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Mapping the catastrophic imaginary The organisation of environmental politics through climate change

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Abstract
Stories about the end of the world continue to pile up daily. There isn't any sense of respite from the litany of horrors we are presented with. The eerie atmosphere of ecological catastrophe colonises our political imaginations. Understanding how we collectively imagine the end of the world, and thus how we understand what is happening, why and how, as well as what we must and can do, is politically crucial. The vast tapestry of environmental crises makes the role of the imagination central; not only in terms of being able to know the crises, but in setting out what is concretely possible and what is cruel fantasy. This paper sets out to map the imaginary of ecological catastrophe as drawn from the body of non-fiction literature that fuels much contemporary environmental activism in the Global North. Taking up the work of a series of environmental writer-activists in order to outline the various refrains that comprise the core of the eco-catastrophic imaginary, I aim to sketch how the slow violence of the present is being narrated as a political event, and what possibilities for averting disaster appear possible. It is the argument of this paper that how we collectively imagine the cacophony of environmental disasters presently unfolding shapes the field of political action.

Keywords
Catastrophic futures, climate change, climate politics, imaginary, environmental politics

The endless torrent of horrific environmental news stories that colonise our attention day after day signal that the very grounds of thought and action – praxis – have been transformed.

We grasp this transformation through the way collectively imagine past and future frames what we think we can do in the present. Imaginaries are thus critical political terrains. The imaginary has

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become a much-used heuristic, over the past two decades coming to almost constitute its own field of research (Adams et al., 2015; Browne and Diehl, 2019; Gaonkar, 2002; Jasanoff and Kim, 2009; Jessop, 2010; Wright et al. 2013). Much of the work names the 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' (Taylor, 2004: 23). From accounts of how our 'sense of planet' (Heise, 2008) are generated to the governmental imaginaries of catastrophe (Aradau and Van Munster, 2011), all have set out to account for how shared images, narratives, and understandings are generated within the current conjuncture and, critically, how these imaginaries shape social action and thought.

Many accounts articulate a vision of contemporary politics as disabled by hegemonic imaginations of the future. Fisher argues that we have witnessed the evacuation of any possible vision of a world beyond capitalism (Fisher, 2009: 2), where even the event of rupture or revolution itself is unimaginable (Fisher, 2009: 3). Such an end of the future (Berardi, 2011) is part of a broader 'return' to 'end of the world' imaginary since the 1990s (De Castro and Danowski, 2017: 1). This return coincides with the emergence of a post-political order (Schlembach et al., 2012; Swyngedouw, 2011, 2013), where concern with the environment has been mobilized to suspend a properly 'political dimension' to environmental politics (Swyngedouw, 2011: 255). De Castro and Danowski outline this mythology as one generative of a 'passive present' (De Castro and Danowski, 2017: 5), a time where there are actions but not actors (Berardi, 2011: 97). Things happen but they are produced through 'impersonal structures' (Fisher, 2009: 66), deranging our political capacities to act (Ghosh, 2018).

Yet radical social transformation has always been seen as unrealistic (Graeber, 2009: 510). This point extends into the construction of contemporary environmental imaginaries, where while many posit a lack of possible action or agency (Bendell and Read, 2021; McGuire, 2022; Scranton, 2015), many more strive to articulate a praxis of transformation in order to generate a collective subject. This praxis is realized either through calls to undertake particular kinds of individual (Gale, 2020) or collective action (Malm, 2021). Or, as is more often the case, through policy frameworks and calls for governments and markets to act on behalf of us all (Gates, 2021; Hawken, 2017; Pettifor, 2020). Thus, debates around the imaginary are not just debates about what the future holds but how to imagine what kinds of action are, or are not, possible. These debates are constituted as political terrains populated by a host of social actors.

While many imaginaries are the product of cultural industries, business and governmental interests, environmental imaginaries are as often the product of broader movements. They are produced through the writings, actions and media of journalists, environmental activists and science communicators, with the latter two often driving the former. In particular, the writer-activist plays a key role in the generation and reproduction of environmental imaginaries (Nixon, 2011). I do not use 'writer-activist' to indicate a hierarchy within the practices of environmentalism, where intellectual labour lies at one end and direct action the other (Emilienne Baneth-Nouailhetas, 2009: 94). Rather it is to indicate the role of writing as an establish mode of environmental activism, be it fiction, non-fiction, biographical or science writing.

While analyses of various environmental and climate imaginaries have previously explored specific movement (Asara, 2020), State (Jasanoff and Kim, 2009; Jessop, 2010) and corporate-capitalist (Castree, 2008; Wright and Nyberg, 2014) imaginaries, previous accounts of environmental imaginaries have often not moved past initial sketches or outlines of contrasting positions (Levy and Spicer, 2013; Luke, 2015; Machin, 2022; Milkoreit, 2017; Wright and Nyberg, 2014). There is, however, a shared set of refrains and imaginary devices that bind many of these accounts. There is a hegemonic climate imaginary, one emerging through the growth of climate activism in the 90 s and early 2000s, that I contend sets out the basic framework for much contemporary environmental politics.

I argue that what we see when we examine the images, texts and articulations within contemporary environmentalism are three contradictory refrains that work together to produce an environmentalism without nature. Catastrophe is ultimately set out as the threat of human extinction and hope resides not in humanity, a figure that is presented as rapacious and excessive, but a phantasmal climate leviathan. That is, a State-machine capable of restraining humanity and forestalling our extinction. This State-machine is suspended, never-not-quite reaching the level of planetary governance (Mann, 2018). It is, in many ways, more fantastical than that, representing a means of overcoming the deficiencies of the market, public inaction, and the failures of international politics.

Environmental imaginaries

Environmental imaginaries are bound to the various technologies, predictions and scenarios of technoscience (Jasanoff and Kim, 2009), even as some aim to work contrary to the aims of the State and capital. These contested ways of seeing the future are bound to alternative ways of living in the present (Haraway, 1998: 190), modes of politics and ethical frameworks. 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).

Not all imagined futures are equal however, nor do all affective orientations take hold. As Berlant outlines, the futures that compel us are anchored in naturalised socially legitimate framings or genres (Berlant, 2011). The various refrains that comprise these images of the future repeat across media and social moments and enable people to make sense of lived experience. These futures are not always achievable or even articulate a positive outcome, yet they represent what is held to be ideal, natural or realistic. Crucially, these imaginaries work only insofar as they are able to speak to both lived experience (Bettini et al., 2021) and the ability of someone to identify with the shared future and community of the imaginary (Anderson, 2006). The hegemony of social imaginaries fray and become contested more often than not where they diverge from lived experience or where the ability to identify or belong does not exist.

Environmental imaginaries, like political imaginaries, are ‘the dynamic constructions of political reality that enable practices, orientate expectations, inform decisions and determine what is politically legitimate, feasible, and valuable—and what is not’ (Machin, 2022: 2). Thus, political and environmental transformation relies on the articulation and development of alternative imaginaries (Jasanoff, 2015: 342).

Environmental imaginaries have been examined as collective visions of environmental and climate crisis as well as constructive or sustainable responses (Dibley and Neilson, 2010; Jessop, 2010; Levy and Spicer, 2013; Milkoreit, 2017; Swyngedouw, 2011, 2013). However, while imaginaries are constantly in motion and production, and themselves are contested terrains (Jessop, 2010: 345–346; Levy and Spicer, 2013), imaginaries form frameworks within which social action is enabled and ascribed meaning. That is, they are not just collections of images or the ways people imagine but the *mode of imagining*. There are imaginaries, emergent or deliberately politically constructed, that contest or resist these hegemonic environmental and climate imaginaries. Imaginaries articulated through struggle and occupation (Fremeaux and Jordan, 2021), indigenous (The Red Nation, 2021), Black radical (Roane, 2023) and anti-colonial imaginaries, as well as more speculative and fabulous left-wing imaginaries that dare to consider a different future (O’Brien and Abdelhadi, 2022). There is no equity between official or hegemonic modes of imagining and heretical imaginaries that struggle – materially, socially – to gain a social foothold however.

Imaginaries take hold when they resonate with socially legitimate framings or genres and speak to lived experience and social identity. Those that are taken up are anchored in their use of common elements of hegemonic social imaginaries. This is the case even when, as considered in this paper, the works and activities of those people who articulate and circulate the refrains seek to contest

elements or parts of hegemonic imaginaries. That is to say, refrains can have contradictory positions within political and public performances, but the weight of their influence rests on those imaginaries and futures that reflect social ideas and practices deemed natural, realistic, or legitimate. That is, refrains using elements of hegemonic imaginaries tend to reinforce those imaginaries even when they seek to contest them.

Modes of imagining converge around a core set of refrains or motifs that set the grounds for debate, policy and political action. The dominate climate imaginary does so for much of the environment movement in the Global North, including institutional actors such as political parties, journalists and writers, NGOs and policy advocates. 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 (Deleuze and Guattari, 1998: 312). 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.

Modern environmentalism deploys 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). Examples abound, from the campaign materials of Extinction Rebellion in the UK to popular works such as Wallace-Wells' book, based on the New York magazine article, *The Uninhabitable Earth* (Wallace-Wells, 2019). As such it functions in an anticipative mode (Adams et al., 2009: 247), one that uses narrations of catastrophe to compel us to act. The image of the end that circulates in newspapers, online, in campaigns and reports is detailed largely through the work of liminal political figures – public scientists, environmental journalists, and for the most part writer-activists, be they full time authors writing fiction or environmental activists scribing leaflets and press releases. It is this heterogeneous milieu that has articulated how we understand the slow violence of ecological catastrophe; they who have set out the various refrains of the imaginary of the end of the world.

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 role played by such works in the elaboration of an image of ecological catastrophe (Nixon, 2011), in particular focusing on the work of three writer-activists. 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 (Nixon, 2011: 15).

The texts I examine are all well-known and influential non-fiction texts. Selected from a broad survey of non-fiction environmental literature, they most clearly capture the refrains of the eco-catastrophic imaginary. I've named these 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 the tipping point, an excess of humanity and extinction. The writer-activists I engage with are, respectively associated with each refrain, Mark Lynas, George Monbiot and Bill McKibben.

Refrain 1: The catastrophe itself

Mark Lynas is a highly influential UK environmental writer, with his book *Six Degrees* being one of the most popular climate change texts (Six Degrees was recently revised and republished as *Our Final Warning: Six Degrees of Climate Emergency*). The trajectory from *Six Degrees* to his

fourth book *The God Species* (Lynas, 2011) is in itself telling, insofar as it moves from the terrifying science of climate change to a call to produce some kind of global sovereign capable of managing the problem – a line of thought common to much environmental reflection of climate change.

Six Degrees is set out as a series of accounts of what happens to the world at particular levels of climate change: at 1C, at 2C, etc. all the way up to 6C. Each scene is bound to a mathematical figuration, and fitted to the scientific scenarios built around each temperature increase. Lynas is far from the only writer-activist to use this approach. It is near ubiquitous, used by the IPCC and government agencies, journalists from New York Magazine contributor Wallance-Wells (Wallace-Wells, 2019: 13) to The Guardian, and science communicators such as The Carbon Brief.

By modelling what impact different concentrations of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere have on the Earth's climate, scientists are able to set out what they believe different 'ranges' of greenhouse gas emissions will produce in terms of changing average global temperatures. These averages are rendered into shorthand as degree centigrade changes – 1C, 2C, etc. This mathematical shorthand enables the creation of a framework for policy changes – greenhouse gases can be measured and therefore managed in line with the 'carbon budgets' set out in different scientific reports (Edwards, 2010).

While it has been suggested that the math of climate change is brutal (Anderson, 2012) and terrifying (McKibben, 2013), it is also a means of organising a story, providing a series of hooks around which a tale can be told, and crucially providing a way of imagining the atmosphere as a kind of global thermostat that can be adjusted in order to arrest climate change. The tale itself though is rather different – terror requires drama, and that is what books like *Six Degrees* provide.

Six Degrees is divided into two parts: below 2C and the collapse of civilisation. The demarcation of 2C as the boundary between merely bad climate change and dangerous climate change is not Lynas' idea but convention, one now superseded by 1.5C after the Paris Accord in 2015. The first chapters set out how 1-2C of global warming will be bad, but ultimately civilisation will continue. It is, however, already a narrative of loss and disaster: coral reefs will die off, low lying atoll nations will disappear, there will be more damaging and more frequent storms, lower rainfall and reduced crop yields. Life will be tougher but with "assiduous planning and adaption" (Lynas 2008: 91) human civilisation will continue. 2C is the limit of this resilient capacity however – as Lynas notes, everything after 2C gets much, much more difficult to manage (Lynas, 2008: 91). As Greta Thunberg writes of the newer 1.5C target, 'either we choose to go on as a civilization or we don't' (Thunberg, 2019: 19).

What Lynas sets out as a more than 2C future is a catastrophe – a cascade of disasters, one leading to the next, all of which amount to the creation of the Earth as a hostile environment within which civilisation collapses and humanity, now 'alone' as other species have died out (Lynas, 2008: 91; 157), is threatened with extinction (also see Extinction Rebellion (2019), McKibben (2019a, 2019b), Wallace-Wells (2019), and McGuire (2022) for examples of this catastrophic framing).

We can pause here for a moment to note what is assumed in this and many other narratives: the current world system, and the formulation of representative democracy plus consumer capitalism plus globalisation, is civilisation; that should civilisation collapse life will become tougher, more brutal (here we can note the confusion of the nation-state with security, and capitalism with abundance); that the collapse of civilisation threatens humanity as a species.

Humanity is often treated as a vaguely undifferentiated category, as the subject of climate change, at risk of further impacts such as heat (Wallace-Wells, 2019) or extinction (McGuire, 2022; Rebellion, 2019). While many campaigns use timelines to indicate how long we have to 'save the Earth' (it was 18 months in 2019 – McGrath, 2019), what is clearly implied in the impacts connected to these campaign statements is the idea we have only 'X' months or years to save 'ourselves' (Carrington, 2022).

When it is differentiated, it is often put into two categories – the humanity that constitutes a civilisation under threat and, as we will see below, a 'natural' consequence of climate change, a threatening force, made to move (Vince, 2022) and forced to starve (Williamson et al., 2021). Those that starve and move are often constituted as a source of insecurity: as a threat to 'us', the (white) citizens of the Global North.

Civilisation is understood to be the world as it currently exists. As Monbiot suggests (below), it is this system that we must find a way to transform if we are to have any hope of stopping dangerous climate change. And it is this system that almost every major book, campaign or policy on climate change seeks to reform without substantially challenging its key precepts or principles (Ajl, 2022, 2021; Beuret, 2019). We see this in everything from green capitalist plans (IEA, 2021) to the Green New Deal (Aronoff et al., 2019). As Maslin argues, 'We do not have time for the revolution: we must use current systems to start to save our planet' (Maslin, 2021: 119); this quote opening the chapter on 'positive corporate power', one of 'our major weapons of change' (ibid:120).

Finally, collapse is the breakdown of this particular world-system, the dramatic end to this particular subject. Not only does 'collapse' appear as an overly cinematic event, it fails to acknowledge that the destruction of multiple worlds was a necessary element of the past 500 years of European colonialism (Estes, 2019; Whyte, 2017). Indeed, the Green New Deal – arguably the most sensitive plan for transforming capitalism – also calls for a renewal of colonial destruction (Robert Hamilton, 2020; Zografos, 2022).

> "These abandoned villages may lie untouched for centuries… They too will hold a lesson for a future world. But whether any humans will be around to learn it is far from clear…" (Lynas, 2008: 135).

Each chapter of *Six Degrees* takes up a similar series of socio-ecological unravellings (also see Flannery, 2005: 83). The first unravelling is that of the biosphere. Not only what has been called the Sixth Great Extinction (Kolbert, 2014), but the destruction of the various forms of life than support the reproduction of soil, agriculture and fishing as extractive industries, as well as the maintenance of the atmosphere. The key figuration here is that of the desert, with the oceanic version named aptly as a 'dead zone'. The desert, resonate with the preceding discussion of how humanity and civilisation is constructed through this refrain, summons the colonial imaginary, denoting the edge of civilisation, its hostile limit (Koch, 2021), yet conversely also the site of extractivism and frontier wealth, from copper to oil (Arboleda, 2020).

The second unravelling is that of stability. Ferocious storms of undreamt-of magnitude, out-of-control wildfires where they previously didn't exist, diseases – new and old – spreading around the globe, floods and droughts, the collapse of the gulf stream and the end of the warm average temperatures that Western Europe has known: what ends here is the stable environment we have taken for granted. As David Attenborough has declared, 'We have left the stable and secure climatic period that gave birth to our civilisations' (Sky News, 2019). The 'background' (Plumwood, 1993) lurches to the front of stage as the global environment becomes unstable, unpredictable and a source of constant anxiety.

Finally, the abundance we have come to rely on unravels: seas rise and deserts spread, fresh water becomes scarce, crop yields collapse. The space within which we can live – both in terms of what is habitable and where we can produce what we need to survive, shrinks.

> "But with less habitable areas becoming more and more crowded, and chaos may come sooner rather than later even in temperate, civilised Europe" (Lynas, 2008: 179).

The human toll is Biblical: famines, water shortages, the loss of our homes due to sea level rise and desertification, mass migration and violent conflict, spreading beyond those areas where the reader,

presumably, could 'expect' it to happen into the heart of 'civilised Europe'. All told, Lynas, like many of the preceding cited authors, produces a particular image of the future after 2C: a world unravelled where humanity has to fight to survive after the collapse of civilisation and, possibly, the loss of millions of lives. What ultimately is undone is any sense that the future can be relied on – we will live in an unpredictable and hostile world, once we move into a more than 2C future.

Crucial to this narrative is how catastrophe arrives: namely, as the crossing of a threshold; as an excessive amount of carbon dioxide, measured in parts per million (PPM) of carbon. It is this measurable threshold between 2C and 3C + that the story hinges upon, and, ultimately, around which political action is organised.

The device that enables the climate to change from one state to another is the tipping point (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 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 (Lynas, 2008: 115) or the release of methane trapped in the Siberian permafrost (Lynas, 2008: 187–189). Ontologically then, it is a real moment insofar as it accurately describes the behaviour of complex non-linear systems such as climatic regimes and ecosystems (Barnosky et al., 2012, Prigogine and Stengers, 1984). As a concept, it is not exhausted by its ontology however.

The tipping point is a narrative device (Russill and Nyssa, 2009), one that enables sense to be made of the slow violence of ecological issues. Nixon outlines the political dilemma of the environmental writer-activist 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 (Nixon, 2011: 13). 'Uneventful violence', such as climate change, has only a weak claim on 'our' attention (Nixon, 2011: 8), all the more so as the already-existing impacts of climate change largely affect the poor across the Global South. As such, uneventful violence is not only attritional slow onset violence, but the structural violence of being 'unworthy' of media attention by virtue of the fact of being poor, not-white, not from the Global North. The narration of a tipping point promises that at some point in the future there will be a spectacular climate change event; or, that retrospectively the slow violence of the unravelling of the Earth's climate will be able to be understood as a historical event.

Tipping points present situated events such as a collapsing ice sheet or a sinking island as the expression of a global phenomenon, subordinating the event itself to a planetary scale, and reproducing the scalar logic of globalisation (Massey, 2014: 81–3). Paradoxically, this effectively renders something that can be encountered into a ghostly expression of a global process that is always beyond experience. It transforms an event into a non-encounter. The Amazon collapses only to be transformed into the symptom of something far more sinister, something we can only grasp via simulations and models.

Tipping points also work to harden time. Each threshold crossed leads irreversibly to the next. Not only this, but the distance to the next tipping point is confusingly short. We have very little time in which to act we are told repeatedly. Yet we do not know exactly how little time we have: what we have are best guesses as to how soon our time will be up.

The way the story is ordered – in PPM, by degree centigrade, in tonnes of carbon dioxide – sets out clear means and measures of intervention. However, the story itself produces a series of sublime scales and a sense that soon, too soon, a future will arrive that cannot be reversed. As the numbers start to add up and get closer to atmospheric thresholds, the sheer horror of a climate change future begins to appear inevitable.

The irony of tipping points is that they enable the tale to be told, and the create a political means with which to grasp the problem, but they also work to undermine existing notions of political

agency through the derangement of political scales. The construction of catastrophe as an urgent, global future event sets out a story where the only likely protagonist is some kind of commensurate actor. At times this appears as a global social movement, but often only one coupled to the coordinated action of nation-states. More often than not what is envisioned is a kind of planetary governance. One that either can set in place a 'properly functioning, efficient market' (Gates, 2021), or, as is more often the case, enact some kind of Green Deal (Siddi, 2020), whether it be one that constitutes a State-backed business plan (Beuret, 2021a) or, preferably, a version of a Green New Deal. In either account this governance recreates existing global inequalities through new forms of colonialism (Zografos, 2022) and climate apartheids (Rice et al., 2022). Yet these plans also manifestly fall short (CAT, 2022). As such, as the space within which to intervene begins to contract, optimism starts to appear cruel at best, or prompts a turn to the fantasy of planetary management: a global climate leviathan (Wainwright and Mann, 2013).

Refrain 2: Humanity in excess

> "I am sorry to say that only regulation… can quell the destruction wrought by the god we serve, the god of our own appetites" (Monbiot, 2007: xxv).

Ecological catastrophe is caused by an excess of humanity, by rapacious desires which are too much for this world. This excess is slippery, it moves between registers, at times figuring as a pure numerical excess (Emmott, 2013), others as an excessive desire to consume (De Graaf et al., 2014). The slippage operates not only within many environmental texts, but over the lifetimes of environmental writer-activists, as they move from more optimistic positions to ones where the hope that reason will triumph over desire fades and back again. The perceived failure of people to restrain themselves presents an image of humanity as an intrinsically pathological subject; a plague (Lovelock, 2007) or destroyer of worlds (Monbiot, 2014).

Writing in a similar vein, arguing that attempts to restrain our appetites have already failed, Roy Scranton suggests:

> "The problem with our response to climate change isn't a problem with passing the right laws or finding the right price for carbon or changing people's minds or raising awareness … The problem … is us." (Scranton, 2015: 69)

The idea that 'everyone' finds the allures of consumerism attractive and is gripped by a desire to consume is a common trope of both the cultural critique of consumerism and non-academic discussions (Lodziak, 2002). That consumerism is to blame for contemporary environmental woes is also common; from 'overshoot day' – the day in the year where 'we' have used more resources than is sustainable to anti-consumerist magazines such as *Adbusters* to scientific (Wiedmann et al., 2020). The environmental critique of consumerism emerged at the same time as the broader cultural critique, quickly becoming hegemonic (Bonneuil, 2016: 148). However, it is worth noting two points. The first is that consumerism as a concept is grounded in the idea that people choose to consume. This notion of consumption as freedom has been broadly criticised as it ignores the structural nature of much if not most everyday consumption (Lodziak, 2002: 1;3) and the role played by economic actors to promote consumerism – from the creation of credit to the privatisation of social needs, from advertising to planned obsolescence (Bonneuil, 2016; Lodziak, 2002). The second point is that the founding assumption of 'overconsumption' is that it is individual desire that is to blame for climate change and other environmental issues and not regimes of production or centres of capitalist accumulation and power. While this has also been subject to critique, the majority of accounts of climate change focus on consumers as the fulcrum of climate action.

My focus in this section is on the work of UK writer-activist George Monbiot. As a prominent journalist and writer covering environmental issues, Monbiot is a central figure in the UK environment movement. Throughout his work Monbiot presents an image of humanity in excess of the Earth, one that is laying waste to the world through the force of its desire. Working with his 2007 climate change book *Heat* as well as other journalistic writings, I map out both the account of humanity as figured in his work and track the development of his own perspective from a narrative account of the excesses of Western consumption to one where it is humanity itself that is the problem.

Heat is notable because of the candour with which Monbiot sets out what he sees as the main political problem of climate change. It is not the scale, nor the opposition of big business. Monbiot argues that government acts when people push it to do so (Monbiot, 2007: ix;xvi–xvii), and that governments have the capacity to constrain and organise the market even if at the moment government has been 'captured' by corporate interests (Monbiot, 2000). The problem is 'us' and our desire to consume.

> "The campaign against climate change is… not a campaign for abundance but for austerity. It is a campaign not for more freedom but for less… it is a campaign not just against other people, but also against ourselves" (Monbiot, 2007: 215).

This sentiment pervades the book: we know but won't act (Monbiot, 2007: 20–21), we won't 'riot for austerity' (Monbiot, 2007: 42), freedom must be rationed if climate change is to be solved (Monbiot, 2007: 43) yet we are 'too comfortable' to give it up (Monbiot, 2007: 212–214).

Monbiot's aim in the book is to demonstrate how modern industrial consumer society be sustained while at the same time solving climate change (Monbiot, 2007: xxii). In this he is announcing a break from much of the anti-consumerism of earlier environmental praxis, and articulating a position that we now find to be unremarkable. It is also one at adds with the continuing anti-consumerist position we could arguably see as extending through the field of ecological economics into anti-imperialist critiques of unequal ecological exchange and the Global North's 'imperial mode of living' (Brand and Wissen, 2018).

Monbiot's starting premise is that unless people can be convinced that solving climate change won't mean countries like the UK reverting to the status of a 'very poor third world country' (Monbiot, 2007: xix) it will be impossible to get those people who are the ostensive cause of climate change to act. And once 'we' change, governments will follow.

There are two problems however. The first is that Monbiot falls short of showing that we can maintain modern life as it is and solve climate change. The second related problem is that this focus on 'our' desire to consume slips between setting out how it can continue and how it must be contained: between managing freedom and imposing restraint. Ultimately, both slippages in *Heat* and in his work more broadly outline a constituent gap in this refrain: the inability to reconcile desire and action.

Both problems stem from what sets desire free: oil. In *Heat*, Monbiot outlines how climate change is the result of a 'Faustian pact' (Monbiot, 2007: 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 (Monbiot, 2007: xvii;20;22;205). The use of humanity as a stand in here, like his use of the word civilisation, enables a certain flexibility in the argument, and enables the suggestion that the desires unleashed by oil are something more general and transhistorical than his book initially posits (I.e., Monbiot, 2014). Such flexibility works to generalize the specific consumer-subject that Monbiot identifies as the target of his critique, effectively turning the white, middle class consumer in the Global North

into an expression of a transhistorical *desire*, enabled and unleashed by fossil fuels and thus always-already a threat to the natural world. In this way, the threat posed by some of humanity in the preceding refrain is extended all the way through our shared species-being in this one.

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 that is coming to an end with climate change and peak oil (Monbiot, 2007: xxi;3;56). Oil and coal have enabled us to construct a vast globe-spanning civilization, to perform 'miracles' (Monbiot, 2007: 3): plasma screen TVs, monster trucks and holidays on palm-fringed beaches (Monbiot, 2007: xvi).

This world of comfort is what must be preserved in order to convince people to take action on climate change, as Monbiot argues action won't be taken if it requires 'giving up' the consumerist lifestyle. The nod to Faust would suggest that perhaps Monbiot's thinking is that with oil we have bargained our soul for plasma TVS, exchanged a brief moment of freedom from necessity for a future of catastrophe.

Yet Monbiot fails to produce an account of how this world can be retained and climate change solved. *Heat* sets out how we have to variously give up flying (Monbiot, 2007: 187), as well as private cars (Monbiot, 2007: 154) and eat seasonally (Monbiot, 2007: 190). We need to have less gadgets (Monbiot, 2007: 75) and accept far more regulation (Monbiot, 2007: 169). Ultimately what we must accept is a form of rationing. Given the equation of oil with freedom, what is rationed is freedom (Monbiot, 2007, 43). And what must enforce this rationing, given people's apparent lack of willingness to 'riot for austerity', is the State.

And here is the problem. Monbiot argues that solutions cannot be 'counter-aspirational' (Monbiot, 2007: 148) but also that 'progress now depends on the exercise of fewer opportunities' (Monbiot, 2007: 188). Rather than read this as disingenuous or even unnoticed by Monbiot, I would rather suggest that it is constitutive of this refrain, and that ultimately what this refrain presents is a political impasse based in the intractability of human desire.

Heat suggests that the desire to consume is unmalleable – that people will choose to burn rather than give up industrial civilisation and consumerism. Monbiot also suggests that as a political horizon, it extends beyond the West (though at times he contradicts this in other writings), and thus there is a need to not only preserve it but make it fair and extend it to all. Oil unleashed this desire: fossil fuels, the source of humanity's Faustian miracles, enables the 'nature' of humanity – 'restless, curious, *unsated*' (Monbiot, 2007: 2 – my emphasis). He repeats this suggestion of humanity as being always-already destructive in *Feral*, arguing that 'there was no state of grace' (Monbiot, 2013: 7), that humanity has always destroyed the wild. In a 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… 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." (Monbiot, 2014)

While at times consumption is a cultural norm, at others it is a transhistorical characteristic of humanity, something only fully unleashed with fossil fuels.

This refrain sets out the limits of climate change volunteerism. Political volunteerism is the reliance of political institutions or projects on voluntary or self-willed action – that is freely willed action without constraint. It involves direct voluntary participation in collective action as well as a sustained commitment to a common political goal (Hallward, 2009: 21). Despite a significant degree of ambivalence around the notion of political volunteerism within progressive social

movements, almost all rely on it vis-à-vis political organisation and mobilisation, while often hoping circumstance will compel people to act. As a mode of political action it is framed by active citizenship, and as such who can or cannot freely volunteer is shaped by issues of race, class and gender, as well as access to time, skills and more affective attributes such as confidence, all of which limit who can volunteer (Yuval-Davis, 2008).

More than this, it could be said that there is an aspect to the desire for volunteerism that belies itself. Part of the constituent freedom of both citizenship and modern individualism is the freedom from having to participate, the freedom to not pay attention, both of which enable what is perhaps one of the most common forms of engagements with contemporary politics in the Global North – an active disengagement (Mair, 2013), where 'the political' takes on a foreign character, becoming something 'overheard' or distant from everyday life (Berlant, 2011: 227). An unwelcome interruption, or worse, an irritating injunction.

Monbiot sets out a desire for volunteerism – a hope that people will act, once the obstacle of their own self-interest is overcome. Yet at the same time the image of a looming catastrophe suggests another image of politics, one that is involuntary. Catastrophe should leave us with no choice but to act. That we don't act despite knowing the catastrophe we face manifests within environmental politics as a limit to voluntary politics. Or rather, it manifests as a desire for an 'unfreedom experienced as freedom' (Berlant, 2011: 227), where people are forced to want to engage with environmental politics.

Monbiot does not go so far as to call for un-freedom. Rather, he describes the State as *the* tool for realising the transition to an ecological society. Indeed, approaches not orientated towards the State are rare to find either in practice or in theory. More often than not, such a focus is coupled to the terrifying timelines we find in the preceding refrain. As Bill McKibben wrote of the 2020 US election 'we're at the last possible moment to turn the wheel of the supertanker that is our government'. Just prior to this call to electoral arms McKibben also listed the decades of climate failures of governments, without suggesting why this time governments might act contrary to previous years (McKibben, 2020).

Here the refrain hesitates. Monbiot presents an image of environmental politics affectively suspended between the excesses of human desire and the hope that people will take action against their own excess and, ultimately, desire differently. Within the impasse politics is made to endure haphazardly through a belief that all that is required is enough people to act for the State to be mobilised on humanity's behalf.

Refrain 3: Environmentalism after nature

Bill McKibben is one of the best-known US environmental writer-activists, with strong connections to many UK-based environmentalists and environmental groups. 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 (McKibben, 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.

> "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, 2003: 51)

To suggest that humanity had killed off nature as an independent force (McKibben, 2003: xiii), was a dramatic statement to make in 1989 when the book was first published. 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 overwhelmed by humanity (McKibben, 2003: ix;3;152). Not only overwhelmed but as argued by many others, nature has entered a Sixth Extinction (Kolbert, 2014), it's diversity shattered and our wonder lost.

The overwhelming of the Earth has taken place via a series of events that start in the Enlightenment, take off with the industrial revolution, and rapidly speed up after WWII (McKibben, 2003: 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 (McKibben, 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 (McKibben, 2003: xv;10). 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'."(McKibben, 2003: 61)

McKibben argues that the meaning of nature was its independence from us. He is not making a point about the essential separability of nature from human society. Indeed like many environmental scholars (i.e., 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 (McKibben, 2003: 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 reckoning. 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.

The claim that nature has ended is not 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 (Hay, 2002: 173). Taking up environmental author Richard Mabey's characterisation, we can say 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 (Mabey, 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 McKibben suggests nature has ended, what he is referring to is the end of nature as existing beyond us; specifically, beyond our control.

> "…for the first time human beings had become so large that they altered everything around us. That we had ended nature as an independent force, that our appetites and habits and desires could now be read in every cubic meter of air, in every increment on the thermometer." (McKibben, 2003: xiii)

McKibben's *The End of Nature* is a tale in two parts. The first is of an unravelling of a particular relationship to the more-than-human world, of life without and beyond us. From the current mass extinction through to the remaking of the atmosphere, humanity has decreated the natural world as something independent of us. As imagined through popular nature documentaries such as the BBC's *Planet Earth* (Fotherill, 2006), and 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 Earth is becoming massively simplified (McKibben, 2010: 220).

The second part of the story is that this act of decreation threatens humanity with extinction as a species. There is a slippage from the facticity of the first extinction to the threat of the second, a slip from environmentalism for nature to one without it, where the aim of environmentalism becomes securing humanity's future as an endangered species (also see McKibben, 2019a, 2019b). We can see this concern repeated ad nauseum in journalistic writing and campaign materials, from newspaper articles (Carrington, 2022), to the materials of campaign groups like Extinction Rebellion (Rebellion, 2019) and Friday's for Future.

McKibben returns to this theme in his book *Eaarth: making a life on a tough new planet* (McKibben, 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. Where in *The end of nature* he invoked a sadness at the loss of nature (McKibben, 2003: xix), in *Eaarth* he says this sadness has turned to fear (McKibben, 2010: xii).

> "We need now to understand the world we've created, and consider— urgently—how to live in it… 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." (McKibben, 2010: xiv).

'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. In a claim prescient of contemporary social movements such as Extinction Rebellion in the UK, McKibben et al. all argue 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 sadness pervading *The End of Nature* is twofold. The first is sadness at the apparent total domestication of the more-than-human world; as a lament for a world barren in life, where far more species are declining than recovering, let alone increasing.

The second is for ourselves – that there is no longer a world that escapes us and thus denying us of a refuge or way out. 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 taming 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 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 the very future itself. McKibben, writing in one of his most recent books *Falter*, tells us:

> "We all have losses already. Where I live, it's the seasons: winter doesn't reliably mean winter anymore, and so the way we've always viscerally told time has begun to break down. In California, it's the sense of ease: the smell of the fire next time lingers in the eucalyptus groves. There are many ways to be poorer, and we're going to find out all of them." (McKibben, 2019b)

In the end, the 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 (Beuret and Brown, 2017). The key question unasked by this refrain is whose survival is at stake? Or, perhaps more resonate with the preceding refrain, what form of life is under threat of extinction? As with the previous two refrains, McKibben, along with other environmental personalities such as Lovelock (Lovelock, 2007), Attenborough (Sky News, 2019) and Scranton (Scranton, 2015), presents us with an image of humanity as a single entity, undifferentiated. Unacknowledged is the fact that for many, the possibilities generated by rich ecologies or through place were made extinct in order to create the imperial mode of living (Brand and Wissen, 2018) in the Global North. Moreover, it fails to draw out the disparities within the Global North – gendered, racialised, based in class and geography – that would offer an alternative perspective on the loss of nature and the destruction of possibility that comes with it.

Conclusion

Talking about catastrophe, particularly catastrophic climate change, within the register of the imaginary risks courting denial, or at the very least opens up questions as to the reality of contemporary ecological crises. Yet there is nothing unreal or immaterial about the imagination. The imagination acts as a circuit, one that enfolds social, technoscientific and more-than-human elements. Our imaginations are never individual, and always draw on practices of knowing and seeing that encompass a range of technologies, techniques and encounters that give coherence to the worlds in which we live. At the same time, how we imagine the world to be and how it can and will become shapes not only what we think is possible but what we do to organise the future through the present. Imaginaries orientate us towards some future possibilities and away from others, acting as a material force in the world.

My aim here has been to map one particular ecological imaginary, that of the catastrophic imaginary, in order to explore how the catastrophic imaginary organises environmental politics in the present. In particular, to explore how agency is undone through catastrophe.

We could summarize the preceding refrains as telling a story, one which frames much contemporary environmentalism in the Global North, that claims humanity in the aggregate has brought nature to an end. 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 brought a particular ecological relation – nature – to an end. 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 individuals, calling 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. 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, novel diseases and cracking ice sheets.

Yet this image is also a form of violent homogenisation. Humanity is repeatedly constructed as a both a unitary subject and as a particular expression of consumerist desire, one set in motion almost inevitably by fossil fuels. The teleology presented through human desire works to reify the particular imperial mode of living of the consumer subject in the Global North, whilst rendering invisible the diversity within the Global North, producing a double movement or erasure. Civilisation, rather

than being critically interrogated, or understood to be plural and diverse, is made equivalent to the current world system.

The political affect produced through these refrains and the silences they effect is one that looks to the State as a means of political resolution. While often described as already inadequate or lacking, the State is imagined as the only actor present on the terrain of climate politics capable of acting commensurate with the problem (Beuret, 2021b). Yet the violence and racism of the State, acknowledged by almost all the writer-activists considered in this paper, coupled with its continual failures, renders this political orientation cruel, marking it as an abstract utopia, unrealistic and ungrounded in the actual possibilities of the present. By positioning State-action the only possible effective form of action, alternative political possibilities are foreclosed as unrealistic of impractical. As Monbiot has suggested, decrying a stronger, more explicitly political approach to climate change, “climate change is not anarchy’s football” (Monbiot, 2008).

To imagine the end of the world otherwise calls for staying with the breaks, contradictions and tensions and finding ways to narrate them otherwise. Catastrophe not as a future event but something that is and has already been unfolding unevenly for some time. Humanity not as a rapacious consumer but a varied series of different actors, and, importantly, as more than the sum of its aggregate desires. Desire as something that rather than being inherent or excessive as the object of political action – something that can not only be critiqued but can be shaped through collective action. The state as neither sovereign nor solution, but an integral part of the problem and terrain of struggle.

The hegemony of these refrains is ultimately contested not by diversifying ‘our’ representatives, but by opening up the environment movement to a broader range of images, perspectives and imaginaries that can take hold of the wealth of lived experiences and connections that constitute a planetary ecological movement. This is already underway, with an increasing visibility of indigenous, Black and feminist perspectives and priorities, with the rise of alternative political framings that contest what is both realistic and what is necessary, from degrowth to collapsology, the Red Deal (The Red Nation, 2021) to the increasing centrality of commons and commoning. The contestation of the hegemony of the refrains presented here will take place on the grounds of lived experience, with their weight and power ultimately diminished as social and political movements emerge that find them unnatural, *un*realistic, and thus finally *il*legitimate.

Imagining climate change, as well as other ecological issues, otherwise is crucial to any resolution of the current catastrophic moment. Central to this resolution is finding other forms for agency – agency that doesn’t stumble when existing humanistic and liberal notions falter and fail. Ecological catastrophe, much like the legacy of the environmental movement, unravels existing notions of human agency, making politics seem an impossible task. Finding ways to narrate agency without succumbing to exceptionalist delusions or fantasies of the State is the necessary task for a new environmental praxis adequate to the Anthropocene.

Highlights

- Outlines the political role of the writer-activist within environmental movements, highlighting the critical role played by their narrations of climate science in terms of setting the framework for environmental praxis
- Details the key elements of the hegemonic climate change imaginary in the Global North, setting out a critical analysis of how it frames and shapes environmental praxis
- Outlines the existing contradictions of the climate change imaginary, indicating how these contradictions shape action and environmental analysis
- Sets out to explore how these contradictions enable ‘imagining climate change otherwise’, renewing contemporary environmental praxis

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