NEGOTIATING CLIMATE CHANGE IN CRISIS

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https://www.openbookpublishers.com

ISBN Paperback: 9781800642607
ISBN Hardback: 9781800642614
ISBN Digital (PDF): 9781800642621
ISBN Digital ebook (epub): 9781800642638
ISBN Digital ebook (mobi): 9781800642645
ISBN XML: 9781800642652
DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0265

Cover image: Photo by Thijs Stoop on Unsplash available at: https://unsplash.com/photos/A_AQxGz9z5I
Cover design by Anna Gatti

11. I'm Sian, and I'm a Fossil Fuel Addict: On Paradox, Disavowal and (Im)Possibility in Changing Climate Change

Sian Sullivan

In recent years I have returned to west Namibia to work with elders of families I have known for more than two decades. Oral histories, recorded as we find and revisit places my companions knew as home, have increasingly struck a chord as a record of lives lived largely untouched by fossil fuels. As the complexity of these pasts has come further into focus, it has become impossible to avoid the gulf between this kind of attunement to environmental contexts and my own life, especially the reality that I am completely dependent on fossil fuels and the products they make possible. This essay is an attempt to fully face this paradox of maintaining hope for binding international climate agreements that have teeth, whilst being aware of my dependence on the fossil fuel extracting and emissions-spewing juggernaut that permeates all our lives. Drawing critically on twelve-step thinking and psychoanalysis literatures I reflect on fossil fuel addiction, and the destructive paradox of not being able to live up to internalised but unreachable values regarding environmental care in a fossil-fuelled world.

 https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0265.11

Once Upon a Time in the Wild West

Sometimes life brings experiences that give pause for thought.

In recent years I have returned to west Namibia to work with elders of families I have known for almost thirty years—a legacy of a childhood split between Britain and southern Africa. We have been documenting histories of land connections prior to a series of clearances of people from large areas of the west Namibian landscape that occurred some decades ago (Sullivan and Ganuses 2020, 2021; Sullivan in press).[1] Often now perceived as an untouched and pristine wilderness, our work instead draws into focus a landscape intimately known, named and remembered by people who once lived there (as conveyed in Figure 5). Oral histories recorded as we find and revisit places my companions knew as home, have increasingly struck a chord as a record of lives lived largely untouched by fossil fuels.

In the contemporary terms defined by modernity, industrialisation and capital, theirs was an economically impoverished existence. But this is not how they define and describe their experience. Beyond the nostalgia that people tend to have for times past, their prior existence is valued in some of the following ways. For the freedom to move to locations where particular foods could be acquired, and for the pleasure of meeting and sharing food, songs and dances with friends associated with different places. For harvesting a series of highly appreciated foods enabling their subsistence in an extreme, dryland environment: the endemic cucurbit (melon-plant) *!nara* (*Acanthosicyos horridus*) processed from 'fields' managed far west in the dunes of the Northern Namib Desert (see Video 1); the seeds of *sâui* (*Stipagrostis* spp.) and *bosûi* (*Monsonia* spp.) collected from harvester ant nests found further inland (Sullivan 1999); and the fruits of *xoris* (*Salvadora persica*) found in ephemeral rivers traversing the landscape. For sweet honey (*danib*) pulled from hives harvested over decades, and diverse animals lived with, hunted and appreciated as sentient, intentional beings with whom people could communicate. For a life filled with nights of songs and healing dances when times of abundance were celebrated,[2] and when

1 I am grateful to Sesfontein residents Welhemina Suro Ganuses and Filemon |Nuab for their multi-year collaboration and leadership in this field research.

2 See *The Music Returns to Kai-as*, online at https://vimeo.com/486865709.

the skills for living in an environment considered one of the most hostile on earth were valued highly.

Fig. 5. ǁOeb: Cousins Noag Mûgagara Ganaseb (L) and Franz ǀHaen ǁHoëb (R) revisit places in the westward reaches of the Hoanib River where they used to live. Here they are close to ǁOeb, now the site of a high-end eco-tourism lodge called Hoanib Camp, located on the south side of the bend in the Hoanib River just to the right of centre in this image. When Franz, Noag and their families lived in this area they would alternate between harvesting *!nara* (*Acanthosicyos horridus*) from their *!nara* plants near the springs of Auses / !Uiǁgams, and walking southwards to Kai-as and the !Uniab River where different foods as well as *!nara* could be found. In the 1950s the coastal dunes were opened for diamond mining. Then in 1971 the lower Hoanib River was gazetted as part of the Skeleton Coast National Park. As these areas became opened for extractive industry and conservation, they became closed to habitation by those who once lived there. Photo: Sian Sullivan, November 2015, composite made with Mike Hannis using three 10 x 10 km aerial images from Directorate of Survey and Mapping, Windhoek, July 2017, as part of a series of images for the exhibition *Future Pasts: Landscape, Memory and Music in West Namibia*: see https://www.futurepasts.net/memory.

Video 1. Hildegaart |Nuas of Sesfontein / !Nani|aus, Kunene Region, north-west Namibia remembers harvesting *!nara* (*Acanthosicyos horridus*) in the dune fields of the Hoanib River. Video by Sian Sullivan (2019), https://vimeo.com/380044842, © Future Pasts, CC BY-NC-ND 4.0.

As the complexity of these pasts has come further into focus, it has become impossible to avoid the gulf between this kind of attunement to environmental contexts and my own life. Like many in 'the West', I would describe myself as concerned with environmental and social justice. All my work has been energised by such concerns, as well as by an animist sense of the natures with which we live, which seems resonant with aspects of the lifeworlds of those Indigenous people with whom I have interacted and worked (Sullivan 2019).

At the same time, the reality is that I am completely dependent on fossil fuels and the products they make possible. This dependence exists even as I simultaneously and publicly acknowledge the serious implications of pumping more climate-forcing gases into the atmosphere. There is almost nothing manufactured in the world around me, or in my life as it is currently structured, that exists independently of fossil fuels. The basic things with which I write and share these reflections—from the plastic refillable pencil I scribble notes with, to the laptop I write on and the Wi-Fi system I am now connected with—are shot through with fossil fuels.

Facing It

Under current structural circumstances, I am completely unable to unhook myself from fossil fuel production and consumption. Even consciously 'low-impact' and low-carbon lifestyles are bound with the fossil fuel industry and the apparent necessity of economic growth this supports (Böhm 2015). The solar panels on my roof at home installed to foster an 'off-grid' lifestyle are made and transported using fossil fuels—not to mention the host of other substances involve in their fabrication whose extraction and associated wastes are seriously environmentally-damaging (see Dunlap, this volume).

Documenting the fossil-fuel-free pasts of people like Franz and Noag above means I fly to Namibia and then drive a diesel-fuelled 4x4 so as to go with small groups of people to the far-flung locations where they lived. Maybe I should simply give up this research so as to be more congruent with a stringently decarbonised lifestyle? But apart from personal love for this research—for the places it takes me to, the people I work alongside, and the diversity I am exposed to and learn from—I do this work in a context of local desire for such pasts to be documented and made public,[3] institutional support for contributions along these lines, and professional pressures to continue with work that consolidates and internationalises earlier research effort. Like others working to engage with and bear witness to justice issues in various global contexts—issues frequently associated with fossil fuel extraction and emissions management—all my research and activist engagements are paradoxically fuelled by fossil fuels.

Of course, I can assuage my conscience by purchasing carbon offset credits—perhaps using a carbon credit card through which every dollar I spend will apparently reduce my carbon footprint[4]—or by planting trees somewhere else. But I do not really accept a model that sees the earth in terms of aggregates (an aggregate carbon budget, an aggregate level of 'natural capital', etc.[5]), the composition of which can be traded, exchanged and substituted between times and places so as somehow to cancel out emissions. I am generating carbon emissions through my life and work, full-stop. There is no 'elsewhere' for these emissions.

As someone who cares about planetary health and is also concerned about the perpetuation and deepening of grotesque economic inequity, I rationalise my activities by considering the documentation I am doing with others in Namibia to be worth it—in terms of making visible currently occluded pasts, experiences of displacement, and different possible ways of living with diverse natures-beyond-the-human. Such

3 Most recently this work has been drawn on by an Ancestral Land Commission appointed in 2019 by the Namibian Government, in its final report to the Office of the Prime Minister making recommendations for Parliament to enact "ancestral land rights claim and restitution legislation" (GRN 2020).

4 For example, 'Eco-friendly Credit Cards' (Thalesgroup.com, 2021), https://www.thalesgroup.com/en/markets/digital-identity-and-security/banking-payment/cards/eco-friendly-credit-card.

5 As advocated, for example, in Helm (2015).

rationalisations, which are amongst those we engage in all the time so as to exist amidst unavoidable contradictions, go some way towards cognitively smoothing the dissonances described above.[6]

In facing these contradictions and the dependences they mask, it becomes harder to simultaneously maintain a stringently critical position towards fossil fuel extractors (I need the substances they produce, dammit!), states and negotiators in the worlds of climate change management. Indeed, motivating this essay is a sense that I am not alone in deploying psychic compartmentalisations so as to act affirmatively in the world, whilst simultaneously damning the fuels, technologies, organisations and structures that make these actions possible—thus ultimately also damning myself. I am wondering if it is increasingly important to recognise the prevalence of such internal divisions, particularly the destructive paradox of not being able to live up to internalised but unreachable values.

I am influenced here by a provocative meditation on the natures of authoritarianism: *The Guru Papers: Masks of Authoritarian Power*, by Joel Kramer and Diana Alstad.[7] In *The Guru Papers*, Kramer and Alstad (1993: 228) speak of "the hypocrisy masking so much of social interaction where people pretend to be far more virtuous than they are". They highlight the destructive authoritarianism that arises as internalised 'good' / 'bad' dualities pit aspects of the self against each other. And they connect this internalised conflict with social contexts in which assumptions and projections of superior morality maintain problematic authoritarianisms. They argue that such everyday authoritarianisms act to avert equality in social relationships, whilst also reducing possibilities for strengthening self-trust and for improving broader awareness of the structural dissonances preventing systemic change.

Acknowledging the implications of such internal and social conflicts and inconsistencies seems critical right now, when so many ecological, psychological and social indicators—not least a global pandemic that has erupted since I first drafted this essay—suggest we need systemic change in spades.

6 I discuss such dissonances in more detail in Sullivan 2018.

7 Thank you to Ya'acov Darling Kahn for drawing my attention to this text.

What on Earth Is Going on?

When re-emerging from periods of field research in west Namibia where Internet coverage is very sparse, into more-or-less constant Internet reality, I have often felt like I am viewing events unfolding in the world from a sort of bemused and horrified distance. An example comes from December 2015, in the moment when the 21st Conference of the Parties (COP) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) was taking place in Paris.

As I sat in a small hotel in Windhoek readying myself to return to the UK just after journeying between Sesfontein / !Nani-|aus and the Skeleton Coast with Franz and Noag pictured above, I wrote about the following constellation of events.

So, the world's government negotiators are meeting for the twenty-first time to attempt to agree to systemically adjust economic activities so as to decarbonise the global economy (UNFCCC 2015). For months now, climate justice activists have also been mobilising protests and actions (for example, Global Justice Now 2015). Of particular concern is the corporate agenda considered to be preventing the UNFCCC COP from reaching a binding international agreement that has real teeth in terms of emissions reductions. Corporate sponsors supporting the Paris COP include airlines, energy corporations and banks (Mcdonnnell 2015; Team Ecohustler 2015). Great effort by (h)activists has gone into designing possibilities for radical play to disrupt the 'mesh' of the formal summit and its associations with "austerity-dictating politicians, fossil fuel corporations, industry lobbyists, peddlers of false solutions and greenwashers" (McDonald 2015: online); as well as to deflect the policing "sidekicks" of the COP (referred to as "Team Blue"). Protests in Paris on the eve of the COP were met by "team blue" with tear gas and police baton charges (Fieldstadt and Grimson 2015).

Simultaneously, the chilling pre-summit attacks in Paris by ISIL ('Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant') in mid-November (BBC News 2015) have precipitated further fossil fuel-intensive military strikes by the West against sites in the Middle East (Marcus 2015), as well as a potentially indefinite state of emergency in France under which public demonstrations are banned (Osborne 2015). The right of public

assembly so as to contest the climate change negotiations of COP21 is curbed under these emergency powers (Chan 2015).

Meanwhile, within hours of a yes vote in the UK parliament (Sparrow and Perraudin 2015), RAF bombers joined allies who have been bombing Syrian oil fields since 2014 (LoGiurato 2014). The speed by which bombers were deployed suggested it was farcical to think there could have been an alternative outcome to the parliamentary vote. Justified as striking at the source of oil finance for 'the terrorist group Daesh', it seems beyond irony that at this intense moment of global climate change negotiations in Paris, wells supplying the supposedly scarce and climate-forcing substance of oil are being bombed, entailing huge emissions into the atmosphere in a situation that would not look out of place in a post-apocalyptic *Mad Max* film.

And here I am nodding to another irony, in that the last *Mad Max* film—*Fury Road* (*The Future Belongs to the Mad*) of 2015—was filmed in the sensitive desert landscapes of west Namibia, not far from where I started this essay, its destructive impacts causing fury amongst environmentalists and scientists there. The film uses the stark beauty of the Namib Desert as the backdrop for a post-apocalyptic desert wasteland where the scarcest of resources are petrol, water and fertile women, and violence is the means whereby control of these precious items is maintained . . .

In any case, apart from the heart-breaking humanitarian disaster of military intervention in Middle East contexts over the last twenty-plus years of international climate negotiations (Sullivan 2003; UN Security Council 2015), such tactics surely contradict 'the West's' avowed allegiance to reduce climate change emissions (Graham 2015). The ferocity with which Western corporations carved up Iraq's oil fields as they worked to remove Saddam Hussein in 2002–2003 (Beaumont and Islam 2002) should remind us that aggressive access to fossil fuels infuses international policy too. Indeed, current military adventure by the West in Syria appears a bloodsoaked strategy to beat Russia and Iran to the significant 'hydrocarbon potential' of Syria's offshore resources (Ahmed 2015). These geopolitical issues are not even close to the public negotiating table in Paris.

Consider, as well, a couple of announcements made as government climate negotiators were meeting in Paris in 2015. The environment

minister(!) of the Australian government justified recent approval of the $16bn Carmichael coal mine in Queensland, to be operated by Indian company Adani, on the grounds that Australia is not a neo-colonialist power that tells poor countries what to do (Taylor 2015). Construction of the mine is ongoing, amidst an array of challenges on environmental and Indigenous title grounds (Currell et al. 2020; Wangan and Jagalingou Family Council 2020). Botswana reportedly announced the sale of fracking rights to a UK company covering half the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park, an area also associated with Indigenous San / Bushmen (Barbee 2015). Although refuted in 2016 by the Botswana government, alarm in the region has now shifted to exploratory drilling for oil in neighbouring northern Namibia, by a Canadian company—Recon Africa—that reportedly also has a licence to prospect for oil in northwestern Botswana (Tan 2020). Initial drilling has been touted in industry publications as potentially yielding "the biggest oil story of the decade" (Leigh 2021). Meanwhile, in the US in 2015, Oklahoma was experiencing an "earthquake boom" (Chow 2015: online), recognised as linked to some extent by oil and gas related processes, including the injection of water into basement rock in extracting natural gas from bedrock, i.e. fracking (US Geological Survey 2020).

Fast forwards to the present moment: the build up to the twenty-sixth COP of the UNFCCC, to be held in November 2021 in Glasgow, UK.[8] Postponed twice due to the COVID-19 pandemic, COP26 is taking place in a world that has tilted on its political axis towards right-wing populism and consolidated plutonomy (Greven 2016): *viz*. the elections of presidents Trump (US) (reprieved by the tight Democrat presidential win in December 2020), Bolsonaro (Brazil), Erdoğan (Turkey), and the ascent of Johnson to Prime Minister in the UK. The green hopes stimulated by a COVID-19-induced pause in especially flying, which is stranding fossil fuel assets everywhere (Kusnetz 2020), are being dashed as recovery packages for oil companies are announced (Harvey 2020), as also observed in Hannis, this volume. Clearly, the contradictions continue.

8 See https://ukcop26.org/.

Disavowal and Doublethink

In trying to generate a coherent picture from these fragments, I feel acutely sensitive to the difficulty of maintaining hope for binding international climate agreements that have teeth, whilst being aware of the fossil fuel extracting and emissions-spewing juggernaut that permeates all our lives.

Humans are adept at deploying the layers of our consciousness to simultaneously maintain sometimes diametrically opposed realities. The pioneer of psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud, in a succinct essay published in 1938, identified this human 'talent' as the *Splitting of the Ego in the Process of Defence*. He asserted that in order to accommodate traumatic and dangerous reality the ego may behave in remarkable ways. In short, a defensive splitting can be deployed such that the threat associated with particular behaviours is both acknowledged and systematically turned away from (Freud 2009[1938]). Attention is instead transferred to fetishised solutions that facilitate continuation of the dangerous but satisfying behavior, at the same time as constituting symptoms of the acknowledged reality of this danger (see discussion in Sullivan 2017). Freud used the term 'disavowal' to describe this simultaneous defence against, and displaced acknowledgement of, dangerous reality.

In carbon management, offsetting mechanisms designed to mitigate emissions production can be seen as paradigmatic of such a fetishised 'solution' (Fletcher 2013; Watt 2021). They signal simultaneous acknowledgement and sustenance of harms caused. As a fetishised solution to anthropogenic climate change, offsets are directing oceans of creative energy and resources towards the production of metrics to fabricate equivalence between carbon produced and stored at different sites, and away from achieving reductions in emissions production (Moreno and Speich Chassé 2015). This is why critics of such exchange and market-based approaches to emissions management cry "false solutions" (REDD Monitor 2014).

'Doublethink' was the term that George Orwell, in his dystopian novel *1984*, used for such practices of structural disavowal. He defined doublethink as "the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them" (Orwell 2013[1949]: 244), identifying enforcement of this practice as at the heart of

maintaining a systemically unequal totalitarian regime. He wrote further that the prevailing mental condition associated with doublethink was "controlled insanity"—a state necessary to forever avert human equality (Orwell 2013[1949]: 226).

Disavowal and doublethink enable hope for emissions-reducing agreements to succeed, even as oil fields are being bombed by the same powers making those promises. They enable acceptance of Western governments as liberal democracies, even as freedom of assembly is severely constrained under arrangements which in France in 2015 were precipitating rushed changes to the constitution. They perhaps also run through the internal psychological divisions enabling impassioned pleas for the cessation of fossil fuel emissions production to be made using technologies, gadgets and transports fuelled by fossil fuels.

Fossil-Fuel(led) Culture

All of us contesting climate change and railing against the activities of fossil fuel companies are doing this using technologies, infrastructures and materials that are fossil-fuelled. Every single one of our online posts working to organise social movements for climate justice are made possible by fossil fuels. They are embedded in our computers, in our mobile phones, in all our mechanised transport systems, in our bikes, in the transport of our foods, however organic and fairly traded they are.

Fossil fuel corporations might be blamed for their hunger to capture oil under the land of indigenous peoples in Ecuador and elsewhere (see Sullivan Chapter 3, and Fremeaux and Jordan, this volume), and cynicism may be justified regarding the will and/or ability of government negotiators to agree a summit text that is binding in terms of national emissions reductions and fossil fuel investments (see Hannis, this volume). But, given the systemic nature of our dependence on fossil fuel products and infrastructure it is starting to feel uncomfortable and inaccurate to engage in divisive communications around the issue of fossil fuel dependence. Just about everything around us and with which we are entangled—much of which we might appreciate and even love—is fuelled by and/or made with fossil fuel.

Addiction and Taking Steps

Recently, and quite frequently, our fossil-fuelled culture has been framed in terms of substance addiction (see also Wright and Nyberg, this volume). It seems clear that we need nothing short of a complete global energy, and thus societal, revolution to unhook us from fossil fuel addiction.

Fossil Fuel Addiction (FFA) and its associated denials, dismissals, disassociations and rationalisations has been identified as a key aspect of climate change negotiations, requiring intervention which climate justice activists, with their perhaps clearer grasp of the desperate reality approaching us, are considered well-placed to offer. Thus, "the climate justice movement must perform a planned intervention with a professional who helps the Addict to see the truth in their polluting" (Hornack 2015).

In the famous twelve-step process of Alcoholics Anonymous and associated programmes, the first step is to recognise that you are indeed addicted. That you are bound to a substance over which you do not have control, such that this substance has become your 'higher power', its material qualities and structures of access determining one's activities and choices in the world. Subsequent steps include acknowledging that external help is needed so as to disrupt patterns of habit and addiction.

Referring again to Kramer and Alstad in *The Guru Papers*, however, such solutions may also sustain perhaps destructive divisions between 'good' and 'bad' behaviours, promoting powerlessness and internal warring in ways that may prevent psychological integration and self-trust regarding choices. To take this back to fossil fuels, in integrating some realities about my own structural dependence on fossil fuels I am starting to feel something a little unfamiliar: something more akin to empathy for the challenge facing government negotiators in the various COPs, all of whom are as wrapped up in a system of intractable dependencies as myself. Even less familiar is something approaching appreciation for the power of fossil fuels and their provision by those organisations I tend to view with intense suspicion and dislike. As Gunster et al. (2018: 12) write, these kinds of perceptual shifts are relevant since

> frank recognition of the [climate] hypocrisy of those who possess environmental sympathies can open up space for understanding the structural forces that generate the gaps between intention and action and thus promote a more complex understanding of the relations between social and political change and individual practices. Embedded within reflexive, sympathetic and dialogic venues of communication, the (often uncomfortable) feelings that attend such recognition can become a spur to reflection, conversation and, most importantly, modes of agency and action that dismantle (rather than enforce) conventional liberal distinctions between public and private, political and economic, citizen and consumer.

In addition to demystifying and working to transform the structural forms driving deepening inequality and environmental damage, then, twelve-step thinking can add some ingredients of its own. In encouraging honest and open acknowledgement of the grip of fossil fuels, combined with inventory of the harms caused by this grip, it can further support whatever choices are possible to reduce consumption and decarbonise one's own life, without losing sight of the systemic and infrastructural nature of one's dependence. Importantly, whilst prompting honesty about one's own substance (ab)use, twelve-step thinking also foregrounds *compassion* for the (im)possibility of unhooking from an addiction that is societal and structural, as much as individual.

In doing so, the emphasis shifts to asking for, and providing support to, fellow addicts. This is not necessarily a competition. We are all in this together, although clearly there are gaping inequities in intentions, uses and impacts. We need to work with each other now in order to unhook ourselves, our groupings and our societies from fossil fuels. Only blaming and entering into conflict with those needed as allies in this transformation potentially hinders the possibility of systemic and supportive reimagining and reconstitution. This includes fossil fuel producers. I of course find this step difficult; but I cannot escape the fact that they have made both the delights and the difficulties of our current lives possible, and perhaps they too need non-violent communications and support in order to divest from and/or to fuel systemic change (although see Fremeaux and Jordan, this volume). At the same time, clearly they need to be radically reconfigured and regulated so as to be weighted more clearly towards people and planet, rather than profit

(Paterson, this volume, also grapples with these systemic connections and complexities).

A re-oriented perception of the nature of fossil fuels may also help. Indigenous peoples have known oil as the blood of a feminised nurturing earth and as saturated with spirit beings considered to nourish the spirits infusing all plant and animal life (see Sullivan Chapter 3, this volume). Such worldviews may limit the possibility of extraction when perceived as fundamentally damaging to the systemic and nourishing health of life, and thus as morally wrong. Whimsical perhaps? But knowing oil and other potent minerals to be precious energisers of the earth, as opposed to disembedded materials whose value exists only in their burning to fuel industrial processes and economic growth, may be part of a toolkit that foundationally shifts human relationships with these substances.

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