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Imaginative Acts, Environmental Futurity: Re-envisioning the Heroic White Male Savior in *Snowpiercer*

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Abstract: In contrast to many Hollywood climate fiction films, *Snowpiercer* (2013) offers a more complex representation of the white male savior. In contrast to films like *WALL-E* (2008) and *Interstellar* (2014) that recuperate and invest in white masculine privilege, *Snowpiercer* highlights the more destructive aspects of a patriarchal capitalist system that privileges hegemonic white masculinity. While the ending of *Snowpiercer* may seem bleak, it also points to the possibility of a new system, an environmental futurity that centers indigenous knowledge and the experiences of women and people of color. Though *Snowpiercer* is not formally an American film, its casting of recognizable Hollywood stars situates this film in a transnational American cinema context, and this is part of what makes this film interesting to examine in contrast to mainstream Hollywood blockbusters.

Keywords: climate fiction film; ecocinema; environmental futurity; white male injury; white male savior, feminist ecology

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Introduction

Snowpiercer's opening credits include voiceover narration of the effects of climate change and how several nations deployed a geo-engineering strategy, the introduction of a coolant called CW-7 into the atmosphere, to halt climate change. The deployment of CW-7 sunk Earth into an ice age where "all life became extinct," except those who manage to survive on a high-speed train that runs around the world. The film opens seventeen years after the CW-7 catastrophe, and chronicles a class revolution by those living in the overcrowded slum-like conditions of the train's tail section, aiming to take over the engine at the front of the train. As leader of the revolution, Curtis (played by Chris Evans) says, "We take the engine and we

control the world.” As film critic Oliver Balaam points out, “*Snowpiercer* embraces the style, structure, and quirks of video game storytelling....The film is structured around the layout of the train, with each successive carriage introducing another fragment of narrative, and another aspect of its fictive reality” (online). On our way to the front of the train we see a prison, a factory that produces the protein blocks fed to the tail end passengers, an aquarium with sushi chef, a garden carriage, a night club, a lounge, a high tech security car, and so on.

It is the class revolution aspect of the film that many critics and scholars applaud. For example, Peter Frase argues that the film is “genuinely subversive and radical,” offering a powerful critique of capitalism as the root cause of ecological catastrophe (online). Similarly, Joshua Clover argues that the film asks serious and important questions about class domination and emancipation similar to those asked by Lenin. Gerry Canavan situates *Snowpiercer* within a “long chain of necrofuturist blockbusters that cast the future as a world of death rather than opportunity and possibility” (12). According to Canavan, the dominance of necrofuturism as a discourse in popular eco-film creates and perpetuates a self-destructive discourse that, on the one hand, acknowledges the inequity and slow violence of late capitalism, and, on the other hand, posits that there is no alternative. Yet, even as *Snowpiercer* is situated within the trope of necrofuturism, Canavan argues that the ending of the film is key in positing an alternative to this very discourse; thus, the film functions as a radical critique of capitalism. Similarly, Fred Lee and Steven Manicaster argue that *Snowpiercer* represents what they term “decolonial exodus,” that the film posits exodus as “a real alternative in the face of the pseudo-alternative of creeping fascism and the liberal ideology that there is no alternative to the current world order” (213). Like Canavan, Lee and Manicaster see that “*Snowpiercer* makes palpable the political limits of comparable sci-fi films” (225).

In this article, I want to extend these analyses of the film's representation of capitalism to include a discussion of the film's representation of race and gender politics, particularly its representation of white masculinity, and the way the film's critique of capitalism is fundamentally linked to a critique of both white supremacy and patriarchy. Different from other Hollywood climate fiction films, *Snowpiercer* posits that we cannot rely on white male heroic agents to save us from climate change and ecological crisis. In a way, the film chronicles the consequences if/as white people, in particular white men, retain power and privilege. And when I say white men here, I'm referring, as Sara Ahmed points out, to an institution, to a persistent structure, and to the mechanisms that maintain that institution as a persistent structure (153).

Katherine E. Sugg similarly explores *Snowpiercer*'s representation of the white male heroic agent, suggesting that the film's representation of race and gender politics reveals "the futility of liberal individual agency and exposes[s] the presumption of heroic leadership" (5). This article supports Sugg's assessment of the film, while also going a step further to highlight the importance of *Snowpiercer*'s re-envisioning of white masculinity and the heroic white male agent for imagining an environmental futurity that centers indigenous knowledge, women and people of color. As I will highlight in this article, *Snowpiercer*'s representation of environmental futurity is an imaginative act that enables political possibilities that are traditionally foreclosed through other Hollywood climate fiction films.

I begin this article by discussing how the white male savior trope is tied to a pervasive discourse in Hollywood climate fiction film, that of white male injury. The white male injury discourse is designed to re-privilege hegemonic white masculinity and re-invest in the white male savior trope. I show how the white male injury discourse is exemplified in two popular Hollywood films, *Interstellar* (2014) and *WALL-E* (2009). I then show how *Snowpiercer* (2013),

by not rooting in an affect of white male injury, deconstructs and reimagines the white male savior trope. *Snowpiercer* offers a more complex representation of the heroic white male agent than represented in these other Hollywood climate fiction films.

Heroic White Male Saviors and the White Male Injury Discourse

Over the past decade or so, several scholars have identified the pervasiveness of a white male injury, or white male victimhood, discourse in American popular culture (see, for example, Johnson 2017; Kelly 2018; Brayton 2007; Rehling 2009). Hamilton Carroll writes about the white male injury discourse as a new form of identity politics, a reactive strategy since the 1970s in which white men, utilizing the same representational and identity politics as women and communities of color, are framed as having suffered the most, having experienced the most economic and social decline in the era of neoliberal capitalism. Utilizing data from the U.S. Department of Labor, Carroll shows that even in an era of declining income across demographics, white men still earn more income than white women as well black and Latinx workers.¹ As Carroll writes, “White injury is clearly more perception than reality, but it is a perception that has extraordinary sociocultural heft...Claiming white male injury is a way of protesting the erosions of white men’s historical advantage while denying that advantage ever existed” (5). The white male injury discourse is a pervasive, reactionary discourse designed to re-privilege hegemonic white masculinity even as it simultaneously denies the historical privilege associated with white masculinity. It is important to note, though we are living in an era in which men’s *entitlement* to privilege is increasingly questioned, white men still have so much more advantage than women and people of color.

In my own research, I show how the white male injury discourse permeates Hollywood climate fiction film, such that white men are frequently located in these films in the position of

what Sarah Jaquette Ray calls the ecological Other (Yates 2021; Yates 2019; Yates 2018). These films position white men as a group particularly disenfranchised by climate crisis, even as simultaneously white men are also often represented in these films as the heroic male agents that ‘save’ humanity from ecological destruction. Frequently these films posit the dominance and privilege traditionally associated with white masculinity as the basis for how humanity is saved. Nonetheless, nostalgia also permeates these films such that there is often a sense that the white male protagonist believes himself to be *entitled* to benefits which seemingly no longer exist. The white male injury discourse can be seen across a number of Hollywood climate fiction films, including *Geostorm* (2017), *Elysium* (2013), *Avatar* (2009), and *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004). Here I would like to briefly show how the white male injury discourse is exemplified in *Interstellar* (2014) and *WALL-E* (2009), highlighting how white men are framed in Hollywood film as suffering the most in the era of climate change.

Interstellar, directed by Christopher Nolan, opens on to a world where Blight has wiped out most agriculture, rendering Earth an uninhabitable Dust Bowl. We see white male injury in an important scene early in *Interstellar*. In this scene, main character Cooper (played by Matthew McConaughey) is sitting on the front porch having a beer with his father-in-law (played by John Lithgow), and Cooper says, “It’s like we’ve forgotten who we are. Explorers, pioneers, not caretakers.” In *Interstellar*, Cooper is an educated white man, an engineer, a former pilot, a character who outside the diegetic realm of the film would hold social power and privilege. In the world of *Interstellar*, however, Cooper is reduced to living in barren, dusty, dilapidated conditions, unable to fulfill his livelihood as either an engineer or pilot. Rather, Cooper is forced to endure agricultural labor, which is framed in the film as feminized, as caretaking labor. Most importantly, Cooper believes he is *entitled* to more. Such is the basis for *Interstellar*’s main

narrative: Middle-class white men, like Cooper, suffer the most in the era of climate change marked by the disappearance of valued (masculine) labor and ecological crisis. This suffering must end, and it does so in the film through space colonization, specifically white flight from planet Earth, and the restoration of Cooper as the heroic white male agent. In another scene also early in the film, Cooper meets with his children's principle and school teacher. In this scene, the principle – one of only two characters of color in the film, a black man - is framed as blocking Cooper's son Tom from going to college to attain the middle-class education to which Cooper feels his son is entitled.²

WALL-E, directed by Andrew Stanton, opens to a trash-filled world where humans have evacuated Earth to live on luxury spaceships. In *WALL-E*, white male injury is embodied by the spaceship Axiom's captain. This is represented in *WALL-E* in the way that the captain, a white man in a professional position of power and authority, longs to be the 'heroic male agent' that restores the inhabitants on the Axiom to civilization and the imagined Garden of Eden on Earth. Yet, through most of the film, the captain is disabled, obese, relegated to a chair. The captain's disability and physical separation from nature frames him as de-gendered and infantilized, emasculated, and therefore un-able to fulfill the 'heroic male agent' role to which he feels *entitled*. In this respect, the captain looks to his ancestral past, to portrait photos on the wall of the spaceship's bridge revealing images of previous captains who were slimmer and fitter. These photos remind the captain of a past when his majority white male ancestors in a similar professional position had power and privilege, the power and privilege he ought to have but lacks because of his circumstances on the Axiom. By the end of the film, the captain's fantasy of heroic male agency does come to fruition as the captain lands the Axiom back on Earth, returning humans to a kind of romanticized, agrarian community.³

Films like *Interstellar* and *WALL-E* are also twenty-first century Edenic recovery narratives that feature white male saviors as active agents that reclaim, recover, and transform nature humanity has destroyed. Edenic recovery narratives frequently represent nature as feminized and female characters as most closely aligned to nonhuman nature (Merchant 2004). We see these links between gender and nature in Hollywood climate fiction films. In *WALL-E*, the robot EVE is aligned with feminized nature, a fallen nature that becomes civilized through the actions of a heroic male agent (i.e. WALL-E). At the end of *Interstellar*, Dr. Amelia Brand (played by Anne Hathaway) is aligned with feminized nature in the form of a newly discovered planet for human habitation. *Interstellar* ends with an invitation for Cooper, the heroic male agent, to rescue and conquer the newly discovered planet as well as Amelia Brand, to turn both into pristine, Edenic nature. Like the white male injury discourse, the Edenic recovery narrative is a pervasive trope across Hollywood climate fiction film that also perpetuates a reinvestment in hegemonic white masculinity.

***Snowpiercer*: Re-Imagining the White Male Savior**

Snowpiercer, directed by Bong Joon-ho, is interesting because it diverges from other popular Hollywood climate fiction films, especially in terms of its representation of hegemonic white masculinity. In contrast to popular Hollywood films like *Interstellar* and *WALL-E* that tend to recuperate and invest in white masculine privilege, *Snowpiercer* highlights the more destructive aspects of a patriarchal capitalist system that privileges hegemonic white masculinity. Though *Snowpiercer* is not wholly an American film, its casting of recognizable Hollywood stars (i.e. Jamie Bell, Chris Evans, Ed Harris, John Hurt, Octavia Spencer, and Tilda Swinton) alongside two Korean actors (Ah-sung Ko and Kang-ho Song) situates this film in a transnational

American-Korean cinema context. This transnational context is part of what makes this film interesting to examine in contrast to mainstream Hollywood blockbusters.⁴

Most of *Snowpiercer* seems to mirror the heroic white male agent narrative of Hollywood films like *Interstellar* and *WALL-E*. Curtis, a white man, is the revolution's leader. The assumption is that he will be the heroic male agent that saves everyone on the train, or at least those in the tail section. This is assumed, in large part, because discursively Curtis' status as a white man (at least in our world outside of the diegetic realm of the film) signifies leadership and agency, a cultural code that is reinforced through films like *Interstellar* and *WALL-E*. While *Snowpiercer* engages this trope of the white male savior in the first part of the film, it is deconstructed in the latter half.

This deconstruction begins to happen in a scene toward the end of the film when Curtis and the security expert Namgoong (played by Kang-ho Song) are sitting outside the engine room. Curtis talks about his cannibalistic past, when he did terrible things to survive in the tail section. In the traditional Hollywood climate fiction film, this would be the moment of white male injury that initiates the narrative re-investment in white masculine privilege. But the narrative structure of *Snowpiercer* does not root in the affect of white male injury. Rather, everyone on the train is traumatized, so Curtis' trauma is not unique. Everyone on the train has had to do, or endure, something terrible in order to survive. Curtis is not suffering the most. Additionally, there is no nostalgia here for a time and place when white men were entitled to more. The nostalgia here, if any, is rooted in the loss of indigenous knowledge, symbolized by the Inuit-style fur coat Namgoong wears. Furthermore, the scene is framed as almost comedic, and this is in contradistinction to the serious horror of cannibalism in a film like *Soylent Green* (1973).

As the camera cuts back to Namgoong, he is listening very deeply to what Curtis has to say. Curtis wants Namgoong to open the gate to Wilford. Instead, Namgoong thanks Curtis for his story and offers an alternative gate to be opened, the one that gets them off the train altogether. This is an important turning point in the film.

Namgoong (speaking in Korean): “You know what I really want? I want to open the gate...but not this gate. That one. The gate to the outside world. It’s been frozen shut for eighteen years. You might as well call it a wall. But it’s a fucking gate. Let’s open it and get the hell out.”

Curtis: “And freeze to death. What, are you fucking crazy?”

Namgoong (pulling his heavy fur coat on to his head): “What if we don’t? What if we could survive outside?”

Namgoong goes on to explain that he thinks the snow is melting, that he can see more of a crashed airplane each year as the train goes by. Then we the audience, alongside Curtis in the film, discover that Namgoong is not a kronole addict after all. Rather he’s been hoarding kronole, a flammable industrial waste product, so that he can build a bomb to blow open the gate to the outside world. Namgoong sticks the kronole bomb on the door to the outside.

This scene becomes the basis for unveiling Namgoong, a Korean man who doesn’t—or refuses—to speak English, as the heroic male agent and his radical proposition of exodus from the train, of an alternative to the current system.⁵ As Curtis’ mentor Gilliam (played by John Hurt) says at the beginning of the film, referencing Namgoong: “Our fate depends on this man.” At this point in the film, these moments of foreshadowing could be overlooked because Namgoong is stereotyped as a drug addict, even though Curtis (as well as the audience) knows he’s a security engineer, a highly educated professional. It is perhaps easier to believe that Curtis, of whom we know very little, is the heroic male agent because white men are culturally coded in traditional Hollywood climate fiction films as heroes and saviors.

At the moment that Namgoong puts the kronole bomb on the door, the gate to Wilford and the train engine opens. Wilford's female assistant comes out. She shoots Namgoong, measures the kronole bomb, takes it off the door, and then invites Curtis inside the front engine room to join Wilford for dinner. Thus, initially, Curtis denies Namgoong's proposal. As Gerry Canavan writes, in this moment Curtis buys into the necrofuturist discourse of no alternatives, and he ends up going in to the engine car to talk to Wilford (played by Ed Harris). Curtis believes in his own "destiny" to change the system, a "destiny" that Wilford also believes in as, inside the engine room, he offers Curtis to become the next leader of the train. As Wilford says to Curtis, while they watch the mostly white train passengers fighting outside the engine room: "You can save them from themselves...Curtis, this is your destiny." And Curtis seems ready to accept his "destiny," to become the next white male leader of the train. But he makes two important discoveries.

First, Curtis learns that his mentor Gilliam conspired with Wilford to construct the revolution as a population control strategy. The tail sectioners are the ones targeted for population control, even though they use minimal resources on the train. This mirrors the overpopulation discourses the global North uses against the global South, even though the latter uses significantly less resources and produces significantly less carbon emissions than the former.⁶ In *Snowpiercer*, Gilliam goes against his own economic interests to align with Wilford across race and gender. And, now Wilford wants Curtis to do the same.

Second, Namgoong's daughter Yona removes a floor board from the engine room, exposing Timmy, one of the children stolen from the tail section, who Curtis now discovers is being used as a literal appendage to the machine, as a replacement part to keep the engine running. It is in this moment of horror, seeing Timmy, that Curtis realizes he cannot be the heroic

male savior without reproducing the very same social conditions that caused the eco-apocalypse in the first place, and that is the foundation for the horribly unequal conditions on the train. And this is very different from the horror in a film like *Soylent Green*, where the horror resides in a discourse of white male injury via the consumption and disposability of the white male body (see Yates 2019). Here the horror is rooted in the consumption and disposability of a black child. Kyla Wazana Tompkins discusses a popular trope in nineteenth century literature, that of the edible black body, where the black body is configured as food, an object to be eaten. As Tompkins points out, to be eaten, to be cannibalized, is to become an object of social degradation, to be relegated as somehow not human, an animal. Though Timmy's body is not eaten or cannibalized as food, it is consumed and objectified in a comparable fashion, as an appendage to the machine. Curtis objects to the way that Timmy is materialized as and subjected to being an object of social degradation. Curtis gives his arm to save Timmy, to pull him up from the engine. Again, this could be a moment where the film roots in an affect of white male injury, as a way of re-privileging hegemonic white masculinity. But the film does not root in this affect. Rather, Curtis gives his arm to save Timmy and, ultimately he and Namgoong give their bodies, to save Timmy and Yona. Curtis gives up his power and privilege for children of color to survive. The film frames white men as important, as part of a larger collective struggle to change the system, even if/as white men, as a persistent structure, must eventually go extinct for humanity to have any hope of survival.

In this realization, Curtis accepts Namgoong's proposal of exodus. He gives a match to Yona, the train explodes, seemingly everyone dies...except Yona and Timmy, who emerge from the train to see a polar bear. As Canavan writes, "The film ends on this ambiguous image of nonwhite futurity, as an Asian woman and a young black child, dressed as Inuits, stare out into a

nonwhite, nonwestern future” (19). Taking a literal approach to the film, Aaron Bady writes, “The movie fades to black before we see the polar bear eat those two kids” (online). Canavan responds by writing, “And of course he is right about this on the level of cold realism” (20). Yet, Canavan goes on to write that the whole film is just preposterous and cannot be taken literally. Rather, the film should be read as an allegory in which to think the unthinkable.

The ending of *Snowpiercer* may seem bleak. Yet as an allegory, the ending of the film points to the possibility of a new system, an environmental futurity that centers indigenous knowledge and the experiences of women and people of color. This is important because as Susie O’Brien and Cheryl Lousley point out, indigenous people and people of color have frequently been framed as “people without futures,” a trope that has justified violence, genocide, expropriation from land, and an investment in white supremacy, historically and in the present (5). We see this trope represented in a film like *Interstellar* when Romilly, one of the only black characters in the film, ages twenty-three years in a matter of cinematic minutes, while Cooper, the white male savior of the film, remains seemingly young forever. Additionally, the end of *Interstellar* depicts a kind of white suburban utopia, an environmental futurity of whiteness, where black people are absent, extinct, and represented as having no future. By contrast, *Snowpiercer* represents an environmental futurity that is framed as female, indigenous and of color. This representation of environmental futurity in *Snowpiercer* enables the representation of political possibilities that are traditionally foreclosed through other Hollywood climate fiction films like *WALL-E* and *Interstellar*.

For Canavan, *Snowpiercer*’s representation of environmental futurity is important for breaking from the discourse of necrofuturism. For me, this representation is important because it breaks from both the white male injury discourse and the traditional Edenic recovery narrative

that often posit a reinvestment in hegemonic white masculine privilege, like what we see at the end of films like *Interstellar* and *WALL-E*. Because both *WALL-E* and *Interstellar*, like *Snowpiercer*, also break from the discourses of necrofuturism, providing a post-capitalist vision of the future that is about life and possibility not death and destruction. But different from those films, *Snowpiercer* is able to move beyond a reinvestment in hegemonic white masculinity.

That the polar bear might kill and eat the two kids at the end of the film is also possible, the larger symbolism being that it's quite possible humans will go extinct. In the film, extinction is common. It is a term used to describe the disappearance of materials things as much as it describes the vanishing of organisms and species. And hundreds, possibly thousands, of species are going extinct every year in material reality, what Elizabeth Kolbert describes as the Sixth Extinction or what Justin McBrien describes as mass extermination. Frederic Jameson writes, "Someone once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism. We can now revise that and witness the attempt to imagine capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world" (online). Patriarchal white supremacy can be added to Jameson's statement. It is hard to imagine the extinction of hegemonic white masculinity, which is frequently visualized in climate fiction films like *Interstellar* and *WALL-E*. In these films, white masculinity retains systemic power and privilege, even in to the seemingly post-capitalist future. By contrast, *Snowpiercer* represents the possibility of human extinction if white men, as an institution and persistent structure, continue to be the engine driving existing social structures and the exploitative relationship of humans to the planet. Furthermore, *Snowpiercer* is able to imagine an environmental futurity where indigenous knowledge and people of color have a future beyond a reinvestment in white masculine privilege.

Films like *WALL-E* and *Interstellar* promote technological fixes and a discourse of white flight from planet Earth. In material reality, technological fixes, like geoengineering and space colonization, are masculinist and white supremacist strategies for solving climate change, designed to concentrate power into the hands of elite white men. For example, Jennie C. Stephens and Kevin Surprise show that solar geoengineering

is being advocated for by a small group of primarily white men at elite institutions in the Global North, funded largely by billionaires or their philanthropic arms, who are increasingly adopting militarized approaches and logics. Solar geoengineering research advances an extreme, expert–elite technocratic intervention into the global climate system that would serve to further concentrate contemporary forms of political and economic power (online).

Stephens and Surprise further argue that advancing technological fixes like solar geoengineering detracts from the growing movements around climate justice, movements that are frequently led by girls and women of color. In contrast to *WALL-E* and *Interstellar*, which both promote technological fixes, *Snowpiercer*'s ending makes it clear there are no technological-spatial fixes for ecological crisis; this crisis is terminal. *Snowpiercer* articulates technological-spatial fixes, like geo-engineering, to systems that reproduce and perpetuate hegemonic white masculinity and environmental injustice. Additionally, as the film shows, “tallying up the numbers,” the capitalist system that quantifies human life and all the mechanisms of social (re)production, are fundamentally white supremacist, patriarchal, and ecologically unjust.

Conclusion

Twenty-first century popular Hollywood climate fiction films, like *WALL-E* and *Interstellar*, emphasize a white male injury discourse that centers white male saviors,

representing white men as giving of themselves to save humanity – and yet, this dominant representation also does not reflect material reality. Representing white men as the saviors of popular climate narratives overlooks and ignores those who are frequently on the frontline of climate justice movements, people who are overwhelmingly not-white and not-male.

Traditionally, women, and especially low-income women and women of color, have been disproportionately rendered vulnerable within the climate crisis and are also on the frontlines of climate justice movements. But this is frequently not what we see reflected on screen.

It is important to note that *Snowpiercer* doesn't necessarily center characters of color, female characters, or queer characters in the way that films like *Neptune Frost* (2021), *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015), *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012), or *Half-Life* (2008) do. Yet the film does offer an important critique of hegemonic white masculinity and the white male savior trope that is pervasive in Hollywood climate fiction films like *Interstellar* and *WALL-E*. In this respect, *Snowpiercer* shifts the discourse to offer a more environmentally just perspective than what we traditionally see in Hollywood film. And *Snowpiercer* is quite self-conscious in engaging with but diverging from these other films. As Wilford says about the Great Curtis Revolution: "A blockbuster production with a devilishly unpredictable plot."

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¹ While working- and middle-class incomes have fallen, the income of corporate executives and the aggregate wealth of the richest 20% of Americans has increased (Carroll 2011, 5; see also Hill 1997, 9).

² For more on the white male injury discourse in *Interstellar*, see Yates 2021.

³ For more on the white male injury discourse in *WALL-E*, see Yates 2018.

⁴ Ye Dam Li acknowledges *Snowpiercer*'s transnational American cinema context while arguing that the film is very much also embedded into Korean cinema; thus shifting what is thought of as a national cinema context.

⁵ As Ye Dam Li points out, "Considered a minor language in the film, taking up only 20 percent

of the dialogues, Korean is the medium through which rare insights about life and the conditions on the train are shared” (26).

⁶ The population control strategies on the train also mirror what Laura Pulido writes about as the indifference of global leaders, mostly in the global North, to the deaths of millions of people, mostly in the global South, because they refuse to commit to policy decisions that could mitigate climate change enough to save people’s lives.