



Debating Population in and Beyond Feminist Political Ecology

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INTRODUCTION

Population is rarely discussed in feminist political ecology. It is tiptoed around, perhaps because of all the emotions it evokes. In order to open up this debate, in this chapter we look at the heated responses to the renowned feminist Science and Technology Studies (STS) scholar, Donna Haraway's call to 'Make Kin Not Babies' (2015). Disagreements in academic debates are often motors for new knowledge and understanding (Collins, 2000, 2002). However, such disagreements can become bogged down in disciplinary dogma and semi-interpersonal conflict (Barney, 1990; Morgan & Baert, 2015). Constructive dialogue stalls, dismissive attitudes grow and certain opinions are relegated to the sphere of taboo

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(Collins, 2002). When conflicting discourses confront each other after years of effective silence, emotions explode. Donna Haraway experienced such explosions firsthand when she re-introduced to (anti-racist, anti-colonial) feminism the proposal that future human population growth could be detrimental to human and more-than-human life (Clarke & Haraway, 2018; Haraway, 2015, 2016). For the sake of survival and ‘multispecies reproductive justice’, Haraway argued that she would like to see human numbers wind down to around 2 or 3 billion people through a voluntary reduction in birth rates, especially among the rich (Haraway, 2016, p. 103). Her attempts to bring population concerns back into feminist discussions were received badly. She was accused of taking “a decisive turn towards a primitivism-tinged, misanthropic populationism” and “trafficking irresponsibly in racist narratives” (Lewis, 2017).

Since Malthus, debates about the impact of human population size on the environment and on the viability of poverty alleviation have held widely opposing views (Bashford, 2014). In the last few decades, feminist academics have been at the forefront of exposing misogynistic, racist, and neo-colonial underpinnings of Malthusian thinking and some of the population programme policies aimed at the global South (Hartmann, 1998; Ojeda et al., 2019; Sasser, 2018). As a consequence of this genealogy of population critique, the possibility that there could be negative environmental and humanitarian impacts of future increase in population has been not on the table in feminist thinking on population.

These views are reflected in international policy circles (Campbell, 2007; Coole, 2013; Halfon, 2006). Due to efforts of the international women’s movement, among others, at the landmark international UN Conference on Population and Development held in Cairo in 1994, international policy focus moved away from a discourse of the “population bomb” or “overpopulation” towards the concept of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) (Campbell, 2007). Now, with the increased concern about climate change, environmental degradation, international migration and growing global poverty and inequality, the population question is making its return (Coole, 2018).

In this chapter, we explore the explosive responses of feminists to Donna Haraway’s thesis of “making kin not babies”. We pay attention to emotions and how they play out in intellectual debates, and in population debates among feminist thinkers specifically. We do this in an informal dialogue format, where we engage each other on both a personal and scholarly level in order to map out the contours of feminist thinking about

the fraught topic of population growth and population control. As we explain below, we write from different positionalities and with contrasting views on population policy. We have tried to meet each other right at the fault line between our views in order to explore our own emotions around the population question.

As Kathy Charmaz notes about feminist research writing: ‘Increasingly, we appear in our texts as thinking, acting—and feeling—participants rather than as disembodied reporters of collected facts. Lines between the subjective and objective blur’ (Charmaz, 2012, p. 476). Inspired by this blurring—of subjective and objective, of researcher and researched—we experiment with a semi-informal dialogic writing style to illustrate the experiential and embodied nature of doing FPE research. We aim to show in the chapter how the feminist research process is one of continuous learning and unlearning.

We have tried to forge a mutual understanding by cutting through academic disciplinary boundaries and the inevitable use of disciplinary jargon. Our focal questions are: why is it so hard to engage in dialogue on population? Has Haraway’s recent call to ‘make kin not babies’ helped to change this? We are interested to see how emotions can shut down dialogue and how by paying attention to this we can open up rather than close debates around population.

We first introduce in more depth how FPE relates to Donna Haraway’s slogan of ‘Make Kin Not Babies’. We then write about the ways in which our different positionalities are linked to the divergent views we hold, before beginning the centrepiece of this chapter: our conversation focused on conflict and emotions in population debates. We decided to structure the dialogue under the headings of five ‘primary emotions’: surprise, anger, fear, sadness and joy, in order to connect our personal experiences with the different debates in feminist thinking around population.

FEMINIST POLITICAL ECOLOGY AND THE CALL TO ‘MAKE KIN NOT BABIES’

FPE scholarship raises questions about methods and ethics that relate to embodiedness, emotions, subjectivities and intimacy when seeking to understand environmental questions. Such attention helps us to deal with difficult questions that must be asked when we wish to engage in transformative research and to create more equitable worlds (Elmhirst, 2011; Hawkins et al., 2011; Mollett & Faria, 2013; Sundberg, 2004).

FPE “recognizes the interconnectedness of all life and the relevance of power relations—including gender relations—in decision-making about the environment” (Rocheleau et al., 1996, p. 296). As such, FPE scholars have a particular interest in epistemological tensions and embrace multiple methods and activist work (Harcourt et al., 2022; Richardson-Ngwenya & Nightingale, 2018). As a field critically concerned with gender, the environment and reproduction, FPE has engaged in issues around population (see for example the work of Mehta et al., 2019; Sasser, 2018). With its focus on emotion, subjectivity and intimacy, an FPE approach helps us to go below the big picture questions to how population is shaped on smaller intimate scales. The attention to emotions allows us to look at how people engaged in debates around population relate to each other and what epistemological consequences this has had.

Donna Haraway blew new controversy into the population debate in 2015. As we stated above, the provocations of Haraway and others, including Adele Clark (Clarke & Haraway, 2018), were met with resistance. In the clash among feminist and environmentalist discourses on population, Haraway’s intervention is important. Haraway challenges feminists “to make ‘kin’ mean something other/more than entities tied by ancestry or genealogy” (Haraway, 2015, p. 161) and to “find ways to celebrate low birth rates and personal, intimate decisions to make flourishing and generous lives (including innovating enduring kin—kinnovating) without making more babies urgently and especially, but not only, in wealthy high-consumption and misery-exporting regions, nations, communities, families, and social classes” (Haraway, 2015, p. 164).

What we are also interested in here is how the responses among feminists to this work, both oral and written, have been rife with emotion. The affection and love many feel for Haraway and her work has informed the controversy (Hamilton, 2017; Lewis, 2017; Schultz, 2021; Torracinta, 2017; Turner, 2017). And the strength of the response demonstrates the hold of anti-population policy sentiment by many feminists engaged in debates on population.

POSITIONING OURSELVES IN THE DIALOGUE

Before we dive further into our dialogue about the emotions that have surfaced around the slogan ‘make kin not babies’, we first need to position ourselves more transparently, especially as we are using our own emotional responses as part of the dialogue. Wendy has worked as an activist scholar

with decades of engagement in feminist debates around the colonial, racist legacy of populationist thought. In her writing and advocacy for sexual health and reproductive rights issues she has expressed deep concern about the instrumentalisation of women of colour in discussions of population numbers, poverty and environmental degradation (Harcourt, 2009, 2020). Milla is an early career scholar currently conducting her Ph.D., is trained in ecology, conservation and demography and is closer to academic discourses that speak of growing numbers of humans as a likely future contributor to extreme poverty in certain places and, to a more limited extent, a potential strain on specific environments.

We have been working together as supervisor and Ph.D. student since 2018, though over these years together we have found ways to go beyond that specific hierarchical relationship. We engage as two women of different generations sharing concerns about our health and well-being, motherhood, and creative expression as well as larger questions around the climate crisis and environmental harm, activism and the challenges of working in a neoliberal university environment. Though we came together in the context of a social science writing project we both start from different positions academically—Mila from science, Wendy from the humanities—something which is reflected clearly in the moments of misunderstanding in the dialogue below. Mila is also trained and works in theatre. Wendy has been active in transnational feminism with a focus on body politics as well as feminist political ecology since the late 1980s. There are other traits which mark our perceptions: we are both white cis women. Mila is Dutch and Oxbridge trained. Wendy is from Australia and has lived and worked in Italy and The Netherlands as both an advocate and academic. And, while we both consider our sexuality fluid, we have had the privilege to be able to choose and physically bear children and to raise them with our male partners who are the biological fathers.

Our dialogue is based on three years of discussions as we met in person, individually and in a feminist discussion group, and online through COVID times. If one can speak about a methodology underlying this dialogue, it was about giving ourselves time to listen to each other's approach and be patient with the other's different opinions due to disciplinary assumptions, age and expectations of what an intellectual feminist project could be. We also noted our frustrations at the other's normative assumptions—and this became a key topic in this chapter. Because of the personal impact of our different opinions encountering each other, we

also recognised the importance of acknowledging emotions in intellectual debate.

We therefore decided to structure our dialogue around five ‘primary emotions’: surprise, anger, fear, sadness and joy. As Turner explains, primary emotions are states of “affective arousal” that are thought to be inherent in human neuroanatomy (Turner, 2007). Because of cross-cultural differences in understandings of feelings and emotional expression, the idea of universal classifications of emotions could be questioned; nonetheless, we use these five headings as a tool to show how a range of emotions play out in academic discourse. Under each heading we list the primary emotion and then as subheadings the secondary emotions, followed by our reflections related to that specific emotion and our interpretation of how it is expressed in population debates.

SURPRISE

Astonishment, Amazement, Shock, Intrigue

This critique of overpopulation (...) has seemed like a settled issue in feminist circles. Making Kin Not Population: Reconceiving Generations resurrects overpopulation as a question for feminism. Its authors, Adele Clarke and Donna Haraway, are two legendary, influential, and beloved figures in feminist, cultural, and science studies. Indeed, I remember the informal networks abuzz when they first presented this material at a conference in 2013. It was as if they had declared that they had stumbled on a herd of unicorns! (Subramaniam, 2018)

Mila: When I began my PhD in 2018, the first text I read was the collection of essays edited by Adele Clarke and Donna Haraway that Banu Subramaniam refers to in the quote above. One of the things which struck me straight away is the way Haraway and Clarke described the intense climate of debate on population within feminism. I was aware that the population topic is sensitive to many engaged in feminist thought (Bhatia et al., 2020; Murphy, 2017; Sasser, 2018). Yet I was surprised to learn that it was near impossible to discuss this issue with feminist scholars and activists without quickly encountering open displays of feelings such as indignation, disgust, passion and anger.

As Banu Subramaniam (2018) states, before Haraway and Clarke started working on population, the population issue seemed settled within

feminism: concern about population numbers was unacceptable. This was the case so in part because “direct environmental impacts driven by human numbers are nearly impossible to tease out because they are not, and never have been, simply biological—they are the result of biological, and political, and economic, and technological, and cultural processes and practices” (Sasser, 2018, p. 150). As such, any attempt to reopen the discussion was very unexpected and cause for upset. At the time, there were feminist scholars writing on population to newly criticise those in other fields of academia and policy making, who were expressing concern about population growth. On encountering resistance to their views, there appeared to be a sense of surprise or disbelief among these scholars. Take for example this quote by Ojeda and colleagues: “What is perhaps most surprising about neo-Malthusian environmental thinking is that, despite trenchant critiques questioning its basic presuppositions, it remains as strong as ever” (Ojeda et al., 2019, p. 4). The scholars expressing this surprise are clearly so convinced by the critiques of neo-Malthusianism that they cannot imagine a well-meaning person could possibly disagree with such critiques. In short, in these debates we see a widespread disciplinary agreement among feminists, to the extent that a leading feminist such as Haraway involving herself in the population discussion could cause much dismay and shock.

One of the most surprising discoveries I made, entering the world of feminist debate, was the ease with which what I took for granted as a knowable physical reality was denied by some feminists writing about population. As someone who has been taught to appreciate the emancipative power of statistics in, for example, public health and environmental conservation, I was shocked to learn that there were whole disciplines with a distrust towards numbers and what they represented. In her book ‘Figuring the Population Bomb’, Carole R. McCann (2017) states she “understand[s] demographic facts to be the products of population theory, a conceptualization of biosocial reality, not a reflection of it (p. 19)” and that “quantification involves an exercise of power that denies it is any such thing (ibid.).” While I had read, within demography, attempts to complicate the understanding of the practices around, for example, census-making, I had never heard the census itself described as depending on “a particular imaginary landscape of ‘human bodies’ in ‘virtual time’ and ‘virtual space’” (Curtis, 2002, p. 24). I still do not know what to make of such assertions. I would prefer to live in a world with enumeration practices and censuses rather than one without. For an

enlightening example, the work of historian William Coleman (1982) in *Death is a Social Disease*, as cited by Haraway (2018), shows that early population thinking and counting led to a better understanding of the apparatuses of inequality and helped galvanise action on public health in urban eighteenth century France. Similarly, I think about the effects early Swedish census-taking had on death rates in that country. In 1749, influenced by the Enlightenment, Sweden became the first country in the world to establish the regular collection of vital statistics (deaths and births) on a national level. They could thereby obtain reliable data on mortality and causes of death, and this data was used to take key steps in improving the health of its populace (Sundin & Willner, 2007). This way Sweden could anticipate and avoid the human devastation of industrial urban growth as seen in places like the UK (Szreter, 2003). In more recent times, time-use studies by feminists have enumerated the disparities between commitments to care between men and women. So, I wonder why among feminists concerned with population there is so much distrust towards numbers, statistics and calculations. Why are time-use studies, or climate physics, seen as important and reliable, but demographic studies scrutinised in order to point to forms of power and domination which they enable?

When I studied demography in my undergraduate, much of the teaching focused on complicating demography's own enumeration practices. The actual number given to a country's population was seen as a useful best attempt to get to the truth, even if not a reliable truth. I vividly remember a lecture about the troubles of collecting reliable census data in a West-African country. Cultural norms about who is a "son" or a "daughter" made a survey question such as: 'how many female and male children do you have?' inaccurate as people would include as their family's sons or daughters any young people who were important to them rather than their birth son or daughter. Additionally, asking questions about stillbirths or infant deaths (the answers being of key importance to a demographer) was not possible due to the stigma that came with the death of babies in the family. By being aware of these issues, demographers could adjust at least partially to such anomalies, to produce statistics which can help us understand rough population trends in those countries. However, coming into feminist debates on population I have missed an open discussion by scholars concerned with the biopolitics of demographic statistics on the criteria of which numbers to trust. Which numbers should we trust and which not? And why, I wondered, is this all so controversial?

I've since learned more about the biopolitical controversies around the topic of population, particularly concerns around racism and colonialism. Philosophical and practical questions around human numbers are fraught with ideological differences. As Diane Coole argues, affecting fertility rates is 'profoundly controversial'. At stake are "liberal values of freedom, autonomy and human rights, entangled here with contested definitions of sexuality, gender roles and identities, family norms and embodiment, as well as with ideological disputes over the role of the state and its powers" (Coole, 2018, p. 4). With a topic that touches so many foundational political and personal questions, no wonder there is so much disagreement, especially across disciplines. The bigger question then becomes: how to manage the conflict and resulting emotions in population debates?

Wendy: First, I admit I was surprised at your comment that there is a knowable physical reality that is captured in demographic studies and cannot be challenged as there is a truth to how we measure populations. My Foucauldian training in bio-politics pointed to the colonial roots of population statistics particularly as used in wide sweeping global population studies, which used numbers to obfuscate historical economic, cultural and political oppression. The concerns around Malthusianism in demographic debates continues. Betsy Hartmann's (1995) *Reproductive Rights and Wrongs: The Global Politics of Population Control* is still a classic in feminist studies on reproductive justice. Her work scrutinises the use of population numbers in discussions of environmental and inter-generational justice. She argues that reproductive justice must be based not on statistics but on understanding social processes and institutions which create communities and provide the social, economic and ecological conditions that support human security and sustainability upon which, ultimately, all production, exchange and accumulation rest. The fight for reproductive justice is not about how many children are born into families and how many people are dying, but also about social, economic, civic and environmental goals. These concerns scrutinise population studies in struggles against patriarchy, racism, classism and extractivism. Feminists like Hartmann, Sasser and Ojeda are deeply concerned about renewed use of statistics in the climate debate which provide the ongoing justification for the control of racialised bodies in population policy (Hartmann, 1998; Ojeda et al., 2019; Sasser, 2014). I am sympathetic to their exposure of these struggles and their call for diverse strategies to build decolonized, socially just futures. However, I do see your concern around the othering

and silencing that goes on among feminists and environmentalists and the quarrel around numbers in the population debates.

So, indeed, I was surprised by Haraway and her call for “making kin not babies”. What I see as positive in the debate is that Haraway asks feminists to consider new forms of knowledge which value kin—other-than-human life—as part of the feminist project to unpack corporate power, technoscience and biopolitics. The invitation is to forge a multi-species eco-justice that breaks through gendered and racialised nature of biology, culture and technology.

What intrigued me most was Haraway’s concept of speculative fiction and how to engage our imaginations in thinking about how human and other-than-human lives need to be considered as kin. I found this idea to be unsettling. Like her *Cyborg Manifesto*, which we discuss below (Haraway, 1990), Haraway provokes our feminist imaginations and our feminist politics. Social science fiction, the art of telling stories, and going beyond the apparent scientific givens of reproductive bodies are appealing to me as someone trained in humanities. In reading Haraway and eco feminists such as Val Plumwood (1993), environmental humanities scholars such as Deborah Bird-Rose (2013) and Indigenous writers such as Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2000) we are challenged to see all ‘earthlings’ as kin and the need for better care for all, including being able to mourn the losses and destruction. Acknowledging the need to care for more than human others deeply resonates with my desire for ‘understanding otherwise’ and decentring humans from our understanding of eco-justice. It seems liberating that we could consider multiple kin as part of our battle for reproductive justice. This helped me go beyond the human numbers game and move towards thinking about our responsibility as humans to other beings on the planet.

Haraway is asking feminists to reimagine kinship, family, and reproduction and to talk about the politics of reproductive justice and our complex relations to others. Reproductive justice is about sustaining the conditions necessary for collective thriving—including environmental justice, food justice, climate justice, antiracist social justice—and nonviolent ways of relating to human and more than human others. Her retelling of reproductive justice in the future with social science fiction stories or ‘narrative speculative fabulation’ about future technologies that merge human and more-than-human forms are indeed fabulous in her tentacular thinking, (see for example the story of the Chthulucene as an alternative to the concept of the Anthropocene, Haraway, 2016, p. 55).

ANGER

Exasperation, Frustration, Resentment, Disgust, Indignation, Annoyance

I have been screamed at after lectures by my feminist colleagues of many years, told that I can no longer call myself a feminist (...) for arguing in public that the weight of human numbers on a global scale, however broken down by analysis of structured inequalities, opposition to ongoing racist population control programs, and many other important things, is an outrage. (Haraway, 2018, p. 87)

Mila: As someone who loves fiction, I appreciate what you say about Haraway's Speculative Fabulation (SF). However, in this case my main intellectual interest remains very pragmatic; my focus is on the clashes of opinion between academics and the emotions which population discourses bring up. Ultimately, my PhD research led me to believe that interpersonal and intergroup dynamics have a profound impact on the knowledge about population which is created and put forward to, for example, policy makers. In 2018 and 2019, I attended four different reading groups on the *Making Kin Not Population* at two different universities in the UK. I ended up coming away each time with a realisation that the topic of the discussion was too inflammatory to lead to in-depth discussions. Many of the comments made related to the emotional responses of the readers, not their thoughts, arguments or intellectual engagement regarding population. Someone said: "This book left me infuriated for weeks." Someone else jokingly proposed imagining a street fight with team Murphy (Haraway's co-author Michelle Murphy, who argues against the use of the word population altogether) and team Haraway. "Yeah, we'd have t-shirts for each!" They then asked the group: "Who are you with?" Various people emphatically said, "I am Team Murphy." Not one person dared to say, "I am team Haraway", though a few people stayed quiet. The joking didn't last long. Reflecting on it later I realised I felt that the general mood of the discussion was that of frustration and indignation towards Haraway. While there was some interest in the 'Making Kin' part of Haraway's slogan, the content around 'Not Babies' was, I would say, entirely ignored.

Before this intervention by Haraway, academic feminism as an activist field of scholarship, had clearly settled on a certain set of norms around

population. From what I could see, students are not only trained in the debates on population and its history, but also on what is acceptable to say about reproduction and population. There is a sense that in feminist circles it is not socially safe to express any doubt or concern about population growth. Instead, related concerns are quickly moved to questions about sustainable consumption or to problems such as eugenics and colonialism that are inherent in much of the historic elements of population control. Deviation from this norm seems to inspire anger.

I do believe that this comes from the best of intentions and a genuine belief in the harms of populationism/neo-Malthusianism. The following anecdote in a podcast is very telling. In ‘Imagine Otherwise’ with Cathy Hannabach (2019) Jade Sasser—a scholar who focuses on gender, climate justice, and reproductive politics—tells us about a frustrating teaching experience she regularly has:

But with that said, what also happens every quarter in the classroom that is intensely frustrating to me because I don’t know what to do about this, is that students will hear me spend an entire hour and a half or even several weeks offering a very critical, very nuanced, very challenging perspective on population control. Then after all that, they’ll still go back to, ‘Well, but we need to slow or control or end population growth because of climate change. Population is still something that we need to really tackle because of climate change.’ And I’m like, ‘Have you not listened to everything I’ve been saying?’ What I’m doing in my work is, I’m really trying to disrupt and dislodge paradigms, knowledge paradigms, and it’s hard for young people to let those paradigms go because they’ve been raised with them. But I continue to persevere. I won’t give up. I will continue to challenge my students’ thinking and really try to disrupt and dislodge the idea that population control is a natural and necessary component for environmental conservation.

I sympathise very much with Sasser’s sense of exasperation. I learned a lot from her thorough work in *On Infertile Ground: Population Control and Women’s Rights in the Era of Climate Change* (2018). However, I can’t help but think that her “have you not listened to everything I just said?” could also be spoken to her—exclaimed even—by some of the equally nuanced and careful scholars who do warn about potential hardship caused by growing human numbers. As far as I can see there are very valid points made by people who call each other opponents,

enemies even (see Wendy's point below). Are Sasser's students not continuing to press their own population concerns after hearing the critiques because they also come across other positions, which convincingly present the inevitable physical reality that the numbers *are*, at times, problematic? Could that not be the same reason that those who are (informally) identified by some feminist scholars as 'being in the enemy camp'—some demographers, certain environmentalists—are continuing to express concern at growing populations, albeit in smaller numbers than in the twentieth century?

Even just entering this debate I could find myself getting frustrated. Not with one party or the other, but with the lack of actual content-based dialogue across disagreement. Why is it so hard to see different types of population knowledge as merely partial truths, as needing synthesis? To my annoyance, I observe a lot of ignoring of the others' arguments, on both sides, and this seems like an utter shame. It seems to me scholars working on reproductive rights, population and environmentalism often find themselves in bubbles and are not listening to the nuances of those in other areas. Or that the anger and indignation is so strong that even when someone like Haraway is making a considered plea for dialogue, she is met with fury by some. I want to say: 'Just think with her! Being in dialogue does not mean agreeing!'

Wendy: I am sympathetic with your frustration and strong feelings which come out when you speak of 'utter shame'. There is anger, even despair when we engage in debates where people do not listen. So much anger erupts around sexual health and reproductive rights which underline population debates about 'family planning' and contraception. I have witnessed over the years tense and loud arguments in UN meetings when representatives of the Catholic Church and other conservative groups would move into rooms and start disrupting discussions. I recall being in a room of a high-level UN official as he was listening to the Vatican Radio decrying the latest World Report on Population (which he edited) and his disgust at what was being said, knowing he would have to face them down in future meetings that would be deciding a country's health budget based on concerns around whether money would be used for sexual health needs. During UN meetings in the 1990s, I would band together with other feminist advocates in the different regional SRHR movements and NGO networks order to plan strategically our interventions and speeches knowing there would be a right-wing attack to confront from conservative and religious NGOs and governments- and

that we would have to battle for every word that touched on sexuality or women's right to choose.

In academe I have seen less room for anger to be expressed directly. There is, though, often a sense of indignation that scholars can feel about their work not being considered or heard by those other academics that do not share their views. I have personally felt considerable indignation at how feminist political ecology perspectives are ignored by political theorists and economic scholars. To take as an example, I reviewed a recent book by Sir Partha Dasgupta on population ethics—a branch of moral philosophy (guided by economic and climate science) that looks at how the numbers of people impact the quality of life of others in the future (Harcourt, 2020). His book totally ignored feminist or gender debates, so I was literally gritting my teeth when Dasgupta states he is “just trying to get the numbers right ... nothing more” (Dasgupta, 2019, p. xxxiii). I felt angry at his dismissive ‘back of the envelope’ empiricism as he asks ‘birth and death’ questions which touch major concerns around gender, reproductive decision making and natural resource use as well as a host of other socio-ecological concerns without acknowledging the context. As an advocate I have approached the questions of population, consumption and environment from a critical gender, development, and human rights perspective, engaging in transnational advocacy and policy work with organisations such as the UNFPA and the World Health Organization. I therefore resented Dasgupta's lofty tone as he uses esoteric models to tell us “how to study the population–consumption–environment nexus, in order to tell us how far we are today from where we probably should be” (Dasgupta, 2019, p. 218). And then, as a feminist political ecologist, I felt indignant that he refers to deep emotional needs that ‘we’ all have to create children and then the unbearableness of life for the half a billion people who are malnourished and prone to disease, living in conditions where ‘you’ wouldn't want to create children.

His work is at completely at odds with my feminist political ecology approach which scrutinizes the use of population in discussions of environmental and intergenerational justice particularly around social reproduction as “social-environmental process required to maintain everyday life and to sustain human cultures and communities on a daily basis and intergenerationally” (Di Chiro, 2008, p. 281). Dasgupta's neoclassical modelling erases the entangled relationships between population growth and environmental problems. Why, I thought while writing the review, is population ethics determined by views such as Dasgupta's, seen

through the prism of economic modelling about the ‘right numbers of people’, rather than seeing how societies and therefore economies are embedded within nature? Do numbers matter? Have we actually tried to live sustainably – not just live differently (as in our everyday habits), but also organise our societies differently and do politics differently, so as to collectively address environmental degradation and inequality without having to impose reproductive decisions?

As we discussed together, quite heatedly, numbers can manipulate and obfuscate. At one point you asked me to look at the 2010 Ted Talk of the Swedish academic Hans Rosling, where he uses the story of his mother’s washing machine to discuss the thorny question of how to distribute the world’s resources so people can benefit from using washing machines without destroying the planet. The story he told, we realised, helped us understand we were not so different in our concerns. For me the issue was not about ‘how many people’ but about distribution and justice. The story Rosling was telling was not about numbers, per se, but about everyday lives, technology, gender, work and global inequities. If the carrying capacity is 3 or 11 or 20 billion people is not the point- far more powerful and important are the multiple and complex interrelationships that raw numbers alone can obfuscate.

FEAR

Alarm, Apprehension, Hysteria, Horror, Panic, Nervousness, Uneasiness

I think that is part of the problem ‘we’ face. The subject is forbidden, no matter how carefully it is framed; it has been ceded to the right and to population professionals. To insist that seriously facing the burden of human numbers is not racist; but shutting up out of terror of the issue might well be. Fear of getting things badly wrong certainly doesn’t serve reproductive justice, even in human-exceptionalist terms, much less in terms of multi-species reproductive justice. (Haraway, 2017).

Mila: Rosling’s storytelling is wonderful, and indeed we learned through it that you and I both cared for many of the same elements of possible human flourishing. Yet Rosling gave that talk when population projections were far more optimistic (in my view) than they are now. I sometimes find myself fearful, along with some demographers, that if

population in specific places continues to grow with the speed they are now – in the context of the capitalism-driven unequal world we live in – it will lead to further immense poverty and societal disruption.

To be specific, while I do not care about the absolute nature of aggregate population numbers, I worry very much about the *speed* with which some populations are growing. For me this is not about being racist but about recognising that this rapid population growth can lead to major problems in timely infrastructure creation, increasing global inequality and vulnerability for many (Coole, 2018; Rougoor & van Marrewijk, 2015; UN Department of Social Affairs, 2011). And that reducing the rate of population growth could make it easier to address existing problems. For these reasons I would say that a good analysis of the potential impact on a particular society of (1) rapid population increases and (2) the presence or absence of a population programme, requires both numbers *and* qualitative research that address multiple and complex interrelationships. The same holds for policies in this area—they need both types of work, both lenses. In short, I do not believe numbers *necessarily* obfuscate other essential considerations, even if they sometimes do.

Wide-spread provision of voluntary family planning services and educational opportunities for girls and young women are the policies which most twenty-first century population control advocates call for. I think you and I agree that these are important things in themselves. Where we may differ is that I also think that it is okay to try to get more funding for them by leveraging population concerns. And that I think it is important that people and governments are well-informed of the concerns of demographers and others who believe there might be trouble ahead if birth rates in certain places are not reduced quickly—as well as of the concerns of those who centre SRHR and oppose (aspects) of population policy. Due to the problematic history of population and the forceful arguments in the feminist discourse on population, concern about population has become somewhat of a taboo in many areas (Campbell, 2007; Coole, 2013; Singer & Kissinger, 2017). This has meant that there are fewer academics and NGOs working on this question than there were previously (Mora, 2014) and such knowledge may not reach the places where it could be relevant.

On a different type of fear: I am still convinced that population debates do not currently address the arguments in themselves but are mired in name-calling—a typical response derived from fear (Shapiro, 2010). Changing your opinion on important matters can be frightening. So, it is

sometimes easier to simply exclude the possibility that one is wrong and instead push away anyone who argues to the contrary. Political ecology teaches us to question dichotomies of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ and promotes the value of bringing together different methods, data interpretations and opinions. I think viewing the population debate with such a lens would go a long way in communicating more fruitfully across difference.

In the case of Haraway, dismissing her and her new ideas was difficult, because of her unique position as a well-loved feminist, a giant in the field. Here Haraway is accused of being genocidal and anti human but also there are attempts to—as it were—split her public persona into different parts: A Haraway to love, one who gave us idea of the “the God trick” (1988) and “cyborg imagery” as “a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves” (Haraway, 1990, p. 316). And then a Haraway to ignore, a Haraway who must somehow be mistaken, must have lost her intellectual acumen or her revolutionary spirit.

Yet I think Haraway’s work on population is evidence of the same intellectual fearlessness as she displayed by writing the Cyborg Manifesto. I suspect she is very aware of her position in this debate, of what is and what is not expected in terms of population opinions and what effect her particular prominent position has on the arguments she makes. She was always a provocateur, no? The Cyborg Manifesto is now widely loved by feminists, but at the time, wasn’t it a very prickly set of arguments she made?

Wendy: While I am not in agreement that the focus on population numbers helps us deal with inequality and that population debates are devoid of colonial and racist views and othering, I do agree that the Cyborg Manifesto was a major intellectual intervention in feminist science and technology studies and was in a sense fearless in its critique of eco-feminism, and a feminist championing of science and technology studies. She looked squarely at the fear that technologies would invade our personal and intimate lives. In breaking through those fears, Haraway’s Manifesto helped us to look at how technology is infused with the political, cultural and material embodied experiences.

Mila: Wait, I may not have been clear enough up to this point. You say you disagree with me and think that I don’t see how population debates are colonial and filled with racist views and othering. However, I in fact do agree that the history of population discourse and practice is linked to colonialism and class and race-based prejudices. What I do not agree

with is that population debates – past, present and future – are *necessarily* racist, classist, colonial and so on. For me the distinction between ‘often is/has been racist’ and ‘is not necessarily/can be not racist’ is key. I would like to promote dialogue across disciplines and viewpoints so that, for example, anti-racism *and* population concerns can come together to promote better policy. This requires a recognition of the historic injustices which have been perpetuated in the name of population. But it also requires that population policy responds to real-life issues for many people, including people of colour in the Global South. I would argue that population discourse and policy frameworks can be developed within a wider progressive politics in ways that can become a force for good.

Wendy: Your interruption is valid, particularly as you point to the need for us to listen to each other. However, we are still not in full agreement. For me progressive politics should be about distribution of resources, changes in rich people’s lifestyles and openness to all women’s reproductive choices, full stop, not a set of ‘population’ policies that aim to reduce numbers because too many (poor) people cause too much environmental damage. Diversity and context matter, and who can access what and who is deciding who (else) is too many. I remain worried about how this is all playing out. I fear that the likelihood of regular global pandemics and heat waves, fires and floods due to climate change will produce an inequitable set of policies if we do not point to racial, colonial and patriarchal discourses underlying current policies and seek very different behaviour (not just good policy). In fact, climate impacts are already affecting the poorest countries, marginalised people, and racialised people.

To return to cyborgs, well we are not so fearful of cyborg life as it is now normalised. This is one reason why I see Haraway’s idea of ‘making kin not babies’ as full of possibilities. Nevertheless, it is with a sense of uneasiness that I take up this call to make kin not babies (or population). As I found in Dasgupta’s text, academics and government workers who are engaged in population policy typically do so from different angles than Haraway’s creative way of helping us envision futures. Most demographers do not see themselves as storytelling but as empirically telling the truth when discussing changing population trends and patterns and the policies required to reduce population numbers to conserve the environment. Talking about social science fiction, writing manifestos, describing personal stories are not usually acceptable academic truths to the majority of demographers.

And at times, I admit, I do give into fear and lose hope. I am afraid of the continued violence, not only the current escalation of wars, the femicides, deaths of environmental defenders, journalists, but also the dark worlds of Internet gaming etc. Such ‘naturaltechnical’ worlds are a far cry from Haraway’s speculative fiction where human genes mix with butterflies. How do we rethink kinning in a world dominated by such oppression, violence and uncertain futures? What we can learn from Haraway is that the question is not a yes or no to technology “invading” life, or a yes or no to having (more or less) kids, but what are the surrounding ethics that we must cultivate to inform such decisions. It is one thing to decide not to have children because I want to make kin with my neighbours, my dog, the sea. It is another to be coerced into not having children for the good of biodiversity. We need to give attention to the ethics and politics that informs the different debates around population and socionatures/naturecultures.

SADNESS

Disappointment, Shame, Grief, Despair, Gloom, Isolation, Rejection, Dejection, Guilt, Regret

This is a brazenly personal paper and a plea for other-than-biogenetic kindred. I begin with a painful mass in my gut, pressing up against my diaphragm until it ruptures. The pain is much like the bodily feeling of grief when my mother died, when my first husband died, when my father died, when the dog of my heart died - the feeling of grief, exploding from the inside out, evisceration, terror. (...) But the pain I feel in my belly has to do with something else (...) the surplus killings of ongoingness, the wanton surplus extinction of kinds, of whole patterns of living and dying on earth, of genocides across human and other than human groups. (Haraway, 2018, p. 69)

Wendy: Like fear, sadness is so much part of our lives right now. You try to shake it off but it is difficult. Perhaps it is closer to despair as Haraway so viscerally and powerfully expresses in the quote above. I look back over the years and wonder at why we are in the crisis (crises) we predicted when I was a student feminist and environmental activist over 30 years ago. Why is it so hard to get out of systemic violence even if it is being named and discussed all the time? Is it just because I exist in my small bubble - even

if it is a transnational bubble and one that stretches over decades full of exciting conversations and what looked like contributions to transformative change? What is my responsibility for the failures? Individually I seem to have benefited well enough from this deeply unfair world.

However, I continue to engage and be inspired—from the courage of others and their stories in end times. I feel it is important to learn as feminist academics to value ways to communicate differently, using art, film, theatre, murals, creative spaces to allow our imagination to be positive, and see that as knowledge alongside the positivists' 'truths'. It is not for me about reducing numbers, but about taking up responsibility which is not just about providing contraceptive choices. It seems more complex than this as I read, watch TV or doomscroll on my phone about the increasing level of violence, war, extractivism and toxic pollution, and recognise my awkward place in the racialised violence of modernity that has benefited me personally at the expense of others. Even if I celebrate some of the changes for some women's lives and their choices, I still feel despairing at what is not happening, from the lack of contraceptive choice and the increase in sexual violence to the oppression against peoples who do not conform to heterosexual norms, to the erasure of cultures and the overwhelming loss of biodiversity and beauty in nature. I remember the first time I heard about tipping points, now 15 years ago, from a biologist and feminist friend. I cried then. But I couldn't believe I would live to see so many tipping points smash bang in our face.

My sadness extends to when I hear so many young people questioning if they should have children as they face economic uncertainty and consider the devastating impacts of climate change in these end times. We need to be aware of a creeping individualization of responsibility which is capturing environmentalism. Deciding to have children when I did was so much more about my choices. I thought I was fighting for the individual choice to have children (the biological, technological and economic choice). Now that 'choice' has become much more entangled in social and environmental responsibilities which diminish the possibility of the individual to speak unaware of collective responsibilities and fearful futures.

JOY

Relief, Hope, Eagerness, Enthusiasm

What if making a baby became truly an act of joy and material, daily responsibility for an enlarged community? How to celebrate children in non-natalist movements? (...) How to celebrate human maturity for women and men in building selves and communities without making babies? (Haraway, 2018, p. 97)

Mila: I also see many of my peers choosing not to have children. Some because of the life(style) they envision for themselves, but many also because of fear of a climate catastrophe. And some worry about the culpability of bringing into the world another European human who will consume and pollute the environment 80 or 90 years ahead in time. I asked myself about these issues when I came to the decision to try to have children or not. At the time, the connection I felt to my partner and my desire to create new life, a family, with him, – for me the ultimate commitment – was a far more convincing future than the one in which I saw my offspring as a planetary liability. I also thought back to how my parents in the late eighties were told by their friends that they were mad to try to bring a baby into the world; after all, the nuclear bomb could drop any moment and bring global devastation. Their child might only ever know great suffering. My parents, living in a squatted farmhouse, without secure jobs, still young, decided against acting on that fear. Lucky for me! I was born, followed by my sister and brother a few years later. And the question of my own reproduction and the risks this would bring for my then hypothetical children came down to a simple comparison: I am so glad to be alive, so grateful I get to be here to experience human existence with all its confusions and pleasures, that I expect that my children might well come to feel the same. They will, however, have to face ecological and climate breakdown and all the unprecedented and incalculable societal changes that will come with that. Perhaps then this is one of my primary tasks as a parent: help cultivate in my children the ability to experience joy, no matter what the circumstances, also in the face of suffering. For now, I am simply so very glad they are here with me on this planet, and as far as I can tell from their endless vigour and frequent laughter, so are they.

Wendy: Such a beautiful birth story Mila. I too can speak of joy and hope, individually as a mother, and collectively as part of communities who help me to find ways to relate and sustain ourselves, our kin and our environment. For me this joy is always mediated as I continually negotiate social practices of mutual support that enable strategies of living well together. The different feminist communities, whether they have been activist, academic or friendship based (and sometimes all three), have enabled me to flourish and enjoy life in deeply important ways. In the last few years, I have tentatively begun to acknowledge my joyful relationship with different environments that support and sustain me. Whether they are the oceans in Australia or the lakes in Italy or the woods in The Netherlands or even the plants and flowers that grow on my terrace, some that have been gifted to me by students over the years., I certainly feel joy in these living beings. This is kinning, as their presence offers a tiny but sustaining way to continue facing the overwhelming concerns of our times.

CONCLUSION

In a political and cultural moment where debate is enacted through name-calling, slander, falsehood, and labelling ones' opponents as treasonous enemies, I am deeply moved by this collection [the Making Kin Not Population book]. Some of us will never agree, but the book reminds us of the critical need to engage rather than disengage, and to argue respectfully rather than blame or ignore those we disagree with. (Subramaniam, 2018)

By boldly using emotions as a way into the tricky topic of population guided by Haraway's invitation to 'make kin not babies' we have tried to listen constructively to each other and to those with whom we did not agree rather than draw up camps of us and them. We have had time to build up enough trust to pause and listen to each other when we started to note emotions rise. We had to listen hard to what the other had to say about numbers and fearful futures. In those moments we slowed down and chose every word carefully so we would not be misconstrued. We also recognised as we spoke that there were taboo topics, stories that could not be told in an academic text, as they were too sensitive or would evoke dismissal. In other projects, where we went beyond the written word, to

theatre performance (Mila) or art (Wendy), we recognised we could allow more to be expressed, understood and heard.

We have aimed to open up the debate on population in FPE not only by introducing Haraway's idea of 'making kin' as a feminist strategy for survival, but also by paying attention to the emotions in which the debate is couched. We have noted the different disagreements within feminist circles as well as between feminist and environmentalists as well as Haraway's acknowledgement of the negative responses she received from colleagues. Haraway's descriptions of emotion in these discussions may well have been part of her own rhetorical device to position her in the debate, but they do foreground how much emotions shape academic debate. Paying attention to the role of emotions in academic work adds complexity to the debate but also can propose ways to break down taboos and open up constructive discussion.

In our conversations, it occurred to us that the large disagreement on the best way to consider population growth might obscure the fact that many scholars engaged in population debates share a similar goal: to influence policy to improve the well-being of people now and in the future. Taking this as an explicit starting point when engaging with those we otherwise disagree with could go a long way in allowing constructive dialogue to develop.

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