

# Beyond dystopia: Regenerative cultures and ethics among European climate activists

Arne Harms 

Senior Researcher, Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle/Saale, Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology

## Correspondence

Arne Harms Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Germany.  
Email: [harms@eth.mpg.de](mailto:harms@eth.mpg.de)

## Abstract

In this article, I analyze practices of self-formation among European climate activists. I develop the concept of *regenerative cultures* as a lens to capture nonspectacular practices that embody intimate forms of activism. Drawing on ethnographic research among climate activists, I show that regenerative cultures employs recursive circuits of practicing, retrospective visions, and subjunctive ecologies in order to enable ethical self-formations geared toward personal or planetary regeneration. I identify two implications of such practices. First, I argue that intimate forms of activism reshuffle the sphere of politics in rendering the intimate a locus of concerted action that is deemed to radiate out. Second, I argue that such ethical labor is situated between what in the anthropology of ethics figures as virtue ethics and endurance. What I identify as utopian becomings instantiated by climate activists' ethical labor embodies attempts to open spaces for caring differently. Moving beyond an understanding of the utopian as prefigurative move, I argue that utopian becomings operate by enabling to become otherwise in affectively loaded encounters.

## KEYWORDS

ethics, regeneration, climate activism, politics, utopia, Europe

## Resumen

En este artículo, analizo las prácticas de autoformación entre activistas europeos del clima. Desarrollo el concepto de culturas regenerativas como un lente para capturar prácticas no espectaculares que corporeizan formas íntimas de activismo. Basado en investigación etnográfica entre activistas del clima, muestro que las culturas regenerativas emplean circuitos recursivos de prácticas, visiones retrospectivas y ecologías subjuntivas en orden a hacer posible autoformaciones éticas orientadas hacia la regeneración personal o planetaria. Identifico dos implicaciones de tales prácticas. Primero, argumento que las formas íntimas de activismo reorganizan la esfera de la política haciendo lo íntimo un locus de acción concertada que se considera irradia. Segundo, argumento que tal labor ética es situada entre lo que en la antropología de la ética

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figura como ética virtud y resistencia. Lo que identifico como devenires utópicos ejemplificados por la labor ética de los activistas del clima corporeizan los intentos de abrir espacios para cuidar diferentemente. Al ir más allá de un entendimiento de lo utópico como un paso prefigurativo, argumento que los devenires utópicos operan al hacer posible convertirse de otra manera en encuentros cargados afectivamente. [*ética, regeneración, activismo del clima, política, utopía, Europa*]

## INTRODUCTION

We are meeting online on a noncommercial platform, with links being provided after personal registration only. It is an intimate meeting, intended to be a space to share thoughts, to learn from one another, and, most importantly to the organizers, to form yet another group in a growing network of such groups that are hoped to facilitate lasting change in the way humankind navigates impending ecological disaster.

It's Friday night. Cameras show people in their living rooms. At this point in the COVID-19 pandemic, all of us are well versed, or so it seems, in the routines and etiquette of online meetings. After a brief round of introductions, followed by an overview of the contents of today's meeting, we are asked to explain what we think of regenerative culture and how we relate to it. Paula,<sup>1</sup> one of the facilitators of the meeting, is third. She says that she feels like she is in a regenerative mode when everything is in a flow and when she feels connected with herself—a state she reaches more and more frequently of late because she allows herself to be at ease and relax. Being connected with oneself, she goes on, has a huge role to play: She learned in a video circulating among climate activists that if all people were connected with themselves, there would be no war and everything would be regenerative. She refers to a spiral of positivity: the more people are connected, the more regeneration takes place.

Paula's statement highlights the multimodality of regenerative culture(s) as it is being used among contemporary climate activists. To her, the term seems to effortlessly weave an inner sense of calm together with an end to geopolitics as we know it and the realignment of societies toward recognizing, and honoring, planetary boundaries. Delivered during a workshop organized under the auspices of one of the best-known climate movements, Extinction Rebellion (XR), regenerative culture(s) also signals shifts in the way politics is reconceptualized among a section of its proponents in terms of the proper place of politics, its orientation, and means. It also seems to recast a few questions that have busied anthropologists for a while, such as around abundance, mutuality, or selfhood. It is no coincidence, perhaps, that the video Paula mentions actually is a recorded talk delivered by an activist who also is a professional anthropologist.

Rising to fame alongside Fridays for Future in what Andreas Malm (2021) calls the third wave of climate activism, XR has made headlines predominantly for its radical approach and its rather efficient use of nonviolent tactics of civil disobedience, bringing climate justice center stage, literally into the heart of European capitals, and amalgamating a wide range of environmental groups and people into yet another pillar of the emergent climate movement. The climate movement has

received sustained interest recently, not just in the media but also in academic research. A number of studies employ a rather classical social-movement research perspective and focus on highly visible events and concomitant networks, ideologies, performances, and infrastructures (Bell 2021; Berglund and Schmidt 2020; Booth 2019). Other research calls attention to less visible, everyday practices of care, complementing and at times informing public forms of activism. Thus, scholars demonstrate how XR activists rekindle care and hope within activist trajectories (Stuart 2020; Westwell and Bunting 2020). Building on fieldwork among climate activists, this article contributes to this emerging scholarship by scrutinizing the fashioning of selves and futures within and below the spectacular blockades or street performances. Such doings are vital, I argue, for understanding everyday dimensions of climate activism, while simultaneously being generative to rethink ethics as a practice of future-making amid planetary injury.

If the future is by definition uncertain, through the lens of the Anthropocene, it seems to be darkening steadily. The broad consensus on climate change, biodiversity collapse, and pollution, coupled with the immensity of the task and widespread governmental inaction, leaves little doubt that the planet will be a less hospitable place. Against this background, statements such as “the future is here” have lost much of the promise they used to have; they now signal the usurpation of the present by dystopian moments that no longer can be deterred. This is not to say that all is lost. Scholarly and activist voices invite us to be attentive to, and generative of, the proliferation of life within disruption and new commitments beyond the human (Haraway 2016; Tsing 2015; Tsing et al. 2017). Hope and concern frequently underpin attempts to secure “least bad futures” (Rojas 2020) and tedious everyday efforts of living well on a damaged planet.

The nonspectacular, often hardly visible, and interiorized forms of activism I focus on in this article are by no means exclusive to the meeting, nor are they specific to Extinction Rebellion. Scholars have begun tracing ethical conduct amid environmental turmoil far removed from the sphere of organized political action. Thus, STS scholars urge us to be attentive to an everyday politics of care and affirmation within more-than-human entanglements (Braidotti 2019; Latour 2018). Ethnographic accounts of everyday life in severely polluted environs introduce caring for people and plants as ethical practice embodying forms of what is being called intimate activism (Tironi 2018; Tironi and Rodríguez-Giralt 2017). Research on Californian permaculture practitioners—to provide one more example—shows them engaging in quotidian acts that are considered to bring about inner and outer transformations in stressed environments (Vine 2018). This article complements this vital research field by ethnographically considering

such barely visible forms of activism. In so doing, I aim to rethink the place of ethics in political practice. Even if the private is political, as we know from feminist struggles, what counts as private and as political is reshuffled in this moment we call the Anthropocene. “For,” as Anand Pandian (2019, 78) notes, “if there is anything that the Anthropocene demands from its human protagonists, it is change in how they are and what they do.”

Working through engagement with climate activists and their engagement with one another, I introduce the notion of *regenerative cultures* as a prism and an analytic to think through reconfigurations of ethical practice and futures amid planetary crises. I demonstrate that striving for regenerative cultures articulates a politics that targets the intimate and is envisioned to rework communities from below and within. My article complements an emergent scholarship on the internalized articulations of politics among radical activists. Scholars across critical race and postcolonial studies call for questioning the way we think and feel, and the everyday choices these modes underpin, in order to make way for another politics. Some take this to be an exercise in troubling how racialized privilege informs everyday thinking, rendering quotidian, internalized, and embodied modes of relating as sites for political struggle (Frankenberg 1997). Others invite us to trouble, and rework, fundamental assumptions about the way realities operate in order to carve out a space for a radically different politics (Escobar 2020). Political activism itself seems to be marked by what Razsa (2015, 199) calls a “subjective turn,” instigating, he argues, “efforts to change their own political desires, to create new individual and collective subjects.” This may lead activists to rework individual food habits as a means of holding capitalism at bay—and literally out of one’s own metabolic system (Krøijer 2020, 56). Or it may involve turning to alternative spiritual practices as a way of buttressing forms of relating to the material world that are decidedly noncapitalist (Koehrsen 2018; Taylor 2009).

All these iterations not only mark the internal as a key site of politics but also call attention to a politics driven by the desire to realize other worlds in the here and now and, hopefully, have them radiate out. Breaking with vanguardism and notions of ruptures and revolutions, political activists seek ways to realize an “otherwise” (Povinelli 2011) deep within the interstices of capitalism. Forms of living together or the much more ephemeral forms of activist politics, such as rallies, may in themselves embody this otherwise and render it visceral (Krøijer 2015). Such iterations align, I suggest, with the ethico-political kernel informing regenerative cultures. All are informed, on the one hand, by open-ended experimentation. That is, they are not prefigurative, in terms of knowing precisely which future to aspire to, but articulate the “hope to create preconditions” (Ballesterio 2019, 190). On the other hand, all are geared so as to embody or become otherwise in the process of engaging with others, human or nonhuman. That is to say, nonlinear temporalities are at play here, where futures are being performed in ephemeral forms, and entanglements across species or forces to be accounted for, which, taken together, embody a utopian promise that is hoped to nourish and fan out. Engaging regenerative cultures ethnographically, as I do in this article, therefore not only calls attention to practices of “improvement” or “healing” but also put into view “seeds of an alternative future” (Biehl and Locke 2017, 79) that

come to be situated at the confluence of variously rhythmized temporal and material enmeshments. Attuning us to emergent forms, the notion of *utopian becomings* helps, I argue, to capture modes of embodied reform emanating from the interstices and from everyday doings on an injured, perhaps doomed, planet.

This article proceeds in three steps. I first briefly sketch regenerative cultures by elaborating on the genealogy of the term, considering the field, and placing it within concerns of the anthropology of ethics. Subsequently, I demonstrate attempts to enlarge the scope of regenerative cultures, arguing that proponents articulate what I call utopian becomings. The next section turns to ethical labor in a climate camp, showcasing how retrospective visions of loss and mourning are mobilized to relate differently to oneself and nature. In my final substantial section, I turn to future envisioning and the retrospective assessment of the here and now, showing how these are mobilized to underpin efforts to fashion selves.

## REGENERATIVE CULTURES BETWEEN VIRTUE ETHICS AND EVERYDAY SURVIVAL

The notion of regenerative cultures circulates across the fields of alternative farming practices, nonmainstream economics, and environmental activism. In alternative farming practices and nonmainstream economic thought, proponents of regenerative cultures (in the plural) call for the reorganization not only of farming but of almost anything in line with natural processes of replenishment (Raworth 2019; Wahl 2016). In this view, many environmental ills are based on human disregard or willful neglect of the regeneration of ecosystems, beings, or forces. Vice versa, life itself is invested with regenerative capacities—restoring landscapes and renewing beings in time—that proponents seek to harness in order to provide for well-adapted, affirmative forms of life. Taking issue with contemporary green-capitalism frameworks, proponents of regenerative cultures seek to replace sustainability or growth as guiding principles with concerns for mutual replenishment across cyclical flows. In other words, this is not about ensuring ready access to specific things as commodities in the future but rather a concern with how things hang together in time and how such material and temporal entanglements can be fostered as a force to bring about planetary health and well-being.

Among environmental activists, on the other hand, the notion of regenerative culture(s) marks a similarly broad and diverse endeavor. I will show below that what the concept entails, whether it should be “culture” or “cultures,” and how it is to be applied is up to discussion, with some activists bent on extending its scope. Most activists use it to refer to a set of practices thought to enable the well-being and emotional or bodily stability of activists in the runup to, during, or in the aftermath of mobilizations (Extinction Rebellion 2019; Luthmann 2018). In this view, the success of this (or any) movement depends on the resilience of individual people fighting for the cause. Well-rested bodies and restored minds, activists argue, enable surviving, and thriving, through drawn-out struggles. None of this is new. Feminist and antiracist struggles have championed concerns for activists’ well-being for decades (Ray 2020).

In and across iterations—in alternative farming and climate activism and the social field that opens up between them—the concept also signals practical interventions geared toward what I call *hospitable futures* by reworking what it means to be human in terms of responsibility and cyclicity. Some activists seek to enable protest pushing for concerted efforts to avoid collapse, while others seek to bolster the self-replenishing capacities of nature as a means of repair. Complementing existing research on the reconfiguration of care, here I turn to the ethico-political kernel of activist iterations of regenerative cultures and demonstrate their temporal workings. In so doing, I argue that they consist of a nonpredictive politics that operates on the level of self-fashioning and embraces nonlinear temporalities and open-endedness in order to open up (utopian) spaces of caring differently. What I call regenerative cultures in the plural, then, is a loosely connected field peopled by rather differently situated actors, beings, things, and forces. The people involved—so much seems fair to say—are likely to be middle class, well educated, and, more often than not, white. Furthermore, they move back and forth between typical forms of collective protest and internalized forms of political action I am concerned with here.

Even while the concept of regenerative cultures does not originate in anthropology, its two components seem to play on classical debates that, in their day, were central to the pursuit of anthropology. That is, it evokes debates on the regeneration of life as a ubiquitous practice to be found in rituals around, say, burial or agriculture (Parry and Bloch 1982), and it evokes culture as a bounded concept (Geertz 1973), “Culture” capitalized. Proponents of the term feature ambiguous takes on both the terms’ pedigree. As in other articulations of radical environmental activism, indigeneity or other purported forms of living in close contact with nature appear valorized and regularly emulated (Krøijer 2019). Yet the rather heady term regenerative cultures is eligible, I suggest, to cross-cultural and multispecies explorations and signals a metis playground where different bodies of knowledge intersect; where anthropological concepts intermingle with psychological, agronomic, or climatologist ones; and where all these approaches are fueled by criticism of scientific mainstreams. My role as an anthropologist perusing ethnographic fieldwork in such a context leads to specific complications. These apply not only to the concerns of this article but to the wider ethnographic project on ethical striving and plural forms of activist engagement from which I draw here. I am inserting a para-site, a field peopled by actors acutely aware of scholarly concepts and methods that allows for unique ways of collaboration (see Marcus 2000), here mainly in view of what might be called real-life experiments conducted toward living well and justly on a wounded planet (Bryant and Knight 2019). Engaging future possibilities, utopian or otherwise, involves not only attending to the ways scholarly approaches or para-ethnographical knowledges circulate alongside, and intermingle with, clichés of ecological noble savages (Ulloa 2013) or of Eastern spirituality. This endeavor continues to be complicated by the challenges provided by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, restricting interactions to video calls and demanding ways to build trust differently as I shift back and forth between online and sustained face-to-face interactions.

It might be surprising to frame the efforts I am engaging here as a form activism or even practices of environmental concern. But they

are, as I will show, understood as such. These rather atypical forms of politics signal another ambiguity inherent in contemporary climate activism. On the one hand, contemporary movements endorse, and call for, attributing science a key role in climate politics. Placards advertise key insights of climate scientists or the urgency to make politicians listen to the experts (see also Martiskainen et al. 2020). And outreach activities of climate movements routinely integrate short presentations on the scientific base of their claims. On the other hand, activists frequently critically engage with scientific practice and conduct, emphasizing the imbrication of science in environmentally disruptive economies or in legacies of colonial injustices. In this view, science is not disinterested, but scaffolding, what Brand and Wissen (2021) call the “imperial mode of living” by providing for the technical means of domination and exploitation. The problem doesn’t stop with overhauling scientific conduct but points toward epistemological and ontological foundations of what is often decried in a rather monolithic manner as modern Western thought. Technological fixes thus need to be replaced by drives to decolonize societies, selves, and minds—a move that puts the issue of self-formation center stage.

Whether anthropology may be going through an ethical turn, as some have it (Fassin 2014), ethics has become a key concern across the social sciences and humanities. Initiatives proliferate that seek to regulate ethical standards within fieldwork-based inquiries (e.g., American Anthropological Association 2012). In addition to these efforts, anthropologists consider ethical conduct in practice. Drawing on studies of moral orders and judgments—where morals stand for rather rigid social structures of assessing practices, sentiments, or beings as morally either good or bad—the study of ethics, as I practice it here, calls attention to ongoing and open-ended processes of striving for the good or for living well. Anthropologists demonstrate how ethical concerns inform both acute crises and normalized everyday practice, opening spaces for considering, and acting upon, ethical aspirations (Keane 2017; Lambek et al. 2015; Zigon 2007). In this view, ethical practice is a contingent series of acts of fashioning selves and societies that is both socially constrained and somewhat elastic: Notions of the good are socially mediated, and modes of attaining such goods certainly are limited by what is possible within socio-material contexts; yet in striving for the good, circumstances may be reworked.

Ethical conduct generally is future-oriented. It seems to be about sustaining life, if possible, in terms of uncovering the good. This may take the form of interventions into selves or circumstances that aim at improvement or the unfolding of desired forms. In this view, ethical conduct often appears to be modeled on the utopian; it is concerned with unearthing what is latent and with transforming toward the good (whether that may be retrogressive, cyclical, or progressive) (e.g., Laidlaw 2014). But ethical conduct is not always about attempting to realize desired futures. Studies of ethical life under conditions of strife alert us to the fact that ethical conduct might rather involve attempts to survive and live in some sort of dignity against all odds. It may be a means of holding violence at bay and thereby reaching toward a future that is lifeworthy, however fractured and fragile (e.g., Das 2020).

Ethical practice as a mode of fashioning selves is bound up in a paradox. On the one hand, it is written deep into the DNA of

neoliberal governance. In this age of “psychopolitics” (Han 2017), power does not merely operate by physical force, regulations, or infrastructural arrangements. Neoliberal governance also internalizes control by making people want to embody beauty, success, or efficiency. Desiring norms keeps in motion endless rounds of self-monitoring and improvement that deepen and enlarge the hold of power relations by literally writing themselves into the flesh. Nikolas Rose (2007) calls this “somatic ethics,” highlighting how the concern for the individualized body or health engrains governance and effectively ties bodies to populations. But Foucault, who is of course very much present in these theoretical formulations, also hinted at a different articulation of self-fashioning. In his final works, he called attention to techniques of the self that consisted of deliberately working the self in light of notions of freedom and virtue (Foucault 2019). Building on this work, anthropologists trace how freedom and virtue engender horizons of ethical practice that inform individual and societal reform in nonneoliberal terms (Dave 2012; Laidlaw 2014; Laidlaw and Mair 2019).

Problematizing the intersection of individual and collective aspirations, most anthropological accounts of ethics remain firmly within the orbit of human socialities. My concern for regenerative cultures moves beyond this frame and situates ethical conduct within more-than-human and planetary interrelations. Echoing Puig de la Bellacasa (2010, 2017), I call attention to an ethics of extended care—one that operates also on a more-than-human, intergenerational, and planetary register. While there is much to be said about care, in this article I highlight the future-making potential of caring differently and—to move back one step—of *working to care differently*.

## BEYOND SELF-CARE

Extinction Rebellion’s sustained concern for self-care makes it an unusual addition to the landscape of social movements. And this continues to cause irritation among sections of the radical left. Under the rubric of regenerative culture (again, in the singular), practices of caring for self and others are enshrined in the movement’s foundational principles. Yet, narrow visions of regeneration and its functions and promises don’t seem to fare well among all activists. Debates cohere around different visions of what regeneration is and what its place would be. In this section, I engage this debate in order to tease out what I call utopian becomings driving groups of activists. Such utopian becomings throw into relief the ambiguous quality of future envisioning among climate activists. Like many environmentalists, they readily paint dystopian futures and portray society as being beyond hope. Yet, the ethical labor set into motion by the exercises I engage with throughout this article embodies a different take. On one level, they thrive on hope. On another level, they seem to prepare the ground for striving for less-bad and still-hospitable futures in the everyday.

As I began researching the movement in earnest, introspection seemed to proliferate among its members. This is unsurprising given the experimental and open design of a movement, and perhaps intensified when it began running into trouble as prominent figures were under suspicion of venting anti-Semitic sentiments or as race seemed

to be dangerously underproblematized across the movement (Conolly and Taylor 2019). The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic—bringing key forms of public protest to a grinding halt, locking people in their homes, and providing room for contemplation—certainly gave further impetus to critically examine the movement. Activists coming together through digital communication platforms and online meetings are concerned with extending the meaning and relevance of “regeneration” within the movement and beyond. To them, self-care as a means to stay fit and sane for the sake of the struggle is not enough. They rather see it as a segment within a broader reconfiguration of care, albeit a central one. In this vision, self-care marks the core that feeds practices of caring for others and caring for the planet. On messenger channels and during meetings, proponents of regenerative cultures take issue with an understanding of regeneration as the proverbial recharging of batteries. A number of activists call for developing definitions of regeneration and rendering it more expansive. Eli, for instance, suggests emphasizing that people of the regenerative culture section “enliven regenerative cultures . . . turning away from the toxic system, resting survival on a lively culture.” (Note the plural!) He goes on to claim, “We want to be change that we wish to see in the world.” During another online meeting, Ben takes this point further when he proclaims that regenerative cultures do not merely facilitate the rebellion but “it is the rebellion.”

On one level, these claims are in tension with the stated claim of Extinction Rebellion to make politicians listen to science and to push an all-in effort for transformations at the levels of law and governance. In contrast to that, proponents of regenerative cultures situate an efficient politics at the levels of a recast culture and of small-scale group activities designed to enable relating differently to selves and others.

On another level, these claims articulate utopian aspirations that are not displaced in place or time, as utopian visions frequently tend to be, but rather situate utopian becomings as a seed within practices here and now. During the same meeting, an XR activist I call Liza introduces regenerative cultures as that which embodies, and sustains, connection and liveliness in all domains of life. It is concerned not with a thing one can touch or hold, she says, but a state that needs to be cultivated, a state of being alive and being connected. Bound up in structural conditions of runaway growth and the exploitative and disconnecting iterations of capitalism, she and others in the movement strive for regenerative modes of being by rhythmically working on themselves, discovering time and again intensities that fade along the way.

The anthropological account of utopian practice calls attention to the relevance of ephemeral embodiments of utopia in the here and now. Political activists no longer seem to be willing to postpone utopia to some point in time after the tabula rasa instigated by a full-fledged revolution. Instead, political activists seek to perform utopia in the concrete forms their protests take (Krøijer 2015). Tracing nudist practice as utopian doings, to give one more example, sociologist Davina Cooper (2014) calls for an understanding of utopian practices as closely intertwined with the normalized everyday. What she calls “everyday utopias” consist of spheres of action, such as nudist meetings, that are rather ready at hand, waiting to be frequented regularly so that proponents can move in and out easily, thereby hoping to enrich and realign ordinary life in terms of utopian aspirations.

Utopian thinking—both as philosophical inquiry and as the theorizing of interlocutors sketched by an attendant ethnographer—obviously coheres around latency. But if both radical activists and nudists strive for anchoring some utopian vision in their midst, its texture and extent varies greatly. While some of these utopias may be of a prefigurative kind, entailing specific visions of the what and how waiting to materialize, others, such as those of contemporary radical activists, are distinctively vague. Among the radical activists Krøijer describes (2015), this is not only a tactical embrace of open-endedness as a liberating force but also is rooted in the mistrust toward grand narratives and their ready answers that marked the twentieth century.

Taking this one step further, proponents of regenerative cultures, then, utilize this open-endedness as a way to engage with the uncertainties of the Anthropocene. Echoing Ernst Bloch's (1967) influential take on utopia in literature, arts, and politics, theirs is a utopian mode operating in the mode of the not-yet-known and the not-yet-emerged. And it is not just mundane encounters and ephemeral forms of gatherings that seem to be required in order to facilitate the emergence of desired states, but the art of doing so repeatedly. In other words, rhythms matter. Returning and rehearsing utopian becomings by way of reconnecting has more of a "becoming-other-than-now-is" (Razsa 2015, 199) that is open and transformative compared to the realization of prefigured, readymade futures. Rehearsing utopian becomings seems to be a mode of recurrently working selves bound in what Deleuze and Guattari (2013) call ordinary lives' "lines of flight"—that is, those socio-material forces whose momentum and direction may be tweaked along the way. Attempting to attain the difficult or almost unattainable is a keystone of ethical practice (Laidlaw and Mair 2019). Activists, I argue, do so by repeated exercises in cultivating regenerative modes in meetings or workshops. And they see this as a way to strive for hospitable futures, within and below other political practice, as a becoming that seeks to shift social constraints, exploiting elasticities through recurrent practices that seek to underwrite a sense of connection inwards and outwards. The language of rhythms is important. It combines the temporal trajectories of regeneration and of latter-day utopian aspirations. Both rely on visions of nonlinear time, where the present is the result of cyclical processes that radiate out in time.

In the next section, I explore how such recurrent practices use retrospective visions in order to open up spaces for doing naturecultures differently.

## MAKING SPACE FOR ETHICAL LABOR: LOSS AND THE AFFIRMATION OF LIFE

Human exceptionalism continues to trouble environmentalist and scholarly debate. Generations of philosophers, science scholars, and activists emphasize the problematic quality of distinguishing self and other or culture and nature and of reserving humans a position above and beyond all else. Yet how to move beyond this, or at the very least how to rework the implications, remains unclear. Proponents of regenerative cultures bet on working the self by way of tapping into emotions and focusing on everyday interaction across the human/nonhuman

divide. Both are rendered critical in order to enable what would from within the anthropology of ethics be considered routines of self-fashioning within a sentient web of life and widening responsibilities.

To this effect, activists committed to regenerative cultures—in the sense I am using it here—seek to integrate a range of activities into mobilizations that hail from spiritual traditions (understood broadly) and political activism. When XR took to the streets of Berlin in 2019 and brought up what they called "climate camp" a stone's throw from the seat of power, the Bundestag and the Bundeskanzleramt, the camp also hosted what was called a "mourning ritual."

The ritual mobilized elements of Joanna Macy's workshops, embodying what she calls "the work that connects" (Macy and Johnstone 2012). With a background in systems thinking and Buddhist practice, Macy developed a number of trainings and routines that foster her own take on deep ecology. Macy argues that contemporary mainstream society avoids mourning, as it is unpleasant and unwieldy for a society obsessed with individualized versions of happiness. She calls for resurrecting mourning not only because it might allow people to live truthfully but also because the act of mourning articulates, and makes emotionally available, love for what has been lost. In this rendition, mourning articulates a relationship—one of care and mutual dependency. Realizing this relationship in mourning enables the reshuffling of practices and even might espouse action to protect what is lost or threatened. Mourning thus becomes an engine of hopeful action and of realigning worldviews toward realizing mutuality in the web of life. On another register does such an act of mourning become an exercise in what proponents call "engaged Buddhism." Proponents of engaged Buddhism hold that no being can be happy until all are and that all should have the means to attain salvation. Practicing Buddhism thus also involves engaging in social and political action to overcome injustices and structural hindrances. Alongside antiracism and pacifism, environmentalism is a major concern. Thich Nhat Hanh's (2008) notion of interbeing—signaling the mutuality of beings in pain and joy—resonates across both engaged Buddhism and deep ecology. Seen by its proponents as both a school of thought and practice, deep ecology aims at destabilizing anthropocentrism and replacing it with biocentric approaches (Naess 1995; Seed and Macy 2007). While critics sometimes dismiss deep ecology for its purported misanthropic leanings, proponents emphasize the need to radically reorient humanity and its doings as part of, and not isolated from, the material world (see e.g., Krøvel 2013).

The mourning rituals held at the climate camp attempted to be just that. They were exercises in entering a state of mourning for what has been or is being lost in this moment of climate crisis, mass extinction, and environmental ruin. People were invited to confront and to express sorrow for species or beings or landscapes and thus to realize their love for them and mutual dependencies between humans and nonhuman others. These were exercises not only in spurring already concerned citizens into action but also in slowly but steadily realigning worldviews and moral orders away from the pursuit of individualism and toward the web of life. Implicitly challenging XR's slogan of "hope dies, action begins," these rituals were bent on instilling hope and the internal action of realignment in the face of death and destruction.

In so doing, they also were an invitation to mourn and celebrate relations to specific beings or lands. Thus, participants spoke not only about fear and sorrow but also about how individual and situated trees or animals or waters mattered to them, perhaps underwriting place-based relations that are unique and irreplaceable

In aiming for the realization of relatedness in and through grieving loss or in turning to specific natures through particularized forms of care, proponents of regenerative cultures engage in ethical labor geared toward enacting naturecultures differently. Replacing disconnect or control, these naturecultures appear to be informed by notions of care and dependency that effectively destabilize human exceptionalism (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017) and thus embody an ethics of the affirmation of life and diversity (Braidotti 2019). Yet, these are also, I argue, practices of future-making. They seek to unlock utopian becomings—realizing mutuality and love—and to enable life-affirming doings within the interstices of planetary turmoil.

In her study of decomposition practices in Colombia's Amazon, Kristina Lyons (2020) uses Michel Serre's notion of the static as a handle to capture the political work gardening can do. Reworked relations between people and between people and nonhuman others may render gardens enjoyable or thriving spaces, but the life cultivated there also spills over—literally across the fence—and across the terrain. Gardens and gardening practices and the abundance they achieve may be seen, she argues, as a kind of static that partly interrupts less-vital and less-joyful relations embodied in monoculture crops or military violence. Regenerative cultures—even in mourning and, as I show, in digital on-screen iterations—may be seen as a similar kind of static: a way of doing things differently in the interstices of wounded life, a way that proponents self-consciously hope will fan out and produce ever more static in order to make for still-troubled but slightly more hospitable futures. Yet, this is not the implementation of some kind of blueprint. Rather, it comes down to experimentation and open-endedness suffused by well-crafted emotional responses. The metaphor of static captures this quite well: disrupting the ordinary and opening up an ethics otherwise that, here, draws on the affective states of mourning, despair, and love.

But while such engagements with plants and gardens may be deemed critical, and the work of laboring emotions generative for realigning politics in the Anthropocene, these and related forms of destabilizing human exceptionalism and working the self require time. This tension throws into relief some of the vicissitudes of ethical labor in what is perceived to be a moment of great urgency. Conversations with activists articulate ensuing tensions quite beautifully. Talking about the limited salience regenerative cultures do have within XR, even while being firmly enshrined in the principles of action, Marcus explains that many activists do not trouble themselves with it too much. "Many think they have to do something now and that there is no time to still also meditate on it [*auch mal reinatmen*]," he notes. Such concerns articulate an inclination toward what might be called "slow activism" that resonates with the emphasis on slow research in contemporary theorizing of ethnography, articulations that are similarly aiming at the establishment of relations with time as a precondition of mutual understanding and care.

In the next section, I demonstrate how such doings are not only time-consuming but also rely on engaging time by way of envisioning futures.

## BEYOND REJUVENATION: ON SUBJUNCTIVE ECOLOGIES

Another online meeting organized under the auspices of the XR's German wing. We begin with a brief round of introductions, a short mindfulness practice, and an input on the tools we are about to encounter. Today's major exercise consists of reassessing the current moment by looking back at it from an imagined future. Thirty years on, Jenny tells us, the environmental problems have been solved and our task now is to explain to a child how we went through this moment of doom. What I have called utopian becomings is seen to intervene in a paradoxical temporal conjuncture. All exercises I have described so far assume that humanity is stumbling into bleak futures. Jenny's invitation to teleport us into a future where the current environmental gridlock has been solved ultimately marks no exception. Within the current predicament, and to this audience, it comes across as utopian in the dictionary sense of the word: as an impossible place, too good to be true. But nested within this profound sense of doom, an alternative seems to lay dormant that requires efforts to become actualized.

Back on the screen, the facilitators have us meeting in virtual breakaway rooms. Allotted by chance, attendees meet in pairs. Once again, cameras eye into living rooms, internet infrastructures connect faces far removed from one another, and we engage, as we are told, in reflecting on the current moment retrospectively from an imagined future. The setting is familiar at this point in the pandemic, the paired cameras enabling a digital meeting that is at once distanced yet intimate. To a set timer we engage three sets of questions shared by Jenny, changing roles of child and our older selves between us so that both have the chance to reflect while addressing questions in speech and by listening to the words of the other.

It is a moment of introspection. The questions posed by the imagined child do not address what was done or how solutions were wrought. Instead, we are invited to reflect on (1) how we felt during the crisis, (2) how we managed to stay sane, and (3) where or how we gathered strength to withstand and to participate in the struggles necessary to help bring about the needed change. The questions diverted attention from technical issues or matters of theory and made us plunge right into emotions and the vicissitudes of endurance, resilience, and care. I have no way of knowing how exchanges went in other breakaway rooms. But I gleaned from the short feedback round concluding the overall meeting that most other exchanges were affectively charged too.

Addressing my interlocutor as a child in an imagined future, I felt emotions welling up. There was grief and anger in the room as we addressed each other in answering questions about how we felt living in a world on fire and how we managed to stay sane. Our exchange took on a lighter tone as we turned to the final question and elaborated on relations, practices, or gatherings that helped us to muster the strength to not plunge into despair and to work toward needed changes. Clearly,

then, the overall sequencing of the exercise was geared at moving us from pain to empowerment. Yet, in every instance, questions invited ethical engagements with ourselves and our surroundings. Even if the task was not to educate one another, the way the task was designed coupled one's own introspections with learning from each other by way of listening attentively to what was said. It was a moment of addressing emotions and of setting the stage for working emotions in order to care differently. Reflecting and exchanging, we were bound up in an exercise of becoming otherwise.

The means we considered nourishing and generative were quite similar. Those means involved prominently being in the companionship of nature and of like-minded people, to moments of celebration and connection and to the experience of community. None of this may be surprising, and it resonates with notions of well-being among white urban middle classes in the early 2020s. But it also demarcated an emerging political practice that was critical for rendering futures on nonpredictive terms (Ballester 2019). What we did was not only identify possible means of staying sound and alert but also probe the terrain that was to be an important site of utopian becomings.

Envisioning futures—as something to prepare for and something to mold our will into being—informs a vast terrain of social practices. Even while utopian thinking lost much of its currency after the long twentieth century, social movements have been careful also in attempting to harness utopian practice, no longer postponing utopian modes of being but using them as a way to foster transformation by way of seeding possibilities and anchoring experimentation toward the just or good. Climate activism is a case in point (Malm 2021; Von Redecker 2020), for two reasons. On the one hand, climate activists agree that the realignment of private practices, in terms of consumption or mobility, is key to avoiding collapse. Such realignments do not necessarily entail sacrifice, but proponents rather see it as tapping into abundance—an abundance here cast in ways that are more or less radically different from the logics and aesthetics of capitalist markets (Hickel 2020). In other words, abstaining from consuming as recklessly as “the market” demands not only means contributing to avoiding planetary breakdown but also enabling living “earthbound” (Latour 2018)—that is, rooted, embedded in mutual care, and decelerating. On the other hand, and this is the point I want to emphasize here, harnessing utopian practice in the here and now articulates a tension that underpins contemporary climate activism. I am referring to what might be perceived of as the loss of utopia, or more precisely, the mounting realization that the Anthropocene can neither be upended nor undone; that species, landscapes, or quality of life are being irreversibly lost; and that the restoration of pristine or intact nature—whatever that would mean—is outright impossible. In other words, there is no perfect state attainable, no utopia waiting, only ways of living well amid, and along with, environs turning increasingly hostile, thin, and vacant. But this does not amount, I suggest, to the dilution or cancellation of utopia in a dystopian moment. At stake here are utopian becomings operating in the open, without a blueprint or detailed vision that inform what I call subjunctive ecologies.

Our reflecting in breakaway rooms—framed by check-ins, feedback circles, and singing-bowl meditations—opened a space for ethical labor

seeking not merely to provide strength or resilience for the long way ahead nor to convey visions of utopia. It rather enabled reflecting on helpful relations or subjectivities within crisis-laden conditions and anchoring a sense that they matter for the movement. It provided for cultivating specific practices and stances of care in a subjunctive mode. And from here becoming appears itself utopian—the subject of carving out a space for futures otherwise.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, I have examined ethical conduct inherent to activists' versions of regenerative cultures (in the plural). If, as I have argued, the ethico-political kernel of activist visions of regenerative cultures consists of the reconfiguration of care (toward self or nonhuman others), it also is a practice of future-making cohering around ethical labor.

The key relevance of time to anything labeled regenerative is in one way obvious, for regeneration never occurs instantaneously and adherence to it requires temporal reckoning. I have complicated the account by highlighting further temporal modes informing ethical labor set into motion by activists. These include retrospective visions, subjunctive ecologies, and recursive circuits of (self)cultivation. Taken together, these modes make up what I have called utopian becomings. I have argued that such becomings aim to uncover what is latent and to anchor desired transformations within the here and now of embodied and emotionally charged practice of self-fashioning along with others. Accounting for ethical labor demonstrates that utopian becomings here cohere around transformations instead of blueprints and on recursive engagements instead of implementing readymade alternatives. This is to say that the optic of “regenerative cultures” calls attention to the way activists strive to attune themselves to nonlinear temporalities and material enmeshments, making up the web of life while being at odds with mainstream takes on the nature of nature. This holds promise both for rethinking the place of politics in contemporary environmentalism and for theorizing future-making.

Striving to care and to relate differently brings into relief internalized dimensions of political practice that remain largely hidden yet are reiteratively bound up with other, more visible forms of activism. Complementing emerging research on internalized or subjective articulations of political practice, I call attention to the experimental and open-ended character of such doings. I have argued that activists do not engage in prefigurative politics. Instead, they seek ways to relate differently and mobilize affective dimensions and temporalities in attempts to reach there. Zooming in on this mode of utopian becomings further, I suggest, the theorization of Anthropocene politics. As this new epoch is dawning on humankind, politics get multiplied once again and become mired in ever more uncertainties. The utopian becomings I have described here demonstrate how the realization of uncertainties, enfolded temporal patterns, and affective dimensions not only ooze into political activism but instigate novel forms of doing politics. Echoing the openness of the future as the “Anthropocene” inserts itself into a political climate wary of grand narratives yet restless for change, regenerative cultures' ethico-political kernel remains



fundamentally open. Devoid of blueprints, and operating in nonpredictive terms, it seeks to enable ways of doing things differently in an attempt to embody space for an “otherwise” (Povinelli 2011). I read this otherwise to be utopian, in the terms of contemporary theorization of utopia, as it seeks to enable being differently in ephemeral forms and encounters that still are hoped to leave an imprint and radiate out. But it is specific, I contend, in that it strives to prepare the ground of being differently with nonhuman beings by cultivating affective registers of care and mutuality.

In this view, ethical practice amid planetary injury appears as an exercise in providing static—in Michel Serres’s (2013) sense—that might contribute to destabilizing mainstream approaches. Regenerative cultures as ethical practice appears as a mode of politics targeting the intimate in order to bring about change at the planetary level across varying temporal registers that hang together in tension. Tracing regenerative cultures, then, is not only an exercise in rethinking ethics in the Anthropocene. It also contributes to the anthropology of the future from what is deemed inner practice.

In so doing, regenerative cultures’ ethical dimensions sit awkwardly between the poles of liberation or freedom and survival at odds that have occupied the anthropology of ethics for so long. In other words, regenerative cultures’ ethico-political kernel oscillates between attempts to bring about desired futures and attempts to uphold life in the interstices of a dehumanizing present. It is driven by attempts to bring about hospitable futures as the world is seen to fall apart.

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#### ORCID

Arne Harms  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0204-0052>

#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup> All names are anonymized.

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