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Race, Human Security, and the Climate Refugee

Neel Ahuja

The public discourse concerning some 65 million displaced people fleeing war, economic crisis, and climate disaster across North Africa and South and West Asia reflects new challenges for critical theories of race. On the one hand, these events reflect the necessity for critical race theories to transcend conventional boundaries of nation, scale, and species at a time when war and environmental destruction cross all manner of geographic, ecosystemic, and social borders. On the other hand, critical race theory stands at a political crossroads in an era in which states proclaim an official racial liberalism that masks how racial inequality is shaped and reproduced through histories of militarism and capitalist development. As migration is ambivalently figured as both a racialized security risk and a resource for adaptation to crisis, the field of racial power is configured in contradictory ways through political struggles over the security state, the carbon economy, human settlement, immigration, and the current wars. How can we locate the field of the racial in emerging security regimes' attempts to control the resulting mobilizations of bodies, ecologies, and affects?

In this short essay, I propose an account of racial assemblage that connects climate-related vulnerability to the productive base of racial capitalism and the geopolitics of oil. Although environmental justice scholarship has made important contributions to understanding "the unequal distribution of environmental benefits and pollution burdens based on race,"[1] a focus on post-facto determinations of unequal vulnerability to environmental harm can narrow the field of analysis of environmental racism in a manner that excludes the productive bases of racial capitalism and that repeatedly stages a debate over whether race or class is a greater contributor to toxicity risk.[2] Post-facto evidence of environmental racism must thus be connected to an analysis of the geopolitical form of the carbon economy in order to track racial capitalism's biopolitical logics, including the logics of security that interlink political, social, and ecological risk. A vision of environmental racism that is primarily focused on distributions of vulnerability is increasingly appropriated by environmental security discourse, which hopes to rehabilitate and mobilize the racialized environmental migrant without transforming the colonial logics of capitalism that displace the migrant. Tracking how the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (the international body of experts that evaluates published climate science for the United Nations) constructs the so-called climate refugee as a site of hope for security and adaptation, I suggest that emerging accounts of race are affected by a form of population construction and scaling that mask the systemic violence of racial capitalism. In response, I examine how an invigorated materialism offers an alternative

by opening critical accounts of the colonial carbon economy, its crisis tendencies, and its forms of social and ecological ordering.

A growing cohort of environmentalists, public intellectuals, and government experts note the racially unequal effects of carbon emissions via toxicity, sea level rise, weather disasters, desertification, and other climatic changes. In the face of a mainstream discourse on the so-called anthropocene (which asserts that human-induced environmental changes are now the primary geophysical forces shaping the planet), environmental justice discourses question the manner in which capitalist extraction and development processes disperse waste unequally across the planet. Yet the terms of description for environmental racism, and its relation to other dimensions of inequality, vary widely. The scalar dimensions and complexity of climate change processes invoke inequalities based on race, class, nation, gender, and species that remain difficult to integrate into a systemic account.[3]

As such, public assessments of climate change as racism often invoke retrospective, empirical calculation of racialized groups' vulnerability to environmental destruction—a configuration of racial power that may be incidental in intent but deadly in effect. In her recent essay on Edward Said and climate change, Naomi Klein suggests that the reckless "refusal to lower emissions ... would have been functionally impossible without institutional racism, even if only latent." Invoking an Orientalist "othering" process involved in displacing and polluting communities for the extraction and processing of coal and oil, Klein notes that proportionally "these are overwhelmingly communities of colour, black and Latino, forced to carry the toxic burden of our collective addiction to fossil fuels with markedly higher rates of respiratory illnesses and cancers." Klein pairs this description of "environmental racism" with another bracketed term, "ecological genocide," which she uses to describe the extractive destruction of native lands from the Niger Delta to the Canadian tar sands.[4] Other writings on such injustices emphasize the class dimension that unequally affects specific national and racial groupings. Junot Díaz emphasizes vulnerability to mass death and dislocation as an aftereffect of colonial capitalism: "This is what Haiti is both victim and symbol of—this new, rapacious stage of capitalism. A cannibal stage where, in order to power the explosion of the super-rich and the ultra-rich, middle classes are being forced to fail, working classes are being re-proletarianized, and the poorest are being pushed beyond the grim limits of subsistence, into a kind of sepulchral half-life, perfect targets for any 'natural disaster' that just happens to wander by."[5]

Even as such statements insist on attending to social, political, and economic factors that are often sidelined in planet-scale accounts of the anthropocene, the turn to the incidental and the empirical invokes an ad-hoc conception of racism. What would it mean to think, along the lines of Arun Saldanha, of climate change more broadly as a racial ecology of capitalism? For Saldanha, "the ecology of global capitalism has for some four centuries been intrinsically *racist*, making white populations live longer and better at the expense of the toil and suffering of others. Humanitarian campaigns after 'natural' disasters in the South (the 2010 Haiti earthquake), disasters which will become routine if capitalism goes on as it does, are the clearest example of the continuing racist hypocrisy underneath Western humanism ... As activists point out, places suffering most from climate change

have contributed least to carbon emissions. The Anthropocene is in itself a racist biopolitical reality."[6] The difficulty in developing such an account of the environmental form of racial capitalism reflects a broader difficulty in responding to a racial liberalism that asserts the post-racialism of the state. Critical race theory has in turn been charged with asserting the generalized nature of racism at the same time that it claims that race is constructed and in a biological sense unreal.[7] And yet if race isn't "real" in the sense of being genetically inscribed in the body, the death-dealing effects of racism are all too easily measured in a host of demographic data on phenomena ranging from disease to toxicity, incarceration, and gun violence.

To challenge such empirical inequalities requires attention to their mobilization in systems of racial control. In the most sophisticated analyses of racial capitalism, the post-facto diagnosis of racially unequal life outcomes becomes an occasion for rethinking the historical transformation of the racial field. Ruth Wilson Gilmore's study *Golden Gulag* explores how the neoliberal prison expansion serves as a solution to crises of political economy, assembling racial categories by reproducing and redistributing social vulnerability. Gilmore's study stands apart from some other recent scholarship on race and incarceration, as well as recent necropolitical trends in critical race theory, by situating the force of California's carceral project against a backdrop of crises of capital and statecraft. It is in this context—in which the criminalization of populations figured as surplus resolves contradictions in the state's management of capital's development potential—that Gilmore defines racism as an institutional social relation: "Racism, specifically, is the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death."[8] From the vantage of the neoconservative common sense about race, as well as from class-centered forms of Left critique, this definition may seem idiosyncratic or simply inaccurate. Centering on the distribution of death rather than the differentiation of life (via phenotype or cultural essence), this definition suggests that race is the product of social relations rather than an a priori social categorization.

The potential of such a redefinition of race lies in part in the ways it registers what Nikhil Singh describes as "the apparent contradiction between the ongoing normalization of racial liberalism and the intensification of racially inscribed domination."[9] Racism must be understood not simply in its rhetorical form as a set of moral infractions, but rather as an effect of the material formation of social relations and their imbrication in more-than-human networks of settlement and ecological reproduction. Thus, despite the fact that Gilmore's focus on racism's relation to death shares a certain conceptual ground with dehistoricized theories of race as social death or exception, her insistence that the social dynamics of this death-dealing relation are *productive* of race rather than its *effect* represents a significant break with these other methods, particularly with black pessimism. This is evident in Gilmore's brief discussion of Islamophobia as at once a reproduction of racial hierarchy and a transition:

> Sadly, even activists committed to antiracist organizing renovate commonsense divisions by objectifying certain kinds of people into a pre-given category that then automatically gets oppressed. What's the alternative? To see how the very capacities we struggle to turn to other purposes *make* races by making some

> people, and their biological and fictive kin, vulnerable to forces that make premature death likely and in some ways distinctive. The racialization of Muslims in the current era does double duty in both establishing an enemy whose being can be projected through the allegation of unshakeable heritage (fundamentally, what the fiction of race is at best) and renewing the racial order of the US polity as normal, even as it changes.[10]

Racism, in this formulation, is not the effect of race, dependent on its prior differentiation. Racism instead comprises both territorializing and deterritorializing forces that reconfigure race as it moves through embodied interactions and collective struggles.[11]

Drawing from Gilmore's assessment of the relation between the management of biosocial vulnerability and the reproduction of racism, critical scholarship on environmental racism can benefit from analyzing how the domain of empirical environmental inequalities feeds back into the productive forces of racial capitalism. As the contemporary politics of both Islamophobia and environmental racism demonstrate, post-hoc figurations of racial disparity are persistently disavowed by actors who reframe race via discourses of security or development.

What, then, might a discussion of current migrations tell us about the relationships between race, war, and climate change? How do the ecologies of conflict and environmental destruction across oil-producing regions reproduce and shift the public articulation of race? In the migrations from the Levant, North Africa, and South Asia toward Europe, forms of racial surveillance highlight a pervasive antiblackness and Islamophobia, as European states sort out non-Syrians by markers of skin color, language, and nationality, and then police assimilation by assuming Muslims' perceived inherent tendency to violence. This reflects multiple layers of regulation carried out against populations already fleeing forms of racial, religious, and sexual discrimination within African and Asian states; media reports suggest that migration has been especially deadly for black migrants traveling through North Africa. At the same time, xenophobic Euro-American assimilation and anti-radicalization discourses divide these mass migrations into "good" and "bad" émigrés, terrorists and innocents, refugees and "economic" or "environmental" migrants.[12] In the process, racial sorting strategies attempt to separate the figure of the climate refugee from the figure of the terrorist, even as there is a blurring of migration causes that lead security officials to view racialized conflict as indistinct from the broader "environment" in both social and ecological senses.[13] Thus, to bracket off the "environmental" dimension of racism from these other forces of the racial assemblage disavows the formative role of the colonial carbon economy in the mass displacement of humans and other species through a history of oil-related wars, ethnic conflicts, and economic and environmental crises.

In this context, liberal responses to climate change invoke "human security"—a form of liberal imperialism that integrates militarized technologies into the government of environmental, biological, and social systems. Despite the apparent internationalism of human security, which purports to transcend narrow national security agendas, this discourse is increasingly deployed as a form of governance integrating war and control. Combining network analysis,

surveillance, policing, military intervention, and the statistical management of populations, economies, and environments, human security activates a "posthuman" biopolitical form that corresponds to Michel Foucault's turn from discipline to security and to Gilles Deleuze's conception of a control society.[14] In this modality of control, bodies are targeted not primarily through techniques of inclusion and exclusion, nor through subjectivation, but rather, through the calculation of gradations of difference in population constructions.[15] Invoking a network model relating social groups to technical, environmental, and geopolitical systems, human security engages in predictive forms of modeling that require aggregated social categories (including racial categories) in order to construct risk differentials.[16]

At the international level, practices of human security reflect developments that integrate human and nonhuman factors influencing migration into assessments of risk. Notably, post-facto evidence of environmental racism is used to describe gradations of climate insecurity. In the fifth consensus report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the chapter on "human security" notes differential economic and racial factors that influence the possibilities for the return or resettlement of environmental migrants. Even as risk is intensified by weather-driven crises, resources for resettlement create wide disparities in the IPCC's rendering of human security:

> Most displaced people attempt to return to their original residence and rebuild as soon as is practicable. The Pakistan floods of 2010, for example, caused primarily localized displacement for large numbers of people across a wide area, rather than longer-distance migration. Structural economic causes of social vulnerability may determine whether temporary displacement turns into permanent migration. In New Orleans, after Hurricane Katrina, for example, economically disadvantaged populations were displaced in the immediate aftermath and most have not returned ... fourteen months after the event, African American residents returned more slowly, because they had suffered greater housing damage. Studies conclude that displacement affected human security through housing, economic, and health outcomes and that these have perpetuated the initial impact into a chronic syndrome of insecurity.[17]

The IPCC's formulation of climate change as a threat to human security links the effects of displacement to racialized potentials for precaritization and rehabilitation. On the one hand, the figure of the climate refugee is marked by a racialized chain of waste-effects as carbon emissions render lands transitory and intermittently productive. This overlaps directly with the United States Department of Defense's framing of climate change as a "threat multiplier."[18] At the same time, the climate refugee's exercise of mobility is itself a resource against the potential catastrophe of spectacular climate disasters that happen at the shorelines of the desert and sea. Detached from the scene of disaster and returned to settled land elsewhere, the re-capacitated climate refugee is rendered as a site of hope for the resilience of populations in the aftermath of disaster.

Like "human security," "climate refugee" is a slippery concept, as it necessarily references a crucible of factors underpinning migration that cannot be reduced to a single ecosystemic or

geographic process. As such, the figure of the climate refugee points to how climate might contribute to the dispersed potentials of armed conflict, and thus be rendered a threat to security by undermining the colonial system of nation-states protected by normative monopolies on violence. The blurring of war and climate was evident in the public discussions over Syrian refugees entering Europe in 2015, where proponents of asylum emphasized the contribution of climate change to the refugees' displacement in Syria.[19] The IPCC refers to historical scholarship on "the relationship between large-scale disruptions in climate and the collapse of past empires" as evidence of climate's security threat (rather than emphasizing the reverse proposition that empire threatens life itself through climate change).[20] Thus the figure of the climate refugee ideologically functions as a supplement to the colonial geopolitical order, a positioning that allows for the valorization of knowledges about and practices of "climate adaptation." Forms of knowledge produced in displacement are increasingly fetishized as indigenous resources for climate resilience,[21] although these processes vary regionally and are contested, for example, in the emergent Latin American "rights of nature" debates.[22] In rendering environmental capacities as human security, "adaptive" forms of flexible, migratory living portend the future of capital after climate disaster.

What methods can be useful for arresting racial capitalism's ideological double-move that extracts the climate refugee from the broader histories of colonial war and migration, fixing the refugee as a figure that is both a risk and a supplement to the political order? A broader mapping of the racial assemblage of carbon-fueled capitalism might instead connect the material base of oil production and its circulation of arms and capital to the emergence of forms of imperial securitization managing the interconnected effects of war and ecosystemic collapse. The Gulf oil economy, advanced by early 20th-century US and British support for the House of Saud in the colonial struggles to carve up and redistribute Ottoman-occupied lands, relied on at least two forms of racial ordering for the control of production sites: one, a racially stratified system of labor in the expat-led oil fields; and two, an orientalist construction of religious difference used to prop up the petro-state by mobilizing the social force of Islamist evangelism.[23] The assertion of national sovereignties over the oil economy in the era of OPEC has intensified the violent relations of this racialized geopolitical formation, drawing huge amounts of petrodollars to fuel a regional arms race alongside neoliberal economic reforms, recurrent migration crises, and a regional revival of political Islam following a devastating Cold War against the Arab Left.

While some scholarship in the anthropocene humanities sidelines such geopolitical connections in order to center a critique of anthropocentrism, it is necessary to take seriously how the management of racial and ethnic difference under transnational capitalism was a formative process for the colonial carbon economy's unleashing of four interrelated forces: the planetary geophysical and ecosystemic shifts of climate change; the geographic and communications mobilities of elite cosmopolitanism (globalization's "time-space compression"); the centering of the dollar as the world's reserve currency in oil and arms trades, enabling global financialization; and the dialectic of "secular" authoritarianism and Islamic revival across South and West Asia. Following these intersecting currents instead of anthropocene

discourses that exceptionalize the "climate refugee" requires mapping the death-dealing effects of carbon in relation to its systemic life-regulating forces.[24] Much more work remains to be done to track the dispersed geographic, ecological, and sociopolitical effects of the extraction of oil as the literal and figurative "corpse juice" fueling racial capitalism.[25] In the process, a theory of racial assemblage can help to rearticulate connections between modalities of racial violence (orientalism, settler colonialism, and antiblackness, for example) which only appear discrete due to the manner in which logics of control mask their systemic forms of reproduction.

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NOTES

[1] Julie Sze and Jonathan K. London, "Environmental Justice at the Crossroads," *Sociology Compass* 2/4 (2008): 1332.

[2] Laura Pulido, "A Critical Review of the Methodology of Environmental Racism Research," *Antipode* 28:2 (1996): 142-59.

[3] David Pellow, "Toward a Critical Environmental Justice Studies: Black Lives Matter as an Environmental Justice Challenge," *DuBois Review* 13:2 (2016): <http://www.academia.edu/27800797/TOWARD_A_CRITICAL_ENVIRONMENTAL_JUSTICE_STUDIES_Black_Lives_Matter_as_an_Environmental_Justice_Challenge>

[4] Naomi Klein, 'Let Them Drown,' *London Review of Books* 38:11 (June 2, 2016): <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v38/n11/naomi-klein/let-them-drown>

[5] Junot Díaz, "Apocalypse," *Boston Review* (May 2011). <http://bostonreview.net/junot-diaz-apocalypse-haiti-earthquake>

[6] Arun Saldanha, "Some Principles of Geocommunism," 2013. <http://www.geocritique.org/arun-saldanha-some-principles-of-geocommunism/>

[7] "Ironically, critical discourse about race today is most likely to task itself with identifying a situation as 'racial' in the face of public absence of such recognition." Nikhil Singh, "Racial Formation in an Age of Permanent War," in Daniel Martinez HoSang, Oneka LaBennett, and Laura Pulido, eds., *Racial Formation in the Twenty-First Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012): 286.

[8] Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Opposition, and Crisis in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007): 28.

[9] Singh, "Racial Formation in an Age of Permanent War," 284.

[10] Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*, 244.

[11] Assemblage theory links semiotic expression to embodied relations (on the one hand) and to temporalities of stabilization and deterritorialization (on the other). See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia,* trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1989): 88. On the application of Deleuzean theory to race, see Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007): 209-10, 215-6; Arun Saldanha, "Reontologising Race: The Machinic Geography of Phenotype," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 24:1 (2006): 9-24.

[12] Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* (New York: Pantheon, 2004).

[13] Brian Massumi, "National Enterprise Emergency: Steps toward an Ecology of Powers," *Theory, Culture, and Society* 26:6 (2009): 153-85.

[14] Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977-1978*, trans. Graham Burchell (Houndsmills: Palgrave, 2007): 4-6; Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control," *October* 59 (1992): 3-7.

[15] Jasbir Puar, "Prognosis Time: Toward a Geopolitics of Affect, Debility, and Capacity," *Women and Performance* 19:2 (2009): 161-72, esp. 164-6.

[16] See Seb Franklin, *Control: Digitality as Cultural Logic* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2015).

[17] IPCC AR5, Working Group II, *Climate Change 2014: Impacts, Adaptation, Vulnerability, Part A: Global and Sectoral Aspects* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014): 767.

[18] US Department of Defense, *National Security Implications of Climate-Related Risks and a Changing Climate,* <http://archive.defense.gov/pubs/150724-congressional-report-on-national-implications-of-climate-change.pdf?source=govdelivery> (23 July 2015): 3-4, 8.

[19] Some reports overstated the role of climate change in Syrian migrations. See Jan Selby and Mike Hulme, "Is Climate Change Really to Blame for Syria's Civil War?" *The Guardian* (29 November 2015): <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/nov/29/climate-change-syria-civil-war-prince-charles> Although climate impacts on the agricultural sector likely influenced the neoliberal reforms that fueled domestic opposition to Bashar al-Assad, the proximate causes of the migrations are aerial bombing and urban war. These are the responsibility of Syria, Iran, and Russia and the opposition Islamist militias backed by the US, Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and others. Despite the media obsession, the Islamic State plays a secondary role. See Yassin al-Haj Saleh, "Palestinization of Syrians and the Present World Condition," 2 January 2015, <http://www.yassinhs.com/2015/01/02/forty-four-months-and-fourty-four-years-4-palestinization-of-syrians-and-the-present-world-condition/>

[20] IPCC AR5, Working Group II, *Climate Change* 2014, 771.

[21] The IPCC describes culture as a threatened resource for adaptation and resilience (IPCC AR5, Working Group II, *Climate Change* 2014, 762-6).

[22] Arturo Escobar, "Latin America at a Crossroads," *Cultural Studies* 24:1 (2010): 1-65.

[23] Robert Vitalis, *American Kingdom: Mythmaking on the Saudi Oil Frontier* (Stanford and London: Stanford University Press, 2006); Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (London: Verso, 2011); Deepa Kumar, *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014).

[24] On the "bio-necro collaboration," see further Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2007): 35; Neel Ahuja, *Bioinsecurities: Disease Interventions, Empire, and the Government of Species* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2016): xi-xiii.

[25] Reza Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials* (Melbourne: re.press, 2008): 27.