



Holding space for climate justice? Urgency and ‘Regenerative Cultures’ in Extinction Rebellion Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

This article explores tensions between urgency and climate justice in a climate activist movement context through the case study of Regenerative Cultures in Extinction Rebellion Netherlands. We argue that urgency obstructs climate justice through encouraging ‘whatever-it-takes’ mentalities that sideline justice concerns in the pursuit of action, and through propelling activist burnout, which causes climate justice movements to falter over time. We situate Regenerative Cultures as a tool used by Extinction Rebellion Netherlands to negotiate these obstructions to climate justice posed by urgency. Regenerative Cultures comprises an attempt by Extinction Rebellion Netherlands to ‘hold space’, away from the urgency which pervades the movement, in order to afford activists the time to experiment with modes of inner transformation. The techniques used by activists to ‘hold space’ for these transformations constitute a form of utopia building. In these utopian spaces, activists learn to acknowledge and manage feelings of urgency, thereby constituting a form of emotional and affective inner transformation. However, the utopian spaces of Regenerative Cultures are isolated from the rest of the movement. As a disconnected utopian enclave, the political potential of ‘Regenerative Cultures’ as a prefigurative vehicle for social change is blunted. This case study is testament to the difficulties involved in carving out spaces to practice prefigurative forms of politics in a context of planetary emergency, while simultaneously outlining the necessity of such spaces for cultivating the inner changes required to enable and sustain projects of climate justice.

1. Introduction

In December 2021, activists from Extinction Rebellion Netherlands (XRNL) - a national group of Extinction Rebellion, “a decentralised, international and politically non-partisan movement” that uses nonviolent methods of action and civil disobedience to pressure governments into acting on climate change (Extinction Rebellion Global, 2023) - responded positively to a request from the antiracist organisation Kick Out Zwarte Piet (KOZP) for support in an upcoming action. Organised on a ship formerly owned by the Dutch East India company on display at the Scheepvaartmuseum in Amsterdam, the action’s aim was to call for the abolition of Zwarte Piet by drawing attention to the violent legacies of Dutch colonialism which are inseparable from representations of the character (NL Times, 2021). In Dutch folklore, Zwarte Piet (‘Black Pete’) serves Sinterklaas (St Nicholas) in his annual delivery of gifts to children in early December. Up until the last decade, Zwarte Piet had been frequently popularly depicted as a ‘blackened man’ or Moor by white

people wearing blackface with “thick red lips, golden earrings [and] an Afro wig” dressed in Dutch Golden Age-era page costumes (Wekker, 2016: 139). While a lightning rod for debates in the Netherlands about racism since at least the late 1960’s, when the first anti-Zwarte Piet protests took place (Wekker, 2016), the controversy surrounding Zwarte Piet has grown increasingly prominent over the past decade, with homegrown anti-racist movements like KOZP (see Spaans, 2020) and a Dutch iteration of the Black Lives Matter movement (Epping, 2020) working to bring issues of racism and colonialism into the Dutch public consciousness.

A few days after the action took place, a group of activists posted a statement on Mattermost, a forum used by XRNL to organise, communicate, and disseminate information, expressing concern that engaging in active support for other social justice issues, like opposing Zwarte Piet, could dilute the focus of XR:

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What we have difficulty with is that this demand is not part of XR's core issue: the climate. XR Netherlands has three demands.¹ The appearance of Black Pete is not one of them. (Anon, Mattermost, 6th December 2021)

The concern that exerting energy in support of KOZP could cloud the focus of XRNL was met with significant backlash in the Mattermost discussion, with many activists arguing that engaging in solidarity work with anti-racist and other social justice struggles was a vital part of XRNL being a 'serious' climate movement:

It is untenable to not be anti-racist, anti-capitalist, anti-patriarchal. XRNL cannot be a serious climate movement without being anti-racist. [...] Black and brown people are dying in the world in massive numbers from the climate crisis. I think we will come to regret not being strong on this if we shut down expressions like this. (Anon, Mattermost, 7th December 2021)

For XRNL activists sympathetic to the action, engaging in anti-racist solidarity work through supporting the KOZP protest was viewed as part of a wider commitment to climate justice.

Navigating this tension between the urgent need to make swift and decisive progress to halt climate change, on the one hand, and the need to foreground and deliberate on questions of climate justice, on the other, is as prescient for wider society as it is for XRNL. As the window of opportunity to avert significant warming narrows amidst continued inaction from state and international governing bodies, with there being "at least a greater than 50% likelihood that global warming will reach or exceed 1.5 °C in the near-term, even for the very low greenhouse gas emissions scenario" (IPCC, 2022: 30), there is a marked dissonance between what is needed to minimise the potential harm done by climate change and what is *actually* happening. This has engendered an acute sense of urgency amongst White, affluent populations in the global North (Pew Research Center, 2021), who have mostly been shielded from the climatic fallout of the violent colonial capitalist extractivism on which the wealth of their societies is contingent by virtue of the fact that the effects of climate change are overwhelmingly concentrated in the global South, where this extractivism takes place (IPCC, 2022; Sultana, 2022a). This relatively newfound sense of urgency is evidenced by the proliferation of 'climate emergency' declarations by international, state, and local governments across the global North over the past five years (Cretney & Nissen, 2022). While the cultivation of urgency is intended to foster action, it risks legitimating a "whatever-it-takes" mentality which sidelines justice concerns deemed to overcomplicate or slow down action on climate change (Hulme, 2019). As important as it is to act swiftly and decisively on climate change then, it is equally as important to "maintain spaces for reflexive political deliberation as the temporalities around us are collapsing into fragmented sites of emergency" in order to ensure that action does not reproduce existing forms of oppression and inequality, and is instead guided by justice concerns (Haarstad et al., 2023: 11).

Inspired by the Zwarte Piet flashpoint, we use XRNL as a case study to explore the dynamic between urgency and climate justice in a climate activist movement context. In particular, we examine how XRNL activists use 'Regenerative Cultures' – a concept which stresses the significance of transforming the affective, emotional, ethical, psychological and spiritual components which constitute an individual's 'inner life' in

¹ The three demands of XRNL to which the statement refers are: first, that the Dutch state 'tell the truth' about the scientific realities of climate change; second, that the Dutch state 'act now' to halt climate change through the imposition of strict emission targets to make the Netherlands climate neutral by 2025; and, third, that the Dutch state 'let citizens decide' on policy related to climate change through establishing a Citizen's Assembly, requiring Dutch parliament to appoint a group of citizens to deliberate with relevant experts and stakeholders to make proposals for state policy (Extinction Rebellion Netherlands, 2023a).

bringing about wider social change (see Pulido, 2003, in Bond et al., 2020) – to 'hold space' for themselves and others to manage feelings of urgency and thereby retain commitments to climate justice. Below, we outline some different pathways to pursuing climate justice, focusing specifically on activism, and highlighting urgency as a potential obstruction to climate justice. We then situate XRNL as a rich empirical site from which to probe the dynamic between urgency and justice, framing Regenerative Cultures as a promising conceptual tool to navigate this dynamic. Drawing on empirical material comprising interviews with 14 activists from XRNL and XRNL documents pertaining to Regenerative Cultures, we outline the potential and limitations of Regenerative Cultures in practice. Our conclusion then distils our analysis to outline the relevance of this contribution for scholars and activists pursuing climate justice in times of climate emergency.

2. Activist pathways to climate justice

Calls for climate justice have proliferated over the past 20 years, as climate change projections continue to worsen and the material realities of climate breakdown make themselves felt through increasingly regular extreme heat events, wildfires, and floods (IPCC, 2022). Climate justice is defined in a plethora of ways across the activist, legal, institutional, and academic circles in which it is most commonly used, though it is generally used to identify and contest the unequal impacts of climate change among different socio-economic and racialised groups in the global North and South (Jafry et al., 2019). For example, Indigenous communities face exposure to more severe mental health symptoms related to climate change because of historical socio-economic and cultural ties to degrading local environments (Middleton et al., 2020). Meanwhile, disabled communities are disproportionately negatively affected by extreme weather events linked to climate change because of ongoing health inequalities manifested in exclusionary evacuation plans (Connon & Hall, 2021). Responses to climate change can also reproduce and exacerbate existing forms of socio-economic privilege and marginality (Rice et al., 2021; Sultana, 2022b). Geographers have drawn out the spatialities of this 'climate apartheid', particularly in urban contexts (Rice et al., 2023). For example, 'climate urbanism', a neoliberal city development strategy involving market investments in urban infrastructures and technological fixes, has been argued to insulate wealthy urban elites from the worst effects of climate change (Long & Rice, 2021; Porter et al., 2020). Low-carbon investments have also been shown to produce novel forms of 'eco-gentrification' which displace poor migrant and working class communities (Rice et al., 2019).

Climate justice refers to a host of related inequalities then, and is pursued in different ways across space and time (Meikle et al., 2016). For instance, the most recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report (IPCC, 2022) draws out three key dimensions of climate justice. First, *distribution* refers to "the allocation of burdens and benefits among individuals, nations, and generations" (IPCC, 2022:7). Second, *procedure* concerns "who decides and participates in decision making" (IPCC, 2022:7). Third, *recognition* entails "respect and robust engagement with and fair consideration of diverse cultures and perspectives" (IPCC, 2022:7). These are markedly different to activist understandings of climate justice, as articulated in Moore and Russell's (2011) *Organising Cools the Planet*. Moore & Russell (2011) offer four activist understandings of climate justice. Climate justice as environmental justice centres inequalities in susceptibility to and responsibility for the effects of climate change. Climate justice as evaluative model foregrounds questions of fairness in proposed solutions to climate change. Climate justice as global justice focuses on geographical inequalities between the global North and South. Finally, climate justice as "living in a good way on Mother Earth" (Moore & Russell, 2011:19) draws from Indigenous activism to underscore the need for global North capitalist societies to redefine their relationships with the more-than-human world. These distinct understandings of climate justice share three assumptions. First, justice should be based on a rights-based framework which

centres collective rights of groups over individual liberties. Second, justice should serve the needs of marginalised groups. Third, climate justice needs to be pinned to a long-term approach to social transformation that avoids mentalities of urgency and crisis regularly used to sideline justice concerns (Moore & Russell, 2011).

The concept of climate justice has its roots in activism, with concerns surrounding local climatic degradation having been a prominent feature of anti-colonial campaigning among communities in the global South for decades (Guha & Martinez-Alier, 1997; Dhillon, 2022). This activism is led from the majority-world, where people and places are racialised as ‘other’ by the ‘developed’ minority world, despite comprising the majority of the Earth’s population (Alam, 2008). The interventions of majority-world activists are significant because the impacts of climate change are disproportionately located in their communities, their communities historically have contributed little in the way of greenhouse gas emissions, and they generally lack the economic resources to adapt to and mitigate these effects (Sultana, 2022b). Majority-world climate activism foregrounds how interlinked global historical socio-political processes of oppression, including capitalism and imperialism, are manifested in local struggles surrounding issues like development, land rights, labour exploitation, and environmental hazard distribution (Schmidt, 2022; Sultana, 2022a). In grounding these processes in place, activists resist Western tendencies to equate the political with the global scale, producing the local as a vital arena for political resistance (Massey, 2005; Escobar, 2020). Majority-world activist movements engaged in place-based struggles across the globe have frequently collaborated on issues of climate justice, issuing a series of important international declarations including the 2002 Bali Principles of Climate Justice, the 2004 Durban Declaration on Carbon Trading, and the 2010 Cochabamba Declaration in Bolivia (Routledge et al., 2018). It is notable that these declarations were not produced through collaboration in conventional spaces of international cooperation on climate change, like the Conference of Parties (COP). Instead, majority-world activists carved out their own spaces of political legitimacy in resistance to global power relations that reproduce their marginalisation (Routledge et al., 2018; Derman, 2020).

Since the mid-to-late-2000’s, climate change has become a prominent issue of public concern across the minority-world, particularly in western Europe, North America, and Australia and New Zealand (Pew Research Center, 2021). Climate justice activism in the minority world originates in the struggles of marginalised groups, particularly amongst Indigenous peoples (Gilio-Whitaker, 2019), and the Black-led environmental justice movement of the 1980’s and 1990’s (Schlosberg & Collins, 2014). Minority-world climate justice activists have drawn important attention to the interwoven racial, economic and geographical inequalities which render particular groups expendable (Sultana, 2022b). Furthermore, while minority world nation-states may be responsible for historically high excess greenhouse gas emissions (Hickel, 2020), this should not mask significant disparities between privileged and marginalised groups across the minority world. A significant strand of this minority-world climate movement pursues climate justice via the institutional pathways through which justice is commonly pursued in these contexts, namely, NGO’s, policymaking and academia. There have also been notable attempts to pursue climate justice through the courts, as seen in the case of Milieudéfense (Friends of the Earth Netherlands) vs. Royal Dutch Shell (see Milieudéfense, 2023). While this strand of the minority-world climate movement has secured important victories in pursuing climate justice from the top-down, this paper focuses more specifically on activist pathways to climate justice in the minority-world.

In the past twenty years, there have been three distinct waves where climate activism has spiked in the minority world (Malm, 2021). The first of these waves was based in the UK and mainland Europe from 2006 to 2009, culminating in the 2009 COP 15 Klimaforum actions in Copenhagen (Chatterton et al., 2013). The second wave was based in the US, lasting from 2011 until the election of Donald Trump in 2016, and

included actions in support of place-based struggles surrounding the Keystone XL and Dakota Access pipelines, as well as the People’s Climate March in September 2014 (Malm, 2021). The ongoing third wave began in Europe in 2018 is defined by massive public strikes coordinated by organisations like XR and Fridays for Future (de Moor et al., 2021). Throughout these waves, the minority-world movement has been defined by a mix of ‘climate action’ and ‘climate justice’ framings of climate change (Smiles & Edwards, 2021). Climate action’ framings position climate change as an apolitical issue solvable through mitigation action within current socio-economic systems (Smiles & Edwards, 2021). Meanwhile, ‘climate justice’ framings stress that climate change cannot be addressed without attending to historical socio-political processes of oppression.

Climate justice has arguably been the dominant discourse for framing climate change and mobilising minority-world climate activists since the 2009 COP15 summit in Copenhagen (Smiles & Edwards, 2021). Then activists collaborated with activists in the majority-world through a series of protests and an alternative ‘climate summit’, connecting issues of climate change to the 2008 global credit crunch and producing the 2009 Klimaforum declaration (Chatterton et al., 2013). However, ‘climate action’ framings are still prominent in minority-world activist campaigns as a legacy of “traditional, liberal environmental protest groups” (Smiles & Edwards, 2021: 1453) like Greenpeace, and Friends of the Earth, with which environmental activism is associated in these contexts. Like majority-world activists, minority-world activist groups often configure the local as an arena of political struggle, connecting the acts of corporations or governments located in historical centres of power to their impacts in global peripheries through disruptive spatial morphologies including camps and blockades (Axon, 2019; Černík and Velicu, 2023). These minority-world climate activists thereby play an important role in conveying the historical socio-political processes through which climate change ties the minority- and majority-worlds together, advocating for a construction of place which is an emergent constellation of local and global processes, wrought through their interaction, tensions and struggles (Schmid et al., 2021).

Activists across the globe face a number of significant obstructions in their pursuit of climate justice, including state violence (Dunlap & Brock, 2022) and alienation from institutions leading mitigation (Jafry et al., 2019). Urgency is perhaps less self-evident as an obstruction to climate justice activism. Indeed, it seems like it would aid climate justice movements by mobilising potential activists (see Saunders et al., 2020). Furthermore, arguing against urgency could be seen to support the efforts of climate ‘delayers’ (Mann, 2021), who exploit justice concerns to attempt to obstruct action on climate change (Lamb et al., 2020; Ekberg et al., 2023). However, while there is an undeniable need for swift and decisive action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions (Hulme, 2019), scholars have recently begun to warn that urgency could impede the pursuit of climate justice (Bergman, 2021). For Whyte (2019; 2021) urgency functions as a ‘ticking clock’ which forecloses just pathways to climate action in two main ways. First, it produces a sense of desperation that encourages the selection of taken-for-granted solutions, like market mechanisms, to protect a taken-for-granted set of social relations predicated on marginalisation and inequality. Second, it obscures the slow, delicate processes of repair required to mend frayed relationships between marginalised groups and state institutions, as well as between people and the ecosystems in which they live (Whyte, 2019; 2021).

Similarly, Hulme (2019) argues that urgency impedes climate justice through producing ‘whatever-it-takes’ mentalities which prioritise lowering greenhouse gas emissions at the expense of addressing structural issues, like poverty, racism and colonialism, among others, which condition vulnerabilities to climate change. He focuses particularly on how such mentalities are produced through the expression of urgency in climate emergency politics. Emergency climate politics demand that other concerns be set aside to focus on climate action (Haarstad et al., 2023). This is incongruous with the kinds of emancipatory political projects required to address the vulnerabilities of different marginalised

groups and, thereby, deliver climate justice. Indeed, ‘whatever-it-takes’ mentalities can be used to legitimate unjust courses of action by obscuring who is leading them, where they take place, and who will be most affected by them. For this reason, a host of scholars warn that the sense of urgency surrounding climate change could be exploited by right-wing nationalist parties to usher in forms of fascistic and exclusionary politics which reproduce and even amplify existing forms of oppression (Wainwright & Mann, 2018; Bergman, 2021; Malm & Zetkin Collective, 2021; Patterson et al., 2021). Urgency can thereby entrench existing forms of inequality and oppression by placing attention solely on emission reduction, obfuscating the significance and different forms of social justice projects that need to occur alongside the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions in order to realise climate justice.

Urgency also hinders climate activism movements through fuelling activist burnout. Individual activists routinely scale back or cease their involvement in social movements because “the initial ‘fire’ of enthusiasm, dedication, and commitment to the cause has ‘burned out’, leaving behind the smoldering embers of exhaustion, cynicism, and ineffectiveness” (Maslach & Gomes, 2006: 43). While not specific to climate activism, the emotional forms of distress, such as eco-anxiety (Ray, 2020), ecological grief (Cunsolo & Landman, 2017) and environmental melancholia (Lertzman, 2015) unique to the issue of climate change augment regular drivers of activist burnout. The incomprehensible scale of climate change (Morton, 2013), and its existential significance for the future of life on earth (Stengers, 2015) confound conventional notions of progress that typically energise activists. This compounds the sense of urgency surrounding climate activism, which can encourage activists to throw themselves further into action without rest, producing a movement culture which valorises martyrdom (Gorski & Chen, 2015). This limits the capabilities of activist movements to pursue climate justice, because they cannot retain momentum for prolonged timespans. Urgency thereby obscures the pursuit of climate justice by diverting attention from political projects of liberation and relational repair that must accompany mitigation action, and, specifically in the context of activism, by driving burnout. These issues point towards two pertinent, interrelated questions that guide this inquiry. First, how do climate activists manage feelings of urgency to avoid burnout? And, second, how might these techniques inform an alternative temporal politics that supports the pursuit of climate justice?

3. Methodology: The case of Extinction Rebellion Netherlands

Extinction Rebellion emerged in mid-2018 out of a small British activist network called Rising Up, comprised of academics and long-time campaigners who had previously been involved in movements including Occupy (Taylor, 2020). This network was drawn together through shared concerns about the inability of contemporary democratic political systems to recognise and respond appropriately to the worsening effects of climate change (Taylor, 2020). Inspired by civil resistance literature (cf Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011; Sharp, 2012), they began a sustained campaign of mass civil action in the name of Extinction Rebellion, based around three key demands: first, that governments ‘tell the truth’ about the scientific and material realities of climate change; second, that governments ‘act now’ to lower carbon emissions; and, third, that governments ‘let the people decide’ through establishing a citizens’ assembly (Extinction Rebellion Netherlands, 2023a). XR actions are intended to achieve these demands through disrupting ‘business as usual’, communicating to the public the severity of the present ecological crisis, and demonstrating the alternative futures advocated by the movement (Jacout et al., 2019). They commonly involve mass occupations of public space and motorways, in the form of blockades (see Extinction Rebellion Netherlands, 2021a), as well as more specific targeting of corporations and political institutions seen to have failed the public through their inaction on climate change (see Extinction Rebellion Netherlands, 2022a). XR’s initial actions and message clearly struck a chord with the public, and, by providing an easily replicable model of

decentralised organisation, the group has grown exponentially, with groups now in over 80 countries (Gardner et al., 2022).

XR is organised as a sociocracy, a semi-horizontal method of governance defined by the organisation of people into small semi-autonomous² ‘circles’ to work on specific tasks and make decisions on issues outlined in their mandate; the use of elections to appoint people to circle coordinator and representative positions; and the use of consent-based decision-making, whereby all individuals in a circle must express consent for a decision to be actioned (Owen & Buck, 2020). Circles may be local or national in scope, and XR activists can participate in multiple circles simultaneously. National circles are grouped into six thematic areas, coming together in regular coordination circle meetings (see Fig. 1). This decentralised model of governance means that circles retain

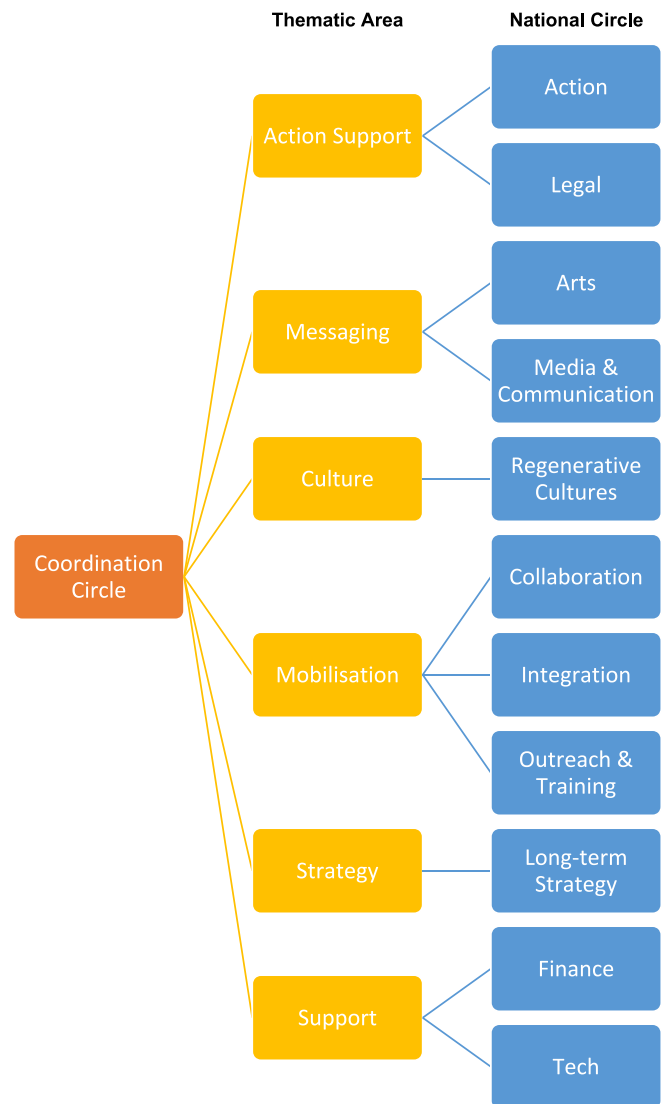


Fig. 1. Overview of XRNL thematic areas and active national circles (Extinction Rebellion Netherlands, 2023c).

² National circles that were active in the past but are presently dormant have not been included. Additionally, XR’s national-scale communities, which bring together activists with shared interests or occupations, and local-scale groups, which bring together activists living in the same area, are omitted from Fig. 1 for concision and clarity.

some autonomy over their political strategy and priorities (Gardner et al., 2022). Extinction Rebellion is, therefore, best understood as a heterogenous collective of circles, each of which may have its own distinct characteristics. Anyone can start an XR group, and thereby take action in the name of Extinction Rebellion, provided they follow XR's list of 10 key principles and values (see Table 1). These principles and values were developed by the movement's founders by drawing on Marshall Rosenberg's (2015) psychology of Non-Violent Communication, Joanna Macy's writings on spirituality and social transformation (cf Macy & Johnstone, 2012; Macy & Brown, 2014), as well as the aforementioned civil resistance literature (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011; Sharp, 2012).

There are two primary factors which make Extinction Rebellion a particularly appropriate case study for this paper: their deployment of both urgency and climate justice to mobilise activists, and the importance they place on the practice of 'Regenerative Cultures'. Many XR activists cite the sense of urgency to act on climate change as a key motivator for becoming involved with the organisation (Saunders et al., 2020). The movement communicates the message that "time is running out" through their hourglass logo, artwork, and actions (Bergman, 2021). Similarly, their introductory talk is specifically designed, in its content and structure, to instigate a sense of urgency which participants are invited to address through joining the movement (Stuart, 2020). Concurrently, themes of justice are regularly evoked by XR artwork and banners, as well as movement literature (cf Yamin, 2019). Additionally, there are numerous accounts of collaboration with activist campaigns 'from the margins' (see Extinction Rebellion Netherlands, 2021b), and support for other social justice issues, as in the case of support for KOZP (see Extinction Rebellion Netherlands, 2022b). Meanwhile, XR's deployment of Regenerative Cultures is significant in drawing explicit attention to the need for activists to manage feelings pertaining to urgency and avoid movement burnout. While far from the first social movement to recognise that providing activists with emotional and physical support is important for sustaining campaigns over time (Ray, 2020), XR are notable in their attempts to structurally embed a commitment to activist support through the establishment of 'Regen' circles, as they are referred to colloquially within XR. By examining Regenerative Cultures and their practice in 'Regen' circles in XRNL, it is possible to gain insight into the strengths and pitfalls of a conceptual tool which may be of value for other movements in navigating tensions between urgency and climate justice.

What follows is based on an analysis of publicly available XRNL documents and semi-structured interviews with 14 XRNL activists in late 2021 and early 2022, nine of whom were involved in XRNL 'Regen' circles at local and national levels or had been within the previous three years. All participants have been given pseudonyms to preserve anonymity, while the local circles with which they are involved are not included for the same reasons. Length of involvement ranged from a few months, in two cases, to over three years in others, reflective of the high turnover within social and environmental movements. The remaining interviewees were involved with other circles, including Action and Logistics, Outreach and Training, and Inclusion and Power. The first

author conducted and digitally recorded the interviews in English, lasting between 30 and 90 min and followed up in six cases with a second interview to clarify previous comments and ask further questions. Both authors first independently coded the transcribed interviews inductively and deductively, then conducted a round of axial coding that generated a set of themes. Neither of the authors, both native English-speakers residing in the Netherlands, is involved in climate activism outside of the scope of this study. As such, we are both 'outsiders' to XRNL. 'Outsider' academics face particular problems with questions of reciprocity and the value of academic knowledge for activist groups (Gillan & Pickerill, 2012). However, we believe 'outsider' research on XRNL is valid given that both authors belong to the same white, middle-class demographic which makes up the bulk of XR activists, and XR explicitly valorises and courts academic knowledge production.

3.1. Regenerative Cultures in XRNL

The notion of Regenerative Cultures refers to the need for 'degenerative' capitalist societies to "replace sustainability or growth as guiding principles with concerns for mutual replenishment" (Harms, 2022: 517). The idea that contemporary capitalist societies are premised on the degeneration of the planet, through exploitation of both intra-human and human-non-human relationships is one with a long academic history, particularly in ecological Marxism and eco-socialism (Foster and Burkett, 2016) and postcolonial and indigenous critique (Whyte, 2017; Dhillon, 2022). Proponents of Regenerative Cultures argue that efforts to redress these exploitative relationships, and thereby deliver structural changes to society, must partly be led 'from the inside out' (Ives, Freeth & Fisher, 2020). This refers to the transformation of the affective, emotional, ethical, psychological and spiritual components that constitute the inner lives of humans (Pulido, 2003, in Bond et al., 2020; Woivode et al., 2021). The notion that the transformation of the imperceptible inner dimensions of humans constitutes a significant political intervention has been a feature of feminist and non-representational theory for some time (see Pile, 2010). Both of these fields, to different degrees (Zerilli, 2015), stress that these inner dimensions are not really interior at all, but imbricated in wider social processes (Ahmed, 2004). This renders inner work as a vital political practice which has the capacity to intervene in, and thus challenge, existing social relations (Massumi, 2015).

'Regen' circles are charged with leading these inner transformations in XRNL. In order to do so, they must carve out defined spaces in the movement which enable and encourage activists to undergo the labour required to bring about inner transformation. The activists interviewed frequently deployed the metaphor of 'holding space' common to therapy, social work and activism to describe the capacity of 'Regen' "to create a supportive emotional and/or physical space" within which activists "can work through and recover from affects which may be otherwise overwhelming" (Downing et al., 2021: 4). "Space," suggests Black feminist organiser, facilitator and mediator adrienne maree brown (2021: 5), "is never fixed by literal, physical dimensions. It varies according to histories, dynamics, emotional nuances, moods, pressures. It does change. It is change. We hold space for each other to change at the individual and collective level." 'Regen' is therefore an attempt to produce spaces in XRNL that enable activists to pursue these inner transformations. In light of this, we frame 'Regen' as a mode of prefigurative politics, "an inherently spatial and performative genre of political activism" (Jeffrey & Dyson, 2021: 643) in which the shoots of new worlds are built in the shell of the present (Pickerill & Chatterton, 2006). Prefigurative spaces are advantageous in politicising the micro-scale, and creating durable skills, knowledges and resources (Jeffrey & Dyson, 2021). However, they risk political impotence at a collective or structural level if activists utilise them to withdraw from societal struggles (Levitas, 2013), and can be co-opted to support neoliberal notions of individual resilience (Carvalho & Ferreira, 2022).

The notion of Regenerative Cultures in XRNL therefore refers to a

Table 1

XRNL Principles and Values (Extinction Rebellion Netherlands, 2023b).

| Principles and Values |
|--|
| 1) We have a shared vision of change |
| 2) We set our mission on what is necessary |
| 3) We need a Regenerative Culture |
| 4) We openly challenge ourselves and this toxic system |
| 5) We value reflecting and learning |
| 6) We welcome everyone and every part of everyone |
| 7) We actively mitigate for power |
| 8) We avoid blaming and shaming |
| 9) We are a non-violent network |
| 10) We are based on autonomy and decentralisation |

prefigurative spatial praxis, or ‘holding space’, to instigate inner transformations. We outline how ‘Regen’ circles ‘hold space’ to resist urgency, affording activists time and space to learn to manage and process feelings of urgency pertaining to climate activism. However, as we go on to illustrate, the wider political implications of Regenerative Cultures are constrained by the isolation of ‘Regen’ spaces from the rest of XRNL.

3.2. ‘Holding space’ for activists to manage urgency

The sense of urgency surrounding climate activism was repeatedly argued by those in ‘Regen’ circles to contribute to the problem of burnout:

If you would slow down as an activist, you would be more in tune with grief. You would probably start to feel deeper actually into what is going on and also into your own powerlessness or your own incapacity to actually turn this whole thing around. So, it’s easier to just keep on top of things until you crash than to feel your way through it, and a lot of people are way too into doing mode because it might be that they are afraid of what they would start to feel if they would do less. (Brix, Therapists circle)

Urgency is envisioned here to preclude activists from ‘slowing down’ and grappling with the emotional heft of climate activism, with many activists seen to prefer staying in ‘doing mode’ – or pre-occupying themselves with as many tasks as possible – as a coping strategy. For Julia (Therapists circle), many activists avoid engaging with ‘hard emotions’ like anxiety and grief – “they want to do something but, you know, it’s often from those unsettling emotions that they act”. This illustrates an understanding of a culture of martyrdom within XRNL, which renders the work of ‘Regen’ circles all the more important.

Interviewees outlined distinct practices through which ‘Regen’ spaces were produced and maintained. Interviewees involved in ‘Regen’ described going for guided forest walks (Mark, national ‘Regen’ circle), intended to encourage activists to “admire, appreciate and enjoy” the more-than-human lifeforms around them (XR Malvern, 2023). This practice is intended to ‘hold space’ for activists to reconfigure their relationships to the ‘more-than-human’ world, with this inner shift viewed as a vital component of just political action by scholars influential to XR’s formulation of Regenerative Cultures, including Joanna Macy (cf Macy & Brown, 2014) and Glenn Albrecht (2019). Interviewees also framed silent grief marches as a practice used to realise ‘Regen’ spaces (Una, national ‘Regen’ circle). These constitute a form of public action in which XR activists wearing dark clothes or funeral attire march through towns or cities in silence (Arnold, 2023). They are intended to ‘hold space’ for activists to reflect on, and pay respect to, past, present and future lives affected by climate change-induced loss. Silent grief marches represent a means through which activists in ‘Regen’ reclaim social space, illustrating to the public their transformative potential for reconfiguring emotional relationships. Another spatial practice unique to ‘Regen’ was empathy and grief circles. These were framed as sites of healing by one interviewee: “it can be really heavy to really give space to the grief, um, and not just let it be there but really like dive into it. But it can also be so healing that you’re not, like, pushing it away all the time but that you, um, allow it to be there” (Eleni, local ‘Regen’ circle). Another interviewee described the flexibility of this circle structure, for use in “whatever situation you need it whenever feelings need to be shared” (Marcia, local ‘Regen’ circle). All of these practices outline the flexibility of spatial practices through which activists in the ‘Regen’ circle endeavor to carve out room in XRNL for activists to engage in the labour required for inner transformation.

In forging these spaces, ‘Regen’ is understood to provide the basis for a healthier coping strategy for feelings of urgency, enabling activists to retain their commitment to climate justice work over a longer period of time:

Climate change can be quite intense [...] many people don’t really like internalising that because it takes a lot of energy to actually deal with it, which is ok because it’s people’s right not to want that but, like, in some way, the climate grief part or the anxiety it can give or the anger it can give people, you do also feel like it’s important to give that an outlet. That needs to be facilitated sometimes because, if you don’t and you have all these feelings, then you stay stuck with it on your own. And I think ‘Regen’ is a part which gives kind of that allowance of all of these feelings about the climate crisis. (Kay, national ‘Regen’ circle)

More than simply affording room for inner transformations to occur, Kay’s comments outline that ‘holding space’ is an active process of intervention. ‘Regen’ facilitators therefore play a key role in producing and maintaining appropriate conditions to encourage activists to engage in inner work. ‘Regen’ facilitators use an array of techniques to form spaces conducive to inner transformation, with interviewees naming singing, hand signals, meditation and breathing exercises, and check-ins and check-outs as important tools. Singing was envisioned to produce strong “feelings of community [and] closeness” (Mark, national ‘Regen’ circle), while hand signals were seen as a means of inviting activists to participate in ‘Regen’ spaces in an embodied way (Una, national ‘Regen’ circle). Meditation and breathing exercises were also framed as devices for “ground[ing] people” in their bodies (Marcia, local ‘Regen’ circle). Check-ins and check-outs were seen to enable facilitators to cultivate activists’ awareness of their interior state. They were also framed as a way of bookending ‘Regen’ spaces, and thereby playing a pivotal role in enabling activists to negotiate the transience of these spaces. These techniques for ‘holding space’ were all envisioned to “pull people into the moment” and thereby “put a stop to everything else in life” (Marcia, local ‘Regen’ circle), outlining their capacity to resist urgency.

The principle of ‘no blaming and shaming’ emerged as central to the attempts of ‘Regen’ to produce alternative spaces for activists to undertake inner work:

I think for regen it’s an important role of holding space and not let it be too much blaming and shaming because it’s not helpful for the actual process [of pursuing climate justice]. (Eleni, local ‘Regen’ circle)

This is XR’s eighth key principle, and is drawn from Marshall Rosenberg’s (2015) theory of Non-Violent Communication, which advocates for restorative forms of justice that repair frayed relationships. Rosenberg (2015) contends that cultural conditioning, which is primarily reproduced through the way humans communicate with one another, has alienated humans from a ‘natural state’ of compassion through normalising ‘violent’ means of communication. To undo this cultural conditioning and foster more harmonious and mutually respectful relationships at personal, interpersonal and societal scales, Rosenberg (2015) argues that humans need to alter their verbal and non-verbal communication practices away from a basis of violence – through blame, judgment and domination – and towards empathy and compassion. While other scholars have argued that this principle of ‘no blaming and shaming’ is used by XR to avoid antagonisms and thereby stay ‘beyond politics’ (see Smiles & Edwards, 2021), interviewees described how ‘Regen’ spaces needed to uphold this principle in order to encourage activists to commit to performing this inner work.

Through these techniques and practices of spatial differentiation, ‘Regen’ is envisioned as a utopian ‘island’ within XRNL where activists can resist the urgency that pervades the rest of the movement:

What we tend to try to do is kind of create spaces that allow it [slowing down] to happen, so either dedicated spaces with workshops or sharing circles or kind of more emotional evaluations of actions. And so we try to create these moments where people kind of, I don’t know, stop and reflect and take space for themselves to also honour their feelings, um, so I think that’s what we try to do [...] we try to create these little islands in a way where people can maybe

sometimes experience to be present in a slightly different way than they're used to. (Una, national 'Regen' circle)

This framing imbues the 'Regen' spaces themselves with transformative potential, as a prefigurative pathway to social change. Being present in these spaces is thereby a means for activists to reconfigure their 'emotional habitus', or how they relate different emotions to cognition, perception and action (Kane, 2001). By reconfiguring the emotional habitus of its activists, XRNL uses 'Regen' to challenge normative ideas of the political efficacy of 'good' and 'bad' feelings (Ahmed, 2010) and illustrates how feelings of grief and anxiety may form a healthier basis of action towards climate justice if time and space is embedded for them to be properly acknowledged and processed. In producing and maintaining spaces for activists to regenerate themselves by contemplating and attending to their emotional and physical needs, the work of 'Regen' circles actively resists and disrupts urgency, and instead attunes activists to the complex, non-linear temporalities of regeneration required to sustain their involvement in activism (Zantvoort, 2021; Harms, 2022). 'Regen' spaces thus cultivate activists' capacities to pursue climate justice by producing distinctive spaces, and maintaining appropriate conditions to teach them how to work with urgency while not being overwhelmed by it, and thereby enabling them to stave off burnout and preserve long-term commitments to climate justice.

3.3. Isolation of 'Regen' in XRNL

Previous studies of Extinction Rebellion have found that 'Regen' circles tend to exist on the movement's peripheries (Westwell & Bunting, 2020; Zantvoort, 2021). That this marginality persists in XRNL is therefore not surprising. However, we argue that this marginality is significant in constraining the capacity of 'Regen' to enable the pursuit of climate justice work because 'Regen' spaces become a disconnected utopian enclave, while the rest of XRNL is given over to urgency. This sense of disconnection was a source of frustration amongst interviewees involved with the 'Regen' circle:

What always feels a bit weird to me is that it [‘We need a Regenerative Culture’] is one of the core principles and that we have a separate circle that is talking about these things and the rest of the movement is like, ‘What is this?’ (Kay, national 'Regen' circle)

Kay went on to describe a feeling that being part of 'Regen' was akin to "living on a separate island" from the rest of the movement. This means that the teachings of 'Regen', with regard to managing and addressing urgency, do not undergird the whole of the movement. This has the effect of further peripheralizing 'Regen', as it is seen to "unnecessarily [slow] down people and the movement and its projects" (Mark, national 'Regen' circle). This mischaracterisation of 'Regen' reproduces its marginality in XR, as it may seem less appealing or politically important than other circles in the movement (Westwell & Bunting, 2020), and is viewed as an impediment to the urgency demanded by climate change due to the focus on imperceptible forms of inner work. The thing that makes 'Regen' radical in terms of its potential to aid climate justice work is therefore configured as a negative in a wider context of pervasive urgency. This was seen to stem, in part, from implicit power dynamics that privilege action over the work of 'Regen': "You have A[ction] and L[ogistics] being at the forefront – ‘Hey, we're the main ones!’ – and then everybody else being pulled with them" (Marcia, local 'Regen' circles).

This separation of 'Regen' from the rest of the movement results in its instrumentalization as a guide to self-care practices, which avoids grappling with feelings produced by this sense of urgency and reduces 'Regen' to a defined set of practices for 'recharging the batteries' of activists:

['Regen' was] only seen as recharging your batteries, and not only that but it was also limited to, like, yoga and meditation... so, it

wasn't only reduced to recharging your batteries but a very specific way of doing that. (Mark, national 'Regen' circle)

Activists contrasted the use of techniques for 'holding space' in 'Regen' to a more superficial-level utilization of these techniques in other circles, with the example of check-ins "where we go blasting through everybody, like, 'Hey, how-are-you-doing-how-was-your-day? The end. Let's go to the meeting'" (Marcia, local 'Regen' circle). This reduction of 'Regen' to a set of defined practices, as opposed to a prefigurative spatial praxis, removes the political promise of transformation. Without 'holding space' open for activists to redefine their relationships to temporalities of urgency, 'Regen' just becomes a sticking plaster for a much wider issue, simply re-instating the prominence of urgency by situating it as something to be managed rather than actively resisted. For some activists, 'Regen' was designed precisely to perform this sticking plaster function: "It's there to ensure that XR doesn't burnout and it's there to ensure that everybody is able to function long term in XR" (Paul, national Action and Logistics circle). However, this misunderstands the power of 'Regen' as a transformative spatial praxis in its own right, and instead places its value solely in its capacity to support the movement's overtly public forms of action (Zantvoort, 2021). Divorced from its utopian political space, then, 'Regen' risks becoming appropriated to encourage individual self-care and personal resilience as solutions to manage urgency, undermining the need for coordinated collective approaches to resist it (Carvalho & Ferreira, 2022).

This production of 'Regen' as a marginal utopian enclave of XRNL also appears to have the effect of making 'Regen' activists consider Regenerative Cultures as something beholden to designated 'Regen' spaces, rather than something that can be scaled beyond the movement:

We're expected to go so fast, all the time, um, so fast. When you don't have time to listen to your feelings, you don't have time sometimes to breathe [laughs] in the joys of your fucking life. Um, and I think regen is a reminder of that. Like I hope and I should and we try to also, like, sow it, how you say, knit it into everyday life for everybody as well. And I feel like it is slowly seeping through, but some people see it as just an XR thing. But it should be, we should be living by the example. (Marcia, national 'Regen' circle)

Illustrating a narrowed imagination of its wider political potential, rather than highlighting the uses of 'Regen' in wider socio-political contexts of emergency and crisis, interviewees primarily narrowed its potential for 'holding space' to the internal culture of XRNL. This reproduces its disconnection from the rest of the movement, and fails to intervene in the urgency that pervades the rest of XRNL. Simultaneously, this blunts its social prefigurative capacity, as the public is afforded few glimpses of this alternative utopian space. This understanding of 'Regen' supports a vision of its spatialities as fixed, rather than composed of relations stretching near and far. This effectively depoliticizes the local as a site for change, and insists on its capacity only to provide a refuge from existing problems, instead of a means to intervene in, and thus challenge, existing social relations.

4. Conclusion

In the aftermath of the statement criticising XRNL's support of the Kick Out Zwarte Piet (KOZP) action posted on Mattermost, the national 'Regen' circle intervened to provide support to the activist that posted and co-wrote it. He recalls:

There was always a lot of compassion for [the emotional burdens placed on activists] and just solving conflicts. Actually, ['Regen'] reached out to me also, for example, after the statement... They contacted me free of judgment, so that's how they... yeah, that was nice of them, I think. So, that's one working circle but, of course, they also try to - it's just also something that should be the culture in the whole movement. It shouldn't just be that circle that does it, but

everyone should sort of be responsible for that culture. (Martin, national and local Outreach and Training circles)

While we have argued that Regenerative Cultures hold conceptual and methodological promise for enabling activists to carve out and hold spaces to learn to manage feelings of urgency, and thereby retain and deepen commitments to climate justice, our empirical data illustrates that, in practice, it is not so straightforward. Martin's comment points to the persistent marginality of 'Regen' in XRNL, framing their approach as one still largely confined to 'Regen' circles rather than undergirding the entire movement. He wishes that everyone movement-wide would be responsible for embracing that culture, but he himself has not opted to do the inner work it requires.

The reason 'Regen' holds so much potential is precisely why it remains marginal in XRNL: it instigates the long, difficult, and materially intangible work of transforming activists' inner lives so that they may become 'a condition of possibility' for the emergence of just worlds (Gibson-Graham, 2006: 7). With Regenerative Cultures' central premise being that inner lives cultivated through centuries of colonial capitalism must be transformed in order to instigate meaningful change, it serves to complicate faith in technological innovation and green capitalism as viable engines for just futures. However, without serious, sustained commitment to embedding space and time for this work in projects of climate justice, it risks becoming an isolated utopian island withdrawn from political struggle in the social arena. Indeed, the case study of 'Regen' in XRNL is testament to the difficulty in 'holding space' to acknowledge, manage, and process urgency and its cognate emotional and affective processes, even when time and space is dedicated to this.

While previous scholarship on XR's Regenerative Cultures has shown how 'Regen' can transform the inner lives of activists through fostering novel emotional and affective subjectivities (Stuart, 2020; Sauerborn, 2022) and producing extended ethical obligations to more-than-human lifeforms (Harms, 2021, 2022), this has not been explicitly connected to the movement's pursuit of climate justice. Furthermore, this paper has contributed to existing scholarship on the difficulties in drawing out the political capacity of prefigurative spaces by focusing on the destructive potential of urgency in a climate activist context. Previous geographical scholarship has illustrated that prefigurative forms of politics can get stuck 'in the local' and risk political impotence if they become disconnected from social struggles, reinscribing the issues they are intended to dismantle (Jeffrey & Dyson, 2021). As a flexible and transient spatial praxis, 'Regen' spaces perhaps resist this tendency as activists cannot use them to withdraw from the world, though their marginality in XRNL limits their public visibility and, thereby, also their prefigurative potential. This case study also holds valuable lessons for understanding the complex nature of urgency in the pursuit of climate justice. XRNL's Regenerative Cultures illustrate the importance of inner work in challenging urgency, and highlight some important techniques for producing spaces conducive to undertaking this work. Through these spatial techniques, Regenerative Cultures hint at wider possibilities for reformulating temporalities away from the linear 'ticking clock' conception which forecloses pathways for action and risks preserving existing forms of oppression and inequality (Whyte, 2019, 2021). Indeed, Regenerative Cultures appear particularly well-suited to challenge the 'whatever-it-takes' mentalities propagated through the manifestation of urgency in climate emergency politics because of the ways in which they engage people's affective and emotional registers (Hulme 2019; Haarstad et al., 2023).

The insights from this study generate a number of pertinent questions for future inquiry into the dynamics between urgency and climate justice. First, how might other climate activist groups 'hold space' for inner work as climate change increasingly makes itself felt in more drastic ways, feelings of urgent desperation intensify, and groups face calls to escalate their campaigns (Malm, 2021)? Second, acknowledging that climate activists have spent decades attempting to get governments to take climate change seriously, how might they overcome the pitfalls

of the urgency discourse without compromising their political vitality? Despite some progress in recent years, climate change remains primarily governed through strategies of obstruction and delay that preserve fossil fuel dependencies (Lamb et al., 2020; Ekberg et al., 2023). Hence, it is imperative that challenges to urgency not be construed and articulated in ways that support these delay tactics. With these questions in mind, XRNL's Regenerative Cultures should be seen as one imperfect yet admirable attempt at producing a nuanced temporal politics which engages critically with urgency and slowness in a climate activist context. Many more attempts will be needed to move forward. As Brix (Therapists circle) reminds us by evoking scholar-activist Bayo Akomolafe (see Akomolafe & Benavides, 2022): "the times are urgent, let us slow down".

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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