Editorial

Planetary imagination

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This special edition of *Soundings* grew from the coming together of two distinct impulses - one from within the *Soundings* collective to instigate a project of self-renewal and another from within the growing movement for climate justice to seek out new spaces for reflection and public engagement: about the nature of the crisis that we face and the appropriate means to repair it.

By now the intersectional refrain that 'the climate crisis is a racist crisis' - rallying cry of Black Lives Matter activists during their first ever UK action in the autumn of 2016 (*see our roundtable discussion, 'Aviation strikes: Direct action at Heathrow, City and Stansted' for further context about this action*) - is understood by a wider public than it was five years ago. Across the UK climate movement, for example, it's now frequently acknowledged that the problem of rising global temperatures, driven by increasing levels of carbon in the earth's atmosphere, is intrinsically linked to historic patterns of slavery and empire, industrialisation and consumption.

The awareness of deep structural racism that came about as a result of the murder of George Floyd, in Minneapolis, last summer, and the worldwide protest movement that followed in its wake, has led so many to an understanding that this history is what lies behind the global patterns of productivity and profit that the richest nations continue to benefit from the most; even while subjecting the world's poorest people - black and brown people living on the frontlines of climate breakdown, across the global south - to the worst impacts of global warming, that they themselves have done the least to cause.

Injustice is the prism through which all our global crises - among them racism, misogyny, ecological breakdown, the loss of civil liberty - need to be seen today. This is a sense not lost on mainstream political actors on either side of the Atlantic, who adopt the language of climate justice as an ascendant currency. In the US, Joe

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Biden marked the beginning of his presidency in January with a set of decisive commitments on climate action, taking the step, unprecedented for a US president, of connecting decarbonisation pledges with commitments to government spending on new infrastructure projects and the 'green jobs' that come with them.

In the UK, Boris Johnson too has adopted the language of a 'just transition', part of a stated commitment to 'level up' the UK economy - though, where Biden has backed up his domestic commitments with increased spending on international aid, Johnson presides over the wildly contradictory action of shrinking the UK's international development spend just when the paths towards social and environmental justice demand precisely the redistribution of global resources, and on an unprecedented scale: not justice repackaged as a nativist conceit.

Climate change and global inequality

This issue is timed to coincide, as protest, with the coming of the 26th Conference of the Parties (COP26), organised by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) to the UK in November. As a pioneer of industrial revolution, a protagonist of slavery and empire, and as a key architect of the neoliberal structural adjustment programmes that have driven up global carbon emissions exponentially in the past four decades, whilst simultaneously, through debt schemes and the dismantling of public services, undermining the resilience of low-income countries, the UK has much to answer for with regards our current state of planetary emergency, and much to offer by way of repair.

Reparation, of course, is not on the agenda at COP26. The COP system, over which the UK presides this year, is broken. It has failed, year on year, to deliver the necessary action within the time-frame that's required, pointing towards a wider system of international governance that is unfit for purpose in this time of interconnected crises. Successive climate summits have disregarded the needs of the world's most vulnerable communities, and have delivered control of the international climate conversation into the hands of global corporations including Blackrock and Shell - corporate actors who, having proactively held back processes of decarbonisation for years, now position themselves as champions of a green capitalist transition, banking on new strategies for economic growth by making pledges based on commitments to deliver Net Zero carbon emissions by 2050.

Editorial

The Net Zero mechanism, on which much of the perceived progress of COP26 will be based, needs to be recognised, first and foremost, as a kind of dodgy accounting mechanism that allows multinational corporations to justify continued investment in the exploitation of oil, gas and coal, while off-setting carbon emissions by buying up land deemed unproductive - predominantly, again, across the global south, thereby reinforcing existing patterns of global productivity and power. It's also an accounting system that remains linked to speculation on technological fixes that are largely unproven and therefore unable to guarantee the results they imply - while, in any case, the proposed time-frame of 2050 would see vast swathes of inhabited coastline submerged before the objective of carbon neutrality is achieved.

August 2021's Sixth Assessment Report (AR6) of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has underlined the urgent need for radical action: atmospheric temperatures have already reached 1.1˚C higher than pre-industrial [1850-1900] levels. We are fast approaching the much discussed threshold of 1.5˚C, which, at current rates of emissions and decarbonisation, we are set to reach or exceed within the next twenty years. Scientists are now observing changes in the Earth's climate in every region and across the whole system, including intensification of the water cycle, impact on rainfall patterns, melting ice sheets and warming oceans. Ours, in other words, is already a climate-changed planetary environment. We are witnessing ever more frequent and intense extreme weather events - wildfires in California, the Amazon, Australia and Siberia, extraordinary hurricane seasons across the mid-Atlantic, super-cyclones over South and South-East Asia, droughts and locust storms on every side of the Arabian Sea, glacial melting in the Arctic and the Andes, killer floods from Munich to Mumbai …

These changes in the climate are driving global inequality. They are fuelling water and food scarcity, forced migration, social and political instability, zoonotic disease. They place a burden of cost on those with the least resources and the least developed infrastructures to withstand it. The great disruption of Covid-19 - characterised by outcomes such as vaccine apartheid and patterns of spiralling joblessness and debt at one end of the spectrum, and of massive, further accumulation of wealth by big tech corporations at the other - needs to be read, within this frame, as our initiation into a new era of ecological breakdown: a warning against our collective unpreparedness and of our urgent need to reimagine the social and political structures that will nurture resilience, and support us in navigating the journey towards a sustainable

ecology in the decades ahead.

On the kind of pragmatic immediate and short-term targets that could put us on track to avoid the breach of 1.5°C, expect nothing from COP26. On climate finance, we will hear great fanfare about proposals to come good on a 12-year-old (broken) commitment by the world's wealthiest countries to deliver $100 billion a year in finance for mitigation against and adaptation to the effects of climate change. There will, however, be little recognition of the extent to which this commitment is woefully short of what is needed: in just the last two years, the global costs of climate-related loss and damage alone have risen to in excess of $150 billion a year, creating a deficit that continues to impose the burden of cost on those with the least resources to mitigate against these impacts, those who also bear the least historic responsibility for causing climate change.

The question of how we adequately and fairly resource these soaring costs of climate-induced loss and damage is now one of the crucial geopolitical questions of our time, as Saleem Huq, Mizan Khan and Md Fahad Hossain indicate (*see 'The intractability of loss and damage in climate negotiations'*), writing from the International Centre for Climate Change and Development in Dhaka, Bangladesh. However, the issue remains off the agenda altogether at COP26, as does any initiative to reckon with the social and ecological cost of the resource extraction - the booming consumer demand for lithium, coltan, cobalt, copper, bauxite and rare earth minerals - on which this new era of transition now depends (*see Sakshi's 'The many entanglements of capitalism, colonialism and Indigenous environmental justice' for further discussion of the discontents of contemporary extractivism*). Consideration of the environmental disaster that the new space race is already perpetrating in our near-earth environments (led by big tech giants including Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos) remains the domain of science-fiction (*see Susmita Mohanty's 'Could future COP talks help to de-junk space?'*).

Imagining new worlds

Where we see an international political system paralysed by its inability to function beyond the logic of extractive economic growth and short-sighted nationalisms, we have sought, in this issue, to evoke a vision of hope and environmental justice that is rooted (and routed) in the centuries' old struggle for abolition from enslavement (*see Matt Sandler's 'The necessity of abolition'*), and in the imagination of our species

position within a planetary frame (*see my interview with Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'On the idea of the planetary'*).

'Planetarity', a concept that has been used variously by writers besides Chakrabarty - including Paul Gilroy [in *Against Race* (2002)] and Gayatri Spivak [in *Death of a Discipline* (2003)] - has, since the early twenty-first century, been used to speak to the possibility of an earth-bound biophysical and geophysical sense of our human existence; one that transcends the troubled, anthropocentric frame of our globalised capitalist modernity.

Alexis Pauline Gumbs, for example, who writes of 'the planet, wrapped in ocean breathing, breathing into sky', reflects on the interrelated experiences of whale, seal, dolphin and Black human lives (*see 'Undrowned: Black feminist lessons from marine mammals'*) in a way that indicates the transcendent possibility of a planetary worldview; while, in conversation with Femi Oriogun Williams (*see 'The possibility of a creolised planet'*), Paul Gilroy reflects on stories of hybridity within the English folk music tradition that in turn suggest the role of art and artists as essential agents of decoloniality, quietly dismantling the perceived certainties of empire and race as they are embedded in the structures that surround us, and pointing us, instead, towards an experience of the planetary abundance that lies beyond.

Inspired, in part, by the reflections of political scientist Adom Getachew (interviewed in 'World makers of the Black Atlantic', *Soundings* 75) - who argues that it was through the artistic and literary inventions and interventions of the Harlem Renaissance and Pan-Africanism, in the early twentieth century, that a new world of decolonial internationalism emerged on the political stage of the mid to late twentieth century - we have sought to respond to the imaginative void of COP26 by highlighting the diverse agency of frontline activists, artists and thinkers who are cultivating new forms, and re-cultivating time-honoured forms, of 'planetary imagination' the world over.

Stories of the iconic struggles and martyrdoms of environmental defenders Berta Caceres in Honduras (*see Marcela Teran's 'Berta Vive!'*) and Ken Saro Wiwa in Nigeria (*see 'The murder of Ken Saro-Wiwa', written by his son Ken Wiwa in 1996 and republished from the Soundings Archive*) speak to the ongoing violence committed against environmental defenders, who put their lives on the line to resist corporate crimes, and whose resisting bodies emerge as testament to the promise of a just ecology. According to Global Witness, the number of defenders murdered since the

signing of the Paris Agreement in 2015 now exceeds one thousand and continues to escalate. In 2020 alone, it reports, 226 land and environmental defenders were killed in 26 countries around the world.

Reflection on the processes of experience and representation as explored by writer Courttia Newland (Dark Matters) and poets Khairani Barokka, Asim Khan and Jay G. Ying, and by Lola Young in her discussion of the photography of Ingrid Pollard ('Environmental images and imaginary landscapes', republished from the first ever issue of Soundings in 1995), points to yet more strategies through which proponents of the human imagination, confronted by sustained and systemic injustice, transfigure and remake the world.

Recalling Audre Lord, who wrote [in *Poetry is Not a Luxury* (1977)] that 'in the forefront of our move towards change, there is only poetry to hint at possibility made real', we seek our renewal, in the face of this void, in the poetry of the planet and the planetary.