



'Is it okay to have a child?': figuring subjectivities and reproductive decisions in response to climate change

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Abstract

In this article, we engage feminist theorisations of figurations as “performative images that can be inhabited” (Haraway 1997/2018) to trace some of the figures which are animating stories about climate change and reproduction in Global North contexts. We focus our reading on a handful of texts which circulate around the question of ‘Is it okay to have a child, given our climate conditions and futures?’ Throughout, we consider the relationship between figurations and our subjective becomings in response to environmental devastations. We critique and resist the hegemonic figuring of ‘the human subject’ as rational and unitary (Braidotti 2014), as this figure naturalises the Western social power relations of advanced capitalism, population control and human exceptionalism. Seeking multiplicity, we look for figures and subjective openings which enable us to become response-able to the pain of ecological worlds dying around us (Haraway 2016), including from our disciplinary location of psychology.

Keywords Figures · Subjectivity · Reproduction · Climate change · Psychology · Donna Haraway

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Introduction

According to reports from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released in June 2021, the anthropogenic cause of global warming is “unequivocal” and Earth’s ecosystems are already severely compromised (IPCC 2021, p. 4). As we live through what Rosi Braidotti describes as “a present that is trying to become an actual, sustainable future” (2022, p. 14), the stories we’re telling about climate change matter, as do the figures which are animating such stories. Thinking of figures as more-than-metaphorical and composed through material-semiotic knots (Haraway 2008), figures have world-building implications: they shape our subjectivities and our social power relations, including our experiences of environmental destruction. In this sense, the latest IPCC report not only reinforces increasingly desperate scientific stories about how climate change is radically undermining the liveability of Earth for human and more-than-human kinds, but it also potentially *figures* an affective and psychic response (Dawney 2022). As Donna Haraway wrote in the late 1980s, “we need the power of modern critical theories of how meanings and bodies get made, not in order to deny meanings and bodies, but in order to build meanings and bodies that have a chance for life” (1988, p. 580).

So, how are the chances for life being bestowed upon children who are not-yet-born, as environmental damage is baked into Earth’s ecosystems by our current worlding projects? We might think of these dominant worlding projects through the conceptual framework of the third carbon age (Klare 2014), distinguished from previous carbon lifecycles by the extraction of heavy oils, tar sands processing, and offshore oil and gas fracking, intensive extraction methods which produce severe carbon emissions in themselves. Or, considering the informatics of domination which mark the late twentieth and early twenty-first century (Haraway 1985), we might also speak of the fourth industrial revolution (Schwab 2016), whereby advanced cybernetic and information economies produce new interfaces between human, organic and technological lifeforms with increasing velocity *and* environmental damages, as seen in the energy and extraction costs of cryptocurrencies (CCAF 2022). In responding to the ethical implications of our historical times, this article will explore a dilemma being storied through Global North contexts: *is it okay to have a child, given our climate conditions and futures?* How are these stories being told in particular ways, with particular bodies and meanings in mind, and how might a focus on figures enable us to reread and reimagine these stories and subjectivities?

Location is important, as we stay with the trouble of the Global North’s heavy historical and contemporary responsibility for the global extraction and pollution of peoples, places, species and environments. Without foreclosing the problematics of privilege that attend to globalising specific localities, in this article, we keep our attention intentionally focussed on stories spawning from Global North contexts and knowledge institutions. We do this to resist the imperialising tendencies of Western knowledge production, continued through a range of climate change literature, to position Global South peoples



and bodies, particularly women's bodies, as the means to enact reproductive and environmental 'solutions' (Sasser 2018). We also attend to how climate stories and anxieties emerge from and are entwined with our disciplinary locations within Western psychology, writing as we do from the colonising context of Aotearoa New Zealand.

We begin by discussing feminist understandings of figures and subjectivities. We follow this by reading a handful of Global North texts which are producing and circulating around the question of 'Is it okay to have a child?', to trace the figures which are animating these texts. As we will show, desire figures as a political and psychological force in the texts that we read, helping to disrupt the rationalisation of climate responses across deeply unjust categories of race, class and gender. And yet, neocolonial number games and their close relations—population control discourses and the individualisation of environmental responsibilities—are not easily overcome: they persist in the thick and urgent production of climactic and demographic quantified reports which are shaping the conditions of our times. Hence, we argue for the need to both refuse narratives of *over*population and remain attentive to how the counting and distribution of people and planetary resources across geopolitical categories is affecting our subjective and psychological becomings. We conclude the article by considering how a movement toward de-psychologising pain might enable us to process the embodied and psychic melancholia of our times, to become subjects differently and more response-ably, as we learn to live and die in the ruins of capitalism (Haraway 2016; Tsing 2015).

Figurations and subjectivities

Generative figures in feminist scholarship

We have noted that figures within Haraway's scholarship are conceptualised as "performative images that can be inhabited" (Haraway 1997/2018, p. 11) and that they come into formation through material-semiotic knots or nodes. As with Haraway's collapsing of the nature vs. culture binary into a natureculture continuum throughout her scholarship (1998), Haraway's material-semiotic knots emphasise "the absolute simultaneity of materiality and semiosis. The inextricability of these two elements as well as the deeply historically contingent quality of it all" (Haraway 1998, p. 137). Haraway's figures—including cyborgs (1985), OncoMouse (1997/2018), the modest witness (1997/2018), companion species (2008) and chthonic ones (2016)—agitate and provoke us to think differently about the stuff of the world; to stay with the trouble of how stories, figures and theories not only describe our worlding projects, but bring them into being.

The deep historical contingencies of Haraway's figurations ground the need for figures to be situated in place and space, just as Haraway's (1988) articulations of feminist objectivity emphasise a commitment to partial and limited perspectives.



Figures are knowingly and response-ably located and locatable within the apparatuses of historically specific social power relations and embodied (biological, technological) visions. Leila Dawney, who follows the threads of Haraway's figurative work in relation to Auerbach's and Foucault's theorisations of figures,¹ emphasises the affective workings and movements of figures, which are "at once social imaginary, media image, archetypal form and locus for public feelings" (2022, p. 22). In this sense, figures have a subversive and repressive power which extends to their capacity to open (and close) space for human beings to turn themselves into subjects differently, including in response to climate change.

Haraway's figures have been fighting tooth and nail for the last several decades against a despotic figure of Western modernity: that of the unitary, rational subject. Rosi Braidotti, thinking with Deleuze, tells us stories about how such a vision of rational, unitary human subjectivity is hegemonic and premised on the qualities of being recognisably "male, white, heterosexual, educated, able-bodied, speaking a standard language, living in an urban center and owning property" (2008b, p. 27). Hence, patriarchal and colonial privileges are embodied within this figure, enabling the continuation of sexualised and racialised social power relations through advanced capitalism.

The figure of the rational unitary subject champions Man's transcendence from nature, animating narratives of human exceptionalism (Braidotti 2019). Within such figurations, violence, domination and the extraction of resources from those deemed less-than-human (women, Indigenous peoples, nomadic peoples, non-human species, landscapes, ecosystems) is taken as inevitable, an incontestable passage through which patriarchal Eurocentric society has had to progress on its journey to evolutionary ascendancy (Haraway 1991). The figure of the white, male, middle-class scientist as a hero of the Enlightenment and Modern historical periods is thickly woven through the ontological and epistemological patterns forming the image of the rational, unitary subject, crafting and legitimising a disembodied and universalising god's eye view as the supreme gaze in Western knowledge production (Haraway 1988).

Resisting such politically suffocating figurations of human subjectivity allows us to recognise how advanced capitalist systems have moved beyond dualistic figurations of 'the subject', to produce and feast on the proliferation of differences in the ongoing accumulation of capital (Braidotti 2019). For Foucault, it is the histories of "the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects" (1982, p. 208) which stirs questions of social power relations. And as ecological (Code 2010; Mallory 2009), Indigenous (Bawaka Country et al. 2016; Tallbear and Willey 2019) and posthuman (Braidotti 2008b; Rutherford 2018) feminist scholarship has demonstrated, often through creative and speculative writing, our subjectivities do not produce themselves. Rather, our subjectivities come into being relationally, in a thick and sticky web of figurations, responsibilities and affectivities (Braidotti 2014), sympoietically responding to the more-than-human kin and environments we share our homes with on Earth (Haraway 2016; Tsing 2015).

¹ Haraway (1997/2018) lays out the threads of these connections in *Modest-Witness@Second-Millennium*.



Becoming subjects differently

Feminist scholarship continues to imagine other modes of becoming subjects, to respond ethically to our climate crises. Climate weathering, for example, articulates the modes by which we become subjects in relation to the climate and the thick textures of our environmental homes (Neimanis and Loewen Walker 2014). Drawing on new materialist and ecofeminist writers to understand our subjectivities as embodied, temporal and in flux, Neimanis and Loewen Walker theorise a trans-corporal, -temporal and -relational ethos for “bringing climate change home” (2014, p. 559). Climate weathering resists the dominance of Western imaginings of what ‘home’ might look and feel like (...domesticated, individualist, heteronormative spaces where the privileged may shelter from the extreme effects of climate change?...). Instead, climate weathering invites us to consider ourselves as “interpellated into the ecological space-time of a much more expansive home, at once as distant as that melting icecap, and as close as our own skin” (2014, p. 559). Since the 1990s, and against much contestation from the wider scientific community, public health researcher Arline Geronimus (2003, 2023) has also developed theorisations of ‘weathering’ to critically analyse how racial and socioeconomic injustices weathered by Black women in the United States lead to multiple health inequities, such as higher rates of infant mortality. Though Neimanis and Loewen Walker do not explicitly connect their theorisations to Geronimus’s (2023) public health literature, the inter-disciplinary connections between the two conceptualisations of weathering invite future analysis, with weathering enabling an “intervention in our cultural imaginary of climate change” (Neimanis and Loewen Walker 2014, p. 561), an imaginary which is not innocent to the interlacing of climate change with racial injustice, gendered violence and frenzied wealth inequality.

Environmental melancholia, in relation, focusses on our internalised, psychic relationships to the environment. Building on psychoanalytic understandings of loss and mourning, Lertzman conceptualises environmental melancholia as a “condition” (2015, p. 4) which moves through affects and unconscious processes, and enables us to consider how desires, anxieties and internal conflicts affect our responses to environmental degradation. Lertzman’s theorisation of environmental melancholia moves beyond the figure of the rational, unitary subject and the value-neutral ‘variables’ of social and cognitive psychological research on climate attitudes. It opens space for us to attend to the messy, nebulous and shifting textures of our subjective becomings with environmental destruction, disrupting the places where we might have become emotionally snagged in place. Lertzman develops her insights through extensive ethnographic fieldwork with communities living on the edge of the Great Lakes in Wisconsin, where decades of unregulated industry have polluted the region’s lakes and rivers. Probing the complexities of psychological responses to environmental losses in interviews with community members, Lertzman learns that a melancholic response to ecological losses can also produce political apathy. Melancholia stuns the subject into stasis, whereby they cannot relationally process and mourn their loss, or even articulate *who/what* has been lost. Such environmentally melancholic subjects are caught in a net of political fatalism, disabled from responding to the very structural forces which are destroying their worlds (Lertzman 2015).



Braidotti's writings on nomadic subjectivity demonstrate the thick interweaving of figurations with subjectivities, offering us both a figure and a philosophical framework with which to re-imagine and re-activate our social horizons of hope (2008a). The nomadic subject is "dynamic, time-bound, embodied and embedded", situated within a politics of location and an ethics of affirmation (2008b, p. 27). Eschewing the privileging of rationality and unitariness, nomadic subjectivity enables us to map the flows and eddies of our subjective becomings, swimming out of the fixed and static categorisations which have, for example, defined post-positivist knowledge production in psychology (Venn 1984). Staying with our embodied and embedded experiences of climate change and ecological disaster, we can sense how we *affect* and are *affected by* those we co-become with on Earth, inviting ethical modes of relational reflexivity which extend beyond the category of the human to "enable us to account accurately for the complexities of our historicity" (Braidotti 2008b, p. 26).

The political implications of drawing on feminist figurations and subjectivities within our disciplinary location of psychology are not insignificant: post-positivist psychology has exemplified the reification of negative differences, through its statistical and symbolic production of a normative figure of the 'universal human'. To this figure, we apply Braidotti's (2019) description of the frozen reification of sameness, which produces a deadening stillness within the endless reproduction of Eurocentric, androcentric authorities of the past, rather than an ethical accountability to our present. Hence, we take up feminist figures in this article to both stay with the trouble (Haraway 2016) of psychology's complicity in reifying binary understandings of environmental responsibility, and to take a creative leap toward actualising the potential (Braidotti 2019) for our discipline to enact hearing and telling stories *differently* about the relationship between kin making and environmental crises.

We recognise that for all the transformative potential of posthuman and feminist theories, they are hardly 'new' when held alongside many Indigenous ontologies and cosmologies, such as those articulated by Indigenous communities in our situated locations of Australia (Country et al. 2016) and Aotearoa New Zealand (Forster 2019; Jahnke 1997; Mikaere 2011). Hence, the work of decolonising our subjectivities and knowledge productions within feminist and critical scholarship is ongoing and informs our commitment to hearing Indigenous women's voices on climate change (Meynell 2023). Our focus in this article is to provide "a critique of the center from the center" (Braidotti 2011, p. 34), to trouble the majoritarian anxieties projected through neocolonial climate figurations. We want to approach Indigenous experiences of and resistances to these majoritarian projections with caution and respect, in recognition that the question of 'Is it okay to have a child?' holds vastly different political implications for Indigenous communities, many of whom survive in spite of ongoing colonial extermination efforts. Future research which can do justice to the incredible cosmological and situated diversities of Indigenous women's writings on environment, kin and decolonisation, and carefully bring them into conversation with climate literature from colonising contexts, will be valued. We readily accept we have not achieved this in the scope of this article.





Fig. 1 Newspaper articles articulating iterations of the question 'Is it okay to have a child?'. Note See Table in the "Appendix" for citations

Is it okay to have a child?

We begin our reading with online media articles which are both producing and circulating around the question of 'Is it okay to have a child?' Such articles are continually proliferating, and resisting the idea of an exhaustive reading, we have included a scattering of their titles in Fig. 1, as an invitation to begin sensing the multiple modes of distress they narrate. As the titles suggest, the dilemma people in Global North contexts appear to be experiencing includes fear and anxiety about bringing



children into a world so plagued by environmental destruction, the worst of which will fall on future generations. As well, there is an emergent moral imperative, which locates the choice to *not* have a child (or children) as a tangible and calculable way to reduce the carbon footprint imposed by the traditional Western nuclear family model.

As in wider ‘grey’ environmental literature, biological imperatives are taken for granted in narratives about climate change and reproduction (e.g. Project Drawdown 2020). Such imperatives reprioritise the normative gendered expectations of what it means to ‘have a child’—a child is born to and raised by its biological parents, who are a cisgendered man and woman. In our reading, we take up the feminist tradition of imagining kinship practices beyond the conflation of sex with gender (Rich 1980/2003), to think-with creative modes of parenting which do not require heteronormatively sexed bodies or relational arrangements (e.g. queer and transgender parenting, fostering, surrogacy, being a god parent or ‘aunty’, single parenting, adoption, etc.).

Becoming a desiring feminist subject

Meehan Crist’s (2020) article, the title of which is included in Fig. 1, traces some of the complexities experienced by women in post-industrialised countries who, faced with the climate crisis, are interrogating their desires to have children. Engaging with statements made by contemporary climate activists, including Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Bill McKibben and Donna Haraway, Crist explores what it means to be a person who brings a child into the world, this world, dogged with all its troubles:

The polar icecaps are melting. Is it OK to have a child? Australia is on fire. Is it OK to have a child? My house is flooded, my crops have failed, my community is fleeing. Is it OK to have a child? It is, in a sense, an impossible question. (2020, p. 3)

The impossibility of the question for Crist lies in what she sees as the individualising of responsibility through the locus of reproductive decisions, obscuring the social power relations which are producing environmental damage. Crist refocuses on the structural determinants of climate change, as advanced capitalism mandates the privileging of profit motives over public and environmental interests. Such profit motives manifest today in the oil and gas industries’ determination to extract and sell as much fossil fuel as possible, while our energy systems are still carbon-dependent (Li et al. 2022); and in the continued political influence these corporations exercise over governments in countries such as Australia (Wright et al. 2022). It matters, too, that BP produced the concept of ‘the carbon footprint’ as an effort to individualise responsibility onto the new ‘subjects’ of advanced capitalism—consumers (Kaufman 2020).

Crist writes from the pain and pleasure of her own pregnancy—an embodied and embedded memory (Braidotti 2002)—in narrating her and her partner’s decision to have a child, despite the arguments to live otherwise, to make kin not babies (Haraway 2016). What emerges from Crist’s piece is much less a tidy theoretical position



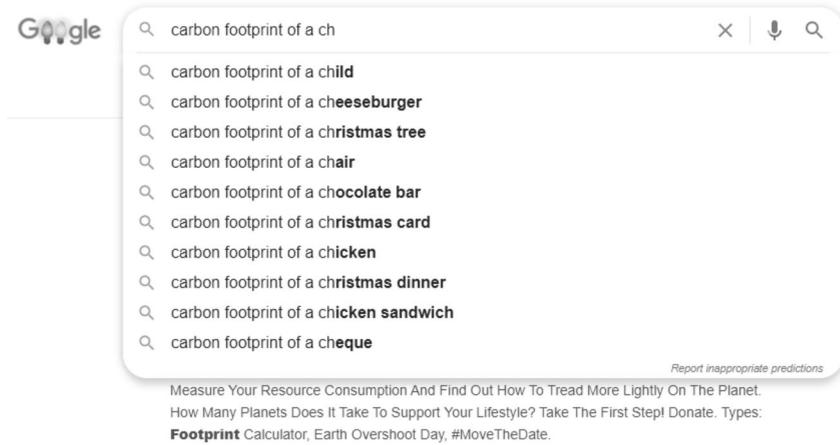


Fig. 2 Screenshot of a Google search and corresponding autofill suggestions when using the terms “carbon footprint of a ch...” Taken December 2020

than a narrative of hope and a determination to move beyond the “toxic logic of the carbon footprint” in making kin (2020, p. 13). We think of the absurdity of advanced capitalism with Fig. 2, where the carbon footprint of children is compared to those of cheeseburgers and Christmas trees. Defying this logic, Crist writes that “for me, having a child has been a commitment to life, and a commitment to the possibilities of a human future on this warming planet. It means giving up claims to moral purity, not because nothing matters, but because things do” (2020, p. 13).

We read Crist’s piece in relation to another feminist environmental text formed through a Global North context: Naomi Klein’s (2014) account of becoming a mother during her research into the destructive practices of big oil industries. Klein begins with grief: her grief for the damage already inflicted on our natural environments, as well as deepening despair over what she saw as the inevitability of total ecological breakdown. Calling this reaction ‘ecological despair’, Klein begins to experience sharp pain and anxiety about the effects of climate change, to the point that she can no longer enjoy nature as she used to. Linking her responses to examples found in tourism advertising, Klein argues that “this is how many of us are consuming wilderness these days—as a kind of nihilistic, final farewell” (2014, p. 420). In our reading, the relational gesture of *faring nature well* carries considerable weight, tapping into the psychic dimensions of environmental melancholy—“an arrested, inchoate form of mourning” (Lertzman 2015, p. xiii). And yet, capitalist entitlements are also worked into the production and consumption of ‘wilderness’ as a tourist product which we can nihilistically say goodbye to, as is the figure of an enduring human subject, who survives despite the loss of wild spaces and complex ecologies.

In Klein’s words, “ecological despair was a big part of why I resisted motherhood until my late thirties... And I was also fully aware that if we were to avoid [a dystopian future], we would all have to cut down on the number of super-consumers we were producing” (2014, p. 420). We note Klein’s wry nod to the internalisation



of carbon footprint logics, which insidiously extends to the rationalisation of reproduction. However, by building relationships with diverse communities who were committed to protecting and regenerating their local environments, many of them Indigenous communities,² Klein comes to fundamentally change her perspective on motherhood. She makes the decision with her partner to attempt to have a (biological) child, and in doing so, is confronted by the limits of her own body and fertility—she struggles to conceive and miscarries, and so begins in vitro fertilisation (IVF).

While acknowledging that IVF enables parenthood for many, including trans and non-heterosexual people, Klein is also suspicious of how IVF shares figurative resonances with the geoengineering of the climate: both have the capacity to enter the public imagination as techno fixes to otherwise insurmountable health crises, and so in Haraway's (2016) sense, reinforces the ideology of self-poetic man overcoming all biological challenges. Rather, Klein argues that learning to hear and respect the pains, protestations and limits imposed by our own bodies is akin to hearing and respecting the ecological limits of our environments. After rejecting IVF, Klein does eventually manage to conceive and give birth to a child—her son—after she makes several significant life choices aimed at reducing her stress, including moving to a rural home in British Columbia, where during long hikes she “even caught [herself] appreciating beautiful moments without simultaneously mourning their loss” (2014, p. 437).

In our reading for the figures which animate Klein's story, Global North privileges form the very warp and weft of climate change subjectivities. Klein attempts to recognise and resist these privileged figurations—indeed, her whole text is a critique of Western extractive economies, and she regularly critiques her own complicity with these structural powers. Even so, socioeconomic resources enable the figures in Klein's narrative to *move*, mobilised through access to land and capital acquired through histories of colonisation. This movement is embodied, geographical and psychological. Reaching higher and safer climes allows ecological despair to be processed and motherhood to become tenable, both as a relational decision and as a biological process.

We recognise the figure of the sexual steward (Sasser 2018) in both Klein's and Crist's narratives, as a gendered animation of women's reproductive ‘stewardship’ in Global North environmental discourses. Sasser describes the sexual steward as “a symbol of the ideal woman framed within the logics of private, individual decision-making and choice” (2018, p. 4). That such a figure appears within Klein's wider critique of capitalism speaks not to failures on Klein's part, but to the immense force through which capitalism figures our subjective becoming with climate change in Global North contexts. Again, we are returned to the unrelenting problem of how to turn ourselves into subjects differently (Foucault 1982), when our very bodies and subjectivities are formed through globalised hierarchies of domination.

² We want to be cautious here not to imply that engagement with Indigenous communities is unproblematic or free from colonising impulses, hence underscoring the importance of decolonising Global North subjectivities in environmental justice movements.



The political force of desire disrupts this problem, somewhat. Fighting back the sexual steward, we sense a *desiring* feminist figure trying to breach the surface in Klein's and Crist's narratives. Such a figure is thickly textured by the yearnings, anxieties, troubles and contradictions of our climate-conscious times. She is right in the thick of Global North patterns of patriarchy, colonisation, genocide and extraction. Monitoring privilege is part of her makeup. And yet even so, this figure moves with the desire to have a child, a decision which is sympoietic (Haraway 2016), extending beyond heteronormative pairings to consider ecological relations. Braidotti's (2010, 2014) writings on desire as plenitude figure in this reading, as a philosophical opening through which we might understand how desire moves us as human subjects, reconfiguring desire not only as object-oriented (Braidotti 2011), but as geographically and environmentally contingent, enabling "a deep yearning for transformation or a process of affirmation" (Braidotti 2010, p. 416). Thus, how are we understanding the desire to have a child (biological or other-wise), even in the face of climactic disaster, as a movement toward affirmative ethics—as a commitment to life itself (Crist 2020)?

Maybe one child, maybe none? Rationalising reproduction in the Global North

We move with the citational threads back in time, now, to Bill McKibben. Today, McKibben is a highly regarded American climate journalist, activist and one of the founders of 350.org, a climate movement which connects and promotes climate protests in diverse countries. In 1998, McKibben articulated one iteration of the question 'Is it okay to have a child?' with his book *Maybe One*—partly a defence of the psychological stability and 'normalcy' of only children, and partly a moral argument for people in the United States to have no more children than required to replace themselves in number. McKibben (1998) argues that for the average US family, 1.5 children per adult woman is the 'ideal' reproductive formula. And since children cannot be produced in decimals, better yet for the environment would be to have only one child per partnership.³

McKibben tells this story through his own situated location, inviting us into the process he and his wife, writer Sue Halpern, went through in balancing their desire for children with their environmental commitments. In the end, they decided that having *one* child was a compromise they could live with. McKibben draws on population statistics and even immigration numbers in telling this story. He proposes that with both reduced reproduction and immigration rates, the United States could reach a sustainable population by 2050—what he sees as approximately 250 million people. McKibben is explicit in addressing his family planning arguments to people in Global North contexts, based on their excessively large carbon footprints. However, the inclusion of immigration into McKibben's rationale demonstrates the pervasive influence of populationism on Western imaginations, which works to

³ The kind of 'partnership' McKibben (1998) is referring to is left unarticulated—heterosexual, property owning, speaking a common language, constituted by two parents? McKibben presumably also means 'biological' when referring to children.



rationalise and position people into categories of same/other, native-born/migrant, citizen/non-citizen, normal/abnormal to naturalise the mass exploitation of those considered less than fully ‘human’ (Braidotti 2014). Such framings also ignore the complexities of increased migration and homelessness due to climate disasters (UN Environmental Programme 2019).

Populationism and population control discourses have circulated within ecological justice movements since the late nineteenth century, to emphasise the role of contraception and ‘family planning’ in responding to climate change through reduced future human populations (Murphy 2017; Sasser 2018). Such discourses discriminate most heavily against women of colour in the Global South—those who are least responsible for climate change (UN Environmental Programme 2019)—locating the reproductive bodies of Global South women as a key site of Western environmental interventions (Sasser 2018). Population control discourses are not distinct from ecofascism, an extreme ecological political movement with racist, classist, sexist roots which emerged concurrently with Nazism and other far-right ideologies in the twentieth century. Ecofascism mixes up ecological justice with genocidal narratives of selective population extermination, inscribing the question of ‘Is it okay to have a child?’ with haunting memories and ongoing lived experiences of human-to-human genocide.

McKibben’s arguments oscillate around the figure of the rational, unitary subject, even as such a figure no longer can hold its shape within the rapacious effects of advanced capitalism and planetary collapse (Braidotti 2014). Brute quantitative estimates dominate McKibben’s narrative, made especially evident in the following excerpt, where McKibben takes up statistics to cut through the moral and emotional complexities which he sees as impeding climate justice:

Everyone has heard the statistics time and again, usually in an attempt to make us feel guilty. But hear them one more time, with an open mind, simply trying to think strategically about how we will stave off the dangers to this planet. Pretend it’s not a moral problem, just a mathematical one. (1998, p. 107)

While staying with the trouble of the violent categorisations of self/other which supersede and manifest in McKibben’s text, we also want to open space in our reading to hear the complexities, contradictions, pains and desires expressed in McKibben’s response to the question of ‘Is it okay to have a child?’ Hearing Braidotti’s emphasis that “we need to enact a vision of the subject that encompasses changes at the in-depth structures” (2014, p. 181), we wonder how *Maybe One* both takes for granted and begins to refuse the figure of rational, unitary subjectivity, moving toward nomadic subjectivity in spite of McKibben’s attempt to rationalise and individualise reproduction. Notably, desire moves McKibben’s narrative, as it does Crist’s (2020) and Klein’s (2014). Desire for climate justice animates McKibben’s decades of climate activism, an activism which he ethically locates within the social power relations of the Global North and which he tells us burns stronger for becoming a parent. And narrating their decision to have a child, McKibben writes that “What eventually made up our minds was largely simple desire; like most, though certainly not all, people we felt some need deeper than deep to raise and nurture a child. Anything else may simply be justification” (1998,



Fig. 3 Screen shot of the BirthStrike hashtag, taken in July 2020



p. 127). Desire, though problematically figured in McKibben's account as an overpowering genetic and normative force, also works to silence the machinations of logic, practicality and quantification in a text which otherwise builds its arguments around presumptions of rational, unitary subjectivity.

BirthStrike

Emerging in the UK under the leadership of Blythe Pepino, BirthStrike was a movement founded on people (including women, men and gender diverse peoples) making a lifelong commitment to *not* have children, as a political campaign to force action on climate change. In her feature interviews with mainstream news publications (e.g. Hunt 2019), Pepino's story is narrated as part of a personal 'climate awakening'. A 32-year-old British-Welsh musician at the time of her interviews in 2019, Pepino contextualises her story through the emotional and physical yearning she felt to have a child with her partner. However, with her growing understanding of the severity of climate change, Pepino realised that she was too afraid to bring children of her own into the world. For Pepino, motherhood is desirable, but it has also become an ethically untenable decision in a world wracked by climate change (Fig. 3).

In our reading of media articles which re-narrate Pepino's story, giving up on motherhood is figured as a gendered sacrifice, summoning up threads of everyday heroism. BirthStrike members' motives are distinct from those of people who identify as child-free and who would prefer, even in an idyllic environment, not to have children. Pepino is also at pains to distance herself and the BirthStrike movement from the racist and classist ideologies of population control. Rather, grief, fear and environmental activism are the pillars of the BirthStrike movement. In September 2020, however, BirthStrike announced on their webpage that the campaign was officially ending. Pepino and her fellow campaign manager Jessica Gaitán Johannesson had realised that they could not continue their political activism without the danger of reiterating population control narratives (Gaitán Johannesson 2022). BirthStrike social media pages were deleted, with only a final notice of their dissolution left on their official page, *birthstrikeforfuture.com*. For those who wished to join, a new private online 'support group' was established called "Grieving parenthood in the climate crisis".

In McMullen and Dow's (2022) analysis of how BirthStrike was heard and re-storied in mediated spaces, the campaign "carried significant ethical and political baggage that triggered numerous anxieties: ecological, demographic, reproductive, and existential" (2022, p. 660). The extensive media attention which BirthStrike managed to produce in such a short time speaks to the provocative power which reproductive and natalist figurations hold over public—and gendered,



heteronormative—imagination. BirthStrike’s leaders were not innocent to this provocative effect; rather, they sought to harness it, mobilising women from post-industrialised, professional and privileged backgrounds—women who might be reading publications like *Marie Claire*, for example—to politicise their climate concerns. And yet, the campaign “lost control of its own message” (Dow and McMullen 2022, p. 1). The important ethical questions which the campaign sought to raise were also left unheard—including how subjects of post-industrialised nations might become response-able to the environmental legacies and impacts of their locations, including in how they/we form and practice kinship relations.

Again, figurations of climate subjectivities are forming through BirthStrike narratives, with the pledge to not have children affirming the significance of reproduction, desire and relational ethics to the feminist project of staying with the trouble of climate change. We want to deploy Ahmed’s (2017) figure of the feminist killjoy to tangle with BirthStrike’s narrative, too, to help reveal the traces of wilful feminist subjectivity embodied in the campaign. A feminist killjoy gets in the way: she causes a problem by revealing a problem; the injustice is too great, too painful for her to stay silent, immobilised and frozen. A feminist killjoy is even willing to kill off her own ‘babies’—in this case, a political campaign—in her movement toward becoming response-able. In doing so, she might also kill the joy of her feminist fellows, pushing them to take their relational ethics further. Not only do BirthStrike members get in the way of heteronormative society, weaponizing their reproductive capacities to disrupt climate change; they also potentially make other feminist women feel uncomfortable, by demanding a collectively intensive, rigorous monitoring of Global North privileges in relation to climate change and reproduction.

BirthStrike reminds us that not having a child for ecological reasons remains not only a fear-based but a political response, perhaps interwoven with the complexities of environmental melancholia (Lertzman 2015) and climate weathering (Neimanis and Loewen Walker 2014). We absorb climate change, not only through acquiring linguistic and scientific information on the ecological threats we’re facing, but also in our emotional and affective responses to what we’re learning, hearing and feeling (on and through the skin). This process of engaging with ecological disaster is in part psychic and unconscious (Lertzman 2015): it can produce grief, guilt and anxiety, yet it also invites us to stay with the ethical and relational dilemmas of our times—to channel desire and despair other-wise.

Make kin, not babies

BirthStrike offers a timely, situated example of the riskiness of talking about *making kin differently* in the colonising landscape of the Anthropocene (Haraway 2016). It raises the question of how we can talk about *not* having children as a feminist, politically agentic response to climate change, without reinscribing the dominant gendered violence which has marked women’s bodies as the sites of imperialising interventions. In trying to have these conversations, BirthStrike runs into a similar spot of sticky ethical trouble as Donna Haraway does in broaching the subject of



human population in *Staying with the Trouble* (2016). The catchphrase of “Make kin, not babies!” (2016, p. 102) is woven throughout Haraway’s text, as Haraway argues the need to think lovingly and ethically with increasingly fragile ecosystems and more-than-human kin about what increasing human populations might mean for living and dying on Earth. Citing the rapid expansion of human populations from 2.6 billion in 1950 to 8 billion today and current projections that human populations will reach at least 11 billion by 2100 (UN 2022), Haraway is not innocent to the dangers of the discursive space she is entering in articulating these arguments. She argues that fear of being tainted by racist, colonising legacies of population control discourses has stopped feminists from engaging in urgent and critical conversations about “the Great Acceleration of human numbers” (2016, p. 6).

Haraway urges us to stay with the trouble of what increasing human populations might mean for those we co-become with on Earth and to consider the multiple, non-biological ways in which we might make kin, as this requires human beings to move beyond heteronormative and biological assumptions about what ‘having a child’ might entail. In the Children of Compost stories, for example, Haraway fabulates the possibilities for cross-pollinated human and more-than-human beings, who are raised by more-than-two parents, through an intentional ethics of care and sustainability. Haraway’s storytelling helps us to locate reproductive choices within an ethics of multi-species care and relationality, such that we ask ‘Is it okay to have a child?’ in an ethical relationship with non-human species, animals and environmental kin.

In articulating her ‘make kin, not babies’ argument, however, Haraway provokes strong emotional and critical responses from feminist readers. Across a number of readings (Appleton and Glabau 2022; Bhatia et al. 2020; Dow and Lamoreaux 2020), feminist thinkers argue that Haraway simplistically and dangerously incorporates narratives of human over-population into her texts. The trouble is that Haraway takes up ‘population’ itself as a category to think with, a move made explicit in *Making Kin Not Population*, a small essay collection co-edited by Clarke and Haraway 2018. Alongside Clarke’s and Haraway’s own contributions, the collection includes essays from intersectional feminist thinkers, who write from Black, Indigenous and Global South locations in articulating rich and contrary responses to issues of kin making. Within the volume, Haraway writes from a place of deep personal pain, as she asks us to bring a critical as well as affirmative spirit to thinking with ‘population’. As Haraway attests in her response to reviews of the collection:

What I want is a different demography, one that worries about how, when, and if to count human beings in entangled living and dying with microbes, plants, animals, and apparatuses, and one that asks about numbers-in-worlds from non-Malthusian foundations. I am not interested in starting from comparative birth, death, and growth rates of the eaters and the eaten. I want a radical, nonhumanist demography embedded in multi-kinded/multi-species justice and care. (Strathern et al. 2019, p. 170)

In our reading of Clarke’s and Haraway’s contributions to *Making Kin*, we crave a more detailed mapping of the way demographic, socioeconomic and planetary health systems are being figured in contemporary climate literature, to enable a



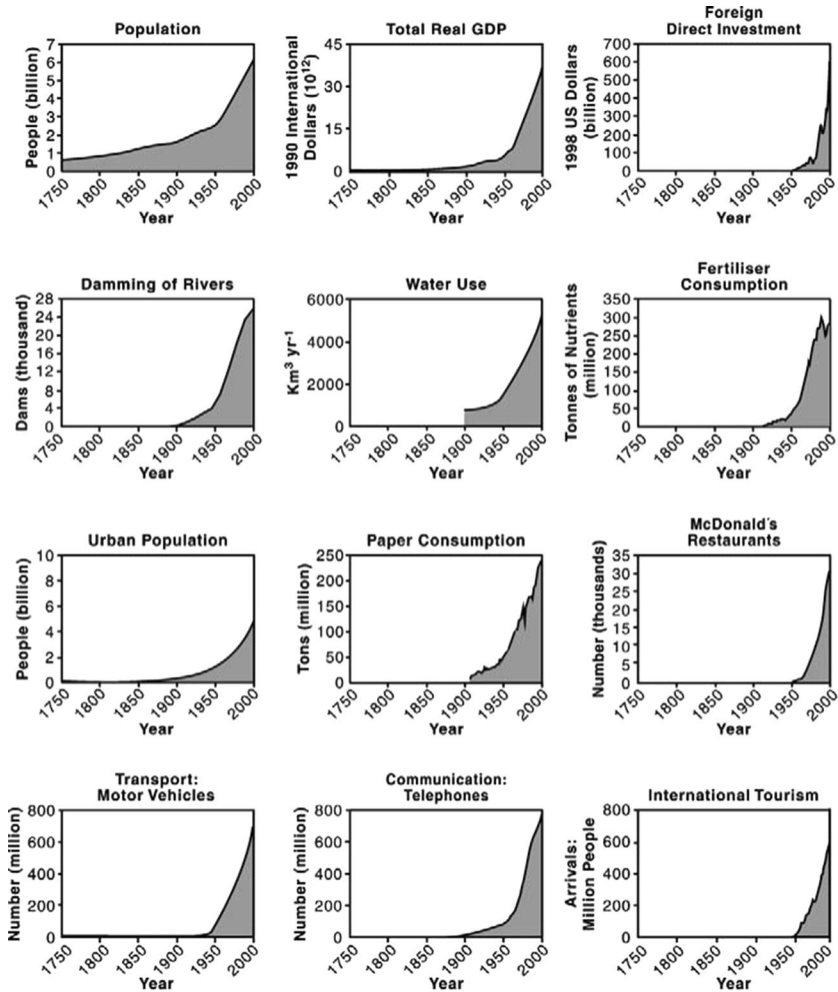
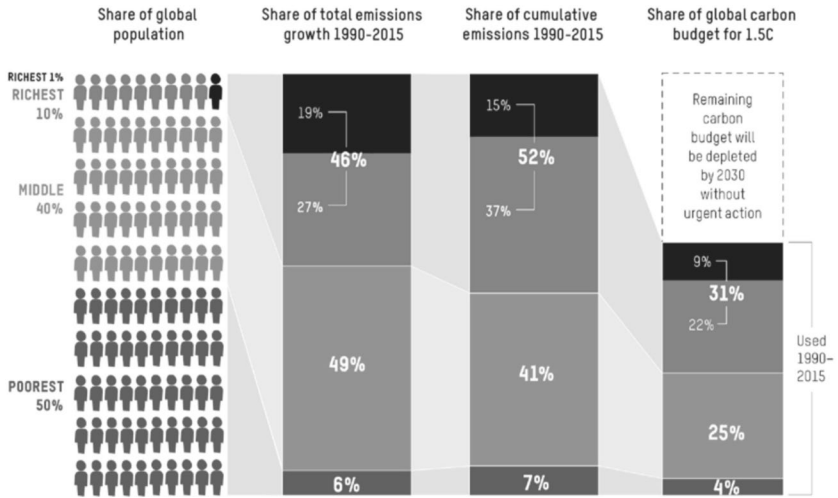


Fig. 4 “The change in the human enterprise from 1750 to 2000 (28). The Great Acceleration is clearly shown in every component of the human enterprise included in the figure” (Steffen et al. 2007, p. 617)

stronger understanding of what’s at stake in these knowledge productions, and for whom (Haraway 1997/2018). For example, Haraway draws on Steffen et al.’s (2015) highly cited work on ‘the trajectory of the Anthropocene’, which graphs the rapid upward shifts in ‘socioeconomic trends’ which have occurred since the 1950s. These socioeconomic trends are accompanied by a different set of graphs showing the





Per capita income threshold (SPPP2011) of richest 1%: \$109k; richest 10%: \$38k; middle 40%: \$6k; and bottom 50%: less than \$6k. Global carbon budget from 1990 for 33% risk of exceeding 1.5C: 1,205Gt.

Fig. 5 A summary of global carbon emissions across income thresholds, between 1990 and 2015 (Oxfam 2020)

rapid worsening of ‘earth system trends’.⁴ Steffen et al. call this post-1950s historical patterning the ‘Great Acceleration’, a period bringing dire consequences for non-human species and planetary ecosystems. In Fig. 4, we provide an earlier iteration of a Great Acceleration graph, produced by Steffen et al. (2007). Visual representations such as Fig. 4 constitute part of the vital knowledge-making practices which are bringing the environmental precariousities of our post-industrial times into view. And yet, we hesitate when we see ‘population’ positioned as the first measure within the socioeconomic trends reported in Steffen et al.’s (2007) graph, giving it the appearance of a beginning, or an origin.

As we consider Fig. 4 and the story it tells about climate change causes, we are visited again by the vampiric figure of Anthropocentric Man, who tries to hide the monstrous effects of his ‘Industry’ behind the feminised figure of ‘Population’. A different possibility for storying these population mappings is provided in Fig. 5, where rather than ‘population’ itself being the central focus, we are encouraged to confront the wealth inequality wrapped up with climate change and population, concretized in the figure of the world’s richest 1% being responsible for 19% of total emission growth between 1990 and 2015 (see Fig. 5; Kartha et al. 2020).

⁴ The Earth System trends include carbon dioxide; nitrous oxide; methane; stratospheric ozone; surface temperature; ocean acidification; marine fish capture; shrimp aquaculture; nitrogen to coastal zone; tropical forest loss; domesticated land and terrestrial biosphere degradation (Steffen et al. 2015).



Future feminist research on the figurative and relational orderings of population-economic-environmental knowledge productions also needs to account for the lack of consensus within scientific communities on the use of ‘population’ as a concept to analyse and respond to climate change. For example, while being very concerned about climate change, demographers themselves are “highly divided on the question whether the global population size should be reduced to lower CO₂ emissions, as well as on the question whether family planning is an effective policy instrument” (van Dalen and Henkens 2021, p. 551). Furthermore, the United States’ Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) have explicitly disavowed the use of population growth arguments in climate change science and policy responses. The UCS describes population growth arguments as a “deeply flawed frame” (2021, p. 1) which not only distracts from attending to the primary drivers of climate change—the burning of fossil fuels—but perpetuates harm against marginalised communities who have the lowest rates of carbon emissions per person.

We wonder how Haraway might bring her disciplinary disloyalties—and her fierce pack of feminist figures—to bear upon such articulations from scientific communities, to both better explain and justify her own uptake of population as a category to think with, and to develop more elastic understandings of the intersections between climate change and reproductive rights, in the feminist spirit of strong objectivity (Harding 2004). With Haraway (2016), we re-member that such work demands, as always, that those of us who have inherited the perverse privileges of ‘Empire’ decolonise our knowledge practices and subjectivities. Doing so requires that ‘we’ stay with the atrocities committed—and still being committed—against colonised and marginalised peoples the world over, often in the name of scientific progress (Tuhiwai Smith 1999/2021).

We trace the violence felt in Haraway’s thinking-with demography back to the mathematical accounting systems through which ‘human populations’ are discursively constructed in wider ecological texts. Legitimising the expectation that we can measure people and their environmental costs through universal mathematical metrics, the figure of the rational, unitary figure reifies our understandings of a single and static form of subjectivity, requiring a rationalised and operationalised response to climate change. How do we stay with the trouble of the material resources required to enable human beings to live safely and with dignity, recognising as we do so that dominant social power relations flow through attempts to calculate these resources and apply them across geopolitical categories? As Jade Sasser’s (2018) research documents, there never has been an ethically and statistically robust measure of the universal carrying capacity of Earth, and efforts to formulate such a measure are steeped in colonising and imperialising assumptions about who even counts as ‘human’ to begin with.

For Michelle Murphy (2017, 2018), who has extensively researched the history and contemporary deployments of populationism, and whose contribution to *Making Kin* offers a compelling refusal of population, the concept of ‘population’ itself has become “intolerable” (2018, p. 105)—so wrought with racial violence that it is beyond thinking with. Murphy writes that “in this moment of intensifying environmental violence, human density is attractive as a managerial policy problem and container for worry because it



points the finger at preventing future human life without requiring the reordering of capitalism, colonialism, the nation-state, or heteropatriarchy as world orders" (2018). Hence, within Murphy's analysis, population figures as both a technology of neocolonial state control, as well as an affective force, appealing to fears and anxieties about climate change. We can also sense how the affective force of population attaches itself to the question of 'Is it okay to have a child?', seductively simplifying and rationalising some of the stickier relational and emotional troubles produced by our climate weatherings (Neimanis and Loewen Walker 2014).

From our own situated locations in psychology, we consider it important to stay with the trouble of how climate subjectivities in Global North contexts are being shaped by population discourses and abstract quantifications of environmental 'resources' and 'thresholds'—with and beyond population debates happening within feminism. Climate change reporting, analysis and responses are being produced at great speed through a thick discourse of numbers and quantifications, including costs and benefits, profits and losses, emission reductions and carbon offsetting, and demographics. Such economic and demographic reportings reduce misery and diversity to a narrow discourse of dynamic factors expressed in numbers. They are also politically potent, built into the mechanics of many of the beleaguered institutions tasked with forming and enacting treaties and agreements to keep global warming below 2 °C (e.g. OECD/The World Bank/UN Environment 2018).

Thus, to be *against* population is still to be *in relation to* population. As "intolerable" as the concept of population may be (Murphy 2017, p. 137), population still forms part of the conditions of our times, and as Braidotti tells us, we must think "with the times and also against them, not in a belligerent mode of oppositional consciousness, but as a humble and empowering gesture of co-construction of social horizons of hope" (2008a, p. 33). Invoking population only through the mode of critique or *potesta* might be to delimit our capacity to stay with the trouble of the pervasive influence of populationism in our everyday lives, our political economies and our climate discourses; or to process the trauma and violence bound up with populationism, a trauma which extends well beyond the human world, to the many more-than-human extinctions and genocides intertwined with climate change.

Following this line of flight (Braidotti 2014), how can we open space to hear and tell *different stories/stories differently* about the implications of population discourses for our subjective becomings, as we both refuse the popular narrative of *overpopulation*, and think/feel with our more-than-human kin about the pain of worlds dying around us? Can we hear, for example, the pain of birds falling from the sky, plunging to their deaths in mass avian die offs occurring in North America, as raging wildfires disrupt traditional flight paths (Haraway and Despret 2020)? Can we hear the stories told by members of BirthStrike, for example, without silencing these stories on the basis that they risk reifying population control discourses? How do we hear the sob of grief and terror embodied in these stories, as part of our commitment to becoming-together or not at all?



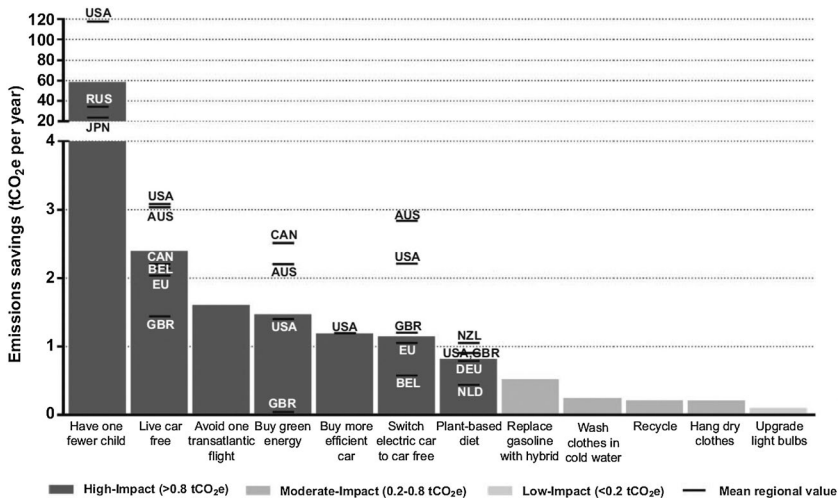


Fig. 6 “A comparison of the emissions reductions from various individual actions” (Wynes and Nicholas 2017, p. 4)

Final thoughts: de-psychologising pain

We end by briefly considering psychology’s location in relation to the processing of environmental losses and melancholia. As a discipline formed around the reification of binary categorisations of same/other and normal/abnormal (Rose 1996), psychology is also marked by what Parker (1989) describes as the contradiction of Western modernity. Herein, scientific truth is prized as the means to solve humanity’s crises, while the responsibility and power to form meaning is attributed to individuals. For Parker, this discourse manifests in social psychology as “both a mechanistic study of behaviour which suffocates human agency and an individualistic notion of rationality which is predicated upon that agency” (1989, p. 48). We feel the weight of this contradiction in McKibben’s (1998) plea for single-child families, which relies upon population and environmental statistics to establish the scientific credibility of its arguments, and then assigns responsibility to individuals to respond rationally, through their reproductive choices.

Though McKibben was writing in the late 1990s, similar discourses continue to flow through social science research on environmental responsibility, further hardening the question of ‘Is it okay to have a child?’ into a story of individual responsibility and individual differences. Consider, for example, Wynes and Nicholas’s (2017) study on how ‘individual actions’ and ‘lifestyle changes’ could support climate change mitigation efforts. Figure 6 shows one of the powerful cultural artifacts resulting from this study, which reduces having a child to a flat and rational consumer choice, comparable to washing one’s clothes in cold rather than hot water. What room is left to move, to breathe, to become nomadic within these relationally alienating figurations and subjective formations?



Staying with the trouble of the contradictions inherent to Western modernity (Parker 1989), we wonder how we might open space within our disciplinary location in psychology, to hear how this contradiction and tension within environmental discourses is experienced through our embodied and embedded subjectivities? How might psychology respond to the challenges of our times, not only by resisting its complicity in individualising responsibility, but also by drawing on the rich therapeutic resources which cluster around psychology's disciplinary locations? How might a movement within psychology toward nomadic figurations and subjectivities enable the processing of the environmental melancholia, contrasting desires, and profound grief evoked by our environmental conditions (Lertzman 2015)?

While such a movement resists figurations of rational, unitary subjectivity, it need not eschew numbers and counting altogether. As Haraway (2018) articulates, we can experience pain through numbers, and numbers can texture our pain; counting and numbers are themselves contextual and may be used in ethical ways (Strathern et al. 2019). Indigenous and decolonial mathematical approaches figure here—both in how Indigenous people have been counted as subjects, and in how Indigenous understandings of quantification are embedded within relational and material contexts (Walter and Andersen 2013). For example, Walter and Suina (2019) discuss how the dominant mode of counting Indigenous peoples within neocolonial research has been through deficit-based measures, using crime, poverty, substance abuse and domestic violence statistics to figure Indigenous people as deficit subjects. As a counter to these ongoing colonising machinations, Walter and Suina emphasise not only the need for a “fundamental disturbance of the Western logics of statistical data” (p. 233); efforts to incorporate Indigenous statistics into the Western academy need to retain and emphasise the embeddedness of Indigenous quantifications within the “Lifeworlds” and “dual intersubjectivities of first world dispossessed Indigenous peoples” (p. 234). As we remind ourselves that Indigenous knowledge “cannot be transplanted, like a skin graft, onto the diseased body of Western extractivist political and economic systems” (Meynell 2023, p. 16), we also wonder how such a shift to more intersubjective modes of quantification within climate literature would enable the question of ‘Is it okay to have a child?’ to be asked through relational, rather than solitary and melancholy, ethical trajectories?

As seen in the quantitative production of a deficit Indigenous subject (Walter and Suina 2019), the logic of advanced capitalism is melancholic and negative, fuelled by fear of difference (Braidotti 2008a). We see this logic at work in figurations of environmental melancholy, whereby unprocessed grief for environmental losses locks the subject in place, disabling their ability to psychically resist the structural forces producing the death of their world (Lertzman 2015). A paradoxical move within psychology to de-psychologise pain might enable this myopia to be creatively transformed, enabling an understanding of pain as a mobilising force, rather than an expression of abnormality or pathology (Braidotti 2008a). To consider the creative and transformative power of pain is not to disrespect pain, or to minimise the many unhealed wounds carried in our bodies and wider environments. It is, however, to shift our subjective becomings toward an ethics of relationality and affirmation, as this requires that we transform “the pain of loss into the active production of multiple forms of belonging and complex allegiances” (Braidotti 2008a, pp. 21–22).



As figured in this article, both desire and pain move us toward relational connections, as desire sharpens the edge of pain, and pain brings depth to desire. In this sense, desire and pain are not necessarily contrary forces; rather, they can work together to create the topological and qualitative leap in imagination needed to redefine subjectivity as “an expanded self, whose relational capacity is not confined within the human species, but includes non-anthropomorphic elements” (Braidotti 2019, p. 42). In this sense, climate change is not simply a problem of resources and reproductive choices, but of imagination. If we are to resist the logic and trajectory of advanced capitalism, we must imagine otherwise, for “how we live in the world is contingent upon how we imagine that world to be” (Neimanis and Loewen Walker 2014, p. 563).

Organising around both points of coherence and of difference (Braidotti 2019), feminist figures show us how to take such imaginative leaps, propelled into movement by pain, desire, and a sheer determination to not cede life on a warming planet to the deathly reifications of Man. Relentlessly historically specific, fleshed out as both killjoys and desiring feminist subjects, they expose advanced capitalism, population control and human exceptionalism as anything but ‘natural’—and the question of ‘Is it okay to have child?’ as requiring so much more than a binary ‘yes/no’ answer. In their webs of material-semiotic relations, feminist figurations might yet teach us how to become response-able to the pain of ecological worlds dying around us, as we too die with them.

Appendix

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