The Beauty of Disorder: From Waste to ReGeneration

By Cara Judea Alhadeff, PhD

The following includes excerpts from my forthcoming two-volume Radical Eco-Art in Action: Unlearning What We Think We Know.

Look closely at the present you are constructing, it should look like the future you are dreaming.
—Alice Walker

The system reproduces its existence because it goes unrecognized.
—Pierre Bourdieu

I once walked into a store and bought something. I purchased a product. Just like that. So easy.

To give you a bit of context: for over 30 years, I have lived in a primarily barter-economy. I have never owned a credit card, smartphone, or car (I bike and walk and catch rides). I am committed to minimal (almost zero) consumption and zero-waste (we reuse all by-products). For material "necessities"/"luxuries" such as clothes, shoes, toiletries, tools, appliances, toys, books, office supplies, etc., I organize and host community swaps and gift economy opportunities such as our mutual-aid economy free store. My family and I have lived in our eco-art converted school bus for eight years. Within the convenience-waste status quo, these ways of living have been both joyful and agonizing.

To confess (and to be specific) the store was a Best Buy. I purchased an external drive for my refurbished laptop. The quality of shock that ran through my nervous system felt eerily calm. I remember thinking, *this is what it feels like to be a consumer, a real American, a normal citizen of the Land of Abundance and Access…a normal person.* Order incarnate. For years in my storytelling mind, I have replayed that scene—crossing the threshold into bigboxtopia, finding the aisle, the product I had been advised to buy new ("Just Do It!"), the cashier ringing it up triggering the supply-chain hegemony, handing it back to me (unbagged, at least), walking out the front doors back to wherever I was going. Somehow, I exited the air-conditioned vacuum-of-awareness unscathed.

Well, not really. Decades later, alarms continue to sound. *THERE ARE NO EXTERNALITIES!* I wittingly contributed to the "disparate impact" of positioning others as collateral damage: "sacrifice zones," "road-effect zones," "distributional consequences," "transition costs," "adjustment costs." These aren't unanticipated consequences; we *know* what happens when we buy most products in this country. In their *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity,* David Graeber and David Wengrow write: "Power over possessions [is] directly translated into power over other human beings." The hollow burden of knowledge of our infrastructural addictions maintained at the expense of harming other people and non-human ecosystems continues to cry out—our common pain. Perhaps Chaos incarnate. As a response to systemic oppressions inherent throughout our current reality of ethnic cleansing, institutionalized misogyny, and climate crisis, I have chosen to raise my child and write *Radical Eco-Art in Action: Unlearning What We Think We Know*—a cross-cultural, cross-temporal, cross-spatial, interspecies tapestry of possibilities. This is my attempt to offer personal-political strategies-as-seeds to cultivate social justice dialog, ecological consciousness, and collective action. An attempt to weave coherent order with delicious chaos.

• • •

How is it possible that I ever get on a flight? For over a decade, I refused to take an airplane for ecological reasons—embodied ethics that shape my every decision. Regardless of my refusal, each night my subconscious leads me into the great inferno of the airport realm—essentially lost in an unknowable city. My barrage of anxiety nightmares always includes an airport scene—desperately yelling, trying to prove to those indifferent to me that someone needed to be somewhere but couldn't get there for too many inexplicable techno-bureaucratic reasons. In these dreams we have lost something terribly precious but can't access connection/communication because there are too many irrational obstacles. I wake up tormented, exhausted, desperately depleted. This is not the kind of disorder I hope to embody…

Now, it is the tail end of my three-month climate justice performance tour in 2025, during which I traveled back and forth between Boston and Miami on Amtrak (maddening tales) and Greyhound (harrowing mishaps) and hitched

many car rides with solo drivers (enchanting episodes of human connection) (so much for public transportation!). I presented subjects ranging from social permaculture as an antidote to Big Ag and Big Pharma, fibershed as an antidote to fast fashion, creative-regenerative affordable housing as antidote to our epidemic of individualism, ancient wisdoms and cross-cultural models of radical symbiosis as antidotes to petroleum parenting and digital technologies, and so many more exquisite entanglements.

Despite meticulous planning, heart-wrenching circumstances forced me to take flight. Immediate maternal duty takes precedence over all else.

I have arrived at the airport. When I get to my gate, I encounter the "border patrol"—those airline agents who scowl as they contemptuously push and shove your overstuffed personal item into that hideously ever-shrinking measuring contraption, smirking as they prove your bag has exceeded the airline size limitations. Lines of other exhausted, irritated Zone 2-6 travelers (maybe some sympathetic) hover behind the perpetrating victim. It's a $75.00 penalty fee if I bring the bag through—half of my month's rent for the land on which our converted school bus tiny home lives.

So I begin the layering process—resembling a humanoid entering the chrysalis phase. Integral to my "economic alternatives" performance is how I hyper-clothe myself in the presence of other travelers waiting at the gate. No one seems to notice my overlay undertaking; almost everyone is transfixed by their smartphone. I am invisible as I dance with Trickster. I stack it on—three seasonal changes of clothing for my tour. Why not literally embody permaculture's stacking function? Especially as we learn from migrant refugees about how to survive fleeing across borders.

I am indisputably wearing globalization—sweat-factory labor spanning Asia to Latin America from head to toe. Saturday Night Live's version of Temu/Xiemu, eat your heart out: three pairs of socks and three pairs of underwear. Four more pairs of each (along with my stretched-out teeny-weeny bikini) are stuffed in my purple corduroy pants that are held up by my childhood belt with rainbow-stretch strap and Snoopy-jogging-with-Woodstock magnet belt buckle—I have worn this treasure for 48 years.

Over 15 or so minutes, my 100-pound body, 5'4", triples in girth. Around my neck: six dresses, 13 shirts, three skirts. Around my waist: three scarves and two pairs of pants. Atop this ensemble, a foam-green so-soft leather dress coat, an orange raincoat with peach-colored stars and two ponchos—one bright pink with striped hoodie and one turquoise hue—although factory-made, both deliciously soothing. They also conceal my four over-the-shoulder bags, wrist warmers, tie-dye pjs, 1970s jungle-print pillowcase and deep turquoise fairtrade *ahimsa* silk sleep sack handmade by Tan Minh Single Mothers' Cooperative in Vietnam.

I keep promising myself that I will do things differently—that I will not always put my body and psyche on the line as I attempt to spotlight status quo senselessness. Yet once again I am straining under straps that cut, burdens that protrude. I hide layers under layers while constantly readjusting the layers. There is no gliding through society's cracks. They snag and too often tear—and inevitably deform. The more I try to wedge myself through those thresholds of impossibility, the tighter they squeeze around me, and the more claustrophobia I experience. Attempting to slip through conformity's narrow passage exacts costs.

Except for the handknit and crocheted clothes and a few fluffy gifts from my mother, not one of these 39 wrapped, draped, stuffed items was purchased—new, or for that matter, used. I acquired them all from community swaps, Naked Lady Parties, and free stores like S.O.U.L. Commons: Shared Opportunity Used Local, the free store my partner and I started in Paonia, Colorado nearly three years ago.

• • •

S.O.U.L. Commons provides economic equity for community members suffering from the classist impacts of industrial and "service" capitalism. The concepts of gift economy and infrastructurally-rooted barter economy are profoundly foreign to most people in this country. Even committed "thrifters" (those who regularly buy from



***Body Composting/ Mycelial Paradise, Micaela Amateau Amato, gouache painting for* Zazu Dreams: Between the Scarab and the Dung Beetle, A Cautionary Fable for the Anthropocene Era.**



Photosynthetics, Self-Portraits in the Anthropocene, Hambidge Residency, Georgia #33.



***Waste-Consuming Creatures (nudibranch, dung beetles, brine shrimp), Micaela Amateau Amato, gouache painting for* Zazu Dreams.**



Theater of Space, masked tree.







Wild, Zazu, Cara building S.O.U.L. (Shared Opportunity Used Local), Franco and Cara gifting from S.O.U.L.

and donate to thrift stores), consistently have a hard time grasping the inner workings of a free store. I am in the process of co-developing an international network of free stores, repair cafés, and upcycling centers to share ideas/actions about practical, beautiful, everyday "trash"-reuse. Throughout the US, in rural communities (ecovillages and small towns) and urban centers (San Francisco and the East Bay as well as all the boroughs of NYC—I lived in all five, except for Staten Island), I have implemented infrastructures to support gift economies for 35 years. Although I still clearly participate in our consumer-convenience transactional world, I feel I can take one step closer to living with integrity while attempting to co-instigate radical (root-based) systemic change.

I am part of a collective: decentralized, horizontal coalitions-of-difference that I am attempting to fortify through *affirmative queer anarchy,* the term I use to describe a practice in which we as individuals and collectives refuse to participate in corporate-sustained "realities"/"inevitabilities." However, neuronormativity ensues when my counter-institutional behavior is pathologized, straitjacketed as "extreme"; direct action is relegated to chaos that must be hypermanaged. We continue to normalize the myopic lens of institutionalized individuality, the pernicious deregulation and market fundamentalism of Margaret Thatcher's TINA (There Is No Alternative)-mentality that currently sustains the core of collective impotency and social inertia.

"There is no alternative" originated with 19th-century liberal political theorist Herbert Spencer. Such neurotypicality dominates our cultural intercourse. As an antidote to TINA, *affirmative queer anarchy* explores how to visually, somatically/kinetically represent the eco-aesthetic, eco-social imperative of nonlinear, relational time/quantum entanglements. "Spooky action at a distance," Einstein's reference to quantum entanglement—how all living things from our microbiome to the macro-cosmos are interwoven—invokes an eco-ethical politics of spiritual intelligence.

Collectively we can move beyond what we think we know. We plant realistic seeds of change (the permaculture chaos of natural order), not fabricate fixed solutions (modernity's order). As citizen-activists we explore cartographies not as a catalog of answers, but as opportunities to recognize the value of rediscovering our innate capacities to think and act beyond the habitual, to blast the lull of cultural somnambulism—to inhabit the fertility of disorder.

• • •

S.O.U.L. Commons is not just a free store but also a social-welfare venture, a hands-on, social-justice educational experiment that expands our capacity to cul-

tivate relevancy through symbiotic direct relationships. These grassroots mutual-aid, collaborative consumption practices give face to both institutionalized poverty and institutionalized racism that too often converge in an indifferent abstract abyss. A practice of environmental justice and community action focusing on Shared, Opportunity, Used, Local develops resilient communities through local infrastructures that support equity, promote ecological and human health, enact reparative justice, and support local food and farming, arts, and resource use.

Through an urgent commitment to these creative collaborations, we can transform industrial-capitalism's everyday tyranny, violence, and entitlement. S.O.U.L. engages five place-specific strategies that create a bridge linking:

1) individual *response-ability*— through behavioral changes;

2) community action-based creative collaboration—for example, through Resource Tree, which catalogs the skills and creative possibilities among members of our community so that when an individual or an institution (such as a school or library) needs something, rather than purchasing it online or at a big box store, they will have abundant access to a series of local resources and go-to advisors;

3) infrastructural re-design—in the form of both personal support (parenting-accountability forums, deprivatized-shared transportation) and structural systems (building energy audits, landfill regulations, waste management), with QR codes *not* required, so no smartphone ownership required;

4) corporate accountability—for example, establishing a safe-drinking-water hotline, local grocery stores banning single-use plastic bags, restaurants banning Styrofoam take-out-containers or any kind of straws (neither plastic nor PFAS-laden paper, except for people who *need* them—I have written extensively about this non-binary consumer-corporate shift in "Greenwashing: The Lure of Capitalism"); and

5) policy transformation—for example, a Town Public Works maintaining its water pipe system to avoid lead poisoning in water and general contamination.

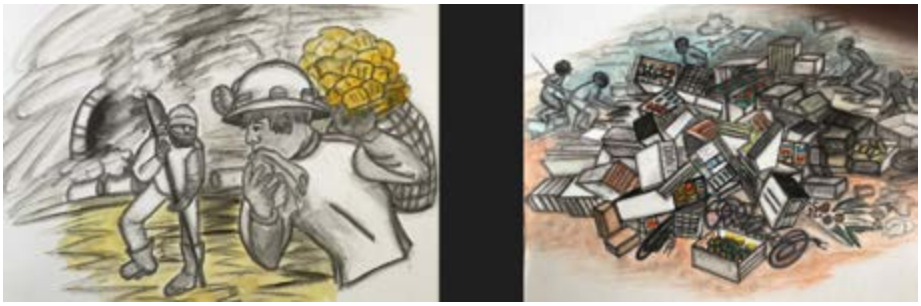
These five interlocking spheres connect the private with the public, the personal with the political. Many people feel their actions honestly don't count, but when we approach our individual actions within the context of collective behavioral change, we can impact our entire society—our entire planet. Just as all toxins accumulate, all positive actions accumulate. As all forms of oppression are interconnected, all forms of emancipation are equally interconnected.

This embodied economy is not about degrowth. It is about growing differently: mutually beneficial co-evolution as a collective act of remembering—remembering how to co-exist, how to live/learn/be curious in relation to one another. S.O.U.L. invites acquisition through magical accidents—and often through deep attunement. One root of *to acquire* is *to inquire*. How can we shift the ideology of infrastructure (centralized, mechanized, inevitabilities rooted in conquest, colonialism, and capitalism) to lived-shared idea-action infrastructure rooted in inquiry and inviting the unexpected?

With its fibershed-based natural-dye garden and a tiny-home building facility, our cooperative, public, S.O.U.L. Commons/Radical Art, Body, and Politics Intersectional Maker Space is a fertile example of embodied economics. It serves an average of 700-1000 people a week (more during the holidays)—local residents and visiting tourists of all economic backgrounds. Within the first few weeks of our makeshift, slightly awkward, always evolving structure, over $10,000 of material goods were exchanged, taken out of the waste stream, "saved" from landfill.

Both S.O.U.L. and bioregional food production generate *contact zones.* Contact zones, infrastructures of storytelling, cultivate webs of sense-making. Yet none of our attempts to establish contact zones will take root unless we raise our children differently and choose to model different behavior through ecological, ethical parenting.

What if we modeled how private enterprise no longer implies technocratic domi-



***Miners / E-Waste, Micaela Amateau Amato, gouache painting for* Zazu Dreams.**



Cryptobiotic Immunities, Self-Portraits in the Anthropocene, Triangle Lake, Oregon #4.