

Lois Tonkin

Haunted by a 'Present Absence'

Children are never simply themselves, co-extensive with their own bodies, becoming alive to us when they turn in the womb, or with their first unaided breath. Their lives start long before birth, long before conception, and if they are aborted or miscarried or simply fail to materialize at all, they become ghosts within our lives.

(Mantell 2003, p.228).

This is a sociological ghost story of sorts but rather than the malevolent ghosts of people who have died, the ghostly subjects of this story are those of children and of maternal subjectivities which are 'only' fantasies, that – as Hilary Mantell suggests in the epigraph – may be understood nevertheless to be an active presence in the lives of the women whose narratives I will discuss. Mantell's memoir is in part an evocative description of the ways her imagined but never embodied identity as a mother and the spectral presence of her fantasy daughter – whom she named Catriona – have permeated and structured much of her life. I relate her experience to my current doctoral study; a psychosocial study of the narratives and drawings of 26 women in their 30s and 40s who are 'circumstantially childless' (Cannold 2000). These are women who have always seen themselves as having children but find themselves at or near the end of their fertility without having done so, for social rather than (at least initially) biological reasons; women who talk about life just not working out the way they planned or expected, who never found themselves in the 'right' circumstances to have a child.

The narratives were laced with the traces of the lives both of their fantasy children, and of their potential maternal subjectivities.¹ I glimpse traces of these fantasies permeating the lives of all of these women, but they were not always easy to identify in their talk. In considering the nature of these fantasies I find the notions of 'ghosts' and 'haunting' to be helpful because they capture something of their invisible yet potent quality, and of the reluctance to acknowledge them, by both the women and others in their social worlds.

I am exploring the possibility that 'relationship' might be a useful way to conceptualise the *linkage* between participants and the something or someone that is the 'ghostly' object of their talk, and 'haunting' the *nature* of that linkage. 'Relationship' is perhaps more often thought of in the interpersonal sense as a two-way phenomenon, but it can also

refer to the ways in which things are connected to one another, and this is the sense in which I use it here. My project here is to take these ‘ghosts’ seriously; to consider how conceptualizing that link as a relationship might add to an understanding of it, and to look at the ways in which those ghosts might be said to ‘haunt’ these women’s lives in order to better understand how women experience not having children when they planned to. ‘Haunting’ is a term with its own genealogy within the social sciences, with one of its major lines being to psychoanalysis and Freud (Roseneil 2009; Frosh 2012). In thinking about the notion of haunting I draw in part on Avery Gordon’s (1997 p.17) use of it when she writes that ‘invisible things are not necessarily not-there [...] that which appears absent can be a seething presence.’ Gordon’s interest is in socio-cultural ghosts, and her attention to them is in the ways they symbolise past suffering and oppression. I do not use ‘ghosts’ in quite the same way – the ghosts I discern here make no claims for justice – but her description of a ‘seething presence’ in apparent absence suggested something of the intensity that I became aware of in the narratives I draw on here.

Roseneil (2009, p.412) writes that a psycho-social analysis is concerned ‘with both psychic and socio-cultural ghosts, with “inner” and “outer” worlds, personal biography and socio-historical conditions, internal, unconscious conflict and social power relations, and the complex, multitudinous ways in which these are intertwined.’ And, as Frosh reminds us, ‘fantasy is not “just” something that occupies an internal space as a kind of mediation of reality, but (...) it also has material effects, directing the activities of people and investing the social world with meaning’ (2003, p.1554). The ‘outer’ worlds of ‘circumstantially childless’ women contribute to the ways in which a woman’s fantasies of maternity and a child are socially constructed and maintained: in the conflation of femininity with maternity, the ‘aestheticisation of the bump’ (Thomson et al 2011, p.58), and the production of motherhood as the fulfillment of a woman’s life, for example. Space constrains me in doing justice to each of these dimensions of their fantasies however, and I focus here primarily on a psychoanalytical frame for understanding women’s relationship to a fantasy child.

I want to make it clear at the outset that in what follows I am not suggesting that all women *should* have children, are ‘meant’ to have children, or will be unhappy at some level if they don’t have children or become mothers, biological or otherwise. Nor am I equating motherhood exclusively with biological motherhood because there are many ways in which women become mothers and ‘do mothering’. Rather I want to suggest that women’s reproductive choices are made in the context of extremely complex social messages around

mothering, of the conscious and unconscious psychological imperatives, desires and fears unique to the individual biography of every woman, and of the ways these are inextricable from one another. My research leads me to conclude that the phenomenon of circumstantial childlessness is one outcome of those complexities.

Researching ‘Circumstantial childlessness’

The incidence of unintentional childlessness in women who have, as popular comment puts it, ‘left it too late’ is rising markedly in many western nations yet the experience is not well understood (McAllister and Clarke 1998).² These women are engaged in a process of coming to terms with the probability that they will not become biological mothers and are in the unusual, but not uncommon, position of being neither ‘voluntarily childless’ (since they would like to have a child), nor ‘involuntarily childless’ (since they were or are, at least initially, biologically capable of doing so). While there is a body of work on the experience of medical infertility,³ and on voluntary childlessness,⁴ there has been little research on this specific form of non-medical involuntary childlessness, particularly of women's qualitative experience of it.

In 2009/10 I interviewed 26 women from New Zealand's four major cities, both individually and in groups⁵. Their ages ranged from 33 to 48, with most in the late 30s-early 40s range. Although I did not follow any individual woman's experience over time, my intention in speaking with women over this extended age range was to get a sense of how the experience of ‘circumstantial childlessness’ might change in relation to women's waning biological fertility. Respondents were recruited via their responses to information about the research promulgated in a variety of ways: posters in a large government department's head office; notices in the national newsletters of a fertility consumers' support group and of the local branch of a national organization of counsellors; a university women's group email list; and personal links between some of the women I interviewed.

I used semi-structured individual ‘guided conversations’ (Cole and Knowles 2001) of about one and a half to two hours, and three follow-up group interviews of one hour, each with about seven women. The aim of the group interview was to facilitate a shared discussion that generated a different kind of talk because it was amongst other women whom the participants knew to share their experience in some way. The groups began with a drawing exercise where I asked each woman to draw with crayons about her experience of childlessness, and then to describe the drawing to the rest of the group. All of the interviews

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were audio-recorded and transcribed. I began each individual interview by asking each participant, ‘How did you see yourself in terms of having children as you were growing up?’ and the narrative of ‘what happened next?’ which emerged was understood to be jointly constructed in the post-structural sense that each occasion of talk is necessarily a product of the unique interaction of the participants in it rather than being a ‘neutral account of a pre-existing reality’ (Hollway and Jefferson 2000, p.32).

I analysed the spoken texts initially thematically across the entire data set, and through this process identified three key interwoven threads to explore in greater depth: agency/choice; fantasy/identity; and loss/grief/accommodation. After identifying 10 stories which either exemplified or offered a markedly contrasting perspective to these themes I used a modified version of the ‘Listening Guide’ (Doucet and Mauthner N.S. 2008; Gilligan et al., 2005; Mauthner N.S. and Doucet 2003; Brown and Gilligan 1992) to further analyse them. A narrative analysis made it possible for me to privilege women’s meaning-making in their own words, and in the context of their whole account, without losing sight of the social contexts in which they were embedded (Emerson and Frosh 2004).

Seeing ghosts is a difficult business methodologically. It entails traversing what Gordon describes as ‘the always unsettled relationship between what we see and what we know’ (1997, p.24). As I analysed stories and drawings the ghostly metaphor has often seemed particularly apt. I found myself trying to pin down in women’s words and drawings the traces of something that had such a powerful presence in the interviews, but which almost disappeared whenever I looked at it directly. I used two methodological strategies to address this problem. The first was to pay close attention to issues of ‘voice’. Throughout interviewing, transcription and analysis I looked carefully at times when participants’ narratives faltered. I paid close attention to repetitions, stuttering, tears, laughter, sighs, long pauses, unexpected links in the narrative, and so forth. I developed a notation system based on Bollas’s (2007) notion of a symphonic score which “imaginatively graphs” the complexity of the unconscious to record these key paralinguistic elements. Along with the category of language (*what* is said) he proposed that attention should be paid to the sonic dimension (*how* it is said); to elements such as timbre, pitch, volume and so forth. In discussing this notion, Bollas clarified that he intended the image to be used metaphorically rather than as an analytical tool in a clinical context, and I used it in a research context in the same spirit; as a useful way to structure my listening. The moments in which these paralinguistic elements are marked might be seen as possible indicators of areas where unconscious and conscious

conflicts or areas of ambivalence 'leak' into the carefully maintained personal and public image a respondent has constructed of and for herself; they 'make visible otherwise invisible internal states' (Hollway and Jefferson 2000, p.151) which is particularly important in a context where a woman might judge her private thoughts and feelings to be at odds with what she perceives to be socially legitimate.

Since articulating a fantasy in speech is often difficult, my second strategy to 'see' ghosts was to elicit data that was not primarily language based. I included participant-produced drawing as forms of visual data in this study on the premise that there are 'multiple forms of knowing' (Eisner 2008, p.5), and that these different forms in turn make possible different forms of representation. In drawing about something – in thinking about it in visual rather than linguistic terms – people are sometimes able to access and express another dimension of their experience that is difficult to put into words; 'the ineffable, the elusive, the not-yet-thought-through' (Weber and Mitchell 1995, p.5). When this was followed by their own description of their drawing, it seemed participants were able to 'translate' this dimension into words that were available as textual data alongside the visual data of their drawings. I adapted Rose's (2007) analytical framework in analysing the visual data in this project.

Maternal 'residues'

'(R)elationships leave residues, [...] we are inhabited by our histories of past relationships, and [...] past experiences, our own and those of others, structure our inner experience and relational possibilities in the present' (Roseneil 2009 p. 412). To consider the genesis of a relationship between women and both their potential subjectivity as mothers and their fantasy child or children I want to briefly discuss the ways women's very early relationships with their mothers might 'inhabit' them, leaving traces in their present lives as adults and indeed, as I will discuss further, in their future lives as they grow older. I begin with Hollway's (2008) psychosocial study of the experiences of women who are new mothers. Based on Winnicott's work she writes that a new mother draws intersubjectively on the 'vestigial experience' of her own infantile and child state in relationship with her mother, even though she has separated to a greater or lesser extent and developed differentiation from her.

I take the implications of this further and argue that, through this intersubjective identification, a woman's *first* experience of maternal subjectivity is shaped by this relationship with her mother, as an infant. I suggest that *before* she has a child a woman in a sense

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anticipates her potential maternal subjectivity through what she ‘knows’ psychically and socially; through this ‘vestigial experience’ as an infant and child, and also through her observation and experience of her mother and other mothers, and the conflicting and contradictory social discourses of mothering in which she is immersed as she grows up. Together these create in her a fantasy maternal subjectivity that has both conscious and unconscious dimensions. It is weighted with all that this means for each individual woman; what she anticipates she would gain, what she would lose, what she fears and what she desires. Through their narratives and drawings research participants constructed this anticipatory subjectivity in more or less detailed ways and demonstrated a fluid investment in it, shifting with time and tangled with the inevitable changes in their bodies. I suggest that women who go on to have a child have to reconcile the embodied reality of mothering and their baby with this anticipatory subjectivity and child and adapt to the differences between them. Research into postnatal depression supports this claim, suggesting that difficulties in this reconciliation often contribute to women’s experience of depression (Mauthner N., 2002).

My research leads me to conclude that when a woman does *not* have a child biologically, although she planned to do so, she does not simply abandon the potential maternity and child(ren) of her fantasy in her pursuit of alternative subjectivities, as the popular cliché of ‘Oh No! I forgot to have children!’ implies. I suggest she engages in a process of accommodation to a life in which her fantasy is not embodied, and that this process is often a lengthy one, fraught with ambivalence, and social and emotional complexities.

The ‘absent presence’

Deborah⁶ spoke articulately and strongly in her interview until I asked her to talk about how she felt about the decision she and her husband (whom she met in her mid 30s) made not to have a baby. The risk of disability was the main reason for this decision:

[It was] incredibly difficult. And is still difficult. [pause] It was difficult because [pause] um [pause] I think it was difficult because [pause], I think it was difficult because [pause] I had never [pause], and in a way still haven't, um, relinquished a, sort of [pause] sense of myself as a mother [trembling, quiet voice, crying]. Um [pause], [it's] very hard to describe.

The words Deborah found in her struggle to articulate her difficulty were ‘relinquishing’ what she referred to as her ‘sense of myself as a mother’. She might equally

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have talked, as other women did, of relinquishing a sense of her child. These fantasies, which I call the ‘absent presence’ of their potential maternity and a future child, were threaded through all of the women’s narratives. Participants described an imaginary picture of themselves as a mother, and/or the child or children they had expected to have, often in very vivid terms. Some women had named their fantasy children as a way of bringing them into symbolization and making them ‘real’. Shelley for example, who for a time considered adopting a child, said, ‘I gave her a name, and that was my biggest mistake. I called her Sophie, and, she was human, she was real.’ Others had developed a clear picture of what their children would look like and imagined themselves interacting with them in quite specific ways and contexts.

Both Isabella and Connie’s narratives provide eloquent examples of this absent presence. Although she had always wanted to have a child, Isabella had not found anyone she was able to form a relationship and start a family with until she met William in her mid 30s. William already had two sons and was willing to have a child together, but by then in her late 30s, Isabella had not conceived because of ‘unexplained infertility’ (presumed age-related). She talked about the child they hoped to have:

We see ourselves as having a daughter [...] I always threaten that she's going to be a horse rider and William is going to have to go to equestrian events and you know, brush the pony's tail, and things like that. [pause] Yeah, she is quite real. [...] She [pause] I always sort of [pause] we talk about her, and we just, yeah feel that, it's meant to be [pause]. Yeah. [...] She *is* somewhere.

Isabella’s words suggest that her child became more real through being a fantasy she shared with William, and was in some ‘quite real’ ways a presence in their household. Along with the materiality of the ‘little bits and pieces I have packed away’ for her to wear, Isabella and William’s talk about their anticipated daughter brought her into existence in their daily life and into the detail of their possible futures. I sensed a shift from a playfulness of what was understood to be an imagined future where their daughter might be a horse rider (‘I always threaten’) to a different conceptualization of her in the present, where Isabella’s pauses and hesitations pointed to her struggling in a more serious way to articulate *how* and *where* her daughter existed, but she concluded with a firm assertion that she ‘*is*.’

The man that Connie met in her mid 30s was older and had adult children. When she entered a serious relationship with him she knew that this meant abandoning her dream to have children:

Well, I always thought I would have a family of my own, and for a long time I thought I would have two boys. [Lois: Did you have names for your boys, in your mind?] No, but they always had dark short hair, liked climbing trees and things like that. [Lois: You saw them as kids rather babies.] Yes, as children. As real boys. Yeah.

Connie presumably meant that these children were real boys in the sense of liking to climb trees and play actively, but it seems in her detailed imagining of them they were real to her in another way as well; she appeared to have a vivid fantasy picture of them. Though she spoke smoothly during the interview, Connie stumbled over ‘this, this, this *vision*’ in describing the nature of her relationship with these boys. I suggest she struggled to find the words because the possibility of these children existing in some way is not socially recognized, and yet that was her experience. For her they were there and not-there, and her struggle was with ‘what we see and what we know’ (Gordon 1997 p.24). In using the word ‘vision’ she wanted to distinguish her fantasy from a vague idea and give it the weight of what she in some way *saw*.

Like a number of other women, Elena talked in terms of her child already existing on another plane or in another time,⁷ saying ‘it’s all, already here [pause] I have a – it sounds ridiculous – but I have a sense of [pause] this child, [pause] it, it, it’s there, you know? Umm [pause] it’s there. It’s somewhere; it’s with me.’ Her words were full of uncertainty and anxiety about how they might be heard; saying ‘it sounds ridiculous’ suggested she was fearful of my judgment of her ‘sense of this child’. Although she clearly struggled to articulate *how* this child existed because she did not have language to talk about this relationship, like Isabella, Elena was clear that it *did*; ‘it’s there, it’s somewhere, it’s with me.’

Although these fantasy children were not always fully formed in these women’s imaginations, they symbolized them in ways which distinguished them as more ‘real’ than the *idea* of a child might be. Very often women had bought clothes for these children, set aside rooms for them in their homes, engaged in specific actions in anticipation of their arrival, or planned their work and career around the possibility of their existence. ‘Everything in here is the shape of a baby’, Janine said as we sat together in her home. When I asked her what it meant to her not to have a child she replied: ‘It’s, it’s empty and it feels like there’s something missing; it feels like there’s *someone* missing.’ Sophia told me that she filled her freezer with baked goods in preparation for a longed-for pregnancy; ‘I kind of nest, I mean most pregnant women nest just before they give birth, but I nested before I even got pregnant simply because I wanted it so badly.’

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'The unborn'

Mantell describes the 'the unborn' as being 'in a sly state of half-becoming [where] they lurk in the shadowland of chances missed' (2003 p. 229). Elena seemed to explore those shadowlands as a potential in her life when she evoked a future image of herself. Speaking of motherhood she said:

But [pause] it's what I want. It's still what I want. Um..I look at the [pause] whole, you know, sitting in the rocking chair when you're 60, 80, whatever looking back, and I can't possibly [pause] see myself not having had a least a child or having been a Mum and learning from that, and, and giving something.

Using 'I' at the beginning of her sentence, she seemed almost to be looking at and talking to her future self in her shift of pronoun ('you're 60, 80'). Then, moving herself into that position and looking back at her present self from the vantage point of her future, she envisioned the intervening years, and could not 'see' herself not having been a mother. At the time of the interview Elena was about to embark on the difficult process of using ART to become pregnant, with the intention of being a single parent. In this segment she used the weight of this fantasy image of her maternal subjectivity some 30 to 50 years in the future as a kind of evidence for herself (and perhaps me) that her desire to be a mother was genuine and durable.

Elena's talk about her fantasy revealed another dimension to women's fantasies of a child. When I asked her what would be lost if she did not have a child as she planned she said:

I feel like it will be part of me, to be honest with you. That I have lost a part of me that I have already sort of accepted. It's part of you know [pause] yeah I, I [pause] [Lois: Can you describe that part of you? Can you tell me about it?] [sigh] I don't know, it's sort of [pause] because of course your child [pause] is a separate person, you know, but I think in the first years [pause] the mother and the child, they *are* connected. Very much. You know the child is [pause] doesn't survive without the mother, um, so [pause] I don't know.

I suggested earlier that when a woman gives birth she is immediately confronted with the embodied *otherness* of her child, and she faces the task of reconciling that baby with the baby of her fantasy. When a woman does not have a child, her fantasy is able to remain intact, as 'part of' her. Elena's struggles to articulate the contradictory way in which a child is both 'a separate person' and yet 'connected' relate to this intersubjective positioning whereby the child of her fantasy is both her and not-her.

Drawing a fantasy



Writing about the contrast between a visual and a written (or spoken) form of representation Kress (2001: p.71) says, ‘The visual is founded on the logic of display in space, on the simultaneous presence of elements represented as standing in specific relations to each other.’ This logic makes it possible to analyse elements of a drawing compositionally in terms of their relativity to one another. Lynn’s drawing was a good example of the ways in which a drawing can add to textual data. In describing it Lynn first explained the small figures, which represented aspects of her past and of her present and imagined future life with her husband, much as she had previously described them in her interview. At the end she spoke about the larger images that dominated the drawing:

And then I sort of put some big breasts over the whole thing [little laugh] because what I always have in [pause] because I, if I really try to feel [pause] feel not having a child I think I get left with, I do have quite deep feelings of, of having missed the opportunity to nurture, and I still [pause] I still would like that experience of a baby suckling on my nipple and I, [pause] I, yeah I *feel* it quite physically, the [pause] that [pause] I sort of think of it as a loss or something like that.

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For Lynn, mothering is about nurturing, and is symbolized for her – as it was for many of the participants – in the act of breastfeeding. In talking about this she did not name this act but rather described the explicitly fantasized detail of an embodied and intimate nurturing; ‘a baby suckling on my nipple.’

The viewer relates differently to the small figures – which all appear to be walking away – than to the breasts, which belong to a woman who faces slightly obliquely, but still directly out to the viewer; almost intimately close. In terms of composition, her ‘big breasts’ – contrasting with the tiny figures of the rest of the drawing and placed in the very centre of her picture – suggest the way in which this fantasy of embodiment is indeed ‘over the whole thing’ for her. Lynn is a slight woman, but these warm red breasts are ‘big’ and full; they are ‘Mummy breasts’, as one (female) viewer commented to me. The drawing and her description of it (‘I *feel* it quite physically’), suggest the extent to which the fantasy of her potential maternal subjectivity, while not an embodied fantasy, is rather a fantasy of embodiment.

Grieving for the loss of a fantasy

As they reached the end of their fertile years, or if they entered into a relationship with someone who was unwilling to have a child with them, participants were faced with the need to ‘relinquish’ their fantasy, to adapt it to other ways of mothering, or to accommodate it in some way into their lives. In the following excerpt, Deborah distinguished her loss from that associated with a death:

It's not loss in the sense of something known. You know how if one loses a parent, or loses a sibling. [...] It's not loss in that sense, and yet it is loss of [pause] I don't know, a vision or a hope or a dream or an expectation, or [pause], so there is grieving that goes with it. Just, I don't know that it's the same grieving as the loss of something that was known to exist. But I think it exists. That, [pause] that sense of loss, and the grieving for something not fulfilled is, you know, does, does exist. Yeah. Yes.

Though she struggled to articulate *what* was ‘lost’, in her insistence that her loss was a reality Deborah claimed her experience as ‘grief’. Her repetitions suggested a determination to defend its existence as grief; as if perhaps its validity might perhaps have been called into question. The disenfranchised nature (Doka 2002, Tonkin 2010) of these women’s experience of grief and loss is a strong theme running through all of the narratives.

In the absence of any social markers for *how* to grieve such a loss, women created a range of ways to address it in their lives. After telling me about her dark haired fantasy boy

children, Connie said that the past few years had been a complex process of temporarily relinquishing that 'vision'. She told me that part of that process was through her belief in future lives and a visit to a medium to ask about these boys:

I said 'I've had this, this, this *vision* for such a long time and now it turns out it's not going to happen. Is it just my imagination? Just to give myself, you know, peace, or is there some truth in there? What do you think?' And she said, 'Well I can see those children too, those boys, and even though they're not with you here now there is a connection and they do support you [crying] but,' she said, 'it's going to be unlikely that you have them in this lifetime.' [...] So I think they'll be there, next time. Yes. It's nice to think a bit broader. It really has given me a lot of faith and strength I think and mental strength as well, and emotional strength to look outside the immediate picture now. [pause] I just think I'm preparing myself now to become a mother in the next lifetime.

A possible interpretation of this segment of her story is that in meeting the constraints of her fertility Connie – and others who talked of their fantasy children existing in another temporal dimension in this way – negotiated the consequences of her choices by positioning herself as remaining in relationship with her fantasy children and with the maternal aspect of herself, in effect by delaying their embodiment for another lifetime, rather than abandoning it. I am not making any judgment about the reality of this belief when I wonder whether *one* possible reason for the number of women who talked about the children of their future lives is because there are few other available narratives to talk about a relationship with a child who exists in fantasy rather than in an embodied form, but is experienced as 'real' in some way.

Another dimension of the experience of loss of a fantasy child was a feature of women's talk when they had had a very early stage miscarriage or terminated a pregnancy. For these women the fantasy had become briefly embodied, and this had implications for how they dealt with its loss. Reflecting on an abortion she had in her 20s Gina said:

In my case there *was* a child. Nobody can ever say whether it was right or wrong that I terminated that pregnancy but there was a child and there is a real loss there. There is a *person* there, really, or a potential. And I did, from time to time I'd think about it and it's that hopelessness of never knowing what that person would have been like, you know. It's just *hopeless*. So, you tell your brain to just [pause] shut up. There's *absolutely* no point pursuing it.

It appears that Gina resorted to logic and an ongoing attempt to repress the fantasy of 'what that person would have been like' as a way of dealing with her feelings of 'hopelessness' in the loss of her fantasy child. Rather than attempting to forget, Julia chose rather to actively remember the two children she had aborted in her 20s, and in doing so to 'claim' her status as

a mother, and to 'do mothering' in relation to them. Following the advice of a Maori healer⁸ Julia chose to go 'up into the mountains' and 'do a ritual' for them:

So in that process I really claimed being a mother, and I put them to rest. So, I know, I know where they are and whenever I drive through [that area] I [pause] talk to them. [crying] So even though that's a little bit like [exhaling sound signifying something hard to do] I've, I've, I've also *done* [pause] um what I think a mother should do, yeah, which is to take care of them. [crying]

For Julia, and for some other women whose children were briefly embodied, the children who died act as a kind of container for their ongoing maternal fantasies:

As I've got older I've always thought about the two children that I didn't have, and wondered what they would look like, and what they would be doing. And I notice myself attracted to same age children; I think 'oh they'd be this age now'. And I think that's really interesting. It's like, it's like [pause] they *have* grown up with me.

Her words suggest that for some women the present absence of their fantasy child(ren) and maternal subjectivity is something that is not abandoned with time as the opportunity to embody it wanes with their fertility, but rather continues to be present in a different way, and to age with them.

Concluding thoughts

It could be argued that in conceptualizing this linkage between women and their maternal fantasies as a relationship I am imbuing it with a distinction that it does not warrant. After all, the lives of individuals are inevitably strewn with 'ghostly lives, destinies that could have been but do not come to pass' (McLeod and Thomson 2009, p.114). I argue however that these fantasies are of a different order from the other possible subjectivities that women might have taken up, but have not (as one might muse, 'I always thought I might have been an architect', for example). Segal (1973, p. 14) describes fantasy as 'not merely an escape from reality, but a constant and unavoidable accompaniment of real experiences, constantly interacting with them.' The usefulness of conceptualizing women's connection to these fantasies as a relationship is that it gives them a weight in their internal reality for these women; it makes it possible to consider what this 'interaction' might look like, and to explore the ways their fantasies 'permeate [their] everyday life and subjectivity' (Roseneil 2009, p. 412).

Understood in this way, the relationship to a fantasy child that haunts 'circumstantially childless' women might be most visible in the ways it is symbolised, in its

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intensity, detail, durability, and in the investment women have in it. In terms of the symbolisation of fantasy, for example, it is useful to consider the important part that a name plays in constituting a relationship to a fantasy child. Although Connie had not named her fantasy boys, several of the women I talked to did have names for their child or children. Others did not talk about a name – and I did not directly ask – but as an example of the ghostly ‘did I see that or did I imagine it’ kind of thinking that has happened so often in this project several of the women sent back their transcriptions with no changes except to the name I gave them as a pseudonym, and in every case they were for popular contemporary children’s names; along with Shelley’s choice of ‘Sophie’ two of the women chose the name ‘Sophia’ and one chose ‘Isabella’ for example.

For the younger women I talked to – for whom bearing a biological child was still a biological possibility – a fantasy child might simultaneously be understood as both a hoped-for future child and also as a present fantasy as I have described (‘she *is*’ as Isabella put it). As time passed and fertility waned the older participants’ potential to embody their fantasy faded, but stories like Julia’s, and in a different way Connie’s, suggest that some women’s relationship to their fantasies have durability over time. It is the intensity of their fantasy that perhaps most marks them out as being of a different order from ‘hopes’ of a possible future though. The notion of ‘haunting’ captures well the quality of this intensity, the sense of an absent invisible *presence*, the there-but-not-there of it, the trace that continues to inhabit an individual’s life over time.

Frosh (2003, p.1555) writes that ‘the social is psychically invested and the psychological is socially formed, neither has an essence apart from the other’. Though it is beyond the scope of this article to do so, attention to these fantasies might also further understanding of the ways that individual women’s lives are embedded in and shaped by wider social dynamics. McLeod and Thomson’s (2009) work on researching social change is useful in this regard. They draw on the work of Italian oral historian Alessandro Portelli’s use of the term ‘Uchronia’ ‘to characterize the telling of hypothetical events [...] things that *could* have happened,’ noting that he suggests that ‘the telling of such stories reveals the individual’s understanding of the relationship between the contingency of their choices and the wider forces that shape their lives’ (McLeod and Thomson 2009, p.114). I hope that attention to these fantasies will have the potential to add, not only to greater understanding of the phenomenon of ‘circumstantial childlessness’ in women’s lives, but also to the complex social and psychodynamic processes which bring it about.

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¹ Edith Balint (1987) usefully distinguishes between two possible spellings of fantasy/phantasy: 'I am distinguishing here between unconscious phantasy spelt with a 'ph' and fantasy spelt with an "F" because fantasy spelt with an "F" and imagination arise out of the ability to perceive external reality and identify with it, and play with it; and unconscious phantasy arises out of the instinctual life which needs to become conscious before it can be played with' (Balint 1987, p.95). In the context of 'circumstantial childlessness' I understand both meanings to be valid, because the fantasy/phantasy has both conscious and unconscious dimensions. Winnicott, on whose psychoanalytic work I draw primarily in this article, also distinguished two kinds of fantasy, spelling both with an 'f': that which is 'personal and organized, and related historically to the physical experiences, excitements, pleasures and pains of infancy' (Winnicott 1958, p.130), and the 'fantasy of day dream, the function of which was to insulate the person from internal reality, from contact with himself and others.' (Phillips 2007, p. 59). For ease of reading, and since I am drawing primarily on a Winnicottian frame, I use his spelling – 'fantasy' – consistently throughout.

² In New Zealand for example (where this study was conducted) no distinction is made in official statistics between those who are childless by decision, and those who do not have a child as a consequence of other events in their life (Boddington and Didham 2007).

³ See for example, Becker and Nachtigall 1992; Cussins 1998; Greil 2002, 1997; Inhorn and Van Balen 2002; Thompson 2002; Whiteford and Gonzalez 1995.

⁴ See for example Bartlett 1994; Cameron 1997; Gillespie 2000.

⁵ The study has approval from University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee.

⁶ Pseudonyms are used throughout this article.

⁷ 11 participants spoke explicitly of this belief, though it was not one I asked a specific question about.

⁸ Julia is a psychotherapist. It is not uncommon for New Zealanders of European origin who work as health professionals to undertake training in traditional Maori healing practices as part of their professional development. These practices are grounded in a Maori ontology in which the dead are understood to hold an ongoing and important part of the lives of the living.

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