

Mothering as Method: A Feminist Approach to Visual Storytelling, Reproductive Anxiety, and the Climate Crisis.

Abstract:

In an age of ecological uncertainty, the question of whether to have children is increasingly shaped by climate anxiety, ethical responsibility, and ruptures in intergenerational and multispecies care. This literature review examines how ecological and reproductive anxieties intersect, drawing on narrative, Indigenous knowledge, feminist theory, and multispecies ethics. It analyses how stories, metaphors, and cultural framings of “mothering” respond to environmental collapse and shape understandings of care in a rapidly changing world.

Interdisciplinary scholarship (Haraway, Sasser, Tsing et al.) and narrative-rich grey literature (Wray, Steinauer-Scudder, Rose) reveal patterns in how climate grief, relational care, multispecies entanglement, and reproductive decision-making are conceptualised in the Anthropocene. While theoretical works offer critical frameworks, zines and illustrated narratives centre intimacy, ambiguity, and everyday care, highlighting both possibilities and limitations in current design discourse.

The findings propose an expanded ecological language of mothering, stretching beyond the human to embrace multispecies kinship. This framework moves beyond policy debates or techno-fixes, centring emotional literacy, interdependence, and storytelling as vital tools for navigating uncertain climate futures.

I acknowledge the Guringai people, the Traditional Custodians of the land on which I live, and the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation, on whose land I work and study. I pay my respects to their Elders past and present, and recognise their enduring connection to Country, knowledge, and storytelling. I also extend this respect to all First Nations peoples.

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1) Introduction

1.1) Context & Issue

In the face of accelerating ecological collapse, the decision to have children has become increasingly entangled with grief, fear, ethical tension, and a growing sense of political awareness. It raises questions of control, responsibility, and the rights of those who can bring another human into the world. For many, whether considering parenthood, supporting others to reproduce, or choosing not to, this decision is not purely personal. It is shaped by larger forces: climate inaction, economic precarity, gendered expectations, and environmental decline. This anxiety is especially pronounced among Millennials and Gen Z, generations raised with acute awareness of the climate crisis and the consequences of intergenerational harm. Their concerns are not abstract, but deeply felt: what kind of future might their children inherit? Should they have children at all? This state of unease has come to be understood as reproductive anxiety, a complex emotional and ethical response that remains largely unrecognised within both mainstream design and broader public discourse.

There are many different experiences of climate and reproductive anxiety, and all deserve attention. For this review, I will be speaking from my own position: a Western, Australian context. I also want to acknowledge that I live and work on Guringai land, land that was never ceded and always was, and always will be, Aboriginal Land. As a non-Indigenous designer, I recognise that the ideas I explore, particularly those related to care, kinship, and responsibility are not new. First Nations peoples have long practised intergenerational, land-based, and relational forms of care. These ways of knowing and being, continue to shape Country today. The framework I propose is not mine to own, but something I move alongside. This work aims to listen to and honour those systems of knowledge without appropriating them.

Design has a powerful role in shaping the narratives, systems, and futures that either support or suppress these experiences. In this context, design can act as a domino, producing ripples of harm or care. Dominant approaches often prioritise problem-solving, clarity, and control, leaving little room for grief, fear, or moral ambiguity. Yet these are the emotional states many people, especially those navigating reproductive futures are living within. There is an urgent need to design outside of the technofix, a term I use critically to describe the belief that technology can solve all social problems. Instead, there is room and responsibility to hold space for emotion, tension, and difficult conversations. What's needed is a different framework: one grounded in care, interdependence, and relational ethics. I approach "mother" not as a gendered identity, but as a verb, an ethic of design rooted in attentiveness, holding, patience, and responsiveness. This framing resists the idea that care is biologically determined or exclusive to women, and instead opens space for care as a practice available to all.

1.2) Significance to Design Research

Guided by the question: How can the medium of visual storytelling, when framed through 'Mothering' reveal the emotional and ethical dimensions of reproductive anxiety through in the context of the climate crisis? This literature review addresses the critical intersection of care ethics, ecological grief, and the communicative potential of visual storytelling as a form of relational activism. As Solnit (2013) writes "To tell a story is always to translate the raw material into a specific shape, to select out of the boundless potential facts those that seem salient." Storytelling especially when visual and emotionally reflexive, becomes a way of organising feelings, revealing hidden labour and shaping a new shared understanding across different audiences. Visual Storytelling offers the power to unite, spark, change and help foster new forms of care.

The objective of this review is to explore how, within the context of visual storytelling, 'mother' can be understood not as a fixed identity or universal archetype, but as a verb; a mode of practice. To mother, in this framework, is to remain attentive to what is needed rather than what is immediately visible. It is a call to design that holds, nurtures, protects, and allows space for things, ideas, people, ecologies, to grow at their own pace. This review does not aim to idealise 'the mother' as a role or gendered figure. Instead, it draws from the principles of mothering care, interdependence, patience, and resilience, as ways to reimagine design that is more empathetic, relational, and ethically grounded. Within the field of visual storytelling, this approach offers an alternative to dominant paradigms that prioritise clarity, control, or impact above nuance, emotion, and uncertainty. By situating mothering as an ethical design framework, this review responds to the urgent emotional terrain of climate crisis, ecological grief, and reproductive anxiety. It seeks to expand current design methodologies by shifting focus from product to relationship, care, and ongoingness, framing storytelling not as explanation, but as invitation.

The review proposes that mothering can serve as a framework for storytelling and design practice, particularly in contexts of collapse and uncertainty. The review also draws on works of visual storytelling and graphic narratives such as Niki Banados' illustrated narrative zine 'Return' (see Figure 1, Appendix), which explores connection / disconnection with the world around us, as well as her graphic narrative 'The Perfect Human' (see Figure 2, Appendix) which explores raising her first child in a climate crisis and speculations around the type of world they might grow up in. Alongside this I use Fionn McCabe's graphic narrative 'Leathery Little Saints', (see Figure 3, Appendix) which speaks of moments parenting with climate change, orange skies and bats. As well as Estee Sarsfield's zine series Scribbles (see Figure 4, Appendix) to demonstrate how care, grief, ambiguity, and emotional truth can be made visible and shareable through intimate, affective visual language. These works function not as didactic answers, but as holding spaces for uncertainty, offering models of design as cohabitation, not resolution.

1.3) Positioning & Theoretical Grounding

This review is needed because design education and research still largely ignore the emotional and reproductive dimensions of care work, particularly in the face of climate collapse. While feminist, speculative theorists and Indigenous knowledge have long articulated the role of emotional labour and intergenerational ethics in navigating uncertain futures, design methods have rarely integrated these perspectives into practice. Instead, this review proposes that design can and must be capable of mothering: of listening, witnessing, and building forms of visual communication that attend to rather than explain away emotion. Visual storytelling, particularly through illustration, zine-making, and narrative design, offers one such mode: it invites readers into relationship, encourages emotional resonance, and allows contradiction to remain intact. Building on the work of nature writers like Chelsea Steinauer-Scudder (2022), Thomas van Dorren (2014) and Rebecca Solnit (2013), alongside feminist and speculative theorists such as Donna Haraway (2016), Anna Tsing (2017), and Daniela Rosner (2018), this literature review explores the role of mothering as a design framework in contexts of reproductive anxiety and climate collapse. It draws on reproductive scholars including Chavkin and Maher (2010), Jade Sasser (2024), Brittany Wray (2023), and scholars of environmental justice and Indigenous knowledge such as de Onís (2019), Carr (2022), Alam and Houston (2020), Archibald (2008), Gothe (2025) and Sam et al. (2022). Collectively, these works foreground care, grief, and relational knowledge as critical to responding ethically to ecological and reproductive disruption.

1.4) Scope & Aims

This review examines approximately 26 key texts published between 2000 and 2025, spanning feminist design theory, practice-based visual storytelling, Indigenous methodologies, and scholarship on climate grief and reproductive justice. Sources include academic texts, zines, comics, and speculative artefacts accessed through databases such as EBSCO, JSTOR, and ProQuest, as well as independent publishers and community design spaces. Search terms combined concepts such as “climate anxiety,” “care ethics,” “mothering in design,” and “speculative storytelling.” The review focuses on texts that explore emotional labour, ecological care, and non-normative kinships in relation to design. Special attention is given to works that centre lived experience, affect, and more-than-human entanglements, including those outside traditional academic publishing.

The aim of this review is to critically examine how mothering as an ethic of care and relational practice can offer an alternative framework for design. It builds a case for emotionally responsive, care-centred design methods by weaving together feminist theory, visual storytelling, and reflections on reproductive and ecological anxiety. Ultimately, it contributes to a growing field of care-driven design by proposing methods that are not only innovative, but capable of holding grief, uncertainty, and collective responsibility.

2) Methodology

This literature review adopts a feminist, care-centred methodology that values emotional reflexivity, relational thinking, and situated knowledge. It is grounded in the belief that design, particularly in the context of reproductive anxiety and climate grief, must move beyond detached objectivity and instead engage deeply with lived, emotional, and political realities. The approach is informed by feminist and post humanist theorists such as Donna J. Haraway (2016), Anna Tsing (2017), and Daniela Rosner (2018), whose work insists on the legitimacy of storytelling, affect, and relationality as knowledge practices. Emerging design scholars including Alison Place (2023) and Chelsea Steinauer-Scudder (2022) further advocate for design as a space of care and interdependence, where emotional complexity and more-than-human considerations are central. These scholars frame care not as sentimentality, but as an ethical and political imperative, one essential for navigating the interconnected crises of our time.

Given this orientation, a rapid thematic literature review was selected as the methodological approach. Unlike systematic reviews that aim for comprehensiveness and neutrality, a rapid review allows for flexible, concept-driven exploration of an interdisciplinary field. This approach is especially suited to feminist research practices, which prioritise meaning-making, reflexivity, and partial perspectives over claims of universality. It enables the integration of diverse materials, peer-reviewed scholarship, speculative design theory, illustrated zines, and graphic narratives reflecting the belief that knowledge in design is not only theoretical, but also embodied, visual, and practice-led. This review is further guided by what Haraway (2016) describes as “staying with the trouble” a commitment to remaining with complexity, contradiction, and entanglement rather than seeking closure. Mothering, understood not as identity but as a research ethic, informs this stance: it is an orientation defined by attentiveness, holding, patience, and relational care. This methodological lens shaped not only what was included in the review, but how the material was approached, read, and held.

3) Method

The research for this review was conducted between March and May 2025. It involved the collection, evaluation, and thematic synthesis of both academic literature and visual storytelling artefacts. The selected materials explored themes of reproductive anxiety, care, design, and climate grief, with a focus on relational and emotional complexity. Sources were selected based on relevance to the review's focus on care, reproductive justice, feminist design, and visual storytelling. Academic texts were published between 2000 and 2025 and included peer-reviewed works alongside select grey literature where conceptually significant. Visual artefacts such as zines, comics, and illustrated narratives were chosen for their engagement with emotional complexity and grounded, often community-based, design practice. Materials were sourced via databases including JSTOR, ProQuest, and EBSCO, using search terms like "climate anxiety," "care ethics," "speculative design," and "mothering in design." Independent publishing platforms and personal networks, including the Blue Mountains Zine Club and Otherworld Zine Fair, whilst attending these Zine fairs I often drifted towards talking to the authors and makers, I have slowly collected a range of zines that resonated with myself around climate anxiety, children and multispecies engagement. Around 40 academic sources were initially reviewed, with 15 analysed in depth for their conceptual and emotional alignment. All works were considered not only for content but for their relational, affective, and ethical contributions to the review's aims.

4) Results

The literature reveals a rich constellation of ideas and practices across feminist theory, care ethics, reproductive justice, and visual storytelling. These sources, ranging from academic texts to grassroots visual artefacts shed light on the emotional, ethical, and ecological dimensions of reproductive anxiety. Importantly, they reveal both the possibilities and limitations of existing design discourse: while theory offers critical frameworks, zines and illustrated narratives centre intimacy, ambiguity, and everyday care. These tensions and patterns inform the thematic synthesis that follows.

4.1) Key Themes Identified

Reproductive anxiety is increasingly recognised as both a structural and emotional condition, shaped not by personal indecision but by economic instability, ecological grief, and systemic collapse (Sasser, 2024; Holmes et al., 2023). Responding to this, care emerges as a feminist design ethic, not only as content but as method, offering a relational and responsive way of attending to complexity (Fisher & Tronto, 1990; Haraway, 2016; Place, 2023). Storytelling, particularly visual forms, complements this ethic by operating as a tool for speculative world-building and holding space, rather than offering resolution (Rosner, 2018; Steinauer-Scudder, 2022). Yet the emotional labour embedded in this work, grief, fear, care, is often undervalued. Zines and comics make this labour visible, reconfiguring what counts as design practice (Banados, 2021, 2023; Sarsfield, 2024; McCabe, 2020). While each theme offers a distinct lens, together they reveal tensions between visibility and invisibility, emotional expression and structural critique. This work draws from all four, asking how visual storytelling might ethically navigate these tensions through care, without reducing them to clarity or control.

4.2) Gaps in the Literature

While this review uncovered rich interdisciplinary perspectives, several gaps remain within the design discourse. Emotional complexity continues to be marginalised in mainstream design methodologies, which still favour resolution, clarity, and scalability over ambiguity, slowness, and relational presence. Despite growing academic interest in reproductive anxiety, its emotional realities remain underexplored in practice-led visual communication projects. Similarly, queer, multispecies, and Indigenous perspectives on kinship, care, and ecological reproduction are still underrepresented in design literature. Lastly, zines and grassroots publishing, despite their relevance as emotionally textured and politically resistant forms are often excluded from academic understandings of legitimate design research. These gaps point to a need for more expansive, care-driven frameworks that recognise affective, marginal, and emergent forms of design knowledge. A visual mapping of the literature (see Appendix, Figure 5) synthesises the relationships between the four core fields, the identified themes, and the identified gaps. The diagram also positions these along a visible - invisible axis, making clear how certain perspectives, such as zines and grassroots publishing, remain peripheral despite their relevance to emotionally responsive design.

5) Discussion

5.1) Reproductive Anxiety and the Climate Crisis

Reproductive anxiety the hesitation, fear, or grief surrounding whether to have children in the context of a climate crisis is a growing emotional experience. Though deeply felt, it is often privately held and publicly dismissed. As Holmes et al. (2023) argue, imagining maternal futures under ecological pressure is not simply reactive; it is an act of emotional reflexivity, shaped by care, kinship, grief, and responsibility. One participant reflected: “I didn’t want to be responsible for sadness – for a child, my child, living in a world of suffering and dying... I did not want to put that burden – that pain – on another human being.” (p. 365) This reflects a refusal, not of care, but of complicity. Sasser (2024) extends this argument, framing reproductive anxiety as a political and ethical response to systemic failure.

The emotional toll of contemplating parenthood amid climate collapse, economic insecurity, and institutional neglect is not simply personal. It is a response to injustice: a burden unfairly placed on individuals, particularly women, who are already navigating structural inequality. Sasser writes: “This is the unjust element of climate anxiety... fears and concerns that future children will endure discrimination, injustice, and an increasingly unliveable planet... It demands a refusal to accept state failures as personal failures.” (pp. 93–94) These perspectives reveal how reproductive anxiety is not only about fear or indecision. It is about refusal, resistance, and the emotional labour of imagining more ethical futures within systems designed to deny them.

Importantly, reproductive anxiety also unsettles dominant sociocultural narratives about motherhood. In contrast to normative ideas that frame motherhood as reproductive duty or personal fulfilment, Holmes et al. (2023) and Chavkin & Maher (2010) locate motherhood at the intersection of social expectations, structural pressures, and emotional labour. Motherhood is not only biological, it involves a complex web of care, identity, and national reproduction. It is “at once intimate and communal... shaped by shifting heteronormative expectations, gender roles, cultural norms, biological possibilities and economic and social conditions” (Chavkin & Maher, 2010). Global demographic shifts further contextualise this anxiety. As Tsing et al. (2017) observe in *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*, “Man is the only animal systematically to torture members of its own species... and engage in seemingly endless and often wildly indiscriminate killing.”

This brutal reflection underscores the urgency of rethinking dominant logics that govern human interaction, not only with each other, but with the more-than-human world. These same extractive, individualising systems underpin the structural pressures shaping reproduction and care. As Chavkin and Maher (2010) argue, many people, particularly women, delay or opt out of parenthood in response to rising costs of living, labour market demands, and the precariousness of housing and relationships. Yet even generous work–family policies fail to address these root conditions. Instead, motherhood is treated as an individualised choice, while the systemic forces that constrain it go largely

unchallenged. In contrast, mothering as a framework resists domination, offering instead an ethic of interdependence, protection, and repair.

Queer theorists have criticised how society often treats “The Child” as a symbol of the future as if having (biological) children is the main way we achieve hope, meaning, and social continuity. This idea is called “reproductive futurism” (Holmes et al. 2023). In this view, producing children, especially within traditional heterosexual families becomes a kind of moral duty or proof of a “normal” life. Despite the depth of these anxieties, the weight of these feelings is underrepresented in design discourse. Visual storytelling, however, offers a way to translate internalised emotion into visible narrative, creating space for recognition and relational witnessing. A compelling example is ‘Return’ by Niki Banados (2021), an illustrated narrative documenting her emotional experience of returning to Australia after living abroad. Though not explicitly about reproductive anxiety, ‘Return’ captures many of its affective textures: collapse, uncertainty, longing, and rebuilding (see Appendix, Figure 6). Its hand-drawn linework, fragmentary narration, and slow pacing act as visual metaphors reassembly. Banados’ work exemplifies what Rosner (2018) describes as “a process more alive and layered than most methodologies allow” a feminist reimagining of design as responsive, relational, and emotionally attuned. Return functions not as closure, but as a holding space for grief and ongoingness. It invites the viewer into proximity with uncertainty, not resolution.

This kind of “future-building,” as Holmes et al. (2023) describe it, is central to how individuals engage reproductive decision-making. One participant shared the tension between personal desire and social pressure: “I’m afraid they’ll never get to have connectedness to beauty in nature... But I’m also afraid of not giving my parents the red-headed babies they wanted.” Such contradictions are not failures of clarity; they are the truth of living and designing for unstable futures. Visual storytelling, when grounded in emotional reflexivity, allows these contradictions to remain present and visible. Its layered and affective nature makes room for feelings beyond anxiety such as regret, hope, longing, and refusal. Niki Banados’ (2023) graphic novel titled ‘The Perfect Human’ illustrates the deep complexities and guilt of bringing a child into a world where it is ‘an environment increasingly hostile’, illustratively painting the future of a child where he will need to ‘survive hotter and drier summers’ and ‘waterlogged urban environments’ (see Appendix, Figure 7). She describes the irreversible change, and finishes the graphic novel with introducing her son to the other ‘perfect’ species that inhabit the shared change asking us at the end ‘what can we do to ensure their survival and happiness?’

Design, when aligned with this ethos, becomes not a tool for solution but a practice of care. Visual storytelling can externalise what is often unspeakable, politicise personal struggle, and foster solidarity through shared emotion. As Sasser (2024) reminds us, addressing reproductive anxiety “demands that more people see themselves as participants and allies in the fight for reproductive justice” (p. 47). Storytelling, especially when slow, intimate, and visual, offers a feminist methodology for this kind of participation. In this way, reproductive anxiety is not just a psychological state; it is a design challenge. One that calls for new ways of communicating, world-building, and holding emotional complexity. Visual storytelling, grounded in mothering-as-method, emerges as a powerful tool for building shared language, resisting silence, and for emotional disorientation and imagining alternate futures in the face of collapse. These overlapping perspectives and examples are summarised in a visual mapping (see Appendix, Figure 8).

5.2) Mothering as a framework for design

If reproductive anxiety reveals the emotional and ethical weight of future-making in crisis, then how we respond to that weight, and how we design futures with care becomes the next question. This is where mothering, not as role but as method, offers a valuable framework. In dominant discourse, motherhood is often imagined as a biological role, a personal responsibility, or a function of gendered social reproduction. But recent feminist, ecological, and Indigenous scholarship has pushed for a deeper redefinition: one that understands mothering not as an identity but as a practice of care, relation, and holding. This reconceptualization, central to both design and storytelling, allows us to move beyond the private realm of “motherhood” into a broader, more inclusive ethic of mothering.

In ‘Coming Into Being’, Chelsea Steinauer-Scudder (2022) argues for a “mothering language” a way of speaking, storytelling, and relating that brings the world into being. “By “mother” I do not mean the noun that refers to females with a uterus and children.” she writes, “I mean everyone, of any gender, any age, any species. I mean people, trees, robins, and rivers.” This expansive vision reframes mothering as a verb: a mode of care that is responsive, interdependent, and ecological. To mother, in this sense, is to listen, to hold space, and to foster life, not just in a literal sense, but in terms of relationships, futures, and ethical attention.

In the context of design, this framework becomes particularly generative. If design is about making futures, then mothering offers a model for how to make those futures with care, rather than control. Drawing from Chavkin and Maher’s (2010) work on the globalisation of motherhood, we can understand mothering as involving emotional, social, and relational labour, the often invisible work of provisioning, caregiving, and holding complexity. These forms of labour are essential not only to families but to the broader functioning of societies, environments, and intergenerational relationships. Carr (2022) calls for an approach to design that foregrounds “embodied and material relations” and recognises care and repair as urgent forms of knowledge in a volatile, resource-constrained world. Similarly, de Onís (2019) emphasises that reproductive justice and by extension, care must be understood as environmental justice, urging design to resist extractive paradigms and re-centre nurturing, regenerative relationships with both people and planet.

This exclusion is not incidental. As Holmes et al. (2023) points out, dominant ideas of motherhood have been shaped by capitalist, colonial, and heteronormative values. Motherhood has been used to reinforce narrow timelines, gendered norms, and productivity metrics. The climate crisis, they argue, presents an opportunity to challenge these ideas and reimagine mothering as something messier, more entangled, and more emotionally reflexive. When participants in ‘Unsettling Maternal Futures in Climate Crisis’ describe their hesitation to reproduce, it is not a failure of care, it is care itself, extended outward to future generations, other species, and the Earth. As Williamson et al. (2020) and Cavanagh (2020) argue, repairing relationships in times of crisis must begin with Indigenous knowledge, trust, and self-determination. Mothering, in this sense, becomes an act of deep listening, respect, and decolonial alignment: a way of designing with, not over, the systems and people who have long held wisdom for planetary care. This ethic is exemplified in Indigenous-led co-design projects that foreground protocol, kinship, and care for

Country. As Gothe et al. (2025) describe in their work on First Nations leadership in land management, “the protocols emerge from the understanding of the specificity of landscapes and cultural lore held by Country and practiced by Local Elders, knowledge holders and community.” These practices are not metaphorical; they are deeply embodied and enacted through “respect, responsibility, reverence, reciprocity, holism, interrelatedness, and synergy” (Archibald, 2008, in Gothe et al., 2025). Using these cultural practices in design relational to care, traditional knowledge transfer, and intercultural dialogue can guide design in ways that are attuned to Country, not imposed upon it.

This kind of care, the kind that refuses to resolve, produce, or optimise, can also be seen in forms of visual storytelling that embrace emotional ambiguity and the everyday. In her zine series *Scribbles*, designer and illustrator Estee Sarsfield (2024) documents daily feelings, thoughts, and fragments using collage, illustration, photography, and writing. One piece reads from her ‘SUMMER’ edition printed in May 2024, “Kindness never curdles, shouts a church notice board. I wonder if I am curdling somewhat. Slowly turning rancid.” (see Appendix, Figure 9). These moments are not dramatic, but they are deeply affective: they hold tension, weariness, and doubt. They represent a kind of low-frequency care, an ongoing tending to emotion, memory, and relational self-awareness. Sarsfield’s work exemplifies the mothering framework in its embrace of slowness, emotional honesty, and non-linearity. It doesn’t aim to solve or explain; it holds. Like Banados’ ‘Return’ (2021), *Scribbles* invites readers into an emotionally resonant space where ambivalence and quietness are not only allowed but honoured. This is a form of design that is deeply anti-extractive, one that makes space for both the maker and the reader to be vulnerable, tender, and unfinished.

Mothering as a design framework is also deeply relational. As Chavkin and Maher (2010) note, caregiving relationships are shaped by power, context, and culture. Recognising this, design must not only attend to the presence of care, but to its conditions, who is allowed to care, who is expected to, and under what constraints. Mothering, in this framework, becomes a lens through which to assess design practices: Are they extractive or generative? Do they hold others or control them? Are they responsive to emotional context, or dismissive of it? Designers and artists working with relational and speculative practices, such as Sarsfield, Banados, are already doing this work. Their zines and stories operate as what Rosner (2018) calls “critical fabulations” creative design acts that challenge dominant narratives and make visible new possibilities. These fabulations are not “solutions” they are invitations to feel, relate, and imagine otherwise. In this way, they perform mothering, not as gendered obligation, but as ethical orientation.

De Onís (2019) also encourages a reimagining of reproduction through the lens of queer ecologies, which challenge narrow, binary, cis-heteropatriarchal models of care and kinship. This opens space for expansive, multispecies solidarities, where kinship is not bound by biology but built through reciprocal, ethical relation. Visual storytelling, especially zines and speculative fabulations, reflects these non-normative modes of reproduction and resistance, fostering alternative family-making and world-making practices in the face of environmental harm. These creative forms embrace the domestic, the emotional, the messy, and the everyday. They become sites where chosen family, fluid kinships, and imagined futures are drawn, collaged, printed, and shared. Just as Sarsfield’s work holds space for emotional ambiguity, and Banados’ *Return* invites collective grieving and reflection.

Finally, mothering as a framework redefines what counts as design success. Rather than prioritising clarity, scale, or output, it asks: Did we care? Did we hold? Did we create space for reflection and relation? These are not metrics easily measured, but they are essential to just and relational design. As this review continues, it explores how mothering understood as care, interdependence, reflexivity, and slowness offers not just an emotional stance, but a design strategy: one that centres holding over resolution, and relation over mastery.

5.3) Visual Storytelling & Practice of Care

To respond to the emotional and ethical complexity of reproductive anxiety and ecological grief, design must move beyond the frameworks of clarity, control, and problem-solving. Instead, it must begin to hold emotional contradiction, ethical ambiguity, and relational tension as valuable sites of design. One methodology capable of doing so is visual storytelling particularly when it is grounded in feminist ethics of care and mothering. Visual storytelling, as framed in feminist and speculative design theory, is not merely illustrative. It is a method for world-building, emotional translation, and collaborative sense-making. As Steinauer-Scudder (2022) writes, “a mothering language is one that strives to bring the world into being through story” an act of holding space for relational futures, more-than-human kinship, and emotional truth. Storytelling becomes mothering when it resists domination and instead invites reflection, presence, and care.

Feminist scholars have long argued that care is not simply a sentiment, but a form of ethical labour. Fisher and Tronto (1990) define care as “everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our world so that we can live in it as well as possible” (p. 40). This includes our bodies, our communities, and our environments interwoven in what Williams (2016) calls a “grounded everyday ethical practice” (p. 514). These principles find rich expression in visual storytelling, where design is used to repair disconnection, evoke empathy, and attend to the specificities of lived experience.

This care is not soft or sentimental. As articulated in *Feminist Designer* (Place, 2023), care is “not just a ‘warm pleasant affection or moralistic feel-good attitude’... it is absolutely fundamental to our survival” (p. 79). Care in design becomes a radical methodology, one that takes seriously the emotional, social, and ecological consequences of creation. When visual storytelling is framed through this lens, it becomes a means of holding fragile narratives, tending to emotional nuance, and building relational understanding across difference.

Rosner (2018) similarly describes design as a process that is “more alive and layered than most methodologies allow” (p.143). She proposes “critical fabulation” as a method for reworking dominant stories and surfacing the relational, hidden, or marginalised aspects of experience. In this view, visual storytelling is not simply a tool, it is a site of alliance, where designers and audiences meet to explore complicated truths. “Working with rather than for” becomes essential to resisting extractive authorship (p.141). Visual stories do not provide clarity, they make space for co-habitation with grief, hope, fear, and love.

These layered alliances are visible in place-based, multispecies practices such as Perth’s “Cockatoo Coalition” (Alam & Houston, 2020). Here, community members stitched together fragmented stories and habitats to protect black cockatoo flightways in suburban areas. Through submissions, planting days, and shared narratives, they created an “alternate infrastructure of care” that responded to ecological and emotional entanglements with attention and reciprocity. This kind of community storytelling is a form of visual and embodied world-building, one that directly mirrors the care-based ethic explored in this review.

Haraway (2016) pushes this further, reminding us that “storying cannot any longer be put into the box of human exceptionalism.” Storytelling,

especially when visual and relational, must now include other species, ecologies, and histories. In this expanded view, to mother through design is to “stay with the trouble”, cultivating conditions for shared survival through multispecies and multimodal alliances.

This layered relationality is powerfully demonstrated in Fionn McCabe’s (2023) comic ‘Leathery Little Saints’, which intertwines a story of parenting young children during Australia’s Black Summer bushfires with an encounter with dying bats falling from trees (see Appendix, Figure 10). Told in a graphic, comic-like format, the story slips between ecological collapse and the mundane everyday: a trip to the pool, a milkshake order, a conversation about bats. The juxtaposition of climate disaster and the ordinariness of parenting becomes a meditation on the emotional surrealism of living in the Anthropocene. McCabe (2023) uses visual language, expressive, gestural, and unpolished sketching style mirrors the chaotic, unpredictable mood of the narrative. The comic makes no attempt to explain or resolve. Instead, it holds the emotional contradiction: the simultaneous need to protect one’s children and to mourn a world unravelling. As Fionn reflects, “Living in the end times is difficult, emotionally complicated, and oddly mundane.” This line encapsulates the experience of reproductive anxiety, where the enormity of the world’s grief meets the smallness of daily care. Rather than offering a prescriptive message, ‘Leathery Little Saints’ performs what Rosner (2018) calls world-reworking. It invites readers into a feeling of being with emotional instability, rather than resolving it. In this way, the comic becomes an example of visual storytelling as mothering design: not about solving or smoothing emotion, but about making it visible, shareable, and less lonely.

This act of visibility is especially important for feelings like reproductive anxiety, which, as discussed earlier, are often internalised or dismissed. As Sasser (2024) notes, the emotional labour of deciding whether or not to have children is made heavier by the lack of collective recognition and shared narrative space. Visual storytelling responds to this invisibility by externalising the inner world. It transforms private grief into relational care. This is not merely expressive, it is pedagogical, therapeutic, and political. Indigenous storytelling traditions, as described by Sam, Richardson, and Currie (2022), frame storytelling as a process that holds spiritual, emotional, and communal balance. These stories carry values of respect, reciprocity, and responsibility, and are often shared in relational, place-based ways. When visual storytelling is shaped by these principles, it becomes a method for holding cultural knowledge, resisting erasure, and building intergenerational connection.

The stories told in works like McCabe’s (2023) comic or Banados’ zine (2021) and graphic novel (2023) do not aim for universalism. They are situated, affective, and often ambiguous. But in that specificity, they create room for resonance, for recognising one’s own fears, doubts, or small joys mirrored in another’s lived experience. These moments of recognition are the foundation of relational design: they build what Place (2023) describes as “new visual stories of civic ecologies”, stories that reconnect people to place, responsibility, and each other (p.110). Mothering, in this frame, is not simply a thematic subject in storytelling. It becomes a structure for how we tell stories. A mothering story slows down. It dwells. It lets things be unfinished. It holds more than it explains. These are the same principles that underlie care as a methodology in design. Visual storytelling, especially when grounded in personal narrative, illustration, and zine culture is uniquely capable of embodying them. As Paulsen (2021) notes, stories that successfully invite participation, depend not just on what is told, but how audiences

are guided into them. “A story may have many events of deep meaning and impact,” they write, “but if there is no defining moment for getting into the story... they will never get to this content.” a story may have many events of deep meaning and impact, but if there is no defining moment for getting into the story – a point of no return for the audience, they will never get to this content.

Visual storytelling in zines and comics excels at this, combining imagery, text, and layout to orient readers and build immersion from the very first page. This is evident, too, in how stories are shared. Zines and comics are often distributed in informal, community-based ways, passed between friends, or found at a local event. They operate outside the formal boundaries of gallery or academic discourse, and in doing so, they model a design practice that is accessible, relational, and deeply embedded in everyday life.

This accessibility is part of what makes visual storytelling effective at conveying complexity. As Mirkovski et al. (2019) argue, stories are cognitively and emotionally richer than other forms of communication. They build empathy, support difficult meaning-making, and promote behavioural change, especially when delivered visually. As we confront ecological uncertainty and growing emotional disconnection, the role of visual storytelling becomes increasingly vital. It allows designers to participate in what Steinauer-Scudder (2022) calls “the language of mothering” a mode of storytelling that “strives to bring the world into being through story.” In a time when design is too often asked to innovate or optimise, visual storytelling offers another way: to tend, to witness, and to mother.

6) Conclusion

This literature review set out to explore how visual storytelling can serve as a care-based design methodology, one capable of holding the emotional and ethical complexity of reproductive anxiety in the context of climate crisis. Drawing together feminist design theory, care ethics, First Nations storytelling, and speculative design, the review reframes storytelling as more than narrative delivery, it becomes a practice of world-building, emotional translation, and relational presence. Through scholars such as Sasser (2024), Holmes et al. (2023), and Chavkin & Maher (2010), reproductive anxiety emerges not as private indecision, but as an affective reckoning shaped by intergenerational care, ecological collapse, and systemic neglect. These experiences remain largely un-addressed in dominant design discourse, despite being deeply entangled with our most urgent planetary questions.

In response, this review proposes mothering as a critical lens for visual storytelling not as a gendered identity, but as an ethic of attentiveness, emotional reflexivity, and relational responsibility. It privileges ambiguity, dwelling, and the capacity to hold what is unresolved. These principles draw from long-standing feminist theories of care and Indigenous practices that understand storytelling as a tool for healing, reciprocity, and environmental stewardship.

When visual storytelling adopts this mothering framework, through zines, comics, or illustrated narratives it becomes a space for collective recognition. Works such as Fionn McCabe's 'Leathery Little Saints', Estee Sarsfield's 'Scribbles', and Niki Banados' 'Return' and 'The Perfect Human' do not aim to resolve or explain. Instead, they honour grief, invite relational witnessing, and give shape to what often remains invisible in design: the slow labour of care, the contradictions of emotional life, and the everyday ethics of tending to a world in crisis. They perform what Rosner (2018) calls world-reworking, shifting design away from extraction and toward care.

This review contributes to a growing call for design to move differently, more slowly, more relationally, and more ethically. It highlights the absence of care-driven, reproductive, and ecological storytelling in mainstream design discourse, and positions visual storytelling as a vital, underutilised response. In a world unravelled by extraction, acceleration, and disconnection, perhaps the most radical work a designer can do is not to fix, but to mother: to listen, to hold, and to craft visual stories that nurture emotional and intergenerational care. These stories may not offer solutions, but they help us stay with the trouble (Haraway, 2016), and from there, imagine otherwise.

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8) Appendix

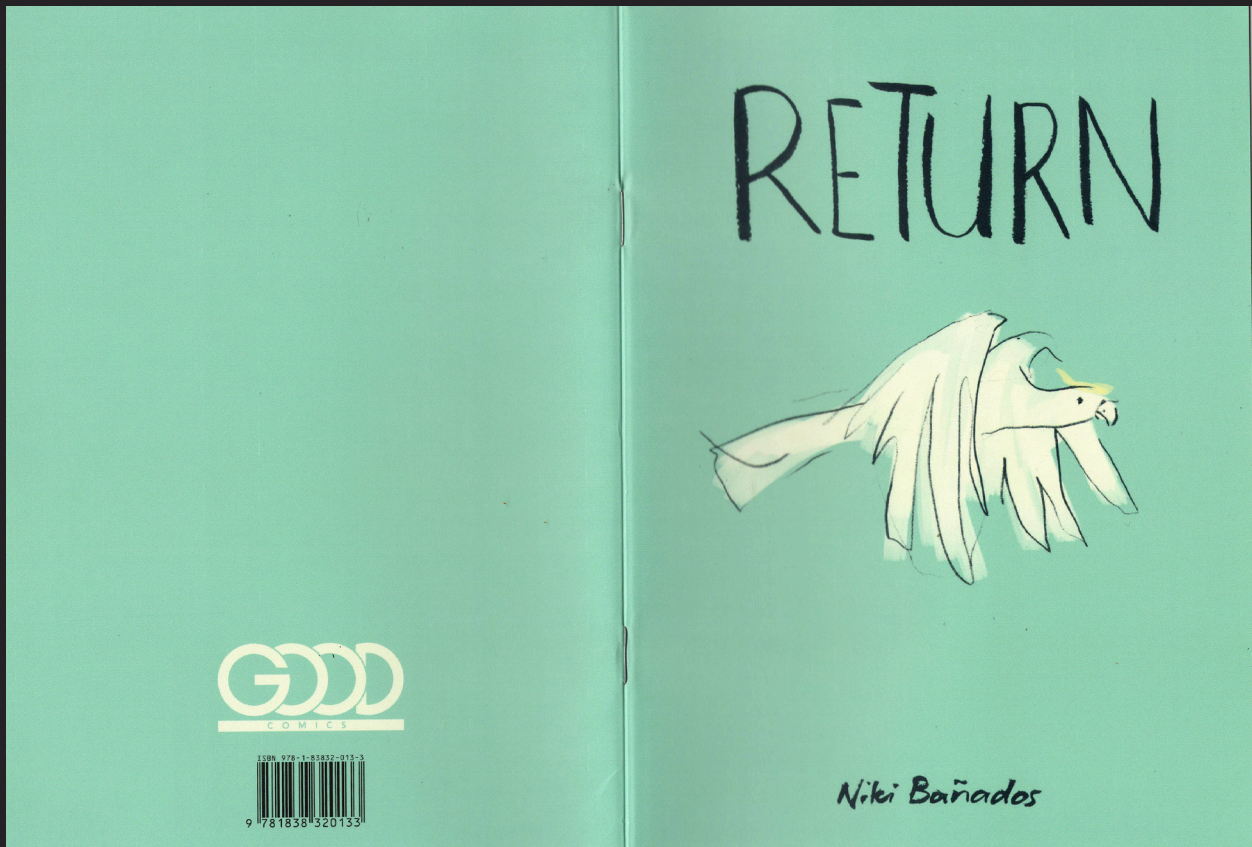


Figure 1

Cover from 'Return' by Niki Banados (2021).

Note. From 'Return', by N. Banados, 2021, Good Comics. Scanned from personal copy with permission from the author.

Source: Bañados, N. (2021). Return [Zine]. Good Comics.

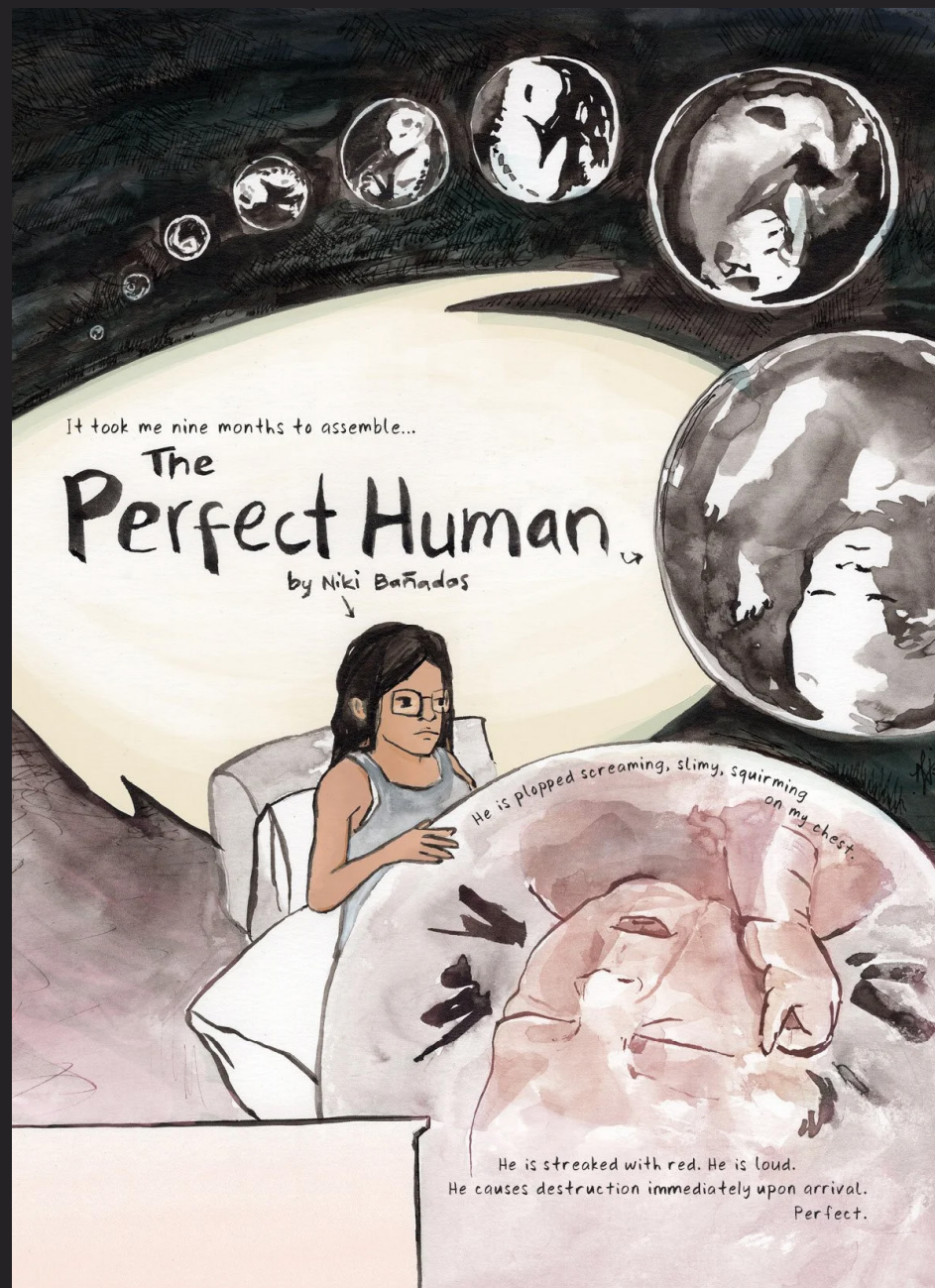


Figure 2

**Title Page from 'The Perfect Human' (2023)
by Niki Bañados.**

Note. Reproduced with permission from the author.
Originally published in Island Magazine, Issue 169.

Source: Bañados, N. (2023). The perfect human. Island Magazine, (169). <https://islandmag.com/read/the-perfect-human-by-niki-banados>



Figure 3

Cover of 'Leathery Little Saints' (2023) by Fionn McCabe.

Note. Scanned from personal copy with permission from the author.

Source: McCabe, F. (2023). Leathery little saints [Comic]. Self-published.

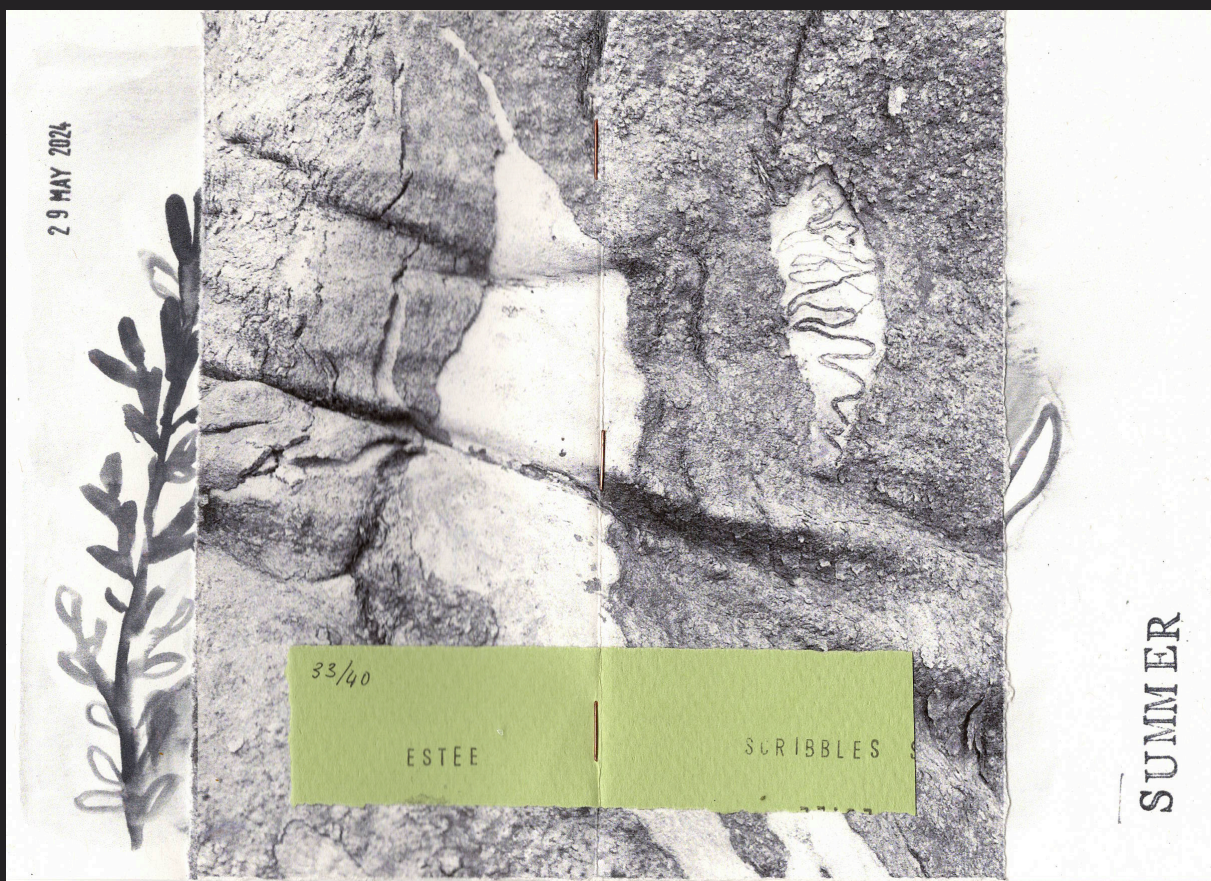


Figure 4

Cover of Scribbles - (SUMMER edition, 2024) by Estee Sarsfield.

Note. Scanned from personal copy with permission from the author.

Source: Sarsfield, E. (2024). Scribbles: Summer edition [Zine]. Self-published.

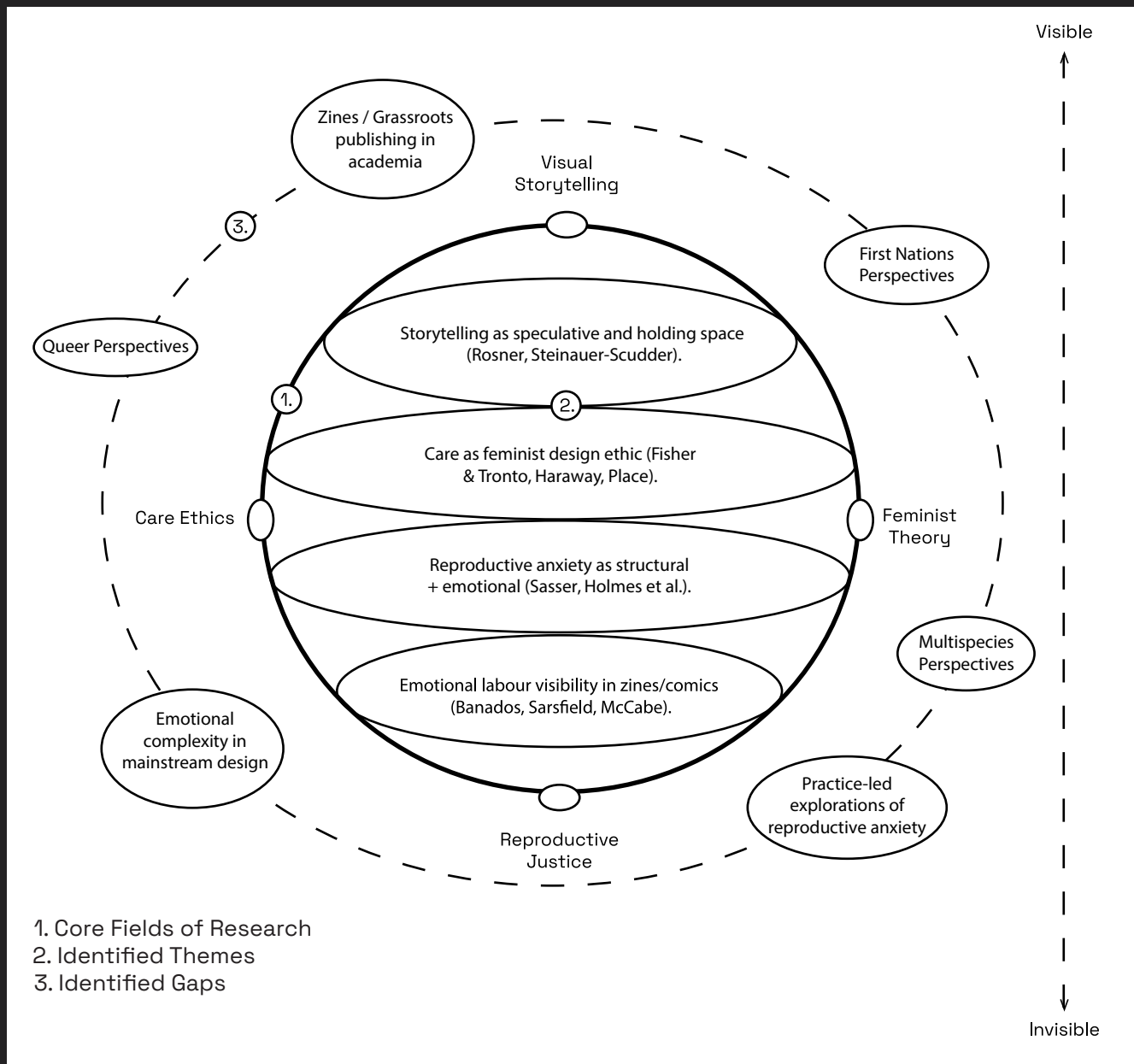


Figure 5

Visual mapping of literature review results

Murphy, B. (2025). Visual mapping of literature review findings [Diagram]. Unpublished literature review, University of Technology Sydney.



Figure 6

Spread 18 - 19, from Return (2021) by Niki Banados.

Note. From 'Return', by N. Banados, 2021, Good Comics. Scanned from personal copy with permission from the author.

Source: Bañados, N. (2021). Return [Zine]. Good Comics.



Figure 7

Page 5 from *The Perfect Human* (2023) by Niki Banados.

Note. Reproduced with permission from the author. Originally published in *Island Magazine*, Issue 169.

Source: Bañados, N. (2023). *The perfect human*. *Island Magazine*, (169). <https://islandmag.com/read/the-perfect-human-by-niki-banados>

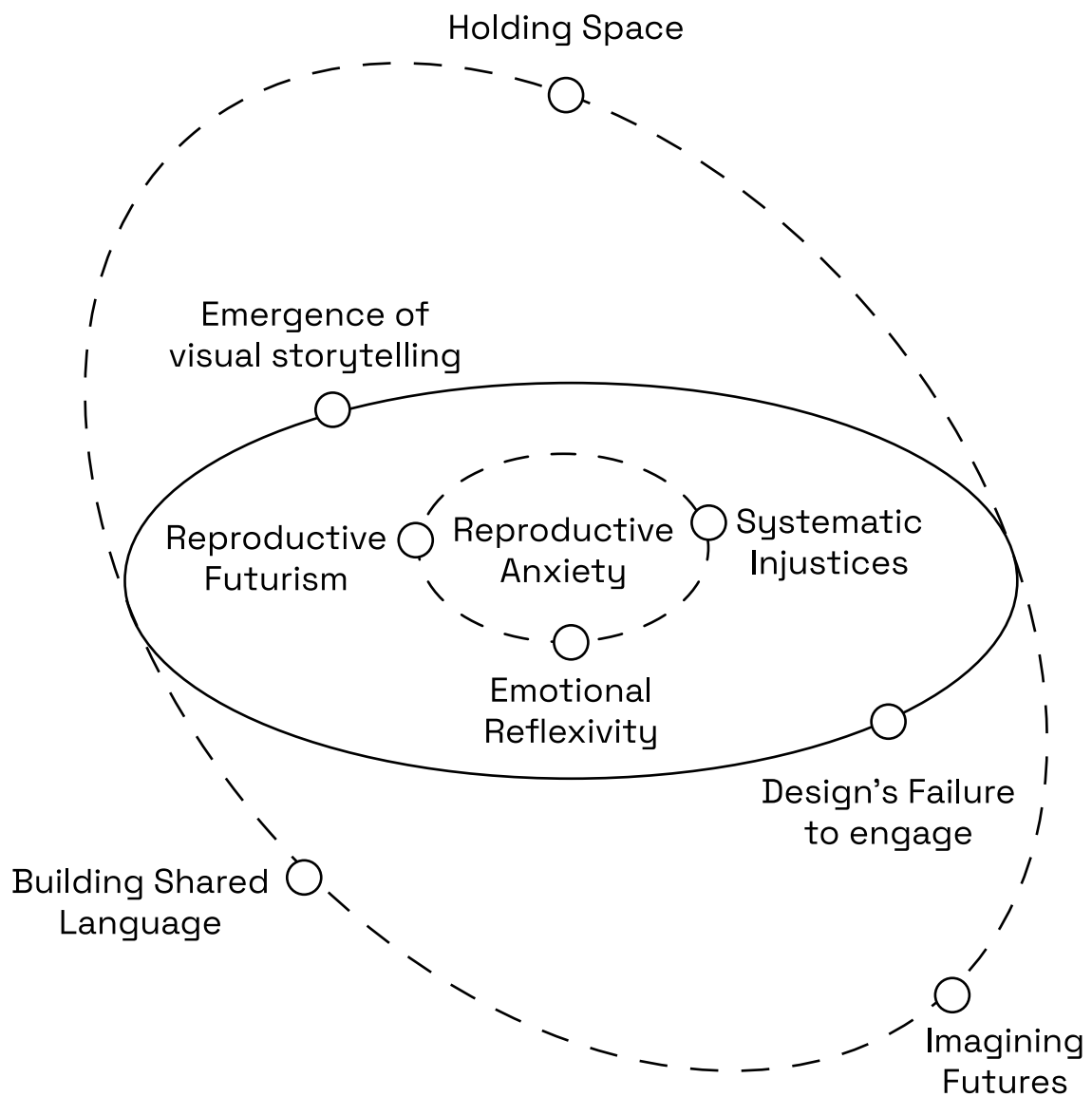


Figure 8

Visual Mapping of Reproductive anxiety in the context of climate crisis.

Note. Murphy, B. (2025). Synthesises key concepts from Section 5.1, [Diagram]. Unpublished literature review, University of Technology Sydney.

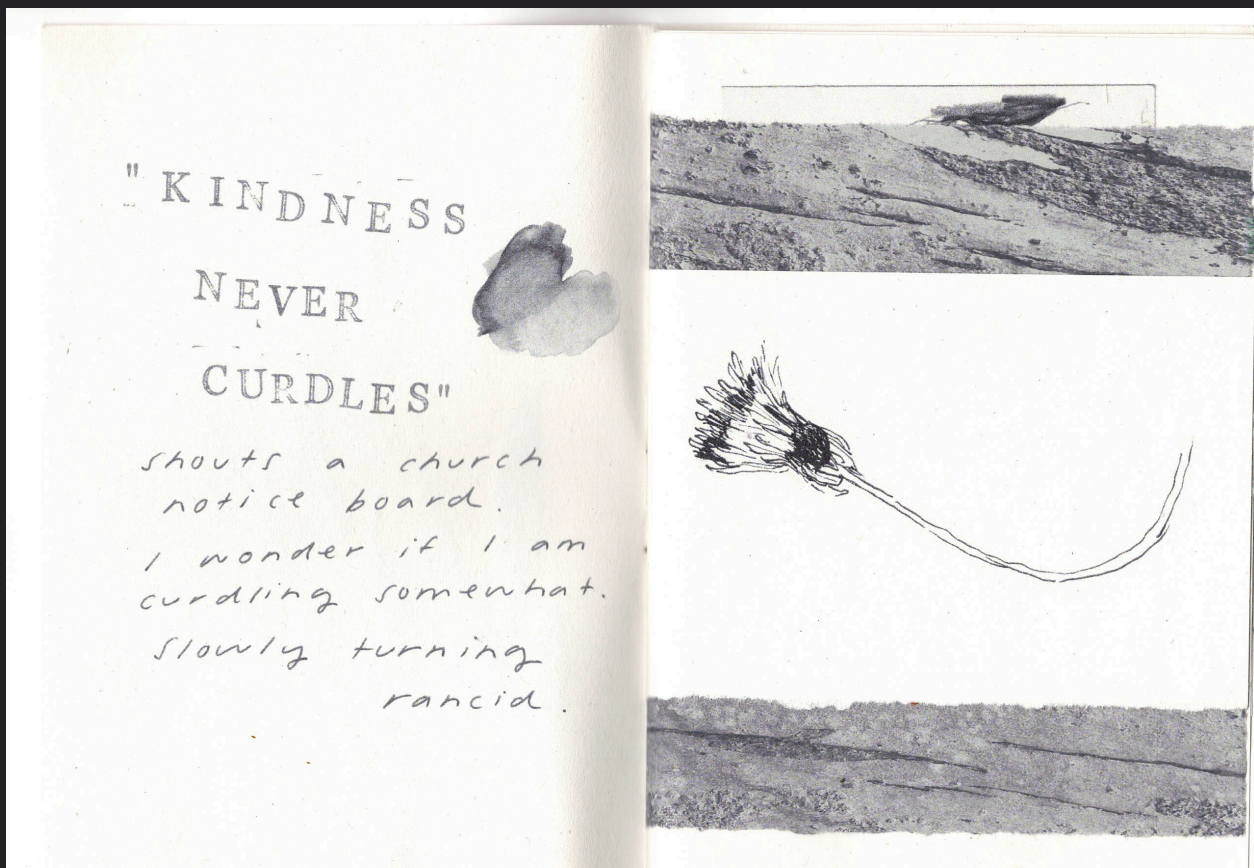


Figure 9

Opening Spread of Scribbles - (SUMMER edition, 2024) by Estee Sarsfield.

Note. Scanned from personal copy with permission from the author.

Source: Sarsfield, E. (2024). Scribbles: Summer edition [Zine]. Self-published.



Figure 10

Spread of Leathery Little Saints (2023) by Fionn McCabe.

Note. Scanned from personal copy with permission from the author.

Source: McCabe, F. (2023). Leathery little saints [Comic]. Self-published.

Hi Bailey,

It is so lovely to hear you. Please include my work, I'm so glad it has resonated with you.

Do you have the full series (I think there are 8 so far)? If you let me know your postal address I can send you any that you don't have.

Kindly,
Estee

Permission Email from Estee Sarsfield (2025)

Source: Sarsfield, E. (2025). Personal Communication.

Hi Bailey,

Thanks for the detailed email. It'd be an honour to be included in your honours project, and I'd love to read it when it's submitted.

I've never taken apart my own work in an academic way like this, so you've already thought about it in ways I haven't yet.

Best regards,

Niki

Permission Email from Niki Banados (2025)

Source: Banados, N. (2025). Personal Communication.

Hey Bailey!

I am so happy and honoured that my comic is a part of your project!

Your text about my work is so dead on and wonderful to read. I'm so happy that my intent is landing so solidly and the way you describe my work so encouraging to me.

Yes, very happy for you to use any of my work.

Do you have a physical copy of Leathery Little Saints? I have a few physical copies if you want one. Happy to pass one off to you (free of charge). It feels so great when work lands meaningfully with someone.

Please holler if you need anything from me other than permission (which you 100% have)!

Your work is great and I would be happy to help however.

Thanks for getting in touch.

best,

fionn

Permission Email from Fionn McCabe (2025)

Source: McCabe, F. (2025). Personal Communication.

Disclaimer: This literature review was produced as part of the Bachelor of Visual Communication (Honours) program at the University of Technology Sydney. It is an unpublished student project created for academic purposes only. While every effort has been made to ensure accuracy, the content reflects the author's interpretations and does not necessarily represent the views of the University of Technology Sydney or any other affiliated individuals. This work is not intended for commercial distribution or reproduction.