

CLIMATE CHANGE AND ENERGY TRANSITION IN LATIN AMERICA

By Amanda Nogueira Moreira de Souza

Introduction

As a child, I had the habit of grabbing leaves, small tree branches, and flowers in every corner on my way to and from school. I would take a small leaf from a tree, sometimes not even look at it, and immediately drop it on the ground. This was a very obnoxious habit according to my father, who complained about it every time I would begin raising my little hands to grab something. I could not understand why this upset him, after all, he used to take roses from our yard so I could give them to my teachers on special occasions and we always harvested herbs to make tea. We were constantly taking from nature.

I never took his complaints seriously until one day, when he asked me: “How would you feel if every day a little girl took a strand of your hair as if it was nothing?” I like to remember this moment as the beginning of my journey to becoming who I am and who I want to be. With a simple question as we walked back home from school, my father helped me develop a better understanding of myself and the environment. He helped me understand myself and the environment as one.

How I see and interact with my surroundings has been deeply shaped by my parents’ teachings about life and the world. Their ancestral knowledge and traditions are an essential part of who I am. As I grow older and reflect upon the early years of my life, I realize that my childhood and my father’s are deeply intertwined. I grew up listening to anecdotes about the early years of his life, when he was surrounded by nature, planting and fully living from the land on his family’s secluded farm. During the COVID-19 pandemic, when my parents had to begin planting most of the food they consumed, my father’s knowledge of the land was essential for their survival. My mother, on the other hand, did not often share about her childhood. Nonetheless, she has always shown to be proud of having learned how to sew and knit with her grandmother as a child. Her handcraft skills were especially important during difficult financial times for our family; she sewed many of my backpacks and clothes when we could not afford to purchase them. Now, as I am pursuing an education far from home, in Minnesota, where winters are long and rigorous, my mother’s handmade scarfs keep me warm and serve as a constant reminder of who I am and where I come from. These are just some examples of the many ways in which my family, and their ancestral knowledge, have shaped the ways I see and interact with the world.

I was raised in a favela, commonly known as a slum, in São Gonçalo, a highly populated and poor city in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Growing up as a Black girl with very few financial resources was challenging, to say the least. Despite this, my parents equipped me with the necessary knowledge and resources to fight for my future and beliefs. Now, as a first-generation college student and the first person in my family to live abroad, having studied in Japan, the United States, and France, I fight for racial and environmental justice. I fight for the generations that are yet to come. I fight to honor my ancestors.

With less than six years left to meet the goals of the Paris Agreement and little progress being made to tackle structural issues associated with climate change and environmental justice, it is time that we prioritize the voices and challenges of those on the frontlines.

Latin America

As I am writing this (November 2023), the state of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, faces an unforeseen heat wave, with temperatures reaching 42.6°C/108.68°F and feeling like 59.7°C/139.46°F.¹ Alongside the heatwave, storms have hit many regions of the state and the country, leaving many families, including mine, without access to energy and water for days. For four days, my father, who suffers from diabetes, could not keep his insulin refrigerated, putting both his mental and physical health at risk. Many families and my community suffered from extremely high temperatures without being able to drink cold water, while others did not have access to water at all. For these people, for my family and my community, climate change is no longer a future threat; climate change is a reality.

In Argentina, the far-right candidate, Javier Milei, who firmly denies the correlation between human activity and climate change, has recently been elected president.² Argentina, alongside Bolivia and Chile, is part of the South American Lithium Triangle - the region responsible for holding most of Latin America's 60% share of global lithium reserves.³ Global North countries deeply value lithium, as it is a key component for the production of car batteries, facilitating the process of electrification. Among the many drastic political and economic changes proposed by Milei, the expansion of lithium extraction to attract foreign capital and boost the country's economy poses a major threat to indigenous communities in the country.⁴ In Argentinian provinces such as Jujuy, the extraction of lithium by foreign companies, under the national government's approval and encouragement, has led to drastic changes in the environment caused by the high amounts of water needed to mine this mineral and the loss of ancestral land of native peoples.

According to data provided by The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD),⁶ the Latin American And Caribbean region is only responsible for 6.7% of the global emissions of greenhouse gases. Still, colonial and aggressive actions taken by Western countries have led communities in this region, especially those of African and indigenous descent, to be disproportionately affected by the impacts of climate change. Although international debates on the environment and climate have historically focused on Latin America's richness in natural resources and biodiversity, it is essential to put the lives and survival of historically marginalized communities at the forefront of all processes of decision-making.

For this reason, I decided to conduct interviews with youth and climate activists from Latin America, aiming to understand their diverse range of perspectives on climate change and energy transition. The following people interviewed, from youth to experienced activists, are fighting to reshape the future of their communities in Latin America, fighting for environmental justice and equity. Their perspectives and life experiences represent the history and roots of this

¹ Constance Malleret, "Hell de Janeiro': Scorching Heat Highlights Brazil's Glaring Inequality," *The Guardian*, 19 Nov. 2023, www.theguardian.com/global-development/2023/nov/19/brazil-temperatures-extreme-heat-danger-climate-change-inequality.

² Vanessa Buschschlüter, "Javier Milei: Argentina's Far-Right Outsider Wins Presidential Election," *BBC News*, BBC, 20 Nov. 2023, www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-67470549.

³ Scott B MacDonald, "The Geopolitics of South America's Lithium Triangle," *Global Americans*, 19 Jan. 2023, theglobalamericans.org/2023/01/the-geopolitics-of-south-americas-lithium-triangle/.

⁴ TaiGadea Lara, "Argentina Elections: Where Do Candidates Stand on the Environment?" *Dialogo Chino*, 13 Nov. 2023, dialogochino.net/en/climate-energy/381934-argentina-elections-where-do-candidates-stand-on-the-environment/.

continent, marked by resistance, resilience, and hope for the future.⁵

Youth and Climate Activists - Latin American Perspectives



Jahzara Ona, 19 years old. A first-generation college student, she is currently studying Geosciences at the University of São Paulo (USP). Born and raised in a peripheral area of São Paulo, Brazil, known as ‘Pantanal’ (swampland) due to the frequent floods that take place every year, Jahzara grew up understanding the impacts of climate change and poor governance as an intrinsic part of her daily life. She works with environmental and climate advocacy, with a focus on environmental education, and has taken part in various national and international conferences and workshops on this topic.

“I do not only fight for the future, I fight for those who came before me and for those who fought before and for me”

Renata Koch Alvarega, 26 years old, from Porto Alegre, South of Brazil. She is a recent graduate from Harvard, with a Master's in Public Policy and is currently working in climate financing at the World Bank. Renata began her journey with international environmental activism/advocacy in 2015, when she participated in COP21. In this first contact with international spaces of decision-making, Alvarega saw up close the adoption of the Paris Agreement and 2030 agenda, but also realized the lack of meaningful participation from youth, especially women from the Global South, in those spaces. Following this experience, she began to dedicate herself to studying and working on the intersection of climate and gender. In 2019, Alvarega founded ‘EmpoderaClima’ with the goal of making information about climate justice and its intersectionalities more accessible, creating relatable and important content in Portuguese, English, and Spanish, and opening spaces for discussion on climate change from a Latin American perspective.



“In Western countries, climate mitigation is commonly seen as a priority in both academic and decision-making spaces; however, we must begin directing our efforts towards climate adaptation and loss and damage, focusing on climate emergency and financing the urgent needs of historically marginalized communities”

⁵ Mara Pedrazzoli, “La Pelea Por El Litio Detrás Del Conflicto Social En Jujuy : Cómo Impacta La Reforma Constitucional En La Explotación Del Mineral, ” PAGINA12, 4 July 2023, www.pagina12.com.ar/564528-la-pelea-por-el-litio-detras-del-conflicto-social-en-jujuy.



Maryta de Humahuaca, 41 years old, from Jujuy, Argentina. Maryta is an indigenous artist and activist. She is part of ‘El Tercer Malón de la Paz’, an indigenous-led movement that is resisting the recently approved Constitutional Reform in Jujuy, which aims to bring international companies to the territory to further the extraction of lithium, consequentially leading to the removal of indigenous communities from the land and loss of water. Maryta and other activists have been forced to leave their homes and camp in the streets of Buenos Aires to protest against this reform and attract supporters for their cause. When the interview was held, Maryta and other activists had already been in Buenos Aires for three months, surviving on food, water, and clothes donations. Maryta, who has learned to live from the land, taking only what she needs while respecting and honoring her surroundings, highlighted how difficult it is for her to be in this situation, surviving

from the solidarity of others, living in the streets, and being constantly discriminated against by people who do not believe in the rights of indigenous communities to the land. For Maryta, international activists, philanthropic organizations, and leaders must listen to the voices of her community and help build a movement that brings change and justice to future generations.

“We are fighting for the future of the coming generations, so that they can have the chance to live as we do and how our ancestors did, in our own land and with clean and abundant water”

Thuane ‘Thux’ Nascimento. Executive director of PerifaConnection, a platform for disputing narratives about Brazilian peripheries. She lives in Vila Operária, a favela in Duque de Caxias, Rio de Janeiro, where she leads social and environmental leaders and is a volunteer teacher at ‘+nós’, an organization that aims to help low-income students to enter institutions of higher education. Graduated in law from the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ), where her academic career was consolidated in the topics of access to land, popular law, and legal sociology.



Speaker on issues of race and the periphery, climate justice, environmental racism, and popular communication, she has broad experiences with both national and international spaces of decision-making. During the interview, she highlighted her discomfort when being invited to

conferences where she and other activists cannot understand the languages being spoken, generally English and Spanish, and are not allowed to participate in processes of decision-making, being restricted to making superficial and short remarks.

“The favelas and outskirts are essential for the development of a sustainable future. They might be marginalized by the elites, but it is key to acknowledge and remember that Brazil and Latin America were made from the margins.”



Angie Ferreira, 27 years old, Colombia. Environmental engineer and activist, has been working as a volunteer Constitutional Coordinator at Red Jovenes de Ambiente Boyaca, a youth-led organization for sustainable development, for the past eight years. She recently had the opportunity to participate in the Regional Conference of Youth (RCOY), highlighted by her as a life-changing experience that allowed her to not only meet new people from across the continent but also learn from their life experiences and find new ways of implementing changes in her daily life and community. Some of the main issues faced by Angie’s community are heat waves, respiratory issues, and food insecurity. According to her, it is urgent that we focus on climate and environmental education, as well as further research adaptation methods, taking into account the diverse range of ways in which different regions and countries in Latin America are affected by climate change. She also highlighted the importance of energy transition strategies that take into consideration the

different needs and resources available and respect the rights of native communities.

“Taking the first step is always scary, but our voices matter and we must continue to be resilient and eager to learn about how to build a sustainable future for all.”

Reflections

The interviews above were conducted in November 2023, directly preceding COP28, a moment filled with feelings of hope, eagerness for change, and fear for the future. I was extremely grateful for the interviewees’ willingness to meet with me during such a busy time, as most of them were preparing to travel to Dubai, where they would be active participants at COP. I am especially grateful to Maryta de Humahuaca for sparing some of her time, while she was in the streets of Buenos Aires participating in a protest for the rights of indigenous peoples of Jujuy, to participate in the interview. Having this conversation with Maryta also allowed me to experience and further appreciate some of my favorite characteristics of Latin American and indigenous culture: solidarity and warmth, as she insisted on having the interview in my mother tongue, Portuguese, instead of Spanish and we found our own way of expressing our ideas, using the similarity of our languages as a powerful tool.

During most of these interviews, besides my concerns regarding COP28, my thoughts and energy were focused on the challenging situation my family was facing in Brazil. As previously mentioned, the heat waves and storms heavily affected historically marginalized communities in Rio de Janeiro. Throughout the interviews, all participants highlighted the fact that the fight against climate change is not only for future generations but also to honor the past and give dignity to those who are disproportionately affected by it now. Another important key concept frequently highlighted was the intersectionality surrounding the fight against climate change, as people in Latin America are not equally affected by it due to the consequences of colonization, slavery and Western occupation of the territory. As my family struggled with unemployment and lack of access to medical care on top of having to face the impacts of climate change without any support, these conversations reassured me that urgent and intersectional actions are needed to guarantee the survival of historically marginalized communities in Latin America.

I have synthesized the information from my research and the perspectives collected throughout the interviews to create the seven major takeaways regarding climate change and energy transition listed below.

Major takeaways/recommendations from the interviews conducted:

1. We must honor and acknowledge the past.

Latin American and indigenous cultures are deeply rooted in appreciation and respect for past generations. During the interviews, Maryta and Jahzara Ona emphasized the importance of remembering and honoring the efforts of those who came before us and contributed to our understanding of the world. To craft and implement effective policies for both energy transition and climate adaptation/mitigation, we must consider the differences across cultures and territories, acknowledging the different past experiences and needs for the future.

2. Lithium extraction in indigenous lands must come to an end.

Indigenous communities in places such as Jujuy, Argentina, cannot have their rights violated in the process of furthering energy transition, in special the electrification of vehicles, in Western nations. International corporations, governments, and organizations must take strong and long-lasting actions in solidarity with the indigenous communities currently being affected by lithium extraction. It is essential to not finance projects to further lithium extraction in those regions, provide financial support and resources to those currently being affected by it, and raise awareness of the issue at the international level.

3. Fighting for climate justice requires us to fight against racism, colonialism and Western imperialism.

Climate change is an intersectional issue. Although sooner or later people from all regions of the world will feel the consequences of climate change, certain groups of people are already disproportionately affected by them. During the interview, when asked about how climate change affects her daily life,

Jahzara Ona shared how constant and more frequent floods caused by excessive rainfall and poor public planning have impacted her life. She mentioned that there were many occasions when she had to carry her younger sister on her back on their way to and from school because the water would reach up to her knees. Similarly, Renata Koch Alvarega also commented on the devastating consequences of excessive rainfall in the south of Brazil. Still, she emphasized that although her family has to handle water infiltrations and reduced mobility, they are among the least affected by climate change in the region. Race, gender, sexual orientation, and many other aspects of one's identity are key to determining their vulnerability to climate change.

4. Energy transition for whom?

The energy transition must happen in an equitable and just manner. When thinking about Latin America and other regions of the Global South, it is essential to be aware of the different levels of access to energy. While people from high economic backgrounds in the continent might be eager to transition to clean energy, others from less privileged backgrounds might never have had access to reliable energy sources. The process of energy transition in the Global South must be guided first by the need to provide equitable access to energy across different groups of society.

5. International spaces of decision-making were not made for us (youth from historically marginalized communities), but it is our right to occupy them.

International spaces of decision-making must welcome youth as agents of change and provide them with the appropriate tools to effectively share their experiences, knowledge, and demands. Thux Nascimento shared that many young activists attend international conferences full of expectations and leave frustrated by the lack of access to real opportunities to participate in debates and decision-making processes. Furthermore, from her own experience, she called attention to the fact that language barriers are still a major problem in these spaces. Since Portuguese is not an official UN language, young activists from Brazil who do not speak English or Spanish, mostly likely coming from historically marginalized backgrounds, cannot actively participate in discussions nor fully express themselves.

6. Latin America is facing a climate crisis: adaption must be prioritized

International efforts and resources must be directed towards those who are the most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Renata Koch Alvarenga, who works with climate financing for environmental disasters in Latin America and the Caribbean, highlighted the urgent need to focus on climate adaptation. According to Alvarenga, although the development of new technologies and funding for climate mitigation are crucial for the development of a sustainable future, international spaces of decision-making and adaptation should pay closer attention to climate emergencies and prioritize adaptation.

7. Climate change does not affect us all in the same ways. A just energy transition needs to consider the singularity of each country/region. We need multiple solutions.

STUDENTENERGY

More funding needs to be directed toward research and education in Latin America. Angie Ferreira called attention to the importance of education in the fight against climate change and the development of a just energy transition. According to Ferreira, the great biodiversity and cultural diversity in Latin America generates a growing need for more research to be conducted in the region to better understand what steps need to be taken. She highlighted the need to provide more educational opportunities for youth in the region so that they can learn about how to best support and contribute to the survival and development of their communities.

“Here is what I know: we are undeniable because we are part of a larger story of place and time; because the ‘before’ and ‘after’ always has us in between; because we are dust to dust; because to know a thing is to love a thing, and we love deeply; and because all of our stories are in relationship - I am because you are. Upright and resolute. And the land remembers, even if we do not. For as the Earth breathes, so do we. Because this is our home” **Carolyn Finney**

A Darker Wilderness: Black Nature Writing from Soil to Stars