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# “It’s the Same Cause”: Climate Change and COVID-19 in the Perspectives of Environmental Feminist Activists

IN 2019, A SERIES OF ENVIRONMENTAL DISASTERS catapulted the issue of climate change into the mass media.<sup>1</sup> While the emergence of COVID-19 in public discourse in early 2020 has shifted attention away from environmental movements in mainstream media forums, it has also populated a series of critical conversations in some print and online platforms about intersections between the issues of climate change and the global pandemic. What precisely do climate change and the global pandemic have in common, for environmental feminists? Pursuing this question resists the media tendency to compartmentalize disasters, which distracts from the systemic interconnection of crises. Scholars and activists have, of course, long pointed out the relationships between capitalism, environmental disasters, and human health. Donna Haraway, for instance, observed that the “Anthropocene,” the term used to define our epoch of human dominance over climate and the environment, can be more aptly named the “Capitalocene”—a consequence of “[a]uto-poietic, self-making man . . . in tragic system failure, turning biodiverse

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1. Jeff Masters, “Earth’s 40 Billion-Dollar Weather Disasters of 2019: 4th Most Billion-Dollar Events on Record,” *Scientific American*, January 22, 2020, <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/eye-of-the-storm/earths-40-billion-dollar-weather-disasters-of-2019-4th-most-billion-dollar-events-on-record>.

ecosystems into flipped-out deserts of slimy mats and stinging jellyfish” that are inhospitable to most human and nonhuman species.<sup>2</sup> Ecofeminists such as Vandana Shiva have pointed to the corporate takeover of food as well as the pesticide and biotech contamination of agriculture as contributing factors to current health vulnerabilities before the coronavirus.<sup>3</sup> The heterogenous movements, perspectives, and epistemologies comprising environmental feminism all agree on the interconnection between environmental degradation and the global pandemic’s deadly generativity and efficacy.<sup>4</sup>

In adapting to the challenges that COVID-19 has placed before their voices and projects, environmental feminists are demonstrating new modalities of creativity and mobilization. In this essay, I discuss the intersections of COVID-19 and environmentalism through interviews with three climate change activists, which I conducted between March 20 and April 15, 2020. The activists are Jörg Hellkvist, a representative of Sweden’s chapter of Fridays for Future; Logan Atkinson Burke, the executive director of the Louisiana-based Alliance for Affordable Energy; and Anoka Primrose Abeyrathne, a Sri Lankan activist for disaster relief and sustainable agriculture. I describe these activists as environmental feminists though they are not all biologically women, but use the signifier in the context of how they self-identify their work through sustainability, community, and collective action. Many of them subscribe to political advocacy and sustainable models of entrepreneurship centered around renewable energy, disaster relief, and sustainable agriculture. While my interviewees express a range of perspectives and identifications within environmental feminism, my conversations with them are principally

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2. Donna Haraway, “Tentacular Thinking: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene,” *e-flux* 75 (2016), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/75/67125/tentacular-thinking-anthropocene-capitalocene-chthulucene>.
  3. Vandana Shiva, “Ecological Reflections on the Coronavirus,” *Medium*, March 23, 2020, <https://medium.com/post-growth-institute/ecological-reflections-on-the-coronavirus-93d50bbf99db>.
  4. Bina Agarwal has distinguished between “ecofeminism” and “feminist environmentalism,” critiquing the former for drawing essentializing equivalences between women and nature. Agarwal privileges the latter as taking into account “women’s lived material relationship with nature” in the victimization they face through environmental degradation as well as their role as agents in environmental protection. See “The Gender and Environment Debate: Lessons from India,” *Feminist Studies* 18, no. 1 (1992):119–58.

informed by Adamson, Briskin, and McPhail's framework of transformational grassroots feminism serving the needs of communities on the ground as well as Shiva's concept of the inter-relatedness of environmental protection and social justice.<sup>5</sup> On-the-ground environmental activism is confronting significant challenges in the wake of COVID-19. For instance, Hellkvist underlined the realities of post-pandemic advocacy in the COVID-19 landscape:

We feel frustrated because when we write articles, they don't fit into on-going COVID-19 discussions and don't get the same attention. In one way, continuing to speak about climate change feels wrong when people are stressed about other things. In another way, our efforts in this time are absolutely important because these two crises are so similar. *It's the same cause.* (emphasis added)

Hellkvist's insight highlights the current locus of the global emergency at the intersection of climate change and COVID-19 as opening spaces of potentiality where effective streams of action can possibly be enabled by pressurizing the stressed exoskeleton of global capitalism. These spaces are being utilized by environmental feminists to further advocacy and mobilization for systemic change. Global capitalism has proven to be extraordinarily adept in causing and harnessing crises to consolidate power in the hands of fewer corporate stakeholders, who then proceed to perpetuate and accelerate those crises, including environmental destruction.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, these interviews illustrate how crises such as the coronavirus pandemic also function as loci of potentiality that expose the systemic untenability of disaster capitalism, enabling creative adaptation and resistance by environmental feminists in their advocacy and programs.<sup>7</sup> While corporations may reinforce the modus operandi as they have in the past, such kaironic spaces wielded by environmental feminists are also accelerating public disenchantment with

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5. Nancy Adamson, Linda Briskin, and Margaret McPhail, *Feminist Organizing for Change: The Contemporary Women's Movement in Canada* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, *Ecofeminism* (London: Zed Books, 1993), xiii-xxi.
  6. Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2015).
  7. I borrow the term "disaster capitalism" from Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2010).

disaster capitalism and opening new directions for global environmental movements.

For environmental feminists long frustrated by governmental reluctance to pass comprehensive climate change legislation, the speed with which government and inter-governmental organizations mobilized on COVID-19 illustrates that rapid delivery of systemic intervention on climate change is entirely possible. For instance, when the Green New Deal bill sponsored by Rep. Alexandria Ocasio Cortez and Sen. Edward Markey was defeated in March 2019 in the US Senate, detractors characterized it as an economically untenable program of government intrusion on corporate and private freedoms.<sup>8</sup> The editorialists of the right-wing *Washington Examiner* vented their suspicions that “This isn’t about clean air. It’s about centralized power.”<sup>9</sup> However, legislators’ response to COVID-19 illustrated that political representatives across the partisan divide, along with their corporate affiliates, could in fact agree to comprehensive government-funded economic relief packages such as the CARES Act and other legislative initiatives, including the Paycheck Protection Program and Health Care Enhancement Act. By May 15, 2020, the US Congress had authorized three trillion dollars in coronavirus relief.<sup>10</sup> Observing the speed of centralized government action on COVID-19, Hellkvist questioned if one tactic might not be to use fear, perhaps taking a page from the playbook of disaster capitalism itself:

People have responded with urgency to this crisis as they haven’t yet done . . . with the climate crisis. In the climate movement, we didn’t like to play the fear card. We tried to avoid frightening people and instead focused on our common goals. I personally don’t want to make people frightened, but maybe that’s what we need people to do.

COVID-19 is also pressurizing the structural untenability of environmentally destructive industries, such as the fossil fuel sector. The oil

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8. Kim Phillips-Fein, “Fear and Loathing of the Green New Deal,” *The New Republic*, May 29, 2020, <https://newrepublic.com/article/153966/fear-loathing-green-new-deal>.

9. Ibid.

10. Kelsey Snell, “Here’s How Much Congress Has Approved for Coronavirus Relief So Far and What’s It’s for,” National Public Radio, May 15, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/05/15/854774681/congress-has-approved-3-trillion-for-coronavirus-relief-so-far-heres-a-breakdown>.

and gas industry is the most heavily subsidized industry in the United States, receiving around \$649 billion a year in direct and indirect subsidies in 2015, while also being the single largest contributor of carbon, methane, and other gases accelerating climate change.<sup>11</sup> COVID-19's disruption to energy consumption and transportation led the International Energy Agency to project a drop in oil consumption of 29 million barrels per day in April 2020 alone as compared with the previous month. This drop in oil consumption is equivalent to the total 2019 oil usage by the United States, Mexico, and Canada.<sup>12</sup>

Environmental activists working in advocacy to help transition city and state-wide economies to renewable energy alternatives are encountering new momentum behind their efforts from oil workers suffering from the employment crisis caused by global reductions in fossil fuel demand. Logan Atkinson Burke, the executive director of the Alliance for Affordable Energy, underscored how the COVID-19 lockdown and the global depression of the oil market was affecting low-income households, some of whose sole source of income comes from Louisiana's petroleum industry. "COVID-19 has been a real challenge because all those workers depending on the traditional energy sector jobs to feed their families haven't been able to do that," said Burke. "[It shows that] Louisiana and the other traditional energy states need to diversify their economies."<sup>13</sup> Burke stressed the widespread disillusionment caused by oil industry lay-offs, symptomatic of the structural shock to the oil sector worldwide.

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11. Tim Dickinson, "Study: U.S. Fossil Fuel Subsidies Exceed Pentagon Spending," *Rolling Stone*, May 8, 2019, <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/fossil-fuel-subsidies-pentagon-spending-imf-report-833035>.
  12. Michael T. Klare, "Covid-19 is Forcing Us to Rethink How We Consume Energy," *The Nation*, April 29, 2020, <https://www.thenation.com/article/environment/coronavirus-oil-energy-consumption>.
  13. Matthew V. Veazey, "Louisiana Layoffs, Shut-ins Happening Faster Than Expected," *Rigzone*, May 6, 2020, [https://www.rigzone.com/news/louisiana\\_layoffs\\_shutins\\_happening\\_faster\\_than\\_expected-06-may-2020-161989-article](https://www.rigzone.com/news/louisiana_layoffs_shutins_happening_faster_than_expected-06-may-2020-161989-article); William Taylor Potter, "Amid Coronavirus, Louisiana Oil and Gas Workforce Sees 23% Layoffs, Wells Shut, Fear More," *Daily Advertiser*, May 4, 2020, <https://www.theadvertiser.com/story/news/2020/05/04/coronavirus-louisiana-oil-and-gas-workforce-sees-layoffs-wells-shut/3080267001/>; "Louisiana Oil and Gas Companies Report Layoffs Amid Virus," *U.S. News & World Report*, AP Wire Service, April 29, 2020, <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/louisiana/articles/2020-04-29/louisiana-oil-and-gas-companies-report-layoffs-amid-virus>.

According to a Rystad Energy analysis conducted in August 2020, employment in oilfield service jobs is set to plummet to its lowest level in over ten years.<sup>14</sup> For oil-rich states such as Louisiana, the embeddedness of the petroleum lobby in regional politics and their reach in the federal government ensure that the system stays rigged to ensure Big Oil's dominance in the state economy. "This particular double whammy of COVID-19 and the oil conflict makes it very clear that we can't go back to the old normal," Burke stressed. With hundreds of workers laid off in states such as Louisiana, the economic dominance of single-energy industries has suddenly become visibly problematic.

COVID-19 is proving to be a threat multiplier, pressurizing capitalistic systems such as the oil industry by highlighting their fault lines including corruption, ecological costs, and large-scale economic vulnerability. While the clean energy industry in US states such as Louisiana was already growing at an exponential rate, it is projected to benefit from COVID-19's shaking of the oil and gas industry's psychological hegemony. Environmental feminists in local government and advocacy groups such as the Alliance for Affordable Energy have played key roles in campaigning for oil divestment and supporting alternative energy industries. In part due to the tireless advocacy by the Alliance for Affordable Energy and other community partners, public opinion in sections of Louisiana was shifting in favor of renewable energy even before the COVID-19 emergency closures implemented in the United States. A February 2020 poll conducted in New Orleans by the Alliance for Affordable Energy found that over 58 percent of the respondents wanted to see the city run entirely on renewable energy.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, on March 12, 2020, the day when Americans were urged into lockdown by the government, the New Orleans City Council Utility Committee committed to a 100 percent clean and renewable portfolio standard by 2040. Burke observed:

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14. "COVID-19 Pushes OFS Headcount to Lowest Level in More Than a Decade, Rystad Says," *Offshore Magazine*, August 11, 2020, <https://www.offshore-mag.com/business-briefs/coronavirus/article/14181435/covid19-pushes-oilfield-services-headcount-to-lowest-level-in-more-than-a-decade-rystad-energy-says>.

15. Alliance for Affordable Energy, "Majority of New Orleanians Support 100% Renewable Energy," *The Watchdog*, March 3, 2020, <https://www.all4energy.org/the-watchdog/majority-of-new-orleanians-support-100-renewable-energy>.

The next steps are working with the various stake holders, including community members and council leadership and the utility to come up with a path for what this will look like. We still have six months of work to do before all of that is final. But the city council made a commitment, and it took two years of advocacy to reach this victory. It was a huge win, and it would not have happened without a coalition of organizations and individuals who have been working non-stop for it.

The agents of this landmark decision included the Alliance for Affordable Energy, the Energy Future New Orleans Coalition, social justice organizations, community organizations, solar companies, and faith-based leaders as well as local politicians such as Helena Moreno, the progressive president of the New Orleans City Council. Burke's own view of the creeping sea changes heralded by this decision foregrounds the efficacy of environmental feminism as a grassroots collectivity. "It is a people-powered answer," she emphasized, in reference to the emerging alternative energy industry in Louisiana. "The only way that you can manage any of it is to remember . . . that whether it is a stimulus package or about rebuilding our economy, it isn't about an industry. It's about the people that make that industry happen."

Exercising agency in the face of a crisis hones the faculties of creative adaptation, and environmental feminists are demonstrating this by adjusting and remodeling their services to benefit the demographics they serve during the global coronavirus pandemic. Anoka Primrose Abeyrathne is a Sri Lankan activist who works on disaster relief, sustainable agriculture, and education with Sri Lanka's most vulnerable populations. Abeyrathne's nonprofit initiatives have typically helped Sri Lanka's coastal populations affected by cyclones to restore their ecologies by replanting mangroves destroyed by natural disasters and supported low-income families across the island through sustainable agriculture. Abeyrathne interfaces between communities and farmers, supplying local markets with their organic, home-grown produce. Through training and resource building provided by Abeyrathne's initiatives, around 60 percent of the food that she sources is home grown and the other 40 percent is grown by small farms. At the onset of COVID-19, Abeyrathne rerouted farmers' supplies to markets providing online delivery services to communities, ensuring that small farmers in her network were continuing to earn a living and that communities around Colombo,



Anuradhapura, Kurunegala, and Batticaloa continued to have access to organic food.

Environmental feminists have long confronted monolithic stereotypes regarding the global North and global South that have stymied collective action toward the excesses of global capitalism. However, COVID-19 has illustrated effective response to the pandemic from a number of countries in the global South vis-à-vis the inefficiencies, structural debilities, and political partisanship demonstrated in parts of the global North. Abeyrathne pointed out the deep partisan divides in the response to COVID-19 in the US government and public, contrasting it with Sri Lanka's effectiveness in reducing the spread of the pandemic. Her account destabilizes tropes of the "developed" global North, with its advanced healthcare systems, versus the "underdeveloped" global South, afflicted with bureaucratic inefficiencies and corruption.

We Sri Lankans are a people who have gone through wars and survived so many grave conflicts in our country. I feel that because of the fact that we are used to living life on the edge due the conflicts, we have a certain readiness of preparation for emergencies. Most millennials here actually remember the [Sri Lankan Civil] war, which lasted for over thirty years. These memories make us take national emergencies a lot more seriously in Sri Lanka. We are taking COVID-19 very seriously here and are following the government's policy of the curfew and lockdown.

In contrast to scenes of partisan conflict, resistance from right-wing groups, and insufficient access to testing that have plagued the official pandemic responses of the United States and some of the other nations in the global North, Sri Lankan activists and officials have pointed to the island nation's early and rapid response to containing COVID-19 through its excellent national healthcare system, high coronavirus testing rate, and the high level of public mobilization and solidarity.<sup>16</sup> Sri Lanka is

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16. Adam Taylor and Miriam Berger, "When It Comes to Coronavirus Response, Superpowers May Need to Study Smaller Nations," *Washington Post*, May 16, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2020/05/16/when-it-comes-coronavirus-response-superpowers-may-need-study-smaller-nations/>; "Country's Excellent Healthcare Service Helped Contain COVID-19 Pandemic - PM," *Daily News*, September 12, 2020, <http://www.dailynews.lk/2020/09/12/local/228542/country-s-excellent-healthcare-service-helped-contain-covid-19-pandemic-pm/>; "From the Soil to the Table: An Organic Farming Community Shows the Way in Anuradhapura," *Daily News*, September 12, 2020, <http://www.dailynews.lk/2020/09/12/features/228519/soil-table/>; RCO Sri Lanka, "UN Sri Lanka

one of the countries that has successfully secured good healthcare at low costs; the country has a legacy of early, decades-long investment in its health system despite low overall spending.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, Abeyrathne warned against lumping countries in the global South together as an undifferentiated “type,” which does not take into consideration specific contexts and histories. “Even here in Sri Lanka, there were people who were trying to compare what we were doing [to combat COVID-19] to South Korea or to New Zealand but what we need to realize is that the one size fits all approach doesn’t really work,” observed Abeyrathne. “The unique experiences of countries in the global South must be taken on their own merit,” she said. The COVID-19 crisis has broken down geopolitical stereotypes in ways that are potentially helping environmental feminist movements gain recognition for their activism and community service in their own diverse, vital contexts.

With COVID-19-influenced protocols of social distancing, the internet and telecommunications have become vital lifelines for connectivity and communication. While the digital divide remains a source of structural inequalities worldwide for marginalized communities, environmental feminists are also turning to online communications to adapt their playbooks for environmental mobilization. For instance, Abeyrathne is using digital communications as a way to hold the governmental officials with whom she networks accountable on their promised deliverables. “Now, with the COVID restrictions, we have recourse to a platform to meet and talk with government officials without having to meet them face to face,” she observed. “In a way, digital contact with government officials becomes a wonderful means of holding them accountable, as they are now on record for promising to help with certain initiatives.”

Global capitalism has used man-made and natural shocks to consolidate power and resources in the hands of fewer corporations and stakeholders. Certainly, there are symptoms of the same *modus operandi* during the global pandemic. As some environmental activists have warned, COVID-19 is distracting attention and resources away from climate change. With only a limited capacity to cope with crises and the tremendous economic toll of the pandemic on lives and livelihoods,

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Highlights Everyday Heroes Spreading Solidarity amid Pandemic,” *United Nations: COVID-19 Response*, <https://www.un.org/en/coronavirus/un-sri-lanka-highlights-everyday-heroes-spreading-solidarity-amid-pandemic>.

17. Ankita Mukhopadhyay, “How Sri Lanka Successfully Curtailed the Coronavirus Pandemic,” *Deutsche Welle*, May 18, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/how-sri-lanka-successfully-curtailed-the-coronavirus-pandemic/a-53484299>.

people have momentarily diverted their attention away from climate change, sidelining it from the spotlight it occupied in 2019. However, as with all structural shocks, COVID-19 is also opening spaces of potentiality that are shaping and being shaped by environmental activists. They work to deliver social programs to grassroots communities and advocate for divestment from some of the core polluting industries of the capitalocene. Through their strategies of flexibility and creative adaptation, environmental activists are rewriting their own game plan. They are taking advantage of the untenability of traditional capitalistic systems exposed during COVID-19 to align new demographics with green alternatives, developing sustainable models of entrepreneurship, and finding creative ways to organize, mobilize, and inspire public discourse against the ecological and economic destructions inflicted by disaster capitalism. "COVID-19 has certainly challenged the way we acted in the past," commented Hellkvist. "We are rethinking how we have done things after witnessing what is possible in the global efforts to fight the pandemic. I believe that we will see a new [environmental] movement after this."