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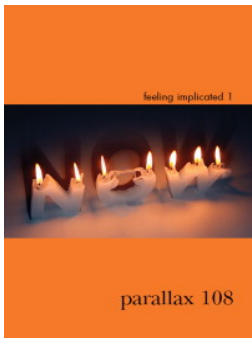
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Environmental Guilt, Political Mourning and Contestatory Citizenship: Responsibility and its Ambiguities

Mihaela Mihai

‘There’s scientific consensus that the lives of children are going to be very difficult. And it does lead young people to have a legitimate question: Is it OK to still have children?’¹ This 2019 Instagram statement by the US Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez validated some of the emotions and dilemmas experienced by many young people, who are facing up to the bleak future of a climate changed world.² That same year, the BirthStrikers, a women’s movement founded in the UK, publicly renounced procreation in response to ‘climate breakdown and civilisation collapse’.³ According to its founding leader, Blythe Pepino, the movement’s goal was not to judge people who have already had children or to discourage others from having any. In refusing to bring children into a world where they would have to live in ‘survival mode’, their main objective was communicative: to draw a powerful signal of alarm about the ecological crisis, out of sheer environmental despair at the failure of representative institutions to take meaningful action.⁴

The group carefully distanced themselves from anti-natalism and its unsavoury racialised history. Moreover, they were sober about the potential impact they could have in relation to a crisis of such magnitude and complexity. Losing hope at the mismatch between the state of the planet and ongoing failures of political will, they politicised the mourning of their unborn children and avowed their environmental guilt as contributors to the problem, hoping to inspire others to become activists and push politicians to act decisively on the climate front.⁵

This paper analyses this movement’s emotionally anchored plea and tries to answer the following questions: how should we interpret these women’s guilt-fuelled political stance? Can we read it as an exemplary, powerful act by citizens assuming political responsibility – for the future human generations and for the planet – against the background of inescapable implicatedness?⁶ And to what extent do they provide a perspective that could productively enlarge current imaginaries of how to live on an environmentally degraded planet? In wrestling with these questions, the paper hopes to offer a lucid assessment of the merits and limits of making women-as-mothers-in-waiting the focus of citizen mobilisation and on centring environmental activism on procreation. It argues that, while its avowal of responsibility via the expressive force of environmental guilt is an important political contribution within a (still) predominantly escapist public sphere, this discourse remains trapped in a

maternalistic, pro-natalist and anthropocentric imaginary that bears problematic implications for green politics. As a counter proposal, the paper introduces several alternative accounts of how one could tackle the link between reproduction and environmentalism, all of which advance visions of non-natalist kin-making predicated on the revaluation of human life and death.

The first section identifies the main discursive and affective parameters of the BirthStrike movement, against a complex landscape of emotional reactions to the fact of climate change. It also proposes to inscribe the Strikers in a tradition of political mourning that women worldwide have historically embraced. Crosspollinating insights from feminist and queer theory, the paper then critically analyses its strategies, highlighting the ethical and political ambiguity of the Strikers' approach. For a more productive angle into the relationship between procreation and environmentalism, the third section recuperates queer, African-American, Indigenous and eco-feminist proposals that invite a revaluation of kin as central to addressing both women's emancipation and environmental concerns. In reconfiguring motherhood, family and fertility, these thinkers avoid the trap of heteronormative natalism. Moreover, some of them provide us with innovative ideas about how to render kin-making compatible with more-than-human flourishing, thus avoiding unreflective forms of anthropocentric futurism.⁷ The conclusion summarises the paper's findings and offers a brief reality check.

I. Grief and Guilt: BirthStrikers' Political Mourning

The latest reports issued by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services highlight that human influence has warmed the climate at a rate unprecedented over the last 2000 years and that around 1 million species face extinction globally. While the scientific evidence accumulates, commensurate political action is lagging, as the flawed agreements reached at the latest UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties show. One can safely say, then, that human societies are 'dithering', to evoke Donna Haraway's diagnosis of the state of enhanced yet indecisive political mobilisation around the environment.⁸

Given that neither climate change nor extinction phenomena have uniform effects across the globe – they are experienced, narrated and resisted differently⁹ – the public debate remains deeply fragmented between different emotionally charged viewpoints. First, some of the most typical emotional responses are outright denialism, self-interested ignorance and delusional hope in technological fixes – all problematic, given the sheer scale, complexity and urgency of the problem.¹⁰ Second, aware of the poor mobilisational record of 'doom and gloom' scenarios, most climate scientists and activists strategically insist on the necessity of hope, lest political paralysis should ensue.¹¹ Third, on the margins of dominant public discourses, growing numbers of public intellectuals, theologians, journalists and members of

communities who have borne the brunt of the crisis (including historically exploited Indigenous people, racialised and impoverished populations, but also scientists and activists) are expressing environmental grief, anger, shame, disgust, disappointment and despair at the sustained pace of destruction.¹²

The BirthStrikers are part of this third category of individuals, emotionally attuned to the intertwined ecological crises. In a 2019 ARTE documentary entitled 'BirthStrike: Staying Childless to Save the Planet', the camera follows several white, middle-class British people – including BirthStrike's founder, Pepino – as they express deep grief and discuss their decision to have only one child or forgo procreation altogether.¹³ A steadfast sense of responsibility for the future generation, hopelessness at current political inertia, as well as a more diffuse feeling of 'ecological horror' permeates their testimonies, some of which invoke future shortages of food, population displacement and violence as inevitable aspects of a not-so-distant future.¹⁴ Given humanity's veering towards 'civilisational breakdown' Pepino argues there is no evidence to think that 'it is safe to have a family'.¹⁵ One interviewee declares that, in opting for an ecological lifestyle and foregoing a large family, she wants to be able to tell her only child that '[w]e knew this was coming, and we did what we could'.¹⁶ Quite aware of the privileges they enjoy as white, economically privileged inhabitants of an affluent country, others outline all the choices they consciously made to limit their impact on the biosphere, ranging from ethical consumption lifestyles, educating existing children about environmental vulnerabilities, confronting friends about their own contributions to the crisis, all the way to renouncing having children – who, they acknowledge guiltily, would leave a much heavier carbon footprint than children in impoverished areas of the globe.

Throughout, the painful emotional cost of limiting one's family is foregrounded. Women speak of their 'very immediate loss and very immediate grief'.¹⁷ Grandparents testify about their own regret: '[w]hat's the most natural thing? To be able to share a life together and have a child.'¹⁸ Potential mothers are featured engaging in harrowing processes of self-questioning and consultation with their male partners, emerging resolute in their decision to join the BirthStrike. Shots of wool-clad women roaming barren Scottish hills, visibly grieving a choice forced upon them, are juxtaposed to images of a women's choir singing a lament for the planet and of a happy nuclear family of three, enjoying a summer afternoon in the English countryside. The film also chronicles an art performance featuring a naked pregnant woman covering herself in soil that causes Pepino to tear up.

Mourning publicly their unborn children brings the women in the documentary together in a collective effort to acknowledge their environmental guilt and express concern about the urgency of the crisis, to responsabilise existing and potential parents and especially interpellate powerholders. In doing so, I suggest, they inscribe themselves in a long tradition of deploying mourning as part of subordinate citizens' contestatory politics.

Political mourning is one of the most powerful mechanisms for conferring moral value on lost lives. As Judith Butler eloquently argued, ‘grievability’ functions as an indicator of humans’ moral worth within a political context.¹⁹ Orchestrated by the state, ritualised mourning secures national hierarchies of worth and valour – as exemplified by the mourning spectacles staged after wars or other forms of political violence. In contrast, non-state actors’ counter-mourning can recognise those whose lives are considered expendable. For example, the public commemoration of the HIV-AIDS dead at a time when they were demonised, or that of the victims of police brutality by the Black Lives Matter movement show how public mourning can seek to transform a community’s moral structure:²⁰ ‘[m]ourning is a practice that opposes disavowal. Mourning both celebrates and grieves our precarious lives. It seeks connections, discovers secret kinships and recognizes intersubjective relations.’²¹

Women have historically mobilised as mothers, often politicising their grief for lost (usually male) relatives to have their deaths politically recognised and secure justice in the wake of large-scale, state-orchestrated violence. Through testimonies and practices of ritualised mourning, they tapped into dominant imaginaries of maternalism and women’s supposed apoliticism, which enabled them to be politically effective. The world-renowned Argentine *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* ritualised their grief to lead a protracted struggle with successive governments over the remains of their children, assassinated by the military between 1976 and 1983.²² Tamil women organised as mothers and wives, utilising their grief nationally and internationally to obtain redress at the end of the Sri Lankan civil war.²³ Grieving Israeli and Palestinian mothers sometimes joined in public vigils for the men killed in the long conflict.²⁴ Mothers of Russian soldiers fighting in Chechnya grieved, petitioned the government and encouraged desertion in ways that influenced public opinion about the war.²⁵ In all these cases, the mourning of disavowed deaths thematised them politically and bestowed value on them by affirming their significance for the community.

The BirthStrikers, I suggest, can be read as belonging to this tradition of contestatory mourning by groups located in a subordinate position within a community’s political space. They grieve publicly for the children they will never have – human beings who are refused a life due to the slow violence of environmental degradation. They represent these future beings’ interests in a world where, were they to be born, they would be condemned to a deprived and uncertain existence. In doing so, the Strikers point to the present moral salience of a future generation, whose well-being is being currently sacrificed by the ongoing, intensive use of fossil-fuel and planet-altering practices.²⁶ The strike invites a shift of perspective – an ethical reorientation at a time when the public debate in the global North is mostly dominated by denialism, self-interested, wilful ignorance, or an unwarranted techno-optimism.

Yet grief at foregoing motherhood is not the Strikers’ only emotional register. They couch their refusal of procreation in a two-pronged discourse:

not only do they suggest that procreation is unethical in the sense that it creates humans whose lives will be negatively impacted by the climate emergency. It is unethical also because procreation is the most impactful contribution an individual makes to the environmental problem, especially given current Northern levels of consumption.²⁷ Therefore, these women are moved to act both by their grief at the loss of their much desired, unborn children and by a sense of environmental guilt at how bearing children would exponentially compound their own existing contributions. Consequently, they are morally compelled to choose environmental activism over procreation.

One could therefore read their act of refusal as an assumption of a double responsibility: towards their unborn children, as mothers aiming to protect them from an unbearable fate, and towards the planet, to whose further destruction they refuse to further contribute individually. On the surface, speaking from a non-dominant position within affluent, capitalist democracies, they appear as exemplary cosmopolitan citizens: disillusioned with representative democracy and its capacity to address the current crises, their immediate addressee is the conscience of similarly situated individuals. Fuelled by a deep sense of despair at the lack of meaningful mitigation measures, (what they conceive to be) a private choice is politicised as self-sacrifice. The magnitude of the loss resulting from this radical choice is such that – the Strikers hope – even sceptics will be finally moved to act. Self-authorized martyrs of ecological decay, these women seek to summon into being not an anti-natalist constituency, but one of environmentally attuned citizens and responsible politicians – beyond the boundaries of the nation-state. And indeed, their public act of self-denial has resonated with many women who were already thinking through the ethical connection between reproduction and climate change, and who answered the Strikers' call.

The mobilisation of political mourning by the BirthStrikers triggered multiple criticisms. Virulent derision came from the right – as exemplified by the interview Pepino gave to Fox News.²⁸ The Strikers' approach backfired on the left as well: their insensitivity to the historical imbrication of racism and population control, their position as highly privileged white women who had not experienced the direct effects of climate change,²⁹ and the individualism of their politics led some to dismiss the project.³⁰ This paper shares critics' concerns about the Strikers' positionality as privileged subjects³¹ and their limited understanding of women's intersectional experience of reproduction and environmental burdens – flaws that the movement recognised when it disbanded in 2020.³² However, in what follows, I will focus on other aspects of their campaign. In particular, I will foreground their participation in what Diana Tietjens Meyers called 'matrigyno-idolatry', but also in heteronormative natalism and anthropocentric futurism.³³ It is to this set of criticisms that I now turn, in an attempt to pave the way for alternative imaginaries of kin-making that, I suggest, avoid the shortcomings in the BirthStrike's attempt to marry feminism and environmentalism.

II. The Ambiguous Politics of the BirthStrike: Natalist Maternalism and Anthropocentric Futurism

‘[T]here is something about birth, reproduction, so innate to all life, that, if someone says “I’m interrupting this natural cycle, this is because it’s a very extreme situation” people will wake up and listen.’³⁴ This statement, by a supporter of the UK-based BirthStrike, condenses the hopes the movement attached to its political testimony-making and ritualised mourning. Simultaneously, however, it locates the movement firmly within a conservative imaginary, along two axes: natalist maternalism and anthropocentric futurism. This section will focus on the political ambiguities of this movement, aiming to assess critically the BirthStrike’s potentialities as a form of contestatory citizenship. In particular, I will be examining its capacity to simultaneously affirm women’s political agency *and* draw attention to the environmental crisis in ways that expand – rather than contract – current visions of what is needed to tackle it.

In a late capitalist, liberal culture marked by an ideology of self-reliance and individualised responsibility, women’s birth-strikes potentially emerge as radical choices that enable them to ‘do their bit’: by engaging in socially unauthorised mourning – of unborn children – they appear as courageous heretics who renounce motherhood in a cosmopolitan mode of political action. Defying national boundaries, their appeal targets a human consciousness that could be moved to action if only people acknowledged the costs current actions pile on unrepresented future generations. In this sense, one could argue that they are expressively and deliberately making a drastic political decision: they reject the ‘motherhood mandate’³⁵ to securely place ecological degradation on the political agenda.

However, in speaking primarily as ‘mothers in waiting’ or ‘mothers-to-be’ and deploring their inability to live up to their ‘biological instinct’, the Strikers nonetheless affirm the validity of the mandate. And this is where the first ambiguity of the movement lies: however radical against the hegemonic cultural background, the decision to focus on reproduction as the ultimate, most effective site of environmental activism reflects both women’s politically subordinate position as citizens *and* their internalisation of the mandate itself. In other words, the Strikers prop up the dominant discourses that overdetermine women’s status and force them to play the ‘mother card’ to have their voices heard.³⁶ Their references to ‘curtailed instincts’³⁷ tap into worldviews that constitute ‘pregnancy and infant care as utopia’.³⁸ As I show below, this is bad *both* for women’s emancipation *and* for environmental politics.

Many feminist scholars have criticised the institution of motherhood and its recruiting of women into reproductive practices that, under the current patriarchal order, are not autonomously chosen and often harm their physical, emotional and economic wellbeing.³⁹ Ideas of ‘natural’ or ‘true’ womanhood – frequently imbricated with religious, medical, racial and nationalist

discourses – lead to a cult of the mother and to the stigmatisation of women who cannot or will not have children. As a regulative ideal, ‘motherhood encompasses the biological act of producing a child, but more specifically evokes the social relationship that is characterised by emotional intensity, selflessness, nurturing, and protection’.⁴⁰ Mythologies of ‘rapturous maternity’,⁴¹ self-sacrificial devotion, self-abandonment and ‘biological instinct’ essentialise, universalise and romanticise maternity, limiting the types of identities that women can inhabit. Reflected in policies, legislation, institutional set-ups, social practices and cultures of representation, these ideas permeate attitudes, behaviours, forms of embodiment and affective registers. As Meyers demonstrated, ‘[t]he discursive setting of women’s decisions about motherhood is overwhelmingly pronatalist. Heterosexuality is not only normative, it is imbued with a procreation imperative’.⁴² This imperative delimits the boundaries of the imaginable when it comes to women’s lives, herein including their political mobilisation.

In entering the political scene as ‘mothers denied’ and in adopting a discourse and iconography that upholds problematic assumptions about women’s roles, the Strikers do a great disservice to women’s struggles for emancipation. Their environmental activism is thus divorced from its complex ethical imbrication with other political struggles, centred on gender, race, sexuality or class.⁴³ Moreover, the strike implicitly places an unnecessary burden on individual women to take responsibility for the planet. It also misrecognises, or at best side-lines, forms of environmental politics that women have historically engaged in as intellectuals, scientists, activists, not as mothers.⁴⁴ The women included in the movement, as well as those interpellated by the Strikers, are all discursively constituted – in good natalist tradition – as ‘pre-pregnant’.⁴⁵ Consequently, by leaving uncontested women’s supposed closeness to nature – assumed to be rooted in their biological capacity to reproduce and their ‘natural instinct’ to nurture – the movement unduly celebrates (or at least assumes) existing or future mothers’ ecologically-attuned conscience.

Decades earlier, Adrienne Rich articulated one of the most powerful criticisms of the political deployment of maternalism:

I do not see the mother with her child as either more morally credible or more morally capable than other women. A child can be used as a symbolic credential, a sentimental object, a badge of self-righteousness. I question the implicit belief that only ‘mothers’ with ‘children of their own’ have a real stake in the future of humanity.⁴⁶

Though not formulated in relation to the environmental crisis, Rich’s statement captures another problematic dimension in the BirthStrikers’ approach: their assumption that women-as-mothers-in-waiting have a greater stake – and therefore an absolute moral standing – to be heard.⁴⁷ In this sense, the

movement can be said to participate in what Lee Edelman diagnosed as ‘reproductive futurism’, a hegemonic symbolic formation that centres on the figure of the Child, who ‘remains the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention’.⁴⁸ In agreement with Edelman, I suggest that the Child, as trope and as ‘repository of sentimentalised cultural identifications,’ colonises the Strikers’ political imaginary, thus affirming heterosexist reproductivism’s capacity ‘to regulate political discourse – to prescribe what will count as political discourse’.⁴⁹ The discursive and iconographic dominance of the Child in all their materials translate Strikers’ unreflective participation in an ideology of motherhood as a pre-political, naturalised experience – ignoring the ways in which the institution of motherhood has been historically constituted.⁵⁰ Moreover, their discourse reaffirms the superiority of bio-genetic kin over other forms of kin-making and care – forms that could, as I show below, open up alternative, less problematic frames for linking reproduction to environmental politics.

The second dimension of ambiguity in this movement’s discourses has to do with the fact that the Strikers’ vision is decisively anthropocentric. While avowing their individual contributions to the crisis, the Strikers’ guilt and grief do not track lost more-than-human lives as ethically salient in themselves, herein included the extinction of entire species or the destruction of whole ecosystems. Theirs is not the grief of those who mourn environmental losses as lamentable non-instrumentally, i.e., not exclusively in relation to human needs and interests, reproductive or otherwise.⁵¹ The Strikers centre instead on the figure of the unborn human Child, for the sake of whom all mitigation and conservation work should be undertaken. The prospective denial of life to potential humans is placed ethically above ongoing and extensive more-than-human extinctions and losses. Thus, their moralisation and politicisation of procreation contributes to ideologies of human exceptionalism, which underpin the social, political and economic order that produced the environmental crisis: humans overdetermine the scope of the Strikers’ moral imaginary.

Given these critiques, where can we find sources of inspiration to simultaneously address the imperative of limiting humans’ impact on the planet while ensuring women’s flourishing? How can we avoid the pitfalls of pro-natalist maternalism and anthropocentric futurism? It is to these questions that I turn, hoping to argue that feelings of environmental grief need to track more-than-human losses and that environmental guilt would be better translated in a form of environmentalism that re-imagines kin-making and care beyond bio-genetic frames.

III. Rethinking Kin in the Ruins

In this section, I turn to several theoretical projects of re-conceptualising kin-making, which, I suggest, avoid the limitations plaguing the Strikers’ approach to environmental mobilisation. I engage with queer, African-

American, Indigenous and eco-feminist theorists, who provide several imaginative proposals of how we could marry feminist and anti-racist struggles with environmentalism. The projects included below can be placed on a continuum of distance from the maternalist natalism and anthropocentrism of the BirthStrike: some require a more courageous leap of the imagination than others, but all point in the same direction, namely towards more ethically and historically sophisticated horizons of environmental responsibility. Queer, African-American, Indigenous and ecofeminist models of kin-making, often invisibilised in theoretical and political discussions about reproduction and parenthood, have already been recognised by various scholars in the Global North as valuable sources for rethinking the oppressive gender norms constituting the family, motherhood and reproduction, but also for addressing environmental imperatives of care for more-than-human beings and limiting human impact on the planet.⁵² They all propose – from different perspectives and relying on different theoretical resources – a reconfiguration of our idea of kin beyond bio-genetic imaginaries, but also, as we shall see, beyond life. That is, they invite us to reconsider how we could build relationships of kin – in life and in death – outside reproductive, natalist frameworks, in ways that simultaneously empower women, recognise histories of racial and sexual marginalisation and advance environmental goals. It is to these sources that I now turn, hoping to outline a range of options readers can rely on in their own quest to rethink the relationship between environmentalism, reproduction and feminism.

Queer theory provides rich insights for reconfiguring kin-making so as to avoid maternalism and heteronormative natalism. In her pioneering work, Shelley M. Park has invited her audience to de-stigmatise adoption as second-best to bio-genetic motherhood and look to multi-generational, queer and poly-maternal families for inspiration. ‘Coalitional families’ – created through adoption, divorce, repartnering and queer kinship – are sites of difference held together by ‘their long-term commitment to noticing, valuing and engaging difference within the context of a network of intersecting and overlapping intimate relationships’.⁵³ Such families presuppose coordination, an enduring sense of solidarity, negotiation, constant self-transformation and an ongoing labour of care, as well as an equitable distribution of burdens between their members. They also allow for a reinvention of motherhood, unshackled from biological or legal prescriptivism: ‘mothers in divorced, blended or poly families are creative with spaces, schedules, and finances as family configurations expand, contract, or transform’.⁵⁴

As Patricia Hill Collins documented, in African-American communities, biological mothers share the labour of mothering with ‘othermothers’ – grandmothers, sisters, aunts, cousins but also neighbours and ‘fictive kin’ who take on childcare responsibilities.⁵⁵ Community-based childcare – what bell hooks calls ‘revolutionary parenting’ – disrupts proprietary understandings of parenthood typical of affluent, middle-class families in the Global North, contributes to women’s emancipation and enriches children’s experience and

learning, enabling them to develop caring relationships with adults beyond biological kin.⁵⁶ Moreover, these networks of care – formal or informal – constitute the ground for African-American women’s political activism: responsible for a variety of dependents, they develop important commitments and affective ties, which lead them to engage politically in a variety of projects in their community and beyond.⁵⁷

Yet fictive kin-making need not be limited to the living within such contexts. Ruha Benjamin invites us to extend our understanding of kin to ‘the materially dead/spiritually alive ancestors in our midst’.⁵⁸ She recuperates ‘spiritual kinship’ as a counterweight to what Orlando Patterson called ‘natal alienation’, i.e., the racialised destruction of kin and heritage, both material and immaterial.⁵⁹ Through sustained, commemorative affirmation of kinship with victims of racist violence – such as enslavement, mass incarceration or police brutality – African Americans seek to undo the kin- and community-shattering effects of white supremacy. In the process, they offer yet another critical perspective, showing how kin can be forged in non-genetic, non-maternalist, trans-generational terms. Alongside adoption, foster-parenting and extended networks of ‘cousins’, spiritual kinship built under adverse social conditions paves the way for denaturalising bio-genetic relationships and imagining our way towards alternative configurations, which could simultaneously advance feminist, anti-racist and environmental goals.

Indigenous practices of extended kin-making beyond bio-genetic relations is yet another source for denaturalising the hegemonic family structure, as imposed by colonial settlers, and which still haunts gendered ideologies of respectability. As Kim Tallbear argues, women enjoyed higher degrees of authority and power in pre-colonial Dakota extended kin formations, which involved both biological and non-biological associations.⁶⁰ Indigenous ontologies are often predicated on an understanding of kin that sits uneasily with bio-genetical ideas of ancestry and that reach beyond both the human and the living.⁶¹ Thus, Tallbear outlines alternative futures for kinship between more-than-humans, wherein caretaking and love – rather than biology – constitutes the ‘glue’ of a richer understanding of kin, wherein responsibilities were shared to enable collective flourishing, including that of more-than-human beings.

Queer, African-American and Indigenous forms of kin-making beyond biology and beyond death shed a critical light on BirthStrikers’ heteronormative, pro-natalist maternalism and enable our imagination to travel beyond it. Apart from certain Indigenous ontologies, they remain steeped in an anthropocentric morality. Nonetheless, I suggest that we can build creatively on their insights about kin beyond bio-genetic reproduction in a way that recognises not only their potential to empower women but also their capacity to contribute to difficult conversations about how to limit humanity’s increasingly destructive impact on the planet. In what follows, I rely on these theorists’ critical contributions, but also look further afield to eco-feminist

reflections for discriminate and morally cautious understandings of kin and posterity beyond reproduction and beyond human exceptionalism.

In her single-authored *Staying with the Trouble* and the collective volume she edited with Adele E. Clark, *Making Kin Not Population*, Donna Haraway invites feminists located in radically different cultural horizons to tackle environmentally the issue of reproduction, while simultaneously paying attention to histories of imperial extermination, racialised reproductive oppression, restricting gender roles for women and the devastation of ecosystems and biota. Together with her collaborators, she proposes a pro-kin, non-natalist, multi-species project that attempts to ensure the reduction of human population over several hundred years – which also involves dismantling the exploitative, unsustainable agriculture and industries necessary to service this population – while pursuing multi-species environmental justice. A radical reinvention of kin is at the core of their proposal: kin-making in non-bio-genetic, off-category, non-coercive modalities is essential to these authors' efforts to address several pressing questions:

How to nurture durable multi-generational non-biological kin-making, while humans everywhere transition to vastly less reproduction? [...] How to deter on-going anti-feminist population control efforts while generating innovative discourses that legitimate non-natalist policies and choices? [...] How to build non-natalist kin-making technologies and sciences in housing, travel, urban design, food growing, environmental rehabilitation, etc (original emphasis).⁶²

The project is complex and nuanced, structurally grounded and historically sensitive.⁶³ It insists on tackling environmental degradation alongside the enduring subordination of the poor, people of colour, women, Indigenous peoples, non-human animals and eco-systems. It recognises the disproportionate contributions people in affluent capitalist societies make to the crisis, given highly differentiated patterns of consumption. The overall argument about reducing human population is compatible with a discriminate analysis of who bears responsibility for the problem and how it can be addressed ethically, without furthering existing patterns of historical dispossession, marginalisation and genocide.⁶⁴

Within a moral horizon that recognises more-than-human beings as ethically salient, it becomes possible to advocate for the reduction of the human numbers by criticising hegemonic ideas of women's worth that centre on maternalism and to support alternative visions of human flourishing beyond making babies, especially in 'wealthy, high-consumption and misery exporting regions, nations, communities, families and social classes', while simultaneously enabling communities affected by historical and ongoing genocide to have more babies.⁶⁵ Alongside Queer, African-American and Indigenous perspectives, Haraway thus helps us to think lucidly and discriminately about reproduction and women's empowerment not in isolation, but in light of the current environmental and biodiversity crisis.

Haraway's most ambitious proposal is to decentre bio-genetic reproduction to make space for kin relations with more-than-human mortal earthlings. For her, 'kin must mean something other/more than entities tied by ancestry or genealogy, including population, family *and species*' (my emphasis).⁶⁶ She argues for 'kinnovation' – a process of developing mutual relationships of care and nurture across genetic borders, human and more-than-human, in multi-species relationships of co-flourishing that refuse a straightforward human exceptionalism and bio-genetic natalism.⁶⁷ Thus, in contrast to the BirthStrikers, the project invites women to dis-identify from the maternal script and requires a recuperation of non-biological practices of care and kin-making as central to their emancipation *and* their environmental activism. To the hegemonic maternalist utopia, it opposes a future predicated on dissolving 'the ties of both genealogy and kin, and kin and species'.⁶⁸ Haraway and her collaborators focus especially on recuperating marginalised communities' practices of oddkin-making, as they emerge from political struggles for survival – as outlined above in the discussion of African-American and Queer understandings of family-making. Foregrounding these practices helps thematise the constructed nature of all kin to advance women's liberation from maternal natalism and extend our practices of care beyond humans, thus nurturing the flourishing of multiple species on this planet.

The practical implications of this multi-species justice project are complex. The slogan 'Make kin, not babies' is not facile: its proponents insist on thinking through the far-reaching implications for migration, education, urban planning, land rights, public health, architecture and agriculture. The project is incompatible with capitalist extractivist 'business-as-usual', with panicked narratives of 'aging populations' and 'underserving migrants'. Its goal is to radically transform women's traditional gender roles, but also to reconfigure hostile visions of migrants – inviting publics to see them as central to reinventing kin-making outside biological, but also racist and nationalist, projects. Moreover, the entire material infrastructure of contemporary societies needs adjusting to make oddkinship possible and manageable practically, paying attention to *how* and *where* the impact of variously positioned human populations could be lessened in ethical and historically informed ways. Environmental guilt should thus inform not a BirthStrike, but kinnovation and the radical configuration of human infrastructures. Only thus can we simultaneously advance women's emancipation and make multi-species flourishing possible.

Moreover, for critical eco-feminists, current forms of political mourning need expanding. What needs grieving is not unborn children, but the far-reaching, past and ongoing more-than-human deaths.⁶⁹ Like the Strikers, ecofeminists recognise the value-conferring function of grief. Unlike them, however, they reject the focus on the figure of the human Child and hope that mourning ecological loss can promote humans' taking responsibility for 'entangled shared living and shared dying' on this planet.⁷⁰

Critical eco-feminists' grieving for the more-than-human debunks the exceptionality of both human life and death. Recognising human entanglement with the more-than-human involves reckoning with two things. First, that lost more-than-human lives do trigger processes of grieving in humans, generally but especially if they learn to live *with* off-category kin, in the spirit of reciprocal nurturing.⁷¹ Second, that human death is not exceptional, given that 'we are food and that through death we nourish others'.⁷² To put it differently, human death needs to be understood 'in terms of reciprocity in the earth community'.⁷³ Inviting us to turn away from ideas of death that reinforce humans' separation from the environment and to orient ourselves towards Indigenous ontologies of entanglement, ecofeminist Val Plumwood hopes humans will learn to see 'death as a nurturing, material continuity/reunion with ecological others, especially the lives and landforms of country'.⁷⁴

What does this reconceptualisation of death have to do with the BirthStrike and the refusal of procreation? In concluding this section, I suggest that such a vision of human death underpins perhaps the most radical account – in relation to the status-quo – of how we can rethink kin-making at a time of accelerating environmental crisis. While Ruha Benjamin articulated a form of kinship beyond death with spiritual ancestors, I now turn to a perspective that reconceptualises death as fertility.

In an essay entitled 'Soil' published in the volume *Dying World: Stories of Grief and Courage from the Global Church* Emma Lietz Bilecky reflects critically on her own implication in the ecological crisis, acknowledging her body is 'at best an inconvenience to the "natural world", at worst sustained by violence against it'.⁷⁵ Grappling with her own guilt, she confesses that, like others of her generation, she thinks that 'becoming mother, ancestor is at times unthinkable'.⁷⁶ Within an anthropocentric, individual framework, the refusal to procreate, i.e., the refusal to go on bio-genetically in the future, fills her with fear, even though, she suspects, it might help her gain a clear conscience. Within a non-anthropocentric framework, however, her own physical finality is no finality at all – for in death she will belong to another order of fertility. In soil, the living encounter the dead in chains of nurturance, at a 'dirty table': 'whether we acknowledge it or not, we are for ever involved in soil's making and unmaking, as long as we are living and long after, too'.⁷⁷

Lietz Bilecky thus offers an ethical reflection on human procreation, which she cross-pollinates with an ecological reading of the Biblical '[y]ou are dust, to dust you shall return'.⁷⁸ She suggests that the dread emerging from a decision to forgo biological motherhood is a symptom of the anthropocentric hubris that needs giving up. Taking our imagination travelling far beyond the horizon of anthropocentrism and maternalism enables us to think about kin-making in orders of posterity that stretch beyond human death, in ways that acknowledge all humans' deep implicatedness with other species.

All perspectives reviewed in this section avoid the limitations of natalism and open new vistas on how all humans – not just women – can think creatively about kin-making in order to tackle the environmental crisis. Some help us go beyond the terms imposed by human exceptionalism. Exciting forms of innovation emerge from experiences of racial marginalization, queer families, memorial practices of building community with spiritual ancestors and nurturing fertility in death – all of which invite a reconceptualisation of kin as relationships of care and mutual nurturing beyond bio-genetics, in more conservative or more radical ways. From the more currently intelligible revaluation of human adoption, foster-parenting and cousinage, to kin-making across species, all the way to spiritual and material kin-making in death, these scholars invite a difficult, yet highly necessary conversation about how we can sensitively and discriminately approach women’s emancipation environmentally.

IV. Conclusions

How do we respond to our environmental guilt and take political responsibility once we recognise the ‘numerous, wide-ranging, cross-scalar, and everyday interactions that bond individuals and societies to networks of close and distant others, including other people and more-than-human beings: animals, plants, rivers, seas, and more’?⁷⁹ This is the key question at the heart of this paper, which sought to decentre maternalist, pro-natalist and anthropocentric models of contestatory politics and instead foreground moral imaginaries that renounce the figure of the human Child as the exclusive focus of green politics. In re-evaluating human lives and deaths in relation to the more-than-human, such approaches simultaneously advance feminist, anti-racist and environmental politics.

This is not to deny that the BirthStrikers kick-started important conversations about individuals’ implicatedness in the planetary crisis. Given the dominant ideological constellation under which they operate, their avowal of guilt and politicisation of mourning did catalyse discussions about the responsibilities and response-abilities that privileged individuals bear, especially since they do not feel most of the burdens and costs of anthropogenic devastation.⁸⁰ However, due to their ethical ambiguity in relation to women’s gender roles and their unabashed anthropocentrism, they fail to provide an appropriate response to the crisis. Instead, I suggested that a more productive way forward lies with training our imagination to ‘go visiting’ beyond bio-genetics, beyond species and beyond death.⁸¹

Notes

¹ Green, “A World Without Children.”

² A 2021 study surveying 10,000 young people (aged 16-25 years) found that 59% were very or extremely concerned about climate change, while over 50% stated they were sad, angry, powerless, helpless and

guilty (Hickman et al., “Young People’s Voices”). For a small study of reproductive decisions being affected by climate change, see also Astor, “No Children Because of Climate Change?”

³ Hunt, “BirthStrikers.”

⁴ *Conceivable Future*, a US-based organisation, similarly focuses on highlighting the impact

of climate change on reproductive justice. The two questions animating the group are: '[h]ow do you protect your health and your children in an increasingly dangerous and toxic environment? How do you decide whether or not to have a baby when a healthy and stable future is increasingly jeopardized?'

⁵ Anxiety about reproduction caused by an awareness of the threats posed by climate change in the Global North has been increasingly documented in the media over the last 3-4 years: Astor, "No Children Because of Climate Change?"; Scheinman, "The Couples Rethinking Kids Because of Climate Change"; *Birthstrike*, Bailey, "BirthStrike"; Britton-Purdy, "The Concession to Climate Change I Will Not Make"; Wray, "Climate Emotions Podcast and Climate Conversations over the Holidays"; Stall-Paquet, "The Women Pledging"; Green, "A World Without Children"; Wray, *Generation Dread*.

⁶ Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject*.

⁷ This category includes humans alongside other entities such as non-human animals and ecosystems.

⁸ Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*.

⁹ Morton, *Hyperobjects*; Rose et al., *Extinction Studies*.

¹⁰ Norgaard, *Living in Denial*; Mann and Toles, *The Madhouse Effect*.

¹¹ Cassegård and Thörn, "Toward a Postapocalyptic Environmentalism?."

¹² Ottum, "Feeling Let Down"; Albrecht, *Earth Emotions*; Verlie, *Learning to Live with Climate Change*; Fredericks, *Environmental Guilt and Shame*. For a systematic typology of eco-emotions, see Pihkala, "Toward a Taxonomy of Climate Emotions."

¹³ For discussions of the racialisation and class in Northern environmentalism, see for example Guha and Alier, *Varieties of Environmentalism*.

¹⁴ Clark, "Ecological Grief and Anthropocene Horror."

¹⁵ "BirthStrike."

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 12:28.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 31:22.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 17:06.

¹⁹ Butler, *Frames of War*.

²⁰ Eng and Kazanjian, *Loss*.

²¹ Stănescu, "Species Trouble."

²² Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood*.

²³ Kodikara, "Inscriptions and Erasures, Grief, Hope and Rights."

²⁴ Flam, "Politics of Grief and Grieving 'Mothers' Movements."

²⁵ Caiazza, *Mothers and Soldiers*.

²⁶ Scientist Peter Kalmus provocatively coined the term 'neocide' to describe 'the deliberate killing of young people and future generations' (Kalmus, "Climate Depression Is Real").

²⁷ Bailey, "BirthStrike." The ARTE documentary gives a graphical representation of the CO₂ emissions having a child emits in the Global North, as opposed to the Global South (11:25).

²⁸ *Some People Too Scared to Have Kids*.

²⁹ On the need to bring together environmentalism and environmental justice objectives, dismantle the whiteness and social elitism of Northern environmentalism and advance an 'ecointersectional analysis', see Thomas, *The Intersectional Environmentalist*.

³⁰ Koranne, "Why 'Birth Strikes' Aren't the Right Way to End the Climate Crisis."

³¹ For recent studies of the racial, classed and ableist dimensions of environmentalism, see Bell and Bevan, "Beyond Inclusion?."

³² McMullen and Dow, "Ringing the Existential Alarm." Some statements featured in the ARTE documentary still feature some problematic racial undertones: '[w]e might have to be fighting for food or protecting our vegetable garden from people who come and steal from us while there will be civil unrest from lots of climate refugees' ("Birthstrike," 12:15).

³³ Meyers, "The Rush to Motherhood."

³⁴ "BirthStrike," 3:22.

³⁵ Gotlib, "But You Would Be the Best Mother."

³⁶ Macgregor, *Beyond Mothering Earth*.

³⁷ "BirthStrike," 20:40.

³⁸ Meyers, "The Rush to Motherhood," 761.

³⁹ Rich, *Of Woman Born*; Gillespie, "Childfree and Feminine"; Douglas and Michaels, *The Mommy Myth*; Kelly, "Women's Voluntary Childlessness"; Mezey and Pillard, "Against the New Maternalism"; Park, *Mothering Queerly, Queering Motherhood*; McRobbie, "Feminism, the Family and the New 'Mediated' Maternalism"; Leite, "(M)Othering"; Peterson, "Fifty Shades of Freedom"; Gotlib, "But You Would Be the Best Mother"; Reed, "Lesbian, Bisexual and Queer Motherhood"; Gimenez, *Feminism, Pronatalism, and Motherhood*; LaChance, *The Maternal Tug*; Averett, "Queer Parents, Gendered Embodiment and the de-Essentialisation of Motherhood."

⁴⁰ Stearney, "Feminism, Ecofeminism, and the Maternal Archetype."

⁴¹ Meyers, "The Rush to Motherhood," 746.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 758.

- ⁴³ For a complex account of the tensions between anti-natalism and feminist anti-racist politics, see Seymour, “Down with People.”
- ⁴⁴ Macgregor, *Beyond Mothering Earth*.
- ⁴⁵ For an analysis of pronatalist marginalisation of women in the Global North, see “But You Would Be the Best Mother.”
- ⁴⁶ Rich, *Of Woman Born*, xxiv.
- ⁴⁷ That mothers or parents in general have a greater stake and are more attuned to the climate crisis is a common assumption in environmental activism. Many activists write as parents (existing or to be) to secure moral authority and political support.
- ⁴⁸ Edelman, *No Future*, 3. To clarify, for Edelman, the Child is a regulating figure of political and cultural discourse that colonises the political realm of the thinkable.
- ⁴⁹ Edelman, *No Future*, 11.
- ⁵⁰ See Lakind and Adsit-Morris, “Future Child.” They argue that the child dominating environmental imaginations as in need of rescuing is usually constituted as white.
- ⁵¹ Cunsolo, “Climate Change as the Work of Mourning.”; Ray, “Loss, Love and Mourning”; Barnett, “Vigilant Mourning.”
- ⁵² For models of caregiving beyond biological kin outside of the Global North, see, e.g. Zhao and Zhang, “Parental Childcare Support”; Shang, “The Role of Extended Families in Childcare and Protection”; Mathambo and Gibbs, “Extended Family Childcare Arrangements in a Context of AIDS”; Conn, Marks and Coyne, “A Three-Generation Study.”
- ⁵³ Park, *Mothering Queerly, Queering Motherhood*.
- ⁵⁴ Park, “Queering and Querying Motherhood.”
- ⁵⁵ Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*.
- ⁵⁶ hooks, *Feminist Theory*.
- ⁵⁷ Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 189–90.
- ⁵⁸ Benjamin, “Black AfterLives Matter,” 48.
- ⁵⁹ Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*.
- ⁶⁰ Tallbear, “Making Love and Relations.”
- ⁶¹ Rose, *Wild Dog Dreaming*; Portillo, *Sovereign Stories and Blood Memories*.
- ⁶² Clarke and Haraway, 4–5 (italics in original).
- ⁶³ It is also radically different from Patricia MacCormack’s Voluntary Human Extinction project in “Embracing Death, Opening the World”, who argues for the extinction of humans as the ultimate form of environmental activism.
- ⁶⁴ Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 29.
- ⁶⁵ Haraway, “Making Kin in the Chthulucene,” 94.
- ⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 92.
- ⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 209. This differs from Deborah Bird Rose’s account of multi-species kin – which, building on Indigenous imaginaries, she takes to be a matter of ontology, rather than one of innovation (Rose, *Wild Dog Dreaming*).
- ⁶⁸ Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 102.
- ⁶⁹ Scholars in the environmental humanities have foregrounded the value-conferring function of mourning on socially disavowed losses. Dooren, *Flight Ways*; Barnett, “Vigilant Mourning.”
- ⁷⁰ Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 39.
- ⁷¹ Plumwood, *The Eye of the Crocodile*.
- ⁷² Haraway uses the concept of ‘compost’ to make a similar point about the inescapable material imbrication of human and more-than-human lives (Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*).
- ⁷³ Plumwood, *The Eye of the Crocodile*, 91.
- ⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 92.
- ⁷⁵ Lietz Bilecky, “Soil,” 77.
- ⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 77.
- ⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 76.
- ⁷⁸ Gen. 3:19.
- ⁷⁹ Tschakert et al., “Multispecies Justice,” 1.
- ⁸⁰ Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*.
- ⁸¹ Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*.

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