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Queering the Climate Crisis

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Introduction

Thirty-four years elapsed between climatologist James Hansen's 1988 testimony to the United States Congress, alerting the world 'with 99 percent confidence' that global warming was underway, and the 2022 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report pleading that 'It's "now or never"' for nations to act to stave off the worst effects of climate change (U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources 1988; IPCC 2023). United Nations (UN) Secretary-General António Guterres succinctly captured the severity of the emergency in declaring:

> The jury has reached a verdict. And it is damning. This report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change is a litany of broken climate promises. It is a file of shame, cataloguing the empty pledges that put us firmly on track towards an unliveable world.
>
> We are on a fast track to climate disaster. Major cities under water. Unprecedented heatwaves. Terrifying storms. Widespread water shortages. The extinction of a million species of plants and animals. This is not fiction or exaggeration. It is what science tells us will result from our current energy policies. (*UN Press* 2022)

The 'litany of broken climate promises' and 'empty pledges' refers to the shortcomings of the most significant international climate efforts to date,

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including the 1992 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and its annual Conference of the Parties (COP) meetings, the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, and the 2015 Paris Agreement, which all have failed to achieve 'stabilization of greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system' (UNFCCC 1992). Despite valiant efforts by climate researchers, activists, international and local non-governmental organizations, and concerned individuals worldwide to enact policy changes to address this existential threat, shamefully little substantive action has been undertaken to mitigate the human drivers of the climate crisis.

Multilateral international negotiations are notoriously long and complex, but the threat of climate change is unique among global challenges that should spur swift and effective action. The crisis threatens the entire planet, leaving no one fully immune to its consequences. Even the most optimistic projections still leave us with a dangerously destabilized climate and perilous future (Kemp et al. 2022; Wright and Nyberg 2015; Dosio et al. 2018). Presumably, everyone would be deeply invested in preventing a climate catastrophe that would render vast areas of the Earth inhospitable.

And yet, those best positioned to take action and enact the necessary changes in energy investment and climate policy do not exhibit a sense of urgency or concern for these forecasts. While powerful nations and fossil fuel companies have made grandiose public statements about their commitment to sustainability and finding climate solutions, they have spent the last three decades not only eschewing any meaningful climate action but also 'actively fighting against sustainability through actions, funding, and lobbying' while further investing in the fossil fuels driving the climate crisis—a tactic researchers (Parafiniuk and Smith, 2019; Li et al. 2022) refer to as 'green gilding'. In other words, humanity's collective inability to enact effective climate action is due largely to the deliberate actions of powerful special interests.

It is baffling that anyone would intentionally sabotage effective climate responses as the crisis affects everyone. Yet, climate justice reminds us that climate change will not affect everyone equally. Indeed, the countries, corporations, and individuals that have amassed disproportionate wealth from emitting large amounts of greenhouse gases are the best resourced to adapt to its impacts. Conversely, those least culpable for the climate crisis find themselves at the forefront of its most devastating effects while lacking the financial and technological means to effectively adapt (Thomas et al. 2019).

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Unsurprisingly, climate-vulnerable peoples are often located in so-called *sacrifice zones*, sites of concentrated environmental harms resulting from the relentless growth from carbon capitalism, the fossil-fuel-driven global economy (Juskus 2023; Gonzalez 2021b). At the same time, the resource-rich elite responsible for the climate crisis derive their power by exploiting these communities and regions through carbon capitalism. These carbon capitalists thus have no true incentive to support any climate action that would affect their power. For example, the fossil fuel industry alone earned nearly USD 3 billion per day in profits from 1970 to 2022, an impossibly high number for any conceivable market incentive to match (Verbruggen 2022). Instead, carbon capitalists have used their disproportionate wealth and power to interject themselves into climate negotiations, spread climate disinformation, further invest in carbon-emitting activities, and generally avoid accountability.

Carbon capitalists, driven by the relentless pursuit of profit through carbon-emitting activities, have not only exacerbated the climate crisis but also entrenched carbon capitalism as the dominant global economic and ideological system, assuring themselves a role in climate change discourse and leverage to obstruct meaningful climate action for decades and further invest in fossil fuel. This dynamic persists largely due to our collective investment in carbon capitalism and its ideological frameworks. Consequently, effective climate justice will remain elusive so long as we continue to operate within the constraints of carbon capitalism.

This chapter utilises queer theory to analyse climate change discourse, seeking to uncover how the underlying ideologies of carbon capitalism reinforce existing power structures and impede effective climate action (Acadia 2021). Although primarily rooted in the study of sex and sexuality, queer theory can function more broadly as an intersectional lens that challenges conventional understandings and reveals the constructed nature of social norms. In turn, queer theory allows us to see how the ideological basis of carbon capitalism obstructs the pursuit of climate justice and contributes to broader systemic injustice.

Following a brief explanation of queer theory, this chapter outlines the fundamental conflict of interests between carbon capitalists and global well-being. Next, it traces the origins of the climate crisis to the rise of European imperialism and settler colonialism, illustrating how these processes laid the material and ideological groundwork of carbon capitalism and the ensuing climate crisis. The chapter then examines the means by which

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carbon capitalists present themselves as good-faith actors in climate change discussions, while actively hiding their efforts to undermine international climate action. It concludes with a view towards the future, inviting us to examine the interconnectedness of climate injustice, homophobia, and other forms of oppression, and proposes the development of a climate-resilient society rooted in cooperation, collective ownership, and the public good.

What Is Meant by 'Queer'

The term 'queer' has a complex history, with multiple meanings and uses over time. Queer originally was used to describe something as strange, odd, peculiar, or eccentric. It later gained a connotation of sexual deviance, frequently used as a pejorative against people who fell outside of conventional understandings of heterosexuality and binary gender expression, such as lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgender people (LGBTQ), or those who were perceived to be so (Robertson 2002; Robb 2005). By the late 1980s, activists began to reclaim the word as a deliberately provocative and politically radical alternative to more assimilationist branches of the LGBTQ community (Sycamore 2008).

Today, queer is recognized in style guides as the most inclusive and respectful language to describe a broad range of sexual identities and gender expression. In the hands of academics, most notably postmodernists and feminist theorists concerned with how power operates in normative codes and normalizing practices, queer became a lens used to examine and critique society's definitions of gender and sexuality, with the goal of revealing the social and power structures at play in human society (Jones 2023). From this, queer theory emerged as an interdisciplinary field intended to 'make strange'—that is, to disrupt, destabilize, deconstruct—effectively to queer what is considered normal, commonplace, or the 'natural order of things' (Peterson 2014).

There is a small but growing body of scholarship and research that examines the intersections of climate change and queerness. This literature predominantly engages 'queer' as an identity category: as a climate-vulnerable population, as environmentalists, or as practitioners of climate adaptation strategies. More research is undeniably needed to better understand how climate change will impact LGBTQ people specifically, given that climate change is known to exacerbate the marginalization of already vulnerable

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communities such as sexual and gender minorities (Dalton 2023; Rice, Long, and Levenda 2022). Yet, queerness can also help in understanding the *why* of climate change: why, for example, certain populations have greater climate risk than others.

This chapter uses the verb form of 'queer' as understood by queer theorists. While sex and sexuality are central to queer theory's history, it engages 'a range of topics including epistemology, ecology, geography, temporality, power, and discourse' (Acadia 2021). Accordingly, this chapter employs queer theory to interrogate climate change discourse in a manner that extends beyond a singular focus on the experiences of 'queered' populations—individuals who are socially constructed as 'strange' or 'other' (including sexual and gender minorities, non-white people, Indigenous communities, and disabled individuals) when confronting climate change. Instead, this chapter utilises queer theory's critical interpretive lens to challenge assumptions within climate change discourse and proposed actions, and further unpack the ways in which power operates through those assumptions (Acadia 2021).

Carbon Capitalists versus the World: We Are Not All in This Together

In *The Sacrifice Zones of Carbon Capitalism: Race, Expendability, and Loss and Damage*, environmental law professor Carmen Gonzalez explains the observed indifference to the plight of the world's most vulnerable by exploring the intersection of *racial capitalism*, the symbiotic relationship between racism and capitalism, and *carbon capitalism*, a distinct and historically unique manifestation of capital accumulation and social reproduction as a global phenomenon driven by, and dependent on, the significant and unequal use of fossil fuels (Robinson 2000; Gonzalez 2021b; Di Muzio 2015). Gonzalez critiques the ways in which these systems operate to produce expendable people and expendable geographic locations through practices that systematically subordinate persons classified as non-white. 'While everyone is vulnerable to climate change,' she argues, 'those who occupy the sacrifice zones of racial capitalism are particularly susceptible to harm due to their classification as sub-human, expendable, and disposable' (Gonzalez 2021b).

Race alone does not account for who is rendered expendable and which regions bear the burdens of capitalism. As environmental historian Jason Moore notes, 'capitalism was built upon the subordination and exploitation of

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most of the world's people, including "indigenous peoples, enslaved Africans, nearly all women, and even many white-skinned men (Slavs, Jews, and the Irish)"' (Moore 2016). Thus, we observe that the failure of carbon capitalists to account for the needs of the world's most vulnerable populations is congruent with a capitalistic devaluation of them as disposable sub-humans living in expendable states and locations in the sacrifice zones. The failure to take meaningful action on climate change, then, can be framed as an issue of power—the outsized power that carbon capitalists wield in climate change discourse and governing bodies. 'It is power, in other words, that needs to be confronted and transformed' in the quest for climate justice (Newell et al. 2021).

Carbon capitalists, derivatively, are those entities who attain disproportionate wealth, power, and influence through the system of carbon capitalism, and who wield their dominance to push for the uninterrupted continuation of this system, regardless of the ecological consequences. These are the most powerful countries, corporations, industry trade groups, and inordinately wealthy individuals with vested interests in maintaining the fossil-fuel-driven capitalist world economy. Some of the most obvious entities include the fossil fuel companies themselves; 'energy superpowers' such as the US, the world's top oil and natural gas producer whose already disconcertingly (record) high production numbers (13.4 million barrels per day for the US as of 2023) are forecast to only continue their unabating rise to new record highs (U.S. Energy Information Administration 2025; Lefebvre 2023; French, DeKeyserling, and Ameen 2023); petrostates such as Saudi Arabia who actively work to censor the scientific findings of international climate bodies and push false technological solutions to delay climate action (Rowlatt and Gerken 2021; Michaelson and Greenfield 2022b); industries predicated on fossil fuel consumption such as the transportation sector and electric utilities; and powerful shareholders, to name a few (Williams et al. 2022; Brulle 2023).

The majority of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions can be traced to fossil fuels sourced from a relatively small number of producers, who also happen to be some of the most dedicated proponents of maintaining the carbon capitalist system (Heede 2014). Nevertheless, neither direct involvement in nor immediate adjacency to the fossil fuel industry is required to merit the label of carbon capitalist, for it is the 'magnitude and universalization of capital accumulation' on a vast scale made possible only through the 'radically unequal access' to 'abundant, affordable and accessible fossil fuels' that

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is the defining quality of carbon capitalism (Di Muzio 2015). Thus, carbon capitalists can be defined more broadly as the predominant proprietors of this system who exert control over and seize the greatest portion of the surplus capacity to 'produce, consume, and exchange' afforded by the fossil-fuel-driven global economy (Di Muzio 2015).

Queering the Origins of the Climate Crisis

The pursuit of wealth and power has been a major driving force behind much of human history, shaping societies and influencing the course of nations. In the European context, this quest for resources and dominance gave rise to imperialism and settler colonialism, setting a path towards capitalism, industrialization, and the climate crisis we grapple with today. The following section examines this process, using queer theory to identify how European imperialism and settler colonialism established the material and ideological foundations of carbon capitalism.

Ideological Underpinnings of Western Culture

This section begins with a discussion of some of the most enduring ideological underpinnings of western thought and culture that motivated European colonial powers, and which continue to inform the behaviours of carbon capitalists today. As ecofeminist scholar Greta Gaard explains in 'Toward a Queer Ecofeminism', the ideological framework of western culture is based on 'dualisms, value-hierarchical thinking, and a logic of domination' (Gaard 1997). This dualistic worldview allows for quick organization of the world: paired concepts simultaneously derive meaning and importance from their contrast, immediately indicating their place along an axis of 'valued' and 'valueless', 'dominated' and 'subordinated' (Gaard 1997; Bowmani 2021). Core to the western worldview are features like value, hierarchy, and domination which philosopher Val Plumwood describes as the 'master model' identity (Plumwood 1993). A distinct western identity thus emerged as Europeans encountered lands, cultures, and people different from their own and sought to make sense of the world and their place within it.

This worldview can be characterized as being particularly concerned with categorizing the world into subject–object relationships. In such a view,

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human beings may be imagined as either 'subjects' (active, with agency to act out its will) or 'objects' (passive, without agency or will). Such value-based hierarchical thinking interprets all differences as inherently significant, rather than as natural expressions of a diverse world. Consequently, western thought can be seen to elevate one element with value and subjectivity, while simultaneously devaluing and objectifying its counterpart.

Interestingly, this process does not render the devalued and objectified as undesirable; indeed, within the western logic, objectification provides a justification for the subject to dominate the object, to make use of the object according to the subject's will. Devaluation, too, creates space for the subject to further exert its power and control over the object, as exemplified in the labour theory of property, a fundamental concept of modern property law, which asserts that an unowned resource may 'naturally' become a subject's property through the subject's 'mixing of labor' (Locke and Goldie 1999). This particular belief was used by Europeans to violently displace Indigenous peoples from lands in North America and throughout the world (Murray 2022). Relatedly, devalued objects are essential to capitalism's endless quest for cheap energy, cheap food, cheap raw materials, and cheap labour power (Moore 2016).

This subject–object relational dynamic is apparent in various dichotomies commonly found in western thought. For instance, the binary of human–nature or human–environment implies that humans are separate from nature or the environment, leading to the eventual conclusion that 'man and nature are two things, and man is master' (White 1967). Because differences are seen as signifiers of value in the western worldview, value and subjectivity are assigned to humans and stripped from nature/the environment in order to establish the appropriate dynamics of dominance. Consequently, human beings are regarded as subjects capable of exerting their will upon the object of the environment, while the environment—devoid of inherent value beyond serving as a platform for the subject's exercise of power—is left susceptible to unrestrained exploitation and deterioration.

As Europeans encountered peoples beyond the Eurasian peninsula during the so-called Age of Discovery, phenotypical and cultural differences too fell victim to this framework of value-laden hierarchy, described by sociologist Aníbal Quijano as the 'coloniality of power' (Quijano and Ennis 2000; Quijano 2007). Scholars have expanded the concept of 'coloniality of power' to include interlocking systems of oppression such

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as core–periphery, male–female, Christian–non-Christian, European–non-European, heterosexual–homosexual, and western–non-western knowledge (Grosfoguel 2006). Gender, for example, is treated similarly in western thought. The distillation of gender variation into a man–woman or male–female binary gives rise to the western categorizations of a male subject and female object, and defines the power relations between them (Gaard 1997). We see this manifested in the ongoing inequity that people who are classified as women and female endure, such as reproductive coercion, gender-based violence, exclusion from decision-making, and women's devalued and often unpaid labour. Indeed, women's unpaid labour is so undervalued globally that a 2020 Oxfam analysis estimated that 'women's unpaid care work alone is adding value to the economy to the tune of at least $10.8 trillion a year, a figure three times larger than the tech industry'—and yet, this contribution is not factored into calculations of gross domestic product (GDP) and 'rarely factors into other measures of economic growth' (Coffey et al. 2020; Wezerek and Ghodsee 2020).

Religion played and continues to serve a crucial role in forming these value-hierarchies and dualisms as well. Christian dogma teaches that 'it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends' and has led to western society adopting a dysfunctional relationship with the environment (White 1967). As Europeans encountered people who were not Christian, the Christian–heathen (or Christian–non-Christian) dichotomy was employed—for example, in the infamous papal bulls of the fifteenth century—to justify European imperialism and settler-colonization of non-Christian lands (Wolfe 2006).

Despite the near ubiquity of western thought throughout the modern world, these value-hierarchical dualisms are not a 'natural', 'inevitable', 'logical', or even 'universal' pattern of human experience. Instead, the normative pressure they exert on contemporary thinking is the result of European violence and domination, carried out under the 'civilizing' mission of European imperialism and settler colonialism and which 'continues to animate present legal norms' (Otto 2022). The deliberate suppression, and eradication of non-European, non-Christian, and non-western worldviews and practices created the illusion that the settler-colonial impulse to conquer is a universal compulsion. The constant reinforcement of western thought through international institutions and policies further normalizes this belief (Wellman 2021). These practices, and their resulting violence enacted upon people and the planet, are discussed in the next section.

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From European Imperialism to Carbon Capitalism

European imperialism and colonialism have been integral to the development and expansion of carbon capitalism. At the heart of European imperialism was a quest for power, specifically the accumulation of wealth in the form of raw materials (for example, timber and sugar cane), land (which contained raw materials), luxury goods (such as coffee and vanilla), and cheap labour (from enslaved and colonized people) to transform raw materials into valuable goods for the empire. The desire for increased wealth and power spurred European nations to establish colonies across the globe. In some cases, this pursuit of power led to settler colonialism, a distinct form of permanent occupation for Indigenous peoples, namely in the settler-colonial states of the US, Canada, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand (Wolfe 2006; Velednitsky, Hughes, and Machold 2020; Di Muzio 2015). In many other instances, Europeans established just enough of a colonial presence to extract resources—in the form of raw materials or people—to take back to the imperial centre.

The colonization of the Americas and the transatlantic slave trade in particular laid the groundwork for capitalism, a system rooted in extraction, accumulation by dispossession, and white supremacy (Davis and Todd 2017; Yusoff 2018; Fraser and Jaeggi 2018). The rise of capitalism allowed for private enterprise and the accumulation of wealth, which incentivized rapid development that was further spurred by the Industrial Revolution. The land, labour, and capital of colonized and enslaved peoples powered the Industrial Revolution—the appropriation of Indigenous lands in the Americas, the extraction of raw materials and minerals from these lands, and the importation of enslaved Africans to toil in the sugar and cotton plantations (Gonzalez 2021b). Displacement, slavery, and genocide were thus central to the projects of European colonialism, settler colonialism, and the birth of carbon capitalism (Samson and Gigoux 2017; Gonzalez 2021b).

The environmental impacts of the imperial enterprise are far-reaching and long-lasting. Colonization and settler-colonialism required infrastructure development, such as dams, roads, railways, and pipelines, to move appropriated resources from the periphery to the imperial and settler-colonial centres. These projects often resulted in the displacement and genocide of Indigenous communities, the destruction of ecosystems, and further environmental degradation for the benefit of capitalist interests (Claire and Surprise 2022). Settler colonialism also disrupted sustainable Indigenous

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land management practices, leading to disruptions in ecosystems (Samson and Gigoux 2017).

The most significant environmental and social consequence, perhaps, is the emergence of fossil fuel energy as the driver of the global economy. Early on, coal was a key source of energy—an abundant fossil fuel that powered steam engines transforming transport systems, driving mass production, and leading to Britain's and later Europe's global dominance starting from the Industrial Revolution. Oil eventually replaced coal as the energy of choice of global powers due to commercial and technological developments—which made it more powerful, cheaper, cleaner, and more practical to use—and geopolitical concerns as Britain, Germany, and the US sought to transition their naval fleets from coal to oil to gain a military advantage at sea prior to World War II (Ediger and Bowlus 2019). Indeed, scholars have noted the importance of fossil fuel energy to the development of global capitalism and a liberal world order (Di Muzio and Dow 2019).

Capitalism transformed 'human activity into commodified labour power, land into private property, and nature into an external object to be harnessed for the accumulation of capital' (Moore 2016; Gonzalez 2021b). The capitalist pursuit of continuous profit necessitated an endless supply of cheap energy, cheap food, cheap raw materials, and cheap labour power (Moore 2016). As a result, human beings and nature became defined mainly in market value terms. For Indigenous people, people of colour, women, LGBTQ people, people with disabilities, and other marginalized peoples, such a system is additionally burdensome because their 'market value' is further degraded as a result of ideologies that define them as socially and culturally less valuable than others (Pellow 2007).

Carbon Capitalists and International Climate (In)Action

International law has been instrumental in shaping the foundation of carbon capitalism. It emerged from colonial encounters and has served to endorse numerous western interventions in the Global South through a range of doctrines, such as *terra nullius*, the doctrine of discovery, the mandate system, trusteeship, modernization, development, humanitarian intervention, and pre-emptive self-defence. These doctrines have portrayed populations in the Global South as primitive, barbaric, uncivilized, underdeveloped, and

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backward to the extent that their lives, means of subsistence, and cultural heritage are deemed unworthy of protection (Anghie 2005; Gonzalez 2021b).

Because carbon capitalism renders certain people and places as less valuable and expendable, it will not concede anything in order to protect these forms of expendability, regardless of appeals to moral or ethical duty. Thus, we see carbon capitalists continue to resist efforts to be held accountable for their actions, or even meaningfully contribute to climate change adaptation or mitigation, instead promoting climate 'solutions' that further capitalist goals (Nyberg and Wright 2019; Li et al. 2022).

This section examines how certain ideologies have contributed to the ultimate failure of achieving meaningful climate action. In particular, it examines how carbon capitalists have were able to successfully weaken the Kyoto Protocol, entirely derail climate negotiations post-Kyoto, and neutralize the Paris Agreement.

From the Kyoto Protocol to the Paris Agreement and Beyond

The devaluation of human life under carbon capitalism is evident in the actions carbon capitalists have taken to obstruct international efforts to combat climate change. A prime example is the 'Global Climate Coalition' (GCC), described as 'the first and largest U.S. domestic coalition organized to oppose climate action' (Brulle 2023). Sensing a threat to their profits following the formation of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and the growing international recognition of the role of greenhouse gases in driving climate change, a number of corporations with strong ties to fossil fuels formed the GCC in 1989. Their climate denial and lobbying activities proved instrumental in driving US opposition to the Kyoto Protocol and creating a 'playbook for other coalitions to emulate in their efforts to stop or slow climate action' in the subsequent decades (Brulle 2023).

The name Global Climate Coalition served as a linguistic instrument for fossil fuel interests to introduce themselves as valid parties in the climate change debate, allowing them to present anti-climate, pro-market rhetoric as a sensible response to the pending catastrophe, marking the beginning of a decades-long campaign against the climate and all life that depends on it. Through a variety of tactics, including disinformation campaigns, climate denialism, and political lobbying/bribery, carbon capitalists were able to

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politicize the issue, sow doubt in the public's mind, particularly in the US, and cast the topic of climate change as an unresolved issue embroiled in controversy, rather than what it actually was: a long-settled scientific debate with a preponderance of empirical evidence and a near-unanimous consensus among scientists (Franta 2022; Mulvey and Shulman 2015).

This politicization of the domestic climate discourse within the US effectively precluded the US from aligning with the international consensus on the urgent need for immediate and comprehensive climate action. As the US was responsible for more than a quarter of worldwide emissions during this period, its non-participation considerably hampered the international response to the climatic crisis (Bohringer and Vogt 2002). Consequently, the Kyoto Protocol, the world's first legally binding climate change treaty to stop dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system, was reduced to 'a harmless, neutral stopgap measure pending more serious efforts to address climate change' (Breidenich et al. 1998; Lohmann 2005). The anticipated and ostensibly 'more serious' effort came nearly two decades later in the form of the 2015 Paris Climate Accords, also known as the Paris Agreement, which, in contrast to its predecessor, received more ebullient praise from proponents, being lauded as a 'monumental triumph' and a 'globally, historic moment' by several heads of state, diplomats, and journalists (UN News Centre 2015; McGrath 2015).

Yet, notwithstanding its ambitious aspirations to limit global temperature rise to no higher than 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels, the newer treaty seems no better positioned to realize its goals and may even be less capable in some respects—lacking the binding enforcement mechanisms of its predecessor, for example (Caparrós 2016). Indeed, the response from many prominent environmentalists has been less than enthusiastic, variously describing the agreement as representing 'continuity with existing climate policy, not a break with the past' and criticizing it for doing almost nothing to address anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions and bearing 'no relationship to biophysical or social and economic reality' (Allan 2019; Spash 2016). James Hansen, the climate scientist whose 1988 testimony is widely regarded as a turning point in environmental history that 'thrust climate change into the public spotlight', aptly denounced the Paris Agreement as 'fraud' (Besel 2013; Milman 2015).

The Paris Agreement also fails to incorporate one of the key demands of the climate justice movement: a moratorium on the extraction of fossil fuels, or at least a phaseout of fossil fuel extraction in wealthy nations. Indeed, the

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Paris Agreement is silent about the need to eliminate fossil fuel subsidies, restrict the extraction of fossil fuels, and curtail fossil-fuel-driven industrial development (Dehm 2020). Despite its references to human rights and climate justice, the Paris Agreement perpetuates the carbon capitalist economy and the status of poorer nations and people as expendable (Gonzalez 2021b). With voluntary, non-binding reduction mechanisms that give high-polluting countries 'every incentive to adopt emission reduction targets that lack ambition and have no chance of achieving the 1.5°C target' and with not even a mention of the need to end fossil fuel subsidies and curtail further investment in fossil fuel infrastructure, the characterization of the Paris Agreement as fraud seems well-founded.

While the GCC officially disbanded in 2001, claiming to have achieved its primary objective of persuading the US not to ratify the Kyoto Protocol, its ambitions to obstruct climate action did not abate (Adam 2005). Exxon and Koch Industries, in particular, were instrumental in establishing and funding a pervasive 'climate change counter-movement' (CCCM) supported by a network of 'conservative think tanks, advocacy groups, trade associations, and foundations, with strong links to sympathetic media outlets and conservative politicians' dedicated to promulgating climate denial, climate action obstruction, and 'promoting neoliberal free-market ideas in many realms' (Brulle 2014). These free-market ideas 'came to represent a significant part of conventional economic wisdom' and normalized the promotion of corporate solutions to the climate crisis, unbridled by regulation, as 'common sense'; with its ideologies normalized this way, carbon capitalists have resisted all serious challenges to the primacy of the market over any other consideration in international climate policy (Franta 2022; Nyberg and Wright 2019). The CCCM has capitalized on these favourable norms to continue their obstruction of climate action well after the dissolution of the GCC, rendering nearly every international climate effort from Kyoto, to Paris, and beyond, wholly ineffective at significantly reducing GHG emissions or our use and subsidization of fossil fuels.

One particularly egregious example of such obstruction was carried out by the US government itself. In 'assessing the environment as an adversary', the US utilized the extensive military surveillance capabilities of its National Security Agency to spy on delegates ahead of the 2009 Copenhagen Climate Summit in order to pre-empt the emergence of 'any agreement resembling the Kyoto protocol' (Gjerding et al. 2014). Accordingly, despite initial high expectations for a new agreement on climate change mitigation to be signed,

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the summit concluded with no new binding agreements or commitments to reduce emissions.

On the industry side, the fossil fuel lobby has increasingly inserted itself into key international climate change negotiations. The industry has had a major presence at the annual UN Climate Change Conferences since their inception in the 1990s, sending hundreds of lobbyists each year. At the COP28, for example, the fossil fuel lobby sent more delegates than any individual country and more than the combined delegation of the ten most climate-impacted countries, surpassing its previous record number by more than four times for a total of 2,400 representatives and lobbyists (Simon 2023). At the same time, carbon capitalists have worked to get major fossil-fuel-producing nations selected to host these crucial international climate talks, such as the chief executive officer (CEO) of the United Arab Emirates (UAE)'s state oil company serving as the president of the COP28 summit (Michaelson and Greenfield 2022a). At the following Conference, fossil fuel lobbyists outnumbered every country but three, and once again exceeded the representation of the most climate-vulnerable nations" (Global Witness, 2024).

For decades, carbon capitalists' aggressive efforts successfully kept fossil fuels off the table at the climate talks until COP28, when the parties finalized 'The UAE Consensus', or 'UAE Dialogue', which calls on parties to voluntarily transition away from fossil-fuel-based energy to reach net zero by 2050. Among other things, it includes the first-ever 'global stocktake', a process for countries and stakeholders to see where they are making progress towards meeting the goals of the Paris Agreement. And like the Paris Agreement, this Consensus has been lauded as 'historic'—by the UAE oil executive and COP28 president Sultan al-Jaber (Volcovici et al. 2023). But the lobbying efforts of fossil fuel interests were not in vain. Through their overwhelming presence at COP29 in the following year, they successfully prevented countries from reaching an agreement on how to actually implement the global stocktake, instead directing the world's leaders to quickly finalize details for the Paris Agreement's international system for trading fossil fuel emissions (Carbon Brief 2024).

The anti-climate lobby has used these positions of influence to oppose the phase-out of fossil fuels and drastic cutting of emissions—which scientists say is necessary to meet 1.5°C targets—and to prevent any binding agreement on significant emissions reductions necessary to comply with the limits set by the Paris Agreement (Klönne et al. 2022). Meanwhile, carbon capitalists

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seek to designate climate activists as 'dangerous radicals' and 'extremists and terrorists', exposing them to 'violence and surveillance … by both state and non-state actors', thus impeding the efforts of grassroots groups to counter climate obstructionism (*UN Press* 2022; Nosek 2020). We also see how they exploit heavily gendered and misogynistic rhetoric to disrupt people's ability to come together over a shared concern for the environment by fostering a culture that codes sustainability and pro-environmental values as feminine and therefore less important or desirable while promoting anti-sustainability behaviours such as increasing meat consumption and driving fuel-inefficient vehicles as inherently masculine and thus more desirable (Hubertz 2020; Daggett 2018). Carbon capitalists further leverage misogyny and anti-queer sentiment—through funding anti-transgender movements to distract the public from 'the very real and ongoing risks that climate change creates'—demonstrating how queer justice, gender justice, and climate justice are inextricably linked (Funes 2025).

On Climate Change and Expendable People

The sustained campaign by carbon capitalists to obstruct climate action has been so detrimental that environmentalist and former US Vice President Al Gore has characterized their actions as 'the moral equivalent of a war crime', adding, 'I think it is, in many ways, the most serious crime of the post-World War Two era, anywhere in the world. The consequences of what they've done are just almost unimaginable' (McMullen 2022). This raises another normalized assumption that must be challenged: the notion that all individuals share a mutual interest in resolving the climate crisis because none will remain entirely unaffected by the impacts of climate change.

Looking at the actions of carbon capitalists throughout the past few decades, from Exxon-Mobile's concealment of their early research in the 1970s regarding the impact of fossil fuels on global warming and its projected consequences, to their promotion of deceptive, greenwashed solutions through the 2020s, it becomes evident that their conduct does not align with a genuine concern for stopping or mitigating climate change (Banerjee, Song, and Hasemyer 2015; Dawson 2010; Biello 2016). Despite repeated, dire warnings from the IPCC for the world to act to avoid a 'fast track' to disaster, carbon capitalists persist in obstructing necessary measures while simultaneously 'adding fuel to the flames by continuing to invest in

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climate-choking industries' (Michaelson and Greenfield 2022b; UN News 2022).

As previously explained, the lack of urgency on the part of carbon capitalists is consistent with the fact that 'some communities and peoples are disproportionately exposed to and affected by climate threats'—namely, the 'expendable people' from 'expendable geographic locations' in the sacrifice zones of carbon capitalism (Thomas et al. 2019; Gonzalez 2021b). The UNFCCC's 'aspirational' goal in the Paris Agreement to limit global warming to 1.5°C, for example, was only pursued at the behest of the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS)—poor, vulnerable nations for whom the previously proposed target of 2°C would be a 'death sentence' (Klönne et al. 2022; Forster 2022). It comes as no surprise, then, that the voluntary emissions reductions commitments of the world's preeminent emitters fall far short of the levels necessary to realize this 1.5°C goal and save these 'expendable people' from death (Matthews and Wynes 2022).

Through carbon capitalism's reduction of human life and the environment to mere market valuations emerges a cold, Machiavellian logic for deciding who gets to live, die, or suffer in the future climate-destabilized world. For instance, in examining the paradox of why countries seem to be doing nothing to avert an impending climate catastrophe despite it apparently being in their collective best interests to do so, professors of natural resource economics Scott Barrett and Astrid Dannenberg explore a game theory explanation, observing that 'uncertainty about the location of the threshold turns the game back into a prisoners' dilemma, causing cooperation to collapse. Our research explains the paradox of why countries would agree to a collective goal, aimed at reducing the risk of catastrophe, but act as if they were blind to this risk' (Barrett and Dannenberg 2012).

This also raises the notion that some entities consider it preferable to take no action to reduce fossil fuel emissions and instead just adapt to the changed climate. In *Weaponizing Economics: Big Oil, Economic Consultants, and Climate Policy Delay*, researcher and climate litigation professor Benjamin Franta describes how in a 1983 US National Academy of Sciences report on climate change, scientists warned about devastation to densely populated coastal areas, river deltas, and farmland, whereas economists, in contrast, 'counseled against policy action, suggesting that global warming might not be that bad' (Franta 2022). One Harvard University economist even argued that 'migration and adaptation would be preferable to reducing fossil fuel emissions' (Franta 2022). Other economists at the time concurred, adding

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that 'climate modification or simply adaptation to a high CO2 and high temperature world—are likely to be more economical ways of adjusting' (Franta 2022).

It is important to note that the ability to adapt to the climate catastrophe is predicated on a country's economic strength and access to technologies, so any strategy that prioritizes adaptation over mitigation necessarily disadvantages poorer countries. Moreover, any suggestion of migration as a solution to the climate crisis stands out as particularly ill-considered when measured against both current and contemporaneous attitudes and policies towards migration in which climate migrants are still not recognized or protected as refugees under international law (Ayazi and Elsheikh 2019). Indeed, we see that 'racialized persons displaced by poverty, conflict, climate change, and green energy face death, detention, and deportation when they attempt to migrate to the Global North' (Gonzalez 2021b).

When we consider the disruptive effects climate change will have on human life and activity, eschewing live-saving mitigation measures now in favour of nebulous proposals for future adaptation seems too unconscionable for anyone to consider—that is until we remember the sacrifice zones of carbon capitalism. Already, we find some research proposing that 'slowing population growth could provide 16–29% of the emissions reductions suggested to be necessary by 2050 to avoid dangerous climate change'. In a separate analysis of climate effects on economic activity, a team of earth systems scientists and a data scientist make the case that climate-driven decreases in economic activity may also lead to reduced emissions, but warn that the resultant economic losses 'may disproportionately affect vulnerable populations' and 'will have high societal costs, potentially increasing wealth inequity and limiting resources available for effective adaptation' (Woodard, Davis, and Randerson 2019). Considering these vulnerable populations are the expendable people from the designated sacrifice zones, this warning about disproportionate impacts is not one a carbon capitalist is liable to heed. Likewise, the projected increase in wealth inequality is no deterrent to the capitalists who not only 'worry less' about such developments but would even consider such to be a desirable outcome that bolsters the 'gravy train' of plutonomy (Kapur, Macleod, and Singh 2005).

In other words, if the disposable people in the sacrifice zones are unable to adapt due to their already disadvantaged economic circumstances, their resulting depressed population growth and economic output would yield a

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corresponding decrease in emissions that may help climate change solve itself without requiring the carbon capitalist to give up anything they value. To the carbon capitalist, the system is working just as intended.

Conclusion

Carbon capitalists, driven by the relentless pursuit of profit, have exacerbated the climate crisis and entrenched carbon capitalism as the dominant global system. This dominance has allowed them to obstruct climate action and shape the discourse surrounding climate change. Queer theory offers a unique perspective on the ideological underpinnings of carbon capitalism that keep us invested in carbon capitalism and prevent us from achieving climate justice. Through this lens, we can trace these ideologies and the origins of the climate crisis to European imperialism and settler colonialism, the precursors to carbon capitalism. This system is led by a western worldview of binary, hierarchical subordination and prioritization of individual gain over collective well-being. International law, shaped by colonial encounters, further reinforces the North–South divide of power and sacrifice zones. Because carbon capitalism requires expendable people and places, moral appeals to act to protect them are ineffective. Instead, carbon capitalists have weaponized ideological frameworks and normalized practices to present themselves as legitimate participants in climate discourse while sabotaging climate action and consolidating power.

Yet, there remains an expectation that climate capitalists will contribute to climate justice. This expectation is misplaced given that carbon capitalism fundamentally contradicts the principles of a sustainable and equitable society. Indeed, a key takeaway from this intersectional analysis is that the interests of carbon capitalists diverge significantly from the rest of humanity: they do not share the same goals or face the same risks, nor do they value human and more-than-human life equivalently. As a result, climate policy remains inadequate and often serves the interests of carbon capitalists.

Carbon capitalists' push for free-market ideologies and the privatization of public goods and services undermine the foundations of communities and perpetuate systemic injustice. Some recognize the fragility of the system they have created, choosing to use their massive wealth to invest in personal security measures rather than systemic solutions. Driven by apocalyptic anxieties, they are buying nuclear-hardened bunkers and snatching up

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land in New Zealand and other remote places (O'Connell 2018; Osnos 2017). This mindset reflects a broader failure to envision alternatives to the carbon capitalist status quo, which perpetuates a false dichotomy between market investment and survivalism (Garrett 2022).

The repeated failures of international efforts to combat climate change and reduce emissions indicate an urgent need to challenge the ideological frameworks and practices of carbon capitalism. Not only do these frameworks prevent climate justice, but they perpetuate systemic injustice. By deconstructing the essentialist beliefs that favour competition over cooperation and champion the primacy of free market enterprise and private profit over collective ownership, accountability, and the public good, we can begin to imagine alternatives that are just and foster harmonious human relationships with the natural world.

Queer theory offers one site for inspiration—life on the margins. LGBTQ people, Indigenous people, women, and other subordinated communities are living examples of resistance to carbon capitalism specifically and intersections of oppression more broadly. For example, many LGBTQ environmental justice advocates, especially younger generations, use video art, music, and dance to affirm their identities as explicitly 'eco-queer' or grounded in their relationship with nature. This is an explicitly political act of resistance, given the history of violence and discrimination against sexual and gender minorities for being 'unnatural'. In the docuseries 'Can't Stop Change' by Queer Ecojustice Project, several LGBTQ artists, organizers, and educators in Florida, US, find hope and transformation in the face of climate-exacerbated disasters (Queer Ecojustice Project 2024). Queer psychotherapist Becca Parkinson writes about personally integrating dance, queer identity, and nature in psychotherapy to heal from the traumas of the climate crisis, queer embodiment, and social and political issues, and to restore connections with nature (Parkinson 2023). Ethnic Studies professor Maricela DeMirjyn discusses how some queer and trans eco-activists specifically link social justice concerns with environmental activism to create a type of 'queer eco-liberationist solidarity' that dismantles and transforms oppressive structures (DeMirjyn 2023). Environmental communication scholar Emerson Cram proposes that, given the history of social and familial expulsion, queer and transgender practices of survival and community-building can provide frameworks for reimagining community and networks of care beyond the 'enclosure of Anglo American bourgeoise reprosexual kinship', such as robust commitments to housing

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justice, healthcare, sustainability, and caring for those marginalized as 'less valuable' (Cram 2024).

We can also learn from Indigenous practices that enshrine the rights of nature in law and grant legal personhood to our life-sustaining ecological systems (Nitah 2021; Russell 2020a). We can look for inspiration outside of western philosophy and embrace communal organization philosophies that nurture 'autonomy, self-reliance, self-sufficiency, [and] independence, both as an individual and as a community' in ways that do not emulate the mistakes of the hyper-individualized carbon capitalism of the Global North (Abraham 2020; Russell 2020b).

Through these and other examples of life on the margins, we begin to see our common humanity and our common struggles. 'Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere,' Martin Luther King, Jr. poignantly wrote, highlighting the need for solidarity (King 1963). Indeed, if we are to achieve climate justice, a queer, intersectional approach requires confronting homophobia, sexism, racism, and other intersecting forms of discrimination; centring the most vulnerable; and fostering solidarity and collective action against the entrenched power structures that perpetuate marginalization.

As long as we operate within the constraints of carbon capitalism, climate justice will remain elusive—we cannot expect justice from an unjust system. It is crucial to create a paradigm shift, where climate action is driven by a holistic approach that recognizes the value of sustainability, community resilience, and the public interest. By critically examining the limitations of carbon capitalism and exploring alternative approaches from marginalized communities, we gain valuable insights into potential pathways forward. In turn, we can pave the way for a more equitable and ecologically sound society that allows us to survive in a climate-changed future.

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