

**Climate Justice:
The Emerging Movement Against Green Capitalism**

Ashley Dawson
Associate Professor
English Department
The Graduate Center
City University of New York
365 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10016
adawson@gc.cuny.edu

The Angel of History must look just so. His face is turned towards the past. Where we see the appearance of a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble and hurls it before his feet. He would like to pause for a moment so far, to awaken the dead and to piece together what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise, it has caught itself up in his wings and is so strong that the Angel can no longer close them. The storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the rubble-heap before him grows sky-high. The name of this storm is progress.

-Walter Benjamin, *Theses On History*

A specter is haunting the planet – the specter of ecocide. The United States, and with it the rest of the world, is experiencing an unprecedented emergency brought on by three intertwined factors: a credit-fueled financial crisis, wildly gyrating energy prices linked to the peaking of oil supplies, and an accelerating climate crisis. Although the news has been filled over the last two years with reports of the sub-prime mortgage crisis, food riots, and the melting of the polar ice caps, these alarming phenomena are seldom linked to one another. Moreover, these grave epiphenomena are not often tied to their underlying cause: the planet-consuming rapacity of a capitalist system that must grow incessantly or expire.¹ Yet the more desperately we try to exorcise this specter of ecocide through saccharine exercises in greenwashing and politically palatable half measures, the louder the death rattle of the planet becomes.

The current triple crisis signals the collapse of the neoliberal paradigm that has held sway since the last major crisis of accumulation during the 1970s.² While there will inevitably be significant continuities between the neoliberal era and what is to come, the triple crisis nevertheless signals the onset of a new phase of capitalism. This new phase, which I believe is most aptly characterized as Green Capitalism, will see the emergence of new spaces of accumulation and novel types of regulation.³ Green Capitalism does not seek to and will not solve the underlying ecological contradictions of capital's insatiable appetite for ceaselessly expanding accumulation on a finite environmental base. Instead, Green Capitalism seeks to profit from the current crisis. In doing so, it

remorselessly intensifies the contradictions, the natural destruction and human suffering, associated with ecocide.

The lineaments of Green Capitalism have been emerging for some time, dating perhaps most clearly back to the creation of the World Bank's Global Environmental Facility during the Rio Earth Summit in 1992.⁴ Nevertheless, with the long-delayed conclusion over the debate about whether climate change is actually taking place over the last several years and the coeval crisis of neoliberalism, a truly Green Capitalist new order is emerging far more clearly. Take the landmark climate change legislation that, at the time of writing, has barely scraped through the House of Representatives and is set to come up for negotiation in the Senate. Fred Krupp of the Environmental Defense Fund, one of the biggest green groups in the US, called the global warming bill "the most important environmental and energy legislation in the history of our country."⁵ Yet the bill, seen as a triumph after more than twenty years of Congressional inaction on the climate crisis, not only fails to mandate necessary reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, but in addition establishes a market-based cap-and-trade policy that essentially commodifies the atmosphere. In recent years, a scientific consensus has emerged that emissions cuts of the order of 85-95% will be required in order to prevent the planet entering into cycles of cataclysmic, runaway climate change.⁶ Yet the new bill, known as the American Clean Energy and Security Act (ACESA), measures emissions relative to 2005 rather than the Kyoto-mandated date of 1990.⁷ It promises a meager seventeen percent reduction by 2020, which translates into only four to five percent less emissions than the US produced in 1990. The heavily promoted cap-and-trade provision of ACESA promises an even more derisory one percent reduction by 2020. In addition, like the European Union's highly flawed Emissions Trading Scheme (EU-ETS), the plan is filled with loopholes: at least eighty five percent of the allowances for continuing to pollute will be given away for free rather than auctioned, as Obama had pledged during his presidential campaign. While the promised reductions in greenhouse gas emissions may be risible under cap-and-trade, the

profits that polluting corporations stand to gain are not. Advocates of the carbon market are looking forward to the emergence of a global trading system ultimately valued at over ten trillion dollars per year.⁸ With an emerging cadre of brokers set to begin trading in carbon futures using precisely the same financial sleights of hand that led to the current economic crisis, the foundations for Green Capitalism are clearly now in place.

As the climate crisis intensifies, the contradictions of Green Capitalism will produce more and more of what Zygmunt Bauman calls “human waste” - the population of human beings rendered surplus by the remorseless advance of modernity.⁹ On one level, these wasted lives will be the result of worsening environmental instability alone, as climate change leads to dessication, water shortages, crop failure, and extreme weather events on an unparalleled scale. On another level, however, the practices of carbon offsetting that are an integral part of Green Capitalism will play a crucial role in mass displacement. Offsets such as those implicit in the cap-and-trade mechanism and in already-established programs such as the World Bank’s Clean Development Mechanism allow polluters to continue their unsustainable behavior by paying others – typically in the global South – to absorb such pollution. But, by, for example, establishing vast plantations of quick-growing eucalyptus trees in countries like Brazil, these offsets displace huge numbers of subsistence farmers and pollute the groundwater through intensive use of the pesticides necessary to sustain such monocultural developments.¹⁰ In many cases, deforestation simply moves elsewhere, meaning that there is no net diminution of carbon. Offsets and the Green Capitalist system of which they are an integral part will thus dramatically augment the production of surplus people and mega-slums that has characterized the neoliberal era.¹¹ In scenarios based on current predictions by the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), for example, twenty percent of the world’s population could be rendered homeless by the end of this century.

Green Capitalism will necessarily hinge on new forms of authoritarian control over the wasted lives that it ineluctably produces. Global elites are already preparing for this eventuality. According to

a report recently presented to European Union heads of state by two senior foreign policy officials, for example, climate change threatens to significantly intensify global political instability.¹² The US military, for its part, recently commissioned a report, *National Security and the Threat of Climate Change*, that frames global warming as a threat-multiplier that the security establishment must prepare to confront on multiple fronts.¹³ As environmental and political instability grow, the turn to popular authoritarian ideologies and increasingly draconian forms of rule over those marginalized by the prevailing socio-economic-ecological order will necessarily be ratcheted up.¹⁴ This trend towards heightened authoritarianism is the dark but integral side of Green Capitalism, which will nevertheless always blame the instability and suffering that are structurally inherent in this mode of accumulation on the “human waste” it produces.

Genuine solutions to the climate crisis cannot emerge from climate negotiations, whether on a domestic or international level, unless significant pressure – pressure that outweighs that of powerful corporate interests – is brought to bear by a globally linked, locally grounded group of social movements mobilizing around the theme of climate justice. This will take genuine organizing – a task that the Left in general and cultural studies in particular has been prone to shy away from.¹⁵ Such organizing is a particularly urgent task on both a practical and a theoretical level given the predominantly anarchist, anti-statist character of the global justice movement in the North. Rather than abdicating engagement with the organs of state power, the crisis of our times requires transformation of these organs through practices of radical democracy. In addition, however, a movement for climate justice needs a theoretical grasp of the economic, political, and ecological stakes at play in the new Green Capitalist order. As I have already indicated in brief, this new order is characterized by significant greenwashing, ideological flim-flam around issues such as offsets and carbon trading, that needs to be laid bare so that those affected by the inequalities of Green Capitalism can mobilize in solidarity with rather than scapegoating the new order’s victims.

In what follows I sketch the recent birth of a climate justice movement. In the US, this movement builds on the deep and powerful roots of the environmental justice movement, which in turn draws on the organizing tactics, cultural forms, and ideological stance of the Civil Rights movement. This emergent climate justice movement will, I argue, play a pivotal role in challenging Green Capitalism, both in the US and internationally. We cannot expect such a challenge to come from the mainstream environmental movement. As the comments of the Environmental Defense Fund official quoted above suggest, many prominent conservation organizations have bought into the new Green Capitalist order. In addition, although some of them have made significant strides of late, many of these mainstream organizations have failed to incorporate the perspectives of communities worst affected by the toxic byproducts of unregulated industrial growth. This failure stems not simply from their closeness to pro-corporate interests, but also from a reifying epistemological stance towards nature embodied in the wilderness ethic, one which sees the environment and human beings and their social struggles in antithetical terms. Building on several decades of activism within the environmental justice movement, the emerging movement for climate justice challenges the wilderness ethic, and in so doing strives to center discussion and militancy around the climate crisis in an engagement with issues of inequality and injustice. The stance of the climate justice movement is, as a result, far more attuned to the issues that drive environmental activism throughout the global South.¹⁶ The movement for climate justice thus promises to be a vehicle for mobilizing the kind of transnational, grassroots alliances that will be decisive in the unfolding fight against ecocide.

There Is No Such Thing as a Natural Disaster

When Hurricane Katrina approached New Orleans in late August, 2005, it was packing Category Five winds whipped up by the thermal energy in the warm waters of the Gulf of Mexico. By the time that it touched land east of the city, however, the hurricane had lost a great deal of its force.

After a tense night, residents of the crescent city who, too stubborn or too poor to leave, had ridden the storm out rather than fleeing to higher ground heaved a collective sigh of relief. The worst, however, was still to come. Katrina shoved a powerful storm surge across the wetlands east of the city and into Lake Pontchartrain, which borders the city to the north. As the storm moved inland, powerful cyclonic winds piled the storm surge up against hurricane protection levees on the city's lakefront and along the Industrial Canal in the eastern portion of the city called the Lower Ninth Ward. These levees eventually ruptured, disgorging toxic floodwaters into the low-lying sections of the city. There was nothing natural about the disaster that ensued.

The work of critical black intellectuals and their allies in the years since Hurricane Katrina has centered on framing the disaster in terms of climate justice.¹⁷ Such analysis forms part of a concerted campaign against dominant views of the disaster – reflected, for example, in the pronouncements of President Bush - as an “act of God” which no one could have foreseen. The points activists made in this context bear reiteration and amplification for a number of reasons. First of all, Katrina and its aftermath illustrated in gruesome detail points that members of the environmental justice movement, which I will discuss in the next section, had been making for over two decades. In addition, the dynamics of the disaster were perhaps the first clear-cut instance of the toll that climate change may take on domestic soil, revealing with horrible clarity the way in which increasingly extreme weather events will magnify already existing inequalities. The fossil fuel industry has spent millions of dollars trying to obscure this connection.¹⁸ But if any lesson can be extracted from the great suffering occasioned by Katrina, it is that the neoliberal order, left to run its course, will create immeasurable human misery and displacement as the climatic instability that it has helped catalyze intensifies. We can look to New Orleans and Katrina, in other words, in order to learn lessons about how *not* to behave in the future. Finally, it is important to discuss the critique generated by the disaster in New Orleans precisely because, rather than learning from this painful past, the rest of the nation has begun to forget

Katrina and the many displaced residents of New Orleans. Memories of the suffering and heroism that unfolded in New Orleans after Katrina struck need to be kept alive as an integral part of the movement for climate justice.

As in many other cities around the world, the geography of New Orleans reflects class and racial disparities.¹⁹ The low-lying and hence more vulnerable areas into which the waters of the storm surge flooded were inhabited primarily by low-income people of color, although middle class black neighborhoods and ethnically mixed areas were also affected. Despite the sweeping devastation wrought by the storm (71% of New Orleans' housing stock was damaged), as television coverage in the initial days following the storm showed, it was the city's predominantly poor, African American population, trapped in flooded houses, neighborhoods, and in the squalid conditions of the Superdome, who suffered the most from the deluge. As geographer Neil Smith puts it, "In every phase and aspect of a disaster – causes, vulnerability, preparedness, results and response, and reconstruction – the contours of disaster and the difference between who lives and who dies is to a greater or lesser extent a social calculus."²⁰

Hurricane Katrina stripped away the sly avowals of race-blindness and post-racialism that have characterized the era after Civil Rights in general and the Bush administration in particular. In place of such studied mendacity, the disaster revealed the production of what Rob Nixon calls *unimagined communities*, populations who find no place in but whose existence is an integral part of neoliberalism.²¹ We are living, that is, through a period of new enclosures in which a global assault on various forms of common wealth is taking place with ever-heightened ferocity.²² As was true of the original enclosures during the early modern period in Britain, these new enclosures separate people from the means of subsistence. They literally produce surplus population, or what Zygmunt Bauman, in a withering indictment of the prevailing order, calls "human waste." Dating roughly to the 1970s, when capitalism entered a crisis of overproduction and embarked on a new, savage round of what

David Harvey labels accumulation by dispossession, the new enclosures are not, however, simply an economic process.²³ As the notion of unimagined communities suggests, this production of a superfluous humanity also depends on representational processes of marginalization, subordination, and scapegoating. This is, in short, a specifically neoliberal mode of biopower that hinges on allotting social death just as much as it depends on guaranteeing the right to live.²⁴ Yet contrary to the work of critics such as Bauman and Giorgio Agamben, whose notion of *homo sacer* has been widely embraced as a way of accounting for the production of people stripped of human rights in extra-territorial zones such as the Guantánamo Bay detention camp, “human waste” is not a universal category produced by a uniform modernity. Instead, the unimagining of *specific* communities is linked to concatenated processes of race- and class-formation within particular national and sub-national arenas during the neoliberal era.²⁵ The state, a major target for enclosure in its social mode (eg. education, health care, welfare, etc.), plays a critical role in this production of unimagined communities.

How did the production of surplus people take place in New Orleans before Katrina? Prior to the neoliberal era, the city’s economy depended primarily on three bases: the petrochemical industrial complex, shipping, and tourism.²⁶ During the 1970s, however, the fossil fuel industry largely left New Orleans to consolidate itself in Houston; at the same time, containerization drastically reduced the labor necessary in shipping. While New Orleans remains an important port, a relatively small segment of the labor force is employed in such well-remunerated work. The majority of the city’s residents, absent state intervention to create alternative, high-wage activities, were consigned to the low-paying service sector. As New Orleans’ economic base atrophied, significant numbers of whites fled to the suburbs and the city became predominantly African American. New Orleans also became increasingly anomalous in political terms: in a conservative and increasingly Republican South, the city had a sizable black majority that consistently returned Democrats to power.

These shifts worsened the city's already precarious environmental condition. Ever since its founding, the city's fortuitous site as a commercial hub at the gateway of the Mississippi had won out over its perilous position in the midst of a highly mutable delta ecosystem.²⁷ In the course of the twentieth century, attempts to fortify and expand the city's position through the raising of levees and the draining of swampland following the highly mechanistic protocols of the Army Corps of Engineers ironically further endangered the city since they allowed the settlement of land that was below sea level.²⁸ Corruption also played a role in the city's increasingly parlous state. Tax breaks and scant oversight permitted petroleum companies to cut canals into the fragile freshwater estuaries to the east of the city, dramatically accelerating erosion of the marshes that provide a vital buffer between the city and the hungry tides of the Gulf of Mexico.²⁹ Powerful real estate interests, tied in many cases to Big Oil, successfully lobbied local and federal officials for permission and infrastructural support to drain and develop swampland in areas such as New Orleans East.³⁰ Developers then conned potential residents, most of whom were African American, into believing that this area, which was surrounded by water on every side, was on higher ground. Naturally enough, this area suffered catastrophic flooding during the Katrina crisis. Finally, in the years before Katrina, repeated calls to stem wetlands erosion and to fix the failing levee system that protects the city were met with blank indifference by a federal administration more interested in tax cuts for the wealthy and imperial escapades in Iraq than in the South's sole blue state.

In the days following Katrina, the national media, kept so tightly on a leash in its coverage of the War on Terror, bore shocked witness to the immense suffering of the heretofore invisible citizens of New Orleans, who went without help for days as the waters rose around them. Against arguments that their abandonment was the product of a mistake in planning by one or another level of officialdom, critical analysis in the wake of Katrina stressed the structural nature of their invisibility, highlighting economic and political factors such as the ones I have just detailed. The structural character of the

unimagining of African American communities that took place before, during, and after Katrina was also made plain by the abrupt shift in media coverage after the first days of the crisis.³¹ If New Orleans' low-income residents had been largely invisible before the crisis, they became hyper-visible as the media began covering instances of the "looting" of private property after the storm. As critics such as Michael Eric Dyson and the INCITE! Collective have documented, there was a glaring racial disparity between media accounts of white survivors who resorted to urban foraging in the absence of federal and local aid and the coverage accorded to African Americans who did the same thing.³² The latter were depicted as criminals instead of desperate survivors by the national media. This return to the racialized script of popular authoritarianism that has been so crucial to maintaining hegemony during the neoliberal period had immediate and dramatic results. Within a week of the storm's passage, the city was locked down by members of the National Guard intent on protecting private property, and Louisiana governor Kathleen Blanco was boasting on national television that the troops dispatched to the city had experience killing terrorists in Iraq and would not hesitate to do the same thing in New Orleans.³³

The production of unimagined communities gathered speed following the storm in what amounts to an undeclared policy of ethnic cleansing of New Orleans. The city essentially became a lab for neoliberal free market experiments in sectors as diverse as housing, education, and policing. While FEMA's criminally bumbling response to the crisis was no doubt partially a result of cronyism within the Bush administration, it was also in the interest of Republican-controlled federal agencies to do nothing since such inactivity would effectively destroy the Democratic power base in the city.³⁴ The disaster capitalism complex consolidated in Iraq was quickly put into play in New Orleans, with no-bid contracts for the demolition of public housing and urban reconstruction going to many of the same Bush administration-linked multinational corporations that engaged in flagrant war profiteering in Iraq.³⁵ Displaced residents were shipped off to distant cities and to grim, concentration camp-like,

formaldehyde-laced FEMA trailer parks far away from their homes. Above all others, these policies attacked and purged the city's most vulnerable people: poor black women and their children.³⁶ With an African American population over 70% before the flooding, New Orleans is now less than 50% black.

Plans for reconstruction of the city have become a particular flash point as neighborhood groups and critical intellectuals have mobilized to challenge the ethnic cleansing of New Orleans in the wake of Katrina. The Urban Land Institute (ULI), a Washington, D.C.-based consulting group drafted by the city's mayor to provide a plan for reconstruction, recognized that much of the city's abusive development in low-lying swamp land was likely to be unsustainable in the face of the increasingly extreme weather events the city will no doubt face in the future.³⁷ But the plan submitted to the mayor's Bring Back New Orleans Commission generated huge controversy since it called for the demolition of all housing in predominantly African American neighborhoods such as New Orleans East, the Lower Ninth Ward, and Broadmoor. These areas were to be turned into urban parkland that would double as a containment zone in the event of future flooding. The ULI plan contained no provision for housing and resettlement of the residents of these areas, despite widespread recognition of the potential for redevelopment of blighted core urban areas built on the higher ground formed by natural levees. A tremendous outcry naturally ensued, and Mayor Nagin rejected the ULI plan for shrinking the city. There was, however, no attempt to frame an alternative plan. Residents of flooded areas were told they could return to their homes, but little was done to rebuild the infrastructure of their neighborhoods. Political expediency has essentially substituted long-term imperilment of these displaced people who are returning to flood zones for the controversial policy of short-term ethnic cleansing of the city.

The vacuum left by federal and local authorities during and after the Katrina disaster has been filled by local grassroots organizations. Neighborhoods such as the Lower Ninth Ward and Broadmoor have united to resist demolition plans and to call for more egalitarian provision of relief funds.³⁸

Organizations emerging from these neighborhoods have been particularly adept at engaging with powerful planning and relief organizations based outside the city such as Harvard's Department of Urban Planning and Design and Brad Pitt's Make It Right Foundation to generate plans for egalitarian and sustainable redevelopment of these communities. Despite the significant successes achieved by such organizations, however, it is important to note that the flooded areas that have been quickest to redevelop have been ones with mixed ethnic and income populations. Many poorer areas of the city simply lack the capital and organizational resources to achieve such successes, despite the attempts of grassroots groups to overcome fragmentation through initiatives like the Neighborhood Partnership Network. In addition, many of the successful neighborhood groups have been led by outsiders. The relationship between local activists and well-meaning outsiders has not been without controversy during reconstruction. Groups staffed by predominantly white, middle class activists such as Common Ground have been accused of marginalizing local African American leadership and organizations, as well as of unwittingly aiding the forces of gentrification by bringing thousands of bohemian twentysomethings to live in under-populated neighborhoods that remain on their knees.³⁹

Four years after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita struck the Gulf Coast, residents of New Orleans are terrified that they are once again being forgotten and consigned to invisibility.⁴⁰ Although the city has long celebrated its unique character, the danger now is that it will be seen as anomalous and disconnected from the rest of America.⁴¹ Federal funds such as the Road Home Program, insufficient to start with, are now drying up. There is still no broad plan to deal with the ecological and economic contradictions of the city. The valiant efforts of grassroots groups may have led to impressive reconstruction efforts in particular parts of the city, but such groups cannot engage in the systematic restoration of the wetlands on the city's easterly flank that must be a crucial part of protecting the city against future violent weather events. Despite the arrival of the Obama administration, no significant

federal intervention seems likely; indeed, with Democratic control of the state essentially destroyed, a neoconservative governor is competing with other Republicans to spurn all offers of federal aid.

Notwithstanding these setbacks and obstacles, however, the Katrina tragedy has help galvanize African American activists and their allies on a local and national scale to theorize and organize around climate justice. Katrina, they argue, was not a natural disaster. The horrible toll taken by the storm – nearly three thousand dead, hundreds of thousands displaced - was a result of the systematic production of inequality and invisibility during the neoliberal era. It was also a harbinger of tragedies to come, unless we change course dramatically. Efforts to deal with climate change must hinge on rendering visible and protecting communities made vulnerable by the capitalist system and the climatic instability it is provoking. These credos are central to the movement for climate justice, to which I now turn.

Climate Justice

The climate justice movement is an outgrowth of the struggle for environmental justice. The latter movement was sparked when a largely poor and African American community in rural Warren County, North Carolina rose up in opposition to the building of a toxic waste landfill there in 1982.⁴² This protest inspired studies which demonstrated that race - rather than income or any other variable - was the primary factor associated with the location of toxic waste facilities.⁴³ The environmental justice movement as it unfolded during the rest of the decade was completely distinct from the mainstream environmental movement of the day. First of all, it drew on the protest repertoire and cultural forms of the Civil Rights movement in the South. In addition, unlike most elite national environmental organizations, it was led largely by women and grew from women's concern with and desire to protect family and community.⁴⁴ The environmental justice movement also pioneered strategies of participatory democracy in its organizing campaigns.⁴⁵ Unlike the mainstream environmental organizations, that is, which became increasingly bureaucratically organized and

centered on lobbying inside the D.C. Beltway after the 1970s, the environmental justice movement grew out of and was attuned to the needs of poor communities. When concern over toxic waste galvanized the environmental movement following the Love Canal disaster in 1978, for example, many mainstream organizations called for closure of polluting industries. By contrast, the environmental justice movement tended to be aware of the economic needs of working class communities and hence was less quick to adopt a purely NIMBY-ist attitude towards environmental problems. Environmental justice advocates hence called not just for *freedom from* contamination, but also for *access to* environmental and social goods such as safe, well-paying jobs.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the environmental justice movement, however, was its challenge to the wilderness ethic that underlay the efforts of mainstream environmental organizations. Many of these organizations had their roots in the Progressive Era, when the first great wave of industrialization and urbanization in US history created highly insalubrious conditions in many American cities and generated a longing to preserve what were perceived as imperiled “wild” areas. Of course such areas had been constructed through complex interactions between people and nature from long before the arrival of Europeans in the Americas. Yet for early environmental organizations like the Sierra Club, nature and human beings were seen as at odds, if not antithetical. The idea of an urban environmental movement was consequently a contradiction in terms for these organizations. Yet the environmental justice movement as it developed during the 1980s and 1990s highlighted precisely the manner in which racialized patterns of urban development had exposed African American and other ethnic minority communities to environmental hazards in radically disproportionate numbers.⁴⁶ In fighting these conditions, activists and intellectuals in the environmental justice movement also challenged many of the pejorative racial stereotypes that were resurrected by neoconservative scholars like Charles Murray to explain and demonize racialized urban poverty during the neoliberal era.

The Harlem-based organization WE ACT exemplifies many of these broader trends within the environmental justice movement. Shortly after the organization was formed in the late 1980s, a group of its organizers, nicknamed the “Sewage Seven,” were arrested while doing civil disobedience to protest toxic fumes emitted by the North River Sewage Treatment Plant, which was located along the Hudson River in West Harlem.⁴⁷ That same year, WE ACT sued the city’s Metropolitan Transportation Authority over its plans to locate a sixth bus terminal in Harlem. As these two cases suggest, one of the primary concerns driving the organization was air quality. New York neighborhoods populated predominantly by ethnic minorities have extremely high rates of asthma; in Harlem, roughly one quarter of children suffer from the disease. It is hardly a coincidence that the community is also burdened by a disproportionate share of the city’s most polluting facilities, including incinerators, diesel bus depots, sewage and sludge treatment plants, solid waste transfer stations, and power plants. Yet despite the apparently intuitive link between such facilities, air quality, and pulmonary diseases, public health authorities tended to individualize high rates of asthma.⁴⁸ Since studies generally found no correlation between individual sources of pollution and disease, medical authorities usually blamed the domiciles (or, to be more specific, the mothers) of sick children for illness-causing poor hygiene. Drawing on the arguments of activist intellectuals like Robert Bullard and Cynthia Hamilton, groups such as WE ACT rejected such blame-the-victim, individualizing arguments, pointing to the presence of multiple “toxic time bombs” in the city’s African American and Latino neighborhoods.⁴⁹

Powered by groups such as WE ACT, the environmental justice movement gained steam during the late 1980s and early 1990s, both through important demonstrations against environmental injustice such as the Louisiana Toxics March of 1989 and through the development of an intellectual framework on a national scale in documents such as the United Church of Christ’s landmark study *Toxic Waste and Race in the United States*.⁵⁰ Such activism was supported by path-breaking scholarship such as Robert D. Bullard’s *Dumping in Dixie*.⁵¹ In 1991, at the historic People of Color Environmental

Leadership Summit, activists drafted a set of seventeen principles for environmental justice. These core tenets underlined that the movement was not just about environmental issues, but rather that social justice goals such as economic equity, cultural liberation, and the political participation of people of color at all levels of decision making were an integral part of the struggle.⁵² In addition, while recognizing that people of color are disproportionately exposed to environmental toxins as a result of conscious and unconscious forms of racism, the documents that emerged from the summit stressed that *no one* should have to cope with such hazards. The environmental justice movement thus stressed that it, like the Civil Rights movement whose legacy it maintains, embodies the inclusive, emancipatory vision articulated in the founding documents of American democracy. In 1994, President Clinton recognized the importance of this vision by issuing Executive Order 12898, which mandated that federal agencies pursue policies of environmental justice. Yet despite its recognition of the movement's goals, Clinton's order was vaguely worded and allowed federal agencies to drag their feet.⁵³ It took the Environmental Protection Agency six years from the time of Clinton's order, for example, to issue instructions to state agencies on how to handle environmental justice claims. Once the Bush administration assumed power, these halting moves towards environmental justice were largely discarded. Business groups argued that such measures would dampen economic development, and without any provisions concerning racism and social justice in the foundational environmental legislation of the 1970s, the movement found it had little traction once the relatively sympathetic Clinton regime ended.

Although the Obama administration has adopted a far more responsive position towards the movement that promises significant advances to come, during the Bush years advocates of environmental justice were hardly in hibernation. Sustainable South Bronx (SSBX), for example, which grew out of and carries forward community struggles over polluting solid waste facilities very similar to those tackled by WE ACT, established the Bronx Environmental Stewardship Training

(BEST) Academy during the Bush years. BEST provides green job training for youths in a neighborhood burdened not simply with high pollution and asthma rates, but also with some of the highest unemployment levels in New York City.⁵⁴ As well as keeping up such exemplary local work, organizations like SSBX, stymied on the federal level, ramped up their efforts to shape urban, state, and regional policy around the broad framework of environmental justice. Many grassroots environmental justice groups played an active role, for example, in drafting PlaNYC, New York City's blueprint for urban sustainability over the coming century. This level of involvement is a huge victory, one that reflects decades of activism for inclusion of communities most affected by environmental and social injustices. Nonetheless, even on this local level there have been significant obstacles to realizing the vision of inclusion and participation. The opposition from SSBX to New York City's plans to build a prison in the South Bronx made for thorny relations with the authorities drafting PlaNYC, for example, despite SSBX's pioneering history of jumpstarting urban environmental sustainability projects such as the South Bronx Greenway.⁵⁵

In addition to these multifaceted efforts, the environmental justice movement also began to adopt a far more international frame. This was partially a result of attempts to draw on international treaties and on transnational solidarity to sweep aside the obstacles erected by the Bush administration. Yet this shift towards a broader spatial scale of activism also coincided with, on the one hand, the growing impact of the Global Justice Movement within the US, and, on the other, increasing public awareness of the climate change crisis. A central thrust of this strategy involved redefining climate change as an environmental justice and human rights issue. Like the Katrina disaster, climate change, the movement argued, is not simply about the environment. In 1999, the San Francisco-based NGO Corporate Watch published a report titled *Greenhouse Gangsters vs. Climate Justice* that set the terms for this redefinition of climate change.⁵⁶ The Corpwatch report focused in particular on the petroleum industry, which it argued was one of the major culprits behind global warming. At the time, this was

an important argument to make given the millions of dollars devoted by Big Oil to funding the climate change denial industry.⁵⁷ Corpwatch's climate justice initiative tackled common greenwashing arguments that focused on individual consumer choices as the solution to global warming. Just as organizations like WE ACT and SSBX had done consistently in relation to air pollution, Corpwatch activists argued that climate change was a structural problem that had to be tackled through sweeping regulation, including, most dramatically, a moratorium on new exploration for oil.

Another relatively novel component of Corpwatch's climate justice initiative was the new spatial scales of struggle on which the group envisioned their struggle unfolding. If the environmental justice movement had developed powerful grassroots initiatives on a local, regional, and national scale in the US, Corpwatch aimed to push the movement's organizing up a notch to the global. Activists recognized that, as capitalism has moved into a transnational phase through the construction of a new international division of labor, so struggles around environmental and climate justice also have to take place on new spatial scales.⁵⁸ An essential component of this strategy was the link Corpwatch drew between exploration for oil and human rights violations around the world, including, for example, in the Niger Delta region, where Ogoni activist and writer Ken Saro-Wiwa was executed in 1995 for his work against the environmental devastation and human rights atrocities committed by Shell Oil and the Nigerian militant junta.⁵⁹ Apparently local struggles such as those pursued by Saro-Wiwa assumed global resonance given the structural injustices that accompany resource extractive industries wherever they alight. Such parallels allow for new modes of transnational organizing. If, Corpwatch argued, indigenous peoples and other marginalized communities like the Ogoni in Nigeria and the Indian tribes of Ecuador's Oriente region suffered uniquely from the environmentally and socially brutalizing impacts of oil extraction, it was also they who, in a kind of double jeopardy, were likely to be most adversely impacted by climate change. Although the Corpwatch report was written long before

Hurricane Katrina, the implicit parallels it drew between environmental racism within the US and on an international plane were already starkly evident.

Corpwatch's climate justice initiative also focused activists' attention on issues of democracy and regulation on a global scale. On the one hand, this would involve reigning in corporations who had always acted across national boundaries. Thus, one of the central answers to environmental racism, the group argued in its four-point platform for climate justice, had to be the consolidation of democratic control over corporations in general, and Big Oil in particular. In addition, however, Corpwatch also drew attention to the role of undemocratic organizations such as the World Bank in promoting unsustainable energy paths in the developing world. Rather than helping developing countries to phase out fossil fuels, the World Bank was, Corpwatch argued, investing millions of dollars in developing the petroleum industry around the globe.⁶⁰

The emerging climate justice's critique of such international institutions was particularly important at a time when the commodification of the atmosphere was proceeding apace as a result of loopholes in the Kyoto Accords. Kyoto Protocol designers gave countries a minimal reduction target of five percent from 1990 emissions levels, a target that was to be achieved by 2012. But countries were then allowed to allocate their quota of credits on a nation-wide basis, most commonly by "grandfathering," so that the most polluting industries would receive the largest share of credits.⁶¹ Countries and companies could then meet their emissions targets in one of three ways: 1) they could reduce their own pollution; 2) they could purchase emission credits from other countries or firms that reduced their own greenhouse gasses beyond their target level; or, 3) they could invest in pollution reduction schemes elsewhere.⁶² Credit-earning schemes that took place in countries with no reduction targets – almost by definition non-industrialized countries in the global South – were administered under the World Bank's so-called Clean Development Mechanism (CDM). The CDM hinged on the

notion that emissions from a polluting source could be “nullified” through investments in renewable energy or “carbon sinks” such as tree plantations in the developing world.

There are a number of fairly obvious scams associated with the CDM. First of all, there’s lots of evidence to suggest that carbon stored above-ground in massive monocultural tree plantations is not equivalent to carbon stored below-ground as fossil fuels. After all, trees eventually fall down and rot, releasing their stored carbon back into the atmosphere, while fossil fuels store their carbon until we dig them up and burn them. So-called carbon sinks are thus nothing more than a temporary solution, which, by suggesting that emissions have been nullified, actually encourage further emissions. In addition, since corporate polluters were held responsible for projecting emissions that would take place without the CDM, they could garner a virtually limitless supply of pollution credits for each CDM project. As a result, companies are able to pollute more elsewhere and also sell their credits to other polluters. Under CDM, in other words, corporations can both emit more greenhouse gases and also profit from their production of these gases.⁶³ But pollution doesn’t simply turn into a source of profit for companies under the CDM. In addition, the program plays directly into the hands of global and local elites since “carbon sinks” can only qualify for emissions reductions if they are managed by an entity with official status. This means that an old-growth rainforest husbanded by an indigenous group for thousands of years is not likely to qualify as “managed” and therefore will not get credits, whereas a massive plantation of eucalyptus trees such as the one operated by the transnational Plantar corporation in the impoverished Brazilian state of Minas Gerais will qualify.⁶⁴ Since the Kyoto Protocol provides for access to over ten million hectares of land per year to act as carbon sinks, carbon trading has encouraged neo-colonial land grabbing by local and foreign elites.

The Corpwatch report was highly prescient in describing the emerging carbon market as a form of false solution, one that produces phantom reductions, promotes fraud, undermines investment in clean technologies, and uses up all the easy carbon reductions in developing countries. This critique of

nascent Green Capitalism has been amplified as the climate justice movement has developed over the last decade. In an important step to consolidate the emerging movement, the US NGO Redefining Progress formed the Environmental Justice and Climate Change Initiative (EJCC) after a group of activists and scholars attended the United Nations' World Conference Against Racism in Durban, South Africa in 2001. In 2004, the first conference on Climate Justice was held at the University of Michigan, where a Climate Justice Declaration was drafted. Critical perspectives on carbon markets have played a particularly important role in climate justice activism given the moves to implement regional initiatives to tackle climate change during the obstructionist years of the Bush administration. In staking out such critical positions, the climate justice movement draws on lessons gleaned from the Clean Development Mechanism and the European Union's Emissions Trading Scheme. Despite and in the face of the growing hegemony of carbon trading, climate justice activists and intellectuals have remained critical of this aspect of Green Capitalism. In their important analysis and statement of principles, *A Climate of Change*, Redefining Progress's EJCC group offers a judicious consideration of the benefits and drawbacks of various measures to diminish carbon emissions.⁶⁵ As was true of the Corpwatch initiative, EJCC stresses the damaging impact of so-called cap-and-trade plans. Sounding themes key to the environmental justice movement for decades, EJCC argues that carbon reduction strategies must not increase the already inegalitarian conditions which low-income communities and people of color continue to endure. A just transition to a sustainable footing, they argue, will be one that benefits not just African American and other ethnic minority communities, who are the least responsible for greenhouse gas emissions; such a transition will be one that brings a greater portion of social justice to all Americans.⁶⁶

Down At the Crossroads:

It is an ugly and rather terrifying fact that the environment we take for granted as the context for life on the planet is likely to alter radically in the relatively near future as a result of runaway climate change. On June 23, 2008, NASA climate scientist James Hansen appeared before a House of Representatives' select committee twenty years to the day since his history-making public announcement of global warming to Congress. Although he repeated his original assertions concerning anthropogenic climate change, one major difference set off this reappearance: Hansen asserted in the starkest language that the world has almost run out of time to prevent the Earth's feedback mechanisms from triggering runaway climate change.⁶⁷ According to new research presented by Hansen during his testimony, the atmosphere is far more sensitive to carbon dioxide emissions than the most recent work of the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) supposed. As a result, according to Hansen a safe level of carbon dioxide concentration in the atmosphere would be no more than 350 parts per million (ppm). Currently, the CO₂ amount is 385ppm, with a rise of over 2ppm per year. We need, in other words, not simply to freeze carbon dioxide emissions, but to *remove* significant amounts from the atmosphere through massive projects such as reforestation. A corollary of Hansen's alarming findings is the fact that the now nearly universally accepted target of maintaining warming below two degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels is a recipe for disaster rather than salvation.

Needless to say, policymakers have not absorbed these findings adequately. Indeed, one of the British government's chief scientific advisors recently made headlines by publicly urging ministers to prepare the nation to adapt to four degrees Celsius of warming.⁶⁸ While it clearly makes sense to seek to adapt to the intensified climatic instability already triggered by greenhouse gas emissions, what precisely would it mean to try to adapt to four degrees of warming? An answer can be gleaned from recent reports commissioned by tough-minded (and hardly bleeding-heart liberal) entities such as the

Pentagon and the European Council.⁶⁹ These agencies increasingly view climate change in terms of a threat to collective security rather than simply as an environmental or even humanitarian problem.

Given these realities, it is difficult to overstate the importance of the historical moment that we inhabit. In looking back to Hurricane Katrina and in reading it as a harbinger for the future, it's hard not to think of Walter Benjamin's Angel of History, who is driven into the future by a storm that gets called progress while watching catastrophe pile up behind him. But perhaps such apocalyptic imagery is dangerous, since it tends to suggest that the fate of human beings lies in the clouds rather than in their hands.⁷⁰ Of course, there will always be significant struggles to be waged to challenge the iniquities of Green Capitalism. The movement for climate justice, I submit, will grow increasingly important as the need to mitigate the damaging impacts of climate change becomes ever more apparent.

Perhaps a more judicious and more hopeful image to characterize the present is that of the crossroads, with all of its symbolic significance for African diasporic cultures. We inhabit a place in time where two worlds touch, a liminal space potent with possibility and danger. Down one fork in the road lies Green Capitalism. My discussion of Hurricane Katrina strives to make clear the likely results of continuing down this path. Down the other path lies climate and environmental justice. This path leads away from the climatic contradictions of Green Capitalism, towards a more egalitarian society framed on principles of social justice. Core tenets of the vision for such a society include: a just transition to sustainable energy sources, with the adoption of low-consumption lifestyles, particularly in the global North; a minimum of sixty percent immediate GHG emissions reductions in the US, leading to a 90% total cut by 2050; repayment of the ecological debt of the North to the South; equal access to and responsibility for common global resources (including the atmosphere) for all peoples; current and future support for refugees of all kinds; and a determined commitment to allowing those most affected to define the solutions to climate chaos. The ten principles of climate justice appended to this essay lay out some of the central steps necessary to realize these elements of climate justice in more detail.

Such goals may appear utopian in the present context. But then, after years of rejecting meta-narratives, perhaps progressives need a comprehensive positive vision, as well as careful strategic thought about how to realize that vision. Admittedly, there are many obstacles to be overcome. Climate justice still remains relatively peripheral to the mission of most mainstream environmental organizations, although that has begun to change. In addition, as J. Timmons Roberts argues, the movement is characterized by a loose coalition of groups rather than one central organizational base.⁷¹ But what Roberts perceives as a weakness may in fact be a strength: after all, one of the defining features of the Global Justice Movement over the last decade has been the flexibility and radical democracy introduced by a politics of non-hierarchical affiliation.⁷² While it is certainly true that the climate justice movement faces dauntingly a well-funded and powerful opposition that has successfully rolled back many of the progressive features of the Kyoto Protocol and seems set to torpedo its successor agreement in Copenhagen, nonetheless the potential inherent in the transnational coalitional politics of the movement for climate justice should not be underestimated. These new forms of affiliation are evident in the movement's mobilizing efforts in the run-up to the Copenhagen conference. On the Mobilization for Climate Justice's website, for example, policy documents articulating the flaws in the United Nations' "Corporate Climate Agenda" sit side by side with information about demonstrations against a polluting oil refinery in a low-income neighborhood in California, and a statement from the international peasants' organization Via Campesina arguing that the false solutions to climate change adopted by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change are at present far more damaging for small-scale, sustainable family farming than climate change itself.⁷³ Such multi-scalar organizing efforts are a crucial strength of the contemporary movement for climate change.

Public intellectuals have an important role to play in this struggle for climate justice. The science involved in climate change is formidably complex, and needs to be articulated to the public in

clear terms that reverse the creeping apathy that has relegated climate injustice to a relatively minor concern in the minds of many people in the midst of the present economic crisis. Links between climate change and the other aspects of the triple crisis of our times also must be unpacked. The efforts of corporate greenwashing campaigns need to be debunked. Perceptions that the unjust and injurious effects of climate change are a result of God-given natural disasters must be challenged. In all these and many other endeavors to turn the tide against Green Capitalism, the efforts of activists in the environmental and climate justice movement over the last three decades serve as a map and a beacon to guide us down from the crossroads.

Appendices

Ten Principles of Climate Justice

(available @ http://ejcc.org/cj/ten_principles/)

1. *Stop Cooking the Planet:* Global climate change will accelerate unless we can slow the release of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. To protect vulnerable Americans, we must find alternatives for those human activities that cause global climate change.
2. *Protect and Empower Vulnerable Individuals and Communities:* Low-income workers, people of color, and Indigenous Peoples will suffer the most from climate change's impact. We need to provide opportunities to adapt and thrive in a changing world.
3. *Ensure Just Transition for Workers and Communities:* No group should have to shoulder alone the burdens caused by the transition from a fossil fuel-based economy to a renewable energy-based economy. A just transition would create opportunities for displaced workers and communities to participate in the new economic order through compensation for job loss, loss of tax base, and other negative effects.
4. *Require Community Participation:* At all levels and in all realms, people must have a say in the decisions that affect their lives. Decision-makers must include communities in the policy process. U.S. federal and state governments, recognizing their government-to-government relationship, must work with tribes as well.
5. *Global Problems Need Global Solutions:* The causes and effects of climate change occur around the world. Individuals, communities, and nations must work together cooperatively to stop global climate change.
6. *The U.S. Must Lead:* Countries that contribute the most to global warming should take the lead in solving the problem. The U.S. is four percent of the world's population but emits 25 percent of the world's greenhouse gases. All people should have equal rights to the atmosphere.
7. *Stop Exploration for Fossil Fuels:* Presently known fossil fuel reserves will last far into the future. Fossil fuel exploration destroys unique cultures and valuable ecosystems. Exploration should be halted as it is no longer worth the cost. We should instead invest in renewable energy sources.
8. *Monitor Domestic and International Carbon Markets:* We must ensure that carbon emissions and sinks markets are transparent and accountable, do not concentrate pollution in vulnerable communities, and avoid activities that harm the environment.
9. *Caution in the Face of Uncertainty:* No amount of action later can make up for lack of action today. Just as we buy insurance to protect against uncertain danger, we must take precautionary measures to minimize harm to the global climate before it occurs.
10. *Protect Future Generations:* The greatest impacts of climate change will come in the future. We should take into account the impacts on future generations in deciding policy today. Our children should have the opportunity for success.

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- ³⁷ On this redevelopment plan, see Sothern, pp. 215-228 and David Dante Troutt, "Many Thousands Gone, Again," in Troutt, 3-28.
- ³⁸ Kathleen Coverick, Personal Interview, June 29, 2009; Stephen Tremaine, Personal Interview, June 27, 2009. For information on these neighborhood organizations, see <www.broadmoorimprovement.com> and <www.helpholycross.org>.
- ³⁹ For a critique of Common Ground and similar organizations, see Alisa Bierra, Mayaba Liebenthal, and INCITE! in South End Press Collective, 40-41.
- ⁴⁰ Brad Richard, Personal Interview, June 28, 2009.
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⁵⁷ For a blistering investigation of Big Oil's funding of climate change denial, see Monbiot, 20-42.

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