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Left for Dead: The Necropolitical Landscape of Climate Induced Migration

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Abstract

Climate destruction is projected to occur sooner than we would like to entertain. As people operating in a late-stage capitalist world, we are preoccupied with material concerns such as income and consumerism. Without proper recognition of the future that is soon upon us, we remain complicit in the neglect of millions of lives threatened by climate collapse. Climate induced migration will displace at least half as many people as the population of the United States. About 200 million people will experience displacement from their homes and families (Myers 168). These 200 million people will be disproportionately people of color located in the Global South. What will happen to these people? In a practice of collaboration and citation, I aim to analyze projections for climate induced migration through the writings and activism of queer scholars, such as Michel Foucault, Achille Mbembe, Riley Snorton, and Jin Haritaworn.

Introduction

The era of climate optimism is dead. Symptoms of a climate on the verge of collapse have already begun to affect the lives of thousands, from poor air quality for the United States' underprivileged populations, to the destruction caused by hurricanes in Central America. In his article "Environmental Refugees," environmentalist Norman Myers states that by 2025, 180 million people will experience displacement because of desertification alone (172). The survival of these individuals will necessitate global population resettlement. Current public discourse (including media coverage, politicians, corporations and more) often posits that the solution to the effects of climate change on humanity lies in institutional projects of reform through renewable energy. However, institutional programs like green energy and climate pledges do not accurately reflect projections for climate conditions that will directly interfere in human lives. In the era of neoliberalism, we are assuredly not prepared for this reality. The following paper is concerned with the application of queer theory to the study of climate induced migration. I will engage in a collaborative analysis with the philosophical works of Michel Foucault and Achille Mbembe and queer theories of C. Riley Snorton and Jin Haritaworn to analyze the displacement of those impacted by climate destruction. My project yields an understanding of disproportionately affected populations as having been marked for death at the onset of climate collapse, and prescribes, through the liberatory possibilities of queer theory, the antidote for a better future.

Before beginning my analysis, I want to share that my reflections in this essay are rooted in the discipline of queer theory. Queerness has historically been understood as a slur relating to homosexual preference. Today queerness is many things, including an identity, a practice, and a theory. A radical understanding of queerness is derived from its definition: "strange; odd" and refers to identities, practices, and theories that are divergent from traditional ways of being. In a world that asserts profit as the chief goal, to look beyond the inclinations of the capital economy is to analyze queerly. Queerness in the realm of theory is a reaching toward the unknown, a denial of carceral thought production, and a pursuit of the unorthodox.

In a more clinical sense, queer theory is practice concerned with studying power in ways that are unusual or peculiar to common discourse. Common discourse, as I will refer to it throughout this body of work, is the rhetoric produced in mainstream media. The loudest voices in the common discourse are those of politicians, corporations, celebrities, and media (such as TV, movies, and music). Common discourse has the power to recapitulate harmful manifestations of power, such as white supremacy. Queer theory is concerned with investigating the cognitive dissonances that arise between common discourse and the material conditions of people. The gap between common discourse and material conditions does not match the reality of people's struggles, resulting in an unsettling disparity between the two

(cognitive dissonance). For example, the rhetoric surrounding race relations in the US posits that Black people have as much access to the resources as any other racial group, but the reality is that power privileges white lives above Black lives.

For many queer theorists, including myself, manifestations of power, such as white supremacy, offer avenues for dissecting cognitive dissonances. Under the conditions of power, populations exist whose survival is directly related to the manifestations of power. These individuals are the marginalized subject and are disproportionately people of color, poor people, disabled people, and LGBTQ+ people. Understanding the complex sets of issues that marginalized subjects face is difficult and at times counterintuitive, because the realities of everyday life for these people do not match the common discourse surrounding them. The marginalized subject has been made strange by manifestations of power through systems of domination. If we are to queerly analyze power, the perspectives of these individuals must be centered. It is through the eyes of the marginalized subject that power comes into focus. This is the work of queer theory. In addition to critical analysis, queer theory offers us the possibility to envisage a better world. As queer theorists, we are those who speak out against the normative structures that demand our subjection to a violent future. Queer theory denies the notion that humanity is inherently evil, and instead illuminates that we have been socialized to pursue profit in all our endeavors.

Neoliberal Confusion

Common discourse surrounding the issue of climate induced migration directly reflects how neoliberalism holds us captive to end-stage capitalism. Neoliberalism is an allusive term, but I have included it in my essay because it is an incredibly helpful tool for understanding the complexity of power in the modern era. Dean Spade describes neoliberalism in his book *Normal Life*, stating, “Neoliberalism has been used to conceptually draw together several key trends shaping contemporary policies and practices that have redistributed life chances over the last forty years” (22). Spade then references the trends of capital that have served to disadvantage the marginalized subjects. One example is “the rollback of the gains of the civil rights movement and other social movements of the 1960s and ‘70s, combined with the mobilization of racist, sexist, and xenophobic images and ideas to bolster these changes” (Spade 22). Further, neoliberalism refers to the technology and discourse that operates to maintain the systems of domination that are foundational to Western institutions (e.g., white supremacy). Neoliberal projects follow the path of wealth and capital rather than the promotion of people, thus obscuring accurate reflections of the world. Neoliberal discourse surrounding the effects of climate change on human lives lends itself primarily to discussions of environmental technologies. Neoliberalism insists on the growth of the renewable energy

sector as a means of salvation. Therefore, most of us come to understand the effort to change the trajectory of global warming to be institutionally led, painting the work of climate intervention as a project of reform. This is a faulty assumption that implies we will put our faith in power that has historically been used to assure our complacency in structures of violence. It would be naïve to assume that our current societal structure's motivation will change from profit to people.

Climate change will have catastrophic effects on not only the environment but our very ways of being. In the simplest terms, climate change refers to the rapid warming of the earth's temperature. NASA reports that "current warming is happening roughly 10 times faster than the average rate of warming after an ice age" ("Climate Change Evidence" 1). The ramifications of this phenomenon are, in a sense, apocalyptic. In the opening of "The Solutions are Already Here," Peter Gelderloos describes a more realistic picture of the effects of climate collapse on human civilization:

In a complex system, such a huge change does not mean a smooth, gradual warming, but a major outbreak in turbulence as shock waves ripple all throughout the interconnected systems of the planet. These shock waves include more violent storms, heavier rainfall, more deadly flooding and catastrophic landslides; and on the other hand, more intense droughts and widespread wildfires. (1)

Therefore, when we are considering the effects of climate change, we should not only be investigating what happens after climate collapse, but what happens during climate collapse. Understanding climate collapse as an immediate issue is incongruent with much of what we understand about the phenomenon. It is an entirely daunting reality; however, a world that is not prepared to reintegrate millions of lives affected by the symptoms of climate collapse is horrifying. We must investigate the needs of populations before the hour of need is upon us. Particularly, we must consider the impending reality of climate induced migration, and strategies to cope with these large waves of migration.

Foundational work on the study of displaced populations refers to the process as "climate induced migration" and the subjects as "climate refugees." The term "climate refugee" has been critiqued by Chris Methmann and Angel Oels in a process of Foucauldian genealogy, and I will refrain from using it in this paper; however, having engaged in the discourse, I find climate induced migration to be a useful phrase for my work here (56). Returning to the work of Myers, to realistically account for a redistribution of 200 million people would require a project of global social reconstruction that is directly opposed to the function of power in Western institutions (168). Those who will be a part of the 200 million live in the Global South and are disproportionately people of color and poor people. We can come to this conclusion using Michel Foucault's theories about the key attributes of power.

Incorporating Foucauldian Analysis

Foucault's analysis of power in his work *The History of Sexuality* begins with a genealogical examination of sexual politics. Foucault takes up the widespread understanding about the history of sexual repression in the common discourse from the Victorian era onward, dismantling the assumption that power represses sexuality by showing how discourse around sexuality actually increased exponentially during the Victorian period despite assumptions that Victorian sexual repression limited this discourse. This suggests that in addition to operating through active acts of repression, power operates through the production of norms, institutions, and ways of knowing. Foucault cautions that the productive capacities of power are dangerous, insofar as we ourselves are avenues of power. As socialized people we have the ability to replicate and promote structures of power without being aware we are doing so. The neoliberal project uses power to produce a society that legitimizes its historical origins through the recapitulation of cycles of violence that best suit its aim. Neoliberal society breeds us to be complacent in life and complicit in the perpetuation of death. This remains true in the context of climate change and migration studies. In the context of climate change, neoliberalism is working through discourse about climate induced migration to reify neglect of the marginalized subject.

In Part Five of *The History of Sexuality* and in *Security, Territory, Population*, Foucault builds upon his understanding of power by exploring the genealogy of the sovereign right to kill (*Security* 91). Foucault illustrates that the onset of industry marks a shift in the role of sovereignty. Historically, sovereignty's chief right was in the bestowing and taking of life from the population. As technology began to secure the possibility for life through science and medicine, the sovereign's role as the arbitrator of life and death shifted. The shift of the sovereign's role marks the era of biopower (Foucault, *Security* 94). Biopower became the new right of the sovereign. The sovereign's power of life evolved into Foucauldian biopower through two chief forms – the production of a healthy body and the monopoly on that production:

One of these poles—the first to be formed, it seems—centered on the body as a machine: its disciplining, the optimization of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces, the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility, its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls, all of this was ensured by the procedures of power that characterized the *disciplines: an anatomo-politics of the human body*. The second, formed somewhat later, focused on the species body, the body imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of the biological processes: propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity,

with all the conditions that can cause these to vary. Their supervision was affected through an entire series of interventions and *regulatory controls: a bio-politics of the population*. (Foucault, *The History* 139)

In this quote, Foucault reveals that sovereign power shifts to biopower through two main “poles.” The first pole is the emergence of the worker’s body as a source of profit and determination of how best to extrapolate productivity from the human form. The second pole is the project of maintaining the worker’s body and assuring that populations will reproduce with the aim of maximizing future generations for profit (Foucault, *The History* 139). A transparent example of biopower is the history of slavery in the United States. The US exercised the categorization and manipulation of bodies to build the economy of slavery, a history that continues to sustain the modern world though it has been rearticulated through the products of neoliberalism. The philosophy of Foucault is often found as an undercurrent in queer theory. For instance, in this paper my analysis rests on understanding power in a biopolitical schema.

Mbembe’s Necropolitics

Foucault’s notion of biopower delineates an understanding of *why* populations are defined and *for what aim*. Cameroonian political theorist Achille Mbembe utilizes the concept of biopower and describes how populations came to be defined in the history of the West. Mbembe’s book *Necropolitics* examines biopower through the concept of “necropolitics” that may be derived from a Foucauldian summary and analysis of the history of race. The theoretical history of necropolitics began with an analysis of the colonial systems of oppression. Mbembe’s project is concerned with examining the relationship between the Atlantic slave trade and the development of democracy in the United States. Mbembe simplifies the complexity of this system of racialized control into a parasitic system of life and death:

A pro-slavery democracy is therefore characterized by its bifurcation. Two orders coexist within it—a *community of fellow creatures* governed at least in principle, by the law of equality, and a *category of nonfellows*, or even of those without part, that is also established by law. A priori, those without part have no right to have rights. They are governed by the law of inequality. This inequality and the law establishing it, and that is its base, is founded on the prejudice of race. The prejudice itself, as much as the law founding it, enabled a practically unbridgeable distance to be upheld between the community of fellow creatures and its others. Pro-slavery democracy, supposing itself to be a community, could only be a community of separation. (17)

Mbembe's bifurcation highlights the centrality of the Black body as a site for biopower in the history of the United States. Recalling the two poles of the development of biopower, the practice of enslaving Black bodies through plantation labor was an experiment in developing the body to be a machine. The legacy of enslavement has reserved the Black body as a test subject in producing the "mechanics of life." The manipulation of the body through biomedical technology and statistical analysis of populations to develop the sovereign's ideal citizenry is therefore inseparable from the exploitation of Black bodies. The ideal citizenry is bestowed the gifts of life through access to work, family, and health.

The resources of life are reserved for those privileged by the systems of power – this marks the remaining portion of the population for death. The function of death in the biopolitical project of pro-slavery democracy arises through the analysis of the division marked by the "*community of separation*." Mbembe codifies the two poles of biopolitics into a system that seeks to mark a population for death to ensure and promote the survival of the citizens of democracy (17). It is from this analysis that Mbembe's term necropolitics arises. Necropolitics is then the process of segregating populations using the technology of biopower to maintain and preserve life for one half at the expense of the death for the other half. From this analysis it is feasible to assume that biopolitics will exploit the effects of climate collapse and neglect minoritarian populations. Thus, analyzing which of the 8 billion people on earth will be among the 200 million people is inherently a necropolitical project.

These 200 million people have been marked by several interrelated systems of oppression dating back to the dawn of biopower. Mbembe's understanding of the pro-slavery democracy and its transnational legacies have divided the global population into a system of life and death. The dividing line drawn by this history directly mirrors the path of the equator and marks the Global South for death so that the Global North may sustain itself. Even though the Global North will not be affected as heavily, it remains true that the effects of environmental catastrophe directly follow the path marked by the Global South. The distinction between south and north is related to the history of extraction and violence through colonialism and the rise of biopolitical technology. The development of biopower has relied on the parasitic relationship between white domination and brown submission. The analysis of racial domination that is central to the work of *Necropolitics* remains effective when studying climate destruction on a transnational scale.

Necropolitical Analysis in the Modern World

The concept of necropolitics is a complex and depressing portrait of the material realities of the marginalized subject in the modern world. Through the lens of queer theory, necropolitical realities cannot be assayed without centering the experience of the marginalized

subject. Focusing on the marginalized subject reveals the strange ways in which systemic and social structures intersect to threaten their survival. Queer theorists C. Riley Snorton and Jin Haritaworn take up the project of necropolitics and apply the theory to the lives of transgender people of color. In their piece titled “Trans Necropolitics: A Transnational Reflection on Violence, Life, and the Trans of Color Afterlife,” necropolitics ceases to be a vague conception as its application in understanding the material conditions of the marginalized subject becomes a site of liberatory productivity. The analysis leads to new ways of understanding the oppression of BIPOC transgender people and how to fight for their survival. The primary reflection from the work of Snorton and Haritaworn that informs my theoretical approach in this paper is the application of necropolitics to the study of a specific segregation of bodies.

In “Trans Necropolitics,” Snorton and Haritaworn are critical of the discourse around transgender lives, asserting that this discourse functions to produce the harmful ways we come to know and understand these lives. In this piece, the place of neoliberalism in biopower is made evident through the production of the “homo-normative” transgender subject:

The current juncture in Europe between welfare and neoliberal regimes, and the ambivalent desires for diversity and disposal that it produces, invite novel performances of transness as innocent, colorfully diverse, and entitled to survival and protection. Nevertheless, these biopolitical and necropolitical conversions do not accrue value equally to all trans people. While those whose multiple vulnerabilities lend the moral panic its spectacularly violated bodies are continually reinscribed as degenerate and killable, the same process secures a newly professionalizing class of experts in the realm of life. (Snorton and Haritaworn 67)

This passage exemplifies the contradictory and mythologized discourse of marginalized subjects for the preservation of the neoliberal landscape of biopolitics. In direct reference to Mbembe’s necropolitics, the splintering of a population—in this case a population drawn historically from race and directly from gender—for the legitimacy of the whole occurs. Out of the population of transgender folks, those who have the potential (marked by proximity to privilege) to be fitted into the vision of a neoliberal agenda are given access to the biopolitical resources of life. The other side of the coin for transgender folks is then the perpetuation of abandonment, neglect, and violence against those without that “potential.” It is important to recognize the function of power to determine transgender people who are worthy of receiving the gifts of life and those who are not. We breed a complacent transgender population so that power may continue to dictate the allocation of biopolitical technologies. The neoliberal discourse would have individuals experience a certain acceptable version of being transgender that is drawn on the historical lines of race and class. The failure to meet this acceptable version is then mystified into the realm of those marked for death, often through associations of crime, race, and substance abuse.

Snorton and Haritaworn's analysis captures the necropolitics theorized by Mbembe and applies them to the epistemological standpoint of the contemporary BIPOC transgender subject. These theorists illuminate a crucial moment in modern history in which the function of neoliberalism in biopolitics produces "new understandings" of marginalized subjects in public discourse that are directly reifying pro-slavery democracy. Snorton and Haritaworn focus their attention on a queer analysis of necropolitics in the present moment. The temporal awareness of their piece allows their work to directly call out the production of knowledge that is serving to perpetuate Black transgender deaths. Their work inspires my queer investigation of climate induced migration because I can directly refer to the same production of knowledge in 2024 that seeks to reify necropolitics. The 200 million people projected to experience displacement will disproportionately be people of color. The history of biopower and necropolitics has decided the place of these individuals in the game of life and death.

In response to the tumultuous events of war on the citizen body, visions of migration to the Global North have been naturalized as the path of life. However, the response of the Global North to migration has been reliant on a division between life and death. The technology of biopower asserts itself through migration by seeking to segregate populations and distribute life to those who are deemed worthy. The construction of the immigrant worthy of refugee status reflects the construction of the ideal citizenry. Thus, the "*community of separation*" (Mbembe 17) organized in migration allows for the gifts of life to be distributed to immigrants who serve the construction of the "deserving refugee," while those too queer for the biopolitical system of the country of refuge are left for dead. In the context of climate induced migration, the manifestations of power will not provide for the 200 million people displaced. The population surrounding the equator are too queer for the biopolitical system and will be forced to fend for themselves. For some of the displaced people, climate collapse will mean entry into a country further north of the equator, but for most this will mean death from climate catastrophe or death from the displacement itself. Collaborating with the works of other philosophers and queer theorists has led me to the conclusion that the 200 million people left for dead will be those who live in the Global South, particularly surrounding the equator. The two most common features of these people are that they are disproportionately people of color and poor. Just as Mbembe investigated the role of race in pro-slavery democracy, race presents itself as a pinnacle feature of my analysis. The envisioned reality of the geopolitical response to climate induced migration has mobilized me to continue my analysis of this daunting issue through queer theory and use of queer analysis to formulate potential solutions. Queer theorists work in conversation together through theory. Only through collaboration can we begin to digest the dismal realities that power presents us with.

Conclusion

Neoliberalism is deeply invested in the production of knowledge around climate induced migration. For example, Myers, the author who prophesies the displacement of 200 million people, presents a neoliberal agenda in his book *Environmental Exodus*. The work describes climate induced migration as if it were a plague that will likely infringe upon the sovereignty of the nation-state. Of course, migration of this scale will obstruct the function of nation-states, but the words describing the displaced peoples allude to the fact that their loyalty lies with the preservation of the current world order rather than the millions of lives impacted. The inclination to promote the nation-state above people reveals the destructive nature of power in the neoliberal agenda. Chris Methmann and Angela Oels write a critique of *Environmental Exodus* that exposes the harmful discourse produced by the work:

Methodologically, Myers and Kent supported their figures with a simple assertion: all those people projected to live in areas affected by serious climate change at a given time will become climate refugees and thus threaten the sovereign order of nation states. What is more, Myers and Kent linked population growth and environmental degradation to human mobility in a somewhat mono-causal and deterministic way. In effect, this discourse does not so much predict that all these refugees are moving to the North; rather, the South is constructed as a 'wild zone' against which the North has to protect itself. Clearly written with the ambition of characterizing climate-induced migration as a national security issue, the study articulates it within a framework of sovereign power. (Methmann and Oels 56)

In the same way that Snorton and Haritaworn in "Trans Necropolitics" dissect how neoliberalism perpetuates systems of biopower through transgender politics, I reveal a similar conclusion about climate induced migration. Neoliberalism serves biopower in climate change currently and will continue to do so during climate collapse.

Through the practice of queer theory, I have entered into a conversation about analyzing power and observing the projections of how power will operate at the onset of climate collapse. My attentiveness to the modern power structure through the use of queer methodology predicts a disastrous future; however, my project is also the cornerstone for how best to engage in and prepare for the mass social change precipitated by climate collapse. The works of Foucault, Mbembe, Snorton, and Haritaworn have provided the apparatus through which to critically analyze the geopolitical landscape using the lens of climate change. We are currently occupying a moment in history when optimism for reversing the effects of climate change has been exhausted. Where then should we turn our attention if hope seems lost? My research has led me to advocate for a period of acceptance and mourning that is actively invested in preparation for future tragedy. We cannot begin to address this issue until we

are able to engage in the emotional process that comes along with this realization. The issue at hand is terrifying and predicts a devastating future, but these feelings will motivate us towards finding solutions. A necropolitical assessment of the current world order anticipates that the majority of these 200 million people will be sacrificed for the survival of the ideal citizenry. This queer analysis requires a queer solution. My theoretical work inspires me to fervently engage in disaster preparedness in a way that aims to undermine the function of biopower.

In the book *The Solutions are Already Here: Strategies for Ecological Revolution from Below*, author Peter Gelderloos presents a variety of anecdotes about communities that have refused to accept the reality of necropolitics and have mobilized against repressive power structures. Gelderloos' work reveals that the solutions are found in the potential for communities to radically alter their material conditions. That potential is then enacted through projects of mutual aid and direct action. Practices of mutual aid and direct action are grassroots organizing efforts that fulfill needs in a community through the collaboration and the will of the community. The idea is to reject the assumption that the nation-state will one day provide us with what we need, and to instead provide ourselves with what we need now. The solutions to the issue of climate induced migration are not easy answers, but inaction will undoubtedly result in catastrophe. As such, it is the responsibility of all of us as global citizens to open our minds and hearts to the possibilities of a better future. I will conclude with a passage from Gelderloos that encapsulates my most essential call to action:

Those who currently hold power in our society, those who have failed us tragically, do not have our interests at heart, nor those of the planet. And in fact, our interests and the interests of the earth are one and the same. We do not know how disastrous these next decades will be. But there is one certainty that can give us hope and courage: there is not a single scenario in which taking action, in defense of ourselves, in defense of one another, in defense of all the interconnected life on this planet, will not make things better. (10)

Gelderloos invites a queer perspective into the analysis of climate induced migration, and he denies the notion that we are to succumb to a narrative that relies on our inaction. As queer theorists, we must observe this issue from the perspectives of those most affected. From the eyes of marginalized subject, climate migration is a matter of survival—the very call to action that we experience collectively as human beings. There is potential for a future that allows the survival of us all. I believe in the end of necropolitics and the dawn of a world that does not determine the right to live through our proximity to power.

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