

# Climate Security: Refusing the Lure of Critique

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### Three Preliminary Points

Firstly, this paper is not providing a critical conceptualization of climate security but, in fact, its starting assumption is that there is very little room for any interesting work if we take a critique of climate security literally. There are two forms of direct critical engagement. Those that concern policy discourses and are focused upon problem-solving the climate crisis and with policy effectiveness. There are differences and therefore criticisms of other positions: Should we have mitigation or geo-engineering? How will the costs be distributed? How do we avoid prejudices and power interests undermining objectivity? etc. But, to my mind these are not critical discourses per se. Secondly, there are the critical approaches that see climate security policies as reproducing problems of race, coloniality, gender, class etc. These critiques, while occasionally interesting, would apply equally well to any international policy agenda and implementation and generally offer very little to specific critical discussions of climate security.

Secondly, this paper engages and attempts to analyse critical approaches that work in relation to climate security that approach the problematic indirectly. I will first be considering the two dominant critical conceptions of indirect engagement with climate security, the 'liberal' approach, which argues that instead of doing climate security we should focus upon how to live with climate insecurities, 'living and dying well in the Anthropocene', and the 'decolonial' approach, which argues that instead of focusing upon climate security, the focus should be on climate justice, on why there is no united world or shared problematic, on making reparation for ongoing colonial violence, rather than privileged or 'White' concerns with a futural crisis or 'ending of the world'. I then counterpose these to a third perspective, which rejects approaches of affirmation or of reparation and instead calls for the 'ending of the world' rather than its salvage.

Thirdly, while there is a shared framework for the three approaches that I focus upon – they all start from climate insecurity as a problematic already entangled with race and coloniality, thus seeing this as enabling broader forms of epistemological or ontological critique – the purpose of this paper is to draw out distinctions between the three. To do this I provide readings of three recent books that heuristically work to enable an elaboration of these three modes of critique: the 'liberal', the 'decolonial' and the 'negativating'. All three start with the imbrication of race, climate change and critique in the 500 years of the modernist project, dating from the material, epistemological and ontological making of 'the world' since the fifteenth century. This shared understanding of the imbrication of race and climate security in the coloniality of modernity forms the epistemic or 'archaeological' base upon which important analytical, temporal, political and ethical distinctions can be drawn.

### Three Modes of Critique:

#### **Anthropocentrism/ Eurocentrism as Problem (Shared World)/ Liberal 'Realism'**

Jairus Grove's *Savage Ecology: War and Geopolitics at the End of the World* (2019)

<https://www.dukeupress.edu/savage-ecology>

The liberal critique sees the desire for climate security as an hubristic 'will to power' of Western elites and attempts to image a pure approach to climate security untainted by interests and power. Being reflexive, the best critical approaches today argue for humility, for pragmatism, for a caring or 'palliative politics', living with climate insecurity with awareness and grace. Climate security is tainted by geopolitics 'a form of life that pursues a savage ecology', a Euro-American global war on collective thriving. The Eurocene. In the face of this, we should consider other 'genres of the human'. The way out is to start with the encounter – to raise the world over the investigator (15). The problem is human-centric understanding; this is countered by seeing the human as just one 'form of life'. Thus, climate security involves a planetary awareness that it is 'not just humans but all things creatively striving toward complexity [that] come to make worlds out of their intractable dependence on and contribution to the environment' (2). This approach is a materially-grounded realism. But 'can realism be critical?' – Of course, we need to be more 'real' in our experience, in our humility.

It's not too difficult to detect the 'whiteness' and the privilege lingering at the tail end of the liberal imaginary, of the moral subject of the 'unscripted' encounter, with 'presumptive generosity' welcoming new 'incipient possibilities' and potentials in order to virtue signal the capacities of 'living well and dying well in the Anthropocene'. Jairus has caught some flack already for the 'whiteness' of this work (*Society and Space* <https://www.societyandspace.org/articles/a-reply-to-my-friends>) but these are essentially superficial critiques around citational issues and narrative content rather than the overall approach.

#### **The Divided World as Problem: Centring Race and Coloniality**

Malcolm Ferdinand's *Decolonial Ecology: Thinking from the Caribbean World* (2022)

<https://www.wiley.com/en-gb/Decolonial+Ecology:+Thinking+from+the+Caribbean+World-p-9781509546220>

The decolonial approach (some of work of which is alluded to in Jason's paper, 'The Unbearable Whiteness of Climate Security'), considers climate security to be a white discourse disavowing the bigger problem of coloniality. A decolonial critique attempts to shift the discourse from climate change as a white problem, to climate justice as a problem with whiteness. Climate change is an apolitical universal discourse assuming a shared world.

Ferdinand argues this 'apolitical thinking about ecology, carried out by those who stand on the bridge and breath in fresh air is nothing but the maintenance of the hell of the hold and the injustices of the Plantationocene' (243). In the spirit of Benjamin's 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' 'the ecological storm is just a different name for the modern hurricane that has been blowing at least since 1492.' For Ferdinand, there needs to be justice for

genocide, enslavement and colonization before climate change can become a question, let alone be tackled. A 'worldly horizon can [only] be projected into the future from the bridge of justice.'

### **The World as Problem: Negativating: Refusing The Lure Of Critique**

Denise Ferreira da Silva's *Unpayable Debt* (2022)

<https://www.sternberg-press.com/product/on-the-antipolitical-1/>

The approach of 'negativation' views the decolonial approach as suborning us to a world to which we owe an 'unpayable debt', a world which we are required to save (as Dana is required to repeatedly slave owner Rufus in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*). Putting race and coloniality at the centre of the critique becomes a tool of disavowal as long as this 'world' and this debt remains. The approach of negativation seeks to disrupt ontologies of world, of discrete entities, of causality and temporality from the perspective of the abject, the slave, the object or Thing, or for Denise Ferreira da Silva, in her recent book, 'the wounded captive body in the scene of subjection' (36).

The World is the problem not merely the imaginary or the 'genre' of the Human. Yes, there is a cut between Slave and Master, Native and Settler, Human and Nonhuman but the solution is not the placing of the cut (redistributing agency differently as in new materialism or extending 'human' rights to nonhuman entities or species). Nor is it possible to unmake or to repair the cut (to return to some state of wholeness as if the world pre-existed the cut). For the negativating approach, the world is a product of totalizing violence not the background in which things are made and can be unmade.

For the above 'liberal' and 'decolonial' approaches which engage in critique, the understanding of the cut is always inverted by putting the world in the background and the results of the cut ontologically at the forefront. The cut is the totalizing violence of coloniality as Ferdinand describes from C15th onwards, however, this violence is rewritten as a problem of the consequences of differential development over time rather than a founding total violence, thus, the concern is with the secondary and contingent violence of racial difference (94-5). Negativating work is not 'negation' as there is no desire to be lured into the world but rather does the work of refusal (55). The capacity for negativation is not essentialized as inherent in black persons but the capacity of blackness as an analytical category (44-5). This capacity destabilizes, refuses, or attempts to end the 'world' via an understanding that critique necessarily needs to take into account the world-making violence that establishes the world as a meaningful order not merely the empirical violence, that may be contingent and arbitrary once that order is established (this point is originally made by Heidegger, Rekret 2018, 26-7).

## Conclusion

The 'lure of critique' that needs to be refused is the reification of the world. Critique, so concerned with remaking the human as humble and aware, or with reparation for the ongoing crimes of enslavement, genocide and coloniality, risks reifying the world as an object available to us as implicit subjects. In fact, it could be argued that the more radical the critique the more entrapped we are in repaying our debt to being/ the world as our shared home. The first two critiques are located from a subject position within the world. The liberal subject, located at the borders of modernity, between the present and the future, the enlightened 'seer' 'looking into the abyss' without fear. The decolonial subject is located in the world but the world as imagined on the other side of the colonial divide, the non-Western or non-modern world. The only perspective that does not reify, or suborn us to, the world is the approach of negativation, which does not offer an alternative 'world', either spatially (decolonial) or temporally (liberal). The analytical power of negativation is (as Ferreira da Silva states) *of* the world but not *in* the world (293), the positionality of non-being or a non-subject, produced by colonial world-making but lacking ontological being.