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Postcolonial Futures: Climate, Race, and the Yet-to-Come

Andrew Baldwin

[T]here is nothing more consistent than a racist humanism, since the European has only been able to become a man through creating slaves and monsters.

-Jean Paul Sartre¹

Human mobility features centrally within the climate change imaginary. So it goes that if allowed to gain purchase on our world, climate change will unleash unprecedented migration and displacement. Elsewhere I have argued that within the rapidly growing discourse on migration and climate change we find an emerging racial script.² In what follows I add to this conversation by showing how the figure of the climate change migrant or climate refugee³ bears a strong affective resemblance to that of the monster. And monsters, as cultural theory reminds us, signify.⁴ Drawing from Michel Foucault (*Abnormal*) and Jane Anna Gordon and Lewis Gordon (*Of Divine Warning*), my claim is that in its monstrousness the figure of the climate migrant or climate refugee signifies a coming racial future. That is, it generates a foreboding sense that the twin European fantasies of impermeability and containment have run their course,⁵ a future that ultimately threatens to dissolve the colonial/racial hierarchy in which a “white” European humanism is elevated above all other forms of difference. But if the first claim set out here is that the figure of the climate migrant designates a racial future by virtue of its monstrousness, the second is that efforts to govern the climate migrant, paradoxically, have little to do with governing “the racial Other” of climate change and everything to do with resuscitating European humanism amidst its own unravelling.

The argument unfolds in three parts. The figure of the climate migrant designates a particular kind of Other⁶ within the context of climate change. The first part of the argument

asks whether postcolonial theory is adequate for coming to terms with the Other amidst our current condition of pending environmental catastrophe, whether understood as climate change or the Anthropocene. The suggestion is that postcolonial methodology may not be up to the task or that it may need to be modified. The central claim is that while postcolonial methodology is predicated on distinguishing difference in the dialectical idiom of *different from*, the form of difference pertinent to climate change and migration is the *yet-to-come*. The second part of the argument builds an account in which the yet-to-come figure of the climate migrant or climate refugee is synonymous with the monstrous by virtue of its epistemological excess and ambiguity. The final stage of the argument then returns to the question of humanism. I argue that the figure of the climate migrant is deployed as a biopolitical tactic of humanist and thus racial renewal in response to the crisis of climate change.

Whither postcolonial theory?

Is postcolonial methodology best suited to addressing questions of difference in light of the wider futurist turn animating much current cultural theory? By “futurist turn,” I have in mind, for example, the recent outpouring of work across the humanities and social sciences on climate change and the concept of the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene concept is significant for numerous reasons. As Dipesh Chakrabarty reminds us in his essay, “Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change,” it is the moment when the human becomes fully manifest in earth history and, paradoxically, the moment in which we lose our ability to comprehend this effect. I take from this that the primary historical significance of the Anthropocene lies in the way its proponents give finality to the blurring of Nature and the Human, even while we know this distinction to have been an artefact of European imperial power. But the Anthropocene is additionally significant because by calling the category of the Human into question it forces critical race theory to reconsider how racial

power is traced in the Anthropocene if by racial power we refer to the myriad ways groups of people are designated outside the category of the Human. In other words, the Anthropocene demands that we historicize dehumanisation at the very moment in which the Human becomes *posthuman*, when the Human is no longer understood as internal to itself (if it ever was) but is instead being reimagined as a reflection of the totality of the Earth system. And yet it would seem that attempts to theorise the Anthropocene have mostly elided the thematic of race. Thus, as we approach the Anthropocene analytically a healthy dose of caution seems warranted insofar as among the more prevalent themes emerging within discussions about the Anthropocene are those of long-term human survival, extinction, sexual difference, social reproduction and, by implication, the kind of human that will endure the coming epoch. And these are all important themes because lurking within them we find the disturbing notion of survivability, disturbing because contained within survivability is the political question of which bodies will come to be designated as best suited for survival. Or Foucault's terms survivability designates a form of power that "consists in making live and letting die" (*Society Must be Defended* 247). Inasmuch as these are racial questions, the analytical challenge before us is whether postcolonial theory is capable of deciphering the politics of otherness contained within them, and, additionally, whether postcolonial theory is able to contribute towards a progressive politics capable of responding to the Anthropocene crisis alongside its resurgent contemporary fascisms.

It goes without saying that postcolonial thought is indebted to Edward Said (*Orientalism; Culture and Imperialism*). We find this indebtedness, for example, in Derek Gregory's groundbreaking postcolonial geography, *The Colonial Present*, as well as across the humanities and interpretive social sciences. Above all it is to Said's thought that many have turned in order to clarify how the figure of otherness constitutes notions of the West, modernity, subjectivity, humanism, knowledge formation alongside numerous other concepts.

Testimony to its significance, the relationality that Said exposed through a method of literary criticism is now a core feature of contemporary critical geography, even while its adequacy is now being called into question.⁷

But it is the method and the philosophy of difference informing postcolonial critique that I wish to put in question here. We might call this *postcolonial methodology*, a methodology widely understood and practiced as the act of excavating the colonial past in the present, exposing how what passes as *after colonial* continues to reproduce colonial relations in the present. This method is encapsulated in Said's idea that "there is no just way in which the past can be quarantined from the present. Past and present inform each other and, [. . .] each co-exists with the other" (*Culture and Imperialism* 4). For Said, "these traces of the past in the present point the way to a study of histories...created by empire" (20). We should read these statements as Said's call for effective history, a methodology that reaches into the past through the study of texts to reveal the other in text, to help us locate the Other's repetition in the present, but above all to help us clarify how the repetition of the Other in the present is central to subjecthood, or indeed being human.

But through its reliance on a method that traces the colonial past in the present, exposing the primordial Other in the text, postcolonial theory appears inadequate to the task of building an analytics and politics of otherness specific to the future-conditional grammar of climate change. Caught in a methodological space that seeks to trace the colonial past in the present, the postcolonial theoretical gaze seems wedded to the past as the exclusive time-space through which difference comes to be understood. My proposition is that such a past-oriented gaze seems habituated to characterising otherness as the repetition of historically produced caricatures that take the axiomatic form of "different from". But such an account of difference seems inadequate for grappling with the future-conditional form of difference found in the figure of the yet-to-come. This ghostly figure recurs throughout the discourse on

climate change in the figure of the climate change migrant about which I will say more below.

My argument is not that we ought to dispense with postcolonial theory for its failure to trace the impress of the yet-to-come on the present. Instead, I want to suggest that we consider augmenting postcolonial methodology such that it better attends to the ways in which the yet-to-come configures colonial imaginaries, both past and present. The yet-to-come can be promissory; it is precisely recognition of an open malleable future that fuels the ethics and politics of invention now so prevalent across the social sciences and humanities. But more often than not, and this is Derrida's point, the yet-to-come is monstrous, excessive and unknowable.⁸ In this sense, the yet-to-come Other exceeds prediction; its arrival can never be known in advance. But the yet-to-come can also inaugurate new forms of categorisation, domestication and colonisation. And so while I share Mark Jackson's optimism that a refreshed postcolonial geography might find promise in the compositional possibilities afforded by concepts like ontogenesis and ontologies of immanence concepts which are themselves future-oriented, my only caution is that phenomena like ontogenesis, emergence, and immanence, are also geographical phenomena over and through which power is exercised.⁹ Indeed, this is precisely the point argued by numerous biopolitical theorists¹⁰: biopower is precisely a power that regularises ontogenesis, not least the capitalist fantasy in which ontogenesis and capital merge once and for all. And so in this sense, I wish to suggest that a revitalised postcolonial theory would do well to address itself to the ways in which the *yet-to-come* is itself colonised but also to the ways in which the subaltern becomes central to its colonisation. Such a revitalised postcolonial theory might, for example, try to expose how difference, or rather how the *movement* of difference, or otherness, is forged in relation to ontogenetic processes. The *movement* of difference I have in mind is a few steps removed from *forms* of dialectical difference that are self-evident within postcolonial theory: Self-

Other, inside/outside, White/Black, coloniser/colonised. The concept of difference I have in mind is instead a kind of pre-differentiated difference, or subaltern in the making, one not yet fully formed and, as such, one that functions as an epistemological limit, or the excess of comprehension.

Monstrousness, race and the figure of the climate change migrant

To illustrate let me turn now to the relation between climate change and human migration. Much has been said about this relation,¹¹ some of which I develop below. Let me start, however, with the observation that the figure of the climate change migrant bears striking resemblance to the figure of the monster. Jane Anna Gordon and Lewis Gordon tell us that disasters, far from natural, amount to the materialisation of values on the world, “symptoms of other phenomena that we would do well to ponder,” (2) and monsters, they tell us, are the survivors of disaster (*Of Divine Warning*). And more than simply survivors, monsters are, what they call, the *sign continua* of the disaster, the lingering effects of disaster that admonish us to query the values that materialised the disaster. As such, monsters are made to signify the symptoms of disaster. Markers of and marked by disaster, monsters emerge from disastrous landscapes as a warning: disasters are the manifestation of a crisis of values, a crisis forged in the crucible of historical time, a man-made crisis that is a crisis of social relations in which humanity comes to know itself only through the oppressions and violent repudiations of its perceived others. Gordon and Gordon remind us, however, that we often fail to heed the warnings that monsters signify. Instead, monsters come to be blamed for own collective inability to respond to the crisis of values from which monsters arise. We have here something akin to the racist practice of confining Black bodies to the present by casting them outside “both culture and historicity” (Gilroy 32). In doing so, monsters are blamed for their failure to read the warning signs of disaster properly. For example, Black bodies

criminalized in the wake Hurricane Katrina are blamed for their ‘monstrous’ condition, even while this perceived condition owes more to a collective failure to address the crisis of race in America. Thus, for Gordon and Gordon, the monster is both signifier of and signified by the crisis—and here we see the monster’s ambivalence beginning to take shape.

But what makes monsters so? For this I suggest we turn to Michel Foucault’s 1974–75 College de France lectures published under the title *Abnormal*. Here Foucault tells us that “The frame of reference of the human monster is, of course, the law” (55). He adds, “what defines a monster is the fact that its existence and form is not only a violation of the laws of society but also a violation of the laws of nature” (55–56). Foucault continues:

And yet, although it is a breach of the law [...] the monster does not bring about a legal response from the law. It could be said that the monster’s power and its capacity to create anxiety are due to the fact that it violates the law while leaving it with nothing to say. [...] When the monster violates the law by its very existence, it triggers the response of something quite different from the law itself. It provokes either violence, the will for pure and simple suppression, or medical care and pity.
(56)

For Foucault then the human monster is marked by an irresolvable ambivalence which he also refers to as its “tautological intelligibility” (57). The monster’s difference is impossible to comprehend so one is forced to look deeply into all the little internal deviations of the monster (morphology, speech, attitude, etc...) in order to explain its difference. We dissect the monster in a fit of incomprehension.

The ambiguity of Foucault’s monster can also be understood as applying to the figure of the climate change migrant. Take for example the monster’s position as both outside the law but also free of any response from the law. Indeed, it is precisely this ambiguity that defines the legal status of the figure of the climate migrant or climate refugee. As Jane

McAdam, a leading legal scholar on climate change, mobility and human rights law, puts it, “the fact that there is still no internationally agreed definition of what it means to be an environmental ‘migrant,’ ‘refugee,’ or ‘displaced person’ makes it difficult to systematically progress deliberations about appropriate multilateral legal and institutional responses” (7). In other words the international legal community is perfectly ill-equipped to respond to the migration or displacement effects of climate change; it cannot write into law and thus cannot extend legal rights to a figure that exceeds all comprehension. This trope of legal incomprehension further echoes across the discourse on climate change and migration. Take for example, the now near universal agreement within the research community, including the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which is that identifying someone as a climate change migrant or climate refugee is impossible. The argument here is that because migration arises from a set of social conditions and is thus irreducible to nature or climate, the phenomenon of climate change-induced migration and its corresponding subject are impossible to define as such. And yet empiricists continue to look for evidence of the climate migrant’s footprints (little internal deviations) where none are to be found, and instead always come up against the migrant’s tautological intelligibility.

So, like the monster, the climate change migrant designates an excess of comprehension and categorisation. But, as with Derrida’s monstrous yet-to-come, so, too, the climate migrant is a liminal figure of futurity inasmuch as its grammatical form is always the future-conditional. And here again we find the figure’s ambiguity. As a figure always on the verge of coming into being, the climate migrant is both definite and indefinite, an ambiguity captured well in the enigmatic claim that “even with the methodological and terminological challenges, the evidence is abundant: a combination of rising sea-levels, increasing temperatures, and changing precipitation patterns will likely affect migration patterns in the

decades to come” (White 4). Here the science of climate change and migration is absolutely conclusive in its inconclusiveness.

To clarify further the ambiguity and thus monstrous nature of the climate change migrant, consider by way of an example the spatial metaphor of the “hotspot.” Hotspots are sites said to be overfull with potential migrants, zones that are said to be ungovernable in their potential heterogeneity. A good example of the hotspot is found in the racial-militarist fantasy in what Werz and Conley, writing for the US-based Centre for American Progress, call the “arc of tension” (12), a space said to encompass Nigeria, Niger, Algeria and Morocco in which the combined effects of climate change, Islamic fundamentalism and increasing northward migration from Nigeria to Tunisia threaten Europe’s southern border. Nowhere in this fantasy space can one find an actual climate migrant yet by the logic of the racial fantasy, everyone in that space is a *potential climate migrant*, living on the verge of ungovernable excess. As such the “arc of the tension” is an ontogenetic space, a zone of potential instability in which the source of that instability, the potential climate change migrant, is not yet fully formed. This is the ontogenetic subaltern *in* formation.

Here in the ontogenetic space of the potential climate change migrant, we might start to trace a new racism in the making, a future-oriented racism that is perhaps specific to the Anthropocene. We might call this a topological racism, rather than a dialectical racism, a racism whose principle ontological form is the *yet-to-come* rather than the more familiar dialectical form of *different from* that I suggested earlier, which is the self-evident form of difference synonymous with postcolonial methodology and theory. In *Racist Culture*, David Theo Goldberg argues that the subject of modernity is abstract, universal and devoid of particularity. Race, for Goldberg, in turn “furnishes specific identity to otherwise abstract and alienated subjectivities” (4). So, in this sense, race is precisely the category that allows for the indeterminacy and heterogeneity of social relations to be given the appearance of a prior,

natural order. Where this concerns climate change and the Anthropocene is that both phenomena portend a kind of coming heterogeneity. To the extent that the debate about climate change and migration is ultimately one about managing this heterogeneity in the interest of ensuring the adaptations of capital, then I'm inclined to think that this procedure is also concerned with finding new ways to categorise bodies in a way that gives them the appearance of order in light of the racist fantasy of a imagined coming disorder. Here I would simply point out that in the predominantly liberal international discourse on climate change and migration, which acknowledges migration as a worthy adaptive response to climate change, the categories now being mobilised are those of adaptation and resilience. And as one might expect, researchers are now searching for examples of adaptive and resilient migration, and by implication maladaptive, non-resilient migration. My contention is that we need to think the categories of maladaptation and non-resilience as an emerging, even topological, racial vocabulary.¹²

To conclude this section of the paper, let me return briefly to the question of postcolonial methodology. If postcolonial methodology reveals the Other in the text by exposing the citationary structures that draw their meaning through references to a colonial past—a process we might call dialectical signification—then perhaps postcolonial methodology needs to shift its temporal gaze towards the future in order to become better attuned to the subaltern in formation, topological difference or the figure of the yet-to-come.

The return to humanism

Let me return now to the question of humanism and the Anthropocene, which, as Dipesh Chakrabarty urges, is the question that must now be at the forefront of “all progressive political thought, including postcolonial criticism” (15). This, for Chakrabarty, is a philosophical project the starting point for which is “the need to view the human

simultaneously on contradictory registers: as a geophysical force and as a political agent, as a bearer of rights and as author of actions; subject to both the stochastic forces of nature (being itself one such force collectively) and open to the contingency of individual human experience” (14). For my part, I concur with Chakrabarty’s injunction, and I would only add that it is equally imperative that we locate this undertaking within the long-overdue decolonial movement now afoot across the Anglo-American academy, although even here I think we should remain attentive to the way the “white” academy is reproduced through tropes of colonial disaffiliation.¹³

In fleshing out what I think such a humanism might be, which we might call *minimal humanism*, borrowing from Arun Saldanha’s essay “Some Principles on Geocommunity,” let me begin with what I think it should not be. My contention is first that we jettison any retooled humanism that locates itself in the saviourism of climate refugees or climate migrants. As I have been arguing, we find here nothing but a newly articulated climate racism, a project that appears to me to be principally about colonising the future, indeed the yet-to-come other, precisely as a means of shoring up a waning humanism whose appearance coincides with the present moment in which modern humanism is now so routinely called into question. Colonising the future in this way, I would suggest, amounts to a biopolitical tactic of racial subordination that reinscribes a naturalised (i.e., climatised) hierarchy onto planetary population survival. Consequently, such minimal humanism in my view ought to refuse any attempt to “climatise” refugees or migrants in much the same way a thoughtful humanism would historicise race.

And here I wish to register a slight disagreement with Paul Gilroy who intervened recently on these themes.¹⁴ Against what Gilroy sees as a new theoreticism in the Anglo-American humanities and social sciences, one that privileges various inflections of post- and anti-humanism (inspired by Deleuze and Foucault, for example) and coincident with the

withering of Marxist historicism, Gilroy makes a strong and convincing case for a reinvigorated left humanism located in the humanist writings of CLR James, Sylvia Wynter, Frantz Fanon, James Baldwin, WEB Du Bois, Leopold Senghor, and other Black intellectuals. His argument is that the Anthropocene warrants what he calls a posthumanist humanism that would take inspiration from 19th and 20th century Black scholarship and its critique of racialism located in anti-racist struggles. But in making this claim, a claim I unreservedly endorse, Gilroy locates his posthuman humanist vision in the spontaneous act of rescuing refugees on the shores of Crete, which for him are a sign of things to come: the arrival of climate refugees. That Gilroy locates his new humanism in the spontaneous act of rescue is laudable; recalibrating what it means to be human amidst the tragedies of contemporary migration in the Eastern Mediterranean is a pressing task. I am, however, less convinced that this humanism can be applied uncritically to the plight of climate refugees, our yet-to-come other par excellence, without at the same time giving full heft to the colonial and racial histories that mark its body. Gilroy is, of course, more than aware of this, but it is the casual and passing invocation of the climate refugee to which I take exception precisely given my arguments outlined earlier.¹⁵ Indeed, I would argue that the climate refugee is a performative category invented precisely to shore up waning European humanism on the eve of its demise, and here I would suggest this is precisely how the figure appears even if only fleetingly in Gilroy's humanism. If climate change designates a kind of ungovernable future—a future of chaos, of catastrophe or in Christian eschatology, the Apocalypse—then the figure of the climate migrant is invented precisely in order to render the ungovernable governable. But I would go even one step further by saying that there is here a kind of epistemological violence that occurs when we label people climate migrants or climate refugees inasmuch as we cast the humanity of these people into a political non-space, into a space of monstrous ambiguity. And the risk here is precisely a humanism that disavows its

own historical conditions of possibility, one that Gordon and Gordon warn us is all too evident in the history of the monster.

Let me finish then with my own thoughts on how we might approach the question of humanism as an imperative of progressive political thought. Foremost, I think we need to expose the invisible racism at stake in the discursive phenomenon of climate change migration and climate refugeeism. The risk in not doing so is that the discourse on climate change and migration becomes a means for orienting us to climate change as a problem of global population management which is all the more fraught given the hard and sudden rightward shift in contemporary political culture in Europe and North America. In this way, a progressive politics of climate change would do well to rethink climate change and migration not as a problem to be solved or as an object of state management, but as a racial relation to be historicised. Specifically, I think we need to expose the ideological structure of this relation and trace the kind of political work it does across all manner of registers—political, economic and cultural life. This seems an important step in order to fully appreciate the material conditions obscured by this relation and to develop an account of the way capital itself is adapting to the crisis of the Anthropocene through a new and emerging spatial fix. A progressive humanism would respond, then, to precisely these emerging conditions.

One form this response might take borrows from Zygmunt Bauman as articulated in his essay “Migration Panic.” In such a context it is imperative that we embark upon “the un-postponable task of building institutions meant to, and capable of, laying foundations for [a cosmopolitan] awareness” (Bauman). And to this end, historicising the relation between migration and global environmental change offers a promising opportunity to generate such a cosmopolitan awareness. And by cosmopolitan awareness I mean not a universal or transcendent view of the world, but a pluriversal view of the world, one in which the plurality of experience stands in for and defines that which is understood to be universal. Each of us

might well live our own anthropological difference understood in terms of politics, history, geography, ethics and so forth. But the pluriverse I have in mind is not composed of a collection of numerous independent and individualised entities as though billiard balls on a table held together by the table bumpers and the rules of the game. It is instead acknowledgement of the way that one's own place in the world is necessarily forged in relation to all other earthly inhabitants, humans and non-humans alike. It is, following the geographer Doreen Massey, to acknowledge that place and our sense of place in the world is neither bounded nor cleaved from the world, but composed of "networks of social relations...constructed on a far larger scale than what we happen to define for that moment as the place itself, whether that be a street, or a region or even a continent" (28). Place, in this sense, is a moment of simultaneity with the pluriverse of relations that compose it. And for Massey this "progressive sense of place" (29), as she calls it, offers a means for conceiving of place not as buffer from the ravages of transnational capital but as means for thinking oneself in a world defined by the complex interdependencies of capital, migration, knowledge, technology, culture and religious fealty. Articulating such a progressive sense of place is especially important in the context of a discussion of migration and global environmental change. Otherwise we risk lapsing into the false belief that the place each of us occupies can somehow be made impervious to the wider world. Instead, by revaluing the plurality of experience and reorienting the debate about climate change and migration away from a concern with buffering or managing socio-environmental transformation, I would argue for a pluralist humanism that embraces personal and collective transformation and as a necessary condition of what it means to live and be human in the world today.

Notes

1. Epigraph: Sartre 22.
2. For an account of the way the "climate migrant" is racialised see "Racialisation." On the affective dimension of climate change and migration discourse, see "Premediation."

3. Good examples of the signifying power of monsters include Gordon and Gordon, Dixon and Ruddick, Rai, and Giuliani.
4. The categories of “climate change migrant,” “climate refugee,” “climate migrant,” “environmental migrant,” and “environmental refugee” are all contested and, paradoxically, defined by their lack of definition. For simplicity, I use the term ‘climate migrant’ but without seeking to reify either the term or the phenomenon it purportedly represents.
5. I borrow the terms “impermeability” and “containment” from Wendy Brown’s *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*.
6. Throughout the paper I capitalise the noun “Other” in order to capture the generic sense in which I use it. The term “Other” is in lowercase when used as an adjective (i.e., otherness), or as verb (i.e., othering).
7. Jackson’s essay “Composing Postcolonial Geographies: Postconstructivism, Ecology and Overcoming Ontologies of Critique” captures well the main tenets of this burgeoning critique.
8. For example see Rai.
9. Michel Foucault’s important essay “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” discusses at some length how ‘emergence’ is the arrangement of forces that the genealogical method seeks to expose. For a specific geographical account of the interlinkage of emergence and biopower see Baldwin “Vital Ecosystem Security”.
10. On the ontogenetic dimensions of biopower see Dillon and Reid and Dillon and Lobo-Guerrero.
11. The relationship between climate change and migration has been discussed at length in a range of texts too numerous to list here. For good entry point, see Baldwin and Bettini.
12. I discuss this at length in “Resilience and Race.”
13. For a recent critique of colonial disaffiliation see Tuck and Yang “Decolonization is not a metaphor” and Baldwin “Ethnoscaping Canada’s Boreal Forest”. I borrow the concept of disaffiliation from Wiegman’s important critique of whiteness studies.
14. I refer here to Paul Gilroy’s illuminating and important keynote lecture at the 2015 Annual Conference of the Royal Geographical Society-Institute of British Geographers entitled “Offshore Humanism.”
15. I would also note that during the very same conference that Gilroy gave his illuminating address, I heard at least two other high-profile postcolonial scholars make a similar casual, uncritical reference to the “climate refugee.” My point is not to condemn these individuals, but simply to point out the category “climate refugee” is an easy and all too convenient reference point from which to build humanist arguments about climate change.

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