

Becoming Human—*Rethinking Marxism*, 37(4), 496–515.

Boone W. Shear

INTRO

About five years ago, David Harvey claimed that, though capitalism wasn't working, causing suffering for many as capital accumulates, it was now "too big to fail." Any serious interruption of capital flows and relations would be disastrous for most people in the world. Thus, those coming from the Left should spend their time working to reform the global capitalist system and ameliorate suffering of communities.

"It is too dominant, and it is too necessary to us that we cannot allow it to fail. We have to actually spend some time propping it *up*, trying to reorganize it, and maybe shift it around very slowly and over time to a different configuration." (2019).

Within Harvey's formulation, and in the formulation of others who view capitalism as a system with its own objective logics that can't really be changed until the system is destroyed, Harvey's proclamation sounds defeatist; it means giving up on revolutionary struggle and giving in to an insatiable, capitalist monster.

One immediately felt, and perhaps too obvious, objection to Harvey's position, is a valuation of capitalism as "failing". For many coming from the Left, capitalism is simply following its design to extract, accumulate, and structure inequalities and violence. Saving something that is responsible for the ongoing destruction of livelihoods, bodies, and worlds is a difficult pill to swallow. Another criticism comes from a position of decoloniality. Harvey's focus on capitalism as *the* structuring power that needs to be contended with risks ignoring and thus naturalizing, the ontological conditions—fundamental ways of being—in which capitalism is made possible and desirable. Capitalism is better positioned as a constitutive feature of a dominant, colonizing reality that I will refer to as *capitalist modernity*.

Still, there are certain aspects of Harvey's position that I want to bring forward and attend to. Peoples' livelihoods are indeed more than ever intertwined with and dependent on global supply chains and global relations of production. Intensifying ecological crises add additional layers of precarity to the daily lives of communities, particularly those populations and bodies that are more intensively exploited and oppressed. Anti-capitalists *should* spend their time attending to the needs of communities (and learning from them). However, rather than viewing this as a necessary but sadly depoliticized act, a moral whimper in the face of an unyielding capitalist monster, a turn towards meeting community needs and well-being in the face of capitalist extraction and abandonment presents an opening for a deepening,

expansion, and transformation of radical left politics. For organizers doing the hard work of building power in and through the needs of communities, this is common sense; deepening politicization happens through people practicing solidarity. One only needs to point towards the recent explosion of mutual-aid efforts and discourse that have taken root in organizing and policy circles as a response to the covid pandemic and the Floyd Rebellion to see the radical potential for remaking care—for remaking how we imagine ourselves and relate towards each other—amidst unfolding crises (Hayes and Kaba 2023). It isn't just capital flows and infrastructure that are precarious, so too are the stories, values, and desires that constitute and naturalize capitalism. Capitalist modernity really is rupturing, breaking down, and folding back on itself in unprecedented ways, even as inequalities grow and capital continues to consolidate.

Harvey's analysis is both not ambitious enough in scope and too delimited in political imagination. Attending to community needs is precisely what's at stake in both a redistributive, reformist politics that Harvey envisions *and* in a politics of radical transformation. Rather than engaging in a politics that aims to shore-up or make a more palatable capitalist system, this is an opportunity for locating, advancing, and organizing around other economies and other worlds. This essay moves the location of politics away from capitalocentric visions of economy (Gibson-Graham 2006) and towards economic possibility and other ways of being. Even more, I position capitalism—and the broader category of economy—as a constitutive feature of the colonially imposed onto-epistemic formation of capitalist modernity. Radical transformation—whether conceived of as survival or revolution—requires abandoning foundational ways of being that constitute reality and assembling other modes of being human.

So, where to begin? That capitalism is 'too big to fail and too monstrous to survive' evokes an observation attributed to Antonio Gramsci nearly a century ago, "the old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born, now is the time of monsters". Whereas Harvey's analysis appears resigned to the existential *reality* of a hegemonic condition; Gramsci can be read as orienting towards cultural-political change and possibility intrinsic to hegemonic struggle against obscene forms of class power. I am proposing a third formulation that embraces Harvey's acceptance of a dominant reality, but positions this acceptance as an important (necessary?) step towards engaging in an ontological politics, a politics that seeks to advance the conditions from which other worlds can be made. *The dominant world is dying, now is the time for monsters*: relationships, stories, projects, happenings that do not fit or make sense within and exceed the confines of white-supremacist, patriarchal capitalist modernity.

I compose this formulation through two, overlapping registers of worlding/ontological politics. First, building from diverse economies scholarship, economic anthropology, and theory and practices of SE movements, I argue that diverse economies offer the grounds for *non-reformist reforms* that rework the conditions of possibility at the level of subjectivity and relations, and time and space.

Understanding economy as overdetermined, open, and heterogeneous renders the category of economy itself, rather than the capitalist system, as the terrain for a “war of position” over its very nature. Other economies and other worlds are already here, waiting to be cultivated, defended, and advanced. Second, drawing from pluriversal and decolonial theory and practice, I position capitalism as a symptomatic feature of the broader condition of capitalist modernity—a dominant dying reality that is invigorated and assembled through stories of progress, anthropocentric hierarchies, nature-culture binaries, and the figure of the individual. These foundations correspond with an aspirational mode of being human that directs, disciplines, and shapes imagination and desire. I suggest that emancipatory politics means supporting and advancing “*monstrous*” ways of being that are able to let go of and transgress the dominant order.

The first section is a retelling of the film *Sorry to Bother You*. Bringing forward particular events from the film, I sketch the ontological features of capitalist modernity, outline the limits of conventional left politics, and begin to envision an ontological politics. I argue that what’s at stake is a politics of being/becoming human that invests sensibilities, knowledge, and aspirations beyond the dictates of capitalist modernity.

In the second section, I reflect on a series of classroom events in order to analyze how affective and libidinal attachments hold us to narratives and practices that constitute reality. Following Vanessa Machado de Oliveira and others, I suggest that an ontological politics involves a letting go of capitalism and capitalist modernity rather than simply fighting against it. More and more people know and feel that that there is something terribly wrong with the fundamental conditions and ways of being that we are subjected to, but accepting and disinvesting ourselves from active participation in defuturing processes can be a difficult, traumatic experience.

In the third section, I focus on an increasingly prominent worlding project, solidarity economy (SE), in order to reveal and better theorize ontological politics in practice and in place. SE movements are organizing communities at different scales and from/in different places to both fight against violence in the dominant world and create conditions for becoming otherwise. I show how SE institutions and projects create non-reformist reforms, that change conditions of possibility, and cultivate other ways of being. There is resonance here with a Gramscian war of position, in which the idea might be to reposition and rework relations throughout civil society--throughout culture-- to create conditions for broader, revolutionary action. An ontological politics sees cultural terrain as comprised of multiple realities, many assembling worlds that can be advanced, defended and organized around.

SORRY TO BOTHER YOU

The 2018 Boots Riley film *Sorry to Bother You* engages with the violence and alienation of racial capitalism. The film’s protagonist, a young black man, “Cash”, is

having a difficult time finding his way. Cash is living out of his uncle's garage, struggling to make ends meet, driving a broken-down car and feeling an inadequacy with himself and in relation to his artist girlfriend. The broader political landscape of Cash's world is much like our own—giant corporations consolidating wealth and controlling labor, widespread precarity and inequality, and so on. Looking to find ways to get ahead, Cash gets an entry-level-job at a telemarketing company, a subsidiary of multinational corporation WorryFree. Cash learns to become a successful telemarketer, particularly after learning how to use his “white voice”—changing his tone and vernacular in order to gain trust and influence with customers.

Though Cash has some misgivings about the predatory nature of the business, he is enticed by the possibility of working his way up to top salesperson, and by the wealth, security and prestige that this might bring. At the same time, a labor organizer begins salting the business. Cash climbs the corporate ranks, acquires an upscale apartment, and subsequently loses his girlfriend who thinks Cash has lost his way in his efforts to get ahead. Cash is then brought in closer to corporate leadership where he learns the depths of corporate immorality and racism, including a shocking secret: WorryFree has been experimenting, splicing human and horse DNA to create a new class of workers, Equisapiens—“stronger, more obedient, more durable...more efficient and profitable.”

The story climaxes with the telemarketers participating in a widespread labor protest and riotous confrontations with police. Realizing he has been on the wrong path, Cash joins his friends and comrades in the streets and, with the surprise help of the Equisapiens, they win, and the workers at the telemarketing agency win a new contract. In what appears to be the movie's final scene, Cash is back in his old apartment. He has returned to his old life and is back together with his girlfriend. Not much has changed, but he is more satisfied and less alienated having come to embrace his class identity.

Then the film does something really interesting. First, Cash, having previously ingested an experimental drug, shockingly transforms into an Equisapien as the screen goes black. This is then followed by a mid-credit coda, in which a herd of Equisapiens collectively march on the estate of the CEO of WorryFree.

I want to think more with these important beats of the film—the white voice, the labor organizing and victory, and the transformations of the Equisapiens.

White Voice

The initial scene involving the white voice reveals whiteness operating in different modalities. When Cash uses his white voice, he adopts a “white” vernacular and intonation, presumably to gain trust with people he is calling. Here we can see whiteness aligning with conventional social justice understandings of white privilege and

systems of oppression that confer advantages and disadvantages on particular groups. The familiar strategy of code switching is used to navigate conscious and unconscious racism that associate black bodies with negative qualities and white bodies with positive qualities, making a successful call more likely.

But the use of the white voice also reveals whiteness operating as an animating feature of capitalist modernity. Cash is instructed to use the white voice by his co-worker, played by the inimitable Danny Glover. After Cash's initial attempt, Glover's character tells him that he doesn't quite have it right. The white voice is "sounding like you don't have a care. You've got your bills paid, you're happy about your future, you're about ready to jump in your Ferrari after this call...It's not really a white voice. It's what they wish they sounded like, like what they think they are *supposed to* sound like." Whiteness is conveyed here as an aspiration, a process of becoming that organizes and animates desire. Whiteness prescribes direction for action and agency. It names and valorizes qualities that individuals should gain and become in order to be of value--materially secure, free from worry, in control, not needing to depend on others. Whiteness names a particular mode of being human proliferating and settling in with colonial expansion and progress.

In the first chapter of the *Mushroom at the End of the World*, Ana Tsing(2015) considers the relationship between progress and precarity. Progress is described as a "regime of being human" (19) that promises stability and well-being through capitalist expansion and development, the flourishing of liberal democracies, a mastery over nature, and rational choice. The modern condition, however, has come to be characterized by precarity, "life without promise of stability" (20) Whether in the form of unstable ecologies, insecure jobs and housing, or global epidemics, the promise of progress to provide a stable, knowable, controllable world, it seems, is being existentially called into question. The relationship between progress and precarity can be better understood if we consider precarity as simply "the condition of being vulnerable to others" (20). Of needing help. Of interdependence. Progress, then, is a promise of improvement through a violent effort to refuse a condition of shared vulnerability and interdependence from which life depends.

Whiteness, progress, and capitalism proceed together, constitutive of the dominant world-making project of capitalist modernity that refuses a condition of shared vulnerability and interdependence with other beings, that refuses and attempts to overcome precarity (and thus symptomatically creates it). Escobar et al. (2024) situate our dominant mode of existence as continually designed and produced through a politics of non-relationality—stories, forces, categories and practices that destroy or relativize or obscure the radical interdependence and relationality of all life. At the center of this design project, both designed by and redesigning, is a particular mode of being/becoming human that Sylvia Wynter has describe as Man2 (Escobar et al. 59-60;

Hantel 2018; Scott 2000) whose central qualities find an idealized representation in Western, white, rational, bourgeoisie man.

This dominant mode of being human overproliferates throughout the political spectrum, limiting and animating desires, including those coming from the left that are concerned with more equal distribution, opportunity, and democracy. To return to the film, Cash's initial desire to individually get ahead proved to be morally bankrupt and ultimately unfulfilling. Cash then embraces his class position, joining in solidarity with other workers to fight for better conditions. This was a much more principled thing to do than corporate climbing and Cash is rewarded with a union contract, repaired relationships, and a more virtuous sense of self. But for those of us interested in revolutionary struggle, it's an unsatisfying resolution. It tells us that the world is and always will be structured through class, but, if we have some level of dignified work and enjoy some of life's pleasures, then things will be okay. Everything is the same as it was, except, with slightly better wages. In fact, both Cash's corporate ambitions and his working-class solidarity—though having different ethical orientations towards capitalism—can be understood as contained within the same ontological and libidinal architecture, the same mode of becoming human, from which challenges to the notions of growth, development, progress, and the cartesian separation of humans from nature, are unimaginable.

From this perspective, it's the Equisapiens that are the true protagonists here, if not of the movie, then of history. The first time we see the Equisapiens, they are shown as grotesque and suffering, a perversion in which the human-nature separation that modernity depends upon, is transgressed in new, monstrous form. Over the course of the film, the Equisapiens then find their footing. First, they join with the broader working class in their struggles in solidarity against a common foe. Though Cash at first seems satisfied with the organizing outcome, he is nevertheless overtaken by the Equisapien transgression. It's a shocking and traumatic transformation, but Cash, along with the other Equisapiens, soon embrace their full power. As a different type of human, a relational-hybrid human that exceeds the categories of capitalist modernity; the Equisapiens cannot fully exist within the dominant reality, and in collective, embodied form, they set out to destroy it.

The staying power of Wynter's bioeconomic Man2 is due to his self-evidentiary nature. Since he understands himself as naturally, objectively existing, he is unable to consider the possibility of remaking himself beyond the presumed objective laws of biology and economy (Escobar et al. 2024). Graeber and Wengrow (2021) similarly remark on this historically specific feature of the dominant, contemporary human condition in which the art of freely imagining and shaping social reality appears to have been lost. Aligning with Graeber and Wengrow, Escobar et al, Wynter, and others, I am suggesting here the importance and efficacy of a politics that aims to expand and multiply the category of being/becoming human. A politics oriented towards radical

design, that changes the conditions of possibility for becoming different types of humans that do not correspond with, are able to transgress the dominant reality, and have desires for other worlds. But, as I discuss below, letting go of desires tethered to the dominant world is a difficult, traumatic process.

Letting Go

In a recent undergraduate course, the class read parts of Vanessa Machado de Oliveira's *Hospicing Modernity*(2021). One of the central arguments in the text is that the modernity is dying. But it is being kept alive in part by our unexcavated investments and desires, in sometimes clear and sometimes complicated ways. For example: how desires for dignity and a sense of worth are constructed through and valorized by being able to support oneself through wage labor. Or how my own desires for security and stability have manifested in home ownership, assembling me into participating in the colonial category of whiteness. Or how state socialist policies are completely compatible with desires for economic growth and progress, thereby taking for granted anthropocentric hierarchies of life.

Part of our task is to learn to let go, to help modernity die. This means, disarticulating the investments and pleasures, and hopes and dreams that are intimately tied up with the viability of capitalist modernity.

After a couple of classes talking through the relationship between capitalism and the Anthropocene/capitalocene/plantacionocene (Moore 2016, Haraway 2015), we worked through an initial passage and exercise from the text. Machado de Oliveira asks us to envision ourselves together in the mid-twenty first century, reflecting-back on three time periods. The first is essentially present day, between 2018-2022, and characterized by familiar pressing conditions: global viruses, increasing inequalities, homelessness, increasing extreme weather events and shifting climate patterns, and generalized precarity. An increasing number of young people recognize the realities of ecological destruction and lack of social mobility, but there is nevertheless a continued emphasis on learner centered curriculum, individual achievement, and market-outcome in education with increased prohibitions around talking about racial privilege, gender identity, or criticism of state policy and the rise of reactionary and authoritarian political leaders. All the things we know and are experiencing.

Machado de Oliveira then turns to the period between 2028-2037 which is “marked by the real threat of human extinction” (6). Climate change mitigation has failed. Rising temperatures, melting ice caps and permafrost, cascading species loss, widespread desertification and global food chain breakdowns are joined with collapsing social safety nets and benefits, increasing violence within and between states, incurable new diseases, and global mental health crises. The result is monumental loss of human life; over half of the global population dies. It isn't until *after* all of this extreme

unravelling and loss, in the period 2038-2047, that humanity is able to radically rethink the dominant mode of life.

We read through these short passages together, aloud. When we finished, everyone had tears in their eyes and some students were weeping. I hadn't been totally prepared for this, and I had to reorganize the next few weeks of class. We adapted some of the exercises from the text to help us slowly reflect and process. A few things became clear that I think are really important. First, when we were able to discuss what was going on internally, in our minds and bodies, students shared that they believed a version of this catastrophic narrative was the most likely scenario. Everybody agreed that they just bury their thoughts and feelings about this truth deep inside so they can make it through the day. And when this truth is surfaced, it's too much to bear.

Most interesting, is that it wasn't the catastrophic loss of life and suffering that was the most upsetting—although people were very upset about this, they are caring people—but it was the loss of their own hopes and aspirations. As one student said, how did *anything* that they were currently doing and planning make any sense? Lauren Berlant describes this relationship to desire as one of “cruel optimism”, when our attachments to a particular desire or narrative becomes an obstacle to our own flourishing. This could be something mundane, like a particular emotional attachment to watching terrible TV late at night (a regular occurrence for me, even though I know that this will deprive me of much-needed sleep.) Or it could refer to something more wicked, as Berlant suggests, like the fantasy of green capitalism, or the narrative of the American Dream: *though imperfect, the United States is a place where, if individuals work hard, make the right choices, and obey the rules, they will be able to find meaning, progress, and find a good life*. It's the insidious, impossible story of a Hamilton in the making that, like other broad social narratives animating capitalist modernity, works to give shape to and organize our desires and hopes. Rather than being a force for social change, hope becomes complicit in a pathological condition, a sort of affective drug that provides psychological and somatic relief from present circumstances and compels us to act, even if it is through defuturing narratives and practices.

A confrontation with capitalist modernity is a traumatic confrontation with the fundamental ways we understand ourselves in relation to our understanding of our own hopes and dreams. Our future selves and future worlds are revealed to be not only impossible, but undermined by our own current practices and relationships that those dreams rest upon or are assembled into. Students in my class were not just experiencing the loss of current and future selves, their identities, but were being asked to consider the loss of the comfort of hope. Like the addict who confronts himself with the task of truly quitting smoking in order to save his own life—it might be the existentially truthful and felicitous position, but can he actually *live* without the comforting pleasure of smoking?

But this project of letting go—of acceptance and disinvestment—is precisely the project that that Machado de Oliveira implores us to consider.

“Before anything different can happen, before people can sense, hear, relate, and imagine differently, there must be a clearing, a decluttering, an initiation into the unknowable; and a letting go of desires for certainty, authority, hierarchy, and of insatiable consumption as a mode of relating to everything. We will need a genuine severance that will shatter all projections, anticipations, hopes, and expectations in order to find something we lost about ourselves, about time/space, about the depth of the shit we are in, about the medicine/poisons we carry.” (2021: 235).

Similarly, Escobar et al. (2024) suggest that a stance of hope itself might inhibit a transition towards other worlds,

“We need to be mindful of recapitulating linear ideas of progress or getting to the “right” place. As Tibetan Buddhist teacher Pema Chodron explains, a profound premise of working in this vein is that we need to give up hope, ‘If we’re willing to give up hope that insecurity and pain can be exterminated, then we can have the courage to relax with the groundlessness of our situation. This is the first step on the path...without giving up hope—that there is somewhere better to be—we will never relax with who or what we are’ ” (111-112).

An ontological politics—a politics that aims to advance conditions for the proliferation of other modes of being human, to advance other worlds—is as much an affective and libidinal project, as it is intellectual and material. It requires a deep acceptance, and disinvestment from the dominant reality, a difficult and traumatic proposition. Machado de Oliveira wonders if “the end of modernity may not manifest primarily as economic or ecological collapse, but as a global mental health crisis where the structures of modernity within us start to crumble” (234).

As I have asserted elsewhere, this is well underway. The growing incoherence and felt-limits of capitalist modernity are shown in part by the increasing levels of depression, anxiety, and loneliness of young people whose alienated bodies are rejecting dominant narratives, stories, and relations (Shear 2017, 2019; Lyon-Callo and Shear 2019; Loh and Shear 2022). Reading today’s widespread depression as a shared psychic modality, Birardi (2024) proposes that depression might best be explained as, consciously and unconsciously, “becoming aware” of the limits of possibility. “Depression comes as a paralysis of our imagination of the future, as a decrease in desire, which results in a weakening, or even a zeroing out, our attraction to reality” (106). Depression is thus a “creative resignation” to a dying, suffering world, that is instructive for those coming from the left. “We should ask ourselves if indignation (an

immediate reaction to the intolerable) is the appropriate key with which to free ourselves from the intolerable, and whether perhaps we should conclude that...it is time to resign ourselves to the end of the modern illusion of political democracy and economic growth” (120).

Berardi sees this loss of hope, this resignation to reality, as manifesting through a symptomatic desertion from key areas of capitalist reproduction—including wage labor, participation in representative democracy, and procreation—and should be further reflected on, processed, and politicized. “Listen to the meaning of your depression, and recognize the truth that your depression brings with it in a collective framework. The community of the hopeless may be a good starting point for going beyond the present suffering and transforming it into conscious disinvestment” (152).

No one wants a mental health crisis, or for people to suffer. But there is an opening here, to not only make sense of but to transmute a growing epidemic of depression, loneliness, and anxiety. As more and more people, to different degrees and in different ways, reject the promises and practices of capitalist modernity, how can this condition be turned into more intentional, collective disinvestments from capitalist modernity, as it unravels? What can give shape to and provide navigation for these lines of flight? Where might we find embodied spaces and places to help further cultivate other ways of being in the world, where desire can be reoriented and reignited? Where other modes of being/becoming human can be explored, organized around and through? What would such a politics look like? In the next section I focus on one such worlding project, solidarity economy (SE).

From War of Position to Worldmaking

In the introduction to this volume, the editors reveal a familiar binary of reform and revolution that appears to be intrinsic to Harvey’s position --“anti-capitalists must devote their energies to devising interim measures to manage and reorganize the system in more progressive directions – rather than its upheaval – to secure socio-ecological reproduction.” The need to engage in a reformist politics (“devising interim measures”), negates the possibility of revolution (“rather than its upheaval”). What if the idea is to devise measures to reorganize communities in directions for well-being *and* for developing the dispositions, desires, and ways of being necessary for both relational survival and radical transformation towards relational worlds? Towards advancing the conditions for people to make and remake themselves?

This is not so different from a Gramscian war of position, in which hegemonic struggle takes place at every level of society. Ideas, relationships, narratives are brought into the political field to be considered, defended, and advanced throughout civil society-- throughout culture-- in order to change the conditions of possibility for revolutionary action (see Harris 2007: 3). But, where Gramsci was concerned with a class-based struggle over capitalism, I’m concerned with an ontological struggle, over

the nature of reality. I am taking cues here from scholars, communities, and activists who are advancing an ontological, pluriversal politics (Escobar 2018, 2020; Kaul 2022; Loh and Shear 2022). There is no singular, objective, reality that we all live in, though capitalist modernity coheres around this belief (Law 2011). There are a multiplicity of worlds, that already and might yet exist.

To be quite clear, I'm not in favor of supplanting a politics aimed at collectively building power and fighting against colonialism and fascism, racism, patriarchy, and fighting *for* equality and justice in and in relation to the dominant world. It is a moral, existential imperative to do so. Even more, it is through efforts towards meeting community needs, building solidarity, and building power, where we might find the beginnings of relational becomings, of monstrous assemblages that cannot be contained by capitalist modernity and imagine and desire a worlding politics. What I am suggesting is the importance of an attunement to and fidelity towards a horizon that can, ultimately, enable communities to make and remake themselves beyond the dominant mode of being/becoming human that animates and assembles capitalist modernity.

Solidarity Economy

One fruitful place to begin is the domain of economy. The very idea of economy was brought into being through colonial expansion and solidified through the ongoing rejection and appropriation of relational worlds. Economy is a modernist category, disembedded from "culture" (Polanyi 2001), separate from and creating separations from other domains of life (Miller 2019). Economistic logics treat the world as a warehouse of scarce resources for human use that functions through internal laws, most prominently through the rational decision making of individuals who compete against each other for individual gain, in order to live well. Economy is largely a project of relational closure and provides a rich habitat for the dominant mode of being human to flourish.

Solidarity Economy (SE) is a movement and framework that calls into question features of the dominant capitalist economy and, potentially, the category of economy itself. At its most basic, SE is an effort to prioritize people and planet over profit. It begins from the premise that the capitalist market economy is not the only way that people can or have practiced livelihoods. A wide range of alternative, non-capitalist economic institutions and practices are possible that could better meet community needs including barter networks, gift economies, community land trusts, and cooperatives of all kinds. Ethical, non-capitalist elements exist alongside, depart from, and stand in contradistinction to the normative values, principles and commitments of capitalist relations. For example, in contrast with capitalist businesses that are organized through hierarchy and exploitation, worker-owned cooperatives aim to embody values of cooperation and collaboration, shared control over working

conditions, and the collective appropriation and distribution of surplus. And, in contrast with private ownership of land, community land trusts transform the rules of land ownership. Land is shielded from the speculative market, and placed under collective, community control where values like equity, sustainability, and community well-being can be prioritized over exchange value, and where relationships between beings can be rewoven.

Though SE has a much longer history in Latin America and Europe, SE efforts have taken-off over the past 15 years in the United States (Safri et al. 2025, Loh and Shear 2015) to meet community needs and build power. SE institutions are growing in numbers, and a growing number of networks and initiatives that self-identify as SE, are organizing at the national, state, municipal, and community levels. As community knowledge about SE deepens, practitioners are increasingly learning about and foregrounding the manifold non-capitalist practices and values that have created livelihoods for communities across time and space, and that communities have historically mobilized for survival and liberation.

At one level, SE operates through a discourse of economic difference. It tells a different story of what economy is and could be. Economy isn't only about individual advancement, profit seeking, and accumulation but can be about collective care and meeting community needs, both material and libidinal. SE speaks a language of diverse economy that has performative effects, opening imagination to economic possibility (Gibson-Graham 2006).

SE also reworks material relations and instills new practices, and through these, cultivates new desires. For example, where I work at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, there are seven longstanding student-run cooperative businesses, including a small market and a restaurant. Student understandings of and imaginings of economy are transformed through this work. It's not uncommon for student cooperators to tell me that after experiencing working cooperatively, they can no longer imagine working in a conventional, capitalist business. They have come to understand labor and enterprise differently—as democratic and self-determining—and have come to desire participating in more non-capitalist practices.

Janelle Cornwell (2011) describes this process of resubjectification in terms of the production and expansion of non-capitalist space. Cornwell shows how at worker-owned cooperatives, cooperators control over their own labor conditions and time, participation in democratic decision-making and governance, and the collective appropriation and distribution of surplus, creates non-capitalist subjects who imagine and desire non exploitation. Alternative forms of exchange similarly cultivate different relationships and desires to and for economy. Burke (2023), for example, shows how the logics and practices of barter can impose themselves on participants through their embodied participation, shifting and activating new dispositions and desires as they encounter multiple regimes of value in through unalienated and negotiated exchange.

One way to understand SE institutions and practices, and the policies and other enabling conditions that help bring them into being, is that they function as non-reformist reforms (Akuno 2017, citing Gorz). They meet community needs, fill in the gaps, redistribute resources while at the same time transforming logics, values, and rationalities; they expose and enact relationships of cooperation, care, and interdependence hidden or destroyed through capitalist modernity's politics of relational closure. They change the conditions of possibility. Still there is no guarantee that SE institutions and practices lead to any particular type of political orientation for participants, let alone other ways of being/becoming in the world, even if they manage to endure. The logics and enticements of the dominant world are powerful forces that work to recapture and reassemble stories, efforts, and relationships that attempt to break away. For example, worker-owned cooperatives are often discussed and oriented towards good economic development that can provide good jobs. Worker cooperatives can even align with neoliberal sensibilities of individual entrepreneurship and responsibility. Even in cases where work-owners truly are experiencing economic democracy and collectively appropriating surplus, the condition of ownership of land and property is often taken for granted. Degyansky, for example, wonders how cooperatives might “learn to include land and other living beings as members”? (2023).

Assembling Worlds

SE invites a war of position over the nature of economy. It challenges and unsettles dominant background logics, values, rationalities, and understandings—the background “culture”—that shapes and constitutes reality. It exposes and creates a new terrain from which other ways of thinking, desiring, and feeling might emerge. On a certain level, the more economic difference exists, the better. The more that people can see, practice, and live into ethical, non-capitalist narratives, institutions, and practices the more that capitalism (and economy) loses its discursive hold. The more potential emerges for shifting dispositions and desires. But this terrain—and these potentialities—are continually contending with the familiar enticements and repressions of the dominant world that push us down and pull us close through our conscious and unexcavated hopes and dreams about what it means to be human.

An ontological politics, then, requires a double movement. On the one hand, advancing conditions from which new imaginings and desires might emerge—for example, from new economic institutions or new political organizations—and on the other hand carefully attending to and abandoning (over and over) the dominant, background categories and ways of being through which we are already being produced (and in ways that seem the most real). Escobar (2018) describes this sort of politics as engaging in ontological design that involves a recognition that we are caught up in designs not of our own making, or rather, we are always already in process of being designed and designing back those designs. Part of what is at stake then, is a politics

that enables communities of beings to engage in a process of designing themselves. It's a politics of radical care, of attending to the arrangement and doing of all of the things necessary to let go of, maintain, or cultivate particular worlds (Loh and Shear 2022). It's helpful to think of SE practices, narratives, relations, and values as elements or materials that communities might use to construct and assemble worlds. Below, I briefly describe two very different place-based projects that are constructing and assembling conditions out of SE materials in order to make and remake themselves.

Cooperation Jackson

Cooperation Jackson (CJ) in Jackson, MS, is organizing against the violence of racial capitalism and white supremacy, and organizing towards working class liberation and Black autonomy. Born out of the efforts of the New Afrikan People's Organization and the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement in the 2000's, CJ is assembling a place-based, SE that is part of a broader strategy for self-determination and liberation. Their community land trust strategically acquires land to interrupt predatory development and begins to implement relationships of cooperation and care through SE institutions. This includes worker-owned cooperatives to control the means of production and collectively appropriate surplus; community gardens and a community production center that prioritize use value over exchange value; mutual aid efforts like thing-swaps and a free store that can meet needs and build relations; and a planned eco-village for sustainable livelihoods and renewable energy.

SE institutions and practices are not an end in and of themselves for CJ. They are part of an effort to reshape the conditions of possibility. Kali Akuno explains that CJ is "trying to do practical things to bring about revolutionary change. This has had a whole bunch of zigs and zags and reversals and experimenting with things that worked one year and don't work the next. But to the extent that we are really building the capacity of those around us, I think that all the experimentation is well worth it." (Shear et al. 2024).

Part of this experimentation has expressed itself through the development of the Build and Fight Formula (Akuno 2024), an approach that brings together a stance of opposition—fighting against forces of exploitation and oppression—with a stance of possibility--building and fighting for conditions for other ways of being in the world. Central for CJ is an analysis that understands their strategic location—and collective labor power—in relation to capital accumulation and Empire. Says Akuno,

"the things that we are invested in through our labor...[are] also a form of power that we can use to transform things...and that is the piece that we're saying that we are trying to build an axis of power within our own community to be disruptive on that side. That's the fight side of things. The build side of things is, there's elements of that infrastructure which can be appropriated to do a different type of distribution, a different type of networking, and that's what we're fundamentally

invested in, but it has to be rooted in our own local community's capacity to produce the goods and services it needs for itself. We haven't gotten there yet. But that's always been our aim and objective" (Shear et al. 2024).

Building an ecosystem of SE institutions and practices to meet community needs as part of a build and fight approach is ultimately a strategy to enable communities make and remake itself. Says, Akuno, "in effect, what we are aiming to do is to create a new transformative culture"; a new mode of life that rejects and breaks free from capitalist modernity. This means assembling conditions that disrupt practices and desires for capitalist development and individual competition, and cultivates desires for other ways of being.

For CJ, the radical, revolutionary nature of place-based, autonomous projects are made possible through movement building and organizing in solidarity with other place-based efforts. For example, the nascent People's Network for Land and Liberation, a network of six autonomous place-based organizations are coordinating around a shared vision of decolonization "to decommodify the land to reestablish right relationship with the earth and all our relatives and relations"(<https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/65a2231d95d641e9b1586063894ca09f>).

Land in Common

Located on Wabanaki homeland, in what is colonially known as Green, Maine, Land in Common (LC), is a project attending to the violence of settler colonialism. LC is committed to foregrounding and working towards Wabanaki sovereignty and determination. LC seeks to redistribute land away from white wealthy property owners and into a process of commoning and decommodification. They mobilize a community land trust to move land to communities and projects for relational living, and steward projects of justice, community and care. These involve other institutions and practices that fall under "SE" like cooperatives of different kinds, community production, and gift economies. As of 2025, LC has removed 780 acres of land from capitalist relations and brought them into land commons across Maine, including 185 acres directly returned to Wabanaki care.

LC emerged and transformed from a white dominated, cooperative land project. Over many years of careful, intentional reflection the members of that project began to disidentify with certain aims and practices of their work, and sought to restructure and redesign themselves in ways that could lead to more radical possibilities. Explains LC Co-Coordinator Ethan Miller, "we grew...in a very consciously transformative way, exploring the possibility of transforming the organization to center Black, brown, and Indigenous communities and priorities, by making the organization radically vulnerable--understanding that we might actually need to abolish this organization and shift resources elsewhere. And we have made this shift in major ways, even as it's always going to be an ongoing process. Now, really, all of our core work and resources are

going toward projects that are led by and in collaboration with grassroots organizations led by communities most impacted by land injustice.”

Settler colonialism involves an ongoing process of transforming land from life-giving, interdependent relations, into a thing, and then into something that can be owned, bought, and sold. Land—and thus interdependent, relational ways of being—are held hostage by and for capitalist modernity. For LC “any work of collective liberation has got to start with the land...because there is no collective liberation if we don't have a restoration of a relationship with land as kin, land as a reciprocal relationship that sustains us and that we take care of in turn.” (Shear et al. 2024).

This means creating practices and narratives that can help people let go of their attachments to the dominant world and cultivate new imaginings and desires. Miller continues, “our goal is to decommodify all the land, and if we're going to decommodify all the land...we want to shift [the] conversation from “how do we create stepping stones to ownership? to “how do we create stepping stones *out of* ownership?” And we want this to speak much more loudly to people who already own private property. People with current access to substantial wealth who already hold land as private property (or who will inherit land).” (Shear et al. 2024).

LC rejects capitalist modernity's notions of individualism, ownership, and progress. They have been in a continual process of assembling conditions that can enable them to make and remake themselves. Transforming themselves away from private ownership and towards collective land holders living cooperatively; then expanding and reassembling community and governance; and restoring and reweaving relations with land through a process of decommodification that might enable relational modes of becoming human. LC views their project as an “*escape vehicle*, putting together the best parts that we can find from this world to build something that will carry us, and our next generations, toward something more liberated and livable.” (Land in Common).

Concluding Thoughts

There is a growing, converging recognition that our species survival is bound up with a project to move beyond the dominant onto-epistemic order that shapes and delimits reality; a politics of becoming “unstuck” from colonially imposed ways of thinking, being, and doing that structure extractivist violence, and that are threatening much of life on earth. The theory and politics emerging in dialogue with this stance—pluriversal, ontological--can rub up against conventional imaginings of revolutionary politics because of its rejection of the reform/revolution binary discussed above, and because of its attunement to place-based worlding projects and concomitant disarticulation from universal (modernist) categories. But disinvestment and letting go, does not mean disengagement. And, from my perspective, an ontological politics must

be careful not to deprioritize analyses of the machinations of corporate elite, the logics of global capital accumulation, and Empire. An ontological politics should embrace the need for building and organizing collective power to defend against and attack these forces at multiple scales. There is a needle to thread, however. An ontological politics requires becoming aware of and letting go of hopes and dreams for transformation that are rooted in capitalist modernity. It moves the horizon from (only) a class-based struggle, to a struggle over the nature of reality.

Becoming unstuck from the dominant reality is not something that can happen through individual choice or individual effort. For the most part, people can't just simply decide to give up desires or decide to have new ones. This is a process of assembling and reassembling. It involves locating, learning about, and advancing spaces and places where other stories are being told and other imaginings and desires are being, defended, lived into, and organized around. The place-based formations described above are in many ways experimental, and in the making. And, my friends from Land in Common and Cooperation Jackson would be the first to say that they are making no claim to being *the* singular project or model to follow. From a certain perspective, they are each responding to local manifestations of violence and sufferings of capitalist modernity through practices of redistribution, inclusion, and justice. But it is in precisely through this work, through meeting community needs and enacting relations of care in place, that they are assembling conditions that are aimed at helping people to become unstuck, to disinvest from desires for individual competition and capitalist development, ownership and progress, white supremacy and control over "nature"; and to invest in cooperation, interdependence, and relational, non-anthropocentric ways of being. Towards creating the conditions for monstrous modes of becoming human that have desires that exceed, abandon, and destroy capitalist modernity.

References

- Akuno, Kali. 2024. Building a SE in the South and Beyond. Nonprofit Quarterly. <https://nonprofitquarterly.org/building-a-solidarity-economy-in-the-south-and-beyond-cooperation-jackson/>
- Akuno, Kali and Matt Meyer. 2023. Jackson Rising Redux: Lessons on Building the Future in the Present. PM Press.
- Berlant, Lauren. 2011. Cruel Optimism. Duke University Press.

Berardi, Franco. 2024. *Quit Everything: Interpreting Depression*. Repeater Books. United Kingdom.

3, Brian J. 2022. *Social Exchange: Barter as Economic Activism in Medellín, Colombia*. Rutgers University Press. New Brunswick, Camden, and Newark, New Jersey, and London.

Byrne, Ken and Stephen Healy. 2006. *Cooperative Subjects: Towards a Post-Fantasmatic Enjoyment of the Economy*. *Rethinking Marxism*. 18 (2): 241-258.

Cornwell, Janelle. 2011. *Worker Cooperatives and Spaces of Possibility: An Investigation of Subject Space at Collective Copies*. *Antipode*. 44 (3): 725-744.

Degyansky, Meredith. 2023. *Can Worker Co-ops Create a Healthier Planet?* *Nonprofit Quarterly*. May 31. <https://nonprofitquarterly.org/can-worker-co-ops-create-a-healthier-planet/>

Escobar, Arturo. 2018. *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds*. Duke University Press: Durham and London.

Escobar, Arturo. 2020. *Pluriversal Politics: The Real and the Possible*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.

Escobar, Arturo, Michal Osterweil, and Kriti Sharma. 2024. *Relationality: An Emergent Politics Beyond the Human*. Bloomsbury Visual Arts. London.

Gibson-Graham, J.K. 2006. *A Postcapitalist Politics*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Graeber, David and David Wengrow. 2021. *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity*. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux. New York.

Harris, Jerry 2007. *Bolivia and Venezuela : the democratic dialect in new revolutionary movements*. *Race & Class*. 49(1): 1-24.

Hantel, Max. 2018. *What is it like to be a Human?: Sylvia Wynter on Autopoiesis*. *philoSOPHIA*. 8(1): 61-79.

Haraway, Donna. 2015. *Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin*. *Environmental Humanities*. 6(1): 159-165.

Harvey, David. 2019. *David Harvey's Anticapitalist Chronicles*. https://www.democracyatwork.info/acc_global_unrest

Hayes, Kelly and Mariame Kaba. 2023. *Let This Radicalize You: Organizing and the Revolution of Reciprocal Care*. Haymarket Books. Chicago, IL.

Kaul, Shivani, Bengi Akbulut, Federico Demaria, and Julien-Francois Gerber. 2022. Alternatives to sustainable development: what can we learn from the pluriverse in practice?. *Sustainability Science*. 17: 1149–1158

Land in Common. 2023. Introduction: Building a Collective Land Base for Just and Resilient Futures.

Law J (2011) What's wrong with a one world world. *Heterogeneities*.

Brookline,

Massachusetts <http://www.heterogeneities.net/publications/Law2011WhatsWrongWithAOneWorldWorld.pdf>

Loh, Penn and Boone W. Shear. 2015. SE and Community Development: Emerging Cases in Three Massachusetts Cities. *Community Dev* 46(3):244–260.

Loh, Penn and Boone W. Shear. 2022. Fight and Build: SE as Ontological Politics. *Sustainability Science*. 17: 1207-1221.

Lyon-Callo, Vincent and Boone W. Shear. 2019. Introduction to the Special Issue Academic Practice and the Ends of Possibility: Negotiating Power and Enacting New Worlds Through Teaching and Research. *Collaborative Anthropologies*. 12 (1-2): 1–23.

Machado de Oliveira, Vanessa. 2021. Hospicing Modernity: Facing Humanity's Wrongs and the Implications for Social Activism. North Atlantic Books. Berkeley, CA.

Miller, Ethan. 2019. Reimagining Livelihoods.

Moore, Jason. 2016. Anthropocene or Capitalocene?: Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism. PM Press.

Polanyi, Karl. 2001 (1944). *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*. Beacon Press: Boston.

Safri, Maliha, Marianna Pavlovskaya, Stephen Healy, and Craig Borowiak. 2025. *Solidarity Cities: Confronting Racial Capitalism, Mapping Transformation*. University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, MN.

Scott, David. 2000. The Re-Enchantment of Humanism: An Interview with Sylvia Wynter. *Small Axe*. 8: 119-207.

Shear, Boone W. 2017. Learning Away From Neoliberalism. *Lines of Connection Towards Other Worlds. Anthropologists Witnessing and Reshaping the Neoliberal Zcademy. ANUAC* 6(1):77–82

Shear, Boone W. 2019. Towards an Ontological Politics of Collaborative Entanglement: Teaching and Learning as Methods Assemblage. In *Academic Practice and the Ends of*

Possibility: Negotiating Power and Enacting New Worlds Through Teaching and Research. Special Issue of Collaborative Anthropologies. 12(1–2):50–75

Shear, Boone, Avery Conrad, and Juliana Greene. 2024. Land Back and Liberated Zones. Amherst Indy. July 26. <https://www.amherstindy.org/2024/07/26/land-back-and-liberated-zones-at-umass-amherst/>

Taiwo, Olúfémi O. Táíwò. 2022. Elite Capture: How the Powerful Took Over Identity Politics (And Everything Else). Haymarket Books. Chicago, IL.

Tsing, Ana. The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins. Princeton University Press. Princeton, New Jersey.