The "Reality" (of my issue) is..."
ST2002 Social Analysis and Community Engagement
Dr. Rev. Gary F. Green II, Ph.D.
Ryan Cagle
Fall 2022

Introduction

"Borrowed time and borrowed world and borrowed eyes with which to sorrow it."[1]

The reality of large-scale environmental catastrophe seems to be no longer preventable, and our society has yet to begin acknowledging, much less addressing, the multiplicity of underlying causes of our present ecological moment. If we are capable of committing to the difficult task of "seeing" we will for the first time be able to come to terms with the fact that the climate crisis is a symptom of a larger web of intersecting problems, performances, and policies that can be defined as "Ecological Overshoot."[2] We will need new eyes and ears to recognize how the various factors at the root of Ecological Overshoot are themselves products of an intricate web of relational, systemic, and structural power dynamics that work in concert to obscure the true nature of our present apocalyptic reality, and prevent any substantial societal change from taking root. American environmental sociologist William R. Catton Jr. highlights the gravity of this reality when he writes, "As numerous and as technologically advanced as mankind [sic] on the average had already become after four centuries of exuberance, we had besieged ourselves. Each of us was now doing damage, just by living" or to put it my native Appalachian tongue, we have gotten too big for our britches, and we do not even know it.[3] What

---

[1] Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), 110.
[2] Teilhard de Chardin Pierre, *The Human Phenomenon* (Brighton, UK: Sussex Academic Press, 2015), 3; William R. Catton, *Overshoot: The Ecological Basis of Revolutionary Change* (Urbana, IL: Univ. of Illinois P., 1982); Ecological Overshoot can simply be understood as that which occurs when demand has exceeded the regenerative carrying capacity of ecosystems through resource depletion, exuberant waste, and a belief of limitless human progress which leaves the planet unable to replenish its resources and properly absorb generated waste such as carbon dioxide.
[3] Ibid, 84.

follows is a meager attempt to speak a true and transformative word by unearthing and examining the power dynamics at play within the relational, systemic, and structural spheres of society responsible for Ecological Overshoot.[4]

Relational

"Earth had two kinds of people: those who could do the math and follow the science, and those who were happier with their own truths. But in our hearts... we all lived as if tomorrow would be a clone [of today.]"[5]

While there are many relational factors at play in the cultural production of Ecological Overshoot, at its heart results from ritualized ways of being in relation to one another, and the environment that are rooted, within the American context at least, in what Dwight N. Hopkins understands as "demonic individualism."[6] Not only has our relational understanding to one another been marred by the various systemic and structural forces we will discuss later in this paper, but nearly all notions of interconnectedness with the rest of the natural world have been abolished within our collective cultural imagination. Considering our present ecological context, this individualism is ritualized into "policies" of unknowing, and uncaring attitudes that manufacture "performances" of ignorance and apathy in the face of environmental degradation.[7] While not exhaustive, I believe that these two manifestations are helpful for understanding how this issue comes to bear in our world relationally, and the power dynamics that sustain them. The work of both Hopkins and Barbara J. McClure helps us to understand Ecological Overshoot as predicated on the ways we have succumbed to an amnesia that "clouds our understanding of

---

[4] Paulo Freire and Bergman Myra Ramos, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed: 30th Anniversary Edition* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014).
[5] Richard Powers, *Bewilderment: A Novel* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2021), 162.
[6] Dwight N Hopkins, *Being Human* (Fortress Press, 2005), 5.
[7] F. Green II, Gary. "*The Production of "Culture"*" Social Analysis and Community Engagement (ST2002) Lecture 4. Lecture presented at the United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities, October 3, 2023.

ourselves as persons" and thus have forgotten that we are interrelated and interconnected beings.[8] This corrosive cloud-of-unknowing leaves many living lives in complete ignorance or in total apathy regarding the damage being done to the environment and the ways these assumed cultural scripts perpetuate destructive power dynamics that thrusts humanity's will upon the environment in the form of continued ecological destruction. Turning to my context, I see the interplay of these dynamics in the life of southern coal miners whose labor unknowingly poisons the earth and the miner's own bodies, in contrast to the lives of the coal barons who are more than willing to sacrifice both miner and land for the continued accumulation of power and privilege. These relational dynamics depend on and are reinforced by the systemic myths and structural policies that work to keep us fragmented from one another, and the environment. Therefore, all our attempts to address Ecological Overshoot, must by necessity begin with an adequate understanding of the dis/connection that this relational deformation has to the deforestation of the world's forests, and how this relational severance is caustic to our own souls and this fragile planet we call home.

Systemic

"That's how the madness of the world tries to colonize you: from the outside in, forcing you to live in its reality."[9]

In reflecting on Ecological Overshoot as culture production I am reminded of the work of both the Catholic priest Thomas Berry, and Islamic theologian Seyyed Hossein Nasr who, despite their disagreements, both express a desire to respond faithfully to the present ecological crisis by challenging us to remember how powerful stories and symbols are for shaping the

---

[8] Dwight N Hopkins, *Being Human* (Fortress Press, 2005), 5; Barbara J. McClure, *Moving beyond Individualism in Pastoral Care and Counseling: Reflections on Theory, Theology, and Practice* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010),190–191.

[9] Jeff VanderMeer, *Annihilation* (FSG Originals, 2014), 110

world in which we live.[10] The culture narratives, myths, and symbols responsible for Ecological Overshoot take shape most notably in the partisan politics of the American political sphere. At the roots of both right- and left-wing political ideologies is the myth that humanity should, in whatever ways they see fit, bend the earth and all of creation to its will, or what I am referring to as the myth of limitless domination. The perpetuation of this myth within right-wing politics takes the overt form of Christian dominionism that views the world and its resources as something to be dominated and spent. Although more subtly within left-wing ideologies, this myth, despite contestation, manifests itself in what I believe to be even more insidious ways than their right-wing counterpart by abandoning the language of Christian dominionism and obscuring its ulterior motivations. In the end this vernacular shift does very little to change the devastating effects this myth has on the environment no matter how many "green" caveats or nuances get added within the left-wing lexicon. At the heart of this myth is an attitude toward the earth that sees it as expendable and though much of left-wing proponents would reject the notion, I believe that Indigenous theologian George Tinker correctly summarizes the underlying attitude well when he writes, "Christians do not think of themselves as belonging to the land, especially when it has been reduced to a commodity. They sing, "This land is not my home- just a-passing through. If Heaven's not my home, O Lord what will I do?"[11] Regardless of religious or political affiliation, humanity cannot help but see the Earth as "simply a stopping place on the way to heaven" (or I suppose possibly the planet Mars) instead of a vital "source of identity."[12]

---

[10] Thomas Berry understood the root of the ecological crisis as an outdated metaphysical story that is no longer relevant considering the advancements of modern evolutionary science or in Berry's own words, "We are in trouble just now because we do not have a good story. We are in between stories. The Old Story… is not functioning properly." Seyyed Hossein Nasr on the other hand identifies the root cause with what he deems the "Promethean Revolt" in medieval theology and philosophy that led to the desacralization of the natural world and collective spiritual amnesia.

[11] Clara Sue Kidwell, Homer Noley, and George E. Tinker, *A Native American Theology* (New York, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 141.

[12] Ibid.

Structural

"One Garden. Two Serpents. Eden never stood a chance."[13]

While both wings of the American political sphere claim to operate from a different set of values regarding the environment, both spread the myth of limitless domination and work in tandem to reinforce the fractured relationality between individuals and their bioregions, leaving the structural forces responsible for Ecological Overshoot not only unchallenged, but reinforced. These relational dynamics and systemic narratives not only uphold the structures of colonialism and capitalism but are created and recreated in a cycle of cultural production but are tools of these structures for exerting power over others. We see examples of this power being wielded by Right-wing politicians who are developing a 920-page proposal that if implemented "would not only undo any progress the Biden administration has made to reduce emissions and fund clean energy development… but it would make it far more difficult for a future administration to pursue any policy that seeks to address global warming at all."[14] Meanwhile, the Department of Energy announced in August that they will provide a "$2 billion funding opportunity to spur the conversion of long-standing facilities to manufacture electric vehicles and components."[15] Though at first glance this move by the Biden administration appears positive, in the end it is revealed to be yet another way this structure works to leave the real causes of Ecological Overshoot unaddressed. In the end, capitalism and colonialism press onward unabated and

---

[13] Dean White, "'The 100' S5 E1 Eden" (Warner Bros. Television, April 28, 2018).
[14] Kristoffer Tigue, "The Far Right Has a 'Battle Plan' to Undo Climate Progress Should Trump Win in 2024," Inside Climate News, last modified August 1, 2023, accessed October 20, 2023, https://insideclimatenews.org/news/01082023/far-right-battle-plan-to-undo-climate-progress-trump-win-2024
[15] "Biden-Harris Administration Announces $15.5 Billion to Support a Strong and Just Transition to Electric Vehicles, Retooling Existing Plants, and Rehiring Existing Workers," Energy.gov, last modified August 31, 2023, accessed October 20, 2023, https://www.energy.gov/articles/biden-harris-administration-announces-155-billion-support-strong-and-just-transition#:~:text=Supported%20by%20President%20Biden%27s%20Inflation,hydrogen%20fuel%20cell%20electric%20vehicles.

uninhibited with destructive policies (reliant on so-called “green” legislation, hollow environmental awareness campaigns, and an emphasis on individual carbon footprint) by either brazen environmental Christofascism or the Machiavellian veneer of an eco-friendly face lift.[16]

Conclusion

"Earth knows no desolation. She smells regeneration in the moist breath of decay."[17]

The above is barely more than a scratch along the surface of the ingrained realities of Ecological Overshoot that are obscured by the relational, systemic, and structural power dynamics working relentlessly to produce a culture incapable of acknowledging, much less addressing, its root causes. Now more than ever we are in dire need to be spurred from our stupor, to undergo a process of anamnesis that leads to “awakened consciousness,” and the remembrance that “God never intended for human beings to consider ourselves - theologically or experientially - separate from creation, but as a part of its community.”[18] I believe that this sort of awakening has the potential to provide cultural disruption and the chance an alternative future marked by new ways of being in relation to one another, new cultural myths that enliven our imaginations, new rituals to guide our communities, and new structures that lead to deeper life and liberation, for us and all of creation. This shift will not come easy, but I believe that if we dare to be so bold to embody hopeful acceptance and unflinching truth telling, we can sow the seeds of sedition and resistance capable of blossoming into a radically different future. I suppose that only time will tell whether we can embody such a radical orientation that does not merely

---

[16] Dorothee Sölle, *The Window of Vulnerability* (Augsburg Fortress Publishing, 1990), 133–141.
[17] George Macaulay Trevelyan, *The Poetry, and Philosophy of George Meredith* (London : Constable, 1906), 92.
[18] F. Green II, Gary. “*The Self as Relational(ly Caught and Constituted)*” Social Analysis and Community Engagement (ST2002) Lecture 2. Lecture presented at the United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities, September 26, 2023; Steve Heinrichs, Buffalo Shout, *Salmon Cry: Conversations on Creation, Land Justice, and Life Together* (Waterloo, Ontario: Herald Press, 2013), 99.

“ease tensions” but “challenges the whole system and becomes a subversive formula” for the ongoing work of ecological repair in the face of our apocalyptic moment.[19]

[19] Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Ossining, NY: Orbis Books, 1973), 276.