

Opinion – Black and Southern Feminisms Matter in the Global Climate Struggle

Written by Lydia Ayame Hiraide

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LYDIA AYAME HIRAIDE, NOV 12 2021

Black people, indigenous people, and people of colour, and particularly women, have often been cropped out of popular mainstream narratives and discourses about climate and environmental issues (sometimes literally). Despite attempts at erasure and exclusion from environmental narratives, these women have long been at the vanguard of environmental struggle – one that manifests within and across national borders. They create and animate radical ecological principles that resonate with the core commitments of radical Black and Southern feminisms. So, what happens if we foreground environmental action undertaken by these women both within and across national borders? What do their praxes tell us about our collective framing of and potential approaches to climate and environmental issues in what has often been referred to as the ‘decisive decade’ on a heating planet?

Neither Black nor Southern feminisms are monolithic. These are sticky terms as they also constitute spaces of contention within themselves, and, in many ways, are also not discrete categories distinct from each other. Nonetheless, we can loosely describe them in the following ways: the notion of Black feminisms typically refers to the long tradition of feminist struggle against the intersecting oppressions of race and gender, particularly, although not exclusively, as animated by enslaved African American women and their descendants. Crucially, Black feminisms put ‘the perspectives and experiences of African American women at the center rather than in their historically marginal position.’ They offer *intersectionality* as a (not uncontested) way of articulating the complex ways in which ostensibly discrete technologies of domination such as race, gender, class, can overlap to produce subaltern groups. In a parallel move to centre marginality, Southern feminisms materialise from the ‘Global South’ – a political concept which describes the ‘spaces and peoples negatively impacted by contemporary capitalist globalization.’ Southern feminisms are therefore not bound to one location. Rather, they are characterised by their critique of the ‘capitalist-patriarchal-modern-colonial order.’ To this end, Southern feminisms also encompass the Black feminisms that emerge from locations such as the space which we refer to as North America, for Black feminists also engage in this critique (although, arguably sometimes with less attention to the global problematics of the histories and reverberations of European colonialism). Moreover, as Anne Garland Mahler reminds us, there can be ‘economic Souths in the geographic North.’

In the context of climate and environmental crisis, Black and Southern feminisms harness their critical approaches to point to the social, historical, and political stakes of environmental matters. They steer away from ‘green’ solutions which serve to reinscribe and perpetuate existing relations of widespread inequality and extractive domination. This is essential because how we frame a problem ultimately determines how we solve it.

Burdens unequally shared

The burdens of climate change and environmental breakdown are disproportionately placed on the shoulders of the poorest across the Global South, and especially Africa. The top ten countries with the lowest CO2 emissions per capita are all African nations. And yet, these countries also mark the places in which food security is being threatened by droughts and extreme weather events to the greatest extent. In an astonishing example, the country with the highest levels of food insecurity in the world is Burundi – which is also the lowest emitter of carbon emissions in the world. In fact, Burundi’s carbon dioxide emissions per capita is so low that the figure is often rounded to zero.

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This contradiction forms the key contention of climate justice activists, who frame climate change as a global social issue wherein ‘those most responsible for climate change are relatively insulated from its impacts, [whilst] those least responsible are stripped of basic freedoms and dignity.’ These global imbalances of climate change thus run along what W.E.B. Du Bois referred to as the ‘global colour line,’ whereby the constructed ‘differences of race – which show themselves chiefly in the color of the skin and the texture of the hair... [are] made the basis of denying to over half the world the right of sharing to their utmost ability the opportunities and privileges of modern civilization.’ Black and Southern feminists show us that this global colour line is also a *gendered* colour line, as women and girls bear the brunt of one of the defining challenges of our century – climate change and environmental breakdown.

Black women, indigenous women, and women of colour will be, and already have been, hardest hit by the effects of ecological crisis worldwide. Women already constitute the majority of the world’s poor. We know that poverty is a significant barrier to climate resilience and/or mitigation. The majority of people displaced by climate change are women. Women are 14 times more likely to die than men in extreme weather events for various reasons. These range from the dangerous conditions in which they often work to the responsibilities they hold for the safety of children. If they survive, they are more likely to experience increased violence at the hands of men afterwards. As temperatures rise and water scarcity increases, girls who should be in school are forced to miss out on their education as they are required to walk further and further to fulfil their responsibilities as the primary fetchers of water for their households. When livelihoods are threatened by drying lands and failing crops, these girls are also more likely to be married off at increasingly younger ages. Climate change has thus been described as a ‘threat multiplier,’ not least by UN representatives themselves. Rosemary DiCarlo, the UN’s Under-Secretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs has noted that the ‘relationship between climate-related risks and conflict is complex and often intersects with political, social, economic and demographic factors.’

Climate change and environmental breakdown do indeed function as ‘threat multipliers,’ aggravating the material manifestations of a global gendered colour line. Black and Southern feminists go further, however, to illustrate that climate change and environmental breakdown not only worsen existing relations of domination, but they are also rooted in the social, political, and economic processes that produced the inequalities that ecological degradation is said to exacerbate. Hence, Black and Southern feminisms seek not only to combat climate and environmental breakdown, but to *explain* them. Importantly, this explanation does not rely on the exclusive use of a solely scientific or technocratic vocabulary that extracts ecological crises from their historical and political contexts. It explicitly engages with the politics of racialised economies, gendered violence, and complex geographies of domination to trace the climate and environmental crisis in ways that the exclusive, affectless invocation of global heating in degrees Celsius cannot.

Instead, Black and Southern analyses allow us to make bolder claims than that of climate change being a ‘threat multiplier.’ They excavate a dirty pipeline from Europe’s first violent encounters with the world beyond its borders to the urgent crisis of ecological breakdown that we face today. Moreover, this historically embedded approach actively rejects a naturalisation of the Global South as impoverished by nature or mere coincidence. Rather, it recognises past and current imbalances of power among and within economies and moves the conversation towards addressing the needs and concerns of those being hit first and worst by climate and environmental breakdown (a category which frequently, and not innocently, coincides with historically marginalised populations). In a word, Black and Southern feminists make a strong case for a ‘just transition’ – ‘moving to a more sustainable economy in a way that’s fair to everyone.’

Crucially, scholars have warned against imposing narratives which speak over people negatively affected by climate change, particularly narratives of passive victimhood. Speaking in another context, Chandra Mohanty cautions against participating in a discursive colonialism which creates for itself unidimensional visions of the ‘third world woman,’ who exists as part of a flattened homogenous group. Certainly, we must not minimise the burdens which Black women, indigenous women, and women of colour are forced to carry on a planet where temperatures, sea levels, and the violent chasm between rich and poor are increasing. But we must turn away from narratives of passive victimhood which enact this discursive colonialism by actively recognising and remembering that these women have long been at the frontlines of environmental struggle across the world, as Black and Southern feminists themselves demand. They have always married the rights of oppressed peoples to that of the land, air, and water

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which nourish and house us. We see this in examples such as the Green Belt Movement in Kenya, the Chipko movement in India, the environmental justice movement in what we refer to as the USA, and the Independent Lenca Indigenous Movement of La Paz in Honduras. Today, we continue to witness a growing dynamic global movement spearheaded by young people like Vanessa Nakate, Mikaela Loach, and Xiye Bastida, who are fully broaching the radical notion of global climate justice. They, like their forbears, urge us to consider the climate and environmental crisis in the context of global and local social inequalities which are bound up in histories of global conquest, domination, and extractive economies.

Black and Southern feminist praxes therefore expose the ways in which the same processes that drive ecological degradation also drive social, political, and economic oppression; they trace ecological crisis through violent histories and contemporary legacies of European empire. Within the increasingly crowded platform of green advocacy, Black and Southern feminists disrupt hegemonic environmentalisms which fail to make these connections. We can understand their positions as part of a longer tradition of anti-colonial movements, which have always placed the rights of people, land, air, and water at the heart of their fights.

Ultimately, Black and Southern feminists challenge us to consider the climate and environmental crisis as a crisis tied up in global histories of race, gender, and class as embedded in European empire. They urge us to consider how these histories continue to manifest, forcing us to reflect on how we perpetuate relations of domination amongst both humans and all other life on earth. By setting up the parameters of the conversation in this way, they delineate the possibilities of change – because identifying exploitative and extractive economies which are organised along the lines of race, class, and gender as a central part of the problem means ruling them out as possible solutions.

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