Forgotten pioneers in degrowth: John Africa and the MOVE Organization

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Abstract

Decades before the term 'degrowth' had gained currency as a rallying cry against the ideology of economic expansionism, John Africa founded The MOVE Organization in Philadelphia based on sanctity of life and dismantling institutions of state and capital (including economic growth). Members eschewed many forms of technology, lived collectively, harbored stray animals, and strove toward an entirely raw food diet in a communal lifestyle that many today would label 'simple living' or 'primivitist.' They rejected fashion and cosmetics, demonstrated for animal liberation as well as against police brutality, militarism, prisons, and pollution of land, water, and air. Notably, John Africa and MOVE emphasized the need to maintain sobriety and break with personal addictions in order to achieve personal and societal balance. Yet, rather than a set of 'single issues' strung together, John Africa formulated an all-encompassing paradigm. This article presents John Africa's paradigm as well as his grassroots decolonial semiotics that critically deconstructed, qualified, repurposed, and reframed conventional English language terms toward emancipatory and radically egalitarian ends. This paradigm, based on 'Mother Nature' and oneness, aligned with (without overtly borrowing from) many Indigenous and Aboriginal paradigms that similarly locate human life as interwoven with habitats and nonhuman animals. Whether or not one agrees with his ideas or approach, John Africa and the organization he co-founded seem to clearly qualify as early pioneers of degrowth. This article brings their hitherto unrecognized contributions into conversation with degrowth literature both to fill out the historical record and provide potentially useful insights for degrowth researchers and organizers alike.

Keywords: degrowth, John Africa's MOVE, black ecology, environmental justice, animal liberation, anarchism, semiotics

Résumé

Des décennies avant que le terme «décroissance» ne devienne un cri de ralliement contre l'idéologie de l'expansionnisme économique, John Africa a fondé l'organisation MOVE à Philadelphie basée sur le caractère sacré de la vie et le démantèlement des institutions de l'État et du capital (y compris la croissance économique). Les membres évitaient de nombreuses formes de technologie, vivaient collectivement, abritaient des animaux errants et s'efforçaient d'adopter une alimentation entièrement crue dans un mode de vie communautaire que beaucoup qualifieraient aujourd'hui de «vie simple» ou de «primiviste». Ils ont rejeté la mode et les cosmétiques, manifesté pour la libération des animaux ainsi que contre la brutalité policière, le militarisme, les prisons et la pollution de la terre, de l'eau et de l'air. Notamment, John Africa et MOVE ont souligné la nécessité de maintenir la sobriété et de rompre avec les addictions personnelles afin d'atteindre un équilibre personnel et sociétal. Pourtant, plutôt qu'un ensemble de «problèmes uniques» reliés entre eux, John Africa a formulé un paradigme global. Cet article présente le paradigme de John Africa ainsi que sa sémiotique décoloniale de base qui a déconstruit, qualifié, réorienté et recadré de manière critique les termes conventionnels de la langue anglaise à des fins émancipatrices et radicalement égalitaires. Ce paradigme, basé sur la «mère nature» et l'unité, s'aligne sur (sans emprunter ouvertement) de nombreux paradigmes autochtones et autochtones qui situent de la même manière la vie humaine comme étant entrelacée avec les habitats et les animaux non humains. Que l'on soit ou non d'accord avec ses idées ou son approche, John Africa et l'organisation qu'il a cofondée semblent clairement se qualifier comme les premiers pionniers de la décroissance. Cet article apporte leurs contributions jusqu'ici non reconnues dans une conversation avec la littérature sur la décroissance à la fois pour compléter le

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dossier historique et fournir des informations potentiellement utiles pour les chercheurs et les organisateurs de la décroissance.

Mots-clés: décroissance, MOVE de John Africa, écologie noire, justice environnementale, libération animale, anarchisme, sémiotique

Resumen

Décadas antes de que el término 'decrecimiento' ganara popularidad como grito de guerra contra la ideología del expansionismo económico, John Africa fundó The MOVE Organization en Filadelfia basada en la santidad de la vida y el desmantelamiento de las instituciones del estado y el capital (incluido el crecimiento económico). Los miembros evitaron muchas formas de tecnología, vivieron colectivamente, albergaron animales callejeros y se esforzaron por llevar una dieta completamente cruda en un estilo de vida comunal que muchos hoy etiquetarían como 'vida simple' o 'primivista.' Rechazaron la moda y los cosméticos, se manifestaron a favor de la liberación animal, así como contra la brutalidad policial, el militarismo, las prisiones y la contaminación de la tierra, el agua y el aire. En particular, John Africa y MOVE enfatizaron la necesidad de mantener la sobriedad y romper con las adicciones personales para lograr el equilibrio personal y social. Sin embargo, en lugar de un conjunto de 'temas únicos' unidos, John Africa formuló un paradigma que lo abarca todo. Este artículo presenta el paradigma de John Africa, así como su semiótica decolonial de base que deconstruyó, calificó, reformuló y reformuló críticamente los términos convencionales del idioma inglés hacia fines emancipatorios y radicalmente igualitarios. Este paradigma, basado en la 'Madre Naturaleza' y la unidad, se alineó con (sin tomar prestado abiertamente de) muchos paradigmas indígenas y aborígenes que ubican de manera similar la vida humana entretejida con hábitats y animales no humanos. Ya sea que uno esté o no de acuerdo con sus ideas o enfoque, John Africa y la organización que cofundó parecen calificar claramente como los primeros pioneros del decrecimiento. Este artículo trae sus contribuciones hasta ahora no reconocidas a la conversación con la literatura sobre el decrecimiento, tanto para completar el registro histórico como para proporcionar información potencialmente útil tanto para los investigadores como para los organizadores del decrecimiento.

Palabras clave: decrecimiento, John Africa's MOVE, ecología negra, justicia ambiental, liberación animal, anarquismo, semiótica

1. Introduction

On the 26th of July 1931, a working class mother of three and migrant to Pennsylvania from Georgia gave birth to a child in West Philadelphia. On that very same day, a young James Lovelock, eventual founder of Gaia theory,[2] celebrated his twelfth birthday in London. The Philadelphian child, born Vincent Lopez Leaphart, would eventually grow into a man with his own ideas about a living Earth. Under the name 'John Africa',[3] he would co-found the multi-ethnic MOVE Organization (hereafter MOVE) and author its key scriptures in the 1970s and '80s. John Africa and MOVE saw industry, technology, economics, science, police, the military, and governments as an entire 'system' at war with life and nature. They called for the total abolition of this 'system' in a mission they believed would take place over thousands of years. To those ends, John Africa and MOVE strove toward a raw food diet and lived communally with no electricity, alongside dozens of animals. Members rejected cosmetics, drugs, alcohol, coffee, and tobacco products. Women gave birth at home. The group furthermore demonstrated against war, racism, pollution, police brutality, and the incarceration of animals. In this sense, John Africa and MOVE functioned as early pioneers of degrowth (rejection of growth-oriented economics and voluntary simplicity combined with equitable distribution of resources).

Connecting worlds that had not yet fully materialized (such as anarcho-primitivism, animal liberation, black anarchism, neo-temperance, prison abolition, Earth liberation, simple living, and radical Black ecology[4]),

[2] Gaia theory posits that various living and non-living parts of Earth together function as a living organism that regulates ecological and atmospheric parameters such that they remain suitable to sustain life (see Lovelock and Margulis 1974).

[3] John Africa's name appears in the sources as a single phrase (never 'Africa', 'John', or 'Mr. Africa') and this article follows suit.

[4] For anarcho-primitivism, see Zerzan (2002); for animal liberation, see Singer (1975); for black anarchism, see (Anderson 2021), Mbah and Igariwey (2001), and Williams (2015); for ecology-oriented neo-temperance activists, including Hardline and the hardcore punk vegan straight edge scene (some of whom drew inspiration from MOVE), see Eeyore (2022) and Kuhn (2010); for prison abolition, see Davis (2003); for Earth liberation, see Parson (2008); for simple living, see Alexander

John Africa condemned not only economic growth but the entire system of industrial technology: "Every company, manufacturer, every industry that exists in your life style are wheels of disaster" (MOVE 1975: 15). He also deconstructed terms such as 'legality' to expose and delegitimize the state, especially in regard to racism: "Legality ain't righteousness. Hitler legally executed 6 million Jews, this country legally executed almost a whole race of Indians, Europeans legally murdered black Africans at will but it ain't right" (MOVE 1994: 2). As we shall see, these views expressed but two aspects of a single paradigmatic complex.

Whereas Lovelock's ecological concerns led him to advocate eco-modernist approaches such as geoengineering,[5] John Africa envisioned a gradual dismantling of techno-industrial society. Both grew up in working class families and in Quaker environments (Lovelock had Quaker parents and Quakers founded Pennsylvania). However, following broader societal patterns of their respective racial categories, white-dominant society worked well for the British Lovelock but not as well for the African American John Africa (who lost his mother at a young age and lost a brother to a shooting). Again, unlike Lovelock, John Africa's teaching has received little to no attention (perhaps in part because Lovelock worked within 'the system' and John Africa worked outside of it, opposed it, and, through MOVE, offered a radically alternative paradigm and praxis that few have tried to genuinely understand). Yet, if "MOVE reflected a historic shift within black religiosity towards the spiritual needs and urgent realities of the black masses" and has largely "been relegated to the most remote corner of America's collective memory", then we can at least explore here their vision and practice (Floyd-Thomas 2002: 12-13).[6]

Discussion about John Africa and the MOVE Organization in relation to degrowth seems important for at least three reasons: (1) to accurately recall which pioneers acted or spoke in relation to benchmarks in degrowth history; (2) to help respond to Romy Opperman's (2020) call for "histories of radical Black ecology" which move concerns and experiences of black ecology toward articulations of alternative anti-state and anti-capitalist futures; (3) to contribute to understanding John Africa's paradigm, civilizational critique, praxis, semiotics, and pioneering contributions to degrowth.

As scholars of degrowth advocate "decolonizing the imaginary" and a degrowth "paradigm shift" (Buch-Hansen 2018; Latouche 2015; Thomson 2011), it seems relevant to examine not just the contributions of John Africa and MOVE to degrowth, but the very paradigm that made those contributions possible. At a superficial level, John Africa added anarchism, animal liberation, prison abolition, racial justice, anti-militarism, sobriety, and sanctity to a contemporary degrowth movement that seems to pay little attention to all or most of those issues or, at least, that the influential volume *Degrowth: A vocabulary for a new era* did not discuss (see D'Alisa *et al.* 2015a).

At a more fundamental level, however, John Africa moved beyond calling for a new *vocabulary* to initiating a grassroots decolonial *semiotics* (study of signs) that countered dominant epistemology (i.e. the matrix of knowledge) with a relevance pertinent to the experiences of colonized peoples and their diasporas.[7] John Africa specifically developed a paradigm of a non-fragmented whole, a conception of life in which equality and bondedness permeated each aspect of existence or, as we hear Denise Ferreira da Silva saying: "What if, instead of the Ordered World, we imaged each existant (human and more-than-human) not as separate forms […] but rather as singular expressions of each and every other existant as well as of the entangled whole in/as which they exist?" (Murphy *et al*. 2021: 397). We may think of 'metaphysics' as a "set of first principles we must possess in order to make sense of the world in which we live" (TallBear 2011). Yet, one could argue, the

(2013); for (radical) Black ecology, see Hare (1970) and Opperman (2020) and, on a related note, see Taylor (1997) regarding the role of race in shaping environmental activism.

[5] See Lovelock (2009).

[6] For a documentation of coverage/absence of MOVE within religious contra legal studies, see Fiscella (2016).

[7] John Africa's semiotics seemingly aspired toward what Darrel Enck-Wanzer has termed "epistemological liberation" as a response to social structures that Andrews and Okpanachi describe as "epistemic oppression" (Andrews and Okpanachi 2012: 86; Enck-Wanzer 2012: 3). Enck-Wanzer applied "epistemological liberation" to work by the Young Lords Organization (young Puerto Rican activists in New York who started in the late 1960s) while Andrews and Okpanachi discussed "epistemic oppression" more generally in their critique of academic Eurocentric and hegemonic frameworks. Also, see Densu (2018) for an outline of African-centered ecophilosophy. For decolonizing political ecology, see Schulz (2017) and for perspectives on performing decolonial research, see Zanotti *et al*. (2020).

"decolonial project, […] nevertheless continues to be undertaken in the language of coloniality" and "facilitates a regeneration of the discourses of coloniality" that obscures "all that resides outside of the imperial worldview" (Ashar 2015: 263).[8]

Paradigmatic shifts entail transformations of not just ideas, vocabulary, and semiotics but transformations of entire sets of "community beliefs and institutions (conventions, norms, rules and regulations) affecting content and conduct" (Spash 2020: 12). Our current economic system exemplifies this with material technology, wage labor, and money which, through routine, may *seem* neutral while, in fact, euphemistic terminologies (e.g. 'development', 'units', 'profits', and 'employment opportunities') obscure the objectifying, extractive, exploitative, and ecologically destructive processes that create material technologies through radically unequal terms of trade (Hornborg 2001: 231; Chertkovskaya and Paulsson 2021: 407 and 413). If we viewed our planet from outer space, Alf Hornborg wrote, we would see that "money is an ecosemiotic phenomenon that has very tangible effects on ecosystems and the biosphere as a whole" (Hornborg 2001: 170). By *ecosemiotics* he meant a recognition of the flows of signs that co-constitute ecosystems alongside material and energy flows. By recentering nature and examining, for example, communication systems within the world of animals, plants, and habitats we might better understand the ways in which human ecosystems (mal)function in sensory, linguistic, ecological, and economic realms.

Although John Locke supported human trafficking in the 1600s,[9] he laid out a useful structure for conceptualizing paradigms in *An essay concerning human understanding* (1690). Here, he broadly defined science in three parts: (1) *ontology* (the nature of things or 'natural philosophy'); (2) *ethics* ("seeking out those rules and measures of human actions, which lead to happiness… [the] right, and conduct suitable to it"); and (3) *semeiotica* ("the doctrine of signs, the most usual whereof being words") (Locke 1959: 460-462). To this last point, Locke remarked that if words/signs "were distinctly weighed, and duly considered, they would afford us another sort of logic and critic, than what we have been hitherto acquainted with" (Ibid: 462).[10]

After brief presentations of degrowth and proto-degrowth as well as degrowth's connection to political ecology and other related contexts, this article focuses on John Africa and MOVE, borrowing from Locke's structure, to present John Africa's paradigmatic contributions in three parts: ontology, ethical praxis, and semiotics.

2. Degrowth, proto-degrowth, and related developments

Degrowth and political ecology

In 1972, André Gorz (born Gerhart Hirsch) (re)coined the term *décroissance* ('degrowth')[11] and Eric Wolf (re)coined the term 'political ecology'[12] (Gorz 1972; Wolf 1972). On April 22, 1970, millions of people

[8] Also, see Motha (2020) on "decolonizing applied linguistics."

[9] For Locke's relationship to and role in trans-Atlantic trafficking from Africa to the 'New World', see Glausser (1990).

[10] Semiotics typically elicits associations to two more recent pioneers in the field: Charles Sanders Peirce and Ferdinand de Saussure (see, for example, Yakin and Totu 2014).

[11] Kallis *et al*. began *Degrowth: A vocabulary for a new era* with the sentence: "The term '*décroissance*' (French for degrowth) was used for the first time by French intellectual André Gorz in 1972" (Kallis *et al*. 2015: 1; also see Weber 2018: 66). Andrew Sutter, however, in an extensive exploration of the term's origins, labeled this claim "substantively incorrect" (Sutter 2017: 80). Instead, he traced economic usage of *décroissance* to 1960 by French historian Pierre Vilar (Ibid: 8, 19).

[12] Tim Forsyth wrote: "The first usages of the term 'political ecology' in academic publications were made in the late 1960s and 1970s" (2004: 4). Viviana Asara and Arnaud Diemer attributed the origin to Bertrand de Jouvenel in the late 1950s (Asara 2015: 48; Diemer 2013: 14). However, academic usages of the term 'political ecology' appeared as early as the 1930s and had made numerous appearances by the early 1960s both in senses similar to contemporary usage (e.g. Thone 1935; de Jouvenel 1959) and very different senses such as sociological examinations of voting and geography (e.g. Heberle 1952; Heberle and Howard 1954), political geography (e.g. Brassert 1956; McColl 1966; Russett 1967), the accumulated knowledge of a people's socio-political, economic, and geographical history (e.g. Gruening 1951), and the symbiosis of a nation's government institutions, forces, and culture (e.g. Lepawsky 1936, Heyck 1972). Frank Thone's 1935 article title "We Fight for Grass" could ostensibly refer to fighting for *domination* over grass/land/resources (in that case, colonial and imperial forces in Mongolia and the Americas), fighting in defense of *access* to land (in that case, Native Americans and

around the world celebrated the first Earth Day, co-organized by Denis Hayes (the event gathered twenty million in the U.S. alone, see Dunaway 2008).[13] The early 1970s produced a surge of inspirational work for researchers in degrowth and political ecology alike such as Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen's *The entropy law and the economic process* (1971), Ivan Illich's *Deschooling society* (1971), Barry Commoner's *The closing circle* (1971), the Club of Rome's *The limits to growth* (Meadows *et al*. 1972), *The Ecologist*'s manifesto *A blueprint for survival* (Goldsmith *et al*. 1972), E. F. Schumacher's *Small is beautiful* (1973), and work by Arne Naess on 'deep ecology' (Naess 1973). In 1976, the founding of The Political Ecology Research Group in the UK helped coalesce research in the nascent field of political ecology.

If degrowth refers to an anti-capitalist "desire for socially and ecologically just limits" and political ecology emphasizes interdisciplinary attempts "to understand the political sources, conditions and ramifications of environmental change", then one might regard degrowth as a prescriptive (and prominent) resolution to current crises in political ecology (Demaria *et al*. 2019: 434; Bryant cited by Batterbury 2015: 27; also see Greenberg and Park 1994). As one scholar stated, "[d]egrowth is the backbone of political ecology and political ecology is at the core of degrowth" (Theodoropoulos 2014: 1).

Early degrowth scholars emphasized a need for "consuming and producing less, *much less*, at least in the wealthy regions of the world" (Flipo and Schneider 2015: xxv; emphasis in original). Others shifted emphasis to "*different*, not only *less*" (Kallis *et al*. 2015: 4). They instead articulate degrowth as a vision based on "new forms of living, producing, and consuming […] that can secure the livelihoods of all without [economic] growth" and yet the term degrowth itself "defies a single definition" and "cannot be pinned down to a single sentence" (D'Alisa *et al*. 2015b: xx-xxi). Instead, it functions as a 'post-capitalist' framework "where different lines of thought, imaginaries, or courses of action come together" (Ibid: xxi). Still, its central focus remains a call for "the decolonization of public debate from the idiom of economism and for the abolishment of economic growth as a social objective" (Kallis *et al*. 2015: 3).

Rejecting "the growth paradigm" implies a "paradigmatic revolutionary struggle" that aims to uproot the "Neoclassical economics" that often appears "as a default set of theoretical ideas, simply because it has been paradigmatically dominant" (Spash 2020: 2, 8).

While degrowth has steadily gathered interest, it has to yet to move beyond the margins or to articulate an actual paradigm shift. According to at least one scholar, "there is surprisingly little discussion either of why degrowth remains politically marginalized or of what it would take for the desired 'paradigm shift' to materialize" (Buch-Hansen 2018: 157).

Serge Latouche wrote: "Paradoxically, the idea of de-growth was, in a sense, born in the South, and more specifically, in Africa" (citing African socialists such as Julius Nyerere and Houari Boumédienne) and he mentioned Beninese scholar/politician Albert Tévoédjrè who envisioned an early degrowth ethic as "anti-consumption and collective wealth" (Latouche 2009: 56; Tévoédjrè 1979: 55). Yet, little work on degrowth seems to have focused on African (much less African American) decolonial approaches.

Hardly monolithic, degrowth researchers and activists investigate and advocate a wide range of practices and proposals such as communal living, grassroots organizing, community currencies, Universal Basic Income (UBI), ecosocialism, the commons, simple living, decreased work hours, urban gardening, and alternative means of measuring prosperity (such as Genuine Progress Index or Gross National Happiness rather than Gross Domestic Product; see D'Alisa *et al.* 2015). Not an anarchist movement *per se*, degrowth does sometimes include anarchist currents (e.g. Toro 2021; Trainer 2012). Degrowth views on the state continue to develop (D'Alisa and Kallis 2020). We see some ambiguity regarding anarcho-primitivism with some degrowthers drawing inspiration from it (e.g. Carcea 2021: 44; Claudio and Gavaldà 2010: 582) and others rejecting it as "nihilist" (e.g. Demaria *et al*. 2013: 209). Some degrowth scholars support *nowtopias* or utopian small-scale experiments and "territorial processes of regeneration that involve non-wage labour and are motivated by a

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Mongols), or potentially, as John Africa's teaching implies, fighting on *behalf* of land and grass as such (not Thone's intention but the phrasing allows for this reading). Thone probably intended the first reading but all three illustrate ways of conceiving political ecology struggles. The term 'black political ecology' seems to have only recently come into usage at all and, even then, without either consensus on its meaning or a clear definition (Frazier 2019; Lambrou 2021; Hawthorne 2019).

[13] According to one source, Hayes had begun teaching 'political ecology' by 1971 (Hoffman 1971: 24).

desire to produce an alternative future" (Demaria *et al*. 2019: 438). Therefore, we might regard practical manifestations of egalitarian anarcho-primitivism such as MOVE as *de facto* variants of degrowth.

Either way, degrowth remains a work in progress with significant blind spots. For example, some scholars have suggested that degrowth does not prioritize "improving relations with other animals" and yet even "limited lifestyle activities like individual vegetarianism or veganism" will not suffice to stop the unprecedented "environmentally destructive" threat that contemporary capital-steered human-animal relations pose to the fabric of life on Earth (Stuart and Gunderson 2020: 75, 77). Similarly, Katharina Richter has argued that degrowth's current ontology, in basing itself on dominant economic calculations (including "objectified in- and outputs" of the living world), serves to "unwittingly perpetuate the 'coloniality of nature'" as well as a "Eurocentric focus", and "anthropocentrism" (Richter 2019: 3, 6, 9).[14]

Proto-degrowth

Although many degrowthers rarely cite previous 'degrowth' movements or societies that shared wealth and lived in relative ecological harmony, we can note some ranging from countless stateless societies (such as the Pawnee or the BaMbuti) to numerous Buddhist or Christian monastic orders. The early1900s alone saw the rise of the Rastafari in Jamaica (based on voluntary simplicity known as *livity* and *Ital living*), the Catholic Worker Movement ("in which one did without the superfluidities and luxuries in order to ensure that there was enough to share"), and Gandhian economics as espoused by the brothers Joseph and Bharatan Kumarappa (see Corazza and Victus 2015; Edmonds 2003; McKanan 2008: 13). The latter Kumarappa coined the term *villagism* to describe an alternative to capitalism that centered on local production-consumption and communal sharing. Kumarappa argued that economic focus on never-ending acquisition distorted and re-shaped actual human tendencies and priorities. Yet, he believed we could reverse that process and foreshadowed the reasoning of the fair trade movement:

> Is cheapness or acquisition of material wealth all that people want? […] Who will be willing, for example, to buy a bracelet which he knows to have been torn from the arm of an innocent child who has been murdered in the process and thrown in the jungle? […] Moral considerations outweigh economic values. If the bracelet were sought to be sold to those who knew how it was obtained, there would hardly be anybody who could be tempted to buy it, however cheap it might be sold. (1946: 110)

Villagism furthermore entailed an economic version of the subsidiarity principle: only that which people absolutely cannot produce locally will they defer to centralized production facilities elsewhere.[15]

Three brief examples of proto-degrowth thought now follow. These three, Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen, Ivan Illich, and *A blueprint for survival* (1972) contributed not only to degrowth but to related fields and propositions such as ecological economics, circular economy, eco-socialism, doughnut economics, the gift economy, Transition movements, social ecology, post-growth, and others).[16] As part of his 'bioeconomic' program, the Romanian-American statistician and economist, Georgescu-Roegen, wrote that "all instruments of war […] should be prohibited completely" and he advocated the immediate sharing of global wealth as well

[14] For related discussion regarding degrowth and ontology, see Buch-Hansen and Nesterova (2021) and Nirmal and Rocheleau (2019). For counters to anthropocentrism, see deep ecology (Naess 1973), ecocentrism (Eckersley 1992), and the less common term 'life-centered' applied to African contexts (Behrens 2014; Densu 2018) as well as Lewis Mumford's neo-luddism (Jiménez and Ramírez 2019: 575), Quaker approaches to economy (Lodenkamper *et al*. 2019), and the eco-activist group Deep Green Resistance who state in their principles: "Civilization, especially industrial civilization, is fundamentally destructive to life on earth. Our task is to create a life-centered resistance movement that will dismantle industrial civilization by any means necessary" (DGR 2020).

[15] Despite his pioneering work, Bharatan Kumarappa and villagism do not seem to have received any attention in degrowth literature.

[16] For a convenient chart providing a historical overview of circularity/degrowth-related thought, see Calisto Friant (2020: 7). For a similarly convenient overview of degrowth background, ideas, and reception, see Weiss and Cattaneo (2017: 228).

as an end to addiction to "extravagant cravings for luxuries and even many conveniences" (1975: 377; 1993: 200).

Ivan Illich, Catholic priest from Austria, held similar views. Inspired, in part, by Joseph Kumarappa, he believed that we needed a radical paradigm shift in order to transform our current society into one compliant with human and ecological needs (Corazza and Victus 2015: 207). Conventional economic theories, however, whether capitalist or socialist, hindered these vital insights. Illich wrote: "Just as the legendary inquisitor refused to look through Galileo's telescope, so most modern economists refuse to look at an analysis that might displace the conventional center of their economic system" (1978: 9). While beneficial for profits and economic growth, a consumption-oriented society reduced overall happiness. The development paradigm meant that all over the world, "plastic had replaced pottery, carbonated beverages had replaced water, Valium replaced chamomile tea, and records replaced guitars" (Ibid). Much like Georgescu-Roegen, Illich saw addiction to materialism and "proliferation of commodities" as key components in a debilitating and destructive system (Ibid: 11). In contrast, he advocated "useful unemployment" and articulated a vision of "convivial" technology (shareable, repairable, user-friendly, adjustable, and locally produced tools) that could serve rather than confine or control us (Ibid: 3).

Finally, the influential text, *A blueprint for survival*, similarly described a dour outlook for the economic growth model and proposed a broad counter approach. In a 41-page text that addressed a wide range of inter-related issues (ranging from mental health, crime, and alcoholism to pollution, resource management, and epidemics), the authors described industrial society as a bull in a china shop with "the single difference that a bull with half the information about the properties of china as we have about those of ecosystems would probably try and adapt its behaviour to its environment rather than the reverse" (Goldsmith *et al*. 1972: 4). Lacking this sensibility, *Homo sapiens industrialis* would soon reduce the world "to rubble in the shortest possible time" (Ibid). They argued that this scenario resulted, in part, from a fragmentary worldview rather than conceiving of life "as a totality" and they blamed our trajectory toward disaster upon hierarchical organizations and the myth that "economic expansion is essential for survival and is the best possible index of progress and well-being" (Ibid: 5). A better guide, they proposed, would involve "minimum disruption of ecological processes", "maximum conservation of materials and energy", and a social system geared toward enjoyment (rather than restriction) (Ibid: 8). Drawing inspiration from indigenous stateless societies where "[t]here are no kings, presidents, or even chiefs, no courts of law, prisons or police force", *A blueprint* called for a "society made up of decentralised, self-sufficient communities, in which people work near their homes, have the responsibility of governing themselves, of running their schools, hospitals, and welfare services" (Ibid: 35, 20). The authors also touched on indigenous spirituality, conceptions of sanctity, and egalitarian social organization as counterweights to "unchecked economic and demographic growth" (Ibid: 38).

Related developments

Related movements, often viewed as kindred spirits in degrowth and political ecology literature, include Environmental Justice (EJ), Buen Vivir, and Ubuntu (Anguelovski 2015; Gudynas 2015; Ramose 2015). Environmental Justice usually traces back to Warren County, North Carolina in the early 1980s although recent scholarship has traced it farther back (e.g., Berkley 2011; Rector 2018).[17] Nevertheless, in 1982, Benjamin Chavis, Jr., a leading minister of the United Churches of Christ (UCC), former political prisoner, and later head of the NAACP, helped spark the EJ movement when he reportedly (re)coined the term 'environmental racism' during a protest blockade of the Warren County toxic PCB waste dump.[18] In 1992, the EJ movement produced

[17] At least as early as 1970, the term 'environmental justice' referred to occupational safety issues and at least by 1977 or 1980 the term carried a meaning closer to how people often think of it today, yet without the emphasis on racial justice (see Bond 1977; Page 1970; Petulla 1980).

[18] Many have credited Chavis with coining the term 'environmental racism' in the 1980s. For example, Mohai *et al.* (2009: 406) incorrectly claimed that Chavis defined 'environmental racism' in 1982 (a claim repeated by others) when the cited definition seems to come from the early 1990s (see Bullard 1993: 3 and Lazarus 2000: 257). In fact, Adjoa Aiyetoro (then Carolyn Burrow), former executive director of the National Conference of Black Lawyers, coined the term 'environmental racism' in 1970 to describe phenomena such as inadequate housing, overcrowding, and lead poisoning that disproportionately affected blacks in St. Louis (Burrow 1970). Students for a Democratic Society, too, used the term 'environmental racism' although more ambiguously and in relation to treatment of Native Americans (SDS 1973: 64).

a manifesto which affirmed "the sacredness of Mother Earth, ecological unity and the interdependence of all species, and the right to be free from ecological destruction" and concluded with a call to "make personal and consumer choices to consume as little of Mother Earth's resources and to produce as little waste as possible" (Madison *et al*. 1992). Although initially led by Black Churches in the U.S., the EJ movement has since spread globally (Bullard 2021; Holifield 2001; Martínez-Alier 2012; Pulido and De Lara 2018).

Buen Vivir ("a fulfilled life, which can only be achieved by deep relationships within a community") emerged in the 2000s as a concept in academia but it draws from longstanding South American indigenous peoples' traditions (Gudynas 2015: 202; also see Kothari *et al*. 2014). Buen Vivir aims to translate the concept *sumak kawsay/suma qamaña* from Quechua and Aymara respectively.[19] *Sumak/suma* means approximately 'beautiful' and 'plentitude' while *kawsay/qamaña* refers to life but in a dynamic sense connoting movement (Brown and McCowan 2018: 318). It refers to an indigenous ideal of harmonious and complementary coexistence with nature rather than a dualistic distinction between 'humans' and 'nature' (Ibid). Paradigmatically distinct from dominant socio-economic regimes, Buen (Con)Vivir "radically criticizes different types of conventional development, foundations both conceptual and practical, as well as its institutions and legitimising discourses" (Gudynas 2015: 202).

As with Buen Vivir, the Nguni Bantu/Xhosa term *Ubuntu* counters dualist separations of 'humans' from 'nature' by conceptualizing people as embedded in relationships. The expression *ubuntu ungamntu ngabanye abantu*, which typically translates into English as "a person is a person through other people", implies an interdependent conception of personhood and corresponds with social practices such as gift economy, sharing, land conservation, respect, and care for nature through "non-enclosed" and "non-monetized" use of the commons (Shumba 2011: 85-86). It can also manifest in smaller, personal forms such that if "I see a tree, I know I am not a tree, but [I know] that tree and I participate in the same life" and therefore "one cannot cut down a tree for aesthetic reasons, i.e. to make a place look nice or to see a few feet away" (Sindima 1991: 6, 8). According to this value criterion, plant (and presumably animal) life has both inherent value and a value higher than that of human aesthetics. Such "bondedness to others and nature" implies knowing "that sharing is the 'organizing logic' that holds creation together" (Ibid: 9, 16). Grounded more in pragmatic routine than abstract ideas, "Ubuntu is not learnt through theory, but through practical socialization" and its "relational ontology" could "be of importance in a Degrowth philosophy" (Hoeft 2018: 16, 29; also see Behrens 2014). Furthermore, Ubuntu "is the belief that motion is the principle of being" and that "through motion, all beings exist in an incessant complex flow of interactions and change" in a comprehensive appreciation for "life in its wholeness" (Ramose 2015: 212).[20]

Less often does one find African American ecology-related traditions, groups, and movements in degrowth and political ecology literature and almost nothing about John Africa and MOVE with whom they share certain commonalities with black American radical traditions.

Only recently have John Africa and MOVE garnered attention in ecological and anti-growth contexts (e.g. Moise 2020; Roane 2020; Shipley and Taylor 2019; Taylor 2022). David Naguib Pellow, in his volume on Critical Environmental Justice (CEJ) Studies, devoted a few paragraphs to MOVE whom he described as a clear "example of an early EJ organization" and an "early influence" on "both earth and animal liberation movements" (2018: 103-104). Finally, a recent master's thesis observed: "The motivations of the iconoclastic MOVE leader were certainly driving past the Naess principle of 'biogenic egalitarianism' and were more in line with the philosophy of his Primitivist contemporaries" (Cranston 2021: 47). Yet, despite numerous differences

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Common usage of the term came much later and some also used the term *toxic racism*. Originally, "protesters in Warren County referred to 'environmental civil rights' [and] the concept of 'environmental racism' only became commonplace after the publication of the United Church of Christ's 1987 report *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States*" (Rector 2018: 65). The UCC report, however, used the term 'environmental justice' (which took another 6 or 7 years to catch on) not 'environmental racism' (UCC 1987: ix). According to a Google Ngram search, most uses of 'environmental racism' took place between 1992 and 2007.

[19] According to José María Tortosa, 'Buen Convivir', a *shared* good life, would more accurately translate the concept from its indigenous origins in *sumak kawsay* and *suma qamaña* (Tortosa 2009: 1).

[20] Examining Ubuntu in relation to Buen Vivir and degrowth, Aram Ziai wrote that, although many Africans may feel "sympathetic to the concept, it is hardly anywhere linked to social movements, but treated generally as a question of ethics …[and] has nowhere been as effective a political concept as Buen Vivir in Latin America" (Ziai 2015: 148).

in their style, circumstances, language, and approach there seems more paradigmatic commonality between MOVE people and indigenous (including African) groups such as Buen Vivir and Ubuntu than predominantly European/white movements such as degrowth or academic-oriented approaches such as political ecology.

That said, one need not erroneously ghettoize John Africa and MOVE into categories that misrepresent them such as 'black liberation'—something outsiders have tended to do (e.g. Pilkington 2021; Sovacool and Dunlap 2022). To the contrary, MOVE has regularly found common cause with predominantly non-black groups such as the Animal Liberation Front, the American Indian Movement (AIM), Earth First!, anarchists, and hardcore punks. Furthermore, MOVE people have insisted that they work for the liberation of *all* life—not just one racial group or class (Africa 1994b).

3. MOVE background

First, a little context from the time period, which is not commonly cited in degrowth/political literature. In 1970, Nathan Hare coined the terms *black ecology* and *white ecology* to describe the very different ecological circumstances, concerns, and subsequent strategies of black and white Americans and, the same year, Carolyn Burrow published the pioneering article entitled "Environmental racism" about conditions in St. Louis (Hare 1970; Burrow 1970).[21] In the late 1960s and 1970s African Americans and other minority groups and worker unions mobilized around various intersections of (largely urban) ecological issues, civil rights, health concerns, and economic equality. These ranged from A. Philip Randolph's *A 'Freedom Budget' for all Americans* (which, among other things, called for public transportation, clean air and water, equal opportunity and economic growth) to Martin Luther King, Jr.'s support for the Memphis Sanitation Workers' strike in 1968 (Berkley 2011; Randolph 1967: 9). In a matter of urban ecology, one of the first campaigns of the Black Panther Party (BPP) demanded a traffic light at a dangerous street crossing in Oakland (Austin 2006: 63).[22] In response to racism, police violence, poverty, and colonial occupation, the grassroots-based AIM formed in 1968. In 1969 and onward, the Young Lords Organization in New York engaged in campaigns around urban health and lead poisoning (Enck-Wanzer 2010; 4, 34). Also in 1969, former sharecropper Fannie Lou Hamer founded the community-supported agricultural cooperative Freedom Farms (White 2017). The United Auto Workers (UAW) union helped fund Environmental Action (co-founded by Denis Hayes and coordinator of Earth Day) which, in turn, sponsored and supported events such as the Black Survival performances in Saint Louis in 1970 and the United Auto Workers' environmental meeting in Black Lake, Michigan in 1976 (Gioielli 2019; Rector 2018). This period also saw publications relevant to black ecology and/or animal liberation such as Frances Moore Lappé's *Diet for a small planet* (1971), *Dick Gregory's natural diet for folks who eat* (1973), Alice Walker's first works including *Revolutionary Petunias and other poems* (1973), Peter Singer's conception of 'Animal liberation' (1973 and 1975), Lenwood Davis's *Ecology of Blacks in the inner city* (1975), and "Apartheid ecology in America" by Terry Jones (1975). In 1976, the Animal Liberation Front formed in the UK, later spreading to the U.S. in 1979. We do not know whom or to which extent any of these people or events inspired John Africa (because he never cited his influences) but they help display the broader social context surrounding MOVE's formation.

We only know that John Africa co-founded MOVE in Philadelphia around 1972. The name 'John Africa' first appeared as the author of a photocopied book entitled *The Book* (Boyette and Boyette 1989: 35-38). The text, written in all-caps, served as the first installment in a series of John Africa's revelations, or 'Guidelines.' Vincent Leaphart, who initially went by Vince Africa to initiates, gradually shifted into the role of John Africa whose teaching purported to provide solutions to all of the world's problems. *The Book* covered a range of topics under 71 headings ranging from "Scientific lawlessness", "Animal experimentation" and "The Calendar" to

[21] Note: Hare did not capitalize 'black.' Likewise, this article capitalizes the term where others do so (as Opperman's *radical Black ecology*) but otherwise does not.

[22] The BPP also established a variety of survival programs "ranging from the provision of free shoes and education to land banking and the school breakfast program" (Patel 2012: 2; see also Heynen 2009). Although many people often may not recognize urban ecology *as* ecology nor associate the BPP with environmentalism, BPP co-founder Huey Newton celebrated "the unity of nature" and described "Mother Nature and Mother Earth" as "universal models for all creation" in his writings on intercommunalism, a black nationalist federalism later adopted by anarchists such as Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin (Newton 2011: 311, 314; Ervin 1994).

"Racism", "Language", and "So-called ecology." Although MOVE members quickly recalled virtually all copies of *The Book* (when the initial distribution did not elicit the desired reception), MOVE people continued to propagate their message but more selectively (keeping some teachings secret). The teaching amounted to a radical naturalism that seemed to extend the Ubuntu value criterion into one that placed a greater burden of justification on the one harming nature, and it transformed the criterion into a guide for activism. It rejected in principle *all* technology (except when necessary to serve the mission of abolishing technology) and advocated total non-intervention in relation to nature (except when necessary to defend nature from 'the system'). Thus, instead of a value criterion which still left some room for potentially arbitrary harm to nature (just not aesthetics), John Africa raised the standard to a criterion of necessity: no more harm to nature than necessary (and he did not regard technology as necessary except to undo technology). Achieving these aims called for people to work actively toward dismantling the system that routinely violates the necessity criterion leading to societal and ecological ills of various sorts. According to a booklet distributed by MOVE:

> MOVE's work is to stop industry from poisoning the air, the water, the soil, and to put an end to the enslavement of life—people, animals, *any* form of life. The purpose of *John Africa*'s revolution is to show people how corrupt, rotten, criminally enslaving this system is, show people through *John Africa*'s teaching, the truth, that this system is the cause of all their problems (alcoholism, drug addiction, unemployment, wife abuse, child pornography, every problem in the world) and to set the example of revolution for people to follow when they realize how they've been oppressed, repressed, duped, tricked by this system, this government and see the need to rid themselves of this cancerous system as MOVE does. (*25 Years on the MOVE* 1997: 3; emphasis in original)

As early as 1973, MOVE members began public demonstrations. According to police surveillance of MOVE, which inadvertently documented their pioneering work in 1974, "MOVE has picketed the Zoo and circus because the animals 'are in cages against their will.' They see a connection between a society which takes its children to view caged animals for pleasure and a society which can indiscriminately bomb Cambodia" (Philadelphia Police 1974: 3).[23] Also, in 1974, MOVE members gained notoriety by handcuffing talk show host Mike Douglas to a chair in retaliation for Douglas having tranquilized a chimpanzee on an earlier show (Fox 1974: 4).

So began a long series of arrests of MOVE members largely on charges of public profanity. Arrests of MOVE members jumped from 33 in 1973 to 142 in 1974. MOVE people would regularly use their arrests as opportunities to loudly preach their message to the court (and then later to their cellmates in jail and prison). This behavior would often lead to additional charges. Exacerbating the volatile situation, city authorities filed a civil suit against MOVE regarding their home for "gross violations of the Health, Housing, Fire, Zoning and Safety Code" (Ebram 2019: 349). In addition to shutting off electricity, MOVE people shared their home with dozens of formerly stray animals: "Of course it smelled like a farm. We kept 50 or 60 dogs" (Cox 1985: 172). Confrontations between MOVE and police escalated significantly during 1976 and onward, culminating in the police raid on their home on August 8, 1978 that left an officer dead and wounded people on both sides. A judge sentenced nine of the arrested MOVE members to 30-100 years in prison for murder and other charges. Initially, according to one study, "most of the [media] texts about pre-Conflict MOVE represented the collective in favorable manners" until about 1976 (Ekeogu 2014: 73). However, this soon gave way to increasingly negative coverage after the 1978 confrontation and, prior to MOVE's next major confrontation with police in the mid-1980s, "the press depicted MOVE members as the 'other,' an uncivilized form of subhuman creature that needed to be tamed, thus justifying the actions of the police and other city officials" (Sanders and Jeffries 2013: 583).

In 1981, police arrested John Africa and Mo Africa on bomb-making charges. Defending both of them, John Africa spoke directly to the jury and they acquitted him of all charges. During these years, MOVE gained a notable adherent named Mumia Abu-Jamal, a former Black Panther and radio journalist who, in late 1981,

[23] MOVE's demonstrations against circuses and zoos appeared years prior to similar actions by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) in the 1980s.

ended up in an altercation with a police officer who, he claimed, had abused Abu-Jamal's brother during a traffic stop (Amnesty 2000). By the end of the evening, the police officer lay dead and Abu-Jamal lay nearly dead (both with gunshot wounds). A trial ridden with controversy concluded with the death penalty for Abu-Jamal. MOVE members then placed their singular focus on releasing MOVE people (Abu-Jamal and the 'MOVE 9') from prison.

Yet, their increasingly bold actions, often unbearable for neighbors (such as the installation of loudspeakers on the side of their home), ultimately led to a new confrontation with police. Sparked by complaints from MOVE's neighbors, police surrounded MOVE's home and headquarters on May 13, 1985. When MOVE people refused to leave, police fired more than 10,000 rounds of ammunition into the building and dropped a bomb on the bunker MOVE people had built on the roof. The ensuing fire burned down the entire city block, leaving more than 250 people homeless, and killing 11 MOVE people including 5 children. An independent commission described the deaths of the children as "unjustifiable homicides" in an ill-planned police operation yet no politician or city official suffered legal consequences as a result (PSIC 1986). Instead, Ramona Africa, the only adult survivor of the bombing received a seven-year sentence on charges of 'rioting' and, upon her release from prison in 1992 helped the remaining members of MOVE re-organize through her role as MOVE's Minister of Communication.

Several factors seem to have led to MOVE acquiring a global impact including: (1) the 1978 confrontation which garnered national headlines and the 1985 bombing receiving headlines across the world; (2) Abu-Jamal's case ultimately launched him into the global spotlight with Nelson Mandela, Amnesty International, the European Parliament, the Beastie Boys, Public Enemy, Rage Against the Machine, and tens of thousands of activists across the world calling for a new trial. Through numerous radio programs and books that Abu-Jamal penned in prison (with pieces such as "Life's Religion" and "The Wisdom of John Africa"), his voice helped give the teaching of John Africa a global reach; and (3) various documentaries have covered the story of MOVE and Abu-Jamal such as Let the Fire Burn (Osder 2013), Mumia: Long Distance Revolutionary (Vittoria 2012), and 40 Years a Prisoner (Oliver 2020).

Much of the energy of MOVE members and their supporters since 1978 have gone toward working for the release of fellow members in prison (now all released after more than 40 years behind bars) as well as Abu-Jamal (who remains incarcerated).[24]

4. John Africa: ontology

Regarding ontology, John Africa essentially taught "*all* is *one*" (MOVE 1975: 87; emphasis in original). He meant this quite literally, not metaphorically:

> There is no reason to search for self, to look for self, for if you do, self will only become more elusive, eventually lost…There is only *one* style of life, *one* race, *one* species of animal, *one* kind of marine life, *one* kind of plant life, the race of *life*, the species of *natural* law, and so it is with everything… *Self* is race, is species, is plant life, is sea life, for when self is violated, *all* is violated. (MOVE 1975: 87; emphasis in original)

[24] The Pennsylvania parole board released all MOVE people from prison (except Abu-Jamal) by early 2021. Court rulings from 2001 to 2011 eventually commuted Abu-Jamal's death sentence to a life sentence. Four of the original 'MOVE 9' have passed away (Merle and Phil Africa in prison and Delbert and Chuck Africa shortly after their release). Consuewella Dotson Africa, sentenced separately from the MOVE 9 in 1978, served 16 years in prison and passed away in June 2021 shortly after it came to light in a well-publicized scandal that Princeton University and the University of Pennsylvania had stored and displayed the bones of her daughter, killed in the 1985 police bombing (Guardian Staff 2021 and Roberts 2021). In the summer of 2021, MOVE underwent a tumultuous rupture when more than a dozen members and supporters either publically rejected current "MOVE leaders" (specifically Alberta Wicker Africa and Sue Levino Africa) or left the organization with a litany of accusations pointed toward Alberta and Sue such as financial crime, authoritarianism, anti-homosexual discrimination, child abuse, and complicity in the murder of Alberta's ex-husband John Gilbride in 2002 (see Africa 2021; Hardy 2021; Nark 2021; Pilkington 2021; Price 2021). While remaining far beyond the scope of this article, these serious issues and accusations warrant attention. They do not, however, seem to directly impact the premise here regarding ideas posited by John Africa and MOVE prior to 1985 or their relation to degrowth thinking and praxis. I myself got involved as a MOVE sympathizer from about 1992-2002 and distanced myself after the vicious campaign against Gilbride ended in his still-unresolved killing.

In this way, John Africa "flatten[ed] the ontological differences between humans, animals, plant life, water, and so on, as all equal manifestations of Life" (Shipley and Taylor 2019: 28). This implied a literal understanding and identification of one's self and one's self-interests as identical with that of all life (which, according to John Africa, also included water, rocks, and the force that makes life possible). John Africa referred to this as "the first reference" and "the government of self." In contrast, technological society based itself on "the second reference" or "the system" (science, economics, bureaucracy, industry, philosophy, culture, etc.). In the first reference, all life exists as one, a single and sacred unity: "All of life is connected, bound together by the law, a law that gives just as much value to an animal's life as any other" and "when one form of life is affected all of life is affected" (Edward Africa 1994b: 9; Janet Africa 1995: 4). In contrast, the second reference falsely and violently divided existential unity into separate parts, an act that ultimately led to hierarchy, inequality, exploitation, and poverty—all facilitated by technology which separated people from 'natural' thinking, instincts, and nature itself.[25] As John Africa told readers, from MOVE's perspective or "framework of one", (i.e. monism/oneness), "it is this very act, this split, attempted separation by man, trying to cut himself off from nature that is the basis of your schizophrenia" (MOVE 1975: 24).

This schizophrenia, or severance, has led people to see animals, plants, and nature as products to exploit, contorting natural materials (such as metals) into technology that exacerbates the destructive process "with money as the motivator for its creation" (Debbie Africa 1999a: 4). Rather than embody 'freedom', governments built prisons which characterize the epitome of civilization. John Africa taught that prisons serve to intimidate people from protesting against injustice and this fear functioned as physical and mental poison in their own right. He saw prisons as equally violent as war: "prison draws the life from people; just as bombs drain the blood from people" (John Africa, cited by Chuck Africa 1998: 4). People needed to unlearn the mentality that produced prisons: "only the person that *believes* in prison can be imprisoned, because a person that believes in prisons will accept the conditions *of* prison, […] it is your *acceptance* of those bars that has you imprisoned" (John Africa 2001: 10; emphasis in original).

John Africa infused undomesticated oneness with a sense of sanctity which, when violated by separateness, required defense: the same system that polluted nature and harmed animals also debilitated people through physical, social, and cognitive co-dependency with the very system that oppressed them. In his 1981 speech to the court, he said:

> You see, when you start threatening industry, you got a fight on your hands and we are threatening industry and they know that. […] Don't you see? If you took this thing all the way, all the way, you would have clean air, clean water, clean soil and be quenched of industry. But, you see, they don't want that. They can't have that. Everything you do, everything you know, everything you see in this courtroom is designed by this system for the economics of this system. […] What I'm saying is everybody has been made dependent. Dependent. Everybody. (United States 1981: 153-156)

John Africa's ontology if understood and implemented, would entail a sort of rewilding of the human soul wherein human life would revert to 'natural law' akin to the instinctive social orders of ant colonies, flocks of birds, or herds of wild dogs rather than the hierarchies and technocracies of modern society. Yet, unlike anarcho-primitivists who may argue for the immediate dissolution of society, John Africa taught that "many hundreds of years of degeneration and imposition will take many hundreds of years to correct" (Dubside and Africa 2021: 70). In this sense, John Africa's gradualist approach to primitivism seems therefore to more closely resemble degrowth in terms of short-term vision than the anarcho-primitivism of, say, John Zerzan (2002).

5. John Africa: ethical praxis

[25] While collapsing the human-nature distinction, John Africa retained a culture-nature distinction (associating the former with 'the system'). For a critique of the culture-nature divide, see Uggla (2010).

Instead of theory, John Africa emphasized ethical praxis as the absolute priority and he described this praxis as 'revolution'.[26] As he phrased it, "application don't need no conversation" and "revolution is not a *word* but a[n] *application*" (John Africa cited respectively by Delbert Africa 1994a: 1 and Phil Africa 1999c: 8).

For purposes of clarity, one could divide John Africa's primary ethical imperative (to embody and exemplify the unity of life) into four sub-categories: (1) *defend life* (e.g. caring for animals); (2) *oppose injustice and inequality* (e.g. speaking out against oppressive institutions and hierarchy), (3) *live sober and simply* (e.g. quitting addictions, striving toward a raw food diet, home-birthing, living without electricity), and (4) *educate self and others* ("putting out information" as MOVE terms it).

We can see examples of defending life in their ad hoc animal sanctuary and refusal to use pesticide against rats and cockroaches (Assefa and Wahrhaftig 1988: 20-21; Boyette and Boyette 1989: 42). We can see examples of opposing injustice when they organized numerous demonstrations at police stations, zoos, pet stores, and universities. We can see their commitment to equality in their public stance regarding their internal organization and rejection of leaders. Examples of sober and simple living manifested primarily through their egalitarian urban commune (much like aforementioned nowtopias).[27] The last category of ethical praxis (education), appeared most prominently through MOVE's public speeches, demonstrations, and literature, including their newspaper *First Day* and, more recently, their website.

In all areas of life, John Africa served as an example for behavior and living guideline for MOVE people. According to Ramona Africa:

> John Africa lived with and like MOVE people. He was not the kind of person who lived in a mansion and collected all the money while his 'followers' were poor and scraping by and living in the ghetto. I had more clothes than John Africa. …There was never a time, no matter of how busy he might have been coordinating something, or how tired he might have been working on something, you could walk into the room and John Africa would say, "How are you doing?" "Oh I am fine." And he would say, "No, you're not," and he would drop what he was doing and start talking to us, and it would come out that something was bothering us. John Africa didn't run away from the work with Life and for Life. No matter what it took, and it is that example to the commitment to Life, including to his MOVE brothers and sisters, that allows us to continue today. (Taylor and Shipley 2017: 188-189)

In the words of John Africa's niece: "He never had any technology. He didn't care about clothes or cars or money in his pocket. Any money he got, he gave away. […] He was bent on protecting all life. If he saw a fly struggling in a puddle of water, he'd take the time to get it out so it wouldn't drown" (Cox 1985: 169). John Africa strove to make this type of sensitivity a dominant and driving feature of MOVE people's attitude toward animals, one another, and all life.

A brief overview of life in the MOVE commune, or 'family' as they often described themselves, should suffice to illustrate their ethics in action. MOVE men and women shared in the labor of physical work and parenting (Ibid: 237). Although they married, they did not have weddings (nor did they celebrate birthdays, conventional holidays, or even differentiate between weekdays and weekends). During the homebirths, MOVE women used neither medication nor painkillers. John Africa also taught that both abortion and artificial forms of birth control went against life and natural law. As long as humans sterilized animals, he said, "baby humans will be disallowed to generate in the womb and called personal preference" (Africa 2000: 1). Likewise, they did not sterilize the dozens of animals in their house. MOVE's approach to sobriety functioned more like a 12-Step program that empowered each person to address addiction at their own pace than the all-or-nothing rigidity of 'straight edge' living. Personal "violations of the body" provided their own guidelines if a person paid attention (such as a hangover after drunkenness or sickness caused by eating improperly): "John Africa taught

[26] His stance seems reminiscent of liberation theology's insistence on first taking practical stances on the side of the poor and oppressed before theorizing about theology and exegesis (see, e.g., Boff and Boff 1987: 22).

[27] Indeed, the ascetic and communal character of MOVE's early days took on some attributes of a monastic (and monist) order yet devoted not only to God and personal improvement but also to radical social change.

MOVE people to interpret some of their bodies' signals—especially pain—as divine punishment for violating their bodies" (Evans 2020: 51). This cognitive rewilding and commitment to sobriety did not come easily. As John Africa's niece, Sharon Sims Cox, described it:

> A distortion would be anything people were addicted to—from chicken to cars. Some people moved at a faster pace than others. Some were more addicted to cooked food or clothes. […] But nobody was forced. As long as everybody was being honest about trying to get rid of distortions and showing a decrease rather than an increase, it was all right. John Africa would say an addiction was an addiction. It was hard to understand that ice cream was no different than dope—until I tried to give up ice cream for a month and went through withdrawal. (Cox 1985: 172)

Rather than organize eating according to a schedule, John Africa encouraged members to listen to their own bodies and respond accordingly. "We never really sat down to meals. The food sat around in big bags or cartons and whenever we were hungry we ate" (Ibid). They didn't send children to school because "reading and writing is what got the system where it is today" (Ibid: 171). Instead, members homeschooled children with the teaching of John Africa. Their mornings typically began around dawn with long runs in the park. Some of them would put bricks in their backpacks as they ran. Then they returned home to walk the dogs (without leashes) followed by car wash labor, chopping firewood, acquiring food, performing child care, demonstrations, and any other tasks to tend to. If any internal conflicts or problems arose, MOVE people would resolve them through communal meetings (Ibid: 173). This type of praxis served to show MOVE people what it could look and feel like to live in unity as a group, exemplifying the broader unity of life.

6. John Africa: semiotics

One of the least known aspects of John Africa's strategy entails his grassroots decolonial semiotics which, as with everything else he organized, he developed with virtually no formal education, a working class background, and minimal resources. While John Africa never used the term 'semiotics', any examination of his work reveals that he "distinctly weighed, and duly considered" words in order to "afford us another sort of logic and critic", exposing the manipulative use of existing signs and implicit biases that permeate dominant constructs. In contrast, MOVE language would accurately depict life/nature as the fundamental source and essence of our existence as well as the single priority around which our cosmology ought to turn. This semiotics built upon the aforementioned distinction between first and second reference (which deceptively imitated the first). Similar to Illich's remark on how "plastic had replaced pottery", John Africa stated, "Science is a trick. Man will see the air and build a fan, see the sun and invent a light bulb, see a bird and build a plane" (Anderson and Hevenor 1987: 6). John Africa taught that "a term is simply an expression of principle" so that ideally the definition of a term comes through its implementation, its action in correspondence with the first reference, rather than an abstract representation of it (MOVE 1975: 47). In this sense, John Africa privileged what ancient Greeks categorized as 'natural signs' (such as dark clouds and smoke) whose significance seems self-explanatory (signifying impending rain or fire) in contrast to 'conventional signs' such as the words 'cloud' or 'smoke' which could ostensibly signify anything (see Clarke 1990: 2-3 and Deely 1994: 155). Understanding it in this light, we might regard John Africa's semiotics as a form of semiotic naturalism (bordering on semiotic nihilism) because "meaning is clearly inherent in self, giving no reason to invent any synthetic concepts" (MOVE 1975: 97).

John Africa argued that "the real danger in an unnatural style of life is the very real fact that it must invent its own terms, concepts, and so-called meanings for those concepts. Language need not be fancy, it need only be clear, for the power of the word is in understanding, not in complexity…" (Ibid: 24). Much like how industry would deceptively pollute nature by building factories for "air fresheners" or "water purifiers", the "retarding disease of academia" would produce new terms that only brought more confusion: "Every attempted description is invented by you, your mantality, as it is impossible to conceive what you have no concept of, for

you are the victim of your own illusions" (Ibid: 42, 46).[28] "Life has only one reference", John Africa said, "and it ain't a word, it is an activity" (United States v. John Africa *et al*. 1981). Hence, the name 'MOVE' refers to the literal and eternal movement of life (note the similarity here to the Ubuntu idea that *motion* "is the principle of being").[29] This connects intimately with MOVE's self-designation as 'revolutionary' which "means to move, generate, be right. So *anything* you do to be right, to be healthy is a revolutionary act" (Janine Africa in James 1999: 15; emphasis in original).

We might outline John Africa's semiotics as building on certain ethical and philosophical themes such as justice, simplicity, equality, unity, and continuity. These themes underlie semiotic strategies such as *decolonial deconstruction* (critically exposing dominant signs),[30] *clarification and/or repurposing* (such as giving words specific definitions or reframing and redefining them), *grammatical interventions* (such as reluctance to use periods in sentences), *semantic qualifiers* (phrases such as "so-called" that highlight the distinction between signs and that which signs refer to), *abolition of numbers* (privileging literal oneness), and *narrative deployment* (weaving various semiotic interventions into larger stories about existence, MOVE, society, and nature).

As an example of decolonial deconstruction, John Africa reversed conventional definitions of 'profanity': "How can anyone get upset about a four letter word […] and sanction man's raping, plundering and murdering his way around the globe?" (MOVE 1975: 41). Real profanity, according to John Africa, included automobile, steel, coal, iron, copper, and rubber industries that stripped and tore "all manner of raw materials […] from earth's body" (Ibid). Violent *behavior*, not words, constituted profanity and such behavior *required* profane words to describe it accurately: "Your life style *is* a four letter word, a motherfucker because you are fucking up mother earth, and if you're raping, ravishing, plundering your way through mother earth, then you are a motherfucker" (Ibid; emphasis in original). In accordance with this logic, MOVE people never decried police as 'pigs' (whom they equated with "life") but would regularly call them 'motherfuckers' (which they equated with 'the system'). Likewise, John Africa taught that positively-charged words often veil destructive actions:

> A loving world can not create a hating example or the false disposition that masquerade[s] hatred, but a hating world can create nothing but hatred and will create a *word* called love to disguise [their] position… just as [the word] *love* is justification for hatred, *patriotism* is the justification for killing. (John Africa 2000: 6; emphasis in original)

John Africa also set out to clarify terms and/or repurpose them toward that which he deemed more accurate and life-affirming. Central to his teaching, he re-signified 'life' to reference a host of meanings not conventionally associated with the term (e.g. Mother Nature, eco-systems, all natural phenomena from rocks to the sun, concepts such as truth, eternity, ideals such as strength and unity, the force that makes living possible, etc.) As Mike Africa, Jr. put it: "We don't believe in black, white, red, yellow, dog, cat, horse… we believe in life. Life is one principle, not fifty thousand different categories" (1999b: 11). Similarly, the term 'system' conveyed meaning to MOVE members as the polar opposite (e.g. industry, numbers, deceit, limitedness, division, weakness, domination, etc.). John Africa also repurposed the term *cycle* (a verb) to refer to what most people

[28] 'Mantality' (man + mentality, aka mentality of 'the system') constituted one of MOVE's semiotic innovations. Saussure emphasized the arbitrary nature of signs with no apparent logical reason for a language to designate a particular animal 'dog' in English versus 'hund' in German or Swedish (Daylight 2012: 42-48). In contrast, John Africa emphasized the role of power in sign construction and how specific words or elements of words seemed to privilege elite perspectives or disguise violence and, in response, he used the methods outlined here to expose and/or correct those features.

[29] This linguistic emphasis on both the wholeness and constant movement of life also recalls physicist David Bohm's experiment with language (that he termed 'rheomode') that prioritized verbs to better capture both the universe's non-fragmentary unity, in accordance with the theory of relativity, and, reflecting quantum physics, its fundamental movement (see Bohm 1980; Stamenov 2004).

[30] We may note that John Africa's decolonial semiotics long-preceded later theorists who similarly recognized that signs embodied and implemented the means to "legitimize and justify coloniality" to the degree that "coloniality is embedded in any and every process of signification and in any and every process of knowing; it means that semiosis and epistemology are instruments of the coloniality of signification and of knowledge respectively" (Mignolo 2020: 10).

call *death*: "We didn't use the word 'death' or 'kill' in MOVE. We said 'cycle', which means to go on to another level of life" (Cox 1985: 237).

> Millions of years ago people created the term 'the beginning of life' and because of this idea they began talking about the end of life, which is of course not true. For life ain't a beginning or an end, it ain't a million years, a thousand days, a hundred seconds. It ain't even a term when totally realized. For you see, when people refer to the end of life they're really referring to the beginning of science, for science does have a beginning and it will end. But life will go on as it has gone on. (United States v. John Africa *et al*. 1981: 100-101)

In rejecting the concept of beginnings and endings in regard to nature/life, John Africa clarified that life "ain't even a term when totally realized" meaning that the first reference transcends the ability of language to create a sign that could point to it. At the same time, it equates life with eternity and ties it to the conception of wholeness and unbroken unity.

Alongside macro-interventions, MOVE's language use reoriented the ways that members thought of their home and its space: "We didn't use lifestyle [system] names like living room or dining room or playroom. We had an exercise room because that was necessary. We did everything in that room: ate, had study sessions, meetings. The rest of the house had no furniture" (Cox 1985: 172).

Grammatical interventions (such as writing in all-caps or avoiding periods) took place mostly in texts and coincided with a concern to align all aspects of language with John Africa's monistic and egalitarian philosophy. Semantic qualifiers such as 'so-called', 'what seems like', or 'what people label' played a more obvious and prevalent role by enabling MOVE people to mark off 'the system's' language and frame it as questionable. For example, we can see in this interview response how Ramona Africa both normalized MOVE belief and de-normalized conventional authority: "You believe in the air that's filling your lungs right now. Everybody believes in MOVE's beliefs, it's all-encompassing. It encompasses all life, every living being from an ant, a beetle, a bug, up to *what people call* the President" (Marcotti and Gleit 1993: 3; emphasis added). The phrase "what people call" both challenged the presumed legitimacy that accompanies the title of President (i.e. second reference) and highlighted its semiotic and socially constructed character distinct from the reality, the first reference, which, in this case, referred to the air that we *breathe*.

Regarding John Africa's opposition to numbers, Cox stated: "Two leads to wars, race riots. You can't fight with one. Numbers, like letters, are dangerous" (Cox 1985: 172). According to John Africa, numbers led to the 'hallucination' of separateness that led to perceptions of superiority, inferiority, and hierarchy which, in turn, have led to inequality and war. Within the first reference, nothing exists except unity or 'one'. We can see how MOVE people would apply this, for example, when Alphonso Africa (Q) questioned Louise Africa (A) before the court in 1981 (United States vs. John Africa, *et al.*):

> Q: Will you tell us how old you are?
> A: Excuse me.
> Q: Will you tell us your age?
> A: One.
> Q: According to the system.
> A: 51.

To an outsider, Louise's initial answer of "one" may sound like '1' the *number*, but in MOVE language 'one' signifies a total *refutation* of numbers. Like 'life', 'one' functions as a semiotic marker for truth, unity, and the whole of existence and, in contrast to '1' the number, "truth is something you can *not* add to, subtract from, multiply, or divide" (MOVE 1975: 47; emphasis in original). Courtroom exercises as cited above provided a pragmatic means for MOVE people to demonstrate their newly acquired vocabulary in concrete ways (e.g. by showing unity in the face of adversity).

Although not obvious to outsiders, the total sum of John Africa's ontology, ethical praxis, and semiotics worked together to compose a new paradigm within which new stories evolved that placed MOVE, John Africa, and life (all three semantically interwoven and sometimes identical in MOVE language) at the center of history and relevance. Such narratives ranged from philosophical treatises (as in the above quote about life versus science), their own names, as well as stories about whatever MOVE people did.[31] For example, the shared last name of 'Africa' served at least three semiotic-narrative functions: locating black Africa (not white Europe) as the source of life and wisdom, equalizing all members in a family unit, and providing a new personal identity from which to directly participate and co-create MOVE narratives. Naturally, the tenacity of the MOVE 9 through more than 40 years of incarceration and the bombing in 1985 have woven themselves deeply into the fabric of MOVE identity and narrative. Because his semiotics had implications for praxis at cognitive, personal, communal, and social levels, it seems to constitute, or at least contribute to, a contemporary decolonial paradigm.

7. Concluding thoughts on John Africa and MOVE as pioneers in degrowth

This article has provided a general outline to John Africa's teaching and The MOVE Organization in order to illustrate ways in which John Africa and MOVE served as forgotten pioneers in a degrowth context. Proto-degrowthers, such as Georgescu-Roegen, Illich, and contemporary degrowth advocates, have sought a paradigm shift in order to stem economic expansion, and *A blueprint for survival*, sought a paradigm that conceived of life as an unfragmented totality. John Africa created such a paradigm by collapsing semiotic barriers between 'humans' and 'nature' as well as centering the shared interests of animals, eco-systems, and humans under the rubric of 'life'. Not only did he and MOVE people advocate and practice voluntary simplicity and communal sharing while rejecting economic growth and industrial expansion, they addressed critical issues that degrowth has yet to prioritize.

None of this should imply that John Africa's teaching and practices had no flaws. Indeed, many of his sweeping generalizations lacked nuance, he held a uniquely authoritative and/or authoritarian position among MOVE people, he held irrational prejudice against homosexuals, his views on abortion and birth control seem inconsistent with reproductive rights, and his apparent lack of appreciation for internal dissent and diversity within MOVE likely contributed to its recent rupture (see footnote 23). Yet, regardless of how obvious or grave his failings appear, they need not distract from his hitherto neglected contributions which, so far, nearly all EJ and degrowth studies seem to have overlooked.

We may list some of the contributions of John Africa and MOVE as follows: (1) they not only taught but practiced a form of degrowth in the 1970s; (2) they situated common ground between indigenous peoples (e.g. Buen Vivir, Ubuntu, AIM) and radical Black ecology together with degrowth principles through an ecocentric ontology;[32] (3) in ascribing sacred status to a non-dualist conception of nature, they cultivated an esoteric, experimental, and ethical praxis of existential unity; (4) through a decolonial semiotics, they repurposed existing terms toward emancipatory ends; (5) they connected both degrowth-aligned principles of simplicity and personal health as well as political ecology-oriented concerns of resource management, ecology, social justice, and development to relatively non-prioritized issues within degrowth/political ecology such as addiction, prison abolition, pornography, racism, police violence, and animal liberation; (6) they engaged in sustained, communal resistance to state power through resilient organization and a long-term vision of daily yet gradual 'revolution'; (7) they stitched together a wide variety of degrowth-oriented projects (e.g. simple living, sobriety, co-housing, work-sharing, peace activism, home-birthing, homeschooling, raw food diet, grassroots organizing, anarchism, egalitarianism, composting, rights of nature, and opposition to economic expansion) into an idiosyncratic, decolonial, and life-centered paradigm. Although they did not speak in terms of 'degrowth', 'political ecology', or local resource management, they did challenge the underlying paradigm that informs the terms, language, and priorities of degrowth and political ecology.

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[31] According to Cox, "We never told [the children] fairy tales but told them MOVE tales, all about things that happened in MOVE that would make them laugh" (1985: 236-237).

[32] Also note, in this regard, MOVE's link of Ubuntu-like ethics to social movement activism, otherwise seemingly absent (see footnote 19 above and Ziai 2015).

John Africa's semiotics served as a catalyst for degrowth in the sense that his entire vision aimed toward the gradual dismantling of economic and industrial production while aiming to increase personal welfare, health, and happiness. Furthermore, it seems difficult to fully grasp John Africa's philosophy without applying a semiotic lens and, perhaps, engaging in its praxis. His focus on 'life' as a comprehensive and pro-active sign also helps highlight the arbitrary choice of diagnostic framing inherent in the term 'degrowth'—a sign that seems to point more *away* from economic growth than *toward* an alternative future. As Richter suggested, the term 'degrowth' remains tied to conventional economic ontological presuppositions rather than the radical decoloniality degrowthers strive for.

John Africa and James Lovelock shared much: a distaste for school combined with a love for learning, an appreciation of Earth as a living organism, and a birthday. But they did not share dreams or destiny. Lovelock saw hyper-technological solutions as the path forward whereas John Africa advocated a gradual but radical degrowth revolution. Renowned and well-respected, Lovelock still breathes at 102 years old as of this writing. John Africa, subject to a police bombing in 1985, lives on more quietly—and unsettlingly—in other ways.

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