



RESEARCH ARTICLE

To enjoy “less” more: Chastened humanism and degrowth

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Abstract

Chastened humanism offers philosophical grounding for an alternative hedonism that might make degrowth palatable to consumer societies. Though not identical to degrowth, alternative hedonism is attitudinally adjacent to its deflationary impulse, its “soft landing” approach to global political-economic restructuring. For degrowth to become ideologically attractive, wealthier humans need to enjoy “less” more. Chastened humanism suggests one philosophical foundation for such enjoyment or retraining of desire. Under conditions of scarcity and risk, but prior to the intensely diminished resource access to come, chastened humanism redevelops classical humanist thought toward a vision of enjoyable transcendence-toward-less, offering a strategy for collective meaning-making that can ground alternative hedonism and degrowth alike. Chastened humanism comprises (1) humility on the basis of species-membership and (2) commitment to transcendence-toward-less. This offers a way of negotiating hard cultural and planetary constraints with an eye to transcending an apparent ecological law of niche construction. If humans, like other species, construct our ecological niche to maximize resource metabolization until interrupted by other biota, and if capitalism and carbon technologies intensify our capacities for niche construction unto death, what will allow us to interrupt ourselves? What habits of mind can help us to desire, and so strive effectively for, the transcendence of “ecological law” that would be collective self-limitation of resource consumption at a mass scale? Chastened humanism draws out from Italian humanist Giambattista Vico’s orations *On Humanistic Education* a way of thinking about such desirable self-limitation *as* transcendence.

We have never needed “less” more. Advocates of degrowth often highlight abundance, articulating ways in which “less of some items *and* more of others” go hand-in-hand (Hickel 2019; Hickel 2022; Buch-Hansen and Nesterova 2023, 1). They distinguish this vision of abundance from green growers’ by stressing that *more* can mean new organizations of

societal, relational, and productive capacities to help prevent us destroying planetary life.¹ The point is well taken, and yet, both *less* and *loss* remain at the heart of resistance to degrowth. Skeptical laypeople rightly apprehend that degrowth entails giving up the *more* of maximizing resource metabolization, and are not thrown off that scent by promises of abundance in other forms (Alexander and Gleeson 2022). We who have been trained to desire to consume (across the Global North and in growing numbers across densely urbanized parts of the Global South) will need to enjoy consuming less. This reality is a barrier to degrowth at the level of self-transformation, a block to desiring change of the sort Buch-Hansen and Nesterova (2023) compellingly detail.

Equally, on the inducement side of degrowth's motivational equation, many continue to stuff their ears to horrific losses-to-come. The specters of climate genocide and a sixth mass extinction visit like ghosts of Christmas future, but that's a lot to take in. As Kelly Hayes and Mariame Kaba evocatively put it, "Amid a landscape of catastrophe and extraction draped in bright plastic product displays and endless streams of escapism, most people are simply being herded along" (Hayes and Kaba 2023, 45). Small surprise that many refuse to hear—and so cannot be motivated to change their structures of desire—when the losses associated with a twinned climate and biodiversity crisis come knocking at the window. How do otherwise in a necrotic Anthropocene organized by the extraordinary resource metabolization of a still-increasing population of eight billion humans? How take seriously the unviability of *this* world when nearly everyone "we" know is constrained by capitalism's logic of growth to live ever more like the most resource-gluttonous five hundred million or so of us?² You still have to get the kids to bed.

¹ For a primer, see Hickel (2021). For a fuller picture, see Parrique's impressive PhD dissertation, "The Political Economy of Degrowth," which identifies degrowth as "our best shot to uncanceled the future" (2019, 5).

² Global North residents enjoy by far the greatest metabolic fruits of the carbon emissions baking our planet, but the biodiversity crisis twinned with fossil-fueled growthism reflects truly worldwide human land- and sea-use patterns. Consumption enabled in the Global North by extraordinary carbon spend remains for much (though not quite all) of the rest of the world aspirational rather than cautionary. As I lay the problem out in *Panic Now? Tools for Humanizing* (2024), an all-too-easy-to-say "we" benefits deeply unequally from the carbon-capitalism-colonialism assemblage destroying Earth's carrying capacity for humans and most other species, and yet the overwhelming majority of our species (Global North and South alike) are trapped in infrastructural logics accomplishing the devastation. Consuming ourselves and everyone else to death is implicit in the horizon of globally organized "CaCaCo" humanity. That horizon is overdetermined by Global North-controlled systems of metabolization—including ideological production—and so these are my primary focus. Still, I gesture here and there toward total human population, since that is our biota in its entirety.

The trouble is that we are not simply constrained. Billions of us also *desire*. We want to take vacations, eat imported foods, and pursue all the other consumption activities economic growth makes available to ever-greater numbers of people (activities that make this very growth necrotic). What affective, epistemic, moral, judicial, and political-economic stances can we take toward the earth system catabolysis we are collectively producing and wanting, if degrowth is to become widely appealing? How can we detrain ourselves, ideologically and at the level of desire, from a global-civilizational orientation toward maximizing resource metabolization? Easy to say we in the Global North must “live with less,” harder to want to. Harder still to persuade a globe mostly filled with people who want “more” to *also* enjoy wanting “less” at the level of the horizon itself (even as such “less” can be concretely, for many, far more than they presently consume). A horizon-determining orientation toward infinitely more is woven into the fabric of capitalist consumer cultures that, though not universal, truly are global. By contrast with core capitalist assumptions, degrowth implies finite horizons for overall species-wide resource metabolization and dramatic curtailment for those presently consuming most. Degrowth promises convivial forms of abundance, yes (Vetter 2018). But it *also* means wanting less. Not just accepting that we will have to consume less, but actively desiring it. Given that maximizing resource metabolization not only underwrites contemporary global structures of life, but even appears as a “law” of ecology, what habits of mind can make radical departure from a consumptive telos—i.e., degrowth economics—not just palatable as a draconian response to climate desperation but intrinsically appealing, desirable?

This article suggests chastened humanism, cautiously self-reflexive retrieval of a philosophical legacy oriented toward human transcendence, as one possible answer. A chastened humanist would desire degrowth. My move here to ground desire for degrowth (through an intermediary “alternative hedonism”) in a form of thought widely regarded as part of the problem is intentional. We need to be able to value as much of our collective cultural legacies as feasible. Degrowth needs a salvage mindset toward intellectual history. Accordingly, the *chastened humanism* offered here is both explication of a philosophical concept and performance of a cultural-rhetorical move. It involves two entwining tendencies, attitudes toward interpretive action that can help us collectively enjoy *less* more: (1) humility on the basis of human species membership and (2) hedonistic commitment to transcendence of

what seem to be hard constraints on collective human becoming.³ The transcendence specific to chastened humanism is about overleaping an apparent ecological law; it is transcendence of a supra-species tendency to maximize resource metabolization, and is *toward* collectively enjoying (and so desiring) less overall consumption. Chastened humanism says we can, broadly and at scale, form self-transcending desires that support intentional movement away from global humanity's catabolysis of the living earth system.

In one sense, there is nothing ecologically novel about contemporary global humanity (our staggering overall disparities of distribution notwithstanding). We're just more effective at expanding the scope of our resource metabolization, mostly because of technologies that entwine carbon-burning, colonialism, and capitalism (Allen 2024), than are other species. In the broadest sense, it appears as an ecological "law" that any given biota will inhabit and expand its niche in such wise as to maximize species-wide resource metabolization (Slagsvold and Wiebe 2007). Ecology observes this supra-species regularity: Biota expand or construct resource niches as fully as they can, until interrupted by other biota and/or niche exhaustion (Archetti 2015; in a more critical vein Trappes 2021). So, transcending ecological "law" is what degrowth demands. Humans have to become (at least relative to our understandings thus far) ecologically novel, self-limiting within a global species-population resource niche that could still be constructed out further yet. (For instance, we must *collectively choose* to leave a great deal of oil in the ground.) Chastened humanism says that humans can indeed desiringly reduce—at the grand scale or species-level, not just individually—our overall resource metabolization. Plausible belief in this transcendence of a physical regularity observed across many biota is a strict entailment of any degrowth process that would be non-authoritarian. Self-limitation need not be austerity, but can be transcendent.

Later in this essay, I ground chastened humanism in the orations of a central figure of early Enlightenment thought: the Italian humanist Giambattista Vico. Vico's humanism is useful because it urges self-limiting *as* humans' proper form of transcendence, and does so on the basis of interpretive species-humility. We are to desire something like "transcendence toward

³ I have elsewhere mapped this in terms of three entwining tendencies (Allen 2023a); here, I collapse epistemic and moral variants of humility to foreground desire and enjoyment.

less” on the strength of realistic assessment of how little we understand and how badly formed our wills tend to be. There are of course many critiques of humanism as intellectual sponsor of our necrotic Anthropocene.⁴ The thing is, though: Either those critiques are broadly valid, in which case we badly need ways of navigating humanist roots of the present order more productive than mere disavowal—disavowal, after all, fails to nullify desire (Nancy 2016)—or else they are mistaken. I’m strongly inclined to accept the former, but either possibility highlights the need to retrieve from humanism what may be of philosophical value. Indeed, that’s the broader principle at play. Drawing philosophico-social motivation for degrowth from Vico’s legacy is an instance of performing salvage operations on culture. Such operations are invaluable in lowering the bar for valuing the “less” of degrowth, alongside but distinct from efforts (like Buch-Hansen and Nesterova’s over the last several years) to communicate clearly its “more.” At the same time, they are part of what it can mean to enjoy being, as people committed to degrowth’s many *beyonds*, interpretively self-limiting recipients of cultural legacies.

Vico’s legacy, I suggest in the following, offers structures of transcendental desire that align with the “alternative hedonism” framework proposed by British philosopher Kate Soper. For Soper, structural transformation of our political economies *requires*, as a pragmatic condition, plausible belief in enjoyment-to-come, even and especially the enjoyment of volitionally diminishing resource-metabolization. A chastened uptake of Vico’s humanism, read together with Soper, offers one way to imagine enjoying “less” more. This, in turn, presents an approach toward shifting what we of the Global North in particular, as hypereffective resource-consumers and waste-producers, may desire and what discard (Liboiron and Lepawsky 2022). We can conceive of *more* quite differently than most of us at present do—and we can conceive of *less* as transcendently enjoyable, itself a version of more. If anything like degrowth is to be possible as a democratic project (rather than, say, the rearguard action of a desperate ecofascism), a great many people will need to so desire.

⁴ This essay is not for doing battle with humanism’s critics, but for salvaging something useful from the wreckage, so I take the critiques not to require rehearsal.

Like any other idea or collection of ideas, chastened humanism is in itself not efficient cause of social change. Ideas participate in changing infrastructures, but no idea, no collection of symbols alone, drives radical material transformation. And yet, ideas are crucial to our structures of desire. My aim is to get at the *wanting* piece of the degrowth puzzle. I offer chastened humanism as one strand of a vast skein of ideas, logics, and action orientations that together would comprise degrowth. It suggests a structure of feeling—a particular way of entwining humility with commitment to enjoyment and transcendence—that, while not sufficient, is necessary for any version of degrowth that would be attractive and voluntary, especially for we ultra-consumers of the Global North. Chastened humanism helps answer the question of how we might be persuaded to enjoy “less” more by reinterpreting a widely (outside of academia, and by Global North consumers especially) valued cultural legacy to valorize collective self-limitation as a form of transcendence. In both form and content, such intellectual salvage offers a model for continuing to draw value from what we would otherwise discard—and, so, inducement to reforming desires rather than merely (and ineffectively) disavowing them, i.e., inducement to truly becoming-other. Before getting to chastened humanism and Giambattista Vico, though, it’s helpful to take stock of the stock-taking many are now beginning to do, and to clarify relations between degrowth and alternative hedonism.

1. Beginning to Want *Not This*

We’re dying out there. To an ever-increasing extent, everybody knows it. In Australia’s 2019–20 bushfires alone, nearly 3 billion vertebrate animals were killed or displaced (Commonwealth 2020, 5).⁵ The moral damage of that single wildfire season in one geographic location, to say nothing of all the others and those of far greater intensity to come, is incalculable. And a great many of us feel it; we have begun taking affective stock of the loss and pursuing new relations of care and witnessing (Barnett 2022). All the same, species-total resource metabolization—from energy and plastics to calories mediated through nonhuman animals to stretches of forest and brushland cleared or burned: in brief, biota-wide

⁵ In the mountain west of the United States where I live, wildfire interrupted work on this article on three separate occasions—a small personal instance of the trend toward megafires throughout drylands and beyond (Allen 2023b).

throughput—both increases and continues not to be mobilized to sustain wide swathes of even the human population every year. Somewhere in the neighborhood of 8 billion humans occupy the globe—3.6 billion, nearly half, face inadequate access to water at least one month of each year (World Meteorological Organization 2021, 5). Biodiversity-devastating monocrops like wheat and rice already fail to feed us; matters will be worse in coming years (Ray et al. 2022). And that’s distinct from the geopolitical tragedies and capitalist rationing that drive famine (Goodell 2022). We are burning and parched, flooded out and starving. All while destroying the conditions of life for most of our nonhuman relations, driving a sixth mass extinction (Cowie, Bouchet, and Fontaine 2022).

In recent years, many in the Global North have begun to feel that all this registers the undesirability of the world-system they inhabit. Unfortunately, this is not the same as desiring to do less of the consuming that underpins this world-system (Karatani 2014). Still, it’s a start. For many decades, the climate and biodiversity crises weren’t that troubling for more comfortable denizens of the wealthier countries. But these days, as an aghast *New York Times* put it in summer 2021, “Climate Change Comes for Rich Countries” (New York Times 2021). By contrast with the tut-tutting complacency about the “Inequality of Climate Change” that reigned, say, eight years earlier (Lowrey 2013), another *Times* headline now laments, “‘No One Is Safe’: How the Heat Wave Battered the Wealthy World” (Sengupta 2021). *The New York Times* is nearly as good a barometer of the moods of a global majority-shareholder class as are stock markets, so that’s a significant shift. Still, even as growthist “decarb bros” make wild promises about innovating our way out of the climate crisis (Gallogly 2023), nearly all of global humanity continues to participate in annihilating our nonhuman kin, an untold and untellable devastation. The sixth mass extinction isn’t even driven, mostly yet, by the climate crisis’s feedback loops of intensification (Kolbert 2014). It thus far springs from land- and sea-use pressures associated with a global human population that’s grown fourfold in just the last hundred years—and that orients still through almost mockingly named “sustainable development goals” toward ever greater resource metabolization for ever more humans

(WWF 2020).⁶ Worse still, all that’s just preface. From an Anthropocene point of view, we haven’t gotten to the bad parts yet.

Many people have begun attuning to loss. Few, however, are ready to enjoy “less.” Moreover, for both better and worse, there’s a lot of scope for *worse* before nothing at all remains possible. For the first time since perhaps the late 1980s, a critical mass of desire for something radically different now appears to be rising around the world. Even business-as-usual people are beginning to panic, asking what they can do to get *not this* (Gongloff 2023). The trouble is that most still want *more* without the *less*. Yes, of course, let there be less resource throughput! But let it come through efficiencies in production and waste management, not through overall decrease of resource consumption and “economically productive” activity. Degrowth offers an off-ramp from a catastrophically failing civilizational structure (carbon-fueled capitalism, organized by the colonial-era global legal legacy). But this entails metabolization of fewer earth system resources by humans overall, with metabolization distributed radically more equitably than at present. And yet consumption is, for a great many people enabled to do a lot of it, *still pretty enjoyable*. Moreover, for billions not so enabled, maximizing resource consumption remains a positive aspiration. The toughest dilemma of our Anthropocene isn’t that we’ve made a deadly geologic age. It isn’t even that we’re held hostage by the robber barons of fossil capitalism; though this, too, is true (Malm 2021). It’s that so many of us *want* to consume a lot, even when we want *not this* world. This desire is incompatible with building other worlds (Hickel and Kallis 2020). The conceptual challenge for all so-called “just transition” paradigms (degrowth, obviously, but still more for the ecomodernists), is how to desire *less* species-overall resource metabolization (without giving aid and comfort to oligarchs, neofeudal barons, and other super-ultra-mega-consumers).⁷

It starts with transcendence. We *can* become radically other to what we are. Whether degrowth will prove a viable approach to remaking the necrotic structure of our world system

⁶ The incompatibility with degrowth of the SDGs developed in 1992’s *Agenda 21*, effectively a manifesto for growth-driven capitalist internationalism, is well understood. See, for instance, Fyock (2022) and D’Alisa, Demaria, and Kallis (2014). The challenge is for enough of us in the Global North to enjoy metabolizing *enough* less to allow some reimagined version of those goals to tilt globally toward justice.

⁷ On the political danger of unevenly distributed austerity masquerading as degrowth, which is virtually guaranteed *unless* a great many Global North ultra-consumers come to enjoy consuming “less” more, see Dean (2020) and Slobodian (2023).

remains to be seen. Certain is that movement toward degrowth is crucial to any broadly habitable, moderately just future (for humans and the more-than-human world alike). We are consuming ourselves, and everyone else, to death. For any future in which eightish billion (or more, or even half that many) humans live fully embodied lives (i.e., not sedentary VR immersions dependent primarily on energy, minimal body sustenance, and vast communication infrastructures) on this planet, something like degrowth is the necessary economic substructure for mass and elite experiences alike. Trying to get there is a moral imperative. This should be axiomatic to anyone who understands our twinned climate and biodiversity crises. But it is not. In part, this is because most people in point of fact *do not want to metabolize less*. Both those consuming at maximal effective rates and those who would like to do so *want more*. A part of the serious action difficulty in moving from understanding an Anthropocene to doing literally anything at all about it is in overcoming a feature of collective life that is, or at least appears, stable well beyond contemporary global humanity: Biota construct their niches to maximize resource metabolization for the biota writ large. *Persuading other people, people who currently want very much to maximize their resource metabolization, to enjoy “less” more* is degrowth’s motivational dilemma. To address it, we need to transcend an apparent ecological law.

Chastened humanism is one logic of transcendence (we need many). It focuses especially on the philosophical-rhetorical context of Global North ultraconsumers because that is the body of people at once closest to the steering wheel of the burning car and most keenly invested in wringing as much consumption as possible out of the present order of things. How can chastened humanism help ordinary people and political elites want to take degrowth’s offramp? To stay one more beat with this article’s orienting questions: How can we be persuaded to desire the efflorescence of novel political economic possibilities (even under difficult conditions) toward which degrowth may lead, in a world where *we who so desire in particular* will ourselves and as a result of this desire’s entry into force be able to consume fewer overall resources? How can that scale beyond a self-abnegating few to structures of production and consumption generally?⁸ What attitudes can change our current, broadly

⁸ Recall that plenty of transformation-averse movements involve asceticism. As the vagaries of Effective Altruism make clear, for instance, self-abnegation by elite actors alone cannot be treated as prefiguration of

consumptive structures of desire? How, again, can a great many of us come to enjoy “less” more and, in the process, *want* to redefine “more”? These are rhetorical questions in a strong sense. That is to say, they concern argumentation about and also the framing of social problems. They concern symbolic inputs into and so restructuring of the systems of desire that maintain (and unduly maintain hope for) the present, necrotic order of the world.

Beginning to want *not this* is a good start, but not a strong basis for radical system transformation. For anything like a decent future to be viable, humans—an exceptionally adept species-metabolizer of resources—will have to stop ourselves short of consumption-unto-death. We’ll need to commit to degrowth, and for every political future besides ecofascism, a great majority of us will need to *enjoy* doing so, developing what Kate Soper (2020) calls alternative hedonisms. That’s about taking pleasure in positive forms of life aligned with less overall resource metabolization.⁹ Even those trained almost from birth to maximize consumption *can* like wanting less than we have been taught to do. We *can* transcend what we presently understand as ecological law to consume less than we could consume, and in order to do so without totalitarian rule, we *can* come as a planetary civilization of sorts to desire differently. We *can*, says chastened humanism, form effective desires quite other to the human animal we at present are (and to what we think biota in general are constrained to). Transcendence, indeed! The alternative is an Anthropocene that, for however long it lasts, will grow only more deathly, ultimately driving catabolic collapse of earth systems.

2. Wanting *Something Else*

Transcendence-toward-less-of-this-and-more-of-that is the basic aim of degrowth. It is *transcendence* because degrowth names a radically transformative growing-beyond-the-bounds of what we know, empirically, vast and complexly interconnective societies (and, indeed, biota in general) to be capable of. In the broadest sense, *degrowth* is intentional processes of large-scale organizational transformation that intentionally result in less overall

justly distributed, non-maximizing systems of resource metabolization. The question is how to achieve mass transformation of our structures of desire without leaving elite loopholes.

⁹ The spirit of an imperative but enjoyable transcendence-toward-less is well summarized by the title of Switzerland’s primary degrowth publication: *Moins!* [“Less!”].

resource (including energy) metabolism by human societies that do not translate to generalized scarcity (Kallis et al. 2018, Hickel 2019). More specifically, I'm thinking of degrowth as the *volitional deflation of economic production and consumption at large*, coupled with *redirection of economic energies toward forms of sufficiency for flourishing* (where an "economy" is any diverse collection of material and symbolic activities that metabolizes resources and whose sum at a given moment may be expressed as a value; and "sufficiency for flourishing" is any mode of economic activity that results from reducing profits, or net value, from end to means—more concrete definitions of flourishing remain ever-still-to-be-collectively-determined).¹⁰

In point of fact, hard planetary boundaries mean that one or another version of interference with human resource-metabolization simply *is coming* (O'Neill et al. 2018). "Degrowth" names the aim of negotiating this fact in ways that allow for volitional and well-distributed flourishing and not merely imposed privation, overleaping the necropolitics of "green" Malthusians and infinite-growth capitalists alike. By contrast with ecomodernists and other adherents of so-called green growth, this way of thinking takes seriously the need for transformative change at all levels in human systems (Parrique et al. 2019; Sandberg, Klockars, and Wilén 2019). In so saying, I follow the practical ambit of Timothée Parrique's "The Political Economy of Degrowth," which constitutes an essential guide to what degrowth has meant thus far and a compelling incitement to (collectively!) make it mean more in the hotter, darker world of our near future. Parrique concludes that "the only force that can burst the dam of growthism is an outpouring of utopian desires . . . wild and extravagant leaps into more desirable tomorrows" (2019, 711). The trick, though, is that these more desirable tomorrows must allow for and depend upon our collectively desiring *less* species-total

¹⁰ These definitions loosely follow Parrique (2019). They clearly necessitate reorganization of the property regimes that orient capitalism's consumption-unto-death, and so also transcendence of capitalism itself. As Parrique describes the sweeping scope of such a process: "From a degrowth perspective, transforming property means redistributing the wealth that exists (*sharing possessions*), ensuring a fair split of the wealth that will be created in the future (*democratic ownership of business*), and preventing the private appropriation of environmental amenities as to ensure a fair distribution of benefits and burdens through society and beyond (*stewardship of nature*)" (2019, 564). Why speak to this only in a footnote? This essay's focus is less on degrowth's relationship to capitalism (which in failing will drive one or another version of degrowth) than with its relationship to alternative hedonism (which is necessary for democratic variants of degrowth to get off the ground).

resource metabolization than today. Degrowth requires a radical shift in collective structures of desire.

To enjoin such a shift is to march into an uphill battle. How can degrowth make itself attractive enough to lifelong trained consumers to secure acquiescence, much less build the political will necessary for social transformation? Kate Soper's notion of alternative hedonism offers one philosophical pincer. We start by *avowing and so transforming our consumption*. Alternative hedonism is an attitude that allows for maintenance of the pleasure-seeking into which liberal consumer societies—where the overwhelming majority of the world's most intensive resource-metabolizers reside—have inculcated those both most resistant to and best primed to drive degrowth. The aim is to redirect pleasure-seeking away from total consumption; to reshape our structures of desire by changing the ways we think and feel about consumption itself: from individual to collective activity, from metabolization to reorganization. The psychic bar of alternative hedonism, Soper argues compellingly in *Post-Growth Living* (2020), is far lower than the bar of asceticism. This ideological complement to degrowth is an emphasis not exactly on reducing, but rather on reorganizing, the *desires* that constitute consumer societies—so as to radically reduce actual caloric spend, resource consumption. This means allowing that consumption does have a political dimension, but not in the individualist sense beloved by liberal reformers of the marketized nineties and aughts, of “voting with your dollar.” Rather, consumption is collective self-making. As Soper has it, “political parties and governments would do well to acknowledge that everyday acts of consumption—and of non-consumption—have a political dimension” (177) because so acknowledging allows us to produce sensibilities around not merely the content of our consumption, but our caloric spend as individuals-in-society more broadly. The consumer-citizen may well be stuck in the mode of desiring machine, but the machinery of that desire can yet be reoriented.

By contrast with, for instance, the de-politicizing notion of an individual carbon footprint,¹¹ Soper envisions citizenship itself as a category that can include agency for collective

¹¹ On the one hand, the gamification associated with “carbon footprint” mapping isn’t the worst idea. On the other hand, the actual notion of individual carbon footprints as developed, marketed, and measured has functioned to publicly reframe structural deficits as personal failures. Even the best-case version, the

consumption. For alternative hedonism, “citizenship necessarily involves something more than enjoying rights and holding a passport, and embraces duties towards and concerns for the wider community, including the well-being of future generations and the planet” (177). Crucially, this incorporation into citizenship of a dialectically individual-and-collective responsibility for resource metabolization is to be *fun*, enjoyable. Soper’s “alternative hedonism dwells on the pleasures to be gained by adopting a less high-speed, consumption-oriented way of living,” highlighting the “ugly, puritanical, and self-denying aspects of the high-carbon lifestyle in the present” (50). We want something else already. Let us begin to enjoy consuming differently! As with variants of degrowth that emphasize the *more* (Buch-Hansen and Nesterova 2023) and diverging from variants of degrowth that skew stringent (Koch, Buch-Hansen, and Fritz 2017), alternative hedonism would not replace the pleasure-seeking of consumer societies with grim asceticism. Rather, it focuses on differently consumptive avenues for collective enjoyment. Soper suggests structures of desire that might transcend the apparent determinism of an ecological law that dooms us to metabolize ever more calories until we are pulled up short, big spenders and the impoverished alike, by hard planetary and biotic boundaries. Chastened humanism offers the complement to this philosophical pincer. Rhetorically speaking, reconstruction of consumer desire starts with perhaps the most universally and specifically (though not exclusively) human metabolic process: that of meaning-making, or interpretation of symbols.

3. Wanting *Less*, Meaning *More*

Negotiating how we take in information and output meaning is central to an ability to desire less consumptively. Structures for meaning-making dispose the sorts of feelings and desires we can, from our interpretations of the world, develop. Before getting to Vico, then, it’s useful to think about what it means for chastened humanism to be a rhetorical hermeneutic. This structure for meaning-making is a reluctantly anthropocentric approach to interpretive invention, to the worldmaking we humans do *as audiences*. A rhetorically attuned humanism is chastened, in part, by recognizing the impossibility of simply leaving behind ways we have been shaped by traditions—including bad old Enlightenment humanism—through the mere

“corporate carbon footprint,” finds definition and metricization in ways that ultimately militate against decarbonization, to say nothing of degrowth (Walenta 2021).

disavowing of those traditions. If we are to become other than we have been by consuming less than we can metabolize, it will be by negotiating, not simply declaring null and void, the constraints that have made us the more or less specific version of a human species that, under present conditions and with infinite internal variation, we globally are. Such constraints are, before almost anything else, constraints on our interpretive capacities. Herein rests the *anthropos* of the Anthropocene, both immanent and remaining yet to be interpreted into transcendently less-consumptive being.

Chastened humanism starts with *noticing* the unavoidability of interpretation and, so, with self-skepticism. To recognize ourselves as meaning-making animals, and thus audiences for symbols, is to grasp immediately the complexity of taking ourselves to know anything definitively, to urge anything decisively. We rhetorical animals receive more than we can make sense of, and our sense-making is shaped by how prior moments of receiving happen to have shaped us already. The constrainedness of our sense-making capacities calls for what Steven Mailloux (2017, 1989) has termed rhetorical hermeneutics. In Mailloux's sense, these are conceptual tools for and practices of navigating the demands of multiplicities, where "in a vast array of different cultural spheres, questions about who we are involve questions about how we interpret ourselves, how others interpret us, and how we interpret ourselves through how others interpret us" (Mailloux 2017, 9). Rhetorical hermeneutics are *chastened attitudes toward interpretation*, ways of approaching our own apprehending of the world that foreground complexity and reflexivity in the service of something like humility. Our capacity for apprehension falls short of the world's demand. We cannot consume every datum and produce an infinite knowledge. As audiences, we are at once partial and ourselves inscribed in what we come to hear and see and feel and mean—and so, to think and urge and do. How have we been interpreted thus far? How does that constrain our own interpretations and so development of new modes of enjoyment, alternative hedonisms?

Chastened humanism fosters political possibility by entwining immanent humility with interpretive transcendence. We interpret to make meaning, and the meanings we make are more collectively invented than determined in advance. Rhetorical animals like the human are free to want otherwise, to transcend ourselves—and yet remain audiences, susceptible of persuasion in patterned, regularized ways (Allen 2018). Wanting to desire and seek

pleasure differently in the first place, and so to enjoy more the “less” of degrowth, starts with our interpretation of the Anthropocene and our capacities within it. The entire point of chastened humanism is to apprehend our biota as both stuck and not stuck, immanently contained within material constraints and past interpretations and yet able, precisely through new interpretation of those constraints, to remake ourselves. As a hermeneutic for inventing within the difficulty and darkness and sheer unfathomable *complexity* of globalized species-being, chastened humanism orients toward the possibility of negotiating constraints and the impossibility of not being audiences. We cannot help but know the world through species-lenses, particularist traditions, and “local” discourses. We cannot help but be audiences with broad species-tendencies toward some sorts of symbolic activity and not others. As such, we can know that we all miss a great deal about how things are, and yet can also know that we’re destroying planetary life (some more than others, but all some).¹² So knowing does not allow us to thereby no longer be the partial audiences that we are. But it opens a path toward transcendence.

We are, we anthropos, audiences for our own actions and for other audiences’ apprehensions of our actions. We come interpretingly into being, and may yet come into being quite otherwise (as many of us, in less densely internetworked worlds, have in the past done and as some of us still do). The “chastening” of chastened humanism—its epistemic and moral humility—opens the way for transcendence toward less through a critical salvage operation. Digging through the intellectual resources of a “bad” foundation for the present world’s order, chastened humanism cashes out in the humbled but also outrageously radical aspiration of escaping our own deadening and deadly trajectory of (delusionally) infinite economic growth. Part of escaping that trajectory is acknowledging that, as expression of an apparent ecological law, desiring infinite growth itself “should be” inescapable. Capitalism’s dismal wager is that this is indeed inescapable, and that there is no limit to the extent to which humans can expand our metabolization of resources to reproduce and further complexify

¹² This is a slight exaggeration. Scattered around the globe are small pockets of humans who stand entirely outside the organization-toward-maximal-resource-throughput associated with the carbon-capitalism-colonialism assemblage. Though human, too, they are not the audiences of this essay. In so saying, I diverge from those—like Kolbert (2014) or Leakey and Lewin (1996)—who treat as *truly* ecological law (and an *especially lawlike law* for humans) biota’s tendency toward constructing a resource niche to maximize metabolization.

social worlds. And yet, plenty of human culture-groups *have in point of fact transcended that “law” through overall metabolic self-limitation*.¹³ Chastened humanism thus bets that we (especially of the Global North) can overcome ecological “law” to take up Soper’s alternative hedonism, itself a medium for desiring the degrowth now even endorsed by the IPCC as a route for transformation of unviable resource-consumption regimes.¹⁴ Chastened humanism opens a psychic pathway for transcendence toward less resource metabolization and more lively flourishing.

I am talking about what it might take for humans to live less awfully together toward and into unfolding catastrophic times than, left to our own too-belated and so reactionary impulses, we are likely to do. Having ushered in a geological age that’s necrotic, with earth systems breaking down at all levels (like cell death this accumulates, driving feedback loops that further damage the whole), interpreters across the political spectrum desire expansively complex forms of world-system continuity—they look to concretene (Robson 2021), or to solar geoengineering,¹⁵ or to fully automated luxury communism (Bastani 2019). Perhaps their meaning-making efforts will pay off in time for a majority-shareholder class to live ever more feudally opulent lives uninterrupted, as in the dark near-term possibility articulated by Jodi Dean (2020), but the hard constraint on any mid-range future contiguous with the present is that there’s a lot of misery locked in for most of us, humans and all our relations alike—and very little action underway to forestall the worst.¹⁶ Chastened humanism asks how we might transcend ecological law and a carbon-capitalism-colonialism structure held in place by violence and desire the world over (Allen 2024), might come to want less resource-metabolization and to apprehend this in more richly inventive meaning-making. This is, at

¹³ See, for the classic articulation, Sahlins (1972). Still more, see Graeber and Wengrow’s (2021) discussions of how metabolically self-limiting societies have emerged, often in schismogenesis, through rejection of the lifeways of consumption-maximizing neighbors, again and again throughout human history.

¹⁴ Parrique has done yeoman’s work compiling references to degrowth in the wildly undermediated 6th report of IPCC Working Group II on “Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability” (Parrique 2022).

¹⁵ “Solar geoengineering would not just be cheap, relatively speaking; it would also be speedy. . . . But if a fleet of SAILs looks like a quick, cut-rate solution, that’s primarily because it isn’t a solution. What the technology addresses are warming’s symptoms, not its cause. For this reason, geoengineering has been compared to treating a heroin habit with methadone, though perhaps a more apt comparison would be to treating a heroin habit with amphetamines” (Kolbert 2021, 180).

¹⁶ UN Secretary-General António Guterres memorably described IPCC Working Group II’s 6th Assessment Report as “an atlas of [far more than merely] human suffering and a damning indictment of failed climate leadership” (2022).

bottom, a question about how a globalized “humanity” might collectively engage our ecological niche differently.

An “ecological niche” is a conceptual chunk of material world. We living beings who derive sustenance and substance from a mattering multiplicity are occupants and constructors of niches. We inhabit, expand, and refashion chunks of metabolic world. In the standard formulation, “Ecological theory states that each species has a unique niche, which encompasses its habitat and its use of resources in the presence of competition and other biotic interactions” (Slagsvold and Wiebe 2007, 19). It is the “other biotic interactions” that, as examined in recent decades by everyone from zoologists and biologists to evolutionary psychologists and bioarchaeologists, have driven niche theory from the static to the dynamic. Where ecological niches were in early iterations hypostasized, supposed at least temporarily static, their actively constructed character has come increasingly to the fore. An ecological niche, as a conceptual chunk of world, is never *only* a being but always *also* a becoming. Not because we humans will it so but because, as far as we can tell, such is the character of reality. The ugly thing about this apparently hard constraint is that, if truly constraining, it means we *cannot* come to desire differently. If humans are subject to ecological law as presently understood, we are as doomed to overshoot as the reindeer of St. Matthew Island (Catton 1982, 216-17)—and so, almost worse and at our collective hands, are most of the nonhuman people we share this earth with.

Species do not merely occupy niches of resource metabolization, is the point. Biota construct these niches, expand them. And they do so at varying rates. The greater the *gradient* of effectivity with which a species constructs its niche—reorganizes its ability to metabolize resources as compared to proximate biota—the worse for all biota concerned, the more likely radical overshoot and non-volitional “degrowth” become. The ecological law of niche construction, though immanent to all biota, has in *Homo sapiens*’ ever-increasing ability to metabolize resources produced “growing capacities for advanced cognition and demographic and geographic expansion, along with an exponential increase in the scope and impact of human niche constructing activities that have culminated in fundamental changes to planetary ecosystems” (Boivin et al. 2016, 6388). Humanity’s challenge, if we will transcend ecological law to forestall still-greater devastation of planetary life, is to collectively become

in and as world *less* than the Earth environment and our own capacities would yet allow. Like alternative hedonism and degrowth, chastened humanism names a style of thinking that refuses the dread tyranny of what apparently is, on behalf of deflationary and so least worst futures that may be discoverable through human agency. In essence, this is about the actual *glory* of transcending through limitation. Chastened humanism says that, reinterpreting an apparent ecological law as provisional or humans as especially capable or both, we *can* transcend rotten conditions of our own largely helpless making. We can desire forms of self-aggrandizement that are collectively self-limiting (without elite carveouts, biota-wide), and so realize a previously only partially imagined human species. And why wouldn't we wish to? For most of us, it's do or die.

4. Salvaging Transcendence

Here's where Vico comes in. "The Anthropocene" is a term of chagrin. Even where carried upon triumphal undertones, it names the incalculable damage our species has done to every other living thing on the only planet we inhabit, and to our own ability to broadly flourish and perhaps survive. "Transcendence," meanwhile, is a once-salvific term many of us have come to loathe. We identify it with the very forces—*more*, ever *more*—that have shaped our necrotic Anthropocene. Against that backdrop, chastened humanism (a) accepts that human activity is necessarily accomplished along lines of moderate species-specificity while (b) lamenting that humans have radically reconstructed our ecological niche, with nihilating effects on planetary biological diversity and at the level of experience and realistic hope of future flourishing for most living beings, and (c) betting all the same on our collective capacity to do something different, something that transcends ecological law as we know it. This orientation cashes out in humility and a corresponding orientation toward "less" as aspirational, a possible fullness to be enjoyed. But that's got to come from somewhere. All interpretations of possibility draw on rhetorical wells sunk into aquifers of traditionary cultures. And if the aquifers are poisoned, well, here so much the better. What better way to set off for the glory of transcending ecological "law" itself than by salvaging what seems irredeemably ruined and ruinous?

To put the logic a bit differently, every surrender pivots on something retained. A lot of people for whom alternative hedonism, and through it degrowth, needs to become appealing presently value a European Enlightenment heritage. Retrieval of philosophical value and motivation from a derogated but also treasured heritage helps lower the psychological costs of surrendering items like the “American way of life” that has globalized in the 30+ years since George H.W. Bush first announced its non-negotiability (foreclosing urgent action to curtail carbon emissions and rein in fossil power by promising *more* resource metabolization *for all*). From Giambattista Vico, we can salvage transcendence. But not just any old transcendence. Precisely the one we need: transcendence-toward-less on the basis of species-humility. Granted, there’s some rubble to clear away. But it’s in there! Besides, the rubble is us, too.

In a series of six inaugural addresses on humanistic education, delivered between 1699 and 1707, Vico establishes a vision of human transcendence supposed to result from rhetorical education. Throughout, he presents humility as not disavowal of that which has shaped us, nor avowal exactly, but negotiation of our shaping as audiences as material-conceptual constraint. Chastened humanism’s negotiation of roots, like Vico’s, involves taking interpretive responsibility for where our epistemic and moral anchoring lies. In this spirit Vico closes the final oration of *On Humanistic Education* with a nod to tradition: “This is the advice which I am not ashamed to have given, because, though I be not wise, I have followed those who are” (1993, 140). A chastened humanism is epistemically humbled in recognizing itself as the rhetorical recipient of history, of multiple prior narratives from among which it hopes to have chosen well. That said, let me be still clearer: There’s a reason the old humanists have been so pilloried these decades past. We find humility and transcendence in Vico, yes, but also binaries that place mind above matter, human above animal, man above woman, European above everyone else, and all anchored in a highly particularistic concept of the divine. The “ones who are wise” he’s followed are the Church Fathers of early Christianity. And yet, there’s no *outside* to that text in a world oriented, by precisely their legacy (Weber 2002), toward radically consumptive niche construction. In rhetorical hermeneutics, we interpret the rubble to know it *as us* and thereby to clear way for paths forward from what’s finest beneath it, finest within us. Humans (though clearly not only humans) are creatures of history, formed of sedimented and sedimenting narratives. Apprehending that, as rhetoric must, should induce a rightsizing of claims and sensibilities. To reframe our own interpretive

activities, to more humbly understand our audientiality, is to make progress toward a restructuring of our desires and delights.

For Vico, humans are incapable of transcendent, infinitizing knowledge. But we are in some sense at the same time “born to” it. Humility and transcendence are opposing faces of the one interpretive coin: “Nature has unhappily established that we, by the impetuousness of our mind, fall into error and are brought around to that truth which we are born to reach not by a direct path but only by a tortuous one” (111). We know but partially, and even our understandings of degrowth and ecological law—transcendent of human experiences though these would be in their opposed and complementary ways (a name for unheralded possibility, a name for thoroughgoing immanence)—must be continually renegotiated, not only with regard to other biota’s characteristic forms of life and an era of planetary upheaval, but also with regard to our own “impetuousness” and our knowing’s having been shaped by histories. Vichian humility accepts the constrainedness of our capacities for knowing, we creatures of history. Indeed, Vico starts from the position that “innumerable and almost infinite proofs of human frailty and misery are available everywhere” (38). The course of humanistic education is “tortuous” and seems roundabout only because of our “impetuousness,” our desire to immediately and wholly consume everything and output knowledge, without yet knowing our own limitations and real capacities. Humility in humanistic education becomes a historically conditioned form of slowing ourselves down, taking in less to make more meaning. One of its enjoyments is the way realistic self-interpretation re-opens a sense of possibility in the world.

The overweeningness characteristic of old humanism may deserve censure, in other words, but let us interpret it to better take responsibility for our own. Take Vico’s second inaugural oration, “On Virtue and Wisdom.” Here, the end of humanistic education is development of the Godly soul, of a “divine reason” which alone can legitimate citizenship in the city of god. At first blush, it’s not a good look. Here, “man alone . . . is the most important among all creatures” (56). It is “man,” and I leave the *sic* out because it would be ubiquitous, “for whom nature has produced such abundance of useful and pleasurable things, to whom all lands and seas are open for exploration and conquest” (56). Humans are awfully important, and *should* build out our ecological niche to consume all resources we can come to have encountered! Vico lays out a vision of wisdom as a Christian virtue to be developed through intensive

engagement with the liberal arts, anchoring that vision in human supremacism or secondness only to a divine. So far, so blah blah blah. But also, so far, so us. Recall: it is not *simply* capitalist extractivism that produces a necrotic Anthropocene, but also and as much the massive increase in human population allowed by a few technological accidents surrounding the reorganization of carbon and a set of *desires* in which many readers of this text likely still share. Sure, human history includes plenty of less intensive land- and sea-use patterns.¹⁷ But a globally human *present* does not, at least as a matter of overarching species-organizational social structures (and structures of desire).

To accept species-membership as a constraining characteristic is to acknowledge that we cannot simply *become the good guys* by fantastically identifying with human societies that have devoted less energy to maximizing their ability to metabolize resources. Indeed, even degrowth—in its movement toward policy prescriptions—has tended in aggregate toward expansionism without always all that much reason or systematicity.¹⁸ What are we to do, asks Vico, with a world that appears to be ours for the conquering? We are *not* to conquer it. It is the fool who “is always seeking excitement, never in touch with himself. He is always searching for new surroundings, new responsibilities, new ways of life, initiating new hopes even to the time of death. He is forever fleeing from himself” (66). Vico’s humanistic education aims at a kind of self-knowledge in tune with limits, an attunement to “divine reason, which is present through the universe and all its parts” (67) and which allows us to “concern [ourselves] only when needed with the fragile and the troublesome” (69). We who live in the shadow of climate genocides to come would do well to better know ourselves, to feelingly apprehend the foolishness of our endless maximizing of resource metabolization. We will continue constructing our ecological niche—but degrowth and alternative hedonism require from many of us *less* concern for luxuries and even lifespans, for the “fragile and the troublesome.”

Chastened humanism suggests transcendence through humility, and here again there is something important to take from Vico. The address “On Virtue and Wisdom” is directed

¹⁷ See Graeber and Wengrow (2021) for a fascinating survey.

¹⁸ For a thorough overview of the unsystematic, expansive but fairly scattershot growth of degrowth at the level of policy proposals, see Fitzpatrick, Parrique, and Cosme (2022).

against “the joys of the fool (which cannot truly be called joys but rather renewals of pain)” (64). Vico exhorts his listeners to abjure those joys, fleshly conveniences, for the city of God. There, “Man’s privilege of citizenship is not by birth, nor by one’s legitimate children, nor is it a reward earned in the fields of battle or at sea, but only by the possession of wisdom” (66-67). Are there not here echoes of Soper’s citizen-consumers, remaking the very notion of joy in collective renegotiation of resource metabolization? In Vico as in alternative hedonism and degrowth, the *something else* to be achieved is more meaning, sufficiency as flourishing, wisdom as pleasure. Humans are the inheritors of a “very great community” founded upon the “law” of “divine reason, which . . . permeates all things and protects and sustains the world. This divine reason is in God, and it is called Divine Wisdom” (67). Helping students to seek it is the work of a liberal arts *studium*. But the contents of the city of God remain obscure. The “purpose of human life and the highest of our aspirations is to know the certain and do the right, to contemplate God by the former and to imitate him by the latter” (68-69). In transcending toward but never wholly reaching this aspiration, we escape a prison, find freedom from “opinions, falsity, and error” (70). We outwit the guards, which “are the senses, . . . keenest in childhood but dulled by old age and throughout life severely impaired by perverse passions” (70). How? By humanistic education devoted to the life of the mind, the study of letters. We unify ourselves with God in virtue, with the “perfect reason by which God acts upon all things and the wise understands all things” (69). Should we be fools, failing at properly motivated studies of the liberal arts and so at achieving virtue, well: “The dark dungeon is our body” itself (70).

On the one hand, the critique of humanism is all right there! It takes nothing but to read Vico straight. And yet, on the other hand, isn’t a secularized version of this *just what we need*? Is not the urge toward transcendence through understanding of the physical world and deprivileging of acquired comforts precisely the *more* that alternative hedonism and degrowth invite us to swap in exchange for consuming less? What is alternative hedonism if not a strategy for rhetorically *detraining* consumerism’s orientation toward high-metabolism creature comforts on behalf of more contemplative (i.e., throughput-limiting because focused on interpretively rather than frenetically being) ways of enjoying being-in-and-as-the-world? The notion of transcendence on behalf of an epistemically and morally uncertain—and yet terribly urgent—good at stake in Vico’s orations is just the sort of goad we need to become

less than we can be together. Seen thus, some of Vico's formulations are perhaps not so *outré* after all. In the fourth oration, "On Education for the Common Good," he speaks of a "natural nationalism" that exceeds even the law of peoples. A "necessity binds you together," Vico tells his charges, who "feel something of which none of you is aware" (95). What is that something? A "kind of necessity" and "degree of love" that come of our helpless descent from "the motherland [that] has given us birth" (96). Is it such a stretch to say, for us today, that this motherland could be Gaia herself? Would not ecological law, degrowth, and all the rest attend upon our transcendent, self-limiting love of her?

Let me return to the humility that anchors chastened humanism. These orations by Vico address a being who, in their being, tends to be wrong in species-specific ways. Indeed, Vico takes turns we might miss if we are too ready to rehearse standard critiques of humanism. Back in "On Virtue and Wisdom," he follows the Aristotelian-Ciceronian line in distinguishing between "two powers like a pair of horses" within the human spirit. We are prepared for the good one to be male- and reason-identified, the bad one to be female- and sense-identified. Instead, both operate "in that part of the spirit which is distinct from reason altogether" (62). Working in the idiom available to him, Vico offers up a horse that "is male and thus rebellious, spirited, and impetuous" and another that is "female and thus pliable, languid, and idle" (62). So far, so misogynist. But that's not all there is to see here. Neither horse can be trusted, for "how many enemies that were hidden come out from those two horses as if each had been a Trojan horse!" (62). Much of the rest of the oration, for all its "the body is the prison of the mind" vibe, is given over to amplification of the ways in which we are, indeed, routinely fooled by our own dispositions. We *are* fallible in ways that register the particular organization of our species-constitution. Our takes *are* subject to materially patterned and repetitive errors, our passions routinely captured by the felt good of the moment and all-indifferent to any fuller or longer sense of obligation. Which is more identified with a Gaian "divine reason" and which with the fool: supposing what we've held to be ecological law thus far immutable, or supposing ourselves capable of transcendence precisely on the basis of our propensity for error?

Chastened humanism lets us approach our necrotic Anthropocene without stopping up our ears when told of the horrors we are perpetrating, nor yet despairing at them. Chastened

humanism is a pathway, though not the only one, toward a realistically dark optimism in the face of interlocking, self-incurred catastrophes. At stake is transcendence of what has seemed an immanent law of ecology, and what certainly has been a naturalized assumption of the carbon-capitalism-colonialism assemblage that organizes our world. We *can* break the law that says every biota constructs its niche to maximize resource metabolization. If such a law were to hold, our clever species-growth in niche-constructing capacities would all but ensure necropolitical futures. A species-based humility of the Vichian persuasion opens onto the plausibility of human transcendence. It *need not be ever thus*. Alternative hedonisms can help us self-limit prior to exhaustion of the resources afforded us. We can develop degrowth systems and motivations to interpretively invent new ways of inhabiting a species-niche. If such an endeavor is not to be captured by the ecofascisms waiting impatiently in growthism's wings, we who have been made modestly comfortable by capitalist overshoot will need sincerely to *desire* fewer metabolic resources, to *enjoy* forms of consumption alien to the ultra-individualist cultural training of consumer societies. Chastened humanism salvages rhetorical grounds for a philosophy of alternative hedonism.

5. A Dark Optimism...

But a moment again with the trouble. Precisely those of us most capable of action have been, on the whole, least able or willing to recognize the global scale of our own local effectivities. William T. Vollman addresses the inheritors of our mess to explain this idiocy: "As we contaminated our homes, warmed our atmosphere and acidified our seas, whatever would happen next stayed comfortably unthinkable, or at least potentially acceptable, back in the days when I was alive" (Vollman 2018, 511). Perhaps—so the old humanist posit, with one cluster of roots in Greek tragedy—if we can see the suffering to come, we shall find a way of coming to be differently now. Or, at least, of making meaning of our failures to do so. Is not such self-interpretation, with its hesitant orientation toward action, the very philosophical basis for becoming-other to ourselves, at little metabolic cost, and for enjoying that process? Of course, it cannot stop there. Chastened humanism and alternative hedonism are rhetorical hermeneutics, but degrowth must be materially worldmaking or it is nothing at all.

Degrowth is a name for the aim of reining in a human, and specifically capitalist, tendency toward ecological niche construction that would be infinitizing-toward-death. As resource access constricts, such transcendence starts to feel plausible to ever more people (Brand *et al.* 2021). After all, we interpret possibility in part through the felt legitimacy of the worlds that have shaped us, their audiences. And as Tim Jackson notes, “The legitimacy of the social contract forged in the crucible of capitalism is fatally dependent on a false promise: that there will always be more and more for everyone” (2021, 151). The demand levied within the twin catastrophes of runaway climate change and global biodiversity loss is for us to recognize that humanity can be driven to metabolize more resources than there *are*. Overshoot is no less possible for anthropos than for every other biota. Our challenge is to learn to want something other than merely more. This, in turn, requires that richer societies at large—and the wealthy, globally—“accept a less expansionary, more reproductive material style of living” (Soper 2020, 6). The alternative hedonism Soper urges would include joys that are “less dependent on innovation and continuous replacement of goods” and more predicated on “leisure time along with the cultural and recreational provisions with which to enjoy it” (6). This would be a wholesale transformation in both productive and consumptive relations, especially for richer societies and persons.

And yet, our era, the time *we here now* share, is characterized by humans’ ever-still-increasing accumulation of carbon in the atmosphere and crowding out of the rest of life from land and sea alike. We don’t yet want degrowth enough to do otherwise, though here the “we” animating this essay spaghetti-fies. It is *our* carbon that warms the skies, acidifies the seas—and still, “we” are not all equally to blame. Indeed, wide swathes of the human species live already in eschatological times, after the end of worlds. “For a large share of humanity,” Achille Mbembe argues of those living in the ravaged zones of colonialism’s long tail, “the end of the world has already occurred. The question is no longer to know how to live life while awaiting it; instead it is to know how living will be possible the day after the end, that is to say, how to live with loss, with separation” (Mbembe 2019, 29). An Anthropocene is without doubt unevenly distributed, even for anthropos, in time and place. And yet even for those most immiserated, a new end *also* approaches. We share, *New York Times* readers and *subaltern humanity* alike, a shimmering horizon of impossibility, a loss-to-come that can hardly be confronted. We share an intuition of climate genocides.

Necropolitics designates the theory and practice that make genocidality a logic, rather than the end of logic. Mbembe's term articulates our collective agency in the making-die of others as worldmaking that maintains and extends the structures of a world of dominance-through-resource-metabolization. Degrowth is an alternate form of worldmaking, but it too is formed by and within this world where, on the sociopolitical terrain designated by our realistic fears of "the end of the world," there exists already "a subaltern category of humanity, a *genus of subaltern humanity*, which, as a superfluous and almost excessive part for which capital has no use, seems destined for zoning and expulsion" (178). Subaltern humanity's present and future entwine with our species' casual eradication of nonhuman life. Making-die as the making of a world is the basis of climate genocide as the accidental-on-purpose product of political decisions. As I returned to this essay in June 2023, millions of people were captivated by the in-real-time contrast between a boatful of refugees European authorities knowingly allowed to drown in the Mediterranean and the extraordinary millions of dollars and thousands of person-hours U.S. authorities spent trying to rescue, or at least pinpoint the location of, a leisure submersible in which several very wealthy people had descended to visit another sunk ship. The majority-shareholder class certainly supposes that not all can be saved.

The organization of life and making-die today is central to the motivational structure of resource consumption. Necropolitics is the order of a human world organized by decisions about who *cannot* be saved, who will be wasted (Liboiron and Lepawsky 2022). Such decisions beget their own "why"s and, in such begetting, rob all humanity of transcendent moral possibility. As Mbembe puts it, "the norm now is to *live* by the sword. Including in democracies, political struggle increasingly consists in a struggle to know who can develop the most repressive measures faced with the enemy threat" (31). This formulation, apt enough for last century's "late" capitalism, is even more trenchant in regard to looming climate genocides. Our species has already committed or *been* committed to organizing the deaths not only of subaltern humanity, but of most living creatures on earth. Humanity's dominant modes of life constitute a causing-to-die of most of all that crawls or flies or swims or slithers or runs. And yet, even as we reckon with consequences of that fact, the complex machinery of our interimbricated global society is such that there is no one *actually able* to shut off the great carbon pump of modernity. There is no switchman to stop the seemingly

ineluctable processes whereby we transform the carbon of the earth into the greenhouse gases of the sky and the acid of the sea. Things are going badly indeed.

Not for nothing does Vollman begin *Carbon Ideologies* by declaring, “Someday, perhaps not long from now, the inhabitants of a hotter, more dangerous and biologically diminished planet than the one on which I lived may wonder what you and I were thinking, or whether we thought at all. This book is for them” (Vollman 2018, 3). There is, it seems, little we can do. As Vollman dourly puts the point, “Now that we are all gone, someone from the future is turning this book’s brittle yellow pages. Unimpressed with what I have written so far, he wishes to know why I didn’t do more” (12). Because, he continues, “when I was alive there were elephants and honeybees; in the Persian Gulf people survived the summers without protective suits; the Arctic permafrost had only begun to sizzle out methane; San Francisco towered above water, and there were still even Marshall Islands; Japan was barely radioactive, Africa not entirely desertified” (12-13). Vollman concedes, “Well, in the end I did nothing just the same, and the same went for most everyone I knew. This book may help you in the hot dark future to understand why” (13). We have at once to apprehend the truth of Vollman’s perspective, the realism about our present world he offers, and to interpret ourselves as capable of more transcendence than he supposes.

The perspective offered by chastened humanism is optimistic, if darkly so. Our Anthropocene is indeed necrotic, characterized by cell death at many levels. Its organization-toward-death is necropolitical, the same reconstruction of the political animal as the animal-who-makes-die that has been underway for some time. The human capacity for resource metabolization has grown monstrous, destroying ever more worlds to make ever fewer. So what, then? We may or may not be able to revivify the world around us, in ways that allow once more for its exceeding and containing of us. It is certainly worth trying, and not all ways of trying will have equally good chances. A duly chastened interpretive schema lets *us* set out to become different sorts of *we* than we yet have been, invites Global North ultraconsumers to discover ways of enjoying degrowth.

A realistic optimism is dark because it sets out from honesty about catastrophe. If the world in its totality is organismic, our species has destroyed enough of the elements that make up

that great living alien-but-anthropos-encompassing and, above all, *active* totality—what Isabelle Stengers (2015) and Bruno Latour (2017) each in their different ways think of as *Gaia*—to produce cascading deadly consequences within most domains of life-sustaining systematicity. The best, indeed the transcendent, hope for the human species is that we will pursue leveling strategies that allow us to collectively pull up short a—guaranteed necrotic—future of “infinite” expansion and thus overshoot. Climate catastrophe and biodiversity loss trace the outline of a necropolitical world in which “humanity is in the process of leaving behind the grand divisions between the human, the animal, and the machine so typical of the discourse on modernity and on humanism” (Mbembe 2019, 179). Our best chance of throwing off a future in which “it is deemed enough to liberate the enslaved’s mimetic potential,” where “the newly emancipated slaves expend themselves in wanting to become the masters they will never be” (179), is to commit ourselves to becoming less than we *can* be, to leaving vast swathes and dimensions of humanity’s potential resource niche undeveloped, unbuilt-out.

Faced with the holocaustal consequences of our extractive energy regimes and an economic system that can only be maintained through infinite expansion, human transcendence today, as for Vico, means self-limitation. We may, to avoid the very worst, stop expanding the boundaries of our ecological niche. We may learn to transcend what will have turned out *not* to be an ecological law after all: the notion that all biota construct their resource niches to maximize metabolization, wherever not interrupted by competition from other biota. We humans can desire differently, can enjoy “less” more. The chastened humanism I suggest as aid in this, again, comprises two core tendencies: (1) humility on the basis of species membership and (2) commitment to something like transcendence. What does or can “transcendence” mean in the context of an Anthropocene? It means that *less* is possible: efflorescently, flourishingly less; so much less that the path of desire is at last cleared to redefine *more*. If this essay is correct—if chastened humanism can help us transcend the ecological law that orders humans to continually reconstruct our resource niche to encompass ever more, such that we doom perhaps ourselves and certainly many other species and without question billions of individual sensate beings to death and suffering—we might realistically hope to develop alternative hedonisms. What could be more novel, more enjoyably aspirational, indeed, more straightforwardly *glorious*, than collective human

transcending of a law seemingly immanent to all biota—toward degrowth, toward collective enjoyment of less metabolization of resources?

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