

2015

## Queer Earth Mothering: Thinking Through The Biological Paradigm of Motherhood

Justin Morris

*McMaster University*, [morisjr@mcmaster.ca](mailto:morrisjr@mcmaster.ca)

---

### Recommended Citation

Morris, Justin. 2015. "Queer Earth Mothering: Thinking Through the Biological Paradigm of Motherhood." *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly* 1, (2). Article 3. doi:10.5206/fpq/2015.2.3.

## Queer Earth Mothering: Thinking Through the Biological Paradigm of Motherhood<sup>1</sup>

Justin Morris

### Abstract

I consider Christine Overall's (2012) proposal that counteracting the ecological threats born from overconsumption and overpopulation morally obligates (most) Westerners to limit their procreative output to one child per person. I scrutinize what Overall finds valuable about the genetic link in the parent-child relationship through the complementary lenses of Shelley M. Park's (2013) project of "queering motherhood" and the ecofeminist concept of "earth mothering." What comes of this theoretical mix is a procreative outlook I define as queer earth mothering (QEM): an interrogative attitude for identifying the ways in which anti-ecological and heteronormative ideologies seep into maternal praxis. I argue that QEM has potential to relocate the value(s) of the putative parent-child relationship, change attitudes toward adoptive motherhood for the better, and shed light on the reality that procreative decisions in affluent contexts can and will rebound with devastating environmental consequences on both present and future populations if left unabated. My hope is that with QEM as our guide for thinking through the biological paradigm of motherhood we will be in a much better position to appreciate why affluent prospective parents should (generally speaking) favour adoption over biological reproduction.

**Keywords:** procreation, motherhood, queer theory, ecofeminism, moral responsibility

---

<sup>1</sup> The following wonderful people had a hand in making this paper far better than it would have been otherwise: Laura Benacquista, Elisabeth Gedge, Violetta Ignieski, conference attendees who heard an earlier version of this paper at the 2015 annual meeting of the Canadian Society for the Study of Practical Ethics (CSSPE), as well as two anonymous referees and the editors at *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly*. My thanks to each and every one of you. Fortunately for me the referees and editors at *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly* are skilled practitioners in the vanishing art of critique without cruelty. I am grateful for their incisive yet humanely delivered feedback on a previous version of this article.

## Introduction

We the affluent wreak such havoc on the planet that determining the extent of the damage on future populations remains something of a mystery. “It is a grand experiment,” Robert A. McLeman (2014) says, “the early results of which will be manifest within our children’s lifetimes, if not our own” (228).<sup>2</sup> What kind of results? Failing to dramatically cut our carbon emissions by 2050 could mean, among other dismal possibilities, that 25 million more children will suffer malnourishment; the overall number of people at risk of hunger will increase 10-20%; and an additional 600 million individuals will die from malnutrition by 2080. Importantly, these grim predictions are the result of ongoing environmental harms produced “mainly by members of rich, industrialized countries, who have also been their main beneficiaries” (Lichtenberg 2013, 33). What a cruel irony it is, then, that those individuals living in the most impoverished communities across the globe—particularly women and children—are the ones expected to absorb their most devastating impacts.<sup>3</sup>

Obviously this dreadful situation is rife with acute challenges in need of “feminist philosophical investigations across a range of topics” (Tuana and Cuomo 2014, 535). One such topic—posed here as a question—has failed to compel much ink (or pixels for that matter) by way of philosophical discussion: *what does motherhood mean in an age of global ecological crisis?* I suggest that whatever it means, we—heavily qualified as this “we” must be—have to make motherhood “greener.” At present, a “child born to a woman in the United States ultimately increases her carbon legacy by an amount (9,441 metric tons) that is nearly seven times the analogous quantity for a woman in China (1,384 tons)” (Murtaugh and

---

<sup>2</sup> The adverse impacts of climate change on human health and well-being are already well underway. The World Health Organization estimates that “climate change was responsible for some 160,000 [human] deaths in the year 2000 alone” (Dwyer 2013). The number continues to grow. As of 2013, The Global Humanitarian Fund pegs it at around 300,000 (2013). Shockingly, these are taken to be conservative estimates in both cases.

<sup>3</sup> For more detail about how the harms of climate change are gendered and undemocratically distributed, see the webpage of the United Nations project, Womenwatch, especially “The Threats of Climate Change are not Gender-Neutral,” available at the following URL and last accessed on March 17, 2015: [http://www.un.org/womenwatch/feature/climate\\_change/#threat](http://www.un.org/womenwatch/feature/climate_change/#threat).

Schlax 2009, 18).<sup>4</sup> Given the greenhouse gas impact of having children in affluent contexts, deciding whether or not to have them is therefore “almost 20 times more important than some of the other environmentally sensitive practices people might employ [for] their entire lives—things like driving a high mileage car, recycling, or using energy-efficient appliances and light bulbs” (14).<sup>5</sup> Does this mean that not having children for environmental reasons is a morally compelling position? How about redefining motherhood in a more ecologically informed way—is that possible? Should feminists scrutinize procreation as closely as other carbon-hungry habits if its effects threaten the well-being of those who are the worst off among us? What follows is my attempt to answer all these questions in the affirmative.

I begin by considering Christine Overall’s (2012) proposal that counteracting the ecological threats attributable to overconsumption and overpopulation morally obligates (most) Westerners to limit their procreative output to one child per person. Overall interprets her recommendation as a practical compromise between setting an unrealistic moratorium on procreation on the one hand and encouraging procreative recklessness on the other. In making her case, Overall considers Thomas Young’s (2001) argument that we should not have children for environmental reasons; she finds it is implausible and beyond philosophical repair. However, in what follows I argue that Overall’s criticisms of Young’s position rely on certain problematic assumptions that define the parent-child relationship in terms of what Shelley M. Park calls a biological paradigm of motherhood, i.e., a “natural, biological phenomenon including both a gestational and genetic connection to one’s child” (2013, 58). In particular, I scrutinize what Overall finds valuable about the genetic link in the parent-child relationship through the complementary lenses of Park’s (2013) project of “queering motherhood” and the ecofeminist concept of “earth mothering.” What comes of this theoretical mix is a procreative outlook I

---

<sup>4</sup> For precise details about these stats, see <http://oregonstate.edu/ua/ncs/archives/2009/jul/family-planning-major-environmental-emphasis>.

<sup>5</sup> Lisa Hymas (2011) vividly describes the situation: “When someone like me has a child—watch out, world! Gear, gadgets, gewgaws, bigger house, bigger car, oil from the Mideast, coal from Colombia, coltan from the Congo, rare earths from China, pesticide-laden cotton from Egypt, genetically modified soy from Brazil. And then when that child has children, wash, rinse, and repeat (in hot water, of course). Without even trying, we Americans slurp up resources from every corner of the globe and then spit 99 percent of them back out again as pollution.” Given this, Hymas decided against having children. See <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2011/sep/27/not-have-children-environmental-reasons>.

define as queer earth mothering (QEM): *an interrogative attitude for identifying the ways in which anti-ecological and heteronormative ideologies seep into maternal praxis*. I argue that QEM has potential to relocate the value(s) of the putative parent-child relationship, change attitudes toward adoptive motherhood for the better, and shed light on the reality that procreative decisions in affluent contexts can and will rebound with devastating environmental consequences on both present and future populations if left unabated. With QEM as our guide for thinking through the biological paradigm of motherhood, my hope is that we will be in a much better position to appreciate why affluent prospective parents should (generally speaking) favour adoption over biological reproduction.

### **I. The Challenge of Situating Procreative Decision-Making in a Global Context**

Christine Overall's (2012) analysis of the morality of procreative-decision making considers the question indicated in the title of her book—*Why Have Children?*—in a global context. As she explains, "It is no longer possible for human beings, especially in the West, to pretend we are all not related: international travel, environmental changes and global resource extraction, manufacturing, and trade demonstrate that national boundaries count for much less than they once did" (175). Overall hopes (as I do) that, from this cosmopolitan realization of global interconnectedness, it only takes a few short steps to appreciate that our individual choices are uniquely positioned to command a disastrous amount of non-renewable resources and leave a sizable carbon footprint in their wake to boot.<sup>6</sup> What Overall wants to impress upon us is the fact that procreative choices are no exception to this rule. So when we read Stuart Rachels's (2014) recent claim that "one's procreative decisions have causal implications that ripple across one's world" (568), it should strike us as causally modest to a fault. In truth, the implications of these decisions are manifold: they span the globe and stretch far

---

<sup>6</sup> Dale Jamieson (2014) argues that we have already lost the battle for mitigating the harmful effects of anthropogenic climate change: "The dusk has started to fall with respect to climate change and so the owl of Minerva can spread her wings. We can now begin the process of understanding why the global attempt to prevent serious anthropogenic climate change failed and begin to chart a course for living in a world that has been remade by human action" (1). Recent studies and a leaked U.N. draft report (Gillis 2014) only serve to confirm Jamieson's pessimism. Still, I do not think the current strategy of spewing ever more gasoline on the global fire is the answer. Ask any firewoman and she will tell you: even if a blaze cannot be snuffed out for good, the smaller ones are generally easier to contain.

beyond the limited reaches of “one’s world.”<sup>7</sup>

But this last point must be delivered very cautiously. Otherwise we could end up democratizing moral accountability for our environmental crisis to such an extent that we obscure social differences, gender inequalities and other factors that would “inappropriately place equal responsibility for ecological damage on the North and the South, the rich and poor, Black and white, men and women” (Mellor 2005, 210). This approach would be not only wrongheaded, but also demonstrably false. The reality of the situation is that we are living on a planet that was once “shaped primarily by natural biophysical processes” but has shifted “to an anthropogenic biosphere shaped primarily by human systems” (Ellis 2011, 1029) thanks to our efforts. Put less abstractly, the “human systems” responsible for the anthropogenic greenhouse gases involved in that dramatic terrestrial shift bear the signatures of affluent human beings.

Speaking about the problems created by the affluent raises other concerns as well. We do not want to assume an imperious tone of moral condescension by implicitly suggesting that individuals in developing regions (and elsewhere) should be left out of discussions about how to mitigate environmental threats. Nor should we participate in the “soft bigotry of low expectations” by holding them to a lower moral standard because they—unlike us—cannot be expected to take up certain strategies for reducing the size of their carbon footprint. Indeed, the effort involved in doing the right thing often corresponds to a putative agent’s level of autonomy—something that we know is staggeringly uneven across the complex intersections of race, sex, class, etc. So minimizing our impact on the environment will no doubt mean different things for different people. Situating moral responsibility and procreative decision-making in a global context is one important way of making sense of those differences.

To wit: Overall (2012) offers five reasons to support her claim that Westerners *in general* bear a significant moral responsibility for curbing their ecologically destructive habits.

[First,] most of us living in the global West are on average well educated.  
As a result, we know (or should know) about the dangers of

---

<sup>7</sup> In this sense, environmental harms are a “peculiarly modern case, especially because [they operate] on a much grander scale than [our] moral intuitions evolved to handle long ago when acts did not have such long-term effects on future generations (or at least people were not aware of such effects)” (Sinnott-Armstrong 2010, 334). Indeed, the moral grammar of our philosophical heritage is bereft of clear-cut moral principles for how to deal with ontologically undignified entities like carbon dioxide molecules.

overpopulation . . . [and] are also sufficiently informed to know how to curb our numbers. Second, we in the West consume far out of proportion to our numbers . . . [so] we need to help [compensate] . . . by curbing our fertility. Third, we in the West have the ability—the research, resources, and technologies—to limit the number of children we have. Fourth, we in the West do not have the same economic needs for many children that people elsewhere have (or think they have). Finally, if prosperous westerners make a concerted attempt to limit their numbers, then arguments to citizens of developing nations that they should consider using effective contraception likewise to limit the numbers of their children will be far more credible. (179)

The combined normative upshot of these points—touching on areas of epistemic, empirical, economic, and moral concern—is that “we in the developed world have a moral responsibility to limit our numbers, given the current threats to planetary carrying capacity posed by overpopulation” (179).

Claiming that we ought to “limit our numbers” raises the predictable objection that it places an unfair moral burden on Western shoulders. These problems—so the argument goes—are simply *too big* to be dealt with at the individual level and ought to be addressed as a matter of global policy, not individual culpability. This objection speaks to the tremendous difficulty involved in parsing out the normative subtleties of individual and collective moral responsibility, especially when “we are now experiencing the cumulative [ecological] impact of individuals living their lives in ways that, until recently, no one had good reason to question” (Overall 2012, 7). Procreation appears to be one such area of quotidian practice commonly assumed to be outside the scope of serious moral scrutiny. After all, we generally “view begetting as an obviously good thing” (Rachels 2014, 569) and that sentiment speaks for Western pronatalist sensibilities at large.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, in my experience, the suggestion that

---

<sup>8</sup> As Rachels (2014) puts it: “In our culture, nothing seems more natural than to congratulate someone who has just had a baby: ‘What a blessing!’ ‘It’s a little miracle!’ ‘What a bundle of joy!’ We’ve all seen someone react to the presence of a baby like Frances McDormand’s character in the movie *Raising Arizona* (1987): ‘He’s an angel! He’s an angel straight from Heaven!’” From this basis, Rachels speculates that “almost no parent wants to talk publicly about the disadvantages of parenthood, for fear of looking like a bad parent or uncaring person. Thus, we tend to hear mostly positive things” (569). Maybe Rachels is right. Or perhaps there are better reasons to explain why pronatalism predominates in our society. My point is simply that it does.

individuals in the West should limit their procreative output for environmental reasons has been commonly viewed as applicable to diehard environmentalists but nobody else. Therefore, I think Overall is right to insist that—rather than complain about shouldering an unfair burden—we need to do some bootstrapping and face up to the reality that our “population will not stabilize, let alone decline, without active decisions being made by individuals” (180).<sup>9</sup> Leaving the task of confronting the ecological perils of procreation at the doorstep of—forgive the neologism—“the supererogateers” among us is simply not a viable option.<sup>10</sup> Rather we need to see ourselves as part of a collective working together to create practical solutions to our shared environmental crises in which we occupy the dual roles of victim and victimizer.

Against this backdrop, our main preoccupations for the next two sections emerge: how can we unsettle Western attitudes that problematically situate procreative issues outside the scope of ecological and moral concern, and what approach should we take in doing so?

## II. One and Done? Overall’s Proposal for Procreative Minimalism

Without concrete practical solutions, we have mere philosophical description. Overall knows this well and deserves credit for putting pen to policy like so: “every individual adult has a moral responsibility to limit herself or himself to [one] procreative replacement only” (183). Overall deems this limitation necessary because “the birth of new human beings . . . will otherwise contribute both to [over]consumption and to the despoliation of our planetary home” (191). Given this, she believes there is “something morally problematic, perhaps morally wrong, about having a large family in the wasteful, consumerist West” (187). Here I think we can safely pin the label of *procreative minimalism* to Overall’s account. This can be roughly sketched as the idea that procreative austerity measures offer a morally legitimate way of reducing the environmental damage caused by having children.

---

<sup>9</sup> According to the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), “The total calories available in 2050 will be lower than in 2000” (see <http://www.worldwatch.org/node/6271>). A statistic like that should be read against the backdrop of yet another disturbing fact: the population is slated to reach some 9.6 billion by 2050. Overall is right: active decisions on our part matter, and they matter a great deal.

<sup>10</sup> To be clear, I am not denying the existence of supererogatory acts—that would be silly. I am merely concerned with how easily certain acts are classified as “supererogatory” and neatly filed away outside the realm of plausible moral action for that reason alone. I discuss this point in more detail below.



Overall takes procreative minimalism to be “easily justified” since “persons get to (try to) have a child of ‘their own,’ if they want one, and the value of every adult is implicitly endorsed through the fact that each one is allowed to reproduce herself or himself” (183). It is largely by design that this approach leaves a constellation of established values about procreation and the parent-child relationship completely untouched. Overall wants procreative minimalism to gain broad appeal and so would rather not stray too far from certain biocentric norms about procreation. Besides, Overall is convinced that competing antinatalist arguments are not only unpopular, but also philosophically untenable. To this end, she considers Thomas Young’s (2001) environmentalist argument that “human procreation is morally wrong in most cases” (183) as a lesson in their general implausibility.<sup>11</sup>

Here is Young’s argument in a nutshell: a fundamental tenet of mainstream environmentalism is that “waste and resource depletion from unsustainable consumption are morally wrong, bad (in some sense), or manifests a serious character flaw” (181). Environmentalists argue that we should abstain from acts of unsustainable consumption for this reason. As it turns out, conceiving and rearing

---

<sup>11</sup> Unabashed antinatalism of the Benetarian kind does not get much play in philosophical circles. But there is a recent exception in Stuart Rachels’s (2014) bluntly titled essay “The Immorality of Having Children.” Rachels crunches the numbers involved in the cost of raising one child in the U.S.— conservatively estimated at \$227,000 (USD)—and uses it to formulate a position inspired by Peter Singer called the “Famine Relief Argument against Having Children.” Succinctly stated, it goes like this: “Having a child costs hundreds of thousands of dollars; that money would be much better spent on famine relief; therefore, it is immoral to have children” (571). Or, formulated slightly differently: “In countries like the United States, parents typically spend over \$200,000 to raise a child. That money would be much better spent on the poor. Therefore, individuals who live in countries like the United States shouldn’t have children” (580; emphasis original, et passim). Rachels notes that this is “essentially an expected-utility argument: we shouldn’t have children because having a child is a poor way to squeeze benefit out of \$227,000. If the language of expected utility seems cold, then we might say: We should immunize, feed and clothe impoverished children who already exist rather than spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on having one child of our own” (571). Whether or not this argument is well supported cannot be considered in any meaningful detail here (I cringe at Rachels’s complete lack of feminist insight). Even so, he usefully illustrates just how much rides on procreative decision-making. And in the pages ahead I aim to show that the ramifications therein are far from exhausted by economic or opportunity costs.

children causes substantial environmental impacts via harmful greenhouse gases. Despite this, environmentalists generally concede that “having children [is] morally permissible, even praiseworthy” (181). Yet, and this is the heart of Young’s argument, if “having *even just one child* in an affluent household . . . produces environmental impacts comparable to what mainstream environmentalists consider to be an intuitively unacceptable level of consumption, resource depletion, and waste, [then] they should also oppose human reproduction (in most cases)” (183; emphasis mine). For Young, then, the takeaway message is simple: moral consistency demands that environmentalists should be committed antinatalists for the exact same reasons they oppose other common consumerist forms of unsustainable consumption.

While Overall agrees with the spirit of Young’s message—“environmental degradation and overpopulation behoove all of us to limit the numbers of offspring we create” (Overall 2012, 181)—she nevertheless finds it wanting on four counts. Let us consider them one by one.

First, Overall claims that due to “the centrality of childbearing and child rearing to human existence, an obligation not to have any children would be supererogatory” (181). Bracketing for the moment Overall’s conflation of childbearing with child rearing, it does not necessarily follow that, simply because one paints an obligation as supererogatory, we can excuse ourselves from trying to live up to the moral standard it posits or assess how our actions fare against it. Simply put, falling pathetically short of certain moral ideals—even if very demanding and never fully actualizable—can be immoral and blameworthy.<sup>12</sup> If matters were otherwise, then philosophical moral inquiry would be in the sorry business of maintaining status quo values for fear that anything “too demanding” could upset prevailing social mores. The erroneous idea that a “behaviour, if sufficiently common, is self-excusing” (Goodin 2009, 11) is already wildly popular, and the last thing we need is philosophers tripping over themselves to justify it. So even if an obligation not to have children were classified as supererogatory, we could not disregard it for that reason alone.

But suppose we are feeling charitable and grant that childbearing and child rearing are central to human existence. Even making this assumption cannot get us very far, for it merely sidesteps the philosophical issue of whether they *should be* and ignores the possibility that in the future they won’t be. On the latter point, an overwhelming amount of empirical evidence indicates that the more education

---

<sup>12</sup> An obvious example concerns telling the truth. Suppose I cannot be truthful at all times. Does this mean I can excuse myself from the enterprise of truth-telling altogether? Not even close. A habitual liar who tries to justify her behaviour by maintaining as much would, I think, be easily rebuked for her paltry reasoning.

women receive, the less inclined they are to have children. If this trend persists, then perhaps, when women are given more educational opportunities across the globe, the once popular idea that childbearing and child rearing are “central to human existence” will become an antiquated view. Any supererogatory associations with going childless will therefore disappear since it would be the de facto preference for most women. Now whether or not this future state will ever materialize is no doubt fodder for counterfactual contemplation (with possibly very depressing results). Back in the actual world, my point is simply this: too often undocumented forces are at work in our classification of certain actions as supererogatory, which, upon closer inspection, are morally problematic in their own right. These unregarded forces are malleable, subject to change, and should not be granted the ahistorical privilege of unearned permanence if we can help it. Qualities we currently peg as essential to human existence are no exception.

Overall’s second reason for rejecting Young’s position is that “people are not likely to adhere to such an obligation not only because it would be so difficult (given how much some people value procreation), but [also] because it would most likely be violated . . . thereby lowering their own motivation and drastically increasing resentment” (2012, 181). Certainly both possibilities could come true. But notice how the same exact charge, *mutatis mutandis*, can be leveled against Overall’s policy almost word for word. Might not some adherents to Overall’s procreative minimalism—who value procreation as much as the next person—resent those who completely ignore her one-child-per-person recommendation? Couldn’t this presumably lower their motivation to follow Overall’s advice? Would this not then drastically increase their resentment toward others? All signs point to yes. So it appears Overall’s criticism of Young boomerangs right back on her own position. Yet, even if it does, I cannot see why Overall’s procreative minimalism or Young’s antinatalism should be deemed impractical simply because they might be difficult to follow or could generate possible feelings of resentment. Striving for moral consistency in a world rife with so much wrong is never an easy go. But if the very striving generates feelings of envy or resentment for those participating in actions that we recognize as immoral, then maybe we have yet to fully appreciate the moral significance of our commitments.

Overall’s third reason for rejecting Young’s position is that it would be hard to “undertake such an obligation knowing that once the population was sufficiently reduced, people would no longer have to adhere to it” (2012, 181). Need it be so? We need not strain our imagination to envision a world where the size of the global population is far from exceeding the earth’s carrying capacity, and yet, thanks to certain technological advances in the art of emitting harmful greenhouse gases, the affluent are better positioned than ever before to cause significant environmental damage at the individual level. In these circumstances,

the obligation against procreation would remain relevant for affluent populations and would need to be preserved even if the global population were sufficiently downsized. Hence the potential problems associated with population growth are not strictly numerical ones.

Once again this criticism speaks to the fact that Overall consistently has us at the mercy of individuals who appear incapable of appreciating the moral dimension(s) of their actions. I suspect that is why she never seriously considers the possibility that one might want to undertake an obligation not to have children and find it valuable precisely because it means that future generations will not have to uphold it. On this more optimistic interpretation of moral motivation, the idea that an obligation is perishable does not deter the agent from adopting it now and into the foreseeable future even if she might never reap the full benefits of its intended effects.

Overall's fourth and final reason for rejecting Young's position is that, "unlikely as it is, if large numbers of people did not have children at all, then a sizable gap in the population might create serious problems within a few decades as a result of a lack of workers (unless adoption from the developing world were undertaken on a massive scale)" (2012, 181). Eyeing Overall's parenthetical remark, if the great majority of individuals in the West saw Young's obligation as morally binding, then perhaps adopting children from developing regions could easily become standard practice and would therefore ameliorate any of the potential problems she is concerned about.

Moreover, this line of reasoning assumes that an obligation not to have children would somehow take the world's economies by surprise. Yet why should we think it would be simultaneously taken up *en masse*? The more likely scenario—in what Overall admits is already an "unlikely" situation—is that, like most other revolutionary social changes, it would steadily gain appeal over time. Any "serious problems" that might result from a decrease in the population could then be anticipated and abated. Furthermore, even if this sudden transformation were to take place we would have no way of knowing whether a sudden drop in the workforce would deleteriously impact future economies. Perhaps having one child per person would somehow more severely hamper economic growth. Does guesswork of this sort constitute a morally sound basis for rejecting Overall's procreative minimalism? I sure hope not. And if I am right, then the same holds true for Young's proposal: mere speculation offers insufficient grounds for dismissal. Developing an acute moral sense of our procreative responsibilities requires a sharpened focus on what we already know—namely that ours is a world overrun with environmental problems caused by overpopulation and overconsumption. With this in mind, it seems wrong, if not morally irresponsible, to dismiss Young's proposal on the basis of some unlikely scenarios that may or

may not actually occur in the far-flung future as a result of not having children.

Quickly recapping my arguments above: I argued that Overall's four objections against Young not only problematically rebound on her procreative minimalism, they also fail to offer us philosophically compelling justification against his argument that having children (in the West) is (in many cases) on par with other environmentally destructive enterprises. It appears Young is right to think that true environmentalism entails a stronger stance against procreation. Undoubtedly this view lacks mainstream appeal, and that is why Overall would rather pursue more palatable solutions. Fair enough. But we still need to understand *why* Young's conclusion would strike Western pronatalist sensibilities with such jarring force. Closer inspection of the apparent unpopularity of Young's position might have us rediscover the parental wisdom of an old and oft-neglected saying: "what is popular is not always right, and what is right is not always popular."

In what follows, I will examine Overall's position in the context of Tracy Isaacs's (2011) deceptively simple observation that "together we can do things that we could not do alone, from moving a grand piano to significantly reducing humanity's carbon footprint" (8-9).<sup>13</sup> I would add that together we are capable of significantly changing attitudes toward procreation. Giving proper daylight to feminist strategies for queering and ecologizing motherhood in ways that transcend the dominant biological paradigm under which it currently resides is, I think, an excellent start.

### III. Queer Earth Mothering

So far I have defended Thomas Young's argument of not having children for environmental reasons against Christine Overall's criticisms. Recall that Young thinks argumentative consistency demands that environmentalists must awaken to their implicit antinatalist commitments, lest they risk moral hypocrisy. In this section, I expand the scope of Young's arguments to include affluent prospective parents in general—and not just the environmentalists among them. To achieve this goal, I take queer theory and ecofeminism together and develop what I call Queer Earth Mothering (QEM). It has two main components. First, QEM is a critical procreative stance that draws on queer theory for the purposes of situating

---

<sup>13</sup> Isaacs (2011) beautifully illustrates this point with the following example: "Think of some small part of a machine. If we take it out, it is useless on its own. The part only makes a difference when it is working in concert with the other parts. When each part is doing its job, the whole thing works. It is very important for individual moral agents to understand themselves as playing possibly small, but certainly valuable, parts. When individuals think of their actions in this way, moral possibilities expand" (10).

adoptive motherhood outside the prevailing biological paradigm of motherhood (BPM) that strictly defines the parent-child relationship in terms of a “natural, biological phenomenon including both a gestational and genetic connection to one’s child” (Park 2013, 58). We need to consider why a vast majority of women would rather “undergo expensive, painful, and potentially harmful fertility treatments rather than choosing adoptive motherhood” (Park 2006, 206). Second, QEM exists as a directive to *queer* the ecofeminist concept of “earth mothering”—an intimate, caring disposition toward nature—by decoupling it from its gendered associations while retaining the valuable ecofeminist vision at its core. Bringing the two components of QEM together should ideally situate us to appreciate how, on the one hand, choosing adoption does not compromise a mother’s ability to participate in the many goods offered by the parent-child relationship and, on the other, understand why the ecological cost of procreation is so often neglected.

It almost goes without saying that the *biological* relationship between parent and child is frequently singled out as being importantly different than other relationships. What is unique about it, according to Overall, “is that the parents not only start to build a relationship with the child but actually *create* the person with whom they have the relationship. They choose to have *their child*” (2012, 215; emphasis original). Along these lines, Overall suggests that becoming a *biological parent* qualifies as the singular expression of seeking “out a connection to a new human being” (216). Apparently seeking a new relationship with an already existing human being does not meet this standard. Why not? Because

in rearing one’s genetically related offspring, very real experiences are involved in discerning and appreciating the similarities between oneself and one’s children. A parent can also enjoy witnessing her own parents’ talents or personality emerging in her children. There is a sense of continuity and history created by the genetic tie. (Overall 1987, 154)

Given these supposed procreational perks, whenever Overall (2012) is consulted by prospective parents about whether or not they should have children, she answers with unhesitating confidence in the affirmative: “Don’t miss it!” (220).<sup>14</sup>

Overall is aware that her pronatalist cheer is hard to square with her skepticism about whether “human beings have an ethereal existence, in which they wait for their potential parents to call them into the material world” (195) or that, as a point of metaphysical fact, children “are not brought into the world for their own sake because they do not preexist their conception” (204). Well then,

---

<sup>14</sup> In keeping with her procreative minimalism, Overall adds the caveat: “Yet I also say, ‘Please consider having no more than one each’” (220).

what can be said about the precise value of bringing a now nonexistent being into a parent-child relationship that supersedes the importance of giving children existing here and now (complete with actual needs) that benefit? An awful lot rides on this question. Unfortunately, Overall's answer reaffirms her reluctance to be an enemy of the commonplace. She argues that procreation gives biological parents a unique opportunity for "self-transformation," the implicit assumption is that a *genetic link* must ground the parent-child relationship for one to reap the self-transformational benefits therein. Elsewhere, Overall claims the "best reason" for prospective parents to have a child of "their own" is that it generates a conditional form of love that provides a "particular meaning to one's own life and to the life of the being that is created" (217).<sup>15</sup>

Appealing to this brand of pronatalist cliché merely elides the thorny issue at hand: why should this specific form of love—and the related benefits of self-transformation—require the passage of genetic material from parent to child? If Overall concedes that these benefits could arise without such a connection, then why elevate a matter of contingency to a level of significance that has yet to be convincingly justified (morally or otherwise)? And, let us be clear, she ought to concede that point. Otherwise she risks giving the impression that a genetic link to one's offspring houses a special relational property unavailable to adoptive parents. Now maybe some parents out there are willing to bite through bullets like taffy to maintain that they only *truly* love

---

<sup>15</sup> To Overall's credit, she acknowledges that "to become a biological parent of a child whom one will raise is to create a new relationship: not just a genetic one, but a psychological, physical, intellectual, and moral one" (216; emphasis original). Yet, despite the qualification, Overall nevertheless consistently tries to single out the unparalleled significance of the genetic tie with unfortunate results. For example: "In becoming a parent, one creates not only a child and a [corresponding] relationship, but oneself; one creates a new and better self-identity" (216). From this basis, Overall thinks her procreative minimalism "implies that every person is sufficiently valuable as to be worth replacing" (183) and, as a result, all "persons get to (try to) have a child of 'their own'" (183). Taken together, the upshot of the two claims is rather unsightly: it seems as if only biological offspring get to count as suitable "procreative replacements" for our personage. Lacking a genetic connection, then, adoptive parents could not strictly speaking consider an adopted child as "their own" in the sense reserved for biological offspring. These unseemly consequences are the direct result of Overall's unwavering commitment to certain aspects of the biological paradigm of motherhood (BPM). I pursue the reasons why she should cancel her subscription to BPM in the pages ahead.

their children because they share a genetic tie. But I hope their numbers are few and far between, and I doubt that Overall wants to count herself among them.

Moreover, even if there were a perfectly legitimate reason for emphasizing the singular value of the genetic link, we would still face a moral quandary. Because if the cost of maintaining that link jeopardizes the environmental integrity of the material circumstances that precondition the very possibility of anyone becoming any kind of parent at all (pardon my thick Kantian accent), then seeking alternative sources of self-transformation other than procreation would still be the morally preferable course of action to take.

Or suppose the benefits of the parent-child relationship did not hinge on a genetic link. What would it require for us to take this possibility seriously? I think we could go about making a case for it in any number of ways. For my part, I suggest that assessing the prevailing assumptions about motherhood that potentially (and often inadvertently) reinforce heteropatriarchal norms should be near the top of the feminist philosopher's list. Luckily, queer theorists have already made significant strides on this front by inventing "new practices and new ways of relating that are beyond normative understandings of what bodies should and should not be able to do" (Browne, Lim, and Brown 2007, 53). It is in this vein that I take Shelley M. Park's (2006; 2013) mission of "queering motherhood" as my normative blueprint for recasting adoptive motherhood in a more favourable light.

As I stated, Park observes that motherhood is commonly defined as a "natural, biological phenomenon including both a gestational and genetic connection to one's child" (2013, 58), and she calls this a biological paradigm of motherhood (BPM). I have previously associated it with Overall's procreative minimalism (although she would certainly deny any endorsement of its unsavoury consequences). BPM further implies that there is something queer about adoptive motherhood. It is queer because, as Park says,

claims about 'real mothers' equate maternal reality with participation in a particular set of biological processes such as pregnancy, birthing, and lactation. Because of participation in these biological processes, a mother is frequently thought to possess a special bond with a child such that loving and caring for the child is natural, a matter of 'maternal instinct.' (4)

As a result, adoptive mothers who lack these experiences are essentially "given an entry visa, but not full citizenship in motherhood" (58).

In this way, Park perceives adoptive motherhood as providing ample "opportunity for [developing] a critical perspective on the dominant scripts of motherhood" (58). Dwelling on these scripts, as it were, is necessary for uncovering



the prevailing, heteronormative assumptions about biological mothering that make it seem as if, in Rebecca Walker's words, "the love you have for your non-biological child isn't the same as the love you have for your own flesh and blood" (quoted in Park 2013, 5). It is not difficult to find such biocentric norms lurking beneath Overall's (2012) *modus operandi*: "I am endorsing a particular vision of who we are as human beings and what parenting is about" (109). What that particular vision reinforces is the idea that claiming "persons get to . . . have a child of 'their own'" (183; emphasis mine) inevitably means having a *biologically related* child of "one's own."<sup>16</sup>

Hence the *Queer* in *Queer Earth Mothering* is about being wary of the ideological nature of maternal subjectivities cut from the conceptual cloth of BPM that construe adoption as a "'second-best' solution to the problem of discovered infertility" (Park 2013, 61). Failing said wariness, we risk sending the recurring message—sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit—that "adoptive motherhood is better than being childless; but inferior to having a child of 'one's own'" (Park 2013, 61; emphasis mine). As I see it, queering motherhood means overcoming BPM and escaping its influences. Otherwise adoptive motherhood will continue to be unfairly interpreted as an unauthenticated, if not counterfeit, form of mothering.

So how do we escape them? Making a moral imperative out of appreciating the many "nongenetic, nongestational, bodily relationships between mothers and children that serve to connect parent and child in both momentary and in fundamental and long-lasting ways" (61) would be a good first step. But it would be even better if we could untangle our understanding of motherhood *in general* from the strictly biological and heterosexual family unit. In Park's words, this means paying attention to how adoptive motherhood "allows us to re-

---

<sup>16</sup> I am not about to deny that some women value not just the genetic linkage itself, but also the "female experiences of pregnancy and childbirth" (Park 2013, 60). I say "some women" because pregnancy is typically fetishized as a transformative experience when, for many women, it is anything but. Pregnancy can be a veritable mountain of accumulated miseries from the first trimester to the time of delivery. For other women, of course, it can be an undeniably positive experience on the whole. But we should not count the hits and ignore the misses by downplaying the multiplicity of meanings that can be derived from gestational experiences—both good and bad. Of course, there exists a vast feminist literature on the phenomenological significance of the gestational link and childbearing that I simply cannot contend with here (see, for example, Oliver 2010; Young 1984; Lundquist 2008; Oksala 2003; Heinämaa 2014; Diprose 2002; Guenther 2006). But if it reassures the reader to know it, I developed QEM with the full philosophical weight of these issues never far from my mind.

envision motherhood and family, thus opening possibilities for novel practices in which biological as well as adoptive mothers may engage” (61). From this undertheorized maternal viewpoint, Park thinks we can “shift family configurations in ways that blur the distinction between the queer and the normal and, in so doing, allow for—indeed, demand—the honest negotiation of differences within and across generations” (221). No doubt it is a tall order, but I think Park is right to start the negotiations at the level of blurring distinctions. Fanning the flames of binary thinking is likely to encourage a zero-sum opposition between biological and adoptive mothers. Our best chance at avoiding this outcome, so Park thinks, is to open up shop for discursive spaces where heteronormative notions about motherhood are openly contested, debated, and if the dialogical cards are played right, possibly resolved.

Clearly I agree with Park for the most part, but I think that these conversations will remain systematically incomplete if they fail to encourage an acute awareness of the ecologically perilous stage on which they take place. Spreading this form of awareness has a privileged place in ecofeminist circles and that brings us to the *Earth Mothering* segment of *Queer Earth Mothering*.

While ecofeminism is not reducible to axiomatic principles, it can nevertheless be charitably simplified as placing a philosophical emphasis on “the historical and mutually reinforcing devaluation of women and nature with a view to transforming existing forms of exploitation” (Kheel 2008, 8).<sup>17</sup> The benefit of analyzing the morality of procreative decision-making from this perspective as a means for expanding our concept of motherhood beyond BPM is that it starts “from an understanding of the social relations underpinning current patterns of unsustainability together with an understanding of the material relations between humanity and nature” (Mellor 2005, 209). Among other things, ecofeminists

---

<sup>17</sup> The latter point—with its use of the categories “woman” and “nature”—has generated a great deal of controversy for possessing an unforgivably essentialist tenor (which I shall discuss shortly). As a result, ecofeminists have faced accusations of ignoring their own “predominantly white, middle-class ethos and uptake” and that ecofeminism, as a movement, is “irretrievably marred by essentialism about women and by regional-, class-, and ethnocentrism” (Thompson 2006, 507). This critique won the day and has effectively cast ecofeminism into the unmarked margins of feminist philosophy. An unfortunate state of affairs I must say. Especially since most ecofeminists burden their claims with an almost overwhelming amount of context-sensitive qualifications. However, I will leave aside these and other peripheral criticisms and focus directly on their proposals since there is already an abundance of articles demonstrating the weaknesses of these criticisms—a notable example being Gaard (2011).

typically use this methodological perspective to pinpoint a longstanding ontological dualism between a rational masculine sphere and a feminine domestic sphere. The former is associated with “human freedom and control ... over nature, especially via science and in active struggle against nature and over circumstances” (Plumwood 1990, 213); the latter “represents the area of immersion in life, the natural part of the human being, the sphere of passivity, acceptance of unchangeable human nature and natural necessity, of reproduction and necessary and unfree labour” (213-214). These mutually reinforcing dualisms form a fault line through contemporary Western culture and come prepackaged with the implication that “it is better to be rational, intellectual, and spiritual than emotional, bodily, and physical” (Bailey 2007, 41). More plainly stated: *it is better to be a man (above nature) than a woman (within nature)*.<sup>18</sup>

Of course the dyad masculine/feminine is far from the only hierarchical dualism. There are numerous other splits between culture/nature, reason/nature, mind/body, rationality/animality, universal/particular, human/animal, human/nonhuman, civilized/primitive, and more still (Plumwood 1993, 43). Together these form a tapestry of “mutually reinforcing dualisms that constructs, marginalizes, and inferiorizes numerous social groups, while providing powerful justifications for coercing oppressive relations between groups based on race, nation, class, sexuality, age and species” (Carr 2000, 16-17). Given how seamlessly this patchwork of interlocking oppressions integrates itself into Western culture (and elsewhere), many ecofeminists identify dualistic thinking as being “at the heart of the current ecological crisis” (Carr 2011, xiv).

Important for our purposes is another side of this dualistic story. The age-old association of women with nature supposedly fosters a profound historical connection “between women’s mothering and caring disposition and their unique propensity to care for nature” (MacGregor 2006, 20). Consequently, many ecofeminists have embraced this primordial women-nature connection and describe it in terms of *earth mothering* (or sometimes *ecomaternalism*). Focusing for the moment on the conceptual genealogy of earth mothering, Carolyn Merchant (2005) describes how it coheres with the

image of earth as a living organism and nurturing mother served as a cultural constraint restricting the actions of human beings. One does not readily slay a mother, dig into her entrails for gold, or mutilate her body. As

---

<sup>18</sup> Let me reemphasize an important point: the dualisms in question need not be peddled as all-encompassing categories with “universal man” on the one side and “universal woman” on the other (Plumwood 1993, 11). Rather, they are better understood simply as “a feature of western thought” (11).

long as the earth was conceptualized as alive and sensitive, it could be considered a breach of human ethical behaviour to carry out destructive acts against it. ... Today, [this] organic cosmology, experienced in some form by almost all of the world's people for all times, has been superseded. (43)

Reviving this type of ecological interrelatedness does not depend on “abstract theorizing but, rather, on what women do—indeed, *have always done*—to survive the vicissitudes of capitalist-patriarchal-colonial development” (MacGregor 2006, 4). That is why earth mothering is put forward as an ideal candidate for the job. Because what women have always done in the form of (earth) mothering is to treat nature with respect as a “living organism and nurturing mother” rather than as a fungible, inert resource.

So perhaps ecofeminists can claim they have a plausible explanation for the growing social science research indicating that women on the whole generally show a greater concern for the environment than men.<sup>19</sup> The thinking is that “as mothers they fear for their children’s health and [therefore] feel a sense of duty to protect and restore their environments” (20). I recognize the inclination at this point might be to cite earth mothering as a textbook example of false universalization on account of its unseemly essentialist overtones. Yet the reality is that it can and does function as a powerful maternalist justification for environmental protection.<sup>20</sup> The question then becomes whether it is possible—much less advisable—to yield the practical potential of earth mothering without taking onboard its gender-troubled underpinnings.

I think it is both possible and advisable. But I can understand why those

---

<sup>19</sup> For a brief and lighthearted synopsis of this research, see Polakovic (2012). Polakovic concludes with the lukewarm suggestion that Aldo Leopold’s “land ethic”—being a Hemmingyeseque manly-man way of appreciating nature (my words, not Polakovic’s)—might be useful for attracting more men to environmental issues. I doubt it. Or at least I suspect that an admonition to “think like a mountain” is incapable of generating widespread appeal (it has had plenty of time to catch on and the teeming masses of Leopoldians are nowhere to be found outside of academia). But even if Leopold’s thinking could gain widespread support, that would not be a point in its favour. Rather than rehash the manifold reasons to explain why that is the case, I will simply point the reader to Mallory’s (2001) wonderful article as a more than sufficient rebuttal to the idea.

<sup>20</sup> The non-profit “EcoMom Alliance” and the group “Mothers Out Front: Mobilizing for a Livable Climate” are but a few of many examples that attest to this fact; see their URLs in References.

familiar with the less than stellar legacy of ecofeminism in feminist philosophy might want to withhold their enthusiasm for resurrecting one of its most derided concepts. After all, doesn't earth mothering ignore the fact that the duties associated with satisfying the biological needs of other human beings are habitually and unceremoniously passed on to women who would rather not have such an "intimate connection" with nature? And if that is true, then shouldn't feminists paint the women-nature connection with the unsettling look of a forced embrace? Obviously they should if associating women with nature casts them in the ontological mold of beings whose lives are "circumscribed by obligated labour (e.g., housework, childcare, managers of domestic economies) [and] performed on the basis of duty, love, necessity, violence, need for, or fear of, loss of economic support" (Mellor 2005, 215). Thankfully, we are under no obligation to fetishize the women-nature connection to the point where we have to ignore its problematic features. In fact, if I am right, the same heteronormative notions about motherhood that I singled out earlier as endemic to BPM are largely responsible for sapping earth mothering of its "spectacular potential to bond women to each other and to nature, to foster a liberating knowledge of self, [and] to release the very creativity and generativity that the institution of 'motherhood' in our culture denies to women" (Umansky 1996, 3). In other words, it is high time we *queer* earth mothering.

How do we do this? We can start by channeling the maternalist commitments of earth mothering *across gender boundaries*. Expressing concern for the well-being of future generations, becoming politically active in environmental causes, caring about environmental degradation, and honing in on an attitude of ecological interdependence are not a woman's burden. At a time of widespread failure to meaningfully address human-made climate catastrophes, they become moral requirements for anyone capable of undertaking them. I am not denying that ecofeminism goes astray whenever it "attempts to combat what it sees as the blanket domination of women and nature with the very logic of that domination" (Johns-Putra 2014, 132). Yet I view recruiting the ambition of queering motherhood and recontextualizing it as a corrective for righting the wrongs inherent in the earth mothering of old as anything but the recycling of bad philosophical habits. And I see no reason why we should discard valuable ecofeminist insight when, if we can successfully queer the concept of earth mothering, then most of the charges against it—that it is essentialistic, gender-specific, complicit with patriarchy and so on—will be dropped.

So taking earth mothering beyond its otherwise narrowly gendered borders is the right move to make in this case. Indeed, at a time when the twin motors of anthropogenic climate change are overpopulation and overconsumption, the process of queering motherhood would be radically

incomplete without ecofeminist insight to support it. This means the value of QEM cannot be located in the mere fusion of queer theory with ecofeminism—nor could we locate it in one theoretical branch without the other—but rather in the novel ways they bolster each other when brought to bear on issues of procreation, ecological stability, and motherhood.<sup>21</sup> Taken together, QEM conditions an *interrogative attitude* for critically assessing the oppressively heteronormative and ecologically destructive assumptions that are employed in the construction and maintenance of BPM.

Defining QEM as an interrogative attitude makes it difficult to draw a clear line of separation between the dos and don'ts of procreative decision-making. Still, I think there are obvious practical implications at hand. Here is one of them: given the ecological calamity caused by affluent populations—recall the “dreadful situation” I outlined in the introduction—it is clear that affluent prospective parents should (generally speaking) favour adoption over biological reproduction. However, and this is a crucial difference between QEM and Young's position, the reasons for this suggestion are not entirely reducible to the environmental harms caused by procreation. I strongly recommend that any affluent prospective parent should keep the following figures close at heart: the number of children living in foster care in the U.S. hovers around 104,000. Roughly 20,000 of them will never be adopted. At the global level, the numbers are staggeringly higher.<sup>22</sup> Should we be surprised that this situation is only getting worse by the day? Not if affluent prospective parents of all people are led to believe that not having biologically related children is asking too much of them, or that from a moral point of view it is perfectly acceptable if adoption never amounts to anything more than a velleity for those who are in the best position to pursue it. With QEM as a guide for relocating the value in the parent-child relationship, I am hopeful that, at the very least, we can influence procreative decision-making in the direction of adoption without having to view it as a major compromise to make that transition.

To be sure, even the best-intentioned prospective adoptive parents will

---

<sup>21</sup> Citing the mere melding of queer theory and ecofeminism as a novel contribution would ignore the important and ongoing contributions that proliferate under the umbrellas of “queer ecology” and “queer ecofeminism.” For instance, see (just to name a few): Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson (2010); Azzarello (2012); and Gaard (1997).

<sup>22</sup> For a closer look at these depressing numbers, see “Facts and Statistics” on the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute webpage, available at the following URL and last accessed March 27, 2015: [http://www.ccaoinstitute.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=25&Itemid=43](http://www.ccaoinstitute.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=25&Itemid=43).

confront a disheartening amount of bureaucratic obstacles throughout the course of the adoption process. Couldn't these obstacles prove so onerous as to be serious deterrents for bothering with it at all? I certainly hope not. But I think if anything must be wrapped in red tape, it should be whatever safeguards adoptees from lousy adoptive parents.<sup>23</sup> Plus, it is not outlandish to think that if more people choose adoption, the demand for it to become a more streamlined process would be harder to ignore. That being said, most prospective parents never pursue adoption as a realistic alternative to procreation in the first place. Therefore, I feel comfortable in maintaining that changing attitudes toward adoption (and adoptive motherhood) via QEM is a necessary and positive (even if not fully adequate) step in the right direction.

#### IV. Conclusion

Let me stave off two probable misreadings of my motives before I wrap up. I have tried to steer clear of synonymizing *biological mothers* with the *biological paradigm of motherhood* for three main reasons. First, conflating the two makes it seem as if biological mothers are incapable of deviating from BPM. Yet they can and do. Feminist theorists with biological children are responsible for some of the most devastating criticisms of BPM and count as the most obvious examples of this possibility. Second, it overlooks the fact that biological mothers are entirely capable of becoming adoptive mothers and that many women occupy both roles simultaneously. Third, without the distinction, QEM might be construed as a thinly veiled attempt to shame affluent women with biological children. This move would be so counterproductive and useless to my purposes that I could not hope to gain anything from it. QEM is about changing hearts and minds, not hardening them.

Next, it is worth reemphasizing that QEM is not a simple matter of calculating environmental harms and following the procreative course of action

---

<sup>23</sup> That does not mean I think it should take nearly as long it does. In some of the worst cases international adoption can take upwards of four years and clearly that is unacceptable. In fact, the delays have caused a dramatic decline in international adoption rates for the U.S.; see Jordan (2015). This brings a related issue to mind: should affluent prospective parents prioritize their adoptive preferences for adoptees living in conditions where basic subsistence is not guaranteed? I think it is important to raise this question, but I must confess that answering it will have to be the topic of a future paper. Although I am happy to leave the door open on the possibility that QEM could require a moral obligation of this kind, currently we are at the ground level of a consciousness-raising enterprise and need something like QEM to elevate the cause of adoptive motherhood.

that causes the largest net reduction of harmful greenhouse gases. A biological mother who, say, commits to a vegan diet to offset the carbon emissions caused by procreation has effectively removed herself from an enterprise responsible for more harmful greenhouse gas emissions than all forms of transportation combined.<sup>24</sup> An adoptive mother who, by comparison, never procreates but regularly consumes nonhuman animal flesh—and engages in other environmentally devastating habits without a second thought—will almost certainly have a more significant carbon legacy over the course of her lifetime. So obviously certain measures like becoming vegan can be implemented to drastically minimize the carbon cost of procreation—and no doubt they should be.<sup>25</sup> Yet notice how this approach leaves BPM thoroughly untroubled. Considering the philosophical complexity of biological motherhood quickly becomes immaterial if all we are interested in doing is making procreation more “eco-friendly.” That is why a more comprehensive procreative outlook like QEM is required.<sup>26</sup>

Reckoning with the reality that procreative choices made in affluent contexts can have ecologically devastating consequences and making motherhood kinder to the planet in turn are major parts of QEM. But it is far from exhausted by these assignments. We have the additional responsibility of critically evaluating BPM, queering the picture of mothering and motherhood implicit within it, and ultimately coming away with a new appreciation for what makes the parent-child relationship meaningful.

Or at least that is the hope.

## References

Azzarello, Robert. 2012. *Queer Environmentality: Ecology, Evolution, and Sexuality*

---

<sup>24</sup> For more about this statistic, see Steinfeld (2006).

<sup>25</sup> Incentives to this end abound—even purely anthropocentric ones. For instance, if all the food crops currently devoted to “livestock” (a truly loathsome term for what are sentient beings) were redirected to human populations we could easily feed 4 billion people; see Cassidy (2013 ).

<sup>26</sup> At the 2015 meeting of the Canadian Society for the Study of Practical Ethics (CSSPE) an audience member objected that QEM would prohibit the possibility of adopting children in developing regions on the assumption that bringing them into an affluent context could drastically increase their (otherwise minimal) carbon footprint. This objection does not hold for the reasons I just provided. And I am hard put to imagine that penalizing those most in need of adoption on account of our ecologically destructive habits could follow from anything I have said about QEM.



- in American Literature*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate.
- Bailey, Cathryn. 2007. "We Are What We Eat: Feminist Vegetarianism and the Reproduction of Racial Identity." *Hypatia* 22 (2): 39-59.
- Block, Ben. 2013. "Climate Change Will Worsen Hunger, Study Says." Worldwatch Institute. Accessed August 24, 2015.  
<http://www.worldwatch.org/node/6271>.
- Browne, Kath, Jason Lim, and Gavin Brown, eds. 2007. *Geographies of Sexualities: Theory, Practices, and Politics*. Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate.
- Carr, Glynis. 2000. "Introduction." In *New Essays in Ecofeminist Literary Criticism*, edited by G. Carr. London: Associated University Presses.
- . 2011. "Foreword." In *Ecofeminism and Rhetoric: Critical Perspectives on Sex, Technology, and Discourse*, edited by D.A. Vakoch. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Cassidy, Emily S., Paul C. West, James S. Gerber, and Jonathan A. Foley. 2013. "Redefining Agricultural Yields: From Tonnes to People Nourished per Hectare." *Environmental Research Letters* 8 (3): 1-8.
- Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute. n.d. Accessed March 27, 2015.  
[http://www.ccaoinstitute.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=25&Itemid=43](http://www.ccaoinstitute.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=25&Itemid=43).
- Diprose, Rosalyn. 2002. *The Bodies of Women: Ethics, Embodiment and Sexual Difference*. London: Routledge.
- Dwyer, James. 2013. "On Flying to Ethics Conferences: Climate Change and Moral Responsiveness." *International Journal of Feminist Approaches to Bioethics*, 6 (1): 1-18.
- EcoMom Alliance®. n.d. Accessed August 22, 2015.  
<http://www.ecomomalliance.org>.
- Ellis, Erle C. 2011. "Anthropogenic Transformation of the Terrestrial Biosphere." *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society A: Mathematical, Physical and Engineering Sciences* 369 (1938): 1010-1035.
- Gaard, Greta C. 1997. "Toward a Queer Ecofeminism." *Hypatia* 12 (1): 114-137.
- . 2011. "Ecofeminism Revisited: Rejecting Essentialism and Re-placing Species in a Material Feminist Environmentalism." *Feminist Formations* 23 (2): 26-53.
- Gillis, Justin. 2014. "U.N. Draft Report Lists Unchecked Emissions' Risks." *New York Times*, August 26. Accessed March 13, 2015.  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/27/science/earth/greenhouse-gas-emissions-are-growing-and-growing-more-dangerous-draft-of-un-report-says.html>.
- Goodin, Robert E. 2009. "Demandingness as a Virtue." *The Journal of Ethics* 13 (1): 1-13.

- Guenther, Lisa. 2006. *The Gift of the Other: Lévinas and the Politics of Reproduction*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Heinämaa, Sara. 2014. "An Equivocal Couple Overwhelmed by Life: A Phenomenological Analysis of Pregnancy." *philoSOPHIA* 4 (1): 31-49.
- Hymas, Lisa. 2011. "I Decided Not to Have Children for Environmental Reasons." *Guardian*, September 27. Accessed March 27, 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2011/sep/27/not-have-children-environmental-reasons>.
- Isaacs, Tracy L. 2011. *Moral Responsibility in Collective Contexts*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Jamieson, Dale. 2014. *Reason in a Dark Time: Why the Struggle Against Climate Change Failed—and What it Means for Our Future*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Johns-Putra, Adeline. 2014. "Care, Gender, and the Climate-Changed Future: Maggie Gee's *The Ice People*." In *Green Planets: Ecology and Science Fiction*, edited by G. Canavan and S. K. Robinson. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Jordan, Miriam. 2015. "Foreign Adoptions by Americans Drop to Lowest Level Since 1982." *Wall Street Journal*, April 1. Accessed August 22, 2015. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/foreign-adoptions-by-americans-drop-to-lowest-level-since-1982-1427837631>.
- Kheel, Marti. 2008. *Nature Ethics: An Ecofeminist Perspective*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Lichtenberg, Judith. 2013. *Distant Strangers: Ethics, Psychology, and Global Poverty*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lundquist, Caroline. 2008. "Being Torn: Toward a Phenomenology of Unwanted Pregnancy." *Hypatia* 23 (3): 136-155.
- Mallory, Chaone. 2001. "Acts of Objectification and the Repudiation of Dominance: Leopold, Ecofeminism, and the Ecological Narrative." *Ethics & the Environment* 6 (2): 59-89.
- MacGregor, Sherilyn. 2011. *Beyond Mothering Earth: Ecological Citizenship and the Politics of Care*. Vancouver: UBC Press.
- McLeman, Robert A. 2014. *Climate and Human Migration: Past Experiences, Future Challenges*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Mellor, Mary. 2005. "Ecofeminism and Environmental Ethics: A Materialist Perspective." In *Environmental Philosophy: From Animal Rights to Radical Ecology*, edited by Michael E. Zimmerman, J. Baird Callicott, Karen J. Warren, Irene J. Klaver, and John Clark. Upper Saddle River, New York: Pearson Prentice Hall.
- Merchant, Carolyn. 2005. *Radical Ecology: The Search for a Livable World*. 2nd

- edition. New York: Routledge.
- Mortimer-Sandilands, Catriona, and Bruce Erickson. 2010. *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Mothers Out Front. n.d. Accessed August 22, 2015.  
<http://www.mothersoutfront.org>.
- Murtaugh, Paul A. and Michael G. Schlabach. 2009. "Reproduction and the Carbon Legacies of Individuals." *Global Environmental Change* 19 (1): 14-20.
- Oliver, Kelly. 2010. "Motherhood, Sexuality, and Pregnant Embodiment: Twenty-Five Years of Gestation." *Hypatia* 25 (4): 760-777.
- Overall, Christine. 1987. *Ethics and Human Reproduction: A Feminist Analysis*. Winchester, MA: Allen & Unwin.
- . 2012. *Why Have Children? The Ethical Debate*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Park, Shelley M. 2006. "Adoptive Maternal Bodies: A Queer Paradigm for Rethinking Mothering." *Hypatia* 21 (1): 201-226.
- . 2013. *Mothering Queerly, Queering Motherhood: Resisting Monomaternalism in Adoptive, Lesbian, Blended, and Polygamous Families*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Plumwood, Val. 1990. "Women, Humanity, and Nature." In *Socialism, Feminism, and Philosophy: A Radical Philosophy Reader*, edited by Sean Sayers and Peter Osborne. London and New York: Routledge.
- . 1993. *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. London: Routledge.
- Polakovic, Gary. 2012. "Are Women Greener than Men?" *Los Angeles Times*, June 13. Accessed August 25, 2015.  
<http://articles.latimes.com/2012/jun/13/opinion/la-oe-polakovic-gender-and-the-environment-20120613>.
- Rachels, Stuart. 2014. "The Immorality of Having Children." *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 17 (2): 567-582.
- Salleh, Ariel. 2000. "In Defense of Deep Ecology: An Ecofeminist Response to a Liberal Critique." In *Beneath the Surface: Critical Essays in the Philosophy of Deep Ecology*, edited by E. Katz, A. Light, and D. Rothenberg. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Sinnott-Armstrong, Walter. 2010. "It's Not My Fault: Global Warming and Individual Moral Obligations." In *Climate Ethics: Essential Readings*, edited by Stephen M. Gardiner, Simon Caney, Dale Jamieson, and Henry Shue. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Steinfeld, Henning, Pierre Gerber, Tom Wassenaar, Vincent Castel, Mauricio Rosales, and Cees De Haan. 2006. *Livestock's Long Shadow*. Rome: FAO.
- Thompson, Charis. 2006. "Back to Nature? Resurrecting Ecofeminism After Poststructuralist and Third-Wave Feminism." *Isis* 97 (3): 505-512.
- Tuana, Nancy and Chris J. Cuomo. 2014. "Climate Change—Editors' Introduction."

*Hypatia* 29 (3): 533-540.

Umansky, Lauri. 1996. *Motherhood Reconceived: Feminism and the Legacies of the Sixties*. New York: New University Press.

Young, Iris Marion. 1984. "Pregnant Embodiment: Subjectivity and Alienation." In *Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Young, Thomas. 2001. "Overconsumption and Procreation: Are They Morally Equivalent?" *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 18 (2): 184-192.

JUSTIN MORRIS is a PhD Candidate in Philosophy at McMaster University. His main research interests are in climate ethics, ecofeminist philosophy, critical animal studies, and environmental aesthetics. He is currently working on a dissertation examining what moral responsibilities affluent individuals bear for mitigating the pernicious effects of anthropogenic climate change on the globally impoverished.