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Imagining a sustainable future: Eschatology, Bateson's ecology of mind and arts-based practice

INTRODUCTION

As critical management scholars concerned with the ecological crises facing us, we acknowledge the insights developed by studies which highlight the 'green-washing' inherent in most corporate engagements with issues of sustainability (Banerjee, 2008; Crane, 2000; Fineman, 2001; Jones, 2013; Milne, Kearins and Walton, 2006; Milne, Tregidga and Walton, 2009; Prasad and Elmes, 2005; Wright, Nyberg and Grant, 2012). As Crane (2000) and Jones (2013) demonstrate, corporations too often rely on existing organizational narratives and metaphors to frame environmental change programmes as broadly consistent with dominant social, political, and economic systems and structures. Such critiques call for transformative change, but would be strengthened by thinking ecologically to indicate how such change might be enacted. We understand ecological thinking as being 'about imagining, crafting, articulating, [and] endeavouring *to enact* principles of ideal cohabitation' (Code, 2008, p. 24; see also the special issue on 'Future Imaginings', *Organization*, 2013). It is necessarily forward-looking and action-oriented while grounded in a reflexive criticality that engages with complex questions about alternative futures. Our contribution therefore extends critiques of familiarizing narratives by proactively considering the generation of alternatives—by broaching head-on what Starkey and Crane (2003, p. 221) identify as the key question: 'how can managers and management theorists break out of their way of understanding the world and (re)discover a nature-regarding world view?' We argue that we must discover and construct new narratives, which more meaningfully connect ecological issues with the emotional, relational, moral, and spiritual dimensions of human experience (Banerjee, 2002; Cherrier, Russell and Fielding, 2012; Crossman, 2011; Jones, 2013; Pruzan, 2008; Wittneben,

Okereke, Banerjee and Levy, 2012). To do this, we draw on insights from theology allied with the ecological philosophy of Gregory Bateson, which points to the expansion in thought and subsequent action that could result from simultaneously critical and future-oriented perspectives on ecological challenges.

To foreground pathways towards alternative futures that are not shaped and limited by the current framing of sustainability, we offer an approach related to the theological concept of 'eschatology'. Eschatology is that branch of theology focusing on 'the end of times' (Shields, 2008). Importantly, the 'end of times' does not necessarily refer to an apocalyptic day of judgment, but to the dawning of a hope-filled new era. Moreover, eschatology holds that the seeds of this future are imminent in, but not bounded by, the present so that a new era is not predicated on violent rupture. Eschatology focuses on the creative (and often simultaneously chaotic) overcoming of hegemonic stories through a community's enactment of a potentially infinite variety of loosely related counter-stories (Alison, 2010). Relatedly, Starkey and Crane (2003) note the broad consensus in management and organization theory that narratives can facilitate change by fostering new meanings that challenge our existing mental models so that we see the world differently. Counter-stories can therefore be frame-breaking in that they can shift us into developing new understandings of our relationships to ourselves and to nature (Jones, 2013).

In drawing on eschatology, we respond to Sørensen, Spoelstra, Höpfl and Critchley's (2012) incitement to 'find inspiration' in theological concepts, and 'redeem their relevance by bringing them to the surface and connecting them to present problems' as a means of 'finding forms of organization that go against the ways in which we currently organize' (p. 268). Key to this is challenging the dualism between the profane and the sacred which characterizes Western mainstream Christian theology and which 'denies the secular, or worldly, the opportunity for insights from theological reflection and

interdisciplinary dialogue' (Moerman, 2006, p. 170; see also Schmiechen, 2005). This requires a shift beyond the distinctions upheld between theology—often understood as a faith-based, revelation-focused perspective grounded in Christianity—and an ostensibly more impersonal sociology of religions (Sørensen et al, 2012). Recognizing that no ideological position, whether secular or otherwise, is value-neutral or faith-free, we embrace a contextual theologies perspective, accepting theology as historically and culturally context-bound, and 'different theologies ... [as] a particular message in a particular situation' (Moerman, 2006, p. 170). It is worth noting that one of us is of faith and one of us is a committed atheist, demonstrating that, following Critchley's (2012) discussion of Oscar Wilde's *De Profundis*, even the faithless can find inspiration in theological concepts.

Our argument proceeds as follows: first, we review the more radical organizational studies literature on sustainability. Alongside acknowledging the significant critical insight found therein, we argue that these perspectives are limited when unaccompanied by a future- and action-oriented imagination. To address these limitations, we offer the frame-breaking possibilities of eschatology, as illustrated by the 'eschatological imagination' evident in the thought of ecological philosopher Gregory Bateson. The paper delineates three key features and qualities of such a move. These are, first, a 'rhetoric of hope'; second, the 'aesthetic harmonization of contrasts'; and third, 'possibilities for flexible imitation'. We will show how this framework for the construction of counter-narratives promises a more generative engagement with ecological challenges, with which we could helpfully experiment. Finally, we offer a tentative example: the work of an activist eco-poet which begins to show how defamiliarizing narratives demonstrating these qualities can inform research practice. Our example is drawn from participatory arts-based practice because, in the words of Eisner (2008, pp. 10-11) 'in addressing what is subtle but significant, the arts develop dispositions and habits of mind that reveal to the individual a

world he or she may not have noticed but that is there to be seen if only one knew how to look'. Art challenges our familiar engagements with the world so we are prompted to make them anew.

CRITICAL MANAGEMENT STUDIES: FROM CRITIQUE TO EMANCIPATION?

As critical management researchers we align ourselves to what Fournier and Grey (2000) describe as the three 'commitments' of CMS: to a critique of the discourse of efficiency and effectiveness characterizing managerialist writing; to close attention to the researcher's own positionality; and to troubling notions of the givens of managerialism such as competition and globalization. We concur with CMS's critique of discourses and material practices of corporate sustainability as green-washing; a strategy to render palatable the continuing drive for growth and consumption associated with a Western-oriented lifestyle (eg Jones, 2013; Ramus and Montiel, 2005; Walker and Wan, 2012). Nevertheless, such critique would be strengthened further by imaginative and generative engagement with possibilities for alternative futures.

For the purposes of this review, we sought out literature taking a more critical stance towards current organizational discourses of 'sustainability' or 'sustainable development'. This literature demonstrates how current discursive formations and material practices of corporate sustainability limit possibilities for transformative change by failing to question the primacy of technology, science, and economic progress (Dryzek, 1997; Hopwood, Mellor and O'Brien, 2005; Newton and Harte, 1997). Most critics claim that such 'weak' sustainability (Turner, 1993) promotes corporate interests over those of the environment (Banerjee, 2003; 2008), provides symbolic reassurance (Greer and Bruno, 1996), and might at best be understood as cosmetic, as a management fad or exercise in impression management (Fineman, 2001; Harris and Crane, 2002; Newton and Harte,

1997). The environment is presented as something to be managed and it is under this guise that it has successfully entered the domain of mainstream management (Prasad and Elmes, 2005), where business is placed centre stage in its potential to generate solutions to environmental crises (Coopey, 2003; Dryzek, 1997; Harris and Crane, 2002; Rossi, Brown and Baas, 2000). Techno-rational approaches emphasizing control and regulation are presented as the means to manage environmental risk and boost eco-efficiency, while 'green' measures promoting sustainable consumerism are simultaneously advocated as a way of boosting the bottom line (Milne et al, 2006). Organizational discourses thus tend to focus on the business case. Business interests are presented as paramount, although eco-efficiency approaches are acceptable if they result in win-win situations where both business and the environment benefit. It is accepted that resources are limited and that their use should be regulated, but with limited tradeoffs against profitability (Turner, 1993). These approaches are presented as reasonable and practical ways of realizing a sustainable future and largely because they work within existing paradigms rather than challenge them (Prasad and Elmes, 2005). The effect of this is to systematically marginalize 'alternative paradigms and philosophies which could shift or re-enchant the organization's relationship with the natural environment' (Jones, 2012, p. 640).

Milne et al (2006) note, moreover, that the concept of sustainability is very vaguely defined in such discourses. It is presented as an ideal future state but the lack of definition enables business interests to avoid entanglement in awkward questions which might open a more radical debate on their very existence. This vagueness has resulted in a proliferation of working definitions of sustainable development (Meadowcroft, 2000; Peterson, 1997), many of which construct its meaning in terms of commercial enterprise and the primacy of profit and the market (Banerjee, 2001; 2008; Ramus and Montiel, 2005; Prasad and Elmes, 2005; Rossi, Brown and Baas, 2000; Welford, 1998). Corporations therefore regard environmental issues in terms of developing new technologies and

opportunities for further growth, and expanding the role of the market. This reliance on existing business-oriented frames of reference has led to apathy and inertia even when dealing with urgent ecological challenges such as climate change (Wittneben et al, 2012).

Thus most scholars looking critically at sustainability agree that climate change and environmental degradation will not be halted by eco-efficiency, green marketing or a technical fix, and that existing notions of progress and development are limited because the cultural certainties on which they are grounded limit possibilities for change. The critical literature insists that more radical changes in the broader socio-economic system are necessary so that sustainable development is predicated on ecological commitment rather than economic rationality. In turn, this has led to calls for a 'fundamental revision of organization studies concepts and theories' (Shrivastava, 1994, p. 721), which, together with organizational discourses and practices, 'represent a failure of imagination' (Banerjee, 2003, p. 168). However, to bring about such a transformation requires what has been described as a fundamental change in mindsets (Banerjee, 2002; Cherrier, Russell and Fielding, 2012), a groundswell of public moral outrage (Wittneben et al, 2012), a reclaiming of the concept of 'nature' (Banerjee, 2003), and a personal, spiritual and affective engagement with the natural environment (Crossman, 2011; Pruzan, 2008). Nevertheless, while the exposure of the paucity of the eco-modernist discourse is necessary and welcome, it is currently less clear how we might displace it with life-affirming alternatives. Indeed, Andrew Crane, who has argued persuasively that corporate greening is limited and accompanied by a process of 'amoralization', concludes that the lesson for those who espouse more radical change is to 'accommodate better the political and cultural realities of modern corporate life' (Crane, 2000, p. 692). We suggest that this is indicative of a wider 'failure of imagination' (Banerjee, 2003, p. 168) which perpetuates buy-in to those same systems of thinking and theorizing.

Instead, Banerjee argues that the debate should focus on how we understand our relationships with our world and one another (Banerjee, 2003, p. 170). Moving away from a notion of humanity as atomized to being part of a larger whole would be a step to achieving the moral transformation needed to underpin a re-conceptualization of sustainability. This paper seeks to move organizations and those who study them towards such a reconceptualization by highlighting the emancipatory possibilities of an 'eschatological imagination' brought alive through aesthetic and arts-based approaches.

ESCHATOLOGICAL IMAGINATION: BACK TO THE FUTURE

Our contention, then, is that CMS's engagement with issues of sustainability needs to embrace eschatology's concern with the *coming into existence* of futures that significantly improve on the present. We suggest experiencing current ecological crises eschatologically, as 'an emerging possibility in history' (Moltmann, 1967, p. 132). So, what might this entail? To answer this question, we undertook a close reading of the eschatological literature emerging from liberationist theology perspectives, which seek specifically to integrate theological insights with possibilities for social change (e.g. Gutiérrez, 1973/1988). We considered the insights from this body of work in conjunction with those in the related (though not identical) theology of hope movement pioneered by Jürgen Moltmann (1967). While liberation theologies tend to focus on practical action and strategies for theologically-informed activism, theologies of hope tend to start from biblical depictions of the future kingdom of God and exhort us to develop and deploy our imaginations so as to move towards 'better' forms of future society (Brown, 2013). As Moltmann (1967, p. 16) explains: 'Christianity is eschatology, is hope, forward looking and forward moving ... Eschatology should not be its end, but its beginning.'

For the purposes of our present argument, we have borrowed most significantly from those theological commentators who combine a commitment to liberation and social change with an eschatological concern with hope, imagination, and the future (e.g. Alison, 2010; Haught, 1984; Shields, 2008). We have aligned ourselves with revisionist, postmodern readings of eschatology which preoccupy themselves with a challenge central to the human condition, that of living in the midst of radical ambiguity (e.g. Tracy, 1975; 1981). In an eschatological imagination of this kind, hope is conceived as action (Shields, 2008) and the manner of acting is open-ended and pluralistic; transgressive, creative, and indeterminate at the same time. Within such revisionist readings, three key elements of an eschatological imagination are apparent; 'a rhetoric of hope', 'aesthetic harmonization of contrasts', and 'possibilities for flexible imitation'. In this section we outline each and then illustrate them by reflecting on the ways in which Gregory Bateson's work manifests or illuminates these qualities in relation to ecology.

A rhetoric of hope

A contemporary eschatology side-steps the temptation to speak with any certainty about the future, just as it does the tendency to speak with a sense of resignation (Shields, 2008). Assumptions of the future as immutable are often implicit in the context of management and organization research on sustainability, which suggests futures in which existing hegemonic discourses, structures, and patterns of behaviour are largely replicated, or even intensified. To create different possibilities for organizational engagements with nature, we must move beyond such grim predictions, and perhaps more importantly, beyond resignation.

The language of cautious but hopeful possibility which eschatological imagination expounds, and Bateson's thought illustrates in an ecological context, becomes particularly relevant. As Shields (2008) explains:

... an eschatological imagination is best constructed as a rhetoric of virtue, an exhortation to live in active ... hope in a world that has passed from modernity into critical postmodernity and that continues to pass into a future that is objectively unavailable yet still of crucial human concern. (p. 4)

The eschatological imagination is mobilized through a 'rhetoric of hope' because, as a genre, the aim of rhetoric is to exhort or activate particular courses of thought and action towards preferred future imaginaries.

It is important to note that the quality of hopefulness involved here is not a compliant, rose-tinted one, but rather one that is informed and alert. Key to eschatology's relevance is that it does not ask us to live 'glued to some fantasy, but learning to perceive the comings of [a new kingdom] in the here and now' (Alison, 2010, p. 149). We must live with an eye to the future we seek to create, but also with discernment in the midst of the present reality: the 'deepest eschatological attitude [involves an] absolutely flexible state of alert[ness] in order to perceive' the unfolding of a new era 'in the most hidden and subtle forms' (Alison, 2010, p. 149). Hope, then, represents a state of discerning and creative openness to alternatives.

Aesthetic harmonization of contrasts

In the rhetoric of hope and the language of cautious possibility propounded above, what is foregrounded is the creative quality which differentiates eschatological imagination from the apocalyptic kind. While the latter tends to emphasize violent ruptures and a clean, if painful, break between the past and the future, the former puts forward the possibility of creative subversion and slow overcoming from within of seemingly entrenched systemic structures (Alison, 2010). While apocalyptic perspectives would seek fully and finally to

distinguish between good and evil, the eschatological imagination aims for what Haught (1984) refers to as an aesthetic harmonization of contrasts. According to Haught (1984, n.p.), this eschatological obsession:

... [is] one in which the evil in the world is not rooted out and separated from the good. Rather [this] vision [is] one in which we should allow the weeds to remain along with the wheat, one in which ... the sun ... shine[s] on both the just and the unjust. There is no moralistic segregating of the innocent from the dark side of life. The aesthetic urge to harmonize contrasts wins out over the ethical impulse to destroy evil outright ... [It does] not strive simply to tell us how to behave but, even more, to open our eyes to the wider vision.

The point for Haught is that our vision must transcend the impulse to moralize, segregate, or make judgments. It is not that critique or opposition is inappropriate but that it must be accompanied by creative engagement with alternatives. Haught's focus is on a universal beauty, which he sees as the ultimate horizon of faith and hope. He argues that 'it is our being drawn towards the spectre of eschatological beauty that gives rise to our moral aspiration in the first place' (1984, n.p.). In other words, it is through keeping our eyes on the horizon, on the beauty of a future which we hope is even now breaking into the present, that we gain ethical clarity. He concludes:

If we try to establish an ethic of duty independently of our hope for ultimate beauty, then the ethic will become an intolerable burden. The vision must precede the moral imperatives. (Haught, 1984, n.p.)

Possibilities for flexible imitation

The possibilities for critique and eventual co-creation opened by a harmonization of contrasts lead us to the final quality of eschatological imagination outlined in this paper, that of flexible imitation. Here, we borrow from Alison's (2010) argument that exemplary counter-stories are needed in which the '... imagination [is] nourished by ... the type of immense creative diversity that we cannot imagine while our imaginations go round in death-bound cycles' (2010, p. 69). It is in the enactment of such stories, inspired by eschatological imagination, that a new era comes to be, through:

... the possibility that we might begin to inscribe ourselves in an immense variety of different and meaningful stories, all of which have as their starting point the creative human overcoming of [cultures of death, violence, and expulsion]. (Alison, 2010, p. 69)

This relates to a CMS research agenda on sustainability in that many critical management scholars are seeking to overcome the cultures of violence upon which organizational and managerialist endeavours are often based (CMS Domain Statement, 2003). If the prerequisite for such 'creative human overcoming' is a reflexive awareness of the ways in which such hegemonies are played out, then so far so good for critical scholarship. From an eschatological perspective, though, critique is insufficient. For as Alison (2010, p. 145) explains, it is while in the midst of critiquing this present reality that those enacting a counter-story must 'give witness to [their] belief in another kingdom, distinct from the kingdoms which seek to found themselves on reciprocal violence'.

Alison is by no means alone in conceptualizing counter-stories as a device to destabilize and open up hegemonic narratives which close down our abilities to conceive of alternative futures.¹ Major philosophers such as Foucault (1977; 2003; on counter-memory), Barthes (1977; on counter-narrative), and Deleuze and Guattari (1988; on anti-

memory), although largely concerned with representations of the past rather than of potential futures, all point to the power of such stories as means of experimenting (Sørensen, 2014) necessary to give voice to other possibilities (see Sørensen, 2014 for a more comprehensive discussion of these texts). Foucault's work points to the discursive practices of remembering and forgetting in which some perspectives are displaced and subjugated. Such perspectives form counter-histories and counter-memories which provide possibilities for resisting mainstream or official versions of history (Foucault, 1977; 2003). For Barthes, dominant narratives are used by society as 'mythical solutions' to resolve the 'contradictions of history'. He argues for the imperative of counter-narratives, which subvert and break through the familiar cultural codes enacted by hegemonic narratives (Barthes, 1977, pp. 63-64). Thus, a counter-story can be seen as a jumping off point, on the basis of which we can let our eschatological imagination run wild. From an acknowledgment of the creative possibility exemplified therein, we can go on to imitate, create, and participate in an endless variety of counter-stories, inspired by but not limited to the mould of the original counter-story.

BATESON'S ESCHATOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

Aspects of Bateson's extensive work have been brought to bear on management and organization theory, most often in relation to logical levels of learning (e.g. Burgoyne and Hodgson, 1983; Roach and Bednar, 1997; Tosey, 2005; Visser, 2007), but also to complexity and change (e.g. Chia, 1998; Eide, 2009; Miettinen and Virkkunen, 2005; Morgan, 1981), reflexivity (Chia, 1996; Marshall, 2004) and communication (Mathur, 2008; Miles, 2004; Mohe and Seidl, 2011; Sclavi, 2008). However, his radical approach to ecological thinking, which is our focus here, is taken up by few in the field (for notable exceptions focusing on the pedagogical implications of Bateson's work for education on

ecology, see Marshall, 2004 and Reason, 2007). Our project includes understanding how Bateson's (1967; 1972a; 1972b; 1979) interpretation of aesthetics and the 'ecology of mind' models the more expansive, imaginative attention required as a next step in CMS's engagement with questions of sustainability.

We highlight the ways in which Bateson's thought is representative of eschatological imagination, affording us the possibility of both a counter-cultural interpretation of hegemonic realities and much-needed hope for alternative futures. Following Jones (2012), what Bateson provides is a frame-breaking story that facilitates new understanding, ecological consciousness, and an original vision of the organization-environment relationship. It is thus also a defamiliarizing narrative, whose 'power lies in [its] potential to excite and captivate an audience that has grown used to unquestioned, even somewhat mundane, perspective[s]' (Starkey and Crane, 2003, p. 227).

It is Bateson's integration of critique and radical possibility which illustrates the first quality of eschatological imagination, that of a rhetoric of hope.

Bateson's rhetoric against resignation: towards an ecology of mind

According to Bateson (1972b), one of the most detrimental constructs of modern times is that which privileges the human being and human mental activity as the pinnacle of existence, setting us above and apart from the rest of nature, and often, one another. In opposition to this view of ourselves as atomized, Bateson's concern is with a more expansive understanding of the nature of mental systems, and of the relationships and connections amongst these that engender an 'ecology of mind' (Bateson, 1972a; 1972b; 1979).

Key to understanding the eschatological imagination inherent in the ecology of mind is Bateson's (1972b) critique of 'conscious purpose'. Consciousness is necessarily selective, and tends to be organized in terms of purpose; of an instrumentality that benefits

the atomized self or group. What makes conscious purpose problematic is the fact that it is increasingly empowered by technology (which, in the business context, includes anything from mass production lines to global financial systems), so that its destructive potential is heightened. The dangers of the narrow instrumentality inherent in conscious purpose are illustrated in Bateson's notion of schismogenesis which considers how intensifying feedback patterns from its environment are of initial benefit to an individual living system but become disintegrative. As organizations are living systems, the notion applies also to the interactions between them and the broader contexts in which they are operating, as both Morgan (1981) and Zundel (2014) have demonstrated. There is an entanglement in such intensifying patterns because there is, initially at least, positive feedback, so that feedback interactions can become vicious circles and what was a successful 'acclimation' turns into a source of stress and decay. Thus corporate reliance on finding a technical fix, a focus on eco-efficiencies, or producing greener products are initially successful adaptations to pressures from government, consumers and other stakeholders to issues of environmental degradation. However, as such actions are limited and constrained by an emphasis on the market and economic growth, environmental degradation will continue until a point of disintegration is reached. Instead organizations need to unlearn their adaptations and re-adjust in order to arrive at a new dynamic equilibrium. Rather than get trapped in such feedback loops, Bateson urges us to act with wisdom defined in relation to knowledge of the total system of which we are a part. Though such knowledge will always be partial, it is the cautious but hopeful possibility of its expansion which characterizes Bateson's eschatological imagination.

Bateson's rhetoric of hope is evident not only in his call for a fuller awareness of contexts and relationships which would support calls for a re-engagement with nature. It is also evident in his attentiveness to the patterns of thought and action which emerge from a simultaneously critical and imaginative engagement with the status quo. Bateson does not

shy away from engaging in dystopian critique: indeed, the urgency of his analysis is grounded in an acute recognition of the problems caused by the systematically entrenched positioning of purposive rationality within our cultural and societal systems. But, significantly, his critique does not stop there. In an eschatological turn, he also foregrounds creative, subversive possibilities for moving towards alternative futures. Thus, he makes some significant—though seemingly modest—suggestions for how consciousness may be ‘a little enlarged’ (Bateson, 1967, p. 10):

It is, however, possible that the remedy for ills of conscious purpose lies with the individual. There is what Freud called the royal road to the unconscious. He was referring to dreams, but I think we should lump together dreams and the creativity of art, or the perception of art, and poetry and such things. And I would include with these the best of religion [and natural history]. These are all activities in which the whole individual is involved. (Bateson, 1972b, p. 438)

As we can see, Bateson’s vision for the expansion of a human consciousness that is ecologically sustainable is embedded in aesthetic sensibilities. We expand on this in the next section, which relates to the second eschatological quality we propose here, that of the aesthetic harmonization of contrasts. For now, we conclude by noting that a number of responses might be appropriate to rhetoric of this kind—anything from hope and inspiration, to curiosity and puzzlement, to resistance and rejection. Even then, such work would succeed in sparking eschatological imagination if it inspired debate and opened up possibilities. The further expansion and inclusion of forms of rhetoric against resignation, then, is one of the movements we believe is called for in developing our field’s research agenda on sustainability.

Bateson's aesthetics: the pattern which connects

We read Bateson's conviction that aesthetic engagement as a mode of being is more receptive to the wider ecology of mind as an aesthetic eschatology. According to Bateson, the aesthetic response is integrative, and characterized by recognition and empathy. He explains, 'By *aesthetic*, I mean responsive to the pattern which connects' (1979, p. 8, original emphasis). Bateson's point, then, is that aesthetic process can be seen as 'an antidote to the pathological isolation of self-conscious-purposefulness' (Charlton, 2003, p. 230), precisely because aesthetic processes depend on connectedness, recognition, and affinity. Following Charlton's (2008; 2003) synthesis of Bateson's thought on aesthetics, we propose that aesthetic engagement can be a mode of inquiry into the nature and quality of our relationship with other systems. This is not to privilege one way of knowing over another – Bateson is clear that he is 'not advocating a greater use of emotion or a lesser use of intellect' (1972a, p. 438) —but to expand what counts as knowledge.

Bateson's thought has some challenging implications for the expansion of CMS's research agenda in relation to sustainability. Bateson makes the case for aesthetic engagement as a means of '[expanding] the mind outwards' and for '[reducing] the scope of the conscious self' (1972a, p. 436). Indeed, the use of creative practices such as painting, dance, poetry or literature to enhance understanding of and engagement with sustainability issues is beginning to be developed (e.g. Guy, Henshaw and Heidrich, 2015; Ivanaj, Poldner and Shrivastava, 2014; Phillips, 2014; Shrivastava, Ivanaj and Ivanaj, 2012) supporting the parallel trend of drawing on arts-based methods and aesthetic insights within the wider field of management studies (e.g. Gayá Wicks and Rippin, 2010; Ladkin and Taylor, 2010; Francisco, 2014). For organizational research and practice specifically related to sustainability, the shift predicated by Bateson's insights is the acknowledgment that generative engagement with ecological problems is possible only when we are enlivened by an intellectual, emotional, and aesthetic appreciation of our

participation within a greater whole. This aesthetic harmonization of contrasts demonstrates an attitude towards change and the future which is firmly eschatological.

Bateson's thought points the way towards the kinds of ontological and epistemological shifts which would facilitate a critical yet creative engagement with questions of sustainability within the field of CMS. At a meta-level, it also models for us the quality of eschatological imagination which enables us to comprehend the pathologies or hegemonies which detrimentally structure our world, and from there to articulate a counter-story, a possibility for subversion and transformation from within. It is this to which we now turn.

Counter-stories and flexible imitation

We have taken care to present Bateson's ideas as an example of eschatological imagination manifested even within highly critical systems of thought. The challenge for our field is to move beyond critical discourses which are 'introspective and self-regarding' (Grey and Wilmott, 2002, p. 412), and to generate a plurality of counter-stories that go beyond the critique of the business case or of reform environmentalism.

As already mentioned, an eschatological attitude requires an openness to discern the unfurling of potential new imaginaries in the here and now. Such an attitude, referred to as an 'absolutely flexible state of alert' by Alison (2010, p. 149), combines a future(s)-creating focus with critical attention to present realities. Bateson's thought strives to achieve this by alerting us to the pathologies in epistemologies which structure our being in the world so that ecological devastation abounds. Simultaneously, it points to the subtle ways in which current 'realities' might be challenged: namely, through diverse forms of aesthetic engagement and a harmonization of contrasts which expands the mind outwards and reduces the scope of conscious purposiveness. As Bateson (1972a, p. 436) suggests, 'A certain humility becomes appropriate, tempered by the dignity or joy of being

part of something much bigger': an ecology of mind, or in eschatological terms, hope for the future.

What Bateson proposes is an opening of debate, in which one challenge would be that of discovering what it would mean to live out new ways of thinking and practice in the midst of the old one. It is this to which Alison (2010) refers when he highlights a counter-story's potential to subvert and transform the hegemonic story from within. The challenge is to follow Bateson in taking the risks involved in re-conceptualizing some of the fundamental assumptions of our field and opening these up not only for challenge and critique but for further development and co-creation.

Of course, it is possible to dismiss Bateson's thought as utopian and naive. To counter such criticisms, we follow Parker, Fournier and Reedy (2007) in arguing that utopias are not necessarily materialistic representations of perfect societies, but an expression of what Bloch (1986) has called a principle of hope which allows people to imagine that the world can be otherwise. They open up possibilities for alternative ways of being that can inspire people to imagine and work for a better world. As Critchley (2012, pp. 151-152) puts it, the consequence of renouncing the utopian is that:

... we are stuck with the way things are, or possibly something even worse than the way things are. To abandon the utopian impulse in thinking and acting is to imprison ourselves within the world as it is and to give up once and for all the prospect that another world is possible, however small, fleeting and compromised such a world might be.

If we cannot imagine the possibility of a better future, we will indeed remain paralysed by inertia.

TOWARDS ESCHATOLOGICALLY INFORMED RESEARCH: AN EMPIRICAL ILLUSTRATION

The three characteristics of eschatological imagination we have outlined are particularly relevant and indeed well-suited to research on sustainability. Here, we highlight some practical shifts in focus to which eschatologically informed research might give rise.

We offer the work of eco-poet Susan Richardson as an example of an aesthetic organizational and social intervention practice that seeks to embody and move us towards both an ecology of mind and a rhetoric of hope that does not shirk from critique. The choice of Richardson as an illustration is arbitrary to the extent that we could have focused on other eco-poets or creative writers, or on practitioners who seek to engage participants through the medium of dance, movement, and/or improvisation.² The work of such artists and practitioners seeks to engage generatively, and aesthetically with groups and communities to raise awareness of complex ecological problems. There is increasing interest in such forms of engagement with environmental issues. For example, primarily scientific bodies such as the Cabot Institute at the University of Bristol, UK, have worked with an artist-in-residence (<http://www.bris.ac.uk/cabot/people/air/>), and the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council has offered funding for arts-led projects to promote more sustainable living (AHRC 2012). Richardson herself serves as artist-in-residence at ARCIO (Action Research and Critical Inquiry in Organisations), the research centre with which both of the authors are affiliated, and one of the authors has collaborated with Richardson on projects involving workshops, presentations and writing.

We look first at one of Richardson's poems and then discuss this and her work more generally using our eschatological framework: as a rhetoric of hope and as an aesthetic harmonization of contrasts. In the spirit of flexible imitation, we consider ways in which this might inspire and challenge those of us conducting formal research in the area

of sustainability. We have separated the three elements of the eschatological framework in order to simplify discussion, but they are best regarded as an integrated whole.

Richardson describes herself as a poet, performer and educator. She writes poetry for publication (Richardson, 2007; 2010; 2015) and has been artist-in-residence for a number of organizations such as The Marine Conservation Trust, Greenpeace, the World Wildlife Fund and a community energy company. These organizations have recognized the potential of artistic interventions to publicize environmental issues, to reach out and foster commitment and to develop communities of supporters. She performs her poetry to a wide range of audiences including women's institutes, Rotary clubs and other business organizations, and as part of larger events such as Bristol's Big Green Festival. She also facilitates eco-poetry and writing workshops which encourage participants to engage with the natural environment through immersion in place. They then compose their own poems; reflecting their own eschatological experiences in the form of further counter-stories.

The account that follows is based on conversations with Richardson and on direct experience of her performances and writing workshops. It is thus subjective and partial, but it suggests the possibility of an engagement with the future that goes beyond critique, and resonates with an eschatological imagination and other work on the potential of defamiliarizing narratives. As Richardson notes, stepping beyond our current boundaries to imagine and be moved to act for a different future is:

... the role that poetry and the other arts have because it is very easy to feel completely disempowered, disenfranchised, hopeless and there has to be something to combat that. (personal conversation)

While we believe that Richardson's work offers possibilities for flexible imitation, we also note the ways in which this kind of intervention is limited and insufficient in itself to

support the paradigm shift required if we are to move CMS's focus beyond critique and into constructive, practice-relevant offerings. Our aim in sharing this example is not to advocate eco-poetry specifically, nor to idealize aesthetic engagements more generally, but to begin to tease out the qualities which critical researchers interested in sustainability issues may seek to enact and integrate into their work, in an effort to enhance its relevance for work and activism on behalf of alternative futures.

Poetry as a rhetoric of hope

Poetry's use of metaphor, imagery, rhyme and scansion, and the different patterns and levels of meaning that they evoke, makes it slippery and difficult to pin down. Reading or listening to poetry is a process that requires the active participation of the reader/listener to create meaning from the text. To paraphrase the words of poet Emily Dickinson, it helps the reader/listener see all the world but see it slant (Dickinson, 1998) as it shifts our perspectives so that we consider new understandings. Poetry engages the emotions; as Richardson puts it, it 'goes straight to the heart, bypassing the intellect' (personal conversation), makes the abstract concrete, and has the potential to infuse passion into the pursuit of a sustainable future.

Richardson's poetry is often inspired by the metaphorical significance of 'the North', which offers a rich seam of artistic possibilities and has assumed an almost iconic status in environmental rhetoric due to the impact of climate change and the melting of Arctic ice. The example we present below is based on an Inuit folk story. Nerravik marries a bird/man against the wishes of her family. While the bird/man is out fishing, her father and brothers kidnap her. Her husband is greatly distressed when he returns home and finds her gone, and so swings his wings and raises a violent storm which threatens the boat taking Nerravik away. Her brothers suspect she is the cause and so cast her into the sea. She tries to climb back in but her father cuts off her fingers. She drowns, but at the bottom

of the sea, she becomes ruler over all the sea creatures and decides whether or not hunting will be successful.

Nerrivik

Do not mistake me for a mermaid.

Do not presume I'll swim to the surface,
perch on a berg and croon.

Do not tell your kids coddled in caribou fur
a fairytale of my creation.

Hold the kayak of truth to their ears:

let them hear

the slice

of the knife when my father chopped

off my fingers,

my arctic howl as I sank

to the ocean floor,

the bloodsong of my thumbs as they bulged with blubber –

before my icestruck eyes, belugas formed.

My index fingers were instant narwhals –

tusks burst

from nails. Ringed seals zinged

from my middle fingers, while the littlest wriggled

far from mammaldom,

riddled with gills and scales.

Do not, however, spear me with pity.

If my whalejaw comb cracks,
if the stumps of my wrists can't clear
the knots from the thick black fronds of my hair,
I can summon a shaman to tackle the tangles,
with the weave and tickle of mackerel and cod.

All I demand is that you treat this zone,
which I was forced to make my home, with care.
Do not thaw my ceiling.
Do not stain my walls with your crimson greed.
Don't rip up my floor with your trawlers.
Don't furnish me with debris from your submarines.

Remember – one shrug
of my shoulders can cause
a four-day storm. I can calve bergs
from glaciers
with the smallest sneeze. If I am displeased,
I will call the offspring of my fingers to me
and make fists to breach your overwater world,
to punch
your beloved sun from its sky.

(Richardson, 2010, pp. 8-9)

We are wary of offering a detailed analysis of the poem as we do not wish to foreclose any of the meanings readers of this article may find for themselves. However, it

is worth teasing out the ways in which this could be understood as embodying and communicating a rhetoric of hope. After all, the potential consequences with which Nerrivik threatens humanity may well be considered catastrophic, from a human perspective. It is important to remember that an eschatological rhetoric of hope does not seek to offer a rose-tinted perspective on the ease of the transition to (an) alternative future(s). Indeed, a rhetoric of hope is deeply rooted in knowledge and critique of the hubris and unsustainability of the status quo (represented here by imagery of devastation wreaked upon the Arctic by human activity). However, the critique inherent within a rhetoric of hope is accompanied and empowered by an eschatological imagination which points to the *possibility* of more positive versions of future reality. The poem brings us face-to-face with both violence *and* empowerment: even though a great brutality has been committed, the 'victim' is empowered through conjoining with the natural world. And we too are empowered: Nerrivik's voice—forceful, unambiguous, unapologetic—communicates to us that she/the Arctic requires nothing from humanity other than for us to tread gently and treat her home with care. The complexity and seeming intractability of much of the ecological crisis can often be experienced as paralyzing and disempowering: instead, the poem enables us to imagine a way forward based on an awareness of mutual respect, interdependence, and principles of responsible co-habitation.

Reading or experiencing the performance of such a poem can be understood as promoting a relatively modest, small-scale response unlikely in itself to precipitate a significant shift away from existing systems. Of course, from an eschatological perspective, that is precisely the point: it can engender an attitude of active hopefulness—of the kind which underlies the creative envisioning of and experimentation with alternative futures—that resides within existing, seemingly intractable patterns of thought and behaviour. That is to say, it produces a rhetoric of hope, such as that exemplified by Bateson, which positions itself in opposition to *and* co-exists with the status quo.

Research for sustainability could seek to do something similar, by enabling research participants to re-connect, at more-than-rational levels, with the local and global systems of which they are part, thus mobilizing a sense of creativity and agency to replace a nihilistic resignation to the status quo.

The defamiliarizing effect of poetry, which Richardson describes as 'bypassing the intellect', also connects to Bateson's critique of conscious purpose. Beyes and Steyaert (2011, p. 100) point to 'the politico-aesthetic power of art to interfere with how the social is assembled and to provoke new constellations of what is visible and sayable', and, we might add, doable and actionable. By disturbing the ways in which the world is currently experienced, poetry can provide new insights that impact on our engagements with nature and disrupt the instrumentally focused feedback loops in which we are currently trapped.

Aesthetic harmonization of contrasts

We now reflect on the ways in which artistically-engaged research interventions can characterize the second quality of eschatological imagination, that of an 'aesthetic harmonization of contrasts' where it is accepted that violent ruptures from the present are neither likely nor necessarily desirable. The challenge, therefore, is to consider how a future in which we wish to participate is always already breaking into our lives, in the midst of the imperfections of the present. This is such that in any programme of renewal and/or re-engineering, one never starts with a clean slate: the old and the new necessarily co-exist.

In Richardson's work with environmental NGOs, their willingness to engage with arts-based approaches to winning support for their causes involved tensions between the means used to capitalize on the poetry workshops and the messages that the workshops espoused. According to Richardson, the organizations favoured a number of marketing techniques to publicize their causes, such as wanting celebrities to read poetry while being

projected onto giant screens or live tweeting during Earth Hour (when energy use was supposed to be at a minimum). The number of people signed up to the cause or the amount of publicity generated across traditional and social media were taken as indicators of the events' success. Such marketing techniques are often criticized when used by corporations wanting to sell less palatable messages. The engagement of eco-poetry in debates concerning our current life-styles therefore presently sits in juxtaposition with what might be regarded as the shadow side of organizations. While such techniques are arguably part of a destructive schismogenic feedback loop, their use in conjunction with eco-poetry events demonstrates the possibility of holding and balancing the positive and negative simultaneously, and of creating a space in which integrative and subversive counter-narratives, the eco-poems, can have an impact.

Such interventions are not above critique. It could be said that work such as this involves preaching to the converted. After all, you might argue, climate change deniers are unlikely to attend a performance of eco-poetry or participate in a workshop. We accept this, although Richardson and others doing similar work do engage with corporate and business groups. For example, the Olivier Mythodrama group (www.oliviermythodrama.com) offers a form of experiential learning and organizational development that draws on a combination of theatrical technique and ritual process to enable participants to 'act in' new archetypes, themselves forms of counter-stories, needed to liberate future potential and address issues of ethical leadership in particular. Olivier Mythodrama has worked with a wide range of corporate clients, including Aviva, BP International, GlaxoSmithKlein, Microsoft, and Motorola. As the testimonial of an HR Change Manager working with Centrica Energy reports, 'Mythodrama brings together the irreconcilable; making complexity simple; the unattainable, accessible. They inspire hope and belief where there is none. Sheer genius.'³ Conversely, those committed to environmental causes can be sceptical. For example, the contact at the environmental

organization with whom Richardson was working was dubious regarding the effectiveness of writing workshops. However, he reluctantly participated in a trial, and subsequently became an enthusiastic supporter. The means by which arts-based interventions are delivered require careful consideration as poetry that stays on the page is unlikely to have the same impact as poetry that is performed. The sound of a poem, such as the way the lines scan or the effect of alliteration, makes a substantial contribution to its impact whether listening to it being performed or reading it aloud. There is also a danger that an overly didactic approach could be counter-productive because readers/listeners do not want to feel preached at. Finally, it is easy to be caught up by the moment of a performance or a workshop, and whether this directly translates into action might be a moot point. It is however possible that poetry or other aesthetic interventions can inspire, such that they are part of a cumulative trajectory towards enacting change. It might thus be of greater use to consider them as seeds being planted.

Possibilities for flexible imitation: toward an eschatological philosophy of inquiry

We conclude this section by returning to the third quality of eschatological imagination relevant to research on organizations and sustainability: that of opening ourselves to the countless counter-stories, both from within our field and beyond, which might offer us creative possibilities for 'flexible imitation'. The poems Richardson writes and with which she engages are counter-stories which can engender new ways of thinking and seeing which, following Rycroft (2005), 'apprehend rather than represent the world – modes that employ the full range of senses and evoke the ... character of being in a world that is always becoming' (p. 354). Richardson's own philosophy is that her poetry is a form of activism:

Other people are activists in terms of climbing ice shards and marching and I've done marches as well but I don't do direct action in that way ... so I wanted to do more, so I do what I can do which is the writing and performing [of eco-poetry].
(personal conversation)

We have stated above that establishing a definitive link between participation in a workshop or attendance at a poetry reading and future activism is far from straightforward. However, it is well-documented that ecological issues such as climate change appear as a distant risk to Western publics (Corner, Whitmarsh and Xenias, 2012; Doan, 2014; Poortinga et al, 2011; Slocum, 2004). Workshop participants reported that climate change felt removed from their everyday lives but writing their own poetry made them think about weather patterns and impacts at a very local level. One participant was inspired to co-found a Facebook group (with 397 members at the time of writing) discussing how the climate change message could be communicated through popular fiction and has since had his own short stories published in an edited collection. Richardson particularly pointed to the reactions of attendees at readings given to business groups several of whom reported that they usually 'switched off' when seeing a story about climate change in news media: 'Poetry seemed to reach them in a way that news stories hadn't; they asked lots of questions and said that this made them see it as an important issue' (personal conversation). Other recent examples of flexible imitation inspired by participation in Richardson's poetry workshops include that of a participant who reported sowing many pollinator-friendly seeds in her garden after a Friends of the Earth Bee Cause poetry workshop, and another who reported making a concerted effort to reduce their plastic waste after a Marine Conservation Society Thirty Threatened Species poetry workshop.

Beyond possibilities for flexible imitation opened up for workshop participants, the present discussion points to some of the alternative ways in which researchers might seek

to complement their essential critique in the spirit of flexible imitation described here. Working with artists and other aesthetically-inspired practitioners can allow researchers not only to describe and interpret, but to experiment with alternative articulations of sustainability by modelling aesthetic approaches in their own work. Action research approaches, for example, increasingly favour creative and arts-based participatory research methods as a way of collaboratively and constructively working with complex challenges (e.g. Smith, 2015; Van Lith, 2014; Ramaswamy, 2014). Management and organization scholars have been calling for and playfully engaging with ways of writing that are alternative to the norms of social science (e.g. Grey and Sinclair, 2006) as a means of communication that is more embodied and less abstract so that it captures and conveys affect (Phillips, Pullen and Rhodes, 2014). Academics have written experimentally including using poetry (Kostera, 1997), biography (Rhodes, 2001) and even very different modes of representation such as textiles (Rippin, 2013). In the field of sustainability, Neimanis and Walker (2014) incorporate their own creative writing into their academic texts while Phillips (2015, forthcoming) has drawn on the poetic writing of Hélène Cixous as a way of overcoming physical and emotional alienation from nature. Such writing has the potential to disrupt and challenge the discourses of conscious purpose of most managerial and academic engagements with corporate environmentalism.

Indeed, the impacts of the use of arts-based methods in deepening engagements with ecological issues have been documented elsewhere. Ivanaj, Poldner and Shrivastava (2014) have encouraged participants to paint their interpretations of 'sustainability' and show how connecting hands, heart and head in this way 'evoke(s) deep personal, emotional understanding and commitment to action' (p. 38). In an earlier article they argue that 'art permits fresh perspectives and new ways of perceiving and interpreting the world, permitting us to give up some of our old habits and responses and to generate new and creative ones' (Shrivastava, Ivanaj and Ivanaj, 2012, p. 29). Guy, Henshaw and Heidrich

(2015) discuss how encountering 'eco-art' – sculpture produced from waste products – can engage the collective imagination and stimulate people into action. These examples illustrate a break with conscious purpose, a move towards an ecology of mind that also apprehends how the future is always breaking into the present.

To sum up, Richardson's approach to inquiry with and in organizations combines critique with a desire to inspire, in what can be described as an eschatological turn. In challenging and bypassing the conscious purposiveness at the heart of discourses on the technical fix and the business case, this mode of engagement simultaneously faces and transcends the possibility of a gloomy future or no future at all. Eco-poetry is an example of a form which fulfills Banerjee's call for sustainable development to go beyond concerns with 'managerial efficiency', and to '[rethink] human-nature relationships, [re-examine] current doctrines of progress and modernity, and [privilege] alternate visions of the world' (2003, p. 28). The alternate vision privileged here is of aesthetic experiences that incorporate 'intuitive, imaginative, spiritual and contemplative dimensions' (Jones, 2013, p. 158). We argue that CMS research would benefit from fuller, more open-minded attention to the possibilities of aesthetic experiences, whether at personal, organizational, or systemic levels to disrupt and challenge the discourses of conscious purpose of most corporate environmentalism.

CONCLUSION

This paper set out to propose a way forward for research on sustainability that offered the potential to shift the thinking of organizations and the scholars who study them. As well as critique the current familiarizing narratives of organizational approaches to sustainability, we also hope to galvanize new initiatives through holding the possibility of change. We have drawn inspiration from Sørensen et al's (2012, p. 275) invitation to 'return towards a forgotten or repressed meaning, connotation or practice that is theological in nature in

order to intervene in contemporary organizational thinking and practice'. This has involved bridging the schism between CMS, understood as a sociological endeavour, and theology (Sørensen et al, 2012). We have thus sought to foreground the critical and liberatory possibilities of eschatology for CMS's engagement with sustainability. Our suggestions for generative research on sustainability is therefore informed by a theological lens on 'end of times' and 'the coming of new kingdoms'.

Reflecting on the work of Gregory Bateson as an example of an eschatological counter-story, we point to two ways in which dominant ontological and epistemological assumptions are challenged by his thought: first, in the move beyond fragmented perspectives and towards a systemic awareness of context, and second, in the reduction in scope of purposive rationality made possible by aesthetic modes of engagement. We argue that greater systemic awareness and an extended, aesthetic epistemology may be understood as a theological turn of the liberatory kind, and that incorporating these qualities into research on sustainability would promote engagement which is simultaneously critical and creative.

That Bateson's references to such ideas as the 'ecology of mind' and an 'ultimate beauty' might raise some eyebrows in the field of management is precisely the point: his rhetoric challenges and transcends the limiting and limited rhetoric of the business case for sustainability, as well as that of its critique in the more critical reaches of our field. Bateson's narrative speaks instead to the kind of moral transformation to which more radical ecologists and management thinkers refer (Banerjee, 2003; Reason, 2007). It foregrounds the possibility of 'making accessible a new sort of human practice in the midst of the old one' (Alison, 2010, p. 67). In other words, it is a meta-level counter-story which emphasizes their paradigm-shifting and future-shaping potential. Even if we were to reject this particular counter-story, its very existence awakens us to the possibility of considering others.

Finally, we have illustrated how such a meta-narrative might be translated into practice through Susan Richardson's work as an eco-poet working with organizations. We acknowledge that eco-poetry may be of limited usefulness in contexts that are less open to creative engagements of this kind. Our aim is not to propose poetry as a particular method above other forms of creative interventions, but to inspire researchers to develop new modes of participating in research for sustainability. For CMS, this would mean: first, increasingly complementing incisive critique with an attitude of active hopefulness, of the kind which underlies the creative envisioning of and experimentation with alternative futures; second, looking for transformational spaces within current practices where possibilities for alternative futures might be breaking through; and third, offering research practices and accounts as possibilities for flexible imitation not just to other researchers but to communities and groups who might benefit from them.

Overall, this paper highlights the possibilities of drawing on fields as diverse as systems thinking, aesthetics, and theology to consider how our own imagination might be inspired, particularly in the context of extending management and organization research in relation to sustainability. In seeking to stretch our collective imagination and widen our research agenda, our focus has generally been at a higher level of abstraction than will eventually be required of our field's engagement with questions of sustainability. Indeed, the downside of eschatology is its potential to be yet another grand theory in the midst of the exhorting management literature. However, what we learn from an engaged reading of eschatology is that, as well as putting forward a stirring call to arms, we need to focus our attention on the modest, practical, iterative actions which we and others can take, and indeed, are already taking, to bring a much-needed creative and subversive imagination to bear on questions of sustainability. It is through engaging in eschatologically informed praxis that we see the eschatological imagination in play. It is hoped that this paper stimulates further research into the possibilities of Bateson's thought specifically, and of

eschatology more generally, for the development of management theory and practice that is embedded in a critical, hopeful, and creative awareness of its participation in an 'ecology of mind'.

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¹ We are grateful to the anonymous reviewer who suggested this connection.

² For examples see Peter Reason (<http://www.peterreason.eu/>); conceptual artist Neville Gabie (<http://www.nevillegabie.com/>); Walk of life movement workshops (<http://www.walkoflife.co.uk/main.htm>); Nose to Nose clowning and improvisation workshops to support social activism (<http://www.nosetonose.info/index.htm>).

³ See <http://www.oliviermythodrama.com/admin/uploads/Client%20Testimonial%20Centrica.pdf>.