

Beyond the Apocalypse: A Letter for Young Activists

Katie McKay Bryson

Editors' Note: In this issue of *DifferenTakes*, Alaskan environmental justice activist Katie McKay Bryson considers recent population alarmism from liberal sources and the isolating effects this strategy can have on young activists. In the vital struggle for climate justice, the ideas we adopt will shape our future.

— Co-editors Katie McKay Bryson & Betsy Hartmann

When I was fourteen, I knew we were screwed. I was born in a petroleum-addicted superpower at the tail end of a century of brutal, increasingly mechanized state-sponsored violence. The food we ate was procured through wholesale torture of animals and chemical swamping of soil. Ice caps were melting, the ozone layer was thinning, and Al Gore hadn't made his movie yet, so most people didn't even acknowledge these things as truth. Environmental devastation and what it meant for the people who lived on this planet (in short, everyone I loved) seemed inevitable.

My best friend and I had our escape planned. Growing up in Alaska, we knew people living successfully off the grid. We never doubted our ability to build cabins, keep sheep and hunt moose, splint our own breaks and stitch our own wounds. I bought used copies of *Where There is No Doctor* and *Spiritual Midwifery*, and stopped eating meat unless I knew the person who killed it.



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It seemed to us that safety lay as far from other people as possible. The sheer quantity of material consumed and discarded in the US each day was overwhelming, and clearly unsustainable. Alaska is historically a US military territory, and the military force necessary to defend our consumption excesses even between wars was a constant presence in our periphery vision. When the crash came, there would be no one to depend on but ourselves — and somehow, that seemed right.

Years later, as an admissions counselor at a private college, I would read essay after essay written by thoughtful, intelligent young people so deeply moved by the portrait of Chris McCandless in Jon Krakauer's semi-biographical *Into The Wild* that they called him their hero. High school students from around the country who saw themselves in McCandless' rejection of society made me wonder why we choose martyrs for our icons. Why the boy who refused boots going into the backcountry and starved to death in an abandoned bus,¹ rather than the many people who accepted wisdom and gifts from others and kept themselves alive? I wondered, but at the same time I knew, because I could remember.

To be pragmatic in the face of desolating knowledge can feel like an insult to your truth. To abandon a world you believe diseased beyond repair yet still take boots implies that there is something worth saving: yourself. We who were born expecting apocalypse have been taught that our very existence is the poison. After all, if people are the root of the consumption, waste, suffering, and the ever-escalating brutality of war, wouldn't the world be better off without us?

A fundamental belief in human overpopulation is key to this understanding. It's a belief that slips into one's worldview in subtle ways. I can't remember being taught that there were too many people, and yet I knew it in the same way I knew the earth was round. I may have learned it from science and social studies textbooks, many of which report overpopulation theory as fact.² I could have absorbed it reading the backs of environmental group mailings; pictures, like those in PopDev's *Stop the Blame: Population Control Imagery* collection,³ of parched deserts and smoking clear-cuts paired with text about condoms. As a white child, I was certainly exposed to repeated connections between images of poor women and children of color and stories about famine, disease, and threat.

It's a frightening idea, this story of overpopulation. Anyone acquainted with even mild claustrophobia can call to mind the sensation it's meant to elicit: *We're running out of space, running out of food, running out of water, running out of air.* People who earnestly believe in the Malthusian equation of unchecked, inevitable geometric growth in human population evoke this sense of crushing urgency by suggesting that because human population doubled during the 20th century, it will continue to double and redouble. The listener is left with images of humanity replicating explosively, a terrible fractal of human life bound together by gravity on this helplessly spinning rock.

What this fear does is make everything else — all questions, all knowledge, all history — fade behind the immediacy of our need to stop population growth. Yet to leave these projections dangling doesn't even represent competent science. Demographers agree that the era of rapid growth is over. Birth rates have fallen in almost every part of the world, a phenomenon linked to global increases in education, urbanization, and women working outside the home. Global fertility rates have dropped by almost half within the last forty years, from 4.7 children per woman in 1970–1975 to 2.6 children per woman in 2005–2010. Even countries with the highest relative fertility dropped from 6.3 children to 4.4 during the same time period, and the UN currently projects that global population will stabilize by 2050,⁴ possibly beginning an aggregate decline.

Those people alive in 2050 will confront many of the same challenges we face, as well as new ones. Social and political structures will remain and evolve and affect which solutions people strive for — just as they do now, with historical colonialism combining with modern free trade to dominate global economic systems and political choices. During my teen years, I felt impending crisis as an intimate self-knowledge, and that wasn't foolish or naïve. As a species, we are exhausting the crucial resources on which our survival depends. We're polluting and privatizing water sources, acidifying oceans, decimating forests, exhausting arable soil with short-term profit-driven agricultural processes, and driving other species to extinction through loss of habitat. And yet we aren't doing these things as a species. Rather, the majority of us are either consuming the products or bearing the impact made by the very few who are polluting, privatizing, and profiting on a massive scale. In the late 1990s, the 225 individuals who comprise the ultra-rich had a combined wealth of over US \$1 trillion — the same amount that represented the annual income of 47% of the world's total population. The extraordinary differences in consumption between individuals and nations beg the question: why is it easier for those who use and waste the most to imagine fewer people than less stuff?

Even after decades of scholarly critique of the overpopulation theory presented in Paul Ehrlich's 1968 book *The Population Bomb*⁵ and activism against coercive fertility control programs descended from the 20th century eugenics movement, the theory has recently resurfaced. Revived by anti-immigrant nativist groups, as well as some media and environmental organizations working on climate change, the argument seems to have escaped unscathed from a generation's dismantling.

Without acknowledging the theory's historical involvement in regulating the bodies of poor women and women of color, public voices now congratulate themselves for reviving something others discarded as deeply problematic — and these voices are in no way confined to the political right.

In the first half of 2010, three liberal entities have already made highly visible appeals to overpopulation theory. On Valentine's Day, the Center for Biological Diversity revealed its Endangered Species Condom campaign,⁶ distributing condoms across the country in little boxes decorated with bright illustrations of endangered species. Outside, the boxes said, "Extinction is Forever: Wear a Condom." Inside, they continued: "Human overpopulation is destroying land, water, and wildlife habitat at an unparalleled rate, causing a massive planetary extinction crisis. In growing to 6.8 billion people, humanity has killed off tens of thousands of plants and animals."⁷

On Earth Day, the Huffington Post ran a series of photos depicting "7 Things You Can Do For Earth Day That Actually Matter." Sixth on the list, between getting rid of your car and buying locally grown food, was "Don't Have A Baby." In a cheery rejection of demography, HP continued, "There's no denying that there are a lot of people out there, 7 billion to be almost exact, and we're not showing any signs of slowing down."⁸

The cover of the June *Mother Jones* magazine is emblazoned with capital letters asking, WHO'S TO BLAME FOR THE POPULATION CRISIS? Cartoons of three white people (the pope, a young woman, and Uncle Sam) play speak-no-evil next to the sunny subscript: "...and the surprisingly pleasant solutions: girl power, cell phones, less work, more play." Inside are several declarations that population is a "taboo" subject around which a "conspiracy of silence" has been formed, followed by a twenty page article about India (where, the author asserts, microloans are "the best 21st century contraceptive").⁹

Each of these stories was bewildering in turn, but experienced in quick succession they seemed linked by truly saddening cynicism. Nowhere was there discussion of raising children to be environmentally aware, or valuing the contributions of young activists. Instead of stories about guiding our own families and supporting others' in our community to address the crises we face, the message was simplistic: virtue through childlessness.

We don't need this argument. Some people within the environmental movement are clinging to it at this crucial moment, but in truth we risk the integrity of our work

by accepting the blinkered view of economic inequality and social determination of who "should" reproduce that ride along with overpopulation theory. We have compelling reasons to address overconsumption and waste at personal, national, corporate, and military levels. We don't need to justify the urgency of acting on climate change or resource scarcity with demographic speculation about the year 2050. The effects of climate change are scientifically clear and present a disturbing reality. Those committed to ignorance about global warming will not be persuaded to change their beliefs when told that women having babies threatens them (though they might act politically against reproductive freedom, or immigrants' ability to live where their labor, safety and families are valued).

We also don't need to justify working for women's social equality, access to education or reproductive health-care by claiming these will lead to fewer babies. Social equality and education contribute to a greater plurality of voices, ideas, and economic contributions. Accessible, safe healthcare (including access to birth control and abortion) enables self-determination. These causes are good in their own right.

Talking about overpopulation spreads blame over a vast number of people, all either anonymous or powerless, and claims that our most urgent issue is one that cannot be affected through communal direct action. (Criticizing those who've chosen to procreate doesn't do much to build community.) Talking about the extraordinary volume of resources our nation dedicates to its military,¹⁰ on the other hand, is a targeted criticism of an extremely powerful entity. Talking about industrial agribusiness — soil-depleting monocropping and disease-contaminated CAFOS¹¹ — means going up against one of the most entrenched lobbies in DC. Talking about the need for a national public transportation overhaul that actually extends viable transit to low-income neighborhoods requires more than gentrifying buses — it requires community-based cross-class organizing.

There are many people taking up these challenges, levying those criticisms, and using them to build broad, inclusive and connected movements. For example, the environmental justice movement challenged traditional conservationists to consider racial and social inequalities affecting who suffers most from environmental degradation, and the importance of human health and livelihood *within* environments. The modern reproductive justice movement is broadening the conversation about bodies, gender, and sexuality, and demanding visibility for the specific ways oppressed and marginalized peoples experience restrictions on their reproductive health.

Because they hold justice at their center, these movements can work in conscious alignment, collaborating in support of “the rights of women and families to live, work, play, learn, and pray in an environment that supports their health and ability to reproduce (as families and communities) if and how they choose.”¹²

As a young person I wasn’t paralyzed in my fear. I had parents, teachers, and friends whose example was to be hopeful, seek mentors, and work collectively. When I became an activist at fourteen, the adults I found spoke with me thoughtfully, never simplifying ideas into packaged messages. They invited me into conversations about the forces that shaped our colonial landscape, and the questions of justice and autonomy that need to inform our work for it to be powerful. They encouraged me to connect with others, to be creative, and to act.

We owe it to young activists to act with courage, welcoming them into our circles and engaging honestly with them about the complex sources of the problems we face. These emerging leaders also owe it to themselves to seek out the voices willing to emphasize inclusive, broad-based movement building. While narrow arguments like the overpopulation theory tend to limit the ultimate range of activist power, there is something heartening and deeply different about our alternatives. Rather than isolating us, these movements make us more than we knew we could be, combining our voices, experiences, and effort with those of others we never knew were allies. Human beings have the power and the creativity to alter the structures we inhabit: this is the belief that will carry us forward.

About the Author

Katie McKay Bryson is Coordinator of the Population & Development Program at Hampshire College, and has worked previously in the fields of environmental justice, access to affordable housing, and higher education. Her 2006 thesis, “Purity and Other Tall Tales: Military Contamination and the Journey to Environmental Justice in Alaska” expands on ideas in this essay, and is available upon request.

Notes

1. Jon Krakauer, *Into the Wild* (New York, NY: First Anchor Books, 1997).
2. Anne Hendrixson, “U.S. High School Social Studies Textbooks: Perpetuating the Idea of Overpopulation,” *DifferenTakes*, No.9, Spring 2001.
3. The *Stop the Blame: Population Control Imagery* multimedia presentation is free for public use and instruction. Download the presentation or request a CD sent by mail at <http://popdev.hampshire.edu/stop-the-blame>
4. United Nations, *World Fertility Patterns 2009* (download at <http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/worldfertility2009/worldfertility2009.htm>). See also, U.N. *World Population Prospects: The 2008 Revision* population database (<http://esa.un.org/unpp/>).
5. In which he wrote, “We can no longer afford merely to treat the symptoms of the cancer of population growth; the cancer itself must be cut out.” See Dr. Paul Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb* (New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 1978), xii.
6. See the Center for Biological Diversity at <http://www.endangeredspeciescondoms.com/> See also Katie McKay Bryson, “Use a condom, save a Polar Bear?” (Altnet.org, 13 April 2010) at http://www.altnet.org/story/146448/use_a_condom_save_a_polar_bear_not_that_simple
7. From the “Use a stopper... save the hopper” (coquí guajón rock frog) condom box, Center for Biological Diversity, 2010.
8. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/04/19/7-things-you-can-do-for-e_n_541165.html#postComment
9. Julia Whitty, “The Last Taboo,” *Mother Jones*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (June 2010), 42. See also: Katie McKay Bryson, “Say it Ain’t So, MoJo,” Population & Development Program (<http://popdev.hampshire.edu/blog/post/say-it-aint-so-mojo>).
10. In the year 2010, \$708 billion on war expenses (over \$830 billion, if you include Veterans Affairs). This means that 5% of the world’s population does 40% of its military spending — the next highest spender is China, which spent about \$84 billion on its military in 2008. (See Bill Quigley, “Corporations Profit from Permanent War: Memorial Day 2010,” The Center for Constitutional Rights, 24 May 2010.)
11. CAFO stands for Concentrated Animal Feeding Operation, a site where animals are held in confined spaces and fed grain (though they have evolved to eat grasses) before slaughter. These have been linked to health issues for both the confined animals and the humans who eat their meat, or vegetables exposed to CAFO runoff during growth. For more on these subjects, see Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2006).
12. Kristen Zimmerman & Vera Miao, *Fertile Ground: Women Organizing at the Intersection of Environmental Justice and Reproductive Justice* (Oakland, CA: Movement Strategy Center, 2009), 2.