

Sarah Lawrence College

Our Accumulation Addiction:
*The Harm of Overconsumption and Rehabilitation Treatments
for our Minds and the Environment*

Holly Gregory

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Abstract

In the same way an addict rationalizes using their substance, environmental degradation has been framed as an unfortunate side effect of our inevitable progress towards a predetermined future. These tendencies are justified using a constructed narrative built on cultural techniques and global systems of oppression, conditioning our minds to be in a constant state of desire. By framing consumerism as an addiction, this analysis questions the source of our unbridled dysregulated desire, investigates potential harm reduction addiction interventions and applies them on a global scale as a treatment for our consumption craving. This path away from consumption dependency engages the difficulties of living simply, our fear of scarcity, and a critical long-term approach to pleasure in an attempt to imagine a future in which we consciously rehabilitate our relationship with the environment by healing our bodies and minds.

I. Introduction

“The patterns of the universe repeat at scale.”¹ This idea is integral to the formation of the argument of this piece: that the issues we face as individuals are similar, if not identical, to the issues we encounter as a collective. As a result, this framework can be used to apply solutions across scales as well.

In her book, *Emergent Strategy*, adrienne maree brown describes the concept of fractals as “complex patterns that are self-similar across different scales. They are created by repeating a simple process over and over in an ongoing feedback loop.” In nature, structure mirrors itself across scales. The Fibonacci sequence quantifies how perfectly formed spirals repeat themselves as they grow and can be seen within the smallest plants to celestial bodies in space. Roots and veins, branches and bronchi, tectonic plates and epidermal layers. We mirror the earth and the earth reflects back into itself.

Throughout this analysis, I will be addressing our addictions that plague us and following the thread of these connections from our individual compulsions to our collective conditioned behaviors. By using the concept of fractals to aid this investigation, I will connect the ways in which our individual suffering is connected to our collective suffering, and how the solution to one can be a solution to the other.

A. Fear of Scarcity

“Plunder has matured into habit and addiction; the people who could author the mechanized death of our ghettos, the mass rape of private prisons, then engineer their own forgetting, must inevitably plunder much more. This is not a belief in prophecy but in the seductiveness of cheap gasoline.”

– Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*, pg. 150

The only way the current system can sustain itself is through the constant extraction of resources. In his book, *Between the World and Me*, Coates is describing the phenomenon as it applies to his experience of being a black man raised in the United States. He recognizes that the extraction of labor and resources taking place on a national and international scale is being driven by a desire.² Unfortunately, it is not only the desire of those who can make a profit, but

¹ brown, adrienne maree. *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*. AK Press, 2017.

² Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *Between The World and Me*. Spiegel & Grau, 2015.

those who are implicated in this global dynamic through the influence of large scale institutions and the dominant narratives they create to perpetuate their power.

This large scale extraction that is taking place has been framed as a symptom of a naturally occurring problem. Rising sea levels, disappearing forests, the extinction of species, none of these are the effects of an earth under siege, but rather the unfortunate sacrifices that have to be made by the weakest or the least resilient for the sake of a necessary transformation in the name of progress.

Limitless growth on a linear timeline is the imaginary we are operating under: that, over time, as we grow and the technology we create grows with us, we will evolve to reach a desired level of development (synonymous with our ‘most civilized’ state). In order to achieve this state, we need to contribute primarily to our economic development.

Malthus was a British economist whose theory is founded on the idea that the world’s resources are finite, and thus in order to avoid potential humanitarian disasters such as famines, there must be strict population control in order to maintain a balance. In order to demonstrate his ethic in practice, Garrett Hardin uses the ‘lifeboat metaphor’ in order to illustrate Malthusian ethics. In a chapter of his text *Living on a Lifeboat*, Hardin compares each nation to a lifeboat that must contain its population. Developing countries (commonly in the global south with poor economies) struggle to contain their quickly growing population in their own lifeboat, and while some can survive in the water for time, some even long enough to make their way to rich countries’ lifeboats and ask to to be let on, there is not enough space for everyone to survive.

If you were to adopt a Malthusian view, that is how the world and its resources function. There is a finite amount, but it is constant, and the population must be adjusted to accommodate. Over the years this theory has been argued and proven inaccurate repeatedly. However, it is still a notion that is widely believed and applied to subsequent analysis. It is because of Malthus and his widely known and understood perspective that an assumption was made, implicitly limiting resources and technology. Resources are no longer required to be distributed based on need, but rather whether or not each nation is deserving based on their ability to adhere to a predetermined threshold. Whether or not you are allowed into the lifeboat – given the resources needed for survival – is determined by how willing you are to take your own space. The responsibility is on the individual to collect what they need for themselves.

Suddenly, *scarcity* is a threat, and the possibility of there *not being enough for everyone* is a valid fear. On the large scale, the solution then becomes to adjust the population, rather than the resources. For the individuals, people are suddenly thrust into a life or death scenario in which there is a risk of not accumulating enough. The potential for something to interfere with our ability to drain the earth of oil, to raze the surface of its forests, to destroy biodiversity and replace it with mass monoculture – all in order to sustain the current level of consumption – is more frightening to us than the life-threatening consequences of these behaviors.

“We are a nation that normalizes dysfunction... This is the outcome of living in a culture where the politics of greed are normalized... When greedy consumption is the order of the day, dehumanization becomes acceptable. Then, treating people like objects is not only acceptable but is required behavior. it’s the culture of exchange, the tyranny of market place values.”³

bell hooks, black feminist author and thinker, writes this in her text, *All About Love*. Here, she is analyzing how we as a society have distanced ourselves from love and have adopted habits that encourage a lack of compassion and thoughtfulness. This lack of compassion impacts us intimately. The more that our society separates loving connection with consumption, and that impacts not only those closest to us, but those much further from our sphere our influence due to the dominant institutions that control our economies, our resources, and our access to each other.

This passage illustrates what it is like to live and attempt to function under this dominant narrative. Whether we realize it or not, our fear of scarcity influences everything we do. Public health figures suggest that 40% of deaths in the United States each year are attributable to dysfunctional relationships with desires, such as unhealthy foods, smoking, alcohol, unprotected sex, and illicit drugs.⁴ It is clear that our consumption habits are similar across scales, but the mindset under which we engage in these habits is also present across the same framework. The fear of scarcity that has been curated over centuries can be linked to a similar fear that manifests within individuals confronted with their addictive tendencies.

³ hooks, bell. *All About Love*. HarperCollins Publishers, 2001.

⁴ Hofmann, Wilhelm, and Loran Nordgren. *Psychology of Desire*. Guilford Publications, 2016.

Research shows that those who have suffered with substance use disorders have been shown to have heightened sympathetic nervous system activity.⁵ The sympathetic nervous system is in control of our ‘fight or flight’ response. In reaction to cues, particularly craving or substance related cues, addicts are affected by dysregulated nervous system activity, which impedes on their ability to make sustainable choices, especially in the long term. Additionally, it also leads to increased anxiety, depression, and perceived stress, which makes it harder to resist addictive behaviors.⁶

Our attitude towards hedonic consumption is most pressing to us in these cases, however they also dictate how we consume from the earth. Delving into this connection and understanding this relationship will guide the solutions we generate for ourselves and the environment.

The drive to accumulate goods and resources is seen as a natural occurrence, simultaneously framed as a necessary component and a byproduct of the system. Therefore, solutions to intervene against overconsumption are rarely implemented, and if so, have little effect on the global issue, due to confronting the symptoms of the problem rather than the source of the disease. The aim of this analysis is to gain clarity on the connection between our consumption tendencies and the environmental degradation that occurs as a result. By shifting the perspective and reconceptualizing how we discuss and frame these issues, I’m hoping to find solutions cross-culturally and in an interdisciplinary way.

First, I use voluntary simplicity as an example to describe why previous solutions addressing overconsumption have not been effective. To bridge this gap in understanding, I highlight the harmful effects of our individual and collective addictive consumption tendencies and emphasize the errors in our understanding of desire and consumption that have created negative patterns of behavior across scales. Finally, through looking at indigenous ethics, eco-feminist thought, and black feminist theory, I investigate how we can change our conception of consumption to begin imagining new, effective solutions to the climate crisis.

⁵ Berridge, K. C., & Robinson, T. E. (2016). Liking, wanting, and the incentive-sensitization theory of addiction. *American Psychologist*, 71(8), 670–679. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000059>

⁶ *Ibid.*

II. Voluntary Simplicity

“Living simply makes loving simple. The choice to live simply necessarily enhances our capacity to love.”

– Richard Forrester, *Freedom of Living Simply*

Scientists, philosophers, economists, and activists have all suggested potential solutions to our problem with overconsumption. However, there is clearly a gap that needs to be addressed, as the proposed solutions have not had the desired impact. In order to find the source of this misunderstanding, this section will use ‘voluntary simplicity’ as an example to investigate where potential solutions are failing to address our needs and those of the environment simultaneously.

Richard Gregg first coined the term Voluntary Simplicity (VS) in his text *The Value of Voluntary Simplicity* in 1936. Inspired by what he learned of Eastern traditions, he translated certain practices into the existing Western framework.

“VS involves both inner and outer condition. It means singleness of purpose, sincerity and honesty within, as well as avoidance of exterior clutter, of many possessions irrelevant to the chief purpose of life. It means an ordering and guiding of our energy and desires, a partial restraint in some directions in order to secure greater abundance of life in other directions.”⁷

Quite simply, VS is the process of becoming more aligned with a single purpose, and thus eliminating material belongings that do not align with this purpose. When a single goal has been determined that is in one’s own best interest in the long term, it can be much more difficult to justify the accumulation of needless excess. Gregg includes an element that can easily be forgotten, stating that “simplicity is a relative matter, depending on climate, customs, culture, and the character of the individual.”⁸ What is important to note is that VS is not a universal state. Not only are populations disproportionately affected by the effects of consumerism, but their agency to act on their consumerist tendencies are also affected by these same inequalities.

Given the way Gregg presents VS, his solutions are only really viable to a small percent of the population. This term, which he creates inspired by Gandhi's teachings on mindfulness, is

⁷ Gregg, Richard B. “The Value Of Voluntary Simplicity.” *Visva-Bharati Quarterly*, Aug. 1936. (pg. 2)

⁸ *Ibid.* (pg. 1)

only relevant to those with the capacity and the power in the Western world to have already accumulated enough excess to begin to question their desires to consume more. His defense of VS is thorough, and the negative side effects of overconsumption are addressed, however his argument is not an attempt to critique the larger systems that encourage the behavior itself. In fact, the paper itself is more structured around addressing concerns that “simplicity may be a danger” or a “camouflage for irresponsibility, for lack of courage or failure of energy.”⁹

Gregg highlights certain criticisms people could launch against simplicity, such as the many benefits of advanced technology, modern medicine, and globalization, which “seems to be founded on the expectation of an ever-expanding market for mass-production”.¹⁰ Accurately, he argues that despite these advancements, scarcity still exists, even in fully developed nations: “The just distribution of material things is not merely a problem of technique or of organization. it is primarily a moral problem.”¹¹ Additionally, he addresses that Western societies function under the assumption that “property and possession and power in ownership gives us stability, independence, status, and a feeling of contribution to a larger community”.¹² However, the irony is that multiple epistemologies such as scientific and psychological studies, as well as religious texts (especially Christianity, the most popular religion in the United States), emphasize the decline in the need for possessions that takes place as we self-actualize.

While the concept of simplicity is a helpful starting point to begin to discuss how we might temper our consumption cravings, it is never discussed how it would be implemented. As Gregg explains himself, this concept is difficult to place into a Western context, stating, “our present ‘mental climate’ is not favorable either to a clear understanding of the value of simplicity or to its practice. Simplicity seems to be a foible of saints and occasional geniuses, but not something for the rest of us”.¹³ Here, Gregg is illustrating an archetype that is used often in the discussion of environmental justice: that those who are fully able to dedicate themselves to embodying their values are extraordinary people in extraordinary circumstances, drawing on the assumption that the practice of simplicity, practicing self-restraint, is a quality reserved for those of a higher capacity than regular people, like the saints and geniuses. VS requires not only

⁹ Gregg, Richard B. “The Value Of Voluntary Simplicity.” *Visva-Bharati Quarterly*, Aug. 1936. (pg. 3)

¹⁰ *Ibid.* (pg. 3)

¹¹ *Ibid.* (pg. 5)

¹² *Ibid.* (pg. 8)

¹³ *Ibid.* (pg. 1)

a material transformation, but an “intellectual, emotional, and spiritual understanding and appreciation”, which can be difficult for people to access, especially if they don’t have the benefit of having been exposed to simplistic living. The solutions he proposes are not described in much more detail than “a change in mindset”, or “directing the imagination towards new desires”, which may be accurate, but do not access the deeper shift that must take place in order to embrace a life of simplicity.

This example offers insight into the ways in which past solutions have not been effective. There is no specific point in Gregg’s analysis that is explicitly *wrong*, asking one to be more mindful of what we consume is a helpful way of beginning to consider the effects consumption might have. However, this conception of voluntary simplicity was introduced from another cultural context with little to no consideration of how it would fit into a Western framework (and as shown previously, it doesn’t). Additionally, there is little explanation as to how one would engage in this process without the necessary historical and cultural knowledge that can’t be expected from those raised in a Western context.

Despite this, VS was a helpful way for Western thinkers to begin to question the ways in which we are conditioned to pursue desires. It was a concept that other Western thinkers were able to use to critique the existing economic system and the harm being inflicted on the environment. Their additions show an attempt to adapt certain existing tools to confront the problem of overconsumption, however these in turn reveal more limitations. Duane Elgin is an author whose further work on VS has helped in being able to define the term in our current context and investigate potential benefits of applying the concept in our routines and in our organizing systems.

In 1977, Elgin outlined five values in his analysis entitled *Voluntary Simplicity* that “emerge as hallmarks of the way of life termed voluntary simplicity... these values possess an underlying coherence which suggests that they have not arisen randomly, *but rather as a strongly reinforcing set or pattern.*”¹⁴

Two of the values have already been discussed, namely material simplicity (simply consuming less material products or resources), and personal growth (allowing that time/energy to contribute to personal goals), however there are others that were not mentioned by the original creator of the terms. Elgin describes that VS can be applied to the way in which we

¹⁴ Elgin, Duane, and Arnold Mitchell. “Voluntary Simplicity.” *Co-Evolution Quarterly*, 1977.

organize, explaining that “reduction of scale is seen as a means of getting back to basics by restoring to life a more human sense of proportion and perspective.”¹⁵ He asserts that living and working in smaller communities as opposed to large scale institutions allows individuals to more easily recognize their contributions and have a stronger sense of shared rewards and responsibility. Voluntary simplicity supports a more decentralized framework which is more adept at addressing the needs of the individual rather than depending on external validation. This is connected to the value of self-determination, which is a need of the individuals to attain more freedom through becoming less dependent on material resources and to aid in exercising more self-discipline in their own consumption pattern. Finally, he also addresses ecological awareness, describing that by applying VS simultaneously “acknowledges the interconnectedness of people and resources”.¹⁶ A recognition of social responsibility is integral to voluntary simplicity, and when we are mindful of the needs of others, both present and future, we become reminded of our collective commitment.

Elgin is cognizant of the ways in which VS can be applied to counter the rise of neoliberalism that was taking place at the time he was writing this piece. This political ideology is one that claims the infallibility of the free-market economy.¹⁷ The founding beliefs of neoliberalism claim that the free-market economy is able to self-regulate naturally, and that privatizing industries allow for more freedom of choice and faster rates of development.¹⁸ The policies designed within this system, which has become the dominant framework of our time, is engaging within the same scarcity mindset described as inspired from Malthusian ethics. These policies place the responsibility on the individual to regulate consumption in a highly competitive environment. Elgin could see that VS was a potential solution to the harm caused by a dangerous self-perpetuating cycle driven by a system that thrives off of “a depoliticized citizenry marked by apathy and cynicism”, who are unlikely to critically consider their consumption, as that is actively hindered by the dominant social, economic and political institutions.¹⁹

¹⁵ Elgin, Duane, and Arnold Mitchell. “Voluntary Simplicity.” *Co-Evolution Quarterly*, 1977. (pg. 6)

¹⁶ *Ibid.* (pg.7)

¹⁷ “Introduction.” *Profit over People: Neoliberalism and Global Order*, by Noam Chomsky and Robert Waterman McChesney, Seven Stories Press, 2011. (pg. 7)

¹⁸ *Ibid.* (pg. 6)

¹⁹ *Ibid.* (pg. 10)

Emphasis in Industrial World View	Emphasis in Voluntary Simplicity World View
<u>Value Premises</u>	<u>Value Premises</u>
Material growth	Material sufficiency coupled with psycho-spiritual growth
Man over nature	People within nature
Competitive self-interest	Enlightened self-interest
Rugged individualism	Cooperative individualism
Rationalism	Rational and intuitive
<u>Social Characteristics</u>	<u>Social Characteristics</u>
Large, complex living and working environments	Smaller, less complex living and working environments
Growth of material complexity	Reduction of material complexity
Space-age technology	Appropriate technology
Identity defined by patterns of consumption	Identity found through inner and interpersonal discovery
Centralization of regulation and control at nation/state level	Greater local self-determination coupled with emerging global institutions
Specialized work roles—through division of labor	More integrated work roles (e.g., team assembly, multiple roles)
Secular	Balance of secular and spiritual
Mass produced, quickly obsolete, standardized products	Hand crafted, durable, unique products
Lifeboat ethic in foreign relations	Spaceship earth ethic
Cultural homogeneity, partial acceptance of diversity	Cultural heterogeneity, eager acceptance of diversity
High pressure, rat race existence	Laid back, relaxed existence

Table comparing the characteristics of an Industrial Worldview to a Voluntary Simplicity Worldview (Elgin, 1977)

Elgin is encountering a significant obstacle: there are powerful systems and institutions established in the Western world that make it incredibly difficult to implement the framework of VS. While he is more critical than Gregg and has translated the original concept to be more applicable to a more modern era, they are both encountering the main problem we will be discussing. The structure of the dominant system as it stands makes it difficult for interventions such as this to take hold and introduce any significant change in the way we conceptualize these issues. In Gregg's argument, simple living and reduced consumption is culturally incompatible with Western societies. In Eldin's far more critical perspective, these same mindful behaviors are antithetical to how Western institutions function and the way in which they are organized.

III. *Changing the Perspective*

Due to this design, there is an intentional barrier placed between those who are affected by the problem, and the implementation of effective solutions, and the only way to bridge it is to address the root of the issue. Guy Claxton is a thinker who expands on the difficulties of VS, illustrating specifically why the values of VS can be so hard to adopt. In his analysis, *Involuntary Simplicity: Changing Dysfunctional Habits of Consumption*, he explores the potential challenges with adopting a VS framework:

“Yet while the spirit, as a result of reflection on these considerations, may, for many people, be willing, the flesh remains often and indubitably weak. In this area of personal lifestyle, as in many others such as dieting or giving up smoking, to *know* what to do, to *agree* that it is a good idea, even to *want* to change, seems over and over again to be insufficient... That which is adopted *voluntarily* has, it seems, little power to resist being shouldered by a deeper impulse that remains involuntarily.”²⁰

Here, Claxton describes the problem that seems to be recurring: despite knowing the harm of overconsumption, despite recognizing the suffering caused by it, and despite even the active desire to consume less, it is difficult for people to commit to the practice. He explains, with great efficiency, why many of the solutions towards the climate crisis have been insufficient. Claxton asserts that consumption is a collective addiction. While it’s definitely not the first time this comparison had been made, it is the first critique of our consumption habits that delve into the suffering it causes us. He explains why VS, despite the number of benefits we have previously outlined, could not be fully effective. If consumption is truly an addiction in the way that Claxton describes, then the methods of adopting a VS framework that have been suggested thus far, namely will-power, self-discipline, and “directing the self towards other desires”, are far from adequate. By this logic, the solutions that will most effectively address the climate crisis are those that confront our environmentally harmful tendencies as an addiction.

This next section will reinforce this comparison with evidence. By viewing our consumption behaviors through an addiction framework, the factors that allow this behavior to continue will be revealed. Additionally, in his article, Claxton provides certain solutions to

²⁰ Claxton, Guy, “Involuntary Simplicity: Changing Dysfunctional Habits of Consumption.” *Environmental Values* 3, no. 1, (1994): 71-78 [doi:10.3197/096327194776679791](https://doi.org/10.3197/096327194776679791) (pg. 73)

remedy the shortcomings of VS. The few solutions he does suggest can be tested by comparing how effective they are on multiple scales – at the level of individual addiction and towards our collective habits. Only then can we begin to analyze and imagine potential solutions to the problem of overconsumption.

IV. Consumption Addiction

A. What is desire?

“In a world where abundance has replaced scarcity as the source of many contemporary societal problems, the question of why people so often fail to act in accordance with their objectives, values, and intentions has become more relevant than ever... To understand this puzzling phenomenon, such behavior is often explained in terms of desires taking over our rational considerations.”

– Wilhelm Hofmann and Loran Nordgren, *Psychology of Desire* (2016)

In *The Psychology of Desire*, the psychologists Hofmann and Nordgren compile essays seeking to investigate desire, how it emerges, the ways in which it influences judgments and attitudes, and especially how it can become pathological.²¹ In this collection they feature many other psychologists researching cravings, pleasure, and addictions and how our behavior is affected by them. It will be a useful guide in defining the characteristics of desire and addiction, which we can then apply on a global scale to diagnose our consumption tendencies.

In chapter 3, *Desire and Desire Regulation*, Hofmann provides an in depth definition of the term desire as “those motivations that propel us to approach certain stimuli in our environment and engage in activities with them that provide us with a relative gain in immediate pleasure (including relief from discomfort).”²² While certain desires can overlap with *goals*, they are far from synonymous. Hofmann clarifies that up until recently, desire regulation was measured using a goal-conflict model (example: short term “goal” to eat something sweet v.s. the long term goal of losing weight), however, by defining desire as simply another short-term goal, “it may actually hinder a deeper understanding of the *specific* characteristics of two

²¹ Hofmann, Wilhelm, and Loran Nordgren. *Psychology of Desire*. Guilford Publications, 2016.

²² *Ibid.* (pg. 62)

opponents involved in these motivational struggles... we might sacrifice a closer analysis of the specific laws that trigger and fuel desire, and the most effective strategies to tame it”.²³

In the beginning of the study of psychology, an overwhelming majority of the research on desire was conducted while framing it as simply another variable our brains would weigh in contrast to other factors such as reward and punishment. There was, and continues to remain, the belief that our brains are infallible at calculating the odds of the best possible outcome, and desire could be quantified in these calculations. Hofmann argues that a perspective of desire as emotional rather than cognitive processes is much more accurate. Desire is affective, capable of eliciting an emotional and physical experience that aligns our behavior with our current goals, bodily states and learning history”.²⁴ Desire is also motivational, meaning it has the capability of creating multiple models of future loss and reward, thus elevating chances of attaining the subject of the desire, granting it the ability to affect and instigate behavior.²⁵

Whether or not people notice that it’s happening, we can recognize many ways in which it’s shown to be relevant in our current society. Advertisements are featured on every surface that can be monetized. Media and entertainment have become facilitators of these messages. It is virtually impossible to move through the world in which we are not being subjected to a message reminding us of something we want, and now you don’t even have to leave your bed, let alone your house. The places in which we learn, work, and socialize have become organized around consumption. We are under assault from stimuli conditioning specific behavior. If we were to ask ourselves how we would apply VS at this stage, ‘turning our attention to other desires’ is difficult to imagine.

B. Misconceptions of desire

“There was a time, for most of the history of the human race, in fact, when to contemplate and strive for happiness was critical, necessarily compelling. But I am convinced that focusing on it now has gotten quite out of hand. It has become a bankrupt idea, the vocabulary of which is frightening: money, things, protection, control, speed, and more.”

– Toni Morrison, Sarah Lawrence Commencement Address (1988)

²³ Hofmann, Wilhelm, and Loran Nordgren. *Psychology of Desire*. Guilford Publications, 2016. (pg. 62)

²⁴ *Ibid.* (pg. 63)

²⁵ *Ibid.* (pg. 63)

The truth is there are a lot of misconceptions about the sensation that have influenced the ways in which we assume desire to function. An example of this is presented in a case study by Lynch and Bonnie in 1994 cited in chapter 11 entitled *Perceptions of Desire*, where less than 30% of smokers in a particular sample believed they would still be smoking in 5 years, only for 70% of them to return 5 years later still smoking actively.²⁶ Ruttan and Nordgren describe the implications: “We contend that the beliefs that these smokers held are a specific example of a much broader error in how people think about desire; namely that people tend to underestimate how much desire (and affect more generally) will influence their attitudes, preferences, and behavior”.²⁷ This is a common misconception that has an intentional function within the dominant narrative that asserts that the main solution to overcoming compulsive desires is rational and deliberate processing, but often the opposite is true. Reflective processes become justification processes.²⁸

This is further explained in chapter 10 of *The Psychology of Desire, License to Sin*. In this chapter, Ridder et al. explain the inconsistencies with how we regulate desire. Regardless of how much we deliberate and debate ourselves about our desires, it rarely - if ever - results in dismissing or repressing it, but rather we are able to further justify our indulgence in the behavior.²⁹ This is called *justification based self-regulation failure*, and we encounter it every day when we attempt to prioritize a short term goal over a long term goal. It is not enough to want something, there has to be sufficient reason enough to rationalize the behavior. As Ridder et al. explains, “having reasons outweighs the quality of the reasons.”³⁰

Claxton’s descriptions of our consumption habits on the collective scale echoes this sentiment:

“Just so, when the mind habitually runs a particular belief system, and when that belief system is instrumental in creating (editing, selecting, interpreting) *experience*, then everything that happens can only be understood in terms of the presuppositions of the system.”³¹

²⁶ Hofmann, Wilhelm, and Loran Nordgren. *Psychology of Desire*. Guilford Publications, 2016. (pg.226)

²⁷ *Ibid.* (pg. 226)

²⁸ *Ibid.* (pg. 200)

²⁹ *Ibid.* (pg. 201)

³⁰ *Ibid.* (pg. 204)

³¹ Claxton, Guy, “Involuntary Simplicity: Changing Dysfunctional Habits of Consumption.” *Environmental Values* 3, no. 1, (1994): 71-78 [doi:10.3197/096327194776679791](https://doi.org/10.3197/096327194776679791) (pg. 74)

On the individual scale, justification based self-regulation failure can result in spending money when we are trying to save or binge-eating when we are trying to reach a personal health goal. On a larger scale, it results in continuing to extract a maximum amount of resources from the earth, while simultaneously trying to attain many of the environmental justice goals that have been set. As long as there is a way we can justify the short-term desire at the present moment, we will continue to be controlled by our desires without even realizing it is happening. That is why arbitrary goals and milestones aimed towards addressing climate change won't be as effective: as long as there are those who benefit from the extraction of resources taking place and the exploitation of those forced to contribute towards it, the harm, injustice, and destruction that occurs as a result will continue to be justified.

There are natural impulses that would urge us to reconsider our habits. In chapter 4, *Desire Over Time*, Joseph Reddin explores the concept of satiation, which is defined as “the drop in enjoyment with repeated consumption”.³² Satiation is integral as it helps regulate our relationship with desire and has certain evolutionary benefits, namely encourage seeking variety and to help redirect focus from the needs of the self to the environment.³³ The somatic and emotional experience of satiation is vitally important to signal to our minds and bodies that we are no longer in need of consumption, and that we can then turn our attention to our other needs and those of the community. However, just like desire, satiation is just as infallible. Reddin explains that satiation is largely constructed based on memory. Memory has repeatedly been shown to be much less accurate than we believe it to be. It can be easily manipulated by “distractions that reduce encoding or by influencing the perception of time.”³⁴ Choices made in the present are dependent on what has already taken place. If there is little awareness as to the last time one consumed something and how much, it could be used as reason to justify further indulgence.

Claxton also describes this phenomenon in his own piece. He describes “a closed system of beliefs that prevent objective inconsistencies from being recognized,” and defines this

³² Hofmann, Wilhelm, and Loran Nordgren. *Psychology of Desire*. Guilford Publications, 2016. (pg. 82)

³³ *Ibid.* (pg.84)

³⁴ Hofmann, Wilhelm, and Loran Nordgren. *Psychology of Desire*. Guilford Publications, 2016. (pg. 85)

phenomenon as a *trap*.³⁵ Much like the basis of an addiction, a trap is our justification-based regulation failure at work.

“Whilst the underlying *trap* is in place, the attempt to live frugally is bound to be experienced, however faintly, as *painful*, as a deprivation of what is ‘needed’, and as soon as this occurs, the system as a whole seeks to rectify the situation. The lack of comfort or of choice becomes an itch that demands scratching; and because the ‘motive’ is still in place, there are no good-enough grounds for resisting the urge to ‘scratch’.”³⁶

Traps are internal methods of self-correction within the individual. However, this term can be used to describe the practices that have been implemented in the routines of Western life in order to discourage mindfulness. We no longer pay attention to what we eat, often multitasking or working at the same time. We cannot appreciate an item we’ve purchased without being reminded of other things to buy with it. Increasingly using technology to free up space that then allows us more time to consider consuming other products in another way. All of these practices are implemented by a combination of the individual and the system they live within in order to influence the sensation of satiation. By reminding us of the ways in which we are dissatisfied, the world around us encourages us to associate our dissatisfaction with shame, disappointment, or lack of success. Thus, satiation itself is redefined into a state we may never reach – unless, of course, we are willing to pay to improve ourselves.

C. *Elaborated Desire and Possible Interventions*

“If dysfunctional habits of consumption are driven by psychological factors, then a satisfactory solution is not going to be found in either technological innovation or in ecopolitical reorganization, but in the liberation of individuals, in their millions, from the sway of an unconsciously self-destructive worldview.”

– Guy Claxton, *Involuntary Simplicity: Changing Dysfunctional Habits of Consumption*. (1991)

Based on the psychological work presented here, it has been shown that our lack of knowledge about desire has allowed our relationship with the stimuli that gives us pleasure to

³⁵ Claxton, Guy, “Involuntary Simplicity: Changing Dysfunctional Habits of Consumption.” *Environmental Values* 3, no. 1, (1994): 71-78 [doi:10.3197/096327194776679791](https://doi.org/10.3197/096327194776679791) (pg. 72)

³⁶ Claxton, Guy, “Involuntary Simplicity: Changing Dysfunctional Habits of Consumption.” *Environmental Values* 3, no. 1, (1994): 71-78 [doi:10.3197/096327194776679791](https://doi.org/10.3197/096327194776679791) (pg. 75)

become unbalanced and susceptible to manipulation. We have become so disconnected from our ability to determine our needs and when they have been met, it can be impossible to discern our real impulses from the conditioned ones. This is the foundation of addiction, otherwise known as “elaborated desire”.³⁷ It “predispose(s) the organism toward (sometimes problematic) consumption via two important mechanisms”, the first being its ability to outweigh other desires, leading the individual to prioritize it over other needs (even self-regulatory goals and values), the second being the ability to “instigate processes of motivated reasoning that justify indulgence” (justification based self-regulatory failure).³⁸ Given this, it would explain why people would easily abandon their values based on VS in the face of a new consumption craving, as elaborated desires are easily rationalized.

Now that we have determined the first part of Claxton’s argument to be true, we can return to the solutions he proposes and determine their efficacy.

The first suggestion he makes is to go ‘cold-turkey’, wherein everyone is forced to restrict or abstain from their consumption tendencies. When translated on to a global scale this is represented as an “eco-dictatorial” solution in which people are required to alter their behavior in a way that doesn’t harm the environment. In this hypothetical situation, simplicity can be implemented, but it wouldn’t be voluntary, which is only one of innumerable reasons for why this suggestion is not applicable.

A second strategy Claxton suggests is to implement certain regulations that encourage people to behave in opposition to the trap they’ve constructed, meaning rewards for good behavior, and punishment for bad behavior. In terms of addiction, this would align most closely with Gregg’s solution of ‘turning our attention to other desires’, essentially addressing the craving to indulge in one addictive tendency with the replacement of another equally rewarding tendency. This is not a sustainable solution, as when the rewards stop, it is likely people are no longer motivated to resist indulgence. On the opposing side, a punitive approach rarely works, especially in the case of addiction, and when applied to a larger scale it could result in an eco-fascist solution.

³⁷ Hofmann, Wilhelm, and Loran Nordgren. *Psychology of Desire*. Guilford Publications, 2016. (pg. 66)

³⁸ Claxton, Guy, “Involuntary Simplicity: Changing Dysfunctional Habits of Consumption.” *Environmental Values* 3, no. 1, (1994): 71-78 [doi:10.3197/096327194776679791](https://doi.org/10.3197/096327194776679791) (pg. 66)

The third suggestion Claxton makes is the most practical solution thus far. One way of encouraging upholding values of simplicity is to “create a special context within which the values of a simplified lifestyle can be experienced”.³⁹ This is the environmental solution that already echoes what is done in addiction treatment. It is common for addicts to attend therapy or rehabilitation centers in order to weather withdrawals and practice behaviors that can help them in maintaining sobriety when they return to the world outside. Similarly, it is common for people to go on retreats or surround themselves in nature in order to practice simplicity in an environment conducive to those behaviors. This can be extremely productive when it comes to learning and practicing temporarily, but it is another ordeal entirely to maintain the behavior in a neutral environment, and even more difficult in an environment in which all of the stimuli are actively encouraging relapse. “There is often little to no carry-over from one context to the other”, Claxton describes.⁴⁰ However, one factor he addresses which is important to remember is that what is unique to these spaces is that community is always available. Being a part of a community seeking to mediate their consumption behaviors and who are available to support each other to attain these goals is the most effective solution that has been provided thus far from the current Western ethic that can allow us to tame our own consumption cravings.

The final and most promising solution Claxton suggests is deceptively simple, “the cultivation of *mindfulness*.”⁴¹ Here, Claxton is inspired by Elgin’s use of the term, which was borrowed from Buddhist tradition. Yet again, we are finding the obstacle we encountered earlier, namely the issue of translating these concepts cross-culturally.

As Claxton explains, mindfulness is extremely helpful in beginning to question our impulses. Choosing not to consume when the opportunity presents itself is the simplest way we as individuals can begin to combat this craving, yet it’s much easier said than done. The Western world is not established on the knowledge required to be able to implement it effectively. Mindfulness has been shown to drastically reduce relapse in addicts, and yet complete sobriety is still not the most likely result.⁴² It is a helpful practice, but it is not an

³⁹ Claxton, Guy, “Involuntary Simplicity: Changing Dysfunctional Habits of Consumption.” *Environmental Values* 3, no. 1, (1994): 71-78 [doi:10.3197/096327194776679791](https://doi.org/10.3197/096327194776679791) (pg. 77)

⁴⁰ Claxton, Guy, “Involuntary Simplicity: Changing Dysfunctional Habits of Consumption.” *Environmental Values* 3, no. 1, (1994): 71-78 [doi:10.3197/096327194776679791](https://doi.org/10.3197/096327194776679791) (pg. 77)

⁴¹ *Ibid* (pg. 77)

⁴² Brandon, Thomas H., et al. “Relapse and Relapse Prevention.” *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2007, pp. 257–284., [doi:10.1146/annurev.clinpsy.3.022806.091455](https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.clinpsy.3.022806.091455).

accessible solution to the population who are struggling to restrain their addictive tendencies, and it is most definitely not accessible to those who are suffering from the harm caused by these same addictive tendencies.

Through this process, we have been able to define desire and understand the ways in which it functions. This is extremely important when discussing consumption, as we must understand how our behaviors around accumulation are justified based on a logic that we construct. It is only through understanding and deconstructing this framework of logic that we can begin to accurately discuss these behaviors and dismantle the assumptions they act on. Now that we have established consumption as an addiction perpetuated by both ourselves and the system we work and live in, we can begin to constructively imagine ways of reducing the harmful effects of these behaviors, knowing now the destructive nature of dysregulated desire that is being cultivated in our society. Now that we have effectively established our relationship to consumption as an addiction and determined why Western solutions are not effective, we can begin to imagine solutions from other traditions and schools of thought that can better attend to our needs and help us heal from the effects of our harmful behaviors.

V. *Harm reduction: Compassion and Pragmatism*

“There is so much injustice in America, and such a conspiracy not to discuss it; and so much suffering, and so much deflection lest we notice. We are told that these problems are secondary, that it would cost too much to fix them — as though money is what matters most.”
– Marianne Williamson, *The Healing of America* (1997)

Harm reduction has only recently entered into mainstream Western discourse; however, it has been a well-established grassroots movement for decades. Because of the amount of attention the term has attracted, not all of it positive, the definition of the term can become easily distorted. Marlatt, Larimer, and Witkiewitz, the authors of *Harm Reduction: Pragmatic Strategies for Managing High Risk Behaviors*, describe that this transition of harm reduction from the local to the national sphere has resulted in some unfortunate consequences. In its origins, harm reduction is heavily dependent on individual contribution, particularly by those who are primarily affected, such as needle and syringe programs and drunk driving prevention. Comprehensive harm reduction is often implemented through large scale policy changes and treatment packages that are extremely helpful, but can be argued do not align with the original

values that harm reduction was founded upon. This has garnered controversy on who this movement is providing for and by whom. However, Marlatt et al. argue that this transition hasn't been entirely negative, stating that "the diversity of approaches and impetus to work in a more multilevel, multidisciplinary way can be energizing and ultimately more effective at various levels of society... the growing confusion and controversy surrounding harm reduction may simply indicate its accelerating growth in fields."⁴³ This is important to note as in order to be effective, harm reduction must be implemented at multiple scales.

So, what is harm reduction at its core? The authors of this text define it as "a set of compassionate and pragmatic approaches for reducing harm associated with high risk behaviors and improving quality of life."⁴⁴ These are relatively simple principles, and they can be applied in an infinite amount of ways. This text cites David Purchase, the director of the North American Syringe Exchange Network, who describes harm reduction "as more of an 'attitude' than a fixed set of rules and regulations."⁴⁵ The emphasis on compassion and pragmatism can be most effectively applied within communities who can benefit from these practices as they restore agency and increase self-determination by minimizing the consequences of high-risk behaviors. This is especially important due to one of the founding beliefs in harm reduction, which is the assumption that there is always the possibility of some individuals engaging in high-risk behavior. In the realm of addiction, it has been shown that 85% of addicts relapse within one year of treatment.⁴⁶ Regardless of whether or not sobriety is achieved there is always the risk of environmental factors triggering craving or withdrawal-like symptoms that can incite an addict to use again. That provides an explanation for why complete abstinence (similar to the eco-fascist solution proposed and discounted by Claxton) may work for a minority of the affected population, but cannot be expected to work as a universal solution.

Harm reduction doesn't only apply to the affected individual. Harm reduction is defined as improving quality of life, which encapsulates the elimination of diseases, disorders, and other dysfunctions in the physical and psychological domains. Harm reduction accepts that everyone

⁴³ Marlatt, G. Alan, et al. *Harm Reduction: Pragmatic Strategies for Managing High-Risk Behaviors*. Guilford Press, 2012. (pg. 5)

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* (pg. 5)

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* (pg. 6)

⁴⁶ Brandon, Thomas H., et al. "Relapse and Relapse Prevention." *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2007, pp. 257–284., doi:10.1146/annurev.clinpsy.3.022806.091455.

is deserving of dignity despite adversity or marginalization. This is maintained through compassion and pragmatism.

Compassion assumes approaching issues with the understanding that “people will make more health-positive choices if they have access to adequate support, empowerment, and education.”⁴⁷ Pragmatism goes one step further and attempts to introduce more effective harm reduction education in addition to ameliorating existing programs that have been shown to have a neutral or negative effect simultaneously. It relies on the understanding that abstinence or complete removal of harmful substances is unlikely. This is transformative for multiple reasons, not only humanizing those who are suffering and restoring their agency, but also leaving opportunities for communities to devise solutions adapted to their specific context and needs.

VI. *Applying Harm Reduction to the Environmental Scale*

“The profiteering prophets of greed are never content; it is not enough for this country to be consumed by a politics of greed, it must become the natural way of life globally.”
– bell hooks, *All About Love* (2001)

There are many examples of ways in which these values can be applied to humans, but how can they be applied to the environment and non-human beings? Due to the limitations discussed above, it can be difficult to conceptualize for a number of reasons. Therefore, this section will be using a review of ecological case studies concerning a specific part of our ecosystem to begin to imagine what this implementation might look like.

In their article *Using a Harm Reduction Approach in an Environmental Case Study of Fish and Wildlife Health*, Stephen, Wittrock, and Wade investigate the benefits using a non-human case study, transferring harm reduction values “from public health to managing environmental harms.”⁴⁸

The authors of this article argue:

“Wildlife health is the outcome of nonlinear, dynamic interactions between individual animals, and their social, biotic, and abiotic environments and is more than the absence of disease... The inseparable links between [the] levels of harm and the array of factors

⁴⁷ Marlatt, G. Alan, et al. *Harm Reduction: Pragmatic Strategies for Managing High-Risk Behaviors*. Guilford Press, 2012. (pg. 6)

⁴⁸ Stephen, Craig, et al. “Using a Harm Reduction Approach in an Environmental Case Study of Fish and Wildlife Health.” *EcoHealth*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2018, pp. 4–7., doi:10.1007/s10393-017-1311-4. (pg. 1)

that determine and modify these links, coupled with tremendous challenges in eliminating hazards like pollutants, pathogens, or climate change, suggest that effective harm reduction requires multi-level intervention, ranging from influencing policy to targeted biomedical interventions.”⁴⁹

This encapsulates the foundation of the argument this article is attempting to make. Extending the realm of who or what harm reduction is applicable to requires also extending the institutions implicated and the communities involved. The interventions required for facilitating harm reduction for the environment have been difficult to implement because transferring legislation from an anthropocentric issue such as addiction to environmental issues requires considering a multitude of ethical and practical factors. The authors outline certain barriers that have prevented effective harm reduction treatment, stating “most methods for disease control cannot be applied... despite this reality, wildlife health policies and legislations remain preoccupied with proximal risk factors, especially with strategies targeting etiological agents.”⁵⁰ Based on their review of the literature, Stephen et al. found that the majority of the research being done in the environmental sciences has been mostly preoccupied with attempting to find the cause behind issues, or centers of impact or persistence of environmental degradation, resulting in “only 8% of studies explored solutions: all targeting the etiological cause.”⁵¹

What Stephen et al. have found is that most of the research being conducted concerning mitigating the effects of environmental degradation have been focused on finding the source of the problem in order to eliminate it completely, and even when trying to generate solutions they are co-opted by this same goal, focusing on solutions such as vaccines that are more applicable to human populations than non-human. In addition to this, an equally important inconsistency has been found: despite the fact that it is understood that environmental degradation is as a result of multiple factors across scales, it has been found that “many agencies involved in managing [environmental] activities remain concerned with a single species or a single activity... It remains no one’s responsibility to integrate the social and ecological dimensions of health nor to coordinate efforts to reduce harm...”⁵² Finally, there is evidence to suggest that

⁴⁹ Stephen, Craig, et al. “Using a Harm Reduction Approach in an Environmental Case Study of Fish and Wildlife Health.” *EcoHealth*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2018, pp. 4–7., doi:10.1007/s10393-017-1311-4. (pg. 1)

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* (pg. 1)

⁵¹ *Ibid.* (pg. 1-2)

⁵² *Ibid.* (pg. 3)

while these institutions may use language claiming they are implementing initiatives that are consistent with a harm reduction perspective, they are not reflected in the application of these initiatives. By analyzing both the recommendations made by the Commission of Inquiry into the Decline of Sockeye Salmon and the actions suggested by Canada's Policy for Conservation of Wild Pacific Salmon they were able to display to what extent policies reflecting a harm reduction perspective. The authors offer one example, stating that "the word health is used over 400 items in the Cohen Commission report, yet salmon health remains undefined and actions to reduce harms uncoordinated", focusing instead on restricting salmon farming despite different communities who interact with the salmon population having different thresholds of what qualifies as inflicting harm.⁵³

All of these issues indicate a much larger issue of framework: how are we engaging with environmental degradation and to what ends? There are clearly gaps in translation needed in order to apply a harm reduction approach to a larger scale. The authors use a case study of the Fraser River sockeye salmon in order to imagine ways in which a harm reduction approach can be made to remedy the steadily declining number in population. They argue that "processes modeled from harm reduction for addictions could help to assess social and ecological harms by collectively and transparently providing locally embedded, social contingent perspectives that recognizes zero risk is not feasible."⁵⁴ Like Claxton had explained, it is impossible to apply a completely "abstinent" approach, especially when it concerns environmental issues. Essentially, the authors advocate for a collaborative approach that incorporates the needs of all who depend on the environment or species, which could contribute to more pragmatic solutions that address everyone's needs. In order for this to take place, a form of communication is suggested that facilitates between institutions and large industries and communities, which would have the added benefit of strengthening trust and understanding and reinforce the compassion needed to implement harm reduction.

These solutions are much more feasible and accessible than previous solutions under the tradition of voluntary simplicity. While they are far from concrete, these suggestions are already offering to advocate for the needs of the community and address the rights of the non-human

⁵³ Stephen, Craig, et al. "Using a Harm Reduction Approach in an Environmental Case Study of Fish and Wildlife Health." *EcoHealth*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2018, pp. 4–7., doi:10.1007/s10393-017-1311-4. (pg. 3)

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* (pg. 1)

actors who also deserve to be advocated for in the discussion of environmental solutions. We can begin to imagine ways in which this approach will be more effective at addressing our consumption needs across relevant spheres. However, like the authors address in the conclusion of their article, at this point harm reduction is far from becoming a model that can be dependent on for critical legislative implementation.

VII. Indigenous Care Ethics: Switching from A Cognitive to an Affective model

If we are still far from a large-scale implementation of these values, how can we begin to practice them? In fact, there have already been many traditions who have investigated ways in which these values can be applied at the level of the individual to then positively impact the environment. The following sections outline some of the values of traditions of thought that critique the dominant narrative that consumerism has been dictated by, the environmental ethic they propose, and the solutions they could potentially generate.

One author who has considered this question a significant amount is Kyle Whyte. Whyte is a philosopher who has delved deeply into indigenous ethics and analyzed how they fit into the wider discourse of environmental degradation and justice. In the article he wrote with Chris Cuomo, *Ethics of Care in Environmental Ethics: Indigenous and Feminist Philosophies*, they outline the benefits of caring and the function it holds in indigenous epistemologies. By bringing gender into the conversation it displays how this ethic can be applied to advocate for intersectional needs.

Care ethics are defined as “approaches to moral life and community that are grounded in virtues, practices and knowledges associated with appropriate caring and caretaking and others... Ethics of care understand moral agents as deeply and inextricably embedded in networks of ethically significant connections and conceive of caring as exercising responsibilities and virtues that maintain and positively influence relationships and general flourishing within those overlapping networks.”⁵⁵ Here, Whyte is asserting one of the most important elements to care ethics, which happens to address some of the most pressing problems associated with our harmful impacts of consumerism.

Care ethics highlights the inherent interdependence between human beings and the environment, thus making it impossible to ignore the ways in which we impact each other and

⁵⁵ Whyte, Kyle Powys, and Chris Cuomo. “Ethics of Caring in Environmental Ethics.” *Oxford Handbooks Online*, 2016, doi:10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199941339.013.22. (pg. 2)

our community. It encapsulates a set of practices that encourages intra-community support with the goal of fostering human development for the sake of empathic connections built on mutual respect, rather than solely rational decision making. Whyte's explanation of care ethics echoes the different definitions of desire presented by Hoffman and Nordgren. "In contrast to ethical theories that assume the paradigm of moral reasoning to be an isolated agent making impersonal, abstract calculations – a dominant view in western philosophy—" similar to the cognitive model of addiction being used before, "ethics of care highlight the affective dimensions of morality... and the relational and contextual nature of any ethical question or problem" which aligns with the affective-motivational model of addiction.⁵⁶

This displays how the values of care ethics are potential solutions to the question of our consumption addiction as they are addressing the concerns highlighted by the more relevant model. Our needs and desires are so easily influenced by our emotional and physical states, there is a possibility that they can be addressed by adapting a communal model as the one suggested by indigenous ethics.

In the article, liberal thinkers and policy makers are criticized for framing these environmental issues in overly conceptual terms, often depending on legal and economic language to keep environmental issues abstract and inaccessible. Whyte continues his critique, explaining how environmental philosophers could be doing more to truly align with the care ethic, highlighting how they "did call for more effective caring for nature," and yet "seem to neglect or underestimate the importance of caring for other human beings as a way of caring for nature."⁵⁷ This again points to the way in which concerning ourselves over others' needs with compassion will benefit both the community and environment through this shift in conceptualization. In terms of our consumption addiction, it illustrates that through caring for others, it could eliminate the need to accumulate for both the providing care and the one receiving it. One could even go so far as to compare movements like the Chipko movement, which popularized drawing attention to environmental exploitation through caring acts like tree-hugging, to addiction treatment methods like therapeutic touch.

⁵⁶ Whyte, Kyle Powys, and Chris Cuomo. "Ethics of Caring in Environmental Ethics." *Oxford Handbooks Online*, 2016, doi:10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199941339.013.22. (pg. 2)

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* (pg. 2)

In this vein, the values within indigenous care ethics are similar to harm reduction interventions employed at the individual level. This can be found by looking at traditions within psychology.

Constructivist psychology is an example of a non-traditional approach to healing mental illnesses. In the article *Inherent Self, Invented Self, Empty Self: Constructivism, Buddhism, and Psychotherapy*, psychologist Spencer McWilliams outlines the comparisons between constructivist psychotherapy and Buddhist approaches to psychology.⁵⁸ The main argument of the paper is to determine the main values in common in between the approaches and determine the most effective ways of healing. In line with the affective-motivational model of addiction, McWilliams makes the argument that our sense of self is constructed based on social systems around us, and thus they are constantly changing. In his piece, he defines dysfunction as “constructions [that] create obstacles to meeting personal goals and considering viable alternative ways of thinking, behaving, and making meaning.”⁵⁹ This is very similar to the *traps* mentioned by Guy Claxton. The main method of rectifying these dysfunctional behaviors is using psychotherapy to deconstruct the self, thus disconnecting the behaviors from the justification processes that these dysfunctions thrive on. Through changing the language in which patients describe their dysfunctional behaviors, they are able to reimagine their constructed self in a way that is no longer as susceptible to influence by outside environmental factors.

Indigenous ethics has a similar effect through the emphasis of communal values. By being more aware of and valuing the needs of others, one is less likely to prioritize and assert one’s own needs above all else. By reconnecting and understanding our inherent interdependence, our own ideas of ourselves are not as clear cut – it is almost impossible to define us as individuals at all. Thus, when using this mindset, our elaborated desires are less likely to consume our needs and influence our behaviors.

Overall, indigenous ethics offers a solution to mitigate our consumption craving through caring for others and the environment in which we live. However, care ethics requires a large community that is difficult to come by in our current neoliberal and capitalist world in which

⁵⁸ McWilliams, S. (2010). *Inherent Self, Invented Self, Empty Self: Constructivism, Buddhism, and Psychotherapy*, Counseling and Values.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

community has been replaced with hyper-individualism. There are other traditions that offer additional interventions that could be applied at other points.

VIII. *Eco-Feminism: Weathering and Increasing Interoceptive Awareness*

In addition to indigenous epistemologies, feminist traditions of thought have considered the ways in which we can reclaim agency, particularly over elements that seem to be out of our control. Environmental degradation is framed, through a variety of ways we have illustrated above, as being as a result of unavoidable mechanisms. Feminist thinkers and writers Neimanis and Walker explain in terms that are extremely relevant to the subject of this analysis how we can transfer these issues into our sphere of influence so as to be affected, and in turn affect our environment. They describe the Western “[climate change] imaginary as one invested in the consumption of *affect* without *intensity*,” referencing the way in which we talk about climate change.⁶⁰ Our media coverage is consumed by fearful and hopeless narratives concerning environmental degradation, contributing to the scarcity narrative that was described at the beginning of this analysis, while simultaneously feeling any personal implication in the harmful effects, thus not garnering much more than sympathy, but no action. As a result, environmental issues, particularly those concerning our consumption addiction feel outside of our control.

In this article, the authors introduce the concepts of *transcorporeal weather*, and *transcorporeal temporalities* in order to “bridge the distance of abstraction by bringing climate change home” through reevaluating our relation to both space and time.⁶¹ This can be a potential solution to the problem that Whyte mentions with liberal theorists abstracting the effects of climate change, thus relieving those with particular privilege in developed nations with the power to change their consumption habits to remain apathetic. By bringing the effects of climate change close to our bodies, as a process that takes place within us, we can begin to determine what is actually needed from each of us to mitigate our negative impact. This comes together in the act of *weathering*, which is defined as an “intra-active process of a mutual becoming... a logic, a way of being or a mode of affecting and differentiating that brings humans into relation with more-than-human weather.”⁶² Essentially, weathering is the process

⁶⁰ Neimanis, Astrida, and Rachel Loewen Walker. “*Weathering*: Climate Change and the ‘Thick Time’ of Transcorporeality.” *Hypatia*, vol. 29, no. 3, 2014, pp. 558–575., doi:10.1111/hypa.12064. (pg.559)

⁶¹ *Ibid.* (pg.559)

⁶² *Ibid.* (pg.560)

of humans becoming more aware of their relations with the world around them and deepening those connections.

On an individual level, this extended awareness can be related to *interoception*. Interoception is now defined as “how the nervous system senses, interprets, and integrates signals originating from within the body,” but the dominant definition that was used until recently originates from 1906, just describing “sensations from the interior of the body.”⁶³ Interoceptive awareness is integral to determining our individual needs, especially those such as hunger and pain. Interoceptive awareness is important to maintaining agency, as it is integral to be able to accurately recognize and prioritize one’s own physical and emotional needs. Research shows that those who suffer from mental illnesses or substance use disorders have increasingly dysregulated interoceptive ability.⁶⁴ While it can be severely impacted by environmental factors and substances, it can also be improved through different forms of therapy and similar interventions.

As intensely porous beings, humans are constantly exchanging matter without environment, and both weathering and interoception are focused on us becoming more aware of our internal systems and how we absorb and interact with the world around us.

IX. Black Feminist Theory: Aligning With Our True Desires

Once we practice enhancing our awareness of our needs, how do we orient ourselves towards them collectively?

A third and final tradition we can draw upon in response to this is from black feminist theory. In a similar vein as feminist theory, black feminist theory focuses on an intersectional approach to defining our needs within oppressive systems and pursuing them with the goal of achieving liberation. This is a diverse and varied tradition, however the particular branch that I will be citing can be traced back to Audre Lorde. While not explicitly related to environmental issues, the values can be easily compared to those concerned in care ethics and weathering, especially in the way that they encourage reclaiming agency against oppressive systems. In her

⁶³ Schmitt, Carolyn M, and Sarah Schoen. “Interoception: A Multi-Sensory Foundation of Participation in Daily Life.” *Frontiers in neuroscience* vol. 16 875200. 9 Jun. 2022, doi:10.3389/fnins.2022.875200

⁶⁴ Berridge, K. C., & Robinson, T. E. (2016). Liking, wanting, and the incentive-sensitization theory of addiction. *American Psychologist*, 71(8), 670–679. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000059>

essay, *Uses of the Erotic*, Lorde describes the capabilities of the Erotic as a force that can reconnect us to our purpose, and thus eliminate opportunities for repression.

The Erotic is defined as “a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire.”⁶⁵ This is why the concept of the Erotic is so important. If we are deeply connected to what we truly desire, to what will completely and wholly fulfill us, it is much harder for insidious cravings to take hold. In terms of the black feminist ethic, the key to liberating ourselves from our consumption addiction comes from recognizing our true desires compared to conditioned ones. Lorde continues to say that “the aim of each thing which we do is to make our lives and the lives of our children richer and more possible”, which aligns with a more healing environmental ethic in which we choose to engage in practices that will construct a better world for ourselves and those that come after us.⁶⁶

This provides a much more accessible way to distance ourselves from needless accumulation that is much more concrete than those proposed by voluntary simplicity. What Lorde describes as the Erotic is an essential tool in the pursuit of true fulfillment. This idea has become the center of a new movement within black feminist thought, Pleasure Activism, which returns us to adrienne maree brown who was mentioned at the beginning of this piece.

In her text *Pleasure Activism*, adrienne maree brown outlines the principles of the movement and the positive impacts of the pursuit of pleasure.⁶⁷ She explains the intentions of Pleasure Activism as follows:

- “Recognize that pleasure is a measure of freedom
- Decrease an internal or projected shame or scarcity thinking around the pursuit of pleasure, quieting any voices of trauma that keep you from your full sacred sensual life
- Create more room for joy, wholeness, and aliveness in life
 - And less room for oppression, repression, self-denial and unnecessary suffering
- Begin to understand that liberation is possible when we collectively orient around pleasure and longing.”⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Lorde, Audre. “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power.” *Out&OutBooks*, vol 3. (1978)

⁶⁶ Lorde, Audre. “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power.” *Out&OutBooks*, vol 3. (1978)

⁶⁷ brown, adrienne maree. *Pleasure Activism*. AK Press, 2019. (pg. 14)

⁶⁸ brown, adrienne maree. *Pleasure Activism*. AK Press, 2019. (pg. 14)

It is important to outline these intentions of the movement, as the definition of Pleasure can easily be misconstrued. The pursuit of Pleasure in this movement aligns with the values that have been discussed as interventions: it is not the mindless pursuit of pleasurable stimuli, but rather it is discerning, critical, and constantly questioning.

On a small scale, Pleasure Activism can help individuals align themselves to the substances, stimuli and experiences that engage their consumption behavior. If these patterns repeat at scale, when humans orient themselves towards what sustains and liberates us, our goals as a species will change when it concerns our consumption habits. In the text *Good Ancestor: A Radical Prescription for Long-Term Thinking* by Roman Krznaric, he proposes a shift in universal human goals that resemble what Pleasure Activism might look like on a larger scale.

This text introduces an argument similar to what Neimanis and Walker discussed with weathering: environmental degradation can only be mitigated through a radical shift in the way we conceptualize time and how we prioritize it. By engaging certain tools to aid reconstructing this conceptualization, Krznaric provides a similar list of values to Pleasure Activism however on a much larger scale.



“The tug-of-war for time”, graph by Roman Krznaric, *The Good Ancestor* (2020)

The drivers of short-termism, particularly Tyranny of the Clock, Political Presentism, and Perpetual Progress, are the main obstacles between us and our ability to be more critical about how we consume. In the same way an addict remains in a constant state of sympathetic nervous system activation, the fear of scarcity is keeping the human species in a perpetual state of survival that is driven by these narratives of short-termism. These narratives do exactly what adrienne maree brown warns us against in *Pleasure Activism*: they repress us, they constrain us, and they create opportunities to oppress and harm each other.

The mindset we can adopt to distance ourselves from these aligns with long-term thinking. Intergenerational Justice echoes the call of *Pleasure Activism* and care ethics to include the needs of others, especially those coming after us, and value them as much as our own. Cathedral Thinking is the antithesis of the scarcity mindset, drawing us away from only being able to consider our needs to ask ourselves what we can provide for others. It also asks us to consider what legacy we wish to leave, taking us away from immediate gratification. Finally, having a Transcendent Goal encourages an adaptive approach rather than a pursuit for constant accumulation and growth. It is modeled after a system of subsistence rather than surplus.

“None of them alone will be enough to create a long-term revolution of the human mind,” Krznaric explains, “but together – and when practiced by a critical mass of people and organizations – a new age of long term thinking could arise out of their synergy.”⁶⁹ There are many different narratives we must deconstruct in order to radically change our collective mindset, however with the benefits of black feminist theory, and their applications on an environmental scale, we can begin to more critically orient ourselves around what will truly fulfill us.

X. Conclusion

This returns us to the discussion of fractals. In the spirit of the original grassroots movement of harm reduction, the implementation of any one of these many interventions depends first and foremost on the impacted individuals. Those suffering at the hands of their addiction are the only ones who are truly in control of it.

This can be difficult to contend with, as it is valid to feel disempowered and helpless when facing behaviors and thought patterns that have been sustained and reinforced over our

⁶⁹ Krznaric, Roman. *Good Ancestor: A Radical Prescription for Long Term Thinking*. The Experiment, 2020.

entire lives. However, regaining agency, while it comes with responsibility, ultimately brings us closer to self-determination. All of these interventions are simply different ways to reconceptualize our harmful behaviors and find solace in the ways in which we do have power to affect our minds. What is hopeful is that there is a direct correlation between our individual behaviors and our collective experience that, when used with intention and with empathy, can begin to disseminate resilience into our lives and communities for our own benefit, and, ultimately, for the world we live on.

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