

## Article

# Climate Crises and the Creation of ‘Undeserving’ Victims

Elizabeth Stanley 

Institute of Criminology, Te Herenga Waka, Victoria University of Wellington, Wellington 6012, New Zealand; elizabeth.stanley@vuw.ac.nz

**Abstract:** This paper explores how advanced liberal democracies respond to climate migrants in ways that reflect colonial logics and practices. With a focus on the Pacific, it reflects on three constructions of climate crisis victims. First, as savages—those incapable of adapting or thriving under catastrophic environmental threats and who need to be saved by ‘the West’. Secondly, as threats—the hordes who will threaten white civilization and who must be sorted, excluded, detained and deported. Thirdly, as ‘non-ideal’ victims—those undeserving of full legal protections but who may survive under hostile conditions in receiving states. These political and policy responses create systemic harms and injustice for those who struggle under or must flee environmental degradation, and they function to ensure that those most to blame for climate crises are prioritized as having least responsibility to take action. The paper concludes with consideration of socially just responses to those most affected from climate harms.

**Keywords:** climate crisis; migration; border controls; colonization; climate justice



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## 1. Introduction

The climate crisis presents *the* most significant risk to humanity, the environment and to all the animals, flora and fauna that inhabit our planet. In 2014, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) confirmed the ‘unequivocal’ nature of climate warming. Greenhouse gas emissions—developed through the extraction and burning of fossil fuels (such as oil, gas and coal) alongside other industrialized practices—have concentrated carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxide to ‘unprecedented’ levels (IPCC [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#), p. 1). With global warming escalating from 1975, it is projected that the earth’s surface will warm by 2 °C by 2040 and could reach potentially catastrophic levels of 5 °C by the turn of the next century ([White 2020](#)). Each year brings new records in global emissions and temperatures. In 2018, the IPCC spelt out stark impact warnings on a rise of just 1.5 °C and reiterated the urgency for action (IPCC [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#)).

Climate changes are already taking significant tolls. Raised ocean temperatures, melting glaciers and shrinking ice sheets are leading to sea level rises that are inundating coastal areas and low-lying countries. Extreme weather events are increasing in intensity, frequency and duration ([Kramer 2020](#); [White 2020](#)). These effects are exacerbated through the time lag on effects from emissions as well as new ‘feedback loops’ that cause ‘extreme extremes’ ([Coumou et al. 2018](#), p. 9). The natural environment is being irredeemably changed through ocean acidification, wildfires, tornados and other events. The destruction of habitats is also leading to extreme risks of extinction—the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services estimates that around a quarter of all animals and plants are threatened by ongoing human actions (IPBES [Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services](#)).

For humans, climate change impacts are all-encompassing, cumulative, and often devastating. Many people die in floods, or wildfires, or within buildings torn apart from storm damage. Extreme weather events bring other kinds of long-term problems, such as disease outbreaks, the loss of homes and infrastructure, declines in food production

and increased competition and conflict over resources and territory (White 2020). The usual norms of farming and crop productivity are all affected by increased salination of low-lying agricultural land, changes in rainfall, temperature increases, and shifts in atmospheric chemistry, such as higher Co2 or low-level ozone concentrations (Black et al. 2011). Similarly, changes in coastal and marine ecosystems are dramatically affecting fisheries (Black et al. 2011).

These situations are undoubtedly connected to advanced capitalist and colonizing systems in which the world's resources and futures are commodified for the benefits of global elites. Of course, environmental damage has long been connected to activities across varied states, including those led by communist or socialist rationalities (consider, for example, the pollution and eco-neglect suffered by those living in the USSR). However, catastrophic climate harms are firmly linked with the consolidation of advanced global capitalist systems that emphasize market economies, privatization, international competitiveness, continual growth, consumption and extractions of (material and labor) resources (Bulkeley 2001; Brown 2017; Klein 2014). Climate problems go beyond individual state organizations to the structure of global economic systems with their persistent emphasis on growth, accumulation and resource exploitation (Ruggiero and South 2013).

Building from my previous work on Western government responses to asylum seekers, 'non-citizens' and other victims of state crimes (Stanley 2017, 2020), this article provides further discussion on these structural contexts of climate crisis. However, it focuses on the situations endured by those victimized from the devastating emergencies or 'slow-onset' impacts of climate crisis. These victims, like so other forced migrants, are increasingly subject to denigration, threats, violence and harms. Drawing on established conceptual literature and specific case-examples in the Pacific—a vast region that contains major polluters (such as Australia and New Zealand) as well as many 'small-island' states (such as Kiribati, Nauru, Fiji) that are made especially vulnerable by extreme climate changes—the article presents a new conceptual framework to address the egregious treatment of climate migrants. It explores three constructions in depth: first, that victims are determined to be 'savages', seen as incapable of adapting to climate catastrophes and who need to be 'saved'; second, that victims are regarded as 'threats', as people who will threaten white civilization and who must be controlled at all costs; and third, that victims are seen as 'non-ideal' such that they endure inhospitable conditions and are compelled to take full responsibility for their futures. These political and policy responses create systemic harms for climate migrants, as well as those victimized by climate crises more broadly. They also ensure that those most to blame for climate crises are prioritized as having least responsibility to take action. Given that, the paper concludes with consideration of socially just responses to climate crises, and to ameliorate the situations for those most affected.

## 2. Climate Crisis

The global risks of climate crisis affect everyone, including future generations. However, they are differentially experienced. Within industrialized economies, those most vulnerable to 'natural' disasters are economically disadvantaged populations including racial minorities, older people and women who are more likely to live in areas that are environmentally precarious (White 2020; Wonders and Danner 2015). Small island states and developing countries bear the brunt however, as they experience the most hazardous weather events. As a result of colonial legacies, and contemporary economic and trade systems, these countries also tend to endure long-standing problems of poverty, food insecurity, pollution, disease epidemics and unreliable access to potable water (Beck 2006; Kramer 2020; White 2020) and have least capacity to protect populations. Further, these countries hold little international power to mitigate or stop the climate risks perpetuated by more developed nations and corporations. The systemic 'organized irresponsibility' in operation is such that those who produce the risks encounter little accountability while those most affected have few chances to control decisions or practices about their futures (Beck 2015, p. 76).

Despite the escalation in deadly experiences, emissions continue to rise. Neither narratives of apocalyptic futures nor new state-corporate commitments to environmentally conscious or culturally appropriate reforms have yet shifted this trajectory. Notwithstanding the recent Paris Agreement, there remains resistance to substantive agreements on carbon emissions, and powerful nations have ensured their continued trade and economic strategies (Brisman et al. 2018). Expansion is always on the agenda. Despite the growing emergence of state commitments to reduce emissions, most governments continue to support risky industries: oil and coal, fracking, deep-water drilling, extracting heavy bitumen from tar sands, mining and mass-production farming, monocultural crops (Kramer 2020; White 2020; Klein 2014)<sup>1</sup>. The deforestation of rainforests for fuel, mining, crops (such as palm oil) or pastoral ends undermines opportunities to mitigate crises. The destruction of tropical forests is such that they are now becoming a source of carbon emissions (Kramer 2020). Deforestation demolishes biodiversity, and it also accounts for '20 per cent of global greenhouse emissions'—the mass logging through Indonesia and Brazil ensures that these countries are now major carbon dioxide emitters (White 2020).

The drivers of climate crisis relate to the colonization of life-worlds. It is, in many ways, a continuation of historic practices of colonization through which land and natural resources have been confiscated (White 2020). But states and corporations now extend global practices of 'colonial theft' and the violent concentration and 'privatization of resources' while making life untenable for all peoples, non-human animals and whole eco-systems (Brisman et al. 2018, p. 306). These violent colonizing processes—in which the benefits of global resources are controlled and exploited for the benefit of global minorities (Quijano 2007)—are self-sustaining and historically derived. Emissions from industrialization emerged out of slavery, colonization and imperialism, while those most affected by climate emergencies have more limited protections, as a consequence of colonial legacies such as land, resource or knowledge dispossession (Sealey-Huggins 2017). Exploitative relations are part of a perpetual process of colonization.

The self-protectionism in operation in polluting states is such that there has been a significant normalization of death, destruction and deepening inequalities, to sustain carbon footprints and underpin further growth (Brown 2017). This has been managed, over years, by forms of denial and ignorance within political and media discourse. For example, in line with major corporate polluters, the republican administration in the USA has cast climate change as nothing more than fantasy, vigorously supporting and removing constraints on carbon producers (Kramer 2020). Similarly, despite frequent mass wildfires in Australia, PM Scott Morrison continues to enthusiastically endorse the coal and other mining industries, arguing that consumption patterns and economic growth agendas should not be changed. This latter rationale is upheld across most Western states as well as across other major powers such as China, India, Brazil and Russia (Teaiwa 2019; Wyatt and Brisman 2017). Meanwhile, corporations have long manufactured uncertainty, casting doubt on climate science and promoting industry interests (Kramer 2020; Lynch et al. 2010; Ruggiero and South 2013; White 2020)<sup>2</sup>. There have also been organized campaigns, from governments and corporations, to minimize the challenges from environmental defenders—criminalizing them, naming them as 'terrorists' and seriously harming them. Global Witness (2020) records that at least 212 'land and environmental defenders' (those involved in activities to stop illegal logging, mining and agri-business) were killed in 2019 alone. Between 2015–2019, Indigenous people were disproportionately targeted, being a third of all those killed.

In these situations of toleration and naturalization of mass harms against all life worlds, climate crisis is 'the ultimate expression' of how elites have 'the power and the capacity to dictate who [or what] may live and who [or what] must die' (Mbembe 2003, p. 11). There is

<sup>1</sup> Many countries have substantively advanced alternative technologies but are continuing to expand carbon-emitting industries, and they are advancing Covid-19 economic recoveries on dirty industries.

<sup>2</sup> From 1988 to 2014, 100 industrial carbon producers (of oil, gas, coal and cement) accounted for 71% of emissions, with just '25 corporate and state producing entities accounting for 51%' of emissions. Their emissions are increasing (Griffin 2017, p. 8).

an inherent eliminatory logic in here as an organizing principle of advanced global capitalist and colonial systems. Narratives of loss and extinction are normalized, not as a one-off event but an organizing principle that is structured through global processes (Wolfe 2006). Patterns of displacement, the taking and repurposing of land, ecosystem collapse as well as the loss of species or cultural loss reflect repressive and exploitative relationships that are inter-generational and ongoing. While climate crisis may feel unprecedented to many populations, it is endured as part of a violent continuum of settler-colonial domination for Indigenous peoples who have long suffered dispossession, displacement and destruction (Whyte 2018).

Racism is a central element of these processes, as racist tropes and technologies are central to who may acceptably be put to death, and whose death will be determined not to matter (Mbembe 2003). These decisions are also determinedly gendered and classed (Wonders and Danner 2015). There is an instrumental rationality to what or who can be acceptably lost, and there is a growing normalization of what or who could be sacrificed for continued extraction, expansion and accumulation—from the clearing of Indigenous territories to make way for logging, pipelines, mines or dams to the inundation of Pacific Island territories and the corresponding obliteration of nations to the further extinction of species. The logic of dispossession and obliteration marks out most people and life-worlds as disposable (Banerjee 2008). Again, this is an ongoing, perpetual process. Yet, while state and corporate perpetrators may still opportunistically reconfigure and reassert strategic and economic power, they will not be able to avoid devastating harms over time.

### 3. Climate Migration

Sustained and developing climate threats are such that groups or entire populations are increasingly moving from their homes in search of safety. The number of people affected is unclear with most of those displaced being uncounted and their experiences unreported. Even recent international reports and agreements on climate crises avoid terms like refugees, migration or mobility (UNFCCC 2015). Still, between 2008 and 2019, about 288 million people were internally displaced as a result of natural disasters, with most being weather-related events such as floods, storms or wildfires (Kraler et al. 2020). Millions more will also migrate from ‘slow onset events such as desertification, sea-level rise, ocean acidification, air pollution, rain pattern shifts and loss of biodiversity’ (Podesta 2019, p. 2). Those who move will mostly come from developing countries as the immediate effects of climate crises combine with global inequities of poverty or poor access to health care, safe housing, potable water, or adequate food. In some areas, like in small Pacific Island states, populations face absolute inundation and loss, with climate change being ‘the single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and wellbeing of the peoples of the Pacific’ (Pacific Island Forum 2018).

Notwithstanding this intensification in migration flows, there is relatively little being done—even still—to substantively mitigate climate change, or to generously assist with the adaptation efforts of those made most vulnerable (Bettini 2017). Climate catastrophes are normalized or expected, and dominant narratives increasingly place blame on those who are perceived to have failed in their environmental self-protection. As this paper shows, materially rich states in the Pacific region (and economically powerful states more broadly) regularly respond to climate crisis migrants in ways that reflect colonial logics and practices, often misrepresenting them in disparaging ways. Here, three interlinked representations are explored. First, that migrants are marked out as savages, or those incapable of adapting or thriving under catastrophic environmental threats and who need to be saved. Second, these victims are determined to be threats—they are the hordes who threaten white civilization and who must be sorted, excluded and detained. Third, they are cast as ‘non-ideal’ victims—those undeserving of legal protections, who may survive under hostile conditions in receiving states or be compelled to leave.

These heavily racialized, and somewhat contradictory, narratives contribute to a wider political, economic and socio-cultural environment in which (actual or would be) migrants

are established as undeserving of protections. Misrepresentations re-create systemic harms and injustice and minimize victimizations. They also represent dominant polluters as benign humanitarians who will ‘save’ the world, despite the levels of inhospitality to those displaced from egregious environmental destruction. All the while, these narratives divert attention from the current global savagery of capitalist, colonizing and patriarchal relations that fuel climate victimizations.

### 3.1. *Climate Crisis Victims as Savages*

In line with colonial racism that emphasizes the deficits or incapacities of Indigenous peoples (Mutua 2002), those hardest hit by climate crises are often positioned by dominant narrators as being helpless victims, unable to adapt or thrive under changing conditions, and caught in the unfurling of an inevitable tragic end (Farbotko 2005; Giuliani 2017). This approach (determining victims of climate crisis as ‘savage’) serves different functions. It promotes an idea that ‘deficit’ populations are incapable of navigating modern conditions. It re-emphasizes a narrative of individualized responsabilization—such that those facing the worst impacts of climate crisis are expected to step up and build their own protections, with a failure to do so being attributed to *their* inability to thrive (Davies et al. 2017). It neutralizes the idea that those most responsible for greenhouse gas emissions must take significant action to change the nature of their industries, production and economies (thereby normalizing self-protectionism for polluting states). And, it covers over the histories of colonialism, capitalism and patriarchy that have made so many countries and regions extremely vulnerable to crises from climate change.

In the Pacific region, the latter situation can be most clearly seen in Nauru. Like Banaba, in Kiribati, the small island of Nauru held high-grade deposits of phosphate, a key ingredient in commercial fertilizers. In 1886, England and Germany established a Declaration announcing Nauru as a German protectorate (Klein 2014). Shortly after, a German corporation (Jaluit-Gesellschaft) took over as the island’s administrator and, in 1902, Jaluit shareholders transferred the title to the England-based ‘Pacific Phosphate Company’ (Tabucanon and Opeskin 2011). Twelve years later, with the start of WW1, Nauru was taken under Australian control and, by 1920, the League of Nations conferred the mandate of Nauru on Australia, the UK and New Zealand. The UN General Assembly stamped off a trusteeship Agreement under these three states in 1947, with Australia taking powers over legislation and administration (Tabucanon and Opeskin 2011). Over time, the island was mined to extinction, becoming an inhospitable and infertile lunar landscape. This ‘disposable country’ was ‘developed to disappear’ (Klein 2014, p. 163) with exported phosphate underpinning the advent of mass agricultural industries across the UK, NZ and Australia. Between 1919–1968, mining companies extracted 34 million tons of phosphate, valued at AU\$300mn, with few royalties returned to Nauruans—just 2.8% of all profits in 1960 (Tabucanon and Opeskin 2011). By 1968, when Australia granted Nauru sovereignty, the local population relied on imported food. With a surge in royalties from final deposits, they struggled with health and social problems and officials misused funds, often under ‘advice’ from unscrupulous international investment advisers (Teaiwa 2015). By the 1990s, the small-island state sought survival as a money laundering haven. With few other options, it then became a site for one of Australia’s largest prison camps for refugees. It is now highly vulnerable to climate change, drought and rising sea levels but has limited resources to effectively respond (Klein 2014). Today, the people of Nauru are regularly blamed for ‘mismanaging’ their situation, yet their history is one of entrenched exploitation and land dispossession for the benefit of powerful states (Teaiwa 2015).

These situations remind us that climate crises are one part of much longer histories of exploitation, militarization, deforestation, pollution, farming monopolies, ecosystem loss, relocation, displacement or environmental degradations that have been and are experienced by less powerful nations, and especially by Indigenous peoples (Whyte 2017). Climate change will entail the threat of environmental destruction but it also presents opportunities for powerful states or corporations to pursue advancements and re-entrench inequitable



power relations. To this end, corporate elites and supporting states are now systematically exploiting extreme environmental shifts by taking land for protection, privatizing tree farms, investing in carbon credits (or rebranding global north consumption as ‘carbon neutral’ by securing carbon offsets elsewhere), developing reinsurance schemes, selling military/security technologies, and so on (Klein 2014).

Further, as environmental changes have created insecure access to vital commodities (such as water or food), many corporations and states (such as China or the Gulf states) are pre-empting future rations by buying land or access to water in other countries (displacing populations in the process) but also reconfiguring state territories, population controls and resource ownership (Sealey-Huggins 2017; White 2020). For example, former US President Trump’s recent assertion that the US might buy Greenland appeared far-fetched, but it also clearly reflects the ways in which states are organizing to take Arctic resources as it opens up through ice-melt. The Arctic holds 13% world’s oil reserves, 30% natural gas, huge mineral deposits (such as zinc) and rare metals. Russia, China and the US are all now actively involved in asserting national military and strategic advantages (Tisdall 2019), imposing significant threats to Indigenous peoples in the region.

While creating the conditions of crisis, and then exploiting opportunities from environmental destruction, global powers simultaneously present as benevolent saviors who can provide salvation for those unable to withstand the forces of nature (Giuliani 2017; Mutua 2002; Russo 2017). For example, Western states frequently position themselves as the superior ‘experts’ who are able to ‘master nature’ and mediate risk through scientific modelling or technological solutions (Giuliani 2017, p. 229; Bulkeley 2001). These ‘reassuringly technical’ responses (Bettini 2017, p. 84)—also seen through the frames of transnational institutions such as the IPCC—advance ‘ecological neo-liberalism’, as they take the ‘lead in knowledge and development over poorer countries’ (Beck 1996, p. 6).

Technical responses propel political capital within anxious polluting states as well as corporations. Moreover, by focusing on technological solutions and cycles, we do not have to question how we do or should live (Beck 1995). These responses also function to solidify state power, labor management, economic productivity and capital accumulation by opening up new ownership of and access to resources (Baldwin and Bettini 2017). And, by taking the lead in knowledge and development on climate change, greenhouse gas emitters cover over ‘their own primary responsibility for world-wide threats to civilization’ (Beck 1996, p. 6) by positioning themselves as saviors who can redeem and protect<sup>3</sup>. Unlike ‘the savage’, they can adapt and, in doing so, might also enjoy redemption for past harms and guilt (Mutua 2002).

Such strategies cover over the established challenges, by those who have long experienced the devastations of climate changes, that we need to put a stop to consumption practices that entail expansive resource extractions and harmful emissions. For example, over three decades ago, in 1990, 15 Pacific states came together in an alliance to act on global warming. The following year, another entity—the Pacific Islands Forum—called for ‘significant and immediate reductions’ in greenhouse gas emissions, noting the serious threats of global warming. They encouraged industrialized countries to switch to alternative energies (Teaiwa 2019). These groups have also been fundamental to the development of the United Nations (UN) Framework Convention on Climate Change—the first UN attempt to address global warming, ‘what would eventually become the Kyoto Protocol, was drafted by Nauru and submitted under the chairmanship of Trinidad and Tobago in 1994’ (Teaiwa 2019, p. 58). In short, despite the paternalistic sense that small island or developing states need advice and assistance from industrialized states, the former have repeatedly demonstrated their capacity and ideas for adaption and mitigation (Teaiwa 2019).

The idea that thinking on climate adaptations is in its infancy also ignores the fact that populations across Pacific Islands have been intensely agile, creative and adept at reacting

<sup>3</sup> This enthusiasm for protections does not readily translate to financial supports for adaptation or mitigation efforts elsewhere. Industrialized countries remain reticent to provide overseas aid (Klein 2014), an issue exacerbated with the economic strains from the Covid-19 pandemic—for example, the UK has already announced a temporary cut in foreign aid, from 0.7% to 0.5% of gross national income (Wintour 2020).

to climate catastrophes for years (Russo 2017). Pacific people have (among other things) secured their land, adapted crop techniques, preserved foods, managed water, explored mangrove nutrition, used solar energies, changed building approaches, reworked sanitation flows, reorganized warning systems, and developed clear practices for community responses to extreme weather events. Environmental adaptations have been ‘a fact of life’ (Bryant-Tokalau 2018, p. 82), and they have combined with a broader resiliency to a whole range of violent or harmful pressures from powerful state or corporate actors (Teaiwa 2019; Whyte 2018). In sum, despite narratives of savage incapability, Pacific peoples have established histories of adapting, strategizing, educating, campaigning, and successfully navigating difficult (and ever changing) conditions. They—like others on the ‘frontline’ of climate crisis—are the leaders in adaptations and mitigations.

### 3.2. *Climate Crisis Victims as Threats*

The racialized construction of savage peoples is implicitly connected to representations of ‘threat’. For example, while European, North American or other comparatively wealthy populations are encouraged to be world travelers, exploring the world to find themselves, the mobility of most of the world’s population is regarded in problematic terms (Giuliani 2017). ‘Alien’ outsiders and non-citizens have long been cast as threatening or suspicious, and these representations are always intensely racialized (Malloch and Stanley 2005). Narratives of invasion, contagion or terrorism from ‘the undesirables’ at the border reflect established colonial and racially-indexed stereotypes (Baldwin and Bettini 2017). In Western states, it is not uncommon for political leaders and popular media commentators to deploy militarized narratives of ‘white civilization’ under threat from ‘hordes of desperate and dangerous masses’ (Saldanha 2017, pp. 156–57); a rhetorical state of siege is never very far away (Lloyd and Wolfe 2016; Bettini 2017). Of course, this willfully overlooks the fact that most migration is internal—undertaken within countries—or involves the movement of people from one developing state to a neighboring developing state.

For these Western states, a vast apparatus now governs life within and beyond borders. A barrage of new technologies—including tracking devices, facial recognition databases, satellites, drones, biometric checks and smart cards—defend membership. Pre-emptive tools are increasingly common. For example, immigration risk-assessment sorting reflects individual attributes (such as criminal pasts, qualifications, work skills or health) but it increasingly invokes new racist biopolitics that prevent entry as well as contain and deport those who are ‘out of place’ (Kalir 2019, p. 32; Valverde 2010). These processes are devoid of explicit racial references but the colonial modalities function to reassert dominance over the ‘suspect communities’ who might challenge white space. In this way, border processes shape and reconfigure power to reassert economic, racialized and patriarchal controls as well as to set the ground on who can be ‘legitimate citizens’ (Murdocca 2004, p. 156)—for example, while many Pacific populations face considerable dangers from rising sea levels and storm surges, they are commonly excluded from permanent residency or citizenship in Australia (see, for example, Weber et al. 2017).

The unbounded nature of climate change risks (including fears of mass migrations) provides limitless scope to exclude populations on the basis that they may pose a future threat. And, under these conditions, criminalization is never far away. Climate crisis is not yet deemed an acceptable reason to seek permanent residence across borders (see below). So, those who flee climate change effects have to establish their protection by other means, such as by entering countries on temporary work or travel visas (or no visa) and running the risk of being criminalized for doing so. For example, anecdotal evidence indicates that climactic conditions—particularly cyclones and storms that have devastated homes and sustainable lands—are ever more central to decisions by Pacific people to migrate to places like New Zealand, and subsequently ‘overstay’ (Scoop 2016). Despite community supports, those without visas enjoy few services and live precarious lives under the official radar. Government institutions emphasize threats—of the ‘harm being caused by overstayers and the financial cost to our communities’ (NZ Immigration cited in TVNZ 2018)—and there

is a ready focus on the identification and expulsion (through deportations or ‘voluntary’ departures) of non-citizens (Stanley 2020).

Such criminalizing, punitive processes reflect a legacy of forced movements and deportations, from the 19th and early 20th Century ‘Blackbirding’—in which over a million Pacific Island people were tricked and forced into slavery and indentured labor on Australian cotton and sugar plantations—to the ‘Dawn Raids’ of 1970s New Zealand, in which Pacific people (who had been invited by NZ to fill labor shortages) were surveilled, violently arrested (often in the middle of night) and deported. The political and legal management of Pacific Island populations by powerful states in the region is accompanied by violent controls of Pacific bodies. The intergenerational trauma and entrenched inequalities from these experiences are not questioned within contemporary decision-making or practices on border controls. Instead, hostile legalities create ‘criminals’ to legitimize punishments and expulsions, and continually construct Western states as places to protect (Giuliani 2017).

More broadly, the border is found in systemic organized violence—directed to children detained with or separated from parents; the people who are left to drown at sea; and those held in a multitude of on/off-shore camps, prisons or other facilities around the world (Mbembe 2018). And, as captured so clearly by Behrouz Boochani (2018)—who was held at Manus Island prison—the system deliberately engages conditions of abject horror, deprivation, ill-treatment, inhumanity and violence. The suspension of legal norms, indefinite and traumatizing detentions, deportations and death are commonplace in polluting states (Farbotko and Lazrus 2012; Krasmann 2007; Malloch and Stanley 2005; Stanley 2017). Deaths, trauma and immigration carceral spaces have become normalized, socially-sanctioned and subject to ‘deliberate indifference’ (Davies et al. 2017, p. 1276; Mbembe 2016). There is no widespread scandal. Instead, ‘problems’ are casually ignored or redefined as security concerns—an ‘act of self-defense against those who are seen as invading Western states’ (Kalir 2019, p. 20). A securitizing remit is emphasized so much so that, despite the proclamations on climate change from the annual Pacific Islands Forum, Australian and NZ security agencies continue to prioritize maritime security and trans-national crime, with Pacific states being seen as ‘weak links’ in regional security concerns<sup>4</sup>.

This all-encompassing architecture of pre-emptive, physical and ideological security functions to reinscribe state authority, and provide quick legitimacy of state power (Ferreira da Silva 2009). It reasserts a false narrative that ‘we’—in countries like New Zealand or Australia—are the victims, real or potential. In this, the ‘endless threat’ of the racialized ‘other’ is always present, and mobility is controlled to uphold the colonial order (Ferreira da Silva 2009, p. 235; Giuliani 2017). And yet, these perpetual actions of control and militarization fundamentally undermine our human, economic, political and ecological security. While the state appears to be taking action for our protection, the dominant focus on border security or migration processing takes attention and resources away from the much larger, existential threats we now face from global emissions and ensuing climate catastrophes.

### 3.3. Climate Crisis Victims as ‘Non-Ideal’

Violent and inhumane exclusions of migrants dominate the landscape across Europe, North America, Australia, and elsewhere. However, they are not all-encompassing responses. These economically powerful states maintain exclusions, hostilities and abjection alongside notions of humanitarianism and compassion to those viewed as the right sort of migrant (Aas 2013; Khosravi 2009). In this, state responses are not entirely brutal as governments also seek to perform benign national identities - after securing the benefits of exploitation, appropriation and dispossession (and fortifying the borders to exclude or

<sup>4</sup> This can be seen in initiatives like the Australia-led Pacific Step Up initiative (DFAT 2020) or programmes from the NZ Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade to strengthen Pacific Island border security and counter-terrorism operations (see MFAT website). In these activities, perceived weaknesses reflect Australian and (to a lesser extent) New Zealand imperatives. From a Pacific perspective, weakness relates to inaction on the climate change—e.g., In an open letter on this issue to the Australian PM, fourteen Pacific leaders outlined that Australia was ‘one of the weakest among wealthy nations’ for its lack of climate action (Tong 2020).



banish most people), they also declare themselves as places of ‘rights and freedoms’ for the ‘very deserving few’ who might be judged as legal migrants (Giuliani 2017, p. 118).

Those forcibly pushed from adverse climate dangers could hold something close to ‘ideal’ status in the hierarchy of those arriving at the border—they are blameless and have been harmed by events over which they have very limited control. Yet, there remains little international appetite to develop law—the current legal framework does not offer protection to those feeling environmental destruction. Climate crisis migrants are not covered by the 1951 Refugee Convention, not least as they are not suffering from individual persecution (McAdam 2015). Across international courtrooms, there has not yet been any cases where people have been granted refugee status on account of being forced from environmental degradation (Stanley 2020). Besides, many of those at risk from climate crises do not want to be regarded as refugees<sup>5</sup>. The toxicity of debate and the degradation of law is such that many climate change migrants do not want that identification. Also, the label ‘refugee’ requires a determination that the person is a ‘victim’ who has run out of options. Pacific peoples, among others, contest this vision. They stress their agency and argue that climate change victimization should not be normalized or accepted (the total destruction of island states is not, after all, an inevitable outcome). Instead, they prioritize state-corporate decisions on emissions, consumption practices, and guardianship of the environment and eco-systems (Saldanha 2017). In this respect, the Refugee Convention will never be appropriate for the mass political, economic and socio-cultural movements required to address climate crises.

Given this legal void, those harmed through climate change are not responded to *as* ‘victims’ but in terms of their potential economic, political or socio-cultural contributions. Those to be welcomed or more fully included—aka ‘the fully responsabilized’ neo-liberal citizen (Brown 2016, p. 12)—will be those who seek to protect themselves, using up every resource and strategy before making claims on others. They must take every measure to adapt to new environmental risks. And, if development assistance is given, they are expected to comply with donors’ demands. There is a conditionality that accompanies proposed ‘solutions’ for climate change impacts and ‘helpful’ powerful states are mostly attentive for their own ends (Sealey-Huggins 2017).

This bolstering of state power through the responsabilization of environmental or climate victims can be seen across the Pacific, but perhaps most clearly with Nauru. During the 1960s Australia proposed the resettlement of Nauruans to Australia, as a means to address the environmental consequences of island mining, while also seeking control over future mining opportunities (Tabucanon and Opeskin 2011). Taking an initial focus on educating children from the island, as a means to allow their full assimilation into the Australian workforce and community, the proposals halted when Nauruans sought resettlement on an Australian island so they might continue self-governance, preserving independence and national identity. Australia would not agree to any retention of Pacific sovereignty (Tabucanon and Opeskin 2011) and sought, instead, to force Nauruans across the country, and quickly manage them into white Australian culture and controls. Fast forward to 2019, when former Australian PM Kevin Rudd suggested that Australia could take on the residents of Nauru, now about 10,000 people, in exchange for maritime resources<sup>6</sup>. Australia would ‘become responsible for their territorial seas [and] their vast Exclusive Economic Zone’ in return for putting Nauruans onto a path of citizenship (Sauer 2019). This would not only include control of significant fisheries but also newly discovered resources such as deposits of nickel, cobalt and manganese—metals vital to the clean-energy industry—that are now subject to deep sea mining exploration in the sea floor around Nauru and elsewhere in the Pacific (Davies 2019; Deep Sea Mining Campaign and Mining Watch Canada 2020).

<sup>5</sup> There is no agreed term—current labels include ‘climate-induced (involuntary) migration’, ‘forced displacement due to climate change’, ‘environmental refugees’, ‘ecological migrants’ and ‘survival migrants’ (Kraemer et al. 2017).

<sup>6</sup> This offer was also extended to the populations of Tuvalu and Kiribati.

On the basis of similar histories, populations under threat are attentive to how receiving states view migration in entitled terms. Beyond the need to contest the taking of their territories and the oppressive attempts to spatially manage them (Kalir 2019), those who need to move have to circumnavigate dominant expectations that migrants will be thankful, disciplined and exploitable labor (Baldwin and Bettini 2017; Escobar 2016; Kalir 2019). To survive well, (potential) climate migrants must be regarded as fully-responsibilized would-be citizens. Ideally, these victims have to evoke sympathy, for their innocence in catastrophic circumstances, but they must also be economically useful. Sensing these tendencies, for many years, the government in Kiribati took an approach of ‘Migration with Dignity’, a plan to educate and upskill local populations so that they would become welcomed migrants (Randall 2013)<sup>7</sup>. Leaders anticipated that the initiative would increase i-Kiribati migration options, making them more attractive as productive migrants in global economies. In this sense, processes of productivity are regularly internalized and reproduced by subjects (Mbembe 2001).

‘Success’ for responsabilized migrants—they will be vulnerable (but without making demands on welfare services), culturally-strong (yet conforming to white controls), and compliant, docile laborers (yet economically productive, innovative and able to pay their way)—is impossible to attain. And, relatedly, there exist noxious narratives of Pacific Island peoples as swindling their wealthier neighbors (Teaiwa 2019). In September 2018, a well-known NZ journalist, Heather du Plessis-Allan, reflected on the Prime Minister’s visit to Nauru, remarking that Pacific states ‘don’t matter . . . They are nothing but leeches on us’ (RNZ 2018). The following month, in October 2018, the Australian Environment Minister, Melissa Price, told the former President of Kiribati, Anote Tong, that she had her ‘chequebook’ with her, as ‘For the Pacific it’s always about the cash’ (Crowe 2018). In August 2019, Australia’s Deputy PM, Michael McCormack, made comments on his government’s refusal to shut down coal mines, stating that Pacific Island nations affected by climate crisis ‘will continue to survive with large aid assistance from Australia’ and ‘because many of their workers come here and pick our fruit’ (Doran 2019).

The above discussions show that while states can give the appearance of humanitarianism (invoking, care, respect or culturally-safe relationships), they also fiercely pursue a racist ‘hostile hospitality’ (Khosravi 2009) to actual or potential migrants. This can be seen too in how receiving states isolate new migrants, particularly asylum seekers and refugees, from public, social and economic life. They place migrants into ‘limbo’ by withdrawing welfare benefits, reducing usual pay levels and removing full rights to health care, education or work (Diken 2004). Further, these regimes repeat terror in a myriad ways—by imposing curfews on migrants or restricting movement in exchange for welfare (such as making demands to reside in certain residences or cities). Under the guise of hospitality, people are separated, surveilled and experience unfreedom (Mbembe 2003). This ‘deliberate withholding of care’ can create miserable, ‘hyper-precarious’ conditions but also permanent injuries for migrants (Davies et al. 2017, pp. 1269, 1273). Those who can ‘choose’ to leave may do (Johansen 2013, p. 258)—with the term ‘voluntary departure’ covering a broad range of institutional practices that funnel, exclude, demean and dehumanize migrants (Khosravi 2009). Yet, where can climate change migrants go? At present, international policies and law reiterate a (false) presumption that displaced populations can return to their place of origin, but climate change will make that impossible for some.

#### 4. Conclusions: Climate Justice

This article demonstrates the embeddedness of capitalism and colonization in the climate crisis, including through the absolute destruction of lives, territory, resources and nation-states. States and corporations knowingly advance their economic, material or technological priorities at the expense of peoples, non-human animals and eco-systems.

<sup>7</sup> The current leader of Kiribati, Taneti Mamau, has replaced the vision of ‘Migration with Dignity’ with a development approach in neighbouring small Pacific states—such as by developing land on Kiritimati (Christmas Island) and expanding food production on land owned in Fiji (Teaiwa 2019).

They rely upon wholesale dispossession, appropriation, exploitation and destruction. Sustaining this advanced global capitalist order has depended on rich narratives—invoking racialized fears, alongside a continued emphasis on the absolute need for industrial growth and economic expansion. This structural order now performs a global eliminatory logic, normalizing the extinguishment of peoples' connection to land, histories, cultures and communities. It also relies upon a systemic use of violence and terror (combined with legal and surveillance controls) to manage victimized populations who challenge environmental harms or who seek to protect themselves from significant threats. Enhanced border controls—including maritime interceptions, indefinite incarceration and deportations—are normalized across many advanced industrial states, so much so that the removal of these activities is now often cast as politically impossible.

Under these conditions, debates on and practices towards people who migrate from climate crises are driven by stigma, containment and exclusion. Whether they are regarded as savages, threats or 'non-ideal', these victims are deemed undeserving. The dominant emphasis has protected the structural and socio-cultural underpinnings of colonization and capitalism. In this, there is little regard for what polluting states or corporations might owe those whose territories are destroyed or inundated (Angell 2017; Farbotko and Lazrus 2012). There are few indications that receiving states will support climate migrants to maintain collective rights, or sovereignty. Instead, there is a normalizing sense that—without 'their' adaptations - 'they' may need to sacrifice territory, history, culture, relations, everything, for 'our' continuing benefit.

While climate crisis presents a consolidation in expansionist and dispossessing activities—on a global scale—these are not new experiences for Indigenous people, populations who have been enslaved, or other groups historically subject to imperialism and marginalization<sup>8</sup>. Rather they reflect ongoing processes of colonial exploitation and containment, through which sovereignty as well as protections over land, waters, animals or eco-systems have been erased. Given all of this, addressing climate injustice requires specific actions, including:

- Continuing legal cases towards egregious climate offenders;
- Removing militarized and repressive border control responses to those who migrate from climate emergencies or slow onset crises;
- Working towards 'settlement' programs and supports that are defined and led by those who migrate;
- Denigrating those states and corporations most responsible for climate change, and campaigns of delegitimization and divestment from significant emitters;
- Dismantling fossil fuel industries (for example to wind down extractions, remove supports for coal, and say no to new carbon frontiers);
- Developing multiple regenerative models for energy;
- Stopping corporate welfare, specifically government subsidies to companies who continue to pollute;
- Establishing new international structures and norms on climate change mitigation and adaptation (that integrate Indigenous rights and human rights frameworks);
- Creating new frameworks to transfer wealth to fund mitigation programs across countries made most vulnerable;
- Building discourses that avoid naturalizing 'climate change'.

However, it also entails the creation of new institutions and co-operative allegiances that uproot capitalist and colonial agendas. Part of this requires attentiveness to how new carbon-reducing initiatives (such as carbon trading markets) may serve to reconfigure colonial relations, such as by embedding inequalities or further dispossessing land or resources. But more broadly it necessitates new structures that fundamentally enhance realities of self-determination. What would it mean, for example, for international and

<sup>8</sup> Indeed, contemporary climate change impacts can be experienced as less harmful or violent than the continuing oppression from 'systems such as colonialism, capitalism, industrialization, and their connections to racism and sexism' (Whyte et al. 2019, p. 328).

national institutions to cede power to and take direction from Indigenous peoples? Or, to give authority to those embedded within eco-system focused cultures? Within this, how might we move beyond private ownership of energy production and distribution, or land and natural resources?

All of these questions are reaching towards other solutions to climate change that can develop equitable systems ‘embedded in interdependence rather than hyper-individualism, reciprocity rather than dominance, and cooperation rather than hierarchy’ (Klein 2014, p. 462). After all, any attempts to enhance life on our planet—including efforts to create care for those who struggle against or move from the harmful impacts of climate crisis—will depend on a future of socially just, co-operative arrangements.

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