

# PROTEST IN THE FACE OF CATASTROPHE: EXTINCTION REBELLION AND THE ANTI-POLITICS OF GRIEF

## INTRODUCTION: THE IMPORTANCE OF GRIEF

Extinction Rebellion (XR) is a global environmental movement originating in the UK in 2018, which seeks to use nonviolent civil disobedience to protest government inaction on the current ecological crisis and the catastrophic prospects of abrupt anthropogenic climate change. The bleak inventory of catastrophic prospects includes rising sea levels, crop failures, extreme weather, melting ice caps and permafrost, burning forests, and the systematic destruction of whole ecosystems. In an ever-expanding body of academic and popular literature dedicated to this breakdown, visions of a future collapse abound, consisting of mass migration, starvation and extinction, the depletion of resources, war and fascism, chronic water shortages, stifling pollution and vast areas of the Earth rendered literally uninhabitable (see Wallace-Wells 2019). Compared to earlier more single-issue and optimistic environmental groups, XR was founded on communicating the catastrophic severity of the climate breakdown, especially the ongoing species extinction from which it derives its name. XR stresses the imperative of taking urgent action *before it is too late*, and its official three demands commonly supported by all in the movement are *Tell the Truth, Act Now* and *Beyond Politics* (establish a Citizens' Assembly for climate justice).

Since XR burst onto the political scene in November 2018 followed by successive

'rebellions' in April and October 2019, a range of insightful academic studies have focused on the movement. Important elements of XR have been analysed: from their internal project of 'regenerative culture' (Westwell and Bunting 2020) to XR's horizontal organisation and 'fantasy of leaderlessness' (Fotaki and Foroughi 2021), the movement's similarities to early Christian millenarianism in prioritising existential vulnerability (Joyce 2020) and its relationship to political millenarianism more generally (Skrimshire 2019). Andreas Malm (2021) amongst others, has also subjected the movement to a thorough critique, focusing on XR's claim to be 'Beyond Politics', its strategy of nonviolent disruption its theorisation of the fossil economy, as well as the movement being 'persistently aloof from factors of class and race' (Malm 2021:126).

Taking these perceptive contributions into consideration, in this article I attempt to provide a comprehensive anthropological account of the movement as a whole, drawing on ethnographic fieldwork to demonstrate what is substantially taking place within the movement at the level of activists' own motivations, beliefs, and objectives. I attempt to ethnographically show how XR actually functions, demonstrating how within the movement there is a novel and distinct project to generate a new kind of subjectivity stemming from the work of mourning and grief. In this article I seek to shed anthropological light on this project as part of a broader investigation into how XR activists construct,

sustain and practice doomsaying subjectivities orientated towards catastrophe and what forms of protest and politics arise from this specific approach to climate breakdown.

The ethnographic detail within this article is derived from fieldwork that took place from late August until mid-October 2019 mainly in the city of York in Northern England. The fieldwork comprised participating in weekly meetings, demonstrations and a workshop, as well as conducting interviews. I also took part in two major ‘rebellions’, which bookended my fieldwork. The first was the more carnivalesque ‘Northern Rebellion’ in Manchester spanning the weekend of 30th August through 2nd September 2019. The second was the ‘International Rebellion’ in London which lasted two weeks from 7th to 21th October 2019.

The centrality of grief, of mourning for the loss of both nature and the future—which will be the focus of this article—was apparent right from the beginning of my fieldwork during the first interview I conducted in early September 2019 with a veteran activist called Luke.<sup>1</sup> Towards the end of a long and emotional discussion about the prospects of climate catastrophe, and reflecting on his position that the human species is bound for extinction, he stated ‘*grief is a thing that pervades me, pervades what I do*’. This in principle stands for the movement overall. Grief, paramount above other feelings of anger, despair, or guilt, is the mobilising and sustaining emotional force that creates XR activists, determining their subjective dispositions and binding them together through a shared project in opposition to catastrophe. Grief for XR activists is a force that stimulates action in the world as an answer to despair and is embraced as an emotion which reveals the truth of climate catastrophe. In this article I argue that the ongoing work of grief, beneath the often mischaracterising public image of XR as

disruptive and eccentric, is what is *substantially* taking place within the movement.

## EXTINCTION REBELLION ACTIVISTS AS DOOMSAYERS

In this section I explore how doomsaying characterises the fundamental orientation and method of activists; what they do and who they are as activists who *Tell the Truth* and demand governments to *Act Now*. In what follows I distinguish between doomsaying and grief. If doomsaying describes activists’ particular *structural* orientation towards the future—their temporal relationship to catastrophe—grief is the emotional *substance* or force which is the content of this orientation—the emotion activists use to construct their subjectivities and performatively express through protest. Hence doomsaying is a general category describing an orientation towards the future which recognises it as catastrophic and necessary to avoid. Whereas grief is specific to XR activists as the basis of their subjectivity and the substance of their particular form of doomsaying. Whilst doomsaying is a description most activists would not use for themselves, it is utilised in this article because it is implicit in activists’ self-descriptions as being ‘humanity’s conscience’, and the Earth’s ‘fire alarm’ or ‘panic button’.

A doomsayer is a person who, energised with prophetic knowledge in an otherwise ignorant or evasive age, makes gloomy predictions about a catastrophic future in the hope of stirring others from negligence, denial, and disavowal into action taken in the urgent present in order to avoid the doom foretold. XR’s first and second demands of *Tell the Truth* and *Act Now* reflect this. Activists unanimously declared during fieldwork that their role was not to offer an alternative vision of the future, but to raise awareness about the severity of the climate



Fig. 1. The Earth Flag at the Northern Rebellion, Manchester (01/09/19)

catastrophe and to prompt action in order to avoid the worst of it. This echoes their own contention that the movement is at root *Beyond Politics*, protesting a crisis the severity of which transcends ordinary politics, demanding a new form of mobilisation which is not only social or political, but also psychic and spiritual. Grief, as we shall see, is vital to this. Firstly, however, I will illustrate how doomsaying temporally structures activists' grieving subjectivities.

The primary goal of doomsaying is to make the future tangibly real (Dupuy 2015). For activists this is achieved through an emotive and apostolic anti-politics of grief.<sup>2</sup> I use apostolic to refer to a type of protest based on the righteous repetition of the truth and the demand for action in opposition to 'business-as-usual'. As I will

further demonstrate in the 'Conclusion', XR's politics is actually an anti-politics, an outlook through which political problems are translated into emotive-ethical issues of subjectivity, with politics situated as an obstacle to transcend and move 'beyond'. This apostolic anti-politics necessarily involves a vagueness about 'practical' solutions since it seeks first and foremost a change in consciousness or subjectivity. The apostle or prophet restates their message of truth through an emotional call to action rather than a 'rational' attempt to persuade.

For an XR activist, to speak the truth of climate breakdown, to acknowledge its full severity and communicate its urgent reality is a radical act in a world that is in denial. For instance, a pamphlet widely distributed at the

International Rebellion titled 'Why We Rebel' declares: 'We face a breakdown of all life, the tragedy of tragedies: the unhallowed horror' (Extinction Rebellion 2019b: 3). This language is specifically catastrophist since 'unhallowed' here signifies not a revelatory apocalypse, but rather a catastrophe devoid of overarching meaning, or as the philosopher Günther Anders (2019 [1959]) put it in reference to nuclear annihilation, 'Apocalypse without Kingdom'. I specifically use catastrophe because of its simplicity, defined by the philosopher Jean-Pierre Dupuy (2015: 34) as 'the occurrence of an abrupt discontinuity in a system characterised by continuous dynamics'. This distinction between apocalypse and catastrophe corresponds to the difference between millenarianism and doomsaying. XR activists are not millenarians because whilst millenarians perceive in disaster the promise of eschatological revelation and salvation, doomsayers invoke catastrophe precisely to avoid it as an 'unhallowed horror.'

Most activists understand this 'unhallowed horror' as one of slow collapse and decay, not a single event, but a process of accelerating decline driven on by ecological tipping points and feedback loops (see Wallace-Wells 2019). As Luke, who has been in the environmental movement since the 1980s and who is immersed in the scientific forecasts put it to me:

It is like standing in a flooded house with the water slowly rising. It reaches to your waist gradually, so you think you have the time to escape. But what you don't realise is that the next rise in the water level will be exponential, reach your head, and drown you... The trouble with the exponential function is that you can only understand it after it's happened!

Here Luke demonstrates the difficulty in conceptualising climate catastrophe as both an ongoing process and a prospect in the future. Conceptualising catastrophe through doomsaying involves generating a different perception of time, which encourages a sense of historical responsibility. This often involves moving from a linear to a reciprocal perception, whereby the past, present, and future are understood as interdependent. The pamphlet emphasises this through the idea of the stewardship of the planet: 'Each generation is given two things: one is the gift of the world, and the other is the duty of keeping it safe for those to come' (Extinction Rebellion 2019b: 5). As Luke also put it, in a foreshadowing tone expressed by many activists, 'I think that on my gravestone, if there is one, I would like it if someone wrote, "*he tried to be a responsible ancestor*". Luke's eco-centric stewardship, a product of interpreting the climate science through an approach called 'Deep Adaptation', means he does 'not have any hope for the human race'. As he put it, 'For me success would be leaving a habitable planet for whatever organisms succeed us'. Whether eco-centric or anthropocentric, this feeling of historical responsibility and ecological stewardship is constitutive of many XR activists' subjectivities and symptomatic of an intimacy with catastrophe, a close and sometimes all-too-immediate orientation towards the future.

In summary, a reciprocal notion of time that connects past, present, and future into an interdependent bond draws the subject into a conscious process of living responsibly through history. Dupuy (2015: 7) argues that through this model of reciprocal time in doomsaying, 'the present preserves the memory of [future suffering], as it were, as a result of the mind's having projected itself into the time following the catastrophe, conceiving of the event in the future perfect tense'. Doomsaying imaginatively



Fig. 2. Posters at the Northern Rebellion, Manchester (01/09/19)

places the catastrophe into the ‘horizon of expectation’ (Koselleck 2004), transforming it into a tangible prospect in order to stir action to avoid it. Therefore, catastrophe paradoxically exists as ‘something that is fated to happen, but at the same time is contingent and accidental, something that might not happen’ (Dupuy 2015: 8).

This process involves a striking intensification of the present, imbued as it is with the

urgency to *Act Now*. As the pamphlet puts it in an epic style typical of the movement:

History is calling from the future, a hundred years from now...Calling the conscience of humanity to act with the fierce urgency of now...we have just this one flickering instant to hold the winds of the world in our hands, to vouchsafe the future (Extinction Rebellion, 2019b:3).

Here history is presented as an agent, summoning subjects to act decisively and fatefully in an intense present. This is a specific feeling doomsaying attempts to generate. For instance, during the Northern Rebellion an activist called Ed described the sensation that sitting down in the middle of Deansgate, Manchester gave him, as a ‘strange experience of consciously living through history’. Looking at the department store Kendals (now House of Fraser), which he often visited as a child, but now from the perspective of the street where traffic should be flowing, he described it as ‘one of those moments when you cast away the veil of society as it is and you get a glimpse of something else even though you don’t know what it is...you see the tantalising prospect of a better world.’ This becoming aware, energised, and empowered in certain key moments of revelation is a theme common in the movement, signifying a distinct temporal subject experience of activism in XR, of living in and through an accelerating historical transformation, with the hope of also *making* history too.

As such, XR activists are sensitively orientated towards a catastrophic future ever more encroaching into the present. Yet anthropology itself—as Nancy Munn (1992) established—is itself decidedly not orientated towards the future and has traditionally ‘viewed the future in ‘shreds and patches’ in contrast to the close attention given to ‘the past in the present’” (Munn 1992: 115–116). Excepting perhaps the anthropology of millenarianism (see Worsley 1957), a specific ‘anthropology of the future’ is seemingly absent from the discipline’s history. Rebecca Bryant and Daniel M. Knight’s *The Anthropology of the Future* (2019) goes some way towards correcting this historical evasion by providing a comprehensive overview of the work of anthropologists specifically concerned with futural issues in the past 30 years, whilst

also drawing eclectically on modern European philosophy for theories of temporality. Whilst their emphasis on historical and temporal ‘orientations’ is useful, their work—perhaps reflecting the wider poverty of anthropological treatments of *environmental* futures—pays little attention to the issue of a climactically catastrophic future. Notably, ‘ecology’ merits only a fleeting mention in the introduction (Bryant and Knight 2019: 10–11). In response to perhaps a lack of anthropological attention towards climate breakdown and the future, I draw on philosophical and psychoanalytical sources from outside the discipline to analyse how XR activists live in relation to a specifically *catastrophic* future. Indeed, the unprecedented nature of XR’s activism and outlook demand such a synthetic approach which can put conceptualisations of catastrophe, doomsaying, grief, and anti-politics into fruitful dialogue with close ethnographic investigation.

As such, building on this use of Dupuy’s theory of doomsaying to analyse XR activists’ orientation towards the future, in what follows I explore how grief animates this doomsaying and how the work of mourning subjectivizes this experience of living through and in opposition to catastrophe. To do this, I must first turn to the ideological heterogeneity within the movement and demonstrate how the importance of grief within XR stems from the work of the American New Age intellectual Joanna Macy.

## INTELLECTUAL CURRENTS WITHIN THE MOVEMENT AND THE CENTRALITY OF NEW AGE THOUGHT

Whilst XR may appear homogenous due to its simple core message and clear aesthetic, the movement is, however, internally differentiated and characterised by an ideological and



Fig. 3. The Extinction Rebellion 'Angel of the North' made from recycled rubbish materials. Here it is in the middle of Deansgate at the Northern Rebellion, Manchester. 'Kendals' (now House of Fraser) is the building on the right. (01/09/19)

organisational amorphousness (see Harding 2020). XR possesses a highly horizontal and decentralised structure, allowing ‘affinity groups’ of six to twelve activists to independently plan nonviolent protest actions. The movement also has no formal membership requirement and eschews any official or elected leaders. This organisational fluidity, combined with a pacifist discipline and a simple doomsaying practice (meaning activists do not have a set of policies upon which they might disagree), enables XR to remain a broad, yet effective alliance of different influences, ideologies, and styles. Nevertheless, XR can be cogently broken down into three main strands: Deep Adaptation theory, social justice, and the New Age. These strands do not represent fixed groups, but are rather key intellectual ‘currents’ which influence the attitudes, strategies, and outlooks of different activists.

Firstly, Deep Adaptation is a minor intellectual current derived from the work of British environmental theorist Jem Bendell, currently Professor of Sustainability Leadership at the University of Cumbria. Bendell (2019) presents his theory as one that takes the scientific predictions regarding abrupt climate change seriously and, therefore, expects imminent ecological and social collapse within the next ten years. Bendell (2019: 75) concludes that any notion of preventing collapse is actually a form of denial, arguing that collective efforts at this point should be directed towards preparation and adaptation both emotionally and practically for a disaster that will mean ‘an uneven ending of our normal modes of sustenance, security, pleasure, identity, meaning, and hope’.

This argument entails a spiritual emphasis which links the theory to New Age ideas, typically expressed in a common quasi-Buddhist idiom of living in the present and severing any attachment to material illusions. Luke aligns himself very explicitly with Deep

Adaptation and told me that he took inspiration from a quote he had heard: ‘When hope dies, action begins’. He wryly joked that hope was really ‘hopeium’, a fantasy that he realised, looking back over 30 years of activism, he had been spreading. Speaking about his Deep Adaptationist outlook on the future as he explained what would accompany each increase in the Earth’s average temperature, he said:

I actually feel like a failure. The activism I have done has all been very worthy but it hasn’t been successful...We are now firing lead shot into this dying body [failing ecosystem]...I don’t actually have any hope for the human race...If I have any hope at all it’s that extreme thermophile bacteria will go ‘Yippie!’

Largely opposed to Deep Adaptation is the social justice current that is the most recognisable model of transformation, stemming as it does from a post-1968 politics of identity, anti-capitalism, consciousness raising and liberation. Capitalism and colonialism are identified as the source of climate catastrophe and the current employs a language of solidarity, struggle, class, race, gender, and populism largely absent from the other two currents, emphasising climate justice as social and political justice. Emily, a student activist, explicitly disagreed with the Deep Adaptationists arguing that ‘they very much sensationalise the science, they are not based in reality...and their research is questionable.’ Politically she stressed both that their ‘scientistic’ discourse does not emotionally connect with the general public and that their advocacy of adaptation is tantamount to surrender, doing nothing for those already experiencing catastrophe in the Global South. As she put it, ‘it is a position of privilege to say, *woe is me, everything sucks!*’





Fig. 4. A poster at Northern Rebellion, Manchester (01/09/19)

Whilst Emily represents the most politically recognisable approach within the movement, it is the New Age current that serves as the *intellectual* backbone of XR. Indeed, the fundamental premise that subjects must grieve the loss entailed by climate catastrophe

in order to psychically process it and act purposefully in the world comes from the work of American New Age theorist Joanna Macy. Macy, whose name circulates widely within the movement, is an environmentalist intellectual whose work blends deep ecology,

Buddhism, and systems theory (Macy and Johnstone 2012). Her approach to grief has been enthusiastically incorporated into XR in the form of ‘regenerative culture’. Regenerative culture is concerned with fostering an alternative caring culture both within and outside XR, based on renewing consciousness and social relations through emotional openness, empathy, resilience, and holistic awareness (see Westwell and Bunting 2020). Grief activates this project because, as Macy puts it, ‘By choosing to honour the pain of loss rather than discounting it, we break the spell that numbs us to the dismantling of our world.’ (Macy and Johnstone 2012: 79). Macy’s influence is most directly manifested in ‘The Work That Reconnects’ workshops, one of which I attended during my fieldwork. These workshops, developed from earlier ‘Despair and Empowerment’ workshops which Macy ran from the late 1970s onwards, are organisationally separate from XR, but frequently attended by activists. I describe the workshop in which I participated in the next section. As a first step, however, Macy’s approach must be placed within its intellectual context.

The New Age movement is a highly fluid and eclectic social and historical formation. Nevertheless, it can be analysed through several key attributes. In a syncretic style it blends humanism, individualism, romanticism, and spiritualism articulated in a language of psychic liberation focused on the ‘inner frontier of change’ (Macy and Johnstone 2012: 32). It is anti-authoritarian, anti-capitalist, and typically expressed through the lapsarian premise that humans have become alienated from an original state of symbiotic harmony with nature. The sociologist Paul Heelas (1996) argues convincingly that New Age thinking opposes the corrupted and contaminated *socialised self* under systems of oppression against the free, true and authentic *inner self*. Thus social

transformation is a case of *returning* to our innate selves.

Macy’s New Age approach is formulated through two arguments: a metaphor of toxicity that articulates the *problems* of ‘the system’ and the transformation of consciousness as the *solution* to these problems. Contemporary global capitalism—‘the system’ or ‘business-as-usual’—is toxic because it not only pollutes the Earth, but is psychically toxic too. Toxicity signifies a decapacitating build-up of distressing emotions such as panic, anxiety, grief, confusion, dread, and despair which have no outlet in the toxic culture of denial and disavowal produced by the fossil economy. As Macy and Johnstone (2012: 2) put it, ‘This blocked communication generates a peril even more deadly, for the greatest danger of our times is the deadening of our response.’ They continue, ‘this is where we begin—by acknowledging that our times confront us with realities that are painful to face, difficult to take in and confusing to live with.’ (Macy and Johnstone 2012: 2).

In this approach, the climate catastrophe is a psychic crisis and as such, only through transforming the psyche or the self can we hope to change the material world. Indeed, Heelas argues that for New Age thought, ‘the inner realm, and the inner realm alone, is held to serve as the source of authentic vitality, creativity, love, tranquillity, wisdom, power, authority, and all those other qualities which are held to comprise the perfect life’ (Heelas 1996: 19). Whilst this explanation is too formulaic, it nevertheless identifies the centrality of consciousness shifting to the New Age. This was made ethnographically clear to me at an XR rally in Russell Square, London, during the International Rebellion. In the pouring rain and after a long march, the crowd congregated for a final gathering. A speaker took the stage and immediately declared ‘This is the Great Turning

Joanna Macy talks about! Look at you all! You are all so amazing, vital, beautiful!' She went on, saying:

We have the sacred seeds for a world transformation. The seeds of the future lie in grief. We have to grieve first...Let that grief fill you up and guide you...It is life speaking to us...This is what consciousness evolving looks like!

The activist's speech lucidly illustrates what I seek to stress here: that grief and consciousness are fundamental to XR's model of social transformation. This is a model whereby subjectivity serves as the vehicle for transformation, as the site of agentive and mobilising emotional truth. I will explore this translation of political and social issues into spiritual and emotive problems in the Conclusion through the concept of anti-politics. To summarise, XR's doomsaying subjectivity that is created through the generation of grief-as-truth is only possible through this New Age prioritisation of consciousness raising. The following section will ethnographically explore this process of generating subjectivity through grief.

## SUBJECTIVITY AND THE WORK THAT RECONNECTS

'The Work That Reconnects' workshop is best described as a therapeutic retreat for activists who are personally distressed by climate catastrophe and intellectually curious about the philosophy behind regenerative culture. The workshop took place over five hours on a Sunday in September 2019 at a small conference centre in York. Its purpose was not to strategically instruct or educate activists, but instead to both expand their consciousness

and relieve their distress. It was structured as a five-part 'spiral' devised by Macy, beginning with *Coming from Gratitude to Honouring Our Pain for the World*, *Seeing with New Eyes*, and finishing with *Going Forth*. This structure was explained by the co-facilitators through the metaphor of a plant, depicted from root to flower on a whiteboard in the room. These co-facilitators, a young man and woman, were officially external to XR and trained in Joanna Macy's approach. They were part of The Work That Reconnects Network, an organisation of trained activists with its own online journal, *Deep Times*.<sup>3</sup> Macy was of singular importance as the intellectual inspiration of this workshop; we were encouraged to browse through her books and at one point we all read out passages from the book *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're in Without Going Crazy* (2012), the text cited in this article.

We began the workshop with all of us (15 in total) sitting in a large airy room in a wide circle, one by one expressing what we were grateful for in life, what gave us inspiration and why we were there. Examples of inspirational sources consisted of fellow activists, the kindness of others and the pleasure of chatting with friends. The beauty of the Yorkshire landscape was inspirational for one woman, whilst others expressed their gratitude for the company of animals, the energy of the sun and Mother Earth. From the beginning the mood was contemplative; the co-facilitators talked slowly and calmly, smiling and nodding peacefully. Most of the activists seemed very comfortable and familiar with this emotional expression and freely shared their thoughts. This segment was followed by a mindfulness breathing exercise which was to be repeated throughout the day between the different activities, on the basis of providing relief after the emotional intensity of each exercise.



Fig. 5. Funeral march, Oxford Street, London (12/10/19)

We then moved into the *Honouring Our Pain for the World* section, which concentrates on the work of mourning. We were told by the co-facilitators to begin slowly ‘milling’ around the room, silently passing each other, becoming aware of our proximity to one another and the atmosphere of the space. We were then told to stop and pair up with the person closest to us, stand opposite one another, and maintain gentle eye contact. This was repeated five times. The first three times, the co-facilitators read out elements of our collective loss: the loss of ecosystems like the Amazon rainforest, extinct animal species, murdered environmental activists, and the loss of a safe future. In the last two pairs I was a part of, we had to interact and share both our worries and our hopes for the future. These included both the personal and the political as worries about flooding houses and local air pollution were mentioned alongside fears about a global descent into fascism and hesitant hopes that a more equal society might emerge from the crisis if XR was successful.

We again performed a mindfulness exercise, and many let out deep sighs, some cried, and others exchanged quiet hugs. The atmosphere was contemplative, peaceful, and ameliorative. There was an acute sense of a common fragility and sensitivity being shared in a mutually appreciative space. These were activists of differing experiences, ages and levels of commitment brought together by a shared distress. The expression of this distress engendered a palpable atmosphere of relief, the efficacy of which appeared to rest in the simple act of publically verbalising loss rather than any interrogation of it. Arguably then, the session, particularly in the *Honouring Our Pain for the World* section, possessed a dynamic analogous to group therapy, whereby catharsis can be achieved through the process of free emotional expression, as others bear empathetic witness to this affective outflow.<sup>4</sup>

After the lunch break, the *Seeing with New Eyes* section began and was orientated towards

an expansion of historical consciousness. A ‘time travel’ exercise involved us pairing up again: one person was to imagine themselves as a member of the current generation speaking to the other, an ambassador of the seventh generation in the future. Here the co-facilitators invoked Native American historical consciousness as more enlightened than Western historical irresponsibility, telling us how, before making a collective decision, the Haudenosaunee of North America consider the possible effects the current generation may have on the seventh generation (Macy and Johnstone 2012). During this exercise, my partner spoke to me as a member of this seventh generation, and expressed his apologies and regret that I had to survive in a wasteland because of *his* generation’s actions. The clear aim of this section was to encourage in activists a reciprocal conception of time whereby each generation inherits the Earth as a sacred gift, imagining ‘a crowd of ancestors cheering us on in all that we do to ensure [that] the flow of life continues’ (Macy and Johnstone 2012: 152).

Following this, the tone of the workshop became more pragmatic, culminating in the final *Going Forth* section. This section’s title signifies a distinction between the realm of the workshop, everyday life, and activist struggle. It prompted activists to translate the understandings they had reached in the workshop into the two other spheres of life. Here through working out literal ‘to-do lists’ with our partners, we concretely speculated on how we planned to translate what we had learnt during the workshop into our everyday lives and the activist struggle. For instance, my partner and I discussed getting more involved in XR and the inspirational potential of being in nature or creating art that we both agreed we ought to draw upon more often.

After this we finished by thanking the co-facilitators. There was a discernible sense of

affective peace and restoration. Yet what was noticeable as I chatted to other participants was how there was little or no conversation on how the workshop linked to the activist struggle. The language instead was emotional, personal and ethical, not political as it had been briefly in the lunch break. Speaking to four activists afterwards as part of a group interview, none of the interlocutors replied to my questions with their own explanations or criticisms of the workshop. Instead, they expressed unanimous affirmation at a workshop-well-done that did not require any sense of elaboration or reflection at that moment in time. Perhaps this was the workshop’s success: being a space where activists were not interrogating and addressing themselves *as activists* but rather as suffering subjects first, as people who care and are overwhelmed. This detachment from the wider political struggle confirms the workshop as primarily therapeutic; the mood was one of relief, not determination. Therefore, whilst it was ethnographically difficult to assess whether the workshop engendered the promise of shifting consciousness, the communal expression of grief had generated a palpable therapeutic and ameliorative effect.

This process can be theoretically illuminated. The workshop’s stated aim was that, by working through the process of mourning ecological loss and the loss of the future, activists will both attain a deeper level of consciousness and relieve their distress or ‘burnout’. Psychoanalytically, this can be understood as ‘breaking attachment to a dying planet’ (Fletcher 2018). Importantly, Freud distinguished a process of healthy mourning—as a painful psychical working-out of the loss of the object of desire—from dysfunctional melancholia. Melancholia occurs when the subject cannot detach from the lost object. The desire preserved for it transforms into an

inward focused self-destructive drive, and the world around is drained of any possibility for pleasure, whilst the subject is preoccupied with their pain. For Freud (1984 [1917]: 262) this melancholia ‘behaves like an open wound’. The subject’s ego is depleted through self-reproach at this deteriorative process, all the while simultaneously disavowing the negative effects of this exhaustive and cyclical behaviour (see Fletcher 2018).

The Work That Reconnects aims to set up a *new* object of desire, that of a re-connected relationship between the subject, others, and nature: a regenerated whole. When Macy describes a movement from passive to active hope she is describing a passage of subject-making through the prism of mourning akin to Freud’s ideal of grief and re-attachment (Macy and Johnstone 2012, Freud 1984 [1917]). The typical ‘end-product’ is a subject who is robust and adaptive, turned out towards the world and able to attach themselves to positive objects of desire that facilitate meaningful relationships. However, the comparison between psychoanalysis and the New Age ends here since catastrophe lends the work of mourning a radically different meaning, namely, a suspenseful *keeping with* the work of mourning rather than the goal of passing through it via gradual detachment. Hence the workshop was not about achieving a healthy state having entirely mourned the ecological loss. Here there is no Freudian passage *through* mourning when the work is done. Instead, there is the sense of having to keep with ecological grief as a process with no discernible end, as a loss all too total and incomprehensible to ‘get over’. As Luke told me, invoking the famous Kübler-Ross model of grief,<sup>5</sup>

... acceptance isn’t the end and then it’s all alright. There is still difficult stuff going on,

lots of ‘what-ifs’ go through your mind...I deal with it by very much living in the moment. I know I could get knocked off my bike anytime or have a heart attack... But when you love life as much as I do it’s very hard to think that it is all going to go to pot!

This ongoing *difficult stuff* is the *stuff* that XR activist subjectivity is made from. This is a specifically *suspenseful* subjectivity formed through a conscious keeping-with-grief, a continual turning over and contemplation of ecological loss, premised on a sensitive existential vulnerability, proof itself of an appropriate response to such a catastrophe. This project of maintaining a vulnerable psychic exposure to the reality of catastrophe involves an attempt to resist either being drawn back into disavowing normalisation or succumbing to burning out and becoming overwhelmed. Hence the demand of XR to *Tell the Truth*, to face the future seriously, without the comforting fantasies of disavowal or denial, to keep with mourning as that which authenticates and substantiates the truth of catastrophe.

This keeping-with-grief can be viewed as a response by XR to the unique incomprehensibility of ecological loss, to the spatial and temporal vastness of this loss that resists apprehension. The philosopher Alenka Zupančič (2018: 25) argues that it is only through the work of mourning that we actually create this lost object retrospectively: ‘only at “the end” will we find out what exactly it was that we lost, in total’. She notes how ‘Our apocalypse is a loss without the lost, a mourning that precedes the loss and actually creates it with its work (that of mourning). It is a mourning without object’ (Zupančič 2018: 26). Ecological mourning then is precisely about a *creation* of the lost object as a corrective against obscuring normalisation.



Fig. 6. The red brigade leading the funeral march down Oxford Street, London (12/10/19)

Hence the function of the imaginative time travel exercise is the paradoxical attempt to retrospectively create the loss prior to it happening in totality, so as to comprehend it as an event and in the process be able to construct a doomsaying subjectivity in relation to it. Overall, the work of mourning is the constitutive process through which the XR *subject* and their *object* of climate catastrophe are formed in relation to each other.

In addition to this construction of subjectivity is its maintenance, manifested as the relief of burnout. Burnout is a phrase commonly used in the movement to indicate when an activist has over-worked. It also expresses a kind of over-exposure to troubling information about climate change and arguably involves an implicit temporal dimension. Many interlocutors expressed an anxiety about the latest scientific predictions regarding flooding, ice melt, extinction, crop failure, pollution and temperature rise. Indeed, this was also part of a wider anxiety about the political stakes of the contemporary juncture. As Emily put it, 'we are at a tipping point, either we can have this amazing transformative change or we can go through the climate crisis, eco-fascism, closing borders, population control and leaving the Global South to suffer...Yeah it's terrifying!' Underwriting these fears was a sense too of time running out or even a resignation that it was already too late. Luke's 'pervasive grief', triggered when he remembers '30 years of failure', or even Ed's optimistic 'strange experience of consciously living in history', entail a temporal intensity of subjective experience that can lead to burnout.

Burnout then is a claustrophobic combination of desperate hope, inertia and acceleration, a feeling that the doors of the future are closing in as the 'horizon of expectation' (Koselleck 2004) drains into

fate. Hence, ‘the panic that climate change so easily induces is really a panic in the face of history’ (Malm 2017: 8). As the late Lauren Berlant (2008: 6) put it, this feeling of being overwhelmed ‘produces all kinds of neutralising affect management—coasting, skimming, browsing, distraction, apathy, coolness, counter-absorption, assessments of scales, picking one’s fights and so on’. Mourning hopes to interrupt this by involving both a stepping out of the flow of time and an ensuing re-attachment to a differently qualified time with a new relation to the threat of the future. The workshop aimed to provide a space for the present *in of itself* then, as a corrective to a burnt-out passive present overwhelmed in the face of the future. Contemplative grief activates this ‘feeling historical in the present’ (Berlant 2008: 5). Time is re-imbued with potential as having cathartically expressed their painful feelings, activists could return to the maelstrom of a present pushed forward into the future with a sense of renewal and hope. Activists could re-vitalize themselves ready to step back into both the ‘attritional’ temporality of struggle and rapid temporality of protest. This is a paradox, crucial to the workshop, whereby the experience of time becomes more manageable through an intensification of the present.

In summary, burnout is a symptom of attempting to sustain a subjectivity vulnerably exposed to radical loss. In this sense then it is both caused and alleviated by the very process of subject-formation I have described. One is burnt-out because one cares so much and does so much. One is relieved only through a sensitive contemplation of *why* one cares. Burnout is the inevitable consequence of a subjectivity based on cultivated sensitivity to catastrophe. Perhaps the workshop is successful because it is not concerned with the pragmatic or political, but rather the psychic and the spiritual, as

energies are therapeutically concentrated into individual consciousness. In this sense activists can go back out into the fight as rejuvenated doomsayers. Having both subjectivized the truth of catastrophe through mourning and relieved their burnout they can return to protest, to performing their grief-as-truth.

## PROTEST, PERFORMATIVITY, AND AESTHETICS

In what follows I will seek to demonstrate how XR’s form of protest is an apostolic doomsaying whereby the truth of climate catastrophe is demonstrated through the public performance of mourning. This highly aesthetic and theatrical form of protest seeks above all to generate an affective reaction, to stimulate feelings of responsibility, possibility, and inspiration.

The ‘funeral march’ (see Fig. 5.) that passed down Oxford Street during the International Rebellion in London 2019 will be taken as the ethnographic example to investigate XR’s protest, performativity and aesthetics. As we marched down the wide road shouting various chants such as ‘Whose planet? Our planet!’, the rally suddenly came to a stop and after a few confused minutes, a rumour shuffled through the crowd that we had to move off the road because a fire engine needed to pass through. We waited with no sign of the fire engine until a slow distant drumming sound, reminiscent of a dirge, crept closer and closer. Then appeared the funeral marchers: activists dressed all in black, many of them carrying hand-made skeletons and extinct animals as well as coffins, a huge skull and black banners with various psychedelic paintings of the Earth. Beside them walked protesters holding monochrome depictions of a child screaming with the statement ‘Our Legacy’ written underneath, urging a sense of historical responsibility. Their



faces were sullen and determined as they looked at the ordinary activists standing at the side of the road. There was a hushed and solemn atmosphere which contrasted sharply with the earlier noise, excitement, and chanting.

How does a bystander react to this? The cultural reservoir of images viewers draw on in response to such a novel ritual is significant here. The funeral march is resolutely opposed to the rhythms and spatial ordering of everyday capitalist life, which finds its archetypal expression at Oxford Street. The march then could easily be imagined as the dystopic culmination of a potent, spontaneous *communitas*. Indeed, to stimulate this feeling of eeriness is of course central to the strategy of a protest performance which openly plays with decidedly cultish imagery. The function though of this macabre aesthetic is the same as presenting someone with an image of their own death as a way to stimulate a drive toward life affirming actions. The aim then is not simply to shock but to stir a sense of responsibility and engender an identification with a screaming child as ‘Our Legacy’. This is the core logic of doomsaying realised in street theatre, since as Dupuy (2009: 212) notes, ‘To make the prospect of a catastrophe credible, one must increase the ontological force of its inscription in the future’. Therefore, the funeral march ‘ontologically inscribes’ the catastrophe into one’s future *personal* death through a ritualistic mourning of *collective* death.

Leading the funeral march were the ‘red brigade’ (see Fig. 6). These are special activists who, dressed in scarlet robes with vivid white makeup frequently appear at demonstrations, walking silently and slowly, often with palms lifted to the sky in a searching expression. The ‘ordinary’ activists I spoke to that day expressed excitement, awe and respect towards them and offered opinions on the symbolism of these

eccentric and mysterious performers. One activist told me she thought their scarlet dresses were meant to symbolise the blood of all extinct species or more generally the shared blood of all beings. Along these lines I argue that the red brigade are a kind of grief personified, standing as a silently beseeching conscience, their eerie costumes self-consciously employing a quasi-monastic millenarian imagery to signify their New Age ideology. This is an apostolic aesthetics to match an apostolic politics, a self-conscious use of millenarian visual tropes of otherworldliness and strangeness, seriously reflecting the movement’s grieving-doomsaying outlook. As we shall see, this aesthetic has led to XR being denounced by some in the right-wing press as a ‘death cult’ but alternatively it is theatrical style of protest that clearly catches public attention.

If the protest in London that day was a noisy carnivalesque interruption with its bright colours, chants, banners and music, then the funeral march was an interruption of the protest itself, aimed at shifting the focus from loud oppositional protest, to quiet conscientious contemplation, as if the workshop had suddenly been thrown into the demonstration. The workshop and the funeral march both employ the same technique of saving the present from being overwhelmed in the face of the future. Yet the latter aims to make a spectacle of that process, of the grieving subjectivity itself, demonstrating that the crux of XR’s doomsaying protest is the *performance of grief-as-truth*.

Reiteration is critical to this process. Take for instance the figure of Greta Thunberg who has rapidly become an icon for the contemporary climate movement. Thunberg’s repetitive simplicity, righteous honesty and emotional authority mark her as apostolic. Specifically, her effectiveness rests in her clear re-statement of the truth of the crisis *against* the

status quo. For example, in her famous speech to the UN Climate Action Summit on 23<sup>rd</sup> September 2019 she said:

This is all wrong. I shouldn't be up here. I should be back in school, on the other side of the ocean. Yet you all come to us young people for hope. How dare you!

You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words. And yet I'm one of the lucky ones. People are suffering. People are dying.

Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction, and all you can talk about is money, and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you! (Thunberg 2019)

Here Thunberg combines a moral outrage and an attribution of generational culpability with a passionate expression of her own loss of a future. Themes of extinction, theft of dreams and childhood, and impotent empty words take on their political force because Thunberg so openly displays her own grief, anger, and distress. These emotions, displayed on the world stage, authenticate the 'true reality' of ecological catastrophe. If Thunberg's formula of protest is 'I am here, this is how I feel, take this seriously, this shows the catastrophe is real' then XR collectively and performatively reproduce this.

Politically this protest style is oppositional in orientation because it is focused on the enunciation of truth against power alone, rather than the articulation of an alternative future. For instance, Ed told me firmly that 'it would be a catastrophe if XR joined up with [the] Labour [Party]' and supported their plan for a 'Green New Deal'. Likewise, Emily said that XR 'should be critically supportive but not aligned' in relation to political parties offering environmental plans. This rejection of politics

as the making of a different future in favour of apostolic clarity is foundational to both XR's ideology and practice.

## CONCLUSION: THE ANTI-POLITICS OF EXTINCTION REBELLION

In this conclusion I seek to explore Extinction Rebellion's position of being 'Beyond Politics'. Through developing an analysis of this position as a form of anti-politics—a rejection and sought for transcendence of politics—I will attempt to show its functional and ideological importance to grief and doomsaying. By demonstrating that XR is both self-avowedly anti-political and depicted as anti-political by its detractors, I will make explicit the diverse and divergent conceptions of 'politics' implicit in discourse regarding the movement. I hope to show how the anti-politics of Extinction Rebellion is both vital to the movement's specific performance of grief-as-truth, whilst also generating attendant issues for activists.

As we have seen, XR's performance of grief-as-truth is the manifestation of a New Age outlook derived from Joanna Macy which is emotional, ethical, spiritualistic, and humanistic, rather than political. Therefore, I use anti-politics not in the sense employed by the anthropologist James Ferguson (1994) to refer to technocratic depoliticization, but rather to refer to a project inherited from this New Age thought, of a) translating political issues into emotive-ethical issues of subjectivity and b) situating 'politics' as an obstacle to transcend. Anti-politics is of course paradoxically still a form of politics, a collective struggle enacted through certain tactics and strategies that seeks to transform the pre-existing 'system'. The *anti-*prefix is thus used in this article to demonstrate the way in which XR activists articulate their

struggle through an emotive New Age outlook which rejects 'politics' as limited, restricting, divisive, ineffectual, or corrupted, as a form of action rendered inadequate and practically obsolescent in the face of climate catastrophe which demands a new and expanded form of activism which transcends the merely 'political'. In this meaning of the concept of anti-politics, whilst XR are *in their own terms* 'Beyond Politics', they cannot be considered as without it. It is not, *à la* Ferguson, the anti-politics of a bureaucratic depoliticising rationalisation imposed on political situations, but rather an anti-politics practiced *by activists themselves*. The purpose of this conclusion then is to elucidate the complex relationship XR has to 'politics' in its variously imagined forms and the bearing this has on the performance of grief-as-truth.

XR's anti-politics is most clearly recognisable in their use of nonviolent civil disobedience which combines Gandhian *satyagraha* and liberalism. This style of protest coalesces the movement's anti-political attitudes into a common expression which comes closest to a traditional political outlook. During fieldwork activists commonly invoked historical figures such as Martin Luther King and Gandhi. For example, the speaker in Russell Square not only referenced Joanna Macy but also declared proudly 'We have a dream do we not? We are MLK's dream and Gandhi's change... Here today are the sacred seeds for a world transformation.' Here the speaker positions XR as heirs to a highly moral, humanistic and spiritualist tradition of nonviolent civil disobedience, which rests on *satyagraha* ('holding firmly to the truth') and the politico-ethical decision of citizens to be disruptive and give themselves up for arrest. Roger Hallam (2019), a key figure in the movement, articulates this morally infused approach in a podcast interview:

The climate catastrophe is not primarily political, it is primarily moral or criminal... It is certainly the case that there are things in the social field which are primarily moral rather than political... If you look at the speeches of Martin Luther King or mid-twentieth century left labour leaders they are basically appealing to universal values... [Now] in so much as everyone is going to die there is certainly a role for a universalistic sort of messaging.

The imagined *political* subject who answers this moral and universal demand for action is that of the citizen rising up against an autocratic regime. For instance, at the end of *This Is Not a Drill*, the XR 'handbook', there is a faux social contract which encourages readers that 'if you feel that the state has breached the social contract, rip out this page and join Extinction Rebellion' (Extinction Rebellion 2019a: 197). This image of the conscientious citizen is supported by academic work popularly cited by activists. Erica Chenoweth's and Maria J. Stephan *Why Civil Resistance Works* (2011) is a significant influence in XR. In it they argue that nonviolent protest is more successful than using violence to achieve political aims, and that a movement is typically successful in achieving its aims if it can amass 3.5% of the population into the movement (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011). Whilst Chenoweth and Stephan are by no means influential across the movement (see Harding 2020), they do legitimate a certain political imaginary, one that imagines fossil capitalism as akin to an autocracy (see Malm 2019), and activists as citizens rebelling against this criminal regime that has tarnished the social contract.

In isolation this is a highly ethical political imaginary that centres on the subject itself, on their performance of disruption, discipline of

pacifism and holding firm to the truth against autocratic power. Yet in its conjunction with the doomsaying practice of performing grief-as-truth, this ‘political tactic’ represented clearly by Hallam, *functions as a form of anti-politics*. This civil disobedience tradition, derived from the historical figures of King and Gandhi and legitimated by the ‘fact’ provided by Chenoweth and Stephan, is the public face of XR’s protest, situating them in a recognisable imaginary of citizenship, pacifism, and direct action. In this sense it provides a historically and academically legitimated ‘political’ tactic for an anti-political subjectivity, enabling activists to participate in a common self-image and shared language. Yet as we shall see it can also generate attendant issues for the movement since as Malm (2021: 126) critically notes, the fossil economy here ‘is understood as similar to an autocracy, a category mistake that licenses pretty much anything for disruption’.

Activists said consistently throughout fieldwork that the movement performed a purely conscientious role, leaving the actual process of dismantling the fossil economy to a Citizens’ Assembly. This deferment of solutions and the praxis of social transformation, that is, ‘politics’ proper, to a future horizon of un-mediated direct democracy functionally clears the space for the performance of grief-as-truth in the present. Thus, the narrative of non-violent civil disobedience is *not anti-political in of itself* but through its emphasis on the ethical it accommodates and enables the anti-political outlook of the New Age. In this sense then the narrative and tactic of civil disobedience is functionally subordinated to the process of generating activist subjectivities and performing grief as the truth which authenticates catastrophe.

By analysing a controversial protest event—which for Malm is the outcome of

theorising the fossil economy as an autocracy—we can see what XR’s anti-politics practically entails. This protest incident took place at Canning Town Tube station, in East London on 17<sup>th</sup> October 2019 towards the end of the International Rebellion. During morning rush hour at the station, a group of protestors stood on top of a train causing considerable disruption. The activists were dragged off and physically assaulted by a small group of angry commuters. The incident caused a huge controversy with many activists questioning the decision and senior figures criticising the people who took part (Townsend 2019). It was perceived by activists as an action which alienated public support since it disrupted working-class commuters rather than the government or fossil fuel corporations. Moreover, the act was seen to be hypocritical as in a video of the protest itself commuters can be heard arguing with the activists saying, ‘you’re stopping an electric train...It’s electric!’ (ITV News 2019). An internal poll found 72% of activists ‘opposed action on London’s underground network under any circumstances’ and whilst ‘It is understood the results of the survey were shared with the groups planning the transport action before it took place’ it nevertheless went ahead (Gayle and Quinn 2019).

Organisationally the incident demonstrates the flaws of a totally horizontal decision-making structure. The protest took place despite the fact 72% of activists were against it because there are no centralised structures at a national level in the movement for democratically making collective decisions. XR then diverges from traditional political organisations which have structures through which to make and mediate a united strategy. The affinity group protesting at Canning Town was in fact a group of Christian activists, seemingly outliers to mainstream XR views on who and what are legitimate protest

targets (Harding 2020). Here then XR is organisationally anti-political because whilst highly divergent political differences exist within the movement such as Deep Adaptation, social justice and the New Age, these differences find no formal structural avenue to be democratically recognised, expressed and mediated, existing instead as different worldviews rather than matters of negotiated political disagreement.

Reflecting this model of organisation is a form of protest which is more the manifestation of individual moral-emotive judgement sanctioned by the truth, than the outcome of collective strategy, orientated more towards affective stimulation of other citizen-subjects, than 'rational' persuasion. This bears an affinity with Michel Foucault's notion of *parrhesia* as the courageous and critical telling of truth against tyrannical sovereignty. It is the dutiful aspect of *parrhesia* which is most evident in activists' self-perceptions of their doomsaying. As Foucault (2001: 19) put it in a lecture as part of a series delivered at the University of California, Berkeley in 1983, 'The orator who speaks the truth to those who cannot accept his truth, for instance, and who may be exiled, or punished in some way, is *free* to keep silent. No one forces him to speak, but he feels that it is his duty to do so'. Doomsaying is thus a form of *parrhesia*. This comparison highlights XR's anti-politics as a kind of duty-driven conviction, a fidelity to certain symbolically important ideas. It is ideas like Truth, Mother Earth, Humanity or History which motivate activists more than political allegiance or definite material goals. This idealism exists both at the level of activists' subjectivities and objectively as constitutive of XR's ideological outlook. It is made possible only when activists are freed from the necessity to 'do politics'.

Importantly, it is a universalising humanism that is positioned here as the force that can

overcome politics. For instance, as one speaker at the Manchester Northern Rebellion put it, 'We are not a political movement, we are a movement of humanity!' Another activist at the 2019 Mill Road Winter Fair in Cambridge reassured me as he handed out a flyer: 'Don't worry we're not political!' This transcendent humanism and steadfast distancing from politics echoes the archetypal unifying calls of millenarianism, the 'calls to forget the narrow loyalties of the past, to abandon those things that divide...and to practice a new moral code of brotherly love' (Worsley 1957: 237). Implicit in XR's position of being 'Beyond Politics' is the notion of politics as divisive, fragmentary and polarising, as an obstacle to be overcome, to be rejected in favour of universal ideals shifting consciousness and mobilising action. As Bendall (2019: 79) puts it, 'we make universal love our compass as we enter an entirely new physical and psychological terrain'. Overall then XR's anti-politics of grief is idealistic, humanistic, universalistic, emotional and ethical.

However, XR is not simply 'Beyond Politics' on its own terms but also in its detractors' terms, who unfavourably compare the movement to millenarianism—or rather to a stereotyped millenarianism—portraying the movement as *transgressing* the boundaries of politics imagined as a realm of rational moderate debate. Thus 'politics' is a normative discursive device, used to both legitimise and discredit different beliefs and movements (see Toscano 2017). For instance in some opinion columns of the right-wing British press, XR has been variously condemned as an 'an upper-middle class death cult' (O'Neill 2019), a 'new millenarian cult' (Williams 2019), a 'hysterical doomsday cult' (McKinstry 2019) and a 'primeval, anti-capitalist cult' (Clark 2019), guilty of 'clueless doom-mongering' (Lesh 2019), 'sheer irrationalism' (O'Neill 2019), and 'apocalyptic moralism' (Young 2019). One

commentator describes activists as being ‘in an emotional fugue state, their eyes burning brightly, like evangelicals possessed by the Holy Spirit.’ (Young 2019). The influential right-wing thinktank Policy Exchange also published a 72-page review of XR, describing them as ‘an extremist organisation’ with ‘an extremist ideology’ (Walton and Wilson 2019). XR was even for a brief period placed on an official counter-terrorism list. As *The Guardian* reported: ‘The guide placed Extinction Rebellion alongside neo-Nazi groups and jihadists and encouraged public sector workers to report any individuals with links to them to Prevent, the controversial anti-radicalisation programme’ (Grierson and Dodd 2020).

The point of these comparisons is at worst to depict XR as fanatical, irrational and dangerous and at best, bizarre, obscure and worthy of ridicule. Indeed, as Luke put it regarding hostile attitudes to his activism, ‘People regarded me as a wacko!’. Here then XR activists are depicted as being ‘outside the frame of political rationality’ and ‘the domain of negotiation’ as ‘intransigent, incorrigible subject[s]’ (Toscano 2017[2010]: xi), consumed by an excess of eco-mystic conviction and fixated on chaos. If the discursive separation between religion and politics is central to secular modernity, then millenarianism stands as an offensive contravention of this division as it is ‘bent on collapsing the city of God into the city of man in an apocalyptic conflagration’ (Toscano 2017 [2010]: 69). Hence why the *m*-word is used to denounce XR, standing as the imaginary extremist Other to the realm of ordinary, sensible and pragmatic politics, signifying an absurd pre-modern catastrophism. The space of politics invoked here is not simply the status quo of capitalist accumulation and its attendant developmental temporality, but rather the basic parameters of modern politics purged

of religion, irrationalism, apocalypticism and spiritualism. Therefore, XR are depicted as both anachronistic—outside politics as enlightened modernity—and fanatical—outside of politics as rational moderation.

Extinction Rebellion’s anti-politics of grief is a project of framing the climate breakdown as a catastrophe requiring above all a subjective and emotional response which posits politics as an obstacle to transcend. If grief is the originating act of a model XR activist, then anti-politics is its ideological scaffolding beyond the workshop and on the streets, orientating activists as a feature of the doomsaying method not only towards climate catastrophe, but the realm of contemporary ‘politics-as-usual’, clearing the space for activists to perform their grief by evacuating the present of the necessity to ‘do politics’. Politics is rejected as that which compromises the effective clarity of doomsaying, the apostolic reiteration of the truth against power. The anti-political project of XR, characterised by its relation to politics-as-ambiguous-other is functionally and ideologically vital to the movement’s mode of operating, namely, their doomsaying performance of grief-as-truth which I have sought to explore in this article. The construction of subjectivity and its performance—the workshop and the streets—would not be possible without this anti-politics which positions activists in relation to a status quo they reject, forms of politics they seek to transcend, their own subjectivities, and the world in catastrophic breakdown that they are determined to change.

## CODA

The long-term outcome of Extinction Rebellion’s project is yet to be fully materialised. In the meantime the movement continues to

generate successes, failures, and controversy. Yet what Extinction Rebellion should now provoke anthropologists to consider is not simply the fact of climate catastrophe and the transformations it is unevenly inflicting in world, but the specific *ways* in which groups, communities, and movements are mobilising against this unfolding disaster. Anti-politics is a response that demonstrates that climate catastrophe is a productive force: it is engendering new forms of political subjectivity, ideology, and organisation, new ways of protesting and apprehending the future, which are *opposed* to politics itself. This means anthropologists need to attend to the politics of climate catastrophe in its divergent forms, from XR's anti-politics, to the emergent 'fossil fascism' of an ascendant far-right (see Malm and The Zetkin Collective 2021) and the resistance of the oppressed throughout the world.

This last case should remind us, *as anthropologists*, of Walter Benjamin's insistence that 'The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that 'the state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule' (Benjamin 1970 [2015]: 248). Benjamin reminds us that 'We should attain to a conception of history in keeping with this insight' (Benjamin 1970 [2015]: 248). I argue similarly, that in apprehending climate catastrophe and considering the political responses to it, anthropologists need to keep this lesson in mind. Anthropology, more than other disciplines should be able to attend to this catastrophe without fascination, awe, or confusion, but with an urgency, participation, and direction that reflects the gravity of the contemporary juncture, precisely because those 'others' anthropologists have studied are those for whom catastrophe is nothing new, but rather the fact of history itself.

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## NOTES

- 1 I have replaced all of the names of activists with pseudonyms in order to protect their anonymity.
- 2 I have derived this idea of apostolic politics from an interview conducted by the philosopher Slavoj Žižek (2019).
- 3 See Brown, Molly (ed.) 2021. *Deep Times: A Journal of The Work That Reconnects* 6 (2).
- 4 As Brabender, Smolar and Fallon put it in *Essentials of Group Therapy* (2004: 97): 'Whereas self-disclosure pertains to a *cognitive* sharing of information about the self, catharsis is an *affective* sharing.'
- 5 This model proposed by the psychiatrist Elizabeth Kübler-Ross argues that there are five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and finally acceptance.

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