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“The Praxis of *Deceleration*: Recovery as ‘Inner Work, Public Act’”

Marisol Cortez
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Marisol Cortez, Ph.D. occupies the space between activist, academic, and artistic worlds. Originally from San Antonio, she got her start as an activist in local environmental justice campaigns, which informed her doctoral research at the University of California at Davis. After graduating in 2009 with her Ph.D. in Cultural Studies, she returned to San Antonio, where she worked as the climate justice organizer at Southwest Workers Union. (cont. p.2) In 2010, she received the American Council of Learned Societies New Faculty Fellowship, which enabled her to teach for two years in the American Studies Department at the University of Kansas, after which she returned home to San Antonio to write and teach as a community-based scholar. She has previously worked at Esperanza Peace and Justice Center as coordinator for the Puentes de Poder community school, a popular education program aiming to support local organizing efforts. She currently works by day at URBAN-15, a grassroots cultural arts organization, and by night continues her work as a creative writer and community-based scholar, all in service of collective efforts to protect *la madre tierra* and create alternatives to parasitic forms of urban “development.” Alongside environmental journalist Greg Harman, she co-edits [Deceleration](#), an online journal of environmental justice thought and practice. For more on her previous publications and current projects, visit marisolcortez.wordpress.com.

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Abstract

Originally published in *Deceleration* and presented at the 2017 meeting of the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment, this short essay details the vision and praxis behind an online journal of environmental justice co-edited by the author alongside environmental journalist Gregory Harman. In this essay, I situate the evolution of this project in relation to our precarious institutional positions as writers with disabilities who consequently work in the spaces between academia, journalism, activism, and creative writing. This positionality has in turn placed *Deceleration* in conversation with degrowth and allied movements around the world, which challenge the disabling productivism that regulates the temporal rhythms of not only academia and everyday life but also our modes of activist resistance. Inspired by these challenges, *Deceleration* envisions new ways of responding to environmental and political crises, grounding writing, thinking, and acting in a reinhabitation of biological time.

When I wrote the abstract for the presentation that became this essay, I imagined that by the time the conference rolled around, I would have long finished a project that absorbed most of my time and energy and kept me from working on *Deceleration*, which is what I proposed I'd be thinking and writing about for the conference panel. I imagined that I would have put behind me a mode of thinking and writing and activism that required me to neglect my family and health in the pursuit of justice, peace, and earthcare—an unsustainable way of doing sustainability work, a praxis of crisis. I imagined that I would have begun to embody the alternative mode of thinking and writing and activism that *Deceleration* was formed to imagine and invoke, so that I might have something concrete and useful to share with those reading and listening.

As you may have gathered by this intro, it didn't quite happen like that. The project I was working on, a 100-page report bearing witness to the impacts of a devastating mobile home community displacement in my hometown of San Antonio, didn't conclude until early May of this year, after two years of steady work and a final grueling homestretch in which I worked non-stop for several months, in the cracks of time between day job and parenting responsibilities. In the last two months before its release, I became pregnant and then miscarried, but I kept going—kept going to my day job, kept writing, kept pushing myself. I felt like I had to—it was the only way a project that size and with those stakes would get done, the only way we would be able to release it in an impactful way, before city elections. I finished the report, but I lost the pregnancy: it felt like a message from the universe, a message to slow the fuck down. A message

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to reinhabit the rhythms of biological time denied both by the exigencies of paid labor but also the intensities of community organizing, the pressure, internal and external, to do more and do it faster, in an era of multiplying crises. After I finished the report last month, I spent several weeks doing very little beyond just going to work and getting my daughter to and from school.

When I found myself ready to start writing about *Deceleration*, then, I found myself at the beginning of something looking forward, rather than in the middle or at the end reflecting back. But that is arguably just as valuable. What I want to do in this short essay, then, is use it as an opportunity to think out loud about what *Deceleration* was supposed to be, is, could be—as a writing project and as a way of approaching writing. Being between projects is in many ways the ideal time to reflect not only on what you do, but more importantly how you do it. It is the ideal time to reflect on praxis, the theory that informs the practice, but also the doing and the being, the living, that emerges from shifts in how we see and think.

Deceleration is a website, an online journal that began as a collaborative project between my partner Greg Harman, a long time environmental journalist, and myself. For my part, I am trained as an academic in the environmental humanities and have taught within university settings, but I've also long worked as a community organizer within social movements, both paid and unpaid, and as a nonprofit worker in the cultural arts. Both of us write—academically, journalistically, and creatively.

Because at the time we launched *Deceleration* I was committed to finishing the report I mentioned earlier, Greg and I did some collaborative visioning, but much of the early scaffolding of the project, the site design as well as its content, was his. It grew out of shifts in his own work, after a debilitating depression that left him disabled for several years forced him to move from full-time journalism to the precarity of freelancing. As he recovered, he moved from freelancing to a graduate program in International Relations; and as he recovered further, he began *Deceleration* in part to register shifting understandings of the news media's role in responding to climate change. For almost two decades, Greg's career as a journalist had catalogued various environmental disasters and their origins in policy failure and structural violence. But within International Relations, what he found himself gravitating toward was emphases on conflict transformation and peace studies. He began *Deceleration*, then, as a way of re-imagining environmental journalism as environmental peacemaking.

For Greg, it was important that *Deceleration* move away from just local and regional reporting to more global and theoretical considerations, particularly the intersection of Indigenous and migrant rights with movements for climate and conservation. But for Greg, as well as myself, *Deceleration* as a project also embodied a cultural and a personal standing down. In his words, to decelerate is to slow the machine for the sake of survival; it is to throttle down a panic response so as to recover one's

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senses and think clearly, so that we might continue to act/write at all. Thus the tagline of the site: *building peace/writing beyond despair*.

In my case, I had come to this project after leaving academia to embed my intellectual and creative work more directly in social movements, only to find that the organizational culture of social justice nonprofits is deeply ableist in its productivism, internalizing self-injuring narratives about the valor of exhaustion and working beyond one's capacity, both individually and organizationally. So much of community work, not unlike academic work, is grounded in assumptions that we are autonomous—wholly free to give our lives wholly, as though we were not also embedded in social ecologies of interdependence, responsible and responsive to the needs of others. For those who live with chronic mental or physical illness, or for those who do caregiving work, the assumption that our bodies and minds can sustain constant conflict, constant confrontation, constant crisis in the name of justice or sustainability is a disabling one. Eventually, I too got sick and had to leave my job as a paid organizer and community-based scholar for my own survival.

There's an image I have for this praxis, this putting of theory into action, which lies just beyond the horizon of language—of a metabolism or timescale or temporality that is all action and no reflection, moving from fire to fire: all day and no night, all frenzied growth and production without the intermittency of darkness, the fertility of lying fallow. The logic of capitalist extraction runs deep in non-profit-based activism as much as academia or working at McDonald's (all of which I've done). It is a logic that is hostile to the temporality of the body, its seasons of health and illness; it is a logic that denies the cyclical, pulsing, waxing and waning rhythms of biological time in pursuit of an unbroken, linear trajectory of growth and expansion.

These are not new ideas, necessarily, but *Deceleration* is borne out of them nonetheless, out of a search for an institutional home for environmental justice writing after the failure of traditional institutions to accommodate the embedded, embodied realities of our lives. Where do you go to do your work when the places that are supposed to fit...don't? Or when you, your body-mind, doesn't? How do you work and write differently, so that even amidst a struggle to protect planet and people from predation you preserve your own life, your own health, your relationships? How do you survive the work of confrontation or witness? Beyond mere resistance, how do you create? For my part, I wanted *Deceleration* to embody this turn in my own life from manic reactivity to deliberate and intentional creation, from a writing and action grounded in productivism to one grounded instead in a reinhabitation of ecological time. *Poco a poco*.

This is a thread that has run through my work from the beginning. As a graduate student, my dissertation research had been about normative understandings of the excretory body, the shame and disgust that surrounds ordinary aspects of human biology within Western cultures, and the accompanying desire to displace that materiality both psychologically and

geographically. What has persisted from that earlier work is my lived feeling that economies of extraction and accumulation centrally depend upon a denial both of embodiment and the ecological embeddedness of bodies, and more specifically on a displacement of responsibility for the work of caring for embodiment, as Mary Mellor has articulated so powerfully in *Feminism and Ecology* (1997).

In both its thematic content and creative process, then, *Deceleration* represents a praxis grounded in recovery. In much of humanities work, we talk about recovery in the sense of salvaging—retrieving texts, lives, and traditions that have been overlooked or devalued and bringing them to light for careful consideration. But as I've been suggesting throughout, *Deceleration* pulls from a second layer of meanings familiar to anyone who has undergone any kind of rehabilitation process, be it 12-Step or physical therapy. Here recovery means a slow, uneven, never-complete process of restoration to health, a moving from disequilibrium to harmony. For those who, like myself and Greg, live with the chronicity and cyclic nature of mental health issues, recovery means the continual press to survive recurrent crises by recognizing our unconscious life-denying patterns without illusion; it means learning to live differently with these patterns and respond differently and deliberately.

Pulling all of these threads together, I view *Deceleration* as a praxis of environmental justice, and an institutional location for that praxis, which responds to climate and human rights crises while insisting on health and spiritual grounding. Based in our own lived experiences of disability and recovery, *Deceleration* seeks to cover unseen or undervalued stories not simply of conflict and resistance but of lived alternatives of peacemaking and peacekeeping, toward a collective recovery from colonialism and petroculture.

But as the name suggests, this is also, crucially, about reimagining the scale and temporality of resistance. In this respect, for me, *Deceleration* is an opportunity to dialogue with concepts from degrowth and allied movements around the world, which have had little intellectual or practical purchase in the U.S., as far as I can tell.

This is regrettable. I'll define degrowth shortly but first want to share just a little about its evolution as an intellectual and social movement. Its origins are largely European, arising first in France and Italy. The original term was "décroissance," coined by French thinker André Gorz in 1972; other foundational thinkers include Romanian economist Nicolas Georgescu-Roegen, whose 1971 book *Entropy Law and the Economic Process* pioneered the field of ecological economics. Another key text was the Club of Rome's "Limits to Growth" report, written following the oil crisis of the 1970s.

As peak oil fears receded and neoliberalism ascended, public discussion of degrowth waned, but then resurged in the early 2000s, galvanized especially by critiques of "sustainable development" as these claims had been belied by actual development policy in the Global South.

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Throughout the 2000s, degrowth flourished both within universities and in the streets, with demands for a scaling down of production and consumption by way of things like worksharing, basic income guarantees and income caps, community currencies, time banks, cooperatives, and ad busting. In 2008, the first international degrowth conference was held in Paris, at which the English word "degrowth" was used for the first time; and in 2010, the second international conference took place in Barcelona, linking European academic communities largely based in ecological economics with Latin American intellectual and social movement networks rooted in political ecology, environmental justice, and *buen vivir*.

In the first comprehensive analysis of the movement published in English just last year, editors Giacomo D'Alisa, Federico Demaria, and Giorgos Kallis define degrowth as, "first and foremost, a critique of growth”:

[Degrowth] calls for the decolonization of public debate from the idiom of economism and for the abolishment of economic growth as a social objective. Beyond that, degrowth signifies also a desired direction, one in which societies will use fewer natural resources and will organize and live differently than today. ... Our emphasis is on different, not only less. Degrowth signifies a society with a smaller metabolism, but more importantly, a society with a metabolism which has a different structure and serves new functions. Degrowth does not call for doing less of the same. The objective is not to make an elephant leaner, but to turn an elephant into a snail (3-4).

To understand degrowth, it helps to quickly define growth and the twin concept of development to which it is wedded. Since the late 1940s, the global goal has been for countries to continually increase the total value of goods and services that they newly produce from year to year, as measured in GDP. To do so is to be "developed," along a single, linear trajectory of progress whose apex is industrial production and consumption, held up as standard for the developing and the undeveloped. The inherently colonial associations between growth, development, and improvement have become unquestionable not simply in our public policy but in the cultural imaginary of the West.

Growth's connection to capitalism is equally key here. Capitalism is of course centrally defined as an economic and social system driven by the quest to produce profit or surplus value as the outcome of economic activity. However, from a degrowth perspective, the most fundamental aspect of capitalism is, according to Diego Andreucci and Terrence McDonough, the "'productivist' imaginary [that] underpins it" (62). The problem with capitalism is not simply the drive to produce and accumulate a surplus, but to reinvest it in further production—to grow—in a process of "continuous self-expansion — 'accumulation for accumulation's sake'" (60). But historically, socialist states too have been productivist, founded

on a central contradiction which assumes that unbroken, continuous material growth is not only desirable but necessary, and—on a more basic level—possible.

Degrowth is, emphatically, not sustainable development or the greening of capitalism or technology. It is radical critique of "development" itself as a cultural and policy paradigm and a concomitant search for post-development models of wellbeing, or as Fabrice Flipo and Francois Schneider put it, "imaginaries and concrete practices that are alternative to productivism, both local and global, in different places on the planet, within or outside the major knowledge producing institutions" (xxv).

The other key set of concepts from the degrowth movement that inform *Deceleration* cluster around the notion of social metabolism, a concept drawn from ecological economics, or "bioeconomics," as originally conceived. Nicolas Georgescu-Roegen's central insight was that "the economic process, having physical and biological roots, cannot ignore the limitations imposed by the laws of physics: in particular, the law of entropy" (Bonaiuti 26). What this concept does is denaturalize capitalism further than the standard formulation which understands it as an historically-specific mode of production. Bioeconomics suggests that *all* modes of production are in turn ecologies, and cultural ones at that—historically-specific ways, according to ecological economist Joshua Farley, of "transform[ing] energy and raw materials provided by nature into economic products that generate service to humans before eventually returning to nature as waste" (49). Based on the extraction of non-renewable energy and material inputs, the industrial ecology of capitalism is characterized by a metabolic rift that leads to the ever-increasing levels of entropy we experience as crises of climate and biodiversity: "Fossil fuel combustion," writes Farley, "is a one-way process that transforms useful energy into dispersed energy and waste by-products, such as carbon dioxide and particulate matter" (49).

Significantly, for Georgescu-Roegen and later degrowth activists, this metabolism has a cultural undergirding in what the *Degrowth* anthology's editors call the "growth imaginary." The multiple crises we encounter today do not simply result from economic activity exceeding biophysical limits of nature, but from the "cultural and institutional premises that characterise growth economies," according to Mauro Bonaiuti (27). Productivism has a cultural and psychological logic, in other words: the "Protestant ethic" that Weber described is, according to Andreucci and McDonough, the "cultural and political deployment of profit" (60). It is the internalization of this "never-enoughness" that makes the culture and operations of social justice non-profits, and much unpaid activism too, so deeply disabling. The idea that we should always be doing more, working harder and faster and more urgently is not the solution to the crisis of growth; it is, rather, growth imperatives infecting our activism, our writing, our thinking.

From a degrowth perspective, and as channeled by *Deceleration*,

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one solution is to re-politicize imaginaries that have been colonized by paradigms of growth and development. Geographer Erik Swyngedouw draws a distinction between "the political" as the "public terrain where different imaginings of possible socio-ecological orders compete" and the realm of politics or policy (90). Whereas politics and policy have been effectively de-politicized under neoliberalism—that is, alternatives to growth and development have been foreclosed and rendered altogether unthinkable—"the political" exists in the realm of the imaginary and is always agonistic. What Swyngedouw suggests ultimately is that resistance to the current order is not enough:

Politics understood merely as rituals of resistance is doomed to fail politically. Resistance and nurturing conflict, as the ultimate horizon of many social movements, has become a subterfuge that masks what is truly at stake, i.e. the inauguration of a different socio-ecological, post-capitalist [and post-growth] order. ... Re-politicization ... marks a shift from the old to a new situation, one that cannot any longer be thought of in terms of the old symbolic framings (92).

I would put it this way: resistance is not enough, because "resistance" as it has come to be practiced actually participates in, internalizes and recapitulates, the unsustainable not-enoughness we need to move away from in our engagement with crisis. I suppose, then, that what *Deceleration* inaugurates is an exhaustion with "resistance" alone—because it *is* exhausting and debilitating, from the standpoint of our bodies, but also maybe because—here I feel somewhat heretical in saying this—it is boring and joyless. Again and again, to go to meetings and exhort the heads of commissions and councils and utilities, to argue and to fight, to weather the inevitable infighting wrought by the divide and conquer tactics deployed by those with power—when I don't even know the names of all the plants or birds in my yard or the names of all my neighbors. What is activism, what is writing-as-activism, when it is grounded in the careful, slow, deliberate work of reinhabitation rather than simply resistance?

This arrives ultimately at a final keyword central to the imaginary of degrowth and *Deceleration* alike: care, "the daily action performed by human beings for their welfare and for the welfare of their community," according to the *Degrowth* editors (63). This daily action is, specifically, care for the *bodies* of others, human and nonhuman—the undervalued and frequently unpaid labor of social and ecological reproduction necessary to sustain unsustainable production, the daily labor of biological time historically performed by women, people of color, immigrants, and the earth itself.

From a degrowth perspective, it is not the dignity of work but the dignity of care that needs to be made central to politics and economy. We have already seen this shift in Indigenous framings of anti-extraction struggles, in the subtle but profound distinction between protesting a

pipeline and protecting water, as at Standing Rock. We might extend this framing to all our work, wherever it is located institutionally, centering what D'Alisa, Deriu, and Demaria describe as "the experience of the vulnerability of bodies' needs. ... Working to lessen the vulnerability of others allows everybody to experience their own vulnerability and reflect on its characteristics. This is a first important step toward abandoning narcissistic affirmations of the self as a guard against weakness, or in other words, abandoning the anthropological essence of growth society" (65-66).

It is important to underscore that when I talk about care, I am not talking about self-care, necessarily. Or, at least, I am not talking about the individualist articulations of self-care that the unnamed author of a remarkable zine published by the anarchist collective Crimethinc calls "a sort of consumer politics of the self" (i.e. tea, yoga, candles, bath beads). Nor am I talking about the ways self-care is often deployed in non-profit-based activism, where it becomes one more thing to do when the work day is done—versus actually doing less or refusing to work from a place of frenzy or compulsion.

On the other hand, as stated in the *Self as Other: Reflections on Care* zine, I'm not *not* talking about self-care. Although "self-care rhetoric has been appropriated in ways that can reinforce the entitlement of the privileged, ... a critique of self-care must not be used as yet another weapon against those who are already discouraged from seeking care" (6-7). The deeper critique presented in this zine, one closer to the point I want to offer as well, maintains that what is at issue is not appending "self" to "care," but rather the *kind* of self constituted by the performance of care. To be liberatory, "care" (of self or others) must involve a transformative rejection of the demand to produce endlessly; it cannot simply be a way to "ease the impact of an ever-increasing demand for productivity" (8). What we long for is not simply to sustain selves constituted through productivity and a denial of interdependency, but rather to transform this self and its constitution: "[W]e have to shift from reproducing one self to producing another" (8):

Your human frailty is not a regrettable fault to be treated by proper self-care so you can get your nose back to the grindstone. Sickness, disability, and unproductivity are not anomalies to be weeded out; they are moments that occur in every life, offering a common ground on which we might come together. If we take these challenges seriously and make space to focus on them, they could point the way beyond the logic of capitalism to a way of living in which there is no dichotomy between care and liberation (11).

Kazu Haga, a Kingian non-violence trainer based in Oakland, puts it similarly in an article entitled "The Urgency of Slowing Down," written shortly after Donald Trump's inauguration. "As we confront the urgency

of the moment," he writes:

How do we ensure that we are not organizing from a place of panic? ... There is no doubt that this is not a moment to procrastinate, but a time to act, as King reminds us. But the frenzied pace that we do our work in is oftentimes a habit that has been ingrained in us by a capitalist system functioning with a different time frame than we do. ... I can still hear the voices of the elders at Standing Rock, reminding us that we need to slow down. That for indigenous peoples, struggle is nothing new. We've been here before. That for them, everything they do is ceremony, prayer, ritual. And those are not things that you rush. You do it with intention, with all of the time and respect that it deserves.

As project and as praxis, *Deceleration* is grounded in these central concepts, emerging from a lifetime of unsustainable engagements in sustainability work—with those in power, with others, with self—and arriving at a present understanding that ours is, ultimately, the work of “spiritual activism” called forth by Gloria Anzaldúa: “now let us shift ... the path of conocimiento ... inner work, public acts” (540).

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