JEREMY WILLIAMS

Climate Change*

*Is Racist

Race, Privilege and the Struggle for Climate Justice

Foreword by DR SHOLA MOS-SHOGBAMIMU, author of *This Is Why I Resist*

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1

Who causes climate change?

'We are fast approaching the point where our interference in the planet's great bio-geochemical cycles is threatening to endanger the Earth system itself ... We must begin to take responsibility for our actions at a planetary scale. Nature no longer runs the Earth. We do.'[1]

That's environmental writer Mark Lynas in his book *The God Species*, which describes how humans are now 'both the creators and destroyers of life'. Finding ourselves with God-like powers, 'we must use our technological mastery over nature to save the planet from ourselves'.

Or to pick another example, here is Stephen Emmott. His book *10 Billion* is 'about the unprecedented planetary emergency we've created ... Earth is home to millions of species. Just one dominates it. Us.'[2]

Who are we?

As a reader in Britain, I know what the authors above are getting at. I read these words in my own copies of the books, in

my armchair, in my house with its fridge and its boiler. I hear cars outside and planes taking off from Luton Airport a mile or so away. When I read Emmott saying that 'we need to consume less', I know those words are directed at me as a Western consumer. (Indeed, both writers do specify at some point in their respective books who they're talking about.)

But let's imagine reading from a different point of view.

I grew up in Madagascar. It was one of the poorest countries in the world in the 1980s and 90s, and unfortunately it still is. If I were reading these words as a typical Malagasy person, I'd be doing so in a house made of mud bricks and a tin roof. There would be no car outside and probably no fridge – less than a quarter of households have a reliable source of electricity.

Average annual electricity use in Madagascar, per person, is 78 kilowatt hours (kwh) per year. Most people don't think in kilowatts, so let me put that into perspective. My fridge uses 1.5 kwh every 24 hours. I'm running the washing machine at the moment, which will use about 1.5 kwh, and I'll use around the same again to make dinner. In the warmer months of the year, my household uses around 4.5 kwh a day. Which means that every fortnight or so, my family uses more electricity than the average Malagasy person uses in a year.

However, my consumption is low for Britain, and Britain's consumption is low for a developed country. Let's look at a variety of other countries, showing electricity use in kwh per capita per year:[3]

- Canada – 14,612 kwh
- Kuwait – 14,090 kwh
- United States – 12,154 kwh
- Australia – 9,502 kwh
- Saudi Arabia – 9,407 kwh
- Japan – 7,150 kwh
- Germany – 6,306 kwh
- China – 4,617 kwh
- Britain – 4,496 kwh
- Madagascar – 78 kwh

How would a Malagasy person respond to reading that 'our interference' is disrupting the climate and that 'we need to take responsibility'?

There are only 27 countries with very high electricity use, of over 8,000 kwh a year. There are 30 or so countries with very low usage, below 150 kwh a year. Most countries sit somewhere in between, often at a level that could be met entirely with renewable energy and considered sustainable.

The top of the list is dominated by Northern European, North American and Middle Eastern countries, along with Australia and New Zealand. The bottom is almost entirely African countries. With the exception of oil-producing Middle Eastern countries where energy is cheap, there's a distinct colour divide here. Even the majority White countries that rank lowest for electricity use, places such as Moldova or Kosovo, still use 25 times more than most countries in Sub-Saharan Africa.

It isn't correct to say that 'we' are overconsuming. 'We' are not using too much energy. Some people are overconsuming. And most of those people are White.

Unequal carbon footprints

The amount of land needed to keep a modern consumer supplied with energy and resources is considerably greater than our literal footprint. As one energy commentator described it, if the average American consumed all their energy as food, they would eat as much as an Apatosaurus.[4] At 40 tonnes and 70 feet long, that's a footprint of an entirely different kind.

Let's broaden the scope from electricity to carbon, and consider the impact of these larger fossil footprints. Since energy use is the biggest component of carbon footprints, it is a similar picture: again we see a vast inequality between countries. Per capita carbon footprints in Madagascar are around 0.16 tonnes. The average Australian has a carbon footprint 100 times larger, at over seventeen tonnes of CO_2 per year.[5] So do citizens of the United States and Canada.

Many European countries come in at half that and could feel superior when comparing themselves to those across the Atlantic. But compared to footprints of those in Malawi or Rwanda, there is less to be smug about. China is also in this middle bracket.

As the map in the introduction showed, the world's biggest carbon emitters – on a per capita basis – are clustered in the Northern Hemisphere and the Middle East. The lowest

footprints are in Sub-Saharan Africa and small island states. The South Asian countries of India, Bangladesh and Pakistan also have footprints below two tonnes per person per year.

The most obvious inequality here is economic. The poorest countries of the world have the lowest footprints. The highest footprints are in the highly industrialised North, and among the well-oiled nations of the Middle East. But if we only look at emissions at this particular moment in time, we will miss the wider perspective.

Historic responsibility

Average individual carbon footprints today show a wide discrepancy in responsibility. That becomes more stark when we look back through time. Some places have had a greenhouse gas problem for longer than others. Britain, for example, was early to industrialise and was by far the biggest emitter of greenhouse gases for over a century. With its coal-powered factories supplying the world with manufactured goods, Britain was more or less unchallenged as the world's biggest polluter from 1750 to 1900.

From that point on, the United States took over and remains the biggest total contributor to climate change today. At 399 billion tonnes of CO_2 to China's 200 billion, it is unlikely that China will catch up, despite the country's rush into coal in the early years of the 21st century (see Figure 3).

Looking at the cumulative totals by continent, we see that Europe, including Russia and the former countries of the USSR, is responsible for a third of all global CO_2 emissions.[6]

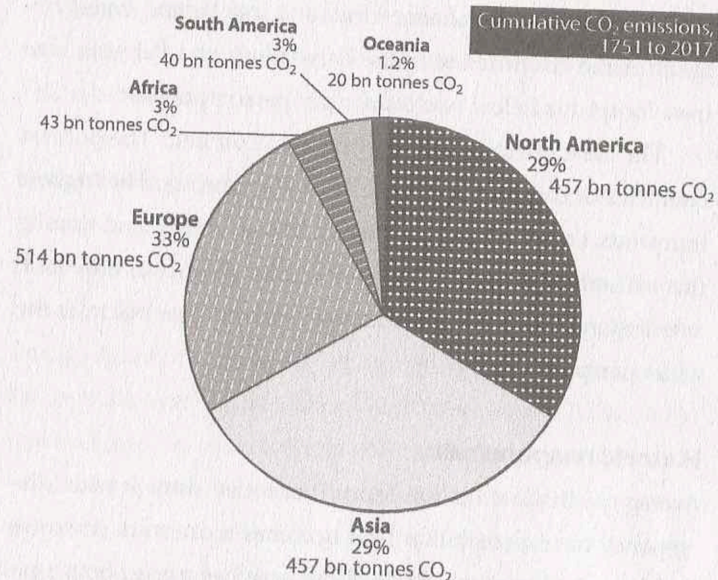

Figure 3. Who has contributed most to global CO_2? Cumulative carbon emissions from 1751 to 2017.
Calculated by Our World in Data, based on data from the Global Carbon Project and Carbon Dioxide Information Analysis Center. Published under a Creative Commons Licence.

North America adds a further 29 per cent, Oceania a further 1.2 per cent. All of these continents have had a majority White population during the period since industrialisation, which is what we are considering here with cumulative emissions.* Together they are responsible for 61 per cent of emissions.

* North America and Oceania were of course not White at all if you go back two centuries more; we will cover colonialism and conquest in Chapter 5.

Asia and the Middle East have contributed 29 per cent of total emissions, though this is spread over a larger population. The entire continents of South America and Africa have 3 per cent each. If we look at Africa more closely, we see that almost half the emissions are from South Africa. The contribution of most African countries is vanishingly small.

Countries are not ethnically homogenous, and we'll come on to that in the next chapter. It isn't always helpful to categorise entire countries by race, and it glosses over indigenous and migrant communities and their own particular stories. I am only really drawing generalisations here. Nevertheless, it is generally true that when we look at total responsibility for climate change, it has been disproportionately caused by light-skinned people of the Northern Hemisphere.

Climate change is a White problem.

That is, incidentally, why this is my book to write. White people like me need to take responsibility and cannot leave it to people of colour to make the case for racial equality.

Carbon corporations

Having said that climate change is a White problem, it would be very unfair to suggest that all White people are equally responsible. Racist structures persist because they benefit the powerful, so let me take another angle on this. The climate crisis is driven primarily by the extraction and burning of fossil fuels. While there are many fossil fuel customers, there are relatively few fossil fuel companies. Several studies have attempted to

quantify the biggest offenders and publish estimates of corporate responsibility for climate change. They yield headline findings like these:

- Just 100 companies are responsible for 71 per cent of CO_2 (*Carbon Majors Report*, 2017)[7]
- 20 firms are behind a third of global emissions (the *Guardian*, 2019)[8]
- Almost two thirds of global warming since 1888 caused by 90 companies (*Climatic Change*, 2017)[9]

The exact breakdown depends on what time frame you use, but the point is clear. A small number of big companies have made enormous profits from activities that have destroyed the climate. Those companies all have a leadership and a CEO.

Jordan Engel is the cartographer behind The Decolonial Atlas, a radical mapping project in collaboration with indigenous communities. He took the 100 companies in the first of those studies above, looked up the CEOs and plotted them on a map.[10] CEOs change, but in 2017 the distribution of those CEOs was as follows.

Out of the 100 most polluting companies, 32 of the CEOs were in North America, nine of them in Texas alone. Eighteen were based in Europe and eleven in the Middle East. India had three, China four, and Indonesia's coal gave it five. Africa had eight of those 100 CEOs, three of them in South Africa. The whole of South America had five.

Again, these are proxy measures, but the power behind fossil fuels is tilted firmly towards the Northern Hemisphere. North America and Europe account for 17 per cent of the world's population, but they are home to 50 of the 100 biggest polluters. A Google image search suggested that 49 out of 50 of those CEOs were White (and one Latino). There was just one woman in 2017.*

The destruction of the atmosphere is signed off by men called Doug or Steve or Gary.

The polluter elite

Corporations and their CEOs are approximate too, not least because that list of 100 top polluters includes many nationalised entities. They represent governments rather than individual business interests. But we can expand the CEO idea outwards to look at the shareholders of the companies most responsible for climate change.

Dario Kenner is a researcher who studies the carbon footprints of the world's richest people and has identified what he calls 'the polluter elite'. This includes directors and investors in the most ecologically damaging companies. Their money finances ongoing climate change, and many of them use their political influence to promote fossil fuels and delay the transition

* This is a crude exercise, I know. It's not for me to assign a racial identity to people, and Google won't show if people have mixed race or Native American heritage, etc. But it would be odd if I didn't mention it.

to a sustainable future. Because people of colour are harmed by this delay, the lobbying of fossil fuel elites is racist.

Kenner used the same list of 100 companies from the Carbon Majors Database, filtered out the state-owned enterprises and began making a list of senior executives and directors.[11] Information on these shareholders is readily available, and listing them personalises what could otherwise come across as abstract power structures. Corporations, like markets, are ultimately just people. And in this case, they tend to be a certain kind of person.

'I actually looked up every single person in my database and so in a way got to know them,' Kenner told me. 'Almost all of them are older White males.'

Responsibility and justice

To return to where the chapter started, global responsibility for climate change is not equally shared. This fact is often neglected in discussions on the environment. I read a book recently that called for global governance, and it described 'a single machine made up of 8 billion humans' that was responsible for climate change.[12]

Or we could take the 2019 film *Planet of the Humans*, much talked about at the time of writing. Despite the planetary title, it barely sets foot outside of the United States. It concludes that 'we must accept that our human presence is already far beyond sustainability'. It ignores the differences in responsibility and makes one universal prescription: 'Less must be the new more.'[13]

You can tell me I have to live with less, but nobody should say it to the billion people who live on a couple of dollars a day. This kind of language obscures the injustice of our climate predicament.

So does the language of the 'Anthropocene' – the geological era in which humanity's actions are the defining feature of global change. By grouping everyone together in one universalist narrative, says the American geographer Kathryn Yusoff, the Anthropocene 'neatly erases histories of racism'.[14]

The language of environmentalism often reaches for inclusive terms in a well-meaning attempt at solidarity, aiming to create a global consciousness or unity of purpose. But campaigners should take care not to accidentally rewrite history in ways that serve a privileged minority.[15] Unity and solidarity are vital, but they are impossible without recognising that some parts of the world bear much greater responsibility for the climate emergency than others.

You'll notice that I use qualifying words such as 'predominately' and 'mostly' a lot. I don't really like them as words – especially 'disproportionately', which goes clanking like a freight train through any sentence I put it in. However, they're important because they avoid absolutes. The world doesn't fit into neat categories, and there are plenty of exceptions.

For instance, Africa has rich, privileged elites who can fly to New York to go shopping for handbags, and there are White Europeans who sleep behind the bus station. I know wealthy White men who live very responsibly. There are class structures

and power imbalances that leave whole White communities voiceless. And there are forms of racism that this book won't investigate in detail, such as distinctive patterns of anti-Asian racism, China's actions in Africa, Islamophobia, or the Gulf States' attitudes to their imported workers from South Asia. Nuance matters, and it's wise to avoid blame and talk instead about degrees of responsibility.

With that in mind, what is the responsibility of the very poorest? The ecological footprints of the poorest 1 billion people – who are largely in Sub-Saharan Africa – are often well below the threshold for sustainability. There are other environmental problems associated with extreme poverty, but from a global climate change point of view they essentially bear no responsibility. Many of the world's citizens might think of climate change as something we are all implicated in and that calls us all to play our part. For those with the smallest footprints, however, climate change is something that is imposed upon them by others.

Constance Okollet, a farmer from Uganda, puts it this way: 'It was not until I went to a meeting about climate change that I heard it was not God, but the rich people in the West who are doing this to us.'[16]

2

Who suffers climate change?

Twenty-third of October 1984, the BBC screened a news report detailing the horrors of the Ethiopian famine. As Michael Buerk narrates from the refugee camp of Korem, clouds of smoke hang over hunched and skeletal bodies dressed in rags. These are horrific and powerful images. The Kenyan cameraman, Mohamed Amin, described how he wept in the edit suite over the footage of 'people dying as far as the eye can see'.[1]

The report moved the audience back at home on their sofas too, prompting a wave of charitable donations and a new interest in overseas development.

Three months later, Bob Geldof and Midge Ure's enduringly grating 'Do They Know It's Christmas?' would become the bestselling single of the year. It raised millions for famine relief as it urged listeners to remember those on the other side of the world where the rains don't fall, and to thank God it was happening to them and not to you.

Seventeen years later, a computer model ran at the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation, Australia. The atmospheric scientists Leon Rotstayn and Ulrike

5

The deep roots of climate injustice

Where does the story of climate change start? If I take greenhouse gas emissions to be Exhibit A, then fossil fuels are the culprit and the story is a straightforward one. Trace the emissions backwards through history to the birth of the Industrial Revolution, and there are the origins of the climate crisis: James Watt and his coal-powered steam engines running mills and looms and water pumps.

Some might start later. The most famous graph in climate science is the Keeling Curve, showing the rise of CO_2 emissions at the Mauna Loa Observatory in Hawaii. It's the earliest annual record of CO_2 concentrations, beginning in 1958, and sets a starting point for the awareness of climate change if not the problem itself. Others would go back much further, arguing that human experiments with the atmosphere began with the forest clearances at the dawn of settled agriculture.[1]

Those approaches are based in the science of the greenhouse effect. A climate justice lens might tell a different story:

'We love to tell ourselves that it all started with the Industrial Revolution,' writes climate justice essayist Mary Annaïse Heglar. 'But we're telling ourselves a lie. It started with conquest, genocides, slavery and colonialism. That is the moment when White men's relationship with living things became extractive and disharmonious. Everything was for the taking; everything was for sale.'[2]

So far we have looked at who has caused the climate crisis and who suffers most from it, and how environmental justice intersects with other inequalities. I described how climate justice cannot be separated from other overlapping injustices. It cannot be separated from its historical context either, and that's the subject of this chapter.

The racism of slavery

1807, and the House of Commons is debating the Slave Trade Abolition Bill, again. It is the twelfth time such a bill has been proposed in the last fifteen years. The debate has raged for decades. Every argument has been heard, and in a matter of weeks the bill will be signed.

If the many years of debate had led Parliament to a greater understanding of human equality, there is little evidence of it here. Black lives are a commodity and referred to as such, with members talking about imports of 'fresh negroes'. The finer points of the bill are discussed – as one minister reminds them, it is 'not the intention of the house to abolish slavery, but the slave trade'.

This is important. Just ending the trade itself should inspire plantation owners to take better care of the slaves they already have, without depriving them of labour or giving the slaves big ideas. 'Be aware of propagating notions of political right among a people so unintelligent and so easily provoked to revolt as the negroes,' warns one MP.[3]

The institutions of slavery rely on a justifying ideology of racial superiority. For the defenders of slavery, black-skinned people were considered to be at best simple-minded and child-like, at worst barbaric. They were lazy and unproductive, and incapable of governing themselves. It really was for the best that the Whites were in charge, and even the abolitionists were not above such thoughts. Only the most radical abolitionists advocated racial equality – often Quakers, who believed that all people were equal in the eyes of God. William Wilberforce certainly did not. After the slaves were free, he expected them to continue to serve Whites as a 'grateful peasantry'.[4]

The racism of conquest

Racial superiority allowed Britain, and later the United States, to explain away slavery as the natural order of things. Perhaps even the God-given order of things. It also underlies imperial conquest.

The lightning rod for imperial racism is Cecil Rhodes, a man whose ego bestrode entire continents. Hailing from Hertfordshire, the same county where I was born, Rhodes made his fortune in the diamond mines of South Africa. He used his

wealth and influence to expand the British Empire, with the vast territories of Rhodesia named after him.*

For Rhodes, expanding White rule was 'a duty': 'more territory simply means more of the Anglo-Saxon race, more of the best, the most human, the most honourable race the world possesses.'[5] It is hardly surprising that equality campaigners have objected to statues, buildings and scholarships in his honour.

Imperialists could appeal to science for backup. There was the pseudoscience of Phrenology, which claimed that intellect and character could be read from the shape of a person's head. Darwin's theories of evolution were also ripe for misuse. His work is certainly open to racist interpretations, with *The Descent of Man* discussing 'savage' and 'civilised races', and how the 'distinct races' of man 'may be more appropriately called sub-species'.[6]

Expansion could be justified religiously too. The imperial hymn 'Land of Hope and Glory' was first performed in 1902, a month after Britain's victory in the Boer war. That was a war for control of gold and diamond reserves, and in which Britain invented the concentration camp. And yet Elgar casually frames this conquest as the will of God in the song's chorus: 'Wider and still wider, shall thy bounds be set. God who made thee mighty make thee mightier yet.'

* Now Zimbabwe and Zambia. Among the few countries that are still named after their White invaders are Colombia and the Philippines.

This is not unique to Britain, of course. When the conquistadors set foot in South America, their brutal subjugation of the indigenous people was fully sanctioned by the Pope. In a series of decrees, Pope Alexander VI explained how all nations not currently occupied by Christians could rightfully be settled, thereby expanding the faith.[7] This 'doctrine of discovery' justified conquest and oppression, and the misuse of religion was not lost on those who were enslaved. 'The god of the White man inspires him with crime, but our god calls upon us to do good works,' said the Haitian revolutionary and Vodou priest Boukman Dutty in 1791. 'Throw away the symbol of the God of the Whites who has so often caused us to weep.'[8]

Plunder

It is easy enough to argue that slavery and empire were racist projects. What is important for our purposes here is that they feed directly into industrialisation, and thus the climate crisis.

Colonialism captured the productive capacity of overseas lands. For a small country such as Britain, the Empire massively expanded its reach, with all resources flowing home to the centre. Slavery harnessed human labour for the benefit of the home country. These two factors – free land and free labour – acted as a huge subsidy to Western development. They provided the capital for industrialisation and account for a large part of global inequality today.

This can be quite directly traced. When slavery was finally abolished in 1833, the slave owners – rather than the slaves

– were compensated for their loss.* The Treasury paid a huge sum in compensation, equivalent to 5 per cent of the nation's GDP at the time, and the records that were kept provide a remarkable list of who owned slaves and how many. Those records only became publicly available in 2013, and they can be browsed online, alongside further information about the slave owners' other interests.[9]

Some slave owners put their money into stately homes or built museums, churches or key infrastructure. Clifton Suspension Bridge and Bristol Zoo were built by the slave magnate Thomas Daniel. The Earl Talbot was an investor in two estates in Jamaica, where over 500 slaves worked between them. He used his wealth to create the Staffordshire gardens of Alton Towers, now the site of one of the country's leading theme parks.

It gets closer to home than one might expect. My children attended Crawley Green School, and walked down Crawley Green Road to get there. Samuel Crawley was an important Luton resident and the owner of the Stockwood estate, now a park and discovery centre. Listed among Crawley's many interests were two coffee plantations in Grenada that used slave labour.[10]

Five minutes' walk in the other direction is my local pub, one of the 2,700 pubs and restaurants operated by the Greene King brewery company, whose beers are stocked in

* This expense was so big that it was only paid off in full in 2015, meaning that I have personally contributed through my taxes to compensating slave owners – and so have generations of Black British citizens.

every cornershop, off-licence and supermarket in the land. The founder, Benjamin Greene, was a slave owner who lobbied parliament on behalf of slavers, and who worked to undermine the reputation of abolitionists.[11]

As well as buildings and businesses, the profits from slavery were invested into Britain's own productive capacity. The records show slave-owners' wealth being ploughed into Britain's railway building boom. Others invested in shipbuilding, mining or manufacturing. Much of the wealth went into the banking sector, which in turn provided the finance for industry.

The Caribbean historian Eric Williams, later the first prime minister of Trinidad and Tobago, was one of the first to detail these connections in his 1944 book *Capitalism and Slavery*. He pointed out that the most iconic invention of the era, James Watt's steam engine, was funded with a loan from a bank financed by the plantations of the West Indies.[12]

Britain takes great pride in the Industrial Revolution – enough to have made it a feature of the opening ceremony of the London Olympic Games in 2012. The story is told with a focus on the ingenuity of the inventors and engineers, and rarely on how it was funded. The reality is that it was the huge input of stolen land, labour and resources from the slave colonies that enabled Britain and Western Europe to industrialise.

First Spain and Portugal, then Britain, France and Germany, Belgium and Italy, and several others, all profited from this plundering of resources and labour. The United States was also built on genocidal land theft and slavery – 'people turned to fuel for

the American machine', in the words of the essayist Ta-Nehisi Coates.[13]

The anthropologist Jason Hickel proposes a thought experiment: 'What if the sum of the value produced by African slaves in the New World – worth the equivalent of trillions of dollars today – was subtracted from Western wealth and added to the total wealth of Africa?'[14]

This matters because, with slavery, it is easy to focus on the abuse suffered by the slaves themselves and miss the absence they left behind. 'Slavery happened to Africa as much as it did to those who arrived in the Americas or the Caribbean,' says the British race scholar Kehinde Andrews.[15] The West's gain in stolen people was Africa's loss, a setback that has echoed through the centuries.

What if the gold and silver from South America are added to the bill? The diamonds from South Africa? The looted treasures in Western museums? The cheap cotton from India? The land from the Native Americans and the Aboriginal Australians? For centuries, the global North took what it wanted. Defenders of empire insist that colonialism brought benefits too, but the priorities of empire were clear: the extraction of value from 'inferior' people and lands.

The logic of climate change isn't so very different. The big emitters extract fossil fuels, often in 'sacrifice zones' in distant countries, and burn them to drive economic growth back home. Then they dump their pollution into a global atmosphere, and shift the consequences on others in distant parts of the world.

As with slavery and colonialism, the perpetrators are mostly White, and those plundered are people of colour.

Independence without freedom

Independence came to Africa in stages, mainly between 1955 and 1975. Even as country after country was signed over to local rule, campaigners for independence could see the threat of ongoing Western dominance. The All-African People's Conference, held in 1961, offered a definition of 'neocolonialism' as 'the survival of the colonial system in spite of the formal recognition of political independence'. Right from the start, African leaders had identified 'an indirect and subtle form of domination by political, economic, social, military or technical means'.[16]

Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of Ghana, expanded on this idea in his book *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*. Among the 'mechanisms of neo-colonialism' that he describes are high interest rates, control of world markets, *coups d'état* against African leaders, and putting conditions on financial aid in order to manipulate domestic policy.[17] On publication in 1965, the United States proved the point by withholding aid, and just four months later Nkrumah was deposed in a CIA-assisted coup.[18] The new military leadership conveniently pivoted away from socialist alliances and turned towards the West, and Nkrumah saw out the rest of his life in exile.

Walter Rodney was one of the first to raise awareness of these issues and connect them to the broader story of slavery and empire. Born in Guyana in South America, he travelled

extensively in the Caribbean and in Africa and became known as a radical pan-African scholar and activist. While working as a university professor in Tanzania in 1972, he published the landmark book *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa.*

'Foreign ownership is still present, although the armies and flags of foreign powers have been removed,' he observed. 'So long as foreigners own land, mines, factories, banks, insurance companies, means of transportation, newspapers, power stations, then for so long will the wealth of Africa flow outwards.'[19] The colonies had been given political freedom, but not economic freedom.

Western interests still controlled the assets and infrastructure, the rights to natural resources and the means of production. The old powers controlled the terms of trade, meaning that 'the whole import-export relationship between Africa and its trading partners is one of unequal exchange and of exploitation'.

Walter Rodney was killed by political opponents in 1980, using a bomb hidden in a walkie-talkie. Responsibility for his assassination has never been established.

Underdevelopment

It wasn't enough to exploit and extract from the colonies. There have always been policies to restrain development too. Britain used its colonies to produce raw materials, and these were then shipped to Britain for manufacturing, with the finished goods often sold back to the colonies again. This captured the value at home in the British economy. It was one of the drivers of the

movement for Indian independence: India was forbidden to spin its own cloth, and Gandhi advocated the simple act of spinning thread at home as an act of civil disobedience.

Sometimes these kinds of prohibitions could be deadly. During the Bengal famine of 1943, British administrators insisted that food exports to Britain continue even as the crisis took hold. There was enough food in the region to feed everyone, but millions of people nevertheless starved. Amartya Sen lived through the famine as a child, and later studied the crisis. Starvation, he concluded, 'is a function of entitlements – and not of food availability'.[20]

The micro-managing of food and resources did not end with the collapse of the colonial era and independence. Even programmes that were supposed to help were compromised in their objectives. Zambian economist Dambisa Moyo has described how development aid comes with all kinds of strings attached that benefit the donor countries and lock poorer countries into dependence.[21]

In the 1990s and early 2000s economists such as Joseph Stiglitz and Ha-Joon Chang blew the whistle on how the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank wrote international rules to favour the richest. For years poorer countries were advised – as a condition of development aid – to produce for export and not attempt to industrialise. They were instructed to open their markets to foreign competition and denationalise prize assets. They were forbidden from subsidising industries or farmers, while the US and the EU ran generous subsidy schemes

for their own producers and crowded developing world producers out of global markets.

All of this kept the profits flowing back to the West. As Chang summarised it in his book *Kicking Away the Ladder*, 'the developed countries did not get where they are now through the policies and the institutions that they recommend to developing countries today'.[22]

Many Western commentators continue to use a one-word riposte to these sorts of arguments: corruption. And while it is true that many African leaders (including Kwame Nkrumah), have a troubled legacy, many of Africa's worst dictators were installed or supported by Western forces. Nnimmo Bassey, the Nigerian environmentalist and poet, points out a double standard. African countries are often accused of corruption, while 'scant attention' is paid to corporate tax dodging, with the full cooperation of the global accountancy firms, which robs African governments of billions of dollars every year.[23] By facilitating capital flight out of Africa, corruption is itself a tool of neocolonialism, allowing Western interests to bypass the processes of democracy and public scrutiny.

The slaves may be free, the old colonies independent. But the power imbalance remains, in the form of the ongoing structural racism of international relations.

Ecological debt

Slavery and colonialism funded industrialisation, and thus lie at the heart of climate change. They are an unpaid debt, and

climate change can be added to that ledger. 'If you take more than your fair share of a finite natural resource you run up an ecological debt,' suggests the economist Andrew Simms in his book on the topic.[24] Some countries run a huge surplus of greenhouse gases, relying on others to run a deficit that mops up their pollution. Yet the damage will not fall on the polluters, making them climate free-riders.

Ecological debt flips the conventional debt relationship on its head. Poorer developing countries are usually the ones seen as debtors, owing billions to the banks and governments of the rich world. From a carbon point of view, the richer nations are in debt to the poor who live well below their means in terms of carbon footprint. Will that debt ever be paid?

In his encyclical *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis spells out the moral implication of this debt: 'Developing countries, where the most important reserves of the biosphere are found, continue to fuel the development of richer countries at the cost of their own present and future ... The developed countries ought to help pay this debt by significantly limiting their consumption of non-renewable energy and by assisting poorer countries to support policies and programmes of sustainable development.'[25]

Whites in charge

'Thinking about the British Empire,' asks the polling agency YouGov, 'would you say it is more something to be proud of or more something to be ashamed of?' It's 2014 and the Commonwealth Games are coming up – an event where

Britain's former colonies compete sportingly as friends. Britain is hosting the event in Glasgow, and there's a positive buzz about the occasion. A sense of *bonhomie* prevails, and nobody will mention the darker side of empire – the slavery and mass displacement, the wars of aggression, the famines and genocide. Yes, say 59 per cent of British respondents. The Empire is something to be proud of.

'Would you like Britain to still have an empire?' the survey goes on. Yes, say 34 per cent.[26]

Boris Johnson, later to become prime minister, took a similarly positive line when writing about Africa. 'The problem is not that we were once in charge, but that we are not in charge any more,' he wrote in the *Spectator* in 2002. 'The best fate for Africa would be if the old colonial powers, or their citizens, scrambled once again in her direction.'[27]

The idea that White people should be in charge doesn't seem to have gone anywhere.

Injustice upon injustice

Climate change arises out of a historical context, and so it reflects the injustices of its time. It is a product of injustice, and it perpetuates the injustices that lie behind it. As the academic activist Janine Francois puts it simply: 'climate change is the outcome of White Western colonialism'.[28]

Again, climate change cannot 'be' racist with any kind of intent. Only people can be racist in the most obvious interpretation of the word. But the climate crisis arises from racial

injustice and the plundering of the global South, and it is in itself a form of exploitation of the global South.

The climate crisis is not generally described in these terms, but it is not news to race activists. 'The impact of climate change on black and brown-skinned people comes on the back of 500 years of exploitation of their bodies anyway,' the theologian Anthony Reddie told me. 'It's a compound disaster, adding one injustice to another ... The people who suffered 500 years ago are the same ones suffering now.'[29]

6

Climate violence

In May 2020, George Floyd was killed in the street. A White police officer knelt on his neck for almost nine minutes, well past the point when he had stopped saying 'I can't breathe'. Bystanders filmed the whole thing, and I cried when I saw the footage. I cried for George. I cried at the fragility of life. I cried at the powerlessness of the bystanders, pleading 'check his pulse!'

Millions responded in outrage, as protestors ignored curfews and took their anger to the streets. Former president Donald Trump – a Venn diagram of affluent detachment, White privilege and toxic masculinity – focused on the violence and said little about the reasons for it. He boasted about the 'vicious dogs' awaiting anyone who crossed the White House perimeter. He tweeted all-caps invocations such as 'LAW & ORDER' – a concern that was notably absent when his own followers stormed the Capitol Building a matter of months later.

Black Lives Matter

Police brutality is currently the most high-profile aspect of racial injustice. Young Black men in America are twice as

likely to be killed by the police as their White counterparts.[1] To take the 2015 figures, for which there is good data, a total of 1,134 people were killed by the police in the United States. Over half of them were from ethnic minorities. And yet, not a single police officer was convicted of murder in 2015.[2] Not even Timothy Loehmann, who shot and killed twelve-year-old Tamir Rice in a public park in Cleveland. Tamir was playing with a toy gun. Loehmann opened fire within two seconds of arriving on the scene.[3]

Young Black men are also more likely to be arrested, charged and imprisoned. 12 per cent of the US population is Black, as is a third of its prison population.[4]

Black Lives Matter was founded in 2013 to highlight these injustices, after the shooting of Trayvon Martin. The movement has grown, but, despite the steps forward in awareness, the problem remains. History keeps repeating itself, and the resurfacing of tensions in 2020 should hardly have come as a surprise. 'Oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever,' as Martin Luther King, Jr. warned in 1963.[5]

The climate connection

In September 2016, activists managed to breach the security of London City Airport and get onto the runway. There they erected a tripod and locked themselves onto and around it. Flights were disrupted for around six hours and 131 planes were rerouted before police could dismantle the protest. Nine arrests were made.

The action was carried out by Black Lives Matter UK (BLM UK), and the banners they laid out on the ground read: 'The climate crisis is a racist crisis.' The action was carried out to 'highlight the UK's environmental impact on the lives of Black people locally and globally', BLM UK said in a statement. 'Black people are the first to die, not the first to fly, in this racist climate crisis.'

As well as making the connection between climate change and the global inequality of its effects, the protesters' choice of City Airport is also significant because it is in the London borough of Newham. London is already the most ethnically diverse city in Britain, and Newham has the smallest percentage of White residents of any local authority in the country, at 29 per cent.[6] It is an archetypal 'sacrifice zone' – a poorer district with a disproportionate number of Black and Asian residents who put up with more than their fair share of noise and pollution. City Airport, meanwhile, serves the elite business travellers of London's financial centre. It's a totemic example of inequality, and its plans to expand further into Newham would later make the airport a target for Extinction Rebellion.

It was perhaps the first time that climate and race were connected in the British press, though it was widely misunderstood. 'Have you been hijacked?' the BBC asked a BLM UK spokesperson.[7] The *Daily Mail* complained that 'all of those involved were White and all from privileged backgrounds', even though this was a deliberate decision.[8] Even some antiracism campaigners were divided on the protest, wondering if it was

a distraction from the real issues. What did flying have to do with Black Lives Matter?

Alexandra Wanjiku Kelbert, one of the protest organisers, explained BLM UK's actions: 'When we say Black lives matter, we mean *all* Black lives, and that includes the lives of those who live in proximity to airports, to power plants, to the busiest of roads, and whose children grow up with asthma and skin conditions exacerbated by air pollution.'[9]

I can't breathe

Reading Wanjiku Kelbert's words about London children growing up with air pollution, one particular child comes to mind: Ella Kissi-Debrah. After suffering from respiratory problems for several years, she died in 2013 after a particularly severe asthma attack. She was nine years old.

Her mother, Rosamund Kissi-Debrah, knew that air pollution in their area of London was a factor in her condition and therefore in her death. But, as is usually the case, the official cause of death was recorded as asthma. It was only after a long legal case that an inquest ruled in 2020: 'Ella died of asthma, contributed to by exposure to excessive air pollution.' It was the first time that a coroner in the UK had named air pollution as a cause of death.[10]

London's Black residents face greater exposure to air pollution, and some of the city's most polluted districts have large Black populations.[11] There is a racial dimension to air pollution in London, another example of environmental injustice, and an echo of the Black Lives Matter rallying cry 'I can't breathe'.

Black Lives Matter has mainly been associated with police brutality and mass incarceration, with violence against Black people. But in counting the cost of climate change or air pollution, isn't environmental harm also a form of violence?

Structural violence

Racism can be understood as prejudiced actions and opinions, as we saw in the Introduction. It can also be understood as structural, embedded in cultural and social patterns. Violence is similar. The most obvious form is direct or inter-personal violence, when one person's actions are seen to harm somebody else. But violence has deeper dimensions.

The idea of structural violence was first developed by Johan Galtung in the 1960s. Galtung was an early practitioner of what is now called Peace Studies, a social studies discipline that deliberately distanced peacebuilding and conflict resolution from the study of conflict itself. He argued that violence can be understood at three levels.

- At the bottom is *cultural violence* – long-standing attitudes such as White supremacy or male superiority, for example.
- This cultural violence legitimises *structural violence*, which emerges as patterns of disadvantage such as racial or gender inequality.
- The third level is the acts of *direct violence* that reflect the inequality: police shootings, or acts of violence against women.

Understood in this wider perspective, violence flows upwards from deep roots. Violent acts flow from inequalities which in turn flow from culture.

Only the top strata requires intent. Direct violence is a deliberate act, whereas structural violence results from 'numerous acts of omission'.[12] Structural violence is better understood as a process than an event. The suffering that it causes can be many times greater than direct violence, but it goes unnoticed because it is de-personified and diffused across many people and many different acts. It is the grinding inequality that holds minorities back, year after year.

Environmental inequalities are an example of structural violence. They too flow from deep cultural ideas about who is entitled to clean air and water, and who is less 'deserving'. Who must be kept safe and who is, to quote a Robert D. Bullard book title, the 'wrong complexion for protection'?[13]

Slow violence

Archona and Priambandhu were farmers in Kaya Benia, a village in Bangladesh. In previous years they had been able to produce two tonnes of rice from their eleven acres of land. After repeated cyclones and floods, their land has shrunk to two acres and what remains is polluted with salt. It is underwater for four months of the year.

'We don't know the future, but we can assume that we will lose it all,' says Archona. 'We are losing our home. We have lost our livelihood and we are fighting to have enough food

and water for each day. If we just had the land beneath our feet, then we could adapt to climate change.'[14]

Archona and Priambandhu have suffered an act of violence. Their home and their livelihood has been destroyed. Their land has been taken from them. They have contributed almost nothing to the crisis – as Constance Okollet said in Chapter 1, this is something that has been done to them.

The cause and the effect are so far apart from each other that it might not be recognised as violence. There was no malicious intent, and yet their experience is all too common. As greenhouse gases pollute the atmosphere from the world's most developed countries, the waters rise or the rains fail in faraway places. Heatwaves claim the weakest. Crops are lost. Places and the memories they hold are erased. Cultural heritage is eroded. The individual events – the storms and cyclones – are sometimes described as 'violent'. Why not the wider issue?

If the cause and the effect could be connected, perhaps it would be more obvious that expanding an airport, opening a new coal mine or pulling out of an international treaty are acts of violence. They are acts of violence perpetrated against nature and biodiversity, and against people of colour.

One reason that climate change is not seen as violence is that it happens so gradually. This is a problem identified by Rob Dixon, a professor at Princeton's High Meadows Environmental Institute. He describes how environmental harm progresses as 'slow violence': 'a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time

and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all'.[15]

Climate violence

Climate change is nobody's fault. Nobody intended it. It has not been designed. It has been 'created by generations of decisions from privileged people who seek to make themselves safe and comfortable, who contribute disproportionately to the problem of climate change while tending to avoid its worst effects'.[16]

That's Kevin J. O'Brien, who argues that climate change is a problem of structural violence in his striking book *The Violence of Climate Change*. 'It has no single architect and no direct cause, but it is nevertheless violence – a selfish expression of power that harms others.'

The book discusses structural violence and presents historical case studies in non-violent resistance as possible responses to the climate crisis. It isn't specifically about race, but in adding the conclusions from earlier chapters to his insights, I reach an uncomfortable conclusion:

Climate change is racial violence.

There is a through line from George Floyd in Minneapolis to Archona and Priambandhu in Bangladesh. They have all suffered from acts of violence that spring from underlying patterns of inequality, where some people's lives have greater value than others'. The convenience of White consumers, the right to drive or fly or eat beef, takes precedence over the rights of Black and Brown people around the world.

As demonstrators took to the streets of Minneapolis in May 2020, climate activists from the local branch of 350.org served food and provided first aid to protestors. Sam Grant, executive director and environmental justice campaigner, made the connection very clearly: 'Police violence is an aspect of a broader pattern of structural violence, which the climate crisis is a manifestation of.'[17]

It is all part of the same struggle, the defiant cry that Black Lives Matter.

The maangamizi

The British media may have been wrong-footed by the actions of Black Lives Matter UK, and their assertion that climate change is racist. African activists would have been less surprised.

Maangamizi is a Swahili word that means havoc or annihilation. It has become a shorthand term for an 'Afrikan holocaust' that stretches from slavery, through colonialism and into current oppression and the threat of climate change. It is used by pan-African activists and academics, including a group who run a petition called 'Stop the Maangamizi: We charge genocide/ecocide'.

'We have our own understanding of the problem of climate change, within the context of Pan-Afrikan Internationalism,' write Kofi Mawuli Klu and Esther Stanford-Xosei from the Pan-Afrikan Reparations Coalition in Europe (PARCOE). The group 'sees climate change as one of the results of the criminal imposition – by the ruling classes of Europe – of a rapacious

system expropriating the resources of the globe, not only at the expense of the majority of Humanity, but also to the detriment of our Mother Earth'.[18]

The term genocide is not an exaggeration. The first genocide of the 20th century was in German-controlled West Africa, a campaign called the *Vernichtung* that drove out the Herero and Nama tribespeople. *The Times of Israel* described it as a 'template for the Holocaust'.[19] Similar atrocities occurred in the Congo under Belgium, Libya under Italian rule, and the French colonies in Algeria. Other crimes may not fit the specific definition of genocide, but what is the right word for systematically obliterating an entire culture, as British imperialist forces did in the sacking of Benin?*

While colonialism may have formally ended, pan-Africans argue that justice is yet to be done and the damage is ongoing. As the rapper Akala puts it, 'They changed that much? Are you so sure? The world's darker people still the most poor?'[20]

This history of genocide and extraction of value from Africa is now being compounded by the climate crisis. It has taken different forms over the centuries, but the same pattern of cultural violence underlies slavery, colonisation, unfair trade rules and the climate crisis. First it was the people and their labour. Then

* In 1897 British forces destroyed the ancient royal city of Benin in what is now Nigeria, burned it to the ground and built a golf course on the site of the king's house. The tens of thousands of African casualties were never counted. Extensive collections of the looted treasure can still be found in the British Museum and elsewhere.

it was the land and the resources. Now it is the atmosphere. The nature of the plunder has changed, but the logic remains the same: White people are entitled to take what they need from Black people.

'I'm going to be greedy for the United States,' promised Donald Trump on the campaign trail. 'I'm going to take and take and take. We're going to take, take, take, take.'[21]

7

Climate privilege

> 'The point about coal is that it has produced enormous improvement in human living standards – and not just coal, same with oil, same with gas, same with all three fossil fuels. The improvement that they have done to human life is spectacular, but not just to human life, to the planet as well. And people somehow think that fossil fuels are evil.'[1]

This is Matt Ridley, a science writer, former banker, peer of the realm and one of Britain's most prominent climate sceptics. He is part of the landed gentry and the owner of the Blagdon Hall estate in Northumberland.

The estate is home to two coal mines.

Ridley acknowledges the conflict of interest, and says his views on climate change would be no different if his family did not profit from coal. Maybe so. Perhaps there is a parallel dimension where Matt Ridley does not have coal mines on his family land, and where he is still a climate sceptic. Until that dimension is found, there is no way to test his claim.

In the last chapter I described the deep roots of the climate crisis. It emerges from an already divided and unequal world,

and environmental injustice reflects all the intersecting injustices of the past. In this chapter I want to look at some of the ways that these inequalities are perpetuated, and how privilege acts to protect the status quo.

Profiting from denial

Climate change has been understood for a long time. The Swedish scientist Svante Arrhenius explained how CO_2 emissions from industry were changing the temperature right back in 1896.[2] The metaphor of a greenhouse effect had been used 70 years earlier by the French physicist Jean-Baptiste Joseph Fourier. And 50 years before him, the less well-known but magnificently named Georges-Louis Leclerc de Buffon had described how the Earth's atmosphere could be affected by human behaviour.[3] There's really little reason for climate science to still be controversial.

It became more controversial as the projections became observable – and, more importantly, as the calls to address it began to grow. Scientists at the Exxon oil company made a study of climate change in the early 1980s. Their briefing paper notes that 'mitigation of the "greenhouse effect" would require major reductions in fossil fuel combustion'.[4] The briefing is available online today, but at the time it came with a note to say it should not be distributed externally. Similar research from Shell a few years later was also kept confidential.

The oil companies knew about climate change and knew that it directly affected their business. A deliberate choice was

made to ignore the science rather than compromise profits. For some, it went further than ignoring it. Climate science was actively suppressed. Funding poured into lobby groups and sympathetic think tanks, spreading alternative 'scientific' explanations. A movement emerged, with its own websites and conferences and superstars. It's a story well-documented in books such as Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway's *Merchants of Doubt* or George Monbiot's *Heat*.

The movement eroded trust in climate science, which in turn played a role in the collapse of the Copenhagen climate talks in 2009. It felt for a while as if the sceptics had won, and every mention of climate change was a battle. Even my relatively insignificant environmental website, The Earthbound Report, came under sustained attack. A little digging into the trolling comments below every climate-related post revealed them to be deliberately coordinated by a small network. The abuse I experienced was trivial compared to the insults, character assassinations and even death threats received by leading climate scientists and campaigners.

We will never know how many were silenced, but we do know who gains from the confusion and the delay: the fossil fuel industry, the polluter elite who benefit from it, and the governments that derive their power from it.

Networks of influence

Let's come back to Matt Ridley for a moment. It's nothing personal; he's just a useful example.

In 2012, on his father's death, Ridley inherited the title of 5th Viscount Ridley and Baron Wensleydale. The following year he was appointed as a hereditary peer in the House of Lords. Unelected by British voters, he has a seat for life in the upper house, able to vote for or against every climate change or energy-related bill that passes before him. Within months he had breached the code of conduct by speaking in favour of fracking while failing to mention that he had investments in the sector.[5]

Ridley already had influence. His brother-in-law is Owen Paterson, who served as environment minister under David Cameron's Conservative government, despite – or perhaps because of – his climate-sceptic views. His uncle was a Conservative MP. He comes from the same Eton and Oxford stock as many Conservative politicians.

And he already had a platform. As well as his own books and website, he has been a science and environment columnist for *The Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*. Both of those were part of the Rupert Murdoch media empire at the time – an empire that includes *Fox News* in the US, and the Australian newspapers that supported Scott Morrison and his climate-sceptic policies.

The White men who run the world have money, political influence and a media platform. They are able to deploy all of these to steward their own interests, and that may not even be a conscious decision. Remember – a structural injustice does not need intent. Self-serving climate arguments don't have to

involve corporate plots or dark money, though sometimes they do. They are just as much to do with old-boys' networks, peer pressure and group-think.

The system is self-reinforcing. A politician will get their news from their preferred outlet, which has likely become their preferred news outlet because it reflects their worldview. They will hear opinions and new ideas from the organisations and associations that they already take an interest in. If they have a question or seek more information, it is likely to be raised with friends and colleagues within their own circles.

Since White Anglo-Saxon men are among the most privileged people in human history, concerns about justice don't surface very often. These are capitalism's winners, climate winners, the beneficiaries of race and gender inequality. 'Those with privilege,' writes Jennie Stephens in her book *Diversifying Power*, 'are generally less aware of the structural oppression that stratifies society than those without such privilege, which is why antiracist, feminist leadership is so critical.'[6]

I'm alright, Jack

Apologies to his lordship, but here's Matt Ridley again, this time in the sarcastically titled book *Climate Change: The Facts*.[7] Ridley does not deny that climate change is happening; rather, he argues that it will be positive: 'the harm is currently smaller than the good [climate change] is doing, through longer growing seasons, milder winters, slightly higher rainfall, and faster growth rates of crops and forests because of CO_2 fertilisation.

And that net good stands in stark contrast to the net harm caused by climate change policy.'

When someone argues that climate change is positive, the immediate question is 'for whom?'

For the world's most vulnerable, climate change is already devastating. What's a longer growing season worth if your land has been flooded with seawater? Or higher rainfall if it washes away your crops and topsoil? And 'milder winters'? Imagine the reaction that comment would get in Turbat in Pakistan. For Black and minority ethnic people, for indigenous communities, the idea of climate change as positive is laughable. But they don't have the money, political influence or platform.

For the polluter elite, however, Ridley isn't wrong. At least in the short term, it is action to prevent climate change that presents a bigger risk. Governments might ban coal power, tax pollution or support the renewable energy that will erode their profits.

Even that apparent immunity won't last forever. The climate crisis will affect everyone eventually, through mounting costs and increasing instability. Ultimately the whole planet will become inhospitable if runaway climate change cannot be averted.

The political turning point may be occurring at the moment, following the escalation in urgency in recent years, and Joe Biden's reset of American priorities. The sceptics' own children may change their minds, as Rupert Murdoch's youngest son James has apparently been trying to do.[8] But it certainly

has been true, for the last 30 or 40 years, that action to stop climate change is against the immediate interests of the polluter elite.

The intersectionality of denial

There are some big funders and influential people behind climate denial, but it also has a grassroots. Millions of people are united in their opposition to carbon targets and policies to prevent climate change. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given what we have seen about overlapping layers of disadvantage, there are overlapping layers of privilege too. People who fear that their privileged position is being undermined on one axis of inequality may be more likely to oppose action on other inequalities.

Salil Benegal, an American social scientist, has studied attitudes towards race and climate change. He found that 'high levels of racial resentment are strongly correlated with reduced agreement with the scientific consensus on climate change'.[9] That's not to say that all those who disagree with climate science are racists, but there is a correlation: a high score on tests of racial prejudice and racial resentment were a strong indicator that people would also reject climate science.

Benegal observed that this tendency increased after the election of Barack Obama. In the early years of the Obama presidency, levels of agreement with climate science stayed the same among Black voters. Among White Americans, it fell by 18 per cent. If somebody felt that their identity or lifestyle was challenged by a Black president, they were likely to feel that

action on climate change was a threat to their identity or lifestyle too.

Surveys of attitudes to climate change in America show higher levels of concern among people of colour. 69 per cent of Latinos are 'alarmed' or 'concerned' about the climate, 57 per cent of Black Americans and 49 per cent of White Americans. White people are twice as likely to be doubtful or dismissive.[10]

That which must not be named

A couple of years ago I was working in an open-plan office, and a colleague was talking about his recent holiday. He had flown to the States and hired a sports car for a road trip. We were just getting to an anecdote about a Texan barbecue when he remembered I was in the room. (I hadn't said anything. Apparently I have this effect on people.) The combined weight of aviation + sports car + beef must have tipped the balance of his moral scales.

He looked at me and shrugged. 'I know, I probably should have hired a Prius instead of the Dodge.'

Everyone laughed, and the passing mention of climate responsibility was brushed aside.

I'm sure you will have experienced something similar – an uncomfortable pause, an awkward laugh, a hasty change of subject. It's very rare for anyone to actually press into that moment of recognition – 'Yes, why didn't you hire the Prius?' Or better yet, 'If you wanted a road trip, why didn't you drive to the South of France or somewhere you didn't have to fly to first?'

It's not like it doesn't come up. There are heatwaves, wildfires in the news, torrential downpours, unseasonal blossom on the trees. And still, it so rarely gets discussed. The sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel calls this 'disattention': 'when we deliberately fail to notice something and cannot even explain that silence'.[11]

Another common response is to explain away culpability. Cost is a common one, when people say that they can't afford ethical fashion or vegan food. Claiming confusion is another: 'I just don't know where to start.' Blaming China remains enduringly popular, or saying that our own actions won't make any difference. Kari Marie Norgaard, a sociologist who studies conversations around climate change, describes these as 'tools of innocence'. When climate change comes up, there's always a plug-and-play reason why it can't have anything to do with me.

Painful though it may be to admit, inequalities are perpetuated through such small things as conversations at barbecues and at the school gates. As Norgaard warns: 'The construction of denial and innocence work to silence the needs and voices of women and people of colour in the Global South, and thus reproduce global inequality along the lines of gender, race and class.'[12]

It would be easier to peg climate denial as a problem for fossil fuel lobbyists and right-wing think tanks. But the most common form of denial is silence. It's the way a married couple might never get round to discussing their credit card debt, or how a group might never challenge a friend's obviously unhealthy drinking habit. It hovers there unacknowledged because it's too stressful to think about.

This is a very human reaction. Humans deny 'the things we don't want to admit exist', as Haydn Washington and John Cook say in their book *Climate Change Denial*.[13] And where climate silence meets White privilege, that's a very quiet place indeed.

Climate privilege

'Ignorance of how we are shaped racially is the first sign of privilege,' says the antiracism educator Tim Wise. 'It is a privilege to ignore the consequences of race in America.'[14] The race commentator Reni Eddo-Lodge summarises White privilege as 'an absence of the negative consequences of racism'.[15]

I think a very direct parallel could be drawn: ignoring the consequences of climate change is a form of privilege. It is a luxury to not have to worry about it, to be free of its negative consequences. Let's call it climate privilege.

Climate privilege is when you can think about the climate emergency as an environmental issue. As you're not a polar bear, it's not something that keeps you awake at night. If you have thought of climate change as something that will affect the future, that's a sign of climate privilege: for many it is right here and right now.

If you've been able to cut your carbon footprint and feel like you've done your bit, there's an element of privilege to that too. Those who are most vulnerable have footprints so small that there's nothing to cut, and they experience climate change as something that is done to them, not something that we're all bound up in collectively.

If you have never experienced climate change as harm, as loss, as injustice or as violence, you are privileged.

There is a big overlap between climate privilege and White privilege.

I appreciate that this is difficult territory. I am both of those things myself, and here again, let me stress the point I made in the Introduction: privilege is not okay, but it is not my fault. Each of us are born into different patterns of advantage and disadvantage. I cannot be blamed for being privileged, but I can be held responsible for what I do with it.

That's a bit of a balancing act, recognising responsibility without accepting blame. The songwriter Courtney Ariel describes it this way, in an article advising her White friends on supporting antiracism:

> 'Privilege means that you owe a debt. You were born with it. You didn't ask for it. And you didn't pay for it either. No one is blaming you for having it. You are lovely, human and amazing. Being a citizen of a society requires work from everyone within that society. It is up to you whether you choose to acknowledge the work that is yours to do. It is up to you whether you choose to pay this debt and how you choose to do so.'[16]