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English 300

12 November 2021

Representations of Climate Refugees

Climate refugees are people who have been displaced, domestically or internationally, as a result of climate change (through natural disasters or more gradual effects such as rising sea levels). Over the next three decades, scientists expect climate change to displace 200 million people worldwide (Brito). Despite the increasing prevalence of climate refugees, there is a lack of consensus among academics on how to define them, rendering them invisible in the international system, for “no institution is responsible for collecting data on their numbers, let alone providing them with basic services. Unable to prove political persecution in their country of origin they fall through the cracks in asylum law” (Brown 15). One key factor underlying climate refugee representation is neoliberalism, an ideology that defines an ideal relationship between citizens and the state in which individuals are viewed as “autonomous market actors who compete against one another and pursue ways to increase their value in the market,” as opposed to citizens working collectively for a common good (Feldman 346). Neoliberal language, when used to shape depictions of climate refugees across genres, prevents audiences from empathetically engaging with the issue. In representations of climate refugees, neoliberal rhetoric emphasizes the value of climate refugees as economic actors rather than human beings, which prioritizes the economic systems that cause climate change over refugees’ humanity.

In many representations of climate refugees, notably news stories, neoliberal rhetoric obscures the first-hand perspectives of those displaced by climate change. Oftentimes these news

stories will include some form of a personal account to give ethos to the author, and to prove that the author has met and talked with climate refugees and thus has authority to speak on the subject. However, the personal perspectives that news articles include are only provided to further the (neoliberal) argument of these pieces, and not to give a voice to those directly affected by climate change. For example, a lengthy New York Times article detailing the impending effects of climate change on migration heavily emphasizes the economic value of migrants. The article states,

“Migration can bring great opportunity not just to migrants but also to the places they go. As the United States and other parts of the global North face a demographic decline, for instance, an injection of new people into an aging workforce could be to everyone’s benefit.” (Lustgarten)

This neoliberal rhetoric of “opportunity” and “benefit” causes audiences to see climate refugees as economic actors rather than individuals with unique reasons for migrating. This language implies that the US should support these refugees solely for economic reasons.

However, this article, unlike many others, does include various personal stories of climate refugees. For example, the article provides the backstory of a Guatemalan refugee named Jorge, and also describes the town where Jorge used to live: “half the children are chronically hungry, and many are short for their age, with weak bones and bloated bellies. Their families are all facing the same excruciating decision that confronted Jorge” (Lustgarten). In the section of the article devoted to Jorge’s story, there are no quotations from Jorge and there are few specific details about his life. Instead, Lustgarten employs metonymy and uses Jorge’s story to represent the stories of many climate refugees, erasing the complexity that is inherent in refugees’ decision to migrate. The purpose of including this personal story is to advance the neoliberal argument of

the article rather than to provide space for a person displaced by climate change to speak openly and freely about an undoubtedly traumatic experience. This way of speaking around those who are directly affected makes the focus of the article more about the author and his experience learning about climate refugees rather than climate refugees' unique experiences.

On the other hand, a news story from Fox News makes even less of an attempt to accurately provide the perspective of a refugee. Instead of highlighting individual stories, the article emphasizes intentionally frightening statistics: "Border numbers have continued to surge with more than 200,000 encounters in July and August -- with more than 1.7 million encounters in FY 2021" (Shaw). These large numbers in combination with language meant to scare such as "illegal alien," "border crisis," and "surge" take the attention away from the different experiences that cause a person to migrate and instead invoke fear rather than empathy in the audience. In a video embedded in this article, the only example that could be considered a first-hand account is a refugee who says she migrated because the economy in her country is bad. The article does not even name which country she is from. This neoliberal emphasis on economics ignores the multitude of reasons that cause people to migrate, including how climate change is making it impossible to live in many parts of the globe. The repeated prioritization of economics over comprehensive and unique first-hand accounts in these news articles reveals the neoliberal rhetoric that is present in both conservative and liberal media, which serves (intentionally or not) to undermine accurate and individual first-hand accounts of climate refugees.

Additionally, neoliberal rhetoric in TED talks contributes to the dehumanization of climate refugees. For instance, in a TED talk on environmental refugees, Robert McLeman defines the word refugee as "someone who has to move from their home and migrate elsewhere because of storms or droughts or floods or other environmental phenomena" (McLeman). In his

definition, McLeman downplays refugees' hardships, preventing his audience from engaging with the negative impacts of displacement. McLeman goes on to discuss the economic benefits of migration by stating that those displaced by Hurricane Mitch were easily able to find work. McLeman also uses neoliberal rhetoric to describe climate refugees' response to the Dust Bowl, "They're not refugees. They're looking for a job...They're seizing themselves by the bootstraps, pulling themselves up, and trying to start over again." McLeman's claim that migrants "[seized] themselves by the bootstraps" ignores the reality that the Dust Bowl drove many migrants into poverty, as they were forced to leave their land and compete with other migrants for low-paying jobs. Additionally, McLeman's refusal to interrogate the systems that exacerbate migration, such as capitalism, creates the faulty impression that climate migration is a personal choice rather than a symptom of a larger problem. Later, McLeman states that "a young working family with kids is the bedrock of every successful society on this planet." McLeman upholds neoliberalism by stating the importance of the nuclear family in economic terms. In his TED talk, McLeman reduces climate refugees to their economic value, preventing his audience from viewing them as human beings.

Furthermore, the U.S. government also acknowledges climate refugees in relation to their economic value. In particular, the Climate Migration Report Draft states that protecting displaced individuals and groups is "linked to U.S. interests in safe, orderly, and humane migration management, regional stability, and sustainable economic growth and development" (*Report 5*). The document asserts that climate refugees' value relates to their integration into the global economy for the benefit of the U.S.. Furthermore, the document reaffirms the U.S.'s commitment to bolstering climate change-affected countries' economies: "U.S.-led adaptation, resilience, disaster risk reduction, and nature-based solutions programs help communities and

countries prepare for, and manage climate change impacts and protect critical economic and development gains” (*Report* 12). The document highlights the importance of development, which substantiates the neoliberal idea that a country’s value depends on its ability to participate in the global economy. Instead of addressing the systems perpetuating climate change, the United States focuses on economic solutions to climate change’s effects. The United States fails to see climate refugees as human beings as opposed to economic actors.

By erasing the human voices of climate refugees and reducing them to their monetary contributions, the economic systems that these refugees are subsumed into are reinforced, rather than held responsible for their part in the migration crisis. Continuing down the White House’s Climate Migration report, one omission makes itself obvious- there is a complete lack of accountability or plans of action towards the corporations whose actions have perpetuated the ongoing climate crisis and refugee situation. In fact, the harshest stance that the report takes with these corporations is when it makes suggestions for working with the private sector on climate migration: “[We will] evaluate how to implement measures, including best practices for the private sector, to ensure that climate actions to limit warming and increase resilience do not inadvertently displace populations in vulnerable situations” (*Report* 31). It is clear that the U.S. government does not plan to make any drastic changes to the way that these corporations currently operate: the use of the phrase ‘best practices’ seems to indicate that corporate suboptimization is what has led to these climate problems, rather than fundamental flaws. Using the word ‘inadvertently’ in regards to displacement also implies that the actions of the private sector were simply accidental, lacking deliberate intent. By trying to deflect blame away from the role that these corporations have played in the climate refugee situation in conjunction with

the portrayal of climate refugees as potential workers, this report further legitimizes the position of the private sector, and capitalism as a whole, in the world.

Public coverage and attention towards climate refugees proves that distracting from and solidifying the position of capitalism and private investments is not merely a government ploy. All of the perspectives mentioned in this essay incorporate neoliberal language in some form (from the McLeman TED Talk calling the family unit the “bedrock of every successful society” to the Fox News article using the term “illegal alien” to invoke a sense of threat to the average citizen) and discuss the potential economic influence these refugees would have. While McLeman and the New York Times article express optimism regarding the economic contributions of climate refugees in the U.S., the Fox News article attempts to incite fear instead with their usage of overwhelming migration statistics- drawing upon the negative preconception (especially among its readership) that immigrants will take jobs away from American citizens. These two opposing opinions create a binary of views, with one side welcoming toward the refugees, and the other hostile. The conflict between these two sides puts the economic viability of refugees at the constant forefront of discussions related to climate migration, which distracts from discussions about corporations’ responsibility towards climate refugees. Additionally, the conflict legitimizes how change is unnecessary, as discussing how these refugees will fit into the system implies that current circumstances should, and will, stay the same. Whether intentional or not, portrayals of climate refugees in the public sphere supplement attempts to deflect critical attention away from corporations and the global economy as a whole in the climate refugee situation.

Not all forms of representation, however, seem to integrate neoliberal language while eschewing the role of corporations and capitalism. Climate Refugees, a non-governmental

organization (NGO) specifically dedicated to raising awareness about both the environmental and social side of climate refugees frequently points out the ingrained neoliberal systems that present a major barrier to progress: “We can learn from disasters and climate-induced events that our policy choices and neoliberal systems perpetuate inequity” (Palmer and Evasco). Not only does the NGO call out ‘neoliberal systems’ as a whole, but it also mentions ‘policy choices’-- drawing attention to the sorts of government figures who would try to downplay the significance of the private sector. However, this type of anti-neoliberal rhetoric is most commonly found in specific, dedicated organizations on climate refugees like this one; much more work must be done to bring the damaging effects of neoliberalism to mainstream attention.

Anti-neoliberal rhetoric is essential to dismantle the systems that dehumanize climate refugees. For instance, representations of climate refugees must provide them with agency by highlighting their first-hand narratives. First-hand narratives complicate audiences’ interactions with neoliberal representations that fail to see climate refugees beyond their economic value. Furthermore, representations of climate refugees must include the systems involved in perpetuating climate change, which challenges neoliberalism by holding systems accountable for economically-driven environmental degradation. By employing actively anti-neoliberal rhetoric, audiences can see the humanity of climate refugees.

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