



On the Margins of Motherhood: Choosing to Be Child-Free in Lucie Joubert's *L'Envers du landau* (2010)

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On the Margins of Motherhood: Choosing to Be Child-Free in Lucie Joubert's *L'Envers du landau* (2010)

Abstract: Voluntarily choosing not to have children is increasingly becoming a preferred life option in contemporary society. Yet there remains an inherent suspicion and pitying of women who do not follow what is still perceived, despite several waves of feminism, as their biological destiny. Such choices are considered 'unspeakable' by the dominant pro-natalist discourse that currently presides in western advanced-capitalist society. This article attempts to challenge and reverse prescribed beliefs about motherhood and create a textual space for those who have been denigrated for choosing not to become mothers.

Keywords: French Canadian literature, Lucie Joubert, motherhood, pro-natalism, voluntary childlessness

Despite the many gains of second-wave feminism over the course of the twentieth century and its endeavour to decentre motherhood from the core of the female existence, it would appear that voluntarily choosing not to become a mother is a decision with which society is uncomfortable and, moreover, refuses outright to accept as valid. In fact, it could be argued that a key feature of contemporary post-feminist society has been a

regression to pre-feminist values that distinctly align womanhood with motherhood (Rodgers 2016: 46). As Melanie Notkin observes in the *New York Post*: ‘We live in a “Mom-opic” world with a myopic view of womanhood as motherhood. We live in a society where the latest celebrity birth is headline news and marketers brand moms as heroes’ (Notkin 2016). Becoming a mother is not just presented as a laudable aspiration for women, but, more perniciously, it is designated the norm. As Notkin comments: ‘to become a mother, it is understood, is to find fulfillment and happiness’ (Notkin 2016). A similar observation is made by Caitlin Moran, who notes that ‘women, it is presumed, will always end up having babies’, and that should a woman proclaim that she does not, in fact, want to have children at all, ‘the world is apt to go decidedly peculiar’ (Moran 2012: 236).

Moving forward from Gayle Letherby and Catherine Williams’ earlier observation that non-motherhood is a ‘lost discourse’ within feminism (Letherby and Williams 1999: 722), this article delineates Lucie Joubert’s essay *L’Envers du landau* (*The Other Side of the Cradle*, 2010) as a key example of what could be described as a new and alternative body of women’s writing on the maternal, emerging in the twenty-first century. Such writing specifically seeks to accord an authentic voice to women who have decided that motherhood is not for them. It demands that we listen to the individual reasonings of these women and attempt to understand them, rather than automatically constructing negative and fallacious assumptions about their alternative life choice.

This article contextualizes *L’Envers du landau* within the wider public discourse of maternalism (in particular, in the media and in politics). It first discusses reductive stereotypes of the voluntary non-mother, then examines how Joubert skilfully deconstructs these. Finally, the ways in which motherhood and non-motherhood pit women against one another are discussed, as well as how feminism might go about addressing this problem. In the process, I intend to highlight Joubert’s essay’s valuable contribution to our understanding of women’s decisions to be child-free and the challenges it presents to dominant, largely negative perspectives of this life choice.

Surveilling the Non-Mother

Evidence of how global culture continues to position motherhood as the ‘true’ goal of every woman and to stigmatize the non-mother is not difficult to locate. In popular culture, female celebrities of a certain age who have no children are constantly harassed with ‘whens’ and ‘whys’ in relation to their

reproductive status. One prominent example is the American actress Jennifer Aniston, for whom the relentless scrutinizing of her ‘unused womb’ recently led her to publish a detailed statement in the *Huffington Post*. She criticized the tabloids’ ‘perpetuation of the notion that women are somehow incomplete, unsuccessful or unhappy if they’re not married with children’ (Aniston 2016).

Childless women are regularly depicted by the media in a pitying light, neglecting that their non-maternal state may, in fact, be a desired life choice. This is particularly evident in the case of the British actress Helen Mirren, despite her frequent public statements describing her lack of desire to have children and her erstwhile sense of fulfilment. Her comment that she briefly cried during the 1980s film *Parenthood* was seized on as evidence that she does, in fact, regret her decision to forgo motherhood (Miller 2016).

Such pro-natalist attitudes are even more pronounced in the domain of global politics. In 2007, Julia Gillard, the first Australian female prime minister, was disparagingly labelled ‘deliberately barren’ by Senator Bill Heffernan. She was similarly criticized by fellow politician Tony Abbott in 2012 for lacking any real experience with children (Rourke 2012).

Politics in 2016 was startlingly contemptuous towards women without children. In June of that year, the Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, in a bid to encourage Turkish women to have more children, claimed that women without children are deficient and incomplete, and that rejecting motherhood amounts to giving up on humanity (‘Turkish President’ 2016). In July of the same year, during her campaign to become Britain’s second female prime minister, Theresa May had her childless state directed against her by her political rival Andrea Leadsom. Leadsom claimed that, as a mother, she had more of a stake in the future of the nation than childless women (Sylvester 2016). In September 2016, Italy launched a campaign that included the establishment of a Fertility Day, and employed scaremongering tactics—for example, warning about the ticking biological clock—to redress a declining birth rate, for which women were perceived as responsible (Coppolaro-Nowell 2016).

This notion that women are to blame for declining birth rates re-emerges in a *Sunday Times* special feature focusing on childless British politicians. The article was accompanied by a sidebar infographic including females only, as if to suggest that childlessness is a state unique to women in politics (Rhodes 2016). In 2017, just fifteen minutes into her inaugural press conference as freshly elected premier of New South Wales, Australia, Gladys Berejiklian was probed about her childlessness and the impact this might have on her ‘relatability’ factor (Barlow 2017).

The Non-Mother as Abject

As Jody Day remarks: ‘Our culture has always feared the childless woman; she’s a destabilizing and potentially radical figure’ (Day 2012). Becoming a mother is posited as the ‘normal’, ‘authentic’ and expected pathway. As a result, those who deviate from the motherhood mandate are ‘open to accusations of selfishness, and the suggestions that [they] have made a calculated decision that alienates them from “ordinary people”’ (Lewis 2015). Additionally, their lives are viewed as ‘inevitably emotionally stunted and unfulfilling’ (Lewis 2015: 31). Tina Hassannia, writing for the *National Post*, describes how her decision not to become a mother is often interpreted as ‘an affront to parents who have made sacrifices to do the opposite’. Hassannia notes: ‘They sometimes react defensively, as if they’re threatened by the decision ... Or they’re just weirded out’ (Hassannia 2016).

This perspective of the non-mother as somehow transgressive and injurious is forcefully upheld by the blogger Bianca Longpré, who, in an entry for the Quebec *Huffington Post* (Quebec being the social and political context for Joubert’s essay), virulently attacks the child-free for renegeing on what she considers to be not simply their destiny, but also their moral duty:

Pourquoi des gens décident de tout garder pour eux? De ne pas partager et redonner à la prochaine génération? ... Je crois que l’égoïsme est ce qui se cache derrière les gens sans enfant. L’égoïsme et la peur des responsabilités. Parce qu’avoir des enfants c’est la seule façon de vraiment redonner au suivant, ou devenir travailleur humanitaire à plein temps, c’est la seule façon de partager ce qu’on a reçu de nos parents et de la société.

[Why do some people decide to keep everything for themselves? To not share or give back to the next generation? ... I believe that selfishness is lurking behind those without children. Selfishness and fear of responsibilities. Because having children is the only real way of passing on, or of becoming a full-time humanitarian worker, it’s the only way to share what we have received from our parents.] (Longpré 2016)

Unfortunately, even when journalists try to explore a child-free existence from an objective standpoint, they unintentionally fall into the trap of perpetuating common stereotypes associated with the non-mother. This is evident in both the case of Lauren Sandler’s special feature for *Time* magazine (Sandler 2013) and Helen Lewis’s previously cited article for the *New Statesmen* (Lewis 2015). Sandler explores the potentially positive aspects of not having children, while Lewis discusses the challenges in

simultaneously negotiating motherhood and professional work. But the overall subversive potential of each piece for challenging prescribed opinions of the child-free is stymied by each text's front-cover image. Sandler's article is introduced by a luxurious holiday scene, inciting notions of self-indulgence on the part of the child-free. Lewis's text is accompanied by a sketch of four eminent female politicians peering over a cradle containing a ballot box (as opposed to a baby), suggesting politics as a substitution for maternity, if not regret over their choice to be child-free.

In addition, the terms that are employed to refer to the voluntarily child-free belie negative social attitudes. Popular terms include 'non-mother' or 'nomo', 'unchilded', 'without child' and 'childless'. Along these lines, with regard to voluntary childlessness in contemporary women's writing in French, Natalie Edwards reflects: 'It is unfortunate that so many of these expressions insist upon a lack; the suffix *less*, the prefixes *non* and *un* and the conjunction *without* are all predicated upon something missing and proclaim the non-normativity of this choice' (Edwards 2015: 8). Indeed, even the term 'child-free', coined as a more positive alternative, carries 'the potential to aggravate tension between the childless and the child-bearing majority' (9). Edwards continues:

Part of the stigma to which the voluntarily childless have been subjected is due to real or perceived accusations from parents that those without children cast judgement upon their lifestyles. In view of this, the label 'childfree', despite its originally good intentions, may be greeted as superior, smug or glib. (9)

In French, the language of Joubert's essay, the medical term *nullipare* ('nulliparous'), which is used to designate women who have not given birth, is particularly offensive in its allusions to *nulle* ('worthless') and *nulle part* ('nowhere').

The Quest for Truth

In spite of its negative press, however, voluntary childlessness is becoming an increasingly popular life option for twenty-first-century women. Exact figures relating to voluntary childlessness are difficult to obtain, as the data is often conflated with statistics on infertility and involuntary circumstances, and thus grouped under the more general category of 'total' childlessness (Chancey and Dumais 2009). But there is no doubt that women are 'publicly proclaiming their right to choose' and constructing 'a femininity that is not connected to motherhood' (Edwards 2015: 4). Kate Bolick, referring to the fact that almost 20 per cent of American women reach

their mid-forties without having a child, comments: ‘The sheer velocity of its emergence suggests a unity of intent, as if an army of Gen Xers came of age razing day care centers and burning diapers, and continues to march steadily into the future, attracting new recruits by the minute’ (Bolick 2016). It is not surprising, then, that these non-mothers and, more generally, non-parents are demanding that their voices, rather than those that promote erroneous assumptions about them, be foregrounded. This is the premise of Meghan Daum’s well-received essay collection, *Selfish, Shallow, and Self-Absorbed: Sixteen Writers on the Decision Not to Have Kids* (2015). Daum notes:

I realized that what I wanted most of all was to find some different ways of talking about the choice not to have kids. I wanted to lift the discussion out of the familiar rhetoric which so often pits parents against non-parents and assumes that the former are self-sacrificing and mature and the latter are overgrown teenagers living on piles of disposable income. I wanted to show that there are just as many ways of being a non-parent as there are of being a parent. (Daum 2015: 3)

Daum’s collection overtly challenges the taboo of choosing a life outside of parenthood, deconstructing the assumption that everyone wants to be a parent, particularly women. Most importantly, as the title indicates, the collection tackles a most noxious of the stereotypes attached to voluntary childlessness, urging society to ‘stop mistaking self-knowledge for self-absorption, and realize that nobody has a monopoly on selfishness’ (9–10).

Edwards notes a wave of recent texts that ‘represent voluntary childlessness in nuanced, insightful ways’ in French contemporary women’s writing (Edwards 2015: 16). Edwards calls attention to Joubert’s essay, the focus of analysis in this article, as a key example of this new and innovative body of work. She also includes Madeleine Chapsal’s *La Femme sans* (*The Woman Without*, 2001), Jane Sautière’s *Nullipare* (*Nulliparous*, 2008) and Linda Lê’s *À l’enfant que je n’aurai pas* (*To the Child That I Will Not Bear*, 2011). All of these texts, Edwards informs us, endeavour to ‘take ownership of their childless identity and to create a textual space to explore this through literature’ (Edwards 2015: 19).

In discussing Joubert, it is important to acknowledge that Quebec is where she lives, teaches and publishes. Quebec is a Canadian province long associated with high birth rates linked to the phenomenon of ‘la revanche des berceaux [the revenge of the cradles]’. This is one means by which French Canadians assured their linguistic survival following the collapse of New France in 1763, then throughout the second half of the twentieth century, continuing into the twenty-first century. Quebec has been hurtling towards a fertility crisis, with the average number of children born falling

to under 1.6 per female (Institut de la Statistique du Québec 2016). As Denise Couture remarks: ‘le danger d’un déclin démographique occupe maintenant une place de premier rang dans le débat sur l’avenir du Québec [the danger of demographic decline now occupies a prime role in the debate on Quebec’s future]’ (Couture 1990: 68). It is a popular topic in the media, with headlines such as ‘Le Québec a besoin de vous [Quebec needs you]’ (Destouches 2016). This illustrates the extent to which scaremongering tactics and appeals to national pride are employed to encourage more Quebecers to have children. In this context, Joubert’s text stands as an example of the voluntary child-free lifestyle that is becoming increasingly commonplace in Quebec, demanding to be respected as a valid life choice. The text additionally demands recognition of this choice as a retaliation against the coercing of women into motherhood for the sake of the nation’s future. This represents a voice that is slowly making itself heard in Quebec. Other examples include Magenta Baribeau’s recent documentary, *Maman? Non merci (No Kids for Me, Thank You, 2015)*, which garnered international recognition at the 2016 London Feminist Film Festival. Another voice emerges in Catherine-Emmanuelle Delisle’s prolific blog *Femmes sans enfants (Women without Children, n.d.)*, which focuses on voluntary non-mothers as well as those who are involuntarily childless, and was awarded the Silver Medal at the 2014 Canadian Blog Awards.

L’Envers du landau

L’Envers du landau, as the title itself indicates, is a text that aims to oppose and, indeed, reverse received existent notions and social discourse concerning motherhood. Speaking from the outside, as a voluntary non-mother, Joubert notes that her voice, ‘dans une société obsédée par les bébés entraîne de nouvelles répercussions, soulève de nouvelles questions [in a society obsessed with babies entails new repercussions and raises new questions]’ (Joubert 2010: 11). A discursive essay consisting of five succinct chapters, *L’Envers du landau* effectively exposes and subsequently deconstructs many of the prejudicial myths associated with non-motherhood.

The cover image selected for *L’Envers du landau* is particularly striking. Featuring a black-and-white photograph of a woman’s feet standing on an open pack of eggs, with one foot slightly raised as if to crush the eggs beneath, the cover immediately alerts the reader to the content and tone of the text: first, it will focus on women who have decided to reject the maternal mandate and, by connection, their ova; second, the text is tackling the incendiary and as yet relatively taboo topic of voluntary childlessness. And in so doing, Joubert, as author, could be said to be ‘walking on eggshells’: she is aware that there is the potential to offend, thus she will

have to proceed diplomatically. At the same time, there is a defiance in her approach—one that suggests she will not allow her opinions on the matter to be censored.

Joubert is no stranger to according a voice to the deviant female, having previously examined and challenged the unfavourable status of the *vieille fille* ('spinster') in literature in an edited collection with Annette Hayward (Joubert and Hayward 2000). While Joubert believes that the *vieille fille* is no longer considered as much a threat to the natural order as she once was, the non-mother, on the other hand, continues to be viewed as an aberrant figure of femininity, possibly more so than ever before:

Le spectre de la vieille fille a perdu de son efficacité, mais la femme sans enfant est toujours perçue comme une déviante et sent sur elle ... le regard critique et interrogateur de la société.

[The ghost of the spinster has lost its potency, but the woman without a child is still seen as deviant and is subjected to ... the critical and interrogative gaze of society.] (Joubert 2010: 16)

Similarly, Joubert is not averse to grappling with feminist issues, as is evident in her most recent publication *Mines de rien*. Here, along with Isabelle Boisclair and Lori Saint-Martin, Joubert exposes and critiques common cases of everyday sexism (Boisclair et al. 2015). *L'Envers du landau* can thus be situated within Joubert's overall body of work which seeks to speak to and for women from the perspective of feminism.

Queering the Non-Mother

Francine Descarries and Christine Corbeil note that:

Mettre au monde des enfants et être disponible pour les aimer ... telle semble avoir été pendant fort longtemps la seule véritable contribution sociale attendue des femmes, tout comme leur seule raison identitaire.

[Having children and being available to care for them ... for a really long time this seems to have been the only social contribution expected of women, as well as constituting their only reason to exist.] (Descarries and Corbeil 2002: 23)

It is no surprise, then, as highlighted by Joubert, that society and culture should position the voluntary non-mother as queer, for she has 'failed' to adhere to the expected trajectory in a number of ways. First, by 'failing' to discipline her body and reproduce, she is seen to have transgressed

both her basic ‘biological destiny’ and, more broadly, her femininity and accepted gender norms. Second, she has ‘failed’ to assume her place within the nuclear family, thus undermining it in her refusal to uphold and contribute to this regulatory, patriarchal, heteronormative structure. Third, by choosing not to have children, the figure of the non-mother has betrayed the longevity not only of her family, but also that of the nation as a whole. In order to highlight the extent to which the non-mother is rendered queer, Joubert likens her open admission of this choice to a ‘coming-out’ (Joubert 2010: 19). Her text then could be said to serve as an example to other voluntary non-mothers who have been silenced by the dominant pro-natalist discourse currently pervading western advanced-capitalist society. These women have had their life choice denigrated to what Joubert describes as ‘l’indicible [the unspeakable]’ (18).

Joubert’s essay has much in common with another controversial text—Elisabeth Badinter’s *Le Conflit: la femme et la mère* (*The Conflict: How Modern Motherhood Undermines the Status of Women*), published in the same year. It should be noted that while Joubert focuses specifically on voluntary non-mothers, Badinter includes them as part of a wider discussion on contemporary motherhood in general. Both, however, are acutely aware of the omnipresence of pro-natalist discourse and the ongoing conflation of womanhood with motherhood. Of the voluntary non-mother, Badinter laments:

celle qui reste volontairement inféconde a peu de chances d’échapper aux soupirs de ses parents (auxquels elle interdit d’être grands-parents), à l’incompréhension de ses amies (qui aiment que l’on fasse comme elles) et à l’hostilité de la société et de l’État ... qui ont de multiples petits moyens de vous punir de ne pas faire votre devoir.

[the one who remains voluntarily childless has little chance of escaping the sighs of her parents (whom she is preventing from becoming grandparents), the bewilderment of her girlfriends (who want her to be like them) and the hostility of society and the State... which have umpteen little ways of punishing you for not having done your duty.] (Badinter 2010: 23)

Joubert makes a similar remark in *L’Envers du landau*, describing the voluntary non-mother as constantly up against ‘un entourage incompréhensif, parfois même carrément hostile et souvent condescendant [an unsympathetic entourage, sometimes even quite hostile and frequently patronizing]’ (Joubert 2010: 16). If, then, as Badinter claims, any woman freely choosing

not to become a mother in today's maternalist context requires 'un sacré caractère pour se jouer de toutes ses pressions, voire d'une certaine stigmatisation [a darn strong personality to be able to withstand all the pressures or, rather, stigmatization]' (Badinter 2010: 23), Joubert has such qualities in abundance. Her primary weapon in *L'Envers du landau* is her caustic use of humour, enacting a feigned awakening to the 'truths' of non-motherhood, as revealed to her by culture and society:

j'ai l'impression de bien aller mais je suis dans un état épouvantable. C'est tout un choc de se découvrir tellement mal en point presque du jour au lendemain. Comment ai-je pu rester aussi étrangère à moi-même. Comment ai-je pu croire que ma vie avait un sens?

[I believe myself to be doing ok but really I am in a terrible state. It's quite a shock to find oneself in such a bad way from one day to the next. How can I have been so removed from myself? How can I have considered my life had any meaning?] (Joubert 2010: 9)

Joubert pursues this ironic tone, stating:

il n'y a d'autre vérité que la maternité. Dès lors, ma recherche universitaire —qui n'est pas un projet valable, je le sais maintenant—ma vie sociale et affective, tout ce qui me constitue est sinon carrément dérisoire, du moins secondaire ou factice dans l'échelle planétaire des valeurs avérées. Je suis en train de passer à côté des vraies affaires, de rater ma vie.

[there is no other truth apart from motherhood. From now on, my academic research—which is not an important project, I know that now—my social and emotional life, all that is part of me is, if not completely derisory, then at the very least secondary or fraudulent on the planetary scale of agreed values. I am in the process of passing by the real experiences, of failing in life.] (10)

Deconstructing the Myths

Joubert's first line of attack in *L'Envers du landau* involves a rigorous deconstruction of the previously mentioned injurious myths and clichés associated with the non-mother. Joubert exposes how each of these distorts and misrepresents the reality of the non-mother, presenting her as immature, egocentric, child-hating, dysfunctional, and so on. Joubert astutely turns the questions that are fired at non-mothers on their head. For example, 'Won't you regret not having children?' becomes 'What if there are women who

regret having children?'. Similarly, 'Why don't you want children?' becomes 'Why do you want children?'. With this move, Joubert points out,

On ne s'informe jamais des motivations qui poussent les gens à avoir des enfants, tant c'est le cours 'normal'. Pourtant, ces raisons, souvent inconscientes, pourraient étonner.

[We never inquire about the motivations that lead people to having children, it's viewed as the 'normal' path. However, these reasons, often unconscious, could surprise and shock you.] (Joubert 2010: 39)

Then there are the scare tactics, particularly in relation to old age and death—you will not have anyone to visit you; you will not have anyone to care for you when you; you will not have anyone to remember you. Joubert promptly dismisses these considerations, stating that:

la famille n'est pas un gage de compagnie ni de sérénité pour nos vieux jours, particulièrement dans une société où les enfants vont faire leur vie quelquefois à des milliers de kilomètres du nid familial.

[family is not a guarantor of company or of happiness in your old age, particularly in a society where children leave to make their life elsewhere, thousands of kilometres from the family nest.] (23)

But perhaps most dangerous of all is the overwhelmingly negative imagery employed in portrayals of a child-free state as one of lacking something, in sharp contrast to the oft-hailed 'plenitude' of motherhood: 'Il me manque un morceau [I'm missing a piece]'; 'dépourvue [lacking]'; 'cette vacuité [this emptiness]'; 'Je suis une prune desséchée, une branche sans fruit, une terre stérile, une source tarie, un cul-de-sac génétique [I am a dried-up prune, a branch without any fruit, a barren land, a depleted source, a genetic cul-de-sac]' (9).

Joubert demonstrates how such highly symbolic language—coupled with the myths, clichés and fearmongering associated with voluntary non-motherhood—can serve as a powerful tool for 'correcting' the deviant non-mother, coercing her back to the 'right' path, to her biological and feminine 'destiny'. Joubert is especially frustrated by the fact that a woman's decision not to have children is frequently considered as something that can be negotiated, as merely 'un égarement passager [a temporary wandering]' (14). She contends:

Qu'on se le dise: certaines femmes n'ont pas d'enfant parce qu'elles n'ont pas envie d'en avoir, et cette certitude est aussi solide que celle des femmes qui affirment ne s'être jamais imaginées autrement que mères.

[Let us proclaim it: some women do not have children because they do not want to have any, and this certainty is as strong as that of women who declare that they have never imagined themselves as anything other than mothers.] (41)

Consequently, Joubert praises—in an ironic tone—research directed towards uncovering the existence of a malfunctioning gene, one that would explain the existence of a missing maternal instinct in some women. For only when such a gene is discovered, Joubert maintains, will non-mothers finally get some respite from having constantly to defend their position: 'N'est-ce pas merveilleux? Bientôt nous pourrions scander ... un inattaquable "ce n'est-pas-ma-faute": c'est la faute à mon code génétique [Isn't it wonderful? Soon we will be able to chant ... an irreproachable "it's not my fault"; it's because of my genetic system]' (41). Of course, underlying this counterfeit jubilation is an opprobrious commentary on the social perception that voluntary childlessness must be explained as an anomalous scientific mutation rather than a desired life choice.

Motherhood and Social Discourse

Alongside this deconstruction of the stereotypes of the non-mother are two core areas of discussion for Joubert: first, the role of social discourse in the propagation of pro-natalist ideology and, second, the impact of motherhood on the relationship between women and, indeed, feminism.

First of all, according to Joubert—and Badinter would agree—we are currently living in an era characterized by what one might term 'un maternalisme frénétique [a frenetic maternalism]' (Joubert 2010: 11). For Joubert, 'la société actuelle pense bébé, parle bébé [contemporary society thinks baby, talks baby]' (94) perhaps more so than ever before: 'En effet, le discours ambiant a rarement pesé aussi lourd sur les épaules des humains en âge de procréer [In fact, ambient discourse has rarely weighed down so heavily on the shoulders of humans of reproductive age]' (13). As Joubert reveals, the reasons for such a renewed valorization of procreation, and indeed motherhood, are numerous and varied. They include factors such as economic precarity, a resurgence of reactionary politics in the west, the fragility of the nuclear family, crises of masculinity, an ageing population and a backlash against feminism.

In the case of francophone Quebec, the context within which Joubert is writing, concerns over extinction, or at least depletion as a people, have given rise, as previously noted, to a ‘nouvel appel de la race [a new call of the race]’ (79). Joubert observes a correlation between moments of societal instability, ‘quand l’ordre établi est menacée [when the established order is under threat]’ (80), and the renaissance of pro-natalist discourse, which is disguised and presented to women as one of free choice. For Joubert—and this is supported by the introduction to this article—it is both the media and the world of politics that are predominantly responsible for the promotion of pro-natalism. Joubert cites the example of women’s magazines and their current obsession with celebrity bump-watching and the mothering techniques of the rich and famous. Such magazines glamourize pregnancy and motherhood, and depict it as a means to acquire societal status as a woman. Joubert comments:

Ces illustres inconnus sont devenus—temporairement, mais c’est mieux que rien—des stars à cause de leurs enfants. Combien d’autres pauvres filles entendront la même chose: qu’il faut avoir des enfants, beaucoup d’enfants, pour avoir le droit d’exister et être enfin sinon aimée du moins reconnue.

[These illustrious unknowns have become—temporarily, but that’s better than nothing—stars, thanks to their children. How many other poor young girls will hear the same message: that you have to have children, lots of children, in order to have the right to exist and finally be, if not loved, then at least recognized.] (71)

In terms of film and television, Joubert notes a retreatism of sorts in productions directed at women:

Finies les folies comme celles que pouvaient se permettre les jeunes femmes de *Sex and the City*: elles ont vieilli, leur horloge biologique commande, il est temps pour elles de se ranger.

[The follies like those indulged in by the *Sex and the City* women are now over: they have grown older, their biological clock is ticking, it is time for them to conform.] (77)

The pro-natalist discourse is not, however, limited to forms of entertainment. Joubert observes how it has also infiltrated the realm of broadsheet journalism and, indeed, political reporting. Politicians, particularly women politicians, are expected to show that they have an inner, private, more gentle and caring identity behind their serious public image. It is not surprising, then,

that the non-mother in a position of power is depicted more austere in the media than the mother in a position of power. Here, Joubert offers the contrasting examples of Condoleezza Rice and Michelle Obama. The former is often portrayed as somewhat ruthless in her ambition, while the latter has been allowed a warmer, more 'maternal' public image.

In the face of such persistent, overt pro-natalism, the non-mother finds herself in a constant state of conflict—first, with her entourage, who neither understands nor validates her choice, and then with herself, as she is forced continually to question her own decision not to have children and to grapple with her position as a social outsider:

Parce que je ne me conforme pas à la norme, je ne corresponds plus à l'image d'une femme cohérente. Je ne me comporte pas comme prévu. Je suis une aberration ambulante.

[Because I don't conform to the norm, I no longer correspond to the image of a coherent woman. I am behaving contrary to expectations. I am a walking aberration.] (33)

In fact, so strong is the conflation of motherhood with 'real' womanhood that the non-mother's identity is not simply marginal, but practically invisible:

Refuser d'enfanter apparaît dès lors comme une façon d'être moins femme; refuser la maternité, c'est décider d'être une moins-que-femme, une femme pas tout à fait féminine, une inféminine.

[Refusing to have a child appears, then, as a way of being less womanly; refusing maternity, that's deciding to become a less-than-woman, a woman who is not fully feminine, a non-woman.] (32)

Such pressures on women to conform to the model of motherhood obliterate the possibility for any 'real' choice for women with regard to having children or not. How can one choose motherhood freely when there is such blatant ideological coercion? How can one's choice not to become a mother be experienced as a 'freely made' and certain decision when there are so many measures in place to punish such a 'transgression'?

Motherhood and Feminism

In relation to pro-natalist discourse and feminism, Joubert sees motherhood as deeply divisive, placing women into opposing camps, pitting them against each other. First of all, there is the ideological division:

second-wave feminists who criticized the institution of motherhood and post-feminists who appear to be re-embracing it. Like other contemporary feminist scholars such as Susan Faludi (2009), Diane Negra (2008), Angela McRobbie (2009) and, again, Badinter (2010), Joubert considers society to be in the midst of a backlash, which is primarily characterized by retreatism and retraditionalism. The world of work has not brought the liberation that second-wave feminists promised, hence the family and the home are being revalorized. The suffocating environment described so well by Betty Friedan is thus forgotten. Second-wave feminists are being held responsible for the discontents of the third wave or 'post-feminist generation', in what Joubert terms the 'faute à Simone [Simone's fault]' phenomenon. This is certainly the case for Gabrielle Cluzel, whose controversial text *Adieu Simone* accuses second-wave feminism (and, again, there is specific reference to Simone de Beauvoir) of being coercive, imposing, tyrannical and even misogynist (Cluzel 2016). As Joubert observes:

En cette époque où la maternité a repris du gallon et n'est plus considérée comme un esclavage mais comme un événement nécessairement heureux, comme un miracle à la portée de tous, il est donc de bon ton de prendre à partie les pionnières qui ont pensé autrement.

[In today's society where maternity has gathered strength and is no longer considered a form of imprisonment but as an unwaveringly happy event, a miracle within everyone's reach, it has become politically correct to challenge feminist pioneers who believed otherwise.] (Joubert 2010: 54)

Joubert is sceptical, therefore, of maternalist policies/incentives, which she views as simply returning the woman to the home, but presenting it as something that is desired and fulfilling:

En demeurant à la maison, et payée pour le faire, la mère devient donc l'incarnation de la félicité puisqu'elle se réalise pleinement; elle peut subvenir aux besoins de la famille ... et laisser les emplois intéressants aux hommes, tel que souhaité par l'arrière-garde. Chacun à sa place, comme le veut la tradition. Mais c'est un peu trop beau pour être vrai.

[By staying at home and being paid to do so, the mother becomes, therefore, the incarnation of happiness since she is entirely fulfilled; she can tend to the needs of the family ... and leave the more interesting jobs to the men, just as the old guard would want it. Everyone in one's place, according to tradition. But it's all a bit too good to be true.] (55)

The second division occurs between women with children and women without children. This is where Joubert expresses her most polemical opinions, particularly when it comes to motherhood in the workplace. Joubert draws our attention to what she considers to be a privileging of maternal rights in society, to the detriment of those who cannot exercise such rights—namely, non-mothers. She points out that having children is recognized as a valid reason for the negotiation of flexible working hours, reduced responsibilities and, in some instances, diminished performance. In fact, Joubert even goes so far as to joke that she should invent a child of her own at work to avail herself of some of these special privileges (64). It is not that Joubert is denying the significant amount of work that motherhood requires and the importance of recognizing and facilitating the place of mothers in the work environment. Rather, she wants to explain how this can, at times, come at the expense of the needs of non-mothers. Joubert cites the case of maternity leave to illustrate what she considers to be one of the inequities of the workplace from the perspective of the non-mother:

Voulez-vous un conge payé pour avoir un enfant? Pas de problème. Un conge payé pour un projet qui vous tient à cœur? N’y pensez pas.

[Do you want paid leave to have a baby? No problem. Paid leave to complete a project that is important to you? Not a chance.] (61)

The non-mother quickly becomes the enemy of the mother in the workplace and vice versa, and Joubert is keen for this to change:

Les mères et les non-mères au travail doivent ensuite prendre la mesure de la distance qui les sépare dans le débat sur la conciliation travail/famille. Divisées cette fois en deux factions très inégales, les mères d’un côté et les sans enfants de l’autre, elles ont à affronter leur lot respectif de préjugés et d’irritants: les mères rament pour tout faire en même temps, les non-mères les regardent aller, passent pour ‘des grasses dures’, veulent bien comprendre et aider, mais écopent et colmatent.

[Mothers and non-mothers in the workplace need to take account of the nature of the division that separates them in the life-work-balance debate. Divided this time into two very unequal factions, with mothers on one side and non-mothers on the other, they each have to deal with their own respective lot of prejudices and grievances: mothers struggle to do everything at once, the non-mothers watch as they try but end up coming across as ‘hard and cold’; they want to help but they just cop the blame or have to cover up the gaps.] (55)

Indeed, Joubert is eager to see the division between mothers and non-mothers dismantled, not just in the workplace, but also on a much grander scale. In fact, Joubert believes that non-mothers and mothers have a lot more to offer each other than they might initially realize—that there is the potential for a reciprocal and enriching dialogue between them. Given the pressures on women in contemporary society to be perfect mothers, as detailed in Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels’ treatise on ‘new momism’ (Douglas and Michaels 2004), there is often more competition than support within the motherhood ‘club’. However, the non-mother, because she is outside of this discourse and has no vested interests in motherhood, is able to speak to the mother objectively. More importantly, the non-mother is positioned to speak as a multidimensional subject, not solely as a mother. Joubert writes:

est auprès des gens sans enfants que les parents trouvent le meilleur réconfort, j’en suis persuadée: une nullipare apaise beaucoup mieux l’angoisse d’une mère que ne le ferait une autre mère, précisément parce qu’elle est *étrangère* à sa souffrance et qu’elle la voit de l’extérieur, pour ainsi dire.

[It is alongside the non-parent that parents find the best comfort, I am sure of it: a non-mother can alleviate much more effectively the anguish of a mother than any other mother could, precisely because she is *unfamiliar* with her suffering and she sees it from the outside, one could say.] (Joubert 2010: 88)

Joubert proceeds to give examples of how the non-mother can support the mother—how they can realign themselves as allies, rather than juxtaposing themselves against each other in inimical terms:

je pense à ces paroles en apparence superficielles (ben non, fille, t’es pas une mauvaise mère, ben non ma belle, ton enfant ne souffrira pas toute sa vie de ce que tu n’aies pas eu le coup de foudre pour lui dès sa venue au monde, ben voyons ma chouette tu peux arrêter l’allaitement maternel sans avoir la ligue des mères laitières sur le dos) qui répondent à des inquiétudes profondes que la mère va taire, puisqu’elle est censée être au septième ciel avec sa marmaille. Même la mère de la mère n’est quelquefois d’aucun secours ici, exactement parce qu’elle ‘est passée par là aussi’ et qu’elle juge la situation en tant que mère. Une non-mère ne s’adresse pas à la mère: elle parle à l’amie, à la sœur, qu’elle n’a jamais perdue de vue sous l’enveloppe maternelle.

[I am thinking of the words that, although appearing to be superficial (no my dear, you are not a bad mother, no my lovely, your child will not suffer forever just because you didn't fall in love with them as soon as they were born, look here my sweet, you can stop breastfeeding without having to fear the leche league on your back), actually respond to the deepest anxieties that the mother will silence because she is supposed to be in seventh heaven with her brood. Even the mother of the mother is sometimes of no help here, precisely because she 'has gone through the same things' and judges the situation as a mother. The non-mother does not address the mother, however: she speaks to the friend, the sister, the one who she never lost sight of, despite the maternal enveloping of her identity.] (87)

Conclusion

In drawing this discussion to a close, I would like to argue that Joubert, despite the fact that she is speaking from the point of view of the excluded on the topic of exclusion and on the right to be different, is essentially grounded in a politics of inclusion and synthesis on a number of levels. First and foremost, as illustrated in the preceding section, Joubert is keen to break down the dichotomy of 'with child' and 'without child'. By identifying what non-mothers can bring to the maternal experience, she is outlining a maternal sphere in which all varieties of women can partake, irrespective of their procreative status. Second, with reference to style, Joubert writes from the perspective of the personal, integrating anecdotes throughout what is essentially an academic text. In so doing, Joubert, in a vein similar to Lisa Baraitser's *Maternal Encounters* (2008), challenges the traditional academic division of the subjective and the objective. She seamlessly weaves the private into the public, the intimate into the universal. There is a similar expansion of text when one considers the backdrop of *L'Envers du landau*, which, although specifically located within Quebec culture and society, transcends national boundaries and addresses a more global audience of women who are all subjected to the same policing of their bodies.

L'Envers du landau is one woman's experience at the hands of a pronatalist society that does not value her life choice. At the same time, it is the voice of many women who have decided against motherhood. In this respect, the essay itself becomes a feminist act of rebellion—one that sets out to challenge established and restrictive norms surrounding womanhood. In complete contrast to differentialist French feminists such as Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous, who consider the maternal body to be the ultimate locus of female power in the struggle against the sovereignty

of phallogocentrism, Joubert champions the radicalizing force of the non-mother:

Une empêcheuse de se reproduire en rond est un grain de sable dans l'engrenage d'une société qui supporte mal ce qui tourne carré.

[A dissenter who refuses to reproduce is like a grain of sand in the machinery of a society which finds it difficult to accommodate anything that is different.] (Joubert 2010: 32)

It is because non-mothers compel us to rethink the very structures of our society that they are more often than not silenced: 'Ces femmes, qu'on préfère invisibles parce qu'elles bousculent l'ordre des choses [These women, whom we prefer to be invisible because they upset the order of things]' (19). And it is for this same reason, Joubert informs us, that we must listen to their stories.

That said, despite the indisputably valuable contribution made by Joubert's text to contemporary discussions of motherhood and non-motherhood, as demonstrated in this article, it would be naïve to conclude without signalling some underlying issues in the essay that are perhaps camouflaged by the persuasiveness of the authorial voice. First of all, I have argued that Joubert manages to interweave the private and the public in her text, speaking both for herself as an individual and for the wider community of voluntarily child-free women. However, it is important to take into account Joubert's position as a white, middle-class, educated feminist. The assuredness with which she writes about her life choice is undoubtedly linked with this position of privilege.

Second, there is a tendency in Joubert to present the decision not to mother as unwavering, clear-cut and finite. Studies such as Letherby's have revealed the narrative of voluntary childlessness to be much more complex, multilayered and, in many cases, ambivalent (Letherby 2002). Such a critique should not, of course, invalidate Joubert's more consolidated stance on the issue, but rather simply raise questions as to whether women who choose non-motherhood, like those who choose motherhood, may be more equivocal and vacillating than this essay would lead us to believe. However, as iterated throughout this article, this points to the importance of calling attention to 'other' trajectories of womanhood within a predominantly pro-natalist society. Joubert's essay is a pivotal example—a voice which, I believe, we need to hear.

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