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10 | 'THE CLIMATE CRISIS IS A RACIST CRISIS': STRUCTURAL RACISM, INEQUALITY AND CLIMATE CHANGE

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Dedicated to the work, life and memory of Deyika Nzeribe.

Introduction: Environmental and Climate Justice

This chapter began life as a memorial to the death of someone whose work must be remembered for its tireless contribution to the pursuit of justice. Sadly, I was never blessed with the opportunity to meet Deyika Nzeribe in person. However, upon agreeing to deliver the inaugural memorial lecture in his name, I found myself encountering the shadow of his legacy and work in many unexpected and unanticipated places. For that reason, I must begin the chapter by thanking Ikem Nzeribe and Anita Shervington who invited me to deliver the talk that provided the basis for this piece. I am honoured to have been asked to speak at an event in Deyika's memory.

Deyika is someone who recognised the interconnected nature of our struggles. He worked to fight police violence and oppression, co-founding the Northern Police Monitoring Project (based in Manchester, UK). He admired the work of Wangari Maathai, finding inspiration to link environmental, economic and racial justice. In addition to being part of the Greens of Colour subgroup of the Green Party,¹ and standing as Mayoral Candidate for Manchester, Deyika campaigned against austerity, and was involved in organisations to commemorate the 45th Pan African Congress. A poet himself, he was also involved in shaping the cultural life of the city, co-chairing Sustained Theatre Up North (STUN), film festivals and many other creative and political projects (Johnson, 2017). I hope this chapter does a degree of justice in addressing a number of the themes that Deyika worked on throughout his career and tragically shortened life.

Part of the motivation for the focus of this chapter, is the experience I have encountered of speaking to friends and family from across the

African diaspora about my research into climate change with its focus on perspectives emerging from the Caribbean region. Frequently I have found that people I have spoken to have indeed heard of climate change, and have some sense of its likely impacts, but often are not overtly aware of its disproportionate impacts on people of colour in the Caribbean and beyond.

Upon further discussion, however, it also often emerges that people do indeed have anecdotal knowledge of the impacts of climate change by way of the connections they might have to family and friends 'back home'. People will speak of relatives whose crops are not flourishing at the times they once were, if at all. Or of beaches that they used to visit regularly on trips home, that are damaged, or no longer there. Sadly, in the wake of 2017's impactful hurricane season, along with a number of other destructive weather events, I fear even more will be made acutely aware of the strange weather befalling the global South that is increasingly becoming the norm.

One important issue to highlight at this point is the way in which analysis of 'environmental' problems often gets framed in narrowly technical terms. These framings make it harder to link 'natural disasters' to the broader social and political causes that pattern their destructive effects. I would argue, instead, that we can only properly understand the harm being wrought by weather events and climate change by directly connecting it to broader social and political processes of which structural racism is a central part. Too many discussions of climate change neglect concerns of social justice, then, and present climate change in reductionist technical terms (Swyngedouw, 2010). These technical approaches are, unsurprisingly, failing in their own terms to adequately address climate change. The explanation of this failure is inseparable from the practices of racism endemic to the global social order.

While the Caribbean's exposure to extreme weather clearly has geophysical dimensions, it is significantly structured by unequal social relations which are imperialist in character (Sealey-Huggins, 2017). In mainstream discussions of climate change, however, there is hardly ever any consideration of the relationships between the colonial and imperialist histories either underpinning climate change's causes, or structuring societies' capacities to respond. Here I am talking about the ways in which the past is not a 'finished' entity: it is a process that stretches into the present and into the future, even if these connections

are too frequently obscured (Trouillot, 1995). Bhambra (2007; 2014) for instance, has implored us to acknowledge that our society, including the very ideas about what counts as 'organisation', is bound up with global 'connected histories' too frequently forgotten. Perversely, when colonial histories *are* acknowledged, it is too often in the form of publics and leaders of former and neo-imperial countries expressing 'imperial nostalgia' (Narayan and Sealey-Huggins, 2017).

To be absolutely clear, the evidence and analysis presented here entails a commitment to the principle that Black Lives Matter. Make no mistake, contrary to the supposed solidarity of the message that 'we're all in this together' (Swyngedouw, 2010), climate change is set to exacerbate existing disregard for Black life, in part through the very universalism embedded in the claim that 'all lives matter' (Catney and Doyle, 2011). This universalism obscures the fact that climate change entails uneven and unfairly distributed impacts, which are significantly intensified by an unequal distribution of wealth and resources. In short, my research has found that we cannot understand climate change, either in the Caribbean or globally, without considering the social relations of contemporary forms of capitalism. By this I mean the ways in which the organisation of our economic system is geared towards unending economic growth and the primacy of the pursuit of profit. At the forefront of our analysis we must also maintain a focus on the fact that the capitalist political economy is underpinned by racism (Robinson, 1983; Johnson and Lubin, 2017; Taylor, 2016). Racism, in turn, has underpinned, and been underpinned by, processes of imperialism and colonialism (Anievas and Nisancioglu, 2015).

My primary ethical and political concern, and area of research, is the Caribbean region. The region is home to some of the countries most exposed to the impacts of climate change (Bishop and Payne, 2012; Rhiney, 2017; Smith and Rhiney, 2015). Sadly, the same, similar and (in many instances) much worse consequences of climate change apply elsewhere in the global South; across Asia, Africa and the Pacific (Bassey, 2012; Bond, 2012b; Ghosh, 2016). These regions share analogous colonial histories, and post-colonial presents. As such, much of the discussion here will apply to greater or lesser extents elsewhere in the global South.

There is a wide and ever-expanding body of literature that details the many ways in which environmental harms are patterned by racism.

Historically, this work has been particularly focused on the US context, where the environmental justice movement came to prominence (see Walker and Bulkeley, 2006 for an overview). Others, particularly those in social and environmental justice movements, have identified how the often intersecting factors of class, gender, impairment (Fenney, 2017) and other vectors of inequality or disadvantage can pattern exposure to climate change or environmental harm (Cabello and Gilbertson, 2015; Vergès, 2017). Given the relatively recent emergence of climate change as a matter of mainstream concern, the connections between climate change, structural racism and development are less well established. Within this chapter, I begin with a discussion of the uneven distribution of the impacts of climate change, focusing on the Caribbean region. From here I move to consider the inadequacies of existing governance responses that contribute to and reinforce forms of structural racism within a climate regime where Black lives matter less. I then conclude by identifying routes for forms of climate justice.

Strange Weather Bears Strange Fruit

Anyone who follows the journalistic reporting of climate science would be forgiven for feeling more than a little downhearted at the scale of the unfolding crisis. It seems that the impacts of climate change, or at least the increased frequency of the kinds of ‘extreme’ weather events that accompany climate change, are already being felt. The destruction experienced in the Caribbean during Hurricane Irma in September 2017 was partly caused by *the most powerful storm ever recorded*. Both Irma, and the preceding storm Harvey, unleashed weather effects that should have been ‘once in a lifetime’ (Chuck, 2017), or ‘once in 500 years’ events (Ingraham, 2017). All of this fits the pattern for stronger Atlantic storms (Bender et al., 2010).

We see an increasing number of weather events that, irrespective of their direct connection to climate change, are in the mould of the kinds of weather that climate scientists are warning is going to become more prevalent. Sierra Leone saw mudslides that killed over 1,000 people (Elston, 2017). Bangladesh, Nepal and India have faced flooding that has killed over 1,300 people already. It has also been reported that in 2015 alone, 12,600 farmers in India killed themselves because of a combination of high debt and the dire effects climate change has had on their livelihoods (Carleton, 2017). With 300,000 farmer suicides in the past two decades, this desperation is far from an anomaly. People

in East Africa have been experiencing famine that is contributing to profound suffering (Williams, 2017). Irrespective of whether or not any one of these individual weather events are directly connected to climate change, I am keen to refocus our attention on the social and political processes that surround these events: in most cases it is people of colour who will lose their lives as weather combines with inequality. We can only understand these processes if we acknowledge the ways in which capitalism is racialised globally.

The preceding account of the impacts of 'extreme' weather raises even greater concern when considering the lack of appropriate action to secure global warming temperatures to under the '1.5°C to (barely) survive' demanded by so many in the global South (Sealey-Huggins, 2017). As such, we are witnessing the failure of the global governance regime to protect Black lives adequately. This fact should not surprise us if we consider the deadly impacts of wider anti-Black racism. Even if the UN climate change targets (that countries have only voluntarily agreed to) were met, it is calculated that we would likely see in excess of 2.8°C of warming (Reyes, 2015). This figure is unthinkable. Yet the trajectory is alarming already, even if we ignore the poor track record that the richer nations have on abiding by their promises and pledges. I want to suggest that part of why responses to climate change are failing in their own terms is because of neglect of policy makers and others – including in some instances, climate activists (Herron, 2017; Mock, 2017; Virasami and Wanjiku Kelbert, 2015) – to recognise the racialised dimensions of the socially structured nature of climate change.

To further reiterate the point, crucial to understanding the connections between structural racism and climate change is an acknowledgement that 'vulnerabilities' to extreme weather are not 'natural'. They are not reducible to environmental or geophysical factors. They are profoundly patterned by the ways in which we organise our societies so as to suit some people's interests at the direct and indirect expense of others. Those states which are least able to deal with extreme weather are often among the most indebted, or least-resourced. Haiti in the Caribbean, for example, is the poorest country in the Western hemisphere. Part of the reason why Haiti is in so much debt is because it was forced to pay reparations to France for having the temerity to throw off its colonial master and establish itself as the first Black republic of the 'new world' (Bhambra, 2016). Caribbean

societies more generally, upon securing their ‘independence’, were frequently forced into forms of development (Cain, 2016) that seemed ill-suited to facilitating the flourishing of their populations, but which were well-suited to maintaining or exacerbating inequalities. This is directly traceable to the fact that the wealth generated in the Caribbean during colonialism was expropriated by imperial elites (Beckles, 2013). All of this meant that Caribbean societies were forced to compete on a deeply uneven playing field when they gained their ‘independence’ (Bishop, 2013).

When Will Black Lives Matter?

Evidence in support of the claim that responses to climate change are unfolding in ways that devalue Black life can be found both globally and locally. Globally, the climate policy regime is overwhelmingly structured in favour of countries in the global North (Bond, 2011; Bond, 2012a; Russell et al., 2012), albeit with a more recent slant towards China and the other BRICs (Brazil, Russia and India). This provides some support for the contention that Black lives don’t matter. To take a couple of examples, the much-hyped COP15 climate talks in Copenhagen in 2009 were widely regarded as a failure for a number of reasons, not least because they did not secure any meaningful ‘post-Kyoto’ climate change deal. Lumumba Di-Aping, representing the Group of 77 and China bloc of 130 nations at the Copenhagen talks, described the agreement under discussion in these damning terms: ‘[i]t is asking Africa to sign a suicide pact, an incineration pact in order to maintain the economic dependence of a few countries’. Di-Aping pointed out that the 2°C target was the limit of the ambitions of wealthy countries in Copenhagen (Bond, 2012b). Troublingly, this extent of average warming globally would result in deadly temperatures in excess of 3.5°C for many parts of Africa. It could be argued that if those talks, and the similarly-hyped Paris COP21 talks in 2015, had been more equitably structured the climate governance regime would be considerably more robust than it currently is. For example, it is no coincidence that the two rounds of talks that have had the most media and geopolitical attention have been based in Western Europe. To better understand the connections between climate racism and the structures of our society, I would like to briefly consider the racism endemic to the current global order, and some of its many manifestations.

'The Climate Crisis Is a Racist Crisis' (Black Lives Matter UK, 2016)

We live in a global system that is patterned by racist and oppressive social relations (Robinson, 1983; Johnson and Lubin, 2017; Taylor, 2016). This is not dependent on the prejudices of any one individual (Bonilla-Silva, 2017), though those prejudices may help and are often encouraged. Rather, racism is embedded within the neo-colonial, neo-imperialist systems of contemporary capitalist society (Johnson and Lubin, 2017; Robinson, 1983; Taylor, 2016). The structural character of racism is too frequently overlooked in relation to climate change. Vergès (2017: 72) employs the term the 'racial capitalocene' to centre an analysis bringing 'together race, capitalism, imperialism, and gender'. Vergès' analysis is drawn from the work of activists and others across the global South and elsewhere, who have worked to join the dots between the systemic entanglement of racist social relations and the social relations of climate change. In the UK, Black Lives Matter (BLM UK) have been particularly prominent in this (Cullors and Nguvu, 2017). BLM UK orchestrated an action that halted flights at London's City Airport, located in one of London's poorest boroughs, a borough with a disproportionately Black population. BLM UK have demonstrated that if we acknowledge the interconnected character of racist and capitalist oppression, then we can understand the environmental violence of climate change as continuous with that of police violence. In fact, it is only by connecting these dots that we stand a chance of dismantling the oppressive structures that devalue Black life. One of the founders of BLM in the US, Patrisse Cullors, suggested in an article written with BLM UK (Cullors and Nguvu, 2017), that:

- 1) Black Lives Matter is a global Black queer femme-led intersectional movement and network that works across multiple issues. We do not believe in single-issue stories.
- 2) Environmental injustice has always been an issue and a fight taken on by Black and poor communities. We are the first to die, but we are also the first to fight on the frontlines.
- 3) The inequalities that turn an extreme weather event into a disaster or human catastrophe mirror the inequalities that cause the disproportionate loss of Black and poor life globally – and the exact systems that Black Lives Matter fights against.

Moreover, if we acknowledge that climate change is already bringing with it the likelihood of millions of people being displaced and

needing to flee their homes (Cabello and Gilbertson, 2015), we must also acknowledge the racist underpinnings of the frequently violent reception that so many migrants have received as they have risked their lives trying to reach the relative security of Europe (Danewid, 2017). Thinking in this way, we are able to connect climate change to the anti-Black racism represented by the active decision of the Italian government to let, predominantly Black African, migrants drown in the sea (Wintour, 2017). We have to acknowledge, too, that the existing control and mismanagement of migration is racist in general. This is evidenced by deportations that see 'Jamaican' people forcibly removed from a country in which they have spent the majority of their lives, to the one in which they happened to have been born (Noronha, 2017).

At the risk of belabouring the point, part of the explanation of why there has been inadequate action to address climate change is because of the racism integral to the power structures that underpin the global socioeconomic system (Robinson, 1983; Johnson and Lubin, 2017; Taylor, 2016); Robinson (1983) has elaborated on this as 'racial capitalism'. Through environmental justice campaigns and scholarship, we already knew that environmental racism means that people of colour are much more likely to be living near sites of industrial pollution and toxic waste (Pellow and Brulle, 2005; Pellow, 2016). Climate change mirrors that disregard for Black life and extends it to unprecedented levels. In trying to think of adequate political responses to these processes, it is important to offer alternatives to the reductive accounts of climate change that risk obscuring the oppressive structures underpinning our societies. Solutions focused on any action or activity that reproduces racialised capitalism are inadequate. Instead we seek to identify the ways in which capitalism is implicated in the very causes of climate change and through this, propose different, more equitable ways of organising our economies and societies. It is also important to acknowledge the ahistorical character of much of the discussion. Dominant accounts of climate change too frequently rest upon an amnesia about the social relations emerging from imperialist and colonial projects. As Ghosh (2016: 146) has pointed out:

The fact is that we live in a world that has been profoundly shaped by empire and its disparities. Differentials of power between and within nations are probably greater today than they have ever been. These differentials are, in turn, closely related to carbon emissions.

The distribution of power in the world therefore lies at the core of the climate crisis.

Considering the case of climate debts in the context of wider calls for reparations further underlines the necessity of acknowledging history as it unfolds in the present.

Debts Due, Not Aid Promised: Climate Justice Now!

Given the failures of the systems of climate governance to secure Black life, I want to suggest that we can pursue alternatives by focusing on climate debt, reparations and justice. Amitav Ghosh (2016) invites us to acknowledge that climate change is shaped by the relations of empire. If we do this then we are better able to understand how the Dutch – whose empire and industrialisation was built on the backs of unpaid slave labour – can afford €16 billion for flood defence schemes, while most countries in the Caribbean region have reported delays in accessing any of the resources required to implement their plans for responding to climate change. Speaking about the need for funding to support Caribbean societies' plans for reducing their exposure to weather events, Dr Ulric Trotz, a pioneer in addressing climate change in the Caribbean, has commented: 'The bottom line is that *we don't have the resources* ... It's not that we don't have any idea about how we need to build resilience' (The Commonwealth, 2017 – my emphasis).

Rather than having to enter into dubious and highly conditional relationships with donor countries and companies (Bracking, 2015), the resources for responding to climate change must be provided to the region on an unconditional basis. The conditions have already been met – they were the systematic exploitation and degradation of the region and its environment throughout the period of colonialism and thereafter (Beckles, 2013). 'Climate debt owed', rather than 'climate aid promised', is a better model because the latter implies voluntary responsibility on the part of the richer nations, whereas the need is *essential*, and the responsibility is clear: industrialised countries have, on the whole, benefitted massively from the same processes that caused climate change (Adelman, 2016; Bassey, 2012; Bond, 2012b). Indeed, often these benefits were inexorably linked, via imperialist logics, to the direct exploitation of those countries now understood to be vulnerable. It is these factors that mean that existing reparations movements rightly identify losses to people systematically exploited by imperial elites.

Part of what gives me hope for climate justice in the Caribbean, is that the Caribbean reparations movement is growing in strength and momentum, alongside other broader movements in pursuit of reparatory justice. In spite of growing support for reparations for slavery and genocide from within the Caribbean and elsewhere, and in spite of the use of reparatory approaches following a number of significant historical atrocities (Beckles, 2013), ‘leaders’ in the global North have been unforthcoming. In a visit to Jamaica, then British Prime Minister David Cameron famously called for Caribbean countries to ‘move on’, authorising the building of a prison for the repatriation of prisoners, whilst ruling out the prospect of British reparations. All of this points to the necessity of both a critique of forms of racialised capitalism, as well as strong social movement action to be able to shift the organisation of societies in a more progressive direction. This more progressive direction must acknowledge that:

Climate justice movements are diverse, but a fundamental principle lies at the heart: the recognition that the threats posed by climate change are a consequence of unequal, colonial, economic and social power relations. (Cabello and Gilbertson, 2015: 6)

As such, climate justice is inseparable from social justice more broadly. It is also likely to mean slightly different things in different contexts. In Sikkim, Northern India, for instance, it might mean opposing the displacement and loss of sovereignty engendered by a hydroelectric project (Arora, 2007). In Germany, conversely, climate justice might mean symbolically shutting down one of the largest coal mines in Europe (Ende Gelände, 2017). Indigenous activists opposing the Dakota Access Pipeline at Standing Rock in the US, meanwhile, could be seen to have been pursuing climate justice when they led a movement that brought critiques of settler colonial disenfranchisement together with those of petrochemical extraction and big oil politics (Stand with Standing Rock, 2017). Understanding our distinctive but entirely connected positions means thinking in broader terms about the importance of solidarity action. This could involve direct action stopping deportations, or the important migrant solidarity work from those working with people at risk of detention or deportation.

Solidarity with the victims of climate change will involve dismantling privilege and educating our neighbours who are unaware of the crises

of hunger and destitution facing millions worldwide (Summers, 2017). It will also involve campaigning for reparative justice, preparing for the movement of people as 'extreme' weather hits, and acknowledging the need to redistribute resources so that people are less in need of leaving their homes. This work will not always run smoothly, as was found in London during Paris talks when the 'Wretched of the Earth' bloc, named in direct reference to the work of decolonial pioneer Frantz Fanon, were pushed to the back of their march by predominantly white NGOs precisely because their anti-imperialist climate justice message was so political (Virasami and Wanjiku Kelbert, 2015). This last example reminds us of the need to remain vigilant in insisting on a critique of climate change that encompasses radical Black perspectives, as well as confronting the processes that result in the redistribution of life from people in the global South to those in the global North. Evidence suggests that only strong, sustained, radically oriented popular pressure offers hope for responses to climate change wherein the above inequalities are acknowledged, and where, therefore, Black lives matter (Bond, 2012b).

After all of this doom, I want to finish with some hopeful words from Noelene Nabulivou, of a number of organisations including: Diverse Voices and Action for Equality, Pacific Partnerships on Gender, Climate Change and Sustainable Development (PPGCCSD), and the Women and Gender Constituency Liaison to the COP23 Presidency. Noelene responded to Trump's homicidal decision to withdraw from the Paris Accord with the following words:

This is not just the decision of one man, rather it is a reflection of an *archaic social and economic system*, one that is based on shortsighted selfishness and corporatization of our planet. *This only strengthens the resolve of all those who deeply care about this planet, all women and all people and all species. Resist and propose. Defend the Commons, work with us on alternate strategies. We will NEVER give up on this beautiful planet.* (fenton, 2017)

We will never give up, until and unless Black lives are made to matter as the crisis unfolds.

Note

¹ The Green Party is a small social and environmental justice party in the UK.

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