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Not our script: a Narrative Exploration of Voluntary Childlessness in Ecuador

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Abstract

Voluntary childlessness, also called “childfreeness”, is not a new phenomenon, it is currently discussed in the media, and there is abundant literature on the topic available. Nonetheless, literature pertaining to Latin America is scarce compared to other regions in the world, and literature exclusive to Ecuador is not available. The present study explores and analyses voluntary childlessness in Ecuador by drawing from narrative theory and decolonial feminism. The data was produced through individual narrative interviews with nine voluntarily childless Ecuadorian women living in Ecuador, ages ranging from 25 to 49. The material emerged in the dialogical encounters between the storytellers (participants) and the listener (me-the researcher) and was analysed narratively taking into account the broader social context of Ecuador. The findings reveal how voluntary childless women in Ecuador construct their narrative identity and negotiate their social positionings while also creating counterstories that protect their identity as childfree women in a pronatalist context. The material also allowed me to discuss the status of bodily autonomy in Ecuador and to understand the social underpinnings of master narratives that conflate womanhood with motherhood. This study contributes to the growing scholarship on voluntary childlessness in Latin America.

Lay Summary

This is a qualitative descriptive study that investigated *la no maternidad voluntaria* (voluntary non-maternity) in Ecuadorian women. Voluntary non-maternity is commonly known in English as ‘childfreeness’ or ‘voluntary childlessness’ and refers to people who decide not to have children. I interviewed nine Ecuadorian women who self-identified as voluntarily childless residents in Ecuador and asked them for their stories about being a voluntarily childless woman in Ecuador. The findings of this research revealed how these women conceive themselves in terms of identity in relation to their childlessness. I identified and analysed what narrative resources they use to construct their identity while submerged in a society that proposes all women should become mothers. The findings also highlighted the importance of being able to exercise bodily autonomy as a right and its connection to voluntary childlessness. This study addresses a gap in the literature as no other studies about voluntary childlessness have been conducted solely with Ecuadorian women to date.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Originally, this work was sparked by an intimate, personal ember, “I do not know if I want to have children. I feel I don’t, but how do women *know*?”. Early on, I remember pitching my thesis idea to my parents in our weekly catch-up, and my mother saying something along the lines of, “that [voluntary childlessness] which you want to research does not exist... only nuns that dedicate their lives to God do not have children”. Unsurprisingly my reaction was a mix of outrage and sadness. I am aware she did not mean to hurt me, but I felt an important life query was being dismissed. Later, mid writing and working on the project, she —*Mami*— became more supportive and even sent me newspaper and magazine articles about voluntary childlessness. Yet, those moments of support would also pass and give way to some pronatalist poking, the latest while writing my findings was to suggest I should start considering freezing my eggs. She dropped the conversation when I ironically wondered out loud where should I freeze my eggs, the UK? Ecuador? Or Italy where my boyfriend at the time was from?

Mid writing this thesis, an important memory came back. I remembered myself years ago laying down on my psychoanalyst’s couch back in Ecuador, feeling deeply anguished and telling her that I didn’t know if I wanted to have children or not. She said, “of course you feel this way and it is not surprising since you are still firmly installed in the position of being a daughter”. At the time, I thought it made sense and I also thought of her as a genius, so she was surely right. It is now, years later, that I realised that in that moment, another important woman in my life had also dismissed my question. I also remembered another conversation we had in which she had openly criticised voluntarily childless women, framing them as immature. When I think about it, I feel that my analyst’s pronatalist poking is the worst I have experienced because while society has encouraged my mother to feel entitled to ask for grandchildren (not that this will have any weight in my decision to have or not to have children), my psychoanalyst was supposed to help me explore and process all sorts of questions instead of shutting me down. I am still grateful for our work together; however, now that I am a therapist I look back and wish I had retorted and questioned the power dynamics in the room.

Throughout this research work, the pronatalist poking never stopped. Earlier on, when I was only toying around with research questions and designs, I was in Italy and the father of my

then boyfriend, a 60-year-old Italian man from Napoli, when listening to my topic, sweetly but sternly said “*la donna deve procreare*” (“the woman must procreate”). Later on, while writing my findings, my brother said to me “you are not getting any more fertile”. Tick-tock, my biological clock seems to be in a rush while I am still unmarried and not concerned with becoming a mother (the horror!). Tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock. As I am readying the first draft, my romantic relationship is crumbling, and I will be 32 years old later in the year. I feel the pressure of master narratives that threaten me with spinsterhood (the horror!). TICK-TOCK, TICK-TOCK, I need to finish this thesis so I can find a husband and have children. No, not really, I don’t want to. I wonder, when did an independent young woman become such a threat that being single and voluntarily childless is sold as the worst possible nightmare. This work aims to challenge this.

My personal motivation for this thesis was also intertwined with a moving and painful experience I had with one of my psychotherapy clients. This is something I realised only after reflection. My client, a young Scottish woman in her 30s, knew what I still do not. She was certain she did not want children. A discussion of the work with this client has no place in this thesis, the only element that needs to be emphasised is the enormous amount of distress she experienced after years of fighting to get sterilised and had said sterilisation ultimately denied. I walked alongside her in the questioning of her identity and the process of creating a counternarrative solid enough that would protect her from societal pressure and pronatalist master narratives around having children (see section 2.4.3. for definitions of master narratives and counternarrative). These two events, my ambivalence regarding my fertility intentions, and my client’s experience pushed me to dive into the topic of voluntary childlessness and to develop this project. A project where I am not an external researcher, aseptic and distant, but present at the centre of it as a woman, as a researcher, and as a practising psychotherapist.

Initially, the project took shape as a “mere” narrative inquiry. I was curious about the experience of being a voluntarily childless woman in Ecuador and decided to ask fellow Ecuadorian women. I was also interested in socio-cultural elements, which pushed me to propose the work from a socio-constructionist paradigm. I would not say it was originally conceived as a politically charged project. Nonetheless, down the line, while engaged in the

process of thinking, selecting, recruiting and producing the data with my participants, the project morphed and became a decolonial feminist narrative inquiry. Decoloniality and feminism came up almost as a need. Decoloniality as the answer to my need of making sense of my identity and positionality as an immigrant *mestiza* woman researching and engaging with a topic that was inherently feminist.

I am an Ecuadorian woman living in Edinburgh and studying for a professional doctorate in Psychotherapy and Counselling. Before moving to Scotland, I never reflected on myself in terms of identity. Not to say I was oblivious to the notion of identity, but I simply existed in my Ecuadorian bubble, not giving it a second thought. I knew I was not white, in Ecuador 71.9% self-identify as *mestizos* (UNFPA 2022) and I did the same (still do). *Mestizo* is a word used for people of mixed racial origins (Oxford English Dictionary [OED] 2019) and is a common term in Latin America because it encompasses the mix between Native indigenous populations and Spanish colonisers that took place centuries ago and gave origin to the wider population.

The place from which I write this thesis is a constant border crossing. I borrow the notion of border crossing from Anzaldúa (2016). This is a notion developed by Anzaldúa to explain the negotiation of identities she needs to achieve as a *mestiza*. In her works, she proposes *the new mestiza*, to explain the process of border crossing that her condition as a mixed person belonging to two countries and cultures needs to do (she was a Chicana woman). In my case, my border crossing is constant, metaphoric and real: crossing the border from Ecuador to the UK and back, crossing from being an immigrant with three part-time jobs to being a spoiled “posh” Ecuadorian that is an only child studying her third higher education degree. Another border crossing is the daughter to mother, having to grapple with being a 32-year-old woman of fertile age, pondering if I want to cross the border and become a mother (or not). The border crossing is the crossing into different worlds, this work also means I am crossing back and forth from being a therapist to being a researcher, from the clinical setting to the academic one. Consequently, different sides of myself are at play in the current project, interacting dynamically and feeding off each other. Anzaldúa’s (2016) idea of the new *mestiza* is that of welcoming the ambivalence and tolerating the contradictions of living in this cultural

mestizaje. Anzaldúa's work is referred to and expanded further ahead in the section about feminism(s) (Section 2.3.).

Working on this thesis has made me immensely happy while also terribly angry, and sometimes angrier and angrier because as I am reading, writing, discussing, exploring, and researching women's bodily autonomy and how women structure their identities in relation to not having children, several things happened around the world that confirmed once again that feminism is important and that there is still a long way to go in terms of women's rights and freedoms. *Roe v. Wade* was overturned in the U.S, Mahsa Amini was murdered by the morality police in Iran for not wearing the hijab according to "standards", and María Belén Bernal was murdered in police premises by her husband, a police officer in Ecuador and many more. Voluntary childlessness in Ecuador, and everywhere, touches on women's bodily autonomy and on being able to decide what to do with our bodies and our lives. Voluntary childlessness also shines light on construction of identity, which is often a question discussed in therapeutic spaces, and I hope that with this project I can contribute to different fields of studies such as psychotherapy and counselling, psychology, sociology, and gender studies.

1.1. Thesis Outline

I will briefly explain how this thesis is structured. This introduction is followed by the Literature Review where I review the three strands that I braided together in my project: voluntary childlessness, decolonial feminism, and narrative theory. In this chapter I also explain the ontological and epistemological lens of this project. The chapter concludes with a rationale for the project. In Chapter 3, I present the methodological underpinnings for the research, and I describe how the research was conducted. The analysis and discussion of findings are presented in three separate chapters, centred around the participants' narratives. The first, Chapter 4, is where I present the findings that contextualise pronatalism in Ecuador. Chapter 5 compiles analysis of findings related to how Ecuadorian women choose VC and its connection to bodily autonomy. Chapters 4 and 5 set the ground for Chapter 6, the final chapter of analysis and the most important because it is where I present the way VC women in Ecuador construct their narrative identities and how identities damaged by pronatalism are repaired through counterstories; and what are the resources and strategies used for said repair. The analysis and

discussion chapters are articulated around quotations from the interviewees. The quotations are presented in Spanish in italicised, separately indented single-spaced blocks. Right below each, the reader will find the English translation. These chapters are followed by Chapter 7, where I summarise and conclude the work by addressing feminism, identity, implications for psychotherapy, and the limitations of my research while also highlighting avenues for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this chapter I will start with a short section on the reasons for my choice of terminology. This is followed by a section where I review scholarship on voluntary childlessness in relation to different theories, and literature pertaining to the topic in Latin America. After this, the reader will find a brief section devoted to feminism(s), where I articulate my need for decolonial Latin American feminisms and how they have influenced and transformed me as a researcher. The third section consists of a revision of key concepts taken from narrative theory that have set the foundations for my narrative approach to the topic. Lastly, the chapter ends with my rationale for the present project.

2.1. Childlessness? Childfreeness? Non-maternity? What do I call it—Notes on Terminology

Voluntary childlessness refers to the choice of not having children. Nonetheless, disagreement surrounds the term and the “definitional difficulties” (Bloom and Pebley 1982) for voluntary childlessness stand out. Studies on the topic of choosing not to have children always take a clear stance on how voluntary childlessness is understood, as there are many ways to conceptualise it. There is also the debate around “voluntary” and the possible complications around what it means for it to be voluntary. Is it truly “voluntary” when someone is “forced” to go against their fertility intentions due to poverty or other external factors? Or is it only voluntary when someone chooses not to have children, simply because they do not want them, aside from any external circumstance? The definitional difficulties are also related to voluntary childlessness as an active choice in a moment of time but bringing awareness to the fact that fertility intentions can change in the future (see Bloom and Pebley 1982 for a discussion on definitional difficulties). Therefore, it can be studied only focusing on women with a “completed fertility” (i.e., no longer in a fertile stage of their lives). Nonetheless, “completed fertility” is also not a hard boundary as it might seem, because there are always options like adoption or fostering, and those can potentially transcend the biological barrier given by menopause or other factors like infertility. So, what should I call it? I move away from the term “childlessness” as it implies something is lacking and opt for “childfreeness”. Childfreeness is not free of

polemic as well. My personal take is that it also comes with a negative connotation aimed at children, typically when oneself or something is “free from” it tends to mean that it is free from something negative, harmful, detrimental or that can cause negative effects (e.g., “I am cancer free”, “free from trans fats”). The term childfreeness has also been popularised on internet forums that are not free from negative takes on reproduction and having children (Cosslett 2022). Consequently, it is not a straightforward all-positive term. Another option available is NoMo (Not Mothers). Although NoMo could be the most factual term, it is only used in certain online communities, and it lacks nuance, as it does not necessarily mean that a NoMo woman has decided not to have children, it simply highlights that at the present time she does not have them.

This research was conducted with Ecuadorian women in Spanish, which added another layer to the issue of definitional difficulties. The terms, voluntary childlessness and/or childfreeness do not have a direct translation to Spanish. This meant that I had to use the Spanish term that came closest to it: *no-maternidad voluntaria*, which translates as “voluntary non-maternity”. Albeit it is a bit clunkier when translated, but it is precise and gendered. On occasion, when discussing Latin American articles, I will use non-maternity or voluntary non-maternity as it is a translation more faithful to the original used by the researchers.

Overall, no term is perfect, and no term will fully satisfy everyone, yet it is important to acknowledge the nuances and reasons for using it or not. For the present work, I have decided to mainly use voluntary childlessness (VC), as it puts an emphasis on volition, on the desire of not having children which then translates into the decision of not having any. On occasion, and for stylistic purposes, I might use it interchangeably with childfreeness, understanding that childfreeness is also referring to someone that has decided not to have children because they do not want them, irrespective of the motives that have led them to that decision.

2.2. Voluntary Childlessness

Research on VC is vast, as it is a topic concerned with reproduction, bodily autonomy, economics, demographics, politics, social structures, feminism, human rights, and more. Consequently, voluntary childlessness can be researched in a multiplicity of ways and from and

through a variety of lenses, and creative methodologies. In this section I will address some of the different theories used to approach, explain, or analyse childfreeness such as life course theory, role theory, identity theory, discourse theory, feminist theory, among others; and how my project relates (or not) to (some of) them.

Life course theory is a perspective that studies how people live, taking into account social institutions and historical moments (Elder, Johnson, and Crosnoe 2003). Hence, life course theory certainly emphasises on the contextual element. Life course theory is not isolated from other disciplines (e.g., sociology, psychology, history, etc.) and fields (e.g., aging, human development, family demography, etc.) and commonly resorts to these to formulate its research questions. If “individuals generally work out their own life course and trajectories in relation to institutionalized pathways and normative patterns” (Elder, Johnson, and Crosnoe 2003, 8) it can be argued that all studies in VC touch on life course theory, whether they do it directly or indirectly, because the subject of study itself challenges pre-established traditional ideas of the pathway that must be followed.

A recent example of the use of life course theory in combination with history and VC is Chrastil’s (2019) book “How to be Childless”. Chrastil takes a historical approach and explores the different pathways to childlessness in the U.S. and Europe by looking at the last 500 years, debunking the idea that childlessness is a 20th-century trend in the West. Chrastil takes an interdisciplinary approach drawing from different fields such as philosophy, history, queer studies, and psychology. Similarly, Tanturri and Mencarini’s (2008) analyse the pathways to VC in Italy, in which the authors try to address a gap in the literature and tackle the idea that childlessness is a mere consequence of celibacy or infertility, discussing what they call “the modern reasons for childlessness in the country”. In a different line, but also using life course theory I would like to mention Umberson, Pudrovska and Reczek (2010) revision of studies on parenthood, childlessness and well-being that states that childlessness is, in many cases, associated with higher levels of well-being later in life and it is a complex experience that needs to be adequately contextualised to be understood. Umberson, Pudrovska and Reczek are based

in the U.S., the family journals they searched are U.S-focused or Europe focused. My approach to voluntary childlessness in Ecuador undoubtedly takes certain elements from life course theory, such as its emphasis on contextual elements and social institutions when investigating and analysing the experience of women that have decided not to have children.

Role theory is also directly or indirectly used when studying childlessness. Role theory at its most basic proposes that we act within pre-defined social categories (Hilbert 1981; Biddle 1979). Nonetheless, Erving Goffman (1990), writing from a sociological and socio-psychological perspective, further developed role theory in the 20th century by introducing the notion of interaction analysis to understand “the functioning and organization of the ‘actual’ practice of performing a role against the background of its normative frame” (Willems 2015, 276). VC ties in with role theory as VC directly challenges the motherhood mandate that is central to being a woman (Russo 1976), as if biology (i.e., the capacity to gestate) was destiny. Therefore, choosing VC, regardless of the reasons, does entail a deviation from the mainstream expectation of womanhood. An example of a VC study that focuses on roles is Hudde’s (2018, 745) work on the societal agreement on gender role attitudes and childlessness in 38 countries, finding “the greater the variation in gender role attitudes, the higher the chance for individuals to remain childless”. Hudde’s study included 38 countries across all continents, and although it did not include Ecuador, the main finding is important because it potentially provides evidence to support the idea that when in a society there is less rigidity around roles, women can opt out of traditional gender expectations and forsake motherhood. Whether that is the case in Ecuador, it is something that my participants will speak about when discussing their experience of being VC in Ecuador.

Identity theory, similar to life-course theory and role theory, also aims to understand individuals as framed within their social interactions and considers socio-historical contexts. Who we are is constantly re-negotiated in our interactions (Stets and Serpe 2013). Goffman also furthered identity theory by proposing identity as tripartite: social identity (the roles set), personal identity (individuality as ascribed to us by others), and ego identity (inner self)

(Goffman, 1990; Willems 2015). Identity and stigma are related, and Goffman (1990), in his work “Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity” explored the situation of people that do not conform to what society called “normal” at the time. Goffman (1990, 10) defined stigma as used to refer to an “attribute that is deeply discrediting”. There are several studies that focus on the stigma management and stigma resistance among VC populations, an example of which is Park (2002). Park (2002), in her work about stigma management in voluntarily childless populations, based on Goffman’s framework, discusses how VC women and men use techniques of information control to manage the impact of the stigma of not wanting to have children, and suggests that a stigmatised identity entails constantly renegotiating social positionings and navigating interactions with others that deem them morally deficient, strange, or faulty. Park’s study used a purposive sample recruited by snowballing that included fifteen women and nine men from and/or based in the United States. Park’s study offers insight into identity construction by addressing the tools to navigate a tripartite identity affected by gender roles and social expectations. My participants, whether they feel stigmatised or not, will be negotiating their identity in relation to the social, the personal, and their inner self. It would be interesting to discover if Ecuadorian women use similar strategies as those employed by U.S.-based childfree people.

In connection to identity theory and roles, it is worth pointing out that some of the research on VC uses discourse theory. A discourse can be understood as “[a] network of concepts, statements, and practices that collectively produce and authenticate particular knowledges and truths” (Aylett and Barnes 2009, 153). Discourse theory is a broad field, but at its basic proposes that our existence within society is traversed by discourses that shape and sustain the power structures that we are forced to navigate (Macdonell 1986). Using discourse theory means that the study of a phenomenon is done using a discursive lens, and the focus is on language: what is said and what can be said about it, and on the social and power structures that traverse said discourse. Although I will not use discourse theory in the present work, it is worth mentioning due to its proximity to the narrative field, the emphasis it places on power, and how discourses play a part on identity construction. In line with this, there are several

studies that take into account discourses, power and social structures when understanding VC (e.g., Giles, Shaw, and Morgan 2009; Hill 2020; Peterson and Engwall 2013; Kelly 2009; Gillespie 2000, 2003; Hird and Abshoff 2000; Hird 2003; Grill 2019; Morison et al. 2016; Lynch et al. 2018).

A good example of a discursive study that explores identity construction in VC is the work of Morison et al. (2016). Morison et al. (2016) took a feminist discursive approach to investigate how VC individuals construct their identity and use “rhetorical strategies” to support their VC decisions and resist pronatalist narratives. The authors generated data by engaging members of online childfree communities and had a total of 98 participants from different parts of the world (some of the countries listed are India, UK, South Africa, Poland, United States). The authors’ main take away is in relation to the rhetoric of choice. On one hand, the ability to choose and endorsing choice is a discursive resource that allows the participants to repair “troubled identities” (Morison et al. 2016, 191). But on the other hand, they also found the “disavowal of the choice script” (Morison et al. 2016, 192) which entailed that their childfreeness was intrinsic and not chosen, or that the costs of parenthoods itself made it impossible to choose to parent. The work of Morison et al. (2016) is relevant to my own in several ways. Firstly, they incorporate the feminist element of resistance and pushed Goffman’s (1990) work further by acknowledging that stigma management strategies are dependent on the social context and on relational elements, which is akin to what I am attempting to do as I detail in my methodology (Chapter 4). Secondly, they were able to incorporate people from different nationalities and locations due to producing and gathering their data online, which in a way ‘globalises’ their findings as opposed to other studies that are only focused on the “Global North”. Although Ecuador-based participants were not included in the study, it did include participants from areas where VC either has not been much researched (e.g., Poland) or from “Global South” countries such as India and South Africa. Thirdly, although the work in the study is discursive, the narrative and discursive fields are not far apart, and both contribute to identity construction. In the case of my project, I have chosen to use narrative and focus on the narrative construction of identity by VC women in Ecuador, as my interest lies on the side of the

stories and their experience rather than the discourse itself. More on this will be developed further ahead in this chapter, section 2.4.

Studies such as Park (2002) and Morison et al. (2016), that proposed ways in which VC populations manage and resist stigma that has repercussions for the way they construct their identities, are relevant to my research as I am proposing to explore what it is like to identify as VC in Ecuador. Although these authors' findings pertain to different socio-cultural contexts, my participants' experience might echo them. Additionally, this type of studies also connect to the motivation and inspiration for my research. As an Ecuadorian woman that has been exposed to and engulfed by pronatalist narratives that are present in her country of birth and has witnessed the stigmatisation of identities and paths that do not conform to heteronormativity and pronatalism, it has been comforting to engage with literature that explores similar challenges elsewhere in the world.

More examples of VC studies that connect (directly or indirectly) with identity theory are those exploring the personality of people who opt for VC (Avison and Furham 2015), or studies that research how childfree people are perceived by society (some examples are Bahtiyar-Saygan and Sakallı-Uğurlu 2019; and Salyakhieva and Saveleva 2017). Avison and Furham (2015) attempted to study personality and VC using the Big Five personality questionnaire. The sample was 91% female and most respondents identified as “white caucasian”; 78,9% of respondents identified as definitely childfree (do not have/want children). The authors discovered that childfree people scored higher in independence and lower in agreeableness and extraversion, and conclude that personality does play a part in the decision of having or not having children (Avison and Furham 2015). Although the authors did not restrict nationality (46 different nationalities were represented) or location of participants as data was collected through an online survey, the fact that the survey was in English makes it unsurprising that 86% of participants were based in the Global North (57% in U.S, 18% in UK, 7% in Canada, and 4% in Australia). If I consider participants were based in the Global North, this opens up a line of further research in relation to societal values, freedom and right to choose, and the way

pronatalism manifests in the Global North compared to how it manifests elsewhere. My participants are based in the Global South and that will influence the way pronatalist pressure is experienced and the resources available to those that want to be childfree.

Bahtiyar-Saygan and Sakallı-Uğurlu (2019) studied the attitudes towards VC people in Turkey. They found out that people who ranked higher in hostile/benevolent sexism tended to have negative attitudes towards childfreeness and perceived children as a requirement for the notion of family. Whether benevolent (i.e., seemingly positive attitudes that nonetheless imply inferiority of one gender) or hostile (i.e. openly negative views directed to whoever challenges gender norms), it is fair to say that any type of sexism implies subscription to gender norms and expectations, therefore these findings are not surprising. Conversely, higher education was a predictor of positive attitudes towards VC and younger people were more supportive of VC. Interestingly enough, gender and income did not predict negative or positive attitudes towards VC, which leads me to believe that it might not be so much socio-economic-status, but rather exposure to a rhetoric of choice grounded on bodily autonomy that tends to be accessed in the context of higher education. Similarly, Salyakhieva and Saveleva (2017) studied attitudes towards VC in Russia and discovered that 40% of the surveyed people have a negative opinion towards VC, and 50% have a neutral attitude. These studies (Bahtiyar-Saygan and Sakallı-Uğurlu 2019; Salyakhieva and Saveleva 2017) are relevant as they were conducted in countries that could be deemed as “conservative” and supportive of traditional family values, pushing for heteronormative ways of life (Robinson 2019; Tuğal 2013). This type of studies are closely connected to the work on stigma because negative attitudes will undoubtedly contribute to the stigmatisation of VC populations.

I identified an interesting tension between the Avison and Furham (2015) study and the Bahtiyar-Saygan and Sakallı-Uğurlu (2019) and Salyakhieva and Saveleva (2017) studies. Avison and Furham’s (2015) work feels like an attempt to find the “cause” of childfreeness, whereas the latter studies provide information as to how VC is perceived by members of what can be considered conservative societies. The tension is worth mentioning because in the end, in

relation to identity both elements need to be taken into account (the self and the social) and how we position ourselves in the face of societal demands and pressures. This is what I will attempt in the present work by asking VC women what their experience of being VC in Ecuador is and attempt to understand how they construct their identity as VC women. Their experiences and how they live their childfreeness will be subjected to the dialogical interplay of their inner self with their social context and the messages received from said social context. Although studies such as Bahtiyar-Saygan and Sakallı-Uğurlu (2019), Avison and Furnham (2015) and Salyakhieva and Saveleva (2017) have contributed to my understanding of the potential challenges faced by VC women, they have also highlighted the need for participant-led or participant-centred research as opposed to studies that investigate what is said about VC women, but do not pay actual attention to their experience itself.

Examples of studies where life-course theory, role theory, and identity theory overlap are several. An example of this are studies that look at VC representations. These studies are relevant because they attempt to understand how VC is portrayed in the media and “offered” to the public, analysing how VC has been represented in books, the press, or to the public.

Benninghaus (2014) analysed visual representations of VC in Weimar and Contemporary Germany. Similar to Chrastil (2019), Benninghaus concluded that childfreeness is not a new phenomenon, and it does not happen in isolation as it is the result of multiple causes. The author highlighted that visual representations tend to simplify or stereotype the phenomenon while serving the trending agendas of those in power. An example of this can be found in the contrast between Weimar Germany’s representation of childfree women as enjoying privileges and leisure compared to the Nazi Germany attempt of encouraging childbirth by using heroic representations of motherhood. Similarly, Chancey and Dumais (2009) analysed representations of VC in family textbooks used in marriage and family courses in the U.S from 1950 until 2000. They identified childlessness represented in the 50s as an alternative to the challenge of parenthood; a lack of representation of childlessness in the 60s and 70s, and a growing academic interest in the 80s, and an attempt for dismantling stereotypes during the 90s. Other

studies analysed VC representations in the press (Giles, Shaw, and Morgan 2009; Hintz and Haywood 2020; Peterson 2014). These studies are relevant because they analyse how the portrayal of VC has changed through the times and how it might have influenced the general public in their fertility decisions, their perception of VC, formation of discourses and changes in social policy. Although I was not able to find similar studies on Latin America, which in itself raises the question of lack of representation of voluntary childlessness in Latin American media and academia, these studies are a reminder that childfreeness cannot be studied in isolation.

Last but not least, it has become evident to me that research on VC women could (and *should*) be framed in feminist theory, as it is a topic that concerns women, women's bodies, and desire (what women want/do not want) (Grill 2019; Harrington 2019). Hird and Abshoff (2000) highlight the feminist dilemma surrounding VC in regard to championing women's rights (bodily autonomy, reproductive rights) while also moving beyond defining womanhood in terms of sexual reproduction. Choosing to be VC entails stating that womanhood is not tied to reproduction and the formula woman=mother. I will try to acknowledge this feminist dilemma when analysing the experience of VC women in Ecuador. Moore's (2014) work on discursive identity construction is another example of an explicit feminist take on VC. The author uses feminist poststructuralism to understand and explore how members of online childfree communities construct their identities as childfree individuals. In general, poststructuralism emphasises on the "contingent and discursive nature of *all* identities" (italics in the original) (Randall 2010, 116) and a branch of feminism has turned to it to problematise and understand what it means to be a woman in relation to identity. Moore worked with 24 participants (only 2 of whom identified as male, the rest as female), with an age range from 21 to 52. From the sample, 22 identified as Caucasian, 1 as mixed race (Caucasian/Native American) and 1 African American. Similar to other studies quoted above, participants were from the Global North (twenty from the U.S, two from Canada, and two from the UK). Moore (2014) identified three stages relevant to identity construction: naming, negotiating, and enacting childfreeness. Moore's findings propose a model of identity construction for a specific population, and I would be interested in seeing if VC Ecuadorian women follow a similar pathway in terms of their

identity. A priori, I am certain that naming and negotiating are stages that my participants would have traversed. The certainty comes from the fact that this project aimed to recruit women that self-identify as VC, therefore this must have entailed at least naming and negotiating being VC. Nonetheless, in relation to enacting, which Moore classes on the side of activism, this is something I will explore in my interviews. My understanding, contextualisation, and use of feminism are detailed below in section 2.3.

In a similar line is Peterson's (2015) work on VC as women's ultimate liberation and their work with Engwall on childfree women's gendered and embodied experiences (Peterson and Engwall 2013). Peterson (2015) interviewed 21 childfree Swedish women to understand the role of the concept of freedom in their positioning as VC and identified two strands of discourse related to freedom. One of the discourses around freedom was related to all the positive aspects that a childfree life entailed and freedom as a key aspect of their identity. Whereas the other strand highlighted how children would impinge on that freedom and the notion that having children means being "trapped". In their other article, Peterson and Engwall (2013) attempted to understand positioning in relation to being childfree, and from their interviews they hashed out a strong focus on the body and how the formula woman=mother is still ever present. The authors described how VC women resist woman=mother by drawing from narratives of biological determinism and the idea of a "silent body". These articles are relevant to my project because they showcase a participant-centred/ participant-led approach and go back to the experience of VC women, while also contextualising said experience in Sweden's welfare society. This is akin to what I want to do with VC women in Ecuador. I want to understand how women construct their identities as VC in the context of Ecuador's society.

Overall, in this section I highlighted that VC is a multifaceted issue that when studied, needs to be supported with and reference multiple theories, frameworks, and paradigms. It is unlikely to find a study where the subject is not treated with the input of many disciplines and fields, always accentuating the social implications and correlations of childlessness. Consequently, through my general review of the field of VC, I have understood how voluntarily

childless women can “create new discourses that can subvert and transform constructions of femininity” that fuse it with motherhood (Gillespie 2000, 224) and negate female subjectivity (Grill 2019). This is a key takeaway, as voluntary childlessness entails that womanhood does not dangle from motherhood. The remaining sections in this chapter will further contextualise and theoretically articulate my research project.

2.2.1. Voluntary Childlessness in Latin America

My research project is concerned with voluntary childlessness in Ecuador. Therefore, it is important that aside from briefly reviewing the field of VC as I did above, I also address the state of the literature in Latin America. When compared to the “Global North”, the Latin American literature pertaining to VC is much less abundant. An initial systematic search carried out in March 2021 using the University of Edinburgh’s DiscoverEd evidenced a lack of literature in Latin America, which contrasted with the amount of research on VC available in the US and Europe.

I conducted another systematic search in May 2023, using the same terms as in March 2021 (see Appendix 1) and I found several additional papers concerning Latin America. Nonetheless, although the presence of additional papers in a 2-year time frame is encouraging, the stark contrast with the amount of literature on the Global North remains.

After filtering the results, I managed to identify around twenty-six papers and several dissertations that addressed voluntary childlessness in Latin America and felt relevant to my research interest. I will briefly summarise some in this section and will note which studies included Ecuador. Akin to “Global North” VC literature, there are various studies that used census data, some used mixed methods, others approached the topic using qualitative methodologies, and some worked with narratives of voluntarily childless women.

Beginning with census data studies, these studies do not necessarily account for the element of desire for children (or lack thereof) which is something I emphasise in my own work. They tend to refer to “permanent childlessness” in women, which is understood as women that have reached the end of their reproductive years without having children. One of the oldest studies I found was Poston et al. (1985). They analysed the relationship with modernisation and

childlessness in different states in Mexico in 1970. These authors work under the premise that childlessness is largely involuntary and state that their study supports the idea that modernisation is negatively correlated to childlessness. Poston et al.'s study worked with census data in which childlessness is accounted for only within partnered women ("ever-married women"). This entails several problematic assumptions such as children being a must within heterosexual partnerships (hence why it is "involuntary childlessness"), presupposes fulfilling pronatalism's demands as the default, and does not account for queer populations. Yet, I am mentioning it here, as it is one of the earliest studies that I managed to find pertaining to Latin America.

Binstock and Cabella (2021) also used census data and analysed permanent childlessness in Latin America from 1980 to 2010 and discovered there has been a shift akin to the European pattern that took place in earlier years. Countries with low fertility rates in 1980 showed an increase in fertility, and childlessness has increased in countries that used to have a high fertility rate. Ecuador was one of the countries in which Binstock and Cabella (2021) identified an increase in childlessness, from less than 5% to almost 10% in 2010. Although I will not use census data in my own work, Binstock's finding is important because it could indicate that the experience of VC women in Latin America might share commonalities with VC women in other places such as Europe.

Another census study is Rosero-Bixby, Castro-Martín, and Martín-García's (2009), who used survey and census data to discuss Latin America's relatively recent increase in childlessness and concluded that childlessness was more prevalent among women with access to higher education and higher income salaries. Ecuador was among the countries studied. This finding is replicated in Brazil with Leocádio, Verona and De Miranda-Ribeiro's (2022) work which investigated the increase in childlessness in the country by looking at the behavioural and compositional changes by analysing census data pertaining six cohorts from 1940 to 2010. The authors also conclude that the increase in childlessness in Brazil is associated with women's agency and socio-economic status (SES).

In contrast, Linares Bravo et al. (2017) used census data to study non-maternity in Mexico and concluded it is a complex phenomenon that is not limited to high SES and highly educated segments of the population. The authors also found a relation between childlessness and being unmarried, which can also be explained in connection to social, cultural, and religious values that support heteronormativity and children only within wedlock or partnership. In a similar line, Castro and Tapia (2021) analysed childlessness in relation to poverty and how women from lower education levels could opt for childlessness. Castro and Tapia (2021) found that in populations with lower schooling levels, permanent childlessness is related to health and self-reported disability status. Their study included fifteen Latin American countries, and Ecuador was included with a census sample from 2001 and 2010 (Castro and Tapia 2021). They conclude that health might be a factor determining childlessness by poverty. These findings open lines of research in relation to the potential discrimination embedded in pronatalist discourses that signal what parenthoods are supported (or not) and which people are deemed fit to parent (e.g., to parent one *must* be healthy, wealthy, able-bodied, productive, etc.).

Similarly to Castro and Tapia (2021), I found a mixed method study that is worth mentioning, due to what it can say about patriarchal narratives. Perez's (2021) study, using life course theory, researched male childlessness in Colombia using census data from 2015 and in-depth life history interviews of men and women, who were parents and non-parents. The author found that there are more childless men than women in Colombia, and that in males with definitive childlessness in later life, this was associated with socio-economic vulnerabilities such as "lower-prestige occupations". Perez's study was the only Latin American study I managed to find that focused specifically on men. I believe its relevance is in highlighting the idea that pronatalism also impacts men. If Castro and Tapia (2021) found that for poor women health might be a factor in childlessness, Perez (2021) seemed to have found evidence that poverty might ban some men from fatherhood.

In a different line, but still using census data, I found De Vos's (2000, 2014) work that investigated the living arrangements and quality of life of childless women (60 years or older) in eight countries in Latin America (Ecuador was included with a census sample from 2001). These studies looked at how cultural patterns support co-residence of elderly single childless women.

De Vos's work is relevant because it challenges societal messages that propose childless women will end their lives alone. Additionally, it also exemplifies the collectivist nature of Latin American culture, which contrasts with the more individualistic nature of some of the cultures in the Global North.

In general, census studies are relevant because they investigate broader social trends and can help to point out social change through the years. Nonetheless, on occasion, these studies do not refer to or engage with relevant theories such as feminism and stick to reporting of data and trends. For example, the fact that Ecuador, according to Binstock and Cabella (2021), has seen an increase in permanent childlessness is relevant and could potentially be explained by and shine a light on a multiplicity of factors such as social transformation (e.g., improved women's rights), access to contraception, increase in sex education, an increase in women's access to higher education, among others. Or if I consider that permanent childlessness in Latin America has followed a pattern similar to that of Europe, this can be an entry point to say something about globalisation and coloniality (see section 2.3.2.). As previously discussed, VC does not happen in isolation and it is a phenomenon that has demographics, political, economic, and social repercussions. Findings from census studies, although valuable, are not enough and studies such as mine utilising in-depth interviews can offer a much more nuanced and contextualised account of the experience of choosing VC.

Quashie and Andrade (2020) used survey data to study the association between parental and marital status with the onset of depressive symptoms in older adults (60+) in seven cities in Latin America and the Caribbean (Buenos Aires, Bridgetown, Sao Paulo, Santiago, Havana, Mexico City and Montevideo) and found that parental status does not have a significant association with experiencing depressive symptoms, but marital status does. The authors conclude that there needs to be investment in healthcare to protect older adults from experiencing depressive symptoms. Although Quashie and Andrade did not include an Ecuadorian city in their study, this finding is relevant as it can potentially challenge the parenthood mandate and the idea that having children translates into a protective factor from depression in older ages. If anything, it seems to highlight the need to develop community and sources of support to prevent the onset of depressive symptoms in older adults. Similarly, in the

line of creating community, in Brazil, Mazzetto et al. (2019) used interviews and did a thematic analysis to study the experience of menopause in women without children (VC and not VC) and concluded that depending on the reasons for childlessness (i.e., intentional or not) climacteric women find different ways of compensating for the absence of children. Although this study is not underpinned by feminism, the authors highlight the importance for adequate support of women during menopause. I mention these two studies (Quashie and Andrade 2020; Mazzetto et al. 2019) because they spark the idea that the creation of support does not have to be focused on family unit or having children, but it can also be socially provided in the form of community or social programs that support older adults (whether childless or not).

Several studies use qualitative methodologies. Researchers based in Argentina, Baena Vallejo et al. (2020) did a thematic analysis of articles between 1992 and 2017 to address the question of the concept of family among couples without children and concluded that the traditional notion of family has shifted and that a childless couple can be considered a new family configuration. The authors included 35 articles from Latin America (n=23) (Argentina, Cuba, Colombia, Mexico, Venezuela, Chile, Brasil, Uruguay, Paraguay, Puerto Rico), Europe (Spain n=8, Portugal n= 1), and China (n=3). Articles varied, but most were theoretical or reflective, with less than a handful quantitative. Their main finding is encouraging as it signals that pronatalist and heteronormative understandings of family are slowly changing in Latin America and elsewhere in the world, and society might be moving to a more inclusive broader understanding of what family is.

Castañeda Rentería (2019) has researched the experience of professional Mexican women that are not mothers (both VC and non-VC) and argues, with data obtained from her PhD dissertation (2016), that, although non-maternity is a framework that allows women to construct their subjectivities and identities outside of the biological demands of motherhood, motherhood itself is still the prevalent frame of reference for women's identity construction. Castañeda Rentería and Contreras Tinoco (2021) used two cases studies from Castañeda Rentería's PhD project, to research identity construction of catholic professional women without children. The authors conclude that subjectively, these women construct themselves with a strong influence from Catholic Christian beliefs, and these shape the plans and expectations for

their lives. In relation to my project, the work of these authors offers insight into the reality of VC women who navigate a heavily Catholic Christian society, which is also the case of Ecuador. According to Ecuador's National Statistics and Census Centre, for 2012, 80% of Ecuador identified as Christian Catholic (INEC 2012). The percentage remains current, and 2020 estimates 74,8% of Ecuadorians still identify as Catholic (United States Department of State 2020).

Escobar and Sanhueza (2018) researched the experience of professional voluntarily childless women in Chile by using semi-structured in-depth interviews. They also interviewed four "experts" to gather information in relation to healthcare and social services available to VC women. Overall, the authors conclude that voluntary childlessness provokes a rupture in a heteronormative social system that is not ready to include women that choose non-maternity and challenge traditional models of existence. Although focused on Chile, their work reconfirms my assumption regarding the challenges that Ecuadorian VC women may face.

Linares Bravo, Nazar Beutelspacher, and Zapata Martelo (2019) studied non-maternity through semi-structured interviews of 24 indigenous women from Amatenango del Valle in Mexico. They discovered that several factors contributed to choosing non-maternity and opting out of marriage. The interviewees expressed that gender violence discouraged them from marriage, and the amount of housework and care duties related to marriage and motherhood was another reason to choose non-maternity. The authors also propose that access to monetary resources opens the possibility of not choosing marriage and motherhood. This work is relevant for many reasons: on one hand it focuses on a population traditionally neglected by research (i.e., indigenous women in Mexico), on the other the results show attempts of resistance in relation to patriarchal demands and shine light into the fact that monetary resources are needed to opt out of marriage and motherhood—suggesting that choice is not available to all women but only to some. I have yet to see if this arises from my data Ecuador.

Based in Mexico, Ávila González (2005) challenges the idea that woman = mother by giving voice to the stories of VC women. She contextualises the choice socio-politically, exploring voluntarily childlessness using feminism and psychoanalytic concepts. The author

demystifies the ideal of motherhood as a made-up cultural project, ultimately to state that biology is not destiny. Ávila González (2005) referred to voluntarily childless women as “liminal women”, as deciding not to have children pushes these women to the boundaries of womanhood. This theorisation speaks into how pronatalist narratives shape what it means to be a woman and conflate it with motherhood.

I found several studies that used narrative to approach VC and I have been inspired by them for my own research design. For example, Chacón and Tapia (2017) take a narrative approach to analyse the socio-cultural factors involved in the decision to be childless. They interviewed four professional women in Chile, showing that for their participants, the decision to be voluntarily childless was in close connection to the desire of having more equal partnerships. Another study is Gómez and Tena's (2018) who collected the narratives of eleven Mexican women to analyse their experience of non-maternity and how they resisted gender narratives that conflate women with motherhood (woman=mother). The authors conclude that it is important to listen to women's narratives about resisting gender mandates and to research this resistance, as this further contributes to the construction and creation of a narrative about non-maternity that challenges patriarchal notions.

Other examples of narrative work are Mandujano-Salazar's (2019, 2021) studies on the narratives of childfree people. In her comparative study on childfree single people in Mexico and Japan, the author concluded that childfree women seemed to struggle more on identity construction due to the motherhood mandate that is still very present in Mexico and Japan, when compared to men (2019). Men also had to fulfil traditional gender roles and expectations, but their childfreeness and singleness was not questioned in the same way as the female informants because hegemonic discourses do not conflate manhood with fatherhood (Mandujano-Salazar 2019). Mandujano-Salazar (2021) also studied childfree narratives of men and women and how individuals cope with the stigma associated to their childfree status. The author concludes that women faced more stigma than men. Similar to the comparative study, the men interviewed, by being employed and economically independent, fulfilled the social expectations of masculinity whereas the women defied social expectations by choosing to be childfree.

In addition to the above-mentioned studies, I was able to find five undergraduate dissertations and nine postgraduate dissertations that addressed the topic of voluntary childlessness in Latin America. From the postgraduate dissertations, seven were master's degree dissertations (Delgado Molina 2022; Hurtado González 2022; Quintal López 2001; Ramírez Ramírez 2013; Jiménez Mata 2019; Vela Reyes 2022; Rodríguez Gutiérrez 2020), one was a dissertation for a law specialisation in family relationships (Chavarriaga González and Pusquin Ospina 2021), and Castañeda Rentería's (2016) PhD dissertation mentioned earlier in this section in connection with her articles. The dissertations evidence that the interest for the topic of voluntary childlessness is growing in the region. Additionally, the fact that the dissertations have been developed in connection with several academic fields (psychology, law, social work, anthropology, gender studies, communication and culture, research, women's studies, social studies, etc.) highlights the importance and richness of the topic, therefore supporting and justifying the need for additional research. The dissertation that stands out for me is Delgado Molina's (2022), who is based in Quito, Ecuador, because it is the only study that I managed to find conducted by someone based in Ecuador. The author researched non-maternity as an affirmation of womanhood by interviewing eleven VC women residents in Ecuador, Colombia, Guatemala, Perú and Argentina.

I further discuss some of these papers and some of the dissertations in my analysis and conclusion chapters (Chapters 4, 5, 6 and Chapter 7 respectively). Although I only managed to find a handful of studies that included Ecuador among the countries investigated and one postgraduate dissertation conducted in Ecuador (that also included participants from other Latin American countries), I note that the different countries in the region share cultural and social commonalities (see section 2.3.1. Latin America: A bit of history, a bit of context, for more on this), which makes the other studies and its findings also relevant to what I may find and elaborate with my participants. I will now continue my literature review diving into feminism.

2.3. Notes on Feminism(s)

As stated in the introduction, the motivation for this research project initially was deeply personal, and it expanded to include others' experiences—my participants. I always knew that I wanted to work with Ecuadorian women. The more I worked and planned the project, the more

I realised that the lens through which I would analyse the data produced in my interviews could not be neutral or—worse—apolitical. From the beginning, I had chosen to approach the topic narratively (I discuss narrative theory concepts further ahead in this chapter in section 2.4. Narrative), but besides narrative something else was missing. Evidently, my thesis was a feminist inquiry. How could it not be? I am aware that it was not consciously conceived in that way, which makes the incorporation of feminism a mid-process thought. Nonetheless, I had always thought of myself as a feminist and understood well before the inception of this project that voluntary childlessness concerned bodily autonomy and women's right to bodily autonomy. Therefore, I turned to feminism and feminist theories to find a frame and fine-tune my analytical lens, as from where I stand, VC cannot be researched without it.

A quick Google search defines feminism as “the advocacy of women's rights on the ground of the equality of the sexes” (definition provided by Google's English dictionary in partnership with Oxford Languages). Deceptively simple, this definition portrays feminism as an all-in-one encompassing (socio-political-philosophical) movement, yet conceiving feminism in this “one size fits all” has proven to be widely unhelpful for people from several areas of the world. Therefore, to “do justice” to my participants (and myself), I have turned to decolonial Latin American feminisms. This does not exclude reference to other feminisms but highlights the need to use feminisms that are “rooted in the social and political context defined by colonialism, the enslavement of African peoples, and the marginalization of Native peoples” (Rivera Berruz 2018, 1). My understanding of feminism(s) is also interlinked with Hierro and Marquez's (1994) idea configurations of power and gender as systems that shape society by imposing a social hierarchy. The inequality of power is backed up by patriarchal morality that works under the logic of power and domination (Hierro and Marquez 1994).

Considering the idea of multiple feminisms in Latin America (and elsewhere), for the purpose of this work, I have decided to structure the present section by contextualising Latin American feminisms, feminisms in Ecuador, and discuss my need for decolonial feminism (Section 2.3.3.). My decolonial review (Section 2.3.2.1.) highlights the work of María Lugones

(2003, 2007, 2010, 2011), one of the pioneers of decolonial feminist theory in Latin America. I also refer to Anzaldúa's (2016) *Feminismo de Frontera*, and her border thinking (Section 2.3.2.2.). By engaging with Lugones's and Anzaldúa's work I have deconstructed my experience as a citizen from a formerly colonised country and I have adopted a decolonial lens as a researcher. My personal decolonial journey has been crucial in attempting to minimise engaging with the data from a stance that perpetuates coloniality. Following these, section 2.3.2.3. includes my elaboration on the current status of bodily autonomy in Latin America, articulating it with community feminism and decoloniality, and offering some brief examples of bodily autonomy being dismissed in Latin America. The section is followed by a brief revision of Crenshaw's (1989, 2010) intersectionality (Section 2.3.3.) as it provides me with a useful framework to understand the different intersections of oppression that play a part in how one can navigate society. My notes on feminism end with a section 2.3.4., on Federici's (2004) and Lagarde's (2005) work. Federici's (2004) theorisations on women's bodies and primitive accumulation are relevant to bodily autonomy and women's rights and role in society, keystones of this research project. Lagarde's (2005) anthropological classification of women's captivities is also central to the current work.

2.3.1. Latin America: A Bit of History, a Bit of Context

Latin America is a complex region, profoundly shaped by its colonial past. Ecuador is no exception. The Spanish Conquistadores arrived in Ecuador in the 16th century, and we gained our Independence in the early years of the 19th century. Therefore, we are relatively new in the world as a nation, and still healing from the wounds of our colonial past. Although "official" chronology traces feminism in Latin America to the 1960s and 1970s, feminist ideas were present in the region from early on. Rivera Berruz (2018) reminds us that the indexing and compilation of feminism in Latin America is still a task that needs to be attended to, but notable efforts are Gargallo's (2011) anthology of Latin American and Caribbean feminist philosophical writings, spanning from the 15th to the 20th century. Although a comprehensive summary of the history of feminism in Latin America goes beyond the scope of this research, it is important to highlight that feminism is not "new" to the region, and I will give a brief historical overview.

For a quick historical summary of Latin American feminism, I propose—based on Gargallo (2004, 2007, 2011), Carosio (2009), Montanaro Mena (2017), and Rivera Berruz (2018)— five broad historical stages, ranging from mid-18th century up to today. I am calling the first stage “suffragette-or a story of us saying we are here”. This was the period in which the aim was to gain legal, political and economic equality with men. In this period, the key driver for the feminist fight was to exist and be recognised by the [male] other, and at the centre of the fight was the right to vote. Later on, Kirkwood (1986) has deemed the period from 1950s to the 70s/80s as the “years of silence”. It was a time when women were claiming space for themselves, but the fight was not marked with clear demands. It was a time in which it was clear that women did not want to be like men, or to be defined in relation to men. They wanted to be themselves and challenge master narratives of sexism and *machismo* (Rivera Berruz 2018; Kirkwood 1986; Gargallo 2004). The 1970s to 1990s can fall under the banner of “neo feminism” and is a fruitful period in which the fight is ignited by widespread state repression and a delicate political climate in the region (fascism, military repression, U.S. interventionism). It is also the period in which the fight for abortion was picked up more intensely, as it embodies how much of the patriarchy crawls into the personal and private spheres. It was also a period in which the desire for recognition by men went off stage and it was about affirming our place as women in our difference. The 90’s up to the 2000s could be deemed as the “institutionalisation” of feminism. Authors state that during these years, some Latin American feminists shifted from radical activism to a place of adaptation to neoliberalism, the prevailing political and economic model in the region. Neoliberalism took feminism out of the political fight and the arena of activism and almost tamed it by absorbing it within academia (Gargallo 2004; Femenías 2007), which pitted feminists that subscribed to hegemonic and institutionalised feminisms against autonomous feminists. This was also the time when Latin American feminists adopted the idea of gender to discuss oppression rather than the patriarchy. I will call the last and current stage, based on previously mentioned authors, “decolonial and dissident”, as the turn of the century evidenced that liberal feminism was potentially replicating oppressive dynamics and overlooked difference (Cabnal 2010, 2012; Cabnal and Siderac 2019; Lissell 2020; Lugones 2007, 2010;

Luciano 2014; Espinosa-Miñoso, Lugones, and Maldonado Torres 2021; Espinosa-Miñoso and Pion 2022).

In general, feminism in Ecuador broadly fits in with the above-described historical periods of Latin American feminisms. For example, Ecuador was the first country in Latin America to give women the right to vote thanks to Matilde Hidalgo de Procel who requested access to vote in the 1924 legislative elections (Stock 2014; Clark 2015). Her request led to the 1929 constitutional change that ensured women's right to vote. Other important feminists in Ecuador, active between the 1940s and the 1980s were María Luisa Gómez de la Torre, Dolores Cacuango and Tránsito Amaguaña. María Luisa Gómez de la Torre was one of the founders of the National Socialist Party, and later a crucial member of the Communist Party (Clark 2015). She also got involved in the indigenous movement alongside key activists Dolores Cacuango and Tránsito Amaguaña (Bernal Carrera 2007). Dolores Cacuango and Tránsito Amaguaña were main figures in the fight for the rights of the indigenous populations and founders of FEI (*Federación Ecuatoriana de Indígenas*, Ecuadorian Indigenous Federation) with the support of Ecuador's Communist Party. They were also crucial in the fight for access to bilingual education (Spanish and Kichwa) for indigenous populations (Bernal Carrera 2007).

Aside from referring to some key examples of the pioneers of feminism, I want to highlight more recent feminist activity in Ecuador and in Latin America. Feminism is alive and well fuelled, fighting more than ever for social change. An example is *#VivasNosQueremos* (We Want Us Alive) that can originally be traced to Mexico in 2014 and then expanded to the rest of Latin America, including Ecuador. In Ecuador from 2016 to 2020, *#VivasNosQueremos* provided a platform to protest sexist violence, amplify the voices of survivors of sexual/domestic violence and raise awareness about femicides in Ecuador (Telesur 2019; El Comercio 2020). Although, *#VivasNosQueremos* no longer runs as a collective in Ecuador, there are several groups, collectives and associations that fight for women's rights by protesting, providing support, or sharing resources (e.g., Nina Warmi, Las Comadres Ecuador, Guayaqueer, Colectiva Runa Feminista, Surkuna, Marea Feminista, among others). Another movement, *Pañuelo Verdes* (Green scarves) that evolved into *La Marea Verde* (The Green Tide/ The Green Wave) started in

Argentina in 2003 with women wearing green scarves as the symbol of their fight for women's reproductive rights (Martin 2020; Telesur 2019). The *pañuelo verde* (green scarf) has become a symbol of Latin American feminism and has even crossed the Atlantic and could be seen worn by Polish protesters rallying against abortion restrictions (Casas 2021). All these movements, fuel the fight, and share a complex history of feminism in the region. The current decolonial feminism that can be placed at the core of Latin American feminism(s) is the result of a process of deconstruction and critique of the Eurocentric, ethnocentric and universalising character of the subjects proposed by "hegemonic feminisms" (Montanaro Mena 2017). The notion of hegemonic feminisms is currently used in decolonial works to refer to Eurocentric and North American strands of feminism that assume the experience of women is susceptible of universalisation, and that the forms of oppression endured by women can be generalised and addressed without considering location, race, class or religion (Bard Wigdor and Artazo 2017; Montanaro Mena 2017).

2.3.2. *The need (my need) for a Latin American decolonial Feminism(s)*

Postcolonial and decolonial theories have emerged in the last fifty years as a challenge to the historical narratives and historiographical understandings of modernity that lacked considerations about imperialism, colonialism and slavery imposed by the Global North (Bhambra 2014). Although postcolonialism and decoloniality are both anti-colonial and not mutually exclusive by any means, for the purpose of this work, I only refer to decoloniality because it is the one that concerns Latin America. Bhambra (2014) differentiates postcolonialism and decoloniality by highlighting that postcolonialism is the result of the work of scholars focused on the Middle East and South Asia and their imperial counterparts, whereas decoloniality emerged from and focuses on Latin America and refers to the conquest of the Americas. Decoloniality came to prominence in the early 2000s through the work of Aníbal Quijano (2019), Peruvian sociologist that proposed that Eurocentric powers have maintained their dominance through the impositions of racial hierarchies (Ruíz 2021).

Ecuador will mark 200 years old as a fully independent state in 2030. Nonetheless, quasi-bicentennial sovereignty aside, the effects of colonialism persist. As a born and raised Ecuadorian I have experienced the way the “Global North” has “othered” Latin America (and other areas of the world). The world order seems to be split between former empires and former colonies, and hegemonic powers have even coined the term “third world”. The notion of “third world” is an example of colonial logic that aims to bundle up and pack together socio-cultural realities, complex problematics, and massive areas of the world under the cartoonish banner of “third world” as a counterpart to the “first world” (whatever this means and wherever this is). Although one could argue that colonialism is no longer a thing, coloniality is still very much alive and determining what falls under the norm, and it is a notion that excludes alternative realities and hardships (López Cardona 2022; Lugones 2007; Quijano 2019; Espinosa-Miñoso and Pion 2022). Quijano (2019) proposed decoloniality as a process of untying former colonies from coloniality and breaking the patterns of power formed when America was “discovered”. Although I have always been aware that colonialism left numerous scars, it was only through living for some years in the UK that I have slowly identified, challenged and deconstructed the coloniality that I had internalised. I will now refer to Lugones’ and Anzaldúa’s work and how I conceived my decolonial lens.

2.3.2.1. Lugones’ proposal for Decolonial Feminism. In conversation with Quijano (2019; Quijano and Clímaco 2020) and problematising his postulates, while also processing her own concerns regarding the production of knowledge in Latin American feminisms, Lugones is the first one to propose (and identify) the decolonial turn after developing a research project on the coloniality of gender (Montanaro Mena 2017; Espinosa-Miñoso 2021; Lugones 2007, 2010). The decolonial turn is the result of combining and integrating the contributions of U.S.A-based black feminism and the critical philosophical take regarding coloniality that was being (and continues to be) actively discussed in Latin America (López Cardona 2022; Lugones 2007, 2010; Quijano 2019; Espinosa-Miñoso 2019). Lugones (2010) nuanced coloniality by framing the colonised-coloniser relationship in terms of gender, sexuality and race. “Unlike colonization, the

coloniality of gender is still with us; It is what lies at the intersection of gender and class and race as central constructs of the capitalist world system of power” (Lugones 2011, 75).

To further understand Lugones’ proposal, I need to refer to the notion of the “subaltern”. Subaltern is an adjective attributed to something of lower status. Antonio Gramsci was the first to coin it in reference to the non-elite groups, in alignment with his interest in mapping and understanding power relations and how these kept the subaltern dominated (Crehan 2002; Gramsci, Cospito, and Francioni 2007). Later on, Spivak (2010) takes the notion of subaltern to discuss it in her seminal essay, “Can the Subaltern speak?”. Spivak (2010) proposes that the subaltern cannot speak because their discourse is not validated by the agents of power that have aimed to silence them while also disciplining their bodies and positing their knowledge as something of no value. Decoloniality and postcolonial studies use the term to refer to the status of subaltern that formerly colonised populations have in the face of their former colonisers. Through the framework of coloniality of gender, Lugones (2010) proposes to understand the oppression of “women who have been subalternized through the combined processes, and at the intersection of racialization, colonization, capitalist exploitation, and heterosexualism” (747).

As an Ecuadorian *mestiza* I can recognise in myself how all these elements intersect and play a part in identity construction. After much reflection, I am now more aware of how colonisation plays a part in the way I navigate my existence in the world, the effects it has had in a wider societal sense for Ecuador, and how I relate to my own racialised identity and how ethnoracial capital (racialization- as a *mestiza* on the lighter skin colour side) can replicate oppressive dynamics. While this has been an important process for myself, it has also contributed to changing my perception of knowledge production and the way I approached the current project. The decolonial lens that I have developed allows me to understand that the master narratives (more on this in section 2.4.3.) present in Ecuador are not in fact a result of “Ecuador being behind” (or any other diminishing explanation that replicates coloniality) but are in fact a result of a complex process that aims to keep Latin America and its subjects

subalternised. Consequently, my aim is to highlight what is happening in the region and add to the literature.

Lugones (2010) proposes the colonised as “a being who begins to inhabit a fractured locus constructed doubly, who perceives doubly, relates doubly, where the ‘sides’ of the locus are in tension, and the conflict itself actively informs the subjectivity of the colonized self in multiple relation” (748). This becomes alive when understanding the fracture of self through the structures of power (Lugones 2011). The author exemplifies it by saying “here I am a woman/there I am Latina” (Lugones 2011, 70). Here the fracture between race and gender is evident, and it is something that resonates with/in me and aligns to intersectionality’s proposal regarding how gender and race cannot be separated (see section 2.3.3.).

Lugones (2010, 2011) proposed how during colonialism, the subalterns were put in a position of the less than human, against the benchmark of what allegedly was civilised (i.e., the colonisers and their practices). As stated before, coloniality remains in the sense that it perpetuates the fragmentation and still actively fractures the sense of self. Yet, it is from this fractured sense of self that coalitional identities emerge (women of colour, LatinX, etc.). A coalitional identity is the resulting identity that emerges resistant to coloniality and groups together those that have been othered. Lugones (2007, 2010, 2011) suggests that the intersubjective nature of a coalitional identity allows the subalternised groups to resist oppression and the logic of capitalism. This makes the coalitional identity a bastion of resistance, which also aligns with what my project is trying to do by contributing to the coalitional identity of VC women in Ecuador by exploring how their choice and experience is navigated in a society still marked by heteronormativity and pronatalism (both inherited from colonial times).

In dialectic relation to the idea of coalitional identities, Lugones (2010) proposes communality as an alternative to coloniality, highlighting that leaving a subalternised position will not be achieved by engaging in a submission-domination struggle, which entails exiting a

logic of hierarchy and giving space for difference and change. Carastathis (2013, 2016) posits that the concept of coalition traverses lines of differences and furthers liberation movements. This aligns with Martínez-Cairo Buscemi (2022) and their proposal that theory and knowledge in Latin American decolonial feminisms are produced and re-produced in action, which is activism and resistance against hegemonies. Resistance also requires voice and representation which is something that my project will bring to the table by amplifying the experiences of VC women in Ecuador.

2.3.2.2. Anzaldúa and her ‘border thinking’. Gloria Anzaldúa is one of the most important representatives of Chicana Feminism, and her ideas and theorisation of the border are important for decolonial feminism. Anzaldúa theorises through her own experience as a queer Chicana woman. A Chicana/o is someone of Mexican descent that resides in the U.S.. Border thinking is the response to being a subaltern (Espinosa-Miñoso 2022; Spivak 2010). It is the thinking that is produced in the life in the borderlands (Anzaldúa 2016). In her book “*Borderlands/La Frontera: The new Mestiza*” she invites the readers to bridge the contradiction of what it means to be a *mestiza* and live, perpetually in the belonging/not belonging. Again, I remind my reader that a *mestiza/o*, is someone of mixed race, Spanish and Indigenous descent, and that I am a *mestiza*. Anzaldúa proposes the idea of the *new mestiza* as an identity category, that results from having to constantly negotiate border crossing. The border for Anzaldúa goes beyond the physical geographical border, it is also the border that is traversed between cultural worlds.

Anzaldúa uses the word play *nos/otras* (Self/others) to signal how the new *mestiza* is simultaneously an insider and an outsider (e.g., colonised/coloniser, white/brown, straight/queer, Mexican/American) and the slash in *nos/otras* is the crack from where the subject can slip and negotiate away from the binary. This idea illustrates how we *mestizas/os* negotiate the “cultural dissonance” and “competing worlds” in which we are embedded. With the idea of the crack, the border becomes permeable and is not as straightforward as it used to be in the past (e.g., colonised/coloniser), as the *mestiza* has crossed over. In line with this,

Anzaldúa proposes a “new tribalism”, which merges well with Lugones’s (2011) coalitional identities, as this new tribalism points to the fact that we do not exist in isolation and identity is relational, we border with others, and we engage in border crossing constantly. The new tribalism aims to erase the “us” and “them” and create a global space. Following Anzaldúa’s take, I can say that as a Latina/*Mestiza* I carry in my body the mark of colonialism: part Indigenous, part Spanish. My condition as a *mestiza* tasks me with negotiating away from the binary, and I take inspiration from Anzaldúa’s proposal to challenge the formulation woman = mother that, according to Lagarde (2005), constitutes one of several women’s captivities. My participants challenge and break this formulation by constructing their identity as VC women.

2.3.2.3. Bodily Autonomy, female sexuality, community feminism and decoloniality.

Natalia Kanem (2022), United Nations Populations Fund (UNPF) executive director stated in March 2022 that “[b]odily autonomy means my body is for me; my body is my own. It’s about power, and it’s about agency. It’s about choice, and it’s about dignity” (lines 6-7). She also proposed that bodily autonomy is a right at the basis of gender equality. Yet, for it to be a right, the ability to have power to exercise our agency and choose what we want—with our dignity unharmed—should not be determined by several factors: our gender assigned at birth, where we are in the world (and all the legal-socio-political implications this has), who surrounds us, and what societal narratives determine what is or what is not “normal” or “expected”. Therefore, bodily autonomy, although it should be a right, ends up being a privilege. Kanem’s definition synthesises bodily autonomy poignantly but I further problematise it by framing it within decolonial feminism(s) and referring to past and current examples of how women in Latin America are denied this right.

The first territory that needs to be reclaimed is the body (Martínez-Cairo and Buscemi 2022; Cabnal 2012; Galindo 2018). This is a notion that I borrow from territorial community feminism which postulates the body as the first territory that needs to be defended. Community feminism has focused on defending the land of indigenous populations (e.g., preventing exploitation of land and resources and focusing on conservation efforts). The notion of

protecting and defending the land has extended to the body, as there cannot be a defence of the land if there is no defence of the body. Cabnal (2019), a Guatemalan territorial community feminist, states that the core aphorism for community feminism is “*recuperación y defensa de territorio cuerpo tierra*” (“recovery and defence of body land territory”), and that this is a product of *cuerpos indignados* (outraged bodies). She also states that territorial community feminism is an epistemic proposal and has its own way of decoding the oppressions endured by the community. This strand of feminism has stated that there is an original ancestral patriarchy, that predates colonial times, and it is where indigenous *machismo* is grounded. Territorial community feminism is a rich and generative strand of thinking because it is the result of work and processes that happen outside academia and offers the possibility of an interesting dialogue with coloniality because it goes beyond colonial times. I will use the idea of the body as the territory that needs to be reclaimed because of what it can bring to the understanding of bodily autonomy and because it also resonates with me as a *mestiza* woman constantly border-crossing and grappling with coloniality.

In Latin America we gained our independence from European States many years ago, however, we are still marked by the colonial processes. Colonialism was like a wolf in sheep’s clothing, permanently cloaked with a layer of benevolence and altruism, aiming to “save” the natives from the original sin and bring them closer to the one true God and the faith. Nonetheless, underneath the cloak of salvation, the aim was to profit from the colonies and newfound “subjects” (in the royal/domination sense, not in the subjective one) as much and as fast as possible by exploiting and controlling their land and bodies. The control of the bodies, as Lugones (2011) posits, was achieved through “systematic terror” by sexual violation and enslavement of native populations. The forced evangelisation, using the origin story of Adam and Eve and that of the immaculate conception, instated the idea that we are all guilty of some original sin (and we will always be sinful in a constant loop of confession, penance and sin), and made the female body undeserving of pleasure and the evil source of temptation (Hierro 1992; Lugones 2011; Federici 2004; Socolow 2015). Therefore, I propose VC as a reclamation of the

body, and it is only possible when having bodily autonomy, and I will explore VC in close articulation to what it means to have agency and bodily autonomy.

Several contemporary cases evidence that women's bodily autonomy continues to be dismissed. I refer to some examples here. Lennon (2010) mentions slave women's bodies as the epitome of what it means to lack bodily autonomy. Although slavery is a classic example and sadly still present in some areas of the world, in the case of women's bodies, governments have replaced slave masters. The examples hereunder reveal the state of women's bodily autonomy in Latin America and justify the need for projects like mine, which discuss and advocate for bodily autonomy.

In Ecuador, intentional abortion has been considered a crime since 1872, with only two legal exceptions: when the pregnant woman's life is in danger or in cases in which the pregnancy was a result of the rape of an intellectually disabled woman (Ron Erráz 2021). The latter exception was declared null in 2021, and in 2022, the Ecuadorian government approved regulations to allow abortions in all cases of rape (Ron Erráz 2021; Human Rights Watch 2021; The Guardian 2022). Allowing abortion in cases of rape is a minuscule step towards women's bodily autonomy, and the government still exercises control over our bodies.

A July 2021 report by Human Rights Watch reviewed 148 cases of women prosecuted and/or imprisoned for consenting to abortion and provided evidence to demonstrate that Ecuador's restrictive abortion law has mostly affected poor and minority women. In some of the cases reviewed in the report, the women were also wrongfully accused of having an abortion and had been reported by healthcare professionals after seeking medical attention for obstetric emergencies. From my experience as an Ecuadorian woman, I can state that illegal abortions are common in Ecuador. Anecdotal experience from my social circle also provides me with some evidence to argue that only privileged women (whether it is with economic means, educated, or with access to the right information) are the ones accessing relatively safe illegal abortions that will not put their health at risk or themselves at risk of prosecution and imprisonment.

Another example of the government's control over female bodies is coerced and forced sterilisation. Because this thesis is concerned with Ecuador and, in a broader sense, Latin America as a region that is neglected by mainstream academia, I will only refer to the Peruvian case. As per the reports by Chr. Michelsen Institute (Roti Dahl 2019) and the Quipu Project (Court and Lerner 2015), in the 90s, the Peruvian government wanted to decrease the birth rate with the aim of reducing poverty and launched a campaign to encourage women to get sterilised. The campaign led to more than 300,000 women and 21,000 men getting sterilised. The women and men that were tricked or forced into getting sterilised belonged to marginalised Quechua-speaking communities. The fight of these group has continued, and finally a judicial investigation is on its way, more than two decades after the sterilisations took place (Young 2023; AMPAEF 2021). These cases of government-motivated forced sterilisations contrast with anecdotal reports of women that have been denied voluntary sterilisations (Machado 2019), which supports the argument that women's bodies, and who gets to reproduce, are still controlled by the government.

In 2020 it was reported that a group of Chilean women got pregnant after taking faulty contraceptive birth control pills provided by public health clinics. It is reported that more than 150 women have been affected by defective batches in which placebo pills replaced active pills (McGowan and Alcoba 2021; Fox and Schlimovich n.d.). Like in Ecuador, elective abortion is illegal in Chile, which means that the women that fell pregnant due to the faulty contraceptives were forced to carry on with their pregnancies as most of them did not and could not meet any of the three legal exceptions for abortion (Fox and Schlimovich n.d.; McGowan and Alcoba 2021).

The above examples show how women's bodily autonomy in Latin America is far from being a recognised right. Whether it is to get pregnant, to have an abortion, or get sterilised, women in Latin America, and especially marginalised minority women, still have little to no agency in relation to their bodies. This is why bodily autonomy is the thread that still guides

feminist activism in Latin America. Luongo (2019), a Chilean Feminist, while in conversation with Gil and Yáñez, discusses how the conversation around voluntary childlessness is still not at the forefront and it only emerges in more intimate contexts. She also proposes that the fight for the right for free and safe abortion is not breached from the questioning of normative motherhood. Currently the fight for free and safe abortion is tackled from the side of women's bodily autonomy and not so much from questioning the imposition of motherhood as women's destiny. Therefore, in my project, I also aim to link voluntary childlessness with bodily autonomy as the first one cannot be discussed without the latter, while also challenging the idea of normative motherhood.

2.3.3. Intersectionality

Intersectionality is a concept originally postulated by Crenshaw (1989) as a metaphor to visualise and understand the intersections and layers of discrimination experienced by black women in the U.S. Crenshaw's work is based on her experience in the legal system in the United States and on how the law seemed to make social justice inaccessible to women of colour by erasing them from the legal system (Lugones 2011, 69). Crenshaw states that "[i]ntersectionality is one of the many registers through which women of colour boldly speak back against their theoretical marginality" (2010, 152). In this sense, intersectionality also sheds light over power dynamics, race, and disregarded identities and makes it important because it translates into an epistemological shift in relation to race and gender, and in how these cannot be separated (Carastathis 2016; Lugones 2011).

Crenshaw (2010) identifies feminism and antiracism as the corner where intersectionality emerged, but she also states that intersectionality is not limited to those concerns. The author's proposal has expanded and evolved into a framework that helps us understand models of privilege and discrimination that affect specific populations (Bello and Mancini 2016; Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013; Crenshaw 2010). An intersectional approach allows me to understand how dimensions of difference (e.g., class, culture, race, educational

level, income, religion, ethnicity) might be at play alongside gender and intersect in an oppressive way (Burman 2003).

In the context of this research, intersectionality provides me with a lens to try to understand the circumstances in which childfreeness is set and how my participants have arrived at it and how they live within it. I want to acknowledge that, although I have emphasised on decoloniality, intersectionality is an anti-oppressive framework that aligns well with a decolonial stance and has been deemed suitable to analyse identity in research approaches framed in feminism (Kurtiş and Adams 2017). For my current research, intersectionality will also help me understand how the choice not to have children emerges—at the intersection of dimensions that can foster privilege or discrimination—in the context of Ecuadorian women residing in Ecuador.

2.3.4. Lagarde and Federici and their work on the Patriarchy

Marcela Lagarde is a Mexican anthropologist, whose book *“Los cautiverios de las mujeres: madresposas, monjas, putas, presas y locas”* (Women’s captivities: motherwives, nuns, whores, prisoners, and crazy) became a crucial staple in feminist anthropology as it approaches women’s oppression in a way never done before, by creating categories and notions that allow a deeper understanding of how women navigate a patriarchal world. Lagarde’s (2005) work is vast, and I limit myself to referring to crucial elements that concern VC, such as her theorisation regarding the lack of terminology available to describe VC, the social expectations for motherhood, and the expectation that women must fall under one of the groups (motherwives, nuns, whores, prisoners, crazy). Lagarde (2005) points out that motherhood is so entangled with womanhood that we even lack a word to describe it (e.g., a woman that has lost her husband is a widow, an older single woman is a spinster, etc.) but in relation to VC we have to borrow from other words. I articulate some of my findings (Chapter 5) with Lagarde’s theorisations and concepts.

Lagarde's work pairs well with the work of Silvia Federici, an Anglo-Italian Marxist feminist writer. Her work is vast and deeply influential and her book, "Caliban and the Witch, Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation" (Federici 2004) has been very important for me as a theoretical reference point in my analysis of voluntary childlessness in Ecuador. Federici (2004) traces the history of the patriarchy historically, articulating it with the development of capitalism. Federici argues that both—capitalism and the patriarchy—sustained one another with the help of Catholicism, by profiting from the female body. She proposes the witch-hunt as the key instrument used to control and relegate women to the confines of reproduction and unwaged housework. Although Federici's work is focused on Europe, the witch-hunt was exported to the colonies as means of controlling the female body (Federici 2004; Socolow 2015). Federici's work is inspiring in connection to bodily autonomy, as it provides historical evidence that explains how and why the motherhood mandate has been installed and perpetuated. Federici's theorisations in relation to capitalism have been thought provoking in approaching VC in Ecuador, as we exist within a capitalist system, so her work has added a layer of complexity to my work and has nuanced the theorisations presented further ahead.

This section has aimed to illustrate how feminism is present in my project, as I consider it the spine that holds and supports my narrative exploration of VC.

2.4. Narrative

In this section I will briefly review important narrative theory notions that have set the theoretical framework for the present research.

2.4.1. Narrative Constructionism

Social constructionism's aim is that of broadening and challenging "socio-historically invariant conceptions of things" (Weinberg 2008, 14). For Latin America—Ecuador included—the conflation of womanhood with motherhood is a colonial byproduct owed to the influence of Catholicism and its archetypal figures of Eve and Mary (Federici 2004; Socolow 2015; Lagarde 2005; Lugones 2007). Hence, it is not farfetched to say that VC can be considered a direct affront to the socio-historical conception of motherhood as intrinsic to womanhood, making

social-constructionism an ideal knowledge paradigm to frame VC research in Ecuador. Best (2008, 57) proposes that adopting and working from a social constructionist perspective allows for the deconstruction of the taken-for-granted assumptions about the world and society by shining light over “the contingent nature of social activity”. Simply put, people must make choices. Said choices can then constrain, shape and challenge social activity. Therefore, if I apply Best’s understanding of social constructionism, while also acknowledging childfreeness as a choice made in a particular societal context, I can aim to analyse how VC can constrain, shape, and challenge social activity, and taken-for-granted ideas around motherhood in Ecuador.

Constructionist inquiry, being concerned with how the world is constructed day to day by its participants, turns to language in this process, as it is through language that these processes are constructed and through language that we can know about them (Berger and Luckmann 1979). It is at this point that constructionist inquiry intersects with other fields and knowledge production devices such as narrative. A narrative can be defined as an “account of a series of events, facts, etc., given in order and with the establishing of connections between them; a narration, a story, an account” or as “the practice or art of narration or storytelling; material for narration” (OED 2019). Narrative is the field and simultaneously the object, and it has been used and it is at the centre of many subjects such as literary theory, psychology, social sciences, aesthetics, music, film, historiography, and many more (Andrews, Squire, and Tamboukou 2013; Clandinin 2007; Pinnegar and Daynes 2007; Gubrium and Holstein 2009; Goodson and Gill 2011). The area that I am focusing and working from is narrative as a form of social science inquiry.

A narrative approach to a topic, grounded in social constructionism, means understanding that narrative is an ontological condition of social life because human life is storied and we know about it through what is said because “language is a social act” (Gergen 2009, Sparkes and Smith 2008) and “language and individuals are interdependent” (Meretoja 2020, 32). Narrative constructionist inquiry emphasises how narrative has a function within and mediates social relationships (Gergen 2015, Sparkes and Smith 2008). This type of approach to narrative is dialogical and allows for a study and analysis of power relations that traverses the contexts where narratives take place (Squire 2013). A dialogical take from a narrative

perspective posits that subjects interact and are interdependent with their social structures (and culturally mediated narrative models) (Meretoja 2020). Consequently, if women—my group of interest for the present research—are “socially constructed beings who live and lead storied lives” (Sparkes and Smith 2008, 296), narrative can serve as a framework and methodology to investigate what childfree Ecuadorian women say about their choice.

Considering the heterogeneity of the field of narrative inquiry, for the present research I have decided to discuss voluntarily childlessness in Ecuador using the notions of narrative identity, master narratives and counternarratives, and narrative ethics. These are defined hereunder.

2.4.2. Narrative Identity

Within the field of narrative, the notion of narrative identity refers to “the sort of identity to which a human being has access thanks to the mediation of the narrative function” (Ricoeur 1991, 73). I am understanding the narrative function as the capacity that humans possess that allows them to articulate life events and experiences in the form of a story. I use Ricoeur’s (1991, 1992) idea of narrative identity and I articulate it with Bamberg (1997), who proposed a narrative understanding to investigate how people negotiate their social actions and positionings, and therefore, their identities. My stance for the research is summarised in Somers (1994, 624) when the author states that the “narrative identity approach assumes that social action can only be intelligible if we recognize that people are guided to act by the structural and cultural relationships in which they are embedded and by the stories through which they constitute their identities”. Therefore, the process of identity construction is a dialogical one, in which identity is a “complex narrative construction” (Nelson 2001, 20) that results from stories and fragments deemed important by us as subjects and by our socio-cultural context. Currently, most authors agree that narratives express and elaborate individual or collective identities (De Fina 2015; Deppermann 2015). Hence, by researching the stories of VC Ecuadorian women, I will attempt to understand how they construct their narrative identities in relation to their choice to be childfree, and how VC as a personal choice is immersed in a socio-cultural context where childlessness is frowned upon.

Narrative identity as a concept has been widely developed and theorised, because people articulate a sense of who they are through stories. Ricœur (1991a, 1992) put forward the notion of narrative identity as a solution to the problems posited for personal identity in terms of its permanence in time derived from the break between ipse (self) and idem (same). Ricœur tackles this problem by referring to literature and the function of the plot, which is what mediates between permanence and change, and consequently gives a dynamic quality to the characters' identities. When translated from literary fiction to life, narratives also have the same functions, allowing for a sense of continuity, linking past and present, accounting for actions, and helping (or not) to make sense of experiences, all giving way to the storied self in the act of telling (Rasmussen 1996, Ricœur 1991a, Somers 1994, Dunne 1996). Requesting anyone to tell a story, and in the case of this research it would be VC women, prompts the storyteller to make links between past and present events connected to the topic of the story, and through the act of storytelling the person might also make sense and reflect around what has led them down a certain path.

To close this section, I wish to articulate Ricœur's (1991a, 1992) conception of narrative identity with the notion of dialogue. Bakhtin (1981, 279) believed that "the dialogical orientation of discourse is a phenomenon that is [...] a property of any discourse". In the context of narrative, this dialogical orientation is reflected in the dialectic between the storyteller and the listener. Similarly, this can be extended to the idea of storied self, as the storied self also emerges in the context of a storyteller and a listener (even if they are both the same, it can also be about the stories one can tell oneself). If storytelling is "a recursive elaboration of those sharing the story" (Frank 2000, 354) it is possible to conceive the construction of any story as a collaboration between the storyteller and the listener(s). This highlights not only the dialogical but also the relational nature of storytelling. There is a need for an other, as we are able to construct who we are when there is another present. Consequently, I want to close this section emphasising the fact that identity construction is always a social process.

2.4.3. Master Narratives and Counternarratives

Bamberg (2004) proposes that the term master narrative can broadly be interpreted in two ways. The narrower interpretation states that master narratives "delineate how narrators

position themselves with their stories” and the other, much broader states that “speakers are principally subjected to grand récits and metanarratives from which there seems to be no escape” (359-360). Andrews (2004) defines master narratives as blueprints that have the function of helping storytellers identify in relation to what is considered a “normative experience”. The idea of a master narrative is not able to exist without the counternarrative. Hyvärinen (2020) posits that we know of a master narrative when it has been conjured and provoked by a counternarrative. On the same line, Bamberg (2004, 361) discusses how most master narratives “remain inaccessible to our conscious recognition and transformation”. Therefore, at its most basic definition, a counternarrative is understood as a narrative that opposes and challenges a master narrative and is shaped and formed by counterstories. A counterstory is “a story that resists an oppressive identity and attempts to replace it with one that commands respect” (Nelson 2001, 6). Following on the dialogical take on narrative, Meretoja (2020) suggests that:

“The dialogical structure of cultural narrative systems of meaning means that they can be subverted and contested. Counter- narratives are critical reinterpretations of dominant narrative models; they typically question the power structures underlying master narratives and shed problematizing light on them” (33).

For example, regarding childlessness, not having a child then contests and subverts a social mandate that is derived from pronatalism. When VC women contest and resist it is when it emerges as a master narrative. Then, VC is then the counternarrative, that challenges and questions the idea that women must have children. This example evidences how counternarratives are “acts of resistance” as Meretoja proposes.

Hyvärinen (2020) proposes that master narratives and counternarratives are relevant concepts in narrative studies because of the way they introduce notions of “societal power, resistance, and conventionality into narrative studies” (17) which is relevant and aligned to the societal constructionist frame of the present research. Hyvärinen (2020) also argues that master narratives and counternarratives bring up a broader analytical dimension to the study of small stories and individual stories because these inevitably draw from the larger narrative context. Yet, the author invites us to think beyond the binary of master narratives vs. counternarratives, proposing that narrators (storytellers) “draw on different and contradictory canonical and

countering resources” (Hyvärinen 2020, 27). The notion of canonicity has been explored by Bruner (1991a, 1991b, 2000) and alludes to how something *should* be. Bruner (1991a, 1991b, 2000) proposes that a narrative serves to make sense of something that deviates from the canonical cultural pattern. Bruner posits narratives are the primary moderation mechanisms that allow us to understand anything that deviates from the canonical pattern and make sense of it. Therefore, if VC is a “deviation” from the canonical pattern imposed by pronatalism, VC narratives are moderation mechanisms.

Research on perceptions around VC has shown that VC women are perceived as selfish and face negative biases (Bahtiyar-Saygan and Sakallı-Uğurlu 2019, Salyakhieva and Saveleva 2017), face stigmatisation (Park 2002), are stereotyped (Letherby 2002), and have their VC choice questioned (Gillespie 2000) among other things. These types of findings, that evidence how VC women are perceived, open the question around the possibility of thinking of VC as a counternarrative that challenges master narratives of pronatalism and motherhood as intrinsic to womanhood. Therefore, if childfree women (in Ecuador and elsewhere) construct their narrative identities in contexts where their fertility intentions challenge the mainstream, VC can be explored as a counternarrative that challenges pronatalism.

2.4.4. Narrative Ethics

The turn to narrative ethics is fairly recent, as ethicists have realised stories can play a role in ethical assessment and also contextualise ethical decisions (Widdershoven and Smits 1996). Narrative ethics is a branch of narrative that has attended to the way narratives shape life and how we, subjects immersed in a socio-cultural context, use narratives to navigate life-making choices that strive to help us live a good life. In this branch of narrative, narratives are considered key instruments that can be used to test theories and make ethical decisions (Nelson 2001). Consequently, narrative ethics are relevant to the present research because I aim to address VC in women that purposefully and actively have chosen childfreeness and feel at ease with it.

Nelson (2001) states that a narrative approach to ethics must answer four questions in relation to the stories that are discussed: what is being done with the story (the narrative act),

the genre of the story, who is the narrative agent, and what is the moral purpose. Applying this to VC opens interesting lines of exploration, as a woman making this choice will do so by drawing from different narratives available to her, and what she can say about her choice will be a narrative act that will have an effect on who she is.

Within narrative ethics, it is important to highlight the notion of narrative agency. Technically we all possess narrative agency, but sometimes we cannot exercise our narrative agency because it is constrained by master narratives in our socio-cultural context. In this sense, narrative ethics also intersect with the dimension of power. For example, a person that opposes a totalitarian regime might see their narrative agency constrained under the threat of danger to their lives. Widdershoven and Smits (1996) remind their readers that narrative research is not ethically neutral but is in itself an ethical endeavour. This is an important reminder for the present project, as I will not be approaching the stories of VC women from a neutral stance. I am researching this topic with a complete acceptance of voluntary childlessness as a valid choice, and I fully support women's bodily autonomy. Nonetheless, my lack of neutrality as a researcher is separate from my application of narrative ethics principles and ideas to understand and analyse how my potential participants chose voluntary childlessness.

2.5. Rationale

Throughout this chapter I have attempted to briefly review the literature relevant to the three strands that braid my project together: voluntary childlessness, feminism, and narrative theory. In this section I aim to provide a rationale for my project.

Firstly, I have evidenced that scholarship on VC is vast. Qualitative studies generally use interviews with people that have opted to be childfree. Some focus on the lived experience of being childfree (Clarke et al. 2018). Others analyse the choice in relation to power structures (Engwall 2014), and others like the ones mentioned in earlier sections analyse and discuss VC in terms of roles and identity (e.g., Gillespie 2003; Park 2002; Mandujano-Salazar 2019, 2021; Moore 2014; Kelly 2009).

Despite the abundant research on VC, my non-exhaustive systematic search showed that the field of inquiry regarding VC in Latin America, although widening in recent years, is still limited compared to the amount of available data and studies relevant to the Global North. As mentioned earlier in Section 2.2.1., only a few studies included Ecuador. Therefore, based on the gap identified, conducting a study on VC in Ecuador is necessary. I build on Lynch et al., (2018) who did a historical content analysis of scholarship on VC to understand knowledge production on the topic and pointed out that inquiry on VC has mostly focused on the global minority (aka “the Global North”), evidencing the need for research on VC and the global majority (aka “the Global South”). The authors also highlight the “short supply of feminist and qualitative research” (33). Whether this can be attributed to the “taboo” nature of the topic itself or the wider knowledge production hierarchies centred in the West, the need for locally relevant knowledge production is clear. Therefore, it is not only important that I conduct localised research, but there is evidence that supports the decision to frame the research in feminism.

As discussed above, feminism(s) is a complex theoretical field. Consequently, I had to make decisions in connection to narrowing the feminisms that inform my approach. Decolonial feminism felt relevant to who I am as well as to my participants, and my engagement with it has transformed my outlook as a researcher and as a person. Choosing decolonial feminism also aligns well with my approach to the research, as who I am is not bracketed or absent from the project. On the contrary, I am very much present, and I acknowledge this throughout.

As stated earlier, decolonial feminism is the lens through which I see the data that has been produced in the encounters detailed further ahead, but the theory I actively use to analyse said data is narrative theory. This is another active choice as a researcher. From the beginning of the project, I knew I wanted to interview fellow Ecuadorian women as I was interested in their experience and how VC was part of who they are. At first unaware of it, my interest was placed on identity as I was (and still am) reflecting on who I am as a woman who potentially does not want to have children, while also grappling with the effects of growing up

in a pronatalist context. Consequently, after discussing research approaches and narrowing down the project I gravitated towards narrative due to my interest and desire to hear other women's stories. Within narrative, I discovered narrative identity and my main research question emerged clearly: *How do voluntarily childless Ecuadorian women construct their narrative identity?* Alongside this primary question, other questions emerged: how do Ecuadorian women choose VC? How does choosing VC engage Ecuadorian women in a process of renegotiating their identities and social positionings in relation to dominant master narratives? How does VC emerge as a counternarrative? What does VC say about bodily autonomy and how are both related?

Chapter 3: Methodology

Voluntary childlessness can be researched in a multiplicity of ways and through a variety of lenses. I have decided to approach the topic from a narrative angle and put an emphasis on the social, as the desire and intention not to have children challenges the motherhood mandate that underpins the structure of society itself. The present chapter will start with a section on reflexivity and researcher's positionality, followed by different sections explaining how the research was conducted through a narrative lens, referring to previously discussed theoretical underpinnings and the methodological approach used in the research process.

3.1. Narrative Interviewing

The chosen method for researching the narrative identity construction of Ecuadorian VC women was narrative interviewing (NI). My approach to NI is dialogical and relational, profoundly grounded in my experience as a psychotherapist, and will be discussed further ahead.

Narrative interviewing (NI) is a method used in narrative inquiry to collect people's stories. This method avoids the question-answer schema that arises in semi-structured interviews and aims to elicit a narration, which in contrast follows a self-generating schema (Jovchelovitch and Bauer 2000, Kartch 2017). The narrative interview is framed as an opportunity for the participant to tell their story (Kartch 2017). This contrasts with other types of qualitative interview where the set of questions is clearly set by the researcher and the participant is prompted to answer. In narrative interviewing the participant is prompted to tell a story related to the topic of interest. By using this method, and framing it from a constructionist stance, the interview setting is not conceived as a harvesting data device, but as a storytelling act where the story is co-created between the storyteller and the listener (Frank 2000, 2005, Brinkmann and Kvale 2018, Gemignani 2014).

The format of NI also entails a shift in terms of power in the participant-researcher dynamic, because in this type of interview the researcher plays the role of a listener. In other

interview formats, the researcher has an agenda and controls the interview process all the way through, whereas in NI that control is relinquished and the interviewee (storyteller) controls where the story goes and how it goes (Anderson and Kirkpatrick 2016). In this sense, NI is framed from a person-centred approach to research because it puts the participant at the core of the study (Anderson and Kirkpatrick 2016). Following the person-centred approach, Fraser and Taylor (2020) emphasise on the importance of a non-judgmental interviewer. A non-judgmental interviewer will have the capacity to make the participants feel comfortable and would avoid issuing value-judgement comments that could potentially impair the flow of the story. Taking a person-centred approach re-balances the power asymmetry between researcher and participants because the “one way dialogue” system of the conventional question-answer schema is replaced by storyteller and listener (Brinkmann and Kvale 2018, Jovchelovitch and Bauer 2000). In NI the researcher still asks questions, but these aim to clarify details in the story and not to modify its course.

Stories are our way to ascribe meaning to our life, our experiences and the surrounding world. Having the capacity to narrate an experience means that we can make some sense of it. Impossibility of narration might point out that the person has not yet fully comprehended an experience (Kartch 2017). Stories, as stated earlier, are also related to identity, because it is through stories that we can make sense of who we are in the world, and it is through those stories that we come alive gaining a sense of being. Kartch (2017, 1073) proposes this happens “because the telling of the narratives is about choices”, choices about our life but also narrative choices. When narrating a story we make choices as to prosody, cadence, order of events, punctuation, where to begin and where to end, and what to include and what to leave out. These elements are what Jovchelovitch and Bauer (2000) refer to as the texture of the story (how many details the narrator includes), the relevance fixation (only events relevant to the narrator are included) and the closing of the Gestalt (i.e., the organisation in beginning, middle, and end). These elements are crucial because it is what differentiates a story from a listing of events; in a story there is a clear attempt to link events through emplotment thereby giving them sense and meaning (Anderson and Kirkpatrick 2016, Connelly and Clandinin 1990).

Kartch (2017, 1073) states that NI is an appropriate method when “the goal is to understand how individuals discursively construct their experiences”. Therefore, again it emerges as appropriate for the present research whose aim is to understand how Ecuadorian VC women construct their narrative identity. Nonetheless, NI can have certain limitations as some participants might not easily slide into the storytelling mode that NI demands and would feel much more at ease with a traditional approach to interviewing (question-answer schema) (Anderson and Kirkpatrick 2016). Therefore, the researcher must be prepared for this challenge by understanding how to conduct narrative interviews.

There are also certain considerations on the side of the interviewer when using this method. Riessman (2008) warns researchers of potential difficulties in avoiding intervening or interfering when the narrated content can be challenging, emotional, or difficult. Although my participants stated the interviews were a positive experience, I always bore in mind that their stories could, and did touch on difficult and emotional content. As a researcher that is also a trained psychotherapist, I also made use of my skills gained in therapeutic work and avoided unnecessary intervention when difficult topics emerged, letting the stories unfold, even when they were about painful past experiences. I also believe that being trained in active listening was an asset when conducting the interviews. Nonetheless, reflexivity as a researcher meant that I was aware of how I stepped into a different role when interviewing and did my best to be a listener and held back interventions. Being an active listener still meant engaging, asking questions, and reacting to what was told, aiming at the co-production of the narrative. This contrasts with the therapeutic context where there are stories, but interaction is clearly framed in the request to address a presenting problem (“what brings you to therapy?”).

Birch and Miller (2000) have addressed the tension arising from being a psychotherapist and an interviewer when researching what they deem sensitive feminist topics. I resonate with their proposal of how the interviewer's positioning mirrors that of the therapist. In my experience with VC women, I was aware that, akin to what happens in therapy, I was providing

them with a non-judgemental space filled with unconditional positive regard, in relation to their choice. For most of them this was in itself a new experience and an opportunity to tell their story about being VC in a different way.

Beuthin (2014) addresses six tensions that can arise for the researcher when doing narrative interviewing framed in constructionism. Each of Beuthin's tensions were addressed during and after the interviews and I discuss them here:

- **Presence tempered by performance** refers to the way one conducts the interview and the careful balance arising from how much the interviewer can be present, attentive, listening carefully and genuine while also performing as researcher with a desire to do well. This entailed a careful balance between what I wanted out of the encounter (i.e., stories), while also negotiating, within myself, the different facets of mine that were present in the interview: researcher, psychotherapist, fellow Ecuadorian woman, and feminist.
- **Equality tempered by power** demands a reflection around ways of equalising power in the interaction; while acknowledging that both people present in the interaction have active roles. A story loses its quality of being performed in the absence of a listener. I addressed power by acknowledging that above being a researcher, I was entering the encounter as a listener and my participants were the storytellers. This shifted the power from that of “researcher-participant”, which is traditionally unbalanced in the favour of the researcher, to that of “storyteller and listener”, in which the storyteller is in control of the story.
- **Leading tempered by following** is related to the dialogical nature of the narrative interview and how the storyteller leads, and the listener must follow the threads, but it is also acknowledging that not all threads can be pursued. I had to address this tension in the aftermath of the interviews as the richness of the data meant an abundance of threads to be pursued, but it was not feasible to pursue them all.
- **Insider tempered by outsider** incites reflection regarding positionality. Where do I stand in relation to childfreeness? My own ambivalence regarding my fertility intentions

makes me an outsider as these women fully self-identify as VC and have decided they do not want children, but as a woman and as an Ecuadorian I am also an insider.

- **Influence tempered by neutrality** refers to the tension between how my presence as an interviewer influenced the encounter and what arose from it. Therefore, to address this tension I had to balance neutrality with how much of myself I brought into the interviews. This is an interesting tension, because it is possible to argue that neutrality does not exist when adopting a social-constructionist paradigm. On one hand I was not a neutral interviewer, besides being an Ecuadorian woman, I am also a feminist and an ardent supporter of women's bodily autonomy, so my interviewees knew from the start that I was not neutral. Nonetheless, like in the therapeutic context where, as a therapist, I know that what happens in the session is not about me, this also came up in the interview. Whilst I was not neutral in my political positioning, this was tempered by my attempt to give the interviewees the centre stage.
- **Trust tempered by responsibility** posits a question around the responsibility of receiving the narratives that have been trusted to me as a researcher, and how I elicit meaning from them via analysis and interpretation. This was possible through informed consent, trust on my work as a researcher and backed up by formal forms and institutional endorsement.

On a different note, Gemignani (2014, 132) encourages narrative researchers to, besides attending to what is told, "reflect on the oblivion and the untold", stating that ignoring the not known or untold might keep the inquiry on a superficial level. He posits *memory-ing*, "the active and socio-cultural process of constructing, remembering, and telling memories" (Gemignani 2014, 132), as crucial to the telling of a story. Lastly, several authors (e.g., Riessman 2008, James and Busher 2009, Fraser and Taylor 2020, Bondi 2014, Gemignani 2014, Anderson and Kirkpatrick 2016) also speak about the importance of establishing a good rapport with participants if the aim is to conduct narrative interviewing. Consequently, I took these recommendations on board during my interview process and afterwards, attending to the dynamic generated with my interviewees as well as the content.

In NI it is important that interviews are audio recorded and then transcribed verbatim, always keeping in mind that the aim is to preserve the richness of the narration in the process. Even though audio recording tends to be the default arrangement because it allows the detailed transcription, it also warrants considerations. Beuthin (2014, 13) has questioned if the presence of a voice recorder “facilitates or flattens the storytelling”, noting how pre- and post-interview stages that are unrecorded feel more natural and spontaneous. The presence of a recorder also means permanence, that what is being said is going to be registered, which can also be related to how recorded accounts sometimes are not as spontaneous. I attempted to address the effects of the audio recorder by clearly communicating data protection and data handling considerations to the participants before the interview took place.

3.1.1. Online Narrative Interviewing

In qualitative research, when it comes to approaching participants, the face-to-face encounter has been deemed as the gold standard due to how much it can add to the understanding of the participants, and there are elements that that can only be experienced in a face-to-face encounter such as physical presence, body movements, verbal and non-verbal cues, facial expressions, and prosody, among others (James and Busher 2009; Fraser and Taylor 2020). Nonetheless, it does not mean that another type of encounter is less valuable and internet-based research is not new, as researchers have explored approaches to online research as early as the 1990s (James and Busher 2009). Fraser and Taylor (2020) propose that the quality of interactions is more important than the medium used to produce the data, highlighting that the quality of the data rests in the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee.

In 2022 the availability of internet platforms that allow for high-quality interactions in real-time was higher than ever before, and this only enriches the type of data that can be produced in an online encounter. This, coupled with the fact that online interviews are advantageous in terms of costs and accessibility and that the recent pandemic years came with

a shift towards technology-mediated interactions, made online interviewing a viable option for the present research. The principles that underpin in-person narrative interviews can easily be translated to online contexts, as it was the case for my interviews. Further ahead I will discuss the interview process in detail.

3.2. Research Design

The following section discusses how I conducted my research and the reasons for my methodological decisions and practicalities. I had nine participants and conducted nine online interviews between February and May 2022. The research design was approved by the School of Health in Social Sciences Ethics Committee of the University of Edinburgh.

3.2.1. Inclusion Criteria:

My participants were selected based on the following criteria:

- a. Women of Ecuadorian nationality with permanent residence in Ecuador who self-identify as voluntarily childless.
- b. Native Spanish speakers.
- c. 18 years or older.

As previously stated, classifying someone as voluntarily childless can entail complications related to how VC is understood. What does it mean to be *truly* VC? Is a reproductively challenged woman coming to terms with her infertility “more” or “less” VC than a woman that decided not to have children since her early 20s? VC is not quantifiable, and I decided it was not up to me to decide who was VC and who was not.

Jeffries and Konnert (2002) studied regret and psychological well-being among voluntary and involuntarily childless women and discovered that 1/3 of the women they had classified as involuntarily childless actually self-identified as childless by choice. Therefore, I decided to request participants to self-identify. This decision meant that I did not impinge on their narratives, and I opened the research to any woman that identifies as VC regardless of the path

that has brought her to identify in that way. This was aligned with the research aim of exploring how narrative identity is constructed in relation to VC. Additionally, due to being focused on Ecuador, for consistency, all participants needed to be Ecuadorian. Finally, I also decided that they needed to be permanent residents in Ecuador at the time of the research because this implied, they have to currently navigate their existence as VC women in a socio-cultural context that is still heavily marked by pronatalist master narratives and gender inequality.

Ecuador is a multilingual country, but Spanish is the most widely spoken and it is a result of the colonisation process that Ecuador underwent. It is important to note that Ecuadorian Spanish differs from Spanish from Spain. How it is used, how it sounds, how it is pronounced, how it has been enriched with words coming from indigenous languages, and how it is structured varies. In linguistic terms, Ecuadorian Spanish differs phonetically, grammatically, and lexically from Spanish from Spain. Doing the interviews in Spanish meant that the data produced during the encounters could remain “pure” and that the interviewees were free from constraints when engaging in the interviews. There are still segments of Ecuador’s population that do not speak Spanish as their first language, but interviewing a woman whose first language is not Spanish would have entailed using a translator/interpreter, which would disrupt the data arising from the encounter between a storyteller and a listener. Consequently, I only included speakers of Spanish as their primary language.

Criterion c required participants to be 18 years or older, this was used as a cut-off point due to being the legal age in Ecuador and reduces any potential additional ethical steps that are needed when doing research with minors.

3.2.2. Recruitment

Participants were recruited through social media, through two Facebook groups. One group is “#PrimerAcoso #NoCallamosMás” (#FirstHarrasment #WeDon’tShutUpAnymore) with over 20.000 members. “#PrimerAcoso #NoCallamosMás” started around 2017 to shine light over violence against women in Ecuador by inviting women to share their testimonies and

stories about experiencing sexual violence. Nowadays the group works like a discussion forum where women still share their stories, but members also post resources, ask for advice, or discuss topics relevant to feminism. The other group is called “*Factor ‘M’... mujeres apoyando mujeres*” (Factor ‘M’... women supporting women) and has around 9.000 members. “*Factor ‘M’...*” started in 2020 as a community by women and for women to post about their female-owned businesses, sell and buy products, request professional services, or ask for advice of many kinds. I have been a member of both groups since their creation, and I was invited to join by other women. Both groups can be described as supportive online communities for women in Ecuador.

First Recruitment Phase. The recruitment started by posting a call for an expression of interest using a poster with a QR linked to a Microsoft Form where women left their contact information and confirmed they fit the inclusion criteria, the form was also linked in the text of the post. This type of recruitment follows a passive approach which means that any interested participants are encouraged to express their interest through an online form and leave their contact information (Gelinas et al. 2017). I posted in both Facebook groups on the 14th of December 2021. My post in “*#PrimerAcoso #NoCallamosMás*” was automatically available as it did not need approval from the group admins. The post in “*Factor ‘M’... mujeres apoyando mujeres*” had to be approved by group admins and it only became available early in the morning of the 15th of December. The original recruitment plan contemplated posting the call for expression of interest and then selecting participants based on their availability. However, the reactions to the posts and number of responses were unexpected. As soon as I posted, responses started pouring in, and in discussion with my thesis supervisor, due to the high number of replies, I decided to close the form after 24 hours and update the Facebook post in both groups stating the form had closed. In total, I received 411 expressions of interest in 24 hours. From the 411 women that expressed their interest, 17 did not fit the inclusion criteria: 10 did not reside in Ecuador, 5 were not Ecuadorian, and 2 did not self-identify as VC. (See Appendix 2 for recruitment poster and Facebook post text).

During the interviews, some of the participants mentioned that they had found the advert through Twitter which indicates it was reposted from Facebook, something that signals how much interest it generated. Another participant, who manages the Twitter account where it was reposted, mentioned that she received messages inquiring about the research after the form had closed.

Second Recruitment Phase. Due to the high number of responses to the initial form, I designed an additional layer to my recruitment strategy in order to select the most diverse sample of women. I submitted an ethical amendment to the School of Health in Social Sciences Ethics Committee and emailed all the women that had expressed their interest on the 18th of December 2021 thanking them and stating that I would contact them mid-January to continue the selection process. I also emailed the women that did not fit the inclusion criteria (17 of them) thanking them for their interest and letting them know they could not be considered as participants due to not fitting the criteria.

The added filter to recruitment consisted in requesting further information from the potential participants. I contacted the remaining 394 women on the 15th of January 2022, stating that I needed more information and asking them to fill out an additional form. The email communication stated that this process was non-compulsory and voluntary. Consequently, participants could naturally opt out if they were no longer interested. The email also had the Participant Information Sheet (PIS) (see Appendix 3 for PIS in Spanish and Appendix 4 for English translation) linked and accessible as a One Drive document. Similar to the first stage of recruitment, the new form was created with Microsoft Forms linked to my Edinburgh University Account and requested the following information:

- Name
- Age in number
- Email
- Location in Ecuador (province) and whether they consider it urban or rural,

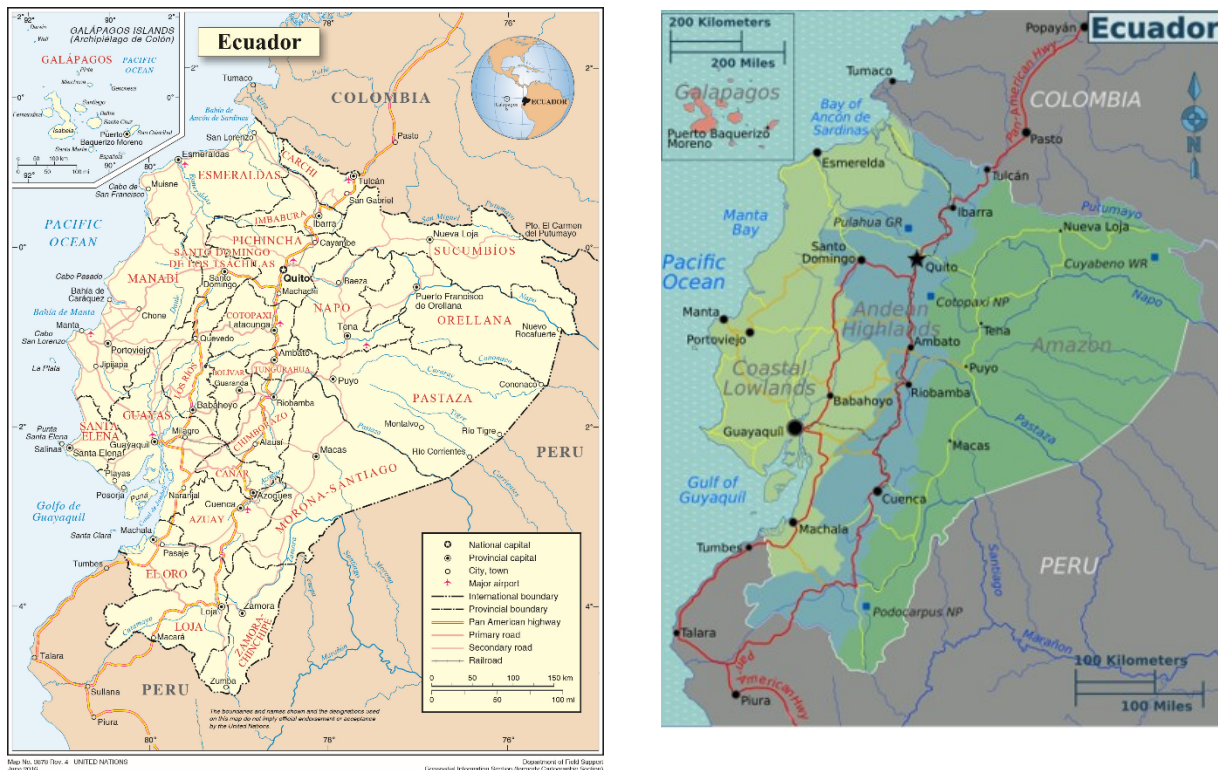
- Experience of living abroad (yes/no)
 - If yes, for how long have they lived abroad
- Educational level (achieved or working towards to)
- Income bracket

The form remained open for a week to give everybody interested an opportunity to fill it out. Once it closed, the link would give a message stating that the second phase of recruitment had ended. I received a total of 149 responses, 2 of which were duplicates, making it for a total of 147 potential participants.

The aim of the second form was to collect enough information to select a group of participants that would be as diverse as possible to represent Ecuador's complex social structure which would not have been achievable if I had approached the first list of 394 potential participants randomly. Therefore, the items included in the second form for recruitment were thoroughly reflected upon before inclusion.

I asked for general location (by province) because Ecuador's 24 provinces are divided into four main geographical regions: *Sierra/Andes* (the Andean highlands), *Costa* (Coast), *Oriente* (Amazon), and *Insular/Galápagos* (Galápagos Islands). See map below in the left for provinces and cities (UN Geospatial 2016) and for regions map in the right (Fitzgerald 2010). Each region has its own regional identity, therefore, I believe the experience of women can vary according to their geographical location, so asking for the province of residence and whether they consider it urban or rural allowed me to select a sample that included participants of the aforementioned regions.

Figure 1. Maps of Ecuador



Ecuador's main cities (Quito, Guayaquil, Cuenca) are respectively located in Pichincha, Guayas and Azuay. Imbabura is also notably touristic. Consequently, the distribution I obtained was not surprising:

- 89 women resided in Pichincha
- 26 women resided in Guayas
- 7 women resided in Imbabura
- 5 women resided in Azuay
- 4 or less respondents: Esmeraldas, Manabí, El Oro, Santa Elena, Santo Domingo de los Tsáchilas, Cotopaxi, Tugurahua, Chimborazo, Loja, Sucumbios, Pastaza, Islas Galápagos
- 0 respondents: Los Ríos, Carchi, Bolívar, Cañar, Napo, Orellana, Morona Santiago, and Zamora Chinchipe

In terms of urban or rural, the results showed 137 considered their place of residence urban, and ten considered it rural.

Of the respondents, 56% had not lived abroad compared to 44% who had. In terms of how long, the responses varied from “1 week”, to a few months, to several years abroad. The longest was twelve years, with another respondent also adding 12 years in different periods of time (the respondent specified the places, for how long and at what age). The cut-off to consider someone has lived abroad was 1 year. This question is important because I wanted to include women that have experienced being VC women in Ecuador, but also knowing if they have lived abroad could open up a line of inquiry regarding if living abroad had or not influenced their decision to be VC.

Asking for educational level also provided me with the option to select women from all types of educational backgrounds:

- 2 women (1%) selected completion of high school as their highest educational level
- 62 women (42%) had completed or were working towards an undergraduate degree,
- 69 women (47%) had completed or were working towards a masters’ degree,
- 13 women (9%) had completed or were working towards a doctoral degree.
- 1 woman (>1%) selected “other”

These results align with trends in childlessness where higher rates of VC are linked with higher rates of access to higher education (Castro and Tapia 2021; Rowland 2007; Beaujouan, Brzozowska, and Zeman 2016).

The last question in the survey aimed to address monthly income. The participants could select 1 out of the following 6 income brackets:

- 29 women (20%) selected “I do not have a monthly income”
- 20 women (13%) selected “Basic Unified Salary (425 USD) or less”
- 41 women (28%) selected “Between 425 USD and 1,000 USD”
- 48 women (33%) selected “Between 1,000 USD up to 2,000 USD”
- 9 women (6%) selected “Between 2,000 USD up to 4,000 USD”
- No one selected “More than 4,000 USD per month”

What I am referring to as “Basic Unified Salary” is a direct translation from Spanish (*Salario Básico Unificado*) and refers to Ecuador’s legal minimum monthly wage. This means that by law, a full-time worker cannot earn less than 425 USD per month. Just to put this into perspective, it is important to note that in Ecuador the standard living income per family is calculated at 793.33 USD per month and the basic family basket (food, housing, clothing, miscellaneous) is estimated at 724.39 USD for 2022 (Vera et al. 2022).

Number of Participants. The question of how many participants to include is a complicated one in qualitative research. Dworkin (2012) states that several authors recommend anything between 5 to 50, depending on what is adequate for a particular topic. As the sole researcher and bearing in mind that this is a doctoral project with a limited time frame for completion that does not aim to arrive at sweeping generalisations regarding the experience of VC women in Ecuador, I planned of having between six to ten participants. In the end, I worked with nine participants. This number is manageable and aligned with the aim of achieving an in-depth engagement with narratives.

Selecting the Participants. I selected the interviewees from the above-described pool of respondents. The selection aimed to include at least one participant from every geographical region, and participants who had a range of ages, monthly incomes, and different educational levels. The selection also tried to balance participants that had lived abroad vs. those who had not and included a couple of participants residing in rural areas.

Evidently, as much as I strived to select the most diverse sample of participants there are limitations to this approach. On one hand, having the additional information played onto my own curiosity, assumptions and expectations. For example, I was drawn to contact participants that presented with what I considered less “common” or “less expected” combination of demographic characteristics (e.g., no income, master's degree, and living in a rural area), which in the end it is entirely related to what I perceived as common or expected. On the other hand,

it could be argued that I could have contacted the first nine people that expressed their interest, and it would still be considered an ethical way of selecting the participants. Nonetheless, this type of approach would have, potentially, jeopardised the quality of the data produced in the interviews. My approach to sampling ensured I would get participants with different backgrounds. By taking this approach I strived to getting data as rich as possible and bringing different stories to the surface.

After combing through the second expression of interest I identified a subset of potential participants, and I gave myself a 1-week deadline in terms of waiting for a reply after they have been invited for an interview. In total, I identified 14 potential participants that I emailed over the course of a 3-week period. The email invited them for an interview, included the consent form (see Appendix 5 for consent form in Spanish and see Appendix 6 for the English translation) and linked again the participant information sheet. I also included a link to a form where they could detail their availability for interviews. I did not hear back from three of the contacted women, and two women filled out their availability but did not reply to my email and did not send the consent form. This left me with a total of 9 participants. Sociodemographic data at the time of the interview, as reported by the participants, is detailed below in Table 1:

Table 1. Participants' Sociodemographic Information

Pseudonym	Age Range	Region	Urban/ Rural	Education	Lived Abroad	Income Bracket
Alejandra	30-34	Andean Highlands	Urban	Master's Degree	Yes	1,000 USD up to 2,000 USD
Lila	25-29	Amazon	Urban	Undergraduate Degree	No	425 USD or less
Selene	25-29	Andean Highlands	Rural	Undergraduate Degree	No	No income
Irene	35-39	Andean Highlands	Rural	Master's Degree	Yes	No income
Tilda	40-44	Coast	Urban	Doctoral Degree	Yes	2,000 USD up to 4,000 USD

Orisa	30-34	Andean Highlands	Urban	Doctoral Degree	Yes	No income
Neira	45-49	Coast	Urban	Master's Degree	Yes	1,000 USD up to 2,000 USD
Isadora	25-29	Andean Highlands	Urban	Undergraduate Degree	No	425 USD up to 1,000 USD
Regina	35-39	Galápagos	Urban	Other	Yes	425 USD up to 1,000 USD

3.2.3. Interview Process

Eight out of the nine interviews took place in February and March 2022. One interview was left for May 2022 due to the need for filing an ethical amendment to get permission to use WhatsApp to conduct the interview. The platforms used were Microsoft Teams, Zoom, and WhatsApp. These three platforms are advantageous because they are free to download, therefore all the participants could easily access them. As the researcher, I accessed Microsoft Teams through the email package provided by Edinburgh University and Zoom through the Edinburgh University subscription as an institution. WhatsApp is a platform for instant messaging and calling, free to download, widely used and has been deemed secure due to its end-to-end encryption feature (Wood 2016; WhatsApp 2023). Although it might seem like an unconventional platform to conduct an interview, it was the best option for the participant that resided in the Galápagos Islands. The Galápagos Islands are located in the Pacific Ocean, 1,000 km away from Ecuador's coast and due to their status as a Marine Reserve, access to technology is much more limited than in continental Ecuador. The participant residing there was clear that Microsoft Teams or Zoom would not work and suggested Webex or WhatsApp. WhatsApp was chosen due to its security features.

The interview was a 4-phase process that I structured following the principles of narrative interviewing outlined by Jovchelovitch and Bauer (2000). The first phase was an introduction in which I explained logistics regarding audio and video recording, reconfirmed that participants were consenting to the process, the purpose of the encounter and that they were

in a setting where they felt safe and able to engage in the interview freely and privately. The second phase was “narration” in which the participants were requested to tell me their story about being a voluntarily childless woman in Ecuador. The third phase was “questioning”, and it took place once the narration came to a natural end. This phase was used to elicit further material or clarify the material that has already been produced. Finally, the last phase, “concluding talk” is a phase that goes unrecorded, and was used to wrap up the interviews. The authors, Jovchelovitch and Bauer (2000), state that this phase can evolve into small talk regarding the interview experience (see Appendix 7 for interview guide in Spanish and see Appendix 8 for the English translation).

Seven interviews took place over Microsoft Teams, and one over Zoom because the participant did not wish to be video recorded, only audio recorded, and Microsoft Teams did not have that functionality to date. The interview with the participant in Galápagos was conducted through a WhatsApp call. The interviews had different durations. The shortest ones lasted around 50 minutes and the longest one was almost 2 hours. The audio from the interviews was transcribed verbatim; more on this further ahead in the section 3.2.5.

Conducting the interviews online reduced costs because I did not travel to Ecuador, and participants did not incur transportation costs. Nonetheless, participation was contingent to accessing a device with an internet connection, which meant that I excluded potential participants that cannot access the internet. On one hand, recruitment through social media was the idea from the start, which means that I was already targeting women that have access to the internet and have a social media presence. But on the other hand, if I had travelled to Ecuador I could have interviewed women that do not have access to the internet but might have been recruited by means other than social media. Regardless, internet accessibility in Ecuador should be mentioned. In 2016, according to the World Bank (2021) only 54% of Ecuador’s population had access to the internet. For the year 2020, Freedom House (2020), a U.S. based organisation that produces research on democracy, political rights and civil liberties, ranked Ecuador as “partly free” with 57/100 in terms of freedom of the net. The rating was due to

obstacles to access the internet, limits on content, and violations of user rights. Therefore, conducting only online interviews did exclude potential participants and can be considered as one of the limitations of the study.

3.2.4. Data Handling

For this research, all the information regarding data handling was clearly detailed in the participant information sheet (PIS) that all participants were emailed before the interview (see Appendices 3 and 4 for PIS in Spanish and PIS in English respectively). The PIS was also available as a OneDrive link in earlier stages of the recruitment.

Following ethical considerations, as soon as the interviews were finished, the recordings were stored in the OneDrive account provided by the University of Edinburgh and transcription was anonymised, removing any potential identifiers that could reveal identity and by choosing a pseudonym for each participant.

Once the transcription was ready, following recommendations on good practice, I sent the transcripts to the participants for review (Anderson and Kirkpatrick 2016). The purpose of sending the transcripts to the interviewees was to give them the opportunity to comment or amend. The participants had a 21-calendar days deadline from the moment they received the transcripts, if there were no replies it was understood that the participants were happy with the transcribed version and had no comments. Sending the transcripts to the participants is an ethical consideration as well as another example of how the power dynamic between researcher and research subjects shifts in this type of approach because it signals that the participants are the owners of the story. None of my interviewees amended the transcript; six of them replied confirming they were happy with it, and three did not reply within the deadline.

3.2.5. Analysis

This section details how the interviews were analysed, considerations pertaining to narrative ethics, and logistical aspects such as the analysis software.

Narrative Dialogic/Performance Analysis. Riessman's (2008) work informed how I approached my narrative analysis. A narrative dialogic/performance analysis is a type of analysis that takes elements from thematic and structural analysis and combines them to propose interpretative queries. Riessman (2008) emphasises on the importance of the socio-cultural context in this type of analysis. A narrative dialogic/performance analysis demands a researcher to be mindful of their influence on the production and interpretation of the narrative data. To study VC in Ecuador, a narrative dialogic/performance analysis offered me the most interesting possibilities due to its emphasis on context and the dialogical nature of narratives (Meretoja 2020; Bakhtin 1984). This type of analysis also aligns well with the social-constructionism ontology and epistemology that underpin my research endeavours.

Riessman (2008) states that for a narrative dialogical/performance analysis the researcher needs to consider the narrative devices in relation to the performance element. The narrative that emerges from the dialogical encounter is also performed, and the storyteller makes use of different narrative devices such as tone, point of view, dialogues (e.g., acting out a scene and taking the voices of others) and many others. I was also mindful of the goals that the stories supported (e.g., bodily autonomy or independence) and the larger cultural forces that traversed the stories (e.g., pronatalism, capitalism, Catholicism).

Besides following Riessman, I also applied the principle of unfinalisability to my narrative dialogical/performance analysis. When analysing stories, the concept of unfinalisability is important as a caveat because it refers to the idea that no person (or character in literature) is ever finalised or revealed, that a person can change, and that the world is in constant evolution and not stagnant. Unfinalisability was originally proposed by Bakhtin in 1929 in his work "Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics" and later revised and further translated (Bakhtin 1984). This concept is inherent to Bakhtin's emphasis on dialogue, which when translated to narrative research reinforces the dialogical nature of it. Stories emerge in a relational context (i.e., storyteller and listener) and are never finalised. If "[w]e equate life with the story or stories that we can tell about it" (Ricœur 1991b, 194-195) unfinalisability ensures the potential for change

and evolution. Frank (2005) states that unfinalisability is a claim of freedom and emphasises on the “principle of perpetual generation” (2005, 967), meaning that stories conjure up other stories, and people (storytellers) are never finalised. Frank (2005) also warns narrative researchers from presenting their research subjects as finalised. Consequently, unfinalisability is important for narrative in general and ever more so for narrative identity because it refers to the ever-changing nature of existence, social life and the self.

Despite the self being storied, it is not finalised, a story does not lock the self into a finalised version, to the contrary, the fact that story takes place between a storyteller and a listener means that it is not finalised, and the same goes for the storied self. Applying unfinalisability to analysing VC women’s stories meant to understand that there is more than the choice of VC, and that their story and identity is not finalised once they tell me their story. It means to understand that after telling their story, they will continue to navigate society as childfree women (or not) and that there is always room for change and growth.

For this type of analysis, I also had to consider my role as a listener. The VC women that participated were the storytellers, and their stories emerged in a relational context. My presence as a researcher interested in VC in Ecuador undoubtedly affected the emergent story, even if the participants were unaware of it, as it is different to perform the story about choosing VC to a fellow Ecuadorian woman that is purposefully researching VC than to do so for someone that disapproves of VC or has no particular interest in it. The different listeners will always shape how the story is told. Consequently, these stories were a unique product of our interaction.

Transcription. All the interviews were recorded which made it possible to transcribe them afterwards. Seven were video-recorded and two were only audio recorded. Brinkmann and Kvale (2018) state that a transcription is a translation from oral language to written language, similar to how a map is the abstract representation of topological terrain. Therefore, it is a complex process that entails methodological decisions.

For my interviews, the transcription process was slightly sped up by the automated transcription functionality available in Microsoft Teams. I worked from the automated transcription file going through it while listening to the audio and ensuring that the transcript was verbatim, correcting the mistakes from the automated transcription. I also formatted the transcripts to ensure maximum readability as a flowing text, which meant reducing the automated time stamps that disrupted the flow of the text.

Following common conventions in social sciences, the transcription of my interviews landed on the side of orthographic rather than phonetic transcription because I was interested in the content, and I was not looking to do an analysis that required a specific type of transcription (e.g., linguistic analysis, voice-centred analysis, etc.) (Ayer 2021). Nonetheless, I did include, when evident (and needed), emotional aspects of the conversation (e.g., laughter), certain prosodic elements (e.g., pitch, loudness), and long pauses, to ensure, as much as possible, a translation into the written medium that reflected the emotional components of the interaction. Despite the inclusion of these, according to Rapley (2018), my style of transcription would be considered “basic” due to the level of detail and the lack of a specific notation system. I justify this decision with Brinkmann and Kvale’s (2018) recommendation to transcribe the interviews in a way that is useful for the research purposes. In addition to this, I believe that being the sole user of the transcriptions also justifies doing basic verbatim transcriptions, because I did not need to present or share the transcripts with a co-researcher.

Transcription has been deemed an initial analysis (Rapley 2018; Brinkmann and Kvale 2018; Ayer 2021) because it allows researchers to become familiar with the data. It is also key in a narrative approach because it makes the data tangible in written form, a format where it can easily be referenced when writing the findings (Ayer 2021). I consider that the transcription process was the first stage of my analysis because it allowed me to identify emerging themes and triggered initial reflections. While transcribing I kept a “transcription journal”. The raw ideas from this phase helped me during the coding process detailed further ahead.

To confirm that my transcriptions were a good enough reflection of the interview encounter, I asked my participants to check them and to let me know if something needed to be amended. As stated in a previous section, the process of sending the transcription back to the participants not only had an implication in terms of power dynamics but also meant that another person has confirmed that I did not misinterpret or misrepresent our encounter.

Once the transcriptions were finalised, I moved onto the next stage of my analysis which consisted of coding the data with the help of ATLAS.ti, the chosen analysis software.

Notes on language, Spanish, English, and (partial) translation. The interviews were conducted in Spanish. Spanish is the most widely spoken language in Ecuador and it is also the official language, alongside Kichwa and Shuar, which are also considered official languages of intercultural relation and are spoken by approximately half a million people (Asamblea Nacional del Ecuador 2011; Eberhard, Simons, and Fennig 2023). I am also a native Spanish speaker, which justifies conducting the interviews in Spanish. Nonetheless, the choice of Spanish is not obvious because Ecuador is a multilingual country. Ethnologue (Eberhard, Simons, and Fennig 2023), which is considered a relatively comprehensive publication about languages, states that the number of established languages in Ecuador is 25, 24 are living languages and 1 is extinct. Additionally, there are unestablished languages such as German, Arabic, Chinese, English and Norwegian, which are related to immigration. From established languages, understood as native languages, this are in varying degrees of usage (including Spanish, Kichwa and Shuar). I justify not pursuing interviews with speakers of Kichwa and Shuar, or any other native language, logistically and methodologically. On the side of logistics, it would have been costly to find an interpreter and it would have warranted further ethical considerations. Methodologically speaking, I have emphasised on the importance of the dialogical encounter. Hence, my decision to only include Spanish speakers.

The decision to use Spanish has triggered decolonial reflections. Spanish is in fact the language of the colonisers, and I do not speak any native language. Nonetheless, in Ecuador, like

in other Spanish speaking countries in Latin America, Spanish has changed through local usage, and now there is an Ecuadorian Spanish. Therefore, I decided not to translate the interviews and to work with the transcripts in Spanish.

Besides my decision to only do interviews in Spanish, I also need to address my methodological decisions in relation to translation. Haywood, Thompson and Hervey (2009) state that “all translation issues are cultural” (68). The discussion goes around the complexities of mapping a source language (i.e., original language) and its culture to the target language and its culture. The mapping process inevitably comes with a loss, as the aim is always to keep the cultural feel of the original text which in most cases cannot be achieved with a literal translation. Consequently, translation brings up a dilemma. A nineteenth century Tuscan adage posits “*traduttori traditori*” (translators are traitors) (Davie 2012). Translation is a betrayal because it always demands a compromise, and a loss. I borrow a visual representation of this loss from a book about witches that I read as a child. One of the writers was briefly discussing how tricky it was to translate parts of Macbeth into Spanish. The writer compared it to a beach chair. Spanish is the beach chair open fully, while the English translation is the beach chair folded and close. Therefore, I decided not to translate the interview transcripts into English to avoid a double loss: richness of the material and time. Moreover, there was not a *real* need to translate the interviews considering that I analysed the material on my own and no one else needed access to the transcripts.

Although I avoided the translation of transcripts, translation did come in during the analysis and write-up period. Initially it was a translation of some of material due to the need to discuss process and progress with my English-speaking supervisor. For this, I tackled my dilemma by coding the material in English while the raw material remained in Spanish. Following analysis, I also translated the interview quotations included in my analysis of findings. Li’s (2011) reflections on the complexities around translation of life stories from Chinese to English helped me navigate the tensions of translating. Li’s reflection is around language choices and exemplifies how complex this decision can be as a story can feel and read different

according to the language in which it is presented. This potentially indicates different ways of relating to and in different languages. It does not escape me that, like Li, I am presenting my findings in English, as this research project is a degree requirement of a programme in a UK-based institution. Consequently, I needed to pay attention to the cultural dimensions of translation.

Haywood, Thompson and Hervey (2009) propose a spectrum to address cultural issues in translation; on one extreme there is “exoticising” or “foreignising” and in the other “domesticating”. Foreignising, according to the authors, lies on the side of keeping as much as possible all the elements of the original language, whereas domesticating aims to make the target language readers understand as much as possible, and it can include integration of cultural references, clarifications, and even replacements (Haywood, Thompson and Hervey 2009). Following Venuti’s (1998) idea regarding the power of translation to form cultural identities and construct representations of foreign cultures, my translation laid more towards foreignising rather than domesticating, but still aiming for readers’ comprehension. Nonetheless, as with the act of translation itself, it is a balancing act. Although I share a cultural dimension with the interviewees while also being familiar and at ease with the target language, target language culture, and the academic context where the findings are to be presented, as discussed above translation always entails a loss.

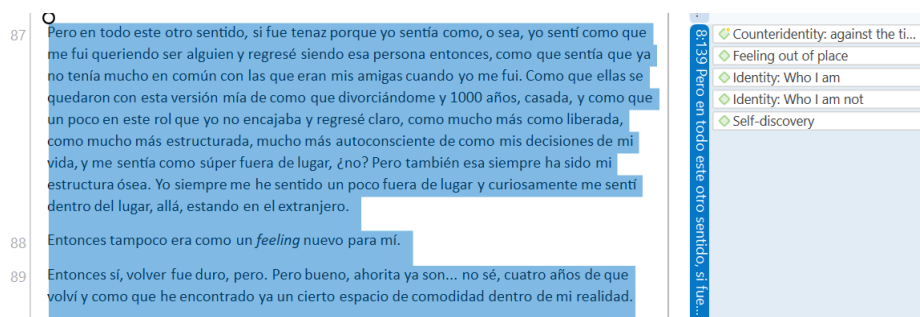
Analysis Software. Interviews were analysed using ATLAS.ti, which is a qualitative data analysis and research software. I purchased a 2-year student license which in the case of ATLAS.ti allows me to use the full programme version. Data was analysed with ATLAS.ti 22, version 22.2.5.0.

Using a qualitative data analysis software (QDAS) can have many advantages as it makes handling, processing and coding large amounts of data much more manageable than when one takes a manual approach. QDAS offer functionalities that enrich and facilitate the data analysis such as: creation, linking and merging of codes; searching for and retrieving data; support other

types of data (e.g., visual); facilitate creation of networks between units of analysis, keep track of changes in entities and analysis units; provide memo function, and many more (Woods et al. 2016; Dohan and Sánchez-Jankowski 1998; Tallerico 1991). Nonetheless, authors also caution around the impact the use of QDAS can have on research when the analysis process is tailored to the software instead of the software being used as a tool to enhance the research (Woods et al. 2016; Blismas and Dainty 2003; Morison and Moir 1998). For the present research I can state that, as a first-time user of a QDAS, I was not concerned to make my research fit the software, but rather experienced it as a supportive tool that allowed me to analyse my data unrestricted and with much more ease than using a manual approach.

Coding Process. The coding process started with an initial reading of each interview transcript. I used the code function that allowed me to select fragments of text, see Figure 2., below:

Figure 2. *Coding example*

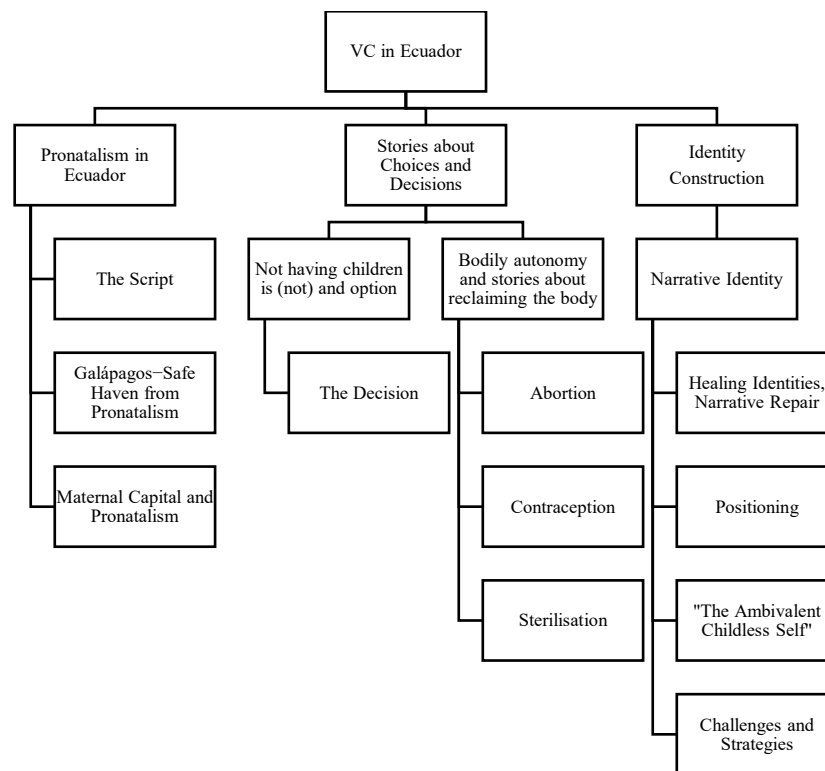


The codes not only referred to the topic or theme but also to the performance element of the story (e.g., the prosody, acting out a scene from the past, mimicking dialogues with significant others or family emembers), and the emotional quality behind it. When every interview was coded, I did another round of coding. Afterwards, I revised every code, merged duplicates together, which reduced the number of codes from 609 to 515. The 515 codes were then separated into 41 thematic code groups. Codes were in multiple groups as they are not exclusive to one group but are relevant to different code groups. Once the codes were in groups, I selected the code groups that were relevant to my research questions.

The coding process was necessary because it helped me in identifying core narratives that underpinned the stories and also how my participants constructed the stories about their voluntary childlessness. By applying the principles of narrative dialogical/performance analysis (Riessman 2008), I also attempted to highlight how these stories are not constructed in isolation and how these stories are the product of, for example: past experiences, emotions, broader societal narratives, relationships, trauma (on occasion), capitalism, resistance, feeling out of place and trying to figure out who they are, and many more . These stories are also co-constructed and multivoiced in a relational landscape.

The themes included in this research are the following and they have been organised in the analysis chapters as presented in Figure 3., below:

Figure 3. Research Themes



The analysis chapters have been divided into three separate chapters as a way of setting up the story for the reader. Chapter 4, Pronatalism in Ecuador, sets the context where the story takes place. Chapter 5 explores how fertility decisions are made and their connection to bodily autonomy. Finally, Chapter 6 is where the story comes together by addressing identity construction of voluntary childlessness.

Chapter 4: Pronatalism in Ecuador

This chapter is the first findings chapter of the present work because it contextualises pronatalism in Ecuador and it is where I analyse and understand how VC takes shape as a counternarrative, which is one of the main argumentative threads that will guide and support the identity construction of VC women. This chapter has three main sections. The first one, below, called “the script” provides socio-cultural context while also revealing the pronatalist script Ecuadorian women receive and how this script is at the core of the master narrative that posits women must be mothers. The second section provides contrast to the first one and is dedicated to Galápagos as a seemingly safe haven from pronatalism. The last section closes the chapter and is a proposal and exploration of the concept of maternal capital and pronatalism which is derived from my interviewees' acknowledgement of the fantasy of motherhood. The final section solidifies the proposal of VC as a counternarrative.

4.1. The Script

The title of this section is not an original idea; I took it from Tilda, my participant who proposed that deciding to be childfree was a transition connected to noticing she did not like the life script she had received. Tilda is a woman in her 40s, highly educated and a high earner:

*Eh... creo que para mí fue como una transición, porque el... como es algo que ya lo venía, o sea... es algo que ya lo venía como notando, que no estoy convencida de esta historia, de este **guion** que me han dado para mi vida.*

Eh... I think that for me it was like a transition, because the... it was like something that I was noticing, I mean I was sort of noticing it, that I am not convinced of this story, of this **script** they have given me for my life.—Tilda (line 47). (Emphasis added).

The notion of a script is important because it metaphorizes well what a master narrative is. Meretoja (2020) proposes that master narratives can become culturally dominant models of sense making, whereas counternarratives are those that take a critical stance against the master narrative. Particularly in Ecuador, and with my participants, the dominant narrative is pronatalist and proposes “women must be mothers” and this is at the core of the script that Tilda had received. When Tilda started questioning the script and realising it is not for her, voluntary childlessness started emerging as a counternarrative. Before diving into childfreeness as a counternarrative I need to expand on what is behind Tilda’s script.

Lagarde (2005), with her idea of captivities, proposes women are captives of motherhood. The author suggests that even when women are not effectively mothers (i.e., biologically birthed a child), women are still tasked with mothering, caring, nurturing and are socially conditioned (e.g., given scripts early on). Hence, the equation woman=mother is not challenged. Lagarde (2005) posits that the Virgin Mary, symbolises women as the motherwives. Therefore, it is not difficult to pin on Catholicism the idea that intercourse's only purpose is that of reproduction, which also entails that women's bodies are there to produce children (Socolow 2015; Lagarde 2005; Federici 2004). In the case of Ecuador, pronatalism is supported by the legal framework, more on this on Chapter 5 where I discuss bodily autonomy.

In Ecuador, it is almost virtually impossible to escape Marian devotion. The Virgin Mary is venerated and celebrated all around; and atheists, agnostics and non-practicing Catholics are exposed to it. Currently the influence of Catholicism might be disregarded or minimised and younger generations are potentially able to escape it, but the master narrative regarding motherhood is still at the core of the scripts that some women access. Nonetheless, if I follow Lagarde's (2005) theorisation of women's captivities in broader categories (motherwives, nuns, whores, prisoners, crazy) as per the patriarchal understanding, marriage and motherhood are the organisational axis that determines how women's lives pan out. Lagarde first published in 1989, yet her work feels valid and relevant for my participants, and I also see myself in it. When a woman refuses to become a mother it posits a problem, as it leaves VC women floating amidst several categories and almost, I would argue, without a definitive identity (an in-depth discussion of identity construction of VC women from a narrative perspective, is addressed in chapter 6).

I want to refer again to Castañeda Rentería's (2019), and Castañeda Rentería and Contreras Tinoco's (2021) work with Mexican childfree women in which they found that identity construction practices are still founded in Christian-Catholic beliefs, which aligns with Lagarde's proposal of motherwives. Although the works of these authors is based in Mexico, I feel it is valid to extrapolate it to Ecuador's context due to the vastly shared colonial commonalities (Socolow 2015). Please see below for elements that formed Tilda's script and how she describes the sacrificial element conveyed to her.

Y, sobre todo, era el de y claro, todo lo que te dicen, ¿no? O sea, “por los hijos, se sacrifica, compensa”. Y era como entonces, si los chicos son sacrificios y reproducirte es un sacrificio, como que no es muy atractivo el plan. Por lo menos a mí no me compensa [ríe suavemente] esa historia. Entonces, si fue mucho, eso ¿no? El tener claro de... “me han dado un guion que no solo no me gusta, sino que además me perjudica a mi plan de vida”.

And, above all, it was, of course, everything they tell you, right? In other words, "for the children, [you] sacrifice, it [having children] compensates." And it was like then, if the children are sacrifices and reproducing is a sacrifice, the plan is not very attractive. At least that story doesn't make it up for me [laughs softly]. So, it was a lot, that, right? Being clear about... "they have given me a script that I not only dislike but is also harmful to my life plan"—Tilda (line 55).

Tilda identified that the script included sacrifice and she was not willing to follow its acting instructions, because she had a different script in mind for herself, which she refers to as her “life plan”. I argue that the sacrificial element is inevitably tied to and supported by Catholicism. The scripts received by my participants varied, but at the core of the script it is possible to find the master narrative that says, “women must be mothers”. See below for more script examples from Irene and Neira.

Y claro, aquí en el Ecuador es un poco muy esquemático. Tienes que terminar la carrera, casarte y todo. Entonces claro, la gente me quedaba viendo raro.

And of course, here in Ecuador it is a bit too schematic. You have to finish your degree, get married and all. So, of course people looked at me weirdly.—Irene (line 16).

[...] en el pueblo, ya tu destino estaba hecho [...]. No tenías que pensar mucho. [...]. Si te graduabas del colegio te conseguías un marido y mejor si el marido estaba viviendo en los Estados Unidos, porque así ya tenías plata. Entonces, o te casabas, el marido iba a Estados Unidos, te dejaba preñada, ¿ya? Te mandaba plata desde los Estados, eso era tu vida. Hacías tu casita, criabas hijos. El marido viene, una vez al año te preña, regresa, ya. ¿Qué ibas a pensar mucho?

[...] in the town, your destiny was already set [...]. You didn't have to think much. [...]. If you graduated from high school, you would get yourself a husband, and even better if the husband was living in the United States, because then you already had money. So, either you got married, the husband went to the United States, leaving you pregnant, okay? He would send you money from the States, that was your life. You would build your little house; you would raise children. The husband would come, once a year, get you pregnant, he would go back, done. What were you going to think a lot for?—Neira (lines 261-262).

Irene, who grew up in Ecuador's capital, referred to the scheme that must be followed in Ecuador and how when she stated that she did not want children (i.e., she said she would not

follow the script) she would receive strange stares. In contrast to her script, Neira's was much more detailed and specific: Neira's script came from the context where she grew up, a rural town in the South of Ecuador in a time when rural people would emigrate to the United States in search of better lives. The United States were the main immigration destination for rural population until 1997 (Martínez Valle 2005). Neira reflected on how having the script pre-set meant that there was no need to think on what to do with life, as a woman there was a destiny already set. During our interview she said she knew from early on that she wanted something different from what the town could offer her. If narratives, as Meretoja (2020) proposes, are sense-making models and are dialogical in nature, when applied to VC it means that women engage in a dialogical interplay with the dominant narrative (the motherhood mandate) and it is in that dialogue that they can start contesting it. The notion of "narrative agency" (Meretoja 2020, 30) is at play here because it allows voluntarily childless women to negotiate their sense of self in relation to the master narrative of motherhood and produce a model to challenge it, which in this case is childfreeness, the counternarrative. A further discussion of narrative agency is continued in chapter 5 where VC is explored as a decision.

Meretoja (2020) classifies narratives as implicit and explicit narratives. Master narratives tend to be implicit narratives that are conveyed within different stories that we are not explicitly or directly told. Conversely a counternarrative, due to its emergence as a critical take on the master narrative, becomes an explicit narrative. For example, the motherhood mandate is not a story that society explicitly tells, but it is an implicit narrative woven into society that emerges in dialogical/relational interaction like the one exemplified below, where Lila describes her encounter with a male gynaecologist:

Entonces él me dijo "no, y ahorita ya está muy bien, está lista para tener bebés. ¿Está buscando ser mamá?". "No, no estoy buscando ser mamá". "¿En cuántos años quieres ser mamá?". "No quiero ser mamá". Entonces él dijo "que raro, usted tan jovencita y no desea tener, es muy raro. Piénselo, piénselo bien y tenga un hijo para que tenga a quien heredar las cosas". [Risas]

Then he said, "no, and now you are doing fine, you are ready to have babies. Are you looking to become a mother?". "No, I am not looking to become a mother". "Within how many years do you want be a mom?". "I do not want to be a mother". Then he said, "so strange, you are so young, and you do not wish to have [children], this is very weird. Think about it, think about it carefully and have a child so you will have someone to inherit your things" [Laughter]—Lila (line 53-54).

I can identify several narrative implications from the encounter. Firstly, Lila's decision was deemed "weird" which shows that the decision to be childfree clashes with the socially embedded expectations for women implied in the motherhood mandate. Secondly, the gynaecologist's comment conveys one story about motherhood, that having children is related to legacy and that one of the purposes of having children is to pass something on. Thirdly, I need to reflect on power dynamics in the context of doctor/patient interaction in which the doctor, who in this scenario possesses medical knowledge and is responsible for women's healthcare, is actively pushing a young woman to have children which is out of his prerogative as a doctor. Lastly, in that encounter, the gynaecologist also implied that Lila was ready to have a baby, and although it came in the form of a question, as soon as she stated her intention to remain childless, the decision was considered strange. This is an example of how, if the master narrative is "women must be mothers"—and if a master narrative helps us in sense-making processes—when someone that subscribes to this master narrative encounters a childfree woman, it simply does not make sense.

To further develop the idea that the master narrative "women must be mothers" is at the core of these scripts, I now need to refer to childfreeness as the counternarrative. As Meretoja (2020) proposes, master narratives are identifiable when challenged. If we take Federici's (2004, 62) historical analysis of the body and the role it had in the development of capitalism, one of the turning points was transforming the body into a work-machine; in this turn women were tasked with the reproduction of the workforce and devoid of any power. Albeit, Federici chronicles Europe, but also acknowledges practices were exported to the Americas, and this is also confirmed in Socolow's (2016) account and Lagarde's (2005) anthropological categorisation of women. Federici (2004) argues that the witch-hunt was the strategy that subdued women to house labour and reproduction. Therefore, it is not farfetched to say that women followed the pre-set script for centuries with little room to avoid it, as avoiding it was potentially dangerous and ostracizing. Although there are accounts of childless women from the past that evidence childlessness is not a new phenomenon (Chrastil 2019), for centuries women had to vow to the motherhood mandate unless they would opt for a different socially sanctioned path, which was often limited to life as a nun, this is something applicable to

areas of the world under the influence of Christian Catholic beliefs, which is the case of Ecuador. Nowadays, depending on where they are in the world, women can take different paths, and deviate from the proposed script like Irene, Tilda and Neira did. When they questioned their script, voluntary childlessness emerged as a counternarrative to that of the motherhood mandate.

But to continue with voluntary childlessness as a counternarrative I take Meretoja's (2020) idea that narrative agency is socially conditioned to propose an explanation on how my participants sought an alternate script and were able to challenge it. For example, Neira grew up with a mother that constantly said to her:

"... no quiero que sean como yo que, ama de casa criando hijos. Me he pasado la vida criando hijos"

"I don't want you to be like me, a housewife raising children. I have spent my life raising children"—Neira (line 14).

In Irene's case, she discussed at length how much her father emphasised freedom and responsibility, a man that encouraged his children to do whatever they want to do with their lives as long as it is done responsibly and without paying attention to what others (society) would say:

Entonces, para él siempre el motivarnos a nosotros a hacer las cosas porque nosotros queramos y no por el qué dirán...

So, for him, he motivated us to do things because we want them and not because of what others would say...—Irene (line 59).

Irene's father emphasised volition, whereas Neira's mother expressed how she wanted an alternative destiny for her daughters. Neira's and Irene's family environments were supportive of values that allowed them to step out of the script. For other participants, the stories that allowed them to step out of the script were found not within their nuclear family or home environments but in other contexts and other experiences that allowed them to contest the master narrative. For example, Alejandra once subscribed not only to "women must be mothers" but also to "children bring you purpose":

... creo que tenía mucho que ver con no ver salida de esta relación y pensar que de alguna u otra forma como que tener un hijo— o ahora que lo digo me da hasta cosas, ya— pero tener un hijo o

tener un bebé de alguna forma iba a como traer algún propósito a mi vida estancada en ese momento.

...I believe it was related to not being able to see an end to this relationship and to think that, in one way or another, having a child—right now that I am saying it, it gives me the shivers, ok?—but having a child or having a baby in one way or another was going to bring some sort of purpose to my life that felt stuck at the time.—Alejandra (line 27).

In retrospect, Alejandra has reflected on the fact that she was in a complicated relationship and felt stuck, and thought a baby would be the solution. She then told me how she had fallen pregnant, and it was only after having a miscarriage that she realised she did not want any children:

Y claro, cuando yo tuve este aborto espontáneo fue, o sea. / Fue una cosa de un... tal vez un duelo de unos... ¿Dos meses no sé unas, tal vez unas cuatro o cinco semanas? No sé y claro, evidentemente quedaba la pregunta de bueno, ¿qué hacemos? ¿Seguimos intentando?/ Y fue un pero definitivo y rotundo “no”. O sea, fue un no, pero, o sea, no, “no” en plan... qué bestia, me acabo de salvar de una cosa tan monumental y no quiero. Y se acabó.

And of course, when I had this spontaneous abortion, it was, I mean. / It was a thing of a... maybe grieving process of.... Maybe two months, or I don't know, maybe about four or five weeks? I don't know and of course, obviously the question remained, well, what do we do? Shall we keep trying?/ And it was a definitive and resounding “no”. I mean, it was a no, but, I mean, no, “no” like... wow, I just saved myself from such a monumental thing and I don't want to. And it is over.—Alejandra (lines 17-19).

In Alejandra's case, the possibility of choosing an alternative script was tied to a specific experience that allowed her to connect to her lack of desire for children.

This section highlighted the roots of the pronatalist script that still stands regent in Latin America, and specifically in Ecuador. The pronatalist script is doubly supported by Catholicism and capitalism which is partly why taking a different position in relation to it, as VC women do, can be complicated. The stories analysed above showed some of the ways that VC Ecuadorian women have found alternative scripts, which emerge as forms of resistance and set the basis for VC as a counternarrative. VC as a counternarrative is further explored in Chapter 6 in connection to narrative identity. The stories have also shed light on the ways participants have negotiated their social positioning in relation to the master narratives. The following section, on Galápagos, offers a contrast to this section and further helps me articulate the socio-cultural elements that potentially enable resistance to master narratives.

4.2. Galápagos—Safe Haven from Pronatalism?

This is a section in which I analyse my encounter with Regina, the participant living in the Galápagos islands. I invited Regina to participate because she was the only one residing in Galápagos who expressed interest. When she accepted, I knew that the encounter was going to provide me with invaluable data as Galápagos is an Ecuadorian region that differs from all others. This section contrasts with the previous one as Regina seems to have been spared the wrestling with the pronatalist script that engaged my other participants. My sense throughout talking to Regina was that being a voluntary childless woman was not a challenge for her. During our interview, I prodded Regina regarding stories of dismissal or discrimination, as she was my last interviewee and by that point, I had listened to numerous anecdotes about VC women being dismissed, judged, and pressured. Regina did not have stories of dismissal of her decision, nor stories of discrimination and judgement, aside for this one from years ago:

Este, bueno, una vez no más, así que creo que tal vez, cuando mi mamá fue la primera que supo que era lo que yo pensaba, que fue hace muchos años, igual me dijo: “¿Cómo? ¿En serio? ¿Por qué? Ay, qué pena, te vas a perder algo increíble”. Dije, “realmente siento que ya lo viví, así que todo bien” [ríe]. Ella como que dijo eso, y de ahí esa fue la única vez como que alguien dijo “oh no”, de ahí, ninguna otra vez realmente.

Um, well, not once, so I think maybe when my mom was the first to know what I was thinking, which was many years ago, she still said to me: “How? Oh really? Why? Oh, what a pity, you are going to miss something incredible”. I said, “I really feel like I've lived it, so it's all good” [laughs]. She kind of said that, and that was the only time someone kind of said “oh no”, after that no one again, really.—Regina (line 80).

Regina's mother expressed her own sadness and Regina argued that she felt as if she had already experienced motherhood. Regina has been quite involved in her niece's life and she also described having a caring role with her younger brother. Nonetheless, she also mentioned at the beginning of the interview that motherhood, in general, has never been of interest to her. Regina has only been questioned about her decision once, by her mother. She also does not recall any negative experience in relation to being a childfree woman. What is the difference? What makes it possible for Regina to be able to exist as a childfree woman without constant challenges and dismissal? Is it Galápagos? Is it something in her own life story? Although I cannot provide a definitive answer, it seems to be both.

Galápagos' history differs from that of continental Ecuador. The Galápagos were discovered in 1535, Ecuador claimed them in 1832, and declared parts of them as wildlife reserves in 1935 to prevent any further destruction to the ecosystem (White 1997). In terms of population, Galápagos went from 1,346 people in 1950 to more than 25,000 by 2015 (Lozano 2018). Regina speaks about this when acknowledging how different it was to live there in the past compared to "the continent" and how the influx of people coming in later years, due to the tourist industry are not aware of conservation and what it means to live in Galapagos. See below for her words:

Sí, no es como que tanta tradición no, no pasa mucho aquí. Es, es todo un poco más suelto, ¿tal vez? Y bueno, también todas estas cosas generacionales no están tan marcadas, tal vez porque realmente como que no hay gente que estuvo antes, estuvo aquí buscando un lugar nuevo para liberarse de lo que ya se conocía como siempre...

[...]

Pero claro, ahorita también hay montón de gente que yo tengo idea de quiénes son y solo son gente que ha venido del continente a trabajar. Todo sigue igual, cero conservación, cero pensamiento abierto, nada de eso [ríe suavemente]. También hay eso que se está dando acá.

[...]

Antes no había luz, este no conseguías mucha comida siempre, este, entonces vivías... estabas demasiado todo con la naturaleza. O sea, y no es como que "ah bueno, hay animales". Pero no, es como que los animales eran parte también tuya, así como tu vecino. Porque todo era todo, era parte de todo y entonces, tal vez crecer más de ese modo y estar también muy aislado también del continente, porque, o sea, ahorita ya no tanto, pero antes no había internet, no había nada, casi no había ni líneas telefónicas. Entonces era como, estabas muy en un mundito.

Yeah, it's not like that much tradition, no, not much happens here. It's, it's all a little looser, maybe? And well, all these generational things are also not so marked, perhaps because people were not here before, they were here looking for a new place to free themselves from what was already known since ever...

[...]

But of course, right now there are also a lot of people that I have no idea who they are, and they are only people who have come from the continent to work. Everything stays the same, zero conservation, zero open-mindedness, none of that [laughs softly]. That is what is happening here.

[...]

Before there was no electricity, you didn't always get a lot of food, um, then you lived... you were intensely with nature. I mean, and it's not like "oh well, there are animals". But no, it's like the animals were also a part of you, like your neighbour. Because everything was everything, it was part of everything and then, perhaps to grow more in this way and also be very isolated

from the continent, because, that is to say, right now not so much, but before there was no internet, there was nothing, almost no there were no phone lines. So it was like, you were very much in a little world. —Regina (lines 83, 85 and 92).

Regina had also lived abroad in several countries in different continents (Asia, Latin America, North America, Australia) for extended periods of time due to her parents' line of work and as a result of that was exposure to different lifestyles, family configurations and different realities which have seemed to offer alternative narratives to that of the motherhood mandate and potentially offered her several scripts, and not just the pronatalist script received by my other participants.

Evidently, Regina's experience cannot be generalised beyond the fact that from her story, her decision to be childfree seems to have never been questioned or dismissed except for that one time. She also described being able to discuss voluntary childlessness openly with childfree as well as parent friends. Whether it is a positive effect of insularity tied to Galápagos as a place different from continental Ecuador or her untraditional upbringing, or a combination of both, her identity does not seem to be damaged by master narratives related to motherhood. This allows me to make an important point regarding the socio-cultural element in identity construction and how subjects construct themselves in a dialogical interplay with society and the master narratives they are offered. Growing up in Galápagos and in different places of the world seems to have protected Regina from pronatalism.

4.3. Maternal Capital and Pronatalism

In this final section I will propose, discuss and explore “maternal capital” and pronatalist narratives as a closure to this chapter. I am understanding capital as “process of self-expansion of value, or valorization” (Kliman 2018, 191) alongside Bourdieu's (2018) proposition of different types of capital that transcends the understanding of capital purely in economic terms. I propose the idea of “maternal capital” as a notion to refer to what women gain when they become mothers and how this is tied to the fantasy of motherhood that we are sold in order to fulfil pronatalism's demands. I consider a woman acquires maternal capital when she has a child and becomes a mother. Once this takes place, the woman in question has fulfilled pronatalism's demands and has bought into the fantasy of motherhood. Nonetheless, it is important to note

that the idea of motherhood that we are being sold is very different to the reality of motherhood. I shift to “we”, as I am also a woman that has been offered maternal capital.

My proposal of maternal capital emerges in relation with and inspired by Federici’s (2004) ideas on primitive accumulation and the female body, as well as grounded in Lagarde’s (2005) anthropological work on women’s captivities. Federici traces the history of patriarchy and makes the case for its close links to capitalism, and how capitalism used and profited from the female body to uphold an exploitative system. My notion of maternal capital does not refer to or include children, but only refers to the value ascribed to women when they become mothers and the benefits that may come from that change of status. Some of the benefits can be mundane like being given a seat on the bus, others can be biologically relevant like a reduced risk of ovarian cancer (Gaitskell et al. 2015), or monetary like a “baby bonus”, which is a government payment for having a child (e.g Malak, Rahman, and Yip 2019; Drago et al. 2011). Other benefits are intangible, like acquiring a new status and the feeling of belonging to an ingroup, and many more.

I want to point out that my idea of maternal capital is not meant as an attack on motherhood. I am aware of the “*not all*” argument. I know some women decide to mother and they are aware that motherhood is a difficult task that will inevitably have an effect or impact on the way they live their lives. These women are aware that acquiring maternal capital might not return the investment. I am also aware that motherhood can come with a wealth of experiences that are potentially positive and life changing. Yet, it seems ironic that women are encouraged, and sometimes even given no option but to have children in contexts that do not support them, more on this further ahead. It is important to note that the motherhood mandate is set up in such a way that the disadvantages are not advertised. My participants identified different variants or derivatives of the motherhood mandate. “Motherhood is worthy of sacrifice”, “motherhood is beautiful”, “woman=mother”, “motherhood is a blessing”, “a home is not a home without children”, and many more.

In the case of my participants, most of them had, to some degree, what I call motherhood-related experiences. Some had helped with their younger siblings, others had

caring roles for nieces and nephews, and a few of them have partners with children of their own. All the participants that detailed motherhood-related experiences said that motherhood is not what it is represented to be, and their experiences had burst the fantasy of motherhood and exposed them to the realities of it, rather than the idealised version that pronatalism pushes. For example, Tilda and Neira acknowledged the body toll of pregnancy; Isadora pointed out the bureaucratic hoops for mothers in the workplace; Selene detailed the sadness of her niece at the fact that she sees very little of her mom, who works away on rota basis in a different city to provide for her; and Alejandra mentioned motherhood can put women in vulnerable positions from a variety of reasons (e.g., bonding you to an abusive partner because you share a child). There were many other examples.

The fact that all the women had some motherhood-related experience also reflects well Lagarde's (2005) idea of women's captivities. Women captive as motherwives even when they are not mothers and chose not to mother. My participants have also acknowledged that having children is a difficult task that demands immense amounts of responsibility. So, it is worth pointing out that these voluntarily childless women have in fact reflected on what it means to become a mother and have decided not to buy into the fantasy of motherhood because the maternal capital that they might acquire, in their view, will not be a good enough investment.

In relation to the stories around this topic, I want to present Tilda's account around the utilitarian and capitalist motivations to have children:

...pero no creo que uno deba tampoco.... promover esta visión de tener, traer hijos al mundo para que luego te cuiden en la vejez. O sea, estamos produciendo nuestros futuros cuidadores. Sí veo motivaciones muy utilitarias, en esto del cómo la sociedad promueve al final la maternidad... te venden esta historia poco romántica, ¿no? Del sacrificio. Este romanticismo medieval del sacrificio y demás. Pero luego, cuando empiezas a profundizar un poquito más, lo que subyace es esto, ¿no? Igual lo veo manipulador y utilitario es siempre, ver... al final tratamos a las personas en función de cómo podemos utilizarlas para otros propósitos en lugar de para que desarrollen como individuos, que creo que es lo que deberíamos ser... una sociedad, que busque más que la persona desarrolle por se y no por cómo va luego a cuidar a alguien o si va a mantener el apellido, o mantiene el "imperio" de alguna manera.

...but I don't think one should either... promote this vision of having, bringing children into the world so that they can take care of you in old age. In other words, we are producing our future caregivers. I do see very utilitarian motivations, in this, about how society ultimately promotes motherhood... they sell you this romantic story, right? Of the sacrifice. This medieval

romanticism of sacrifice and so on. But then, when you start to dig a little bit deeper, what's behind it is this, isn't it? I still see it as manipulative and utilitarian, it is always, see... in the end we treat people based on how we can use them for other purposes instead of for them to develop as individuals, which I think is what we should be... a society, that seeks more for the person to develop per se and not for how they are going to take care of someone later or if they are going to keep the last name, or maintain the "empire" in some way. —Tilda (lines 99-101).

Tilda highlights several problematic elements around the motherhood mandate and the utilitarian connotation of having children. Tilda advocates for childrearing aimed at developing the individual's potential but this is at odds with capitalism, as it could be argued that capitalism only desires workers.

Another example aligned with utilitarian motivations was noted by Selene:

Te dice lo típico, “¿quién te va a cuidar cuando tú seas viejita?” o “un niño te cambia la vida, es la mejor bendición del mundo”

They say the typical thing, “who will take care of you when you are old?” or “a child changes your life, it is the greatest blessing in the world”—Selene (line 38).

Selene's two-part quote allows me to tease out two different strands of pronatalism. On the one hand, "who will take care of you?", also mentioned by Tilda, can be considered a classic retort experienced by most of the women I interviewed. Park (2002) also found the same in her work around managing stigma in voluntarily childless women. By proposing that one should produce children to ensure care in old age is problematic, it can be argued as a selfish reason to have children, as it is an unfair expectation and pressure on a child, and care in old age is not guaranteed. Children do not have a saying in their coming to the world, and yet they are expected to care for their parents as if there was some sort of implicit contract. De Vos (2014) did a comparative study on family co-residence of elderly childless women in eight Latin American countries, and by using census data, discovered that, for Ecuador, 82% of 60+ aged childless women lived in extended family houses. Although data used in the study is from the 2000s, it still strongly suggests that lack of children does not necessarily mean isolation and solitude in older age and that provision of care by kinship, or at least co-residence, is still an option. It is important to note that the study does not account for the reasons behind childlessness (whether voluntary or involuntary) as it just pooled women with 0 children, or an unknown number of children ever born. Whether De Vos (2014) provides evidence to

counterargue the pronatalist question of “who will take care of you when you are older?”, I have to say that my interviewees were not concerned with this question, if anything just annoyed that this seemed to be a reason to have children.

In relation to the latter part of Selene’s quote, in effect, having a child changes multiple things in the life of the parent, and the issue with pronatalism is that all those changes are sold as positive and that is not necessarily the case. I have discussed elsewhere that Ecuador is a Catholic country. Last year, Pope Francis, said that “not seeing the problem of childlessness is a myopic attitude” (CE Noticias Financieras 2022). The irony at play, besides the fact that a celibate childfree man criticises childlessness, is that, although pronatalism wants us to have children, the system in itself is not very supportive of parents, and specifically of mothers. Case in point, Ecuador does not only prohibit elective abortion but also does not comply with maternity protection policies as outlined by the international labour standards (World Health Organization 2023). For example, paid maternity leave is only 12 weeks, even though the international labour standards establish it should be a minimum of 18 weeks and no less than 14 weeks (World Health Organization 2023). Paid paternity leave is now 15 days instead of 10 days; and unpaid maternity leave has recently been expanded from 9 to 15 months (PrimiciasEC 2023). If a father, in Ecuador, only has 15 days of paid paternity leave, it is not far-fetched to say that the Ecuadorian laws are also—potentially—perpetuating traditional gender roles and gender expectations in which the mother is the main caregiver of the child. Yet, when my participants, Ecuadorian women living in Ecuador, state they do not want to have children they are met with judgement and criticism and receive retorts aimed at selling them the fantasy of motherhood.

Neira provided me with another example of a pronatalist argument. In this case, it is worth highlighting that the proposal was not as utilitarian as producing a carer for old age, but it conveys the idea that women are only complete when having children.

Las tías solteras también, “mira mi caso, estoy sin hijos esto no es bueno. Alguien para que te acompañe, alguien por quien vivir, alguien porque levantarte, por quién luchar en la vida...” No sé qué, no sé cómo.

The spinster aunts too “look at my situation, I am childless, this is not good. Someone to keep you company, someone to live for, someone to wake up for, to fight for in life”. [They say] Things of the sort—Neira (line 17).

Neira’s aunts transformed themselves into cautionary tales, projecting their own feelings about their childlessness upon Neira. Neira said that the more time passed, and the older she got, she kept reconfirming her decision to be voluntarily childless. Nonetheless, Neira’s aunts imply that women exist for the purpose of childrearing, if there are no children it would seem we have no reason to live for. This is simultaneously dismissive of women as agentic subjects, perpetuates gender stereotypes and could inhibit women reaching their full potential. Despite this, Neira was able to draw from other narratives besides the motherhood mandate to challenge the pronatalist script and feel confident and comfortable in her existence as a voluntarily childless woman.

In this section I have linked pronatalism within the broader system of capitalism that, following Federici’s (2004) argument, still profits from women’s bodies and uses them for the reproduction of the workforce. Throughout this section I aimed to highlight how much entanglement exists between pronatalism and capitalism. Said entanglement is an obstacle to access counternarratives as the master narrative of the motherhood mandate is “protected” by a system that swallows society as a whole.

This section closes the chapter that contextualises pronatalism in Ecuador and demonstrates that women in Ecuador, and elsewhere, are still offered life scripts that support pronatalism and capitalism. Yet, to counterbalance this, I also presented the Galápagos case, because it challenges the idea of captivities, and in a way demonstrates that when societal values are not constrained by tradition, religion or capitalism, people can in fact be freer or at least less constrained by gender expectations and social demands. Nonetheless, elsewhere, scripts seem to constrain alternative paths and propose motherhood as the only option available for women.

Chapter 5: Stories about Choices and Decisions

This chapter builds on the previous chapter's contextualisation of pronatalism to explore how Ecuadorian women choose VC while submerged in a pronatalist context, and what the choice of VC can say about bodily autonomy. The first section addresses VC as a hidden option and how the participants have chosen VC. This is explored as a decision-making process. The second section of the chapter is devoted to VC as a reclamation of the body and it explores bodily autonomy in relation to abortion, contraception, and sterilisation, which are topics discussed by my participants. This chapter presents findings that add to the foundation for the analysis of narrative identity presented further ahead in chapter 6.

5.1. Not Having Children is (Not) an Option

In this section, I will address VC as a veiled option, which is the reason why the “not” is bracketed in the title. VC is an option, but it is not accessible to everyone. Even though academic literature pertaining specifically to Latin America is scarce compared to other regions in the world, I am still willing to state that most Ecuadorian women, at least from my generation and those before me, have been asked the question of having children in terms of “when?” and “how many?”, but not in terms of desire or choice. See below for Alejandra's and Neira's account of this experience.

Como un ver que se puede decidir hacer lo que te dé la gana. O sea, que tienes de verdad tienes tantas opciones que no te dicen que tienes. O sea, no sabes que tienes hasta que... No sé, hasta que alguien te dice. No sé, a mí, no, a mí nunca nadie, me dijo: “No tienes que tener hijos”. O sea, suena curioso ya. Pero de verdad nadie en la vida me dijo. Nunca.

Like seeing that you can decide to do whatever you want. In other words, you really have so many options that they don't tell you that you have. I mean, you don't know what you have until... I don't know, until someone tells you. I don't know, no, nobody ever told me: “You don't have to have children.” I mean, it sounds odd now. But really, no one in my whole life told me. Never. —Alejandra (lines 65-66).

Para las mujeres, el tener hijos es, era la única opción. No había otra ¿ya?

For women, having children is, was the only option. There was no other, ok?—Neira (line 290). Alejandra and Neira state that options were limited. Alejandra said, “you really have so many options that they don't tell you that you have”, pointing out that options were available but not made explicit, hence veiled. Whereas Neira states that motherhood was the only option, yet the

fact that she was able to remain childfree indicates the opposite. Nonetheless her statement evidences the forcefulness of the master narrative. Even when she was able to choose VC, motherhood is still perceived as the only option.

For my participants, fertility options beyond motherhood came up in different ways. Whether by experiences in their past or made explicit by an other (a parent, a friend, a colleague), or by listening to themselves:

Pienso que siempre estuvo como que muy presente en mi esa idea.

I think that idea was always very present in me—Orisa (line 8).

Nonetheless, this is not the case for all of Ecuador's female population. I expand on this, in section 5.2. where I discuss bodily autonomy.

All my interviewees framed their voluntary childlessness as a decision, albeit decisions made under different circumstances and contexts. As evidenced by their accounts, except for Regina who lived in Galápagos, the choice was not readily available, and it was a process to reach the decision to be VC. Decision and choice tend to overlap, but here I am understanding choice as “the act of choosing; preferential determination between things proposed...” and a decision as “[t]he action, fact, or process of arriving at a conclusion regarding a matter under consideration; the action or fact of making up one's mind as to an opinion, course of action, etc.; an instance of this” (OED 2019). I will briefly first attend to choice and its implications for childfreeness and further ahead I will explore the decision element in my participants' narratives in the following section.

Technically, in 2023, women have plenty more of options and there is some scope to choose alternate scripts as evidenced in Chapter 4. Nonetheless, choice in relation to getting or not getting pregnant is limited and constrained by access to knowledge, limitations to sexual reproductive rights, access to contraceptive medication, socio-cultural context, and ultimately awareness of an alternative option (i.e., not having children is in fact an option). In Ecuador the choice is not as obvious as it might seem. Ecuador has one of the highest rates of teenage pregnancy in Latin America. Ecuadorian adolescent women from poor households with little to no access to education are at the highest risk for unplanned pregnancy (Goicolea et al. 2010);

for 2018, teenage pregnancy was calculated at 111 births per 1000 adolescent girls (15 to 19 years old) (UNFPA 2018); while in 2021, Ecuador's National Statistics Centre reported 15,7% of pregnancies were teenage pregnancies and 0,7% belonged to girls under 14 years of age (Mella 2022); teenage motherhood also increased from 48% in 1999 to 60% in 2012 among women with complete primary education (Espinell-Flores et al. 2020). This detour regarding teenage pregnancy and teenage motherhood in Ecuador further complicates and nuances my discussion around choice and bodily autonomy, because childfreeness is only possible when having bodily autonomy and having choice is at one's disposal. The prevalence of adolescent pregnancy in Ecuador makes me feel confident in saying that sadly, childfreeness is not an option for everyone. The fact that it was an option for my participants is analysed further ahead when discussing abortion, contraception, and sterilisation.

5.1.1. The Decision

Framing voluntary childlessness in terms of a decision requires a discussion in relation to free agency and narrative agency. To understand and conceptualise voluntary childlessness as a decision, I take from philosophy. I use Benson's (1990) feminist theorisations of free agency that had also been referred to by Nelson (2001) in her work about narrative repair, and I articulate these with Hierro and Marquez's (1994) take on feminist morality, and what it means to have narrative agency.

Benson (1990), who is based in the U.S., challenges the traditional discussion of free agency as non-relational and value-neutral, which assumes that the agent has the power to control and regulate their behaviour. Benson's approach merges well with the socio-constructionist paradigm that frames this research because it considers power and how power plays in society. For example, my participants had to dialogically engage the master narrative in order to be able to challenge it, and challenging was only possible by having access to their narrative agency. In this sense, narrative agency is a resource. Benson (1990) also emphasises the importance of social location. An example of this applied to the subject at hand is how different it is to opt for childfreeness in a rural setting, in a town like the one described by Neira in Chapter 4, where the destiny was set, compared to choosing childfreeness while being a Christian and a feminist in an urban setting, which is the case of Isadora. Both decisions, Neira's

and Isadora's, were based on entirely different considerations, which aligns with Benson (1990) when the author articulates free agency as relational and highly dependent on what he calls the "normative competence" dimension of freedom. With this, he refers to how agents are aware of normative standards and how these are brought in at the moment of making decisions, because these standards are the ones that determine how truly free we are, and are also used by those who surround us.

While, for example, Neira, Irene, and Regina grew up in settings where freedom of choice and responsibility were supported, whether it was by clear direct messages (e.g., Neira's mother plainly stating hopes for a different future for her daughters or Irene's father vocally supporting responsibility and freedom) or exposure to alternative modes of life (e.g., Regina's life in different countries); Alejandra, Lila, Selene, Orisa, Tilda, and Isadora had to navigate settings in which asserting themselves as free agents required more negotiation and boundary setting. An example is Orisa's experience reflected in the following dialogical encounter:

"Ah bueno, yo te voy a dar un consejo, tienes que empezar a pensar en tener hijos. Yo quiero nietos y quiero nietos tuyos porque luego, cuando ya seas más grande, vas a ver que los hijos son una compañía"

[...]

Entonces mi respuesta fue como "papi... ese no es un tema para conversar. Eso es un, o sea eso lo conversaré yo con él, pero no con usted. Y por ahora no. O sea, por ahora... primero, usted no tiene el derecho a pedirme nietos, o sea, usted no puede pedir algo. Segundo, o sea, eso lo conversaré yo, lo veré yo y en segundo lugar lo hablaré con mi pareja".

"Oh, okay, I am going to give you some advice. You need to start thinking about having children. I want grandchildren, and I want grandchildren from you because later, when you grow up, you will see that children are company"

[...]

So, my response was like "daddy... that's not a topic to discuss. That is a, that is [something] I will discuss with him [partner], but not with you. And not for now. I mean, for now... firstly, you don't have the right to ask me for grandchildren, it is not something you can ask for. Secondly, this I will discuss, I'll see to it, and I will talk it through with my partner"—Orisa (lines 108 and 110).

Orisa's father said this to her when she was in her late 20s which was not far back from when we had our interview. Orisa acknowledged that it was not an ill-willed attempt on her father's side, yet she had to assert herself as a free and non-compliant agent and take positionality in terms of what are the standards managed by her father and how they clash with those

managed by her. In terms of normative competence, in the city where Orisa grew up and where this encounter took place, there are clear expectations as to how women must behave and what is expected of them, which again aligns with Lagarde's (2005) proposal of motherwives. Orisa's city is in the south of Ecuador, and it is traditionally conservative. Albeit Orisa also stated that now feminism feels much more present and influential in that particular city and society than when she was a teenager, she also described other encounters in which she has faced judgement over the way she lives her life as a single, economically independent, childfree, sexually active woman.

From Orisa's encounter, I tease out another strand that is related to how making a decision such as childlessness takes a relational dimension. Orisa's father asked for grandchildren, which aside from having the tone of a demand, also has echoes of an expectation. Bruner (2000, 1991b, 1991a), a U.S.-based psychologist, proposed that narratives are about expectations, and the stories we tell about things help us manage social expectations. In the example at hand, the "parenthood mandate" is a master narrative that contains multiple stories within it, and one of those is that of grandchildren. For the sake of argument, I can sum up said story as "I had children, my children will have children and make me a grandparent". The fact that choosing childfreeness results in no grandchildren for their parents and/or in-laws also came up with Isadora, Tilda, Lila, and Irene. The way they felt about the fact varied. For some, it brought up guilt, for others it sparked a discussion around the entitlement of such a request (i.e., grandchildren) considering that it comes with a myriad of life-changing implications on different levels (body toll, financial, career-altering, emotional, etc.).

In terms of decision-making, Benson (1990) highlighted that the agent needs to have the psychological equipment to be able to reflect upon motives and control their actions. Whereas traditional discussions around free agency would argue that one can do as one pleases, Benson's take is that free agency is not something we merely possess, and we can make use of it, but it is dependent upon several factors. Orisa had the psychological resources to make the decision to be childfree despite navigating a pronatalist environment and, in the example provided, she also engaged in boundary setting with her father, reaffirming her decision to be childfree. This is not such an easy task, and several participants brought up stories of other

people in their lives who have shared regret about having children or have offered advice, see below for Tilda's and Lila's experiences.

Incluso he tenido estas charlas, ponte, con colegas después que te dicen, "o sea, es que está muy bien [no tener hijos], o sea... a mis hijos, los quiero mucho, pero tal vez si lo hubiera pensado mas no los hubiera tenido.... si hubiera sabido cómo iba a ser no hubiera tenido los que tengo o incluso no". O sea, es un poco darte cuenta de que no tuviste la oportunidad en realidad de decidir por ti misma si querías o no hacer esa maternidad. Pero ya están ya ni modo pues, ya ahí vas con la situación.

I've even had these talks, like, with colleagues who tell you, "I mean, it's ok [not to have children], I mean... my children, I love them very much, but maybe if I had thought about it more I wouldn't have had them... If I had known what it was going to be like, I would not have had those that I have or none at all". I mean, it is a bit like realising that you didn't really have the opportunity to decide for yourself whether or not you wanted to mother or not. But they are here, so well, there you go with the situation.—Tilda (line 65).

Recuerdo que era la profe N, porque yo así le decía, me dijo, igual en una salida, me dijo "Si usted se va a ir, no tendrá hijos. ¿Para qué?" Y te hablo de una mujer que tenía cuatro hijos.

I remember that it was teacher N, because I used to call her that, she told me, on an outing, she said to me "If you are going to leave, don't have children. What [are you going to have children] for?" And I'm speaking to you about a woman who had four children.—Lila (line 58).

Tilda and Lila have conversed with others about their experience of having children, which points out to the fact that the decision to be VC is not taken in isolation. Whether the conversations have just reinforced what was already decided or have sparked reflection, it points out to the dialogical interplay of agency and sense of self.

I bring in morality because it is inherent to decision making processes. Hierro and Marquez (1994) differentiate between patriarchal morality and feminist morality, stating that the first one is focused on control and domination, often achieved through violence while the latter follows the logic of pleasure which is connected to love, nonviolence, welfare and hedonism. Hedonism is taken in the sense of an ethical theory and philosophical stance in which good is achieved through the search for pleasure and avoidance of pain, and pleasure is understood broadly as the source of a pleasant feeling or experience (Moore 2019) and not only in the narrow colloquial sense of sensual pleasure.

I use feminist morality to frame my participants' decision to be childless because of the way this decision is inherently feminist and opposes patriarchal and capitalist expectations over

women's bodies. What is at the basis of the decision to be childfree? I have mentioned elsewhere that I emphasise on the volition, on the desire to NOT have children. But besides the desire, which follows the logic of hedonism in the sense of providing the highest good for the person that decides, there are additional motivations worth mentioning that also fit what Hierro and Marquez (1994) define as feminist morality. See below for Selene's reflection:

Y, como le dije, creo que tener un hijo es si es tiempo completo y yo no quisiera darle poco tiempo a un hijo. O sea, debería ser a tiempo completo. Entonces, como es tiempo completo y yo, mi objetivo es otro, mi objetivo es tener mi empresa, generar fuentes de trabajo y ayudar a otras personas.

[...]

Entonces... la no-maternidad... En mí, pienso que es algo...es una.... es una decisión responsable. Al menos en estos tiempos que estamos, es mejor... creo que es mejor no tener un hijo a traer un hijo a sufrir tanta maldad.

And, as I told you, I think that having a child is full time and I wouldn't want to give a child little time. In other words, it should be full time. So, since it's full time and me, my objective is different, my objective is to have my company, generate jobs and help other people.

[...]

So... non-maternity... In me, I think it's something... it's a responsible decision. At least in these times we are in... it is better... I think it is better to not have a child than to bring a child to suffer so much evil. —Selene (lines 153-155, 162).

Referring again to feminist morality (Hierro and Marquez 1994), the logic of desire, welfare and non-violence becomes alive in Selene's decision. Selene wants to follow her objective (which can be considered a desire) and help others, which can fall under "welfare". To further contextualise this, Selene has been one of the primary caregivers for her niece, and she is familiar with the demands of a caregiving role and the sacrifices related to it. On this topic, Selene has been quite clear that she exercises the role of an aunt and by no means she identifies as a substitute mother, but also recognises her sister's struggles as a single mother and the toll it has on her sister and niece. Selene also mentions it would not be fair to bring a child into a world that she experiences as evil or that could potentially cause them suffering. Women do not *need* to have children (despite what society might want from them), if anything it has to be about *wanting* to have a child. If a woman does not want to have a child (whatever the reasons) it should be all right. Yet, if a woman *does not want to*, but is *forced to*, it is not far-fetched to say that being an unwanted child is not ideal and can potentially be a risk factor for

mental health or neglect. I want to note that I am not implying that mothers of unwanted children are bad mothers or that the children are destined for a rough life. I am not aiming for a sweeping generalisation here; I want to point out that to some degree being *wanted* if anything is a protective factor.

In a similar line, Regina reinforces her decision, which was initially a hedonistic desire, with further welfare-related motivations:

[...] Ya, ya por más que haya sido una decisión que ya quería desde antes. Sí, es algo que en los últimos años me he puesto a pensar bastante de cómo, yo de verdad si es algo que igual quisiera, no lo haría ahora. Porque sí, no sé más que nada por como veo que está todo. Me parece tan feo como está el mundo. [...]

[...] Now, even though it was a decision that I wanted from before. It is something that in recent years I have begun to think a lot about how, really, even if it was something that I would like, I would not do it now. Because, I don't know, more than anything because of how I see that everything is. The world seems grim to me. [...]—Regina (line 99).

Although Regina might sound pessimistic to some, these considerations are framed by her experience of the current state of the world and deeply connected to her experience living in Galápagos and how conservation-related aspects are decaying, putting Galápagos' unique ecosystem at peril, also presented in Chapter 4.

Lastly, I consider that narrative agency was paramount to make sense of my participants' decision-making process. Narrative agency is the capacity that we have, as subjects, to use, interpret and re-interpret the narratives that frame our socio-cultural context (Meretoja 2020). It is via narrative agency that the women from my research have taken narratives such as the motherhood mandate and reworked them in a way that enables them to tell their own story and make the decision to be VC. Their stories are counterstories that protect, and repair identities damaged by pronatalism. A further discussion of healing identities and narrative repair takes place in section 6.1.1.

5.2. Bodily Autonomy and Stories about Reclaiming the Body

When discussing their experience of deciding to be VC, my participants brought up the topic of bodily autonomy in connection to abortion, contraception, and sterilisation. All are

tightly linked with the idea of decision-making previously elaborated on and related to being privileged enough to actually decide not to have children.

5.2.1. Abortion

Bodily autonomy pertains to mental and physical domains, including the regulation of fertility, enjoyment of sexuality, and safety and integrity from any kind of violence (Hierro 1997, 2003, 2007). In Ecuador, with abortion being illegal, women's bodies become the fighting arena where law, government, and culture aim to punish and limit personal decisions backed up by a normative discourse (Cevallos Castells 2011, 2021). This is no different in voluntary childlessness, as childfreeness is the other side of that same coin; as previously discussed, the motherhood mandate is a master narrative that in Ecuador is part of that normative discourse that keeps elective abortion illegal in Ecuador, which is a clear dismissal of bodily autonomy as a right. If I cannot choose to end a pregnancy it means that I am forced to become a mother. If the only legal reasons to have an abortion are: if the health of the mother is at risk or if the pregnancy was the result of rape; it is not extreme to assert that the government in fact has a high degree of control over women's bodies. This is reflected in what Orisa said to me:

Si es que lo vemos a nivel general, decidir sobre la maternidad es un mito aun, es algo que está muy lejano. Es algo que mujeres como yo, porque, pues en este caso me estás entrevistando a mí, podemos decidir.

Porque tenemos la información, porque tenemos los medios, porque tenemos la, las redes necesarias. Porque sabría, además, yo, como cuidarme. Yo jamás informaría en mi casa, que me voy a hacer un aborto, por ejemplo.

Claro, pero no todas las mujeres tenemos esa posibilidad y esa, ese es el peligro de que no sea legal el aborto.

If we see it at a general level, deciding on motherhood is still a myth, it is something that is very far away. It is something that women like me, because in this case you are interviewing me, can decide.

Because we have the information, because we have the means, because we have the necessary networks. Because I would also know how to take care of myself. I would never say at home that I am going to have an abortion, for example.

[...]

Of course, not all women have that possibility and that, that is the danger with abortion not being legal. —Orisa (lines 162-166).

Orisa deems the act of deciding or not to become a mother a myth and acknowledges the way certain privileges would allow her to exercise her right to bodily autonomy if she were to fall pregnant. Orisa refers to having the means, the information, and access to networks and knowledge as essential things to access a safe illegal abortion. Other women cannot do the same simply because of their life circumstances. See below for what Selene said about this:

Yo he visto en mi barrio y en el barrio vecino, y en toda la ciudad, que hay muchas chicas que tienen hijos. Hay niñas de doce, trece años que tienen ya un hijo. Entonces me da como que un poquito de pena, de pesar, de que niños cuidando niños.

I have seen in my neighbourhood and in the nearby neighbourhood, and throughout the city, that there are many girls who have children. There are twelve, thirteen-year-old girls who are already have a child. That makes me sad, fills me with sorrow, children taking care of children. — Selene (line 180).

Selene brings up how common and upsetting it is to see pre-adolescent mothers. Following on the idea of the body as the land that needs to be reclaimed (Cabnal and Siderac 2019; Cabnal 2019), it is worth asking what had to happen for those children to be claimed by motherhood or what happened such that as a society we are not protecting them and offering them options. With abortion behind a closed door that can only be crossed by some in particular circumstances and these pregnant children continuing to add to the statistics, it becomes clear that when bodily autonomy is not a right it becomes a privilege. Several factors contribute to this: lack of access to comprehensive sex education, the normalisation of violence against children, gender-based violence, and legislation that does not support vulnerable sectors of the population. Bodily autonomy as a privilege is addressed further ahead in sections 5.2.2. Contraception and 5.2.3. Sterilisation. Because in Latin America women's bodily autonomy is limited and encroached on by the government, feminist activism has opted to reclaim the body by disseminating information and trying to make safe abortions accessible to the wider population, while also pushing for changes in legislation (see Section 2.3.1 for examples of feminist activism in Latin America).

5.2.2. Contraception

Contraception and healthcare were mentioned by several participants. Access to contraception is important in the context of childfreeness. Modern contraception is highly

effective in preventing pregnancies, but contraception in itself is not a new idea. Women throughout history have strived for some sort of degree of control over their bodies and there are records of contraception methods dating as far as 1525 B.C. (Makematic 2020). Nowadays, although access to contraception is more widely available, socioeconomic inequalities still have an impact in terms of access. Quizhpe et al (2020) assessed Ecuador's Ministry of Health reforms implemented between 2007 and 2017 and concluded that modern contraception use increased from 40,7% to 48,4% which was a lower increase than the average in the rest of the Americas. The authors consider the increase "modest" in relation to the amount of investment, purchase and supply encouraged by the reforms.

In the line of accessing contraception, some participants also addressed experiences in healthcare. Selene and Orisa were the only ones that described a positive and supportive experience with a gynaecologist. In Selene's case when she asked for contraceptive alternatives and discussed her decision not to have children the gynaecologist did not question her and offered her alternatives. Unsurprisingly, this gynaecologist was recommended by a fellow childfree friend. Nonetheless, as evidenced below, the delivery of contraception by a nurse was the opposite experience:

[...] me fui a poner la inyección [anticonceptiva] con la enfermera y me dijo "tan jovencita y no quiere tener hijos". Me dijo "mejor, ahorita ya debería tener hijos para que tenga un hijo bonito, sin enfermedades ni nada". Y bueno... no... no... simplemente no respondí, no hice ningún comentario y le dije que por favor me pusiera la inyección.

[...] I went to get the [contraceptive] injection with the nurse and she told me "so young and you don't want to have children". She said, "better right now, you should have children so that you have a beautiful child, without illnesses or anything." And well... no... no, I just didn't respond, I didn't make any comments and I told her to please give me the injection. —Selene (line 138).

The intrusive comment and caveat around the "biological clock" gave me a further insight into master narratives. The "biological clock" is a metaphoric element of the master narrative:

"women must be mothers". Another example of this was described by Lila:

"Cuidado a los treinta ya no, ya no se puede, ya no es igual. No ve la tía, no sé cómo... tuvo [un bebé] a la edad de tantos años y la hijita le salió así."

"Be careful at thirty, no longer, it is no longer possible, it is no longer the same. Didn't you see the aunt, I don't know... she had [a baby] at X years and the daughter came out like that".—Lila (line 83).

This is what people say to Lila when she says she does not want children. Just like Selene's nurse, people in Lila's environment also seem to think that all women want to be mothers and that they will be mothers at some point. I propose that probably there was no ill will behind these comments. The main issue is that these people felt entitled to *actually* say them out loud. Not only the master narrative comes through in the comments, but it is another example of how what women choose to do with their bodies is of public domain and can be commented on. More on this is developed further ahead in section 6.1.4. where I address dismissal of VC.

Orisa's experience with healthcare professionals was not particularly bad, and she describes the positive effect that contraceptives have had in her sex life:

Digo yo...me permite o me ha permitido vivir de manera increíble mi sexualidad últimamente. O sea, es como que me da mucha seguridad. Sí, mucha seguridad, mucho disfrute en la capacidad de apasionarse, la capacidad de sentir placer es otra, cuando al menos yo, estoy como que primero segura de que no me va a pasar nada, hablo a nivel de maternidad. Luego, pues, tengo una pareja estable y que coincidimos en esto ¿no? Entonces no siento esa presión.

I mean...it allows me or has allowed me to live my sexuality in an incredible way lately. I mean, it's like it gives me a lot of safety. Yes, a lot of safety, a lot of enjoyment in the ability to be passionate, the ability to feel pleasure is different, when at least I'm like, firstly, sure that nothing is going to happen to me, I speak in terms of motherhood. Then, well, I have a stable partner and we agree on this, right? So, I don't feel that pressure. —Orisa (line 72).

Orisa's journey to this point was not a straightforward one. She described navigating contraception with previous partners and the process of taking positionality and ownership of her reproductive health as a learning process in which she realised, with time and in different conversations, that the choice of contraceptive method was entirely up to her and not dependent on her partner's validation. In Orisa's story I identify elements of gender, risk and responsibility in connection to contraception. Brown (2015), based in the UK, discusses how gender roles play a part in contraception. Although Brown's focus is on young people, the author questions the reasons why the responsibility for contraception lies with the women and the assumptions around contraception. Above, it is clear that Orisa is much more satisfied with her current arrangement and I would argue that it is connected to having a partner respectful of her bodily autonomy. This contrasts with her experience with her ex-partner, who deterred her from getting an IUD and also raises questions in terms of power dynamics within the relationship:

[...]. Y alguna vez que hablamos sobre hijos con él, porque si, con él también tuve esa conversación, él me dijo, “cuando tenga que pasar, pasará”, y ahí entendí su concepto de “usamos condón”. Porque, pues no es mi responsabilidad ni la tuya, sino será responsabilidad del condón. Y bajo, bajo esa premisa de “cuando tenga que pasar, pasará”, yo no estuve muy de acuerdo, pero digamos...tampoco... tampoco discutí.

[...]. And once when we talked about children with him, because yes, I also had that conversation with him, he told me, “when it has to happen, it will happen”, and that's when I understood his concept of “let's use a condom”. Because, well, it's not my responsibility or yours, but it will be the responsibility of the condom. And under, under that premise of “when it has to happen, it will happen”, I didn't really agree, but let's say, I didn't argue either. —Orisa (line 55).

Orisa acknowledges lack of contestation. In the scenario with her ex-partner, by accepting the idea of “whenever it has to happen, it will happen” it feels like a relinquishing of her bodily autonomy rather than finding a method that suited her better at the time. Nowadays, Orisa is in a different position with her new partner, a man who is not only childfree but does not aim to meddle in terms of what she does or does not do with her body. She also mentioned that after her last relationship she now knows that in terms of decisions concerning her bodily autonomy the prerogative is only hers.

5.2.3. Sterilisation

The other element discussed by some of my participants was sterilisation. In terms of “hard data”, Ecuador's National Institute for Statistics and Census (INEC) (2014) stated that for married and partnered women between the ages of 15 and 49, female sterilisation was the most used contraceptive method with a 32,3%, followed by the pill with 11,2% and the contraceptive injection at a 10,8%, other methods (condoms, IUD, implants) had 5% or less. Nonetheless, the key words are “married” and “partnered”, and highly likely already mothers.

Machado (2019), a journalist for an online Ecuadorian publication, collected several anecdotal reports of women being denied sterilisations in Ecuador for different reasons: age, civil status, lack of partner's permission, or not having any children yet. It is important to note that voluntary female sterilisation is protected by Ecuador's laws in the sense that a woman can request to get sterilised, and that should be enough for her to be eligible for the procedure (Ministerio de Salud 2014). Regrettably, this is not put into practice and when single, childfree women state they want to get sterilised, their decision gets questioned or dismissed by medical professionals, who, by gatekeeping the procedure are supporting pronatalism and reaffirming

the equation woman=mothers. It is worth noting that in Ecuador, female sterilisations are still more common than male sterilisations. For 2018, there were 18,517 female sterilisations and 646 male sterilisations (Machado 2019). This is important because, even though women that get sterilised are already mothers, the fact that so few men get sterilised is question-provoking. The contrasting numbers make me wonder around how master narratives about parenthood (motherhood and fatherhood), womanhood and manhood play a part on accessing permanent contraception. I will elaborate on this with the help of Irene, Tilda, and Orisa.

Irene shared the story of a woman, from her university friends' circle, that wanted to get sterilised in her 20s:

Y claro, para cuando ella dijo eso [que se quería esterilizar], entre el grupo de amigos fue como: "estás loca, ¿qué te pasa? ¿Por qué dices eso?" Y para mí fue como "sí está bien, o sea, si quieres, vamos, te apoyo". Y claro, el médico igual y se oponía y le decía que no, que ella es muy joven porque ahí teníamos unos 23, 24 años. "¿Que cómo va a tomar esa decisión?" Pero era para mí era muy racional. Para mí no estaba fuera de foco. Para mí, no era nada como "Guau ¿Cómo puede tomar esa decisión?" Para mí estaba muy bien.

And of course, by the time she said that [she wanted a sterilisation], among the group of friends it was like: "you're crazy, what's wrong with you? Why do you say that?" And for me it was like "yes it's okay, that is to say, if that is what you want, let's go, I support you." And of course, the doctor was the same and opposed, telling her no, that she is very young because we were around 23, 24 years old at the time. That "how is she going to make that decision?" But to me it was very rational. To me she wasn't out of it. For me, it was nothing like, "Wow, how can she make that decision?". For me it was all ok. —Irene (line 30).

Although it is not possible to know much more about this woman, Irene recalls the shock and judgement the desire evoked in her peers compared to what was evoked in herself, making it clear that Irene already subscribed to an alternative discourse. There are several elements worth teasing out of this story. On one hand there is the blatant dismissal of this woman's desire, she is immediately labelled as "crazy", and she is refused for the procedure by a medical professional. This lends itself to be articulated with the concept of agency.

Bamberg (2011) proposes that the management of agency is one of the dilemmatic spaces of identity construction. The author elaborates on the management of agency from a double vectorial position. Is it the subject who constructs the world? This would entail a person-to-world fit. Or the fit is a world-to-person, and this entails that the world constructs the subject. Bamberg (2011) acknowledges the futility of the binary construction and the

advantages of seeing it as a dynamic process. In the case at hand, the woman's agency over her own body is attacked. But where is her agency originated from? Bamberg (2011) offers the idea of a continuum from interiority to exteriority. Agency originates from within, but it is also limited by or determined by social structures that state what we can and cannot do. The author also refers to the "assumption of biological or partly psychological dispositions that are equally viewed as housed inside the person and determining his/her actions—if not action potential" (Bamberg 2011, 9). In Irene's example, it becomes clear that within herself there was a clear disposition to be childfree from early on in life, but her potential for action is limited by outside agents.

Another interesting example is Tilda's experience of being denied sterilisation in France. See below for her account:

...también lo vi, y eso ya fue en Europa en algún momento en que intenté, el que me hagan una ligadura. O sea, fui para—justamente como ya estaba decidido, me parecía la decisión mejor y más saludable—hacer una intervención quirúrgica para hacer la ligadura y no me dejaron.

...I also saw it, and that was in Europe at some point when I tried to get a [tubal] ligation done. In other words—I went, because it was already decided, it seemed the best and healthiest decision— to perform a surgical intervention to do the ligation and they wouldn't let me. —Tilda (line 117).

Tilda's story about this topic is important because it highlights that the master narrative around motherhood as inherent to womanhood is widespread and women's bodily autonomy is not only limited in Ecuador or the Global South but also in the Global North. At the time when this happened, Tilda was already in her 30s and she remembers being interrogated regarding motives and then being denied the procedure. This story exemplifies, again, how from a societal standpoint it is acceptable to assume that women do not know their own mind.

Here I want to remind my reader about the experience of my Scottish client, as I discussed earlier in the introduction, who was not able to get a sterilisation. What Irene's, Tilda's, and my client's story have in common is how society, in some cases, still seems to think women do not know their own mind and control over our bodies is disguised as "safeguarding". In theory, by laws and regulations, women can request a sterilisation if they want one, but in pragmatic terms it is very difficult to get one unless already a mother (Richie 2013). From

“women must be mothers”, there seems to be narrative branches emerging: “women’s bodies are not their own”, “women do not know their own mind”. In my work, this narrative branch has emerged in Ecuador, France, and Scotland.

Another important example comes from Orisa’s story about having a boyfriend, in Ecuador, that managed to get a sterilisation early on in life.

Recuerdo que en la Universidad tuve, tuve un novio también. Quien tenía una posición muy clara sobre el tema de la reproducción. Y él, desde una posición mucho más, si quieres hasta un poco más radical— en el buen sentido de su concepción—él decidió hacerse la vasectomía. Entonces él se hizo jovencito de 18 años, se hizo la vasectomía 19, creo, yo tenía 21.

[...].

Y, en realidad, yo apoyé mucho esa cirugía y, o sea, “chévere, hazte”. Para nada me pareció algo extraño, aunque para mucha gente de nuestra edad le molestaron. Me acuerdo de que él vivió muchísimo bullying por el hecho de su decisión, pero... Pero, para mí, o sea en mi casa, cuando se enteraron de que mi novio se hizo la vasectomía, mis papás casi se mueren como “pero ¿por qué? Si es tan joven y ¿los hijos?” y no sé qué. Pero yo realmente lo vi como algo “chévere”, es como “si tú quieres, si tú no quieres, o sea, todo bien, ¿no? No, no pasa nada, ¿no?”...

I remember that at the University I had, I had a boyfriend too. Who had a very clear position on the issue of reproduction. And he, from a position that was much more, if you want, even a little more radical—in the good sense of the word—he decided to have a vasectomy. He did it while being very young, 18 years old, he had a vasectomy when he was 19, I think, I was 21. [...].

And, actually, I was very supportive of that surgery and, I mean, “cool, do it”. It didn't seem strange to me at all, although many people our age teased him. I remember that he experienced a lot of bullying because of his decision, but... But, for me, that is, in my house, when they found out that my boyfriend had a vasectomy, my parents almost died like “but why? If he is so young, what about the children?” and blah blah. But I really saw it as something “cool”, like “if you want to, if you don't want to, in other words, everything's fine, right? No, nothing's wrong, right?”... — Orisa (line 44 and 46).

Similar to Irene, Orisa clearly acknowledged and supported bodily autonomy from early on in her life. She also did not find it strange or did not find the need to question her boyfriend’s choice. Unsurprisingly, Orisa’s parents did. From this interaction the motherhood mandate broadens or evolves into a parenthood mandate. Yet, this 19-year-old man was able to have a vasectomy while single and childfree. I feel that by this point, most would agree that it will be almost impossible to find a 19-year-old woman sterilised at her own free will. Now, I want to point out that Tilda’s partner was able to get a vasectomy in France, the same European country where she was denied sterilisation. Hence, this seems to provide back-up to “women’s bodies

are not their own". If I contrast these anecdotal reports of women being denied sterilisations with the reported cases around forced sterilisation, it becomes clear to me that women's bodies seem to be at the mercy of those in power, whether it is to prevent certain groups from reproducing, or denying others the option to remain childfree.

To close this section on bodily autonomy I will briefly discuss privilege. Whereas my participants have been able to decide not to have a child and follow through with that decision (i.e., not getting pregnant), there are women in Ecuador (and other countries), like the previously mentioned adolescent mothers, that do not have the same opportunity. If I propose that voluntary childlessness is not an option for everyone (as previously discussed) and I consider the fact that bodily autonomy is not guaranteed in Ecuador, my participants' choice to be childfree becomes about privilege and warrants an intersectional discussion. Several of my interviewees also acknowledged and recognised the privilege in being able to make their own decisions. See below for Isadora's and Irene's acknowledgement:

Claro, yo tengo la libertad porque tuve la información, el conocimiento previo para yo tener esta libertad ¿no? De decidir esto y también en eso mismo moverme con la responsabilidad de tomar esa decisión.

Of course, I have the freedom because I had the information, the prior knowledge for me to have this freedom, right? To decide this and act with responsibility in the making of that decision. —Isadora (line 235).

Quizás si más como un punto feminista... enseñarles a las a las chicas, a las mujeres, y bueno, también a los hombres, que uno puede escoger qué quiere ser y cómo puede ser, escoger qué hacer con su cuerpo y con su vida. Y para mí eso sí es importante, porque de lo que les he leído dije "que bestia, si yo no hubiese crecido en la familia, que crecí, con el papá que crecí, o si yo no hubiese estado... he tenido acceso a la educación y a la cultura, yo no hubiese podido elegir lo que yo he elegido".

Perhaps even more as a feminist point... to teach girls, women, and well, also men, that you can choose what you want to be and how you can be, choose what to do with your body and your life. And for me that is important, because from what I have read I said "wow, if I had not grown up in the family, that I grew up, with the father that I grew up with, or if I had not been... I have had access to education and culture, I would not have been able to choose what I have chosen". —Irene (line 94).

Isadora and Irene recognise freedom, knowledge, and information as essential to deciding not to have children and reclaiming their bodies. These elements have created modes of privileges in which my participants (and myself) are allowed to exercise our right to bodily autonomy and

are given options and opportunities. For the girls in Selene's town, located in Ecuador's Highlands, (and many more rural and conservative towns in Ecuador and elsewhere) different factors such as lack of education, conservative value systems, and poverty intersect in ways in which oppression is perpetuated and their options are veiled due to pronatalism. In this chapter I have argued for VC as an option accessible to my participants due to intersecting factors such as accessing their agency and their experience of exercising their bodily autonomy in connection to their decision for VC in environments that make it difficult for women to have control over their bodies.

Chapter 6: Identity Construction

This is the final findings chapter. Up to this point I have focused on the socio-cultural set up where my participants navigate their existence as childfree women. In this chapter, building on what I have already presented in previous chapters, I explore how Ecuadorian VC women construct their narrative identity. The first section explores narrative identity and branches into four subsections: healing identities and narrative repair, positioning, the ambivalent childless self, and a final section on challenges and strategies for identity construction.

6.1. Narrative Identity and Voluntary Childlessness

To understand narrative identity in the context of my research, I draw from several authors, but mainly from the work of Ricœur (1991a, 1991b, 1992), Somers (1994) and Nelson (2001). What all these authors have in common is that their conception of narrative identity is inherently relational. This means that who we are comes from the stories we construct about ourselves, and the stories others construct about us, acknowledging that we are immersed in a specific cultural and relational matrix, and that identity is related to our moral life and agency; who we are and what we do. All permanently embedded in and in interaction with the social contexts where we exist. Therefore, it becomes clear that the notion of narrative identity transcends the simple “who am I?” here I explore the ways VC Ecuadorian women construct their narrative identity within a pronatalist context. I explore narrative identity and counterstories, which then I further articulate with Nelson’s proposal of narrative repair, followed by narrative positioning. The section ends with a brief exploration of the ambivalent childless self.

To start exploring the idea of narrative identity I will use a comment received by Neira when she went for a routine check-up with a female gynaecologist. The comment, short and, in my opinion, hurtful, provides me with a relevant entry point to discuss identity construction from a narrative point of view.

“Mujer sin hijos, ¿qué es?”.

“Woman without children, what is it?” —Neira (line 153).

If I consider that female identity has been conflated with motherhood for a long time (Gillespie 2000, 2003; Russo 1976), the gynaecologist's comment is not surprising by any means. On one hand the question has at its basis the idea that motherhood is inherent to womanhood, and as the reader can notice, it shifts to a “what”, dehumanising the subject, equating women without children to a thing, to less than human. Ricœur's proposal will help me further analyse, what I consider was an aggression received by Neira. Ricœur (1991a, 1991b, 1992) articulates narrative identity as the result of a dialectical relation between *idem* (sameness) and *ipse* (self). *Idem* and *ipse* can be understood as two different but overlapping dimensions of identity. On the side of *idem* we have what Ricœur, in narrative terms, refer to as character: the lasting disposition that allows for re-identification through time. Character is related to what others see in me and ascribe to me. Whereas, on the side of *ipse* Ricœur puts the self and how the self comes to be dialectic and relational. Ricœur says *ipse* is in relation to who we are and our own possibilities and in keeping one's word, which is what makes it different from *idem* identity, that pertains to the self as a what. Narrative mediates between *ipse* and *idem*, bringing them together in terms of character and actions: *who* did *what* and *how*.

Now, returning to the quote at hand, what this woman said to Neira is identity-related and potentially damaging. On one hand there is the misplaced ontological element of “in order to be a woman you must have a child”. I call it misplaced because the gynaecologist was pointing out to *idem* identity, conditioning being a woman with having children, all women are the same, and all women *must* have children in order to be considered women. When Neira receives this question, the woman is pointing out at an identity-deficit element, disregarding *ipse*. Yet, following Ricœur, on the side of selfhood (*ipse*), the ontology of selfhood starts in the ground of acting, therefore selfhood is relation to possibilities. In Neira's case the possibility is childfreeness, which also challenges the normative conception of womanhood that it is hidden in the gynaecologist's comment.

Ricœur (1991a, 1991b, 1992) defined narrative identity as the act of balancing the immutable traits linked to history and character with the traits that separate identity of the self from the sameness of character. This balancing act, or this mediation provided by the narrative function, facilitates a discussion on counteridentities and resistance, and all my participants are

tasked with this balancing act in order to exist as voluntarily childless women in a pronatalist context. If I understand character as what is ascribed to me as a subject (e.g., women *must* have children), I need to balance this characterisation with who I am and what I (do not) want, which in the case of Neira is not having children as stated below:

Bueno, pero en Ecuador el no tener hijos si es una cosa...un poco complicada. Porque no te ven como, primero, no eres una mujer completa. Siempre te faltará algo ¿ya? Y el que no te vean como una mujer completa y que te vean como mujer completa cuando tienes hijos, esto siempre me molesta a mí, ¿ya? Otro, te ven como una mujer egoísta, ¿ya? Que tienes algún problema psicológico, mental o no sé qué, porque no te gusta los hijos, alguna falla debes tener de entrada. Tercero, justamente el término machorra es el término que mejor define a las mujeres sin hijos y es el término más duro para decir que no puedes, no tienes hijos. El término machorra es el término más duro ¿ya?

Well, but in Ecuador not having children is a bit complicated. Because they don't see you as, first, you're not a complete woman. You will always be missing something, right? And the fact that they don't see you as a complete woman and that they see you as a complete woman when you have children, this always bothers me, ok? Another thing, they see you as a selfish woman, ok? That you have some psychological, mental or I don't know what problem, because you don't like children, you must have some fault from the start. Third, precisely the term *machorra* is the term that best defines women without children and it is the harshest term to say that you cannot, you do not have children. The term *machorra* is the harshest term, ok?—Neira (line 197).

Neira acknowledges that being a childfree woman in Ecuador is complicated. She recounts assumptions such as being selfish, mentally ill, or the idea that she must dislike children. The word *machorra* can be translated as “tomboy” or “butch”, yet in Spanish it also means “sterile, fruitless” or “sterile female” (Real Academia Española 2022). These are all characteristics that tend to be ascribed to VC women. These come from status-quo stories (Keating 2013) that push forward and impose what I consider is an essentialist identity on women, as if to say, “there is only one way to be a woman, and that is to have children”. It is important to note Neira’s experience is not one of a kind, several studies have shown voluntarily childless women tend to be negatively perceived and receive social judgement (some examples are Bays 2017; Kopper and Smith 2001; Lampman and Dowlingguyer 1995).

I need to complicate the discussion by referring to how narrative speaks about our moral life and our agency, something that was also addressed by Ricœur’s (1991a, 1991b, 1992) conception of narrative identity. Adams (2008) discusses narrative ethics and proposes that the

stories we get told as subjects are influenced by culture and society, and these stories tend to dictate what is a good life, and therefore who is a good person, or morally “fit”. If I consider that narratives provide us with sense-making models that set expectations about how to live life (Meretoja 2020; Ritivoi 2009; Adams 2008; Bruner 1991a, 1991b, 2000; Bamberg 2011), it also becomes evident that there is an ethical dimension to narratives. From Neira’s experience it is clear that the societal story around childfree women is not a positive one. I want to note that all of my interviewees have at least one story in which their childfreeness has been dismissed, and several of them have also endured aggressive questioning about their identity as VC women. When they have been objects of exhaustive questioning, the aim has been to prove them as faulty and reprehensible for not wanting children.

Underneath these stories, it is possible to tease out that in some contexts VC women are perceived as morally unfit or are doing something wrong by not having children. In this point I need to re-introduce the notion of counterstory. A counterstory is “a story that resists an oppressive identity and attempts to replace it with one that commands respect” (Nelson 2001, 6). Neira, and my other participants are compelled to create counterstories that facilitate traversing Ecuador’s society as voluntarily childless women and resist pronatalism and hegemonic conceptions of femininity (Peterson and Engwall 2013). As a reminder, I understand pronatalism as “the set of multifaceted attitudes, rules, demands, assumptions, and conventions that encourages every person to procreate” (Avivi 2022, 52).

My participants articulated their own counterstories. I will analyse these by referring to three elements proposed by Ritivoi (2009), who works in narrative studies, and argue that it is through these counterstories that they managed to challenge the notion of themselves as morally unfit agents. Ritivoi (2009) states that to analyse narratives of identities one needs to examine “the particular strategies employed in stories about the self, the goals they support, and the larger cultural forces they encounter” (32). I understand strategies as narrative devices, in this case the goal supported is that of being voluntarily childless and the larger forces are pronatalism, Catholicism, and capitalism. I want to note that, although the counterstories were unique to each of my participants, they had commonalities, the most notable, already addressed, was voluntary childlessness conceived as a decision.

Peterson and Engwall (2013) explored how childfree women in Sweden created a positive identity as non-mothers by drawing from the same biological determinism that proposes women must be mothers. I refer to Peterson and Engwall's work because Neira and Regina articulated their lack of desire from a perspective that I perceive is akin to biological determinism (i.e., in the same way some people feel an urge to parent, they did not).

Yo no alcanzo a entender eso [el impulso/deseo de tener un hijo] porque no lo siento ni lo vivo ni, ni está dentro de mí. O sea, es una cosa para mí, eso es natural, o sea, yo no, no, no, no entiendo, no entiendo, ¿entiendes? A ese punto, ¿ya? A ese punto. Mi cerebro no está hecho para eso.

I can't understand that [the urge/desire to have a child] because I don't feel it or live it, nor is it inside of me. I mean, it's something for me, that's natural, I mean, I don't, no, no, I don't understand, I don't understand, do you understand? At that point, right? At that point. My brain is not made for that. —Neira (line 89).

Sí, no sé, es como que no... Hasta solo ponerme a pensar en cómo, que... no sé, dar a luz y tener algo adentro y como que... no sé, me da... Una... no sé si — creo que sí existe algún tipo de fobia, una movida así, pero me va dando así, una cosa como que no, como si quisiera darme claustrofobia. Alguna cosa así es como que “no, no, no” [ríe suavemente].

Yes, I don't know, it's like no... Even just thinking about how, I don't know, giving birth and having something inside and like... I don't know, it gives me... A... no I know yes, I think there is some kind of phobia, a move, like that, but it's giving me like that, something like no, as if it wanted to give me claustrophobia. Something like that is like “no, no, no” [laughs softly]. —Regina (line 8).

Neira places the lack of desire within herself, determined by her biology when she says, “my brain is not made for that”, this was a remark made after saying she does not understand why some people are desperate to have children. Regina wonders if there is a phobic element present in the way she feels, but also it is clear that she is listening to a bodily-based feeling. From an interpretative side, I consider that the phobic element in Regina's story shows the trail of pronatalism. By offering the hypothesis or possibility of a phobia, Regina is attempting to make sense of her experience within a pronatalist normative frame (e.g., “women want children, if you do not, something is wrong with you”). In this case I consider the mention of the “phobia” as a narrative device that supports her goal: not to have children.

Peterson and Engwall (2013) point out their surprise at VC women using essentialist or biological arguments to construct their identities. On one hand this type of argument is simultaneously making room for difference by challenging the notion that our wombs determine our destiny, while also acknowledging pronatalism and the existence of a

reproductive urge. Peterson and Engwall (2013) state that using biological determinism to explain VC transgresses conventional notions in which femininity is conflated with motherhood and opens up terrain for the existence of another type of women, women that do not have a reproductive urge. Hence, with this argument there are women that *must have* children (i.e., biologically determined to have the desire to become mothers), but it also posits there are women that are “biologically determined” not to have the same desire. This is a way combatting pronatalism by using the same logic. This has potentially healing elements for VC women that are constructing their narrative identity within a pronatalist context, but it probably has little impact on broader pronatalist policies, as governments continue to excel at controlling women’s bodies as discussed in previous chapters.

Although there are ways of being free from social scripts, as agents in the world, we also get narrative recognition from master narratives, and our identity-constituting desires are sometimes drawn from these master narratives (Nelson 2001). When discussing identity-constituting stories, Nelson (2001) reminds us that at the same time that we construct stories about ourselves, who we are, what we care about, and what we want in life; others in our lives do the same and on occasion these stories do not match. Nelson (2001, 106) argues that dominant groups use master narratives to oppress certain groups and she argues that this causes “*doxastic damage*”. This type of damage, as Nelson writes, is an attack on their self-conception and their beliefs regarding who others are. Therefore, Nelson proposes the idea of narrative repair, which I will explore in the next sub-section.

6.1.1. *Healing Identities, Narrative Repair*

VC women’s identity, as argued above, is damaged by pronatalism. Yet these damages can be repaired. Nelson (2001) proposes that a counterstory can repair damaged identities and it is what makes it different from just being an alternative narrative (Nelson 2001). I will use Irene’s and Selene’s stories to exemplify how a counterstory repairs. Irene and Selene do not take explicitly from the biological determinism argument presented above, but their explanations for their childfreeness echo something that can be classed as an origin story, a complete lack of desire from early on:

Entonces nunca había sentido... igual una afinidad muy fuerte con, así como las personas suelen decir, "mi sueño es ser madre". No. Para mí nunca fue un sueño, para mí nunca fue como un punto.

At that time, I had never felt a very strong affinity with, as people often say, "my dream is to be a mother." No. For me it was never a dream, for me, it was never like a point. —Irene (line 9).

...la verdad nunca tuve esa ese deseo de ser mamá. Entonces, no...

...the truth is that I never had that, the desire to be a mother. So, no... —Selene (line 215).

This lack of desire for motherhood is central to their counterstories because by acknowledging the lack of desire they are also asserting and enhancing their moral agency, which is a key aspect of counterstories according to Nelson (2001). So, for Irene and Selene the common essence to their counterstories is "I am not faulty, it's just not in me". VC women are drawing from biological determinism to be able to challenge the master narrative. Their counterstories were created by narratively flipping biological determinism in a way that explains the lack of desire to be a mother and protect their sense of self. This was the case for Neira, Regina, Selene and Irene. For the remaining participants, Alejandra, Lila, Tilda, Orisa and Isadora, their voluntary childlessness was articulated in relation to master narratives and as decision making process discussed in earlier sections.

In the line of repair, Tilda provided me with an example of a counterstory that not only challenges normative conceptions about womanhood but also demonstrates how our personal identity is not constructed in isolation. As stated before, who we are is a dialogical construction between what stories we tell about ourselves and the stories others tell about us, making identity a social and interpersonal construction (Nelson 2001; Bamberg 2011; Bruner 1991a, 1991b).

[...] Pues, por ejemplo, ya en casa, mi mamá, ponte, ya lo tiene normalizado, ¿no? El de "yo, no voy a tener hijos" y cuando ella lo conversa... y en cierta forma, eso creo que es algo bonito. Las personas que te quieren, cuando te quieren bien, aunque les cueste, tal vez en primera instancia esas decisiones que al final han afectado también su historia de vida... [...] Y ella misma ahora, cuando hablas... ella es como "mi hija no tiene hijos, ella decidió" y claro lo dice y ahora ya es en un modo de orgullo, ¿no? "Mi hija tomó su decisión de que no, ella tiene una carrera y se dedica a la ciencia y es investigadora".

Y ella, pero pues va contando ya la historia desde esta otra perspectiva, ¿no? Del de, "pues no, no tiene hijos y ya está. La maternidad o no maternidad no es lo relevante en ella, sino lo relevante es que está haciendo su investigación, que está con lo de las redes, estas otras cosas".

Pero si fue un proceso, ¿no? Del que se vaya haciendo esa transición, creo que mi familia en general, ya en este punto lo... el resto de la familia menos cercana también lo ha asumido. Es el de ya se sabe que no y ya está y ya.

[...] Well, for example, at home, my mom, see, she already has it normalised, right? The "I'm not going to have children" and when she talks about it... and in a certain way, I think that's something nice. The people who love you, when they love you well, even if it is difficult for them, perhaps, in the first instance, those decisions that in the end have also affected their life story... [...] And she herself now, when you speak... she is like "my daughter doesn't have children, she decided" and of course she says it now in a proud way, right? "My daughter made her decision that no, she has a career, and she is dedicated to science and is a researcher."

And her, but well, she's already telling the story from this other perspective, right? From hers, "well no, she doesn't have children and that's it. Motherhood or non-motherhood is not what is relevant in her, but what is relevant is that she is doing her research, that she is with the networks, these other things".

But it was a process, ok? A process for this transition to be made, I think that my family in general, already at this point... the rest of the less close family has also assumed it. It is already known that it is a no, and that's it. —Tilda (lines 171, 172, 173).

In the interview Tilda mentioned how, from early on, in her life she was exposed to the idea that motherhood is a must, through comments in the family home. An example could be comments alluding to potential grandchildren. Nonetheless, here in this fragment, I have insight into a third-person account of who Tilda is. Tilda acknowledges that her mother tells her story from a different perspective, where her mother does not only accept her childfreeness, but also acknowledges it publicly with pride. To further understand this, I need to refer to Somers (1994), who proposes that the dimensions of time, space, and relationality serve to challenge the traditional categorical and rigid aspects of a more traditional idea of identity. A good example of this is provided by Tilda's experience, in which with time and changes in the relationship, the mother was able to narrativise a different story that challenges the master narrative around motherhood. I analysed Tilda's process in the section called "the script".

Continuing in the line of narrative repair, Nelson (2001) proposes that identities are sometimes damaged to order. This needs to be understood by addressing power relations within society. I connect Nelson's proposal with Somers' (1994) who states that all identities must be analysed and understood in the context of the social and cultural matrices where they exist. For example, if I refer again to Neira (quoted earlier in this chapter), I can tease out pronatalism when she tells me that she perceives the identity ascribed to her as a childfree

woman is that of “selfish, mentally ill, infertile, butch, incomplete woman”. Playing off Nelson’s idea (2001), this is the identity ascribed to a woman that cannot technically fulfil what is expected of her, the “natural order of things”.

Lugones (2007) proposes that gender was used in colonial times as a mode of organisation. This particular mode of organisation included prescription of heterosexualism, setting marriage as aspirational, and highlighting the purpose of sexual relations was procreation (Socolow 2015). All morally and legally regulated by the Catholic Church. Evidently things have changed since colonial times, but the mandate remains. When speaking about the new generation of feminists in her city, Orisa provided me with an example that backs up how the effects of coloniality linger.

Y que son las chicas que van a entrar o que están en los colegios en los últimos años, las que están entrando a la Universidad y que cuando el profesor en la Universidad que le diga lo que a mí me dijo, “a ver, ¿cuántos habemos aquí? A ver, somos 45 estudiantes muy bien, ¿cuántas son mujeres? Veinte, de estas veinte, 10 han venido a buscar marido, cinco se van a retirar porque se van a quedar embarazadas y las otras probablemente no aprueben la carrera”. Eso me dijeron a mí en mi primer día de Universidad, cuando estas chicas lleguen al primer día de Universidad y alguien se atreve a decirles eso, estas chicas se van a parar y le van a dar su buen discurso feminista.

And these are the girls who are going to enter or who are in college in recent years, those who are entering University and when the professor at the University tells them what he said to me, “let’s see, what how many are here? Let’s see, we are 45 students, very good. How many are women? Twenty, of these twenty, 10 have come to look for a husband, five are going to retire because they are going to get pregnant and the others probably will not pass the degree”. That’s what they told me on my first day of university, when these girls [new generation of feminists] arrive on the first day of university and someone dares to say that to them, these girls are going to stand up and give them a good feminist speech. —Orisa (line 146).

Although, Orisa did not take on board the identity thrust upon her, upset or discomfort are inevitable.

Here is where counterstories play a role again. In the same way Tilda’s mother articulated a different story about her daughter, each of my participants provided me with counterstories that I consider pieces of a larger counternarrative that I formulate as women ≠ mothers.

Y no es que no me gusten los niños, no es que no me parezcan agradables, sí me parecen muy agradables y todo, pero en sí, haciendo un balance de las cosas y de los objetivos que yo tengo en vida, para mí no es, no es un objetivo.

And it's not that I don't like children, it's not that I don't find them nice, they do seem very nice and everything, but in itself, taking stock of things and the goals I have in life, it's not for me is, is not a target. —Irene (line 13).

Irene affirms herself as a moral agent, addressing who she is (e.g., she is not someone who hates children), and what she wants in life while articulating her identity as a non-mother and rejecting generic characterisations. When Irene states that she likes children while simultaneously acknowledging that there can be other objectives for women besides motherhood, she is supporting the counternarrative previously formulated, repairing any damage done to her own narrative identity, and stating she is not in opposition to mothers. This section on narrative repair leads into the next section where I discuss positioning in the context of narrative identity, because a healed identity achieved by an agentic self also takes position differently in the face of master narratives.

6.1.2. Positioning

If women do not have to be mothers, it opens up the possibility of different ways of existing as a woman, which also challenges gender stereotypes and expectations. Whereas the master narrative aims to essentialise identities, from a narrative identity perspective, identity is dialogical and never finalised (Deppermann 2015; Somers 1994; Ricœur 1991a, 1991b, 1992; Bakhtin 1981, 1984), hence it is not all-encompassing or essentialising. Deppermann (2015) and Bamberg (1997) use positioning as a concept that opposes static views of identity traditionally defined by personality (i.e., biological traits and dispositions). Gender roles, expectations and stereotypes are cemented in the more traditional view. The ideas that posit women have to be one way or another, and that women are inherently good mothers due to having wombs or the so called “maternal instinct”, are tied to societal master narratives, and while some women do subscribe to gender roles and expectations (and it is ok), others do not (which is also ok).

Positioning fosters understanding in relation to the agentic self, addressing that we are not helpless in front of master narratives. Bamberg (1997) proposed three levels of positioning. The first one (1) is within the story world (positioning of characters in relation to one another,

within what is narrated), the second one (2) is in the interactional plane (narrator to audience), and the third one (3) addresses the “who am I?” question in which the analysis is focused in understanding how the narrator positions themselves to themselves. Considering that my interviewees navigate a context traversed by pronatalism and Catholicism, they are constantly negotiating their social positionings in a way that will keep them as safe as possible in the face of the judgement and dismissal of their status as childfree women.

... ¿Cuánto tiene que ver con quién eres? Si tiene que ver mucho, porque también una empieza a ajustar su discurso y el cómo manejas las conversaciones con base en la experiencia. Entonces, como yo, ya sé que ese es un tema que siempre, que la gran, gran mayoría de los casos genera una reacción negativa y así esta cuestión de que les compele a no estar de acuerdo con mi decisión... Entonces sí suele ir acompañado en proveerles la información acompañada de un discurso ¿no? De no y, de hecho, creo que en realidad uno lo que debería preguntar es cuando alguien quiere tener hijos es ¿por qué quiere tenerlos? ¿por qué los tuvo? Es allí donde debería ir y a veces, dependiendo de lo que sea, es también el optar por la vía un poco más diplomática de sacar el tema de lo personal.

... How much does it have to do with who you are? It has to do a lot, because you also start to adjust your discourse and how you handle conversations based on experience. So, like me, I already know that this is an issue that always, that in the great, great majority of cases generates a negative reaction and this that compels them to disagree with my decision... So yes, it usually goes accompanied by providing them with the information, alongside a speech, right? Of why not, and, in fact, I think that what one should really ask is when someone wants to have children, why do they want to have them? why did you have them? That's where it should go and sometimes, depending on what it is, it goes also by taking the slightly more diplomatic route of taking the topic out of the personal terrain. —Tilda (lines 163).

Tilda recognises how the topic has identity repercussions (level 3), and how it determines level 2, which is the relational plane. Tilda counteracts any potential question with a previously prepared “speech”, which also signals she exercises her narrative agency. She also proposes what I call a “flipping of the narrative” by suggesting potential parents should face questions regarding their desire in the same way childfree women do for their no-desire. I consider this a counter narrative device that protects Tilda from questions while also, potentially, inviting others to reflect and engage in a dialogue. In relation to level 1, Tilda mentioned that she questions the socially accepted practice of inquiring about people’s reproductive life as ice breaker topics. If I translate this into level 1 positioning in the story world (Bamberg 1997), with this Tilda sets a boundary between characters, and also proposes there is more to people than their reproductive choices.

6.1.3. “The Ambivalent Childless Self”

Up to this point I have articulated identity construction of VC women by referring to different elements such as narrative agency, narrative repair, positioning, and framed those in the context of pronatalism. This section builds on previous sections to tackle a seeming “dilemma” (for lack of a better word) faced by some VC women. I am borrowing the subheading from Gotlib’s (2018) work “Wanting to want: Constructing the ambivalent childless self”. Gotlib is based in the U.S., a context different from the one I come from and the one I currently live in, however, she speaks directly into my personal struggle as my own fertility intentions are not clear to me just yet, I think it also allows for a discussion in relation to my research and childless women as moral agents and identity construction. In my case, I know I do not want a child *now*, but I am also not discarding the possibility that I might change my mind in the future, a perspective ambiguous and undecided. In her paper, Gotlib (2018) discusses the difficulties as an ambivalent voluntarily childless woman of being left in an unclear, liminal, moral space for not being able to embrace her desires wholeheartedly. She also argues that identity-constituting desires are commonly policed and questioned as a voluntary childless woman. Here, in the ambiguity and the policing of desires, is where I attempt to articulate her work with my data. While most of my interviewees framed their voluntary childlessness as a definitive decision, Orisa and Isadora framed it as a current decision.

Y yo pensaba en [esta] entrevista y decía, claro, o sea, “yo hasta ahora tengo muy claro, pero no tengo idea qué pase después”, o sea, no, no sé. ¿Quizá? ¿Quizá sí o quizá no? O sea, no sé, esa es mi experiencia hasta ahora. Pero no sé qué pase luego.

And I thought about this interview and said, of course, that is, “up to now I am very clear, but I have no idea what happens next,” that is, no, I don’t know. maybe? Maybe yes or maybe no? I mean, I don’t know, that’s my experience so far. But I don’t know what happens next. —Orisa (line 77).

O la otra, también es como que “¿será que es una etapa?” O sea, como que ahorita estoy definiendo esto y después no sé, a los 31 me enamore y diga “sí, quiero tener el legado, [ríe] sí quiero tener hijos”. Y tenga hijos. Entonces sí es como que el miedo ¿no? Ya en la medida en que el ser humano... sé que soy consciente de que voy a ir cambiando como que hasta donde ya he visto, los años que han pasado es como “no, no, no deseo tener hijos”.

Another, it’s also like “could it be a stage?” I mean, right now I’m defining this and then I don’t know, at 31 years of age I might fall in love and say “yes, I want to have the legacy, [laughs] I want to have children”. And have children. So, yes, it’s like fear, right? Now to the extent that the

human being... I know that I am aware that I am going to change as far as I have seen, the years that have passed and it is like "no, no, I do not want to have children."—Isadora (line 240).

I am highlighting this element of ambivalence because from a narrative approach to identity, inability to fully embrace one's desire, or leaving open the possibility for change is not morally questionable nor does it diminish our existence as moral subjects and actually accounts for us as social beings. To further understand this, I need to refer again to time, space, and relationality as dimensions that serve to challenge the traditional categorical and rigid aspects of a more traditional conception of identity. These dimensions dynamize and historicize identity. When I apply these dimensions to what Orisa and Isadora say, it is clear that in the emplotment of their stories, time, space and relationality are considered in relation to their status as VC women, articulating the above-mentioned dimensions with the possibility of change. This also brings up the principle of unfinalizability originally proposed by Bakhtin (1984). Bakhtin (1984) proposed the self as unfinalizable, acknowledging and leaving available the possibility of change. I consider unfinalizability important because it serves as a reminder that the stories which I received from my participants are the expression of their experiences in a particular moment in time and that the stories can change, as they are narrative constructions that emerge in specific dialogical encounters.

6.1.4. Challenges and Strategies

This is the final section in the chapter, and I will address challenges my participants face while navigating their VC identity. Some of the challenges I explore are discrimination and dismissal, and I characterise them using the framework of subtle acts of exclusion (SAE). I will articulate those with Goffman's (1990) stigma framework. I will also use the challenges to exemplify narrative strategies used by my participants to avoid stigmatisation or judgement in connection to their VC identity.

All my participants faced some sort of dismissal and discrimination of their VC identity, but Irene lost her job. She worked for a governmental organisation and when staff cuts took place, she was let go under the premise that she does not have children and that her husband had a job. She was told:

"...es que tú no tienes hijos, no tienes tantas necesidades"

“...it's that you don't have children, you don't have so many needs” —Irene (line 140).

Irene was not the only VC person that had to go, she recalls two more colleagues were also let go for the same reasons. When the premise to decide staff cuts is that people without children do not need their job as much as someone with children, it is not difficult to point it out as discriminatory. In the same line, Tilda has navigated being a childfree woman in academia and having to challenge assumptions regarding the use of time and money (e.g., you can take on the extra workload because you do not have children).

In Sweden, Peterson and Engwall (2016) studied the work experience of VC people in the context of what they call a “child-friendly society”, and their findings echo Tilda’s and Irene’s experience in which parents are prioritised and assumptions are made about childfree women. Irene’s experience is an example of blatant discrimination against VC populations. Nonetheless, other participants have experienced “subtle acts of exclusion” (SAE). Subtle acts of exclusion were proposed by U.S based Jana and Baran (2020) as an alternative to the term “microaggressions” to highlight the non-intentional side of these behaviours and to work towards an environment that fosters healing. It is important to note that the authors do not minimise the impact of SAE and highlight that the prefix “micro” might deceive people into thinking “it is not so bad, people are overly sensitive”. I have decided to use SAE to frame the experience of some of my participants when their childlessness is pointed out in negative and exclusionary ways based on how deeply ingrained pronatalism is and how the master narrative posits having children as the default. The SAE premise is that most times, the intent behind a SAE is not deliberate harm yet it pushes people further into the margins, and I agree with this premise. In the case of my participants, they have often heard comments along the lines of “you wouldn’t understand because you do not have children”. While these comments might seem innocuous, they support a master narrative that frames VC women as unfit, while also being exclusionary, fostering divisions (mothers vs., not mothers), and stopping any possible dialogue. See below for Tilda’s and Irene’ for some examples of SAEs:

Entonces, si ya a mis 20-21 fue como “no quiero tener hijos”, ya lo decía... a esa edad todo el mundo se permitía decir, “no, ya te llegará”. Eso les duró, como más o menos a los 35...

So, yes, when I was 20-21 years old it was like ‘I do not want to have children’. I used to say it at the time... At that age everyone thought themselves entitled to say “no, it will arrive [the desire to have children]”. That lasted, more or less, until I was 35 years old... —Tilda (line 29).

Me quedaban viendo y se reían o decían como “ay, ay, ya te ha de pasar”

They would look at me and laughed or said things like “oh, oh, it [the desire to be childfree] will pass”—Irene (line 87).

The interactions exemplify how women tend to be dismissed when their decision is not aligned with what society expects from them, by saying that the desire to have children will come, the implication is that they do not know their own minds and that their positioning in relation to motherhood is not valid. Overall, it is a challenge to Tilda’s and Irene’s condition as free agents.

Stories like the ones described above allow me to propose that VC seems to be stigmatised. Goffman (1990, 11-12) broadly classified stigma in three large groups: “abominations of the body”, “blemishes of individual character”, and “tribal stigma”. I propose that voluntary childlessness falls under blemishes of individual character, and I will make the case for why it can also fall under tribal stigma. Voluntary childlessness as a blemish of character is almost self-explanatory; in line with the idea of character developed in section 6.1 on Narrative Identity. It almost seems that a lack of desire for children is a fault in characterisation, as surely *all* women *want* to have children. So, where does this leave women like my participants? Un-women, incomplete, unnatural, infantilised, among other pejorative damaging descriptors, as discussed in earlier sections. Again, I know that *not all* people think this of VC women, yet this section touches on encounters in which the choice to not have children has been in one way or another stigmatised.

Concerning “tribal stigma”, on the other hand Goffman (1990) suggests that race, nation and religion can be sources of tribal stigma and have an intergenerational component. I play with this notion, because more than one participant has referred to family members that have also expressed interest in being childfree and in some cases have also decided to be childfree: Isadora’s sister, Lila’s sister, Neira’s niece, Irene’s brother and niece. For example, Irene’s father was an “illegitimate” child, born from a single woman residing in a small town in the south of Ecuador in the first half of the 20th century. When Irene’s grandmother was pregnant, her father (Irene’s great grandfather) took his daughter to live in a different town for her to be able to have

her baby. Albeit this is not a story about childlessness, but it is a story about challenging social conventions in a time where having an “illegitimate” child was not short of scandal, which I would argue installed within the family a spirit of rebellion and disregard for society’s judgement. It is not surprising that Irene’s father always insisted on freedom and responsibility, values that have also seemed to have been supported by the previous generations. In the case of Neira, although she was the first one to actively choose childlessness, I could argue that the trend started with her mother. Her mother was vocal about wanting a different life for her daughters, than the one she had. Neira’s niece seems to be continuing the trend. Within these “tribes” there are other narratives that circulate, such as “not all women must be mothers”, “biology does not determine destiny”, “bodily autonomy is not conditional”, and “fulfilment in life is not only achieved through parenthood”, among others.

To tackle stigmatisation of their VC identity, women resort to different narrative strategies, these differ from healing or repairing as these prevent damage, dismissal and discrimination. These narrative strategies can be likened to what Goffman (1990) proposed as means of information control to protect identities from stigmatisation. In the context of VC, passing is an example of such techniques. When asked about having children, Lila used to say:

“...no por el momento...”

...not for the time being... — Lila (line 73).

As Park (2002)—study mentioned in section 2.2. Voluntary Childlessness, part of the Literature Review chapter—brilliantly puts it, for women that are still in their fertile age or appear to still be in their fertile age, passing is an option that might protect them from an interaction in which their choice is at risk of being dismissed.

Another form of information control technique under the umbrella of passing is “identity substitution”, which is a term I borrow from Park (2002). Neira has resorted to this:

[...] Entonces a veces también, claro, para evitarme explicación de más, “ah, es que no he podido”. [Ríe suavemente]. Ya, eso también así.

[...] So, sometimes also, of course, to avoid further explanation, “ah, it's just that I haven’t been able to [have children]”. [Laughs softly]. Yeah, that too. —Neira (line 159).

The implication here is that she has not had the chance to have children, and the listener is left to fill in the gaps of the story —infertility? Lack of partner? Whatever they come up with is not of Neira's concern, and she has avoided having to justify and defend her choice. Neira's identity as a VC woman is momentarily substituted with that of someone who has or had the desire for children and could not fulfil it, potentially eliciting reactions aligned with pronatalism such as compassion or sadness, while simultaneously protecting her identity.

In a similar line to identity substitution, I also found the use of decoy stories. I am understanding decoy stories as a narrative resource used by my participants to protect themselves from the challenges and attacks to their childfreeness. For example, Neira has also used, "my partner does not want them". In this example, she is offering a story line that can potentially protect her from further questioning as it puts the decision-making power on someone else. In Neira's case, whose partner is a man, this is also a story line concordant with the ever-present sexism in Ecuador. By justifying it using her male partner, Neira is also positioning herself as a non-agent, dependent on someone else's desire. Not surprisingly, this seems to make people back off and stop questioning the childfreeness, which again, based on Neira's words, only confirms that in Ecuador the idea that women are dependent on men is still common, and this is also echoed in other participants' stories. For example, when stating her childfreeness, Lila has also received questions like "and what does your husband say about this?", as if the decision had to be approved by a male partner to be validated. While Neira is using a decoy storyline to avoid giving explanations, Lila expressed comfort in the idea that she can say "we've decided to be voluntarily childless", she felt it made it easier for her to be a "we" than an "I" when discussing or disclosing the decision. In Lila's case, her husband was the first proponent of childfreeness, and it is a decision that they have processed and embraced together as a couple. She was the only participant for whom the decision came about in this way, which is different from my other participants.

Other decoy storylines are "we will adopt" (Orisa) and justifying the decision with the help of an ecological argument (Tilda, Irene, Orisa). Although these participants truly care about the environment, they acknowledge that the decision to not have children came about independently from any ecological justification. Nonetheless, sometimes, when questioned

about their decision, they use the ecological argument to take the topic out of the personal realm and into a more general political-social arena. In any case, whether the resource is a decoy story or identity substitution, these are narrative strategies to protect themselves from attacks in which the attempt could be to portray them as unfit or immoral.

Earlier, in section 6.1., I described Tilda's approach to receiving questions and challenges about her choice. I refer to her strategy as "flipping the narrative", because she proposes asking back the same type of questions she receives— why did you have children? Why do you want to have children? Park (2002, 37) calls this "situational redefinition" describing it as a request, by the childfree individual to justify the "normative behaviour". Change can only take place when what is considered normative is questioned. Tilda wondered why, as a society, we believe it is appropriate to make small talk regarding fertility intentions or reproductive choices. Somehow, discussing these topics is normalised and relationship status and parenthood status are usually the first things to come up in a first-time encounter. I am not proposing our relationships with others are not important, but it can be argued that there is more to us than our partners or children.

This section has aimed to give an overview of some of the challenges faced by my participants when declaring or stating their status as childfree women. These challenges evidence the need for techniques of information control that are used to prevent stigmatisation of VC identities.

To close this chapter on identity, I feel it is important to note that one of the questions guiding my research was to explore VC as a counternarrative that would be translated into resisting master narratives. It is important to note that resisting does not necessarily translate into oppositional ways of thinking. Counterstories emerge as ways of repairing damaged caused by master narratives and make room for other stories and other ways of being. In my work I am coming from a post-oppositional view, which takes inspiration in Anzaldúa's work that aims to go beyond the binaries (Anzaldúa 2016; Keating 2016, 2013). I am not aiming to create a "childfree women vs mothers" narrative, but to transcend the idea that VC women must remain liminal. I have reviewed how VC women in Ecuador construct their narrative identities amidst a

pronatalist context through accessing their narrative agency. Accessing their narrative agency allows them to create healing counterstories about who they are and what they want in life. These counterstories are pieces and contributions to a broader counternarrative that then challenges pronatalism, which further down the line frees new generations of women from the constraints of gender expectations.

Chapter 7: Summary and Conclusions

In this chapter I will address how my research speaks to decolonial Latin American feminism, bodily autonomy, and discuss my findings in connection to some of the relevant Latin American literature available on the topic of voluntary childlessness. I will also discuss my research's implications for clinical practice. The chapter will close addressing the limitations of the study and lines for potential future research and a conclusion for the work.

7.1. Feminism and Voluntary Childlessness

My research aimed to look at how voluntarily childless women position themselves in a socio-cultural context that opposes their choice not to have children. I have approached the topic by emphasising on volition and self-identification. Throughout my work it has become clear that by openly stating their desire not to have children, these women are pushed to the boundaries of womanhood and become “liminal women”, a term I borrowed from Ávila González's (2005) work with voluntarily childless women in Mexico. After exploring VC with my participants, it is safe to say that womanhood is still conflated with motherhood in Ecuador, and elsewhere in the world. This is why in this work, I hoped, like many other authors and researchers, to challenge the idea that women = mothers, proposing women ≠ mothers, and that biology is not destiny.

In recent years, voluntary childlessness has become slightly less taboo, and it is being publicly discussed in mass media, as a few clicks on Google will confirm. Nonetheless, despite the copious amount of material and research, voluntarily childless women remain liminal. Ávila González (2005) aimed to locate the figure of the mother and ideal of motherhood as a “made-up” socio-cultural product dating from the XIX century. My research, similar to others, aimed to put out the idea that we do not *have to* become mothers unless we *want to*. While I agree with Ávila González (2005) on the part that it is a made-up socio-cultural product, in Latin America I like to trace it further back, to pre-colonial and colonial times.

In connection to pre-colonial times, community feminism (Cabnal 2010, 2012, 2019; Cabnal and Siderac 2019; Lissell 2020) has proposed the idea of an ancestral patriarchy that set the conditions for the installation of the western patriarchy that came in colonial times and

shaped ways of being a woman. In connection with this, Federici's (2004) argues that women's bodies were instrumental in the early phase of capitalism. In this era, women's bodies were profited from by being tasked with the literal production of the workforce and housework. Reproduction and housework were encouraged under the premise of it being our divine destiny and a labour of love. During the colonial period this was then imported to what is now Latin America, rooted in the figure of Mary and in Catholic values. Mary is the root of the mystification of motherhood, which has also set a standard impossible to achieve if in fact one chooses to become a mother. Therefore, when a woman decides not to have children, she is simultaneously challenging deeply rooted Catholic and religious values, capitalism's premise that women's bodies are not their own, the conception of family that structures society, and the "woman = mother" equivalence.

The challenge VC posits to the "woman=mother" equivalence is only possible through bodily autonomy. Bodily autonomy is proposed as the foundational right for gender equality (Kanem 2022), but in Ecuador, and other countries in Latin America it is not so much a right as it is a privilege. Therefore, it remains one of the main concerns of feminist activism in Latin America. VC women's choice and exercising of bodily autonomy pushes them to the boundaries because it means they have taken an active stance against a system that wants to impose motherhood as the default for women. Through their stories, my participants have recounted their journey to access bodily autonomy and being able to exercise it while making fertility decisions congruent to their desire. As discussed earlier, their desire went against scripts given to them early on in their lives. To do so, these women addressed the different messages they received from their environments while growing up and challenged these messages in different ways. Whether it was with the help of others (e.g., family members offering alternative options) or drawing from broader alternative narratives (e.g., feminism), this is what allowed them to choose VC for themselves.

Choosing VC, as evidenced in this thesis is not an easy path when submerged in a pronatalist context. One of the key "complications" faced by VC is the apparent impossibility of being defined without acknowledging a lack (*childfree*, *childless*). Lagarde (2005) suggests that this only evidences the centrality of motherhood for womanhood, and it is what makes her

propose the idea that all women, since the moment they are born, are *madresposas* (motherwives). I want to challenge this based on how my participants have navigated identity construction not from lack nor from motherhood as a reference point. My participants' way of approaching identity-construction echoes Escobar and Sanhueza (2018), and Chacón and Tapia's (2017) findings. These authors, worked with VC women in Chile and conclude that the idea of motherhood needs to be revised from a socio-historical understanding and highlight the way women without children challenge the mandate as opposed to proposing that they are defined in relation to it.

In the case of my participants, who all self-identified as VC, there was less of defining themselves with motherhood as a reference point, and more of a revision and re-signification of womanhood. My participants have named, negotiated, and enacted their childfreeness, and these resonate with stages identified by Moore (2014) when studying identity-construction practices in childfreeness. From the start I was interested in exploring the experiences of women who already defined their identities as VC and listening to their stories evidenced how the naming and negotiating of their identity came about. In relation to enacting, this is framed on the side of activism by Moore, but I frame it in much simpler terms. In my understanding, enacting is living life as an openly VC woman in a pronatalist environment, and to do so not from the idea of lack. In this line of thought, I align with Delgado Molina (2022), and her research on VC women's stories, who discusses the need to foster space for conversations within feminist spaces that do not define being a woman from a perspective of absence or of what is lacking (e.g., children or partners). My participants' stories echo Delgado Molina's (2022) take, as they mentioned how the position of *madresposa* is perpetuated by the lack of space for alternative modes of femininity. If we make space for VC, this will challenge the reference point that comes with the patriarchy, allowing space for different ways of being.

In this point I bring back the notion of coalitional identities posited by Lugones (2011) in the context of decoloniality. The narrative identity construction of VC, besides contributing to the creation of a counternarrative, as I discussed in previous chapters, also translates into a coalitional identity. During my research, even though I did not connect my participants with each other, our encounters created a sense of communality. Communality is the alternative to

coloniality (Lugones 2011, 2003, 2010; Cabnal and Siderac 2019; Cabnal 2012; Lissell 2020), and it is how subalternised groups resist oppressive mandates. During the interviews, my participants knew that besides being interested in VC, I was also speaking with a broader community of VC women. This fact alone connected them to the notion of an already-existing community of women that challenge the motherhood mandate while navigating a pronatalist society. This coalitional identity aspect is also related to reclaiming women's bodies because by being VC, women are stating that their bodies are their prerogative.

Aligned with resisting oppression, my findings echo Mandujano Salazar's (2019, 2021) which posit that social imperatives and dominant discourses that continue to put parenthood as the definitory stage for male and female adulthood, can have a negative impact in the identity construction processes of individuals that opt for childlessness. Consequently, the decision to be VC arises as a point of tension that can lead to stigmatisation and social pressure. I have addressed this in my findings by discussing the construction of narrative identity and narrative repair, and by analysing the challenges faced by my participants, more on this in the following section where I discuss implications for practice.

In the work with my participants, it became evident that bodily autonomy and choosing childfreeness is a privilege. This also resonates with the work of Linares Bravo, Nazar Beutelspacher, and Zapata Martelo (2019) who studied non-maternity in indigenous women in Chiapas, Mexico. In their study, they found that in the specific socio-cultural context, there was an imperative of motherhood that cannot be split from marriage. The lack of children and marriage is seen in a negative light, unless these choices conform to gender expectations (e.g., an unmarried childless woman must remain celibate and also devote herself to caring roles). This aligns with Lagarde's (2005) proposal of motherwives. To challenge this, their participants chose non-maternity motivated by the desire to remain single and independent (i.e., escape women's captivities by resigning to motherhood), which differs from my participants who chose solely based on their desire not to have children. This allows me to also discuss resources and privilege. The authors of the Chiapas study concluded that accessing financial resources opens up the possibility for choice, and it is through choice that the women ensure their freedom.

In contrast, my participants' freedom and access to choice was not constrained in the same way. Although they did have access to financial resources, I theorise that beyond these resources it was access to narrative resources that allowed them to construct a shelter from the motherhood mandate. My study reveals different ways in which women can access or generate narrative resources, for example by drawing from broader narratives or from stories within their family of origin. This demonstrates intersecting dimensions of privilege. Therefore, this dissertation provides stories of women who have successfully resisted the mandate due to their own desire and to demographic and economic factors which allowed them access to alternative scripts. Consequently, this brings up the need for resources to the forefront of research into VC. Whether psychological, narrative, or economic, it is with access to resources that women are made aware of their options. Through my participants' stories, it became clear that motherhood is, in fact, *not* the only option or their destiny as women.

Gómez and Tena (2018) posit the need for the construction of positive narratives about voluntary childlessness, because this would contribute to shift the way these women are perceived in society away from a perspective of lacking something or opposing motherhood. This aligns with what one of my participants highlighted: that the topic of voluntary childlessness is not yet attended to even within feminist contexts, because it is perceived as taking away from the allegedly more pressing issues experienced by mothers. For this, I return to post-oppositional thinking.

A post-oppositional thought transcends frameworks that generate us vs. them dynamics (Keating 2013, 2016). On one hand, VC women are requesting to be seen and given space, rather than pitted against mothers and motherhood. Nonetheless, the patriarchal and capitalist logic that holds the motherhood mandate as ideal and aspirational is underpinned by oppositional frameworks that keep relegating voluntarily childless women to the sidelines. To move beyond oppositional thinking, my work has aimed to braid together counternarratives and decolonial feminism by looking at how women manage to live lives without motherhood.

7.2. Implications for Counselling and Psychotherapy—Narrative Repair

There are several implications and considerations for psychotherapeutic practice that can be derived from my research. The implications discussed here are connected to Birch and Miller's (2000) understanding of the interview as a therapeutic opportunity. My research speaks into narrative identity, narrative agency, narrative repair, positionality, and relationality. All of these are important for psychotherapy, and I will discuss them here, in my voice as a psychotherapy and counselling practitioner. Despite the potential overlap, it is important to mention that I am not speaking and discussing these implications from the theoretical framework of narrative therapy (Epston 2014; White 2007; Payne 2006), but from my own experience as a therapist who works in the dialogue between person-centred and psychodynamic therapies, and how my research has had a positive effect in my clinical practice.

The aim of this research was never to generalise the experience of VC women or propose a therapeutic intervention but to voice the experiences of a group of women frequently stigmatised in Ecuador. Consequently, the main therapeutic implication for counselling and psychotherapy practice that I derive from my research is to challenge pronatalism. Firstly, by bringing awareness as to how it operates, how it affects people, and what are the devices that uphold it as a master narrative. A second implication is providing yet another example of the need for and importance of an intersectional approach when working with people's experiences. Beyond my participants' volition not to have children, there is a socio-cultural-political dimension that I have addressed throughout this thesis, and I believe should be addressed in the psychotherapeutic space, regardless of the theoretical orientation that underpins one's practice. Not addressing this dimension de-contextualises a client and can be damaging and isolating as everybody, including therapists, exists within a social group. This brings me to my third implication concerning relationality: how I understood it before this research and how I understand it now. My participants' stories showed the different relational challenges they experienced and how they overcame them by addressing the master narratives and their effects. This can be translated to therapy. As a therapist, my job is to facilitate the client's growth. Yet, I also have to be aware and mindful of how my and my client's socio-

cultural-political dimension manifests in the room. It is naïve to think it is absent when relating to a client.

Another consideration for counselling is how, to a certain extent, presenting problems in the therapy room are often related to identity. Presenting problems tend to be connected to questions such as “who am I and where am I positioning myself in a society that demands XYZ things from me? And in a society where I, inevitably, have to relate to others?” My participants have answered these questions by articulating an identity as VC women while refusing to comply with the demands of the motherhood mandate and have done so despite stigmatisation derived from master narratives deeply ingrained in Ecuadorian society. I have strived to present their processes here to contribute to the broader understanding of VC in Ecuador and to highlight the importance of concepts such as narrative identity and narrative agency and their usefulness in understanding people and their choices. Following Birch and Miller’s (2000) proposal, qualitative in-depth interviews overlap with therapeutic acts in the sense that in both settings, identity gets discussed.

In close connection to narrative identity and agency, I also found narrative repair, which is a notion I borrow from Hilde Lindemann Nelson’s (2001) work on how narratives can be used to repair identities that have been damaged by master narratives. My participants’ stories are excellent examples of the narrative repair that Nelson proposes. Narrative repair is evidenced through their accounts of their experience. Most of them have faced instances in which the master narrative of the motherhood mandate has been thrown upon them in the form of subtle acts of exclusion, generalisations, dismissal and criticism of their choice not to have children. None of my participants feels ‘un-womanly’ or ‘incomplete’, which are words that pronatalism uses to describe women who challenge and resist the motherhood mandate. Their life stories are woven in ways in which they not only resist master narratives but also repair the damage caused by pronatalism. They create counterstories that add to the counternarrative proposing women ≠ mothers.

The element of repair is important because the way damaged identities are repaired varies. In the case of my participants, the repair was done throughout their lives by accessing

stories and narratives that had the potential to be healing, whether it was in one-to-one settings (e.g., a family member's story) or more broadly (e.g., feminism). Although none of them mentioned therapy, narrative repair can still take place in an interview context similarly to the way it happens in therapy (Birch and Miller 2000). As a therapist, the key to good practice is to listen to the story, because it is in the story that I can understand how the client is positioned in relation to master narratives and what is their sense of agency. This means that therapeutic work needs to pay attention to what is being said about the master narratives (e.g., is it experienced as a mandate? Is it being criticised? Is it experienced as oppressive? etc.) and what it is that the client wants. To listen to stories means understanding positionality. I understand positionality with the help of narrative positioning and its different levels: within the story, towards the audience, and to ourselves (Bamberg 1997). In interview contexts as well as in therapy, positionality concerns both people in the dyad, because both settings are a dialogical/relational encounter. I would argue even more so the therapist due to the power imbalance in the therapeutic dyad (see Proctor 2017 for a discussion on power in the therapeutic space).

I will articulate Bamberg's (1997) levels with what I have learned from my participants' stories and how it has influenced my therapeutic practice. During the encounters with my participants, I noticed how positioning changes throughout the storytelling act. Firstly, there was positioning within the story, and at this level, protagonists and antagonists could be identified. The second level is how the storyteller positions themselves in relation to their audience. In this level, VC was no longer something that had to be protected or disguised but something to share with an other because the listener, me, was a researcher, curious and supportive of VC. Consequently, the setting invite intimacy and disclosure. Lastly, is the third level in which the narrator positions themselves to themselves. Bamberg (1997) proposes that at this level the question "who am I?" gets answered and caveats it by saying that the answer does not necessarily translate to other contexts. I want to articulate this level with the principle of unfinalisability (Bakhtin 1984). My participants answered the question of who they are in relation to being VC and their narrative identity, but this is an answer that emerged in our specific encounter, and it is susceptible of changing in the future. Unfinalisability is necessary for

change to happen, which is also one of the “goals” of the therapeutic space. Now, as a therapist, I pay careful attention to positionality within stories brought to the therapeutic space, as it allows me to identify how a client relates to themselves, to me, to others in their life, and to broader master narratives. Attending to all these levels is what will allow repair to take place.

Positioning in relation to master narratives always has an effect. In the case of my participants, despite the fact that they had embraced being VC, the negative toll of pronatalism did bring discomfort and upset as the normative frame of motherhood is still firmly installed in Ecuador’s society. Yet, being able to discuss it openly, with a fellow Ecuadorian supportive of VC made the experience positive and several participants stated they had never thought of their VC with as much depth as they did when we met for the interview. If I translate this into the therapeutic context, it means that my task as a therapist is to have a reflective stance and clear position in relation to master narratives in order to be able to address them and identify how they are woven into the stories that are brought into the session. If I do not do this, the potential negative toll of master narratives might not be discussed and I could be, inadvertently, perpetuating the stigmatisation of already marginalised identities.

An example of this is the work with my Scottish client, whom I discussed at the beginning of this thesis. With her, we inadvertently engaged in a very slow process of narrative repair, which is something that I can only identify now, with the experience and knowledge gained from this project. I would have addressed master narratives and damaged identities much earlier in the process if I had been familiar with the concepts.

Overall, this research has influenced my clinical practice because it has brought a new dimension to my therapeutic work. My training as a psychotherapist lacked acknowledgement of how the socio-cultural context and broader social systems were present in the room. This was mostly due to the emphasis the training placed on non-directivity, inner world, and a “here and now” focus. Although I still class myself as a non-directive therapist, I now name and bring into the room broader social narratives and systems that are at play such as capitalism, religion, culture, pronatalism, etc. I trust in my ability to bring these elements into the room as offerings and resources and that they will not be experienced by my clients as impinging on the work.

7.3. Limitations, Future Research, and Conclusions

My study has several limitations. In the recruitment process I paid careful attention to the survey forms, asking for education levels and income brackets, location within Ecuador, and experience of living abroad. Despite this, I did not fully address these elements in my findings or my discussion. Although there were some mentions to regional differences and income-related realities, these elements were not as prominent in the stories, and did not warrant an in-depth discussion. Nonetheless, addressing these differences is a potential area for future research.

Another limitation comes from my decision to recruit participants through social media and to conduct online interviews. Although this was advantageous in terms of costs and time, as well as a solution to the travel restrictions active at the time of the interviews due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it does mean I excluded potential participants that have no internet access, limiting myself to a population that is already privileged to a certain degree. Consequently, future research on VC could focus on groups that have been neglected by research in the past such as: marginalised populations, people who live in rural areas with no internet access or social media use, and older populations.

During recruitment, I did not ask potential participants for their gender and sexual orientation. On the one hand this was justified due to my interest in doing an exploratory study on voluntary childlessness and not wanting to focus on any specific group. Nonetheless, by not asking for that information I missed an opportunity to include non-heterosexual and non-cisgender participants. Aside from one participant that referred to an earlier same-sex relationship, all the participants were either currently partnered with men or expressed being sexually and romantically interested in men. Therefore, future research could address the experience of voluntary childlessness in queer populations, as the research with this population is still limited (e.g., Delgado Molina 2022 included lesbian women in her study; Clarke et al. 2018 studied the experience of childfree lesbian women in the UK).

In the line of gender, by design, the study did not include men. Although this is not a limitation per se, as the desired focus was women, the experience of voluntarily childless men is worth exploring as there is less research available on the topic, and, except for a few studies

(Mandujano-Salazar 2019, 2021; Perez 2021) it is notably limited in the Latin American context. Researching VC in men will open new lines of inquiry that will surely contribute to the conversation around gender mandates. Future research can look at the topic from the position of challenging binary conceptions of gender by investigating a parenthood mandate, rather than a motherhood mandate.

Considering that childlessness has increased in Ecuador from 5% circa 1980, to 10% circa 2010 (Binstock 2021), directions for future research could be a mixed method study in which the experience and stories of VC people are analysed and presented alongside quantitative data. This type of study could potentially elucidate VC in Ecuador and paint a much more complete landscape that would speak into social transformation. My recruitment process, which initially received 400 replies in less than 24 hours, signalled the potential to look at VC also from a quantitative angle. Overall, considering that research on VC in Latin America is flourishing in later times, there are several lines of inquiry ready to be tapped.

Conclusions

I want to conclude this work by acknowledging the journey it has been. At certain points the stories seemed to convey that women will always face criticism regardless of their fertility decisions. In general, women seemed to be at fault simply for being women. But, if anything, my participants' stories speak about not wanting to mother and not having children and how it was to make such a decision while submerged in an aggressively pronatalist context and to come out of it stronger and confident. Their stories are about bodily autonomy and resistance. At the core of this dissertation there was a desire to showcase how voluntarily childless women contribute with their experience and stories to the creation of a counternarrative that proposes women ≠ mothers. This counternarrative supports the endeavours of feminist activism, which in the end just wants to be inclusive of all women.

Voluntarily childless women in Ecuador challenge gender expectations and gender stereotypes by stepping away from the motherhood mandate. They are perceived as a threat to the status quo because they move away from the idea that women's bodies are destined to procreate. This is something evidenced from the stories I have presented, but besides being

consistent with research on the topic, it was not the sole purpose of this dissertation. I aimed to highlight the narratives of my participants, narratives that have shown that the existence of voluntarily childless women presents a direct affront to capitalism and the patriarchy, systems where all societies are rooted, albeit to different degrees. If women do not have children, if women do not want to mother, who will do it? When a woman decides not to have children and defies the mandate, she is rejecting being tasked with unwaged child-rearing labour and is embodying the feminist promise of freedom and agency.

Currently in Latin America, feminist activism is fighting for bodily autonomy and reproductive rights, aiming for it to be rights and not privileges. This fight is currently fuelled in great measure by decoloniality and intersectionality, which are relatively new lenses that have allowed subaltern women to challenge hegemonic feminisms that have become allied with and in service to capitalism and the patriarchy. As a researcher I adopted a decolonial lens in relation to the process and the data that made it possible for me to analyse the master narratives understanding their relationship with coloniality. Even though some of my findings can also speak into the reality of women not only in the Global South but also in the Global North, by engaging with decolonial theories and Latin American feminisms I have strived to contribute to the research in the region in a way that aims not to replicate or perpetuate hegemonic power dynamics.

Time and time again, pronatalism aims to convince us that motherhood comes naturally to women, but I believe it is safe to say it does not. Becoming a mother (or not) should be about desire and not about social expectations. My participants have put the accent on desire and the voluntary element in relation to childlessness. Women are not captives of motherhood and can choose something else. The more research that is done on the topic, the less womanhood will be conflated with motherhood.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Systematic Search Strategy

Search performed 2 nd of May 2023		
Search Terms	Number of Results: University of Edinburgh's DiscoverEd	Number of Results: Scholar Google
"childlessness" OR "childfree" OR "child free" OR "voluntary childlessness"	9,203	77,400
"childlessness" OR "childfree" OR "child free" OR "voluntary childlessness" AND "south america" OR "Latin America" OR "Ecuador"	98	6,340
"childlessness" OR "childfree" OR "child free" OR "voluntary childlessness" AND "Argentin*" OR "Bolivia*" OR "Chile*" OR "Costa Rica" OR "Costarricen*" OR "Cuba*" OR "Dominican*" OR "Ecuador*" OR "Ecuador*" OR "Salvador*" OR "Guatemala*" OR "Hondur*" OR "Mexic*" OR "Nicaragua*" OR "Panam*" OR "Paraguay*" OR "Peru*" or "Puerto Ric*" OR "Puertorrique*" OR "Uruguay*" OR "Venezue*" OR "Venezola*" OR "Central	124	55

America*" OR "South America*" OR "Sudamerica*" OR "Latin*" OR "Carib*" OR "Hispan*"		
"No maternidad" And "Argentin*" OR "Bolivia*" OR "Chile*" OR "Costa Rica" OR "Costarricen*" OR "Cuba*" OR "Dominican*" OR "Ecuador*" OR "Ecuador*" OR "Salvador*" OR "Guatemala*" OR "Hondur*" OR "Mexic*" OR "Nicaragua*" OR "Panam*" OR "Paraguay*" OR "Peru*" or "Puerto Ric*" OR "Puertorrique*" OR "Uruguay*" OR "Venezue*" OR "Venezola*" OR "Central America*" OR "South America*" OR "Sudamerica*" OR "Latin*" OR "Carib*" OR "Hispan*"	12	378

Appendix 2: Recruitment Poster:



Facebook Post Text

Posted 14th of December 2021 at 13h50
(GMT)

¡Hola a todas!

*¡Soy una mujer ecuatoriana, estudiante de la
Universidad de Edimburgo y estoy buscando
participantes para mi proyecto de
investigación sobre la no-maternidad
voluntaria en el Ecuador!
La No-Maternidad Voluntaria en el Ecuador*

**Se necesitan participantes para
investigación**

*¿Te identificas como una mujer que no
quiere tener hijos?*

English Translation:

Hello everybody!

I am an Ecuadorian woman, a student at the
University of Edinburgh and I am looking for
participants for my research project on
voluntary non-maternity in Ecuador!

Voluntary Non-Maternity in Ecuador

Research participants needed

Do you identify as a woman who does not
want children?

Are you Ecuadorian and reside in Ecuador?

¿Eres ecuatoriana y resides en Ecuador?

Would you like to participate in a qualitative study on voluntary non-maternity in Ecuador?

¿Te gustaría participar en un estudio cualitativo sobre la no-maternidad voluntaria en Ecuador?

Express your interest by scanning the QR code in the image or click the link here:
<https://forms.office.com/r/7Yp1wC7HPe>

Expresa tu interés escaneando el código QR en la imagen o dale clic al link aquí:
<https://forms.office.com/r/7Yp1wC7HPe>

Addition to Facebook post after form closed:

Posted 15th of December 2021:

English Translation:

Update 15/December/2021:

Update 15/Diciembre/2021:

Después de 24 horas, el formulario ha cerrado.

After 24 hours, the form has closed.

¡Muchas gracias por esta gran acogida!

Thank you very much for this great welcome!

¡Muchas gracias a todas las personas que se han registrado!

Thank you very much to all the people who have registered!

He tenido un número increíble de respuestas y me siento muy sobrecogida y agradecida con esta comunidad de mujeres que se identifican con la no-maternidad voluntaria y están interesadas en participar.

I have had an incredible number of responses and I am so overwhelmed and grateful to this community of women who identify with voluntary non-motherhood and are interested in getting involved.

¡Gracias infinitas por las expresiones de interés!

Infinite thanks for the expressions of interest! I will contact everyone who has registered for more information about participating in my research and give you more details!

Me comunicaré con todas las que se han registrado para mayor información sobre participar en mi investigación y darles más detalles!

<3

<3

Appendix 3: Participant Information Sheet (PIS) [Spanish]

La no-maternidad voluntaria en el Ecuador: un abordaje narrativo

HOJA DE INFORMACIÓN AL PARTICIPANTE

Está invitada a participar en una investigación sobre la no-maternidad voluntaria en Ecuador. Yo, Natalia Cisneros Buitrón, estudiante de posgrado de la Universidad de Edimburgo conduzco esta investigación. Antes de que decida participar, es importante que comprenda por qué se lleva a cabo la investigación y en qué consistirá. Por favor tómese el tiempo para leer cuidadosamente la siguiente información.

¿CUÁL ES EL PROPÓSITO DEL ESTUDIO?

El propósito del estudio es explorar cómo las mujeres que se suscriben a la no-maternidad voluntaria en Ecuador estructuran su identidad. El estudio tiene como objetivo explorar cómo las mujeres eligen la no-maternidad voluntaria y cómo la elección podría tener un efecto en cómo las mujeres piensan y se entienden a sí mismas en su contexto sociocultural. La exploración se realizará pidiendo a las participantes que me cuenten su historia sobre ser una mujer que no quiere tener hijos en Ecuador.

¿POR QUÉ ME INVITARON A PARTICIPAR?

Está invitada a participar en este estudio porque expresó interés en la investigación cuando la investigación se anunció en las plataformas de redes sociales.

¿TENGO QUE PARTICIPAR?

No, depende totalmente de usted. Su participación en todo momento es voluntaria y puede retirarse en cualquier momento y puede retirarse sin dar una razón. El estudio tiene tres fases de reclutamiento de participantes

- **Primera fase (fase concluida el 15/12/2021):** expresión de interés vía redes sociales.
- **Segunda fase (fase concluida el 22/01/2022):** selección de participantes vía cuestionario online. Si es que usted está interesada en participar, por favor llene el cuestionario accesible vía el link que se le ha enviado por email. La información proporcionada en el cuestionario permitirá seleccionar a una muestra representativa del Ecuador.
- **Tercera fase (fase actual):** diez (10) participantes serán seleccionadas para ser entrevistadas. Las participantes serán seleccionadas utilizando la información provista en la fase dos, con miras a seleccionar una muestra lo más diversa posible.

Si usted es seleccionada para la fase de entrevista, yo, la entrevistadora, me contactaré con usted para coordinar la entrevista y le solicitaré llenar un formulario de consentimiento informado para demostrar que comprende sus derechos en relación con la investigación y que está feliz de participar. Recuerde que usted puede retirarse en

cualquier momento y sin dar una razón. Si es que usted es una de las participantes entrevistadas y desea retirarse del estudio en una fecha posterior, anote su número de participante (que usted encontrará en el Formulario de consentimiento) y proporciónelo a mí, Natalia Cisneros Buitrón, La decisión de no participar o retirarse del estudio no le afectará de ninguna manera (por ejemplo, atención médica, empleo, etc.)

¿QUÉ PASARÁ SI DECIDO PARTICIPAR?

Si es que usted es seleccionada para la entrevista y decide participar, se le harán algunas preguntas sobre su decisión de no tener hijos y su experiencia de vivir en Ecuador como una mujer que se identifica con la no-maternidad voluntaria. La entrevista se llevará a cabo *online*, utilizando la plataforma Microsoft Teams. La entrevista se llevará a cabo en un momento que sea conveniente para usted y se le solicita tener acceso a un ambiente seguro que garantice la confidencialidad. Dado que la entrevista es en línea, yo como investigadora solo puedo garantizar la confidencialidad en mi lado de la llamada en línea, por lo que usted será responsable de participar en la entrevista desde una ubicación que usted considere segura, confortable y pueda hablar libremente. Idealmente, me gustaría grabar sus respuestas, Microsoft Teams ofrece la oportunidad de grabar (video y audio) (y necesitaré su consentimiento para esto), por lo que la ubicación deberá ser en un área tranquila. La entrevista tomará alrededor de 1 a 3 horas para completarse.

Una vez finalizada la entrevista, los archivos de audio y video se almacenarán en una ubicación segura en la nube proporcionada por la Universidad de Edimburgo para salvaguardar su privacidad. Una vez finalizada la recogida de datos, la entrevista se transcribirá y anonimizará. Una vez que se complete este proceso, le enviaré una copia de la transcripción de su entrevista para su revisión y enmiendas. Tendrá la oportunidad de revisar la transcripción y comentar cualquier cambio o enmienda que desee hacer, estos cambios o enmiendas son en términos de contenido, no de formato (la transcripción se hará literalmente, es decir, palabra por palabra). A partir de la fecha de envío de la transcripción de la entrevista, tendrá 3 semanas (21 días naturales) para modificar o comentar el contexto si así lo desea. Esto no es obligatorio. Si, después de los 21 días, no he recibido noticias tuyas, el análisis de datos procederá bajo la suposición de que está satisfecha con la forma en que la transcripción refleja el proceso de la entrevista.

¿CUÁLES SON LOS POSIBLES BENEFICIOS DE PARTICIPAR?

Al compartir sus experiencias, me estará ayudando a mí, Natalia Cisneros Buitrón, a comprender mejor la no-maternidad voluntaria en el Ecuador, y contribuirá a ampliar la escasa investigación y limitado conocimiento existentes sobre el tema en los países de América Latina.

¿HAY ALGÚN RIESGO ASOCIADO CON LA PARTICIPACIÓN?

No existen riesgos significativos asociados con la participación en esta investigación. Sin embargo, tenga en cuenta que, aunque hablar acerca de ser una mujer que se identifica con la

no-maternidad voluntaria puede ser una experiencia que empodera y enriquece, también puede traer recuerdos emocionales o traer a la memoria vivencias que pueden ser dolorosas o incluso traumáticas. Si este es el caso, yo, Natalia Cisneros, podría sugerir una lista de recursos de manejo de crisis o recursos de apoyo.

Dado que las entrevistas serán en línea, no existen riesgos relacionados con el COVID-19. No obstante, independientemente de que la entrevista sea *online*, recuerde que si no se encuentra bien (física o mentalmente) antes de la entrevista programada puede comunicarse conmigo, la investigadora, Natalia Cisneros Buitrón, por correo electrónico a _____ y pospondremos o cancelaremos la entrevista.

¿Y SI QUIERO RETIRARME DEL ESTUDIO?

Aceptar participar en este proyecto no la obliga a permanecer en el estudio ni tiene ninguna otra obligación con respecto a este estudio. Si en algún momento ya no desea ser parte del estudio, por favor infórmeme a mí, la investigadora, Natalia Cisneros Buitrón (_____). Debe tener en cuenta que sus datos pueden usarse en la producción de resultados de investigación formales (por ejemplo, artículos de revistas, documentos de conferencias, tesis e informes) antes de su retiro, por lo que se le recomienda que se comunique con la investigadora lo antes posible si desea retirarse del estudio. A pedido específico, destruiré todas sus respuestas identificables, pero tendré que mantener registros de su participación consentida.

PROTECCIÓN DE DATOS Y CONFIDENCIALIDAD

Sus datos serán tratados de acuerdo con la Ley de Protección de Datos del Reino Unido. Toda la información recopilada sobre usted se mantendrá estrictamente confidencial. Todos los datos sin procesar se almacenarán en una ubicación segura en la nube y, una vez transcritos, se anonimizarán y seudonimizarán. Si acepta que se grabe el audio, todas las grabaciones se destruirán una vez transcritas. Si acepta que se grabe un video, el video se almacenará en la ubicación segura de la nube en todo momento y se destruirá una vez que finalice el análisis. Sus datos e información sin procesar solo serán vistos por mí, la investigadora, y sus datos anónimos serán vistos por mí y el supervisor de la investigación. Todos los datos electrónicos se almacenarán en un archivo de computadora protegido con contraseña.

TRANSFERENCIAS INTERNACIONALES DE DATOS

Sus datos se recopilarán en Ecuador, pero se almacenarán en un servidor en la nube seguro proporcionado por la Universidad de Edimburgo, tan pronto como sea posible después de la recopilación de datos.

¿QUÉ PASARÁ CON LOS RESULTADOS DE ESTE ESTUDIO?

Los resultados de este estudio pueden resumirse en artículos publicados, informes y presentaciones. Las citas o hallazgos clave siempre serán anónimos en cualquier tipo de

publicación, reporte, o documento académico. El anonimato siempre se mantendrá a menos de que tenga su permiso previo y explícito por escrito para atribuírselos a su nombre. La información también puede conservarse para futuras investigaciones.

Una vez que finalice la investigación, le enviaré un resumen de los resultados.

¿A QUIÉN PUEDO CONTACTAR?

Si tiene más preguntas sobre el estudio, comuníquese conmigo, la investigadora: Natalia Cisneros Buitrón, dirección de correo electrónico:

Si desea presentar una queja sobre el estudio, comuníquese con:

- Matthias Schwannauer, dirección de correo electrónico: headofschool.health@ed.ac.uk
En su comunicación, proporcione el título del estudio y detalle la naturaleza de su queja.

Puede obtener este documento en formato accesible: audio, en letra grande u en otro formato si lo necesita.

Para obtener información general sobre cómo usamos sus datos, visite: [Privacy notice for research participants \(continued\)](#)

Appendix 4: Participant Information Sheet (PIS) [English]

Voluntary Childlessness in Ecuador: A narrative approach

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

You are being invited to take part in research on Voluntary Childlessness (VC). Natalia Cisneros Buitron, postgraduate student at the University of Edinburgh is leading this research. Before you decide to take part it is important you understand why the research is being conducted and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?

The purpose of the study is to explore how voluntary childless women in Ecuador structure their identity. The study aims to explore how women choose VC and how the choice might have an effect on how women think and understand themselves in their socio-cultural context. The exploration will be done by asking the participants to tell me their story about being a voluntarily childless woman in Ecuador.

WHY HAVE I BEEN INVITED TO TAKE PART?

You are invited to participate in this study because you have expressed interest in the research when it was advertised on social media platforms.

DO I HAVE TO TAKE PART?

No – it is entirely up to you. If you do decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. The study has a 3-phase participant recruitment process:

- **First phase (phase concluded on 12/15/2021):** expression of interest via social networks.
- **Second phase (phase concluded on 01/22/2022):** selection of participants via online questionnaire. If you are interested in participating, please fill out the questionnaire accessible via the link that has been sent to you by email. The information provided in the questionnaire will allow the selection of a representative sample of Ecuador.
- **Third phase (current phase):** ten (10) participants will be selected to be interviewed. Participants will be selected using the information provided in phase two, with a view to selecting as diverse a sample as possible.

If you are selected for the interview phase, I, the interviewer, will contact you to arrange the interview and ask you to complete an informed consent form to demonstrate that you understand your rights in relation to the research and that you are happy to participate. Remember that you can withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. If you are one of the interviewed participants and wish to withdraw from the study at a later date, write down your participant number (which you will find on the Consent Form) and provide it to me, Natalia Cisneros Buitrón, The decision not to participate or withdrawing from the study will not affect you in any way (for example, medical care, employment, etc.)

WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF I DECIDE TO TAKE PART?

If you are selected for the interview and decide to participate, you will be asked some questions about your decision not to have children and your experience of living in Ecuador as a woman who identifies with voluntary non-maternity. The interview will take place online, using the Microsoft Teams platform. The interview will take place at a time convenient for you and you are required to have access to a secure environment that ensures confidentiality. Since the interview is online, I as a researcher can only guarantee confidentiality on my side of the online call, so you will be responsible for participating in the interview from a location that you feel is safe, comfortable, and able to speak freely. Ideally, I would like to record your responses, Microsoft Teams offers the opportunity to record (video and audio) (and I will need your consent for this), so the location should be in a quiet area. The interview will take about 1-3 hours to complete.

After the interview is complete, the audio and video files will be stored in a secure cloud location provided by the University of Edinburgh to safeguard your privacy. Once the data collection is finished, the interview will be transcribed and anonymized. Once this process is complete, I will send you a copy of your interview transcript for your review and amendments. You will have the opportunity to review the transcript and comment on any changes or amendments you wish to make, these changes or amendments are in terms of content, not format (the transcript will be done verbatim, ie word for word). From the date the interview transcript is sent, you will have 3 weeks (21 calendar days) to modify or comment on the context if you wish. This is not required. If, after 21 days, I have not heard from you, the data analysis will proceed on the assumption that you are satisfied with the way the transcript reflects the interview process.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE BENEFITS OF TAKING PART?

By sharing your experiences, you will be helping me, Natalia Cisneros Buitron, to better understand voluntary childlessness in Ecuador, and you will contribute to enlarge the scarce amount of existing research on the topic in Latin American countries.

ARE THERE ANY RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH TAKING PART?

There are no significant risks associated with participation in this research. However, please be aware that, although talking about being a voluntary childless woman can be an enriching and empowering experience, it can also bring up emotional memories. If this maybe the case, I, Natalia Cisneros, might suggest a list of crisis resource management or counselling resources.

Since the interviews will be online, there are no risks related to COVID-19. However, regardless of whether the interview is online, please remember that if you are unwell (physically or mentally) before the scheduled interview you can contact me, the researcher, Natalia Cisneros Buitrón, by email at _____ and we will postpone or cancel the interview.

WHAT IF I WANT TO WITHDRAW FROM THE STUDY?

Agreeing to participate in this project does not oblige you to remain in the study nor have any further obligation to this study. If, at any stage, you no longer want to be part of the study, please inform me, the researcher, Natalia Cisneros Buitron (_____). You should note that your data may be used in the production of formal research outputs (e.g. journal articles, conference papers, theses and reports) prior to your withdrawal and so you are advised to contact

the researcher at the earliest opportunity should you wish to withdraw from the study. On specific request I will destroy all your identifiable answers, but I will need to maintain records of your consenting participation.

DATA PROTECTION AND CONFIDENTIALITY

Your data will be processed in accordance with Data Protection Law in the United Kingdom. All information collected about you will be kept strictly confidential. All the raw data will be stored in a secure cloud location, and once it is transcribed, it will be anonymised and pseudonymised. If you consent to being audio recorded, all recordings will be destroyed once they have been transcribed. If you consent to be video recorded, the video will be stored in the secure cloud location at all times, and will be destroyed once the analysis is finalised. Your raw data will only be viewed by me, the researcher, and your anonymised data will be viewed by me and the research supervisor. All electronic data will be stored on a password-protected computer file.

INTERNATIONAL DATA TRANSFERS

Your data will be collected in Ecuador but will be stored in a secure cloud server provided by Edinburgh University, as soon as possible after the data collection.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN WITH THE RESULTS OF THIS STUDY?

The results of this study may be summarised in published articles, reports and presentations. Quotes or key findings will always be made anonymous in any formal outputs unless I have your prior and explicit written permission to attribute them to you by name. Information may also be kept for future research.

Once the research finalises, I will send you a summary of the findings.

WHO CAN I CONTACT?

If you have any further questions about the study, please contact me, the lead researcher, Natalia Cisneros Buitron, email address:

If you wish to make a complaint about the study, please contact:

- Matthias Schwannauer, email address: headofschool.health@ed.ac.uk

In your communication, please provide the study title and detail the nature of your complaint.

You can get this document on tape, or large print and various computer formats if you ask us.

For general information about how we use your data go to: [Privacy notice for research participants \(continued\)](#)

Appendix 5: Consent Form (Spanish)

FORMULARIO DE CONSENTIMIENTO INFORMADO DEL PARTICIPANTE

Título del estudio: La no-maternidad voluntaria en el Ecuador: un abordaje narrativo

Por favor
coloque
sus iniciales

1. Confirmando que he leído y comprendido la Hoja de información al participante del estudio mencionado anteriormente.
2. Se me ha dado la oportunidad de considerar la información proporcionada, hacer preguntas y se me han respondido todas estas preguntas satisfactoriamente.
3. Entiendo que mi participación es voluntaria y que puedo solicitar retirarme en cualquier momento sin dar una razón y sin que mi atención médica o mis derechos legales se vean afectados.
4. Doy mi consentimiento para ser grabada en audio.
5. Doy mi consentimiento para ser grabada en video.
6. Entiendo que mis datos anonimizados se almacenarán durante un mínimo de 5 años y pueden usarse en futuras investigaciones aprobadas éticamente.
7. Acepto participar en este estudio.

Nombre de la persona que da el consentimiento	Fecha	Firma
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	___/___2022	
Nombre de la persona que toma el consentimiento	Fecha	Firma
Natalia Alexandra Cisneros Buitrón	___/___ 2022	

Número de participante: XX

Appendix 6: Consent Form (English)

PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Study Title: Voluntary non-maternity in Ecuador: a narrative approach

Please initial
box

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the Study Participant Information Sheet mentioned above.
2. I have been given the opportunity to consider the information provided, to ask questions, and all of these questions have been answered to my satisfaction.
3. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may request to withdraw at any time without giving a reason and without affecting my health care or legal rights.
4. I consent to be voice recorded.
5. I consent to be video recorded.
6. I understand that my anonymised data will be stored for a minimum of 5 years and may be used in future ethically approved research.
7. I agree to take part in this study.

Name of person giving consent	Date	Signature
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	___/___/2022	
Name of person taking consent	Date	Signature
Natalia Alexandra Cisneros Buitrón	___/___/2022	

Participant Number: XX

Appendix 7: Interview Guide (Spanish)

No-maternidad voluntaria en Ecuador: un abordaje narrativo

Guía de entrevista¹

- **Fase 1-Introducción:**
 - Explicar el proceso de la entrevista (grabación de audio y video), obtener el consentimiento
 - Explicar que después de la entrevista yo voy a transcribir el material y les voy a enviar una copia y tendrán 21 días de plazo para hacer comentarios en cuanto al contenido- pero no a la forma en la que está presentando.
 - y explicar que me gustaría escuchar su historia en sus propias palabras sobre ser una mujer que no quiere tener hijos en Ecuador.
- **Fase 2-Narración:** La narración comienza y no se interrumpe hasta que el entrevistado señala el final de la historia. Si la narración no comienza espontáneamente, se puede volver a obtener solicitando su historia.

"Entonces, ¿puedes contarme tu historia sobre ser una mujer que no quiere tener hijos en Ecuador?"

Para esta fase, estímulo no verbal y dejar que el participante hable libremente.

- **Fase 3-Preguntas:** esta fase puede combinar preguntas de estilo narrativo o semiestructurado y es para obtener material nuevo y adicional más allá de lo que se mencionó en la fase de narración. Aquí se recomienda hacer preguntas sobre eventos "qué pasó antes/durante/después". O preguntando más en profundidad, "¿puede decir un poco más sobre X?"/ Cualquier pregunta formulada durante la fase de preguntas debe hacerse utilizando el lenguaje del participante.
- **Fase 4-Conversación final:** esto concluye la entrevista, la grabadora y la grabadora de video se apagan y puede convertirse en una pequeña conversación sobre la experiencia y cuáles son los próximos pasos para el investigador (por ejemplo, transcribir). Aunque esta fase ya no se registra, puede proporcionar información valiosa para el investigador.

¹ Esta guía de entrevista sigue los principios de la entrevista narrativa descritos en: Jovchelovitch, Sandra; Bauer, Martín W. (2000). Entrevista narrativa [en línea]. Londres: LSE Research Online. Disponible en: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/2633> y en Anderson, Claire y Susan Kirkpatrick. . "Narrative interviewing." *International journal of clinical pharmacy* 38, no. 3 (2016): 631-634.

Voluntary Childlessness in Ecuador: A Narrative Approach

Interview Guide²

- **Phase 1-Introduction:**
 - Explaining the interview process (audio and video recorded),
 - gaining consent,
 - and explaining that I would like to hear their story in their own words about being a voluntarily childless woman in Ecuador.

- **Phase 2-Narration:** Narration starts and goes uninterrupted until the interviewee has signalled the end of the story. If narration does not start spontaneously, it can be elicited again by requesting their story.

“So, can you tell me your story about being a voluntarily childless woman in Ecuador”

For this phase, non-verbal encouragement, and letting the participant talk freely.

- **Phase 3-Questioning:** this phase can combine narrative or semi-structured style of questions and it is for eliciting new and additional material beyond what was brought up in the narration phase. Here it is recommended to ask questions about events “what happened before/during/after”. Or asking for more in depth, “can you say a bit more about X?”/ Any question formulated during the questioning phase must be done so using the language of the participant.
- **Phase 4-Concluding talk:** this concludes the interview, the tape recorder and video recorder are switched off, and it can evolve into small talk regarding the experience, and what are the next steps for the researcher (e.g., transcribing). Although this phase is no longer recorded, it might provide valuable information for the researcher.

² This interview guide follows the principles of Narrative Interviewing outlined in: Jovchelovitch, Sandra; Bauer, Martin W. (2000). Narrative interviewing [online]. London: LSE Research Online. Available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/2633> and in Anderson, Claire, and Susan Kirkpatrick. "Narrative interviewing." *International journal of clinical pharmacy* 38, no. 3 (2016): 631-634.