



# **Climate (In)justice and the Other: Dissecting the Politics of the Representation of Climate Displaced People in the Bay of Bengal**

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## **Abstract**

In this exploratory study, we engage with the politics of narrative and storytelling, specifically the representation of climate displaced people across the Bay of Bengal. We pathologize and dissect the dynamics of racial capitalism through a review of pertinent literature and the analysis of three documentary films depicting the plight of climate displaced people in Bangladesh and surrounding regions in the Bay of Bengal. In the geological epoch of the Anthropocene, humanity is faced with a fatal increase in global temperatures, causing devastating natural disasters and sea level rise that threatens the survival of small island and low-lying nations. Bangladesh is one such place that is exceptionally vulnerable to climate change, despite contributing only 0.3% to global emissions. Drawing on literature within critical border studies and climate justice frameworks, we have analyzed three documentaries produced by countries defined by the UN as “major developed economies.” We have manually coded these films using NVivo according to patterns of colonial dynamics, Othering, and the treatment of agency in the representation of climate displaced people in this region. Storytelling and representation have significant political implications, and these documentaries operate as a microcosm of broader global power dynamics. The narratives they espouse serve to abdicate the responsibility of racial capitalism for the destruction posed by the climate crisis.

**Key words:** Erasure; climate justice; climate displacement; Bangladesh; coloniality; disposability; sacrifice zones; racial capitalism; exploitation; Othering; documentary film.

## **Introduction**

Since the mid-20th century, humankind has been a dramatically and exponentially growing influential force on the natural world. This period in history has been termed the *Anthropocene*, a geological epoch marked by vast industrial growth and international development efforts.<sup>1</sup> With projected rising sea levels and annually escalating temperatures affecting the habitability of vast regions of the earth, the majority of the impacts are concentrated within communities marginalized by global power structures such as capitalism, colonialism, and hetero-patriarchy. In 1990, the

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<sup>1</sup> Jones, O. “After Nature” In *A Companion to Environmental Geography*. (Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2009).

UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change<sup>2</sup> reported the anthropogenic nature of the climate crisis, identifying human activity to be a primary cause of increasing atmospheric greenhouse gas concentrations that warm the earth's surface. If the Earth is to continue on its present economic trajectory and cater to the status quos of a neo-liberal capitalist economy, we are headed toward a fatal increase in global temperatures by at least 4 to 6 degrees Celsius within 50 years.<sup>3</sup> With sea levels rising at an alarming rate, small island and low-lying nations are faced with the threat of disappearance<sup>4</sup>, and "it is globalised capitalism which is denuding cultural, psychological, and ecological diversity to the extent that we are witnessing 'ecocide' on a global scale."<sup>5</sup> At the heart of the geographical realities of the climate crisis are the unequal distribution of projected impacts of rising sea levels and temperatures, and their disproportionate impact on the region around the Bay of Bengal. Within the next thirty years, approximately 17% of Bangladesh will disappear beneath rising waters, as rivers and sea levels rise, natural disasters increase and land becomes uninhabitable, putting at least twenty million people on the move.<sup>6</sup>

This is not a crisis of the future - it is a present reality. As early as 2014, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) acknowledged that the responsibility for climate change and the extent of vulnerability to its effects are unevenly distributed among countries occupying different positions in the global economy.<sup>7</sup> In spite of being one of the lowest emitters of greenhouse gases and having one of the lowest carbon footprints, Bangladesh will be, and is already being devastated by the impacts of anthropogenic climate change. Rapid escalations in global warming, losses of agricultural yield, and freak weather events disproportionately impact communities concentrated on the margins of society, class, as well as political power.

Before investigating the political implications of stories that are told about climate migration surrounding the Bay of Bengal, we must gain an understanding of the immensity of displacement that is projected to occur. This crisis of forced displacement due to climate change will produce up to one hundred and forty million

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<sup>2</sup> The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.ipcc.ch/>

<sup>3</sup> Alder, P. Book Review Essay: The Environmental Crisis and Its Capitalist Roots: Reading Naomi Klein with Karl Polanyi. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 60(2), (2015).

<sup>4</sup> Jones, "After Nature" 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Jones, "After Nature" 2009, 300

<sup>6</sup> Marcin Szczepanski, Frank Sedlar & Jenny Shalant, *Bangladesh: A Country Underwater, a Culture on the Move*. (2018). Retrieved from: <https://www.nrdc.org/onearth/bangladesh-country-underwater-culture-move>

<sup>7</sup> Xiaorui Huang, "Ecologically unequal exchange, recessions, and climate change: A longitudinal study," *Social Science Research*, Volume 73, (2018) 1-12.

climate-displaced people across Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, and Southeast Asia.<sup>8</sup> Bangladesh, the eighth most populous country in the world, is predicted to lose between 11-20% of its total land mass by 2050 despite contributing to only 0.3% of global emissions.<sup>9</sup> Already, we have seen around at least 6 million Bangladeshis being displaced and forced to migrate due to the effects of climate change,<sup>10</sup> and on the other side of the Indo-Bangladesh border, 3.6 million people have already been displaced within West Bengal and India between 2008 and 2018.<sup>11</sup> The geographical location of Bangladesh makes it all the more vulnerable to the impacts of climate change due to its flat, low-lying, and delta-exposed topography.<sup>12</sup> On top of that, Bangladesh is currently undergoing an unsustainable process of urbanisation, and hence does not have the adequate infrastructure to deal with climate disasters of this magnitude.<sup>13</sup> Due to this ongoing displacement, centers of urbanisation such as the densely-populated capital Dhaka often become the destination for climate displaced people, which simply do not have the infrastructure to take on such vast swathes of people. This brings into question where those at the frontlines of this impending crisis, the majority of which are not responsible for it, will be forced to migrate to.

Disparities in climate impact do not only just affect marginalized populations disproportionately between regions, but also ethnicities. Indigenous or *Adivasi* communities<sup>14</sup> in the neighbouring states of North-East India such as Assam, Nagaland and Manipur and along the Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh are severely marginalised and socioeconomically disadvantaged. Already disproportionately affected by the impacts of climate change,<sup>15</sup> *Adivasi* communities in these regions are estimated to bear the brunt of climate displacement. Additionally, while 50% of Bangladesh's population is made up of women, 80% of women live in rural areas which will be disproportionately affected. Women will be affected more by the impacts of climate change due to their already limited mobility in society, left more vulnerable to gender-based violence, child marriage, lack of access to education,

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<sup>8</sup> Rigaud, Kanta Kumari, de Sherbinin, Alex, Jones, Bryan, et al. 2018. *Groundswell: Preparing for Internal Climate Migration*. World Bank, Washington, DC. World Bank. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/29461>

<sup>9</sup> Szczepanski, Marcin. "Bangladesh Country Environmental Analysis," 2006. <https://doi.org/10.1596/33925>.

<sup>10</sup> Mohammad, Nur. "Climate Change and Displacement in Bangladesh : Issues and Challenges." *Handbook of Climate Change Adaptation*, 2015, 177-94. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-642-38670-1\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-642-38670-1_4).

<sup>11</sup> India. Internal Displacement Monitoring Center. <https://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/india>

<sup>12</sup> Ayers, Jessica M., Saleemul Huq, Arif M. Faisal, and Syed T. Hussain. "Mainstreaming Climate Change Adaptation into Development: a Case Study of Bangladesh." *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change* 5, no. 1 (2013): 37-51. <https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.226>.

<sup>13</sup> *World Bank Data, Bangladesh*, 2021. <https://data.worldbank.org/country/bangladesh>.

<sup>14</sup> Indigenous peoples (Sanskrit)

<sup>15</sup> Alder, P. Book Review Essay: The Environmental Crisis and Its Capitalist Roots: Reading Naomi Klein with Karl Polanyi. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 60(2), (2015).

and loss of income,<sup>16</sup> due to the intersecting dimensions between capitalism, patriarchy, and colonialism.

Documentary film has been used as a tool of awareness raising surrounding this crisis, however many of these films have been produced by stakeholders in the Global North and have a distinctly different relationship to the climate crisis than the nations that will be most affected, such as Bangladesh. The politics of storytelling influence the manner in which narratives are shaped, and since story is one of the most formative ways that we engage with the realities of the world, this influence cannot be understated. We have chosen to engage with documentary film as it can be incredibly influential in creating particular public perceptions of a crisis such as this, and may also expose many of the implicit and explicit dynamics of larger dominative power structures, namely the institutional interests and influences propagating them. Given the jarring present and impending realities of the climate crisis, we set out to investigate patterns within narratives that are put forth by documentary films portraying racialised climate displaced people specifically in the Bay of Bengal, through a critical climate justice lens. To what extent does media framing function to uphold narratives of racial capitalism surrounding racialized climate displaced people? How do spatio-temporal mechanisms of racial capitalism both produce and necessitate the neocolonial agenda of erasure? In addition to the textual analysis of documentary films, we engage with literature addressing the construction of invisibility and disposability of certain bodies in the context of climate displacement, and explore the spatio-temporal strategies of racial capitalism and their relationship to erasure. Lastly, we aim to explore the ways colonial dynamics complicate storytelling and representation, and how as modes of knowledge production, they may contribute to larger cultures of the exoneration of responsibility for the climate crisis.

## **Reflections on our Positionalities**

### **i. Alternate Knowledges and Geographical Realities**

Reflexivity and scrutiny of where our research interests and opinions come from, and how they might impact interactions with every stage of the learning process is crucial. Positionality is not fixed or static. We are all constantly evolving in our understanding of ourselves, our places in the world, and ways of engaging with the

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<sup>16</sup> Afrin, Afifa & Dhali, Helal. Environmental Migration, Adaptation, and Gender Relations: A Study in Dhaka. (2015)

world's systems, therefore we believe it of great importance to situate ourselves in the processes of learning and knowing to recognize the nuanced and dynamic nature of our engagement. Understanding grows and shifts through experience and discomfort, and this process of growth is influenced by the multiple dimensions of identity we each hold. As three young and diverse women in academia, presently situated in Dhaka, Bangladesh, and Vancouver, Canada, reckoning with our respective positionalities requires so much more than merely acknowledging the intersecting dimensions of privilege and oppression that mark our identities.

It is crucial to mention that as we are writing, we are positioned amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, which has been well-documented in its continual exacerbation of deep systemic inequalities,<sup>17</sup> disproportionately impacting communities of colour worldwide<sup>18</sup>. This crucial backdrop of tangible and overwhelming structural failures catalyzed us as we began our research joining Zoom calls from three separate time zones - Bangladesh, India, and Canada, and from overlapping disciplines of political science, sociology, economics, and gender, race and social justice. A common passion for climate justice and exploring pathways towards a livable future bring us together.

At the root of our mutual passion is a shared sense of grief and anger. We are working within the contexts of painful, violent and continually dispossessing colonial legacies, each of which have shaped our respective engagements with these fields of interest in different and similar ways. Dually impacted by the immediacy of current events, namely the worrisome escalation of global natural disasters exacerbated by climate change - such as the devastation of Cyclone Amphan<sup>19</sup> across the Bay of Bengal as well as the West Coast wildfire season of 2020<sup>20</sup> - geographically, some of us are situated in and originate from within the very borders where unequal consequences of these intersecting crises are unfolding.

Cyclone Amphan struck on the 16th of May, 2020 and continued until the 21st of May, 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic was growing in severity, and one member of our team, Rwitika, was not allowed to travel home to India. Borders had closed, and her family was in Kolkata, India. When she could not connect with them via the internet or telephone, the situation became dire. After finally being able to get ahold

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<sup>17</sup> Marrett, C.B. Racial Disparities and COVID-19: the Social Context. *J. Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities* (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40615-021-00988-8>

<sup>18</sup> Lopez L, Hart LH, Katz MH. Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities Related to COVID-19. *JAMA*. 2021;325(8):719-720. doi:10.1001/jama.2020.26443. Retrieved from: <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/2775687>

<sup>19</sup> *Cyclone Amphan: Exploring links with climate change*. The Daily Star. <https://www.thedailystar.net/country/news/cyclone-amphan-exploring-links-climate-change-1904353>

<sup>20</sup> *Wildfires and Climate Change*. Center for Climate and Energy Solutions. <https://www.c2es.org/content/wildfires-and-climate-change/>

of them, she found out that all the glass in her entire home had shattered and caused multiple injuries, and their car was broken causing damage to everything in its path. People with whom she had grown up had lost their homes, and were unable to alleviate their circumstances due to financial constraints and the restrictions imposed due to the pandemic. Confined by these circumstances, the inability to emotionally and financially be of any assistance to the people she loves was harrowing. Unsure of whether her feelings were even valid or worth being taken into consideration, being in Canada brought up guilt and relief simultaneously.

Complex distance from the site of destruction enables a deep felt experience of its effects. Another researcher, Sagorika, intimately relates, with her family's recently liberated homelands - celebrating a mere 50 years of independence this year - already facing the imminent threat of mass land loss. An immense source of existential grief, this difficult truth has been amplified in its devastation by both physical distance and the present political realities of Bangladesh, where the ruling government's well-documented human rights abuses, erosion of democratic freedoms, and settler colonial violence against Indigenous communities continue to multiply in both ferocity and impunity.<sup>21</sup> Climate action measures are a barely perceptible fraction of the nation's most recent budget, particularly in comparison to multiple state sponsored environmentally degradational projects for energy and tourism<sup>22</sup>. Thus being situated in Canada, while offering us the complicating, profound exilic guilt diasporic writers oft speak of, it also entitles her to navigate it constructively through the rarity of space, security and academic liberties North America offers. Two-thirds of our team—Rwittika and Sagorika, from West Bengal and Bangladesh respectively—share similar spatial proximities to the political geographies we are exploring in the Bay of Bengal. This situates us within inextricably intimate and pained relationships to the displaced populations we are highlighting. Tangible loss and powerlessness in the face of cataclysm drove us in our attempt to comprehensively engage with the personal and systemic tragedies embedded within the unjust realities of climate change. This is not just an ideological debate reserved for intellectualized hypotheticals— the impacts of climate change are tied to our present realities and futures of our homelands, heritages, communities, and senses of belonging.

Being a team composed of those who identify as women, the majority being women of colour, we recognize our historical disadvantages within academic spaces

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<sup>21</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Bangladesh Events of 2021", World Report. (2021) Retrieved from: <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/bangladesh>

<sup>22</sup> *Budget reflects no concern for environment.* The Daily Star. <https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/news/budget-reflects-no-concern-environment-2105509>. 2021.

and how it is additionally complicated by our respective positionalities, given factors such as race and class. For one researcher, Holly, there is a degree of distance that her whiteness provides from this crisis, with the privilege to choose to view it as a theoretical and academic exercise rather than embrace the fullness of its lived realities. This research has been an opportunity to reckon with this privilege of never being forced to question the validity of her presence within academia and at UBC, and never having faced the fear of being displaced from her home. A privilege of distance from emotionality has provided insulation from realities of tragedy, but through the course of our research her sense of urgency has been deeply affected, and this facade of distance has been replaced with a new dedication to humility and to the centering of story and lived experience.

Instead of minimizing any of these relations, we draw from them in our excavation of the politics of voice in order to offer the power in the lived experience, human affect, and the potency of emotional knowledge. As Schaffer and Smith highlight in the production, circulation, and reception of storytelling that enter the global lexicon of political and academic discourse, "all stories emerge in complex and uneven relationships of power" and at various levels of dissemination, a person's story is inextricably negotiating itself within the highly political site of its production in human rights discourse and the impact of its transmission.<sup>23</sup>

As we are working against narratives of homogenization, we believe it to be of paramount importance to center lived and emotional knowledges as ways to erode the historical marginalization of non-Eurocentric intellectual projects. As the production of every story or group of stories is dependent on the vast differences in context and historical timing, it is "heard" or silenced, depending on the identities engaging with it.<sup>24</sup> Collaboration is a unique, interdisciplinary space to utilize ecological and existential grief and the consequent guilt the climate crisis entails in pursuit of radical action. Our sorrow and anger catalyzes us to engage in the unlearning of exclusively Eurocentric capitalist modes of knowing and being by helping formulate transformative spaces for working with and from our emotional knowledges.

Due to the collaborative nature of this work, we aim to think "synthetically, bringing together diverse theories and tools, selected based on their potential usefulness"<sup>25</sup> rather than finding ourselves isolated in particular academic traditions

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<sup>23</sup> Schaffer, Kay & Smith, Sidonie. *Human Rights and Narrated Lives, The Ethics of Recognition*. (2004). 10.1057/9781403973665.

<sup>24</sup> Million, Dian. "Felt Theory." *Therapeutic Nations: Healing in an Age of Indigenous Human Rights*. (University of Arizona Press, 2013),

<sup>25</sup> Gobby, J. *More powerful together: collaborative theorizing with social movements about decolonizing and decarbonizing Canada*, (2019), 44.



and perspectives, seeking to unsettle academic imperialism by centering and engaging with the politics of lived experience both in our research and spatial relations to it. One of our primary strengths as a group of scholars is the multiplicity of perspective and positionality that we bring, each holding different bases of knowledge and different proximities to the violence of climate injustice in the regions surrounding the Bay of Bengal.

## **ii. Colonial Legacies, Academia as Institution, Our Places Within Them**

As researchers, a goal we share is to make our work more transparent, in order to minimize the risk of it becoming a merely rhetorical exercise, hence we seek to ground our research in longer term engagement with these topics beyond academia by centring lived experience and community engaged learning. We occupy a socioeconomic niche that allows us all to engage with these topics on an intellectual level, which in itself is a privilege, as our immediate livelihoods are not threatened by this crisis like so many of those displaced because of dimensions of class, gender, race, and ethnicity.

It is integral to note these capitalist dynamics in our positioning within these institutions of knowledge production, as we are provided a sense of security and legitimacy by virtue of our association with the University of British Columbia. The University of British Columbia is situated on the unceded, stolen, ancestral, and traditional territories of the x<sup>w</sup>məθk<sup>w</sup>əy<sup>ə</sup>m people and this violent colonial legacy informs our work in deeply entangled ways. As individuals not Indigenous to Turtle Island, our studies at UBC are made possible by the realities of forced displacement, which include how “Indigenous communities across Turtle Island have been separated as a result of colonially imposed Canadian borders.”<sup>26</sup> Central to our understanding of climate justice is that Indigenous people globally are disproportionately affected by climate injustice, despite their lack of responsibility for the anthropogenic causes of climate change.<sup>27</sup> As colonial borders separate and alienate, our work actively resists this through engaging directly with a holistic and critical treatment of forced migration.

### **Situating our Research Within a Broader Conversation**

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<sup>26</sup> Harsha Walia, *Undoing Border Imperialism* (AK Press and the Institute for Anarchist Studies, 2013), 7.

<sup>27</sup> Mirjam Macchi, *Indigenous and Traditional Peoples and Climate Change, Issues Paper* (IUCN, 2008)

Despite the impending threat of mass displacement caused by anthropogenic climate change, even within the scholarly field of critical refugee studies and critical border studies, displacement specifically caused by climate change and those impacted by climate violence are scarcely discussed. Scholars such as Genova<sup>28</sup> and Coutin,<sup>29</sup> Naomi Klein,<sup>30</sup> Rob Nixon,<sup>31</sup> and Harsha Walia<sup>32</sup> working within these epistemological frameworks engage with the systemic erasure and disposability of climate displaced bodies to extents. Our research seeks to utilize these epistemological frameworks, applying them to displacement specifically catalyzed by climate change, and the driving neoliberal capitalist forces behind this crisis. It is significant to note literature discussing the power dynamics and political implications of image and structural inequality, augmented by literature within refugee and border studies.

One of the most critical geographical realities of climate change, and where most of the literature is situated, is the unequal distribution of impacts, which is integral to consider through a lens of climate justice. This lens emphasizes that climate action must center the ways in which injustice is embedded in the climate crisis and seek to dismantle this injustice by considering intersecting dimensions of oppression. There is a distinct “unavoidability of justice” in conversations surrounding climate change, and climate migration, as “the effects of environmental degradation are not necessarily experienced as costs by the people who cause -- and most benefit -- from them.”<sup>33</sup> Marginalized people on local and global scales will be and are already disproportionately impacted by climate impacts,<sup>34</sup> despite being responsible for only a fraction of this climate violence, and this reality of injustice informs our analysis as we engage with a critical and decolonial theoretical framework.

Although the climate crisis is wrought with injustice and a climate justice lens is integral to understanding the intersections and intricacies of the impacts of it on forced displacement, claims for justice in global institutions for the most part have been subject to little definitional and philosophical precision. Immense contention characterizes discourse surrounding the definition and categorization of displaced

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<sup>28</sup> Nicholas De Genova, “Migrant ‘Illegality’ and Deportability in Everyday Life,” *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 2002, 31(1): 419-447.

<sup>29</sup> Susan B. Coutin, “Borderlands, Illegality and the Spaces of Non-Existence,” in *Globalization and Governmentalities*, Richard Perry and Bill Maurer, eds. (2003), 171-202

<sup>30</sup> Klein, Naomi. “Let Them Drown The Violence of Othering in a Warming World.” *London Review of Books* 38: 11, (2016)

<sup>31</sup> Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard University Press. (2011)

<sup>32</sup> Walia, Harsha (2013)

<sup>33</sup> Okereke, Chukwumerije (2011): “Moral Foundations for Global Environmental and Climate Justice” *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 69: p. 118

<sup>34</sup> Alder (2015)

people, because there is not a singular causal link between climate change and the movement of populations - this relationship is complicated by a multiplicity of intersecting factors. Impacts of displacement, rising temperatures and sea levels, diminishing viability of land for agriculture and increasing conflict around resources are all impacts faced disproportionately by those in the Global South. These impacts are so deeply intertwined with one another that it is difficult to discuss one dimension of climate injustice, such as climate migration, in isolation.

The complexities and rigidity within the legality and bureaucracy of international legal frameworks function to gate-keep bodies on no basis besides them being 'other.' The language of environmental or refugee is insufficient, as the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees refers to refugees only as those who cross international borders due to "well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion."<sup>35</sup> This definition is problematic because it does not address environmental factors, and does not advocate for the protection of those who are displaced within one country's borders, such as the "estimated 200 000 Bangladeshis, who become homeless each year due to river-bank erosion," and cannot easily appeal for resettlement.<sup>36</sup> This exclusion of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) represents a critical gap in legal frameworks. The term "climate migrant" is also insufficient, as there isn't a widely agreed-upon definition of what specifically constitutes a 'climate migrant,'<sup>37</sup> and even with so many theoretical conceptualizations of these terms, their meanings are the "most uncertain in the context of law and practice."<sup>38</sup>

Within a framework of climate migration, the relationship between climate factors and the movement of people is complicated by an important temporal element.<sup>39</sup> Slow onset disasters emerge gradually over time, and include drought, desertification, sea-level rise and disease epidemics. More immediate disasters such as flash floods and storms, earthquakes and critical infrastructure failures can be categorized as sudden-onset disasters.<sup>40</sup> Both of these catalyze displacement, and are

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<sup>35</sup> UNHCR, "Climate change and disaster displacement" Retrieved from: <https://www.unhcr.org/climate-change-and-disasters.html>

<sup>36</sup> Apap, Joanna. 'The concept of 'climate refugee' Towards a possible definition.' *EPRS | European Parliamentary Research Service* (2019)

<sup>37</sup> International Organization for Migration. International Migration Law N°34 - Glossary on Migration. (2019) Retrieved from:

<https://publications.iom.int/books/international-migration-law-ndeg34-glossary-migration>

<sup>38</sup> Apap, (2019).

<sup>39</sup> Apap, (2019).

<sup>40</sup> United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction. (n.d.). *Terminology: Disaster* | PreventionWeb.net. UNDRR.

often inextricably connected - especially when it comes to climate change. Flash flooding and violent storms, for example, are associated with rising global temperatures. For some scholars, this temporality brings into question what should happen to those displaced by temporary disaster, and some even ask "to what extent should people who flee from devastation be obliged to return once the danger has passed?" as if some "compassionate grounds" for allowing displaced persons to remain could be institutionalized. While these classifications and debates are grounded in larger structures of violence, we recognize that this language is the only language accessible to us. These definitional frameworks are inherently limited and exclusionary, as even the notion of compassionate grounds is incredibly subjective and perpetuates a power hierarchy of who has the capacity to determine the legality of another's presence.

For the purposes of our engagement with these topics, we have utilized the terminology of "climate displaced people," as a more concise adaptation of "persons displaced in the context of disasters and climate change," as asserted by the UNHCR as the most accurate terminology. This refers to people forcibly displaced as a result of at least one of the conditions relevant to population movement, defined by the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), in the key findings of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. These conditions include: "a) the reduction of available water; b) decreases in crop yields; c) risk of floods, storms and coastal flooding; and d) negative overall impacts on health (especially for the poor, elderly, young and marginalised)."<sup>41</sup> "Forced" for our purposes engages with the notion that people may make the decision to flee their homes, but that decision is fundamentally influenced by factors that they individually have no control over related to the impacts of climate change.<sup>42</sup>

Central to a critical treatment of climate displacement is an understanding of the project of racial capitalism. A term originally coined by Cedric Robinson, and more recently articulated by Jodi Melamed, "racial capitalism" describes the inherent embedding of racism within capitalist systems and structures. Any form of "capitalism is racial capitalism,"<sup>43</sup> as power structures that enable racial capitalism foster a global divide between those with power and those without. Racialized and marginalized populations are rendered displaced, exploited, and disposable. The "antinomies of

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<sup>41</sup> United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction. (n.d.). *Terminology: Disaster | PreventionWeb.net*. UNDRR.

<sup>42</sup> Apap, (2019).

<sup>43</sup> Melamed, Jodi. "Racial Capitalism." *Critical Ethnic Studies* 1, no. 1 (2015): 76-85. January 26, 2021. doi:10.5749/jcritethnstud.1.1.0076.

accumulation require loss, disposability, and the unequal differentiation of human value.”<sup>44</sup> This differentiation of human value is distinctly entangled with the crisis of migration that threatens racialized and marginalized communities, as capitalist accumulation by so called “developed” nations is enabled by exploitation and pollution of the Global South. There is no accumulation of capital without racialized exploitation,<sup>45</sup> thus Marx writes “capital comes into the world dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood.”<sup>46</sup>

Through global capitalism’s contribution to the depletion of natural resources and environmental degradation, it is a direct perpetrator of global warming<sup>47</sup> and thus of intense relevance in our dissection of the inequality of the effects of climate violence. Strategies of racial capitalism enable disproportionate direct and indirect violences, and are corroborated by pervasive narratives of disposability. Under what Henry Giroux calls “the new biopolitics of disposability,” the poor, and especially people of colour, are “excommunicated from the sphere of human concern, they have been rendered invisible, utterly disposable.”<sup>48</sup> For instance, this year marks 6 years since the Rana Plaza disaster, when garment factories in Dhaka collapsed, killing at least 1,132 people and injuring more than 2,500,<sup>49</sup> catalyzing little change in the global garment industry regarding labour standards. This pervasive ideology of disposability rationalizes precedents of Indigenous dispossession and the “letting die of the racialized poor,”<sup>50</sup> which is also being seen in those displaced by climate injustice in the Bay of Bengal.

Racial capitalism allows for “distinctions between the valued and the devalued”<sup>51</sup> and creates unstable social relations through “single axes of recognition” which impose a dismissal of collectivity and “greater social wholeness” in favour of accumulation, exploitation and the securitization of constructed borders.<sup>52</sup> Harsha Walia expands on this division of humanity, noting the socially constructed nature of borders and their

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<sup>44</sup> Melamed (2015), 77.

<sup>45</sup> Melamed (2015), 82.

<sup>46</sup> Marx, Karl. *Capital Volume One* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 926.

<sup>47</sup> Baer, Hans. “Global Warming as a by-Product of the Capitalist Treadmill of Production and Consumption-the Need for an Alternative Global System.” *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 19, no. 1 (2008): 58-62. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/ezproxy.library.ubc.ca/10.1111/j.1835-9310.2008.tb00107.x>.

<sup>48</sup> Giroux, Henry A. “Reading Hurricane Katrina: Race, Class, and the Biopolitics of Disposability.” *College Literature* 33, no. 3 (2006): 171-96. Accessed April 14, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25115372>.

<sup>49</sup> International Labour Organization. “The Rana Plaza Accident and its Aftermath.” (2018). Retrieved from:[https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/geip/WCMS\\_614394/lang--en/index.htm#:~:text=On%2024%20April%202013%2C%20the,and%20injured%20more%20than%202%2C500.&text=Among%20these%2C%20at%20least%2035,and%2027%20lost%20their%20lives.](https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/geip/WCMS_614394/lang--en/index.htm#:~:text=On%2024%20April%202013%2C%20the,and%20injured%20more%20than%202%2C500.&text=Among%20these%2C%20at%20least%2035,and%2027%20lost%20their%20lives.)

<sup>50</sup> Melamed, J (2015), 78.

<sup>51</sup> Melamed, J (2015), 79.

<sup>52</sup> Melamed, J (2015), 79.

violent implications in her critical book *Undoing Border Imperialism*.<sup>53</sup> Elucidating the ways in which physical borders “enforce a global system of apartheid” and conceptual borders “keep us separated from one another.”<sup>54</sup> This effectively enables “the division of humanity into “worthy” and “unworthy,”<sup>55</sup> which a critical and decolonial conceptual framework actively resists by adopting instead a praxis-organizing intention to center lived experience of those most marginalized, and expose the embedded assumptions of disposability within systems of racial capitalism.

One of the crucial mechanisms of racial capitalism to justify this division and disposability is what Nixon terms slow violence, which “occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space...a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous but instead incremental, whose calamitous repercussions are postponed for years or decades or centuries” or in other words, the externalized impacts of neoliberal capitalist industrial activities.<sup>56</sup> It is the geographical and psychological casting out or out-sourcing of capitalism’s costs that effectively manufacture “sacrificial peoples,”<sup>57</sup> as Naomi Klein articulates. These are people concentrated within marginalized communities who are made homogenous and expendable across what scholarship has termed “sacrifice zones,” or low-income, racialized communities shouldering disproportionate environmental harms related to pollution, contamination, toxic waste and heavy industry.<sup>58</sup> This framework offers an embodied and tangible understanding of how the “disparities in wealth and power” characteristic of capitalism become, by design, “inscribed and re-inscribed through social processes of racialization” which is thus “understood to produce disparities in environmental burdens” and naturally, the longer-term consequences of these impacts like inhabitability and displacement.<sup>59</sup>

The politics of image and social construction are vital to our study, as the portrayal of a crisis reflects political interpretation and ways of thinking and seeing.<sup>60</sup> As explicated by Allan Sekula, “the making of human likeness on film is a political

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<sup>53</sup> Walia, H (2013)

<sup>54</sup> Walia, H (2013), 2

<sup>55</sup> Melamed, (2015), 80

<sup>56</sup> Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and Environmentalism of the Poor*. 2011.

<https://southwarknotes.files.wordpress.com/2018/10/slow-violence-and-the-environmentalism-of-the-poor.pdf>

<sup>57</sup> Klein, Naomi. “Let Them Drown The Violence of Othering in a Warming World.” *London Review of Books* 38: 11, (2016)

<sup>58</sup> Lerner, Steve. *Sacrifice Zones: The Front Lines of Toxic Chemical Exposure in the United States* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2010)

<sup>59</sup> Scott, Dayna N. et Smith, Adrian A. ““Sacrifice Zones” in the Green Energy Economy: Toward an Environmental Justice Framework”. *McGill Law Journal / Revue de droit de McGill* 62, no. 3 (2017) : 861-898. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1042776ar>

<sup>60</sup> Schneck, Stephen Frederick. “Michel Foucault on Power/Discourse, Theory and Practice.” *Human Studies* 10, no. 1 (1987): 15-33. Accessed April 12, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20008986>.

act.”<sup>61</sup> Documentary film influences the production of knowledge and societal perception of issues, and it is this process that affects everything within political realms. Knowledge production, and in this case, documentary making, is carried out within the limits of the episteme of a particular period and culture, and shapes political rhetoric. It is fair to assert that in the present context, knowledge production is inherently influenced by neoliberal and capitalist ideologies which then produce stereotypes that entire peoples are reduced to. Foucault also argues that the subject of political discourse is produced and constructed within discourse itself. It follows that any discourse surrounding the topic of climate displaced people, such as documentary film, affects social perception and policy. The fact that the existence of the subject is entirely restricted to its development in discourse is what positions the discourse as our main framework of analysis. In the case of our research, we are investigating this within the contexts of the inequalities of climate violence and examining whether, as the theory posits, this truly limits political agency as well as the power the subject has over their own voice.<sup>62</sup>

Documentaries that are political in their essence often have the inevitable effect of distinguishing insiders from outsiders<sup>63</sup> with their illicit assumptions regarding hierarchical divisions between the so-called East/West, backward/advanced, and civilized/uncivilized providing meaningful insight into international geopolitics, particularly when thinking of foreign policy as Self/Other relations.<sup>64</sup> Films about the plights of people struggling are thus acknowledged externally by the filmmakers who control and craft a particular narrative and portrayal of those viewed as ‘Other.’ Images can induce powerfully influential subconscious responses, and understanding the context is of vital importance. Documentary making as a medium of storytelling has developed in conjunction with developments of neoliberal globalisation,<sup>65</sup> and thus plays a significant role in forming perceptions of documentary subjects (in the case of our research, those displaced by climate change) according to norms of representation

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<sup>61</sup> Sekula, Allan. "Sekula, Allan." *Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary (Notes on the Politics of Representation)* Oxford Art Online, April 19, 2019. [https://doi.org/https://www.institutdesameriques.fr/sites/default/files/sekula\\_-\\_reinventing\\_documentary.pdf](https://doi.org/https://www.institutdesameriques.fr/sites/default/files/sekula_-_reinventing_documentary.pdf).

<sup>62</sup> Olsson, Michael. "Power/Knowledge: The Discursive Construction of an Author." *The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy* 77, no. 2 (2007): 219-40. Accessed April 12, 2021. doi:10.1086/517845.

<sup>63</sup> Callahan, William A. "The Visual Turn in IR: Documentary Filmmaking as a Critical Method." *Millennium* 43, no. 3 (June 2015): 891-910. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0305829815578767>.

<sup>64</sup> David Campbell, *Writing Security* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); R.B.J. Walker, *Inside/Outside: International Relations as Political Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); William Connolly, *Identity/Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

<sup>65</sup> Demos, T. J. "Destination: The Politics of Aesthetics during the Global Crisis." *The Migrant Image*, 2020, 245-50. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822395751-018>.

that are shaped by global power dynamics. Patterns of Othering in representation have been well documented by scholars, notably Palestinian-American professor Edward Said, whose comparative analyses of art, history, and literature greatly inform our own. Said's assertion that colonial dynamics greatly influence storytelling and representation can be summed up by his conception of Orientalism, the constructed imagination of cultures which exaggerates and distorts differences in order to see people groups as exotic, uncivilized, or even dangerous.<sup>66</sup>

Taking into account this relevant literature surrounding critical climate justice frameworks, the dynamics of racial capitalism, and the political implications of storytelling, the aims of our research are to excavate the power dynamics— implicit and explicit— within the narratives of climate change induced displacement. We seek to utilize documentary analysis to widen the scope of understanding of how portrayals of the people on the frontlines of climate violence may intersect with wider institutional dynamics. By regarding documentary analysis as a discourse anchored in concrete social relations, we are interpreting ideologies that govern global political rhetoric. The politics of representation undergirding the migration crisis we are analysing stem from a decolonial lens of the liberal capitalist worldview, as art is considered a form of discourse that models social relations and global circumstances.<sup>67</sup> Documentary analysis thus enables us to look into how stereotypes about so-called 'developing' or rather, 'overexploited' nations are constructed.<sup>68</sup>

## **Research Methodologies**

Our primary avenue of investigation in this exploratory study is a qualitative analysis of documentary film produced by countries outside of the region of focus - the Bay of Bengal - given our curiosity about how this crisis is framed by actors in countries characterized by relative power and privilege. Utilizing NVivo software to conduct inductive textual analysis of the documentary transcripts, we manually coded the data, looking for how each documentary engaged with three particular variables -

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<sup>66</sup> Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. (1978)

<sup>67</sup> Sekula, Allan. "Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary (Notes on the Politics of Representation)." *The Massachusetts Review* 19, no. 4 (1978): 859-83. Accessed April 10, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25088914>.

<sup>68</sup> "The Visual Representation of Developing Countries by Developmental Agencies and the Western Media." *The visual representation of developing countries by developmental agencies and the Western media | Development Education Review*. (2007) <https://www.developmenteducationreview.com/issue/issue-5/visual-representation-developing-countries-developmental-agencies-and-western-media>.



colonial dynamics of voice, the frame of Othering, and the agency of climate displaced people.

Our methodology involved the analysis of selected media sources depicting the plight of climate displacement in long and short documentary form, with a specific focus on work produced by organizations and individuals situated in the Global North. All of the sampled documentaries are widely accessible on online platforms such as YouTube, and these documentaries were selected by convenience sampling. In this exploratory study, we did not strive to make claims of probability or generalizability, but instead to excavate the larger power dynamics in storytelling.

The three films we sampled occupy two particular criteria. The first is that they focus on the specific region of Bangladesh and the Bay of Bengal. The second is that they were produced by countries that have played a disproportionate role in global emissions. We decided to examine films produced in countries defined by the UN's country classification scheme as Major Developed Economies<sup>69</sup> because these nations are rich enough to afford to be stylistically engaging with this suffering through documentary film. All of these countries are among the 20 countries with the highest global carbon emissions per capita, making them disproportionately responsible for climate change.<sup>70</sup> Bangladesh on the other hand, is among the countries with the lowest emissions, with 0.3 metric tons of carbon emissions per capita.<sup>71</sup>

Rather than focusing our analysis on media sourced from one particular location, we decided to select sources from a diverse geography of countries classified as "developed," because we sought to understand whether the same patterns and narratives are visible within documentary film across the Global North. The particular films sampled were produced in Germany and the United States. This mitigates the influence of the spurious variables of political ideology that vary between and within nations. The three particular films selected for analysis are --

- ***Losing Ground*** , directed by Lisa Hornak and Erin Stone, distributed by The Atlantic in the United States. This short form documentary centres on Mousuni island in the Sundarbans, Bangladesh, where "the sea is already advancing about 200 yards a year [and the] Island [...] is experiencing the worst effects of the changing climate. Coastal erosion, floods, salinity ingression, and

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<sup>69</sup> United Nations, "Country Classification," World Economic Situation and Prospects, (2014). Retrieved from: [https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/policy/wesp/wesp\\_current/2014wesp\\_country\\_classification.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/policy/wesp/wesp_current/2014wesp_country_classification.pdf)

<sup>70</sup> Union of Concerned Scientists, "Each Country's Share of CO2 Emissions" (2020) Retrieved from: <https://www.ucsusa.org/resources/each-countrys-share-co2-emissions>

<sup>71</sup> World Bank Data, "CO2 Emissions, Metric Tons Per Capita" Retrieved from: [https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/EN.ATM.CO2E.PC?most\\_recent\\_value\\_desc=true](https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/EN.ATM.CO2E.PC?most_recent_value_desc=true)

increasingly violent storms [leaving] most of the land barren. In the past decade, the island's inhabitants including women, children and elderly people have seen their houses and livelihoods destroyed."<sup>72</sup> What was once a self-sustaining agricultural community is now on the front lines of the climate crisis. The directors traveled to Mousuni Island to explore the lives of the climate displaced people there, with their film focusing the emotional toll permanent environmental changes have taken on residents.

- ***The Floods are Coming: Climate Refugees in Bangladesh***, produced by Deutsche Welle (DW), Germany's international broadcaster. The official description terms it as "a journey to the Bangladesh of the future, a country that's set to suffer terribly from climate change. Climate change has already wreaked havoc; around 2,000 displaced people arrive in the Bangladeshi capital Dhaka every day. With a population topping 20 million and a crumbling infrastructure, the city is on the verge of collapse."<sup>73</sup> This documentary zooms in on these realities, incorporating perspectives from environmentalists, politicians, analysts, and NGO workers.
- ***Climate Refugees***, produced in the United States and directed by Michael P. Nash.<sup>74</sup> Described as "the first feature film to explore in-depth the global human impact of climate change and its serious destabilizing effect on international politics. The film turns the distant concept of global warming into a concrete human problem with enormous worldwide consequences."<sup>75</sup> The filmmakers traveled the world for nearly 3 years to document the impact of climate change, witnessing inhabitants of countries forced to leave their homes by climatic events with little or no protection. The film features a variety of leading scientists, relief workers, politicians, and public figures. *Climate Refugees* was filmed in Bangladesh, Tuvalu, China, Fiji, Chad, Sudan, Kenya, Maldives, Europe and the US.

Our coding of these three documentary films is grounded in Figueroa's approach to the study of audio-visual materials, the AVO-approach.<sup>76</sup> Positioning audio-visual sources as objects of analysis, rather than merely medium (as with AVM

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<sup>72</sup> Hornak, Lisa. and Stone, Erin. *Losing Ground*. The Atlantic. (2019).

<sup>73</sup> DW Documentary. *The Floods are Coming: Climate Refugees in Bangladesh*. (2019).

<sup>74</sup> Nash, Michael P. *Climate Refugees*. (2010).

<sup>75</sup> Video Project: Educational media on the critical issues of our times. Retrieved from: <https://www.videoproject.com/Climate-Refugees.html>

<sup>76</sup> Figueroa-Dreher, Silvana K. "The Grounded Theory and the Analysis of Audio-Visual Texts," *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 11(1):1-12.

approaches) allows us as researchers to investigate not only the explicit textual content of the documentary films we engage with, but also factors that may have influenced filmmakers choices, such as funding, and the political implications of the stories that are told and the images that are utilized. Figueroa's AVO approach, as articulated by Viswambharan and Priya<sup>77</sup> emphasizes how 'audio-visual material is the result of social interactions between, for instance, journalists, camera-people, editors, etc,'<sup>78</sup> and has three methodological considerations:

- 1) Firstly, it asks for an "explication of epistemological standpoints and interpretive frameworks."<sup>79</sup> We have engaged with a critical climate justice lens in approaching our engagement with relevant literature and our analysis of the data.
- 2) The second consideration refers to the treatment of "audio-visual material as a 'whole,'"<sup>80</sup> thus we have engaged with the broader contexts of the documentaries – such as institutional influences, intentions, and political motivations and implications of the films.
- 3) The third consideration involves the practice of grounded theory in data analysis, and emphasizes further refining the macro-propositions through coding thematic patterns that emerge from the story represented.<sup>81</sup> The specific thematic patterns we have emphasized in our coding of the data surround voice and expertise, imagery, language and key thematic patterns in narrative.

Utilizing NVivo data analysis software and inductive analysis, the transcripts of sampled documentaries were coded at the sentence level, according to three key variables. When it comes to the first variable of voice, in our coding of the three documentary film sources that formed our data, we grouped speakers into three distinct categories. The category of "climate-displaced people" includes those who have been displaced, or face imminent threats to the habitability of their homeland due to climate change. Not all of these individuals have been displaced, but all of them experience some threat to stability that is at least in part due to sudden or slow-onset climate disaster. The category of "experts" includes climate scientists,

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<sup>77</sup> Viswambharan, Aswathy P., Kumar Ravi Priya. "Documentary analysis as a qualitative methodology to explore disaster mental health: insights from analysing a documentary on communal riots." *Qualitative Research*, 2015. 1 -17

<sup>78</sup> Viswambharan and Priya, 5

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 5

<sup>80</sup> Ibid. 5

<sup>81</sup> Ibid. 5

politicians, and civil society. Each film also has one “narrator;” the consistent faceless voice that controls the majority of the narrative in each film. We recognize that many voices have the capacity to ‘narrate’ in some way, however the narrators we identified in each film are characterized by being the one voice whose face we never get to see, and whose perspectives carry through the entirety of each film. When engaging with the analysis of voice, we engaged with its colonial dynamics in particular, and how voice is connected to gaze.

Regarding narrative frames identified, our analysis focuses on the portrayal of climate-displaced people, and found frames of Othering to arise in each documentary in similar and different forms. These narrative frames include the exoticization of poverty, emotional exploitation, and securitization. Finally, the third variable we engaged with in our qualitative analysis is that of each film’s treatment of agency among climate displaced people. After watching the entirety of each film and reading through their transcripts, we identified these patterns and conducted an in-depth analysis of their multidimensional spatio-temporal strategies. As “films are visual texts & there is no direct method of interpretation for visual data,”<sup>82</sup> through transcription, film is made accessible for textual analysis. Other dimensions of film are significant however, so we also comment on filmmakers' choices with regard to imagery, though our primary investigation of patterns was grounded in the film transcripts. When utilizing film analysis as a research instrument, it is best combined with other methods.<sup>83</sup> Due to potential subjectivities, we have additionally engaged with relevant institutional dynamics to examine the various ways that patterns found in these documentaries are a microcosmic illustration of systemic international trends.

The narratives that these particular documentaries espouse have political implications, and this is integral to our analysis. Because of the small scale of our analysis (only examining three films) and the subjectivity of our coding (ultimately it was up to us to determine whether statements fit within each theme), the primary aim of our research was not make conclusive or comprehensive claims about the films as artistic works but instead to dissect the political implications of the specific frames mentioned, in the ways they connect to erasure as a strategy of neoliberal racial capitalism. In addition to this textual analysis of thematic patterns, our research involved examining and dissecting how themes that arise in our findings may be connected to broader local and international power dynamics and political

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<sup>82</sup> Dodia, D. R. “Film Analysis: A Research Instrument” *Indian Streams Research Journal*, 1:V, p. 3. (2012). Retrieved from: <http://oldisrj.lbp.world/UploadedData/1032.pdf>

<sup>83</sup> Dodia, (2012).

motivations surrounding this crisis. We analyze relevant financial and bureaucratic motivations of dominative power structures, actors, and policy across both the Global North and South. One key example is that of the Rampal Power Station, a coal fired plant being constructed in the extremely ecologically vulnerable Sundarban region in Bangladesh, and currently funded by India, despite vocal resistance from UNESCO and environmentalists.<sup>84</sup> Working with Figueroa's AVO approach to incorporate discussion of implicit and explicit visual and contextual elements of the documentaries, we primarily emphasize the political implications of storytelling, particularly situated within the context of the power dynamics embedded in global racial capitalism.

## **Findings and Analysis**

Our analysis is grounded in the understanding that racial capitalism is a powerfully influential driving force across time and space, and from our observations of the documentaries, we have determined that creative choices and patterns of narrative are entangled within socio-political and historical contexts. These films are, to a great extent, a microcosm of racial capitalism's strategies in its project of violent inequality through the construction of climate displaced people disposable, 'othered' bodies and the erasure of the 'developed' world's disproportionate responsibility for the climate crisis. Through our analysis of the documentary transcripts and the films as a whole, we have found that all three films reproduce colonial dynamics and patterns of Othering through voice and narrative respectively, in similar and different ways. The patterns that we have selected to highlight specifically deal with the ways in which climate displaced people are portrayed by actors in the global North.

## **Colonial Dynamics**

### **i. Voice**

To understand the political implications of the frames and narratives presented by these documentaries, we begin with a dissection of voice - who is telling the story? Who is allowed to? What are the implications of narrative authority considering broader colonial socio-historical contexts? Our analysis is informed by a recognition that even though people displaced by climate disaster share their perspectives and

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<sup>84</sup> Inam, Ahmed. "DISASTER written on the wall. Unique Sundarbans inching towards death with 'development' initiatives." The Daily Star. 2016.

lived experience within these films, ultimately the narratives that are presented are curated by filmmakers situated in the Global North. It is important to note here that their curatorial choices shape how the testimonies of the people of the Bay of Bengal are structured, which is further complicated by the fact that their voices possess less political and economic power within the confines of racial capitalism and imperialism.

Academic engagement with historically marginalized groups, or the non-Western Other, has always been complicated by colonialism. In her influential text "Can the Subaltern Speak?" post-colonial scholar Gayatri Spivak problematizes the production and retrieval of voices of non-white bodies in light of such choices' "dependence on dominant discursive fields, which constitute subaltern subjects, define their modalities of expression, and structure the positions from which they speak and are heard."<sup>85</sup> Investigating the choices in how voice is utilized, in both absence and presence, offers a clearer understanding of how climate displaced people are configured as subjects within the larger dominative system of capitalism. The knowledge produced by such discourses became social praxis, which then became reality; by producing a discourse of difference, Europe maintained a dominance over a non-western Other, using a binary social relation that created and established the subaltern narrative, realised by excluding the Other from the production of discourse, between the East and the West.<sup>86</sup> This is relevant to consider in engaging with the chosen voices highlighted across the films, particularly in their inclusion of direct testimony from climate displaced people. When the Other is allowed to use their voice, it is constructed within the parameters of the dominative modalities themselves, which has been termed a form of epistemic violence.<sup>87</sup>

All three of these films have a central focus on the region of the Bay of Bengal, and engage with an array of stakeholders to different degrees. Climate-displaced people make up a mere 8% of *Climate Refugees*, and each of the 12 climate-displaced people are featured in one clip, or speak one time, on average. Of these 12 individuals, only 3 are named. In both *Climate Refugees* and *The Floods are Coming*, these interviews are dubbed over in English, the actual voices of climate displaced people barely audible. This is further seen in *The Floods are Coming*, where text spoken by climate-displaced persons makes up a mere 24% of the transcript, while the narrator forms 45%, and experts make up 28%. All of this contributes to a sense of erasure, as

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<sup>85</sup> Coronil, Fernando. "Listening to the Subaltern: The Poetics of Neocolonial States." *Poetics Today* 15, no. 4 (1994): 643-58. doi:10.2307/1773104.

<sup>86</sup> Hall, S. "The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power". *Race and Racialization: Essential Readings*. Das Gupta, T. et al (eds). Toronto: Canadian Scholars Press. (2007)

<sup>87</sup> Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1988. *Can the subaltern speak?* Basingstoke: Macmillan.

those who are the most impacted by climate disaster and displacement are the least often represented in this film, giving the impression that 'experts' situated in the Global North have more valuable and legitimate perspectives to offer, in other words, providing them with epistemic authority, as knowledge production is validated through eurocentric framework.

Contrasting Michael P. Nash's generalized treatment of the impending crisis of climate migration, in their documentary *Losing Ground*, American journalists Lisa Hornack and Erin Stone highlight the story of one family in a particularly climate vulnerable area - the island of Mousuni which is surrounded by the Bay of Bengal. Climate displaced people, speaking from their lived experience offer a unique perspective, and this is reflected in this film as, based on character count, 50% of the transcript is one family sharing the impacts of climate displacement, and how their lives are affected. In *Losing Ground*, these voices are made accessible to an English speaking audience through subtitles, which maintains more of the integrity of the climate-displaced people's stories than the alternative of being drowned out by an English speaking translator. 35% of the transcript of *Losing Ground* is made up of narration, and the only 'expert' figure is Adalat Khan, the head of government for the Island of Mousuni. Voice in this film, while it seems to prioritize the experience of climate-displaced communities over expert opinions, still has problematic political implications. Despite the fact that climate displaced people make up 50% of the transcript, a power differential between interviewers and interviewees is still present as the overarching narrative of the film was still constructed and curated by directors in the United States, thus removing a degree of agency from climate displaced people to determine how their own story is told. Power dynamics are deeply embedded in storytelling, and this is inescapable. This contributes to what many post-colonial theorists have termed key issues in the "subaltern" or Othered, marginalized bodies speaking. bell hooks explicates this power differential as the colonizer, or the bodies or institutions originating from or validated by the so-called West, emphasizing that from the perspective of the colonizer speaking to the colonized,

"[There is] no need to hear your voice, when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own.

Re-writing you, I write myself anew. I am still an author, authority. I am still a

colonizer, the speaking subject, and you are now at the center of my talk.”<sup>88</sup>

In selectively extracting certain primary perspectives from climate displaced people in conjunction with so-called experts from the West, the dominative neoliberal structures the documentary makers symbolize translate lived experiences of displacement into a larger, deliberate interpretation of climate change that “tell[s] it back to [the colonized] a certain way.”<sup>89</sup> This constructs a new history that does not directly implicate the extractive capitalist forces and relevant political institutions, as those who represent these dominative systems are offered just as much or more space within their discourse, which legitimizes their perspective. It is not about honouring lived experience, but erasing evidence of the violent institutional forces behind them.

Faceless narrators across all three films are utilized, with disembodied voiceover functioning as the primary mode of exposition. Mellor highlights how this tactic of “stitching” films into coherent wholes via this “expository “voice-of-God” commentary” is “didactic in tone, omniscient in its access to knowledge, and articulated through a rhetoric of objectivity,”<sup>90</sup> and while these narrations seem objective and transparent in their representation, they reproduce the same colonial biases and gaze of the filmmakers, as the use of voice-over is not necessarily a marker of a claim to the transparent representation of reality.<sup>91</sup> American director Michael P. Nash himself narrates *Climate Refugees*, and is the voice that draws connections between interviewees, making up 10% of the film’s transcript.

In *Climate Refugees*, the perspective that dominates the film is that of ‘experts,’ making up 81% of the transcript and speaking a total of 117 times. This group of ‘experts,’ identified by markers of expertise such as titles, indoor interviews, and authoritative statements, is overwhelmingly composed of white people, who make up 91% of the experts’ transcribed statements. When considering voice, there is a distinctly different way that politicians and climate scientists speak on these issues - speaking with a sense of detached authority and distance from climate change’s impacts on human life. For instance, in *Climate Refugees* U.S Senator Newt Gingrich emphasizes how “[talking] about carbon loading of the atmosphere” is “a much easier conversation because it’s so clear when it’s happening in terms of scientific data”<sup>92</sup> in

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<sup>88</sup> hooks, bell. “Marginality as a Site of Resistance”, in R. Ferguson et al. (eds), *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1990: pp. 241-43.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Mellor, Felicity. “Configuring Epistemic Authority: The Significance of Film Style in Documentaries about Science.” *Science in Context* 31, no. 1 (2018): 39-59. doi:10.1017/S0269889718000042.

<sup>91</sup> Mellor, Felicity. “Configuring Epistemic Authority: The Significance of Film Style in Documentaries about Science.” *Science in Context* 31, no. 1 (2018): 39-59. doi:10.1017/S0269889718000042.

<sup>92</sup> Nash, Michael P. *Climate Refugees*. (2010). (00:47:04 - 00:47:16)



direct comparison to the plight of climate vulnerable communities losing their homelands to rising sea levels.

The legitimization of dominative perspectives and expertise is also seen potently in *The Floods are Coming*, produced by Portuguese director Lourdes Picareta, and distributed by DW, a German media outlet. The Rampal Power Plant, a coal power plant, is presently under development in the Sunderbans, on the low-lying coastlines of the Bay of Bengal, a deeply climate vulnerable area and one of Bangladesh's few natural defenses against climate change. Multiple reports have emphasized its cataclysmic environmental damage, and yet one of the 'expert' voices in this documentary – Nasrul Hamid Bipu, the Minister of State for Power, Energy and Mineral Resources in Bangladesh is interviewed in this film, stating that the coal burning power plants that are presently under development "will be a clean coal energy."<sup>93</sup> Although other expert voices such as Munir Muniruzzaman, President, Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies disagree with this minister, calling attention to the "disastrous consequences for survival"<sup>94</sup> that the power plant will bring, allowing the Energy Minister a platform within the film grants a degree of legitimacy to the capitalist structures his position represents, as the inclusion of his voice in conjunction with activists and civil society members indicates an of equating truths between profit driven interests and climate science.

## ii. Gaze

Intertwined with the colonial dynamics within voice is gaze as a constructive force, as the dynamics of power that inform the legitimacy of expertise also determine the lenses through which stories are told. In engaging with the relationship between power and representation, it is integral to investigate the foundational institutional elements of the content in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the power dynamics present. All three films are financially supported by production houses situated within the Global North, and more importantly, are directed by white American and European men and women. What role does whiteness play in the creative engagement with climate-displaced people? Who possesses epistemic authority in framing climate displaced people and their plights? What are the implications of this? As figures of authority both logistically and artistically, there are evocations of Said's conception of how the so-called West, in essence and practice,

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<sup>93</sup> DW Documentary. *The Floods are Coming: Climate Refugees in Bangladesh*. (2019). (00:11:27)

<sup>94</sup> DW Documentary. *The Floods are Coming: Climate Refugees in Bangladesh*. (2019). (00:12:22)

from the beginning about its “speculation about the Orient,” constructs an imagined homogeneity. Said posits that “the one thing the Orient could not do was to represent itself. Evidence of the Orient was credible only after it had passed through and been made firm by the refining fire”<sup>95</sup> of the dominative institution’s representatives. Documentary film is one such representative, and the three films that form our data are not innocent of this colonial gaze given the white European and Americans creatively spearheading them. It is impossible to disentangle colonial histories from present storytelling strategies, and by positioning itself as the sole legitimate storyteller, validating the construction of how these racialized regions possess a “extrareal, phenomenologically reduced status that puts them out of reach of everyone except the Western expert.”<sup>96</sup> Thus the Global North exploits and erases the heterogeneity of climate-displaced people even as it tells their story, because although climate-displaced peoples’ voices are included in this story, the story itself is not constructed by those who are the most affected.

This colonial gaze is also evidenced by some of the particular narratives within these documentaries, namely frames of securitization and objectifying portrayals of climate-displaced people. This cultural construction serves to consolidate the condescending and patronising stereotypes of peoples and places exotic to the ‘West.’ Said’s idea of the non-West serving as the mysterious, *mystical*<sup>97</sup> and enigmatic caters to the dangerous idea of so-called civilisation in order to validate the West’s construction of the exoticized Orient, which in this case is the climate vulnerable regions around the Bay of Bengal as simultaneously a population devastated by environmental disaster, and a threat to security. These choices in imagery actually serve to uphold the hierarchies of racial capitalism through their enabling of this construction.

## Framing the Other

The word exotic is derived from the Greek word ‘exo’ meaning outside, and is an effective tool of neocolonial erasure, enabling the Othering of the ‘unknown’, which in this case, is the Global South. Exoticism denotes the inherent quality and status present in the Non-western other.<sup>98</sup> Historically, political functions of exoticism and

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<sup>95</sup> Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. 1978.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.* 248.

<sup>97</sup> Beard, Michael. "Between West and World." *Diacritics* 9, no. 4 (1979): 2-12. Accessed April 25th, 2021. doi:10.2307/464909.

<sup>98</sup> Sheppard, W. Anthony. "Exoticism." *Oxford Bibliographies Online Datasets*, 2012. <https://doi.org/10.1093/obo/9780199757824-0123>.

Otherness represent the power dynamics between colonial powers and the subaltern, and in this case, represent the power imbalance produced by racial capitalism. This construction of 'Otherness' has harmful and dire consequences due to the stereotypes it reproduces. These depictions of the Global South function to objectify the suffering of climate displaced people whilst misrepresenting their plight. Which stories are being told? Why are these stories necessary? This process of 'Othering' has become naturalised in depictions, particularly in documentary and film making, and has other consequences by establishing the political, cultural and economic hegemony of nations in the Global North.

Throughout all three documentaries, a pattern of dehumanizing and Othering climate-displaced people is accomplished through various spatio-temporal strategies in similar and different ways. In all three documentaries we have analysed, this pattern of Othering is reinforced by a visual and textual exoticization of poverty in the regions of interest. In particular, choices made with regard to the curation of interview content functions to reinforce a pattern of a high degree of emotionality. This functions to position the suffering of the people represented as existing within a vacuum, as there is not an acknowledgement or engagement with systemic inequality that is inherent in racial capitalism. By neglecting to address this systemic global inequality, the emotional portrayal of climate-displaced people serves to dehumanize them. In all three of the documentaries we have chosen, the manner in which countries like Bangladesh are presented exemplifies the exoticisation of poverty, further reinforcing the notion of 'Otherness,' and this is accomplished through capitalization on emotionality, implicit strategies of emotional exploitation, as well as more explicit narratives of securitization.

### **i. Emotional Exploitation**

In the opening sequence of *The Floods are Coming*, a Bangladeshi woman - Momtaj - shares her story with the interviewer, looking at the ground with tears rushing down her face. She recounts her story of being forced to see the decay of her and her family's home for generations and how normal natural disasters have become for her in this region.<sup>99</sup> "The world seems to pay attention to Bangladesh only when disaster strikes there..."<sup>100</sup> are the opening words of *The Floods are Coming*. Equating

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<sup>99</sup> DW Documentary. *The Floods are Coming: Climate Refugees in Bangladesh*. (2019). (00:06:41)

<sup>100</sup> Ibid. (00:00:06)

the country's identity with disaster is normalising suffering as a part of the identity of Bangladeshis. We also see similar framing throughout *Losing Ground* in which habitants of the island Mousuni are seen weeping as they recount their travels and the recurring damage to their homes, as well as in *Climate Refugees* when an unnamed young woman recounts the story in detail of losing her child to tidal waves, lamenting that she "never found her body."<sup>101</sup> The inclusion of these traumatic scenes inherently capitalizes on emotionality as a means to legitimize the plight of these human beings, consolidating an unspoken requirement of immense suffering for climate displaced people to be in order to be seen and validated as worthwhile beings deserving of safety by Global North audiences.

In an interview with *The Atlantic*, one director of the documentary *Losing Ground*, American Erin Stone, said she "wanted to pursue a story that centered [on] people's internal worlds as they experienced the intense external pressures caused by climate change and poverty."<sup>102</sup> She hoped these stories might help humanise the plight of climate displaced people, as "everyone can understand the importance of home—and imagine the trauma of being forcibly displaced from it."<sup>103</sup> By explicitly seeking to humanise, such a tailored investigative scope ironically functions to dehumanize the climate-displaced people represented. This need for the climate displaced people to appeal to Western audiences emotionally implies that climate displaced people require help to be humanised, as they have been othered to the point of normalised dehumanization. This framing implies that one should care about climate-displaced people because they are relatable – thus it is solely their relatability that makes them worthy of empathy, not their inherent rights as humans. These attempts to humanise by showing depth of emotion have a reverse effect instead of exploitative dehumanization, because not only is their trauma extracted to be translated into a more cinematic, palatable form for *Atlantic* audiences, there was no evidence found that those interviewed were offered any financial compensation either, meaning their pain is only valuable to progress the filmmaker's interests, not their quality of life.

These scenes are repeated throughout all three films, where climate-displaced people generously share their stories with filmmakers, who select particularly emotionally moving clips to include for viewer consumption. This enables the

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<sup>101</sup> Nash, Michael P. *Climate Refugees*. (2010). (00:09:58)

<sup>102</sup> Buder, Emily. *THE ATLANTIC SELECTS The Next Wave of Climate Refugees*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/video/index/591832/climate-refugees/>

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

objectification of climate displaced people by taking away the ability of subjects to decide how they should be represented. By showcasing the emotionally haranguing stories and situations of climate-displaced people, as opposed to offering tangible solutions or directing the blame where it needs to be directed-- to the forces of racial capitalism which facilitate neocolonial erasure of climate displaced people. In fact, despite *Losing Grounds'* director emphasizing in the film's official description that, "the inhabitants of the Sundarbans produce a nominal carbon footprint compared with much of the rest of the world [and] this unequal distribution of climate consequences is likely to continue...the people who have almost zero contribution to the greenhouse gases that fuel global heating who are most impacted,"<sup>104</sup> this disproportionate impact and the systemic causes are not actually touched on or mentioned in her film. These films reproduce a narrative of Otherness. The process of Othering is the foundation and primary tool used by the systems of capitalism in order to paint a picture that is exclusionary and not encompassing of the whole story.

## ii. Securitization

Another strategy we observed within the variable of narrative that is reflective of the dehumanizing and Othering nature of the colonial gaze is that of securitization. The framing of displaced people as security threats is an age old adage perpetuated by primarily conservative policy makers over decades, and this framing is evident in documentary representation of climate displaced people, particularly in how the crisis is framed by 'experts' in *Climate Refugees*. All throughout this film, the primary crises associated with climate migration are not framed as the ways in which poor and racialized populations will be disproportionately affected by climate change, but instead the ways that climate change will catalyze migration, which will impact the United States and other so called "developed" nations due to the movement of populations and competition for resources. Securitization refers to nationalist protectionism rooted in anti-immigration rhetoric, and ultimately racial capitalism, which depends on a racialized hierarchy to survive.

*Climate Refugees* opens with the assertion that "climate change is a threat to our national security," made by Navy Vice Admiral Lee F. Gunn.<sup>105</sup> Blaming growing populations and resource scarcity, Ed Begley fears "there will be great civil unrest"<sup>106</sup> and this is a narrative reiterated throughout the film. Some interviewees express these

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Nash, Michael P. *Climate Refugees*. (2010). (00:04:00)

<sup>106</sup> Ibid. (00:05:50)

fears more indirectly, broadly alluding to climate wars,<sup>107</sup> and some such as Andrew Simms blatantly state that “climate change is about upheaval... [and] upheaval is the enemy of security.”<sup>108</sup> In *Climate Refugees*, the question is posed: “where are those 250 million people going to go? Can they be stopped at the borders of Europe, and what are they going to do to try and get in anyway?”<sup>109</sup> This assumed ideation of climate displaced people rejecting the fact that they will inevitably “stopped” at the borders of the developed world and still “try and get in anyway” is dehumanizing and grounded in frame of securitization is deeply rooted in a fear of the “other,” an anti-immigrant rhetoric upholding racial hierarchies.

This frame is primarily found in *Climate Refugees*, which is reflected by the voices that are given priority - those of presumed ‘expertise’ - American politicians and climate scientists, rather than the people who are actually most impacted by climate violence, those forcibly displaced by climate-change. The fact is that climate displaced peoples will face immense psychological and physical hardship, which will onset the process of ecological grief as a result of loss of identity and native home for generations to come.<sup>110</sup> However, this fact is diminished by the presumed threat of border security for Western nations; the alleged fact that countries like the United States of America and the United Kingdom will have to bear the responsibility of providing refuge to climate displaced people is what is treated as the necessity to take the issue seriously. Without being a threat to the safety of Western lives, the issue of climate migration is not given the same magnitude of attention that it so clearly requires. When an entire population of people are framed as threats to national security, this reinforces hierarchical power dynamics by vilifying climate-displaced people and rendering them less deserving of safety and being treated as human.<sup>111</sup> This also ties in to the phenomenon of Otherism; as Said laments, the ‘Orient’ or the ‘Other’ is an “assemblage of mental maps and socio-cultural attributes constructed, consolidated and represented through the discourse of orientalism, which sought to define ‘Western identity’ and inevitably, the ‘Other.’”<sup>112</sup> Thus, anti-immigrant discourse is consolidated by the process of ‘Othering’ which we see in this documentary, and the

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<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.* (00:17:56)

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.* (00:53:00)

<sup>110</sup> Comtesse, Hannah, Verena Ertl, Sophie M. Hengst, Rita Rosner, and Geert E. Smid. “Ecological Grief as a Response to Environmental Change: A Mental Health Risk or Functional Response?” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 18, no. 2 (2021): 734. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18020734>.

<sup>111</sup> Fassin, Didier. “The Biopolitics of Otherness: Undocumented Foreigners and Racial Discrimination in French Public Debate.” *Anthropology Today* 17, no. 1 (2001): 3-7. Accessed April 29, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2678317>.

<sup>112</sup> Arias, Rosario, and Martyna Bryla. “Orientation towards Otherness in the Social and Literary Spaces of Today’s Europe.” *Palgrave Communications* 4, no. 1 (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-018-0070-3>.

impending politicization of climate displaced people is bound to take on a similar rhetoric to the prevalent one in the political realm today, in which political polarisation is at an all time high.<sup>113</sup> Overall, all three films perpetuate narratives of Otherness surrounding their treatment of climate-displaced people, whether implicitly through emotional exploitation, or through a more explicit framing of climate-displaced people as threats to national security.

## **Agency of Climate Displaced People**

The final focus of our analysis is an investigation of the treatment of agency, which we found present within the documentaries in a paradoxical way, as filmmakers simultaneously infantilize climate-displaced people through various creative choices, while celebrating their resilience in withstanding vast trauma. When constructing a narrative, agency is arguably the most important aspect to consider. Agency denotes consent, and when it is superimposed, it is by virtue of this superimposition, manufactured consent.<sup>114</sup> The consent of climate-displaced people is therefore manufactured, causing them to lose their agency. Agency denotes the dignity of climate-displaced people, and their fundamental right to tell their own story to the world.

### **i. Patronization and Infantilization**

One of the ways that this variable of agency arises within these documentaries is through patterns of patronization and infantilization of climate-displaced people, which reinforce the stereotype that people in the Global South are in dire need of aid from countries of relative power and privilege, because of their own inability to solve systemic issues that are often deeply rooted in imperialist histories and present realities. Colonial paternalism is described as a system under which the authority of the empire undertakes the supply of presumed needs to regulate conduct of those under its control,<sup>115</sup> This control replicates itself across representation, impacting the subjects' colonies or post-colonies ability to be fully individuated due to these imposed,

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<sup>113</sup> Gooch, Donald Michael. "The Culture Wars & Political Polarization in Perspective : Why Polarization and Its Perturbations Are a Persistent [i.e., Persistent] Puzzle in Political Science," n.d. <https://doi.org/10.32469/10355/9882>.

<sup>114</sup> Herman, Edward S., and Noam Chomsky. *Manufacturing Consent: the Political Economy of the Mass Media*. London: Bodley Head, 2008.

<sup>115</sup> Narayan, Uma. "Colonialism and Its Others: Considerations on Rights and Care Discourses." *Hypatia* 10, no. 2 (1995): 133-40. Accessed April 29, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3810285>.

enduring, either explicit or implicit relations to their signified colonizers.<sup>116</sup> Seen through both explicit and implicit description and depiction of the plights of climate-displaced people, this is a less direct form of dehumanization, because it still upholds a power dynamic and hierarchy by framing some in the position of saving and others in the position of being saved, thus further highlighting the Othering of climate-displaced people.

In particular, throughout these films, the notion that climate-displaced people need saving functions to infantilize victims of climate violence, rendering them nothing more than their trauma. In *The Floods are Coming*, Momtaj Begum offers fears of losing her life after losing her home, lamenting that she “didn’t sleep at all last night, worried that [she] was going to drown in the flood waters,”<sup>117</sup> and now that her house is gone she states that in order to survive, she will have to “rely on the kindness of others.”<sup>118</sup> Similarly in *Climate Refugees*, when Michael describes an interaction with a seven year old boy in Bangladesh, he describes this boy asking him, when he gets back to America, to “tell everybody that Bangladesh is not going to survive unless America helps them.”<sup>119</sup> The selection of this story, and the following narration elaborating that “this seven year old boy, every day all he thinks about is whether America is going to save his family, his friends, and his country”<sup>120</sup> reflects a narrative of saviourism, wherein an imperial power – where the director originates from – is depicted as a beacon of superiority and heroism.

This dynamic is further reinforced by the plethora of U.S politicians and military generals highlighting how the U.S needed to be prepared for oncoming influxes as they theorize that displaced people from other parts of the world, more vulnerable to climate change, would be naturally drawn to the so-called developed world for sanctuary. These patterns in framing are infantilizing as they homogenize the displaced as both undesirable and desperate. The narrative that the nations from which these films originate are in a natural position to rescue climate-displaced people from their plight is perpetuated, but not in terms of the responsibility held by the developed world to tackle their disproportionate role in climate change, but as a burden on their economic might, as climate-displaced people are constructed to rely on the good will and paternalism of colonial powers. In *Losing Ground*, we observed a noticeable lack of emphasis on this narrative of saviourism in comparison to the other

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> DW Documentary. *The Floods are Coming: Climate Refugees in Bangladesh*. (2019). (00:06:06)

<sup>118</sup> Ibid, (00:06:41)

<sup>119</sup> Nash, Michael P. *Climate Refugees*. (2010). (00:16:00)

<sup>120</sup> Ibid, (00:16:08)



two documentaries. The film's dialogue itself did not explicitly express any expectations of Global North intervention, which can potentially be owed to the fact that this film prioritizes the voice of climate-displaced people as 50% of the film invokes stories from the climate-displaced folks themselves.

This framing of victims of climate violence as helpless victims in distress, inflates a sense of righteousness for those in a position to offer aid without actually acknowledging or helping the suffering, consolidating the status of the 'saviour.' it fails to provide tangible solutions that would benefit climate displaced people. In doing so, the so-called 'developed' world erases itself from being a cause or a solution to this crisis, and places itself as the only legitimate authority of telling this story by geographically and psychologically distancing itself from the crisis, and by controlling the narratives of suffering.

The loss of agency is also exemplified by the creation of distinct Western and non-Western identities, as these identities are moulded by implicit, unchangeable narratives about the Global South. According to Said, the Western identity was one rooted in a sense of cultural superiority that was enhanced by economic superiority. This economic superiority of Western nations can be traced back to hoards of wealth amassed during imperial rule. In fact, within the region of the Bay of Bengal, the colonial history of the three predominant nations; Bangladesh, India and Pakistan were all directly affected in their creation by the colonial British Raj. The mass displacement created by the Partition of 1947 was a direct result of poorly planned policies implemented by the British government before formally ending colonial rule. It is also interesting to note that these policies were predicated on the notion that cultural homogeneity would be best for the diverse populations, and hence religion and language were the tools of division used.<sup>121</sup> In this case, we see that the Othering of climate displaced peoples takes away the inability for them to be seen as human, and deserving of control over their own narrative as well as survival. The agency to determine their own identity is taken away by the embedded fabric of Orientalist portrayals.

## ii. Glorification of Resilience

Throughout all three documentaries, alongside patterns of patronizing saviourism is a seemingly contradictory theme of the glorification of resilience. This

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<sup>121</sup> Dalrymple, William, Pankaj Mishra, and Steve Coll. "The Mutual Genocide of Indian Partition." *The New Yorker*. Accessed April 29, 2021. Retrieved from: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/06/29/the-great-divide-books-dalrymple>.

paradox of agency frames climate-displaced people as without agency, forced to rely on help from the Global North, but simultaneously as adaptable and resilient agents in their lives. This emphasis on individual instances of adaptation and resilience functions to absolve guilt of those responsible for the climate crisis.

In *Climate Refugees*, Andrew Simms comments on how “the fact that civilization has survived on these shards of land in the remote ocean for so long is a testimony to human resilience and the ability to meet your needs in extreme circumstances,”<sup>122</sup> a perspective that glorifies the resilience of climate-displaced people, assuming that they will find a way to survive this crisis of ecocide that globalized capitalism is responsible for.<sup>123</sup> Statements such as this one, by experts that are from countries which are disproportionately responsible for climate change, glorify climate displaced people for their ability to survive, which further consolidates their identity as the ‘Other’ and creates a justification for the immense injustice that affects marginalized populations globally.

Throughout the three documentaries, the language used to depict climate-displaced people ensures they are inevitably held to a constructed standard of romanticized resilience, and additionally serves to normalize the level of suffering they are forced to endure. In the opening sequence of *The Floods are Coming*, the narrator states that “for Bangladeshis, natural disasters have become part of everyday life,”<sup>124</sup> which immediately establishes a sense of normalcy surrounding freak weather and rising rates of natural disasters exacerbated by climate change, embedding this as an integral part of ‘Bangladeshi’ identity, everyday life, and the fabric of their beings to the rest of the world. This functions to construct a narrative that unjustly burdens victims of climate violence with the responsibility for intervening in a structural and intersectional process of creating more just systems. Highlighting how “Bangladeshis are left with few options but to try to protect themselves,”<sup>125</sup> tells a story that unfairly burdens the people least responsible for the climate crisis with the task of surviving it, and this is reinforced in the documentaries with curated stories of climate-displaced people proving their resilience. In *The Floods are Coming*, stories are presented of climate-displaced people having to rebuild their homes three times,<sup>126</sup> and of a woman named Swapna owning a few sheep as a “life insurance policy.”<sup>127</sup> Ramzan in *Losing Ground*, for instance, works from “7:00am - 11:00pm every day...and makes barely

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<sup>122</sup> Nash, Michael P. *Climate Refugees*. (2010) (00:22:24)

<sup>123</sup> Jones, (2009), 300

<sup>124</sup> DW Documentary. *The Floods are Coming: Climate Refugees in Bangladesh*. (2019), (00:00:14)

<sup>125</sup> Nash, Michael P. *Climate Refugees*. (2010), (00:08:57)

<sup>126</sup> DW Documentary. *The Floods are Coming: Climate Refugees in Bangladesh*. (00:18:10)

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.* (00:15:40)

enough to support his wife, their two young children, and his mother.”<sup>128</sup> These long hours are presented as Ramzan doing whatever he can to support his family’s survival, therefore representing resilience, however it is the intersecting forces of racial capitalism that are to blame for these circumstances that Ramzan and other climate-displaced people endure. Yet again, however, we are not shown any root cause of the problem but rather a glorified representation of the resilience that climate-displaced people demonstrate in the face of crisis, thus exonerating the structural powers that are to blame.

By glorifying resilience and strength of displaced people, this narrative serves to impose the responsibility of alleviating climate displacement on those who are on both the frontlines of loss and possess the least amount of political power. Corporations are responsible for climate change, not these people, and thus mitigation should not be their responsibility, let alone a source of celebration when propagated by them. While their efforts are admirable and undoubtedly worthy of recognition, why are they put on a pedestal of merit and not highlighted as an unfair burden? It is the absence of other dimensions that is of concern here, namely the lack of incriminating the systemic causes of their suffering. In all three documentaries, we can identify certain paradoxical approaches; climate displaced people are being framed as devastated and to be pitied by recounting their emotional journeys. At the same time, they are also perceived as security threats to the borders of western nations with the exacerbation of the ongoing refugee crisis. Furthermore, climate displaced people have their agency removed when being portrayed as requiring help from the Global North, they also have the responsibility of being resilient whilst withstanding immense trauma.

## **The Larger Story of the Exoneration of Capitalism**

Throughout the films, climate change is framed in manifold but distinct ways. “At the heart of the issue,” *Losing Ground* intones, is “the relentless rise of the warming ocean.”<sup>129</sup> Multiple times, *Climate Refugees* highlights “overpopulation, competition for resources, food, water, energy”<sup>130</sup> as key causes of concern, offering the man-made nature of climate change as a debate or uncertainty, despite scientific consensus. “A combination of factors” is highlighted but never expanded upon, but there is a clear absence of direct causes. In *Climate Refugees*, the root cause of the crisis is attributed to “too many humans demanding ever-increasing consumption, not sharing with

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<sup>128</sup> Hornak, Lisa. and Stone, Erin. *Losing Ground*. The Atlantic. (2019), (00:04:30)

<sup>129</sup> Ibid. (00:07:53-00:07:56)

<sup>130</sup> Nash, Michael P. *Climate Refugees*. (2010). (00:04:20)

people[...], and not investing enough to invent our way out of the problem.”<sup>131</sup> Here, the issue of climate change is attributed to a generalised issue with human nature, and not the nuances of today’s global neoliberal economy and racial capitalism once more.

Scientists say current emissions will result in temperatures warming beyond a fatal 4-6 degrees celsius and catastrophic sea level rise, which will be devastating to communities along coastlines. The majority of investments in fossil fuels come from capitalist forces operating at an institutional level both within Bangladesh and globally,<sup>132</sup> and yet this is not highlighted as the cause of the extreme circumstances.

It is an undeniable truth that the Earth’s present systems of life are under active threat of extinction as a result of the culminating costs of neoliberalism’s exported and offshored slow violence. Through the detailed analyses of the patterns above, it is evident that the spatio-temporal strategies that these three documentaries espouse function to distance the Global North from the harms of global racial capitalism through the curation of stories and the construction of a narrative that erases the realities of racial capitalism and the ways that it exports violence. The purpose of not directly incriminating the dominative institutions at fault by instead rendering and centering those most immediately vulnerable to the violence of these institutions as paradoxically resilient and fragile, undesirable, disposable threats is to abdicate capitalism of its responsibility. These films, by virtue of the institutions and individuals creating them, are microcosms of the larger project of racial capitalism.

This omission of the true cause of the climate crisis has devastating political implications, as our warming world is the culmination of the discussed intersecting forces. Inherent to capitalism’s economic model is the assumption of endless growth, achievable only through perpetual extraction of finite resources and profit generation. Given their accessibility and support by large, influential, well-known companies in the Global North, these films had a unique opportunity to facilitate accountability – to expose the systemic inequalities of capitalism, and reckon with the global disparities of emissions and impact. Instead they implicitly and explicitly uphold the status quo of the portrayal of marginalized peoples in the Global South as the Other. By constructing its narratives around and within the axis of Eurocentric intellectual authorization, these documentaries contribute to absolve the responsibility racial capitalism has for climate change and comfortably situate them as non-complacent, passive, or absent.

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<sup>131</sup> Nash, Michael P. *Climate Refugees*. (2010). (00:68:17)

<sup>132</sup> Gunaratna, K. Locana. “Managing Climate Change in South Asia.” *South Asia Economic and Policy Studies*, 2018, 53-69. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-8923-7\\_6](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-8923-7_6).

As exemplified across these films, the so-called developed world both erases itself from being a cause or solution to this crisis, instead placing itself as the only legitimate storyteller, geographically and psychologically distancing itself by controlling the narratives told about institutional dynamics and the bodies at the frontlines of the changing climate. The climate displaced person has been depicted as the simultaneously tragic victim and resilient worker, and not proof of a global need for transformative climate action. Negative stereotypes and imagery in documentaries have the debilitating effect of exacerbating the political viewpoint that situate migration as being attached to a sense of patronising resilience in the current neoliberal world of control, repression and inequality.

As hooks emphasizes, the colonizer takes many forms even after direct rule. Writing from the perspective of the embodiment of colonial knowledge production, she states that what the dominative institutions want is to know the story of those dominated, only to tell it back to them in a new way, "in such a way that it has become [their own]."<sup>133</sup> Re-writing the stories of climate displaced people, the Global North writes itself anew, as presumed author and authority of truth.

No matter its public intentions and commitments, capitalism as a system renders certain bodies of less value than other bodies, because hierarchy is inherent to it, which it continually reinforces and reproduces through "re-writing" racialized bodies as Other, as compliant and disposable, in order to "write [itself] anew,"<sup>134</sup> as not a culprit or perpetrator of violence, but as either saviour or wholly absent. The suffering of people that are displaced and at the frontlines of this violence, such as on the coastlines of the Sundarbans, are only validated for commercial and creative purposes – which serve to further strengthen capitalism's only story about itself as solely legitimate.

Racial capitalism requires a culture of impunity, and its exoneration enables such. Telling stories of hierarchy, making marginalized folks invisible and sacrificial is how this has been accomplished. This erasure and hierarchy has always been a strategy of capitalism since European colonial endeavours, and continues to be so through story-telling in documentaries. Under racial capitalism, it is always the disenfranchised people in the Global South at the bottom of the hierarchy. Climate change is the ultimate culmination of centuries of intersecting factors, and now has arrived, and is projected to continue emboldening as humankind's greatest existential

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<sup>133</sup> hooks, bell. "Marginality as a Site of Resistance", in R. Ferguson et al. (eds), *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1990: pp. 241-43.

<sup>134</sup> hooks, bell. "Marginality as a Site of Resistance", in R. Ferguson et al. (eds), *Out There:*

threat yet. Systemically embedded within racial capitalism, the unjust impacts are thus by design.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Millions across racialized communities globally have been rendered intensely, disproportionately vulnerable to the threat of anthropogenic climate change despite their lack of significant contributions - a grievous cost of extensive ecological devastation through the industrial, exploitative, and systemized project of racial capitalism. Impending displacement looms, with policy, law, and media continuing in their negligence of marginalized bodies, even in conceptualization. Stories and narrative are how we make sense of reality, as humankind has done time immemorial. This grants a medium such as documentary filmmaking power to reflect and shape the normative foundations of worldviews, beliefs, and political systems. Knowledge is power and power is always political. It becomes a necessity for the "victims" of history to rearticulate the terms of history, as they are presented with a colonial structure to function and tell their stories in.<sup>135</sup>

The frames unearthed in the three documentaries we have analyzed - *Losing Ground*, *The Floods are Coming*, and *Climate Refugees* - are no exception to this. Colonial dynamics of voice and gaze were excavated within these documentaries. Voice denotes who is telling the story, who is allowed to, and the implications of that. In this case, with some variation across the three documentaries regarding voice, we found that the voice of the filmmakers situated in the Global North are ascribed the utmost authority. Othering narratives also arose, shown through the forceful recounting of emotionally distressing traumatic situations which were intended to allegedly humanize climate displaced peoples. The paradoxical form of agency that climate-displaced people are portrayed with is undergirded by the reality that even in documentary films representing climate-displaced people, the subaltern still does not speak for itself.

By dehumanizing and Othering climate-displaced people in implicit and explicit ways, these documentaries tell a story of hierarchy, and this hierarchy is what racial capitalism depends on to survive. As exemplified across these films through various strategies, the so-called "developed" world both erases itself from being a cause or

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<sup>135</sup> Million, Dian. "Trauma's Empty Promise." *The Routledge International Handbook of Global Therapeutic Cultures*, 2020, 409-20. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429024764-38>.

solution to this crisis, instead placing itself as the only legitimate storyteller, geographically and psychologically distancing itself by controlling the narratives told about institutional dynamics and the bodies at the frontlines of the changing climate.

Human storytelling is how we have made sense of our existence from the earliest known civilizations. The way we understand, live, and engage with the world, its systems, and even ourselves is through the stories we have been told. Narratives make up the fabric of the institutional power structures we are critiquing, and it is evident that the sustainability of racial capitalism has required, and continues to require the erasure of certain stories and the perpetuation of others. Throughout our analysis, we highlighted why certain narratives of climate displacement are left out and whose stories are being erased. One of the grandest myths of capitalism is that the economic, political, and social structures we are living under are how it has always been and will be. It is the stories of capitalism which make up the foundations of the violent, exclusionary, and dominative structures that are perpetrating these vast inequities. But must life on this planet be this way? These stories are not what they seem, for they are extractive, reductive, and demeaning, particularly in how they position, construct, and erase marginalized and racialized groups. The stories of racial capitalism reproduce hierarchies, even if implicitly, and justify the story that there must always be the "Other" who is suffering, who is a threat, who is omnipotent but deficient. We assert that these narratives are damaging and tired.

While we are limited in our scope, analyzing a fraction of stories, we emphasize that these stories are a microcosm of a larger dynamic. Engaging with creative data such as documentary film is subjective in nature, as film as a medium is something that is experienced in variant ways, thus it is difficult to systematically dissect, and therefore our observations are exploratory rather than prescriptive. Potential future research could look into whether this dynamic has the potential to be reproduced in other creative forms, or in a wider range of source material, as well as policy and law, which represent more enduring material impacts on these arenas that will grow in importance over the coming warming years.

The only way we can create a livable future and a new way of navigating the world is by telling new stories. While there is no hierarchy of oppressions, it is intensely evident different bodies experience life differently under capitalism. However, the stories we tell do not need to be stories of injustice or erasure. The stories we choose to tell can recognize these unique and intersecting disadvantages so we can be more engaged, intentional, and cognizant in resisting them and offering meaningful reparative and transformative modes of thinking, being, and community organizing in

their place. Let us tell and advocate for stories that centre the fact that there have been countless before us and there will be countless after us who deserve to have a livable world, who deserve to not have to carry the weights of generational pain and the burden of climate induced mass displacement. Stories that centre and offer transformative visions of a more equitable, livable world – where no living beings need to be sacrificed for economic growth.

With every year illustrating the worrying acceleration of the crisis our world faces, so does the certainty of mass displacement. How are these climate displaced people going to be narrativized and conceptualized as they grow in number, as the climate crisis grows in intensity? What forms can justice and reparations take for people whose lives are treated as disposable? What can life beyond the systemic erasure of certain bodies look like? What does it mean to build a more just, equitable, and compassionate future for all of us, not some? We hope we have demonstrated that these normative stories that continue to be reproduced by neoliberal capitalist forces are dehumanizing, harmful, and perpetuate violence – but another story is possible. Narratives construct the realities we live in and know – therefore, when we create new stories, we create new worlds. As Indian author, environmentalist, and human rights activist, Arundhati Roy imparts, “Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing.”<sup>136</sup>

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