

Why #BlackLivesMatter Should Transform the Climate Debate



Demonstrators at the Climate Change Conference in Lima, Peru (AP Photo/Juan Karita).

The annual United Nations climate summit is wrapping up in Lima, Peru, and on its penultimate day, something historic happened. No, not the empty promises from powerful governments to finally get serious about climate action—starting in 2020 or 2030 or any time other than right now. The historic event was the decision of the climate-justice movement to symbolically join the increasingly global #BlackLivesMatter uprising, staging a “die-in” outside the convention center much like the ones that have brought shopping malls and busy intersections to a standstill, from the US to the UK.

“For us it is either death or climate justice,” said Gerry Arances, national coordinator for the Philippine Movement for Climate Justice.

What does #BlackLivesMatter, and the unshakable moral principle that it represents, have to do with climate change? Everything. Because we can be quite sure that if wealthy white Americans had been the ones left without food and water for days in a giant sports

stadium after Hurricane Katrina, even George W. Bush would have gotten serious about climate change. Similarly, if Australia were at risk of disappearing, and not large parts of Bangladesh, Prime Minister Tony Abbott would be a lot less likely to publicly celebrate the burning of coal as “good for humanity,” as he did on the occasion of the opening of a vast new coal mine. And if my own city of Toronto were being battered, year after year, by historic typhoons demanding mass evacuations, and not Tacloban in the Philippines, we can also be sure that Canada would not have made building tar sands pipelines the centerpiece of its foreign policy.

The reality of an economic order built on white supremacy is the whispered subtext of our entire response to the climate crisis, and it badly needs to be dragged into the light. I recently had occasion to meet a leading Belgian meteorologist who makes a point of speaking about climate change in her weather reports. But, she told me, her viewers remain unmoved. “People here think that with global warming, the weather in Brussels will be more like Bordeaux—and they are happy about that.” On one level, that’s understandable, particularly as temperatures drop in northern countries. But global warming won’t just make Brussels more like Bordeaux, it will make Haiti more like Hades. And it’s not possible to be cheerful about the former without, at the very least, being actively indifferent to the latter.

The grossly unequal distribution of climate impacts is not some little-understood consequence of the failure to control carbon emissions. It is the result of a series of policy decisions the governments of wealthy countries have made—and continue to make—with full knowledge of the facts and in the face of strenuous objections.

I vividly remember the moment when the racism barely under the surface of international climate talks burst onto the world stage. It was exactly five years ago this week, on the second day of the now-infamous United Nations climate summit in Copenhagen. Up until that point, the conference had been a stultifying affair, with the fates of nations discussed in the bloodless jargon of climate “adaptation and mitigation.” All of that changed when a document was leaked showing that governments were on the verge of setting a target that would cap the global temperature rise at 2 degrees Celsius (3.6 degrees Fahrenheit, more than double the amount of warming experienced so far).

This was defined as a strategy for averting “dangerous” levels of warming.

But the temperature target—pushed by wealthy nations in Europe and North America—would likely not be enough to save some low-lying small island states from annihilation. And in Africa, where drought linked to climate change was at that time menacing many lives in the eastern part of the continent, the target would translate into a full-scale [humanitarian disaster](#). Clearly the definition of “dangerous” climate change had more than a little to do with the wildly unequal ways in which human lives are counted.

But African delegates weren’t standing for it. When the text was leaked, the dull UN bureaucracy suddenly fell away and the sterile hallways of the conference centre came alive with shouts of, “We Will Not Die Quietly” and “2 Degrees is Suicide.” The paltry sums rich countries had pledged for climate financing were angrily dismissed as “not enough to buy us coffins.” Black lives matter, these delegates were saying—even if this corrupted forum was behaving as if that was far from the case.

The highly racialized discounting of certain lives does not just play out between countries but also, unfailingly, within them—perhaps most dramatically within the United States. I was reminded of this while reading about Akai Gurley, the unarmed 28-year-old black man who was “accidentally” shot and killed last month in the dark stairwell of a Brooklyn housing project. Like the dilapidated elevator, the lighting system in the building had been left unrepaired, despite complaints. And when that neglect of a public institution that disproportionately serves African-Americans intersected with armed fear of black men, the result was lethal.

When Superstorm Sandy hit New York City two years earlier, a similar combination of forces showed its brutal face, but on a much larger scale. Housing projects suffering from decades of official neglect were devastated by the storm, with water and electrical systems completely knocked out for weeks. No lights. No heat. No power for lights or elevators. But the worst part was how fear of those darkened buildings clearly played a role in keeping government officials and relief agencies from checking in on elderly and sick residents, leaving them stranded in high-rise buildings without basic provisions for far too long.

And Sandy was by no means the only example of this toxic combination of heavy weather and highly segregated neglect. “George Bush doesn’t care about black people,” Kanye West famously said, going way off script during a 2005 telethon for victims of Hurricane Katrina. As that storm showed so nakedly, the worst impacts of extreme weather follow racial lines with the same devastating precision as the decision about whether to employ lethal police force.

During Katrina, it was overwhelmingly New Orleans’s black residents who were abandoned on their rooftops and in the Superdome; who did not receive emergency aid in the earliest days; who were called “looters” when they took matters into their own hands; who were labeled “refugees” in their own country; and who were shot by both vigilantes and cops on the streets of their city. Race also continues to play no small role in determining whose homes and schools are rebuilt (or torn down, or privatized) in the name of “building back better.”

Taken together, the picture is clear. Thinly veiled notions of racial superiority have informed every aspect of the non-response to climate change so far. Racism is what has made it possible to systematically look away from the climate threat for more than two decades. It is also what has allowed the worst health impacts of digging up, processing and burning fossil fuels—from cancer clusters to asthma—to be systematically dumped on indigenous communities and on the neighborhoods where people of colour live, work and play. The South Bronx, to cite just one example, has notoriously high asthma rates—and [according to one study](#), a staggering 21.8 percent of children living in New York City public housing have asthma, three times higher than the rate for private housing. The choking of those children is not as immediately lethal as the kind of choking that stole Eric Garner’s life, but it is very real nonetheless.

If we refuse to speak frankly about the intersection of race and climate change, we can be sure that racism will continue to inform how the governments of industrialized countries respond to this existential crisis. It will manifest in the continued refusal to provide serious climate financing to poor countries so they can protect themselves from heavy weather. It will manifest in the fortressing of wealthy continents as they attempt to lock out the growing numbers of people whose homes will become unlivable.

And in the not too distant future, the firm if unstated belief that not all lives matter could well push our governments to deploy high-risk “geoengineering” technologies like spraying sulfur into the stratosphere in order to reduce global temperatures. Never mind that several studies project that [a side effect could be suppressing the summer monsoons](#) in India and Africa, with the water and food security of billions of people hanging in the balance.

Indeed, it is distinctly more likely that our governments will favor these terrifying techno-fixes over approaches to emission reduction that are far more likely to succeed, in no small part because those solutions are being offered by poor people with darker skin. Such casually discounted, eminently sensible responses include free public transit for all; decentralized, community controlled renewable energy; land redistribution to support small-scale agro-ecological farming; and respecting the rights of indigenous people to refuse logging, drilling and mining on their lands.

Here is some good news: if we committed ourselves to responding to the climate crisis on the basis that black lives matter, and that requiring people of color to shoulder even more of the burdens of uncontrolled emissions is morally unacceptable, it would demand these types of hopeful transformations. In practical terms, that would mean unprecedented economic and technological investments in some of the most neglected parts of the world—from Kenya to Ferguson to Pine Ridge—bringing greatly improved services, increased democracy and self-determination, real food security and countless good jobs. In short, a justice-based climate mobilization would do more than end the way neglected communities are policed; it might just help end the neglect itself.

[According to Alicia Garza](#), one of the people who founded the #BlackLivesMatter project, the slogan is not meant to claim that black lives matter more than others. Rather, by highlighting the foundational role that anti-black racism has played in constructing a system of racial superiority, it tells everyone that black lives “are important to your liberation. Given the disproportionate impact state violence has on black lives, we understand that when black people in this country get free, the benefits will be wide reaching and transformative for society as a whole.”

What climate change tells us is that this is as true at a global, species-wide scale as it is

within the borders of the United States. In Copenhagen in 2009, African governments argued that if black lives mattered, then 2 degrees of warming was too high. By disregarding this basic humanist logic, the biggest polluters were making a crude cost-benefit analysis. They were calculating that the loss of life, livelihood and culture for some of the poorest people on the planet was an acceptable price to pay to protect the economies of some of the richest people on the planet.

Here we are just five years later and the governments of wealthy countries are set to blow past their earlier target, putting us squarely on the road towards 4–6 degrees Celsius of warming. That is a destination that will leave almost no one safe and may well be incompatible with anything resembling organized society. This is no coincidence: it turns out that once decision-makers start rationalizing the sacrificing of some lives, it's awfully hard to stop.

In the face of systemic state violence, courageous demonstrators shouting “I Can’t Breathe” and “Black Lives Matter” are asserting a positive, core principle about the value of every single human being, starting with the lives that are currently most discounted. Supporting the urgent call for justice and a transformation of the criminal justice system is of paramount importance and should not be watered down by piling every issue under the sun on top of it.

At the same time, the clarion call that Black Lives Matter deserves to transform how we approach a great many crises in our societies, from school systems that systematically fail African-American kids, to a healthcare system that too often discards black lives. It must also jolt us out of our climate inaction.

Because if the current race-based hierarchy of humanity is left unchallenged, then we can be certain that our governments will continue their procrastination, redefining “dangerous” to allow for the sacrifice of ever more people, ever more ancient culture, languages, countries. Conversely, if black lives matter—and they do—then global warming is already a five-alarm fire, and the lives it has taken already are too many.

The slogan adopted for die-in in Lima, which has been used in some of the Ferguson protests, was “*somos semillas*”—we are seeds. In this context, it means that the people

who have died in storms and droughts from the Philippines to the Horn of Africa can be more than tragedies. Their losses, if we are willing to acknowledge them, willing to fully grieve them, have the power to help us grow a new and safer world. Indeed, they must.