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"Humanistic" City in the Age of "Capitalocene"

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Abstract

The humbling climate crisis of the twenty-first century poses a challenge to classical humanism that cherishes the spontaneity of human action and its possibility of instigating newness. With more-than-human philosophies on the mainstream horizon, there remains a conundrum with regard to how one can retain the "humanistic" core while attending to the arresting gravity of environmental degradation. The present paper addresses this enigma in three ways. First, we synthesize urban environmentalism debates and their embattled relationship with humanistic concerns; second, we illuminate everyday creative interventions that urban youth themselves are generating in their continual negotiations between individual and social, old and new, vernacular and technical; and third, we deflect the linear projection of a "Capitalocene" future by exhibiting contingent practices of southern urbanism. Accordingly, we propose new ways of reinventing urban environmentalism that sees humans as a part of its divergent future landscapes. Our version of "humanistic city" frames the urban as a provisional space in which youth socialities and sensibilities are seen as emerging potentialities calibrating the pace of spatial transitions.

Keywords

people as infrastructure; post-Western ontologies and knowledge systems; urban environmentalism; Kampala and Nairobi; urban youth

Toutes naissance porte en soi une bonne nouvelle pour le monde, entendu au sens de l'espace public qui relie les individus entre eux. Venir au monde est un évènement qui nous intime de rester soi-même créateur et source de tout changement.

— Frédéric Spinhirny, *Naître et s'engager au monde* (2020, 26)

Introduction

The remarkable success of Greta Thunberg's climate activism lies in her cogent articulation that on top of the fact that the younger generation is inheriting a world they did not choose to be born into, they have had no participation in its constitution. As such, the message put forward by today's youth may be summed up as: I do not wish to be part of the mess you have created (or been complicit in creating)—and in fact, I did not *choose* to be here anyway.[1] In considering this fundamental yet neglected truth, the words of Hannah Arendt on the role of future generations in politics spring to mind:

> It is only natural that the new generation should live with greater awareness of the possibility of doomsday than those "over thirty", not because they are younger but because this was their first decisive experience in the world (What are "problems" to us "are built into the flesh and blood of the young.") …
>
> To the often-heard question, Who are they, this new generation? one is tempted to answer, Those who hear the ticking. And to the other question, Who are they who utterly deny them? the answer may well be, Those who do not know, or refuse to face, things as they really are. (Arendt 1972, 119–120, capitals in the original)

Despite Arendt's human exceptionalism, her thoughts remain helpful in framing the politics of the future—especially her emphasis on associative freedom being cast within one's spatial and phenomenological existence. Above all, Arendt gives serious consideration to the philosophical inquiry of why someone may decide to engage with a world they did not choose to arrive in, and which therefore remains foreign to them (Arendt 1994). Moreover, Arendt argued that, given that the world exists only in terms of the in-between spaces between humans—who, through sharing their unique life stories, co-constitute a collage mapping out their common world—having *more* people, rather than fewer, makes the world more meaningful:

> The more people there are in the world who stand in some particular relationship with one another, the more world there is to form between them, and the larger and richer the world will be. The more standpoints there are within any given nation from which to view the same

> world that shelters and presents itself equally to all, the more significant and open to the world that nation will be. (Arendt 2007, 176)

The purpose of this paper is, therefore, to explore whether this humanistic vision of the world—where new people being born is good news—is still of relevance to urban environmentalism or environmentalist planning in the "Capitalocene epoch".[2] More generally, how should one interpret or understand a humanist perspective at a time when the existential crises of our time (e.g., a rapid rate of planetary environmental degradation) call for more radical ways of recalibrating "human" needs?

Learning from three key conceptual interventions—Abdoumaliq Simone (2004)'s "people as infrastructure," Sylvia Wynter (2003)'s decolonial humanism, and Doreen Massey (2005)'s concept of "spatialization" of time—we advance the notion of "humanistic city" by projecting the possible trajectories of "humanism" apt for today's environmentalist narratives. Embracing the decolonial critique of Western humanism of which stratification of "what it is to be human" resulted in effacing heterogenous modernities (Satia 2020), our version of humanistic city rests less on a specific image or embodiment of values, and more on a continuous process of inclusion through difference, a way of making use of what exists within a judicious negotiability of give and take that sees the human as a non-essence, whose arbitrary languages permits continuous reinvention (Simone 2018). Though we are inspired by Arendt's use of phenomenological thinking in linking natality with politics (Spinhirny 2020), our paper extends beyond the givenness of the "human" through engaging and working with the *geographical* thought that considers spatial interrelationships as constitutive of the human subjectivity formation process.

We define "humanistic city" as a city where continually evolving human-nonhuman relationships as well as technical-cultural intersections experimentally perform more-than-human politics in new and unpredictable ways; and where urban life is "humanized" through the creation of enduring relations across diverse ontologies. Within this process, we consider how *people themselves* form a part of their own everyday "landscapes" (Brace and Geoghegan 2011). Building on Simone, who accentuates physical togetherness as the key ingredient for generating "spaciousness" in everyday urban life, our version of humanistic city takes notice of how urban youth are at the center of continually reinventing and reshaping the world in which they jointly inhabit with (more-than-human) "things". In this

scenario, “human” has no essential characteristics; if there is an acknowledgement of a certain “species-being”, its operation can only be characterized as the exigency to “invent ethically”. Instead of value being subject to an infinite series of conversions, the human must always convert difference into the possibilities of renewing the terms of its existence.

The structure of our paper is as following. First, we provide a literature review of humanistic threads in Urban Political Ecology (UPE)-inspired environmentalism and ethnographic accounts of youth and urbanization in the South. Second, we make a case for deflecting the linear projection of a “Capitalocene” future, contending that this is necessary for relaying environmentalist thought with the urban majority world’s budding youth population. Third, drawing plural storylines from the experiences of Kampala (Uganda) and Nairobi (Kenya), we concretize our vision of “humanistic city”, highlighting the role of youth in co-creating new urban realities and possibilities. In doing so, we put forward a permeative model of “collective action” as evinced in everyday creative interventions, in which human subjects mediate the contested dichotomies between old and new, mainstream and heterodox, the vernacular and the modern. In short, we argue that urban geographers should pay attention to the complex, situated, spatialization processes of everyday social relationships on the move, where local customs and culturally-specific values are constantly being challenged, reinvented, and reshuffled through their encounters with new technologies, ideas, and evolving livelihood conditions—amidst of which, as will be demonstrated below, urban youth remain protagonists calibrating the pace of their transitioning societies. Such a vision is “humanistic” to the extent that it acknowledges how our present conditions of possibilities are, or can be, composed not only of everyday happenstances but also of one’s volitional, precursive, and experimental engagement with their changing socio-material worlds in the hopes of a different future.

Literature review: humanistic threads in urban environmentalism

Urban Political Ecology and Its Discontents

Urban political ecology (UPE) framework sees the interests of capitalist accumulation as *the* source of environmental catastrophes, calling for direct human actions against them. What

can be considered as “UPE” is an expansive terrain of research topics and thought processes that consist not only of the Marxist analytical frame but also of the complex conceptualizations on agency and subjectivity (Keil 2003; Braun 2015; Heynen 2018; Gandy 2021). One of the most well-represented strands in UPE, however, is the neo-Marxist urban theory in which the primary cause of environmental degradation is traceable back to market domination (Swyngedouw 1997). As Heynen, Kaika and Swyngedouw (2006, 5) put it: “Whether we consider a glass of water, an orange, or the steel and concrete embedded in buildings, they are all constituted through the social mobilization of metabolic processes under capitalist and market-driven social relations.” Here, the role of human will is deemed essential in bringing about a post-capitalist utopia—to make come true, in the words of Keil (2003, 724), “the general project of the liberation of humanity.” For instance, some of the recent urban environmentalism actions include expanding the presence of state and state-led infrastructure projects that advance social good (e.g., Green New Deal; Aronoff et al. 2020) or pursuing conceptually predetermined ecologism (e.g., degrowth; Kallis 2011). These propositions reflect the generic political program of UPE, which is “to enhance the democratic content of socio-environmental construction by means of identifying the strategies through which a more equitable distribution of social power and a more inclusive mode of the production of nature can be achieved” (Heynen, Kaika and Swyngedouw 2006, 5).

UPE literature, as Lawhon et al. (2014) succinctly summarize, teaches two important lessons. One is that material flows (of resources, water, electricity, infrastructure investment) often function in the service of capitalist accumulation—e.g. forests (Heynen 2003) and lawns (Robbins 2007) becoming biophysical objects that manifest how power operates through artefacts. The other is that capitalists have a tendency to co-opt environmentalism as a means of justifying their work through a new discourse. However, as Southern Urbanism scholars point out, such unwavering adherence to Marxist reasoning and traceable capitalist relations often overshadows the possibilities of collective will and human agency present in everyday practices. As Lawhon et al. (2014, 510) argue, an alternative framing that extends beyond the limits of the Marxist UPE tradition should begin “with the complexities of everyday practices rather than only examining capital accumulation and structure”, thus giving us “more hope”.

More specifically, the "local autonomy" expressed in makeshift settlements in peri-urban zones is, in some cases, in conflict with the demarcation of ecologically critical sites (on the grounds of both environmental conservation and protecting the city's atmospheric health). For instance, Aguilar and Santos (2011) map out the complex political ecology constellations of land and air in the extended urbanizations of Mexico City. On the one hand, the settlement communities' "right to occupy" is embraced by certain politicians seeking a quick voting base; on the other hand, the continuous short-term decisions enchained by the political life of officials are threatening the local ecosystem—of which feedback in turn may influence everyday uses of water, food, and air quality. Ultimately, as Robin and Broto (2021) point out, a postcolonial perspective on urban environmentalism must embrace the contextual problematics of everyday affordances in Southern cities, particularly with regard to "fragmented electricity, waste, water, transport and energy infrastructures" that perpetuate "colonial and postcolonial legacies of uneven access to networked services" (872). What remains to be explored, therefore, is how livelihood and ecological concerns can be better calibrated in such precarious circumstances—not only in terms of morphological forms, but more critically in terms of how different social actors continually renegotiate their emergent needs in the intersections of political and environmental landscapes (see Silver and Marvin 2017; Broto 2019; Silver 2019).

From a more philosophical perspective, however, there still lies a tension between the degree of human agency and the material affordances it finds itself in. After all, the humanistic discourse found in UPE struggles to articulate itself in the face of a decolonial post-humanist critique (Barua 2019). The rise of more-than-human thinking has challenged the existing model of anthropocentric political ecology, by proposing that *decentering* the human subject can allow more empirically grounded, phenomenologically embodied reconfiguration of human-nonhuman relationships (Grove 2009; Jon 2020; Barua 2021). As Gandy (2021, 27) put it: "Although the Lefebvrian 'right to the city' has been elaborated within political ecology to encompass the 'right to nature', we hear little about the 'right of nature' to the city. Do crows or stray dogs, for instance, create urban space or merely thrive within it?" In fact, this growing attention on the "question of *matter*" (i.e. studying "agency" as arising from dynamic mesh-works of practical materialities rather than humans' sole self-determination) is related to the decolonial critique levied against the Western humanism, where the modernist promises of a "better future" have often justified their act of eviscerating

non-Western cultures and their ontologies that confound the Western-centric understanding of what it means to be "human" (Satia 2020).

Therefore, this paper expands on Barua (2019)'s version of decoloniality in which pan-relationalist ontologies have extended the ethical and moral dimensions of UPE beyond human exceptionalism, by exhibiting the dynamic networks of more-than-human worlds that *shape* and *condition* what we call "human agency". Our position is agreeable with this fluid notion of the "human", although we argue throughout this paper that physical surrounds themselves do not on their own dictate what our landscapes are to become; everyday material affordances have a transactional relationship with local customs, cultures, and valuations that remain influential in the spatial organizations of a specific time and place.

Our interest in such relationalist ontologies is not necessarily to negate the idealist aspiration put forward by Marxist humanism (Berman 1999), but to illuminate how the universalistic abstraction of what it means (or should mean) to be "human"—and the kinds of proposed actions based on such essentialistic conceptualization—could face a moral dilemma when applied empirically. Even in the most generous interpretation, UPE's relationship with humanism remains somewhat obscure particularly due to what Jackson (2020) describes as privileging of mainstream modality of space in which "intentional human action" occupies an exclusive role, when the dynamic subjects' somatic experience of reality as topological "climate" (i.e. qualitatively living environment), in practice, effectively blurs the distinction between what human does/is and what it doesn't/isn't.

Confronting this theoretical impasse between a stronger version of human will (and its proactive role in actualizing the right trajectory of history) and a "humbler" sketch of situating human agency (within the already-existing networks of more-than-human landscapes), our contribution here is to draw more explicit connection across the works of Simone, Massey and Wynter in ways that progress human geography's contribution to decolonial humanism. While Jackson (2020)'s version of a similar effort focused on the possibility of art in performing innovative philosophizing and contrary aesthetics (against the hegemonic claims on "being human"), we argue that geographical imagination and thought can further this dialogue by considering the realities of rapid population growth in certain parts of the world and the humanistic concerns that such condition mandates. More generally, how could we factor in the kinds of humanist discourses on population (e.g., the right to

social reproduction; see D. E. Roberts 1997) to our contemporary attention on the gravity of environmental degradations, especially in the contexts of the urban majority world?

Youth and urbanization in the South

In *New Urban Worlds*, Simone and Pieterse (2017, 34–37) explain the implications of the Global South's burgeoning youth population: first, even when housing is provided by the government, it is likely that many youths, due to their low and erratic income flows, will not be able to meet the maintenance costs of a formal house; second, both local and national government will have a low tax base, with "minuscule resources available at a local level for public expenditure on a per capita basis" in African cities (Simone and Pieterse 2017, 36). Ever-mushrooming makeshift settlements often slip out of the government's purview or control, which leads to local communities receiving site-specific utility infrastructure assistance from NGOs or the private sector (Pieterse 2008; Jaglin 2014; Swilling 2016; Jon 2021). Expecting state-driven distributive justice may be unrealistic in a context where there is little to distribute in the first place (Simone and Pieterse 2017, 187).

Regarding such vantage point of seeing the world from radically different realities, Simone's longitudinal ethnographies of youth, urbanization, and post-Western rhythms of life (Simone 2004, 2010, 2014, 2018) provide a useful ground on which one could imagine "humanism" in novel ways—through recognizing the role of physical togetherness in place-based solidarities, as well as the transitory nature of everyday life and cultural landscapes in the urban majority world. His focus on phenomenological relationships (that transcend human exceptionalism) and a transitional sensitivity toward post-Western cultures (avoiding romanticization of the past) nurture a space for exploring "humanistic values" that are continuously on the move.

Debunking the norms and strictures of Western (i.e. stemming from the Greek tradition) models of politicizing the urban, Simone (2004) argues that the strength of any community not only comes from its "social harmony" developed through discursive intersubjectivity, but also from the community's ability "to be indifferent to different groups acting on their differences" (Simone 2004, 235). The "solidarity," "collective identity,"

"cohesion," or "fellow feeling" felt in the urban majority, especially with its burgeoning youth population, is not only those existing within affinity groups but also those continually emerging from of "*crowded* interactions" in markets, improvised gatherings, reciprocal favors—where people are simply indifferent to each other's different essentialistic identities (Simone 2010, 332). Such architecture can exist across different peoples (of divergent ethnic groups, class, cultures), different species, and things—all lively present as "bodies" shaping the place they momentarily reside; "Materials, spaces, and people may come together, wrap themselves tangled up in impenetrable knots that can be undone only by expenditures of violence and coordination that for one reason or another prove too costly" (Simone 2014, 229).

Here, we see the possibilities of trans-corporeality and interspecies solidarities via a unprecedently specific, phenomenologically situated, mode of co-existence of different bodies. Simone (2021), therefore, in revisiting the concept of "people as infrastructure", shows that pursuing humanistic values is not necessarily in contradiction with a more-than-human philosophy. Viewing people as "infrastructure" is much more than native agentialism or presentist voluntarism. Rather, the word "infrastructure" is useful because it acknowledges above all the life-sustaining webs of relationships that exist across human and nonhuman materiality; and the fact that such relationships are continually evolving, with new people, ideas and movements forming new solidarities and projecting new political possibilities. The exigencies of urban precarity open possibilities for mutuality and solidarity, although there is no universal teleology at work here in how this plays out (Lake 2019; Jon 2023a, 2023b); as we will discuss throughout the paper, actually existing circumstances and spatial encounters across different life-stories matter.

We therefore believe that Simone's discussions on fluctuating disjunctions of subjectivity (that overcome essentialistic identities) and "agency" as a series of contingent calibrations (between old and new) carve a new ground on which one can reconceptualize "humanistic" values apt for today's climate crisis epoch. Building on Simone, we pay attention to the role of sociogenic cultures in spatial transitions, i.e. how the intense on-going presence of local customs, habits and conventions—particularly observable in the urban majority world—constitute a living, or continually-evolving, software determining the pace of spatial transitions in which urban youth plays an integral part. In the next section, we explain why documenting these heterodox urban lives "in transition" is relevant for urban

environmentalism debates in human geography, drawing from Sylvia Wynter's decolonial humanism and Doreen Massey's concept of "spatialization" that deflect the linear projection of time. Through this effort, we bridge the aforementioned UPE-style humanism with the realities of youth and urbanization in the South—by proposing, above all, the significance of sociogenic cultures, narratives and ways of inhabiting the planet, which have been historically underrepresented in the global environmentalist discourses; and secondly the possibilities of these plural life-logics defying the reiteration "Capitalocene" future through their actually-existing, spatial manifestations.

Deflecting the linear projection of time via spatialization of sociogenic narratives

The contemporary urban scholarship often unquestioningly internalizes the linear projection of a "Capitalocene future"; human geography can play a role in challenging such aspatialist assumptions, by exhibiting contingent practices comprising not only of practical materialities but also of culturally embedded norms and ethics in a situated social context. As Wynter notes, the linear thinking process driving discussions of "the (Apocalyptic) future"—that is, "human disturbance = ecological harm"—is problematic (Wynter and McKittrick 2015, 21). Proclaiming the arrival of the "Capitalocene epoch", Donna Haraway has made a universalistic statement that could be considered globally anti-natalist ("Make Kin, Not Babies!"; see Haraway 2016, 161). While capitalist greed and its insatiability are indeed driving the planet toward destruction, it should nevertheless be asked who the "we" is in this conversation. As Wynter observes in response to a report by *Time* in 2007, blaming *human* activity for global warming:

> All the people of the world, whatever their religion/cultures, are drawn into the homogenizing global structures that are based on the-model-of-a-natural-organism world-systemic order. This is the enacting of a uniquely secular liberal monohumanist conception of the human—Man-as-*homo oeconomicus*—as well as its rhetorical overrepresenting of that member-class conception of being human. … that's the terrifying thing with the Time report. It thinks the causes of global warming are human activities, but they are not! The Masai who were (and are) being displaced have nothing to do with global warming! (Wynter and McKittrick 2015, 21)

As the above implies, Wynter is arguing that "human guilt" should not befall on *everyone*, especially those who have maintained their livelihoods outside of capitalist operations and therefore fall outside "the human cause" behind the climate crisis.

By the same token of questioning the "referent-we", one could question the idea of "everyone" being merely passive subjects of the capitalist machine and its mutation. The West's normalization of the "Economic Men (*homo oeconomicus*)"—wedded to the Malthusian macro-origin stories—is driven by an overrepresented understanding of humans as atomized individuals. On the other hand, the historical endurance of heterodox cultures and knowledge systems—of which operational logic cannot be reduced into the logic of Economic Men—proves that there is something special about human beings; whose ways of relating with others continue to defy pecuniary motivations or contractual barter and exchange. From anthropologists, Wynter argues that humans start identifying themselves as humans *only through* a historically contingent, "genre-specific" discourse, i.e. the "master code" of social norms (that we are forced to learn, to a certain extent, in order to be part of the social; consider, for instance, gender categories and culturally-dependent social norms attached to them—which are subject to change over time).

What we should remember, according to Wynter, is that any "master code" is a fabrication, it can therefore be overturned—if we could continually generate a new narrative (or other alternative social codes) that is as compelling as the overrepresented ones. Cultural norms (e.g., languages, expected social behaviors) can govern our biological reaction (or what Wynter calls "neutral firings"); the continuing existence of customary habits and logics (that function outside of Western modernity), albeit altered and adapted to the changing world, proves that humans need much more than meeting the utilitarian needs.

Wynter's decolonial humanism therefore asks us to revive the "narrative side" of humans. According to her, the "universality" of humanness is useful only in so far as it recognizes that humans are "biological" and "narrative" animals—that is, we are subject not only to biological/survival needs but to situated, context/genre-specific "sociogenic" principles that are particular to the geographic location and historic moment in time (Wynter 1995, 2003). Through this insistence on the "sociogenic" side of humans—meaning, humans are identified as "humans" only through their culturally situated, genre-specific social

narratives—Wynter's philosophy marks a more propositional turn in decolonial thought (McKittrick 2006, 2014, 2015, 2021). More specifically, Wynter allows the possibilities for humanness to imagine a different future *through* resuscitating, regenerating, and mainstreaming the kinds of intersubjective articulations that cannot be subsumed into Cartesian reductionist reasoning. As McKittrick notes, recapping Wynter's reference to the power of reinventing "sociogenic principles": "The work of liberation does not seek a stable or knowable answer to a better future; rather, it recognizes the ongoing labor of aesthetically refusing unfreedom" (McKittrick 2021, 61).

Such new narratives/creative storytelling not only defy colonial reasoning and Cartesian reductionism, but also helps dismantle the human-exceptionalist discourses that continue to negate our phenomenological connection with land, nature and environment (N. Roberts 2015, drawing from Glissant, 1989; see also Wright 2020). For example, in *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (Tsing 2015), Anna Tsing argues that "human disturbance" is not necessarily evil, but should be seen as a "participant" in the process of co-creating the future alongside nonhuman actants. Tsing contrasts the American approach to environmentalist action with the Japanese way of co-thriving with nature. While American environmental conservationists typically aim to control human activity or disturbance due to it the perceived "threat" to ecological health, Japanese "Satoyama" forest management is a hybrid of preservation and cultivation practices that benefit both humans and nonhumans.

Another example is the indigenous Australian culture—as depicted in Michele Lobo (2019)'s work "Affective Ecologies"—which shares the aforementioned aspect of everyday cross-species solidarity, which Lobo refers to as "co-becoming". The culture of Saltwater peoples includes a communal understanding that humans are emotionally, physically and spiritually connected to their immediate landscape/surroundings. It has been documented that Saltwater peoples could feel the impending arrival of cyclones several weeks prior to the storms hitting, an ability that was a mystery to Westerners who hailed from a different genre-specific culture. Wynter and McKittrick assert that the embodied stories of human life—as an ongoing praxis of performing/reinventing collective identity—permit us to "witness and live a script that delights in and profits from dehumanizing most of the world" (McKittrick 2021, 57). Could new storylines of human–nonhuman material entanglements then allow us to recast "life" and its associated webs of interdependency in a new light?

According to Massey (2005), such webs of interdependency are best manifested as *spatialized* practices of performing plural, heterodox, futures. In her seminal work *For Space*, Massey argues that the way to deflect a linear projection of the "future", as well as its teleological narrative of "History", is through spatializing it. This involves paying attention to territorial situatedness and the everyday actors who are participating in the process. Building on Hall (1996), Massey has made a compelling argument in favor of geography's role in decolonizing modernity and its fixed story of "evolution" or "the natural course of things"—by spatializing the story of modernity, we can "rework modernity away from being the unfolding, internal story of Europe alone" (Massey 2005, 63).

The role of human geography is important here because, through exposing the multiplicity of territorially situated and historically contingent trajectories, it can manifest an open-ended, outward-looking notion of the future that focuses on "the *experienced* passage of time". This moves beyond an abstractly interiorized notion of time, which often leads to a "philosophical miserablism" obsessed with the fear of death (ibid., 56). Highlighting the role of space and how it affects our (intersubjective) perception of time—due to space being where geographically embedded interactions across humans, nonhumans and ideas occur—can divert unquestioned time horizon projections, thereby opening up new political possibilities. Massey's petition for geography therefore seeks to "liberate space from the old chain of meaning" in a way that contains greater political potential, as, by understanding space as an open, ongoing production, we can project the "genuine multiplicity of trajectories and potentially of more voices" (ibid., 55).

Drawing from the above arguments of Wynter, McKittrick and Massey regarding (1) deflecting, via the spatial multiplicity, the linear projection of time and its "fixed story" of the future; and (2) the political implications of situated (sociogenic) narratives in terms of challenging established hegemonic orders—that is, making possible a reconfiguration of heterogeneity—we proceed in the following section to put forward our proposition for a "humanistic city-making."

Humanistic city-making in the Capitalocene epoch: a proposition

Our proposition of a "humanistic city" is a city that is alive to the possibilities of situated relationships, entanglements, and becoming; a city that is open to the trajectories of different futures as they relate to the experiences, aspirations, and wisdom of urban youth. It is "humanistic" (rather than "humane") in that it must consider how more-than-human assemblages in which people, organisms, and things, by the virtue of their physical togetherness, manifest an unprecedentedly specific, "accidentally synchronized" mode of coexistence (Simone 2023). We argue that such a vision is demonstrable through a spatially-situated sociogenic living that involves solidarity and interdependency; and that the landscapes conjured up by such a vision can only be held together via "generative ensemble of relays" (Savransky 2021, 68) that different bodies entrust their future with in a specific time and place. In order to demonstrate how such a city can be evinced in reality, we draw on the anecdotes and ethnographic sketches of urban practices in Kampala (Uganda) and Nairobi (Kenya).

These two cities are both undergoing contested processes of city-making; i.e. the pursuit of cosmopolitanism often divides the life-scapes of residents along the cultural and socioeconomic lines. They both portray an urbanization that signifies a contrast between the expansion of modernist "cityness" undergirded by the capitalist regimes of value *and* the non-Western cultural tendencies and everyday sociogenic living that resist the former. This generates a perpetual urgency of restlessness, agitation, and tension; a particular form of uneasy vibration that hovers over the general mood of African urban societies *in transition*. This urgency requires residents to become more proactive in how they inhabit the city, which, through their spatial manifestations, contests and reconfigures "the visions" imposed by those in power. In particular, the urban youth—who now constitute the majority of both cities' population—are confronting and navigating diverse challenges, dislodgements and deficits in real time. In such conditions of precarity, it often becomes inevitable that self-driven strategies of makeshift urbanism and improvisation will arise.

Therefore, it is this visceral experience (of how the dynamics of old and new are continually reshuffled by the budding practical materialities in a specific time and place) that inspired our method of narrating everyday urban realities from the ground-up. We use an

ethnographic storytelling that chronicles place-based, micro-spatial processes of city-making, drawing from broader research work and encounters in part through field observations and interviews conducted at different intervals across Kenya and Uganda in eastern Africa between June 2014 and April 2022. We complement these with critical reflections using secondary literature to locate our empirical findings within a broader scholarly debate. We offer illustrations that make visible of how everyday urban youths not only simply adapt to but also actively reconfigure their situated life circumstances. Further, our storylines highlight the on-going presence of sociogenic principles in everyday urban practices—redescribing such forms of socialities as culturally-specific, continually-evolving "softwares" that confound the hegemonic logics of global capital. Here, we may glimpse the possibilities of the West-centric narratives on urban environmentalism being reinvented—beyond human exceptionalism, beyond the fixed story of the predetermined "future," towards "ever-moving, generative, spatio-temporal choreographies" (Massey 2005, 54) that witness the continual emergence and submergence of old and new knowledge programs, with everyday judicious negotiations that urban youth undertake modulating the pace of their own transitioning societies.

The role of youth in co-creating new urban realities

The plural realities and possibilities of the "new urban worlds"—in which urban youths are continually entering as new protagonists—question the authority of the "Capitalocene" scenarios reliant upon the linear projection of time. This is best reflected through different forms of socialities that veer toward solidarity rather than disaffection; collective networks rather than individualism; cohesion rather than competition; and interconnection rather than "going it alone". In addition, they constantly and daringly seek to grasp opportunities, devising solutions, mechanisms and responses in real time. In doing so, they coproduce creative alternatives to an ineffective, exclusionary or absent state.

Take the example of the "jua-kali" engineers: informal mechanics and repair whizzes who design reasonably priced products in Nairobi's downtown markets and neighborhoods. Their operations are hardly subservient to the predictable expansion of market logics; the city's everyday spaces and their associated socio-technical relations are inseparable from the

agent-centered negotiations between survivalistic needs and their relationship with the social. These engineers—who work both as separate individuals as well as "accidentally synchronized" collectives—constitute micro-economies, co-producing local, inexpensive, informal and improvised technologies that reshape (and are being reshaped by) the existing social lives and intersubjective meaning-makings. Such situations play out in the places of the high-demand mobile phone repair centers that, in many African cities, are delivered from a multitude of 4x4ft makeshift kiosks or partitioned spaces selling mobile accessories. These strategically placed sites provide fertile ground for heterogenous encounters, with technicians typically sharing advertising spaces, skills, and mobile phone spare-parts.

In Kampala, the circulation of hybrid technologies furnishes a crowd of tech entrepreneurs occupying "car garages" (open-air parking areas adjacent to markets often found in Southern cities) as their workplaces. These parking lots are pseudo-public space; the land is owned by someone who has no use for it, and someone may come up with a simple idea to open an automobile repair shop; but soon the small lot evolves into a multi-purpose space for different kinds of repair and economic activities where the different roles performed by participating actors are all continually renegotiated. Here, in addition to the several core workers such as everyday engineers, technologists and programmers, there are other "secondary" technicians who handle minor repairs and gadget replacements all within the same space. Two key observations are made here. First, beyond the big tech's gospel of disruption that promotes a sanitized and corporatized form of innovation and casts the tech company as the only legitimate actor of change, these parking areas flatten this hierarchical constellation through their spatial existence. Second, we witness the workers' ability to operate cordially within the same space, affirmed by their reverence toward the existing social conventions' humanistic tendencies. Here, an observer may experience how "sociogenic living" unfolds in practice. Conflicts might surface every now and then, such as those between car owners and tech engineers competing over space; but these are most likely to be solved by the interhuman processes of restorative justice, i.e. an extensive conversation through which the owner of a vehicle must negotiate with the engineer until they come to a point of mutual agreement.

Another example can be seen in the increasing number of speculative sojourners playing a constitutive role in extended urbanization processes in Africa, such as the local

entrepreneurial youths who have in effect become self-fashioned real estate brokers. These youths purchase large plots—often acres—of unimproved marginal land, before subdividing and selling on the land in 50x100ft lots. The sale of the initial batch of lots then creates increased demand for those lots still to be sold, meaning later buyers are obliged to pay a higher price. Here, "outsiders" (e.g., developers) *need* local social networks relying on interpersonal relationships, of which the tech-savvy entrepreneurial youths now constitute a significant part, as observable in their utilization of online marketing and social networking platforms (including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and WhatsApp).

Indeed, the precariousness of agricultural communities is aggravated by such processes of land commodification, giving rise to dislocation, dispossession, social marginalization and injustice (Buwembo 2021; Steel et al. 2019; Westoby and Lyons 2016). The reality is that hundreds of peripheral villages and towns around the city are already being incorporated into these speculative schemes—meaning, the urban core is extending to the peripheries, turning rural livelihoods into urban real estate. But in such a context of ongoing urban landscape production, youths in Kampala are leveraging their interpersonal networks and relations in a way that introduces new social situations. Their scenarios transpire in complex and unexpected ways, with youths pooling political resources using cooperative schemes or counteracting indifferent moves of the capital through their shared commitment to certain customary values. For instance, as the youths take part in the creation of new land markets, the ways in which they manage land parcels—whether they would allow an entity to operate in their network or how they would negotiate ownership and leasing—are contingent upon their kinship-related responsibilities or subscription to culturally-specific social norms (see also Baral 2023). In other cases, the trader groups of urban marketplaces resist the making of a speculative land market; the workers of the Nakasero market in Kampala, comprised of approximately 10,000 vendors, staged protests and wrote directly to the President in response to the local politicians and tycoons trying to redevelop the land and displace central markets to the outskirts of the city (Montieth and Camfield 2021). As Ghertner and Lake (2021, 16) argue in *Land Fictions,* land market-making is an "on-going social drama"; their heterogenous trajectories of storylines are never predetermined but always in the process of unfolding. Recognizing the fictitious aspects of land commodification entails a collective subscription to "better stories" in which cultural narratives and social relations can receive more substantiated attention.

Understanding how the spatiality of "the urban" converses with the plural aspirations of urban youth offers a way of thinking about "collective action" or "social change" unburdened by their hegemonic enunciations. Jackson (2020), in her generative critique on necropolitics in which the technological object or weaponry (targeting material destruction of human bodies and populations) is strictly lodged outside of the body of a subject (which is hypothesized as "inert"), argues that racial violence as well as the possibility of defiance against it manifest through the *interactive systems* between human subjectivity and its surrounding "external" environment. This is because, as Jackson draws from Wynter and McKittrick, subject and object are always in the process of reconfiguring biochemical dynamism (of bodies and environments) as well as culturally specific, semiotic encodings of reality (via shared vocabularies). The arrival of new generations and the kinds of social realities that young people are constantly co-creating anew—exemplified in the spatial processes of how they actively pluralize the paths of land commodification—must be taken into account in such dialogues on reconceptualizing "human agency", especially when the global dominance of market logics continues to mutilate lives, socialities, and ontologies that refuse to conform to the mainstream. The concept of "collective action" must be perceived with and beyond the institutionalized practices; instead, the alternative modalities of interdependence centered around practical problems and physical togetherness exhibit a means of city-making that draws on the interstitial contexts of everyday life (Simone 2010).

Evolving non-Western philosophies and sociogenic living

The narratives of "humanistic city-building" in the urban South cannot "make sense" without engaging with non-Western philosophies and practices of sociogenic living (Simone 2003; Parnell and Robinson 2012). In Kenya, the concepts such as Chamaa and Harambee[3] allow residents to rely on the culture of endurance through communal efforts; different projects may be formed in order to pool or share limited resources, identify problems, and mete out new solutions. On a micro level, Chamaa and Harambee collectives support small and home-owned businesses or enable savings for precarious situations such as eviction or home demolition. On a meso/macro level, they lead the construction of schools, hospitals and other developmental institutions.

Chamaa and Harambee share much in common with other African worldviews and philosophies observable today in Tanzania (Ujamaa[4]) and in Southern Africa (Ubuntu[5]), indicative of how indigenous sociogenic principles remain prevalent. In exploring diverse modalities of interdependence with and beyond the institutional spaces of "participation", these African sociogenic philosophies—albeit subject to continual recalibrations over time—possess unique explanatory power. For instance, they are actualized through committees, task forces and groups at various levels, including: water and sanitation committees and cooperatives; groups organizing garbage collection; savings and credit groups; land advocacy forums; peace-building committees; gender-based violence prevention groups; education committees; and religious bodies (Metcalfe, Pavanello and Mishra 2011; Guma 2015).

In Nairobi, for instance, formal infrastructure systems within low-income settlements are increasingly shaped by collective grassroots actions and processes. One of the examples is the Social Connections Policy, where the central water utility company has piloted innovative approaches in Kayole Soweto under the project dubbed as Maji Mashinani (Swahili for 'Water for Grassroots') (Mwangi et al. 2015). Through the Maji Mashinani project, the company worked closely with the community, deploying community assistants and social workers who conducted door-to-door campaigns and events, equipping residents with different modes of accessing water in a way that enhances the collective ownership of taps and pipes. However, the grassroots processes are also enacted through improvised governance arrangements such as the "nyumba kumi" structure, a civic household-based security collective; as well as the "chama" structure that acts as a hybrid citizen-based self-help association and framework. These collectives or "community groups" are composed of informally elected oversight committees where designated elders, brokers, property owners, religious leaders, youth groups and women's associations all play different community-assigned roles. As these governance arrangements do not necessarily fall within the realm of formal institutions, their recognition and legitimation rest on the fact that they wield significant power under the communal or "customary" rules. In other words, the relevancy of their existence does not rely on formalized contracts or agreements but rather on the fact that the residents share certain mutual understandings, enabled in part by the locally and socially-bound sociogenic principles.

In Uganda, sociogenic principles are expressed through the values of "obuntubulamu", which is akin to Ubuntu. To be "omuntumulamu" is to empathize with, and belong among, kin, friends, clan and community. It is also about prioritizing group harmony, interpersonal relationships and networked collectivity over atomized individuality. "Omuntumulamu" is a person who deserves to be integrated into a network, actualizing appropriate social conduct in a community where the individual is bound to others. Here, people acknowledge the usefulness of community-centeredness; in navigating their everyday landscapes, they strive for communal relationships or friendship-based interactions. As a result, what makes a particular technological intervention or an infrastructure initiative "valuable" depends on whether and how it would help advance the existing communal values or modes of living. An example here can be seen in how mobile phone and mobile-based innovations such as "mobile money"[6] can provide the infrastructural tools for balancing social obligations with economic cooperation among extended family networks, group-specific associations, and social networks (Guma 2014). The mobile phone, and mobile money in particular, re-enact communal and social networks, allowing people to connect and promote the values of community, collaboration and shared access to resources.

Another example is the practice of Gwanga Mujje (Gwanga can be directly translated as "earth" but is sometimes used in a context closer to "nation" or "land" and "earth", and Mujje is a "call to gather"),[7] where one can observe how young people in Kampala apply the traditional Ugandan knowledge programs in their use of social media platforms such as WhatsApp. While one might think that social media by its very nature incentivizes competition and dis-incentivizes collectivism, the urban youth in Uganda have long used WhatsApp groups to build collectives, calibrate social action, and advocate and negotiate for the interests of those within (and sometimes outside) of the group. Hence, members in the WhatsApp group are expected to play the politics of solidarity—i.e. supporting members' weddings, baby showers, and other hustles, collectively sharing the burden and sometimes pooling resources and efforts together to make sure that one attains whatever they need at a given moment. These small-scale interventions evince a type of actions that, while not being directly mediated by Gwanga Mujje in the most traditional sense, nonetheless weaves through the youths' calls in the spirit of Gwanga Mujje—igniting the sensibilities of integration, inclusion and participation.

Regarding the sociogenic principles that also attend to more-than-human relationships, one can witness the youths' continuing practice of Bulungi Bwansi, an "ecosophy"[8] that emphasizes the interdependence of human beings and nonhuman nature. Here, individual wellbeing and the wellbeing of the land and community are intricately woven together (Kezabu et al. 2018). This ecosophy is expressed throughout oratures and art forms, with its subscribing members "respecting and reviving the wisdom of elders; considering the living, the dead, and future generations; sharing responsibility, and resources within the community; and embracing spiritual values, traditions and practices reflecting connections to a higher order, to the culture, and to the earth" (Dei et al. 2000, 6). More recently, Bulungi Bwansi has been reborn through the activities of young people working both online (via Twitter and Facebook) and offline (via school clubs), linking environmental tragedies with more immediate land- and community-related social responsibilities.

At the same time, however, we resist the temptation of essentializing these customary practices as inherently good or ideal. Spivak (1999) has noted, the risk of doing so includes exoticizing it; fixating cultural practices as if they only exist in the vanishing past is a dangerous act, as it can further silence the voices that are uninterpretable under the currently dominant episteme (as demonstrated through Spivak's example of a girl who commits suicide during her period to prove that her agency to immolate herself lies beyond culturally specific gender norms; see Jon 2022). What remains important to note here then is *continual evolution* of the existing sociogenic principles, informed by the practical materialities of a specific time and place (Wynter 2003). The above examples demonstrate how sociogenic practices, orientations, and principles have become increasingly *hybridized* through their adjustment to new modernities, exhibiting the actually-existing performances of how the urban majority navigate the pressing challenges of our time. As such, they manifest as "innovative cultural knowledge forms and practices and technological adaptation to environmental conditions as communities manage their lives in sync with the changes and regenerative cycles of the environments around them" (Masolo 2017, 40).

Conclusions and future directions

In searching for answers from the storylines and experiences of the urban majority, one thing becomes clear: alternative assemblages enacting more-than-"Capitalocene" scenarios are palpably present, defying the aspatial assumptions of economism or technologism. The situated and spatialized modalities depicted in this paper are demonstrative examples of how a "humanistic city"—always an incomplete work in progress—is open to a heterogeneity of processes that experimentally perform "urban environmentalism" in new and unpredictable ways. This can be broken down into two major aspects.

First, the stories of concrete, situated worlds of urban youth remind us of the importance of departing from, and becoming an antidote to, the unquestioned linear projection of time (Massey 2005). The complex modes of "physical togetherness" utilized by urban youth go far beyond their assimilation into the mainstream market economy, since their individual livelihood concerns do not necessarily pose a barrier to them being simultaneously concerned with climate disfiguration or other social causes. In fact, both sets of concerns are embodied within their everyday livelihood-makings such as participating in the constitution of a land market or turning garages into mobile tech hubs, of which spatial operation is often in conversation with the culturally-specific modes of being-in-the-world.

What this implies in the current dialogues on urban environmentalism is that the recent "empiricist turn" must consider such "software" aspects of everyday practices. As it currently stands, empiricist urban environmentalism highlights the role of landscape/urban design in raising climate awareness (Robin and Broto 2020) as well as connecting everyday infrastructure with ecologically functional processes (electricity, water; Lawhon et al. 2014; Truelove and Cornea 2021). The urban majority storylines drawn from Kenya and Uganda, on the other hand, underscore the importance of paying attention to how urban youths navigate and reinvent their immediate/surrounding environments via narrative-led endurance, inseparable from the influence of sociogenic principles and heterodox knowledge programs.

Second, our stories demonstrate different mechanisms of "collective agency" through which the contested dichotomies (commonly observable in Southern cities)—between older

and newer, mainstream and heterodox, the vernacular and the modern—are actively mediated via a spatial milieu in a specific time and place (Simone 2018; Gaskins 2019). While Western scholarship tends to restrict "human collective action" to being either counter-hegemonic action or government policy practice (Simone and Pieterse 2017; see a similar critique in Hughes 2019), our examples reveal a more permeative style of "agency" that modulates the pace of social and environmental change. Clearly, the arrival of new ideas, technologies, global policy trends or neoliberal logics posit a challenge to the existing conventions and ways of living. In the face of such disruptions, however, we note how hybridization becomes a way of life for many youths in Africa, who continually renegotiate the values of existing community architecture with new problematic situations emergent in spatial practices of co-inhabitation (e.g., socioeconomic precarities, infrastructure planning).

Ultimately, the "humanistic city" we have invoked throughout this paper is a space expressive of divergent "technicities" and plural logics of "otherwise", a city where the continually unfolding stylizations of hybridity across heterogenous modernities can be embraced. We believe that if "urban environmentalism" is to account for natality and population dynamics, its "spatialization" remit must be further expanded in order to consider *how* urban philosophies and existing ways of sociogenic living—especially those that possess explanatory power in the contemporary habits of the urban majority life—are *mediating* the course of market expansion and the associated socioenvironmental transitions, of which phenomena become evident in situated spatial milieus. The geographies exploring such underrepresented ways of being-in-the-world can not only teach us about the livelihood logics beyond *homo economicus*, but also enlighten us of the actually existing processes of co-becoming between human subjectivities and their more-than-human surrounds. At the heart of our efforts to unearth these situated modalities lies a classic humanist vision that sees every single human, by the virtue of phenomenologically existing in the world, remains an active agent capable of creatively interrupting the pre-prescribed epistemologies and hegemonies that are currently synonymous with today's Western-driven scholarship.

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[1] Nobody in fact "chose" to be born into this world so this is perhaps a moot point in a grander scheme of things, but from the perspective of youth (who may now consider themselves as a social/political agent capable of making a difference), these existential considerations may hold some truth.
[2] Donna Haraway (2016) has cogently summarized the history of the "Capitalocene" concept, discussing the catastrophic consequences of capitalist-driven globalization and modernization—particularly writing against "the managerial, technocratic, market-and-profit besotted, modernizing, and human-exceptionalist business-as-usual commitments" (see Moore 2017). In proposing more radical actions to counter the Capitalocene status quo, Haraway makes the famed claim, "Make Kin, Not Babies!" (Haraway 2016, 161). Mattheis (2022) offers a conceptual elaboration on such non-natalist claim, drawing attention to the politics of resisting state-building pro-natalism (as in normalization of heteronormative procreation) while advocating for pro-child kinship making.
[3] Harambee (distributionism) and Chamaa (collectivism, i.e. through welfare or investment groups) in Kenya refer to a trend among urban societies toward contributing time and energy to collective work (Guma 2021).
[4] Ujamaa, literally translated, refers to "familyhood" or "brotherhood" in Swahili, a local dialect in Eastern Africa (Guma 2016). In a broader sense, it refers to a form of "cooperative economics", in the sense of people cooperating to self-provide the essentials of life.
[5] Ubuntu is an epistemological and humanistic metaphor that embodies the significance of possessing relational, collectivist, intuitive and contemplative ideals in a community (see Guma 2012). It offers an important counterweight to the individualism apparent in contemporary cities, as well as a reminder that cities are not homogenous sociocultural entities, but spheres that exhibit variegated forms.
[6] A recent innovation that provides financial transaction services via mobile phone. The service allows users to store, send and receive money funds electronically.
[7] Through this practice, Elders would sound a drum to call upon all those concerned often with the goal to ignite communal and cultural obligations for integration, inclusion and participation.
[8] According to Cajete, (1994, 197), "ecosophy" is the term that describes "the integration of environmental knowledge with physical, social, mythological, psychological and spiritual life characteristic of Indigenous societies".