

Organising against the end of the world: the praxis of ecological catastrophe

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Abstract

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This thesis explores the role of the catastrophic imaginary in shaping environmental praxis in the UK. Confronted by the threat of a looming climate change catastrophe, environmentalism in the global North is caught in a state of impasse. Despite numerous organising attempts no mass climate change movement has emerged to confront the threat. This absence of a political movement is compounded by the failure of legislative campaigns and the inadequacy of government responses. Environmental praxis appears caught between ineffective practices and a catastrophic imaginary. It is this state of impasse, one as yet to be critically analysed, that this thesis sets out to explore.

The thesis argues that the impasse in environmental praxis emerges from the intersection of the catastrophic imaginary and the limits of activism as a mode of liberal politics that I term liberal utopianism. Exploring a number of specific environmental organisations through a nomadic methodology framed by the practices of multi-sited ethnography, this thesis contends that the failure of liberal utopianism to adequately engage with climate change is in part due to the form climate change takes as a sociotechnical problem and not only an outcome of political practice itself.

Exploration of responses to this state of impasse suggests that it is possible to break from the impasse by transforming the material grounds of the imaginary and envisioning catastrophe as a process of slow violence, and thus amenable to situated political action. This thesis explores the potential recent moves towards a politics of collapse, one I call radical fatalism, hold for environmental praxis. The thesis concludes by suggesting the need for a turn away from the politics of the event and the over-determining valuation of global scales within environmental praxis.

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Abbreviations

| | |
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| 2°C | two degrees centigrade |
| CO ₂ | carbon dioxide |
| COP | Conference of Parties |
| DDT | Dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane |
| DIY | Do it yourself |
| ECX | European Carbon Exchange |
| EDM | Early Day Motion |
| EDP | Energy Descent Plan |
| G77 | Group of 77 (countries) |
| G8 | Group of 8 (countries) |
| GMO | Genetically modified organism |
| IMF | International Monetary Fund |
| MP | Member of Parliament (UK) |
| MSE | Multi-sited ethnography |
| NGO | Non-Governmental Organisation |
| PPM | Parts per million (CO ₂) |
| RBS | Royal Bank of Scotland |
| RSPB | Royal Society for the Protection of Birds |
| STS | Science and technology studies |
| TG | Transition group |

Chapter 1: **The promise of catastrophe**

The organisation of stories, and stories about organisation

1.1 – Introduction: The problem of catastrophe

1.1.1 – Scene 1: ‘We stand with Africa’

It's 2009 and I am inside the Bellacentre conference centre, host to the international climate change meeting COP15. COP stands for 'Conference of Parties' and is an international body composed of those national governments who are part of the UN process on climate change. This is the year the COP will meet for the 15th time to negotiate the international climate change treaty to follow on from the Kyoto protocol. The Kyoto protocol was an international treaty involving 192 national governments that required all signatories to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions. It's Monday morning and I am working for an environmental NGO organising actions and events inside the Bellacentre and outside in the streets in the snow. I've been briefed not to expect that much will come from the COP, that our job isn't to try to make sure we get an international treaty that would address the dire warnings of climate scientists. That's unrealistic. Our job is to try to make sure the wealthy countries of the global North don't use the COP as a way of either avoiding their historical responsibility for greenhouse gas emissions or find ways to profit from climate change at the expense of the global South.

I'm standing in the main hall, the gathering place for media, non-government delegates and minor government officials. I have a blue plastic poncho hidden under my jumper. Around me scattered through the crowd of several thousand people are other members of the NGO, around 60 people in total. I check my watch. It's time. Glancing around to see if there is any security near me I take out and put on my poncho. The others members near me do the same and soon all 60 of us have them on. I start clapping and others follow. We break into chant "We stand with Africa, Kyoto targets now". We chant, yell, again and again. Some delegates join us, particularly those from the G77, or the countries of the global South. The night before a schism had opened up between the countries that wanted to keep the greenhouse gas reduction targets of the Kyoto protocol and those from the

global North who wanted to have 'less ambitious' targets. For many the Kyoto targets weren't ambitious – they were inadequate. But as some people said they were all we had. We were trying to make a stand, to put pressure on the governments of the global North by making a scene. We did it again on Tuesday. On Wednesday we were kicked out of the COP for being disruptive. But today we are doing geopolitics – we are trying to put pressure on the global North by taking a side (or choosing a continent...), and demanding a 'realistic' outcome. The geopolitics of geology gives way to the geopolitics of international relations.

The talks failed however. The outcome is the inadequate *Copenhagen Accord*. Scientists and politicians had told us for months that this meeting was our last chance to stop runaway climate change. We had tried to be realistic, to play geopolitics, to not demand too much.

1.1.2 – Scene 2: 'Nature doesn't do bailouts'

It's earlier in 2009, before the COP, on April Fools' Day and the sun is shining. We are in the city of London and there are thousands of us. The G20 meeting of national leaders, Prime Ministers and Presidents, are in town and we are out in the sunshine to protest. Most of us are at the Bank of England, protesting the just-starting wave of austerity measures governments around the world are imposing, supposedly in response to the Great Recession. I am with about a thousand other people as part of the Climate Camp protest. Climate Camp is both a network of climate change activists and a series of protest camps that existed between 2006 and 2010. We are almost at the end of the cycle of Climate Camps but that's not how it feels that day in the sun. We are occupying the road out the front of the European Carbon Exchange, the place where carbon emission licences are traded and money is made out of the right to pollute the atmosphere. The Exchange is closed. We know the computers have not stopped, and we know there are temporary trading desks set up somewhere else in the city. But we are making connections today between finance capitalism and climate change. About how not only are business and government not doing enough to fight climate change, they are making a profit out of it. And the story we are trying to tell is one where people can come together to stop the profiteering and bring an end to climate change. We underline this with our banner that reads 'nature doesn't do bailouts'. We believe

that unlike the banking system, if the biosphere crashes there is no coming back. If the Earth's climate reaches critical tipping points the change will be certain and disastrous.

But the day wears on. There is bunting and cake and singing, and the Exchange just sits there – a node in a global circuit of financial exchange. The year before we had tried (and failed) to shut down a power station. Actually, we had not yet succeeded in shutting down much of anything. But a system of financial trading is harder to blockade than a power station – at least a power station can be shut down. How do you blockade a virtual market? Talking it through outside the Exchange, the problem seems insurmountable. How do you confront a global 'thing' like capitalism? Or come to think of it, like climate change? My friends and I get dispirited. The task seems too big, too distant. Someone says you have to start somewhere, that we will build a movement and that we can win. Then a cry comes from the other end of the camp. Riot police have lined up against the campers. We all get ready, but it's hard to know what to do. More police surround us all, but my friends and I get out before they can close us in. We hear the shouts as the police close in, battering people who can't get out of the way. The day ends on a note of defeat.

1.2 – Thinking through the impasse

Part of the problem with moments of defeat is knowing if they are really moments where we are defeated, if they are just set-backs that we will recover from, or even if it only feels like we have lost. Defeat like failure is an uncertain and complex thing, one that may provide the grounds for either progressive renewal (Roitman 2014) or a transformation of our form of life (Halberstam 2011; Munoz 2009).

If these moments felt like defeat, they have not yet provided for a transformation of environmental praxis in the UK. This is perhaps because it is unclear what defeat means in a period of environmentalism largely organised around confronting climate change. While innumerable campaigns and actions are taking place both in the UK and globally, there is an abiding sense that they are not enough: that environmentalism is failing to adequately tackle the problem. This sense of inadequacy has not led to a transformation of environmental praxis however

despite the hesitations in the environmental movement about the transformative reach of existing praxes. The contention of this thesis is that this conjuncture expresses a state of impasse within the UK environment movement.

Impasses can result from physical events such as a breakdown in sociotechnical infrastructure or a natural disaster, both of which can unsettle existing systems of belief and certainties (Clark 2010). Responses to such disasters and crises can be highly productive either with regards to forms of social cooperation and autonomy (Solnit 2010) or vis-à-vis governmental and corporate forms of management (Aradau and Van Munster 2012; Fletcher 2012). Crises here hold the potential to renew social life, or to correct misapprehensions and mistaken beliefs. As such they can reveal a limit or an insufficiency in the order of things and thus the possibility of historical progress (Roitman 2014). Crisis is often understood as an event that orders history, making progress possible as limits or internal contradictions are overcome.

Climate change is a crisis unlike other ecological disasters. It occurs not in the present but the future, and when it takes place it appears not as a crisis but as a catastrophe. Unlike a crisis there is no recovery from catastrophe. Nor is there an outside to the catastrophe of climate change – it engulfs the world, making escape impossible. Catastrophe is a historical end point, one “without revelation, a historical void, an end of the road that cannot point beyond itself” (Williams 2011:5). Historical progress is impossible when the world ends. As an event, catastrophe is thus the figure of the limit of both practice and knowledge (Aradau and Van Munster 2012:107). This event is unlike other political events insofar as it is not a moment of possibility but rather of the exhaustion of possibility. One important argument in this thesis is that the relationship between this unavoidable catastrophic future event and ineffective political practices produces the current state of impasse within UK environmental politics.

Impasse is a moment where existing strategies and tactics no longer work while new strategies or tactics have not been invented. It is what Lauren Berlant calls a situation (2011:4) designating “a time of dithering”. A moment of impasse is not framed by existing social narratives, fantasies or imaginaries and is thus a moment without orientation. This recalls Deleuze’s conceptualisation of exhaustion, where

nothing can happen because there is nothing left to happen – the field of possibility has been ‘used up’ and no further connections can be made (1995a). Deleuze also connects such moments to how they are framed – specifically to the exhaustion of our capacity to speak in such moments, to the uselessness of words or the sense of being speechless. Impasse is not purely a discursive moment: for both Berlant and Deleuze it is produced when there is seemingly nothing productive left to do.

This thesis sets out to explore three specific problems that have converged to create this impasse. The first is the construction of climate change and other environmental issues as global problems that are not resolvable at any given scale but the global must be resolved ‘all at once, everywhere’ as I discuss in Chapter 3. The elaboration of these problems as future facts takes place through the earth sciences and is articulated politically as urgent and overwhelming global problems that supersede all others in importance. The second problem is the lack of efficacy of environmental practices on global scales. As set out in Chapters 4 and 5 the tools, such as direct action and legislative and public awareness campaigning, that orchestrated the environmental successes over the previous 40 years have become ineffective when confronting global problems. The third problem is the more general crisis in liberal democracy (Brown 2015), one linked to both the breakdown of the economic basis of social-democracy (Streeck 2014) and the mutual withdrawal of politicians and citizens from political engagement (Mair 2013). All three come together to produce the moment of impasse that this thesis explores, where the activism of environmental politics can neither mobilise a mass movement nor shift Government policy and cannot take hold of climate change as a problem amenable to situated direct action.

My project here is to map and analyse this state of impasse; how it comes to be and how it is constituted. My argument is that the state of impasse is the result not of a depoliticisation of environmental politics (Swyngedouw 2010; 2013) but rather the impossibility of sustaining the practices of the liberal political tradition, in which I include much leftwing political praxis, in the face of global ecological catastrophes. Catastrophe exhausts the liberal political tradition, and undermines not only our conceptualisation of democracy but also political activity itself.

Through a thick engagement with the practices of UK environmentalism I demonstrate that a significant part of the political problem is how we understand environmental issues: specifically, how they are narrated as events. As such, this thesis constitutes a sustained argument against the politics of the event and an exploration of what it could mean to refuse the eventification of political praxis (Chapters 6, 7 & 8).

1.3 – Thesis framework

This thesis is a work of activist-scholarship and militant research (Shukaitis, Graeber and Biddle 2007). As explored in Chapter 2, it goes beyond the partisanship of much critical ethnographic research and clearly ‘chooses a side’, in the sense that it is a work of radical scholarship by and for the broadly conceived environment movement, itself constituted as a porous and diffuse transnational milieu. As such, the orientation of the thesis is towards the milieu and the varied networks, movements and communities that constitute it, with the aim of making an intervention into existing environmental praxis in the global North. It is, at the same time, also a work of scholarship, one that draws equally on radical geography, contemporary critical theory and science and technology studies. While the primary objects of engagement are varied social movement actors, this thesis is not primarily a work of social movement study. Rather, it is an engagement with the question of how environmental problems are constituted, by whom, and what such constructions enable or disable politically.

One central concern that runs through this thesis is the question of failure. Not only is failure both a point of departure for this thesis (section 1.1) and an object of analysis, it is a proposition. As will be explored in Chapter 4, much current scholarship on environmental politics takes up what could be called an affirmationist stance.

Affirmationism names a theoretical orientation (Noys 2010) within social science scholarship focused on environmental politics that works via two conjoined affirmations: the uncritical affirmation of the ‘facts’ of climate change and the affirmation that environmental activism is succeeding, even if what success means

needs to be defined as something other than achieving the stated aims of a particular campaign or action.

These two affirmations share a common political orientation. This common orientation combines a suspicion of negativity grounded in the fear of its totalizing effects with a form of politics that ontologises resistance as necessarily being constructive and affirming (Noys 2010:ix-xii;9-13). This affirmationist stance denies any role to destructive or negative gestures, including encounters such as loss and failure, making for brittle modes of political action and articulation.

As set out in Chapter 4, current literature on climate change politics and activism in the UK sets out how recent campaigns and protests have been successful, despite the lack of obvious campaign success on the issue of climate change itself (i.e., Chatterton, Featherstone and Routledge 2013a; Plows 2008; Saunders and Price 2009). For the most part the question of success or failure is not dealt with in the terms set by various campaigns or organizational goals, which often state that arresting climate change is the primary objective of taking action. Indeed, with a few notable exceptions it is not addressed at all except to outline how climate activism has been successful

The existing affirmationist literature undermines political analysis by suggesting all is well within environmental praxis. The thesis sets out to contest such a conviction, drawing on a range of experiences in the UK environmental milieu and candid accounts of when and how environmental campaigns, actions and practices have failed to achieve their stated aims. As such, it embraces the question of failure as necessary for any transformation of environmental praxis and thus any break from the impasse. In this it is part of a broader turn to dark ecological concepts, radical visions of failure and a political embrace of negation and negativity (Agamben 2007; Clark 2010; Halberstam 2011; Kingsnorth and Hine 2009; Morton 2010). If we take the destructive gravity of climate change seriously as a contemporary condition that demands our engagement, then I would suggest that what is required is a more speculative approach to political critique, one that embraces failure as an opportunity for the renewal of political praxis.

This thesis is a sustained work of political speculation on the problem of catastrophe, one that sets out to work through the problem via an engagement with the question of failure and the limits of liberal humanism. This engagement is theoretically framed, broadly speaking, by critical thought of Deleuze and Guattari, Foucault and Agamben (and those who have developed and extended their philosophies) on the one hand, and the works of a number of science and technology studies philosophers – particularly the work of Stengers, Clark and Haraway – on the other. Much of my account of the imaginary draws on a Deleuzian account of subjectivity and subjectification, one influenced by Deleuze's reading of Foucault's oeuvre (1999), as well as drawing on the varied Marxist engagements with both authors by Jason Read (2003) and Nicholas Throburn (2003). This is not to suggest that these authors, or the works of Stengers or Haraway, are taken up as expressing single systems of thought or unitary bodies of theory. Rather, in a Deleuzian style, my engagement with these authors (and the others taken up in this thesis) is as purveyors of philosophical tools; tools that are meant to be put to work in the world on problems. As such, thesis is not a work of theory but one of following the world, with all of its inconsistencies and breaks, obligations and demands (Stengers 2010).

The philosophical common ground of these theorists is to be found in their constructivist accounts of how agency and subjectivity are co-produced through socio-technical conditions, discourses, practices, the more-than-human world and visions of the future. Within constructivist accounts the subject appears not as a sovereign soul or self but as the outcome of a continual process of subjectification (Deleuze and Guattari 1983; 1998). The subject emerges from the convergence of various relationships and flows – geological, meteorological, biological, social, technical, etc (Massumi 1999:83; Parr 2005:132;274). That these relationships are often (if not always) social means it is never just one body that is subjectified but always more than one – subjectification is a social process. The subject, while produced, is also an agent of production in turn, making ecologies, subjectivities and worlds.

Agency within this framework is not a single or singular thing, but a description of varied and differentiated capacities to act within specific worlds in specific ways

(Mitchell 2002). Crucially, within the framework of Deleuze and Guattari's accounts of subjectification, agency is an outcome of what coheres a subject (1998) – of refrains and abstract machines such as an imaginary. It is a description of the form of the subject in the world, a kind of style or approach to its relationships, or what is called a form of life.

A form of life as the way in which something lives in the world, as a style of being and becoming that refuses to separate life from living, or life from politics (Agamben 1996; Papadopoulos 2010:145; Winner 1986). A form of life is a social subject that is not separable into the social on one hand, with its habits, norms and practices, and the living subject on the other that is reducible, in the final instance, to bare life (Agamben 1998). Forms of life, as ways of being in the world, are tangles of practices, technologies, ecologies and imaginaries. When the practices and tools used by a form of life no longer work effectively, when the world the form of life depends on changes, when the institutions that give meaning to action breakdown, and when the images of the future that orientate a form of life cease to be viable, a situation of impasse is born.

In order to explore the breakdown of particular forms of life in the UK environment movement, this thesis puts the construction of climate change as a global political problem (Chapter 3) into conversation with the legacy of liberal humanism as expressed in environmental praxis in the UK via the imaginary (Chapters 4 and 5). The notion of liberalism that I am working with in this thesis draws heavily on the Foucault's analysis of liberalism and neoliberalism (2004; 2007; 2010) and makes use of recent refinements of his theorisation by Mirowski (2013) and Brown (1995; 2001; 2005; 2015). As Brown sets out, liberalism is a political tradition¹ that brings together the notion of individual sovereignty with its conceptualisations of rights-based personhood and the role of the state as being to secure the freedoms of individuals on a formally egalitarian basis, with the historical framework of technologically driven progress (2001:3-12; 2005:39).

Brown contends liberalism is disappearing as a viable body of political praxis (2015). While in her most recent work she argues that this is largely the result of

¹ For a more detailed account of the history of liberal political praxis see Losurdo, Domenico. 2014. *Liberalism: A Counter-History*. London: Verso.

neoliberalism, in her early work the breakdown in liberal praxis is the outcome of a number of conjoined processes including the political activity of those people excluded from full participation within liberal democracy and the breakdown of socio-economic progress as a historical tendency (1995; 2001). In this thesis I am translating both her and Lauren Berlant's work into the environmental milieu in order to explore how liberalism as praxis endures and how it as a form of politics contributes to the co-production of the state of political impasse. Such a translation also operates as a critique of Brown's radical liberal humanist framework: as such, my engagement with Brown (and to a lesser extent Berlant and Graeber) is a critical usage that seeks to mobilise and extend their work beyond the liberal humanistic framework. This is all the more timely for Brown's insistence that environmental issues such as climate change forms a geophysical limit to the very concept of democracy (2015:209) – catastrophe figures, for Brown, as a limit for democratic practice, one that this thesis sets out to critically interrogate.

1.4 – The imaginary

1.4.1 – Images of doom

Modern environmentalism is often driven by catastrophic imagery – horrific visions of futures that may come to pass if we don't act or change our way of life (Buell 1995:295). As such it functions in an anticipative mode (Adams, Murphy and Clarke 2009a:247), one that uses narration of catastrophe to provoke anxiety as to the future that is yet to come to compel us to act. The use of the imagination in contemporary environmentalism (Buell 1995:285) can lead to charges of dishonesty: claims that ecological problems are either exaggerated or made-up by environmentalists pursuing hidden socio-economic agendas (Klein 2014). Much environmental future visioning rests on scientific claims of factuality (Hay 2002) and thus with the rise of "scientific activism" (Buell 1995:295) in the 1960s, these questions of honesty and factuality extended to debates over what counts as good or proper use of science (Forsyth 2003). These debates do not only revolve around interpretations of science as it translates into political policy and practice (Demeritt 2006), but as to what counts as fact and political rationality tout court. As various fields of science – the earth sciences in particular – have become more

deeply entwined in political debate, scientific facts are considered matters of public concern (Latour 2004b). What is at stake is not only the socio-economic consequences – consequences that either make or break both political and economic fortunes (Klein 2014) – but what constitute valid ways of seeing the future. As a means of bringing images of the future into the present the imagination shapes what kinds of things – problems, lives – we can be attentive to and what kinds of things we are unable to see, thus shaping the forms that our political practices can take (Yusoff 2013:213). As such the imaginary is a political and sociotechnical territory, one that provides the material grounds for political interventions.

1.4.2 – Species of imaginary

There is a significant body of work in the social sciences that productively deploys the concept of the imaginary as both a device for interpreting social forms and processes in a co-constitute manner and an object of research, one that takes recourse to neither ideology nor the reifications of culture (Strauss 2006:322). The common conceptual architecture for many of these approaches to the imaginary is the work of Benedict Anderson (2006a). Anderson theorised the concept of “imagined communities” as an explanation for the existence of social bonds such as the modern nation that emerge through the collective work of imagining community, rather than actual face-to-face social relations. A community is organized not by direct social interactions but through the image of what that community is – its self-description, its described values and norms, etc. For Anderson this work of imagining the nation is a techno-social process, one first enabled by the rise of mass communications media (print and associated print languages) and the emergence of a common temporality that is homogeneous and empty (2006a:24): the time of modernity (Lefebvre 1991).

Charles Taylor builds on Anderson’s account, outlining an imaginary as “the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them... the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations” (ibid:23). These relatively static accounts of the imaginary lack an account of the future, of how the imagination brings an image of the future into the present as an active social force.

Jasanoff and Kim highlight the role that the imagining of the future plays not only broadly in social formations but specifically in the discursive fields of science and technology (2009:122). What they call sociotechnical imaginaries describe “collectively imagined forms of social life and social order” (ibid:120) reflected in the design and execution of technoscientific projects such as programs of nuclear power. Imaginaries in this iteration integrate mental schemes, societal norms, institutional practices and structures, and technical arrangements. Sociotechnical imaginaries are both futuristic and instrumental (ibid:123) and constitute the bounds of realistic and normative future expectations.

The inclusion of images of the future within any account of the imaginary is therefore crucial. Also vital for this approach is the incorporation of non-human elements into schemas of the imaginary. Contrary to the theorisations of Jasanoff and Kim, imaginaries are not bound to the workings of the nation-state but rather are dispersed throughout the social field – or rather, transverse it (Appadurai 1990). In particular, various environmental imaginaries have often formed a vital part of environmental protest and politics, one independent and often opposed to existing social arrangements (Buell 1995; Dryzek 2005). Taking up the work of Appadurai, we could suggest here that such environmental imaginaries are increasingly dispersed around the globe (1990:297), making not only for a “sense of planet” (Heise 2008) as an expression of a cosmopolitan global environmentalism, one concretized through whole-earth technologies (Edwards 2010), but for a series of situated imaginaries that are nonetheless connected across global space.

The imaginaries elaborated by social movements (Guidry, Kennedy and Zald 2000:15) have had significant social and political effects (Graeber 2007; Shukaitis, Graeber and Biddle 2007) – the modern environment movement being but one example (Buell 1995; Dryzek 2005; Hay 2002). Importantly, many of these imaginaries encompass not only positive or utopian images of the future but dark and dystopian ones (Carson 2000).

These environmental imaginaries are bound to the various predictions and scenarios of technoscience, more often than not as part of a work of narrating catastrophe. The variations within modern environmentalism offer a range of

political tendencies, many of which work contrary to the aims of both the state and capital (Dryzek 2005; Hay 2002; Luke 1997). As such the realm of the imaginary is as much one of social dis-organisation and re-organisation as it is of aborescent organization (Parr 2005:14). Environmental imaginaries are contested terrains that necessarily entangle technoscientific regimes and epistemic communities. These contested ways of seeing the future are bound to alternative ways of living in the present (Haraway 1998:190), ways that express modes of both politics and ethics (ibid:192). Competing visions of the future form the basis for competing affective orientations: each vision carries with it an imperative not only to act but how to feel about the future (Berlant 2011; Lockwood 2012).

The various theorisations of the imaginary outlined above all share a common failing. According to Strauss these descriptions of the imaginary often fail to explain how the boundaries and confines of the imaginary are resisted in the present (2006:333). The contestation of the definition and content of an imaginary community is of crucial political significance. In addition to a conceptualization that incorporates the insights of the accounts above, what is needed for political analysis is the development of the concept of the imaginary as a dynamic and contested terrain.

Building on the various accounts of the imaginary outlined above I make use of a reading of the work of Deleuze & Guattari in order to develop an account of how the imaginary comes into being, how it works to organize the social field, and finally how it is contested and breaks down. I outline how the imaginary is a future-orientated technosocial machine, one that emerges to organize a range of social bodies including the UK environment movement. The imaginary is a contested terrain, one that posits the nature of the future as a crucial political problem central to socio-political struggle.

1.4.3 – The imaginary as contested terrain

Despite Deleuze's doubts about the utility of the concept of the imaginary (1995b:65), his work with Guattari does offer a perspective on the imaginary as an organizational form, one that enables a reading of the imaginary as co-produced,

open and politically contested (1998:129; 2012:358-9)². The starting point for bringing their work together with existing work on the imaginary is to outline how the shared “mental reality” (Deleuze and Guattari 1998:129) that organizes subjectivity is co-produced. Subjectivity for Deleuze & Guattari can be described as the capacity to follow a mental reality, or what I would describe as an imaginary. This capacity to follow a mental reality is not passive – following a mental reality is an experimental activity, one actively engaged in making the world. It is also a co-productive activity – as the imaginary is followed it is also reproduced, though not always faithfully and often incompletely, thus crucially transforming the imaginary or opening it up to other images of the future.

An imaginary organizes social practice through two devices – the future-image and the strategy. The future-image is an image of what could be, one that is social and normative (or what Massumi would call habituating – 1999). Individuated act of imagining produces a series of images – both of how the world appears to the person imagining it and how it could or will be in the future (Deleuze and Guattari 1983:28-9). These images are both reproductions of existing accounts of how the world appears and is understood (normative images) and works of fabulation where new ways of being in the world, and new worlds, are envisioned (Bogue 2006; Parr 2005:99). The imaginary as a social form organizes the practice of imagining as a repository of images – of how things should and will be. Not only this, it provides a framework for imagining – what sorts of things should be imagined, what kinds of futures there should or could be. It is a framework of expectations. This framework organizes individuated imaginings by setting out the material for the imagination. This framework is constantly renewed, reshaped or contested however. Not only by the quotient labour of fabulation, but also by broader shifts in how the world is composed.

Individuated imaginings are more-than-human affairs – the imagination works on and through a range of apparatuses and devices. Climate scientists imagine the future through a series of computer simulations and algorithms (Edwards 2010)

² My objective here is not to provide an exhaustive discussion of the connections and disjunctures between Deleuze & Guattari’s works and the concept of the imaginary. Rather I set out where the two usefully connect. For more on Deleuze & Guattari and the imaginary see Massumi, Brian. 1999. *A user’s guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia: Deviations from Deleuze and Guattari*: MIT Press, Smith, Daniel. 2012. *Essays on Deleuze*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

that produce future climate scenarios out of vast volumes of data. They imagine the future by calling on the paleo-climatic work of other scientists and their ice core drilling machines, on the modelling of economists, the accounts and works of biologists, and a host of others. Their capacity to imagine the future is situated and sociotechnical in nature. It is also bound habitually to the future-images of the social forms within which they are located – images of human nature, of economic behaviour, of social dynamics, of lives and lifestyles to be valued.

The future-image is thus a composite image, one that suggests a range of variation of what the future should or could be like. It is constrained by other existing future-images within the “epistemic community” engaged in the construction of ‘the facts’ of climate change (Castree 2014b:6) and the influence of other social imaginaries and norms. It is also shaped by the sociotechnical arrangements that enable imagining the future – from computer models to TV studios to ice core samples. This composite image functions to orientate social forms as a promise of a future to come, a promise that can be either positive (as in normative or utopian future-images) or negative (dystopian visions, catastrophes). In both cases it works to orientate social forms providing something around which to organize a form of life either by attraction or repulsion: something to be realized or avoided.

The second component of the imaginary is the means by which the future-image is either realized or avoided – the strategy. Where the future-image suggests what could (or should) be, the strategy suggests how the promise of the future-image is to be realized or avoided. It is a diagram (Deleuze 1999:30) that sets out how to navigate the world (or rather how to make the world) between the present and the yet-to-be realized future. Returning to climate scientists, if their shared vision of the future is one of a looming climate change catastrophe, the strategy that is within their climate change imaginary might be one that sets out who can act effectively (national governments), how they can act (legislation) and importantly how they as climate scientists can work on this terrain (producing compelling and truthful scientific accounts of climate change). This may not be the only strategy within the imaginary – imaginaries may contain multiple strategies that correspond to the future-image. But more often than not imaginaries contain a limited range of strategies, often bound by how the imaginary frames agency and

produces political (and ethical) scales. The future-image and strategy(s) together compose the imaginary as an open terrain. New relationships, problems, events or sociotechnical arrangements can all intervene into an imaginary, creating the conditions for its corruption³.

1.4.4 – The refrain

The work of cohering individual acts of imagination into the imaginary, and organizing the future-image and strategy, is done by what Deleuze & Guattari call the refrain (1998:311). The refrain is also an answer to the question of how imaginaries form and how they break down. As long as experience conforms to the imaginary, and our concepts are validated by experience, then both operations of the imagination reproduce the imaginary. But when we encounter something that runs contrary to the imaginary, the process of imagination opens up the possibility of either transforming the imaginary or undoing it altogether and creating a new one. The imagination acts as both a relay in the cycle of reproduction of an imaginary and as the site where an imaginary breaks down. The relationship between the imaginary and the imagination is not a direct relationship, but a mediated one. The blurred images of the imaginary are carried to the imagination, and vice versa, by the refrain.

Refrains are “motifs” around and through which social formations (assemblages) are formed (Bonta and Protevi 2006:133). Motif is a word that denotes an artistic or musical pattern, one that works to coordinates the various elements of the assemblage, inducing them to act in harmony. The musical roots of the concept refrain are deliberately chosen as the refrain is above all else a device for creating a melody or harmony (Deleuze and Guattari 1998:312). It could however also be usefully compared to a literary trope – a trope being a word or phrase deployed figuratively, such as a metaphor (Miller 1991:9). Motifs, refrains and tropes are all words that convey a sense of a discrete order, one that works to carry one towards (or away) from the ‘bigger picture’, be it an image, a song, a story.

³ In a more Deleuzian articulation, we could suggest that it is the necessary excess of imaginaries, including the excess that emerges from sociotechnical processes that fabricate “digital earths” (Yusoff, 2009:1010), that enable imaginaries to be contested or corrupted. Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. 1998. *A Thousand Plateaus: capitalism and schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, Yusoff, Kathryn. 2009. "Excess, catastrophe, and climate change." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 27:1010 - 29.

Deleuze & Guattari outline the theoretical progression in the emergence, life and entropic death of a social assemblage through the refrain (1998:312). Things such as bodies, flows of energy, etc. encounter one another, and find a resonance that exists as a refrain. This refrain does not have to be symbolic – it could be a phrase, a practice, a mode of inhabiting an ecology, a cycle in the flows of energy or matter. What matters is that all the elements share the refrain, and reproduce it. In my thesis, one such refrain that coheres the eco-catastrophic imaginary and organizes the various social movement assemblages captured by it is the image of the catastrophic event. The catastrophic event is a shared motif, one that is taken up and enunciated time and time again. It is around the motif of a catastrophic event that many social bodies came together. This coming together is the first aspect of the refrain. That the catastrophic event serves as a basis for continued action and discourse is the second aspect of the refrain. The imaginary is maintained through the repetition of the refrain. It is not just that experience supports the imaginary: the refrains must continue to be reproduced. It is what links the future-image to the strategy. The catastrophic event does not just present an image of the end of the world, it also suggests urgency, a scale of the problem, and a language to engage with it. The refrain is a block of content (Bonta and Protevi 2006:133), outlining both a future-image and a strategy. On its own a single refrain is only part of an imaginary – a number of refrains come together to combine their images and strategies into what will become the imaginary, itself more than the sum of its refrains just as a song is affectively more than its melodies, rhythms and refrains. For example, as I develop in Chapter 3, the eco-catastrophic imaginary is expressed via three refrains – the catastrophic event, often imagined as a flood or some other dramatic disaster; the idea of humanity as a consuming being, again often expressed as a statement of human nature as boundlessly greedy; and finally in the sense that nature has ended, often figured through images of contamination or pollution. These three come together to constitute the eco-catastrophic imaginary, marking out its boundaries and form, and also where it starts to break down as an imaginary as we shall see.

The refrain is the element that enables the coherence of organisational forms such as the imaginary to be established. Refrains co-produce the assemblages' enduring character as well as that of the imaginary. The refrain also serves as the point

where assemblages break down or mutate. The refrain through repetition finds itself resonating with new elements. Connections are made with other refrains, other assemblages. A social movement advocates for economic policies that responded to catastrophic climate change. The Pentagon also takes up catastrophe as a motif, suggesting a new form of war. The refrain of catastrophe here connects two distinct assemblages, suggesting that both must change. The Pentagon outlines a strategy for securing increasingly scarce resources; the social movement shifts to protesting oil wars, connecting energy imperialism to climate change. A mutation has occurred.

The creation of new connections can strengthen the assemblage or transform it. It can also lead to it breaking down completely. This process of decomposition can result from either a shock to the imaginary itself through a confrontation with the symbolic or sublime (Deleuze 1978), or through the corruption of the refrains that cohere it (Deleuze and Guattari 1998:241). How is a refrain corrupted? The definition of the refrain suggests that to corrupt an assemblage means taking up a refrain and drawing it into another connection, one that undermines the coherence of the whole. It is to take the idea or phrase out of context, put the elements to other uses, to render the function unproductive. To stay with the musical theme, imagine an orchestra where one player becomes besotted by the refrain they are playing. They decide to follow it, paying no heed to the conductor or indeed the piece of music they should be performing. The player follows the inclinations of the refrain, playing increasingly out of step with the other musicians. The piece the orchestra is corrupted, and sounds ever more discordant and the player's free improvisation takes over. Corruption in this fashion decomposes the body of the assemblage through a process of excess. The refrain refuses to remain bound by the imaginary and instead sets off on its own.

The idea of corruption offers a suggestion for political praxis⁴. Corruption is the take up of one element of an institution in a manner that ignores how that element fits into the order of things and the rules of how it functions within that institution.

⁴ Corruption as a potential political tool has many similarities to Agamben's notion of profanation, a concept Braun explores with relation to the emerging urban dispositif of resilience. Agamben, Giorgio. 2007. *Profanations*. New York: Zone books, Braun, Bruce. 2013. "A new urban dispositif? Governing life in an age of climate change." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 32:49 – 64.

It is to make it work against the institution by taking it too far, all the while leaving it in place. It means drawing the element into another project, making it part of a different plan, orientating it towards contrary goals. It is a process of unauthorised appropriation or, pace catastrophe, of salvage (Chapter 7). In order to overcome a blockage or impasse, an assemblage must be corrupted. I explore two such moments of imaginative corruption – Transitions Towns and the Dark Mountain Project (Chapters 7 and 8). I set out how both reimagine ecological catastrophe as a way of refusing certain aspects of environmental praxis in order to break from the impasse of UK environmental politics, teasing out how they move away from other forms of environmental politics.

1.5 – Situating this thesis

1.5.1 – Entanglements

This thesis is the outcome of a series of movements, including movements through disciplines and bodies of knowledge, driven by the problem of impasse. Starting with environmental praxis and the matter of how the future was imagined, I worked into current debates within geography, the environmental humanities and science & technology studies that articulate a materialist account of political practice (Braun and Whatmore 2010) in order to produce an account of the role of the imaginary in environmental politics.

For the past 30 years there has been a series of slow disciplinary transformations and the emergence of a number of minor scholarships that explore social relations as the outcome of more-than-human entanglements and arrangements, most notably within geography, science & technology studies and political theory, perhaps culminating with the material turn (Braun and Castree 1998a; Coole and Frost 2010; Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012; Rose et al. 2012). This tendency towards the production of situated knowledges (Haraway 1991) that refuse the culture-nature binary and seek to explore how worlds are co-constructed by human, more-than-human and geo-technical agents has emerged slowly as a counter-current within several disciplines. It rests on a number of developments, but specifically draws on largely feminist developments in the materialisms of Deleuze and Foucault, the work of science & technology scholars such as Haraway,

Latour and Stengers and a number of methodological innovations within social science (Bennett 2010; Bonta and Protevi 2006; DeLanda 2006; Dooren 2014; Kirksey and Helmreich 2010; Star 1999).

While this tendency has been given a sense of urgency by the series of profound environmental and social crises of recent years (Ellsworth and Kruse 2012; Rose et al. 2012), we should be wary of proclaiming crises as the cause of such a development. Rather as outlined by Braun and Castree vis-à-vis geography (Braun and Castree 1998a) and Braidotti vis-à-vis feminism and philosophy (in Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012), such a tendency has been present within a range of disciplines for several decades, and speaks to a number of convergent political concerns. Here I would suggest that the tendency speaks to an attempt to overcome the left political impasse of the late 1960s and early 1970s, or what Wendy Brown has called Left Melancholia (1999), an impasse that in certain respects demands a deeper engagement with the technical and more-than-human aspects of social and historical dynamics.

A key debate within this broad movement of scholarship centres on the question of agency with complex more-than-human social assemblages (Bennett 2010; Coole and Frost 2010; DeLanda 2006; Latour 2004a). Specifically, with the acknowledgement of the active role of non-human things within social relations existing notions of political agency have become troubled. Not only is there an open question as to what to include in the political community (Latour 2004a; Stengers 2010), there is also the question of producing an account of human political agency compatible with the idea that all such agency takes place within a space of “constrained freedom” (Braun and Castree 1998a:35). The constraints interrogated here are not merely those of complex inter-dependencies (Federici 2004; Midnight Notes 1992), but are specific to the current socio-ecological conjuncture (Castree 2014a; Clark 2010).

Two specific political problems emerge in relation to climate change. The first is that the problem of climate change is on an inhuman scale, both physically and temporally (Clark 2010; 2012b; Morton 2013). Individual actions neither ‘add up’ to climate change nor seemingly affect it as a problem. At the same time the non-linear (‘chaotic’) nature of climate change means it is unclear what any specific

action will do vis-à-vis climate change, and that a small action could have drastic outcomes. Secondly, the problem of climate change is not reducible to human actions but necessarily involves non-human actors, including inhuman geological actors. Hence it is not completely amenable to human actions because of the active role of other agents (Clark 2010).

Here it is important to note that the notion of constrained freedom and the problem of agency emerges in large part because of the narrow political terrain of much existing work on the politics of matter (Braun and Whatmore 2010:xxvii). While there is an emerging body of work, most notably within radical geography and anthropology, that explores a range of political frameworks vis-à-vis environmental politics (Lockrem and Lugo 2015), much existing scholarship remains bound to liberal political presuppositions, especially work making use of Actor-Network Theory (Latour 2004a; Noys 2010). As yet unexplored however is the role of liberal political praxis within environmental politics. I explore liberal praxis within this thesis as part of the sociotechnical material that shapes what can be imagined as realistic future possibilities or what Nigel Thrift calls “plausibilities” (2010:139), and thus a crucial component of both political praxis and the environmental imaginary.

The problem of the limits of liberalism as a political praxis emerged during the course of my memory-work specifically around the question of how scalable political agency is vis-à-vis climate change. Throughout this work what manifested was a (commonplace) hierarchical notion of political scale (Marston, Jones III and Woodward 2005), where the local or situated was deemed inadequate as a place from which to act on climate change and the global set out as the only site of possible, realistic political action (Gibson-Graham 2002; Massey 2014:81-3). This globalising scale is an expression of a universalist liberal political logic (Brown 2001; Massey 2014; Tsing 2004), one that is troubled by images of future ecological catastrophes; indeed, it could be argued that climate change and the notion of the Anthropocene (Castree 2014a; Steffen et al. 2011) both mark the limit of this universalist global scale (Cook and Balayannis 2015).

Despite both the exhaustion of the global political scale and the destructive processes of neoliberalism as a project and mode of reason (Brown 2015; Harvey

2007; Mirowski 2013), liberalism lingers on as praxis, particularly within UK environmentalism. As such my interrogation of the impasse within environmental praxis also focuses on how liberalism has been able to endure neoliberalism, especially when other social-political projects have not be able to do so (Povinelli 2011). It is in order to examine this question that I work with the work of Lauren Berlant (2011) and Wendy Brown (1999; 2001; 2015) as theorists of the impasse of liberal political praxis and affect.

This thesis is also engaged in a sustained conversation with work within the environmental humanities and science & technology studies (STS) as they intersect with the politics of ecological catastrophe. Specifically I draw on and work with STS scholarship in order to develop an account of how the science of ecological crises, climate change in particular, is co-narrated as a matter of political concern within an environmental milieu that includes scientists, writer-activists, activist and Non-Governmental Organisations (Clark 2010; Demeritt 2001; Demeritt 2006; Edwards 2010; Jasanoff 2010; Latour 2004b). I also work with the low theory (Halberstam 2011)⁵ of peak oil and the broad non-academic literature produced within this field in order to explore how catastrophe can be understood as a kind of slow violence (Nixon 2011) in order to escape the impasse of environmental praxis (Greer 2008; Heinberg 2005; 2007; Hopkins 2008; Kingsnorth and Hine 2009).

Starting from these excursions I work through accounts of what I would call situated politics – politics that takes place within frameworks that are concerned with how specific worlds are co-constructed, be it through care (Bellacasa 2012; 2015), grief and mourning (Butler 2004; Dooren 2014), or craft, repair and the ontological labour of producing thick justice (Easterling 2014; Jackson 2014; Papadopoulos 2010; 2014; Plumwood 1993). The common thread that I have used to bring these works together is the narration of the necessity of co-producing a proximate political and ethical scale, one that works with more-than-human communities. It is on the basis of this rescaling that the question of making space

⁵ By low theory Halberstam means theory produced from eclectic and eccentric materials – academic, popular, counter-cultural and otherwise. This theory pursues knowledge outside of recognised frameworks, often in pursuit of problematics as yet unconsidered either in the academy or within governmental institutions. The body of work produced around the issue of peak oil is, I contend, a kind of low theory, one rapidly becoming accepted within existing institutional frameworks.

for other 'things' can be taken seriously (Dooren 2014), and that a situated politics that emphasises the point that to be for some worlds is to necessarily be against others (Haraway 2014:47), thus compelling us to care for the worlds we make possible and those that we render impossible through our actions and ways of knowing.

1.5.2 – A specific kind of nature; a specific kind of crisis

There are two approaches within existing social science research (largely within geography and sociology) on UK environmental movements that tackle climate change and 'systemic' environmental issues such as peak oil. The first tendency focuses on providing a positive account of the transformative effects of environmental activism. On the one hand the political framework of climate activists is said to provide an alternative antagonistic (as opposed to consensual) political framework focused on global solidarity and commons-building (Chatterton, Featherstone and Routledge 2013a). On the other hand we also see accounts that suggest the transformative power of climate and environment movements in the UK is incremental – the result of the building of activist capacities over generations (Plows 2000; 2008). Both approaches to the transformative power of environmental activism suggest that environmental activists produce change either as an intervening force that alters what is considered to be possible (McGregor 2015) or as a constituent force that builds autonomous institutions of social power (Barry and Quilley 2008; Saunders and Price 2009). Both accounts merge within the literature not only critically (Frenzel 2014) but in order to place UK environmental activism within broader political tendencies (Feigenbaum, Frenzel and McCurdy 2013; North 2011) that extend beyond informal and grassroots political groups to the understudied area of environmental Non-Governmental Organisations (Doyle 2009; Szarka 2013). While much of this work is largely positive if not celebratory, there are a number of critical accounts that question the radical constitution and capacities of organisations such as Climate Camp (Saunders 2012) or Transition Towns (Brown et al. 2012; Cato and Hillier 2011; North and Longhurst 2013). In addition, there has been some work that has attempted to construct an account of the UK environment movement over time including accounts of how activism transcended

the bounds of local conflicts to become international issues (Rootes 2013), and an account of the milieu in relation to broader societal trends (Dalton 2015).

Such critical questioning gestures towards the second tendency of research on the UK environmental milieu. If we can broadly characterise the first affirmationist tendency as one that positively focused on the specific transformative effects of environmental activism, the second tendency is more concerned with exploring the limitations of the political frameworks used by environmental activists. This body of geographical work is largely conducted through an account of environmentalism as a form of postpolitics (Swyngedouw 2008; 2010; 2013). Postpolitical here signals the transformation of environmental political praxis from one concerned with 'properly' political questions to one focused on technical policy solutions, framed within neoclassical and neoliberal economic orthodoxy, that are presented in place of properly political debate and discussion (Crouch 2012; Valentine 2005). While a much contested concept (Dean 2009; McCarthy 2013; Valentine 2005), this approach has been particularly used in relation to Climate Camp (Schlembach 2011; Schlembach, Lear and Bowman 2012), producing some useful insights on how climate science discourse is mobilised by Climate Camp to often stifle debate or internal dissent.

While the latter two papers break with much of the postpolitical literature and interrogate a specific site – Climate Camp – the traffic between the earth sciences and environmental activism in the UK is little explored beyond noting the adoption and translation of science into activist policy (Schlembach, Lear and Bowman 2012). The processes of scientific knowledge constitution and the mobilisation of knowledge within activist praxis is undertheorised, with the result being an account of UK environmental activism that lacks any substantive discussion of how scientific knowledge of climate change is produced or of the role of environmental activists in producing such knowledge. In addition, the postpolitical analysis tends to treat science as a specific kind of exhaustive fact, one that paralyses political activism and that can only imply technical or policy solutions, an account at odds with the long history of environmental studies, as well as that of science and technology studies (Castree 2014b; Demeritt 2001; 2006; Dryzek 2005; Fortun 2001; Haraway 1991; 1997; Hay 2002; Jasanoff 2010; Latour 2004a). As such,

while presenting a welcome intervention into the collective framework of environmental praxis, this second tendency fails to offer a sufficiently critical account of how environmental activism in the UK both succeeds and fails, and thus what it enables and disables as forms of politics.

To both of these tendencies we could add a more general concern with the problem of impasse in environmental politics that takes place at a medium point between universalist critiques and specific 'localised' analysis. Here we largely find a series of debates and accounts that focus on declining membership numbers in environmental groups or a lack of efficacy in producing legislative changes (Anderson 2010a; Dalton 2015; Feola and Nunes 2014; Plows 2008; Schlembach 2011). As such we find a description of the state of impasse but no explanation for it. This body of work fails to adequately resolve the question of impasse: either the accounts are too general or descriptive, or they lack a sufficiently wide gaze and thus cannot offer an analysis of the impasse.

I would suggest here that this is due to the impasse being located at the level of the imaginary and thus neither a matter of discourse nor something that can be explored within a singular research site. Rather, as suggested by Marcus (2007; 2009), the imaginary is something that emerges across multiple material and discursive locations and thus requires a mobile methodology and a theoretical framework attentive to emergent objects (Bonta and Protevi 2006; Massumi 1999). Research requires an experimental procedure, one that works to make visible or summon into being the research object in order to ask how it comes to be, how it endures and how it produces a state of impasse.

I would suggest that the broader import of this thesis lies in the exploration of how forms of knowing the world shape not only praxis but what kinds of hope we have access to, and what these forms of hope enable and disable politically. While Braun and Castree argue that hope is to be found in understanding how our world is co-produced and how we are situated in a more-than-human world, and thus in the articulation of a politics that, pace Haraway, is neither beholden to a myth of environmental Eden nor a future of technological dominance but rather is attentive to the consequences of how we construct and care for our worlds (Bellacasa 2012; Papadopoulos 2014), I would suggest that such an understanding

may just as easily produce a sense of hopelessness and fatalism. Rather, we need to know how it is that we are produced as hopeless not only despite but through our attentiveness to the world in order to make our way through the impasse of modern environmentalism and engage with ecological catastrophe.

1.6 – Thesis outline

This thesis is a story about stories, specifically of how catastrophic stories are made, told and circulated and about what happens to politics as narrated within a tale of ecological catastrophe. I start by outlining my methodological approach in ‘Chapter 2 – How to imagine the end of the world’. In this chapter I bring my account of the imaginary into conversation with multi-sited ethnography (Marcus 1998; 2007) and memory-work (Haug 1999) as a method of exploring social imaginaries through the work of juxtaposition and bricolage.

In ‘Chapter 3 – The horror of the end’, I connect my account of the mechanics of the imaginary, particularly their reproduction via the refrain (Deleuze and Guattari 1998:312) to the discursive field within which my research sites are situated. I draw out the character and functionality of the three refrains of the eco-catastrophic imaginary, ‘catastrophe itself’, ‘humanity in excess’ and ‘the end of nature’ and outline how they specifically work to orientate UK environmental praxis. I examine the work of a number of specific writer-activists (Nixon 2011) – Mark Lynas and Clive Hamilton, George Monbiot and Bill McKibben – as well as a smaller host of associated writer-activists and scientist-activists. This engagement takes place in three movements working through recent scholarship in science and technology studies (i.e., Edwards 2010; Jasanoff 2010; Stengers 2000; 2010), the work of geographer Nigel Clark on the inhuman scales of ‘natural’ processes and forces (2010) as well as discussions on the naturalisation and construction of limits, boundaries and nature as an object of concern.

In ‘Chapter 4 – Managing catastrophe and counting carbon’ I turn to the first of my field sites Climate Camp. Through a particular approach to memory-work I draw out the various tensions in the Camp’s practice and history, and outline how the state of impasse was produced through the Camp’s praxis and in particular its cruel attachment to a vision of active citizenship. The impasse in climate change

activism in turn undermined the Camp's radical political positioning and induced a shift towards a politics of advocacy over one of direct action. Taking up a number of critiques of global-scale thinking (Gibson-Graham 2002; Massey 2014; Tsing 2004) I contend that a shift away from disruptive actions took place in favour of more politically liberal forms of advocacy. Critically mobilising the work of Wendy Brown (1999; 2001; 2015) and Nira Yuval-Davis (2008) I contend that the impasse of environmental activism as expressed by Climate Camp is the outcome of a politics that rests on the possibility of active citizenship at a point in history when such a political vision is less realisable than ever.

Continuing to trace the idea of making demands on national governments as a means of addressing catastrophic climate change, in 'Chapter 5 – Liberal utopianism part 2' I explore through memory-work a environmental Non-Governmental Organisation campaign to institute a climate change law in the UK. This chapter concludes the exploration of the impasse started in Chapter 4 by turning to an organisation that explicitly rests its hope of solving climate change as an issue on the nation-state. Over the course of the chapter I explore how the public professions of faith in government hid a set of privately held beliefs in the futility of appealing to government and, ultimately, of environmental activism vis-à-vis climate change. I do so through a continued engagement with Brown's work through the use of queer theorisations of both failure (Berlant 2011; Halberstam 2011) and utopia (Munoz 2009), and the necessity and impossibility of both. The end result is the rise of a form of green melancholia, where humanity and human nature come to be blamed for the inability to politically address the problem of ecological catastrophe.

At this point I turn to the details of a specific re-imagining of the eco-catastrophic imaginary undertaken by a tendency within the UK environmental milieu. In 'Chapter 6 – The slow violence of collapse' I make use of the work of Rob Nixon (2011) to outline how the catastrophic event is re-imagined as a long and slow process of social collapse by two UK environmental organisations, Transition Towns and the Dark Mountain Project. I outline how this re-imagining affects the other refrains of the eco-catastrophic imaginary, and what this future-image of collapse suggests as possible political strategies. Specifically, I set out how re-

imagining the catastrophic event as a process of collapse enables a practice of dwelling within ecological crisis and the re-scaling of environmental praxis.

In 'Chapter 7 – Transition Towns' I make use of ethnographic participant-observation within a local Transition Towns group in order to explore their particular approach to the 'inevitable' collapse of industrial civilisation, that of relocalisation. I explore this strategy as an example of what I call radical fatalism, or an approach to social change that relies not on human activism but natural limits to transform society for the better. I interrogate the practices that make up this strategy through the work of a number of science and technology studies scholars (Bellacasa 2012; 2015; Easterling 2014; Jackson 2014; Papadopoulos 2010; 2014) as well as the work of philosopher Val Plumwood (1993). I argue that Transition Towns' approach, while both novel and necessary, falls short of the desire to produce a benign collective form of survivalism by failing to challenge existing social and material inequities.

Chapter 8 continues to explore radical fatalism and the future-image of collapse through my ethnographic fieldwork with the Dark Mountain Project. Here we see a project dedicated to embracing collapse but without the hope for positive social transformation as found within Transition Towns. In its place we encounter a deep belief in the agency of catastrophe itself as a force of social change, one that will correct the horrors of industrialism and necessitate a more intimate, ecocentric form of life. I set out an account of their attempt to use catastrophe and social collapse as a means for transforming social imaginaries – that is as a method – making use of the work of Judith Butler (2004; 2010) and Thom van Dooren (2014), and continuing in my engagement with the work of Plumwood, Papadopoulos and Bellacasa. The Dark Mountain Project ultimately embrace a stronger version of radical fatalism than Transition Towns and are completely reliant on a catastrophic agent to realise their vision of life after collapse. I conclude by arguing that neither catastrophe nor collapse can be considered as unitary or singular events, and that the UK environment movement remains caught in an orientation towards globe-spanning agents, be they social movements, governments or inhuman agents such as peak oil or 'nature' itself.

I conclude in Chapter 9 by outlining the limitations of visions of both catastrophe and collapse, and suggest it is the politics of the event itself that forms the foundation of the impasse. I argue that the politics of the event, along with the legacy of liberalism, is undone by the complexities of ecological catastrophe as a form of slow environmental violence, one that exists across multiple spatial and temporal scales. This complex existence produces an excess that cannot be captured at a global level but rather can only be engaged with by following the specificities of any given problem as it works its way in and through the world. I suggest that shifting focus away from the catastrophic event to the complex unfolding processes that characterise slow environmental violence creates the imaginary conditions for a transformation of environmental praxis. This transformation represents a break with existing liberal political traditions and the cultivation of forms of situated politics that takes the conditions of life as the basis for action over and against the event.

While this thesis covers much ground, it does not cover everything. It focuses on a brief period of climate and environmental activism (2006-2013) and within this period it does not explore all of the environmental organisations or movements of the UK. As the research period of this thesis was ending, a direct action orientated environmental movement seemed to be emerging in the UK focused on confronting and opposing the development of hydraulic-fracturing (so-called fracking) projects in the UK. This could prove to be an opening into other forms of environmental praxis marked by a decentring of the catastrophic event in favour of a concern for what Papadopoulos calls questions of “thick justice” (2010). Finally, my research does not engage with the small but significant body of activist-scientists and their practices in any sustained way. Further exploration of the connections and differences between these activist-scientists and the UK environmental movements would be a fruitful avenue of future research.

Chapter 2: **Working with the end of the world**

2.1 – Introduction

My research set out from the intuition of a problem that first emerged while I was within the UK environment movement. I followed this problem through my research, developing a body of not only theoretical tools but also a specific methodological approach. Working back and forth through my materials, I developed a way of mapping what I call the eco-catastrophic imaginary. Making use of the concept of the refrain I found it possible to set out how this imaginary worked within the environmental milieu, outlining how the future appeared (the future-image) and how the future organized environmental praxis in the present (the strategy).

The work of mapping an imaginary is one of comparison and approximation. By comparison I do not mean the setting up of a standard against which judgments can be made, but rather what Isabelle Stengers has suggested is a process of creating the conditions of a rapport between assemblages (2011). By creating the conditions of rapport, the refrains can be explored through a process of juxtaposition. One practice overlaid on another, one set of phrases over another, one form over another. Juxtaposition is a practice of comparison that relies on the rapport between assemblages in order to produce situated knowledge (Haraway 1991).

The work of building a rapport was not only a methodological one but, as set out in Section 1.4, a matter of bringing together a coherent theoretical framework. Both journeys are processes of political experimentation and both constitute intertwined styles of following the world. The methodological framework I took up at the beginning of this journey was one attuned to the thickness of everyday experience without being contained by it – that of ethnography, or more specifically, multi-sited ethnography (Marcus 1998). Multi-sited ethnography (MSE) is part of the partisan tradition of ethnography (Marcus 1998; Marcus and Fischer 1999) that emerged in response to not only the novel problems of the emerging neoliberal period, marked by anti-colonial, feminist, queer and ecological struggles, but as an attempt by queer, feminist, environmental and radical scholars

to engage with everyday experiences of political struggle and life within a globalised world-system against the colonial and imperial inheritances of the social sciences (Biehl and McKay 2012; Fortun 2001; Graeber 2009; Marcus and Fischer 1999; Ong and Collier 2005; Povinelli 2011; Thomas 1993; Tsing 2004). I brought this current of radical ethnographic practice into conversation with the use of ethnography within science and technology studies in order to thicken the methodological account of agency to include the technoscientific and more-than-human worlds (Helmreich 2008; Kirksey and Helmreich 2010; Latour 2004a; Rabinow 2003; Rajan 2006; Star 1999; van Dooren 2014).

While MSE is the overarching framework, my journey took me into my own past, and thus called for an engagement with memory. A political engagement with memory calls for a de-individualising of past experiences. It calls for a political practice of making private experiences into public affects, a practice common not only to much environmental praxis (Lockwood 2012) but to feminist methodology. I worked with the methodology of Frigga Haug (1999) in order to develop a means of putting my own past experiences into question with others in order to develop the accounts that form the basis of Chapters 4 and 5. Haug's approach to memory-work resonates with the juxtapositional approach used by MSE, and thickens the engagement with the UK environmental milieu by drawing in past events, memories and recollections into the accounts of the present, thus opening up a mnemonic and genealogical context alongside a geographical one.

2.2 – A mixed multi-sited methodology

The research process I've undertaken starts with a particular problem that I have access to and then explores the connections that problem has to other problems (How to apply direct action tactics to climate change for example), things (protest camps), processes and flows (Marcus 1998:16). My research project works through an instrumentalisation of my memories and participant observation fieldwork, supplemented with an analysis of the environmental milieu's literature, in order to map the eco-catastrophic imaginary. The methodological framework I chose at the outset of my project to undertake this analysis was that of a multi-sited ethnography (MSE). MSE as a methodological approach makes use of a range

of specific methods that enable the work of juxtaposition and approximation to map imaginaries (Marcus 2007). After exploring MSE below, I turn to the specific devices I made use of during my research: participant-observation and memory-work. These methods are part of the overall work of juxtaposition and serve to draw together the various elements of the social assemblages and the refrains of the eco-catastrophic imaginary.

2.2.1 – Constructing emergent objects

Ethnography's particular contribution to social science methodology rests on the role of the experience of the researcher (Clifford and Marcus 1986:2; Van Maanen 1988:ix). It is a method for systematically describing and analysing a contemporary culture, lifeworld or framework of interpretation through the practices of fieldwork and writing up (Geertz 1973). Traditional ethnography "privileges an engaged, contextually rich and nuanced type of qualitative social research, in which fine grained daily interactions constitute the lifeblood of the data produced" (Falzon 2009:1). Typically the researcher spends a long period in a single place and draws their data from that single site. The fieldsite is often conventionally considered as a kind of container for the set of social relations being researched (ibid). These social relations are brought into relief and studied through the researchers experience of difference. Ethnography works through instrumentalising ones own experience of difference in order to represent "the social reality of others" (Van Maanen 1988:ix).

George Marcus first proposed MSE as a methodology in order to study the process, ideas and relationships of the globalising world-system (1998). Marcus argued that rather than compare one site to another it would be better to juxtapose research sites in order to "put questions to an emergent object of study whose contours, sites and relationships are not known beforehand" (1998:86). This meant shifting the locus of research from the fieldsite to the relationships between sites, and in doing so took up the challenge of researching trans-local phenomena such as social imaginaries (Marcus 2007) by understanding them as emergent phenomena, and not cultural practices bound to a particular location (Nadai and Maeder 2005).

This approach to trans-local and global phenomena is functionally focused on examining what Collier and Ong call “both the ‘mechanical’ foundations... and the actual processes and structures” of assemblages (2005:10). Collier and Ong deploy a Deleuzian conceptualization of the assemblage as a means of exploring the articulation of different aspects of globalization in specific locales (ibid:4). They situate this particular approach to the assemblage alongside other accounts of the assemblage such as Foucauldian accounts, as a ‘middle range’ theoretical device. Paul Rabinow’s reworked approach to anthropology also builds on a Foucauldian framework of assemblages and apparatuses (dispositifs) (2003) and is part of what Marcus and Saka call a tendency in research that seeks to engage with “the imaginaries for the shifting relations and emergent conditions of spatially distributed objects” (2006:106).

The labour of juxtaposition is thus an additive not differential practice, one that can and does incorporate a number of specific methods in order to fabricate an account of the emergent object of research. In order to map the contours of the eco-catastrophic imaginary, there needs to be a process of ‘following’ a thing (Marcus 1998:16) across various sites using whatever method most appropriate to that terrain.

2.2.2 – Following the world

MSE as an approach is mobile, following a ‘thing’ from one site to another, moving by way of “displacements and juxtapositions” (Marcus 2007:12) and mapping not only the social processes that organize the movement and ‘liveliness’ of the thing, but the range of “actual and possible outcomes” of its functioning (Marcus 1998:69) in an iterative and emergent process.

This movement constitutes what Falzon suggests is the key practical difference between single and multi-sited ethnography, where the analytical direction is to extend social process out in a manner that undermines the boundedness of single sites as opposed to looking to contain social processes within a territory (2009:13). This movement is itself a heuristic model, one that Marcus links back to Deleuze & Guattari’s account of the rhizome (1998:86). One of the crucial characteristics of rhizomes is how they work – via “variation, expansion, conquest,

capture, offshoots” (Deleuze and Guattari 1998:21). Such a movement suggests not only an approach to researching emergent objects, but also a mechanics for how social assemblages themselves function.

Researching such objects requires what I would suggest (following Deleuze & Guattari) is a kind of nomadic fieldwork; not only in the sense that each site of research is only visited in order to be left behind, favouring the relation over the site, but also in the sense that the objective is not to construct a holistic or universal account but to follow the flow of things in order to develop an account of a specific problem (ibid:362). Nomadic fieldwork is a work of situated social science, but one that employs the techniques not of an ordered discipline but rather whatever tools come ready to hand that can be put to work in order to “attend to material[s] and forces” (Bonta and Protevi 2006) that condition the problem under study (Deleuze and Guattari 1998:362).

There have been thus far few efforts to make use of the concept of the refrain in ethnographic accounts (Crociani-Windland 2011; Ivinson and Renold 2013; Palmas 2011). My own approach follows the conceptual schema laid out in Chapter 1 and looks to combine both repetitive discursive and non-discursive practices as the “social correlates and groundings” (Marcus 1998:108) of the refrains. Such an approach is necessarily a work of experimentation with the refrains (Stengers 2008a), where the fabrication of connections requires moving not only across different geographical sites using participant-observation, but different temporalities via memory-work. In addition, the UK environmental milieu hosts a diffuse discursive site in the form of circulating texts and documents that also requires careful analysis as a site in its own right and not just a supplement to territorialized fieldsites. This latter diffused field across sites serves as the departure point for my analysis in Chapter 3.

2.2.3 – Locating the researcher

My position is that of a partisan researcher with dual membership (Anderson 2006b) to both the academy and the UK environment movement. As my research is a work of critical MSE and more broadly located within the radical social sciences, such partisanship does not undermine my research. Indeed, much recent

critical ethnographic research has been built deliberately on partisan foundations (Marcus 1998; Shukaitis, Graeber and Biddle 2007; Thomas 1993). As outlined in the introduction (and in Chapter 1), the actual historical process of research did not include the idea of the refrain or imaginary as objects of research but rather started with an intuition of a problem that captured my attention. Indeed, the concept of the imaginary itself emerged through mapping the connections and relations of the various fieldsites. This is not to say that the imaginary is only a heuristic device. While the imaginary is a social construction insofar as the researcher articulates it through a project of research and analysis, this does not mean they are the only agent involved in its construction. An environmental imaginary, as I set out in greater detail in Chapters 3, 4 and 5, emerges out of a series of experiments and articulations: scientific devices and labours, activist practices, journalism, writing and awareness raising, the organisational concerns of NGOs, questions of finance, of policing and of international law. Which is to say while I in no way discover the imaginary, it should not be said that it is my invention. Rather it is an emergent research object (Marcus 2007:7), one that compels me to understand how the imaginary unfolds (Stengers 2005), to find way to make it visible as I in turn act on and shape it as a partisan researcher.

My overall research stance is methodologically and theoretically critical, in that while I do not set out specifically to address entrenched or 'elite' power structures (Biehl and McKay 2012; Thomas 1993), my research does set out to become a (limited) means of "social consciousness and societal change" (Thomas 1993:4). My focus is on the limits to the praxis of the environment movement as expressed in the current political impasse of the milieu. As such my fidelity is to the political problem of the impasse, a fidelity aided by my dual memberships (Anderson 2006b) insofar as moving between worlds partially dislocates me from both. My assumption is that political knowledges and practices are far from innocent (Haraway 1991:584) and thus require interrogation as a part of a reflexive political praxis.

2.2.4 – Research ethics

In the latter part of my fieldwork, what Marcus outlines as my epistemic partnership or complicity (2007:7) was limited to debates and conversations with

people I had only just met, or knew only for a short time, as often occurs in traditional participant-observation. The first half of my fieldwork was undertaken amongst friends and colleagues from the environment movement. There are a number of potential issues with and advantages to working with friends. McConnell-Henry et al. (2009:3) suggest that one advantage is that research time is not “wasted” establishing a forum in which the participant feels comfortable opening up”. Previous dialogue and relations enable an immediate depth to conversations that often is produced only after much fieldtime in traditional ethnographic methods. To know a terrain well often means that time need not be spent getting to know the field and attention can be turned to more productive questions. There are two potential problems here. The first often identified is that familiarity might disable the ‘newness’ of a site that produces knowledge. As outline above, MSE does not rely on difference as a method so much as juxtaposition, and thus this objection is less relevant to my methodology. If I were to remain in the terrain of the familiar, then it might perhaps undermine even the work of juxtaposition. Therefore there is a necessary balance to be struck between novel and known. However, as Falzon outlines, there is a significant degree to which no site is entirely novel in a world of rich globalised connections (2009:5-6). Marcus’ initial suggestion as to the ‘problem’ that MSE was responding to a suggestion that difference is in fact no longer operative in a globalised world, where difference is now only a matter of degree and not kind (Marcus 1998).

The second problem as identified by Howell (2004:345) is that while close social relations may often produce the richest data they are often also relationships a researcher may feel reluctant to betray through exposure. As Fraser and Puwar note, taking “private moments of exchange into the public realm in the name of a scholarly ‘good’” may result in “a sense of betrayal and disloyalty” (2008:10). My approach to this dilemma is twofold. Firstly I work to ensure that I meet strong standards of ethical practice – data is anonymised, consent gained for use of individual materials, and I ensure that I do not misrepresent or distort the views or opinions of others but faithfully reproduce not only the detail but general sense and context of a statement or position. Where individuals may feel that I have misrepresented or ‘betrayed’ them, I will be able to provide notes and transcripts in order to work through the issue at hand, correct any errors on my part and any

misunderstandings on theirs (Brewis forthcoming). This may not be sufficient to ward off feelings of betrayal however, as it may be my conclusions or analysis that could be the contestable elements: that is, the problem could be a political or theoretical disagreement, not one of fair representation. In this instance my approach is to state clearly and forthrightly my own complicities and alliances, as well as positions, making clear that my location as a researcher is not neutral and thus, as Haraway reminds us, is a way of “being for some worlds and not others” (1997). As a critical insider – a member of the UK environmental milieu – I am focused on where the movement is going and what we can do to face the problem of catastrophic climate change.

2.3 – Research methods

My research and methodological exploration is arranged as a journey instead of a predesigned research programme. My methodology grew iteratively as the intuition that compelled my research developed into a research problem, coming together as a MSE project. The specific devices I deployed to undertake my research, including concepts and theories, also accrued over the journey as I followed the specificities of the refrains across the UK environmental milieu, taking turns I did not anticipate at the outset.

In this section I outline the specific methods I made use of across this journey in a chronological order, starting with the texts of the environmental milieu, moving onto memory-work and ending with participant-observation. This mirrors the exposition in Section 2.4 where I outline the research sites, starting with an overview of the textual materials before moving onto the memory-work territories and finally the sites of participant-observation.

2.3.1 – Memory-work

The method used to explore my past involvements in the UK environment milieu is memory-work. Like much map-making, memory work functions to patch “together reconstructions out of fragments of evidence” (Kuhn 1995:4). My focus here is not on the much contested and debated nature of memory as a thing (Brown 2008). Rather, my focus is on working with memory in order to understand how a

particular way of imagining the future impacted on past activity in which I was involved. This means the process of memory-work takes place on contested imaginary terrain (Stephenson and Papadopoulos 2006: 52), and is explicitly political in its orientation (ibid: xvi). Memory-work is a “multi-sited affair” as “the production of remembering and forgetting... demands research in multiple loci, involving many and diverse types of materials” that often produces a methodological framework that resembles MSE even when it is not explicitly invoked (Hamilakis and Labanyi 2008:11).

My particular approach to memory-work is initially inspired by Frigga Haug’s methodological prescriptions (1999). For Haug, it is the repetitions across individual memories, drawn out through a process of writing, sharing and discussing specific memories, that enables the mapping of common mnemonic points of reference (1999:43). The identification of repetitive elements enables collective political practice as it brings to light those processes and social forms that organize and maintain existing social structures (ibid). The process Haug outlines involves individuals writing up an account of their memory of a specific event or episode, then the sharing of these texts among a collective group, leading to a group discussion focused on differences and commonalities. This creates a situation where each individual’s memories are subject to the “gaze cast by one stranger on another” (ibid), thus echoing the instrumentalisation of experience found in traditional ethnographic research, and my own work of juxtaposition.

The approach I have adopted to working with memory in my research differs from Haug’s. Where Haug starts with a collective work of writing, I start with my own written reflections as a basis for discussion, both with individuals and within group environments. This is because my object is less to create a shared recollection and rather to trouble my own memories of the two sites, and subject my intuition of impasse and its relationship to catastrophe to interrogation. The instrumentalisation of my own memories serves as the common third source of memory-work as outlined by Steve Brown (2008). In this way, I shift the work of interpretation in the first instance to my epistemic partners, and only secondly to myself after the conversations during the process of writing up. The troubling of

my own memories produces an object of common concern – a shared problem but not a collective recollection.

The conversations themselves took place in a mix of public and private spaces, depending on where best suited individuals. As the participants will be associates of mine from adventures past, the setting is less important than honesty as to my purposes, hence the methodological recourse to starting with something I have produced in order to ‘show my hand’ and open the conversation. This also affects the presentation of the material: the contributions of conversationalists are integrated into the narrative alongside my own memories as compliments or series of counter-points, not necessarily presented as consensus but all organized around a similar problematic.

2.3.2 – Participant-observation

Participant-observation is a well-established range of methods that includes direct observation, participation in the activity of the research group, involvement and engagement in individual and collective discussions and the analyses of the documents produced within (or by) the group (Flowerdew and Martin 2005:167-8). At its simplest it involves gaining access to the community or group to be researched and observing what happens in that community: “sitting back and watching activities” (ibid:168) and recording what is noticed and seen in a field diary. While observation is always theoretically informed and guided, it is crucial to excessively record data and make notes – its unclear at the time of observation what details will become later relevant or significant. The objective is to create a ‘thick description’ (Geertz 1973) that makes the context of events clear, and outlines the various roles, relations and practices of the site. The process of participant-observation involves analysis of data throughout the process: what details are important or significant, and what questions to ask or pursue come from analysis. As Emerson outlines, the ethnographer’s role is to “identify and communicate the connections between actions and events”, and thus requires theoretical attention throughout the research process (1988:24-5). I undertook the full range of participant-observation methods across two sites, attending both events (local and national) and regular meetings of groups.

2.4 – Research sites

In this section I outline my research sites. They are ordered according to the narrative structure of this thesis, starting with the literature of the UK environmental milieu where my research problem was first clarified and contextualized. I then turn to the two sites that provide the context of the problem – Climate Camp and an environmental Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) that I worked in from 2007 to 2011. While Climate Camp was an open protest camp through which hundreds, if not a few thousand people moved, the NGO in question has been anonymised as it is much smaller and there are a number of individual professional and social relations to be protected from any unwarranted impacts of my research.

It is my involvement in these two spaces that first provoked the thought of impasse and its relationship to catastrophe, an intuition I explore coming back to my experiences using the method of memory-work outlined above. From these mnemonic sites I set out to explore the edges of the impasse, using participant-observation to look at two specific movements that articulate their approach to environmentalism as explicit attempts to overcome the situation of failure and impasse UK environmentalism finds itself in: Transition Towns and the Dark Mountain Project.

2.4.1 – UK environmental texts

When I first set out on my research it became clear that the various sites I had chosen were all embedded within a broader environmental milieu, one that was strongly marked by the use of both journalism and literature as campaigning tools. This is no surprise, and there are several broad overviews of environmental discourse (Dryzek 2005). My work sets out on a more specific path, in service to a specific political problem. It is nonetheless inspired by the work of environmental theorists such as Dryzek and Hay (Dryzek 2005; Hay 2002), and ecocritics such as Buell and Nixon (Buell 1995; Nixon 2011), all of whom I engage with in Chapter 3.

Much of the future-image of the eco-catastrophic imaginary circulates between sites in the form of text – books, calls for action, campaign materials, scientific

papers and journalistic pieces. While there is a strong case to be made for the impact of fictional works on environmental praxis, I have focused on non-fiction because of the direct role played by such works and their authors on the elaboration of an image of ecological catastrophe. Importantly, I have chosen to focus not only on the texts themselves to map the circulation of the refrains of the eco-catastrophic imaginary, but to also to chart the impact and significance of a number of what Rob Nixon calls writer-activists (2011).

This choice is grounded in the 'relaying' role of environmental writer-activists. As outlined by ecocritical theorists Buell, Lockwood and Nixon (Buell 1995; Lockwood 2012; Nixon 2011), the role of writer-activists in environmental politics is crucial. This is not only because of the central role of practices of publicizing environmental problems or 'raising awareness' play in environmental politics (Forsyth 2003:125), but also because of the specific challenges in making visible often invisible, slow and dispersed forms of ecological violence such as climate change or toxic drift (Nixon 2011:15), a task requiring imaginative works of narration and action (Buell 1995:285). Writer-activists, such as Mark Lynas and Clive Hamilton who I consider in Chapter 3, play a vital role in narrating the crises, current and impending, brought to light through scientific research. In addition, the texts they produce circulate as campaign resources; often serving as introductions to scientific debates and providing campaign resources for groups such as Climate Camp to draw on. Writer-activists are, as the name denotes, also activists functioning as relays for ideas and images within the environmental milieu, or as conduits for scientific research, but as campaigners in their own rights. As such, the writer-activists I focus on in Chapter 3 tend to reappear across subsequent chapters, both as central characters and as reference points. Some writer-activists that feature heavily in later chapters, such as Rob Hopkins and Paul Kingsnorth, are largely absent from my discourse analysis in Chapter 3. This is because these writer-activists (along with others in later chapters) are approached as expressive of their respective movements, and their work is therefore used as a resource for the specific chapters. My intention in Chapter 3 is to draw out via a close reading of a small number of texts chosen from the broader discursive field the key refrains of the future-image of ecological catastrophe.

The texts I examine in Chapter 3 are all well-known and influential non-fiction, science-based texts. Selected from a broad survey of non-fiction environmental literature, they most clearly capture the refrains of the eco-catastrophic imaginary. Those three refrains are the 'catastrophe itself', 'humanity in excess' and 'the end of nature'. I outline each through a common image that they invoke: respectively the image of climate change, the limit and extinction. Here it is important to reiterate that these refrains emerged from both a reading of the literature and my fieldwork. As the refrains emerged they became themselves the tools of critical analysis for the eco-catastrophic imaginary.

While all the texts articulate the eco-catastrophic imaginary, I have made use of them separately through how they express more clearly distinct refrains so as to draw out the refrain details more strongly. In addition each of the texts as well as being well-known and clear in its articulation references the others as a part of a web of Anthropocenic discourse⁶, thus articulating the circulation of ideas in an overt manner. The authors of the texts are themselves well-known as writer-activists, both by the social movement actors considered in later chapters of this thesis (this forming a direct personal link between text and social movement), and the UK environment milieu more generally.

Thus the refrains and the writer-activists all play important roles in producing the consistency of the eco-catastrophic imaginary (Deleuze and Guattari 1998:327). By treating discourse as a practice or set of strategies (Foucault 2002:74), and the discursive plane as a single fieldsite in interaction with the others, I am able to bring the different aspects of discourses of the UK environmental movement into conversation with the specific groups and sites I consider via my MSE fieldwork, strengthening the overall analysis.

2.4.2 – Climate Camp and the NGO

I introduce both Climate Camp and the NGO in question fully in Chapters 4 & 5, where I outline my research on both sites. Here I will outline why they were

⁶ By using the term Anthropocenic discourse I am outlining a broad field of discourse that takes the idea of humanity as a species-agent that acts on the whole Earth as its principle concern, be it focused on energy, climate change, pollution or extinction. My account closely resembles, but is not identical to, that of Eileen Crist. Crist, Eileen. 2013. "On the Poverty of Our Nomenclature." *Environmental Humanities* 3:129-47.

chosen and how my research on them was conducted. Climate Camp was an environmental protest camp and network that existed between 2006 and 2011 in the UK. I was involved as a participant between 2008 and 2011, attending a number of protests and meetings. I worked in the environmental NGO for four years between 2007 and 2011 in a number of roles, including as a political campaigner and in Copenhagen in 2009 for the intergovernmental negotiations on climate change, COP15. The reason for starting with these sites is twofold. The first is that both sites are in themselves significant organisations within the UK environment movement. Climate Camp was perhaps the primary grassroots movement on the issue of climate change during the period it was operative (Monbiot 2007a; Russell 2012). It could be argued that Climate Camp changed the framework of debate on climate change and introduced thousands of individuals to environmental activism (Plows 2008). The NGO has a long history in the UK environment movement, and has worked on a number of significant local and national (and international) campaigns, including, with other NGOs, the world's first climate change legislation, the 2008 *Climate Change Act*.

The second reason is pragmatic. Not only were these the sites that produced the intuition of the problem that orientates this research project, they are also sites that I have sustained and deep access to through my own social networks and connections. In returning to the sites through memory-work, I am able to develop a shared account of the problem, further refining it and developing the context and contours of it. I can do this by mobilizing existing contacts and relationships, thus enabling the kinds of deep reflections afforded by familiar relations as outlined by Howell (2004).

2.4.3 – Transition Towns and the Dark Mountain Project

These sites were chosen as both explicitly set out from the failures of modern UK environmentalism in attempts to overcome them. Both start from an embrace of the idea of catastrophe, and seek to make catastrophe the core of their praxis. As with both Climate Camp and the NGO, I will introduce both sites in depth in Chapters 7 & 8. Transition Towns is both a national organization and a network of hundreds of local groups, which was started in 2004 by permaculturalist Rob Hopkins (Hopkins 2008). Transition Towns take the idea of ecological catastrophe

beyond climate change, the principle figure of the eco-catastrophic imaginary for both Climate Camp and the NGO. They add to climate change the idea of peak oil – that oil production either has or soon will peak, bring about the collapse of industrial civilization (Hopkins 2008). The response of Transition Towns is not to campaign on either issue but to attempt to transform local economies in order to make them less reliant on fossil fuels and more self-sufficient or what they call resilient (Hopkins 2008).

The Dark Mountain Project departs from UK environmentalism in another way. Where Transition Towns attempt to directly engage sociotechnical infrastructure as a political response to catastrophe, the Dark Mountain Project set out an artistic and literary response that seeks to embrace collapse and fabricate new stories for dwelling within the ruins of industrial civilization and what we now call the Anthropocene (Crist 2013). The Project was launched in 2009 by Paul Kingsnorth and Dougald Hine with the publication of *Uncivilisation: the Dark Mountain manifesto* (2009). As outlined in the manifesto, their vision of the future is also one of collapse like Transition Towns. Unlike Transition Towns, they embrace collapse, and argue that ecological crisis is less a manifestation of limits per se and more a manifestation of a disastrous separation from nature and of an ideology of progress (ibid). The focus of their activity is a series of artistic and literary projects, including a number of published volumes or works and a series of gatherings (four in total), running from 2010 to 2013, that set out various visions of life in a world post-collapse. Alongside these publications and events, and like the Transition Towns network, there are a series of websites, blogs and online lists and forums. The Project currently claims a network of 1700 members, with 18 local Dark Mountain groups in eight countries (Kingsnorth and Hine 2013).

I undertook participant-observation within my local Transition Towns group for six months, including attending group meetings and public events, and social gatherings. This was complimented by further analysis of both printed and online materials. With the Dark Mountain Project, over the course of a two-year involvement in the network I attended a two of the national gatherings as well as numerous smaller local events and social gatherings. In addition, I supplemented this work with analysis of printed and online materials and debates.

2.5 – Conclusion

As should be now clear from my exposition, my theoretical framework is itself a work of methodology, and my methodology a theoretical framework. As the chapters ahead progress it should also become clear that many of the theoretical and methodological concepts I have explored in this chapter emerged during my fieldwork, fieldwork itself also serving a dual theoretical and methodological exploration. As such my thesis is very much a work of experimental situated knowledge construction, one that works as a nomadic account focused on finding a path through the current impasse of the UK environment movement.

Chapter 3: **The horror of the end**

3.1 – Introduction

This chapter sets out to map the future-image of the eco-catastrophic imaginary by critically analyzing a series of refrains. It analyses a set of texts that form a common discursive resource for the UK environment movement – from scientific papers to books, films and TV shows to blog posts by well-known writer-activists.

The three refrains of the eco-catastrophic imaginary explored in this chapter are the catastrophe itself (Section 3.2), humanity in excess (Section 3.3) and the end of nature (Section 3.4). The texts I examine in this chapter are all well-known in the UK and are influential non-fiction, science-based texts. From a broad survey of non-fiction environmental literature, they most clearly capture the refrains of the eco-catastrophic imaginary. Each refrain constitutes a co-produced object of concern – a thing that has emerged during the course of my research through an involved practice of experimental co-construction (Stengers 2008b; 2010). That is, the refrains as they appear in this thesis are the manifestation of a particular encounter with the UK environmental milieu. I outline each refrain through a common image that they invoke: respectively the image of climate change, limits and the Anthropocene and extinction.

Peter Hay contends that the genealogical basis for modern environmentalism is to be found amongst "doom-preaching scientists" (2002:16) and not the various philosophers and authors who populate environmental political philosophy texts. According to Hay, the orientation of modern environmentalism is towards the future and not nostalgically to the past insofar as it is not a political tendency focused on returning to a lost Arcadia but one firmly anchored in scientific narrations of human impacts on the more-than-human world (ibid:10).

Talk of limits in modern environmentalism gave way to questions of sustainability in the 1980s and early 90s (Dryzek 2005; 2007). Hay suggests that the eclipse of the discourse of limits was in large part due to the failure of apocalyptic

predictions to come true (2002:185)⁷. Starting in the late 1990s, there has been a powerful resurgence of the discourse of environmental limits, once again hitched to scientific accounts of catastrophic futures. However where once the talk of doom and catastrophe was coupled with the hope for a recovery after the losses caused by human excess, now the talk is of a 4°C future world, empty of more-than-human life and strewn with the exhausted excavations of natural resources: a world in ruins.

The recent resurgence of limit-discourse differs from previous iterations in that it proposes that the Earth itself has undergone an irreversible radical transformation (McKibben 2010; Steffen et al. 2011). Much recent scholarship has taken up the proposed geological name for this transformation, the Anthropocene (Castree 2014a; Zalasiewicz and al 2008), in order to signal the emergence of humanity as a geological force that shapes the Earth on par with other more-than-human processes.

As an element of the future-image of catastrophe, the concept of the Anthropocene proposes a ruined Earth as the horizon of ecological thought (Clark 2014), where every inch of the planet has been transformed, or better yet exhausted, through human activity to the point of threatening humanity (along with innumerable other species) with extinction. This chapter is not concerned with the various debates over the definition of the Anthropocene, and nor are the facts of the Anthropocene identical to those of climate change, peak oil or extinction. I focus more broadly on the image of ecological catastrophe that the Anthropocene speaks to – the concepts of the limit, of dramatic and sudden transformations, extinction and the derangement of human agency. The Anthropocene serves as a useful point of reference for my analysis however, as the problematics foregrounded by the concept are where to locate responsibility for ecological catastrophe and how we are to live on a ruined Earth. Both problematics in turn put forward the question of

⁷ It could be argued that another aspect to the eclipse of limit-talk was the renewal of global economic growth that took place after the incorporation of socialist and post-socialist economies in the 1980s and 90s, the new enclosures driven by IMF and World Bank structural adjustment programs, as well as a number of so-called post-Fordist techno-economic developments such as the shipping container, all of which reconstituted the 'ecological regime' of global capitalism. Arrighi, Giovanni. 2007. *Adam Smith in Beijing: Lineages of the Twenty-First Century*. London: Verso, Harvey, David. 2005. *The New Imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, Midnight Notes. 1990. *New Enclosures*. New York: Autonomedia, Moore, Jason. 2007. "Ecology and the Rise of Capitalism." in *Geography*. Berkeley: University of California, Berkeley.

political-economy, or more specifically, the question of whether or not capitalism and economic growth are compatible with an adequate response to ecological crisis (Hulme 2009; Jackson 2011; Klein 2014). Or, indeed, whether capitalism thrives on the basis of crisis and disaster (Fletcher 2012).

Such considerations lie at the heart of political responses to climate change, peak oil and extinction. But more is at work here than a debate over political-economy. Much Anthropocenic writing outlines a vision of human nature, expressing both its 'essence' and its relation to the more-than-human world (Castree 2014a), as either corrupted by civilization or as naturally rapacious and greedy – a desiring force to be tamed lest the Earth be destroyed (Monbiot 2014a). This conflictual vision of humanity in turn frames how political action is taken – to constrain humanity, to mobilise people to act – or indeed not taken when the understanding produced is that conscious social change will not be forthcoming.

3.2 – Catastrophe Itself

3.2.1 – A 4°C future

In recent years, the notion that we as a species may mitigate or limit future climate change to so-called 'safe' levels has lost much of its valiance. Whereas many early climate change campaigns sort to limit future climate change to 2°C or less as outlined in international agreements such as the Kyoto Protocol or national legislations such as the UK's *Climate Change Act*, the sense that it is still possible politically to achieve such a goal has all but dissipated (Hamilton 2010; McKibben 2010). One of the UK's most well-known climate scientists, Kevin Anderson⁸, has 'done the math' along with fellow scientist Alice Bows and claims that for there to be any chance of limiting future climate change to 2°C – a figure many scientists including Anderson now suggest is too high in itself – greenhouse gas emissions need to peak no later than 2015 (Anderson 2012; 2013; Anderson and Bows 2010).

In this chapter, when citing earth scientists such as Anderson I am not suggesting their statements should be considered as a 'factually true' background against

⁸ In addition to appearing in a number of the texts explored in this chapter, Anderson also makes frequent appearances in public forums, policy spheres such as intergovernmental climate negotiations, and in briefings to environmental NGOs such as the one in which I worked from 2007 to 2011 and is the subject of memory-work in chapters 4 & 5.

which politics takes place. Rather in drawing on their work as both discursive underpinnings of environmental praxis and as political interventions in their own right, I am suggesting we consider the production of scientific knowledge and accounts as part of the process of environmental politics.

The math of climate change suggests that in 2015 (the year I am writing this passage) there would have to be a binding international agreement to limit the carbon dioxide content of the atmosphere to 405 parts per million (ppm). The current carbon dioxide content of the atmosphere is around 400 ppm and thus “to avoid breaching the 405 ppm threshold, fossil-fuel burning would essentially have to cease immediately” (Mann 2014). Given much of the industrialized world remains trapped in economic stagnation, and many of the world’s most powerful governments are fully signed up to a doctrine of not only economic growth but neoliberalism, and the deep linkages between fossil fuel use and economic growth (Midnight Notes 1992; Mitchell 2013), such an agreement appears as unlikely at best, especially given the inadequate existing carbon reduction pledges of most national governments (Neslen 2015).

A sense of despair that we could call climate realism emerged after the failed 2009 international climate change negotiations, themselves touted by some politicians and environmentalists as the last chance to stop dangerous climate change (Gray 2009; Wintour and Sparrow 2009). These failed negotiations were also in many respects the inspiration for this thesis, and as such 2009 features as a turning point in my research, the point at which the supposed failures of modern environmentalism provoked much soul searching and rethinking of environmental praxis (i.e., McKibben 2010). It was after this that many began to think

“we can no longer prevent global warming that will this century bring about a radically transformed world that is much more hostile to the survival and flourishing of life.” (Hamilton 2010:xviii-xix)

There is no one temperature increase that marks the exact point of catastrophic climate change, although beyond a 6°C increase there are few details as to what the world would look like (Lynas 2008:217). 4°C serves as a useful figure for my purposes here as it is at once a figure that before 2009 was treated as

unimaginably catastrophic by many environmentalists and after 2009 as a figure that haunts the present as the likely future of the Earth's climate (Hamilton 2010; Lynas 2008). As such it serves as a minimally horrific baseline of catastrophic climate change, one shared within the environmentalist milieu at a global level.

The following section paints a picture of a 4°C future using the works of writer-activists Mark Lynas and Clive Hamilton. Both authors serve a number of functions that make their work useful for such purposes. Both have outlined what a 4°C would look like in some detail using the most recent and comprehensive scientific documentation available to them. Both are well-respected writer-activists whose work is well read and referenced within not only their national contexts (the UK and Australia respectively), but internationally. Finally, they serve as bookends to the period I am researching: Lynas wrote his book *Six Degrees* in 2007 as a follow up to his 2004 book *High Tide*; Hamilton wrote *Requiem for a Species* in 2010, after the failure of the Copenhagen climate negotiations. Lynas and Hamilton present a 4°C future through two different approaches. Lynas makes use of climate and paleo-climate research to narrate a vision of the future, whereas Hamilton takes us into the world of climate and earth science to show us what scientists think about a 4°C future.

3.2.2 – Mining the past for a catastrophic future

Lynas presents a threefold vision of the future as transformed by a 4°C global temperature rise. First, he sets out how rising sea levels will inundate coastlines, driving a process of mass human displacement

“...judging from the palaeoclimatic evidence from the Pliocene⁹, eventual rises of 25 metres [of ocean levels]... are pretty much inevitable...” (2008:166)

“The destabilisation of both major Antarctic ice sheets could yield sea level rises of a metre or so every twenty years – far outside the adaption capacity of humanity” (ibid:170)

⁹ The Pliocene was the geological epoch that extends from 5.34 million to 2.4 million years before present, and was a period of global cooling. Despite this, it was substantially warmer than the present climate. Archer, David. 2009. *The Long Thaw: How humans are changing the next 100,000 years of the earth's climate*. Oxford: Princeton University Press.

“The pressure on cities will be immense. Inland cities will face a constant stream of refugees from coastal areas, with thousands – and perhaps millions – arriving all at once when major storms hit.” (ibid:165)

This mass displacement will come at a time when the biosphere’s capacity to support extensive human life is severely compromised, and in some instances exhausted.

“Global warming is joined by other mounting threats – including population growth, soil loss, fossil aquifer depletion, and the wholesale destruction of ecosystems – each of which has the potential to escalate into a major survival crisis for modern civilization” (ibid:170-1)

“...agricultural breadbaskets will be suffering declines right around the world by this time, with whole areas knocked out of production one by one.” (ibid:173)

“[in the European Alps] with neither snowmelt nor rain, vegetation will wither, turning the green landscape into baked-earth browns as the grip of droughts intensifies.” (ibid:181)

“The world’s weather will go increasingly haywire, with wilder storms mobilizing undreamt-of ferocity as they strike ever-larger areas.” (ibid:176)

These transformations will increasingly strain existing social institutions and structures, leading to social collapse in many instances.

“With world food supplies crashing, humanity’s grip on its future will become even more tentative.” (ibid:186)

“...it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that mass starvation will be a permanent danger for most of the human race...” (ibid:174)

“History... is littered with the ruins of societies that collapsed once their environments became overstretched...” (ibid)

“In some ways the situation is even worse now because this tie our ecological crisis is truly global... Civilisational collapse, like the blast wave of a neutron bomb, will sweep around the globe” (ibid:175)

This is the future-world as a scorched and flooded landscape battered by ferocious storms of undreamt-of magnitude, where humanity’s future appears as mass migration, conflict and starvation. Lynas concludes by noting that with a 4°C increase in global temperatures a tipping point will likely be crossed, causing runaway climate change.

“Once again humanity could be powerless to intervene as runaway global warming continues to push the world into an extreme – and increasingly apocalyptic – greenhouse state.” (ibid:190)

The conclusion of his chapter on a 4°C world, Lynas suggests that climate change is a kind of catastrophic agent – a force unto itself that once started is difficult if not impossible to stop. There are a number of figures in Lynas’ account that require unpacking. The first is the basis for Lynas’ account, what Hamilton calls his “comprehensive and compelling synthesis” of the science (2010:190). What is the basis and nature of the scientific facts that such accounts are built on? The second is how the scale of the problem is co-produced. As Lynas describes, the problem is global, and affects food production, weather patterns, human migration and settlement, etc. There is nowhere and nothing that is not affected by climate change, and nowhere for humanity to escape to. The third is how Lynas’ description of a series of processes that will take hundreds if not thousands of years to unfold is presented as a series of events. Civilizations will collapse, agricultural sites will be knocked out of production, ice sheets will disintegrate suddenly, the Earth’s climate will be (finally) tipped into a new state.

3.2.3 – The facts of climate change

What makes Lynas’ vision so powerful is not just its compelling language or shocking descriptions but its status as a narration of scientific fact. Equally it is precisely the nature of catastrophe as a scientific fact that drives Hamilton’s account of a 4°C world. Describing a 2009 scientific conference, at which Dr

Anderson presented his vision of the 'brutal numbers' of likely climate change futures (2012), Hamilton writes

"by the time the conference came around, scientific knowledge had developed to the point where the likelihood of the world warming by four or more degrees had moved from the edge to the middle of the probability distribution. Based on all of the evidence, an extreme scenario had become the most likely one." (2010:192)

Hamilton presents an account of scientists becoming increasingly alarmed at what their research indicates the future holds. As he reports, with only a 2°C rise, something that will mostly likely occur by 2036 (Mann 2014), all coral reefs will die off, oceans will rise by 50m, and the methane trapped in the permafrost in Siberia will be released, meaning "we will be toast" (2010:195), and, according to Anderson, a lot of poor people will die. And that is just halfway (2°C) on the way to a 4°C world. As Anderson writes of a the feared 4°C world scenario,

"There is a widespread view that a 4°C future is incompatible with any reasonable characterisation of an organised, equitable and civilised global community" (2012:29).

Hamilton goes on to translate the various emission reduction models into his own set of 'brutal numbers' with respect to government policy:

"If developing-country emissions peak in 2030 and decline at 3 per cent per year thereafter... and developed-country emissions peak in 2015 and decline by 3 per cent a year thereafter, then the world has a 50:50 chance of limiting warming to four degrees." (ibid:196)

These accounts of "doom, constructed in order to avert doom" (Buell 1995:296) are docu-dramatic renderings of particular scientific facts – the facts of climate change. The entanglement of environmentalism with earth sciences (Hay 2002:16;173) is not one where environmentalism reads or misreads the 'facts' however. Both environmentalism and the earth sciences are mutually entangled, the point of common convergence being a shared sense of impending disaster and ecological crisis (Weart 2008:66), one that few outside of the epistemic community

share with the same affective vigour. The state of the global environment is the matter of concern from which matters of fact are derived, reversing the often-claimed passage from scientific fact to political concern (Latour 2004b). As such, the various experiential and scientific approaches to knowing and constructing the world weave together, making for a two-way traffic in both ideas and affects between political and scientific communities¹⁰.

With regards to climate change, this traffic takes place on an abstract and global terrain, blending both personal intimacy and the digital aesthetics of “whole-earth technologies” that enable a global sense of place (Heise 2008; Yusoff 2009) and producing a conceptual scalar gulf between the lived experience of the weather and the fact of global climate change (Hulme 2009). Thus the matters of common ecological concern come to be framed by the abstract and technical languages of those techno-scientific perspectives (Jasanoff 2010). These debates are enabled by and organized through the currency of scientific data (Yusoff 2009:1010), and often via a single molecule CO₂ that acts as a common measure for commensurating differentiated climatic processes. This framing of the problem of climate change tends to reduce political action to questions of policy (Wynne 2010:291) – to discussions over which technical solution should be used in order to reduce CO₂ levels in the atmosphere (Demeritt 2006).

Much of this has to do with how the facts of climate change are constituted. Climate change as a phenomenon is constructed out of a series of calculated approximations using sophisticated computer models (Edwards 2010; Weart 2008). It is for this reason climate is commonly described as time-averaged global weather (Archer 2009:25). And as with many other scientific facts it is inseparable from the instruments and technosocial relations through which we come to know it (Jasanoff 2010; Stengers 2000): in particular, the computer models that we use to simulate the Earth’s climate.

¹⁰ While with regards to catastrophic climate change predictions and the mobilization of images of 4°C the conjoined epistemic communities are scientific and environmentalist, as Shackley & Wynne have noted elsewhere, there is a concurrent conjunction between climate science and climate policy, scientists and government. Shackley, Simon, and Brian Wynne. 1995. "Global climate change: The mutual construction of an emergent science-policy domain." *Science and Public Policy* 22(4):218-30.

The data that we use to narrate the fact of climate change is in a very real sense inseparable from the models we use to understand it (Edwards 2010). It is not the case that we observe the world, then plug this data into a computer model, finally coming to see the processes at work in the thing we call climate change. Climate models and thus our knowledge of climate change, in so far as this is what most of our knowledge of climate change boils down to, exist in parallel to the observed data. In climate science there is no clear distinction between data (the 'facts') and models (2010:433). Climate models start from their own simulations and not observable 'facts' in order to generate what are essentially inductive arguments (ibid:347); in other words, models are scientific fictions that tell the truth.

I am not only suggesting that the construction of climate science involves contestable judgments and practices (Demeritt 2006:462), but that the scientific facts being contested are in many ways themselves fictional, as outlined by Latour (2010), Stengers (2010) and Haraway (1997). This however does not make them any less scientifically useful; climate science would not be possible were it not for the various fictions at play. As Edwards has outlined, climate scientists use a series of proxies for the various elements of the Earth's climate, then construct a series of algorithms that mirror the observed climatic processes, put the two together in a model and 'spin it up', letting it run for a few simulated years. These models are then checked against the observed data to ensure that they match. Edwards suggests that in fact there is no data without the models in a real sense. As he says, "everything we know about the world's climate – past, present, and future – we know through models" (2010:xiv).

Crucially, the fact of climate change is constituted as a global abstraction. That is, not only is it constituted through digital simulation, it also applies universally as fact (Jasanoff 2010:234) thus functioning as a scale-making device (Braun and Whatmore 2010:xxii). The work of climate science co-produces an epistemic scale – the technical apparatuses of climate science, the planetary constitution of the Earth's climate and the specific nature of the digitally simulated Earth that manifests in climate models all work to co-produce the political scale of climate change as an abstract global scale. This scale matches existing global socio-

economic scales, including their hierarchical ordering of influence and power (Marston, Jones III and Woodward 2005:416; Massey 2014:81-3).

The scale of climate change is sociotechnically maintained by a vast machine (Edwards 2010), one that interpellates scientific, government and environmental milieus and requires constant labour in order to secure its factuality. As outlined by Edwards (2010), the narration of climate change facts requires the combined analysis of multiple climate models in order to produce a best-fit description of climatic dynamics: no one model or series of calculations is sufficient. This means that there is never constituted a single, decisive fact that would 'speak the truth' and allow climate scientists to withdraw. If as Stengers argues the power of scientific fictions is to silence those who would argue they are 'only fictions' (2000:79), what we find with climate change is that such epistemic closure does not and cannot occur. As such climate change as a fact requires the continual and active participation of climate scientists in supporting its narration; not only supporting its narration but disavowing climate uncertainty in general (Shackley and Wynne 1996). Hence while the construction of climate models constitutes an "experimental practice" (Stengers 2000:85) that allows them to be presented as scientific facts and therefore distinguishing them from other accounts of the climate or weather (ibid:84), the significance of the facts – what they 'mean' as "matters of concern" (Latour 2004b) is open to dispute (Demeritt 2006:472).

It is the scale of climate change as a global problem that in many ways necessitates the particular approach outlined above, one that opens the science up to processes of dispute and produces earth scientists as the producers of political uncertainties (Stengers 2000:143). At stake here is the political question of who can make nature speak, and who will be listened to when doing so thus conferring social legitimacy (Demeritt 2006; Stengers 2000:81). That climate change is a fact is, in the UK, in little dispute (Rogers 2013). What is in dispute is what the facts 'mean' (Demeritt 2006:472). And as suggested by Hulme, what they mean is deeply entwined with economic and political calculation – with the question of what sort of socio-economic system humanity will inhabit in the future (2009). Or, as outlined by Kirsch and Mitchell, how complex processes are ossified into facts depends very much on who benefits from their co-production (Kirsch and Mitchell

2004). Climate change as a fact is not only a matter of approximation and abstraction, but also of the economic calculus of emissions pathways and the energy intensity of production methods, as outlined by innumerable environmental and scientific authors (Anderson 2013; Hamilton 2010; Hulme 2009; Inman 2010; Klein 2014; Monbiot 2007b; Spratt et al. 2009; Stern 2006; World Bank 212). The economic calculus of climate scientists such as Anderson and Bows (2010) is a process of scale-making (Tsing 2004), one that positions the world economy as a crucial element of a global economic-scientific model of catastrophic climate change.

3.2.4 – Global scale

Lynas' text presents a series of global crises – events of vast geographical scale and importance – through the image of climate change. The problem of climate change is not confined to any one territory but rather exceeds each human political unit. There are several excessive scales at work in this image. The events that populate catastrophic climate change are themselves sublime in scale – ice sheets disintegrate, storms engulf continents, whole agricultural areas collapse. Hamilton paints a similar, if somewhat drier, account of the global scale of climate change and the vast size of the events that populate it, including 'civilisation killing' events such as the sudden release of methane trapped in Siberian permafrost (2010:194). What Hamilton does in a more thorough fashion than Lynas is present the scientific scalings – the vast enterprises of research and the mathematical sublime of the calculations of how much CO₂ we can emit, and when the peaks must occur (2010:4-5). The scientific scale often blurs into an economic one, as the labour of building a global climate simulation involves creating a model of economic processes. Climate change science is at once scientific and economic in import. We can obtain a sense of the obscene eco-scientific scale by turning to the more detailed work of one of the primary figures presented in Hamilton's text, Kevin Anderson.

In Anderson's paper "Climate change going beyond dangerous: brutal numbers and tenuous hope" (2012) he explicitly sets out the vast scale of the problem of climate change. He starts by saying that if the consumptive behaviour of humanity followed a conventional population biology graph, then humanity would be facing

a “sticky end” (ibid:21). He takes for granted the global scale of the problem, as well as the sublime import of the particular events that would populate catastrophe, all well illustrated in the quotes from Lynas’ above in Section 3.2.2. His paper focuses instead on the mathematics and temporality of climate change as catastrophe. Anderson sets out the mathematics of emissions reductions in terms of economic activity. By Andersons calculations there would need to be a period of emissions reductions of 10-20% year on year for fifteen years (between 2020 and 2035) in order to have a 50:50 chance of maintaining the Earth’s climate below a 2°C increase (ibid:24). And as Anderson notes,

“The disastrous collapse of the Soviet Union triggered 5 per cent year-on-year emission reductions for about 10 years – a rate just half to a quarter of what is necessary to give us a 50:50 chance of achieving the 2°C goal”
(ibid:25)

And this reduction would have to happen around the globe, everywhere, at the same time. As he goes on to note, “we simply have no precedent for transforming our economies in line with our commitments to avoid dangerous (or even extremely dangerous) climate change” (ibid:25).

The timetable outlined by Anderson suggests a fourth aspect to the scale of climate change – the impossibly contracted timeframe in which to act, even as we are presented by the long tail of climate change’s effects, which will take centuries if not millennium to unfold completely (Archer 2009). In Anderson’s paper above 2020 is suggested as the final point at which the vast socio-economic transformations required must take place. Elsewhere it has been suggested that 2015 is the last temporal point at which dramatic change must take place (Anderson 2012; 2013; Anderson and Bows 2010). The mathematics suggests that we must act now in order to affect an unfolding transformation of the climate across inhuman timeframes. These four registers of scale – the global terrain, sublime catastrophic events, the dizzying mathematics and the impossible timetables of social transformation – evade human political comprehension. Clark suggests that it is individually impossible to grasp the totality of global ecological events all at once (ibid:152), and that this impossible scale produces a derangement of the ethical and political senses (ibid). These scalar derangements

further compound our inability to grasp climate change at anything other than an abstract level.

As noted by Clark, individual actions do not scale in any rational sense vis-à-vis climate change. Unlike in cartographic scales, there is no smooth transition from one level to another with environmental issues (from the local to the global for example). As with political processes, ecological processes jump between scales, there are ruptures, breaks and incalculable scale effects (Clark 2012b:149; Prigogine and Stengers 1984:160), as well as chaotic feedback loops and organisational processes (Prigogine and Stengers 1984:195-6), that means that unlike cartographic scales the connection between the local, the intimate, and the global or abstract is disjointed and often unidirectional. One is no guide to the other. This is captured, Clark suggests, by the common ethical injunction found in many climate change books to “never to fill the kettle more than necessary when making tea” (2012b:151) as some kind of response to the threat of looming ecological catastrophe. What Clark is gesturing towards here is a confrontation between the aggregate responsibility of humanity for climate change and the singular global fact of climate change – a derangement of political scales, where agency fails to translate smoothly ‘up’ from individual to global expression.

Scale here designates both a framework of understanding and an organizational form. We ‘see’ climate change globally and at the same time it works to organize our practices and actions around a global reference. The lack of equivalence between scales within climate change as a framework further undoes the relation between politics as collective action and personal ethics. Not only is there no clear connection between individual actions and aggregate effect, there is no equivalence between one instance or tonne of CO₂ and another (Clark 2010:113). As Clark asks, how are we to understand the tonne of CO₂ that finally tips the climate over into a near climatic regime? That no single act can be known to be the one that will ‘push’ the Earth’s climate into a new state in advance (nor, given the nonlinear nature of the Earth’s climate, in retrospect), means existing modes of justice and political agency come undone by the deranged scale of climate change that functions without equivalence (ibid:118).

While climate change as a global phenomenon discursively demands humanity think and act on a global scale (Chakrabarty 2009:213), no commensurate political praxis has yet to manifest despite 40 years of environmentalism framed by the injunction to ‘think global and act local’ (Heise 2008). As Buell argues, the dilemma of ecological ‘apocalyptic tales’ is that the problem is often without ‘place’, and thus can only be fixed by “fixing everything” (1995:295) – something that only government appears able to do in most accounts (i.e., Lynas 2008; Monbiot 2007b). In the gap between an aggregate species effect and a missing species agency, climate change figures as a ghostly antagonist, one that haunts environmental actors. I follow Wendy Brown in her suggestion that such ghostly figures indicate a blockage or impasse in thought – an inability to “master” the past and present, and a deep uncertainty as to what either mean in light of the haunting (2001:146). I would suggest that in order to grasp such a ghostly antagonist, many authors, scientific and environmental, have turned to the literary-scientific device of tipping points as thresholds around which politico-economic action can be organized.

3.2.5 – Tipping points

The device that enables the climate to change from one state to another – from the baseline of 1990 to the 2°C increase of 2036, for example – is the tipping point (Hamilton 2010:21; Lynas 2008:189). A tipping point “commonly refers to a critical threshold at which a tiny perturbation can qualitatively alter the state or development of a system” (Lenton 2008:1786). It is the moment that cannot be precisely predicted in advance, that a system moves from one state to another. It also marks a point in time that cannot be reversed such as the collapse and desertification of the Amazon Basin (Flannery 2007:198). Ontologically then, it is a real point insofar as it accurately describes the behaviour of complex non-linear systems such as climatic regimes and ecosystems (Anderson 2010b; Barnosky and al 2012; Prigogine and Stengers 1984). As a concept it is not exhausted by its ontology however.

An example of a tipping point common to many climate change texts including Lynas’ and Hamilton’s is the ‘methane bomb’ contained in Siberian permafrost.

“Perhaps most worrying, the threshold for release of methane and CO₂ from the vast permafrost of Siberia is approaching, driven by temperature rise in the Arctic, which at nearly 4°C is three to four times the global average”. (Hamilton 2010:10)

“The ‘really big giant’, he noted, is the methane trapped in the permafrost in Siberia and northern Canada, estimated to be equivalent to twice the total amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. ‘If this is ever released we will be toast,’ Schellnhuber said” (ibid:194)

“How much will the Arctic meltdown add to further global warming?... what we do know is that the potential amounts are huge, and very, very scary”. (Lynas 2008:189)

“...because of the amounts of carbon in question are so enormous – perhaps as high as 900 billion tonnes in total – even small changes can have a colossal impact”. (ibid:190)

What we find in this example of tipping points is an image of a future event¹¹ that will occur suddenly and transform the world into an apocalyptic greenhouse state. The existence of many climatic tipping points are known, though when and how they are triggered is as yet not clear – they exist as ‘known unknowns’ and thus induce an affective state of anxious anticipation for the future (Adams, Murphy and Clarke 2009b). Tipping points therefore function to accelerate the feel of the process of climate change in two ways. They break the process of climate change up into a series of events, transforming the steady transformation of the Earth’s climate into a series of ruptures with the past. Each rupture is in turn a burst of climate changing activity, where in place of a steady change the Earth’s climate suddenly ‘tips’ over into a new state in a rush of rapid transformation. The science of complexity compels the Earth to speak in the language of events and ruptures – it compels the Earth to engage with environmental politics through the staging of events that human actors can engage with. That is, the scientific work of narrating tipping points is also a political work of narrating an event.

¹¹ Or not. There are reports of giant ‘sinkholes’ opening up in the Siberian permafrost while I write this chapter that, it is suggested, are the result of just such methane releases. See Moskvitch, Katia. 2014. “Mysterious Siberian crater attributed to methane.” *Nature News*(31 July).

We can understand this work of narration through a reading of Nixon's theorization of slow violence (2011). Nixon describes slow violence as those forms of violence that occur gradually, dispersed across geographical space and lived time, and out of sight (ibid:2). Slow violence is often attritional, narrated through statistics and probabilities, and is often not viewed as violence at all (ibid). Nixon outlines a series of examples, including toxic drift and accumulation, radioactive aftermaths, the thawing cryosphere, deforestation, and climate change (ibid), focusing on the effects this violence has on humanity. I would suggest that we could consider these exhaustions of life and the wearing out of populations to encompass a more-than-human world, and invert Nixon's perspective. We could consider slow violence to be a form of violence not only enacted on humanity through the environment, but on the environment through humanity as a kind of unravelling of life or work of extinction (Dooren 2014).

Nixon outlines the political dilemma of the environmental writer-activist (2011:14) as finding ways to bring the story of these forms of violence to the attention of the public (however constituted) in order that it be acted upon. Nixon argues that it is only spectacular forms of violence – an explosion, a shooting, etc. – that Western media audiences see (ibid:13). 'Uneventful violence', such as climate change, has only a weak claim on 'our' attention (ibid:8). Nixon's suggestion is that there is something specific to the materiality of environmental crisis that resists easy incorporation into spectacular media narratives. At a time when the presentation of public discourse through the media is ever-faster and interruptive (2011:13) the temporality of slow violence poses a specific challenge to environmental writer-activists, and all the more so when the very constitution of environmental violence primarily affects those that Butler (2004; 2010) has described as unworthy of media attention, as structured by race, gender and class. The challenge Nixon presents is how to translate slow violence into a narrative form that can capture the attention of political actors.

One solution to narrating climate change as a political event of slow violence is to present the eventual effects of climate change as though they had already happened – to stage a future-anterior event, bringing the image of the future into

the present (Nixon 2011:264). This is what is occurring with the presentation of various future scenarios in climate change texts such as Lynas' – there is a staging of the future in the present, a presentation of images of doom in order to avert doom as Buell suggests (1995:296). But I would argue that such a staging still relies on there being specific political events in the future that can serve to orientate action in order to avoid the catastrophic future imagined in such futures-to-come. Nixon outlines a stunt by the government of the Maldives, where they held a government cabinet meeting underwater to illustrate the future drowning of their islands due to sea-level rise associated with climate change (ibid). This image in turn relies on other sets of images of collapsing ice sheets, dramatic storms and floods, and collapsing civilisations – all of which are organized through the concept of tipping points. At some point, the Maldives will sink beneath the waves. At some point the ice sheets will collapse. At these points, it will be too late, but before them politics is still possible.

Tipping points are thus future moments that enable the organisation of political action around the urgency of their prevention. As they are currently constituted however they also present a number of issues with regards to slow environmental violence. As both Fredrick Buell and Evan Williams have noted, the image of a catastrophic event works to obscure the fact that many people around the globe already exist on ruined Earth, particularly in the global South, in a post-catastrophic landscape (Buell 2010; Williams 2011). As such, the implicit audience of texts such as Lynas' *Six degrees* and Hamilton's *Requiem for a species* is an audience in the global North.

Bringing together the previous arguments on abstraction and scale, I argue that tipping points work to further translate situated processes into the total abstract event of climate change. Tipping points present situated events such as a collapsing ice sheet or a sinking island as the expression of a global phenomenon. They work to render them as local expressions of a global phenomenon, subordinating the local to the global and reproducing the scalar logic of globalization (Massey 2014:81-3). More than this, each local event signals an irreversible transformation of the global system: once a tipping point has been

passed, the Earth's climate will have already switched into a new state that may take thousands of years to be undone, if ever (Archer 2009).

The non-linear processes of climate change and the existence of tipping points seriously trouble existing conceptualisations of human agency (Clark 2010:116-8). Compounding the derangements of scale, the existence of tipping points suggests that it is unknowable just what our actions will result in with any certainty, even if the general tendency or trajectory of (geo)history is well established, thus reproducing the sense of inevitability that accompanies notions of the global within environmental politics (Massey 2014:82).

Hence while tipping points might offer the sense of an event to orientate political strategy around, the event appears inhuman in that it is the expression of a catastrophe over which we have little if any direct control (Clark 2010). Or rather, tipping points as localised manifestations of a global problem suggest that anything less than a global response is doomed to failure. Within the refrain of 'catastrophe itself' there exists a derangement of political scale that poses a problem of agency that must be addressed. Most iterations of the eco-catastrophic future-image, including those of Lynas and Monbiot, propose government or some other global scale political actor as the only agent that may resolve the tension between an existing species-effect and an absent species-agent.

3.3 – Humanity in excess

3.3.1 – A consumed world

If the image of climate change appears within the eco-catastrophic imaginary as the catastrophic effect, then humanity as a species is figured as the cause. My objective in this section is to develop an account of how human excess is imagined as a part of ecological catastrophe. To do so I outline how humanity figures in the works of popular UK writer-activist George Monbiot. As a prominent journalist and writer covering environmental issues, Monbiot is a central figure in the UK environment movement. He also frequently makes appearances at protests such as Climate Camp and intervenes in specific issues such as fracking and airport expansions. I argue that throughout his work Monbiot presents an image of

humanity in excess of the Earth, one that is laying waste to the world. My argument is that this figuration of humanity is the dominant one within the eco-catastrophic imaginary.

3.3.2 – Monbiot's figuration of humanity

In his 2007 climate change book *Heat* Monbiot is careful to not speak about a species and focuses instead on the 'rich' population of the global North. He moves however in later works to a more general thesis of humanity as a "destroyer of worlds" (2014a), a species that destroys other forms of life through its ravenous consumption of the world. This shift from an account of the impact of consumption in the global North to a more general presentation of humanity as the destroyer of worlds I argue is an explicit response to the political failure Monbiot perceived in the response to the threats of climate change and the extinction of the more-than-human world.

In *Heat*, Monbiot outlines how climate change is the result of a "Faustian pact" (2007b:3). The 'pact' is between humanity and the vast solar reserves buried in the Earth: coal and oil. Monbiot makes use of the term humanity, but frequently adds that he is referring to the wealthy portion of humanity located in the global North, and even there his target is the professional and middle classes (ibid:xvii;20;22;205).

Monbiot outlines the cause of the current ecological crisis as the attempt by some of humanity to overcome the ecological limits of life. According to Monbiot, 'our' discovery and exploitation of fossil fuels have enabled some portion of humanity to be released from the constraints of the biosphere for a short period, a period that is coming to an end with climate change and peak oil (ibid:xxi;3;56). As Monbiot writes: "we inhabit the brief historical interlude between ecological constraint and ecological catastrophe" (ibid:xxi).

Oil and coal, according to Monbiot, have enabled us to construct a vast globe-spanning civilization, to perform "miracles" (ibid:3), a point made by many other environmental authors (Diamond 2006; Flannery 2007; Hopkins 2008; Jensen 2006; Klein 2014; Lynas 2008; Spratt et al. 2009). While fossil fuels enable some portion of humanity to live a life of "voluptuousness" (2007b:2), of plasma screen

TVs, monster trucks and holidays on palm-fringed beaches (ibid:xvi), Monbiot argues that climate change marks this life as but a brief moment before we are carried away into the “flames of hell” that will be the climate change future (ibid:2).

While Monbiot often overtly identifies the rich as the true culprits of climate change, he more generally suggests that it is human desire that is the actual problem. This manifests in *Heat* as a matter of who has access to power, and a condemnation of those who know about the problems of their consumption and have the power to do something about it but refuse: what Monbiot identifies as the professional and middle classes, and the environmental movement itself (2007b:xxv;20;22;205-6). Monbiot outlines how even environmentalists that he knows refuse to give up their wealthy lifestyles, despite knowing that it is ‘their’ actions that are destroying not only the Earth but also destroying the poor who are themselves excluded from such conspicuous consumption (ibid). Highlighting their hypocrisy, Monbiot writes that environmentalists in the West act as though “environmentalism is for other people” (ibid:xxv).

For Monbiot this hypocrisy is built on two elements of human nature, elements that in his later writings suggest that it is not the global North but humanity itself that is the problem (2013; 2014a). The first element is the denial of the problem as applying to ‘us’ in the global North (2007b:205-6). Echoing survey and poll results (Chambers 2013), Monbiot notes that many people with something to lose in giving up consumerism deny that climate change will affect them at all. Not only is environmentalism for other people but also catastrophe will affect the poor, not the rich. The power of fossil fuels here figures as a means to escape the consequences of ‘our’ actions. The second element is that as Monbiot describes it, when someone has access to this power to escape both the confines of the Earth and the consequences of their actions, they will not give it up. The Faustian pact thus figures in Monbiot’s work as something deeply troubling – an image of humanity as essentially susceptible to the seductions of petro-power. Clive Hamilton reviewing *Heat* argues that to solve the problem of climate change means changing ourselves, unmaking ourselves as consumers and thus to “experience a sort of death” (2007:92). Indeed, while suggesting that Monbiot has written a

disorientating text Hamilton notes that he has correctly identified the key problem within climate change politics – the psychology of people and their lack of desire to give up what they have (ibid:95-6).

Monbiot concludes *Heat* by calling on us in the West to take up an alternative reading of Faust (ibid:17-9), one that suggests that redemption is possible “by working, with frenzy and agonizing lust” to affect political and economic change (ibid:19). The required change, in Monbiot’s various texts, is realized through government action (2007b:xxv;214; 2008a), but government action will only be brought about through a campaign by social and environmental movements. That is, we must campaign to force government to impose limits on our consumption. This is a campaign that Monbiot describes as:

“a campaign not for abundance but for austerity. It is a campaign not for more freedom but for less. Strangest of call, it is not just against other people, but against ourselves.” (2007b:215)

There is an obvious tension here: if humanity is seduced by the power to escape the confines of the Earth, who will campaign to reimpose them once they’ve acquired such a power? It is precisely this tension Monbiot is describing when he condemns the hypocrisy of professional and middle class environmentalists in the UK. The question of human nature arises not in the matter of assigning blame, but when outlining who will act to solve the crisis of climate change, with Monbiot arguing that no one with the power to do so will in fact take action as it would mean acting against their own interests. It is for this reason that Monbiot calls for the imposition of green austerity by government in *Heat*, a call he repeated elsewhere including at the 2008 Climate Camp (Association 2008). The evolution of Monbiot’s thoughts on human nature are apparent in a later newspaper article, where he describes humanity as a trans-historical force of natural destruction – a “destroyer of worlds” that has driven endless numbers of species to extinction (2014a). In this latter article, Monbiot fully situates humanity as a force in the Anthropocene, leaving little room for doubt as to the cause of our current ecological crisis:

“The Anthropocene, now a popular term among scientists, is the epoch in which we live: one dominated by human impacts on the living world. Most date it from the beginning of the industrial revolution. But it might have begun much earlier, with a killing spree that commenced two million years ago. What rose onto its hind legs on the African savannahs was, from the outset, death: the destroyer of worlds.” (2014a)

3.3.3 – Boundaries and peaks

That the world is constituted by a series of physical boundaries and that human consumption of natural resources exceeds those boundaries, has long been a fundamental aspect of modern environmental discourse (Buell 1995; Dryzek 2005; Hay 2002). As outlined by Buell (1995) and Hay (2002), the original discursive basis for modern environmentalism was a set of scientifically grounded texts, such as Carson’s call to arms against the pesticide DDT *Silent Spring*. Equally famous and influential was the report *The limits to growth* (Meadows et al. 1974). Published in 1974, *The limits to growth* outlined a looming conflict of ‘brutal numbers’: between the growing human population and the finite nature of the world’s resources (Dryzek 2007:49). Its basic Malthusian postulate was that the world’s resources are finite, and that there will be in the not too distant future a need to propose a limit to growth – defined with regards to economic, urban and population growth.

After a period of eclipse in the 1980s and 90s (Dryzek 2005:25; 2007:49), talk of limits has returned to the centre of environmental discourse. The past decade has seen the publication of a number of books on limits, and a spate of films and documentaries on ecological boundaries, climate change being but one. Most climate change texts are stories about the limits to the carbon cycle and our greenhouse gas emissions. To this list we could add those texts on the limits of the biosphere, expressed as the threat of extinction, such as *The Sixth Extinction* (Kolbert 2014), *The Revenge of Gaia* (Lovelock 2006) and films such as *The End of the Line* (Murray 2010).

The core of the resurgence of the talk of limits is to be found in the concept and literature of peak oil, particularly with texts such as *The Party’s Over* (Heinberg 2005), *Peak Everything* (Heinberg 2007) and *The Long Emergency* (Kunstler

2006b), and popular films such as *The End of Suburbia* (Greene 2004). Fossil fuels, and oil in particular, are the key to unlocking the current moment of crisis humanity finds itself in (2007b:3). Fossil fuels are both finite as resources and a means to overcome ecological limits. In this way they constitute a complex and threatening 'gift': they enable people to overcome the limitations of the biosphere, yet themselves are limited and will one day be exhausted as a resource, thus rendering an oil-dependent society precarious (Urry 2013)¹². In addition they also enable the destructive consumerism that Monbiot, among others, claim is bringing about an ecological catastrophe.

While the magic of fossil fuels may be seductive in Monbiot's account, the ecological question presented by the idea that oil is a finite resource is whether or not so-called peak oil – the point in time at which the global production of oil reaches a maximum and begins the slow process of 'running out' – will occur soon enough to 'save' humanity from climate change. While Monbiot subsequently argued peak oil would not arrive in time to prevent runaway climate change (2012b), he does argue that its inevitable arrival will produce a complex disaster when combined with climate change. Thus as Monbiot argues in *Heat*, governments will soon have to start transitioning their economies to low-carbon, non-fossil fuel regimes. This is precisely the argument of many peak oil activists with whom Monbiot has engaged in debate, including Rob Hopkins, founder of Transition Towns. As Hopkins argues, "climate change says we should change, whereas peak oil says we will be forced to change" (2008:37). While there are some in the peak oil community who, in 2007 at least, suggested that peak oil would cause the collapse of industrial civilization in the near-future and thus effectively solve climate change as an issue (Heinberg 2007:145), most take up a variation on Hopkins' position and argue that climate change will eventually radically transform the Earth and civilization as it responds to this altered climate, but that peak oil is a more immediate threat and will definitely 'crash' civilisation well before substantial climate change (ibid).

¹² And thus constitute for Timothy Mitchell the basis upon which an ideology of endless growth or what Brown describes and technological progress can be constructed. Brown, Wendy. 2001. *Politics out of History*. Oxford: Princeton University Press, Mitchell, Timothy. 2013. *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil*. London: Verso.

In 2007 Monbiot and Hopkins argued that taken together peak oil and climate change necessitate a massive and swift 'de-carbonisation' of the global economy in order to deal with both threats. Since then however, Monbiot and 'Transitioners' like Hopkins have parted ways, as debate began to rage over so-called unconventional oil supplies¹³. Unconventional oil is oil produced through any other means other than the traditional method of sinking a well, and including processing the tar-sands of Alberta, Canada, and accessing the oil trapped in shale rock deposits by breaking them apart in a process known as hydraulic fracturing (fracking). The increase in the price of oil per barrel during 2011 and emergence of unconventional oil reserves led many, including Monbiot, to claim that 'peak oil is dead', and that the idea that peak oil would lead to the collapse of civilisation was wrong. As Monbiot argues, "the automatic correction – resource depletion destroying the machine that was driving it – that many environmentalists foresaw is not going to happen." (2012b)

Hopkins responded to Monbiot's piece on the end of peak oil, arguing that the claims of vast reserves are over-stated, and questioning the economic basis of unconventional oils (Hopkins 2012b). Indeed, the basis for Hopkins' argument is that industrial civilization cannot possibly survive without cheap and plentiful oil, a position shared by many peak oil proponents (Heinberg 2005; Hopkins 2008). While the image presented here is not without its tensions, perhaps most notably the failure of limits to check the growth of industrial civilization thus far despite doomsday threats, the image of humanity as sketched by Monbiot is if anything strengthened by the end of peak oil. Peak oil manifests as a failed check on human desires, desires that are boundless and destined to bring about ecological catastrophe.

Within the refrain 'humanity in excess', the nature of humanity itself constitutes a force that escapes all limits. In the quote from Monbiot above, peak oil is described

¹³ That conventional oil production has now peaked is widely accepted in the energy industry. However, recent innovations in fossil fuel production, notably deep sea exploration and shale gas extraction (also called fracking) – so called extreme energy – have caused many to question the existence of peak oil. These rebukes to the theory of peak oil have of course in turn provoked further defences of the peak oil thesis. Despite the controversy, peak theories continue to be widely influential in environmental circles and beyond. Ahmed, Nafeez. 2013. "Former BP geologist: peak oil is here and it will 'break economies'." in *The Guardian*, Andrews, Steve, and Richard Miller. 2014. ""Peak is dead" and the future of oil supply." *ASPO-USA*, Initiative, Extreme Energy. 2013. "What is extreme energy." University of London, Inman, Mason. 2010. "Has the World Already Passed "Peak Oil"?": National Geographic, Rotman, David. 2011. "Peak Oil Debunked." *MIT Technology Review*.

as an “automatic correction” – a limit, in the population biology sense, that stops a population breeding too far past the ‘carrying capacity’ of a given territory (i.e., beyond what the ecology of that terrain can support physically). As Dryzek outlines, modern environmental talk of limits is often framed by a use of population biology and ecological science (2005), a framing that implicitly suggests a figuration of humanity as a single species-agent. This logic is appears throughout the eco-catastrophic imaginary and is implicit in the framings of CO₂ emissions, population growth, resource usage and biodiversity loss as modelled graphically.

Whereas Monbiot’s earlier work set out how it is the demands of the rich that drive ecological destruction, in his later works after the failures of the climate movement in the UK (post 2009), he adopts a more general stance against humanity. As he writes in his most recent book *Feral*, much recent scholarship on past human relations with nature across the entirety of ours species history shows that “there was no state of grace” (2013:7), that humanity has always destroyed the wild. This line of reasoning leads to other formulations of humanity as a pathological subject, one that would, if it could, chew its way through the world. Within the eco-catastrophic imaginary, the question of how to limit human consumption looms large. For many in the movement, including Monbiot, it is this question that compels a turn to government as the only actor that can possible confront the problem global ecological catastrophe at its source by constraining human desire.

3.4 – The end of nature

Nature in the form of resource limits and boundaries appears in the refrains above as a kind of lost object. Through one resource – fossil fuels – we have managed to overcome the other limits to our growth, transform the Earth’s climate and, it has been suggested, end nature itself (McKibben 2003; Steffen et al. 2011; Zalasiewicz et al. 2010). The idea that nature has ended is separable from the notion explored above that humanity, by its very nature, has wrought destruction on the natural world from its genesis. Importantly the claim that nature has ended is not, contra ecocritics such as Tim Morton (2007), a claim that a pre-civilised ‘pristine’ nature

existed without human interference. According to Hay this argument is a straw man, as rarely do environmentalists speak of untouched or pristine nature (2002:173). Much modern environmental writing focuses in on the co-produced nature of nature (Mabey 2012) as well as on liminal environmental spaces such as roadsides and derelict spaces (Farley and Roberts 2012). Taking up environmental author Richard Mabey's characterization, modern nature writing focuses on the entanglements between human and non-human, more often than not with the expressed desire to trouble our received notions of personhood and community (2013). It is the balance of power within these entanglements that is the focus of much modern nature writing; what is perceived as lost is a more-than-human world that is not shaped or subsumed by humanity, and that has a degree of agency that exceeds us. When Bill McKibben suggests nature has ended, what he is referring to is the end of nature as existing beyond us; specifically, beyond our control¹⁴.

3.4.1 – The extinction of summer

Bill McKibben is one of the best-known US environmental writer-activists, with strong connections to many UK-based environmentalists and environmental groups, including Transition Towns, George Monbiot, Naomi Klein, and NGOs such as Greenpeace and the university student group People & Planet. He is a founding member of the global climate change organization 350.org (referring to 350ppm), and is deeply involved in a number of other campaigns including against the proposed Keystone XL oil pipeline project.

In 1989 McKibben published *The end of nature*, possibly the first campaigning book written on the effects of climate change for a general audience. It sets out how humanity, through climate change, is “decreating” the world (2003:xx). Decreating means reducing the diversity of the more-than-human world and reducing the meaning of the more-than-human world as something outside of or beyond us.

¹⁴ This is also the case for Monbiot in his rewilding book *Feral*, where he argues that the wild, as a concept, is about the limits to human control, and that a positive environmental vision is one where humanity confronts a “fiercer, less predictable ecosystem” (2013a:11).

"If the waves crash up against the beach, eroding dunes and destroying homes, it is not the awesome power of Mother Nature. It is the awesome power of Mother Nature as altered by the awesome power of man, who has overpowered in a century the processes that have been slowly evolving and changing of their own accord since the earth was born." (McKibben:51)

Time is crucial to McKibben's vision of the transformation of nature. As he outlines in the opening passages of the book, until very recently nature and the Earth were viewed through deep time – as changing slowly, over generations if not much, much longer. He sets out a contrast between the short history of humanity as a species against the single life spans of trees and lichen (ibid:5), noting how this contrast produces a false sense of comfort in that deep change such as the drift of tectonic plates or the evolution of new species appears gradual rather than abrupt. He then notes that humanity has yet to notice that it has passed a threshold, and entered a new world where nature has ended.

"By the end of nature I do not mean the end of the world... When I say 'nature' I mean a certain set of human ideas about the world and our place in it. But the death of those ideas begins with concrete changes in the reality around us..." (ibid:7)

To suggest that humanity had killed off nature as an independent force (ibid:xiii) was a dramatic statement to make in 1989 when the book was first published¹⁵. As he says in the preface to the revised 2003 edition, the book charts humanity's envelopment of the Earth: where once geological change was viewed as slow, through the lens of climate change it is understood to be fast; where humanity was understood to be small and the Earth large, now the Earth is understood to be shaped as a single territory by humanity. Humanity is large, and the Earth but one planet among many (ibid:ix;3;152).

¹⁵ Around the same period, similar arguments were being made in the social sciences and in science and technology studies by numerous authors, most famously Bruno Latour and Donna Haraway. I would argue that the common basis for both lies less in direct experience and more in the developments of the earth sciences themselves, from which both currents of thought draw. There is, as far as I can tell, little direct traffic between the two currents of thought. This thesis hopes to redress this lack of cross-contamination in a small way. Though it may be, as Clive Hamilton has argued, that the social sciences have no come to and end. It is yet to be seen whether the same could be said for environmental politics, though I would think (and hope) not. Hamilton, Clive. 2013. "Climate change signals the end of the social sciences." *The Conversation*.

Humanity is prefigured in McKibben's text as an Anthropocenic being – the speed with which our species acts and the scale of its actions overwhelm the Earth as a territory; indeed, in the guise of Gaia or Mother Earth, as McKibben narrates in the quote above, the Earth is overwhelmed as an entity by humanity as a force. The overwhelming of the Earth takes place via a series of events that start in the Enlightenment, take off with the industrial revolution, and rapidly speed up after WWII (ibid:4-5) – what has elsewhere been described as the Great Acceleration (Steffen et al. 2004), and is an outcome of both an increase in population and resource use (2003:13). As McKibben describes it, humanity overwhelms nature through pollution: radioactive toxins, DDT, ozone pollutions, plastics and oil spills, genetically modified organisms and most powerfully greenhouse gases (2003:xv;10).

Through these increasing and aggregated acts of pollution that occur at ever-greater scales and speeds the independence of nature is compromised. Where once there were boundaries to humanity's impacts, both in terms of the geographical scale of them and the bio and geological depth of them (we did not previously make fish glow in the dark by modifying their genetic codes...), those boundaries have been overcome and we now face the Earth as a force that has effected and shaped all of it (ibid:xiv-xv). Our impacts are no longer 'locally' containable, they are global (ibid:60). It is not only the fact that the deep ocean contains millions of pieces of microplastic, or that traces of pesticides and herbicides can be found in the ice of both the Arctic and Antarctic, but that with climate change everywhere is now transformed as the weather is transformed. Climate change is the point at which humanity polluted the world, marking a qualitative threshold over which the sheer quantity of pollution has carried us, and thus ending nature (ibid).

As suggested in the quotes above, McKibben does not hold to a crude figuration of nature. Rather, nature exists as a set of relatively independent forces and relationships upon which humanity has constructed an image of 'nature' or the wild, a reflexive understanding that mirrors much recent work on the construction of nature within the social sciences (Braun and Castree 1998b; Castree 2014b). McKibben sets out how, starting with the Enlightenment and ending with the emergence of climate change, humanity has separated itself from the rest of nature

and progressively eroded the autonomy of the more-than-human world¹⁶. This resulted in the eventual loss of nature as an independent force, and with it something of profound importance for environmental politics.

“A child born now will never know a natural summer, a natural autumn, winter or spring. Summer is going extinct, to be replaced by something else that will be called ‘summer’.”(ibid:61)

McKibben argues that the meaning of nature was its independence from us (ibid). As he notes, there have been numerous ecological catastrophes prior to the rise of human civilization. And he is not making a point about the essential separability of nature from human society. Indeed like many environmental scholars (Merchant 1990; Plumwood 1993) he argues that the human-nature dyad is an artefact of the Enlightenment, one that created the cultural grounds for the destruction of nature. What he is arguing is that the foundational separation between humanity and nature has come to an end (ibid:68). This has two meanings. The first is that the distinct histories of human society and nature have now collapsed into each other – there is no separate ‘natural’ history anymore in McKibben’s reckoning¹⁷. Secondly, and more profoundly, where once humanity was subject to the forces of nature in an uneven relationship, and humanity’s effects on the biosphere bound to specific places, McKibben is suggesting that now the reverse is the case – that humanity shapes the Earth, and may be subject to localized set-backs and disasters, but that our global civilization now has the capacity to ‘ride out’ local disruptions. Turning to the works of writer-activists Tim Flannery and George Monbiot, we could suggest here that the capacity to ‘eat the future’ and undermine our own ecologies has expanded to encompass the globe, thus making us not the future eaters of Flannery’s text (2000), but the world destroyers of Monbiot’s (2014a). The outcome of this qualitative transformation is the emergence of a new world that subjects humanity to global disasters, most notably climate change – disasters that threaten humanity as a species (ibid:108).

¹⁶ Again an account that mirrors critical academic accounts of the Enlightenment and Modernity. Merchant, Carolyn. 1990. *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*. New York: Harper Collins, Moore, Jason. 2015. *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital*. London: Verso, Plumwood, Val. 1993. *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. London: Routledge.

¹⁷ Here McKibben could be said to have prefigured Dipesh Chakrabarty’s argument about the end of separate human and natural histories. Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 2009. “The climate of history: Four theses.” *Critical Inquiry* 35(2):197-222.

McKibben returned to this theme in his book *Eaarth: making a life on a tough new planet* (2010). He outlines how the planet we now inhabit is different in a number of crucial respects to the one we inhabited for the first 200,000 years of human existence, give or take a few centuries. Where in *The end of nature* he invoked a sadness at the loss of nature (2003:xix), in *Eaarth* he says this sadness has turned to fear (2010:xii).

“We need now to understand the world we’ve created, and consider—urgently—how to live in it. We can’t simply keep stacking boulders against the change that’s coming on every front; we’ll need to figure out what parts of our lives and our ideologies we must abandon so that we can protect the core of our societies and civilizations.” (ibid:xiv).

McKibben is calling for a project of reconciling to the world we have created and learning to live within it, post-nature. He is, like Clive Hamilton, calling for action to stop things getting worse. McKibben outlines in chapter 2 of *Eaarth* how humanity has pushed beyond the limits of the biosphere, and that the new *Eaarth* can no longer sustain the economic growth that defined human civilization from the industrial revolution until today. That is, we have altered the planet and with it undermined our capacity to live on it, and now face the real possibility of the collapse of civilization. He suggests, in an interview on the book in *Scientific American* (Mirsky 2010), that we have hit the limits to growth that were first outlined in the 1970s (Meadows et al. 1974). The end of nature here is more than a matter of pollution – it is a question of extinction.

“We cut down the greatest temperate forests in the world and drove to the edge of extinction the greatest herds of buffalo and flocks of birds the world has ever seen.” (2010:112)

Published between McKibben’s two texts was the *Millennium ecosystem assessment* – a four-year study conducted by 1,300 scientists to assess the health of Earth’s biosphere. The conclusions weren’t positive. Of the twenty-four ecosystems that scientists thought essential to human life, fifteen were being pushed beyond their sustainable limits towards a state of collapse. McKibben, in co-edited book *Earth*

under fire (Braasch and McKibben 2007), describes the conclusions of the report as claiming that humanity has worn down and depleted the Earth (ibid:162).

As imagined through popular nature documentaries such as the BBC's *Planet earth* (Fotherill 2006), and environmental science books such as *The sixth extinction* (Kolbert 2014), the depletion of the Earth manifests as the extinction of the more-than-human world. Nature has been physically lost, and no amount of campaigning will bring it back. This loss is measurable not only numerically, but in terms of diversity as the biota of Ea(a)rth is becoming massively simplified (2010:220).

McKibben et al. all suggest that the political task on our new 'Eaarth' is to ensure the survival of the remaining species, starting with humanity. This is what appears at the end of the eco-catastrophic imaginary: an overriding concern with the threat of human extinction. The suggestion is that the various processes humanity has unintentionally brought into being, captured by the concept of the Anthropocene, demonstrate not mastery over nature but that we have accidentally broken the world, producing a geological epoch that constitutes one long environmental disaster (Clark 2014). The politics of ecological catastrophe is situated in this space of accident and break-down. McKibben suggests as much in *Eaarth* by describing the transformation of our planet from an oasis to a "desert", suggesting that while the planet itself may survive, we might not (ibid).

3.4.2 – Dreams of extinction

In this final refrain the point of departure is the failure of environmental politics, what has been lost, not won; specifically, the failure to stop nature coming to an end. Like Hamilton, McKibben marks the failed COP15 negotiations of 2009 as a turning point – a moment the climate crisis was resolved not for the better but for the worse (2010). The political problem of the refrain 'the end of nature' is that of how to act when it is already too late. When the political objective appears as not making things worse, or fighting to limit how bad things will get, it mobilizes a weak form of hope. In this case, I would argue, the politics of the future are far from utopian and feel grimly realistic. Pollution and extinction occupy the language of the refrain, with our current epoch existing at the point at which pollution makes a qualitative jump from local to global, from bounded to excessive

to the Earth. And with it there is an affective movement from sadness at the loss of nature to a fear of our own extinction.

The lament for a lost nature found in McKibben's writing is not a Romantic¹⁸ lament but rather a sadness at the apparent total domestication of the more-than-human world. This lament manifests in two ways. The first is as a lament for a relationship that has been lost. Lost not only to extinction or destruction, but lost in a substantive sense as even those ecosystems that remain have been silenced. In 2013 the RSPB published their *State of Nature* report (Burns et al. 2013). It paints a picture of a territory barren in life, where far more species are declining than recovering, let alone increasing (ibid). As reported in *The Guardian*, "an unprecedented stock take of UK wildlife has revealed that most species are struggling and that one in three have halved in number in the past half century" (Carrington 2013), with many threatened with extinction (Burns et al. op cit). This matters as ways of being in the world disappear along with the more-than-human world itself, as McKibben argues. Not only does the extinction of the more-than-human world negatively affect human social relations and mental health (Burkeman 2014; Griffiths 2014), but the loss of the relationship produces a subject that does not value the more-than-human world and is less likely to try to establish a relationship to it or even defend it (Monbiot 2012a).

The second way it manifests is as a lament for ourselves – that there is no longer a world that escapes us and thus denying us of a refuge or way out. The loss of nature is, in this instance, a manifestation of the scale of our pollutions. We have destroyed any hope of escaping from the destruction we have brought upon the world. The end of nature is the end of the ability to escape from the Enlightenment project and from civilization itself. In polluting the world we have contaminated ourselves; in domesticating the world we have domesticated ourselves.

What is lost then with the end of nature is a sense of possibility, that there are alternatives and worlds beyond the one we have manufactured. The end of nature

¹⁸ By Romantic lament I do not mean to refer to the contested terrain of the study of the Romantic period, but rather to the lay conceptualization of Romanticism as a form of nostalgia for a lost wilderness, one that was destroyed by the rise of industrial civilization. On both the expression of such a vision of Romanticism, and a critique of it see Hay, Peter. 2002. *Main Currents in Western Environmental Thought*. Sydney: UNSW Press, Morton, Timothy. 2007. *Ecology without Nature. Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. London: Harvard University Press.

as a refrain does not solely look back on what we have done, and what environmentalism has failed to do. It also suggests that our ruination of the world has undermined not only our social relations and mental health, but the very future itself.

In the end, the eco-catastrophic imaginary presents us with the image of our own extinction prefigured in the end of nature. The stable geological time of the more-than-human world is no more: the long warm summer of the Holocene has past and with it we have entered into a period where the future horizon of environmental politics appears predominantly not as one of sustainability but survival.

3.5 – Conclusion

The eco-catastrophic imaginary as sung through the three refrains explored in this chapter, ‘catastrophe itself’, ‘humanity in excess’ and ‘the end of nature’, outline a complex image of past and future, humanity and the world humanity has brought into being. We could summarize the preceding refrains as telling a story which suggest that humanity in the aggregate has brought nature to an end and inaugurated a new geological period – the Anthropocene – on a new planet – Eearth. What has brought nature to its end is an excess of humanity, an excess enabled by the exceptional power of fossil fuels. This excess of humanity is an excess of aggregated desire and not one of agency. The excess of effect and surfeit of agency has accidentally brought a particular ecological relation – nature – to an end. In addition, through our excessive consumption of the world we have brought into being a catastrophic event, one that looms uncertainly on the horizon manifest in the form of climate change. The event of climate change is fabulated through the language of the earth sciences, thus producing it as a ghostly problem, one that is beyond the grasp of individual activists and thus calls for a global actor capable of imposing restraint on an excessive humanity.

To be sure, this narration is not without its breaks, contradictions and tensions, as outlined above. Humanity occupies a complex place in the story, at once the culprit, impervious to transformation or reform, yet also an ecological actor that desires social change. Government appears as both salvation and as that which has failed

to act. Nature has ended yet returns doubled in the form of storms, weeds and cracking ice sheets.

The future-image of ecological catastrophe does not prescribe the actions to be taken to avoid or adapt to it as a future event however. As outlined in Chapter 1, there is a dynamic relationship between the future-image and strategies of an imaginary. The problematic that compelled my research was precisely to explore the relationship between the two, to map how the future-image constrains political praxis, and how in turn political praxis and the material conditions of political action shape the future-image. It is to this dynamic and the forms of politics it enables and disables that I now turn.

Chapter 4: **Managing catastrophe and counting carbon**

Introducing Liberal Utopianism, Part 1

4.1 – Introduction

As outlined in Chapter 1, the impetus for this thesis was the experience of a state of impasse within the UK environment movement, specifically bound to the climate change politics of 2006-2011 and the trajectory the movement has taken over the past decade. This chapter turns to one of the germinal sites of my experience, Climate Camp. The approach I take follows on from my particular reading of memory-work as a method (Chapter 2, Section 2.7.2). In order to produce a ‘frictive’ account (Tsing 2004), where the juxtaposition of various texts produces a thick description of what I see as the state of impasse in the politics of the UK environmental movement, I closely juxtapose my own mnemonic accounts with the responses of my conversationalists as well as with archival and academic text. As outlined in Section 2.3.1, the role of conversationalists is to trouble my own mnemonic account and add further thick detail, and not act as a respondent to my questioning. The conversationalists have been anonymised and are differentiated by single letter designations such as *J*. Their accounts analysed in this chapter are responses to a specific “memory fragment” drawn from my own experiences, a memory fragment that formed the basis of our conversations and was sent to them prior to our engagements, and were developed in real time conversation with myself¹⁹.

My contention in this chapter is that Climate Camp is organised by the eco-catastrophic imaginary. The future-image of catastrophic climate change was the impetus for first organising the Camp; it was its orientating device around which a strategy was developed out of pre-existing environmental praxis and the problem of climate change. The relationships between the Camp and the imaginary can be described as one of reciprocal capture (Stengers 2010:36). Reciprocal capture describes a process of co-invention, in which both terms participate in the construction of the other and where it is the friction of the encounter (Tsing 2004:4) that works to produce (and contain) both terms of the relationship. The

¹⁹ Full transcripts of the conversations are not included due to the sensitivity of the materials and the need to maintain anonymity for both the conversationalists and those referred to during the conversations.

imaginary organises the Camp, and the Camp's practices in turn shape the imaginary. The focus in this chapter is on what was enabled and disabled by this vision of climate change, and how the practices and form of the Camp shaped the imaginary in turn.

The strategy pursued by Climate Camp in order to engage with the future-image of ecological catastrophe is what I call 'liberal utopianism', a strategy I suggest is shared by the NGO in Chapter 5. Liberal utopianism is the idea that reinvigoration of egalitarian liberal ideals as expressed by active citizenship and participative democracy is the solution to the problem of ecological catastrophe. It is a vision of a humanity reformed and of a state either made redundant by the universalisation of self-governance (Chapter 4) or rebuilt as a responsive social-democratic actor (Chapter 5).

4.2 – Shutting down Kingsnorth

4.2.1 – Introducing Climate Camp

Climate Camp was arguably the most significant element of the climate change protest wave that took place in the UK between 2006 and 2011 (Russell 2012; Schlembach, Lear and Bowman 2012). To be sure climate change activism is not exclusive to this period in the UK, with a history that dates back to the early 1990s and continues to this day. With respect to media coverage and participation however, it is arguable that this 5-year period was the high point of climate change activism (Russell 2012; Schlembach, Lear and Bowman 2012). Indeed media coverage of the Camp itself peaked in 2009 (McGregor 2015:5), prior to the Camp's end.

4.2.2 – Going camping

When I first read the call out for the 2008 Climate Camp, what inspired me to go was the commitment to taking direct action against climate change. The promise in the call out was that Climate Camp was part of a growing movement of climate change activists – a mass grassroots social movement that confronted climate change as a problem, one so dire that time could not be wasted waiting for experts or politicians.

“...the threat of climate change is so vast, so urgent, so universally shared, that the action we need to take must be similarly wide ranging, immediate and carried out by everyone; not delegated to ‘experts’ and ministers who will deal with the issues sometime tomorrow or the day after...” (Camp 2008b)

The focus of the 2008 Camp was the Kingsnorth coal-fired power station. In 2008 the UK government was planning on building six new coal-fired power stations, which in the words of the Camp would emit “50 million tons of CO₂ a year” (ibid). Kingsnorth was to be the site of the first new build of the short program, and alone would account for between “6 and 8 million tons of CO₂ every year” (ibid). The idea of the camp was to mobilise enough people to take direct action in order to make building the new coal-fired power stations physically impossible, a strategy that drew on the practical legacy of campaigns such as the anti-roads protest movement in the early 1990s that stopped the UK governments road building program through direct action camps (Wall 1999).

I want to set out my memory of the main day of action, and the mass direct action in particular, because it was in this moment that it first occurred to me that the UK environment movement was in a state of impasse. The first section below is a presentation of an entire memory-fragment on a Climate Camp day of action, supplemented with materials from the Camp where appropriate. The subsequent accounts and recollections are fabricated from my memory-work conversations, where the outcome was to produce a thick mnemonic account, one that presents a critical appraisal of my own memories and thickened with the (at times conflicting) contestations and memories of my conversationalists. These accounts have been written up as narrations alongside critical readings of Camp and environment movement materials.

4.2.3 – The day of action: a memory account

The Climate Camp day of action was to be the day when

"climate camp will go beyond talk and culminate in a spectacular mass action to shut down Kingsnorth. Permanently!" (Camp 2008a)

But that's not how things were looking the day before the main action. The day before it became apparent that the mass direct action had yet to be organized. I had gone to the camp with a number of old friends from the anti-globalisation movement – a movement that took direct action against both international institutions such as the IMF and World Bank, and attempted to disrupt significant international government meetings such as the G8, as a protest campaign against the global processes of neoliberalism (often called globalisation).

S remembered thinking "holy crap, there is no mass action that people can join in". Talking that moment of realization through with *W*, she said, "I don't think that much thought had gone into it". After trying to find out what was going on, then passing through a 'holy crap, nothing is planned' moment myself, I met up with *S* and a few other people to figure out what to do about the lack of a plan. In the end the five of us decided to make a plan and organize the action. It was why we were there after all.

The day before the main day of action, *S*, a few others and I got hold of a map of the area and concocted a hasty plan for getting to the power station. We didn't have one for getting into the power station, but at least we could see how we could get people there. It all appeared a bit ramshackle the day before the action, and the lack of preparation was disturbing. While none of us said it at the time of the action we all thought that the lack of organization did suggest, as *B* said to me, "that [the lack of preparation] was because people didn't think it was going to happen."

Despite all of our misgivings, at the appointed hour for the mass direct action we trundled down to the advertised meeting point. Around 140 people turned up (out of what the organisers were saying was 2000 people present at the camp). As we all milled about at the appointed time in the appointed place, it became painfully clear that the camp hadn't organized a facilitator or a camp representative to host

the action on the day. My friends and I called the 140-odd people together and presented our plan to them. It was a simple plan – people should form themselves into groups of around five people who would look out and work with each other. Then we'd jump the back fence into a field of wheat, make our way around the field to the train tracks that ran along the bottom of the field, and head along it towards the power station. Once we'd gotten to the tracks it would be quite easy to make our way to the fence – the power station was visible from everywhere, and there were any number of paths, tracks and roads to follow.



Figure 1: action route from Climate Camp (top) to the fence, Kingsnorth power station (bottom), approximately 2.5 miles. Source: Author.

I remember there were no questions and no discussion, so we asked if people were up for it – voices came back saying yes. We said we'd give people time to organize themselves, and then, a few minutes later, we yelled out that it was time to go and made for the fence. All 140-odd bodies came tumbling down the hill we had met on towards the fence. When we got there a few cops, perhaps three or four, tried half-heartedly to stop us, batons flailing, but the mob of us made it past them, through

the field and down to the tracks. The trip between the field and the power station was notable only for one incident when a dozen cops in riot gear tried to stop us crossing a road. After a few people got batted by the police we made our way around them. A few roads and fields later we found ourselves at the fence of the power station, being trailed by a couple of motorcycle police and, more distantly, a squad of riot cops.

Where we found ourselves, in fact, was facing two fences topped with razor wire, a moat and a line of police with dogs inside the power station itself. We dutifully dismantled some temporary fencing that was ready to hand and used it to create some ladders up the first fence, but almost all of us hesitated before climbing up and going in. It was painfully obvious that we were not going to get into the power station, and that if we tried the best we could expect would be to be arrested. As *S* said, "If we had been hundreds more people we could have actually shut it down, we could have caused mayhem in there." But we weren't hundreds, we were a small crowd with no substantial plan outside of a well-fortified power station. Still despite this around a dozen people did try to make it into the power station and were arrested by the police inside.



Figure 2: climbing the fence, Kingsnorth power station. Source: Indymedia UK

Talking this through with S later on, I found my feelings of that moment perfectly expressed in something he said: “I don’t know how the people who jumped the fence felt, but I do know how we felt which was ‘Huh. Now what?’”

None of us climbed the fence in the end. I think we were hoping something, some way of taking action, would present itself if we just got there. But there wasn’t an opportunity. All we could do was watch as some of the people who had tried to get into the power station by raft got rescued by the water police. One person actually made it as far as the power station cooling outflow pipe and was arrested.

After a while, we made our way back to the Camp. I went down to the main assembly tent for the post day of action debriefing. It was in this debriefing that I heard from the front of the assembly that everyone present should give a cheer for those people who tried to enter the power station on the direct action because it meant that “we [Climate Camp] could say we did it” (personal notes). That is, symbolically Climate Camp had entered the power station, achieving ‘our’ aims. We did not shut down the power station however – not even temporarily. We did

arguably contribute to the Governments decision to not allow the future power station units to be built in March 2009 (Adam and Tran 2009), along with a number of NGOs such as Greenpeace who had taken action against it in 2007, 2008 and later in 2009. But that was a government decision based on its more general energy policies, and not a result of our disruptive efforts. We didn't even convince the company responsible – E.ON – that we as a movement would make it too costly for them to continue, as is the case in many other direct action campaigns (Wall 1999). In the end the power station ceased generation in 2012 when it consumed all of its Large Combustion Plant Directive hours, as mandated by law (DEFRA 2013).

There are four questions from this episode that I explore through the remainder of the chapter. The first concerns the role and effectiveness of direct action as praxis. The second explores how Climate Camp understands the socio-political changes demanded by the science being instituted: what the Climate Camp theory of social change is. The third concerns the subject of the Camp – who is it that could or could not participate in the Camp, and what do these limits tell us about the political vision of the Camp? Finally I examine the relationship between means and ends, strategy and utopian promise in the Camp praxis.

4.3 – Situating Climate Camp

4.3.1 – Urgent action

The point of departure for Climate Camp was the inaction of the UK government over the urgent issue of climate change (Camp 2008b).

“Climate change is already affecting millions of people around the world through extreme weather events, flooding and other disasters. We need urgent action now to avoid reaching catastrophic tipping-points.”
(Camp 2012)

As outlined in Chapter 3, tipping points function in the catastrophic imaginary to render the process of climate change into a series of events via global thresholds: moments in the future where the Earth's climate ‘tips’ over into new, horrifying

states. In Climate Camp communications these climatic tipping points appear as a matter of calculus:

“As Drax shareholders rake in the profits, the rest of us tremble as we wake up to the effects of the 21 million tonnes of carbon released by Drax each year. If we carry on at this rate in the next few years we will have emitted enough CO₂ to cross the dreaded 2-degree temperature threshold” (Camp 2006).²⁰

Responding to this future threat, Climate Camp advocate taking direct action as government has not only failed to act, but will not act:

“The climate crisis cannot be solved by relying on governments and big businesses with their 'techno-fixes' and other market-driven approaches. Their grip on political and economic power lies at the heart of the problem.”

“We must therefore take responsibility for averting climate change, taking individual and collective action against its root causes and to develop our own truly sustainable and socially just solutions.” (Camp 2012)

While the question of urgency and government inaction are both crucial to the form Climate Camp took, there is also the question of the political legacy Climate Camp inherited from previous protest camp movements and how this shaped its response to climate change.

4.3.2 – A brief history of Climate Camp

Table 1: Climate Camp events and actions (Source: personally compiled)

| Date | Place | Action | Attendance |
|-------------|------------------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------|
| August 2006 | Drax power station, West Yorkshire | Protest camp and mass action | 600 <i>approx</i> |
| August 2007 | Heathrow Airport, London | Protest camp and mass action | 2000 <i>approx</i> |

²⁰ Climate Camp go on to argue that “predictions at this point include the Greenland ice sheet collapsing and sea levels rising, water shortages in many parts of the world, the extinction of the polar bear, and most worrying of all runaway climate chaos” (ibid).

| | | | |
|---------------|--|--|-------------------------|
| August 2008 | Kingsnorth power station, Kent | Protest camp and mass action | 2000 <i>approx</i> |
| April 2009 | European Climate Exchange, London | Mass office blockade | 1500 <i>approx</i> |
| August 2009 | Blackheath, London | Education & training camp | 1000 <i>approx</i> |
| October 2009 | Ratcliffe-on-Soar power station, Nottinghamshire | Protest camp and mass action | 800-1000 <i>approx</i> |
| December 2009 | COP15, Copenhagen, Denmark | Mass actions as a part of international mobilisation | 1000-2000 <i>approx</i> |
| August 2010 | Royal Bank of Scotland, Edinburgh | Protest camp and mass action | 600-800 <i>approx</i> |
| February 2011 | Dorset | Final network meeting | 100-150 <i>approx</i> |

The aims of Climate Camp remained the same for the years it was active: to take direct action, to produce a media spectacle, and to build a movement through education and inspiration. The movement Climate Camp sought to create was a self-organised, participatory and grassroots movement that would challenge “consumerism, [economic] growth and capitalism” (Camp 2010b) and create “a vision of a real democracy” (Camp promotional flyer, 2009).

Climate Camp started in August 2006 with a 10-day camp involving 600 people at the Drax coal-fired power station in West Yorkshire, “the UK’s biggest single source of carbon dioxide” (Camp 2009a), in order to “kick-start a social movement to tackle climate change” (Camp 2009a). The Camp culminated in a single mass action on 31 August with ‘campers’ attempting to “breach the perimeter of the fence” (Features 2006) and “shut down one of the root causes of climate change: Drax coal fired power station” (Wroe and Schlembach 2007).

The second Camp in 2007 against the expansion of Heathrow Airport gained massive media coverage and drew almost 2000 attendees (Willis and Agencies 2007), and could be described as the Camp’s public ‘breakthrough’ moment. While

the official target was the proposed third runway (one that has still not been built largely due to public opposition), many Climate Campers also sought to highlight air travel as a form excessive consumption that needed to be stopped (Ford 2008). This meant that while the Camp expressly tried not to disrupt the airport's operations and focused attention on the corporations that profit from air travel and not airline consumers (Camp 2007a), this public attempt to avoid 'guilting' air-travel consumers was contradicted by the "narrative of personal responsibility to reduce one's own carbon emissions [that] ran through the publicity literature, workshops and protests of the Camp. Often the Camp's message was a moral argument against flying." (Schlembach 2011).

Media coverage increased in 2008 at the Kingsnorth coal-fired power station protest (Hickman 2008; News 2008; Zee 2008). The camp had around 2000 participants, though with a more subdued atmosphere and fewer direct action participants (Features 2008). The camp itself was also heavily policed, sparking a public debate over the role of police in environmental protests (David 2008; Vidal 2008).

The next year, 2009, was the peak of Climate Camp activity in terms of the number of actions taken (if not in the numbers of people participating), as well as the peak of radical climate change activism in the UK more generally (Russell 2012)²¹. It was also the peak of public awareness and concern with climate change (Climate 2011). There were three Climate Camps in 2009 (but only two mass direct actions), and a substantial Climate Camp contingent that travelled to the Conference of Parties on Climate Change conference (the 'COP15') in Copenhagen in December²² (KM 2009). The three camps took place on Blackheath in south London, outside the European Climate Exchange in central London (ECX) (Camp

²¹ Russell has produced an excellent summary of climate related environmental direct actions throughout this period. His table finds there to be one Climate Camp action in 2006 (out of three total actions), one in 2007 (against six in total), one in 2008 (against twelve in total), nine in 2009 (against twenty six in total) and two in 2010 (against seven in total). Russell, Bertie. 2012. "Interrogating the Post-Political: The Case of Radical Climate and Climate Justice Movements." in *Department of Geography*: University of Leeds.

²² COP15 was the fifteenth Conference of the Parties (COP) under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The conference took place from December 7 to December 18, 2009 in Copenhagen, Denmark. The COP is the highest body of the UNFCCC and consists of environment ministers who meet once a year to discuss the convention's developments. The summit was famous both for its failure to reach substantive agreement and for the open rebellion by the G77 against the wealthy countries comprising the G8. See Vidal, John. 2008. "Those Kingsnorth police injuries in full: six insect bites and a toothache." in *The Guardian*. London.

2009b), and at the Ratcliffe-on-Soar power station (Camp 2009d). The Blackheath camp was constituted as a series of workshops and debates and fundamentally about separating off the educational and showcase elements of Climate Camp from the actions in order to better facilitate both. The Camp in London against the ECX took part at the same time as a very large and at times very confrontational anti-G20 protest around the Bank of England (Lewis and Walker 2009; Weaver 2009). Climate Camp's rationale for targeting the ECX was to draw attention to the "underlying cause of climate change, airport expansion and coal-fired power stations: our political and economic system" (Camp 2009c). The third camp of 2009 at Ratcliffe-on-Soar was smaller than previous camps with around 800-1000 people attending (BBC 2009b).

The December 2009 COP15 protests drew a large number of participants from across Europe to the venue in Copenhagen, and was the site of numerous demonstrations that brought together both 'mainstream' environmental and development NGOs and more grassroots climate change campaigning groups. The protests did not aim to shut down the meeting but to make an intervention, one that had mixed results. The COP itself was widely understood to be "the last chance to stop climate change" by Climate Camp (Adam 2009) among others (Gray 2009; Monbiot 2009). The meeting was a failure, ending in a non-binding agreement (Vidal, Stratton and Goldenberg 2009). While it has been contended that the COP15 mobilisations heralded a significant development in environmental praxis vis-à-vis climate justice (Chatterton, Featherstone and Routledge 2013b), no climate movement emerged out of the protests as hoped, and the protests themselves had little impact on either the negotiations or the public perception of the COP²³.

The last Camp for Climate action took place in August 2010 at the headquarters for the Royal Bank of Scotland (RBS), Edinburgh (Camp 2010a). Around 600 campers broke into the RBS compound and set up camp, focusing their attention on RBS's involvement in tar sands production in Canada, their role in financing fossil fuel production more generally and their recent public bailout (Camp 2010c). However,

²³ One of the contentions of this chapter is that in contrast to the somewhat relentlessly positive analytic one finds in social and environmental movement literature, such as in Chatterton et al. (2013), what is required is a constructive attentiveness to the failures of environmentalism.

public and media attention had significantly waned by this point (McGregor 2015:5).

The final Climate Camp event was the *A Space for Change* meeting in Dorset, February 2011 (Camp 2011b) where it was decided to disband the network. The final Climate Camp act was the release of the *Metamorphosis* statement that stated that “This closure is intended to allow new tactics, organising methods and processes to emerge in this time of whirlwind change.” (Camp 2011a).

In this brief history we can start to see how the questions outlined in Section 4.2.3 were broadly articulated over the lifetime of the Camp, setting out a number of points of tension. The practical focus on direct action found itself in tension with the urgency to act on climate change as an issue and the perceived need to produce a mass movement in order to do so. There was a continual tension between the need to promote the Camp (the Camp’s media presence) and the desire to take effective action. The repeated failures of the actions also put direct action into question as a tactic capable of affecting change vis-à-vis the scale of climate change. These tensions suggest a deeper conflict between means and ends with regards to the Camp’s praxis, between the negative vision of climate change and the positive vision of an ecological society prefigured by the Camp.

4.3.3 – Seeds of Climate Camp

The idea for Climate Camp emerged from the debates concluding the anti-G8²⁴ protests in Gleneagles, Scotland, in July 2005 (Harvie et al. 2005; Schlembach 2011:2). Climate Camp came out of the Horizon eco-village, an anarchist protest camp that was situated within the broader anti-G8 protest. In our conversation about the Climate Camp action, *B* outlined the continuity between the anti-globalisation movement and Climate Camp:

“There were discussions in the [Horizon] camp about what happens after Gleneagles, and that was the first time that people put forward the

²⁴ The G8 refers to the Group of Eight – eight ‘highly developed nations’, France, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom, Japan, the United States, Canada, and Russia, that hold an annual meeting to build consensus on global issues such as economic growth and global security.

argument that we need to move issues to climate change because if we don't sort the climate out all the other issues become irrelevant."

The anti-globalisation movement was a global movement focused on opposing the processes and institutions of neoliberal globalisation (Kingsnorth 2004; Nowhere 2003). For roughly seven years (1998-2005) a movement comprising a wide range of actors from unions to peasant armies, Non-Governmental Organisations and anarchist networks all mobilised jointly on the global stage, focusing their attention on the meetings of key global institutions such as the World Bank, IMF, the G8 and the World Economic Forum (Nowhere 2003). This movement saw the fusion of radically democratic or horizontal political forms, of the primacy of the tactic of direct action, and of the centrality of protest camps into the lexicon of the radical left (Feigenbaum, Frenzel and McCurdy 2013; Graeber 2009). For many this period of radical politics in the UK was one where anarchism as a political praxis came to dominate with respect to organisational forms and procedural practice (Graeber 2002; Nunes 2005).

Many of the protests of the anti-globalisation movement were characterised by experiments in prefigurative forms of social and political life (Feigenbaum, Frenzel and McCurdy 2013; Mueller 2006; Nowhere 2003). Generally these experiments were characterised by horizontal or flat organisational structures, participative processes and a 'do it yourself' (DIY) or direct action ethic (ibid), all characteristics taken up by Climate Camp (Schlembach 2011:4). Climate Camp explicitly developed the 'living alternative' model used by the Horizon camp in order to produce an example of the kinds of democratic and infrastructural processes that could form the basis of a low-carbon society (Camp 2012).

"We think that one of the most exciting things about the Camp for Climate Action is the way that it is organised. Rather than having a small group of people running things, we encourage everyone who comes to the camp (that means you!) to take part in deciding how it will be run. Democracy is at the heart of our beliefs." (Camp 2007c)

Climate Camp was organised through mass assemblies using consensus decision-making and operated on a volunteer basis (ibid). This process was meant to

prefigure a future centred on the institution of a radical form of participative democracy. But where as the anti-globalisation movement had been organised around globalisation as an issue, Climate Camp set out to tackle the issue of climate change. The choice of climate change as an issue by the (post)anti-globalisation movement was justified on the basis of the gravity and urgency of the issue of climate change. As *B* said of the call to form Climate Camp, promoters of climate change as an issue argued “climate change means that if we don’t sort this issue out first then the other issues don’t matter because we’ll all be dead.”

4.3.4 – Starting out from the wrong kind of decline

In addition to the legacy of praxis and a future-image of ‘catastrophe itself’ as the point of political orientation, in this section I argue that Climate Camp started out at a moment of social-movement decline. By 2005 many within the anti-globalisation movement had started to note the decline of the anti-globalisation movement as a social force, with the peak of activity being in 2001 (Scholl 2012; Thompson 2010). People had also started to criticise the form politics had taken within the movement, activism, as it was no longer considered capable of confronting something like capitalism (Thompson 2010:129-30).

One thing that strongly emerged from my memory-work conversations was the sense that Climate Camp started with a sense of pessimism, not hope. *M* said that

“even with Gleneagles, my memory of that process is that people didn’t go through it with a huge sense of optimism. Or that it was the right thing to do.”

W remembers that:

“There was a real debate in the movement at that point [2005] about summit hopping, about what was the point of having these mass mobilizations. So, I remember being cynical with the initial rising of Climate Camp because we were like these mass mobilisations don’t necessarily cause radical change or cause mass direct action. The anti-globalisation movement was dying at that point.”

B concurs, noting that:

“From J18 [1999] when there was thousands of people up for it [direct action], to Gleneagles, it was six years, and that’s a lifetime. People disappeared. They stopped going to protests.”

These statements reflect that at its peak, tens of thousands of people mobilised for the protests of the anti-globalisation movement (Kingsnorth 2004; Nowhere 2003), and it was common place for activists to travel long distances to other countries to take part on the various mobilisations. But as noted by *M*, *W* and *B*, by 2005 the mobilisations had decreased in size, with many openly questioning the movement’s praxis and strategy. But, as *W* said of the 2005 Gleneagles mobilisation, “there were far more people at Gleneagles than any of the Climate Camps.” Indeed, media reports for the Gleneagles protests suggest that the main protest march had 4000 people, with 1000 breaking away from the march to confront police and attempt to break into the venue of the G8 (Tempest and Clarke 2005). In addition to this march there was also a counter-summit and rally organised by a number of large NGOs, called Make Poverty History, and attracting up to 200,000 people.

While some theorise the anti-globalisation movement as a success and highpoint of political mobilisation (Graeber 2009), I argue that the memory-work accounts as well as other internal reflections of the movement suggest that by 2005 an impasse had been reached at the level of praxis, with attendance at the mobilisations starting to decline from around 2003 (Nunes 2010; Scholl 2012; Thompson 2010). Looking at the figures of attendance at Climate Camp from Section 4.3.2, we can see that after a short period of growth from 2006 to 2009 Climate Camp went into decline, and that at its peak it never drew more than 2000 people, a far cry from the preceding mobilisations of the anti-globalisation movement from which it emerged.

4.3.5 – Internal tensions

The final point to note in order to situate the 2008 Kingsnorth action is the state of the internal camp debates at the time – specifically, the documented tension between the sections of the camp membership who were explicitly anarchist in

political orientation, and those we held to more liberal or ‘mainstream’ political perspectives (Plows 2008; Schlembach 2011).

There was a lively debate ‘inside’²⁵ the Camp over the political tensions and direction of the Camp, with a minority decrying what they saw as the drift towards a more pro-government, liberal political perspective over time (Shift and Dysophia 2010). This perspective narrates the history of Climate Camp in a way that emphasises its anarchist roots in the anti-globalisation movement, and argues that having started out radically anti-capitalist, Climate Camp became more reformist having been “hijacked by liberals” (Charsley 2007) as it tried to draw more people into the climate change movement.

The tensions inside the Camp have been described as being between either strong and weak green perspectives (Plows 2008:92), or, more commonly, between reformists and radicals (Schlembach 2011:5). In the latter instance, the key debate was over the role of the government (Saunders and Price 2009:120; Schlembach 2011:15). These accounts of an internal political conflict are contested by Saunders (2012) who suggests that based on her fieldwork there was in fact no common radical political basis for the Camp from its inception (ibid:329). Saunders argues that while there was a marked drift to more reformist political positions over the lifetime of the Camp (ibid:329;340), there was always a majority position that held to “pragmatic” political positions (ibid:329). This resonates with the Camp’s own reflections that noted the Camp hedged its bets politically and tried to “strike a balance between broad social objectives and immediate strategic objectives” (Camp 2010b). Saunders suggests that the Camp appeared more radical than it in fact was because the public presentation of the Camp via the press-work and outreach materials was dominated by Campers who held more radical political perspectives (2012:330). Saunders argues that the majority of the Camp was constituted by a pragmatic liberal political tendency, and that over time as the Camp grew in size this tendency increased proportionately (ibid:336;342). In the

²⁵ The designation of inside and outside is for convenience sake: there is no clear boundary between inside and outside of Climate Camp, with the Camp being a site of convergence and overlap between different social networks, NGOs, organisations and currents. As an assemblage, it drew on and concentrated a number of social flows, and marked out an identifiable terrain. As such, there was a sense of the Camp as a space, making the idea of internal debates methodologically realistic.

end it was the near-eclipse of the more radical political tendency that formed part of the basis for the break up of the organisation (ibid:343).

The debate over the roots of Climate Camp and the state of internal political tensions marks a more fundamental debate over how change occurs and what the relationship to the government should be. The radical tendency argued for the need to act autonomously from government and the majority liberal tendency argued for a pragmatic engagement with government, including seeking short-term reforms. This debate can be framed as one over how best to organise grassroots activism.

4.4 – Taking grassroots action against climate change

4.4.1 – Doing the brutal math

The Camp's foundation in opposition to government inaction suggests that direct action, the method favoured by the Camp, is sufficient to the problem of climate change (one way or another). The question then is how was direct action meant to tackle climate change as an issue?

As with much environmental direct action the focus is on stopping a process of production, in this case one that produces CO₂ emissions. The initial problem to overcome is the fact that every aspect of social life is in some way bound to processes that produce greenhouse gases, prompting the question of 'where do you start?' Indeed, the global scale of climate change and the idea that everything has to change all at once could be said to render grassroots politics difficult if not impossible. As explored in Chapter 3 climate change is made comprehensible to publics through a work of mathematical abstraction – it is articulated as a set of 'brutal numbers' (McKibben 2013) that 'add up' to different climate change futures. This mode of articulation suggests that actions can be translated into a series of calculations, into quantifiable events that can all be brought together as equivalent vis-à-vis climate change through the climate equivalent CO₂, what the think tank Cornerhouse argue is a carbon fetish (2010)²⁶.

²⁶ While there is much to be said in support of calling CO₂ a fetish, especially as it acts within carbon trading and government policy, it is more accurate to call CO₂ a factish, following Bruno Latour and Isabelle Stengers

Returning to Section 4.2.2, the Kingsnorth direct action was framed in terms of its potential to stop 6-8 million tons of CO₂ per year. This method of framing actions and making a set of quite distinct events equivalent as a part of a single campaign is also used by more policy-orientated climate change writer-activists and NGOs such as Mark Lynas (2008) and George Monbiot (2007b), both of whom have outlined their proposals for transforming society through government policy, through a series of carbon calculations.

This way of understanding or framing actions draws on how climate change is constituted as catastrophe. Catastrophe is articulated through a series of figures and calculations where to grasp the problem is to take hold of it mathematically. Understood in this way as an operation on the future through a series of mathematical calculations, direct action appears as a possible way of 'doing the numbers' where any given action is made fungible with any other through the use of CO₂ as a universal equivalent. I argue that the logic that inheres in this form of action is a logic of counting carbon: as long as enough direct actions take place, undertaken by enough people, the numbers will add up. At the same time it also de-politicises direct action, as the justification for direct action is less a matter of expressing a vision of radical or participative democracy, and more a matter of efficacy and expedience²⁷. As long as it is the fastest and most direct way in which to reduce carbon emissions, direct action is justified. But when it does not produce the outcome required 'by the science', then its value as a mode of political praxis comes into question. In essence, environmental action is economised or managerialised, with ends and means collapsing into each other along purely instrumental lines.

4.4.2 – Back to Kingsnorth

Because of the global scale of climate change, Climate Camp is premised on the idea that there needs to be enough people taking action in order to do something

formulations of scientific experimental constructions. See Latour, Bruno. 2010. *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*. London: Duke University Press, Stengers, Isabelle. 2010. *Cosmopolitics*. London: University of Minnesota Press.

²⁷ This is consistent with the way Wendy Brown characterises neoliberal social logic as a matter of economics, a characterisation that concurs with a number of environmentalists attempts to calculate the cost or worth of climate change. Brown, Wendy. 2015. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*. New York: Zone Books.

substantial about climate change. In this way the camp itself was structured as a machine that would produce a movement: the actions, propaganda, workshops and various prefigurative elements were all designed to build a mass climate change movement so that direct action would be effective. According to my reading of the Camp, direct action was both the means to build a movement and the ends the movement was supposed to pursue in order to stop climate change. This is a particularly interesting instance in which memory-work around the action at the Kingsnorth Climate Camp in 2008 (Section 4.2) produced a series of reflections that put both the process of movement building and the utility of direct action against climate change into question.

More than a few conversationalists pointed out that the Kingsnorth power station was never realistically going to be shut down; indeed, that wasn't even the plan. *L*, reflecting on the role of the mass direct action at Kingsnorth, told me that

"The idea of the stunt was that it's always a stunt until we can built our power and it's no longer a stunt. It was a stunt to help build a movement so we could move beyond stunts. And we never got to that point. I mean, in the end, how different is this [the Camp's actions] from theatre?"

B suggested something similar, that: "I think there was a symbolic nature to the direct action at that point, and the idea was to do more, an actual direct action at a later point." As *Y* said, "in the shutting down of Kingsnorth, I think the action was a Greenpeace style stunt". Talking with *B* about the 2006 Drax Camp, *Y* said:

"At Drax there was a lot of research in order to switch it off, lots of briefings and stuff like that; but not much of a plan other than chaos. But with Drax we could have beaten the cops. At one point three cops basically stopped [the action] and people weren't prepared to take on the cops. At that point we were still trying to legitimate civil disobedience and climate change."

Direct action and civil disobedience was still in the process of being legitimated by 2008 and the Kingsnorth Camp. *B* said of the Camp's objectives and direct action that:

“By the time you get to Kingsnorth, we knew that in order to shut down a power station it’s going to involve something the public is not ready for. And just holding a camp was what the battle was for at that moment. By Kingsnorth absolutely nobody thought they were going to get in and shut it down ... basically at that point people thought there only way it could work would be to increase numbers to the point where you wouldn’t need that level of determination.”

But two years after Kingsnorth, by the time of the 2010 Ratcliff-on-Soar camp, the movement that had been hoped for still had not arrived. Indeed the number of participants at the 2010 Camp was smaller than in previous years, and the levels of preparedness for direct action on the part of the campers was still not at the levels necessary for mass direct actions. As *L* said to me the action of Ratcliff-on-Soar was in itself little more effective than the much smaller action of the 2008 Camp despite there having been more preparation and training:

“With Ratcliff-on-Soar there were [sic], we dropped grappling hooks near the fences, and made all sorts of preparations. But, you know, I’ve got a friend who was arrested at Ratcliff who is really fucking bitter, because he felt [his arrest] was pointless, it was just a stunt. He saw that he was up for [the direct action] but nobody else was.”

Over the lifetime of Climate Camp, the requisite levels of militancy and activist numbers never quite emerged, making the direct actions of the Camp a series of stunts and not direct actions per se. The internal reflections of the Camp suggest that participants didn’t “distinguish between direct action and publicity stunts” (Camp 2010b), while many of the internal critics argued that the actions were never more than spectacles (Shift and Dysophia 2010) or symbolic gestures (Charsley 2007).

Part of the problem with Climate Camp direct actions was that unlike the genealogy of environmental protests in the anti-roads and anti-GMO movements

that preceded them, no one quite knew how to tackle a power station technically, in order to shut it down²⁸. As *Y* said,

“...about shutting down Kingsnorth permanently, that was never going to happen. I’ve organized plenty of direct action, but I don’t know how to shut down Kingsnorth permanently.”

W and *M* both suggested that the Kingsnorth action had always been set up as symbolic, and that there was something about climate change as an issue that made direct action difficult:

W: “You might be able to blockade one power station but in the grand scheme of things you’ll just make a publicity stunt.”

M: “There is something about scale. You can’t imagine Climate Camp, even if they had stopped a runway being built, or a power station, that it was going to stop climate change.”

There is something to *M*’s suggestion that with climate change the technical problem extends more broadly and is not resolved by just knowing which button to press. *S* suggested that actually directly intervening into climate change as a problem required more than just technical knowledge – it required finding a point of leverage, something that was missing in the climate change movement:

“We do not have the power to do more than [symbolic actions and stunts]. Kingsnorth was symbolic partly because we have no idea of how to actually disrupt the plant, and that’s a function of our actual material weakness. Overall it seems we are thrown back to our overall weakness. The reason we do symbolic actions is a function of our weakness. What we lack, what we don’t have, is a point of intervention. A point of leverage. But it’s all about ‘where is our point of intervention’? Where do you go to exercise power? And we don’t really know.”

There is a suggestion here that the problem with direct action is that the numbers simply won’t add up – that the scalar logic of climate change is non-linear, and that

²⁸ And, in the case of the 2007 Heathrow Airport protest, few were willing to disrupt the functioning of major public infrastructure such as the airport.

localised actions of individuals' accountings do not add up to the systemic effect. Climate Camp's answer to this problem was to try to build a mass movement that could act on the appropriate (read equivalent) political scale.

Speaking about the idea that Climate Camp would produce a mass climate change movement, *L* said, that there was a "real lack of faith" in people on the part of the 'official' Climate Camp organisers. Both *Y* and *B* said that many of the organisers of Climate Camp that they knew had privately given up on the idea of creating a mass movement, and that many thought the best they could do was to intervene in the public debate through media-friendly actions.

4.4.3 – Direct action as praxis

Woven into the fabric of Climate Camp are two competing understandings of direct action. These two understandings fused in the period of the anti-globalisation movement and became an unresolved legacy inherited by Climate Camp. This legacy included not only a conflictual understanding of direct action, but also a sense that the agent of direct action need be equivalent in scale to the problem. That what was needed in the case of both globalisation and climate change was a mass global movement, something the same 'size' as the problem.

In the recent history of UK direct action the early 1990s figures as a conjuncture where the long tradition of civil disobedience (Plows 2008:105) came together with a more confrontational and antagonistic approach to direct action (Wall 1999). It was in the early 1990s, and around the anti-roads campaigns of the 90s in particular, that the moral action of environmental civil disobedience was transformed into a practice of active disruption (Seel, Paterson and Doherty 2000). Carter has suggested that disruptive direct action as an environmental practice emerges in the global North during the early 90s as a reaction to the lack of responsiveness of government and corporations to environmentalist demands. Walls makes a similar claim for the UK direct action movement, adding that the lack of responsiveness – what Carter calls democracy – extends to the environmental organisations that emerged in the 1970s (Wall 1999). Concurrent with this break with established groups, there was also a notable turn to more

radical critiques of capitalism and industrial civilisation within the environment movement (Hay 2002; Luke 1997).

Among both academic and movement literature, there is much commonality to the definitions of direct action and civil disobedience, the latter often used to clarify the former. There are three commonly outlined aspects to direct action. The first is that it is action that seeks to actively and directly disrupt or intervene into a contested process, often (though not necessarily) illegally, but falls short of armed militarised intervention (Graeber 2009:201; Seel, Paterson and Doherty 2000:1; Wall 1999:156). This disruption is often both a disruption of a particular process (the construction of a road) and a repudiation of the legitimacy of government. This contrasts with the more-often legal yet still disruptive protests of civil disobedience that do not seek to contest the legitimacy of government per se. The distinction is often suggested to centre on the question of antagonism. Where direct action actively sets out to antagonistically produce conflict, civil disobedience works through a practice of refusal, often without hostility or outright opposition to the government. The second commonly agreed element is that direct action is described as a style of praxis, one that constitutes an overt declaration of antagonism or dissent (Graeber 2009:204; Tormey 2005:337). The final element is that direct action, like civil disobedience, is described as a form of morally compelled protest that suggests an ethical logic or accounting of individual behaviour (Carter 2005:4; Seel, Paterson and Doherty 2000:1).

As described in Section 4.3.5 many within the Camp understood the defining feature of direct action to be an opposition to government, both to lobbying government and more generally a disposition against government tout court. Graeber argues that this is the common historical definition of the term (2009:203), though this perspective has been contested by a number of other authors (Carter 2005; Plows 2008). Indeed there is a substantive body of thought that would argue that direct action is part of the vitality of the democratic process (Carter 2005), with direct action constituting a part of the practice of active citizenship (Plows 2008:105).

Graeber's suggestion that direct action works against government as an institution (2009:203;433) could be said to apply whether or not direct action is considered

intrinsically opposed to government or not, as the work of disruption is a practice premised on the existence and use of situational power – leverage, in a word, build on the foundations of a social power autonomous to government and the workings of the state.

4.4.4 – Blockading ghosts and the logic of equivalence

Acting against existing social processes and institutions, constituting friction vis-à-vis the processes of state governance (Tsing 2004:4), requires locating sites where leverage can be exerted through disruption or interference. Confronted with the totality of climate change and the factual need to transform every aspect of society from what we eat to how we move around to how the economy functions, Climate Camp's answer was to construct a movement on as global a scale as possible, starting with the UK. The logic at work here is that a global problem requires a global actor. To be sure Climate Camp is not the only environmental actor who suggests the need for equivalence. From government officials (Wintour and Sparrow 2009) to economists (Spratt et al. 2009; Stern 2006), from writer-activists (Lynas 2008; Monbiot 2007b) to academics (Heise 2008), there is a general contention that global problems that exceed local confines such as climate change can only be confronted on a global scale.

I argue that there is a confusion here, one that mistakes the scale of the problem for the necessary scale of the intervention. This confusion is in part an artefact of the scalar logic of climate change (Chapter 3). Climate change scales the world in a particular way, both through its sociotechnical composition and through its role within the imaginary. As Massey argues the perception of space and spatial scales shapes the organisation of space and scale (2014:84). That is, scale is both descriptive and prescriptive as a concept.

The global scale of climate change mirrors existing global scale narratives (Cook and Balayannis 2015; Jasanoff 2010). The sense of planet (Heise 2008) produced has all the characteristics of globalisation as a concept: the Earth is rendered as an abstract space, one where global forces such as technology and economics (and climate dynamics) cannot be controlled but must be adapted to, where power resides at the level of the global and the local is always-already a victim of global

forces (Massey 2014:81-3). This scalar framing designates some political practices as valuable (those that can act 'globally') and some as ineffectual (those that are local). As Gibson-Graham argues:

“We are all familiar with the denigration of the local as small and relatively powerless, defined and confined by the global: the global is a force, the local is its field of play; the global is penetrating, the local penetrated and transformed.” (Gibson-Graham 2002:27).

It is this hierarchical logic that organises the praxis of Climate Camp. Contrary to this scalar logic, both Massey and Gibson-Graham argue that the global and local are variously constructed, always partial and open to the influence of the other (Gibson-Graham 2002:32; Massey 1994:151; 2014:10;154), and that there needs to be a critical interrogation of how power moves between scales, and where change can be implemented. Gibson-Graham argue that the focus on global actors, be they a political organization or a singular historical agent such as the multitude, is evidence of a capture by a “vision of power that inheres in greater size and spatial extensiveness” (2002:28), and is more of a bodily state than a well-reasoned intellectual position (ibid:27).

Anna Tsing outlines how the global scale is a product of global/local congeries, emerging out of the friction of the “grip of the encounter” (2004:5). The global is thus, like the universal, not a thing that explains anything, but rather a thing that must be explained (Deleuze 1995b:62). For Tsing it is the confluence between different processes, the encounter between varied materials, flows and forms that produces social arrangements including the immaterial and abstract social arrangements such as imaginaries. This matches Massey’s account of the co-construction of local, regional and global places, where places can be considered as spatial-temporal events that mark the accumulation of different human and more-than-human histories and exist as sites of possibility and thus as always open to contestation (ibid:139). Contrary to the hierarchical logic of global scale, conceptualising place as an event enables a political attentiveness to how places and scales are constructed (Massey 2014:102).

By evacuating all but the global scale of political potential, Climate Camp de-situate the problem of climate change thus making it difficult to grasp. As Buell suggests, the dilemma of global apocalyptic tales is that the problem is often without 'place', and thus can only be fixed by "fixing everything" (1995:295) – something that only a global mass movement or government appears able to do.

This is the logic deployed by Climate Camp where direct action appears as a kind of sorcery that sets out to conjure a mass social movement into being through symbolically representing the actions that the movement will take in the future. It is as such a kind of theatre machine (Raunig 2010) that seeks to produce a people by articulating what the people will do. It is not the only mode of direct action possible however. Massey's formulation of the co-production of global/local suggests that it is possible to contest the processes of globalisation at a situated level by taking actions that wear down or disrupt globalising processes, a mode of political action Timothy Mitchell calls sabotage (2013:22).

Sabotage works by disrupting of the free flow of crucial materials, including energy (ibid:22). Sabotage expresses a logic not of equivalence but of vulnerability, where what is being contested is not inclusion in a global process of governance but the very capacity to exert control over a flow. An example within the modern UK environment movement of effective sabotage is the anti-roads campaigns of the 1990s, where small numbers of protesters effectively occupied sites through which roads were to be built, denying the smooth and free flow of the construction process. The process of sabotage does not work in an all or nothing manner however, and it is not necessary that sabotage completely disrupt a particular process. Sabotage targets not only the smooth functioning of a process, but the expectation of future-functioning that maintains social investment in that process. It disrupts the smooth functioning of return that maintains the future as a progression of the present, thus undermining the present.

Climate Camp did not set out to contest the control over the production of CO₂. While it located several key emission sites, the project the Camp embarked on sought to construct a mass movement capable of acting on a commensurate scale, and not to produce sustained disruptions to energy or transportation processes (as might be constructed around power stations or airports, for example). In their

own terms then the limits to Climate Camps mode of spectacular direct action then are to be found in the limits of its power to create a mass movement, in not only how well it works to bring a new people into being through its theatre, but also in the contours of the people that it fabricates: who they are, what they can do, and the shapes of their utopian visions of the future.

This latter point is crucial. As outlined in Chapter 2 and explored in Chapter 3 how the future is imagined is a crucial element in social organisation, one that constrains how we act and who we become. Within any imaginary, there are always countervailing influences, other fragments of images that draw us into the future. While the dominant future-image of the eco-catastrophic imaginary is that of a looming catastrophic event, one that must urgently be averted if the threat of extinction is to be staved off, the promise of a reformed humanity offers up a utopian possibility. The utopian seed contained in the eco-catastrophic imaginary is that humanity might act to constrain its excesses, to turn its hand to managing itself as the dominant species on Earth but in a way that denies the authoritarian impulse and instead realises a vision of radical democracy.

4.5 – The unfulfilled promise of activism

4.5.1 – The future is not what it used to be

Lauren Berlant suggests we consider utopian dreams and social fantasies as clusters of promises (2011:23), as declarations or assurances that something will come to pass. This echoes my suggestion in Chapter 1 that the imaginary be understood as a claim on the future, where future-image serves as a warning of future catastrophe and the strategy as a promise that the future could be otherwise – that the catastrophe can be averted. If the promise of Climate Camp is that humanity can work to constrain its own excesses, that radical democracy can triumph where liberal democracy has not, how are we to describe the strategy outlined thus far in this chapter?

Climate Camp suggests “the future is not what it used to be” (Camp 2008b). The future as it used to be has failed. The future that failed was certain – it was the future as continuation of the past, a past of natural certainties – the cycles of the

seasons, the rhythms of the Earth. While this image of the past itself is highly contestable (Clark 2010), we can treat it here as a contrasting device, one that sets out how the present is a state of “creeping confusion”, one that marks a “crucial transitional moment” where either climate change is stopped or humanity faces a harsh future where death and extinction threaten us all. This current moment has been brought about not only by rampant consumer capitalism but also by a “failure of imagination”, where humanity thought itself independent of nature, where humanity could “somehow transcend limits – and live without a body” (Camp 2008b).

The crucial point here, one that reflects the analysis of humanity explored in Chapter 3 as a species in excess of the Earth, is that the current crisis is one of human excess where humanity has failed to respect the limits of the biosphere, and as such has plunged the Earth and itself into existential crisis. The solution as presented by the Camp is to conjure a mass movement of activists into being: active citizens who will act to stop climate change directly. That is, the objective or end of climate activism is to create a mass movement of climate activists through the means of climate activism. The vision of social change presented through this collapse of means and end is one where through the work of self-education, participation and direct action, climate change will be addressed and humanity restrained, resolving ecological catastrophe.

4.5.2 – The education of the self

Much of the focus of Climate Camp was on the workshops. Education was one of the three aims of the Camp and one area many would claim as a success. Each Camp hosted a series of workshops, seminars and talks, on topics ranging from renewable energy to veganism, the role of government to direct action methods. The workshops were in themselves just one element of the process of education within the Camp however. As outlined in Section 4.3.3, the Camp as a whole was an exercise in prefigurative politics – it was meant to serve as a heterotopic example (Saunders and Price 2009), where the promised future could be glimpsed and lived in the present. The Camp itself ran on renewable energy and had compost toilets and communal kitchens that served vegan food. But more than any of these sustainable alternative technologies the principle prefigurative element was the

system of internal radical democracy. As the Camp claimed, they were creating a “vision of real democracy” (2009 Flyer, author copy)

The Camp attempted to do this through the creation of a democratic infrastructure. There were the foundational aspects to this infrastructure, including wheelchair assessable pathways, a volunteer desk where people could do to get involved in the various maintenance activities of the Camp, the Camps open organisational meetings prior to the action camp, and most importantly the Camps neighbourhood and general mass assemblies.

The major Camp decisions were made at the general assemblies – mass participative forums that worked by consensus (Camp 2007b).

“Rather than having a small group of people running things, we encourage everyone who comes to the camp (that means you!) to take part in deciding how it will be run. Democracy is at the heart of our beliefs.” (Camp 2007c)

Consensus decision-making is a process of deliberation that works through debate and discussion, and reaches final conclusions by all participants reaching an agreement, and is characterised by processes of compromise around proposals and points of debate (Kauffman 2015). This is a vision of a radically democratic process of self-governance where participation and not delegated representation is practiced (Feigenbaum, Frenzel and McCurdy 2013:149). The democracy of the assembly is counter-posed to existing forms of ‘deliberative’ or representational democracy (Graeber 2007:331-2) and exists as both an expression of what existing democracy lacks (engagement with the broad mass of the public) and what it could be (mass participation), with “ordinary people collectively managing their own affairs” (ibid).

4.5.3 – Who participated?

The desire to create a mass movement of activists – of actively engaged and participating individuals – was a promise made with particular material constraints. The two most significant constraints were the urgency of climate change as an issue, creating a truncated timeline within which to create a

movement, and the existing social terrain of the UK environment movement, including those people potentially capable of being engaged.

As outlined in Section 4.3.5, the majority of the Camp was politically liberal and pragmatic vis-à-vis how to achieve their outcomes. As suggested in Section 4.3.5, there was a drift to a stronger liberal political position vis-à-vis the Camp over time, with some of the reason for this drift being the influx of new people into the organisation of the Camp. The influx of people had, according to my conversationalists, a certain consistency. *B* noted that

“The new generation of people who got into Climate Camp tended to be quite well heeled. Most of the people at Climate Camp had never been on a protest before, let alone done direct action.”

There was a general consensus among conversationalists that Climate Camp had deliberately set out to mobilise people who already held beliefs that resonated with Climate Camp’s aims – green or environmentalists ethos – and largely were already engaged in environmentalism, meaning it drew heavily on university educated activists, as *W* outlines:

“As more and more of the old school people dropped away, you could see it becoming more and more NGO-ified, because those were the people they’d tried to bring on board. Because who are you going to recruit? People already into green issues, and you attract them by making direct action less scary and more stuntsy.”

Generally speaking, modern environmentalists and activists tend to be young, white and university educated (Bergman 2014; Graeber 2009; Wall 1999). In addition, activists tend to be time-rich and without commitments such as care or work responsibilities that would mean being unable to go to a protest camp for five days (Frenzel 2014). These constraints did not just reflect who attended, but who was able to rise to positions of leadership and responsibility in the Camp structure (Saunders 2012:830), including who could participate in the often-time consuming processes of consensus decision making (Kauffman 2015). These constraints are reflected in the Camp’s composition, itself critically noted within the Camps own reflection process, where it was noted that the structure of Climate

Camp favoured the “young and fit” and that there was a notable lack of “working class people and people from different races” (Camp 2010b). This final point is reflected in the scholarship on the camp that argues the Camp lacked local community engagement (Saunders and Price 2009:119), and no support or engagement from the workers in the targeted industries (Saunders and Price 2009:119; Schlembach 2011:18)²⁹. All of this gestures towards what *R* called the NGOification of Climate Camp, by which I understand to mean the professionalization of activism as a social form, where the *ad-hoc* practices of the activist milieu become codified as professional skills, and those skills in-turn become subject to managerialist and neoliberal logics of best-practice and benchmarking and subject to an instrumentalist value-system.

4.5.4 – Liberal utopianism

It can be argued that no project of creating a people through educative processes comes without a population. In other words, there is a reciprocity to the efficacy of particular modes of subjectification and the bodies interpellated by them. Existing social forms of life constitute a material basis on which modes of subjectification can (or can't) work. It is a process of reciprocal capture (Stengers 2010:36), where the process of subjectification and the material of the subject shape each other; where the materiality of social life introduces a necessary friction into the process of subjectification. Which is to suggest there is a connection between the project of educating the self and the kinds of people drawn into Climate Camp, one that is not entirely contingent or coincidental but bound together by a particular logic.

The project of education posited a particular form of subjectivity as the ideal Climate Camp subject – the activist. The activist is someone who practices activism as a self-defining activity where activism is broadly defined as a practice of engaged or vigorous campaigning to bring about political or social change. Such a definition includes both Climate Camp and the work of a campaigning NGO, but excludes industrial action or armed insurgencies (Graeber 2009). In general terms it is a form of engaged or active citizenship (Carter 2005; Plows 2008), one that

²⁹ Indeed, the 2009 Kingsnorth Camp saw a campaign waged by the coal workers union, National Union of Mineworkers, against the Camp.

became associated with political radicalism and disruptive protest tactics in the UK during the 1990s (Seel, Paterson and Doherty 2000; Wall 1999).

The shared political horizon of activism is democracy, either in a social-democratic or radical form (Carter 2005; Graeber 2009). This concern with democratic governance extends to the internal organisation of the movement, with radically egalitarian and participative organisational structures hegemonic within the post-90s UK environment movement and new social movements more broadly (Feigenbaum, Frenzel and McCurdy 2013; Graeber 2009; Seel, Paterson and Doherty 2000; Wall 1999).

The ‘outsider’ stance of UK activism is part of the activist identity, and activism is often the preserve of a specific subculture of activists (Graeber 2009). Membership in this subculture is often fluid with people moving in and out of the milieu, or occupying multiple roles (Wall 1999), such as being a member of an NGO and a member of Climate Camp at the same time (Saunders 2012). As such we should consider activism to be a porous milieu, one that overlaps with a range of other organisations and milieus including environmental institutions such as NGOs.

In the late 1990s in the UK, the figure of the activist and the activist milieu came under sustained internal critique, the most famous intervention being the pamphlet *Give up activism* (X 2001). The principle arguments of *Give up activism* have been repeated numerous times since it was first published in 1999, including once directly after the 2005 Gleneagles protest prior to the emergence of Climate Camp (Trott 2005). As Trott argues in the latter piece, *Gleneagles, activism and ordinary rebelliousness*, and as *M* suggests above, there is an element of impasse to the overcoming of activism as a form, a kind of necessity and impossibility to producing a non-activist form of grassroots politics.

There are two enduring elements of the critique that relate to Climate Camp. The first is that activism as a form is inadequate to abstract problems. The roots of activist campaigning in the UK are to be found in single issue campaigns like those against genetically modified agricultural crops or the anti-roads protests of the 1990s (Wall 1999; X 2001). While the content of activist campaigns during the late 90s shifted to “capitalism” and later “climate change”, the form remained

unchanged, and the tactics of blockades, occupations, etc., are said to be not suited to the different terrain.

This echoes the criticisms of both *M* and *W*, and my own arguments in Section 4.4.4. Starting in the late 1990s, the problem around which activism organised shifted from one of situated issues to global problems of capitalism and climate change. This transformation produced a strategic problem where the direct action and protest camp tactics of early activism lost much of their efficacy, and in turn shifted from being largely disruptive direct actions to spectacular direct action-style stunts (Shift and Dysophia 2010; Trott 2005).

The second criticism is that activism enacts a professionalization of grassroots politics and reproduces the separation of politics from everyday life that characterises existing liberal democracy. As noted by *W*, there was a certain professionalization of the activism of Climate Camp. *X* outlines how this separation occurs in two steps. Firstly, the production of a milieu that constructs its identity around grassroots political activism functionally delineates between political activism and everyday life. Secondly, this cultural separation produces grassroots politics as a specialist activity. As grassroots activism is set up against institutional politics as substantially more 'real' (as in 'real democracy'), the practices of activism occupy all of the terrain of informal politics, in effect de-politicising everyday life and producing the activists as a political professional. *X* argues that as activism draws on a moral conviction (Carter 2005), the separation of activist/non-activist, and activism/everyday life produces a moral judgement on those people who 'refuse' to take action (*X* 2001).

We can further develop this point by noting that the separation of politics from the everyday through activism is materially reproduced through the necessity to develop and maintain skills and physical capacities on the part of activists; the know-how to set up protest camps or organise actions, for example (Bergman 2014; Plows 2008). This set of capacities constitutes a legacy that is maintained within the milieu as a defining characteristic, one that is often cited as a success in and of itself (Plows 2008). One of the most crucial skills to develop and maintain is participation in the mass assemblies and consensus decision-making processes, as suggested by Climate Camps emphasis on the process, and the number of guides to

the process it produced. The capacity to develop and maintain these skills requires one to be both time-rich and, for the most part, able-bodied (Graeber 2009; Wall 1999). Clearly people do not arrive at the Camp in a similar state vis-à-vis these capacities, especially the capacity to participate. Participation as a skill is differentiated by race, gender and class (Yuval-Davis 2008), with the opportunities and confidence to participate clearly delineated by access to particular social institutions such as universities, etc. This unevenness of capacities and resources produces a social terrain where those with more time and greater resources to become “de-facto leaders of the camp” (Saunders 2012:830), or within the activist milieu more generally (Frenzel 2014:906).

My contention here is that there is a frictive encounter between the tendency within activism towards political professionalization and the constitution of the problem of catastrophe. Where the problem is situated, as within early direct action activism such as the anti-roads movements, it is difficult to fully separate activism from everyday life, as the process of constituting a community of interest around the problem is necessarily porous and entangles the locally interested community as well as bodies entangled through relations of work, governance, political and social interest, etc. (Wall 1999). Where the problem is constituted as abstract, the passages through which it as a problem circulates are far removed from the everyday, and become the spaces of scientific research, public debate (the media, the internet, etc.) and sites of governance. Climate change as a problem is distant to everyday life (Hulme 2009), it is “abstract” (Camp 2010b) as noted internally by Climate Camp. This abstraction reinforces the reproduction of the activist milieu in isolation from other affected communities or communities of interest, a reproduction unconstrained by the friction of situated encounters and thus enabling the full development of the tendencies of activism towards a form of radical liberalism.

Much of the description of activism above matches the outline of active citizenship (Turner 1990:209). Active citizenship is a subset of citizenship more generally, and is a role that as Yuval-Davis points out has only ever been occupied by a (gendered, classed, racialised) minority (2008:83). Active citizenship is the active participation in the process of ruling, as opposed to the passive (or, rather,

differently active) process of being ruled (ibid). It rests as a normative concept on the division between the political and social spheres, where political rights can be distinguished from social rights (ibid:84). It also references a conceptualisation of citizenship as having obligations and duties, as well as rights and freedoms (ibid:88), where the 'burden' of rule is a duty of citizenship, one taken up voluntarily and thus an expression of a moral character. This burden requires, as Brown outlines, a minimum level of education (2015:177) as well as an understanding of participation as something to be prized and valued (ibid:204). Yuval-Davis situates active citizenship ambiguously between liberal and republican notions of citizenship (individualistic vs. community conceptions), at the point where social and material needs are translated and incorporated into properly political concerns (2008:86). Active citizenship is thus perhaps a liminal notion, one that functions to produce matters of political concern³⁰, one that necessarily only enables the involvement of a minority of any given population. The active citizenship of Climate Camp sets out to legitimate climate change as a properly political concern, and direct action as a properly political mode of action.

But this mode of politics is limited to who can participate. In addition to access to time and resources, the key differentiating attribute between active and so-called passive citizens is education. Education has long distinguished the practice of active citizenship; indeed acted as a condition for it. In the long history of liberalism, education has served to demark those who should have access to politics (and thus, in certain senses, democracy) and those who are too ignorant to take part (Brown 2015:175-9; Losurdo 2014). Education is said to be a right that enables social and political participation (Brown 2015:175;189), the current crisis of which threatens democracy (ibid:179). As suggested by the structure of Climate Camp, to take part in a "real democracy" requires learning how to take part: the rules to follow as well as the expectations and norms of participation.

The division between active and passive citizenship suggests that there are those who are deemed capable of ruling themselves (or at least in participating in their

³⁰ Or, as in the case of the Right's use of the concept in the UK during the 1980s, to delegitimize matters of political concern as matters of private concern, what Yuval-Davis and Wendy Brown both call a process of de-politicisation. Brown, Wendy. 2015. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*. New York: Zone Books, Yuval-Davis, Nira. 2008. *Gender & Nation*. London: SAGE.

own rule), and those that should be ruled. Those that have the capacity to manage themselves and those that need be managed. To be educated means not only acquiring the skills and capacities to participate in governance, but to be able of managing oneself, the skills of self-restraint and self-control. This tendency of thought, that politics requires self-restraint and self-control, collides with the image of humanity in excess that populates the eco-catastrophic imaginary. The process of restraint necessary to properly participate in politics is doubled in an image of personal austerity that suggests that an ecological politics requires an act of restraint of ones own consumptive excesses. Such an analysis is confirmed by the anti-consumerist politics of Climate Camp: the vegan food, the guilt of individualised carbon footprints, the rhetoric of anti-consumerism itself, all of which was supported by appeals to science (Bowman 2010; Schlembach, Lear and Bowman 2012). The problem of excessive humanity was tackled by Climate Camp through an attempt to produce a movement of self-restraint, of “activists for austerity” (Association 2008) who would willingly restrain their own excessive consumption and thus solve the problem of climate change without government intervention.

However, the reading of Climate Camps politics I have proposed in this chapter supports the thesis that the separation of activism from everyday life and the structural impossibilities of universalising active citizenship, doomed this effort from the beginning. The liberal utopianism of Climate Camp, the vision of a mass radical democracy populated by active citizens capable of self-restraint, was unrealised.

4.6 – Conclusion: impasse on a global terrain

Climate Camp ended in 2011 in what I’ve called a state of impasse. In Berlant’s work an impasse denotes a situation, a temporality that more often than not does not result in an event and thus signifying a stretch of time without clarity as what one should do, where the world appears both “intensely present and enigmatic” (2011:4). An impasse results from a breakdown in the functioning of fantasy structure that organises a way of life or set of practices around an object of desire (ibid:23).

This mirrors what I described in Chapter 1 as the mechanics of the imaginary, where an imaginary functions through a future-image and a strategy. The principle difference between my account and Berlant's is that while for Berlant the future-image is positive (if unobtainable), images of catastrophe are dystopian and serve not as an object of desire but as a warning. An affective regime of fear and not longing compels climate change activism. The strategy of the imaginary in this instance can be conceived of as a promise that by taking action the future-horror of climate change can be avoided. However the failure of a mass movement to arrive and the lack of efficacy of direct action suggest that the strategy cannot fulfil its promise. Building on Berlant we can suggest that this inability for environmental praxis to produce an effective response to the future-image of climate change undermines environmentalism as a social movement. Moreover it works to breakdown organisations such as Climate Camp. The lack of effectiveness undermines its ability to reproduce itself as a social form and weakens its broader appeal. As the number of people mobilised by Climate Camp dwindled and the media attention waned, this unravelling of the Camp became a cycle of decline making it ever-less likely or realistic that a mass movement would form or that direct action as taken by the Camp would succeed. However the vision of catastrophic climate change maintained its imaginary hold over Camp activists, compelling them to act. Camp participants were caught between the compulsion to act and ineffective practices – stuck in an impasse, one characterised by Berlant as a moment of “cruel optimism” (ibid:23). As suggested by Berlant, moments of impasse where one imaginary has ceased to function effectively but another has yet to emerge often result in a tendency to repeat existing practices and habits not so much with the hope that a different outcome will occur but because you do not know what else to do (ibid:24).

In Section 4.5 I outlined how an impasse within grassroots environmental activism was produced through the encounter between catastrophe as an abstract and urgent problem and the internal liberal political tendencies of activism as a form. There is a third factor to consider – the role of the absent people, the people who failed to arrive as a mass movement, who refused to be mobilised. Climate Camps proposal was to prefiguratively create a radically democratic movement against the threat of climate change. Their diagnosis of the problem was that neither

government nor business could be trusted to act, and that people would need to be mobilised to 'do it themselves'. The problem then was one of moving an inactive population to a state of activism.

Climate Camps' solution to this state of inactivity was somewhat paradoxical. In order to address the issue of a lack of participation in climate change activism, Climate Camp proposed to produce participation through an intensification of political participation, as though the solution to the lack of desire to participate in the political campaigns and organisations could be solved by creating more spaces in which to participate (Dean 2009:94). Dean suggests that this approach to democratic lack is doomed to fail, as it assumes the solution to the problem of democracy is more democracy, thus forestalling a proper critique of democracy as a political ideal (ibid). Instead, it could be more productive to ask why people do not wish to participate, to interrogate the basis of the refusal to participate.

It is now common place to argue that the preceding 40 years of neoliberal governance has produced a situation where society has been de-politicised (Brown 2003; 2015; Yuval-Davis 2008), producing what has been called a postpolitical consensus (Crouch 2012; Valentine 2005) where technical policy solutions, framed within neo-classical and neoliberal economic orthodoxy, are presented in place of properly political debate and discussion. While this has been contested as a concept (Dean 2009; Valentine 2005), there is much to the argument that neoliberal structures of governance actively work to diffuse and disperse social and labour demands, and to reframe social concerns as individual problems (Brown 2015), and that the current economic condition of European capital renders the détente between capital and state-form conflictual and a return to social-democracy unlikely (Streeck 2014).

However, while the process of economic exhaustion of and neoliberal assault on responsive government does partially explain the current impasse of liberal utopianism, it is insufficient as an explanation in itself. The de-politicisation of UK society has been co-produced by both tendencies within the UK populace and the transformation of mechanisms of social and economic governance. As outlined by Stuart Hall, there was a marked turn away from political engagement, both formal and informal, in the years preceding the rise to power of the political right and the

emergence of neoliberal government (1988). Peter Mair concurs, noting that there was a process of mutual political disengagement of populace from elite, producing a self-reproducing political mechanism, one no doubt compounded by the economic processes that undermined the social-democratic 'deal' (Brenner 2006; Streeck 2014). Mair describes the current situation as one where neither politicians nor populace display much interest either in the functioning of democracy nor in an actual involvement in the processes that would maintain or renew democratic practice – what he calls as a general state of indifference (2013:8).

The figure of the active citizen is, and has only ever been, a minority figure within existing liberal democracies, one available only to certain bodies that adhere to social norms and majoritarian forms (Yuval-Davis 2008). To be an active citizen is more often than not to be a part of a demographic that has access to the mechanisms of rule. As *B* said, one of the reasons Climate Camp did as well as they did in gaining public and media attention was that they “scrubbed up well” – they were the sort of people who had access to power and the press, and resembled them in many ways. Or, given the bias towards university education, and within that towards elite university education, not just resembled but came from the same social milieu. This is not to suggest that Climate Camp reinforced neoliberal rule. Rather, it is to suggest that the active citizen and the horizon of radical democracy as utopian figurations speak to a particular set of bodies to whom self-management appeals as a cluster of promises and a desirable subjective form.

Ultimately there was a process of exhaustion of Climate Camp where the repeated failures to produce a movement and to realise the liberal utopian vision encountered the sense of urgency of the catastrophe itself. Climate change is presented as a wicked problem: something that requires everything to change rapidly. It is not a problem that enables a process of partial victories, set-backs and failures before a final victory. Rather, it suggests that pragmatism and realism, not idealism, is required. But to maintain a pragmatic political approach to grassroots activism presents a dilemma – it requires one to either maintain hope in the vision of a movement to come when it is apparent none will arrive, or to turn to government and render grassroots activism into a kind of militant lobbying tactic.

This tension was increasingly resolved in favour of the latter position, though not before many in Climate Camp appeared to have given up on activism as a mode of social change. As Berlant suggests there is a reluctance to let go of “cruel” attachments such as liberal utopianisms attachment to active citizenship as to let go of the hope that such an attachment maintains is often to lose all hope in the future, to surrender to the void that constitutes the impasse. Returning to the themes explored in Chapter 3, here we could suggest that it is at this point that humanity itself becomes the principle object of political concern and not climate change per se. Confronted with the impasse in grassroots political action many in Climate Camp appear to have taken up a political position in favour of the imposition of change on society by government as a solution to climate change³¹. It is to the attachment and promise of government that I now turn.

³¹ It is worth noting here that even Brown argues that at times there are issues that democracy cannot confront, specifically citing climate change as one of those issues. It is at this point that Brown argues non-democratic stewardship may be necessary (209). Brown, Wendy. 2015. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*. New York: Zone Books.

Chapter 5: **The melancholic state**

Liberal utopianism, part 2

5.1 – Introduction

We ended Chapter 4 with Climate Camp in a state of impasse, an impasse that I argue in this chapter extends more broadly within UK environment movement. This impasse comes down to the question of political realism; that is, to the struggle over how we are to see the world (Haraway 1991:194). While throughout this thesis there is an underlying question of philosophical realism – the ‘reality’ of catastrophe, climate change, etc. – that is not what is at stake here.

In this thesis I refer to political realism as the notion that the primary end of political action is the exercise of acquisition of power – it is an arena of conflict (Brown 2001:139)³². The pursuit of power however is an expression of a particular kind of political logic, that of an instrumental logic where all that is valued is effectively and efficiently achieving the desired end (ibid 2015:199). As a political stance, realism is suggestive of a vision of humanity in which social conflict would appear inevitable (North 2010b). It also suggests a certain kind of immediate pragmatism – to be realistic is to accept the world as given and to use what is to hand to resolve social conflicts and environmental threats.

The question of how to tackle climate change marked a fault line within the Camp between those who understood direct action and mass movements to be the approach mostly likely to work, and those who thought that it was only through government action that climate change could be solved. The focus of this chapter is on the question of the government, specifically on explaining what happens to liberal utopianism when government fails to act. How does this affect the strategy of liberal utopianism, the vision of the future and the constitution of the liberal political subject?

³² I am not here endorsing or advocating for political realism; it is something that has come out of my memory-work as a guiding concept or schema. Rather I see political realism as a kind of trap for thought, where what ends up being presented is a series of ‘infernal alternatives’ that forecloses the potential of any given space or moment. Stengers, Isabelle, and Phillipe Pignarre. 2011. *Capitalist Sorcery: Breaking the Spell*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

5.2 – The state debate: on giving up on humanity

5.2.1 – The state of government

In this section I return to the 2008 Climate Camp outside the Kingsnorth power station to a debate between George Monbiot and a member of the Free Association³³ over how change is to be achieved: through the state or via the manifestation of a social movement. The debate became one over where the efforts of activists should be focused in order to be most effective. It also took place at the point that, according to my conversationalists, many within the camp privately gave up hope of a climate change movement emerging and when it first became clear that the Camp might not be entirely politically radical in its orientation (Saunders 2012).

This debate captured a broader conversation that raged throughout the camp itself (Charsley 2007; Schlembach 2011). The debate was entitled *The Road to 90% Cuts in CO2 Emissions and the Role of the State*, and hosted George Monbiot, Almuth Ernsting (the co-director of Biofuels Watch), and Keir Milburn³⁴ from the Free Association collective³⁵. The title is a reference to the plan outlined in Monbiot's book *Heat* (2007b), where he outlines the need for a 90% reduction in carbon emissions. His plan centres on the institution of a series of far-ranging reforms, from transport to localised power generation. The conclusion reached by Monbiot is that only the state could implement these changes in the required time and at the required scale. In the book he calls for the imposition of green authoritarianism (ibid), a call he repeated in the plenary session³⁶. It was not the first time such a call had been made at Climate Camp – in 2007 at the Heathrow camp it was made twice, once by Mark Lynas and also once by Mayer Hillman, Senior Fellow Emeritus of the Policy Studies Institute (Charsley 2007). The chair introduced the debate:

³³ The Free Association is a small writer-activist collective based in the UK. See <http://freelyassociating.org>.

³⁴ My thanks to Keir Milburn for discussing this event and the camp more generally with me.

³⁵ For a summary of the debate, as well as a round up of various materials relating to it including the audio recording of the event see Turbulance. 2008. "Climate Camp."

³⁶ There was a re-run of this debate at the 2009 Blackheath Camp for Climate Action. See Schlembach, Raphael, Ben Lear, and Andrew Bowman. 2012. "Science and ethics in the post-political era: strategies within the Camp for Climate Action." *Environmental Politics* 21(5).

“The question is, what should the role of the state be? We hear the helicopters, we know that a lot of us think the state is an entity that we do not really want to call upon, but on the other hand how are we to get that 90% reduction [in carbon emissions] without a state that will push it through?” (debate audio)

Monbiot was the first to respond.

“Now in every other walk of life you can be an anarchist, a statist, a communist. But climate change, the problem is so pressing and so great that there is really one ism that allows you to make the right decisions, and that’s pragmatism. With climate change we are faced with challenges that overwhelm any other political response.”

“We have to start from where we are. We cannot start from a utopia of our own design. Yes by all means let’s try to reshape the social fabric. Yes by all means let’s try to create a new political system. But our primary task, right here, and right now, is to prevent runaway climate change”

“Unless there is a state that comes along to implement wider public policy, your individual action is meaningless. It only becomes meaningful in the context of wider public policy. Now, if voluntarism doesn’t work, you require a degree of compulsion to have a universal across the board cut, and that requires a state. We have to make use of [the state] as an instrument or we will fail.” (Monbiot, debate audio)

As outlined previously (Chapters 3 & 4), the urgency of climate change is given as fact within the eco-catastrophic imaginary. However urgency was not the sole rationale for Monbiot’s call to ‘use the state’. As we saw in the debate quotes above and in Chapter 3 the deranging scale of climate change requires an actor that is capable of engaging with climate change at a global level. In the absence of a massive and revolutionary international movement this means turning to government or what Wainwright et al. call the climate leviathan (Wainwright and Mann 2013). Monbiot said as much both during the debate:

“What you need is an entity that is capable of dealing with a technological change on a very large scale indeed. This requires a state, and something bigger than a state, a system of global governance.” (debate audio)

A third reason for the necessity of state action is to be found in how human nature is narrated. As discussed in Chapter 3, the cause of climate change and eco-catastrophe more broadly is rapacious human desire. That is the boundless human desire to consume. Imagining humanity this way means that politically speaking humanity is not to be trusted. Humanity as a species and conceived of on a global scale is the problem and not the solution.

As explored in Chapter 4 a hesitation in making such a historical judgement on humanity is required in order to maintain a radical democratic vision. Without an image of humanity as capable of being educated and of self-governance, radical democracy is unimaginable. It was the failure of a climate change movement to emerge, the failure of people to participate in their own direct self-management, which moved the Camp towards a strong pro-government position, one where the government was viewed as a realistic tool capable of solving climate change.

In *Heat* Monbiot specifically cites human nature as a factor that required state intervention (e.g.: xvi; xx; xxii). Years earlier in a piece on peak oil (2003), he argued people would not willingly ‘give up their stuff’ or their consumerist lifestyles and so change will have to be imposed by government. Which is to say that a force or power abstracted from daily life is necessary to impose change on individuals against their own desires but, supposedly, in their interests. The implicit position this suggests, one contained within the refrain of humanity in excess, is that people cannot be trusted to institute by themselves the changes required by the science.

Milburn set out his response to Monbiot by taking the political realism of relying on the state to task, to directly challenge the state as a force for social change. As Milburn argued in response to Monbiot,

“So when people talk about the state, I wonder what state they are talking about? Are we talking about the UK state, the Brazilian State, the Chinese state... The reason I’m saying it is because there are no actually existing

states that can solve the problem of climate change. There isn't a magic button that says 'State', we press it and the problems go away. I'm not being idealistic here, I'm being pragmatic. We have to deal with the problems in the here and now. We can't wish there was something out there that could solve our problems for us, we have to be pragmatic." (debate audio)

During the debate itself there was the near-constant sound of police helicopters hovering overhead, and at one point the debate was interrupted by a police incursion into the Camp (people were called on to prevent this happening by trying to block their access). In conversation with me about the debate Milburn noted that contra Monbiot at least part of the State as an institution was present at the Camp in the form of the police. He noted that the presence of the police, one that was widely condemned after the Camp for being repressive and heavy handed (McVeigh 2009), had "made [his] point for [him]" insofar as he was arguing that the State isn't a single simple thing to be used. Milburn's position, one in line with the more radical elements of Climate Camp, was that the State was not necessarily available to social movements as an institution that could tackle climate change. That in fact it was historically complicit in both producing climate change and acting (sometimes repressively) against the UK environment movement. Such an intervention also indicates the role of the material in the workings of the imaginary – how change can be imagined by Climate Camp participants is shaped as much by the actions of the police and the openness of the power station to direct action as it is by the images and words of writer-activists such as Monbiot or Milburn.

The State Monbiot was appealing too, in his own words, did not exist. Monbiot has argued that corporate interests have captured the UK government and that it does not represent the interests of the UK public (2000; 2007b; 2008a). Monbiot's call to turn to the state during the debate was premised, I would argue, on the liberal utopian promise of a reformed and responsive liberal democratic state, one recovered from the de-politicising effects of neoliberalism.

"We are not arguing for the State in its current form to go on as it currently exists."

“We need to make sure that it becomes the democratic state that it is not. The challenge here is not to say ‘no state’, but to say we must have a State that is in the pocket of the people and not in the pocket of big business.”
(debate audio)

Milburn maintained that it was dangerous to think that we could rely on the state – what was far more realistic in terms of achieving the necessary ends was a focus on building a powerful social movement, one capable of acting to both force the government’s hand and institute a new social order.

“Whatever the role of the State will be, it’s only by getting massive social movements that you even have a chance of having a massive social transformation. You need a counter-force, and there is only one counter-force powerful enough, and that is a mass social movement. In the transformations that need to take place, who are the agents? The State is not the agent. The agent is the mass movement, and that is the only thing we can rely on.” (debate audio)

In spite of the differences between these two positions that I take Monbiot and Milburn to epitomise, there seems to be at stake a particularly liberal conceptualisation of humanity that can be moved to act in both visions. I argue that the difference between the two is between a vision of democracy as a collective project and one where democracy is understood to be a matter of the character of government. In the former there is a vision of democracy without government, and in the latter a vision of democracy being found in the susceptibility of government to public interventions.

In both instances the objective is to transform existing socio-economic arrangements in order to arrest (and address) climate change. What matters in both instances is where change can realistically be achieved – through social movements or by government. The question arises because the physical and temporal scales created by climate change means social change must be rapid and universal. With the repeated failures of Climate Camp and non-appearance of a mass climate movement, faith was increasingly placed on government as an agent of change. It was (and is) however a weak figure of hope.

5.2.2 – The waning of faith

It would be a mistake however to overstate the faith in the utopian potential of liberal government. From the period of the debate in 2008 through to the present we can witness a loss of faith in the work of writer-activists such as Monbiot, Hamilton and McKibben. Much of this loss of faith occurred after COP15 in 2009 with the failure of the talks undermining the capacity to maintain hope in government as an actor (Monbiot 2009). In 2009 Monbiot argued that

“For the past few years I have been almost professionally optimistic, exhorting people to keep fighting, knowing that to say there is no hope is to make it so. I still have some faith in our ability to make rational decisions based on evidence. But it is waning.” (Kingsnorth and Monbiot 2009b)

By 2011 Monbiot was claiming that no one in the environment movement “has a convincing account of how humanity can get out of this mess” (2011). And as explored in Chapter 3 (Section 3.3), Monbiot went on to embrace a more naturalised account of humanity as a “destroyer of worlds” (2014a), a position that resolved the tension in his own work around the nature of humanity. This trajectory is emblematic of a broader tendency towards the pathologisation of humanity and a concurrent call for the imposition of change by the State apparatus (i.e., Lovelock 2006), a call that is not limited to the question of ecological crisis but extends to questions of crisis more generally (Aradau and Van Munster 2012; Cooper 2008). Indeed, green authoritarianism and talk of ecological catastrophe are historically paired (Dryzek 2005; Hay 2002). However as with the grassroots orientation of Climate Camp explored in Chapter 4, the subsequent loss of faith in the capacity of government to act brought about not a shift in political praxis, but a more general loss of hope in social change, pace Berlant, and a loss of faith in humanity.

5.3 – Doing what you know, doing what you can

5.3.1 – The NGO

In order to understand the depth of the failure of government and how it relates to liberal utopianism, I turn to another memory-work site, a previous workplace of mine within the environmental Non-Government Organisation (NGO) sector. The NGO where I worked is a medium-sized UK environmental organisation, with a staff of around 140 and an operating budget of around £10 million/year (2012 figures). It has been campaigning on a range of environmental and environmental justice issues for over 40 years, has a strong network of local groups, a large financial membership and is a member of a large international network. I worked there for four years between 2007 and 2011.

In the section that follows I explore a specific campaign that I worked on to pressure the UK Government to adopt a climate change law. The campaign was ultimately successful, with a law being adopted in 2008. As I will outline below however, there were serious doubts as to the efficacy of the proposed law within the organization during the campaign. I will first outline what the campaign was, turning to my memory-work conversations to draw out some of the details of the expectations and understandings of how the campaign functioned within the NGO, before examining the actual effects of the law on UK carbon emissions.

5.3.2 – The campaign

The campaign kicked off in April 2005 when the NGO, working with a cross-party group of MPs drafted a climate change Bill committing the government to reduce carbon emissions by 3% each year until 2050, resulting in an overall reduction of 80% from the 1990 baseline. This Bill served as the basis for the campaign, which was formally launched in May of that year with the introduction of an Early Day Motion³⁷ (EDM) by the MPs working with NGOs calling on the government to implement the Bill. Over the course of the next year the campaign developed a set

³⁷ An Early Day Motion (EDM) is a motion put to the House of Commons in the UK parliament calling for a formal debate on an issue. They rarely result in an actual debate however, and are primarily used for “publicising the views of individual MPs, drawing attention to specific events or campaigns, and demonstrating the extent of parliamentary support for a particular cause or point of view.” See Parliament, UK. 2015b. “What are Early day motions?": UK Government.

of high profile supporters, including the current Prime Minister David Cameron. By October 2006 over 130,000 people had written to their local MP supporting the call for a climate change bill. By this point 412 MPs (out of 646 in total) had signed the EDM calling for annual carbon emission reductions³⁸. In the Queen's speech³⁹ in November 2006 the government announced they would introduce a climate change law, a draft of which was published in May 2007. The draft was considered to be insufficient by the NGO and many other environmental groups, and after a year and a half of further campaigning (the period of the campaign I was involved in) the government agree to take a stronger draft bill to the House of Commons. The bill was passed into law as the *Climate Change Act* in November of 2008.

The *Climate Change Act* calls on the government to act to reduce the UK's emissions of six climate-changing gases by 2050. The primary mechanism of the *Act* is the five-year carbon budgets that constrain the amount of emissions for the period they cover (the first period was 2008-12)⁴⁰. In the sections that follow I will first outline how the campaign and the *Climate Change Act* were being discussed and seen within the NGO during the campaign. I will then go on to assess the relative success or failure of the *Act* and campaign, indicating where some of the material constraints on success might lie.

When I set out to work with ex-colleagues around my memories of the campaign and NGO, I wanted to understand the relationship between the vision of climate change that animated the campaign and the efficacy of the Bill itself. Two memories in particular seeded the process and served as the starting points for my engagement with my conversationalists.

The first is from my time as an Events officer, a period where I was tasked (with others) of orchestrating the actions of local members of the NGO – lobbying MPs,

³⁸ 2006 is notable in UK climate change history as the year the Stern Review was published. The Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change is a report published by a team led by Lord Nicholas Stern. Lord Stern is the chair of the Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment at the London School of Economics and also chair of the Centre for Climate Change Economics and Policy (CCCEP) at Leeds University and LSE. The Stern Review discusses the effects of climate change on the world economy, famously calling climate change the greatest market failure ever seen. Stern, Nicholas. 2006. "The Economics of Climate Change: The Stern Review." London: HM Treasury.

³⁹ The Queens speech sets out the government's legislative agenda for the coming parliamentary year, and takes place at the formal start of the parliamentary year. See Parliament, UK. 2015a. "State Opening of Parliament." UK Government.

⁴⁰ See Government, UK. 2008. "Climate Change Act 2008 Summary." UK Government.

doing media stunts and hosting public events and stalls. I had just finished taking part in a phone conference with a regional campaigner, and I was sitting with the then Head of Campaigns / in a small meeting room out the back of the mezzanine area where I worked. We lingered for a moment after the call, and I took the opportunity to ask him what he thought about climate change. He said something that stuck with me. He described how he saw climate change, and why it was the most important issue that we faced. He said to imagine that we were in a car, speeding towards a cliff at 100mph. You don't search for consensus amongst all the passengers and slow down to 60mph, or even 40mph. Any speed at all means you still go off the cliff. You hit the brakes. Climate change is a matter of life and death, and action is either effective or it isn't.

The second is from towards the end of the campaign. During my time as an Events Officer, I had started hearing more doubts about the campaign, first from local group members and then from campaigners within the organisation, including very senior campaigners. People were suggesting the legislation wouldn't be that effective in the end. There were doubts that it would be effective in reducing carbon emissions, because of the necessary compromises that would have to be made to get it into law, and because the legislation itself wouldn't fundamentally alter the processes responsible for producing climate change that are economic. This latter point was always made with hesitation or caveats, such as the law would be symbolically significant, or that it was a part of building a broader public movement. But it was a powerful doubt, not least because of who was putting it forward – usually senior or well-respected campaigners. The most significant of the people advocating it as a criticism was none other than the man who championed it in the first place, the senior political campaigner. It was his cynicism that I remember most. More than once he said that he didn't expect the *Climate Change Act* to have an effect on carbon emissions.

These two memories produced a tension in my mind. There is what is politically realistic to expect and then there is the realism of ecological catastrophe, a realism that does not negotiate. As I worked through my memories though I found more than this singular tension. Coupled to this was a series of tensions inside the organization and more broadly within the practice of political campaigning inside

environmental NGOs confronting ecological catastrophe – a tension that expresses the nature of hope within liberal utopianism.

5.3.3 – What the campaign was meant to do

The objective of the campaign was to mobilise thousands of people to put pressure on government to introduce the world's first climate change law, one that would set the UK on a pathway to making the reductions in greenhouse gas emissions necessary to keep future climate change to below 2°C. The campaign was conceived of within a broader campaign on international climate change negotiations, and in both arenas the logic was the same as *F* explained:

“it's really simplistic. Which is climate change is happening, we need to act now, and the solution is the same logic on the national level and the international level. The logic is we can only drive action if we have rules and an international agreement and a carbon budget.”

The campaign was not merely a vehicle for achieving a legislative end – from the beginning it was constructed to achieve a set of organizational outcomes. During my time at the NGO I had the sense that this was the case – it came up, or rather was hinted at, innumerable times. But it was through my memory work that this aspect of the campaign's objectives was brought out to me. In response to my memory of *J* and the cliff analogy, *F* said:

“I don't think there was ever a big picture strategy behind the [campaign] because the organization doesn't have one. The organization has always just used the tools it had to tackle issues, and that's what happened with the campaign. And the people behind the campaign used those tools to appear to do something about climate change, and to do something for the organization. The campaign was riding on a wave of awareness and pressure on climate change that had come from Climate Camp and other NGOs. What we did was provide a neat winnable thing. That was the end of that discussion and that's why it came about.”

T outlines the campaign as in fact being more about the organization than the legislation:

“The Campaign was about positioning the organization as much as it was about the issue. There was quite a lot of cynicism. Well, not cynicism, but deliberate internal politics around using climate change in order to force through that model. It was as much about creating change internally as it was anything else.”

This is not to say that it wasn't also about stopping climate change, only that there were multiple and at times competing priorities within the organisation. It could be suggested that these differing priorities were in fact involved in the co-production of climate change as a political issue within the NGO. Rather than counter-posing environmental and organisational questions here I would suggest that this encounter between individual, organisational and environmental needs enables us to see how environmental problems are constructed in practice as complex matters of concern.

5.3.4 – *It's much worse than you thought*

T: “For me, when I joined [the NGO] I didn't really understand climate change. I thought it was a bit airy-fairy. Through being there I learned that it's bad, pretty fucking bad. I learned it was really bad, and quite unjust as well. And an early memory was *R* [a senior climate campaigner] walking around and pulling her hair out saying ‘I've just been reading the science, I've just been reading the science’. She was doing the science stuff and so she was like the harbinger of doom. Very nerdy but, also, ‘its much worse than you thought’.”

J talking about climate change as a car speeding towards a cliff, *R* pulling out her hair and *T* thinking “it's pretty fucking bad” – climate change was seen as catastrophic by many inside the organization. Not all however – *N* noted “we just didn't think about it. It was a different campaign”, indicating that while much of the organisation was caught up in the campaign, others inside NGO were focusing on their own campaigns and jobs. As *F* said:

“At the time I remember thinking that climate change was slightly scientific and scary and the sense of it as a catastrophe wasn't generalized. Now I'd assume that we all knew about it, but at the time we didn't.”

Much of the conversation with *F* around catastrophe was bound up with the campaign to achieve a meaningful international agreement at COP15 in 2009. In the lead up to COP15, the NGO, like many other NGOs, was pushing the meeting as a critical juncture for climate change politics. As *F* says, “all the external communications for Copenhagen were like ‘this is it, it’s make or break’”. Prior to the actual talks, the main international climate campaigner *H* said to me that the best possible outcome to the COP was no outcome at all. He explained that the only likely outcome would be so bad that the best thing to happen would be nothing. I brought this memory into my conversations and *F* in response said:

“But I was also thinking about what *H* said to you, and that the best thing to do is to have nothing happen. My understanding is that there are degrees of fuckedness. And what could have happened could have been worse. If you’d had an even weaker deal at Copenhagen, without showing how bad the deal was, there would have been even less pressure to act on climate change.”

There is a kind of political realism at work here that functions through a logic of containment – that there are degrees of fuckedness, and that what must be campaigned and fought for is not to achieve something, but to stop something being as bad as it could be and to achieve the least worse outcome possible. In the end however even this political realism was to be disappointed. *F* went on to note:

“I think that a lot of people were shocked at how shit it did come out. People thought they had a lot more power to change it that it turns out we had.”⁴¹

What *F* is referring to is the ‘farce’ that was the *Copenhagen Accord*, the final agreement that came out of COP15. The *Accord* was not a formal or binding agreement, set no deadlines for carbon emission reductions, nor a timeline for reductions (BBC 2009a; Planet 2010). In the end the COP did not even formally adopt the *Accord* – it merely noted it (International 2009), giving it no force whatsoever.

⁴¹ Naomi Klein documents an even more emotional reaction to the failure of COP15, describing a dinner with a climate change activist in Copenhagen after the COP where the activist broke down into tears, sobbing that they thought “Obama understood” (12), marking just how invested activists were in getting government to understand and act. Klein, Naomi. 2014. *This changes everything: Capitalism vs the climate*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

5.3.5 – Limits to campaigning

Many of the limits to the model of campaigning adopted by the NGO were apparent to many people inside the organisation. In exploring these limits two reasons for not altering the campaign models and methods came out. The first came up in conversation with *N* – “you do what you know, because what else can you do?” Organisations like the NGO campaign to achieve legislative or policy outcomes. There are some exceptions, but the model of change built into many campaigns is change as achieved through state governance. As *N* said:

“If you’re playing in the legislative arena, this is what you do. There’s a certain cognitive dissonance to it. This is the game we’re in, the legislative game. So what else do you do?”

By cognitive dissonance (Cooper 2007; Mirowski 2013:25) *D* meant the ability for a campaigner – or even an organisation – to both not believe securing legislation will be sufficient to solve a problem and yet still maintain a commitment to a practice that seeks legislation as its goal.

When I encountered *N*’s line of thinking I thought it cynical, especially as conversationalists I had talked to prior to *N* had also called it cynical:

F: “I think a lot of people were cynical. As far as you can make a generalization, a lot of the people who are informed and got a good analysis and are committed, I feel a lot of us would critique something until it got to the point where you couldn’t change it, then we’d just get behind it, and buy into it and make it have the biggest impact that it could have, because that’s the best thing to do in that situation. There comes a point where you think, ‘we’re semi-locked into this, I think it’s bullshit...’”

T: “It becomes your job doesn’t it.”

F: “It becomes your job, but it’s also because you care about the end point.”

N disputed that cognitive dissonance was an expression of cynicism. *N* said, “It’s not being cynical, it’s just being politically realistic.” *N* agreed that the people behind the campaign didn’t think that the *Climate Change Act* would address

climate change substantially. *N* said, “in legislative terms we aren’t anywhere near what we need to do. Legislators aren’t set up for dealing with this problem.” At the same time as making the analysis that the UK government couldn’t yet deliver, *N* argued:

“something can be legally weak but politically strong. Legally, the *Climate Change Act* is unimportant. It’s about the politics. The idea was to use it against the politicians, to get them to do something about climate change.”

I left the conversation thinking that this could be seen as another example of the cognitive dissonance *N* was talking about. The conversational narrative runs something like this: we all know legislation isn’t necessarily effective, despite knowing that the only level a solution can occur at is a national and international level. We push for policies and legislation to create political pressure – to fabricate a tool we can use to push governments to act. But at the same time we hold to the belief that government won’t really act, at least not to the degree necessary, and all that we can hope for in the end is the least worse outcome.

The second reason for not pursuing other campaigning or activist strategies centres on the perceived need to maintain the organization and the jobs it produces. This can be seen clearly in the conversation involving *F* and *T* above. At one point *T* said, “it’s also about the job”. *N* concurred, suggesting that what was important was to ensure the security of the organization, something achieved by maintaining a high public profile and thus ensuring financial security: “It’s in the nature of NGOs to look to organizational continuity. You’re going to play the game, because jobs are at stake.”

Least we assume a large degree of cynicism here, there should be no doubt that many in the NGO deeply cared about climate change as an issue (as suggested by *F*). Nor should there be doubt as to the desire within the organisation to tackle climate change as an issue. As *N* mentioned above, the idea of the campaign was to create change, even if that change did not take place as a direct result of the campaign. Cognitive dissonance and not cynicism is what is at work here. I asked *N* what he meant by cognitive dissonance and he said that he meant the ability to believe one thing and do another, in this instance to both know that government

action was going to be inadequate yet still campaign to bring about legislative change.

In response to the failure of government to act and the formal inadequacy of the Climate Change Bill, I would suggest that what takes place is a shifting of emphasis within institutional and personal priorities, with the self-perpetuation of internal organisational priorities taking precedent over campaign outcomes vis-à-vis climate change. This shift of priorities contributes to the preservation of the core belief that climate change and other environmental issues can be addressed through legislative action – that government can be mobilised to address ecological catastrophe. Thus it is less a work of cynicism and self-interest and more a labour of preserving liberal political beliefs and hope in the capacity of government as a political actor. For liberal utopianists to give up entirely on government as a political agent is effectively to give up hope tout court (Berlant 2011:24).

5.3.6 – The end of the world stuff

The question of cognitive dissonance goes deeper than recognition of the limits of legislative campaigning to questions of deeper political and ethical values and visions of the future. The positive visions (the utopian dreams) subscribed to by some people within the NGO, including some of the key campaigners involved in the Campaign, were at odds with the campaign's implicit liberal vision of the future. Talking with *F* and *T*, conversation turned to how the senior campaigners working on the Campaign related to climate change. *F* said that “they all fucking loved it, the end of the world stuff. But they were scared to communicate it to other people.” The conversation turned to remembered conversations with the senior campaigners on preparing for a world dramatically different to this one, one where there would be a substantial economic degrowth⁴² and relocalisation⁴³. I mentioned that this would seem like the logical end point to the analysis of the

⁴² Degrowth is an economic framework that suggests that in order to tackle environmental and social issues it is necessary to reduce consumption and downscale production: to contract economies, and focus on happiness or well-being. See Latouche, Serge. 2009. *Farewell to Growth*. London: Polity Press.

⁴³ Relocalisation is an economic project that sets out to solve socio-economic problems, specifically issues of social alienation and limits to growth through a process of de-globalisation and the creation of regional or local economies that are largely self-sufficient. It is also the strategy pursued by Transition Towns (Chapter 7). See Boyle, David. 2009. “Localism: Unravelling the Suppliant State.” New Economics Foundation. Hopkins, Rob. 2008. *The Transition Handbook: From Oil Dependency to Local Resilience*. Vermont: Green Books.

causes of climate change. *F* said that she didn't think people were prepared to follow the logic of their ideas all the way to their conclusion,

"I got the sense that there was a feeling of us and them. There is us, who know about things and are prepared to accept the consequences of catastrophe or whatever, and there are the people out there in the world, and we'll never be able to sell this to them, because they're more materially consumerist minded than we are, so they'll never accept that this is necessary."

There was a distrust of people, one often articulated through the concept of humanity. Other environmental groups in the UK, as we have seen in Chapter 4, shared this distrust. The private vision held to by many within the NGO is one of a radically simplified, localised and non-consumerist society. And it is this utopian vision of the future that campaigners didn't believe people outside the environment movement would find desirable or even acceptable. As *F* said, "its very hard to tell a positive story because you just say you're going to have less stuff, you're going to have to work harder for it. And that's a bigger problem of the environment movement." It would have been unrealistic to campaign on degrowth – as Monbiot says, who would riot for green austerity (Association, 2008)?

5.3.7 – The state of failure

The doubts within the NGO as to the efficacy of the *Climate Change Act* appear to have been justified as government efforts to combat climate change since the implementation of the *Climate Change Act* have been largely ineffectual.

Since the *Act* was introduced in 2008 there has been a small decline in UK carbon emissions – less than 1%/year as of 2011 (Change 2012; DECC 2014a). This small annual decrease stands in contrast to the sorts of emissions declines demanded by the *Act* of 3%/year and international targets that often require reductions per annum in excess of 4%/year (Anderson and Bows 2010). By way of contrast, the annual reductions before the implementation of the *Act* averaged 0.5%/year between 1990 and 2005 (Clark 2012a). Reductions after the adoption of the *Act* were scarcely more than before the adoption of the *Act*.

The aim of UK emission reductions is to reduce carbon emissions to 80% below the level of carbon emissions in 1990 (the international baseline for emission reductions). As of 2013, UK emissions of the six greenhouse gasses have reduced by 21% from 1990 levels (DECC 2014b). Almost all of this decrease was achieved prior to 2008 (ibid), and much of the reduction since 2008 was due not to Government efforts but the effects of the global recession (Harvey 2011; Rees 2011) and due to a shift away from coal to gas-fired power stations. The estimate for 2014 UK emission reductions is an unusually large 9.7%, bringing the estimated total reduction to 36% below 1990 levels (Evans 2014; 2015). The main factor behind the large reduction in 2014 (one of the only reductions recorded when the UK was not officially in economic recession) was the reduction in coal usage (ibid). The other main factor was the continuing drop in energy demand which is down 10% from 1990 levels, and which peaked in 2005 (ibid). However, these two factors make only a marginal contribution to the overall reduction in UK carbon emissions, and the UK is still on track to miss its emission reduction targets (Harvey 2014).

Much of the reduction prior to 2008 was due to the process of deindustrialisation in the UK, starting in the 1980s, meaning that since then the UK has increasingly imported manufactured goods, in effect exporting the carbon emissions associated with goods manufacture. If the embedded carbon emissions of the goods and services imported into the UK are taken into account, then UK emissions actually rose over the 20-year period from 1990 to 2010 by 21% (Change 2013; Rees 2011).

If we view the *Act* as a political device, one that works to transform government policy and to push it in the 'right' direction, then here too we can understand it as a failure. It is widely accepted that recent government legislation and policy sets out to deepen the climate crisis, not alleviate it. From the government push to develop the fracking industry (Warner 2015), the requirements of the proposed *Infrastructure Bill [HL] (2014-2015)*, which would in effect mandate increasing UK carbon emissions (Monbiot 2014b), and the vast sums of money loaned to fossil fuel projects by the UK government despite a pledge to not undertake such

investments (Vaughan 2015), the government is clearly not moved to act against climate change.

Two problems can be identified in the *Act* as a political instrument. The first is the technical focus on reducing greenhouse gas emissions – what has been derided as ‘targetism’ (Pearce 2013). This technical approach to the political economy of the UK reduces the politics of climate change to a technical question best addressed by experts (Demeritt 2001; 2006; Wynne 2010:291), a phenomenon that expresses part of the deeper logic of neoliberalism (Brown 2015:135). Others have argued that this turn to policy and away from politics leaves intact the broader socio-economic processes that produce climate change as a form of pollution and leave untouched the common sense notion that the economy must grow at all costs (Hamilton 2010; Klein 2014).

The second problem is that the scale of social and economic transformation is presented as so huge, so substantial, it amounts to a complete economic transformation, one that effectively would amount to end existing neoliberal economic policies, at least within the boundaries of the UK (Jackson 2011; Klein 2014; Spratt et al. 2009). Even if we put aside the question of socio-economic transformations, the mathematical scale of the reductions required by the *Act* made it seem doomed to failure (Piekle 2009).

In the light of these conditions it would seem that Milburn correct to suggest Monbiot’s vision of the State was unrealistic. Returning to the *Climate Change Act*, Monbiot himself has outlined just how the government had managed to extricate itself from any substantial commitment to adhere to its own climate change legislation (2008b). It wouldn’t be farfetched to suggest that Milburn was also right to argue that what is required is something akin to a massive social upheaval or revolution. Certainly that would seem to be a reasonable assessment given the consensus on the scale of the transformation required. The problem is that there is no social movement that currently exists that is capable of provoking this kind of rupture within existing social relations. And given the timelines called for by the science, for a peak in emissions by 2015, such a movement appears impossible.

Given the failure of the state to act how is it that belief in government as an actor is maintained? Is it merely a matter of cognitive dissonance as outlined in Section 5.3.5? That would seem almost too cynical an assumption given the reflexivity displayed by the conversationalists. Rather, I would suggest that the question of how belief is maintained is a matter of how hope is constituted through the utopia vision of liberal democracy. As *N* said, the campaign did not directly challenge climate change but it did try to fashion a tool with which to move government to act. The suggestion that the objective of political activism is to transform government echoes Monbiot's understanding of government as captured by corporate and financial interests in Section 5.2. Belief is maintained, perhaps cruelly, by hope in eventual government reform and responsiveness, and not by cognitive dissonance or self-interest per se. Here we can also note the similarity in logic to Climate Camp's focus on producing a movement of climate activists. Where the NGO and Monbiot focus on transforming government in order to address climate change, Climate Camp focus on transforming people. In both cases we see that the object of politics is to create a capable political agent at an appropriate scale in response to the problem of climate change.

However, as with Climate Camp and the potential of humanity, the enduring belief in the potential of government to be positively transformed is weak at best and beset by a series of doubts in government and in the UK public. Indeed, there appears to be little substantive faith in either government to act or the UK public to desire a more frugal or austere life. It is assumed that neither accepts 'the end of the world stuff', despite the solid scientific evidence of a looming ecological catastrophe. As with Climate Camp the NGO evidences a split between those who accept catastrophe as ontologically real and thus a basis for political action, and those who refuse to accept the reality of catastrophe and refuse to engage in a project of self-restraint and self-management. In both sites we find an 'us vs. them' approach to humanity. What I argue here is that this separation of politics and everyday life, responsible and irresponsible, capable and incapable is produced through liberal utopianisms intolerance of failure. Catastrophe cannot suffer failure: there is no time to wait for a movement to emerge, people to take responsibility or government to act as the threat of climate change is too grave, too

global. And it is this inability to fail that undermines the utopian aspects of environmentalism, pushing it into a cruel and melancholic affective state.

5.4 – The march towards utopia

5.4.1 – The constitution of hope and utopia

Hope as a promissory forces works to preserve liberal utopianism despite its lack of efficacy. Hope, be it grounded in the actions of a subject or the result of processes beyond the hopeful individual's influence, is the promise of a better future. Despite the vast array of meanings given to the word hope (Hage 2003a:10), it is this productive relation to the future that exists at the heart of the concept. It is an affective bond to what the present could be, a form of optimism (Berlant 2011) and not anxious anticipation (Adams, Murphy and Clarke 2009a). Our relationship to hope depends on how we can conceive of our future and what we think our future could be (Hage 2003a) – on the plausibilities of our lives (Thrift 2010:139). Hope is a positive mode of engaging with the present through an image of the future (Buchanan 1998:22). It is “the method through which better possible futures are engaged with in the present” (Ellis and Tucker 2011), and as such a crucial component of any imaginary, even (and especially perhaps) catastrophic ones.

Utopias as images of better futures also exist as promises whether or not they take the form of blueprints of better societies (Parker 2002b) or descriptions of impossible futures that suggest the limits of the present (Jameson 2007). And while as with hope there is much debate as how to distinguish between possible and impossible utopian visions (Buchanan 1998; Munoz 2009), utopia exists as hope does – as a promise that things will be better in the future, a promise that that marks what is wrong with the present.

As suggested by Berlant, sometimes promises of a better future are cruel – they can bind us to practices and forms of life that not only have no actual hope of success but in fact act to impede the realisation of a better future. This insight takes us beyond critiques of hope and utopia as visions of escape from the present (Hage 2003a:11). Such criticism suggests that utopian visions and hopeful dreams

turn us away from work necessary on the present to create a better future. Passive hope nonetheless presents us with a constructive relationship to the future – it is still something to engage with as different to the present, even if it is not ‘us’ who brings the changed future into being. Hope is still capable of being transformative even when passive. But cruel hope preserves the present as unchanged.

Unlike more actively pursued hopes, cruel hope is not a way of being against the present (Munoz 2009:99) in favour of what Munoz calls the “not-yet” (ibid:25-6). It does not seek to cultivate or realise the plausibilities that exist in the present. This not-yet future necessarily involves the creation of new subjectivities and the formation of a “new people” (Thoburn 2003: 18-21) that is the subject of a form of politics. Active hope is thus experimental in practice. However, cruel hope, like cruel optimism, is not a work of transformation but preservation. It does not seek to bring about a not-yet future but rather maintain a ruined future-anterior; a place that no longer exists in contrast to the image of utopia that ‘could’ exist. It is an affective relationship to a lost object, and thus sets out to preserve a mode of life that looks backwards to the future. It is, as I set out in later sections, a form of melancholia (Brown 1999). Cruel hope preserves a vision of the future that is no longer actual or actualisable, and thus preserves a form of life or mode of sociality despite the fact that it no longer has purchase on the present. It protects the form of life from the possibility of change. The reason to preserve a no-longer realisable form of life or practice from transformation is, quite simply, the desire to preserve oneself. To transform ones hopes and dreams, one’s vision of the future, is to transform oneself as well as existing social dynamics and forms of life.

5.4.2 – Exhausting hope and utopia

To maintain hope requires maintaining the potential for that hope to come true. This means ensuring that the material conditions that create and sustain the potential continues to exist in the present. The future is made from the potential of the present (Holland 2006:238), and this is as true for those events that break with the status quo of present and produce new possibilities as it is for those processes that maintain the present as it currently is into the future.

How things can break or change depends on how they are constituted and the potential of the web of relations within which they are located. This is a crucial fact for those movements that wish to break with the present: they must seek out points where the present can be opened up, broken or corrupted. It is for this reason Deleuze & Guattari suggest that change is brought about through “contagion, epidemics, battlefields and catastrophes” (1998:241). But in each of these instances the breakdown of the present takes place through specific material conditions – the proximity of receptive bodies, the possible strong relation between human body and virus, the existence of armies and technologies, the unstable Earth and its autonomous movements. Rupture requires finding points or processes that can be disrupted or sabotaged, or spaces, pauses and gaps that can be wedged open or used to escape.

Both hope and utopian visions have material conditions and as such are subject to periods and conditions of scarcity (Hage 2003a:3). There are places and periods that lack not only hope but also better futures. Indeed, it has been theorised that the current period of neoliberalism lacks for a sense of the future in general (Ables 2010; Berardi 2011) as the grounds for alternative lifeworlds become exhausted (Povinelli 2011).

For a hope to endure the conditions it corresponds to must also endure. What we have seen thus far in Chapters 4 and 5 is that the grounds for a belief in either liberal government or active citizenship around the issue of climate change is largely absent. There is no mass movement and the potential for one constituted by active citizens seems unlikely given the restricted material conditions that enable only a small number of people to become active citizens, a number that is set to shrink as current pro-austerity government politics further reduce the time and resources necessary to be politically active (Cederstrom and Fleming 2012). In addition the continuing global economic crisis, in part due to long-term economic conditions (Brenner 2006; Streeck 2014), and in part due to efforts to undermine liberal democratic avenues (Brown 2015; Crouch 2012; Mair 2013), make the vision of liberal government appear as a relic of the past and not a hope for the future. Broad overviews of social-democracy – the most ‘radical’ egalitarian iteration of liberal democracy thus far and the material grounds for radically

democratic visions, as suggested by Brown (2015) – has been in sustained regression from the 1970s across Europe (Moschonas 2010). Which is to say active citizenship is in retreat. As such liberal utopianism does not represent a break with the present, a possible line of flight into a better future, but a vision of a future that never was, one that was bound to the social conditions of late social-democracy in the 1960s and 70s, and one that even then was never realised beyond limited instances at best (Brown 2015:44).

5.5 – The necessity and impossibility of failure

5.5.1 – Fail again, fail better?

But there is no hope without failure. By this I do not mean that hope suggests that what is hoped for might not come into being: clearly if something could exist, it could also not exist, and the same condition of uncertainty characterises utopian thought (Buchanan 1998:23). Rather, here I mean that hope must be able to survive failure if it is to endure as hope. We must be able to hope for something, and fail to achieve it but continue to hope for hope to survive. Hope requires being able to live with failure (Duggan and Munoz 2009:281). As explored in Section 5.4.2 hope can become exhausted once it no longer represents a future possibility. Failure does not necessarily destroy hope: indeed, to hope is often to fail at first and to try again. The difficult work of hopeful political practice requires enduring failure (Munoz 2009:9). For hope and politics to endure, failure cannot be final. Just as hope is differentiated, and utopian visions cleave to different social arrangements and forms, there are different kinds of failures matched to social assemblages. Liberal utopianism as an iteration of liberal political praxis takes up and translates the traditional form of liberal failure: crisis.

Crisis is omnipresent as a concept (Roitman 2014:3), even more so that the notion of the event to which it is bound as a historical idea. Roitman suggests that this is due to the fact that crisis as a device enables a particular notion of history (2014), where history appears as the product of human labour, distinct from ‘natural’ history (Chakrabarty 2009; 2014). As such it is a foundational concept for both modernity and liberalism. Crisis designates a moment of suspension in time: a moment where history as the smooth unfolding of events breaks down, thus

revealing the inner workings and logic of historical progression. This constitutes a moment of truth (ibid2014:3) where judgement can be passed on the present. The errors of history are brought to light and may be subject to critique and correction (ibid:9). The act of judgement not only offers a negation of the present; it constructs a history of the present, suggesting what is or is not important from the past (ibid:7). As such, crisis constitutes both a failure of history and the opportunity to correct or remedy that failure. The objective is not to bring a new world into being but preserve the old through works of repair and renewal. Crisis, as a kind of failure, creates the opportunity to conserve the present against radical transformation. Progress and not revolution is the horizon of crisis. Walter Benjamin suggests such a horizon is inherently conservative, seeking as it does to protect the present against rupture and radical transformation (1999).

Brown argues the period within which we live is one where “our capacity to intervene in the trajectory and the wide range of effects of capital..., to whatever extent it once existed, appears exhausted” (2001:139). She argues that the pace of socio-economic change overwhelms political action (ibid), creating a condition that Berardi describes as one where we see political events take place without any apparent political actors (2011:125). Cooper argues that time within neoliberalism is “always-already exhausted” (2008:31), creating a situation without the space within which to act politically, undermining the very capacity for politics producing a sense of helplessness (Brown 2015:68). I would argue here that we be wary of attaching the concepts of democracy and politics too tightly, even if, as Tronti argues “the political has a bourgeois history” (2014:unpag). What is exhausted with the end of progress as the inevitable and unidirectional improvement of the condition of humanity (Brown 2001:169) is a particular mode of politics – liberal politics. It speaks to the failure of one particular utopian vision, a vision bound up with the specific universal of progress as expressed within modernity.

The universal of progress was bound to specific material conditions, namely the existence of geographical, human and energetic frontiers that would enable the sense of the future as a space of limitless expansion (Chakrabarty 2009; Mitchell 2013; Moore 2015). As a universal it also served specific socio-political ends, albeit

with the promise that those ends would themselves be overcome and the benefits of progress generalised. The work of crisis-renewal significantly took place within what Benjamin called a form of empty homogenous time (Brown 2001:165) and abstract space (Lefebvre 1991), where the work of improvement can take place without interruption. Brown's contention, one she shares with other thinkers such as Mitchell (2013) and Chakrabarty (2009; 2014), is that the capacity of the world-system to support the elaboration of this universal is exhausted: progress is no longer possible.

5.5.2 – Terminal crisis

What we find within liberal utopianism is a breakdown in the progressive historical labour of crisis-renewal itself. Crisis as articulated within the eco-catastrophic imaginary does not offer up the hope of renewal. Rather once a moment of crisis is reached, it is understood as final – either because a tipping point was crossed creating an entirely new material terrain or because the changes wrought by ecological crisis are so dramatic it will take thousands of years to 'correct' or repair them (Archer 2009). Crisis as reinterpreted through the future-image of ecological catastrophe manifests as terminal and thus a moment where progress ends. As such ecological catastrophe intensifies and extends the current state of impasse described by Brown et al., suggesting where once we could say there was yet a weak hope for the return of progress and democracy as ideals (2015:18), with ecological catastrophe this weak hope has disappeared altogether.

A terminal crisis does not offer up the hope of renewal. A terminal crisis is truly catastrophic – it offers only the end of the world without hope of renewal or rebirth. A terminal crisis suggests the future exists as a "historical void" (Williams 2011:4) – that in fact there is "no future" (Berardi 2011). The only hopeful possibility is to predict and avert a terminal crisis before it occurs. Catastrophe in this sense is never resolved, and thus the failure necessary for utopian thought and hopeful politics is forever deferred into an unspecified point in the future.

Without the space for renewal that maintains the coherence and continuity of liberal praxis, liberal utopianism breaks down. Hope fades with the image of looming catastrophe that is seemingly politically untouchable. Climate change as

imagined within the eco-catastrophic imaginary cannot suffer failure. If 'we' fail to confront it as a challenge, humanity risks extinction. The concept of the Anthropocene, as a container for these various catastrophic processes, thus marks a crisis in the notion of progress and history, one that unlike earlier environmentalist critiques of the concept of progress and human exceptionalism (Luke 1997; Plumwood 1993) does not offer up the idea that another way of life is possible beyond the crisis. Instead it marks out a final crisis, one without the possibility of redemption, as the very possibility of renewal, tied as it is to the frontier and to there being an 'outside' available to replenish progressive society, has ceased to exist.

Within liberal utopianism, failure signals an end to politics (not to mention human civilisation) rather than a chance of renewal. Thus rather than mobilise failure as an opportunity, liberal utopianism fears failure to the point of paralysis. If failure is a necessary companion of hope, the impossibility to fail evacuates hope from liberal utopianism. At the same time the impossibility to fail also forecloses processes of experimentation and exploration – processes that hold out greater risks of failure and engage with the unknown – that might work to renew or transform environmental praxis. This loss of experimental potential weakens the utopian potential of environmental praxis, and reinforces the sense of political foreclosure insofar as the only actions that appear realistic are those that are politically normative and pragmatic (Brown 2015)⁴⁴.

5.6 – Moralism and melancholia

5.6.1 – Green melancholia

For the time being liberal utopianism endures despite its failures. The question is what form does it take as it endures and what gives it the capacity to endure within the impasse? I argue in this section that confronted with the inability to fail and the impossibility of success, liberal utopianism becomes a melancholic strategy. In doing so it returns to the refrain of humanity in excess as not only the

⁴⁴ We could here suggest that rather than being exceptional the eco-catastrophic imaginary foreshadows the more general collapse of the liberal political imaginary, one gestured towards by Brown as well as Berlant. Brown, Wendy. 2001. *Politics out of History*. Oxford: Princeton University Press, —. 2003. "Neo-liberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy." *Theory & Event* 7(1), —. 2015. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*. New York: Zone Books. Berlant, Lauren. 2011. *Cruel Optimism*: Duke University Press..

cause of catastrophe but as the reason for the state of impasse. This melancholic return transforms liberal utopianism into a moralistic practice that frames ecological catastrophe as a condemnation of humanity's refusal to restrain itself, a condemnation that in turn generates support for green authoritarian thought – a climate leviathan (Wainwright and Mann 2013).

What started to emerge through my memory-work within both Climate Camp and the NGO was a sense that many participants in the Camp were undertaking actions without necessarily having the expectation that their actions themselves would address climate change as an issue. The sense was that climate change required the production of a subject who could take action, either a mass social movement or as a responsive government. Through my conversations the picture that developed of both organisations was one where at first there was some hope that these subjects would emerge but that over time this hope waned. With the decline in the size of the climate movement and loss of public attention post-2009, success started to appear unlikely. And as outlined in Chapter 3 many started to openly discuss what life would be like on a post-climate-change Earth (Hamilton 2010; McKibben 2010)⁴⁵.

What does it mean to act without hope of success, when failure risks catastrophe or, worse yet, human extinction (Hamilton 2010)? What does it mean to aim not for victory or a solution but the 'least worse outcome'? It produces what I call a state of green melancholia. Melancholia as a concept has a long and versatile history in European thought (Eng and Kazanjian 2003; Middeke and Wald 2011:1), all be it one most constantly associated with the experience of loss (ibid:3). David Eng has suggested that it is the defining psychological trait of the end of the 20th century (2000:1275), albeit one that is heavily racialised and gendered. Melancholia is a pathological state of mourning, one where the refusal to grieve produces a haunting by the lost object (Eng 2000:1276). Brown argues that in response to the neoliberal transformations of both the liberal political tradition and the mechanisms of socio-economic governance, the US left entered into a melancholic state (1999; 2001:21) refusing to give up its attachments to forms and

⁴⁵ It is also at this point that public discussion of both the Sixth Great Extinction and the Anthropocene take off (Google Trends).

ideal suited to an era of liberal democratic governance and a political horizon married to the idea of the future.

For Brown the loss of progress as a temporal framework undoes both liberal and left wing political praxis. What underpins left melancholia is the loss of “the promise that left analysis and left commitment would supply its adherents a clear and certain path towards the good, the right, and the true” (1999). That is, what is lost is a sense of purpose and history, or what I have outlined above as a utopian vision with its promise of a better tomorrow.

Without the orientation of a utopian vision and the hope that the future will fulfil its promise as a better version of today, Brown argues that the left becomes a “mournful, conservative, backward-looking attachment” (1999:22), one that is no longer effective at realising its lost vision, but rather looks to maintain itself as a form against the erosion of failure. Adrian Little suggests that Brown herself is in fact caught in a form of democratic melancholia as she fails to adequately critique democracy as a concept (2010:974).

As noted by Middeke and Ward, within a melancholic state time seems to “stand still” (2011:4). That is, it enters into a state of impasse as described by Berlant, one without events to secure a passage into the future and instead populated by situations without certainty of resolution or meaning. Within this state Brown suggests political praxis is reduced to denunciations of the wrongs and transgressions of the current order and the failings of the Left as a social force (2001:29).

Liberal utopianism sets out from the same loss of the future. Human history appears to collapse into natural history (Chakrabarty 2009), and catastrophe consumes progress as a future narrative. Where left melancholia suggests that the loss of the future is due to the failings of the Left (Brown 2001:20), what we find with liberal utopianism is an individualisation of failure as a result of the impossibilities of the political scale of climate change. This individualisation matches broader neoliberal processes of individuation and responsabilization in the global North (Brown 2015:131).

At first glance it would appear that the lost object of liberal utopianism is reasonable, responsive liberal governance. But if we return to the details of both the state debate (Section 5.2) and the private lack of faith within the NGO that people will 'accept having less stuff' (Section 5.3.6), then what manifests as the lost object of liberal utopianism is the active citizen. It is the active citizen who can force government to act, or, in the case of the more radical tendency within Climate Camp, can act autonomously from the state. It is the active citizen who can manage their excessive desires, who can end the state of impasse by containing the excesses of humanity. In a moment of ecological crises and catastrophe, where humanity as a species overflows the boundaries of the Earth, it is the active citizen who can both be responsible and take responsibility. But as Brown argues this subject has all but disappeared, and with it the utopian promise of liberal democracy (Brown 2003).

Given how humanity is pictured within the eco-catastrophic imaginary as something that needs to be restrained, it would appear that something more than a responsive government is required: what is needed is an environmental state that has the will to impose 'green austerity' on its population. Here we are returning to the ambiguities of the 'State debate' between Monbiot and Milburn. When Monbiot argues that the campaign against climate change is a campaign against ourselves (2007b:215), and that the campaign requires the State as a tool or agent, what I take him to be suggesting is that in the end the State will be needed in order to impose change on people, a suggestion darkly prefigured in Milburn's gestures towards the repressive function of the State as experienced by environmentalists.

This gesture towards the State-as-leviathan suggests a loss of faith in the power of the liberal citizen to affect change, and an investment in the hope that change is something that can be imposed from 'above'. The scalar logic here is perhaps not accidental but an artefact of how scale is constructed through the eco-catastrophic imaginary as it intersects with common sense notions of the hierarchical nature of social power (Gibson-Graham 2002; Massey 2014). The speed and scale of climate change seemingly calls for immediate action. Such immediacy forecloses the possibility of taking the organisational time to build a movement, to shift cultural and economic practices, or to even impose more significant and radical social

change. It is lack of time that prompts Monbiot to argue that climate change is too urgent a problem to be used to further a 'political agenda' – the only thing that counts is solving the problem, and social change can come 'after' (Monbiot 2008a).

Such a position echoes Brown's suggestion that there are problems and moments that cannot be addressed by liberal democracy, climate change perhaps being one of them (Brown 2015:209). The fact of a climate emergency could easily be grounds for the suspension of the remaining elements of liberal political process in favour of a green state of emergency, one that many authors fear is more-than-possible (Hamilton 2010; McKibben 2010; Monbiot 2007b). This worst-case scenario manifests as inevitable unless people act, and act now.

It is crucial to emphasize that the vision of green authoritarianism is more often than not explicitly outlined as dystopian: it is not the desired outcome of an environmental campaign or a climate change text. If anything it is a privately held fear (or belief), as in the case of the NGO works detailed in Section 5.3.6. There is little to embrace in an authoritarian state, especially by campaigners and activists who more often than not work to combat the lack of accountability of government and the failures of democracy. I argue that the convergence of this lack of desire with the sense that State intervention is the only solution to climate change produces a melancholic affect within liberal utopianism. Rather critically interrogate how the problem of climate change is constituted as an issue, environmentalists turn on humanity itself as a subject that has failed to act. The failures of government are narrated in this way as the failure of people to force government to act.

5.6.2 – The moral turn

It is at this point that the UK environment movement takes a moral turn. We see this in the idea within Climate Camp that protesting was about taking a stand and 'doing their bit' as outlined by *B*:

"It's a stance. People think, 'well I'm going to go protest, and I've done my bit', and then people think they've done their bit and they can basically get on with the rest of their life. Climate change is a moral issue. People come at it that way."

‘Their bit’ is their bit of activism: both coming to the protest and participating in the prefiguration of what a green liberal utopia could look like in the camp. In the former instance we see how active citizenship is figured: as taking part and fulfilling an obligation (‘doing their bit’). In the latter instance, what they are participating in is a theatre of self-restraint. As the camp figures sustainable and participative technologies, it serves as a demonstration of how things could be if people took responsibility for themselves. This is the significance of the vegan kitchens, the mass assemblies, and the compost toilets. This approach to ‘having less’ and self-management extended to expressions of joy. As both *M* and *W* said to me:

W: “There is an element of austerity that comes in with these kinds ‘clean camps’. There was no bar, no messiness, no party.”

M: “There was a kind of earnestness about it.”

W: “They were trying to, they really took all the fun out. That was normal for Climate Camp, but not for anything prior to Climate Camp. Climate Camp went down that route, that we have to be dry, we have to be sensible.”

And, as *F* said many of the people who worked inside the NGO didn’t think people would do what was necessary to tackle climate change as an issue, because they are “more materially consumerist minded than we are” and they would not want to accept what had to be done because they wouldn’t accept that they’d “have less stuff” and “have to work harder for it”.

Here we see the return of the refrain humanity in excess without any of the hope associated with the internal debates of Climate Camp. Humanity, at least that portion of humanity that has failed to become the active liberal citizen (i.e., most of it), reveals itself as naturally greed and destructive – the “destroyer of worlds” (Monbiot 2014a), a species that ‘eats the future’ (Flannery 2000) by destroying ecosystems and driving species to extinction, remaking the weather in the process (Flannery 2007). Humanity is infantilised – presented as a greedy child who refuses to “give up their stuff” (Monbiot 2007b:22). Or humanity is pathologised and presented as a disease of Gaia (Lovelock 2010).

When liberal utopianists can no longer inhabit their visions of the future in good faith they “strike out angrily against the world that affords their adherence only mockery” (Brown 2001:27). That is, the turn resentfully (Brown 1995:69; 2001:129) against humanity, replacing hope with bitterness. Bitter pessimism and not optimism, becomes the dominant affect of liberal utopianism.

The problem here is not necessarily one of historical responsibility for ecological catastrophe, a complex issue contested by many from a variety of positions that suggest it is in fact colonialism (Lewis and Maslin 2015) or capitalism (Malm and Hornborg 2014; Moore 2015) that is to blame and not humanity in general, or that the very idea of humanity in general is a notion bound up with the patriarchal logic of mastery (Crist 2013; Plumwood 1993). Rather, the problem is one of political agency – how should ‘we’ constitute a political actor capable of confronting climate change? Where should we locate them, and on what scale? Liberal utopianism suggests that the only realistic scale of political action is minimally at the level of the nation-state, a world-scale that can in turn work to produce a global political actor via international treaties. Climate leviathan as Empire (Negri and Hardt 2000).

The failure to produce a political actor and not the historical responsibility for ecological catastrophe is what provokes the condemnation of humanity, for nowhere has an adequate actor emerged despite the endless calls for a climate change movement. Intriguingly what is reinscribed through this act of moral condemnation is the liberal subject itself, all be it at the level of the species and as a moral principle not political horizon. The lost object of liberal utopianism haunts the globe, presenting hope as something dead but unable to release its grip on the living. Butler suggests as much when she argues that melancholia has a “deadening” effect on people, rendering them “ghostly” as subjects (Eng and Kazanjian 2003:471).

It is not the only image of death that haunts the global environmental imaginary. The failure of liberal utopianism and the failure to arrest climate change suggests another future in place of progress: that of extinction. This is precisely what we see outlined by writer-activists such as McKibben (2010) and Hamilton (2010), and in fantasies such as *The World Without Us* (Weisman 2008), where the ruins that

remain after us are explored in great detail. Faced with the failure of people to campaign 'against themselves' and the threat of human extinction, it is little surprise that many turn to notions of green authoritarianism – the imposition of green austerity as advocated for by Monbiot and others such as Mark Lynas and James Lovelock. This is of course a return to the green authoritarianism of the early environmental movement (Hay 2002), a tendency that disappeared when many of the predictions of catastrophe failed to materialise. However, given the scientific certainty of catastrophes such as climate change, it may be that here we need to invert Marx's dictum and see catastrophe as something that appeared first time as farce and second time as tragedy.

5.7 – Conclusion: the exhaustion of liberal environmentalism?

The cruel optimism invested in either social movements or liberal government by liberal utopianism produces a green melancholic state. Within the melancholic state time stands still – liberal utopianism is caught in an impasse, a situation without a clear path to resolution. With the end of progress as a master narrative, it is not clear that resolution can still function as a historical device at all.

As time stands still, it produces a feeling of teetering on the edge: that 'we' stand poised just before a threshold, the slightest move triggering a cascade of dire geological and biospheric changes. The future here disappears, and unless catastrophe is avoided progress cannot begin again. The paradox of failure within liberal utopianism is that the longer 'we' fail to address climate change as a species-agent the worse the catastrophe becomes and the more distant the future as an accessible place becomes.

While liberal utopianism lingers in the impasse, the utopian vision that sustains it starts to fray and the movement behind liberal utopianism becomes exhausted. Activists drift away, media attention wanes, people are less inclined to believe that climate change is as bad as activists say, or that anything can be done about it (Bord, O'Connor and Fisher 2000; Hope 2013; Lorenzoni et al. 2006; Prikken, Burall and Kattirtzi 2011).

These last two chapters have described liberal utopianism as a strategy that is breaking down. If an assemblage can no longer realise the strategy of an imaginary, if the future-image acts to disable and not enable action or transformation, the imaginary starts to degrade. It becomes stuck in previous modes of action, performing a memory of itself in order to preserve its form, despite a lack of efficacy.

If as Brown argues neoliberalism has corroded and undone liberal politics (2015), here I would suggest that it nonetheless lingers on as a social relic. Either taken up by various governmental institutions in a functionalist sense (to facilitate different aspects of social governance) or as stubbornly persistent forms-of-life that endure despite their lack of efficacy. What facilitates the endurance of liberal politics is the still-enduring existence of a social demographic that has both the time and capacities to engage in activism and the overwhelming urgency of the issue of climate change. That is, liberal politics endures because of the encounter between a subject with the capacity to make time for politics and an issue that brings political time to an abrupt end.

There is a response to the failure of liberal utopianism that returns to Enlightenment principles of mastery with renewed vigour – a new Prometheanism (Hamilton 2014). The image of this movement of liberal renewal is that of geoengineering and the totalisation of technological mastery over the Earth, and perhaps could be said to unflinchingly embrace the implications of a global species-agent. There is not the space here to permit an exploration of this movement, one that has already been heavily critiqued by a number of scholars and writer-activists (Hamilton 2014; Hulme 2014). Instead, I wish to take another path, one that sets out from heretical environmental movements that seek to directly engage with the question of loss that animates the melancholia of liberal utopianism.

As extinction is the horizon of the failure of liberal utopianism, it is little surprise that there is a reluctance to let go of the lost object of active citizenship and liberal governance. But might not there be other ways to engage with the loss of the visions of liberal utopianism? Could there be modes of engaging with loss that move past melancholia into a more continuous engagement with not only what is

lost, but what remains after loss (Eng and Kazanjian 2003:4)? That is, that use loss as a means of enabling us to think and imagine differently (Yusoff 2009:1015), to make space for other forms of life (Dooren 2014) and to interrogate what we are able to see and what is made obscure in our political calculations (Yusoff 2011)?

David Eng reminds us that Freud drew a clear distinction between mourning and melancholia (ibid:3). Mourning is a process through which we withdraw from the lost object, letting go of what is no longer present. This process of mourning is partial and slow – we tarry with mourning and grief (Butler 2004:30). And this process of mourning opens us up to other points of view as it undoes us as a person. The disorientation of mourning and grief suggests that we cease to be who we are and trouble our distinct identity, and become open to other ways of being in the world through our vulnerability. Mourning means undergoing a transformation, the end of which cannot be known in advance (ibid:21). And with respect to ecological catastrophe, it means moving away from abstract models and brutal mathematics and towards an intimacy with both what is lost and what remains. It requires undoing the narration of catastrophe as an event and instead paying close and sustained attention to the slow violence of both climate change and the Anthropocene. Mourning here works to de-objectify what is lost (Butler 2004:22), thus enabling a “keener sense of life” (ibid:xviii) just as it appears most vulnerable.

While the state of mourning introduces an extended period of vulnerability, it also enables us to endure loss. Mourning brings loss to a close, whereas melancholy indefinitely preserves the moment of loss, foreclosing the possibility of investing in new objects and dreams (Eng and Kazanjian 2003:3). The melancholic state of liberal utopianism disables the necessary process of political experimentation, instead dwelling in the impasse of ecological catastrophe. I now turn to two environmental movements that set out from a process of mourning and that embrace catastrophe as an already-present process of collapse. Survival, and not salvation, forms the basis of their praxis, one I call radical fatalism.

Chapter 6: **The slow violence of collapse**

6.1 – Introduction

As outlined in Chapter 3 the image of a future catastrophic event is produced through the work of writer-activists. Transforming the varied processes of things such as climate change or deforestation into catastrophic events requires organising the facts of such processes into matters of concern that can be grasped politically. In order to do so the facts of catastrophe are organised through a series of events: tipping points. These tipping points serve as political devices that enable not only environmental discourse but also environmental activism. But as we have seen over the previous two chapters there are limits to what this vision of ecological catastrophe enables politically. The catastrophic event effectively disables partial or situated political responses, and produces an instrumentalist and calculative approach to issues such as climate change. It sets the scales of agency in such a way as to devalue and delegitimize situated actions and campaigns and focus the praxis of environmentalism on leviathan figures such as mass movements and nation-states that could potentially act on a global scale.

Returning to the architecture of the imaginary as outlined in Chapter 1, while the refrain brings together and maintains an imaginary it is also the element through which an assemblage or imaginary breaks down through a process of corruption. The refrain is both that which organises a thing and that which disorganises it. In response to the impasse of UK environmental politics a number of actors have attempted to re-imagine catastrophe as a terrain of political and ethical action. In doing so the starting point is often a re-narration of the catastrophic event. Chapters 7 and 8 explore two such actors – the Transition Towns movement and the Dark Mountain Project. I introduce both actors in Chapters 7 & 8, and so here I will confine myself to outlining their shared re-imagining of the refrain catastrophe itself.

Both make use of a similar re-narration of catastrophe, figuring it not as an event but as the collapse of industrial civilisation, a collapse that is slow, fitful, uneven and importantly already happening (Hopkins 2008; Kingsnorth and Hine 2009). Catastrophe is imagined as a long disaster (Clark 2014), one that manifests as a

field of destruction (Yusoff 2009:1026) taking place over the *longue durée* Transition Towns and the Dark Mountain Project both refuse to render the slow violence of ecological crises into an event. This is a refusal of activist political praxis (Kingsnorth 2012c) and of the scalar logic of catastrophe. In contrast to the catastrophic event as narrated through tipping points, complex and dispersed processes (such as deforestation or toxic drift) evade direct engagement; they call for complex and interlocking responses across a range of political and sociotechnical scales, often without the support of easily consumed representative imagery. Complex processes cannot be engaged at a level of abstraction; they are only ever partially engaged through frictive encounters in specific places (Tsing 2004). Environmental politics is thus reconfigured. Confronted by the slow violence of ecological crises, the question is no longer how to avert or defer the catastrophic event, but how to endure catastrophe and engage with an on-going process that is only partially amenable to human intervention.

Following on from the re-narration of the refrain of catastrophe itself, there is a return to the refrain of humanity in excess – that is, to the causes of catastrophe. This return is different for both of the organisations examined in Chapters 7 and 8. Transition Towns return to the question of peak oil and fossil fuels, while the Dark Mountain Project turn to the question of industrial civilisations foundational myths. In both instances however, what we find in contrast to liberal utopianism is an image of humanity as desiring a close and constructive relationship with the more-than-human world and each other, and happier with a simpler, non-consumerist life. In place of the ravenous beast that is humanity as the “destroyer of worlds” (Monbiot 2014a), we find an image of fossil fuels and industrial civilisation as something we should – and will – be glad to be rid of.

In this Chapter I describe this vision of collapse and outline the contours of the transformed imaginary that these two movements share, one that produces a new strategy that I call radical fatalism. Here I turn to the re-narrated future-image, making use of the texts of both actors, similar to my approach in Chapter 3. I then turn to the respective strategic approaches of the actors in following chapters based on my fieldwork in these organisations, including their overlapping utopian

visions of re-localised and eco-centric communities as the futures that (could) await us in the future.

6.2 – All fall down

6.2.1 – What is collapse?

Where catastrophe as a word signals an event – a sudden disaster or disturbance – collapse as narrated within environmental literature often indicates an uneven process, one that can move quickly but more often than not takes a lifetime to unfold (i.e., Greer 2008:27). Where catastrophe etymologically suggests an overturning, collapse points towards the falling down of a structure (Chambers 1999), with the implication being the incomplete destruction of the old and a process of ruination where relics or ruins remain of the old world. In contrast to catastrophe, the collapse into ruins is a process of internal decay where a structure weakens and falls in on itself, rather than being broken from the ‘outside’ by external forces. It is this process of ruination that is captured by the concept of the Anthropocene and its future-anterior emphasis on ‘what traces humanity will leave behind’ (Clark 2014:21; Zalasiewicz et al. 2010). Indeed, the future images of collapse literature are often littered with images of the ruins of the old order, either in world devoid of humanity (Weisman 2008) or, as in the explicitly utopian vision of Transition Towns, in a contracted world of localized and craft-based economies (Hopkins 2008:104).

A collapse is thus a partial end – neither a crisis in the sense explored in previous chapters (Williams 2011:4), nor a terminal crisis as we find with catastrophe, as collapse never seemingly ends. It is a decline or fall without end. It is a refutation of the notion of linear history, captured by the cyclical definitions of civilization as things that rise and fall throughout human history (Kingsnorth and Hine 2009). As such the re-narration of catastrophe as collapse importantly holds the future open (Brown et al. 2012) – it is unclear what the future will be, other than different to today.

6.2.2 – A realistic ending

The future-images of catastrophe outlined in Chapter 3 are derided by many of the authors and movements discussed in this and subsequent chapters as “Mad Max” fantasies (The Dark Mountain Project - Kingsnorth and Hine 2010:3). While many admit that the future could be bleak as industrial civilization collapses, all suggest that such bleakness will not be an event or filmic but some state of either global or localized conflict, usually over resources (Transition Towns - Hopkins 2008:46-7).

The collapse of industrial civilization will be (or is) slow, fitful and fragmented (Hopkins 2008:45; Kingsnorth and Hine 2010:4; 2012:15), and will involve the disintegration of industrial civilization as well as an end to consumerism and to the social complexity of the current world-system (Hopkins 2008:45; Kingsnorth and Hine 2010:3). This process of collapse is a “long descent” (Greer 2008:27) that takes place over decades if not centuries.

Collapse is the future-image of the in-between, an in-between that is described by the Dark Mountain Project as more realistic than either the fantasy of progress or the filmic vision of the apocalypse (ibid). Civilisation will crumble, not explode (ibid). As they say, the “stuttering collapse of a civilization, a way of life, is not the same thing as an apocalypse” (Kingsnorth and Hine 2010). All of the authors above are clear on the idea that what is collapsing is industrial civilization, a civilization that benefits a wealthy few⁴⁶. Paul Kingsnorth from the Dark Mountain Project is clear on this point when he suggests that the subject of collapse is “the bourgeois consumer class of the ‘developed’ world, and ‘our energy systems’ are needed to provide us with our cars, planes, central heating, Twitter feeds, ambulances, schools, asphalt roads and shopping malls” (Kingsnorth 2012a).

6.2.3 – The end of civilisation

The image of a collapsing civilization is painted in a variety of tones and hues, often as a series of scenarios. Rob Hopkins from Transition Towns surmises the various

⁴⁶ In the literature rarely do we find capitalism explicitly named: it is almost always industrial civilisation. This marries to the suggestions that actually existing socialism was as destructive environmentally as capitalism, and that the answer to questions of environmental destruction are not to be found in either the works of Adam Smith or Karl Marx. Kingsnorth, Paul, and Dougald Hine. 2009. "Uncivilisation: The Dark Mountain Manifesto." The Dark Mountain Project.

collapse visions of a range of authors and organisations, including those of Richard Heinberg and permaculture writer-activist David Holgrem in *The Transition Handbook* (2008:46-7). *The Handbook* draws on a broad array of thinkers and writers, and was written in conversation with many others, and as such the range of collapse scenarios presents a relatively complete picture of how collapse is imagined.

Hopkins outlines three distinct envisioned futures – adaption, evolution and collapse ‘proper’. Adaption describes those future scenarios where the present lives on in some form or another, either through the ‘magic bullet’ of technology, a transition to green capitalism or through military force. This future is essentially the continuation of the present despite collapse, and as such presents an image of collapse arrested through the action of either a climate leviathan or behemoth (Wainwright and Mann 2013), what many authors describe as the least desirable option (Kingsnorth and Hine 2012:15). It is also a set of scenarios many authors, including Hopkins, describe as highly unlikely and that depend on the emergence of a miracle of some kind (Hopkins 2008:45) – often geo-engineering or some form of ‘free energy’ that Greer calls a *Deus ex machina* (2008:41-2), creating a narrative order out of the complex processes of decline. Evolution is the positive array of future-visions, those that see the future as (possibly) being one where humanity consciously sets out to transform civilization into something more sustainable, humane and less reliant on fossil fuels. This is a vision that ranges from the optimistic (Transition Towns) to the pessimistic (Dark Mountain Project), with the latter position being one where hope for society lies with small numbers of people but not in grand social transitions. It is here in this set of visions that we find the notion of collapse as an in between space that can, is and will be inhabited by humanity. The final set of scenarios – collapse – outline the various visions of resource conflicts and global wars. And while resources wars are already taking place amidst ecological crisis (Parenti 2011), the vision of total collapse would suggest a global civil war, a Hobbesian turn that is seen as more fantasy than possibility.

Collapse itself, at least for the global North, appears as a long, stuttering material contraction, one that introduces economic crisis, increasing shortages of material

goods including oil and food, and the end of narratives of progress and growth (Greer 2008; Heinberg 2005; Hopkins 2008; Kingsnorth and Hine 2009). While the exact contours of collapse depend on how people in the global North react, there are similar outcomes. The collapse of industrial civilization involves a reduction in its organizational scale from the global to the local and a reduction in its complexity, from a vast world-spanning consumer society to a relocalised, human-powered socio-economic system. As Greer outlines, the future will be:

"a world of hard ecological limits, restricted opportunities, and lowered expectations, in which many of our fondest dreams will have to be set aside for the foreseeable future – or forever. It's a world where hopes can still be realized, dreams can still be pursued, and the experience of being human can still be contemplated and celebrated, but all these things will have to be on a much more modest scale than the experience of the recent past..." (Greer 2008:49-50)

The road down to this reduced level of expectation will be bumpy, but is ultimately survivable. After all, as claimed by the Dark Mountain Project, the end of civilization is not the end of the world (2009), and civilisations have collapsed repeatedly throughout human history yet humanity and human society remain present (Diamond 2006).

Collapse reintroduces vulnerability to the more-than-human world as a common defining trait of humanity, again the temporary respite provided by fossil fuels for some in the global North. With the collapse of a globe spanning world-system and the end of oil, societies will have to become more "resilient" (Hopkins 2008:54) in order to survive, and life will be subject to disruption from more-than-human forces (disease, earthquake, etc) on a scale thought left behind by progress (Kingsnorth and Hine 2009). Many authors suggest that collapse heralds a return to more intimate modes of life where survival becomes a daily question, and matters of concern centre on individual and social reproduction.

6.2.4 – The end of oil

The narrative of civilisational collapse hinges on a confrontation of industrial civilization with ecological limits where the principle ecological limit is not

atmospheric but petrolic. In contrast with the liberal utopian refrain of catastrophe itself, it is not climate change that figures as the only (or even central) problem but peak oil (Chapter 3, Section 3.3). Within this body of literature the present moment is best described as a kind of bubble:

"Consider the structures on which that bubble has been built. Its foundations are geological: coal, oil, gas – millions upon millions of years of ancient sunlight, dragged from the depths of the planet and burned with abandon" (Kingsnorth and Hine 2009:7-8)

This narration of the present as a kind of gigantic 'carbon bubble', akin to the logic of a financial bubble, is repeated throughout the literature from Transition Towns (Hopkins 2008) to peak oil authors such as Greer (2008) and Heinberg (2005; 2007), through to the writer-activists of liberal utopianism such as Monbiot (2003; 2007b) and McKibben (2010).

Peak oil is the theory that oil resources are finite, and that at some point in the near future the total amount of oil humanity will be able to extract from the Earth will cease to increase. At this point, one that some say has already been reached, oil production will plateau but demand will continue to increase, leading to a complex dynamic of sea sawing prices and demand. This chaotic demand and supply schedule will produce economic havoc and the collapse of industrial and consumer society (Mitchell 2013:266). As it is the arrival of a geophysical limit, it is absolute – once peak oil has been reached, there is only the possibility of decline vis-à-vis the energy available for industrial civilization.

The image of industrial civilization painted through peak oil is one that is utterly dependent on oil to exist – it is a petrolic theory of society where the very notion of endless growth and the economy is bound to the exploitation of a finite resource, oil (Mitchell 2013; Urry 2013). It is the flow of energy that sets out the framework for how civilization is organized, where what 'powers' a society's economy shapes how it can be organized. Which is to say industrial civilization is an outcome of the discovery of how to combine fossil fuels with a particular mode of production, and not a deeper desire or character trait on the part of humanity (Malm and Hornborg 2014). When the resource flows necessary for the maintenance of this civilization

become exhausted or insufficient that it risks collapse (Hopkins 2008). While oil is the key resource for industrial civilization, collapse is often imagined as occurring due to a convergence of numerous ecological limits: from peak 'soil' and other key resources (Heinberg 2007) to the collapse of fisheries and whole ecosystems (Jensen 2006) to finally climate change (Rockström et al. 2009), industrial civilization is described as having brought itself as a system to a point of over-reach and collapse.

For many of the authors above, including those from Transition Towns and the Dark Mountain Project, the collapse of industrial civilisation necessarily involves the collapse of the narratives that have sustained it, particularly the myth of progress. As argued by the Dark Mountain Project progress is the notion that the future will be a better version of the present, one marked by endless accumulation: of knowledge, wealth and power over the world (2009). This they say, drawing on John Greer's work, is a myth founded on oil. Without oil the very idea of endless growth and progress would be impossible. This is an argument that Timothy Mitchell pursues in his history of what he calls carbon democracy, arguing that modern liberal (or neoliberal) democracies are built on foundations of coal and oil, and that the two are not separable (2013). Mitchell suggests that it is coal and oil and the tremendous power they contain that enabled the emergence of modern economics and the notion of endless growth. However, with peak oil Mitchell argues that the era of fossil fuelled civilizations is drawing to an end. Despite this, he suggests that there is an inability to imagine life without oil and to imagine nature as other than mere resource, an argument that resonates with the Dark Mountain Project's call to abandon the "myth of nature" (2009). For Mitchell, peak oil 're-natures' politics by undoing the division between so-called natural concerns and political concerns. Nature, following his account, was a myth only maintained when it could be understood as so abundant as to be limitless.

In contrast, in what I've described as the Anthropocenic literature, much of the measurement of the 'age of oil' is conducted by way of listing the horror of industrial civilization – from battery hens and what the Dark Mountain Project call "ecocide" (2009:6), what others have called the Sixth Great Extinction (Biodiversity 2012; Kolbert 2014), to the psychological damage of a consumer

society (Jensen 2006; Kingsnorth and Hine 2009). That is, progress is critiqued from the perspective of what it costs both humanity and the more-than-human world and found to be less than was promised.

6.2.5 – *The monkey trap*

The final aspect of the narration of collapse involves revisiting how humanity figures as an agent. In contrast to the tension within liberal utopianism between an image of humanity as naturally greedy and rapacious, the literature of collapse imagines humanity as caught in a “progress trap” (Wright 2005). A progress trap is a process where a civilization solves one problem only to find that the solution to a problem in turn becomes its own problem. Ronald Wright defines a progress trap through the familiar framework of ecological limits: humanity needs to eat to survive; it solves this problem through agriculture; but agriculture denudes the earth and undermines soil fertility, creating the conditions for famine; the solution is to intensify agricultural production leading to deeper crisis and so on. The element that deepens the cyclical crisis is human population growth: each time the crisis is resolved, it involves the creation of an increased capacity to feed, house and sustain a human population, which then enables further population growth and thus plunging the civilisation in question into crisis again.

This dynamic is said to be playing out with industrial civilisation through its dependency on oil; an energy source that enables not only a globe-spanning economic system, but the intensification of agricultural production via mechanization and artificial fertilizers (Patal 2012). This capacity to feed increasing numbers of people is in jeopardy however, not only because of peak oil (or peak resources more generally) but because of the effects of fossil fuel pollution – climate change.

A progress trap suggests that it is not humanity per se that has created the problem, but short-term logic and thinking – what Greer elsewhere calls a monkey trap (2008:55). The political suggestion here is that it is by taking up a perspective over the *longue durée*, one that matches the tempo of collapse itself, it is possible to interrupt the population dynamics of human civilization. This suggestion both reinscribes the logic of population biology within the imaginary (and thus

maintaining a continuity between the imaginary of radical fatalism and that of liberal utopianism) and offers a means of breaking with it. This suggestion is however posed hesitantly as neither Transition Towns nor the Dark Mountain Project necessarily believe that such a change in perspective will happen.

Part of this hesitation is produced by the re-naturalization of humanity that takes place by imagining us as but one species among many. Humanity is not an exceptional species, but rather just an ape that happened upon a tool (oil) that outstripped its capacity to manage it. While this is a somewhat de-historicised account (Malm and Hornborg 2014; Mitchell 2013), it has the benefit of enabling another vision of human nature, one where in contrast to the vision of liberal utopianism humanity can transform society without having to do so 'all at once' on a global scale or through the actions of government or the leviathan-State.

As a vision is also produces a paradoxical image of human population growth. While set out as part of the problem, it is nonetheless both de- and re-naturalised. De-naturalised in that population growth is reimagined as an outcome of a particular socio-technical arrangement of carbon democracy and not the expression of human nature. It is re-naturalised through the image of the inevitable rise then fall of civilisations (and with them populations). That is, population growth in the abstract is denaturalized, while the rise and fall of civilisations is renaturalised, undoing the myth of progress yet retaining the logic of population biology that underpins much modern environmental thought and practice (Dryzek 2005). As such, it presents a counter-image to that of progress (or apocalypse), one dominated not by endless growth but by complex 'natural' cycles and rhythms as described by the mathematical patterns of population biology.

Situating humanity on an unstable Earth inside natural history produces humanity as a vulnerable and not masterful subject (Clark 2010; 2014). This reimagining fundamentally alters political praxis. Where liberal utopianism maintains activist praxis, the reimagining of catastrophe as collapse and collapse as a possibly positive development produces a politics of what I call radical fatalism. Radical fatalism suggests that collapse is inevitable and should be embraced as it offers the possibility of a better world. The ruination of industrial civilization is the grounds for utopian dreaming, a dreaming that imagines a future without the 'horrors' of

industrial civilization. The radicality of radical fatalism lies in a return to the force of early environmental critiques of consumer society, such as those by thinkers such as Ivan Illich and Ernst Schumacher, that emphasized the need to remake Western civilization along more localized, less energy-intensive lines with an emphasis on appropriate technology and living within the limits of the Earth. To be sure, such visions are not missing within liberal utopianism – they often appear in the private visions of environmental activists who believe no one but them would possibly embrace a life with ‘less stuff’. The difference is how such visions are realized. Whereas liberal utopianism can only imagine change taking place via a climate leviathan, radical fatalism relies on the world itself to institute social change in the form of a inhuman catastrophic agent.

Chapter 7: Transition Towns

The inevitability of relocalisation and the harsh reality of survival

7.1 – Introduction: the Transition Towns movement

Transition Towns started in 2004 when Rob Hopkins set the students of his permaculture⁴⁷ course at Kinsale Further Education Collage in Kinsale, Ireland, the task of applying the principles of permaculture to the issue of peak oil starting with their town. The outcome of this task was the document the ‘Kinsale Energy Descent Plan’ (College 2005), which was adopted by the local council in 2005 (Kinsale 2014). After moving to Totnes, England in 2006 and launching the Transition Town Totnes process (Morrison 2011), Hopkins founded the Transition Network in order to promote and disseminate the Transition model (Kinsale 2014), a project aided by the publication of *The Transition handbook* (Hopkins 2008) in 2008 which sold over 25,000 copies (Network 2014b). The Transition idea quickly spread and as of July 2014 there were 417 listed Transition initiatives around the world (Network 2014a).

The idea at the heart of Transition Towns is that there needs to be a conscious rescaling of our existing socio-economic infrastructure to become less reliant on fossil fuels and more ‘resilient’ at a local level. Resilience means “the ability of a system, from individual people to whole economies, to hold together and maintain their ability to function in the face of change and shocks from the outside” (Hopkins 2008:12). Hopkins argues it is important to build community resilience as it is to cut carbon emissions – that, in fact, to do the latter and not the former is “ultimately futile” (ibid). Resilience has become increasingly important as a political concept (MacKinnon and Derickson 2013; Neocleous 2013) precisely because resilience emphasises the production of the capacity to “bounce back” (Alloun and Alexander 2014:14) after the shock of disasters or crisis, two events that feature heavily within both climate change and economic discourse (Brenner 2006; Klein 2008). But while resilience as a concept has come under sustained critique as a

⁴⁷ Permaculture is a system of sustainable socio-agricultural design first developed by Bill Mollison and David Holgrem in the 1970s that focuses on making the most out of natural rhythms and processes by “working with, rather than against nature”. Mollison, Bill. 1994. *Introduction to Permaculture*. Tasmania: Tagari Publications.

conservative concept that privileges expert rule (Neocleous 2013), as utilised by Transition Towns the concept suggests something more akin to the idea of resourcefulness or adaptability as a disposition, rather than the capacity to remain the same despite changing circumstances.

As such resilience is perhaps best understood as a still-emerging dispositif (Braun 2013) that is yet to be codified as a mode of governance. While still open there are some clear common points of usage. Resilience refers to the capacities of infrastructure – what it can and can't do and withstand – and is focused on the governance of urban spaces and scales through infrastructure (ibid:50;58). As I go on to explore in this chapter, this notion is as open to grassroots political practice as it is to state-led governance and forms a point of convergence where the boundaries of expert knowledge can be contested and forms of “technical democracy” can be made (Mitchell 2013:241).

For Transition Towns peak oil is the reason to cultivate resilience. Peak oil⁴⁸ is the idea that we either have or will soon be producing as much oil as is globally possible. Once peak oil is reached, oil will become steadily more expensive as demand outstrips supply (Heinberg 2007). As oil supplies dwindle, there will be an urgent need to transform the global economy that is, they argue, completely dependent on oil (Hopkins 2008). Ultimately as a result of peak oil there will be a process of de-globalisation as the complex supply chains and dispersed production processes of globalised industrial civilization require oil to exist.

In the Transition vision the de-globalising effects of peak oil are further compounded by climate change (Hopkins 2008:30). Climate change creates further disruptions and uncertainties through natural disasters, reduced crop yields and mass migrations (Flannery 2007; Parenti 2011). The two combine to create a world where the capacity to maintain a global oil-dependent consumerist way of life become nigh impossible and where the return to local and regional socio-economic systems is inevitable (Hopkins 2008:68).

In the sections that follow I set out how the Transition Towns' vision of a localized future and their practices for building resilience work in practice through my

⁴⁸ Peak oil was discussed in depth in Chapter 3, 'Humanity in excess'.

exploration of my local Transition group (henceforth TG) via participant-observation. As we shall see the key to embracing collapse as an ongoing process is to be found in how resilience is developed as a disposition (Easterling 2014) through a rescaling of socio-economic processes on an urban or 'local' scale. This rescaling involves not only transforming or repurposing existing sociotechnical infrastructure but also remaking people as resilient through a process of being 'reskilled'. Importantly neither of these two processes are entirely voluntary insofar as they are said to be necessary responses to the inevitable material and spatial contraction of social life that will take place in the near future as a result of peak oil.

7.2 – Outlining life after oil

7.2.1 – Food for free

I started attending my local TG events in May 2013 as a part of the fieldwork for this thesis. In order to introduce the image of collapse at work within Transition Towns here I want to turn to my field notes from an event in April 2013. At the start of my notes for that event I have the history of TG outlined. I found myself at the event early and so passed the time exploring the notice board of the vegetarian café that was the venue for most TG meetings and events, as well as a host of other local green groups and projects. On the notice board was a flyer about the local Transition Group, its principles and brief history.

The flyer said that TG had its first meeting in late 2011. Prior to that there were a sequence of Transition initiatives in the area from 2008 until the end of 2009 when they went "into hibernation". This last quote is from the TG website, where I found most of the text in the flyer⁴⁹. The 'about us' section of their website lists the aims of the group and the group's purpose as creating "a happy, healthy [local area], where through working together as a community we can reduce our energy use and increase our resilience". TG has three specific aims:

- (1) support local organisations that encourage the development of more resilient communities;

⁴⁹ I've rendered my field notes and the identifying texts anonymous and hence cannot provide a direct citation here.

- (2) help local people gain low carbon and low energy living skills, reduce their living costs, and enjoy the benefits of better connectedness with their community, and;
- (3) run projects which demonstrate the potential for [our area] to reduce its planetary impact.

All of the events of my TG were focused on points (2) and (3) and included workshops on yogurt and other fermented food making and the techniques of food preservation, to bicycle maintenance and more general household repairs, as well as more general workshops on 'living for less', foraging for food and 'making instead of buying'. All of the events I attended had the same small group of people present, all of whom knew each other and were involved in a range of other groups and projects such as Friends of the Earth, the local environment centre, the Green party and other one-off environmental projects around cycling campaigns, local food events, etc. And while there was a wide range of ages, most of the attendees were white and seemed quite well educated.

Overwhelmingly the events of my TG were focused on what we could call craftivism: a fusion of what could be called the 'domestic arts' (food preparation and preservation, DIY repairs, approaches to managing domestic spending and budgets, etc) and the practices of activism (hosting public events and screenings, initiating campaigns on 'consumptive' topics (bike lanes, securing funding for public initiatives such as repair cafés and recycling centres, etc). The events of the TG were all either repair or food related, outlining an implicit vision of both what the future would be centred on and how it was to be inhabited.

My introduction to this vision was the event I was waiting to attend. The event was advertised as a 'super new foraging class', a class about how to find 'food for free' in the local area. When I arrived (around 8pm), there were close to 20 people in the room. Upstairs a Green Party meeting was taking place, and people kept filtering in during the class to make their way upstairs. The meeting started with some of the café staff passing around plates of food, dips and bruschetta, all of which they said they'd sourced from foraged food (nettles, wild garlic, etc). This served as the introduction to the night, and the person leading the class, *G*, said that foraging was "about looking at things differently" – about seeing food where

other people saw weeds. Foraging is the collection of wild foods, from blackberries to mushrooms. But it's more than that – as *G* said in his introduction “it's about being aware of what's in your local area”. *G* said local food was a local solution to the current crisis. There was no real mention of what this crisis was. No one seemed to be at all confused as to what it was however. After the introduction *G* put on a video he'd made with other members of TG showing them collecting wild foods with a guide in the local area, with the guide explaining what each of the foods was, what it was good for and when and where to find it. After the video ended people talked about their own food experiences. Half the room seemed to have an allotment⁵⁰, and most were involved in food box schemes, purchasing food directly from either a farmer or through a local scheme that sourced its food from farms within the area.

G had to almost yell to bring the meeting to order. *G* went on to show a video he and a few others in the group had made of the last wild food walk the Transition group had hosted. After the film a map of the local area was put up on the wall and we all started to fill locations of where herbs and fruit could be found for free. About 20 minutes into this map-making exercise, one of the people in the room said, “it's quite nice, but foraging sounds small”. One of the Transition group members, who had been involved in making the short film, said that it was, but “it was part of something bigger”. She went on to mention how food could be found in supermarket bins (practices variously called gleaning, or dumpster diving), and that with box schemes and allotments it was “all a part of bringing food back to us”. Someone else added that you could grow fruit and nut trees alongside the streets, and that “wouldn't it be nice to have food plants everywhere”. *G* spoke up and said that all of this was small scale, and that on its own it wouldn't be the change required, but it was a first step and more about how we understood ourselves and how we could start to imagine the future. The practice of sourcing local food and foraging is as much an exercise in expanding the imagination as part of an actual transition.

⁵⁰ An allotment is a small area of land let out by local government, usually, to individuals to cultivate food crops or decorative plants for personal use.

The imagined end result of the food event was the beginning of a local food movement – after the mapping exercise, *G* outlined the groups plans for a buyers co-op scheme, and their involvement with the local organic food market and box scheme and took names of people interested in the projects. *P* said the two would support each other, as the renewed attention to food and from where it comes would drive deeper social change.

7.2.2 – Seeing things differently

The local food event illustrates a number of crucial elements of Transition praxis. The practice of making a better life within the collapse of industrial civilization is framed as a matter of ways of seeing things; i.e., it is a matter of how we imagine the future. This is not a case of just narrating the future or the present differently – it is bound to specific practices that engage with the present in an alternate fashion, starting from the use and not exchange value of things: what can be done with them and not what they cost or are ‘worth’. Exemplary here is the idea of taking food from supermarket bins and turning consumer waste into food (Carolsfeld and Erikson 2013).

Such food waste, once retrieved via ‘dumpster diving’, constitutes an “uncommodity” (Giles 2014:109), a thing that has been rendered incomparable to other commodities by being cast out from market relations. Such a state is necessarily ambiguous as while the wasted food may be reclaimed and put to other uses and thus have its value qualitatively changed as exchange value is extinguished by use value, the work of retrieving it from the dumpster can also serve as a basis for new exchange value if the retrieved item is recirculated as a commodity. As suggested by Giles, such works of salvage often result in new commodities – from art made of industrial waste to food sold from found or foraged produce.

Such an ambiguity is to be found in the passage of salvage from meaning the labour of recovering economic value from ‘lost’ cargo ships (Williams 2011:34), to a labour that sets to work on what can be done with the ruins of commodities and infrastructure when all value is lost. Salvage in the second sense is a re-working of something broken, wasted or ruined, and is thus salvage in its most utopian form

(Williams 2011:42)⁵¹. This is the sense in which dumpster diving and foraging works in the TG. It is a response to the necessary waste of industrial food production (Carolsfeld and Erikson 2013), one that is suggestive of a different relationship to food and food production, at once focused on needs (and not accumulation of wealth) and an intimacy on the production of food. And while the talk of community gardens, dumpster diving and foraging might be somewhat 'unrealistic' as suggested by the TG discussion on scale, the aim of the experiments is to change how people relate to food production. It is about driving deeper social change via a re-imagining of social relations vis-à-vis food.

Starting from waste – be it food or, as we shall see below, broken appliances – is suggestive of a particular worldview that sees industrial civilization as in need of repair. It is what Jackson calls an example of “broken world thinking” (2014:230), where the perceived failure of a piece of infrastructure draws attention to the forms of on-going labour that maintain it. And in drawing attention to the infrastructure, how it functions or fails to function, such broken world thinking enables imagining how it could function differently. As such the praxis of broken world thinking could constitute a work of repair and thus of reviving the infrastructure, or salvage and taking what can be used from the infrastructure and putting it to work servicing social needs. It could also constitute an act of invention and the creation of new infrastructure from scratch to service social needs. In all three cases what is posed is a questioning of the implicit values or dispositions of infrastructure (Easterling 2014:74) through a process of “ontological politics” that suggests that “social transformation is mainly driven by material transformation” (Papadopoulos 2014:70). Ontological politics is focused on the organizational possibilities of infrastructure (ibid:71) – what can or can't be done with a particular assemblage (Easterling 2014:75). Such politics is a matter of working with the capacities and dispositions of nonhuman actants and is built on “knowing how” (ibid:84) to work with material capacities; what we can call craft (Papadopoulos 2014:78) In the case of Transition Towns the basis for such

⁵¹ It could also be considered as a form of what Braun following Agamben calls profanation. Braun, Bruce. 2013. "A new urban dispositif? Governing life in an age of climate change." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 32:49 – 64.

material transformations is to be found in the various material flows that serve as the basis for social reproduction, most importantly energy.

Ontological politics is productive of what Papadopoulos calls “thick justice” (2010:137). Thick justice signals a shift away from liberal humanist conceptions of justice as a matter of redistribution and correction within existing material conditions towards focusing on the question of material conditions themselves (ibid:145). Thick justice focuses on how infrastructure conditions the lives we can live – on the question of what forms of life infrastructure enables and disables, produces and inhibits (ibid). It is a form of politics that seeks to open up infrastructure as a political question insofar as it seeks to make infrastructure something that can be not only contested but created by non-experts (Mitchell 2013:241). The work of repair and salvage is set against the possibility of collapse and seeks to ensure the collective survival of Transition Towns under conditions that empower community members and produce a high degree of local autonomy.

This turn to salvaging is part of a broader turn away from the professional advocacy of activism to the everyday labour of repair (Jackson 2014). Where we saw a tendency towards professionalization in the activism of Climate Camp and the NGO, with Transition Towns what we see is something more ramshackle, more amateur and enthusiastic, where meetings and events do not flow or proceed smoothly, and are often a series of tangents or unfinished conversations focused on personal obsessions and interests.

The world is broken and cannot be restored to its old state: this is the implicit message of a vision of collapse. What can be done is repair what lies within reach, and salvaging what sociotechnical infrastructure is within the grasp of a local group. The focus of both such activities is not to produce for the market or to restore good governance, but to enable a kind of sustainable social reproduction at a local level. Salvage and repair are both scale-making labours (Tsing 2004) that set out to produce the material conditions of imagining a utopian vision of life at a local scale.

7.2.3 – Situated imagining

The workshops of the TG were exercises in what I would call situated imagining, where there is a turn towards the possibilities to be found in the dispositions of intimate material relations: what they could be used for as opposed to what they currently do now.

The classic thought experiment that Transition Towns use to fuel the work of situated imagining is the response to rationing and material shortages in the UK during World War II, as they say this resembles the kinds of effects of the future peak oil induced material contraction. In the *Transition Handbook*, the founding text and programmatic guide for local Transition groups, Hopkins approvingly outlines some of the efforts undertaken during the war by the British government, such as the broad engagement with the public and the speed and breadth of the government response to the situation. Hopkins focuses on the specificities of government planning focusing on the ‘essentials’ of food production and distribution, energy and health – three things at the heart of the Transition concept (2008:65-67). As he outlines, the wartime economy effort massively increased the amount of food cultivated in Britain, halving food imports and effectively making Britain food self-sufficient for 160 days per year (up from 120). The same period saw a massive rise in allotment gardening involving over half of Britain’s manual workers and providing around 10% of the food for the national diet (ibid:66). There was also significant efforts to recycle, salvage and repair equipment and infrastructure at an everyday level (Simms 2009). As important to Hopkins as the shift in land use and labour was the imposition of rationing for food and fuel. Total food consumption in Britain fell 11%, and with the changes in consumption came a number of health improvements such as reductions in infant mortality rates and instances of diet-related diseases (2008:66-7).

The purpose of such examples is to provide a basis for more collective thought-experiments and not to provide a blueprint of what the future will look like. In contrast to the work of writer-activists such as Hamilton, Lynas, McKibben and Monbiot, Hopkins argues that images of doom do not foster social change (2008:78). The collapse of industrial civilization is not cause for despair but an opportunity (2008:45), one to be seized by working with others to collectively

envision a “different, post-carbon collective story and taking steps towards realizing it” (Alloun and Alexander 2014:6). Story-telling is central to Transition practice (ibid:5) as it seeks to “open up new possibilities” (ibid) that renew political praxis through the power of collective positive visioning (Hopkins 2008:94).

The Transition practice of positive visioning is a deliberate break with environmental activism. As Hopkins describes, environmentalists often campaign by presenting people with an image of a horrible future, then try “to get them excited about not going there” (ibid:94). Transition instead seeks to convince people to take up Transition practice by enthusing them with a vision of “an abundant future: one which is energy-lean, time-rich, less stressful, healthier and happier” (ibid). It is this process of situated, positive visioning we see in the TG food event. The food map, the video and the dinner made from dumpstered food all work as narrative devices that enable the participants to imagine a post-consumerist future.

There are a number of imaginative devices that Hopkins suggests as organizing tools in the *Handbook*. The first is a material story – that is, a narrative that is bound up in a material object or process. Hopkins describes the local currency the Totnes pound as just such one ‘story’, one that told a “beautiful new story about money” (ibid) and about money’s role in local communities. Another such story is the food map described in Section 7.2.2, one that tells a story about collectivized knowledge, community food resources and a future where food is for free. Another is using tale of how things have been in the past during periods of greater material or energy scarcity, as in the tale of wartime rationing.

The practices of story-telling and visioning play central roles in the Transition program, a series of 12 steps that outline how to start a local Transition group (ibid:148). According to the *Handbook* they are the result of observations of how the first Transition Towns initiatives worked, and thus the result of permaculture-inspired observations. The steps start with the idea of setting up a steering group and raising awareness of the issues of peak oil and climate change in the local area. This initial work is then built on by engaging with other, existing groups and local government, and working towards what is called “the great unleashing” (ibid:153).

The great unleashing is a public launch of the Transition group and plan in the local area, one that is meant to serve as a catalyst for broader involvement in the Transition group. After the public launch, there are a series of steps that involve forming specific working groups on issues such as food, energy, etc., who then go on to research the needs and capacities, as well as alternative histories and stories, of those issues in the area. The Transition group should then go on to create material stories in the form of “visible manifestations” of the Transition plan (ibid:163), running workshops to create the capacities and skills necessary to live in the post-collapse world. The final stages involve making links with local government to see what scope there is for using local government as a device to transition the local area and realising the ‘energy descent plan’ – what Hopkins calls the start of the real work of transition (ibid:175).

The energy descent plan (EDP) is a vision of “a powered-down, resilient, relocalised future” (ibid) that sets out how the vision is to be realized. This step, as with the previous steps, is a product of the collective labour of a given local Transition group. There is no one ‘central’ plan, although given the common analysis of the present as a state of collapse and what practices should be undertaken to respond to collapse, most EDPs look very similar.

7.2.4 – Looking back from 2030

Using a common environmental trope⁵², Hopkins outlines his positive vision for 2030 in the *Handbook* via a series of sectoral changes in the areas of transport, agriculture, energy, healthcare, housing, education and economics (2008:104). Farms serve regional needs, and are highly diversified enterprises producing not only a wide range of food, but building materials, energy and medicinal plants. In addition, cities become garden cities with available space being used to grow vegetables, fruit and salads. Healthcare in general becomes focused on well-being and preventative medicine, and becomes regionalized. The general lack of oil means people must travel on foot more often which, when coupled to the lack of heavily processed food, produces a healthier society. Economies are relocalised, with the result being a profusion of local currencies and businesses. Energy is also

⁵² An approach also used by Monbiot in his blueprint for a post-climate change society. Monbiot, George. 2007b. *Heat: How we can stop the planet burning*. London: Penguin.

relocalised and produced largely through renewable means. There is a massive reduction in energy demand however, as people move away from energy-intensive lifestyles. Housing, as well as becoming more energy efficient and autonomous, tends to also be more communal, with new collective living arrangements becoming popular. All of this is underpinned by a vision of the radical transformation of education. The national curriculum is transformed and now focused on producing the skills necessary for independent material reproduction – how to farm, medical skills, construction and repair skills, etc.

Overall what we find in Hopkins' vision is a world of regional self-sufficiency, localized market economies, small-scale energy production and increased communal living, as well as the massification of the skills necessary for material autonomy after oil. It is a vision of the end of the global scale as dominant social frame in favour of a regional, time-rich life.

Transition Towns imagine this change as taking place through a long and uneven process of collapse, one brought on by natural limits to energy supplies (Hopkins 2008:102). The project of building a new world takes place during collapse, and within the ruination of the old world. Such a project however relies on how Transition Towns produce the capacities of localization and repair amongst their practitioners. As Hopkins suggests, currently the UK general population does not have the skills to undertake such projects of transition or localization. There needs to be a process that puts “an end to useless” (ibid:166).

7.3 – An end to useless

7.3.1 – The repair café

In Section 7.2.2 I suggested that the activity of Transition groups is a work of repair and salvage, and in Section 7.2.3 that such work is organized by the dispositions of the materials being worked with. In this section I set out how repair is practiced by Transition Towns through the process of reskilling. Reskilling is fundamentally a practice of repairing the self for Transition Towns, one that is coupled to the work of visioning as a way of overcoming the “addiction” of oil and learning how to enjoy a life with less material wealth. In this section I set out my

notes on an event run by my local TG in June 2013 – a trial run of what they were calling a repair café.

“Household items, bikes, furniture, electrical goods, clothes ... find out from other local people how easy & satisfying it is to repair instead of buying new, at the same time reduce landfill & the drain on your cash. If you are wondering how to repair an item, bring it along to get guidance from others. If you have something favourite you’ve fixed, bring it (or a photo) along and tell us how you did it.” (Flyer, author copy)

As I later learned when reading the *Transition Handbook*, setting up projects like the repair café were part of the 12-step program (step 8), and necessary to creating the situated imagining of a different relationship to material life that the EDP requires.

The repair café event kicked off at 8pm. *P*, one of the people involved in running the TG, announced the commencement of the event, and asked people to make their way to the back room of the café, a space that is a recycling centre that hosts an unusually large collection of house paint and a lot of tools and equipment. The group that made its way to the back room included 15 people of various ages from early 20s to late 60s, both men and women (and all white).

Once we had all made our way to the backroom, *P* introduced the night. It had become clear to me that *P* was a kind of unofficial public face to the group, and as I’d learn later he was involved in a number of other local environment groups. Indeed, during my time with TG I found that most TG members were involved in a range of environmental groups, and not just the TG. *P* introduced the night as a trial run and showcase of what he and TG hoped would be a new venture – a permanent repair café. *P* said that the idea of a repair café was to have a kind of community co-op where there would be the resources (tools, materials, etc) and some staff to both offer repairs on everyday household and DIY items (drills, bikes, toasters, etc), as well as provide the opportunity for people to learn how to undertake repairs themselves.

P said that the café was an expression of the reuse concept of the green mantra ‘reduce, reuse, recycle’, and as the current crisis deepened repair cafés would

spring up everywhere. He went on to say that the deepening of the crisis would mean a return to a more frugal life, one where repairing everyday items would become something that people just did, replacing a disposable consumer culture with a frugal life without waste.

It was at this point in the introduction that I noticed that *P* hadn't introduced himself or the local Transition group, or the Transition Towns concept. Looking around the room after that observation, it occurred to me that perhaps the group of people present needed no introduction, as no one seemed lost or confused. Most in fact seemed to know each other. There appeared to be an assumption that people at the event already knew each other, what the Transition concept was, and what the crisis and its deepening meant.

Before moving onto the actual repairs and reskilling of the night *P* orchestrated a 'go around', where people were asked to say what they had that needed repairing, or what repairs skills they wanted to learn. Most people mentioned household items like toasters and radios, and there were a few bike-enthusiasts present (including me). After the go-round, we were broken into small groups of 4 or 5 people, and asked to discuss two questions: why we were here and what we wanted to get out of it⁵³. My group was all quite young (20s and 30s I guessed) and all knew each other. We ended up doing a mini go-around, taking it in turns to answer the questions, and we all said more or less the same thing – that we wanted to work towards having a less consumerist lifestyle, and that we wanted to learn how to do simple repairs to make ourselves more self-sufficient. When the groups all came back together there was another go round where people said what they'd discussed in the smaller groups. There was a consistency to why people were here and what they wanted, which was pretty much the same as what we'd discussed in our small group.

After this the repair café proper started. A number of TG members set up repair stations – benches with the tools required for specific repairs – and then people

⁵³ During the go-round I mentioned my research, and the others in my ground suggested that this was also part of the work of Transition. Indeed, Hopkins has done post-graduate research as have many other Transitioners. Cato, Molly Scott, and Jean Hillier. 2011. "How Could We Study Climate-Related Social Innovation? Applying Deleuzian Philosophy to the Transition Towns " *SSRN*, Smith, A. 2011. "The transition town network: a review of current evolutions and renaissance." *Social Movement Studies* 10(1):99-105.

milled about getting various repairs done, talking shop about how to undertake repairs or what tools they thought best for specific jobs. There was a bike getting its rim trued, a radio being gutted and repaired, a toaster being soldered, and one or two darning repairs being undertaken. Conversations around the room moved between specific practical conversations, places to buy the gear necessary to do repairs, and more general conversations about how this would become the new normal.

About half an hour into the session I had a long conversation with *T* about the end of oil. He'd introduced himself by telling me permaculture had changed his life and helped him to understand things better, like how to simplify his life and how to deal with the inevitable collapse of this civilization. I asked him what he thought would happen in the future and he told me that the end of oil would mean the end of "this consumerist life" as oil got more expensive and there was less of it around. He told me that it was inevitable that economies would become local again, with people growing their own food and having to make do with less stuff, learning to do things for themselves again. I asked him how he thought it would happen and he said life would just start to get "closer to home". A woman who'd be standing nearby introduced herself and said she thought that it would be a bumpy ride down, but that it wouldn't be as bad as people thought. It would make for local communities again, and people would get to know each other and their neighbours. *T* agreed, saying he thought it would be a good thing. I asked if they didn't think it would be a bit chaotic, with shortages of food and oil, and an economic crisis as oil got more and more expensive as it ran out. Both of them agreed, saying there would be "some confusion", but that there would be a kind of natural process where people would "just make do with less".

As the repair part of the evening drew to a close *P* told us all that we were welcome to come to the café to have a cup of tea and discuss where next for the repair café. Most of the people attending decamped to the café for tea, cake and the debriefing. The debriefing discussion was very ambitious, with people generally being very keen to set a permanent repair café up. There was a short discussion of which building in the local area would be good to acquire, with one person outlining how they could get permission from the local council because they knew someone in

the relevant department. Someone else in the room told us that there were a series of grants available from the council, and that they were friends with the council officer in charge. The people in the room all seemed to have a lot of knowledge and contact with local councilors and council workers – as the discussion went on, as specific councilor and council worker names came up there was either discussion about them, or debates around their perceived friendliness to the Transition concept.

7.3.2 – How to make do with less

The desire to make do with less is the desire that animated the repair workshop. The people attending all wanted to become more self-sufficient, as opposed to the dependency of the “consumerist lifestyle”. This opposition between consumerism and self-sufficiency is crucial to the Transition vision of positive collapse. Indeed, the positive vision of collapse of Transition Towns relies on the opposition being resolved through a process of repairing the self so as to enjoy “making do with less”.

What is implicit in the preceding episode is made explicit in the *Handbook* – consumerism has made people “useless”. As Hopkins writes, often the response to the issue of peak oil is one of panic, one that stems from the realisation that we no longer have many of the basic skills our grandparents took for granted” (2008:166). While in the *Handbook* Hopkins genders his statement, claiming that this realization of ‘useless’ is often expressed by young men (at once also making a generation claim), within the TG repair café session there was no such gendering. Everyone was there to learn, everyone wanted to become ‘self-sufficient’. This is not to deny that there is an unevenness to existing capacities (often the skills of repair or construction are gendered), only to say that within the repair café workshop the desire to overcome being “useless” was a common desire.

To be useless is to be unable to maintain the infrastructure of one’s life. To be rendered helpless when things like radios, washing machines, cars, bikes, and clothing breakdown. It is bound up with the other kinds of useless expressed by the TG workshops such as finding, growing or preserving food. To this list we could add some of the other skills prized by Transition groups such as beekeeping,

house building, farming animals or making cheese and bread, fishing and building boats and alternative medicine. What this list suggests is the imagined infrastructure of a localized, post-oil society. That is it assumes that life post-collapse will involve a fusion of production and reproduction at a local level and the collective involvement of a local community in maintaining that infrastructure.

To be useless then suggests that the frame of reference is the future ruins of industrial capitalism. But at once it is also the present insofar as it is a critique of consumerism. As most of the repair café participants said, they wanted to do away with their consumerist lifestyles as these lifestyles have deprived them of a kind of independence. Independence here would seem to indicate being able to organize or manage one's own reproduction by working on or with the infrastructure of one's life. This relates back to the question of food and the idea of ontological politics outlined in Section 7.2.1.

This twofold denunciation of a state of produced uselessness in the present and in the future suggests more than just the political need to take hold of social infrastructure or what Easterling calls "extrastatecraft" (2014). The inclusion of a future perspective opens up a novel vista – that of the future ruins of industrial civilization. In that broken world image, what we could call the "denied dependencies" (Plumwood 1993:48) of industrial civilization become apparent. More specifically for Transition Towns, the dependency of industrial civilization and consumerism on oil.

The future-image of collapse that compels Transition praxis describes the collapse of civilization as precipitated by peak oil. They argue that without plentiful cheap oil industrial civilization will necessarily collapse. Other connected peak oil theorists and writers such as Richard Heinberg (who wrote the forward to the *Handbook*) argue that industrial civilization is not only in denial about its dependency on oil, but to a range of other finite resources, all of which will peak soon and precipitate a collapse of global industrial civilization (2007).

Such concerns are not limited to peak oil theorists and Transitioners but are subject to a wide range of corporate and governmental planning, including planning for future resource wars on the part of the US government (Townsend

and Harris 2004). Indeed, it is the question of the material limits of the Earth that helped spark the emergence of the modern environmental movement with the publication of the Club of Rome report *Limits to growth* (Meadows et al. 1974) and has returned to environmental discourse with climate change and the idea of the Anthropocene.

As outlined in Chapter 3 the image of catastrophe is coupled in the environmental imagination to that of soon-to-be-reached terrestrial limits (Hay 2002). This could be described as the imaginary counter-vision to the idea of boundless accumulation that animates the capitalist imaginary, itself a notion built on the imaginary foundations of the Enlightenment idea of progress (Wright 2005) which is an idea that rests on two fundamental denied dependencies – women’s reproductive labour and the various capacities of the more-than-human world (Plumwood 1993).

Transition Towns chart a more specific path through this thicket of limits-discourse, one focused on the question of oil, using peak oil to open up the question of economics to democratic debate. As suggested by Mitchell, oil is a resource that has enabled the fiction of not only limitless economic growth to flourish, but the emergence of the very idea of the economy as something distinct from society (2013). Mitchell argues that without the energy derived from oil, the form that life has taken in the global North – that of industrialized consumerism – would not exist, and that with peak oil it will soon have to change (ibid:13), a point well made by participants during the repair café. As peak oil theorists argue the entire economy of food, travel, housing and consumption relies on the availability of cheap, plentiful fossil fuels, a point many ‘peak’ writers agree on (Heinberg 2007; Kunstler 2006a). Thus with the emergence of peak oil the autonomy of the economy and the apparent neutrality of infrastructure comes into question.

Transitioners see the relative neglect of the issue of industrial civilisation’s dependency on oil as dangerous for two reasons. The first is that the state of denial leaves people unprepared for the “bumpy ride down” – to be prepared requires more than reskilling. It requires accepting collapse as inevitable, and adjusting psychologically to that fact. The second is that it is the attempt to continue in denial of the Earth’s limits and oil in particular that fuels the worst possible future

outcomes to peak oil – a barbaric future of intense resource-wars on a scorched Earth (Hopkins 2008:44).

The viability of the Transition project in many ways rests on these two points. If people do not accept collapse and the loss of the consumerist lifestyle, and if governments do not see reason and instead fight to maintain a carbon-intensive form of life, then the idea that the bumpy ride down “won’t be as bad as people think” as claimed in the repair café session, will turn out to be just a species of wishful thinking.

7.3.3 – Overcoming our addiction to oil

As outlined in Section 7.3.1 there is a sense among Transitioners that a post-consumerist future would be a better one. A sense of community would return, people would have more control over their lives. As Hopkins writes in the *Handbook*, people would be happier and healthier. Oil, it is suggested, is bad for us. Indeed, Hopkins argues it is an addiction (2008:86).

Hopkins is referring to “stuck patterns of behaviour that can be difficult to change even when we know they’re causing harm” (ibid). Harm means simply “where consumption of a substance has already started causing problems. Climate change can be thought of as a toxic effect of heavy use of fossil fuels” (ibid:87). Humanity is not ‘naturally’ greedy or rapacious, as we find in the future-image of the eco-catastrophic imaginary. Rather it is just another animal, one caught in the progress trap (Wright 2005). Getting out of the trap is difficult. Hopkins sets out a program of dealing with the psychological dislocation produced when someone encounters the ‘fact’ of peak oil for the first time, a dislocation he calls “post-petroleum stress disorder” (2008:80). This disorder encompasses a range of symptoms, from mild physical reactions to a sense of bewilderment; from grasping irrational or unfeasible solutions to outright fear, nihilism and survivalism, as well as denial and excessive optimism (ibid:80-2).

The solution to this disorder is to be found in the collective projects of preparation of local Transition groups. It is by working through what the future will practically mean that the disorder is overcome. It is by outlining how we are dependent on oil,

and how we would live after oil that it is possible to re-imagine ourselves “making do with less”.

The ‘go around’ session within the repair café workshop is a case in point. This was a process of collective reflection that set out from exploring the desire to live without consumerism. It assumed the end of oil, and the lifestyle that comes with it, and asked not ‘how would we cope’ but ‘why would we want to live without oil’, and as such was a reversal of perspectives. As with the process of visioning, the technique here is to refuse fear in favour of utopian thought. When coupled to practical skills and a collective project of planning, such a refusal manifests as a sense of concrete utopianism (Munoz 2009:3), a utopianism grounded in actual capacities and dispositions and not mere wishful thinking.

Its concreteness is tied, however, to the willingness to make do with less. Historically, this vision of life as better with less relies on voluntary reductions in consumerism. The various calls to make do with less, from heterodox economists (Jackson 2011) and anti-consumerist social scientists (Hamilton 2004), to magazines such as *Adbusters* and *The Ecologist* to organisations such as the Simplicity Institute and the Slow Food movement, all constitute a varied current of ecological thought (Cato and Hillier 2011) that is ultimately underpinned and made realisable through political volunteerism.

Political volunteerism is the reliance of political institutions or projects on voluntary or self-willed action – that is freely willed action without constraint. As Hallward argues, political volunteerism “involves collective action and direct participation” as well as “the power to sustain a common commitment” (2009:21). There is a deep ambivalence around the notion of political volunteerism not only from political tendencies that distrust or reject notions of popular will or sovereignty, but from within the traditions of radical democracy and the Left (Hallward 2009). Despite this ambivalence, progressive political projects have relied, in some form or another, on the notion of a popular will and political volunteerism since the French Revolution (ibid).

Political volunteerism could be said to encompass active citizenship as outlined in Chapter 4. As such it rests on practices of education and empowerment as well as

actual material capacities to participate (ibid:22). As discussed in Chapter 4 there are real material limits to political volunteerism, limits that cannot be overcome by education alone (Yuval-Davis 2008). These material limits apply broadly within the UK environmental milieu, and have been suggested as specifically applying to Transition Towns.

Generally the people drawn to Transition Town groups are the same people drawn to other environmental groups in the UK (Aiken 2012; Alloun and Alexander 2014:6; Seyfang and Haxeltine 2012:388). In addition, as with Climate Camp and many environmental NGOs, Transition members tend to be white, well educated and middle class (Alloun and Alexander 2014:2). Analysis of Transition groups suggests that the movement itself though popular, is quite small and attracts mainly those who have the social and material resources to undertake this kind of activity (Alloun and Alexander 2014:6; Connors and McDonald 2010; Feola and Nunes 2014; Smith 2011).

As with Climate Camp and other environmental groups, education plays a central role in Transition praxis. However the shift from a focus on a future catastrophic event to an on-going process of collapse means education functions differently with Transition practice. The role of education is less a matter of becoming active as a citizen and thus of producing a volunteerist 'willing' subject (Hallward 2009), and more a matter of preparing for the inevitable. The common interest of Transition politics is not constructed through education, as it were, but a matter of fact that will inevitably become a matter of concern as what is at stake is life itself.

Education and positive visioning thus combine in Transition praxis as a way to bring people across the treacherous divide between the fact of collapse and necessity to embrace collapse as the new terrain of social life. Both are processes of mental and imaginative preparation for the inevitable end of industrial civilization. Framed as processes of tackling an addiction to oil or overcoming denial, we could also see them both as ways of suggesting that the only realistic option is to give up on the false hopes of liberal utopianism.

This capacity to imagine a positive outcome to collapse rests on it being a process and not a catastrophic event (an imaginative transformation that, as outlined in

Chapter 6, is also framed as being a more realistic vision of how climate change and peak oil will occur in the future). This vision also rests on the perceived realism of the solutions Transition Towns proposes; i.e., how likely it is that their plans will succeed. Thus while Transition Towns is uniquely utopian in many senses as it starts not from a crisis to be averted but a vision to be realized⁵⁴, there is a fragility in their vision that crucially depends on how willing people will be to embrace collapse.

Realism then is a means of overcoming the fears of catastrophe. In the first instance this means accepting 'the inevitable', in the second refusing 'Hollywoodesque' visions of catastrophe as a result of climate change or peak oil. This imaginative realism was developed explicitly in response to the images of doom used by the environment movement as a means to cultivate both awareness and action (2008:78). However, not only do Transition Towns contend that this response has not worked, they suggest that such a fearful approach to the future will counter-productively produce a dystopian outcome as people respond to the inevitable collapse by resisting the material contraction of their lives or seeking (at times violently) to secure the resources necessary to maintain it (ibid:49).

Transition's utopian vision rests not on the inevitability of collapse but on the inevitability of people's acceptance of collapse (else it will be a dystopian future that is realized and not a transition). Here it is necessary to note that for many of the people attracted to Transition groups the notion of 'making do with less' might not seem to imply material hardship. As many have a particular level of wealth and material comfort it is not difficult to understand how the material conditions of their future imaginings frame collapse as an opportunity for positive social transformation, especially when coupled to a critique of both industrial civilization and consumer capitalism as set out in the accounts above as well as the Transition literature. However, the material conditions of existing Transition Town members are not the general conditions of life in the UK (at the very least) suggesting the grounds of their utopian vision is uneven at best.

⁵⁴ An approach I, for the record, whole-heartedly embrace as both timely and politically necessary.

Within Transition praxis such a fear of the limits to the Transition vision can be found implied in criticisms of how people won't want to 'give up their stuff' or will resist the inevitable contraction of society, the latter being pathologised in Transition literature as an addiction. The feeling that people will resist transition provokes fear for the future when placed within the future-image of collapse: when people resist collapse they become destructive and violent giving rise to a general dystopian condition ("barbarian worlds" - *ibid*:48). As such, a generalized resistance to embracing collapse endangers the entire Transition project, working to transform the vision of a post-oil relocalised society into one where at best what is built are a series of "lifeboats" that will ensure the survival of the Transitioners within a sea of social chaos (*ibid*:49).

Transition Towns discursively attempt to resolve this dilemma by mobilizing the inevitability of collapse through a process of what I would call political involunteerism. By this I mean the notion that people have no choice but to try to solve the political problem of peak oil as the infrastructure of their lives will be radically transformed no matter what they believe or do. Collapse as a fact removes the voluntary aspect of politics, and the compulsion to adapt to peak oil is thought to do the necessary labour of producing a common interest and thus hold community together (Brown et al. 2012:1619). It becomes a choice between denying collapse or embracing it. Thus Transition Towns circumvent the problems of liberal utopianism by outlining catastrophe as an inhuman force that will change society regardless of how we act. The role of Transition Towns is thus to try to "minimize the pain and nurse the new society to full health" (*ibid*:50).

Their capacity to do so rests very much on being able to move people from resisting the inevitable material contraction of their lives to embracing it, thus on the strength of the Transition vision of the future and how we are to get there. What is at stake here is how realistic it is to imagine the Transition vision coming to pass, based not only on the strength of Transition praxis but on how human nature is perceived within the imaginary of radical fatalism.

7.4 – Change without antagonism

7.4.1 – Governmental ambivalence

There is an ambivalence in Transition praxis that suggests some Transitioners have doubts as to the widespread acceptance of making do with less. We find it subtly in the connections to local government in the TG as outlined at the end of Section 7.3.1, and more explicitly stated in the *Handbook* where it is openly claimed that as peak oil and collapse becomes obvious, government itself will start to enact the transformation of society so desired by Transition Towns.

In many ways given the composition of the Transition movement it should be no surprise that many members have connections to local government, both because of the class composition of Transition Towns and because many in Transition groups have a history of environmental campaigning. More interesting is the admission within the *Handbook* that Transition plans almost require local government involvement:

“Whatever the degree of groundswell your Transition Initiative manages to generate... will not progress very far unless you have cultivated a positive and productive relationship with your local authority” (2008:170).

While the approach to government differs substantially from that of liberal utopianism in that the government is seen as a partner not ‘the’ actor, and it is local government that is cultivated not national government, there is still a sense that the machinery of government is crucial to transforming local economies. Hopkins goes further and suggests that along with local government, local business interests and other community organisations need to be included in the transition to a localized economy (ibid:152-3).

There is a remnant of liberal utopianism at work here, one that has retained faith in humanity. It is a vision where the capacity for reason will triumph in the end, where politics as a consensual process can and will work as people come together through their common interests to localized their economy. This is the idea that provides the basis for optimism that people will eventually happily make do with less, and that government and business will respond to the crisis of peak oil by

adapting to a low-carbon future and not defending entrenched interests and social inequities. In short it rests, much as the weak hope of liberal utopianism does, on a liberal political conception of both individual citizens and government. The difference is whereas liberal utopianism does not strongly hold to such a belief and instead embrace a melancholic perspective, the joy of Transition Towns relies on it completely.

This “pragmatic turn” of Transition politics (Barry and Quilley 2008:2) extends to an engagement with national government. In 2009 ex- leader of the labour Party Ed Miliband (then UK Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change) attended the Transition Network national conference as a ‘keynote listener’. Also in 2009 the *Transition Handbook* was voted fifth best book to take on holiday by MPs and the Scottish Assembly awarded a grant out of its Low Carbon Communities Fund to enable the establishment of a national Transition hub, Transition Support Scotland (Smith 2011:100). In 2010 the UK government Department of Energy and Climate Change hosted a half-day event entitled *Policy Response to Potential Future Oil Supply Constraints* that Hopkins was invited to attend along with twenty other industry and policy figures (Hopkins 2010). Hopkins could not report what the Minister for Energy and Climate Change said at the meeting under Chatham House rules, but could say “there is clearly a desire to continue this dialogue on peak oil” (ibid).

7.4.2 – Working within the ruins of the world

But what could Hopkins or Transition Towns expect from this continued dialogue? Is the relationship to government a productive or even positive relationship? The relationship to government has not gone uncontested by members of Transition groups and by supportive writer-activists and academics. While some scholars have noted that the relationship to local government has the potential to “shake up” local government policy and community relations (North and Longhurst 2013:1426) and potentially have a cumulative effect leading to deeper structural change (Alexander 2013), others have outlined how Transition groups risk becoming incorporated into local government policies and programs (Smith 2011:102). The danger of co-option through the reliance of Transition programs on local government funding and support is a strong possibility, one evidenced by

the long history of relationships between local and national government and Non-Governmental Organisations (Chatterton and Cutler 2008:27). However as Cato and Hillier suggest we should not overstate the possible dangers of co-option as many Transition group members have limited confidence and trust in politicians and 'traditional' politics (Cato and Hillier 2011:11).

Perhaps more challenging for the Transition approach to government is the argument that antagonistic political approaches are required to challenge and ultimately transform existing social inequities and the uneven distribution of material and social resources (Bettini and Karaliotas 2013; North 2010a), all of which are maintained by the actions of local and national government either directly or indirectly through policies that promote market-based economic growth. The transition to a relocalised no-growth economy will not benefit everyone: at some point someone has to lose (Chatterton and Cutler 2008:25), and often those with something to lose occupy positions of considerable influence or power (Cato and Hillier 2011; Chatterton and Cutler 2008).

Ted Trainer from the Simplicity Institute, an Australian institution set up to promote anti-consumerist politics and no-growth economics, has been one of the strongest critics of Transition Towns from a sympathetic political position (2010). Trainer argues that the Transition movement "leaves everything in place" (ibid); that they do not set out to challenge the existing distribution of wealth and power but seek to work around it⁵⁵. In this account it is Transition's inclusive, consensual style of politics that is the problem, not its emphasis on the local as the starting point as others have argued (Sharzer 2012).

Trainer agrees with the Transition approach to creating visible manifestations of the Transition plan such as the repair café. The *Handbook* sets out these manifestations as public statements that signal the local Transition group "means business" (2008:163), and that with the implementation of such projects momentum towards transition will build (ibid:166). The text also outlines how

⁵⁵ On this point also see Bailey, Ian, Rob Hopkins, and Geoff Wilson. 2010. "Some things old, some things new: The spatial representations and politics of change of the peak oil relocalisation movement." *Geoforum* 41(4):595–605.

these projects should be “uncontroversial and photogenic” (ibid:163), and in Trainer’s assessment this is precisely the problem.

Trainer’s point is not that creating and maintaining these projects is difficult, though often the projects suffer from a lack of active participants (Seyfang and Haxeltine 2012). Rather Trainer argues that the uncontroversial and consensual approach to creating these manifestations means that the projects that are created end up being things like “community gardens, recycling centres, skill banks, cycle paths, seed sharing, poultry coops, etc” (2010), things Trainer claims are entirely compatible with the continued existence of a “consumer-capitalist society” (ibid). I would add that despite the explicit desire to re-scale socio-economic processes such projects do not work to practically reinvent existing economic infrastructure in a way that would produce a localized socio-economic scale. Building on Trainer’s critique, they also do not refashion the processes or institutions of governance, leaving the existing hierarchical scale in place thus requiring working within existing governmental frameworks.

Not only are the uncontroversial projects compatible with existing socio-economic arrangements, none of the “most crucial institutions for transition” (ibid) are in the list above, nor part of any local Transition initiative with perhaps with the exception of local currencies, themselves quite limited in scope and impact. Trainer suggests that Hopkins’ injunction to just “do stuff” (Hopkins 2013) is misplaced, and that what is needed is a clear and workable plan for taking over the local economy (2010). He argues that without a more antagonistic approach to transition, one where the unequal distribution of power and wealth is challenged along with a perceived lack of democracy at a local level, the Transition project will not progress much past producing “the lifestyle choices and hobby interests of a relatively few people” (ibid).

The aversion to conflict within Transition Towns also extends to question of conflict within local areas and communities. Within Transition literature, local communities are presented as sites of social renewal, with ‘a sense of community’ being one of the most often lauded outcomes of relocalisation and a return to craft, as outlined in my field notes from the repair café. But communities are rarely sites free from social conflict (Featherstone et al. 2012:178). The notion that a turn to

the local will resolve existing socio-economic conflicts is romanticisation of community (Alloun and Alexander 2014:11), one that substitutes a localized scale for equity of power as a measure of internal democracy.

But would Transition Towns draw as many participants if it took on a more antagonistic stance towards existing economic and political institutions, particularly if we keep the example of Climate Camp in mind? There is research to suggest that it is the moderate stance of Transitions Towns – their lack of an anti-capitalist and anti-government rhetoric – that make it attractive to many existing members (Bailey, Hopkins and Wilson 2010). Other authors have suggested that this is not the case, and that many within the Transition movement either openly call for an anti-capitalist stance on the part of the Transition movement (Cato and Hillier 2011:6), or suggest that such a positive is implicit in the Transition concept (Alloun and Alexander 2014:15; Hopkins 2013:13;30). Implicit or not, as Hopkins argued in his response to Trainer a more antagonistic stance would alienate local businesses and government, both of which he called “key players” (Hopkins 2009). Again here we can perhaps see a crack in the optimism of Transition Towns, where it will be necessary to involve government and business insofar as they will be needed to implement the transition. Whereas within the NGO and Monbiot such hope in government, backed by a lack of faith in humanity, was tempered with doubts as to the capacity of government to act, Hopkins’ response is to suggest that it will be in government and business interest to adapt to a post-oil economy: essentially, to claim that necessity will force both to see reason and engage in transition projects (ibid).

7.4.3 – How bumpy will the ride down be?

Transition Towns’ non-confrontational approach essentially leaves existing inequities and power structures in place (MacKinnon and Derickson 2013), opening the Transition movement up to the full weight of the criticisms surveyed in the previous section. Alloun and Alexander ask how realistic it is to imagine a consensual or non-confrontational transition given existing social dynamics (2014:9).

The limits of a politics of working-with are the actually existing limits of the system itself – in this case, of an economy predicated on endless growth, cheap oil and social inequity of wealth and power, one that produces substantive ecological destruction. The promise of Transition Towns' vision is that collapse will (a) not be a horror-filled process and (b) will level out social hierarchies, with the latter premised on the theory that it is energy flows that ultimately determine how complex or hierarchical a society can be. Such a promise enables Transition Towns to argue that in the end their localist program will work as a means to inhabit collapse well.

The crux of the question then is how likely is it that collapse will be 'not too bumpy' a ride down the energy curve? If "peak everything" (Heinberg 2007) will just intensify social and political conflict as corporations, government and communities race to secure "what's left" (Klare 2012), wouldn't a process of contraction be more likely to be marked by an increase in social conflict, including inter- and intra-community conflict, as is already the case in numerous countries around the globe (Parenti 2011)? What exactly will survival look like in a post peak oil world?

7.5 – Circling the wagons?

7.5.1 – Survivalism

Survivalism is a broad church of practices and beliefs that range from anti-government libertarian militias hiding in the hills of remote regions in North America to serious-minded policy analysts focused on preparing disaster response plans. What they have in common is a perspective that orientates around preparing for future crisis and disasters (Mitchell Jr 2004). The public face of survivalism is a type of North American survivalism, one that is often racist, vehemently anti-government, heavily armed and has a pronounced tendency towards violent apocalyptic fantasies. Contrary to appearances, Mitchell suggests that what is being prepared for by this branch of survivalism is not destruction per se but creation. Or, more specifically, what is being prepared for is an answer to the question "who will create" the world after collapse (ibid:5). As such, Mitchell

describes survivalism as a creative tendency, driven by the desire to “craft culture” and invent new social narratives (ibid:9).

In this sense Transition Towns is very much part of the survivalist milieu that engages with the notions of ecological limits (Dryzek 2005:28). The discursive framework for environmental survivalist discourse is population biology and its exponential logic, a logic that can be seen at work throughout the peak resource literature (Heinberg 2007) and also serves as a common point of reference for other environmental discourses and imaginaries such as the eco-catastrophic imaginary. The difference is one of perspective. Where organizations such as Climate Camp set out to prevent society breaching environmental limits and boundaries, survivalist organisations such as Transition Towns assume that it is already too late. Either the limits have already been reached (the ‘peak’ has passed), or there is no way to stop the boundaries being breached (humanity is caught in a ‘progress trap’).

While Dryzek suggests that there has been a subtle shift in environmental survivalist discourse, one that now emphasizes boundaries over limits, and ecosystems over resources (2005:35), the overall picture of the threat of transgression and crisis remains much the same. Dryzek describes eco-survivalist discourse as being organized around a few main tenets: the absence of human factors such as technological progress, political action, etc. vis-à-vis ecological crisis; the characterization of populations as things without agency; the naturalization of conflict and hierarchy; a tendency towards authoritarian political forms; and a framework of population biology that emphasizes the ideas of population overshoot and collapse (ibid:43).

Transition Towns sets out a distinct survivalist path, one at odds with much of the ‘majoritarian’ eco-survivalist discourse and explicitly rejects many of the common tenets including the need for authoritarian government (the Climate Leviathan). Rather than outline an absence of human factors vis-à-vis environmental limits they in fact emphasis and rely on human factors as key elements of a dynamic narrative. In place of populations as things without agency, they suggest a complex figure of the population as at once stuck in a developmental trap and yet positively responsive to crisis. They emphasis cooperation, consensus and participative

democracy, and reject imposed solutions. They do embrace the logic of overshoot and collapse, even if they are coy as to the question of global human population.

In many ways, Transition Towns can be read as a response to the idea that collapse will produce a conflict-ridden world, an image that animates much liberal utopian praxis (i.e., see Monbiot's perspective in Kingsnorth and Monbiot 2009a). Hopkins suggests that such a vision of the future is both selfish and unrealistic:

“According to the survivalist philosophy we are about to witness the inevitable and horrible disintegration of society, where the rising price of oil will lead to us all rushing out and bashing each over the head. In order to avoid this, they argue, we need to get away from everyone else and sort ourselves out in such a way that we will be able to see out these perilous times.” (Hopkins 2006)

While Hopkins is referring specifically to the North American variant of survivalism, his argument could be said to equally apply to the lack of faith in humanity that underpins liberal utopianism, a lack of faith that compels liberal utopianists to seek hope in government as a means of averting catastrophe.

What we find in Transition praxis – in the workshops of the TG and the *Handbook*, as well as the numerous other events, texts and websites, is a hopeful vision of humanity:

“This is the time when we truly find out what we can do when we collectively apply our genius and brilliance. I don't believe that our collective response to crisis will be violence and disintegration, I believe our collective adaptability, creativity and ingenuity will come to the fore.” (Hopkins 2006)

7.5.2 – Collective survivalism

The utopian vision of Transition Towns is maintained by hope in and for humanity (in contrast we could suggest that the eco-catastrophic imaginary represents the exhaustion of humanistic hope). Thus much depends on how this hope endures.

Transitions Towns' suggest that most environmentalism does humanity a disservice by framing their campaigns with images of doom, as though fear is the only thing that could motivate people to act ecologically. We could extend this point by suggesting that this speaks to the image of humanity in the eco-catastrophic imaginary, one motivated by self-interest and seemingly incapable of self-restraint. Transition Towns argue that people are more than capable of radical transformation, but that they need a positive vision of the future in order to do so. And this capacity to envision a better future within collapse rests on the creation of the material grounds for another imaginary.

This is a nuanced position vis-à-vis humanity in transition. It is not that Transitioners believe people can (and perhaps will) respond well to ecological disasters, but that people can respond well given the material and imaginary conditions to do so. This could be said to build on Rebecca Solnit's insight that people's responses to disasters largely depends on their vision of humanity, and that most people have historically responded well, suggesting a deep humanistic social current in Western societies (2010:1;2;8)⁵⁶. But, contra Solnit, the Transition vision is not one that suggests people will respond to collapse well, only that given the right conditions they can. Those conditions are grounded in the infrastructure necessary to collectively survive collapse.

It is here that Transitions' hesitations around the capacities of people to act without recourse to institutions such as government or businesses is important analytically. There are doubts within Transition that their plans and actions will be enough to secure a sense of collective survivalism. There are doubts that people will happily make do with less (Hopkins 2008:80). The notion that resistance to making do with less is a pathology (Section 7.3.3) works to de-socialise (Brown 2003; 2006) the inequities of material wealth in the UK and thus undermines the positive vision of humanity within the Transition imaginary. To supplement their vision that there is the force of the inevitable that will leave people with no choice but to make do with less, and there is the role of institutions in imposing social change on recalcitrant subjects. Government in this account is a necessary

⁵⁶ One that Solnit suggests survives the transformations enacted by neoliberalism as a social project.

supplemental – it is not at the heart of the Transition vision, but it is nonetheless still necessary for it.

The problem here is, pace Solnit, it is often those with much to lose (such as power, influence and wealth) that respond poorly to disasters and crises (2010:8). We could bring in the small (yet growing) body of literature that explores current responses to resource crises (Klare 2012) and climate conflicts (Parenti 2011) to outline how governments are responding from within a geopolitically realistic framework. Or, returning to the themes of Chapter 5 we could outline how the UK government has failed to respond to ecological and resource concerns with a program of transition. Indeed, there has been an intensification of existing geopolitical efforts, both in the geological and geopolitical senses of the word. Government is thus a poor buttress for the Transition vision, one that ultimately could be said to leave it largely unsupported and thus appear unrealistic (pace Trainer, Section 7.4.2).

The Transition vision for collective survival feels somewhat thin given these fears and weak hopes. I would argue here that it is this lack of imaginary substance that undermines the endurance of many Transition groups. A substantial number of local Transition groups are maintained by a small number of “hard-pressed individual” volunteers (Cato and Hillier 2011:7; Smith 2011). The surveys of Transition groups activities suggest that what these hard-working individuals are able to do is maintain one or two significant projects in any given area for a measure of time, as well as putting on the occasional public event, and not much more (Alloun and Alexander 2014; Bailey, Hopkins and Wilson 2010; Connors and McDonald 2010). An examination of the current status of existing Transition groups and their initiatives reveals much the same picture (ibid). This is in fact my experience within my local Transition group, which since I embarked on writing my field notes up has gone into hibernation, just as it has done before several times before, often for years at a stretch.

7.6 – Conclusion: liberalism without growth

Transition Towns' shift away from a focus on the catastrophic event and towards an embrace of a certain process of collapse opens up new political vistas and reorients praxis around more intimate human scales, thus enabling a suit of alternative political and sociotechnical practices to take root. But where such a reorientation flounders is on the question of how to tackle existing distributions of material and social resources. This lacuna undermines Transition praxis, turning what at first glance appears to be a practical approach to the complex set of ecological crisis faced by industrial civilization into a set of inadequate responses to the challenges of peak oil and climate change.

Transition Towns aim to break out of the closed loop of much UK environmental activism and engage a broader group of people, making use of both positive visioning and a non-conflictual approach to do so. In the end however, Transition groups are largely made up of environmental activists from the broader UK environmental milieu. Their consensual approach to politics leaves unchallenged existing distributions of wealth and power, again potentially limiting in turn the appeal of Transition Towns as a movement to those outside of the existing environment movement.

The hesitations within Transition Towns and the reliance on social connections to local government reproduce elements of the liberal political tradition as explored in Chapters 4 and 5, in particular the sense that government as an actor is necessary to produce the transition from global or national to local economy, an economy that Transition imagine to be a re-scaled version of the market economy. But perhaps more than any other element it is the belief in the power of reason that reproduces liberal political thought. The embrace of collapse relies on the positive reaction of both people and government to peak oil and climate change. In Transition praxis necessity produces reason; they believe people will act rationally to collapse, and that government and business will adjust their workings to a post-oil world rather than fight to maintain access to the remaining resources and secure their relative positions in the world order.

It is in fact a similar logic to that which pervades liberal utopianism. The difference is that liberal utopianism does not believe that government (or business) really will be rational, it just weakly hopes that it will be the case that they do. Transition Towns on the other hand have a stronger belief in such an outcome. As I have suggested it is the difficulty in maintaining such a belief that undermines the work of Transition groups and makes it difficult for them to endure as living viable political projects.

There is perhaps another unspoken dilemma for Transition Towns, one that I take up in Chapter 8. That is what will happen should industrial civilization not collapse? What will happen if neither peak oil nor climate change undo a globalised and industrialized consumer society? How does the future appear if peak oil fails to do its work in reordering the world?

Is it just a continuation of the socio-ecological disaster that is the present? Is it a deepening of existing inequities and conflicts? Or will it be something else entirely – a kind of disaster capitalism or climate behemoth perhaps (Wainwright and Mann 2013)? Regardless it appears that without a praxis that encompasses a politics of antagonism and compels a program that works to redistribute material and social resources at a local level, Transition Towns are paralysingly reliant on peak oil to bring about social change. Transition politics thus appear as a form of liberalism without growth, marked by a desire for collectivity but without the capacity to realize it as Transitioners passively await the collapse of industrial civilization.

Chapter 8: The Dark Mountain Project: Vulnerable life in the ruins of civilisation

8.0 – Prelude

From my fieldnotes of the Dark Mountain Project's annual 'festival',
Uncivilisation:

After the opening plenary of the 2012 *Uncivilisation* festival I went outside to grab a coffee and look at the program to see what I should do next. I ran into a woman that I had met years ago at Climate Camp. She asked me what I thought of it all, of the vibe in the opening session, and I said that I thought that it was interesting – maybe even that it was realistic to think about the world already in the process of ending. She equivocated, not necessarily agreeing or disagreeing, then went on to say that for a lot of the people “we knew” in Climate Camp, Dark Mountain was seen as apolitical – as just a retreat from politics. She said she disagreed with them, that it wasn't that simple and that she knew a lot of people at the festival who were self-identified activists, and that she thought it was a good space to get away from the “necessary optimism you get in Climate Camp” and to think about what “was really happening”. I asked her what she meant, and she told me that with peak oil and climate change things were going to get worse, that “things are going to break down, they are already breaking down”.

The next morning I was having breakfast when I overheard two friends catching up. He was in his fifties and said he was a conflict resolution trainer. She was also in her fifties, and I heard him ask how her Transition Towns project was going, of which she was the coordinator, and she said it was going well. After some initial catch up banter, he said, “Can I ask you a question?” She answered yes, and he said to her “Could you say what Dark Mountain is about in five words?”. After a brief pause for thought she said, “I could do it in six. Looking things straight in the eye.”

Jumping now to my fieldnotes from the opening plenary of the next year's *Uncivilisation* in 2013. The weekend is rainy, but it is not raining first thing Saturday morning. Everyone has squeezed into the main tent to hear Dark Mountain co-founder Paul Kingsnorth's opening talk. This is the last year of the event, and most people aren't happy about this fact. But it does lend gravity to

proceedings. Kingsnorth takes us back to the beginning of the Project. He says that he and Dougald Hine had written the *Dark Mountain manifesto* because “writers and artists weren’t taking the crisis seriously”. He said that story-telling and stories are at the basis of any society. It’s how we understand our lives and make meaning that matters. The time had come, Kingsnorth said, “to get rid of false-hopes” and write stories for “this moment of crisis”.

Written down later on in the same notebook, I set out three things to explore when I come to write this chapter on the Dark Mountain Project: what is being looked in the eye; what happens after hope; and how do you live in a time of crisis and collapse?

8.1 – Introduction

Two writer-activists Paul Kingsnorth and Dougald Hine started the Dark Mountain Project in 2009, launching it with the publication of *Uncivilisation: the Dark Mountain manifesto* (2009) two years after the financial crisis hit and at the peak of public awareness and concern with climate change as an issue (CIRES 2013). The manifesto was written because both authors “shared a sense that there was a widening gap between the reality of the world today and the official narrative of that reality” (ibid).

“The challenge is not how to shore up a crumbling empire with wave machines and global summits, but to start thinking about how we are going to live through its fall, and what we can learn from its collapse.” (Paul Kingsnorth, in Kingsnorth and Monbiot 2009a)

Kingsnorth is setting out the role of narratives vis-à-vis collapse here as one of orientation (Berger 2008) and not one of impression management or necessary optimism (Goffman 1959). Stories he suggests do not so much reflect the world as it is as organize and sustain a particular relationship to it. The particular relationship Kingsnorth argues we should have to the threat civilisational collapse is one of embrace. There is no hope of holding back the catastrophic tide so all that we can do is try to survive the collapse of civilization and start to build the society that will emerge from its ruins. Kingsnorth is making an explicit critique of what I

have called liberal utopianism, with its global climate summits, policy fixes and technological solutions. Kingsnorth suggests that survival and not activism is the appropriate attitude to adopt with regards to ecological catastrophe (Kingsnorth and Hine 2009).

The Project has produced a series of literary anthologies since the publication of the manifesto. These are collections of texts that take up the challenge of creating new stories for a post-collapse world (Kingsnorth and Hine 2010) and work to draw together a range of writers, 'ex' activists and artists into a 'post-civilisation' milieu. The Project's mythopoetic production has been supplemented by a number of articles, websites, blogs and events. The most notable events were the four *Uncivilisation* festivals that took place between 2010 and 2013, with around 300 people attending each year. The Project currently claims a network of 1700 members, with 18 local Dark Mountain groups in eight countries (Kingsnorth and Hine 2013). The particular perspective that binds the writings together within the framework of the Project is an embrace of catastrophe, of the idea that civilization is collapsing and there is nothing to be done to stop it. Contrary to the Modernist notions of crisis that govern liberal utopianism, the Project rejects the idea that current ecological crises are amenable to resolution or political action. The problems can't be fixed, at least not within the conventional sense of the phrase. What will bring the ecocide (as they call it) to an end is nothing less than the end of industrial civilization. Hope lies not in the work of crisis-renewal, but in the idea that the end of civilization is not the end of the world and that collapse can be survived (Kingsnorth and Hine 2009:3-4; 2011:60).

8.2 – Letting go of what?

8.2.1 – No more false hopes

What are the false hopes people attracted to the Dark Mountain Project feel that are letting go of? We find some sense of it in the fieldnotes above. Firstly there is the 'necessary optimism' of environmental activism – the sense that if we organize enough, mobilise enough, get enough press coverage, attract enough people, sway public opinion, that change is still possible. There is the letting go of the hope that collapse will be averted at all. And finally, as suggested by Kingsnorth, there is

something deeper to let go of – a story, the story about civilization and what it means.

As outlined in Chapter 6 the fact of collapse is co-constructed largely within the logic of population biology and the apparent exhaustion of material resources – that is, as a matter of natural limits. When the world becomes exhausted – when the oil, coal and gas runs out, when the lands of the Earth can produce no more food, when there is no more fresh water to be extracted – industrial civilization will not only cease to grow, it will collapse in on itself, becoming more localized and less complex.

What the Project brings specifically to the question of catastrophe and collapse is the suggestion that what is lacking is an honest, realistic engagement with what catastrophe means. They suggest people – writers particularly – are refusing to engage with it as not only an idea but as a likely future and perpetuate false hopes. These false hopes all suggest that something could be done to stop collapse. Or, worse for the Mountaineers, it is the hope that civilisation's foundations – its myths and stories in particular – may survive collapse and serve as a basis for rebuilding civilization after the fall. Kingsnorth and Hine argue they are not sure everything will be fine, and nor do they want it to be fine (Kingsnorth and Hine 2009). They want the collapse of not only of civilization but also of its myths and stories.

In the manifesto Kingsnorth and Hine call industrial civilisation a bubble, one built on geological foundations – a carbon bubble (2009:7). It is successively built up from “ancient sunlight”, through “a jumble of supporting horrors: battery chicken sheds; industrial abattoirs; burning forests; beam-trawled ocean floors; dynamited reefs; hollowed-out mountains; wasted soil” (ibid:9). They go on to add that “windfarms or no windfarms”, the consumerist way of life and industrial civilisation is coming to an end, and that there is no need to do anything but wait for the collapse. The entry point for the Project into an exploration of the failures, structures and functions of civilization is the failure of environmentalism. The Dark Mountain Project starts from admitting that ‘we’ as environmentalists have failed.

8.2.2 – Uncivilisation 2012

In August 2012, the Dark Mountain Project ran their third festival, *Uncivilisation*. It was held in the South Downs, Hampshire (England) in the Sustainability Centre⁵⁷. I arrived on the opening day (Friday) around 4pm by train, and knowing that there was a free shuttle bus service. I milled about the train station waiting for a ride. I ended up waiting with around a dozen other people including a few people who thought they were just going to another event on Britain's festival circuit⁵⁸. Eventually the minibus arrived, we piled in and drove the short distance to the venue. Making our way down from the car park to the fields set aside for camping, every person we all met said hello, smiled or waved. The atmosphere was incredibly warm and welcoming. There looked to be around 250 or so people at the event, including a large family contingent. I found myself a pitch and set up my tent, and set off to explore the venue. It was structured like a festival, with a central big top tent, and a number of smaller ones clustered around it. There was also a space set off to the side with a children's yurt⁵⁹, and spaces for various workshops as well as independent stalls for different artistic projects and craft-related products. The venue included some secluded spaces set back into woodland, and was large enough not to feel cramped, but small enough that the people there had to brush past each other to move around. The day was hot and it stayed hot for the whole event, and it wasn't long before the scent of wood fire and port-a-loos fills the air. I grabbed myself a cider from the bar tent, and sat down to people watch while I waited for the evening entertainment to begin (there is a music program for each night of the festival). There was an endless stream of people hugging and kissing, catching up and saying hello. It was clear that many of the people here know each other, or at least have seen each other around in other places.

The next morning after meandering down to grab breakfast and coffee, I made my way to the main tent to hear the opening plenary session. It wasn't too long before everyone else at the festival did the same and the tent became rather crowded. Not

⁵⁷ See <http://www.sustainability-centre.org>.

⁵⁸ There is a large festival circuit and scene in Britain, with 3-400 festivals each year of varying sizes. The festival 'scene' dates back to the 1970s and the free festival movement, famously repressed at the so-called 'Battle of Beanfield'. McKay, G. 1996. *Senseless Acts of Beauty: Cultures of Resistance Since the Sixties*. London: Verso.

⁵⁹ A yurt is a large round tent that originates on the steppes of Central Asia and has become a common venue or accommodation structure at festivals in the UK.

too long after the appointed time, Paul Kingsnorth stepped up to the front of the tent to welcome us all to the festival.

The talk was notable because it started off with a long eulogy to the anti-roads movement. Kingsnorth was part of the anti-roads protest camps and spent some time talking about his experiences of the protest camps. He said that this year's *Uncivilisation* had a series of small memorial plaques around the site detailing different anti-roads camps and key moments in the campaign, as a part of the work of memory of environmentalism. He went on to say that he's since given up activism – that he was a recovering environmentalist, and that the anti-roads protests were the last 'real' environmental campaign in the UK. He said that he thought that why we were all here at *Uncivilisation*, why we had heeded the call of the Dark Mountain Project, was that we all knew deep down that environmentalism has failed. That we all knew it was time to let go of activism. He said that he still perhaps foolishly thought it possible to try to defend what little unexploited nature still existed. But that the time had come to admit that environmentalism had failed and that now was the time for grief. We are living in a moment of collapse he said, and that the future would look very different to today. It was at this point someone from the crowd shouted out "the future looks like ecocide and impending carnage!", to which the audience in the tent cheered. Kingsnorth smiled and said that he was right, that the future did look grim, but that the lesson of the anti-roads protests was the importance of place, of having a place and valuing that place. Belonging to a place was the most important thing you could do he said.

Kingsnorth went on to outline what was happening over the weekend at the festival, then opened up the space to a conversation involving the audience. Most of what people had to say focused on the need to emotionally process the failure of civilization, to let go of the trappings of consumerism and its way of life. Grief and mourning were words used often for the first half of the conversation, and no one contradicted the idea that we were living in a moment of collapse or that we should be grieving. As the conversation went on, it turned first to what was being lost. People spoke of the Sixth Great Extinction, of the loss of forests and streams, and they spoke of a cultural or spiritual loss – a loss of connection to the world

beyond people and their things. People were talking about the death of the natural world and the collapse of civilization, but the latter was always referred to obliquely. It seemed assumed that we all thought that our civilisation was in a process of collapse, and that 'other people' were in denial of it (we had come together to grieve, not to take up activism). The end of the session became one where people kept saying how happy they were to have found other people who thought like them. That what they appreciated most was "finding people". One woman said that in the years to come that was the most important thing for her, to find other people, to make a community.

8.2.3 – The failure of environmentalism

What most stood out for me that morning was the claim that environmentalism had failed. I had thought till that point that there were failures (climate change being one of them) but had never considered the idea that the movement itself might have failed. By this I do not mean I had not considered that there might be something wrong with the strategies and tactics of much UK environmentalism, what I later came to refer to as liberal utopianism. What I mean was the idea that 'that was it' for a political praxis; that there was no point in trying to renew or remake environmental politics.

There is no longer any point to environmentalism according to Kingsnorth, because one of the objects of its concern – civilization – is coming to an end⁶⁰. The certainty of collapse means the end of environmentalism. Thus when Kingsnorth talks about giving up activism, either in the plenary or in his writing (2012c), he is not setting out a critique of activism as maintaining a division between politics and everyday (human and more-than-human) life as explored in Chapter 4. He is saying that he has given up activism because it failed to do what it was meant to do: to protect the more-than-human world from the destructive effects of industrial civilization and to transform our relationship to the more-than-human world. He is giving it up because he sees environmentalism as a lost project.

⁶⁰ On the idea that environmentalism is a response to industrial civilization see Hay, Peter. 2002. *Main Currents in Western Environmental Thought*. Sydney: UNSW Press, Morton, Timothy. 2007. *Ecology without Nature. Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. London: Harvard University Press. We could conjecture from this point that if industrial civilization comes to an end, so too would environmentalism. Thanks to Maria Puig de la Bellacasa for suggesting this connection.

8.2.4 – An ecology of loss

Narrating this failure, Kingsnorth sets out what he sees as the last moment of actual environmentalism in the UK – the anti-road movement. This is linked to his evocation of place, a reoccurring theme of the Dark Mountain texts and events. What place offers in Dark Mountain texts is a scale that can be grasped and experienced (much like the weather vis-à-vis climate...). As such place is a perspective, one that requires familiarity and thus necessitates the time to explore and see somewhere and the access to that space.

The anti-roads movement was a movement in the early 1990s that innovatively made use of camps as tools of disruption. Anti-roads protesters would physically occupy the site of future road construction in an effort to block their development. The anti-road protest camp was both an action in itself (a blockade) and a place where the anti-roads protestors could be reproduced as antagonistic subjects enmeshed in a broader community both human – those who lived in the local area prior to the protest camp – and more-than-human, insofar as the camp's were located in forests, glens, etc., that were the 'thing' being protected from development. As I argued in Chapter 4, the situated character of the issues (the road project) also makes it difficult to fully separate activism from everyday life as the process of constituting a community of interest around the problem is necessarily porous and entangles the locally interested community, as well as bodies entangled through relations of work, governance, political and social interest, etc. (Wall 1999). As such, the situatedness of the anti-road campaign calls forth a series of negotiations and conflicts that centre on the question of how people will live and be able to live in that place and not at a more abstract level of government policy or national development (or global economics).

Place here is understood as something made through a series of negotiations (Massey 2014:139). What is being negotiated are a series of relationships that shape how a place exists in the world (ibid:102). Where the contestation of place within Transition Towns is envisioned as a material intervention – a project of relocalisation – within the practice of the Project it is an imaginary contestation. The focus on place aims to produce a different way of seeing not only space but community. For Kingsnorth, place enables a kind of "thick justice" (Papadopoulos

2010) not only with people connected to the campaign, but to the more-than-human world connected to that place. Place enables an ecocentric ethics and politics, one that is counter-posed to the anthropocentrism of industrial civilization (Kingsnorth and Hine 2009).

While I have previously argued that the failure of Climate Camp in part stemmed from the abstract nature of climate change and the inability to directly confront it as an issue, this is not what Kingsnorth means when he argues environmentalism has failed. Kingsnorth thinks that the environment movement has been captured by the anthropocentric ethos of industrial civilization. Modern environmentalism is a form of environmentalism without nature, focused on human well-being and the maintenance of the environment as human infrastructure. What has been lost is an ecological perspective.

What is lost with the shift away from situated environmental campaigns is the loss of a way of experiencing the world. Ecological thought as practiced by the Mountaineers is not a matter of nostalgically longing after a lost green Arcadia, as some have argued is to be found in many environmental texts (Buell 1995; Heise 2008). To value place as a method is to start by thinking of “an area of the world as a rich and complicated interplay of people and the environment – as a place – is to free us from thinking of it as facts and figures.” (Cresswell 2014:11). As Kingsnorth and Hine argue, “facts never tell the whole story” (2009:6); indeed, they argue that they work to obscure more than they reveal insofar as they distance people from the situation ‘we’ find ourselves in. The facts of environmental crisis, like the concepts of the environment and nature, produce a distance from the experience of the world (ibid:6-7).

Their place-method is a kind of phenomenology, one that attempts to see and feel a “deep affinity with the sensuous, palpable earth.” (Abram in Hine 2011:65). Beyond the obvious spiritual elements here, the suggestion within Kingsnorth’s work and the Project more broadly is a sense of the sensuous palpable earth is necessary if one is to defend a mountain, or to grieve for its loss, for the death of a species or the felling of a forest glade. The failure of environmentalism is the failure to maintain a deeper intimacy with the more-than-human world.

This failure to maintain another perspective is as important to the Project as environmentalism failure to slow down or stop particular moments of ecological destruction. It is possibly more important, as in the Project's account of civilization it is the framework of civilization – its myths – that are ultimately responsible for the current ecological catastrophe. As Abram outlines in the second Dark Mountain anthology,

“one can sense, perhaps, that this is the very origin, the secret source of the ecological mayhem and misfortune that has befallen our world. Because it's so hard, even today, to mobilise people to act on behalf of the last dwindling wild river, or the last swath of a great forest that is about to be clear-cut, since people no longer feel any deep affinity with the sensuous, palpable earth.” (in Hine 2011:65)

Place is not a matter of working on the world to make oneself a home, but rather the outcome of an opening up of the self to the more-than-human world. The method of place, of situating oneself in order to feel and see what Abram calls “a world of multiple intelligences” (1996:9), is for the Dark Mountain Project a corrective method, one that will enable them to live through collapse joyfully as they find something positive in the end of civilization. Place, like grief, is a way of learning to be affected by the more-than-human world (van Dooren 2014:152). It is a method that enables them to feel and sense the absences that industrial civilization produces – the extinctions, the clear-fellings, the pollution – and to use these feelings of loss as a reason to celebrate the collapse of the industrial world. In contrast to other environmental movements, the affect of loss is not being used in order to mobilise a defence of the environment, but rather to orchestrate a celebration of societal collapse (Lockwood 2012).

8.2.5 – The crumbling myths of progress and nature

People spoke of being at the *Uncivilisation* gatherings because they were drawn to something in the texts they recognized – a need to openly embrace or at least talk about the end of the world. Their ecology is a dark ecology, where civilisations rise and fall. While the Dark Mountain Project share much of the narrative of collapse with Transition Towns, they differ on their critical emphasis. Where Transition

Towns focus on energy supplies and flows as organizing elements of human society, the Project focus on the role of myths and stories (Kingsnorth and Hine 2009:2). Where Transition Towns attempt to construct an urban political scale, the Project elaborate a more diffuse intimacy as the grounds of their praxis.

This intimacy is set at odds with what they see as the two principle myths of industrial civilization – progress and nature – as the ultimate causes of our current state of catastrophe and collapse (Kingsnorth and Hine 2009:5). Kingsnorth and Hine set out how it is the belief in the stories of progress and nature that maintain civilisation. The myths of progress and nature “determine [civilisation’s] direction and destination” (Kingsnorth and Hine 2013). Civilisation is a story (Kingsnorth and Hine 2011:2), one that has brought about our current ecological and social crises. In doing so it has also produced its own collapse and as civilization collapses the narratives of progress and nature will disappear.

The critique of progress and nature that the Project articulates is not uncommon – it is essentially similar to (and draws on) various environmental, post-colonial and ecofeminist critiques (Federici 2004; Merchant 1990; Plumwood 1993). Central to these critiques is the idea that nature as something external to human society was constructed through the development of science and industry during the Enlightenment and industrial revolution – that is, there is nothing natural about our received notion of nature (Castree 2014b). It was constructed as a passive object of human action, legitimating a particular mode of production that treated the more-than-human world as little more than a resource to be used. Nature thus constitutes both a limit to be overcome and an unruly object to be mastered (Plumwood 1993:3)⁶¹.

In the writings of the Dark Mountain Project the myth of progress describes a linear historical process, one that is akin to an escalator moving humanity ever-upwards, towards some perfect destination that remains always just out of reach. Promising that each life will be better than those that came before, that the future will

⁶¹ As Federici, Merchant and Plumwood outline this construction of nature is bound up with the production of both race and gender within capitalist social relations (or the relations of Modernity). Federici, Silvia. 2004. *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*. New York: Autonomedia, Merchant, Carolyn. 1990. *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*. New York: Harper Collins, Plumwood, Val. 1993. *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. London: Routledge.

be “an upgraded version of the present” (Kingsnorth and Hine 2009:9). Progress is not merely a process of historical improvement but of the endless accumulation of knowledge and wealth.

Progress is not just the accumulation of wealth and knowledge, it is an accumulation of power over the Earth (Kingsnorth and Hine 2009:5). It expresses what Plumwood calls a logic of mastery, where knowledge is produced specifically to firstly objectify then exploit the more-than-human world (1993)⁶². As such, progress as a narrative describes the subjugation of nature and its transformation into a resource (Kingsnorth and Hine 2011:63). For the narrative of progress to function, nature needs to be cast as a limitless resource – an ‘outside’ that can be treated as a boundless frontier external to social considerations. These myths rely on the conceptual separation of humanity and the more-than-human world (Kingsnorth and Hine 2009:5), and as such are anthropocentric myths that describe a tale of the rise of humanity as the dominant species on Earth⁶³.

For the Project our alienated relationship to the more-than-human world is the principle cause for our current ecological crises. By casting the Earth as a limitless resource and orientating society around a project of boundless accumulation, civilisation has necessarily produced a crisis. Intriguingly, like Transition Towns’ approach to the technological trap of oil this analysis of the current conjuncture suggests that it is not humanity per se that is to blame, but a social framework within which humanity is trapped. It is here that we can connect the critique of the two myths with the sense of loss being invoked within the Project’s gatherings. This moment of loss foregrounds all that is denied and foreclosed by the narratives of progress and nature, most poignantly a communal connection to the more-than-human world and the expanded sense of community and interdependence such a connection suggests. The breakdown of industrial civilization enables the recognition of its obscured mechanisms and an acknowledgement of what these mechanisms enable and disable, and thus a radical critique of the social form in its

⁶² Plumwood connects the domination and domestication of nature to that of women through the idea of ‘denied dependency’ – the idea that the Enlightenment project and capitalism are dependent on the wealth and activity of the more-than-human world and women, but cannot admit its dependency on them.

⁶³ A tale that is repeated in the most prominent articulations of the Anthropocene as a concept, forming what Eileen Crist calls the Anthropocene discourse. Crist, Eileen. 2013. “On the Poverty of Our Nomenclature.” *Environmental Humanities* 3:129-47.

most fundamental sense. Which is to say, it enables a kind of broken world thinking (Jackson 2014) that suggests not what could be done to repair civilisation but what can be salvaged from its ruins.

8.3 – Uncivilising

8.3.1 – The method of uncivilising

In some respects the world is not broken enough for the Project. What they propose in order to widen the cracks is a process of ‘uncivilising’ – to try to undo the perspective of civilization and the habits that (re)produce it. Uncivilising explicitly refers to the production of new post-collapse stories and myths. But it also incorporates a more general material turn towards craft and situated living. Rather than a preparatory method, as we find in Transition Towns, craft serves as another means to produce an uncivilized perspective.

At any given gathering there are a series of workshop on various crafts, from bread-making and fermentation to scything and natural medicine. The anthologies of texts contain numerous descriptions of lives where craftwork and horticulture figure heavily. In addition the online Project forums host numerous discussion boards devoted to craft such as *Dark Mountain Makers*, *Dark Mountain Homesteaders*, and *Hemp Cultivation*⁶⁴.

The *Manifesto* proposed that readers attend to writing uncivilized texts with “dirt under fingers” (Kingsnorth and Hine 2009), suggesting that this is part of cultivating an uncivilized perspective. Craft is productive of a perspective insofar as it is an embodied practice (Papadopoulos 2010). Embodiment refers not only to the emphasis on the use of the body but also to the process of embodying – of the making of the self through material practices. What matters in craft-work is less the end product and more the process of making itself (ibid 2014:78). The process of making requires a thick knowledge of the various ‘things’ involved in the crafting process: their capacities, proclivities, and limits. As such to learn a craft is to learn to work within the limits imposed by the more-than-human world, with its

⁶⁴ In previous long-winded drafts of this chapter I had pages of ethnographic notes on craft-work that needed to be excised due to the constraints of word limits, thus saving the reader from my obsession with sour-dough baking.

capacities and intensities (ibid:80). It is a matter of “practical everyday engagement with the mundane invisible labours of different actants” (ibid), not necessarily in order to make them productive but to see what they can do. Thus craft is an open process of experimentation in the world and thus in crafting oneself as capable of acting within a particular ecology (Stengers 2008a:47).

One is often said to master a craft. Being a craftsperson or having a craft skill is said to be the result of years of practice (Sennett 2009). But mastery here does not refer to domination. Rather this is a different sense of mastery, more closely related to the notion of the mastery of the self. Craft often requires an open process of learning – of researching the history of a particular wood so as to learn the techniques for working with it; of the relationships between bacteria and yeast and weather in order to bake bread; of local insects and how they relate to native and non-native species. Such learning is layered, open – a process of thinking with and not against or over (Bellacasa 2012). As such it is a process of situated knowledge production, but one that necessarily involves the elaboration of a series of relationships of care (ibid:198).

The phrase ‘to craft’ is often a synonym for ‘to take care’ in ones labour. Craftsmanship signals a careful labour, where attention is paid to the specificities of production, its processes and tempos. To care is look after those things with which one works and lives: it is a matter of attending to the “doings needed to create, hold together and sustain life’s essential heterogeneity” (ibid) and thus treating those things as though they were part of a community. This is not to confuse care with love – care can be a loveless labour, something imposed or demanded from us (ibid). But when bound to craft it does speak to a desire or love for the community of things with which we work. As such it is part of the cultivation of a perspective where the feeling of community extends beyond the human into the more-than-human world. Not in a general sense, but one bound to a particular ecology of things – the elements of bread-baking, the particular woods one works with, the inks and machines of a printing press, the engine parts of a car. It is a process of learning to care for those things that sustain a particular labour. For both Transition Towns and the Dark Mountain Project these labours are often reproductive and based on the production of food, medicine and shelter,

and as such emphasize the often invisible or silenced dependencies of our lives (the processes of soil production or pollination, the work of bacteria and yeast, the materials we draw on from the forest or deep in the earth).

Craft is thus part of cultivating an uncivilized perspective insofar as it produces an orientation towards the denied dependencies of human centred industrial civilization, towards those biospheric processes that we depend on and are now in crisis. It does so as part of a turn away from the abstract global perspective towards a situated one that values the thick experience of specific ecologies. It is part of the Project's attempt to develop a perspective that understands people to be "enmeshed in a patchwork and a framework of places, experiences, sights, smells, sounds" (Kingsnorth and Hine 2009:16).

8.3.2 – Story-telling

"We will assert the role of story-telling as more than mere entertainment. It is through stories that we weave reality" (Kingsnorth and Hine 2009:19).

The second aspect to uncivilising is the work of fabricating new post-collapse stories that articulate an alternative perspective to those of progress and nature. The *Manifesto*, the website and the anthologies all serve as inducements to write as a part of the Project, offering guides and examples of how to write 'uncivilised' stories. Here I turn to my notes from a story-telling session at *Uncivilisation 2013* to explore the role story-telling has in moving people through a period of collapse joyfully.

When Precious Red Beads Pour From Our Mouths:

Ancient Stories as a Living Being

In this talk, mythologist Martin Shaw will be working into the idea that as we reach towards new stories, the heritage of fairy and folk-tale is a root system grounding us to a history of liminal culture – a storied-speech that many societies have utilised to keep open a door to the wild intelligence of an animistic world. In a culture obsessed with the notion of growth, how do we deepen? (*Uncivilisation 2013* program)

I came to this session slightly apprehensive in that I thought what it would be was a session that took itself very seriously. Re-reading my notes from that day it's clear to me that while I had very little trouble situating myself conformably in the moments of Climate Camp, within memories of NGO campaigns or the collective work of Transition Towns, the work of making myself open to the more spiritual practices of the Dark Mountain Project, the publicness of grief and mourning and emotional connection all made me rather uncomfortable.

In the end I needn't have worried. Walking into the marquee where the session was being held I found myself walking into a space full of giggling people. Martin Shaw, the guy running the session, had begun just before I arrived by handing out various props – animal figures, drums, sticks and feathers. Martin is a big man, with a big beard and voice that filled the marquee. He walked through the room handing out the various props for this story without telling us what they meant or how they'd be used. As he went he explained that he would be loosely telling an East European folk tale.

After handing out the props, Martin explained who he was and what he did. He was a bard he said, someone who told stories and taught story-telling, mainly to young people. He told us that he was going to involve us in a tale, and that after we'd heard it we would have to go away and tell it to one other person in the weeks to come. He emphasised the necessity of repetition. Myths aren't just books or stories he said, but tales that circulate, that people take into their lives. We had to take up the story he was going to tell us for it to mean anything to us he said. He said that while he told us the story we shouldn't "dream but get dreamt" – it was the story that told us, and not the other way around.

The tale itself was essentially a tale of coming to age, a long winding tale that went on through various digressions for about an hour. It moved between Eastern European folk tales to Viking myths into Celtic stories and back again, with bears marching and shadows dancing and all manner of fairytale figures and tropes. It was a magical tale, where animals and trees were alive, where a body became an owl who became three people, all kinds of magic took place. I got lost in the jokes and innuendo and music quickly: there was a recurring process of collectively chant-talking through the transitions of the story, with lots of laughter and banging

on drums. And there was an endless succession of sexual references. I lost track of the various threads as I could barely keep up with the profusion of elements. Towards the end he brought the various threads together, saying that getting lost in the tale was the point. The tale was meant to create a story-time, a place apart from the normal rhythm of things. He went on to say that time mattered not just for us, but for the story itself. To make stories and new myths he said, takes a long time. It takes time for them to be created, to be accepted, and to become not the property of the story-teller but something with a life of its own. He said it takes a hundred years at least.

What I want to draw out of this account is the role of story-telling as a preparatory method. Shaw describes a coming of age tale, and tells it in a way that situates the listener in a story-time, or a liminal space (as outlined in the workshop description). A liminal space is what Shaw elsewhere calls a transitional space between different social roles as well as between different more-than-human worlds (Hopkins 2012a). Shaw is an author, mythologist and storyteller who draws liberally on anthropological resources⁶⁵. In anthropology, liminal or liminality often refers to the experience of disorientation that occurs in the middle stages of ritual when one stands between social roles or identities, between childhood and adulthood, for example (Thomassen 2009). In the story-telling session Shaw kept moving between human and more-than-human perspectives, as well as between the various 'stages' of life – boy, man, girl, woman, youth, elder. He also kept moving between sources – at one point the fairytales were Celtic in origin, at another Iroquois, another Germanic.

Shaw was producing a liminal space through a process of bricolage (Hopkins 2012a) – actively juxtaposing times, stories, identities. His aim was to unsettle us, to push the listener into a space that called for a work of transition. That is for the listener to do the work of moving from one perspective or situation to another, to become practiced at moving from one to another. This work of moving between perspectives and social roles is what Abram defines as magic – to be a shaman is to be able to “slip out” of one's cultural boundaries and to be able to make contact or alliance with the powers of the more-than-human world (1996:9).

⁶⁵ See <http://www.schoolofmyth.com>

Such a process of slipping between roles could be considered crucial to the work of constructing another way of living in the world. More than this, it could be said that collapse is itself a liminal time. As Berlant suggests, when one set of social imaginaries ceases to describe the world within which we live but another has yet to be made we exist in an in-between space, a situation that is without clear orientation or structure (2011). Where Berlant describes this space negatively, Shaw suggests that such liminal spaces enable us to actively create new connections or escape old roles in preparation for new lives. We could consider liminality as a device for creating new connections and thus corrupting old forms and practices.

As a practice of bricolage it could be said to be neither focused on producing the new nor being nostalgic. Rather the past serves as a reservoir of things to be put to work. Stories are salvaged, and the parts put together to see if they can be made to work in a different context for Shaw. The emphasis is on crafting stories that can circulate and involve or make a community. And thus on crafting a new post-civilisation imaginary.

The focus of the liminal experiences in the story was the relationship to the more-than-human world. It was a collective story-telling that sort to 're-enchant' the world (Kingsnorth and Hine 2009:11). The story merged human and more-than-human; mists became sexual organs, people became animals, apples transported us through time. Story-telling here is about weaving the "mysterious into the fabric of life" (ibid), what Shaw elsewhere calls a love affair (Hopkins 2012a).

The final thing I want to note is the timeline Shaw presents where it will take a hundred years to create new myths. Story-telling takes time, and takes place over time. It is a form of slow politics and thus the tempo of story-telling and mythopoesis matches that of collapse.

8.3.3 – The work of mourning

In addition to the numerous texts describing or mourning the age of ecocide, a strong focus of the Dark Mountain events was the production of rituals of mourning.

Saturday, Uncivilisation 2013

It's just after 2pm and we are gathered in the woods to build a Life Cairn – a stone mound to mark the current wave of extinctions underway around the world. It's raining, and there are only a few of us. The session leader Kornevall has brought a stone from the Life Cairn in Mount Caburn⁶⁶. He places the stone in the centre of our little circle and then we all take turns building up the pile with stones we have brought with us or found around the ritual site. The process consists of naming an extinct species then placing a stone on the growing pile. Kornevall reads the names of the dead out from a scrap of paper he had in his pocket. We talk about the species – where they existed, when they died off, how they lived and in what kinds of habitats. With the rain and in the woods the gathering is solemn and still. Someone rings a bell after each name, and we all take turns drinking from a wooden Saami spoon filled with mead. Kornevall said that the mead was to represent the tears of the Earth Goddess, something he'd taken up from Norse mythology. The session ends quietly and we drifted away slowly from the small cairn.

Sunday, Uncivilisation 2013

Sunday morning starts wet, just as the day had ended the night before. Apparently some people were up all night rolling in the mud making animal noises in some kind of Earth communion, howling and barking at the trees and wind. I managed to sleep through it all, lulled by the rain on the outside of my tent. I make my way to one of the first sessions of the day, something similar to the Life Cairn session the day before. It's called the Liturgy of Loss. Maybe 30 of us gather in the main area of the festival, by the fire pit. We gather around as the conveners of the session, Ellie, Chris and Nick Hunt start us off with a talk about writing for loss. Paper was passed around and we took a moment to write our liturgies of loss, which we then proceeded to read out our liturgies and then ritually burn them one by one in the fire. From there we went into song, led by Nick, singing songs of farewell for disappearing lives. The songs weren't all dark, or at least I didn't feel them to be so

⁶⁶ Looking at the event description on the *Uncivilisation* website after coming home, I found this statement by Kornevall: "The wild is caught in a fireblaze, the flames seem too high to stop. If we cannot grieve for all that is being lost in the wild, then it was never loved." Kornevall, Andreas. 2013. "Building a life cairn." The Dark Mountain Project.

dark. There were smiles on the people around me, jokes made as well. We stopped between songs to talk about grief and what it means to be living amongst so much loss. Most people seemed to just be happy to have someone to talk about it with. I fall to talking with a woman to my right who tells me that her partner doesn't want to hear about it all anymore, that he finds it too depressing. I tell her I know how she feels, but that it's actually nice to be here marking the death of different lives, even if we will never get to meet some of them. She smiles and nods and says that's what has made this festival special for her – she's not alone in mourning.

What can we make of these ritual events? Grief and mourning suggest a love or at least an openness to the more-than-human world, a love Kingsnorth argues has largely been lost within environmentalism (Kingsnorth and Hine 2010). In the passages above grief plays a dual role. It acts as a statement of realism about the state of the world as an ecological catastrophe where species are disappearing and the process of extinction has become massified. It is also a collective ritual making visible the slow violence of extinction and as such takes the extended unraveling of a complex form of life that is extinction (van Dooren 2014:19) and renders it into something that can be grieved.

The work of collective grieving also functions as a lived critique of existing environmentalism. Where environmentalism treats ecological catastrophe as a threat to human life, the Dark Mountain Project suggest that insufficient attention is paid to the more-than-human toll of our age. Grieving is undertaken as a collective practice: it is about finding people to mourn with and hence is an aspect to the uncivilized labour of creating another form of life for a post-collapse world. The practice of collective mourning in both sessions took the form of marking particular deaths and as such represent an opening to other forms of life alien to our own (Butler 2010).

Butler's approach to loss focuses on the role it can play in elaborating another mode of politics, one generous and open to the (human) other. Mourning and grief are productive labours focused not necessarily on what is lost but rather on what remains – on the 'ruins' made through the process of loss (Eng and Kazanjian 2003:xi). In ecological terms, this would be to focus on devastated ecologies and environmental wastelands. Growing deserts, islands of plastic in the ocean, quiet

glades and silent forests. This is the horror of industrial civilization described by Kingsnorth and Hine in the *Manifesto*, and the vision that lies behind the impulse to uncivilise and embrace collapse.

Accepting loss enables us to be transformed by it, creating the grounds for new communities and connections. The Project make use of these rituals of mourning as a way of both making extinction visible and making a community that will mourn the loss of the more-than-human world. It is a project of bearing witness.

Witnessing here is a partisan act committed to a 'side' of the conflict between human and more-than-human forms of life. As van Dooren suggests, such witnessing necessarily refuses to treat extinction as a statistical matter. The forms of life that are mourned are mourned in their particularity, name by name as in the Sunday session described above. Van Dooren argues that to witness extinction in this way, with an attention to the particularities of the lives lost is "to insist on a truth that is not reducible to populations and data: a fleshier, more lively truth that in its telling might draw us all into a greater sense of accountability" (2014:16).

Van Dooren argues loss is always particular. A species as much as an individual has what he describes as an entangled significance (ibid:13). The loss of a form of life – a way of being in the world and with others in that world – has ramifications for each connected being and process. The loss of an insect could mean that a plant goes extinct, or that a niche is opened up for a competitor, or that a wheat crop grows more easily. It can also radically affect human social relations – from the end of particular past times and habits to entire ways of life or the destruction of religions or industries.

Part of the challenge in mourning the loss of the more-than-human lies in how we make this loss present. The challenge is not only translating a mass extinction into specific losses, thus reversing the process of narrating slow violence as a political event (Nixon 2011), but also overcoming our lack of awareness of and attentiveness to different kinds of loss. Much life is insensible (Yusoff 2013:209) and difficult to know (even when we are made 'aware' of it). And life is also often "unlovable" (Rose and van Dooren 2011) – a virus, bacteria or parasite that stands in contrast to the charismatic mega-fauna of conservation campaigns (i.e., the

Panda). All of which suggests that the labour of mourning and the process of becoming capable of mourning is a difficult and uneven one, and that grief is not a general state but a receptivity that is specifically for some lives and not others.

What is mourned is always a loss of a specific way of being in the world with an extinct species. Or for some people the loss of a way of being differently in the world that they never got to experience but nonetheless miss. As such mourning speaks to another way of engaging in the work of producing a thick justice with the more-than-human world, where what is lost is the potential for being otherwise. A form of life is lost and with it a unique perspective, one that we may have come to if not share then at least ally ourselves with. In mourning such a loss what the Project mourns is other ways of being that do not articulate a form of human exceptionalism. What is mourned is not only what life could have been lived, but the chance for living a life that is not complicit with the on-going extinction of the more-than-human world. Conversely, the collapse of civilization offers a means of ending our shared complicity in ecocide.

8.4 – Vulnerability and survival

8.4.1 – Joy at the end

The Project's various writings and events are marked by a joyful character, and in a way I was surprised to encounter so many smiles at an event that was focused on the collapse of civilization. But as I came to know the Project the joy began to make sense. Not only is there a cathartic role in the telling of 'dark tales for dark times', but in the telling the tales turn out to not be so dark after all. Hope for the future, and thus joy in the present, emerges as catastrophe will do what environmentalism failed to do: stop the destruction of the more-than-human world. As civilization collapses, the horror of the "age of ecocide" will end (Kingsnorth and Hine 2009:3-4; 2011:60).

Unlike Transition Towns they do not imagine industrial civilization, its citizens and governments, coming to their senses and consciously transitioning to low carbon, no growth localized economies. They imagine a process of collapse in all its messy glory. Such a process necessarily renders humanity, or at least that portion of

humanity that is dependent upon the processes of industrial civilization to survive, highly vulnerable.

One of the images within the *Manifesto* is that of the breaking of the crust of a lava flow, where stability gives way to a dangerous geological flow. Collapse is the breaking of a falsely assumed stability. As the Holocene gives way to the Anthropocene, the idea that the Earth is a background to human life falls away in a period of crisis and disaster (Clark 2014). These moments of rupture are not cinematic. As outlined in Chapter 6 the notion that the Anthropocene will be a period of Mad Max-esque episodes is a fantasy that has its roots in the idea that there is no other future than a continuation of the present (Kingsnorth and Hine 2010:3). Collapse will be fitful and slow, and while Kingsnorth and Hine suggest that in such episodes it is “easy to die” for the most part they suggest that the end of civilization is not the end of the world, and that life will go on.

As outlined in Chapter 6, what is suggested here is that civilisations have regularly failed and collapsed throughout history – failure is normal, if not inevitable. This is the retort of what I call the radical fatalists such as Transition Towns and the Dark Mountain Project to the myth of progress. They argue that some crises are different to others, that there is not always the possibility of a work of renewal or repair as demanded by the logic of progress (Roitman 2014). In place of a vision of crisis as opportunity they suggest an image of crisis as exhaustion – a terminal crisis, a true catastrophe as a moment without renewal or redemption (Williams 2011:44). In this way catastrophe acts as a kind of agent in place of the environmental movement or the climate leviathan. It is not an agent of reform but an agent of destruction, one that acts through the production of disaster and produces regimes of vulnerability.

8.4.2 – Uneven grounds of vulnerability

Vulnerability as an ethico-political category has predominantly been explored as a state produced by humans on other humans (Butler 2010). Exploring the aftermath of the September 11 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center, Butler argues that the experience of vulnerability presents us with the insight that our

lives are dependent upon those of others (ibid:31), that our vulnerability indicates just how entwined our lives are with those of other bodies.

It is this state of vulnerability that enables the production of community on the basis of a shared wound or disaster (Blanchot 1995:25). Such a community is produced not only by the need to react to disaster of catastrophe communally (Solnit 2010), but through the openness disaster produces in the individual (Clark 2010:160). Individuals are made open through the disruption of the certainties and stabilities they have taken for granted – the denied dependencies of their lives become apparent as the world ‘breaks’, and it is at this point that their bodies become enmeshed with the world to a frightening degree.

Butler explicitly demarks the boundaries of such an openness to others as belonging to human communities (2004:20), but as she notes later vulnerability does not emerge with the Modern political agent, the Modern “I”, but is rather pre-individual (ibid:45). Thus we could reread Butler as suggesting vulnerability is an ecological state – that humanity as a species is always-already vulnerable to the world and thus open to it (ibid:30). It is this kind of vulnerability, of humanity to the inhuman and more-than-human world, that the Dark Mountain Project suggest will become predominant in the years to come.

This reflects the scientific discourse that forms the basis UK environmental praxis. The earth sciences have produced a detailed picture of an active unstable Earth, one that when interrogated scientifically produces uncertainties and not stable truths (Stengers 2000:143.4). It suggests an indifferent Earth – not indifferent in the sense that there is not a play of interdependencies and care at an ecological level, but indifferent in the sense that it does not matter if humanity survives (ibid:145). This produces an asymmetry – we must care for the Earth, but it need not care for us – which is the basis for our vulnerability (Clark 2010:30;48;50).

Such a vulnerability is suggestive of another mode of human life, where risk is accepted not managed, where humanity seeks not to master nature, but to ‘follow the world’ (ibid:50). Following here resembles not the process of discovery (following leads) but the political process of following (follow the leader; follow the one who provides for you yet remains indifferent, detached). In this way the

people produced through the imaginary of collapse ground their political praxis on the Earth, where the asymmetry of force and care produces a self orientated to the Earth as the body of politics in place of an exclusively human community.

Many of the responses to the Dark Mountain Project focus on what embracing vulnerability means in practice. For writer-activists such as Monbiot it can only mean accepting the feared consequences of climate change and social collapse:

“the immediate consequences of collapse would be hideous: the breakdown of the systems that keep most of us alive; mass starvation; war... How many would survive without modern industrial civilisation? Two billion? One billion?” (ibid).

Monbiot argues that unlike Kingsnorth he does not desire collapse and thinks that collapse would only bring about barbarism, marking clearly the distinctions in imaginaries between the liberal utopianism of Monbiot and the radical fatalism of Kingsnorth.

What Monbiot is suggesting is at stake in how we relate to ecological catastrophe is nothing less than human extinction. In the Project’s embrace of catastrophe I would suggest the threat of extinction plays a positive role. There is an embrace of the Earth’s actions, of its dangers and ‘wildness’. It is to be celebrated as an inhuman force that dwarfs humanity and produces it as vulnerable.

But for extinction to play a positive role someone has to survive. And while the Project argues that humanity will survive the collapse of civilization, there is a reticence to say how many of us will survive. Within the Project’s milieu, as within the peak oil milieu of Transition Towns, it is not uncommon to find the suggestion that the end of industrial civilization will necessarily mean a reduction in the number of people that live on Earth. But as Monbiot asks, does this mean collapse will reduce the human population to 1 billion? To 2 billion? More? Less?

When pressed on this issue during the debate Kingsnorth’s response was to put it to one side and suggest that things would not be as bad as Monbiot fantasized, that it was not a useful question as collapse is inevitable and all that can be hoped for is a smooth descent (ibid). Practically the Dark Mountain response is in many ways

the opposite to the Transition approach. Where Transition Towns openly confronts this problem by proposing the solution is a kind of willed collective project of survival, the Dark Mountain Project tends as a group towards more individuated 'journeys' – that is, more openly towards a kind of individual survivalism.

8.4.3 – Journeys through the ruins

It's the afternoon of the last day of the last *Uncivilisation* in 2013, and I'm trying to write my notes while standing in line for lunch. The whole weekend has had a distinct spiritualist vibe, more so than the previous years. You hang out around the fire, camp in a field, sit in a tent talking about where civilisation has gone wrong, learn to pick wild herbs or use a scythe, and you do all these things surrounded by a method – spiritualism. And each moment of the method reinforces the idea that there is something wrong with us – that we have been severed from place, from each other, from the world and from ourselves.

As I was in the line, I got talking with one of the organisers of the event Dougald Hine. Halfway through the conversation he turned to greet someone else he knew, someone who had just finished running a session on 'uncivilised psychology' called "new narratives for the mind". His friend asked if he had noticed the change in the event over the years towards a stronger emphasis on personal journeys. Hine said that he had, and that there was an increasing desire to work on a kind of 'healing' of the self and with the world.

That same year I attended a session on "wild economics" hosted by Mark Boyle. Boyle's session was basically a short exposition of his book *The moneyless manifesto* (2013), where he describes how to live without money (i.e., for free) based on his own experiences over the past three years.

Boyle was introduced by one of the organisers of *Uncivilisation* who said the session was about living 'wild'. Boyle started out with a rambling tale of how he'd started on 'his journey' by working to reduce how much stuff he had – giving away unused things, thinking about what he "really needed", reducing all of this down until it fit into a suitcase. He said that this was something he wanted to do, to get rid of the excess in his life. He made is sound very much like he was talking about a

personal spiritual journey and not the practice of living without money, as suggested by the session blurb. Boyle moved onto the practicalities of his life without money. He said he'd travelled around the UK immersing himself in the gift economy, taking and living off whatever anyone would give him, or taking what the Earth would give him and he could forage. He'd spent much of his time on foot, walking from one place to another. He told us that this was a wild economy – the gift economy – and that the gift was the natural state of things.

What struck me about the session and the exchange afterwards was that what was being presented was not an economic critique as such – it was not a serious proposal to replace capitalism (as proposed by Transition Towns). It was presenting the gift as something that lay hidden underneath our lives, a natural 'truth' to be rediscovered on a personal quest or journey.

If collapse necessitates a labour of survival, what can we say when that labour of survival is described as a personal journey, one where a natural gift economy plays a central role? I would argue that what is evidenced in the passages above is an individualization of survival, where the work of making a life or securing the necessities of life is divorced from broader social projects or memberships, as outlined in the previous chapter. The talk of spiritualism or personal journeys here obscures the fundamental unevenness of individual survivalism: if making a new life in the ruins of the old is an individualized affair, then what hope is there for those who lack the capacity to survive?

In the debate with Monbiot, Kingsnorth's retort to Monbiot's point about the likely suffering and death of millions of people in the event of social collapse is to suggest that collapse will be long and slow – a "long descent" as described by Greer (Kingsnorth and Monbiot 2009a). But this is an evasion of the question. Violence can be both fast or slow, and in either case the fatalities can mount and lives can waste away.

In another essay, Kingsnorth suggests that his personal response to the failures of environmentalism is to "go out walking" (2012c). He describes the hills and woods that surround him, and says that he is going to withdraw from environmental campaigning, and instead exile himself into the more-than-human world. And

while this confirms the discussion above on making a vulnerable life as a kind of terrestrial exile, it also confirms the critique of the Project that while it serves as a 'flag' for like minds to gather under, the actual work of survival is left to the individual.

8.4.4 – Life in the existing ruins

Who can go out walking? Who can take a journey into a life without money? Here we return to a theme of this thesis: there is a restriction of access to these forms of environmental praxis to those who have wealth, security and social resources: overwhelmingly young and university educated. There are few studies of the Dark Mountain Project, and so there is scant detailed research to outline who makes up the Project's members. The festival atmosphere of *Uncivilisation* meant that while it was easy to note the racial characteristics of the festival (overwhelmingly white), the gender mix (quite even) and the age make up (largely late 20s to late 30s), the class composition and educational background was much harder to determine, though many people I personally met had been university educated and had professional jobs.

Here it is enough to suggest that undertaking survival as a personal journey is an activity differentiated by race, gender and class. Such a differentiation speaks to the differentiated nature of collapse and catastrophe. Often in Dark Mountain texts or at the gatherings, catastrophe and collapse are set out as global processes – it is civilization in general that is collapsing. This vision effectively ignores the very real differences in vulnerability to crisis and catastrophe that exist globally, as well as the incomplete and differentiated nature of catastrophe and collapse itself.

If collapse was a global process, one that was undifferentiated in any substantial way, then it could be suggested that collapse forms a common condition. But, as with vulnerability, this would appear not to be the case. Indeed, it has long been a staple trope of climate change discourse to refer to the differentiated effects of climate change – where there will be benefits in the short term (Easterbrook 2007), which areas will turn to desert, where food crops will collapse, etc. (Editor 2015). These texts are often framed as future scenarios; narrations of the future framed as scientific fact (factions, not fictions), and as such present a kind of

future-anterior catalogue of a ruined Earth. And it is an often repeated truism within environmental discourse that those nations that have contributed least to climate change are those that will suffer the most for it (Goldenberg 2014).

As such, neither collapse nor catastrophe form a basis for political praxis beyond the boundaries of tightly circumscribed social demographics, contra theorisations of catastrophe as a common political horizon (Morton 2010). This is the limit of imagining that ‘we’ already live in collapse, or in a time of global ruin such as the Anthropocene. There is no common state of vulnerability to respond to. Catastrophe and collapse do not exist as singular events.

Nor is social collapse or ecological catastrophe a future horizon – for many, it is already a description of their daily life (Parenti 2011). If we take as our starting point the key concerns of Anthropocenic discourse, a discourse that captures the complex ecological disaster that is unfolding around the globe, and put to one side historical yet localizable ecological catastrophes, then what we see is not a single catastrophic process or event but a series of interconnected crises (Yusoff 2009:1026).

As Nixon sets out, these are processes of slow violence – violence that is dispersed, slow working, long lasting and unspectacular (2011:6). Nixon argues engaging with the slow violence of ecological issues means engaging with attritional violence that “overspill clear boundaries in time and space” (ibid:7) and thus requires attending to the specificities of how one place is connected to another, and how places and connections persist or fail to persist overtime. To map the slow violence of ecological crises then requires paying particular care and attention to the passage of individuals through space and time, and thus to how each body is differentiated. As such the insistence on a praxis of individuated journeys into the ruins of industrial civilization produces an inevitably opaque vision of collapse, one that leaves unseen and unspoken the existing state of ruination of the world.

There is no common state of exposure to ecological crises, no shared state of vulnerability, no common present or future that could serve as a basis for a shared political or ethical praxis. And so there is something not quite right about the story

the Dark Mountain tell about collapse, something too uncomplicated. To go out walking, in the words of Kingsnorth, it to set out from a place of relative calm, with a sense of security, on a journey towards a quiet Earth, one that few people might recognize as a realistic description of the world they live in or the future they will inhabit.

8.5 – The catastrophic agent

8.5.1 – The work of the catastrophic agent

Despite the Dark Mountain Project's rejection of political activism they do not give up hope of social change completely, only of human-induced social change. The Project suggests that while environmentalism has failed, industrial civilization will nonetheless be brought to an end. In is an inhuman force – a catastrophic agent – that undertakes this global social transformation.

In the works of the Dark Mountain Project catastrophe is figured as a complex agent, but an agent nonetheless. Catastrophe is the name for an enraged nature, one who has lost all patience with civilization.

“...there is an underlying darkness at the root of everything we have built. Outside the cities, beyond the blurring edges of our civilization, at the mercy of the machine but not under its control, lies something neither Marx nor Conrad, Caesar nor Hume, Thatcher nor Lenin ever really understood.”
(Kingsnorth and Hine 2009:4)

Catastrophe is not presented here as a kind of monstrous global figure or entity. Rather it is a force that resists mastery, not exercises it. Elsewhere in the manifesto they describe it as something “savage and unseen” (ibid:2), as a Nemesis (ibid:3). Nemesis being the Greek spirit of fortune or in some interpretations divine retribution, especially for hubris. And it is to hubris Kingsnorth and Hine suggest that catastrophe as nemesis is responding – hubris being as much a matter of loss of contact with reality as it is a matter of pride (Fisher 1992).

The idea of a resistant nature has long haunted European (capitalist) civilisation – from the crop failures and various climatic disasters pre-industrial revolution, to

the limitations on the processes of industrialization and accumulation, nature has often been painted as something undomesticated that must be mastered (Merchant 1990). Clark suggests that it was just such an image of nature that spurred Kant's work on humanity as a self-determining subject that has the capacity to rise "above the threatening forces of the earth and cosmos" (2010:85). But something that can be mastered is also something that can resist (Kingsnorth and Hine 2009:6).

The second thing to note is that nature does not appear as a single thing in the manifesto – it is a legion of processes and entities that have their own limitations and desires, that manifest as a series of crises, as the return of the idea of limits, and not as a singular event (as in a tipping point):

"Even the nightmare of climate change makes its way into waking reality as a muddled, muddy sequence of events which, though they amount to a threat to civilization, do not satisfy our idea of how such a threat should announce its arrival" (Kingsnorth and Hine 2014:1)

This lack of satisfaction is all the more alien and confronting. Catastrophe resists our narrations, presenting as an alien force that escapes comprehension. But despite the complexity of catastrophe, these muddled, muddy events culminate in a single moment, namely collapse. While the agency of nature is legion, existing in a chorus of more-than-human voices, the point at which it intersects with civilization is singular. In a logic similar to that of the tipping point what collapse registers is the crossing of a threshold, a moment where two complex systems intersect with the result being a transformation of both: industrial civilization transform the Earth creating the Anthropocene and the Earth in turn undermines civilization, causing it to collapse (Kingsnorth and Hine 2009:9).

What we find with the catastrophic agent is the end of human history (Chakrabarty 2009), and with it the end of a particular Modernist notion of freedom from the constraints of the Earth. Against this the Dark Mountain Project read the trends of the more-than-human resistance to industrial civilization and the failures of modern environmentalism, and conclude that no human act can have any substantive effect on the ecocidal nature of civilization. Neither social reform nor

political revolution is possible. What is left is to withdraw and wait: not a withdrawal to nihilism, but to a radical fatalism.

The process of collapse will bring about the end of civilization. Ultimately what will occur is a kind of contraction, similar as a process to that imagined by Transition Towns, but without the certainty of a re-localised political-economy. It will not be a smooth process – indeed, it will cause havoc no doubt. But it is inevitable. Civilisations all crumble and fall in the end. And when this one does, the process of ecocide it produces will also end, making room for other ecocentric forms of life. Here buried in the narrative of collapse is a vision of revolution without human agency, a vision of social change all the more powerful for its public disavow. The Project's desire for radical social change exists without either the weak hope of liberal utopianism or the humanistic vision of Transition Towns. Theirs is a vision of environmentalism where hope is something reserved for the question of survival, not civilization.

8.5.2 – Failing to collapse

The Dark Mountain Project is deeply reliant on the catastrophic agent. The Dark Mountain Project do not propose to bring down industrial civilization on their own. Theirs is not an active political resistance but a collective waiting for the end. As such it produces not a hope in the capacities of themselves or their allies, but rather a hope that manifests as a form of faith and deferral (Zournazi 2002:151). It is an incomplete deferral to be sure, as they spend much of their efforts on realizing the kind of life they wish to lead in the here and now, infusing the everyday with the meaning and intimacy that they desire. In this way they avoid producing a kind of hope against life (ibid), as their joy in living is not postponed for some future time. However there is still an element of negation of joy involved as the culmination of their vision, the end of civilisation, remains beyond their reach until something else makes it manifest.

And here we find the most substantial difficulty for the vision of the Dark Mountain Project: what if collapse never comes? What if civilization fails to fail? As explored previously, collapse may well be uneven and incomplete, and in many ways already is. The complexities of an incomplete and uneven collapse already trouble

the Dark Mountain vision of the end of industrial civilization. As Ghassan Hage argues, “hope... is an ambivalent affect, always laced with fear.” (2003b). The fear left largely unspoken in the Project’s writings is that collapse may not come. Where such a fear is articulated publically, it comes as a description of how industrial civilization (and by inference capitalism) survives bound to a kind of neo-environmentalism (Kingsnorth and Hine 2012:15). This vision of a dystopian future without collapse is:

“a strange and unworldly combination of an ongoing collapse which will continue to fragment both nature and culture, and a new wave of techno-green ‘solutions’ being unveiled in a doomed attempt to prevent it.” (ibid:23).

It is a future of what we could call a static collapse, one where the crises never end, where capitalism never entirely succumbs, and where industrial civilization manages to find a way to live with the Earth’s ruptures and failings. Elsewhere Kingsnorth asks what happens if technology can indeed save us, or if the biosphere can survive in a simplified state of “rats, cockroaches, pigeons, GM crops, synthetic livestock”

“In other words, what if all our talk of ‘collapse’ is a narrative designed to quell a worse fear: that things might not collapse, but continue like this? That the Earth’s final wild frontiers may be tamed and diluted, ravaged and destroyed, and that we would not care much.” (Kingsnorth 2012b)

The fear here is that the “ecomodernists” (Asafu-Adjaye et al. 2015) – those that see the Anthropocene as a reason for celebration, where human mastery has triumphed over the Earth and progress has finally made us a God species (Lynas 2011) – may win in the end and that catastrophe may be insufficient as a force to stop them.

We could argue that this image is one that is already being realized, where crises such as climate change and industrial pollution exist as opportunities for profit (Fletcher 2012; Klein 2008) and not impediments to capitalism. Or where the parts of humanity deemed not necessary to economic growth are contained geographically or managed as surplus populations (Davis 2007; Endnotes 2010). It

is an image of the current world where wars rage over resources (Parenti 2011), where armies factor in climate change (Townsend and Harris 2004), and where not even the end of oil might necessarily finish it all off (Monbiot 2012b).

This description does not appear as a future-image: it is more akin to a description of current affairs. The question then is how likely is the future collapse desired by the Dark Mountain Project? The fact that it is not inevitable – or perhaps even likely – indicates the limits of the Dark Mountain Projects praxis.

The horrors of civilization can only mount as they wait for it all to come crashing down. Their faith in a catastrophic agent renders them passive with regards to the process of destruction. The utopia of a post-collapse world is a promise of an end to progress and the age of ecocide (Jameson 2007:6). Something keeps a promise, and in this instance it is to be kept by an inhuman force – catastrophe. But such a solution to the global problem of ecological destruction is perhaps too easy, too neat. Jameson reminds us that one of the deepest flaws of the utopian impulse is the obsessive search for simple, single-shot answers to social problems (ibid:11).

It resembles the solution proposed by liberal utopianism in Chapters 4 & 5 – that of a singular global subject, a species-being manifest through government. An inhuman force has replaced the human species-being in the radical fatalist imaginary. But this global figuration is no less dubious for its inhumanity. Nor does it offer us any purchase on the present as political agents. Crucially collapse here is presented as a singular moment. Collapse is not presented as a loose collection of processes with different spatial and temporal characteristics, but as a single unfolding moment, and thus a singular event: the collapse of industrial civilization. Through the use of the future-anterior collapse is rendered into a historical event, mirroring the eventification of climate change through the use of tipping points.

This is not to say that this figuration is not without complexity. As noted above, the image of collapse is a complex one that plays out imaginatively slowly over decades (Kingsnorth and Hine 2012:22-3). Kingsnorth and Hine claim that the collapse will not arrive as a Hollywood-style event, noting that such a vision is as unrealistic as the continuation of industrial civilisation. Collapse is a description of innumerable intertwined processes, all with potentially very different tempos and

outcomes. By imagining the process of collapse as inevitable, it becomes a singular historical event in the future-anterior. The event is at first undone by imagining collapse only to become re-made through its inevitability.

Collapse as an eventual outcome is far from certain. But it is described as such by the Dark Mountaineers, and hence appears as a fantastical vision of the future. Thus despite their critique of the twin myths of civilization and their commitment to a particularized and situated story-telling, they fall back into the creation of grand universal myths: the myth of collapse.

8.6 – Conclusion

The radical fatalism of the Dark Mountain Project sets out a method for embracing the failures of environmentalism and for overcoming the fear of humanity that animates liberal utopianism. But despite its embrace of collapse and of place as a method, the Project recreates the scalar logic of the eco-catastrophic imaginary through its narration of collapse as a singular process, one that takes place on a global scale. Unlike Transition Towns, social change for the Project is an outcome of a global event and not situated labours or campaigns. However, contrary to liberal utopianism, this global event is not amenable to political intervention: hope lies not in arresting climate change but surviving it and in creating a better, ecocentric life in the ruins of industrial civilisation.

The largely unvoiced fear of the continuation of industrial civilization produces a mythologisation of catastrophe. In place of one set of universal imaginaries the Project has proposed another. As such it has retained a grand narrative, one that spans not only space but also time: collapse is a transhistorical condition, something that ‘regularly occurs’, a historical truth.

But if we were to take Dark Mountain’s own methodology further we might be able to envision a more complex catastrophic future, one that opens up the future as uncertain and therefore contestable. This would mean politicizing the future and denaturalizing the present. It would mean embracing the uncertainty of the current moment and not seeking certainty in either a climate leviathan or collapse. It would require adopting a dark ecology of ungrounded earths, unstable worlds,

and unclear socialities. To enter into such a future would require actively seeking out and grasping possible futures, and taking up the possibilities afforded by situated practices and the places that co-produce.

While there is much to be lauded in the Dark Mountain method, their faith in catastrophe renders them unable to take up their own critique of civilization actively, much as Transition Towns' faith in the power of consensus and reason render them unable to act against the existing material inequities of the world. In both instances the state of ecological crisis they are responding to is left largely unchanged. Instead what we see is a lifeboat approach to eco-social crisis, where waiting and withdrawal take the place of active political antagonism. For both change is something to be survived, not created.

Chapter 9: **Letting go of the catastrophic event**

9.1 – Stories

It's not always easy to know when you are lost. More often than not you realize you are lost when you come across an unfamiliar landmark – a building, a monument, something strikingly unknown. It's rarely at the first wrong turning, or on a street you don't recognize. To be lost is not necessarily to be on unfamiliar ground but, I would suggest, to not know where to go. It is to be without orientation, without a path to follow. It is to be mired in a state of impasse.

This thesis has been a story of disorientation. Contra the state of impasse as we find in the work of Berlant, the impasse in UK environmental politics is not a situation without events to guide it but one where landmarks work to de-familiarize political practice. The catastrophic event undoes the meaning of environmental politics, de-situating and de-locating practices and placing it within a universal scale where action is disabled for all but the most global of actors.

This has been a story about a specific story: the story of ecological catastrophe and the role it plays in organizing environmental political practice. It has been a story that has asked other people to be involved in it's telling through memory-work, where the question of impasse was used as an unfamiliar landmark. As such, my story contributed to the production of the state of impasse, making it into something that can be taken hold of.

While many environmentalists have suggested that environmentalism was in crisis, in naming the crisis as a moment of impasse it takes on a particular character. Like naming the moment you are lost it is suggestive of a qualitative change of course where action need be reorganized to a different purpose. No longer a journey from one place to another, it requires finding out where you are so that movement becomes possible once more.

In telling the story of the impasse, my aim has been to focus attention on the grounds of environmental praxis in the UK, to draw out what is not working and why. To return to a theme of Chapter 8, it is a liminal story that aims to make

environmental praxis unfamiliar enough to make visible its workings and create the basis for a labour of repair, reimagining and reinvention.

It is important to note the limits of this story, of what it could be said to speak to and what it leaves unsaid or absent. This thesis is a story about the state of part of the UK environment movement. As indicated by the second half of the thesis (Chapters 6 to 8), this does not mean it is an exhaustive account of the UK environmental milieu, or that this milieu is organised around a single imaginary. Rather, it is an account of what I contend is the dominant imaginary in the UK environment movement. I would suggest this imaginary not only organises a majority of the UK's environmental groups, as we find in the wide array of writer-activists, organisations and networks set out in Chapters 3 to 5, but forms a narrative that compels dissenting groups to respond to it in order to elaborate other environmental imaginaries, as we find in heretical organisations such as Transition Towns (Chapter 7) and the Dark Mountain Project (Chapter 8).

The argument of this thesis loops out beyond the geographical boundaries of nation-states, through the circulation of texts, the global science of climate change, the production and contestation of international laws and treaties and the movement of environmental praxis. While there are innumerable differences between the conditions of environmental politics in the countries of the global North, I would speculate that many of the arguments of this thesis apply to other comparable contexts, not least in those countries with similar neoliberal conditions of life and governance (Brown 2015; Mair 2013; Streeck 2014). Indeed, it could be suggested that this thesis has in part addressed a more global project of political constructivism, where climate change science and activism are involved in producing the global environment as a singular object of political concern (Blok, Nakazora and Winthereik 2016), one that is bound up in a specific global environmental imaginary and political scaling.

There are two substantive absences in this thesis however. The first is that it is a situated work of radical scholarship that explores the environmental milieu in the global North. As such, it does not touch on the many varied praxes and imaginaries of environmentalism in the global South (i.e., Nixon 2011). The question of how the many movements concerned with social and environmental justice, as well as the

varied institutional agendas of governments of the global South, relate to the construction of global environmental issues as looming catastrophes is as yet an open question, and is deserving of sustained critical research. In particular, researching how the various processes that constitute environmental issues as global catastrophes are being actively contested and resisted in the global South would be a natural extension of the research program of this thesis. The second absence is one that emerged during the course of the research for this project in the UK – the re-emergence of environmental campaigns against infrastructure projects. These campaigns of material activism against oil pipelines, road projects, mining developments, and the instantiation of hydraulic fracturing wells amongst other things, were largely absent in the UK after the mid-1990s, though constitute a more continuous historical movement in the USA, Canada and Australia. Given the potential fusing of situated forms of political activism with climate change science and planetary environmental imaginaries, such campaigns could serve as a useful space for exploring how the transformation of the material grounds of political action could work to enable a reimagining of environmental issues. This is not to pre-emptively suggest that infrastructure campaigns, organised around climate change as an issue, would necessarily function to produce alternatives to the eco-catastrophic imaginary, only that as indicated by the latter half of this thesis this should be considered a strong possibility worth exploring through further research.

9.2 – Liberal utopianism and radical fatalism

9.2.1 – The refrains

Starting from the suspicion was that the impasse was in part constructed by UK environmentalism's image of the future, I brought together the methodology of the refrain from Deleuze & Guattari and the juxtapositional philosophy of multi-sited ethnography. I did so in order to make visible the eco-catastrophic imaginary and compel it to "speak" (Stengers 2008a; 2010).

My approach to the imaginary set out from an account of how it works to organize social life through two devices: a future-image that works to orientate the activity of the social assemblage and the strategy that sets out how to act within the

orientation of the future-image. Both are held together by the refrain. Imaginaries break down when the refrains within them are made to work in novel ways – experimentation is necessary in order to see what refrains can do (Stengers 2008b). There is a symmetry here between the methodology of this thesis and the process of making and breaking imaginaries. New imaginaries form when refrains come together and cohere into a single narrative form; they break down when new connections are made and the old ones no longer hold together. A multi-sited ethnography works by putting things together – as a process of juxtaposition and connection, one that has as its ‘meta-object’ the imaginary (Marcus 2007). The aim is to experimentally construct an imaginary, to draw out the organizational form that connects the research sites. Such a process also functions as an intervention – by telling a particular story about an imaginary, it produces the possibility of changing that imaginary by creating new connections and relationships through a labour of bricolage.

The particular refrains that cohere the imaginary of ecological catastrophe are ‘catastrophe itself’, ‘humanity in excess’ and ‘the end of nature’. The future-image produced by these refrains comprised a narration of the slow violence of climate change as a catastrophic event, one articulated through the language of mathematics and existing on a number of disruptive global scales; a vision of humanity as in excess of what the Earth could sustain and possessing a limitless desire for consumption that is ruining the world; and a lament for what has been lost – nature. The world has now been transformed into a subjugated or domesticated territory (the Anthropocene). In this image we find an image of doom – a looming future event, one that co-produces on a global political scale, that threatens human extinction and is caused by an excess of desire and human power.

Exploring the refrains of the eco-catastrophic imaginary revealed a number of critical points. Rather than impasse being a matter of how the future was being mobilized, examining the refrains suggested that at least part of the problem was how the problem itself was known and constituted. Furthermore the problem expanded to encompass not only ‘environmental’ issues such as climate change

and peak oil but a particular narration of human nature as always-excessive and in need of management.

9.2.2 – Liberal utopianism

This complex narration of ecological catastrophe is bound to a specific strategy, one I called liberal utopianism. As a strategy it aims to confront the problems of global environmental issues and that of an excessive humanity by mobilizing an equivalent scalar power – either a global social movement or the nation-state as global actor. I explored this strategy as expressed through two environmental actors – Climate Camp and a UK environmental NGO.

Climate Camp attempted to use spectacular events to produce a mass climate change movement, one that would then be able to use direct action as a means of directly confronting climate change by shutting down the major sources of greenhouse gas emissions and triggering a broader social transformation. A number of issues surfaced within the praxis of Climate Camp over time as the strategy was implemented. The first was the difficulty in figuring out how to effectively engage with the targeted infrastructure and thus produce the reductions in emissions. The actions themselves never seemed to quite add up to a serious reduction in CO₂ emissions, even in theory. Climate change always seemed out of reach, beyond the capacities of direct action as a mode of political engagement. Building a mass climate movement was presented as a means of overcoming these limitations. But a mass climate movement failed to arrive, and by 2011 the Camp ceased to exist.

As I argued, part of the reason for the breakdown in the praxis of the Camp was the model of political practice it embodied: that of activism. Activism as a form is unable to be massified – it cannot be the figure of subjectivity or praxis that Climate Camp needed it to be. Climate Camp's solution to climate change was to try to produce a mass movement of activists, people who would be capable of imposing the necessary changes to the UK's political economy without recourse to government action. It called for a movement so big that direct action would be undertaken on a national or global, a scale commensurate to the problem of climate change. In this way what would be produced would be a self-managing

climate subject, one that would not need to be restrained by a climate leviathan but could and would live within the carbon limits of climate science. The failure of this movement to arrive contributed to the 'reformist drift' towards embracing government-imposed change as the solution to climate change and to the eventual disbanding of Climate Camp.

The government as a climate leviathan (Wainwright and Mann 2013) is not the government as it currently exists. As explored in Chapter 5, the government has to be made into an actor capable of solving climate change. Currently the UK government is complicit in producing climate change and has only thus far acted inadequately to address the issue, if not set about deepening the climate crisis. If in Chapter 4 the problem was creating a climate movement on a scale commensurate with climate change as an issue, the problem of Chapter 5 was whether or not it was possible to reform the State to act as a constructive global agent. In this chapter I set out how the *Climate Change Act* was produced as a device to transform politics. It was, just like the spectacular direct actions of Climate Camp, also prefigurative insofar as the action a reformed government would take would also be legislative. The *Act* was therefore both means and end. However like the direct actions of Climate Camp the legislation failed to address climate change or to transform the political landscape and force successive UK governments to adequately act on climate change as an issue.

The doubts as to this prefigurative liberalism were more pervasive within the NGO than within Climate Camp. There was a stronger sense that the *Act* would be insufficient and less hope that government would be reformed or made to act within the framework of climate science and its social demands. There was in fact a deep sense of pessimism towards the future that made a sharp divide between those people who understood and accepted the reality of climate change and those who did not. This 'us vs. them' divide was also apparent within Climate Camp. I argued that it was this us vs. them divide, one that is embodied in the practice of activism, that maintained the weak hopes of liberal utopianism. By focusing on the shortcomings of 'them' – people who had not yet accepted the need for action and change, governments who had not yet acted – hope in the idea that they would eventually change was fragilely maintained. At least until the failed COP in 2009

when it became apparently that neither people nor governments would act in time to prevent dangerous climate change (as measured by global temperature rises of 2°C). It was at this point that the weak hope in the capacities of people or governments to be moved to act on climate change started to become cruel. Unable to let go of hope in a global actor, environmentalism undertook a moral turn, one made all the more forceful by the now-commonly articulated threat of human extinction (Hamilton 2010; McKibben 2010; Monbiot 2014a).

This moral turn worked to preserve liberal utopianism as a form of politics by maintaining the idea of both a climate movement and a climate leviathan through a condemnation of humanity. If only humanity would act then either climate change would be resolved directly or governments would be forced to act. It is humanity's failure to act that is to be condemned. This condemnation works to maintain a cruel hope in the leviathan figure and reproduces liberal utopianism despite the failure of either the climate movement to arrive or the government to act. Liberal utopianism is thus melancholic: understanding climate change as an issue that requires a global actor, hope in such an actor is maintained by a longing for a lost global actor, one that it could be suggested has never existed.

This instance of green melancholia is part of a broader unravelling of liberal politics in the global North. Just as the left in both the UK and the USA went into crisis in the 1980s and 90s (Brown 1999; Hall 1988), environmentalism in both countries has gone into crisis in the 2000s⁶⁷. In both instances the political impasse is the result of a particular crisis of practices and imaginaries – ways of campaigning, visions of the future and most critically of the political subject. In both instances the political subject is the activist, a figure that as I have shown is the radical expression of the active liberal citizen and one structurally impossible to massify. As argued by Brown, the fate of the radical imaginary of liberal democracy is bound to the fate of normative liberal democracy: when the latter is undermined or destroyed, radical liberal democracy as a plausibility also disappears (2015).

⁶⁷ Though, pace Wall, we could suggest that the first crisis for modern environmentalism was in the late 80s and itself led to the rise of the direct action environmental movement. This could be said to mirror the logic of the rise then fall of the new left. Wall, D. 1999. *Earth First and the Anti-Roads Movement*. London: Routledge.

The point here is not to emphasise the neoliberal project of undermining liberal or social democracy (Brown 2015; Harvey 2007), nor to point out the economic impossibility of social democracy (Streeck 2014), but to suggest that the internal limits to active citizenship doomed efforts to make it the basis for broad-based social movements. The problem of liberal politics is people (Losurdo 2014) – how to manage ourselves and others. As such the failure of liberalism is as much due to the resistance to self-management found amongst the populations of the global North such as in Europe and the UK (Mair 2013) as it is to the ascendancy of neoliberalism. Contra Brown et al., the liberal political demos is undone not only ‘from above’ by agents of neoliberalism (Brown 2015; Mirowski 2013) but ‘from below’ through peoples resistance to the creep of managerialism into daily life as a liberal political practice (Hancock and Tyler 2004; Parker 2002a). If the impasse is in part a product of the everyday resistance to creeping self-management then pace Dean (2009) we could argue that the failures of activism will not be solved through the call for more activism or indeed for more democratic political engagement but only through the invention of forms of politics beyond the liberal humanistic framework.

9.2.3 – Radical fatalism

This thesis has focused on attempt to break environmentalism out of the state of impasse from a sympathetic position: one that would renew (or perhaps corrupt) environmentalism rather than abolish it as a countervailing power to capitalist realism (Fisher 2009). Perhaps ironically here, where Fisher suggests that ecological catastrophe has the capacity to break with the pervasive sense that there is no alternative to neoliberalism (what he calls capitalist realism), I have shown that catastrophe can act to reinforce the sense that the only thing to be done is something ‘realistic’. The catastrophic event acts to reinforce a sense of pragmatic political realism, not undermine it. Indeed we could go one step further here and suggest that the assumed ontological realism of the catastrophic event mitigates against speculative and experimental forms of politics as it confronts them with the impossibility of failure. Without the opportunity to fail there can only be repetition without difference and not political experimentation or innovation.

One tendency within the UK environmental milieu has sought to transform what is politically and ontologically meant by realism by reimagining catastrophe as a long process of inevitable collapse. I outlined this re-imagining of catastrophe in Chapter 6. The refrain of collapse expresses the view that industrial civilization will inevitably collapse in the near future due to natural limits. The exact details of how collapse occurs differ from movement to movement. But there is a consistent framing of collapse as inevitable and thus a 'realistic' image of the future, thus reconstituting political realism on a fatalistic basis. Collapse is not understood as something to be feared however. Rather collapse will achieve what environmentalism failed to achieve – the ecological transformation of society.

In Chapters 7 and 8 I explored the particular approaches to radical fatalism of two social movements: Transition Towns and the Dark Mountain Project. Transition Towns focus on responding to the inevitable collapse of industrial civilization due to peak oil – the point at which no more conventional oil can be produced and after which oil production declines. Transition Towns argue that societies in the global North are completely dependent on oil. As oil begins to run out, communities will need to respond to the inevitable process of re-localisation. Transition Towns' response is to undertake a program of repair that aims to preemptively relocalise the economy through public projects such as introducing local currencies and the reskilling individuals. In the latter instance the project of repair takes aim at the material basis of our imaginations. Transition Towns argue that it is the lack of material skills and resources that restricts people's capacities to imagine other ways of life and that produces a fear of collapse. The work of creating localized economic institutions and reskilling aims to not only provide a material basis for survival but also a basis for imagining the future differently. Rescaling as an activity works to create the grounds for other forms of life and subjectivity. Crucial to this labour of repair is cultivating a sensibility of being able to 'make do with less'. Repair as a project aims not only to build capacities in individuals, but to make them able – and happy – to have less material wealth. The positive vision of the future relies on this latter change in perspective.

Their positive vision for the future is one of a village economy where production and reproduction are minimally separated, where there is a revival of domestic

economies, and there is a predominance of local markets. It is I argued a form of liberalism without growth, one that, echoing Massey, reproduces the vision of the local produced within global imaginaries (2014:65). While Transition Towns argue that relocalisation is inevitable, they suggest that the transition will be smoother and less conflictual if it is organized before collapse really gets underway. They also say that whether or not collapse happens transition to a low carbon localized economic model will address climate change, and so is an environmental priority regardless of the threat of peak oil. Their approach to relocalising the economy is consensual and seeks to involve local government and businesses.

This has the effect, as Ted Trainer outlines, of leaving existing material inequities in place (2010). This approach to social change has a number of significant ramifications. It limits what projects can be undertaken by Transition Towns to those that do not conflict with local regimes of capitalist accumulation. It also limits participation in those projects to people who already have the material and temporal resources to participate in them (as with activism in Chapter 4), undermining the credibility of Transition Towns' projects as 'realistic' alternatives. Compounding this point, the attractiveness of the idea of making do with less relies on a sense amongst participants that they can make do with less – something that many people cannot do, especially in a period of economic austerity and deepening social crisis. If as Transition argue the imagination is shaped by material conditions, the lack of resources and practical solutions make their positive vision of collective survival appear unrealistic on their own terms (Bailey, Hopkins and Wilson 2010).

If it is unrealistic it is nonetheless still compelling. The focus on questions of infrastructure produces a conversation with their critics exploring what it would practically take to bring about a different form of life, one adapted to less energy use and that has a lower ecological impact. The shift of emphasis to the material grounds of life draws attention away from the global scale towards social configurations that people can grasp more easily and envision themselves within. Where Transition falter is on the question of how change can and will be brought about. This question remains open through the various debates that surround Transitions Towns, notably with Ted Trainer and other peak oil writer-activists.

Where Transition Towns focus on the power of imagining a positive outcome to collapse, the Dark Mountain Project instead offer a vision of collapse without hope. The Dark Mountain Project sets out to directly confront the failings of environmentalism not by correcting its dark visions but by arguing they are not negative or doom-laden enough. The Project argues that what it means to be realistic is to accept that environmentalism has failed and that civilization is already collapsing. Far more than Transition Towns the Dark Mountain Project emphasizes a kind of 'dark' ecological thought that suggests it is already too late to either reform environmentalism as a perspective or stop collapse.

For the Project the key to understanding collapse is to be found in the 'mythical' or imaginary framework of civilization, one that the Project argues environmentalism has come to share. They outline a critique of the foundational myths of civilization – progress and nature – and argue that it is this framework that is ultimately to blame for the current socio-ecological crisis. In their articulation industrial civilization is founded on the notion that the world exists as a limitless resource (the myth of nature), and that it is both possible and desirable for economic growth to continue forever (the myth of progress).

They argue that environmentalism has come to focus on human well-being rather than on producing an alternative ecocentric perspective. But rather than set out to renew environmentalism they suggest that as civilization is collapsing anyway, there is no need to engage in environmental activism. What is to be done is to engage with the collapse as realistically as possible. Their particular approach is grounded in their analysis – that what is required of them is to make stories for "darker times" (Kingsnorth and Hine 2009) so as to enable a different form of life after civilization.

While there is an element of reskilling and preparation within the Dark Mountain praxis, this is not the basis for their joyful embrace of collapse. This is based on two things. They disaggregate humanity and civilization and argue that historically speaking civilizations collapse all the time, yet humanity survives and that this collapse will be no different. The second aspect is that collapse will achieve what environmentalism failed to: a change in how people live. Collapse will necessitate finding other ways of dwelling within and working with the more-than-human

world, as it will mean the end of the Enlightenment project of achieving mastery over the Earth. Joy is built on foundations of a rejection of industrial civilization and its various horrors.

As with Transition Towns, there is a failure to sufficiently confront existing social and material inequities, making Dark Mountain Project an affair of those people able to accept the collapse of civilization as a 'good thing' and not those who would arguably suffer most for it. The key point here is not the unevenness to how collapse would be experienced but rather the narration of collapse as a unitary phenomenon. The Dark Mountain Project (and Transition Towns) articulate collapse as though it were a global process that transforms the capitalist world-system as a single historical event. Thus while the catastrophic event is re-imagined as a process, the process is articulated in the future-anterior as a historical event with much resting on how people imagine their lives 'after the collapse'. In this way it resembles many recent articulations of the Anthropocene as a future-past and thus as a geo-historical event (Weisman 2008; Zalasiewicz 2008).

Within the narration of collapse as a historical event, humanity is not articulated as the principle actor. Collapse is understood to be an accidental outcome, one brought about by nature in response to the excesses of industrial civilization and not humanity per se. It is the legions of nature that break through the 'thin crust' of civilization and bring about its destruction (Kingsnorth and Hine 2009). Nature takes the form of an inhuman catastrophic force, one that humanity cannot struggle against but can only survive. What we find at the end of the world is an inhuman agent of change and the arrival of a politics of survival.

The problem with the politics of survival as articulated within radical fatalism is not the passivity of humanity towards those inhuman and more-than-human forces that shape society. Rather, it is the absolute reliance on the catastrophic agent to bring about social change. This absolute reliance means that should collapse fail to happen, or even happen unevenly, the respective visions of Transition Towns and the Dark Mountain Project will not materialize. Instead of building a new world in the ruins of the old they will be instances of survival

within industrial civilization, spectators to an on-going and unending process of environmental destruction.

Radical fatalism is compelled by a desire to see industrial civilization come to an end. Not necessarily completely as we find within primitivist fantasies (Jensen 2006), but as a universal social system, one that dominated the Earth. For it to only partially fail and cling on as a world-system, or not fail at all, means the frustration of radical fatalism's desires. It would mean the failure of not only the catastrophic agent as a force of social transformation but of the strategy of radical fatalism. In contrast to the inability of liberal utopianism to suffer campaign failures vis-à-vis climate change, radical fatalism cannot endure the continuation of the present: it is not the end of the world that produces fear and suffering, but its continuation. This endurance is not physical as we find on the margins of neoliberal society and settler colonialism (Povinelli 2011) but rather affective and imaginal. It is hope that cannot endure civilization as there is no space for the kinds of futures desired by Transition Towns and the Dark Mountain Project in the processes and infrastructures of industrial capitalism.

9.2.4 – Uneven catastrophes

This vision of collapse as a radical social transformation still owes much to the notion of progress. Viewed as a historical episode, collapse takes on the characteristics of a historical event despite efforts to avoid this narrative fate (Roitman 2014) – specifically as a crisis from which humanity will recover. Not only recover from as a species but, according to Transition Towns and the Dark Mountain Project, use as a means of improving humanity as a species. Collapse still very much figures as a means of social progress, even if such progress requires the collapse of society. What radical fatalism proposes is that, on a ruined Earth, progress needs to be re-imagined on a deeper time scale. No longer as the improvement of the human condition within civilization, but as the abolition of our (sic) civilization as a 'correction' to the error of industrialization. While such a correction need not be total – there is much in civilized life that both Transition Towns and the Project would retain – progress is nonetheless not an improvement on industrial civilization but a more profound social transformation that effectively ends one form of social life and institutes another.

Viewed in this way, the collapse of industrial civilization appears less as civilisation's end and more as its salvation. Progress is made inhuman, perhaps for inhuman times, and retained even if it no longer gestures towards human mastery over the planet but towards a kind of 'enlightened' mastery over ourselves so that we may live with the Earth.

I would argue that the problem with this is not only the limitations of a politics of self-mastery, but that the event may never arrive. If the catastrophe does not occur, if collapse does not take place, then what hope is there for even this re-imagined notion of progress?

9.3 – Letting go of the event...

"We have to stop imagining that repair is possible." (Butler in Editors 2015:15)

Nixon argues that environmental politics requires a labour of rendering the slow, dispersed and insensible processes of ecological violence and degradation into visible events. Events are the means of making processes visible and, at once, the object of political action. We act on or against events and in turn our actions become historical events. Climate change manifests as a devastating flood – we build sea barriers, organize emergency relief, create new ministries or departments to tackle climate related disasters. The future is set as a series of tipping points – we describe them as historical events (the collapse of the Greenland ice sheets, the destruction of the Amazon...) then pass laws, make pledges, set policy. Or we take action – we blockade pipelines and power stations, organize rallies and protest marches.

Events enable us to grasp the problem. They enable the representation and communication of environmental issues and thus the production of political communities and public affects out of private fears and experiences (Lockwood 2012). The event is a device that produces the possibility of politics. But this politics is not of the everyday or quotient variety. Rather it is politics as a separate sphere of action, one that stands apart from work and private life and arguably has its roots in the liberal conceptualisation of both politics and humanity (Brown

2001; Losurdo 2014; Tronti 2014). The event is the device that organizes politics and in turn history. It is also what has conceptually separated human from natural history up until the Anthropocene within Modernist imaginaries. Nature was inert, inactive, and worked on geological deep time (Merchant 1990). Ruptures punctuated natural history, but these ruptures only became events once incorporated into human history (Lisbon, 1755, etc). But as suggested by Dipesh Chakrabarty, the Anthropocene – or more specifically climate change – has brought such a division to an end (2009; 2014). Human and natural history once more coincide.

But where many Anthropocenic authors assert that nature has been subsumed by humanity (the ‘God Species’ as Lynas calls us), what we find is that instead humanity has ceased to exist as anything other than an inhuman force – a greedy, rapacious all-consuming force, one that needs be contained. Or, if not this, then it is humanity as victim of inhuman forces, destined to fall back into the muck of “merely living life” (Crist 2013).

The catastrophic event as a liberal political figuration undoes the very process of liberal politics. More than this, when posited as a global inhuman force, catastrophe undoes the very possibility of humanism as a political framework. It suggests that we can no longer be committed to man (sic) as it is either a species that will not fulfil the dreams of liberal agency or conversely because humanity has become an inhuman force, collapsing back into the realm of ‘nature’ (Malm and Hornborg 2014).

Given these failures of humanity, what catastrophe can be seen as suggesting is that what is required is a climate leviathan: which is to say liberal politics must be suspended in order to secure survival. This requires shifting the emphasis of politics away from freedom (Chakrabarty 2009; 2014) to containment. As an excessive species, humanity must work to contain itself. The human species’ assent to the global throne coincides with its imprisonment within self-imposed material austerity.

But whereas climate change and the Anthropocene both suggest an end to liberal humanism and to the utility of the event as a politico-historical device, both also

create the grounds for other forms of life. We find glimpses of these possibilities in the turn away from the event. We could imagine taking the deconstruction of the catastrophic event undertaken by Transition Towns and the Dark Mountain Project much further than the articulation of the historical fact of collapse. As they suggest, collapse is a long drawn out process. But what if we don't stop here? What if we articulate collapse not as one process, and an inevitable one at that, but a tendency that describes a series of uneven and dispersed processes, all of which exist as contestable terrains? What if we do away with collapse and catastrophe altogether and stay with the long present?

Moreover, what if we outline collapse as an ever-present possibility, one that is part of the contingent nature of how spaces and scales are co-constructed within the Anthropocene (Massey 2014:10-12)? Understood this way collapse would be a promise to be realized through our actions insofar as our actions intersect with the processes of scale-making. Collapse as an uneven process that describes the breakdown of the reproduction of industrial civilization would appear as an outcome of situated practices that introduce a measure of friction (Tsing 2004) into the making of the global scale. That is, as an always-present possible outcome of our resistance.

This is not to suggest we ignore the future. Rather it is to suggest that we go deeper into the process of situated imagining and refuse to narrate the disparate array of ecological disasters currently taking place (or the legacies of past disasters) as events. What would it mean to 'stay with the trouble' of catastrophe (Haraway 2014)?

I would suggest that we would find something of a return to those environmental practices that resist the universalizing processes of global capitalism while seeking to produce a thick justice for more situated lives. Global problems would be seen as a complex set of issues, and amenable to situated actions (Gibson-Graham 2002). We would not, perhaps, confront climate change so much as tackle the specific industries out of which climate change emerges. We would need to be attentive to the specificities of how our worlds are breaking down and ground our visions of the future in those 'broken worlds' (Jackson 2014). The ecological labour of repairing or caring for a damaged Earth manifests here not as a heroic labour of

political activism but that of a quotient labour of reproduction. Environmentalism would no longer be 'politics' as understood as a separate activity, one that takes place in the public sphere, but as a daily, embedded activity. As a difficult labour of care (Bellacasa 2012) that takes place without end.

This caring ecological labour is no singular project but a series of projects situated in their specific worlds and attentive to how they are damaged, by whom, to what ends and through what means. It is with this work of situated living that the adequate means of political action within a ruined world are to be found. It would mean focusing on knowing what lives are made possible by the organization of our worlds and actively working not only to make other lives possible but to hold space open for other forms of life, especially those of the more-than-human world.

This labour would mean stepping back from the promise of the global scale, a promise that has not been kept. Or rather, a promise that was always framed as a promise of capitalism as a universalizing system, one that not only creates a global socio-economic system but a series of global socio-ecological accidents, the two necessarily bound together as the expression of a single world-ecology (Moore 2015). If we consider the production of a global political scale part of the problem of modern environmentalism, this suggests rethinking the role environmentalism plays within the world-system and moving beyond spectacular political visions to an embrace of a more intimate political life, one that dwells within a social ecology and foregoes dreams of the global, dreams that have turned to nightmares of scorched deserts and rising seas.

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