Chapter 3

Researching onto-epistemological change

> Stories go in circles. They don't go in straight lines. It helps if you listen in circles because there are stories inside and between stories, and finding your way through them is as easy and as hard as finding your way home. Part of finding is getting lost, and when you are lost you start to open up and listen.
>
> *Terry Tafoya in* Wilson, 2008

The foregoing observations about inquiring into transformations in onto-epistemologies as a process which involves describing 'how we know what we know' (Williams, 2012) and understanding how we come to enact particular assumptions about the world as academic subjects (Gibson-Graham, 2008) in order to generate a contextualised theoretical 'plot from within' social life (Ingold, 2011), calls for an approach to empirical research which asks fundamental questions about "how far the process of knowing [something] also brings it into being" (Law, 2004, p. 3). Seeing all social phenomena as taking place within the same ontological plane – the holomovement of life (Bohm and Hiley, 1993) – overturns many conventional assumptions about the research process because "to move, to know, and to describe are not separate operations that follow one another in series, but rather parallel facets of the same process" (Ingold, 2011, xii). At the same time, attending to the various ways in which particular phenomena are enacted in practice, singular Reality becomes a multiplicity of lived realities (Mol, 2002) and the academic becomes co-creator of the phenomena she describes. Analysis is therefore not separate from observation or interpretation; a simple method for arriving at more or less objective descriptions or for producing 'facts'. It is an activity which explains why certain interpretations are privileged by recounting how particular patterns of meaning are derived (Maines, 1993).

In this chapter, I outline how I address these methodological challenges in this thesis, explain the specific strategies and methods I employ and describe the ways in which the research evolved in the course of the study. The next section explains how this study draws

on methodological approaches spanning ethnography, narrative inquiry and participatory research in order to establish a framework which both sets clear standards for evaluating the validity of the research and acknowledges the multiple perspectives, ambiguities and contradictions that 'problem driven' social science needs to include in order to develop sensitivities to a problematic that theory alone cannot afford (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Section 3.2 then describes how the case study was developed, while section 3.3 reflects on the research process and explains the 'nuts and bolts' of this thesis.

3.1 Constructing the travel guide

In the course of formulating research questions and strategies, scoping potential cases, practicing my research skills, building a theoretical understanding of onto-epistemological transitions, doing empirical work and writing about this process, I have had to acknowledge the actuality that my research topic includes what John Law (2004) calls *elusive realities*: phenomena which "necessarily exceed our capacity to know them" and so "def[y] any attempt at overall orderly accounting" (p. 6). This realisation opened up for a lot of questions and considerations about how the research process itself performs a worldview, it brought my own self into play as a source of data, made it necessary to develop my own methods for establishing inter-subjective meaning, and called for finding ways to allow for and handle uncertainty and emergence. Law describes the methodological challenge for research into the "generative flux of forces and relations that work to produce particular realities" (ibid., p. 7) as one of finding and imagining new methods for knowing such realities, and he asks whether 'knowing' is the appropriate metaphor for these activities. These concerns encapsulate much of the search for and motivation behind the particular methods I engage with in this study.

Building on Latour's (2005) analogy of 'method' as a shorthand for describing "where to travel" and "what is worth seeing there" (p. 17), I would like to add "*how* to travel" as an aspect to include in this 'travel guide' of methodology. As a case study – "an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real life context using multiple sources of evidence" (Yin quoted in Robson, 2011, p. 136) – of individual and collective modes of environment-making, the attempt is to create a 'virtual reality' where "[r]eaders will have to discover their own path and truth inside the case" (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 238). This means that I have come to understand my main responsibility as a researcher to be providing 'traceable links' for my findings (Mol, 2002) and to make my conclusions accessible and apparent to those who choose to follow – here, I follow Annemarie Mol when she contends that "[m]ethods are not a way of opening a window on the world, but a way of interfering with it. They act, they *mediate* between an object and its representations" (ibid., p. 155). It is my hope that part of the original contribution of this thesis is the way it introduces transparency – traceable links – into the research process. Before going on to describe the ways in which I have done this in practice, I will first outline the methodological considerations that have shaped my practice.

3.1.1 (Auto-)ethnography and phenomenology

Early on in formulating my approach to this research I came to the conclusion that what was perhaps more important than following any particular method was a "commitment to enhancing my skills in observation and description as well as maintaining an open frame of mind regarding causes and effects"[1]. This meant interrogating my own practices and reasoning to explain why and how I make sense of things the way I do because, as Moses and Knutsen (2007) explain, "[w]hen faced with a given context, we tend to select certain facts; we use these to establish a pattern which is subsequently used to make sense of the remaining facts (in terms of that pattern)" (p. 205). In this way, ethnographic methods became an important starting point for me. While ethnography has its roots in an anthropology which was "unreflexively a spoil of colonialism" (Bourgois, 2002, p. 417) recent 'strategic turns' over the last decades have produced disruptive ethnographies which "desire to emphasize dialogue instead of monologue and communication instead of information" (Koro-Ljungberg and Greckhamer, 2005, p. 292). Broadly, ethnography

> "... is a practice that evolves in design as the study progresses; involves direct and sustained contact with human beings, in the context of their daily lives, over a prolonged period of time; draws on a family of methods, usually including participant observation and conversation; respects the complexity of the social world; and therefore tells rich, sensitive and credible stories" (O'Reilly, 2012, p. 11).

As a form of 'iterative-inductive' process which "involves constantly moving forwards and backwards from our research questions to the data, and back to refine our questions or line of inquiry in light of what our participants share with us" (ibid., p. 226), ethnographic methods align well with the need for allowing for openness and uncertainty in the research process.

Ethnographic approaches and methods vary greatly – Robson (2011) describes ethnography as "very much a question of general style rather than of following specific prescriptions about procedure" (p. 143) – but are generally "based on fieldwork using a variety of (mainly qualitative) research techniques including engagement in the lives of those being studied over an extended period of time" (Davies, 2008, p. 4-5). Describing the qualitative researcher as a 'bricoleur' or 'quilt maker' who "creates and brings psychological and emotional unity – a pattern – to an interpretive experience" using "the aesthetic and material tools of his or her craft" (p. 4-5), Denzin and Lincoln (2005) suggest that a key aspect of qualitative research is finding and inventing suitable approaches for particular research questions and contexts. In this way, the 'quilter' ethnographer "stitches, edits and puts slices of reality together" (ibid., p. 5). However, not haphazardly but out of her sensitivity and craft. Thus, 'craft skill' in representation and application of methods is just as important as theoretical and analytical competence (Seale, 1999). Ethnographies often produce

[1] I documented the evolution of my research and approach in a series of written expositions, some of which are available online. All quotes concerning my own learning process refer to these documents. See: http://patternwhichconnects.com/phd/academic_writing.html.

'thick descriptions', through detailed description and interpretation, which are based on participatory methods (Moses and Knutsen, 2007). Because such thick descriptions cannot be entirely reduced to, or verified by, statistical techniques or criteria, ethnographic research engages with other ways to ensure the quality of qualitative research, often by developing a 'methodological awareness' and practical proficiency (Seale, 2002) and invariably by "respect[ing] the irreducibility of human experience, and acknowledg[ing] the complex, messy nature of human lives and understandings" (O'Reilly, 2012, p. 227). This requires both recognition of one's own positionality as researcher and transparency about the strategic choices made in the course of the research process.

For these reasons, I approached the empirical work by developing a 'reflexive' attitude "whereby ethnographers consider their position within their research, their relationship to their field subjects and their wider cultural context" (Scott-Jones, 2010, p. 8). To me, this meant that preconceptions "about the researched should be left behind the moment the researcher enters the public field of the subject matter"[2]. But as I progressed in my research, I began to question the limits of this stance, not just because it disregarded the inescapably stable nature of parts of my own identity, definitions and assumptions (cf. Crang, 2003), but because it reinforced a relation between researcher and researched which I was not comfortable with. This became particularly apparent towards the end of the empirical work when the phrase "withdrawing from the field" frequently emerged in my reading and discussions. The division between 'academy' and 'field' felt contrived, not least because by that point I had become part of the 'case' I was studying. Unwittingly, I was confronted with my own 'double disengagement' (cf. section 2.2.3) and association with the attitude of the 'modern constitution' (Latour, 1992) which encloses the subject (myself) and object (what I was observing) within a foundational polarity which imposes a conceptual stranglehold on interpretation. So I found it necessary to attempt to discontinue this division, however, more as a matter of trying to understand how I participated in its production than as a matter of denying its reality – which I felt firsthand.

I was relieved to find D'Amico-Samuels' (1991) pertinent observation that "[t]he mythology of the field allows for the contradictory assumption that ethnographers can suspend those aspects of their identity without which they would not be able to do research in the first place" (p. 72). This effectively divides the academic subject and weakens the effort to introduce transparency into the research because crucial connections between the researcher and the object of study are obscured:

> "... although "the field" is supposed to signal a set of experiences that adds intensive inquiry and observation to our always present participation with other humans in living, it in fact deletes salient dimensions of contemporary life by claiming that a qualitatively different relationship and events obtains during that bounded time" (ibid., p. 74).

[2]This quote is from my research diary. See: online research diary, 26.01.12, 'Theoretical considerations: The world and I', http://patternwhichconnects.com/phd/diary_2/Entries/2012/1/26_Theoretical_considerations__The_world_and_I.html

As D'Amico-Samuels suggests, an antidote to this facet of reflexivity is a combination of awareness, an attitude of humility and clarity about the aims, methods and ethics of the research project. Or, in Mol's (2002) words, discontinuing this division between researcher and researched can be achieved "by doubting the assumptions of the relation between knowledge and practice that come with it" (Mol, 2002, p. 48). This attitude helped me question my research without feeling distanced from it.

As I was increasingly engaging with my own experience as a source of data, I began to employ aspects of auto-ethnographic methods for the study. Combining autobiographical qualities with ethnographic practice, auto-ethnography performs different modes of storytelling aiming to "use personal experience to illustrate facets of cultural experience, and, in so doing, make characteristics of a culture familiar for insiders and outsiders" (Ellis *et al.*, 2010, p. na.). Recognising that "the researcher is the epistemological and ontological nexus upon which the research process turns" (Spry, 2001, p. 711) auto-ethnographies engage with a range of expressions to reflect upon their authors' life experience and to "express more fully the interactional textures occurring between self, other, and contexts in ethnographic research" (ibid., p. 708). Through practices such as my online research diary, blog reflections, interactive interviews and creative collaborations I used different elements of auto-ethnographic methods, including personal and co-constructed narrative ethnography, layered accounts, reflexive ethnography and interactive interviews (Ellis *et al.*, 2010). I also benefited from insights from the literature on auto-ethnography in the considerations about positionality, reliability and ethics discussed throughout this chapter (e.g. D'Amico-Samuels, 1991; Davies, 2008; Collins, 2010).

As a theoretical perspective, ethnography embraces a range of epistemological positions and shares methodological outlook with non-positivist approaches like hermeneutics and phenomenology (Koro-Ljungberg *et al.*, 2009). As I developed my "commitment to enhancing my skills in observation and description", I found that I shared a certain attitude with some phenomenologists. While recognising that perception and interpretation are inseparably part of the same process (cf. Ingold, 2011) I became sympathetic to seeing research as a practice which, as far as possible, "consider[s] *every* phenomenon, including known ones, as if they are representing themselves for the first time to consciousness" in order to "become aware of the fullness and richness of these phenomena" (Maso, 2001, p. 138, original emphasis). Rather than being a naïve assumption that it is possible to disregard or 'bracket' previous or past experiences, I see this as a practical way to sharpen observation and reflection. In this way, my own lifeworld entered my research as the object of radical reflection about worldviews and ways of being. As "the totality of certainties, skills, practices, and interpretative frames that we take for granted as we each find our way in the everyday worlds that form the changing horizons of our experience" (Gross, 2010, p. 125), the lifeworld encompasses all those objects, relations, beliefs and narratives which are the subject of research into onto-epistemological transformation as discussed in the previous chapter. And, as the lifeworld incorporates both what is present and absent in lived experience, it is "always in motion, always in a process of sedimentation and foundation" (Dorfman, 2009, p. 300). Because "we create a world according

to our mode of participation" (Bohm, 2004a, p. 130), the concept of the lifeworld is a way into examining and thematising aspects of how those worlds are enacted in a process of becoming (cf. Gross, 2010). As a tradition which focuses on the relationship and co-constitution of the self and the world (Finlay and Molano-Fisher, 2008), and which gives special attention to the meaning of lived experience, phenomenology is able to probe into these processes (Lindseth and Norberg, 2004).

It is in this way, without explicitly following a set phenomenological methodology, that phenomenology enters this ethnography: as an approach which provides both a suitable concept, the *lifeworld*, and an apposite method, *radical reflection*, to study onto-epistemological transformation. As described in section 2.2.4, the lifeworld is rooted in an intuitive understanding of the world beyond conceptual thought. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the lifeworld as the *entwining* of 'self', 'world' and 'other' before these categories are conceived conceptually, Dorfman (2009) describes how the endeavour to understand the lifeworld is necessarily an activity which at the same time revives and transforms it. Acknowledging that the reproduction of concepts is necessary for the very kind of inquiry phenomenologists are interested in, Dorfman describes how Merleau-Ponty's notion of radical reflection – which is "conscious of its own acquisitions and effects" (ibid., p. 299) – as a method provides a way of probing into the lifeworld without relying on concepts which are unreflexively 'emptied' of meaning as they are reproduced. If the temptation to bestow permanence on the concepts used in describing the lifeworld can in this way be resisted, a different kind of inquiry becomes possible: one which does "not look for the origin, but rather for the *sense* of origin" and where "this sense can be empty or full according to the degree of reactivation exercised upon it" (ibid., p. 300). It is in this light the ambition of the present inquiry to participate in the onto-epistemological transformation it examines should be understood: it seeks to be conscious of its own effects and to (re)activate the sense of origin in the concepts it employs.

Here, my understanding and usage of the notion of 'radical reflection' draws in particular on David Bohm and Jiddu Krishnamurti's dialogue practice[3]. In relation to reflecting on the lifeworld, I have found two insights from their dialogues particularly helpful: the first is the value of *suspending* thoughts or actions, the second is *proprioception* or the self-perception of thought. Suspension is a practice which brings attention to the way thoughts, feelings and actions are inter-related and affect each other – often without being produced by a subject. This can allow the subject to reflect on the content of the mind without reacting to it. Proprioception is the perception by thought of the process of thought, in other words: an awareness of the ways in which thought produces effects inside and outside of ourselves. This kind of reflection has been helpful in the research both on a personal level and in interviews. On the one hand it has helped bring attention to the ways my own thoughts participate in perception and on the other it has motivated me

[3]Bohm and Krishnamurti's dialogues, of which there were more than thirty, took place over the course of the 1960s to the 1980s and were recorded in a series of video, audio and book publications. Many of the core insights of this collaboration are related by Bohm in his book *On Dialogue*, 2004b.

to learn "a certain way of knowing how to come in and how not to come in, of watching all the subtle cues and the senses and your response to them – what's happening inside of you, what's happening in the group" (Bohm, 2004b, p. 45). This also pushed me to think further about how to narrate my own role in the research and how to find ways of strengthening participants' reflections on their lifeworlds.

3.1.2 Narrative inquiry and methods

I was initially attracted to narrative research paradigms because I saw them as a way to understand how situated narration expresses and empowers new ways of thinking and being within grassroots movements: narratives order characters and events in space and time, and so they hold a lot of information about the actors they include, their identities, relations and worldviews. The development of a narrator's experience and position gives insight into her lifeworld and presents a format for examining the construction and transformation of subjectivities (Bamberg, 2004). Thus, taking personal and collective narratives as a starting point for social inquiry and focussing on the social role of stories in grassroots innovations are ways of finding out more about how situated narration enable (or disable) new perspectives on, and actions in, the world. As I began the empirical work and read more about narrative methods and analysis, I realised that this approach also resolved some of the difficulties I had encountered with ethnographic research: through engaging directly with my 'ethnographic self' I could define and widen my role as researcher-participant in the gradual process of narrating my own development. By 'bridging' these identities, this became a key way to acknowledge my own role as mediator:

> "... we are simultaneously members of many worlds, some overlapping in a simple ideological sense, others separate – unless, of course, we are active in bridging the distance between them. This 'bridging' is made possible by the narrative proclivity of the self, by our extraordinary facility for trading stories" (Collins, 2010, p. 236).

This also brought my own subjectivity to the fore in unexpected ways. I was challenged with both respecting the 'irreducibility of the human experience' and representing those experiences – now including my own. Helpfully, narrative research introduces distinctions which bypass this predicament by identifying *who* is trading stories. Kohler Riessman (2008) describes three levels of analysis in narrative research:

1. Stories told by the research participants;
2. Interpretive accounts by the investigator (narrative of narrative); and,
3. The readers' reconstruction (narrative of narrative of narrative).

Because narrative inquiry takes place at three distinct levels (at least), I could incorporate or accommodate my own 'ethnographic self' without getting conflicted about finding an 'unbiased' viewpoint – as long as I could avoid obscuring the different levels. While these

distinctions are not absolute they are a helpful heuristic insofar as they aid distinguishing who is doing the narrating and interpreting.

As an umbrella term for distinct but related types of analyses and methods that focus on the role, function and context of stories, narrative research requires some clarification of foundational assumptions. Different strands of narrative analyses have their own histories and theoretical starting points which sometimes conflict and often produce very different approaches. Figure 3.1 displays some of the broader contentions within narrative research, showing established differences as well as some newer approaches which address some of these dichotomies (note that the columns are not prescriptive so that different approaches do not necessarily ascribe to all standpoints within a particular column).

Facet	Longstanding dichotomies		Alternatives
Analytical focus	Events – recounting of particular past events	Experience – analyses general or imagined phenomena	Co-construction – interested in the social patterns and functioning of stories
Audience	Narratives say something about individual thought or emotion	Social production of narratives by the audience	Narratives follow larger patterns of social and cultural story-telling
Agency	Stories express personal identity and agency	Individual agency does not operate through narrative	Social roles are performed in narratives
Language	Underlying cognitive structures or social functioning of narrative	Focus on meanings and social positioning of language	Narratives reveal social positioning as discourses
	Data contains stable or unified narratives of experience	Language is non-transparent and stable data is not produced	
Time	Time as it is experienced	Chronological time	Non-temporal sequencing

Figure 3.1: Overview of different approaches in narrative research. Based on Squire *et al.*, 2008.

Highlighting the 'strategic, functional, and purposeful' role of stories, Kohler Riessman (2008) identifies the following social functions of narratives: 1) reassessing memories; 2) argumentation; 3) persuasion; 4) engaging an audience; 5) entertainment; 6) misleading an audience; and 7) mobilisation for social change. In these ways, stories connect personal biographies and societal narratives by giving individual lifeworlds meaning and purpose in a wider social context; and, because identities are storied in relation to other actors, narratives are also potentially transformative: "[t]hey build collective identities that can lead, albeit slowly and discontinuously, to cultural shifts and political change" (Squire, 2008, p. 55). This happens, as Tamboukou (2008) points out, through a questioning of existing knowledge structures:

> "How has our present been constituted in ways that seem natural and undisputable to us, but are only the effects of certain historical, social, cultural, political and economic configurations? By revealing this contingency we become freer to imagine other ways of being" (p. 102).

Thus, rather than closing down interpretations by providing 'final' readings, it is the researcher's task to provide openings for new and further readings of a narrative. Here, I agree with Squire (2008) that *stories are completed in the reader* and with Andrews (2008) that the richness of narrative data should be taken as "evidence of its resilience and vitality, and of its infinite ability to yield more layers of meaning when examined from yet another lens, as we explore the ongoing changes of the world within and around us" (p. 98-9).

In accordance with Ingold's (2011) view that storying is in itself a form of knowing, I see narratives not only as evincing social roles and positioning but as representing localised forms of knowledge. As Squire *et al.* (2008) articulate: "[w]ithout overextending its remit, or treating personal narratives as universal theories, research on narratives as ordered representations can indeed claim to be mapping forms of *local* knowledge or 'theory'" (p. 12, original emphasis). However, because stories travel beyond local contexts and become part of yet wider narratives they also reflect wider knowledges and relations: "the local knowledges that [narrative research] produces [...] may be particular, but they can enter into dialogue with each other and produce [...] larger and more general, though still situated narrative knowledges" (ibid., p. 12). Viewing the grassroots as sites of situated narrative practices which reflect on both local meanings and macro contexts, they can be seen as instances of counter-narratives (Bamberg and Andrews, 2004), which open up for new ways of seeing, doing and acting. Bamberg (2004) suggests that a narrator's 'positioning' within both personal and meta-narratives is a good starting point for examining the emancipatory potential of stories. The next section outlines the ways in which this study engages with participatory modes of inquiry to examine such processes of narrative re-positioning.

3.1.3 Participatory research

This study draws on insights from participatory action research (Reason and Bradbury, 2001) as well as approaches from two recent research projects: community economies (Gibson-Graham, 2008) and Autonomous Geographies (Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006; Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010; Chatterton *et al.*, 2010). As a way of including the subject(s) of research in the research process itself, action research "seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice" in order to generate "practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities" (Reason and Bradbury, 2001, p. 1). By engaging actively with the perspectives of the persons or communities involved it may become possible for the researcher to establish both how subjectivities are "constituted in ways that limit their

possibilities" and to "detect glimmers of new forms of subjectivity that offer enabling futures" (Cameron and Gibson, 2005, p. 328). Action research is also a challenge to the researcher because it brings new elements and relations to the research project and poses questions about how theory is done and what it is used for. And because many of these relations are fundamentally uncontrollable it is necessary to find ways of handling uncertainty in the research process. Reason and Bradbury (2001) identify *emergence* as a key characteristic of action research – see Figure 3.2 – and describe action research as a praxis which is not just about creating new knowledge(s) but extends to creating new *abilities* and new *forms* of knowledge.

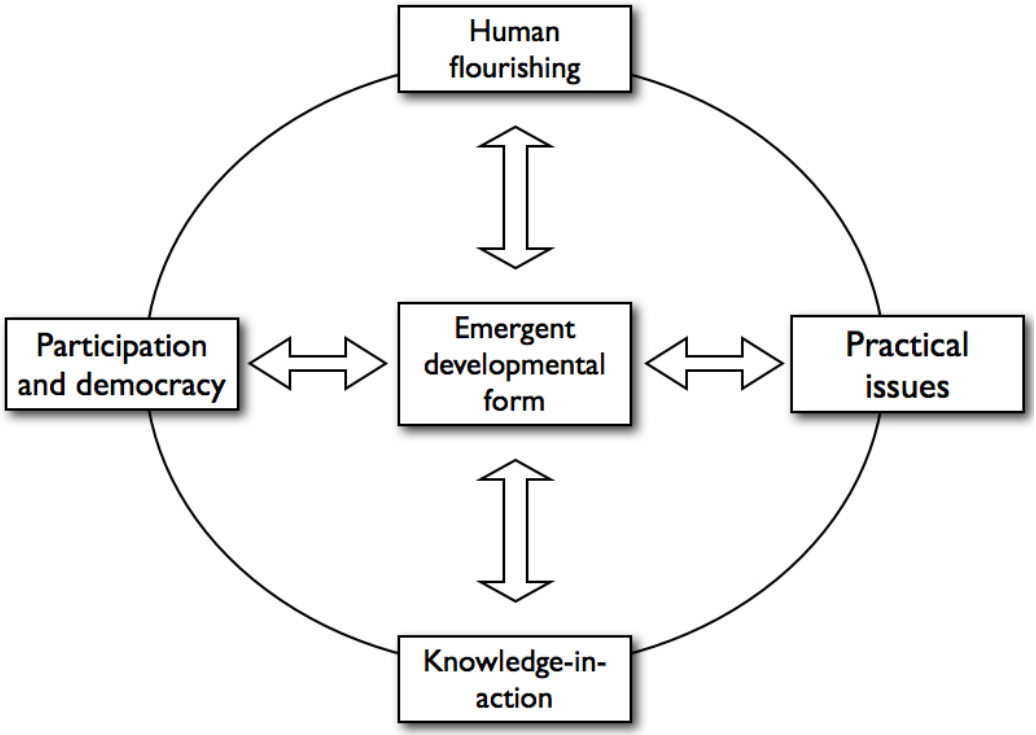

Figure 3.2: Characteristics of action research. Source: Reason and Bradbury, 2001, p. 5.

Drawing on Law and Urry's (2004) insight that "[t]he social sciences have always been embedded in, produced by, and productive of the social" (p. 392), Gibson-Graham (2008) developed an approach for their diverse economies programme which sees research as a performative ontological project. Seeing in the endeavour to become "discerning, detached and critical" observers of the world a kind of theorising which "is tinged with skepticism and negativity, not a particularly nurturing environment for hopeful, inchoate experiments", the authors describe this theoretical mode as producing strong claims about social research which affirm "an ultimately essentialist, usually structural, vision of what is and reinforces what is perceived as dominant" (p. 618). This stands in direct relation to Latour's (2004) observation that "[t]he critic is not the one who lifts the rugs from under the feet of the naïve believers, but the one who offers the participants arenas in which to

gather" (ibid, p. 246). In developing their approach of 'doing thinking' as a starting point for performing new worlds as academic subjects, Gibson-Graham show how Latour's philosophical observations can apply in practice. In agreement with Mol (2002), they explain how this involves rethinking ontology as performative:

> "When ontology becomes the effect rather than the ground of knowledge, we lose the comfort and safety of a subordinate relation to 'reality' and can no longer seek to capture accurately what already exists; interdependence and creativity are thrust upon us as we become implicated in the very existence of the worlds that we research. Every question about what to study and how to study it becomes an ethical opening; every decision entails profound responsibility. The whole notion of academic ethics is simultaneously enlarged and transformed" (Gibson-Graham, 2008, p. 620).

By practicing 'weak theory' which acknowledges the consequences of this implication of the researcher in the social world, the academic ideal of "masterful knowing or moralistic detachment" falls away and leaves "greater scope for invention and playfulness, enchantment and exuberance" (ibid, p. 619). 'Weak theory' or 'doing thinking' involves ontological reframing of one's research to produce ground for new possibilities, re-reading data to uncover the possible, and creatively generating possibilities where none used to exist. This clearly resonates with the narrative and ethnographic approaches outlined above which refrain from providing finalised interpretations and leave the story to be partly completed in the reader.

Another source of inspiration for this study is the Autonomous Geographies research project which examined the practices of different activist groups and "how they challenge, deal with and imagine alternatives to life under capitalism in the everyday" (Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010, p. 475) through participatory action research in social centres, housing projects, and novel forms of eco-building. Seeing activist practices not just as expressions of resistance but complex forms of interweaving *anti-*, *post-* and *despite-* capitalisms into lived realities (ibid., p. 476), the project undertook research "alongside everyday struggles of a number of anti-capitalist or 'autonomous' political groups, networks and spaces in the UK" (Chatterton *et al.*, 2010, p. 246). Reflecting on the complex, messy and challenging nature of doing this kind of participatory research – which did not always succeed or progress as expected – the Autonomous Geographies Collective was able to identify a number of valuable principles for doing participatory action research. While many of these pertain in particular to "the problems of attempting to work collectively in an institutional setting which thrives from individualising our efforts" (ibid., p. 265), a number of these insights are relevant to participatory research into the transformation of onto-epistemologies. They can be summarised under two headings:

1. **Ethical and political considerations as academic subjects:** Crucial issues around the nature, focus and approach of a research project need to be clarified as early as possible in the research process. It is necessary to consider how the research –

and academe more widely – is part of those modes of knowledge production which participants in the research aim to subvert. This means acknowledging how the 'out there' of the real world is shaped by the 'in here' of academia, recognising the emancipatory potentials of researching as an activity and building networks of mutual support and understanding. Being prefigurative by practicing the change one wants to see and enabling knowledge investment back to the grassroots is key.

2. **Strategic and practical measures:** It is important to become aware of the 'footprint' of a research project. How are issues around inequality of resources, capacities, experience, ownership and power dealt with to avoid the role of the academic who imposes an outside agenda? Finding ways to avoid speaking for others while still communicating their ideas and reflecting on the ways value is derived from the experience of others are central concerns, as is acting strategically to ensure accountability and enabling input from participants in the research process. Questions should be raised about how to align the research agenda with relevant issues and needs of participants. This involves longer-term practical commitment to the relationships that form during a research project.

A key insight from participatory approaches is that our identities as academics "overlap and intertwine with our research" while they are "dynamic and fluid and thus often co-evolve with our research" (Gillan and Pickerill, 2012, p. 139). Rather than trying to erase this fact from the research process the challenge is to acknowledge it in ways that strengthen an understanding of the procedures involved and affirms the complexity of academic positionalities. This "moves the ethical debates beyond simply a question of what form of reciprocation is appropriate" (ibid., p. 139) and brings questions about our self-understanding and role in social change to the fore.

The methodological issues and considerations described here, surfaced at different points in the research and brought new perspectives and challenges to my research practice. The gradual inclusion of my own self (or selves) as a resource and a source of data, reinforced the need for establishing 'traceable links' – which in turn called for openness and honesty. Situated as 'at once both subject and object' (Abram, 1997), I found that many facets of the questions I was asking about viewing sustainability as a relationship were immediately visible in my own relations, thoughts, conversations and modes of participating in the research and beyond. This was both troubling and exciting, and it called for developing ways to capture these aspects of the research project by introducing layers of documentation that could capture how my participation and thinking developed over time. In the next section, I describe in more detail how the research was set up and developed in an 'emergent developmental form' to address the issues of transparency, reflexivity, ethics and documentation raised here.

3.2 Developing the case study

Having identified a need to examine worldviews and sustainability narratives in grassroots innovations, and decided on the appropriate methodological approaches for doing the empirical research, the key question became which grassroots groups to look at. At this stage I benefited from invaluable discussions with members of my research group – in preparation for the empirical work I invited various faculty members to discuss a draft research plan[4]. Based on this initial literature review, I had established two main dimensions that characterise differences across grassroots sustainability narratives and visions: 1) whether the focus of an innovation is agency- or artefact-based; and, 2) whether sustainability visions are synergistic or antagonistic in relation to existing socio-technical regimes. By in this way charting the various grassroots innovations I had started following during the initial phase of the research (see Table 3.1 for an overview of these projects) I could collate differences and similarities between them, which helped me to start thinking about different aspects of the sustainability narratives in those groups I was most interested in. Having provisionally chosen the Dark Mountain Project, Transition Towns and Open Source Ecology, I could then contrast differences in visions and approaches to sustainability, social change and narrative positioning (see Figures 3.3 and 3.4).

Open Source Ecology; The voluntary simplicity movement; Slowfood movement; Ecovillage movement; Permaculture; Global Justice Movements (e.g. Pachamama Alliance, Earth First!, People's World Movement for Mother Earth, Indigenous Rights); The Long Now Foundation; Low carbon lifestyles (e.g. Carbon Reduction Action Groups, Low Carbon Communities Network, Forward the Revolution); Transition Towns; Contemporary spirituality (e.g. Integral Life, mindfulness); Cultural Creatives; The Great Transition Initiative; Dark Mountain Project; Earth Stewards Network; The Earth Charter Initiative; avaaz.org; tactical media (e.g. Creative Climate, culture jammers, the Church of Stop Shopping); sustainability art (e.g. Cape Farewell, 2020 – Arts and Climate Change Network, RSA Arts and Ecology Centre, Centre for Sustainable Practice in the Arts, Red Latinoamerica); education initiatives (e.g. Question Based Learning, Integral Science, Eco-literacy, popular education); 'sustainability knowledge hubs' (e.g. The Well, Whole Earth Catalog, World Changing, Labforculture.org).

Table 3.1: Types of projects initially considered

Through discussions with, and guidance from, fellow academics, I decided to do a single case study of the Dark Mountain Project. At the point of formally deciding on my case study I had already been engaging with the Dark Mountain Project through participation in the 2011 Uncivilisation festival and conducted a few pilot interviews. So, based on my feeling for and access to the group, I decided to proceed with an in-depth, qualitative case study of this project. The Dark Mountain Project describes itself as:

> "... a network of writers, artists and thinkers who have stopped believing the stories our civilisation tells itself. We see that the world is entering an age of ecological

[4]This is available at: http://patternwhichconnects.com/phd/academic_writing.html.

> collapse, material contraction and social and political unravelling, and we want our cultural responses to reflect this reality rather than denying it. The Project grew out of a feeling that contemporary literature and art were failing to respond honestly or adequately to the scale of our entwined ecological, economic and social crises. We believe that writing and art have a crucial role to play in coming to terms with this reality, and in questioning the foundations of the world in which we find ourselves"[5].

As a network which is specifically interested in exploring creatively how to respond to social-ecological crisis, and which engages with the cultural foundations of how such crises are perceived, the Dark Mountain Project seemed like a good starting point for examining onto-epistemological change. The Dark Mountain manifesto states:

> We believe that the roots of these crises lie in the stories we have been telling ourselves. We intend to challenge the stories which underpin our civilisation: the myth of progress, the myth of human centrality, and the myth of our separation from 'nature'. These myths are more dangerous for the fact that we have forgotten they are myths (Kingsnorth and Hine MA, p. 19).

The direct engagement with the relation between the meta-narrative of progress and personal or collective action in the Dark Mountain Project also appeared to be a good fit with the key concerns of this thesis. The next sections describe the strategic measures and specific methods I developed to for the study.

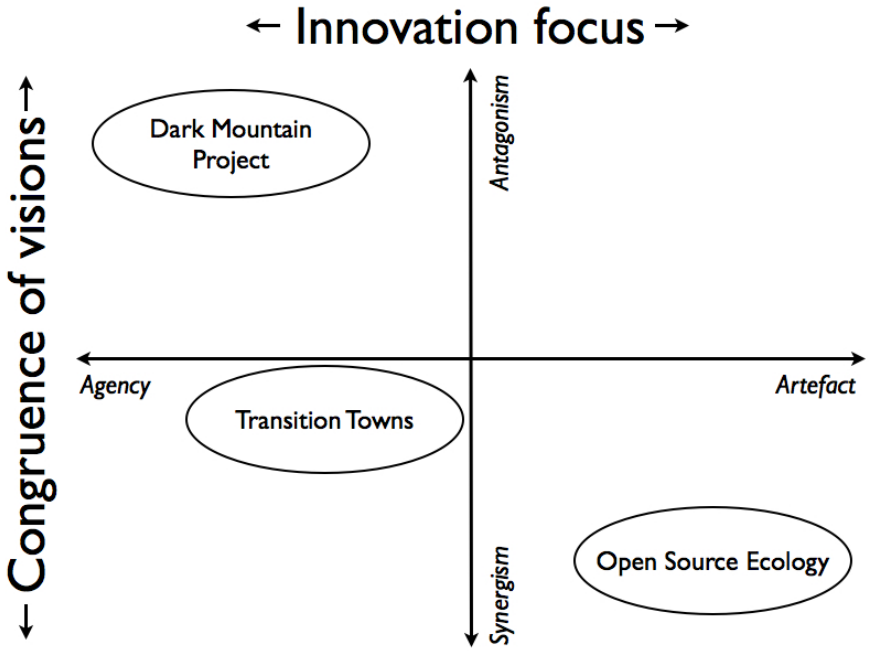

Figure 3.3: Initial case selections mapped according to sustainability visions and innovation focus.

[5] See: http://dark-mountain.net/about/the-dark-mountain-project/.

VISION / G.I.	Sustainability	Process of change	Role of the group
Open Source Ecology (a) *Sustainable civilisation with modern comforts*	"harmonious coexistence between natural and human ecosystems" based on "land stewardship, resilience, and improvement of the human condition"	'development of a replicable village infrastructure by advanced self-sufficiency at unprecedentedly small scales'	"to promote harmony between humans and their natural life support systems" through "open access to the best practices of economic production"
Transition Towns (b) *Energy descent*	"living with less energy is imperative because of climate change and inevitable because of fossil fuel depletion"	"Without vast amounts of energy, we all lived a much more local life. As we go through the energy descent, that'll happen again"	"unleash the genius of the local community to design their pathways through the energy descent that we're facing"
Dark Mountain Project (c) *Uncivilisation*	"There is a fall coming. We live in an age in which familiar restraints are being kicked away, and foundations snatched from under us"	"The shifting of emphasis from man to notman: this is the aim of Uncivilised writing. To 'unhumanise our views a little'"	"Uncivilisation ... which sees unflinchingly and bites down hard as it records ... This is what we are here for"

Figure 3.4: Different visions and approaches to sustainability across the initial case selections. Sources: (a) www.opensourceecology.org; (b) www.transitionnetwork.org; and, (c) www.dark-mountain.net.

3.2.1 Following the narrative

Given the considerations outlined in the previous section, I became interested in finding a way of 'doing thinking' in the process of the empirical research and two insights in particular seemed appropriate to the case study I was doing. One was from actor-network theory based on the sentiment that "it is no longer enough to limit actors to the role of informers offering cases of some well-known types. You have to grant them back the ability to make up their own theories of what the social is made of" (Latour, 2005, p. 11). In light of my ambition to "maintain an open frame of mind regarding causes and effects", the idea of 'following the actors' rather than imposing definitions and theories on them resonated with me: "to catch up with their often wild innovations in order to learn from them what the collective existence has become in their hands, which methods they have elaborated to make it fit together, which accounts could best establish the new associations that they have been forced to establish" (ibid., p. 12). The other approach I adopted was an attitude from narrative sociology which embraces the uncertainty and uncontrollable nature of doing social research. As Kohler Riessman (2008) states:

> "Creating possibilities in research interviews for extended narration requires investigators to give up control, which can generate anxiety. Although we have particular paths we want to cover related to the substantive and theoretical foci of our studies, narrative interviewing necessitates following participants down their trails. Giving up control of a fixed interview format – "methods" designed for "efficiency" – encourages greater equality (and uncertainty) in the conversation" (p. 24).

Borrowing the metaphor of "following actors/participants along their narrative trails", this became an approach which I began to think of as *following the narrative*. To me, this meant a preparedness to go wherever the narratives I encountered took me while carefully documenting the 'trails' in order to identify from where the narratives emerged, how narrators situated themselves and if there are certain points of contradiction or transformation. It also meant that I had to log the development of my personal narrative and find ways to navigate the different levels at which the narrative operated (see section 3.1.2).

This proved to be a simple but highly structured way of deciding where to inquire further, gradually drawing out common themes and building a broader 'map' of the narrative trails I was following. In practice it first of all meant reading and following the material that had circulated online about the Dark Mountain Project, inquiring whether participants would speak with me and beginning to participate by contributing to the conversations. Early on I identified six 'narrative sites' which I needed to examine in more detail (see Figure 3.5). This helped me specify the narrators and materials I needed to engage with as well as the appropriate methods for doing this. 'Following the narrative' also introduced a straightforward and flexible – but non-random – sampling strategy: it meant that decisions about who to interview were based on which site I was inquiring about and how far into it I had gone – much like 'snow-balling' but based on a relatively large pool of potential sources of narrative data. Sampling gradually became more pointed and easier and, as I became more familiar with each of the sites, Figure 3.5 became helpful for deciding how far I still had to travel to be satisfied that I had reached a point of relative saturation.

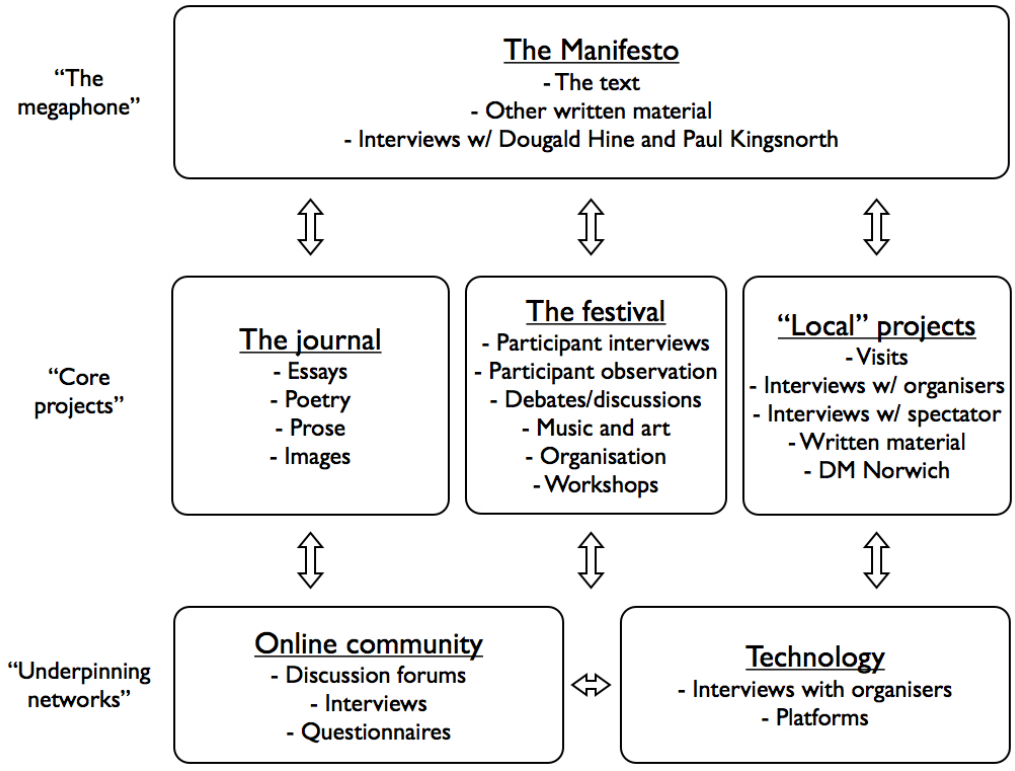

Figure 3.5: Different 'narrative sites' in the case study.

Through a recursive and open-ended process which involved continually moving between engaging with the personal and collective narratives I encountered, reflecting on these and connecting them up, writing about the process and drawing in theory, I was able to incorporate new findings fairly readily and easily into the research process. This approach helped me to deal with uncertainties and the surprises that occurred along the way and it turned out to be a good way to connect my theoretical understanding, research questions and tentative findings in an iterative process of reflection, refinement and query. But it also presented me with a number of challenges. I had to find ways to ensure sufficient documentation of the different types of data in the different sites. This meant that I had to engage with different media and forms of note-taking which came to include audio recordings, various diaries and blogs, emails, photography and a large set of notes detailing my ongoing reading and thinking about findings, research questions, methods, themes, meetings and events (see section 3.3). As the sprawl of data grew, I had to develop a structured way of archiving and keeping track of the various types of data. And later on I had to balance the depth of my analysis and the scope of the data. So this also became an issue of incorporating the insights and findings of the data that I had to leave out, which in turn meant I produced more conceptual notes and documentation. That made me realise that there was a seventh site of narrative about the Dark Mountain Project: my own thesis.

When I found that the conversations I was having through my research was directly related to other circles of conversation within the Dark Mountain Project, I decided to make some of my data available online. I had already created a webpage for my research[6] and through my blog I began to publish some of my reflections and interviews (see Figure 3.6). With this decision, a whole other layer of data emerged in the responses, ping backs and comments to these documents. So as the research progressed I had to make strategic decisions about which sites and what data were more interesting and relevant to particular questions. However, I had learnt from David Maines not to discriminate data until after it is collected, so I had to accept the impossibility of including everything and try to gauge when was the right time to stop finding and producing more data. As Maines (1993) describes, "[t]he virtue of this approach is that the researcher has access to the contradictions and thereby is on firmer empirical grounds than without them, but it increases difficulties in drawing conclusions across cases" (p. 129). This points to what I see as the central challenge for this kind of approach: being honest and open about how things get done and introducing a radical kind of transparency into the research process.

3.2.2 Ensuring transparency

As I came to identify my own thesis as a narrative site for what I was researching the need to "introduce a high level of transparency into the research process" became obvious if I wanted to create traceable links between the empirical research and my conclusions about it. At the same time, I had to clarify how I translate certain data and findings

[6] See: http://patternwhichconnects.com/phd/main.html

Figure 3.6: Screenshot of the webpage I maintained for the research project.

into particular understandings and framings, or how "the possibility that one thing (for example, an actor) may stand for another (for instance a network)" (Law, 1992, p. 386) in the course of the research. This is similar to, but broader than, Maine's point about avoiding early closure of data in that it includes the "modes of thought, habits, forces and objects" (Callon and Latour, 1981, p. 285) which are involved in the research. This meant that, as far as possible, I had to postpone strategic decisions about re-narrating the narratives I encountered until after they had been recorded and that these choices should be made public. At the same time, I had to refrain from engaging in theoretical analysis too early because theory can get in the way, as Bent Flyvbjerg (2006) posits:

> "Narrative inquiries do not—indeed, cannot—start from explicit theoretical assumptions. Instead, they begin with an interest in a particular phenomenon that is best understood narratively. Narrative inquiries then develop descriptions and interpretations of the phenomenon from the perspective of participants, researchers, and others" (p. 240).

Having engaged extensively with electronic media I decided to take Flyvbjerg's notion of developing case study research as a 'virtual reality' literally in order to increase possibilities for the reader to be able "to enter this reality and explore it inside and out" (ibid, p. 238). To me, this has meant making part of the research material available (through references and hyperlinks) so the reader can access narrative levels beyond the interpretations I make in this thesis (see section 3.3).

Here, Kohler Riessman's (2008) distinction of narrative interpretations taking place at the levels of the research participant, researcher and reader became useful for introducing transparency to the research. At the level of research participants there was already a high degree of transparency because the publications, events and meetings of the Dark Mountain Project are in the public realm. Much of the content of the journals, blogs, debates, talks and performances has thus already been through a process of reflection and articulation in which the narrators have positioned themselves. Even live events are deliberated and could be recorded with permission by, and courtesy for, the participants. The most difficult aspect of introducing transparency at this level was the in-depth interviews which would go into the – possibly sensitive – details of personal worldviews. For this reason I decided to give the interviewees co-ownership over our conversations by letting them read through and adjust the transcripts I had produced from the recorded interviews. This proved to be a really fruitful decision. When an interviewee was willing, we passed the transcripts back and forth between us, sometimes several times, in a process of both clarifying and uncovering new meanings. This created a multi-layered conversation where we were able to delve deeper into particular aspects which had previously been vague. In this way, I was able to pinpoint and learn more about certain concepts, terms or ways of speaking which were relevant to particular themes or other data. As an example of how this process proceeded, compare the following two extracts of my conversation with Catherine Lupton. The original, literal transcript is visible in the first excerpt as the text in black. The interviewee's reflections, adjustments and additions are then visible in the layer indicated by the strikethrough and red text. The second excerpt is the final version of the same text (see Appendix H for the full interview).

> But I think the strongest thing is that desire to have conversations differently, to carry out enquiry differently. To ~~kind of~~ open up space for saying let's not just bring our received ideas to the table and keep repeating them, and keep cutting out these words, and these stories and these expressions of who we are: "oh, my goodness that's so terrible", or "why don't they do that" and those kinds of voices speaking. What I mean is the kind of speech that sounds pre-scripted [I like Andrew Taggart's distinction, which I came across more recently, between reciting and improvising], and depersonalised, this unspecified 'we' or 'they' as the object of speech. And to actually crack that open. And I think that was the thing that really ~~kind of~~ fired me, that I went on to write about. It obviously struck some kind of chord in me that somebody was creating that kind of possibility.

> But I think the strongest thing is the expressed desire to have conversations differently, to carry out enquiry differently. To open up space for saying let's not just bring our received ideas and ways of speaking, of engaging with each other, to the table and keep repeating them. What I mean is the kind of speaking that sounds pre-scripted and depersonalised – say, the habit any of us can fall into of saying things like 'we really must do something!', when it's not at all clear to whom that 'we' is referring. I recently came across Andrew Taggart's distinction between reciting and improvising, and I found that helpful for thinking further about this [hyperlink]. I connected with people in the project who seemed to share this sense of openness. So that's probably the touchstone for me.

This method addressed the issue of translation directly: by checking and engaging with the content of the interview the research participants could be sure that I would (re)present the conversation in their vocabulary and from their perspective. On a practical level it helped me better understand the core themes and clarify those parts of the transcript which were unclear. But it was also a way to handle my strategic and ethical concerns about doing participatory research (see section 3.1.3) by building understanding and trust. Opening up the interview process in this fashion introduced accountability while it produced rich and multi-layered data set. Treating the interview as an *ongoing process* rather than a one-off event in which meanings are immutable, really generated a depth to the conversations which was unexpected and let me become familiar with the ways both I and the participant were positioning ourselves in relation to each other and to a wider audience (other participants in the Dark Mountain Project). Often I was being actively drawn into the interviews and asked about my perspective and for this reason I prefer to think of them as 'interview-conversations'. When a participant agreed, I would publish our conversation online on my personal blog (see Figure 3.7)[7].

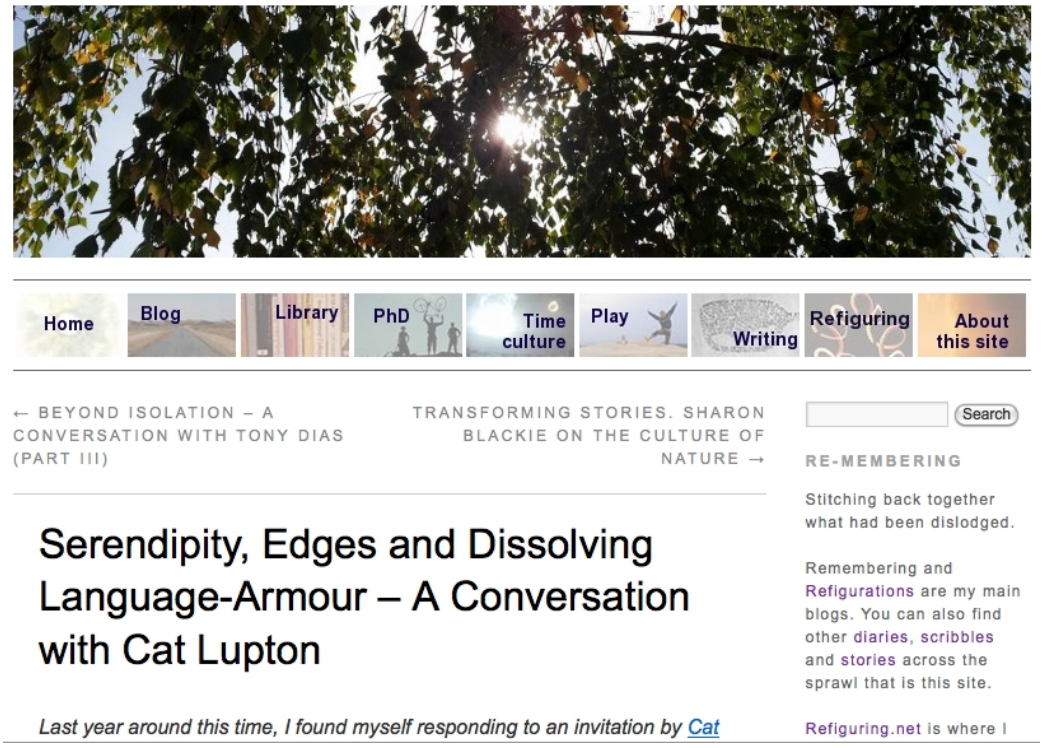

Figure 3.7: Screenshot of my blog *Remembering*.

In this way, the conversations contributed to and became part of the wider dialogue going on between participants in the Dark Mountain Project (see section 3.3). I was lucky that the participants I interviewed were all creative, reflective and insightful people who

[7]The conversation containing the two excerpts were published under the title 'Serendipity, Edges and Dissolving Language-Armour – A Conversation with Cat Lupton', see: http://patternwhichconnects.com/blog/serendipity-edges-and-dissolving-language-armour-a-conversation-with-cat-lupton/. See also Appendix H.

had a lot to say to my questions. All of them already wrote blogs and engaged with all sorts of artistic expression so I had a lot to go by. First, I would read as much as I could from their public materials and then I would sit with that and draw out themes or particular questions. I would then bring three to six comments or questions with me to the interview-conversation and let the interviewee talk around those. At times this method led us to unexpected topics but it always yielded very interesting conversations. Some of these continued afterwards around the transcripts I had produced and with some people I had several conversations. I found that the key to developing the transcripts was to engage with them as if they were a continuation of the conversation: to compare with previous versions, to try and delve into certain ways of speaking to see what they revealed, sometimes to insist on particular interpretations of phrasings and to ask questions like "when you say this...?", "what do you mean by...?" and "so does this mean...?"

At the level of my personal 'narrative of the narrative' (cf. Kohler Riessman, 2008) being transparent about the research meant writing as much as I could about my own development and, where appropriate, to make this public. I was fortunate that my supervisors urged me to continually write about my process and I produced a series of discussion notes on the progression of my empirical research, reading and theory, the development of my research questions, my approach to methods, conceptual notes, research statements, pilot thematic analyses, and presentations. I also participated in several seminars and workshops, gave poster presentations and, towards the end of the research, I was invited to speak at different events, including some hosted by the Dark Mountain Project. I attended various meetings, events and festivals of the Dark Mountain Project and I helped to set up a local group in Norwich. I kept four different research diaries and wrote a large number of blog posts during the research for myself and others. My personal website[8] became both a way to communicate about my research process, a resource for structuring my methods and thinking, and a tool for reflection on various aspects of the themes and methods I was developing (see also section 3.3). I also decided to publish some of the notes on my methods, theory and approach in order that people could find out what I was doing should they wish to know. While I do not know exactly what the wider impact of this approach has been, it helped ensure that I had ways to produce links between the empirical findings and data, the development of my own thinking, and the process of creating a coherent narrative about sustainability narratives and worldviews in relation to the Dark Mountain Project.

As for the third narrative level of this thesis, I hope the measures I have introduced aid the reader to enter and explore the realities that this research have generated and performed (cf. Gibson-Graham, 2008; Mol, 2002) in order to create a 'narrative of the narrative of the narrative' (cf. Riessman, 2008). My aim has been to leave enough room and trails open for readers to 'complete the story' (cf. Squire, 2008) and discover 'their own path and truth' in the virtual reality of this research (cf. Flyvbjerg, 2006). The thesis spills over into the various materials, participants and narratives that I have enlisted. The traceable links

[8] See: http://patternwhichconnects.com.

(cf. Mol, 2002) this research has created are intended to open up for these connections and show how I 'mobilise and hold together the bits and pieces' (cf. Law, 1992). I have aimed to be as clear as possible about whose perspective is expressed when and where. To do this I provide links to the different data points wherever possible (see section 3.3.4) and introduce an alternative font which I use whenever I am quoting empirical data (as opposed to quotes from academic literatures). Where I myself have co-created data, or where I bring in my own reflections during the empirical research, my voice also appears in this font. I do this to show that I became, as I discovered in the diary reflection below, a co-creator of the narratives about the Dark Mountain Project:

> Over the course of these conversations I gradually became more confident of my own narrative and I noticed a slight shift in my own attitude as I began to 'feed back' some of the insights and concepts that had emerged during earlier conversations. Sometimes previous co-narrated terms would fit the meaning discussed in a present conversation, or a particular figure of speech I had talked about earlier would present a topic or a concept in a new light. This would often be very useful for making sense of different ideas and brought a quality or depth to the discussions that I think would have been absent if the conversations had occurred in isolation. In this way, the meanings of different concepts was co-produced not only between an individual narrator and myself, but by all the narrators (including me) together. My role in this context was also one of a 'seeder' or someone who takes meanings and concepts across different perspectives.[9]

As I progressed in the research and began understanding my own role, and how this process worked, better, my focus and structure began to revolve around a set of core principles: openness to the unexpected, detachment from outcomes, attention to means, perceptiveness, honesty and patience. The following section explains this in more detail.

3.2.3 Ethics, emergence and co-producing realities

Mediating narratives about aspects of something as personal and emotive as transformation in onto-epistemological assumptions about the world meant that I had to clarify the ethical dimensions of the research early on. In grassroots participatory research ethical concerns are "about much more than bureaucratic checklists of practical elements we must include in our research, they become (and always were) about how we understand ourselves, our role in social change and our very identities" (Gillan and Pickerill, 2012, p. 139). There was clearly a potential for conflict both between my 'academic' and 'personal' selves and between my identity as 'researcher' and 'participant'. This could lead to a questioning of my motives, actions and interpretations from a variety of perspectives. If I was unable to bridge these identities, there was a danger that I could be seen to simply

[9] See: online research diary, 18.03.12, 'Reflections: Co-creating the Dark Mountain narrative', http://patternwhichconnects.com/phd/diary_2/Entries/2012/3/18_Reflections__A_stones_throw_2_3_3.html.

"use what other people know to become something [I was] not before, personally and materially" in order to "translate this knowledge into the language of power and publishing, regardless of the novelty or readability of the final product" (D'Amico-Samuels, 1991, p. 79). On the other hand, the inclusion of my own self in the research process could be interpreted as 'going native' and thereby as undermining my voice as academic researcher (cf. Fuller, 1999). While I tried to address these issues by being open and transparent about everything I did, they kept resurfacing until very late in the research process when I had gained confidence in my role and identity as researcher-participant. As both D'Amico-Samuels (1991) and Fuller (1999) affirm, antidotes for these kinds of conflicts are found in developing an attitude or approach which brings awareness and humility into the research process.

Clarifying my own intentions and ambitions also helped me to be more comfortable and confident when I had to make spontaneous or intuitive decisions regarding *where* to follow the narrative during the empirical research. And as I gradually began to embrace the 'unruly' nature of this research, I discovered that my ethical concerns indirectly shaped the outcomes of the research: knowing that I did not have to worry about my own motives made me more comfortable in the face of uncertainties and I could begin exploring emergent aspects of the research process. This turned out to be invaluable for understanding some of the subtler connections in the 'discursive terrain' of the metaphors, ideas and emotions that comprised the narratives I encountered (cf. Williams, 2012). I came to understand emergence as a process of sidestepping intentions and freeing up attention in order to be able to notice connections in the discursive terrain – "[c]onnections which hold the potential to widen our perspective by offering the data we were not looking for and which will turn our understanding on its head" as I later reflected[10]. The somewhat unexpected implication of this experience was that *ethics and attitude matter* beyond being procedural or psychological concerns – they shape actions and outcomes in significant and consequential ways.

I later came to see this as a practical expression of Law and Urry's (2004) insight that "[i]f methods are not innocent then they are also political. They help to make realities. But the question is: which realities? Which do we want to help to make more real, and which less real?" (p. 404). In terms of the personal narratives I encountered this was relatively straightforward: I wanted to empower them by being an attentive listener and a decent conversation partner. But within the multitude of wider narratives about the Dark Mountain Project as a group this was more complicated because there were sometimes conflicting views, opinions and beliefs. Here, my identity as researcher was really helpful in claiming a nonpartisan stand – in this regard my methods were invaluable because creating 'traceable links' works both outwards and inwards: it is a way to elucidate the research process to fellow academics but it is also a means of practicing accountability

[10] See: online research diary, 14.09.12, 'Reflections: Emergence and submergence', http://patternwhichconnects.com/phd/diary_2/Entries/2012/9/14_Reflections__Emergence_and_submergence.html.

and sincerity in relation to research participants. And establishing co-ownership over the transcripts I produced also ensured that research participants were clear about my understandings and interpretations. But there is a finer point to Law and Urry's question: simply making a series of statements about intentions or designing the research around principles like co-ownership and participation does not in itself establish what kind of reality is co-produced. As Kohler Riessman (2008) observes, the disposition and sensibilities of an interviewer directly affects the outcomes of a conversation: "[t]he specific wording of a question is less important than the interviewer's emotional attentiveness and engagement and the degree of reciprocity in the conversation" (p. 24). This statement resonates with my experience of the various conversations I engaged in during this research. Because narration depends on expectations (ibid.) the kind of manner and spirit in which an inquiry is undertaken affects the type of accounts or answers one receives. Therefore, a subtle – but critical – element of my interview practice became developing presence and an attitude of openness and attentiveness.

In these ways, ethics became a key component of my methods. I slowly came to rely more on ethical and practical understandings and less on the standard research techniques I had been trained in as I developed my own research 'craft skill' (cf. Seale, 1999, 2002; Denzin and Lincoln, 2005) and became clearer about my role in the relations and processes I was examining (cf. Gillan and Pickerill, 2012). The next and final section explains the data collection and production, how I have patterned the data and provides a guide to how my own trails can be (re)traced and examined.

3.3 Connecting the trails

As explained in section 3.2.1 the guiding principle for the empirical research in this thesis, has been to follow the narrative through the different sites I had identified (see Figure 3.5 above). This section will clarify what this meant in practice, describe how I collected and generated data in the different narrative sites and provide an inventory for the various data sources I have worked with. But first it is necessary to briefly summarise how I have approached the process of interpretation, theorising and story building that has gone into creating my own 'narrative of the narrative'.

3.3.1 What am I listening and looking for?

While the iterative-inductive approach to doing an ethnographic case study outlined above implies a continual movement between observation, reflection, analysis and theory (cf. O'Reilly, 2012), it is important to explicate what has guided my strategic and editorial decisions in the co-production and patterning of the data. As explained in Chapter 2, the overarching question that guides this research is *how sustainability narratives affect life-worlds within grassroots innovations?* This means that I have been looking for aspects of the activities, conversations and outputs of the Dark Mountain Project which in some

way could tell me more about the ways in which participants begin to narrate their life-world with the help of some of the concepts and practices that circulate within the wider network – as well as how this relates to personal outlook and actions. I have done this on the basis of the theoretical understanding – developed in the previous chapter – that conceptual structures, webs of metaphors and narrative positioning provide clues to the structuring and meaning of particular sustainabilities. However, based on the methodological framework outlined in this chapter, I have tried to avoid building too much theory into the empirical chapters: instead, the theory has provided a focus for 'where to look' for signs of onto-epistemological change.

To find out about this in practice, I built a large pool of secondary data (referring to the material about the Dark Mountain Project written by others, e.g., the manifesto, journals, blogs, etc.) and a smaller pool of qualitative primary data (referring to interview-conversations, participant observation, notes and reflections). Collecting and analysing the secondary data has been relatively straightforward insofar as this has followed a simple approach to thematic analysis (cf. Riessman, 2008) which focuses on the content and context of the material – although my understanding of this data has also benefitted from discussions with authors and participants. The primary data has gone through more varied processes of patterning. Thematic analyses of interview-conversations have been critical for drawing out different aspects of participants' understanding and interaction with the Dark Mountain Project. And the process of working through the conversations with the interviewees has furthered an understanding of how each individual narrative was constructed dialogically – as did follow up interviews and online communication. For live talks, meetings and events the use of audio recordings, note taking and diaries were important for the initial ordering of data. This was then subsequently revisited and developed in discussion notes and draft expositions. To capture my emerging understanding it was imperative to continually document my own narrative trails in notes, diaries, blog posts and reflections. These could then later be compared with other types of data and integrated into the process of patterning the entire data set. Figure 3.8 illustrates how this has been done for different types of data.

Sections 3.3.2 and 3.3.3 will say a little more about this process while section 3.3.4 provides a key to the data. There is one aspect of patterning the data which is difficult to capture in a diagram like Figure 3.8 and that is the *emergent developmental form* which this process necessarily takes (cf. Figure 3.2). That means that while I considered different qualitative techniques and methods that could be employed in this study beforehand, they gradually developed as the research progressed and also began to inform each other. So while the different types of data and methods that are shown in Figure 3.8 are situated within separate circles, they also speak to each other and corroborate understandings that emerge across different data sets. Figure 3.9 contrasts the emergent developmental form of participatory research with the 'doubly disengaged' or linear view of the research as distinct phases of formulating hypotheses, empirical testing and analysis.

Each dot in Figure 3.9 marks a data point and the lines illustrate trails between these points. By situating all the aspects of the research – from creating research questions

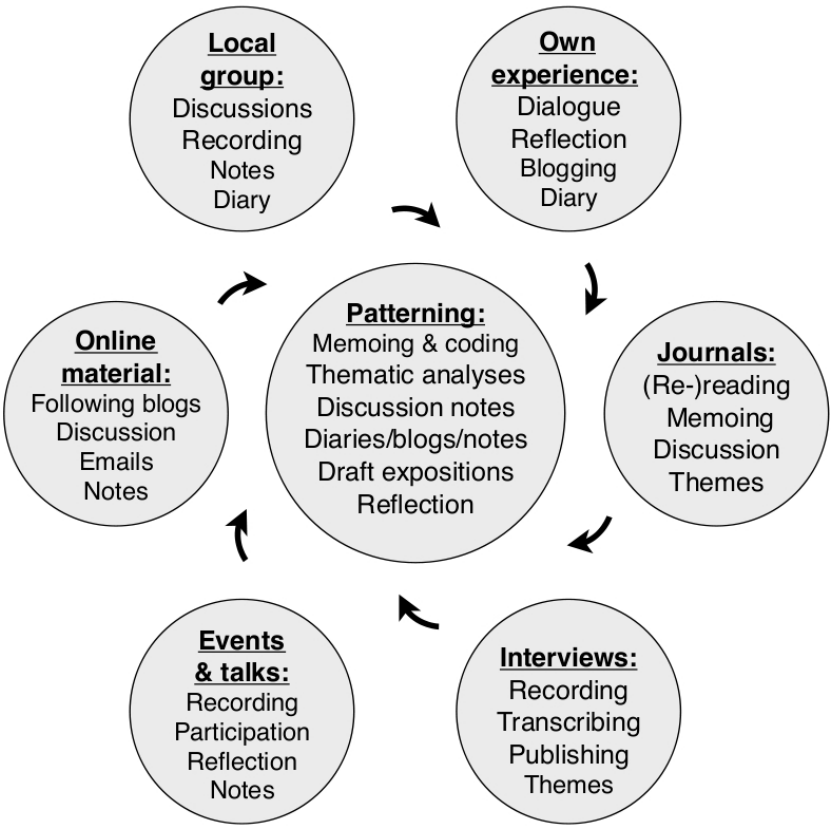

Figure 3.8: Patterning of the different types of data.

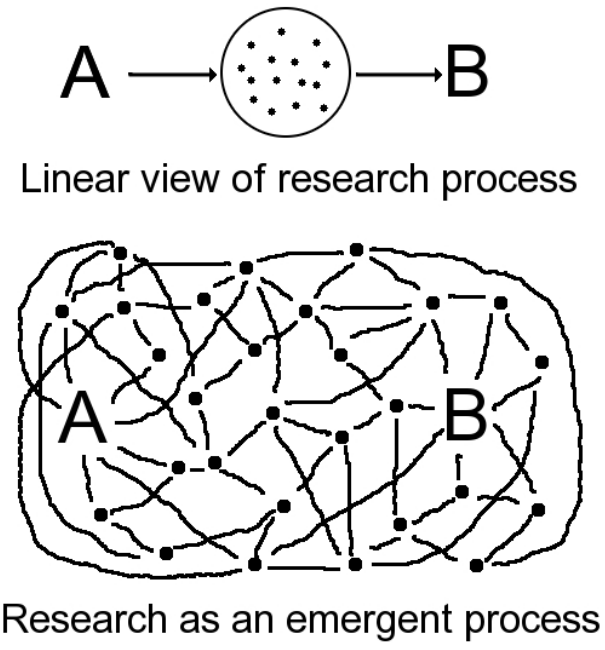

Figure 3.9: The emergent form of participatory research.

to answering them – within the same plane, the emergent form becomes apparent. This also illustrates how I approached re-constructing the data that had been produced in the course of the research: the structures and themes that emerged in the production of the data provided a framework to write around while I could also re-examine this pattern by following the various data 'backwards' through the questions they emerged from. But there was also a material aspect to this emergence as the online platforms I was building became more than simply a way of communicating: in some ways they came to frame how I was doing things by providing both a searchable repository and a structure for aspects of the empirical research. The online diary is a good example of this development: it was at the same time a methodological 'experiment', a 'testing ground' for particular observations, a means of 'widening the audience' of my narrative, and a 'way of introducing transparency' into the research (see Table C.1 in Appendix C). This materiality in turn informed my theoretical understanding of the research process. An overview of the different types of data I collected is provided in the following section.

3.3.2 Data collection and construction

In the course of the empirical research I collected and co-produced the following types of data across the different narrative sites:

(a) Publications by the Dark Mountain Project (manifesto, 4 journal issues).

(b) The Dark Mountain blog (participant contributions).

(c) The Dark Mountain Ning platform (participant blogs and message boards).

(d) Participant blogs (see Table E.1 in Appendix E).

(e) Talks or debates about the Dark Mountain Project available online (see examples in Table B.1 in Appendix B).

(f) News and journal articles about the Dark Mountain Project (see examples in Table B.1 in Appendix B).

(g) Participant observation at live events (notes, audio recordings, photography).

(h) Own interview-conversations (see Table 3.2).

(i) Published interviews (see Table 3.3).

(j) Own blog posts (see Table C.2 in Appendix C).

(k) Online research diary (see Table C.1 in Appendix C).

(l) Field diary.

(m) Dark Mountain Norwich diary.

(n) Audio diary.

(o) Graphic material.

(p) Email exchanges.

(q) Conceptual notes including research proposal, methodological considerations, research design, pilot analysis, discussion notes on research questions, thematic analysis (see examples in Table C.3 in Appendix C).

In addition to this there is another type of data which I unintentionally co-constructed but only have limited insight into: the comments and responses to some of the above data which occurred in other online conversations and blog posts. To generate and collect the data I relied on digital recording equipment, VoIP software (Skype) and online social networks and platforms (Ning, Twitter, Tumblr and Facebook). I used iWeb and WordPress to create and maintain my own websites and blogs.

I provide an overview of all the data sources I reference in this research below and in Appendices A-E. Due to the size of these indices most have been relegated to the Appendix – the two tables included in this section serve to illustrate my system of referencing as well as how the online data can be retrieved. Table 3.2 lists the participants to the interview-conversations alphabetically and shows the date of the interview:

Interview-conversation, date	**Marker**
Roger Barnes, 20.11.11	RB I-C, 20.08.11
Anna Boyle, 21.08.11	AB I-C, 21.08.11
Tony Dias, 29.02.12	TD I-C, 29.02.12
Tony Dias, 18.04.12	TD I-C, 18.04.12
Tony Dias, 28.08.12	TD I-C, 28.08.12
Charlotte Du Cann, 16.03.13	CDC I-C, 16.03.13
Alex Fradera, 19.09.12	AF I-C, 19.09.12
Jay Griffiths, 19.08.12	JG I-C, 19.08.12
Vinay Gupta, 09.09.12	VG I-C, 09.09.12
Dougald Hine, 08.09.11	DH I-C, 07.09.11
Dougald Hine, 24.01.13	DH I-C, 24.01.13
Paul Kingsnorth, 20.02.12	PK I-C, 20.02.12
Paul Kingsnorth, 28.01.13	PK I-C, 28.01.13
Andy Letcher, 19.08.12	AL I-C, 19.08.12
Cat Lupton, 23.05.12	AL I-C, 23.05.12
Daniela Othieno, 17.02.12	DO I-C, 17.02.12
Daniela Othieno, 23.06.12	DO I-C, 23.06.12
Laura Sorvala, 16.08.12	LS I-C, 16.08.12
Dougie Strang, 17.08.12	DS I-C, 18.08.12
Em Strang, 18.08.12	ES I-C, 18.08.12
Andrew Taggart, 06.02.12	AT I-C, 06.02.12
Andrew Taggart, 13.07.13	AT I-C, 13.07.13
Steve Thorp, 05.03.12	ST I-C, 05.03.12
Steve Wheeler, 18.08.12	SW I-C, 18.08.12
Camilla Wimberley, 17.08.12	CW I-C, 18.08.12

Table 3.2: Index of interview-conversations

Each participant was approached on the basis of where I 'followed the narrative' as described in section 3.2.1. The online aspect of this research also meant that I was faced with finding ways of adjusting my methods to include 'netnographic' approaches (Kozinets, 2010); it required that I got familiar with the conventions and practices of the online culture that the Dark Mountain Project is part of. It also became a key way of encountering interview participants, expanding my understanding of certain themes and receiving feedback on my observations. And once I had met someone online, their 'trails' would lead me to other participants or themes. Typically, I would come across participants as I was following certain themes in the different narrative sites or through mention in the conversations that I took part in. For example, through inquiring about the theme of 'improvisation', which became a topic early on in the research, I eventually met Alex Fradera, an improvisation performer and main contributor to this topic. Based on my transcript of our recorded conversation, we then proceeded to co-create the published interview conversation 'Looking backwards to see what happens next' on the basis of the principles of co-ownership and co-production described in section 3.2.2. Table 3.3 lists the interview conversations that were published on my blog *Remembering* chronologically:

Published interview, date, address	**Marker**
Dougald Hine: Beyond the parameters of the game, 18.11.11, *Remembering*. Available at: http://patternwhichconnects.com/blog/beyond-the-parameters-of-the-game-a-conversation-with-dougald-hine/.	DH P-I, 18.11.11
Andrew Taggart: Uncivilisation, settlerism, metaphorising and jazz, 31.03.12, *Remembering*. Available at: http://patternwhichconnects.com/blog/uncivilisation-settlerism-metaphorising-and-jazz-a-conversation-with-andrew-taggart/.	AT P-I, 31.03.21
Paul Kingsnorth: Getting to month one hundred, 11.05.12, *Remembering*. Available at: http://patternwhichconnects.com/blog/getting-to-month-one-hundred-a-conversation-with-paul-kingsnorth/.	PK P-I, 11.05.12
Steve Thorp: Soul-making, wildness and the psychology of collapse, 16.07.12, *Remembering*. Available at: http://patternwhichconnects.com/blog/soul-making-wildness-and-the-psychology-of-collapse-a-conversation-with-steve-thorp/.	ST P-I, 16.07.12
Jay Griffiths: The otherness of time, 14.09.12, *Time culture*. Available at: http://time-culture.net/the-otherness-of-time-a-conversation-with-jay-griffiths/.	JG P-I, 14.09.12
Tony Dias: Finding community, 25.10.12, *Remembering*. Available at: http://patternwhichconnects.com/blog/finding-community-a-conversation-with-tony-dias-part-i/.	TD P-I, 25.10.12
Tony Dias: Suspending choice, 20.11.12, *Remembering*. Available at: http://patternwhichconnects.com/blog/suspending-choice-a-conversation-with-tony-dias-part-ii/.	TD P-I, 20.11.12
Tony Dias: Beyond isolation, 11.12.12, *Remembering*. Available at: http://patternwhichconnects.com/blog/beyond-isolation-a-conversation-with-tony-dias-part-iii/.	TD P-I, 11.12.12

Published interview, date, address	Marker
Cat Lupton: Serendipity, Edges and Dissolving Language-Armour, 20.12.12, *Remembering*. Available at: http://patternwhichconnects.com/blog/serendipity-edges-and-dissolving-language-armour-a-conversation-with-cat-lupton/.	CL P-I, 20.12.12
Sharon Blackie: Transforming stories, 27.12.12, *Remembering*. Available at: http://patternwhichconnects.com/blog/transforming-stories-sharon-blackie-on-the-culture-of-nature/.	SB P-I, 27.12.12
Alex Fradera: Looking backwards to see what happens next, 31.01.13, *Remembering*. Available at: http://patternwhichconnects.com/blog/looking-backwards-to-see-what-happens-next-a-conversation-with-alex-fradera/.	AF P-I, 31.01.13
Dougie Strang: Caught out of the corner of the eye, 27.02.13, *Remembering*. Available at: http://patternwhichconnects.com/blog/caught-out-of-the-corner-of-the-eye-a-conversation-with-dougie-strang/.	DS P-I, 27.02.13
Steve Wheeler: Unprogramming the apocalypse, 14.03.13, *Remembering*. Available at: http://patternwhichconnects.com/blog/unprogramming-the-apocalypse-a-conversation-with-steve-wheeler/.	SW P-I, 14.03.13
Vinay Gupta: Subverting the war of stories, 26.03.13, *Remembering*. Available at: http://patternwhichconnects.com/blog/subverting-the-war-of-stories-a-conversation-with-vinay-gupta/.	VG P-I, 26.03.13
Charlotte Du Cann: Medicine stories, liberation and shifting allegiance, 23.04.13, *Remembering*. Available at: http://patternwhichconnects.com/blog/medicine-stories-liberation-and-shifting-allegiance-a-conversation-with-charlotte-du-cann/.	CDC P-I, 23.04.13

Table 3.3: Index of published interviews

I reference data according to the 'markers' indicated in the right column of Tables 3.2 and 3.3. These markers can then be followed back to the relevant index which gives the full details of the source. In the electronic version of this text, the markers are active hyperlinks which lead the reader to the index, or, where the data source is publicly available, directly to the relevant location online. For example, by clicking the marker for the published interview with Alex Fradera: AF P-I, 31.01.13, this source will open in a web browser. For the print version, all data sources referenced in the text are available on the accompanying compact disc (which also contains an electronic version of this text). Appendix A contains a list of all the material from Dark Mountain publications referenced in this research (data source a), Appendix B lists the articles, blog posts and talks cited (data sources e and f), Appendix C provides an overview of my own diary entries, blog posts and documents which are available online (data sources g, j, k and q), Appendix D shows the events and talks I recorded on audio (data source g), and Appendix E provides a list of the different blogs I followed in the course of the research (data sources b, c, d).

So while the nature of qualitative research necessarily foregrounds my role as mediator (cf. Mol, 2002) I have attempted to counterbalance this 'narrative inequality' by introducing traceable links to each data point. When I refer to discrete data points in the

following chapters, I do this because they reflect a particular question well – e.g., an individual quote can convey findings beyond the particular site where it was recorded insofar as it expresses something that I also found in other sites. My approach to the inclusion of data in this thesis has invariably been its relevance to the activity or event in question – providing a link to the data source enables the reader to revisit the original context. Section 3.3.4 describes how the various links can be (re)traced in more detail but first I will outline how I engaged with the different kinds of data that was produced during the research.

3.3.3 Interpretation and story building

In drawing together the data into the findings presented by the narrative of this thesis, I engaged with the data at various levels and through different approaches:

- Written material

  (a): on the basis of a first reading, a selection of material was chosen for further study. Through notes, memoing, and cross comparison, individual passages and quotes were then typed into word processing software. This served as the basis for thematic analysis in which particular topics where identified for further inquiry (see Figure 3.10 below for an example).

  (b,c,d,f): based on the approach of 'following the narrative' a list of individual blog posts, essays and articles was compiled and archived according to their topic and context. During this process individual quotes and notes served as a basis for comparison and future referencing (see Appendices B and E for indices of the articles and blogs referenced in this research).

  (i,j,k,l,m,p,q): the material I (co-)produced in the research process served as a record of 'where' I had travelled. This was helpful for further development of research questions, themes and provisional findings (see Table 3.3 and Appendix C for indices of material available online).

- Interviews (h): all interviews were recorded and most were transcribed. All transcriptions were coded in order to create a list of themes (see example in Appendix F) and 'pilot' analyses were undertaken at different stages of the research (see example in Appendix I). Some transcripts were further developed together with the participant and published online as described above (see example in Appendix H).

- Live events (g): notes and reflections of events were recorded during and after different events, some events were also photographed or recorded using digital audio equipment.

- Audio recordings (e,g,n): individual recordings where listened through in a process of memoing and note-taking. Some parts were transcribed (see Appendix D for a list of events and talks recorded on audio).

- Graphic material (o): Photographs were archived and some later used in reflections and photo essays. Some images from the journals were also obtained from the artists for use in the thesis. Sometimes this would lead to a further conversation about the images. A simple visual analysis was undertaken in a few cases (see example in Appendix G).

As shown in Figure 3.8 the various sources of data were gradually integrated in a recursive process which drew together documents across the various types of data. The production of further conceptual and reflective notes, draft expositions and pilot analyses also relied on the structures and themes which gradually emerged during the research as illustrated in Figure 3.9.

To begin patterning the data as a whole, I would go through an initial process of memoing in which I drew together observations from the different narrative sites on the basis of notes, codes and highlights (see Figure 3.10 for an example of this rough coding of the Dark Mountain manifesto). This would suggest broader 'motifs', which I would at this stage leave open but which were helpful for comparing the data. In this way, key themes would gradually build around particular topics or narrative sites and suggest further lines of inquiry. Eventually, I would group the data around key themes (see Figure 3.11 or full example in Appendix F). I piloted different forms of thematic analyses throughout the research and discussed emerging themes and questions both with my supervisors and participants in the Dark Mountain Project (see example in Appendix I). In this way, I gradually created new degrees of interpretation all the while being able to follow higher level themes back to their root in the data. Thus, in a recursive fashion, my interpretation would evolve in phases of initial readings (e.g. material produced by interviewees, journal articles/essays, online discussions), direct inquiry (e.g. interview-conversations, query of texts), reflection (e.g. transcription, note-taking, diaries), second reading (e.g. revisiting texts with more specific questions in mind), open coding (e.g. generating 'motifs' and pilot themes as explained above, cataloguing quotes and excerpts), drawing out themes (e.g. comparing various data sets and fields), exploring texts thematically (e.g. revisiting and rereading original texts), and producing draft expositions (e.g. discussion notes and draft chapters).

Imagery	Language of civilisation	Analysis	Moving forward
The present: Walking on lava Civilisation: The machine Impossibility of continued growth/progress (either we change course or destroy life on Earth) Collapse (loss of meaning, despair, social	Progress Development Growth Nature Environment Sustainability	Myth of progress at the heart of the machine Climate change + is showing the utter failure of this narrative A generation is growing up that is no longer better off Cultural illusion/delusion prevents us from seeing how deep 'crisis' goes – denial	Uncivilised writing needed to include non-human perspective in our stories (ecocentrism) Shifting worldviews - inhumanism Taking on a certain attitude Opening paths by asking

Figure 3.10: Initial motifs found in the Dark Mountain manifesto (redacted).

What's DM reacting against?	Way to DM	What's DM about?	Attitude	Tools
Linear narrative (DH) Seeing the promises of progress break (PK) Cultural nihilism/decline (SW) Isolation following from interest in decline (SW) Stuttering as the	Despair (ST) Despair (DS) Carrying the weight of ecocide (DS) Heart ache (DO) Recovering from trauma (TD) Acceptance (PK) Being ready for the conversation (PK) Finding each other: contingency and	Conversation (DH) Conversation (DO) Way of being/seeing (DH) Innovation as theology (DH) DM as a philosophical experiment (DH) Doing the same thing but in different domains (AF)	Openness to the unexpected (DH) Reality as playing field (DH) Ambiguity as a means of coming into awareness of the arbitrariness of the game rules (DH) Wildness (AF) Wildness (ST) Presence (AF)	Deliberately opening up a space (not top-down) (SW) Holding the space space as a way of improvising conversation (SW) Language as emergent and improvised (AF) The role of language and metaphor (AT)
Principles	**Pitfalls**	**What's DM saying?**	**What happens/emerges?**	**DM evolution**
Improvisation (DH) Improvisation (PK) Improvisation at the root of what DM is doing (SW) Making do with less (AF) Finding solutions by looking backwards (AF)	Movements (TD) Signposts and labels (TD) Ends and means (TD) Ego and short-circuiting (TD) Negotiation (TD) The white, male intellectual (DS)	The game is almost over (DH) What we have is enough (AF) Catabolic collapse (PK) Environmentalism: all or nothing (PK) Psychological collapse (ST)	Five stages of coming to terms with death (DS) Opening up for creativity and writing (DO) Connecting with likeminded people (DO) Shifting worldview	Manifesto 'hit a nerve' (PK) Conversation (following from manifesto) (SW) Keeping DM open, avoiding definitions (PK) Wide range of opinions within DM

Figure 3.11: Pilot thematic groupings for interview-conversations (redacted). See Appendix F for full example.

As described in section 3.3.1, my research questions focussed my inquiry on the meaning and circulation of particular concepts and practices as well as the ways in which they relate to individual worldviews and actions. But the specific questions also varied. Starting from my broader research question about the relations between sustainability narratives and personal lifeworlds, I first began to refine the overarching question into more specific queries based on my reading as articulated in the previous chapters. During the empirical work these research questions went through further stages of articulation and refinement in accordance with the progress of the empirical research, my reading and theory building. At different stages I identified sub-questions that I needed to explore and even broke these further down in order to find out about specific aspects of my core questions (an outline of these sub-questions is given in the next section). Towards the end of the research I refined and abridged all my questions which then guided my thinking and writing during the production of the final version of this study. The next section explains how the following chapters are structured.

3.3.4 The nuts, bolts and cracks of this thesis

This section provides a guide to the construction of the three following chapters and shows how they can be traced back to the empirical data in order for the reader to open up meanings where I have closed them down. During the process of interpretation described above, I began to see participants' interaction with the Dark Mountain Project as occurring in roughly three distinct but overlapping phases depending on both personal circumstances and perspectives on the Dark Mountain narrative. These are:

1. Positioning oneself within the wider Dark Mountain narrative (this typically involved identifying with and adopting part of the narrative, finding and relating to other participants, articulating one's personal understanding and interpretation);
2. Exploring new ways of speaking and interacting (e.g. engaging in alternative modes of conversation, experimenting with creative forms of expression, artistic participation and collaboration); and,
3. Integrating new experiences along a path of life (this often meant bringing parts of the personalised Dark Mountain narrative to bear on individual circumstances).

This pattern is reflected in the three following chapters which can be read as an exposition of: 1) becoming a participant in the Dark Mountain Project; 2) exploring new viewpoints, practices, and ways of being; and, 3) embodying new ways of life. However, each chapter has to do a little more work in order to create a coherent narrative which addresses the different aspects of my research questions. Therefore, Chapter 4 also includes sections about the emergence and wider significance of the narrative of the Dark Mountain Project, Chapter 5 explores the implications of collapse for thinking about sustainability and Chapter 6 discusses implications for understanding innovation as a social practice.

The individual sections in the next chapters address different aspects of my research questions or particular themes which emerged during the patterning of the data. As described in section 3.3.3, I developed sets of (sub-)questions that could help answering specific lines of inquiry in the course of the research. Each of these questions arose out of theoretical or practical considerations about the connection between narratives and the lifeworld, and they connect back to one of the four research questions which guide the overall inquiry:

How do sustainability narratives inform what kinds of knowledge and action participants engage with in grassroots innovations?

- What kinds of knowledge are invoked by the Dark Mountain Project and how do they express alternative modes of perception and action?
- How does the Dark Mountain narrative frame the future and how does this position individuals narratively?
- How does active re-narration of the lifeworld enable the 'constellation of an alternate reality'?
- How are alternative conceptions of reality enacted?
- How can new ways of seeing and speaking emerge without being enclosed by those conceptual frames and webs of metaphors they seek to undermine?

How are transformations in individual and collective cultural narratives expressed in participants' worldviews and actions?

- How are new stories integrated into the lifeworld within the narrative framing of 'uncivilising' and how do they affect personal identities?

- What is the experiential and psychological significance of the Dark Mountain Project's narrative of the 'collapse of civilisation'?
- How is it possible to avoid reproducing the worldviews and relationships of modernity in the development of new ways of speaking?
- What characterises the transformation of individual identities and life narratives within the Dark Mountain Project and what kind of relations to the surrounding world do they express?
- How does a transformation away from linear understandings of time shape personal identities and worldviews?

How do sustainability narratives affect the organisation and diffusion of grassroots innovations?

- What is the Dark Mountain Project and how did it emerge as a 'cultural movement'?
- How does the Dark Mountain Project define itself in relation to the meta-narrative of progress and what is the outlook of the *Uncivilisation* narrative?
- How do people find the Dark Mountain Project and enter into conversation with other participants?
- What characterises the Dark Mountain Project as a community of inquiry and why do people join the conversations?
- How is the underlying vision and narrative of the Dark Mountain Project expressed in its organisation and development?

What is the role of stories in enabling emerging practices and tools for social change?

- How does the Dark Mountain Project approach re-storing the lifeworld and creating new social institutions?
- How can new forms of interaction be enabled and encouraged between participants?
- How do participants in the Dark Mountain Project approach the deep uncertainties that arise from accepting the 'topography of collapse'?
- What forms of life are implied by the transformation in worldviews and life narratives within the Dark Mountain Project?
- How do new social institutions emerge from the mutual inquiries that take place within the Dark Mountain Project?

In the next three chapters, I have inserted the specific question I am addressing in each section directly after the section title as a 'guiding question' which helps bring the broader issue or theme into focus (labelled *GQ*). At the end of each chapter, I provide a short chapter summary which outlines my understanding of what I have found in relation to these questions.

It is my hope that providing links which connect the data and my interpretations will create a space for the reader to find her own meaning in my 'virtual reality' and 'complete' the storyline I trace. The thesis 'spills over' into the different materials, participants and narratives which I have enlisted and many of these are publicly available. Along with tables 3.2 and 3.3, appendices A, B, C, D, and E list all other empirical material referenced in the following chapters (tables 3.3, C.1, C.2 and C.3 present a key to the material I have (co-)produced during this research). This provides an entry point to the different layers of the data, should the reader want to follow my trails. Where the data is available online each reference is an active hyperlink which will open the data source in a web browser (for the print version this data is included on the accompanying compact disc). All urls, references, chapter and section numbers in this text are also hyperlinked in the e-version. By clicking these links the reader will be taken to the relevant place in the text or to the online source. Appendices F, G, H and I provide examples of my working. As explained in section 3.2.2, I have found it useful to introduce an alternative font which I use to distinguish quotes from the empirical material from other quotes or references which appear in the same font as the rest of this text. I hope this will introduce a helpful signpost for the reader to distinguish between the different levels of this narrative outlined in section 3.1.2.

3.3.5 Originality and limitations of the methodology

Before turning to the empirical chapters, I would like to make a few last comments about the nature of this text. My determination to practice 'weak theory' where "ontology becomes the effect rather than the ground of knowledge" (Gibson-Graham, 2008, p. 620) means that I have constructed my methods in ways that seek to produce spaces for participants to create their own narratives, individually and collectively, without subordinating these to assumptions about 'objective reality' which serve to disengage me as a researcher from the phenomena I research (cf. Ingold, 2000). What has been my primary interest and what I seek to convey here is how the phenomena I engage with have come into being, i.e. how these particular worlds and processes are enacted. This means that the findings produced by my methodology point to *possibilities* rather than 'hard answers' about onto-epistemological transformation. In the course of the study I became increasingly aware of the limits my methodology set on the answers I produced to my research questions: the methods I have engaged with positioned me within the community of respondents to the questions I pose and my findings are particular to the experiences that the participants I got to know have had. I do not see it as my role to 'judge' the nature or value of the answers or processes I have researched – I have felt that would reinforce the form of social criticism which divides the researcher as a subject (cf. D'Amico-Samuels, 1991) and take me away from the attitude of 'doing thinking' which I have sought to nurture (cf. Gibson-Graham, 2008). This circumstance has been a continued source of tension in my strategic and editorial decisions. And in this way, my critical engagement with the Dark Mountain Project has focussed on aspects related to onto-epistemological change – not on a general

critiquing of its wider aims and objectives. Accepting its *raison d'être* is a premise for engaging in the kind of activities Dark Mountain curates. I do, however, see it as my task to enable the reader to engage critically with my findings: that is why, in order to make this research open to scrutiny, my methods have been based on principles of transparency and accountability. While I acknowledge the inevitability that certain editorial decisions have become obscured or erased, the reader should be able to establish the reliability of this text on the basis of 'traceable links' introduced throughout.

I believe that creating these methods for answering my questions about the role of sustainability narratives in grassroots innovations have pointed to new ways of doing narrative inquiry (cf. Riessman, 2008) and online ethnographic research (cf. Kozinets, 2010) which broadens the toolkit of narrative and 'netnographic' work. Situated at the crossroads of ethnographic, narrative and participatory methodologies, it can be seen as an extension of people-based approaches seeking new ways of establishing authoritative and credible accounts of social phenomena. Here, I agree with David Maines (1993) that "whether an account is regarded as valid is a function of the social contexts and conventions that the members of those contexts use to construct validity as a criterion for truth claims" (p. 133). This methodological disposition, in combination with a theoretical framework which views social life as a *field of relations* (cf. section 2.2.4), emphasises the need to enable research participants to express their lived experience as (truth)fully as possible. It is a premise for the possibility of this kind of research. However, this places the researcher-as-critic in a position of "offer[ing] the participants arenas in which to gather" (Latour, 2004, p. 246) rather than in the role of detached analyst. It also means that it can be hard to summarise or draw neat generalisations from the research which can be readily transferred to other contexts. But here I agree with Flyvbjerg (2006) that 'distillation' of theory may not always be desirable because it risks losing something fundamental and that, rather, "[g]ood [case] studies should be read as narratives in their entirety" (p. 241).

So while the final version of this thesis is in many ways 'unalterable', I am not claiming to have discovered any 'facts' about the processes I inquire about. What I am showing in this chapter is how my findings can be retraced and re-constructed, not that these findings are immutable. As narrative scholar Molly Andrews (2008) reflects: "[m]eaning is not something that, once extracted, can be contained in a pure, undiluted form, bottled as it were" (p. 93). What I have bottled here is only a representation of the real thing and that is a brew which only exists 'out there' beyond this text. After all, the data points that I provide are only markers along the road traveled. The experience of *doing* this research has also been a source of data in itself and that cannot be captured in its fullness no matter how many field notes, reflective blog posts, and conceptual commentaries are written. That is where research slips into so-called real life – I hope to have covered enough of these cracks for the reader to follow. This research has been a huge learning process where I have also taken wrong turns. Many of the trails I have left bear witness to this. Things that at one point appeared obvious later turned out to be complex and I went through many detours and doubts on this journey. As my last entry in the online research diary sanguinely claims:

> Looking back across the path I have walked these last months and years, the landscape is littered with moulted skins. These inside-out discarded skins are artefacts of my past selves' relation to the universe. And I see that I will probably never finish this continual process of shedding skins, there are always more skins to shed. The directions of growth are endless. Slowly the landscape beyond binaries that I've sense [sic] for some time is beginning to take shape (O-D, 06.12.12).

This is a landscape which I am still exploring and I invite the reader to advise me on my folly: how are my questions answered from the reader's own perspective and narrative?