



14

CATASTROPHE AS USUAL

Learning to live with extremity

Nigel Clark

World's end

'Let's start with the end of the world, why don't we? Get it over with and move on to more interesting things' (2015, p. 1). So begins N.K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* fantasy series that imagines a tectonically hyperactive Earth whose inhabitants lurch from seismic upheaval to another, culminating in geocatastrophe so monstrous that it will cause climatic chaos lasting thousands of years. The three-volume story revolves around a minority of people who have the ability to both trigger and quell geological activity – a talent for which they are forced into the role of absorbing the shocks of the volatile Earth on behalf of the rest of society. If this is a tale that speaks to the geophysical anxieties of the present, so too does it address deep-seated issues of injustice. Jemisin began writing the trilogy at the height of the targeted police violence that sparked the Black Lives Matter movement. Her description of a key character leaves little doubt as to the history she has in mind: 'he reaches forth with all the fine control that the world has brainwashed and backstabbed and brutalized out of him, and all the sensitivity that his masters have bred into him through generations of rape and coercion and highly unnatural selection' (2015, p. 6).

Images of catastrophe are all around us at the moment, in film, literature, scientific reports, on the lips and placards of our children – and keep in mind that I first wrote this prior to the COVID-19 outbreak. It's worth remembering, however, that Susan Sontag's essay 'Imagination of disaster', an inquiry into the pervasive representation of apocalyptic destruction in science fiction cinema, is over half a century old. 'Universes become expendable. Worlds become contaminated, burnt out, exhausted, obsolete', she muses, in tone that's anything but dated (1966, p. 219). Sontag's point was that fictional rehearsals of cataclysm bypassed anything remotely like social criticism, the conventions of the genre avoiding any consideration of the social and political forces that engendered the catastrophes in question. A similar argument is channelled through endless citations of Frederic Jameson's remark 'that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism' (2003, p. 76). But the alleged apoliticism of the catastrophic trope gets a resounding retort from Jemisin, whose characters rage against their oppression with every means at their disposal. Likewise, what many critical political thinkers have been saying about the vice-grip of compliant, individualised neoliberal subjectivities seems not to have sunk in for today's climate change activists or those who have

rapidly mobilised around the coronavirus crisis. And in the shadow of growing climate catastrophe, rising pressures for global decarbonisation, and the current global health emergency, it is not only 'extremists' who are beginning to think that capitalism may be in for a hell of a shake-up.

Cataclysmic and apocalyptic motifs are ancient, and many of their manifestations have been and remain otherworldly in orientation – devastation being taken as a pathway to ascend beyond earthly finitude. My concern here is more focused. I am interested in how critical thinkers – those with a more-or-less secular commitment to transforming worldly conditions – negotiate between extreme events and the possibility of human-directed societal transformation. Catastrophes, I suggest, have a slippery and contentious presence in contemporary social inquiry. This is not simply because they demand that we think the unthinkable but also because of the way that every actual or anticipated catastrophe is haunted by another kind of rupture. Radical social thought and practice, it hardly needs to be said, is deeply invested in the idea of breaks in the continuity of social existence and transitions to new and better social orders (See John Clarke, this volume). But the upheavals that are actually visited upon us, or that seem always to be gathering on the horizon, are only very rarely the ones that progressive thinkers desire and work towards. Amongst critical intellectuals, while there is considerable agreement that we live in catastrophic times, there is a great deal of disagreement about how the catastrophes that occur far too often are related to the societal discontinuities that happen not nearly often enough.

Few would doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic is a catastrophe. But while this event justifiably captures so much attention, it has irrupted into worlds already brimming with situations, conditions, incidents that have also been described as catastrophic. So how bad do things have to get before they count as a catastrophe? Those who meditate on the ethical significance of catastrophes often note the inappropriateness of applying metrics to events that occasion loss and suffering. Though attentive to the 'millions of radically endangered strangers' who constitute the contemporary refugee crisis, Michael Dillon seeks ways of addressing this predicament 'that would apply even if there were only one displaced, nonassignable, human being in the world' (1999, pp. 109, 105). On the other hand, social scientific analyses have noted that in practice workable distinctions between catastrophes and accidents, emergencies, crises, or disasters are often set in place. Claudia Aradau and Rens van Munster offer the following example: 'The FEMA (US Federal Emergency Management Agency) training on risk and disaster management ... differentiates catastrophes from disasters, which are considered less destructive' (2011, p. 28; see also Adey *et al.* 2015). While some of the work I will be touching upon seems to conceive of the catastrophe as a specific level or magnitude of damage, my sympathies lie with styles of catastrophic thinking that approach extreme events in terms of the particular challenges to thought and action they pose – which usually involves some sense that how we theorise these events should itself be perturbed by the intensities of suffering or loss that appear before us.

It is this putting into question of available or conventional ways of accounting for what sometimes happens to our worlds – rather than the scale of any particular geological upheaval – that Jean-François Lyotard is getting at when he reflects: 'Suppose an earthquake destroys not only lives, but the instruments used to measure earthquakes directly and indirectly' (1988, p. 56). Here we can identify a family resemblance between Lyotard's sublime and a range of other invocations of extremity that includes Maurice Blanchot's disaster (1995), Edith Wyschogrod's cataclysm (1998), James Berger's apocalypse (1999), and Deborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's ends of the world (2017). Although arising from varying contexts, such approaches share common themes. There is a sense that the events in question

constitute a significant temporal break. If not necessarily unanticipated, such events overwhelm personal or societal coping mechanisms. They are traumatic, inflicting lasting wounds and irrecoverable loss. This damage not only affects lives and worlds but impacts upon the language through which realities were previously made intelligible. Through this making strange of both worlds and words, the disruptive event serves as provocation to think and act otherwise, but that incitement is perplexing because the speech it cries out for cannot yet exist.

While we can attempt to conceptualise extremity along these or other lines, those who have experienced catastrophes demand of us that we witness their tribulation in all its singularity. Which is to say that catastrophes call for proper names: we are summoned to view them as befalling particular people in particular times and places, and not simply as examples of more general conditions, categories, and types. But this is far from straightforward. For as Wyschogrod impresses upon us, no sooner do we name an event than questions arise about who is to be included, how experiences that come under the denomination differ from each other, and what to do when the afflicted may themselves have been involved in acts we do not condone (1998, pp. 12–4).

Rather than seeking to untangle all these issues, I want to focus on what social thinkers make of, or do with, events that are experienced as extreme. What I am curious about is the largely unspoken complicity between critical thought and the catastrophe: the shared stock-in-trade we have with de-familiarisation, the making strange of the given, the taking apart of the taken-for-granted. After looking at some of the different ways in which social thinkers engage with the idea of the catastrophe, I consider historical shifts in the attribution of catastrophic status to situations and events. This leads to a consideration of how the thematisation of discontinuity in the writing of the catastrophe relates to more ordinary and ongoing efforts to reduce pain, injury, and damage in social life, raising questions about what it might mean to ‘de-exceptionalise’ extreme events. While in no way wishing to depreciate the horrors of the COVID-19 crisis, my main focus will be on the global environmental predicament: a situation that we have had longer to absorb and process, and one that will remain profoundly important whatever trajectory the current pandemic takes.

The work of catastrophe

‘For better or worse’ observes Bonnie Honig (2015, p. 624) ‘...democratic theory and practice today are enveloped in the trope of catastrophe’. There is nothing especially contentious about this claim, but the idea that democracy – concerned with what is collectively ‘doable’ – is bound up with catastrophe – the experience of the ‘unthinkable’ says something of the anxieties and frustrations of our time. What political work is catastrophe doing, we need to ask, and how helpful is this work for the task of thinking and making our social realities otherwise?

Let’s start with those who take the presence of catastrophe in contemporary politics for worse, as they currently appear to be in the majority. Today we find frequent echoes of Sontag’s concern that making a spectacle out of destruction serves as a diversion from properly critical social inquiry. The point is often made that the kind of high drama that most informational or infotainment media alight upon detracts attention from the attritional grind of everyday injustice and worldly degradation. As Rob Nixon (2011, p. 3) puts it: ‘Falling bodies, burning towers, exploding heads, avalanches, volcanoes, and tsunami have a visceral, eye-catching and page-turning power that tales of slow violence, unfolding over years, decades, even centuries, cannot match’. Isabelle Stengers (2010, p. 4) makes the related point that the most urgent task of contemporary political activity is the painstaking bringing into visibility

of otherwise insensible or unimaginable problems, as opposed to embracing those more blatantly disastrous events that already ‘have the power to force unanimous recognition’.

Such claims, on closer inspection, are less blanket dismissals of catastrophic themes as they are calls to be attentive to the multiple temporalities, scales and compositions of processes that do damage. There are more sweeping indictments of catastrophic motifs which contend that powerful actors the world over are deliberately promoting fear over impending disaster as a way to undermine potential political challenges – an assertion that often takes its cues from Walter Benjamin’s observation at a crisis point in the mid-twentieth century that the otherwise exceptional ‘state of emergency’ had become normalised (1969, p. 257; see also Honig 2009, pp. xv–xvi). This claim is often linked to the idea of a generalised condition of depoliticisation in which the ‘authentic’ political will to contest existing social orders is being ceaselessly eroded by the advance of techno-managerial planning. As Eric Swyngedouw (2010, p. 219) would have it: ‘apocalyptic imaginaries are extraordinarily powerful in disavowing or displacing social conflict and antagonisms’. A frequent corollary of this argument is the charge that neoliberal capitalism is ever poised to convert pervasive anxiety into new profit-making ventures (Cooper 2006, Klein 2007, see John Clarke, this volume).

It’s worth pausing here and considering the stress that Swyngedouw and so many other critical thinkers put on *social* conflict or contestation – a weighting that has its counterpart in the axiom that ‘there is no such thing as a natural disaster’. Neil Smith (2005) performs a version of this denaturalising of disaster in the context of Hurricane Katrina: ‘In every phase and aspect of a disaster – causes, vulnerability, preparedness, results and response, and reconstruction’, he declares, ‘the contours of disaster and the difference between who lives and who dies is to a greater or lesser extent a social calculus’. Whatever may have sparked the crisis, Smith wants to convince us, what we should look for in the unfolding of the extreme event is the surfacing, the becoming visible, of pre-existing states of injustice and exclusion. In other words, what catastrophes do, or should be encouraged to do, is to strip away the protective veneer of normality and expose the underlying social structural fault-lines. And so the ‘social calculus’ in question is one that has clearly been worked out in advance by left intellectuals.

Read in this way, just about any conceivable or inconceivable catastrophe is open to being recuperated for progressively useful political work. To give an example, whereas many left-liberal social thinkers once viewed climate change and ecological degradation as distractions from the project of revolutionary transformation, it is now common to read these same threats as incontrovertible evidence of the necessity of such change. Far from displacing social conflict and deflecting political mobilisation, in this regard, a correctly deciphered catastrophe ought to serve as a pathway to political awakening and radical social action (See John Clarke, this volume). Along these lines, Ulrich Beck (2015, p. 77) makes the case for an ‘emancipatory catastrophism’ in which the very shock of the extreme event can prompt ‘cathartic’ new forms of awareness that reignite the possibility of ‘the transfiguration of the social and political order’. Other progressive thinkers affirm that the kinds of spontaneous nonhierarchical self-organisation that often occur during catastrophic events serve as prefigurations of alternative social worlds (see Solnit 2009).

It would appear, then, that the trope of catastrophe has been appraised and set to work by critical social thinkers in a range of ways. But rather than simply concluding that catastrophes are relational – that their meaning or value shifts from one context to another – I want to dig a little deeper into the ambivalence around the question of whether extreme events do positive or pernicious political work. What’s at stake here, I suggest, goes beyond the immediate contours and effects of those situations that are diagnosed as catastrophic, or the act of making such diagnoses, and opens up questions about how we imagine that social change can or ought

to occur. This brings us back to the point I made earlier that critical thought tends to invest heavily in the unsettling of apparently given or unexamined aspects of social existence, which is also the effect attributed to the catastrophe. And in this way, the tussling over the socio-political valence of the catastrophe draws us into questions about the different ways theorists conceive of the relationship between the ordinary and the extraordinary, the orderly and the disruptive, the familiar and the strange.

It's worth returning at this stage to those thinkers who have dwelt upon the more existential or phenomenological dimensions of the catastrophe: to Lyotard, Blanchot, Wyschogrod and fellow theorists of extremity who we met in the opening section. For what their writing serves to do is to discourage any supposition that the catastrophe can be straightforwardly set to work, for whatever end. Such thought is not averse to conceiving of the catastrophe as exposing shortfalls in the existing order – but this point is fairly obvious, for no collective can anticipate every imaginable threat. What it does find problematic is the idea that the logic of the catastrophe is to reveal a deeper, truer reality. For such reasoning assumes that both the underlying condition and its diagnosis precedes and endures the event in question. It implies that the catastrophe confirms rather than confounds our existing grids of intelligibility, that it lays waste to lives and worlds while leaving thought itself unscathed or even reinforced (Clark 2011, pp. 65–6).

We might say that what these thinkers are seeking to do is to write *through* rather than simply *about* catastrophes. The catastrophe can't just be set to work to support an existing project – even a radical one – they contend, because the very future-orientation of work or a project is undone by the event (Wyschogrod 1998, pp. 225–9). And that includes the project of thought or critique. For the catastrophe, as we saw earlier, is by definition the event that is of such contrariety that it jeopardises the language, the narratives, the theories we would otherwise reach for to make sense of it. So as Blanchot (1997, p. 103) would insist, this means that if the catastrophe does not to some degree 'renew the language that conveys it', we who would engage with it have not allowed ourselves to feel its full force.

It is important to recall that for these thinkers, the shock of the catastrophe is much more than a matter of scale: as exemplified by Dillon's point that a single 'displaced, nonassignable, human being' ought to be enough to shake up the contemporary political imagination. For the most searching catastrophic inquiry is a way of apprehending the eventfulness of the world rather than a measure of the size, speed or physical destructiveness of the events in question. Its message, above all, is an insistence on the finitude of bodies and collectivities, and a reminder that thought itself is not immune to the forces that injure flesh and devastate communities.

Such sensibilities, however, need not lead us to the purity of the absolute break or the sharp contrast of normality and rupture. The idea that every community, every polity, is constructed across fault-lines of trauma and loss can be taken to suggest not only that the experiences associated with catastrophe are originary, but that they are in a certain sense immanent or endemic to 'ordinary' life (Wyschogrod 1998, p. xvi, Clark 2011, pp. 153–9). And in this regard, suffering injury and loss, struggling for words, feeling the frames through which we apprehend the world flex and buckle may be as much within as beyond the flow of everyday existence.

We can see such logic at play in Anne Michaels' *Fugitive Pieces* (1997), a novel which is ostensibly about the Holocaust – that proper name of catastrophe that is sometimes taken to be the epitome of total rupture and exceptionality. But without diminishing the horrors inflicted upon central Europe's Jewish people, Michaels depicts a world in which ongoing change and upheaval, continuity and disruption appear more enfolded than opposed. 'The present, like a landscape, is only a small part of a mysterious narrative' she writes. 'A narrative of catastrophe

and slow accumulation' (1997, p. 48). Honig (2009, p. xviii) sets out to do something similar with political thought. She does not deny the force or significance of extreme events, but encourages us to 'de-exceptionalise the emergency': to partake in the kind of thinking and practice that 'cuts across the binary of extraordinary versus ordinary, rupture versus procedural'. Or as Jemisin (2017, p. 170) expresses a similar intuition: 'One person's normal is another person's Shattering'.

There is something else that Michaels and Jemisin have in common. Both authors move fluently between themes of profound social injustice and the upheavals of the Earth. Yet in neither case is the rifting of the physical world intended simply as a metaphor for social fracturing or as a device to disclose 'underlying' societal divisions. For Jemisin and Michaels, then, social and physical realities are equally liable to generate disturbances of varying intensities, albeit it in entangled, overlapping ways. In this regard, both authors serve as guides not only to the onto-existential dimensions of the extreme event, but to the particular conformations of catastrophe gathering on the contemporary horizon.

For it indeed matters what kind of upheaval we are grappling with, I want to argue, just as it matters who is being impacted and what kinds of political responses the event incites. Concerted monitoring of atmospheric carbon dioxide levels is not the same thing as relentless surveillance of social 'outsiders' or 'deviants', just as imposing quarantine in the face of life-threatening infectious disease outbreaks is different from placing political opponents under curfew or house arrest. If assigning the specificity of a proper name to the catastrophe is important, I am suggesting, then this applies no less to the particularity of the stimuli or conditions that trigger an extreme event. And in the case of a great many contemporary challenges, the dynamics of the unfolding catastrophe bring social thought into conversation with the natural sciences. But so too do extreme events bring the knowledge practices of the West into dialogue with a wealth of other ways of knowing or experiencing the world.

Changing contours of catastrophe

I have been proposing that painful, language-defying, frame-shattering experiences might be more widely distributed throughout social life than is often implied in critical thought's putting to work of catastrophe. More 'democratic' distributions of the experiential dimensions of catastrophe, however, come with risks of their own. Judith Butler (1993, p. 202) pointedly asks whether such generalisations can 'respond to the pressure to theorize the historical specificity of trauma, to provide texture for ... specific exclusions, annihilations, and unthinkable losses'. Butler's recuperation of the proper names of catastrophe also opens up the political issue of which catastrophes count or can be made to count, and whose lives are grievable. This is a problem that animates many of the responses of Indigenous, colonised, or formerly enslaved peoples to scientific narratives on global warming and Earth system change, the challenge that resounds through Jemisin's *Broken Earth* trilogy. It is the issue that Frantz Fanon (1986, p. 87) prised open over sixty years ago when he provocatively referred to the Holocaust as 'little family quarrels' – in this way challenging Europeans to be as disturbed by the devastation wrought by colonisation as they were of the carnage committed on their own soil.

What makes the Holocaust paradigmatic of catastrophe in western discourses is not only its depth of loss and suffering but the paradox that the Reason we might turn to in order to make sense of the atrocity is profoundly implicated in its perpetration. In a related sense, the atomic bombs detonated over Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the sudden lurch from World War II to the Cold War nuclear arms race embroils scientific rationality – with its self-image of making the world more intelligible – in the possible extermination of all sensibility (Blanchot 1997,

pp. 101–8). With the prominence of natural science in the disclosure of global environmental hazards, something of this enigma has been diluted. But in another sense, what science is now telling us about the way the Earth operates serves to extend and elaborate upon the motif of catastrophe (Clark 2017).

Modern western science has its own versions of catastrophe. Catastrophism – as opposed to Uniformitarianism or gradualism – was the early nineteenth century hypothesis that the Earth had been shaped in deep time through successive geological upheavals. Overshadowed but not entirely eclipsed by the slow-moving incrementalism associated with Darwinian evolution, it was not until the latter twentieth century that catastrophic change made a full comeback in the natural sciences (Brooke 2014, pp. 1–8). Initially, the idea of ‘catastrophic shifts’ was a value neutral term that referred to any relatively rapid transition in the operating state of an ecosystem or other physical system (Scheffer *et al.* 2001). But a series of developments in Earth and life science increasingly pointed towards catastrophic changes that operated at the planetary scale, a theme that crystallised in the 1980s hypothesis that the Earth’s climate system had, in the past, frequently passed through abrupt transitions (Clark 2011, pp. 116–21). In the early years of the current century, the idea of the vulnerability of climate and other aspects of the Earth system to catastrophic shifts triggered by human agency – shorthanded in the Anthropocene concept – has emerged as the preeminent global figure of catastrophe (See Clark and Szerszynski 2021, Noel Castree, this volume).

Catastrophe, it is important to note, is no longer simply an empirical concept in the natural sciences. The more that ‘neo-catastrophist’ Earth and life science discovers about the inherent dynamism of our planet, the more that human life appears contingent and precarious – even before we factor in human-induced perturbations to Earth systems. As Timothy Morton (2012, p. 233) elaborates, geoscience finds itself confronting ‘an abyss whose reality becomes increasingly uncanny, not less, the more scientific instruments are able to probe it’. Faced with accelerating environmental change and the increasing likelihood of human-induced abrupt transitions in Earth systems, many scientists are not only becoming ever more politicised but having to deal with the trauma of the permanent loss of life-forms or landforms around which they have constructed their working lives. In this context, as [Native American](#) scholar-activist Kyle Whyte (2017, pp. 158–9) and others have suggested, there is much that western science might learn from Indigenous communities – not just about filling in ‘gaps in climate science research’ but about living on through catastrophic events.

As Whyte’s comments suggest, the idea that western science might have something to learn from Indigenous thought and practice is more than an addendum or complement to globally dominant discursive frameworks. While blatant climate denial is on the retreat, the paramount status that scientifically-framed threats to Earth systems are now acquiring is being questioned in ways that are analogous to Fanon’s unsettling of the exemplariness of the Holocaust. Just as the coronavirus pandemic has reopened painful memories of past outbreaks of infectious disease, so too have theorists from Indigenous and colonised worlds been arguing that, for their people, the ending of worlds signalled by narratives of climate change and the Anthropocene [have](#) already occurred, often repeatedly. As Whyte puts it: ‘the hardships many nonIndigenous people dread most of the climate crisis are ones that Indigenous peoples have endured already due to different forms of colonialism: ecosystem collapse, species loss, economic crash, drastic relocation, and cultural disintegration’ (2018, p. 226; see also Davis and Todd 2017).

Such claims challenge the right of European or western thinkers to preside over the designation of planet-scaled catastrophe (See Noel Castree, this volume). But at the same time, the logic with which Indigenous and decolonising thinkers question whether diagnosis of the

planetary predicament can be entrusted to the same scientific reasoning that informed and benefitted from colonial projects can be seen as an extension of one of the classic catastrophic themes. For in condemning the way that western science has served to marginalise and disavow the knowledge practices of others, scholars and activists from colonised regions offer their own version of the idea that thought itself ought not to escape unscathed from acts of destruction in which it is implicated.

Indigenous thinkers are by no means alone in questioning the proper-naming of today's unfolding planetary catastrophe as the Anthropocene. Rather than get into debates about how best to diagnose and denominate the current geohistorical juncture, I want to consider in more depth how issues arising out of the current contouring of dangerous Earth system change and its contestations might help us to explore and develop the idea of the de-exceptionalising of catastrophe.

Living with catastrophic ordinariness

In the previous section we saw how the natural sciences have been developing an idea of catastrophism that has been on a convergent course with the more philosophical concern with the vulnerability of social life to traumatic disturbance. This confluence of broadly western ways of thinking about catastrophe also finds itself increasingly in conversation with Indigenous and other colonised peoples who have endured successive waves of calamitous change. This encounter can be viewed in terms of multiplying or pluralising experiences of catastrophe. But if we are interested in thinking about the relationship between normality and extremity, we might also discern certain resonances or intersections between renewed western scientific interest in catastrophism and a world of other ways of living with and through potentially hazardous events. There are three aspects of this I want to explore.

First, I would suggest that, in their own ways, the narratives of Earth system science and those of Indigenous peoples who have inhabited landscapes over extended timescales both provide insights into the way in which abrupt and gradual change are enfolded into each another. Whether disclosed by western or Indigenous sciences, deep temporal histories of ecosystems and Earth systems generally support Michaels' intuition that 'catastrophe and slow accumulation' (or we might add catastrophe and slow violence) are implicated rather than opposed. Attention to the temporalities and rhythms of complex systems not only foregrounds the ongoing demands of riding out peaks and troughs but highlights the challenge of periodically enduring more encompassing forms of systemic reorganisation (Cruikshank 2005, pp. 9–12, Danowski and Viveiros de Castro 2017, p. 68). Moreover, to live in intimate contact with such variability is to know that sooner or later coping mechanisms will be pushed to their limits.

It matters what temporal scales we take into our purview. Situations that can be cataclysmic from the point of view of collectivities – by no means composed solely of humans – take on a tone of ordinariness when they are read through the discordant rhythms of the Earth. In this regard, the semi-autonomous communities or 'comms' in which much Jemisin's *Broken Earth* trilogy are set offer a sustained rumination on political formation during times of extreme stress. Part eco-commune, part runaway slave settlement, Jemisin's comms are not always paragons of deliberation and consensus building, though 'impromptu councils' have an important place (2017, p. 152, 2016). What they provide is an occasion to speculate about possible forms of community building, decision-making and provisioning under conditions in which survival depends on speedy improvisation – including mobility and resettlement. And what Jemisin also reminds us is that trauma is to be expected, such that the work of mourning

and other ways of dealing with loss can be as much a part of everyday life as matters of livelihood or ongoing political altercation.

The shifting configurations of catastrophe I have been sketching out indicate how important it is to cultivate the kind of politics that treats extremity as a possibility implicit in the everyday rather than as the categorical other of normality and routine. In this regard, rather than simply reading Benjamin as a theorist of the crushing, depoliticising normalisation of the 'state of emergency', we should also appreciate his observations on the way that everyday economic life under conditions of capitalist modernity generates waste, ruin, and loss (1969, pp. 256–8): an insight that anticipates key themes in later environmentalist discourses.

Attentive to such mundane ruination, Stengers is right to insist that in attending to political issue formation we shouldn't let big, loud events drown out the murmuring of microphysical trouble in-the-making, though it is worth remembering that disasters which 'force recognition' themselves tend to be incubated under conditions of obscurity or insufficient awareness. An enhanced sensitivity to the rumbling potentialities of the Earth commends us too to Roberto Unger's insistence that 'even without the provocation of trauma we can render our daily experience more intense even as we enhance our powers' (2007, p. 182). Unger's point is that ~~we were to~~ view our forms of democracy as being in need of constant experimentation then we might reduce the dependence of social change on the incitements of catastrophe (2007, p. 138). To put this another way, he is counselling us not to rely on upheaval, rupture and ruin to do the work of stretching the frames of the political and renewing the grammars of ethico-political expression – but to treat this as the unexceptional task of politics (see also Barnett 2017, p. 61).

Which leads to the second point I want to draw out of the contact zone between different ways of dealing with worldly perturbation and stress. In worlds in which variability – including extreme and abrupt change – is acknowledged as more-or-less ordinary, politics itself may not be as ubiquitous as it often appears in critical discourses. Or rather, the line between the material practices constitutive of livelihood and the deliberative practices definitive of the political are likely to be blurred. As Andrew Barry (2010, p. 109) observes, materials become topics of political controversy and issue formation under certain circumstances: 'only occasionally, not in general'. Extreme situations may well initiate Jemisin's 'impromptu councils' – or better still, deliberation might be launched by awareness of the extremity slumbering in any context. But we should also appreciate that not all improvisations and experiments are political, and that a great deal of the work that goes into living with and through variability is not dependent upon explicit problematisation, public address, or agonistic clashes. Neither should we assume that the lack of visibility of the political implies it was once present and has now dissipated.

To give an example, it has been noted that many traditional landholders use fire as a form of political resistance when their customary land use practices are under threat, especially in colonial contexts. But in a close reading of Madagascan political ecologies, Christian Kull proposes that what may actually be happening is that local people take advantage of social or political distractions to resuscitate long-established but prohibited modes of grassland and woodland management. 'In Madagascar, more often than not, people light fires during elections or periods of unrest not to protest the state, but to take advantage of state distraction in order to renew their pastures, reduce the fuel load, or clear brush without fear of enforcement' Kull notes (2002, p. 949). As he elaborates: 'The observed logic and patterns of resource use strongly point to the conclusion that most fires are a straightforward livelihood practice (if at times politically savvy), and not overt protest'. Which is to say that when people are grappling with the vagaries of the world around them, we shouldn't be too quick to conclude that their actions are

primarily political. As Kull's reference to reducing fuel loads intimates, intentional burning is an ancient and widespread means of reducing wildfire hazard, and more generally of dealing proactively with pulsing rhythms of climate and ecology. In short, selective firing of grassland and woodland in much of the world is an ordinary way of mitigating potentially disastrous environmental fluctuations, as many western ecologists have come to understand.

As with much other customary land management, however, there are often deep histories of struggle and loss sedimented in routine burning practices. Learning to work with fire – including adaptation to new fire regimes when climate switches or when people migrate – is never easy (Langton 1999, p. 169). Wildfire hews to its own agenda, and to bend this in new directions usually involves lifetimes of risky experimentation (Clark 2008, 2011, pp. 174–6). This applies not only to fire. There are many contexts in which institutional repertoires and infrastructure embody hard won collective knowledge about living with volatile Earth and life processes. This is another reason why we need to be cautious about generic claims of depoliticisation, for the prioritisation of insurrectionary rupture may not be the best way of respecting the mundane material practices that are already oriented to risk and extremity. And where there are 'long histories of having to be well-organized to adapt to seasonal and inter-annual environmental changes' (Whyte 2017, p. 153) practitioners rarely take kindly to seeing deeply valued knowhow wrenched out of context and exposed to the harsh light of political wrangling.

Having gone to some lengths to render catastrophes more worldly, to weave them into the fabric and flow of everyday socio-material existence, my third and final point takes a turn back to the 'cosmic' – by way of considering the questions of finitude and exposure that are at the core of truly catastrophic thinking. I have been suggesting that the contentiousness of the catastrophe and kindred terms in critical social thought is tied up with tendencies to invest deeply in temporalities of rupture and discontinuity. In response, we have looked at some different approaches that help us to see how extreme events and the way they are experienced might be de-exceptionalised by folding them back into the rhythms, tempos, singularities, and concatenations that are ordinary aspects of earthbound life.

When we consider such enfolding, our own constitutive vulnerability – 'the afflictions and perturbations we are subject to as embodied creatures' (Turner 2006, p. 36) – is never far away. Social and political thinkers who are working to de-dramatise rupture and catastrophe draw our attention to the numerous ways that even relatively modest revisions of democratic practice can greatly reduce the risk, injury, and pain to which people are exposed. And yet, sooner or later, the catastrophic thematic must confront the fact that there are limits to the capacity to overcome suffering and loss. However much stress is put on the social conditioning of vulnerability and on the ability of judicious political action to alter these conditions, the writing of the catastrophe reminds us that the jurisdiction of the sociopolitical goes only so far. In an eloquent response to the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, Rebecca Solnit (2005, unpag) put it like this:

The relief will be very political, in who gives how much and to whom it is given, but the event itself transcends politics, the realm of things we cause and can work to prevent. We cannot wish that human beings were not subject to the forces of nature, including the mortality that is so central a part of our own nature. We cannot wish that the seas dry up, that the waves grow still, that the tectonic plates cease to exist, that nature ceases to be beyond our abilities to predict and control. But the terms of that nature include such catastrophe and such suffering, which leaves us with sorrow not as problem to be solved but a fact.

The critical incantation that ‘there is no such thing as a natural disaster’ has been less than helpful in encouraging us to probe these outer limits of the social or the political. But some theorists have begun to give serious thought to the indeterminate zone where what is amenable to our own influence fades into the inaccessible, the immutable and the indifferent. Resonating with Solnit’s observations, Rebekah Sheldon (2016, p. 66) ponders how ‘potential catastrophe marks the limit of political resistance’, while Claire Colebrook (2011, p. 11) evokes what lies on the other side of this limit as the ‘monstrously impolitic’. In a related sense, Elizabeth Grosz (2008, p. 23) introduces the idea of ‘cosmological imponderables’ in reference to ‘forces beyond the control of life that extend life beyond itself’.

It is significant that Grosz speaks of extending life, for this reminds us that our organismic perviousness to powers beyond our willing is not just a matter of exposure to harm but of the capacity of living things to become more or other than they are now. Again, this sense that humans and other life forms are constitutively open to potentially life-changing forces beyond their control is suggestive that we shouldn’t draw sharp divides between the earthbound and the cosmological, the this-worldly and the other-worldly. But then, of course, there have long been life-ways and worldviews in which the relationship between these domains is handled in very different ways.

Over recent decades, Indigenous peoples and others with deep place-based traditions have increasingly been drawing the attention of their western interlocutors to the range of ways they deal with everyday uncertainties that both can and can’t be evaded. This often includes figures – such as earth beings, spirits, ancestors – who specialise in mediating between different domains of existence (Whyte 2018; de la Cadena 2015). Not only are these more-or-other-than-human entities making inroads into political arenas, there is growing intercultural appreciation of the role they can play in helping embodied, earthly beings deal with the inherent changeability of their worlds and their own inescapable vulnerability (Clark and Szerszynski 2021, pp. 160–8).

These burgeoning conversations point to ways in which the motif of catastrophe can offer hinges between otherwise very different ‘ecologies of practice’ (de la Cadena 2015). Such openings onto the question of how to live with catastrophic ordinariness may turn out to be more provocative than assuming we know in advance what extreme events will reveal to us, and more generative than holding our breath for a world-transfiguring rupture.

References

- Adey, P., Anderson, B., and Graham, S., 2015. Introduction: governing emergencies: beyond exceptionality. *Theory, Culture and Society*, 32 (2), 3–17.
- Aradau, C. and van Munster, R., 2011. *The politics of catastrophe: genealogies of the unknown*. London: Routledge.
- Barnett, C., 2017. *The priority of injustice: locating democracy in critical theory*. Athens: University of Georgia Press.
- Barry, A., 2010. Materialist politics: metallurgy. In: B. Braun and S. Whatmore, eds. *Political matter: technoscience, democracy and public life*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 89–117.
- Beck, U., 2015. Emancipatory catastrophism: what does it mean to climate change and risk society? *Current Sociology*, 63 (1), 75–88.
- Benjamin, W., 1969. *Illuminations: essays and reflections*. New York: Schocken Books.
- Berger, J., 1999. *After the end: representations of post-apocalypse*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Blanchot, M., 1995. *The writing of the disaster*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Blanchot, M., 1997. *Friendship*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Brooke, J., 2014. *Climate change and the course of global history: a rough journey*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

- Butler, J., 1993. *Bodies that matter: on the discursive limits of 'sex'*. New York: Routledge.
- Clark, N., 2011. *Inhuman nature: sociable life on a dynamic planet*. London: Sage.
- Clark, N., 2017. Anthropocene bodies, geological time and the crisis of natality. *Body and Society*, 23 (3), 156–180.
- Clark, N. and Szerszynski, B., 2021. *Planetary social thought: the Anthropocene challenge to the social sciences*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Clark, N., 2008. A post-originary cosmopolitanism. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Studies*, 32 (3), 737–744.
- Colebrook, C., 2011. Matter without bodies. *Derrida Today*, 4 (1), 1–20.
- Cooper, M., 2006. Pre-empting emergence: the biological turn in the war on terror. *Theory, Culture and Society*, 23 (4), 113–135.
- Cruikshank, J., 2005. *Do glaciers listen? Local knowledge, colonial encounters and social imagination*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.
- Danowski, D. and Viveiros de Castro, E., 2017. *The ends of the world*. London: Polity Press.
- Davis, H. and Todd, Z., 2017. On the importance of a date, or decolonizing the Anthropocene. *ACME*, 16 (4), 761–780.
- de la Cadena, M., 2015. *Earth beings: ecologies of practice across Andean worlds*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Dillon, M., 1999. The scandal of the refugee: some reflections on the 'inter' of international relations and continental thought. In: D. Campbell and M. Shapiro, eds. *Moral spaces: rethinking ethics and world politics*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 92–124.
- Fanon, F., 1986. *Black skin, white masks*. London: Pluto Press.
- Grosz, E., 2008. *Chaos, territory, art: Deleuze and the framing of the Earth*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Honig, B., 2009. *Emergency politics: paradox, law, democracy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Honig, B., 2015. Public things: Jonathan Lear's Radical Hope, Lars von Trier's Melancholia, and the democratic need. *Political Research Quarterly*, 68 (3), 623–636.
- Jameson, F., 2003. Future city. *New Left Review*, 21, 65–79.
- Jemisin, N. K., 2015. *The fifth season*. London: Orbit.
- Jemisin, N. K., 2016. *The obelisk gate*. London: Orbit.
- Jemisin, N. K., 2017. *The stone sky*. London: Orbit.
- Klein, N., 2007. *The shock doctrine: the rise of disaster capitalism*. London: Penguin.
- Kull, C., 2002. Madagascar aflame: landscape burning as peasant protest, resistance, or a resource management tool? *Political Geography*, 21 (7), 927–953.
- Langton, M., 1999. 'The fire that is the centre of each family': landscapes of the ancients. In: A. Hamblin, ed. *Visions of future landscapes*. Canberra: Proceedings of the Australian Academy of Science. Fenner Conference on the Environment 2.5.
- Liotard, J.-F., 1988. *The differend: phrases in dispute*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Michaels, A., 1997. *Fugitive pieces*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Morton, T., 2012. Ecology without the present. *Oxford Literary Review*, 34 (2), 229–238.
- Nixon, R., 2011. *Slow violence and the environmentalism of the poor*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Scheffer, M., et al., 2001. Catastrophic shifts in ecosystems. *Nature*, 413, 591–596.
- Sheldon, R., 2016. *The child to come: life after the human catastrophe*. Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota University Press.
- Smith, N., 2005. There's no such thing as a natural disaster [online]. *Understanding Katrina: Perspectives from the Social Sciences*. Available from: <http://understandingkatrina.ssrc.org/Smith/> [Accessed 5 June 2019].
- Solnit, R., 2005. Sontag and tsunami [online]. Available from: https://www.tomdispatch.com/post/2095/rebecca_solnit_on_sontag_and_tsunami [Accessed 5 June 2019].
- Solnit, R., 2009. *A paradise built in hell*. New York: Penguin.
- Sontag, S., 1966. *Against interpretation and other essays*. New York: Picador.
- Stengers, I., 2010. Including nonhumans in political theory: opening Pandora's box? In: B. Braun and S. Whatmore, eds. *Political matter: technoscience, democracy and public life*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 3–33.
- Swyngedouw, E., 2010. Apocalypse forever? post-political populism and the spectre of climate change. *Theory, Culture and Society*, 27 (2–3), 213–232.

- Turner, B., 2006. *Vulnerability and human rights*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Unger, R. M., 2007. *The self awakened: pragmatism unbound*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.
- Whyte, K., 2017. Indigenous climate change studies: indigenizing futures, decolonizing the Anthropocene. *English Language Notes*, 55, (1–2), 153–162.
- Whyte, K., 2018. Indigenous science (fiction) for the Anthropocene: ancestral dystopias and fantasies of climate change crises. *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*, 1 (1–2), 224–242.
- Wyschogrod, E., 1998. *An ethics of remembering: history, heterology, and the nameless others*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.