

Introduction: The Climate Issue

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Climate is emerging as the predominant problem of the twenty-first century. The existential threat posed by climate change, which has long been understood in the abstract, is beginning to take concrete shape for more and more people. Released by the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the Sixth Assessment Report (2021) shows that climate change is not only a dire present issue but also now irreversible for the next few hundred to a thousand years. The Sixth Assessment Report also documents an increased certainty that there will be more frequent and more intense severe weather and climate-related extremes. People are already experiencing the effects and "slow violence" of climate change through heat waves, heavy precipitation, sea level rise, wildfires, drought, flooding, tropical cyclones, and the rapid loss of marine fauna. Agriculture and yield production in the United States and around the world are negatively impacted by climate change, and this impact will continue in the future. Climate change threatens lives and livelihoods across the world. These developments have engendered a variety of cultural practices, discourses, and imaginaries that range from targeted demonstrations (e.g., People's Climate March, Extinction Rebellion) and lawsuits (e.g., *Juliana v. United States*) all the way to influential scenarios of future decline or renewal. These cultural manifestations in turn shape not only our moral, political, and economic responses to climate change but our very understanding of climate itself.

As Matthew Schneider-Mayerson (2015) has pointed out, there is a dearth of scholarship within the field of American Studies addressing climate change even though the United States is a main driver of climate change. Schneider-

Mayerson notes that there are no special issues within the field of American Studies dedicated to climate, and that it is only in the past few years that there have been American Studies Association conference panels dedicated to the topic.

Since the 2015 publication of Schneider-Mayerson's critique, there has been one special issue on climate in the field, "Cli-Fi and American Studies," edited by Susanne Leikam and Julia Leyda for the journal *Amerikastudien/American Studies* (2017). As Leikam and Leyda note in their Introduction, the twenty-first century has seen a "remarkable burgeoning of a heterogeneous body of cultural texts, including literature, film, visual arts, and performances, and scientific works that take on the challenge of prompting global audiences to engage emotionally and intellectually with the implications of anthropogenic climate change" (109). They further note that "the conceptual, methodological, and theoretical frameworks of American Studies offer extensive expertise for analyses of the heterogeneous body of cultural texts engaging with anthropogenic climate change" (111).

In 2020, *American Quarterly* published a special issue on "Energy Past and Futures in American Studies," edited by Natasha Zaretsky, Michael Zizer, and Julie Sze. Though the special issue has important overlaps with an analysis of climate, it is focused on the also relatively underexplored topic of energy studies. Meanwhile, a variety of social science and humanities journals whose scope partly overlaps with that of American Studies have recognized the importance of engaging with climate. Some have published special issues that include case studies about the United States, for example, *Theory, Culture & Society's* 2010 special issue on "Changing Climates"; *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment's* 2014 special issue on "Global Warming"; and *Polygraph's* 2020 special issue on "Marxism and Climate Change."

Our aim with this special issue of *American Studies* is to expand the conversation around climate within American Studies, and to push the field toward a more robust dialogue and thorough engagement with all aspects of climate change. One of the things that an American Studies approach to climate can offer is an interdisciplinary perspective that captures the socio-cultural, political, and ontological dimensions of climate change, including experiential forms of knowledge that are frequently overlooked or not captured by scientific and quantitative methods. An American Studies approach can address issues that undergird or even shape such methods, for example, the impact of environmental activism, climate skepticism, or corporate greening strategies on the perception and negotiation of climate change in the United States and beyond. As the articles in this special issue exemplify, an American Studies approach provides structural analyses of climate that attend to history, social power and hegemony, intersectional perspectives, and a centering of climate justice.

Transdisciplinary Approaches

As far as academics have contributed to the production of public knowledge about climate change, this contribution has overwhelmingly come

from the natural sciences. Within the academy, the predominance of the natural sciences manifests on material, semantic, and structural levels. Programs in Environmental Studies, for example, are typically run by the natural sciences, with a few contributions from the quantitative social sciences but rarely from the humanities. The legitimacy and importance of empirical research on climate are evident. The natural sciences can tell us how the climate is changing, and they can project how these changes will affect global and local ecosystems. What they cannot tell us is how humans perceive, understand, and imagine the climate; how it affects their attitudes and behavior; and how that translates into political action.

Yet these human dimensions frame empirical knowledge about the climate on both ends. They shape the basic categories and approaches—including the very notions of climate and of the human—that the natural sciences use to gather data and develop projections. They also influence how these data are interpreted and which projections are regarded as plausible. They also determine whether and how this knowledge makes its way into society at large. These human dimensions need to be understood in order to address some of the most crucial questions around climate today.

Scientists have spent decades pointing out the dangerous consequences of climate change and proposing a range of countermeasures, but attitudes have been slow in changing and very few of these measures have been meaningfully implemented. To accelerate this process it will not suffice to gather more empirical data. The most pressing task is to examine the discourses, practices, and imaginaries that shape climate politics from local communities all the way to national and transnational organizations. This kind of examination requires the expertise of the humanities and social sciences.

What the humanities and social sciences explore is not only climate itself, but the discourses that create and modify knowledge about climate: newspapers, television, film, social media, literature, music, photography, oratory, and many others. These media reach much broader audiences than scientific publications, and they affect these audiences in personal, emotional ways. Each medium and each genre can draw on a range of specific techniques for illustrating the impacts of climate (change) on individuals and communities.

The humanities have long examined such processes of knowledge production and aesthetic representation. American Studies has taken a leading role in drawing attention to the power structures in which these processes are entangled, and especially to the construction of social difference along lines such as race, nationality, or gender. These differences challenge unified conceptions of the “human” while at the same time stressing the impact of human (in)action both on the climate and on the way climate affects individuals and communities.

The ambiguous temporality of climate change—*longue durée* yet urgent—indicates the importance of historical research and diachronic perspectives. Climate itself has multiple histories, both as material phenomenon and as cultural concept; its American history is entwined with the history of science and agriculture but also of settlement and imperialism. Climate change is usually

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discussed by extrapolating potential futures that demand adjustments in the present—futures that are already the present in parts of the Global South and increasingly in the United States. The political debates around climate change disturb received notions of conservatism and progress. Most environmentalist activism aims to preserve a stable climate, while anti-environmental policies aim to continue received traditions at the price of accelerating climate change.

In engaging questions of climate, American Studies connects with a range of related disciplines in the humanities. This special issue draws on perspectives from history, economy, political science, literary studies, urban studies, geography, and ethnography. The approaches adopted from these disciplines have a common denominator in their qualitative focus, which enables them to trace the complexity of social structures and cultural narratives. The subject of our inquiries, the fluid geographical and cultural entity called America, requires collaboration among these disciplines—collaboration that may result in modifying the terms and procedures each discipline brings to the task.

This transdisciplinary approach puts American Studies in a position to identify and interrelate a wide range of perspectives on climate. It encourages attention to multiple meanings, conflictive perceptions, and hidden ambiguities. It also encourages methodological and epistemological self-reflection. Like all discourses on climate, scholarship in American Studies is structured by tacit presuppositions, conventions, and exclusions. Self-reflection on these issues can help scholars identify and evaluate analogous structures in other discourses and in society at large. This includes conventions of media representation, access to positions of authority in institutions including the media, strategies of politicizing or monetizing climate, vocabularies and iconographies of climate change (e.g., resilience, green technology, or the word “climate change” itself), and aesthetic patterns that shape and are shaped by the sensual apperception of climate.

An American Focus

The United States is an important case study for cultural approaches to climate change. It is arguably the main driver of climate change worldwide, both in terms of per capita emissions and as the center of a global capitalist system that drives up emissions around the world. Not least to legitimize this role, corporate interests within the United States have fostered an unusually large and uniquely vocal group of “climate skeptics.” By turning climate change into a partisan political issue, climate skepticism has become yet another case of scientific knowledge entangled in and dominated by cultural identity narratives organized around class, religion, race, and gender.

From an early point, marked by Leo Marx’s classic *The Machine in the Garden* (1964), American Studies has been attentive to the ambivalences and vested interests of American narratives about human-environment relations. Marx’s observation that American settler culture celebrates pristine nature not least to distract from its own destructive exploitation of that nature remains pertinent

today. A similar ambivalence runs through denialist claims that American climate is not really changing, especially as these claims are being made amid visible evidence that the effects of climate change are literally coming home—engulfing American homes in wildfires, dismantling them in hurricanes, or collapsing them along eroding coastlines.

International studies consistently rank the United States among the most climate-skeptical countries on the globe while it is also the site of key advancements in climate science. The common explanation for this new “American exceptionalism,” Greg Garrard and his collaborators note, is that conservatives in the United States “identified the threat from climate science and politics to free-market, fossil-fuelled capitalism in the early 1990s, and mobilized against it rapidly and successfully” (2019, 29). Social scientists have found that the gap in *knowledge* about climate science is negligible between Democrat- and Republican-leaning voters, whereas *belief* in climate science is unusually divided along partisan lines (Kahan, Peters, Wittlin, Slovic, Ouellette, Braman and Mandel, 2012). This disconnect attests to the key role of cultural narratives in climate change debates, and to the extent to which these narratives are entwined with categories of sociopolitical identity.

Several such categories have been identified as statistically relevant and invite further examination from an American Studies perspective. Conservatives, for example, have exerted a greater impact on climate change debates in the United States than in most other countries, and conservative denialist positions have been disproportionately represented in the media (Garrard, Goodbody, Handley and Posthumous, 2019). Another specificity is the pervasive religious framing of climate skepticism in the United States, which has a stronghold among Christian fundamentalists and intertwines with eschatological interpretations of the Bible to distract from the human impact on climate (Handley, 2019). Generally, identity categories are particularly pervasive in climate change discourses and attitudes in the United States, from national framings on the right to race, class, and gender on the left (Pechar and Mayer, 2015). The United States has become a testing ground of the struggle for climate justice as an increasingly diverse coalition of environmentalists is calling for an approach attuned to such sociopolitical differences.

Climate Justice

Social justice is a defining trait of American Studies, and climate justice is one of the important perspectives American Studies can offer to environmental scholarship. Climate justice activists and scholars have long articulated the unequal impacts of climate change, and the way that marginalized populations in the United States and around the globe disproportionately experience the “slow violence” of environmental pollution and climate crisis (Nixon, 2011). These disparate impacts are likely to increase as the planet approaches, and likely exceeds, 2°C warming (EPA, 2021). In response, climate justice strives for social and environmental equity, while also recognizing that communities of color

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and other socially vulnerable communities “possess a unique environmental perspective that is critically needed in today’s fight against climate change” (Byrnes, 306).

As the other “side” of this special issue brings to the fore, race is central to conversations about climate change. Centering the perspective and experiences of people of color as well as how people of color envision surviving the climate crisis, present and impending, is an important contribution to American Studies. As Laura Pulido (2018) argues, climate change is a fundamentally racialized process, and racism shapes the differential ways climate change is experienced, including life and death. Scholars like Kathryn Yusoff (2018) are making connections between climate change and racial capitalism, showing how the kinds of extractive economies that cause global warming are intimately tied to colonialism and slavery. Julie Sze (2021) also articulates an intersectional framework, highlighting how the climate crisis and environmental pollution are fundamentally interconnected and inextricably linked to crises such as incarceration and policing, immigration, housing, and public health.

Gender is also an important component of climate justice. Women, girls, and gender nonbinary people tend to be some of the world’s poorest, are more likely than men to lack access to resources like education, and are more likely to be cut out of policy development and other decision-making processes. As a result of gender inequity, women, girls, and gender nonbinary people in the United States and around the world are also more vulnerable to the effects of climate change. Furthermore, as Stacy Alaimo (2009) highlights, men and masculinity are frequently associated with a greater carbon footprint. For example, Alaimo shows how aggressive masculine consumer cultures, like those associated with the rise of the SUV and the trend of the McMansion in the United States, contribute to global climate change. Utilizing the concept of petro-masculinity, Cara Daggett (2018) argues that fossil fuels, which cause global warming, are intimately tied to the maintenance of white patriarchal dominance.

Populations in the Global South, including regions in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean, also disproportionately experience the impact of climate change, while simultaneously bearing the least responsibility for producing the kinds of greenhouse gas emissions that contribute to global warming. A transnational American Studies approach to climate justice offers an understanding of the way that the United States is not a singular bounded entity. Rather, American politics, culture, and economics extend beyond the reach of the United States’ physical borders to impact people and geographies all around the world, including potentially rendering those in the Global South more vulnerable. As Julie Sze writes, “the United States has much to do with the present state of the world characterized by environmental racism, injustice, and climate disasters—a world that relies on the exploitation and cheapening of nature and peoples” (2021, 260).

Utilizing a range of conceptual and methodological approaches, the contributions in this special issue address climate justice as a common denominator.

Rob Gioielli shows how climate crisis, and the United States' contribution to carbon emissions, is fundamentally tied to debates around (auto)mobility and public transportation in many metropolitan American cities. Centering race in his analysis, Gioielli highlights how white suburbanites in the Atlanta metropolitan region in the decades after World War II mobilized against mass transit, leading to the centrality of carbon-intensive automobile dependency.

Julie Sze examines the web series *The North Pole* as an abolitionist climate justice narrative that is able to articulate links between incarceration and policing, gentrification, speciesism, and climate crisis. Sze argues that storytelling in cultural productions like *The North Pole* are important for the environmental justice movement to envision what social and environmental equity looks like, including mutual aid, kinship between humans and nonhuman animals, and solidarity in the face of climate crisis.

Aaron Eddens shows how the climate crisis is utilized as an opportunity for American financial companies and the American security state to expand operations across the continent of Africa, developing agribusiness markets for the former and increasing militarized interventions for the latter. Eddens shows how discourses of resilience justify these kinds of American interventions while reproducing racialized logics that render socially vulnerable populations ever more vulnerable.

Moritz Ingwersen illustrates how modernist aesthetics of the early twentieth century represent entanglements around energy and climate. Reading William Gibson's "The Gernsback Continuum" (1981) and John Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer* (1925) alongside examples from art and architecture, Ingwersen demonstrates how these texts represent carbon-intensive energy infrastructure while simultaneously concealing its environmental implications.

Claudia Sadowski-Smith analyzes two novels, Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* (1997) and Merlinda Bobis's *Locust Girl: A Lovesong* (2015), that focus on climate migration and cross border mobility within the context of settler colonialism. Coining the term climate migration fiction, Sadowski-Smith highlights how both novels use magical realist imaginaries of *multispecies* movement, representing hope in the face of climate crisis, militarized borders, and racialized exclusion.

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