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**Climatic Change**

An Interdisciplinary, International  
Journal Devoted to the Description,  
Causes and Implications of Climatic  
Change

ISSN 0165-0009

Climatic Change  
DOI 10.1007/s10584-019-02632-1



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# Whose everyday climate cultures? Environmental subjectivities and invisibility in climate change discourse

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Received: 26 July 2018 / Accepted: 17 December 2019/Published online: 09 January 2020

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## Abstract

Public climate conversations are inattentive to how differences in social location and culture shape people's knowledge of and responses to climate change. Instead, emphases on climate apathy and climate skepticism overrepresent privileged sensibilities, marginalizing those who fall outside of what Black feminist theorist Audre Lorde calls "the mythical norm" (1987). In so doing, predominant approaches obscure forms of climate engagement that do not resemble researcher identified pro-environmental behaviors. In order to illustrate relationships between social location, culture, and response to climate change, we apply the notion of *environmental subjectivities* in a secondary analysis of climate engagement in two communities, one of which resembles and one of which lies outside the "mythical" norm. Both members of the Karuk Tribe and urban homesteaders frame climate change as symptoms of unsustainable political-economic structures. Yet differences in the structural location of each community result in divergent understandings of and practices in relation to the changing climate. These divergent community understandings and practices cannot be explained by individual preferences or cultural differences alone. Instead, the concept of *environmental subjectivities* (1) calls attention to the situated knowledges of climate change that emerge in relation to differences of indigeneity, race, and class, (2) relates community environmental practices to interlocking power structures, and (3) illustrates how elite narratives obscure the role of the colonial, settler, capitalist state in the generation of climate emissions.

**Keywords** Indigenous peoples · Culture · Intersectionality · Subjectivity · Cultural framing

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This article is part of the Special Issue on Everyday Climate Cultures: Understanding the cultural politics of climate change<sup>^</sup> edited by Goodman, Doyle and Farrell

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“Somewhere, on the edge of consciousness, there is what I call a *mythical* norm, which each one of us within our hearts knows “that is not me.” In America, this norm is usually defined as white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian, and financially secure. It is with this mythical norm that the trappings of power reside within this society.” Audre Lorde, *Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference*.

## 1 Introduction: embedded assumptions in climate change discourse

Climate change professionals have puzzled over how people respond to information about climate change (Leiserowitz et al. 2016; Moser 2007, 2016) on the basis that understanding will shape corrective policies. Research confirms that public understanding of climate change as anthropogenic is a strong predictor of risk perception globally (Lee et al. 2015). Clearly, knowledge is an important factor in shaping response; but it is still not clear *how* knowledge shapes engagement. One missing puzzle piece is the acknowledgment that the way people *know* about climate change is not uniform but filtered through cultural systems accessed from lived experience within hierarchical social institutions that sort people by status. The recognition of differential knowledge based on group standpoint is a staple of feminist theory (Harding 2004), but its most powerful engagement comes from Black feminist scholars who have long recognized the ways that oppressions overlap to produce subjects whose experiences are shaped not by gender, race, class, or citizenship alone but by the intersections of interlocking oppressions (Collins 2009; Crenshaw 1991; Lorde 1987). Positionality within these systems provides individual knowledge about the material world that is unique to their status within it (Collins 1989; Jordan 2005; Lorde 1987). An intersectional lens has not been sufficiently applied to climate change (for exceptions, see Nagel (2012) and Godfrey (2012)), but its insights offer the potential to change how we understand climate engagement.

By remaining inattentive to how differences in social location and culture shape people's knowledge of and response to climate change, public and professional conversations about climate change overrepresent elite sensibilities, marginalizing those who fall outside of what Audre Lorde calls “the mythical norm” of whiteness, heterosexual masculinity, and economic privilege (1987). Emphases on apathy and skepticism foreground the responses of the most privileged communities. Predominant approaches thus obscure many forms of climate engagement that an intersectional framework might correct (Crenshaw 1991).

Structural and contextual factors shape how individuals engage with climate change (Norgaard 2011), but this is not always evident in the research on climate beliefs, concern, and practices. Rather than attending to the culturally specific ways in which people make sense of and respond to climate change, most social scientific research on climate response has measured subjects' relationships to researcher-identified units of meaning, such as beliefs, attitudes, concerns, and behaviors, often without accounting for the researchers' own subjectivities, and the ways that those shape the questions being asked.

People who occupy different strata within a hierarchical structure hold different cultural schema and have access to different resources.<sup>1</sup> This becomes apparent when we compare specific social groups and their knowledge about, and response to, climate change in reference

<sup>1</sup> By resources, we mean both material (things like money, property, and access to water, food, etc.) and nonmaterial resources (such as education, social, cultural and emotional capital, political power, etc.), modeled after Sewell's use of the term in *A Theory of Structure* (1992).

to their social locations. We engage the concept of *environmental subjectivities*, the lived experience of environmental knowledge as shaped by power, ideology and agency (Ford 2019) to illustrate relationships between social location and response to climate change in a secondary analysis of climate engagement in two communities located in the contemporary USA, one of which resembles the mythical norm and one of which differs from it.

The Karuk are the second largest tribe in California. People in this rural Northern California community do not embody Lorde's mythical norm. As Indigenous people, they are targeted by settler colonialism, whose continuity depends upon the extirpation of native tribes (Wolfe 1999). Although settler colonialism and systems of white supremacy are not interchangeable, they overlap. Native peoples are racialized through stereotypes and structural racism (King 2004). These power dynamics produce an environmental subjectivity distinct from settler positionality. Karuk people relate to climate change through the experience of settler colonialism as an ongoing, daily reality that members have resisted for over a century. Climate change in this context is not a surprising departure from an otherwise idyllic modern life but a symptom of an ongoing, violent system of displacement. From this standpoint, responding to climate change involves upholding traditional management practices that Karuk people have practiced since time immemorial, taking responsibility to act on behalf of a specific place, species, and people. This is an act of resistance that challenges settler colonialism by engaging directly with the power of self-determination and political rights to land and its management.

Secondly, we consider a population that more closely resembles the mythical norm: contemporary homesteaders, a community composed mostly of middle-class white people of European settler descent. Homesteaders are aware of and concerned about climate change and see it as a symptom of political-economic systems. However, their more privileged positionality within interlocking systems of power produces an environmental subjectivity that is ambivalent about challenging the project of modernity, even as it produces intolerable levels of risk. Without a critique of settler colonialism, homesteaders' appropriate language and practices gleaned from the mythical past of the white frontiersman—the foot soldier of settler colonialism. Homesteaders' response to environmental risk is to adopt individual, household level practices that minimize their dependence on institutions they distrust, without politically challenging the legitimacy of those institutions.

Both members of the Karuk Tribe and urban homesteaders view climate change as the product of unsustainable political-economic structures. But their different environmental subjectivities result in divergent responses. These cannot be explained by individual preferences or cultural differences alone. Attention to their differing environmental practices (1) reveals the relationship between indigeneity, race, and class to situated knowledges of climate change, (2) situates community-level environmental practices within interlocking power structures, and (3) illustrates how elite emphases on the need for individual (often consumer) action, technological fixes, and the potential for state action obscure the role of the colonial, settler, capitalist state in the generation of climate emissions and the necessity of transformative response.

Below, we critique existing methodological approaches to climate change responsibility in research on environmental concern, knowledge, and practices. We then introduce the concept of environmental subjectivity, building on, but substantively altering Arun Agrawal's (2005) conceptualization. Using data from two ethnographic case studies, we consider how two North American communities make sense of and respond to climate change based on their differing environmental subjectivities. Our first case considers how members of the Karuk Tribe navigate environmental change in the context of their ongoing struggle against colonialism

and finds that their experience of climate change is filtered through the experiential knowledge of colonial oppression. Response to climate change is readily integrated into tribal political projects of reclaiming sovereignty over land management decisions, especially regarding fire management in a drought prone state. Our second case attends to the practice of contemporary homesteading, in which mostly white, middle-class individuals seek to minimize reliance on institutions that otherwise meet their material needs (access to food, water, energy, shelter, durable goods, etc.) in order to minimize their participation in institutions they oppose. Response to climate change is limited by cultural individualism and a limited systematic critique, which does not include colonialism, reflected by the uncritical adoption of the moniker *homesteaders*. Political or cultural differences alone do not sufficiently explain divergent responses to climate change at the group level, suggesting that attention to intersectional elements of environmental subjectivities can better account for the emergence of responses to climate change shaped by structural location and cultural worldviews.

## 2 Methodological limits to the analysis of the links between environmental knowledge and practice

Social science research that tries to predict environmental knowledge, concern, and practices tends to adopt individualistic models of human behavior that presume “rational” action will follow scientific knowledge (Shove 2010). Researchers have attended to the effects of values and attitudes (Bolsen et al. 2018; Dietz 2013; Druckman 2015); beliefs and the communicative frames that influence them (Hartter et al. 2018; Metag et al. 2017); perception, awareness, and knowledge (Capstick et al. 2015; Lee et al. 2015; Luís et al. 2018; O’Brien 2012); environmental concern; and political ideology and partisanship (Bolsen et al. 2015; Fisher et al. 2013; Hart and Nisbet 2012; Palm et al. 2017; Wood and Vedlitz 2007; Zia and Todd 2010) on public understanding of climate change. Much of this research surveys individuals as the unit of analysis and seeks to measure researcher identified environmental beliefs, values, and practices. Critics of this model contend that continued focus on individuals as a primary unit of analysis obscures the cultural and structural contexts in which individuals act (Hargreaves 2011; Kasper 2009; Shove 2010) and reproduces a dichotomous understanding of individual/society (Kasper 2009:316), without sufficiently accounting for the co-constituted nature of human socio-environmental relationships.

What counts as an environmental practice? Researchers generally adopt a top-down approach, categorizing practices like buying organic food (Moon et al. 2002) or recycling (Saphores et al. 2012) as pro-environmental (for an interesting list of behaviors deemed pro-environmental, see the method section of Bamberg and Möser’s (2007:17) meta-analysis). These methodologies have epistemological ramifications, shaping perceptions about meaningful responses to climate change. By legitimizing some environmental practices (reducing airline transport, recycling, or making donations to environmental organizations) and overlooking others (changing wildfire management or caring for children), researchers situate the cultural worldviews and sensibilities of middle-class, Western-educated professionals as the baseline against which all others must be measured. For example, an environmental behavior such as donating to an international environmental nongovernmental organization (eNGO) based out of the Global North is made to stand-in for a willingness to pay or a willingness to support a social movement (Clements et al. 2015) without considering problematic relations between international eNGOs and Indigenous peoples who have been

marginalized or displaced by top-down conservation initiatives (Chapin 2004). Someone who chooses not to donate because of their relationship to the eNGOs history (or other reasons unbeknownst to researchers) risks being measured as not sufficiently pro-environmental, when in fact, they may have strongly environmental reasons for not doing so, rooted in non-dominant epistemologies.

The expectation of certain “logical” behaviors, such as a donation to a global eNGO, whose failure to emerge must be explained, implies a shared subjectivity between researcher and research subject. By only focusing on what we expect to see, environmental professionals participate in the erasure of alternative environmental practices shaped by relationships to interlocking political-economic structures (Norgaard 2012). Research that preselects environmental practices takes for granted that all environmentally concerned individuals share the political goals of elite-envisioned sustainability, such as green development that serves the continuation of modern nation-states. But some groups and individuals that are committed to addressing climate change are not uniformly aligned to support the continuity and extension of the current political economic system.

### 3 Environmental subjectivity

Rather than search for researcher-defined pro-environmental behavior, we suggest attending to and analyzing sets of behaviors or practices, in their social contexts, to make sense of how different groups experience the environment in daily life. This approach draws on sociological theories of practice, which have only been applied to the environment in limited ways (c.f. Ford 2019; Hargreaves 2011; Shove and Walker 2014). In this paper, we attend to homesteaders’ and Karuk tribal members’ experiences of knowing about climate change in the context of their divergent social locations and cultural worldviews. We call upon the concept of *environmental subjectivities*, defined as the lived experience of relating to the environment in a social context that recognizes the effects of power and culture on individual practice. Because all people are embedded in ecosystems, we consider all people environmental subjects.

Subjectivity refers to the ways people take up and live culturally available roles in relation to systems of power. The concept brings together elements of psychosocial experience that environmental concern literature attempts to get at (concern, priorities, care, knowledge, beliefs, values, etc.) in an integrated manner,<sup>2</sup> linking these variables to structural position without essentializing those positions.<sup>3</sup>

Arun Agrawal (2005) defines environmental subjects as “people who care about the environment” (162), asking “what makes certain kinds of subjects, and what is the best way to understand the relationship between actions and subjectivities?” (162–3). To be a subject, he notes, is to be an actor or agent, but it is also to be subordinate (subjected) to some other force. Focusing on the interplay between agency and subordination, in Kumaon, India, Agrawal argues that environmental practices develop in response to experiences with the state over which individuals have little control; beliefs and thoughts (here, the formation of environmental subjectivity) follow (163).

<sup>2</sup> For a cautionary note on the way analysts might potentially fail to integrate the psycho and the social, see Wetherell (2008).

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of the psychoanalytic elements of environmental subjectivity, see Lertzman (2013).

For Agrawal, environmental subjectivity is linked to care—it is a measure of how citizens come to *care* about the environment (in his case study, forest management) via involvement with state regulatory practices that shape their knowledge and beliefs. While we build on Agrawal's useful exploration of the relationship between government and subjecthood, our engagement with the concept diverges from his in some significant ways. First, we fine-tune our analytic gaze to consider how subjectivity is shaped not by government alone but by interlocking structures including settler colonialism, capitalist economic systems, and systems of racial domination. All these structures are overlapping and interact with or challenge the state to varying degrees. But they are analytically distinct enough to warrant separate consideration, especially when attention to them illuminate definitive differences in outcome.

Secondly, Agrawal downplays the importance of structural location in shaping beliefs and thoughts, a position we disagree with. Agrawal states that “residents of Kumaon vary in their beliefs about forest protection and that these variations are related to their involvement in regulatory practices rather than their social-structural location in terms of caste and gender.” This minimizes the importance of gender, and caste, which Agrawal seems to read as fixed identity categories, stating: “These factors are of course important. Nonetheless, it is necessary to distinguish between the politics generated by involvement in different kinds of practices and the politics that depends on stable interests presumed to flow from belonging to particular identity categories” (163).

The problem with this dismissal is that identity categories are produced by and productive of regulatory practice; that is to say, involvement in regulatory practice is almost always determined by significant social-structural locations, including gender. “Gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power” (Scott 1986:1067). Relegating it to a matter of identity reproduces the bifurcation of subjectivity and identity into isolated units unrelated to each other, reproducing somewhat stale social-psychological thinking that divides the “personal” from the “social” or the internal self from the external (Wetherell 2008:76). Doing so, Margaret Wetherell gently admonishes, fails “to rise to the challenge of the new work on intersectional identities,” which demonstrates the interactions between personally salient social categories like race and gender and their cultural production in reference to systems of power. The production of gendered (Acker 1990; Martin 1998), racialized (Lopez 2006; Omi and Winant 2015), and classed (Bourdieu 1987; Lareau 2002) subjects go beyond static identity categories as they are embodied, felt, performed, and experienced: in short, lived. Experience is not divorced from structural location but its vector.

Lastly, we differ in our conceptualization of environmental subjectivity in that ours is not predicated on singular units of culture like care. Beliefs, attitudes, concerns, and knowledge are often approached in the climate literature as isolated, but they are in fact all what we might think of as “units of culture”—analytical units of measurable meaning—that develop in the context of social structures; i.e., an individual may hold a belief, but most beliefs can be traced to institutions such as churches, science, families, or schools. Further, care for the environment is not conclusively linked to environmental behavior (Blake 1999; Kennedy et al. 2009; Kollmuss and Agyeman 2002). Subjects may care about the environment and not act on that care. Yet humans are subject to environmental conditions regardless of their feelings about it.

A final problem with conceptualization based on care is that it presupposes shared understanding of what is and is not environmental. This risks the continued centering of dominant, nature-based concepts of environment, a long-standing concern of those whose conceptions fall outside of it and are thus ignored (Di Chiro 1996). Analytically, foregrounding dominant conceptualizations limits our ability to understand environmental subjectivities that



take place outside of Western, white, male, elite understandings about what is and is not environmental. Looking at cultural responses to material concerns about climate change is valuable whether or not the group in question conceptualizes their relationship to nonhuman nature as environmental.

## 4 Data and methods: ethnographic comparative case studies

Each of us is involved in longer-term research projects about how communities experience and are responding to climate change. We pull from material collected in these projects to put them in conversation with each other for comparative purposes.

### 4.1 Case 1: homesteading and self-sufficiency

Homesteading in its contemporary usage refers to efforts made by individuals to be self-sufficient by adopting practices such as gardening, food preservation, preparation and storage, and self-provisioning of food, water, and energy. Homesteaders seek to minimize their reliance on institutions like industrialized agriculture, state-run utilities, electric grids and transportation networks that they see as untrustworthy, unsustainable, and politically objectionable. Adopting language that celebrates the individuals who settled the American frontier in the nineteenth century, contemporary homesteaders seek to replicate a seemingly simpler way of life from a pre-modern era.

Ford collected data on homesteaders for 9 months in 2014 as part of a study on self-sufficiency movements that included homesteaders and preppers. Her field work included participant observation and semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 13 people who identified as homesteaders and participated in a homesteading community in a mid-size city in Oregon. Recruiting strategy focused on people met during participant observation, followed by snow-ball sampling. All but one of the interviews was conducted one-on-one; the exception was a couple who were interviewed together.

Participant observation took place at events organized through an online club. Events included group meetings to plan activities, a public homesteading fair, a private festival at someone's house, and classes on canning and making dairy products like butter, yogurt, and cheese and pantry storage and rotation. Observations and interview data were triangulated with written content, including brochures and fliers picked up at events, and online content including club communications, social media, message boards, and blogs.

The homesteading community Ford observed was made up of mostly white, middle-class, citizens of the USA, who followed traditional gender roles. Of the interview sample, all 13 were white, 8 were women, and 5 were men. None of the participants referenced a sexual orientation, but heteronormative interactive relations were the norm and many referenced heterosexual relationships such as husbands, wives, ex-wives, etc. Two out of the 13 interviewed acknowledged struggling financially, but all were either raised middle-class or currently considered themselves middle class. All but 1 were college educated, and 11 owned homes in middle-class neighborhoods. This demographic spread was representative of the community observed during participant observation. People of color were occasionally in attendance but never made up more than 5% of the group. The population of Oregon is 86% white (Bureau, United States Census 2018), so this remains unrepresentative.

Analysis of data was performed in Atlas.ti and included line-by-line coding until significant themes emerged, at which point thematic coding was performed.

## 4.2 Case 2: Karuk tribal environmental management

Karuk people have lived in the Klamath-Siskiyou Mountains in the northern part of what is now known as California since time immemorial. The Karuk Tribe is federally recognized, and with a population of over 5000 members and descendants, they are the second largest American Indian tribe in California. Karuk Aboriginal Territory spans an approximate 1.38 million acres, and Karuk environmental management practices have shaped the region's ecological conditions for millennia and supported a thriving subsistence economy for the Karuk people. The geographic area is remote—from most of Karuk territory, it is a 2-hour drive to the nearest stoplight. Here a wealth of Indigenous cultural knowledge and ingenuity exists alongside intense disenfranchisement, poverty, and substance abuse. Since time before memory, large numbers of salmon have made their way up and down the Klamath River. Other riverine species like lamprey, sturgeon, and trout have been in abundance.

A high percentage of Karuk people rely on subsistence activities such as fishing, hunting, and gathering for at least part of their food supplies. Despite federal recognition, the US Forest Service (USFS) asserts jurisdiction on over 90% of Karuk lands, and tribal jurisdiction over most of their territory is contested. Having survived the brutality of overt genocide during the 1800s and state sponsored forced assimilation into the 1950s—both of which massively reorganized their economic, political, and social systems—in recent decades, the Karuk Tribe has had their federal recognition reconfirmed, brought back nearly all their ceremonial practices, and developed a new political structure. Their Department of Natural Resources (DNR) engages in cutting-edge biological research and policy. The region is home to the largest number of native language speakers and traditional basket weavers in the state of California.

Norgaard has worked as a research collaborator and consultant for the Karuk Tribe since 2003, most recently as a lead author on the Karuk Climate Vulnerability Assessment and the Karuk Climate Adaptation Plan. Our understanding and descriptions of how the Karuk community experiences and responds to climate change come from Norgaard's experience in climate planning work for the Tribe and consists of the use of secondary analyses of materials from that effort including participation in hundreds of hours of meetings, interviews, informal conversations, and direct observations regarding community climate perceptions and mobilization. We also draw upon secondary analysis of publicly available information (e.g., publicly available documents including the climate plans themselves, quotations from films made by the Karuk Department of Natural Resources and previously published material). This material is used in the context of this paper by permission and with tribal review.

## 4.3 Basis of comparison

Together we have hundreds of hours of interviews and observations of how different people experience, make sense of, and are responding to the changing climate. In previous collaborations, we have identified significant tensions around the question of why some groups (in this case Karuk tribal members) adopted a strong, collective, pragmatic approach to addressing climate change, while others (reflected here by contemporary homesteaders) focused their efforts primarily on the individual, household level (Ford and Norgaard 2019). Both

communities exhibit a critique of dominant social systems—however their relationships to these systems significantly shape the environmental practices that follow.

Oregon urban homesteaders and members of the Karuk Tribe have common geographical locations in the North American West but differ vastly in social location. By placing the environmental subjectivities of these communities side by side, we shed light on several layers of invisibility within US popular climate discourse and illustrate the relevance of relationships between social structure, social location, culture, and responses to climate change. Case studies are ideally suited for research questions that consider contemporary phenomenon in real-life contexts when “the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (Yin 1981:1). They are also useful in exploring questions of “how” and “why,” which are central to making sense of everyday climate change responses as relational (Yin 2018:4). A comparative case method illustrates the significance of environmental subjectivities in shaping everyday responses to climate change.

## 5 Climate subjectivities: findings from two cases

Our comparison of how homesteaders and Karuk tribal members interpret and respond to the changing climate brings into stark relief the significance of each group’s relationship to structures of capitalism and colonialism—the political economic structures linked to the production of climate change. We begin with information from the Indigenous community.

### 5.1 Karuk climate subjectivities: responses to the changing climate in Karuk territory

The cultural landscape concerning climate change is different in Karuk country than academic or media portrayals of either climate apathy or climate skepticism would suggest. Not only is there virtually no traction for the “climate skeptic” frame, there is none of the handwringing that pervades more privileged environmental communities. Instead, many people talk about the changes they see in the land on a regular basis and take seriously the responsibilities they feel to act on behalf of specific places, species, and people. Here we describe three notable aspects of environmental subjectivity as expressed in official actions by the Karuk Tribe and as articulated by families and individuals across the community: an experience of climate change as a continuum of highly problematic state policies, a sense of responsibility to the natural world, and diverse forms of powerful climate engagement.

#### 5.1.1 Climate experiences and subjectivity

While changing patterns of precipitation and temperature affect a range of issues from river temperatures to farming practices, the most urgent and immediate impact is of an increased frequency of high severity fires in the Klamath Basin in recent years and related fire politics. Statewide, California is the hottest and driest since modern record keeping has taken place (Mann et al. 2015) and trends in other Western states are not far behind. We are seeing more frequent large hot fires than ever before. In the words of Karuk DNR staff and cultural practitioner Analisa Tripp, “We’ve seen a lot of high severity fires in the last few years. Growing up I’d see them every three years, every five years but now it’s every year.”

When fires do occur on the Klamath, many of the actions taken by the USFS and the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CALFIRE) do as much damage to

cultural resources and tribal sovereignty as do the fires themselves. For example, retardant drops to the bulldozing of fire lines along ridge tops directly damage and often destroy culturally significant habitats and species assemblages that have been created over generations. These ecological conditions are themselves living archives of past management actions; they represent a repository of traditional knowledge in the land.

But if all this is what climate change looks like in Karuk country, there is nothing new about it. Rather than a “new” event, climate effects like fires manifest as an intensification of longstanding, problematic social relations that have been at play for well over a century. Larger, hot fires are more frequent due to a combination of changing patterns of precipitation and temperature on the one hand *and* a fraught legacy of fire suppression on the other. The Karuk Tribe’s Climate Vulnerability Assessment emphasizes the extent to which climate-induced patterns of fire behavior and past management practices that have led to high fuel loads cannot be untangled. Low intensity purposefully set fires have long been used to provide protection from the fuel buildup that causes larger, hotter (potentially quite dangerous) fires that have recently been burning across the West. Furthermore, the short- and long-term impacts of having more frequent hot fires (e.g., sedimentation, postfire salvage logging) are also experienced on a continuum of racism and colonialism.

Fire policies are enactments of what Bacon (2019) calls *colonial ecological violence*—in other words violence that is enacted through alteration of the ecological world. Colonial ecological violence is both racialized and gendered—it targets people’s gender and racial identities through altering practices such as fishing and gathering that are important for sense of self. The Karuk Tribe must fight to assert management authority within a context of Indigenous erasure that works through notions of terra nullius, (the erroneous belief in an empty continent of untouched wilderness), and Indigenous fire science is devalued by fire agencies and the USFS. All of this perpetuates racist notions that Indigenous peoples are “backward,” romanticized through Nobel Savage and erasure discourses even though their approaches to fire and fire management are in fact the only ones that have worked.

The community’s experience of climate change is well-described by Whyte’s (2017) notion that it is nothing new but rather a symptom of ongoing systems of destruction that have targeted Indigenous peoples, Whyte’s “ancestor’s dystopia.” By contrast, Karuk (as well as other Indigenous) peoples point to how colonialism and capitalism have created an alienated, extractive, high fossil fuel world. Until we address its cosmologies and material practices, we will not respond to climate change in a way that gets us anywhere else.

### 5.1.2 Sense of responsibility

A second theme expressed in tribal documents and widely articulated by Karuk families and individuals is a sense of responsibility to other species who make up the “natural” world. Karuk people hold responsibilities to tend and care for the food and cultural-use species they consider relatives. These species flourish as people manage the landscape through burning, digging, praying, and other activities. This sense of responsibility is explicitly manifested in important Karuk ceremonies known as the Pikyávísh or the “Fix the World” Ceremonies which are carried out to ensure abundant harvests and restore social and personal balance. Karuk people often describe themselves as the “Fix the World” people. People also have responsibility to harvest and share these foods with their families and the community. Many traditional management tasks are gender specific. Women tend to gather sites through the use of fire and other techniques, gather acorns and basketry materials, weave baskets, store and

prepare foods, care for young children, and more. For men from fishing families, fishing comes with a set of responsibilities to family, community, and the fish themselves. Traditional practices are integral to both sustainable, culturally specific management of the land and to Karuk identity, which is informed in relation to land and community.

In the Climate Adaptation Plan, Leaf Hillman, Karuk Tishuniik ceremonial leader and DNR Director, describes this relationship and its associated responsibilities with reference to the Karuk Creation Story and the importance of World Renewal Ceremonies: “The rocks and the trees and the water and the air, the responsibility that I have, those are real relations... We have not forgotten that we are related and that we have responsibility. And at the same time, we give thanks to those other spirit people for helping to subsist us and reminding them that we haven’t forgot that we owe them something too. So, the renewal is renewing the bonds that exist.”

### 5.1.3 Multiple forms of climate engagement

Awareness of ongoing colonial ecological violence and a sense of responsibility to land, species, and community are sensibilities that lead people to pursue collective engagement on many fronts. Karuk people and communities have excelled in a wide range of tactics for restoration and social change: from winning innovative legal cases to building relationships with non-Indigenous communities, developing environmental policies and public education campaigns, and engaging in a range of “direct action” protest tactics. Traditional dip net fisherman Ron Reed explicitly translates the notion of traditional responsibilities to fish and community to a responsibility to speak out against colonial ecological violence.

Before, it wasn’t easy. Ceremonies, subsistence, those, you know, those aren’t easy things to accomplish. There’s a great deal of responsibility and pride involved in those activities, but we never had to go speak for the fish, we never had to go talk about our values, our cultural ways, our traditional values. As long as we followed them, we were taking care of them. But now the fisherman’s role is also to speak for the fish. Speaking publicly isn’t a common trait of the Karuk people. The people who speak on behalf of the fish or resources are people that have taken that responsibility and have been able to speak for the resource in a way that is foreign to us...

I decided to start speaking on behalf of the fish. On behalf of the fishermen. On behalf of the basket weavers, on behalf of the people who walk before us, and on behalf of the people who walk after us. That’s the fisherman today. It’s a burden, it’s a responsibility, it’s what I cherish, and I wouldn’t do anything else. I mean, this is, God put me, the Creator put me on this earth for a reason. I think I’m fulfilling that reason. That’s what it is to me being a fisherman today.

In contrast to non-Indigenous responses to climate change like a handwringing of “nothing can be done,” a questioning of climate science, or a reduction of airline miles traveled, Karuk leaders have excelled in advancing their agendas at national and local levels simultaneously. Exciting recent achievements include the formation of the Western Klamath Restoration Partnership. This collaboration of federal, tribal, and nongovernmental organizations is working to restore traditional fire. The Karuk Tribe works actively with the local Mid Klamath Watershed Council on a myriad of projects including hosting an annual fire training exchange where people come together to learn techniques of prescribed burning, as well as the Salmon River Restoration Council, which organizes and implements annual fish counts and other fish and river enhancement projects. Tribal individuals and communities have achieved all these

gains in the face of being targeted by state and federally sponsored structures that work against their survival, brutal interpersonal racism, and severe economic disadvantage.

Lisa Morehead-Hillman, Píkyav Field Institute Program Manager, Karuk Tribe notes that:

The traditional land and resource management practices of the Karuk people is based on traditional ecological knowledge. It's adaptive in nature. It's not about a certain date when you do something. It's not about a measurement that tells you that you are right or wrong. It's about listening, observing, feeling, remembering...and communicating. We have it all over the western scientists when it comes to adapting to climate change. We've been adapting to a changing climate for thousands of years.

These diverse approaches taken by Karuk people share similarities with other Indigenous restoration efforts. In the Klamath Basin, the Klamath, Karuk, Hoopa Valley, and Yurok Tribes have prevailed in numerous legal disputes focusing on water quality and quantity, as well as in the protection of endangered species. These documents, words, and actions make sense given the Karuk Tribe's political positionality as Indigenous people in a settler society that is the product of colonization. They offer a cultural framing of climate change, in which global environmental destruction is not a surprising, anomalous consequence of a political economic system that is otherwise benign and beneficial to their wellbeing but simply one more dimension of the destructiveness of colonialism and Eurocentric political economies that favor economic profit over the well-being of the environment and people (Whyte 2017). These responses to climate change are tied to Indigenous resistance and the ongoing fight for tribal sovereignty that would allow the tribe greater agency to enact ecological responsibility. Because there is less investment in the dominant narrative that takes for granted the desirability of maintaining the modern nation-state, climate change can be framed as an opportunity rather than simply a limit on an otherwise desirable way of life.

In this sense, Karuk people are part of a broader movement across North America and beyond, in which Indigenous peoples can be found leading the way in climate change policy, strategy, and resistance by participating in political processes, engaging in land stewardship, and being at the forefront of activism efforts. Although varied, the analyses Indigenous practitioners put forward center deep structural circumstances naming capitalist and colonialist thought as causes of climate change. Having already experienced erasure, loss, and environmental injustice, native peoples are likely to attend to knowledge of climate change very differently from people whose experiences are centered in the dominant social paradigm, those closer to Lorde's mythical norm. The 2014 National Climate Assessment Indigenous Peoples chapter explains that climate change impacts on tribes are likely to be especially severe given that they are "compounded by a number of persistent social and economic problems," and that Indigenous adaptive responses "occur against a backdrop of centuries-old cultures already stressed by historical events and contemporary conditions" (Bennett et al. 2014:298). The authors identify a number of vulnerabilities that may affect (and are in some cases already affecting) Indigenous communities in the face of climate change, including loss of traditional knowledge as a result of rapidly changing ecological conditions, increased food insecurity due to reduced availability of traditional foods, changing water availability, and loss of historic homelands, traditions, and subsistence activities that have been carried out for millennia (Bennett et al. 2014). The development and advancement of colonial structures depend upon the annihilation of socio-ecological relationships, violently disrupting Indigenous ways of being (Arvin, Tuck, & Morrill 2013:12).

## 5.2 Environmental subjectivities of urban homesteaders: individual responses to collective problems

Like members of the Karuk Tribe, homesteaders see climate change as a symptom of complex systems that are inextricably linked. Unlike them, homesteader's social locations do not allow them ready access to a historical critique of settler colonialism or capitalism and their role in producing climate change. We address three aspects of homesteader environmental subjectivities: the erasure of settler colonialism, emphasis on individual responsibility, and the ideology and practice of self-sufficiency as an apolitical response to environmental concern.

### 5.2.1 Climate experiences and subjectivity

Homesteaders largely resemble the mythical norm. The culture is dominated by white, middle-class people, and heteronormative gender roles are the norm. All the homesteaders Ford interviewed were citizens of the USA whose ancestors had come from elsewhere. Many could identify settler-ancestors within several generations of their family history that had claimed and farmed land. As such, they had benefited in material ways from the dispossession of Native Americans from North American land. Yet even as they acknowledged the unsustainability of contemporary political-economic systems, colonialism was largely invisible in their assessment of systemic crisis. Erasure of colonial history is a tactic of settler colonialism; we point out this absence not to blame individuals for their failure to know their own history but to show how a social location at the intersection of higher status race, class, and citizenship informs culturally available narratives, as people try to make sense of climate change.

Homesteaders care deeply about the environment and social justice, but they struggle to translate this to political action. Their adoption of homesteading resembles what Nina Eliasoph identified as “cultural work,” efforts made to fit public, political feelings into culturally available—private—space (Eliasoph 1997:607). Eliasoph observed how Americans do cultural work that produces cultures of political avoidance. Homesteaders adopt ideals and practices oriented toward self-sufficiency that refocus political energy inward to their household lives, and roles as consumers, rather than outward into citizen-based, political activity (Eliasoph 1997). Homesteaders channeled their energy toward changing individual practices, sometimes in addition to political participation, but often in lieu of it. Indeed, many framed their household activities as being a social movement. Ellen explained, “every little thing that I do, whether I really realize that I’m doing it or not is part of the movement.”

### 5.2.2 Forms of engagement

Homesteaders grow gardens, fish, forage, and hunt and set up gray water or rainwater catchment systems. They may move to a plot of land on a stream or install small-scale renewable energy systems. They often heat with wood-burning stoves; rely on herbs, tinctures, and plants as medicine; and make, repair, or reuse material goods rather than purchase consumer goods. The most common homesteading activities involved food production or procurement like gardening or mushroom hunting; food processing, like learning to turn raw milk into a variety of dairy products (butter, cheese, ice cream, and yogurt); and food storage, such as canning, dehydrating, or freezing foods. Many worked to minimize reliance on municipal water systems, either supplementing access with rainwater catchment systems, relocating to places with wells, or simply trying to conserve. Other activities included making

their own household products such as soaps and shampoos and learning about growing and identifying medicinal plants.

Homesteaders' feelings about climate change were integrated into a broad perception of socioeconomic-environmental risk. Homesteaders exhibit an embodied awareness of what social theorist Ulrich Beck calls "risk society" (1992), a phase of global capitalism in which the risks caused by industrialization intensify. For homesteaders, climate change was intertwined with a variety of environmental risks that are all symptoms of industries and governments ruled by greed: contamination, pollution, nuclear threat, and threats to systems of social organization, be they natural disasters or economic collapse.

"For me it's the three big things: climate change, peak oil and then the economic collapse," explains Don, a middle-aged white male homesteader. As Don illustrates, climate change is indicative of deeper economic problems embedded in the social world. But his systematic critique stops there. Many homesteaders focused on economic injustice and the risks it produced. Like Don, Noah described an economy "based on greed." He explained, "The guiding value of economic development is one of maximizing profit." Almost all homesteaders agreed. They were critical of a wide variety of industries, including healthcare, agriculture, pharmaceuticals, and household goods, even as they were aware of their dependence on institutions that produced and supported those industries.

Homesteaders observed that industries and institutions were economically driven to the extent that they failed to provide services for people that they ostensibly existed to serve. Annette, who worked in a health care profession observed,

I think that it's just the way that our healthcare system is set up, where...it's all economically driven. And there's this connection of pharmaceutical industries to the financial wellbeing of the medical institutions. You know, we have no value system for doctors in making the health of their patients; there's actually no benefit in it, so it's just kind of like treating and putting Band-Aids on where you can.

Although they were critical of specific industries, only one homesteader interviewed explicitly criticized capitalism. Colonialism was also notably absent from their critique. Indeed, rather than address the violent history of colonialism, urban homesteaders embrace the language of settler colonialism. By adopting the name "homesteading," participants focus on the industriousness of white settlers facing hostile conditions on the untamed frontier, bolstering the mythological status of the white settler as hero. This story of expansion is racially neutralized though. In fact, the hostile conditions are a reference to Native Americans, who are racially coded as backward and violent, without acknowledgment of the ferocity of the US's sustained, military attack on their life, land, and way of life (Dunbar-Ortiz 2018). By adopting the name "homesteaders," whites reinforce and build upon a deep cultural story (Hochschild 2016) that retains salience for Americans who are still invested in a colonial national identity, even as they are critical of some of its manifestations. In common usage, the term "homesteading" was de-historicized, keeping alive an invented tradition of rugged self-sufficiency without a political critique of power (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Norgaard 2011).

As settler descendants concerned about climate change, homesteaders had remarkably little to say about the role of colonialism in generating ecological crisis. The erasure of specific racialized histories is a key element of color-blind racism, which Eduardo Bonilla-Silva identifies as the dominant racial ideology of our times (Bonilla-Silva 2014:3). Colonialism and racial politics are analytically distinct but interlocking. Colonialism is a racial project, that is to say, "an effort to organize and distribute resources (economic, political, cultural) along



racial lines” (Omi and Winant 2015:125). Color-blind racism protects racial hierarchy by depending on seemingly race-neutral cultural frames that whites use to justify their continued dominance over people of color, whether or not they hold explicitly racist beliefs (ibid. Bonilla-Silva 2014:83). Most homesteaders maintain neutrality regarding specific structures like colonialism and capitalism, even as they struggle to make sense of a system that they see as “utterly unsustainable” (Don). The result is a sense of hopelessness about the potential to solve problems collectively. As Don explained, “They’re [the world’s leaders] patching the world’s economy together with so much chewing gum and duct tape and crazy glue and band aids, but when it finally does fall over, it’s just going to go kaboom.”

Even as they are critical of institutions that they saw as not serving the public, the critique is infused with resignation. The idea that “that’s just the way the system is set up” was echoed repeatedly in a discouraged tone. In response, homesteaders turn toward self-sufficiency.

### 5.2.3 Individual responsibility

Humans need food, water, energy, waste disposal, medicine, material goods, and shelter. In advanced industrial societies like the USA, these resources are distributed by a mix of state and private organizations. Homesteaders are aware of and uncomfortable with their ecological dependency. This is a central motivating factor that drives them to homesteading. Ryann, a young, white woman homesteader, explained:

Homesteading to me means self-sufficiency. To be able to fend for yourself, provide for yourself, take care of yourself and your family and not for a short period of time but to do that as long as you need to...If anything ever were to happen, if you were to lose a crop, if, who knows, we could have a huge, crazy earthquake and have one of these volcanoes go off, not have access to things for a while. You never know what can happen. I do not want to live in the what-ifs, but I’d like to be able to take care of myself. (Ryann, homesteader)

Being dependent on institutions for access to life-sustaining resources means that most individuals do not have the skills, knowledge, or resources to access food, water, energy, etc. For homesteaders, this elicits feelings of discomfort that must be mediated. However, few already had direct, unmediated relationships to land. Many had moved to Oregon from out of state and had grown up within dominant cultural landscapes, in which relationships to land were limited to a landscaped yard. One woman reported wanting to turn her lawn into a garden, only to be met by resistance from her husband, who was put off by the unruliness of this transition. Several homesteaders had grown up on farms in different states and had working knowledge of food production, but no historical relationship to the place that they currently resided. Under the cultural ideals and material organization of modernity, individuals do not need unmediated access to land—their needs are to be met through markets, organized by deep divisions of labor. As they come to distrust the integrity of this system, homesteaders begin to seek access to land through private property ownership—a major organizing principle of capitalism. Some owned land, and some were seeking to acquire it. Almost all agreed that private, individual land ownership was necessary to attain self-sufficiency.

Homesteaders feel a sense of responsibility to take care of themselves and their families, and they see self-sufficiency as morally upstanding in that it allows them to do so without dependence on institutions they distrust. As shown in Ryann’s above quote, fending for oneself is a mark of practicality and honor. Homesteaders draw from narratives of American

individualism that emphasize an individual's responsibility for their ultimate success or failure, regardless of circumstances (Bellah et al. 1996). Even as they speak of out-of-control industrial political-economic systems that put them at risk, homesteaders see individual reform as the best solution. Independence and self-reliance demand high personal effort, encouraging individuals to attend to their own needs while minimizing collective solutions and interdependence with social others.

Even in cases where collaboration is desirable, individualism got in the way. Noah, an older, homesteader man, complained that “there is not a capacity for cohesion.” He explained,

There is an individualism...people who step outside social norms to create new kinds of institutions and new models, they have a lot of...self-esteem (laughs)...The downside is it takes away from their capacity to collaborate. They're strong individuals with passions for their particular pet project. We did one conference on economic re-localization...it was a big success. Then the question is well, how do we move this forward? So we had a meeting...For a start let us go around and get people's ideas as to what would be those projects in the community that we should identify that have the greatest value for giving momentum for bringing forward a re-localized community empowered economy that is sustainable. So we went around and everybody...spoke passionately to their own project. Front yard gardens, solar electric cooperatives, blah, blah, blah. There was only one that was even willing to speak to how do we bring about some sort of integration. How do we get some sort of focus to our energies in a way that we can create a broader impact?

Organizing individuals committed to individualism is a challenge. Many homesteaders care about social justice, inequality, and environmental problems. But those who had participated in social movements reported finding them “really disempowering” (Parker), discouraging (Noah), and insufficient. Many are also discouraged by what they see as the green movement's failures. As Ellen put it, “We've already had a green movement, but the green movement produced hybrid cars, which are terrible for the environment.” Interestingly, most thought that movements *could* potentially effect long-term social change; but few trust that their fellow citizens would really show up to create this type of transformative change.

Homesteaders' knowledge of climate change is shaped by historical ties to settler colonialism and the racial and class privilege it confers. Thus, their environmental subjectivity limits the range of culturally logical responses, based on their social locations and cultural worldviews. Many identified with the deep story of the self-sufficient homesteader because they could trace their own family ancestry back to settlers who moved west in various waves of westward expansion. As mostly white, middle-class people struggling to make sense of their relationship to risk-generating systems, homesteaders turned to a practice that helped them feel empowered on a personal level, but that did little to challenge the systems politically.

## 6 Discussion and conclusion

Much of the climate literature focuses on the need for individual (often consumer) action, technological fixes, and state actions that potentially reinforce existing structural inequalities. These forms of climate response originate from elite environmental subjectivities and obscure the role of the colonial, settler, capitalist state in the generation of climate emissions. To move beyond them, we must consider how people outside of these cultures make sense of climate

change. Black feminist thought reminds us that different relationships to power produce different bodies of knowledge. This is not to say that a structural perception is only possible for oppressed groups; however, it is more likely because understanding structural inequality is a survival mechanism. As Lorde points out, “it is the members of oppressed, objectified groups who are expected to stretch out and bridge the gap between the actualities of our lives and the consciousness of our oppressor. For in order to survive, those of us for whom oppression is as American as apple pie have always had to be watchers, to become familiar with the language and manners of the oppressor...” (1987:xx).

In this paper, we have integrated Black feminist epistemologies, the framework of intersectionality, and theories of practice to account for differences in how subjects make sense of climate change. Social memberships in groups and communities affect perceptions of and responses to climate change. Although members of the Karuk Tribe and urban homesteaders both frame climate change as a symptom of unsustainable political-economic structures, the differences in their structural location and cultural worldviews result in divergent practices. This cannot be explained by individual preferences or cultural differences alone. The concept of *environmental subjectivities* situates individual environmental practices in relationship to interlocking power structures and calls attention to situated knowledges of climate change that emerge in relation to differences of indigeneity, race, and class. For the Karuk people, environmental subjectivity is shaped by a sense of responsibility to the natural world that spurred many creative, politically engaged responses to climate change and related environmental problems. Native Americans are persecuted by the settler-colonial state, whose existence depends upon their discursive and physical erasure. Their social location, both as Indigenous peoples and as Native Nations now existing within a settler-colonial state, produces a variety of (now) subjugated knowledges that shape peoples' interpretations and responses to climate change.

In contrast, homesteader subjectivity was marked by the invisibility of colonialism as a key structure implicated in producing the current environmental crisis, a commitment to individualism, and the adoption of ideologies and practice of self-sufficiency. Mostly white, middle-class homesteaders struggled to make sense of environmental risk, but their social location limited their access to cultural narratives in which climate change made sense. Holding on to the myth of unadulterated nobility attached to the historical figure of the homesteader, contemporary homesteaders channeled their political feelings of concern into personal, depoliticized actions.

A critical takeaway from Karuk and other Indigenous communities' climate activism points to the many possible forms of climate engagement. A cultural frame that allows us to see climate change as a logical outcome of a system built on injustice opens the conversation up to solutions beyond consumer or technological fixes. If climate change is not new, then there are examples for insight, strategy, and inspiration. Indigenous peoples in North America have endured over 500 years of invasion by multiple powerful military forces. Europeans believed native people were destined to be eliminated, but Indigenous communities not only exist today; they continue to flourish in new ways. Indigenous people are on the forefront of climate adaption efforts, as well as climate resistance in every form imaginable across the board from innovative scientific approaches to community revitalization. If we observe the actions being taken and listen to the spokespeople from these communities, we can see that the paths being taken are deeper than shifting ones' transportation choices or even changing from coal to solar fuels—but toward a reorganization of the social, political, and economic systems that are destabilizing life on earth.

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