

SPECIAL SECTION OPEN ACCESS

No Future, No Children; or No Children, No Future? Or Neither? Reproductive Reluctance as a Form of Adaptation to Climate Change Futures

Matilda Fitzmaurice 

School of Global Affairs, Lancaster University, Lancaster, UK

Correspondence: Matilda Fitzmaurice (m.fitzmaurice@lancaster.ac.uk)**Received:** 23 October 2025 | **Revised:** 23 April 2026 | **Accepted:** 1 May 2026**Keywords:** climate adaptation | climate change | family | futures | queer theory | reproduction

ABSTRACT

Could reproductive reluctance constitute a form of ‘adaptation’ to climate change? This commentary takes younger people’s reportedly growing climate change-related anxieties about having children as a starting point for reflections on researching and making (non)reproductive futures in geography and beyond. First, it reflects on the value of a rejection of reproductive futurism, or the reduction of the future to the ‘Child’ (Edelman 2004), and the need for a new antinormative vocabulary in an era of unprecedented environmental destruction. Second, it articulates how the already vast rift between the generations has taken on geological form, and suggests looking to the deep history of the human (e.g., Clark and Whittle 2023) when thinking of how to live in the future. Third and final, it addresses the tensions between progress, reproduction and adaptation as highly contested narratives of future-making. It concludes by suggesting adaptation as an accountable yet affirmative approach to (non)reproductive futures.

1 | Introduction

The current moment is notable for the coincidence of two (seemingly) contradictory visions of reproductive futures. On the one hand, anxieties about declining birth rates, and sometimes fully-fledged ‘pronatalist’ movements, are ascendent in most of the affluent world. Trading on narratives of crisis and scarcity, these envisage a future of bankrupt welfare states and defunct pension schemes or, in the case of many ‘pronatalists’, an overtly racist vision of depleted ‘ethnic majority’ populations. On the other hand, younger people are confronting the possibility that their children (existing or hypothetical) will lead more insecure and dangerous lives as the effects of climate breakdown unfold. The relationship between reproduction and climate change has been broached in, at least, the Anglophone media: ‘Want to fight climate change? Have fewer children’, as the *Guardian* told readers in Carrington (2017). This assumes that more births inevitably bring greater environmental costs and treats having

a child as a consumer choice like any other. Elsewhere, this coverage verbalises the growing dread felt by (prospective) parents. In 2016, a US-based journalist wrote that: ‘Any child born now could, by midlife, see massive storms inundate coastal cities and the Great Plains turn to dust. Could I have one, knowing I might not be able to keep her safe?’ (Ostrander 2016). While these concerns are entirely legitimate and relatable, they may perpetuate the idea that parents, and especially mothers, are and should be primarily responsible for the safety and welfare of ‘their’ children. More broadly, it presupposes that care is a privatised and individualised activity. Historically, the privatised family has been elevated over and above other structures of caregiving, often to uphold racist and gendered hierarchies (Spillers 1987). Historic reproductive injustices persist in the present, as evidenced by recent cases in Greenland and Canada (Cooney 2023; Cooper 2023), while populationist discourses have become more prominent with the rise of ecofascist violence (Sasser 2024). With these patterns in mind, and having seen how COVID-19

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revealed a chronic under-investment in care of all kinds, there is an urgent need for collective conversation about how to adapt family and caring relationships to the turbulent futures we are all, albeit from different positions, facing.

The relevance and value of this conversation are not limited to would-be parents. The relationship between climate change and caring responsibilities enjoys scant attention from policymakers, at least from where I am writing in the United Kingdom (see MacGregor et al. 2022). The purview of this commentary extends beyond ‘reproduction’ to *social reproduction*, or that which ‘hinges upon the biological reproduction of the labor force, both generationally and on a daily basis, through the acquisition and distribution of the means of existence, including food, shelter, clothing, and health care’ (Katz 2001, 711). Relatedly, despite long-standing policy concerns about the future of care, such as chronically under-funded infrastructure, the devaluation of care work both paid and unpaid, rapidly ageing populations and the potential threat posed by AI to caring work, there are nonetheless very few spaces in which people can reckon with the prospect of parenting or otherwise caring in a volatile climate and depleted environment. While a flurry of media articles on the subject appears every few months, this does not concretise into a sustained focus for government, research, third sector and community organisations.

In this commentary, I draw on recent writing in geography, sociology and literary criticism to sketch a provisional orientation to the researching and making of non-reproductive futures, in geography and beyond. In doing so, I reflect on concepts and narratives germane to future geographies of (non)reproduction: reproductive futurism, intergenerational relationships, progress and adaptation, and how these might be re-thought at this moment. I close by highlighting the importance of an affirmative approach to this subject, as well as the prospects of learning from historically marginalised groups, such as Black, Indigenous, queer and trans communities, who have always done ‘family’ in other ways.

1.1 | From Reproductive Futurism to the Crisis of Intergenerational Relations

Children are an enduring symbol of futurity. The ‘reproductive dystopia’ is a familiar genre in Euro-American culture: in which an apparent cessation of human fertility threatens human civilization, as in the 2006 film *Children of Men*. Climate change has solidified this connection. Maggie Nelson opens ‘Riding the Blinds’, her Nelson (2021) essay on freedom and the climate, with a story about her then-3-year-old son’s innocent and joyous love of trains. Attempting to reconcile this with the entanglement of railroads and the steam engine with slavery, extraction and fossil fuel economies, Nelson (2021, 173) writes:

Here I am, still feeling the unprecedented (in my life, anyway) sensation of simple, total happiness in witnessing another’s simple, total happiness, of beholding a new beginning in this world, while the words *The end of the world has already occurred* tick by under the scene.

Nelson is not alone here: in *This Changes Everything*, Naomi Klein centres her struggles with infertility and her eventual joy when her son was born. This reliance on the figure of the child appears ‘natural’, as Nelson herself acknowledges (ibid., 190), but also opens one up to charges of ‘reproductive futurism’. This term was popularised by the queer literary scholar Lee Edelman in his 2004 book *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. At the core of Edelman’s argument is not only that political appeals about the future of the social order are made in the name of an abstract Child, but that these appeals are made politically impossible to oppose. This text was pivotal in introducing geographers and social and cultural theorists to the figure of the Child as a symbol of the future, which, Edelman argues, is to be rejected in favour of a queer anti-futurism. However, critics of Edelman refuse to reject the future, arguing that ‘the here and now is simply not enough’ (Muñoz 2009, 96). For José Esteban Muñoz, Edelman’s account of reproductive futurism disavows race and reproduces the Child as always already white, while queer Black feminists call for a reappropriation of ‘motherhood’ away from idealised white middle-class norms (e.g., Gumbs 2016). Moreover, what happens when the idea of any future becomes impossible to imagine? Nelson, too, acknowledges this bind of wishing to maintain an antinormative stance towards the nuclear family and compulsory heterosexuality, while taking seriously the next generations’ fears about the world they have been bequeathed. She writes that: ‘It’s hard to get excited about queerness as a force come to ‘ruptur[e] our foundational faith in the reproduction of futurity’ (Edelman) when climate change is accomplishing the same goal, to catastrophic effect’ (Nelson 2021, 193).

In the past decade, children, teens and students have been leading participants in the climate fight, calling out present generations of adults for their failure to act. This brings to the fore a ‘crisis in human intergenerational relations’ to which geographers are well-equipped to respond (see Clark and Whittle 2023, 229). Older generations (emblematically, the post-war baby boomers) bear significant collective responsibility for the climate crisis, but are of an age where they will not live to see the fullest unfolding of its consequences. Meanwhile, younger generations such as Gen Z (born between 2000 and 2010), to which the school climate strikers belonged, bear no responsibility for climate breakdown and may have little choice but to eke out a life amidst chronic fear, insecurity, penury, violence and displacement. This also goes for the millennial generation (born between 1980 and 1995), who are considering whether to have children or are already raising them, in which case, children are approaching the age where they begin to ask difficult questions of their parents. Given that over half of all CO₂ emissions have been emitted since 1988, the geological conditions under which older generations came into the world contrast with those witnessed by younger generations. In a tangible sense, the rift between generations is not only ideological, political or economic, but also geological. Contemplating this intergenerational dynamic, Clark and Whittle (2023) caution against an over-intense level of investment in the figure of the child, which can be such that non-child-focused pursuits are devalued. Instead, they look to the ‘deep time disciplines’ of palaeontology, paleobiology and paleoanthropology, and above all co-operative childcare as a way to confront the ethical and political challenges of caring on a tumultuous planet.

1.2 | Progress, Reproduction and the Future

The final part of this commentary rethinks progress and reproduction as narratives of future-making. As Savransky and Lundy (2022) argue, progress isn't just one idea among others but a settled, almost universal faith in a modernist vision of social, economic and technological development: the engine of the future. Reproduction as the creation of a legacy also envisages the future, as we saw in the previous section. However, in modernist economic and social development, progress has long been associated with *falling* birth rates. According to the demographic transition models of the mid-twentieth century (see Murphy 2017, 37), as societies become wealthier and better educated, and as the position of women improves, they have fewer children and families become smaller. This, claim liberals invested in 'population control' as well as climate-concerned progressives, is the mechanism through which fertility will drop off in regions with high current fertility rates: namely, the Global South.

While progress helped realise some futures, it has also locked in certain patterns that make it difficult to envisage alternatives. Twentieth-century progress came with compulsory labour market participation (for one parent and later, both), the re-organisation of caring arrangements around private single-family dwellings and nuclear family units instead of multi-generational households. Mobilities and provisioning were organised around the mass production of consumer goods and the uptake of private cars. Even as it opened some possibilities, which, especially for women in the global minority world, have resulted in meaningful freedoms to determine their own life trajectories, it also locked out other potential futures. Progress, as Curley and Smith (2024, 168) show, served as the justification for the violent erasure of existing space-times and their overwriting by the abstractions of modernity and linear time: an overwriting that persists in the dominance of the 'Anthropocene' (but also other 'cenes', like the Capitalocene and Plantationocene) as a theorization of global time. 'Progress' has also brought about irreversible (detrimental) ecological effects. Taking in the rapidly shrinking window for climate change mitigation, the geographers Wainwright and Mann suggest that 'adaptation is becoming the "progress" of our time' (2018, 98). Just as 'progress' was the defining idea of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, adaptation will define the twenty-first century. But as the authors insist, the politics of how this adaptation materialises remains open: the question is not whether to adapt, but *how* (ibid.). It is my suggestion that we tie the question of how to define the political futures of climate change directly back to those of family, care and reproduction. For this, we can learn a great deal from Indigenous scholars such as Potawatomi philosopher Kyle Whyte (2021, 41–42), who proposes 'kinship time' as an alternative way to narrate climate change. Rather than through linear units of time, kinship time tracks climate change according to shifts in kinship relations, which are defined not through biological or legal relatedness, but broader relationships of responsibility and mutual caretaking. For example, younger people deciding not to become parents, to bring up their children very differently, or cultivate alternative kinship relations entirely, might be understood as a form of adaptation: after all, they are preparing for life, and adjusting their prior aspirations and expectations to the conditions of a fundamentally transformed world. How might we take reproductive reluctance for reasons related to climate change as a starting point

for rethinking how communities adapt to climate change? What forms of kinship-as-adaptation (to borrow from Whyte) from the recent or deep past—from surrogate families among queer communities during the HIV/AIDS crisis, to allomothering early in the *Homo* genus—might help inform how we care for one another in the future?

2 | Conclusion

In this commentary, rather than labour the question of whether it is 'OK' to have a child, I have sought to propose an alternative, affirmative agenda for researching and making (non)reproductive futures, both in geography and beyond. In other words, I have sought to affirm people's choices to have no (more) children and to suggest that choices not to parent, or to parent differently, might be understood as forms of adaptation to changing planetary conditions. Moreover, while adaptation rarely happens without loss, I am also keen to avoid misplaced nostalgia for an imagined past, where reproductive decisions were apparently untroubled by environmental and economic conditions. It is critical to push back against pro-natalist sloganeering and policies that will do little to make having children more affordable, while also stigmatising people without children. The shift to choosing a life without children is not a recent one, as sociological writing from the 1970s and 1980s attests. It is time to acknowledge and affirm that aspirations for family and caring futures have changed. Though this change pre-existed mass public awareness of climate change (people were already deciding not to have children 50 years ago), the increasing visibility of climate breakdown brings a renewed urgency to these questions.

Geographers have a key role to play in bringing about a compassionate and affirmative public conversation on reproductive futures, care and family. One approach could be to learn from marginalised communities, such as Black, Indigenous and LGBTQIA+ communities around the world, who have never been able to rely on normatively sanctioned versions of the family to meet their care and social reproduction needs (see Purifoy 2021). As well as activism demanding government recognition and access to treatment, both during the HIV/AIDS crisis and in subsequent pandemics, this also involved providing food, housing and care to the sick and dying, and running outreach campaigns to reach the most vulnerable members of the community (see Love Tank CIC, n.d.). I hope this is a compelling call to think creatively and compassionately about (non)reproductive futures.

Acknowledgements

The author thanks Emma Ormerod and Jennie Day for their organisation of the 'Geographies of the Future' lightning talks sessions at the RGS-IBG International Conference in London in August 2024, as well as all fellow presenters and participants in these sessions. The author also thanks the anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments, which helped strengthen the manuscript.

Funding

This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council, ES/Y007565/1.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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