





DEAR FRIEND,

How are you?
I want to hear your news. Here's some of mine. Over the past few years,

I've been collaborating on a book that looks at the arc of human reproduction through the lens of design—something I never found in design textbooks and exhibitions when I was a student. I wanted to change that. Perhaps contrarily for a project that has a lot to do with motherhood, pregnancy and birth, and reproduction, the chapter I found the most interesting to write—perhaps even cathartic—was the one titled “Childfree.” It is still connected to design and life, but from the perspective of choice—something that feels so very relevant in a week where Texas struck at the core of *Roe v. Wade*.

While the neologism of being *childfree* emerged from second-wave feminist consciousness-raising and access to increasingly reliable forms of contraception, as I researched the chapter, it was clear that it was women of color forming the vocabulary of the reproductive justice movement who gave it nuance. They recognized that, far from signifying just an individual choice, this adjective and the state it describes are bound to systemic and interconnected social and cultural factors that determine who gets to procreate, and how. Regardless of who utters it, *childfree* has been, since its inception, received as an extremely gendered term almost always reserved for women, and sometimes substituted with spiteful terms ranging from *barren* and *deviant* to *selfish*.

I am currently childfree.

It is crucial to note that the choice or circumstance of childbearing and child rearing has often been violently withheld. The foundational literature of the childfree movement makes no reference to the racialized historical experiences of enslaved people whose children were considered not their own to raise and tend but the property of others, or to generations of women, predominately of color, who were sterilized without their consent and consequently unable to conceive (unlike white women, who were encouraged to procreate). When anti-natalists invoked the environment in the 1960s and 1970s, it was in the form of cries to save the planet, without mention of the debilitating effects of pollutants on human endocrine systems that can lead to devastating infertility for those who do want babies.

In the twenty-first century, when the choice exists to opt out of childbearing on environmental and anti-capitalist grounds, it is now bound up with increasing access to education (one of the most predictive factors for fertility; when education rises, birth rates fall) and the right to access family planning without political interference and with governmental support. In 2019, writer Anna Louie Sussman mined this millennial zeitgeist in her 2019 *New York Times* opinion piece “The End of Babies?”: “Something is stopping us from creating the families we claim to desire,” she wrote. “But what?” (Her answer: late capitalism.)

Rebecca Solnit’s self-described “rabbinical approach” is my favorite response to what she calls this “mother of all questions” that inevitably hounds women—and almost never cis men. Recalling a talk

she once gave on Virginia Woolf that devolved into numerous questions from the audience about why Woolf never had children, Solnit reminds us to be vigilant when we talk about the lack of children: “Why are we asking that?” A fascination with the productive capacity of a uterus is so often a deflection from other types of creation: “Many people make babies; only one made *To The Lighthouse*,” she says. Yet Solnit still sticks to a binary—babies or books. Many have before her, too. Doris Lessing chose to be childfree *after* giving birth and despairing over the “Himalayas of tedium” of young motherhood (she left her marriage and children to write). As she explained, “no one can write with a child around.”

And yet, as other writers and workers prove, there is no one-size-fits-all. Toni Morrison framed motherhood, in her books and her life, not in terms of the millennial struggle to retain work-life balance or the need to choose one over the other, but as part of the powerful and multidimensional whole of Black female identity. For Morrison, mothering is part of knowing “how to be complete human beings . . . it’s not a question, it’s not a conflict. You don’t have to give up anything. You choose your responsibilities.”

Poet Adrienne Rich opened her groundbreaking 1976 text, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as an Experience and an Institution*, with the reminder that because those who bear and suckle children are also tasked disproportionately with the responsibility for their raising, “most of us first know both love and disappointment, power and tenderness, in the person of a woman. We carry the imprint of this experience for life.” With her lucid, lyrical capacity to write about womanhood, Rich put words to the difference between one’s individual relationship with the “powers of reproduction” and the institutionalized and essentialized notion of motherhood that, she argued, “alienated women from our bodies by incarcerating us in them.”

For the author Jenny Brown, the imperative to be childfree is part of a conscious “birth strike,” responding to “bad labor conditions” in the twenty-first century. Following in the footsteps of the feminist activists Silvia Federici and Barbara Ehrenreich, Brown sums up the contraceptive effects of modern life through interviews with a range of women who describe the lived realities of inadequate, racist, and exorbitant prenatal medical care in the United States, the lack of universal childcare, and personal and cultural reasons for remaining childfree.

In 1975, Rich highlighted the power of sharing such experiences widely: “Women have often felt insane when cleaving to the truth of our experience. Our future depends on the sanity of each of us, and we have a profound stake, beyond the personal, in the project of describing our reality as candidly and fully as we can to each other.”

Whether childfree or not, it is the right to shape reproductive destiny that reimagines social power relations not as inevitable inheritance, but as paradigms ripe for resistance and rethinking.

Tell me more about the design of your family, friend.

Yours,

★ MICHELLE ★