



Not Too Late

CHANGING THE CLIMATE STORY
FROM DESPAIR TO POSSIBILITY

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Decolonizing Climate Coloniality

Farhana Sultana

INTRODUCTION

Colonialism haunts the past, present, and future through climate. The burden of climate damage is falling disproportionately on formerly colonized and brutalized, racialized communities in the developing world of the Global South. Frontline communities of the world are feeling climate destruction politically, ecologically, economically, socially, spiritually, and viscerally across the world. This is acutely so in formerly colonized countries across the tropics and subtropics of Asia, Africa, and Latin America that hold less geopolitical and economic power on the global stage. The outcome is a system of climate coloniality where those least responsible for contributing to climate breakdown are impacted more acutely over longer periods. We are still colonized, this time through climate change, capitalist development industry, and globalization, colliding into centuries of varied and overlapping oppressions, yet also concomitant existing and emerging sites of resistance.

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The interactions at annual global climate negotiations or COP (for Conference of the Parties) conferences make dramatically evident the climate geopolitics reflecting this imbalance in power and positionalities. At the 2021 COP in Glasgow, colonial tactics were identified and openly called out. While some framed the discussion in terms of climate justice failures, others were more direct in calling out colonial and racial tactics of control and disposal of marginalized communities across the Global South and elsewhere. Many articulated a sense of injustice and climate delay in light of the decades of insufficient critical global action.

The COPs can be seen simultaneously as one of the theaters of climate colonialism (led mainly by corporations, powerful governments, and elites) and also as a site of decolonial, anticolonial, antiracist, and feminist politics (led primarily by activists, youth, Indigenous groups, academics, and unions). While international neocolonial institutions and platforms such as the COPs are resistant to radical change, these are nonetheless also spaces of opportunities to challenge the system, to utter necessary words for more people to hear, collectivize among young and old activists, learn from different positionalities, create new openings and possibilities of alliances—in other words, a repoliticization of climate instead of the depoliticized techno-economist utopias that never deliver. The global theaters of climate negotiations showcase politics and the political, whether subaltern or suburban, where there are both reifications and ruptures in what constitutes politics and its pathways. A sense of despair, grief, rage, suffocation, stagnation, abandonment, and regression coexists with that of revolutionary potentiality, alternative possibilities, collectivizing, determination, worldmaking, and critical hope.





UNDERSTANDING CLIMATE COLONIALITY

Coloniality maintains the matrix of power established during active colonization through contemporary institutional, financial, and geopolitical world orders, and also through knowledge systems. I argue it continues its reach through climate in climate coloniality, which is experienced through continued ecological degradations that are both overt and covert, episodic and creeping—for example, pollution, toxic waste, mining, disasters, desertification, deforestation, land erosion, and more—whereby global capitalism, via development and economic growth ideologies, reproduces various forms of colonial racial harms to entire countries in the Global South and communities of color in the Global North. Thus, climate coloniality occurs where Eurocentric hegemony, neocolonialism, racial capitalism, uneven consumption, and military domination are co-constitutive of climate impacts experienced by variously racialized populations who are disproportionately made vulnerable and disposable. Legacies of imperial violence from active colonial eras live on, not only exacerbating environmental degradation but also increasing climate-induced disasters. As frequencies and strengths of climate-fueled natural hazards such as tropical cyclones grow, the structural violence of colonialism is further experienced and vulnerabilities entrenched. Slow but compounding violence intensifies vulnerabilities that maintain climate coloniality and extend it into the future. Some lives and ecosystems are rendered disposable and sacrificial, fueled by structural forces both historical and contemporary. The racial logic of climate tragedies and cumulative impacts are ever present.

Climate coloniality is perpetuated through controversial global land and water grabs, REDD+ (reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation) forestry programs, neoliberal conservation projects, rare-earth mineral mining, deforestation for growth,





fossil-fuel warfare, and new green revolutions for agriculture, which benefit a few while dispossessing larger numbers of historically impoverished communities, often elsewhere. Interventions are called by various names and have different tenors—green colonialism, carbon colonialism, fossil capitalism—but often have similar outcomes of domination, displacement, degradation, and impoverishment. Carbon colonialism through carbon-offset projects, which are increasingly ramping up instead of down, despite known critiques and resistances, has been discussed for some time. Extractivism propagated by global capital and state-sanctioned interventions perpetuates geopolitical climate necropolitics within and beyond borders.

As transnational corporate monopolies travel the globe for profit, patterns of colonial dispossession are further entrenched. Extraction and imperialism perpetuate unequal political economies, with imperial and emerging modes of hierarchies of power relations fueled by global market systems.

Climate apartheid is what many call this socio-spatial differentiation in who pays the disproportionate price of climate breakdown, who is made expendable, and who is spared for now. This form of eco-apartheid manifests between and across the Global North and Global South at multiple scales. Climate apartheid exists for those at the intersection of race, gender, and class exposed to ecological harms and toxic environments across sites.

DECOLONIZING CLIMATE COLONIALITY

There is thus an urgent need to decolonize climate to address the harms done and prevent future harm. To decolonize climate at a basic level means to integrate more decolonial, anticolonial, feminist, antiracist, and anticapitalist critiques and struggles into mainstream climate discourses and practices to redress ongoing oppressions and marginalizations. It is not about just recognizing





the problems but working toward distributive justice, reparations, and restitution. Decolonizing means accounting for and reflecting on the past and present, in order to configure future pathways to remove colonial and imperial powers in all their forms.

Decolonizing climate would mean rethinking and addressing various institutions and processes at multiple intersecting scales. For instance, it would entail restructuring the world economy to halt the unequal ecological exchange that drains from the Global South to the Global North, which enables the latter's higher consumption and inequitable appropriations. Many climate "solutions" perpetuate the problems of climate coloniality and climate apartheid, so more caution and collaborations are necessary. Likewise, the debates around climate reparations remain contentious, as loss and damage acknowledgment has not been followed through with sufficient financial support.

At the same time, healing colonial and imperial wounds through transformative care, empathy, mutuality, and love holds possibilities. We desperately need to heal colonial wounds everywhere. Ethics of care and collectivity are how we have survived colonialism, capitalism, development, disasters, and disruptions. Caring for each other, despite differences, is what carries us forward through devastations of cyclones, sea surges, riverbank erosion, loss of livelihoods, and degradation of homelands. Nonetheless, it would be callous not to acknowledge the socially mediated, globally and locally produced, ecologically relational vulnerabilities that do worsen over time; how impoverishment and disposability persist; and how increased and repeated harms and shocks make us weary and more vulnerable.

Climate coloniality is thus perpetuated through mundane and institutionalized ways of subalternization of non-Eurocentric, non-masculinist, and noncapitalist understandings of climate, ecology, and human-environment relations. As a result, decolonizing educational





systems is fundamental, as systemic cognitive injustices often begin through the formal Eurocentric capitalist education that has gone global. In recent years, the effort to decolonize knowledge and the academy has been powerful in Eurocentric universities. The decolonization of the mind remains critical for epistemic justice and pluriverse, where recuperation of collective memory, dreams, desires, and cultural practices to foster conviviality are important to overcome the colonial matrix of power. Decolonizing knowledge systems to confront climate coloniality requires Indigenization of knowledge and politics. Throughout history, this has been not only ignored, silenced, and resisted in dominant discussions on climate but also often violently oppressed or erased. Yet, power exists in the shadows, forging solidarity and cultural continuity against great odds.

While multiple Indigenous knowledge systems are excluded in hegemonic climate discourses and practices, they are valuable existing cosmologies of decolonial knowledge and resistance that center on accountable, reciprocal, and ethical relations and processes across the globe. There are many different ways that decolonization is enacted, ranging from direct action, law, care networks, leap-frogging alliances, cultural resurgence, and more to center BIPOC futures. For instance, blockades, resistance movements, and land-back claims build community claims for liberatory praxis. Speaking in one's native tongue, collective memory and culture rebuilding, retelling of historiographies, and celebrating human–nonhuman kinship are some of the strategies. Native singing and dancing are resistance, and valuing storytelling is decolonial action. Reclaiming sacredness is anticolonial, and counter-stories and counter-mapping are strategies of opposition. Defending territorial ontologies is decolonial politics. Recognizing relational entanglements and healing fosters well-being and convivialities. For many, various practices are simultaneously coping mechanisms, refusals, resistance movements,





and decolonial actions, where recollections of collective memories and practices as well as enactments for liberation remain the goal.

Through such processes, ethics of care, care networks, and prioritizing collective well-being instead of only individual well-being become more clarified. This accounts for embodied, ecological, economic, and political safety from harm and fosters flourishing. Healing the colonial wound through transgressive love and solidarity becomes possible. Alienation is fought against by reclaiming sacredness and relationalities, by moving toward liberation and self-determination without apolitically fetishizing or romancing the local communities or cultures.

SOLIDARITIES AND POLITICAL LIBERATIONS

What is evident is that political liberation from climate coloniality will rely on allyship and solidarities in intentional anti-imperial and anticolonial projects across peoples of occupied, postcolonial, and settler-colonial contexts—particularly among BIPOC from across continents. Political consciousness informed by anticolonial politics is necessary for decolonization and abolition of systems of harms. The natures of these relationships need to be worked out, but coalitions come together by working through contentions and differences. Kinship building can be fraught; it needs humility and humanity, overcoming alienation, and acknowledging differences and commonalities to build shared goals.

Decolonization thus must build political community and practical solidarities that foster pluriversality and reparative relations, ethics of care, and restoration of humanity and agency in the battle against climate change and climate coloniality. The ruthless extractions and dispossessions across territories everywhere showcase the connections across place-based materialities to broader extractive ideologies and colonial-capitalist greed. Indigenous scholarship





demonstrates the importance of self-determination and ecological kinship, more-than-human relationality, and multispecies justice. Recognizing and valuing living complex ecosystems and agroecology, instead of marketized nature as commodity in a capitalist exploitative system, become vital for epistemic and material climate justice.

Ultimately, there is no single blueprint for decolonizing climate, as decolonizing is a process and not an event; it is ongoing unlearning to relearn. It is the many acts, small and large, acting in constellations and collectivities over time and place, that bear results.

