Victoria and I are talking via the computer on a spring day in Southern California. She is a young Black woman from the Inland Empire region of California, where the diesel trucks on the road and intense heat collide to create some of the worst air quality in the country. At twenty-three years old, Victoria recently graduated from college and moved back home with her parents while she prepares to apply for graduate school. Although she is excited about the next stage of her life, she is also afraid—and those fears have a lot to do with climate change.

“There’s a lot of fear and a lot of frustration about what’s ahead of us with climate change,” Victoria says. “This isn’t normal. All of these brush fires, I’m like, the world shouldn’t be catching on fire like this. Like, that’s not normal, for the air to be smelling like smoke for months at a time. Like, I’m just seeing chaos. Things that are not what I would expect to see, like crime rates going up and environmental problems everywhere, but when I turn on the news, they’re just brushing over it. But it’s getting worse and worse. Why aren’t they focusing on it?”
Victoria wants children—lots of children, she says, as many as four. Her parents immigrated to the United States from Ghana before she was born, and she was raised in a large, happy family of cousins and extended relatives. Although she wants the same for her own future, she doesn’t believe it will happen, because of increasing environmental instability. She worries how that instability is impacting her.

If there’s a catastrophe like a hurricane, if I had kids in that situation, I would be worried every day about their life and them being alive and getting to grow up. Like, would I be able to keep them safe? That’s a really scary part of parenthood that I don’t have to think about now because I’m not a parent. It’s frightening to see the world, how there’s so much more chaos happening. And it’s environmental chaos . . . like, do I want to bring kids into that if I don’t even know what the future holds at all? And being a person of color and thinking about the future and having children . . . it always comes with some type of other narrative when it comes to our bodies and children. The way we’re thought of and treated. Whenever I think about it, I just feel really anxious.

Anxiety. Worry. Fear. Frustration. Despair. These emotions and others have increasingly become the subject of surveys and other research into how climate change impacts emotions and mental health outcomes; for example, a 2020 poll conducted by the American Psychiatric Association found that 67 percent of people between the ages of eighteen and twenty-three were either “somewhat” or “very” concerned about how climate change is impacting their mental health. These emotions also shape how people of reproductive age grapple with what I call the “kid question”: the issue of whether, when, and how to have a child while grappling with climate crisis. A nonscientific national opinion poll conducted in 2021 found that 75 percent of members of Generation Z and 77 percent of Millennials said that climate change affects their major life decisions, including where they want to live, their career paths, and parenthood. On that last note, 78 percent of Gen Zers in the survey
said that they weren’t planning to have children because of climate change. In other words, climate change is having a direct impact on plans for the future, and the kid question is a part of those plans.

The widespread impacts of climate change—a set of long-term shifts in temperature and weather patterns, unevenly spanning the globe since the 1800s as a result of human beings burning fossil fuels, cutting down forests, and using land in unsustainable ways—are disrupting the planet’s ecological systems, which we depend on for survival. These disruptions include warming temperatures, droughts and water scarcity, heat waves, sea-level rise, increased and intensified storms, flooding, loss of biodiversity, and severe wildfires. Climate change is causing excess human deaths from heat events, malnutrition, malaria, and diarrhea, and is making us sicker from a range of health concerns from asthma to cardiovascular problems.

Scientists concur that the changes to the climate are intensifying, and will worsen to the level of being catastrophic, unless government leaders around the world unite to take strong policy action to reverse reliance on fossil fuels and build energy infrastructure that centers alternative energy. In other words, we’re in the midst of a crisis. So far, progress toward these goals is limited and uneven on a global scale, and the United States—a global outlier in terms of the historical number of emissions the country has put into the atmosphere—has been notorious for refusing to act aggressively to enact necessary policies. Even when US government officials do adopt key legislation to combat climate change, the gains are inconsistent and uneven. For example, President Joe Biden signed the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022, aiming to reduce carbon emissions by approximately 40 percent by the year 2030. The bill went through a nasty political fight in Congress but was a significant step in the right direction—particularly because it pays attention to issues of inequity and justice. And then, early the following year, Biden’s administration approved the Willow oil drilling project in Alaska, which will generate up to 9.2 million metric tons of carbon emissions every year.
The pace of climate politicking and policy making is dizzying and confusing. Meanwhile, humans, animals, and the planet itself are suffering. We’re not just suffering physically: researchers are finding that climate change is having impacts on our emotions and mental health. These impacts are driving people in their reproductive years to question whether it makes sense—physically, morally, and ethically—to birth and/or raise children. In other words, they are asking the kid question. Newspapers, magazines, blogs, podcasts, and academic research journals have been publishing articles, surveys, and simple opinion polls on climate change–related emotions and kid questions for years. However, there’s been a strange omission in these writings: they almost always ignore the issue of race. This is strange because climate change in the United States has disproportionately hard impacts on communities of color. The same communities often have fewer resources to adapt and be resilient to climate disasters. You would think that race and inequality would come up at some point in the research on the kid question.

They don’t. Much of the research about climate emotions—a lot of it focused on “eco-anxiety”—focuses on the experiences of young, white, middle-class people. While eco-anxiety may seem like a neutral term, climate emotions expert Sarah Jaquette Ray argues that it is often deployed in ways that center white people’s experiences and reinforce white privilege. Specifically, she writes that many public accounts of eco-anxiety, or climate anxiety in particular, reflect racial anxieties in which white people are anxious to hold on to their way of life and to “get back to normal” rather than confront and fight for systemic change. These descriptions frame climate change as the greatest existential threat of our time, a perspective that ignores the longstanding existential threats that have faced communities of color—including slavery, colonization, and the ongoing terror of police violence. In other words, accounts of climate change that describe it as the greatest existential threat of our time are rooted in privilege, because they ignore the experiences of communities living through other more immediate or long-term threats to their existence.
These issues came into sharp clarity one day in June 2022, when I met my friend Laurie at a café for lunch. It was nearly a hundred degrees again; the temperature had been in near the triple digits every day for weeks. Laurie and I hadn’t seen each other in a few years. She’d had a baby in the interim, and I was curious to hear how life was going with her little one in the mix. But as she spoke, the conversation strayed unexpectedly from diapers and potty training to a subject closer to my own heart: climate change. “I think about it all the time,” she said, taking a bite of her sandwich. “When I was pregnant, I actually started having nightmares about it. I would wake up in a cold sweat, thinking, how could I knowingly bring a child into this horrible climate situation? Was this the most selfish act in the world? How could I ever feel good about being a mother, knowing what would await my child?”

Laurie is white, middle class, and married. She has a solid career. She is someone whom you would think of as privileged; she has easy access to fresh, healthy food. The air she breathes, despite being in a city, is relatively clean. She is not what you would call vulnerable. And yet she sees climate change and the ecological upheavals it produces as an existential threat: the kind of challenge that upends the possibility of continuing to live life as we know it. When Laurie became pregnant, she was consumed with alternating emotions: excitement and anticipation at her baby’s arrival, and anxiety and worry about climate change. She was grappling with the kid question.

Of course, many of us may experience heat waves, intense storms, drought, or floods at some point, depending on where we live. But we don’t all experience these effects in the same way, and the resources we bring to the experience—as well as what we have available to cope with afterward—vary greatly. Climate mental health expert Britt Wray—who, like Laurie, is white and middle class and has confronted strong, painful emotions as she thought about whether to have a child during the climate crisis—argues that people with more social privilege are particularly ill-equipped to deal with existential threat, because they’re used to thinking that they are generally safe
and that their government and other leaders generally act to keep it that way. Yet, she argues, it is important not to individualize the experience but rather approach it from a political perspective. “We’re going to get this wrong if we depoliticize this pain, by not seeing its entanglement with centuries of environmental violence, racism, and domination,” she writes. “Without that context, we cannot be honest about who is the most vulnerable now and going forward, nor figure out how to best reduce harm. On the flip side, the tumultuous feelings that are on the rise are completely valid, need tending to, and present a great opportunity for justice-oriented personal, environmental, and social transformation.”

While women like Britt and Laurie are often the public face of this struggle, they are not the only ones grappling with the kid question in the midst of climate change. In fact, a national survey of forty-four hundred Americans conducted in 2020 found that, of those who did not have children, the people who identified climate change as a reason why they were not parents were disproportionately Hispanic/Latino or Black. Specifically, of those surveyed, 21 percent of white respondents indicated that climate change was a factor in why they did not have children, compared to 41 percent of Hispanic respondents and 30 percent of Black respondents.

Clearly race is a factor in how climate change shapes the kid question, but how and why? What’s race got to do with it? This book asks these questions, exploring why more and more people of reproductive age are thinking of foregoing having children, or worrying about how to raise the children they do have, because of the climate crisis—and what role race plays in these concerns. For example, a widely cited Yale survey conducted in 2019 found that Hispanics/Latinos and African Americans care more about climate change than their white counterparts. Researchers in the study found that 69 percent of Hispanics/Latinos and 57 percent of African Americans reported that they were either “alarmed” or “concerned” about climate change, whereas 49 percent of white respondents were. In contrast, 27 percent of white respondents were “doubtful” or “dismissive” of climate change, while
these numbers were just 11 percent and 12 percent for Hispanics/Latinos and African Americans, respectively. These feelings of concern may also translate into mental health outcomes; another Yale study conducted several years later found that Hispanic/Latino people were more likely to report climate change-related anxiety, depression, and psychological distress compared to Black or white populations. That groups of color are more concerned and alarmed about climate change makes sense: Black communities are most likely to be located near oil refineries; Latinos often live in food deserts—communities that have little access to stores that provide fresh, healthy fruits and vegetables at affordable prices; and Native American tribal lands are crisscrossed with oil pipelines that violate access treaties and poison aquifers.

Communities of color are also disproportionately exposed to long-term air pollution, made worse by climate change, which has myriad health impacts, including on newborn infants and children. Racial inequalities and redlining make it more likely for people of color to live in communities that are disproportionately exposed to environmental threats. It makes sense that this exposure translates into heightened worry and concern. Do these worries and concerns also shape reproductive questions for communities of color? How can we know if researchers who study climate and reproduction don’t also study race?

At the same time, climate and reproduction are increasingly in the public discussion because ideas about vulnerability are shifting and expanding. We are all vulnerable to climate impacts, though not equally—and many people who otherwise may have never thought of themselves as vulnerable to existential threats are coming to grips with the intensity of the crisis. Add to that the stunning blow delivered to reproductive autonomy in the June 2022 repeal of Roe v. Wade, and eco-anxiety and the kid question are hot topics. But the public attention they are given often ignores those who are most deeply impacted—either through exclusion or through assuming that young, middle-class white people’s experiences and perspectives are shared by all. They are not.
This book draws on dozens of interviews with people of color in their reproductive years as well as the results of a national survey I conducted with more than twenty-five hundred respondents. I also read and analyzed hundreds of articles, books, and various forms of media to explore how people are thinking, talking, and writing about how climate crisis impacts the kid question for them. Throughout, I demonstrate that these issues are simultaneously heightened by social inequality and that the challenges of struggling with the kid question are worsened because the struggles are largely waged in private. Yet these are not private concerns at all; they are the result of collective conditions—the impacts of climate change—that we are publicly living through every day as a society. Therefore, they must be addressed in public, in ways that prioritize climate and reproductive justice through systems and policy change.

The central arguments of the book are as follows. First, research and popular writing about climate concerns and reproductive anxieties tends to ignore race, with the effect of both erasing the experiences of people of color and low-income communities while representing white, middle-class perspectives as the norm. This matters because climate change impacts are distributed in much the same way racial inequalities are, and the impacts of those inequalities further disadvantage already marginalized communities, making it difficult to advocate for justice-oriented policy change. Second, climate-reproduction concerns are often responses to distressing environmental emotions, and when these emotions are relegated to the space of private concerns and individual decisions, it obscures the public nature of the problem. Climate change is a public problem that we are experiencing together, even if its impacts are unevenly distributed. And climate emotions are the result of this public problem. As a result, we are internalizing a set of concerns that we, as individuals, did not create—which makes it harder to demand the necessary action from lawmakers, corporations, and other powerful institutions that are causing us to feel this way. Furthermore, individualizing the problem and obscuring its racial dynamics allows
dangerous groups like ecofascists to fill in the gaps by identifying population growth as the main problem—and racist violence as the horrifying solution.

The third and most important argument is that we’re not listening to young people. Young Millennials and Gen Zers have been telling the people in their lives—each other, older relatives, teachers, and now the general public—that the climate crisis is disrupting their hopes, dreams, and imagined futures. For many, the climate crisis is instilling a sense of fear, making them question the moral and ethical consequences of creating families. For others, it is sparking new ways of thinking about how to build those families outside of a narrow biological model—from fostering and/or adopting to intentionally creating extended, blended families and kin networks. And for others still, they are foregoing raising children altogether.

There is no single way to respond to climate emotions, and there are certainly many ways to form a family if you desire that. But the problem is that increasingly people in their reproductive years aren’t acting on their desires and dreams; they are foreclosing and narrowing their reproductive possibilities because the social and environmental conditions we’re living in today are cause for despair, and they fear that the future will not be any better. Those I’ve interviewed for this book aren’t giving up, though: some have organized public campaigns or nonprofit organizations to have the conversation with others in public. They’ve refused to focus on the narrow question of whether to parent children; they’re instead claiming that the very fact that they have to ask this question is evidence of government policy failures. They are telling us that we need to change the fossil fuel–powered economic systems that drive the global climate crisis and make them feel that they can’t have the families and futures they want. They are resisting these conditions, and they are asking us to join them. This book is my way of telling them: Yes. I’m with you. And I hope this book will bring others along as well.

What I don’t discuss much in this book is population growth, at least not as a driver of climate disruption. As I detailed in my
previous book, *On Infertile Ground: Population Control and Women’s Rights in the Era of Climate Change*, population growth among the poor has been blamed for environmental problems for centuries.\(^\text{14}\) This blame has been used to justify coercive interventions targeting communities of color around the world, resulting in sterilizations, abusive medical experiments, and other human rights violations. In the case of climate change, this blame particularly obscures the roles of governments, corporations, and the military—all of which are driving the problem, far more than the reproductive practices of people of color and low-income people. Focusing on population is dangerous. This is not a generalization; for decades, white supremacists known as ecofascists have seized on environmental issues to argue that low-income people of color are over-populating the Earth, and they have used these arguments to justify mass murder.\(^\text{15}\) I will not give those ideas much of a platform here, in part because this book is about people who are primarily concerned about how planetary changes will harm their children, not the other way around. When I do address population and ecofascism in later chapters, it will be to critique and dismantle their underpinnings. All of which is to say, if you’re looking for a book that will promote slowing population growth as a way to help mitigate climate change and save the planet, this is not the book for you.

Instead, this book is written from a place of advocating for climate justice—a perspective that seeks to redress the differential and unequal burdens of climate impacts on vulnerable communities—and reproductive justice. Reproductive justice comprehensively supports the ability to *have* the children you want, not have the children you *don’t* want, and raise those you *do* have in safe and sustainable environments. Understanding climate anxiety and its relationship to reproductive anxiety and the kid question adds a dimension to the multifaceted fight for justice by revealing the ways the unjust systems causing climate change have pervaded not only our environments and communities but our minds, hearts, and deepest desires around children and family. That this is also a heavier burden for