

**Opinion Article***Copyright © All rights are reserved by Celia R Caputi*

# Mother Earth is Pro Choice

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When I describe myself to my Women's Studies students as "a conscientious non-breeder," they laugh. My irreverence toward the cult of maternity shocks and delights these budding feminists, and that is the perfect moment to call their attention to the sobering issue of climate change and overpopulation. The connection is both indisputable and almost universally ignored. I have been following the abortion rights debate for about fifty years now; as a feminist educator and author, I have been participating in pro-choice conversations, rallies, and academic forums since the early nineties. But I have never heard a single commentator mention overpopulation.

I have never had, and never wanted, children. It was not my calling. I remember vividly the one pregnancy scare I had in my life. I was eighteen years old and two weeks late for my period. My boyfriend and I were at the beach when I told him. He was also eighteen. He was Irish Catholic and his mother, who had been adopted after five years in foster care, was a pro- "life" zealot, projecting (understandably) her abandoned, infant self onto every threatened zygote. After I shared my anxieties about a possible pregnancy with my boyfriend, he began a sentence and didn't finish it. He was gazing out at the water as he formulated the sentence, which commenced, "Well, I was raised to believe that." He then looked me in the eye. Silence. The statement he was about to make died on his lips, and the belief-that abortion was murder-died with it (I learned later), right on the spot, as he faced the real prospect of teen parenthood.

My initial resistance to motherhood was personal, but as I became sensitive to the environmental crisis I realized that this stance was ethical too. In First World countries like the U.S., where the average family leaves a carbon footprint of a titanic 20 metric tons, the refusal to bear children is, bar none, the most effective

action a woman can take to combat climate change. By the same token, the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* by the U.S. Supreme Court is not only an assault on women's personal freedom and not only a disaster for women's healthcare providers but a direct and long-term set-back to the environmentalist cause.

There has been some attention to the intersection between reproductive rights, human rights, and the environment, but much of the discussion-justifiably-has focused on the ill effects of global emissions and climate change on the health of childbearing humans and their offspring. But looking at the climate crisis exclusively in terms of preventing the suffering of children and parents occludes the way in which individual human suffering reflects, in microcosm, the suffering of Mother Earth. As we are one with the environment, we suffer along with it, but presenting environmentalism as self-protective is a strategy that, though effective, has some philosophical drawbacks.

When I hear my students express reluctance to bear children, their ethical framework is inevitably humanist: why bring children into this dying planet? When I point out that their refusal to do so might actually save the planet, it's clear that my perspective is as alien as it is liberating.

Why is this so? Why are even the most staunchly feminist and environmentalist commentators silent about this positive route toward reversing global warming? Does everyone adore babies, and want one or more with their own genetic imprint so passionately that the prospect of a non-parenting adulthood is so bleak as to be unthinkable? Or do parents feel compelled to praise family life so that their children don't feel unloved? Or is it, rather, that heteronormativity and the cult of the nuclear family is so hegemonic that confessing an aversion to childbearing and parenthood amounts to heresy?

The self-censorship around these issues is, notwithstanding my wry comments in the classroom, something I am guilty of too. What I censor is not, however, the fact that I am childless by choice: I will admit even to my Republican neighbours that I never wanted children. But what I rarely confess is my lifelong, ongoing joy at my freedom from motherhood.

It's true. I am not only happy in my lifestyle: I relish it. Every single day. When I roll my shopping cart past the diapers in the supermarket, a part of me is tempted to gloat. When I hear my friends who are mothers agonize over their children, I silently pity them. Their wistful comments about my travels, my many creative projects, my exuberant sex-life, daily reaffirm my now irreversible choice. But I do not feel comfortable expressing my joy. And that's a shame because I suspect some people actually feel sorry for me.

According to one study under the auspices of Stanford University, "Preventing unwanted births-by making contraception and legal abortion freely available-would reduce global carbon emissions by

about 10 percent, or 3.6 gigatons per year, which is more than the total combined emissions of Germany, Japan, Brazil, Turkey, Mexico, and Australia." Giving up meat, driving a hybrid or electric vehicle, recycling. . .these are excellent ideas, but to have a real, positive impact on the environment, nothing beats the refusal to create more polluters. of course, most parents don't want to view their children that way, and I see evidence that the younger generations (my students, for example) are embracing environmentalism. I can only pray that it is not too late. And continue to declare myself, shamelessly, a conscientious non-breeder.

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None.

### **Conflict of Interest**

No conflict of interest.