I want to start with a prose poem I wrote several years ago. I wrote it to challenge the silence that surrounds voluntary childlessness in heterosexual relationships, both in the wider community and in poetry and fiction. I created the poem by cutting and pasting the voices of childfree women gleaned mainly from online forums and newspaper articles. Rather than simply expressing my own feelings and opinions as a childfree woman, the cut-and-paste technique allowed me to show the conflicting emotions and thoughts of non-mothers more broadly, and to use humour to negotiate a sensitive topic. The resulting prose poem, ‘Feisty and Childless’, has been published (with slightly different subtitles) online and in print, but it is also quite performative. I enjoy reading it at public poetry readings, where women often come up to me afterwards to say it reflects their own experience.

Feisty and Childless (an internet cut and paste)
A long time ago I decided that I wasn’t going to have any children. People need to feel they’re right, and have to convince everyone else that they are. We suppress other biological urges: nobody thinks
fidelity is ‘weird’. E-researchers have found that people derive more satisfaction from eating, exercising, shopping, napping, or watching television, than taking care of their kids. Looking after the kids appears to be only slightly more pleasant than doing the housework.

A long time ago I decided that I wasn’t going to have any children. We’re used to childless women running things, they used to be called nuns. Did you ‘just know’ you wanted to be a mother? Well I ‘just know’ I don’t. I do worry about being lonely when I’m older. I pursue volunteer work for charity, I give blood, I’ve offered to donate my eggs. Look, I like kids – I just couldn’t eat one whole.

Childless women subvert discourses round constructions of femininity. As a mother myself, meaning that only women with children have real feelings. A filmmaker, talking to the New York Times, probably is more comfortable discussing her films than her uterus. First Romeo wants to marry Julia. I have experienced firsthand the effects of bad parenting, and I don’t want to perpetuate that. My partner doesn’t want kids. I lack the appropriate resources. I was never drawn to dolls. I wonder why I am so ambivalent about my own status: why at times I feel myself a lesser being, even as I despise anybody who sees me that way.

‘I think having children is the greatest experience of any lifetime.’ My childhood was enriched by a childfree uncle, who took us to galleries and films we would not otherwise have seen. There is a constant drip, drip, drip of pressure, a need to justify your self in a way parents never have to do. If childbirth and rearing are so bloody essential, why do so many abortions happen every year? I am on constant alert, fearful of the stray remark or image that will rock my equilibrium.

A long time ago I decided that I wasn’t going to have children, and a long time ago the world decided I wasn’t, because I didn’t have children. The time has just gone and it was or wasn’t a long time ago for time is short. And in short, I am not sure whether I decided to have children or not, maybe I did and maybe I didn’t.²
To write the poem I browsed online forums for women’s views about voluntary childlessness, known medically as elective nullipara. Many of the women who contributed to the forums voiced fears of speaking out publicly about being childless by choice. This was because they believed they would be misunderstood, and because of the stigma they felt was attached to being childfree. (Most of the women were in long-term heterosexual relationships, and the particular pressures they experienced are my main focus here, rather than the equally significant but distinct difficulties experienced by childless gay couples or single women.)

These women were far from paranoid: negative assessments of non-mothers have been shown to be prevalent among the public in numerous sociological studies.³ The voluntary childless are seen as ‘selfish, materialistic, abnormal, unnatural, unfeminine, and inadequate’⁴, though Gordon Carmichael and Andrea Whittaker suggest that such judgmental attitudes may be lessening as awareness grows.⁵ Non-mothers are often reduced to crippling stereotypes, in the same way that people are reduced to stereotypes because of their ethnicity, sexuality or disability. While the stereotypes (for example, that childless women do not like children) have been shown to be false, childless women still sometimes internalise these formulations. This is evident in the puzzling, but common, tendency for non-mothers to refer to themselves disparagingly as selfish⁶: in so doing they fail to distinguish between selfishness and the more positive desire for self-fulfilment; they also perpetuate the contestable notion that mothering is a completely selfless activity. The idea that non-mothering is selfish also ignores the contribution childless women make to society through paid and voluntary work, and the contribution they make to family life in ways other than having their own children.⁷

The stigmatisation of non-mothers has manifested itself time and again in the media and in politics in different parts of the world. Even the term ‘voluntary childlessness’ has been thought by some to perpetuate the stigma because it seems to point to a loss or absence, rather than a positive, well-considered stance. Feminist researchers Maryanne Dever and Lise Saugeres found that ‘dispassionate images of women who have chosen childlessness are extremely rare and stories that validate their decisions virtually non-existent’.⁸ In Australia, much was made of a press photograph of Julia Gillard, former prime minister
and high-profile non-mother, in her supposedly sterile kitchen. In the UK, during the Conservative leadership campaign in 2016, Andrea Leadsom claimed, indirectly, that she was more suitable than Theresa May to be prime minister because she had children. On occasion, non-mothers in public life, like Theresa May, have felt impelled to say why they are childless, to reassure the public that they wanted to have children but simply could not for physical reasons. The centrality of procreation is also prevalent in politics in the emphasis on family values and financial rewards for families, such as family tax benefits. The implicit suggestion is always – as, for example, in former Australian treasurer Peter Costello’s claim, in 2004, that having a child was doing something for the country – that having children is the most important way in which women can contribute to society.

Childless women in the public eye occasionally buy into these notions. In Australia, Virginia Haussegger, in a highly publicised article, voiced her regrets about not being a parent in a way that placed the blame heavily on feminism:

I am childless and I am angry. Angry that I was so foolish to take the word of my feminist mothers as gospel. Angry that I was daft enough to believe female fulfilment came with a leather briefcase.

However, as the older generation of Australian feminists, like Wendy McCarthy, pointed out in response, feminism did not advise women to stop bearing children; its mission was to improve the lot of women with or without children.

Voluntary childlessness is a growing phenomenon in industrialised countries, including Australia. On current trends the Australian Bureau of Statistics predicts that by 2031 couples without children will account for 43 per cent of families, overtaking those with children by 5 per cent. The reasons for deciding not to mother are numerous, contextual, and in any one case can involve multiple factors. They can include having a partner who does not want to parent, desire for freedom and personal growth, a lifestyle choice, or a wish to find fulfilment in other ways. Childfree women, numerous surveys have shown, do have a distinct profile despite their differences because they tend to be:
More highly educated, have little or no religious affiliation, hold non-traditional sex roles, report a higher commitment to their careers, and are more likely to live in urban areas than women with children.\textsuperscript{16}

In my own case an important factor in the decision to remain childless was that my husband was definite that he did not want to have children, though he did assure me that if I really wanted to he would be willing. This left me with a choice, albeit with one option that was unattractive to my partner. In addition, I was ambivalent about the matter myself. As a teenager and young adult I had wanted to have children and assumed that being a mother would be an important part of my life. But once I was in a serious relationship my enthusiasm started to erode. This was partly because I wanted to develop my relationship with my husband as far as possible, and I felt that the emotional and practical demands of a child might impede that. But I was also equivocal about investing so much in the parent–child relationship, which is often beset with problems and limitations as well as benefits. I knew of many children who resented their parents, and it seemed as if some resentment often accompanied the need to become an autonomous human being. While some people accept this as part of the process of being a parent, I strongly disliked the idea of being the object of such resentment. I was also conscious of the various kinds of psychological damage it was possible to inflict on a child even with the best intentions. Although there might be ways to avoid this, there were likely to be many deleterious cultural and environmental factors involved in bringing up a child that were not within my control.

My wish to pursue a career did not feature hugely in my ruminations. In fact, Dever and Saugeres, among other researchers, have found that for many women a career — though it may be a contributing factor — is not necessarily the main reason why they are childless.\textsuperscript{17} As a young adult I hoped that if I decided to have children I would be able to combine childbearing with a career, and I also felt that if I really wanted to have children, that wish should take precedence. In retrospect, however, I am extremely grateful for the opportunity I have had to devote time to my career, passions and interests, without the additional demands of parenthood. Making a contribution to society through work, and developing my own intellectual and
creative potential to the full, have remained important ideals for me, and not having children has made it easier to pursue them.

Negative perceptions surrounding voluntary childlessness are much stronger for women than men. Because motherhood is the most common state for women in long-term relationships, and because nurturing and caring for the next generation are still gendered primarily as feminine activities, non-motherhood is seen as deviant, whereas men who do not want to have children are not generally perceived negatively: this is borne out by numerous sociological research projects.¹⁸

Among the many problems of perception that childless women face – and one that is not always directly addressed in these surveys – is that they are not expected to publicly display ambivalence. Whereas it is increasingly acceptable and normal for mothers to express mixed feelings about mothering, and to speak freely about the pressures, anxieties and irritations it entails, as well as the joys, it seems as if voluntary childless women are expected to be 100 per cent certain that they do not want to have children. If a woman is ambivalent about whether she should have children, the normal advice is to have them so that she will not ‘miss out’. However, sociologist Maura Kelly shows that women often change their minds about the matter over time.¹⁹ Laurie Lisle foregrounds her ambivalence in her account of childlessness – at several points in her life she did want to be a mother – and sees this as an inevitable part of the process given the biological and social pressures to mother.²⁰ Since people tend to harbour some ambivalence about most life decisions, or at least acknowledge that most beneficial situations also carry deficits, it seems odd that the choice of whether or not to mother is expected to be exempt from this. Closely related is the issue of what makes childlessness voluntary or involuntary, since there are always contextual issues that wear away at the individual’s right to choose, and any decision to either mother or not mother, as Carmichael and Whittaker discuss, may contain both voluntary and involuntary elements.²¹

The different contexts that contribute to the decision to remain childless also relate to national identity and ethnicity. Although the experience of voluntary childlessness is shared across different societies, I suspect that national identity and ethnicity make a big difference
to the decision, and this needs to be further addressed by researchers. This is a point made strongly by Kelly.22

I come from a Jewish family, where the emphasis on the significance of familial relationships and the expectation that I would have a family were particularly high. My parents both pursued engrossing professional occupations; however, they were very insistent that having children was the most important goal in life. They also believed that one lived vicariously through one’s children, without seeing this notion as problematic. I questioned this ideology of family-above-everything-else as I grew up, particularly the idea that it was essential to have children. I appreciated my parents’ warmth towards and love for me, and feel that this has impacted positively on my life: I respect the value of family and understand the benefits it can bestow. But while my parents followed convention with regard to family structure, I tended to be attracted by the unconventional and marginal, even the transgressive: I did not see any reason to have children just because other people did. Furthermore, I reacted against the idea that children were an extension of their parents, and the lack of individual differentiation such a view involved. Effective mothering seemed to me to be quite the opposite: it required a radical respect for a child’s alterity.

During most of my potential childbearing years I lived in the UK, where I was born, and I certainly felt pressure from my parents, as well as a more general social pressure, to have a child. This pressure lessened as I grew older and it became more obvious that I would not have children: such a decrease of pressure, according to Kyung-Hee Lee and Anisa Zvonkovic, is a common experience.23 By the time I came to live in Australia, in 1988, the pressure had sharply reduced and has continued to decline. My friends normally have been open-minded about such matters and many of them, for an array of reasons, are also childless. Nevertheless – like the women I came across in online forums or sociological studies – I am not necessarily quick to declare my childless status, or give explanations about it, to people I meet for the first time. This is partly because of the stereotypes I feel this will inevitably evoke, and the difficulty of moving beyond them in a short conversation.

Sociologists tend to highlight the emphasis non-mothers give to the freedom childlessness affords them, and the opportunity it
presents for both women and men to be explorers in their own lives: Carmichael and Whittaker refer to the desire for ‘self-actualization’ as an important aspect of this.\textsuperscript{24} And Doyle, Pooley and Breen point out that, in their study,

Half of the women spoke about the freedom their choice enabled and considered it a key reason for their choice...There was a sense of continual potential in what or who they could be.\textsuperscript{25}

For example, one of their interviewees said, ‘I can go and do anything I want to do and be anything I want to be because I don’t have kids’.\textsuperscript{26} An underlying issue here is the notion of creativity, of having the opportunity to express and extend the self. Elise Matthews and Michel Desjardins begin to explore this when they move beyond the desire for freedom into the idea that

[A voluntary childless] identity is not only part of a conception of self but also a lifestyle, a world, an ethical aim and a life plan; all these aspects of existence are components of a global configuration.\textsuperscript{27}

They also suggest that ‘By constructing an extraordinary lifestyle, originating in their youth and emanating from the [voluntary childless] character, the participants presented an alternative model of the “good life”’.\textsuperscript{28}

The creativity invoked here is of a generalised kind that is relevant to everyone and that sees creativity as central to self-development. However, one more specific question that interests me is what difference, if any, does being a creative artist make to the experience of being childfree? And, perhaps, does the creative expression that is a part of being a mother find a different outlet in artistic work? This is an issue that is not addressed much in the sociological literature, understandably, because most people are not creative artists. However, I think it can be a factor for people who are, or wish to be. In my own case I feel that working as a creative writer has helped me to live a rich life without being a mother.

My professional life has been complex in that I have had two careers: the first as a professional performing musician and the second
as a writer and academic, with an intervening period when I was studying for a PhD. These two periods of my life partly overlapped: I had been a professional musician for many years when, at the age of 30, I started to write poetry. When I was 34 I commenced a PhD in American literature, though at the same time I was writing poetry and continuing to do some professional work as a violinist. When I was 38 I embarked on a career as an academic at the University of New South Wales. Then my poetry writing expanded – though I only gave up professional violin playing when I was 46. My need to start writing, to become an academic and to stop being a musician, was partly a result of my wanting to spend more time on creative work. Even though there is a creative aspect to being a classical music performer, the objective is to play and interpret other people’s music. In the end I found I wanted to create as well as interpret, and began to write poetry. The need to spend time thinking and working imaginatively, then, became quite urgent, but it manifested itself in making art rather than having children.

I do not believe that the creation of life and the creation of art are analogous or that one can substitute for the other. It seems fallacious to claim that because you are an artist you do not need to mother, and certainly many creative artists have felt the desire to have children. But, having said that, the fulfilment that comes with making art may make motherhood seem less imperative. It affords a form of expression and personal development that is very different from other kinds of career advancement or material success. In my own case, having a creative outlet has been critical to me in making a space for myself that is not defined by motherhood, and has been part of a broader approach I have taken to inventive living.

This returns me to the issue I raised briefly near the beginning of this essay, concerning the lack of literary works about voluntary childlessness. As a writer, I had been surprised to find a dearth of poems, plays or novels that exposed the topic. There are many literary works that portray the effects of infertility, abortion and adoption; a recent Australian example would be Enza Gandolfo’s *Swimming* (pertinent here because it shows that involuntary childlessness can have some positive outcomes). But childlessness by choice does not seem to be explored. There is some nonfiction work on the topic, notably
Lisle’s groundbreaking book, Without Child\textsuperscript{30}, and there are also more recent essay collections edited by Nicki Defago and Meghan Daum – the latter a collection of essays by both female and male writers.\textsuperscript{31} However, given the extremely wide range of topics that novels, plays and poems explore – and the wish of writers to innovate, formally and thematically – it seems remarkable that this topic has not found more widespread literary expression. Does the lack of open discussion around this taboo topic mean that writers have failed to register its imaginative scope and social relevance, or have they not yet found appropriate genres and linguistic modes to approach it?

I do not as yet know the answer to these questions. But the lack of literary works has made me see writing about this issue as an urgent challenge, a way of speaking out, a form of non-belligerent activism. I have enjoyed not only exploring different aspects of the topic but also a variety of technical approaches because, as Daum points out, there are so many different ways of being and thinking about being childless\textsuperscript{32} and to my mind these consequently warrant different modes of expression. I therefore want to end the chapter with my poem ‘The Club’. It is a more metaphorical, abstract and emotive poem than ‘Feisty and Childless’, and attempts to explore, through a more overtly poetic style, some of the psychological and social complexities of being childfree, and the alienation that may result from the heretical act of rejecting the universal club of motherhood.

The Club\textsuperscript{33}

the woman who didn’t have
what other people have
was looked upon
with fear with pity and with envy

they wanted her to long for
everything in which they had invested
craved an expression of regret
she couldn’t give it
in every sphere there are the haves and the have-nots
the woman didn’t speak of her have-knotted-ness
and they didn’t ask her which surprised her

it’s like a club
most people have joined up and
want to be reassured
they haven’t wasted their money

*how to explain what cannot be explained*
it was not her decision only
it was not a decision at all
there were mumbled words she couldn’t catch
strident voices framed in spotlights

there was so much more
closed in but banging on the sides
the intricacy of coupling
the companionship of art

how she disliked rules
ownership, possession
(to have must not be to hold on to)

but soon she would be
amnesiac, bedridden, alone
the hardest part was coming after her
Notes


ibid., p. 402.


ibid.

ibid.


L. Lisle, *Without Child*.

