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Chapter 8   
Sustaining Difference: Climate Change, Diet and the Materiality of Race

Nigel Clark and Yasmin Gunaratnam

Introduction

There is now overwhelming scientific evidence that human activity has changed the composition of the earth’s atmosphere in ways that are causing a gradual warming and may yet trigger runaway changes in global climate (IPCC 2007). People in many parts of the world are already bearing witness to the ways that their environments are changing. Communities in low-lying, arid, and polar regions fear that conditions may change to such an extent that they will no longer be able to sustain their current livelihoods and settlement patterns. Across much of the earth, the most generalized and hard-hitting impact of global heating is likely to be on the capacity to grow and harvest the food that ordinary people rely on for sustenance and income.

While the issue of human-induced climate change frequently puts fossil fuel use at the forefront of debates, we need to remember that most of the world’s peoples make only light or negligible use of fossilized hydrocarbons to provide for their daily needs Most of the food that sustains the global populace is still grown or sourced without need of fossil fuels or fossil fuel-based supplements (ETC Group 2009). It depends, as food provisioning has for nearly of the time we have been human, on ‘renewable’ resources – sunlight, soil, water, biological life. The cruel irony is that those who have historically relied least on non-renewable energy to meet their needs look likely to suffer the worst effects of global climate change. And increasingly, at climate change forums and other venues of political contestation, they are seeking to hold the heavier emitters of greenhouse gases to account.

In this way, the issue of climate change is deeply bound up with the question of justice at a global scale (Roberts and Parks 2007). To what extent those of us – mostly from the wealthier, temperate zones – who are most responsible for global heating ought to curb our current energy use and make amends to those who will suffer the worst consequences is perhaps the most intractable global political problem a globalizing humanity has yet faced. It is an issue that drove deep divisions through the negotiating parties at the 2009 COP 15 summit at Copenhagen, and it is likely to become increasingly intense as the impacts of climate change grow more severe. In April 2010, the British lawyer, Polly Higgins added to the debates about global responsibilities for climate change by launching a campaign to have ‘ecocide’ recognized by the United Nations as a ‘crime against peace’ that could be tried at the International Criminal Court. Higgins’ definition of ecocide is ‘[t]he extensive destruction, damage to or loss of ecosystem(s) of a given territory, whether by human agency or by other causes, to such an extent that peaceful enjoyment by the inhabitants of that territory has been severely diminished’. Higgins says that her starting point for the campaign was the basic question: ‘How do we create a duty of care to the planet, a pre-emptive obligation to not harm the planet?’ (Guardian 2010).

So far, while issues of global distribution of wealth, national sovereignty, and the value of different ways of life have been prominent in debates about responses to changing climate, the question of race has not featured prominently. There are, however, movements for ‘environmental justice’ which have for some decades been drawing attention to the disproportionate burden of environmental pollution and other ‘bads’ on the places where racially minoritized groups live. US environmental justice campaigners have made strident claims that Black and Hispanic communities are much more likely than non-minoritized populations to live near and suffer from the negative consequences of toxic waste and other pollutants. This is closely related to another set of arguments that these same groups are also likely to be relatively disadvantaged in their access to such environmental ‘goods’ as healthy, fresh agricultural produce and quality ‘green’ spaces.

With an increasingly global sphere of operations, environmental justice movements are turning to the present and future threat of climate change, and drawing attention to the ways in which it impacts unevenly and unfairly on ‘communities of color’. As Feldman and Hsu explain:

Race continues to play an active role in distinguishing between those who are relatively protected from (or compensated for) environmental harm and “most of the earth’s inhabitants”, who are left with the disproportionate burdens and not the material benefits of resource depletion, toxic dumping, and climate change. (2007, 199)

While making a case for the profoundly ‘material’ consequences of climate change and related threats to racially marked bodies and communities, environmental justice movements are very much in the business of seeking to overcome the differences signaled by racial categorization. Especially in the context of a global problem that requires global cooperation, what is sought are new forms of justice that apply to all people without bias or categorical exclusion. The imperative is to think through race in order to arrive at a juncture beyond race. The assumption seems to be that the last thing that we need is to gaze across the divides gouged by economic and environmental injustice and apprehend others who we imagine to be fundamentally different from ourselves. What is required, Ziser and Sze argue, are ‘new kinds of ecocultural narratives that do not pit nation against nation, race against race …’ (2007, 386).

While sharing in the desire to move beyond race as it is currently most often understood and experienced, this chapter attempts to do something different with race – in its conjunction with climate and food. Without losing sight of the profound importance of social inequalities in the impact of global climate change, and all the complex issues of justice that attend these divisions, we want to take climatic variability as an incitement to approach the question of human difference from another angle. The recent attention to the potential changes in the global climate system and its consequences for contemporary social life of life has also generated new understandings about the way that the earth’s climate has varied in the past, and its impact on our distant ancestors. In the same way, addressing the present and future impacts of changing climate on food supply is also opening new perspectives on the way that past human populations have sustained themselves under conditions of climatic variability.

Most of these insights are coming from the physical sciences. They feed into discourses about global governance, informing predictions and strategies of mitigation and adaptation to climate change. But there are other things we might do with this data, different ways it might be combined with other kinds of stories and imperatives. In this chapter, we suggest how the escalating interest in the long-term climatic history of our planet might prompt us to think afresh about what Kay Anderson terms ‘the puzzle of human variety on earth’ (2007, 27).

The idea of thinking through the ‘social’ in terms of its constitutive entanglement with more-than-human forces is by now a well-established theme in the social sciences and humanities. As Bruno Latour inquires, ‘What would a human be without elephants, plants, lions, cereals, oceans, ozone or plankton?’ (1998, 231), a rhetorical question announcing a reconsideration of human being in terms of the heterogeneous elements with which it forms compounds and collectives. But thus far, such multiplication of the ‘ingredients’ out of which we imagine sociable life to be assembled has tended to remain fixated on contemporary or relatively recent achievements. What might happen, we ask, if such ‘relational materialities’ were extended to encompass the variable forces, the shifting elements, the changing availability of materials with which our distant relatives composed themselves over ‘deep’ geological and evolutionary time?

In this chapter, we negotiate between the proposition that certain categories of ‘marked’ human bodies are disproportionately exposed to the negative effects of contemporary global climate change and the idea that *all* living bodies bear the physical traces of long-term interchanges with dynamic environments. We look not only at the ways in which collective capacities to produce food are currently being impacted upon in unequal ways around the planet, but also ask how the social bodies in question are themselves manifestations of the deep historical variability of edible resources.

Though sensitive to critical accounts revealing the malign effects of previous attempts to compound race and climate, we are interested in a different topology of relationships. We suggest that there are ways in which the concept of race might be creatively reworked in the context of a radically expanded sense of climatic, biological, geological and even cosmological influences on human bodies. While there are times, as we face climatic crisis, when we should stress the shared humanity of all members of our species, we argue that there are also situations in which we might usefully acknowledge the physiological or phenotypic variety that our bodies present to one another. There are moments when those who encounter each other at political borders, at climate forums, or in metropolitan streets might take inspiration from the divergent paths that their ancestors have taken through the earth’s turbulent past: occasions when we might wish to make a virtue out of the different ways that our bodies bear the traces of ancient tussles with volatile climate and variable nutrients.

Race, Famine and Moral Climatology

One of the most significant – and unfair – impacts of predicted global climate change is likely to be on agricultural production. Recent studies show that the early-industrializing nations with the weightiest per-capita carbon footprints may even benefit from a warmer planet, while those already underprivileged regions whose historical contribution to the build-up of greenhouse gases have been light look set for an especially rough ride. As Mike Davis sums up the anticipated regional repercussions of climate change on agriculture in the closing decades of this century:

Even in the most optimistic simulations, the agricultural systems of Pakistan (a 20 percent decrease from current farm output predicted) and Northwestern India (a 30 percent decrease) are likely to be devastated, along with much of the Middle East, the Maghreb, the Sahel belt, Southern Africa, the Caribbean, and Mexico. Twenty-nine developing countries will lose 20 percent or more of their current farm output to global warming, while agriculture in the already rich north is likely to receive, on average, an eight percent boost. (2008)

The interests of burgeoning industrial powers like China and India complicate crude north-south divisions. However, it is clear to many critical commentators that the emerging cartography of climatic under-privilege has disturbing resonances with the racialized geopolitics of the colonial era. These broad brush-strokes of global disparity resonate at more localized scales, as it becomes apparent that racially minoritized groups within more prosperous regions may also be experiencing more than their share of the ill-effects of climate change. Recent reports indicate that African Americans are already suffering disproportionately from the damaging health effects of global heating (CBCF 2004). The idea of pronounced racialization of susceptibility to extreme weather was graphically rendered in the media coverage of Hurricane Katrina’s devastation of the U.S. Gulf States in August 2005. It remains debatable whether the intensity of the 2005 Atlantic hurricane season was exacerbated by human–induced ocean warming. Yet, Katrina also made it clear that in the world’s wealthiest nation, race is a key variable in determining who is most exposed to the immediate and lasting impacts of disaster.

It is unlikely, however that most of the privations wrought by changing climate will be this dramatic or as telegenic. For those whose lives are closely bound up with non-industrialized agricultural production – predominantly living in the Global South – the impacts of global heating are more likely to be slow onset, drawn-out and recurrent. Altered patterns of rainfall – manifest as both drought and deluge, outbreaks of micro-organismic and insect pestilence, salinization, along with heat stress on both cultigens and cultivators are on the long-term agenda for much of world’s rural populace.

But care must be taken when depicting broad spectrum scenarios of climatic vulnerability and precarity of food supply, especially when these map closely onto existing imaginaries of ‘third world’ underdevelopment or backwardness. In western thought there is a long and troubling history of imagining that the people who dwell in the planet’s more torrid zones are susceptible to the effects of fickle climatic forces in ways which predestine them for lives of poverty and degradation: a depiction intended to contrast with the industriousness and probity of the inhabitants of northern temperate latitudes. As geographer David Livingstone explains, it has long been assumed – and documented – that climate is a primary determinant of particular human characteristics, temperaments and dispositions. The discursive formation he terms ‘moral climatology’ involves ‘both a widespread tendency to deploy moralistic language in depicting climatic conditions *and* a conviction that it is entirely reasonable to read moral order straight off patterns of global climate’ (2002, 160).

Typically, Europeans, and later North Americans grounded the virtues they imagined most defined themselves in the geographical regions they inhabited, and projected less favored traits onto other zones – with a particular disparagement of the tropics. A critical force in racial climatology’s repertoire was its evolutionary temporalizing or the conversion of time into space, producing geo-normative dualities such as ‘primitive’ versus ‘advanced’ or ‘backward’ versus ‘modern’ (Agnew 1999, 32). In this schema, Johannes Fabian has recognized that:

Time may almost totally be divested of its vectorial, physical connotations. Instead of being a measure of movement it may appear as a quality of states; a quality, however that is unequally distributed among human populations of this world. Earlier talk about peoples without history belongs here, as do more sophisticated distinctions such as the ones between “hot” and “cold” societies. (2002, 23)

Such temporal projections were flexible enough to encompass an appreciation of the fecundity of warmer climes: that recurrent European fascination with the biotic luxuriance of the tropics that went as far as speculation that especially abundant regions may have been the site of the ‘original garden’. But even this celebration of tropical plenitude was deeply ambivalent. When famine struck, most infamously in Bengal in 1770, the succumbing of local populations to hunger and malnutrition-related disease was soon diagnosed as a symptom of the allures of an excessively generous environment. Taken as evidence that tropical peoples were lulled into passivity and fatalism by the overbearing fertility of their surroundings, starvation could be read as a moral failing that required the enlightened intervention of a European colonial administration to be made good (Arnold 1999, 95).

So potent was the image of famine as a cipher of backwardness that even locally it could affix a starving population to the lower rungs of the evolutionary scale. The Celtic fringe of the British Isles did not have to await a devastating fungal infestation of the potato crop to attract racialized disparagement from their English neighbors and colonizers. But the mass starvation of the 1840s helped cement the depiction of the Irish as morally depraved and developmentally stunted, or in the words of a *Punch* journalist, as ‘the missing link between the gorilla and the negro’ (cited in Pearce 2010, 29).

But even the horrific death toll and depopulation wrought by Ireland’s ‘Great Famine’ pales next to the untallied tens of millions who perished across the monsoonal regions in a series of catastrophic famines that Mike Davis (2001) describes as ‘late Victorian holocausts’. Drawing on new understandings of the periodicities of global climate, Davis shows how, at certain junctures in the 1870s and 1890s, a set of particularly pronounced episodes of rainfall deficit that struck the monsoon belt happened to overlap with significant downturns in what was then a newly globalizing economic system. This concatenation of forces converged on agrarian communities across India, China, Brazil and neighboring regions, at a time when an ascending ideological commitment to market forces encouraged harsh global competition while disparaging any mobilization of relief and aid. While there was nothing new about periodic climatic extremity, Davis argues, what had changed across much of the tropical world was that traditional practices aimed at mitigating drought-induced famine had been subverted or dismantled. His verdict is unequivocal:

We are not dealing … with “lands of famine” becalmed in stagnant backwaters of world history, but with the fate of tropical humanity at the precise moment (1870–1914) when its labor and products were being dynamically conscripted into a London-centered world economy. Millions died, not outside the “modern world system”, but in the very process of being forcibly incorporated into its economic and political structures. (2001, 9)

As Davis contends, the integration of tropical and sub-tropical peasantries into the world system in the context of debilitating drought and famine enabled the very relations of economic inequality that had precipitated disaster to be entrenched still deeper. So deeply, in fact, that the global disparities set in train in Victorian times remain with us today.

Climate Justice and the Body

Whether the call is to ‘Feed the World’, to ‘Make Poverty History’, or to stave off global climate chaos, political activists inevitably tread a fine line between exposing geopolitically uneven vulnerabilities and reinforcing tropes of tropical climes predestined for catastrophe. While the moral climatologies of the colonial period may have been subjected to thorough-going critique, it is difficult to evade the after-image of ‘famine lands’ where sun-browned bodies struggle incessantly against elemental inclemency.

Most progressive thinkers would have us divest these bodies of anything reminiscent of biological or material underpinnings. In its drive to purge western thought of the racial determinisms of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, ‘critical race theory’ has shifted the focus onto the ways that racialized bodies are produced by specific discourses and practices (see Gunaratnam 2003). Categorizing bodies in terms of ‘race’, it is argued, may have profound material consequences, but the clustering of visible markers itself is seen as having its source in socio-cultural processes rather than in the supposedly less mutable realm of biology. Aside from the thematization of racially uneven impacts of global heating by environmental justice theorists, consideration of race in discourses of climate change seems to have been overshadowed by the stress on global economic disparities. But in significant ways, the handling of human diversity in liberal and radical climate politics resonates with critical race theory’s insistence on socio-cultural rather than bio-material determination.

To counter the often implicit assumption amongst privileged sectors of the global community that their life styles are ‘not up for negotiation’, those who are committed to climate justice have been exploring more equitable ways of apportioning the opportunities and costs of consuming the earth’s non-renewable energy. Most of these proposals hinge on the assumption that no-one on the planet should be entitled to levels of fossil fuel consumption or greenhouse gas emission that are denied to others.

Expressing the logic behind his influential contraction and convergence model, Aubrey Meyer characteristically claims that ‘the right to emit carbon dioxide is a human right that should be allocated on an equal basis to all of humankind’ (2000, 19). There are numerous ways that equitable distribution of the costs and benefits of greenhouse gas-emitting activities is being framed or calculated, but what they share is a fidelity to the fundamental premise of modern justice: the ideal of impartiality. Which is to say, climate justice seeks to treat everyone as if they are of equal value – undeterred by privilege, antecedence or categorical exclusion.

But justice enacted according to these precepts it is not without exclusionary effects of its own. As Latour puts it, in regard to the modern staging of politics more generally: ‘We were told that all of us – on entering this … public sphere – had to leave aside in the cloakroom our own attachments, passions and weaknesses’ (2005, 30). The key venues of juridico-political deliberation over climate change are no exception. Though climate is clearly a process that works its effects on the receptive surfaces on the biological body, the conventions of dispassion demand the abstraction of interests from bodily or affective specificity. For even in the context of global heating, justice, as Alan Ryan has observed, is a ‘chilly virtue’ (cited in Dobson 1998, 229). Warm-blooded, fleshy singularity is not its *modus operandi*.

And yet, in spite of the prevalent rules of conduct, embodied and personalized experience has managed to carve out a niche for itself in the clefts of climate politics. Envoys from afflicted zones come to the climate summits bearing testimonials from compatriots who feel themselves to be living through the tribulations of global warming. These narratives of suffering or loss demand to be taken in good faith rather than being subjected to critical scrutiny. In this way, they complicate the ideal, and masculinist, impartiality of justice (see Berlant 2001). At the same time, however, such stories are also intended to provoke and excite the quest for just resolutions. A closer proximity to the lived experience of climate change, as conveyed by the anguished faces or voices of those caught on the frontline, it is hoped, will help move others to care enough to imagine and make the necessary conciliations.

But if a small window for the body – in its sensuous and affective particularity – has opened in the corridors of climate adjudication, how much more of our respective corporealities might we wish to draw into the frame? There is, as we are learning all the time, nothing new about a changing climate exerting pressure on the human organism. Those spikes and troughs in the global climate system that Davis showed to be entwined with emergent market forces have been impacting upon human bodies since long before there were global economies or even agrarian communities. Such variability, it can be argued, has not simply born down upon us, but has helped make us the complex embodied beings that we are. As sociologist Barbara Adam expounds:

A symphony of rhythms and temporalities … underpins our development as humans and as living organisms. It marks us as creatures of this earth, as beings that are constituted by a double temporality: rhythmically structured within and embedded in the rhythmic organization of the cosmos. (1998, 13)

Thinking in this way encourages us to attend more searchingly to the bodies that convene over the current climate crisis, to ask how they have arrived at the places from which they have come. What have they endured to get where they are? What relations or attachments have helped them along the way? To take up a prompt from Gilles Deleuze: ‘The question concerns the forces that make up man: with what other forces do they combine, and what is the compound that emerges?’ (1988, 88). This quickly raises the issue of the differing forces, the range of combinations that have made us who we are. It returns us – via the climate change problematic – to ‘the puzzle of human variety on earth’, suggesting avenues of inquiry that critical race theory and progressive climate politics have not yet wished to pursue.

Climate and Diet in Human Evolution

That our activities are capable of transforming the planet in its entirety is surely one of the biggest shocks that the human species has had to confront for a long time. But perhaps just as surprising – and no less worrying – is the gathering evidence about just how unstable global climate is even without our intervention. Glaciologist Richard Alley sums up the history of our planet’s climate as one in which: ‘Change is the only unchangeable reality, and change will continue’ (2000, 86). New evidence about the movement in and out of glacial eras shows that each major shift is rent by multitudes of rapid warmings and coolings that see global weather tipped into completely different states in as little as a few years. And this sort of vicious vacillation turns out to be the rule rather than the exception for most of the time humans have been around. In the words of paleoclimatologist William J Burroughs: ‘for more than 90 per cent of the time that our species has existed on this planet it has had to grapple with an immeasurably more capricious climate’ (2005, 16).

Our ‘becoming human’ – the psycho-social and physiological transformations that have turned us into what we are now – is caught up in this climatic fluctuation, if in ways that are unlikely to ever be fully deciphered. The magnitude of environmental changes which ancestral humans and hominids have lived through needs to be treated carefully in order to avoid crude physical determinism. However, the uncertainty about future climate behooves us to learn all we can from previous episodes of instability. Nature may not set us on a single, unwavering path, but as Elizabeth Grosz argues, ‘it bequeaths to all the forms of culture a series of problems or provocations … which each cultural form must address’ (2005, 51). As Grosz continues, responding to these incitements is not just about effecting socio-cultural change, it is also a matter of a succession of biological bodies engaging with, transforming and being transformed by the elements which make life possible (2004, 2).

Paleoanthropologists currently locate the divergence of the genus *Homo* (composed of numerous ‘human’ species, one of which eventually led to *Homo sapiens*) from fellow ‘great apes’ in the east of Africa some 2.4 million years ago. This is around the time when increased aridity in the Rift area of eastern Africa led to a reduction in tree cover, and expansion of the savannahs, exacerbated by repeated multi-millennial transitions in and out of glacial episodes at higher latitudes (Denton 1999, Behrensmeyer 2006). The work of paleoclimatologists suggests that three main ‘forcing’ mechanisms were at work: regional tectonic uplift, orbital forcing (changes in the tilt of the earth’s axis and orbit) and global climate changes brought about by reductions in atmospheric carbon dioxide (Maslin and Christensen 2007). As anthropologist Yves Coppens describes the emergence of the earliest humans: ‘We are partly the fruit of an astronomic event, helped by a tectonic one, which produced a dramatic drought in periequatorial eastern Africa’ (1999, 17).

Even social thinkers who have come round to the idea that more-than-human elements help compose the social still have much to learn from such accounts that regularly include forces which so exceed the human as to be not even of this planet. But it is equally vital that we give full consideration to the multiple and diverse ways in which humans and other species have responded to the ‘provocation’ of external pressures. In the context to vacillating climate, paleobiologists remind us, human or hominid evolution needs to be considered in relation to the mediating role of other species, and the generalized tension between local ecosystems and global climate change (Behrensmeyer 2006, Foley 1999). This brings many factors into play, including competition with other species and the impact of predators and pathogens. Yet amongst all the variables, researchers tend to afford a special cogency to the shifting constitution of the human diet and the developments that surround food procurement.

The timing and the significance of changes in diet remain highly contested. Some researchers view the turn to meat-eating as pivotal in the divergence of hominids from other apes. Emphasis has been given to the psycho-social advances associated with collective hunting as well as to the opportunities that arose out of an expanded range of edible resources (Owen-Smith 1999). Others focus on the unique human capacity to use fire, pointing to the greatly increased energy value of cooked food as well as the social developments attending associated with life around the campfire (Wrangham 2010). Wherever the stress falls, there is broad agreement that major shifts in diet were reflected in altered physiology, from cranial structure and dentition through to the composition of intestinal bacteria: changes of a kind that continued all the way down to the relatively recent domestication of plants and animals and the move to settled agrarian social life (Ungar 2007, Leach 2003). More than simple cause and effect relations in human behavior and morphology, what such accounts each underscore is the variety and variability of the ‘ingredients’ out of which human life has been shaped over the very *longue durée*. Taken together, they each tell a rich and complex tale of more-than-human networking: of shifting encounters, mergers and incorporations.

There are at least two major factors that make it clear that this is no simple tale of ‘ascent’ – or unilinear development – of our species. One is, as we have seen, the accumulating evidence of the volatility of global climate, and its often dramatic and unforgiving impingement on organismic life. The other, closely related to the pulsing climate systems, is the story of hominid or human colonization of nearly all the earth’s landmasses. Viewed in concert, these two thematics offer several lessons: that of the utter precariousness of human life, of the fact that the various lineages and branches of our species have faced very different kinds of challenges and forged disparate sets of attachments, and of the possibility that ‘our’ development and that of our ‘relatives’ might just have easily taken divergent pathways with alternative evolutionary outcomes.

Fossil records indicate that hominids first radiated out of Africa some 1.8 million years ago and colonized much of the ‘old world’ of Eurasia. But the current consensus, supported by analysis derived from mitochondrial DNA, indicates that all living humans derive from a single, tiny African group, who migrated outwards around 100,000 years ago. There is no known continuity between these ‘modern’ humans and the earlier migrants out of Africa, no living remnant populations, no evidence of mixity or inter-breeding (Burroughs 2005, 114). This means that every other wave of migration out of Africa – including those who successfully colonized a whole range of diverse habitats in the Eurasian continent and survived fluctuating climatic conditions for over a million and a half years – came to a complete and irrevocable end. Aside from opening the intriguing possibility that ‘modern’ human beings, but for contingent circumstances might well have ended up cohabitating with range of hominid ‘others’, this story also puts the stress on the relative brevity of the *Homo sapien* global diaspora and thus on the proximity of all extant branches of our species.

But if it really makes a difference what nonhuman entities we humans forge alliances with – whether it is cybernetic machines, companion species or microbial ecologies – then we ought to take seriously the divergent compositions *Homo sapiens* has entered into over this 100,000 year span. This period of time marks a busy interval encompassing a glacial and interglacial episode, and migration across nearly all the landmasses and latitudes of the planet. Such events and activities are all the more remarkable if we contemplate the evidence from biology that speciation – full divergence from a common lineage – can occur in less than 25,000 years (Gould 2002). In this light, the fact that our species has maintained its fundamental unity over the last 100,000 years or so is a significant achievement – and not simply a state of being that we can take for granted. It is an accomplishment that seems to suggest, following recent human evolutionary theory, that the same capacities for social networking that enabled successful migration also facilitated the continued contact and intermingling of every one of the extremely dispersed offshoots of our species (see Dunbar et al. 2010).

But if human unity might best be seen as a contingent, provisional and socio-culturally conditioned feat – an ongoing performance rather than an essence or a given – so too might we view the differences which that enactment is constantly working with and across in this way. The idea of innate or essential differences between human populations may be every bit as unsupportable as critical race theory insists, but this rather uncontroversial and routine claim still leaves the ‘puzzle’ and the ‘provocation’ of material variation to be addressed. Far from the rigidity of biological essentialism, what we need to account for is the social and cultural capacity of bands of human beings to enter unfamiliar environments, endure new kinds of bio-material challenges, and forge novel sets of alliances – and to hold their ground long enough for this new constellation of forces to leave its mark on corporeal and social identities. Whether it is a case of varying facial features, composition of intestinal flora, pigmentation of skin, skeletomuscular proportions, sites and rates of fat deposition, resistance to pathogens, or efficiency in metabolizing nutrients, physical differences between human populations might be seen as the tribute that biology pays to successful socio-cultural performances (see McEvoy et al. 2006, Burroughs 2005, 147–148)

‘Life on Earth retains a memory of its past’, proclaims biologist Lynn Margulis. ‘Living bodies store in their complex chemistry memories of past environmental limitations they overcame’ (2001, 18). Our species is no exception. What this also means is that when any one of us makes contact across the climate negotiating table with someone who is perceptibly (and imperceptibly) different from ourselves, what we are each apprehending is the unfinished outcome of a vast lineage of interconnected bodies – bodies that have grappled with and overcome all manner of environmental limitations. In the absence of a more apposite term, or in the interests of provocation, we might refer to these differences as ‘racial’ – with the vital proviso that this entails the proliferation, complication and provisionalizing of what counts as ‘race’ (see Saldanha 2006, 2007).

Curiosity and Care in the Time of Climate Crisis

At the height of Hurricane Katrina, hastily hatched bulletin boards like ‘hurricanehousing’ and ‘katrinahelp’ buzzed with offers of hospitality. Many of these posts were at once urgent, practical and poignant:

I AM A SINGLE 30 YEAR OLD WOMEN WITH A 2 YEAR OLD DAUGHTER AND I DON'T HAVE MUCH BUT I CAN OFFER A PLACE TO LIVE FOOD COMPUTER USAGE A WARM PLACE TO SLEEP PRIVATE BATHING AND A SHOULDER TO CRY ON. I AM OFFERING HOUSING TO ANY SINGLE WOMEN AND CHILD EDERLY AND OR A COUPLE. I AM AN AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMAN BUT IT DOESNT MATTER. EMAIL ME AT (msdeanneg@yahoo.com) call 24hrs 713-271-1595.

In the face of a cataclysmic weather event, race ceases to matter. Or does it? Perhaps in this example race matters precisely because of one woman’s courage to allow a deeply felt sense of the needs of strangers to override a perceptible difference that she well knows retains its significance in her part of the world (see also Saldanha 2006). But is this a way of conceiving of difference that we ought to invest in, yet again? After all the lessons of critical race theory, all the interrogation of the destructive effects of raciologies past and present, why wager on a concept many would hope is on its way to extinction?

There are reasons why such risks might be taken, we are suggesting, but their logic is neither simple nor unambivalent. Today, while concentrations of atmospheric carbon dioxide continue to escalate, global climate change negotiations are at an impasse. The main sticking point is the issue of justice and equality on a planetary scale. The ‘global South’ knows itself to be at once less responsible for climate change, more vulnerable, and less equipped for mitigation (Roberts and Parks 2007, 7, 97). How to deal with this profound asymmetry, in a context in which limiting overall carbon emissions seems to preclude the world’s less developed economies from following pathways of industrial modernization taken by more developed nations is a problem so profound and complex that no workable solution currently exists.

To break the ‘North-South deadlock’ before the planet’s climate system passes over an irreversible ‘tipping point’, Timmons Roberts and Bradley Parks argue, will take a much greater commitment to justice and equality on the part of the North than it has currently demonstrated. Even when the fundamental injustice of the present predicament is acknowledged, responses have thus far tended to be slow, self-serving, parsimonious, and deeply conditional (Roberts and Parks 2007, 221–225). At the close of a clearheaded and sober analysis of the prospects of working through the North-South stalemate in global climate policy, Roberts and Parks come round to the idea that the west must show that it truly ‘cares about poverty’ (2007, 232). To this end, they cite Robert Keohane’s counsel that ‘[c]ool practitioners of self-interest … may be less able to cooperate productively than individuals who are governed by emotions that send reliable signals, such as love and reliability’ (2007, 226).

This swing away from the prioritizing of relations of reciprocity, calculation and equivalence chimes with Jacques Derrida’s claim that for justice to come anywhere near to attainment it must, above all, be *desired* (1992, 25). Even the most assiduous calculation and tallying, he urges, is never enough: whoever is in the position to pursue justice must care – deeply, passionately – for those who suffer injustice. In other words, we cannot, should not, leave our passions, attachments and susceptibilities in the cloakroom. This desire, Derrida and fellow ethical philosophers have insisted, does not depend on a sense of our ‘sameness’ with those we find ourselves caring about. Rather, they take flight from our intimations that the others whose suffering or injustice we wish to address are different from us in vital ways: that their experience, their story, their pathway though life has not been the same as ours. Which means that a sense of imagined or perceived difference is not a hurdle to justice, but its very incitement. Care, responsibility, the quest for justice, in the words of Emmanuel Levinas, is ‘[t]he adventure separation opens’ (1969, 292).

Such concerns with a kind of care that reaches out across difference are rare in climate change discourses and only sporadic in the field of race studies, though they have been, from early on, associated with a phenomenological interest in the sharing of food and vital sustenance between bodies (see Levinas 1998, 55). What this thematic suggests is that difference or otherness is something about which our curiosity matters: not in the manner of deciphering others once and for all, but more in the sense of a deep, intrigue or enthrallment. Referring explicitly to ‘races’, ‘colors’, and ‘traits’, Jean-Luc Nancy contends that the quest for ‘equality of all has for its very condition the nonsameness of “humanity”. And along with this equality, the curiosity of each about the other’ (1997, 158).

With regard to climate change crisis, we are proposing, this coupling of curiosity and care might well be nourished by a stronger sense of the long and fraught journeys that every line of human beings has taken to arrive at their current destination. Human life, we have been arguing with the help of the ‘paleo’ stories of climatologists and anthropologists, has often been precarious. Our species survived and held together while numerous other branches of the genus *Homo* did not. Our celebrated human ‘unity’ is thus forever haunted by the absence of near-relatives who might still have walked amongst us. We are, all of us, the lucky ones, even amongst our own species. Speaking of bouts of abrupt climate, evolutionary psychologist William Calvin muses, ‘Our ancestors lived through hundreds of such episodes – but each became a population bottleneck, one that eliminated most of their relatives. We are the improbable descendants of those [who] survived – and later thrived’ (2002, 3).

Each of us, then, derives our current capacities and capabilities from a miraculously unbroken relay of ancestors, ‘a chain of bodies’ to whom we might see ourselves as being profoundly indebted – if in ways which we can never fully bring to light (Grosz 2004, 2). But the bodies we have inherited, while they may have shared the same volatile planet, have often taken very different routes. Human physiological or phenotypic variety signals, amongst other things, that we have survived and thrived differently. Wherever the scene in which we address each other, whatever its other socio-cultural interpretations, perceptible difference can also be viewed as a marker of distance, of a geographical and deep historical sundering. Our corporeal publicity announces that your people and mine, at some point, parted company, endured different conditions, made different choices, or had alternative trajectories imposed upon us. It hints, if often in ambiguous and misreadable cues, that our predecessors faced different ecological and geophysical provocations, found different solutions to the challenge of vacillating climate, variable food supply, shifting environments, and forged different networks of heterogeneous entities.

When members of visibly distinct human populations meet, it may well be over a hiatus of 15, 30, or 60, 000 years, and one or many continental or oceanic divides. The miracle of any such meeting is that we can so often bridge these yawning spatio-temporal and cataclysm-strewn rifts in as little as a split second. Alongside the novel and ongoing assembling of its institutional architectures, it is such encounters that make the trans-global arenas of climate change negotiations so remarkable. Though perhaps no more remarkable than the interactions of travelers or the everyday life of the metropolis.

These bodily differences may yet come to matter in ways few of us have ever experienced, and can probably scarcely imagine. What we now ought to be seriously considering is that the sort of extreme climatic incitements to morphological change and diversification that our species has weathered over the long term, but have been spared over most of the last 11,000 years or so, may be about to return. ‘The role of climate in the origin and adaptations of humans relates not only to our past’, paleobiologist Anna Behrensmeyer reminds us, ‘but also, potentially, to our future’ (2006, 476). Comfortingly, as Burroughs adds ‘[h]umans … are capable of adapting remarkably well to hot conditions’ (2005, 295). But he goes on to stress just how vulnerable we remain to abrupt climate change. When we consider the fragility of urban infrastructures, the standardized and finely-tuned nature of modern agricultural production, and the fact that over 600 million people currently live within 30 feet of sea level, there is every reason for anxiety. And even without major changes in the global climate system, the issue of how local people relate to migrants and other ‘strangers’ in their midst is already a fraught one (Dikeç, Clark, and Barnett 2009, Gunaratnam 2009).

Both in regard to the global environmental changes that now look inevitable and those that might still be averted, we have been proposing that the ethics and politics of climate change cries out for a warm-blooded supplement to the evidence-based calculus of cause and effect. Or what Levinas referred to as ‘a sort of paroxysm of materiality’ (1969, 256). The same coupling of care and curiosity that might help enliven the quest for justice, we would suggest, might also excite new outbursts of hospitality at a time when food and water security, livelihoods and living spaces are in jeopardy. In this regard we ask whether proliferating the base matter of our variability, rather than subtracting from it, might best serve to arrest the slide from impartiality to indifference when the heat is really on.

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