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Forum 4: the environmental privilege of borders in the anthropocene

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ABSTRACT

Mobility can indicate a powerful or privileged relationship with one's environment. The ability to exercise mobility or not (of oneself or others) is an exertion of power that demarcates where particular people belong and under what kind of environmental conditions. This essay focuses on the significance of borders in creating *environmental privilege* in the Anthropocene. Environmental privilege is accrued through the exercise of economic, political, and cultural power that enables the construction of exclusive environmental amenities such as clean air and water, open space, and safe neighborhoods. For years, environmental justice scholars have revealed the burdens and oppressive conditions associated with environmental inequality, but few studies consider the flipside of that reality. We argue that environmental privileges enjoyed by some rest upon the manipulation of the mobility of others – human and nonhuman. We believe border making will come under greater pressure as the effects of climate change increase, and the volume of resources required to maintain exclusive spaces intensifies. Continued mass migration will bring heightened anxieties about national identity and calls for greater border enforcement, despite the reality that borders – both literal and figurative – consistently fail to alleviate migratory pressures while exacerbating the effects of climate change and environmental injustice. Our research shows that greater ecological instability increases efforts to create privatized places as pristine spaces untouched by global turmoil, thereby reinforcing those social forces that produce environmental injustices in the first place.

KEYWORDS

Environmental justice; environmental privilege; mobility justice; climate change; immigrants; migration

Introduction

Mobility can indicate a powerful or privileged relationship with one's environment. The ability to exercise mobility or not (of oneself or others) is an exertion of power that demarcates where particular people belong and under what kind of environmental conditions. This commentary focuses on the significance of mobility in creating *environmental privilege* in the Anthropocene.

Environmental privilege is accrued through the exercise of economic, political, and cultural power that enables the construction of exclusive environmental amenities such as clean air and water, open space, and safe neighborhoods. For years, environmental justice scholars have revealed the burdens and oppressive conditions associated with environmental inequality, but few studies consider the flipside of that reality. In our earlier work on a series of conflicts in and around Aspen, Colorado, we coined the term 'environmental privilege' to capture the ways in which many well-heeled communities are able to protect their populations and ecosystems from numerous environmental health risks through policies and practices designed to preserve bodies

and landscapes that are more highly valued by those with greater social capital and political power. This idea builds on the pioneering work by Laura Pulido, who argued that a major gap in environmental justice studies scholarship was its inattention to systems of racial privilege and white supremacy that constitute key driving forces that make environmental racism both appealing to whites and challenging to dismantle (Pulido 1996).

In many ways, environmental privilege reveals how *mobilities* of power and nonhuman actants function to inflict and reproduce environmental racism and injustice on vulnerable communities through mechanisms that simultaneously, consciously, and deliberately preserve the health and security of wealthier, more politically connected, and usually whiter communities. For example, in 1999 and 2000, the city of Aspen and the County of Pitkin, Colorado both passed resolutions that sought to maintain the image and reputation of those communities as 'green' and ecologically sustainable through a direct call on the federal government to militarize the US–Mexico Border so as to reduce migration from Latin America. The driving logic behind these resolutions was that (1) population growth is the greatest threat to environmental sustainability; (2) immigration is the greatest contributor to population growth; so therefore (3) immigration is the greatest environmental threat in the US (Heiman 1999; Hooper 1999). This was a form of 'nativist-environmentalism' that sought to erect symbolic, discursive, and material borders to hold back migration from South of the Border, despite the fact that (1) the town of Aspen, the County of Pitkin and the state of Colorado's economies are heavily reliant on immigrant labor; (2) the major drivers of environmental harm in the state of Colorado are the expansion of the real estate market for second and third homeowners (none of whom are low-income immigrants) and the widespread industrial extraction of ecological materials; and 3) immigrants are some of the most ardent supporters of pro-environmental policies and are among the most visible and outspoken leaders of the environmental justice movement. Like many other forms of prestige and elite status, environmental privilege suffers from a foundation of illogical suppositions but is supported by a cultural mythology rooted in white supremacy.

This vignette on Aspen, Colorado's history of nativist-environmentalism and the construction of environmental privilege speaks to key themes related to the scholarship on mobilities, in particular, the concept of mobility justice. Mimi Sheller argues that mobilities research must be attuned to the ways in which 'uneven mobilities' are rooted in longer histories of colonization and racial injustice, and are shaped by meanings, representations, and discourses that are themselves constitutive of mobilities (Sheller 2018). The scourge of environmental racism and its driving opposite, environmental privilege, reveal those linkages, as we see how immigration by some populations is cast as troubling, anxiety-inducing, culturally problematic, and 'unnatural,' while elite mobilities are celebrated and encouraged. Thus, the idea of mobility justice is intended to reveal and challenge the ways in which social inequalities shape, restrict, and criminalize mobilities for certain bodies while normalizing and enabling mobilities for others through discursive and material systems of racial, gender, sexual, and national differences and border making.

Environmental (in)justice and mobilities

The body of scholarship known as Environmental Justice Studies dates back at least to the 1970s and demonstrates that communities with majority low-income and/or people of color residents face disproportionately greater environmental and public health threats from government and industry (Bullard 2000; Mohai, Pellow, and Timmons Roberts 2009; Taylor 2014). These dangers include, for example, anthropogenic climate change, polluted air, land, water, and food sources that negatively impact human and ecological health. Many of these hazards are localized in the form of toxic waste sites and hazardous chemical manufacturing and waste disposal, while others are much more globalized, such as climate change. From the perspective of the concepts of *mobilities* (Sheller and Urry 2006) and mobility justice, environmental justice scholars and activists reveal that nonhuman agents associated with environmental harm follow socially marginalized

populations by moving into those communities and bodies. In other words, government, corporate, and unregulated organizations are exercising unjust mobilities as their operations and/or their hazardous materials migrate across geographic space, through air, land, and water to be deposited in these communities and neighborhoods, and in the bodies that inhabit them (Crowder and Liam 2010; Bullard and Wright 2012). Note that this dynamic stands in contrast to the 'Minority Move-In Hypothesis' that posits that people in contaminated communities ended up in those spaces because they moved in *after* the hazards were already present. On the contrary, according to Paul Mohai and colleagues, more often than not, the reverse is true: residential communities are already present and hazardous operations tend to move in afterward (Mohai and Saha 2015). Thus, environmental hazards are following – one might say targeting – particular populations, not the other way around. It is also the case that such environmental injustices endured by some create environmental privilege for others.

The tensions between inequalities and privileges in immigration and environmental politics in places like Aspen are reflected in other parts of the US and the globe. For example, the increasingly noted figure of the climate refugee induces apocalyptic narratives of millions of unruly and destitute masses (Bettini 2013). In such a focus, the problem of climate change easily translates into a security crisis of migration from the global south to global north nations (White 2011; Hartmann 2010; Smith 2007). Bettini astutely argues that such xenophobic narratives forestall emancipatory and democratic solutions to climate-induced migration and instead disempower concerned populations by instituting increasingly authoritarian policies in the name of national security. In the midst of this 'apocalyptic' frenzy, another kind of climate migrant has taken shape. Some of the wealthiest individuals in the world have been quietly preparing their own private refuges from climate change and other major global catastrophes. For instance, Peter Thiel, the billionaire venture capitalist, purchased 477 acres in New Zealand in 2015 and received legal citizenship four years prior, despite having spent less than 12 days in the country up to that point. In fact, his New Zealand citizenship was conferred in a private ceremony at a consulate office in Santa Monica, California (O'Connell 2018).

The anxieties that drive eco-survivalism cross political and class divides. For those on the left who accept the science of climate change, the ascension of Donald Trump to the White House is cited as instilling a deep sense of insecurity (the election of Barack Obama prompted similar doomsday preparations among those on the political right). A technology sector worker living in San Francisco bought five acres on an island in the US Pacific Northwest to 'ride out the apocalypse.' He explains: 'I think people who are particularly attuned to the levers by which society actually works understand that we are skating on really thin cultural ice right now' (Osnos 2017). For the wealthy, stockpiling vacation homes and applying for additional passports to other countries not only generates passive income in the short term but also provides an escape during the civilizational collapse. Yishan Wong, former CEO of Reddit and an early Facebook employee, explained, 'The tech preppers do not necessarily think a collapse is likely. They consider it a remote event, but one with a very severe downside, so, given how much money they have, spending a fraction of their net worth to hedge against this... is a logical thing to do' (Osnos 2017). Reid Hoffman, co-founder of LinkedIn, estimates that 'fifty-plus percent' of Silicon Valley billionaires have purchased semi-isolated property in the US and around the world as 'apocalypse insurance' (ibid.).

According to a recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report (IPCC 2014: 2), 'warming of the climate system is unequivocal, and since the 1950s, many of the observed changes are unprecedented over decades to millennia.' Climate scientists note that 'Continued emission of greenhouse gases will cause further warming and long-lasting changes in all components of the climate system, increasing the likelihood of severe, pervasive and irreversible impacts for people and ecosystems' (ibid: 8). Given these fearsome realities, transnational migration as a form of escape has become an adaptive response by the ultra-wealthy. Ironically, this same action by low-income immigrants of color is frequently castigated as detrimental to the security of those living in privileged environments in global North nations.

IPCC scientists are clear that limiting climate change requires substantial and sustained reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, which, together with adaptation, can limit climate change risks. They write, 'Adaptation and mitigation responses are underpinned by common enabling factors. These include effective institutions and governance, innovation and investments in environmentally sound technologies and infrastructure, sustainable livelihoods and behavioural and lifestyle choices' (IPCC p. 26). Instead, those with the greatest privilege in both wealth and knowledge have created privatized refuges for their individual families. These spaces of seclusion not only maintain but also increase inequality, which exacerbates the impacts of climate change. For the wealthy, these second, third, or fourth homes do not resemble survival bunkers of the Cold War. Rather, these structures require considerable resources and generate economic growth – central causes of climate change in the first place. In effect, these actions create greater vulnerabilities for everyone, including for themselves.

Environmental privilege as border making

Saskia Sassen (2014) argues that there is an irreversible sharpening of borders – a 'savage sorting' – that is occurring at a systemic level as a result of the globalization of capital. She writes, 'What may have been minor displacements and losses in the 1980s, such as deindustrialization in the West and in several African countries, had become devastations by the 1990s (think Detroit and Somalia). To understand this scaling as more of the same inequality, poverty, and technical capacity is to miss the larger trend' (ibid.: 3). This larger trend is marked by brutal expulsion 'from life projects and livelihoods, from membership, from the social contract at the center of liberal democracy' (ibid.: 29).

Environmental privilege is not just about maintaining exclusive access to ecological amenities; it is also about maintaining access and belonging to the broader reality of social place, of which both ecological and non-ecological amenities are a part. Environmental privilege is ultimately an exertion of power that demarcates where particular people belong. This border making will come under greater pressure as the effects of climate change increase, and the volume of resources – both human and non-human – required to maintain exclusive spaces intensifies. While it is not yet clear how large or how far these climate change-related migration patterns will reach, we already see the effects of severe droughts, storms, and heat waves indicative of climate change on the livelihoods of entire communities (See Baldwin and Bettini 2017). We also know that with mass migration comes heightened anxieties about borders and calls for greater enforcement (White 2011). This is despite the reality that strengthening the border and punishing migrants consistently fails to alleviate migratory pressures. In fact, borders – both literal and figurative – exacerbate climate change's effects. Those with relatively greater resources will fare better as they protect themselves and their territory, and those without will become more vulnerable. This is the logic of environmental privilege.

A sense of greater ecological instability leads to greater efforts to maintain particular privatized places as pristine spaces untouched by global turmoil. These actions are then justified as morally legitimate by evoking a narrative of rescue – conjuring images of environmentalists as protectors of our natural world. Calls for militarizing the US–Mexico border and weakening the rights and protections of immigrant families are made in the name of protecting the environment and national security. This is a problematic claim in multiple ways – it is harmful to migrant families, and it is not demonstrably protective of ecosystems. While stronger national borders certainly render immigrants' lives more difficult and precarious, such policies do not actually reduce the number of undocumented immigrants. The US federal government has already spent \$200 billion in the last two decades on immigration enforcement – a historic high. And the population of unauthorized immigrants rose to a record 11 million during that same period (Massey 2003). At the same time, for those privileged within the interior of the border, a problematic sense of protection and security is fostered where accountability for climate change is denied. In effect, those who

have contributed the least to climate change are bearing the greatest cost of climate change. The most vulnerable populations are deemed burdensome in this scenario. Conversely, it is actually those who live and work within elite and exclusive spaces of consumption and privilege whose lifestyles are among the greatest ecological burdens facing the earth (Dauvergne 2017).

Apparently, the maintenance of environmental and climate privilege requires the denigration of the environments and climates of others. The impact of this denigration can be profound. Building on Hannah Arendt's foundational work on human rights, refugees, and the conditions of citizenship, recent scholarship has reiterated the significance of spatial territory in conferring rights (Paik 2016; Gundogdu 2015). We now have a better understanding of how spatial belonging serves as a precondition for citizenship, or what Arendt calls, the 'right to have rights.' Those who are stateless, including refugees, asylum seekers, and undocumented immigrants, are left in a state of rightlessness in which they not only lose their citizenship rights but also their human rights. The territorial basis of these rights proves to be its limitation, and, migrants, as stateless people, must establish their belonging in ways that go beyond the restrictions imposed by territorial borders. As others in this volume have noted, these exclusions and refusals are additionally troubling because mobility and migration have always been a part of the human experience, and movement across borders has been the rule rather than the exception. But human migration is intensifying in the current era of 'new mobilities,' prompting one scholar's proposal to label this epoch the 'Kinocene' (Nail, this volume).

In this regard, environmentalism could have become a transformative force that embraces justice for all, given our shared global ecosystem. Instead, we have constructed political, economic, and social borders to protect only certain people's ecosystems and human communities. These borders are not only artificial, but they are also the *source* of environmental devastation. The exclusive 'protection' of the backyard of the privileged is dependent upon the impoverishment of someone else's common space. The volume of resources – both human and non-human – required to maintain the heavenly experience of spaces of exclusion and environmental privilege is profound. If environmentalists are truly committed to ecological sustainability, they must find ways of reducing ecological damage through an acknowledgment and alleviation of social inequality rather than fixating on immigrants and population control.

Linking the concepts of environmental privilege and mobility justice illustrates the importance of understanding environmental racism, poverty and inequality by turning our analyses beyond the 'ghetto' and 'el barrio' and extending them into places where racial and economic and environmental privilege are produced. The fact that communities of color and working-class populations face greater environmental harm is indeed a social problem, but we must frame the existence of environmental privilege and uneven mobilities as a social problem as well because that unevenness is produced primarily by institutions and actors in spaces where elite mobilities are embraced and supported. The segregation of people of color in certain neighborhoods in American cities and policies restricting the movement of immigrants across national borders facilitates environmental racism by maintaining sites of human immobility exacerbated by the continued migration of ecological hazards into those spaces. And that segregation serves to bolster environmental privilege by maintaining racially exclusive and elite spaces for the wealthy.

If environmental privilege in the Anthropocene can be framed as the appropriation of the life chances and the time of other people and more than humans, then what might environmental *justice* look like? It would involve not just a rearrangement of cultural, material and spatial relationships, but a rearrangement of temporal relationships as well, a democratization of time so that people and more than humans whose time has thus far been appropriated and expropriated, must be able to regain control over their time, their life chances, and their mobility (see also Grusin 2017; Moore 2017). Environmental justice movements, therefore, are a form of *political* mobility that seeks to challenge the arrangements that produce environmental injustice and privilege, and ensure that the correlation between uneven mobilities and environmental harm becomes a site of productive tension that might produce relations and practices of mobility justice.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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