FROM CLIMATE COLONIALITY TO PLURIVERSALIZING DEMOCRACY

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Is it too late for climate justice? For the environmental justice scholar Kyle Whyte[1], the damning verdict is yes. Whyte's perspective reminds us of an inconvenient truth. As an enrolled member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, a federally recognized tribe located in Oklahoma, he points out a central contradiction in our attempts to address the climate crisis: interventions to achieve climate justice require healthy relationships between peoples and the land. Since these relationships have been shredded by centuries of colonialism and extractivism, any large-scale climate policy risks further aggravating existing injustices, causing further devastation, particularly to Indigenous Peoples.

If we take this problem seriously, what does this mean for our understanding of democracy and climate change? I argue that our democratic responses to climate change have been limited by ignoring the knowledges of those most affected and most fervently struggling against socio-ecological destruction. These are Indigenous and other peoples fighting for sovereignty over their lands, their cultures, and their livelihoods. It is also those who are affected by floods, food insecurities, droughts, and wars

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exacerbating socioecological pressures. To understand how narrow the knowledge is that informs most existing democratic systems, we need nothing short of an epistemic revolution. We need to move from a narrow epistemic "monoculture of the mind," as Vandana Shiva (2000) calls it, to a pluriversal democracy, in which diverse ways of knowing are the basis for collective decision-making.

Pluriversalizing democracy is therefore a movement, a seed, a growing epistemic mycelium that seeks to change the debate on climate change. Instead of considering climate change primarily through the lens of carbon emissions, we need to understand our current situation as one of "climate coloniality" (Sultana, 2022). This means we are not only trapped in runaway heating of the planet, but also in a way of thinking about politics that is epistemologically reductionist and prone to reproducing the very problems that led to the current intersecting crises in the first place. To address this, we need pluriversal ways of thinking, which means centering local, indigenous, and feminist knowledges. From this pluriversality a climate politics can emerge that is based on "planet repairs," where ecological considerations are shaped by repair and reparations for the harm done through colonialism, patriarchy, and capitalism. Reestablishing sovereignty and democratic ownership of peoples over their lands, knowledges, and means of production is a prerequisite for achieving planet repairs, and with that, climate justice.

Does such an approach ask for too much? If societies are unable to agree on adequate measures to mitigate climate change, how can we agree on much more far-reaching demands, such as dealing with legacies of colonialism and symmetrically integrating indigenous knowledge systems? This question points to the important problem of how to form democratic majorities for radical climate action. However, limiting climate politics to emissions reduction risks leaving intact the very socioeconomic structures at the root of the climate crisis. More importantly, a carbon-reductionist approach is prone to ignoring those most affected by the climate crisis, who are currently most actively resisting the ever-increasing expansion of fossil fuel projects and other forms of destructive extraction.

To achieve climate justice would mean to center healthy relationships with those most affected by and in direct confrontation with fossil fuel extractivism. As Whyte (2020) has argued, these healthy relationships

need to entail consent, trust, accountability, and reciprocity. In the absence of such healthy relationship parameters, large-scale climate interventions will inevitably result in Black, Indigenous, and people of color experiencing further injustices. That is why the quest for climate justice is inextricably linked to the experiences of those who are already affected by environmental injustices. For example, this can take the form of environmental racism, where people racialized as non-white live in the most polluted areas, or they are driven away from the lands on which their livelihoods depend through land grabs for pipelines, mines, and plantations. Frequently these expropriations are carried out in the name of environmental protection. Interventions such as rewilding, decarbonization, and economic transition often limit peoples' access to ancestral lands, increase the financialization of nature, and are enforced through top-down decision-making. "Conservation tourism" can be part of the problem too. One case in point is the forced displacement of and disregard for the rights of the Indigenous Maasai people in the construction of high-end eco-tourism resorts in Tanzania and Kenya.

We have therefore already crossed what Whyte (2020) calls a "relational tipping point." This means that it is too late to repair the relations with and between marginalized people of various ethnic backgrounds in different parts of the world. At the same time, such repaired relationships are necessary to avoid further disenfranchisement and violence from climate interventions. This is particularly true for Indigenous Peoples and those relying on the fragile ecosystems that fossil fuel-based capitalism has been destroying over the past centuries.

What could a democratic response to this devastating diagnosis look like? In the following, I will outline why we need to recognize our current political and historical condition as one of climate coloniality. I will argue that decolonial and pluriversal knowledges are necessary preconditions for democratic climate action. Based on this diversification of knowledge, "planet repairs" and climate reparations are vital steps to confront climate coloniality. Failing to take these perspectives seriously means that climate action is prone to be part of the problem it tries to solve. Rather than a backward-looking exercise, this would be a pathway towards future-oriented democratic renewal — local, global, and planetary.

Why do we need to take climate coloniality seriously when thinking about democratic responses to multidimensional socio-ecological crises? The simple answer is that not taking an explicitly anti-colonial perspective means one is likely to perpetuate colonialism's enduring epistemic and material violence. Amnesia about colonial legacies and continuities takes different forms. Many proposals to address climate change, for example, through a "just transition" that focuses on creating "green jobs" by retraining fossil fuel workers, are largely oblivious of the histories of environmental destruction. This means that they frequently fail to grasp the political dimensions of how ecological destruction came about, and thereby fail to identify the systems that caused them. Most accounts of anthropogenic climate change focus on Europe's Industrial Revolution of the 19th century. What this perspective often neglects is to account for colonialism, the political project that produced the global economic structure, its railways, pipelines, supply chains, dispossessions of indigenous lands, and the cheap labor that fueled the Industrial Revolution. The extraction of some of the Industrial Revolution's most important — and most environmentally destructive — commodities, such as sugar, cotton, coffee, tea, tobacco, gold, rubber, and oil, was facilitated by imperial violence.

Colonialism has had many meanings and iterations throughout history. (Post)colonial regimes continue to shape former colonizer and colonized societies. For instance, the monetary policies of some former French colonies in West Africa are still largely determined in Paris. Schooling in Malawi is largely in English, meaning literacy levels in both the vernacular and the old colonial language remain low (see Cochrane, 2023). At the same time, colonialism also refers to a wide range of phenomena that structure the world today: Eurocentric epistemologies, economic exploitation, psychological alienation, ethno-nationalist categories, and the domination of human and more-than-human nature. Beginning in the 15th century, European colonialism relied on slavery and forced labor, resource extraction, industrial pollution, land grabbing, and degradation of social and ecological systems through plantation agriculture. Many ownership structures, trade relations, and legal arrangements that emerged

during that time continue to shape the global economy today. These histories continue in the destructive externalities of economic production, for example toxic shipbreaking in Bangladesh and the petrochemically polluted so-called Cancer Alley that stretches through predominantly Black neighborhoods in Louisiana.

Today's economic extractivism also frequently exacerbates gender inequalities. For example, compensation for the land used for planting sugar cane and building the East African Crude Oil Pipeline (EACOP) in Uganda is often only paid to men. This discriminatory distribution of money increases the power of men in the home. As a result, substance abuse and domestic violence often increases, and many men abandon their rural families for a new life in the city. Similarly, well-meaning conservation efforts on a mission to "protect nature" have espoused colonial logics of expropriation, which result in violence against Indigenous Peoples. Many national parks in Africa were created by driving out indigenous populations to create the pristine nature sought by white hunting parties. This practice continues today in the luxury wildlife estates in Kenya's Maasai Mara and South Africa's Kruger National Park (see Mbaria and Ogada, 2016). Even organizations with millions-strong support bases such as the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) are complicit in such conservation violence. They have equipped rangers with training and weapons that have been used to beat up, sexually assault, and kill people living close to national parks. One such case of human rights violations concerns the Baka people in the Republic of the Congo, abuse that the youth activist group What the F**k World Wildlife Foundation (WTF WWF) has drawn attention to by occupying the WWF's London headquarters in 2021 (WTFWWF, n.d.).

Pushing out Indigenous Peoples from their ancestral lands in the name of protecting nature is a colonial continuity in climate politics today. Because the complicity of mainstream environmental organizations in these processes is largely unknown to the middle-class white people that make up the majority of their fee-paying members, there is little incentive to face up to the widely documented complicity of conservation efforts in violating Indigenous Peoples' rights. As a result, Indigenous Peoples are often excluded from the demos, eroding the possibility of democracy on

the ground. Only by taking colonial histories and their lasting impact on human-ecological relations seriously can we grasp these logics. Without centering the self-determination of Indigenous Peoples, environmental and climate interventions are likely to further disempower those groups most affected by ecological destruction. This in turn renders collaborative stewardship of the Earth's remaining biodiversity impossible. This insight is key to understanding the underlying causes but also the possibility of democratic responses to the climate crisis.

Aptly summarizing these arguments, the geographer Farhana Sultana (2022) suggests that the entanglements of colonial, patriarchal, and capitalist dynamics in the transformation of the planet constitute our current moment as one of "climate coloniality." The plantation and the mine, infused with forced, enslaved, and exploited labor, are the forms of human-nature configuration that mark our age. They are the root causes of the current accelerating mass extinction, at a breathtaking rate of up to 150 species every day. The dominant focus on carbon emissions and the depoliticizing language of benchmarks, contributions, and assessments in UN climate negotiations obfuscate the political realities that have created the energy-, land- and pollution-intensive modes of production and consumption at the heart of the crisis.

What is frequently missing in policymaking at local, national, and global levels is both the experiences and the agency of the billions of people who live through the devastating effects of extractivism. Their perspectives are vital to understanding how, across the Global South, resource wealth from their territories is funneled towards multinational corporations. This process is often supported by post-colonial elites who have simply taken over as the enablers and beneficiaries of the exploitation of minerals, agricultural products, and people's cheap labor during colonialism. Confronting climate coloniality means taking seriously how power — colonial and otherwise — shapes the way we tell our human-ecological history. This is important for a democratic response to the climate crisis since many proposals for planetary and global interventions, from carbon-offsetting to geo-engineering, risk perpetuating colonial logics of decision-making. They often fail to consider those most affected and

whose territories are being intervened in, let alone establish their consent and participation. This means that any attempt at "planetary democracy" is prone to perpetuate colonial logics if it is not based on a reckoning with (post)colonial histories.

If we have passed the relational tipping point, the question of whether "we" will make it "on time," reveals itself to be a highly exclusive one. Many people whose social and ecological histories have been shaped by colonialism and its enduring economic patterns are not "at risk" of experiencing some future ecological and societal collapse, as many in the Global North fear. Instead, they have been living in and resisting socio-ecological destruction for centuries. What these people have faced due to ecological colonialism — land expropriation, mass pollution, biodiversity loss, water shortages, desertification, droughts, famines, species extinction — is similar to what many peoples around the world are already experiencing, and will increasingly face, due to climate change.

This realization urges us to rethink basic assumptions about democracy. We need to build upon theory from the South, taking the real experiences of ecological devastation as the starting point for our democratic thinking, rather than treating it merely as a "policy issue" or as a distant threat. Confronting climate coloniality means bringing people from the margins into the centers of political decision-making. It requires that we interrogate the way certain peoples, and the ecosystems their survival depends on, have been structurally excluded from the possibilities of democratic futures. Pluriversalizing the knowledge systems democracies rely on is essential to meet this epochal challenge.

Pluriversalizing Democracy

How can we gain a deeper understanding of what our condition of climate coloniality means for the (im)possibilities of democratic futures? Historically, democracy has gained power to transform societies at moments when the definition of the demos was expanded. This was true when suffrage was extended to those without property, to women, and to those discriminated against based on racialized and anti-Black categorizations.

For democracies stuck in systems defined by polarization and elite capture, we can learn from this history that we need to radically extend suffrage and representation to confront the climate crisis. This should include enfranchising (climate) refugees and teenagers, who have the highest stakes in today's ecological decision-making. It should also involve extending legal standing, rights, and representation to non-human entities, such as rivers, forests, glaciers, and ecosystems. This has been attempted by the Bolivian Law of the Rights of Mother Earth, which has been championed by grassroots peasant-indigenous organizations. The original ecocentric proposal stipulated that whenever there was a conflict of interest, the protection of Mother Earth should prevail. Unfortunately, the Bolivian government only adopted a watered-down and largely ineffective version of the law and the Mother Earth Ombudsman it promised to create twelve years ago still does not exist (see Muños, 2023). Climate movements are demanding the institution of local, national, and global Climate Citizens' Assemblies with real decision-making powers. Hundreds of climate assemblies have already been run at municipal, national, and civil society levels, which demonstrates the enormous appetite for such democratic experiments.

While these are all important initiatives, they are not in themselves sufficient to deal with the root causes of climate coloniality. They leave intact the institutional pillars of capitalist nation-states, including, importantly, their ontological and epistemological underpinnings. As long as demands to "protect nature" or to "rewild" the planet exclude the most marginalized, such as those living in legal grey zones, in fragile ecosystems, and on land that does not "belong" to them according to the logic of private property, these well-intentioned calls to action simply perpetuate the same colonialist patterns. The cognitive and normative thinking that has produced structures that have pushed humankind and other species to a precipice, and many humans and species beyond it, cannot provide adequate tools with which to dismantle these same structures. Black feminist philosopher Audre Lorde's famous claim that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" challenges us to think about which tools — epistemic and political — are suitable to confront climate coloniality, and which ones are prone to reproduce its logics. Colonial logics are often infused by a universalist supremacy, i.e., that one language,

political system, religion, or economic form should dominate. Therefore, we need what anthropologist Arturo Escobar (2020) calls a "pluriversal politics" — meaning that frequently excluded experiences, worldviews, and knowledges should take center state. In a world of "Europatriarchal" (Salami, 2020) racial capitalism, this then would be the knowledge of women, Indigenous Peoples, grassroots movements, and spiritual traditions, especially on questions of (re)production, care, conviviality, and multi-species justice.

A democratic and decolonizing response to climate coloniality requires radical imagination and politics that center both the histories of loss, expropriation, and violence, and the practices of resistance, resilience, and transnational collaborations. This means unsettling the universalist moral and sociological assumptions that underly dominant climate discourses. Among the most salient reductionist dualisms these discourses engender are that of nature/culture, thinking/feeling, modern/traditional. Take, for example, the five strands of the "Great Leap" proposed by the 2022 Club of Rome Report *Earth for All: A Survival Guide for Humanity*: poverty, inequality, gender, food, and energy. While acknowledging some of its merits, environmentalist Ashish Kothari argues that the report is "curiously silent on the deep cultural and spiritual revolutions required and the pluriverse of cosmologies available for this" (Club of Rome, 2022). This points to the required epistemic transformations towards pluriversality that we need to decolonize climate coloniality.

From this perspective it becomes clear that beneath the alleged novelty of green politics lie epistemological and ontological continuities that must be uprooted to achieve a truly democratic and liberatory response to the climate crisis. As Sultana (2022, p. 7) succinctly puts it: "Liberation comes from destroying colonialism's impact on lands, bodies, and psyches to overcome the apocalypse that continues to be coloniality — i.e., moving from alienation and dehumanization to self-realization in order to decolonize colonial traumas." This means that a politics of liberation needs to be epistemological and discursive as well as material, embodied, and political. At the same time, these terms, like the language we use to express them, are limited tools which need to be complemented by sensemaking from other ways of worldmaking.

For example, the campaign "Stop the Maangamizi: We Charge Ecocide/Genocide" uses the Swahili word *Maangamizi* to draw attention to the interlocking effects of colonial nation building, environmental destruction, and racialized violence (Stop the Maangamizi, n.d.). Similarly, the genocide of the Herero and Nama by the Germans in Namibia or that of the Kikuyu by the British in Kenya were intimately tied to the destruction of ecosystems through plantation agriculture, mining, and pollution. These logics and effects still haunt the politics and everyday lives of postcolonial states across the continent of Africa today. Pluriversalizing democracy means democratizing the knowledges at the basis of collective decision-making and centering "herstories" and "ourstories" — the frequently neglected histories of women and grassroots communities, those who have been most affected by the double movement of ecological and political domination. This epistemic pluriversalization is a necessary requirement for a democratic politics of planetary repair.

Repairing Planet and Politics

One of the most visceral manifestations of today's intersecting crises are the proliferating colonial-ecological wounds. From deadly air pollution and toxic uranium mines, to leaking pipelines and the epidemic of sexual violence that often accompanies resource extraction, our present condition requires responses beyond the climate politics produced by the Europatriarchal (Salami, 2020), i.e., Eurocentric and patriarchal, epistemological and economic status quo. What is needed is a feminist repair of relationships. We need to repair relationships to our traumatized bodies, to our close and distant kin, the human and more-than-human, to the land, and to the collective ourstories of resistance against all that has propelled us into the age of extinction.

The fight for reparations for enslavement and colonialism has been an ongoing struggle for centuries. However, the climate crisis reveals why combining reparations and climate action might be a political project that provides a rallying point across the fractures of progressive politics. In his recent book *Reconsidering Reparations*, Olúfémi Táíwò (2022) argues that climate reparations are necessary not only to prevent backsliding of gains

made by people of color in the US since the Civil Rights Movement, but they are also conducive to revitalizing communities, to improving welfare provisions, and to establishing democratic bodies where spending decisions can reestablish local agency for a just ecological transition.

The epochal significance of both the past injustices of colonialism and the future injustices of climate change means that combining the two perspectives opens up a political vision at a scale that might be able to meet the magnitude of the climate crisis. This is because planet repairs advocated for by leading reparationists, such as Esther Stanford-Xosei and Kofi Mawuli Klu, require us to fundamentally reshape the cognitive, economic, spiritual, and ecological relations of our world. While not all share this broad view, ideas in the field of climate reparations are gaining increasing traction: planet repairs, ecocide trials, climate debt cancellation, abolition ecology, the Land Back campaign to reestablish indigenous sovereignty, and a truth and reconciliation commission for the destruction of the climate are just some examples. They are all instances of the growing momentum of locally grounded and planetarily oriented efforts for ecological decolonization (see Müller and Cochrane, 2024). They are efforts "to heal colonial wounds everywhere" (Sultana, 2022, p. 7), which require new forms of democratic reckoning with the injustices of the past and the present.

Grassroots movements (very broadly understood) are crucial to bringing topics such as those discussed in this essay to public attention, as well as to shifting the "Overton window", i.e., the space of what is politically thinkable and possible. As Deva Woodly's (2021) account of the Movement for Black Lives demonstrates, grassroots movements are not merely conducive to democratic renewal, they are a democratic necessity. Movements are the loci of production of political philosophies and theories grounded in struggle, constantly pushed to evolve by those excluded by society. In these frictions, new forms of political thinking and action emerge. While they are not immune from reproducing the very pathologies they seek to overcome, self-reflective movements harbor the potential to transform the meaning of the very terms of democratic politics, such as sovereignty, representation, and freedom. Centering experiences of resistance is also necessary for healing relationships with peoples shaped by histories of imperial violence, in colonizing and colonized societies alike.

Healing and repair of planet and politics requires a multi-scalar and multi-sensual approach such as that embodied in the tricontinental vision of *ubuntupachavidya* advocated by Extinction Rebellion's Internationalist Solidarity Network (XRISN, n.d.). This approach combines the shared humanity of the Southern African concept of *ubuntu*, the Mother Earth orientation of the Abya Yalan (Latin American) concept of *pachamama*, and the comprehensive knowledge encapsulated in the South Asian concept of *vidya*. Taking the time to really understand such traditions of knowing and doing is in itself an exercise of epistemological resistance and creativity that can reshape the terms by which we understand our shifting position in the web of life.

Unlearning the ways we have looked at the world thus far and relearning to connect to such traditions of knowledge is certainly a challenge for many and requires long-term commitment, possibly for life. This commitment to unlearn and relearn is the opposite of the allegedly quick technofixes of carbon pricing, carbon capture, and geoengineering, which leave our cognitive, economic, and political structures untouched. As with any diverse constituency, different local and indigenous communities will disagree over what concepts and cosmologies are most useful to break the deadly cycles of climate coloniality. However, making space for and listening deeply to these debates is not an insurmountable problem but rather part of the necessary process of democratic renewal.

Rallying around the pioneering work of movements for planetary, relational, and reparatory justice could bolster new approaches that shatter the destructive stranglehold of Europatriarchal universalism and extractive fossil capitalism on democratic politics. This is a prerequisite for a truly just transition that experiments with new modes of political and (more-than-)human relationships. Confronting climate coloniality is a promising pathway to think and practice how to do that, and is essential to the future of democracy.

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