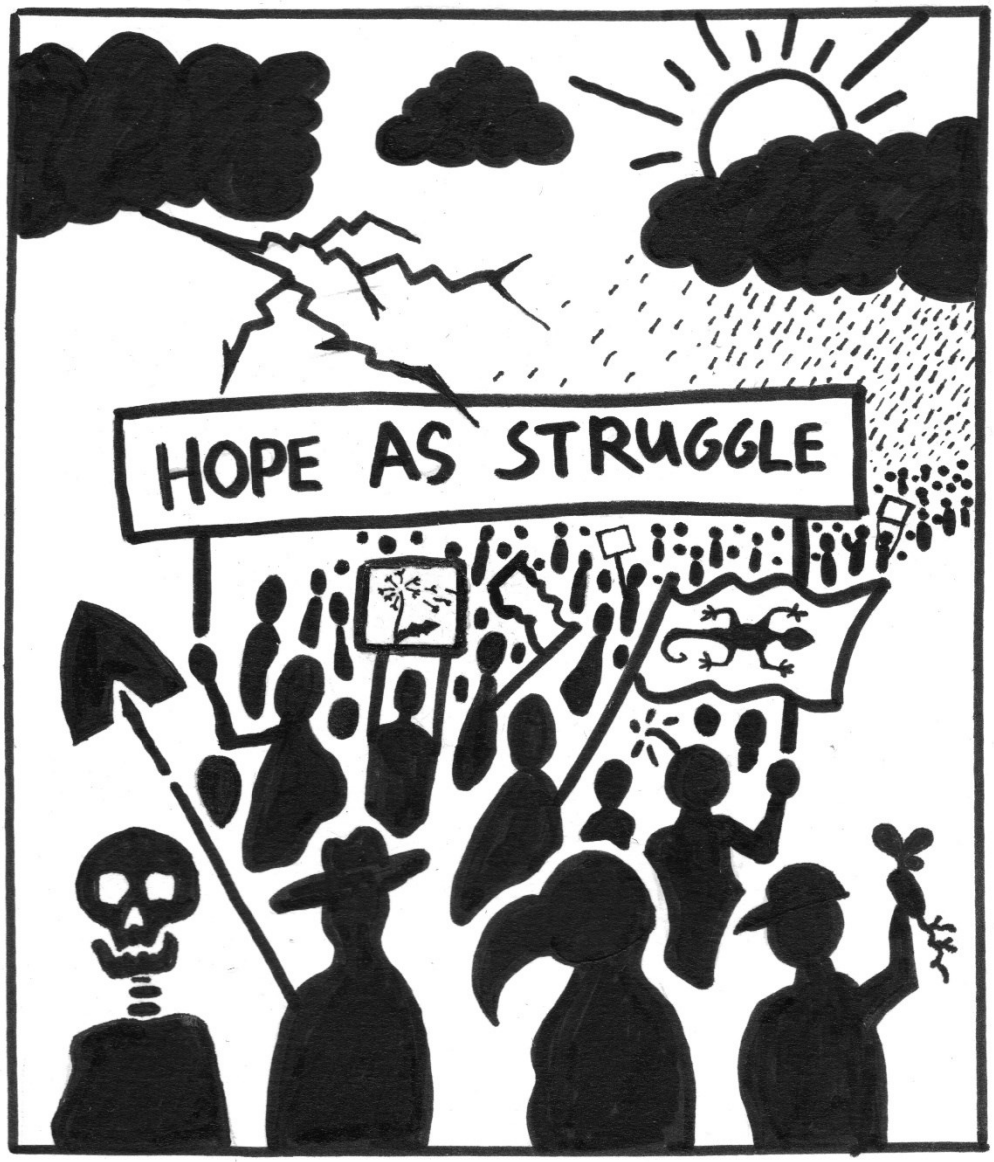

WORKING WITH NARRATIVES TEMPORALITIES AND EMOTIONS IN THE BELGIAN CLIMATE MOVEMENT

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Hope as Struggle. Working with Narratives, Temporalities, and Emotions in the Belgian Climate Movement

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Part I

1 Introduction

1.1 Prelude: "And? Is there hope?"

When encountering new people –a distant friend of a friend or the uncle of your sister-in-law – the question *"And, what do you do?*" is often considered an easy way to start or continue a conversation. The question then inquires not about what one is doing at the current moment, but about what one does for a living. For the past six to seven years, I answered this by saying I'm a doctoral student. If the conversation partner was not scared off by that, they might keep probing until I answered that I'm working as a sociologist to investigate hope in the Belgian climate movement. More than half of the time, the conversation partner would then curiously ask: "*And? Is there hope?"*

The question then seems to assume hope is a *thing* that can be present and can be possessed, something that *is* or *is not*. If only that were true! It would have significantly shortened my time of writing, and yours of reading, to literally interpret the question and formulate a "yes" or "no". (un)Fortunately, social life is not that binary. The kind of hope implied also often occurs to me as a kind of passive hope whose presence is comforting and allows people to sit back, while others organize, march, disrupt public order, and put sand in the life-wrecking machines. And if hope is absent, and the world is going to hell anyway, one could just as well lean back and have another drink, as there's little one can do, right? From this viewpoint, if there's hope, and it would be a thing, would it be a good thing then?

In this doctoral dissertation, I don't regard hope as a *thing out there* that just is present or not. Rather, I approach hope as a process, that has to be *made* and demands continuous work to be crafted, held up, cultivated, maybe even pruned now and then. So then … *is* there hope in the climate movement? Well … yes, of course, at least sometimes, but it's a struggle.

1.2 Why (look for) hope in the face of climate breakdown?

The world we inhabit seems to be crumbling. We experience heat records, water bombs, forest fires, and worsening storms. And as the planet floods and burns, we witness rising injustices and mass extinctions. Even mountains disintegrate, as the ice that holds them together melts at an ever-accelerating pace. In these, and many other, respects, the present is already bleak. Contrary to the myth of progress so weaved into Western thought, our futures will play out in an increasingly destabilized climate in which ecological conditions for a good life are shrinking – not to say unraveling.

We know this apocalyptic story. It has been told for decades by scientists, journalist, activists, and many others. Even the UN secretary-general Antonio Guterres warns the world is "*on a highway to hell, with our foot still on the accelerator"* and indeed, decades of delay are causing death (GuardianNews, 2022; UN-news, 2022). Yet, so goes the usual storyline towards the end, "there is hope, climate catastrophe can still be averted, we can act and change course, and many are already doing so". Depending on the messenger, they might then refer for example to increasing renewable energies - often forgetting that this doesn't necessarily replace burning fossils – or to protests and resistance if they are somewhat more militant (Thunberg, 2018).

Why this appeal to hope? Hope often pops up as a buzzword, bringing a positive charge that can help mediate fears after hearing about the dire state of the world. More fundamentally, dropping the buzzword appeals to a widespread societal need for hope. In the face of climate breakdown, hope invokes a sense of future possibility (Straume, 2019). It brings the message that things might look bad, but there is a potential they can get relatively better – or at least less bad. Against demise, hope helps to take an alternative reality more seriously (Dinerstein, 2015). However, hope gets used in public discourse in various ways. What are the underlying reasons then, for wanting hope? Below, I outline five of them.

First, hope would imply meaningfulness (Nairn, 2019). Vice versa, absence of hope would imply senselessness, and be a recipe for giving up, as the future ceases to be open and possibly different from the present. Terpe (2016), however, points out this might be a (Catholic) Christian way of approaching hope, and other combinations of ideas and emotions can provide meaningfulness as well. Hope might then not be strictly necessary for giving a sense of purpose, but in our Belgian and Western European context, it remains culturally key for meaningfulness.

Secondly, hope is appealed to because it would link to action (Nairn, 2019). Hope implies *seeing* future possibility as well as *desiring* it. Hope would inspire as well as motivate people to act, even in the face of low odds (Summers-Effler, 2002). Some authors even deduce that, if there is action, there must be hope to be found (Stuart, 2020). However, others have convincingly argued action can spring up from other motivations as well – like plain anger at injustice, or doing the right thing (Cassegård & Thörn, 2022). Besides motivating into action, hope is also invoked to *sustain* active engagement: in the face of difficulties, hope can help someone carry on instead of falling into desperate despondency (McGeer, 2004; Solnit, 2016). Interestingly, both academics (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017a) and activists (Thunberg, 2018) have argued in the context of climate protests, that hope can be produced *through* collective action.

Thirdly, hope can be pursued as a way of emotively and cognitively opening up to reality, rather than shutting oneself off. The direness and scale of climate change can easily be overwhelming (Bushell, Buisson, Workman, & Colley, 2017). Brulle and Norgaard (2019) even view climate change as a cultural-emotional trauma. To not have to bear the weight, people easily distance themselves from the problematic reality, leading to stronger and more everyday forms of avoidance and denial (Head, 2016). A process of hoping could then cognitively and emotionally *acknowledge* losses in the past, limitations in the present, and threats in the future, whilst looking for possibilities to act upon (Head, 2016; Macy & Johnstone, 2012). In this meaning, hope allows for looking into the abyss without shying away.

Fourthly, and somewhat less explicitly mentioned in public discourses, hope can help to cope with the present (Cook & Cuervo, 2019). A sense of future possibility can provide comfort in the face of worry, fear, and powerlessness (Terpe, 2016; Wettergren, 2024). Akin to "emotion-focused coping" (Folkman, 2008; Ojala, 2015), the comfort that hope provides can be based on several sources, like minimizing the problem or finding additional sources outside oneself (like technological solutions). Thunberg (2019, p. 34) rejects the latter option: *"People always tell us they are hopeful that the young people are going to save the world, but we are not"*. The comforting function of hope might thus be based on *others' actions*, without being activating itself. However, it can also be comforting to feel that "*you are not alone"* whilst acting (D. Roberts, 2013).

Fifth and lastly, hope is also appealed to as a cultural-emotional requirement. To put it differently: hope is invoked because *not doing so* would be breaching social codes. According to Head (2016), in Western countries, there is a general cultural pressure against "doom and gloom". Climate movements adopt strategies of "positive communication" to align with this emotional norm (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017a). Doing so, however, might shy away from productive conflicts, and contribute to everyday denial of possible catastrophes (Latour, Stengers, Tsing, & Bubandt, 2018). To rhetorically refuse hope, whether in general (Malmqvist, 2024) or specifically dominant hopes, as some recent climate movements have openly done, can then trigger strong public reactions, as well as open up possibilities for movement activity (Stuart, 2020; Wettergren, 2024).

Having discussed the abovementioned reasons why hope can be desired, I want to touch upon reasons why some actors refuse hope. Drawing mainly on Blöser, Huber, and Moellendorf (2020), taking "pitfalls of hope" into account is necessary for a thorough understanding of hope. Firstly, hope can be refused when it is regarded as 'naïve' and overestimating possibilities. One indeed can hope for something that is no longer possible or never has been. Such "fraudulent" hopes can mislead one's efforts, or falsely provide comfort, like – according to Stuart (2020) – the idea that future technologies will solve climate change. However, often it is difficult to determine "false" from "true" possibilities. Moreover, hopes can be active as well as passive, in the latter

case leading people to rely mainly on external sources, rather than acting themselves (Wettergren, 2024). This can become a particular manipulative strategy when states govern through seductive, but fraudulent passive hopes (Lueck, 2007). Freeing oneself of such hope can then open space for acting (Terpe, 2016). Lastly, hope can be 'cruel' when leading to disappointment and bitterness. And to avoid the pain of disappointment, people can also 'cling on' to wishful but ungrounded hopes, foreclosing openness to *other* possibilities (McGeer, 2004). Sleat (2013) argues against hopes as they inflate our ideas of possibility, rather than focusing on what is possible within democratic frameworks. However, given dominant political actors' failure to address climate change, the challenge for climate movements, in particular, exists in cultivating hopes that go beyond these existing frameworks – that is to engage in the struggle of "no longer letting people in power decide what is politically possible, and what hope is" (Thunberg, 2021). Hope, then, might not only be *drawn from* the struggle. Keeping up hope can also *be* a struggle, and it might require a struggle to reclaim hope as well.

1.3 Why hope in climate movements?

In the context of ongoing and escalating climate breakdown, one can hope for various goals: for (at least some) climatic catastrophes to be averted by mitigating emissions, or more concretely to avoid tipping points by remaining within carbon budgets to threshold temperatures. In addition, one could hope to collectively treat climate change to limit the increase of social injustices through adaptation as well as mitigatory action. Or, more transformative, one can hope for climate action to be a catalyst for tackling injustices, and even to instigate systemic change (Klein, 2014). A somewhat "darker" hope without optimism could acknowledge ongoing losses while still hoping for "saving what is left" and finding yet-unknown possibilities amidst the ruins (Stuart, 2020). The objects one hopes for can shift, and can be reflexively revised – to some extent they indeed seem to do so as climate breakdown continues to escalate (Cassegård & Thörn, 2022). A crucial question then becomes, where to draw hope from? What sources can enable the imagining and sustaining of future possibilities?

Dominant sources of hope have long been situated in the global climate regime – the UN-established science-policy nexus, as well as in technological possibilities to mitigate emissions (Goodman, 2017). As in Thunberg's quote above, however, those sources are increasingly losing legitimacy after 30 yearly climate summits while emissions continue to rise, and technologies are not living up to their promise given the immense urgency of lowering greenhouse gases now, instead of in the future. Climate movement organizations such as major environmental groups and public intellectuals have long contributed to cultivating hopes situated in this dominant regime (Goodman, 2017; Schlosberg & Collins, 2014). Other more climate justice-oriented, climate movement organizations have thoroughly criticized hopes founded on this dominant policy regime as dangerously delusional and as protecting the current system more than the climate (Bullard & Müller, 2012; Kenis & Lievens, 2015; Swyngedouw, 2013). These organizations would state that in contrast to the "paralysis above", a source of hope can also be drawn from "movements from below" (Bond, 2012).

Climate movements' – including climate *justice* movement organizations' – contributions to the abovementioned aims are usually imagined (not in the least by their participants) as a way of putting pressure on policymakers, voicing concerns, and bringing topics to the agenda (de Moor, De Vydt, Uba, & Wahlström, 2021). Moreover, climate movements can also confront fossil infrastructures and contest attempts by vested interests to co-opt or thwart sustainability transformations (Marquardt, 2020; Owen, Rivin, Cardoso, Brototi, & del Bene, 2017). Furthermore, movements act not only *on*, but also *within* society (Goodman, 2017). Put differently, movements not only oppose, but can also propose, generate, and perform alternative concepts, meanings, and cultural and organizational practices (Martinez-Alier et al., 2014). Additionally, as movements help to develop collective agency they can aid in expanding the realm of possibilities (Kallis & March, 2015; Summers-Effler, 2002). As Goodman (2017, p. 1) puts it: *"A genuine social movement, we are taught from history, is indeed a transformative force capable of remaking social and political relations".*

While climate movements in theory hold such potential to be sources of hope, by themselves they are not capable of achieving their goals of, among others,

urgently cutting down emissions in just ways. Movements can be considered to operate in complex, multi-layered systems (Cassegård, 2022; Törnberg, 2021). Their various achievements can be imagined to intervene in social tipping dynamics – non-linear mechanisms that enable disruptive societal system changes (Knops, 2023; Otto, Donges, Cremades, et al., 2020). Operating in such complexity, movements, therefore can contain a certain unexpectedness – like the surprising youth-led wave of climate mobilizations has exemplified. Given that hope can hide in the unexpected (Head, 2016; Solnit, 2016), and given the rising uncertainty and shrinking of possibilities as climate breakdown ensues, movements become a relatively more attractive source as they can be an unpredictable factor for change. From this view, movements can hold the promise of resurfacing, like mushrooms springing from the ground after rainfall, seemingly appearing from nowhere, but thriving on invisible rhizomatic underground networks (Castells, 2012; Solnit, 2016). This metaphor connects the characteristic of unpredictable changes concerning the environment, with the slow effort of building connections and establishing alternative ideas and practices that one day can be reaped. If hope in social movements is like the mushroom, one can wonder what it draws upon. What does working and struggling below the surface look like? Less metaphorically put: I wonder how movements enact and sustain hopes and reflexively relate to hope whilst shaping, reorienting, and reproducing themselves.

1.4 What could a *sociological* approach contribute?

So far, I have discussed reasons why people look for hope in the face of climate breakdown, and why climate movements are seen as a source of hope. What could a sociological approach contribute to understanding hope among climate movements?

The sociological approach to hope that I take here starts from the assumption that hope is socially constructed – not merely as an abstract idea or individual mental disposition. The hopes we speak of in the face of climate breakdown are social and political hopes. They are oriented towards communal social-ecological goals and involve large-scale social and political changes (Blöser,

Huber, & Moellendorf, 2020; Wettergren, 2024). In the context of movements, it becomes apparent that hopes are dynamic: they can be cultivated and sustained, gained as well as lost (Summers-Effler, 2002). As such contexts can structure actors' tendencies to hope or not, while actors themselves can also actively engage with hope, for example by drawing on social support (Cook & Cuervo, 2019). While movements can communicate hopes to external audiences, I'm more particularly interested in how the climate movement internally works with hope to shape, reorient and (re)produce it. Furthermore, movements as collective actors can engage in learning the capacity to hope, through collective processes of informing, imagining, and tempering future possibilities, as well as developing oneself both as individual and collective agents (Dinerstein, 2015; McGeer, 2004). In addition to furthering such an understanding of hope, sociology as a reflexive science can also consciously seek to interfere with the social realities studied and become a "hopeful sociology" (Lueck, 2007) that joins in the efforts of not only critically appraising limitations but also exploring and affirming future possibilities.

This is not a straightforward task. As hope is socially constructed in relation to multiple (and changing) contexts, it takes shape and meaning in varying ways by scholars as well as movement participants and their wider audiences. According to Pihkala (2022), there is a strong need to inquire about these. In particular, research on how climate movements move among those meanings is scarce and has only begun emerging recently. Scholars have identified the need to investigate empirically *how* climate activists can collectively deal with hope and despair, as well as resist "dominant delusional hopes" (Nairn, 2019; Wettergren, 2024). This research aims to untangle the multiple *meanings* attached to hope as well as gain insight into how climate movement participants *engage* with it.

Nevertheless, some analytical delimitations are necessary to avoid confusion when speaking about hope. In this dissertation, I will approach hope as starting from discontent with the present, and therefore cognitively and emotionally orienting toward future possibility (Wettergren, 2024). It crucially differs from pure optimism and confidence as the possibilities hoped for are *uncertain* and the ability to achieve one's goal is *limited* (McGeer, 2004). Hope can be passive or active, individual or collective (Terpe, 2016). Moreover, hope

can be considered a pleasant emotion, providing emotional energy that can help to motivate and sustain action, as well as provide comfort. However, the process of keeping up hopes that resonate with reality involves not only cultivating confidence but also acknowledging limitations that inform what is *not* possible. As such, hopes can also be informed – and indeed "educated" by unpleasant emotions like fear (Wettergren, 2024) despair (Nairn, 2019), or grief (Head, 2016). In relation to environmental demise and contradictory social contexts, it involves (often reflexive) effort to cultivate, sustain and temper hopes: hoping demands work.

1.5 Research questions and overview

Given the widespread societal appeal to hope in the context of climate breakdown, the focus on climate movements as potential sources of hope, and my understanding of hope outlined above – the primary and overarching research question of this dissertation I ask:

> *RQ 1: How do participants in the Belgian climate movement work with hope?*

I use "working with hope" as a conceptual metaphor for the collection of effortful activities that actors undertake to relate to hope. I explore these along the three dimensions of narratives, temporalities, and emotions through which hope can, among other things, be enacted, articulated, shaped, sustained, revised, refused, and struggled with. Narratives, temporalities, and emotions form the basis of my analysis throughout this dissertation. I discuss more in detail how these dimensions are linked to hope in Chapter 2, and how these emerged from going back and forth between theory, literature, and empirical research in Chapters 2 and 3. Here, I shortly outline how these three dimensions are connected to working with hope, and as such lead to three sub-questions.

Narratives by climate movement actors enable me to study working with hope as envisioning desirable future possibilities. More specifically, "Transformation Pathway Narratives" allow me to investigate how climate movement

participants see the present as problematic, articulate future goals, and envision pathways toward these. As such, the first sub-question is:

> *RQ 2.1.: Which transformation pathways narratives are being enacted within the Belgian climate movement?*

As hope starts from discontent with the present and orients to better future possibility, it contains an essential *temporal* dimension (Wettergren, 2024). How climate movement participants work with hope is shaped by the "temporalities" they enact: the socially constructed ways of relating to time. Therefore, the second sub-question is:

> *RQ 2.2. Which different temporalities are enacted within the Belgian climate movement, and how do actors deal with tensions between those?*

Hope is not only about seeing but crucially involves *feeling* future possibility. As such, it is often conceptualized as an emotion (Jasper, 2018; Summers-Effler, 2002; Wettergren, 2024). On the emotional dimension, working with hope can be understood through the concept of *emotion work* (Hochschild, 1983), which concerns the efforts to regulate emotions, for example by invoking or repressing certain emotions and their expressions in relation to expectations about these emotions within social contexts (Wettergren, 2019). Investigating how climate movement participants engage in the emotion work to cultivate, revise, or refuse hope thus uncovers the emotional dimension of how they work with hope. The third sub-question therefore is:

> *RQ 2.3. Which forms of emotion management are performed by Belgian Extinction Rebellion members to keep up hopes, and how do they deal with tension in these processes?*

In the following chapter, I will further outline my approach by embedding this research question in overarching approaches to studying social movements. Subsequently, I discuss how my study has taken a socio-constructivist and emotional approach to climate movements. Moreover, I outline how contemporary literature on climate movements is linked to narratives,

temporalities, and emotions, and how these dimensions link to working with hope.

In Chapter 3, I will outline my methodological framework of qualitatively researching hope, through an immersed position, going into the description and selection of the Belgian climate movement. I also discuss my methods of sampling, collecting, and analyzing data while ending with a reflection on my position as a "co-conspiring" researcher in the movement.

Part II of this dissertation contains the four papers that make up the main empirical and theoretical corpus of this research. The first paper connects to research question 2.1. and is entitled *Pathways to climate justice: transformation pathway narratives in the Belgian climate movement* (Chapter 4). I argue for the recentering of movements within environmental-social scientific understandings on pathways for sustainability change. Based on interview data and document analysis among Belgian climate movement organizations, I discern various transformation pathway narratives and show the movement as multi-faceted. Moreover, I argue within the Belgian climate movement, climate justice functions as an overarching metanarrative.

The second paper is linked to research question 2.2., and is entitled *Dark sides of urgency: Navigating temporal tensions within the Belgian climate movement* (Chapter 5). Based on the same interview and document data, I argue the Belgian climate movement enacts various temporalities, making it "multi-paced". While these temporalities can conflict, by engaging explicitly with temporal tensions, movements engage in a learning process of rethinking present and future possibilities.

The third paper is linked to research question 2.3. and is entitled *Hope through action? Emotion work on anger, enthusiasm and disappointment during a Belgian Extinction Rebellion action* (Chapter 6). Based on ethnographic data of an Extinction Rebellion mass action of civil disobedience, I empirically unpack emotion work throughout the action process. I argue participants appeal to hope mainly as a means to keep going in adverse circumstances and look to cultivate it by drawing on collective disobedient action as well as on backstage moments of togetherness.

The fourth paper equally links to research question 2.3. and is entitled "*Looking for a way out too": Hope through emotion work in Extinction Rebellion* (Chapter 7). In this chapter, I dig deeper into Extinction Rebellions' internal "regenerative culture" and the Active Hope workshops XR organizes. I argue these workshops respond to the problem of keeping up hopes amidst climate emergency as a problem of emotion management and therefore present a system of emotion channeling work involving building confidence and accepting painful limitations. Due to XR's temporal ambiguity, however, participants find it hard to sustain concrete hopes. Instead they maintain a feeling of future possibility by drawing on togetherness within the movement and leaving hopes unarticulated.

In the concluding part III, I first review how this dissertation unpacks hope work along the dimensions of narratives, temporalities, and emotions. Following, I conclude with the overarching contributions of this dissertation. Finally, I consider research limitations and avenues for future research as well as implications for practice (see Chapter 8).

2 A social movement outlook on hope in the climate movement

In this chapter, I embed my research on how Belgian climate movement participants work with hope, in the broader approaches to study social movements, and the debates within literature on climate movements. I first paint a broad picture of the main theoretical approaches in the more established field of social movement research, before going into more recent literature on the climate movement.

2.1 Approaches to social movements

As previous scholars have established, the field of social movement studies contains a rich theoretical variety, structured in several overarching approaches (Della Porta & Diani, 2015). In their historical overview of social movement studies, Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta (2000) describe how the main approaches before the 60s often regarded movements as irrational crowds or masses, prone to excitement, expressing deprivation, and open to steering by charismatic leaders. Since the 70s, movement scholars were more often sympathetic to or had participated in e.g. the civil rights, antiwar, or feminist protest movements they studied. This generation of researchers responded to the so-called 'irrationality' of movements by emphasizing the instrumental rationality of movement actors, describing movements as "politics by other means". Drawing primarily on organizational and rational-actor models, studies within this broader approach took a more structuralist perspective to investigate how movements mobilize available resources (Jenkins, 1983), act upon political opportunities (Koopmans, 1999), or strategically enact repertoires of contention in relation to how open political channels were to their demands (Tilly, 2006).

During the '80s and '90s, researchers increasingly studied social movements through a socio-constructivist approach (Goodwin, Jasper, & Polletta, 2000).

They were inspired by the wider cultural turn in social sciences as well as by newly emerging movements and their cultural resistance and struggles for autonomy that challenged then-dominant conceptions of social movements and social change (Mcdonald, 2002; Touraine, 1981). This approach focuses more on how movement participants' understandings are shaped by e.g. collective identities that define an "us" in relation to (possibly antagonistic) others, along with symbols, belief systems, and visions (Melucci, 1996; Thörn, Cassegård, Soneryd, & Wettergren, 2017). Also within the broader socio-constructivist approach, other theories focus on discourses (Kenis & Mathijs, 2014; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), narratives (Polletta, 1998) or framings (Benford & Snow, 2000) to investigate how movement actors make sense of situations, identify problems and solutions, and motivate participation, and highlight the political dimension of interpretation struggles.

Even though protest activities are often outspokenly emotional, approaches focusing on emotions have long been underrepresented in social movement studies. Aminzade and McAdam (2001) attribute this to a tendency of scholars to oppose emotions to reason, public life, and masculinity (see Wettergren (2019); Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta (2000)). They also point to more dominant state-centric understandings of politics and scholars' adherence to the methodological norm of dispassionate investigation. Nevertheless, by drawing on feminist scholarship and the sociology of emotions, scholars since the 1990s have built a distinct socio-constructivist approach to social movements that focuses on emotions (Jasper, 2011). In this analytically distinct approach, emotions are seen as ways of processing information, constitutive of, and radically interwoven with, cognition and rationality (Barbalet, 2001; Wettergren, 2019). As emotions are both shaped by groups and social contexts and give shape to these groups and contexts, it is unsurprising emotions interplay with every stage of movement activity (H. Bergman, 2023; Flam & King, 2007; Jasper, 2018). Movements can invoke or repress emotions like anger, seek to transform e.g. shame into pride, build trust and solidarities, and overall seek to contribute to social change by regulating emotions like fear or hope (Collins, 2001; Flam & King, 2007; Gould, 2009; Jasper, 2011, 2018; Summers-Effler, 2002; Wettergren, 2009). Movements can align with societally dominant norms of what one is supposed to feel or express in a given situation, as well as resist those and cultivate

alternative norms (Summers-Effler, 2002). Moreover, just as movements can consciously aim for cultural transformation, they can strive towards emotional transformations both in the self and in wider society (Neckel & Hasenfratz, 2021; Sauerborn, 2022).

2.2 A socio-constructivist and emotional approach to climate movements

The literature on climate movements equally reflects a wide diversity of research approaches. Scholarship adopting a structuralist approach has looked, among other things, at conditions for successful movement protest, like elite fracture (Bullard & Müller, 2012), political opportunities, and mobilizing structures (McAdam, 2017). Moreover, structuralist-inspired scholarship on the climate movement has studied extending networks among allies (Gunningham, 2018), transnational diffusion of protest (Gardner, Carvalho, & Valenstain, 2022) or effects on greenhouse gas emission reductions (Fisher & Nasrin, 2021). Moreover, a good deal of climate movement research has described upcoming movement organizations like the Youth strikers (usually under their most common name Fridays for Future) or Extinction Rebellion, seeking to unpack the movements' composition, tactics, practices, motivations, and messages (de Moor et al., 2021; Neas, Ward, & Bowman, 2022; Saunders, Doherty, & Hayes, 2020).

A large proportion of climate movement scholarship adopts a socio-constructivist approach and focuses on socially and culturally constructed meanings and interpretations and how these shape social life (Dietz & Garrelts, 2014; Goodman, 2017; Stammen & Meissner, 2024; Thörn et al., 2017). Within this approach, researchers focus for example on movements' framings of climate justice or climate emergency (Chen et al., 2023; Della Porta & Parks, 2014; Soler-i-Martí, Fernández-Planells, & Pérez-Altable, 2022; Svensson & Wahlström, 2023), or how the pandemic shifted communication frames (Sorce & Dumitrica, 2023). Besides "outwards" oriented messages, researchers have also dug into how shifting meanings shape the self-constructions of the movement, e.g. by focusing on politicization and depoliticization in movement discourses (Cassegård & Thörn, 2017; Kenis, 2019, 2021; Kenis & Mathijs, 2014; Swyngedouw, 2020), movement stories

shaping strategies (de Moor & Wahlström, 2019), shifting temporal narratives (Cassegård & Thörn, 2018, 2022; de Moor, 2022; Sunnemark, 2023) as well as moderate – radical or modern-terrestrial imaginaries (Knops, 2021b; Marquardt, 2020).

More recently climate movement scholarship has expanded on the emotional dimension of activism. Within this approach, researchers investigate emotions invoked in external movement communication (Knops, 2021b, 2023; Soler-i-Martí, Fernández-Planells, & Pérez-Altable, 2022). Researchers have also studied the importance of fear and anger for motivating protestors (H. Bergman, 2023; Crouzé, Godard, & Meurs, 2024; Kleres & Wettergren, 2017a; Lorenzini & Rosset, 2023; Pickard, 2021), as well as explored a broad range of other emotional experiences like despair, joy or hope (Martiskainen, Axon, Sovacool, Sareen, Furszyfer Del Rio, & Axon, 2020; Poma & Gravante, 2024). Moreover, researchers have convincingly argued the highly reflexive character of emotional experiences (Neckel & Hasenfratz, 2021; Pickard, 2021; Sauerborn, 2022) as well as how movement actors navigate various social contexts and their contradictory emotional requirements (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017a, 2017b; Malmqvist, 2024).

Given my focus on how climate movement participants work with hope, and my approach to hope as a cognitive-emotional concept oriented toward future possibility (Wettergren, 2024), this research will primarily rely on socio-constructivist and emotional approaches to study the climate movement. Therefore, this research includes less of a structural perspective. As I'm interested in the active ways participants enact and sustain hopes, and how they construct relationships with hope, I adopt a specific micro-interactional perspective. As such, my emphasis lies less on how hopes are communicated to "movement-external" publics or how they are used in mobilizing, but rather on the climate movements' "inside" life, the reflexive experiences of more regular participants that shape, reorient, and reproduce the movement in cultural-emotional ways (Haug, 2013).

In what follows, I will outline three main strands of research focusing respectively on the dimensions of narratives, temporalities, and emotions – each of these relating to one of the secondary research questions. These are

the dimensions on which my understanding of hope in the climate movement has crystallized throughout a process of going back and forth between theoretical assumptions, literature and empirical investigation. These strands describe mainly how movements are shaped and are evolving on multiple fronts. While researchers within these strands do not always make links with the concept of hope, in fact these strands often explore future possibilities and limitations in the climate movement. By linking these explicitly with hope, I aim to deepen as well as integrate my understanding of these movements.

2.3 The changing faces of the climate movement: climate change, climate justice, and climate emergencies

This strand of research focuses on the changing faces of the climate movement: its changing narratives. In this strand of research, how societies react to climate change depends (at least partly) on the struggle for the story. Narratives or stories[1] help people make sense of events and their contexts by sequencing them into storylines that link pasts, presents, and futures, and thereby orient actions (Veland et al., 2018)[2]. This strand of literature often deals with *strategic* narratives, as these narratives also define problems, solutions, and actions and construct the relevant actors: the "we", and potential friends and foes (Bushell et al., 2017; Luederitz, Abson, Audet, & Lang, 2017). In this sense, narratives aren't only a matter of external communication: narratives also shape and organize movements – movements can even be regarded as "bundles of narratives" (Fine, 2002). Within this approach, therefore, investigating narratives clarifies how the climate

[1] Following Polletta and Gardner (2015), I interpret the terms narratives and stories in broad ways and use them interchangeably

[2] In this research, I opt for narrative analysis, other cultural-constructivist approaches like discourse theory or framing analysis are also prominent in this literature strand. Although each approach has its own specific sensibilities ((Cassegård & Thörn, 2017; Della Porta & Parks, 2014; Kenis & Mathijs, 2014) also see H1), they also overlap (de Moor & Wahlström, 2019) and some authors more pragmatically combine their terminologies, as for example in Marquardt (2020)

movement takes shape, and how it is evolving. In contrast to approaching the climate movement as one monolithic entity, where its most mediatized part can be easily mistaken for the entire movement, analyzing the climate movement's narratives allows us to find conceptual variety over time, depicting the movement as *multi-faceted* and dynamic entities.

2.3.1 From emission management to climate justice

"*What do we want? Climate Justice! When do we want it? Now!".*
A main topic within the literature focusing on climate movement narratives deals with how the movement articulates climate justice (Bond, 2011; Bullard & Müller, 2012; Cassegård & Thörn, 2017; Chatterton, Featherstone, & Routledge, 2013; Della Porta & Parks, 2014; Kenis & Mathijs, 2014; Schlosberg & Collins, 2014).

The movement's articulation of climate justice emerged in this research as an overarching metanarrative in antagonism with the so-called mainstream or dominant climate politics (Bruno, Karliner, & Brotsky, 1999).[3] For a long time, the dominant way of approaching climate change within climate-focused NGOs and movements was through an overarching narrative I call emission management (Vandepitte, 2022). This overarching narrative arose from the nexus of climate science, UN processes, and civil society (Goodman, 2017). The narrative of emission management can be roughly summarized as: human activity has caused greenhouse gas emissions to rise, which has been irrefutably shown by scientists to result in climatic change. This leads to dangerous climate impacts like sea level rises and extreme weather, severely threatening people, animals, and ecosystems. The main solution is to urgently lower greenhouse gas emissions through policies and green technologies, while citizens can alter consumption and demand more ambitious from political leaders (Vandepitte, 2022).

[3] More detailed treatment of this debate can be found in Vandepitte (2022)

The movement's articulation of climate justice emerged through critiques of the politics of emission management (Bond, 2012; Bruno, Karliner, & Brotsky, 1999; Chatterton, Featherstone, & Routledge, 2013). From a climate justice perspective, the story of emission management focuses on greenhouse gasses but omits the social processes that have produced them. Rather than tackling climate change as an isolated phenomenon, a climate justice analysis views it as a symptom of an underlying system – primarily labeled as "capitalist" – that causes social injustices and ecological damages (Bullard & Müller, 2012; ClimateJusticeCamp, 2019c; Gesnat, 2015; Klein, 2014; Swyngedouw, 2013). The climate justice narrative critiques the assumption of the emission management narrative that "we are all in this together" and need to work on solutions consensually (Kenis, 2021; Kenis & Mathijs, 2014). From a climate justice outlook, not everyone is in the same boat, as climate change is deeply interwoven with social inequalities (Lévay, Vanhille, Goedemé, & Verbist, 2021; Vanhille, Goedemé, & Verbist, 2021). Contributions to climate change, benefits from both high-emitting activities, access to transition policies, and risks caused by climate change, are unevenly distributed along social hierarchies, with unequal processes of recognition and participation (Martinez-Alier et al., 2014; J. T. Roberts & Parks, 2009; Schlosberg & Collins, 2014; Sealy-Huggins, 2017; Sultana, 2022a). From a climate justice standpoint, not highlighting these injustices is both unethical and unstrategic as worsening injustices through climate policies might provoke a popular backlash (Kinniburgh, 2019; Martin & Islar, 2020). Moreover, neglecting the power differences producing those injustices also omits how vested interests like fossil industries resist social changes towards sustainability through strategies of denial, delay, and co-optation (Lamb et al., 2020; Wright, Nyberg, & Bowden, 2021). Critics note that a politics missing these power relations risks being impotent (Swyngedouw, 2020) and might protect current power relations more than the climate (Gesnat, 2015).

In contrast, the climate justice metanarrative regards climate change as a *global* issue of environmental justice (Bruno, Karliner, & Brotsky, 1999; Martinez-Alier et al., 2014), and aims for a "system change": an emancipatory social-ecological transformation towards a more egalitarian, just and ecologically sustainable social order (Chatterton, Featherstone, & Routledge, 2013). This broad idea of social change is to be enacted by connecting

environmental and various movements into larger alliances (Almeida, 2019; Klein, 2014; Tokar, 2018). From early on, this movement had clear demands like repaying ecological debts or keeping fossil fuels in the ground (Schlosberg & Collins, 2014). Moreover, its narrative constituted antagonistic positions towards so-called climate criminals like fossil fuel industries and the governmental actors supporting them while seeking to align itself with frontline communities for social and environmental sustainability (ActforClimateJustice, 2018; Klein, 2014).

The 2018-2019 mobilization wave brought along narrative shifts. The mass demonstrations led by striking youth put extra emphasis on injustices *between* older and younger generations (Bowman, 2020; de Moor et al., 2021; Friberg, 2022; Kenis, 2021; Knops, 2021b; Lorenzini & Rosset, 2023; Marquardt, 2020; Martiskainen et al., 2020; Soler-i-Martí, Fernández-Planells, & Pérez-Altable, 2022). This sparked reactions of groups highlighting aspects of justice *within* generations. Moreover, the increasing popularity of the climate emergency narrative among youth-led movements and groups like Extinction Rebellion, created new openings but also intensified tensions (Hayes & MacGregor, 2023).

2.3.2 Towards a climate emergency?

The idea of a climate emergency narrative predates 2018 (Anderson, 2017; Bushell et al., 2017). However, it gathered wider attention during the 2018-2019 protest wave through its enactment by movements like Extinction Rebellion, Youth4Climate / Fridays for Future, or even by larger NGOs like Greenpeace.

The emergency narrative constitutes a radicalization of the mainstream story of climate change. Instead of citizens demanding more ambitious climate policies from political leaders, now more determined citizens demand also the rules and processes of regular democratic processes be changed to be able to sufficiently respond to the crisis (Neubauer, Thunberg, De Wever van der Heyden, & Charlier, 2020; Soler-i-Martí, Fernández-Planells, & Pérez-Altable, 2022; Thunberg, 2019). They do so by using more disobedient tactics like school strikes, disrupting public events, or sit-ins on public roads and squares.

Whereas previous more disobedient parts of the climate movement were often situated in struggles against fossil investments or infrastructure, the emergency narrative's focus on governmental actors presents a "return to the state" (de Moor et al., 2021). Moreover, the emergency narrative targets collective denial of the climate crisis – while the science is roughly known and understood by the wider public (in Belgium), individuals continue their daily practices, as if the world's future will not influence their personal ones (Brulle & Norgaard, 2019). Rather than perceiving this mainly as a cognitive problem, movements enacting the emergency narrative have adopted more emotionally explicit and alarmist communication, aiming to break through this collective denial (Knops, 2021a; Neckel & Hasenfratz, 2021).

As discussed more in detail in Chapter 4, the climate emergency narrative has been intensely debated. First, critics questioned it's "alarmist" message: emphasizing the catastrophic nature of possible futures while those futures are perceived as far away, would raise cognitive dissonance and therefore would risk people feel increasingly "hopeless, overwhelmed and distanced" (Bushell et al., 2017, p. 43). However, movements like XR or Youth for Climate depicted climate change as more nearby to their daily lives in both *time* – impacting protestors' own futures, or even presents – and *space* as climate disasters increasingly occur in the global North as well. A second critique states that demanding governments to declare climate emergencies, without specifying sufficiently what needs to be done, risks authoritarian co-optation as procedures of deliberation are forestalled (Asayama, Bellamy, Geden, Pearce, & Hulme, 2019; D'Alisa, 2019). However, as Anderson (2017) notes, emergencies also contain an emancipatory potential, as they are imbued with the hope that there is time in which urgent action can avert future harm to return to "normality", or more latent in the climate movement, it can be used to *interrupt* ongoing catastrophes and open space for alternative futures. Considering these points, the emergence of the climate emergency narrative has shifted temporal as well as emotional frameworks within the climate movement as I will discuss in Chapters 5, 6, and 7.

2.3.3 Linking narratives to hope

The literature strand on narratives within the climate movement rarely explicitly speaks of hope. Nevertheless, they are linked. Approaching hope

through a narrative lens enables studying hope as a vision (see Lamont (2019)). Analyzing narratives captures how climate movement participants problematize the present , how they envision goals that would bring a better future, as well as how they imagine pathways toward these futures. As such, here I consider (strategic) narratives as "carriers of hope": they articulate future possibilities – the *objects* of hope – and what to change in the present to get there – the present *target* of hope. The climate movement can, and often does, put in the work to form niches wherein alternative narratives are cultivated, and by doing so they offer alternative hopes. The narrative of climate justice, for example, has changed the object of hope from mitigating climate change to instigating social transformation that would bring betterment to most people's lives as well as avoid further climate breakdown (Klein, 2014). Moreover, enacting narratives also brings along the work of articulating possibilities while moving contradictions and ambiguities (Veland et al., 2018). By studying narrated pathways for transformation, I therefore aim to contribute to unpacking the narrative dimension of how climate movement participants work with hope.

2.4 The changing paces of the climate movement: struggling against and with time

As changing narratives have dynamically shaped the *faces* of the climate movement, they have also influenced its *paces*. The way the climate movement socially relates to time, and their *temporalities (Lilja, Baaz, & Vinthagen, 2015)*, are linked to the narratives enacted. However, the temporal dimension has been emphasized in a somewhat distinct strand of literature (Asayama et al., 2019; Cassegård & Thörn, 2018, 2022; D'Alisa, 2019; de Moor, 2022, 2023; de Moor & Marquardt, 2023; Friberg, 2022; Hayes & MacGregor, 2023; Hulme, 2019, 2020; Kenis, 2021, 2023; Knops, 2021b, 2023; Kolinjivadi, Almeida, & Martineau, 2020; Rowe & Ormond, 2023; Soler-i-Martí, Fernández-Planells, & Pérez-Altable, 2022; Stuart, 2020; Sunnemark, 2023; Swyngedouw, 2013; White, 2024b; Whyte, 2020).

Urgency has long been central to the temporalities of the climate movement (Cassegård & Thörn, 2022; Heller & Robbe, 2010). Climate breakdown is a worsening process, not linearly and gradually, but exponentially escalating

through positive feedback loops and tipping points. While emissions have continued to rise, time, in this sense, is limited and is *running out* – like the popularly used image of the hourglass, the climate struggle seems to be one *against* time (Hulme, 2020; Kenis, 2023). This sense of urgency – the idea that one has to act *now* to avoid climate breakdown getting worse – has long been prevalent in movement narratives, while absent in other societal domains that e.g. continue to expand fossil infrastructure. While this dimension was less emphasized in the years after the Copenhagen 2009 COP15 (Cassegård & Thörn, 2018; Kleres & Wettergren, 2017a), movements are again foregrounding urgency by invoking climate emergency narratives (Hayes & MacGregor, 2023). Indeed, declaring something an emergency means the situation is exceptional and urgent, but it also contains a sense of hope as there is still an interval of possibility in which to avert or stop further harm (Anderson, 2017; Soler-i-Martí, Fernández-Planells, & Pérez-Altable, 2022). However, the sense of hope in emergency narratives is generally not a very bright or rosy one: it often acknowledges climate catastrophes are already causing losses and they are feared to get worse (Wettergren, 2024). As such, the climate emergency narrative's timeframe is ambiguous (Cassegård & Thörn, 2022; de Moor et al., 2021).

These changing temporalities have led to a movement struggling *with* time (Knops, 2021b), sparking internal debates and inquiries among scholars of the climate movement. Researchers have started wondering how the ways in which climate protestors enact urgency through clock time and deadlines contain contradictions (Asayama et al., 2019; Kenis, 2023; Kolinjivadi, Almeida, & Martineau, 2020) and might have unintended side-effects on for example movements' attention for justice (Hayes & MacGregor, 2023; Hulme, 2019; Rowe & Ormond, 2023). Statements of urgency have been primarily *apocalyptic* – aimed at avoiding future catastrophes (Cassegård & Thörn, 2018). However, a narrative of *post-apocalyptic* environmentalism has also emerged, questioning if "it is not already too late" to avoid further escalating climate breakdown and ensuing social-ecological collapse (Cassegård, 2023; Cassegård & Thörn, 2022; Davidson, 2023; Malmqvist, 2024; Wettergren, 2024). And given the unevenness of climate breakdown, scholars have specified the question "for whom and what it is (not) too late": who's future needs to be saved, at who's expense, who's suffering is made (in)visible and

who is already dying from the consequences of decades of inaction on climate change (Cassegård & Thörn, 2022; Kenis, 2021; Swyngedouw, 2013; Whyte, 2020)? Researchers have also wondered what this implies for movement activity, zooming in on discussions about whose temporal experiences are included and excluded (Hayes & MacGregor, 2023; Sunnemark, 2023), to what extent the emerging post-apocalyptic narrative impacts movement strategies or is prevented from doing so (de Moor, 2022; de Moor & Marquardt, 2023), and how this influences participants' emotional experiences, and their capacities to sustain engagements (Cassegård, 2023; Cassegård & Thörn, 2022; Nairn, 2019; Stuart, 2020).

2.4.1 Linking temporalities to hope

As hope is about possible future betterment in regard to an insufficient present, it is a temporal concept (Friberg, 2022; Wettergren, 2024). Timeframes then, inform and influence hopes, shaping what to hope for, where to direct one's hope to, and where to draw hope from. For example, climate movement participants generally reject progress-based techno-optimism as a kind of "fraudulent" and "passive" hope (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017a; Stuart, 2020; Wettergren, 2024). Instead, they mainly enact "apocalyptic" hopes aimed at averting feared-for future catastrophes via urgent action (Cassegård & Thörn, 2018). Alternatively, movement actors can also cultivate "post-apocalyptic" hopes for interrupting ongoing catastrophes and open space for the arrival of justice. Moreover, temporal ambiguities can also underpin difficulties in articulating hopes (Cassegård, 2023; Cassegård & Thörn, 2022), while moving among ambiguities, articulating, clarifying, and shifting temporalities demands work (de Moor & Marquardt, 2023; Sunnemark, 2023). Temporalities also shape the range of time and possibility and (un)likeliness of hoping for something. Therefore, one might also adapt temporalities to reimagine possibilities, and thus craft space to keep up hopes. Typically, more radical transformations demand more time to be imagined as possible and to perceive struggles as part of a learning process – rather than just loss of precious time (Maeckelbergh, 2016). One can also acknowledge losses and shift hope to a new object in the future, for example by letting go of the hope to limit climate change below 1.5 degrees above the pre-industrial level, and instead broaden up the frame stating "every tenth of a degree counts". As such, temporalities shape hopes, and climate movement

participants often put in work to i.e. explicate, sustain, and shift their temporalities. Therefore, by researching climate movements' temporalities, I aim to contribute to unpacking the temporal dimension of how they work with hope.

Temporalities not only link to narratives – they also relate to emotions: for example, progress narratives tend to emphasize optimism, apocalyptic narratives invoke fear of disasters and hope for averting them while post-apocalyptic narratives rather highlight losses and anger.

2.5 The changing emotions of the climate movement

Narrative theorists often acknowledge that narratives motivate by appealing to emotions (Goodwin, Jasper, & Polletta, 2000; Polletta, Chen, Gardner, & Motes, 2011; Polletta & Gardner, 2015). However, the focus of the narrative strand of literature on the climate movement (as well as the temporal strand) mainly stays on the *cognitive* dimension while leaving the emotional side somewhat undertheorized. Investigating emotions in the climate movement can address this gap, as researchers have begun to do in the past years (H. Bergman, 2023; Crouzé, Godard, & Meurs, 2024; Kleres & Wettergren, 2017a, 2017b; Knops, 2021a, 2021b; Lorenzini & Rosset, 2023; Malmqvist, 2024; Martiskainen et al., 2020; Neckel & Hasenfratz, 2021; Pickard, 2021; Pihkala, 2022; Poma & Gravante, 2024; Ransan-Cooper, A. Ercan, & Duus, 2018; Wallaert, 2020; Wettergren, 2024).

This strand of literature has started unpacking the emotions that climate movement participants indicate as motivating their engagements, which emotions they discursively foreground, and which ones they manage to keep inside the movement. Kleres and Wettergren (2017a) have observed global Northern climate activists are mobilized by fear of future consequences of climate change, as well as by anger at political leaders and "the system" to which guilt is ascribed, while this pattern of emotions is mediated by hope in one's collective capacity to act. However, these movement participants put in the effort to manage fear and anger and shy away from using it publicly, preferring more "positive", joyful, and optimistic messages for mobilizing. Global Southern activists' responses differed as climate change was

experienced as a manifestly present reality – rather than a mostly future one, and therefore felt more acute panic-like fear mingled with anger, while hope is experienced more as a dire necessity than as a joyful option.

Since the 2018-2019 mobilizations and its emergency narrative, global Northern climate movement participants indicate experiencing a wide range of emotions such as powerlessness and despair for climate breakdown and political inaction, while experiencing joy, connectedness, and hope in collective action (Martiskainen et al., 2020; Poma & Gravante, 2024). Importantly, participants primarily refer to fear and anger as motivating (Crouzé, Godard, & Meurs, 2024; Knops, 2021b; Lorenzini & Rosset, 2023; Martiskainen et al., 2020; Pickard, 2021; Poma & Gravante, 2024; Soler-i-Martí, Fernández-Planells, & Pérez-Altable, 2022). A key finding is then that "unpleasant" emotions like fear, especially when linked to anger, can be an activating force (Contreras, Blanchard, Mouguiama-Daouda, & Heeren, 2024; Stanley, Hogg, Leviston, & Walker, 2021), a finding which counters the necessity for strategies of "positive communication" (see e.g. (Bushell et al., 2017)). In addition, how climate protestors relate to emotions also seems to have shifted. Neckel and Hasenfratz (2021) describe how more recent movements like Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion *emotionalize* climate change: they foreground the emotional dimension of the climate crisis. Through explicit emotional discourses, these movements aim to affect audiences to get past denial and make people acknowledge the crisis as an emergency. The emotional dimension of sustaining engagement is foregrounded, with more attention on care and mental health – which within Extinction Rebellion is bundled into regenerative culture as a specific program of sustaining engagement and emotional transformation (Sauerborn, 2022; Westwell & Bunting, 2020).

2.5.1 Linking emotions to hope

Hope is often conceptualized as an emotion – sometimes in more broad or implicit ways (Nairn, 2019; Stuart, 2020) or sometimes more specifically defined (for example; Jasper (2018); Summers-Effler (2002); Wettergren (2024)). As the emotion of future possibility, one not only *sees* hope, but crucially *feels* it as well, hence its role as motivator or comforter. Emotion-theoretical approaches to hope might differ in terms of emphasizing its

cognitive elaborateness and reflexiveness, or rather as a feeling of hopefulness that might be less specific in terms of what it hopes for (Cassegård, 2023; Jasper, 2018). Other emotions can shape the hopes felt and constructed by actors in the climate movement: fear and anger can trigger collective action that opens up possibilities and grounds for hope (Pickard, 2021; Thunberg, 2019), or formerly naïve hopes can be educated and shaped by despair and disappointment (Nairn, 2019). Given a widespread need for hope, participants in the climate movement tend to relate to hope in reflexive ways. Ongoing climate breakdown and political betrayal and/or disappointment produce climate movement participants to experience difficulties in keeping up hopes, especially when experienced as an individual burden (Nairn, 2019). However, participants also put in *emotion work* to relate to hope, e.g. they look to cultivate hope by framing collective action and togetherness found in the movement as a source of hope (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017a; Poma & Gravante, 2024), or by acknowledging losses and engage in mourning work to make space for new hopes (Cassegård & Thörn, 2022; Head, 2016; Stuart, 2020). Similarly, participants can also engage in emotion work to refuse specific hopes or hope more generally (Cassegård, 2023; Malmqvist, 2024). By investigating climate movement participants' emotion work to relate to hope, I therefore aim to contribute to unpacking the emotional dimension of how they work with hope.

3 Methodological framework

"*Method is also about the kinds of social science we want to practice*" (Law, 2004, p. 10).

3.1 Researching hope qualitatively

This dissertation aims to answer calls for investigating hope in the context of climate change and climate movements. More specifically, it seeks to unpack how climate movement participants work with hope, putting effort into enacting, shaping, sustaining, revising, and struggling with it. All these are processes of meaning-making. To gain insight into these, I have used qualitative research methods. Accordingly, this research is largely aligned with the social constructivist ontology that regards social relations between people, as well as with their non-human surroundings, as socially constructed (Bryman, 2012; Kolinjivadi, Almeida, & Martineau, 2020). Researching social constructions, and processes of social constructing, means one has to interpret meanings while being inextricably part of the social reality studied. As such, the knowledge I seek to develop is co-constructed with the research participants and settings (Yanow, 2014; Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2014). The data I gathered is, as such, not strictly found but rather produced throughout a process of interaction in which my position also matters. In addition, I want to acknowledge my research is also generative: it "performs" social reality (Law, 2004). By interviewing, participating, writing, and presenting about hope in the climate movement, I participate in an interactive process of shaping and enacting meanings about the topic I study. The kind of knowledge that I seek to develop throughout this dissertation then is not so much to discover a thing, like a biologist would discover hope as a kind of rare salamander species crawling in the mud. Neither am I looking for mere analytical-conceptual purification of the concept. Rather, I seek to untangle the multiple meanings and tensions around hope that are being enacted in climate movement activity, and by doing so contribute to generating a kind of reflexive understanding of hope in this context.

According to Law (2004), researching slippery, textured, and indefinite topics might benefit more from *embracing the messiness* of their reality. Given my overarching research interest in inquiring into the thick ways of how climate movements work to deal with hope, a more messy approach aligns with both my topic of research, as well with my overall conceptualization of hope as an embrace of uncertainty (Solnit, 2016). Law (2004) proposes to deal with the mess by adopting an open sense of method, that, in contrast to what he calls ”automatic” or ”mechanical”, can be slow, uncertain, multiple, and open to the unexpected. As such, investigating hope in climate movements can somewhat resemble the salamander, but instead of being discovered, the researcher is the one struggling to tentatively grasp meanings, crawling in the mud of messy reality. Throughout this research trajectory, I have done so more specifically by drawing on a position as both researcher and movement participant (as discussed in 3.4).

Each one of the empirical chapters (4, 5, 6, 7) in this manuscript has its own more detailed methodological section describing the methods used to reach the insights presented in that chapter. In the remainder of this methodology section, therefore, I provide insight into the Belgian climate movement, the choice to select the Belgian climate movement for investigating hope, the sampling choices I made within the Belgian climate movement and how I collected and analyzed the data, while I finish with a reflection on my position as an engaged researcher.

3.2 Research context: the Belgian climate movement

3.2.1 Depicting the Belgian climate movement

Despite the richness of the Belgian climate movement and available research into parts of it, a comprehensive overview and history of the Belgian climate movement has yet to be written (and falls outside of the scope of this

research).[4] The Belgian climate movement is composed of more institutionalized organizations as well as grassroots collectives. The more institutionalized organizations primarily focus on policy influencing and take on 'advocacy' roles. Central within this category is the 'Klimaat Coalitie-Coalition Climat' (*climate coalition)* which since 2008 has frequently organized yearly demonstrations and brings together a broad array of more than 90 civil society organizations (and their umbrella organizations), including the three big labor unions, environmental organizations, as well as international solidarity organizations, human rights and youth organizations and including grassroots groups. International NGOs like Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth combine such more 'institutionalized' roles as policy workers with protest actions and supporting grassroots movements. A more unique but influential organization is Klimaatzaak (climate case), aiming to enforce a Belgian climate policy through legal action. A subsequent category is smaller and often more local NGOs with few paid staff members, like Climaxi which focuses on social inequality and climate change in local cases. Other NGOs primarily work in support of (climate) movements by giving trainings and workshops like Tractie (part of a peace organization) and LABO (organization for critical citizenship) do.

The category I focused most on for my research includes the grassroots movements that are run predominantly by volunteers. Between 2013 and 2018, Climate Express was one of the more prominent organizations mobilizing towards COPs in Europe and for national demonstrations. During the 2018-2019 wave of mobilizations, the school strikers of Youth for Climate were a core mobilizing force, aided by several other collectives that emerged like Grandparents for Climate, Students for Climate, Scientists for Climate, Workers for Climate, and Teachers for Climate. In addition to groups primarily

[4] Lajarthe (2022) has went into great detail analyzing the more grassroots and politically radical climate justice (sub)movement in Belgium between 2009 and 2020. While her research was influential of my understanding of the Belgian movement, my approach of the climate movement requires a broader scope of who to include. A short historical summary of the movement how I constructed it, can be found in the movement description of Chapter 4.

aimed at marches, a distinct set of groups arose mostly between 2015 and 2018, focused on divesting from fossil fuel companies or infrastructures and organized locally like DivestGent or 'KU Leuven Fossil Free' (around Leuven University). In addition, other groups have focused on more disobedient actions. The now disbanded Brussel-based collective Act for Climate Justice did so in more politically radical ways from 2018 to 2020, while Extinction Rebellion has established multiple local groups in various Belgian cities. 'End Fossil' is a more recent group, that since 2023 focuses on occupying university spaces to end fossil ties. Lastly, the Climate Justice Camp held a unique position as a grassroots group not oriented to action but brought people together during yearly weekends focused on the work of deepening the understanding of, and barriers to, climate justice.

Having outlined these main movement organizations, what are more overarching characteristics of this movement, and more specifically of its grassroots wing? Climate protestors have been described as predominantly having (parents with) higher education degrees (de Moor et al., 2021), and little indicates that Belgian participants would, as a group, significantly differ in this respect. In addition, most groups seem concentrated in the larger cities (like Brussels, Antwerp, Ghent, or Liège) and draw on relatively younger constituencies – with Grootouders voor het klimaat (*grandparents for climate),* and to a lesser extent Extinction Rebellion, deviating from this. The Belgian climate movement is loosely structured along language, with Dutch-speaking and French-speaking networks, and often Brussels-based bi-lingual organizations. Organizers within the grassroots sections of the Belgian climate movement tend to form fluid networks, with people taking part often in multiple collectives, or meeting each other in larger campaigns like Tegengas-Dégaze (against new fossil gas power plants), Ineos Will Fall (against new petrochemical infrastructure), and Code Rouge/Rood (mass civil disobedience against fossil infrastructure). Within these networks, a cultural style of 'personalized politics' often shapes social interactions (Lichterman & Eliasoph, 2014; Vandepitte, Vandermoere, & Hustinx, 2019). This entails participants imagining their ties to outsiders as characterized by opposition to e.g. inaction of politicians or so-called 'fossil criminals' and envision their efforts to contribute to social transformation while hoping to appeal to a broad universal audience. Internally, participants predominantly view their own bonds as

(aspiring) highlighting participants' personal uniqueness resulting in harmonious unity-in-diversity, rather than attempting to speak with one voice.

During the earlier stages of my empirical research, I pragmatically constructed a preliminary exploration of the movement's composition to get a grasp on who was this climate movement. This image was iteratively informed by the sampling process, focusing more on Dutch-speaking and bi-lingual movement organizations, and the first rounds of data collection . Key for constructing this image was a question posed to interviewees to draw how they perceived the Belgian climate movement, with some making networked clusters, analytical schemes, or more figurative drawings (see Figure 1 below). While movements tend to move and evolve in how they are shaped, and this overview is imperfect at best, my hope is this depiction can help orient the reader unacquainted with the Belgian context and provide guidelines to researchers interested in this movement. In the following section, I will discuss several tendencies that shed light on the more general movement characteristics, starting with the movement organizations I include in the depiction, and looking into some overarching characteristics afterward.

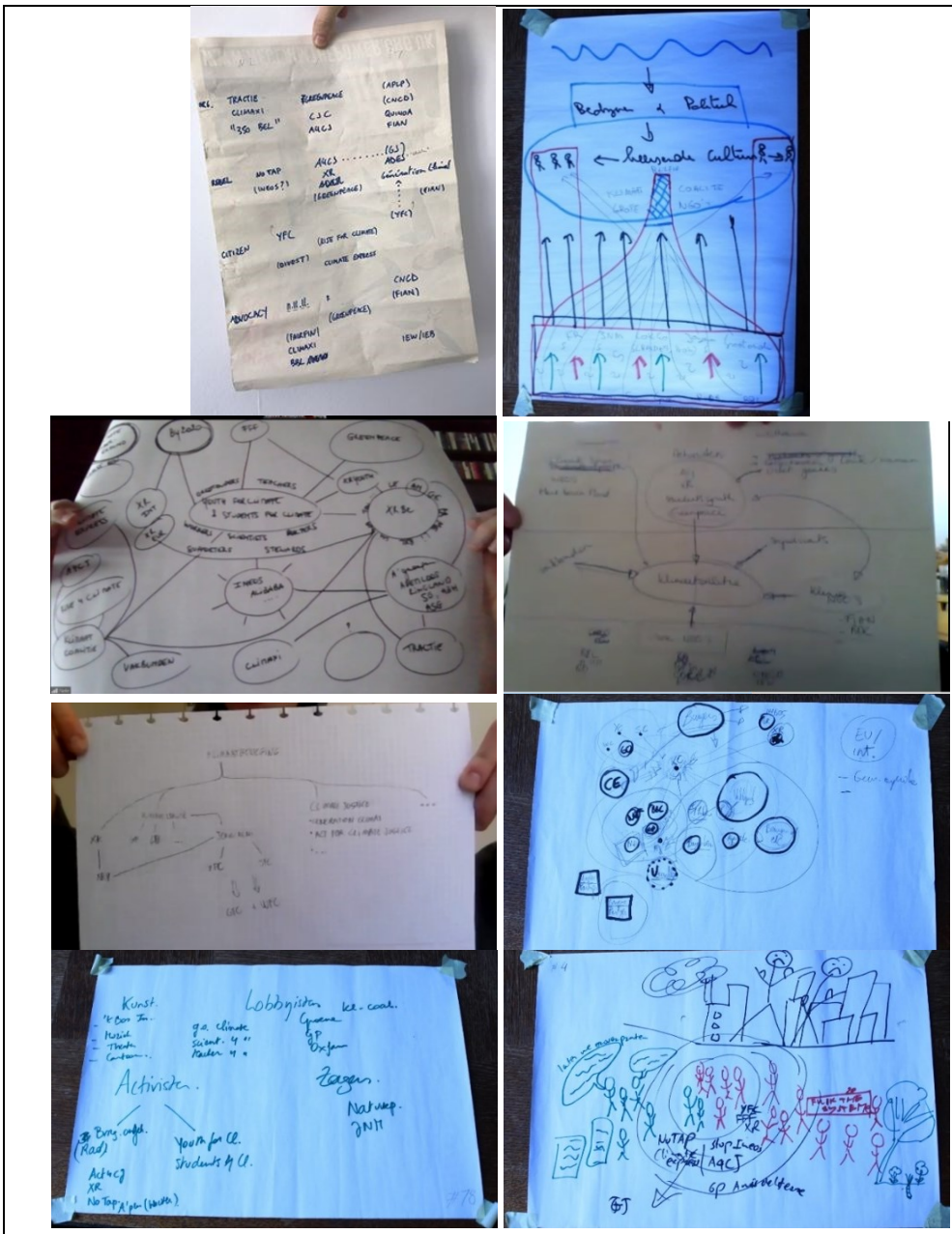

Figure 1 shows a selected number of drawings by interviewees, depicting their view on the Belgian climate movement.

3.2.2 Selecting the Belgian climate movement

My research on hope among climate movements is entirely based on an in-depth study of the *Belgian* climate movement. This raises the question what makes this movement appropriate for the topic?

Firstly, Belgium – founded as a buffer state – is at the intersection of larger neighboring countries like the Netherlands, Germany, Luxemburg, France, and via the Southern North Sea also Great Britain. It's climate movement has established networks with neighboring climate movements, and through participating abroad has learned from movements like the British climate action camps, German mass disobedience of Ende Gelände, or French territorial struggles (Lajarthe, 2022; Vandepitte, Vandermoere, & Hustinx, 2019). As such, dynamics that reshape and reorient movement activities – like the recent school strikes or emergency narrative enacted via XR – are often present in Belgium as well, making it an exemplary movement to study. . Yet, national contexts also shape movement activities in distinct ways. The large presence of European institutions in Brussels makes the Belgian case unique. Moreover, for the Belgian climate movement, its multilingual character is defining, with movement organizations being Dutch or French-speaking, or bi-lingual. In addition, Belgium's particular federalized state structure leading to four equivalent climate ministers (one federal minister, and one for each of the Flanders, Brussels, and Wallonia regions), has since long sparked accusations of lacking political action and responsibility by the Belgian climate movement organizations. Also, Belgium's specific colonial history towards Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi has long been (and still is) little acknowledged and ill-processed, feeding i.a. into discussions around on the dimension of recognition of climate injustices.

Secondly, the Belgian climate movement provides a variety of experiences and outlooks on social change that can embed various meanings of hope. The Belgian climate movement has a continuous history since at least 2007, with newly emerging grassroots groups springing up every few years, bringing narrative (and sometimes temporal and emotional) changes. As such, the Belgian climate movement has experienced successful mobilizations abroad (e.g. in 2009 to the Copenhagen COP15, or the 2013 Warsaw COP19), as well as yearly largescale national manifestations, with the 2018 yearly

demonstration drawing 100.000 people, making it one of Belgium's most prominent protest movements in terms of turnout. At the same time, the movement has known periods of (partial) demobilization after the disappointing COP in 2009 and the election results 2019, which shape participants' relations with hope (Nairn, 2019). In this pattern of mobilization and relative demobilization in between the movement's more visible peak periods, some members have remained (or returned), resulting in a 'layered' variety of experiences (that shape their ways of working with hope) between more recent members and members that have engaged in the movement for a decade or more.

Thirdly, the Belgian movement is multifaceted. It enacts climate struggle in various ways, both through more grassroots politics as well as more institutionalized approaches (Kenis & Mathijs, 2014; Lajarthe, 2022) – the latter aligning with the country's neo-corporatist welfare regime where civil society organizations have a tradition of seeking negotiated agreements with governments through institutionalized channels and participate in shaping the policies that regulate them (Pauly, Verschuere, De Rynck, & Voets, 2021).

Fourthly, a reason to research hope among participants of the Belgian climate movement was my already established bonds with actors in that movement. These were built up throughout previous research and movement participation (for a more thorough discussion of positionality, see section 3.4). Besides the pragmatic reason of accessibility and convenience of selecting this movement, my already established access also allowed a close and in-depth research approach among the participants of the Belgian climate movement.

3.3 Sampling, collecting and analyzing data

This research project started with the aim of studying hope in the climate movement by taking a micro-interactive lens and focusing on narratives and emotions. This theoretical starting point served to guide an exploratory abductive approach to the empirical (Lichterman & Reed, 2015; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). Sampling, data collection, and data analysis formed an iterative process that, by weaving back and forth between theory and data, enabled a gradually deeper understanding of hope in the Belgian climate

movement. I conducted this process of selecting, gathering, and analyzing data during two periods. During the first period, between July 2019 and December 2020, I took a broad approach and purposively selected a variety of Belgian climate movement organizations, collecting data primarily through 20 in-depth interviews with organizers of Belgian climate movement organizations. Chapter 4 on narratives and Chapter 5 on temporality are based on this first empirical period. Moreover, this period also generated a number of sensitizing questions and observations (e.g. how does hope relate to mourning, how does hope relate to togetherness). These guided a more in-depth approach through participant observation among Extinction Rebellion groups, which I conducted during the second period, ranging from October 2021 up to January 2022. Chapters 6 and 7 on the emotional dimensions are based on this second empirical period. In what follows I explain these processes of data selection, collection, and analysis in more detail.

3.3.1 Sampling

For the first period, I mainly applied a strategy of purposive sampling, in my aim to explore a diversity of perspectives on narratives enacted among the Belgian climate movement. More specifically, I combined this strategy with a strategy of convenience sampling. Based on prior research with the Belgian climate movement (Vandepitte & Vandermoere, 2018; Vandepitte, Vandermoere, & Hustinx, 2019), I tentatively identified several groups and initiatives to sample. Moreover, during both research periods, I focused on Dutch-speaking and bi-lingual groups due to reasons of language accessibility. During July 2019, I carried out three pilot interviews with well-networked organizers in the climate movement, who each had multiple years of experience and were active in more long-term grassroots organizations, larger NGOs as well as more short-term campaigns.

As foreseen in the original research plan, during August and September, I also started with participant observations among two cases. First, among Belgian participants mobilizing to Free the Soil – a mass action of civil disobedience in North-Western Germany, tackling the issues of fossil fuels and industrial agriculture by targeting YARA – a large producer of fertilizer and considered to be Europe's biggest individual consumer of fossil gas. In early September 2019, I also participated in the four-day Belgian climate justice camp (as well as in its

two following editions). Based on its website, this organization aimed at providing a space for reflection and deepening understanding of what justice and intersectionality could mean for the climate movement, after a period of peak mobilization and movement growth. Both cases were selected to start observing more micro-interactive processes, as well as for their outspoken "Blockadia" (in the case of Free the Soil) and "climate justice" narratives. Observing these two cases proved generative for further sampling, sparking sensitizing questions as well as a more general embodied understanding of the movement through observing, participating, and numerous informal conversations. Even though preliminary analysis was included in several presentations at conferences and seminars, these cases did not make it into Chapters 4 to 7 as I opted for other examples in the text but my participant observation at these events nevertheless shaped my further data collection and informed my analysis.

In a snowball way of sampling, these first interviews and participant observations, fed into a new round of interviews (n=8) with movement organizers between February and June 2020 – overlapping with a societal lockdown and social distance measures due to the Covid-19 pandemic that overwhelmingly reduced movement activity. For this round, I focused mainly on highly active individuals within grassroots organizations and smaller climate-justice-oriented NGOs that self-aligned with grassroots movements. In addition, I sampled to include more long-term as well as more recent activists within the movement. Moreover, I also made use of the 'drawings' provided throughout the interviews, (see Figure 1 above) as they provided insight into participants' constructions of the movement.

At the end of the first period of sampling, I carried out nine more interviews between August and December 2020 and mainly sampled for more variation as saturation started to be reached within the core of grassroots organizations. As such, I included more experienced organizers from larger NGOs, less prominent grassroots organizations as well and social-ecological think tanks at the edge of the movement. Furthermore, I included a few specific individuals who had been suggested by research participants as knowledgeable on narratives, in a snowball fashion, as well as participants with specific knowledge on like temporalities, "active hope" workshops, more radical

approaches to climate justice as well as on the emission management metanarrative.

The initial research plan held the idea of first studying the smaller Belgian climate *justice* movement, before studying anti-gas resistance in Groningen (Northern Netherlands). However, through increasing knowledge of the literature and the first round of interviews, it became clear that delineating the climate *justice* movement from the climate movement made little sense in my case, with the *metanarrative* of climate justice being broader than groups carrying "justice" in their name and instigating through disobedient actions – although they certainly constitute an important part of this movement, I came to understand climate justice as more widespread, and interpreted in various ways. As such, I came to understand the metanarrative I was studying to be broader than first imagined. I preferred to further enquire into the richness of this movement in Belgium than to add another movement in the Netherlands (which would add comparative value, but less in-depth situated knowledge). In consultation with my supervisors and PhD guidance commission, I reoriented the sampling plan to deepen the focus by staying within the Belgian climate movement.

For the second, shorter, period of data collection, I selected Extinction Rebellion (XR) as a critical case. I came to see XR as a case that stands out from other climate movement organizations in terms of organizing, strategy and narrative, temporal and emotional dimensions. As a more recent and fast-growing network organization, XR Belgium managed to spark attention, as well as reactions from multiple interviewees. These remarked their emergency narrative, the explicitly emotional language used for mobilizing – including despair – as well as their tactical escalations combined with a "beyond-politics" stand (Westwell & Bunting, 2020) in contrast to e.g. more openly anti-capitalist groups practicing disobedient actions. Interviewees also remarked on XR's double-sided relation to time; on the one hand doubling down on apocalyptic urgency, on the other hand cultivating an internal "regenerative culture" of slowing down to allow care work. Moreover, at the outset, as a researcher and movement participant, I had less personal affinity with XR than with many other movements and their participants. This enabled a fresher gaze on this movement organization. Therefore, between October 2021 and

January 2022, I conducted participant observation among two local Dutch-speaking Belgian XR groups, including the action process of the Time for Rage national civil disobedient action (see Chapter 6), as well as more backstage moments on regenerative culture and the active hope approach by Macy and Johnstone (2012) (see Chapter 7).

3.3.2 First period of data collection

During the first period of data collection, I aimed to explore the different faces of the climate movement – primarily through a narrative lens – as well as tentatively start probing into tensions around hope. To do so, I used multiple forms of data collection. I primarily relied on in-depth interviews with movement participants, but also on collected documents like statements, self-descriptions, and reports from movement websites, as well as on the abovementioned participant observations on Free the Soil (in 2019) and Climate Justice Camp (2019, 2020, and 2021). These three ways of collecting data served to give input into one another as well as triangulate findings to enhance the robustness of understanding of this movement (Schwartz-Shea, 2014; Yanow, 2014). I collected documents on the respective movement organizations which I drew on to design the interviews. During the first three explorative interviews, I focused mostly on the narrative dimension. Along with the first participant observations, the issue of temporality emerged from the data as a tension around emphasizing apocalyptic urgency in organizations' narratives, as well as in which ways a sense of urgency shapes movement practices and might be at odds with more long-haul organizing. As such, my research focus developed step by step, iterating between participant observation, documents, and most importantly interviews.

The twenty in-depth interviews I conducted with Belgian climate movement organizers all took a semi-structured form, relying on a basic questionnaire while allowing openness for probing deeper into what came up, as well as for more unexpected topics. Each interview started with an informed consent section (see Appendix I) approved by the faculty ethical commission. I gave a printed copy to the research participant, while verbally going over the form, and emphasizing confidentiality, anonymity as well as my intentions of contributing to this movement by investigating it (see section 3.4 below). Next, I asked questions about participants' personal trajectories of movement

engagement, asking for example: "*How did you arrive at [organization x]?"* and "*What are you currently working on?"*.

Subsequently, a section enquired into the narratives occurring in participants' organizations. The pilot interviews started with questions like "*What does climate justice mean to you?*" and probes like "*What does the climate movement want?"* and "*How does it aim to reach that goal*"?. Later on, I relocated that question towards the end of this interview section while starting with questions about the stories their organizations enacted by asking for example *"Could you formulate in one or two sentences the main message of your organization"?* and then probing on narrative elements that were derived from literature (Bushell et al., 2017; Luederitz et al., 2017) such as the problem definition, solution, actor, action, goal, narrator and audiences. From the third round of interviews (interviews 12-20) onwards, my questionnaire also included follow-up questions based on elements that recurrently occurred in earlier interviews like how participants understood and related to the climate emergency, the narratives of the broader climate movement, and more radical groups, and how their organizations related to governments and the role of fossil industries.

A third main section of the questionnaire included their "maps" – not in the sense of literally mapping their networks but in the more micro-cultural sense of the other relevant actors they identified and related to (see Lichterman and Eliasoph (2014)). If there was enough time, I frequently asked participants to draw out how they imagined these relations (see Figure 1). Participants often asked if I wanted a summary or network, and my standard response was that they could interpret this open question freely, which led to schemes, networked clusters as well as caricatures. One research participant showed a picture of a unicorn (as it exemplified the joyfulness he experienced in the movement), while another participant refused this as she didn't feel comfortable drawing, but instead verbally drew out ties to other movement organizations. I then discussed these drawings/explanations with them, asking what divided and united sections of the movement, and what evolutions they saw. Moreover, in this section I also questioned tensions in the movement, referring to public discussions on differing strategies or narratives within the movement (e.g. on the sign for my future petition – see Kenis (2021)).

Furthermore, during the third round of interviews, I also used quotes from websites, or anonymized respondents, to probe about more radical interpretations of climate justice, and about temporalities and as these were identified as domains of tensions during earlier data collection. For both topics, the climate justice camp's public discussions of these themes often served as the main reference.

If the topic did not come up before, I would inquire as well about how they saw the future (related to climate change and climate protest), and how they perceived hope, with some respondents giving more personal answers about how they experienced deep fears and despairs for crossing climatic tipping points, as well as responding more on a strategic level (how the climate movement could e.g. reorient from limiting global warming to 1.5. degrees to an "every tenth of a degree counts" message), or with one respondent theatrically depicting active and passive hopes through bodily posture, and paraphrasing Paulo Freire by metaphorically describing hope as "*a fire one sees over there, and a fire one feels here (puts his hand on his chest), and you want to connect those fires, which makes you move".* Finally, I concluded by asking if there were things they wanted to add, or revise, if they could suggest other people to interview, and if they wanted to ask me anything.

Practically, this questionnaire served primarily as a backbone for the semi-structured interviews. Often, participants started sharing more elaborative stories of experiences and the lessons they had drawn from them – for example about disappointed hopes after large-scale mobilizations – and the interview organically developed along their narrated experiences while I probed further by relying on the questionnaire. Interviews took between one and three hours, and in five cases I conducted a follow-up interview within the week of the first one. All interviews occurred in Dutch, the native tongue of those respondents as well as for me, except for one in English. Interviews took place mostly at people's workplaces, their homes, my home in one instance, or during lock-down periods also online through Zoom, as well as in one instance, a follow-up interview was done while walking in a park. During interviews, I tried to create a calm and informal atmosphere, often through chitchatting and sharing a coffee or thee. During online interviews, I consciously tried not

to go through this informal part too fast as I believed it helped to establish trust and comfort in the relationship.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed, except for two instances where technical issues resulted in failure to record, in which case I transcribed from notes I took during the conversation right afterward.

3.3.3 Second period – Ethnography among Extinction Rebellion

During the first period of data collection, several themes emerged from the interaction between my initial theoretical focus, evolving literature, and the gathered set of data. The tensions between various temporalities, revolving around the concept of urgency, was one such main theme. Two respondents also mentioned the active hope approach as a way of cultivating slower as well as less shaky hopes, while others referred to XR's regenerative culture as exemplifying such "slowing down". In addition, quotes by participants during my earlier observations left me pondering on the relation between hope, various emotions, and togetherness. For example, during Free the Soil's celebratory plenary end meeting, where a few hundred participants had just blockaded the entrance to an industrial fertilizer plant for over a day and built a makeshift encampment, a participant shared: "*next to all blocking production and transport, by living together here we will all leave with a bit more hope*". Similarly, during a workshop by XR at the first climate justice camp, a scientist who had entered Extinction Rebellion shared his view with the other attendants: "*What gives me hope, is if others share with me their grief, their anger".* Moreover, statements by interviewees had left me wondering about the link between action and hope, as some saw a minimal sense of hope as a requirement for action, while movements like XR rhetorically opposed the two through slogans like "hope dies, action begins". As XR was a group that stood out for their general style, as well as their relation to time and emotions, it made most sense to select them for researching these dimensions more deeply.

Between October 2021 and January 2022, I conducted ethnographic research among two local Belgian XR groups, focusing on Dutch-speaking groups. I opted for ethnography as a way of collecting qualitative data to gain more in-

depth knowledge about dynamics in XR. In comparison to interviews and document analysis, the ethnographic method allows deeper immersion in the everyday practices of participants for the researcher to observe as well as experience participants *in action* (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994). Given the research focus included temporal and emotional dimensions and how these linked to hope, the ethnographic method had the advantage of enabling an embodied co-presence allowing a better grasp of the emotional dimension of interactions, as well as more access to how participants deal with the messiness of tensions.

More specifically, I adopted a role as participant-observer, openly observing as a researcher and taking notes, whilst joining as a regular, non-organizing, participant as much as possible. As can be seen in Table 1 below, I carried out research in twelve separate moments, including moments revolving around the preparation, execution, and debriefing of the national Time for Rage action, as well as moments organized within the regenerative culture idea of slowing down for emotion work.

Table 1 moments of participant observation among two Belgian XR groups.

Month & Year	**Activity observed**
October 2021	Empathy circle
October 2021	Workshop Active Hope
October 2021	Action training
November 2021	Reading group on Active Hope
November 2021	National Time for Rage action
November 2021	Debriefing 1
November 2021	Debriefing 2
November 2021	Reading group on Active Hope
December 2021	Red Rebels public performance
January 2022	Reading group on Active Hope
January 2022	Reading group on Active Hope
January 2022	Online workshop Active Hope

Gaining access to the XR groups studied was a continuous process. Although relatively recently established in Belgium, XR was not a completely new group

to me, as three of the interviews were, or had been, active in XR (amongst other groups). Moreover, I had witnessed a mass action of civil disobedience by them the year prior and had been engaged in a local campaign that was co-organized by some individuals who were also engaged in XR. I contacted one of these XR members for an exploratory conversation. After this person saw no problems in my research role, I was invited to events by this local group. For the first three events (the empathy circle, the active hope workshop, and action training) I sent an email to the contact addresses on their websites and Facebook pages, in which I asked if I could join as a participant observer, explained with whom I had discussed attending their event before, as well as giving some background info on the previous research I had done. In those emails, as well as in introducing myself as a researcher during the introductory rounds of workshops, meetings, and trainings, I stressed I wanted to contribute to the wider movement, as well as being committed to confidentiality and anonymity, as well as to gaining consent for their participation (and that a "no" is, of course, okay at any time). While one facilitator of the action training voiced his concern for possible discomfort for newer participants if I openly took notes, he agreed after a short talk. Apart from that moment of negotiation, participants were unanimously easy with the research, within each case, organizers and participants stressed that it was okay for them but being a horizontal group, they could not represent everyone.

During this process of gaining access, I gradually became more accepted by participants. Earlier during the process, some participants were curious about my research and felt eager to share their stories and thoughts. One of these participants also introduced me to a non-publicly displayed reading group on Macy and Johnstone's (2012) book on active hope. Later during the research process, as I became less of a novelty for most participants, my presence became gradually more normalized. During this process of gaining acceptance in the group, I had been open about my position as engaged researcher (see 3.4), but less about the specific kind of actions and campaigns I had joined before as a movement participant. As many of the XR members were relatively new to disobedient activism – which is an international trend (Saunders, Doherty, & Hayes, 2020) – I did not want to stand out too much from them in terms of experience or political standpoints. Doing so, I believe, facilitated

keeping the research focus and preventing me from sliding into a more activist-participant role.

During the ethnographic process among XR, my focus continued to lie on narrative and temporal elements and built on the first period of data gathering and analysis. In addition, I focused on the emotional processes, more specifically by using elements of interaction ritual chains as a lens (Collins, 2004)[5]. I alternated between such theoretically guided focus and more open observations, wondering "what is going on here", and going into more detail when observing tensions. From the Time for Rage action onwards, I sharpened my focus and observation guideline to include more explicit attention to the emotions participants named and connected, how they referred to hope and disappointment, how they performed temporal elements in their public communication as well as within their organizational practices.

3.3.4 Data analysis

Overall, data analysis happened in a continuous iterative process, weaving back and forth between sampling, collecting, and analyzing data (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). The process of analyzing usually started after taking interviews or field notes and writing down memos containing short summaries of what had struck me most. This continued throughout the process of transcribing interviews and field notes whilst adding reflexive memos and questions to them – resulting in a total of 420 pages of interview transcriptions and 148 pages of observations – before more in-depth analysis of the data through both open coding and more selective coding strategies (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012). Overarchingly, I adopted a more abductive-interpretive approach of going into the field with a prior theoretical base and deepening that along the way through interaction with emerging themes from the data

[5] According to Collins (2004) Interaction ritual chains can be observed by investigating their ingredients of group assembly, barriers to outsiders, mutual focus of attention and shared moods, as well as how these could lead to 'collective effervescence' that could lead to outcomes like group solidarity, emotional energy, 'sacred object' symbolizing the social relations as well as group standards of morality.

(Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). So, while I tried to retain an open gaze for unexpected meanings and links, this was no blank slate approach, as I already knew I was interested in hope, narratives, and the emotional dimension of climate activism, while the theme of temporality emerged from the data in a less expected way early in the process. For these dimensions, my understanding more slowly transformed through presenting tentative findings to my supervisors, colleagues, and at conferences and seminars as well as through the exploration of literature that could then generate a deeper understanding of the collected data and links I was making.

Moreover, during and after periods of data gathering, I carried out "member checks" with research participants as well as trusted movement participants, to improve the multivocality of my data (Ybema, Yanow, Wels, & Kamsteeg, 2009), and enhance the trustworthiness of the emerging findings (Creswell & Miller, 2000). While many researchers use programs like NVIVO for analyzing, ordering, and retrieving large quantities of data, I did not do so after I found working with it numbing and instead fell back on a more "artisanal" (and possibly more time-consuming) method of gaining familiarity with the data by reading and coding it on paper, and later adding more selective codes in text files whilst making "axial" links and summaries in separate text documents. In the remainder of this section, I will outline how my research foci and findings came about for the narrative, temporal, and emotional dimensions.

The analysis of the narrative dimension took place within the first period of collecting data and already started during the first three explorative interviews. From literature on transition pathway narratives (Luederitz et al., 2017) and strategic narratives in climate communication (Bushell et al., 2017) I derived elements to analyze narratives with, such as problem definition, key actors, proposed actions towards envisioned goals and how these related to wider contexts, who narrated the stories as well as for which the audiences they were intended to. Based on those theoretical frameworks and the first interviews and document analysis, as well as familiarity with the wider movement, a first tentative analysis already resulted in the overarching findings presented in Chapter 4, which was presented at a conference. From this preliminary analysis, I collected further data in subsequent interview rounds and engaged in more focused coding of the data. In this stage, I

selected narrative elements that allowed me to analytically distinguish in a more parsimonious way. Moreover, throughout interview rounds two and three, I gradually deepened my analysis of the stories respondents told –e.g. movement disappointment after peak mobilizations or various ways of interpreting climate justice – aiming for a more "thick" understanding that was supported by multiple participant's accounts, as well as to grasp the *evolving* meanings, tensions and their accounts of these process (such as respondents' stories about how climate justice was first a slogan to them, and only later did they acquire an understanding of it).

I had been less theoretically acquainted with the dimension of temporality when it emerged from the data as a tension between so-called fast and slow approaches to movement organizing based on movement experiences of disappointment and burnout. From the first three interviews, "urgency" became a sensitizing concept and was integrated into subsequent data collection rounds making use of quotes from documents or anonymized interviews to probe respondents. After initial open coding of the interviews and documents, I presented tentative findings at various seminars and conferences. However, these preliminary findings remained exploratory and got theoretically grounded in a slow process of gathering feedback from (international) colleagues, supervisors, and commission members, which helped sharpen analytical focus from "urgency" to "temporality" whilst expanding my theoretical base about works on deadline-thinking (Asayama et al., 2019; de Moor & Wahlström, 2019), as well as apocalyptic- and post-apocalyptic environmentalism (Cassegård & Thörn, 2018; Kenis, 2021). With this enriched understanding, I returned to the data for a more thorough focus and axial coding that aided in restructuring my argumentation and "thickening" the description of the various temporalities within the movement (see Chapter 5).

Before gathering and analyzing data on Belgian Extinction Rebellion groups, I approached the emotional dimension of hope in climate movements predominantly through Collins' theory of *interaction ritual chains* (2004). Moreover, the first period of data gathering had sensitized me to the temporal linkages between hope and disappointment and had delivered intriguing puzzles about the links between hope and action, and hope, loss, and

togetherness. These guided my focus during participant observation with XR groups. During observations, I transcribed field notes and added methodological as well as theoretical reflexive memos to them, to iterate initial open coding with observations. These memos often were generative for later findings. For example, before the Time for Rage action, I wondered what the problem was that participants sought to address and how they perceived social change: if their strategy was to address political inaction, was the tactic of a blockade then the appropriate one? Another option was that the problem was people feeling hopeless and powerless in the face of climate breakdown and systemic inertia, and that the disobedient action therefore was aimed at emotional change by inspiring hope and countering feelings of powerlessness – which became a core argument later in Chapter 6. As the observed events lay close together and I transcribed field notes soon after each event, I experienced less time for reflection and theoretical elaboration during this iterative process of data collection and initial analysis. Moreover, the slow writing process for Chapter 5 on temporality competed with developing a theoretical focus and deepening insights into the emotional dimension. While this created more distance from the data and events, it also allowed me to expand the theoretical base on hope and emotions (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017a, 2017b; Nairn, 2019; Stuart, 2020). As such, more in-depth analysis through focused coding of the data occurred only in early 2022, in the run-up to and during a research stay intended to focus on the emotional dimension. This was done together with Karl Malmqvist who also co-authored Chapter 7. Already during data collection, I had started attending to participants' reflexive relations to emotions. Through presenting tentative findings, as well as the recurring in-depth discussions with Karl Malmqvist on how to interpret the data, I gradually left the framework of interaction rituals for a focus on emotion work and feeling rules as this resonated better with the data and with my evolving understanding of hope. Throughout this process, I also started clarifying arguments and theoretical contributions to the literature, leading to distinguishing Chapters 6 and 7 on their empirical basis as well as argumentative storyline while relying on similar theoretical lenses.

3.4 Positionality: on public sociologists, companions, and co-conspirers

At the onset of this doctoral trajectory, I had the opportunity to co-author a book chapter reflecting on my positionality as a researcher (Vandepitte & Vandermoere, 2018). I had written an ethnographic master's thesis on how climate activists occupied fossil fuel infrastructure (Vandepitte, Vandermoere, & Hustinx, 2019), and had myself been a participant in several protest movements. Coming from "Blockadia", I entered academia intending to conduct research that could somehow support the movements I studied. I therefore relied on Burawoy's (2005) typology of sociologies – in which he distinguished one axis of instrumental-reflexive knowledge, and one axis of academic-non-academic audience, resulting in the types of professional sociology (instrumental-academic), policy sociology (instrumental – non-academic), critical sociology (reflexive-academic) and public sociology (reflexive-non-academic). We posited that what Burawoy envisioned as the "defense of the social" – or rather social-ecological –could be strived for by engaging in a public sociology that openly engaged for emancipatory social transformation by dialoguing with non-academic audiences (Feagin, Elias, & Mueller, 2009).

In my specific case of moving between worlds of Blockadia and Academia, this meant refusing a kind of extractive research that instrumentalizes movements as a resource for the pursuit of a professional career without being responsive to the movement – something participants had cautioned me for (Vandepitte & Vandermoere, 2018). Instead, I aimed to "give back" reflexive knowledge to the wider social movements (Graeber, 2004) whilst acting as a "companion" that moves along with the movement (Scheper-Hughes, 1995). Throughout the past years, I have tried to let these frameworks guide and motivate my doctoral trajectory. For instance, by giving guest lectures, joining panels, and co-authoring op-eds as a traditional way of pursuing public sociology, by sustaining an engaged role in local social movements, as well as by aiming to make my "professional" sociological tasks of writing articles as well as this dissertation complementary with the abovementioned goals.

Burawoys general *typology* helped me to legitimize social engagement in and alongside my academic practice. The more specific *role* of *co-conspirer* (Temper, McGarry, & Weber, 2019) has helped me understand my position and how it shaped how I co-produced and interpreted data, as well as how it influenced my general research practices and results. By using the rather unusual metaphor of Tarot cards as a way to open intuitive and out-of-the-box thinking, Temper, McGarry, and Weber (2019) outline a variety of engaged research approaches. They describe the ”co-conspirer” as conducting research "*to enrich the justice movement they are specifically immersed and implicated in"* while doing so by struggling with others to understand and build on emerging concerns, challenges, and transgressive practices *(p7).* Moreover, this "*way of working believes that without a flourishing understanding of who we are, we lack then the epistemological roots to guide or trace our way forward"*. I found this characterization both revealing and clarifying my position as an engaged participant in the broader movement I studied. I will rely on this typological role as a guideline for the remainder of this section on positionality, by reflecting on how this role benefited complementarity between research and movement practices while holding specific challenges.

The position as co-conspirer benefited my research practice in various ways. This position facilitated gaining access to the field, as well as to more backstage spaces, as I could rely on previously built networks. Earlier movement experience also provided a kind of cultural capital that could help gain trust in emerging relations with research participants as I was already familiar with the specific cultural codes, and could also explicitly refer to these when I felt the need to signal my position as trustworthy. In addition, my movement networks and engagement could also help motivate and sustain my research, by giving a sense of purpose, providing feedback as well as productive critique. Furthermore, movement contacts also enabled me to participate in XR's Time for Rage action, as their support helped me overcome the intense fear I felt of possible police violence and potential maladaptive responses by movement members (a pattern I had experienced myself before and witnessed with others in this action as well). Moreover, acting from the position of a co-conspiring researcher shaped the co-production of knowledge, by providing access and in shaping the questions I posed and the interpretations I made. These were, at least in part, motivated by the will to

enrich the climate movement as I sook to contribute to a reflexive understanding of how hope is worked with.

Conversely, I believe my position as a co-conspiring researcher also benefited the Belgian climate movement in several ways. Throughout academic practices like writing, presenting, and teaching I tried to amplify the knowledge held in the niches that social movements often form. Moreover, by struggling with challenges (e.g. to keep up hope) together with research & movement participants I tried to contribute to advancing emerging collective insights on narratives, temporalities, and emotions. By questioning and dialoguing with research participants, my questions may have been performative in creating spaces for more in-depth reflection and co-production of insights for participants as well (as some interview participants indicated). In addition, working as a researcher has gained me access to literature and helped me develop skills and reflections that flow back to the movement in my own movement engagement, (e.g. by applying narrative analysis to communication-in-the-making, or using acquired skills of writing or presenting). Finally, I also (actively) hope that the insights I co-constructed and bundled in this doctoral manuscript will find their way toward movement participants as well.

Besides complementarities, the role as a co-conspiring researcher also brought challenges. Unsurprisingly, research and movement engagement can be both demanding in terms of time, energy, and focus and therefore exclude each other. This for example played out in periods of more intense writing, but could also occur on the micro-scale, when during observations at for example Free the Soil, I felt myself often sliding into a movement participant role whilst finding it harder to keep the researcher's focus. Switching between the worlds of movement and university can also be confusing in navigating the requirements of these differing contexts and keeping these worlds apart. For example, in who to write for as well as how to write (a paper is different from a pamphlet and requires, among other things, different management of indignation). In addition, early during the research process, two participants who combined grassroots activism with NGO work had cautioned against “extracting” from the movement. While I tried to take this to heart, this also fed into counterproductive hesitancy to share writings and findings, out of fear

of not meeting an (ultimately self-imposed) norm of *having to* integrate movement engagement in research.

Researching from the co-conspiring role also entails specific emotional challenges (Temper, McGarry, & Weber, 2019).[6] First, researching disobedient action through participant observation holds the risk of repression and its shorter and longer-lasting effects on one's health. Moreover, according to Brulle and Norgaard (2019), climate change can constitute a potential "cultural trauma" in the manifold challenges it poses to how we relate to the world. Climate change is therefore often met with avoidance (and sometimes more active resistance). Such avoidance can be subtle, in more everyday distancing from the brutal reality of climate breakdown – which can, at times, be a productive coping strategy (Head, 2016; Klein, 2014). However, studying how movements navigate how to emotionally deal with this, can facilitate *embodying* their very struggles as well, when emotionally acknowledging the ongoing catastrophic nature of climatic and ecological unraveling. For example, in 2022, I had been reading about post-apocalyptic environmentalism during a research stay and had come back home amidst heatwaves and drought, sparking a sense of ongoing loss and despair that lasted and cropped up every once in a while for over six months. While such emotional experiences can in ways be beneficial, their intensity demands a kind of emotion work for which I was ill-prepared. The main sources of support I tapped into were other engaged scholars. These ties and the support they offer, however, might be inaccessible to many other researchers. One way of responding to this would be learning ways to "collectivize" dealing with

[6] Temper, McGarry and Weber (2019) state: The co-conspirer might be overwhelmed with emotional, traumatic or difficult forms of knowledge that might emerge from her transgressive practice and she must be able to find psycho-social support when necessary to hold and recognize these emotionally complex knowledge's" (p.8)

despair and hopes (Nairn, 2019), not only within movements but also within universities.

Part II

4 Pathways to climate justice: transformation pathway narratives in the Belgian climate movement

Abstract

How can societies deal with climate change in more just and sustainable ways? In societal debates, multiple strategic pathways for dealing with climate change compete among each other. A narrative approach has been used both as an analytical tool for studying strategic pathways and the tensions between them, as well as a tool to render such tensions more productive through the suggested development of overarching metanarratives. Despite the recent global wave of climate protests, climate movements and their various narratives have remained understudied among sustainability transition scholars. To address this gap, I aim to contribute to the recentering of movements in transition studies by investigating transformation pathway narratives within the West-European case of the Belgian climate movement. Based on interviews (n=20) among organizers in Belgian climate movement groups throughout 2019 and 2020, I identify climate justice as an actual existing metanarrative, aimed at bottom-up systemic transformation through interlinking social and ecological struggles. While it has developed in opposition to a 'mainstream' metanarrative, I find that in the case studied, climate justice provides an ambiguous but common ground on which more moderate and radical interpretations can engage. Furthermore, I find four more transformation pathway narratives: climate plan, climate emergency, divestment and blockadia and shed light on the discussions within the Belgian climate movement around these narratives. A single unified (meta-)narrative might be impossible as well as undesirable. While spaces for listening and debate can render tensions more productive, creating common ground might still require sharp edges.

keywords: Climate Justice, Climate Change, Social Movement, Narrative, Transformation, Sociology

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4.1 Introduction

How to deal with climate disruption? How can people develop collective agency to transform unsustainable pathways into sustainable alternatives? These are defining questions of our time (Goodman, 2017). Throughout 2019, millions of youth and adults contested the unsustainable and unjust ways in which societies deal with the climate crisis, and in particular demanded more radical climate action from governments (Almeida, 2019; de Moor et al., 2021). These protests have increased public and academic attention for climate movements – at least in the Western-European context.

Yet, despite their growing presence, climate movements and their contributions are not adequately reflected in sustainability literature (Temper, Walter, Rodriguez, Kothari, & Turhan, 2018) and their more subversive complexities have often been obscured by dominant frameworks (Bowman, 2020). Sustainability studies seem primarily occupied with policy actors and often overlook the ways in which civil society actors, and social movements in particular, resist and provide breeding grounds for alternative pathways (Martinez-Alier et al., 2014; Pelenc et al., 2019).

In this study, I therefore join the call by Temper et al. (2018) to recenter social movements in sustainability studies by focusing on bottom-up attempts towards more disruptive transformations. More specifically, I investigate Belgian climate movement participants and shed light on how they make sense of sustainability transformations.

In alignment with movement's calls for systemic change, researchers are increasingly pleading for a profound transformation across societal domains such as energy and food regimes (IPBES, 2019; Temper et al., 2018). Such

transformations entail fundamental and accelerated social change that disrupts power relations and vested interests (Pelenc et al., 2019). Conceptually, *transformations* emphasize more fundamental and conflictive processes in contrast with the more commonly used *transitions* which are to be understood as more managed and gradual processes through dominant structures (Stirling, 2015). Since vested interests often resist fundamental change, 'top-down' approaches aiming to convince those very same vested interests are insufficient (Geels, 2014). In response, scholars have put more emphasis on 'bottom-up' pressure by civil society as a force for sustainability transformations (Otto, Donges, Lucht, & Schellnhuber, 2020; Smith, Christie, & Willis, 2020).

Imagining and creating transformations requires a process of engaging with different ways of relating to the climate crisis (Veland et al., 2018, p. 42). Single-solution approaches typically fall short of navigating the murky uncertainty-ridden landscapes of transformation. Scholars therefore typically propose to analyze and explore multiple open-ended pathways and foster learning between them (Luederitz et al., 2017). Narrative analysis provides an approach to gaining insight into the pathways through which actors conceive of climate change and wider sustainability changes (Bushell et al., 2017; Luederitz et al., 2017; Scoones, Newell, & Leach, 2015; Veland et al., 2018). As multiple narrative pathways often conflict, scholars suggest developing metanarratives. Such broader overarching strategic metanarratives can create perspectives from which different roles and functions can be seen as complementary (Bushell et al., 2017; Luederitz et al., 2017). However, the literature on *transition* and *transformation* pathway narratives has likewise paid insufficient attention to social movements and their suggested contributions.

I aim to tackle this gap through an in-depth case study of transformation pathway narratives among Belgian climate activists throughout 2019 and 2020, shedding light on the internal tensions around enacting these narratives. This case needs to be understood as an example of a West-European climate movement, belonging to the Global North (Thörn et al., 2017). Belgium is a small but wealthy country, it can be conceived as a liberal democracy and corporatist welfare state with a tradition of civil society participation in state

policies. It is heavily industrialized and urbanized and has a continuing colonial legacy. While such structural characteristics and macro-power relations are not the focus of this article, they are shaping climate politics in the wider country as well as among climate movement actors. Moreover, the epistemic grounds on which this research relies are shaped by these wider power relations as well (Sultana, 2022a, 2022b; Temper, McGarry, & Weber, 2019).

My findings present climate justice as an actually existing metanarrative aimed at linking social and environmental struggles towards a bottom-up systemic transformation. While this metanarrative was developed out of the antagonism between the "mainstream" and "radical" sections of the climate movement, I find it provides a common ground on which various competing interpretations can engage.

Furthermore, I analyze four more transformation pathway narratives: climate plan, climate emergency, divestment, and Blockadia, and shed light on the discussions within the Belgian climate movement around these narratives. As such, I aim to provide insight into the various and dynamic ways in which climate movement participants deal with the politics of sustainability. Besides this academic contribution, I hope my analysis can contribute to reflections on strategies and narratives among climate movement actors.

In section two, I build on various critiques of sustainability literature and argue to focus more on power struggles by recentering social movements and through adopting frameworks of transformation. In section three I introduce the concepts of transformation pathway narratives and metanarratives to study movement contributions through their multiple suggested pathways for change. In section four, I argue the movement's approach to climate justice constitutes a metanarrative shift toward a more transformative approach. I introduce the case study of the Belgian climate movement and explain the collection and analysis of qualitative data in section five.

Presenting the findings in section six, I analyze how participants give meanings to the main transformation pathway narratives and elaborate on their ongoing debates. In section seven, I discuss that the climate justice metanarrative provides an ambiguous but mutual ground where tensions among conflicting

interpretations can be productive. However, narrative divisions can be irresolvable and even undesirable since common ground might require sharp edges and thus conflict with outsider positions. I conclude in section eight by looking into the limitations of the study and exploring future research avenues.

4.2 Recentering movements in transformations

In response to contemporary sustainability challenges, a wide literature has emerged on how systemic changes happen (Vandermoere, 2019). For example, the multi-level perspective studies socio-technical networks consisting of material infrastructures, cultural aspects, regulations, policies, and so forth. By distinguishing (interactions between) niche, regime, and landscape levels, the multi-level perspective studies how non-linear changes follow different pathways (Geels & Schot, 2010). Vandermoere (2019) suggests that the multi-level perspective can be applauded for its sensitive study of past changes, but that it insufficiently aids currently unfolding and often contested transformations.

Preceding the multi-level perspective is the strategic niche management approach, which focuses on nurturing niches as experimentation zones for sustainable innovations (Kemp, Schot, & Hoogma, 1998). By developing visions, building governance networks, and creating learning opportunities, strategic niche management aims to diffuse these innovations from the niche to the regime level. While this appears to be a more linear approach compared to the multi-level perspective, it does have the advantage of providing instruments for steering societies toward more sustainability (Vandermoere, 2019).

The multi-level perspective approach, as well as the wider literature on sustainability *transitions*, have been criticized for insufficiently taking into account the deeply political nature of societal changes (Scoones, Newell, & Leach, 2015). For example, Geels (2014) advocates for more focus on how vested interests such as fossil energy producers resist fundamental changes, thereby inhibiting the diffusion of green innovations. He suggests a research agenda highlighting the politics of sustainability, in particular investigating how

vested regimes can be destabilized. In the same vein, Scoones, Newell, and Leach (2015) argue that the urgently needed fundamental transformations imply disruptive changes and profound shifts in power.

To highlight the political character of sustainability changes, Stirling (2015) heuristically distinguishes *transitions* from *transformations*. *Transitions* are to be understood as "*managed under orderly control, through incumbent structures, often emphasizing technological innovation, towards some particular known (presumptively shared) end*" (p54). In contrast, *transformations* involve "*more diverse, emergent and unruly political alignments, more about social innovations, challenging incumbent structures, subject to incommensurable knowledges and pursuing contending (even unknown) ends*" (p54). By emphasizing the need for fundamental change through rupturing economic and power structures, this conceptualization of transformation aligns with the classical distinction by Hopwood, Mellor, and O'Brien (2005) between status quo, reformist, and transformational understanding of sustainability.

In their defense, transition scholars like Luederitz et al. (2017) do acknowledge the need to *"rupture conventional practices and revolutionize structures"* (p394). Moreover, they state that in complex systems rather moderate or shallow interventions can also stimulate deeper or more radical changes. Stirling (2015) clarifies that the point of making this distinction is not to create a mutually exclusive dichotomy, but rather to spotlight power struggles and the possibility of cooptation of transitions by incumbent interests, to the disadvantage of subaltern groups. Building on Stirling's argumentation, Temper et al. (2018) call for recentering social movements as forces for transformations. Specifically, they suggest that the environmental justice movements' systemic, multi-dimensional, and intersectional approach is uniquely placed for contributing to sustainability transformations.

4.3 Narrating transformation pathways

Suggested pathways for sustainability intensely compete on what needs to be transformed, and in which ways (Scoones et. al., 2015). Moreover, core concepts like 'sustainability' are essentially contested. An inherent

indeterminacy makes it prone to being interpreted within various pathways. While Stirling (2015) mainly focuses on how this ambiguity of sustainability can be used by vested interests to subvert emancipatory changes – greenwashing for example – Vandermoere (2019) suggests this ambiguity can also be a constructive openness, providing learning opportunities in uncertain contexts.

Narratives help actors navigate uncertainty (Beckert, 2013). Scholars have applied the theoretical lens of narratives to provide insight into the diverse strategies for sustainability and create learning opportunities amongst them (Bushell et al., 2017; Luederitz et al., 2017; Scoones, Newell, & Leach, 2015; Vandermoere, 2019; Veland et al., 2018). Generally, narratives allow people to make sense of experiences by describing, explaining, and evaluating sequences of events through storylines (Polletta et al., 2011). They are temporal and dynamic structures that "*constrain and enable what is thinkable and sayable"* (Veland et al., 2018, p. 42). Because narratives strongly appeal to our emotional and moral faculties – engaging and transforming peoples' identities (Polletta & Gardner, 2015) – they are uniquely equipped to motivate action and contribute to social change.

Studying narratives is one approach to investigate how cognitive structures shape meanings. Scholars have pointed out familiarities with framing theory (de Moor & Wahlström, 2019), which is also a cultural perspective studying discursive processes, operating from a social constructivist epistemology (Benford & Snow, 2000). Both collective action frames and narratives provide interpretative schemes and guide actions by identifying problems, suggesting goals and means to achieve them (Della Porta & Parks, 2014; Lele, Brondízio, Byrne, Mace, & Martínez-Alier, 2018).

While framing theory provides an elaborate toolbox to analyze the qualities of frames being used (Ketelaars, 2016; Noakes & Johnston, 2005), narrative analysis highlights how actors link events over time into plotted storylines rendering this approach more sensitive towards the temporal dimension (de Moor & Wahlström, 2019). Bushell et al. (2017) therefore argue narratives are more useful for climate communication. In addition, Polletta (1998) has pointed out that narratives constitute a distinctive mode of cognition we are more likely to turn to when dealing with uncertainty. Moreover, Fine (2002)

argues that as narratives are central bases of social interaction, approaching social movements as 'bundles of narratives' – collections of shared stories – is, therefore, a fruitful approach to studying movement meanings.

In the context of sustainability transformations, narratives have been studied as both 'frontstage' techniques for communication and 'background' cognitive structures of sense-making (Veland et al., 2018). In accordance with the latter, Luederitz et al. (2017) developed the concept of *transition pathway narratives* to capture the idealized solutions for steering societies toward sustainability. These solution approaches imagine and justify particular interventions. As such they create pathways of change (Scoones, Newell, & Leach, 2015). These pathways are open-ended explorations dealing with uncertainty, and should not be understood as blueprints or recipes for social change (Luederitz et al., 2017, p. 404).

As both climate disruption and transformational changes are dynamics across multiple levels, actors, and scales, scholars generally argue that multiple strategic narratives are needed to engage with multiple audiences and aim for changes at multiple leverage points (Luederitz et al., 2017; Veland et al., 2018). While multiple solution approaches are imagined, there is also intense competition among those. A narrative approach as developed by Luederitz et al. (2017) aids in systematically distinguishing different narratives by analyzing their narrative dimensions: the problems they address, the core objectives they imagine, the key actions suggested, and the main actors involved. This analysis is then aimed at offering learning opportunities by exploring narratives' relative strengths, weaknesses, conflicts, and complementarities. In their study, Luederitz et al. (2017) discern four such transition pathway narratives (a green economy, a low-carbon transformation, ecotopian solutions, and transition towns), and discuss the more shallow and deeper ways in which these aim to contribute to sustainability.

Scholars have advocated investigation into unifying and overarching metanarratives that could provide common ground for singular narratives and foster communication between them (Bushell et al., 2017; Luederitz et al., 2017). These more abstract, broader narratives are often taken for granted and embed our understanding of the world around us (Vanderplanken, Rogge,

Loots, Messely, & Vandermoere, 2016). Making such metanarratives visible, or producing new ones, could render tensions and ambiguities more constructive by creating common ground in which differences are functional.

However, scholarship on sustainability narratives often focuses primarily on policy actors and generally neglects contributions by social movements. Moreover, when such movements are mentioned, the focus tends to lie more on how they shape alternatives and less on how these alternatives are often deeply connected practices and narratives of resistance (Pelenc et al., 2019).

In this paper, I seek to study the varied, emergent, and challenging ways in which climate activists contribute to transformations. The narrative approach by Luederitz et al. (2017) lends itself to analyzing the solution approaches this movement imagines and enacts. Building on the abovementioned need to challenge vested interests and spotlight power struggles, I propose to speak of *transformation* pathway narratives (instead of *transition* pathway narratives). This conceptualization is better aligned with Temper's call to recenter movements and to investigate the systemic and multi-dimensional ways in which social movements are searching to become forces for transformations. I will apply this lens to Belgian grassroots climate activists and to the notion of climate justice playing a shaping role within that movement. In what follows I will outline a short history of climate justice and the climate movement, before going deeper into the Belgian case and its transformation pathway narratives.

4.4 From climate change to climate justice: a metanarrative shift

The movement approach to climate justice has grown out of two main roots: the environmental justice and alterglobalization movements. In the 1980's, the disproportionate dumping of hazardous waste in US poor and African-American neighborhoods led to the formation of the environmental justice movement which analyzed this shifting of costs towards dominated groups as environmental racism (Taylor, 2000). This meant the emergence of a new environmental paradigm revolving around justice concerns.

Around 1999, grassroots organizations such as the US-based Corpwatch and UK Rising Tide network started using the term climate justice as a global issue of environmental justice (Bruno, Karliner, & Brotsky, 1999; Martinez-Alier et al., 2014). While climate justice had been used before by academics and NGO's since 1989, it was popularized via this grassroots struggle-based narrative in opposition to the fossil industry and dominant climate politics (Bond, 2012). From early on, key demands were keeping fossil fuels in the ground, repaying of ecological debt, and a just transition providing assistance to vulnerable and fossil-dependent communities (Schlosberg & Collins, 2014).

The second root, the alterglobalization movement, contested capitalist globalization (Tokar, 2018). It aimed to link workers, farmers, environmentalists, and many others into a 'movement of movements' against neoliberal hegemony. Around 2005 - 2007, alterglobalist networks, and practices spilled over into climate justice protests, to the extent that the movement for climate justice can be conceived as a second round of alterglobalization protest (Almeida, 2019). For West-European and Belgian climate justice groups in particular, this root of alterglobalization movements (and tapping into British environmental direct action movements) is crucial to understand their emergence (Lajarthe, 2022).

Climate justice analyzes climate disruption as interwoven with inequalities (Schlosberg & Collins, 2014). Firstly, contributions to climate disruption are highly unequal. Historical greenhouse gas emissions and current per capita responsibilities including consumption follow patterns of economic inequality between and within countries and are influenced by legacies of colonialism (J. T. Roberts & Parks, 2009; Sealy-Huggins, 2017). Additionally, benefits from the emitting activities are unequally distributed (Martinez-Alier et al., 2014).

Secondly, populations made vulnerable through colonialism, imperialism and other processes of economic racialized inequality tend to contribute the least are generally more impacted by climate disruption events such as heatwaves or floods (Sealy-Huggins, 2017). As such, climate disruption reinforces intersecting axes of domination such as class, gender, race, and ethnicity (Sultana, 2022a).

Thirdly, climate mitigation and adaptation policies risk shifting costs to more vulnerable populations when neglecting issues of justice (Bond, 2012). Fourthly, power inequalities are reinforced through procedural injustice – by excluding the most impacted and most vulnerable 'frontline communities' from decision-making (Temper et al., 2020). Therefore, climate justice advocates plead, among other things, for rapid decarbonization efforts to be combined with measures of distributional and procedural justice.

Climate justice constitutes a new orientation in climate movements (Klein, 2014). It generates a shift in metanarrative – or in terms of framing theory as a change in master frame (Della Porta & Parks, 2014). The climate justice metanarrative treats social and climate injustices as symptoms of a larger system that therefore needs to be transformed. Klein expresses this bridging effort as aiming to *"weave all these seemingly disparate issues into a coherent narrative"* working towards a mass movement for which climate action can be a rare catalyst (2014, p8).

Importantly, the climate justice metanarrative has been constructed in opposition to a (perceived) mainstream approach to climate change (Schlosberg & Collins, 2014). The initial climate movement saw NGOs emphasizing the realness of science behind climate change and used largely institutional channels to pressure nation-states and international organizations to take action with debates framed in terms of technical and economic feasibility (Almeida, 2019).

The more narrow focus on carbon emissions, especially the mechanism of carbon trading or 'carbon colonialism' proved a point of controversy between climate justice and 'mainstream' approaches (J. T. Roberts & Parks, 2009; Schlosberg & Collins, 2014). From a climate justice perspective, the mainstream approach has been critiqued for being an instrument of maintaining existing power balances, ineffective in tackling greenhouse gas emissions, and exaggerating inequalities (Gesnat, 2015). In other words: of changing things so nothing really has to change (Swyngedouw, 2013, p. 13).

Moreover, by adopting a depoliticized 'everyone together' message, the mainstream narrative is critiqued for neglecting power differences and the

role of vested interests (Kenis, 2021). In contrast, climate justice brings a (re)politicizing critique of the fossil-based industrial modernity causing climate disruption. It self-positions as 'mobilization from below' aimed at transformation in contrast to a perceived mainstream 'mobilization from above' that evades disruptive changes (Brecher, 2017).

The uneven impacts of climate change imply radically different ways of responding to climate change (Sultana, 2022b). Unsurprisingly, climate justice has a crucial North-South dimension (Goodman, 2017; Hadden, 2015). For example, Kleres and Wettergren (2017a) describe how climate activists from the global North and global South differ in experiencing fear, anger, guilt/blame, and hope. While the mainstream approach focused on managing carbon emissions has been mainly popular in the global North, climate justice has to a large extent been centered by movements in the global South. These Southern movements have emphasized how histories of colonialism are intertwined with climate responsibilities and vulnerabilities (Sealy-Huggins, 2017; Sultana, 2022b). Generally reflecting unequal power structures, global Northern narrations of climate change have spent less attention on present people in the global South, but have mostly concerned future people in the global North (Sealy-Huggins, 2017; WretchedoftheEarth, 2019).

Climate movements are clearly no homogenous entities. Goodman (2017), for instance, discerns three types of climate movements based on their society-nature relations: a transition movement seeking to dominate nature, a post-political movement expressing natural limits that dominate society, and an anti-systemic movement that aims to free nature-society relations from both natural limits as social domination. More recently, Marquardt (2020) studied the German Fridays for Future youth climate strikers movement and discerned more moderate and radical approaches. In these models, climate justice can be understood as the more radical and anti-systemic approach to transformation.

These ideal-typical distinctions provide insight into debates between different approaches. However, social movements are no static entities either. Hadden (2015) describes how an initially small and cohesive climate movement became larger and more diverse in the running-up to the Copenhagen 2009

COP15. This caused a cleavage between more traditional environmental NGOs and organizations rooted in a global justice movement adopting a climate justice narrative. This cleavage was visible in different strategies (insider vs outsider), tactics (more conventional vs more disruptive), and modes of coordination (more formal vs more horizontal).

After most climate organizations experienced the Copenhagen COP15 as a failure, skepticism rose over the possibilities of influencing international negotiations through insider strategies. Instead, organizers emphasized movement building from below (de Moor & Wahlström, 2019; Hadden, 2015). This led to a bigger focus on domestic and non-governmental targets and left a larger space for the climate justice metanarrative to develop (Della Porta & Parks, 2014). In the period between 2009 and 2013, among global Northern climate movements, the meaning of climate justice evolved from an antagonistic and dividing concept into a unifying narrative, shifting the struggle from between metanarratives to different interpretations of what climate justice entails (Cassegård & Thörn, 2017).

I aim to build on such approaches of a multi-faceted and evolving climate movement in which actors give their own dynamic narrative interpretations of concepts such as climate justice. Moreover, the inherent ambiguity of such concepts can cause tensions that can spark conflict or be rendered productive. In this study, I distinguish two levels of narratives to give a more layered analysis: the overarching level of metanarratives and an underlying level of transformation pathway narratives.

4.5 Methods

4.5.1 Case description

In the Western-European context, youth climate strikers and Extinction Rebellion have received unprecedented media attention and have as such largely determined the public image of climate movements since their emergence in 2018-2019. This has aroused renewed academic interest (for instance see (Bowman, 2020; Kenis, 2021; Marquardt, 2020). However, these are but two manifestations of a multi-faceted movement (Chatterton,

Featherstone, & Routledge, 2013). As its history shows – based on the data and literature I gathered – the Belgian example provides insight into the multiple actors, processes, and narratives that constitute a movement.

Before 2006, climate disruption seems to be treated as a theme within generalist environmental organizations. Around that period, a distinct Belgian climate movement emerged from environmental, radical ecological, and alterglobalist networks (see e.g. Kenis & Mathijs, 2014). NGO's and citizen initiatives such as *The Big Ask* demanded public attention to climate change (TheBigAsk, 2008). Simultaneously, climate action camps, inspired by British examples, held direct actions against highway extensions and coal transports (Belorf, 2009a).

In 2009, the UN COP15 in Copenhagen functioned as a locus of mobilization: institutionalized civil society groups organized into the still-existing Belgian platform *Climate Coalition*, while radical grassroots groups joined the more antagonistic *Climate justice action* network (Chatterton, Featherstone, & Routledge, 2013). The COP15 was widely treated as the summit of the last chance, a moment of now or never. When it did not produce the results hoped for, widespread disappointment followed and resulted in demobilization – a story commonly told in European climate organizations (de Moor & Wahlström, 2019).

After a period of less (visible) activity, students and NGOs mobilized by train to the COP19 in Warsaw in 2013. This led to the formation of *Climate Express* which demanded a just transition and a societal change of railroad tracks. During the 2015 Paris COP21, Climate Express mobilized 15.000 people to demonstrate. While this indicated quantitative movement growth, organizers' exhaustion led to a new period of relative inaction in terms of local mass mobilizations.

After the abovementioned failure of the Copenhagen COP, the international climate movement shifted emphasis from global top-down summits to more local bottom-up approaches (Bullard & Müller, 2012). In the period between 2015 and 2018, two such pathways emerged more clearly in the Belgian context. Inspired by American examples, divestment collectives sprang up,

targeting fossil investments (Lajarthe & Zaccai, 2017). Simultaneously, *Ende Gelände* was formed out of German climate camps and started organizing yearly mass occupations of brown coal infrastructure, and narrated their civil disobedience in terms of climate justice (Vandepitte, Vandermoere, & Hustinx, 2019). As Ende Gelände's example spread across Western Europe, it shaped networks through which hundreds of Belgians participated in similar actions.

The 2018 heatwave, combined with the 1.5°C IPCC special report, reinforced a public sense of climate disruption coming near. During the autumn, the *Act for Climate Justice* (2018) and Belgian *Climate Justice Camp* (2019a) collectives emerged. Additionally, climate change got more politicized when a tax raise on gasoline by the French government, perceived as an unjust climate measure, sparked large-scale French (and Belgian) resistance from the Yellow Vest movement (Martin & Islar, 2020). In December, a national climate demonstration during COP24 drew an unexpected 100.000 participants but saw little government response (ClaimtheClimate, 2018).

Meanwhile, Extinction Rebellion's actions in London and Greta Thunberg's school strike rose to international attention. In early 2019, Belgian *Youth for Climate* school strikers organized weekly demonstrations (YouthforClimate, 2021). Their message of fear for their own future mobilized thousands of pupils and sparked a wave of protest throughout spring (Kenis, 2021). New collectives sprang up such Students-, Workers-, Teachers- and Scientists4climate, while more disobedient groups like Act for Climate Justice targeted climate ministers and banks.

This assembled civil pressure opened nationwide debates but key demands such as a climate law were not met. Already fading mass mobilizations ceased after disappointing election results. While civil disobedience campaigns by *Extinction Rebellion* (2019) and *Ineos Will Fall* (2020) kept on organizing, the pandemic and related government measures largely put movement activity on a break.

4.5.2 Data collection

To study transformation pathway narratives in the Belgian climate movement, I collected data between June 2019 and December 2020 – starting after the peak of the abovementioned protest wave and continuing during the pandemic. I collected twenty in-depth interviews with key movement organizers and activists and gathered documents on movement websites, press releases, and reports.

I organized data gathering and sampling into three rounds. At first, I carried out three explorative interviews with climate movement organizers known for their established connections. In two subsequent rounds, seventeen respondents were selected through snowball sampling and purposeful sampling toward variation. While I started selecting fairly experienced organizers within grassroots groups, gradually I diversified toward members from newer groups, NGOs, and think tanks. Interestingly, many respondents flexibly combined membership in multiple groups and campaigns.

Belgian social movements are often organized around region and language. Due to reasons of accessibility, I focused on Dutch-speaking and bi-lingual organizations in the Flemish and Brussels regions, leaving out French-speaking and Walloon groups. Within these given constraints, I have aimed for a fairly varied research sample in terms of geographical spread, gender, movement experience, and group membership. However, the collected sample of climate activists should not be seen as a representation of the wider Belgian climate movement. More info on interviewed research participants can be found in the methodological appendix.

All interview invitations were accepted by respondents. This reflects a process of gaining trust through previous engagements as both a researcher and movement participant and an approach in which I clarified my aim to co-produce insights as contributions to movement causes. As such, I took a role as a “self-reflexive researcher” (Wittmayer & Schäpke, 2014) and “co-conspirer” (Temper, McGarry, & Weber, 2019).

Interview questionnaires were semi-structured and generally inquired about respondents' movement trajectories, the roles they took up, and the messages their groups brought. Early findings provided additional focus in subsequent interviews. Additionally, (anonymized) quotes were used to probe respondents to position themselves in comparisons with other narratives. During the interview, I asked respondents to draw out the perceived Belgian climate movement. The inter-organizational mappings, analytical schemes, and cartoons that came out provided a step up for further questions. Moreover, these drawings identified the main movement components that fed into the sampling process.

Throughout an iterative process of data collection and analysis of transcripts and documents, I focused on narrative elements like problem definition, key actors, envisioned goals and proposed actions, and how these elements related to their wider contexts (Luederitz et al., 2017; Roe, 1994). As a result, I provide a non-exhaustive overview of the main narratives present among the studied groups and participants. I distinguish climate justice as a metanarrative, and climate plan, climate emergency, divestment, and blockadia as transformation pathway narratives. In general, I have aimed to stay close to the concepts used by movement participants in interviews, slogans, and movement texts.

4.6 Findings: transformation pathway narratives among Belgian climate activists

"*What do we want? Climate justice, when do we want it? Now"*. One of the most popular slogans among Belgian school strikers, it was already chanted on the streets of Copenhagen in 2009 (Kenis, 2021). But what does climate justice mean beyond the slogan? I argue it should be understood as an overarching metanarrative. It offers an understanding of climate disruption and suggests a pathway of system change. It functions as an ambiguous common ground for multiple interpretations. In what follows, I discuss the climate justice metanarrative and four more transformation pathway narratives according to their elements, criticisms, and tensions.

4.6.1 Climate justice metanarrative

“Within the climate movement, there’s an increasing understanding that our current economy is the real problem. That both climate change, the gap between rich and poor and the exploitation of working classes, are both a symptom of that” (Hermes, May, 2020).

During an online interview, Hermes, involved in organizing the Belgian school strikes, expresses a typical climate justice view of the problem. Within this metanarrative ‘the system’ is the root cause of climate disruption as well as wider ecological and social crises. Andrea engaged in a grassroots climate justice group, adds to this that the movement is “not only fighting climate change, but they are rather fighting against all the injustices that brought climate change, and that are increased by climate change” (Andrea, December 2020).

Additionally, “the system” is seen to hinder solution attempts. Elias, who has been involved in a grassroots group organizing demonstrations for several years, states straightforwardly: “If we want to have socially just climate policies, we cannot have it within the current political and societal context, because it is based on profit” (Elias, July 2019). Rather than treating the problem as “one of its branches”, respondents like Hermes suggest tackling the roots and going for “system change, not climate change”.

Generally, this system change is narrated as a shift in goals, from an economy based on profit towards putting central “people and the environment” through principles such as solidarity, equity, and democratic control over commons such as water, air, and energy. As such, climate justice does not only revolve around limiting the disastrous impacts of the climate crisis, it also considers this crisis an opportunity for a progressive transformation (Klein, 2014, p. 7). This hopeful trait is embedded in a struggle-based perspective, as Axel, a man in his thirties working for a progressive small NGO explains: “Today there are many powerful groups that obstruct climate measures (…). The only way to ensure that these [measures] do happen is to have countervailing power. And to have countervailing power you have to be able

to mobilize and organize people, and that's only possible if you can give people enthusiasm" (Axel, September 2020).

From this perspective of struggle, climate justice has since its movement articulation connected demands such as a moratorium on fossil fuel expansion, affirming indigenous rights, and acknowledging leading roles for particularly affected communities (CorpWatch US et al., 2002). Moreover, several respondents require policies to avoid shifting costs to already disadvantaged groups or other ecological domains. Measures not meeting this threshold are deemed as "false solutions".

Reflecting on the climate justice analysis that links environmental with social crises, respondents hope to link social movements and jointly contribute to the envisioned system change. As Paul, a longtime radical involved in climate justice activism and working for a small NGO since 2007, notes: "How do we get there? By doing people power, by building alliances, by transcending the divisions (…) and we can only do that by recognizing and naming the injustices and inequalities in the present and then building bridges across them" (Paul, April 2020).

This envisioned linking of movements reflects how climate justice is rooted in the alterglobalization movement with its ideological preferences of building a 'movement of movements'. Additionally, it also contains a strategic element: without the support of other movements such as feminist, anti-racist, and labor movements, a just and systemic transformation is seen as unattainable.

The main actors within the climate justice metanarrative are social movements and the so-called 'climate criminals', the (fossil) corporations ascribed to that role (see e.g. ActforClimateJustice, 2018). Additionally, "ordinary people" figure as a group victimized by climate injustices and needed to be reached, sometimes with a specified sub-group of workers. On the other hand, governments are mostly treated as defending the interests of an unjust system, reluctant to take responsibility, and therefore need to be pressured into action. Depending on the enactment, respondents prefer movements to be antagonistic towards governments or take a more pragmatic and persuasive tone.

Among Belgian climate activists, the climate justice metanarrative is seen as gaining popularity, as is often cited by respondents, and can be observed in slogans (YouthforClimate, 2021) and group names (ClimateJusticeCamp, 2019a). However, this narrative is interpreted in various ways. More radical actors like Angela, involved in grassroots organizing, see climate justice as a "left-wing reorientation of the climate change theme. It isn't about acknowledging the existence of climate change, but about how and for whom it is dealt with" (Angela, April 2020). In this anti-systemic enactment of groups like the Belgian Climate Justice Camp or Act for Climate Justice, climate justice implicates i.e. anti-capitalism and open borders (ActforClimateJustice, 2018).

In contrast, more moderate and instrumental enactments mainly state that government policies should in addition also be socially just to obtain a support base and enable its implementation (Scientists4Climate, 2019). Moreover, in the more instrumental version of climate justice, interviewed respondents often referred to the Yellow Vests movement as an example of how climate measures can produce a societal backlash when perceived as unjust.

More radical respondents like Andrea often critiqued that instrumental lip service enactments decouple climate justice from its radical implications: "I was sometimes a bit surprised about people using these two words 'climate justice' and forgetting the 'justice' part" (Andrea, December 2020). She continues: "It [climate justice] really impacts what you're doing, the kind of actions you do, the kind of coalitions you do or networks you're part of" Its increasing popularity seemed to bring an initial watering down of the climate justice concept. As Sally, a mother of two involved in grassroots organizing who since the 2019 mobilizations gradually moved towards more disobedient activism, shares: "In the beginning, I shouted 'climate justice' but I actually didn't know what I was talking about" (Sally, November 2020).

These tensions exemplify how the climate justice metanarrative is a terrain of contestation (Kenis & Mathijs, 2014). Terms like system change are relatively empty vessels meant to open up. As such, they get interpreted in ambiguous ways and risk cooptation. However, this ambiguity can also be seen as politically productive (Vandermoere, 2019). For example, Paul is more hopeful in his analysis:

"[in] 2009 Copenhagen, we fought to get that term [climate justice] accepted, while now I have the feeling this term has really taken hold with us [the Belgian movement] but that the content has insufficiently done so (…) Should we already be happy that the term is getting used, and it is a first step which does make it easier to have this debate? (…) Maybe we should say, like in many cases, yes this was a victory, now we should go towards the next" (Paul, April 2020).

While most of the interviewed respondents favor a more radical approach, which doesn't necessarily reflect the broader climate movement, critiques were apparent as well. Annie, a woman in her thirties with longstanding experience in organizing among larger NGOs as well as grassroots movements, expresses her doubts:

"You mobilize people with something small and close. And the big overarching narrative of the system is shit and capitalism must die, yes there is a certain group of people who will latch on to that, but those are often the people who have been politically active for a long time (…) System change is for a lot of people something very scary" (Annie, February 2020).

While climate justice's content might open up communication on climate disruption and link it to other issues, its overly oppositional articulation combined with rather vague goals risks solely reaching the already politicized (Kenis & Mathijs, 2014). However, the climate justice metanarrative gets partly coupled with more concrete transformation pathway narratives, which I discuss in the following sections.

4.6.2 Climate plan

The climate plan is the most longstanding and popular transformation pathway narrative in the Belgian climate movement. "We do demand Belgium to be really ambitious on the European level. And yes, mainly that there comes a plan, a strategy for the long term" (Sarah, July 2019), says Sarah, a coordinator of a national platform organization. Similarly, Grandparents for Climate demands on their website "yearly concrete and measurable goals and a step-by-step plan" to make Belgium climate-neutral

(Grootoudersvoorhetklimaat, 2020). It is seen as a lack of political will that there is no such ambitious and just national encompassing plan yet to address climate disruption. Respondents note that the solutions are known and waiting to be implemented and demand politicians to show courageous statecraft, transcend their so-called quarrels, and look beyond the next election. Independent and concerned citizens are the main actors within this transformation pathway narrative, and they prefer actions such as holding petitions and demonstrations. Through such classic civil society repertoires they aim to pressure policy makers and hope to express a broad support base.

This predominant transformation pathway narrative has mobilized increasingly large numbers, from the Sing for the Climate gatherings in 2012 to the 100.000-strong Claim the Climate demonstration in 2018 (11.11.11., 2012; ClaimtheClimate, 2018). It has been articulated by big NGOs, citizen groups, corporations, celebrities, scientists, and youth (BondBeterLeefMilieu, 2019). With their school strikes, the latter seemed to have been more recognizable and nearer messengers than the ones before them.

One of the barriers to establishing and implementing a climate plan can be found in Belgium's specific political context of having three regional and one national minister of climate. In response, climate groups have since long demanded a climate law with constitutionally binding emission reduction targets. During the wave of mobilizations in the spring of 2019, green parties proposed such a climate law. In support, a previously unseen coalition of NGOs, more radical activists, and media figures normally wary of civil disobedience organized Occupy4climate and occupied a central street and square near the national parliament for 48 hours. This attempt resulted in large-scale media attention but failed to convince opposing parties to achieve a needed ¾ majority parliamentary vote.

Afterward, critics of the climate law and climate plan transformation pathway narrative pointed out the risk of enacting a rather thin version of climate justice. For instance, the Occupy4climate action overlapped with a yearly anti-racism march and resulted in the predominantly white climate movement drawing away attention from anti-racist struggles (ClimatejusticeCamp, 2019b).

Moreover, the square where the occupation had largely taken place included a large statue of Belgian king Leopold II – mostly known for his genocidal policies that killed an estimated 10 million people in the then private colony of Congo. Some participants had put a cloth over the statue's head and later graffiti appeared on the statue – among others a slogan that translates as "for a decolonial climate law". However, activists from a larger NGO covered this slogan with a banner saying "Politicians talk, leaders act".

Joshua, a male activist in his early thirties engaged in a grassroots organization as well as in a international large NGO, looks back uneasily on the Occupy4climate event during an interview in August 2020, a few months after Black Lives Matter protests had erupted in Belgium and had also taken up decolonial critiques:

"We heavily went wrong there. We received severe criticism from people in the movement because we even used that banner to cover graffiti. I was convinced at the time that that was the right move, I then spoke to the people (…) who had put up those graphs to explain our motives. That was a very interesting conversation, we didn't come to a conclusion at all, we parted company saying "We don't agree on the strategy". (…) That was a different era back then man. If we were to do that now, we would really be heavily, heavily ...." (Joshua, August 2020).

This neglect and suppression of racialized voices contradicted the climate justice metanarrative around building inter-movement alliances. Andrea sharply sums up the legacy this event left: "I guess it was difficult to come after and say "No we are really serious about racism" (Andrea, December 2020).

The climate law focused on emission reductions but without proposing pathways how to achieve these. This enabled interpretations less in line with the climate justice goals, and, as argued by Kenis (2021), made it vulnerable to neutralization. Joshua reflects on this during an interview:

"We threw that empty box into the political arena and everyone started filling it in their own way. While I think we should also dare to fill it in ourselves." He continues: "I think we lost a part of the narrative because the climate finally

got politicized (…). But from the moment it became front page news (…) I think we were not prepared for that" (Joshua, August 2020).

Additionally, the climate plan transformation pathway narrative addresses political leaders as potential allies for (just) decarbonization. In contrast, more radical respondents perceive its practical implementation as "a detour doomed to fail" (Angela, April 2020). The climate plan would overestimate the power of politicians while neglecting more structural and systemic power imbalances. As such, it might be closer to the mainstream than the climate justice metanarrative. However, others take a less principled and more pragmatic position. Sally agrees that neither climate plan nor law would be sufficient, but sees them as steps forward:

"I always think, better something than nothing. Other countries have had such a plan for a long time (…). It would be easier for us (…) if there was a plan that we could criticize. Because we are constantly shouting "there's nothing yet". (…) At least we'd have something to refer to" (Sally, November 2020).

The climate plan transformation pathway narrative has been successful in mobilizing large numbers and invoking societal discussion. However, ambitious and just plans for carbon neutrality have not been taken up by Belgian governments – neither after a court judged the national and regional governmental climate policies to violate human rights (Klimaatzaak, 2021). This absence, in combination with both rising global emissions and increasing extreme weather events, reinforced a sense of urgency, feeding into the climate emergency transformation pathway narrative.

4.6.3 Climate emergency

The climate emergency transformation pathway narrative problematizes a lack of acknowledgment of the extent of climate disruption. It stresses urgency and aims for a governmental emergency mobilization to surpass current barriers to transformation. This would allow for instance phasing out fossil fuels, re-organizing food systems, and restoring ecosystems. In this transformation pathway narrative, concerned and determined citizens aim to (symbolically) disrupt business as usual by purporting school strikes, sit-ins, and other forms

of civil disobedience. This narrative has gained momentum throughout the climate mobilizations in 2018-2019. It has been articulated by leading school strikers (Neubauer et al., 2020) and by Extinction Rebellion (2019) with their demand to declare a 'climate and ecological emergency'.

The climate emergency can be seen as a radical variation of the climate plan transformation pathway narrative. Both narrative's civil actors aim their messages towards (national) governments and the general public alike. Thereby, the demand for an emergency mobilization stays close to the goal of an encompassing climate plan. However, its emphasis on urgency results in a more alarming tone and more disruptive proposals and actions. The emergency mobilization is conceived to override barriers in the form of regulations and vested interests. Thereby, it trades the long-term temporality of policy plans for a short-term one that opens up political possibilities. Additionally, party politics are seen as having demonstrated their inability to address the emergency alone. In response, Extinction Rebellion proposes to set up a system of sortation where a lottery-like selection of citizens constitutes an assembly that decides on the measures to take after being informed by scientists.

Respondents acknowledge that the climate emergency transformation pathway narrative has enabled organizing and mobilizing large numbers of protestors, specifically people who weren't involved in climate protests before. Moreover, the practice of 'telling the uncomfortable truth' can breach a numbing sense of optimism and could therefore open up space for transformation.

However, the climate emergency transformation pathway narrative is commonly subjected to criticism as well. Similar to the climate plan, it risks becoming another 'empty box'. For example, Els, a middle-aged woman active in grassroots organizing, is critical of the effort of pushing local governments to declare such an emergency: *"Then they [governments] say it, and then what? It doesn't necessarily mean something will happen with it"* (Els, March 2020). While movements like Youth4climate and Extinction Rebellion have mainstreamed more disruptive tactics, they have 'apolitically' left substantive measures undetermined.

Moreover, Francine, a campaigner working for a national platform organization, states on Extinction Rebellion's citizen's assemblies that it *"goes more on the process-side, while according to us the reason really isn't about the process, but there are forces that hinder the ambitions"* (Francine, October 2020). This tendency to neglect power relations reinforces a technocratic tendency already present in the climate plan transformation pathway narrative. Additionally, scholars (Asayama et al., 2019; D'Alisa, 2019) and respondents alike fear the emergency transformation pathway narrative "*can be used for authoritarian measures as well"* (Pjotter, July 2019).

In short, these criticisms point out a tension between the climate emergency transformation pathway narrative and the more emancipatory responses of the climate justice metanarrative. Moreover, as argued by the Belgian Climate Justice Camp (2019a), the emphasis on urgency can lead to a problematic 'hierarchy of urgencies' that overlooks other issues, can lead to conflicts with other movements, and weakens the enactment of climate justice. As Axel rhetorically asks during an interview: *"Why not call an emergency for poverty, why not for police violence?"* (Axel, September 2020).

A second line of critique has revolved around the 'alarmist' tone of the emergency transformation pathway narrative. Bushell et al. (2017) argue alarmism generally leads to hopelessness and disengagement. They suggest linking narratives to everyday lives to produce higher engagement (p 43). Moreover, several respondents like Elias, Pjotter, or Paul argue that the climate struggle is a long-term struggle and that the short-term focus of the emergency narrative could facilitate activist burnout.

This critique is rooted in the experiences of the Copenhagen COP15 when a now-or-never rhetoric added to disappointment when the hope that had been placed on world leaders produced a movement dip (de Moor & Wahlström, 2019). Afterward, groups like the climate coalition have switched from alarmism towards a more local focus on 'positive alternatives'.

However, respondents evoking this history do point out that the emergency transformation pathway narrative was successful in mobilizing during 2019, and that it connected climate disruption with everyday experiences and

youth's very own prospects. As such, the question remains what groups were mobilized? Asayama et al. (2019) suggest that the emergency transformation pathway narrative would mostly resonate with people already predisposed to heightened concern. As international evidence suggests, both Youth Climate Strikers and Extinction Rebellion seem to have mostly reached higher educated audiences and didn't deviate from the typical climate-engaged profile (de Moor et al., 2021). To what extent the effects on mobilization and longer-term engagement really differ from other narratives however remains unclear.

4.6.4 Divestment

A third transformation pathway narrative is divestment and problematizes how fossil investments enable climate disruption (Lajarthe & Zaccai, 2017). If climate protection measures were implemented, fossil investments could risk losing their value as stranded assets. This transformation pathway narrative aims to have fossil-free institutions and enterprises by divesting: and cutting their (financial) ties with the fossil industry (FossilFreeBelgium, 2017). As finance is a key pillar of support for fossil industries, the divestment transformation pathway narrative has been theorized as supply side strategy (Piggot, 2018) and as a potential social tipping dynamic (Otto, Donges, Cremades, et al., 2020).

While the divestment transformation pathway narrative originated around 2010 in the U.S., it spread to Belgium and neighboring countries around the COP21 in Paris 2015 (Lajarthe & Zaccai, 2017). For example, grassroots groups such as Divest Gent have moved universities and municipalities to (partially) divest their funds, while other examples have targeted specific bank investments (FossilFreeBelgium, 2017). Since the 2018-2019 mobilizations this transformation pathway narrative's appearance has become less prominent in Belgium, with some key organizers moving to other transformation pathway narratives such as climate justice, blockadia or emergency.

Despite internationally large amounts of money having been divested, critics have questioned the effectiveness of the divestment approach in decarbonizing (Lajarthe & Zaccai, 2017). Additionally, respondents discussed

its potentially shallow connection to the climate justice metanarrative. For example, Pjotter, a white middle-class cis-gender man in his early thirties who previously organized divestment campaigns, states:

"Divestment is mainly symbolic because the shares get sold anyway (…). Basically it is not critical of the system. One can advance with it, within the system divestment goes for a situation that is less bad. However, it doesn't really contain an intersectional critique. The messaging is about carbon and numbers but less about people" (Pjotter, July 2019).

Angela, who was involved in a grassroots climate justice group that blockaded a major bank's headquarters, favors a more antagonistic articulation of this transformation pathway narrative:

"We shouldn't give the impression that if banks divest they can be part of a new system. I consider that to be a danger to focus too much on divest campaigns where you kind of applaud banks if they retreat from some structures. So in that respect, divestment fits in with (…) targeting sectors and is simply a strategy to put pressure on companies" (Angela, April 2020).

However, she does perceive divestment by for example universities as a "*step towards another model*"(Angela, April 2020). In this more symbolic sense, the divestment-transformation pathway narrative can be conceived as a first step in a wider delegitimization process that targets the fossil industry's social license to operate (Klein, 2014, pp. 354-355).

4.6.5 Blockadia

A fourth transformation pathway narrative is blockadia, a term coined by Naomi Klein to describe the "*roving transnational conflict zone (…) a collection of pockets of resistance (…) stopping climate crimes in progress"* (2014, pp. 294-295). It problematizes how expanding fossil infrastructure and extraction of existing reserves threatens to exceed the carbon budget. Its main goal is therefore, as a slogan states, to "keep fossil fuels in the ground". Envisioned actors are 'frontline communities' living near those projects, and social

movements applying direct action and civil disobedience. These actors often antagonize fossil corporations and governments facilitating these projects.

The blockadia transformation pathway narrative taps into a history of local and regional ecological direct action such as forest occupations by Earth First/Groenfront and climate action camps (Belorf, 2009b). It re-entered the Belgian climate movement via the German Ende Gelände mass occupations of brown coal mines – actions that inspired similar campaigns across Europe (Vandepitte, Vandermoere, & Hustinx, 2019). While terminologically popularized by Klein, the roots of this pathway lie with Nigerian Ogoni and Ecuadorian Yasuni movements combatting oil extraction (Martinez-Alier et al., 2014).

An example in Belgium has been the Ineos Will Fall campaign which aims to prevent the development of planned petrochemical plants in the port of Antwerp (IneosWillFall, 2020). The Ineos will fall campaign linked the opposed industrial site with international shale gas exploitation, global and intergenerational climate injustices and local environmental impacts such as deforestation and plastic pollution. While the campaign's efforts were seen to contribute to combatting international and global injustices, the campaign's actions and targets were primarily local.

Klein welcomes how the blockadia transformation pathway narrative shifts climate struggles "*from closed-door policy and lobby meetings into something alive and unpredictable and very much in the streets*" (2014, pp. 295-296). Proponents like Klein argue that this territorial and tangible character of the blockadia transformation pathway narrative facilitates engagement since it tells less about intangible abstract numbers and policies, and more about tangible people and places nearby. Els confirms this by comparing the blockadia narrative to the Extinction Rebellion's version of the climate emergency transformation pathway narrative: *"when you compare them, "Ineos Will Fall" is very clear: this factory shouldn't come there. Sometimes that's an easier story to tell. And you can also notice that it is easier for people to jump on that cart"* (Els, March 2020)

Additionally, spaces of blockadia can also serve as temporary autonomous zones for small-scale experimentation with more democratic, horizontal, and ecological relations (Vandepitte, Vandermoere, & Hustinx, 2019). Even though blockadia actions have often been placed explicitly within the climate justice metanarrative and have been part of its popularization within the wider climate movement, there are some potential tensions between them. Demands to prevent or shut down fossil infrastructure are often framed as harming jobs and thus welfare of regional inhabitants and workers. As Mark, an environmentalist well known for his ties with unions, explains this tension: "*If this is the way you are going to approach a workers' public for the first time, with "we're going to close your factory", I don't think you'll book many successes"* (Mark, February 2020).

Moreover, while climate justice activists often use the notion of "just transition" to flank their demands by stating that workers should not be the victims of sustainability transformations, this can become lip service rather than genuine enactment when devoid of components of procedural justice.

4.7 Discussion

Table 2 gives an overview of the main (but non-exhaustive) transformation pathway narratives present in the gathered interviews and documents. Following Luederitz et al. (2017) it displays these narratives according to the narrative elements of problem definition, goal, action, and main actor supposed to carry out the suggested actions.

Table 2: Overview of the main transformation pathway (meta)narratives in the Belgian climate movement, according to narrative elements.

	climate justice meta narrative	**climate plan**	**climate emergency**	**divestment**	**blockadia**
Problem	Climate vs the system	Lack of political will and courage	Collective denial of the crisis	Fossil investments	Fossil reserves vs the carbon budget
Goal	System change	Ambitious and just national policy	Emergency mobilization	Fossil free finance & institutions	Keep fossil fuels in the ground
Action	Bridging movements	Demonstrating, Petitions	Disrupting, disobedience	Divesting as delegitimizing	Civil disobedience and direct action
Actors	Movement of movements	Broad civil society, concerned (young) citizens	Concerned and determined citizens	Citizen-customers, Ngo's	Frontline communities and radical movements

Reflecting on the events at the COP15 in Copenhagen in 2009, Bullard and Müller (2012) critically note that proponents of climate justice had "failed to provide a visible alternative to despair" and "failed to provide a new pole of attraction" (p57). They continue: "In some sense, the global climate justice movement remained something more of a potential than a reality". A decade later, climate disruption has kept unfolding and one can wonder how this movement has evolved.

Almeida (2019) stresses the potential of climate justice mobilizations to confront neoliberal globalization and sketches how the climate justice movement has grown momentum through global mobilizations in 2014-2015 and 2019. Based on my analysis of Belgian climate activists, I want to caution

against too easily applying the label of climate justice as it might overlook important differences and tensions among the narratives used in the climate movement.

Historically, the movement articulation of climate justice has been developed as an attempt for fundamental transformation through struggle 'from below', in opposition to a perceived technocratic mainstream approach that mobilizes 'from above' (Schlosberg & Collins, 2014). However, in the movement studied, there is no clear-cut distinction between climate justice and a mainstream climate movement. For example, Andrea placed herself as part of the climate justice movement but outside the mainstream climate movement, Paul self-positioned his climate justice group as a subset of the wider climate movement, while Els perceived the climate movement as a subset of a broader climate justice movement that also encompassed labor struggles.

Starting from the realization that narrative analysis can provide insight in the various ways in which people give meanings in sustainability struggles, I approach climate justice as a metanarrative occurring within the climate movement. While this metanarrative is increasing in popularity, there are competing interpretations of what climate justice means. The radical enactment of climate justice seems more aligned with the grassroots interpretation that historically arose out of environmental justice and alterglobalization movements. In the meanwhile, the moderate interpretation seems relatively closer to the mainstream climate movement. Adoption of the same climate justice terminology has not excluded struggles over the meaning, but it does provide a common ground on which mutual learning is possible.

One example aimed specifically at this mutual learning has been the Belgian Climate Justice Camp: a yearly coming together of movement activists during an extended weekend in the Brussels area. This initiative started out from the analysis that the wider Belgian climate movement insufficiently paid attention to other movements' agendas and concerns – like in the abovementioned Occupy4climate case (see 6.2). Therefore, the Belgian Climate Justice Camp has aimed to deepen understanding of what climate justice actually entails through the likes of workshops and discussion sessions that focus on learning

from other social struggles and building towards a more interconnected movement.

Specifically, the Belgian Climate Justice Camp held 'shape-the-camp' sessions with, among others, anti-racist, feminist, and LGBTQI+ activists who discussed how the climate movement reproduced inequalities, and how the Belgian Climate Justice Camp could take into account these movements' concerns more. However, as Andrea, one of the Belgian Climate Justice Camp co-organizers, cautions in an interview, this is a long-term process: "You don't build trust in five minutes. It's like, it takes time. We have been trying to do that for two years and we're clearly at the beginning" (Andrea, December 2020). Given its centrality in the climate justice metanarrative, attempts at building alliances deserve more scholarly attention.

By making sense of the world around us, narratives are both world-describing and world-making (Veland et al., 2018). Conflicting narratives cannot be simply resolved through facts or straightforward dialogue. Divisions can go 'all the way down' from descriptive, to normative and ontological levels, leaving tensions possibly irresolvable. While participants in the climate movement regularly acknowledge the importance of diversity in roles, strategies, and tactics, this plurality is not always used constructively.

For example, as described by respondents and by Kenis (2021), during the 2019 mobilizations, a petition called Sign For My Future called for a climate law. It was launched by a collective of citizens, CEOs, and civil society organizations. The initiative had large media budgets, and mainstream support and looked to gather as many voices as possible. However, it included CEOs from Belgian branches of multinational corporations not widely recognized as champions of sustainability. In reaction, more radical climate justice activists launched a series of critiques against perceived greenwashing, opening public debate around strategies to deal with climate disruption. While some respondents perceived the discussion as a productive way of clarifying different positions, others saw it as a missed opportunity. As Pjotter suggests:

"it was up to us to make sure it became complementary, rather than burning it down. The empty demands made it possible to fill it in ourselves. We should

have made sure to claim it as the first one (…). For example, they demand a climate law, we can demand a decolonial climate law" (Pjotter, July 2019)

Rather than such a more transformative synthesis, the discussion remained a clash between climate justice and mainstream metanarratives. As the Sign For My Future discussion exemplifies, a unified narrative such as Bushell et al. (2017) promote might be next to impossible. Moreover, such unity could be undesirable (Veland et al., 2018). As a societal transformation requires acting on multiple leverage points, multiple narrative pathways engaging multiple audiences could be more fruitful. However, rendering complementary tense and sometimes irresolvable differences within the climate movement seems to require working in everyday troublesome mud.

One way of dealing with this, is through "fostering spaces of listening, debate and imagination" (Veland et al., 2018, p. 45). There, potential allies can co-construct multiple (meta)narratives, which could partly transcend and hold multiple approaches. As seen in the example of the Belgian Climate Justice Camp, such approaches do seem to be productive. However, this is no deliberative utopia: such attempts will always include divergence, exclusion, conflict, and struggle. Creating common ground might require 'sharp edges' and thus conflict towards mutual adversaries (C. Bergman & Montgomery, 2017).

Transformation pathway narratives should be regarded as pragmatic tools for social change, not reified truths. The climate movement has enacted different transformation pathway narratives. This narrative diversity has produced a variation of messages, messengers, and publics and has mobilized large numbers. Concrete transformation pathway narratives could also provide space for cooperation where irresolvable metanarratives sometimes cannot. A classic micro-sociological insight is that people switch cultural codes according to context (Eliasoph & Lichterman, 2003). For example, respondents mostly working within the more moderate climate plan have joined blockadia actions, emergency-proponents have taken up climate justice concerns and so forth.

Looking at complex impacts and interactions between transformation pathway narratives can open up space for mutual learning. As mentioned above, the

divestment transformation pathway narrative's direct goal of selling away fossil shares might not be as effective for decarbonizing. However, it can provide leverage for delegitimizing the fossil industry, which could render a climate plan more possible. Similarly, large mobilizations within the climate plan transformation pathway narrative have created legitimacy for the emergency and blockadia narrative. In this respect, what appears at first to be mere system modification might contain transformative potential as shallow interventions can open up possibilities for deeper system change (Luederitz et al., 2017). Such indirect consequences and complex interactions provide an avenue for future research.

4.8 Conclusion

In this paper, I have aimed to contribute at the effort of recentering movements in transformation studies (Temper et al., 2018). I studied transformation pathway narratives among Belgian climate activists. Centrally, I have argued climate justice can be understood as a metanarrative aiming at system change through bridging social struggles. Where scholars like Bushell et al. (2017) suggest developing a future overarching narrative, climate justice constitutes such a real-life attempt "from below". It does so by placing itself as a counter-narrative in opposition to a perceived dominant metanarrative that seeks change 'from above'.

Additionally, I have outlined different transformation pathway narratives – the climate plan, climate emergency, divestment and blockadia – and have described their relation with overarching attempts of the climate justice metanarrative. By outlining different transformation pathway narratives, I have approached the internal variety within the climate movement in a layered and dynamic way. Moreover, this might shed a nuanced light on the evolving tensions between moderate and radical components of the climate movement (Marquardt, 2020), and possibly offer suggestions for rendering different approaches more complementary (Luederitz et al., 2017).

I have limited this research to one in-depth study of Belgian climate activists, with data gathered in 2019-2020. I did not take into account the pervasive effects of the pandemic on the climate movements and their narratives.

Additionally, a cultural and geographical expansion of research would lead to richer comparative work. The climate justice metanarrative centralizes bridging attempts between movements. Investigating such attempts, both failing and more successful ones, would prove a highly relevant avenue for future research. Moreover, while I focused on the occurrence of transformation pathway narratives, I did not include underlying mechanisms of how narratives get abandoned or picked up. Such mechanisms could entail for instance more strategic interpretations of opportunity structures (de Moor & Wahlström, 2019), as well as more affective dynamics of indignation, hope, despair and enthusiasm (Castells, 2012).

Scholars have emphasized the importance of positive and attractive futures within climate narratives to produce engagement and generally criticized alarmist narratives for their depoliticization (Bushell et al., 2017; Swyngedouw, 2013). In this light, the relative vagueness of the horizon of the climate justice pathway and the success of the alarmist emergency narrative is remarkable. As Kroijer (2019, 2020) remarks, affects like fear, hope and utopian and dystopian imaginaries can coexist, unhindered by seeming contradictions. A future avenue for research could analyze how narratives combine and connect to such affects and imaginations. This would aid in understanding the evolving climate movements and the ways they influence how societies deal with climate disruption.

5 Dark sides of urgency: Navigating temporal tensions within the Belgian climate movement

Abstract

A sense of urgency is core to the ways global Northern climate movements aim to contribute to limiting future climate disasters. However, after decades of 'no time to waste', climate movements' main ways of relating to time have become contested, resulting in a movement seemingly stuck in temporalities. Recent literature on the time dimension of climate protest has started to analyze and critique dominant temporalities and investigate upcoming alternatives. Less is known about how movements deal with and learn from temporal tensions. Based on in-depth interviews and document analysis among Belgian climate movement organizers, this paper aims to unpack temporalities and their tensions in this multi-paced movement.

I find Belgian climate movement organizations predominantly enact urgency towards averting future climate catastrophes and approach this within a rapidly closing window of opportunities, which they specify through deadlines and ticking clocks. Studied participants contest this main temporality from two angles. Its focus on short-term deadlines can enhance exhaustion and facilitate an easily disappointed "shaky" hope. In addition, the way urgency is enacted can produce a hierarchy of urgencies, prioritizing emission reduction while sidelining justice concerns. From alternative "long-haul" temporalities, participants enact the climate struggle as a "marathon, not a sprint", taking a broader, and more uncertain, time horizon in which impacts are imagined. This would make more space for emotional sustainability and take the "political time" for the "slow spade work" of sustaining collectives, building movements, and embodying justice principles.

Rather than avoiding discussing temporal tensions, I argue that Belgian climate organizers partake in a collective and imperfect process of learning "time literacy", enabling them to acknowledge multiple temporalities and move among the tensions between them. Gaining insight into these temporal processes and reflections is needed to further understanding of, and possibly contribute to, how contemporary climate movements imagine how to change societies.

5.1 Introduction

The climate crisis is in many ways a temporal crisis. Disrupted carbon cycles accelerate through positive feedback loops, causing, among others, slowly rising sea levels, speeding up extinction rates, and derangement of seasonal weather patterns. These processes interweave with human timescales (Goodman, 2016). For example, linear visions of modern progress can hinder acknowledgment of how societies depend on and are severely disrupting, eco-systems (Head, 2016). Potential loss of futures motivated youth climate protestors to demand urgent action to avert crossing climate tipping points (de Moor et al., 2021; Friberg, 2022; Marquardt, 2020). For others, the climate crisis threatens to reinforce unjust patterns of the past as, among others, colonial legacies shape present climate responses (Sealy-Huggins, 2017; Whyte, 2020).

Climate movements are enacting, as well as being shaped by, temporalities – ways in which time is perceived and socially organized (Lilja, Baaz, & Vinthagen, 2015). In the global North, they have done so mostly by narrating climate change as a future threat, still possible to be largely averted but only by acting urgently within a closing window of opportunity (Cassegård & Thörn, 2018). Recent literature, however, paints a picture of global Northern climate movements as stuck between temporalities (Knops, 2021b). In search of transformative potential, many climate movements seem to struggle to get beyond temporal limitations and reproduce dominant social-ecological relations (Cassegård & Thörn, 2022; de Moor & Marquardt, 2023). After decades of "no time to waste", climate movements' main temporality is increasingly contested. While climate movements' have successfully mobilized with messages of urgency and inter-generational justice, trying to "save the

future" in combination with deadline-thinking has contributed to depoliticization and premature demobilization (de Moor, 2023; Kenis, 2021, 2023). As windows of opportunity are shrinking further to the point of reaching tipping points, some activists accept future societal collapse as unavoidable (Cassegård, 2023; Malmqvist, 2024). Other social movements are enacting alternative temporalities that focus on intra-generational justice. In France and Belgium, *Gilets Jaunes* (Yellow Vests) have called to include the economic insecurity of "the end of the month" in confronting the ecological "end of the world" (Kinniburgh, 2019). Feminist climate movements call to center care work, focusing more on *how,* rather than *when* to address climate breakdown (Hayes & MacGregor, 2023). Decolonial climate movements plead to include global Southern experiences for whom it is, in many ways, already too late, and demand equally urgent action to repair colonial crossing of "relational tipping points" (Sunnemark, 2023; Whyte, 2020; WretchedoftheEarth, 2019). A common thread in this literature is the call by researchers and activists alike to explore and learn from diverse temporalities and tensions between them (de Moor et al., 2021; Hulme, 2019; Marquardt, 2020).

I contribute to this effort by investigating the Belgian climate movement. Depicting a "multi-paced" movement, I aim to unpack how diverse temporalities and tension between them are enacted. In addition, I explore *how* movement actors deal with the often messy nature of temporal tensions. Scarce case studies show that climate movements in the UK and Western Europe tend to avoid open debate on temporal tensions (de Moor, 2022; de Moor & Marquardt, 2023). Based on interviews with Belgian climate organizers (n=20) and document analysis, I show how they engage with various temporalities more openly than previous studies had presumed (ClimateJusticeCamp, 2019a; Kenis, 2021). With this analysis, I seek to deepen my understanding of how contemporary climate movements learn to inhabit multiple temporalities and navigate tensions between them.

In what follows (section 2) I outline how previous research analyzes climate movement's main temporalities as performed via closing windows, deadlines, and clock time. Critics point out that this narrow focus has a homogenizing function, and therefore they plead for acknowledging alternative

temporalities. I connect this main temporality to a wider apocalyptic narrative focused on averting future threats (section 3). An emerging post-apocalyptic narrative, seeing environmental catastrophes as already ongoing, also occurs among climate movements, producing temporal tensions. To research how climate movements navigate among these, I qualitatively investigated Belgian climate movement participants (section 4). In the findings, I unpack (section 5) how Belgian climate movement organizations resist societal delay by performing urgency. This common "sprinting" temporality is critiqued first for facilitating easily disappointed "shaky hopes", and secondly for performing a "hierarchy of urgencies" that sidelines justice concerns. In contrast, an alternative "long haul" temporality broadens up time horizons to "make time" for sustaining engagements, acknowledging uncertainties, and reflection. I conclude (section 6) by discussing how movement actors' attempts to navigate temporalities within a multi-paced movement constitutes a messy learning process of "time literacy", much needed for exploring possibilities and revaluing climate politics in a warming world.

5.2 Closing windows and ticking clocks

"Save the world, it's now or never". When studying climate movements, at least in Western Europe, it is hard not to encounter such slogans. Messages like these and logos like the running hourglass illustrate how climate movements commonly approach climate change through the frame of a closing window of opportunity (Hulme, 2020). Such a window depicts a definite timeframe in which action can be taken before it closes – in the case of climate change to avoid tipping points. As time is limited, this temporality creates urgency: it adds importance to an issue by stressing temporal scarcity. Urgency prioritizes cognitively and emotionally within what (Collins, 2001) calls people's limited space of attention. Within the frame of a closing window of opportunity, a sense of urgency facilitates and directs motivation to act to forestall future harm (Anderson, 2017). Like the images of the hourglass running empty, or clocks ticking, the notion of a closing window of opportunity has since long been well embedded within European climate movements (Heller & Robbe, 2010).

More specifically, movements apply deadline rhetoric to translate the idea of closing the window of opportunities (Asayama et al., 2019). Building on constructed thresholds of “dangerous” climate change like 1,5 or 2°C, and carbon budgets estimating allowable emissions before such thresholds would be reached, deadlines communicate the ‘due time’ at which such carbon budget would be exhausted. As such, the rather abstract notions of mean surface degree temperature and gigatons of greenhouse gasses, are translated into the more tangible notion of time. Based on such expert knowledge, metric notions of countdown clocks further disperse this message (Kenis, 2023). According to (Asayama et al., 2019), it is no wonder that particularly the IPCC (2019) special report on the 1,5 °c rise facilitated the gaining traction of the climate emergency narrative. Particular about emergency temporality is that it breaks with linear time: it interrupts normality, by imagining an interval wherein present action is still possible, in the case of the climate movement mostly to avert a future threat (Anderson, 2017). As such, calling for a climate emergency compresses time, doubles down on urgency, and can override ‘delaying’ considerations. Local Belgian Extinction Rebellion groups frequently illustrated such urgency by quoting UN secretary António Guterres: “*Delay means death” (see* Figure 2 *below).*

Figure 2: Two XR-protestors carrying a barrel, wherein they are to lock themselves to block coal transports in the harbor of Ghent, Belgium (ExtinctionRebellionGent, 2022).

Besides describing how climate movements enact temporality, researchers have also pointed out drawbacks to the ways urgency is created. As urgency prioritizes, it can also narrow the focus down to reducing carbon emissions, whilst forgetting justice and wellbeing concerns (Hulme, 2019). For protest movements, this can lead to focusing on "acting now" through mobilizing for marches or civil disobedience, whilst neglecting the need for 'organizing' (Haug, 2013). Similarly, (Hayes & MacGregor, 2023) warns climate movements' urgency-fueled temporalities risk short-cutting what (Amsler, 2010) calls "political time" – the open-ended time needed for reflecting movement building, power analyses, and imagining other worlds. On a wider scale, a

narrow focus on urgent mitigatory action can facilitate a technocratic approach to climate politics (Swyngedouw, 2010). For the emergency narrative specifically, multiple voices have warned against its vulnerability to being co-opted into authoritarian rule (D'Alisa, 2019; Hayes & MacGregor, 2023; Hulme, 2019).

Deadline temporalities also face specific downsides. Deadlines can expire. The moment when the window of possibility closes, it becomes too late for meaningful action. The European climate movement experienced this the hard way when large sections framed the 2009 Copenhagen COP15 summit as a "now or never" moment for decisive climate action (de Moor & Wahlström, 2019). As "now" became "never", widespread disappointment was narrated as an important cause for movement disengagement. In addition, translating the slow unfolding of climate disruption to specific points in time contains a degree of unknowability, leaving one unsure when tipping points are crossed or when exactly it becomes "too late", let alone when such a moment generates a noticeable change (de Moor, 2023). Such distance between the dangers pointed out, and everyday life risks increases cognitive dissonance (Bushell et al., 2017).

Lastly, presenting climatic urgencies through clock time risks paradoxically undermining the possibilities for action it hoped to create (Kenis, 2023). As the countdown clock homogenizes diverse realities into a single linear metric – and indeed seeks to synchronize towards it – it risks limiting potential by concealing the existence of multiple, often non-linear, temporalities e.g. pipeline investments, elections, or unraveling of ecosystems. Moreover, (Kolinjivadi, Almeida, & Martineau, 2020) point out clock time risks being *fetishized*: when one confuses actual social-environmental relations for its representation in the form of a ticking clock. As such, in addition to "governing" through time, one can also end up being governed by it. As much as climate politics seem stuck in dominant relations, they also seem stuck in the clock time of progress-oriented modernity that has caused socio-ecological crises in the first place. Therefore, (Kolinjivadi, Almeida, & Martineau, 2020) plead for openness to alternative temporalities as a way of exploring possibilities to "rekindle the spirit of the now" and "reclaim the means of temporal coordination".

Researchers have both outlined and criticized the main ways in which climate movements enact urgency through closing windows, clock time, deadlines, and emergencies. While those ways of relating to time do vary, they share an overarching common focus on averting future catastrophes. Deeper temporal differences, however, do occur among climate movements and create tensions – though these are not always visible from the outside. Additionally, it is less investigated *how* contemporary climate movements deal with the abovementioned articulated critiques and navigate among alternative temporalities. Recent literature on apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic environmentalism, however, provides a framework for exploring alternative temporal narratives.

5.3 Apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic environmentalism

Past and present human action (and inaction) has produced the possibility of future catastrophic climate events unless people urgently change their behavior to mitigate climate change – according to (Bushell et al., 2017, p. 43) this is the basic plot of the "end of the world" narrative. (Cassegård & Thörn, 2018) have more systematically analyzed this narrative as "apocalyptic environmentalism": it depicts the present as a crossroads where a collective "we" has the choice to either continue business as usual and face future climate catastrophe or take action to avert this. Within this overarching apocalyptic temporality, the climate movement struggles "against doom" (Brecher, 2017). The apocalyptic narrative emphasizes fear of future disaster, where the future haunts the present (Kenis, 2021), but combines this with the hope of preventing it (Cassegård & Thörn, 2022). This might be enacted through clock time and deadlines based on expert knowledge, as well as enacted through more everyday biographical temporalities like the potential loss of future prospects as in the case of youth climate protestors (Friberg, 2022).

Figure 3: grandparents for climate, demanding "a livable world for our grandchildren".[7]

Contemporary climate movements draw on an international lineage of post-World war II apocalyptic environmentalism, inspired by, among others, the Hiroshima and Nagasaki nuclear disasters, Barry Commoner's The Closing Circle' and Rachel Carson's warnings of poisoning leading to a "silent spring". Apocalyptic environmentalism contains a critique of human mastery over nature, connecting modern progress to global catastrophe (Cassegård & Thörn, 2022). Given apocalyptic narratives' emphasis on urgent action to forestall future disasters, it constitutes a kind of "temporal resistance" (Lilja, Baaz, & Vinthagen, 2015) against the ongoing business as usual. Unsurprisingly, this contestation of future optimism has provoked broader societal reactions from eco-modernists defending techno-scientific progress

[7] https://www.dewereldmorgen.be/community/beschamend-vlaams-klimaatplan-vinden-grootouders-voor-het-klimaat/

(De Cock, Nyberg, & Wright, 2019) and from vested interests' narratives of denial and delay to continue fossil hegemony (Lamb et al., 2020; Wright, Nyberg, & Bowden, 2021).

Within climate movements, discussions on apocalyptic narratives have centered more around aspects of strategic communication. After the Copenhagen COP15 failure, many NGOs took distance from "alarmist" communication as it would enhance cognitive dissonance and facilitate withdrawal (Bushell et al., 2017). While not denying the urgent need to tackle climate change, they upheld a strategy of "positive communication", emphasizing the potential for climate actions and how these benefit, among others, health, jobs, and environmental quality (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017a). However, such "positive messaging" is easily coupled with an "everyone together" message that depoliticizes by concealing power differences (Kenis, 2019). Moreover, shying away from fear and anger can impede the productive potential of political conflict (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017a). If the need for so-called "positive emotions" pushes anger, fear, and grief backstage, this can lead to a kind of emotional dissonance that was to be avoided in the first place (Head, 2016).

Despite the apocalyptic narrative's merits in mobilizing and opening space for critiques on modern narratives of progress, it can also operate in tandem with progress (Swyngedouw, 2013). In its aim to interrupt business as usual to avert future disasters also lies a wish to perpetuate "normality" (De Cock, Nyberg, & Wright, 2019). Indeed, apocalyptic environmentalism can be a 'sibling of progress' that has proven vulnerable to cooptation into a technocratic way of governing (Cassegård & Thörn, 2022). And just as progress narratives tend to neglect its many sacrifice-zones, the apocalyptic narrative's focus on preventing future harm can conceal ongoing inequalities and suffering from the past to the present, and as such risks reproducing them (Kenis, 2021).

From these critiques, the post-apocalyptic narrative emerged (Swyngedouw, 2013). Instead of projecting the threat of climate change onto the future, it sees social-ecological catastrophes as inevitable or already ongoing (Cassegård & Thörn, 2022). It acknowledges that for those living through, or dying from, floods, heatwaves, and so forth, it might already be too late in some aspects.

For those, apocalypses might already be happening, its uneven distribution in time and space is enhanced by social inequalities (De Cock, Nyberg, & Wright, 2019). The post-apocalyptic narrative therefore centers on experiences of loss and resulting emotions like grief and anger. But if things are already "too late", then what possibility is left? Post-apocalyptic environmentalism doesn't necessarily imply fatalism (Cassegård, 2023). Acknowledging losses and engaging in grieving could open up space for re-evaluating formerly held hopes, making post-apocalyptic environmentalism a potential wellspring for new struggles and politics (Cassegård & Thörn, 2018). As the protest wave after the Fukushima nuclear disaster exemplifies, movements can demand dignity and justice, responsibility from power holders, repairs where possible, and demand to halt the catastrophe from further expanding (Cassegård & Thörn, 2022).[8]

Drawing on the work of Walter Benjamin, such an approach can be framed as "hope without optimism" (De Cock, Nyberg, & Wright, 2019). A post-apocalyptic politics can contain its own urgency (Anderson, 2017). Instead of saving the future by metaphorically averting the train from driving into the abyss, as in the apocalyptic narrative, it rather creates urgency towards pulling the emergency brake, to interrupt the train from continuing wrecking catastrophe as it progresses (Cassegård & Thörn, 2022). For the latter option, Anderson (2017) takes the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement as an example of creating a temporal interval wherein to urgently interrupt ongoing racial oppression through police violence. The USA-originated BLM protests resonated strongly overseas, including in the UK and Belgium where they were used to, among others, interrupt colonial legacies (Bogaert, 2023; Goddeeris, 2020). Within global Northern climate movements, post-apocalyptic environmentalism is significantly influenced by global Southern-based experiences where climate impacts are hitting sooner and harder, exaggerated by colonial legacies and post-colonial presents (Cassegård & Thörn, 2018). In particular, the BLM protests facilitated contesting climate movements'

[8] Of course, post-apocalyptic narratives can also result in fatalism, reactions of withdrawal and a more depoliticizing approach to the emotion work of grieving and envisioning cultural change (Cassegård & Thörn, 2022).

prevailing apocalyptic temporalities and opened up space for alternatives. As (Sunnemark, 2023) analyzed at the COP21 in Glasgow, anti-racist activists and movements from the global south employed the temporality of post-apocalyptic environmentalism as a common ground for bringing forth decolonial articulations of climate justice.

This late awakening to post-apocalyptic environmentalism among global Northern climate movements, however, has not resulted in straightforward acceptance and application of the political potential it contains. Rather, empirical research among European and British climate groups suggests that apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic sentiments and narratives exist alongside each other, causing temporal ambiguity (de Moor, 2022). These British climate activists mainly seek to reduce this ambiguity by clinging to the more ingrained apocalyptic hopes by avoiding discussing temporal tensions and keeping post-apocalyptic reflections out of public communication and strategizing spaces (de Moor & Marquardt, 2023). Other movements like XR rather seem to "oscillate" between either apocalyptic or post-apocalyptic narratives (Cassegård & Thörn, 2022) and risk compartmentalization by separating apocalyptic action strategies from depoliticized post-apocalyptic practices of emotion work to sustain activism (Westwell & Bunting, 2020).

This emerging literature presents a movement somewhat stuck in time, limited in its exploration of possibilities, and finding it difficult to navigate multiple temporalities. (de Moor & Marquardt, 2023) therefore argue against homogenizing temporalities, and engage in open conversations in which participants can learn through acknowledging multiple temporalities and exploring the "grey zones" and tensions in between them. Such a "polychronic" view could open up possibilities (de Moor, 2023). I seek to contribute to this literature by investigating Belgian climate movement organizations, as they have openly engaged in such debates. Therefore, I research how they construct temporalities and articulate critiques, to aid in clarifying how climate movements can learn from engaging in the process of moving among temporal tensions.

5.4 Methodology

In this paper, I build on qualitative research conducted among Belgian climate movement participants between July 2019 and December 2020. In total, 20 in-depth interviews – ranging between 90 and 180 minutes in length – were held with organizers from the Belgian climate movement. Data collection and understanding of the movement have been informed, facilitated, and shaped by non-researcher participation in various local climate protests, and by conducting research as a participant observer at the Climate Justice Camp (in 2019, 2020, and 2021), among Belgian participants of Free the Soil (in 2019) and local Extinction Rebellion groups. Such a position as (semi-)insider in the larger movement has helped in gaining participants' trust (Sherif, 2001). During the larger span of research, I took a position close to the "co-conspirer" (Temper, McGarry, & Weber, 2019), conducting research to enrich the movement. Therefore, with this article, I seek to analyze temporal tensions I encountered during data gathering and collect and clarify lessons drawn with the aim of partaking in a collective learning process of 'time literacy' and cultivating hopes.

For practical reasons, I focused on Dutch-speaking and bi-lingual groups to adequately immerse myself as the aforementioned co-conspirer in their settings. I started out with three pilot interviews among well-established and connected organizers and focused mostly on grassroots groups before gradually diversifying the sample to include newer groups, NGOs and think tanks. As such, the sample involved groups focusing on mobilization[9] and more disobedient actions[10] as well as focusing more on policy work[11] and organizing spaces of movement learning[12]. In preparation for each interview, I conducted document analysis on websites, reports, and press releases. A more detailed

[9] Youth4Climate, Students4Climate, Grandparent for climate, Climate express, Climate coalition, Greenpeace

[10] Extinction Rebellion, Act for Climate Justice, Greenpeace

[11] Bond Beter Leefmilieu, Greenpeace, Arbeid en Milieu, Denktank Minerva, Friends of the Earth Europe

[12] Climate Justice Camp, Labo, Tractie-Vredesactie

description of the participating individuals and the groups they are part of can be found in the methods chapter and appendix of this dissertation.

While the interviews were originally set up to explore movement narratives and how participants dealt with hope, the themes of urgency and temporality arose spontaneously as an important tension in the first three interviews. This led to an early tentative understanding of (tensions around) the main enactments of urgency. These themes were then taken up as part of questionnaires in later interviews. I thereby used anonymized quotes from previous interviews and document analysis to probe respondents and further deepen the interview conversations. After initial open coding, I continued data analysis in an iterative fashion, informing thematic coding rounds with literature on deadline and clock time temporalities, apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic environmentalism, and feedback on presentations of tentative findings I gave at conferences and seminars. As agreed with respondents before taking interviews, I have anonymized their contributions by using pseudonyms and by linking individual respondents only to categories of organizations as specific organizations are sometimes too small to ensure anonymity.

This research context was characterized by the aftermath of the 2018-2019 mobilization wave. Since late 2018 climate mobilizations have become unprecedented in size and later in frequency when joined and sustained into the spring of 2019 with the emergence of new groups that brought many newcomers to the movement, most prominently in Youth4climate and Extinction Rebellion (XR), but also through groups like Students4climate and Grootouders voor het klimaat (*grandparents for climate*). Especially Youth4Climate and XR deviated from the earlier "positive communication" strategy (also see (Cassegård & Thörn, 2018)) and instead doubled down on apocalyptic urgency messages through their emergency narrative. Simultaneously, Act for Climate Justice and Climate Justice camp, newly formed collectives based on longer movement experience, brought more radical articulations of climate justice. In addition, other grassroots organizations like Climate Express and various NGOs and platform organizations leaned on members' experiences of mobilizing and organizing towards the COP in Warsaw (2013) and Paris (2015). Within this context,

otherwise rare open discussions on movement strategies and narratives took place, such as around the emergency narrative, the occupy4climate action (see findings), and between more politicizing and depoliticizing approaches discussing the Sign For My Future petition that controversially included many "captains of industry" (Kenis, 2021). The research context during 2020 was marked by the COVID-19 pandemic and the installed lockdown and social distance measures that limited possibilities for movement assembly. Lastly, the American Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests following the death of George Floyd in June 2020 also sparked protests in Belgium that raised attention for racist police violence, and through the targeting of statues of Leopold II, also aimed to interrupt colonial legacies. Together with the earlier Gilets Jaunes (*yellow vests*) protests that connected the "end of the month" with "the end of the world", the BLM protests opened space for questioning the climate movement's dominant apocalyptic temporality, by emphasizing how colonial legacies and racial-ethnic hierarchies threaten racialized people in the present.

5.5 Findings

In what follows, I attempt to unpack the temporal tensions performed by Belgian climate movement organizers, observed from in-depth interviews and document analyses. Firstly, I show how climate movements I studied aim to produce a sense of urgency to "act now" to reduce carbon emissions. They do so by using deadlines and countdown clocks to communicate a narrowing window of opportunity to avert future climate impacts. Thereafter, I analyze two threads of respondents' critiques on this predominant movement temporality. The way climate movements try to produce urgency would risk producing exhaustion and particularly "shaky hopes" leading to cultivating disappointment. In addition, climate movements' temporalities could end up contradicting climate justice concerns when reproducing "hierarchies of urgency" between and within movements. Finally, I describe alternative temporalities that center around a "long haul" approach by focusing on sustaining participants' engagements, "slow spade" organizing work of movement building, and broadening envisioned time horizons in which hopes and expectations are placed.

5.5.1 Performing urgency: "no time for delay"

"Tick tock, Tick tock. The clock is ticking. Global warming is here, and it is affecting us. Tick tock. We don't have time for delay anymore. Let's get to action. Because there is still time to change the course of history". Mobilization text for 'Back to the Climate' demonstration (Brussels, Belgium - 10 October 2021 https://reset.vlaanderen/agenda/back-to-the-climate/ Retrieved 12/06/2023, translated by author)

The abovementioned text reads as a typical, almost programmatic, example of public communication by Western climate movements (at the time of data gathering). Similar messages are omnipresent: ticking clocks and hourglasses show that "time is running out". We would still have "12 years to save the planet", or 100 days to react to the climate crisis[13]. This deadline rhetoric is usually combined with an equally omnipresent call to "act now"[14], to start building a better future, and "do it now, now, now" (11.11.11., 2012; Marquardt, 2020).[15] And as "the next months and years will determine our chances"[16], the moment to act might even be "now or never", with the ever-next climate summit being "the last chance" (de Moor & Wahlström, 2019). These images and phrases enable climate movements to perform a sense of urgency.

Urgency plays a predominant role in the narratives of most climate movement groups studied, in the sense that it is a commonly occurring widespread trope and it takes on a central role, and it has done so for at least a decade. The groups researched here commonly imagined urgency as a main driver to prioritize and take action on the climate crisis. Movement participants' self-

[13] https://lef-online.be/index.php/artikels/19247-de-klimaatcoalitie-geeft-belgie-100-dagen-om-te-reageren-op-de-klimaatcrisis - retrieved on 17/10/2019

[14] https://climate-express.be/ – retrieved on 14/08/2020

[15] the *sing for the climate song* -originating in a Belgian campaign and regaining popularity through the international youth strikes that changes the Italian worker's and anti-fascist partisan song 'Bella Ciao' for 'do it now now now'.

[16] https://youthforclimate.be/nl/ - Retrieved on 13/08/2020

understandings reflect this centrality of urgency. As David, an organizing member of a young grassroots organization, exemplifies during an interview "What unites them [climate movement groups], is the sense of urgency. The sense of 'something must be done now'. And also the realization that the whole political system is so paralyzed, is running so slowly". (David, April 2020)

In accordance with (Cassegård & Thörn, 2018), the movements I studied frequently enacted urgency within an apocalyptic narrative, calling for action to prevent future climate catastrophes. This message intends to activate fear and transform it into engagement, working as a wake-up call. This happened in the case of Els, a middle-aged mother who became active in grassroots organizing after attending a public presentation by climate scientists during the height of the school strikes for climate in 2019.

"Then I was like: "Wow it's really super pressing this problem". I did know that there was something going on, and our house is well insulated and we do pay attention to what we buy and we did some little things like that. But that it was really that urgent, I really didn't know that. Then, that afternoon, I immediately said "I want to jump on this."" (Els, March 2020)

Within this apocalyptic narrative, the Belgian climate movement organizations researched here predominantly communicated climate change as something to be urgently addressed within a closing window of opportunity, emphasizing the costs of inaction and the shrinking, but still present, possibilities to act. This limited available time stands at odds with the scale of the problem and the actions required to address it. In the words of Climate Express – a collective focused on mass mobilizations – this "requires enormous efforts in a short period. The next few years will therefore determine our chances of countering global warming. There is no more time for procrastination, no excuse for procrastination." (website climate express – retrieved on 14 August 2020). Crucially, the window of opportunity closes towards a deadline, an imagined point in time after which it is too late to act (Hulme, 2020). Among the movements studied, this deadline is usually constructed in relation to the 2 or 1,5 degrees Celsius threshold, related carbon budgets, and national or supranational decarbonization scenarios. The moment when it is 'too late'

would then be when various tipping points are irreversibly reached, implying positive feedback loops resulting in runaway climate change. Further translations of these thresholds into countdown clocks are also applied by activists to create a sense of urgency. An Extinction Rebellion activist argued on national television that we have "2462 days" left until the 1.5-degree limit is reached (Zevende Dag, 2022)[17]. As Rob, a young member of a more recent grassroots organization notices: the countdown clock translates the abstract problems of temperature rise and emission reduction goals into a more recognizable notion of time slipping away (also see (Asayama et al., 2019). Moreover, this sense of urgency can be entangled with a strategy of "scientization" (Evensen, 2019), with respondents referring to climate science arguing the climate crisis is objectively urgent. As Joyce, an advocating climate scientist, told me in an interview: "Well, those tipping points don't take into account whether you like it or not that it is urgent. It's just a fact now that it's highly urgent." (Joyce, June 2020). Joshua, a man in his early thirties with a history in grassroots organizing and working for a larger international NGO, shared how climatic urgency was fueled by science, but also jokingly observed how different collectives translated these into different emission reduction targets and deadlines, giving the impression that, less than the specific calculations, the general sense of urgency might matter more within their movement organizing practices.

While the object of the urgency expressed by climate movements is to limit climate change, it is targeting politicians, political systems, and a societal lack of urgency towards climate change. The call to "act now" is contrasted with delay tactics of vested interests (Lamb et al., 2020) and the "procrastination" and "slowness" of political power-holders. David boldly expresses his indignation:

"For fuck's sake, we've really had plenty of time now to make plans, and set plans ahead and discuss plans and plan plans. It is often exhausting to see how there is always more and more consultation. Whereas we have no need for

[17] https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/kijk/2022/10/23/d7d-select-klimaat-arvato_52532611/ (retrieved on 30/03/2023)

consultation anymore. (…) But we do need to start as soon as possible. Come on, go, everyone: start. (…) It seems only natural to take action and be decisive. With Corona (Covid-19 pandemic), you don't sit and plan for ten weeks either. The first thing you do is: what decisions need to be taken now".

Through performing urgency, respondents like David enact a form of temporal resistance (Lilja, Baaz, & Vinthagen, 2015). They deviate from progress narratives by emphasizing possible future climate catastrophes and aim to interrupt the continuation of business as usual to avert those catastrophes. As such, these climate activists refuse to patiently wait for future solutions while the crisis unfolds. This entails a rejection of the more techno-optimistic future solutions like negative emission technologies of carbon capture, which they regard as passive and fraudulent hopes (also see (De Wever van der Heyden, Gantois, & Olyslaegers, 2019; Stuart, 2020)). An excerpt from an interview with Joyce illustrates this:

"I understand that people hope for those [mitigatory negative emission technologies]. It's easy to hope for that. But it also gives a bit of a sense of security: "the scientists will solve it with technology". But I fear we're not going to get there.

Interviewer: That hope is unjustified, or not?

Joyce: Yes. It's totally unfeasible. (…) That's really just to help those last bits, and hopefully prevent dramatic consequences in time, but totally not as a substitute for phasing out fossil fuels." (Joyce, June 2020).

With the upcoming emergency narrative during the 2018-2019 wave of mobilizations, the role of urgency became highlighted, and also more contested. Previously, Belgian climate movement organizations like Climate Coalition and Climate Express have commonly enacted a 'climate plan' narrative (Vandepitte, 2023), aiming to tackle a problem of political will through civil pressure by repertoires such as demonstrations and petitions. Within that narrative, the sense of urgency was translated into demanding more ambitious (and just) climate policies. However, events such as the 2018 global heatwaves and the publication of the IPCC 1,5-report allowed activists

to reframe climate change: instead of spatially and temporally imagining climate change as something distant, groups like Youth4climate and Extinction Rebellion increased a sense of urgency by approaching the crisis as nearby, to be felt in the near future or even already in the present. As such, the emergency narrative escalates the climate plan narrative, framing the problem as more immediate and disruptive, demanding more transformative action and drawing on more disobedient action repertoires such as school strikes or sit-ins. Moreover, these groups used more emotionally explicit messaging, mixing despair and fear of future catastrophes with the hope of averting them (Friberg, 2022; Neckel & Hasenfratz, 2021).

Figure 4: Projection by Greenpeace on European Commission Headquarters, Brussels, Belgium. June 19, 2019. https://media.greenpeace.org/collection/27MZIFJ80D4G6

As the 2018-2019 mobilizations were also the largest in the Belgian context, research participants commonly acknowledged how emphasizing urgency can be activating. However, respondents also frequently criticized the way urgency was communicated by groups like Youth4climate or XR acting from an emergency narrative. Respondents like Joyce found the way movements constructed urgency misleading: "*It may not be the best message (to say) "we have eight years or 12 years left". First of all, it's not a binary problem: it's not that you have time until then and then it's the end of the world. But those tipping points do exist." (Joyce, June 2020)".*

In addition, respondents critiqued the tone of emergency messages as alarmist. Respondents like Sarah, a woman in her early thirties working for a national platform organization, worried that emphasizing fear for dystopic futures could result in more paralysis and looking away (also see (Bushell et al., 2017). This line of critique draws on a commonly narrated (West-European) movement history of disappointment and disengagement after the 2009 Copenhagen COP15(de Moor & Wahlström, 2019). More established NGOs, in particular, revised their communication strategies away from alarmism towards emphasizing "positive feelings" to show how climate action contains possibilities for better life quality (Cassegård & Thörn, 2018). As Sarah explains the communication strategy of her platform organization: "*trying to paint a kind of attractive future, to seduce people to that, (…), that we shouldn't think that we're going to be worse off, but better off".* While these critiques are mostly about strategic communication, other criticisms also emerged from the interviews, worrying about how enacting urgency could impact movement building by cultivating disappointability and sidelining concerns for justice.

5.5.2 Cultivating disappointability

The first line of critique raised by research participants points out that the way climate movements enact urgency can obstruct long-term engagements. By fostering impatience and putting hopes on urgently needed short-term impacts, climate activists can render themselves more open to disappointment, losing hope and disengaging as a result. During an interview, Elias, a soft-spoken man in his twenties or thirties, at the time involved for five years in a grassroots organization mainly focused on mobilization, articulates this analysis:

"In the movement, we often feel that we have too little time to be allowed to really learn, that we want to achieve our objective immediately: "Ah yes, we want it solved by then". That's what I'm getting through after five years: you can't solve this problem in one day. But that is an idea held by most people entering the climate movement "We're going to do this action, and we will succeed, and this will have a big impact on our society". Well then I think: good, but don't go too far in this because you will be massively disappointed". (Elias, July 2019)

Elias links his own experiences to a more recent example of this dynamic among the Youth For Climate school strikers. They organized twenty subsequent weekly school strikes up to national and regional elections, which in the Flanders region resulted in a victory for the far right.

"And I feel like that's kind of what's going on now with Youth for Climate, who have been aiming very hard for the elections: [they got] not at all the result that they wanted, also not in Flanders. Which I think has hit some people really hard. Because I do recognize some things that played out with us (…) back then. That is: having a very clear objective, having setbacks that you didn't get the result you wanted. I think for those young people that was mainly "We want to have a clearly different [climate] policy in Belgium after the elections"". (Elias, July 2019)

Elias links an increase in disappointability among movement participants to experiencing setbacks towards an upheld **"**very clear objective". Joshua elaborates this argument when he reflects about the downturn of the youth-led 2019 mobilizations and the short-term focus among climate protestors:

"Well, your brain should be oriented more towards the long term. They [youth for climate] were focused super hard on the elections, and of course, if the result is disappointing you do have a problem. It does seem interesting to me to think about: you put all your eggs in the basket of elections and politicians, whereas the kind of problem we have now, what we're working around, climate justice, equity, international equity even, that's not something we're going to win with an election". (Joshua, August 2020).

Respondents such as Elias and Joshua describe how climate movements creating a sense of urgency via a single short-term objective can be like "putting all eggs in one basket": they warn that such a strategy of narrowing down their focus can lead to a hope that is insufficiently robust and easily disillusioned. Moreover, setbacks can be experienced as a loss of precious time, increasing stress and worry for participants like Hermes, a young grassroots campaigner: "*I have a huge sense of urgency. So every little setback immediately feels to me like now we are [losing] precious minutes up to the*

tipping point again, so to speak. For me, that's always a hard experience. I do have that, that it's a constant reason for stress". (Hermes, May 2020).

The pursuit of these objectives can take on deadline-like temporalities. While this can motivate engagement in the run-up to the deadline, it risks depleting motivation when the passing of the deadline is imagined as unavoidable and it becomes "too late" to act. Angela, a woman in her early thirties active within multiple radical grassroots initiatives, explains how this risk becomes especially prominent with "now or never" framings:

"There are times when people feel like "it's now or never". And often that's a totally irrational thing. But people translate their big sense of 'there is an urgency of climate change, but we don't really see the …', they translate that to one point "whether this happens or not is decisive". Then you fall into an urgency that is unproductive." (Angela, April, 2020)

Multiple respondents referred to the movement experience at the Copenhagen, 2009 COP15. The mobilization to that summit was widely framed as 'the last chance', as when the summit did not deliver hoped-for results, 'now' becomes 'never' with ensuing disappointment and demobilization (de Moor & Wahlström, 2019). Francine, at the time a policy officer working for a national platform organization, explains a widely narrated lesson:

"Because in Copenhagen, we expressed so hard, like 'this is the time, now it has to change'/ And then the climate movement collapsed a bit. And that, I think, is the reason why organizations that have been around longer, especially Copenhagen meant a shift in that, are sometimes a bit more cautious. That we are no longer quick to say 'this is the moment when it all has to change'." (Francine, November 2020).

Continuing that narrated lesson, respondents such as Kim or Elias feared that this dynamic might play again in the future, and worried specifically about Extinction Rebellion's (XR) emergency narrative that emphasizes apocalyptic urgency:

"My feeling with XR is (…) there is a very strong sense of urgency in there, which I understand very strongly, but that can also cause people to also really just have something like 'well, if it doesn't change within a year, well then it's done'. And that people get despondent about that." (Elias, July 2019)

Such narratives of urgency can get translated into practices, where groups enact urgency by focusing on a singular clear object. Respondents worry that this can enhance vulnerability to exhaustion. Depletion of energies can cause activist burn-out and movement disengagement[18], and it can also worsen feelings of disappointment, and hopelessness, and reinforce the risk of drop-out. For example, Sally, an energetic mother of two who became active in, among others, Extinction Rebellion since the 2019 mobilization wave, talks about this risk of burnout.

"There's always this urgency that makes you constantly feel like you're running behind. But we've also noticed that that just burns people out a lot. (…) Because unfortunately, we're only human beings, right? And you can't run all the time. Actually, we should all be running. (…) Well, the urgency clearly has

[18] Of course, fatigue can be experienced without disappointment. For example, this happened in the case of the Climate Express collective, who led mobilizations to the COP21 in Paris, 2015, which functioned as a focal point for short term organizing.. While their goal was to mobilize 10.000 Belgians to the neighboring France, their plans were thwarted by the government's state of exception following terrorist attacks, leading them to last-minute organize Belgian demonstration. One respondent was part of the organizing team, and provides an example of urgency-fueled short term temporality, with relative success, leading to exhaustion and temporary disengagement.
"Well that was certainly not a general feeling of 'we're now disappointed in the COP'. And also, we were certainly not disappointed in our action, because we ended up getting 14.000 people on the streets. Right before we were going to leave to Paris we had to change everything around and reorganize because there were the attacks in Paris. So everybody was just dead tired actually (laughs). I myself had a kind of burnout afterwards, so I just really couldn't carry on"

not yet sunk in. Nowhere. Well, nowhere isn't true, among certain people it has. But then you get that urgency that makes people lose hope and become sad (…) or then they fall into burnout or depression. And then you lose them again." (Sally, November, 2020).

Sally was not the only respondent to link urgency to a risk of losing hope. Kim also made this link, a non-binary grassroots activist and educator in his early thirties, with over a decade of involvement in radical environmental and climate protests, he speaks about the Ineos Will Fall campaign, targeting a planned large petrochemical facility in the port of Antwerp, to reflect on the balancing work between a motivating sense of urgency and possibility, and keeping a more robust long term hope.

"Certainly for climate activists, it helps in part to get away from the "now, that Ineos factory must absolutely not be built, because if that happens it will be too late, then it won't work anymore with Flanders and climate change". Oh dear, I'm getting stressed already, if you start thinking that way you might have a lot of hope that your campaign will succeed, but that's a very shaky hope."

Later in the interview, he mentions:

"Especially around climate activism it's a very difficult balance to maintain enough hope to be active, but also to make sure that your sources of hope are sustainable and that these don't just break at the moment your campaign fails" (Kim, November 2020).

As others have noted as well, sustaining hopes can be difficult when faced with political inertia and a warming world (Nairn, 2019; Stuart, 2020). While Kim speaks about disappointed hopes targeted to local campaigns, these campaign goals are often connected to larger objectives like limiting climate change below 1,5 degrees Celsius. In the light of increasing emissions and a further closing of the window of opportunities, even real political progress can appear as "way too little" in the light of the worsening climatic conditions. Joshua connects this to a sense of resignation due to "losing the war":

“So in that sense, we are losing the war’. I see that with people around me who really did take up leading organizing roles and who say to me ‘Pff (sigh), what good does it do’, and even worse, “What good did it do”. So they also kind of question the gigantic protests of the last two years. “What good did it do that we came out in the streets with 100.000 people”.” (Joshua, August 2020)

As an alternative – as I discuss in section 5.5.4 – respondents like Joshua or Kim propose a longer-term temporality based on the slow work of organizing where one learns to acknowledge impacts while embracing setbacks as part of the process, and when necessary, acknowledging losses and re-evaluating what hopes are still possible.

5.5.3 Sidelining justice through hierarchies of urgency

A second line of critique that emerged from the data, held that the predominant ways in which urgency is being produced within the Belgian climate movement can sideline justice concerns. This can play out when a narrow focus on emission reductions leads to policies and processes insensitive to side effects that worsen social problems (Hulme, 2019). On the process side, such distributional justice leans on recognizing the experiences of subaltern groups at various frontlines of climate change and making just procedures for these voices to be included – including their various temporalities (Kolinjivadi, Almeida, & Martineau, 2020). For climate movements, their articulation of climate justice aims towards a just and transformative system change, which entails building power from below to counter vested interests (Bond, 2012; Vandepitte, 2023). Especially for movements in the global North, such effort demands making political time for fostering alliances between different movements and for engaging in -often slow and painstaking- learning processes of acknowledging how climate movements can also reproduce injustices (Hayes & MacGregor, 2023). I firstly focus on the way climate movements can reproduce injustices through the construction of their temporalities, and secondly on how they can do so by *not* making political time.

"Surviving is indeed important, but the question is how, and for whom".
Pjotter, at the time combining a job at an international NGO while still firmly rooted in grassroots campaigns, is picking at the emergency narrative during an interview. He critically points out how this narrative, embedded in a politics that prioritizes emission reductions, is concerned with saving *future* conditions of mainly Northern citizens – particularly their middle-class lifestyles. This, however, conceals the suffering from climate impacts – happening first and foremost in the global south – that is *already* present. To discursively exclude the temporal experiences of those most impacted contributes to reproducing unequal power relations (Sealy-Huggins, 2017).[19] As the UK-based Wretched of Earth (2019) collective argued in their wide-resonating letter to Extinction Rebellion: "*Our communities have been on fire for a long time and these flames are fanned by our exclusion and silencing*". So rather than focusing on averting the loss of a future, attention is drawn to interrupting present suffering and the continuation of past patterns of domination that have produced it. As argued by (Sunnemark, 2023), these critiques entail a post-apocalyptic environmentalism that is used to articulate *decolonial* climate justice. By forwarding an alternative temporality from a subaltern position, Global Southern movements attempt to open space for including the voices of those most impacted.

Continuing the line of argument of recognizing the post-apocalyptic temporality for those most impacted, respondents criticized the idea of a 'hierarchy of urgencies'. As Andrea, a grassroots climate justice activist in her late twenties, stated:

"I truly believe that there are very different types of urgencies and that one is not more important than another. (…) it's just I don't feel that climate change is more urgent for example than tackling racism, and I think if we read the news you can see that people are actually dying in Belgium because they're beaten up by policemen, because of racism. (...) If you open up a bit your

[19] For a particularly contested example of this: see Kenis (2021) discussing the 'sign for my future' example.

perspective then you see that climate change is one of the big problems, but that there are several, several others." (Andrea, December, 2020).

This critique on "hierarchy of urgencies" is aimed against excluding social problems from climate politics – whereas from a climate justice perspective, these would be seen as intertwined. As such, respondents point to the urgency of poverty, deadly police violence along racial lines, European border politics, or patriarchal violence. For example, Axel – a researcher at a small NGO – is rhetorically wondering:

"We are in a rich country like Belgium with 15% [of the population] poor, (…)? Recently, police violence has come to the fore in Belgium, so why not declare a state of emergency for that? (…) It's not like that short-term suffering of people, people suffering now, that you can say that is less important". (Axel, September, 2020).

Underlying this argument is a critique of who decides what is urgent. Focusing on the urgency of emission reduction, at the expense of tackling social inequalities, is then seen as reflecting unequal power dynamics. As Angela argues: *"Especially if one looks at the climate movement in Belgium or Flanders, you find yourself with all, or a large part, privileged people imposing on all the rest of the world that this is really the urgency now".* (Angela, April 2020).

In the Belgian climate movement, the critique on hierarchy of urgencies came to the fore through tensions with other movements[20]. As Angela exemplifies during the same interview passage, she finds urgency *"a good driver, but not the best guideline for decision making"*. She continues to explain why: *"There is*

[20] Similarly, the website from the Climate Justice Camp collective stated: "This constant focus on action (…) has nevertheless come at a cost: it has strengthened the sense of urgency that is already present in the mainstream climate narrative ('now or never', 'we have 12 years to save the planet'), which has created conflicts with other movements. During the organizing, not enough attention has been paid to other movements and their agenda's, leading to a weaker definition of climate justice" (ClimateJusticeCamp, 2019a).

something very problematic. Sometimes it's just used as an argument that weighs more than other arguments because it's urgent. That is also expressed in a lot of discussions with the feminist or anti-racist movement, who feel that the climate movement is very much effectively imposing that [their urgency]."

Respondents like Angela and groups like the Climate Justice Camp regard such hierarchy of urgency not only as problematic because it contradicts the upheld values of climate justice, but also from a strategic perspective as it hinders building alliances between movements. They criticize how urgency guides a focus on organizing actions like demonstrations or civil disobedience. However, this focus on the dimension of 'task' would be insufficiently balanced against 'process' and 'relation' – in other words a focus on public protests comes at the expense of taking 'political time' (Hayes & MacGregor, 2023) for harder discussions around strategic reflection, procedural justice and building alliances. In contrast, an urgency-guided focus on action is described by respondents like Pjotter as "*running before we have learned to walk*", while Joshua and Elias both speak of 'skipping steps':

"I think that what often [happens] is "Yes, but we have so little time left". That causes steps to be skipped. And yes, that connections, partnerships that are actually obvious, are not made, because of not making time to chat with each other." (Elias, July 2019)

An example that was given by respondents like Angela, Andrea, or Joshua, was that of the Occupy4Climate action in early 2019: an action organized by a broad coalition ranging from more radical grassroots movements to larger civil society organizations that would engage in civil disobedience for the first time. They occupied a politically central crossroad in Brussels to put pressure in favor of a climate law that would constitutionally bind emission reduction targets. This took place at the height of the 2019 protest wave, with weekly marches and frequent actions of civil disobedience happening, and was organized short term with only one week of planning. However, it was planned on the same date as a yearly anti-racism march. Engaging in such hierarchy of urgencies created an agenda conflict and competition for media attention with the anti-racist movement (ClimatejusticeCamp, 2019b). Moreover, Angela remarks, the short-term process also resulted in the reproduction of

domination at the intra-organizational level: *"That was decided so very last minute, which brought a lot of the, I thought typical, power structures within the group back to the surface"*. She goes on that within the organizing group, there was no space to discuss the competition with the anti-racism march, and neither for considering patriarchal power dynamics in who took positions of power. Later in the interview, she reflects: "*I just think that the stress and urgency allow less time to deliberate or to undertake a well thought out collective decision".* Underlying this reflection is an insight that being guided by urgency can lead people to fall back on task-focused habits that hinder taking 'political time' for recognition and procedural justice, both between and within movement organizations.[21]

5.5.4 Alternative long-haul temporalities: "A marathon, not a sprint"

In this section, I analyze how respondents react to the above-mentioned dark side of urgency by giving shape to an alternative temporality aimed at "long haul" engagement in the struggle for climate justice. Respondents do so by, first, emphasizing the work involved in 'sustaining' activism in the longer term. Secondly, by viewing movement organizing as 'slow spade work' where the impact of political change can be uncertain and distant in time. Thirdly, through an understanding of 'temporal skills' of working along with changing contexts for movement organizing – knowing when to slow down and when to speed up along with the momentum.

In contrast to the experiences of movement disappointment and exhaustion, several respondents like Paul see growing attention for "a struggle in the long haul" within the Belgian climate movement. Kim and Francine both use the phrase "running a marathon, not a sprint" to talk about the shift from short to middle and long-term perspectives. One dimension of keeping up engagement is through preventing burnout by exploring sustainable activism: practices of

[21] For examples of initiatives openly taking such 'slower' political time: see the 'Queer-Feminist Finger' at German climate justice movement Ende Gelände: https://transitionnetwork.org/news/lets-be-dangerous-together/

care for the (emotional) well-being of movement participants. For example, during the climate justice camp, workshops aided participants in exploring what drains and what gives them energy. Participants like Sally, Els, and Paul point to Extinction Rebellion's "regenerative culture" that bundled such practices of sustainable activism and made them more visible. However, Paul remarks the effect might be neutralized when such settings remain rather compartmentalized pockets of slowing down within an otherwise urgency-dominated organization (also see (Westwell & Bunting, 2020)).

In addition to such explicit emotion work, respondents like Paul, Kim, Elias, and Rob narrated from experiences of exhaustion, how organizing for the long haul demands thinking beyond the task of immediate mobilization. This entails taking time for the reproductive work of focusing on processes of strategizing, decision-making, and interpersonal relationships. For example, Rob, a young organizer who became active since the 2019 mobilizations, describes this as a lesson learned from experiencing disappointment and exhaustion:

"What has convinced me to indeed stop thinking so much in the short term, is simply that we have been "plowing in the mud" for a very long time. (…) And that we are just not questioning ourselves enough and not having enough time to reflect because we are indeed living too much from action to action. (…) Then you rather quickly neglect that time should also be taken to do debriefings, to reflect on structure, on how we work, how we live towards an action, how we organize as a group, how we relate to each other internally, what is our attitude in discussions, are there any personal conflicts. There is so much to think about constantly, and it's just easier to say "We're not going to think about that and we're just going to organize another action". But at a certain moment, you reach a point where you must deal with that." (Rob, August 2020)

This "taking time" becomes more overtly taking "*political* time" when it refers to building alliances within movements. Respondents like Pjotter state that "doing it right, might be more important than doing it now" while referring to Wretched of the Earth's letter to Extinction Rebellion (WretchedoftheEarth, 2019). Pjotter interprets this as focusing on building communities of care and making interconnections with for example feminist and anti-racist movements

to be accountable to them, and points to the climate justice camp as a group investing in that pathway. Similarly, Joshua also proposes to invest more in building movement alliances towards a more interwoven struggle for system change. For him, this constitutes a long-haul approach, entailing "work in the shadows", and "away from urgency and mobilizing" to invest time and effort into building trust. In like manner, Andrea who joined in organizing the climate justice camps expresses herself on taking political time for alliance building:

"I still believe it's a good idea we make the links between our struggles. But first, we have to do the links theoretically. For example, clearly linking climate change with colonialism, with patriarchy, and this kind of stuff. And then we also have to make the link by developing trust and relationships with people that are part of these other movements. (…) you don't give trust in five minutes. It's like it takes time. We have been trying to do that for 2 years and we're clearly at the beginning". (Andrea, December 2020).

For the abovementioned respondents, approaching their engagement as running a marathon, not a sprint, implies slowing down to sustain energies, and work on organizing and building alliances. Paul, drawing on the US civil rights movement, calls this approach 'slow spade work':

"In your garden, if you want to have fruits, every good gardener knows that you have seasons where you have to prepare and are not going to see the fruits." (Paul, April 2020)

Besides taking time for slower – and often harder – processes, this approach also entails a broader time horizon where change can take longer to unfold and proof of impacts should not be expected in the short term. Francine recalls how she experienced an evolution from expecting short-term results to adopting a broader outlook of what impact means:

"That is just learning to accept those contributions, that that doesn't happen so fast, and that we are never going to see in our lifetime what we have contributed. But that doesn't mean that it's not important, or that we haven't had an impact. And that's something that I do notice now through working politically [doing lobbying work], that sometimes an effect of something only

becomes apparent a year or so later, in a totally different dossier, in a totally different place. I'm sure as well, that before the big figures came like Rosa Parks (…)there was a lot of work that preceded that which we don't talk about. And maybe that's the work that we are doing now. Maybe not, but we have no other option but to try I guess". (Francine, October 2020).

Francine's account is reminiscent of Rebecca Solnit's Hope in the Dark (2016). As an antidote against impatience and the 'premature despair' of not witnessing results hoped for, Solnit places hope as an embrace of uncertainty, emphasizing that change can be a complex, slow, and messy process where impacts can happen in unexpected places and times.

In addition, participants like Francine, Elias, or Andrea contrast the easily disappointed short-term concrete hopes with framing their engagements as contributing to changes that they may never see in their lifetime. Greta (Thunberg, 2019) uses the metaphor of 'cathedral thinking' to capture the idea of contributing to such long-term efforts, pointing to the work of laying foundations without knowing "all the details about how to shape the ceiling" (also see (Friberg, 2022)). Andrea also perceives her engagement as just a piece of a *"longer history that probably will continue after you".* By doing so, Andrea places what is hoped for further away in time and relies on involved others – imagined or identified – as a source to draw from.

Moreover, Andrea lays out another part of her long-term hope approach as *"it's about recognizing the limit of what you can do actually"*. By invoking a sense of humility, she goes against expectations inflating into guaranteed disappointment. Instead, recognizing limitations becomes a part of how to

sustain hope.[22] Interestingly, Andrea further connects this to the idea of protest waves:

"If you're doing activism you have to be prepared to do that for a few years. It's not like in six months it's finished. Even if you have moderate demands it takes years. There have been NGOs that have been working for a long time on climate issues. Sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't, sometimes they have visibility, sometimes they don't. (…) It's like that: social movements at some point they rise, and at some point they weaken. It's just a long-term thing I mean."

She continues:

"I think, the chance I had when I became an activist (…) was that I was in touch with very experienced activists that told me 'haha, no, it's not gonna be in six months'. I think it's experience when you know what it is to organize a march that no one cares about. When you know what it is to struggle and no one listens to you, and you really are super happy when there is a peak of mobilization and visibility. But you know that it is not going to last. I remember last year, for example, people from Act for Climate Justice [a direct-action oriented grassroots collective], I heard them saying 'we really have to organize actions now, because we know it's not going to last". (Andrea, December 2020)

Such a longer-term view of movement waves can help deal with both "ebb" periods of lower mobilization as well as peak "flow" periods of heightened activity. Joshua also speaks of movement waves, and about *"understanding them to be able to surf them better in the future".* The metaphor of 'surfing' movement waves points to the skill of reading changing contexts and attuning

[22] This might seem counterintuitive when hope is viewed as a positive sense of enthusiasm akin to optimism and confidence. Theorists like McGeer (2004) and Wettergren (2024) however, emphasize hope is about cultivating a sense of possibility amidst uncertainty and limitations to what one can do.

strategies and expectations to them. For periods after mobilization peaks, like the 2019-2020 period of data collection, this means recognizing the limits of the context and not expecting the continuation of previous successful mass mobilization. It also means using the "low" period as a chance for reflection, reorientation, and movement building. For "high" periods, Andrea points to the skill of recognizing and acting towards temporarily enlarged possibilities. Joshua connects the "high period" with being prepared for success. He recounts how the movement was neither prepared for organizing many new participants nor for "harvesting" the political successes, which resulted in more incumbent actors recapturing the public narrative.

Drawing from these accounts, it becomes clear the long-haul temporalities of sustaining engagement and "slow spade work" are not only about slowing down in a unidimensional way. Rather, as the playful metaphor of "surfing" movement waves suggests, they point more to learning to organize a more robust engagement through attuning tempos, strategies, and expectations to changing contexts whilst navigating contradictions.

5.6 Concluding discussion

In this chapter, I have sought to contribute to the emerging literature on how climate movements relate to time by studying temporalities among Belgian climate movement organizations. I depict the Belgian climate movement as "multi-paced", and have unpacked how organizers enact various temporalities and I explored how they try to navigate among these. Consistent with previous research (Asayama et al., 2019; de Moor & Marquardt, 2023; Kenis, 2023), I find that the predominant temporality constitutes an apocalyptic outlook (Cassegård & Thörn, 2018). It aims to produce a sense of urgency that drives engagement in climate movements and is intended to motivate societies to change course to avert future climate catastrophes. The possibilities for action are depicted within a closing window of opportunity. This is further made tangible through deadline rhetoric and countdown clocks that emphasize temporal scarcity in order to prioritize the need for climate mitigation measures. While researchers and respondents alike acknowledge this temporality's potential for mobilizing, critiques are also frequent (see e.g. (de Moor & Marquardt, 2023; Hayes & MacGregor, 2023)). From the gathered

data, I analyzed how respondents highlight two "dark sides" of how urgency is produced. First, by narrating their efforts as urgently running towards a short-term deadline, climate organizers risk facilitating disengagement by producing exhaustion and cultivating a particular disappointable kind of hope. This critique aligns with the movement lesson after the Copenhagen 2009 COP15 of avoiding "now or never" moments, instead opting for more open time horizons (de Moor & Wahlström, 2019). Second, prioritizing a narrow focus on urgent carbon mitigation can result in sidelining justice. Enacting what respondents call a "hierarchy of urgencies" can reproduce domination between and within movements by i) concealing the temporal experiences of those already and most impacted, ii) preventing them from taking time to address ways of organizing and strategizing. As an alternative to these dark sides of urgency, respondents imagine the climate struggle "as a marathon, not a sprint". Such long-haul temporality aims at sustaining movement participation through caring for emotional well-being, as well as the "slow spade work" of maintaining collectives and movement organizing. Doing so, respondents move away from deadlines towards imagining broader and less specific time horizons in which meaningful action is possible. This opens up space to attune activities to changing contexts while being less fixed on visible immediate impacts and instead emphasizing the slowness of societal transformations and the uncertainty of how futures unfold.

This long-haul altertemporality shifts ideas on how to shape the climate struggles: influenced by feminist and decolonial movements it takes on a more post-apocalyptic orientation to justice, asking not only *when* to address climate breakdown, but opening up alternative responses for *how* to do so (Cassegård & Thörn, 2022; Hayes & MacGregor, 2023; Sunnemark, 2023). Rather than confining the future to deadlines or "now or never" moments, a more open future horizon is envisioned where even though climate breakdown is already ongoing, and some tipping points might be practically unavoidable, action to prevent future harm is still regarded as meaningful. However, in the long haul altertemporality stretches both "backward and forward in time" (Hayes & MacGregor, 2023), linking present efforts to histories of social-ecological struggles that probably will continue in the future. The object of transformation is less to restore an imagined "normality" by averting future threats, but for a "system change" that entails the arrival of

justice (Cassegård & Thörn, 2022). This justice is articulated more in *intra*-generational terms, in contrast to the youth climate movements' emphasis on *inter*-generational justice (Friberg, 2022). In doing so, the long-haul alter-temporality shifts understanding of the present. Rather than apocalyptically approaching the present through a threatened future, the present is viewed as a space to interrupt the continuation of ongoing socio-environmental injustices (Kenis, 2021). Within the long-haul alter-temporality, greater importance is given to prefiguration: embodying climate justice principles into movement discourses and practices, in order to bring about changes in the larger society (Maeckelbergh, 2016; WretchedoftheEarth, 2019). To experiment with and learn from prefiguration, (Hayes & MacGregor, 2023) argue it is key to take the 'political time' (Amsler, 2010) to do so.

Relying on existing literature and my empirical insights, I posit that by engaging in temporal tensions, actors have opened space for shaping alternative climate politics. Therefore, I want to nuance existing diagnoses of climate movements as clinging on to their dominant (apocalyptic) temporalities (de Moor, 2022). De Moor and Marquardt (2023) argue that to resist fatalism, climate movements would avoid reevaluating their timeframes, by compartmentalizing post-apocalyptic doubts away from strategizing spaces. While this general pattern is not absent in the movement organizations studied[23], I find Belgian climate movement organizers do actively explore temporal tensions and even openly discuss these when the political time to do so is created – for example at the climate justice camps (2019a). While fueled in large part by more politically radical parts of the movement, tentative changes are even visible in the evolving temporal discourse of the more moderate yearly climate demonstrations: in contrast to earlier versions, the

[23] At the time of data gathering, the studied Belgian climate movement organizations showed indeed little public post-apocalyptic strategizing, with the exceptions of climate justice camp, and some public mourning performances of Extinction Rebellion. A more outspoken contemporary counterexample, however, could be the French movement 'Les souslèvements de la terre' (the earth's uprisings) and their mediatized campaign contesting large water basins meant to sustain industrial agriculture which they regard as a maladaptation during escalating droughts.

2023 mobilization text refrained from ticking clocks and instead messaged that "every tenth of a degree counts" (klimaatcoalitie-coalitionclimat, 2023).

Drawing on Maeckelbergh's discussion of temporality and prefiguration (2016, p. 130), I understand respondents' reflections in the data therefore not only as revealing temporal tensions, or critiques on failures to fully uphold principles of climate justice, but as taking part in a collective and imperfect learning process. More specifically, my analysis shows Belgian climate organizers exploring and deepening their understanding of the temporal dimensions implied in their practices – in other words acquiring "time literacy" (Lilja, Baaz, & Vinthagen, 2015). Their calls for a long-haul approach and for 'surfing movement waves' can be seen as taking steps towards the kind of "polychronic view" (de Moor, 2023) that is called for. Rather than collapsing heterogenous temporalities into a homogenizing now-or-never moment, such a polychronic view seeks to open up spaces of possibility by considering alternative temporalities. This work of navigating temporal tensions is not straightforward in this context of unfolding socio-ecological crises. Faced with shrinking windows of opportunity, attitudes of fatalism or clinging on to hollowed-out-hopes might seem attractive to escape the temporal contradictions between being too late and not too late, between urgency and slowing down to take time. But as Kim reflected in an interview, and as we will discuss more in the next chapters: *"I think that both things can exist at the same time: it is very urgent (…) and we need to take time to breathe, to communicate calmly, to reflect and adopt a broader perspective".*

6 Hope through action? Emotion work on anger, enthusiasm, and disappointment during a Belgian Extinction Rebellion action.

Abstract

An emerging field of study investigates how emotions shape people's reactions to climate change in far-reaching ways. Since the emotionally explicit and reflexive protest wave of 2018-2019, researchers have started exploring a broad range of emotions among climate movements. Less explored has been the role of hope within climate movement's emotional constellations, and how movement participants reflexively work to keep up hopes in the face of ongoing climate breakdown. Movement activists and researchers argue that hope might not be a necessary precondition for action – rather, one could counter powerlessness by acting collectively, and gain from that a sense of hope. However, if much-needed hope is to be created through action, how are hope and other emotions dealt with when actions disappoint? This paper, therefore, draws on ethnographic research among participants in a Belgian Extinction Rebellion action of civil disobedience called Time for Rage. I show that for this action, XR Belgium explicitly mobilized on anger, but limited its expression through norms of civility Participants aim to counter powerlessness by partaking in this action, hoping it will be energizing and contribute to a sense of hope. However, during the action, police repression makes participants face difficulties in overcoming fears and cultivating a joyful atmosphere, leading participants to experience disappointment in how the action failed to attain its goals and provide emotional rewards. During debriefings, this disappointment is managed collectively into a sense of hope by re-evaluating failure and transforming it into emotional success. These findings point to the importance of emotion work of managing messy contradictions between various goals and emotional norms. Moreover,

literature and respondents have pointed out how a sense of hope to sustain engagement is drawn from collective actions. However, when actions fail, falling back on backstage management of disappointment through togetherness proves key in emotion work within the movement.

6.1 Introduction

> "*We've had 30 years of pep-talking and selling positive ideas. And I'm sorry, but it doesn't work. Because if it would have, the emissions would have gone down by now. They haven't. And yes, we do need hope, of course we do. But the one thing we need more than hope is action. Once we start to act, hope is everywhere*." (Thunberg, 2018, pp. 42-43)

> "*Hope is not about knowing what is on the horizon, but taking the courage to leave port despite uncertain weather*." (Fremaux & Jordan, 2021, p. 15)

How do emotions shape people's reactions to climate change? This topic recently received an upsurge of academic and societal attention. Not only does climate change influence the feelings people experience, e.g. by invoking anxiety or depression (Stanley et al., 2021), but emotions, and the ways people give meaning to them, also shape reactions to climate change (Pihkala, 2022). For example, fear of social change and longing for the continuation of undamaged normality – which might be already in decline – can suppress fears of climate catastrophes and result in the denial of climate crisis in everyday life (Head, 2016; Norgaard, 2011). In contrast, experiencing anger about climate change, related injustices, and political inaction can motivate pro-environmental behavior and climate protest (Contreras et al., 2024; Knops, 2021b). Emotions thus play key roles in both concealing climatic problems, as well for generating more productive responses. Climate movements provide prominent and often more explicit examples to investigate how emotions relate to climate change. Moreover, social movements can form niches for cultivating alternative approaches to organizing practices, narratives as well as emotions (Cassegård, 2022; Summers-Effler, 2002). Therefore, investigating the emotional dimension of climate movements can help in understanding

how people relate to climate change and could aid in exploring how to contribute to social-ecological transformations (Poma & Gravante, 2024).

The protest wave that started in late 2018 with youth-led climate strikes has sparked the interest of predominantly global Northern researchers (de Moor et al., 2021). Alongside the protests' more emotionally explicit narratives of emergency, enacted by movements like Fridays for Future (FFF) or Extinction Rebellion (XR), scholars have started inquiring more about the emotional dimension of climate protests (Knops, 2020, 2021a; Neckel & Hasenfratz, 2021). Recent studies show a broad range of emotions is involved in climate protests (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017a; Martiskainen et al., 2020; Poma & Gravante, 2024). Most prominently, participants share, and are motivated by, fear of future climate catastrophe and anger at political inaction (Crouzé, Godard, & Meurs, 2024; Knops, 2021b; Lorenzini & Rosset, 2023; Martiskainen et al., 2020; Pickard, 2021). However, other emotions are also at play, including experiencing mistrust towards political leaders (Crouzé, Godard, & Meurs, 2024; Knops, 2021b), feeling sadness and despair over expected future losses (Martiskainen et al., 2020) and perceived failures to prevent those (Cassegård & Thörn, 2018; Nairn, 2019; Stuart, 2020), as well as cultivating joy and togetherness through movement involvement (Knops, 2020; Pickard, 2021).

This paper aims to contribute to the emerging literature on emotions in climate movements by focusing on the role of hope in climate movements' wider emotional constellations. Responding to Pihkala's call to inquire about the actual meanings of hope for various people and scholars (2022, p. 17), I investigate how actors work to cultivate hope. However, researchers conceptualize hope in conflicting ways. Jasper (2018) conceives hope as a positive mood: an energized feeling without a specific object, akin to confidence that enlarges one's sense of possibility. Wettergren (2024), in contrast, defines hope as an emotion that starts from acknowledging the present as insufficient and is aimed at an object of future possibility. Hope differs from optimism and confidence by revolving centrally around uncertainty and limited agency. As such, hopes are not only shaped by e.g. joy and togetherness but also by fear and loss.

The kind of hope investigated in this study is specifically a *political* hope, implying its object – what it hopes *for* – is communal and so transcends the merely private (Blöser, Huber, & Moellendorf, 2020)[24]. Most global Northern climate movements primarily articulate hope to *mitigate* climate change, which can be linked to various timeframes in which to do so, as well as to various understandings of *how* to do so (e.g. in more or less just ways – see Chapter 4 and 5. (Vandepitte, 2023)). Climate movements can act as 'hope brokers' (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017a, p. 517). They negotiate between different kinds of hope, largely downplaying or outright rejecting as delusional the societally dominant hopes on technology and top-down governmental politics as usual. In contrast to these – from their standpoint – "passive" hopes, climate movements more commonly advocate cultivating 'active' hopes linked with collective action (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017a; Poma & Gravante, 2024; Stuart, 2020; Thunberg, 2018; Wettergren, 2024).

Hope is especially invoked in times of crisis and uncertainty, to respond to a lack of perspectives by inducing a sense of future possibility (Kleist & Jansen, 2016). Hope, at least in many global Northern settings, is culturally often regarded as key to meaningfulness (Terpe, 2016). Regarding the climate crisis, hope is invoked to *not give up* in the face of overwhelming bleak prospects, and instead instigate action. Hope might not be strictly necessary to provide meaning and motivate action – other emotions can do so as well – but it does play a possible role in *facilitating* those (Cassegård, 2023).

Contemporary climate movements, tend to emphasize hope as a result of collective action, more so than as a precondition for it (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017a; Thunberg, 2018; Wettergren, 2024). As in the case of the youth climate strikers who were mainly motivated by fear and anger, collective action can feed into hope as it opens up possibilities (Knops, 2021b; Lorenzini & Rosset, 2023; Pickard, 2021). Moreover, by bringing people with similar concerns

[24] While Blöser, Huber, and Moellendorf (2020) see communal as 'at least directed at that which concerns us all', I would add, from a more sociological standpoint based on Lichterman and Eliasoph's (2014) concept of civic action, that the 'us all', the common life in society, is as the actors imagine society, and thus need not be strictly universal.

together, collective action can create a sense of joy, togetherness, and overall collective energy which can feed into a feeling of hopefulness (Crouzé, Godard, & Meurs, 2024; Poma & Gravante, 2024). Climate movements can thus act as "collective scaffolders": as peers provide social support, they make hopes more robust and prevent them from sliding into despair when experiencing disappointment (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017a; McGeer, 2004). As such, movement action can form a *source* from which to draw hope (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017a; Wettergren, 2024). While such a sense of hope can be a means to sustain movement engagement, gaining hope through action can also become a goal in itself (Wettergren, 2024). As approaching the climate crisis as an emergency entails a feeling of powerlessness (White, 2024b), hope can then be longed for to cope with powerlessness. Engaging in collective action to gain hope can then become a way of coping emotionally with the overwhelming reality of climate change.

However, if an action fails, how can actors look to create hope through action? As most movements don't succeed in their larger goals (certainly not immediately), how can hope be kept up when experiencing setbacks and disappointments? In this chapter, I suggest the answer might lie less in the direct results of the action, and more in the experience of being and acting together which makes movement activity into a source of hope to help cope with the dire present. Therefore, this paper investigates the *work* of keeping up hopes – understood within a broader constellation of emotions. I do so through an in-depth case study of a local Belgian Extinction Rebellion (XR) group joining a civil disobedient action named Time for Rage. XR is an example of a prominent contemporary climate movement that relates to emotions in explicit and reflexive ways (Knops, 2020, 2021a). Disobedient action is part of the escalation of tactics invoked by the emergency narrative (Kenis, 2021; Vandepitte, 2023), but is a less studied aspect of contemporary climate movements. Furthermore, doing so through ethnographic methods expands the recent literature on emotions in climate movements, as this literature relies primarily on interviews, surveys, and document analysis.

In the following section, I will introduce core insights from the sociology of emotions and the study of emotions in social movements. Subsequently, I address the recent literature on emotions in climate movements while arguing

a need to examine the role hope plays in more depth. Thereafter, I explain the ethnographic method and introduce the case studied. In the findings section, I analyze the emotions discursively mobilized for the studied action and zoom in on the ambiguity of mobilizing anger but limiting its expression through norms of civility (6.4.1.). I explore how participants aim to counter powerlessness by partaking in the action, hoping the action will prove to energize and contribute to hope. Preparing for this involves building confidence and trust, as well as exploring limitations (6.4.2.). However, when part of the action plan doesn't work out, and faced with police repression, participants experience difficulties in overcoming fear and performing an energizing atmosphere. The moments of higher collective enthusiasm that occur are focused on supporting other protestors (6.4.3.). As such, a sense of disappointment is widespread among participants, which I unpack (6.4.4.). Afterward, during debriefings, participants manage disappointment by highlighting a sense of togetherness experienced during or even after the action (6.4.5.). In the concluding discussion, I explore the implications of the emotional constellation participants enact, and for emotion work on hope in particular.

6.2 Theoretical framework: a sociological approach to emotions in social movements

6.2.1 The socio-cultural approach to emotions

Emotions are crucial for experiencing and making sense of the world, and are integral to action, including social movement participation (Barbalet, 2001; Jasper, 2018). Contrary to the traditional modern view that emotions are opposed to rationality, emotions are a way of assessing information (Hochschild, 1983) and are inseparable from rationality (Barbalet, 2001; Wettergren, 2019). A socio-constructivist view holds that emotions both shape and are shaped by collectives and broader social contexts (Goodwin, Jasper, & Polletta, 2001; Hochschild, 1983; Von Scheve & Ismer, 2013). This approach rejects categorizing emotions as positive or negative (Poma & Gravante, 2024; Wettergren, 2019), and rather understands emotions as pleasant or unpleasant (Stanley et al., 2021), as more or less appropriate to social norms (Hochschild, 1983) and as conducive or disruptive to actions and goals. As such a positively evaluated goal like mobilizing people for climate action, can also

be achieved through relatively unpleasant emotions like fear and anger (Lorenzini & Rosset, 2023) or even despair (Sauerborn, 2022).

Emotions are analytically discrete but tend to arise in patterned constellations (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017a; Poma & Gravante, 2024). For instance, Kleres and Wettergren (2017a) describe how global Northern climate activists (between 2012 and 2015) fear future climate catastrophes, which triggers anger-motivated activism as guilt is ascribed to politicians and "the system", and this is mediated by hope in their collective capacity to act. As such, emotions like fear or disappointment can give input to identify or re-evaluate what to hope for (the future object), what to focus on in the present (the target), and where to draw hope from (the source) (Wettergren, 2024).

Hochschild (1983) explains that *feeling rules* subject emotions to social norms about what is appropriate to feel and express in a given context. *Emotion regimes* (Reddy, 2001) are then, on a more general level, sets of feeling rules and practices (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017a). Feeling rules make actors engage in *emotion work* (used synonymously with *emotion management*): aligning with or resisting what one is supposed to feel (Hochschild, 1979). One can do this by inducing emotions – e.g. a musical artist psyching herself up before coming on stage – or suppressing emotions – e.g. a protestor withholding anger in front of cameras. While emotion work is most noticeable in cases of conflict between the self and social norms, or when various parts of the self are in conflict about what to feel, it also happens when an emotion that moves one towards a goal is summoned. Moreover, emotion work can also become habituated and happen in less conscious and backgrounded ways (Wettergren, 2019). Feeling rules and emotional regimes can then feel natural to actors when sufficiently habituated. For example, Kleres and Wettergren (2017a) describe how global Northern climate activists engage in emotion work to keep their fear and anger to themselves and instead intentionally communicate so-called "positive messages" that emphasize possibilities and depict the joy of collective action. By doing so, they align with a Western emotional regime that tends to distrust public anger and "doom and gloom" messages (Head, 2016).

6.2.2 Emotions in social movements

After having long been underrepresented, recent decades have seen a resurge of interest in emotions among social movements (Goodwin, Jasper, & Polletta, 2000; Jasper, 2011). Movements arise from and are sustained by emotions, as well as generate them (Gould, 2009; Sauerborn, 2022; Summers-Effler, 2002). Emotions interplay with every stage of movement activity. (H. Bergman, 2023; Flam & King, 2007; Jasper, 2018).

Movements often have to navigate between cultivating alternative emotional regimes or aligning to dominant emotion regimes to appeal to broad audiences by e.g. managing their anger into public fun (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017a; Wettergren, 2009). Deviating from dominant feeling rules can drain emotional energies, due to social sanctioning or by suppressing the deviant emotion and thus importing the conflict into the self (Summers-Effler, 2002). To counter this dynamic, movements can form *emotional refuges* (Reddy, 2001), where deviant emotions are shared, and enabled by alternative feeling rules. Such spaces enable participants to meet with like-minded people and offer a release of the incongruity otherwise felt "out there". This collective sharing can amplify deviant emotions, enhance emotional energy, and foster solidarity (Collins, 2001). This can nourish critical consciousness, help to overcome fears, and motivate action for social change (Summers-Effler, 2002). While such collective sharing of emotions can result in "effervescent" high enthusiasm, movements outside of their peak moments usually have to struggle for the attention of audiences and to sustain participant involvement (Collins, 2001).

Social movements often engage in emotion work in highly reflexive ways. They can seek to invoke emotions – for example, fear of climate change and indignation at political inertia (Knops, 2021b), or transform emotions – for example managing shame into anger (Summers-Effler, 2002), or despair into hope (Stuart, 2020). Movement participants learn to manage their feelings in accordance with the subgroups' feeling rules through everyday socialization as well as deliberate training (Gould, 2009; Sauerborn, 2022).

The reflexive ways in which some contemporary movements like XR approach emotions relate to late-modern approaches to emotions (Neckel & Hasenfratz, 2021). Scholars have contextualized such high emotional reflexivity, exemplified in XR, in late-modern ways of therapeutically approaching the self (Neckel & Hasenfratz, 2021; Sauerborn, 2022). While such focus on the self could enhance individualization, it could also acknowledge the self as a possible site of resistance (Summers-Effler, 2002). More specifically, in climate movements like XR, this takes the shape of "personalized politics" (Lichterman & Eliasoph, 2014) that helps in structuring group life by providing emotional guidelines (Sauerborn, 2022).

Contemporary climate movements like FFF or XR combine climate science with explicit emotional discourse (Knops, 2021a; Pickard, 2021). Such *emotionalization* of climate change could help to bridge the gap between the emotions climate movement participants internally feel and those outwardly communicated. Neckel and Hasenfratz (2021) argue that within the climate emergency narrative, emotionalization is aimed at facilitating an honest realization of the ecological crisis and enabling people to act accordingly. The emotionalization is characterized by a high degree of reflexivity in which movements like XR don't only strategically try and mobilize emotions, they also name emotions to articulate them clearly, openly communicate to mutually exchange them, and try to intentionally invoke them – for example, XR's "*Time for Rage*" or Greta Thunberg's "*I want you to panic*" (2019) – as well as subject emotions to collective orientation and regulation (Neckel & Hasenfratz, 2021, p. 255). As such, one can wonder to what extent, the emotionalization of climate protest not only invokes emotions to be instrumentalized towards acting for external goals (such as motivating to protest, to pressure politicians into climate emergency measures) but could also be a means to emotional ends like coping with powerlessness or despair (Wettergren, 2024).

6.3 Methodology

6.3.1 Case selection

Extinction Rebellion (XR) is an international movement that originated in 2018 in the UK and has spread, according to their estimation, to over 88 countries[25], involving multiple local groups in Belgium[26]. With slight variations, XR groups commonly demand governments to i) declare a climate and ecological emergency, ii) enact an emergency plan to rapidly halt biodiversity loss phase out fossil fuels, and reduce greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2025, and iii) establish citizens' assemblies that, informed by experts, decide on how to navigate.[27] To back up these demands, XR aims to disrupt everyday normality by using non-violent civil disobedient tactics such as sit-ins, disrupting public events, and blocking roads. XR adopts a style of leaderless resistance (Joosse, 2007), where groups are free to act in the name of XR as long as following core demands and principles[28]. More specifically, decision-making is decentralized to local groups and their "circles" or teams that can focus for example on communication, action, or "regenerative culture" focusing on creating a caring movement (for more detail see Rowe and Ormond (2023) and also Chapter 7).[29]

In Chapters 4 and 5, I investigated narratives and temporalities among Belgian climate organizers, and XR emerged as a climate movement that stood out from the rest because of its communication was emotional (also see Knops (2021a)) in both explicit and reflexive ways, exemplifying the emotionalization of climate protest. They did so by enacting a climate emergency narrative, aiming to disrupt public business-as-usual to challenge denial of the ongoing climate and ecological emergency. They combined an outspoken apocalyptic urgency with a backstage "regenerative culture" that emphasizes slowing

[25] https://rebellion.global/
[26] https://www.extinctionrebellion.be/en#section-demands
[27] For a critical discussion of citizen assemblies: see (Machin, 2023)
[28] https://www.extinctionrebellion.be/en/about-xr
[29] https://www.extinctionrebellion.be/en/self-organising-system

down to make space for care. Moreover, as XR initially experienced strong movement growth, it drew in many participants relatively new to grassroots climate movements and received a lot of media-attention. It became a prominent part of the Belgian climate movement both in numbers as in public visibility. For these reasons, I selected XR as a case through which to study in depth how climate movement actors engage with emotions and hope. Guided by previous research, I specifically focus on how participants relate to togetherness, action and hope, and how these relations are embedded in narratives, temporalities and wider emotional constellations.

6.3.2 Data gathering and analysis

Between October 2021 and January 2022, I conducted ethnographic research among local Belgian XR groups, selecting Dutch speaking groups for reasons of accessibility. For this paper, I focus on one local group and it's process around XR's national "Time for Rage" civil disobedient action. More specifically, I draw on data gathered through participative observation at a local preparatory action training, the public action, two debriefings (which I explain more in depth in the section below) and public communication documents from their website and Facebook page. Furthermore, the analysis is informed by the broader research I conducted among XR (also see Chapter 7) and more informal conversations with XR members during the doctoral research, before, during and after the specific period of data gathering.

I gained access to the research setting by relying on previous experiences with Belgian climate movement organizations as a participant and "co-conspiring" researcher (Temper, McGarry, & Weber, 2019). I contacted one research participant who was already a trusted acquaintance for an exploratory conversation on the possibility of ethnographic research and he gave his permission as, in his view, "I was on the good side". After being invited to a public introductory evening session, I registered for the action training and sent an extra email to introduce myself to the trainer. The trainer shared his concerns that newer participants could be more uncomfortable with openly taking notes during the training but agreed after a short process of negotiation. During the introduction round of the training – as well as later in both debriefings – I presented my research role while distributing short informed-consent files with my details, emphasizing my intention to benefit

the wider movement, as well as the importance I attach to consent, confidentiality and anonymity during both data gathering, storage, as well as analysis. During the action itself, such an open introduction was impossible due to the more chaotic setting and lack of collective focus. To protect the confidentiality of my data against governmental authorities, I took a separate notebook to the action.

During ethnographic work I took on a role as a participant observer, being open about my research role and aims while furthermore joining in as a regular participant. During the training, action, and debriefings, I took notes based on theoretically guided observation, alternating with more open observations, focusing mostly on "what is happening here", as well as taking more reflexive notes. However, at times during the training or debriefing, taking notes too openly felt like it would disrupt the setting too much and therefore felt inappropriate. At such times, I would try to mentally summarize the main points, scribble them somewhere, and write them out during toilet breaks. I approached taking notes in the action similarly, taking them when possible during more calm moments, while memorizing and taking short cues while moving or during more intense moments. Notes were transcribed shortly afterward, and during this process, I added methodological and theoretical reflections to them. This constituted a process of iteration between observation and first analysis, guided by my theoretical focus on hope, action, togetherness, and interaction rituals. During the analysis phase, I got more acquainted with emotion-sociological concepts, and during a subsequent round of coding, concepts like emotion work and feeling rules resonated more and more with the data. Emotions were analyzed by interpreting notes of participants' behavior and speech, or by relying on the emotional labels participants used. During a research stay at the University of Gothenburg, this coding was checked by Karl Malmqvist, a post-doctoral emotion sociologist, co-authoring Chapter 7, which is based on the same overarching ethnographic data. The analysis was further specified by presenting and discussing preliminary findings at various seminars and conferences, leading me to understand the analyzed emotions not only as instrumentally used means for larger movement purposes, but also as goals by themselves in this "emotionalized" movement.

6.3.3 Case description

Organization

The Time for Rage action was openly announced as a national civil disobedient action, aimed at blocking and holding citizens' assemblies in the “Wetstraat” – Belgium’s central political street, that houses the federal parliament and the prime minister’s official residence, where protest is forbidden. Besides this public character, some components of the action strategy were not openly shared to maintain an element of surprise (e.g. where to exactly install the blockades). Not unusual for coordinated civil disobedience, those active in coordinating the action and its strategy were not always identifiable for reasons of protection against repression, and neither did I have access to such settings. I took part as a general participant within the framework of a local Dutch-speaking XR group. Other participants ranged in age from young adults to people in their 50s, varying in previous social movement experience, with a significant minority partaking in civil disobedience for the first time, whereas others had participated in civil disobedience a few times, and some for more than a decade. Besides generally participating or joining the overarching coordination, others from the local group took on roles like preparing material for the action, facilitating training and debriefings, as well as other backstage support roles like aiding in arrestee support.

The course of the action

In preparation for the Time for Rage action, the studied local group holds a day of training in "non-violent direct action”. Around 16 participants join the training day, facilitated by Cod, a tall man in his thirties active in the local group. While sitting in a big circle looking at a slide presentation, Cod explains different kinds of disobedient movement actions, interactively discerns different tactical roles during actions, and different strategic roles in movements, and explains civil disobedience drawing on examples from the historical US civil rights movement. Participants are also introduced to some basics of horizontal organizing: “buddy pairs” commonly take care of each other before, during, and after the action, while pairs team up into “affinity

groups" of 4-8 people who can take decisions autonomously.[30] The training also includes moments for participants to introduce themselves and get to know one another. Furthermore, the training informs participants about legal risks, rights as a protestor, and how to behave during interactions with police during arrest, and it included a role-playing exercise on de-escalating situations of actions involving, for example, angry drivers.

The action takes place a few days afterward, on the 6th of November, simultaneous to the COP26 in Glasgow. Our six-person affinity group meets in Brussels in a calm place. Two of us have been doing similar actions for over a decade, two for several years while for the remaining two, it is their first time. Like other groups, dispersed over this area of the city, we have a map with possible blocking spaces and are waiting for a sign from the action coordination, expected at 12 p.m., where to block. In the meanwhile, we get to know one another better and talk about what risks we do and don't want to take our expectations, and what we hope to get out of the action. The atmosphere in this affinity group is focused as well as slightly nervous. XR had previously cautioned those who joined the action not to be conspicuously recognizable as participants, as the police might try to stop, search, and pre-emptively arrest those "intending to break the law". One person in the affinity group had to pass police checkpoints, set up for this action, but got through. At 12 p.m. we receive the location where we need to do our sit-in. Upon arrival, we see the place packed with police vans, while policemen are driving around on scooters. At this sight, other activist groups as well as our group linger around, unsure of what to do.

The groups decide to go to a further crossroads in the same central political street and block from there. Around 20 people go sit on the street and prevent traffic from passing. After an hour or so, the number of participants has been steadily rising to 40 or so The police have now surrounded the sitting blockaders have started arresting participants one by one and transporting

[30] For deeper discussion of buddy pairs and affinity groups in other decentralized (climate) movements, see: (Mcdonald, 2002; Vandepitte, Vandermoere, & Hustinx, 2019)

them by bus to group cells in Brussels' police barracks, from where they are released a few hours later.

In the week afterward, the local group I observed organizes two collective de-briefings, held in participants' private homes. Twelve and eight people participate in these two respective local debriefings. The attendees are mostly XR regulars above thirty and forty years old, while younger and newer members are less present. The sessions take between two and three hours and are led by two facilitators and set up by the regenerative culture circle.[31] They start with a check-in round, followed by a "technical" part focusing on tactical aspects, and subsequently an "emotional" part focusing on sharing emotionally intense experiences, while closing with a check-out round – returning to how people felt with the debriefing experience.

6.4 Findings

6.4.1 Time for Rage?

"Climate change is not your fault. Politicians are driving the climate crisis". With this sentence, Extinction Rebellion Belgium announced that they would hold a disruptive action, called Time for Rage, in front of the Federal Parliament. In this section, I argue that their mobilization text exemplifies an emotionalized message within the emergency narrative[32], and indeed displays this narrative's typical emotion pattern, before focusing on the ambiguous role of anger that, despite being discursively invoked, is in practice restrained in expression.

The text starts with mobilizing fear of climate and ecological breakdown, with a global impact that is also expected to hit the inhabitants of Belgium. While XR emphasizes future risks, they underpin those by referring to environmental

[31] For more info on "regenerative culture" see Chapter 7 and Rowe and Ormond (2023); Westwell and Bunting (2020).

[32] https://www.extinctionrebellion.be/time-for-rage (seen at 4th November 2021)

disasters already ongoing and unavoidable. The mobilization text then moves on to describe the ecological emergency as a problem caused by a self-destructive growth-based system in pursuing profits, and how politicians who are in denial of the problem, aggravate the situation by extending fossil infrastructure and by not implementing known equitable and sustainable solutions. The text finishes by refuting helplessness, and invoking a sense of possibility motivated by anger: "*Join us! Because we can no longer afford to succumb to feelings of powerlessness. Because it is up to us to define our common future together. Because it is high time to unleash our rage!"*

XR Belgium's mobilization text touches on emotions of fear of future climate catastrophes, blame and anger at politicians, and hope in the movement's collective action. All these emotions are commonly observed among recent (young) climate movement participants (Lorenzini & Rosset, 2023; Martiskainen et al., 2020; Pickard, 2021; Poma & Gravante, 2024). Moreover, the mobilization text follows the main movement-internal motivational emotion pattern observed by Kleres and Wettergren (2017a, p. 514) among global Northern climate activists between 2013-2015: "*Ascribing guilt identifies the object of anger, whether 'decision-makers', 'politicians', or 'the system'. From this perspective, fear may trigger angered activism, via the ascription of guilt, and mediated by hope in one's own (collective) capacity to act".* Whereas fear can be paralyzing when coupled with powerlessness, leading one to cope with it through denial or avoidance, in the text, XR seeks to activate fear through anger at guilty politicians. As anger aids in asserting the self, it can be an emotional source to confront the problem of political inertia in tackling the climate crisis.

In a way, this is unsurprising as social movements have often mobilized on anger and indignation over the violation of what one cares for (H. Bergman, 2023; Jasper, 2018; Knops, 2021b). Moreover, anger can aid one in taking more risks, and overcoming fear of e.g. social disapproval or police repression (Castells, 2012; Summers-Effler, 2002). According to Kleres and Wettergren (2017a), global Northern climate movements tend to be motivated by fear and anger. However, they kept those emotions inside the movement and shunned publicly displaying them as "overused" fear messages could be paralyzing and invite fears to be managed by technocratic crisis management strategies that

leave social and economic structures untransformed. Instead, these activists relied more on a "positive messaging" strategy that emphasizes opportunities for future betterment and the joy of collectively acting on those. While such "positive messaging" intended to appeal to broad audiences and had been itself a reaction to previous movement failure based on an apocalyptic "now-or-never" strategy (Cassegård & Thörn, 2018), rejecting public anger can mean shying away from productive conflict and thus leaving injustices and power inequalities unaddressed (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017a).

In contrast to this emotion strategy of positive communication, XR instead openly communicates fear and anger and has successfully mobilized while doing so. Compared to previous predominant narratives like the climate plan – demanding net zero emissions by 2050 or 2045 through classic civil repertoires like petitions or marches – XR's emergency narrative places the climate crisis closer in time and space, as already ongoing. It thereby demands a more urgent and disruptive response, allowing emotionally more acute fear and anger, as well as more disobedient reactions fueled by those emotions (Vandepitte, 2023).

Despite XR's overtly emotional call for the mobilization of rage, the anger of the activists observed was not as simply invoked as the text would have us believe. Instead, tension was present between the emotional discourse and the movement's emotional regime. Initially, the action was announced quite differently under the slogan "Requiem for a species" (see Figures 5 and 6). According to what Heron, a woman in her mid-thirties regular to the group, informally shared with me during the preparatory phase, this message was deemed "aiming too much at highly educated audiences" and was therefore changed into Time for Rage. Heron did not seem happy with the change towards the emphasis on rage accompanied by the close-up angry faces: "*The tone should not be more angry, harder, than the action. I'd rather see more pink."* During the second debriefing, after the action, Zaza, a woman in her early thirties and a core organizer in the local group, voiced a similar critique on the mobilizing visuals: "*The visual aspect of campaigning is also very important, it is also part of Regen [regenerative culture]".* Others in the debriefing responded to her comments by nodding. Leen, a soft-speaking

newer member, added: *"Why just rage? We're not arsonists. It's love and rage"*.[33]

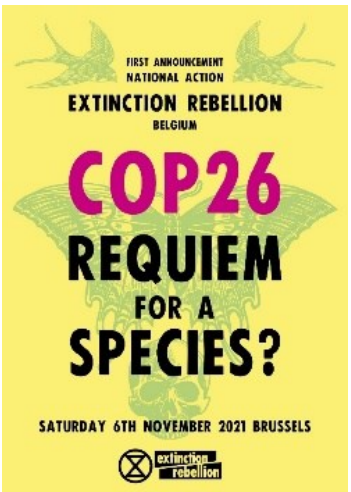

Figure 5: Early social media announcement for 'requiem for a species"

Figure 6: The main picture for online communication for the "Time for Rage" action.

[33] "Love and rage" refers to the way messages and e-mails by XR members are often closed with, itself an expression borrowed from Spanish and American anarchists.

These quotes indicate a breached feeling rule around anger: XR allows, and even cultivates, anger in the form of indignation orienting participants' evaluations and motivating them toward a determined disobedience. However, this disobedience is embedded within a regime characterized by civility (Eliasoph, 2011). This "civil" emotion regime grew out of, among others, the civil disobedience tactics of the US civil rights movements and later local environmental, peace, and alterglobalist movements. I understand that within a civil emotion regime, protestors are expected to appear as worthy and "good" citizens – or at least the hegemonic idea of what that means within the civil society arena. In a Belgian context, this would, among other things, mean appearing openly, calm, polite, and reasonable (Vandepitte, Vandermoere, & Hustinx, 2019). The norm of civility is commonly upheld not only because of participants' personal preferences but also for the strategic reason of appealing to the legitimacy of a broader audience.[34] Rage and other more aggressive forms of anger, that signify antagonistic conflict and can contain a threat of verbal or physical violence, and disturb the civil image, then need to be limited or disapproved – those would belong more to a kind of unruly and uncivil politics displaying an idea of ungovernability (D'Alisa, Demaria, & Cattaneo, 2013). Indeed, as Poma & Gravante (2024) observed among Mexican climate activists: those who felt most restrained in showing anger were particularly less politically radical and more upper-class activists.

This civil regime and its emotion rules are not only brought into the movement by habituation, or by stating some aspects of it in the movement principles (like its adherence to non-violence), but also by actively learning it**.** During preparatory action training, the trainer teaches participants not to resist during arrest and to instead "go limp, like a sack of potatoes", and to behave calmly and politely towards police officers. One exercise involves a role-playing game where protestors have to de-escalate by intervening between a co-protestor and a bystander or security personnel. Another exercise involves exploring differing opinions, and holding discussions over what constitutes violence, and what is legitimate, the scenarios including spraying graffiti or

[34] This may, of course, not always succeed, when for example others see sitting-blockades already as uncivil, or do not perceive XR's demands as legitimate.

scolding police. During the action, these civil norms are generally adhered to. There is no clear display of rage towards those deemed responsible for the climate crisis – maybe also because the target of the action, a street filled with anonymous high-reaching office buildings, invokes less of such an antagonistic interaction. The only observed tense moment of indignation was when some participants shouted "*Heeey*" out of the urge to draw attention to police violence against protestors sitting down or going limp.

This first section of findings explained a mismatch between the discursively emphasized anger in XR Belgium's national Time for Rage action, and its cultivated civil emotion regime of avoiding public anger. As such, while the studied XR group deviates from earlier observed patterns of discursively mobilizing emotions, despite their emergency narrative, their practices largely align with previous (climate) movements' preferences to keep anger inside (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017a). In this respect, the similarity with the culture jammers' motivations to manage anger into joy, observed almost two decades ago, is striking (Wettergren, 2009). This hints at the persistence of emotional regimes of protest. But if the productive potential of anger is shunned, how do participants hope to open up possibilities through joy?

6.4.2 Hoping-for-hope to counter powerlessness

The emotionalized movement activity within XR Belgium is not limited only to its explicit invocation of emotions to orient climate protest toward their external goals. While participants' goals are multiple, for the sake of theoretical exploration I want to highlight that sometimes, the goal of the action itself appears also to be emotional when participants hope the action will energize them. While this energy can flow back into the movement in the future, it primarily seems oriented to counter feelings of powerlessness in the face of the climate emergency. As such, there is an observable pattern among participants of hoping for hope to cope with the dire present. As I lay out below, participants put in emotion work to make the action energizing by anticipating joy, building confidence, and managing fears. In the following observation, we can see participants states their motives:

> An hour or so before the action, our six-person affinity group is discussing what we want to get out of the day. Joost and Lennart, for whom it's their first action of civil disobedience, are hoping to reach people and be able to hold citizens' assemblies. Annie and Alexander, both more experienced activists and well acquainted with XR, are less concrete and more focused on the emotional side: Annie wants to remind herself why she was ever that enthusiastic about XR. Alexander joins because he "wants to feel the enthusiasm, the energy, again." He's hoping for some "time for rage", that there will be some joy, and that the action could further movement growth.

Alexanders' statement makes explicit a tendency of "hoping for hope" within XR's action: the emotional experience of acting collectively can fuel hope, making collective action a source from which to draw hope (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017a, p. 513). Hope is then often regarded as a means to instigate or sustain action. In this case, however, the cultivation of hope through action becomes a primary goal in and of itself. As Wettergren (2024) suggests, looking for hope through action can be a reaction to climatic despair. In the case of XR Belgium, looking for hope should be understood against a sense of powerlessness linked to the movement's emergency narrative (White, 2024a). XR Belgium explicitly presents their disobedient action as a way of countering powerlessness. As such, they are putting forward movement action as a source of hope, when other sources (such as technology or intergovernmental agreements) are deemed insufficient as a source of hope.

The idea of joining a movement action in search of hope was mostly voiced as a looking for an energizing experience. More specifically, the idea of cultivating emotional energy was approached by anticipating collective joy, rather than anger. In line with the more civil emotion regime, participants were aiming for a "festive blockade". In addition, making the action "energizing" also involved the emotion work of building a sense of confidence, managing fears as well as exploring risks. This was mostly done during the preparatory action training:

The preparatory action training focused in part on building trust between participants. This constitutes a form of organized scaffolding work (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017a; McGeer, 2004). It did so by, among others, welcoming

participants in their diversities[35], having playful exercises of getting to know each other, and keeping awareness of others while physically moving as a group. The trainer and regular XR members also tried to build trust in the organization, for example, Cod emphasized "*You will be taken care of*", and Ynke shared her experience of how upon release after arrestation, other XR members "*will be waiting for you, even in the middle of the night*". By mutually recognizing one another and building a collective sense of confidence, participants are encouraged to enhance emotional energy to motivate taking action.

In a subsequent part, the training explored limitations to the participant's agency. It did so by informing participants of the legal rights and risks while managing fears about this, by for example stating the organizers think the police won't use "excessive violence" this time (in contrast to a previous action by XR). As such, the training, makes some uncertainties visible, while trying to reduce others by setting expectations. Sometimes this process is somewhat messy, for example when Cod is laying out the plan for the action: the organization is keeping open several options where to install blockades, and the exact choice will be announced at noon on the day of action. He states the goal of the action is "*to sit and block the road for a couple of hours so citizens assemblies can be held to discuss measures on the climate and ecological crisis"*. The sixteen attendants react with collective laughter as if they don't believe they'll attain that goal of blocking for that long. Notwithstanding this perceived unlikeliness, most participants in the training joined the action.

6.4.3 The messy work of keeping up energies

Despite this preparatory emotion work, participant's expectations collide with a more troublesome reality during the action. Large police presence, pre-

[35] 'the diversity' welcome, as a tool for opening gatherings, is a way of welcoming participants while naming visible and less visible variations in the group composition, intending to signal intent for inclusivity (for example welcoming people from all ages, genders, religious backgrounds, sexual orientations, ethnicities, languages, action experiences, and various emotions). For more info see: https://www.trainingforchange.org/training_tools/diversity-welcome/

emptive arrests, and the threat of violent treatment installed fear made it challenging to keep up confidence and reduced the space for collective joy. In this section, I argue this makes keeping up energy during the action (to feed back into a sense of possibility) a rather messy work. The following field note describes this process at the onset of the action:

> When the location of the blockade is announced, the group I'm part of is there within five minutes but the place is already packed with police. Only a handful of participants managed to get there and are staging a "die-in": they lie flat on the ground while a child lays flowers on them (a moment that later becomes broadcast on national television). Our group feels put off by the prospect of quick arrest. Other groups are hesitantly lingering around as well, a few of them already returning while shaking their heads "no". The collective body languages show a lack of confidence and no one seems to know what to do.

Part of the motivation to partake in the action was overcoming powerlessness. However, maintaining collective energy was difficult when faced with the police force, and the threat of arrest that entails at least a partial and temporary loss of agency. This collective state of hesitation was somewhat overcome by a more experienced organizer, drawing from lived experience in how to overcome fear:

> One of the more experienced organizers repeats to their group several times "If no one begins, a critical mass will not arise". On this person's insistence, one of the affinity groups decides to move to a nearby injunction on the Wetstraat, and other groups follow. Around 20 people decide to have a sit-in there. They wait for the traffic lights to go green, then go and sit down in a big circle at the intersection. The only police presence amidst these tall office buildings is an agent diverting passing car traffic. Once installed, the group falls silent for half a minute until Alexander chants a slogan: "*What do we want? Climate justice! When do we want it? Now!*" Half of the group joins in but the slogan quickly dies out and this process repeats itself a few times without catching on. The atmosphere feels hesitant. An older man gets up and announces a citizen's assembly': "Any proposals" he asks. Someone

> shouts “Stop the capitalist system”. Someone else proposes a collective die-in, but there is no real response from the larger group, let alone considered deliberation resulting in something to pass on to politicians. At the same time, focus is being drawn away from the group toward arriving police vans and a helicopter hovering above us.

The field note above shows the difficulty of managing fears and building up collective enthusiasm in this setting. This only shifts somewhat later during the blockade, when the group grows to around 50 persons including someone waving a large flag with an XR logo. Some passersby are filming and police presence also increases. Provided with a larger in-group, a clearer audience, and confronted with police as a clearly demarcated outsider group, a more vivid energy arises, and, at least for a moment, humor reverses the hierarchy experienced where one undergoes the dominance of police order:

> A line of police agents in full riot gear comes running towards us. It looks intimidating but also has an absurdness to it. “*Why are they running towards a sitting blockade”,* I hear a nearby protestor ask aloud, as none of them are clearly planning to move by themselves. Simultaneously, a few other protestors are whistling the main tune from the Indiana Jones adventure movie. This ridiculing of the ongoing scene instigates a collective and relaxing laughter among the protestors.

The field note above shows how collective energy is created in a power-focused interaction, by focusing on, and at the expense of, the outsider group (the police). However, the moments of highest collective emotional energy happened when there was a clear demarcation from the police that was also focused on supporting co-protestors. This became visible when the first arrests were made, and the collective energy, focused on the in-group, further mounted. A man, estimated in his sixties, gets up and addresses the other participants to the sit-in, declaring “*It’s an honor to be here with you*” and is met with a long applauding cheer. When police agents, carry away protestors, lifting them one by one, the group cheers for each arrestee, rhythmically chanting “Y*ou are not alone”*. Later in the police busses and group cells, this collective enthusiasm lowers again, the atmosphere being filled mostly by

fatigue, ennui, and small gestures of solidarity such as sharing food. However, this state of passing time is interrupted a few times by highly energetic cheers, like in this field note:

> From a group cell further down the hall, a slow cheer rises. As in a Mexican wave, it passes multiple cells. When it arrives at the cell I'm in, it takes over: for a few seconds, I see almost everyone in the cell going along in it, cheering, yelling, and stomping their feet. Then it passes on and the enthusiasm slowly lowers again to the level of our previous state.

This rolling cheer was later, during a debriefing, named "the magic moment" by Leen. It can be understood as a quite typical moment of collective effervescence (Collins, 2004), that produces, among others, emotional energy and a sense of group solidarity. As we will discuss in the next section, participants recall those highly joyful moments as "bright spots". However, participants also experienced the action by and large, in many respects as disappointing.

6.4.4 Experiencing disappointment

Already during the action, a sense of disappointment was prominent among participants. While this feeling later proved to be widespread among participants, there were varying ways in which they were and were not disappointed. In this section, I outline how participants were disappointed in three analytically different ways.

First, participants voiced disappointment in their collective agency. They were hoping to feel like being able to achieve something, for example by disrupting everyday order, bringing many people together, or outsmarting the police. Since the action was partly regarded as a means to counter powerlessness regarding climate change, the relative success of police repression and the difficulty of installing a large blockade made the action disappointing.

> Still during the blockade Alexander shares he had looked forward to the action and was hoping to bring together many people. But faced with

> the small blockade and large police presence he sounds unconvinced of the success, even while Annie and Ursula try to cheer him up: “We’ve been blocking for over an hour now!” In the cells, Alexander is sharing his thoughts with Staf, a man in his forties with a strong regional accent who wonders “*What are we disturbing now with such a short blockade*?” Alexander adds *“We should block where it hurts them more.* Right after release from the cell, Alexander summarizes his evaluation: “*This was not a useful action”*

Linked to the first aspect, the second aspect of disappointment was in not achieving the goals of the action. For example, Annie looks back at the action a few days later: she had a good day and was pleased for herself, but disappointed with the result. *“There were more police than activists, and there was little media coverage. I'm glad I didn't put months of my life into this. But other people did”.* During the debriefings, disappointment in achieving the actions’ goals, became more focused on the choice of location for the blockade, as such becoming disappointed in the strategic choices of the organizing team.

> During the second debriefing, Zaza, critiques the choice of location. For a moment she thought it was a miscommunication to block that close to where the police were already stationed. “*I was perplexed when I saw that”*. Also, she didn’t think the location was strategically interesting. In addition, she was pre-emptively arrested for carrying material, which left her feeling “disgusted” and overall disappointed: “so terrible, so stupid”.

> During the first debriefing, Jeffrey is wondering “Why didn’t we try to fool the police more?” Michail continues with this thought: “We should use the strength of the police more against them, like in Eastern martial arts”. Cod also joins in: “The police were already blocking a part of the street for us, we had the potential to make a big and successful action”. Michail returns: “But why there?”

In addition, there was ambiguity about the goals of the action, in the sense that it was not explicit what the primary and secondary aims of the action

were: to mobilize many people, to get mass media attention, to hold citizens' assemblies, block the street as long as possible, or to have as many arrests as possible? This ambiguity can result in not clearly being able to evaluate in what ways the action did and did not succeed.

A third aspect of disappointment was in the emotional reward. Participants hoped the action would be a joyful an energizing experience, and connected this to the presence of common symbols that could serve as (im)material objects to generate energy from. During the first debriefing, for example, one XR member shares how he smuggled in the pink flag to the blockade, with Fagus commenting "*That flag made the action*". However, such common symbols were largely lacking in the action. During the debriefing, Leen wished they had learned more songs. At both blockades, launched slogans and songs seemingly did not catch on well, making it harder for people to find a common rhythm and focus, from which to generate collective energy. Besides insufficient preparation in this respect, police repression also prevented other symbols from arriving. For example, in the cells, Staf, shares he had been "hoping for a party" and was looking forward to a pink boat that was being brought – it had been used previously on a well-mediatized XR square occupation in Brussels. However, this time the pink boat got stopped by police before it got to the action, and the activists escorting it had been arrested for planning to bring it to the blockade. He shares his experience as "anti-climactic". Others who had worked on the boat and tried to bring it in equally felt robbed of a high feeling of joy as their object to catalyze it was taken from them.

6.4.5 Managing disappointment through togetherness

Already before the action took place, members of the local group had planned for two occasions to debrief in the days following the action. There, action participants could come together in a facilitated way to recall their experiences and give feedback on the action. In the following section, I describe how participants managed disappointment in these debriefs, firstly, by cultivating a sense of togetherness through making space to express experiences of successes as well as deficiencies, and secondly, by re-evaluating failures into a sense of – mostly emotional – success. I argue that this work of managing emotions feeds into a sense of hopefulness.

First, during the debriefings, XR participants managed disappointment by acknowledging various experiences and concurring feelings, facilitating a sense of togetherness that scaffolds hopes. They did so by starting with a check-in where participants could give their name, explain how they felt, and were invited to recall and share a moment "where tensions fell off". While for some participants, this was when they got home after leaving the cells, or their supportive function outside of the physical action, others mostly recalled joyful moments during the action like singing and dancing in the cells. Subsequently, a more "technical" part of the debriefing invited one participant to share her course of the day as a framework, inviting others to add what worked out and what did not for them. Thereafter, a more emotion-focused section asked participants to share "*a snapshot of a moment that got to you"*, taking the form of an Empathy Circle where participants take rounds of four minutes to speak while others listen, having one participant actively listening by feeding summaries back to the speaker. Some participants recalled moments of high joy and togetherness. Some shared moments they felt "respected by the police" while still others shared more violent experiences, like Jeffrey, who, when trying to run from being pre-emptively arrested, was stopped by police officers and choked into unconsciousness. The debriefing finished afterward with a "check out" round where participants shared how they felt about the debriefing. While those individual experiences and feelings could widely differ, and even contradict, having them acknowledged and shared, enhanced the emotional energy of participants, created a space of belonging, and gave a sense of confidence that fed back into movement engagement (Summers-Effler, 2002).

Secondly, participants at the debriefing managed disappointment by re-evaluating their failure into a success. One way in which they did so was by broadening the time horizon, making a short-term failure in outcomes into a potential longer-term success – a strategy also observed by Gulliver, Pittaway, Fielding, and Louis (2023). For example, during the second debriefing, Zaza shared that in the group cells, she felt downcast because of the action's failure. However, she talked with Nora, who, reminiscent of Rebecca Solnit's Hope in the Dark (2016), stated "*Right now, you can't say whether or not the action succeeded*." When Zaza recalled this, Nora, also present at the debriefing, took over: "*Maybe it was an okay experience for many – in contrast*

to the Royal Rebellion [a previous heavily repressed action] *whereafter many dropped out – which, in time, may make it a more successful action for the movement".* Stating that the action might be successful for future movement growth, was one way of adding an element of, albeit uncertain, possible success to the action. As such, these participants countered disappointment by imagining an open future possibility, helping them to cope with the present.

A second way of coping with disappointment was by re-evaluating failure to attain instrumental goals into emotional success on the individual level. During the debriefings, multiple participants, re-evaluated the action's failure by highlighting feelings of togetherness the action provided them. For example, Ludo, a calmly and somewhat ironically speaking man in his fifties, shares that he often feels somewhat down, being confronted with a social context where he experiences people as cynical and not sharing his concerns. The action was good for him, being together with like-minded people who share a sense of urgency. Zaza recalls how she felt frustrated and angry at police agents for her pre-emptive arrest. When led into a group cell the six or so persons already there collectively welcomed her by getting into a line and forming a human tunnel with their arms, and they did so for every next person coming in. For Zaza, "*This was the most hopeful part of the day".* Similarly, Leen recalls feeling "flooded with love" when she entered the group cell and recognized some other arrestees. In addition, other participants pointed to a feeling of togetherness cultivated during the debriefing, rather than in the action, as something that re-evaluated their experience of failure. Participants during the second debriefing closed off by valuing the local XR group as a "good" and "safe" group. Similarly, during the first debriefing, Michail shared during the closing round: *"The action felt pretty much like a failure, but now [with the debriefing], it is more successful"*. Bertha adds that what matters "is not only the action but also afterward." As such, these participants draw on the movement as a source of hope as it offers togetherness that can comfort in the experience of disappointment.

The way the local XR group dealt with disappointment fits with Neckel & Hasenfratz's (2021) thesis on emotionalization. Tactical and strategic aspects are part of the debrief, but discussing them seems to be less a matter of revising tactics in the light of the action's failure – otherwise, a common

strategy to respond to failure among environmental movements (Gulliver et al., 2023). Rather, these elements are employed towards a wider emotional re-evaluation of the action. The ambiguity about the action's goals that made it hard to know what the action was for, is now more positively employed to re-evaluate the more instrumental failure of the action as an emotional success, as individuals found a sense of joy and togetherness in the movement.

As Gulliver et al. (2023) note, finding a sense of meaning and belonging in a protest group is an important factor in persisting after failure. Here I can offer a specification of their point. First, the sense of togetherness constructed in the movement is a result of the wider action process as well as from conscious emotion management during the debriefing. Secondly, the way they manage disappointment constitutes a form of "hope work" via scaffolding (McGeer, 2004; Wettergren, 2024). By creating space for evaluation, participants could acknowledge and explore insufficiencies in the present, as well as energizing elements of e.g. collective joy and possibility (like outsmarting police). Moreover, listening and sharing each other's experiences creates a kind of communal embeddedness that signals they are not alone. This can help prevent actors from sliding from disappointment into despair (McGeer, 2004). While Kleres and Wettergren (2017a) posit that collective action can constitute a source of hope, and indeed participants hope for this to be the case, this part of the analysis shows that in the light of a failure of collective action, conscious emotion management of disappointment in a backstage setting can constitute a sense of togetherness in the movement that makes up a source of hope as well. As D. Roberts (2013) suggests, in the face of adversity, asking for hope can be akin to asking for fellowship to share bearing the weights with, to knowing that "you are not alone".

6.5 Concluding discussion

In this chapter, I have aimed to contribute to existing research on emotions within climate movements. I have done so by unpacking emotion work among Belgian Extinction Rebellion participants. To complement research based on interviews and surveys I relied on an ethnographic study of an action of civil disobedience. More specifically, I investigated how they seek hope through action, as hope could help them to keep going in adverse circumstances. After

facing setbacks, participants deal with disappointment by drawing on experiences of collective joy and togetherness in both public and backstage movement settings. In doing so, the movement, and more specifically emotion work in the movement, can function as a source of hope that can help sustain engagement.

Before going deeper into the role of hope, I will outline my general contributions to unpacking emotion work. The Time for Rage action I studied sought to mobilize fear of climate catastrophes by linking them to anger toward political leaders, and organizers used this to call for action to overcome powerlessness. As such, this emotional discourse deviates from the pattern found by Kleres and Wettergren (2017a), while aligning with recent research (Knops, 2021b; Lorenzini & Rosset, 2023; Pickard, 2021). While the action discursively mobilized anger, participants adhered more to an emotion regime of civility that restricts expressing anger. Connecting this finding to the work of Poma and Gravante (2024), an avenue for further research is to study the role class plays in varying emotional displays among (climate) movements. One implication of the civil straightjacket on public anger is that it may hamper the potential to recognize ongoing climate injustices (H. Bergman, 2023; Wallaert, 2020). One could wonder in what ways more *uncivil* expressions of anger would open up political potential – e.g. like the sabotage Malm (2020) has argued for? This remains a topic of debate and further inquiry to what extent Global Northern climate movements take this path. My findings also emphasize the role of collective joy in sustaining participants' movement engagement. Pihkala's (2022, p. 16) observes a lack of research on how emotions like pleasure and joy relate to the climate crisis. In response, both recent literature and my findings suggest that anticipating and experiencing collective joy in protest settings works as an energizing force to help overcome feelings of isolation and powerlessness (Pickard, 2021; Poma & Gravante, 2024). While some participants saw public displays of so-called "positive" joy and "negative" anger as opposed (also in (Wettergren, 2009)), other studies suggest that an anger-embracing "joyful militancy" can also sustain environmental protest movements (C. Bergman & Montgomery, 2017; Ransan-Cooper, A. Ercan, & Duus, 2018).

Concerning hope, I find participants join the action in part hoping to have an energizing experience, needed to fuel a sense of future possibility – hope – that helps them to keep going in the present. Specifically, I find they do so more by drawing on the energy of collective joy and togetherness, more than on anger. This contributes to Pikhala's (2022) argument that joy enhances a feeling of possibility and of the ability to make a difference. However, the planned action largely failed and sparked disappointment. In response, during debriefings, participants in part managed disappointment into an open sense of hopefulness by re-evaluating failure into emotional success. They did so by highlighting feelings of togetherness based on collective joy in the action and the sharing of disappointment. These findings point to the importance of "communal embeddedness" for keeping up hopes in adverse contexts. Consistent with the analysis by Kleres & Wettergren (2017), the "we" of collective action can act as a source of hope, and indeed becomes hoped for to help cope with the dire present (Wettergren, 2024). As such, the emotion of hope seems more of a result of movement engagement, rather than a necessary condition for it. In addition to this, my findings point to the yet-understudied importance of backstage settings for the collective management of emotions and for providing the movement as a source of hope (also see Chapter 7).

In the remainder of this chapter, I will discuss two implications of my analysis of how participants relate to hope. First, conceiving hope as a "positive mood" – characterized by energy, self-efficacy, and an "expanded sense of the possible" (Jasper, 2018) – insufficiently captures hope's specificity. Hope differs from confidence and optimism as it essentially involves uncertainty and limited possibility to achieve aims (Blöser, Huber, & Moellendorf, 2020; Miceli & Castelfranchi, 2010; Wettergren, 2024). Indeed hope is often invoked in contexts of crisis and uncertainty (Kleist & Jansen, 2016). This implies that emotionally managing hope, means not only relating to more energizing emotions like joy, but also through unpleasant or painful emotions. Actors also keep hope from becoming optimism which would be inappropriate with the situation by exploring limitations through fear (Wettergren, 2024), grief (Head, 2016), or disappointment as in my analysis. Moreover, the hope enacted in this data fits less with the concept of an emotional mood as moods are more general feelings without clear objects, while the object of hope lies in future

possibility (Wettergren, 2024). This object could be specific, such as contributing to limiting climate breakdown, or could as well be a less clearly articulated, more vague sense of possibility like when participants indicate the debriefing made them feel hopeful (Cook & Cuervo, 2019).

Second, the way the studied XR participants relate to hope is primarily as a means to keep going in adverse circumstances. As calling for climate emergency typically corresponds with feelings of powerlessness (White, 2024b), hope among XR activists is meant to counter the despairing powerlessness in the face of climate breakdown and political inertia. In such a context, to be able to keep facing the dire present, hope might be needed and therefore can become a goal by itself (Wettergren, 2024). One might wonder then, to what extent participants treat this movement as a means to cope with climate breakdown rather than an instrument for large-scale social change – that is, movement activity would be *therapeutic* rather than *strategic.* In contrast to this narrower view of strategy, movements frequently blur such categorizations and treat emotions both as a means as well as an end to political action (Bowman, 2020; Wettergren, 2009). The hope work in the case studied here should be understood less as trying to identify clear goals and means to achieve them, and more as what McGeer (2004, p. 105) calls "reflexively developing oneself as an agent of potential" through collective scaffolding. In the face of ongoing climate breakdown and lacking clear pathways that respond to the immensity of the transformations needed investing in this kind of hope work, can help to retain a sense of possibility instead of looking away. The so-called mere "therapeutic" emotionalizing approach to climate change, could in such an uncertain context be strategic to keep open a space for exploring and re-orienting possibilities and limitations.

7 “Looking for a way out too”: Hope through emotion work in Extinction Rebellion.

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Abstract

Faced with bleak prospects characterized by further unfolding climate change and social inertia to prevent future climate catastrophes, climate movements frequently encounter difficulties in keeping up hope. Recently, researchers have started analyzing how contemporary climate movements like Extinction Rebellion (XR) sustain, lose and gain new hopes. These processes are challenged by future ambivalence: movements are shaped by both an apocalyptic narrative of climate catastrophes as a looming future threat that is hoped to be avoided, as by an emerging postapocalyptic narrative regarding climate catastrophes as already ongoing or impossible to prevent. While some researchers argue postapocalyptic environmentalism enables to acknowledge losses and cultivate different hopes, others point out how the cultural and emotional challenge it poses can be repressed. Few studies, however, focus in any detail on the emotion work climate movements engage in to navigate within this ambivalent context. In this paper, we approach the difficulty of keeping up hopes as a problem of emotion management and investigate how this is dealt with. We draw on participant observations among Belgian local Extinction Rebellion groups, looking at the backstage ‘active hope’ practices central to their internal “regenerative culture” program of emotion management. We analyze how Belgian XR activists work up confidence and channel painful emotions (e.g., fear, sadness, anger, or despair) into hope through a process of what McGeer calls ‘scaffolding’ – mutual support to

explore capacities and limitations. However, this hope work is complicated as it sometimes deviates from what Hochschild calls feeling rules – norms of what is socially appropriate to feel and express within a situation. In a context of future uncertainty and ambivalence, this emotion work does not lead participants to cultivate concrete hopes. Instead, they retain a sense of possibility by leaving futures unarticulated and relying on the movement and its emotion work to create a sense of community that functions as a source of hope. Cultivating such 'hope in the dark' throughout collective emotion work, points to the potential of keeping up hopes, even without clear future visions for change – a collective capacity needed to actively engage with increasing future uncertainty.

Keywords: Climate change, social movement, postapocalyptic environmentalism, scaffolding, non-representational hope

7.1 Introduction

Climate breakdown presents a future and present threat to societies. Social movements are among the key actors in co-producing more sustainable, just, and transformative responses to the climate crisis, as they highlight problems, contest dominant answers, and propose alternative approaches (Temper et al., 2018). Within the literature on climate movements, recent research has paid special attention to the role of emotions, and especially hope, in fueling activism (e.g., (Cassegård, 2023; Knops, 2021b). However, as climate breakdown further unfolds, as institutional political responses to this breakdown continue to be disappointing, and as the window of opportunity for climate mitigation is steadily shrinking, climate movements struggle to keep up hope (Cassegård & Thörn, 2018). Moreover, as climate breakdown further escalates, climate movements' time frames are also changing: especially in the global North, these movements are waking up to the effects of climate change occurring not only in distant futures but also in the present (Cassegård & Thörn, 2022). Hope is especially relevant in this context of uncertainty and despair, as it might help cope with bleak circumstances (Kleist & Jansen, 2016; Solnit, 2016). Thus, scholars often point to the importance of hope for meaningfulness (Lamont, 2019) and for producing and sustaining action (e.g. (Blöser, Huber, & Moellendorf, 2020; Straume, 2019), although

some research on climate movements suggests that it is mostly collective action that generates hope, rather than the other way around (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017a).

Although present in the climate movement at least since the failures of the COP15 summit in 2009 (e.g.,(Cassegård & Thörn, 2022), the problem of keeping up hope became especially foregrounded during the 2018–2019 wave of climate protests and the resulting emotional and temporal shift it implied (Knops, 2020). In that context, Nairn (2019) analyses how New Zealand youth climate activists struggle to keep up hope in the face of disappointment in government officials. Additionally, Stuart (2020) describes how UK Extinction Rebellion activists perceive stopping global warming through bold climate action as increasingly unfeasible. In response to the loss of formerly held (potentially naïve) hopes, these activists formulate a *different* kind of hope informed by despair (Stuart, 2020). These studies show a desire for hope among global Northern climate activists. While some hopes are rejected (Thunberg, 2019), hope as a feeling of future possibility itself is generally regarded as something to strive for, or even something one *should* have – thus invoking emotion management (Hochschild, 1979) to attain it.

In this paper, we investigate *how* such hopes are produced and maintained. Drawing from the sociology of emotions, we address the difficulty of keeping up hope within climate movements as a problem of emotion management. We particularly seek to investigate climate movement participants' efforts to channel their emotions towards hope, and how they navigate contradictions in these processes. We draw on qualitative and ethnographic data gathered through participant observation among Belgian Extinction Rebellion (XR) groups. More specifically, we focus on workshops drawing on Buddhist activist-scholar Joanna Macy's notion of 'active hope' (Macy & Johnstone, 2012) and organized by local XR groups as explicit attempts to address the difficulty of keeping up hope.

We seek to make a twofold contribution. First, we explore how climate activists respond to the problem of keeping up hope through conscious and collective backstage emotion work. Second, we show that although hoping for concrete futures becomes hard to sustain for these activists, they do not lose

hope altogether. Instead, they rely on a sense of togetherness accomplished through movement-internal "scaffolding" work (McGeer, 2004) to fall back on a different kind of hope, which is "non-representational" as it aims for a vague and unarticulated future goal (Cook & Cuervo, 2019). While this "hope-in-the-dark" (Solnit, 2016) does not involve clear *visions* of the future, it retains an unarticulated *feeling* of possibility.

Our argument develops as follows. In section 7.2, we argue that while emerging post-apocalyptic environmentalism intensifies climate activists' problem of managing hope, few studies analyze efforts to respond to this. Therefore, we investigate the emotion work movements such as XR do to cultivate hope, relying on emotion-sociological tools for our analysis of this hope work. In section 7.3, we describe our methods and material. In section 7.4, we show how the studied XR activists cultivate a sense of possibility through mutual scaffolding, wherein they both build confidence and explore the painful side of acknowledging limitations and uncertainties. However, this hope work is complicated as it sometimes deviates from dominant feeling rules that pressure towards optimism. Faced with increasing uncertainty and difficulty in keeping up concrete hopes, participants retain a feeling of possibility by falling back on hope in an unarticulated future. In Section 7.5, we conclude with a discussion on how this hope is supported by a sense of togetherness generated through the activists' scaffolding work.

7.2 Literature review

7.2.1 Extinction Rebellion: between apocalyptic and postapocalyptic environmentalism

Among global northern climate movements, the problem of keeping up hope has become more prominent with the emergence of postapocalyptic environmentalism (Cassegård & Thörn, 2018). This form of environmentalism regards climate catastrophes as already ongoing or unavoidable (though unevenly distributed). In doing so, it contrasts with other, more dominant environmentalist narratives. Thus, the green progress narrative emphasizes optimism about industrial capitalist societies' abilities to manage ecological crises through economic and technical development. The apocalyptic narrative

combines fear of future climate catastrophes with hope to avert such threats through deliberate action. The postapocalyptic narrative challenges these two narratives by emphasizing experiences of ongoing or unavoidable loss and related feelings of grief and anger (Cassegård, 2023).

Research on postapocalyptic environmentalism firstly suggests the existence of these three narratives alongside each other often gives rise to ambivalences regarding optimism, hope, and action (Cassegård & Thörn, 2022). de Moor et al. (2021) therefore call for investigating the relations between climate movements' various time frames and related emotions such as hope and despair. Secondly, the postapocalyptic rejection of hope is often not full-blown but instead involves a process of finding a *different* kind of hope (Cassegård & Thörn, 2018; Friberg; Nairn, 2019; Stuart, 2020). Thirdly, aligning apocalyptic and postapocalyptic narratives is difficult, and this difficulty often prompts a return to apocalyptic strategies as doing so keeps up (apocalyptic) hope (de Moor, 2022; de Moor & Marquardt, 2023). Few studies, however, focus in any detail on the *emotion work* (Hochschild, 1979) that climate movement participants engage in to navigate between the contradictory apocalyptic and postapocalyptic narratives and their related feeling rules.[36] In this paper, we respond to this by investigating the emotion work of managing hopes by activists engaged in Belgian branches of Extinction Rebellion (XR) – a movement that combines apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic narratives.

XR originated in the UK in 2018 and gained widespread media attention through blockading bridges in London. Their mass civil disobedience is organized through a decentralized network model of protest, where local groups share basic principles and core demands of "telling the truth" about climate and ecological breakdown, declaring an emergency to address this, and establishing citizens' assemblies to develop a binding plan (ExtinctionRebellionBelgium, 2020). XR deviates from the "positive communication" style that was previously dominant among so-called mainstream climate movement voices (Cassegård & Thörn, 2018). Instead, XR

[36] However, see Author 2 (2024), for an exception. (Malmqvist, 2024)

emphasizes fear of future climate breakdown and the hope of averting it through urgent collective action. With this messaging, XR stays close to an apocalyptic enactment of the emergency narrative (Asayama et al., 2019). However, emergencies can also have a postapocalyptic enactment, calling to interrupt already ongoing catastrophes rather than averting them (Anderson, 2017; D'Alisa, 2019). At times, XR also embodies this, expressing despair and grief for already occurring losses (Neckel & Hasenfratz, 2021). As such, XR ambiguously switches between apocalyptic and postapocalyptic temporalities (Cassegård & Thörn, 2022).

We take a special interest in XR's "regenerative culture". Under this name, XR bundles largely pre-existing practices of "sustainable activism": established ways of doing movement-internal emotion work aimed at avoiding exhaustion and dealing with tensions and trauma. Westwell and Bunting (2020) describe XR's regenerative culture as revolving around caring for the self, social relations, and the planet, challenging "fundamentally uncaring and destructive relations of modern western society"(p546). This involves practices such as check-ins to encourage open expression of emotions, meditation moments, and organizing wellbeing hubs at public actions. Regenerative culture constitutes a program of emotion management, working on the self to sustain movement engagement (Sauerborn, 2022). In addition, Stuart (2020) describes how regenerative culture settings can provide emotional and social support, facilitating a feeling of collectivity that supports hope and prefigures future resilient communities. However, this transformative potential gets blunted when regenerative culture gets isolated from wider political explorations and functions instead as a space to "recharge your batteries" (Rowe & Ormond, 2023). Moreover, while the self is a site where dominant social relations can be resisted (Summers-Effler, 2002), a focus on the self could slip into individualizing and depoliticizing systemic inequalities (Sauerborn, 2022).

We approach XR's regenerative culture as shaping participants' responses to the problem of managing hopes. More specifically, previous fieldwork of both authors and pre-existing research (Stuart, 2020; Westwell & Bunting, 2020) indicates that XR's practices of regenerative culture are to a large extent inspired by the "active hope" approach (Macy & Johnstone, 2012). In their work, Macy and Johnstone distinguish their approach from business-as-usual

optimism as well as from pessimism focusing on social-ecological unraveling. Instead, they emphasize a path of active hope that embraces uncertainty and is open to opportunities for transforming towards a 'life embracing society'. Besides more classical resistance to destruction and construction of alternatives, the active hope approach regards the 'inner transition' of changing one's consciousness also as an avenue for change. Drawing from mindfulness and Buddhism (Sauerborn, 2022), Macy and Johnstone propose guidelines and tools to cultivate long-term engagement. As such, the active hope approach shapes XR's practices of emotion management.

7.2.2 Emotion work in social movements

In this study, we approach Belgian XR activists' hope work from an emotion-sociological perspective. While emotions were long underrepresented in social movements research reigned by "structural environmental perspectives" (Aminzade & McAdam, 2001), the last two decades have seen a surge of interest in the various ways in which emotions drive and inform activism (Flam & King, 2007; Jasper, 2011, 2018). Emotions are not simply biologically given but also socially constructed (Goodwin, Jasper, & Polletta, 2001). As emotions both inform us about our situated goals and interests and prepare us to act on these, they link structure to agency, social reproduction, and social change (Barbalet, 2001). As such, emotions also drive and sustain the collective action of social movements (Jasper, 2018).

Emotions are subject to *feeling rules*, i.e., norms about what is appropriate to feel in each situation (Hochschild, 1979). To adjust to or resist these rules, people engage in *emotion work*, i.e., in evoking, suppressing, or changing feelings depending on social-situational expectations. On a more general level, sets of feeling rules that pertain to social collectives as well as the practices involved in adjusting to such rules can be called an *emotional regime* (Reddy, 2001). *Deviant emotions* are those emotions and emotional expressions that breach the feeling rules of a setting (Summers-Effler, 2002). Expressing deviant emotions generally leads to negative sanctioning. Actors can engage in the conscious and unconscious emotion work of aligning with prevailing feelings rules, but they may also work to repress these feelings. Summers-Effler (2002) describes how managing deviant emotions involves internalizing social conflicts, which results in emotional disharmony and loss of emotional energy.

On the other hand, deviant emotions can be indicators of social conflict and thus offer potential for critical consciousness. Acknowledging deviant emotions and legitimizing their expressions generates emotional energy and, when done collectively, group solidarity. Cultivating alternative feeling rules facilitates this process.

Social movements strategically perform emotion work to evoke emotions conducive to the movement's goals while suppressing non-conducive ones, for example, by *channeling* potentially demobilizing emotions into mobilizing ones (e.g., grief into anger, anger into fun, or fear into hope; see, respectively; (Gould, 2009; Kleres & Wettergren, 2017a; Wettergren, 2009). In doing so, movements actively challenge society's emotional regime and participant's attachments to it in favor of alternative frameworks (Flam, 2007; King, 2007). For example, Kleres and Wettergren (2017a) describe how climate activists commonly reject dominant hopes of green technology to solve the problem of climate change. Instead, they emphasize fears connected to hope in collective action or embrace grief over inevitable losses (Cassegård & Thörn, 2022). Yet, while movements may challenge dominant emotional regimes, they need at least partly to align with such regimes to mobilize effectively (Wettergren, 2009). Thus, even though climate activists may themselves be driven by fear of a looming climate collapse, they may still feel pressured to communicate outward "positive messages" (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017a), thereby partly aligning with the dominant emotion regime of the optimistic green progress narrative (Cassegård & Thörn, 2022), as well as with a more general feeling rule in the West against preaching "doom and gloom" (Head, 2016; Norgaard, 2011).

XR openly rejects green progress optimism but is ambivalent about hope. On the one hand, XR is informed by a postapocalyptic narrative of already ongoing or unavoidable catastrophe (Cassegård & Thörn, 2022), as suggested, for example, in the slogan "hope dies, action begins!" (Stuart, 2020). On the other hand, the strategies of local XR groups are often clearly mitigation-oriented (de Moor, 2022; de Moor & Marquardt, 2023). Thereby, the movement is also informed by an apocalyptic narrative of a fearsome but still preventable future climate catastrophe and, consequently, driven by the hope to avoid this catastrophe (Cassegård & Thörn, 2022). As such, XR can be seen as navigating

between different and even contradictory feeling rules regarding hope. In this paper, we seek to analyze the emotion work that the XR activists studied perform in practicing "active hope" (Macy & Johnstone, 2012) and how they navigate the movements' ambivalences about hope. Drawing on emotion sociological research on hope, we also investigate what sort of hope they thereby manage to cultivate.

7.2.3 Sociology of hope

We approach hope as an emotion of future possibility (Wettergren, 2024). Starting from dissatisfaction with the present, hope involves both a *wish* for a better future and a *belief* in the *possibility* of that future (Miceli & Castelfranchi, 2010). However, hope is inherently paradoxical (McGeer, 2004). On the one hand, it arises in situations of *uncertainty*; attaining its object is never more than *merely possible* (Miceli & Castelfranchi, 2010). This differentiates hope from optimism, which is an *expectation* that a desired outcome *will* come about (ibid.). In contrast, hope starts from an experience of *limited agency* (McGeer, 2004). On the other hand, what McGeer calls "good hope" ultimately involves an experience of *agentic capacity* (ibid.). This, we argue, suggests that hope is a *process* where uncertainty and limited agency are met with a degree of *confidence*, i.e., a degree of assured expectation about the success of one's own actions (Barbalet, 2001). We say 'degree' because, as Summers-Effler (2002, p. 53) observes, hope is 'not complete confidence'; there is always a degree of uncertainty and limitation left.

Meeting uncertainty with confidence to create hope, however, requires what McGeer (2004) calls *scaffolding* – a process where actors mutually support and recognize each other's wishes and capacities as well as each other's distressful emotional experiences of agentic limitation. This process allows them to explore and attempt to transcend limitations instead of despairing when facing them. Whereas hope is inherently precarious, scaffolding thus makes it more robust. We assume that scaffolding works in this way because confidence arises in contexts of mutual recognition and acceptance (Barbalet, 2001). Thus, successful scaffolding creates the emotional energy for engaging in subversive action in situations where success is unlikely (Summers-Effler, 2002). Given this, we assume that the internal emotion work of scaffolding in social movements may create hope by building confidence.

Moreover, we distinguish different dimensions of hope. First, we distinguish between the future *object* of hope – what it aims for – and its *target* in the dissatisfactory present (Wettergren, 2024). The object of hope may be more or less clearly articulated. Thus, following Cook and Cuervo (2019), we distinguish between *representational* and *non-representational* hope. Unlike the former, the latter lacks a clearly articulated object and only retains a *feeling* of hopefulness. These two modes of hope can switch from one to the other, typically becoming less representational with increasing uncertainty. Non-representational hopes require more effort than representational hopes to be maintained, especially under adverse conditions (p. 1107). While representational objects may help actors orientate towards possibilities, actors may also sometimes "cling on" to such hope objects, resisting re-evaluating goals even when they have become virtually unreachable. In doing so, they may remain passive (Terpe, 2016; Wettergren, 2024).

Second, we distinguish the object from the *source* of hope (Wettergren, 2024). If the object is what we desire to attain – what we hope *for* – the source is what we *draw hope from*. In a way, the source provides a 'reason' for hoping outside oneself: it makes the hope object appear attainable by partly compensating for limited agency and uncertainty (Wettergren, 2024). If one hopes to survive a sinking ship, the source could be the lifeboat. If one hopes to limit climate breakdown, the source could be climate summits or a movement's collective action (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017a). Moreover, Wettergren (2024) argues the clearer the source is, the easier it is to activate, making it important for understanding hope's motivational capacity.

Drawing on emotion sociology helps us understand how climate movements deal with the challenge of maintaining hope. Their context is one where one's agency is becoming more limited, time horizons are shrinking, action to meet thresholds like the 1,5-degree objective is expected to fail, and institutional inertia gives rise to disappointment in external sources of hope and to an increasing sense of present and anticipated loss as climate breakdown further unfolds. Kleres and Wettergren (2017a) state that in a context of narrowing possibilities, when the catastrophe no longer belongs to the future but becomes increasingly present, climate movements might be in even greater need of collective scaffolding. We build on this approach to investigate *how*

movements engage with the backstage emotion work of keeping up hopes in such a changing temporal and emotional context.

7.3 Method and material

This empirical research is part of a larger research project on Belgian climate movement organizations (Vandepitte, 2023), which focuses on XR as a movement that draws on a clear emergency narrative, highlights both fear and grief and exemplifies temporal ambiguity. Within the wider Belgian climate movement, XR can be seen as a more recent organization, emerging in the 2018-2019 wave of mobilizations. Local XR groups seem largely modeled after the original British example, taking over characteristics such as demands, aesthetics, organizational form, and the largely highly educated and white demography of its participants (de Moor et al., 2021). As a movement, XR succeeded in creating mainstream media attention for their symbolic disruptions of everyday order in (semi-)public settings like city squares, automobile fairs, or television studios, using both smaller actions and mass civil disobedience. Being a highly visible component of the Belgian climate movement, XR appears to be an 'entry' point for many first-time participants in more disobedient forms of climate protests. On their website, XR Belgium(2020) notes 17 different local groups, located primarily in the bigger cities.

Between October 2021 and January 2022, the first author conducted participant observation among XR Belgian groups, largely focusing on two Dutch-speaking groups for reasons of accessibility. For this article, we focus on regenerative culture settings – largely backstage settings where participants engage in conscious emotion work to sustain their activism. The local groups observed were organized into multiple 'circles' functioning as working groups, including action and regenerative culture. While members of these circles could overlap, people most engaged in regenerative culture tended to take up more backstage roles focusing on mental and emotional support during, after, or in between public actions.

During fieldwork, Author 1 took an open participant observatory role. When entering a research setting, informed consent was obtained first from

organizers and facilitators, and subsequently from all participants. While Author 1 was a newcomer in the observed groups, he built on previous experience as a researcher and participant in other climate movements. Explicit communication of the aim of the research to contribute to the wider movement's cause further helped build trust and gain access. Field notes were made openly during and immediately after participation, and the notes were later transcribed and supplemented with methodological and analytical reflections. Participants were given code names to ensure their anonymity.

While Author 1 started out observing public meetings and events, participants soon invited him for more backstage moments from the regenerative culture circle. In this paper, we focus on data gathered during one physical and one online active hope workshop and four meetings of a reading group on active hope.

The first active hope workshop lasted seven hours. It was guided by two facilitators not closely affiliated with XR and involved eight participants. Participants introduced themselves during the opening round: half of them were regular to the local hosting XR group, while two others were not involved in XR and were mainly interested in the active hope approach (Macy & Johnstone, 2012). Around half the group had some kind of previous experience with this approach. Participant's ages ranged from early twenties to roughly forties, but most were in their late twenties and early thirties. Six of the ten participants were men. All participants except one belonged to the ethnic-racial majority group. The workshop took place in one space, with participants walking around and sitting in pairs or in one big circle.

The online active hope workshop lasted two hours and took place during the first months of 2022. It was guided by one facilitator (the same person as during the physical workshop) and counted fourteen participants, six men and eight women. Participants came from different cities but were dominantly involved in the local XR group (a different one than the offline workshop). Half of the participants were recent members, having joined only in the last few months. Participants' ages varied between early twenties to early fifties, the majority being in their forties and fifties.

Lastly, data was gathered during four meetings of a reading group on the book *Active Hope* by Macy and Johnstone (2012). This group varyingly involved the same four to six participants. The group composition was roughly gender-balanced, and participant's estimated ages varied from late twenties/early thirties to sixties. All participants were active within the local XR group, mainly within the "Regen" circles. While some took up more "frontstage" roles in public and civil disobedient actions, others offered backstage practical support for these. Meetings took place in participants' living rooms. Author 1 joined the last four meetings that focused on discussing the content and trying out exercises from the book's last four chapters.

Both authors carried out the data analysis in an iterative process. Fed by prior empirical work we were attentive to time frames, apocalyptic and postapocalyptic traits (see Chapter 5), and notions of vague hope and the role of togetherness. During coding rounds, this focus was gradually sharpened through theories on emotions and postapocalyptic movements.[37]

7.4 Findings: the emotion channeling work of active hope

"Many people feel deeply affected by the serious damage done to nature and life on Earth. Because we feel so powerless, this pain often leads to guilt or denial, resulting in closing our minds. When we deny or suppress our pain to the world, we also undermine our power to contribute to its healing."

Taken from an online announcement of a workshop, this excerpt exemplifies how the studied XR group practices active hope work. It is framed as an approach to overcoming feelings of powerlessness and denial in relation to

[37] Important for the development of this paper was also the feedback received at seminars where we presented earlier versions of this research in 2022 in 'träff om klimataktivism' – Gothenburg workshop, at the Critical margins/ESA RN25 conference, at the ESA RN11 conference, and at the day of sociology Ghent 2023.

climate and ecological crises. In response to the problem of withdrawal, XR activists engage in active hope work to “acknowledge the mess that we’re in”, and foster emotion connections with self and various others.

The XR practices of emotion work we study draw heavily on the active hope approach by Macy and Johnstone (2012). Rather than only treating hope as a discrete singular emotion (also see Wettergren, 2024), this approach channels multiple emotions towards active hope. It does so by employing a sequence of stages of emotion work – used as a guideline for structuring workshops, including the ones we observed – which Macy and Johnstone call “the spiral of the work that reconnects” (see Figure 7).

This sequence starts with gratitude and is intended to strengthen participants’ resilience. In section 7.4.1., we contend this entails cultivating mutual recognition and a sense of connection. The confidence participants draw from this is used as a source to support engaging with difficulties and limitations. Building on the first stage, the second stage of the sequence, “honoring pain”, involves sharing fear, sorrow, anger, and despair. In section 7.4.2, we show how this enables participants to face the present as unsatisfactory and to acknowledge limitations and (risks of) failure. We understand such mutually supported sharing of difficult emotions as a part of the process of scaffolding precarious hopes. Crucially, this involves participants practicing alternative feeling rules to create space for deviant emotions. In section 7.4.3., we show how this process of emotion management gets complicated when participants must navigate tensions between dominant and alternative emotion regimes.

The third stage of the active hope sequence, “seeing with new eyes”, is intended to point towards future possibilities by taking on the differing viewpoints of various human and non-human others at different points in time. The last stage, “going forth”, continues with imagining desired futures and envisaging practical steps to take toward them. In section 7.4.4., we focus on the kind of hope resulting from the way these stages are applied within the XR workshops. Reflecting a temporal ambiguity, participants do not so much cultivate concrete hopes as fall back on a non-representational mode of hope that leaves its future goals unarticulated while leaning on a sense of togetherness in the movement.

Figure 7: a dandelion illustrating the circling sequence of emotion work)[38]

7.4.1 Scaffolding through mutual recognition and building of confidence

The first stage in the emotion channeling sequence in the active hope approach consists of "coming from gratitude". In the physical workshop, this was translated into a "mingle" exercise where people walked randomly through a room and stopped at a sign of the facilitator to converse with the nearest person, alternating between talking and listening. The conversational topics were "*Think back to a mythical place from your childhood"* with observed participants recalling childhood tree houses or skating on natural ice when winters were colder. A second question was "*Think of someone who*

[38] *image by Dori Midnight from* www.Joannamacy.net/work

gave you self-confidence" with observed participants referring to close friends and partners. A final question was "*What do you appreciate about yourself?*".

Macy and Johnstone (2012) argue that gratitude makes one more present and helps build trust and resilience. In the studied workshops, the activities involved in this stage also contributed to building confidence as participants drew mental support from recalling positive evaluations of the self, others, and places. Significantly, this involved mutual recognition, as becomes apparent in a moment in the online workshop where duos (i.e., breakout-room discussions in pairs) discussed the questions "*What do you value about yourself?"* and "*What do you value about life in times of collapse?"* (see section 7.4.3). Afterward, the participants were encouraged to share their experiences with the bigger group. Thus, for example, July, a woman in her early forties and trained as a social scientist, said that "*the recognition is nice, it confirms one's pathway, and showing gratitude makes one solid".* Five other participants of the online workshop started expressing similar feelings of appreciation about meeting 'like-minded people' and feeling recognized in their choices to engage in movements. Birgit, a spontaneous speaking health care professional, added that she felt connected in the shared acknowledgment of the problem.

The work of mutual recognition that participants undertake in the 'gratitude' stage of active hope workshops, we argue, can be understood as joint efforts of *scaffolding* hope to deal with difficulties and limitations (McGeer, 2004), such as those addressed in the second stage of the 'spiral of the work that reconnects' (see section 7.4.4). As the quotations and examples above indicate, these efforts work by drawing on communal embeddedness as a supportive source that enhances participants' sense of *confidence* (Barbalet, 2001). While Kleres and Wettergren (2017a) emphasize how scaffolding happens through meeting face-to-face and partaking in joint action, our results suggest scaffolding can also take place in backstage and even online settings explicitly aimed at emotion work. In addition, as Macy and Johnstone (2012) suggest, this work of gratitude can function as a scaffolding tool that helps one face painful realities.

7.4.2 Scaffolding through the sharing of dissatisfaction and deviant emotions

In the emotion channeling sequence of the active hope approach, the 'gratitude' stage is followed by a stage of "honoring pain". In the physical workshop, this step involves a ritual sharing moment, following a pre-scripted form.[39] Closely following Macy and Johnstone's framework, participants sit in a circle around four objects explained to represent emotions and their other side in terms of possible responses to them: a stone represents fear, but also invites courage; a wooden stick represents anger, but also points to values informing injustice; dried tree leaves stand for a sorrow that also implies appreciation and love; and an empty bowl stands for despair and emptiness, inviting creativity. Amos, the facilitator adds: "*Without darkness, one can't see the stars either*". He further describes the ritual as lasting an hour and encourages participants to enter the circle, take hold of an object, and speak to the point while letting their emotions out. With gallows humor, he adds *"Tears are like shit: you better not keep it up".* Participants can speak in the language that they want, be silent, or take on a persona. Those not in the speaking role are encouraged to listen, remain silent, and respond to each speaker's finished statement with "[name]: I hear you".

Linking the emotional practice of "honoring pain" to hope might seem counterintuitive if hope is confused with optimism. However, hope begins in dissatisfaction with the present (Wettergren, 2024). In addition, acknowledging lost possibilities is an important part of cultivating "realistic" rather than "fraudulent" hopes based on false assumptions (Stuart, 2020). The emotion work in the ritual is aimed at helping participants acknowledge the often painful feelings that dissatisfaction and loss give rise to. According to Macy & Johnstone (2012), cultivating a capacity to act demands "looking into

[39] Also see: https://workthatreconnects.org/resources/truth-mandala/, and Macy and Brown (2014).

the abyss". Suppressing the feelings that arise in doing so constitutes denial and feeds powerlessness.

In most Western contexts, however, cultural pressure towards optimism obstructs this "looking into the abyss", making anger at climate injustice or sorrow for ongoing environmental loss deviate from dominant feeling rules (Brulle & Norgaard, 2019; Head, 2016). Against these feeling rules, and in tune with their narrative of climate and ecological emergency, the activists studied here seek to revalue emotions like fear, sorrow, despair, and anger.

Thus, within the workshop setting, the facilitators take the lead in indicating alternative feeling rules. When the ritual starts with a long collective "ah", it is followed by a hesitant silence for a while. Amos decides to begin with a personal example of family-related sorrow. Anna, an extrovertly speaking and visibly pregnant woman then takes the stone and talks about the fear she feels for cars when cycling, connecting this to the anger she feels at some of the car drivers. Then she switches to being pregnant and feeling guilty and sorrowful towards her unborn child for already passing along toxins from the polluted city environment. Every time, the listening participants respond with "I hear you".

Notably, while the leaves of sorrow and the empty bowl of despair are barely used,[40] the stick of anger and the stone of fear are used more widely.[41] For example, Karel, a father and an experienced activist in his forties, engaged in the local "Regen" circle, holds the stick, and talks about the anger he feels, and how that sometimes can hurt people around him. He describes sitting at the breakfast table with his family, hearing a politician speaking, and starting to yell angrily at the radio. A second time, he holds the anger stick to talk about

[40] An exception is Amos, the facilitator, who talks about feeling empty after watching online videos about deep adaptation (also see Davidson 2023)

[41] This may reflect the tension between apocalyptic and postapocalyptic narratives within XR, as expressions of fear or anger may be more easily reconciled than sorrow or despair with apocalyptic narratives, where avoiding climate breakdown still appears as a future possibility. We return to this tension in section 6.3.

his kids, his anger at the school system, and his feeling of being pushed to continue "normality" as if there is no climate and ecological emergency. In addition, he also talks about the movements he is part of and his anger at the inequalities being reproduced within those movements through an emphasis on urgency.

At other moments, participants take up the stone. Jakob, a concisely speaking man in his thirties talks about fear of worsening ecological circumstances and how this harms lives. He goes on about his fear of ensuing social unrest and his fear that such systemic deterioration might be chaotic and violent rather than dignified. After an hour or so, the ritual is closed with a long hum. The facilitators invite participants to share their thoughts. Anna calls it 'quite intense' and multiple participants nod in agreement.

In both workshops observed, the stage of honoring pain was treated as the most important, as well as the most intense one.[42] The deviant emotions concept (Summers-Effler, 2002) is key to understanding what is happening. Dominant feeling rules normally sanction the expression of emotions such as climate fear. This perceived deviant nature contributes to making such emotions painful to allow. To nevertheless express these, participants encourage one another and thereby draw support from the confidence generated in the previous stage of gratitude. Further, the sharing of deviant emotions is legitimized and assisted by alternative feeling rules which are exemplified by facilitators and reflected by the other participants. This helps remove the sense of threat of expressing deviant emotions, making the movement similar to an "emotional refuge" (Reddy, 2001) where the incongruity with the wider world is temporarily removed. This process can generate emotional energy and a sense of connectedness among participants, and further disentangle them from dominant emotional regimes. Thus, while Kleres and Wettergren (2017a) described how climate movements practice scaffolding by cultivating hope to mitigate the paralyzing effects of fear, our

[42] Macy describes the honoring pain as 'the critical passage' in the sequence of emotion work (https://www.joannamacy.net/work)

results indicate that the ritualized sharing of *deviant and even painful emotions* such as anger, sorrow, despair, or even fear may also perform a scaffolding function.

7.4.3 Navigating emotion regimes

In both observed active hope workshops, XR members engage in explicit emotion work, opening space for sharing deviant emotions and thereby disentangling participants away from the dominant emotion regime. This process, however, is not always straightforward. Feeling rules may conflict, and this may set up obstacles to the emotional channeling towards active hope.

Tensions around feeling rules occurred most clearly in the online workshop. There, participants had largely joined XR more recently and were also more often first-time partakers in active hope workshops. During the gratitude stage, one of the questions asked to duos in "breakout rooms" was *"What I'm valuing about life in times of collapse is …".* In response to this, July is critical of the assumption of collapse in the question, saying: "*if you adhere to that, you can't have hope, can you?"*.

This tension resonates with a central ambiguity regarding the emotional and temporal dimensions of XR's regenerative culture. Like most Western climate movements, XR's public narrative revolves mainly around the combination of fear and hope to avert (further) future climate catastrophe. In backstage contexts, however, it was not uncommon to observe doubts about the possibility of succeeding in this. But while active hope work involves acknowledging losses, and while the observed XR group even staged a public ecological grief ritual, some activists, like July, experience it as breaching to straightforwardly embrace a "collapse thesis" (Davidson, 2023), instead preferring to hold on to hopes as culturally central for meaningfulness (Terpe, 2016).

This ambiguity reflects an unresolved tension between feeling rules. On the one hand, active hope requires participants to honor their pains and accept, e.g., fear. On the other, dominant feeling rules lead them to emphasize a hope

of averting further climate breakdown or even outright optimism that suppresses so-called "negative emotions" such as despair or sorrow in relation to climate and ecological breakdown. Previous research describes how climate movements align with dominant scripts by publicly following a pattern of 'positive communication' while keeping anger and guilt ascription backstage (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017a). In addition, we find such emotional tensions do not only take the form of a frontstage-backstage division but also play out within backstage settings, even when directed to explicit emotion channeling.

A second example of conflicting feeling rules occurred as participants refrained from the explicit goal of acknowledging pains. In the online workshop, participant-duos were asked to complete the sentences "*When I acknowledge that my efforts for a better world may be in vain, I feel ..."* and *"Ways I try to avoid my feelings around it are ...".* The data-gathering researcher is teamed up with Marijn, a man in his upper forties, who joined XR a few months ago after seeing images of a local action of mass civil disobedience. While answering, Marijn is giving a positive spin to his answers. Thus, he concedes he would feel like giving up when his efforts may be in vain but complements this by stating that "*in a movement, you're not alone and your cries will be heard"*. Equally, he describes he might avoid his despair by fleeing into music or hiking, yet immediately reframes this as a positive flight by taking rest. The same avoidance through positive reframing appears during the collective debriefing. Elisa, a woman in her forties, describes how she can feel powerless yet reframes this as a positive sense of humility. In a similar line, Jonas, a freely speaking middle-aged man, shares that his "negative" feelings often lead him to paralysis and shutting down and that such feelings are too strong to carry alone. He closes his contribution by stating *"You are not alone"*, referring to a slogan used during a past action of civil disobedience. For the only time during the workshop, several digital hands go up to agree and applaud.

In this example, the alternative feeling rules of the active hope setting conflict with societally dominant climate optimism. The alternative feeling rules of the workshop setting require participants to acknowledge painful feelings as a precondition for channeling these into active hope. Participants' positive reframing, however, kept them from doing so and can be interpreted as a form of denial. While cultivating a sense of connectedness is key in the scaffolding

process, using that communal support to avoid painful emotions, rather than staying with them, can be counterproductive towards building hope. This positive reframing reflects a wider cultural pressure toward climate-related optimism in contemporary Western society, which facilitates collective denial of painful emotions around climate change (Brulle & Norgaard, 2019; Head, 2016). Thus, the practice of active hope work is not necessarily straightforward but involves navigating tensions between competing feeling rules. Then how do these real-life complexities influence the outcomes of the emotion channeling program? What shades of hope do the XR participants cultivate?

7.4.4 Looking for a way out: relying on a non-representational mode of hoping

Social movements can constitute a *source* of hope (Nairn, 2019). In the sections above we have argued movements like XR can offer spaces of support and acknowledgement. They can function as collective scaffolders (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017a) where participants are "*not alone*". Furthermore, movements also offer the possibility of resistance and social change. This possibility is often assumed to be in connection with imagined alternative futures and pathways towards them. However, movements can also offer such a sense of potential without explicit visions for change. During fieldwork, this was explained during the online workshop. Following Jonas' statement of "*You are not alone"*, Lennart, a middle-aged man, picks up on the reflection, saying: "*From this conversation, I'm drawing respect for the struggles of people and for continuing those. It also gives hope. I'm not standing alone, others feel the same and are looking for a way out too*".

Lennart's quote clarifies the kind of hope we encounter most often during fieldwork, which can be specified using the notion of non-representational hope (Cook & Cuervo, 2019). For participants like Lennart, XR, and the sense of togetherness it provides, becomes a *source* to draw hope from. This hope is not only a form of coping with the present through partaking in a social movement. There is an end to which movement membership is directed. However, that future *object* of hope remains largely open and unspecified.

Cook and Cuervo (2019) state that non-representational modes of hoping should not be understood in contradiction with more articulated, representational hopes. Instead, these are connected modes of hope that can shift into one another. In our data, the unspecified hope of looking for a way out together is related to broader hopes enacted in the (global northern) climate movement. There, the dominant hope enacted has been directed at influencing policymakers to pursue climate change mitigation. In relation to science and policy institutions, movements have made these objects of hope more specific via deadline rhetoric and threshold values like 1,5 or 2 degrees Celsius of global warming. However, in light of the failure of governments to mitigate emissions and further escalating climate breakdown, this representational hope is increasingly hard to sustain.

Research participants occupy a position between retaining the apocalyptic story of averting collapse and moving into a postapocalyptic hope. Given this ambiguity, and the heightened uncertainty it provides, participants opt for a non-representational hope. This pattern is remarkable, as Macy and Johnstone's (2012) active hope approach provides exercises in cultivating both non-representational and representational hopes. This becomes most prominent in the fourth stage of the emotion channeling sequence, which focuses on 'going forth'. However, the observed workshops emphasized the honoring pain stage, at the cost of largely leaving aside the 'going forth' stage. In the reading group on the last chapters of *Active Hope*, this stage was more thoroughly treated, as field notes below show.

> In a reading group session on chapter nine, titled Catching an inspiring dream, Macy and Johnstone (2012) present a method for imagining a better future and thinking back from there toward the present to envision concrete actions along that imagined pathway. The authors emphasize that for this purpose the "what" comes before the "how": catching the vision is important, and one should not let oneself be obstructed by the difficulty of seeing how it would be possible. This, however, seems easier said than done. We decide to do the exercise and start by taking a few minutes to dream about something before returning to the group. Rebecca, a woman in her late twenties, opens the sharing round by stating "*I don't believe that my dream is possible*".

"*What's your dream?"* the others ask. "*Having no self-reinforcing climate breakdown".*

In the subsequent meeting of the reading group, we treat chapter ten, which is about learning to deal with discouragement by perceiving change as discontinuous instead of linear and incremental. Rebecca, whose concrete hope could not be held up, now leans towards the non-representational mode of hope, stating in reaction to the idea of non-linear changes: *"that you don't know, is in some way hope".*

A similar expression of non-representational hope is made by Jeroen, a male academic in his forties. While discussing chapter twelve, on maintaining enthusiasm, the group is exploring ways to stay active for decades. Jeroen states he tries to adopt a position of "realism without fatalism". Paraphrasing the book, he says: *"active hope is directed towards sustaining engagement without necessarily succeeding"*. He links this to the difficulty of succeeding in the climate struggle, and doubtfully states: *"To overthrow the system in just a few years … hmm"*.

In these interactions, participants question the possibility of achieving the end the movement hopes for stopping climate change through systemic transformation. In response to this difficulty of keeping up apocalyptic hopes, they do not let go of hope altogether but opt to preserve a sense of possibility by keeping futures uncertain but open. Importantly, this non-representational mode of "hope in the dark" (Solnit, 2016) is scaffolded by drawing from the *source* of mutual support in the movement. As Jeroen exemplifies in the subsequent reading group meeting: *"I situate the value of XR more in the building of community rather than in the actions".*

The field note above shows the difficulty of managing hope for the participants, and the ambiguity resulting from their efforts. As is common within climate movements, they reject the hopes offered by technology and governments as a form of complacent optimism. Within the emergency narrative that they publicly enact, social movements offer concrete hopes to

disrupt business as usual, instigate social transformation, and contribute to averting further climate breakdown. In the backstage setting observed, these movement hopes seem hard to sustain as participants see no realistic way of fulfilling them. Moreover, the emergency narrative directed at averting future disasters is also in tension with a straightforward postapocalyptic position of reducing uncertainty by embracing collapse as unavoidable. Thus, participants experience added uncertainty by finding themselves in an ambiguous position between the apocalyptic and postapocalyptic. As it becomes unclear what to hope for and how to achieve it, participants tend to stay with ambiguity and imagine an open future. Despite the tools offered by Macy to cultivate concrete hopes, they opt to leave their objects of hope unarticulated. As such, responding to ambiguity by falling back on a non-representational mode of hoping allows participants to retain a sense of possibility without subscribing to a concrete and hard-to-retain hope object.

7.5 Concluding reflections

Climate movement research has pointed to hope as important for instigating or sustaining action (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017a; Nairn, 2019). Yet, as climate breakdown further unfolds, movements struggle to keep up hope (Cassegård & Thörn, 2018). In this light, scholars have called for investigating how hope and despair are linked to ambiguities in climate movements' various timeframes (de Moor et al., 2021), as well as how hope and despair can be "collectivized" rather than carried alone and how hope can be sustained in relation to other emotions (Nairn, 2019). We replied to these calls by studying the struggle to keep up hope as a problem of emotion management.

Thus, conducting ethnographic research among local Belgian XR activists, we found that one way XR manages hope is in the context of their "regenerative culture", drawing extensively on Macy and Johnstone's (2012) active hope approach. Our analysis emphasized how this approach constitutes a system of emotion channeling work. In active hope workshops, XR activists engage in mutual recognition and connect to parts of the self, others, and places. This allows them to draw mutual support and build confidence to engage with difficulties and limitations. By "honoring pain", participants are also encouraged to acknowledge loss, anger, fear, and despair. This enables them

to recognize the present as insufficient, but also to acknowledge shared emotions that are deviant in the context of a regime of optimistic denial. Expressing these emotions presupposes the cultivation of alternative feeling rules that positively revalue them, disentangling participants from the dominant emotion regime. As this constitutes an additional source of support and confidence for participants, we argue movements can behave as collective scaffolders of precarious hopes, not only through public actions but also via backstage emotion work. However, successful mobilization also requires certain alignment with the dominant emotion regime (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017a), which needs balancing against the hope work of sharing deviant emotions without trying to tone them down. Thus, navigating between dominant and alternative emotion regimes brings tensions that complicate backstage emotion work. Moreover, while the active hope approach envisions cultivating concrete hopes to guide engagements, the uncertainty arising from failed attempts to mitigate ongoing climate breakdown means that participants find it hard to sustain concrete hopes. Instead, they leave objects of hope unarticulated, or "non-representational" (Cook & Cuervo, 2019). Yet, we argue, they maintain a feeling of possibility by focusing on movement activity itself as a source of hope.

Previous studies of climate movements have suggested that while setbacks and disappointments may lead to a loss of hope, new and different hopes informed by despair may emerge (Nairn, 2019) in the form of a commitment to making something good out of what is left (Stuart, 2020). Based on our findings, we suggest this "different kind of hope" may be more clearly understood as non-representational. Cook and Cuervo (2019) suggest that increased uncertainty may lead to a shift from representational to non-representational hope. In our case, the contradicting temporalities of apocalyptic and postapocalyptic narratives represent such uncertainty. Within XR's narrative of climate and ecological emergency, hope in the dominant climate regime – characterized by green progress through technologies and intergovernmental agreements – is seen as insufficient or altogether rejected. In contrast, XR has foregrounded hope in disrupting business as usual and instigating social transformation to avert further climate breakdown. However, rising emissions and the increasingly felt disruptive effects of climate breakdown (now also in the global North) make the apocalyptic hope of

averting climate catastrophe through such means harder to sustain. Yet, while some activists respond to this with postapocalyptic non-hope (Cassegård, 2023; Malmqvist, 2024) doing so conflicts with XR's emergency narrative. Our findings show that instead of clinging on to apocalyptic strategies not really believed in (de Moor, 2022) or move towards an unambiguously postapocalyptic stance (Cassegård, 2023), another option is taking a more ambivalent position. In taking such a position, the activists in our study retained a sense of future possibility by falling back on non-representational hope.

Retaining this ambiguity, we argue, allowed the activists to manage tensions between contradicting temporalities without having to re-evaluate the larger group framework. The non-representational hope they hold does not threaten XR's central emergency narrative. Moreover, the activists' source of hope – a sense of togetherness found in the movement – is also left untouched. However, the question is whether this also means that the movement framework inhibits the potential of the active hope workshops to come up with more articulated alternative objects of hope. Perhaps, moving outside of the XR framework could enable a broader process of exploring limitations and possibilities.

One merit of the concept of non-representational hope is that it pinpoints a hope that is less reliant on a clear vision yet retains a feeling of possibility. While feelings of possibility are often assumed to be connected to imagined alternative futures and pathways towards these, movements may therefore offer a feeling of potential that could motivate action despite lacking concrete visions for change. Yet, Cook & Cuervo (2019, p. 1114) argue, hope would be more easily maintained when aimed at a representational object, whereas non-representational hope would be harder to sustain as it does not 'lean on anything but work by the individual and collectives'. However, in our case, movements are confronted with the continuing failure to attain the representational object of limiting climate change. In that context, it might be less disappointing and disengaging to fall back on non-representational hopes kept up through scaffolding work. Therefore, we stress the importance of distinguishing between the *objects* and *sources* of hope: it is the clarity of the source, more than that the object, that renders hope an activating force

(Wettergren, 2024). Hoping towards a clear object without a concrete source to draw energy from may result in a hope that actors can cling to without necessarily acting. In our case, however, the movement functions as a collective scaffolder: a source to keep up hopes in the face of powerlessness and despair. Active hope as a form of scaffolding emotion work performed backstage in the activist community, we argue, can result in an unarticulated but very real feeling of future possibility that can be maintained over time.

Part III

8 Conclusions: Unpacking hope work in the Belgian climate movement

8.1 Introduction

In this dissertation, I have adopted a sociological perspective to study how contemporary climate movements deal with hope. I have done so because a need for hope is widely expressed in the face of ongoing climate breakdown. This need is reinforced by the decades of societal failure to sufficiently address the destabilization of the atmosphere and environment we inhabit; the passing of planetary boundaries and climatic tipping points; and the manifold injustices interwoven with this (Armstrong McKay et al., 2022; Kolinjivadi, Almeida, & Martineau, 2020; Steffen et al., 2015). Hope, then, would be an antidote to despondency, as it entails a sense of future possibility. It is appealed to because it would aid action, make efforts meaningful and help in dealing with difficulties without giving up. As social movements can be an unexpected "transformative force capable of remaking social and political relations" (Goodman, 2017, p. 2) and be niches for cultivating alternative visions and approaches, they have become a prime source from which to draw hope. However, as climate breakdown further escalates, climate movement participants themselves, struggling to protect the climate, tend to also struggle to keep up hope (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017a; Nairn, 2019; Stuart, 2020).

Despite the manifest social significance, research that links hope to climate change and climate movements has long been scarce. Indeed, there is a "*strong need to enquire about the actual meanings of 'hope' for various people and scholars"* (Pihkala, 2022, p. 17). More specifically, scholars have recently called for research on *how* climate activists can collectively deal with hope and despair (Nairn, 2019), as well as to "*empirically investigate collective constructions of hope that resist 'dominant delusional hope'"*(Wettergren, 2024, p. 16). Therefore, I have pursued the following overarching research question: How do participants in the Belgian climate movement work with hope? The explorative nature of this research aimed to contribute to a

reflexive understanding of hope within this movement. In doing so, I have approached hope not merely as an abstract idea or individual psychological trait, but as a socially constructed cognitive-emotional process. The hope I investigate is oriented towards a collective goal (Blöser, Huber, & Moellendorf, 2020), as well as shaped and performed through collective activities. In these processes, hope demands *work* to be cultivated, shaped, sustained, managed, tempered and so forth. Following the approach of Petersen and Wilkinson (2015), I have focused on clarifying tensions and the multiple interpretations and experiences of how Belgian climate movement actors construct hope. As such, I have adopted a micro-interactional lens to investigate *how* hope is worked with in the Belgian climate movement.

Throughout the doctoral trajectory, my understanding of hope in this movement has crystalized into the dimensions of narratives, temporalities and emotions. Hence, I have looked at how Belgian climate movement organizations enact multiple narratives – more specifically transformation pathway narratives – and multiple temporalities. Similarly, I have investigated the emotion work that participants in the Extinction Rebellion movement perform to cultivate and keep up hope. Crucially, I have also focused on participants' struggle to work with various tensions on arising within these three dimensions.

By interpreting and connecting the literature on the dimensions of narratives, temporalities and emotions in climate protest, I have tried to contribute to a deeper understanding of this movement. Taking an immersed position, I have provided thick descriptions of social realities, rather than aiming for broad generalizable knowledge. I have done so using qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews, document analysis and participant observation. Specifically, my position as a "co-conspirer" (Temper, McGarry, & Weber, 2019) allowed me to go beyond the most visible public faces and discourses of this movement to provide a less common view on the inside life of what Haug (2013) and Tufekci (2017) call the internal movement dimension of "organizing." As such, I have been able to analyze the often slow and messy unfolding of the learning processes of movement actors in relation to deepening collective capacities to sustain engagement, moving among differences and reshaping the movement. In doing so, I have shown the

sociological variety, revealing that the Belgian climate movement is multi-faceted and multi-paced as well as enacting changing emotional constellations.

In the remainder of this final chapter, I will first draw conclusions on hope and narratives, temporalities and emotions, respectively, by linking them to the empirical papers that form the core of this dissertation. Subsequently, I will explore the limitations of this study and avenues for future research. Finally, I will look at the possible implications and guidelines for practice and movement activity that can be drawn.

8.1.1 Hope as working with narratives

As the slogan goes: *Another world is possible*. If hope is the emotion of future possibility (Wettergren, 2024), how then do we imagine it? In Chapter 4, I approached hope in its narrative dimension, studying hope as a vision. I treated the climate movement's strategic narratives as carriers of hope, as they spell out pathways for change. Specifically, I analyzed multiple transformation pathway narratives among Belgian climate movement organizations, drawing on in-depth interviews and documents. I outlined distinct pathways that: tackle fossil fuel infrastructures (blockadia) and fossil investments (divestment); demand more ambitious climate policies (climate plan); target collective denial of the crisis and the urgent action needed; and therefore call for emergency mobilization (climate emergency). These transformation pathway narratives varyingly align to overarching metanarratives of more moderate emission management or its antagonist of climate justice. This in-depth study contributes to the literature by re-centering movements within sustainability studies and showing the multiple narratives for change that such movements have developed (Temper et al., 2018). Moreover, I have shown the slow but continuing articulation of this metanarrative by proponents of climate justice (Bond, 2011; Chatterton, Featherstone, & Routledge, 2013; Kenis & Mathijs, 2014), moving it from the margins towards the mainstream of the climate movement (Cassegård & Thörn, 2017; Della Porta & Parks, 2014) and continuing to deepen its meaning (Sultana, 2022a; Sunnemark, 2023).

What do these findings thus imply for our understanding of hope in the climate movement? First, the metanarrative shift from emissions management towards climate justice implies a change in hope. Drawing on Wettergren's (2024) analytical model allows us to see how a narrative of climate justice changes what is hoped *for* (the object): not only a limiting of emissions but a transformation to more just and ecological societies, or, in other words, to free nature-society relations from both social and ecological domination (Goodman, 2017). Moreover, the call for "system change, not climate change" shifts the *target* of hope in the present, from managing emissions to changing the socio-political relations that produce these. This entails a much more politicizing approach, which envisions change through forming alliances between movements. As such, the *source* from which to draw hope also shifts from governments and technologies towards collective action primarily "from below."

Second, approaching hope through narratives of change enables the theorizing of hope as a vision. Visualizing pathways towards a hoped-for-outcome enables its representation as a genuine possibility (Blöser, Huber, & Moellendorf, 2020; Kwong, 2018). Accordingly, this approach looks more to the *how* of social change, that is, the imagined pathways that lead to the *what* – the state of things at which one hopes to arrive. Terpe (2016) calls these the auxiliary and core meanings of hope, respectively, and links the auxiliary (the how) to social movements that hope to change things through collective action – indeed, as the climate movement tends to emphasize (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017a).

My approach, then, has focused less on the various utopias that are hoped for.[43] However, I believe that approaching hope through pathway narratives resonates well with the rather vague horizons imagined by climate movements, as well as with how sustainability transformations are thought of as multiple and open ended (Luederitz et al., 2017; Scoones, Newell, & Leach,

[43] See Cassegård and Thörn (2018, 2022) for a focused study on various "positive" and "negative" utopias, imagined by the climate movement and broader environmental movements.

2015). Indeed, transformations should not be guided by blueprints for the future, but by a process of learning from tensions between various pathways (Veland et al., 2018). If the reality we inhabit is characterized by transformations in any case – by the efforts of the movement as well as by the disruptive effects of ensuing climate breakdown – acknowledging the emergent, unruly and fundamentally open nature of changes might be a first step to orienting ourselves in more fruitful ways. However, this presents a challenge for the climate movement's narratives: spelling out and following clear pathways might be difficult and amidst the mess it is easy to lose track. Indeed, Terpe (2016) points to the phenomenon of movements that know *what* they want (e.g., no self-accelerating climate breakdown) but have no vision of *how* to get there. Enacting hope then becomes a "plunge into the unknown" (Solnit, 2016). Terpe (2016) posits that in such cases one can also draw on despair so as to act, which might open up possibilities further down the road (Wettergren, 2024). However, more paralyzing powerlessness also lurks amidst this uncertainty (White, 2024b). This state of uncertainty, possible despair and powerlessness, characterize the context in which many actors in the Belgian climate movement struggle with hope. This is strongly linked to the social construction of relations to time in the climate movement.

8.1.2 Hope as working with temporalities

Hope is crucially linked to time: it draws on pasts and presents to develop an orientation to future betterment. How one constructs temporalities – how one socially relates to time (Lilja, Baaz, & Vinthagen, 2015) – enables and limits the possibilities one perceives and acts upon. Temporalities shape what to hope for, where to direct hope and where to draw hope from. At the same time, in the pursuit of hope (or its refusal), temporalities can also be *worked* with reflexively to reimagine possibilities. How do temporalities and hope shape one another in the Belgian climate movement?

In Chapter 5, I analyzed the movement's temporalities. Based on interviews and documents, I outlined how the Belgian climate movement aimed to avert future climate catastrophes by performing urgency – by depicting a rapidly shrinking window of opportunity where the time left to avoid threshold deadlines is ticking away. However, movement participants also point to potential "dark sides" of how urgency is performed. Narrowly focusing on and

working with short-term deadlines might facilitate exhaustion and disappointment and result in movement *disengagement*. In addition, performing a global North-centered "hierarchy of urgencies" can sideline justice concerns, as it conceals the experiences of those already and most impacted by ecological devastation and social domination. Moreover, urgency can prevent taking the time to reflect on organizing and strategizing. As an alternative, movement participants construct a "long-haul" temporality. They prefer to approach the climate struggle as a "marathon, not a sprint," while being open to re-evaluating strategies according to changing contexts. This temporality entails "taking time" for the political "slow spade work" of sustaining collectives, centering care work, building movements and learning how to embody principles of justice.

By unpacking how these multiple temporalities are performed and reflected upon, I contributed to an emerging literature on the time dimension of climate movements that depicts them as stuck between temporalities (Knops, 2021b) and struggling with time (de Moor & Marquardt, 2023; Kenis, 2023). Moreover, I depicted how movement participants engage with, rather than avoid, temporal tensions, allowing them to learn from conflict and adapt accordingly; for example, by letting go of more narrowly defined deadlines (such as 1.5 or 2 degrees targets) and instead opting for a more open timeframe where "every tenth of a degree counts," or by taking up elements of post-apocalyptic temporalities that regard climate catastrophes as already ongoing and unavoidable, but which are globally and socially very unevenly distributed (Cassegård & Thörn, 2022; Sunnemark, 2023; Whyte, 2020).

How the climate movement struggles with time connects to how it struggles with hope. First, movement participants widely refuse to wait and passively hope – what they regard as fraudulent hope – for techno-optimistic future solutions such as negative emissions technologies (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017a; Stuart, 2020). Instead, Belgian – as well as many other – climate movement participants have usually enacted urgency as a kind of temporal resistance, performing an apocalyptic hope to avert future catastrophes (Cassegård & Thörn, 2022). However, this predominant hope within climate movements has become harder to sustain due to the above-mentioned criticisms, along with climate catastrophes becoming increasingly more

prevalent and unavoidable. Here, the emergence of post-apocalyptic environmentalism presents a challenge: How, then, do they retain a space of possibility in which other worlds can be imagined? How do they remake hope without giving up? One coping strategy is to hold post-apocalyptic doubts at a distance, keeping them private while publicly clinging to more accustomed apocalyptic hopes (de Moor, 2022; de Moor & Marquardt, 2023; Wettergren, 2024). While this strategy may align with norms of appropriateness and therefore avoid threatening some social bonds, it also constitutes a kind of denial of fears and losses that could help cultivate well-grounded hope.

An alternative response to the post-apocalyptic challenge is to broaden future outlooks and extend the space of possibilities beyond carbon deadlines and tipping points: even in a warming and increasingly catastrophic world, it makes sense to struggle to avoid some future harm. Such long-haul hope could facilitate sustained engagement, as it allows the humble recognition that changes often happen slowly and in barely noticeable and unexpected ways. The longer timeframe might then also allow for the adaptation of one's activities (and strategy) to the ebb and flow of movement momentum and thus potentially incorporate learning from disappointments. In addition, an explicitly politicizing response to the temporal challenge involves the articulation of a justice-oriented, post-apocalyptic environmentalism (Cassegård & Thörn, 2022; Kenis, 2021; Sunnemark, 2023; Swyngedouw, 2013). In this approach, as interpretations of the past and present shift, hope becomes less about averting feared future disasters and more about *interrupting* ongoing socio-ecological injustices. As a source, this hope draws on the collective capacity to prefigure the justice pursued – crucially, on the dimensions of recognition and participation (Schlosberg, 2004) – and to engage in the often difficult struggle involved in moving among manifold tensions, both of which take time (Hayes & MacGregor, 2023). However, such post-apocalyptic hope involves the sometimes painful work of acknowledging severe limitations and dealing with ensuing rage, despair and loss that often arise as a result (Cassegård, 2023; Head, 2016; Wettergren, 2024).

Given the different narratives and temporalities in the movement, there are partly related but distinct interpretations of hope, which differ not only in what to hope for and where to draw hope from, but also on how to proceed.

Given the ambiguities and uncertainties that are bound to narrative and temporal struggles to imagine future possibilities, and the potential ensuing despair and powerlessness, cultivating hope in the context of climate breakdown also entails an *emotional* struggle.

8.1.3 Hope as working with emotions

Since hope is the *emotion* of future possibility, it functions as something one not only sees, but, crucially, also feels (Wettergren, 2024). In Chapters 6 and 7, I approached hope as being shaped within broader emotional constellations that can involve emotions such as fear, anger, confidence, joy and togetherness, as well as powerlessness, grief and despair. Moreover, hope is not only individually experienced: given a widespread need for hope in the face of climate breakdown, participants in the climate movement tend to reflexively *work* with hope (Pickard, 2021; Stuart, 2020).

Specifically, I have studied the emotional dimension of hope through participatory observations among local Belgian Extinction Rebellion (XR) groups. In addition to constituting a prominent section of the Belgian climate movement, XR has a particular approach to how it "emotionalizes" climate protest (Neckel & Hasenfratz, 2021). Through explicitly and reflexively articulating, communicating, evoking and regulating emotions, XR members aim to break through denial by facilitating acknowledgment of the present emergency and enabling people to act accordingly (Knops, 2021a). This emergency narrative opens a particular space of possibility, wherein climate breakdown and socio-ecological unravelling can be treated as exceptional problems, and where disruptive and urgent action can still make a difference within a limited time interval (Anderson, 2017). However, as White (2024a, 2024b) notes, emergencies are also declared out of a feeling of powerlessness. While they can contain post-apocalyptic elements, they are mainly apocalyptically oriented to avert future harm, making their timeframes ambiguous, or even having a tendency to oscillate (Cassegård & Thörn, 2022).

In Chapter 6, I contributed to recent literature on emotions among climate movements by unpacking emotion work that occurred during the process of preparing, enacting and debriefing an XR action of mass civil disobedience.

Consistent with recent literature (Lorenzini & Rosset, 2023; Martiskainen et al., 2020; Pickard, 2021; Poma & Gravante, 2024), I analyzed how this movement organization sought to mobilize by explicitly invoking both fear and anger. I thereby highlighted that, in practice, they have an ambiguous relation to publicly performing anger (also see Kleres and Wettergren (2017a); Poma and Gravante (2024). Moreover, participants anticipated and experienced collective joy, overcoming their sense of isolation and gaining a sense of togetherness (Knops, 2020; Pickard, 2021). Action was thereby mainly seen as a means to cultivate hope, instead of conceiving action as requiring hope. Because action can bring collective joy, overcome isolation and facilitate the feeling of togetherness, it can offer a sense of possibility (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017a). While the strategic failure of the disobedient action thwarted the straightforward achievement of these emotional outcomes, the participants coped with this by highlighting another kind of emotional success through recalling moments of joy and sharing their disappointments – both of which fed into a sense of not being alone in the face of climate breakdown. In the context of powerlessness, collective action then not only acted as a source of hope, but participants also actively pursued hope through partaking in action, treating action not only as a means, but also as an emotional goal (also see Wettergren (2024)).

Chapter 7 contributed to recent literature on struggling with hope in the climate movement (Cassegård & Thörn, 2018; Kleres & Wettergren, 2017a; Nairn, 2019; Stuart, 2020). This chapter focused on XR's regenerative culture – their internal program of emotion management (Sauerborn, 2022; Westwell & Bunting, 2020) and, more specifically, on how the active hope approach (Macy & Johnstone, 2012) proposes a collective answer to the emotional problem of keeping up hopes. By drawing on ethnographic data, I analyzed how these active hope workshops facilitate the channeling of emotions into hope, starting by engaging in mutual recognition and by exploring sources of confidence in the self and in natural and social environments. Drawing on this, participants engaged in acknowledging limitations by "honoring pains": encouraging participants to share fear, anger, loss and despair. While XR thus cultivates a space in which to share emotions that deviate from dominant feeling rules, its practice also involves navigating contradictions in these feeling rules. While the active hope approach is aimed at opening up to new

possibilities and re-imagining pathways for change, in practice, this is limited by XR's ambiguous temporalities, in which it seems barely possible to limit self-accelerating climate change. Nevertheless, a fully post-apocalyptic position is not embraced. As it becomes unclear what to hope for and how to achieve it, participants respond by falling back on a non-representational mode of hope, oriented to an unarticulated sense of future possibility (Cook & Cuervo, 2019). They keep this up by relying on togetherness in movement activity.

Findings from both chapters on emotion work in XR point towards the importance of understanding the climate movement as a *collective scaffolder*. To explain how this works, McGeer (2004) refers to how parenting that seeks to develop a child's sense of possibility involves providing cognitive challenges and emotional comfort, as well as the child learning to contain and tolerate frustration when meeting limitations. Through this process of supportive scaffolding, individuals learn to confidently recognize themselves as agents of possibility as well as to depend on others to some extent. Climate movement participants, then, can be peer scaffolders, as they acknowledge each other's hopes and limitations and become partly invested in each other's agency. This communal embeddedness can make hope more resilient as it aids in dealing with disappointment, instead of sliding into despair (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017a; McGeer, 2004; Wettergren, 2024). Building on Kleres and Wettergren's (2017a) argument that movements scaffold through collective action, I add that in the case of XR, they also do so via conscious backstage emotion work, cultivating hope through seeking sources of confidence as well as exploring limitations. That participants actively seek this should be understood in the context of narrowing possibilities: as climate breakdown further escalates, this mutual work of scaffolding can allow participants to cope with disappointment, despair and powerlessness by keeping up a sense of hope. As such, these findings point to the importance of having a clear *source* of hope – in this case, the movement and how it provides a sense of togetherness – that can also support a non-representational sense of possibility to fall back on when other pathways are not perceived as viable.

8.2 Going forth: limitations and avenues for further research

This section discusses some of the main limitations of this research project and suggests avenues for future investigations. I start by going into the limitations, considering the who and what of my empirical studies.

I conducted qualitative research from an immersed position as a "co-conspirer," aiming to provide in-depth knowledge of the movement from the inside. While this positionality provided access to some key organizers who actively and reflexively shape the movement, I paid somewhat less attention to the political margins within this movement (although I tried to compensate for this in the last interview rounds). Moreover, I also did not explicitly take into account demographic margins that can often provide clear critical reflections on the main ways of doing things within this movement (see e.g., ClimatejusticeCamp (2019b). As such, various social hierarchies, such as those based on class, ethnicity and migration background, have not been thoroughly taken into account, which has undoubtedly left invisible many traits of dominant tendencies within the movement. This is directly relevant not only to a more comprehensive understanding of the climate movement, but also to how participants relate to hope.

In relation to future research in this respect, first, in my analysis, I emphasized how movement participants draw on togetherness in the movement as a crucial source of hope. However, creating togetherness across political, cultural and demographic differences is often challenging. Moreover, the participation and recognition dimensions of justice (Schlosberg, 2004) have become more salient and more politicized within the movement since I started this research project. As such, one avenue for future research would be to more explicitly take into account togetherness *for whom* and on *whose terms*, and how this relates to hope.

Second, larger axes of social inequalities structure social distributions of hope: one's social position significantly influences one's capacity to perceive future possibilities (Cook & Cuervo, 2019; Petersen & Wilkinson, 2015). While I have

mainly looked at how the climate movement creates hope "from the bottom up" through scaffolding, I have not taken into account how this interacts with more "top-down" structured distributions of hope. A fruitful avenue for future research might therefore consider the comparative differences between social positions.

This point can be further extended to include a more comparative analysis of how different contexts shape hope. One way might be to look at how varying national, political, democratic and civic histories shape how respective climate movements work with hope – for example, in post-communist or formerly colonized countries. Another dimension for comparison might take into account geographical and social factors enhancing climatic vulnerability that lead to more clearly post-apocalyptic social realities, as pointed out by Kleres and Wettergren (2017a). One could begin by comparing the more typical Western and Northern European cases with the experiences of Southern European countries, or compare these contexts with various perspectives of the global South. Moreover, various social movements might be moving within different contexts and towards different goals. The object of study here was the climate movement, sometimes tentatively drawing out how it is influenced by others, such as feminist, decolonial and anti-racist movements. However, a more systematic comparison of various social struggles and movement trajectories could be a further way of broadening understanding of hope in social movements.

Another area of limitation concerns how my research has been more explorative and tentative, moving forwards while going back and forth between the literature and the collection and analysis of data. While this approach has enabled productive serendipity, it has also limited the systematic nature of this study. More specifically, I started my research trajectory with theory, studying the literature on civic engagement and environmental sociology (see, respectively, Vandepitte (2023); Vandepitte, Vandermoere, and Hustinx (2019). As such, I only incrementally started drawing more on the rich fields of social movements and the sociology of emotions, which might have allowed a more thorough grasp of the particularities of the climate movement. Moreover, the literature on hope, and more specifically on hope among climate change and climate movements, has developed significantly since the

beginning of this research project. I have tried to weave these insights into my own understanding while staying relatively close to my empirical material. As such, I have not taken a more systematic and synthesized approach that would bring together analytical dimensions such as active vs passive, individual vs collective, core vs auxiliary, mere vs real and representational vs non-representational hope (Cook & Cuervo, 2019; Nairn, 2019; Stuart, 2020; Terpe, 2016). Wettergren's (2024) recently published model of hope as an "emotive-cognitive chain of evaluation" offers the most comprehensive overview. Given its relevance, future research could start from this more extended theoretical base and move on from there to further integrate understandings of hope.

Finally, as my approach has been to remain close to the messiness of the data, this study has been limited in its ability to explore the various ways hope is approached in different intellectual and political traditions. One avenue of further study would be to connect thick empirical understandings to hope's genealogies. Gili and Mangone (2023) have recently started exploring the intellectual history of hope within the canon of sociology. Cassegård and Thörn (2022) have done this more specifically in their analysis of the environmental movement's narratives of progress, apocalypse and post-apocalypse between 1870 and 2020. Given the increasingly post-apocalyptic times, researchers in the traditions of critical sociology frequently look back to conceptualizations of hope from other catastrophic periods – such as Walter Benjamin's hope without optimism, developed during the rise of fascism (Cassegård & Thörn, 2022; De Cock, Nyberg, & Wright, 2019). One way of furthering this research would be through connecting and comparing these approaches with how hope is theorized in anthropological, science and technology and literature studies, which have also taken to heart concepts such as living amidst catastrophe (Stengers, 2015), ruins (Tsing, 2015) and ecological mourning (Craps, 2023). Another option would be to dig into more explicit anarchist understandings that link hope and catastrophe in often clearly post-apocalyptic ways (Anonymous, 2011, 2018; Kroijer, 2019, 2020). This could possibly offer inspiration for theorizing and practicing how not to be afraid of the ruins, as "another end of the world is possible" (Çubukçu, 2020).

8.3 Implications for movement practice

In the final sections of this dissertation, I will consider some recommendations for practice. First, I will look more broadly at the implications of my research that might be useful in aiding movement struggles with hope. Second, I will focus more narrowly on recommendations concerning hoping in the struggle. Given the exploratory and case-based nature of my research, these recommendations should be taken tentatively: I do not intend to provide recipes for hope, but rather to present a loose collection of suggestions and guidelines for the art of working with hope, while acknowledging that one can always take different routes.

8.3.1 Struggling with hope

Rebecca Solnit's (2016) seminal work, *Hope in the Dark*, has for the past four years been a major inspiration to my understanding of hope. Her attack on what she calls "premature despair" and people's attachment to loss, leans on recognizing the always and already occurring changes, the past victories and the possibilities hidden in the imperfectness and inherent uncertainty of our world, where the formidable messiness of reality often surpasses both our dreams and nightmares. Her concept of hope does not mean denying harsh realities, but facing them and then plunging actively into the "dark" of the unknown. The stake of the discussion for Solnit is the potential of hope to instigate and sustain active engagement and social struggle.

Looking back, to a large extent I understand her work as developing guidelines to maintain non-representational hope (Cook & Cuervo, 2019): a sense of hopefulness that the future holds possibilities, even if one cannot yet articulate them. According to several research participants advocating this, one piece of advice for those struggling with hope would be to read Solnit's book. Stopping there, however, would do injustice to the many experiences and insights shared by the movement collectives I had the honor to study.

Hope requires work

The first main insight I have tried to make central to this dissertation is that hope – at least the kind of active hope responsive to reality – requires *work*. Hope is not only about a basic belief in future possibility. Our context is characterized by ongoing climate breakdown, as well as being culturally infused with passive optimism, combined with a tendency towards despondency about our own capacities to contribute to the societal changes we hope for. In this context, upholding a basic belief in future possibility requires cognitive-emotional work. It requires collective effort so that hope can be informed and kept in touch with changing contexts and it requires us to be emotionally open to those changing possibilities as well as limitations. Moreover, it also requires work to move among the many contradictions encountered along the pathways we enact, in the relations we construct with the temporal dimension of climate change, which is both always and never too late, and in the conflicting emotions we might feel. Realizing that hope might not stay with us by itself but needs to be sustained, tempered, and socially supported can help us develop a reflexive relation to it – that is, it can enable us to pursue hope more consciously.

An important insight by Nairn (2019) that I have tried to build upon concerns recognizing the emotional and other work involved in carrying the burden of struggle against climate breakdown or against the actors causing and perpetuating it. This recognition can be the first step in sharing this burden more widely, both within movements and in society at large. “Collectivizing” hopes, disappointments and despairs can be the start of learning to deal with them in more healing ways.

Hope is a learning process

A further step in constructively dealing with hope in processes of societal transformation is conceiving of it as a complex and often slow learning process. Cultivating a reflexive relation to hope seems needed to learn the collective capacity of hoping (Dinerstein, 2015). This process advances through the exploration of possibilities and limitations (McGeer, 2004), through trial and error, through struggles and disappointments (Amsler, 2016; Dinerstein,

2015). Learning from failure can be a way of tempering hope from becoming too elevated. This is what Nairn (2019) calls "educating hopes." Learning to hope, then, happens in part in embodied ways. It proceeds by doing. But I believe there is more to it.

I would posit that it is important to create and sustain movement infrastructures that focus on collective self-development. Moreover, collecting and remembering experiences also seems key: past victories and historical transformations can also inform possibilities (Solnit, 2016). In this sense, apart from a small number of narratives such as the "Copenhagen failure," the climate movement in the global North seems more future oriented and might be missing the chance to cultivate its history as a source of hope. In addition to gathering those histories, another way of countering this might be to connect generations of former and current movement organizers. This seems all the more important as we live in a context where civil institutions such as unions or mass political parties – which have long organized to construct a clear idea of the future – have been disappearing, thus adding to the struggle to articulate what to hope for, how to move towards it and where to draw it from (White, 2024a).

One way I have sought to specify *how* movement participants learn to hope is through cultivating *literacy* in the dimensions of narratives, social relations to time and emotions. Narrative literacy involves recognizing basic analytical dimensions: identifying the problems, goals, proposed actions, main actors, messengers and audiences. It seems just as important to be learning how to move among narrative differences, while acknowledging the movement's evolutions and, in this way, not only to focus on what is still not yet, but also to draw out what it could become.

Linked to this, temporal literacy involves learning to make explicit our relations to time – possibly through conflict – and going beyond the binary of *it* being too late or not, but rather specifying for *who* and *what* it might be too late, in *which* ways, as well as acknowledging the multiple paces existing within climate movements. In an increasingly post-apocalyptic world, seeing possibilities beyond proposed deadlines and amidst ongoing losses also seems crucial in orienting us. Furthermore, some research participants moved from

relying on rather singular and narrow short-term hopes towards broadening their timeframes. This implied acknowledging that changes can take a long time to occur or to become visible, attuning expectations and strategies not only to a movement's high-mobilization period, but also finding possibilities in periods in-between the peaks. This might require temporarily moving from concrete hopes to non-representational hope – the feeling of future possibility without being able to articulate what to hope for – or as Solnit (2016, p. 22) visualizes it: "*a sense that there might be a door at some point.*"

Emotional literacy might start by learning to name and articulate emotional experiences, as well as gaining insight into how emotions are shaped by contexts through various feeling rules. Drawing on Summers-Effler (2002), I would argue that it is key to develop and expand settings for deviant emotions, spaces in which emotions such as anger, despair, loss and fear with respect to climate change (but also in broader ways) can be articulated, acknowledged and shared.

Hope is not optimism, nor is it merely positive

Hope can be pursued and experienced as a "pleasant" emotion. The feeling of future possibility can be comforting as well as energizing, and hope can be nourished by collective joy and togetherness. However, hope is not merely a "positive" emotion of possibility – it revolves around uncertainty and a limited capacity to attain your possible-but-unlikely aim. As such, hope is analytically different from higher degrees of certainty associated with optimism and pessimism.

Acknowledging limits and uncertainties therefore is key to tempering hope: keeping hope in tune with reality and preventing it from naively overstating possibility. This, however, can involve unpleasant and even painful emotions such as fear, grief or despair (McGeer, 2004; Wettergren, 2024). So-called "negative" emotions, therefore, do not necessarily exclude hope (nor would they necessarily impede mobilizing). Indeed, hope can be educated by reflexively and collectively relating to losses and failures, disappointment and despair (Nairn, 2019).

Amidst climate breakdown there are few reasons for optimism (Head, 2016). While optimism can therefore be rejected, hope can still be salvaged (Macy & Johnstone, 2012; Solnit, 2016). This kind of "hope without optimism" is about acknowledging the dire truth without the illusion that things will likely be fine or that "everything will get better," while still maintaining room for commitment to uncertain future possibilities (De Cock, Nyberg, & Wright, 2019). Working with hope is often an arduous task, but if it was easy, we would not call it a struggle.

8.3.2 Hoping in the struggle

Hope beyond the given

Hope is a means to take an alternative reality seriously in order to help it become more likely (Dinerstein, 2015). Movements should therefore not stick with what seems feasible from the start. Rather, hoping can involve exploring what seems merely possible and, by articulating and acting on it, make it more of a real possibility (Stuart, 2020). This process of exploration involves both surpassing and acknowledging limitations that temper hope. In the context of climate change, appropriate hope seems tempered by what is physically possible – and thus acknowledging the already ongoing nature of climatic catastrophes – while refusing to be tempered by what seems politically possible within the given order, which protects itself at the cost of climate breakdown. As such, it might be important to reject some hopes as delusional and indeed potentially harmful. Given the strong need for open, unruly and emergent thinking and acting in transformative environmental politics, I consider hope too important to give up. Confusing delusional hopes with *all* hope and therefore rejecting it seems to be akin to throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Instead, Greta Thunberg might be right when she states: "*We can no longer let the people in power decide what hope is.*" Instead, learning to hope beyond the given might take us further.

Togetherness is a key source of hope

Climate movements can function as collective scaffolders: they can provide mutual support to keep up one's inherently precarious hopes. By cultivating

feelings of togetherness, climate movements can provide the necessary emotional energy to help endure setbacks and face limitations as well as explore possibilities. Climate movements do so not only through collectively acting in the streets, but also through focused emotion work in spaces that are more internal or backstage to the movement. Providing a sense of togetherness can help in coping with despair and powerlessness, as "*the weight of climate change, like any weight, is easier to bear with others*" (D. Roberts, 2013). Having one's worries, fears, despair and anger acknowledged and shared by others can legitimize feelings that are appropriate to the dire mess we are in but that might not be accepted as such in wider society. This might not only sooth the soul, but can be a crucial step for building critical consciousness (Summers-Effler, 2002). Knowing "you are not alone" can create confidence and enable more open resistance, as possibilities often grow when being connected. Togetherness is a key way in which movements provide sources of hope. However, imagining and cultivating togetherness given the many differences and inequalities within climate movements, as well as in broader ways, can also be a struggle that demands work.

Tying hope to action

While passive hope tempers action and relies on waiting for the unlikely to happen, active hope motivates one to make it happen (Terpe, 2016). Given this promise of active hope, it is not surprising that climate activists claim the latter and reject the former, affirming that "action and hope go together." But hope might not be strictly necessary for action – for example, anger or "doing the right thing" may also be motivators, separate from hope or in combination with it. Hope can connect to action by sustaining it over time, helping one to face hurdles and setbacks. Conversely, action can also breed hope. For this reason, collective action can also become the instrumental means to the emotional goal of cultivating hope, as it helps to cope with powerlessness by providing a sense of togetherness. Equally important, action also breeds hope by breaking open the façade of the given. In this sense, struggle can generate possibility.

Epilogue

By way of ending, I want to return to question this dissertation started with.

“And? Is there hope?”
Well, it depends. What does hope mean to you?

My answer would be: Of course! As long as we are alive, a sense of future possibility is possible. But hope demands collective work for it to be cultivated and tempered. In the ebb and flow of how movements move, it can be a struggle to keep hope afloat. But then, where else is hope to be crafted but in the struggle?

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Appendix I – respondent matrix

Interviews with organizers in the Belgian climate movement, conducted by the author

Nr	**Pseudonyms**	**Type of organization mainly involved in**	**Main role**	**Month and year of interview**	**Interview duration**	**On/-offline**
1	Pjotter	International large NGO and multiple grassroots organizations	Campaigner (employed), grassroots activist	July 2019	Not timed	Offline
2	Sarah	National platform organization	Coordinator (employed)	July 2019	1h.49	Offline
3	Elias	Grassroots organization	Volunteer supporter (employed)	July 2019	2h20	Offline
4	Annie	International large NGO and multiple grassroots organizations	Campaigner (employed), grassroots activist	February 2020	2h06	Offline
5	Mark	National small NGO	Community organizer (employed)	February 2020	1h49	Offline
6	Els	Grassroots organization	Grassroots activist	March 2020	1h02 + 55m	Online
7	David	Grassroots organization	Grassroots activist	April 2020	2h34	Online

8	Angela	Grassroots organization	Grassroots activist	April 2020	2h06 + 1h55	Online
9	Paul	National small NGO	Educator (employed)	April 2020	2h52	Online
10	Hermes	Grassroots organization	Grassroots activist	May 2020	1h42	Online
11	Joyce	Grassroots organization	Researcher	June 2020	1h28	Online
12	Joshua	International large NGO, grassroots organization	Coordinator (employed) Grassroots activist	August 2020	1h24 + 1h31	Online
13	Rob	Grassroots organization	Grassroots activist	August 2020	1h33	Online
14	Axel	National small NGO	Researcher (employed)	September 2020	1h47	Offline
15	Ward	National small NGO	Researcher (employed)	September 2020	1h48 + 42m	Offline
16	Hilda & Dirk	Grassroots organization	Grassroots activists	September 2020	2h07	Offline
17	Francine	National platform organization	Policy officer (employed)	October - November 2020	1h01 + 1h04	On & offline
18	Sally	Grassroots organization	Grassroots activist	November 2020	2h02	Offline
19	Kim	National small NGO	Grassroots activist	November 2020	2h06	Offline
20	Andrea	Grassroots organization	Grassroots activist	December 2020	2h57	online

For reasons of anonymity, the table displays research participants according to their type of organizations, but does not link further detailed information to the pseudonyms, in order to prevent identification.

Research participants were predominantly white, higher educated young adults between 18 and 35, with seven respondents being 35 to 70 years old. Most interviewees lived and worked in the main cities like Brussels (n=6), Antwerp (n=5) and Ghent (n=7), with two respondents living in smaller towns. Eleven of them identified as men, nine as women and one person identified as non-binary. Interviews each lasted one to three hours each.

All specific organizations involved are:

a. International large NGO's: Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth

b. National platform organizations: Bond Beter Leefmilieu (*Union better environment*), Klimaat Coalitie – Coalition Climat (*climate coalition)*

c. National or regional small NGO's: Vredesactie/Tractie (*peace action/Traction),* Denktank Minerva (*think tank 'Minerva'),* Arbeid en Milieu (*Labor and environment)*, LABO vzw, Climaxi

d. Grassroots organization: Climate Express, Climate Justice Camp, Extinction Rebellion, Grootouders voor het klimaat *(Grandparents for the climate),* Youth4Climate, Students4climate, Scientists4climate, Act for Climate Justice, Ineos Will Fall

Appendix II – informed consent file

Informed consent file for interviews and participant observations

Hello,

My name is Ewoud Vandepitte. I'm a Ph.D. student in sociology at the university of Antwerp, under the guidance of professors Frédéric Vandermoere and Ilse Loots. With this letter I want to shortly introduce my research to you:

What?

I'm researching the climate justice movement. I want to understand how people in this movement deal with climate change and issues of social justice, with hope and the future. Therefore I will study how this movement organizes itself and how participants talk about these themes.

How?

Through interviewing participants of the climate movement and organizing a group talk. Besides this I will also carry out participatory observation. That means I will join actions and meetings for a few months. More informal talks during or around the actions and meetings can be very insightful for the research as well.

Do we have to participate?

No. Everyone is of course free to choose whether or not they want to participate in the research. At any given moment, you can let me know you do not want to take part (anymore). If you prefer that some things you say or do will be left out of the research, you can let me know without any problems.

And the data?

I won't collect or process any personal names. All collected data will be treated confidentially: no one else, except for me, will have insight in the data, nor process it. In addition, I will take the necessary precautions to safely store this data, for a maximum period of 10 years.
In eventual publications, it will not be possible to link data to certain specific persons.
If you want to, you can of course have insight in personal data, and possibly have it adjusted.
I would love to keep you informed about the final results of the research.

Questions?

If you have questions or remarks, you can always direct them to me.
you can also contact me at Ewoud.vandepitte@uantwerpen.be
Or you can contact Frédéric.vandermoere@uantwerpen.be
and Ilse.loots@uantwerpen.be

I hereby confirm to have read the above information on the study, and to participate on a voluntarily basis to this research:

YES
NO

I agree with this interview being audio-recorded

YES
NO

This simplified informed consent file was approved by the ethical commission of the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Antwerp (file number: SHW_19_49).

Appendix III – Author Contributions

All chapters:

Ewoud Vandepitte – preparing research, data collection, data analysis, drafting, and revising the manuscript.

Chapter 7: "*Looking for a way out too": Hope through emotion work in Extinction Rebellion*

Ewoud Vandepitte – data collection, data analysis, conceptualization of the chapter, drafting the introduction, literature, findings, and conclusion sections, revising the chapter.

Karl Malmqvist – data analysis, conceptualization of the chapter, drafting the literature section, giving critical feedback, and revising the chapter.

Appendix IV – Summary

In this dissertation, I study hope in the Belgian climate movement. Against climate breakdown and societal inertia, a need for hope is becoming salient. While climate movement organizations struggle to cultivate and maintain hope, this collective challenge is understudied. This gap is addressed through qualitative and ethnographic research as a co-participant in the Belgian climate movement. I understand hope as a collective yet complex cognitive-emotional process. This thesis systematically unpacks how climate movement participants work with hope along the dimensions of (i) narratives, (ii) temporalities, and (iii) emotions. The data illuminates how the Belgian climate movement is multi-faceted and multi-paced, linking hope to other emotions in their front- and backstage activities.

First, I show how a wide range of climate movement actors envision and strategically narrate diverging pathways for change that varyingly relate to climate justice as an overarching metanarrative. Next, I demonstrate how participants navigate competing temporalities of urgency and long-haul hopes by learning to rethink past, present, and future possibilities. These narrative and temporal processes shape what to hope for, where to direct hope, and what sources to draw hope from. I then adopt an emotion-sociological lens to reveal how local Extinction Rebellion groups struggle to maintain hope and cultivate it through collective action and backstage emotion work. I show how hope is cultivated to persist in adverse circumstances, involving managing emotions like anger, fear, and grief. While concrete hopes can be hard to sustain amidst narrowing possibilities and increasing uncertainty, a sense of togetherness within the movement acts as a key source of hope, aiding in coping with disappointment and despair. By furthering theoretical and empirical knowledge of “hope as struggle” within the Belgian climate movement, this dissertation aims to enrich the collective work to see, feel, and act on transformative possibilities.

Appendix V – Samenvatting

Hoop als Strijd: Werken met Narratieven, Temporaliteit, en Emoties in de Belgische Klimaatbeweging.

Hoe gaat de Belgische klimaatbeweging om met hoop? Tegenover klimaatontsporing en maatschappelijke inertie wordt de behoefte aan hoop steeds duidelijker. Dat ook klimaatorganisaties worstelen met hoop is een onderbelichte uitdaging. Daarom onderzoek ik de Belgische klimaatbeweging kwalitatief en etnografisch, vanuit een positie als mede-deelnemer. Ik benader hoop als een collectief cognitief-emotioneel proces en analyseer hoe klimaatactivisten met hoop werken langs de dimensies van (i) narratieven, (ii) sociale tijdskaders (temporaliteiten), en (iii) emoties. De Belgische klimaatbeweging presenteer ik als veelzijdig en veel-tijdig, waarbij hoop linkt aan meerdere emoties, en dit in zowel publieke als 'backstage' activiteiten.

Ten eerste toon ik hoe een scala aan klimaatorganisaties paden van verandering vertolken, en deze op verschillende manieren linken met klimaatrechtvaardigheid als overkoepelend verhaal. Vervolgens laat ik zien hoe deelnemers handelen binnen concurrerende tijdskaders van urgentie en lange-termijn hoop, en hierdoor navigeren door mogelijkheden in het verleden, heden en toekomst te leren herdenken. Deze narratieve en temporele processen bepalen mee waarop te hopen, waar hoop op te richten, en uit welke bronnen hoop te putten. Via een emotie-sociologische benadering toon ik hoe lokale Extinction Rebellion-groepen proberen hoop te cultiveren via collectieve actie en 'backstage' emotiewerk. Daarbij werken ze met emoties zoals woede, angst en verdriet en dient hoop vooral om vol te houden in moeilijke omstandigheden. Te midden van krimpende kansen en stijgende onzekerheid wordt concrete hoop moeilijker te behouden. Een gevoel van samenhorigheid binnen de beweging fungeert echter als een belangrijke bron van hoop, wat helpt om te gaan met teleurstelling en wanhoop. Door te bouwen aan theoretische en empirische kennis van "hoop als strijd" binnen de klimaatbeweging, wil dit proefschrift bijdragen aan de capaciteit om kansen tot maatschappelijke transformatie te zien, voelen en ernaar te handelen.