me: Ever-Single Women’s Perceptions of Their Social Environment.” *Journal of Family Issues* 32 (7): 956–80.
Simon, Barbara. 1989. *Never Married Women*. 1st ed. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
Simpson, Roona. 2016. “Singleness and Self-Identity: The Significance of Partnership Status in the Narratives of Never-Married Women.” *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 33 (3): 385–400.
Smith, Barbara. 1983. Introduction to *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, edited by Barbara Smith. New York: New York. Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press.
Smith, Dorothy. 1987. *The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology*. Boston: Northeastern University Press.
Stahnke, Brittany, Amy Blackstone, and Heather Howard. 2020. “Lived Experiences and Life Satisfaction of ChildFree Women in Late Life.” *The Family Journal (Alexandria* Va.)28 (2:159–67. https://doi.org/10.1177/1066480720911611.
Stahnke, Brittany, Morgan E. Cooley, and Amy Blackstone. 2022. “‘I’ve Lived My Life to the Fullest:’ Life Satisfaction among Childfree Older Women.” *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy* 34 (3–4): 296–312. https://doi.org/10.1080/08952833.2022.2139078.
Stahnke, Brittany, Morgan E. Cooley, and Amy Blackstone. 2023. “A Systematic Review of Life Satisfaction Experiences Among Childfree Adults.” *The Family Journal* 31 (1): 60–68. https://doi.org/10.1177/10664807221104795.
Stokes, Jeffrey, and Sara Moorman. 2018. “Influence of the Social Network on Married and Unmarried Older Adults’ Mental Health.” *The Gerontological Society of America* 58 (6): 1109–13.
Swank, Eric, and Breanne Fahs. 2017. “Understanding Feminist Activism among Women: Resources, Consciousness, and Social Networks.” *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World* 3:1–9.

Sweet, Paige L. 2020. “Who Knows? Reflexivity in Feminist Standpoint Theory and Bourdieu.” *Gender & Society* 34 (6): 922–50. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243220966600.
Swidler, Ann. 2001. *Talk of Love: How Culture Matters*. Paperback. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Taylor, Anthea. 2012. “Theorizing Women’s Singleness: Post-Feminism, Neoliberalism, and the Politics of Popular Culture.” In *Single Women in Popular Culture: The Limits of Post-Feminism*. England: Palgrave Macmillan.
This Morning. February 23, 2021.*The Woman Who Married Herself After Giving Up on Love*. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=umyNha7hj3k
Timmermans, Stephan, and Iddo Tavory. 2012. “Theory Construction in Qualitative Research: From Grounded Theory to Abductive Analysis.” *Sociological Theory* 30 (3): 167–86. https://doi.org/10.1177/0735275112457914.
Tracy, Sarah J. 2020. *Qualitative Research Methods: Collecting Evidence, Crafting Analysis, Communicating Impact*. Second. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell.
Traister, Rebecca. 2016. *All the Single Ladies: Unmarried Women and the Rise of and Independent Nation*. Hardcover. New York: First Simon & Schuster.
Tuck, Eve, and K.Wayne Yang. 1 No.1. *Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor*. Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society.
Umberson, Debra, Tetyana Pudrovska, and Corinne Reczek. 2010. “Parenthood, Childlessness, and Well-Being: A Life Course Perspective.” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 72 (3): 612–29. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2010.00721.x.
Velez, Emma, and Nancy Tuana. 2020. “Tango Dancing with María Lugones.” *Critical Philosophy of Race* 8 (1–2): 1–24. https://doi.org/10.5325/critphilrace.8.1-2.0001.
Vinson, Candice, Debra Mollen, and Nathan Grant Smith. 2010. “Perceptions of Childfree Women: The Role of Perceivers’ and Targets’ Ethnicity.” *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology* 20 (5): 426–32. https://doi.org/10.1002/casp.1049.
Volsche, Shelly. 2017. “A Comparison of Mothers and Childfree Women on the Common Characteristics of Romantic Love.” *SAGE Open* 7 (1): 215824401770152-. https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244017701529.
Walby, Sylvia. 1989. “Theorizing Patriarchy.” *Sociology* 23 (2): 213–34.
Waldron, Ingrid, Christopher C. Weiss, and Mary Elizabeth Hughes. 1997. “Marital Status Effects on Health: Are There Differences between Never Married Women and Divorced and Separated Women?” *Social Science & Medicine (1982)* 45 (9): 1387–97. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0277-9536(97)00065-8.
Walsh, Isablle, Judith A. Holton, Lotte Bailyn, Walter Fernandex, Natalia Levina, and Barney Glaser. 2015. “What Grounded Theory Is...A Critically Reflective Conversation Among Scholars.” *Organizational Research Methods* 18 (4): 581–99.
Williams, Kipling D., and Steve A. Nida. 2005. “Obliviously Ostracizing Singles.” *Psychology Inquiry* 16 (2 & 3): 127–31.
Wolkomir, Michelle. 2009. “MAKING HETERONORMATIVE RECONCILIATIONS: The Story of Romantic Love, Sexuality, and Gender in Mixed-Orientation Marriages.” *Gender & Society* 23 (4): 494–519. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243209340033.
Young, Anne F., Anne Russell, and Jennifer R. Powers. 2004. “The Sense of Belonging to a Neighbourhood: Can It Be Measured and Is It Related to Health and Well Being in Older Women?” *Social Science & Medicine* 59 (12): 2627–37. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2004.05.001.

Zavella, Patricia. 2022. “Women of Color.” *Feminist Anthropology* 3 (2): 404–11. https://doi.org/10.1002/fea2.12103.
Zhang, Chao. 2020. “‘Leftover? I Am a Victorious Woman!’- The Potential for the Emergence of a New Womanhood.” *Asian Journal of Women’s Studies* 26 (1): 36–54. https://doi.org/10.1080/12259276.2020.1718867.

Appendix A: Interview Questions

**Participants are free to refuse to answer any question in part or in full.* The categories are anticipated to change as the interviews are conducted. Not all the questions outlined will be asked to each participant depending on their comfort level.

Research Questions

Primary Questions
1)What do you do for/at work?
2) What do you do when you get home from work?
3)What do you do on a typical weekend?
4) What do you like to do when you are on vacation?
5) Who, if anyone, do you spend your free time with?
6) How would you describe your childhood?
7) How would you describe your sex life?
8) Do you think there was a time or event that you *decided* not to marry and/or have children?
9) Do you feel not to marry was a decision at all or more of happenstance?

The following is a list of possible *prompts* or follow-up questions to be determined once data collection has begun. These questions may or may not be used.

<u>Childhood</u>
How would you describe your childhood? Would you say you were a happy child?

<u>Family relationships</u>
What was your parents' relationship like?
(Married? Divorced? Alive? Did both parents live with you and who work inside/outside home)
Do you have emotionally positive relationships with family members? As a child? As an adult?
Do you think your family relationships had an effect on your not marrying or having children?
Has your cultural background affected your decision to not marry or have children?

<u>Personal values and beliefs</u>
How would you describe yourself in terms of your values?

<u>Gender, Sex and Sexuality</u>
Would you say you have traditional ideas of gender and sexuality?
How would you describe your sex life?
Is it important to you to have an active sex life?

<u>Romantic relationships</u>
Was there a time in your life that you thought you would marry and have children? Can you describe/explain what was going on at that time in your life?

How important (if at all) is romantic love in your life? Has that changed over the course of your life?

Interpersonal Relationships

How important are interpersonal relationships to you?

Work life and Economics

How would you describe your work life?

Lifestyle (interests/hobbies)

How would you describe your personality and lifestyle?

Turning Points

Do you have a time in your life you would describe as the happiest? When/age/what were you doing professionally/relationships

Do you think there was a time or event that you *decided* not to marry and/or have children? Do you feel not to marry was a decision at all or more of happenstance?

Demographic questions:

Age
Ethnicity
Profession
Income
Education
Parent's education
Number of siblings
Place in birth order
Age they left home
Sexual activity (celibate, asexual, or sexually active)
Sexual Orientation

Appendix B: Social Media Outreach Flyer

Dissertation Research at Memorial University looking for single, never-married, voluntarily childfree women of color

Participants Wanted!!

My participant criteria are the following

- Single, never-married, voluntarily childfree women of color to include: Heterosexual, bisexual, lesbian, cis-women and trans women
- Women who are celibate, asexual and sexually active
- Currently single (not in a cohabitation relationship for at least 6 months prior to participating in the study)
- Single (not in a cohabitation relationship) for the majority of their lives.
- From the United States or have lived in the United States for at least ten years
- Between the ages of **40 and 60-years-old**.

Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this study is to examine the perceptions and experiences of women about their lives and how they feel about romantic love, singleness, relationships and sex. These women will self-identify and may not answer any question that makes them uncomfortable. I will conduct one online interview that will range from 1-2 hours in length.

Interviews will take place online

If you are interested in participating or you know someone who fits the criteria, please forward the following contact information

Researcher Contact Information

Kimberly Martinez Phillips, Ph.D. Candidate
Memorial University in Newfoundland
Department of Sociology
kmphillips@mun.ca
(714)227-6178

The proposal for this research has been reviewed by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research and found to be in compliance with Memorial University's ethics policy. If you have ethical concerns about the research, such as your rights as a participant, you may contact the Chairperson of the ICEHR at icehr.chair@mun.ca or by telephone at 709-864-2861.

Appendix C: Recruitment Flyer

Dissertation Seeking Research Participants

I am seeking your assistance in finding women of color who may be interested in participating in research for my doctoral dissertation at Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador. I am studying single, never-married, voluntarily childfree women of color. I would appreciate if you could forward this request to your faculty, students, staff, customers and volunteers.

Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this study is to examine the perceptions and experiences of women about their lives and how they feel about romantic love, singleness, relationships and sex. These women will self-identify and may not answer any question that makes them uncomfortable. I will conduct one online interview that will range from 1-2 hours in length.

My participant criteria are the following

- Single, never-married, voluntarily childfree women of color to include: Heterosexual, bisexual, lesbian, cis-women and trans women
- Women who are celibate, asexual and sexually active
- Currently single (not in a cohabitation relationship for at least 6 months prior to participating in the study)
- Single (not in a cohabitation relationship) for the majority of their lives.
- From the United States or have lived in the United States for at least ten years
- Between the ages of **40 and 60-years-old**.

Interviews will take place online

If you are interested in participating or you know someone who may fit the criteria, please forward the following contact information. If you have any questions or need additional information do not hesitate to contact me.

Researcher Contact Information
Kimberly Martinez Phillips, Ph.D. Candidate
Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador
Department of Sociology
kmphillips@mun.ca
(714)227-617

Appendix D: Informed Consent Form

Informed Consent Form

Date:

Name of Participant:

Study Name: An Examination of Never-Married, Voluntarily Childfree Women of Color

Researchers: *Kimberly Phillips*

Purpose of the Research: The purpose of my study is to examine the lives of single, never-married, voluntarily childfree women of color and examine their perceptions and experiences about romantic love, singleness, relationships and sex using the qualitative analysis method of semi-structured interviews. My research will study what commonalities these women share and what can be learned from their experiences. My expectation is to discover themes in these women's lives that will add to the discourse in feminist literature.

What You Will Be Asked to Do in the Research: Participants are asked to participate in one semi-structured interview on an online platform with the lead researcher and possibly one follow-up interview. A follow-up interview may also be conducted on an online platform. The participant can decide not to participate in a follow-up interview. The initial interview can range from 1-2 hours. Follow-up interviews (if requested by either party) can take from 30 minutes to one hour.

Risks and Discomforts: We do not foresee any unusual risks or discomfort from your participation in the research. You have the right to not answer any question or to end your participation in the study at any time.

COVID-19: Before any in person research begins, participants will be required to complete the COVID-19 daily assessment tool

.

Benefits of the Research and Benefits to You: Benefits may include the personal gratification of having your voice heard and your story told.

Voluntary Participation: Your participation in the study is completely voluntary and you may choose to stop participating at any time. Your decision not to volunteer will not influence the nature of your relationship with Memorial University either now, or in the future.

Withdrawal from the Study: You can stop participating in the study at any time, for any reason, if you so decide. You may inform the researcher of your desire to withdraw through telephone message or conversation, text message, email or other correspondence. Your decision to stop participating, or to refuse to answer particular questions, will not affect your relationship with the researchers, Memorial University, or any other group associated with this project. In the

event you withdraw from the study, all associated data collected will be immediately destroyed wherever possible.

Confidentiality: The researcher will be taking handwritten notes, as well as audio-recording of the interviews. The data in the form of interview notes and recordings will either be transcribed by the lead researcher or through the use an A.I. platform service such as Otter Voice Meeting Notes https://otter.ai or Happy Scribe https://www.happyscribe.com.

Unless you choose otherwise, all information you supply during the research will be held in confidence and unless you specifically indicate your consent, your name will not appear in any report or publication of the research. The data will be safely stored in a locked file cabinet and only research staff will have access to this information. The consent forms will be kept in a separate cabinet from the interview notes and transcriptions in the researcher's home. The data will be kept for a minimum of five (5) years. Confidentiality will be provided to the fullest extent possible by law.

Questions About the Research? If you have questions about the research in general or about your role in the study, please feel free to contact Kim Phillips either by telephone at (714) 227-6178, or by e-mail kmphillips@mun.ca. This research has been reviewed and approved by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research (ICEHR), on behalf of Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador, and conforms to the standards of the Canadian Tri-Council Research Ethics guidelines.

Legal Rights and Signatures:

I, *(fill in your name here),* consent to participate in *(insert study name here)* conducted by *Kim Phillips*. I have understood the nature of the project and wish to participate. I am not waiving any of my legal rights by signing this form. My signature below indicates my consent.

Signature _____ **Date** _____
Participant

Signature _____ **Date** _____
Principal Investigator

I, *(fill in your name here),* agree to allow video and/or [digital images or photographs] in which I appear to be used in teaching, scientific presentations and/or publications with the understanding that I will not be identified by name. I am aware that I may withdraw this consent at any time without penalty.

Signature _____ **Date** _____
Participant