Fast slow: Imagining climate futures beyond the end of the world

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Abstract

This article addresses the call to 'act now' in response to climate change, in a context where 'end-thinking' appears dominant in popular culture and climate activism. Building on literature from Geography and International Relations, I develop an argument against the linear, globalised accounts of a homogenous future present in some of these calls, and argue for a focus on the affective and everyday register, and how people go about making their lives viable. In making this argument, I draw philosophical insights from a performance work by artist Sonia Hughes called, 'I am from Reykjavik'. In this work, Hughes builds a hut over the course of seven hours, to ask how, as a Black woman, she makes herself feel at home. Drawing inspiration from the 'slow time' of this building project, and by bringing work on environmental politics into conversation with affect theories, the article presents the concept of Fast slow. This concept, first developed to describe an architectural process by Lovett et al., captures a sense of impatience for change, with hesitation and ambivalence in terms of how we act for a better future. Overall, the article argues against the linear and depersonalised ideas about time and society prevalent in some elements of climate activism, and joins others who are calling for a deeper consideration of how we imagine the climate crisis. Thinking change and the future in a different register is important to avoid the climate crisis becoming weaponized as part of a polarized, populist politics.

Keywords

Affect, climate change, future, politics, performance

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Introduction: critical thinking in end times

There is a collective mood, prevalent across popular culture as well as climate activism, that we are living at the end of the world. A family memorial by Greta Thunberg titled, *Our House is on Fire: Scenes of a Family and a Planet in Crisis* (2020)*,* a popular novel by Rumaan Alam, *Leave the World Behind* (2021), and Netflix film *Don't Look Up* (2021) suggest some of this shared structure of feeling. These real and fictional depictions of apocalyptic futures are mediated to us alongside the collective experience of the Covid-19 pandemic and climate emergency, increasing global inequalities, the war between Russia and Ukraine, Israel's war against Gaza, and populist and authoritarian leaders emboldened to make new claims to power. This article does not dispute the various challenges we face - from catastrophic loss of wildlife and species, heightened toxicity and pollution, to brutal wars and heightened violence. What I examine is the dominance of 'end-thinking' (Huysmans, 2023) and 'extinction scripts' (Robson, 2025) in critical thinking, and their capacity to shape creative responses to current global challenges. I argue that this way of thinking risks reproducing a story about one humanity, travelling together towards a common future, and in doing so, casting aside questions of politics and of cultural difference. This story, which emerges from serious and indisputable concern about our environmental futures, is unhelpful, and I present resources for thinking otherwise.

I address the question of how we imagine climate futures beyond ideas about the 'end of the world' through a recent performance work by artist Sonia Hughes called, 'I am from Reykjavik'. In this durational work, Hughes builds a hut over the course of 7 hours, to ask how as a Black woman she makes herself feel at home. Nominally, this work is not about climate change; it is about 'race, claiming space and belonging' (project website), and was influenced in part by the Black Lives Matter protests in the summer of 2020. However, I argue that in its focus on the affective and the everyday register, it provides philosophical insights into how we imagine alternatives to end-thinking. It imagines the present and future in plural and lively, passionate and responsible terms, whilst refusing to subscribe to homogenising and fatalistic accounts of politics.

Many have argued that the apocalyptic accounts of the Anthropocene are *depoliticising* (Fagan 2024; Swyngedouw, 2010). Indeed, the philosopher Achille Mbembe argues that simply *announcing* the world's ending, through 'eschatological narratives and discourses of collapsology' (2024: 1) seems to have replaced the work of *thinking*. I contribute to these arguments, showing how narratives of the future as already known risk presenting politics as a moral choice, between accepting how the world is or rejecting it. What such narratives restrict is the sense of politics as an affective space of difference, where we have multiple ways of experiencing and understanding our worlds. Accepting there is no unequivocally good position, we must be cautious of claims we can fully escape or resolve the mess that we're in. As Michel Foucault puts it: 'we know from experience that the claim to escape from the system of contemporary reality so as to produce the overall programs of …another vision of the world, has led only to the return of the most dangerous traditions' (Foucault in Rabinow, 1984: 46). Building on Lisle (2016), I argue for hesitation, ambivalence and doubt in considering how we act politically, drawing on the legacy of the postcolonial, feminist and poststructural scholarship that emerged from the collective experience of the Second World War. This tradition of work is highly attuned to how different responses to crisis and suffering risk producing their own forms of horror, harm and violence (Lisle, 2016). It also reminds us that it remains critical to think different crises together.

The article contributes to Geography literatures that are expanding our imaginations in relation to communicating the climate crisis (Kumar et al., 2025; Hughes, 2024; Yusoff and Gabrys, 2011), as well as International Relations literature arguing against 'end of the world' imaginaries (Mitchell and Chaudhury, 2020). However, I am no expert in environmental politics. I arrive at these debates from my experience of working on nationalism in global politics, and from my academic home in a

Geography department. Ideas about end-thinking, and how they are enabled by a homogenous, linear account of time are familiar to me from studying how they underpin the nation. What has captured my interest is how some of the ideas that underpin the nation may be continuing in other forms. This suggests we need to think carefully about how we imagine people's lives 'here' and 'there' as we imagine various climate futures (Clark and Gunaratnam, 2019).

Whilst I therefore share the political impulse that we must act now, I present a philosophical and artistic thinking that emphasises plurality and ambivalence in considering how to act. The article is organised as follows. The first section looks at examples of 'end-thinking' in climate activist images and narratives and how they are problematic. The second section turns to literatures on environmental politics to show how considerations of culture and affect must be included in these debates (see Lewis, 2024). The article then introduces 'I am from Reykjavik'. Through ethnographic observations on the performance, and inspiration from Lovett et al. (2024), I develop the concept of 'Fast slow'. This concept brings together a sense of impatience for political change with ambivalence and hesitation about how we progress. I discuss how it contrasts with a homogenising account of politics, to acknowledge how we are differently situated in relation to histories of exploitation and injustice. Arguing for ambivalence and hesitation may seem a privileged, even irresponsible position to hold. I make this argument because of what I consider to be the dangers of lapsing into a unitary account of politics, where we disregard difference in the name of making progress towards a more civilized place. Overall, I turn to Hughes's performance to present resources for imagining change in alternative terms.

Act now to change the world

The activist call to 'act now', made against the context that 'we are on the brink of a global catastrophe' (Extinction Rebellion, 2024) has become prevalent in climate activism in the global north. The point is made visual in initiatives such as the 'climate clock', as seen in Union Square, New York - an eighty-foot-wide clock established to count the 'critical time window remaining for humanity to act to save itself' (Climate Clock, 2025) (Figure 1).[1] Other examples include the 'Carbon Clock' - a website that shows planet earth spinning against a dark background, that calculates how much time is left until the world's CO_2 budget is depleted, and 'for political decision-makers to take action' (Carbon Clock, 2025).[2] These images resonate with the text of movements such as Scientist Rebellion, who claim their attempts at warning publics about the effects of climate change have not worked, and that scientists need to change tact: 'What is the point in documenting in ever greater detail the catastrophe we face, if we are not willing to do anything about it?' (Scientist Rebellion website, 2025; Wyatt et al., 2024).

Writing against the grain, International Relations scholar Carl Death argues that climate policies are often presented in 'depoliticised and linear visions of universal, homogenous time, with little spatio-temporal or ecological plurality' (2022: 434). In a complementary vein, Geographer Ben Anderson asks whether climate change – rather than being straightforwardly imagined as 'overwhelming or unbearable or motivating' – may ensue feelings of detachment, indifference, even boredom (2023: 135). Both authors suggest we need to pluralise the stories and images through which climate change is understood as a political problem. This matters because some forms activism make climate change the *grounds* of politics, rather than an urgent issue to be addressed *through* politics. In so doing, they bypass the foundation of politics – difference. As Rancière puts it, 'politics is primarily conflict over the existence of a common stage and over the existence and status of those present on it' (1999: 26–7). In avoiding the contradictions at the heart of politics, we risk making politics into the work of enforcing agreement – where people must declare themselves 'with us or against us'. In an era where environmental issues are under threat from nativist and populist movements (Amin, 2023, Anderson and Secor, 2025, Paterson et al., 2024) and diverse
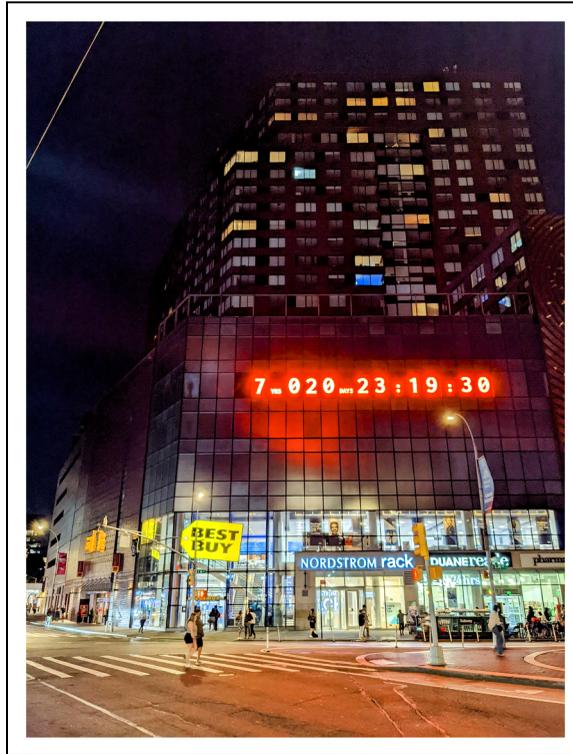
Figure 1. Climate countdown, Union Square, New York, July 2022. Photo by edenpictures via Flick.

forms of 'far-right political ecologies' (Allen et al., 2024), pluralising the ways climate change is addressed is essential to stop it becoming weaponised in a polarised politics.

I join these debates by turning to artistic and cultural approaches to develop alternative approaches to understanding and communicating climate change (see also Pigott et al., 2024; Strausz, 2024). As I've discussed previously, the arts work with 'sensations, affects, intensities as its mode of addressing problems' (Closs Stephens 2022: 10); as such, they provide an important supplement to the idea that politics is negotiated through reason. They provide other routes into imagining the climate crisis by engaging the everyday and affective register, of how people live, and make themselves comfortable in the world. At their best, the arts may 'interrupt dominant ways of seeing' (Closs Stephens, 2022: 10). Writing in the publication that accompanied the 2023 Hayward Gallery exhibition, 'Dear Earth: Art and Hope in Times of Crisis', in London, curator Rachel Thomas argues that we need different narratives for reflecting on the major environmental issues of our time, and that the arts can 'spark active and imaginative responses' (2023: 15). I present Sonia Hughes's work in this vein. But firstly, I turn to another example of visualising the future through a clock.

Countdown clocks

Another example of visualising the future in relation to continued global warming is found in the NASA Climate Legacies project (2024). This project features images of generational icons, and visitors to the website can input their own date of birth, to project the likely average global

surface temperature for when they, and 'Ayisha' (born 2024), 'Aidan' (born 2007) or 'Carlos' (born 1952) are 80 years old. On the website, these icons appear against the 'climate stripes', developed by Ed Hawkins, and originally produced for the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Sixth Assessment Report. The climate stripes features colours ranging from blue to yellow to red, with the palette representing the average global surface temperature as compared to the average temperature between 1850–1900. It then projects five potential greenhouse gas scenarios for the years 2021–2100, with red signalling the most extreme scenario of 4° warming. The stripes have been reproduced on t-shirts and posters to signal the problem of human-caused global warming. However, they confirm Death's point, about the tendency in climate policy work to imagine ecological futures in a 'global, linear and anthropocentric' way (2022: 441). Dixon critiques them for presuming a standard association between colour and meaning (e.g., red and purple - danger), and a standard unit of measurement for understanding changing planetary conditions (2023: 104). Indeed, these well-meaning initiatives ignore how people see and experience the world differently. They prompt us to ask: how do we address the planet-wide problem of climate change, whilst acknowledging the world is composed of 'different regimes of oppression: colony, race, class, gender, sexuality, ideologies, interests, and so on' (Chakrabarty, 2021: 17)?

In the early Twentieth Century, Walter Benjamin described a 'homogenous, empty' understanding of time, as one where time is assumed to proceed straightforwardly, and in a standardised way, where the future is mapped as already known (Benjamin, 1968). Within this temporal framework, society is presented as a homogenous actor. It therefore has a double logic: it can appear both self-sufficient and threatened. It can seem to have its own separate identity and yet seem at risk of disappearing. The risk with the NASA Climate Legacies project is that the future is presented as inevitable and common to all, and a sense of people's cultural and religious differences is diffused in an image of us as individualised figures, devoid of attachments. The activities that the generational icons are seen to engage in is instructive in this respect. We see the icons running, kicking a football, pulling a suitcase, playing golf, holding a walking stick: this is a privileged, Westernis and individualistic account of how people move through the world. As part of the important effort of raising awareness of the 'oneness' of the world, the many varied differences in how we live are stripped away.

One world, many worlds

To address the planet-wide problem of climate change, yet avoid collapsing the differences of the world, Carl Death turns to Africanfuturist climate fiction, to identify imaginations of the future that defy both the 'techno-optimist visions of ecological modernisation' and the 'apocalyptic nightmares of climate chaos' (2022: 43). Across policy, journalism, documentaries and social movements, Death says, 'universal, homogenous' storylines produce an account of politics as a 'heroic project' where we're called upon to 'intervene 'just in time'' (2022: 441). This is bound up with a sense of 'forwards movement', in turn 'bound up…with modern colonial and capitalist notions of time, progress, and productivity' (Linz and Secor, 2021: 108). In this section, I want to focus on the forms and the impact of this linear, universal and homogenous account of time. It's an account of time as progress or decline that has its roots in Enlightenment thought, and it's familiar from the way it also underpins how we imagine the modern nation (Anderson, 1991). This universal, homogenous understanding of time can only acknowledge difference when it is subsumed within it, and misses other ways of imagining the present and future that are already part of our worlds.

This account of time has many dimensions, including leaving nature behind to launch the time of society, distinguishing between civilized and less civilized populations according to their position on a journey of development, and it enables the emergence of a heroic, masculine subject that acts to

shape the world around them. Versions of this heroic actor can be gleaned in many popular films about climate collapse, as Gergan et al. argue in their discussion of different imaginations of the Anthropocene (2020: 93). As one example, they discuss the film, *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), where (white, male) scientist Jack Hall predicts the next ice age arriving due to global warming, and sets out to save his son where he is hiding from the rising tides at the New York public library. Gergan et al. argue that the film fits into a broader Christian narrative about a 'great deluge' enveloping society, and 'as a proxy for deep-seated anxieties of racialized Others 'taking over' the planet' (2020: 93). As such, it 'reiterates a Nature-Human binary in racialized terms' (2020: 93), as we watch scientist Jack Hall work out how to intervene 'just in time'. This idea of the heroic actor who can shape the future is indeed, present in imaginaries of climate change, but it's also familiar from ideas about a strong, robust nation that can lead us to salvation.

End-narratives have often been critiqued for how they reinscribe racial difference. Mitchell and Chaudhury argue that end-times narratives are not concerned with all worlds; rather, they are 'specifically concerned about protecting the future of *whiteness*' (2020: 310). Baldwin has developed an extensive critique of the racialised narratives at work in images and stories of climate change, showing how the figure of the 'climate change refugee', for example, does not amount to an innocent descriptor. Rather, he shows how this figure resonates with a racialised script about a future threat from climate change: it belies a fear of masses of people arriving in Europe from elsewhere, reproducing a form of 'racist humanism' (2017: 292, see also 2022). Meanwhile, Mirzoeff argues that the very effort of proposing a new geological era, through the marker of the Anthropocene, identifying a *single* manifestation of world change, 'is inevitably and persistently imbricated with concepts of race and racialization' (2018: 123). For Mirzoeff, 'the 'man' of the anthropocene in fact depicts the imperialist white, Euro-American man' (2018: 123). These contributions demonstrate how a universal, modern account of time is intertwined with efforts to order people according to race.

This point about how ideas about time are intertwined with the histories of the enlightenment and the rise of the nation are arguments that are central to postcolonial and decolonial theories. Yet, Chakrabarty reminds us that postcolonial and decolonial perspectives are often missing from many current debates around climate change. For example, 'climate-justice' – the argument that the burden of addressing climate change should be borne by those most responsible for greenhouse gas emissions, and not the poorest - is largely accepted in the humanities and social sciences. However, this position 'gives no insight into the *history* of these third-world desires' (2021: 101), says Chakrabarty, the desire to become modern, developed, to embrace technology and science - desires that were born in the West and imitated across the postcolonial world. Yet Chakrabarty has been critiqued for introducing his own form of linear universalism (Pasha, 2020; Baucom, 2014). Whilst acknowledging the laudable effort to decentre the human, and impressively retrain from his expertise in postcolonial studies to the earth sciences, Pasha sees Chakrabarty 'falling back on the familiar co-ordinates of 'liberal cosmopolitanism' as he appeals 'to a uniform solidarity for survivability' (2020: 365). In doing so, Chakrabarty risks presenting 'new forms of mastery' (ibid). Pasha's point provides us with a sense of the challenges of addressing climate change without collapsing the question of difference.

Chakrabarty nevertheless reminds us of the historical interconnections between the rise of the nation and the destruction of the environment: for 'the project of making the nation modern' was intertwined with 'what would turn out to be energy-guzzling human futures' (2021: 106). He offers the example of air-conditioners - a practical necessity in India, where only 5–9% of the population have them - as opposed to around 87% of US households (2021: 97). Air-conditioners fitted with heat-trapping hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs) emit strong greenhouse gases and contribute to furthering atmospheric warming. Yet these objects are in huge demand by people, partly as they have few alternatives, but also because they represent aspiration and

modernisation. Pacific Studies' theorist, Teresia Teaiwa, describes some of our modern desires as dreams of 'unsustainable living'. Yet their appeal, she says, *sustains itself*, and has outlived so many forms of analysis, critique, revolt and protest (2011: 178–9). This point about aspiration and desire is not only relevant for understanding developing countries; it provides a different entrypoint for understanding the challenges of bringing about environmental change. It also suggests the importance of an analysis that considers affect, enabling us to address questions of lifestyle, comfort and how we live together, as I do in the next section.

From end-thinking to making ourselves at home in the world

'End-thinking' involves reading the present through its existential limits. According to Huysmans, this means reading life from a heightened awareness of its ending (2023: 263). This drive to structure politics through anxieties has the effect of leading us into a series of oppositions (we will either *act* or we will *fail*). Thinking differently calls for loosening these anxieties, making space for the possibilities in-between the choice of *all* or *nothing*. In arguing against end-thinking, Huysmans accepts that he may be seen as not taking current crises seriously enough: as 'in denial', 'naïve', or 'depoliticising' (2023: 265). Whilst he doesn't deny the seriousness of different crises facing us, he argues that he 'refuses to be drawn by the spectre of death and end-times' as a way of ordering political action (2023: 267). This is slightly different to a position that says: the future is catastrophic, but we must remain hopeful. Such a position seeks to resolve the catastrophe, and redeem failure (Coward and Lisle, 2025). In contrast, resisting end-thinking allows us to 'stay with the trouble' (Haraway, 2016).

In this vein, Latour (2018) encourages us to think of the *connections* between three crises of the present moment: the rise in global nationalism, climate change, and global inequalities. He draws our attention to the decision of the United States on 1st June 2017 (following the first election of Donald Trump as US President), to leave the Paris Agreement (the international agreement to keep global warming to 1.5°C). This decision shows that climate change is now central to global politics, Latour argues. As he puts it, with this decision, the US declared that it didn't want to belong to the same earth and change its way of living. But before we rush to blame the United States, Latour claims we shouldn't blame the nationalist extremists for wanting to return to nostalgic ideas about a solid nation with clear boundaries. After all, who would want to face the crisis ahead of us? Whilst we may not agree with the nationalist-populists, he says, *we can understand* the urge to refuse to accept the world we belong to, and the fantasy of holding on to borders, walls and nations (see also Brown, 2010). Rather than presume that elites don't appreciate or understand the scale of the emergency we face, he claims they know very well. It is not a question of *not-knowing* (McGoey, 2019). They know that the boat is sinking, and in the face of that reality, they are choosing to grab the small number of lifeboats for themselves. The question that Latour poses is, do we want to build a future that is better for the majority, or for a small, rich elite?

As enticing as this framing is, it is also problematic, as it returns us to a politics framed in existential terms, presenting a binary opposition. Chakrabarty disagrees with this framing, arguing that climate change impacts us all - rich and poor: 'They are not affected in the same way, but they are *all* affected' (2017: 30, my emphasis). The environmental crisis is different to the crisis of capitalism, he says, in that 'there are no lifeboats' for the rich (Chakrabarty, 2017: 29), as it impacts 'the sustenance conditions for humans as well as other forms of life' (2017: 31). Whilst appreciating Chakrabarty's argument that climate change supersedes the framework of capitalism, and may even bring about capitalism's demise (Carrington, 2025), some will of course buy their way out of climate change - those who can afford to rebuild their homes after wildfires, or leave the urban heat. Yet whilst this may be possible under 1.5°C of warming above pre-industrial levels, 2°C or 3°C warming would pose greater risks to all human health and security. I agree with

Chakrabarty's analysis is that a 'rich vs poor', 'us vs them', political framework is insufficient, but I concur with Pasha and Baucom that *his* analysis returns us to an unidirectional, homogenous future. In his impressive focus on extinction, he risks negating our attention to the various and vast differences in how we live and experience the world, as well as the differently placed cruel, destructive and intertwined crises that we face.

What I appreciate in Latour's analysis is he encourages us to move away from a framework of reason, which presumes if only people *knew better*, they would act. Chakrabarty's attention to narratives of desire and aspiration (as developed in his example of air-conditioners) suggest this similar attentiveness to how politics is shaped by forces beyond reason. Yet a framework of reason seeps into his analysis. For example, in comparing climate change with the fear of global nuclear war, Chakrabarty distinguishes between them, arguing that nuclear war 'would have been a *conscious decision* on the part of the powers that be', whilst climate change 'has largely been a combination of intended and unintended consequence of a cascade of human decisions and actions' (2021: 45, my emphasis). The distinction he draws suggests politics was once a field composed of rational agents taking rational decisions, but is now threatened by a new catastrophe. Whilst politics involves decisions, calculations and judgements, a focus on affect acknowledges how it is also formed in the everyday, which 'throws itself together out of forms, flows, powers, pleasures, encounters, distractions, drudgery, denials, practical solutions, shape-shifting forms of violence, daydreams, and opportunities lost or found' (Stewart, 2014: 29). Both Latour and Chakrabarty's analyses ultimately don't help us get closer to the everyday affective dimensions through which people live their lives. But this is where we need to get to understand the forms and possibilities of change.

This brings us to consider our own position and our capacity for harm and destruction. This is what Ghassan Hage reminds us of, in his approach to how capitalism, racism, colonialism and the ecological crisis are intertwined (2017). Hage focuses on practices of home-making, and invites us to consider the minute and ordinary acts through which we practice domination, control, extraction, and exploitation in our daily lives (2017: 71). In this way, he's able to connect settler colonialism, for example, to the ways insects, animals and plants are rendered homeless or exterminated to make space available for humans as a privileged species. Whilst a capitalist theory of exploitation offers some tools for explaining the racial/colonial crisis and the ecological crisis, Hage argues, 'it keeps unexplained at least one large facet of both crises: their affective dimension' (2017: 55). For Hage, the affective register is crucial for attending to both the material and the existential work that goes into making ourselves 'at home in the world'. To address the domination of nature, then, we have to consider it alongside our domination of the racialised other, as well as of women and children. Whilst we cannot eliminate domination, we can ask how can we better acknowledge and reduce the harm created in our position as home-makers, as we find ourselves balancing the aggressive with the comforting to make our own way in the world. Hughes's performance of 'I am from Reykjavik' fits with this ethos, by looking closely at how we make ourselves at home, and from that, how we might consider the possibility of change.

Introducing 'I am from Reykjavik'

> I AM FROM REYKJAVIK IS AN ARTWORK BORN OF A PEEVISH INCIDENT BEGAT FROM A HISTORY OF RACE. MADE SO I CAN DECLARE POCKETS OF THE WORLD FREE FOR ME, ERGO YOU, TO BE (IAFR project website).

I went to see Hughes's latest performance, 'I am from Reykjavik' (IAFR), on 27 May 2023, when it was being performed in the ecovillage of Findhorn, at the edge of the Moray Firth in north-east Scotland. The title, 'I am from Reykjavik', does not suggest a connection with Icelandic society.

Figure 2. Findhorn ecovillage, May 2023. Photo by Solomon Hughes.

Rather, it emerged from a joke that Hughes, a Black British artist, shared with a friend, designed as an answer to the racist question often posed to them: *where do you come from?*

Findhorn in Scotland forms an early example of an alternative counter-cultural community, established in the 1960s. Its founding members, Peter and Eileen Caddy and Dorothy Maclean, went to live in Findhorn Bay caravan park to experiment with living differently, growing their own food and living in proximity with nature.[3] It was by chance that IAFR was performed here, as part of a Dance North festival. IAFR has also been performed in several cities across the UK, including St Helen's, Edinburgh, Hastings, Brighton, London, and in North America and Europe, including Montreal, Toronto, Stockholm, Utrecht and in Reykjavik. Findhorn ecovillage turned out to be an interesting location for situating this project because of how the histories of the site invoke the desire to change the world – in this case, through building a more environmental and spiritual life. Whilst in the 1960s and 1970s, Findhorn attracted people interested in living a simpler life, today it has a reputation as 'an expensive place'.[4] It includes a combination of the original cottages and new eco-friendly housing estates which feature state-of-the-art solar panels, communal recycling points, children's play areas, and shared washing lines (Figure 2). But there's no mistaking that this eco-village, beautiful in its architecture and landscape, also presents a 'sharp white background' for Hughes's performance (Rankine, 2015). This is a landscape where people of colour form only a small minority.

I have been following Sonia Hughes's work since 2017 (Closs Stephens, 2022), and as with previous work, this new performance addresses questions about living together, and about political change. In IAFR, Hughes precedes the performance by reaching out to people to establish connections, in a part of the project called, 'Would Like To Meet'. In this, she uses social media to meet people who are 'a bit like me': 'someone who is fat, someone who likes swimming, someone who used to be a political activist', from the area where the performance will take place. Hughes writes a fragment about her own interests or questions, such as whether she's living in the right place, or how she enjoys cooking for friends, and uses these to establish a connection to others. These brief stories, and invitations to meet, are poetic, often funny, and affirm Hughes's tender yet courageous approach.

For the performance itself, Hughes identifies a street in the city centre, or in this case, woodlands in the village, where the performance will take place. She then marks an area of around 6×6 metres using pot plants and yellow paint (Figure 2). She then proceeds to build a wooden hut over the course of 7 hours, with the aim of gradually making herself at home in the space. Made of wood, the hut resembles the shape of an upside-down small boat. It is built on an angle which expands to allow around 3–4 people to fit inside the finished structure. She uses the work of

Figure 3. Establishing the camp, May 2023. Photo by Solomon Hughes.

building it to experiment with the question of where she can feel at home. This has a political impact: it responds to the problem of Black (and other minority ethnic) women feeling like 'bodies out of place' (Puwar, 2004) in different spaces, institutions and gatherings. But the structure also reminds me of Latour and Chakrabarty's lifeboat debate – how the rich will build lifeboats to escape the environmental crisis. Rather than use the lifeboat to escape, however, Hughes uses it to host difference. Over the course of seven hours, she occasionally invites people to join her in helping build the hut. But this is not an unconditional welcome. At times, she just gets on with the work of building, and expects people to take care of themselves. The aim of the work is to generate connections with others, but also for her to inhabit space in as 'unbothered' and 'unapologetic' a way as possible (Hughes, 2023).

(Figure 3).

I watched this work, off and on, from 11am to 6pm on 27 May 2023. About half an hour into the performance, Hughes stepped out of the space and returned with a trolley of wood. She then proceeded to lift the wood, in stages, into the area of the 'camp'. A woman wearing a navy trench coat became the first audience member to stop and ask her what she's doing: I watched them have a brief chat. The woman then proceeded to help her lift the wood. Although it was a sunny day, the tall Scots Pine trees largely blocked out the light. With the occasional gust of wind, pine cones fell down around us. Along with other audience members, I sat on the tree stumps nearby, surrounded by common gorse. Hughes proceeded to get a vice from her toolbox to assist her in aligning the planks of wood, and then a hammer for nailing the planks together (Figure 4). The sound of the hammer echoed around the woods. Later, when the structure took shape, Hughes changed into a green party dress: she looked radiant and at ease. She placed two stools on either side of the hut – a more explicit invitation for someone to join her. Occasionally, she played music. More people stopped and chatted, asking what she was doing. People were intrigued, and joined in the work for a short time, or stayed to chat and then move on. When they left, Hughes took a moment to lie on the emerging structure, facing the light of the sun. The next two sections suggest how 'I am from Reykjavik' offers alternative entry points for thinking about change, the relationship between the present and future, and forms of belonging.

The fast slow time of change

The duration is a central element of this work. It is testing, but it also suggests a different temporality to the call to 'act now'. I treated it as an invitation to slow down with Hughes, a feeling that

Figure 4. Building the hut, May 2023. Photo by Solomon Hughes.

was enhanced by the late May sun, and in being in this alternative space. In politics, change – meaning to alter, or to make something different – may be something we want to take place *now*, but this project suggests the slow work of change, as something that will necessarily involve being with others, including in uncomfortable ways. It does not present change as transformational, or ever complete. Recalling Anderson's point about how climate change may invite complex feelings of disaffection, even indifference: this work also embraces boredom (2023). It suggests the joy of taking one's time around a task, as the performance unfolds through a mixture of attention and inattention. Overall, it works with a different set of affective energies to those that might lead to overwhelm - the small breaks taken for rest suggest a method of guarding against strong emotions - be they overly pessimistic or overly hopeful.

The hut that Hughes builds was designed to be assembled quickly. Yet the work is based on a sense of taking one's time, organised as it is over a long duration. The work therefore prompts me to think about acting fast and slow at the same time, and what this might offer our political imagination. To develop this, I draw inspiration from an architectural concept, 'Fast Slow', coined by Sarah Breen Lovett. Breen Lovett and her co-authors put forward this idea to describe the architectural properties needed to build homes that have 'health-giving and well-being properties' quickly, and at scale, yet in a way that reduces harm to society and the environment. They describe a building process that combines fast do-it-yourself, prefabricated materials, such as a flat-packed timber frame system, with slow earth building tools and methods, including strawbale, rammed earth, hempcrete and cob building, and mindfulness techniques (2024: 292). Conscious of the charge that being able to build one's own home remains a privileged aspiration, they respond that they want to enable more people to build sustainable homes, boosting planetary well-being. We can borrow the ethos of this concept to combine a sense of the urgency of acting on climate change and other global crises, with hesitation and ambivalence about what counts as progressive change.

I therefore borrow the concept of fast slow to mean that changing the world might require acting both quickly, confidently, and slowly with hesitation. When acting fast is attached to a linear timeframe, it risks condensing political work into a 'countdown' that does away with politics - that is, the stubborn, irrevocability of difference, and of a conflict of worlds (Rancière, 2009: 278). Reflecting on the recent shared collective experience of the Covid-19 pandemic, we know that sweeping societal changes can be made fast, and for progressive ends, but this was combined with a need for many to slow down, halt flying and driving, and work in other ways. However, change and progressive measures did not come without huge social costs. In the case of the pandemic, change also emerged through improvisation and trust. Rob Nixon reminds us that

heightened attention to spectacular, fast forms of violence distracts from the casualties of 'slow violence' – human and environmental – who remain unseen and uncounted (2013: 13). A fast slow approach to change refuses to favour speed, but rather combines urgency with doubt. The risk with a story about urgent action in end times is that it generates an oppressive account of options: you're 'either with us or against us'. This makes it more difficult to hold open a space for asking questions and practicing critique.

Finally, thinking in terms of fast slow also helps us think about change as something other than a 'heroic act' – a point that aligns with universal, linear accounts of time (Death, 2022). Indeed, charismatic political leadership is appealing in nihilistic times (Brown, 2023). However, charismatic leadership needn't be 'heroic', despite the prevalence of muscular, masculinist leadership styles in this era of nationalist populism. Wendy Brown describes how charismatic leadership can also emerge in a way that refuses to align with myth or utopia, or the promise of fast or revolutionary change. That is, charismatic leaders can be 'passionate *and* responsible, visionary *and* careful, inspirational *and* sober' (Brown, 2023: 57). Returning to the insights provided by Hughes's performance, this kind of leadership might involve practising conversation with others, including those we most vehemently disagree with. Dialogue is a good example of a politics that is best practised fast slow – because it is filled with stumbling blocks, as we negotiate vastly different ways of seeing and experiencing the world around us. It is nevertheless urgent in these divided times, filled with direct and indirect forms of violence. The point about thinking change beyond a heroic act, and in a way that maintains hesitation and impatience, brings us to the question of how we live with others.

Grounds of belonging

Mid-way through this performance, the back of the structure, and half of another side are in place. It then started to rain, and I went into the hut, to ask if I could help. I enjoyed getting immersed in the task of screwing in nails to keep the wooden structure in place. Hughes asked me about the place where I grew up (Aberystwyth, Wales), and I asked her about her experiences – this is prompted by a photograph of her mother and father which at this point sit on display on a small shelf outside the entrance. Hughes talked about how she grew up in Dunstable, in a community organised around several factories, where her parents worked making parts for Ford and Chrysler cars. Today the factories have been replaced by new big businesses: Amazon, Sports Direct, Next. She described the precise, detailed and repetitive work her parents did, and how it built a community around it, where children benefited from the regular routine. She recounts how the factories were destroyed in the 1980s, as globalization moved manufacturing overseas. When Vauxhall's factory closed, her father switched to that hard physical toil of working night shifts at a plastic moulding plant.

At 5.30pm, as the work of building the hut came to an end, Hughes invited those around for a conversation inside (Figure 5). Later, everyone joined in the work of pulling the entire structure down. This seemed to be the most energetic part of the performance, as people enthusiastically joined in this collective task. But whilst building (and then dismantling) the structure is integral to the performance, what emerged was Hughes's capacity to host and generate a collective, formed in the moments of togetherness made possible through work and conversation with others. These conversations changed on each occasion of the performance, but the form of togetherness is characterised by its looseness and warmth, where people draw lines of connection but do not find in it anything as strong as grounds for a shared identity. Similarly, the work of building the hut is not prescribed with a sense of meaning. This provides inspiration for thinking about a form of being together that doesn't draw us into a strong account of a common journey. Rather, it allows for difference and antagonism, underpinned by what William Connolly calls a 'presumptive generosity'. The performance works on 'the molecular register of cultural life': the affective feelings,

Figure 5. The finished hut with guests inside, May 2023. Photo by Solomon Hughes.

visceral responses, the push and pull forces of different social situations, and how these can be worked on, or shifted in one direction rather than other (Connolly, 2017). This is a form of togetherness that sits inbetween the desire to change the world and refusing to be defeated by it.

The idea of acting with urgency has a strong place in imaginaries of what it means to be political. However, this suggests a form of political subjectivity that is often individualised and ableist, where standing up, speaking out, and propelling ourselves forward are considered *the* modes of political action. This aligns with moving fast, and often presumes some people are responsible for *shaping* time, casting others as 'left behind'. The problem with this framework is that it presumes to know what is best for others (Edkins, 2019). In contrast, Hughes's work considers how imperial formations leave their marks in dispersed, unexpected, and ongoing ways: what Stoler describes as 'uneven temporal sedimentations' (2016: 13). This emerges by way of the photograph of Hughes's mother and father, sitting on display outside the hut, and a letter written by Hughes and published on the project website to a 'child of an immigrant' (Child of an immigrant - I am from Reykjavik). This perspective reminds us that we are not all starting from the same point in time, and that differently placed populations are navigating varying histories of extraction, exploitation, and injustice, marked in the body and in the landscape. A fast slow approach acknowledges how people are differently placed.

Enquiring about the relationship between feeling at home, feeling like oneself, and the land and landscape around us, Hughes asks:

> Do you have ease where you are? Does anybody else around you speak your language? Do you look out of your window and feel like the place that you see is home? How do you get to make yourself feel like you belong? Do you have to ditch all the things from your migrant home or can you bring it all to where you are now? Do you want to?

'I am from Reykjavik' brings questions about race to the fore by staging a new relationship between place, land and home. The questions work on the affective register. That is, they are not intended to deliver a strong message. Rather, Hughes works indirectly, building the hut, spending time, inviting people in - but not unconditionally. She is interested in building relations, but there are no 'heroes' here: everyone is differently situated, and in various ways compromised by the everyday structures we are caught in. This reminds us of Ghassan Hage's starting point, that we are all already engaged in a myriad ordinary acts of exploitation, control and domination. But Hughes's conversations

combine tenderness with limits, generosity with doubt, as she actively circles the question of how we live together.

Hughes's 'I am from Reykjavik' addresses multiple emergencies – from racism to inequality – but it doesn't do so directly. It is also humble. As such, it refuses to 'globalize suffering', which risks leaving us feeling that 'sufferings and misfortunes are too vast, too irrevocable, too epic to be much changed by any local political intervention' (Sontag, 2003: 79). What Hughes invites us to do instead is, very slowly, work on building the hut. There is no obligation for people to join, but people do, from a place of curiosity, excitement and trust, more than from charity. People are invited to sit and talk, and so, fears and anxieties - emotions that are integral to 'end-thinking' (Huysmans, 2023) - must be loosened. Hughes's approach to belonging acknowledges tension, antagonism, difference, without seeking to smooth these over. Yet this work also carries with it traces of the hope for another future, as expressed in the large-scale protests of the summer of 2020. In that singular summer, there was a sense of intensified empathy for others, and widespread eagerness to develop more understanding of racism and how to counter it. This moment also forms part of the sediments of time informing this project.

Conclusion: fast slow and 'tender hope'

Amid pressing global problems – mental health problems endured in the aftermath of Covid, war in Ukraine, genocide in Gaza, extreme weather, we can understand how the idea that we're living in end-times is persuasive. I have argued that the idea nevertheless limits our political imagination, and disregards the political sphere as one of difference. In its presumption that we share a common journey, it puts forward a narrow understanding of the present and future, and inadvertently risks creating a politics of 'us and them'. Addressing climate change by way of this framework will not be sufficient in addressing right-wing and authoritarian nationalism. Indeed, it may even reproduce some of nationalist populism's ways of thinking. Wendy Brown's efforts to think through what political action might mean in our nihilistic epoch stresses the need to model 'tender hope' and refuse to 'submit to the lures of fatalism or apocalypticisms, pipe dreams of total revolution or redemption by the progress of reason' (2023: 8). Working fast and slow invites us to imagine how we can work with purpose and restraint, enthusiasm and a sober understanding of our lack of innocence, to navigate building better futures whilst minimising harm.

I have turned to Sonia Hughes's 'I am from Reyjkavik' project to show how we might think the present and future differently, and beyond the call to 'act now'. I have borrowed a concept, fast slow, from Dr Breen Lovett and co-authors, and use it to develop an argument about maintaining a sense of the urgency of acting, whilst remaining ambivalent about the best way forward. This ambivalence draws on a tradition of postcolonial, feminist and poststructural thought that is highly attuned to how our responses to harm and destruction can nevertheless produce their own violence. It argues that politics is imbued with multiple, conflicted positions, which must be navigated rather than resolved.

In marking territory with yellow paint and pot plants, 'I am from Reykjavik' also interrupts some of the foundational ideas of nationalist populism: it gently mocks the urge to build a territorial border, and to police who gets to come in or leave. This project celebrates the courage shown by minorities and the disenfranchised taking up space in the world, and echoes with the spirit of the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020. As such, Hughes's project provides an insight into how a fast slow politics might show a different form of defiance and disruptiveness to that presented by nativist political movements (Amin, 2023: 146). It provides inspiration for thinking about a politics that proceeds determinedly, yet with doubt, aware of the difficulties of acting without reproducing harm, but committed to act. In this, it doesn't seek to *preserve* or *defend* against the decay around us, but rather practices what Mitchell calls 're-rooting', to bring 'forms of knowledge-

making into alignment with Earth and its worlds' (2024: 441). It brings together a sense of impatience for change with critique, and hesitation about how we progress.

I have argued that moving away from 'end-thinking' involves turning to how people live and make themselves comfortable in the world. Hughes's project presents ideas about living with others in ways that acknowledge disagreement and discomfort, and how imperial formations leave their marks in ongoing ways. Our complicity may bring us together with others in new ways, navigating shared yet uneven vulnerabilities (Weatherill, 2024). I have argued that these ephemeral relations do not amount to anything as strong as a shared identity or political aim, but they are nevertheless integral to the mobilised energies necessary to bring about change. These loose, and less purposeful relations also bring us back 'down to earth', in a way that accepts shared sovereignty (Latour, 2018: 102–105). Acting both fast and slow accepts the need to move away from the modern desires that Teaiwa aligns with 'unsustainable living' (2011). However, it also refuses to fully subscribe to calls for a slow politics, or a return to the local. There is a risk when slow is equated with the 'local' and the 'land', as these are easily claimed by nationalist populism, and aligned with ethnic homogeneity, nostalgia and authenticity (Latour, 2018: 53). In Hughes's 'I am from Reykjavik', home or the local can never straightforwardly be a place of comfort, innocence, or a shared ground of agreement. As her project puts it, the local can feel distant or unfamiliar. But in experimenting with where she can feel at home, reaching out to build new and unexpected relations, Hughes explores the partial transformations we can make by working fast and slow, moving between home and the world. This is how this project challenges 'end-thinking', and offers resources for a 'tender hope' that also defies nationalist populism.

Highlights

- This article addresses the prevalent call in climate policy and activism to 'act now', and the idea in popular culture that we're living in 'end-times';
- Drawing on literature from cultural Geography and critical International Relations, it argues for a focus on the everyday and affective register, as a way of avoiding universal, homogenous ideas about a common society headed towards one future;
- It develops this argument through an engagement with an arts performance, called 'I am from Reykjavik', by artist Sonia Hughes. This performance, which unfolds over 7 hours, presents philosophical material for imagining the possibility of political change differently;
- Drawing on both the literature and performance, the article presents the concept of 'fast slow' (first developed by Lovett, 2024) – this combines an impatience for change with a call for ambivalence and hesitation in how we act politically;
- Overall, the article argues that thinking change and the future in a different register is important if we are to avoid the climate crisis becoming weaponized as part of a polarized, populist politics.

2024, in particular Michele Betsill, Peter Marcus Kristensen and Maja Zehfuss. The views expressed in this paper are mine, and I bear responsibility for them.

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Notes

1. Based on an idea by Gan Golan and Andrew Boyd, supported by Beautiful Trouble and March for Science, it opened on 19 September 2020.
2. Hosted by the Mercator Research Institute on Global Commons and Climate Change, visitors can click on one of two scenarios, where the planet is set to warm by 1.5° or 2° C.
3. The community grew from 20 to 150 people during the 1970s, when they developed an educational remit. It echoes a similarly visionary project in mid-Wales, the Centre for Alternative Technology, which opened in 1973.
4. This is how a local taxi driver described the place to me.

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