

Imagining Wakanda
ST2002 Social Analysis and Community Engagement
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“Where there is no vision, the people perish.”¹

Humanity has found itself in a profound moment of ecological crisis, and somewhat unsurprisingly, this reality has done very little to rouse most the world’s population into an awareness capable of recognizing it as a global emergency, its root causes, or potential solutions, much less the imagination and willingness to have responded adequately to the initial signs of destabilization of the world’s ecosystems. While numerous theologians, scientists, and activists have been persistent voices crying out in the wilderness for decades about the long-term effects of climate change and global warming, we have failed to catch the prophetic imagination that has driven their clarion calls for wide scale global, social, and economic change. I believe that the French Jesuit Paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin gets to the heart of this issue well when he said, “Seeing. One could say that the whole of life lies in seeing... To try to see more and to see better is not, therefore, just a fantasy, curiosity, or a luxury. See or perish.”² After all of these years, and despite some of our best efforts, we are still failing to see the proverbial forest for the trees, even as we lose the Earth’s trees at an increasingly alarming rate.³ The climate crisis is in many respects at our door and with every passing day the looming effects of wide scale climate

¹ Proverbs 29:18-19 King James Version.

² Teilhard de Chardin Pierre, *The Human Phenomenon* (Brighton, UK: Sussex Academic Press, 2015), 3.

³ Rachel Nuwer, “What Would Happen If All the World’s Trees Disappeared?,” *BBC Future*, February 24, 2022, accessed September 20, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20190911-what-would-happen-if-all-the-worlds-trees-disappeared#:~:text=Since%20the%20onset%20of%20the,places%2C%20tree%20loss%20is%20accelerating.>

catastrophe seem no longer preventable as the deeper issue of what American environmental socialist William R. Catton Jr. deems “Ecological Overshoot” has ultimately gone unchallenged and therefore unchanged.⁴

Ecological Overshoot can be understood as that which occurs “when human demand exceeds the regenerative capacity of a natural ecosystem” leaving our respective bioregions, and the planet unable to replenish its resources and properly absorb generated waste such as carbon dioxide. Or to summarize Catton, humanity has in various ways overshoot the “carrying capacity” of the earth by rapid resource depletion, exuberant waste, and the belief of limitless progress.⁵ While I find Catton’s formulation helpful for understanding the larger issue at the roots of the climate crisis, his analysis is lacking because of his limited context and socio-economic locations. In my perspective, any critical engagement with Ecological Overshoot as a viable theory for our present ecological moment must by necessity address its deep roots in the death-dealing forces of Christian theology, capitalism, colonialism, and all the ways these systems intersect in oppressive and destructive ways in our world, of which Catton spends little to no time acknowledging much less addressing.⁶ What Catton offers us despite his own lack of vision, is a starting place for critical reflection beyond the calls for green legislation, shallow environmental awareness campaigns, and an emphasis on individual carbon footprint responsibility as the primary means for responding to the climate crisis. Now more than ever we

⁴ Scientists Deliver 'Final Warning' on Climate Crisis: Act Now or It's Too Late,” The Guardian (Guardian News and Media, March 20, 2023), last modified March 20, 2023, accessed April 12, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/mar/20/ipcc-climate-crisis-report-delivers-final-warning-on-15c>; C.J. Atkins, “Already Too Late: IPCC Report Says Global Warming Consequences Now Unavoidable,” People's World, last modified August 9, 2021, accessed April 12, 2023, <https://www.peoplesworld.org/article/already-too-late-ipcc-report-says-global-warming-consequences-now-unavoidable/>; William R. Catton, *Overshoot: The Ecological Basis of Revolutionary Change* (Urbana, IL: Univ. of Illinois P., 1982).

⁵ “Media Backgrounder: Earth Overshoot Day,” Earth Overshoot Day, July 19, 2023, accessed September 20, 2023, <https://www.overshootday.org/newsroom/media-backgrounder/>; William R. Catton, *Overshoot: The Ecological Basis of Revolutionary Change* (Urbana, IL: Univ. of Illinois P., 1982); 1. “Carrying Capacity,” Education, accessed September 20, 2023, <https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/resource-library-carrying-capacity/>.

⁶ Lynn White, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” *Science* 155, no. 3767 (October 1967): 1203-1207.

direly need a shift away from the dreams of prevention of our past, and toward radical acceptance, unflinching truth telling, deeper commitments to liberatory praxis, and the construction of a new society capable of surviving in a world on fire wrought by the myriad facets of ecological overshoot.

“Welcome to New Appalachia, we’re glad you’re home.”

From the foothills of North-West Alabama to the mountains of West Virginia stretches the land now known as the Commonwealth of New Appalachia, a diverse and thriving anarcho-mutualist federation of communities rebuilding in the wake of the catastrophic effects of drastic environmental changes brought on by the unwillingness of the nation formerly known as the United States of America to address Ecological Overshoot.⁷ New Appalachia is not the byproduct of a world where Ecological Overshoot was never an issue to be resolved or even one that quelled the effects of the rampant resource depletion and extraction of colonial-capitalism, but rather this utopian society emerged from the ashes of the old world without its myths of scarcity, hyper individualism, and limitless progress. Much in the same way that vibranium served as the utopian catalyst for the Nation of Wakanda, the catastrophic results of the ecological crisis became a spoke in the very wheel that birthed the crisis in the first place, giving rise to new possibilities for human flourishing in a post-overshoot world. Unlike Wakanda, these abrupt changes did not come without leaving a lasting and deep wound on the Earth and its people. The earliest years were bleak, and rife with failure and famine as they sought to find stable footing in the hills and hollers of this land. In the wake of widespread grid failure, government dissolution, loss of arable land, and the failing of the world’s global markets the

⁷ Shortened as “New Appalachia” from here on out.

people of New Appalachia turned inward hoping to build a “post-scarcity, post-hierarchy, post-capitalistic” community predicated on commitments to solidarity and interdependence among its diverse people rooted in the knowledge of their inextricable link to the Earth and all its inhabitants, human and otherwise.⁸

Through struggle and trials, the people of New Appalachia slowly crawled their way out of the dystopian state of the world toward a solarpunk post-industrial agrarian society that was determined to not return to the old ways of endless resource depletion and exuberant waste.⁹ The people of New Appalachia learned to live simply and communally knowing that the only way to survive in a world on fire is through reciprocity, communal interdependence, solidarity with the earth, and making sure they never repeated the mistakes of their ancestors. There was never an attempt to return to the industrial ways of the pre-collapse world, instead the people of New Appalachia depend on solar power and Lo-Fi technological innovations that came at no cost to the environment as they worked to reimagine, reconfigure, and recycle anything and everything from the old world that could be of use.

Taking the old notion of Southern Hospitality to its logical end, New Appalachia became a refuge for displaced people far and wide, people of different races, ethnicities, religions, and perspectives, searching for fertile soil in which their lives could grow and flourish. Life in this land is not perfect, but the people know for certain that a different world is possible. Evidence of a different world can be seen in the work and life of their diverse communities working together to provide clean water, energy, and food for everyone who calls these hills and hollers home without exploitation of one another and the destruction of the environment. A different world can

⁸ “A Solarpunk Manifesto (English),” ReDes - Regenerative Design, accessed September 20, 2023, <https://www.re-des.org/a-solarpunk-manifesto/>.

⁹ “Solarpunk,” Wikipedia, September 20, 2023, accessed September 20, 2023, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solarpunk>.

be seen in the growing population of lightening bugs, hellbender salamanders, barred owls, and white-tail deer that were all but extinct just a generation ago. In every okra seed sown, sweet potato harvested, and non-native tree that makes New Appalachia its home, a different world is born.¹⁰

¹⁰ Savannah Halleaux, “Traveling Trees: Assisted Migration for Climate Resilience,” US Forest Service, April 11, 2023, accessed September 20, 2023, <https://www.fs.usda.gov/features/traveling-trees>.