

# The missing subject: Enabling a postcolonial future for climate conflict research

Ayesha Siddiqi 

Department of Geography, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK

## Correspondence

Ayesha Siddiqi, Department of Geography, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK.

Email: [as3017@cam.ac.uk](mailto:as3017@cam.ac.uk)

## Abstract

This paper suggests that the dominance of one debate on climate related conflict – establishing whether climate change leads to conflict, or not - is the product of Imperial knowledge produced in the Global North Orientalising the Global South. This debate is also one in which the subdiscipline of political geography has been inadvertently complicit by accepting positivist approaches, that erase the subject and their subjectivities from this discussion, and frame them as science. The argument in this paper problematises the fundamental understanding of 'climate conflict', as defined and universalised by Western science in the Western academy. Instead, it argues that the subaltern's lived experience and interpretation of hazards and their relationship with conflicts needs to be located and centred in this conversation – not just as that of a hapless victim but as knowledge producers able to set the agendas and re-orient the focus of this field. Research examining conflicts around floods and evictions begins to map a new future for how that might be possible.

## KEYWORDS

climate, conflict, knowledge, natural hazards, risk, science

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

The Syrian civil war has drawn substantial attention to the relationship between climate change and conflict, especially within geography, in recent years. This is a particularly polemic debate between the “alarmists”, who see climate change as a substantial “contributor” in creating the conditions for the conflict (Feitelson & Tubi, 2016; Gleick, 2014; Kelley et al., 2015; Malm, 2016) and the “sceptics” who insist that there is “no good evidence” showing global climate change-related drought in Syria contributed to the unrest and civil war (Selby et al., 2017a, p. 241). Despite the substantial airtime that this debate has received (Gleick, 2017; Hendrix, 2017; Kelley et al., 2017; Selby et al., 2017b), with some scholars even offering detailed explanations on why there are such polarising positions on the ‘climate conflict’ links in Syria (Ide, 2018), this issue is far from considered resolved.

New research and literature are still regularly published either establishing fresh links, or disproving old connections, between climate change and conflict, especially in the Syrian context (Daoudy, 2020; Fekete & Zsóka, 2021; Linke & Ruether, 2021; Zubkova et al., 2021). This is, despite it being well known for over a decade, that the “preoccupation with proving or disproving a correlation between climate change and conflict is not helpful”. Rather, it has long been time to move beyond this “impasse” (Lind et al., 2010) towards a more meaningful understanding of the ways in which climate vulnerabilities (amongst an array of other social vulnerabilities) unfold, and how that impacts security, conflict, and unrest. Yet it seems political geography missed that memo and a substantial body of work is still devoted to examining new methods, frameworks and dependent variables that establish whether climate change is leading to conflict, or not (Abel et al., 2019; Gilmore & Buhaug, 2021; Mach et al., 2020). This paper is not another examination into whether climate change is leading to conflict but rather it contends that the dominance of the ‘conflict or not’ debate within climate change research is not value neutral and is the product of a particular system of knowledge production. It identifies the presence of this epistemic bias in existing literature and constructs a critical analysis that reorients the discussion away from a Western science dominated climate-change-resulting-in-conflict-or-not dialectic. In so doing, the paper seeks to introduce a postcolonial critique of the contemporary climate conflict debate.

The editors for the political geography section of this journal recently expressed a desire to rethink ‘traditional themes’ within the discipline and “popularise debates at the cutting-edge”. That vision particularly emphasises new thinking on “the *traffic between postcolonial theory and political geography*” (Crane & Grove, 2018, p. 3 *emphasis added*). This paper fulfils that aim in taking the first step towards advancing a postcolonial critique of a ‘universal’ debate on climate conflict. The latter is a topical subject area that has not only failed to generate any memorable “traffic” with postcolonial theory but has, in many ways, done the opposite. By normalising largely positivist research, seeking to uncover the ‘truth’ about climate change and conflict linkages, political geography as a sub-discipline has increasingly been complicit in contributing to Imperial tropes (Hartmann, 2014; Verhoeven, 2014), of poorer parts of the world descending into war and chaos due to climate change. While this position has been challenged by scholars from within and outside the discipline, their objections have largely been critical of the methods used, or the frameworks employed, (for e.g.: correlation between climate and conflict variables is unreliable) (Ide, 2017; Selby, 2014), rather than questioning the Eurocentric basis of this knowledge production. My aim in this paper is therefore twofold. First, to demonstrate epistemic bias in current state of knowledge on climate conflict in political geography. Secondly, to present a postcolonial critique of this work and suggest ways of moving forward.

## 2 | THE RED-LIGHT STOPPING TRAFFIC: LIMITATIONS OF THE CLIMATE CONFLICT DEBATE

Critical scholars have identified some obvious epistemological and methodological biases in climate conflict research. It has been pointed out that most research on the impacts of anthropogenic climate change on violent conflict, employs a deeply rationalist approach, drawing primarily on large-N datasets that illustrate causality rather than uncovering complexity (Selby, 2014). Such studies tend to follow a standard pattern common in quantitative research.

They demonstrate a correlation between proxy variables [such as precipitation/rainfall (Fjelde & von Uexkull, 2012; Hendrix & Salehyan, 2012), or temperature (Bollfrass & Shaver, 2015; Buhaug, 2010; Burke et al., 2009)] for climate change, with those that stand in for conflict [such as one measuring “battle-related deaths” (Burke et al., 2009; Von Uexkull et al., 2016)] usually showing this relationship to be statistically significant. As Ide’s (2017) review demonstrates this method is widely popular in producing knowledge on climate conflict especially within political geography (see Special Issues in the journal *Political Geography* – Nordas & Gleditsch, 2007, Salehyan, 2014).

These “positivist quantitative and modelling methods” within climate conflict research (Selby, 2014, p. 845) result in large-N regressions developing oversimplified correlations and simplistic models linking climate change with conflict that fuel stereotypes of people and places in the Global South as prone to violence. Hence what is needed to “move the literature and practice forward” is not more of the same type of climate change research studies with updated and “new(er) datasets” (Selby, 2014) but rather deeper “qualitative, highly granular spatial and temporal framings” (Abrahams & Carr, 2017) that help to unpack the complex relationship between climate change and conflict. This work drawing on in-depth qualitative research, in specific contexts of the Global South could “act(s) as a vehicle through which a more multi-dimensional, context specific and historically relevant understanding of” (Siddiqi, 2014) climatic change and its intersection with varying forms of conflict can be developed further.

Yet, while such a qualitative and in-depth approach is often touted as a panacea to understanding the ways in which climate change and conflict might be unfolding in complex ways in people’s lives, in the following section I also present a critique of this literature on climate conflict. I suggest that contrary to mainstream thinking, this qualitatively based body of work is neither particularly successful at bringing the “required level of community level granularity to the research” (Vivekananda et al., 2014) nor at adequately representing the “views expressed by locals” (Ide, 2018). Most importantly however, it does not move beyond ‘providing context’ to generalised climate conflict debates and towards the difficult questions of how knowledge on climate conflict is produced and whose knowledge counts.

## 2.1 | Subaltern conflict: Mobilising to resist hegemonic power

By calling for a move towards a postcolonial climate conflict debate this paper is challenging the statist and sovereignty focused framing of *conflict* in political geography. Traditionally, the latter has tended to examine internal conflict by simplifying different forms of postcolonial political action (peasant revolts, social revolutions, banditry) as “civil wars” to facilitate coding for large-n quantitative studies (Chandra, 2013). External conflict too has tended to emerge from a statist lens that sees the environment as vast and out there and on which different state-related actors might stake their claim (Robbins, 2003). In overlooking daily and interesting facets of political action (ibid), or in such seemingly callous misunderstanding (Chandra, 2013), *conflict* is conceptualised from the perspective of a particular kind of Weberian state. This knowledge is produced at a safe physical and epistemological distance from where different forms and typologies of climate conflict are taking place and is labelled “science”. It is therefore inadvertently complicit in producing ‘a stable (white, patriarchal, heterosexual, classed) vantage point’ (McKittrick, 2006, xiv). From this dominant perspective, postcolonial, Black, any Other geographies are hidden and invisibilised; they are rendered “out of sight” and “out of place” (Pain & Cahill, 2021, pp. 5–6). For the subaltern however, the state might not be the referent of the violence of conflict but rather the perpetrator; this however is by no means a universalizable experience.

Drawing on my experience of, over a decade of, ethnographic fieldwork in climate related disaster contexts in Pakistan, Philippines and Colombia I present an alternative perspective on climate change and conflict in the Global South to deconstruct orientalist narratives in mainstream literature. In my time working in this field, I have seen greater conflict with subaltern subjects – some of it violent, some of it not - because of the policies that are being implemented to ‘build resilience’ in communities to human-induced climate change. Vulnerable communities, everywhere in the Global South, are being told that extreme weather events related to climate change are likely to make

their lives hazardous. They are thus being evicted from their homes in cities such as Karachi in Pakistan, so that the city authorities can implement better flood risk planning (Hasan, 2021). While indigenous communities in Antioquia in rural Colombia are being displaced so that a large dam can make more green and renewable energy (Henao, 2019). These communities tend to fight back. They resist the state, the international financial institutions funding these projects and large corporations, basically everyone who tells them that that they are being dispossessed now, so that climate change doesn't dispossess them in the future. Needless to say, this is not a perspective they share nor one that is acknowledged and developed in the countless articles on climate conflict published in political geography journals every year.

On the other hand, what has not been obvious in my research work is local or regional level fighting between different groups or 'tribes' over water, food or land – ubiquitous in mainstream/Western climate conflict literature. This paper thus presents an alternate perspective on climate conflict drawing on postcolonial critique to suggest that our very understanding of 'climate conflict' is being constructed through rational, scientific knowledge rather than by the subaltern citizens experiencing these social processes every day.

### 3 | THE TRAFFIC SIGNAL IS BROKEN: A POSTCOLONIAL CRITIQUE OF THE CLIMATE CONFLICT DEBATE

The prevailing Eurocentrism in climate conflict research has not thus far been identified as a significant shortcoming in the substantial body of state of knowledge and review articles on the subject (Abrahams & Carr, 2017; Adams et al., 2018; Ide, 2017, 2018; Koubi, 2019; Lewis & Lenton, 2015; McDonald, 2013; Nordas & Gleditsch, 2007; Salehyan, 2014; Saublet & Larivière, 2018; Solow, 2013). While research on climate related conflict is overwhelmingly focused on "a small number of cases" from "Africa" and the Middle East (Adams et al., 2018), it does not engage with the subject at the centre of this discussion – the people living with the impacts of a changing climate making the decision to migrate, or not, to fight over scarce resources, or not. The voice of the *postcolonial, subaltern, marginalised* subject, living with the precarity of climate change and insecurity, is conspicuously absent within this debate.

This is an unsurprising criticism when one examines the mapping of scholars who make up the 'enviro-security' field (1990–2015). Saublet and Larivière (2018) conducted a systematic review to reveal that the foremost scholars who made the most substantial contributions to this field are connected to Toronto, Oslo, Berkley or Zurich research groups – names based on their geographical location – while two thematically named groups are based in Texas and Hamburg. It is not just that there is no Nairobi, Karachi or Lima research group writing about local narratives and experiences of climate conflict in these places but that there are in fact almost no authors from the Global South on a topic that primarily focuses on cases of climate conflict from "Africa" and the Middle East (Adams et al., 2018). As contemporary debates in human geography emphasise – "a postcolonial demand for responsible disciplinary knowledge production necessitates that we understand the representational effects of knowledge (and those who produce it) on th(ose) objects/subjects of our research" (Jazeel & MacFarlane, 2010, p. 113). Reflection on the "representational effect" of knowledge produced in Oslo and Zurich about "Africa" is clearly missing in climate conflict literature. It is therefore critical to acknowledge that the obviously positivist epistemological tilt and over-reliance on quantitative methods in climate conflict research needs to be understood as the Imperial "politics of knowledge production" rather than simply "abstraction" for wider application.

Postcolonial theory suggests that positivism is itself a 'Theory', one that believes its own ability to 'objectively' represent the 'real world' (Spivak, 1988) through systems of imperial knowledge production applied universally. Thus, in positivist research the "position of the investigator remains unquestioned. If and when this territorial debate turns toward the Third World, no change in the question of method is to be discerned" (Spivak, 2010, pp. 47–48). This unchallenged positionality of Western scholars is particularly evident in climate conflict research. Even where critical theorists engage with the politics of knowledge production (for e.g.: Selby, 2014 and Verhoen, 2014) and express their "scepticism" of positivist climate conflict research, it is primarily because of its truth claims of representing facts

(Ide, 2018), not for its evident 'Whiteness'. This small canon of critical theory on climate conflict however does not go so far as to challenge the way the Global South is constructed by the "EuroAmerican professional intellectual" who is diagnosing (Jazeel & MacFarlane, 2010, p. 114) the condition of climate change resulting in violence. Thus, the mainstream focus of climate conflict research on positivist epistemology, and the literature critical of this theory and method, neither body of work confront the Eurocentrism prevalent in this form of knowledge production.

### 3.1 | Quantitative studies

The dominant positivist quantitative strand of research within the field of climate conflict is part of an "imperial episteme", producing "Eurocentric knowledge (that) represses or hides modernity's imperial constitution" as objectivity and scientific rigour (Go, 2013, p. 31). Imperial knowledge production has a history of discursively constructing the European as rational, "a close reasoner" and "devoid of any ambiguity" (Said, 1978), this idea that (European) people make rational choices and maximise utility is the basis on which most statistical analysis is based. While literature on the statistically significant relationship between climate change and conflict aims to provide an "objectively measurable reality in a value-free way" (Ide, 2017) – for example, that a 1° standard deviation in temperature increases the risk of intergroup conflict by 11% (Hsiang et al., 2013) – postcolonial theory argues that knowing such an 'objective reality' is entirely impossible. As "there is no discipline, no structure of knowledge, no institution or epistemology that can or has ever stood free of the various sociocultural, historical, and political formations that give epochs their peculiar individuality" (Said, 1989, p. 211). In fact, Western knowledge's triumph and lasting endurance comes from how successfully it hides "partisan ideology" as scholarship (ibid). Yet, by touting the universality and indiscriminate applicability of quant-based climate conflict studies, scholars ensure the "positivist inclusion of a monolithic collectivity" (Spivak, 2010, p. 32) – the unmodern Global South where such climate conflicts take place.

Further, the belief in quantitative work being neutral science begins to cast the scientist doing this number crunching as an apolitical agent removed from their own socio-cultural histories. In fact, Said and scholars following in his tradition of postcolonial theory take a somewhat conservative humanist approach (El-Haj, 2005; Said, 2004), to the *political* backgrounds of knowledge producers, almost arguing that 'the politics of knowledge' (Said, 1993) could be race and gender agnostic:

it does not finally matter *who* wrote what, but rather *how* a work is written and *how* it is read. The idea that because Plato and Aristotle are male products of a slave society, they should be disqualified from receiving contemporary attention is as limited an idea as suggesting that *only* their work, because it was addressed to and about elites, should be read today (*emphasis original*, 460).

While Plato and Aristotle should certainly not be "disqualified", the frames of reference through which they study society should be part of any serious discussion on their contributions to knowledge. In fact, the Modernity/Coloniality/Decoloniality (MCD) correct for this agnosticism by emphasising that "race and place, if not gender" are "at the analytical and political heart" of decolonial thinking (Asher, 2013). Representation of the postcolonial by those with the same history and identity is an important part of contemporary decolonial critiques. Hence the use of quantitative data to write about climate conflict does not make this work anymore 'neutral' but rather further highlights the prevalence of hegemonic knowledge systems and the use of numerical data to support them.

Indigenous and Black geographers are increasingly leading the movement to make the discipline more politically responsible and accountable to the decolonial agenda (Radcliffe & Radhuber, 2020). This increasingly means challenging the dominant "Whiteness" within the discipline of geography through inclusion, diversity and equality (Desai, 2017; Kobayashi, 2014; Noxolo, 2020). Yet this recognition is all but missing in work on climate conflict, reliant on quantitative studies espousing neutrality. In fact, even where "in-depth, ethnographic and site-specific research" (Ide, 2018) on climate conflict is taking place the fact that there is almost no inclusion of scholarship from a home

in the Global South or from non-Western authors<sup>1</sup> is a problematic aspect of climate conflict literature that has an obviously Ethnocentric flavour.

### 3.2 | Qualitative studies

The “missing subject” is, in some ways, even more evident in qualitative research studies on climate related conflict focused on specific locations of the Global South. These studies are “in-depth, interview based” and credited with bringing “cultural context and human agency” of those affected by climate change and conflict (Ide, 2018) to mainstream discussion. Yet there is no recognition in this work of the subaltern as a “knowledge holder” (Radcliffe & Radhuber, 2020), instead these subjects tend to primarily feature as victims of circumstance, often unable to comprehend the complexity of their own lived reality.

This is best explored by examining the theoretical frameworks employed in flagship studies. For example, Fröhlich's (2016) study on Syria seeks to critique the “imaginaire” of “linear causality between global environmental change and conflict via environmentally induced migration” (38). The paper is “dispelling misconceptions” around drought related migration, believed to be the starting point for the Syrian uprising, by introducing complexity in people's migratory decisions not determined by environmental factors alone. Her study is unique on this subject, as the subaltern has a voice. Of the 30 interviewees included in the research, the author illustrates in direct quotes that they express discontentment with Hafiz al-Assad's policies on water sharing with Turkey, they discuss how household economic situations changed over time and the research participants have distinct and identifiable views on migration and migrants. This paper is noteworthy for being the only academic analysis on climate conflict in Syria that demonstrates this depth of understanding and does not refer to a “monolith collectivity of” Syrians. At the same time, however, its intervention is quite some way from presenting a critical postcolonial perspective. This is evident in its approach to the interpretation and analysis of the interview data. The paper is often driven by a realist desire to establish *the truth* behind migratory decisions and thus suggests that those interviewed might not understand the “reality” of their situation.

A migrant who moves because he can no longer sustain himself through agriculture as a result of drought and ensuing land degradation will often categorize the reasons for his movement as economic, not environmental. This entails what Castles (2002) has termed ‘conceptual fuzziness’.

Whenever the theoretical framework of social science research is set up to establish *the truth*, it becomes an inherently political project produced by the “knowledge industry” (Said, 1989) to serve particular forms of power. In Spivak's words this form of “representationalist realism” is “the justifying foundation of advanced capitalist neocolonialism—to define its own arena as ‘concrete experience,’ ‘what actually happens’” (2010). It tells us there is one universal ‘reality’ of migration resulting in climate conflict and many subaltern ‘perceptions’ and that these are not equal.

Other qualitative studies are more explicit in their distinction between what they consider ‘fact’ and what is judged to be ‘perception’. Hence making their epistemic bias somewhat more evident. Vivekananda et al. (2014), for example, conducted qualitative fieldwork in three districts of mid-Western Nepal to understand the ways in which climate change and post-conflict complexities interact at a local level to impact resilience. Their research was based on five focus group discussions in communities and eighteen “key informant interviews” in Kathmandu. The disparity in knowledge produced when “community” respondents are “interviewed” as a group and policymakers individually is not reflected upon in this research. What the methodology does however explain is the steps taken to “maximise objectivity” (919). It is a study that is aiming to objectively establish “facts” through its qualitative fieldwork. At one point it states

Acknowledging that *local perceptions* are just as relevant as *facts* in post-conflict contexts, the methodology is designed to collect data on perceptions and attitudes at household level to better understand how individuals perceive their risks and resilience (*emphasis added*, 917).

The distinction in this research is between 'perceptions' which are 'local' and 'facts', considered to be obviously neutral. The former is the place where the subaltern resides, a qualified world of 'views' and 'perceptions' while the universal relevance of fact belongs to Western knowledge. While all theories emerge from particular space and specific experience, "whiteness and masculinity remain un-marked and unquestioned voices of authority" (Naylor et al., 2018, p. 205) within this field. There is no work, even qualitative in-depth ethnographic work on climate conflict that has either used postcolonial knowledge to provincialise Western knowledge or used the MCD critique to pluri-versalise it.

A number of other qualitative studies of contextualised climate conflict, attempting to better represent 'local realities' in specific locations of the Global South, draw on official archives. This includes, amongst others, records by "colonial administrators" of traditional customs, such as cattle raiding, in Imperial Kenya (Adano et al., 2012), or a similar study of 'elite' history in Niger (Snorek et al., 2014) or Israel (Feitelson & Tubi, 2016). An examination of climate conflict that draws on 'history from below approaches' (Chakrabarty, 2002), has not yet been conceptualised. The voice of the subaltern, the marginalised subject, living with the precarity of climate change and different types of insecurity and conflict is noticeably absent, in archival and fieldwork-based knowledge produced (some exceptions include de Chantel, 2014, Dhukhan, 2014 & Chandra et al., 2017) on this subject.

This missing subject, the subaltern, living with a changing monsoon system and an insurgency or urban violence may not see these two conditions as connected to each other any more than any of the other worries she deals with, such as inadequate access to services or rising prices of utilities. Or alternatively the subaltern might ascribe the changing climate or the insurgency to "some God" (Chakraborty, 2000) and thereby centring an entirely marginal epistemological and cosmological imaginary. These "non-western geopolitical imaginations and forms of agency" require a deeper understanding of the interplay between the "multiple scales" at which the climate conflict manifests and unfolds, along with the "diverse actors" (Radcliffe & Radhuber, 2020) - from the 'modern' state to the 'unmodern' rebels. Any genuine attempt at this exercise will include anthropological detail through ethnographic depth in a specific locality where a particular form of climate disruption is taking place and intersecting with socio-political processes considered 'conflict' by subaltern groups. This new body of work may need to be developed by a new generation of scholars dedicated to the enterprise of decolonising climate conflict narratives through in-depth fieldwork in the societies being studied. This is an intellectual pursuit that has not yet been taken seriously by postcolonial or political geographers. Even a closer examination of a review article on the "anthropological perspective on the climate change and violence relationship" (Shaffer, 2017), reveals that none of the "ethnographic analysis" on Darfur (Abouyoub, 2012; Kuznar & Sedlmeyer, 2005) or "East Africa" (Adano et al., 2012; Opiyo et al., 2014; Raleigh & Kniveton, 2012) - its two case studies - referred to in the article are based on long-term and intensive fieldwork in these societies. It seems understanding subaltern subjectivities and cosmologies is irrelevant when trying to establish the 'truth' about climate conflict.

As demonstrated thus far the climate conflict debate is dominated by a particular traditionalist political geography and realist international relations, seeking to find the one 'true' relationship between climate change and conflict. This positivist approach makes the climate conflict terrain a fundamentally hostile one for scholars from postcolonial studies, coming from an epistemologically oppositional position seeking to uncover the power structures that construct knowledge as truth. The challenge is thus to present a possible way forward that goes beyond the "negative polemic" postcolonial studies scholars are often accused of and one that does in fact "advance a new epistemological approach or method" (Said, 1989). The next section will draw on my experience of working with communities in the Global South, living with hazard-based disasters and different forms of conflict and insecurity, to illustrate one possible pathway (of many) for a postcolonial approach to the climate conflict discussion within geography.

## 4 | ONE PATHWAY TO FIX THE SIGNAL: A CRITICAL POSTCOLONIAL CLIMATE CONFLICT DEBATE

Patricia started most conversations with how much better everything was in her old house. Her chickens had space to roam free, her neighbours' houses were far away enough that she did not feel claustrophobic, the neighbourhood was 'lush green' and she easily walked out to her small patch of farmland where she grew seasonal fruits and vegetables. In her current house none of this was possible. Patricia was an Indigenous Mandaya resident of a small town in south-eastern Philippines, where I did ethnographic fieldwork over many months in 2017 and 2018. The town had been ravaged by a typhoon (2012), despite being in a notoriously "typhoon-free" region of the Philippines that was now regularly being affected by storms due to "climate change" (Belford & Lema, 2013; Brown, 2012; Montalvan, 2014). It was also subject to heavy military presence, considered a stronghold of Marxist insurgents by state officials. Patricia had been re-settled by the local state in her new home 2 years after the disaster because the original neighbourhood was declared hazardous and unsafe in the face of a changing climate. She missed her old home and her old neighbours and was deeply unhappy with the forced re-location.

Marcela started most conversations by stating, in no unclear terms, that if she had one of the new houses in the re-settled neighbourhood her life would be much easier. Her house would not be in a constant state of disrepair, she would not be harassed by the military every time she went to the market (since there was no military checkpoint in the new neighbourhood) and she could meet her family and friends more often. Marcela was a single mother of meagre means, and a distant cousin of Patricia's, who had moved into the typhoon battered house abandoned by Patricia's family. I met Marcela frequently during my time doing fieldwork in this town and she was at pains to emphasise how deeply unhappy she was at being 'left behind' and at not being allocated a shiny new house in the newly developed neighbourhood.

My fieldwork data from areas considered hazardous and 'at risk' of climate related disasters reveals that state enforced re-location (even where accompanied by re-settlement) is a form of epistemic violence that totally erases subaltern subjectivities and histories. In most instances it is the erasure, the silencing, that results in greater violence, rather than Malthusian resource conflicts between tribes or groups. This is true for those who move and also true for those who are left behind. It plays out in especially distinct but dissimilar ways in places with underlying issues of insurgency and insecurity. In the case of a deeply marginalised, and conflict affected, neighbourhood with primarily internally displaced people residents, state led relocation due to flood and hazard risk, exacerbated after a deadly landslide in Colombia, saw the unravelling of the postcolonial subject's relationship with the (modern) state (Siddiqi et al., 2019). In the context of the municipality in the Philippines the relocation reinforced the expendable and easily erasable status of the marginal, the Indigenous, the subaltern citizen (Siddiqi & Canuday, 2018), while in flood affected districts in Pakistan the state used similar policies to re-assert its omnipresence amidst its general absence (Siddiqi, 2019). These realities were lived and experienced differently by different people and rarely resulted in a simple cause and effect relationship with existing insurgency and insecurity in these towns.

In many ways such work challenges universalising truths around contemporary climate change conflict understandings. It demands theoretical analysis not link "climate-related migration" to "the risk of political instability and conflict" (De Juan, 2015; Gleditsch et al., 2007; Nordås & Gleditsch, 2007, see also; Reuveny, 2007), and it does not argue (as critics do) that environmental change cannot be isolated as the only reason for mass migration (Borillon et al., 2019; Brzoska & Fröhlich, 2015; Fröhlich, 2016) but rather suggests that the fundamental questions being asked should be entirely different ones. Can the agents of colonial modernity – states, markets, financial institutions – adapt to climate change and reduce hazard risk without erasing and "muting" the subaltern? And is it this erasure that brings subaltern communities into a form of 'climate conflict' with these agents? It is the kind of conflict that convinces writers such as Frantz Fanon that "radically antagonistic, perhaps violent riposte is the only interlocution possible with colonial power" (Said, 1989). In the different cultural and political contexts where I work with communities living amidst hazards and insurgency, climate related hazard is not resulting in displacement and possible conflict but, ironically, the policies being implemented by colonial modernity to keep the subject safe, that is. It is telling that

in the fieldwork site in Colombia, people displaced by the insurgency and those re(dis)located by the state due to climate hazard were referred to by the same Spanish word '*desplazados*'.

These insights of course remain the product of ethnographic fieldwork in postcolonial contexts by a privileged Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) woman trained in the Western social sciences. They still maintain what Said (1989, p: 212) saw as "the problematic of the observer" and while I speak from "ethnographic authority" I am admittedly exercising "strategic choice" in the narrative I chose to write. I am tempted however, to give the ethnographer more credit than Said partly because I do not see my own positionality and choices as "remarkably underanalyzed" in my work but at the very centre of its argument. If privileged, western educated BAME women based in the heart of Empire and its academe are not represented in the pages of 'climate conflict' scholarship, then is political geography even vaguely moving towards a direction where Patricia and Marcela, one day, might stand a chance?

Taking this one step further if Patricia and Marcela did indeed become the subjects for a new generation of scholarship on climate conflict, Spivak would argue that constructing their consciousness or subject status would require the kind of sustained work that would eventually make theirs the dominant history and not the representation of undocumented history of the subaltern. This would "cohere with the work of imperialist subject-constitution, mingling epistemic violence with the advancement of learning and civilization. And the subaltern woman will be as mute as ever" (1988, 90). So, while on the one hand postcolonial studies suggests that there is no acceptable way to give Patricia and Marcela a voice that can be disconnected from me and my choices as a researcher, and even then, the labour of entirely constructing their ontological position would ensure they are no longer subaltern, it also provides multiple tools for moving forward. For Said, this was in seeing the postcolonial subject not as "ontologically given" but as "historically constituted". Thus climate conflict literature, that reflects on how Patricia and Marcela's are constituted and subsequently constructed using, where possible, their own words and experiences of conflict, needs to be seen as a potential way forward.

This includes challenging our own frameworks for understanding climate conflict and recognising that for my research participants the violence is often being perpetuated by the state displacing them to keep them "safe" from climate change, not necessarily or exclusively by the insurgents considered the agents of "armed conflict" in climate change and conflict scholarship. Without universalising hazard-based disasters in postcolonial contexts, it is still possible to argue that colonial misadventures and misrecognitions bind particular subaltern histories. State enforced re-location as a strategy to adapt to climate change and disasters is never an intervention that emerges from the lived reality of women like Patricia or Marcela but rather from the victory of a particular Western hegemonic knowledge on climate change that sees postcolonial subjects dealing with just one form of 'hazard'. There is a substantial body of work, for example, on flooding and evictions that seems to be telling a different story of 'climate conflict', one that goes against the grain of knowledge produced by existing climate change and conflict studies in political geography. It tends to take a critical approach, studies local level cases closely and argues that the 'conflict' is between the power-holders (colonial modernity) and those resisting the oppression of displacement (e.g.: Alvarez & Cardenas, 2019, Amoako, 2016, Musungu, K., Drivdal, L & Smit, K 2016). Using this work as inspiration, to study not what the Western academy might consider climate conflict but what certain subaltern communities are trying to tell us about conflict, could provide a pathway for a better flow of traffic between political geography and postcolonial studies in the field of 'climate conflict'.

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## ORCID

Ayesha Siddiqi  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4114-9824>

## ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup> Dahi second author in Selby et al. (2017a), and Dukhan (2014) are the only non-Western names I encountered in my own reading and engagement with the subject.

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## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

**Ayesha Siddiqi** is a University Lecturer at the Department of Geography at the University of Cambridge. She has been working with people affected by hazard based disasters in areas facing insurgency and conflict for over a decade. Her research uses digital storytelling, picture elicitation and other arts-based approaches to decolonise 'scientific' discourses on disasters and climate change. Ayesha has worked with communities affected by floods, typhoons and landslides in Pakistan, Philippines and Colombia and with policy-makers in the UK's Houses of Parliament, UN's Disaster Risk Reduction agency and various policy think tanks. Her research has been funded through grants from the AXA Research Fund, UK Research and Innovation and the British Academy.

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