

Article

# Climate Politics and Race in the Pacific Northwest

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**Abstract:** The collective politics of climate justice makes the important claim that lowering emissions is not enough; society must also undertake radical transformation to address both the climate and inequality crises. Owing to its roots in the environmental justice movement, addressing systemic racism is central to climate justice praxis in the United States, which is a necessary intervention in typically technocratic climate politics. What emerges from US climate justice is a moral appeal to ‘relationship’ as politics, the procedural demand that communities of color (the ‘frontline’) lead the movement, and a distributive claim on carbon pricing revenue. However, this praxis precludes a critique of racial capitalism, the process that relies on structural racism to enhance accumulation, alienating, exploiting, and immiserating black, brown, and white, while carrying out ecocide. The lack of an analysis of how class and race produce the crises climate justice confronts prevents the movement from demanding that global north fossil fuel abolition occur in tandem with the reassertion of the public over the private and de-growth. Drawing on research conducted primarily in Oregon and Washington, I argue that race works to both create and limit the transformative possibilities of climate politics.

**Keywords:** climate justice movement; carbon pricing; racial capitalism; de-growth

## 1. Introduction

In the past decade, alongside the response from environmental NGOs, state actors and multilateral organizations, a mobilization for climate justice<sup>1</sup> has emerged in the US linking environmental justice and climate change (Speth and Thompson 2016; Tokar 2014a). Its history, analysis, and practice differentiates these activists from the mainstream, environmentally focused climate movement. Specifically, climate justice activism, a constellation of actors, practices and ideas<sup>2</sup>, demands emissions abatement *and* societal transformation or ‘system change’. Such transformation requires attention to the question of race in the ways I elaborate below.

Drawing on qualitative research primarily in the US Pacific Northwest,<sup>3</sup> this paper contributes to the literature on global north climate politics. This literature, broadly speaking, studies the modes of organizing thought and action that produce truths about past responsibility and future possibility,

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<sup>1</sup> Most scholarship found using keyword ‘climate justice’ deploys the term as a conceptual framework to theorize scale, responsibility, vulnerability, debt, and burden primarily with respect to future generations and the global south in light of climate change (e.g., Caney 2014; McKinnon 2015; Popke et al. 2016; Roberts and Parks 2009; Vanderheiden 2016). The meaning of justice is the focus. The paper acknowledges but does not address this literature.

<sup>2</sup> Activists and organizations identify as members of the climate justice movement or with the climate justice framework discussed in the sections below. It is a contested term, masking internal questions, divisions, and conflicts (Chatterton et al. 2013). Cognizant of these arguments, I use ‘climate justice’ as short hand to discuss the dynamics of a tendency in thought and action while recognizing the danger that in so doing, I create the impression that climate justice is more coherent than it actually is.

<sup>3</sup> For this paper ‘Pacific Northwest’ refers to the states of Oregon and Washington although the region technically encompasses the US state of Idaho as well as British Columbia, Canada. Unlike Idaho, Oregon and Washington have been active on climate mitigation since the early 1990s.

enabling some routes and foreclosing others, and authorizing certain forms of life. Some, in assessing praxis, offer normative analyses and propose alternative conceptualizations as this paper also hopes to do.

In my exploration of the work of race in climate justice activism, I make the following three claims. First, owing to its origins in environmental justice, the climate justice movement derives its praxis from an analysis of systemic racism. This important intervention shifts the politics of the environmental movement away from the singular focus on emissions and their mathematical urgency and toward the process of social change. Climate justice (CJ) makes a moral appeal for a politics of 'relationship', calling for solidarity by white social justice groups, workers, and environmental organizations with community of color organizations in order to build the movement and protect against the dangerous future. However, derived from a repressive understanding of power, an essentialist sense of race, and a liberal theory of change, CJ leads activists to focus on personal white privilege and the procedural issue of who leads. In the US, climate politics must proceed from an analysis of structural racism, but moral appeals are not enough against racial capitalism.

Second, climate justice discourse writ large argues for transformative change to confront the climate *and* inequality crises without commodifying the atmosphere. However, locally, climate justice organizations pursue ecological modernization—the idea that contradictions between capitalism and nature can be resolved by techno-managerial interventions such as the polluter pays principle and green technological innovation (Hajer 1995; Nugent 2011). They do so based on a distributive politics that asks for policy measures that meet the needs of racialized black and brown people who, as 'first and worst' affected, stand on the 'frontline' of climate change. The means they choose is carbon pricing with the revenue returned not through a dividend to mitigate the regressive impact of the measure, but through investments aimed at creating jobs. Specifically, they propose to protect and enable their constituents ('impacted communities') by mobilizing capitalism to provide green equity: the creation of green jobs and funding for nonprofit service provision from green investment of carbon revenue. While understandable, this defensive politics will benefit only a few and fails to address the precarity of the many. Like the liberal left politics of today, which Fraser (2017) captures in the term 'progressive neoliberalism', climate justice fails to advance an expansive agenda for social change.

Third, the liberal politics of race from which these proceduralist and distributive claims emanate precludes a praxis based on a critique of racial capitalism. Organizations shy away from the word capitalism, not acknowledging that even green capitalism relies on structural racism to enhance accumulation by alienating, exploiting, and immiserating black, brown, and white workers while inducing ecocide. I do not suggest that green capitalist policies like carbon taxation are necessarily a bad idea. Meliorist policies, like a well-made carbon tax or expansion of the public sector, can be useful. However, following the example of prison abolition (Gilmore 2015), a carbon tax should sit within a framework that demands global north fossil fuel abolition, advocates for de-growth, reasserts the public over the private, and offers a vision of a feminist, nonracist, socialist present to be built. Currently, I see neither these demands nor this vision. In these ways, race works to create and limit the transformative possibilities of climate justice politics.

### *Methodology*

The arguments in this paper draw on observations over nearly two years in Oregon (OR) and Washington (WA), and to a lesser extent, in Massachusetts (MA). I build the argument on the basis of a composite picture that knits together analysis of interview data, participant observations, and climate justice discourse gleaned from activist campaigns, emails, and blogs. Most of these data are from Portland, OR. Secondary material allowed me a partial perspective on the national and global context connecting Pacific NW activism to the larger social movement that identifies as climate justice. Though my arguments are specific to the Pacific NW, I draw on material from other parts of the country to offer a more general interpretation of the movement in the US. This analysis shows tendencies, offering a sliver of the story.

While teaching a class on climate politics in Vermont, I brought in a guest speaker to discuss climate legislation in MA, attended three panels in Western MA, went to rallies in Albany and Boston, and conversed by phone and email with scholars and activists about legislation in the state. At the same time, I was learning about legislation, policy proposals, and activist work via a Portland key informant newly interested in antiracism and reparations and an active member of multiple climate groups. On the basis of her good reputation, I was able to speak with many others in the fairly closed community of climate justice once I moved to Portland. It helped to be able to say, “my mother suggested that I speak with you”. I conducted twenty semi-structured interviews mostly with members of self-identified climate justice organizations. Open-ended, unrecorded conversations on the theme of the research numbered an additional ten. A draft of the paper was circulated to research participants.

The research is also based on substantial participant observation in Portland. As a member of the 350PDX committee promoting the Portland Clean Energy Fund and Community Benefits ballot initiative, I attended meetings, wrote a summary of the initiative, trained to be a volunteer trainer, obtained signatures to put the initiative on the ballot, and did data checking and entry. The research also drew on observation of hearings and education sessions on OR cap and trade legislation, call-in meetings to learn about the WA carbon tax, video-calls to learn about climate disobedience strategy, meetings to promote the idea of fossil fuel risk bonds, webinars and panels on climate justice positions, an environmental justice tour of North Portland, a decolonizing our activism workshop, a screening and discussion of *The Reluctant Radical*, attendance at five seminars led by Portland State University professor John Perona, and attendance at various 350PDX and other climate activist meetings. Finally, I kept up with the flood of activist, think-tank, and other climate-related missives into the ether from the Pacific NW, Massachusetts, and other parts of the country. Through this period, my interlocutors were graduate thesis advisees, [Thurman \(2018\)](#) and Alex Weiss. The latter has significant experience in climate justice activism in the US and Canada. The former defended a thesis built on interviews with activists across the country concerning the fault lines within the CJ movement.

In the face of climate change, writes Bruno Latour, all disciplines “... are now seized by the same feeling of urgency and the heated necessity of ‘doing something’ and influencing policy ...” ([Latour 2014](#), 139 *American Anthropological Association*, 7, see also [Stengers 2015](#)). As a nominal member of one of these disciplines, I feel this ‘urgency and heated necessity’ to write. Unlike Latour’s ambivalence toward addressing the policy world, I would urge greater critical academic engagement in local climate justice advocacy and policy design. It is in this spirit that I make the arguments below.

Section 2 situates the study in the climate politics literature and argues with and against the ‘post-political’ framework. Section 3 makes an argument concerning the way race is mobilized to undergird the concept of ‘the frontline’ and advance the movement through the notion of relationship. Then, in Section 4, I use the case of a carbon pricing controversy in Washington state to offer further evidence of the movement’s focus on procedural justice and to introduce its distributive demands. Section 5 makes the case for an analysis of racial capitalism as central not only to a critique of the green capitalist and third sector emphases of CJ policy making, but also as a means to expand the movement to embrace the white precariat. My conclusion outlines the contours of abolition climate politics.

## 2. ‘... [T]he Problem Is Bigger than Parts per Million ... and Will Not Be Solved If We Are Willing to Let Some Communities Continue to Be Thrown under the Bus’<sup>4</sup>: The Political in US Climate Justice

The dominant framing of climate change mobilized by environmentalists, economists, scientists, journalists, and policymakers produces it as an ecological problem reliant on scientific models ([Demeritt 2001](#); [Lahsen 2005](#); [Taylor 1997](#)) to be solved by stabilizing CO<sub>2</sub> using technocratic measures ([Chakravarty et al. 2009](#); [Jasanoff 2010](#); [Swyngedouw 2010, 2007](#)). Lacking a normative vision and an antagonistic sense of power, this approach, which Eric Swyngedouw calls ‘post-political’, subordinates

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<sup>4</sup> Mariama [White-Hammond \(2017, np\)](#), cited and discussed on page 5.

“questions of how we should or can live to questions of how we are to manage climate change” (Beuret 2017, p. 15). Politics are reduced to policy-making by enlightened economists and liberal multiculturalists (Swyngedouw 2010, p. 219). Salved by the balm that there is recourse to ever-rising emissions in greenly managed capitalist life, this hegemonic discourse prevents us from imagining anything else (Schlembach et al. 2012; Swyngedouw 2010; Williams and Booth 2013; Wright et al. 2013). While many acknowledge the utility of this critique, others suggest it too severely constricts what is ‘properly political’ (see Bosworth forthcoming; Bryant 2016; Featherstone 2013; Knox 2015; McCarthy 2013) and settles too firmly what are no longer clear categories of antagonism and vulnerability (Clark and Gunaratnam 2013; Clark and Yusoff 2017; Povinelli 2017). This paper draws on Swyngedouw’s critique, but finds it only partially useful to an analysis of climate politics today.

Ten years after Swyngedouw’s intervention, emissions are higher (University of East Anglia 2017) and the climate movement has changed somewhat (Dean 2017a; Yusoff and Gabrys 2011). Observers propose that after the 2009 UN Conference of the Parties meeting in Copenhagen, parts of the larger movement became more radicalized, organizing under the banner of ‘climate justice’ (Buxton and Hayes 2016; Chatterton et al. 2013; Featherstone 2013; Klein 2016). These voices dispute the prevailing view that climate change is a universal, natural threat requiring the commodification of greenhouse gases and technological solutions (Kenis and Mathijs 2014). They argue that lowering emissions is not enough; society must also undertake radical transformation to address both the climate and inequality crises. Water joins the colonized, occupied, polluted, and endangered—Standing Rock, Palestine, Flint, planetary life—implicitly refusing the market and racial logic that decides oil extraction and profit are more valuable than all of us. Climate justice is sought by differently racialized, middle and working-class people whose focus tends to be local policy advocacy and civil disobedience. Working on the preconditions for justice (DeChristopher 2018), these efforts seek to counter the nihilism of ‘it’s too late’ and ‘it’s too big’ with a moral appeal situated in the present.

The foundation for the radicalization of climate discourse in the US was built in the late 1990s as anti-corporate, environmental justice, and indigenous thought linked systemic racism and climate change (Dawson 2010). Via collective statements from Chicago, New York, and Oakland (see EJ4All n.d.; Environmental Justice and Climate Change Initiative 2002), organizations sought to knit together indigenous rights, environmental justice, civil rights, labor rights, and anti-corporate positions (Tokar 2014a, 2014b). Declarations condemned the US abdication of responsibility, corporate fossil fuel interests, and carbon pricing, points also being made today (see Gilbertson 2017; Gilbertson and Reyes 2009). Activists called for climate policy that generates ample revenue, demanded inclusion in policy-making, and declared support for energy efficiency, renewable energy, energy conservation, and a ‘just transition’ for workers (Goldtooth et al. 2001; Wright et al. 2001). Using the language of “sin”, organizations acknowledged that the same processes that created climate change also “advanced environmental racism” resulting in a disproportionate burden of pollution and climate change effects for communities of color (Wright et al. 2001, n.p.). Today, for activists, “[t]rue climate justice looks like transit serving affordable housing, clean energy in low-income neighborhoods, healthy food systems and good locally rooted jobs” (Lee and Gutierrez 2015, n.p.). Environmental organizations are now less likely to name CO<sub>2</sub> alone, instead recognizing, from the EJ critique, sulfur dioxide, nitrous oxide, and particulate matter. Environmental justice groups, in turn, address the hazards to which communities are exposed locally, as well as how policy responses to climate change, such as California’s 2006 cap and trade legislation (AB32), could affect their communities (London et al. 2013). The movement articulates the idea that racism places people of color in current danger, not climate change itself (Buckland 2017; Movement Generation n.d.; Vergès 2017) and foregrounds the *process* of social change.

This process begins with a challenge to those who overlook injustice in the focus on mathematical urgency. Massachusetts-based Reverend Mariama White-Hammond (2017, n.p.) states:

... I don’t see things in buckets like environment, immigration, I see that we don’t know how to live in relationship with each other in a way that puts value for life first, and not just human life. We don’t think about the tiny phytoplankton in the ocean ... We have a

hierarchy of humans that is highly problematic. Once we slap the term criminal on somebody, we treat them in ways that we generally agree is torture, but if you're a criminal, it is OK . . . I fundamentally believe that our system is unsustainable, not just because of parts per million in the atmosphere but because it dehumanizes people . . . I would like for the climate movement to never talk about environment without also thinking about equity . . . [My work] is challenging the predominantly white climate movement to recognize that the problem is bigger than parts per million, that it won't be solved if we are willing to let some communities continue to be thrown under the bus and while it is very urgent, we should certainly not use the urgency of climate change to justify and replicate unjust systems that are affecting those people who already didn't consume very much and who already are going to be deeply affected.

She notes that the existence of disparities, and on whom they fall, is known. In addition, based on an acknowledgement of difference, she asks that people desire justice, such desire being necessary to its attainment, and such difference being the incitement to care (Clark and Gunaratnam 2013). White-Hammond also invokes the "fatal spirit of temporizing" that has characterized whiteness' approach to racial justice (Du Bois 1970, p. 195; Balfour 2018, p. 248).

The experience of racial injustice creates the knowledge necessary to know what needs to be done. In an oft-heard sentiment, this Oakland, California advocate argues, "[t]he only way to achieve climate justice and land and housing justice is through organizing and supporting the leadership of folks who are most impacted by these issues and conditions to . . . self-determine and build the communities they want and need to live in" (Phillips 2016, n.p.). The climate politics that follows requires that those who will be most affected by climate change—the frontline—must be enabled to articulate their needs and perspectives and lead in the design of climate policy. 'Frontline' tends to mean indigenous and people of color. In practice, the definition contracts to focus on local people (rather than residents of the global south), and expands to include white landowners along pipeline routes and as well as workers in the fossil fuel industry.

In contrast to Swyngedouw's assessment, this post-2009 US mobilization mounts a moral argument, shifting the discourse away from the global scale and the future, as it seeks to create the political and ethical space for confronting racism under climate change now. If the environmental movement has relied on the calculative logic of emissions counting, subsuming political questions under the terrifying math, the climate justice movement retains CO<sub>2</sub> but displaces it. Drawing from its history, the movement emphasizes the procedural elements of leadership, self-determination, solidarity, and antiracist process. As a basis for its regenerative and resurgent politics, activists demand a shift away from the ethos of dominion over nature (Harcourt 2014) toward "caring for the land and caring for one another" (Klein and Wright 2017, p. 36; Ranganathan and Bratman 2018).

The post-political critique, however, fits climate justice organizing in terms of the 'solutions' proposed and the limiting of the locus of antagonism to a politics of inclusion. The demands made in the 1990s foreground technological change and growth in a reformist, liberal, and Judeo-Christian policy frame, as they do today. To reinforce the September 8, 2018 world-wide demonstrations, the 'solutions' activists are asked to demand via tweet are "100% renewable energy, no new fossil fuel projects and divest from all fossil fuels" (email 350.org, 11 September 2018). 'Jobs' continue to headline locally and nationally, but jobs are not a solution to immiseration. Activists do not use the word 'capitalism'. Indeed, in one Portland organization, staff were explicitly told not to refer to it. In general, the climate justice movement tends not to elaborate the form radical change will take or how to get there (Bullard and Müller 2012; Kenis and Mathijs 2014; Müller 2012; North 2011; Wainwright and Mann 2013). Specifically, climate justice activism does not mount proposals that would subvert racial capitalism. For this paper, racism is " . . . a death dealing displacement of difference into hierarchies that organize relations within and between the planet's sovereign political territories" (Gilmore 2002, p. 16). The planet's 'Anthropocene' "is intrinsically a 'racial' phenomenon [in] that contingently distinguishable human bodies are differentially positioned in relation to geological and ecological

transformations” (Saldanha forthcoming, n.p.). The next section presents the racial politics of the movement, which I see as inadequate to what we face.

### 3. The Racial Politics of Climate Justice

Oregon’s climate justice movement rose out of a growing awareness of climate change as it relates to environmental justice concerns, subsequent funding for climate justice positions, white antiracist practice, and national-level coalition building. It has been only in the past two to three years that community of color organizations in Portland have begun to devote attention to climate change. These organizations, whose knowledge of climate policy has been accumulated recently, work in coalition with, but also separately from, white environmental groups. Specifically, in Portland, they meet in two community of color committees, Redefine, oriented toward policy analysis, and the CJ Collaborative, which provides mutual support and capacity building. Additionally, for the past year, EJ organization OPAL (Organizing People, Activating Leaders) has organized and led the Oregon Just Transition Alliance (OJTA) that consists of organizations working on issues of environmental justice, farmworker rights, white nationalism, and immigrants’ rights. Sierra Club and 350PDX, environmental organizations that have embraced the CJ analysis, are supporters, not leaders, owing to the fact that they do not represent people of color (OPAL n.d.). Against the transactional relationships that have existed as well-resourced, white organizations call upon community of color groups to show up as token representatives when needed, CJ praxis requires the former’s deliberative, humble, and transparent engagement. Respondents referenced the continual need for such work with examples of environmental organizations and city government actions that perform the white, middle-class privilege of being able to forget there is anyone else. For instance, while the city/county process to create the 2015 Climate Action Plan eventually undertook that deliberative engagement (Williams-Rajee and Evans 2016), the new mayor’s staff forgot to engage people of color organizations as the office rolled out its commitment to 100% renewable energy in all sectors by 2050.

Nationwide, the importance of frontline leadership is being taken more seriously by some environmental organizations. As part of that shift, efforts to decolonize activism and understand white privilege are evident in Pacific NW climate justice mobilizing. On the eve of the 2016 Portland climate march 350PDX circulated a statement to its membership written by OPAL that said:

“We will elevate the frontline communities who are leading the day of action. The Portland Climate Movement will not just focus on carbon-reduction and sea level rise (though those issues are vital, and impact our communities first and worst), but on all the intersecting issues facing communities on the frontlines of environmental and climate justice . . . The proper role of mainstream groups in climate justice is to uplift and support the vision of frontline communities”.

350 sought to educate its members owing to confusion about what climate change had to do with housing. It also sought to affirm its chosen direction in light of some members doubts about the utility of the justice framework. To uplift and support the vision of frontline communities, organizations have used white awareness and decolonization training, and adopted the Jemez principles.<sup>5</sup> In particular, the Oregon and Washington Sierra Club and 350 chapters have insisted that their membership learn about racism.<sup>6</sup> The white millennials and seniors who make up the CJ movement enthusiastically oversubscribe these classes, seeking to actively reflect on their personal stake in racism. Even Citizens’ Climate Lobby PDX, which focuses on a national-level, revenue-neutral carbon tax and has not engaged

<sup>5</sup> The Jemez principles date from 1996 and outline an approach to collaboration that recognizes how people and organizations are situated differently in hierarchies of race, class and gender. The principles include bottom up organizing, inclusion, self-transformation, and allowing those who experience environmental racism, for instance, to speak for themselves. See <https://www.ejnet.org/ej/jemez.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> In 2013, the national organizations, Sierra Club and 350.org released statements expressing solidarity with immigrant justice (Black et al. 2016).

with climate justice praxis, invited U-Mass Amherst professor emeritus Barbara Love to speak on antiracism at its monthly web meeting with chapters across the nation. There, she suggested that individuals in this almost entirely white group should make friends with people of color and learn how to pronounce their names.

Yet with the willingness to learn also comes a fervor to call out those who fail to embrace quickly enough the latest correct terminology or mode of thinking. At a decolonizing training, participants in the white group were asked to engage in role play in which pairs practiced apologizing for our participation in genocide and asking forgiveness as if we were speaking to a native national. Those who questioned the ethics of the exercise were seen as demonstrating their privilege and ‘white fragility’, a term that names the practice of white people turning the attention to themselves and away from the subject at hand by bringing their own discomfort into the discussion (DiAngelo 2011). Similarly, in a class on racism, an eighty-year-old white woman’s inability to think of something racist she had witnessed, but had not confronted, was justification for criticism by the teacher. Citing a “culture of shunning, shaming, and self-righteousness that is killing the climate movement” (email, 6 November 2017), Climate Disobedience Center co-director Tim DeChristopher asked that activists read *Conflict is not Abuse* (Schulman 2016), which he saw as the most important book for the movement today. Sarah Schulman argues that society has become hyper-attuned to the violence of erasure done by normalized representations, such that questioning what counts as violence is seen, itself, as violence. This call out culture and an unwillingness to engage with people where they are threatens the movement’s ability to sustain itself (DeChristopher 2018).

It is no wonder, then, that in movement discourse, the term ‘relationship’ is often invoked. Doing the dark work of facing *fully* what climate change means clearly requires companionship (see Goodwin-Grayzel 2018). Its importance rests, as well, on a recognition of the need to continually rebuild connections in activism as the structures of racism work to break them. However, equally, for Movement Generation, relationships are essential to system change: “[t]he most basic thing is human consciousness . . . in the sense of how we behave, how we think, how we understand the world we’re in, and how we form relationships. In addition, to the extent that we start transforming those understandings and those relationships, that is part of forming the new [non-extractive] economy today here and now” (Dayeneni n.d., n.p.). Similarly, White-Hammond (2017, n.p.) argues, “what we need is to be in relationship with each other and in relationship with other life forms . . . the only time you feel like there is a tradeoff is when you see things as separate . . . but if we all carry the burdens for all of these challenges together, [we can] realize that they’re all interconnected”. Relationship will enable people to be more willing to make sacrifices of comfort as we decarbonize.

Not only is ‘relationship’ aimed at enabling present-day organizing, but it is done in anticipation of the intensifying hardship to come. According to activists, Occupy Sandy could move quickly and effectively because relationships had already been established during Occupy Wall Street (Stephenson 2014). Seeing what Hurricane Harvey, in the guise of poverty, petro-chemicals, water, and the neoliberal state did to Houston residents, some communities of color in Portland pressed their organizations to become involved in climate politics. Organizations now seek to prepare their constituents through revenue derived from carbon pricing. In addition to obtaining carbon revenue, some suggest that “[t]he solution to most of these problems is weaving tighter relationships and taking care of each other” because then, elders will not be left in their homes during heat waves (White-Hammond 2017, n.p.).

Activists’ aim is to create relationships that enable co-defense as a basis from which to build solidarity, under the leadership of the frontline, and prepare for a hard future in which there will never be a ‘new normal’. Some theorists considering the “aimless” governance of climate crisis in which threats are no longer to be overcome but instead to be “absorbed, attenuated and survived”, see relationships as one way to “profane” the apparatuses of resilience (Wakefield and Braun 2014, pp. 9, 5 n7). For Sarah Wakefield and Bruce Braun, relationships do this work by connecting people to neighbors, resources, and ideas, thereby elaborating worlds. The question is both “how to take care of each other” and “how to erase debt records, property deeds...[h]ow to not just survive the

Anthropocene, but dwell in it?" (Wakefield and Braun 2014, p. 10). This question of how to 'dwell' in a 2+ °C world is a politics of invitation (Sarkar and Butler 2018) and an affirmation of change, not just defense. Thinking with vulnerability and generosity (see Clark 2007; Clark and Gunaratnam 2013) are good ways to unsettle the solid boundaries around race implied by antiracist thought in climate justice mobilizing.

What troubles the possibility embodied in 'relationship' is the way race is understood in movement politics. In what I have witnessed, antiracism is confined to a focus on white people's *personal* decisions (making friends, pronouncing names, apologizing, noticing microaggressions, checking privilege), yet this awareness remains largely disconnected from an agenda for societal change. At the level of epistemology, environmental justice has been critiqued for reducing race to a fixed field of difference based on a repressive, rather than productive, understanding of power (Moore et al. 2003, p. 16). When race is flattened into an essential category, white people become 'fragile', privileged oppressors (see Bonnett 1997) making it difficult to understand whiteness as diverse (Nayak 2003; Saldanha 2006), which effects climate organizing and policy making as I argue in the next section. Similarly, the interpretation that there exists a 'people of the global majority', affected first and worst by climate change, works to obscure the "geopolitics of the many types of carbon dioxides" (Latour 2014), the class differences within and among the formerly colonized (see Hughes 2013) and the diversity of racialization. Beyond a politics of climate justice that simply refers to the fact that people of color will disproportionately be burdened by climate change, Andrew Baldwin (2016, p. 88) argues that race should not be understood "as something that can be read off skin, or ethnicity, or even the world map". Race, for this paper, is the "complex assemblage of phenotypes and environments rearranged by colonialism and capitalism . . . [and] the material and mental division of bodies into groups according to shifting criteria" (Saldanha 2011, p. 453).

Arising out of the climate justice antiracist framework, 'frontline' is a slippage between a relational, contingent concept and an essentialist one. While the situated knowledge of frontline communities of color certainly "might be a visual clue", "[s]ubjugation is not grounds for an ontology" (Haraway 1991, p. 193). The utility of 'frontline' is in its effort to signal relational difference. However, apart from problems like the literal issue of CJ groups' capacity, the tactical and epistemological question of who represents whom, the desire for inclusion it signals (discussed in the next section), and the emphasis on experience (a red flag for critics of populism, cf. Bosworth forthcoming), the downside is in its mapping too firmly to race. White people cannot lead because their whiteness marks them as always already oppressor, which fails to acknowledge whiteness' diversity and ascribes to whiteness an inevitable non-place in climate policy. With this mapping ascendant, the relational aspect is lost. The frontline also gains unenviable empty signifier status as it expands to cover white landowners. This is where an understanding of the contingent nature of race is lost. To wit, when white landowners felt as if they were 'becoming indian' as their land was taken for the Dakota Access pipeline, some were able to imagine native nation dispossession. However, overall, Kai Bosworth (2018) argues, this sentiment and the designating of this group as momentarily 'frontline' by climate justice and environmental groups alike rest on a profound misreading of the constitutive relationship between whiteness and property. Property produces white subjects as free from forces that affect non-white others, like legalized dispossession and the violence of racial capitalism. The liberal multicultural strategy of pipeline resistance insists on a non-existent coherence between white conservative landowners and members of indigenous nations (ibid.). Without a relational understanding of race, the movement undermines its agenda for system change.

Climate 'pre-loss' (Klein 2014), systemic racism, and the overwhelming nature of what activists are trying to do need a bulwark against that enormity and a framework for the changes we want. Yet while activists seek to connect the structural dots, their analytic support for doing so is liberal, behavioral, and spiritual. Through the advocacy of sacrifice for some, while others who consume less and are vulnerable retain a certain innocence, it ends up very like the individualizing and ineffective politics of reprimand, blame, and behavior change for which environmentalists and state bureaucracies



are famous (see [Schlembach et al. 2012](#); [Shove 2010](#); [Young 2003](#); [Yusoff 2013](#)). It is true that some consume more, and that life is relationally tangled with fossils, making it hard to act differently, but it is important to acknowledge this relational responsibility without authorizing discourses of exceptionalism, choice, blame, or sacrifice. Moreover, the focus on personal relationships to provide care aligns with neoliberalism, under which “... ‘caring for others’ becomes removing the social resources of care and inserting market evaluations and values” ([Povinelli and DiFruscia 2012](#), p. 87). In the localized relationships imagined above, neighbors prevent elder heat death by watching out for each other, not by forcing the state to care for them by making what is private, public. Undeniably, people need to be cared for, but meanwhile the neoliberal state expects those elders to adapt and, barring that, make way for disaster capitalism.

Because of the way race works under the liberal governance of the racial state, relationships and the frontline seem the right tools to confront the impossible immensity of climate change as it meets the overwhelming confluence of structural violence. However, a moral politics cannot address the class relation and the way that racism makes it material and affective. Solidarity requires more than interpersonal relationships and following the lead of the frontline; it means to achieve “historical agency” in that once “organized, what has been alienated achieves effective solidity” ([Kovel 2002](#), p. 232). It is built, in part, by supplementing those personal and particularized relations with an affective relationship to an organization ([Dean 2017b](#)), a strategy for political change, and a vision for what change is sought. It means not just a commitment to defense, but an affirmationist invitation (see [Weeks 2012](#), p. 185) to erase debt, socialize the ownership of land (see [Stratford and Beswick 2018](#)), and dwell in something better than the Capitalocene. These things are necessary to counter the Left’s tendency toward loss, melancholy, and despair, an investment in injury against the possibility of social change ([Brown 1999](#); [Weeks 2012](#), p. 185). While climate justice is clearly working on ‘how to take care of each other’, I do not see much evidence of the invitation to and insistence on a new world. Climate justice, in demanding system change, recognizes the struggle but needs to become more. It needs to draw on the combined expertise of the polluted, precariat, radical, and policy wonk, not just the frontline whose demands are neither antiracist enough, nor anticapitalist. Lacking a socialist lens, one could say the climate justice movement imagines a green capitalist future with better relationships, the focus of the next two sections. When race loses its historical and geographical specificity, and when the relationship between race and capitalism is undertheorized, climate justice forfeits a stronger analysis, a more capacious collective, and a more radical vision for a habitable present-future.

#### 4. Investing in the People We Are Becoming?

Though carbon pricing is decried by national climate justice leaders ([Food and Water Watch 2018](#); [Gilbertson 2017](#)), local groups see the revenue from a carbon price as a means to provide funds for necessary investment in their impacted communities. Therefore, at the state level, environment, labor, and CJ nonprofits are pursuing cap and trade (Oregon Clean Energy Jobs) and a carbon fee (Protect Washington Act). Carbon pricing is regressive, causing many economists to argue that in order to prevent harm to lower income people, revenue should be returned in dividend form. Against this, CJ groups in Oregon and Washington insist that more can be done to mitigate and adapt by funding projects (green infrastructure), following the example of California’s cap and trade policy. A large sum of money, they argue, can do more for the collective good than rebating it to individuals.

In 2016, the nonprofit Carbon Washington offered Initiative 732 (I-732) a revenue-neutral carbon tax modeled after British Columbia’s. As the first carbon tax in the nation, it would have returned carbon revenue to residents by way of a lower sales tax, altering the most regressive tax system in the country.<sup>7</sup> Designed to garner support from business, environmentalists, and voters across the

<sup>7</sup> Counting state and local sales, excise and property taxes, people making \$21,000 and under pay 16.8 percent of their total income in state and local taxes. The wealthiest 1% (making over \$507,000) pay 2.4 percent ([Davis et al. 2015](#)).

political spectrum, it was controversial but not because it would tax carbon emissions. Controversy arose because, according to critics, the initiative's author, economist and comedian Yoram Bauman, had not engaged with community of color advocates. The Alliance for Jobs and Clean Energy (AJCE), a large coalition of labor, social justice, and community of color organizations, argued that I-732 would actually harm workers and people of color. The measure was also criticized because it aimed for revenue neutrality rather than allowing the state to collect carbon revenues, and because it offered corporate tax cuts to protect jobs in energy-intensive, trade-exposed industries. Pacific NW think tank Sightline Institute took a mostly positive line on I-732 due to its sales tax decrease and potential to cut emissions, but found that the measure would not protect some 300,000 lower income households. Still, Sightline argued that the AJCE's counterproposal<sup>8</sup> was actually less beneficial to disadvantaged communities than I-732 (Eberhard and Durning 2016a, 2016b, 2016c). Kristin Eberhard and Alan Durning (Eberhard and Durning 2016c, p. 5) pointed out that "clean energy investments neither shelter lower income people from a carbon price nor do they move them beyond carbon".

To those within the climate movement, I-732 marked an important moment to declare solidarity with frontline organizations. In support of the AJCE, mainstream environmental groups such as the Washington Environmental Council and the Union of Concerned Scientists lined up against the initiative. 350 Seattle rescinded its support. However, Audubon, Climate Oregon, and many science and economics faculty at the University of Washington supported the measure (Ballotpedia 2016). Green capitalism proponent Van Jones labeled James Hansen's pro I-732 position 'racist' (Hansen 2016). For protesting that I-732 pursued policies favored by the Movement for Black Lives—expanding the Earned Income Tax Credit and reducing sales tax—Bauman was accused of 'blackwashing' (Rodriguez-Flores 2016). Despite these critiques, Seattle's majority minority districts voted in favor of I-732, as did 41% of voters (Carbon Washington n.d.).

In the small activist community of Washington and Oregon, the conflict was painful and personal. One Oregon NGO staff member referred to Bauman disparagingly as a "white economist". Environmental organizations that might have endorsed I-732 like Sierra Club WA and 350 Seattle could not do so because it would have been a very public rejection of what had become an organizing principle for the movement. Support for I-732 would have shown them to be purely transactional when it came to engaging with frontline organizations. In sum, for activists, I-732 violated the critically important principles of frontline leadership, solidarity, inclusivity, and investment in community.

Racism, as it is named in this example, means exclusion from involvement in decision making. It is the eminent white scientist who fails to see the dimension of justice because he is terrified by the math. It is also the essentialist hostility that confuses the person with the systemic force. While whiteness is the force creating an environmental movement that has to be pushed to respond without throwing some under the bus, whiteness is not monolithic. For excluding AJCE groups, Bauman's efforts in progressive taxation would be dismissed and for rebating rather than investing, he was seen as forestalling equity. Reprising the post-political thesis, we see climate justice groups engaging deeply in the most complicatedly technocratic of policies (carbon pricing) and refusing the lead of the Indigenous Environmental Network and the Climate Justice Alliance that reject all forms of carbon pricing. At the same time, Oregon and Washington groups also oppose arguments made by those with significant EJ-credibility (e.g., economist James Boyce) that the regressive effects of carbon pricing must be mitigated. While there appears to be a pessimism about any possibility in whiteness, there seems great optimism that green capitalism is the route to the equitable future. There are two linked issues here: the politics of inclusion and the question of distribution through green capitalism, the focus of Section 5.

The politics of inclusion takes aim at the white, propertied, masculine logic of liberalism that recognizes difference only in certain ways, which then establishes what justice claims can be brought

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<sup>8</sup> The AJCE's carbon tax proposal will be on the November 2018 ballot.

into the public sphere (Fraser 2009). Liberalism sets the terms of discussion, authorizing some to speak, apportioning to them the resources that enable that speech, and defining the means and mode of progress, the meaning of freedom, and the parameters of the possible (see Derickson and MacKinnon 2015; Fraser 1989; Harrison 2011; Sze et al. 2009; Young 1990). In the case of the EJ Working Group for Oregon's cap and trade bill, the legislature granted climate justice groups standing, calling forward community of color leaders to do prodigious amounts of work to make the case for cap and trade legislation. CJ advocates did this despite what they knew: that the carbon revenues available for their constituencies will be much smaller than anticipated, that offsets were non-negotiable, and that carbon revenues must be sought because the state offers insufficient funds for social welfare. When the final bill came out, these groups offered conditional support or neutrality in part because, with service provision responsibilities to constituents with more pressing concerns, they need to conserve political capital.<sup>9</sup> While it is understandable that climate and environmental justice demands have been for recognition, inclusion, and reforms like green investment and jobs, these groups seek concessions from the same state that sanctions and abets racialized vulnerability to premature death (Mirpuri et al. 2009; Pellow 2016) and compels a material relationship with capitalism (Coulthard 2014). In pointing out these limits to a politics of recognition (demand), Glen Coulthard advocates a "politics of the act" (Day 2005) for indigenous nations, by which he means acts of "resurgence and regeneration" that directly confront the state, such as Idle No More's blocking of pipeline development. These acts, he argues, strengthen the capacity to make demands (Coulthard et al. n.d., p. 4). Though not opposed to seeking and influencing power in the state, Climate Justice Alliance member and director of Cooperation Jackson, Kali Akuno (Akuno 2017) suggests giving limited time and energy to winning elections and focusing instead on building working class organizations like cooperatives.<sup>10</sup>

Climate justice is informed by two tendencies in current liberal and radical left politics. First is the preference for localist and NGO efforts that avoid the state and policy change. In radical left politics, Terry (2015, n.p.) finds a sense "that suggesting policy reforms, developing organizational infrastructure, promoting spokespersons or even articulating utopian political visions is likely to lead to unintended complicity in the oppression of marginalized groups" (see also Weeks 2012). While engaging in the policy process has the deep limitations raised above, not doing so makes one complicit in the continuation of structures of domination (Elliott 2016). Leaving governance to the plutocrats of either party, and working only at the local level, seems a recipe for regressive policy on the one hand, or ensuring that good ideas benefit only progressive, wealthy, and/or organized places on the other (see North and Longhurst 2013). For Jodi Dean (2017b), the strikes and protests that rise around the world today dissipate without a political form that endures.<sup>11</sup> They scatter under the influence of neoliberalism that tells us to stay local, and the distrust brought by racism and immiseration. In the consensual politics of the multitude, Dean finds a "horizontalism that fails to scale" (Dean 2017b, p. 160; Dawson 2010). She further suggests stepping "away from the fantasy that we can have politics without division" (Dean 2017c, S42). Such antagonism is necessary to an anticapitalist and antiracist politics (see Camp and Heatherton 2017; Davis 2017; Taylor 2017; Terry 2018a; West 2018). Rather than a narrow pragmatic reform or a desire for recognition, a utopian demand, for Kathi Weeks (2012, p. 176), seeks substantial transformation of social relations, generates political effects beyond the reform proposed, and prefigures a different world. The act of demanding constitutes new subjects in another future (ibid., pp. 197, 221).

<sup>9</sup> On lobby day (spring 2018) at the statehouse in Oregon, one CJ organization supportive of the cap and trade bill sent its constituents to advocate for legislation concerning reproductive health equity, tenant protections, cultural competency, ethnic studies, and racial profiling—but not the cap and trade bill.

<sup>10</sup> In this point, Akuno is responding to debates among Black radicals concerning the National Coordinating Committee of the New Afrikan People's Organization's decision to run a candidate for mayor of Jackson Mississippi as a Democrat, which, the latter argues, was done in order not to abandon its residents to the ongoing ruin created by neoliberalism and white supremacy (Umoja 2017). Reference thanks to Daniel Denvir's newsletter for his podcast, The Dig, 24 April 2018.

<sup>11</sup> The form Jodi Dean suggests is the communist party.

Reading the Trump election coming out of the politics of the last thirty years, Fraser (2017) identifies what she sees as ‘progressive neoliberalism’ in which multiculturalism allies with the capitalism of today. In this politics, the progress of the few is seen as sufficient, undermining an expansive politics for the many (Fraser 2017; West 2018). The liberal discourse of self-authorizing freedom and the need to defend it (Povinelli and DiFruscia 2012, p. 80) focuses attention away from protection for all (Fraser 2017). In this neoliberal moment, the precariously waged attribute their insecurity to personal failing and take pride in the necessity of self-government (Silva 2013); “survival is its own reward” (Dean 2017b, p. 34). Living in a time when fealty to freedom is enough, no one need melt into the pot or expect anything from the state, society, or companies anymore (Tsing 2015). This racial neoliberalism, a bulwark against whiteness’ “impending impotence”, wields state-phobia to undermine racialized Others and “preserve the dominance of white value systems” (Baldwin 2016, 85). Meanwhile, unions and liberals remain silent on ever-generalizing insecurity, while we imagine that the pinnacle of achievement is a descendant of slaves leaning in to claim that White House built by the enslaved (Taylor 2017). This is the politics that stopped at affirmative action, leaving people of color *and* poor white people subjected to Black law (Gilmore 1999; Pulido 2016), forever non-innocent, and permanently taken out of society (Alexander 2010; Gilmore 2017).

This is the context within which the climate justice constellation mobilizes and these are tensions within it. To their credit, climate justice organizations in the Pacific NW have engaged in policy-making, which has also been a consistent part of the protest politics creating the Thin Green Line across Cascadia. The next section concerns my critique of their policy demands. Based on the carbon pricing and racial politics analyses above, I suggest that climate justice, alongside the Left, is not that voice for the racialized white, black, and brown persistently and increasingly precarious. It does not propose a state-based, much less socialist response, to precarity.

## 5. A Demand for Public Social Consumption and De-Growth against Racial Capitalism

The distributive demand that carbon pricing serve racial equity through investment in green infrastructure and jobs is the second aspect of the carbon pricing example. The dominant approach to climate change suggests that green growth, using market-based policies to encourage energy efficiency, renewable energy, and new technologies, will create profit, generate social benefits (jobs, clean air), and *solve* climate change (Asara et al. 2015). A Green New Deal, an idea from the late 1990s proposed in the wake of the financial crisis (Luke 2009), is the primary proposal from the mainstream left. Though there are different forms of green capitalism (Tienhaara 2014), and while the UK Green New Deal group’s platform has some policies useful to addressing the climate and inequality crises (public banks, tax on financial transactions), climate advocacy focuses on growth and jobs.

Solutions thinking, whether from the mainstream or in the form of the ‘false versus real’ solutions of CJ rhetoric, is rooted in liberal thought’s progress narrative. In the general optimism for green technological solutions, it becomes difficult to separate climate justice advocates from the environmental movement. Some of the former believe in a renewable-electric car-techno-utopia, advocate ‘solutions’ like 100% renewable without altering current forms of ownership, and are largely silent on what to do after shutting down the pipelines (Fairchild and Weinrub 2017). The green dream of a continuous smooth flow of renewable power fails to acknowledge the complexity<sup>12</sup> of keeping below 1.5 °C (Pinkus 2017). Karen Pinkus demonstrates one piece of that unacknowledged complexity in the contrast between Cornell University’s shift from coal to a new gas-powered cogeneration facility autonomous from the relatively poor town of Ithaca in the decidedly struggling region of

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<sup>12</sup> Sometimes climate justice positions belie the complexity society faces when the pursuit of CJ principles jeopardizes the future. In Massachusetts, Sierra Club and other social justice groups demanded immediate closure of Pilgrim nuclear, a plant already slated for (eventual) closure, but they also rejected hydro power from Québec because it endangered indigenous lands. Why was *immediate* shut down necessary when, without hydro, emissions would rise (see tweet thread) (Jenkins 2018; Roberts 2018)?

upstate New York. There is currently no reason that Portland's commitment to all sectors using renewable energy by 2050 would *not* divide along similar lines of class and race. The global north energy precariat (see [Petrova 2018](#)) is a similar complication understood not in terms of the processes creating precarity, but as households that lack access to solar or weatherization and could benefit from green charity ([Thurman 2018](#)).<sup>13</sup> While most of the world's population will be suffering from insufficient cooling, insufficient heat can cause premature death. In the UK, over the last decade, there have been 27,000 excess winter deaths due to fuel poverty ([Gough 2017](#), p. 138). In the US, a major contributor is high rents and low pay, as well as extraction from the public sector to serve the private. This past winter, Baltimore, Maryland students had to wear their coats in class, a consequence of being black and poor in a city that has used public wealth to enrich the private sector in a trickle-down bid that does not pay off, in any form, for white, black or brown lower-income residents considered expendable ([Spence 2018](#)).

Pacific NW carbon pricing policies deploy the rhetoric of green capitalism, avoiding the class and race dimensions of rising emissions and inequality. While there is a promise of trickle down dollars, as one respondent said, from carbon pricing for displaced fossil fuel workers and impacted communities, just transitions are not planned for the many other non-union, female, of color workers in service sector jobs likely to be affected ([Eberhard and Durning 2016c](#)). Despite economists' warning that spending revenue from carbon pricing on greening is redundant ([Schmalensee and Stavins 2017](#)), the Washington carbon fee is a fee because advocates want it limited to climate-related spending in the interests of both emissions reduction and green job creation. Yet if jobs are what is desired, more would be created in Oregon, the Northwest Economic Research Center found, by depositing all carbon revenues in its general fund (for schools, social services, fire departments etc.). However, jobs do not solve poverty. Meanwhile, economic inequality derived from the extraction of value from individuals through their indebtedness and the creation of wealth through rent, interest, dividends and speculation (the two hallmarks of neoliberal financialization) have no clear Left response ([Massey and Rustin 2014](#), p. 175).

Now, the post-political populist foe of Swyngedouw's analysis has changed from CO<sub>2</sub> to 'polluters': "Who are the biggest polluters? Big utilities and fuel distributors", "Initiative 1631 [the WA carbon tax] will build clean energy projects such as solar and wind and make the polluters pay for it" ([Yes on 1631 2018](#)). Yet carbon prices will be passed on to individuals, falling more heavily on lower-income groups. Thus, one could argue that the poor, not polluters, are the ones who will really pay. The strategy and the policy sidestep our varied complicity in the Keeling curve's ever-upward trajectory. We are all very deftly but differently imbricated in the social world of energy use through energy-intensive ways of life (see [Shove et al. 1998](#); [Shove and Walker 2014](#)). This knowledge is necessary to make a point, not about individual responsibility, but about social relations in order to bring into the public and policy conversation how class and race positioning under racial capitalism enables levels of consumption and authorizes forms of production inimical to a 1.5 °C world. We know the vexing proximate problem of emissions reductions are automobile and truck drivers, the future people who must drive 64% fewer miles per day to meet 2050 Portland city/county transportation sector targets ([Baraso 2018](#)). Driving, when you could take the bus, undermines the financial viability and social rationale of mass transit ([Massey 1991](#)). It creates the situation whereby drivers, who may

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<sup>13</sup> Low-income households (those living at or below 80% of area median income) across the largest cities in the US experience higher energy burdens than average households (they pay more for utilities per square foot) ([Drehobl and Ross 2016](#), pp. 1–4). By raising household efficiency to the median, the excess energy burdens of 42% of African-American, 68% of Latino, and 97% of renting households could be eliminated (*ibid.*). Programs for low-income energy efficiency measures that benefit renters are generally the first to be cut ([Stein 2018](#)); federal funds for heating fuel assistance are also inadequate. During discussions of the EJ and Just Transition working group for Oregon's cap and trade bill, lawmakers wondered whether an on-bill assistance program to help lower-income people pay their energy bills once a carbon price had been implemented might raise emissions because it would encourage people to waste energy or they might use those funds to buy consumer goods from out of state (food?), ideas that are not born out in the data ([Baranzini et al. 2017](#)).

also be the diverse residents no longer able to afford<sup>14</sup> to live in Portland (Goodling et al. 2015; Portland Housing Bureau 2017), face either long bus rides, or are compelled to drive. Not only are class politics sidestepped, but all are encouraged to see themselves in this romanticized anti-corporate identity (see Bosworth 2018), occluding the relationship between whiteness and property (as houses, cars, and dividends) in the violence of racial capitalism and climate change.

Drawing on Cedric Robinson's argument in *Black Marxism*, Gilmore (2017, p. 227) writes, "capitalism was never not racial, even in rural England and Europe, because it meant creating hierarchies of people that depended on group differentiated vulnerability to premature death". Capitalism brings difference into supply chains to exploit it and salvages, for accumulation, value produced by processes outside its control like photosynthesis and socialized knowledge extant in groups (indigenous, women); it relies on discrimination (Tsing 2009, 2015). Racism is a "constituent logic of capitalism"; neither, alone, explains Flint (Robinson 2000; Pulido 2016, p. 7) nor climate catastrophe. Capitalism uses the differential value created by racism, such as the value of black land in relation to that of white land (Pulido 2000), to accumulate more than would be possible without racism (Pulido 2016). This relationship, for Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton (Carmichael and Hamilton 1967), involves anti-black attitudes and practices as a normative order that became routinized in institutional logics that then legitimized the expropriation of wealth and super-exploitation of African Americans upon which capitalism relies (Terry 2018b, p. 317). Green capitalism is no different. Juan De Lara (2018) shows how the pro-growth position of a Green New Deal coalition resulted in the technological fix of eliminating trucks run on diesel fuel in the Port of Los Angeles. This fix continued to undermine the biophysical and social basis of black and brown communities and laborers because it failed to confront the conditions that made them vulnerable as people of color. Against the green promise, truckers argued that "technological fixes like cleaner trucks will only provide a nicer ride into the precarious world of social and economic insecurity" (De Lara 2018, p. 546). Racial capitalism, as a concept, is necessary to explain pesticide drift, water poisoning, (climate) gentrification, and climate vulnerability, as well as to propose just responses. However, with capitalism unaddressed and racism reduced to personal or organizational acts that have liberal or individualized solutions, the opportunity is a missed to present an analysis of racial capitalism's relationship to the planet, to differently raced and classed people of color, and to all people who become vulnerable through socio-ecological apartheid.

If racialization is a process connecting visible differences and norms contingent on time and place into enabling and limiting hierarchies, caught up in that process are also the debilitated, the unhoused, imprisoned, Muslim, the migrant—and the white impoverished. With the antagonistic politics of class relations occluded by defining racism as exclusion and with race simplified in the form of a vulnerable, excluded, exceptional, and oppressed frontline versus a unitary whiteness that acts to repress, white poor people are displaced outside the climate justice analysis and its organizing embrace. They are denied an empathetic and theoretical positioning as racialized that would understand them as produced by marketization, opioid crises, caging, climate change, pollution, and their failure to ascend to normalized, middle-class whiteness (see Winders 2003). These white people are hurt by racism, even though they do not suffer as much, or in the same way, as people of color do the "incessant assaults" on "intelligence, beauty, character, and possibility" (West 1993, p. 235). The white impoverished were, for Martin Luther King, Jr., the collateral and forgotten victims of racial capitalism (Balfour 2018). In focusing on the broad structural harms of white supremacy, Lawrie Balfour (Balfour 2018, p. 239) explains that King refused the false choice between abolition of all poverty and the debt owed for the specific harm done to black people. It is for climate justice to mount a demand against precarity and to collaborate with all difficult, precarious subjects. Not doing so is antithetical to the project of

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<sup>14</sup> According to the Portland Housing Bureau, "[t]here are no neighborhoods affordable to rent for the average Black, Latino, Native American, and single mother households" (Portland Housing Bureau 2017, p. 9).

building the beloved community and without such a campaign, as King saw, there is a great deal more that black, brown, white, and global south populations could lose (*ibid.*). The resistance to lowering emissions in this country turns on race; so much depends on how race is elaborated in collective acts and demands.

Increasingly, economists and other scholars suggest that it is no longer possible to both stabilize the climate and pursue growth of any kind, even green, particularly in the global north ([Hay and Payne 2013](#); [Raworth 2017](#)). Consequently, some argue that the strategic focus of climate politics should not be on fossil fuels at all, but instead on growth ([Hickel 2016](#); [Stuart et al. 2017](#)). Degrowth advocates propose selective and incremental downscaling in the US, Australia, Japan and Europe, with some sectors growing and others declining, while other parts of the world would grow ([Gough 2017](#)). This would require that some oil is used rather than keeping it all in the ground ([Schwartzman 2015](#)), while everyone limits per capita emissions to the level found only in the least wealthy countries ([Stanton 2017](#))—in other words lowering emissions by 70% to allow the least energy-intensive to increase per capita consumption by 30% ([Capellán-Pérez et al. 2015](#)).

Rather than growth and jobs, Doreen Massey and Michael Rustin suggest “a reassertion of the public against the private, and a rebalancing away from the individual and towards the collective” ([Massey and Rustin 2014](#), p. 186). Public consumption is more eco-efficient than private consumption and has a disproportionate benefit on the post-tax income of lower income groups ([Gough 2017](#)). Those states with more publicly funded welfare emit less carbon than those, like the US, where people must buy health care, education, housing, internet, and transportation on the private market ([Gough 2017](#), p. 163). Ian [Gough \(2017\)](#) argues that it is possible to lower emissions and not grow while protecting the population, but only through income redistribution and raising the share of public social consumption. This could occur by cutting work hours, increasing government social spending, guaranteeing a minimum income, setting an income maximum (6 to 1), significantly raising taxes on land, inheritance and capital transfers, levying a \$200/metric ton carbon tax,<sup>15</sup> and socializing services necessary for the public good (*ibid.*, p. 181). Others argue, similarly, for free transit and higher education, debt cancellation, universal basic income or basic services, and putting land into the public domain to end cycles of speculation. Rather than the Green New Deal idea that the route to climate sense and justice is through a green economy (The Corp Network, cited in [Luke 2009](#), p. 18), the proposal here suggests that greater public social consumption results in an economy favorable to people and climate.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, what should be emphasized are the race and class dimensions of consumption and the rising per capita emissions variations within rather than between countries ([Chancel and Picketty 2015](#)), as a comparison of places like the Bronx and Manhattan shows ([Cohen 2016b](#)). The emissions of the wealthy everywhere play an outsized role in total emissions (see [Chakravarty et al. 2009](#); [Chancel and Picketty 2015](#); [Cohen 2016a, 2016b](#)). The top 10% of emitters globally are responsible for 45% of emissions and of the top 1% of emitters, half of these (12% of its citizens) are in the US ([Gough 2017](#)). The top 1% of Americans produce 50 times the world average per year ([Chancel and Picketty 2015](#), p. 29). Tyndall Centre Deputy Director Kevin Anderson extends responsibility for 40–50% of emissions to those making over £30K per year (\$39,000) ([Anderson 2012](#); [Knox 2015](#), p. 96). On the basis of this responsibility, [Chancel and Picketty \(2015\)](#) propose to tax carbon on the basis of who emits the most rather than a regressive, flat carbon tax.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> In deeply unequal countries like the US, the carbon price has to be very high to alter the behavior of the wealthy who contribute so substantially to emissions, unless there is an additional tax on luxuries ([Gough 2017](#)).

<sup>16</sup> Even now, facing climate change, Marxist theorists will be critical of any longing for Sweden’s democratic socialism (e.g., [Dean 2017a](#)) and proposals to use the state to redistribute wealth from carbon pricing. While their critiques may reflect an accurate reading of capitalism and the state, they offer few alternatives ([Pearse 2014](#)). Meanwhile, right-wing lawmakers propose regressive carbon taxes, emissions rise, more people join the precariat, and more migrants meet hostility as they flee north.

<sup>17</sup> [Chancel and Picketty’s \(2015\)](#) proposals include: all emitters above the world average contribute in proportion to their excess emissions (effort sharing: US and Canada 36%, China 15%); all top 10% emitters contribute in proportion to their emissions in excess of the threshold (US and Canada 46%, China 12%); and the top 1%, those who emit over 9.1 times world

## 6. Conclusions: Toward Abolition Climate Politics

The world is currently taking a path beyond a 2 °C average temperature-increase above pre-industrial levels (Climate Action Tracker 2017; Rogelj et al. 2015; Schwartzman 2015). Current progress toward UN voluntary abatement and local policies are insufficient to move us off that path (Allwood et al. 2017; Hansen et al. 2013; Rockström et al. 2016). Apart from a few academics and activists, no one is actually panicking (Colebrook 2011; Fong 2017). After all, ordinary life does not encompass a threat like climate disruption or radical changes to how we live. Existential provocations are difficult to acknowledge and a way through them is hard to imagine, let alone enact. Yet some are mobilizing because they know how climate change coupled with deepening inequality is unfolding. People are inspired to act *because* we are likely too late (Peaceful Uprising n.d., Stephenson 2015) to avert the 6th mass extinction, genocide in the Sahel (Pacala 2008), and countless socio-ecological catastrophes worse than hurricanes Katrina and María.

As a global demand, a US movement, and a universal ideal that becomes situated in the ‘slips and grips’ (Tsing 2004) forming climate politics in Oregon and Washington, climate justice wants transformative change to prevent the cataclysm of gross levels of inequality and a 2+ °C world. Its praxis makes it less tenable to maintain climate change in the domain of technocratic gatekeepers, although this post-political discourse remains dominant. Emissions are now linked to the ways certain racialized life is persistently devalued and delimited. In the US, structural racism is fundamental to the climate justice analysis and strongly informs activism through the idea of frontline leadership in solidaristic relationships defending interconnected issues. This praxis may be creating the basis for transformed socio-ecological life, but it also has its weaknesses. It is understandable to follow a politics of investment in communities when dispossession has been the rule, and to want to be heard when exclusion is commonplace. However, self-determination by the frontline may not lead to policy that is sufficiently protective of the communities of color it represents nor of the white precariat, racial capitalism’s collateral damage. The climate justice movement, caught by liberalism’s tools in liberal institutions, proposes reform. Lacking a critique of racial capitalism, it asks for green growth to help communities of color advance. Progressive neoliberalism influences the focus on recognition and inclusion against a more expansive and transformative politics for a non-racist, non-capitalist present, and a shot at survival. There is no demand for starting points like the regeneration of public social consumption or for more radical proposals like degrowth. The ways race is mobilized through climate justice limits the transformative potential of this politics just as it also affords it the possibility of becoming more.

The basis of abolition climate politics is Du Bois’ (1935) abolition democracy, an idea recognizing that the power of white supremacy is entrenched through capitalism (Balfour 2018). An abolitionist-imbued climate justice would acknowledge legacy environmental racisms (Ranganathan and Bratman 2018) and envision non-capitalist, -patriarchal and -supremacist relations with land, sea, and climate (Heynen 2015, 2016). The concept has been most eloquently and urgently articulated in the idea of prison abolition. My proposals drew on this literature to suggest that certain meliorist policies can be undertaken, but only if they are based in non-consent to the structure itself (Davis and Rodriguez 2000; Gilmore 2011). Critically, abolition is for everyone.

In 1967, Martin Luther King, Jr. thought that immediate and radical action was needed in the face of growing evidence that it was “*too late* to avert disaster”, referring to racialized brutality, poverty, and militarism (Balfour 2018, p. 252, my italics). Balfour argues that we ought to take belatedness as “a spur to action, in King’s words, to love” (ibid.). It is on this basis that climate justice

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average emissions are taxed (US and Canada 57%, China 6%). Noting that their proposals are unlikely to be instituted, they suggest a global tax on air tickets. Based on the share of air travel, the US and Canada would contribute the most (29% of the total). They would use revenues to finance the \$150 billion per year adaptation costs of the global south.



advocates act. Love looks like<sup>18</sup> people being disobedient in the West Roxbury Massachusetts lateral gas pipeline because Pakistan is digging anticipatory mass graves for heat deaths (DeChristopher 2016). However, climate justice must also be a movement for another world based on an analysis of the relations we live in, and a recognition that the climate cannot be compelled to be patient, unlike people. The proposals for CJ praxis outlined in the paper suggest meliorist (public redistribution) and transformative (socialist degrowth) routes against the current localist, market-led, and third sector-oriented approach. Such effort would be an investment in the people we are becoming, those new subjects constituted through utopian demands who do not just survive, but become more than our past, directing us towards the present we want now and willing a better future that is unrecognizable (Weeks 2012, pp. 198, 203, 221, 229).<sup>19</sup>

I suggest there are more things to ask for from policy, more people to collect under the climate justice umbrella as co-producers of demands, and more radical things to say in the now more audible voice of the movement. Abolition climate politics requires a socialist, antiracist framework to simultaneously refuse the continued extraction and use of fossil fuels in the global north, demand de-growth, reassert the public against the private, and thereby to extend an invitation to the people we are becoming.

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<sup>18</sup> 'Fossil fuel abolition' is a phrase I take from Tim DeChristopher who, in turn, was able to imagine it from the license and courage that prison abolition gave him. He served 21 months, including 3 weeks in solitary confinement, for bidding on oil and gas leases as an act of civil disobedience. Before being taken to jail, Tim DeChristopher told the judge, "[a]t this point of unimaginable threats on the horizon, this is what hope looks like . . . with countless lives on the line, this is what love looks like, and it will only grow" (Peaceful Uprising n.d.).

<sup>19</sup> In theorizing utopian demands and the affect necessary to make them, which she calls utopian hope, Kathi Weeks (2012, p. 202) asks "[w]hat would it mean to respond to the prospect of our own 'perishing' in a different future, a future in which neither we nor our children—to note that common trope by which we still might imagine a place for ourselves, or people bearing family resemblances to ourselves—would exist, and to respond, moreover, not with fear and anxiety but with joy and hope?" Utopian hope requires affirmation of the present without either denying suffering of the past or resenting the present it has produced, and then willing a new future in which the self, so affirmed, no longer exists.

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