

In the Shadow of Death: Loss, hope and radical environmental activism in the Anthropocene

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Abstract

This article posits that the myriad socio-ecological crises that mark the Anthropocene have generated a novel form of green utopianism or 'ecotopianism' in the form of contemporary radical environmental activists (REAs). Drawing on posthuman and green utopian theoretical tributaries, the article seeks to critically assess how the intrusion of crisis into the present influences REAs' modality of ecotopianism, in particular their relations to central utopian concepts of 'hope' and 'futurity'. REAs are embroiled in a fervent refusal of the 'present' of climate and ecological decline, frequently emphasizing the need to create micro-exemplars within the 'here and now' and evincing scepticism towards closure around particular notions of 'the better'. REAs' singular mode of 'hopeless activism' is not devoid of hope but rather disavows hope in its abstract and future-oriented modality, instead emphasizing a 'critical modality' of hope. The latter, stemming from REAs' post-anthropocentric worldviews and deep kinship bonds with the nonhuman world, is fuelled by grief over the extant widespread loss of cherished Earth kin and moulded by a desire to create a 'not-yet' devoid of the widespread absence of Earth others. The article concludes with reflections on the nature of hope, loss of life and the utopian imaginary amid times pervaded by crisis, and on the potential for co-constructing more liveable worlds with Earth others.

Keywords: Post-humanism; radical environmental activism; Anthropocene; ecotopia; hope

The Eco-Dystopian ‘Now’

The current Anthropocene era of widespread and proliferating socio-ecological perturbations is one laden with paradoxes. It is marked on the one hand by the global ecological consequences of a runaway human agency (**Crutzen, 2006**), and on the other by often violent protests by recalcitrant entities – hurricanes, wildfires, droughts, novel infectious diseases, etc. – who no longer consent to being treated as mere inert objects for furthering human ends (**Latour, 2004: 156**). Our climate system is increasingly in disarray, with the latest IPCC report (**2018**) warning that the planet could reach 1.5 degrees of warming by as early as 2030 without urgent global political action and structural transformations. More problematically, we are now well into the planet’s Sixth Mass Extinction event, wherein present rates of loss vastly exceed normal background rates of extinction (**Ceballos et al, 2020**). The WWF made headlines when it announced in its 2018 Living Planet Report that – as a result of human activities including the fragmentation, loss and degradation of habitat, pollution, toxification, climate change, and species overexploitation – we have lost a near incomprehensible 60% of monitored vertebrate species per 1970 levels (**WWF, 2018**). The extant widespread loss of Earth others is no mere existential crisis threatening the continuity of human life but, fundamentally, an ethical one implicating the steady erosion of intricate multispecies relations forged over vast spatial and temporal horizons.

This article seeks to shed critical light on radical environmental activists (REAs) as grounded ecotopian movements (**Price et al, 2008; Davis, 2012**) mired in a concrete¹ (**Bloch, 1986**) and multidimensional refusal of the myriad socio-ecological deficiencies that characterize the ‘Now’ of the Anthropocene, and as seeking to instantiate a future devoid of the widespread loss of life. REAs may be posited as utopian in the sense that they engage in multidimensional critiques and fervent resistance against the status quo of global capitalism and its ecological dislocations (**Sargisson, 2002; Moylan, 1986**), and in complex – though less explicitly articulated – ways desire to supplant it with better alternatives. Thus, this article draws variedly on post-humanist (**Braidotti 2013; Ferrando, 2016; Latour 2017**), post-structuralist (**Derrida, 1995; 2003; 2016**) and green utopian (**Pepper, 2007; Garforth, 2018**) theoretical tributaries in order to critically assess how REAs’ post-anthropocentric worldviews (**Ferrando, 2016**) and modes of relationality with regards to the non-human world in turn influence (and are influenced by) their relations to the ‘Now’ of the Anthropocene, hope, and the ‘Not-Yet’. This theoretical framework is applied to primary data in the form of semi-structured interviews conducted with 26 REAs from such groups as Earth First!, Sea Shepherd, and Extinction Rebellion. Of particular interest is how and why, for those REAs who seemingly have relinquished hope for a viable future and for

whom near total ecological and biological annihilation is seemingly all that is promised by the ‘future-to-come’ (Kirkby, 2006; McNeish, 2017), they ‘bother to strive for the good’ (Atwood, 2009: 279). As will be noted, REAs exhibit what Duggan and Muñoz (2009) refer to as ‘critical modalities of hope’ wherein hope does not vanish but is rather critically reconfigured by grief (Bloch, 1986) stemming from their prolonged and keenly felt experiences with the pervasiveness of multifarious Anthropocene losses – particularly of cherished Earth kin and wider biospheric integrity. REAs’ grief and anguish over such losses – experienced as nothing less than the unravelling of ethico-political relations extending across vast spatial-temporalities – is critically redeployed in a renewed resolve to resist the present. REA mobilisations and ecotopian modalities appear to be thoroughly influenced by their deep kinship bonds with Earth others. Moreover, traditional associations of hope with abstract ideals (Ibid) to be implemented on the distant horizon of a benignly unfolding futurity are eschewed in favour of a desire to bring about a world devoid of the systematic annihilation of nonhuman life in the ‘here and now’.

Contemporary Manifestations of Ecotopia

A core premise of the green utopian or ‘ecotopian’ tradition, whether in literary or social movement form, is the notion that there is something fundamentally wrong with the way growth-oriented industrial-capitalist societies presently relate to the non-human world, and that far more ecologically harmonious attitudes, relations, and modes of subsistence are of the essence (Garforth, 2018). Contemporary ecotopian thought emerged from the ‘limits to growth’ discourses (Meadows et al, 1972) and ‘deep ecology’ movement in eco-philosophy (Naess, 1973) throughout the 1970s and 1980s. The same tributaries also gave rise to REA groups such as Earth First! and Sea Shepherd, hence ecotopianism’s classification as the ‘utopia of radical environmentalism’ (Pepper, 2007: 289). The new ecological consciousness exhibited by such groups cautioned against worsening human transgressions of planetary boundaries (Rockström et al, 2009) ² via expanding human populations and, crucially, ceaseless-growth-oriented socioeconomic systems, loudly proclaiming the incommensurability between the latter and Earth’s finite systems (Garforth, 2018). The urgency of the current ‘end times’ (Latour, 2017) has compelled REAs to deploy direct-action tactics such as the sabotage of industrial machinery, road blockades, and tree-sits as desperate measures for bringing an immediate halt to ecologically destructive enterprises (Tarrow, 2013: 98). Furthermore, such ecotopian modalities exhibit post-anthropocentric (Ferrando, 2016; Alberro, 2020) worldviews that reject notions of a disembodied and superior humanity with the right to subdue and exploit the natural world at will.

Utopianism in its myriad manifestations tends to surface during times of considerable upheaval. The Anthropocene, wherein crisis and breakdown are ubiquitous, is particularly ripe for radical resistance and novel imaginaries. ³Hence the pertinence of REA mobilisations against the myriad deficiencies of the 'Now' and their post-humanist sensibilities for investigating the broader dynamics of contemporary ecotopianism amid the Anthropocene.

This article draws on a wider project featuring semi-structured interviews with 26 REAs from groups such as Earth First!, Sea Shepherd, Hambacher Forst, Extinction Rebellion and other long-standing activists in the radical green movement heavily involved in contentious or prefigurative modes of political activism – i.e., through engagement in ecological direct-action and who express 'radicalized identities' (Stuart et al, 2013). Due to the difficulty of accessing these groups in light of the occasionally illicit nature of their activities and consequent distrust of outsiders (Alberro, 2019), recruitment proceeded via snowball sampling after extensive prior communication with key gatekeepers, followed by opportunistic/emergent sampling (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). Moreover, interviews were largely conducted through internet communication technologies (ICTs) such as Skype and Facebook Video (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014) in order to access participants across vast geographic distances and to help safeguard participant anonymity. In order to ensure the latter, all data was anonymised, stored on an encrypted drive, and the participants given pseudonyms. Experience proved, as others had previously suggested (Madge & O'Connor, 2004), that the remote nature of online interviewing helped facilitate further reflection by participants on sensitive topics. Though online research is in its relative infancy, existing research has shown that the nature and quality of the data obtained through online interviews – in terms of pauses, repetitions, recasts, etc. – is very similar to that obtained through more traditional methods (Cabaroğlu et al, 2010). Lastly, a thematic analytical approach entailing the identification and analysis of patterns in data sets (Braun & Clarke, 2013) was utilised. Subsequent coding, theme development and data analysis proceeded electronically through the NVivo software program (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013).

'Valuing Life in Ecosystems, and Even in Stars'

The findings featured in this article expand upon previous research (Taylor, 2008; Cianchi, 2015) on REAs' decidedly post-humanist (Taylor, 2012; Braidotti, 2013) or post-anthropocentric (Ferrando, 2016) worldviews and modes of relationality with regards to the non-human world. Though it has many strands, Taylor's (2012) rather expansive definition frames post-humanism as the dissatisfaction and/or rejection of

the ‘two central tenets of humanism’: namely, the belief that humans are the centre of the world (i.e., anthropocentrism) and that, as superior rulers of existence, we have the right to subdue, exploit, and/or otherwise reduce the unruly ‘other’ to the status of object (Derrida, 2002: 37). Similarly, post-humanism rejects longstanding assumptions such as that human ways of knowing and being in the world are *essentially* different from and superior (Heidegger, 1995) to those of nonhumans (Chiew, 2014; Plumwood, 2002). A variety of environmental ethical tributaries can be subsumed within the posthuman tradition, from bio-ethics emphasizing the inherent value of all living beings (Rolston, 2012) to more holistic approaches such as Val Plumwood’s (2002; 2010) non-dualistic philosophical animism which depicts a world populated by agentic persons, only some of whom are human. Virtually all REAs interviewed begin from these basic post-humanist premises in problematizing and deconstructing antagonistic dualisms between humans and animals (Plumwood, 2002; Wolfe, 2010), interrogating and reconceptualizing humans’ ethical responsibilities towards nonhuman others (Morton, 2010), and proclaiming the inherent and equal value of all life (Naess, 1973). However, a complex and at times contradictory mosaic of ethical approaches can be detected within REA worldviews. Curiously juxtaposed alongside REA claims of the inherent and equal value of all life were traces of hierarchical value classification particularly around (1) a species or individual’s perceived level of sentience/intelligence (Singer, 1976), and (2) the perceived significance of a species’ ecological role (i.e. phytoplankton and cetaceans) (Alberro, 2020). Such approaches, infused by instrumental and aesthetic-based valuation (Rolston, 2002), harbour inklings of ethico-ontological modalities ‘predicated on affection for sameness’ (Sargisson, 2000).

Nevertheless, most were critical of and sought to deconstruct rationales underlying moral-ethical boundary delineations, extending them beyond the sentient or ecologically consequential and in some instances avowing an agential matter (Latour, 2004; Bennett, 2010; Alberro, 2020). REAs evince generally expansive ecological worldviews wherein humans and non-humans exist in entangled and egalitarian relations with one another, and crucially, wherein Earth others are kin. For instance, the following are somewhat typical responses in this vein:

Jellyfish: ...now I feel when I see whales die, like, my friends are dying, like, it’s a person or somebody that I’ve already seen or connected with.

Poseidon: I’m part of the whole system, and I’m not any different, or better, or worse. I am part of this world, just like an ant, or a snail, or a rabbit, or whatever. (Participant Interviewees)

In avowing our inextricable entanglement with the more-than-human world, REAs make significant strides in dismantling the ontological foundations of human supremacy and the logic of dualism (Plumwood, 2002) more generally. For instance, Badger reflects on the ethical paucity of traditional emphases on sentience amid deliberations around who matters and why, and on the problematic nature of boundaries as such:

we've become very nervous-system-[focused]. Like, a lot of Animal Rights folk won't give credence or any time to any kind of theorizing or philosophizing, or experiential musings on the fact that plants, trees, etc. might have a degree of being, or sentience and intelligence that we can't comprehend as yet because they lack a central nervous system, in the same way that a lot of vegetarians will say, 'Oh no, it's alright to eat fish because fish can't feel pain', kind of malarky. And again, it's this grading of superiority. (Participant Interviewee)

Humans, no longer situated aloft and disconnected from the rest of existence and other entities, are firmly re-situated within the vast assemblages that constitute reality, moving and striving alongside other actors (Latour, 2004). In line with these ontological premises, particularly deep kinship ties between REAs, other species and the wider earth system, many REAs cite the profound urgency of the times and grief over widescale loss as key motivating factors underlying their activism. However, why this occurs, what the widespread loss of cherished Earth kin via contemporary biological annihilation entails for REAs, and, crucially, how this influences their relations to key utopian concepts of hope and futurity have hitherto been underexplored. It is to this that I now turn my attention in the following sections.

'I am Hopeless, and Yet I Continue to Fight': REAs' Critical Modalities of Hope

The interchange below with Poseidon is one that surfaced frequently throughout interviews with REAs following queries around why they continue to mobilize on behalf of threatened Earth others despite purportedly lacking hope in a better 'Not-Yet':

Poseidon: To be honest, I don't think there's a solution. I think there would be a solution if the whole planet, so seven billion people, would change from today until tomorrow, change right now, but that's not going to happen. So, I think it sounds fairly pessimistic what I'm saying, but I think we are...excuse me for the word, but I think we're fucked...

H: If it's all fucked, why bother trying to save things?

Poseidon: Well, you must never lose hope, so, of course, and every single animal is worth fighting for. So, even if it's the last known animal it's still worth fighting for. (Participant Interviewee)

Why continue to fight if a situation appears hopeless? In the case of REA mobilisations, the answer appears to partly stem from their deep kinship ties to Earth others – that is, views of the latter as family rather than external and/or isolated entities – and the immeasurable grief over their eradication. Contemporary climatic and ecological breakdown have been linked to a consequent proliferation of mental health ills such as depression, anger, distress, sadness, anxiety, and hopelessness (**Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018: 275**) amongst increasingly wider sections of the global population. Hence the recent proliferation of the term, ‘ecological grief’, denoting grief over both actual and anticipated ecological loss – of species, of whole ecosystems, of times characterized by relative stability, and of a predictably unfolding futurity (**Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018**). In light of their deep kinship ties to the more-than-human world, REA’s experience ecological grief particularly keenly:

Stonehenge: There is no getting away from the lack of birds in the skies, and the lack of insects, and the trees still standing but dead...we are clearly in troubled, deeply troubled times... [What we need is] the recognition and acknowledgment that we are really where we are. No more disconnect, no more turning away, no more getting lost in the guilt and shame of it. We need to use remorse as a stepping stone into transformation.

Badger: In my own lifetime in what is one of the most privileged countries in the world, I've also seen the creep of the absence of life into this country, this island. So, hedgehogs, badgers, foxes, the birdlife...all these factors, again, they weigh on me. (Participant Interviewees)

Grief appears to serve as both ‘an expression of deeply felt kinship bonds with other species *and* a significant factor in creating those bonds’ (**Pike, 2016: 420; Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018**). Indeed, participants often shed tears during interviews as they recount painful memories and first-hand experiences of the degradation of beloved Earth others and landscapes. Grief over the sheer scale of contemporary loss of beloved co-evolutionary kin in turn serves as a powerful factor driving conversion and especially sustained commitment to radical environmental activism (**Pike, 2016**), hence activists’ willingness to engage in often high-risk actions such as inhabiting trees for years on end in order to keep extractive enterprises at bay, or – in the case of Sea Shepherd activists – physically interposing their bodies between whales and harpoons.

Crucially, REAs' ecological grief – in conjunction with their frequent eco-apocalyptic portents of total ecological breakdown (**McNeish, 2017**) – has altered their relationships to hope and futurity in significant and complex ways. Despite powerful ecological grief resulting from repeated first-hand experiences of ecological loss (i.e. witnessing the felling of old-growth trees they've been protecting for years on end) and their purported disavowal of hope amidst the looming prospects of socio-ecological collapse, REAs nevertheless cite an ineffable 'something' that keeps them fighting (**Haas, 2016: 293**):

Butterfly: I'm going through a phase where I actually don't have an awful lot of hope, and people go, 'Well, why do you continue doing what you're doing?' And if I had a garden where I had the last butterfly in my garden and I knew it was going to die, I would still do everything that I could to make sure that butterfly lasted as long as possible, you know? And so, it's just part of our makeup; it would be impossible not to look at our flora and fauna, us, and not want it to exist as it was, and as it should be.

Warrior: I mean, if you look at what's really going on, it's very hopeless in a lot of ways. So in my mind, like, getting out there and saving that one individual stingray, or that one individual shark, or that one individual porpoise, like, that's the only thing in my mind that really, really matters. Like, finding small pockets in the world where you can help create a liberated space for oppressed groups and individuals, to me that's all that really matters.

Stonehenge: I'm also actively stepping away from the idea of hope, as it is traditionally espoused, for the reasons I mentioned. Hope projects something into the future, and right now I'm really focusing my energies on how to address how we live now, rather than how we might live in the future. (Participant Interviewees)

Many REAs claim to have relinquished hope in a viable future while somewhat paradoxically alluding to the possibility that a better world might arise after the wholesale collapse of the present socio-ecological order. However, as denoted by Stonehenge, REAs' active distancing from hope appears largely rooted in a rejection of its traditional association with the 'Not-Yet' as located in a distant futurity, as opposed to hope in its concrete modality (**Bloch, 1986**). Hence REAs' repeated emphases on the need to live and embody better alternatives within the 'Now' (**Foucault & Miskowiec, 1986; Davis, 2012; Latour, 2017**). Anthropocene crises have effectively shattered beliefs in an ordered and benignly unfolding future whose horizon can be more or less predictably delineated (**Wood, cited in Fritsch et al, 2018: 38**). Increasingly, the 'future' is shrouded in uncertainty amid the volatility of contemporary ecological paroxysms, wherein the

event horizon of our *collective* ‘ceasing to be’ (Haas, 2016: 287) lends further difficulty – and perhaps an air of futility – to attempts to delineate the ‘Not-Yet’. REAs’ absorption into the present and reluctance to map out the ‘Not-Yet’ is further indicative of the grounded ecotopia or heterotopia’s (Foucault & Miskowiec, 1986) acute scepticism surrounding future-oriented utopian modalities that, in casting their gaze to distant eras wherein society’s ills have already been resolved, risk losing the crucial element of praxis (Bloch, 1986) in resisting the ‘Now’ by creating spaces of alterity within it where a better ‘Not-Yet’ might be enacted. Crucially, these spaces are deemed vital for resisting the loss of life that thoroughly suffuses the ‘Now’ and therefore demands urgent and complete attention. As discussed below, hope amid REA sensibilities and mobilisations does not vanish but is rather reconfigured by the exigencies of Anthropocene decline and, crucially, their kinship bonds to Earth others.

Duggan & Muñoz’s (2009) notion of ‘critical modalities of hope’ serves as an apt lens for further examining REAs’ relations to hope, the more-than-human world and the future-to-come amid the Anthropocene. Herein, hope and hopelessness are conceived of not in an oppositional but rather in dialectical relation to one another. The opposite state of hope is not hopelessness *per se* (Lazarus, 1999) but complacency (Duggan & Muñoz, 2009). When *all* hope fails, and being itself is perceived as meaningless, ‘there is *nothing but despair*’, which can in turn morph into complacency in the face of the looming prospects of climatic and biological annihilation (Lazarus, 1999: 654, italics added). Yet, REAs vehemently repudiate complacency and passivity via their active and continuous resistance against the widespread injustices being imposed on the more-than-human world. Many are hopeless, indeed, but hopeless in the narrow sense of recovering *specific* loss – i.e. of individuals and species already and irretrievably gone (Lazarus, 1999: 660). For instance, Atacama articulates this notion rather eloquently:

...there’s stuff today that is lost already, really, but there’s also so much that’s around that can be saved if we all put ourselves to the task...it would be really, really sad to just give up now and say, ‘Oh, it’s all fucked, it’s too late’, when actually, maybe it’s not. I mean, it’s definitely too late for a lot of things, but maybe for most things it’s not.
(Participant Interviewee)

Hope in this instance is not wholly lost but rather reconfigured into critical modalities (Duggan & Muñoz, 2009) which are beyond complacency and denial. Herein grief – at widespread loss of life and the very loss of the ‘Not-Yet’ as previously conceived – is *actively and collectively* confronted (Head, 2016). Belonging and alliances on the basis of a shared dissent in relation to the deficiencies of the ‘Now’, coupled with shared negative

feelings such as cynicism, despair, and grief, are ‘critically redeployed’ (Duggan & Muñoz, 2009: 278; Pike, 2016) towards a fervent refusal of the ‘Now’ and its myriad injustices. This would seem to support Hornsey & Fielding’s (2016) seemingly counter-intuitive findings that negative emotions help boost eco-crisis mitigation motivations and feelings of efficacy. Hope, on the other hand, was found to have a much weaker relation to mitigation motivations by reducing risk perceptions of eco-crises and increasing complacency (Hornsey & Fielding, 2016). The authors conclude that, ‘An implication of this is that hope-filled messages about change would need to be balanced with active reminders of the negative current reality’ (Ibid: 32). Hence the indispensability of contrasts between utopian projections and the deficient ‘Now’. However, REAs effectively sever any simplistic associations between hope, efficacy, and behaviour within traditional investigations of collective action (Van Zomeren et al, 2008) via their critical modalities of hope. REAs repudiate the future-oriented dimensions of hope, and rather draw on its concrete and normative dimensions – particularly the ‘ought’ of more egalitarian and respectful relations with the nonhuman world. REA hope and ecotopianism more broadly, occasionally mired in an energetic hopelessness, emphasizes the need to simultaneously resist and create micro-exemplars in the ‘here and now’.

The Meaning of Loss in the Era of Biological Annihilation

Why is it that the loss of badgers, foxes, hedgehogs, and myriad other life forms weighs so heavily on REAs? REAs’ deep-rooted kinship ties to singular Earth others result in their feeling so emotionally and socially ‘at stake’ in the lives of these earth kin that their loss is experienced as no less than the ‘severing of a social bond’ (van Dooren, 2014: 136), which in turn results in powerful emotional and physiological experiences of grief (Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018). As noted in the previous section, the critical redeployment of grief often serves as a key factor motivating the activists’ ‘engagement beyond negativity’ in their myriad strivings. A sense of being at stake in meaningfully shared worlds (van Dooren, 2014: 40) and conceiving of oneself as intimately implicated and entangled – socially, emotionally, ethically, existentially – in the lives of nonhumans emerges:

Delfin: For me the ocean is alive... it's a great force of nature that in reality is one of the more prominent forces of our planet, as it is the grandest ecosystem, however much we live our lives walking upon firm, dry land. And it's a spirit, a force with which I feel deeply connected.

Stonehenge: We [Stonehenge and a tree she was protecting from felling] became a kind of collaborative link... in the moment of connection, I'm not there...I don't feel anything; I'm lost in connection, you know, I'm completely, just...the sense of self isn't there. The sense

of interwoven connectedness with another being doesn't really have space for ego as such, as me having power. It just feels like a longing has been fulfilled. (Participant Interviewees)

REAs evince a thoroughly relational sense of self (**Braidotti, 2013**), though crucially one that also often values the other's singularity (**Sargisson, 2000**). Hence the profound grief experienced at the departure of such cherished kin – from individuals to whole ecosystems – in turn fuelling REAs' desire to take virtually any means necessary in order to curb further loss. Van Dooren (**2014**) enquires: 'What does it mean that, in this time of incredible loss, there is so little public (and perhaps also private) mourning for extinctions?' (**Ibid: 140**). He suggests by way of a response that there appears to be a general inability to grasp the multiple connections between ourselves and Earth others, an orientation that can partially be explained by the still-dominant paradigm of human exceptionalism which continues to posit the non-human world as mere resource for a disembodied and superior humanity (**van Dooren, 2014: 141; Plumwood, 2009**). REAs categorically refute and, though they don't always succeed in doing so, strive nevertheless to deconstruct such orientations to Earth others through their post-anthropocentric sensibilities (**Ferrando, 2016**).

Furthermore, the irrevocable loss of Earth kin seems to be experienced by REAs as not merely the end of *a* world but of *the* world in the Derridean (**2005**) sense. Herein, each living being – from mycelia to California redwoods, to sperm whales – represents a singular origin of existence or patterning that constructs and interrupts our own. Though we share in common with Earth others a finite mortality and embodied earthly habitation, these singular worlds can never be wholly appropriated by us and, crucially, can never be recouped once lost. What, then, occurs when an entire species passes from the world (**van Dooren, 2014: 4**)? It is not merely the calculable loss of biodiversity or the mere departure of a 'fixed' population of organisms along with the death of its last living member (**van Dooren, 2014: 39**). Rather, species are 'embodied intergenerational achievements' (**van Dooren, 2014: 27**), whereby individuals are singular entities situated in dynamic co-evolutionary spatial-temporalities that extend from their past descendants on through the now and towards futures of infinite potentiality and diversity. What extinction constitutes, then, is something truly profound, extending far beyond any individual: the protracted unravelling of life-ways and entanglements with multiplicities of other organisms situated in particular spatial-temporalities extending from the past on through the present and to-come. The widespread ceasing-to-be of singular 'others' in the context of biological annihilation entails not the loss of life as such in an objective sense – for life will likely continue in one form or another – but the (unjust) eradication of irreplaceable and irreducibly singular life-worlds in all of

their diverse spatial-temporal manifestations. What's more, such loss effects a permanent disruption of their intricate entanglements with myriad other singular beings (**van Dooren, 2014**) situated in particular co-evolutionary communities. It is the immeasurable depth of this kind of loss, exacerbated by our common, though differential, complicity in it, that exerts a powerful ethical pull on REAs to intervene in order to stem the tides of contemporary annihilation:

Shark: We're basically in very high debt to animals, because we are the reason for the mass extinction which is happening right now, and, yeah...we are in a debt, a huge debt to save as many animals as we can. But yeah, basically my motivation came from a friend of mine who basically said to leave the earth a little bit better than you found it.
(Participant Interviewee)

REA grief over past and present loss of cherished Earth kin, and their fervent desire to prevent future annihilation, highlight the protracted spatial-temporal dimensions of death and mourning. From an evolutionary perspective the very capacity to grieve the loss of an 'other' is a biosocial achievement developed through millennia of co-evolving and living in intimate relation with others (**van Dooren, 2014**). Similarly, from a psychological perspective, grief is no mere fleeting emotion but a complex process by which one engages and comes to terms with loss (**Lazarus, 1999: 656**), as evinced by Badger's observation that species loss continually 'weighs' on him. Traditional psychoanalytic accounts of mourning advise that we (those who have lost a cherished other) relive and then relinquish our memories of the dead (**Freud, 1984**). However, as with van Dooren (**2014**) and Derrida (**1995**), the death and mourning of *an other*, and extinction more broadly, are distinctly ethico-political phenomena because they are thoroughly constitutive of self-other relations; that is, both life and death are fundamentally relational affairs that implicate multispecies worlds or assemblages (**Dastur, 1996; van Dooren, 2014**).

Mourning in the Derridean sense entails not an abandonment of the departed, cherished other but an active affirmation of their unsubstitutable 'otherness', of our enduring connection with them, and our broader connection to some sense of a beyond (**Derrida, 1986: 85; Kirkby, 2006: 464**). Herein there is no possibility of permanently severing ties to the dead in order to reconnect to the world of the living (**Freud, 1984**) because death is the very 'concrete structure of the living present' (**Derrida, 2016: 70-71**). In other words, the dead are simultaneously constitutive of – as well as beyond – us (**Derrida, 2016: 70; Nancy, 2002**), as our own speech and life-worlds are always laced with traces of those who have come before (**Kirkby, 2006: 467**). As such the border between

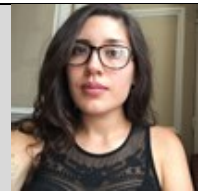
life and death always remains ‘open and ultimately interminable’ (Derrida, 1995: 78). This yields an enduring connection to a sense of loss and suffering and, crucially, an acute attentiveness to a simultaneous resistance against – and access *through* – misery to revolt (Bloch, 1986; Anderson, 2006: 701). What REAs actively strive against is ‘utopia’ in its pejorative sense, the good place that is no place, in this instance the ‘ultimate nowhere of non-being’ where life in its myriad manifestations is reduced to a fraction of its former abundance (Clark cited in Davis & Kinna, 2009: 9). REAs’ life-affirming praxis deploys a critical modality of hope in a concrete refusal of the necropolitics of advanced capitalism (Braidotti, 2013), and is further mobilised by a desired ‘Not-Yet’ (Bloch, 1986) whose content, though never fully determinable, ought to at the very least be devoid of the systematic eradication of life’s rich assemblages.

Building More Liveable Worlds in the Here and Now

The preceding discussion suggests that hope and delineations of the ‘Not-Yet’ during times of extreme duress do not disappear altogether but are rather transformed. Traditional utopian conceptualizations of hope and futurity are radically reconfigured by the ‘shadow of death’ cast by contemporary climate breakdown and biological annihilation, which increasingly obscures, though seemingly never entirely extinguishes, articulations of – and strivings towards – better alternatives. The critical, concrete modalities of hope exhibited by REAs serve as critique enacted via an embodied sense that ‘the Now’ is woefully insufficient, and that there are *other ways* (Duggan & Muñoz, 2009) – in the form of radical spaces of alterity within the ‘Now’ that prefigure more ethical and respectful relations with our nonhuman counterparts. A significant aspect of that ‘something’ that keeps REAs kicking vociferously in the ‘here and now’ (Garforth, 2018: 158) is their intimate kinship bonds with Earth others, with whom they feel ethically, existentially, and socio-politically entangled, and therefore whose increasing absence is experienced as a profoundly moving phenomenon sparking an access through grief to revolt – not merely against the injustices of the ‘Now’ but, crucially, towards a more abundant ‘future-to-come’. It would appear that hope traditionally conceived is not the only, nor necessarily even the most powerful, resource protecting against a wholesale descent into nihilistic despair amid the eco-dystopian ‘Now’ (Lazarus, 1999 656). Equally if not more consequential is a form of negative energetic hopelessness (Haas, 2016) that draws on longstanding ties with cherished co-evolutionary kin in order to resist the depredations of global capitalism and its need for continuous expansion, exploitation and commodification in pursuit of profit (Alvater et al, 2016). During times of widespread loss and precariousness, the concrete and critical utopian impulse – in the form of

REAs' critical modalities of hope – draws strength to continue in its formidable challenges to the status quo. The mode of ecotopianism manifested by REAs' lives in the interstices, at the intersection of dread and hope (Kirksey et al, 2013), wherein conceptualizations of the 'Not-Yet' are continuously (re)enacted. The content of these potential worlds for REAs, though not clearly identifiable, would at the least consist of more ethical modes of human-animal-nature relationality devoid of systematic exploitation and domination, wherein we might enter into more dialogical partnerships with our co-terrestrial inhabitants as entities who are, fundamentally, *with* and not *for* us (Plumwood, 2003; Le Guin, 1985: 76).

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Endnotes

¹ Bloch (1986) makes an important distinction between abstract and concrete forms of utopianism. The former are compensatory, escapist fantasies divorced from the exigencies of the 'Now' (Pepper, 2007: 290) and lack any further societal transformation. Concrete utopianism, on the other hand, is derived from critical social theory, rooted in praxis, and helps us sharpen our critiques of existing society through a critical engagement with the virtually unbounded horizon of possibility surrounding the real (Bloch, 1986: 223). It is in the concrete modality where hope resides and harbours its transformative potential.

² That is, the 'safe operating space' beyond which further disturbances of key earth systems such as biodiversity, the climate and nitrogen cycles can result in unpredictable and potentially catastrophic feedback loops.

³ Though theorisations of the origins of this contested era abound, the 1800 marker initially proposed by Crutzen (2006) is a useful one; after the momentous productive transformations ushered in by the Industrial Revolution, ice core data began to reveal considerable spikes in global concentrations of CO₂ and Methane (CH₄) arising from the industrial-scale burning of fossil fuels. Since then the post-1945 'Great Acceleration' (Steffen et al, 2015) has seen an 'explosion' of the human enterprise, particularly through near exponential increases in consumptive and productive activities particularly after the 1970s (Ibid). Though as Moore (2017) and others crucially point out, these increases in socioeconomic activity and subsequent ecological impacts have historically been overwhelmingly associated with the Global North – embedded in histories of colonial dispossession – and especially the profligate lifestyles of the wealthy elite (Malm & Hornborg, 2014).
