9. Depopulating the Novel

Post-Catastrophe Fiction, Scale, and the Population Unconscious

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… je ne peux pas, personnellement, avoir d'espoir pour un monde trop plein.

—Claude Lévi-Strauss

The Population Unconscious

Having Kids was an organization dedicated to, as the 2019 version of its homepage had it, 'universal child-centric family planning policies that promote smaller families cooperatively investing more in every child'.[1] This baseline vertiginously traversed a wide array of scales: from the singular ('every child') to the universal, from the downscaled family to the aggrandized child. Still, the visual rhetoric of the website consistently privileged a smaller bandwidth of scales, as it prominently featured relentlessly cheerful images of families with one or two children and testimonials by families who have adopted the organization's model of delayed, reflexive, and constrained reproduction. Under the rubric 'The Facts Supporting Fair Start Family Planning', the website featured a colourful illustration demonstrating the scalar satisfactions of smaller families (see Fig. 26). The image promises easy scalar mobility (and here I am scanning the image counter-clockwise): between the (consciously small) nuclear family, a network of similarly sized families, and an eminently manageable (not too much) larger community. Not

1 'Homepage', *Having Kids.org* (7 June 2019), https://havingkids.org.

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only does this scale of life promise plenty of room for date nights where participants can celebrate what the image calls 'well-being' and 'gender equality', it even boasts well-deserved me-time where individuals can withdraw and enjoy their intimacy with nature, away from their loved ones.

Fig. 26 Having Kids, *The Benefits of Smaller Families* (2018) © Fair Start Movement. All rights reserved. https://havingkids.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/New-2100-graphic-rearranged.jpg

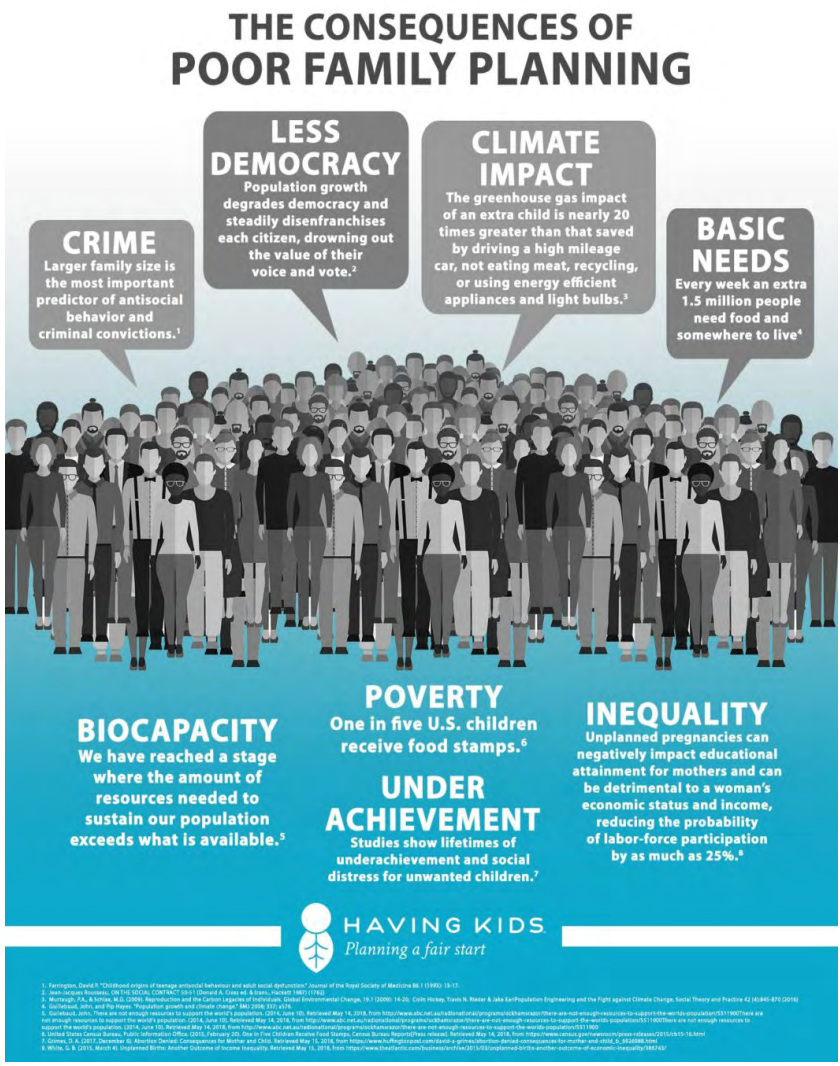

Fig. 27 Having Kids, *The Consequences of Poor Family Planning* (2018) © Fair Start Movement. All rights reserved. https://havingkids.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/New-2100-graphic-part-2-1.jpg

All this is only possible, the website implied, because these loved ones are not too numerous. Remarkably, the website did not really consider the plight of the unloved many—the people who will have to disappear (or stop reproducing) for the lifestyle promoted here to (literally)

find a place within the lifetime of the website's audience. Indeed, the reality of demographic excess only surfaced in one image that contrasts with the previous one: illustrating 'The Consequences of Poor Family Planning', the visual shows a greyscale drawing of an undifferentiated crowd surrounded by slogans expressing the miseries of overcrowded life (see Fig. 27). Most of the website was dedicated to the affirmation of a particularly scaled mode of life: small and manageable, egalitarian, with constant face-to-face interaction. The reality that this solution would be hard to scale to a planet populated by 7.7 billion people was not made explicit. The attractive lifestyle the website advanced depends on a disavowed population politics—what I will call its 'population unconscious': it leaves implicit the inconvenient fact that implementing its vision of the good life within the lifetime of the audience it addresses would require a spectacularly rapid demographic decrease.

This chapter examines a much broader—and, I want to argue, deeply problematic—tendency to articulate a vision of the good life while obfuscating the need to get rid of the majority of the world population for that vision to materialize. It is not that such initiatives *obscure* the question of scale: their blueprints for thriving are emphatically *scaled*—they belong to a particular scale domain (ranging from a few dozen to a few hundred individuals)—but foreground the scale of their particular version of the good life only to sideline the challenge of demographic surplus and the fact that their templates for human thriving do not seem amenable to scaling up. What I call the underlying 'population unconscious' is as ineluctable as it is unspeakable, and has, as I will argue below, existed at least since Malthus.

What makes this relevant for literary scholars is that this combination of affirmation (of a particular scale of flourishing) and disavowal (of a population politics based on radical decrease) also marks the popular genre of post-catastrophe fiction. While some of the most iconic instances of the genre—such as Cormac McCarthy's relentlessly grim *The Road* (2006) or Alfonso Cuarón's gruelling *Children of Men* (2006)—are clearly not committed to an imagining of the good life, other examples of post-catastrophe fiction (or post-, neo-, crypto-, or ana-apocalyptic fiction, a terminological confusion which testifies to the genre's affective and temporal complexity), are much less depressing and bleak, and instead present post-catastrophe life as somehow

desirable.[2] In novels like Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014), which will be my main touchstone in this essay, post-catastrophe life is presented as pleasant and attractive.[3] These novels sideline the fact that this life is only attractive for a limited group of survivors, and only *because* the group of survivors is limited. Through their engrained survival bias, which draws attention away from the mass extinction that powers them, these novels invite readers to invest in their visions of the good life while participating in their disavowal of demographic catastrophe. By outsourcing that catastrophe to a nonhuman, biological force—a pandemic in the three novels studied here—they distract from the realization that their templates for survival *depend* on demographic elimination.

But is it really plausible that these novels' imaginings of post-catastrophe life have an encrypted normative force—that the lives they represent are meant to be desirable? Surely there is a difference between a nakedly programmatic family planning initiative like Having Kids and the fairly sophisticated works of upper middlebrow fiction? The rest of this essay argues that, while the normative force of these fictions is vague enough to afford them plausible deniability, the difference is not as great as one might be inclined to think. I make this point by situating the genre of post-catastrophe fiction in three different generic genealogies—all of which participate in the longer history of literary engagements with population: utopian fiction (which, as I explain in detail below, has always imagined the good life on a particular, limited scale), science fiction (where, as I show, anxieties about over- or de-population are traditionally confronted through the genre's defining spatiotemporal displacements), and the realist novel (which recent scholarship has shown to negotiate the pressures that growing populations put on political and aesthetic forms). To the extent that post-catastrophe fiction recombines elements of all three trajectories in a conjuncture that also generates initiatives like Having Kids, it borrows their normative and affective dimensions in a way that make their avoidance of population issues problematic at best. As we will see, at a time when there is no

2 Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (New York: Vintage, 2006); Alfonso Cuarón, *Children of Men* (Universal Picture, 2006), DVD; for the variety of terms, see Heather Hicks, *The Post-Apocalyptic Novel in the Twenty-First Century: Modernity beyond Salvage* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 6, https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137545848.

3 Emily St. John Mandel, *Station Eleven* (Basingstoke: Picador, 2015).

longer any scientific evidence that a 'population bomb' is looming (as research published in such venues as *The Lancet* makes clear, and as the widely reported falling fertility rates during the COVID-19 crisis in both Asia and the West have made inescapable), the fantasy of a less overcrowded planet is displaced, and hides behind the pleasing images of decluttered life that post-catastrophe fiction and certain family planning initiatives project. These works and initiatives provide what Fredric Jameson has called 'blueprints for bourgeois comfort' that offer little in the way of a solution to planetary challenges.[4]

Cosy Catastrophe

Post-catastrophe fiction's promotion of particular versions of the good life is not a recent phenomenon. Already in 1973, British science fiction writer Brian Aldiss identified the 'cosy catastrophe' subgenre of apocalyptic fiction: a spate of fictions from the 1950s and 1960s, the most famous of which is John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids*, where 'global disaster is survived by a typically prosperous remnant that adapts, with reasonable aptitude and plenty of common sense, to the new conditions of a post-collapse world'.[5] Aldiss' term ('cosy') underlines the decidedly tame and diminutive natures of post-catastrophic comfort—his most enthusiastic description of Wyndham's works calls them 'urbane and pleasing'. His most direct definition of the subgenre directly links this affective downscaling to a more radical diminishment: 'The essence of cosy catastrophe is that the hero should have a pretty good time (a girl, free suites at the Savoy, automobiles for the taking) while everyone else is dying off'.[6] Post-catastrophe's diminished pleasures are only available to reduced numbers of the human race; in most cosy catastrophe fictions, the imagining of the good life is intimately connected to an eliminative population politics—a connection that Aldiss' formulation intimates ('while') even while the works themselves bury it underneath the narrative pleasures they afford.

4 Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2007), p. 12.

5 Andrew Tate, *Apocalyptic Fiction* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), p. 8, https://doi.org/10.5040/9781474233545-004.

6 Brian Aldiss, *Billion Year Spree: The History of Science Fiction* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973), pp. 315–16.

Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014) is a case in point. The gentle and subdued nature of the world the novel imagines is already apparent in its (at least) double generic affiliation: *Station Eleven* gained critical acclaim both as a work of science fiction—it won an Arthur C. Clarke Award—and as a work of literary fiction—being shortlisted for the National Book Award and the PEN/Faulkner Award. This double consecration is enabled by the novel's decision to organize itself around a genre element—a pandemic that wipes out 99.6% of the world population—without dwelling on the grim horrors and deprivations such events typically unleash in works like *World War Z* or *The Walking Dead*:[7] the novel studiously skips 'the first ten or twelve years after the collapse' and shifts to the 'calmer age' that follows it.[8] Indeed, the most conspicuous aspect of the life of the survivors is how cosy and pleasant it is. There is a travelling group of actors who perform Shakespeare for the communities they encounter; there is a character living the life with his wife, his son, his newborn, and a puppy, 'baking bread in an outdoor oven'; there is, most notably, a small community establishing itself in an airport terminal and organizing itself around an improvised 'Museum of Civilization' containing defunct iPhones, stiletto heels, and Nintendo consoles.[9] Life here, as Caroline Edwards remarks, is set in 'a pastoral world of slowed-down time that asserts the mundane and the domestic over the catastrophic and the dramatic'.[10]

In *Station Eleven*, life after collapse is nothing if not desirable—at least, for people who are not part of the 99.6%, because for them, there are no outdoor ovens, only the burning pits where contaminated corpses

7 These works, significantly, feature images of mindless and uncontrollable zombie hordes, as if to underscore that the horror of the end of times essentially has to do with surplus populations; the demographic excess figured in the zombie apocalypse, which is typically presented as a teeming horde of mindless bodies invading all residual comfort zones, is the flip-side of a novel like *Station Eleven*'s minimalism; if a novel like *Station Eleven* disavows the fear of overpopulation, the zombie apocalypse hysterically acts it out. Andreu Domingo has argued that contemporary zombie 'demodystopias' function as technologies for elaborating the 'radical split between [...] "redundant" and the "resilient"' populations'. Andreu Domingo, 'Resilient Evil: Neoliberal Technologies of the Self and Population in Zombie "Demodystopia"', *Utopian Studies*, 30 (2019), 444–61 (p. 446), https://doi.org/10.5325/utopianstudies.30.3.0444.

8 Mandel, *Station*, p. 145.

9 Ibid., pp. 312, 255, 258.

10 Caroline Edwards, *Utopia and the Contemporary British Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 161, https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108595568.

end up. Or so readers can presume, because the novel does not disclose any details, as its economy of attention conspicuously skips the realities of mass extinction and focuses readerly attention on the surviving few, not the superfluous many. If the novel kills off 99.6% of the world population, that means that 0.4% survive—which is to say (although the novel does not tell us), 28 million people. Yet the novel's imagination is set at an even smaller scale: we read that '[t]here were 320 people living in the Severn City Airport that year, one of the largest settlements Kirsten had seen'.[11] *Station Eleven*'s imagining of a more or less pleasant post-pandemic life—which leads Caroline Edwards to define it as an example of 'pastoral post-apocalypse'—invites readers to forget what Aldiss' definition of the cosy catastrophe subgenre foregrounds: that the pleasures of post-pandemic domesticity depend on the vast majority of the world population 'dying off'.[12] The novel's refrain is '*Because survival is not sufficient*'—which is cast as an answer to the implicit question of why we need a meaningful and comfortable life. What does not enter the novel is the perspective of the 99.6% for whom survival would, if not sufficient, at least have been something.

This logic is not exclusive to *Station Eleven*. In Margaret Atwood's tonally very different *MaddAddam* trilogy, for instance, which outsources its demographic solution to the workings of an evil genius who creates a lethal virus, the final volume presents a small community of human survivors living a simple but nurturing life (together with the Crakers, an improved posthuman species) in a fortified cobb house. The novel intercuts the story of the simple life in this 'makeshift community of sustenance and care', sustained by a simple vegetable garden and beehives, with analepses to the brutal and violent life of some of the characters in the pre-catastrophe world.[13] This narrative organization underscores that the life at the cobb house is a desirable retreat 'away from the urban rubble'.[14] And in the post-pandemic world, the large numbers of city life are no longer a threat: life feels like 'a vacation of sorts', but '[t]hey aren't escaping from daily life. This is where

11 Mandel, *Station*, p. 306.
12 Edwards, *Utopia*, p. 161.
13 Shelley Boyd, 'Ustopian Breakfasts: Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam*', *Utopian Studies*, 26 (2015), 160–81 (p. 161), https://doi.org/10.5325/utopianstudies.26.1.0160.
14 Margaret Atwood, *MaddAddam* (London: Virago, 2014), p. 6.

they live now'.[15] The former world was divided between secured elite Compounds on the one hand and the slums, suburbs, and malls that make up the 'pleeblands' on the other. If this old world was riven by violence and hate, the post-pandemic world overcomes violence (a large part of the plot tells the story of how the survivors unite to attempt to kill off their last enemies). This neat opposition between the violent and overcrowded past and the downscaled and peaceful present only holds up, however, if we forget that the survivors' pleasures depend on the death of most of the population. As in Mandel's novel, the comforts of simplicity and scarcity serve to obfuscate a fairly sinister population politics.

In a disgruntled review of a spate of post-catastrophe fictions, Ursula Heise has remarked on the genre's disavowed demographic politics. In these works' depiction of a return to a simpler life, '[w]hat really counts is that the characters, in their break from the corruptions of the past, no longer have to deal with things like crowded cities, cumbersome democracies, and complex technologies. Whatever the hardships of their lives may be, they are better off without the world of corporations, biotech, and the Internet—even, apparently, at the price of genocide'.[16] Such an insight into what I call the genre's population unconscious has not been an explicit focus in the scholarly books about the genre that have begun to appear in recent years: Heather Hicks' *The Post-Apocalyptic Novel in the Twenty-First Century*, Andrew Tate's *Apocalyptic Fiction*, which, in spite of the different genre named in the title, deals with many of the same texts, and Diletta De Cristofaro's *The Contemporary Post-Apocalyptic Novel*, which again covers the usual suspects (*Station Eleven*, *The Road*, Will Self's *The Book of Dave*, the novels of David Mitchell).[17] While these books offer sophisticated accounts of the forms and functions of such fictions, they do not explore to what extent they serve to channel particular disavowed population fantasies. In order to fill in this gap, the next sections situate the genre in different generic genealogies that, I argue, cumulatively endow their scaled depictions of the good life with

15 Ibid., p. 184.

16 Ursula Heise, 'What's the Matter with Dystopia', *Public Books* (2 January 2015), https://www.publicbooks.org/whats-the-matter-with-dystopia/.

17 Hicks, *Post-Apocalyptic*; Tate, *Apocalyptic*; Diletta De Cristofaro, *The Contemporary Post-Apocalyptic Novel* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

a peculiar affective and normative force: science fiction (which I situate in the context of popular scientific concerns over demographic growth), utopian fiction, and the realist novel.

Population between Science and Speculation in Science Fiction

Contemporary fiction is not the only place where questions of population scale figure only indirectly. Even while questions over the impact of human action on the ecological and chemical makeup of the planet have taken an increasingly prominent place in environmental thought, it has been remarkably reluctant to confront the question of population head-on. Environmental ethicist Patrick Curry has pointed to a taboo on talking about 'the P-word' and uses Sandy Irvine's term 'overpopulation denial syndrome (ODS)'.[18] Ecocritic Greg Garrard has noted the failure of environmental literary studies to talk about the rescaling of the human population. For Garrard, art and literature are regrettably better at imagining an empty world without humans than a 'world with *far fewer* of us'.[19] Political theorist Diana Coole talks about a vast 'disavowal of the population question', and identifies 'five categories of silencing discourse' that make it much more difficult for people to raise the issue of demographic growth.[20]

Taboo, denial, disavowal, silence, shame: these terms strongly indicate that population discourse is never merely scientific, but always overdetermined by fantasies and affective investments. This is all the more obvious because contemporary science no longer supports the idea that overpopulation is a major planetary problem. Given that the ecological footprint of affluent Westerners is vastly larger than that of the regions where the population is actually growing (most current and projected growth being situated in Africa), pointing to population numbers as an index of environmental impact reveals a disregard for global

18 Patrick Curry, *Ecological Ethics: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity, 2006), pp. 123–24.

19 Greg Garrard, 'Worlds Without Us: Some Types of Disanthropy', *SubStance*, 41 (2012): 40–60 (p. 59), https://doi.org/10.1353/sub.2012.0001.

20 Diane Coole, 'Too Many Bodies? The Return and Disavowal of the Population Question', *Environmental Politics*, 22 (2013), 195–215 (p. 197), https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2012.730268.

wealth inequalities. As Diana Coole notes, what makes problematizing population almost shameful is 'a pervasive suspicion that limiting population actually means limiting certain categories of people who are deemed redundant or undesirable'.[21] Contemporary population discourse also suffers from its association with the disputable political track record of earlier reflections on the environmental ramifications of population growth—not only in the eugenic tradition, but also in what Michelle Murphy has analyzed as the 'historically specific regime of valuation' she terms 'the economization of life', which held population to be adjustable and manageable in relation to the macroeconomy of the nation-state.[22] Discussions on the impact of demographic growth cannot help but resonate with the earlier interventions of Thomas Malthus' *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798) and Paul and Anne Ehrlichs' *Population Bomb* (1968), even if these earlier works' emphasis on food security has been replaced with a focus on ecological footprints, carbon emissions, and the threat of global pandemics. Such discussions inevitably slip from the domains of ecology and biology into more ethically and politically fraught terrain, where those concerns end up taking on more sinister biopolitical connotations.

Population increase only became a critical concern with the work of Thomas Malthus. As Emily Steinlight underlines, demographic increase was an unambiguous marker of social wellbeing until the end of the eighteenth century.[23] Malthus famously made the case that the planet would not be able to sustain population growth: while food production can increase at only arithmetic rates, populations tend to grow exponentially at geometric rates, and the result is a mismatch that will threaten the lives of many. Malthus' fears of overpopulation are often traced back to his concerns over the French revolution (whose danger might be located in 'the sheer numbers—the swarm-like quality of the poor');[24] they were formulated before demographic data about England

21 Coole, 'Too Many', p. 199.

22 Michelle Murphy, *The Economization of Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), pp. 5–6.

23 Emily Steinlight, *Populating the Novel: Literary Form and the Politics of Surplus Life* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018), p. 4.

24 Alex McCauley, 'The Promise of Disaster: Specters of Malthus in Marxist Dreams', *Ecozon@*, 9 (2018), 53–65 (p. 63), https://doi.org/10.37536/ECOZONA.2018.9.1.1649.

were even available and were rooted less in empirical observation and ecological awareness and more in principles of macroeconomic thought. The spectre of overpopulation, from its Malthusian origins despite its claim to scientific credentials, is a matter of speculation and projection—as Frances Ferguson has it, less 'a response to the pressure of too many bodies' than to 'the felt pressure of too many consciousnesses'.[25] Malthus' writings evoke the Kantian figure of the *mathematical sublime:* a plurality that is immeasurable and uncontainable and overwhelms the human's rational capacities. Crucially, overpopulation is here *not* an empirical observation—the data was simply not available—but a projection powered by a fantasy of withdrawal, control, and containment—a downscaling operation that is still at work in contemporary post-catastrophe fiction.

The return of the population question in the 1960s and 1970s *was* supported by biological knowledge and real science. Garrett Hardin, who wrote 'The Tragedy of the Commons' in 1968, was a professor of human ecology (as well as a eugenicist and a white supremacist), while the crucial notion of 'carrying capacity' made its way from biology into demography and human ecology.[26] Paul and Anne Ehrlich, who wrote the bestselling *The Population Bomb* in the same year, were conservation biologists, and this allowed them to present a detailed vision of the planetary deterioration that would befall an exhausted planet unable to feed its human population. The very title of the book obviously resonated with contemporaneous fears over a coming nuclear winter, as the book balanced the Malthusian fear of overcrowding with an ecological fear of environmental exhaustion. The book's tagline underlines this double movement, simultaneously threatening exhaustion and overcrowding: 'While you are reading these words four people, most of them children, will die of starvation—and twenty-four more babies will have been born'.[27] The dash between the two declarations and the future anterior ('will have been') suggests that Malthus' fear was materializing *right now*; the affect it inspired was dread and panic.

25 Frances Ferguson, *Solitude and the Sublime: The Romantic Aesthetics of Individuation* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 114.

26 Sabine Höhler, '"Carrying Capacity": The Moral Economy of the "Coming Spaceship Earth"', *Atenea*, 26 (2006), 59–74 (p. 70).

27 Paul Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb*, revised and expanded edition (New York: Ballantine Books, 1971).

The scientifically grounded fears of the Ehrlichs and Hardin found their way into '60s and '70s overpopulation dystopias, where they intersected with concerns over eroding class privilege. As Ursula Heise has shown, these works tended to cast overpopulation as an urban phenomenon marked by 'nightmarish crowding and the erosion of individual privacy'. Observations of global demographic excess beyond the planet's carrying capacity were reflected in 'quite class-specific paranoias' and concerns over inconveniences afflicting metropolitan middle-class life.[28] The abiding fear in these dystopias, as Fredric Jameson notes, 'is that of proletarianization [...] of losing a comfort and a set of privileges which we tend increasingly to think of in spatial terms: privacy, empty rooms, silence, walling other people out, protection against crowds and other bodies'.[29] Eva Horn has noted that both *The Population Bomb* and the 1973 ecological dystopian thriller *Soylent Green* (a film based on Harry Harrison's 1966 novel *Make Room! Make Room!*) begin with the image of a third-world overcrowded city.[30] In these works, the reality of demographic growth is represented, not disavowed under the guise of a pandemic or natural disaster. The support for the diagnosis of rampant population growth in ecology (Hardin), biology (the Ehrlichs), and interdisciplinary environmental research (as in the Club of Rome's famous 1972 report on *The Limits of Growth*, drafted by a team of 17 researchers) gave population politics a prominent place in these 'demodystopias'.[31]

One reason for the more recent backgrounding of population politics is that scientific evidence has reliably failed to provide evidence for unchecked population growth. Works of popular science such as *Peoplequake* and *Too Many People?* downplay the dangers of overpopulation, and a 2009 forum in *The New Scientist* on 'The Population Delusion' is similarly unimpressed.[32] A study published in *The Lancet* in the summer

28 Ursula Heise, 'The Virtual Crowd: Overpopulation, Space, and Speciesism', *ISLE*, 8 (2001), 1–29 (p. 2), https://doi.org/10.1093/isle/8.1.1.

29 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989), p. 286.

30 Eva Horn, *The Future as Catastrophe: Imagining Disaster in the Modern Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), pp. 117–18.

31 Andreu Domingo, '"Demodystopias": Prospects of Demographic Hell', *Population and Development Review*, 34 (2008), 725–45, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1728-4457.2008.00248.x.

32 Fred Pearce, *Peoplequake: Mass Migration, Ageing Nations and the Coming Population Crash* (New York: Eden Project, 2011); Ian Angus and Simon Butler, *Too Many People?*

of 2020 predicts that the world population will not exceed ten billion in this century and begin to decline as early as 2064—a position echoed in a work of popular science like *Empty Planet: The Shock of Global Population Decline*.[33] Already in 2001, Ursula Heise noted that '[o]verpopulation has lost its terror for the Western imagination' and that 'so many of the Western overpopulation dystopias of the 1960s and 1970s seem dated by now'.[34] This lack of scientific alarmism makes apparent the 'dubious cultural politics' of earlier fictions engaging with demographic growth, which retain traces of a discredited eugenics, elitism, and racism—nowhere more clearly, perhaps, than in Jean Raspail's racist classic *The Camp of the Saints* (1973), which depicts a future France overtaken by nameless Third World hordes.[35] It also makes clear that population fantasies will require updated literary templates. Contemporary post-catastrophe fiction is one such template where population fantasies and paranoias survive the erosion of their evidentiary basis.[36]

Survival at Scale in Post-Catastrophe Science Fiction

Contemporary post-catastrophe fiction no longer draws on the tension between the multitude and the individual that has dominated demographic speculation since Malthus; instead, it resolutely focuses on minor scales that it presents as desirable while removing all too palpable images of overcrowding.[37] Post-catastrophe fiction imagines an alternative to overcrowding, not the reality of crowdedness. The vision

Population, Immigration, and the Environmental Crisis (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2011); 'The Population Delusion', *New Scientist* (23 September 2009), https://www.newscientist.com/round-up/population/.

33 Stein Emil Vollset, et al., 'Fertility, Mortality, Migration, and Population Scenarios for 195 Countries and Territories from 2017 to 2100: A Forecasting Analysis for the Global Burden of Disease Study', *The Lancet*, 396 (2020), 1285–306, https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)30677-2; Darrell Bricker and John Ibbitson, *Empty Planet: The Shock of Global Population Decline* (New York: Crown, 2019).

34 Heise, 'Virtual', pp. 1–2.

35 Lionel Shriver, 'Population in Literature', *Population and Development Review*, 29 (2003), 153–62 (p. 158), https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1728-4457.2003.00153.x.

36 Editors' note: In chapter 7, Rishi Goyal studies how comparable 'population fantasies and paranoias' shape the imagining of the pandemic city in Ling Ma's *Severance* (2018), notably through its use of uniformising descriptions 'from above'.

37 See Timothy Clark, '"But the real problem is....": The Chameleonic Insidiousness of "Overpopulation" in the Environmental Humanities', *Oxford Literary Review*, 38 (2016), 7-–26 (pp. 16–18), https://doi.org/10.3366/olr.2016.0177.

of the good life that novels like *Station Eleven* and *MaddAddam* project is not imagined as scalable. Instead, the scale on which they operate (the small community) is intrinsic to their visions; they promote a Marie Kondo-style minimalism rather than indulgent excess. As one of the characters in Atwood's cobb house muses, '[o]nce, there were too many people and not enough stuff; now it's the other way round'. In the cobb house, there is enough stuff, but not too much, as '[n]ow that history is over, [they]'re living in luxury, as far as goods and chattels go'.[38] The cobb house is developed according to a hipster aesthetic marked by vintage quaintness: a hand pump that used to be 'a retro decoration' becomes both 'the source of their drinking' and a source of delight for the children; the structure of the house survives as 'ersatz antiquity, like a dinosaur made of cement'.[39] Even at the serene end of the story, DIY projects continue apace, as extensions, a nursery, and extra solars are being developed. While these initiatives point forward to a better future, there are no indications that this future will be scaled differently and that life will return to pre-pandemic numbers.[40]

The intrinsic connections between the good life and scarcity are nowhere clearer than in the way *Station Eleven* affirms the value of commodities that make up the 'Museum of Civilization'. These objects are repeatedly said to be 'beautiful', and their beauty is directly linked to their finitude. The characters 'had always been fond of beautiful objects, and in [their] present state of mind, all objects were beautiful'.[41] When one of the child actors in the play that opens the novel, Kirsten, who will survive and play a prominent role in the narrative's post-apocalyptic strand, receives a paperweight on the eve of destruction, it is described as 'the most beautiful, the most wonderful, the strangest thing'; after the collapse, she still finds it 'nothing but dead weight' yet 'beautiful'.[42] After the collapse, the world is rendered more lovely by the prospect that '[p]erhaps soon humanity would simply flicker out', which releases '[t]he beauty of this world where almost everyone was gone'.[43] Even an abandoned Toronto strikes one survivor with '[a] stark and unexpected

38 Atwood, *MaddAddam*, p. 45.
39 Ibid., pp. 55, 116.
40 Ibid., p. 458.
41 Mandel, *Station Eleven*, p. 255.
42 Ibid., pp. 15, 66.
43 Ibid., p. 148.

beauty, silent metropolis, no movement'.[44] It is only when cars have stopped driving and planes have stopped flying that people 'recognize the beauty of flight'.[45] The removal of excess populations, in other words, creates room for the value of objects and experiences to emerge. The removal of the boredom and waste of contemporary life generates beauty. The inverse observation, that it is the overabundance and excess of our current overpopulated lives that robs the world of its beauty, is left implicit—tangible enough for readers to indulge in, but vague enough that it affords both the novel and its readers plausible deniability.

The association between fantasy and scale is so pervasive that it also appears in Ling Ma's post-apocalyptic zombie novel *Severance*, a work that strongly rejects *Station Eleven*'s and *MaddAddam*'s belief in the promise of small pockets of survivors, since it shows a small commune fall prey to authoritarianism and violence. The novel's protagonist flees a collapsing New York to join a group of survivors; neither of these scales suit her, and she ultimately leaves for an emptied Chicago. The crew's stalking missions, in which they indulge the lure of commodities in abandoned houses, offers an aesthetic experience not that different from what *Station Eleven*'s museum affords: 'Room by room, we amassed boxes', in a looting project involving 'empty boxes and garbage bags' and 'supply vans'.[46] Scavenging is figured as 'an aesthetic experience', in which Candace, very much like a post-pandemic Marie Kondo, 'would get lost in the taking of inventory, with the categorizing and gathering, the packing of everything into space-efficient arrangements'.[47] Again, it is the emptiness of the houses they visit (and the demographic reduction on which it depends) that enables experiences of beauty and that phantasmagorically converts scarcity into value, converts survival into a vision of the good life.

This logic also accounts for the peculiar organization of the novel: while Candace's life story up to the pandemic and her stay with the survivors are narrated non-chronologically in (mostly) alternating chapters, the novel builds toward the period of Candace's stay in an abandoned New York as a somehow almost benign period. When the city is deserted, 'everything seemed to take longer. The city was

44 Ibid., p. 182.
45 Ibid., p. 247.
46 Ling Ma, *Severance* (London: Picador, 2019), p. 65.
47 Ibid., pp. 58, 65.

operating on a different kind of time', an alteration she takes it upon herself to document—'documenting the deserted city', 'deserted but not abandoned'.[48] As a cab driver tells her, one reason not to abandon New York is that '[i]t's too beautiful not to enjoy', especially when '[t]he fevered stumbled around New York in ever-diminishing numbers'.[49] As in *Station Eleven* and *MaddAddam*, the intricate relation between diminishment and desire obscures the horror of demographic reduction by substituting it with a palpable image of the enjoyment of small numbers.

Utopian and Realist Fictions

If the genre of post-catastrophe fiction is informed by deep affective investments and an eschewal of scientific insight, as I have argued, an appreciation of its intrinsic normative claims requires an exploration of its affiliation with utopian and realist fiction. Indeed, the idea that literature's imagining of life has normative value is nowhere more apparent than in the genre of utopia—and post-catastrophe fiction's reliance on utopian devices transports this normativity to its imagining of community. Crucially, scale is intrinsic to the make-up of the forms of community that utopia imagines. Lyman Tower Sargent, one of the leading thinkers of utopia, notes that nineteenth- and twentieth-century imaginings of utopia typically posit so-called 'intentional communities', which he defines as 'a group of five or more adults and their children, if any, who come from more than one nuclear family and who have chosen to live together to enhance their shared values or for some other mutually agreed upon purpose'.[50] Size is often central to the definition of an intentional community: the scale of utopian thought is typically that of the 'communal experiment' or the 'commune'.[51] As Fredric Jameson has it: the 'insistence on *the small group itself* […] is the libidinal fountainhead of all Utopian imagination'.[52]

48 Ibid., pp. 248, 255.
49 Ibid., pp. 260, 258.
50 Lyman Tower Sargent, 'The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited', *Utopian Studies*, 5 (1994), 1–37 (p. 15). Italics removed.
51 Lucy Sargisson, 'Utopia and Intentional Communities', unpublished manuscript (Uppsala: ECPR Conference, 2004), p. 4, https://perma.cc/HB77-N2QG.
52 Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 67.

In what is customarily considered the first modern utopia, Thomas More's book that coined the term 500 years ago, the issue of scale is confronted directly—and immediately solved: in utopia, cities consist of no more than 6,000 households of some 10 members each; when there are too many people, they can simply go and settle somewhere else—until they are needed again. Already in More (or, indeed, already in Plato's Republic, which was supposed to be smaller than a typical village), an ideal society is a community operating on a particular scale; it can be cloned but not scaled up.[53] When post-catastrophe fiction then borrows formal and thematic devices from utopian fiction—the meticulous description of the minutiae of everyday life (which explains, for instance, why *Robinson Crusoe* is such an important intertext for post-catastrophe fiction); the fairly static nature of the world (which allows *Station Eleven* to simply skip an eventful decade); the rejection of some aspects of contemporaneous culture (overcrowding, in the case of *Station Eleven*); and, not least, the eminently manageable scale of life—it also imports the normative dimension of the genre, even if it does not make it explicit.

Although they are organized around an imagined cataclysm, the fairly conventional textures of novels like *MaddAddam*, *Severance*, and *Station Eleven* are also clearly indebted to the tradition of the realist novel. Recent scholarship has unearthed the intricate relationship between realist fiction's commitment to particular scale domains, its normative claims, and its implicit population unconscious. Anna Kornbluh's *The Order of Forms* sees a measure of utopia's 'social dreaming' as constitutive of realist form. For Kornbluh, realist fiction's worldbuilding amounts to 'a speculative projection of hypothetical social space'.[54] Realist novels intrinsically project a particular normative ordering of society—they are essentially 'about making spaces and order deliberately and justly'.[55] If we bring the vocabularies of utopian and realist fiction together, we can say that the community that a realist novel imagines is always potentially also an intentional community gathered around a normative conception of the good life: 'Every project *of* is a project *for*'.[56] For Kornbluh, there is

53 Edwards, *Utopia*, p. 47.
54 Anna Kornbluh, *The Order of Forms: Realism, Formalism, and Social Space* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), p. 30.
55 Ibid., p. 4.
56 Ibid., p. 10.

no opposition between realism's commitment to limits and its utopian force: realism's recognition of limits is not simply a conservative affirmation of the status quo; rather, the 'encounter with limits [that] is built into realism's architecture' amounts to 'realism's utopianism'.[57]

This 'recognition of constrainedness' sets realism apart from romance and traditional science fiction. The realist embrace of diminishment and limitation provides a good gloss for the kind of writing we find in novels like *Station Eleven*, *MaddAddam*, and *Severance*: while they are all organized around a science fictional device, their 'realist' attention to all-too-human concerns is in line with the peculiar utopianism Kornbluh observes in realism. In an essay on the work of Kim Stanley Robinson, Kornbluh has noted that a number of contemporary works that officially qualify as science fiction abandon science fiction's customary imaginative excess and replace it with an acceptance of 'constraints of finitude [and] mortality' and a 'constriction of the environment'.[58] This 'diminution of science fiction to realism', I argue, also pertains in the way contemporary post-catastrophe fiction projects intended communities—in abandoned airport terminals, in repurposed cobb houses, and in Candace's community of one.[59] Realism's constitutive self-limitation provides it with an alibi to focus on a small-scale reality and leave demographic multiplicity unaddressed—an alibi that post-catastrophe fiction borrows in the form of an excuse for the removal of surplus populations.

Realism's constrainedness has arguably always implied a sinister population politics. In her recent book *Populating the Novel*, Emily Steinlight has foregrounded the genre's population unconscious. Steinlight finds 'a systematic emplotment of superfluity' through which novels aim to come to terms with the reality of 'demographic excess'.[60] *Station Eleven*'s refrain that '*survival is insufficient*' (which implies that only particular forms of life are worthy to be recognized as life) inscribes it in a longer novelistic tradition in which, in Steinlight's words, 'some qualitative human essence' works hard to escape subsumption by 'the sheer quantitative excess of human beings pressing against each

57 Ibid., p. 42.
58 Anna Kornbluh, 'Climate Realism, Capitalist and Otherwise', *Mediations*, 33 (2020), 99–118 (pp. 102, 104).
59 Ibid., p. 103.
60 Steinlight, *Populating*, pp. 21, 3.

other'—the 'sublime' scenario we observed in Malthus and in the 1970s population panic.[61] For Steinlight, this means that the realist novel is not only a form that negotiates the relation between subject and society, between individual and aggregate (as influential accounts by the likes of Nancy Armstrong and Franco Moretti have it), but also a form that metabolizes 'demographic excess' and engages in 'a recalibration of the relationship between society and species, polity and population, power and life'.[62] What a critical tradition has investigated as the novel's imagining of 'a coherent body politic' is often also a way of managing demographic surplus.[63]

In the face of the reality of demographic excess, fiction is faced with the challenge of attending to an overcrowded world. One possible strategy for managing this impossible imaginative feat is exercising what Steinlight calls 'relative indifference to most of what [the work] sees': most of what the world contains is waste and superfluity, mere matter that cannot figure in designs of the good life.[64] Historically, one way of 'managing the human aggregate' has been the 'intensified psychologism' typical of modernist fiction, a strategy that *Station Eleven* and *Severance*, in their minute attention to the moods, thoughts, and feelings of their character, also adopt.[65] As Steinlight makes clear, this cultivation of interiority is always also a training in accepting the superfluity of most of the lives that make up the exterior world. I submit that post-catastrophe fiction's displacement of demographic solutions to viruses and other natural disasters is another strategy for giving shape to such indifference; the lack of sentimentality in the way *MaddAddam* and *Station Eleven* deal with excess populations is indicative of this. This is one way in which Atwood's trilogy, as Steinlight notes, 'reveal[s] the specter of disposability lurking behind the longstanding fantasy of optimizing health and longevity'.[66]

The one death that *Station Eleven* mourns extensively is that of Arthur Leander in the novel's extremely powerful and moving opening scene. While performing the lead in *King Lear*, Leander dies on stage—not

61 Ibid., p. 2.
62 Ibid., pp. 3, 6.
63 Ibid., p. 10.
64 Ibid., p. 14.
65 Ibid., p. 212.
66 Ibid., p. 222.

from the virus, but from a heart attack. Characteristically, *Severance* is more self-conscious in the way it stages indifference as a hard-won survival strategy that involves a painful excision of sympathy. When Candace suspects that the cab driver she has befriended has become infected, she escapes from New York by dragging him out of his car and stealing it. Candace pauses to consider that '[i]t's possible that there is another true story', a version in which 'he wasn't fevered': 'It's possible. I can't be sure. Because I wasn't really all that careful. All I thought about was myself. It got me where I needed to go'.[67] The following final two chapters consolidate this resoluteness as they describe Candace (in an open-ended present tense) escaping from her confinement and going her own way. The novel does not imagine a clear plan or resolution—it leaves us with the protagonist 'step[ping] out and start[ing] walking'.[68] Indifference, it seems, is the key achievement—an indifference to excess populations that the post-catastrophe genre enacts through pandemic or catastrophic solutions.

Conclusion: Downscaling Survival

This essay has argued that post-catastrophe fiction functions as a refuge for demographic fantasies that no longer find as much scientific support for the looming threat of global overpopulation. Lacking an evidentiary basis that was—or seemed to be—much more solid a few decades ago, those fantasies no longer inform the stark oppositions between the multitude and the individual that science fiction demodystopias inherited from Malthus, but rather take shape as positive blueprints for comfortable living that leave their reliance on mass-extinction implicit. It is the genre's peculiar blend of science fiction elements, utopian devices, and realist notation that makes it a site for the projection of a normative vision of the good life that does not need to avow what I have called its population unconscious.

As my opening discussion of a certain type of family planning initiative already indicated, post-catastrophe fiction is not the only place where these fantasies and imaginative traditions surface. When we analyse the visual and textual rhetoric on the websites of projects such

67 Ma, *Severance*, p. 278.
68 Ibid., p. 291.

as Uncrowded (whose tagline in 2019 read 'Smaller Families for a Better World')[69] or the organization Population Matters, at least two features stand out. First, while the 'sublime' opposition between an overcrowded multiplicity and a more cosily scaled community persists (especially in the infographics), there is an undeniable shift toward affirmative images of the blessings of a less crowded life—images in which the reality of overcrowding, just as in post-catastrophe fictions, is magically resolved. One of these blessings of decluttered life, to judge from these websites, is the capacity to enjoy nature. This is a second key feature: the natural world is not, as in earlier population discourse, mainly a source of food provision, but a resource to restore a qualitatively superior form of human life; this resonates with Matthew Hart's argument that post-catastrophe fiction offers a world marked by 'archipelagic insularity': dotted by small, populated territories surrounded by unclaimed wilderness.[70]

The gradual shift from a rhetoric of sublime opposition between the many and the few to an affirmation of the joys of small-scale life is most apparent on the website of Uncrowded.[71] In 2021, the home page provided images of traffic congestion, busy walkways, and other urban inconveniences of what it called 'Our Crowded World'; scrolling down, we could see these make way for sunset images of an individual woman and a one-child family (a shift that characteristically moves us from the city to the countryside, as it overwhelmingly does in post-catastrophe fiction, especially in the strand Caroline Edwards analyses as 'pastoral post-apocalypticism').[72] The images on the organization's 'The Facts' page repeated this visual rhetoric that opposes a scary and confusing multiplicity to a clear and wholesome individuality: an infographic visualizing the CO_2-equivalent for different actions foregrounded the self-evident simplicity of 'hav[ing] one fewer child' against the confusing background of a multiplicity of comparatively insignificant options (see Fig. 28); another image juxtaposed a human figure to an overkill of cars, appliances, and light bulbs to underline the self-evident

69 Uncrowded, *Our Crowded World* (7 June 2019), https://havingkids.org/uncrowded-home/.

70 Matthew Hart, *Extraterritorial: A Political Geography of Contemporary Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), p. 134.

71 Uncrowded, *Our Crowded World*.

72 Edwards, *Utopia*, p. 160.

superiority of family planning as a strategy for reducing environmental impact (see Fig. 29). The Global Footprint Network, an organization that does not explicitly promote family planning, adopts a similar visual rhetoric of number: an infographic that shows how many earths would be necessary if everyone adopted particular lifestyles is fairly useless in terms of information value—letters are illegibly small, and there is simply too much information—but the sheer multiplicity of planets and the dynamic generated by their escalating increase successfully conveys a sense of a world spinning out of control by the force of number (see Fig. 30).[73]

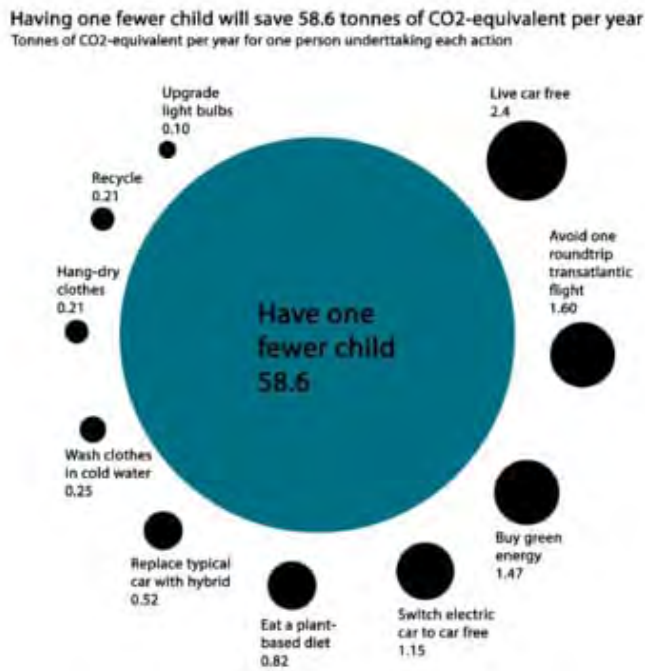

Fig. 28 Having Kids, *Having one fewer child will save 58.6 tonnes of CO2-equivalent per year* (2018) © Fair Start Movement. All rights reserved. https://havingkids.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/child-impact-guardian-graphic-1-358x400.jpg

73 Global Footprint Network, *How Many Earths?* (2019), https://www.footprintnetwork.org/.

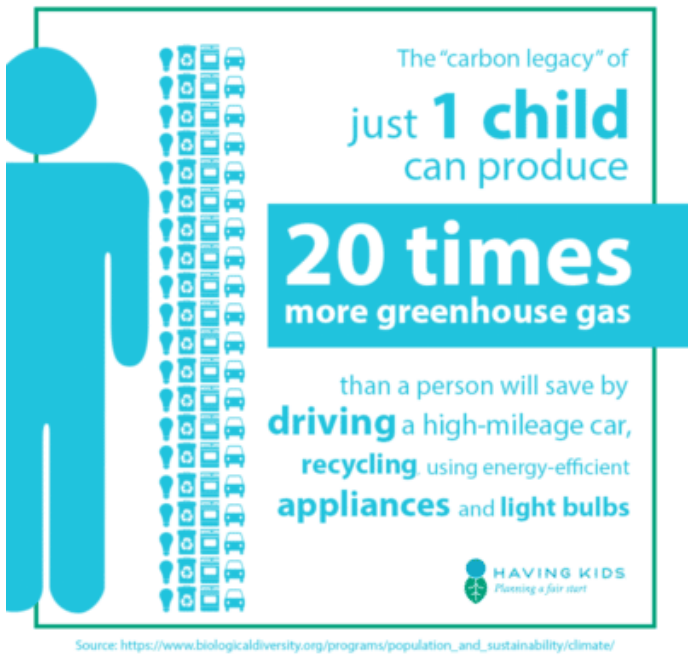

Fig. 29 Having Kids, *The carbon legacy of just one child* (2018) © Fair Start Movement. All rights reserved. https://havingkids.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/27972800_1575734402545365_7111663051996650685_n-400x400.png

It is significant that, as of 2020, the Uncrowded website was nested inside the more affirmative Having Kids website—a change that reflected the shift toward more affirmative visions of what it called 'a world of smaller and truly democratic communities, surrounded by nature'. This vision also dominates the website of the UK-based Population Matters initiative.[74] Population Matters has a more scientific orientation: there are more graphs and numbers, as well as quotes from David Attenborough. Like Having Kids, it foregrounds the pleasant realities of downscaled families under rubrics such as 'Having a Smaller Family' or 'Life in a Smaller Family'. There is a remarkable consistency in the images used to advertise small families across these websites: a predilection for sunsets, seas, and faceless figures; children are without exception small children, never bored teenagers; cities have disappeared and made way for

74 Population Matters, *Homepage* (2021), https://populationmatters.org/.

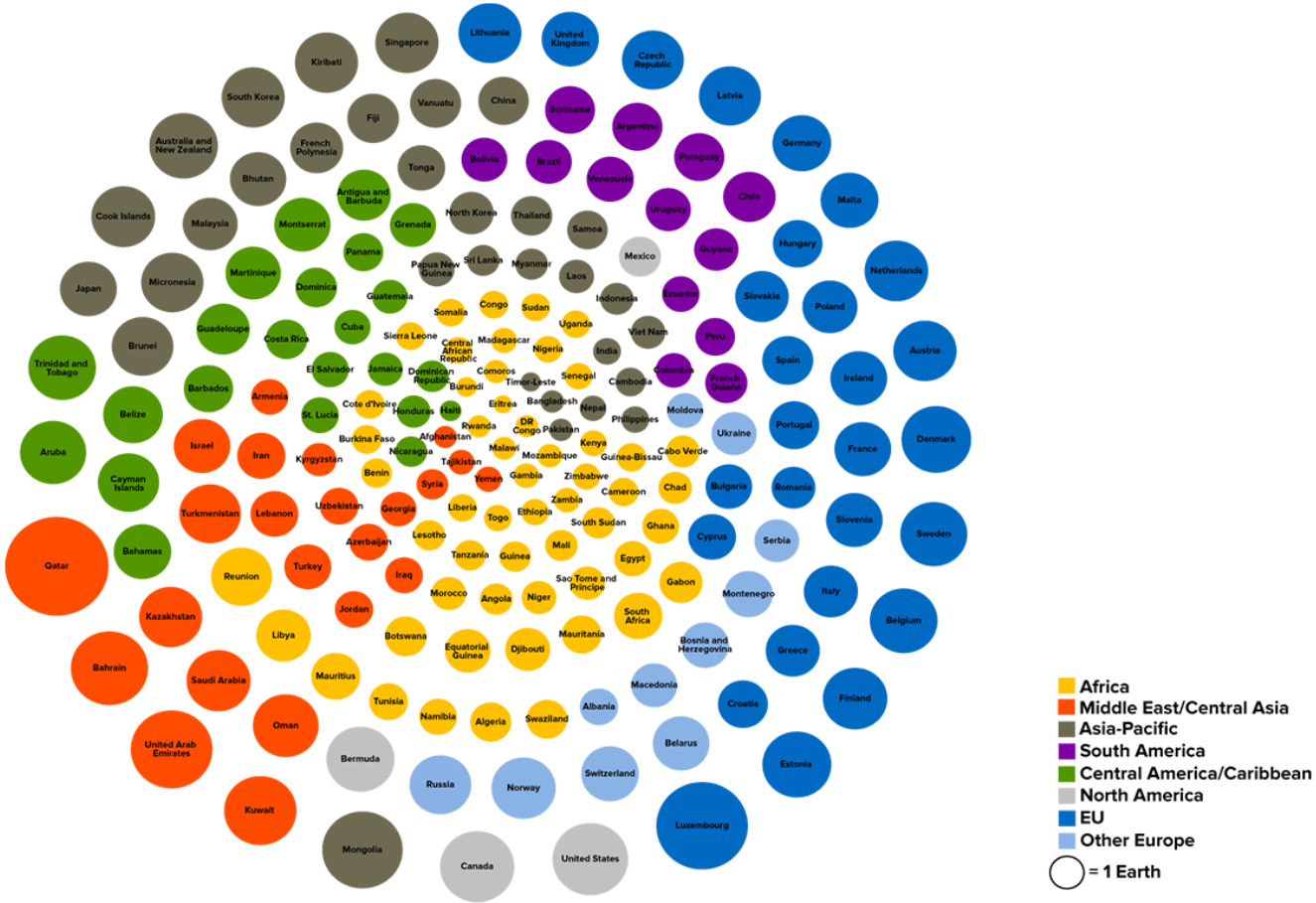

Fig. 30 Global Footprint Network, *How Many Earths?* (2019) © Global Footprint Network. All rights reserved. https://www.footprintnetwork.org/content/uploads/2019/01/Infogrpahic-Pub-Data-Circle-v3.png

nature and suburbs. The issue of where all this free space comes from is not addressed: it is as if the rest of the world had *also* adopted this agenda and decided to take up less room (and, given the ostentatious contemporaneity of the images, done so overnight), or as if the problem of surplus populations had magically resolved itself. It is hard not to see these images as works of post-catastrophe fiction in their own right.

Fig. 31 Population Matters, *Having a Smaller Family* (2021) © Shutterstock. Free to use. https://populationmatters.org/having-smaller-family

Fig. 32 Alberto Casetta, *Family Walking in the Rain* (2021) © Alberto Casetta. Free to use under Unsplash licence. https://populationmatters.org/sites/default/files/styles/full_width_image/public/alberto-casetta-349138-unsplash_0.jpg?itok=UzNpoVfv

Fig. 33 Uncrowded, *Homepage* (2021) © Fair Start Movement. All rights reserved. https://fairstartmovement.org/uncrowded-home/

With remarkable frequency, these images of nature-adjacent, downscaled life are set in fairly moderate weather: it is often windy, cloudy, rainy, and grey (See Fig. 31–33). It is tempting to see this as a complement to the population fantasy informing these images: they suggest that a world with smaller and fewer families will be a world without global warming and rampant climate change—a world where the moderation and predictability of the Holocene will be magically restored, as if putting a break on population growth will achieve nothing less than a solution to climate change. This fantasy points to a desire to preserve current inequalities and to continue to enjoy privileges that many of us still take for granted. This desire is all the more apparent in the figures (typically with their faces turned away or cropped out of the images) who inhabit these mild landscapes—figures who profit from expensive rain clothes, hiking gear, bikes, campers, and the like. The good life that these images project is *not* a life without the commodities affluent audiences currently enjoy; it is a life where there will be more space and less intruders to enjoy these things.

A common imaginary of the down-scaled good life links those initiatives to the post-catastrophe fiction examined in this study. The novels I have analysed show a commitment to current inequalities and an inability to think of planetary challenges at a proper scale—which is to say, for 7.7 billion people rather than some 320. In *Station Eleven*, global warming is pre-empted by a drastic reduction of the human impact on the planet. As the novel notes, 'automobile gas goes stale after two or three years'—which is what happens in the years following the collapse.[75] In *MaddAddam*, the survivors simply decide to adopt a

75 Mandel, *Station Eleven*, p. 31.

'hipster DIY and maker culture in their attention to walking, traditional medicine, mushroom foraging, and roasting of local wild roots for coffee'—even if, as Ursula Heise has remarked, there is nothing in the world's fictional givens that compels them to do so.[76] *Severance*, as I have already noted, concludes with the end of automobility when Candace arrives in Chicago, where traffic has come to a standstill as cars have been abandoned across town. All there is left to do for Candace (as for Atwood's characters) is to 'start walking'.[77] Walking, we know, is good for you, but it is not a solution for environmental crisis. Nor is it an activity that cannot be shared with 7.7 billion others, for that matter.

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76 Heise, 'What's the Matter', [n.p.]
77 Ma, *Severance*, p. 291.

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