

**ENVIRONMENTAL INEQUALITIES IN BRAZIL: THE LENS OF CLIMATE
JUSTICE AND ENVIRONMENTAL RACISM**

**DESIGUALDADES AMBIENTAIS NO BRASIL: A LENTE DA JUSTIÇA CLIMÁTICA
E DO RACISMO AMBIENTAL**

**DESIGUALDADES AMBIENTALES EN BRASIL: LA LENTE DE LA JUSTICIA
CLIMÁTICA Y DEL RACISMO AMBIENTAL**



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ABSTRACT: The dossier presents a set of texts based on the guiding principle that climate justice is not a homogeneous concept; it is a conceptual field in dispute, appropriated by state, corporate, multilateral, community, and academic actors, often with profoundly divergent meanings. From the perspective presented, climate justice can be co-opted into technocratic representations centered on metrics and indicators, but it can also serve as a platform for anti-racist and anti-colonial resistance, provided it is anchored in concrete territorial experiences.

KEYWORDS: Environmental inequalities. Climate justice. Environmental racism. Climate coloniality.

RESUMO: *O dossiê apresenta um conjunto de textos a partir do fio condutor de que a justiça climática não é uma noção homogênea; trata-se de um campo conceitual em disputa, apropriado por atores estatais, corporativos, multilaterais, comunitários e acadêmicos, muitas vezes com sentidos profundamente divergentes. Na perspectiva apresentada, a justiça climática pode ser cooptada em representações tecnocráticas centradas em métricas e indicadores, mas também pode servir como plataforma de resistência antirracista e anticolonial, desde que ancorada em experiências territoriais concretas.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Desigualdades ambientais. Justiça climática. Racismo ambiental. Colonialidade climática.*

RESUMEN: *El dossier presenta un conjunto de textos basados en la idea central de que la justicia climática no es un concepto homogéneo, sino un campo conceptual en disputa, apropiado por actores estatales, corporativos, multilaterales, comunitarios y académicos, a menudo con significados profundamente divergentes. Desde la perspectiva presentada, la justicia climática puede ser cooptada en representaciones tecnocráticas centradas en métricas e indicadores, pero también puede servir como plataforma de resistencia antirracista y anticolonial, siempre que se base en experiencias territoriales concretas.*

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Desigualdades ambientales. Justicia climática. Racismo ambiental. Colonialidad climática.*

Introduction

The climate emergency is no longer announced as a future threat; it is already a present condition, producing material, symbolic, territorial, and bodily effects that traverse Brazil in profoundly unequal ways. Climate impacts are not randomly distributed; they follow structural lines of race, class, gender, territory, and postal code, reflecting the intersection of the climate crisis with exclusionary urbanization, coloniality, patriarchy, and environmental racism. Since its initial academic formulation in Brazil, as noted by Selene Herculano (2008), environmental justice critique has emphasized that Black, poor, and peripheral populations are systematically exposed to the highest environmental risks and the lowest institutional investments, revealing a “moral geography” that determines who suffers and who profits from environmental degradation. This genealogy is essential for understanding that the climate crisis is not merely ecological, technical, or meteorological: it is primarily socio-historical, shaped by coloniality and structural selections of life.

This perspective aligns with the argument developed by Farhana (2022) in *The Unbearable Heaviness of Climate Coloniality*, which demonstrates how global climate governance and hegemonic responses to the crisis maintain, reproduce, and update colonial patterns of exploitation of Global South peoples, positioning them as permanent victims, carbon credit providers, or territories for environmental compensation, while absolving the historical agents responsible for systemic destruction. Such critique underscores that climate justice is not only a mitigation demand but also an ethical and political imperative involving historical memory, territorial autonomy, and reparation.

Araújo, Rodrigues, and Dunder (2023) reinforce this perspective, arguing that, in the face of climate coloniality and hegemonic responses that often exacerbate the very problems they purport to address, climate justice provides the critical framework necessary for effective resistance to the climate emergency, guiding transformations emerging from the territory that confront structural inequalities.

The dossier “Desigualdades ambientais no Brasil: a lente da justiça climática e do racismo ambiental”, published in *Cadernos de Campo* (UNESP), operates precisely within this critical horizon. The collected texts argue that climate justice is not a homogeneous concept; it is a contested field, appropriated by state, corporate, multilateral, community, and academic actors, often with profoundly divergent meanings. As Isabela Carmo Cavaco and Pedro Henrique Campello Torres (2025) discuss, climate justice can be co-opted into technocratic

frameworks centered on metrics and indicators, but it can also serve as a platform for anti-racist and anti-colonial resistance when anchored in concrete territorial experiences.

This critical approach converges with central contributions of contemporary sociology, which emphasizes the inseparability of the climate crisis, structural inequalities, and power relations. As Nancy Fraser (2022) argues, the ecological crisis cannot be understood apart from the dynamics of expropriation and plunder that sustain the expanded reproduction of global capitalism; it reflects a broader social crisis affecting bodies, territories, and ways of life. Brazilian sociology finds in Lélia Gonzalez (1984) a crucial interpretive framework for understanding how racism structures the differential distribution of environmental risks and damages, creating an internal coloniality. This analytical lens is essential to interpret why climate impacts systematically affect Black, Indigenous, traditional, and peripheral populations. In dialogue with these authors, Silvia Federici (2004) shows that processes of enclosure and disciplining of land and bodies are not merely relics of primitive accumulation but reappear in contemporary forms through environmental degradation, forced removals, and the financialization of nature. Thus, the sociological debate illuminates human and political dimensions of the climate crisis that are often obscured in technocratic or naturalized readings of the phenomenon.

Environmental Racism and Socio-Environmental Conflicts: The Common Thread of Brazilian Cases

The historical relevance of the concept of environmental racism resurfaces strongly in the articles of this dossier. Trissia Maria Fortunato Paes de Barros (2025) offers a contemporary overview of the recent Brazilian period in which the federal government, dominated by a far-right, denialist worldview, dismantled environmental policies, demonstrating how the interplay between neoliberalism and neo-extractivism has worsened the climate crisis and perpetuated environmental racism. By analyzing the presence of the theme in Brazilian graduate programs, Aline da Cunha Miranda and Iris Carmen Pinheiro Rodrigues (2025) show that Black, Indigenous, and peripheral communities remain at the epicenter of contemporary environmental conflicts, reaffirming classical diagnoses in national literature, such as those by Herculano, regarding the selectivity of environmental degradation and protection. Additionally, the authors highlight the growing discussion of the topic in graduate education and underscore the importance of the environmental racism perspective for investigating conflicts in the country.

The analysis of public policies in Bahia by Joana Nery Giglio and Paula Cristina da Silva (2025) demonstrates how the state actively or passively contributes to producing these inequalities. Fragmented environmental management, low social participation, and conflicts between traditional communities and economic enterprises reveal that environmental policies, when disconnected from concrete territorial disputes, may reinforce historical asymmetries rather than mitigate them.

In the various case studies addressed in this dossier, environmental racism emerges as a structuring layer. In Recife, Marcos Tavares de Arruda Filho and Pedro Roberto Jacobi (2025) examine how precarious urbanization, spatial segregation, and insufficient socio-environmental policies render certain territories particularly vulnerable to extreme events. Jeniffer Hübner et al. (2025) highlight Quilombola communities as epistemic communities that valorize traditional knowledge and align with the field of climate justice as a political and epistemological arena, with potential to strengthen decolonial approaches and recognize work rooted in territorial realities. In the Quilombo Senhor do Bonfim (Paraíba), Julia Rensi, Nádia Jarouche Aun, and Ellen Monielle do Vale Silva (2025) analyze how solidarity-based agro-food networks reinforce food sovereignty and climate resilience. Adrielle Costa Xisto *et al.* (2025) emphasize the urgency of climate justice for Amazonian riverine communities, which face historical vulnerabilities exacerbated by climate change; resistance through social movements and traditional knowledge is essential but must be combined with more effective, participatory, and anti-racist public policies. In Rio Grande do Sul, Luana da Silva Rosa (2025) demonstrates through ethnography that the 2024 flood reactivates an “ancestral catastrophe,” where racism, urban inequality, and institutional neglect intertwine and materialize as climate injustices.

The case of Quilombo do Cumbe (Ceará), analyzed by Marina Passos Pereira Campos *et al.* (2025), is emblematic: shrimp farming, tourism, and wind energy projects not only degrade territories but also generate internal ruptures, divisions, loss of community bonds, and symbolic violence—a strategy frequently associated with the expansion of enterprises in traditional territories. The contestation over narrative—who defines “development,” “progress,” or “sustainability”—becomes as important as territorial disputes. This centrality of narrative conflict directly resonates with Torres et al. (2025), who show how institutional, legal, and media discourses shape perceptions of legitimacy, classify subjects, and produce social realities, including in the environmental domain. The performativity of discourse, as highlighted in their study, helps explain why affected communities often fight not only for

physical territory but also for the right to name their own conflicts and to exist politically within decision-making arenas.

Finally, Matheus Guimarães de Barros (2025), in his article “A world in broken dropper: (re)thinking futures that are both useless and liveable”, argues that modern-colonial capitalism represents a hegemonic model steering the planet toward climate catastrophe, which in contexts like Brazil manifests through inequality and environmental racism. According to the author, pathways toward the future must engage ancestral epistemologies and worldviews that confront the dominant capitalist-colonial imaginary.

The critical perspective guiding this dossier also draws on foundational contributions from contemporary social theory. Nancy Fraser’s analyses, particularly in *Cannibal Capitalism* (2022) and her essay with Rahel Jaeggi, *Capitalism: A Conversation in Critical Theory* (2018), provide a powerful framework for understanding the climate crisis as an expression of a “general expropriation crisis,” in which capitalism devours the very conditions that make life possible—including bodies, territories, nature, and care labor. Complementing this structural critique, Sueli Carneiro, notably in *Racismo e Sexismo na Cultura Brasileira* (1984), demonstrates how racism materially and symbolically organizes Brazilian social formation, producing an internal geopolitical hierarchy whose contemporary expression manifests as environmental racism. Lélia Gonzalez, in works such as *A Categoria Político-Cultural de Amefricanidade* (1988), further elucidates how racialization processes structure territorial and political hierarchies shaping climate impacts in Brazil. Silvia Federici, in *Caliban and the Witch* (2004) and *The Zero Point of Revolution* (2017), shows that capitalist accumulation operates through continuous enclosures—of land, bodies, knowledge, and collective forms of life reproduction. This reflection highlights the reproductive and community dimensions of the climate crisis, showing how its effects disproportionately impact women, racialized populations, and traditional communities. By integrating these three critical strands, the dossier reaffirms that addressing environmental inequalities in Brazil requires an anti-racist, anti-colonial, and feminist perspective capable of overcoming both denialism and false solutions that perpetuate the very structures that created the crisis.

Climate Coloniality, False Solutions, and the Struggle over the Future

All articles included in this dossier converge on a crucial point: it is impossible to understand climate inequalities without recognizing the ongoing operation of colonialism.

Critiques of climate coloniality show that global solutions based on carbon offsets, financialization of nature, and “clean energy” initiatives without territorial justice reproduce structural asymmetries and shift impacts onto historically vulnerable communities, including in Brazil. Not only must the critique target the actions that led to the climate emergency, but the construction of solutions must also acknowledge that unequal relations under dependent capitalism drive peripheral exploitation, perpetually exacerbating socio-environmental and climate vulnerabilities (Araújo; Rodrigues; Dunder, 2023).

The experiences documented in this dossier—wind farms imposed on Quilombo territories, urban removals, degradation of riverine lands, and the absence of social participation—empirically confirm what critical literature has long warned: many hegemonic “climate solutions” are, in fact, contemporary variants of extractivism. The risk posed by these false solutions calls, as Cavaco and Torres (2025) argue, for an intersectional and politically situated reading of climate justice, one that understands conflicts not as side effects but as expressions of underlying power structures.

By integrating empirical analyses of specific territories, anti-colonial theoretical reflections, critical genealogies of environmental justice, and studies of contemporary socio-environmental conflicts, this dossier fulfills three key functions:

1. It strengthens the critical field of climate justice in Brazil by connecting territorial experiences, traditional knowledge, and counter-hegemonic epistemologies;
2. It exposes the persistence of environmental racism, showing that the climate catastrophe is selective, deeply shaped by historical inequalities, and that climate justice cannot exist without confronting racism; and
3. It challenges climate coloniality, engaging in the international debate while situating Brazil at the center of discussions on development, reparation, and the future.

More than a collection of articles, this dossier constitutes a public intervention, aimed at expanding the boundaries of climate debate in the country. It calls on academia, the state, and social movements to reject both denialism and technocratic solutions that ignore structural inequalities. In a nation where race, territory, and class continue to determine who breathes, who floods, who loses their home, and who decides, climate justice can only be achieved by confronting environmental racism and coloniality.

By highlighting the complexity of conflicts, inequalities, and narratives that shape the climate emergency in Brazil, this dossier also reaffirms the indispensable role of sociology and the social sciences in understanding the human dimensions of the crisis. In a field often dominated by technical models, metrics, and approaches focused exclusively on emissions, infrastructure, or risk management, the social sciences reclaim what is truly at stake: lives, bodies, territories, and power regimes that determine who suffers, who decides, and who profits from the climate crisis. The critical tradition inaugurated by authors such as Fraser, Gonzalez, and Federici demonstrates that no environmental phenomenon exists outside social, historical, and political contexts. Sociology thus contributes to exposing structures of inequality, processes of racialization and gendering of vulnerability, forms of community resistance, and delegations of power that shape climate governance. By placing these issues at the center of reflection, this dossier underscores that addressing the climate crisis requires not only technical solutions but profound transformations in the social, political, and economic relations that sustain its reproduction.

The dossier also emphasizes the centrality of climate justice in the operationalization of public policy. By presenting empirical case studies that employ ethnography across different territorial contexts, it reinforces the role of public management instruments in responding to the climate emergency, both in terms of mitigation and adaptation to extreme events. The dossier is published during a period of reconstruction of public policies following a phase of dismantling and denialism at the national level, as well as amid increased attention to climate debate following the 30th Conference of the Parties in Belém, a location chosen on the principle that heads of state cannot impose solutions on territories they do not know. Beyond this, we argue that decisions must be made with the people who inhabit the territory.

Thus, the dossier reaffirms that contesting the future requires contesting narratives, policies, territories, and epistemologies—and that the struggle for climate justice in Brazil is, above all, a struggle for lives that matter, territories that resist, and worlds that remain possible.

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