

Chapter 8

No Wom(b)an No Cry: Contemplating Wom(b) anhood as (In)voluntary Childfree Education Faculty

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ABSTRACT

In education, where caregiving is paramount, the role of wom(b)an educators who are childfree—whether by choice or circumstance—introduces complex dynamics of identity and expectation. This chapter shares a collaborative autoethnography involving four racially and ethnically diverse female fac-

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ulty from universities across the U.S. who are part of a co-mentoring circle. They navigate their professional landscapes while grappling with societal and cultural expectations. The chapter delves into the testimonios to explore the nuanced experiences of being childfree wom(b)an faculty, examining how these experiences shape their scholarship, teaching, and engagement in academia. It investigates how broader sociocultural perceptions of wom(b)anhood influence their professional lives and the norms within academic settings. By weaving their stories, this work sheds light on the paradoxical freedom associated with their status, the impact on professional identity, and the balance between work and personal life.

Little darlin', don't shed no tears. No, woman, no cry.

These song lyrics from Bob Marley and the Wailers (1974) instinctively came to mind for us as we began to contemplate what it has meant to navigate our roles as wom(b)en, aunts/tías, partners, daughters, and sisters while in our profession as educators who do not have biological children of our own; some of us by choice and others by chance. In a world where being a wom(b)an is almost always inextricably linked to motherhood, we fall outside the norm. This is all while we are situated in a field (P-20 education) that is in the service of children, where we prepare aspiring educators and leaders. In education, the concepts and enactment of other mothering (Beauboeuf-Mafontant, 2002; Esposito, 2014), further mothering (Brockenbrough, 2014), and caregiving (Kaufman, 2021; Noddings, 1984, 2003, 2006; Rivera-McCutchen, 2022; Valenzuela, 1999) are common and expected. These expectations are shaped by gendered norms; motherhood and mothering is seen as instinctual to wom(b)en and those in the field of education deemed able to naturally draw on their personal mothering abilities. However, little thought is often given to the ways in which such expectations shape the experiences of wom(b)en educators who are childfree.

As wom(b)en who do not have biological children of our own, our wom(b)anhood is often questioned, deemed defiant, or less than by the larger society. We have felt marginalized to varying degrees because of our childfree status, leading us to question our self-worth. Some of us have felt anger, frustration, and heartache when efforts to conceive were not fruitful. We've consoled ourselves, each other, and been consoled by our partners and family in such cases. All the while, colleagues and students we work with may not have any idea of what we are going through. Tears were and are still sometimes shed, enabling healing for associated trauma and loss experienced when dreams

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