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Ringing the Existential Alarm: Exploring BirthStrike for Climate

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ABSTRACT

Climate change is altering the horizon of a liveable future and as a result giving rise to a host of anxieties: ecological, demographic, reproductive, and existential. The BirthStrike for Climate collective was a group of people who were reconsidering reproduction as a result of the climate crisis. In exploring the case of BirthStrike we consider how these decisions were used as a tool for "existential" activism and how the campaign was encountered and discredited in the public realm. We argue the campaign ignited numerous anxieties, resulting in an inability to "hear" the existential threat BirthStrikers aimed to call into focus.

KEYWORDS

Climate change; reproduction; birthstrike; existential; anxiety

BirthStrike for Climate aimed to raise the existential alarm about the climate crisis by reconsidering reproduction. Why was this message so complex?

BirthStrike for Climate was a collective of climate concerned individuals who were reconsidering and resisting reproduction because of the climate crisis. BirthStrike aimed to discuss reproductive decision-making publicly as an activist intervention in part because such discussions would seem shocking and personal to a broad audience. Their main aim was to raise the alarm about the existential threats of climate change in order to galvanize governments and corporations to act to prevent further environmental crises. Setting up as a campaign represented an objective to reach the mainstream, "the pages of Cosmopolitan magazine," as one founder described it. While some misinterpretation was anticipated, and it was hoped this would lead to meaningful and generative debates, BirthStrike encountered a number of challenges "going public" and in controlling the narrative regarding the collective's rationale, which eventually led to their disbanding in September 2020. The challenges they faced provide insight into how reproductive decisions are received publicly and in the way they engage a number of longstanding discourses, including those related to demographic anxiety. In this article we will discuss the case of BirthStrike, from inception to disbanding, as an illustration of what happens when an activist campaign touches on a number of overlapping anxieties – demographic, personal, political, and environmental – and how these anxieties can give momentum to such campaigns, but also create blockages in whether and how their message is heard.

In March 2019 Blythe Pepino, one of the founders of BirthStrike, was interviewed on Fox News by conservative presenter Tucker Carlson. The segment opened with a video of US Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC), on Instagram, describing the anticipated future shocks and impacts of climate change and asking, "is it still ok to have a child?" Carlson picks up after this, and the following exchange takes place:

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Tucker Carlson: Some people decided that no it is not okay to have children, Blythe Pepino is a co-founder of BirthStrike, it's a group of people who are refusing to have children in order to resist climate change and she joins us, anyway thanks very much for coming on. I think this story makes me sad, I'm not here to attack you, I want to take what you're saying seriously but I'm not sure I understand why you're choosing not to have children so I would be grateful if you tell us?

Blythe Pepino: Sure and yeah thank you for asking because a lot of people are getting a little bit confused about what we're trying to do here, BirthStrike isn't about trying to stop other people from having children. We feel too afraid to have kids because we feel that we're heading toward civilization breakdown as a result of the environmental crisis and the sort of mismanagement or political inertia over dealing with it. Does that make sense?

Tucker Carlson: It does make sense, it's a sadder answer even than I imagined because there are a lot of people who argue that nobody should have kids that's what argument you're basically saying: the species is over, it's hopeless, we should in effect as a group end it and commit suicide?

This exchange, and the rest of the interview, characterizes many of the interviews that Blythe participated in. She often found herself asserting that climate change is real and dangerous and clarifying that sharing her decision and the aim of the collective is to "ring the alarm" about the climate crisis; it is not an instruction for others, but an invitation to consider what is at stake without meaningful climate action from governments and corporations.

AOC's question and Blythe's concerns have been on the minds of many environmentally conscious people (see Crist 2020). These concerns are present in various blog posts, online forums, kitchen table conversations, and discussions amongst friends and activists, but gained a more visible public presence when three separate collectives began to organize around the subject. Conceivable Future in the United States, BirthStrike in the United Kingdom and No Future No Children in Canada all emerged between 2015 and 2020. They reflect a personal and collective anxiety about reproducing during the climate crisis and represent various aims. Each collective is different in aspects of its objectives, approach, and formulation, but all aim to bring attention to the climate crisis by discussing its impact on reproductive decision making and (future) children and all are focused on asking for real, tangible action to end the climate crisis.

In this article we reflect on these concerns and emergences and explore the BirthStrike for Climate collective. We consider how discussion about reconsidering reproductive choices as a result of the climate crisis was used as a tool for activism and how it was encountered in the public realm. We also explore the range of public responses to this decision and unpack what happens when activists collectivize around what is commonly considered a private, personal decision. Over a period of two years we undertook interviews, analyzed testimonials, attended events and analyzed media content related to BirthStrike for Climate, No Future No Children, and Conceivable Future. The larger data set includes transcripts of 16 in-depth interviews, 164 texts including testimonials, pledges and declarations from individuals reflecting their reproductive intentions online, and 30 pieces of media including public interviews, newspaper articles, and podcasts. In this article we focus on a case study of the BirthStrike for Climate campaign, and the experience of one of the spokespeople in particular, Blythe Pepino. Our findings presented here are based specifically on 4 in-depth interviews with Blythe, 15 media pieces and ethnographic observations at panel talks, protests and artistic events in which BirthStrike participated.

The BirthStrike for Climate campaign carried significant ethical and political baggage that triggered numerous anxieties: ecological, demographic, reproductive, and existential. We explore how the case of BirthStrike may be an example of epistemic injustice, and why the message of BirthStrike was so hard to hear. We conclude that BirthStrike was attempting to produce a kind of "existential shock" to spur climate action and that some of the public reaction to the campaign can be read as a form of denial that calls on existing tropes and logics in its response. Ultimately this renders the conversation that BirthStrike aimed to provoke familiar and obscures their call for radical and structural change.

Individual and collective anxiety: demography, climate change and reproduction

Demographic anxiety

Demographic anxiety takes many forms, including concerns about growing populations, shrinking populations, and migration, for which the climate crisis has provided new valances. One of the most common manifestations is concern about "overpopulation" and its contribution to global emissions, environmental degradation, and migration. Human reproduction has been a perennial concern for some conservationists and environmental advocates who have engaged with aspects of demography in their work for a long time, with some aiming to manage human population size in places with high biodiversity, or advocating for human population reduction to conserve resources (see Sasser 2018). Climate change can bolster these environmental rationales and arguments, and with new tools (see Bhatia et al. 2020; Haraway 2016; Murphy 2017; Ojeda et al. 2020). Global emissions and climate targets take the conversation from one of local natural resource availability and flora and fauna, to a more global and to a degree more dislocated arena. Here, numerous projections and models come into play. They engage reproductive decision making, but at large scales, often obscuring those meant to be enacting these decisions and the bodies on which they depend. An example of this was The Drawdown Report of 2017 which ranked the "Top 100 Solutions to Climate Change" (Hawken 2017). Girls' education and family planning ranked 5th and 6th and, when combined, topped the list (Hawken 2017; PRB 2017). The "solution" they identify is population reduction and the role of education and contraception in reducing the total fertility rate. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) list population dynamics as drivers of environmental degradation and the climate crisis, which further complicates the picture (IPCC 2014; United Nations Environment Programme 2020). This type of analysis and the general revival of population discourses has presented a challenge for actors in the gender and reproductive rights space, which was largely forged in response to top-down, state-led population policy and fought to center a human rights-based, individual choice-led approach to reproductive decision making (Hartmann 1995; Pizzarossa 2018). Navigating calls for family planning as a "solution" to climate change revives longstanding debates while presenting new challenges (McMullen 2019).

This includes the legacies and logics of colonialism, racism, exploitation, and oppression. Asking whose reproduction is valued and whose is not, and under what circumstances, is a quick guide to some of the most oppressive logics at work societally and globally, as pointed out by various reproductive justice scholars (Hartmann 1995; Hoover 2018; Murphy 2017; Ojeda et al. 2020; Roberts 1998; Wilson 2017; see also Di Chiro 2010; Dow and Lamoreaux 2019; Sturgeon 2010).

To a degree, this global discussion obscures what AOC was getting at with her question, "Is it ok to have a child?" which appears to respond more to an individual's felt sense and sphere of action. Like Blythe Pepino, rather than exhorting people not to have children, AOC was attempting to acknowledge people's concerns about whether future generations will grow up in liveable environments. Meehan Crist, writing in the *London Review of Books*, takes up AOC's question and explores it in the round. One dimension of the debate she problematizes is how large corporate contributors to the climate crisis have emphasized the role of individual responsibility for resolving the crisis, and the advent of the individual "carbon footprint." Not having a child is often listed as a green action people can take, alongside eating less meat or driving less. This can distract from the true drivers of the climate crisis, as well as minimizing the significance and meaning of having children, while shifting responsibility onto individuals. As Crist writes, "It accepts as inevitable the neoliberal order that has driven the climate crisis, and insists that our responses to this crisis take place in the same system" (Crist 2020:3). However, when people are faced with the scale of the challenge, taking action can provide relief from what some describe as an onslaught of eco-anxiety, providing a sense of control, including by reconfiguring family plans.

Eco-anxiety

Eco-anxiety and the emotional and mental health impacts of climate change are gaining attention. Various definitions exist, but eco-anxiety is widely understood as "the generalized sense that the ecological foundations of existence are in the process of collapse" (Albrecht 2012:250). In a summary of recent thinking on eco-anxiety, Panu described how key to definitions of anxiety in general is how anxiety is usually future oriented and contains significant uncertainty (Panu 2020). These characteristics fit well with the climate crisis, which is widely described as in the future, despite already occurring, and also as a series of future oriented projections with ranges of certainty and probability. Beyond anxiety, people describe a range of feelings related to what is expected as a result of climate change, including fear, anxiety, grief, despair, dread, and other largely negative emotions (Marks et al. 2021; Wray 2022; Schneider-Mayerson and Leong 2020). Much of the related activist protest has featured elements of grief and mourning, including plenty of imagery representing death and extinction, exemplified by Extinction Rebellion (XR), which, as we will discuss, was involved in BirthStrike's inception.

Eco-reproductive anxiety

Some descriptions of eco-anxiety engage a reproductive angle. Recently, empirical research has started to address the question of whether, how, and why people are factoring climate change and other environmental conditions into their reproductive decision-making (Arnocky et al. 2012; De Rose and Testa 2015; Helm et al. 2021; Schneider-Mayerson 2021; Schneider-Mayerson and Leong 2020). Existing studies tend to focus on individual decision-making rather than people who are publicly discussing their reproductive concerns as an activist tool, as the most prominent members of BirthStrike have, though of course members of BirthStrike are also people with personal lives and the overlaps between their individual decision-making and their activist profiles are at the heart of many of the dilemmas we discuss here. Schneider-Mayerson (2021) has helpfully described how, even for those who are not public figures, reproductive decision-making can still act as a "socio-political tool" for opening up conversations about environmental politics among individuals' social networks.

One study (Helm et al. 2021) comparing attitudes in the USA and Aotearoa New Zealand found that interviewees were concerned both that having children would contribute to "overpopulation" and overconsumption and that (future) children would have to deal with very difficult circumstances because of the existential threats of climate change. Importantly, the participants' decisions were not clear-cut, and indicated a spectrum of reproductive reconsideration, including having no children, having fewer children than they would like to and adopting. Helm and colleagues helpfully note that one factor coloring reactions to these kinds of conversations and decisions is existing antipathy and suspicion toward women (in particular) being "childfree,"[1] which, while increasingly common, is still stigmatized in society and often a source of tension within families.

Matthew Schneider-Mayerson and Kit Ling Leong have conducted a survey of over 600 Americans aged 27–45 who are concerned about climate change to gauge the contours of their "eco-reproductive concerns." In summary:

> While 59.8% of respondents reported being "very" or "extremely concerned" about the carbon footprint of procreation, 96.5% of respondents were "very" or "extremely concerned" about the well-being of their existing, expected, or hypothetical children in a climate-changed world. This was largely due to an overwhelmingly negative expectation of the future with climate change. Younger respondents were more concerned about the climate impacts their children would experience than older respondents, and there was no statistically significant difference between the eco-reproductive concerns of male and female respondents. (Schneider-Mayerson and Leong 2020:1007).

Unlike other studies which tend to conflate arguments about the impact of children on the planet with the impact of the state of the planet on children, Schneider-Mayerson and Leong helpfully distinguish between these in their analysis. While these "impacts" may be entwined in research participants'

reasoning, it is important to disentangle them in analysis, in order to avoid inadvertently and uncritically reproducing simplistic arguments about the relationship between population growth and carbon emissions and, as Schneider-Mayerson and Leong point out (Schneider-Mayerson and Leong 2020:1009), to disaggregate individual decision-making from policy recommendations.

In a follow-up article on the same survey data with what he describes as "climate leftists," Schneider-Mayerson (2021) discusses how those survey respondents who were parents or who were planning to become parents discussed being effectively incentivized to act on climate issues for the sake of their children and a hope that their children will become future environmentalists. Amongst those who were planning to (probably) not have children, there was by contrast an assumption that having children would displace time and energy that could be spent on activism. These respondents also discussed using their decisions as a way to open up conversations about the scale of the climate crisis with those who were less aware, which resonates with the aims of BirthStrike to use reproductive decision-making as a means to sound the alarm about climate change.

BirthStrike for Climate

We will now explore how BirthStrike as an activist intervention was often misinterpreted and misrepresented, in part because of this host of related anxieties, but also because of their message and the complex socio-historical baggage their subject engages. BirthStrike was started by Blythe Pepino in 2018 in the United Kingdom. The collective was conceived of as a media campaign, and supported with a launch by the XR media team. A website and Tumblr page allowed people to make declarations and access related resources. Pepino has done dozens of media interviews and actively participated in public conversations about her decisions and the mission of the organization. BirthStrike demanded system change and "stands in compassionate solidarity with all parents, celebrates their choice and fights for the safety and lives of their children" (BirthStrike for Climate 2019). BirthStrike was open to people regardless of their parental status, and, while based in the UK, received declarations from all over the world. BirthStrike for Climate disbanded in 2020 and became a support group entitled *Grieving parenthood in the climate crisis: Channeling loss into climate justice.*

Advent: BirthStrike for Climate

A singer-songwriter, Blythe was feeling disengaged with what she saw as the mainstream system and also had more time on her hands after a period of commercial music success. After attending a lecture by XR, she became engaged in climate activism. Despite a longstanding interest in the environment and social justice, in one interview with us, she described the experience in the following way: "Went to the lecture, mind blown, and it activated me on all those other aspects of our culture and our system I was already disagreeing with . . . that moment was such a mobilizer for me, as I think it probably was for a lot of other people'." Over a period of six months she read about, discussed, and engaged with the future anticipated by the climate crisis. This new knowledge jarred with her plans, including having children. Speaking with us in 2019, she stated:

> At the time it felt very much like, "I can't do this and this is a decision that I feel like I'm not going to be making any time soon." Not just because of the uncertainty of that future for the child and the extremity of how I see things going, but also because . . . the next few years just seem so incredibly important. And if people like me who have the time and the money and the privilege, basically, to be agitating aren't doing that, then what chance do we have?

Blythe became very concerned with speaking the truth of the climate crisis to others. She also began sharing her reproductive concerns with people who were attending climate activism events and found she was not alone. Here she describes some of the rationale for BirthStrike, as well as the start of collectivizing her concerns: "birth seemed like this really prescient way of getting this existential element of the crisis across . . . birth was really a harsh, important slap around the face to do that with.

But I only did it, I only actually went through with it because it wasn't just me that was thinking this. There were lots of other people who were thinking this as well." As an artist, Blythe describes a comfort with making feelings public, but wanted to collectivize and hear from others before getting started. She summarized the conversations she was having in the following way: "the impression I got [from others] was 'I've been thinking about this, I don't know how to speak about it because it seems really taboo and almost too scary for me to say out loud'. And I feel there was a definite instinctive feeling there was a taboo and they were going to get shit for it. Or that it was just quite simply too sad, to think, to talk about."

Blythe got organized and gathered like-minded individuals, they engaged the XR media team, who offered support, and began to share their concerns on social media. As a test of concept, Blythe posted on climate-related forums and asked people who shared these concerns to get in touch; she was overwhelmed by the response. After some consideration and consultation as well as back and forth on the name, BirthStrike for Climate was launched in 2018. Although conceptualized as a media campaign, Blythe and team were wary of appearing as if they were encouraging people not to reproduce. They wanted it to be open to people who shared this concern, regardless of their parental status or family plans. She sees BirthStrike as "a sign that lots of people are becoming active and it's a sign that lots of people are afraid, and that's just a clarion call to action." Before launching, about 100 people were engaged, they developed a press release and some social media content. There was a Google form to register interest and soon BirthStrike had about 700 people registering similar concerns, with hundreds more engaging with the Facebook group.

Prior to launching, the collective anticipated some of the public reaction. They knew that BirthStriking could be read as a movement that centered population growth as a driver of climate change and as a movement encouraging fewer people being born. This was complex, in that this was precisely what drew some people to register their interest. Blythe described some of these challenges to us:

> There were a lot of people who signed up to BirthStrike, and I welcome them in, who are more on the kind of "I don't want to contribute to this nightmare" and I think that's a really understandable emotional reaction. But it's been a real fine balance between inviting those people in and preventing them from trying to use BirthStrike to coerce other people to have the same feelings. And that's yeah, that's it. It's very difficult to talk in nuanced terms these days, isn't it?

Exposure: going public

After launching BirthStrike, the collective participated in numerous media engagements. This included interviews on Fox News, Sky News and BBC Radio's Woman's Hour, participating in panels such as The Battle of Ideas, being written about in newspapers and magazines, featuring in documentaries, and more. The collective guessed correctly that the concept was one that would garner media attention. However, they found their message was commonly misrepresented.

In analyzing how BirthStrike was interpreted publicly, three main themes are explored. The first is how BirthStrike was often associated with population growth and encouragement to produce fewer humans. The second is how the positionality of BirthStrikers for climate was interpreted and engaged aspects of privilege. The third is how BirthStrike was sometimes interpreted as misanthropic.

Population

BirthStrike described the "overpopulation" discourse as one of the main challenges to the existence and message of BirthStrike. So unrelenting were the associations of their movement with population reduction that they cite it as a main reason for eventually disbanding. Before discussing this further, we

will briefly outline relevant literature that discusses the historical and contemporary links between discourses of "overpopulation" and environmental crisis to suggest some of the epistemological and political legacies that influenced how the campaign was received.

Malthus' *Essay on the Principle of Population*, written in 1798, can be considered a seminal text of demographic anxiety. Malthus is best known for predicting that population growth would increase misery by outpacing food supply and worsening poverty, and arguing that lowering fertility would improve prosperity and wellbeing. Malthusian ideas, as described by historian Alison Bashford (2018, 2019), are fundamentally about "closed and limited systems" (Bashford et al. 2019:2) and continue to influence environmental discourse and practice.

A fundamental point of overlap between (neo-)Malthusianism and eugenics is the idea that the human population can be categorized into "fit" and "unfit" populations for reproduction (see also Murphy 2017). Similarly, anxieties about limited land, space, and food which were prominent in Malthus' argument, characterized eugenic and ecological thinking in the early twentieth century (Bashford 2018), in which natural resources and land are naturally limited, while human sexual appetites are unlimited. This has the effect of naturalizing scarcity and limited resources; it also plays into (neo-)colonial stereotypes about sexuality and fecundity in relation to race, gender, class, and ability (Ojeda et al. 2019). This is troubling in itself, but also because these arguments have been mobilized to effect population control through overt and covert means throughout history.

In her study of how some conservation groups in the US link population growth and environmental activism, Jade Sasser (2018) draws on the reproductive justice framework to challenge these neo-Malthusian logics. Reproductive justice aims to center social justice and the structural drivers of oppression and inequality that facilitate reproduction for some groups over others. Although reproductive justice is based upon human rights principles, it extends reproductive rights to consider social determinants and systems, recognizing the individual within a constellation of forces that mean some are more able to enact rights and "choices" than others. Sasser shows how "population" seems to have enduring appeal because it is presented as a simple or commonsense "solution" to the highly complex problems of climate change and biodiversity loss, yet, as she says, this only perpetuates the sense that climate change can be fixed through individual "choices" instead of by systemic change. This was also a problem for BirthStrike, as many understood their "ask" to be that people consider having fewer children to save the planet, rather than pointing out the existential threats of climate change in order to pressure governments and corporations to act to prevent climate change from getting worse.

Blythe described to us how she was often misled about how a media piece would be framed, or would be paired with population reduction organizations and repeatedly asked questions related to this rationale. She also describes being contacted on numerous occasions, sometimes repeatedly, by organizations advocating for population reduction requesting they work together. She describes some of this experience in the quote from an interview with us below:

> We were putting ourselves forward through a prism of media and a society that didn't understand . . . So, because our name was so triggering toward populationism, it just, no matter what we said around it, as soon as we said we're called BirthStrike, essentially it was like, "Oh, that's what they are".[2]

She went on to describe why she thinks this angle was more appealing to mainstream media outlets. In discussing one of her media interviews, Blythe recounted:

> So he's [the interviewer] like "Oh, so you don't want humans to exist anymore". That kind of feeds into that like, "I musn't look at the fact that what she's saying is that we've done a terrible job, and the way that we live is really shit, because it's depressing, and it's too guilt-trippy for everyone. No one's going to like it, and everyone's going to be upset. So let's focus on population stuff" because that is easier, even though it makes absolutely no sense.

Blythe is convinced that much of the reason BirthStrike was so regularly misconstrued was because the reality of what the collective was trying to say was too challenging. It is easier to rely on ideas and "solutions" that exist in society and discourse. Related to this is the very different levels of engagement

with climate science in the general population and in media training. This means that there may not be shared understanding of the state or stakes of the climate crisis. Her sense was that this could make her sound extreme, whereas she felt she was responding to the facts.

Privilege

A lack of diversity and colonial overtones have been long standing critiques of environmental organizations and activism, but this has become stronger in recent years as climate action has become more mainstream and movements such as Black Lives Matter advance the public conversation on racial inequality and injustice. Privilege, race, and class often come up in conversations about "birth-striking," usually in descriptions of the issue as one of white, middle class concern. It has also been the experience of the authors, that one of the first responses when engaging in academic and casual conversations about the research is a question about privilege. As described by Heglar, climate change is not the first existential threat and many people, particularly people of color, have had and continue to have their lives and reproduction curtailed by forces outside of their control (Heglar 2019; see also Hoover 2018). Heglar terms the tendency of the climate movement to reify the existential threat of climate change as "existential exceptionalism" and criticizes it for not recognizing the arc of history and how life, including family life, has been and continues to be unsafe for many people.

Blythe describes how, in media interviews, she was often asked about the positionality and privilege of BirthStrike. What she describes demonstrates a recognition of privilege and a willingness to use it as a tool of activism. Speaking to us after BirthStrike disbanded, she reflected:

> It's a bunch of people working on part of the dream of safety, and that safety has come from essentially the oppression of other people. That safety itself is wonderful. We get to live in that. And it still has trials and tribulations, and horror, and all the rest of it, but essentially being able to wake up in not a war-torn place is a great privilege. So, I do think it's a privilege. But I kind of knew that from the start, and those are the people I was trying to get to . . . the privileged community, the point of BirthStrike in a way, was to get to those people, and I was most happy when we were in Cosmopolitan, when we were in those kind of magazines, where we would be talking to people who were still in that dream of like, "Everything's cool. The world's really nice," you know? But I think if people say, "Oh, it's a bunch of middle class white people," then I'd be happy with you saying, "Yeah, it mostly is, actually."

Misanthropy/sadness/hope

Another common response to BirthStrike is an accusation of misanthropy and not having sufficient hope in the future of humanity to resolve the climate crisis. This often extends to the suggestion that those reconsidering their reproductive choices are not recognizing the potential for the next generation, including their own potential children, to be part of the solution. This can chime with a suggestion that those choosing not to reproduce do not truly value children, or humans, and are somehow altogether misanthropic. This can jar for some involved in the movement. In various media and research interviews Blythe assuredly described how much she loves children and would like to have them, and clarified that she just does not feel safe enough. Some others involved in these movements described in interviews and testimonials how their decision reflected the opposite of misanthropy and represents their deep love for humanity, with their climate activism motivated by a desire for human and other life to continue safely and with more justice and wellbeing. For some, this is a love for humanity in general, for others the fear and concern is specifically related to their own (potential) children.

Disbanding BirthStrike: from raising the alarm to grieving the future

In August 2020 BirthStrike posted a statement on their website indicating that the campaign was ending and BirthStrike was being replaced with a support group. The post states that, after six months of reflection, they feel continuing is untenable:

> In the light of the recent BLM [Black Lives Matter] protest spurring conversations around racial and social justice, and what we see as a welcome and increasing awareness of the inextricable links between social/racial justice and climate collapse, we think it will be dangerous for us to continue to campaign as "BirthStrike" going forward.

The statement goes on to describe how they feel the campaign had some success, in part because of its "seemingly 'scandalous' nature," but also describes a willingness to name what they understand as its flaws.

The first issue BirthStrike describes is challenges they believe are a result of their name and a relentless association with population discourses. This is the "danger" referred to in the statement:

> Witnessing the loss of control of our narrative has been very distressing and humbling. We have to concede that we underestimated the power of "overpopulation" as a growing form of climate breakdown denial – even in some of our most revered scientists and fellow climate activists.

They go on to describe how they feel this narrative may gain ground as the crisis intensifies and has the potential to feed into divisive ecofascism. They end this paragraph indicating that "the topic triggers too many to obsess over demographic solutions to a crisis that cannot be 'solved' only managed."

As this suggests, (neo-)Malthusian ideas are influential in the (far-)right. In their recent analysis of "the Muslim question" in Europe, Bracke and Hernández Aguilar (2020) argue that "fear of replacement," the idea that migrant populations will "overwhelm" and "replace" the "native" population, acts as a palimpsest, which accumulates new layers of meaning over time while retaining vestiges of its original meaning. As Thomas and Gosink (2021) argue, with members of the right-wing shifting from denying climate change toward incorporating it into their ideology, we need to be vigilant about the revival of eco-fascism. Eco-fascism's plasticity seems to lend itself to current political currents, in which "old" ideologies like population control and racialized fears of immigration have been tied to the environmental crisis by far-right leaders and by some members of environmental groups (Thomas and Gosink 2021:35).

The common thread between neo-Malthusianism, fear of replacement and eco-fascist populationism is an ideology that divides the global human population into groups whose reproduction should and should not be supported, with the further element that those who have historically held political and economic power view themselves as victims. In particular, in the racialized and classed thinking of eugenics and neo-Malthusianism, women of color are portrayed as naturally robust and fecund while white women of higher socio-economic classes are seen as morally superior yet physically and emotionally weaker and more prone to suffer from problems of fertility and childbirth (Hartmann 1995; Ojeda et al. 2020). This not only perpetuates stereotypes, but also lends credence to coercive interventions in others' reproductive lives, which tend to be meted out to those who are already marginalized and disempowered.

The disbanding statement then goes on to discuss how:

> [the] links between ecological devastation and human racial domination have not been taken seriously enough by many Global North environmental groups. In short: "justice" has often been on the back burner. **In order to achieve system change "justice" must be front and center and decision making must be genuinely guided or made by those who have been oppressed by this system in order for that systematic change to be thorough**.

They write about how BirthStrike was "essentially run by a middle-class, white, English woman and remains heavily Global North weighted therefore cannot be titled as 'international' despite the fact that the coordinating team became more representative." The statement ends thanking supporters for their bravery, pointing out that they spoke about a difficult, emotive, and taboo subject "whilst also bracing against various types of xenophobia, and from countries where this decision is more than a taboo."

Members of BirthStrike for Climate were then invited to become a part of a new collective entitled: *Grieving parenthood in the climate crisis: Channeling loss into climate justice*. The language used in the name of the collective is notable: grief, parenthood, crisis, loss, and justice. The active language of striking and birth has been replaced and the name feels more subdued. The shift from a campaign to a support group happened during the Coronavirus pandemic. In the UK (where BirthStrike was based)

this meant many people's lives became more limited and local. Blythe also described this in an interview with us as a part of the shift, how thinking about the global existential stakes of climate change was exhausting and stressful and how the world was just not ready for the messages BirthStrike was trying to convey. Living more locally felt less anxious and coincided with more acceptance about the future during the climate crisis for Blythe:

> I think Birthstrike and XR were attempts to pull everyone quick to it, into fast change, and I just don't think that it's going to happen like that, unfortunately . . . I think a lot of those [media] interviews, not only was it a prism of them not really understanding, but it was also a real inability to connect with the full emotional truth of what's happening. Yeah, I still maintain that that's a huge reason why we got misconstrued so much.

For Blythe, people are not ready for the speed and scale of change required to avert the worst of the climate crisis.

Ringing the existential alarm: hearing and mishearing BirthStrike

What becomes apparent is how difficult it was for the message of BirthStrike to be interpreted as they intended. It is also clear how BirthStrike reflects, but also ignites, a multiplicity of anxieties. We propose that these two findings go together. There are a number of reasons BirthStrike struggled as a campaign. The action they were taking (resisting reproduction) is not the action they were asking for (system change and climate action) and they were using a very local (one's own body) and individual choice to advocate for change at a much larger societal scale. The campaign reflects numerous anxieties – reproductive, ecological, and existential. For some who signed up to the campaign, demographic anxiety was also evident. When BirthStriking hits the public stage, it is often read as somewhat hysterical, calling in longstanding sexist tropes about women's emotionality and irrationality. It is also read as gloomy and as an instruction to others to reduce their individual carbon footprints, missing the call for systems change. Further still, it pulls in Malthusian discourse, some of it understandably, as what many BirthStrikers describe is a fear of lack of food, water, resources, and civilizational or societal collapse – exactly the kinds of concerns that have characterized (neo-) Malthusian discourse. But it can also call in other dimensions of Malthusian thinking that link to racism, colonialism, and eugenics. This, combined with the privilege of the figureheads, can make it appear that the demographic considered most responsible for climate change is suggesting its solution is limiting birth, without considering the potential reproductive injustices this might incite.

Blythe and others maintain that part of why the campaign was challenging is because of the existential stakes of their message and the unwillingness for this to be heard, particularly by mainstream media outlets. At first reading, it may seem that it is the reproductive decision making that is not being heard, and to a degree this is true – it is clear that public conversations are loaded with judgment about this. However, a deeper reading reveals that what is perhaps creating the greatest dissonance is the concept of a world where life is so significantly destabilized by climate change that it may be unsafe for future children, and further, by something created by humans and upon which there is still time to act.

What BirthStrike was trying to communicate was existential anxiety, in order to spur action from governments and corporations with the greatest culpability for the climate crisis. They were often met with a kind of climate denial that relies on existing orders and ideas, eliding the difficulty of the statement.

Being heard

Perhaps it is unsurprising that activism centering reproduction and emotions and calling for system change was often misread and misheard. The history of feminist activism and reproductive politics represent numerous examples of when women, in particular, have been denied credibility and authority and shamed for speaking out about their experiences. Feminist writers and theorists have a long history of engaging personal and intimate topics politically and the second-wave slogan of "the

personal is political" rings true in the case of BirthStrike. Anthropologists have also documented some of the ways in which activists on reproductive issues are and are not heard. One classic example of this is Faye Ginsburg's groundbreaking study of activists on both sides of the abortion debate – itself shaped by the history of eugenics and population control (Ginsburg 1998:34) - in a small town in the USA. As Ginsburg's careful ethnography shows, persuading others to share your interpretation of a political message is a crucial objective for any activist.

In 2007 Miranda Fricker coined the term "epistemic injustice" to describe the different ways people are heard or not and who has the facility to understand and act on their experiences. The feminist movement has a history of confronting epistemic injustice and there are areas of connection and disconnection in the example of BirthStrike. Fricker (2007) proposes two kinds of epistemic injustice. Testimonial injustice is where systemic prejudice and a "credibility deficit" combine to mean contributions are not heard and individuals are not recognized as holders of knowledge. Hermeneutic injustice is when sense making resources are not available to support people to render their experiences intelligible and therefore to effectively convey them to others. With testimonial injustice, the communication doesn't land and is discredited, with hermeneutic injustice there is a difficulty in communicating in the first place, as the experience does not fit with dominant concepts, social facts, and ways of knowing. Both examples place the burden and consequence on the discredited and marginalized person or group.

Dotson also theorizes epistemic injustice and violence and introduces concepts that may help understand the mishearing of BirthStrike. Testimonial quieting describes instances where a hearer fails to identify a speaker as a knower (Dotson 2011; Vitale and Miller 2020), which is similar to testimonial injustice. Some of this is evident in Blythe's interview with Tucker Carlson: he focuses on her emotions rather than the scientific data she is trying to share and implicitly dismisses her as not knowing what it means to be a parent. Dotson also introduces the concept of contributory injustice which describes the hearer willfully calling on hermeneutic resources that maintain structural power and harm the epistemic agency of the speaker and knower, despite there being available resources that would more accurately interpret and represent the testimony of the speaker (Vitale and Miller 2020). What happened to BirthStrike could be seen as an example of contributory injustice, where old scripts were mobilized to interpret the message.

José Medina describes how feminist expressions and interventions have been systematically distorted and co-opted (Medina 2021). This coheres with the experience of BirthStrike, which was publicly represented by (and as) women despite having members of various genders. However, central to Fricker's description of what constitutes an epistemic injustice is social power and identity position. Epistemic injustice goes beyond being discredited, but wraps in systemic oppression via social position and identity, exacerbating the consequences. Fricker calls this "tracker prejudice," as it follows people through various systems and institutions, producing a level of social power that is at work even when not being overtly enacted (Fricker 2007). In the case of BirthStrike, there may be a "credibility deficit," but not an epistemic injustice, as identity and social position may be part of how the collective was able to mobilize such a large amount of media interest in the first place. At least in some of the media pieces and panel talks, there were comments about how people who might birthstrike are exactly those who "should" be reproducing, and that their children may, in part as a result of their climate consciousness and presumably their social position, be able to enable and engineer a more liveable future. Even Tucker Carlson ends his interview with Blythe by saying "I think you should have children, I think they solve a lot of problems and put things in perspective, you seem like a nice person and I bet you'd love it." In this comment one can read pronatalism, judgment, and a paternalistic suggestion of irrationality. If reproductive justice asks who is being supported and encouraged to reproduce, who is not, and under what conditions (Sasser 2018), this does not appear to be the cohort experiencing social and structural impediments to reproduction and the alarm BirthStrike aimed to capitalize on is demonstrative of this.

Hearing existential threat

Tim Christion Myers explores climate change as an existential threat and its relationship to climate denial (Myers 2014). Building on work by Kari Norgaard, whose ethnographic findings suggested that climate denial is an emotional defense, Myers argues that climate change is perceived as an existential threat and this shuts down ethical reflection. He states that "by calling into question our most basic assumptions about how we ought to live, how we ought to relate to others and to nature going into the future, the *continuity of social existence* is threatened at a collective level" (Myers 2014:55, original emphasis). With BirthStrike, this kind of calling into question was exactly the aim. What better to signify existential threat than halting birth? BirthStrike was aiming to produce an "existential shock" to spur action on the climate crisis. However, drawing on contributory epistemic injustice, credibility deficit and climate denial, numerous heuristic resources were mobilized in an attempt to discredit the existential stakes of the climate crisis and therefore BirthStrike. Persistent scripts about demographic anxiety and hysterical women, combined with a casting of BirthStrikers as doomsayers, kept the conversation familiar and blocked their message about government and corporate inaction.

In describing the existential challenge of climate change Myers describes how "we see ourselves – our past and future – in the very world responsible for climate change," and how this complicates the line between what is outside of us and what *is* us, meaning that addressing climate change can be understood in a sense as "building a movement against ourselves" (Myers 2014:54–55). This produces a kind of identity crisis where "reforming one's identity risks endangering the collective sense of order, stability, and continuity in life required to live with integrity and confidence" (Myers 2014:57). Responding to the existential threat of climate change is anxiety inducing and disruptive to the lifeworld, requiring normative shifts. Norgaard lists the numerous ways that people and societies work to deny the threat of climate change and how emotion is implicated in this. One form of denial is implicatory, where climate change is acknowledged as real and happening but the moral, psychological, and political implications are minimized (Norgaard 2006). BirthStrike ultimately considered that the drive to resist the message of the collective would only grow as climate predictions became increasingly dire, so it would be dangerous to continue the campaign.

Conclusion

The IPCC AR6 report describes climate impacts occurring at a faster pace than expected and anticipates a quicker timeline for the kinds of existential threats that BirthStrikers cite in their testimonials. Portions of the earth will become uninhabitable and many communities face a real existential threat. As this picture emerges more steadily into the mainstream, the credibility deficit BirthStrike faced appears to be closing. As these challenges intensify it would not be surprising to see more campaigns that aim to produce an "existential shock" and take on forms of existential activism. This demands an engagement with climate change that takes into account the moral, ethical, and psychological aspects of the crisis and engages with responses that do not replicate the logics that created the current situation.

Notes

1. We are familiar with the argument about using the terms "childless" and "childfree" to indicate individuals' relationship to voluntary and involuntary childlessness. Helm and colleagues describe participants without children as childfree, yet this jars with the fact that many people who are opting not to have children because of their concerns about the climate would still like to have children but do not feel able to, which seems quite different from those who are choosing not to have children because they perceive that to be a more positive outcome for themselves.
2. While it is unlikely that many of these people Blythe is describing know the specific reference, it is worth noting that the early reproductive rights campaigner and eugenicist Margaret Sanger wrote an essay in 1920 called "A BirthStrike to Avoid World Famine," which centered not only Malthusian ideas and anxiety about growing

populations, but also demonstrates that "birthstriking" has deep roots and has long been linked with ideas about there being "too many children in the world.".

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