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“Say no to life”:

Reproductive Futurism and Antinatalist Responses to Environmental Crisis in Contemporary Britain

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Abstract: Environmentalist discourse has long relied on various reproductive futurisms, ranging from the now almost clichéd appeals to our ethical responsibilities to future generations to more radical demands to end human dominance over the planet by ending humanity itself. Such antinatalist stances are burdened by the legacies of Malthusianism, colonialism, classicism, and racism, and tend to pit current humans against future ones. This article explores the intersection of climate change discourse and antinatalist ideas in contemporary British public discourse and cultural expressions by considering some recent examples which highlighted tensions between the individual and collective spheres. These include much publicised calls to reduce the human population for environmental reasons, spectacularised poverty and its associations with uncontrolled reproduction, as well as controversial contradictions between the public stances of prominent figures on overpopulation and their personal reproductive choices. This is followed by a reading of the satirical take on antinatalist environmental policies presented in the recent dystopian novel *The Offset* (2021), published under the pen name Calder Szewczak. The novel, set in a future Britain ravaged by climate change, troubles the ethics of environmentalist antinatalism by stressing the great individual costs of enforced antinatalist policies and showing how easily environmentalist measures morph into ecofascism. Finally, the quandary of imagining an ahuman future is briefly discussed. While all imaginaries of the future necessarily entail considerations of reproduction, art allows for insightful probing of nonreproductive futurisms.

Keywords: antinatalism; environmentalism; population; cultural representation; satire

1. Environmentalist Reproductive Futurisms

Both the notion that human reproduction binds us to ethical environmental choices and its converse, that ethical reproductive choices are central to leading environmentally sound lives, are deeply engrained in environmentalist discourse. In short, to borrow Lee Edelman's useful formulation, environmentalism has long been premised on various reproductive futurisms. At the centre of Edelman's analysis is the idealised, symbolic figure of the child who, through metonymic equation with the future, "remains the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics" (2004: 3).

In environmentalist discourse, reproductive futurism is often expressed as an ethical responsibility to future human generations. In his opening speech delivered on 1 November 2021 at the UN Climate Change Conference in Glasgow (COP26), Boris Johnson stated that, if world leaders were to fail to counteract climate change, they would be judged by "children not yet born and their children", asserting that the conference was "centre stage before a vast and uncountable audience of posterity" (2021). On the other hand, however, the fear that human population growth will outpace available resources in a manner that will inevitably lead to widespread famine and death has long been prominent in environmentalist thought. This idea, popularised by Thomas Malthus in his *Essay on the Principle of Population* and premised on the notion that there is a "constant tendency in all animate life to increase beyond the nourishment prepared for it" (1973 [1798]: 5), was again disseminated by, for example, Paul Ehrlich's apocalyptic *The Population Bomb* (1968).¹ These two reproductive futurisms coexist seemingly frictionlessly in environmentalist discourse, broadly speaking: in order to reduce human impact on the environment, fewer humans need to

¹ Robert J. Mayhew has identified a "publication bomb" in 1958–1976, referring both to new editions of Malthus's essay and popular publications like that of Ehrlich, which coincided with the birth of modern environmentalism (2016: 261). Mayhew is however careful not to exaggerate the importance of this "Malthusian moment" (*ibid.*) in the overall development of the broader environmental movement.

be born; if future generations are to enjoy a liveable world, these must be smaller than current ones.

The metonymic child of environmentalist reproductive futurisms thus encompasses both individual reproduction choices and the collective results of those choices. At the collective level, population looms large enough to have been dubbed the "P-word" by Patrick Curry (2006: 124). Contemporary critics have largely reiterated the reasoning already presented in *The Legacy of Malthus*, Allan Chase's scathing critique of Ehrlich and others for basing their arguments "on subjective moral judgments about the intrinsic value of the lives of human beings other and poorer than oneself" rather than sound scientific evidence (1980 [1975]: 403). As Michelle Murphy has noted, although *population* appears to be a neutral term, it is incessantly racialised: "Race is the grammar and ghost of population" (2017: 135). Similarly, Kolson Schlosser has traced the geopolitical influence of neo-Malthusianism during the Cold War, arguing that "[m]odels of a natural relationship between population growth, scarcity and conflict" were used to legitimise interventions in the developing world (2009: 479). Discussions of population therefore pose a particular quandary for contemporary feminists and environmentalists, who are rightly wary of raising concerns about population control, given the murky legacies of fascism, eugenics, and colonial rule in the area of reproductive health. This reluctance has repeatedly been noted: Greg Garrard asserts that "[i]n ecocriticism, just as in mainstream environmentalism, population is virtually unspeakable", shrouded in a "pall of historical guilt" (2012: 55), while Lawrence Buell has described how most environmental researchers only "gingerly" approach "the specter of overpopulation" when it is not "dismissed as a canard or shunned as taboo" (2016: 19).

Although ecocritics remain loath to discuss population issues – and Buell has even identified a shift in literary apocalypse away from the once-prominent trope of overpopulation (*ibid.*: 23), thus perhaps limiting their opportunity to do so – the issue of population has recently received attention from prominent, and somewhat unexpected, intellectual quarters. Donna Haraway's repeated call to "Make Kin, Not Babies" (e.g. 2016: 5–6) in *Staying With the Trouble*, followed by further explorations of human reproduction and population in the 2018 volume *Making Kin Not*

Population, co-edited with Adele E. Clarke, has rightly attracted attention and criticism. Jade Sasser, for instance, has argued that Haraway's suggestion fails to present an alternative to "the focus on numbers that grounds understandings of population–environmental problems in biological processes" (2018: 150). The treatment of demography in Clarke and Haraway's volume has been criticised by Banu Subramaniam for adopting a predominantly North American perspective on fertility as well as the "easy, familiar, and opportunistic logic" of population (2018), while Katherine Dow and Janelle Lamoreaux likewise specifically reject the suggestion that population has become a taboo topic for the political left due to pronatalism, instead ascribing this reluctance to "scholarly commitments to antiracism, anticolonialism, and reproductive justice" (2020: 478). Dow and Lamoreaux's critique – which contains many salient elements – thus largely follows the pattern identified by Garrard and Buell, who have both called for ecocritical contributions that raise population issues.

Patricia MacCormack's advocacy of ahumanism could be seen as both one answer to the calls by Garrard and Buell – as indeed could Haraway's recent ventures into the population debate – as well as a continuation of Edelman's argument. MacCormack too draws on queer discourse, describing ahumanism as a way of "queering our relationship with our future" (2020: 51). Whereas Edelman identifies queerness as "the side of those *not* 'fighting for the children,' the side outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism" (2004: 3), MacCormack in effect calls for all humanity to join this side. In doing so, her position shares the antinatalist impulse of philosopher David Benatar, known particularly for his titular assertion that it is *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence* (2006), although she fails to engage more than superficially with his arguments. One prominent ahuman aim is human extinction, celebrated by MacCormack as "a vitalistic, ethical, joyous opportunity to both live the life immanent to us and prevent the detrimental expressions and affects of any further human lives to come" (2014b: 11). Her vision is not one of utter nihilism but is nevertheless completely disanthropic: "Extinction means nothing in ethical consideration when single, real

lives in their unique emergence and duration are the crux of relational considerations between lives" (MacCormack 2014a: 179). Ahumanism thus addresses the population issue by focusing on the individual rather than the collective level, and, in doing so, avoiding some of the traps inherent in discussions of population sketched above.

In what follows, I explore the intersection of climate change discourse and antinatalism in contemporary British culture by first looking at the tensions between the private/individual and the public/collective spheres in some recent discussions of population and reproduction. Next, I examine the satiric representation of antinatalist policies in the recent dystopian novel *The Offset* (2021), cowritten by Natasha C. Calder and Emma Szewczak and published under the pen name Calder Szewczak. The novel troubles the idea that environmentalist antinatalism is necessarily more ethical than pronatalism, and the difficult personal choices made to become ahuman are portrayed in bleak detail. As the examples under discussion illustrate, antinatalist ahuman becoming is a highly contested area in British public discourse and cultural expressions. Imagining an ahuman future remains a quandary, as briefly discussed in the final section, where I consider whether antinatalism leads beyond reproductive futurism.

2. (Not) Having Children in the Public Eye

LGBTQ groups have in recent decades frequently campaigned for marriage and adoption equality – successfully in some cases and as yet unsuccessfully in many others. In the United Kingdom, the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013 came into effect in 2014 and allowed same-sex couples to marry in England and Wales. This right was enshrined in Scotland in 2014, and finally in early 2020 in Northern Ireland. Such gains may well be regarded as the further entrenchment of conventional reproductive notions and are politically quite far removed from Edelman's celebration of queerness as the eschewment of reproductive futurism. However, some 'queer' notions about reproduction have become increasingly mainstream, as for example evidenced in the 2006 addition of the adjective *child-free* to the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The

entry emphasises individual prerogative: "Designating or characteristic of a person who does not have children, esp. by choice" ("child-free" 2022). The freedom implied in the definition contrasts with the negative connotations of 'being childless', thus resonating with MacCormack's repudiation of regarding future human absence as a sacrifice (2014a: 183–184). Current levels of childlessness in the United Kingdom are at around 20% (Berrington 2017: 57), with an apparent class differential: women with tertiary education "are roughly twice as likely as women with low levels of education to remain childless" (*ibid.*: 70), for reasons varying from involuntary childlessness due to delayed childbearing to voluntarily child-freeness.

In 2005, Jessica Autumn Brown and Myra Marx Ferree identified a pronatalist, pronationalist agenda in British print media that frames "the transition to low fertility as a crisis for the nation" (20). Stated differently, conservative politics hinges on a very specific reproductive futurism in which the 'desired' are required to reproduce to ensure the future of the nation. However, antinatalism has in recent years increasingly been represented as an ethical pro-environment decision, rather than a selfish lifestyle choice.² The UK charity Population Matters, patroned by David Attenborough, has repeatedly (e.g. n.d.: 1–4 & 2020: 19) connected a growing human population to the increased likelihood of exceeding the "planetary boundaries" demarcating a "safe operating space for humanity" as identified by Johan Rockström *et al.* (2009: 472–475). British news media have also frequently cited research suggesting that if a US family were to choose to have one child less, this would result in "the same level of emissions reductions as 684 teenagers who choose to adopt comprehensive recycling for the rest of their lives" (Wynes & Nicholas 2017: 3). *The Guardian* has for instance used the headline "Want to Fight Climate Change? Have Fewer Children" (Carrington 2017) while *The Independent* asked "Should I Factor Climate Change

² A study conducted on UK samples by Ekelund and Ask indicates that others, especially those with or who plan to have children, expect child-free people to later regret their decision, and that it is mainly those planning to become parents who "consider the childfree to be morally inferior and less likable" (2021: 284).

Into Deciding Whether to Have Kids?" (Ng 2021). A YouGov poll conducted in September 2019 showed that for at least some childless/child-free adult Britons the answer was yes: 9% indicated world overpopulation as a reason for not wanting children while 5% indicated climate change (Ibbetson 2020).³ In these reports and polls, the individual choice to abstain from contributing to population growth is thus frequently cast as an action for the collective good and future survival of humanity. At the same time, however, individualising environmental responsibility appears symptomatic of a neoliberal, business-as-usual approach characterised by prevarication both on the part of governments and big polluters.

In debates on reproductive freedom the focus is often on women and their bodies, but in January 2022, *The Guardian* reported on the rise of the "climate vasectomy", or men deciding against procreation based on their concerns about climate change and overpopulation (Usborne 2022). There is little indication of consistent adherence to an antinatalist ethic in the voluntarily child-free, bar those subscribing to the ideas promoted by charities like Population Matters, the short-lived BirthStrike movement or the Voluntary Human Extinction Movement (VHEMT), all of which have received considerable press coverage. From an ahuman point of view this may well be a case of the end justifying the means: even anthropocentric concerns about living standards may lead to the gradual elimination of humanity.

The very idea of overpopulation tends to be infused with classism, in addition to racism and sexism; as Schlosser notes, it is "about the *who* of reproduction as much as the *how many*" (2009: 479). Class thus provides a useful lens for understanding some reactions to the making public of reproductive choices. Indeed, members of the royal family, a veritable monument to both class divides and nationalist reproductive futurism, have sparked some controversy with their remarks on population. During an address to the United Nations, Prince Philip asserted that while science and technology should be credited with improving the

³ Many more participants, however, indicated that they were too old to have children (23%), did not want a child to impact their lifestyle (10%), or that children cost too much (10%) (Ibbetson 2020).

chances of human survival, “the resulting human population explosion” is “the root cause of the degradation of the natural environment” and species extinction (1990: 388).

These sentiments were echoed in 2017 by Prince William, the royal patron of Tusk Trust, a British conservation charity, who in his speech at their annual awards ceremony directly connected the decline of “global wildlife populations” to “Africa’s rapidly growing human population”, concluding that “[t]here is no question that this increase puts wildlife and habitat under enormous pressure” (Tusk 2017). Unsurprisingly, this provoked outrage, not least because the prince was expecting his third child at the time of the speech and his focus on Africa could be seen as racialised scapegoating and hypocrisy. William again emphasised “[t]he increasing pressure on Africa’s wildlife and wild spaces as a result of human population” at the Tusk Conservation Awards ceremony held in November 2021, while relying on reproductive futurism to declare that “[w]e owe it to our children and future generations to act now” (Davies 2021). Earlier in 2021, Population Matters awarded the Duke and Duchess of Sussex for their “enlightened decision” to limit their family to two children (Javed 2021) – a rather absurd accolade, given how many Britons have two or fewer children – while Robin Maynard, director of the charity, praised William’s remarks and reminded the British public that “[t]he most effective action we can take to cut our consumption is to choose smaller families” (Webster 2021).

Boris Johnson is another public figure who may well be accused of hypocrisy regarding reproductive matters. In a much-cited column in *The Telegraph* he dubbed global overpopulation “the real number one issue” and climate change a “secondary challenge” (Johnson 2007). Johnson himself has, however, long refused to discuss his own family size, confirming that he had six children on a US trip in September 2021 (Stewart 2021). He and his wife Carrie have subsequently had another child, but at the time of his resignation as Prime Minister in July 2022, the number of his children was reportedly believed to be eight (Hampson & Young 2022), while the imminent birth of another baby was announced in May 2023 (Stacey 2023).

Although Johnson's unwillingness to broach the topic of his children has generally been regarded as evidence for his perceived dishonesty (Macaulay 2020: 52), the reproduction of the poor tends to bear the brunt of critique, which explains the negative reception of Prince William's remarks. The intersection of 'poverty porn', neoliberal austerity, and population discourses has led to the vilification of working-class mothers in Britain. As Imogen Tyler argues, "a new publicly sanctioned wave of middle-class contempt for the lower classes" is embodied by the *chav* mother of reality television and the Vicky Pollard character played by Matt Lucas in the sketch series *Little Britain* (2003–2007) (2008: 22). The biopolitics of poverty was also evident, for instance, in *Jamie's School Dinners* (2005), in which TV chef Jamie Oliver drew attention to the food poverty faced by British schoolchildren, and the controversial Channel Four series *Benefits Street* (2014). Public reactions to these broadcasts, and perhaps most pointedly to Heather Frost, the unemployed mum of eleven showcased in the 2013 Channel Five programme *On Benefits and Proud*, clearly illustrate the role of class in population discourse.⁴

Questions of reproductive freedom – and therefore the mode of reproductive futurism – seldom lose currency, as evidenced in the current backlash against such liberties, particularly in the USA, but also in the continuing concern over access to abortion services in Northern Ireland.⁵ Moreover, antinatalist stances and issues of human population are, as briefly noted above, burdened by a Malthusian logic and eugenic baggage, whilst frequently pit-

⁴ These are just some examples of a slew of reality-style TV productions that have spectacularised poverty and associated concerns with reproduction and parenting in Britain. For an in-depth discussion, see, for instance, *Reality Television and Class* (Wood & Skeggs 2011) or *Moralising Poverty* (Romano 2018).

⁵ In 2018, the United Nations' Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women condemned the lack of adequate access to abortion services in Northern Ireland. In response, the UK parliament has passed a series of statutes to compel Northern Ireland to abide by the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women regarding abortion rights (Rough 2023).

ting individual choice against the collective good, or future generations against current ones. Whereas the need to discuss the choice *not* to reproduce has necessitated the inclusion of *child-free* in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, more than 10 million babies worldwide are estimated to have been born as the result of assisted reproductive technology since the birth of the first in-vitro fertilised baby in 1978 (European Society of Human Reproduction and Embryology 2022: 1). Simultaneously, the use of surrogacy is expanding rapidly in the United Kingdom, reportedly almost quadrupling in the decade 2011–2020 (Deahl 2021). Accordingly, class differences are evident both in voluntary child-freeness *and* the use of pronatalist technologies, while the reproductive choices (or lack thereof) of working-class people are frowned upon, or made the stuff of spectacle.

3. Offsetting Population Growth

Speculative fiction, an umbrella term that includes science fiction, fantasy, utopia, dystopia, and horror, is frequently infused with reproductive futurism. Some prominent expressions include the eugenics in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), the brutal pronatalist regime of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) or the mass infertility of P. D. James's *The Children of Men* (1992). *The Offset* is here read as a recent literary examination of antinatalist ethics in the face of irreversible climate change.⁶ The

⁶ Although a more complete survey of British speculative fiction dealing with overpopulation falls beyond the scope of this article, it is also a key concern in, for example, Anthony Burgess's *The Wanting Seed* (1962), which presents an interesting case of queer reproductive futurism, and works as diverse as J. G. Ballard's short story "Bilennium" (1961), on the spatial repercussions of population growth, and Sarah Hall's *The Carhullan Army* (2007), on contraception forced on women. John Hickman and Jonathan D. Parker have recently surveyed a subgenre of 20th-century literature which they call "fertility dystopias", defined as "fictions that focus on fertility (esp. rates and controls) and population size" (2021: 207). Since they further delimit their criteria to fiction set on earth in which fertility is a primary concern, rather than a secondary issue arising from climate change (*ibid.*), the works they identify and discuss

future Britain in which the novel is set is no longer a recognisable United Kingdom. Due to the ravages of climate change and nuclear disaster, various small splinter states have appeared and much of the land is no longer inhabitable. Although some remnants of advanced technology remain, global adoption of the Bogotá Accord, "meant to save the planet from burning" (Szewczak 2021: 96), has banned air travel and the private ownership of motorised vehicles. In a further effort to control human population, on turning eighteen each child must nominate a parent to be publicly executed in a ceremony known as the titular Offset.

In the novel, antinatalist activists use drawings of the ouroboros, the snake eating its own tail, to symbolise both their stance and the Offset law ("For every birth, a death"; Szewczak 2021: 10). With slogans like "Say no to life" (*ibid.*: 7), antinatalists are pitted against so-called breeders, couples who do decide to have a child. In choosing the term *breeders*, Szewczak recycles a derogatory term used for heterosexuals by homosexuals ("breeder" 2022), which resonates with the emphasis on the queerness of antinatalism and ahumanism discussed above.⁷ The resulting scenes resemble – and satirically reverse – US pro-life demonstrations, with protestors attacking women about to give birth while making their way to the hospital doors, chanting "[e]ighteen years and you'll pay!" (Szewczak 2021: 151). The Offset is deemed "a matter of balance. The parent creates life and, in so doing, renders their own in forfeit" (*ibid.*: 188). Abstract carbon offsets, those contemporary indulgences governments and individuals pay while largely maintaining the status quo, are thus made flesh in the parents who sacrifice themselves for the greater good and the right to bear children.

The novel encompasses multiple timelines and focalisers, with the present focalised through Miri, on the days preceding

somewhat differ from my current focus, although they certainly form an adjacent corpus.

⁷ In what may well be deemed an instance of reappropriation, the derogatory term features as the title of the current comedy drama series *Breeders* (2020–), which stars Martin Freeman as a middle-aged husband and father, and centres on the trials of parenthood.

her eighteenth birthday. This is interwoven with chapters focalised by her mothers, Jac, a world-famous mathematical biologist, and Alix, a doctor, while flashbacks to the past are also included. Miri is literally the poster child for Jac's efforts to accelerate carbon capture by planting the nuclear wasteland of Greenland with trees in Project Salix; her mothers "would never have brought her into the world if they hadn't believed there'd still be one around for her to grow old in" (*ibid.*: 156). Miri *embodies* reproductive futurism.

Yet the Offset system is shown to lead to a new cycle of gendered reproductive violence. A man "desperate to avoid the Offset at all costs" is afraid that his girlfriend is pregnant and attempts to remove her womb, severely injuring her in the process (*ibid.*: 185). According to the regulations, if only one parent survives until the time of the Offset, "the survivor is pardoned for their crime of procreation" (*ibid.*: 186). The results are dystopian: the "exemption acts as an incentive for murder", disproportionately affecting women in heterosexual couples, although sometimes also leading to filicide, or both (*ibid.*). The novel offers a bleak conclusion: "The victims vary but the motivation is always the same: survival at the expense of all else" (*ibid.*). Involuntary antinatalism is portrayed as *as* dangerous to women's health as real-world pro-life politics. In engaging in the thought experiment of enforced antinatalism, the novel satirically brings home the individual costs of abstract population rhetoric.

4. Nonreproductive Futurisms: Imagining a Last Generation

Arguments about population reduction are seldom predicated on the total eradication of humanity, but rather tend to rely on a problematic reproductive futurism that privileges certain humans and choices to safeguard a better future for the inevitably following generations. Ahumanism, on the contrary, appears to shun reproductive futurism, since "an ahuman world can value the lives lived without lamenting those that never will be" (MacCormack 2014b: 11). The question is, however, whether antinatalism truly manages to move beyond reproductive futurism. It surely re-

mains futurist, either by envisioning a world with a radically diminished human population or, in its ahuman incarnation, one entirely void of humans.

Despite gaining increasing traction and finding multiple cultural expressions, antinatalism (and particularly antinatalism as part of an abolitionist ahuman agenda) is still very much a marginal phenomenon. Adherents have drawn on various rhetorical strategies to win followers: from the frequently individualised arguments based on carbon footprints to the notions of transgressed planetary boundaries and affect-based population panic. If antinatalism is to have an environmental impact and simultaneously avoid neo-Malthusianism and ecofascism, multiple *non-reproductive futurisms* must be conceived, of which *The Offset* serves as one recent literary example.

Speculative fiction, and literary satire particularly, albeit itself arguably a marginal form of aesthetic expression, provides an apt vehicle for exploring the tensions between individual choices and their results at the collective level. As Benatar notes in his endorsement of *The Offset*, the novel presents "a cautionary tale" that does not necessarily expose antinatalism per se as flawed but shows how "views aimed at reducing suffering can increase it if fanatics seize control" (Szewczak 2021: n.p.). In doing so, Szewczak manages to present nuances necessarily absent from the absolutist abolitionist core of MacCormack's manifesto. Garrard has noted that "[i]t is not the world without us that calls for new artistic forms, but the world with *far fewer* of us that we should seek to imagine" (2012: 59), and arguably *The Offset* can be read as exactly such an endeavour. The novel satirically extrapolates the consequences of one attempt at nonreproductive futurism without providing resolution. Unlike programmatic manifestos, art excels at probing the gloomy uncertainties of human futures.

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