“I Cannot Bring A Child Into This World”: Hearing And Writing I Poems With BirthStrike Testimonials

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Abstract
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Keywords
BirthStrike, climate change, reproduction, the Listening Guide, Carol Gilligan

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BirthStrike for Climate was a UK-based movement whose members “striked” against having children, to demonstrate the desperate need for political action on climate change. In this article, I engage with the Listening Guide (Gilligan & Eddy, 2017) to hear, trace and construct “I poems” with BirthStrike members’ testimonial statements, which were published online between 2019-2020. My analysis focuses on how BirthStrike stories articulate the psychosocial impacts of climate change, particularly in relation to questions about having (and not having) children in times of environmental and social crises. I provide an iteration of how the Listening Guide can be applied to non-spoken texts. As I will show, even in the absence of research participants, the listening process for me was a relational encounter: the stories moved me, stirring up strong affective resonances which in turn informed my hearing and writing process. My analysis is therefore an effort to give access to the affective flow I felt in response to the stories, as a process of both listening and being called to respond from an intersubjective location.

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**Introduction**

In the face of astonishing losses to Earth’s ecosystems (IPCC, 2023), can we learn to hear, gently hold, and care for the thick affective flows—of grief, guilt, melancholy, joy, anger, courage, desire—produced and felt in response to our historical conditions? As Donna Haraway writes, living and dying well on a damaged Earth requires that we cultivate our capacities to respond, “passing patterns back and forth, giving and receiving, patterning, holding the unasked-for pattern in one’s hands, response-ability” (Haraway, 2016, p. 12). How might we do this emotional and relational work of becoming response-able from our locations as psychological researchers, where the stories and narrated subjects we encounter carry us to the strange and unsettling edges of “self” and “other”? These are some of the questions I asked myself, as I went through the process of analysing BirthStrike’s stories. These opening questions are, therefore, meditative, not research questions; I lay them down here, at the outset, to foreshadow the process through which I write in the second half of this article.

Social science research on the emotional and psychological impacts of climate change has proliferated in recent years, broadly conceptualised under the headings of climate anxiety (Clayton, 2020; Kennedy-Woodard & Kennedy-Williams, 2022; Ray, 2020), eco-anxiety (Oramus, 2023; Vakoch & Mickey, 2023), and climate change mental health (Goldman, 2022; Hayes et al., 2018). Such research tends to draw on cognitive and clinical psychological paradigms to frame understandings of and responses to climate change and is sometimes packaged in the form of self-help books. While recognising that such literature meets an urgent need, especially when considering the devastating impacts of climate change on young people’s
thoughts and feelings about the future (e.g., Hickman et al., 2021), it also comes with its epistemological limitations. At least in my own reading, the continued dominance of post-positivist assumptions about human subjectivity as singular and universalizable in social science climate research constrains efforts to attend to both the social power relations and the psychosocial structures which have produced environmental precarity in the first place (Meynell, 2023).

Feminist scholarship has been taking a different approach for decades, to critique how environmental harms fold into the intersecting social oppressions of gender, race and class. Indigenous, intersectional and decolonial feminist scholarships have probed the ways in which colonial, racial and geopolitical forces produce and normalise environmental and social devastations (e.g., Bhatia et al., 2020; Gay-Antaki, 2020; Hernandez, 2022; Kwaymullina, 2017; Mies et al., 2014; Te Awekotuku, 1991). And then there is the bright mix of feminist technoscience studies (e.g., Barad, 2015; Haraway, 1988, 1997/2018, 2016; TallBear, 2013; Tallbear & Willey, 2019; Tsing, 2015), feminist new materialisms (e.g., Alaimo, 2010; Colebrook, 2013; Neimanis & Loewen Walker, 2014; Verlie, 2022) and feminist philosophies (e.g., Braidotti, 2011, 2022; Plumwood, 1993; Tuana, 2010, 2013) which in different ways disrupt hegemonic epistemic and ontological assumptions underpinning violences of many kinds, including those enacted against our non-human kin. It is from this scholarship that the current project takes shape.

I focus in this article on the interrelation of climate change with emotional and ethical dilemmas about having children, as these emerge from Global North contexts. I ask, how do BirthStrike voices articulate the psychosocial impacts of climate change, particularly in relation to having children? The Listening Guide informs my analysis of BirthStrike’s stories. The Listening Guide is based on Carol Gilligan’s (1982/2003) feminist psychological understandings of voice as an embodied expression of associative psychological logic. I “listen” for the voices in BirthStrike members’ written testimonials, which invites an interesting methodological variation on how to engage the Listening Guide beyond working with interview recordings and transcripts. As my analysis attempts to trace, the process of listening to non-spoken texts was nevertheless an affective encounter: the stories moved me with their pain, dignity, and determination to stay with the trouble of our times (Haraway, 2016), and I felt a call to respond. As well as writing “I poems” with selected BirthStrike stories in the analysis, I trace the movement of four contrapuntal voices: the voice of the child, or of before; the voice of affliction; the voice of longing and desire; and the voice of monitoring privilege.

My own location matters to how I hear and respond to the BirthStrike stories. I descend from colonising European ancestors who first arrived in the South Pacific in the 1800s. Born in Aotearoa New Zealand, I am a tangata Tiriti, or a person of the Treaty (Ngarewa-Packe, 2022). My citizenship and sense of belonging in Aotearoa rests upon the relational obligations between Māori (tangata whenua; Indigenous peoples of the land) and non-Māori, as this relationship is formally inscribed in Te Tiriti o Waitangi (the Treaty of Waitangi). To be tangata Tiriti is to stay with the trouble of the colonial legacies which continue to shape New Zealand’s contemporary landscapes and political relationships, including in climate change policy (Meynell, 2023). I am also a woman who does not have children. This is because desire to have (biological) children of my own hasn’t figured in my own life. Hence, although I am continually weathered (emotionally, politically, physically) by climate change (Neimanis & Loewen Walker, 2014), and I am trying to become response-able to the violences of our times,

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1 Te Tiriti o Waitangi recognises the right of Māori to tino rangatiratanga, or political self-determination, though this right continues to be denied by Crown governments to the present day (Mikaere, 2011).
enacted through colonisation and globalisation, I do not carry the emotional weight of ethically interrogating an embodied desire to have children.

**BirthStrike and the trouble of single stories**

“I’m gutted to not be able to start my family, and I resent that our self-destruction and planetary destruction all for greed and ‘economic growth’ has stopped me from doing this. I’m 24 and instead of dreaming about my career and family, I’m burdened with the disease we’ve created. My decision not to have a child I truly feel is a necessity not a choice.”

— BirthStrike member testimonial

**BirthStrike for the Climate** was a UK-based movement founded on members (including women, men and gender diverse peoples) making a commitment to not have children, as a political campaign to force action on climate change. The movement formed in 2018 and disbanded in September 2020 (McMullen & Dow, 2022). Initiated by Welsh musician Blythe Pepino, BirthStrike integrated environmental and feminist activisms, taking up reproduction as the means by which to “strike” against Western governments’ inadequate responses to climate change. BirthStrike was explicit in its political intentions: it distinguished itself from anti-natalist and population control narratives, took up with reproductive justice movements, and focussed its strike on the structural causes of climate change—the extraction and disposal of environments, human and more-than-human kinds through the long reach of colonisation, systemic racism, gendered violence and advanced capitalism. In this sense, and as suggested by the above quote, striking against birth was not necessarily considered to be a choice by BirthStrike members, but a necessity. Propelled by grief, fear and anguish, members expressed their sense of uncertainty and sometimes impossibility about bringing children into a world radically destabilised by climate change.

BirthStrike’s dissolution came about in response to sustained social justice concerns that the campaign potentially reified population control discourses. These concerns and the subsequent decision by BirthStrike leaders to end the campaign, in respect of these critiques, exemplifies the contentious emotional and discursive terrain through which BirthStrike came into being (Dow & McMullen, 2022; Gaitán Johannesson, 2022). Population control discourses have a complex history, being interwoven with the earliest Western environmental movements and continuing to exercise significant influence over Global North developmental and climate change understandings (Bhatia et al., 2020; Sasser, 2018). In its most rudimentary form, populationism speaks through guises of biological neutrality to tell a story about a planet overpopulated by human beings, and of reproductive interventions as the technofix through which unsustainable growth can be controlled (Murphy, 2017; Sasser, 2018). Deeply racist, classist, sexist and ableist, in my view population functions according to a Western imperialising gaze: it takes up particular categories of people as the focus of its reproductive interventions and assumes that some humans are more and less desirable than others.

Despite the efforts of BirthStrike leaders such as Jessica Gaitán Johannesson and Blythe Pepino to tell a different story—one which focussed on the emotional impacts of climate change and attempted to trouble Global North privileges—BirthStrike became an example of narrative unruliness, attracting pro-natalist and anti-natalist hearings and tellings alike (McMullen & Dow, 2022). Indeed, population discourses do appear within the BirthStrike testimonials from time to time, as some members story their anguish about not having children in times of climate crisis through the decontextualised language of resource limits, population thresholds and a futureless Earth. BirthStrike was, importantly, a collective: it was composed
of many voices, it was not clean or innocent in its formation, and it was subject to the wider forces of our advanced capitalist times, where a thick and urgent flow of demographic and economic discourses are shaping the ways we can turn ourselves into subjects (Meynell et al., 2023). Echoing these discursive flows, media restoryings of the BirthStrike campaign continually emphasised population concerns over the complex emotional impacts which BirthStrike sought to externalise and politically mobilise (McMullen & Dow, 2022). As Gaitán Johannesson writes, “Our group never suggested a tool for tackling the climate crisis, other than telling one of many necessary stories of what we are losing, what so many people have lost, and refusing to lose it silently” (2022, p. 151). And yet, “the population argument was there, waiting for us in every conversation” (2022, p. 142).

The current project does not focus explicitly on the social power relations forming population discourse in its silencing of the BirthStrike stories. The broader shaping of environmental movements in relation to population discourse are the focus of a growing literature (Bhatia et al., 2020; Meynell, 2023; Sasser, 2016, 2018). Analyses of how the BirthStrike campaign was shaped by population include McMullen and Dow’s (2022) reading of how BirthStrike was (mis)heard and responded to through mediated contexts, effectively silencing the existential alarm which BirthStrike sought to raise; and Meynell, Morgan and van Ommen’s (2023) discussion of the Global North figures which are animating the question of “Is it okay to have a child in conditions of environmental crisis?”, including within the BirthStrike movement. By focussing on the affective resonances of BirthStrike stories, I am attempting to resist the powerful sway of population discourses in the stories we hear and tell in climate change literature. Hence, I read BirthStrike’s formation and storytelling as part of a broader psychosocial response to living through conditions of environmental collapse, as these narratives express not only pain, but a desire to become other-wise—to imagine and bring into being “sustainable horizons of hope” (Braidotti, 2019, p. 41).

Theoretical locations: Feminist relational ethics

With all that we’re tasked with holding and becoming response-able to in our times, it seems we need especially “capacious bags for collecting, carrying, and telling the stuff of living” (Haraway, 2016, p. 39). Here’s where the figure of a carrier bag comes in, borne through material-semiotic knots which are not merely metaphorical but have world-building capacities (Haraway, 2008). Carrier bags aren’t just for carrying. They’re also useful for whacking at the edges of heteropatriarchal power relations. This includes knocking from his pedestal the figure of Western Man, whose domination of nature, whether through a spear or a laboratory, continues to justify the exploitation and silencing of those considered “other” (Haraway, 2019).

Feminist theorisations of carrier bags begin way back, in the layers of unnamed and interwoven women’s labours and knowings. But also, for scholarly purposes, they begin with Elizabeth Fisher’s (1980) argument that having something to put things in—a container, a bag, a bottle, a gourd, a baby sling—was technologically momentous for prehistoric humans, grounded in women’s kinship practices. Ursula Le Guin (1989) continues the thread through her carrier bag theory of fiction, where stories about gathering wild oats seeds and collecting water become tellable and hearable, offering us less violent ways of knowing and storying the world than conflict-centred narratives; and Donna Haraway (2016) insists on the figurative power of carrier bags, which help us to resist human exceptionalism and to situate our thinking and knowledge practices within an ethics of multispecies justice. As I think with the narrative writings of Indigenous women scholars in my home of Aotearoa New Zealand (Connor, 2007; Simmonds, 2011), and with the incredible artistic practice and legacies of Māori women’s raranaga/weaving (Evans et al., 2005), I am also reminded that carrier bags have limits. We
cannot carry every story, nor do we have the right to, especially when we have descended and benefitted from histories of colonisation and exploitation, as I have (Meynell, 2023).

I think of carrier bags as woven from the very stuff of feminist relational ethics—women’s stories and ways of knowing the world, their practices of care and resistance. The wider weave of feminist relational ethics privileges relationships and relationality with ontological and political generativity. We see these theoretical connections laid out in Donna Haraway’s (2016, 2019) writings on sympoiesis, which attend to the relentless historical and relational contingencies of our worlding projects; Michelle Fine’s (2017) feminist psychology writings on the movement of narratives, as stories call us to respond from transnational and intersubjective locations; Patricia Hill Collins’s (2002) articulations of a Black feminist epistemology, where emotions and relationality are embraced within knowledge production; and Rosi Braidotti’s (2008) movement toward affirmative ethics and process ontologies. Of course, the collective of feminist relational ethics far exceeds the citational threads made explicit here.

Figure 1

Carol Gilligan’s feminist ethics of care forms a vital part of the carrier bag weave. Like Fine (2017), Gilligan’s work developed from within the North American psychological discipline, and her ethics of care responds directly to the androcentric privileging of self-separation in psychological theories of moral development formulated from the mid-20th century. Based on her experiences of listening to girls and women share their sense-making processes, Gilligan came to hear a different voice, one which spoke through an associative rather than rational logic and valued relational connections over abstract claims to “justice”
And yet why was this different voice and moral logic which Gilligan heard so often silenced, not only by society at large, but by girls and women themselves? Where had the voice retreated to?

Gilligan theorises voice as “natural and also cultural … composed of breath and sound, words, rhythm and language” (1982/2003, p. xvi). In this way, voice is not reducible to a mind/body binary, but is dynamic, physiological and psychological. Our voices contradict themselves and contain multitudes – including emotional tones and registers, resonances and pitches, inconsistencies and disruptions, suppressions and dissociations. For Gilligan, processes of “voicing” bring the inner psychic world of the speaker outward, externalising the speaker’s psychological processes and emotional terrains. By following the voices of women and girls, Gilligan was able to hear how patriarchy is a separating psychological force: it sows its seeds of binary hierarchical relations of domination and subordination within the fabric of our subjectivities, though it enforces this split in psyches at different developmental stages across genders. Patriarchy is hardly inevitable or universal in its psychological tyranny, however. Though much silenced and straining to be heard, a voice of care and relationality nevertheless remains alive and resistant within the psyche, moving us toward the potential for hearing and responding differently. As we become response-able to the embodied and embedded pain and joy expressed through voicing practices, we’re moving towards the affirmation of difference, rather than its fear, and the creation of trust, rather than its destruction (Gilligan, 2014).

I argue that the inner psychological workings of patriarchy documented in Gilligan’s work scaffolds to our psychic relationships to environmental crises, too. The moral codes of patriarchy continue to dominate environmental policies and narratives within Global North contexts, re-figuring a binary distinction between nature/culture, masculine/feminine, and rational/emotional (Meynell, 2023; Tuana, 2013). Such figurations reify environmental responsibility as a decontextualised and individualised concern which can be mitigated and responded to through rational thought and action (Meynell et al., 2023). We see this logic at work in the device of the “carbon footprint,” which seeks to inscribe environmental responsibilities through the mechanisms of individual decision-making and consumption, while obscuring the globalised hierarchies of domination through which unsustainable consumer economies and subjectivities are enacted (Crist, 2020; Kaufman, 2020).

An ethics of care, rather than an ethics of self-separation, is “grounded less in moral precepts than in psychological wisdom, underscoring the costs of not paying attention, not listening, being absent rather than present, not responding with integrity and respect” (Gilligan, 2014, p. 13). Doucet and Mauthner (2008) build on these understandings to trace the complexities of “how we come to know narrated subjects in research practice” (2008, p. 404). An intrinsically relational subject, the narrated subject is reflexively constituted through narration and voicing practices—both in the stories subjects tell and the interpretation of these stories by researchers. It may not be possible to “know” subjects beneath or beyond their narrated subjectivities, but by listening with care and curiosity, we can attend to the “multilayered nature of the expression of human experience and the interplay between self and relationship, psyche and culture” (Gilligan, 1982/2003, p. 163).

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2 In making reference to the psyche and psychic worlds, Gilligan (2004) is drawing on her feminist readings of psychoanalytical texts, including the Greek myth of Psyche and Eros, to resist Oedipal narratives of self-becoming through separation. Rather, as Tolman and Head discuss, “psyche” within the Listening Guide is suggestive of “embodied and embedded psychological processes—associative rather than rational logic” (Tolman & Head, 2021, p. 153).
Methodology: Writing I-poems with BirthStrike narratives

Continuing the fledgling tradition of generative Listening Guide applications (e.g., Haynes, 2020; Kielgelmann, 2021; Koelsch, 2016), my analysis of BirthStrike’s stories invited a departure from set methodological applications. This departure was relationally informed, driven by the creative challenge of trying to “hear” the voices embedded within written rather than spoken texts. My analytical process is iterative, not prescriptive, and tries to give access to the affective flow I felt in response to the stories. The process is described and embedded within the analysis itself. For methodological transparency and to aid readers who are unfamiliar with the Listening Guide methodology, in the following sections I provide (i) a brief discussion of the Listening Guide’s stages of hearing, undertaken in this article; and (ii) my ethical and methodological specificities for collecting and selecting from the BirthStrike narratives.

The Listening Guide

The first stage of analysis, listening for the plot, involves reading broadly across the narrative(s) collected for analysis (Gilligan & Eddy, 2017). The researcher maps the features of the emotional terrain which the stories bring into being, guided through such questions as:

“Who is present, is anyone missing, what are the major and minor themes, are there emotional hotspots, salient images or metaphors, what stories are told, are there gaps or ruptures in the narrative, and also what is the researcher’s response to being on this landscape with this person?” (Gilligan & Eddy, 2017, p. 78)

As is the case throughout the Listening Guide research process, listening for the plot involves attending both to what is articulated and what is not, or cannot, be said. However, it’s important to note that this first stage of listening does not involve forming analytical opinions or suppositions. Rather, there is a commitment to “resisting the profound pull to categorize, to compress too early” (Tolman & Head, 2021, p. 154). In other words, researchers must be willing to get in the water of the story and allow themselves to be swept along with the narrative and psychological currents, noting their own responses and reactions as they go.

The second stage of analysis, listening for the “I,” attends to how the narrated subject (Doucet & Mauthner, 2008) begins to form with and through the selected text. “I statements” (consisting of first-person singular subject and verb statements, such as “I felt… I cannot… I want…” are highlighted and listed sequentially in the order they appear in the text, to trace the psychological movement of the narrated-subject-in-becoming. In this way, the researcher crafts a poem from the narrator’s own words. In crafting I poems it may be tempting to retain the contextual detail which follows each I statement, especially where this gives the appearance of telling a thicker “research story” (Koelsch, 2015). However, by rendering the I statements down to the movements between subject and verb, the psychological process expressed by the narrator can be heard, felt, seen. The resulting I poems are starkly beautiful. They evoke and dignify the narrated self, “lay[ing] bare the associative logic of a particular psyche as it crosses a specific terrain” (Gilligan & Eddy, 2017, p. 79).

The third stage of the analysis, listening for contrapuntal voices, involves listening beyond the plot and the voice of self, to hear the multiplicity of voices expressed within the text. This stage of listening demonstrates the Listening Guide’s overarching assumption that subjectivity is not singular or rationalisable, but is formed and narrated through multiplicities of voices and psychic processes, as these voices and processes co-become in rich relationship to each other and to the conditions of everyday life. Indeed, the nuances and complexities
enabled at this point of the research can be overwhelming, producing a “cacophony of orchestral sound” (Gilligan & Eddy, 2017, p. 79). For this reason, it’s important to be guided by the research question in hearing and perceiving the movement of contrapuntal voices. How do the voices sound, physically? Where are the tensions, disruptions, harmonies and silences? How do these relational interactions between voices express embodied psychic movements and associations? And how does the interplay of these voices move the researcher, as the researcher engages in “relational attunement” with these voices (Tolman & Head, 2021, p. 156)?

**Collecting and selecting BirthStrike narratives**

I collected a total of 80 BirthStrike testimonials between late-2019 and mid-2020 from the Birthstrike webpage (www.birthstrikeforfuture.com) and Instagram site. The testimonials are what I consider to be “activist texts”: they were published with the intention of awakening and activating as many people as possible to the political aspects of climate change. None of the testimonials came from “private” communication channels, such as member-only forums or group chats. Hence, I consider the stories to have existed in the public domain at the time of collection, not requiring the consent of individual authors to be collected and analysed for academic research.

The testimonials take the form of short blog posts, with the majority being approximately 200 words long, consisting of one or two paragraphs. This said, the texts vary extensively in length, from single sentences to short essays. Authorship of the testimonials is ambiguous. For the most part, BirthStrike members signed off their testimonials with a name and age, though it is not relevant or appropriate to this study to attempt to establish whether these “names” correspond with actual identities or are pseudonyms. In an effort to respect the privacy of BirthStrike members who may have contributed to these testimonials, and to intentionally relocate the stories as co-created rather than individually-authored texts, I removed names and any identifying details from the testimonials before including them in the voice analysis.

Ethical decisions about the collection, analysis and presentation of BirthStrike narratives were guided by feminist relational ethics and peer reviewed by senior academics. My approach sought to resist the pervasive individualisation and privatisation of knowledge “commons” enacted by colonisation and capitalism since modernity. Such extractive and individualising mechanisms continue to the present day, intensified through neoliberalism and advanced capitalism, to reduce ways of knowing and stories—including the stories we tell stories with (Haraway, 2019)—to single and patentable forms of narrative capital (Haraway, 1997/2018).

Underpinning and naturalising such economic, legal and cultural formations is the figure of the rational, unitary subject, hegemonically envisioned and enacted as “masculine/white/heterosexual/speaking a standard language/property-owning/urbanized” (Braidotti, 2011, p. 212). So often taking on universalising proportions through repetitions of the god trick (Haraway, 1988), this figure continues to underpin our expectations of “who” constitutes the subject of research ethics, as well as what is at stake in the protection of this subject’s individual rights and autonomy. In this project, I wanted to take a different approach, as I thought with Connor et al. (2015) about the stubborn complexities of doing research with online texts, which refuse to conform to the standard binary of public/private and demand that we shift our attention “from what individuals are saying to how this text is functioning for this community” (p. 236; italics in original).

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3 These online pages are no longer active. The testimonials themselves were presumably deleted with the dissolution of the BirthStrike campaign and its social media pages in late 2020 and can no longer be accessed.
Locating and listening to BirthStrike narratives as co-created texts is not to collapse or flatten the psychological specificity expressed within the narratives to a single or coherent note, as though co-creation must constitute sameness. Rather, I understand co-created stories to be carrier bags for many situated knowledges, many voices, many psyches, which with all their vital differences are propelled toward movement, mobilised by their pain(s) to protest their historical conditions. Rosi Braidotti’s feminist philosophical shift toward the affirmation of difference enables such a figuration, whereby “to map out points of convergence is not reductive, but rather productive; it is a methodological example of an encounter with otherness as a generative or affirmative force” (Braidotti, 2008, p. 16). Thus, while an important aspect of the Listening Guide is to locate and listen for the formation of the first-person subject within the text, I understand such an “I” to be always and already in relation, not reducible to the binary of individual/collective which haunts psychological knowledge production. Through such a feminist relational understanding, I am still attending to and listening for the movement of “a particular psyche as it crosses a specific terrain” (Gilligan & Eddy, 2017, p. 79), even as I locate BirthStrike testimonials as co-created texts, containing the movements of many psyches through relational formations.

I began by reading broadly across the entire set of texts, 80 in number, mapping the emotional terrains and plots of the stories they contained (stage 1). Recognising the limits of my carrier bag and the impossibility of performing an in-depth listening analysis with all of the stories, I began to arrange the testimonials into smaller groups, based on their relevance to the research question and their narrative qualities. These qualities included: narrative point of view; the predominance of I-statements; the thickness of emotional language; and the plots of the stories they brought into being. This process enabled me to gather a more carriable set of 20 stories with which to conduct stages 2 and 3 of the Listening Guide. These stories were written in first-person, and thickly woven with I statements; perhaps because of this, they also tended to be emotive in language and told compelling personal stories, rather than focussing on the reiteration of climate change “facts.” Although the remaining 60 stories did not continue on through to the later stages of the analysis, they form and bring into being the overall narrative terrain of the BirthStrike testimonials, constituting the relational text within which I listen for the movement of specific psyches and psychological processes.

**Analysis**

*Mapping the emotional and narrative terrain*

The first stage of listening was emotionally difficult for me. I had obviously read snippets of the BirthStrike testimonials in forming a research proposal and collecting the online stories for analysis. However, I remember distinctly the first time I sat down at my desk with the intention of reading across the whole collection of stories—to listen for the plot. It was a Saturday morning in mid-winter, a quiet time I had set aside to “hang out” with the stories. Without any attempt to order or categorise the stories, I spent the next two hours reading across the testimonials, taking brief notes and making the first sketches of the emotional terrains that I felt the stories brought into view. I recall the way my body began to respond to these stories, the more I read—the hollow feeling which grew in my chest; the hunch which spread over my shoulders and down my spine, as though I was wearing a backpack which someone kept filling up with stones. Somewhere around the halfway mark of reading through the collection, I needed to stop and cry. The emotional weight of the stories rushed over me and poured out in

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4 Here, I am drawing on Buckingham’s (2022) feminist community psychological research, where spending time and “hanging out” with the communities who were involved with the research project enabled meaningful conversations, insights, and stories to be shared and heard.
leaky tears all over my workspace. Here at my desk, tired and soggy, the idea of listening from an “intersubjective” location did not seem terribly theoretical to me, but humbling and immediate. The stories had moved me with their pain and dignity, and I felt a call to respond.

Pain was a pervasive thread woven through the stories, though it was expressed through different forms. Some stories manifested their pain in what I heard as an agonised cry, a loud and heavy sob, in articulating the psychological effects of climate change, including how climactic conditions have stultified possibilities for bringing children into the world. Other stories were much more reliant on informational discourses in establishing the emotional impacts of climate change; they begin by “laying out the facts” of current and projected future environmental conditions, before locating themselves and their emotional responses within this larger picture of world events (e.g., Figure 2).

**Figure 2**
*A BirthStrike testimonial, from Stage 1 of the Listening Guide analysis.*

“The inevitable truth is humans have impacted on the natural ecosystem to such a degree that it’s unlikely we will stop the great mass extinction which has already started & will wipe out the human species. Climate breakdown has begun & it is impacting on communities across the world. Climate breakdown impacted on Syria starting the catastrophe & human displacement & war. I could not look my child in the eye with the knowledge & experience I have knowing their life would be not joyful & free of the impacts of climate breakdown.”

As suggested by Figure 2, dystopian themes significantly shaped the landscape of the collective BirthStrike narratives. Woven alongside harrowing accounts of personal grief and loss, these dystopian futurisms play heavily in crafting an envisioned world where suffering, death, cruelty, scarcity of resources, and never-ending conflict and war would render childhood—and the having of children—an ethical and material impossibility. Revisiting these stories many times over months and years, I could not help but hear the tropic quality of some of these dystopian narratives, which (alongside their utopian cousins) continue to plot their stories through a broader narrative binary of apocalypse vs. salvation, total annihilation vs. final redemption (Haraway, 2016).

Though few in number, some stories drew on population discourses to figure the decision to not have a child as the ultimate sacrifice, one made for the greater good of planet Earth, a globalised location discursively cast as already groaning under the weight of human numbers. Coming across population discourses within the BirthStrike narratives felt particularly jarring, appearing as violent rents in the otherwise politically astute narrative fabric of the collected texts.

**Figure 3**
*Political critiques in BirthStrike narratives*

“It is not only climate breakdown for me, it is also the whole catastrophe of the capitalist market which at every turn creates less opportunities for a healthy balanced family life”
Figure 4
Disgust at politicians and political systems in BirthStrike narratives

“I fear for the future of my children, I imagine them dying with me when climate change decimates our food supply. I despair at the ignorance and willful [sic] greed and callous campaigns of the fossil fuel industries to maintain business as usual when they could have been part of the solution, and I’m disgusted at our politicians, who care more about pandering to powerful lobbies than protecting our futures.”

If dystopian themes shaped the landscape of the collected texts, then political critiques constituted the clay, the river shoal, the volcanic rock of the stories. Political critiques were often blunt, locating capitalism and extractive economies as responsible not only for climate change and environmental destructions of many kinds, but for rendering “family life” untenable (e.g., Figure 3). A need for radical political intervention was articulated in the majority of stories, with some stories utilising the language of “war” and “system change” to emphasise the desperation of our historical and environmental conditions. Western governments were located as complicit in the destruction of a liveable planet; corrupted by their entanglements with “big business” and oil and gas industries, Western governments were seen to be obstructing rather than supporting mitigation efforts (e.g., Figure 4). Temporal pressures amplified the emotional intensities expressed throughout the stories. Such pressures were both planetary and personal. They were planetary in that timescales for climactic tipping points were frequently rhetorically deployed, to convey the urgency with which political action on climate change was/is needed. And they were personal in that climate change was often storied through a Bildungsroman or coming of age narrative structure, involving loss, a journey, a conflict, and a gradual process of coming to maturity (Golban, 2018).

Figure 5
A single BirthStrike entry, where activism is described as a form of mothering

“I don’t have time and I am scared for all children alive today. As activists in XR we are mothering the future and I don’t have capacity for a family of my own.”

For all that the stories were drenched in pain and despair, they were also full of determination, of a connection to community and of a willingness to trouble Global North privileges. Many stories spoke to the significance of finding a community in which they could express their fears, anxieties, depressions and decisions about having (and not having) children in times of climate crisis. The period preceding the finding and forming of community was often described as a period of darkness, of being forcibly silenced by terror and isolation. To find community was to be unearthed—to be able to share, connect and breathe. And in some

5 Modern iterations of bildungsroman narrative structures came to prominence in 18th century German and 19th English novels, though as Golban (2018) suggests, the form has a long history, developing through European classical and medieval storytelling. Bakhtin described bildungsroman as “an image of man growing in national-historical time” (as cited in Boes, 2012, p. 6). And yet Boes argues that while bildungsroman novels developed partly in response to modern European nationalism, many such novels failed to give “definitive form to the collective experience that they articulate. There is always some kind of remainder, some identity claim that resists nationalism’s aim for closure in what … we can identify as the normative regime of the nation-state” (2012, p. 3).
stories, community and climate activism was described as a form of mothering, with concomitant demands on time and energy (Figure 5).

Who is missing from the collection? There are very few stories narrated “from the margins” within both Global North and Global South locations. At the same time, “the Global South” haunts the collected texts, figured through post-Cold War socioeconomic and political hierarchies, to cast less economically developed countries as the geographical location where the earliest and worst effects of climate change will be seen and felt. As in the reiterations of temporal climate tipping points, these references to the Global South carry the echoes of Western developmental and climate discursive productions. And yet, they’re also deeply personal, overshadowed by a sense of guilt, anguish, and a desire to address the outsized responsibility of Western nations—and the hyper resource-consuming citizens of those nations—for the damage done to Earth’s ecosystems.

**Listening for the movement of the psyche**

As I moved into the second and third stages of listening, I came to embody the stories in other ways. As I listened for the “I” and for contrapuntal voices across the smaller collection of 20 BirthStrike texts, I also needed to physically hear the way the stories were voiced—the tones they took on, the places where they paused, the moments where the voices flooded with emotion and waivered on the edge of saying something… almost unsayable? These texts were, of course, written texts, and I had no recourse to embodied and embedded memories of research interviews, let alone voice recordings. So, I began to read the stories aloud to myself, noting the places where my own voice broke and sang, dropped and rose in pitch, carried strength and vulnerability. I likened this voicing process to the reading aloud of poetry, which in a similar spirit to the carrier bag, helps us to re-member the thick relationality of storytelling and poetic performance (Haraway, 2019), which has not always been reducible to the figure of a self-producing, self-narrating individual human subject (Haraway, 1997/2018).

I made this methodological shift within the space and flexibility enabled by arts-based and poetic methodologies, including the Listening Guide, which continue to challenge hegemonic distinctions between the categories of “researcher” and “research subject” within social science research (e.g., Seppälä et al., 2021). For example, I was guided by Tangerås’s (2022) psychological research on how the reading aloud of poetry in a dementia care home enabled a spontaneous and creative intersubjective movement—the poem affects a person, and a person is moved by witnessing and sharing this process of affectivity with others. With the BirthStrike narratives, I don't go so far so to mistake my own reading voice for “the voice of the text.” I am, however, fascinated by how the narratives came to inhabit me, lodging in the vibrations of my chest, throat, and mouth as I read them aloud, over and over again; and how I came to inhabit the narratives, in turn, as my voice and the many layers of lived experience which tremble through my voice told stories with BirthStrike’s stories.

**Figure 6**
*Notes taken during my listening analysis*

- How do I distinguish myself from these stories?
- They are too heavy with pain, I am oversaturated and cannot hold the location of “researcher.”
- I cry—I cry and cry and cry. I write a poem in response. I need to take frequent breaks, to allow myself to digest the emotional content of the narratives.
The Listening Guide asks that researchers attend to and distinguish between their own responses and the story and voice of the research participant. The intention here is to privilege the voice of the research participant over the theoretical expectations of the researcher, and to enable the researcher to engage in a profoundly relational listening process. These are good intentions, and I did my best to adhere to them. And yet when I allowed the stories to pierce me at a deep emotional level, I found the “distinction” between researcher and text difficult to maintain. As I’ve already gestured to, and as my research notes from this stage of the listening analysis attest, the transformative power of listening also had the peculiar and somewhat terrifying effect of making me feel exposed, as though the protective casing which demarcates my own subjectivity – my psychological “skin,” so to speak – had been cracked open, requiring emotional first-aid to stitch it back up again (Figure 6).

In considering how demarcations across subjects become hardened into categories, I think with Donna Haraway about how “inside and outside are lies. The edge is all there is” (Haraway, 1997/2018, p. 154). Though Haraway in this quotation is referring specifically to inside and outside of technoscientific narratives, nevertheless, the spirit of “the edge” carries me to thinking about the edge of encounters between research actors of all kinds—including fleshy researchers and the texts they animate and become animated by.

**Figure 7**

*BirthStrike testimonial, with “I” statements in alternate text and bolded*

| “After becoming a vegan nearly 2 years ago, I have gradually come into awareness of our environmental situation. During the summer something that feels like an awakening occurred for me, I suddenly saw things in a new light, I became uncomfortably aware of my cultural conditioning and I began questioning everything, which has led to a shift in my world view. I am gradually finding the language to talk about these new concepts and reaching out to others that are experiencing the world in similar ways. I experience intense grief and heartbreak and rage at the destruction of our living planet and I have moments of panic and fear at what the future holds. I have come to the conclusion that I cannot bring a child into this world with such an uncertain and bleak looking future.” |

Returning to the Listening Guide, the movement toward listening for the “I” in stage two became a way for me to try and balance upon the edge of the research encounter with the BirthStrike narratives, as this balancing act demanded that I neither harden against or sentimentally succumb to notions of being inside or outside of the stories.

Working with a smaller collection of twenty stories, I tracked “all instances, phrases, sentences, that constitute the narrator’s presence in her own story” (Tolman & Head, 2021, p. 157). An example of this process has been provided in Figure 6, where I statements have been marked in an alternate font. From these statements, I then composed the first iteration of an I poem:

| I have gradually come into awareness |
| I suddenly saw things in a new light |
| I became uncomfortably aware |

| I began questioning everything |
| I am gradually finding the language |
I experience intense grief and heartbreak and rage
I have moments of panic and fear at what the future holds
I have come to the conclusion
I cannot bring a child into this world

I am attached to this first iteration of an I poem. I think it works both as a poem, and as an insight into some of the emotional tensions which generated the BirthStrike campaign. However, the contextual detail, while making the poem’s plot self-evident, distracts from the psychological process of the narrated subject. So, I reluctantly remove even more detail from each I statement. I also give this second iteration of the poem a name – “Poem of Becoming” – based on the words of significance it contains.

**Poem of Becoming**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I have gradually come</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I suddenly saw</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I became</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I began</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am gradually finding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have moments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have come</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I cannot</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When seen and heard in this poetic shape, the psychological formation and movement of the narrated subject becomes more distinct. I hear and feel in this poem the force and energy of change, of the “I” being propelled toward becoming a different kind of subject. The psyche, in its associative logic, is on the move. In places, this change feels almost violent – “I suddenly saw / I became.” And yet change occurs through temporal and cartographic gradations, too, marked through a pattern of beginnings, gradual findings, and the having of moments and experiences, with these gradations bringing some gentleness to the psyche’s journey. The final two lines of the poem strike me in their certitude. They carry a weight of knowing, following as they do a series of assertions: “I have come / I cannot.” These lines, particularly the final negation of “I cannot,” articulates a psyche which is not above or outside of the particular terrain it is crossing. It is a psyche which has come to a threshold—an edge, perhaps, or a point of finitude, which cannot be transgressed.

**Poem of the Child**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>When I was a child</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I would live</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I went through</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I knew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’ve come to terms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can’t</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Poem of Hope**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I could bestow</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I hope</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I do all I can</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I reject</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have rejected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poem of Enough</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was never</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am now</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I no longer see</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I view</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have enough</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Above, I have presented four more I poems composed from the BirthStrike collection. Each of these poems is formed from its own text or testimonial, though they speak together of different affective movements. I have also given these poems names.

As with Poem of Becoming, two of these poems—Poem of the Child and Poem of Hope—flow through a series of assertions, before coming to rest at a final negation—“I can’t” and “I reject.” In Poem of the Child and Poem of Knowing, the narrated subject takes up the location of a witness—“I went through, I knew” and “I have known, I have watched”—in claiming and asserting the I’s knowledge. To know is to be heard; it is to have the psyche’s process of change to be witnessed and legitimated, in turn—including from and by the self. In Poem of the Child, the juxtaposition of the lines “When I was a child / I would live” hits me especially hard, knotting up a muscle somewhere in my abdomen, making it slightly harder to breathe. Perhaps it is the lingering joys and pains of my own childhood which hear and respond to this call, but the words—“When I was a child / I would live”—evoke in me both the lively memory and the tropic figure of a child, filled with sheer determination and desire to live. Holding this determination and desire in my carrier bag with the thicker terrain of BirthStrike stories, and the wider patterning of our historical times, where the chances for life are continually under threat, and I am teetering a little on that edge again, awash in feelings, not sure where I end and “they” begin.

Poem of Enough establishes a different pattern, beginning with a negation—“I was never”—and moves forward, through a series of assertions to another kind of ending: “I think—I have enough.” The poem’s midway transition from “I no longer see” to “I view” is another interesting associative logic, not only in how the “I” moves backwards and forwards, in quick succession from not seeing to viewing, but also in how visual metaphors enable this psychic transformation to be explicated. I am reminded of Poem of Becoming’s “I suddenly saw,” and I am taken by the image of a psyche—a soul, dare I say—being flooded with light. Biblical allusions aside, there is a sense in many of these poems of the psyche moving with a force greater than just “the self.” There is a sense of being swept along, of being rendered blind, of having sight restored, and of coming to a place of rest—of resolution and certainty, at least for the time being.

**Listening for the interplay of voices**

As with the second stage of listening, my listening for and mapping of the contrapuntal voices within the collective BirthStrike texts was an unambiguously physical process—I read the testimonials aloud, over and over again, as I attempted to tap into the emotional tones, sounds and musicality which were woven through the narratives. I was listening in relation to
my research question, asking *how do BirthStrike voices articulate the psychosocial impacts of climate change, particularly in relation to having children?* With this question as my metronome, I came to hear an interweaving of at least four voices across the texts, which articulate the psychic impacts of climate change in different emotive modes and from different embodied and tropic locations. I have distinguished these voices through the following names and font choices:

i) the voice of the child, or before  
ii) the voice of affliction  
iii) the voice of desire and longing  
iv) the voice of monitoring privilege

Though you see no bright colours here, colours were important to my process of tracking the voices across the texts and listening for their interplay. For example, the voice of the child, or before, was originally marked through aquamarine blue highlights. The voice of desire and longing was also marked in highlights—fuchsia. The colours were associated with the emotions the voices evoke. For publication purposes, I have removed these colours, though try to hear, if you can, the colour and the sound of the voices. I have provided an example of my hearing and marking of the voices across two BirthStrike testimonials (Figures 8, 9 and 10), though the analysis of contrapuntal voices occurred across the whole smaller collection of 20 stories.

The first of these voices, the voice of the child, or before, has an ethereal quality to it. It speaks from a distance, as though it is being carried over the clouds or the waves. The dreamlike quality of the voice of the child is in part produced through its soft and high pitch; it speaks sometimes in barely more than a whisper, other times in a gentle rattling full of sadness and loss. The voice of the child is also a voice of witness: of coming to see, to know, and of being left on the other side of knowing. (Another edge). The voice of the child can’t be easily reached, hence why it visits in dreams. It speaks to another place and another time, from before the narrated self came into its current shape—before the “I” was forced to confront the present moment of environmental catastrophe. “Big business” has betrayed the voice of the child, stolen its future, and left it hiding in the undertones of the “I.” Often, the voice of the child opens space for two more voices to flow through: the voice of desire and longing, which brings an emotional weight and urgency to the voice of the child’s plea to not be forgotten; and the voice of monitoring privilege, which shifts the register toward a more ambivalent and uncertain location, where the “I” cannot be clearly distinguished from the child’s tormentor — capitalist society and its consuming citizens.

**Figure 8**
A BirthStrike testimonial with contrapuntal voices marked. Poem of the Child was formed from this text.

When I was a child, the mere mention of climate change would cause me to have a panic attack. The idea that the world could go through such a catastrophe, or that I would live to see it happen, was too much for me to handle. It fostered mental illnesses such as anxiety and depression. I went through periods of denial because that’s the only way I knew how to deal with it.

Now I’ve come to terms with the reality that climate change is real, and knowing how that anxiety robbed me of my childhood and caused me so
much suffering, I can’t bring an innocent child into the world knowing that they will have it even worse than I did, and that they will not even begin to have a full life.

Unlike the voice of the child, the voice of affliction is right here, lodged in the gut of the “I.” The voice of affliction is acoustically heavy, expressed with a deep bass. Pain rises up with the voice of affliction, disrupting the lighter tones of the narrative—like an introjection of hard truth into the regular flow of the conversation. The voice of affliction often speaks through “I” statements, and it is blunt, erupting through bursts and impulses. It crackles somewhat with emotion, leaving the “I” breathless. This voice is not only stricken with pain; it is afflicted with excruciating and bewildering suffering of a kind that renders creative movement almost impossible. “I cannot imagine” the voice of affliction tells us; “I can only see things getting worse!” (Figure 9). The voice of affliction’s heaviness is part of its certainty: it has been to the edge of the edge of its own knowing, and it cannot see beyond “an uncertain and bleak looking future” (Figure 10).

Figure 9
A BirthStrike testimonial with contrapuntal voices marked.

“I already feel so stressed out for the coming generations about how they will struggle to cope in a changing climate if nothing is done. I cannot imagine bringing a life (especially one that I would care so deeply about) in the knowledge that they will struggle and worry more than I currently do, as if nothing changes I can only see things getting worse! People want the best for their children, but I don’t think society at the moment are in a place to be able to do that, due to the damage we are inflicting upon the planet!”

As opposed to the heaviness of the voice of affliction, the voice of longing and desire has a rushing quality to it and a sense of elasticity. It stretches and yearns in its emotional capacities; it also ranges across a variety of vocal tones and pitches, expressing itself now with a tremble of hope, now with a brave note of self-denial. Of all the voices I hear in the collected BirthStrike narratives, the voice of longing and desire seems to express the most movement, and the most potential for surprise. This voice reminds us that be full of desire and longing is also to live shoulder to shoulder with pain and uncertainty—for desire does not guarantee its fulfilment, nor can fulfilment protect against loss. And yet in the face of not knowing, the voice of desire continues to move outward toward relational connections, the voice sometimes breaking in its yearning to “bring a life” (Figure 9), to imagine a “full life” (Figure 10). Compellingly, the voice of desire is often expressed through negation. The utterances of “I can’t…” “I cannot…” and “I reject…” move through the voice of desire, expressing the “intense grief and heartbreak and rage” (Figure 9) which renders the desire to “bring an innocent child into the world” (Figure 8) an ethical and emotional impossibility. In this movement toward expressing desire through negation, I hear the voice of longing and desire attempting to grapple with the voice of the child and the voice of affliction. How can “it” desire in ways which do not silence and deny the suffering of others? How can it bring a life in other ways than having a child? Perhaps in this way, the voice of desire enables pain to be processed in a movement toward relational mobilisations and resistances, to desire other-wise in the thick political and environmental conditions producing “the destruction of our living planet” (Figure 10).
"After becoming a vegan nearly 2 years ago, I have gradually come into awareness of our environmental situation. During the summer something that feels like an awakening occurred for me, I suddenly saw things in a new light, I became uncomfortably aware of my cultural conditioning and I began questioning everything, which has led to a shift in my world view. I am gradually finding the language to talk about these new concepts and reaching out to others that are experiencing the world in similar ways. I experience intense grief and heartbreak and rage at the destruction of our living planet and I have moments of panic and fear at what the future holds. I have come to the conclusion that I cannot bring a child into this world with such an uncertain and bleak looking future."

The fourth voice, the voice of monitoring privilege, is the most ambivalent and uncertain of the contrapuntal voices. It has a tentative quality, slipping from the emotional variations of its sibling voices to hover at times in a flat and hollow tone of self-abnegation. Perhaps the lack of emotionality in the voice of monitoring privilege can be explained by the way it circles back regularly to climate change language and discursive formations in staking its claims. It is as though the logic underpinning the voice of monitoring privilege comes from outside, and the voice hasn’t come to trust in its own knowledge and ways of knowing, yet. It is trying hard to get to know itself, though—to become response-able to its own complicity in inhabiting Global North locations where environmental damages are enacted and naturalised in the name of economic progress. References to awakening, becoming aware, shifting from denial to knowing proliferate within the voice of monitoring’s evocations. As the voice of monitoring privilege tells us, punctuated by the sharp pain of the voice of affliction: “I went through periods of denial because that’s the only way I knew how to deal with it.” Echoing the violence of change heard in Poem of Becoming’s psychological movement, the voice of monitoring privilege tells us how to be awoken from denial is a painful process, requiring reflexive openness to our relational and situational constitutions as subjects: “I became uncomfortably aware of my cultural conditioning and I began questioning everything.” That the voice of the child shadows this particular articulation speaks to how becoming an “I” who is capable of monitoring and resisting its own privileges is also to lose some of the tropic power of innocence—to mourn again the betrayal of the child.

I hear vulnerability in the voice of monitoring privilege, a sense of being open to discursive manipulation in the voice’s tentative efforts to “find the language” it needs to map this particular emotional terrain (Figure 10); to “come to terms with the reality that climate change is real” (Figure 8). I can hear how population discourses would slip in here, seducing the “I” with what seems like a tangible way to reduce the scale of its own complicity, and hence to diminish some of the relational tensions and response-abilities bound up with staying with the trouble of our historical times (Haraway, 2016). Such seductions rest upon the wider discursive naturalisations of the myth of clean, quantifying knowledge-making systems, through which we can calculate, adjust and redistribute climate change consequences and responsibilities across gendered, racial and geopolitical categories. And yet, the voice of monitoring privilege also tells another story, especially as it moves with the voice of desire to imagine other-wise. In this other story, the voice of monitoring privilege speaks from a structural and political location in warning of what will befall us “if nothing is done,” “if nothing changes” (Figure 9), and it processes and begins to mobilise its pain through a desire-filled “reaching out to others” (Figure 10). In such movements, I hear the discursive flow of the “plot” beginning to recede from the voice of monitoring privilege, opening space for the
other contrapuntal voices to carry and process their pain as a movement toward relational becoming, to “bring a life.”

**Holding the threads**

“We are all responsible to and for shaping conditions for multispecies flourishing in the face of terrible histories, and sometimes joyful histories too, but we are not all response-able in the same ways. The differences matter—in ecologies, economies, species, lives.” (Haraway, 2016, p. 29)

I began this article with a meditation of sorts. How can we learn to hear, gently hold, and care for the thick affective flows produced and felt in response to our historical conditions? And how might we respond to these affective movements from our locations as psychological researchers, where the stories and narrated subjects we encounter carry us to the strange and unsettling edges of “self” and “other?” Hovering at the point of saying goodbye, I hold these thoughts and BirthStrike’s stories like threads, searching for some strong and tidy knot to end with. And yet the threads tumble from my carrier bag, reminding me that there’s no such thing as a satisfying ending—not if we’re staying with the trouble of the terrible, and sometimes joyful, histories and futures which unfold before and after us (Haraway, 2016).

The hurtling violences of our times, moving with all the momentum of hundreds of years of known and denied cruelties, enslavings, and extractions, including the abuse and pollution of the non-human ecosystems from which human biology spawned, is breath-taking. I clutch at the threads, to not be swept away by it all. How can we make our carrier bags capacious, flexible and strong enough to catch and become response-able to these violences? To slow them down, disrupt their naturalisations, and in the process, learn to become human subjects other-wise? Donna Haraway (2016), as is often the case, reminds me that I don’t hold, clutch at, these threads alone. We can pass the threads, share the patterns, take a breath—a dog’s paw and an arachnid’s claw holding the pattern (Haraway, 2008). Giving and receiving. We’re stitching and holding these bags together, though not all from the same locations and not with the same capacities to respond. This is part of the delicate and determined work of learning to live and die well on a damaged Earth.

This research project has both strengthened my suspicions of categorical distinctions between subjects, while renewing my appreciation for differences in locations and response-abilities (Haraway, 1988). We don’t all speak in the same voice (Gilligan, 1982/2003), and we don’t all become response-able in the same ways (Haraway, 2008). The differences matter, indeed. It matters that in my relational engagement with BirthStrike stories, I have held the location of a knowledge producer, with its particular response-abilities of listening from a place of curiosity, rather than judgement (Gilligan & Eddy, 2021), and of carrying and amplifying the stories I hear into the academic spaces I’ve been privileged to access. I have received an awful lot from the stories, affectively, but they were not given to me as gifts. I sought them out, moved by my desire to hear, to understand. Have I managed to give anything back to the stories themselves? Can stories “receive” a hearing, even in the absence of a direct relationship between embodied research subjects—those who tell and those who try to hear? I’m doubtful. I imagine the stories and their affective traces scattering out into the grandness of a late autumn evening sky, now a leaf and now a star, untouched by my small, close reading. And somehow, this is fitting—itself a way to laugh joyfully at the idea of satisfying endings and relational symmetry.

For a moment in time, BirthStrike stories carried and tried to become response-able to the pain of the cascading deaths of our worlds, while also yearning for ongoingness, stretching with desire toward others, toward life. I’ve carried the stories for a little while. And the carrying...
goes on. I work, now, a poem of my own into the pattern. I wrote this poem in the depths of listening to the BirthStrike stories—it came out as an inadequate but urgent articulation of the need to respond, to share my own pain. I stitch it here now, as a way to remember and say goodbye to the stories, to pass on the threads.

April 2022

We start with an ache
in our chests, documenting
our fall into the abyss,
reading stories of pain
and wonder, of unbecoming
and becoming again.

I wonder how it
feels, looks, sounds
down there, at the end of the world?
Soft, round, almost silent—
the seedpod quietly waiting,
holding some life, and death.

We start with a tremble
in our hands, knitting together
colours warm and bright: ochre, sage green,
the obsidian which I wear on my fingers, as though it has the power
to ward off incoming storms.

There's kindness here, too,
at the end of the world—
the way the horizon
burns gold, umber, warming us
as we huddle together,
wrapped in rags and grief.

It ends with an ache
in the chest, a refusal to die
alone, the way the purple thistle
finds its way to grow, again—
chopped off at the knees, and alive,
still breathing—do you see, do you hear?

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