

RUBY WARRINGTON

WOMEN

with

out

KIDS

THE REVOLUTIONARY RISE OF
AN UNSUNG SISTERHOOD

BOOK EXCERPT

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CHAPTER 4

Sexual Evolution

“ONE, TWO, THREE, FOUR, FIVE *beeeaaaauuuutiful ladies!*”

The men picked us out one by one with their chant, which followed us along the cobbled streets of Amsterdam’s Red-Light District. The windows of the storefronts were stacked with rainbow-colored bongos, some showcasing live women writhing in leopard-print underwear. Reflected in the glass, we five “ladies” shimmered in the melting midsummer heat, on a summer break to the city famed for its lax marijuana laws and relaxed attitude to sex work. *Without our parents.* Our mothers had come to see us off as we’d boarded the overnight coach at Victoria Bus Station, wearing anxious smiles, arms crossed tight over their chests. We were sixteen years old: sensible, mature, intelligent young women, they’d reassured each other with their eyes, their faces sickly yellow in the jaundiced nighttime light of the bus depot. *We’d be fine.*

Striding the summer streets five-abreast in our short shorts and cropped tops, I knew I should be annoyed with the men who lurked along the sidewalks, eating up our tender thighs and exposed midriffs with their eyes. But instead, the attention felt like confirmation that I was indeed a beautiful, sexy *woman*,

like the ones dancing in the windows. A straight-A student, my acute shyness meant I was flunking in what had swiftly become the most important area of study: *boys*. Which may have been why, on the last day of our trip, I said yes to the man with the leather jacket and the long Jesus hair when he turned over a beer coaster at the Bulldog Café, wrote my name on it, and told me to give him my number.

We'd been gathered, giggling, in a store, selecting packs of novelty rolling papers as souvenirs, when he'd bowled over and cut the vibe dead: *Awww, look at the tourists*. But he and his friend were from London too, and they were also heading back that night. When he'd invited us to come for one last smoke, he'd somehow positioned it as something we owed him for the attention he'd paid us. At the coffee shop, he rolled joint after joint, his eyes slyly scanning my hair, my face, resting on my dusky pink hotpants. I felt hot and exposed; for some reason he'd picked *me*. The weed was so strong that it made me forget how to speak, and I'd been too dazed to write down any other digits than those that would connect him directly to my mother's home telephone.

By the time I got back home he'd already left a message on the answering machine. My mum was spooked by the fact that he was twenty-two; I shrugged it off, but the sound of his voice made my insides clench up, too. Something about him repulsed me. But his cocky self-confidence also made it hard for me to say no when he told me he would be taking me out that weekend. The first time we had sex, we were in his bedroom at his parents' house, the chintzy floral wallpaper and pastel sheets clashing with the *Scarface* poster and the baseball bat he slept with under the bed. He pursed his thin lips in displeasure when I told him I'd done it before; his name was *Adam*, and I got the impression he liked the idea of being my first man. He also knew I was on the pill, which I'd started taking the year before. But since I didn't know how to explain that I'd actually only done it *one* other time, I didn't. In

fact, I didn't say anything, until afterwards when he asked me: "did you come?" "Uh-huh," I lied, sitting up and attempting a smile as I pulled the covers over my naked form, before taking a drag on the joint he'd rolled for me. Part of me would remain there, fake smile frozen on my face, for the duration of our six-year relationship.

Was this not how I was supposed to have responded? All I'd learned about sex in school was how babies were made and how not to get pregnant. The logistics and the efficacy of various forms of contraception, and the names and symptoms of the different STDs. The female orgasm had most definitely not been part of the curriculum, the female orgasm being surplus to reproductive requirements. Since sex was primarily for procreation, and since boys *had* to ejaculate to make a baby, male orgasm was positioned as a biological *need*.

As for instructions on deciding who to have sex with and how to negotiate who did what to whom, these I'd had to cobble together from movies, *Seventeen* magazine, and Jilly Cooper novels, all of which implied that since men *only want one thing*, they had better want *me*.

The underlying message (as in unconscious, and therefore all-powerful) being that a woman being wanted, taken, owned, and ultimately impregnated (by the right person, at the right time) was the natural order of things. And deeply interwoven with *this* was the notion that men (and society) were essentially entitled to women's bodies as the means of reproduction. Part and parcel of Russo's Motherhood Mandate, my friends and I had been subtly indoctrinated from an early age to believe that our *raison d'être* was, in fact, to be *fuckable*—as in knock-up-able. A message that was as old as patriarchy—and one that the 1990s sex-positive feminist movement had attempted to turn on its head.

By the time I moved in with Adam at age eighteen, the empowered thing now was for women to have sex "like men." That is, freely,

frequently, and for our physical gratification first and foremost. Forget making babies. For men, sex had always been about pleasure, with none of the consequences of pregnancy. Now, as sexually liberated women, we were entitled to the same. Within this context, being down to fuck was not a sign of submissiveness but a way for women to own our sexuality.

But as freeing and empowering as this sentiment might appear on the surface, it simply mimics the most cartoonish version of the masculine libido. That is, one rooted in entitlement, and which glosses over things such as emotional intimacy and mutual consent. The only “pleasure” I got from my encounters with Adam was the fleeting validation of feeling wanted. Meanwhile, for all the advances of the sex-positivity movement, the pressure for women to put our cunts to “proper” use *eventually* is still very much alive beneath the surface, while high rates of sexual violence against women, a resurgence of misogynistic rhetoric online, and regressive anti-abortion laws reflect a vicious backlash to women having more say over our sexual lives.

Within this, we see the unfinished work of the sexual revolution, which is to eradicate any and ALL expectations about our sexual expression, regardless of gender, including what we do and don’t desire, who we have sex with and why, and the role sex plays in our lives. What does being “sexually liberated” mean to you, and why? As I see it, “owning one’s sexuality” might mean having lots of sex, and it might mean having none at all. It most definitely means the freedom to self-determine when it comes to one’s reproductive identity. The role of women without kids within this? To live unapologetically in defiance of centuries-old conditioning about who we are as sexual beings—so as to set a living, breathing example of true sexual liberation for generations to come.

* * *

If the twentieth century saw the unfolding of the sexual revolution, then in the 2020s the time is ripe for sexual *evolution*—that is, a total reimagining of our sexual selves, and a mass departure from the overarching narrative that has defined human sexuality to date. Symbolically speaking, by revoking the biological imperative to procreate, women without kids are the walking, talking embodiment of this; “proof” that women’s bodies and sexuality are not inextricable from the procreative project. And as long as we are seen as deviant and “unnatural,” and as long as women who can’t get pregnant are deemed as having “failed,” we will know there is still work to be done.

After all, historically it has been natal women who have (literally and unfairly) borne the consequences of sex. It is women who become pregnant; women who gestate the developing fetus; women whose bodies are split in two by the agony of childbirth; and (even in the most progressive families) women who must put everything else on pause in order to nurture the infant after it is born. This is why the advent of effective birth control and safe, legal abortion have been central to the sexual revolution. A movement that has essentially sought to free women from the burdens of reproduction—enabling us to choose when and with whom to have kids, and to prioritize our own freedom and well-being, sexual and otherwise.

The sexual revolution has also manifested in the destigmatization of self-pleasure and sex before marriage, advances in LGBTQIA+ rights, and a push to decriminalize sex work. Within this, sex for pleasure, intimacy, and personal empowerment has been framed as equally valid as sex for reproductive purposes. Meanwhile, the less *sexy* parts of the sexual revolution could also be said to include calls for paid parental leave and universal child-care, which equally help to “free” women to be sexual without fear of the potential consequences: the career setbacks, stigma, and financial instability inherent in unplanned parenthood.

In some ways, the rising number of women without kids can be read as a natural by-product of the sexual revolution; the birth rate began to decline steeply in 1965, following the introduction of oral contraceptives. But the slippery sheath of *shame* that we still often inhabit, the gossipy side-eye and the overall distaste that we are subject to, tells me that society at-large can still only *really* stomach women's sexuality when it is employed in service of a specific role: that of "respectable" wife and mother. If you're reading this, you've felt it: any woman who remains freely sexual without eventually assuming this role is still viewed with suspicion.

We like to think our ideas about human sexuality have evolved, but in many ways we're stuck in the dark ages with this subject, forever falling backward down potholes on the road to enlightenment. We see this in the rolling back of *Roe v. Wade*, which, lurking behind the pro-life rhetoric, seems to want to punish women for having sex for sex's sake. We see it in the tabloid vilification of "other" women, the harlots and the homewreckers. We see it in acts of homophobia and transphobia, since queer sex, generally speaking, flies a rainbow flag in the face of baby-making sex. And we also see what is the underlying dogma of heteropatriarchy—*men's entitlement to women's bodies as the means of reproduction*—in the pervasive influence of the male gaze, in incidents of sexual and domestic violence against women, and in the misogynistic views of the incel (involuntary celibate) movement. Not to mention in predatory older guys claiming ownership of younger women's bodies, and naive girls like me *just going along with it*.

All of which boils down to quite the witches' brew.

The toxicity of this became clear when I was considering calling this book *Selfish Cunt*. This book *wanted* to be called *Selfish Cunt*; the title pulsed in my brain like a horny teenager while I was working on my proposal. I mean, isn't the whole point of women's sexual liberation to be *selfish* about what we do with our *cunts*? But when I reached out to people about conducting research interviews, I shied

away from it, subbing in the softer *Women Without Kids*. Not being able to say the *c*-word out loud would definitely be an issue when it came to selling books. Unlike with the *f*-word—there having been a moment there when putting “Fuck” in your book title practically guaranteed a bestseller. But while we’re apparently fine with fucking, the fact that the word *cunt* is so reviled shows just how much pain, fear, and loathing still exists in the realm of female sexuality. That is, how many generations of conditioning about women’s sexual submissiveness is stored in our cells; how much shame we harbor about expressing our complex and nuanced sexual selves; and how much sexual trauma, pain, and abuse must be acknowledged, felt, and processed if we want to be free of this in our lifetimes.

By a raise of hands, who here can relate to faking an orgasm, holding back from expressing what you want in bed, or going along with a sexual act when you didn’t really want to? Who here has felt the fear vibrating in your chest walking home alone along a darkened street? We didn’t need the #MeToo movement to tell us how many of us have experienced some degree of sexual trauma as a result of the inherited (*vs. inherent*) sexual entitlement among men—sexual trauma that was also part of our mothers’ and our grandmothers’ lived experience, and which has been handed down to us in our DNA. This sexual trauma equally exists in the collective unconscious, where it will remain, manifesting in our default beliefs and behaviors around our sexuality until we consciously choose to disrupt them.

The desire to engage with this work, so that we might finally evolve beyond this, is beginning to be expressed among younger generations. There’s the fact that Gen Zs and millennials are having significantly less sex than their predecessors. Sometimes referred to as a “sex recession,” this might not actually be a bad thing if it means people are having less unwanted sex. Then there is the steep drop-off in teen pregnancies, concerns about the psychological impact of porn, and current ultra-progressive conversations about gender and biological sex. Taken together, the overarching

theme of our emerging sexual landscape is one of discernment, self-determination, and the debunking of stereotypes. If anything, we are witnessing what can feel like a bid to remake human sexuality from the ground up, an observation that extends to the more radical faction of the childfree movement. Reporting on this phenomenon in 2021, Suzy Weiss interviewed several women aged nineteen to thirty-one who had opted for a *laparoscopic bilateral salpingectomy* (known as “The Operation” on childfree Reddit forums)—that is, an irreversible sterilization procedure. Their reasons? Everything from economic instability to climate change to not wanting to raise a kid in a violently racist world.

Having one’s tubes not tied but *removed* at age nineteen might seem extreme. But if anything, these outliers are enacting a privilege our foremothers fought long and hard for: the right to self-determine when it comes to our sexual and reproductive lives. A fight that is ongoing; unsurprisingly, requests for The Operation have increased since the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*. And they are equally acting on information that once seemed radical—and which can now simply be taken as fact: that women will never be truly equal to men until, like men, our sexuality is not ultimately seen as a means to a reproductive end.

In many ways, being a woman without kids represents the apex of the feminist dream. So why are we not celebrated for being the torchbearers for sexual and gender equality that we are?

The answer lies again in the pronatalist ideology that perpetuates the gendered sexual binary: the one where men do the fighting and the fucking, and women do the birthing and the nurturing. In the shadowy corners of this binary lie the roots of misogyny—which is at the heart of all gender inequity and all sexual violence toward women and queer and nonbinary people. Defining individuals by their reproductive parts also negates the concept of a human sexuality that is equally about self-expression, personal power, and the giving and receiving of mutual pleasure. And it is deeply entrenched in the collective psyche.

Of course, the past half-century has seen major advances in women's sexual liberation, with many of those leading the charge having been women without kids themselves: women like Shere Hite, whose 1976 *The Hite Report* introduced the clitoris to the masses and proved that the majority of women do not orgasm from intercourse (i.e., baby-making sex)—and whose work drew so much criticism in the United States that she self-exiled to Europe; Betty Dodson, the pro-sex feminist who brought her assistant to orgasm on camera on an episode of Netflix's *The Goop Lab* at age ninety; and prostitute and porn star turned radical sex educator Annie Sprinkle, who has spearheaded the feminist porn movement.

But sexual liberation is not the same as *sexual healing*—and the former cannot come fully into its flourishing without the latter. Sexual healing often begins and ends with healing from the physical and psychological residues of misogyny, while sexual liberation without sexual healing finds us engaging with our sexuality in dysfunctional ways. When I gave Adam unrestricted access to my body, like I was a human ATM, I thought I was being sexually liberated; in reality, I was acting in a scene straight out of the same old patriarchal playbook.

The legacy of our shared ancestry means that everybody and *every body*—including heterosexual, cis male bodies, whose desires have also been perverted and exploited by heteropatriarchy—has sexual healing to do. But the solution is not to say, “Oh look, women's bodies can be just for sex, too.” The solution is to teach all people about the true meaning of sexual autonomy—something that is intrinsic to the rising ranks of women without kids.

Forgoing motherhood, for whatever reason, and however we feel about this, means experiencing one's sexuality as separate from its biological function. What surfaces for you when you feel into this? If there were no risk of becoming pregnant or experiencing sexual assault, and no expectation for you to behave a certain way, how would you engage with your sexuality then? Meanwhile,

more of us engaging with this work is how we will continue to enact our ongoing sexual *evolution*. For ourselves, of course, but also on behalf of all those women whose bodies are not their own, and who are still being exploited for their sexuality and their reproductive capacity.

* * *

So, what does sexual healing look like in our lives, and how can we engage with it on a personal and a collective level? While it's important for there to be sex-positive expressions of female and queer sexuality, healing our individual and collective sexual wounds is equally a private and *internal* process of recovering the sexual selves that exist beyond prescribed gendered sex roles. The practicalities of this will be individual to each of us—but it begins with understanding why we needed the “sexual revolution” in the first place, the better to understand what we are healing *from*.

The concept of the sexual revolution was first introduced by Austrian psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich. A protégé of Sigmund Freud, Reich believed that all neurosis and misery was the result of people being severed from their “orgastic potency”—that is, the life force energy of unrestrained pleasure and fulfillment that we experience in orgasm. This severing, he posited, could be traced back to fearmongering religious and political doctrines and oppressive socioeconomic conditions. Religious doctrine often positions pleasure and personal fulfillment (sexual and otherwise) as sinful, while under extractive capitalism these things are only attainable through hard work and consumerism.

In his 1933 classic, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, Reich introduced the idea that sexual suppression is part and parcel of fascist ideology—since any *self*-generated feelings of desire, pleasure, and

fulfillment that connect us to our individual agency and power pose a threat to existing power structures. Meanwhile, in any system of dehumanization, severing people from that most basic human drive—the drive for orgasm—and creating shame around their sexual expression is a powerful tool of oppression. Shame manifests as the idea that “there is something wrong with me,” which, in turn, begets the internalized belief that “I deserve to be treated as less than.”

Crucial to our conversation here, Reich noted, “The idealization of motherhood is essentially a means of keeping women from developing a sexual consciousness and from breaking through the barriers of sexual repression.” When a woman’s only valid role is mother, he meant, her sexuality becomes public property—something to be engaged with for the primary purpose of furthering the species—as opposed to something that belongs to *her* to do with as she pleases.

He also wrote that “the very existence of woman as a sexual being would threaten authoritarian ideology; her recognition and social affirmation [by society at large] would mean its collapse.” Here, he suggests that women being seen as men’s sexual equals (i.e., being allowed a sexuality beyond its reproductive function) would be a fatal blow to the gendered status quo. An idea that is further extrapolated in the 2019 book *Nurturing Our Humanity*, in which social systems scientist Riane Eisler and anthropologist Douglas P. Fry chart the impact of what they refer to as either “domination systems” or “partnership systems” on human development through the ages.

So-called domination systems rely on top-down control of the population and impose rigid hierarchies and ranking. In contrast, partnership systems are predicated on collaboration, and they promote ideals of mutuality, caring, empathy, and creativity. Like Reich, Eisler and Fry argue that “denying women reproductive freedom (by vilifying non-motherhood, for example) is part of a larger fundamentalist political agenda to maintain, or in some cases

force a return to, domination systems where both the male head of household and the male head of state have unquestioned control.”

This is ultimately the message of fundamentalist religions that condemn all non-procreative sex as sinful (including masturbation, prostitution, queer sex, and sex outside of marriage). In some cultures, these religious rules are enforced with extreme measures, including the “honor killings” of women and girls who bring shame to the family by engaging in queer, premarital, or extramarital sex, or refusing to enter into an arranged marriage. And while these acts are condemned by international civil rights organizations, similarly tyrannical attitudes to sex and sexuality simmer close to the surface in secular, Western countries too. Homophobia and transphobia and punitive anti-abortion laws (those that seek to imprison abortion providers, or to try for murder women who get the procedure, for example) all have their roots in the rigid sexual binary as imposed by organized religions.

Stoking unconscious fears about being punished for more fluid expressions of our sexuality, the through line goes something like: color outside the lines of approved gendered sex roles and there will be hell to pay. Literally, in some cases. And I can smell this same fear in the moral judgments that people often project onto women without kids—as with any woman-identified individual whose sexuality is not employed in service of fulfilling our reproductive duty. Can’t you?

Putting these puzzle pieces together is the first step to reclaiming our sexuality from this ancient, oppressive narrative—which is right there in our collective origin story: the story of Adam and Eve, the first man and his wayward wife, thrown out of Paradise and condemned to a life of repentance after she succumbs to her desires and takes a bite from Satan’s forbidden fruit. “Fruit” which could be read as a metaphor for female orgasm—the ultimate proof, as Shere Hite’s work highlighted, that female sexuality is not just for reproduction.

A mythology that has been passed down, woman to woman, *womb to womb*, through the ages, it has always felt ominously prophetic to me that his name was Adam, too—the man I dutifully submitted to, year after year, even when everything in me recoiled from his touch with a silent, shrinking *no*. Afterwards, I would lie staring into the hollow dark, wondering how the fuck this had become my life. But so ingrained in my psyche was the notion that he was, indeed, entitled to my body, and that my pleasure was irrelevant, that it was only decades after I left him that I could recognize this dynamic as abusive.

So this, all of this, is why we needed the sexual revolution. The twentieth-century movement to normalize premarital sex, queer sex, birth control, and abortion at least having acknowledged that human sexuality has many expressions and functions beyond the procreative act. Any woman who has chosen not to have kids, whatever her reasons for this, has been the beneficiary of this work. But the reason we have yet to be truly sexually liberated—let alone sexually healed—is that there is no escaping the story of human evolution. That is, the one that says men are *designed* to impregnate as many women as possible, and that women are *built* to bear these children. *Again, who can argue with nature?* Following this thread to its logical conclusion, some (male) evolutionary psychologists have even argued that rape is a natural consequence of our evolution as a species. In the controversial *A Natural History of Rape*, for example, the authors argue that forced copulation is just another expression of the violent and domineering “survival-of-the-fittest” instinct that informs natural selection. Abhorrent, of course (depending on who you’re talking to), but essentially a by-product of the genetic hustle for survival.

But if we accept this theory, then we must also accept that all men are wired for rape—which is the same sort of logic that says all women are wired for child-rearing. Just because you can, doesn’t mean you must. Within this evolutionary worldview, there is also no place for women without kids, even if our emergence has been

enabled by evolutions in consciousness that have helped to shape societal progress over the course of the past century. As with the female orgasm, *our very existence is an inconvenient reminder that there is more to life, and sex, than the multiplication of the species*. And what about men who don't have children? Well, there's no way to *prove* they haven't sired a child somewhere down the line, what with all the raping and pillaging they're supposed to have been getting up to.

Ugh. I think we can all agree that it's a marker of human progress that we are evolving beyond this thinking. So, if we can accept that it is not in all men's biological makeup to commit acts of sexual assault, why is it still so hard to accept that not all women are biologically compelled to become mothers? If anything, the flourishing of *womankind* (and thus, ultimately, the thriving of the species) is directly linked to women having control of our bodies, our sexuality, and our own reproductive lives. For example, the better educated and more financially independent the female population, the less kids women have overall, preferring to pour more resources into fewer offspring (benefiting said offspring first and foremost) than stretch themselves to breaking point caring for a larger brood. Simply put, the more say we have over how, when, and if we become mothers at all, the better women do, the better our children do, and the better *human beings* do overall. The sexual revolution was one thing—whatever that term means for you. But what if the next stage in our sexual *evolution* was more of us continuing to have fewer kids?

* * *

Of course, there are those who would argue that preventing pregnancy with the use of birth control or abortion “is not natural”—

and therefore not part of human evolution. This mentality might also claim the same of homosexuality. And speaking of evolution, isn't the whole point of the "sex instinct" to get us to produce as many progenies as possible? Not necessarily. Speaking on a program on childlessness on BBC Radio 4, evolutionary biologist Gillian Ragsdale debunked the notion of a biological maternal instinct: "It has never been necessary for any animal—including humans—to set out wanting to have children. What they have to have is a sex drive," she explained—a drive for orgasm being what she meant. After all, all female mammals have a clitoris, the sole purpose of which is to react to sexual stimulation.

When I called to ask her about this, she spelled it out: when rabbits have sex, they are not thinking about creating baby rabbits. And it's the same with us: "If you woke up on a desert island tomorrow, and you had forgotten everything about what it means to be human, you would try to find food and water. You would probably masturbate at some point. But the thought of wanting a child would never even cross your mind."

The human sex drive, then, is less about a specific desire to procreate than it is about simply expressing the orgasmic potency inside of us. Which . . . is kind of what we've been taught about men's relationship to sex. Meanwhile, "So long as you're having miscellaneous sex—lots of it and *most of it non procreative* [emphasis mine]—you will have children. When the kids come along, it is very useful if at that point there is a natural urge to look after them," she concluded. I might never have experienced "baby-fever," but this latter part is something I can absolutely relate to—a desire to protect and provide for young humans (ideally) applicable across the gender spectrum.

And how about when babies don't "just happen" as the result of unprotected sex? Anybody who has not been able to become pregnant "the natural way" and seen it as a personal failing may find cold comfort in the 2020 book *Count Down*, in which environmental and reproductive epidemiologist Shanna H. Swan charts

the decline of human fertility rates in Western nations over the past four decades. Sperm counts have plummeted by 50 percent since the 1980s, with diminished ovarian reserve (a condition in which the number and quality of a woman's eggs is lower than expected for her age) and risk of miscarriage rising steadily among women of all ages over the same period. Swan describes her doomsday prognosis as being “rotten,” “bleak,” and “*No bueno!*” She also lays the blame squarely at the feet of environmental factors, showing how everything from the level of microplastics in our food and water supply to the stress of modern life have negatively impacted human fertility.

And in some ways, the above could also be read as part of our evolution as a species, a case of survival-of-the-fittest gone too far. Stay with me on this one. Many of the technological advances filling our skies with smog and clogging our systems with microplastics started life as low-cost/high-convenience innovations to feed, clothe, house, and transport the rising global population. But equally, the way in which they are implemented often reflects the greed and self-serving mindset of those who have made it to *the top of the industrialized food chain*: the corporate “robber-bandits” (in the words of feminist copywriter Kelly Diels) for whom the hoarding of resources is just good business. If anything, Swan's alarmist book is part of a great awakening to all the ways in which our planet, our species, and, as it turns out, our procreative potential have been decimated by the evolution of extractive capitalism. So, what does it mean to have come of age at a time where human beings' biological capacity to reproduce is no longer a given—another important factor in the rising numbers of women without kids?

I believe that we find ourselves right here, right now for a reason. Considering the harm done to our planet and our shared humanity by the domination systems that have shaped modern civilization, what if what the world really *needs* is for us to slow down with the procreation until every adult human has had the

opportunity to heal their wounds around sexuality, gender, race, bodily autonomy, power, and spirituality, as inflicted by centuries of dogmatic religious, economic, and social control? Until the non-human world has had a chance to regenerate itself? What if Mother Nature is telling us that it's time to stop *reproducing more of the same* and focus on tending to these collective wounds instead—the same way we are currently tasked with sucking carbon from the skies and cleaning up our oceans? What if boldly claiming your place in the growing movement of women without kids were a vital part of this?

Okay, okay—I appreciate that this is a pretty far-out framing of what could ultimately lead to *the end of the human race!* I also don't mean to minimize the pain of anybody who has experienced fertility issues, or the anxieties of those who have made the difficult choice not to have kids due to fears about the environment. But human beings are nothing if not adaptable: what if the revolutionary rise of women without kids were an evolutionary adaptation to conditions on planet Earth that are simply not supportive of our continued flourishing?

* * *

It is white cis-gendered Western women who have benefitted most from the advances of the sexual revolution. When my mother thought it would be wise for me to go on the pill at age fifteen, it was because the underlying message for girls of my generation was that becoming pregnant too soon (motherhood still being the eventual goal) would mean *game over*. It would mean the end of freedom, the end of opportunity, the end of any chance at a meaningful career. The end of our potential to live as self-actualized, creatively fulfilled, and financially independent women. This

message has been powerfully disruptive to the gendered status quo—and it has resulted in more women having fewer kids. But it does not necessarily encompass the notion of liberation and healing, sexual and otherwise, for all.

Within the directive to avoid becoming pregnant at any cost, white women growing up on the heels of women's lib were essentially being groomed to be men's equals in a world created by white men for white men. That is, a world that continues to reward competition, self-sufficiency, and the accumulation of assets. What is not immediately obvious here is that second- and third-wave feminism have unwittingly continued to privilege and exalt the straight, white, masculine ideal. The more closely people of all genders are able to emulate this—for example, by not becoming mothers—the better they will continue to do. When the SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective formed in 1997, the aim was to highlight specific factors negatively impacting the reproductive lives of women of color that were not being addressed by mainstream white feminism: from enforced sterilization and high maternal mortality to difficulty accessing birth support choices and parents being separated from children through racially biased immigration and incarceration practices.

The founders coined the term “reproductive justice” through an amalgamation of “reproductive rights” and “social justice” to describe their aims. This is defined by current executive director Monica Simpson as

an intersectional framework that advocates for the human right to have the children that we want, to not have children, to end pregnancies, and to have access to the contraceptives that we need to determine how we want to make a family or not. Overall, reproductive justice is about the human right to self-determine, the ability to be able to live free from fear and violence, and to have healthy lives so that we can grow and live into our destinies.

This is a doctrine that could be the manifesto for a truly woman-centric feminism and a *real* sexual revolution: that is, one that serves our ultimate evolution as a species, moving us beyond systems of domination and oppression and toward a more equitable world.

As for what it will really take for us to move beyond ancient narratives about the nature of human sexuality? In the name of leveling the playing field, I can see the benefit of a movement encouraging men to have sex “like women”: that is, as if each sexual encounter might result in pregnancy, seriously limiting one’s life choices going forward. To this day, I also wonder if things would have gone differently with Adam and me if I’d been taught in school that sex is *primarily* about self-expression, connection, empowerment, self-awareness, intimacy, and trust. Like, what if all new people coming onto the planet learned that instead of sex being part of a contractual agreement as to who owes what to whom, the most important thing of all is to always love yourself? That babies, should parenthood be something a person feels they are cut out for, were just the by-product of an activity to be engaged in primarily for the purpose of *feeling good*. And that in a world of unavoidable suffering, sex is a gift and a reminder that our bodies are built to experience well-being, satisfaction, and joy.

This is the approach sexuality educator Justine Ang Fonte was taking when she was forced to resign from her position at the prestigious Dalton School on the Upper East Side of Manhattan in 2021. All she was trying to teach, she explained when we spoke, was that “until we also understand that sex is about pleasure and power and agency, we cannot understand who we are as sexual beings.” This is especially relevant to sex ed classes (which supposedly are about keeping young people safe), as you can’t have a real conversation about consent, for example, without talking about what feels good, what doesn’t, and why. And you can’t talk about these things

without talking to kids about intimacy, masturbation, homosexuality, and porn.

Meanwhile, Fonte is also an advocate for teaching about “a gender-full world, rather than a gendered world that limits us to being defined by our reproductive parts.” A gender-full world that would also incorporate the concept of the Motherhood Spectrum. She also told me that, given how far we have to go, she does not expect to see a world in which human beings are truly sexually liberated in her lifetime.

In the meantime, a powerful manifesto for the reclamation of the *erotic* beyond the sexual act can be found in adrienne maree brown’s *Pleasure Activism*, which positions pleasure as fuel for enacting social justice. Brown quotes Audre Lorde’s 1981 *Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power* as what helped her reorient her life, her work, and her activism toward helping all beings experience joy and personal fulfillment: “The erotic is . . . an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves,” Lorde wrote. Framed this way, acknowledging and embodying the erotic in us—synonymous in many ways with Reich’s orgasmic potency—means knowing what we want, going after it, and living a life where we feel satisfied on every level, a potent directive for any woman seeking meaning and fulfillment beyond motherhood.

For brown, “Lorde made me look deeply inside my life to find the orgasmic, full-bodied ‘yes!’ inside of me, inside the communities I love and work with, and inside our species in relationship to our home planet.” You’ve felt that YES, haven’t you? It’s the kind of yes that won’t take no for an answer, the kind of yes that feels like fireworks. She continues: “Once we know the extent to which we are capable of feeling that sense of satisfaction and completion, we can observe which of our

various life endeavors brings us closest to that fullness.” And for me, brown is writing about the *Affirmative Yes* that has for so long been yoked to motherhood among women, not least by the message that *you will never find fulfillment, or know true love, until you have a child of your own*. It is also the same yes that we clear the way for whenever we are able to find and voice our Affirmative No—about having sex that we don’t want, about having kids we are not ready for, or about anything else that is not aligned with our utmost desires for our life.

Which brings to mind something else Gillian Ragsdale had to say, this time about the “feeling rules” attached to motherhood: “Once you have to make rules about something in society, it’s a clue that the thing you’re trying to inculcate is not natural. All these cultural rules that say women should be married, should have children, you wouldn’t need that pressure if women weren’t likely to make other choices if they had the freedom.” In other words, if our orgasmic, Affirmative Yes wasn’t just as likely to take us by the hips and guide us away from the well-tended pastures of motherhood, toward as-yet untraveled pathways to satisfaction, fulfillment, joy, and pleasure for pleasure’s sake. Pathways that we are poised to explore together, in sisterhood, as women without kids.

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“I remember feeling this incredible pressure when I graduated, that within ten years I was supposed to build a career, save for a wedding, get married, pay off student debt, save for a house, save for a kid.”

— **age forty, about to be divorced**

“I had cancer in my early thirties and had to get a hysterectomy. At that time I was not married. As an artist I had not been interested in having a child. It is only now, at age fifty, that I feel settled enough to provide a home for a child. But so far that desire has not been strong enough to lead to me deciding to adopt.”

— **age fifty, married**

“I spent my young childhood in a Catholic and extremely patriarchal society. When my family moved to the US, I felt so much more freedom and possibility in my life and didn’t want to let go of that. I feel like having children would rob me of the freedom I love so much.”

— **age thirty-six, single**

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Ruby Warrington is a British-born author, editor, and publishing consultant. Recognized for her unique ability to identify issues that are destined to become part of the cultural narrative, her work has been featured by countless media outlets globally, while her previous books include *Material Girl*, *Mystical World*; *Sober Curious*; *The Sober Curious Reset*; and *Women Without Kids*.

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