



## LIVING LEXICON FOR THE ENVIRONMENTAL HUMANITIES

# Growth

SANDRA CALKINS

*Department of Knowledge, Transformation, and Society, University of Twente, the Netherlands*

TYLER ZOANNI

*Department of Anthropology and Cultural Studies, University of Bremen, Germany*

The figure of growth has risen to prominence in economic thinking. Without going into the intricate genealogy of this “great derangement,” we simply note that a powerful natural analogy is at work: if the process of growth is fundamental to biological flourishing, then it must be for economic life too.<sup>1</sup> In this way, it becomes hard to think about the economic outside of this framework, where only growing economies are considered healthy.<sup>2</sup> While it is common for societies to model their conventions on natural regularities,<sup>3</sup> there is something particularly perverse about the way metaphors of growth are used to imagine neoliberal accumulation. Even if economic imaginaries have been decoupled from any direct connection to natural processes,<sup>4</sup> thinking in terms of growth continues to naturalize an exploitative economic order that causes widespread environmental devastation.

Ideas of growth understood as economic expansion are hard to jettison. Hence, calls for “green growth,” which holds onto the idea of continued economic expansion, ostensibly in an environment-friendly way.<sup>5</sup> More radical critiques of the growth ideology give its naturalizing analogy a pathological twist: economic expansion is figured as cancerous, cancer cells having the capacity to grow exponentially until destroying host

1. Ghosh, *Great Derangement*; Murphy, *Economization of Life*.

2. Schmelzer, “Growth Paradigm”; Murphy, *Economization of Life*; Schabas, *Natural Origin of Economics*.

3. Daston, “How Nature Became the Other.”

4. Schabas, *Natural Origin of Economics*.

5. Fiorino, *Good Life on a Finite Earth*.

and habitat.<sup>6</sup> Here growth is understood as a form of self-destructive expansion that results from petrochemical capitalism, the excessive exploitation of natural resources, and overpopulation.<sup>7</sup> This type of growth is targeted by calls for “degrowth.”<sup>8</sup>

In light of hegemonic understandings of growth, a more general question of strategy arises, a question at once intellectual and political: When terms and concepts are appropriated and instrumentalized by dominant formations of power and capital, is it more generative to give them up entirely, or try to reclaim and reimagine them?<sup>9</sup>

The critiques of the destruction that accompanies naturalized economic growth are timely and highly appropriate in resource-squandering North Atlantic and settler- and neocolonial settings. On this front, degrowth remains a highly significant corrective to “self-devouring growth.”<sup>10</sup> At the same time, however, degrowth is not an equally meaningful or even fair call in different parts of the world, where growth thinking can take other forms.<sup>11</sup> There are good reasons not to cede the imaginations of growth to capitalist ideologies, to think more expansively, and to reclaim growth in order to imagine other possible futures.<sup>12</sup>

A more encompassing sense of growth is evident in many settings outside the North Atlantic and beyond contemporary colonial imaginaries: a sense of growth as a dynamic cross-species vitality that involves organisms and environments, organic and inorganic matter. In Uganda, for instance, where we work, the growth of plants, persons, and collectives has long been fundamentally entangled—materially and metaphorically. For centuries, banana gardens, in particular, have been places where people grow food, build families, connect with the past, and cultivate futures. Such gardens are burial sites, where ancestor spirits dwell and generational connections are maintained. While crops like rice or yams have annual planting and harvesting times and foster an imagination of growth as seasonal flourish and decay, banana gardens generate notions of continuous forward-movement based on this plant’s rhizomatic capacity for expansion.<sup>13</sup> Such rich, more-than-human growth is central to the viability of persons and collectives. Its absence means that paths for progress and the basis for well-being are blocked.<sup>14</sup> Finally, notions of abundance and flourishing that emerge in relation to banana

6. McMurtry, *Cancer Stage of Capitalism*; Livingston, *Self-Devouring Growth*.

7. Livingston, *Self-Devouring Growth*. See also Murphy, *Economization of Life*; Clarke and Haraway, *Make Kin Not Population*.

8. At the same time, many degrowth initiatives are not simply negative: they call for the expansion of public services as well as new modes of collectivity and solidarity. Latouche, *Farewell to Growth*; D’Alisa, Demaria, and Kallis, *Degrowth*.

9. Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality”; Trouillot, “Adieu, Culture.”

10. Livingston, *Self-Devouring Growth*.

11. Calkins and Zoanni, “On Bundling.”

12. Escobar, *Encountering Development*, 94–101.

13. Calkins, “Health as Growth”; Wynter, “Novel and History, Plot and Plantation.”

14. Zoanni, “Possibilities of Failure.”

gardens provide their own highly elaborated idioms of critique, often grounded in eating, for unethical and unjust forms of growth—forms of growth gone wrong.<sup>15</sup>

Thinking growth from locations like banana gardens emphasizes a project of humans and plants growing in concert, in tissue, spirit, and metaphor. And what we observe in Uganda is evident in many places where people conceive of growth as a multi-dimensional process of expansion and decomposition, where cycles of living and dying together occasion new life.<sup>16</sup> Attending to wider notions of growth doesn't necessarily mean opposing ontological alternatives to capitalist growth; sometimes it implies noticing what proliferates in the ruins of capitalist extraction.<sup>17</sup> Regardless, growth can be understood as a process that highlights animacy and connection while dissolving boundaries between organic/inorganic, natural/cultural, and living/nonliving.<sup>18</sup> Such an understanding challenges the narrow strictures of dominant growth ideologies today.

Economic visions of growth are powerful and structure contemporary horizons of imagination. Therefore, developing counterimages and counternarratives has important ethical and political implications. Degrowth initiatives have mounted the most incisive critiques of this type of growth, refusing its forward momentum and progress narrative entirely. Yet in economically marginalized settings like Uganda, where economic, spiritual, moral, and others forms of growth are often imagined to occur jointly, calls for degrowth may be not only problematic in view of histories of colonial exploitation and underdevelopment but also not as urgent or compelling. This moves us beyond simply being for or against growth. Reclaiming growth means “staying with” growth in all its ambivalence and messiness, bearing in mind deeply unequal responsibility for past and present destruction.<sup>19</sup> It implies taking growth seriously and across multiple registers: as metaphor, as figure, as imaginary, as aspiration, and, not least, as material-semiotic process through which a wide range of beings and relations are made and unmade. This is not to say that thinking growth otherwise is an easy endeavor; again, the difficulties are made clear by all the ways that “green” has been deployed to shore up hegemonic visions of growth. Ultimately, though, foregrounding growth's relationality and its capacity to sustain multispecies thriving is a pressing matter: it entails refusing to let our imaginations and lives with others—whom we cultivate and who cultivate us—be defined by capitalism's narrow trajectories of growth.

15. Themes of cannibalism, vampirism, and other monstrous kinds of consumption are central to critiques of illegitimate power and wealth in Uganda and in many parts of Africa. See, e.g., Karlström, “Power in the Post-colony”; Behrend, *Resurrecting Cannibals*; White, *Speaking with Vampires*.

16. Calkins, “Health as Growth”; See also Battaglia, *On the Bones of the Serpent*; Strathern, “Gathered Fields”; Langwick, “Politics of Habitability”; Bloch and Parry, *Death and the Regeneration of Life*; Lyons, *Vital Decomposition*; Chao, “Children of the Palms.”

17. Tsing, *Mushroom at the End of the World*.

18. Ingold and Hallam, “Making and Growing.”

19. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*.

SANDRA CALKINS is associate professor in the Department of Knowledge, Transformation, and Society (KiTeS), University of Twente. She works at the intersections of post-/decolonial science and technology studies, plant studies, and environmental anthropology.

TYLER ZOANNI is assistant professor of anthropology at the University of Bremen. His research focuses on health, politics, kinship, aesthetics, personhood, and subjectivity.

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