

Workshop: Living in Climate Refuge

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Strassler Center Professors Sultan Doughan and Frances Tanzer organized a workshop to examine climate induced displacement, its historical implications, and current dimensions. They directed a wide-ranging conversation with Justin Hosbey (Emory University), Caterina Scaramelli (Boston University), and Tessa Rose Farmer (University of Virginia) that highlighted the connections between three case studies: post- Katrina New Orleans, the wetlands of Turkey, and water-scarce Cairo. The discussion captured historical and anthropological perspectives that enable a reframing of our understanding of climate and displacement not only as a looming crisis but also as a historical and ongoing reality.

In Hosbey's ethnographic research on the black population of post-Katrina New Orleans, education is one node in the fight to return to the city. Characterizing his research as an "ethnography of absence," Hosbey emphasizes that 100,000 low income and working-class black people displaced by Katrina have not returned. Yet, he questioned the fight to restore black life in a city that may not survive another 100 years. Climate change and environmental degradation exacerbate structural issues including race, class, and the massive carceral system. Angola Prison, located on the site of three plantations that enslaved people trafficked from Angola, is the largest maximum-security prison in the US and the site of major human rights violations. During Katrina, the disproportionately black prisoners remained behind bars despite rising waters. Moreover, following the massive Deepwater Horizon oil spill, prisoners were subcontracted to private companies to remediate the clean-up. These events are harbingers of what to expect as

climate change brings issues that define the long durée of black suffering in this vulnerable coastal zone to a head.

Scaramelli introduced the term slow violence, first theorized by the literary scholar Rob Nixon, to describe environmental harm that unfolds over decades. Rather than a dramatic spectacle, slow violence accumulates from incremental events including long term exposure to toxic pollution, droughts, fires, climate change, land and water dispossession. Her archival and ethnographic research focuses on climate and environmental change in Turkish wetland areas. She recounted the deeply fraught history of one coastal wetland where saltier, warmer, and more polluted water has infringed on the labor of a group of fishermen who have long maintained the environmental infrastructure of the place. Descended from a population resettled from the Balkans around the founding of the Turkish Republic, the fishermen experienced their work in the lagoon as a refuge from factory labor. Turkey's changing and unpredictable climate has impacted the traditional work of these fisherman as well as that carried out by Turkish seed savers who are crucial to the country's biological and cultural diversity.

Farmer describes cities as “hyper visible locations of fear” within the discourse of climate change. The threat of thirsty cities is growing given the rapid warming of the planet, especially in the global south where access to potable water and reliable wastewater systems are not guaranteed. Researching charitable water fountains, called sabils, that are part of a tradition of gifting water in the street, Farmer shows how the residents of Cairo prioritize ethical concerns as the city experiences more days of extreme heat. The people of Cairo have picked up the tradition of sabils to remake their built environment in ways that respond to the needs of human bodies as

well as the desire to be kind and good. In other research, Farmer articulates the issues underlying completing claims to Cairo neighborhoods between luxury developers and those seeking to preserve Egypt's archaeological patrimony for tourism. Efforts to unseat the residents of these contested places is part of a project of capital accumulation through dispossession. The state casts the residents as fundamentally problematic, justifying their dispersal to satellite desert cities.

The relationship between displacement and climate change is not only about physical displacement or forced migration, but also dispossession, changes in access to citizenship, public services, welfare, and quality of life. These changes impact people who are forced to move but who may not fit legal or official definitions of refugees. It also might include experiences of people who remain in the same space, but then adapt to a dramatically transformed environment. Ongoing debates about climate change, ecocide, and its relation to genocide opened discussion on the issues such as to what extent racism might be considered genocidal, as well as how we can define regime-sanctioned violence in the context of ecology.

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